

Original article

Study of Cultural and Societal Influences on Postmortem Practices in India

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Abstract:

Objective: Our study investigates the cultural and societal influences on postmortem practices in India, focusing on the diverse rituals and ceremonies associated with death. Our research aims to elucidate the common themes, cross-cultural variations, and participant perspectives that shape these practices.

Methods: A sample of 60 cases, representing diverse religious and socioeconomic backgrounds, was purposively selected. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and participant observations, with thematic analysis applied to identify recurring patterns. The sample characteristics, common themes, cross-cultural variations, and participant perspectives were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods.

Results: The findings reveal a rich cultural diversity, with Hinduism predominating the sample, influencing elaborate rituals and ceremonies. Cross-cultural variations highlight distinct practices among Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Christian communities, reflecting religious doctrines and cultural norms. Socioeconomic factors play a role, influencing preferences for cremation or burial. Participant perspectives underscore the positive aspects, challenges, and suggestions for improvement, providing a holistic understanding of the lived experiences surrounding postmortem practices in India.

Conclusion: Our study contributes to the understanding of the complex interplay of cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors in shaping postmortem practices in India. The results have implications for healthcare professionals and policymakers seeking culturally sensitive approaches to end-of-life care.

Keywords: Postmortem practices, India, cultural influences, religious diversity

Introduction:

The study of postmortem practices is a profound exploration into the diverse ways in which cultures and societies engage with death, influencing rituals, beliefs, and memorialization processes. ¹Our research aims to unravel the intricate tapestry of cultural and societal factors that shape postmortem practices across the globe. The significance of these practices extends beyond the realm of mere rituals, serving as a mirror reflecting the values, norms, and collective consciousness of communities.

By employing a multidisciplinary approach, we seek to bridge the gaps between anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intricate interplay between the living and the deceased. ²Through this study, we aim to contribute valuable insights that transcend geographic and cultural boundaries, fostering a deeper appreciation for the

rich tapestry of human diversity in the face of mortality. This research holds the potential to inform cultural preservation efforts, enhance cross-cultural understanding, and shed light on the universality of the human experience in grappling with the profound mysteries of life and death. ^{3,4}

Methodology:

To investigate the cultural and societal influences on postmortem practices, a rigorous and systematic research methodology was employed. The study utilized a purposive sampling technique, targeting 60 diverse cases spanning different geographic regions and cultural backgrounds. This sample size was deemed sufficient to capture a representative spectrum of postmortem practices while allowing for in-depth qualitative analysis.

A comprehensive literature review was conducted to identify key cultural dimensions and societal factors influencing postmortem practices. This

served as the foundation for developing a semi-structured interview protocol and observation guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from participants or their designated representatives, emphasizing the voluntary and confidential nature of their participation.

Data collection involved immersive fieldwork, with researchers actively engaging with communities to gain first-hand insights into their postmortem rituals. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals involved in the postmortem process, including family members, religious leaders, and community elders. Additionally, participant observation was employed to document the rituals and practices in their cultural context. The research team maintained reflexive journals to

capture their own cultural biases and reflections throughout the data collection process.

Following data collection, a thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns, cultural nuances, and societal influences on postmortem practices. This analysis was guided by the theoretical frameworks derived from the literature review. The findings were then triangulated with existing research to enhance the validity and reliability of the results. The study's methodology aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and societal dynamics shaping postmortem practices, offering valuable insights into the intricate tapestry of human responses to mortality across diverse communities.

Results:

Table 1: Overview of Sample Characteristics

Religion	Socioeconomic Status	Sample Size
Hinduism	Varied	25
Islam	Middle class	15
Sikhism	Upper middle class	10
Christianity	Low income/ Middle income	10

Table 2: Common Themes in Postmortem Practices in India

Themes	Frequency (%)
Rituals and Ceremonies	88
Religious Influences	75
Family Dynamics	60
Socioeconomic Factors	40
Cultural Beliefs	82

Table 3: Cross-Cultural Variations in Postmortem Rituals

Rituals/Ceremonies	Hinduism	Islam	Sikhism	Christianity
Funeral Processions	High	Moderate	High	Moderate
Cremation/Burial	Cremation	Burial	Cremation	Burial
Mourning Periods	Varied	Extended	Short	Extended

Table 4: Participant Perspectives on Postmortem Practices

Participant Category	Positive Aspects (%)	Challenges (%)	Suggestions for Improvement (%)
Family Members	90	35	70
Religious Leaders	80	25	75
Community Elders	75	40	60

Discussion:

The findings from our study on postmortem practices in India illuminate the intricate interplay of cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors that shape the diverse rituals and ceremonies surrounding death.⁵

Cultural Diversity in Postmortem Practices:

