Navigating Stillbirth and Infant Mortality Risks Beyond 39 Weeks

Dr. Preeti Sindhu

Sr. Consultant, Obs & Gynae Nandal Hospital, Rohtak

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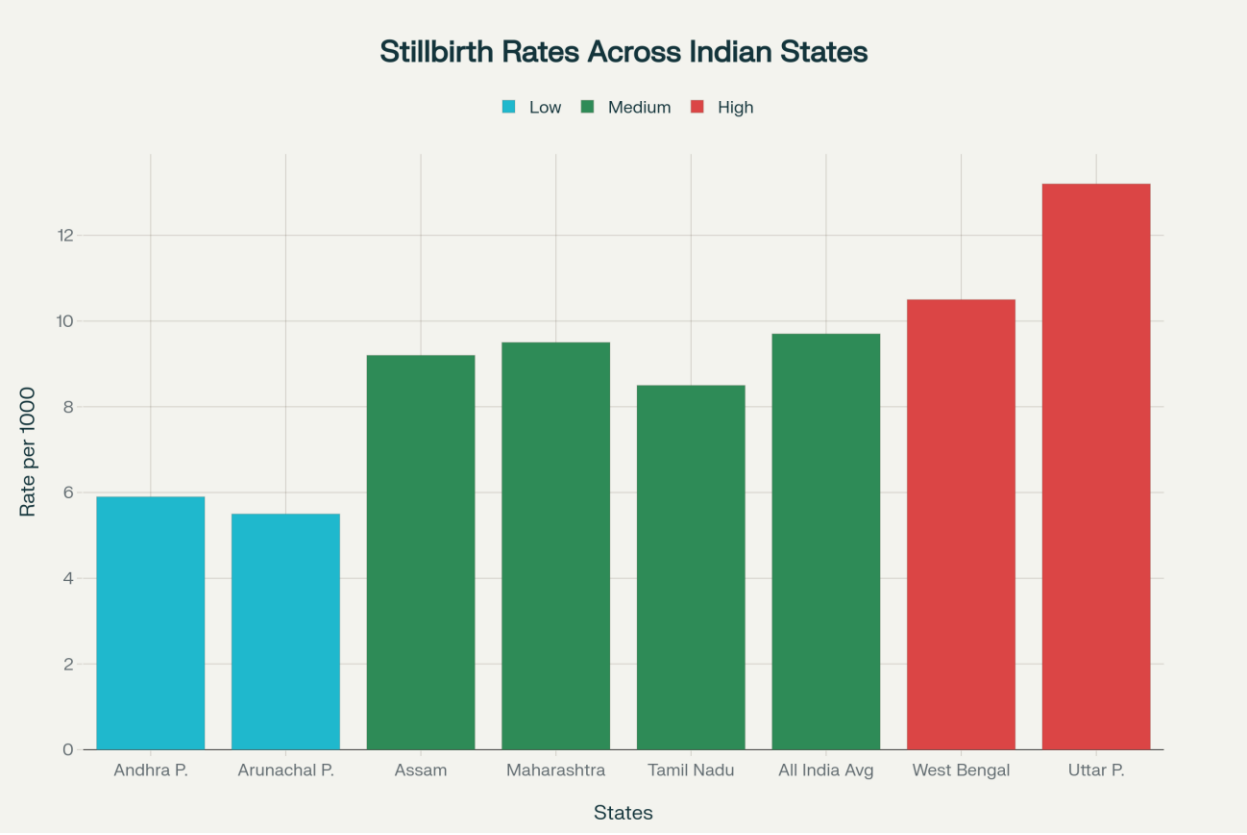
Introduction

This comprehensive analysis examines the complex relationship between full-term pregnancy completion and adverse outcomes including stillbirth and infant mortality, with specific focus on the Indian healthcare landscape. While conventional wisdom suggests that carrying pregnancy to full term (39-40 weeks) optimizes fetal development, emerging evidence reveals nuanced risks that increase with gestational age, particularly in resource-constrained settings like India where maternal healthcare quality varies significantly.



