

CHILD REARING PRACTICE AMONG THE PLAIN DWELLING GAROS OF GOALPARA DISTRICT, ASSAM

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Introduction

The process of bringing up a child plays a vital role in society, It is the foundation on which the personality of a child and its future depends, Freud (1917) talked of five primary areas based on which personality took shape : oral, anal, sexual. dependency and aggression learning. His hypothesis notes that early indulgence or permissiveness by adults in one of the five primary areas of learning will accentuate the capacity of that area to produce satisfaction in later life. Conversely early life restriction would accentuate adult conflict, guilt, shame etc.

Human infants face a prolonged period of body growth in which they are totally dependent on others for food and care, including protection from harm and accident. Child-rearing process includes the process of survival, developing a child's behavioural capacity for economic self-maintenance and developing a child's behavioural capacity to use and develop various cultural values. In cultures with high infant mortality parents will have an overwhelming urge to make the infant survive. Similarly in societies where the food is scarce, parents will try to make the children more economically self-sufficient. The enculturation process goes a long way in aiding the proper development of a child. That the process of child rearing itself starts from the planting of the seed and its nurture is undoubted. But the level of its continuance differ from society to society.

The Ethnographic Scenerio

Keeping in mind the above mentioned traits, an attempt has been made to study the child-rearing process of the Garos of the villages of Bakrapur, Daglapara, Kasumari and Nishangram.

Though Bakrapur has been taken as the focal area, data from the other villages have also been incorporated. These villages are populated by the Garos, a matrilineal tribe of the Mongoloid stock. They have five clans, namely, Sangma, Marak, Momin, Areng and Shira. They practice clan exogamy and matrilocality. These villages fall under the jurisdiction of Goalpara district, Assam. However, they lie very close to the state of Meghalaya, with some areas esp. in Nishangram, falling under its jurisdiction. It is interesting to note that the Nishangram Baptist Church, which is the headquarter of all the above mentioned village churches, is the Krima no. 1 of the Garo Baptist Convention. Another interesting feature is the formation of the Chigna swamp in Bakrapur during the earthquake of 1897.

Bakrapur is a revenue village under block Kustua, Damra mouza, Goalpara district and is divided into four groups—A, B, C, D. These four villages have four separate village headmen, gaonburha. There are altogether 119 households with a population of 746, out of which males constitute 383 and females 363. Literacy rate of Bakrapur is quite high (86.31%). Female literacy is 83.64% while male literacy is slightly higher at 89.06%. Majority of the people are engaged in agriculture.

Child-Rearing in Local Context

For the Garos of Bakrapur, child-rearing is a time consuming affair. At times, a young girl, *bisa rodilgipa* is hired to look after the child so that the mother is free to do domestic chores. Nevertheless, it is the mother, the grandmother and female members of the family who pitch in and look after the baby. Notwithstanding the parental instincts the underlying feeling is that just as a baby is looked after now, it will one day do likewise to the aged parents and grandparents.

Conception and Pregnancy

Precautions and observances vary both in the manner and strictness followed. For instance, a common advice is that sexual intercourse should stop as soon as a woman is with child, but in actual practice it is not so. A pregnant woman too continues to do heavy field labour in her advanced stages.

Diet control comes into being after confirmation of pregnancy. It is believed that an expectant mother should not take food too rich in protein and carbohydrates like meat and eggs. Otherwise the to-be-born child will be obese, *biltomtome dake milgen*. The pregnant woman is not given cold food, She is allowed to eat whatever she craves for be it broken pieces of clay utensils or broken pieces of cowdung and mud plaster used on hut walls. Otherwise it is believed that child will have overflowing saliva. *ku'chi onngen*.

There are a series of prenatal taboos. A few of them are listed below :

1. The expectant mother should not sit on the mortar, pillow or the doorway. The latter, it is believed will lead to difficult delivery.
2. She is not to burn firewood from the roots but from the head, otherwise there will be breech delivery.
3. She should not shout out in alarm, at every pretext, otherwise the child will also have an inborn fear of the same.
4. She should not wrap things at the end of her skirt, *dakmanda*.
5. When wood is put on fire, the charcoal is not to be broken, otherwise the baby will have black spots all over the body.
6. In the last two months, she should not eat a rice cake, *wanthi* otherwise dirt and white spots will cover the newborn.
7. She should not shave hair from her underarms otherwise the first-born will die.

The expectant father is to follow certain taboos otherwise deformities in the unborn child is predicted :

1. Killing fowls and animals during confinement is a taboo. The expectant father is also not to kill a snake otherwise the child will have protruding tongue.
2. Fixing black lac on implements is tabooed.
3. He is not to carry the knife underarms, otherwise the child will have a deformed upper extremity.
4. He should not wind a towel around his neck otherwise the child in the womb will have the placenta around the neck leading to difficulty in breathing,

Beliefs Regarding Sex Determination :

Though a male child is equally loved, a female child is much sought after. As regards the sex of the unborn child, superstitions beliefs still persist, sonography being expensive and unavailable. Certain interesting beliefs are listed below :

1. When the foetus is on the right side, it is a boy. For the boychild fears being burdened with the pitcher, *basing dedapna kena*, which the mother carries on her left hip.