India, known for its rich cultural tapestry, exhibits significant diversity in postmortem practices. The majority of the sample follows Hinduism, where rituals and ceremonies hold immense significance. The high frequency (88%) of rituals and ceremonies underscores the deeply ingrained cultural practices associated with death in Hinduism. This finding aligns with existing literature emphasizing the elaborate nature of Hindu funeral rites, involving cremation and subsequent rituals to guide the departed soul.^{6,7}

Religious influences emerged as a notable theme, with 75% frequency. While Hinduism predominantly shapes the postmortem practices, other religions such as Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity contribute to the mosaic of cultural beliefs surrounding death. The coexistence of various religious practices within the Indian context reflects the country's pluralistic ethos, with each community preserving its unique identity.⁸

Cross-Cultural Variations:

The cross-cultural analysis of postmortem rituals in India provides insights into the distinct practices among different religious communities. Funeral processions, a commonality across religions, vary in intensity. Hinduism and Sikhism exhibit high-frequency processions, underscoring the communal involvement in bidding farewell to the deceased. Islam and Christianity, while also engaging in processions, display a more moderate involvement, possibly influenced by specific religious doctrines.⁹ Cremation and burial preferences offer a glimpse into the diversity of practices. Hindus, adhering to cremation traditions, contrast with Christians, who often opt for burial. Sikhism, despite sharing cremation practices with Hinduism, showcases its own unique customs. These variations are rooted in religious doctrines, reflecting the influence of longstanding beliefs and cultural norms on postmortem choices.

Mourning periods, varying from religion to religion, unveil the temporal aspects of grief and remembrance. The diversity in mourning periods is particularly evident, with Hinduism and Sikhism

having varied durations, accommodating individual and familial preferences. Islam, adhering to an extended mourning period, contrasts with Christianity, where mourning tends to be more prolonged.

Socioeconomic Factors:

Socioeconomic status emerged as a distinctive factor influencing postmortem practices in India. Hinduism, with its diverse adherents, displayed varied socioeconomic statuses, reflecting the inclusivity of the religion. Islam, predominantly represented in the middle-class segment, showcased a blend of cultural and economic influences. Sikhism, associated with upper-middle-class participants, demonstrated a unique socioeconomic profile. Christianity, represented in the low-income category, reflects the diversity within the Christian community in India.

The influence of socioeconomic factors on postmortem practices is particularly evident in the preferences for burial or cremation. While cremation is often associated with Hinduism and Sikhism, its prevalence may also be linked to economic considerations, as it tends to be a more cost-effective option. Conversely, the Christian community, predominantly represented in the low-income category, leans towards burial, potentially influenced by religious doctrines and cultural traditions.

Participant Perspectives:

The participant perspectives shed light on the lived experiences and perceptions surrounding postmortem practices in India. Family members, being intimately involved in the rituals, expressed overwhelmingly positive aspects (90%), emphasizing the cultural and emotional significance of these practices. Challenges (35%) identified by family members, including logistical issues and emotional strain, highlight the complexities associated with navigating traditional rituals in contemporary contexts.

Religious leaders, acting as custodians of cultural and religious traditions, acknowledged the positive aspects (80%) of postmortem practices, emphasizing their role in providing solace and fostering a sense of community. Challenges (25%) identified by religious leaders include the need for adapting practices to changing societal dynamics, maintaining a delicate balance between tradition and pragmatism.

Community elders, serving as cultural arbiters, reflected on the positive aspects (75%) of postmortem practices, emphasizing their role in preserving cultural identity. Challenges (40%) identified by elders include the evolving nature of societal norms and the potential dilution of cultural practices. Suggestions for improvement (60%) underscore the need for adaptive measures to ensure the continued relevance and meaningfulness of postmortem rituals in the face of modernization.

Implications and Future Directions:

The findings of this study contribute to a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted influences on postmortem practices in India. The cultural diversity, religious dynamics, socioeconomic influences, and participant perspectives collectively shape the intricate landscape of rituals and ceremonies surrounding death. Recognizing these influences is crucial for healthcare professionals, policymakers, and communities to develop

culturally sensitive and inclusive approaches to end-of-life care.

Future research endeavors could delve deeper into the evolving nature of postmortem practices in India, considering the impact of globalization, urbanization, and changing social norms. Longitudinal studies may provide insights into the dynamics of cultural preservation and adaptation over time. Additionally, comparative analyses across different regions within India could further elucidate the regional variations in postmortem practices.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, our study offers a comprehensive exploration of the cultural and societal influences on postmortem practices in India. The intricate interplay of religious, cultural, and socioeconomic factors contributes to the diverse tapestry of rituals and ceremonies, reflecting the dynamic nature of Indian society in navigating tradition and modernity in the realm of death and mourning.

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