

Her Healing Heritage : Local Beliefs and Practices Concerning the Health of Women and Children : A multistate study in India. edited by Dr. Mira S. compiled by Smita Bajpai. Chapter 5. Chetna Publication. March 1996. p.216.

Loss of Pregnancy

Kachha ghada phootne mey jyaada takleef hoti hai ... (With the shattering of an un-baked earthen pot the suffering is more... women in Rajasthan)

Women use images of earthen pots breaking, flowers or fruits falling, to symbolize the loss of pregnancy. kachha ghada phoota (UP Rajasthan), phool jhade (Madhya Praciesh), kaacho padi gayo (Rajasthan), garbha-alasyam (Kerala) are some of the terms used to describe miscarriages.

In english, human embryo death and its exit from the womb if unintended is called miscarriage, or if caused purposefully it is called abortion. Spontaneous abortion and induced abortion are terms that doctors use.

Miscarriages are not uncommon among women in India. In the west, research has estimated that between fifteen to thirty conceptions out of a hundred are miscarried. Most are 'silent', near the time of the expected menstrual period. Early miscarriages are now largely understood as natural selection by a woman's body to weed out genetically blighted embryos. But early miscarriages can also result from poverty-linked and gender-tainted factors like under-nutrition, infections, work stress, accidents, domestic violence and so on.

In India, nothing is known about how often miscarriages really happen. Even for a woman herself, it is sometimes difficult to tell between a very early miscarriage and a menstrual period. And, if the family members come to know, she may be held to blame. Treatment aside, they may pressurize her to conceive sooner.

The likely total number of abortions and miscarriages is estimated to be about 11.2 million. About 6.7 million of these are induced, including MTPs, and 4.5 million are miscarriages. This gives an overall abortion/ miscarriage rate of 452 per thousand live births (Chhabra & Nuna, 1992).

The problem of induced abortion is equally complicated. In India, 'medical termination of pregnant (MTP) is the common term for abortion when performed in a hospital or clinic. It was legalized in 1975. Twenty years later, however, MTP is still not available for most women, especially in rural areas.

Official data for 1991-92 show 0.6 million MTPs, and for every MTP there may be ten or more (sixty lakhs of) abortions uncovered by law...

Unsafe attempts at abortion result in about 14% of women's deaths related to pregnancy (Bhatia, 1985.)

In rural India, this amounts to about fifteen to twenty thousand women including teen-aged girls dying every year, and many others who are injured. Factors in women's 'choice' of unsafe or illegal abortion include:

1. poor access to safe legal abortion services
2. little control over domestic resources
3. little part in house-hold decision-making
4. cultural taboos against abortion, and various desperate circumstances.

A woman needs money, time, energy and permission to reach a faraway hospital for a legal and supposedly safe MTP. Then, the staff must be there and respond to her. Even at a government facility, there is a 'extra' expense for service and medicines and pressure to 'accept' family planning. On top of it all, most health centers and hospitals brim with filth and carelessness.

Arranging to leave her homeland house-hold chores may be a woman's biggest problem. Generally people abort her pregnancy if she has conceived in marriage, so they are suspicious. Within marriage for the sake of having a male child, in-laws may force her to go on with the pregnancy.

Miscarriages and abortions can lead to serious problems from blood loss and injuries. Anaemia makes a woman more open to infections of the womb and pelvic area. Especially after unsafe abortion, this may cause not only ill-health but also inability to bear a child in future.

Experienced women and dais were asked to focus on the causes of miscarriage and the methods ' used to induce abortion, and to list them drawing on their experience and beliefs.

What do women say about causes of miscarriages?

Information was gathered from women in ten states, except Karnataka, from which we have listed eighteen perceived of causes of miscarriage. Women spoke from the context of day-to-day life and the framework or traditional understandings. Table 1 indicates the state-wise prevalence of each particular cause as reported.

