

Traditional rituals and beliefs regarding the childbirth among Bhumij people : An ethnographic case study

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ABSTRACT

In this ethnographic study, the researches described traditional beliefs, rituals, customs, of the Bhumij people concerning childbirth. The significance of visionary dreams allied with childbirth, pilgrimages to holy places to receive beneficent signs, ceremonial placing of the infant. These folk traditions are manifest widely in Bhumijepics. In addition, genesis of beliefs that have been preserved in myths and tales is discussed.

Key Words : Traditional childbirth, Customs, Rituals, Ethnography, Bhumij

INTRODUCTION

Childbirth has been the exclusive work of women, who labor and bear down with their uterine muscles to deliver their babies from their wombs into the larger world of society and culture. Anthropologists have consistently shown that, although childbirth is a universal fact of human physiology, the social nature of birth and its importance for survival ensure that this biological and intensely personal process will carry a heavy cultural overlay, resulting in wide and culturally determined variation in childbirth practices: Where, how, with whom, and even when a woman gives birth are increasingly culturally determined. In contrast, anthropological research in developing countries with the highest maternal mortality rates highlights the general poor health of women, who suffer from overwork, exhaustion, anemia, malnutrition, and a variety of diseases resulting from polluted water, showing that the most important interventions required for improving women's health and for increasing safety in birth are clean water, adequate nutrition, and improved economic opportunities for women¹.

Among the Bhumij people, the birth of a child was not an ordinary event. This was a gift from a god, sent by the Sky under the auspices of sacred spirits. Therefore, many of the Bhumij rituals, beliefs, and customs associated with this event have been preserved in original form or spirit in their customary perception. The Bhumij people belonged to the Mundari group of people, speaking *Munda* language in their original homeland and Bengali in the other places particularly in the different districts of West Bengal. The *Munda* people according to the anthropologists were all Australoid i.e., they bore close affinity with the physical characteristics of the Australian aboriginal tribes. In

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West Bengal, the Bhumij have been described as the original inhabitants of *Dhalbhum*, *Patkum*, *Barabhum* and *Baghmundi*. They may chiefly be located in the area between the Kansai and *Subamarekha* rivers.

Amis and Objectives of the Present Study:

The present study is mainly concentrated on the following objectives-

- To make an ethnographic account of the traditional childbirth rituals as exists among the communities under study.
- To study native concepts of childbirth ritual as observed among the communities under study.
- To analyze the factors and issues regarding taboos in the childbirth rituals of the communities.

METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted among women who belonged to Barameytala village of Bankura District in West Bengal. The study is basically qualitative one. The method and techniques as used for data collection in the present ethnographic study were direct intensive interview (unstructured), questionnaire (open-ended) and case studies. It is worth mentioning that the questionnaires that were given to the samples covered a wide range of issues like childbirth, custom, traditions, rituals and different socio cultural along with health issues. The intensive interviews as conducted were unstructured but the context of the interview questions were used as guidelines to give direction to the interviewee. The interviews that were conducted also followed a similar pattern. The sample that was interviewed was mostly women with the help of this tool in-depth exploration was possible.

Studied area:

In order to reach the proposed objectives, the present study was conducted at Barameytala village of *Khatra-II* number Gram *Panchayet* in Bankura District, West Bengal. It falls under the *Khatra* Development Block.

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Traditional Childbirth Rituals:

The birth rituals are made in with three different phases. These are A. Pre-Birth Rituals B. Birth Rituals and C. Post-Birth Rituals.

Pre-Birth Rituals:

Pre-birth rituals are those rituals when every ritual is held around a pregnant lady. During these stages, the family members specifically women observe the symptoms of the expecting women. The symptoms are exposed after one month of her pregnancy and all the aged women to see this; they understand that this woman will be a mother. Her menstruation is stopped. Then her family members got to her into the Dr. Goutam Mahata's chamber for check up. After that she goes to Primary Health center and a card is given to her from this center, the name of that card is - '*Ma abang Sishu Suraksha* Card' (Mother and Children Protection Card). By following this card all injections and iron tablets are given to her from this center. Here many types of test is also done like- blood test, sugar-albumin test, body weight etc. When a lady is diagnosed that she is pregnant

that time 1st T.T. injection is given to her from this center. The 2nd T.T. injection is given just after 1 month. More two injections are also given to her at the time of 3rd and 5th month of her pregnancy, and another injection is given her. In 9th month of her pregnancy tetanus are also given to her. Every day she takes one iron tablet with the permission of primary health center, and these tablets are supplied from this center free of cost.

