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Research Article

Harmful Traditional Practices Adversely Affecting Child Health in Aligarh

Madhatullah Khan Sherwani

Accountant, S-CCSP-SS in Aligarh District Project, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh - 202002, Uttar Pradesh, India
E-mail: madhatullah@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study is based on the practical field experiences and observations related to infant health in the community. Harmful traditional practices prove to be bottlenecks and create numerous hurdles in achieving the goal of reduction in infant mortality rate. These practices need to be eradicated from the community to improve the health standard of the state and in turn the country. Lives of children may be saved by counselling their parents and other family members. Some of the prevalent practices among the community are discrimination between male and female child; first bath immediately after birth; keeping babies for few days without any clothing; cutting the umbilical cord with *khurpa*, *hasiya*, piece of pot or glass; keeping sharp objects close to the newborn like knife, blade, etc.; burning smoke near the newborn; confinement of mother and child for a few days; applying *kajal* in the eyes of the infant; keeping shoes with the newborn; avoiding vaccination; throwing away of colostrum – the first milk; reluctance in adopting exclusive breastfeeding; and feeding with pre-lacteals, e.g., *ghutti*, *pehuwa* and honey These practices adversely affect the health of infants. Often it was observed that in case of illness, some *Ojha* was being consulted rather than a qualified medical practitioner. The images provided in this study present the suffering of the children due to these malpractices.

Keywords: Khurpa, Hasiya, Kajal, Ghutti, Pehuwa, Ojha

"It is better to leave a tradition than let it become a killer"

INTRODUCTION

Tradition represents the sum total of all behaviours that are learnt, shared by a group of people and transmitted from generation to generation. It includes language, religion, types of food eaten and methods of their preparation, childrearing practices and all other values that hold people together and give them a sense of identity and distinguish them from other groups. To evaluate a traditional practice as harmful/beneficial, we might use the objective instruments based on the knowledge gained from social and natural sciences. Today, we have ample knowledge about the physical nature of human beings, their physical anatomy and their social life. It is therefore possible to assess objectively whether a specific traditional practice is harmful to the physical nature of human beings, their psychology and their social needs and development, and therefore incompatible with scientific theory and practice (Assefa, 2005). Every society follows some traditional practices with the arrival of a newborn. These practices may either be beneficial or have no adverse effects on the newborn. Modern medical science has highlighted some harmful traditional practices prevalent in the community; these practices are deep-rooted in the society and hence often

difficult to uproot. People connect these practices to their religion, which makes it mandatory to follow them because the well-being of the child is perceived to be associated with these practices. These practices are believed to ward off evil or black magic, and hence not following them would adversely affect the newborn and may lead to death.

The term 'traditional practices' is essentially contested and often debated. 'Harm' is discussed in terms of health or, expansively, in terms of human rights. Depending on viewpoints, the term is said to mean rituals, traditions or otherwise practices that have a prejudicial effect on health, physical and psychological integrity, or the full exercise of human rights. It can be argued that a wider definition should also include practices affecting boys and men (http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_is_the_meaning_of_Harmful_Traditional_Practices).

When pregnancy has been definitely established, restrictions are imposed upon the woman's diet. Her food intake and the kinds of food she has are strictly controlled by her mother-in-law or by other elderly female relatives. The pregnant woman is advised to eat moderately so that the foetus does not grow too large and make the delivery difficult. She is often forbidden from eating certain kinds of fish, meat, vegetables and sweets. Such foods are tabooed because they may harm the foetus, produce certain deformities in the child or result in a miscarriage. Because of the taboo, pregnant village women are deprived of fish, their main source of protein, during the period when high-protein food is most needed. The village women's diet during pregnancy consists of boiled rice eaten with spiced potatoes or with pickled green mangoes or hot and spicy chutney made with berries (boroi). If green mangoes and berries (which are seasonal) are not available, the rice is eaten with salt and green peppers. Such a diet, even when rice is plentiful, is hardly adequate nutritionally, especially for a pregnant woman. Traditionally, village women are supposed to continue to work during pregnancy. Only in the later stages does the woman refrain from doing hard physical work, provided she can find someone to help her. Most of the women are kept busy, especially during the harvest season, when threshing, parboiling, husking and storing paddy are their normal duties and household chores. Women look after the kitchen, garden and poultry, do all the cooking, fetch water and attend to the children. Unlike other rural societies, most women in Bangladesh do not work outside their homes or in the fields, even when not pregnant. All their activities are normally confined within the *bari*, a central compound with a cluster of huts surrounding it. Sexual intercourse is discouraged during the last few months of pregnancy in the belief that it might harm the child (Bhatia 1981).