Table 1: Beliefs about causes of miscarriage

(Key: 3 = women report, - = don't report, * = text-mentioned, &127; = not text-mentioned)

Causes	B I H	G U J	K A R	K E R	M A H	M P	O R I	R A J	T N	U P	W B	T O T
BELIEF RELATED &127; evil spirits	3	3	-	-	3	3	-	3	3	3	3	8
ACTIVITY RELATED * weakness/exhaustion	-	3	-	-	3	3	-	3	3	3	-	6
* fall/injury/jump	3	3	-	-	3	3	3	-	-	-	3	6
* lifting weight	3	3	-	-	3	-	-	3	-	3	-	5
* hard work	-	3	-	-	3	-	-	3	3	3	-	5
* too much sex	3	3	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	3	4

* climbing stairs	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	1
EMOTION RELATED * 'shock'	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	3	3	-	3
&127; child not wanted	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	2
&127; craving unmet	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
DIET RELATED * heat in body	3	-	-	-	-	-	3	3	3	3	3	6
* drinking liquor	-	3	-	-	-	3	-	3	-	-	-	3
* not enough blood	3	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
&127; outside foods	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	3	-	2
OTHER FACTORS * medicines	3	3	-	-	-	-	-	3	3	3	-	5
* early marriage	3	3	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	3	4
* major illness	3	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
* weakness of womb	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Totals	10	9	0	2	9	4	4	8	6	9	5	

The most common cause of miscarriage given from eight states is the effect of some (woman's) evil eye or nazar. Or, it may be the work of an irritated devta or scheming churail (spirit of a dead woman, or a witch).

They say that 'bad' and 'barren' women become dakin, dain, churail... (witches) gain the power to cast a spell causing a woman to miscarry. In fact, in many states women are singled out as witches.

If a woman is childless or has only daughters, or if she is rebellious or exceptional, and stands up against social and political atrocities, she can be labeled as a witch and tortured.

After a woman miscarries, she may go to a shrine or temple, or to a place or person renowned for warding off evil spirits. It usually includes sacrificing a goat or a hen, giving some grain and cloth to the priest or healer, and agreeing to abstain from some foods (like jaggery, oil, coconut..). When desperate enough, the woman herself becomes involved in practicing occult rites and rituals, or witch-craft.

This complex of rituals and beliefs sustains the myth that women alone cause mishaps of childbearing. Even though the causes may lie with society or the male partner, the woman must continue to suffer. And false faith allows everyone to escape the need for tests and treatment.

The texts contain areas of healing called 'daiva vyapaashraya chikitsa' and 'bhoota vidya', which we might understand as faith-healing. While they do not point to entities like evil spirits as causes of miscarriage, they discuss supernatural influences like graha (inhabitation's) and bhoota (spirit-beings) and how they can affect one's body. We need not discuss this twilight branch of ayurveda here, beyond pointing out that, unlike western health science, both local health traditions and the formal shaastric streams of medicine in our country recognize effects beyond ordinary human understanding.

Numerous causes were not related to diet. On the face of it, they are related to activities, yet they speak of the overall conditions in which women live. For instance,

1. fall injury may indicate domestic violence
2. lifting weights & hard work point to over-work
3. excessive intercourse may mean marital rape
4. early marriage indicates lack of control over lives
5. 'shock' speaks of the harsh realities women face
6. cravings not fulfilled indicates women's low status
7. child not desired reveals women's lack of control over their bodies and fertility.

Under these circumstances, it seems callous for the shaastras to merely explain in text-book fashion how excessive intercourse and emotional stress brings about imbalance of vaayu with vitiation of aapaan vaayu.

If asked about 'shock', perhaps women from more states would agree that a strong emotional jolt is likely to cause a woman to miscarry.

Women from Bihar and Rajasthan said that if a woman does not desire a child, her body casts out the foetus.

This reveals the folk belief in mind-and-body union. In the classical texts, 'not wanting the child' is not specifically mentioned among the causes of miscarriage, but they advise women to avoid negative emotions in pregnancy. Much importance is given to mind-and-body relations throughout ayurveda.

The shaastras state that 'unmet cravings during pregnancy' sometimes cause deformities in the infant. However, it is not suggested that unfulfilled cravings might cause miscarriage.