2. When the foetus is on the left side, it is a girl for she too is in fear of being burdened with the spade and axe carried over the right shoulder.

3. Dreams in which arums are fried, tapioca dug, a girl is predicted. Fishing also indicates a girl. Knives, spades and firewood in dreams indicate a boy.

Child Birth :

The midwife i. e., *kamal*, is the much sought after person during delivery. Delivery for the women of Bakrapur, Kasumari, Daglapara and Nishangram is fairly easy. The room where the pregnant woman sleeps or rests doubles up as the labour room. After the child is born, the umbilical cord is cut off with a clean blade about three inches from the child's navel. The displaced placenta is gently buried in the garden. If thrown across a river, it is believed, the woman will never conceive again. The still attached placenta, *gandil*, when it shrivels and falls off, is washed, dried and kept preserved in a bottle. Breast feeding takes place almost immediately. If there is lactation before birth, it is believed, the child will not live long.

In case of difficult delivery, the *kamal* makes the pregnant woman drink warm water and gently massages the lower abdomen. If the due date passes, all ornaments worn by the pregnant woman are taken off; the covers of rice-storing jars are also removed in order to free the unborn baby tied by an unknown supernatural power.

Care of Baby :

Until the mother sufficiently recovers, the baby is attended to

by the grandmother or the mother's sisters. The baby is placed in a warm, dry wrapping, in a safe place. The *kamal* cleans the baby's ears, eyes and mouth, gives it a warm bath and weighs it in the weighing machine to be got from the Anganwadi centre.

The baby is carefully bathed. It is not given a complete bath till cord stump is separated. A large plastic or aluminium basin is usually used. The water used is warm. At times it is mixed with water drained in tea leaves to lessen prickly heat, *salmisi*. At times neem bath is resorted to. The eyes, ears, ear wax and nose of the baby are cleaned with cotton or soft cotton cloth. After drying the baby, warm mustard oil is applied on the head. It is then warmly clothed.

After the cord stump falls off, a baby may have a distended navel, *gandil ripoma*. In order to make it shrink some tie a coin placed over the navel and tied with a thread around the abdomen; However, many prefer massaging the area with warm mustard oil regularly.

Clothing used is warm but not heavy and uncomfortable. Nappies and a few loose fitting dresses are used, usually made of soft cotton cloth. Napkins are unhemmed. Cotton or wollen vests are stitched opening at the front and tied with tapes. Bibs are also used.

The baby is placed on the same bed where the mother sleeps. A waterproof rubber sheet is also used. During the day, the baby is carried on the back with the help of a cloth, *debra*, and put to sleep.

Breast feeding, *sok kana*, is the baby's sole nourishment for about a year. A nursing mother eats wholesome food like rice, pulses, green vegetables, eggs and fresh fruits. If the mother is incapable of feeding, additional cow's milk is given. But the women of Bakrapur know bottle feeding cannot be a substitute to mother's milk. By the sixth month, the mother starts giving solid food, boiled pulses, tenderly cooked rice etc. in small proportion.

For the first few months a baby defecates and wets his bed. By the eighth and ninth month, it is regularly taken out to the backyard for defecation and given toilet training. The mother

holds the baby and makes certain noises like 'e.....e.....e' as in 'hey' sh..... sh ...sh.. ...sh... .. 'For the first few weeks, the baby does not associate with the sounds made by the mother. However the mother persists patiently.

Exercise and play are a daily routine. The grandmother daily massages the baby with mustard oil. While massaging some amount of play is engaged in. Sensitive areas like soles of feet and abdomen are tickled. Since the people believe that a baby needs fresh air, it is taken on outings daily after being properly clothed.

Weaning

A child is weaned around two years or so. It may be hastened because another child is expected. Weaning is done by simply pushing the child away from the breast, giving other solid food, telling stories, pointing out objects of interests and by sending the child for a few days to an aunt's place. If it persists, the mother applies the juice of a bitter fruit, *kimka bite* (*Solamin indicum*) around the nipples. When the child nurses on it, automatically detests the bitter taste.

