

## DISCIPLINE IN CHILD REARING PROCESS: A CASE STUDY AMONG THE GAROS OF ASSAM

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### ABSTRACT

Disciplining a child plays an important part in the child rearing process. This paper is an attempt to study the various forms of child discipline present among the matrilineal Garos of Assam, and whether changes have taken place in time. The data presented herein are incorporated from the Garos of Bakrapur village, Goalpara district, Assam. It was found that forms of discipline ranged from reproach of varying degrees to beating with sticks. Making a child ashamed of his or her behaviour is another common form. Extreme form of discipline was rarely found. The idea behind it is to conform to "correct" behaviour, and so that the child does not become the cause of "embarrassment" and "shame" in public.

### INTRODUCTION

Child rearing is a very important aspect in understanding human behavioural pattern. Behaviour of parents and others, it is seen, play a great role in instilling in children an idea of how to conform to cultural expectations. Children may be taught directly by rewarding certain behaviour, and punishing others. But it may be more subtle, like the kind of work children are assigned etc. As one begins to explore the considerable variation in child rearing beliefs and behaviors cross-culturally, it becomes clear that

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there is not a universal standard for child rearing, or for child discipline, which many construe as child abuse and neglect. This presents a dilemma. If we fail to allow for a cultural perspective in defining child abuse and neglect, we find ourselves in the position in which our own set of cultural beliefs and practices are presumed to be preferable, and in fact superior, to another. However, we have to accept that cultural variations will be there, and in some societies that which is construed as a form of disciplining the children for their future life, is at times mistaken as child abuse.

Culture, no matter whose it is, is never an excuse for hurting children, and virtually all cultures have as a value that children may not be hurt permanently, or undergo mental and physical trauma. In every culture, members of the community have a responsibility to intervene when children are being hurt. However, what behavior we label as abusive or neglectful, how we go about intervening, how we understand the causes of problems, and what we do to help alleviate the stresses, have much to do with our understanding of the family's culture and what is normal or acceptable within that culture.

Western cultures consider, for example, the initiation rites that occur in other parts of the world as abusive. During such rites, pre-adolescent boys may undergo genital operations, facial scarring, and beatings, by older members of the group. At the same time, many Western child rearing practices would be viewed as equally abusive or neglectful by these same groups. For instance, practices such as isolating children in beds or rooms of their own at night, making children wait for food when they are hungry, forcing young children to sit in a classroom all day, or allowing infants to "cry themselves out" etc.

For the Garos of Bakrapur village, Goalpara district, Assam, such practices are not found. However, for them, 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 aged parents and grandparents.

The child rearing process in Bakrapur starts right from conception and continues till the child is able to fend for itself. When a child is conceived in light, it is believed the child will be intelligent, and when conceived in dark that it will turn out to be a dork. A pregnant woman is offered food that she wants to have, even unusual cravings like broken pieces of clay pot, tobacco leaf etc. However, she takes care not to eat *wanthi*, a local cake prepared from pounded rice, for they fear the foetus will develop white spots on the body. A very interesting gender interpretation is present, besides dreams and other omens. When the mother feels the foetus on the right side, it is assumed to be a male and when she feels it on the left, it is a female. The reasoning behind this being that an axe or a big knife, *ate*, is carried over the right shoulder and water pitchers are carried on the left hip. So invariably the male foetus is scared of the pitcher and prefers to be on the right side and vice versa. The inherent idea is that even before a child is born, sexual division of labour is present.

The Garos being matrilineal in descent, succession, inheritance and residence, the importance attached to a girl child is tremendous. A mother tries to beget as many female children as possible. This need is necessitated by the fact that descent and inheritance is in the female line. The most favoured daughter gets the lion's share of the property as well as shoulder the responsibility of looking after aged parents and other elderly relatives. On the other hand, since the maternal uncle plays a significant role in family affairs, a boy child is also wanted.

The ways of teaching a child for the future may take different forms. And it differs according to age and gender. For instance, both boys and girls may be disciplined in the same manner, but physical punishment is usually meted out to erring boys. Girls are spared the "rod", but not the "tongue". Moreover after the attainment of puberty, the father and other elderly male relatives take care not to touch the girl even in anger.

### FORMS OF DISCIPLINE

Discipline in Bakrapur is equivalent to good behaviour (*bewal nama*), obedience (*kata mania*) and one who quietly does the job one is asked to do (*sontala*). In order to conform to correct behaviour, parents and elders try to teach their children. Their lessons may take the following forms.

