

Hindu Religious Practices in Pregnancy Care for Stunting Prevention among Hindu's Family in Kupang City

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of Hindu religious practices on prenatal care and stunting prevention among Hindu families in Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara. Despite the region's high stunting prevalence, Hindu families exhibit significantly lower rates. To understand this disparity, the research employs a qualitative methods approach, incorporating in-depth interviews, observations, and a textual analysis of relevant Hindu scriptures. By delving into specific practices like *magedong-gedongan*, this study aims to identify cultural factors contributing to improved maternal and child health outcomes. Hindu practices, such as *magedong-gedongan*, offer valuable prenatal education and socio-cultural bounding, while *banten* and *prasadham* provides nutritional guidance. Additionally, the ceremonial aspects and daily prayers contribute to optimal physical, psychological and mental well-being, essential for stunting prevention. The findings of this study may inform culturally sensitive public health interventions and programs to address stunting, especially in this region.

Keywords: Hindu Religious Practices, Pregnancy Care, Stunting Prevention, Kupang City

I. INTRODUCTION

Both physical and non-physical health care during pregnancy have a significant impact on birth outcomes. Various health efforts have been programmed by both government and private health institutions, as well as the involvement of families as those responsible for the continuity of the next generation. This includes the introduction of the 1000 Days of Life (1000 HPK) program, which covers various aspects of needs, especially nutrition, during pregnancy up to the first 2 years of a baby's life. This first 1000 days of life period is a sensitive period because the impact that occurs will be permanent and difficult to correct (Sudargo and Aristasari, 2018). Knowledge about the importance of meeting maternal nutritional needs, disease prevention, regular check-ups (Antenatal Care) and various other physical aspects is very important to ensure that the fetus in the womb grows and develops optimally.

Based on Suryani's (2020) research, psychological comfort during pregnancy plays a vital role in a child's long-term development. The study underscores the importance of both mental and spiritual well-being for successful implementation of the 1000 Days of Life program. Numerous studies have confirmed that optimizing maternal and infant care during this period is a key strategy for stunting prevention.

Stunting is a growth failure and developmental disorder in children caused by chronic malnutrition and/or recurrent infections, characterized by height or length below the standard set by the health ministry. According to Susanti (2022), citing the WHO (2020), stunting refers to being short or very short for one's age, more than 2 standard deviations below the WHO growth reference, caused by inadequate nutrition and/or recurrent chronic infections within the first 1000 days of life. Stunting in young children, characterized by significantly impaired height growth below the standard, remains a major problem for Indonesia, not only in terms of health but also in every aspect of the Human Development Index.

In East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), stunting remains a major problem as the 2022 Indonesian Nutrition Status Survey (SSGI) recorded the highest prevalence of stunting among toddlers in Indonesia at 35.8%, while Bali Province has the lowest stunting rate in Indonesia at 8%. In Kupang City, there has been a decrease in the number of stunted toddlers from 26.1% in 2021 to 25.6% in August 2022, which is only a 0.5% decrease. This is still far from the national target of reducing stunting rates to around 14% by 2024. In the 2021 measurement assessment for toddlers in Kupang City, 5,497 stunted toddlers were found. Of all stunted toddlers, only 3 were from Hindu families, or 0.05%, as recorded by the

Kupang City BKKBN.

The data above shows that Bali Province, which is predominantly Hindu, has the lowest stunting rate in Indonesia. Similarly, in Kupang City, although it has the highest stunting rate in Indonesia, only 0.05% of the population who adhere to the Hindu religion experience stunting. The high prevalence of stunting in toddlers is related to the family's economic level and welfare, parents' education level, exclusive breastfeeding, and access to health and nutrition services. In addition, awareness of the importance of pregnancy care, especially meeting nutritional needs, is also very important in preventing stunting. This is a belief in religion and daily religious practices in Hindu families. Hindu philosophy and practices emphasize the sanctity of life, particularly during prenatal and postnatal stages. The Tutar Rare Angon text (Triguna, 2022, Gautama, 2008, Suweta, 2020) exemplifies this by explaining the spiritual significance of fetal development and the rituals associated with honoring the divine within the unborn child.

