

Notions and Rituals Concerning Birth among the Oraon Community in North Bangladesh :

A Case Study

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Like other communities of Bangladesh the Oraons ¹ also observe many rituals regarding birth. Here I will discuss some of them and focus on their meanings. Moreover, I will consider their specific characteristics and describe how the Oraons themselves feel and understand these traditional practices.

1. Ritual for Pregnancy and gender identification before child birth

The Oraon community observes a special ritual for a pregnant woman. ² The ritual is done during seventh or eighth month of pregnancy. ³ In this ceremony they identify the gender of the forthcoming child. They follow a traditional way to determine the gender of the child. They do it in a ceremonious way. As they live in a backward society, poor economic condition, and abstained from modern medical facilities, they follow the traditional way for determination of gender. Though now-a-days people can know the gender of the yet-to-born child through medical check-up, still they follow their own traditional method to do it. ⁴

For this ritual they invite the experienced aged people to determine the gender of the child. The guests also come with various kinds of gifts and foods. First, the pregnant woman is bathed with turmeric mixed water, and adorned with new attire. Then she pays homage to the aged persons present there. Then, some clay collected from river or pond is given her to eat. They believe that the clay keeps the stomach clear from indigestion, and as a result the child can grow safely in the mother's womb. ⁵ After the ritual, she is entertained with dainty food.

Birth of a child is the blessing of God. This is the Oraon concept of birth. Miscarriage is considered to bring ill-luck to the family. It is also thought that it is a punishment inflicted on the couple by God for a grievous sin committed by them previously. Mostly, the sins of the females are being considered responsible for miscarriage. So, the aged persons make the pregnant woman aware about her responsibilities during pregnancy and encourage her to carry the child with great care. The sages teach her various rules and norms, especially how to take care of the child in the womb and to give birth to

the child. They also advise her to follow the customs of their society during the carrying of the child in the womb. Especially the grandparents of the pregnant woman make many kinds of jokes and enjoy themselves in many ways. The ambience is filled with homeliness.

The wise ones forecast the gender of the child by considering the various characteristics or symptoms of the pregnant woman. When I asked some aged persons of Harirampur Chatnipara Village of Nababgong *Upazila* (sub-district) in Dinajpur district, whether the forecast came true, they promptly answered that it did in many cases, although they admitted that it failed sometimes. Later, all the guests are entertained with sweets and various kinds of cakes and tea. They enjoy singing, dancing, and drinking home-brewed wine. The following symptoms are mainly considered to determine the gender of the yet-to-born child:⁶

1. The child in the womb will be male if—

- a. The woman bends her right hand more in the time of movement and while walking the stepping is rapid with her right leg producing more sound than the left one.
- b. While standing up or sitting down the woman rests more on the right hand to perform the action.
- c. The face or complexion gets gloomy and the eyes get deeper because the child in the womb makes fast movements.
- d. Because of the load in the womb the woman tends to lean more towards right.

2. The child in the womb will be female if—

- a) The woman bends her left hand more at the time of movement and while walking the stepping is rapid with her left leg producing more sound than the right one.
- b) Her complexion remains normal because the child in the womb moves less.
- c) During standing up or sitting down the pregnant woman puts much pressure on left hand.

Considering the rituals it seems that the ritual is mainly performed to make the pregnant woman aware about the responsibilities during the pregnancy period, since giving birth to a child is a complex matter.

2. Taboo

Among the Oraons, pregnant women have to observe the following taboos:

- a) She should not go to the burial ground;
- b) Both husband and wife are allowed to see the dead body of a person, but neither the pregnant woman nor her husband should touch the dead body. The husband may go to the burial ground, but he should not participate in digging the grave for consigning the dead body in it. He should not also pour earth on the dead body. The pregnant woman is not allowed to eat cooked food in the house of the deceased person, whereas the husband may take cooked food in that house.
- c) The pregnant woman should not attend a birth ceremony or on a girl in puberty pollution. If she violates the taboo, the foetus may suffer injury resulting in abortion.

