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### Sacred suffering: Unmasking religious and cultural child abuse in India

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**Background:** India has the world's largest child population, with 41% under eighteen. Deeply rooted cultural and religious traditions have led to practices that harm children, often under the guise of faith and devotion. The objective of this study is to highlight several such harmful religious and cultural practices and to propose strategies to curb these practices under the available statutes and suggest policy reforms.

**Method:** We adopted a qualitative descriptive design using publicly accessible digital sources. The data collection process involved an internet-based search of Indian and international newspaper reports, online blogs, academic publications, government advisories, and publicly shared case reports. The search was conducted using predefined keywords including "child abuse," "religion," "faith," "customs," "superstition," and "traditional practices in India." Google and academic databases were used for the initial screening of content. After the initial selection, deep content searches were performed to extract detailed information about each practice, including regional prevalence, cultural justification, and associated health or legal consequences.

**Results:** It was observed that child abuse in name of faith is quite rampant in India. Some of these practices are described herewith. The Devadasi system, though legally banned, continues in some regions where young girls are dedicated to temples, often resulting in lifelong exploitation. Khatna (female genital mutilation), practiced within specific communities, inflicts physical and psychological trauma. Branding rituals involve burning marks onto children to 'cure' ailments, causing severe injuries. Child tossing rituals persist in certain temples or mosques, where infants are dropped from heights to seek divine blessings. Shulum Kuthu in Kerala involves piercing children's cheeks or tongues, inflicting unnecessary pain. Other harmful practices include immersion in boiling liquids, Doodh Peeti (milk drowning), cow dung dipping, and burial in sandpits during solar eclipses, all based on superstition. The Sumangali scheme exploits adolescent girls under deceptive employment conditions, while Nikah Mutah (contract marriages) in Hyderabad force minors into temporary unions with foreign nationals.

**Conclusion:** Despite laws like the POCSO Act, Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, and laws against superstitious practices, enforcement remains inconsistent due to cultural acceptance, lack of awareness and social complicity. This study attempts to shed light on these abuses and underscores the need for strict legal enforcement, policy reforms, and community education to protect children's rights and well-being.

**Keyword:** Child abuse, religion, faith, superstition, culture, harmful traditions.