‘Sadhh’ Ritual on 5th Month:

On the 5th month of the pregnancy a day is selected by use of ‘*Panjika*’ for the *Sadhh* ritual. All the females of her house come on this day. The mother, aunts all aged women of this pregnant lady invite in her in-law’s house. The wife of her husband’s elder brother makes a special type of food by using five types of vegetables; this is known as ‘*Panchamrita*’. She takes this food. Outlive with the five types of fruits, sweets, ‘*Payesh*’, flattened rice are also offered to this expecting woman. This ritual is called “*Sadhh*”.

‘Sadhh’ Ritual on 9th Month:

Another ‘*Sadhh*’ ritual is held at the 9th month of her pregnancy. This *Sadhh* ritual is the main ritual. All the members of her father’s house come to her in-law’s house with a special food, which is known as ‘*SadhhAnna*’. This time all the relatives are invited all the villagers mainly females are also invited. To begin with her husband takes food, then the pregnant lady wear a new *saree* and then she starts to eat food. All the food like-meat, fishes, fruits, vegetables curry, ‘*Payesh*’, Sweets are served on the leaf of ‘*Shal*’ tree which is known as ‘*Shia Pata*’. Then after finishing her food, all relatives are started their meal. After some days suddenly the pregnant lady feels a delivery pain at her lower belly, then the aged females understand it and then the water emits from her passage. Then they admit this lady to a nearby government hospital. The baby is born in this hospital. After 2 days the mother and the baby return to their house.

Birth Rituals:

Birth ritual is that ritual when the baby is just born and the pollution period which is called ‘*Antur*’ starts. ‘*Dhaima*’ comes on the very next day of the arrival of the mother and the new born. She brings some woods when she comes to this place and lit this on an iron pan. Then she smears the mustard oil over the whole body of the baby to warm slowly in heat. After that she also to warm slowly in heat on the waist of the mother with the help of ‘*Jaru*’ leaves covers it with piece of cloth and mustard oil. All the cloths of the mother and child are washing by *Dhaima*. If in case of birth of the son the rice is given to the mother after 5 days and in case of daughter it takes time 4 days. Before this day, the flattened rice is given to the mother. She also gives her to eat the garlic, because this very useful to heal the wound.

After coming from hospital the mother and the child enter into their house. If it is a son then *dhaima* brings 9 sticks or *Shal* tree for firing it, in case of daughter it is 7 sticks. *Dhaima* fires these sticks at the house of ‘*Antur*’. Then she smears to the mother with the oil and massage on her body then the *dhaima* warm slowly in heat on the mother’s body. Then *dhaima* also smear to the child and warm slow in heat. In case of normal birth of the child, the mother and the child return their house within 3 days. If the ceaser birth is happened then the mother and the child come their house within 8 days.

Dhaima comes after one day and washes all the cloths. The ash of wood is buried into a hole which is situated corner of the house, the place is not used. After warming process id done in four

times then she bury the ash in to this whole. Before the mother takes food, at first she throws some little amount of food into the iron pan, then she throws some food below the bed and then she takes it.

Till 9 days of the child's birth in this room where the mother and child stay, no one is allowed to enter in this room, without the *dhaima*. Mother-in-law or aunts come only few times in this room but the males are not allowed. Till 9 days this time is called '*Antur*'. It is another type of pollution period. This time the mother not allows to go anywhere, or to cook food or touch the goods. No one touches the mother and the child at that time.

Some process was present in a few years ago:

In case of if the child is born at the house then the *dhaima* to cut the umbilical cord and bury this into the land. If the child is born to Bengali month of *Shraban* the ploughing is prohibited in this time. The fire is held in 3 days. The ashes are away from the house and mop the house with mixture of cow-dung and water.

