

## Traditional Beliefs From Nepalese Culture In Relation to Obstetrics

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The mountainous kingdom of Nepal with an area of 147,000 sq. kilometers, has a population of just over 15 million which is increasing at a rate of 2.66 percent even with a high rate of infant mortality of 150 per thousand. The doctor and population ratio is approximately 1:30,000, and thus traditional ways and means of child-bearing and child-rearing are rested deeply among the people. Tradition and culture of Nepalese people varies from place to place according to the environment and the ethnic composition. Although a small country, Nepal has a prevalence of over 40 separate language groups among its people whose ethnic composition is varied and diverse. Careful study and analysis of traditional beliefs and practices could provide interesting clues not only to find out indigeneous means to combat with their obstetrical and gynaecological problems but also to find out new directions of research guided by age-old knowledges.

In this presentation an attempt is made to put together some information regarding cultural beliefs and traditional practices prevalent among Nepalese women during their pregnancy, child-birth and baby-care.

### **Ante-natal beliefs:**

Nepalese women live in a closed circle of relatives and friends. They are very shy to talk about sex and pregnancy. No woman would come forward to declare her pregnancy. However, the type of food, a woman starts to prefer, soon indicates that she has conceived. Sour fruits and spicy foods, become her choicest things to eat. Another indication of her pregnancy is the development of 'temper tantrums' among small kids who live in her vicinity. Such kids are subjected to a cold shower and are also brushed by broom-sticks as a part of treatment.

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Life-style in rural Nepalese is characterised by hard-work and physical exercises to women thus there is no tradition of recommending special antenatal exercises. However, women do carry heavy loads even during late pregnancy. During this period she is fed with more nutritious food. On the 9th month of pregnancy parents have to offer special food for their daughter. The ceremony is termed as "Dhau-Bazi Nakegu" literally meaning feeding curd & beaten-rice. After the ceremony she is not supposed to stay over-night at her parents as to avoid delivery in the parent's home.

Sex prediction of the baby has always been an interesting game of guessing in all societies. In Nepal, it is believed that if a woman gets lazy in her daily activity and develops brightness in her facial looks she will deliver a daughter. On the other hand if she works actively and her face rather tends to look dull and gloomy she is likely to have a son. In the same way, if she consumes more of the leafy vegetables she will deliver a daughter and if she prefers fruits and solid vegetables like carrots & radishes she will have a son. A pregnant woman becomes more conscious of her dreams. If she dreams goddesses like Bhagwati, she is likely to have a daughter while if she dreams gods such as Shiva, Narayan etc. she will feel better because it makes her believe that she will have a son. A son or a daughter? has always been a great question to all pregnant women. There is no end to traditional beliefs and social values to the particular question. However, one of the strongest beliefs among Nepalese people is that if a woman feels the foetal movement more on the left side she has a girl in her womb and the contrary is said to be true for a boy.

Birth-marks on babies are not desirable to mothers. So pregnant women in many cases tie a piece of Kush-grass around her waist to keep the baby free from birth-marks. Dark birth-marks on babies are generally attributed to the effects of eclipse. If a pregnant woman happens to touch her abdomen during the eclipse (Solar/Lunar) it results to such ugly birth-marks.

### Delivery period:

Rural people in Nepal make lavish use of paddy straw in their house-hold affairs. Dried paddy-straw is prepared for the delivery room. Such a room should be free from damp or draft. Small fire-stoves are kept in the room to keep it warm. Strangers are not allowed to enter the room to protect from evil spirits.

During labour a woman is made to drink some Raksi (Spirit from rice/malt) with an egg and some sugar syrup. A gentle massage with mustard oil on the abdomen and on the forehead is said to be helpful for hastening delivery. Various methods are practised to deliver retained placenta. One of the effective means is to put tuft of hair inside the mouth, which in turn causes an instant vomiting. This leads to the expulsion of placenta, due to increased intra-abdominal pressure. Another practice is to give tapping on the back by the shoe of her husband. In some cases she is made to drink a gulp of water which has been used to wash the winnowing bamboo plate "Nanglo". These methods sound funny and

crude. However, they do have some psychological impact on the ailing patient. In some cases, the umbilical cord is tied with a long thread and the thread is then tied around the thigh of the patient.

Various treatments of psychological nature are also practised to hasten the delivery. At Kathmandu people worship a special diety known as "Nhyasa Ajeema" which literally means the quickening of hastening grand mother. In the low-lands of Terai, used train-tickets are fastened around the mother's neck with a belief that it hastens the delivery.