'Taking medicines' during pregnancy sometimes leads to miscarriage, as data from five states testifies. The women did not name any medicines responsible, but they make an important point in appreciating not to take medicines during pregnancy.

Shaastras do not specifically warn against 'climbing ladders and stair-cases'. But if a woman falls while climbing, she may miscarry. So, climbing anything should be done with care, without exertion or a heavy load.

Early teenage pregnancy was reported as a cause of miscarriage by women in only four states, despite child-marriage still being prevalent in several more states. The shaastras say that if a girl conceives before her late teens, her body is not mature enough to nourish or carry the embryo. As a result, her womb may not hold a foetus, and her body may outright reject it, again through the action of aapaan vaayu.

'Anaemia' was reported in only two states, yet we know it is a nearly universal factor in miscarriages. While poor nutrition and anaemia need urgent attention, instead the woman may be asked not to eat nutritious foods! Tending to see anemia as part of normal life, few women think it causes miscarriage. The shaastras say that if a woman is

underfed and thin, she lacks enough body substance to nourish the embryo in her womb. Apan vaayu gets vitiated and her womb may expel the foetus.

'Liquor' enters quickly and easily into minute body spaces and particles to generate heat. Therefore, it is logical that it could cause a woman to miscarry, although we found no such mention in the texts. Perhaps, women in 'good society' even long ago were not likely to consume liquor. Presently, we shall see that liquor is relied upon as an effective although risky home method for inducing abortion particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged groups and tribal communities in our country.

Some causes given are more medical in nature, which may reflect a higher level of development and health services in the state.

In Kerala women spoke of only two reasons for miscarriage - major illness and cervical incompetence.

Miscarriage during 'major illnesses' may be well known in other states, and yet this factor may be subsumed in other perceived causes like, spirits or heat.

'Weakness of the womb' due to congenital and structural malformations is described in our ayurvedic reference texts. General body weakness is held to include weakness of the womb, when a woman cannot carry her foetus. Specifically, it may amount to 'incompetence of the cervix'. This is how physicians refer to a womb-mouth which remains loose and open. Miscarriages due to cervical incompetence usually happen around the fourth or fifth month of pregnancy.

If a woman miscarries because her cervix is weak and open, it should be easy to prevent next time. In the third month or so, a doctor would sew a simple 'purse-string stitch' to tighten the opening of her womb (and would release it later, when ready for birth). But, if her problem lies undetected, she might continue to have mishaps.

Once a woman miscarries, she may fall into a vicious cycle of pregnancies and miscarriages. Soon pregnant again without having time to recuperate, she is more likely to miscarry again, and so her health goes on breaking down. Incidentally, doctors call this 'habitual abortion', quite unfairly. Such a desperate woman is easy game for financial emotional and sexual exploited.

What do shastras say about miscarriage?

The wide range of this study didn't allow deep exploration of people's ideas about conception and pregnancy. Here is how ayurveda interprets the dynamics of pregnancy and miscarriage.

There are five different kinds of vaayu or 'air' in the body - praan, vyaan, samaan, udaan and apan. When not pregnant, apan vaayu is what brings on a woman's menstrual periods. So, in pregnancy, it may play a role in starting a miscarriage. Vaayu functions or dysfunctions along with the various causes of miscarriage.

Vaayu and physical causes: Physical movement and strain such as lifting weights, walking long distances or grinding grain can 'vitate' or stir up apan vaayu in a woman's body and cause her to miscarry. When a woman is under-nourished her body accumulates vaayu. So naturally, it gets more easily distributed when under physical strain and stress.

Vaayu and diet-related causes: Eating too much food that is heat-producing, drinking liquor, taking outside foods, not having enough to eat and being anaemic (not having enough blood) are nutrition-related reasons given in the survey.

Vaayu and emotional causes: Shock, unmet cravings and not wanting the child are emotion-related causes which influence the functioning of vaayu.

The shastras summarize that substance and activities which increase body heat are likely to vitiate both vaayu and pitta, and can bring on early menstruation, miscarriage and premature labor.