On the Day of '9 Latta':

On the 9th day of the child's birth *dhaima* comes at the morning and washes all cloths. *Dhaima* atfirst smear the oil on the baby and takes him to bath by using of turmeric water and grasses inside this room. Then the mother goes the "*bandh*" with *dhaima*. During this 9 days the mother and the child do not take bath. The '*Antur*' is mainly held in in-law's house. Only the father of this child is allowed to enter in this room at the time of '*Antur*'. During those days the mother is not allowed to touch anything, even she does not enter in the kitchen room. The 1st day of the baby's birth to 9th day this time is called '*Antur*' and this is a pollution period. On the 9th day barber comes and cuts the nails of the child and his mother. He also cuts the nails of all the family members. The mother and child get many new cloths on this day. The cloths also come from her father's house to in-law's house.

On the day of 9 '*Latta*' all member of the mother's father's house come to her at in-law's house, they stay in the next day, on the 11th day they back to their house.

On the day of 9 '*Latta*', the mother comes to a nearby pond with *dhaima*. Then *dhaima* worships beside the pond with sunned rice, egg, vermilion, flattened rice, molasses etc. *Dhaima* bury five coins of 25 paisa, lamp-black, vermilion, sweets, flattened rice, 1 *myrobalam*, some flowers at one corner of the mother's house, it is done on the day of 9 '*Latta*'. The *dhaima* also worships the '*JalMa*' (pond water) with Rs.21 and 25 paisa and also egg. Atfirst she starts to worship '*Ghat Puja*'. She makes a small heap of cow-dung and egg, is placed on this. Then she puts three resins, 3 drops of lamp-black, vermilion and she does the '*Ghat Puja*'. Before *Ghat puja* *Garam Puja* is held with mustard oil and turmeric. In all worship, the breast milk of the mother is given to these. After all this the mother bows towards the pond and she smears her body with oil and turmeric and takes bath. She wears a new cloth and comes to her house. She bows all the members of her family this time the members of her father's house also come. After bath of the child, *dhaima* give to the child to the mother and she does not come after that.

Occasion of New Name (Namkaran Ritual):

On the evening time in the day of 9 *latta* all the females of this village come in this house. The mother sits on floor with her child on lap. All relatives suggest 4-5 names for the child. After that among these names one name is selected by all and give this name to the child after remembering

of 'Garam Devta'. At this time if any inauspicious sign is happened like- if any one coughs, or any one sneezed then the name is rejected. After that new name is given to the child and then all bless to the child with drop of sandal.

On the Day of '21 Sha':

On the 21st day another ritual is held this is called '21 Sha'. New cloths come from the mother's father's house for the child and mother both. Plates, glasses, gold come on this day from the maternal uncle's house of this child. A big celebration is held on that day. All relatives are invited on this day. 'Bhojna Ritual' is held on this day. All relatives of this child's maternal uncle's house are present of this day. On this day barber also comes and cuts the nails of all the member of this family, then they take bath and this way their body become pure. This way all the pollution period is finished after this day the mother enter into the kitchen.

The honorarium of Dhaima is- soap, new saree, blouse, 9 'kona' rice, 9 pieces of turmeric, 9 'aana' mustard oil, 1 'ser' flattened rice, molasses. In this village two dhaima's names are Mithu Sohis and Latika Sohis. The *Dhopa* also takes some honorarium, there are- 9 'kona' rice, flattened rice, molasses, a new *saree*, Rs.100. Barber also takes honorarium these care- 9 'kona' rice, 10 'aana' mustard oil, 1k.g. potato, new dhoti, 9-10 pieces of turmeric.

Post-Birth Rituals:

Post birth rituals are those rituals which are held after some days of the baby's birth. Mainly post birth rituals are the "*Annaprasan*" ritual.

***Annaprasan*:**

The day of 'Annaprasan' is selected by the holy book 'Panjika'. In case of son, this occasion is held after 6th months of his birth, in case of daughter it is done after 7th months of her birth.

In the morning the cow-dung water sprinkle all the home and court-yard, and clean this entire place. In the morning new cloths are come from the maternal uncle's house for the child. These occasions is held very pomp and grandeur. This ritual is held in the house of in law of the mother. All relatives are invited on this day.

