Superstitions help guard pregnant women

MYTHS DECODED

DR NANDITHA KRISHNA

Indian society is rife with superstitions surrounding pregnant women. From those that say pregnant women should not wander alone at night to beliefs which propagate notions like pregnant women should not enter empty houses because evil spirits might infest her and more — the stories are far and varied. However, if you look closely, you would realise that these so-called superstitions aren't without their explanations.

There are fairly good (and practical) reasons as to why some of them were propagated in the first place. For instance, the myth about pregnant women not wandering alone at nights

> 'Not entering empty houses was purely to avoid subjecting the woman to any sort of unnecessary apprehensions'

has its roots in the dark ages — specifically, the era when there was no electricity. A majority of the deaths that took place during those times were resultant of complications during labour or during the period of pregnancy. Therefore, protecting the woman during the crucial nine months was very important. If the woman tripped or fell in the darkness, she could even lose the child. That's why they were prevented from venturing out at night.

Similarly, not entering empty houses was purely to avoid subjecting the woman to any sort of unnecessary apprehensions. Empty houses may not have any evil spirits, but the manner in which they have been typecast might transform even the creak of a door into something to be scared of.

Another important ritual of sending a pregnant woman to her mother's house was based on the fundamental reasoning that the women would get complete, undivided attention and ample time to take rest at her mother's house. In contrast, staying at her mother-in-law's house would not provide her with that freedom as she would not be able to take rest when her mother-in-law would be slogging in the kitchen or taking care of household duties.

The writer is a renowned historian and environmentalist based in Chennai