

# Beliefs on Parenting and Childhood in India

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## INTRODUCTION

In the investigation of parent-child interactions, studies on parent-child relationships, parent attitudes, discipline methods and their impact on children's development have been the primary areas of research. Developmental researchers in various cultures have over the years focused much of their attention on accounts of socialization patterns and the overt behavior of parents (what parents do) with limited attention to their thoughts as parents (what parents believe). Parental behavior has been the preferred pathway to understanding development. The formal study of parenting beliefs, ideas or cognitions is seen by some to have begun in the 1950s in research that interviewed parents to gather information about socialization practices, the home environment and parent child relationships (Rubin and Mills, 1992; Sears et al., 1957). Later this trend was reversed with objections being raised about the validity and accuracy of reports and recall made by parents, the weak correlation between beliefs and behavior and the feeling that much behavior may not have any salience for parents and hence they may not be able to comment on it. So for a long period, parental ideas were not the focus of research. The revival of interest in parental cognitions and ideas is a recent development (Kagiticbasi, 2007).

All parents have some ideas about the manner in which children ought to be raised, about what they feel must be an essential part of their children's lives, about the goals and values that they consider important about children and childhood. These culturally shared ideas that parents have about children and their development are referred to as beliefs. They include parental explanations and understandings of everyday events, childcare customs and choices and are often implicit; "taken for granted ideas" about the "right" way to think or act.

Parental ideas or beliefs have been labeled differently by researchers: parental cognitions, psychology of the caretaker, beliefs or belief orientations, naïve theories, ethnotheories (Sigel, 1992). Each of these refers to the cognitive domain of parenting behavior; parents thinking about parenting; the naïve psychology that influences what parents do.

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### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PARENTAL BELIEFS

Parental beliefs are of value because they acknowledge the cognition of parents and recognize them as thinking beings. Additionally, these beliefs guide parental behavior and activity. Because of their link with parental goals and values, parental beliefs influence developmental outcomes directly or indirectly. Parents' beliefs are expressed in the manner in which the everyday lives and activities of children are organized. These routine activities are the visible representations that serve to convey beliefs to both parents as well as children. In their model of the developmental niche, Super and Harkness (1986) refer to the culturally determined customs and practices followed by parents as the "cultural scripts" for parenting.

The link between parental beliefs and behavior and from behavior to the development of children is a tenuous one. However, "beliefs as parts of the parents' psychological system are systematically linked to parental action and different forms of that link may have different consequences for the life-world of developing children" (Lightfoot and Valsiner, 1992: 395). Parental beliefs are constructed from the collective cultural resources to constitute the personal beliefs of parents. Definite cultural variations are also reflected in the fact that each cultural group determines for itself the manner in which parents bring up their children. These cultural scripts influence the different beliefs and practices of parents as well as the goals parents work towards. Despite intra cultural homogeneity, the variation in parenting beliefs must be recognised. Parental beliefs come from individual experiences, interactions with family, friends and professionals as well as through cultural messages. Diverse cultural and familial positions contribute to the multiplicity of beliefs held by parents. Personal experiences such as education, occupation, socioeconomic considerations and "the availability of experts" make each parenting experience a unique one. The bidirectional flow of cultural messages implies a co-constructionist perspective in the development of parental beliefs. Parents and children are both receivers as well as a source of culture (Goodnow, 1988; Harkness and Super, 1996; Valsiner, 2007).

### FAMILY AND CHILDCARE IN INDIA

India is a nation characterized by cultural diversity and plurality at many levels. Heterogeneity is a salient feature of social reality. In India, the family is a key social institution that exerts a definitive influence on the lives of all its members. The family is central to all levels of social interaction and individuals are identified by the family they belong to, by their fathers and their forefathers. The family is the hub of all activity from the day a child is born. With a large majority of families having a joint structure, the identities of members also take on collective hues. Roland (1989) proposed that the deeply group-oriented nature of Indians can be aptly described as having special leanings towards their families labeled as the "familial self." It is not surprising that most research on Indian families has described the unit to have a collective, interdependent orientation. However, there is also adequate argument to support the serious limitations of this viewpoint (Gupta and Panda, 2003; Tuli and Chaudhary, 2010).

Children in India grow up in a network of multiple interactions with members from within and outside the family. Despite the pivotal role played by mothers in the lives of their children, the raising of children has often been a shared experience with family, friends and others in the neighborhood (Chaudhary, 2004; Kakar and Kakar, 2007; Keller, 2007; Seymour, 1999).

This inclusive arrangement is especially prevalent in the case of joint families and in rural and semi-urban communities.

