

Traditional Knowledge and Social Taboos of the Bodo on Birth

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Abstract

The Bodo are one of the indigenous ethnoses of Assam who are supposed to have been migrated from East and South East Asian regions at different periods of time in the successive waves of movements. The ancestors of the Bodo gifted rich conventional knowledge and tradition relating to the birth. The formulated traditional methods and techniques by the forefather of the Bodo are still initiated over centuries based on trial and error method. The rich treasure of the traditional knowledge of the Bodo on the birth is the area of the virgin for research which to be explored more and more. Every society has own customs and traditions or totem and taboo on the birth of a child. In the society of the Bodo there is well established tradition on to the birth. The present paper dealt with the Bodo who mainly concentrated in the Brahmaputra valley.

Keywords: Bodo, Traditional Knowledge, Social taboo, Birth, Purification Ceremony

Introduction

From the facts and findings of evolutionary theories, it is known that *Homo sapiens* did not evolve in the soil of Assam. The Bodo who are regarded as the indigenous ethnoses of Assam most probably had been migrated from East and South East Asian regions at different periods of time in the successive waves of movements. The Bodo linguistically and racially show a close affinity to the East and South East Asian. They spoke Tibeto-Burman sub-family of the Tibeto-Chinese (Sino-Tibetan) family of languages. The ethnogenic history or origin of the Bodo is still murkiness and debatable and more research on the concerned subject is still needed. Hypothetically it is presumed that the area of characterization for the primitive Sino-Tibetan speech appears to have been North Western China between the head waters of the Hoang-Ho and the Yang-tze-Kiang rivers. The term Bodo signify the greater Bodo races with yellowish complexion, prominent cheek, bones and snub nose, mainly

inhabited in the regions like Sikkim, North Bengal, Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Ladhak of Kashmir etc. Similarity of culture and tradition are found among the speaker of Tibeto-Burman languages. The Bodo who are settled down in different places are identified with different name. Those who are inhabited in North Bengal, Nepal and Bhutan are known in the name of Mech or Meche. They are called as Meche in early days but now as Bodo in between the Sonkos river and the Brahmaputra river. Kachari is the name given to them in Kachari hills, Dimasa in Dimapur, Pripuri or Kok-Borok in Tripura¹.

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In the rites of passage birth is deemed to be the beginning of life cycle but it embarks on normally with conception. In the traditional society of the Bodo as well as in early days the Bodo used to apply traditional technique for the confirmation of the pregnancy. The traditional knowledge tool in detecting the conception of the Bodo are still current in the remote areas where no modern medical facilities are available. The following techniques and the methods have been applied by the Bodo to authenticate the pregnancy of the woman²:

1. Monitoring the stoppage of menstrual cycle of a married woman for about one or two months which gives the first clue of conception.
2. Examining the tendency of vomiting and avoiding of some foods to know the pregnancy.
3. Observing the growth and changes of breasts and abdomen to get the clues of pregnancy.

The given symptoms are found to a woman who is in the state of conception of a child. As and when such symptoms are found to a woman, the news is brought to the notice of her husband³, mother-in-law or any elder female members of the family or nearest relatives or her own mother. For the confirmation of the pregnancy, an elder member of the family who possessed the knowledge on it observed carefully the stoppage of menstrual cycle, vomiting tendency and other changes in her body. If there is no expert elderly female

member in a particular family, they generally consulted an expert woman of the village for the confirmation⁴.

When the pregnancy is verified, the expected mother and father have to observed many social taboos as sanction by the traditional custom. The following are the dos and don'ts are to be maintained by the concern couple during pregnancy:

1. Prohibited to consume double banana or any kind of twin fruits. The Bodo belief that if such fruits have been consumed by the pregnant woman she may give birth twin children.
2. Avoiding of consuming bitter things, sour food, hot chili, etc. by the expected mother.
3. Forbidden to eat egg. In the belief system of the Bodo it is believed that if the expected mother have had egg she may be given birth a speech-impaired or dumb child or less speaking child.
4. The expectant father also should avoid those foods which are prohibited to expectant mother⁵.