Hindu rituals are diverse in form and type, almost all of which are forms of worship and yadnya, offerings and/or sacred sacrifices. If we connect this to Gerardus Van Der Leeuw's formulation (Dupre, 2022) that religious ritual is a game bound by rules, then the rules that guide yadnya in Hinduism are originally sourced from the Vedas, and are elaborated according to the specific time and place in bhisama or lontar texts, which are generally mastered by panditas or religious leaders. The playful aspect of rituals indicates a sacred order in maintaining the memory of the origin of the game, which is the transcendent. Van der Leeuw's view of religious ritual is strongly influenced by his approach of trying to understand religious phenomena through direct human experience, viewing religion both rationally and dogmatically. Overall, for Van der Leeuw, ritual is one of the most essential ways for humans to connect with the divine, sacred power, and transcendent reality. Ritual is a path through which humans can experience a power greater than themselves, both personally and collectively.

In Zazuli's "History of Human Religion" (2022), it is highlighted that Balinese Hindus place great emphasis on dramatic and aesthetic rituals dedicated to the Hyang (deities). More than 80% of Hindus in Indonesia reside in Bali, with a unique belief

system and ritual practices or yadnya that are rich in art, culture, and local wisdom, distinct from Hinduism in India. Zazuli argues that Balinese Hindu society is a reflection of a very strong cultural and spiritual richness, where religion, local traditions, and social structure play a major role in shaping their identity. The blend of Hindu teachings and indigenous Balinese traditions makes Balinese Hinduism distinct and unique compared to Hinduism in other places. Balinese Hinduism is deeply intertwined with daily life. Every action in the daily lives of Balinese people is often guided by religious values. Balinese people are known for their devotion to religious ceremonies, which encompass various stages of human life, from birth, marriage, to death.

According to Triguna's 2022 research, Hindu practices concerning pregnancy preparation, prenatal care, and postpartum care are deeply rooted in the sacred texts such as the Rare Angon. These practices highlight the importance of not only sacralizing the events surrounding conception and birth but also cultivating a nurturing environment for the child from the moment of fertilization. Hindu teachings emphasize treating the fetus and newborn as manifestations of the divine (Hyang), fostering a profound sense of reverence and care.

The Rare Angon then explains the essence of a child. At 1 month, the child is known as Sang Hyang Manik Kama Gumuh; at 2 months, Sang Hyang Manik Kama Bhusana; at 3 months, Sang Hyang Manik Tigawarna; at 4 months, Sang Hyang Manik Srigading; at 5 months, Sang Hyang Manik Kembang Warna; at 6 months, Sang Hyang Manik Kutthalengis; at 7 months, Sang Hyang Manik Wimba samaya; at 8 months, Sang Hyang Waringin Sungsang; and at 9 months in the womb, the child is called Sang Hyang Tungtung Bhawana. Such is the existence of a baby in the womb.

By honoring and revering the fetus in the womb as one would honor God (Hyang), Hindu families should strive to provide the best possible prenatal care. This reverence is not limited to religious rituals but is manifested in everyday life. This is an interesting and worthy topic for in-depth research to analyze why Hindu religious practices play a role in prenatal care for the prevention of stunting, especially among Hindu families in Kupang City. How do these religious practices evolve, and to what extent do they impact and contribute to prenatal

care in Hindu families for the prevention of stunting, as well as promoting physical, mental, spiritual, social, and cultural well-being?