In urban nuclear households, the experiences of childhood and parenting show a great deal of diversity making it difficult to provide a single prototype. However, education and global interface has provided parents with new ideas about childcare and development which they integrate with traditional wisdom and practices to a lesser or greater extent as and when required. The smaller family size has also modified but not eliminated the involvement of extended kin members. Even though families are becoming smaller in size and essentially nuclear in structure (especially in urban metropolises), the ethos of the family continues to be characterized by "jointedness." There is a high value on being connected and the network of relationships is sustained across distances and changing aspirations, occupations and lifestyles. In the realm of family and childcare, changes due to urban mobility are visible in the altered patterns of family interaction, evolving role expectations and renewed ideas about motherhood and fatherhood (Bhatia, 2006; Uberoi, 2007). When mothers go out for work, arrangements of childcare and household management are bound to change.

With rapid urban influences several changes have been documented in the structure and functioning of families in India (Bhatia, 2006; Kakar and Kakar, 2007; Sharma, 2003). Increased global and modern influences have initiated many changes in gender and class equations as well as in family dynamics. The plurality and contradictory nature of Indian social reality is vividly illustrated by descriptions of changing family structure and roles. The family in India continues to be at the centre of social organization. And yet, despite providing a point of anchorage, the role of the family is continually being altered. Its approval is less important and its disapproval is gradually becoming less significant.

### **Parental Beliefs**

Parental beliefs mediate between culture and behavior. Parental beliefs and practices provide the developmental context of the family by creating the backdrop for the unfolding of everyday routines of childcare. The following sections of this paper will focus on some aspects of parental beliefs that have emerged from the study of select families in India.

The paper is based on data from the author's doctoral study titled "Beliefs on parenting: An ethnographic study of Indian families" (Tuli, 2008; Tuli and Chaudhary, 2010). Thirty families with children in the age group 3-6 years, in the city of New Delhi, India, were selected using "Contact Sampling" (Tuli and Chaudhary, 2008). Mothers were the key respondents of the study. Six fathers and five grandmothers also participated. While identifying the families, family structure and SES (socio-economic status) were used as descriptive rather than as selective criteria. Instead, residential areas and descriptions of the homes were used to assess the economic situation of the families. However, all participants could be described as coming from a range of middle class families. Of the 30 families that participated in the study, 11 mothers worked outside the home and 19 mothers stayed at home. Of these 19 mothers, five mothers had given up working after their children were born, one mother worked from the house and one was in the process of going back to work. The study was designed using a qualitative framework. Extensive interviews with the participants of the study, observations of family routines and interactions and family mapping exercises were used to construct an

ethnography of parental beliefs. In all, 112 home visits were made for interactions with the mothers with each visit lasting between 2-4 hours; fathers and grandmothers were interviewed separately.

Through the interview schedules that were developed, beliefs about children's development and childhood were investigated within the following domains: experiences during pregnancy and childbirth; food and eating; regulating behavior; attributing agency to children; development and learning and parental values and aspirations. In the extensive interactions, beliefs were sometimes directly declared and sometimes had to be culled out. Parental behavior was not within the purview of the study. The narratives of all the participants were coded and analyzed using the ATLAS Ti 5.0 software for the analysis of qualitative data.

In the following sections, the data from this study (hereafter referred to as the study) has been used to provide an overview of parental beliefs as expressed by the 30 families that participated in the study. Only a summary of select beliefs is presented in this paper. This sample of parental reconstructions is aimed at providing a descriptive backdrop to the concluding remarks on parental beliefs made at the end of the paper.

### **Mothers' Beliefs on Parenting**

#### *Beliefs about Pregnancy and Childbirth*

Having children is a socio-religious obligation for couples in India. All participants of the study, including the fathers and the grandmothers, expressed views to support the cultural emphasis on having children. For the mothers, becoming pregnant was seen as an accomplishment; a fulfillment of their social roles and was described by them as generating a lot of goodwill and support from the rest of the family. Any time after 30 years was considered "old" for the birth of the first child. Any departure from the expected time-table of "marry and have children" raised comments from others, including strangers.

#### *Beliefs about Food and Eating*

Here too the belief was a unanimous one: that breast feeding was best for babies. This was seen as inevitable and "the right thing to do." The average duration the mothers' breastfed their infants was between 4-6 months with first born children usually being breast fed for a longer time than second born children. Using the bottle was to be avoided at all costs. Mothers (five) who were unable to breast feed for various reasons expressed strong feelings of guilt and inadequacy.

