



## CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS PERCEPTIONS AS BARRIERS TO AUTOPSY ACCEPTANCE: EVIDENCE FROM SOUTHERN RAJASTHAN

### Forensic Medicine

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study investigates the cultural and religious perceptions of family members of the deceased regarding medico-legal autopsies in Southern Rajasthan, India, and identifies specific barriers to acceptance. **Methods:** A cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted at R.N.T. Medical College and Maharana Bhupal Hospital, Udaipur, involving 278 family members of deceased individuals who underwent medico-legal autopsy. A structured questionnaire assessed perceptions using a 5-point Likert scale, covering religious objections, beliefs about bodily integrity, perceived benefits, and emotional impact. **Results:** Religious concerns were prevalent, with 35.25% of respondents believing autopsies contradict their religious beliefs (3.24% strongly agreed, 32.01% agreed). Nearly half (44.96%) agreed that the deceased's body should not be tampered with. A significant portion (41.09%) believed autopsies offer no benefit to the living, while 40.65% felt the procedure causes additional suffering to bereaved families. Hindu participants (N=248) showed slightly higher acceptance (mean perception score: 9.85±1.54) compared to Muslim participants (N=30, mean: 9.36±1.46, p=0.04). **Conclusion:** Cultural and religious perceptions represent significant barriers to autopsy acceptance in Southern Rajasthan. Targeted interventions addressing these specific concerns through culturally sensitive communication, engagement with religious leaders, and public education campaigns are essential for improving cooperation with medico-legal investigations.

### KEYWORDS

Autopsy acceptance, cultural barriers, religious beliefs, forensic medicine, Southern Rajasthan, medico-legal investigation

### INTRODUCTION

Medico-legal autopsy serves as a cornerstone of forensic medicine and the criminal justice system, providing definitive evidence regarding cause and manner of death in cases of unnatural or suspicious fatalities<sup>1</sup>. In India, these procedures are legally mandated under Section 194 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSs), formerly Section 174 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973<sup>2</sup>. Despite their legal necessity and scientific value, autopsies frequently encounter resistance from family members of the deceased, particularly in culturally diverse regions where traditional beliefs and religious practices strongly influence attitudes toward death and the treatment of deceased bodies<sup>3</sup>.

Rajasthan, particularly its southern districts including Udaipur, Chittorgarh, and Dungarpur, presents a unique socio-cultural landscape where modern legal-medical requirements intersect with deeply rooted traditional values. The region's predominantly Hindu population (89.2% in this study), along with significant Muslim minorities (10.79%), exhibits diverse perspectives on post-mortem examination that are shaped by religious doctrines, cultural practices, and community norms<sup>4</sup>. Understanding these perceptions is crucial for forensic practitioners to navigate the delicate balance between fulfilling legal obligations and respecting family sentiments during periods of grief.

Previous research has documented that religious and cultural beliefs significantly impact autopsy acceptance across various populations<sup>5-7</sup>. However, limited region-specific data exists regarding the nature and extent of these barriers in Southern Rajasthan. This study addresses this gap by systematically examining the cultural and religious perceptions that serve as obstacles to autopsy acceptance, providing evidence-based insights that can inform more effective communication strategies and policy interventions.

In Hindu tradition, which predominates in Rajasthan, death is viewed as a transition of the soul, and the body is considered a sacred vessel. Traditional practices emphasize prompt cremation, ideally within 24 hours of death, and maintaining the body's integrity is believed to ensure the soul's peaceful journey<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, Islamic tradition mandates swift burial and views the deceased body as inviolable, with any unnecessary intervention potentially seen as disrespectful<sup>9</sup>. These

beliefs create an inherent tension when legal requirements mandate autopsy, particularly when families perceive the procedure as desecration.

While attitudes toward autopsies are generally positive in principle (as demonstrated by our broader study findings), perceptual barriers rooted in culture and religion often override rational acceptance. The normalized perception score in our overall study population was the lowest among all measured variables (0.610 compared to 0.794 for attitude and 0.696 for knowledge), indicating that perception represents the primary obstacle to full community cooperation. Our study specifically examines the cultural and religious dimensions of these perceptual barriers, providing detailed analysis of how traditional beliefs influence autopsy acceptance and offering practical recommendations for addressing these concerns.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

#### Study Setting

This cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted at the Mortuary, Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, R.N.T. Medical College and associated Maharana Bhupal Hospital, Udaipur, Rajasthan. The study period extended from October 2024 to October 2025.