Stillbirth rates vary significantly across Indian states, with some states showing rates above the national average

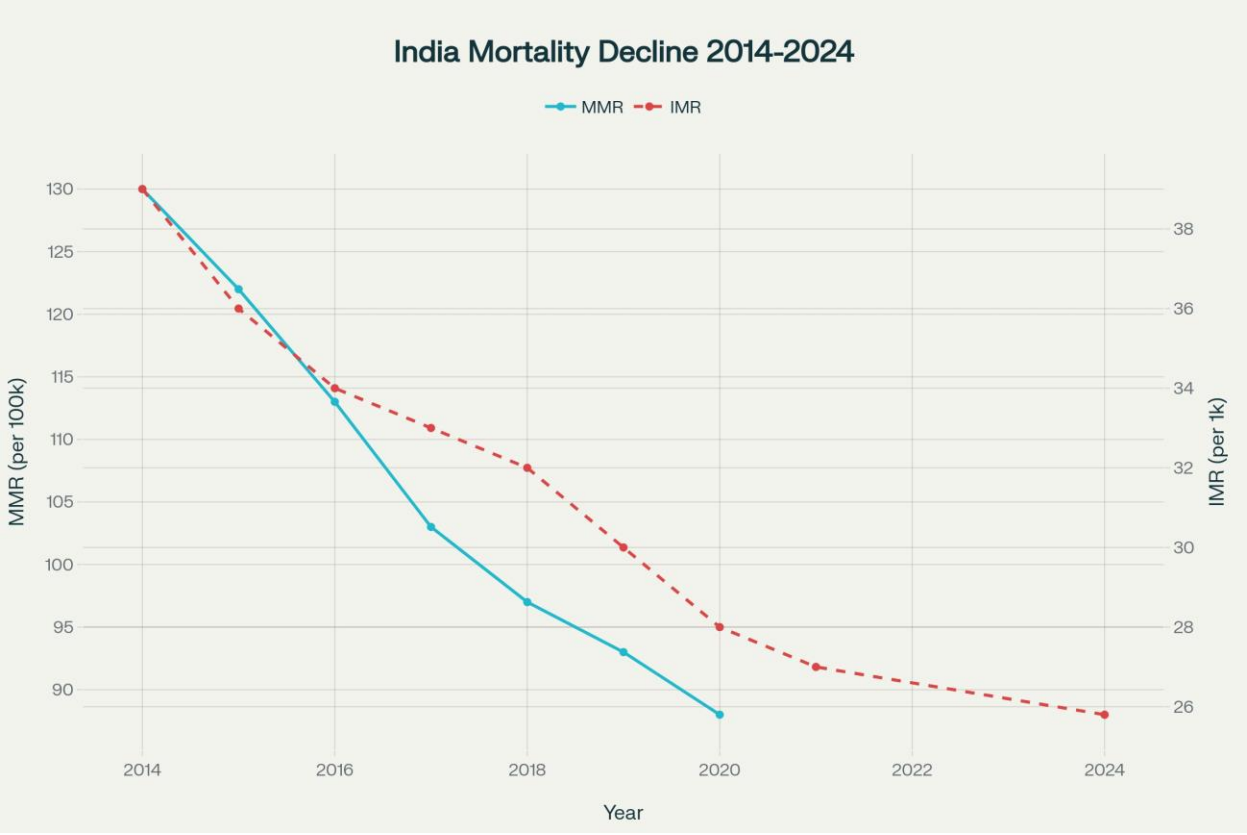
Current State of Stillbirth and Infant Mortality in India

India faces a substantial burden of preventable perinatal deaths, with **9.7 stillbirths per 1,000 births** according to the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21)[1][2]. This rate is 2.6 times higher than the Sample Registration System's reported rate of 3.8 per 1,000 births, highlighting significant **underreporting challenges** in India's vital statistics system[1][2]. The discrepancy

underscores the complexity of accurately measuring stillbirth burden in low- and middle-income countries where civil registration systems remain incomplete.

The **geographic variation** in stillbirth rates across Indian states is pronounced, ranging from 4.2 to 14.8 per 1,000 births[3]. States like Andhra Pradesh report lower rates (5.9 per 1,000), while others show concerning increases. **Tribal populations** face disproportionately higher risks, with Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups experiencing neonatal mortality rates of 59 per 1,000 compared to 31 per 1,000 for Other Backward Classes[4]. This disparity reflects broader

healthcare access inequities affecting India's most marginalized communities.



India has achieved significant reductions in both maternal and infant mortality rates over the past decade

India's maternal and infant mortality trends demonstrate substantial progress over the past decade. The **Maternal Mortality Ratio declined from 130 per 100,000 live births in 2014-16 to 97 in 2018-20**[5][6]. Similarly, the **Infant Mortality Rate decreased from 39 per 1,000 live births in 2014 to 27 in 2021**[5]. Despite these improvements, India still accounts for **17.3% of global stillbirths**, representing approximately 567,000 stillbirths annually at ≥20 weeks gestation[7].