3. Notions regarding delivery

At the time of delivery, the doors and windows in the room are completely closed. A midwife called *kushrāin* and a few women (mother, mother-in-law, elder sister and other elderly neighboring women) assist the delivery. Male members, unmarried girls and children are strictly prohibited to enter the room during the birth of the child. The doors and windows are kept closed mainly because they firmly believe that during the time of delivery a ghost called *carā curni* comes in the guise of a black cat to suck the blood released and umbilical cord of the child which is called *kuddā* in the colloquial language of Oraon.⁷ They also believe that due to the influence of this inauspicious ghost, the child will get sick and die earlier. When a child is born, they announce it by playing drum, Kasha,⁸ flute and *huludhvani* (a chorus sound by the women), etc.⁹ In the case of Muslims, they declare the birth of a child by giving Azan at house yard.

After the delivery, *kuddā*, the umbilical cord, is cut off. The *kushrāin* (midwife) cuts the umbilical cord of the child by *jhikṭi*¹⁰ or a sharp bulk of bamboo. Now-a-days, many use either blade or knife to do it. To dry the remaining umbilical cord, they use the dried bulk powder of bamboo on it. They keep the umbilical cord on a broken *kenter* (winnowing fan made of bamboo) and cover it with ashes. They then bury the *kuddā* in the floor of the delivery house and keep fire on it.¹¹ They call it *burshi* in their colloquial language. Other Buddhist communities and Hindus also bury it, but outside of the house.

Meanwhile the child gets its first bath with water collected two or three days earlier. The baby is bathed with mustered oil mixed with green turmeric. Then, for first food they put some milk of a Nanny-goat in the mouth of the newborn baby, and the mother is fed with hot water mixed with green turmeric after the delivery. Besides, she is also provided with foods that contain high protein.¹²

After delivery, they keep a knife or an object made of iron and fire beside the bed of the newborn baby and mother. A bangle or bracelet made of iron is adorned on the hand of the mother.¹³ It is believed that during the delivery period, the mother, baby and the house remain impure inviting evil spirits, which can harm the mother and the infant. Burning fire and keeping iron objects drive away the evils spirits called *curni* from the house. So, they take the cautious measure to keep the mother and child free from evil spirits. Visitors who enter the house to see the baby also have to touch the fire to drive away the dangerous spirits or influences. In the view of Dr. Dilip Kumar Barua and Dr. Mitsuru Ando,

“According to Bengali Buddhist and Hindu custom, fire is to be burnt in the delivery room for a number of purposes. Both Baruas and Hindus believe that evil spirits or evil gods are likely to harm the mother and infant, as they are in a state of ritual impurity. By burning fire, these evil spirits can be kept away from the house.”¹⁴

In my opinion, this system has a scientific basis, too. The house is heated and insects, mosquitoes, flies and other harmful creatures make their way out of the house. In addition, fire is a source of energy enabling the baby and the mother to develop resistant to illness, lethargy and weakness.

Like other communities (Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian) of Bangladesh, the Oraon also performs some rituals to re-establish the purity after delivery. After five or six days, the umbilical cord of the child gets dry and drops itself. They secretly bury it near the main entrance (door) of the house. They do this because they believe that if any woman incapable of motherhood steals the umbilical cord, she will be able to get pregnant but the mother whose child's umbilical cord is stolen will be infertile in turn.

4. Purity Ritual

All religious communities in Bangladesh believe that some impurity prevails in the house and in the body of the mother and infant after the delivery of the child. Each community re-establishes purity by performing a number of rituals which are very specific in their contents. The Oraon community also observes some rituals to re-establish purity after birth.¹⁵

4.1. *Tuwlicutti* or First Head Shaving Ceremony

Tuwlicutti or the first head shaving ceremony is observed as the first ritual to re-establish purity after birth. They shave the hair of the child in a ceremonious way which is called *Tuwlicutti* in their language. *Tuwlicutti* means the hair of the baby with which s/he is born. It is noteworthy that they perform this ritual on an odd day, i.e., 3rd, 5th, 7th or 9th day after birth.¹⁶

The first hair of the baby is shaved with celebration. Guests, kith and kin, are invited on this occasion. They decorate the house yard with flowers, balloons, colorful papers, flags, garlands, etc. They cover the yard by canopy and under the canopy a bed sheet is spread on the mid-yard keeping it onto the east-west direction. A *duvahā* (big pot filled with water), a *donā* (a small pot used for pouring water) and a *khura* (razor or shaving blade) are kept beside the bed sheet. The grandparents (maternal or paternal) of the baby touch the head of the baby and shave off the head carefully.

