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Warding off envy: Folk rituals for evil eye protection among women in Kangra and Una districts of Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract

In the hills of Himachal Pradesh, protection from the *evil eye*—a silent curse believed to be cast through envy—remains more than just a superstition; it is an everyday act of care. Known locally as *nazar* or *drishti*, this belief has been woven into the rhythm of life, especially around mothers, infants, and expectant women. To understand how these traditions endure, a door-to-door survey was conducted in Kangra and Una districts of Himachal Pradesh with 150 women, using a self-developed questionnaire. The responses uncovered a living tapestry of rituals—some simple, others elaborate—each carrying the weight of generations. In Kangra, women tie *black dori/dhagga* on wrists, place *banah* leaves by the bed, or prepare *black maah khichdi* to absorb ill will. In Una, the scent of asafoetida, coins from funerals tucked away, and alum or turmeric near pillows stand guard. Across both districts, red chilies crackle over burning coals, mustard seeds rest in red or black cloth, and *black tikkas* over faces were considered as symbols meant to confuse, distract, or repel the malevolent gaze. For infants, odd-numbered chilies, tea leaves, bread, or stones are waved in circular motions before being burnt or cast away.

Keywords: Evil eye, Survey, Dhagga, Banah

Introduction

The evil eye supernatural curse believed to arise from a malicious or envious glance has haunted human imagination for thousands of years. Archaeological evidence shows that amulets meant to ward it off date back nearly 5,000 years. Scholars trace its roots to Sumeria, from where it spread through Indo-European, Mediterranean, and Middle Eastern societies, eventually reaching northern Europe, North Africa, India, Portugal, Spain, and the Greco-Roman world. In contrast, the original folklore of Native America, Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa contained no such concept until the arrival of Spanish colonists, who introduced the belief to the New World.

In India, the evil eye often called *nazar* is deeply woven into cultural traditions. Many believe that prosperity, beauty, or happiness can draw the gaze of envy, turning success into misfortune. This “*nazar*” is thought to follow people, especially those who are thriving, and manifest as negative energy that disrupts even the most promising endeavors. Over centuries, Indians have developed protective rituals to counter it.

One of the most common involves *nazar utarna* removing the evil gaze. For example, when a mother feels her child has received too much praise, she might circle a handful of red chilies around the child's head before burning them to

dispel harmful energy. Across India, these practices take different forms and names: *drishti* or *kannu* in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, *dristi* or *drushti* in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Karnataka. Objects like rock salt, lemons coated in kumkuma, white pumpkins, or oiled cloth are often rotated around the affected person and then burnt or discarded in a place where no one will step on them.

Symbolic deterrents are also popular. In southern states, fierce-looking *drishti bommai* (protective ogre dolls) are hung on homes and vehicles to scare away envious glances. In some areas, strings of green chilies, neem leaves, and lemons are hung on doorways, while small heaps of rock salt are placed outside houses to absorb and block negativity.

Certain rites are performed at key life stages to remove the evil eye's lingering presence. In Hindu tradition, the *Mundan Sanskar* the ceremonial shaving of a child's head is believed to eliminate any negative energy that may have clung to them since birth. The act symbolically discards the “old” hair, which is thought to attract demonic influences, and ensures the child begins anew, free from harmful gazes. Whether viewed as a genuine supernatural threat or simply as a cultural metaphor for envy, the belief in the evil eye in India remains deeply personal shaped by individual faith, family tradition, and centuries of collective memory.

Therefore, the present study was conducted in Himachal Pradesh to document the prevalent practices for removal of evil eye for infant and mother.

Materials and Methods

Locale of the study: The research was carried out in two districts of Himachal Pradesh namely Una and Kangra. A sample of 150 women was selected for the survey.

Sample size: The total sample for the study is 150 respondents.

Sampling procedure

India's northern states include Himachal Pradesh. It is divided into twelve districts. For the study, Kangra and Una districts were chosen at random among a total of twelve districts. Two blocks from the Kangra district Bhawarna and Bhedu Mahadev and two blocks from the Una district Amb and Haroli were chosen randomly. Five villages were randomly chosen from each block. Ten villages were selected from Kangra, and ten from Una as a result. Thus, 20 villages were selected for the sample selection.