Full-Term Pregnancy Risks: The Evidence Gestational Age-Specific

Mortality Patterns

Contrary to traditional assumptions about pregnancy safety, research demonstrates that **stillbirth and infant mortality risks increase progressively beyond 39 weeks gestation**[8][9][10]. A comprehensive U.S. study found that **gestational age-specific stillbirth hazard was approximately 2 per 10,000 fetus-weeks among preterm gestations and >3 per 10,000 fetus-weeks among term gestations**[9]. Both antepartum and intrapartum stillbirth risks **increased in late-term and post-term gestations**[9].

The **ARRIVE trial impact analysis** revealed that despite increased induction rates at 39 weeks post-trial publication, **stillbirth rates at 39 weeks or greater showed no significant decrease** (adjusted relative risk 0.92, 95% CI: 0.85-1.00)[8][11]. This finding challenges assumptions about early term delivery benefits and highlights the complexity of timing optimal delivery.

Indian tertiary care data shows concerning patterns. A study from central India found that **post-term pregnancies (>42 weeks) had significantly higher rates of meconium-stained liquor, low Apgar scores, and stillbirths** compared to earlier term deliveries[12]. The **Cesarean section rate was 60% in post-term pregnancies** versus approximately 40% in earlier term groups[12].

Biological Mechanisms of Late-Term Risks

Placental aging represents a critical mechanism underlying increased late-term risks[10]. After 38-39 weeks, placental efficiency begins declining, potentially compromising fetal oxygenation and nutrition. **Oligohydramnios (decreased amniotic fluid)** becomes more common with advancing gestation, increasing risks of cord compression and fetal distress[10].

Fetal macrosomia risk increases with prolonged pregnancy, particularly problematic in Indian populations with high **gestational diabetes mellitus** prevalence[13]. Large babies face increased risks of **shoulder dystocia, birth trauma, and Cesarean delivery**[14]. Indian studies report **maternal diabetes affects 7-15% of pregnancies**, substantially higher than global averages[15].

South Asian Population-Specific Risks

South Asian-born women face unique vulnerabilities during late pregnancy. Australian research demonstrated that **South Asian women at 41 weeks gestation had stillbirth risks up to 5 times higher than Australian-born women**[16]. Implementation of **fetal monitoring from 39 weeks resulted in a 64% reduction in stillbirths** among South Asian women[16][17].

The **biological basis** for increased South Asian stillbirth risk includes higher rates of **gestational diabetes, pregnancy-induced hypertension, and fetal growth restriction**[16]. These conditions, combined with **delayed recognition of fetal compromise**, create compounding risks during late pregnancy[17].

Healthcare System Challenges in India

Quality of Antenatal Care

Antenatal care quality remains suboptimal across Indian healthcare facilities. A Bihar state assessment found that only **30.4% of pregnant women received quality ANC services** during their visits[18]. Coverage was particularly low for **first-trimester pregnancies (6.8%)** compared to later trimesters[18].

The **Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan (PMSMA)** program, designed to provide assured antenatal care, shows implementation gaps. **Facility-level variation** in quality ANC coverage ranged from 3% to 83.1% across different centers[18], indicating substantial system-level inconsistencies.