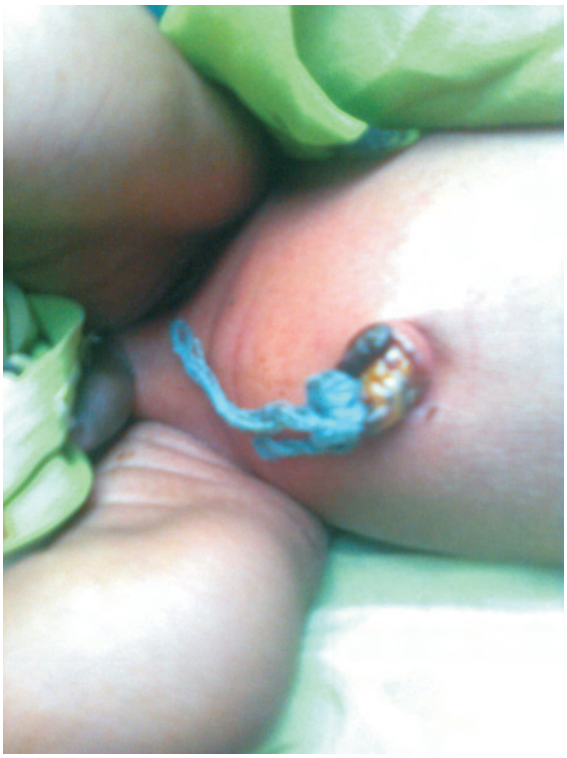
Harmful traditional practice: There is no clear and comprehensive definition in the international instruments, although these instruments explicitly mention the harmful traditional practice. Every year, millions of children fall prey to so-called harmful traditional practices, which have different consequences, in the fields of health, education, survival and development, which are often violent and which may cause severe injuries, and sometimes death (http://www.childsrights.org/html/documents/formations/sem2010_Programme_E.pdf).

Health of newborn: First hour, first day, first week, first month and first year are crucial in the life of a newborn. Any mistake in proper care and wrong decision may lead to death of the child. Sometimes these may also result in lifelong infirmity for the child. The number of deaths among babies 0–28 days old decreased from 4.4 million in 1990 to 3.1 million in 2010. There was also a 28 per cent reduction in neonatal mortality rates (NMRs) over the same period of time, from an estimated 32 deaths per 1000 live births to 23 deaths per 1000 live births – a slow progress (http://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/topics/newborn/en/index.html). Preterm birth is the world's largest reason of newborn babies' death, causing more than one million deaths each year; ironically, 75 per cent deaths can be avoided without expensive, high technology care (http://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/topics/newborn/en/index.html).

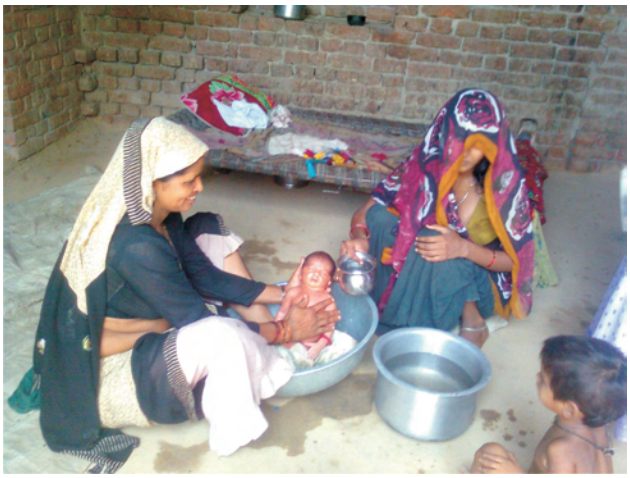
This study finds some major harmful traditional practices that may lead to serious complications or death of the child; these are discussed in the points that follow.

1. **In case of illness, some *ojha* is being consulted rather than a skilled medical practitioner:** A child needs proper medical care and when a family consults an *ojha* or magician to ward off evil or magic from the child, it eventually leads to complication of illness, which could have been treated at its onset. This practice is one of the hidden factors that contribute to increasing infant mortality rate.