In these days, Oraon Buddhists also invite Buddhist monks from their nearest monastery. They consider that the monk's blessing is necessary to ensure a sound and happy life for the new born baby. First of all, all present there take refuge in the five precepts (*pañcasīla*) along with three refuges (*trisarana*). After this the Bhikkhus (Monks) utter verses from the holy Pitaka, especially from the *Mangala-sutta*, *Ratana-sutta* etc. The monk keeps hand along with razor or shaving blade on the head of the baby and blesses him. A feast may be arranged and monks may be entertained in order to make the occasion memorable together with seeking blessing for the child.

After the shaving, the child is bathed with oil and turmeric. After the bath, the child is primed with new attire. A new born baby is not allowed to wear any attire, except for a small cloth to cover the genitals before this ritual. It is the Oroan's social norm.¹⁷ Until the child's head is shaved, the mother is not allowed to go to other households with the child. Neither she is allowed to do any domestic work or religious/social activities during the period of impurity. Moreover, she cannot touch any food and drinks prepared for other members in the house. Furthermore, the neighbors cannot lend any utensils and money from this house. They believe that the hair with which the child is born contains poisons and it would cause unhappiness in the family and to the neighbors.

Among all religious communities,¹⁸ women are commonly prohibited to do any domestic work or religious activities during the period of impurity. It seems to me that it has a hygienic basis, both physically and mentally. She is extremely tired after giving birth, and she needs time to rest and recover. Through the ritual she is provided with opportunity to recover herself physically and mentally.

4.2. *Chāti* or a ritual related to purification, clan identification, and naming

These rituals are observed to identify the clan of the child, to purify the mother and child, and for naming the child. They are performed within 5-9 days after the birth. Sometime they are held on the same day of the head shaving ceremony. Until the *chāti* ritual, the family is considered or termed as impure family.

4.2.1. Purification of the Mother

On the day of *chāṭi*, the *kushrāin* (mid-wife) along with her companion clean the house and the house yard of the mother by pasting cow-dung on the walls. They also clean the cloths of the mother by hot water mixed with ashes. Now-a-days they use the soap instead of ashes. Then, they paste oil and turmeric on the body of the mother after bath. After the bath she wears new clothes or garments, and goes to bring water from the *kuā* (a ring-well) or pond keeping the pitcher on to the waist. Going to the pond, first she burns candles and incenses and pastes vermilion (*sindur*) on her forehead, and then sprinkles water on her body three times. It is followed by paying homage to the god *Dharmesh* and she gets back home along with water in the pitcher. This water is used for all works related to *chāṭi* ceremony. After finishing the ceremony, the mid-wife ¹⁹ *kushrāin* and her accompany are entertained with dainty food, cloths, money and home-brewed wine (*hāriā*). In this way, the purity of the mother is re-established.

4.2.1. Rituals for Naming

Generally a newborn baby's name is given in the *chāṭi* ceremony after shaving head. At first, the grandparents take the child on the lap. Then, facing east direction the grandparents sit under the canopy along with *Pāhān* (priest), *Pāñcāra* (a village leader) and kith and kin. After paying homage to their ancestors and Dharmesh god, the grandfather or grandmother gives the name of the child. Generally the Oraons name a child after the name of the day of birth.²⁰ For example, a baby who is born on Wednesday is named as *Budhuā*. *Budh* is a Bengali term meaning Wednesday. In a similar way, *Birshā* for a baby who is born on *Brihaspati* or Thursday, *ṣukrā* (*Sukra*, Friday) etc. If the child is female then the name would be *Budhnī*, *Birshī* or *ṣukrī*, etc. They also give names in the names of flowers and fruits.²¹ Mostly the first name of a child is given based on the ancestor's name. After naming, the family members or relatives offer various kinds of gifts, such as cloths, dolls, cradles, toys, money, fruits, utensils, etc. to the child. Muslim community arranges a ritual for naming of the child one month or three months after the birth. They call it *ākikā*. During the *ākikā* ritual they sacrifice two goats or two sheeps if the child is male. In the case of female they sacrifice a goat or a sheep and entertain the guests with its meat. But the parents of the child cannot eat the meat.²² Hindu community also has a ritual for naming the child. In the case of male child they do it in odd months, and for female child they arrange it in even months.²³ All the religious communities consult horoscope to decide an auspicious day for naming ceremony.