The couple are also made mandatory to observe certain social restriction which are furnished below:

1. Prohibited killing of any animal or living being both by expected mother and father.
2. Joining in hunting by the expected father is forbidden as it involved killing of living being.
3. The expected mother is banned to see and touch dead body.
4. Visiting the place of disposal of dead body or graveyard or cremation ground by the expected mother is also come under social restriction but expected father is allowed to participate in the last funeral rites of his own family members.
5. In case, husband of a pregnant woman or her own mother, father, mother-in-law, father-in-law or nearest blood relatives died, she is permitted to see and touch the dead body. However, she should be purified in front of the *Bathou* with the help of *Dwori* or *Oja* as she became impure due to her contact with dead body or breaking the social taboo condition⁶.
6. Debarred from setting on double tools (placing one tool on another) believing that if she seat on such tools, twin child may be born.
7. Prohibit for talking on the subject matters like evil spirits and devils. It is in the belief of the Bodo that if pregnant woman speaks on evil spirits and devils, the

evil spirits or devils may create harmful to fetus as well as may generate problems during the time of giving birth.

8. She is refrained from talking and thinking of blind, handicap, psychopathic, etc. believing that such negative words and thoughts may effect to fetus which may lead to give birth blind, handicap, psychopathic baby.
9. To avoid unwanted accident during the time of delivery to both baby and mother, the expected mother and father are abstained from talking on the topic of death.

The Bodo always take the precaution to protect the expected mother from the influence of evil spirits. Precaution measures are refrain from going graveyard, jungle, touching or looking at dead body, etc. If the pregnant woman is believed to be influence or given harmful by the evil spirits than her family generally use to take the advice of the *Dwori* or *Oja* (Priest) to find out the solution. If the source of trouble is on account of evil spirit than a ritual is performed by the *Dwori* or *Oja* to appease the evil spirit for giving further trouble to pregnant woman and her fetus. The offering and sacrifices are made by the respective family on the advice of *Dwori* or *Oja* who can negotiate with the evil spirits or devils⁷.

In order to avoid any kind of the complicacy, the pregnant woman is not allowed to conduct any hard work. However, this restriction seems to be imposed in the initial stage of pregnancy to avoid from miscarriage. When fetus is fully developed in the womb of the mother, no restriction is imposed on her works⁸ as physical exercise is very much required for the mother for the smooth delivery of the child. It is clear that the restrictions for doing hard work is only in the early stage of pregnancy but it does not meant that she is allowed to do all kind of work which cause danger to her as well as to baby in her womb.

A pregnant woman is advised to observe certain social taboos and restrictions relating to pregnancy to avoid any kind of complicacy. It is the belief of the Bodo that if the pregnant woman violate prescribed rules and regulations of the pregnancy including social taboos, she may be in trouble facing some serious consequences at the time of the delivery. In spite of observance of such social code of conducts or taboos by both expectant mother and father, there are miscarriage and unhappy delivery where mother or child or both mother and child died during delivery. The death of either mother or newly born baby or both at the time of child birth is called *Sor Nangnai* in Bodo⁹. B. H. Hodgson¹⁰ reported that deliveries are almost always very easy and death in childbirth scarcely known. However, *Sor Nangnai* became very common in past days¹¹. Even today also such incidents are also occurred but become very rare as a result of modern medical facilities.