#### Sample Size And Sampling

The sample size was calculated using the formula for finite population with an estimated autopsy load of 1000 cases annually. Assuming 50% knowledge proportion (to maximize sample size), 95% confidence level, and 5% margin of error, the required sample size was 278. Consecutive sampling was employed, approaching all eligible family members during the study period until the target sample was achieved. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews using a structured Hindi/English questionnaire, focusing on four perception domains measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

#### Inclusion And Exclusion Criteria

Adult family members (≥18 years) or close relatives of deceased individuals brought for medico-legal autopsy were included. Non-relatives (police personnel, ambulance staff) and those unable to provide informed consent were excluded.

#### Conflict Of Interest

There were no conflicts of interest reported.

**Funding**

The study was self-funded.

**Data Analysis**

Data entry and initial cleaning were performed using Microsoft Excel to ensure data quality. Statistical analyses were conducted to compute rates, ratios, and proportions for qualitative data. The chi-square test was applied for statistical inference, with a significance level set at  $p < 0.05$ . All findings and conclusions were derived from the analyzed data.

**RESULTS**

**Table 1: Religion Of Respondents**

Religion	N	%
Hindu	248	89.2
Muslim	30	10.79

Religious distribution showed 89.2% Hindu and 10.79% Muslim participants. Hindu participants (N=248) showed slightly higher acceptance (mean perception score:  $9.85 \pm 1.54$ ) compared to Muslim participants (N=30, mean:  $9.36 \pm 1.46$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ).

**Table 2: Religious Perception Of Autopsy (N=278)**

Response	N	Percentage
Strongly Agree	9	3.24%
Agree	89	32.01%
Neutral	177	63.67%
Disagree	1	0.36%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%

Analysis of the statement "An autopsy is against the respondent's religion" revealed significant religious concerns (Table 2). A combined 35.25% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while the majority (63.67%) remained neutral. Only one participant (0.36%) explicitly disagreed, and no one strongly disagreed.

**Table 3: Perception Of Bodily Integrity (N=278)**

Response	N	Percentage
Strongly Agree	0	0.00%
Agree	125	44.96%
Neutral	149	53.60%
Disagree	1	0.36%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%

Responses to "The body of the corpse must not be tampered with for any reason" showed strong cultural reverence for maintaining bodily integrity (Table 3). Nearly half of respondents (44.96%) agreed with this statement, while 53.60% remained neutral. Only one participant (0.36%) disagreed.

**Table 4: Perceived Utility Of Autopsy (N=278)**

Response	N	Percentage
Strongly Agree	0	0.00%
Agree	114	41.09%
Neutral	151	54.32%
Disagree	1	0.36%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%

Regarding the statement "Autopsy examinations have no benefit to those who are still alive," responses indicated skepticism about broader societal value (Table 4). A total of 41.09% agreed, 54.32% were neutral, and only 0.36% disagreed.

**Table 5: Perceived Emotional Impact (N=278)**

Response	N	Percentage
Strongly Agree	4	1.44%
Agree	109	39.21%
Neutral	162	58.27%
Disagree	3	1.08%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%

Responses to "The autopsy examination caused further difficulty and suffering for the bereaved family" showed mixed perceptions (Table 5). While 58.27% remained neutral, 40.65% agreed or strongly agreed that autopsy compounds grief.

**DISCUSSION**

This study provides empirical evidence that religious concerns represent a substantial barrier to autopsy acceptance in Southern Rajasthan, with over one-third of respondents (35.25%) explicitly agreeing that autopsies contradict their religious beliefs. This finding aligns with extensive literature documenting religious objections to post-mortem examination across various cultures and faiths. The high neutrality rate (63.67%) on religious objections is particularly noteworthy. Rather than indicating indifference, this likely reflects the complex tension between personal faith and recognition of legal necessity. As Mahanta and Gogoi noted in their critical review, autopsy resistance often stems not from outright rejection of medical science, but from moral and spiritual dilemmas where families feel torn between honouring the deceased and complying with legal requirements<sup>10</sup>.