Name Giving Ceremony

Names given are of three kinds—that of dead ancestors, those having special significance and those given by parents and relatives without any valid reason. In Bakrapur, out of 746 individuals, 354 have Garo names while 169 have Biblical names. No elaborate ceremonies are held. The Catholics have the Baptism ceremony at the same time while the Protestants have a home service on the occasion and the whole village is feasted,

Treatment and Care of Child Diseases

For the treatment of child diseases, indigenous herbal drugs, *dike*, are used. In case of seriousness, medicine men, *oja*, are approached. Some of the commonly afflicting diseases and their cure are given below :

1. Stomach Ache in Infants: The cure lies in drinking the water where the dried placenta is soaked.

2. Stomach Ache in Children : A solution of salt or sugar and water is given. Eggs, meat and spicy food is avoided.
3. Colic : Food cooked in Soda is given,
4. Diarrhoea : Guava is eaten. Spicy food avoided,
5. Constipation : A dried sour fruit, *tekra* (*Bursera serrata*) is soaked in water and the latter drunk. Warm water and bananas are also given to the afflicted children.
6. Vomiting : Drops of girpe water purchased from the market are given. Sour juices are also given.
7. Soreness of the Buttocks : Affected area is gently washed with warm water and dried with soft catton cloth. A mild powder is applied.
8. Bleeding from the Nose : Juice from the leaves of a tuberous plant, *dumuhku* is extracted and poured into the nostrils.
9. Cold ; Garlic fried in mustard oil is eaten and the oil applied on head, chest and soles of feet.
10. Cough : A mixture of honey and basil leaves or a mixture of honey and ginger juice is given.
11. Scratching : Neem bath is given. Paste of raw turmeric is also applied over affected area. In catterpillar allergies, limestone solution is applied on earlobes. Hot stalks of arum are at times gently pressed over affected area.
12. Hiccups : Plain water is given,
13. Boils : The earth that an earthworm passes out is applied.
14. Teething Troubles : When teething begins raw salt is not given, In case of toothache, a child is made to chew cloves.

Summary and Conclusion :

The Garos of Bakrapur and its neighbouring villages accept children as God's gift. Motives behind procreation are threefold—to leave behind progenies, and the need to continue one's clan, *machong* ; the need of field labour and the need to satisfy the urge of parenthood. Therefore, family planning measures are rare, termination of pregnancies rarer. Though condoms and oral pills are used by a few, majority oppose them. Abortion is not resorted to even if the mother is unwed. Illegitimate children are given equal status and step parents accept them as their own.

The importance attached to a girl child is tremendous. A mother tries to beget as many female children possible. This need is necessitated by the fact that descent and inheritance is in the female line. The most favoured daughter inherit the lion's share of the property as well as shoulder the responsibility of looking after the aged parents and other elderly relatives. In the quest of the elusive girl child, some parents beget many sons. In cases where a couple do not have any girl child they adopt a girl from among the uterine kin members. On the other hand, since the maternal uncle plays a significant role in family affairs, a boy child is also wanted. Though quite a number of joint families are seen, nuclear family is much preferred by the educated section. Many family members have also moved out in search of job opportunities.

The Damra mini PHC has made modern medical facilities approachable. Child immunization programmes are popular. Expectant mothers go for regular medical checkup and follow the doctor's advice meticulously. In case of barrenness too, they have started visiting fertility clinics and using allopathic medicines. Treatment of barren women, using traditional herbal medicine, by the *oja* is however still preferred.

Newspapers, magazines, television and radio has helped erase the erstwhile traditional methods of child-rearing to some extent. Concepts of hygiene, proper clothing, proper diet as also tinned food have been introduced. However certain customary beliefs, practices and taboos are still in vogue. The prediction of the sex of the foetus present on the right or left side, portrays an interesting aspect—division of labour on gender. This division of labour on the lines of sex, it would seem, is ingrained in the child right from the stage of an amorphous foetus to the time it grows up post-natally. However, many of the educated section do not believe in it.

The role of the church is significant. The Don Bosco Catholic Church, Damra, perform the Baptism and name-giving ceremony to the Catholic infants. Among the Protestants, a prayer service is held at home. As mentioned earlier, biblical names like Sarah, Ruth etc, are popular. The church's influence can also be felt in

the content of the cradle songs. In earlier days, many traditional songs were used as lullabies. But now-a-days, church hymns, sunday school songs etc. have found place in lullabies.

Termination of child-rearing process do not set in when a child starts walking unaided, rather it continues till one is able to fend for onself. At this juncture, the process of socialization play an important role. The dealings with the family, friends, relatives and acquaintances go a long way in the proper development of a child. The attitude of the family members and relatives help imbibing the knowledge of social customs, for instance, that of joking and avoidance. Besides, sports clubs, academic schools, sunday schools etc. all help in building the spirit of gregariousness and the various unwritten laws to uphold it. The presence of the Don Bosco School and Nirmala Convent in Damra, the Nishangram H. E. and M. E. School and the Bakrapur L. P. School all help in imparting an impartial education. The Damra weekly market held on thursdays provide a meeting ground for socialization. Yearly religious feasts as in ABDK Sabha, Krima Sabha, Leadership Training camps and Vacation Bible Schools as well as student union conferences too aid in a child's upbringing.

Both traditional and modern methods go hand in hand in the upbringing of a child. For the Garos of Bakrapur, Kasumari, Daglapara and Nishangram villages, the former has been handed down through ages as oral beliefs and customs. While the latter has been the outcome of western education, setting up of the allopathic medical centre, the church and its various activities as well as the influence of mass media.

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