Generally, child birth was taken place at home for which no separate hut was required. The Bodo followed age old customs, traditions and methods at the time of the delivery of child. It is also fact that in the present days the adopting of traditional methods for the delivery of the child is growing rare because of the availability of the modern medical facilities. However, the villagers who are residing in remote areas where modern advanced knowledge and medical facilities are not reached, they still used to continue the past practices of delivery. Not only the villagers, some people who still believed the traditional practices are continuing old age methods of child birth. In course of delivery the duty of midwife is executed by an expert elderly woman of the village. Sometimes more than one midwife is also attended in course of delivery. Elderly women of the village assembled and helped each other for delivery. It is asserted that among the Bodo there was no formal midwives and any experience persons or competent matron could give attendance and assistance at the time of delivery¹². B. H. Hodgson¹³ says that at the time of delivery any midwife was not required as mother did everything without the help of any one. The observation made by B. H. Hodgson is needed to be examined as it may be in some exceptional cases, not in general. He may have given such comment to signify the good knowledge of every mother on the child birth in those days. Such knowledge was procured from their elderly women or mother during unmarried time or after marriage which have been handed down from generation to generation. From this angle the statement of B. H. Hodgson may be regarded as true.

To ensure for safety of the pregnant woman and smooth delivery of baby, all the arrangement are made as perfectly as possible immediately after pregnant woman starts feeling labour pain. *Uwal* (wooden mortar), *Owa Katimal* (sharp-edged slip of green bamboo skin), *Dhara* (bamboo mat), *Songrai* (winnowing fan) etc. are main required materials or articles for delivery. Some metal objects like a piece of iron, a knife and a sickle are also required which are kept below the bed or anywhere inside the delivery room to prevent from the interference of evil spirit during the time of delivery¹⁴.

In early days, delivery normally took place on the floor where a *Dhara* (bamboo mat) was spread which covered by a cloth on it. At the time of delivery, to push herself, the expectant mother took help of *Uwal* (wooden mortar) by positioning on her knees and holding the wooden mortar with her hands. Sometimes, expectant mother was required to swallow some hair to generate vomiting tendency so that she could produce maximum force for pushing the baby from her womb¹⁵. The traditional past practices of delivery are growing rare day by day at present due to availability of medical facilities. However, old practices are also still adopted at the places where medical facilities are absent.

If the expectant parents violated the taboo condition, it may cause problem or complicacy during the time of child birth. When the delivery is delayed or labour pain goes on for a long time without any outcome, it came to be noticed that the expectant parents seems to be violated the taboo conditions. As and when, the birth related problems emerged or detected, the midwife or attendant or elderly women usually asked for confession to expectant parents for their wrong doing so as to enable delivery of baby without any further troubles. When husband or wife confessed their wrong doing, then the wrong doer is required to do penances by confessing the nature of breaching of taboo in front of *Bathou* alter to *Batou Bwrai* with the help of *Dwori* or *Oja*. In case of confession of the expected mother, the rituals for confession is mainly done by the concerned husband on behalf of wife as she is not in a position to do the penance because she is in the complicated condition of delivery. It is also believed that if the expectant mother and father have pre-marital sexual relation with others, they may face problem at the time of delivery. In such situation, he or she is required to confess their act of pre-marital sexual relation otherwise complicacy would be continued till the confession is made¹⁶.

After birth, the navel-cord was cut with sharp-edged slip of bamboo called *Owa Katimal* specially made ready for the purpose. It is reported that the bamboo blade should be made from green bamboo¹⁷. Midini Chudhury¹⁸ stated that navel cord was cut off by a sliver in the form of blade which was cut from a bamboo post of the labour house.

Before cutting the umbilical cord it was required to tie the navel string with thread of unboiled cotton or *muga-silk* thread at a suitable place five times for baby boy and six or seven times for baby girl. An experience elderly lady or midwife cut the cord¹⁹. Sidney Endle²⁰ supplied the information that no scissors, knife and implement made of steel was used while cutting the umbilical cord as it was done by sharp bamboo blade. He further stated that the cutting of cord was not at one stroke but in a consecutive slender cuts five times for boy with five different bamboo blades and seven times for girl by seven different bamboo blades. B. H. Hodgson²¹ narrated that mother herself cut the navel string. Such case was seems to be possibility in the remote past time when there was very few people and when there was no availability of midwife or in the absence of anyone expert to gave assistance to her. It is also indicated that every mother had acquainted the knowledge of the delivery.