As children moved away from breast milk, the mothers expressed the "stress" of feeding meals to the child. All mothers believed that their children did not eat enough. They felt that their children were "fussy" eaters, ate too little and mostly ate the wrong kind of food. A high level of regulation was reported by the mothers in the domain of eating. Although all mothers expressed the belief that children should learn to eat by themselves, all but one mother were still feeding their children. They felt that this was easier, less time consuming and ensured that a certain amount of food was consumed by the child. The need to regulate what children ate, when and where and with whom was expressed by the mothers to varying extents.

*Beliefs about Behavior Regulation*

Along with food and eating the domain of behavior elicited the expression of a high degree of control. In the narratives of the mothers' socially appropriate behavior and conduct were under great scrutiny. That the behavior of children needs to be regulated and that children learn from what they see around them were the dominant beliefs in this domain. Mothers believed that the behavior of the child must be person and context sensitive with different expectations of conduct for older persons as compared to younger ones. Mothers were viewed by all as the key figures for behavior regulation. Some mothers clearly articulated that the involvement of too many people caused confusion for the child and should be avoided. The role of fathers and grandparents in behavior regulation was reported to be secondary to that of the mother, with fathers often being viewed as ineffective, last resort players in this domain because of their minimal involvement in everyday family activity.

Many strategies were reported by the mothers to direct the conduct of their children such as persistent repetition, offering explanations, instilling fear, invoking guilt and negotiating with rewards. Despite having expressed certain beliefs, mothers also shared the inconsistencies in their own behavior and the manner in which beliefs about behavior were often violated by them due to situational constraints.

*Beliefs about Encouraging Independence*

Value for children doing things "independently" or self-reliance was expressed by all the mothers. However, on further elaboration of childcare activities it was realized that the beliefs on autonomy (expressed by the mothers) were situation and domain specific. For instance, food was non-negotiable when compared to TV viewing but more flexible when compared to respect for elders. Although the choice for self-reliance was desirable (as expressed by the mothers) it was not always feasible. Here too, situational constraints such as lack of time, convenience or practicality took salience in comparison to expressed beliefs.

*Beliefs about Development and Learning*

Beliefs expressed included that each child was unique, learnt differently, had different capacities and should be treated differently. At the same time the mothers' felt that the environment of the house and the mothers' own responses were key influences on what children learnt. The belief that it was their "duty" as mothers to provide their children with inputs and experiences at an early age was something that was declared by more than one mother. This was coupled with the belief that it was important to provide children with the "right information." The belief that children can be "molded" highlights a deterministic standpoint; that parents need to determine the direction of the child's development. Exposing children to specific experiences, keeping them away from some, and guiding them towards others, understanding the limitations exerted by individual innate nature, and in one case also the use of medication: these were some of the ways through which mothers believed that they could make a difference to their child's development. While the role of the mother in this process was repeatedly highlighted, the individual position of the child in seeking out experiences was not commented upon.

*Beliefs about Gender*

There was a predominant belief in the essential or basic difference in the nature of boys and girls as shared by the mothers. The belief that girls and boys were inherently different and so must be treated differently was expressed by 13 mothers. Fourteen mothers believed that the manner in which the behavior of boys was regulated was different from that for girls. Eight mothers expressed the view that while this difference existed and they too had experienced it while growing up, they themselves do not subscribe to it with their own children.

### *Beliefs about Family Relationships*

In the narratives of the mothers, the pivotal location of the family was expressed repeatedly. Within this unit, physical proximity and contact through activities such as eating and sleeping together were encouraged. From an exercise on family mapping as well as from the descriptions of the mothers about everyday activities in the family it was evident that a clear distinction was made between core (mother-child-father) and peripheral (grandparents and others) relationships within the family. However, these boundaries were not static but were constantly changing to accommodate situational demands and personal needs. The fluctuating positions of relatedness and independence in the interactions within the family demonstrate the fluidity of interpersonal relationships among the families in the study. This deliberate expansion and contraction of self-other boundaries in the mothers' relationships with others as well as in the children's interactions has been termed "elective interdependence" (Tuli and Chaudhary, 2010).

Mothers were reported to be the primary figures in the lives of the children. Interactions with others (even the father) were routed through the mother creating a "triangulation of relationships." However it is important to note here that the primacy of the mother in the lives of her children was not exclusive but co-existed with interactions with others. Value for being a "good mother" was commonly shared and feelings of guilt were expressed by 15 mothers for not doing the "right thing." Gender and role specific patterns of parenting were the norm among the families in the study. Shared parenting on a daily basis was found only in three families.

