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Lullabies, Masculinities & Care

Looking at fatherhood through
the everyday act of a lullaby



Introduction

In Indian homes, a lullaby is rarely just a song. It holds memory, comfort, and care, but also carries assumptions about who sings, and who doesn't.

Picture a father awake at 3 AM, rocking his baby, softly humming in the dark. It's a scene that can feel both tender and unfamiliar.

In many families, caregiving has long been shaped by unspoken roles: mothers nurture, fathers provide. The idea of a dad soothing his child to sleep, through song, touch, or presence, sits at the edge of what's traditionally been seen as masculine.

But norms are not fixed. They shift, slowly, unevenly, sometimes in silence.

This study began with a simple question: what happens when we use the lullaby as a lens to understand fatherhood, care, and emotion in India? What feels natural? What feels awkward?

And how much of that is shaped not just by gender, but by culture, community, and memory?



Approach

Objectives & Methodology

Our aim was to understand the link between singing, care, and gender—**why some fathers feel comfortable singing to their children, and why many do not.**

For this study, men refers to individuals who self-identified as male at the time of participation. We have used he/him pronouns based on participants' own identification.

We surveyed 500 people who identified as male, aged 18 to 80, across India, with a basic Yes/No question: *do you sing to your children or grandchildren?*

The survey was done through random sampling in everyday public spaces—crowded markets, bus stops, train stations, weddings, and other such settings. Some participants were also reached via snowball sampling.

For the deeper interviews, we only spoke to those who showed interest in sharing more. These were men who were curious and willing to reflect on their experiences. In that sense, the interviews were self-selected.

We had longer interviews with twenty fathers and grandfathers from cities and smaller towns, listening to their stories about bedtime routines, childhood memories, and what care looks like in their homes.

Note on Limitations

This study focused mainly on those who were available and open to sharing their experiences. Because the deeper interviews were self-selected, the stories shared here reflect the voices of those who were already curious or willing to talk about emotions and care. Given the informal recruitment methods, our findings may reflect certain types of social networks, regions, or comfort levels with participation more than others.

We did not cover the experiences of fathers across the country, and we did not explore broader structural factors such as household income, caste, or religion in detail. These are important layers that future work could explore more deeply.

Key Findings

Emotional Norms in Fatherhood

A striking finding was just how rare it was for fathers to sing to their children. In our survey, **97% of men said they have not sung to their children**. One of the clearest patterns that emerged in this study was how fathers spoke about emotions and how much discomfort still surrounds it.



"We grew up hearing the same things—men don't cry, fathers shouldn't fuss over kids, be tough, not soft. Being a father was about staying strong, not showing love."

Some admitted it just feels awkward to express softness with their children. Others spoke about the worry of how they might be judged by family, neighbours, or society at large. Very few fathers in our survey said they sing to their children. For many, the idea of singing or showing that kind of affection felt far outside their comfort zone.



"Singing? That is odd and not comfortable for us men"

That said, a few younger fathers did share that they're trying to shift this pattern. Some spoke about learning to show love through physical affection, and even letting themselves cry in front of their kids.

It was **grandfathers who shared that they sang lullabies to their grandchildren**. Many told us that they now comfort their grandchildren in ways they never allowed themselves to with their own children.



"Earlier, we had to act strict. There was pressure to be tough as a father. Now, with grandkids, it feels easier to relax, to joke around, and just enjoy with them. It's one of the nice parts of growing older."



Key Findings

Regional Musical Traditions in Lullabies

India's lullabies carry far more than soothing melodies. They hold memory, language, and culture. Every region has its own cradle songs, called loris, lullis, thalattu, amongst other names, passed down through generations. These songs aren't just for putting babies to sleep; they tell stories, teach values, and pass on the rhythms of family life.

Across much of India, it has historically been mothers and grandmothers who carry these songs. **Singing a lullaby has long been seen as an act of maternal care.** But as more fathers today take on bedtime routines, they're starting to become part of this musical tradition too, even if slowly.

When we spoke to fathers from regions including West Bengal, Kerala, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, and Jammu & Kashmir, we noticed something interesting. Men from these regions were far more likely to say they sing to their children. At first, it surprised us, especially since so many fathers elsewhere said they did not. But as we listened more, it became clear why.

In these regions, music is already part of daily life. People sing during prayers, festivals, and family gatherings. Songs fill kitchens and courtyard. Singing here isn't seen as anything unusual.



"We sing during festivals and prayers, so singing to my children feels normal too. But it's mostly those prayer songs or movie songs. Not really lullabies."

It was a reminder that what feels "normal" for a father isn't just about masculinity or personal choice. It's also about whether the local culture makes space for song and care to coexist, whether music is seen as something everyone shares, not just something women do.



Where Could Care Go From Here?

The changes we are observing around fatherhood and caregiving open up space for more shifts. It is clear the story is still being written and there are small but meaningful ways to push this change further.

Here are a few possibilities that emerged via the deeper interviews, that could help reframe and reimagine the caregiving roles of fathers:

Part of this shift could simply come from seeing more fathers in everyday stories, on screen, in ads, or in books, doing ordinary things like cooking, comforting, or even singing to their kids. The more these images show up, the less unusual they may feel.

But it is not just about what we see. Practical changes matter too, such as normalising paternity leave or flexible work so fathers can actually take on care roles without it becoming a big deal.

Many dads still feel isolated in their parenting journeys. Simple spaces, whether parenting groups, casual “dad and baby” events, or even online chats, could help men swap stories, share worries, and feel less alone.

And it can start early. Boys who grow up helping at home or at school with small care tasks are more likely to see caregiving as part of life later on.

Holding on to old traditions matters too. Lullabies, for example, can easily get lost. But sharing these songs through families, schools, or even simple playlists could bring them back, blending old comfort with new ways of parenting.

These shifts will not happen overnight. But every small action can potentially challenge older beliefs. Maybe the real hope is that, one day, a father singing his child to sleep won’t feel like a rare act of care at all. It will just feel normal.



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About Voices of Care

This report is part of Voices of Care - a Bachpan Manao Collaboration seeded by EkStep Foundation in 2024.

Voices of Care is an ongoing inquiry into the caregiving systems that shape childhood in India. It explores everyday acts of care, big and small, and asks what makes care flourish in different homes, communities, and cultures. By understanding what enables care, we also begin to understand what helps children thrive.

Bachpan Manao is a mission and a celebration to recognize the abundance of childhood for the 0-8 year olds in India.

This work is anchored at mudito - research and design practice that explores how people navigate everyday choices, across both digital and physical worlds, by working at the intersection of human behaviour, design, and systems change.