Tools for data collection

The tools for data collection were self-structured interview schedules and these were developed for obtaining information from women. The items on schedule were got checked by the experts and accordingly modifications were done. Pre testing of self-structured schedule was carried out in order to test the field developed schedules. 10 respondents were interviewed randomly from non-sampled area prior to actual data collection.

Data Collection

A door-to-door survey was conducted and data were collected through personal interview method by visiting each respondent personally at home. In order to ensure good response, rapport was established with the selected respondents. They were convinced that the information provided by them would be used exclusively for the research purpose and will be kept confidential.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 depicts the practices prevalent in both districts regarding evil eye protection. In district Kangra respondents reported that they tie black *dori/ dhagga* across the wrist, put *banah* leaves near pregnant woman bed to protect her from evil eye (Lakhanpaul *et al.* 2025) ^[5]. Majority of respondents from both the district follow the practice of tying mustard seeds in red cloth to ward off evil eye. Spreading mustard seeds in room, tying mustard seeds in black cloth, applying asafoetida on body were practiced in district Una only to ward off evil eye.

Table 2 explains the practices for evil eye protection for infant. Majority of respondents used red chillies (in odd numbers), tea leaves or half cooked roti to ward off evil eye. For casting off evil eye they take them in a fist. Turn the closed fists downwards (facing the ground). The individual casting off the evil eye should wave his/her hands from down to upward direction in a circular manner. After completion of the casting off process, red chillies are to be burnt on coal. Another method is taking 7 stones wave his/her hands from down to upward direction in a circular manner 7 times and throws away from home on any crossroad. Majority of respondents from both districts apply black tikka on forehead to prevent evil eye. Choudhary *et al.* 2017 also stated that placing a black dot on forehead was common. It is believed that the black dot will protect from bad eyes of strangers. Practices prevalent in district Kangra for wading off evil eye are throwing drops of water on hot griddle and rotating it upward to downward direction 7 times to ward off evil eye. Black maah khichdi without salt was prepared to ward off evil eye by waving it in circular manner and add 7 flags to it and keep it on any crossroad. Whereas in Una wearing coin collected from funeral and keep hand fan near pillow helps to prevent evil eye. Take alum/flour/turmeric/wick to ward off evil eye. For casting off evil eye take them in a fist. Turn the closed fists downwards (facing the ground). The individual casting off the evil eye should wave his/her hands from down to upward direction in a circular manner. After completion of the casting off process, these are to be burnt on coal. Put a coin in vessel full of oil and rotate it clockwise 7 times to ward off evil eye. Pat on umbilical cord for casting off evil eye. Applying black tikka on backside of head and under feet was practiced to prevent evil eye (Lakhanpaul *et al.* 2025) ^[5]. Keep *hing* while going out was practiced to ward off evil eye. For casting off evil eye take *hing* in a paper and close the fist. Turn the closed fists downwards (facing the ground). The individual casting off the evil eye should wave his/her hands from down to upward direction in a circular manner. After completion of the casting off process, flush *hing* along with paper in running water.

Table 3 shows the practices prevalent for protecting mother from evil eye. In district Kangra tying *dori dhagga*, black thread on wrist until the completion of third trimester was practiced to ward off evil eye was practiced (Mohyuddin *et al.* 2015) ^[6]. The other practice for casting off evil eye was to take red chillies in a fist. Turn the closed fists downwards (facing the ground). The individual casting off the evil eye should wave his/her hands from down to upward direction in a circular manner. After completion of the casting off process, red chillies are to be burnt on coal. Whereas tying mustard seeds in red cloth and keeping iron articles under bed was prevalent in both the districts and followed by majority of respondents (Tadesse *et al.* 2025) ^[8].