4.2.3. Clan Identification Ritual

In socio-religious terms, to keep the clan identity is one of the utmost concerns for Oraon community. They believe in reincarnation. They also believe that if someone dies at an early age or the death is caused by any accident, he or she did not come from their clan. To determine the clan of the baby they

invite the priest called *Pāhāna* or aged persons of the village. A puja is offered to their ancestors called *Purakhāra* and to their main god Dharmesh. Then, a group of five wise men called *Pāñcāra* is formed who take their position near the worship place with the child to determine from which clan the child has come. The guests and relatives also participate with the *Pāñcāra*.

The baby's mother brings water in plate, silver coins, a handful paddy, some grass called *durvā* and turmeric placed on a winnowing fan (*kulā/ kenter*) as the ingredients of the puja to the ancestors (*Purakhāra*) and Dharmesh god. The following prayer is dictated for the ancestors and main god:

“E ipur āur ā-puratā purakhāro ema mina horamāra gusāna doyā neā lāgadana. Emahaya bhula cukāna chemā nānake, emahaya hurminuma sāriyāake uike. Ema pāñchāma khekkyāntā dāsho ālñglina joṛacakāmaki gohrāra lāgadāma-e emahaya kohā urbāyo. Ema pāñchāma kiiyā, māiyā nina dhārme, pāñchāra māiyā dāyā nāñjāra uike. i-khādde nehike ekā khuṭati bārācāsa/bārācā neka gāne joṛacakāya rāādāya ādina teñgā āmake nuṛāa.”

(Trans.) To the people of the worldly life and the departed ancestors, we are wishing the blessing from you all. Forgive our mistakes and keep our everything fine. We five people are all praying with ten folded fingers each to the greatest Lord, we five are down here and you are up there. Keep your holy blessings on us. Tell us from which clan the child has come, do not keep it hidden.

After the prayer, the silver coin is dropped into the water on the plate. Then, two grains, obtained from the seeds, are dropped into the water on the plate. While they drop the seeds, in case of male child the name of grandfather and in case of female child the name of grandmother are announced. The grains, by the name of the grandfather or grandmother, are observed. If in a certain time span the grains do not come closer and stick to each other then they sink the grains in the water. The process is repeated with new grains by the name of uncle and aunt. If the rice grains do not stick together in the second time, then they conclude that the child has not come from their own clan. On the other hand, if the rice grains do get together in both times then they conclude that the child has come from their own. If the child is determined to come from the same clan, the *Pāñcāras* (group of village leaders) sprinkle the water from the plate on the roof of the house. If the child does not come from their own clan then they mix the water with turmeric paste and anoint it on the child. Beautifying in this way they welcome the child into their clan.

After the ritual they float the child's hair into the river. They believe that the hair will fall into the sea through the river and will meet with the hair of his or her prospective husband or wife.²⁴ Finally, the grandmother washes the legs of the child, then she washes the legs of all *Pāñcāras*. Thereafter, all relatives and guests offer largess and they bless the child keeping their hand on the head of the child or taking the child onto the lap. All guests are then entertained with dainty foods and *hāriā*.²⁵

5. Conclusion

The life style of Oraon community is very simple. They lead their lives according to the movements of nature. Just as the trees and bushes of the forests burgeon, flowers blossom and fruits ripen, they (the Oraon) live a simple life. Like other religious and ethnic groups of Bangladesh, birth is an important chapter in the life of Oraon. Though modern medical facilities are available especially in the cities and towns of Bangladesh, the Oraons give birth in their own homes. It seems to me that they do so owing to poverty rather than tradition. As child delivery is a complex matter, they follow various norms during the pregnancy period and child delivery. The risk is definitely high in case of such child delivery. So, they observe many rituals for normal delivery, and re-establish the purity. In this regard, they are highly influenced by the popular beliefs like other tribal peoples of Bangladesh. Though they take refuge in Buddhism, they could not give up their tradition and popular beliefs in the case of child delivery. Moreover, their purity ritual is different from other Buddhist ethnic groups in terms of beliefs and practices.