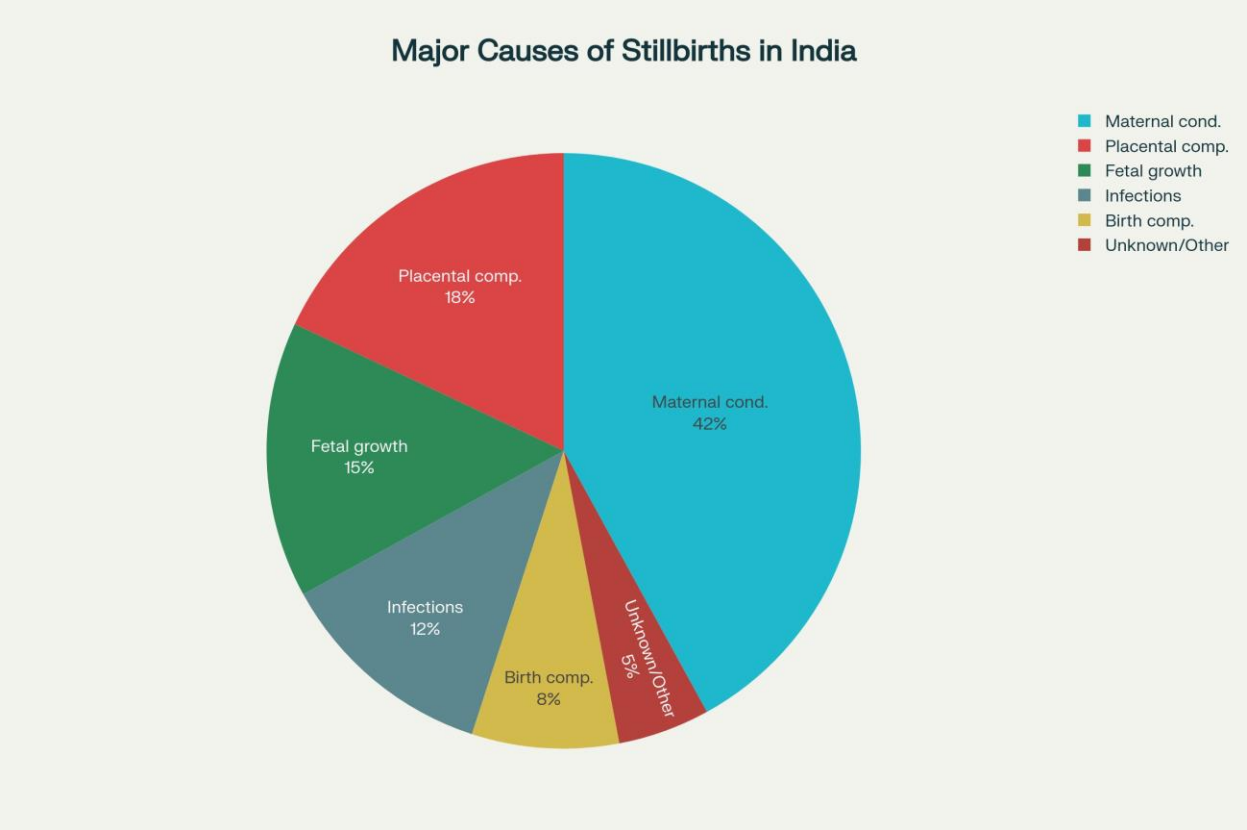
Rural-urban disparities significantly impact pregnancy outcomes. Rural women experience **12% higher miscarriage rates, 21% higher stillbirth rates, and 19% higher late neonatal mortality** compared to urban counterparts[19]. Only **17% of rural pregnant women receive**

comprehensive antenatal care including four visits, iron supplementation, and tetanus vaccination[20].

Institutional Delivery and Emergency Care

While **institutional delivery rates have increased dramatically from 34% in 2000 to approximately 89% today**[21], **quality of intrapartum care** remains inconsistent. Studies show that **56% of women received suboptimal fetal heart rate monitoring** during labor[22]. The risk of **intrapartum-related death was 47% higher** when fetal monitoring was not performed according to clinical standards[22].

Emergency obstetric care capacity varies significantly across Indian states. Many facilities lack **adequate skilled personnel, equipment, and protocols** for managing obstetric emergencies[23]. This deficiency particularly affects outcomes when pregnancies extend beyond expected delivery dates and complications arise.



Maternal conditions including hypertensive disorders are the leading cause of stillbirths in India

Clinical Evidence on Pregnancy Prolongation Risks

Maternal Complications

Hypertensive disorders of pregnancy represent the leading cause of stillbirths in India, accounting for approximately 42% of cases[24][25]. These conditions show **progressive worsening with advancing gestation**[26]. A U.S. study found that **hypertensive disorder prevalence increased from 4.5% in 2014 to 6.0% in 2018** among term pregnancies[26].

Maternal age compounds risks associated with pregnancy prolongation. Women over 35 years face **increased risks of stillbirth, gestational diabetes, and pregnancy-induced hypertension**[27]. In India, where **maternal age at first pregnancy is increasing** in urban areas, these risks become more relevant for clinical decision-making.

Fetal and Neonatal Outcomes

Post-term pregnancies show increased neonatal morbidity patterns. Iranian research found that babies born at 41+ weeks had **2.24 times higher odds of macrosomia, 2.32 times higher odds of meconium-stained fluid, and 2.38 times higher odds of fetal distress**[14] compared to term deliveries.

Respiratory complications remain elevated even in late-term births. Despite lung maturity, **meconium aspiration syndrome** risk increases significantly after 41 weeks[10]. Indian NICU data shows **respiratory distress affects approximately 5% of babies born at 36 weeks and continues to pose risks in post-term deliveries**[28]. **Innovative Approaches and Solutions**

Technology-Enhanced Monitoring

Digital health innovations show promise for improving pregnancy monitoring in Indian contexts. The **Samrakshan program** demonstrated significant reductions in perinatal mortality (18.97 per 1,000 births) compared to national rates (36 per 1,000 births) through **multiparametric risk assessment and targeted interventions**[29].

Mobile health platforms enable remote monitoring of high-risk pregnancies. **Telemedicine consultations** through initiatives like e-Sanjeevani provide specialist access in rural areas where such expertise is traditionally unavailable[30].