This study is expected to contribute to the development of theories related to pregnancy care, stunting prevention, and social sciences, particularly health anthropology, especially in the context of pregnancy care and stunting prevention. This research is also anticipated to uncover the role of Hindu religious practices in promoting positive pregnancy care outcomes and stunting prevention, thereby offering new approaches to pregnancy care and stunting prevention interventions. For medical and paramedical professionals, this study can broaden their perspectives, encouraging them to explore not only Western medical and nursing practices but also local traditions and wisdom, especially those rooted in Hinduism. Furthermore, this research is expected to enrich community health programs, particularly those focused on pregnancy care and stunting prevention.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

This field research explores Hindu religious practices in prenatal care and their implications for stunting prevention. It involves on-site observations, in-depth interviews, and an analysis of Hindu philosophical texts that discuss beliefs and practices related to pregnancy. An initial group of informants, knowledgeable about stunting prevention and Hindu pregnancy practices, will be identified in Kupang City. A snowball sampling technique will be used to expand this group until data saturation is achieved. This study will adopt a qualitative research design. This research is conducted in Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara, where stunting rates are among the highest in Indonesia. However, stunting rates are significantly lower among Hindu families in this region. Additionally, this study involves an analysis of several Hindu religious texts related to pregnancy care and child development.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Kupang City is located at the western tip of Timor Island, bordered by Kupang Bay to the north, Kupang Barat and Nakamese Districts to the south, Kupang Barat District and Selat Semaui Strait to the west, and Kupang Tengah and Taebenu Districts, Kupang Regency to the east. The total area of Kupang City is 180.27 km², consisting of 6 districts and

51 urban villages (Tim Penyusun, Bank NTT, 2022).

Kupang City's landscape is a blend of rocky hills, farmlands, residential and commercial areas, and beaches. The climate is generally dry and hot, with an average minimum temperature of 22.5°C and a maximum of 34.1°C. Rainfall in Kupang City is relatively low, averaging 87.16 mm per month. The highest rainfall occurs in February with 275.8 mm, while the lowest is in August with only 2.9 mm.

Kupang City has a population of 455,847 people, comprising various ethnic groups such as Timor, Helong, Rote, Sabu, Flores, Alor, Sumba, Lembata, Chinese, and some from Ambon, Bugis, Java, and Bali. They commonly refer to themselves as "Beta Orang Kupang." The Hindu population stands at 6,114 individuals, accounting for 1.34%. The majority of Kupang's residents are Protestant Christians (357,456 people).

The 2023 Indonesian Basic Health Survey (SKI) data shows that the stunting rate in NTT has actually increased to 37.9%. NTT is among the top three provinces with the highest prevalence of stunting, along with Central Papua at 39.4% and Papua Pegunungan at 37.3% (Jogja Health Department, 2023). For Kupang City, the same survey conducted in the same year found a stunting rate of 29.9%.

Stunting not only has external physical impacts such as significantly impaired growth, particularly in height, but it also leads to problems with intelligence, sensory and motor centers, and increases the risk of mental health issues (Noroyono, 2024). This is caused by a deficiency in both macronutrients and micronutrients. The rapid development of neural centers in the brain occurs during fetal life and the first two years of a baby's life.

The integration of the exploration and deepening of Hindu teachings with modern health/medical knowledge has been implemented in Kupang City, through a good collaboration between leaders in the Ministry of Religious Affairs office, Hindu religious leaders, and various existing community organizations. This is supported by the active involvement of Hindu doctors and nutritionists who are also active in Hindu community organizations in Kupang City and NTT Province.

Hindus in Kupang, although living outside of Bali, continue to preserve ancestral

traditions related to pregnancy. Performing ceremonies during pregnancy is a way to honor ancestors and maintain the continuity of Hindu culture passed down from generation to generation. This also helps strengthen religious and cultural identity within a multicultural society.

The Hindu community in Kupang City continues to practice their religion according to Balinese traditions due to a number of strong cultural and religious reasons. Despite being far from Bali, their cultural and religious roots remain deeply intertwined with Balinese Hindu traditions. Let's delve into how faith plays a pivotal role in preserving these practices.

Emphasis on the element of faith with an explanation of the meaning of each step of the ritual process is important. This event can be categorized as a process of education for the fetus (Baby Education) because both in Hindu beliefs and in the medical world, fetuses in the womb can hear sounds and store memories.