### **Fathers' Beliefs**

In the beliefs articulated by the fathers, the primary responsibility for childcare was seen to lie with the mother. Fathers felt that the mother was the one who guides and influences the child. Fathers found themselves more involved with their children than their own fathers. They also shared how their involvement increased as children grew older. The difference in parenting styles between mothers and fathers was another significant theme. Like the mothers, the fathers too believed that children learn from what they see happening around them and so the atmosphere of the house was a significant influence. Autonomy for children was encouraged within prescribed boundaries. The interactions with the fathers displayed the doubts and contradictions in beliefs that were prevalent.

### **Grandmothers' Beliefs**

The beliefs of the grandmothers emphasized the relational nature of Indian families. They shared how the value for interpersonal interactions was declining. All the grandmothers believed that the mothers have a primary position in the lives of their children. They also

explicitly stated the need to change with the times. Expanding on this they shared that because of diverse demands and requirements, it was imperative to deal with children today in a different manner from when they raised their own children.

When given a choice, all six grandmothers said that they preferred a living arrangement independent of the joint household. Despite the cultural norm for maintaining strong bonds within the larger family network, it seems that the desire to build a unit around the conjugal relationship may be far stronger than is usually believed. The reference to extended family members was frequently heard in the conversations with the grandmothers.

## DISCUSSION

### **An Overview of Parental Beliefs**

In cultural research, it is extremely difficult to conclude about a group of people, even within the same culture. The families in the study came from a diverse range of social, economic and situational positions. Despite this diversity there were some cross-cutting themes that characterized the expressed beliefs about child care. The beliefs expressed by the three groups of caregivers in the sample displayed some overlap as well as some distinction.

The narratives from all three (mothers, fathers and grandmothers) emphasized the centrality of the mother as the primary care giver for her children. Her involvement and her influence were unquestionable. At the same time, other adults in the family, namely the father as well as the grandparents, were involved at differential levels. The acceptance of culturally guided roles was evident in the beliefs. Perhaps this was one reason why very few fathers were reported to be involved in the daily routines of their children.

Grandmothers' beliefs displayed an acceptance of intergenerational differences and the need to keep up with changing times. In many ways, the grandmothers in the study acknowledged recent developments in childcare as well as the changing attitudes and involvement of parents. They even offered to rationalize current practices and trends in parenting behavior on the basis of a changing environment.

### **Sources of Parents' Beliefs**

The beliefs expressed were complex, domain-specific and future-oriented. For the parents in this study, their beliefs came from a variety of sources, both personal, familial as well as cultural and were incorporated into the everyday cognitions of the caregivers with or without modifications. Doctors were most frequently referred to as a source of beliefs on early childcare, perhaps a reflection of the urban milieu of the families. This however did not imply an exclusion of traditional sources from within and outside the family. Frequent references were made to traditional practices during pregnancy and childbirth as well as to the use of home remedies for curing minor ailments. The comfort with accessing multiple and often "seemingly contradictory" sources of beliefs was a reflection of the heterogeneity and multiplicity within the culture.

### **Characteristics of Parents' Beliefs**

The parent-child relationship is embedded in the socio-cultural, economic and historic location of the family and the community. The interface between parents and children emerges from their experience in culturally loaded interactions and from parents' own cognitions. Parental behavior is therefore greatly influenced by the beliefs that people subscribe to. Some salient features of parental beliefs from the families that participated in the study are summarized here.

#### *Heterogeneity of Beliefs*

Beliefs are heterogeneous even within a culture. Intracultural variations in beliefs (and the manner in which these enter the interactions of parents and children) stem from the multiple experiences of families in very different cultural contexts even in the same culture. Parents' educational, economic and historical situations all contribute to the cumulative experiences of individuals as well as of families. In urban communities, with rapid global exchange, the exposure to eco-cultural change occurs to greater or lesser extents, resulting in the variations in beliefs across families from apparently similar cultural backgrounds (Miller, 1988; Palacios and Moreno, 1996). For Rosenthal and Roer-Strier (2006:517), parents' understanding of what is "adaptive" and how it is attained will differ on the basis of their personal experiences.

In the beliefs that emerged in the study, a similar heterogeneity was visible. Often, ideas and understandings about children and their development were modified in the face of more pressing circumstances.

#### *Multiplicity and Contextuality of Beliefs*

The Indian sense of heterogeneity has a peculiar character that can be linked to contextuality and subjectivity. Any rule will always become subordinated to when, what, where and with whom.