#### MILD REPROACH

As soon as a child can toddle about, he or she is sent on errands and ordered by an adult to give small service. The service may range from fetching a stool to bringing already cut areca nut and betel leaf. This is a very important part of their culture. This is the first thing they offer to a guest or visitor. And those failing to do that are reproached as someone who does not want neighbors and friends to visit them. The elders ordering the children do not say 'thank you' and 'please'. However the children when asking for some eatables etc. have to say "please" and 'thank you' in return, otherwise they are mildly reproached. If a child does not behave according to the oral instructions given, he is mildly rebuked saying '*daknabe*' meaning 'don't do that'. However when a child repeatedly commits the same mistake, the parents or other elders scold him or her harshly.

#### SCOLDING

The erring children are scolded with words like '*jara*'/ '*nagok*', meaning 'you foolish boy'. In fact for the Garos, the word '*jara*' used for a boy and '*jari*' for a girl is a common word of admonishment. Sometimes they also refer to such a child as '*amikha jara dakaia*', meaning 'so and so is a demented child'. All the family members older to a child have the right to scold him for unwanted or unwarranted acts committed. Other commonly used words are '*denggu bipa*' (naughty boy) or '*denggu bima*' (naughty girl). The tone used in scolding is harsh and rough; and a child is generally frightened by it. If however, a child is not brought under control, threats may be used.

#### THREATS

Threatening is a common form of discipline. A child may be threatened with punishment. Common words used are '*anga nangko nigen*' meaning 'I will see you'. An adult may also threaten with words like , '*na'a go'ol amenga?*' meaning, 'do you want to be beaten with a stick?' or '*na'a bet amenga?*' meaning I will beat you, or simply brandishing a stick or knife or even an axe and threatening with words like, 'you want?'

A child is also threatened with no gifts and no visits to favourite places. The parent may threaten not to take the child to the Damra weekly market, which is 7 kms away and is a much awaited outing for the children for its wide array of playthings and eatables, and also for acting as a venue to meet uncles, aunts and other cousins; or with refusal to buy him new clothes or toys or even to leave him alone in the house. The latter is a very frightening prospect for them.

The children are also at times threatened with facing the wrath of the maternal uncle. He is the most revered person in the family and the children are in awe of him and are also very much scared of him. An erring child is sometimes threatened that he would be sent to his maternal uncle's house.

## BEATING

This is another form of discipline. Parents as well as older siblings and elderly kin members have the right to strike a child who has erred and who adamantly refuses to correct his ways. Beating may take the form of slapping on the face (*satkapa*), catching hold of the hand and pulling him (*salroroa*), beating on the body (*doka*), pulling the ears (*nachil sala*), and tying one to a post and beating him (*kae doka*). The last of the above is an extreme form of punishment. When a naughty child repeatedly does mischief, he is punished so. Beating may take place with bare hands, sticks, with the handle of a knife or spade or even the branch of a tree or bamboo. However a child is not beaten on the head. A child is also not beaten with iron or other metal objects.

When a naughty child is beaten, the passersby may also join in with shouts like, 'beat! Beat him!' (*dokbo! Biko dokbo!*) or with words like 'serves him good!' (*namjok*).

## COMPARISON

Sometimes the wrong doings of a child is tried to be corrected by instilling in a child a feeling of what other supposedly good children do. They are compared with the neighbour's children or a relative's children. A child who refuses to bathe is told of another child who bathes daily and how good he is. If a child refuses to eat some food items, especially vegetables, he is told of other children who eat, who are good and who has grown big so fast. This is very commonly done in Bakrapur. In fact, it was found that every single child was compared with the other.

#### MAKING THE CHILD ASHAMED

A child who cries constantly is talked to in the following manner, 'Be ashamed! Look at them (the passersby)', (*kratchabo! Biko nibo!*). Or 'be ashamed! Everyone has seen you!' (*kratchabo! Manderang niangtokenga*). In fact, 'shameless child' is a common way of scolding. It is seen that this form of discipline has a great impact. A child who is crying automatically stops, and looks around him or her.

#### REWARDS

The promise of rewarding a child if he is good, or if he does what is asked to do, is common too. A child may be promised sweets, clothes or toys. In Bakrapur, the promises made are kept. One of the common promises is a visit to the Damra weekly market on Thursdays. The children especially enjoy this for they get to wear their best clothes, get to eat lots of sweets and other delicacies and see many toys which if they are good and conform to their best behaviour, they might be lucky enough to receive as gifts. Rewarding a child for being obedient and good, it is found, is very common in Bakrapur. Visits to the grandmother and mother's sister's place, it is found, are also rare and enjoyable treats for the children.