Although the benefits may be felt after performing the action, and the benefits are felt through observing the experiences of others directly. In Hindu religion, obtaining knowledge through direct observation using the five senses is called *Pratyaksa Pramana*. According to Hindu teachings, belief in the benefits can be felt through observation of the experiences of other individuals in a social context. According to Dharmapatni (2023), the importance of faith and devotion in performing the *yadnya* ceremony can overcome the limitations of observation with the five senses (*Pratyaksa*). Sincerity, freedom from negative feelings, faith accompanied by knowledge of the order of the ceremony, the meaning of offerings, and the purpose of the ceremony, is believed to open the way to approach the source of supreme energy, namely Brahman, or is called *yoga*.

All the ceremony conduct at *Grya*, by conducting the ceremony at a *Grya*, the hassle is significantly reduced. The pregnant mother, husband, and family simply need to attend and participate in the series of rituals. The *Grya Agung Manuaba* in Kupang, though seemingly modest, offers dedicated spaces such as a garden and a pool for purification rituals. There's also a *Bale*, where the priest performs the sacred rites, complete with an altar for offerings and a prayer area. The spacious grounds provide ample room for the pregnant mother and other attendees.

Lestari's research (2022) found that performing *Manusa Yadnya* ceremonies at a *Grya* is more economical, practical, and efficient compared to conducting them at individual homes without compromising the essence of the ritual. This is particularly true for large-scale ceremonies. Although mass-scale ceremonies have not been common in Kupang, the tradition of holding these rituals at a *Grya* has been consistently observed.

On the auspicious day chosen, the couple and their family gather to participate in the ceremony. Meanwhile, the ceremonial offerings (*banten*) and other necessities have been prepared by the designated person. The proceedings begin with a *puja*, or a ritual where the priest chants mantras. This is followed by a purification ceremony (*pelukatan*), involving holy water and various offerings. The initial purification, which is a physical cleansing, is performed by bathing the pregnant woman in water infused with seven-colored flowers and blessed

Following the purification ritual, the ceremony proceeds with a spiritual cleansing using offerings such as *byakala*, *durmanggala*, and *prayascita*. Next, the pregnant woman performs a ritual of walking through a symbolic gate made of *dapdap* branches and string. The father then pierces a *taro* leaf pouch containing a fish in water until the fish is released, symbolizing a smooth and easy.

The ceremony concludes with the ritual of *natab banten ayaban*, where a portion of the offerings is taken back. This symbolizes the acceptance of blessings from the divine. Devotees then offer prayers and worship, expressing gratitude and seeking divine blessings. Offerings are placed within the *pagedong-gedongan banten*, a structure resembling a womb or cave, symbolizing the source of life. Finally, participants receive holy water (*tirta*) and sacred food (*prasadham*) as blessings from the ceremony.

While undergoing the *magedong-gedongan* ritual, pregnant women often intensify their daily religious practices, even if they are not specifically related to pregnancy. These practices include offering daily *canang* (offerings), family prayers, and *Tri Sandya* (daily Hindu prayers), and visiting the temple during full moons to pray with other Hindu devotees in Kupang.

These spiritual activities, whether performed at home or in the temple, are

considered sadhana or bhakti (devotional practices). The daily act of offering canang involves physical movement, such as preparing the offerings and placing them in various locations around the home.