The person who supposed to perform the duty for cutting umbilical cord should not be widow or widower believing that the child might not have a long life if the cord was cut by such person. The Bodo believed that there were three types of hand namely sweet, bitter and

sour. It was believed that if the umbilical cord was cut by a person having sweet hand, it took time to dry the wound; if it was cut by bitter hand, the wound dried soon and the wound could not be dried soon and the baby might have fractious disposition afterward if it was cut by sour handed person. For this reason bitter hand person always prepared to sever the umbilical cord with the aim to heal and dry the wound immediately without any infection²². However, in course of time due to modernization and availability of modern facilities, the Bodo nowadays started to abandon the processes of old age practice of *Utumwi Hanai*. No doubt, the Bodo had developed the traditional knowledge for keeping each and every body to remain healthy. The observations of taboo, restrictions on the foods, social restrictions, system of child delivery etc. clearly indicated that in the past they had a good knowledge on the traditional healthcare.

Jwr is Placenta. The placenta is buried in front of *Noma No* (Main house) for which a burial pit of about one and half foot depth is dug by the father of newly born baby near verandah. Certain care is taken in course of the burial of placenta which includes placing of the placenta gently. Hurriedly buried placenta may lead to occasional convulsions to newly born child in future²³ which is the belief of the Bodo.

Gotosa Pwtarnai ceremony is performed for the purification of the newly born baby considering the baby as impure. So, the ceremony *Gotosa Pwtarnai* signified the purification of the newly born baby. In this ceremony the child is given bath by the mother with tepid water. After the bath, the baby is placed on a *Songrai* (winnowing fan) which is already covered with a soft cloth. The baby on the *Songrai* is kept in the veranda of the *Noma No*. The ritual of the purification is conducted by *Dwori* (priest) by sprinkling holy water which is prepared with nine pieces of conch grasses, one branch of basil leaves and a ring of gold with reciting the following words²⁴:

Oi Gwdansa goto,
Nwngba gwdw mamwn,
Bangal na Jungal,
Garo na Gongar, Harsha na Mephal mon?
Dinwiniprai Bodo Jabai.

Free English translation:

Oh new child,
Whatever you before,
Be a *Bangal* or a *Jungal*,

A Garo or a Gangar, a Harsa or a Mephal?

From this day you have become a Bodo.

After the purification the newly born baby is introduced to the Supreme God i.e. *Bathou Bwrai* and *Bathou Buri* and also to other god and goddess known as *Miainao* and *Songraja* who are also known as *Duari Buri* and *Duari Bwrai* with the performance of a ritual known as *Duari Hanai*. While performing the ritual, sacrifice of the chicken by the father in front of the *Noma No* is compulsory in the traditional society of the Bodo. In course of the sacrifice father recites the following words²⁵:

Nwi Manni Agduari,

Nwngtangni Onnairjwng

Hwoasa/Hinjaosa Goto Mwnbai.

Nwngtangnw Bini Takai

Dao Tekra Hwbai,

Hw Giri Nwng, Kangnw Hwdw.

Free English translation:

Hi respected *Agduari* (*Agduari* means god and goddesses of house)

With your kind and blessing

We have got boy/girl child.

Thou for this

We have sacrificed a small chicken,

As you are the giver, please be allowed us to be the parents of the child.

With the completion of rituals and ceremonies relating to birth, a small party is arranged by family concern for midwives, *Dwori* or *Oja* including to those who are coming to greet the newly born baby. In this party only Rice-beer (*Jumai* or *Jwo*) is offered to them. Generally on this occasion mother served rice-beer if she is in good health condition after child birth.

It is unquestionable fact that the Bodo society incorporated many rituals and taboos in connection to the birth. In the traditional society of the Bodo, traditional medical knowledge on the pregnancy, delivery and caring of the mother and baby are predominant. Traditional norms of the Bodo put restriction on certain eatable items during pregnancy and breast feeding period. Due to the process of urbanization and culture contact with the outsiders, a threat to the indigenous knowledge has been emerging gradually, even though the traditional knowledge and practices of the child birth is still prevalent among the Bodo to some extent with or without modification.

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