A Buddhist Monk blessing the child and reciting verses.



A Buddhist monk touching the blade on the head of the child.



Devotes taking the five precepts (*pañcasīla*) and reciting three refuges (*trisarana*).



Food is offered to the Buddhist Monk



Performing the first head shaving ceremony



Child is bathed by grandmother after head shaving



Oil is pasted on the body of the child.



The child is adorned with new attire.



Guests are entertained



Villagers and guests are entertained with Haria.

Notes and References

1. Oraon is one of the oldest indigenous communities in Bangladesh. Oraon is included in Dravidian community. They have black complexion. Their noses are flat and their hair black and almost curled, skull is round and the height is medium. Oraon community is divided into many clans. In Bangladesh they mainly live in Bogra, Dinajpur and Naogan districts. There is also an Oraon population living in the tea estates in Sylhet region. Though previously the Oraons were the followers of animism, now-a-days they are converting to Theravada Buddhism. They started to observe the Theravada religious rituals along with their colorful popular rituals.
2. Barua Buddhist community also observes rituals during the pregnant period. (For details: Barua and Ando, *Syncretism in Bangladeshi Buddhism*, Supported by Grant in Aid for JSPS Fellows, Japan, 2002, p. 160f.)
3. The information is collected from the aged persons of Barakendri Village of Pachibibi, Joypurhat.
4. Educated and rich people are now taking modern medical facilities.
5. This opinion is collected from the aged women of Harirampur Chatnipara Village of Nababgong, Dinajpur.
6. Arun Khalkho, *Bangladesher Oraon Adibai*, Master Printers, Dinajpur, 1985, p. 26.
7. *Ibid*, p.28.
8. One kind of musical instrument made of silver.
9. Jagannath Barua, *Uttarbanger Itihash Oitirjho O Adibasi Oraoder Jibondhara*, Nabarag Prokashani,

Dhaka, 2009, p. 214.

10. Broken piece of clay pitcher.
11. *Bangladesher Oraon Adibai, op. cit.*, p.28.
12. *Uttarbanger Itihash Oitirjho O Adibasi Oraoder Jibondhara*, op. cit., p.214.
13. *Bangladesher Oraon Adibai, op. cit.*, pp.28-29.
14. *Syncretism in Bangladeshi Buddhism, op. cit.*, p. 161.
15. The Oraon community also observes rituals to reestablish purity after death.
16. *Uttarbanger Itihash Oitirjho O Adibasi Oraoder Jibondhara*, op. cit., p.214.
17. *Bangladesher Oraon Adibai, op. cit.*, p. 29.
18. Therese Blanchet, *Meanings and Rituals of Birth in Rural Bangladesh*, Dhaka, 1987, pp. 32ff.
19. The midwife is required to stay for some time after delivery for assisting the new mother and for nursing the child. She is given cooked food daily. She collects remuneration for the services. Her remuneration varies from village to village. The following table shows the period of her stay and the remuneration of her services in different villages.

Table
Particulars of Midwife

Village	No. of Days Attended	Cash	Remuneration kinds
Chatnipara	2-3 days	Tk. 80-90	Hand brew wine, Food, new saree and meal
Barakendri	3-5 days	Tk. 90-100	Hand brew wine, meal, betel leaf and betel nut
Surjapur	2-3 days	Tk. 70-80	Hand brew wine, new saree, meal and food
Pirpal	3-4 days	Tk. 80-90	Hand brew wine, meal and new saree

Source: Field Work.

20. *Bangladesher Oraon Adibai, op. cit.*, p. 31.
21. Ramkanta Singha, *Bangladesher Nritattik Janagosti*, A. H. Publishing House, Dhaka, 2002, p.165.
22. Dr. Wakil Ahmed, *Banglar Loka-Sanskriti*, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1974, p. 169.
23. Nagendranath Basu (ed.), *Bishwakosh*, Vol, 10, Calcutta, P. 9.

^{24.} *Bangladesher Nritattik Janagosti, op, cit., p. 166.*

^{25.} *hāriā* is one kind of home-brewed wine made from rice.

Keywords: Oraon, Purity ritual, Pregnancy, *Tuwlicutti*, Naming, *ākikā*, Dharmesh.
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