   Cutting the umbilical cord with unclean thread, *khurpa, hasiya,* piece of pot, broken cup or glass: These are some of the contaminated items used to cut the umbilical cord of a newborn. These objects infect both the newborn and the mother as they are not sterilised. Tetanus is a very common and dangerous infection arising out of these cases, which may lead to death and increase in mortality.



2. **First bath immediately after birth:** Newborns should not be bathed just after birth as per child healthcare guidelines. Newborns need to stay warm. It is advised to just wipe and dry the baby using clean, warm towels and bathe it around a week after birth. Because of unawareness, people bathe the newborn to clean it, causing a potential threat for susceptibility to hypothermia (low body temperature), thereby leading to infections. In other words, this leads to pneumonia, which is one of the major causes of infant mortality. It is observed that the practice is followed with rigidity, as the baby is considered unclean until it is given the bath immediately.



3. **Throwing away of colostrum (the first milk):** It is observed that there is a tradition of throwing away the colostrum without knowing the significance of it for the newborn. Colostrum has high concentrations of nutrients (like carbohydrates and protein) and antibodies, but it is small in quantity. It is also low in fat (as human newborns may find fat difficult to digest). Newborns have very small digestive systems, and colostrum delivers its nutrients in a very concentrated low-volume form. There are 170 million underweight children around the world, 3 million of whom die each year because of being underweight. WHO recommends that all children be exclusively breastfed for 6 months. Feeding colostrum in the first hour is the first step. It is imperative that every child receives colostrum to prevent malnutrition (http://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/world_breastfeeding_week/en/).

Colostrum (also known as beestings or first milk) is a form of milk produced by the mammary glands in late pregnancy and the few days after giving birth. Human and bovine colostrums are thick, sticky and yellowish (http://www.sciencedaily.com/articles/c/colostrum.htm).

4. **Avoiding vaccination:** Immunisation is the process whereby a person is made immune or resistant to an infectious disease, typically by the administration of a vaccine. Vaccines stimulate the body's own immune system to protect the person against subsequent infection or disease (WHO, 2012). Newborn needs to be protected against all types of infections and diseases for proper development. It is found that some parents or grandparents avoid vaccinating their children, so much so that they even argue in favour of their behaviour and pose resistance to immunisation drives of the government.

5. **Discrimination between male and female child:** The birth of a girl, however, is marked with less ritual with reduced value attributed to the mother, reception ceremony is minimal and less colourful (Ras, 2006). Compared to the male child, a female child is less valued in some sections of the society. From the inception of life, she faces discrimination. Her own mother does not give her proper attention. It is found that mothers do not feed the female child properly. This discrimination due to lack of care and nutrition may precipitate the female child mortality.

6. **Burning smoke near the newborn:** Smoke produces high levels of carbon. It is observed that both the mother and child are kept in less-ventilated rooms, resulting in emission of poisonous carbon monoxide gas. Carbon monoxide gas can kill even a grown up adult. At tender age newborn has to face high level of danger for his/her life.

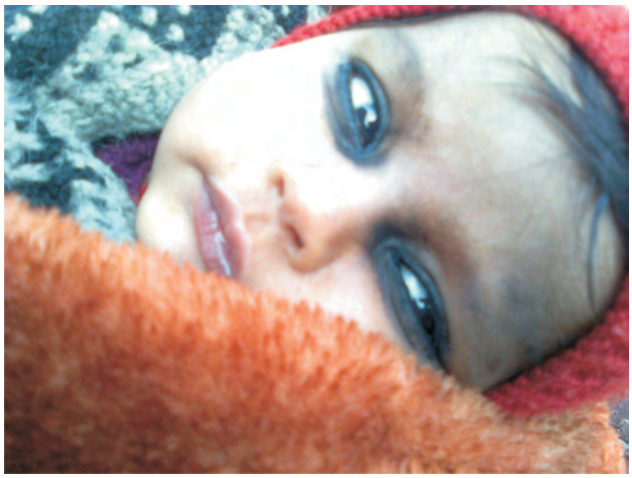
7. **Keeping babies for few days without any clothing:** It is observed that even in the chilly winter season, newborns are kept without clothes for a few days. When the paternal aunt (*bua*) visits, only then the child is provided with clothing. During this period, the newborn lives under the danger of contracting a cold, which eventually leads to pneumonia and sometimes death.