Beliefs were articulated at multiple levels. Mothers expressed beliefs about many different domains related to care giving and even beyond. At the same time, consistency in beliefs across parenting domains was uncommon. Mothers, fathers and grandmothers were found to frequently change their views within and across domains. While at first glance this could be seen as instability in their ideas, it was in fact an expression of multiplicity and a response to specific situations. There seemed to be a high tolerance of ambivalence and even contradiction in ideologies, as has also been reported by Kakar and Kakar (2007) regarding the use of multiple forms of health cures.

From the study it was found that the participants did not demonstrate the presence of overarching, grand beliefs about children. What was believed was found to be negotiable depending on the situation. This too contributed to the shifting or fluctuating position of beliefs declared by the parents. When adults articulate beliefs they seem far more stable and homogenous (at least within domains) than when they talk about the actual interactions with children and the situational constraints. There was evidence in some mothers' discourse that displayed feelings of guilt about not living up to one's beliefs, but they were clearly declared.



This comfortable multiplicity or negotiability of values is a common feature of the Indian culture (Sen, 2006), and it was clearly prevalent in the responses. Sensitivity to context among Indians in their thoughts and practices has also been reported by Ramanujam (1977). Many authors have described this as an issue peculiar to the increasing demands and stress of urban living. Commenting on what they find are peculiarly Indian traits, Kakar and Kakar (2007:124) feel, "we should not underestimate the Indian affinity for tradition *and* for contextualization, the latter constantly amending the former in service of pragmatic ends."

Perhaps the urban situation places specific demands and the daily schedules require families to respond to time related cues. At such points in time, the belief did not necessarily disappear. Nor was it altered; it seemed as if it was placed as the ideal form of behavior that is owned because it is valued, but due to certain factors, could not be adopted in that situation. In such circumstances, whether because of time constraints or simply temperamental ones, it was not uncommon to find mothers choosing to do exactly what they had said they did not believe in. Having done so, they would also express regret and guilt saying that at that point they did not know what to do. This was particularly evident with reference to disciplining and behavior regulation.

It almost seems that negotiability is a feature of the belief itself, since it was found to always depend on the person, the relationship, the circumstances and the domain about which one is concerned. Eating, family relationships, and respect for elders were some of the domains in which negotiability was comparatively lower. Perhaps it is possible to speculate that the more prized the domain for the family, the lower the flexibility for contextuality.

#### *Ideology and Practicality: Belief to Behavior*

Research in the field of parenting beliefs has demonstrated a limited belief-behavior connection (Palacios et al., 1992). In this study too, a one-to-one correspondence between belief and behavior was unusual. Since behavior was not observed, this conclusion is based on the responses of the adults. The articulation of a belief did not always ensure that it would be directly visible in the behavior of the parent. Despite having a strong belief about a particular issue, parents would also not do what they said or do something that was contrary to a declared belief. Beliefs expressed by mothers in the study were often compromised due to situational or circumstantial constraints. The constraints to ideology existed as circumstantial constraints as well as interpersonal and temperamental ones. Typically lack of time, the presence and even absence of "others" at the moment, inconsistent priorities and even "in the heat of the moment" were most frequently cited as the constraints in everyday parenting choices. From the narratives it was gathered that there were distinct levels at which the discussions proceeded. At the level of explained reality, adults were far more coherent and homogenous in their views, at least within specific domains of childcare. However, when speaking about practical constraints a compromise in beliefs expressed earlier was evident. It is important to note, however, that these departures from articulated beliefs were most often picked up for discussion, displaying a very common sense of guilt, or doubt, or sometimes even helplessness at the situation.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The data presented here and the discussion that followed suggests that there are some key features about the beliefs of parents in India. It is important to recognize and work with the fact that beliefs about parenting do not necessarily consist of a clearly articulated, consistent and uniform understanding about children. The beliefs held by parents are likely to be complex, heterogeneous and domain specific. Parental beliefs were found to change while addressing different domains of parenting and childcare. Therefore, expecting consistency across domains is impractical when dealing with families and children.

Parents usually present a functional, activity based description of everyday routines. Food and conduct were found to be the most central concerns for parents in the study. Academic categories (such as feeding, weaning, toilet training) which are used frequently when researching childhood and childcare practices can be misleading since they are likely to misrepresent parents' real priorities. Parenting as a joint activity did not find any reference in the narratives of the participants. Evidently the roles of mothers and fathers were distinct.

Living in urban circumstances creates specific demands for children, parents and families. These shifting priorities coupled with the rapid changes in Indian culture indicate the need to renew ideas about parenting and childhood in India, without losing sight of the persistent patterns.

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