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Topic of Research: A Comparative Study of Early Childhood Care Practices of Hindus and Muslims in District Moradabad, U.P.

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It has been universally recognized that childhood years forms the basis of intelligence, personality, social behavior of an individual and the capacity to learn and nurture oneself into an adult. Every child is a unique individual with their own characteristics and temperament. During early years of life, children undergo massive transformations in all domains of development i.e. physical and motor, cognitive, language and socio emotional, which make this age group further critical to be studied for providing a holistic understanding and to develop an understanding of the effective interventions in early years. Herlihy et al (2013) explain that newborn care practices vary widely across cultures of various places. The forces and care givers that shape newborn care practices, views on illness, diseases and threshold for care seeking are unique to each context.

The Indian population which is by and large young, being in their productive and reproductive age category, brings forth the need to review the child care practices. Since, children are the supremely important assets of the nation, so the present research endeavor appointed significance. The current study undertake Brönfenbrenner socio ecological theory to explains human behavior and social phenomenon as the intersection of the influences of multiple and interrelated systems. The present study aims at exploring and comparing of early childhood care practices amongst Hindus and Muslims. The objectives of the present study are as follows:

- 1) To explore the early childhood care practices among Hindus and Muslims in district Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh.
- 2) To compare the early childhood care practices among Hindus and Muslims in Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh.
- 3) To understand the mother's perception on efficacy of child care practices and the gaps within these practices.
- 4) To look into the nature of access and utilization of health care services among Hindus and Muslims.

The present study is a primarily qualitative in nature and the research design used for the study is descriptive *ex-post facto* and is located at Moradabad, U.P. The respondents are mothers, grandmothers and stakeholders and are identified through purposive sampling. The data is analyzed through thematic interpretive analysis.

Few important findings are discussed below:

- 1) An encouraging fact is that across the categories, mothers and grandmothers accepted that pregnancy is an important period of life.
- 2) The women following childbirth are found to observe confinement because of the perceived notion of pollution attached to them. This confinement varies



between 11 to 40 days in Hindus and complete 40 days in Muslims. The post partum confinement gives a new mother opportunity to rest and relieve her from household responsibility thereby helping in rejuvenating her.

- 3) A strong emphasis on the traditional importance of breastfeeding is found which helps in universally influencing the young mothers to adopt it. Due to religious guidelines most Muslim mother adhere to 2 years of complete breastfeeding to their newborns, which also happens to be in line with current health norms.
- 4) Among Muslims a religiously guided practice is to perform *taharat* i.e. washing of private parts after every visit to toilet and washing hands following it, whereas no such parallel ritual is present in the Hindus. Moreover, some Hindu grandmothers admitted open defecation, which is associated with known health risks.
- 5) The practice of confinement during pregnancy of a woman is found to be stricter in Hindus than in Muslims. Pregnant women are generally considered as vulnerable to jealousies and even evil spirits so they are advised to avoid outings in general and haunted places in particular. Such a practice restricts the movement and acts as a barrier in availing ANC services, especially in rural areas.
- 6) Home deliveries are found to be traditionally trusted form of child birth. These forms of deliveries are found to be prevalent in rural areas and that too more specifically among Muslim population. It is preferred for two reasons: (a) for preserving traditional way of child birth; and (b) for avoiding surgical procedures of hospitals which are considered to be painful and shameful. Consequently institutional delivery which is medically assisted is avoided.
- 7) The feeding of prelacteals is almost universally present across the categories of the respondents. It has been established that apart from traditional basis it has also got religious sanctions from both the faiths as certain foods like honey, dates or cow's milk are considered as auspicious for a newborn.
- 8) A common practice among Hindu respondents is to discard mothers' first milk called 'colostrum' as it is considered as impure and also inauspicious. Very few rural Muslim respondents were found practicing it but predominantly it is observed in Hindus.
- 9) Preference towards male child is strongly evident in the study. It is found to be uncommon in Muslims but prevalent in Hindus because of salvation and social support.
- 10) A new thing that emerged is that many rituals related to child birth that are gender specific i.e. only performed in case of male child.

The present study recommends the policy makers to take in to account the locally followed customs and traditions while formulating maternal and child health programs. It also requires training the frontline health workers to sensitize them regarding the same so as to increase the acceptability of health interventions among mothers. The study acknowledges the great influence that grandmothers have on child care decision in the home settings so it urges for their inclusion in along with the mothers, in sensitization for child health issues. The study also suggests including religious leaders right from the formulation of the child health programs to its implementation again for suitability and success of it.