While causes of miscarriage, factors harmful to the foetus and management of miscarriage have been described in the texts of ayurveda, induction of abortion is brought up only in connection with management of severe complications like toxemia, making it induced child-birth.

The garbha (roughly 'embryo') is described to be in a semi-solid state up to the fourth month of pregnancy. So, miscarriage before the fourth month is classically termed garbha-straava and after fifth month as garbha-paata (straava and paata meaning 'flow' and 'fall' respectively).

Thus, it is stated to be more difficult to save a pregnancy if miscarriage begins in the first three months. Whereas, if after the fourth month, it may be more possible to halt a miscarriage, as the embryo would have gained jeeva (a certain 'viability' acquired along with form and movement).

'Factors harmful to embryo or foetus (garbha-opghaatkar bhaava) are responsible for garbha-paata, foetal death and premature child-birth. A woman may be susceptible to them because of her personal constitution, or her nutritional or emotional state.

Factors linked with food: Beware of eating, irregularly, too little or too much, stale or unclean foods, and unsuitable foods. Unsuitable foods are those not congenial with one's constitution, or with the state of pregnancy, including *amla foods like sour curds (yogurt) *ruksha (dry) foods like horse-gram *katu (pungent) foods like hot chillies *ushna (hot) foods like black gram *tikshna (irritant) foods like pepper.

Foods like *garlic *brinjal *black pepper *mustard leaves, and many others combine these aggravating properties, according to the texts.

Factors linked with woman's reproductive system: Deformities of womb and vagina (garbhashaya-dosho/yoni-dosha), and diseases and disorders of a woman's reproductive system (yoni vyapat). [Reproductive disorders in the male partner at this point will only concern the beeja, mentioned below.]

Factors linked to physical activity: Heavy work and exertion *awkward postures, squatting, straining *traveling long distance, jolting *riding upon animals *injury to belly, pelvis or back.

Disorder in the beeja (seed): If the doshas of the beeja are vitiated and it is not orderly or healthy, this leads to miscarriage.

Age of the partners: If either partner is too young or too old, miscarriage is more common.

Emotional factors: Anger grief a fear *stress shock.

Illnesses: Fevers and other major illnesses.

Factors which are unknown: Sometimes, causes for miscarriage remain a mystery.

What do women say about methods for abortion?

Women from all eleven states told of twenty-six methods for abortion, including MTP. Consider Table 2

Table 2: Local methods for inducing abortion

(Key: * = text-mentioned &127; = not text-mentioned)

Method of abortion	State	Remarks
* Honey (250 grams)	RAJ	Ruksha (rough)
* Brinjal seeds by mouth	RAJ	Heat -producing, vaat--pitta-kar
* Carrot seeds, by mouth	RAJ	Heating stimulant, abortifacient
* Aritha seeds crushed & eaten	MAH	Emetic, toxic
&127; Horse-gram fried in oil, eaten	TN	Ruksh, vaat-pitta kar
&127; Mustard seeds crushed	TN	Heat-producing and dry;
&127; Various 'hot' foods, eaten	UP	Incomplete information
* Giving a fright	TN	May abort, not recommended
&127; Herbal roots tied around waist	WB	Data incomplete
* Mahua liquor given to drink	GUJ, MP	Stimulant, heating
&127; Heat applied to belly	MAH, RAJ	Data is incomplete
* Carrot seeds & bamboo leaves ground together & eaten	UP	Carrot seeds not in texts, but known abortifacient
* Carrot seeds pounded with old	UP	Stimulant and heat-