Community-Based Interventions

Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) play crucial roles in **identifying and tracking high-risk pregnancies**[31]. Enhanced ASHA training programs focus on **recognizing danger signs and facilitating timely referrals**[32]. Community-based interventions show **potential for 19% reduction in stillbirths** when properly implemented[33].

Women's group participation and **community mobilization** demonstrate effectiveness in reducing perinatal mortality. These interventions are particularly valuable in rural Indian contexts where **traditional birth practices** may delay appropriate medical intervention[33].

Policy and System Strengthening

The **India Newborn Action Plan (INAP)** sets ambitious targets of **single-digit neonatal mortality and stillbirth rates by 2030**[34][35]. Implementation focuses on **six intervention pillars**: pre-conception care, labor and delivery care, immediate newborn care, healthy newborn care, sick newborn care, and care beyond survival[34].

Quality improvement initiatives like **LaQshya (Labor Room Quality Improvement)** aim to standardize intrapartum care quality across Indian healthcare facilities[23]. **SUMAN (Surakshit Matritva Aashwasan)** provides **assured, dignified, and quality healthcare** at no cost for pregnant women and newborns[32].

Recommendations for Practice and Policy

Clinical Practice Guidelines

Individualized risk assessment should guide decisions about pregnancy duration rather than arbitrary gestational age cutoffs. **High-risk pregnancies**, including those with diabetes, hypertension, or previous adverse outcomes, may benefit from **delivery planning between 38-39 weeks** with appropriate fetal monitoring[13].

Enhanced fetal surveillance protocols should be implemented for pregnancies extending beyond 40 weeks. This includes **twice-weekly cardiotocography, amniotic fluid assessment, and biophysical profile evaluation**[16][17]. For **South Asian women**, consideration should be given to **initiating monitoring at 39 weeks**[16].

Healthcare System Strengthening

Standardized protocols for managing term and post-term pregnancies should be developed and implemented across Indian healthcare facilities. **Training programs** for healthcare providers should emphasize **risk recognition, appropriate monitoring, and timely intervention decision-making**[36].

Quality assurance mechanisms must be strengthened to ensure consistent care delivery. **Regular audits of stillbirth cases** using frameworks like WHO's "Making Every Baby Count" can identify system-level improvement opportunities[36][37].

Data Systems and Surveillance

Improved stillbirth reporting requires addressing definitional inconsistencies and training healthcare workers on proper documentation[1][38]. **Electronic health record systems** should be standardized to capture comprehensive pregnancy outcome data[39].

Community-based surveillance systems should complement facility-based reporting to capture home births and early pregnancy losses[40]. **ASHA workers** can provide valuable community-level vital events information[40].

Future Research Priorities

Large-scale prospective studies are needed to better understand optimal timing of delivery in Indian populations, considering genetic, nutritional, and healthcare access factors. **Randomized controlled trials** of different monitoring and intervention strategies could inform evidence-based guidelines.

Health economics research should evaluate cost-effectiveness of various monitoring and intervention approaches, particularly important in resource-constrained settings. **Implementation**

science studies can identify effective strategies for scaling successful interventions across diverse Indian healthcare contexts.

Population-specific risk models need development to account for genetic, nutritional, and environmental factors affecting pregnancy outcomes in Indian subpopulations. **Artificial intelligence and machine learning** applications may enhance risk prediction and clinical decision-making capabilities.

Conclusion

The relationship between full-term pregnancy completion and adverse outcomes in India reflects complex interactions between biological, social, and healthcare system factors. While carrying pregnancies to 39-40 weeks generally optimizes fetal development, **risks progressively increase beyond this period**, particularly in high-risk pregnancies and resource-limited settings. **Evidence-based clinical decision-making** must balance individual risk factors against population-level recommendations.

Substantial improvements in India's maternal and child health indicators demonstrate the potential for continued progress through **targeted interventions, system strengthening, and quality improvement initiatives**. However, **significant challenges remain**, including regional disparities, quality gaps in care delivery, and data collection limitations.

Success in reducing preventable stillbirths and infant deaths requires coordinated efforts across multiple levels - from individual clinical encounters to national policy implementation. **Innovation in monitoring technologies, community engagement strategies, and healthcare delivery models** offers promising pathways for further improvements.

The **ultimate goal** remains ensuring that every pregnancy in India receives high-quality, culturally appropriate care that maximizes the chances of healthy outcomes for both mothers and babies.
Achieving this vision requires sustained commitment from healthcare providers, policymakers, and communities working together toward shared objectives of maternal and child health excellence.

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