All aged females like grandmother, aunts of this child play conk and go to the Baguli Bandh with the child on their lap for bathing of the child. After the child's bath, the child wears a red-coloured fabric which is called '*Shalu*' and come to his house with his grandmother and aunts. Then they wear to the child a new cloth. All food of *Annaprasan* is cooked by a aunt of this child this aunt is called '*Kakima*', She cooks rice, vegetables curry, pulses, fishes, meat, curd, '*Payesh*' sweets etc. This time the father and mother is not seen this all occasion and it is prohibited. A place is decorated with '*Alpana*' by limestone, where the child sits. Atfirst the priest worships the '*Buro Shiva Baba*' for the child and the child has to bow to the lord Shiva. Then the little amount of the food of deity is kept for the child and other is distributed to all the children.

The aunt of this child makes a special vegetables curry with 9 different types of vegetables this is cooked for this child and this is eaten by the child at that day. A garland is made of Arabian jasmine, shirt, and pant; '*ghumsi*' is also send from the child's maternal uncle's house for the child. Atfirst the child takes *Payesh* from his grandmother's hand then he takes all the food items of '*Annaprasan*' by the help of this grandmother. He takes very little amount of food. All the rice, fishes, meat are eaten to the child by his grandmother. After that the child stays in the lap of his all relatives because it is prohibited that after taking food the child should not touch the floor.

Then the paddy, grasses, small heap of cow-dung, pen, pencils, book, money all is decorated in a 'Uthhan Thala' and keeps it in front of this child. The child puts one items and all the villagers and his family member assume that whatever thin he picks, his career will move to that direction, e.g.-

1. if the child picks paddy then he will be a good farmer,
2. If the child picks pen then he will be a good teacher.

In this way birth related all the ritual is completed.

Taboo:

Some taboos are present around a pregnant woman, these are given below-

1. **Rising of heavy weight** things is strictly prohibited, also to raise a filled pitcher for the pregnant woman.

2. **Heavy work** is prohibited for this woman.

3. She does not eat any **sour food**.

4. Coming out side **without tie the hair** is prohibited.

5. At night she does not go outside her house.

6. Also she does not attend '**Sradhha**' (bury) occasion.

7. She does not throw her hairs in anywhere.

8. On the day of 'Annaprasan' the father and the mother do not see the face of their child.

Case Studies:

Case-1:

Lalita Sardar (Age-29) stays her father's house at the time of her pregnancy. At first she does not understand that she is pregnant. After 4 months of her pregnancy she understands her pregnancy. Then she goes to the *Sonar Danga* Health Center with her mother for health check-up. 1st T.T. injection is given her at that time and after one month the 2nd T.T. injection is also give to her.

On 5th month of her pregnancy the ritual of 'Sadhh' occasion is held in small way at her father's house. Her mother is given to a special curry which is made of 5 types of vegetables. In 9th month of her pregnancy her mother makes a '**Pithe**' of molasses which is made of sesame and powered rice. Her mother gives flattened rice, sweets and molasses to her. In this way 'Sadhh' ritual; of 5th month is held.

On 9th month of her pregnancy his time all the relatives are invited all the villagers mainly females are also invited at her father's house. Initially her husband takes food, then the she wears a new saree and then she starts to eat food. All the food like-meat, fishes, fruits, vegetables curry, 'Payesh', Sweets are served on the leaf of Shal tree which is known as 'Shia Pata'. Then after finishing her food, all relatives are started their meal.

In 10th month of her pregnancy one day she realized that a pain is start on her lower belly. In next day the ambulance is come at 5:00 a.m. and takes her to the hospital. The name of the Hospital is 'Bangla Hospital'. Date of birth of her son is 12th May 2010. She comes from hospital with her son to her father's house on that day at afternoon.

The *dhaima* is come in next day. She takes rice after 5 days. *Dhaima* brings some woods when she comes to this place and lit this on an iron pan. Then she smears the mustard oil over the whole body of the baby to warm slowly in heat. After that she also to warm slowly in heat on the waist of the mother with the help of 'Jarua' leaves covers it with piece of cloth and mustard oil. All the cloths of the mother and child are wash by *Dhaima*.

Dhaima fires 9 sticks at the house of 'Antur'. Then she smear to the mother with the oil and massage on her body then the *dhaima* warm slowly in heat on the mother's body. Then *dhaima* also smear to the child and warm slow in heat.