By performing daily prayers and Tri Sandya, pregnant women are also engaging in yoga practices. In Hinduism, yoga encompasses various forms and levels. For pregnant women, asana (physical postures) and pranayama (breathing exercises) are particularly beneficial. These practices involve controlling movement, posture, and breath. As outlined in the book "Samkya and Yoga" by Sura I G and Sukayasa IW (2009), yoga is a vast Hindu philosophy. The yoga taught by the sage Patanjali is a practical application of Samkya philosophy, which explores the process of creation, liberation, and reunion with the divine

According to Rowan (2006), the bond between a mother and her infant is one of the most fundamental and important connections in human development, characterized by emotional, psychological, and biological interconnectedness. Rowan emphasizes that this bond goes beyond physical connection, encompassing various aspects that influence the well-being of both parties in the short and long term. Rowan explains that bonding between a mother and her infant begins during pregnancy when the mother starts imagining and feeling the presence of the fetus in her womb. After birth, early interactions such as skin-to-skin contact, breastfeeding, and cuddling form the foundation for a strong relationship. This bond is crucial in developing a sense of security and love in the infant. Rowan also acknowledges that the mother-infant relationship is influenced by social and cultural contexts. In some cultures, the mother's role in caring for her infant is strongly supported by extended family or the community, while in others, mothers may face greater challenges if they do not have adequate social support. In this context, the magedong-gedongan ritual provides social support for mothers during pregnancy. Social support, according to Glazier et al. (2004), is essential in reducing stress and improving emotional well-being, especially for individuals in high-stress situations such as pregnancy.

Based on the data collected from the research, religious practices, particularly the Garbha Samskara and Magedong-gedongan ceremonies, have been found to have both direct and indirect positive impacts on maternal

and child health. Informants, especially pregnant women who have personally experienced these ceremonies, reported feeling calm, reduced anxiety, and increased happiness. The performance of these ceremonies, especially during pregnancy, has many dimensions, including contributions for maintaining health and preventing stunting. In every religious Hindu practice, a key element is sajen or bebantenan (offerings). Banten or sesajen are creations of Hindu people that are offered sincerely to ancestors, gods, or God as a form of gratitude. Based on their materials, banten can be categorized into three elements: mataya, maharya, and mantiga. The function of banten can be as a symbol of Brahman and its manifestations, as an offering, a means of petition, a means of purification, and a means of cosmic balance. Banten is also a religious language, both a language of petition and offering. (Widiarti, 2022).

With the change in feelings after undergoing the ceremony, and after having a normal and healthy child, both parents, as well as both families, and even the Hindu community in Kupang City, directly or indirectly, have received observable and tangible proof of the goodness of undergoing Hindu religious ceremonies. This is not merely knowledge gained from books or explanations from religious officials or leaders.

In the book "History of Human Religion" (Jazuli, 2022), it is stated that religious practices will continue to be carried out consistently in modern times because they are perceived to have tangible benefits for their adherents. This is in line with George C. Homans' Social Exchange Theory, which states that individuals will maintain traditions, practices, or behaviors if they perceive benefits for themselves and their community, whether these benefits are in the form of social status, honor, or the preservation of cultural identity. As for physical benefits, these can be explained by health theories, particularly those related to factors that play a role in fetal growth and development found within the ceremonial process.

IV. CONCLUSION

Prenatal care plays a crucial role in preventing stunting. In the early stages of pregnancy, when the sperm and egg meet and unite—a union believed to mirror the cosmic creation of Purusha and Prakriti—genetic codes

are mapped out. A healthy and nurturing uterine environment is essential for the growth and development of the fetus. Adequate nutrition, rich in essential nutrients, is vital during this period.

Nutrients consumed by the pregnant mother are absorbed through the placenta and delivered to the fetus via the umbilical cord, serving as building blocks for the growing baby. Beyond nutritional needs, the pregnant mother's psychological state significantly influences fetal development. Reducing anxiety and fear, fostering calmness and peace, and maintaining a happy and harmonious home environment contribute to a positive psychological state for the mother during pregnancy and childbirth.

Respecting and honoring the mother and fetus provides a strong foundation for harmony and ensures that the mother's physical, psychological, social, and spiritual needs are met, including the ability to perform pregnancy-related rituals. Hindu religious practices, such as ceremonies and yoga, contribute to this process in various ways. These practices not only fulfill religious obligations, social and traditions but also offer numerous benefits for prenatal care and stunting prevention, as supported by an eclectic analysis of various references and underlying theories.

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