8. **Confinement of mother and child for few days:** Confinement of mother and child for 3–5 days and lasting for up to a week in a closed room is a common traditional practice. This period of confinement is called *saubar.* It is essential that the newborn is provided with proper ventilation to breathe oxygen-rich fresh air. Observance of this tradition hampers the proper development of the brain of the child.

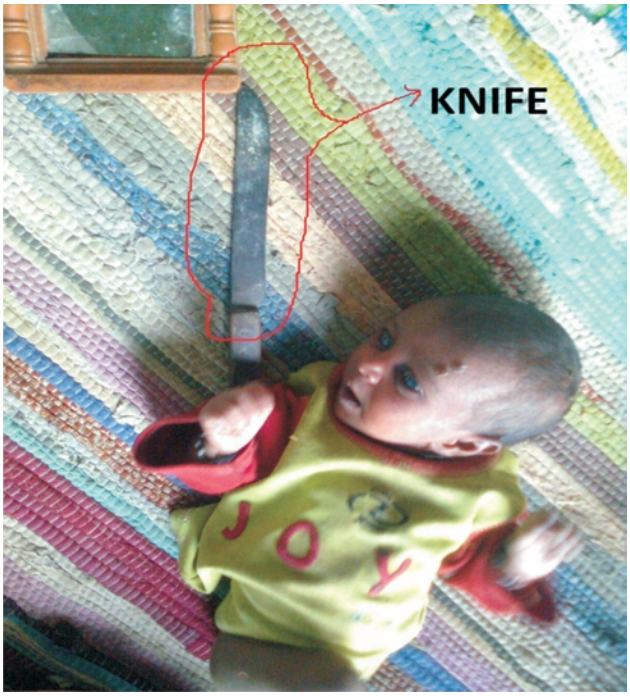
9. **Place of delivery:** People are found to choose the dirtiest place for delivery at home. Labour is attributed to be unclean and unhygienic, and thus to be carried out at a filthy place. Sometimes, a place where cattle are kept and hay stock is piled is chosen. There are chances of infection with Tetanus as the place is replete with cow/buffalo dung, which carries the potentially deadly bacteria *Clostridium tetani* (*C. tetani*). It is ironical that people welcome a new

guest – newborn – at the most infected and dirtiest place of the home.

10. **Applying *kajal* in the eyes of infant:** *Kajal* may be a cause for infection in the eyes of newborn as usually the composition of *kajal* is not known and unauthenticated. The traditional belief is that it wards off the evil eye and gives a large appearance to eyes.



11. **Feeding with pre-lacteals and reluctance in adopting exclusive breastfeeding:** Giving pre-lacteal feeds like *ghutti*, *pehuwa* and honey is a prevalent practice among the community at large. The child should be exclusive breastfed for 6 months, as mother's milk is of primary importance for the survival of the child. Pre-lacteals may cause several diseases because they are difficult to digest and reduce the intake of mother's milk.
12. **Keeping sharp objects close to the newborn like knife and blade:** Sharp objects kept close to a child can result in an injury and can invite problems for newborns. In many cases, it has been seen that children were infected with Tetanus as the objects were not clean.
13. **Keeping shoes besides the newborn:** Shoes are kept beside a newborn to ward off the evil or bad eye. It is observed that most of the time shoes may be dirty, spreading infection to the newborn.



CONCLUSION

In the light of this discussion, it can be stated that harmful traditional practices prove a barrier in achieving the millennium development goals. These harmful traditional practices are still followed for various reasons, although they can cause a spectrum of health and social problems, especially related to the health of children. In addition to the deep-rooted beliefs, customs and rational attitudes, lack of knowledge and being unaware of the effects of these practices help maintain these problems. Sometimes when these practices turn fatal, then these need to uprooted to save the future of the country. Children are the future of a country. To save the future, some important actions should be taken to reduce the mortality of children, especially newborn mortality. Grass-roots level workers like Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs), lady health visitors (LHVs), staff nurses (SNs) and anganwadi workers (AWWs) can go a long way in helping to mitigate these harmful traditional practices related to children. These grass-roots workers can fill the gaps between the health department and the community. Therefore, these workers should be especially trained to tackle harmful traditional practices and their counselling skills will be vital in eliminating harmful traditional practices.

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