Dhaima comes after one day and washes all the cloths. The ash of wood is buried into a hole which is situated corner of the house, the place is not used. After warming process id done in four times then she bury the ash in to this whole. Before the mother takes food, at first she throws some little amount of food into the iron pan, then she throws some food below the bed and then she takes it.

On the 9th day of the child's birth *dhaima* comes at the morning and washes all cloths. *Dhaima* atfirst smear the oil on the baby and takes him to bath by using of turmeric water and grasses inside this room. Then the mother goes the "Bandh" with *dhaima*. During these 9 days she and the child do not take bath. During those days she is not allowed to touch anything, even she does not enter in the kitchen room. The 1st day of the baby's birth to 9th day this time is called 'Antur' and this is a pollution period. On the 9th day barber comes and cuts the nails of the child and her. He also cuts the nails of all the family members. She and her son get many new cloths on this day.

Dhaima starts to worship 'Ghat Puja'. She makes a small heap of cow-dung and egg, is placed on this. Then she puts three resins, 3 drops of lamp-black, vermilion and she does the 'Ghat Puja'. Before *Ghat puja Garam Puja* is held with mustard oil and turmeric. In all worship, the breast milk of the mother is given to these. After all this the mother bows towards the pond and she smears her body with oil and turmeric and takes bath. She wears a new cloth and comes to her house. She bows all the members of her family. Then she takes food. On the evening time she takes her son on her lap this time many females are came in her house. Her father gives her child's name as- Ranjeet Singh.

On the 21st day another ritual is held this is called '21 Sha'. A big celebration is held on that day. All relatives are invited on this day. 'Bhojna' Ritual is held on this day. All relatives are present of this day. On this day barber also comes and cuts the nails of all the member of this family, then they take bath and this way their body become pure. This way all the pollution period is finished after this day she enter into the kitchen.

Annaprasan :

After 6th months 'Annaprasan' rituals is held in her in-law's house. In the morning the cow-dung water sprinkle all the home and court-yard, and clean this entire place. In the morning new cloths are come from the maternal uncle's house for the child. These occasions is held very pomp and grandeur. This ritual is held in the house of in law of her. All relatives are invited on this day. All aged females like grandmother, aunts of this child play conk and go to the Baguli Bandh with the child on their lap for bathing of the child. After the child's bath, the child wear a red-coloured fabric which is called 'Shalu' and come to his house with his grandmother and aunts. Then they wear to the child a new cloth. All food of Annaprasan is cooked by a aunt of this child this aunt is called 'Kakima', She cooks rice, vegetables curry, pulses, fishes, meat, curd, 'payesh' sweets etc. This time the father and mother is not seen this all occasion and it is prohibited. A place is decorated with 'Alpana' by limestone, where the child sits. Atfirst the priest worships the 'Buro Shiva Baba' for the child and the child has to bow to the lord Shiva. Then the little amount of the food of deity is kept for the child and other is distributed to all the children.

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jashmine, shirt, pant, 'ghumsi' is also send from the child's maternal uncle's house for the child. Atfirst the child takes Payesh from his grandmother's hand then he takes all the food items of 'Annaprasan' by the help of this grandmother.

Then the paddy, grasses, small heap of cow-dung, pen, pencils, book, money all is decorated in a 'Uthhan Thala' and keeps it in front of her son. He picks the pen all relatives and all the villagers are seen this and they are very happy because they believe that her son will be a good teacher in future.

Conclusion:

Main findings of this present study are to come across the actual traditional birth rituals followed by this group. It is quite interesting to show the various taboos are followed by the pregnant lady and also the mother who is just gave birth to her child, so this is very much unique findings of the present study. An overall rituals starting from pregnancy to *Annaprashan* rituals which are commonly known as Rice Ceremony is covered under this study. So, this study is very much important findings in respect to this Bhumij tribal group. This study also provides an overall view of the ways in which cultural values are constructed, internalized, and/or resisted within the context of childbirth and shows us that there is variability within cultural systems. And also endow with the cultural beliefs and practices relating to childbirth within this specific community and points to a relationship between particular economies and particular cultural constructions of birth.

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