#### FRIGHTENING WITH BOGEYMAN CHARACTERS

A disobedient child is frightened with tales of bogeyman characters. *Mong*, an imaginary giant, is talked of often. 'Look *Mong* is coming', is a common phrase. It is not sure what *Mong* will do, but with a description of *Mong* as a very big creature with long ears and red eyes, the children are frightened and keep quiet. Sometimes a fox or an owl is also

used to frighten a child. Various folktales are narrated to the children where evil characters are colorfully described. These also take the form of bogeyman later. At times, a non-Garo too is also referred. A phrase such as 'a non-Garo will come and take you away' is enough to send the children under covers.

#### TASK ASSIGNMENT

The Garos of Bakrapur assign certain tasks to children aged 5 to 13 years or so. This range from looking after pets at home like goats, hen, ducks, etc. to looking after younger siblings. Usually their task is to let the hen or ducks out from their coop in the morning, feed them grains, and in the evening take them back to their coops. Those who have younger siblings look after them the whole day when the father and mother go to work. It was seen that children aged 12-14 years or so, gathered and played together in the village fields carrying their younger siblings.

#### CONCLUSION

It can be assumed without much ado that the way children are reared will determine the type of personality they will have in adult life. Margaret Mead (1953:4) stressed the tremendous role played by the social environment in which each individual is born and reared. Neither race nor common humanity can be held responsible for many of the forms which such basic human emotions as love, fear and anger take place under different social conditions.

For the Garos, proper behaviour in family and in social gathering is very important. That is why, much care is taken by parents to teach their children, the hows and whys of correct behaviour. It is pertinent to note that the Garos praise a girl who is shy, modest, obedient and hardworking; and a boy who shows courage, who does not cry, who does all the errands assigned to him and listens to what the elders say without disturbing is referred to as a "good boy". Various folktales and stories narrated to the children around the fireplace at night stress on the fact that good happens to those children who are

modest and obedient, and bad things befall those who are proud, adamant and stubborn. Also that hard work pays and laziness brings doom and suffering.

The various methods of discipline, in the long run all help in instilling in a Garo boy or girl the qualities wanted in them. The Garos as such do not display their emotions overtly. They would rather prefer a private display of their sorrows and joys. Therefore, a child that cries is taught not to. A child who does not show respect to elders is threatened or scolded. Since modesty is one of the virtues for them, they always try to instill in the children a feeling of shamefulness if their behaviour is not proper.

There have been many changes in the child rearing pattern in Bakrapur. For instance, lullabies have taken the form of Sunday school songs of the church. And instead of the legendary character *Mong*, who was earlier used to frighten adamant children it is now Satan. One of the upcoming treats was allowing the children to watch television in the neighbour's house if they had behaved well. Earlier almost all the children had been assigned different tasks, but now with the children being sent to school, it is only during holidays that they are asked to.

Rewarding a child for good behaviour, it was found, was one of the most common and popular method. Another commonly used method is praise. The mother and other onlookers praise the child when it learns to walk or does not wail on being tripped. She, at times, uses rewards to discipline the child, giving more sweets when it obeys and depriving one when it disobeys. Mild reproach and scolding take place when a child fails to obey and show respect to elders, especially the mother's brother. Bogeyman characters are also used to frighten stubborn children. Girls are rarely beaten, and when they are physically punished it is the mother who usually does so. On the other hand, naughty boys are threatened and beaten by the father. When children cannot be controlled by the parents, they are sent to the maternal uncle's place. The children are usually in awe of the latter and remain well behaved before him.

Another form of discipline is the process of task assignment. The **Six Culture Study** showed that children who regularly baby sit are more nurturing than other children even

when they are not babysitting (Whiting and Edwards, 1988:265). It was found that children in Bakrapur who had been assigned tasks of either looking after pets or after younger siblings tend to be more responsible and more caring. They also very rarely throw tantrums.

Chagnon (1983:115) studying the Yanomamo found that boys were encouraged to be fierce and rarely punished for hitting parents. In Garo society, if such an incident occurs, the children are punished severely. When a grown-up boy hits parents, it no longer remains a family matter, a meeting of the clan members is called and the boy punished severely. Dentan (1968:61) while studying the Semai found that they encourage children to be non-violent. Such situation is not seen among the Garos – for parents and older siblings teach them to stand up for themselves if another child provokes a fight.

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