The statistically significant difference between Hindu and Muslim participants' perception scores ( $p = 0.04$ ), though relatively small in absolute terms, reflects documented variations in religious teachings regarding body treatment after death. Islamic tradition's emphasis on swift, intact burial creates particular tension with autopsy procedures. However, the fact that both groups' mean scores fell in the moderate range suggests that religious opposition, while present, is not absolute and can potentially be addressed through appropriate communication strategies.

The finding that 44.96% of respondents agreed that "the body must not be tampered with for any reason" underscores the profound cultural significance of maintaining bodily integrity in death. This belief transcends specific religious doctrines and reflects broader South Asian cultural values regarding respect for the deceased. In Hindu philosophy, the body is viewed as the temple of the soul, and its preservation is linked to the soul's peaceful transition. Similarly, in Islamic tradition, the body is considered a sacred trust (amanah) that must be returned to God intact. These deep-rooted beliefs create visceral emotional responses to the concept of autopsy, which families may perceive as mutilation or desecration despite its legal justification.

The finding that 41.09% of respondents believed autopsies offer no benefit to the living reveals a critical knowledge-perception gap. While our broader study found relatively high knowledge scores regarding basic autopsy purposes, this perception data indicates that families struggle to connect autopsy's abstract benefits to tangible value for themselves or their communities. This skepticism is particularly concerning because it undermines one of the primary justifications for autopsy – its role in advancing medical science and preventing future deaths. The high neutrality (54.32%) suggests not outright rejection but rather uncertainty and lack of conviction about autopsy's value, representing an opportunity for targeted education about real-world impacts such as solving crimes, identifying epidemics, and improving healthcare.

The perception that autopsy causes "further difficulty and suffering" was endorsed by 40.65% of respondents, highlighting the emotional toll of the procedure on grieving families. However, the predominant neutrality (58.27%) on this question is encouraging and suggests that many families do not view autopsy as inevitably compounding their grief. Research by Gupta et al. supports this, finding that when autopsies provide definitive answers and closure, they can actually alleviate some family distress rather than exacerbate it<sup>11</sup>.

These findings have direct implications for improving autopsy acceptance. Forensic practitioners and police personnel should be trained in delivering information about autopsy necessity in ways that acknowledge and respect cultural values. Rather than simply asserting legal authority, explaining how autopsies serve justice and can be performed with dignity may be more effective. Given the significance of religious concerns, involving local religious leaders and community elders in awareness campaigns could be transformative. These respected figures can help frame autopsy as compatible with religious duties by emphasizing values of truth-seeking and justice. Where culturally appropriate and forensically feasible, offering minimally invasive alternatives or post-mortem imaging might reduce objections while still providing valuable diagnostic information. Simple accommodations such as allowing brief family prayers before autopsy, ensuring respectful body handling, and facilitating swift release for funeral rites can demonstrate cultural sensitivity without compromising forensic integrity.

This study has limitations including its predominantly male sample

(93.53%), small Muslim sample size (N=30), and single-center design from Southern Rajasthan, which may limit generalizability to other regions with different cultural contexts.

## CONCLUSION

Cultural and religious beliefs are significant barriers to autopsy acceptance in Southern Rajasthan, with many citing religious objections and the need for bodily integrity. However, a high rate of neutrality across responses suggests that many families are uncertain rather than rigidly opposed. The core challenge lies in bridging the gap between traditional values and medico-legal requirements through empathetic, transparent communication.

Improving factual knowledge alone is insufficient, as addressing the emotional, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of autopsy is paramount. Key strategies include engaging religious leaders, incorporating cultural sensitivity into forensic practice, and being transparent about the procedure's necessity and the respect afforded to the deceased.

Future research should assess interventions like community education programs and track perception changes over time. Ultimately, by respectfully engaging with bereaved families, forensic medicine can serve justice while honouring cultural values and providing closure.

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