	jaggery, boiled in milk		producing combination
*	Crushed black pepper & jaggery, boiled & drunk	GUJ	Heat-producing, stimulant,
&127;	Gingelly seeds soaked in palm jaggery, eaten	TN	Unctuous, sweet, nutritive; not known as abortifacient
&127;	Italian millet soaked & eaten raw	TN	Ruksha (rough); not known abortifacient
&127;	Paste of tender neem leaves, patachi, camphor & pepper, eaten	TN	Unusual combination; contradictory effect
&127;	Cloves, jaggery & cotton seeds, eaten	RAJ	Heat-producing, not a known abortifacient
&127;	Jaggery water, one or two glassful drunk every 1-2 hours	RAJ	Effects not understood
&127;	Kotopaira (?), oldjaggery & mundga (drumstick) bark crushed together, eaten	ORI	Effects of combination not understood; herb identity unclear
*	Raw papaya, chewed and eaten	RAJ, TN, GUJ	Known to cause abortion
&127;	Guvaar vegetable, jeaggery & ground-nits cooked	BIH	Not known to cause abortion, but not harmful.
&127;	Chidchida (<i>A. aspera</i>) root placed in vagina	BIH	Not a known abortifacient, harmful action on womb
&127;	Vagina fumigated with smoke of burning til (sesame seeds)	RAJ	Not known abortifacient
&127;	Belly and womb massaged & manipulated	MP, BIH	Physical pressure may result in abortion
&127;	Herbs used at home	GUJ, WB, MP, ORI	Data insufficient for comment
&127;	Calotropis stick inserted into vagina/cervix	TN, GUJ, RAJ, WB, MAH, BIH	Severely irritant, hazardous method
&127;	'going to hospital' for MTP	WB, KER, UP, MP, RAJ, MAH	Not mentioned in the texts...

The traditional methods for inducing abortion can be considered in five groups: * consuming a herbal decoction or paste * placing a stick in vagina or womb * massage of belly and womb * applying heat over the belly * exposing vulva and vagina to smoke and heat.

Most abortifacients can be hazardous as well as effective. Popular methods are likely to vary somewhat, and actual use is not strictly consistent. Details about quantity, dosage, timing, usage, indications and precautions were not sought during the collection of data. In this broad study neither safety nor efficacy were possible to assess.

Out of the twenty-eight methods for abortion, only ten find mention in shastras. Our vaidya friends commented on the first ten from text references and their personal experience and opinion.

Ingredients of the first six - including carrot seeds, brinjal seeds, jaggery, honey, mohua liquor, black pepper and unripe papaya - are all text-mentioned, but not for the purpose of abortion. They are supposed to be effective to some degree, depending on their various properties, dosage, constitution of the woman, stage of pregnancy. Of these, the methods in most widespread popular use are raw papaya, mohua liquor and carrot-seeds. If further evaluated so that efficacy and exact guidelines for safety are worked out, some might be recommended or allowed for use at community level.

Aritha (soap nut seeds) and calotropis stick (ak, aakada, akowa, rui) are not text-mentioned and hazardous for women. Their surprisingly wide use is undoubtable an indication of women's ancient and desperate need for abortion. Achyranthus root (chidchida) placed in the vagina, and frightening a woman, can bring on abortion. But they declare these measures, harmful.

Abdominal massage and fumigation perhaps could help induce abortion. While there is no reference for the purpose of abortion, vaidyas feel these measures are harmless, unless they delay the decision for MTP.

Alongside traditional ways, women in half the states reported going for abortion to a hospital. Information to differentiate between MTP and illegal 'allopathic' methods was not obtained in this study.

Women cope....

Women dearly stress that miscarriages are caused by too little good food and too much hard work. Hence, the basic need is to improve women's access to food as well as to reduce their heavy workload.

Mistaken beliefs that someone's evil eye or wicked spirits cause miscarriages and other mishaps of the reproductive system are widespread. It is difficult to challenge such beliefs. Rather, as poverty and suppression of women is at their root, we must focus on eradicating these evils.

Women have numerous indigenous ways to bring on abortion. While we cannot assess their effectivity, it shows that women do try to regulate their fertility by means in their control. Interestingly, very few of these practices are mentioned in the ayurvedic texts.

Herbal remedies and external manipulation may be relatively safe methods of abortion. Research is needed to look into actual safety, effectivity and standardization. Some indigenous methods might be appropriate for use at community and primary health care level. Aborting with the calotropis stick is certainly harmful and needs strong discouragement without question.

Local traditional methods cannot replace making MTP services available and safe for all women.