Table 1: Frequency distribution of woman respondents regarding evil eye protection practices

Practices	Kangra (n=75)		Una (n=75)		Total (N=150)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Tying black <i>dori/ dhagga</i> across the wrist	75(100.00)	-	-	-	75(50.00)	75(50.00)
Put <i>banah</i> leaves near bed	75(100.00)	-	-	-	75(50.00)	75(50.00)
Tying mustard seeds in red cloth	41(54.70)	34(45.30)	52(69.30)	23(30.70)	93(62.00)	57(38.00)
Spreading mustard seeds in room	-	-	75(100.00)	-	75(50.00)	75(50.00)
Tying mustard seeds in black cloth	-	-	23(30.70)	52(69.30)	23(15.30)	127(84.60)
Apply Asafoetida on body	-	-	24(32.00)	51(68.00)	24(16.00)	126(84.00)

Table 2: Frequency distribution of practices regarding evil eye protection for Infant

Practices	Kangra (n=75)		Una (n=75)		Total (N=150)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Stones	75(100.00)	-	75(100.00)	-	150(100.00)	-
Red chillies	75(100.00)	-	75(100.00)	-	150(100.00)	-
Tea leaves	75(100.00)	-	75(100.00)	-	150(100.00)	-
Half cooked bread	75(100.00)	-	75(100.00)	-	150(100.00)	-
Black <i>Tikka</i> on fore head	75(100.00)	-	75(100.00)	-	150(100.00)	-
Griddle	16(21.30)	59(78.70)	-	-	16(10.60)	134(89.33)
Alum	-	-	75(100.00)	-	75(50.00)	75(50.00)
Flour	-	-	75(100.00)	-	75(50.00)	75(50.00)
Black <i>maah khichdi</i> and 7 flags	75(100.00)	-	-	-	75(50.00)	75(50.00)
Wear coin collected from Funeral	75(100.00)	-	-	-	75(50.00)	75(50.00)
Keep hand fan near pillow	-	-	75(100.00)	-	75(50.00)	75(50.00)
Turmeric	-	-	75(100.00)	-	75(50.00)	75(50.00)
Coin in oil Vessel	-	-	75(100.00)	-	75(50.00)	75(50.00)
Umbilical cord	-	-	75(100.00)	-	75(50.00)	75(50.00)
Black <i>tikka</i> under feet	-	-	75(100.00)	-	75(50.00)	75(50.00)
Black <i>Tikka</i> on backside of head	-	-	75(100.00)	-	75(50.00)	75(50.00)
Wick	-	-	20(26.70)	55(73.30)	20(13.30)	130(86.60)
Asafoetida	-	-	60(80.00)	15(20.00)	60(40.00)	90(60.00)

Table 3: Frequency distribution of women respondents regarding evil eye protection for mother

Evil eye protection	Kangra (n=75)		Una (n=75)		Total (N=150)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
<i>Dori Dhagga</i>	75(100.00)	-	-	-	75(50.00)	75(50.00)
Red chillies	75(100.00)	-	-	-	75(50.00)	75(50.00)
Hang <i>Banah</i> leave on door	75(100.00)	-	-	-	75(50.00)	75(50.00)
Tying Black Thread	75(100.00)	-	-	-	75(50.00)	75(50.00)
Tying Mustard seeds in red cloth	75(100.00)	-	75(100.00)	-	150(100.00)	-
Keep Iron article under bed	75(100.00)	-	75(100.00)	-	150(100.00)	-

Conclusion

The findings from both districts reveal that diverse and deeply rooted traditional practices are followed to ward off the evil eye, reflecting a strong cultural belief system around protection for pregnant women, infants, and mothers. Common practices such as tying mustard seeds in red cloth and applying a black tikka were widely reported across both Kangra and Una, highlighting their perceived effectiveness and cultural acceptance. District-specific practices, such as using banah leaves, black maah khichdi, and water-on-griddle rituals in Kangra, and wearing coins from funerals, keeping hand fans near pillows, and using alum, flour, or turmeric in Una, underscore regional variations in belief and ritual performance. The recurring use of circular hand movements, burning of materials (red chillies, asafoetida, or hing), and disposal at crossroads or running water further indicates a shared symbolic understanding of transferring and neutralizing negative energy. Collectively, these practices emphasize the community's reliance on ritualistic, symbolic, and preventive measures to safeguard health and well-being, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive health interventions that respect and incorporate local belief systems.

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