#### **Post-Partum care:**

In Nepalese culture babies are breast-fed for a prolonged period of time. This helps to keep the baby healthy on one hand also it avoids the chances of conceiving again on the other hand. The mustard oil has a versatile use in the post partum care. The skin of the whole body both of the mother and the child is stimulated at least twice a day by the massage of mustard oil. Drops of oil are put in all body orifices. It is also believed that the baby needs to be soaked in oil as to mimic the environment of the womb. The oiling helps to insulate the body from surrounding temperature. The baby and the mother get regular massage of mustard oil for at least two months. The film of oil on the skin protects the body from insect bites as well as from fungal infections. Besides, the massage helps the muscle to regain its tone. The baby's head is massaged firmly in a circular motion so as to keep it in oval shape. Similarly gentle but firm pressure is given during the massage on the chest and the abdomen. Extremities are also subjected to firm massage. The main principle in massage is to manipulate the skin in such a way as to feel the muscle and the bones through the skin, thereby stimulating the skin, the muscles and the bones.

Nepalese women prepare a special pillow for new babies. The pillow is filled loosely with mustard seeds so as to keep the head in a good shape. The diet of the mother in her post partum period should consist of nutritious food. The most popular ingredients of such foods consist of "Ghee" i.e. purified butter and "Chaku", molasses cake. Salt is normally prohibited till the fourth day of delivery. Then after the diet is supplemented with meat, green vegetables and sweets. She is given heavy meal four times a day. There is a tradition of decorating the eyes by a lining of "Gajal" (Soot paste in mustard oil) on the margin of lower eye-lids. This helps to keep-off U.V. rays from entering the eye. In addition it renders prominence to the eye-ball. Thus all Nepalese babies and mothers have Gajal on their eyes.

#### **Herbal Medicines :**

Specific herbal preparations are administered to the mother and her baby for several weeks. The medicines are prepared by experienced Vaidhyas and Kavirajs. They are based on Ayurvedic system of medicine. Four kinds of medicines are in general use in Kathmandu. They are as following:

##### **(a) Kwati Wasa:-**

A special preparation which consists of dry ginger, piepper, black paepper clove,

cinnamon leaves and bark, nut-meg, *Nigella* seeds, cardamom, rock foil roots, and etc. These ingredients are powdered finely and are boiled in water with some molasses and ghee. This preparation is not administered before the sixth day of delivery.

**(b) Phaku Wasa:-**

This consists of black pepper, dried ginger, piperseeds, cinnamon, nut-meg, cumin, *Nigella* seeds and so on. These ingredients are boiled in a plenty of milk, molasses and ghee till thick paste is formed. Then it is administered two times a day but such medicine is given only after the 12th day of delivery.

**(c) Chauthi:-**

A powder of some six different herbs such as piper, *withania somnifera* etc. are mixed in the mother's milk. The mixture is administered to the baby after the sixth day of birth.

**(d) Ghoti:-**

It consists of about a dozen of herbs such as cloves, nut-meg, cinnamon, cardamom, lotus seeds etc. The herb powder mixed in the mother's milk is administered to the baby two times a day.

Herbal preparations as described in the preceding paragraphs are by experienced house-wives. Those preparations are widely used even by modern families.

Ayurvedic doctors make extensive use of such herbal medicines. A number of herbs are prescribed for the prevention of pregnancy. A preparation consisting of 'Kalo Jira' (*Carum bulbocatanum*), seeds of harro (*Terminalia chebula*) 'Hagkeshar' (*Curcuma zeodarica*) 'Kafal' (*Myrica nagi*), and 'Mogrelo' (*Nigella sativa* & *Carum carvi*) is administered with water for seven days after menstruation. This avoids pregnancy for that month without any side effects. Another preparation consisting of 'Pipla' (*Piper longum*), Bayu Biring' (*Embelia ribes*), 'Palas biz' (*Butea monosperma*) in milk-base is administered regularly for 4-6 days after ovulation. If this treatment is followed for three months it avoids pregnancy for the whole year. Ayurvedic doctors also prescribe a preparation to induce menstruation and it consists of the roots of *Amaranthus spinosus* ground in chaulani-water (washings of rice).

**Discussion:-**

Antendents and sequels of obstetrics are always interwoven with social beliefs and traditional practices in all societies. This is especially true & strong in developing countries such as in Nepal where the level of education (literacy 20%) and the economic standards are still very low. Modern facilities of medicine are not available to the majority of the population and traditional ways and means have no alternatives. Careful study and analysis of athno-pharmacology of traditional societies would reveal many new ideas that we as modern doctors have to understand and endorse. In Nepal we have been endorsing the practice of oil massage, eye-decoration with soot linings, herbal medicines, and many other

do's and don'ts to our patients of obstetrics. Besides it is important that a doctor should understand the feelings of the patient, her cultural background and traditional faiths and beliefs. We do believe that worshipping the goddess won't hasten the delivery but we do not tell them to stop it unless it is detrimental to health. Integration of modern methods of treatment with that of traditional practices could provide practical answers to a number of questions relating to obstetrical problems. Modern doctors should not only be equipped with modern methods but he/she should be equally equipped with the knowledge of traditions of the society in question.

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