

Changing Birth Practices and Rituals among the Bengali Women in Siliguri

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Abstract: *In this paper, I have attempted to make sense of the social ways in which Bengali women find themselves when they go through birth giving. Based on ethnographic study of Bengali women in Siliguri city, this work aims to understand the dynamics of cultural change and continuity vis-à-vis the practice of birth rituals in contemporary times. It examines the ways in which birth practices provide both the context and the medium for the social formation of gender, caste and community relations. The fieldwork insights demonstrate the decaying significance of traditional birth rituals and builds on women's narratives about the birth as a social event in their personal and family lives. The work draws upon the conceptual and theoretical insights from the sociological literature on child birth and social and cultural experiences, social classification, identity and socialization.*

Keywords: Birth rituals, social change, community practices, cultural experiences, Bengali women, categorization.

Introduction

This paper provides a brief discussion for understanding the socio-cultural perspective based on ethnographic research, concepts, and the rationale for adopting this approach to interpret women's childbirth experiences. Beginning with a description of how women in Siliguri perceive childbirth in many ways, the paper continues with a discussion of the cultural context of childbirth in Bengal. This is followed by a brief analysis of the social perspective on childbirth, including topics such as change, caste, choice, social class, institutional births, etc.

Childbirth is both a significant personal and social experience for women in all societies. Despite a similar physiological process, women from various cultures and societies have distinct childbirth experiences. To comprehend the childbirth experiences of women, it is necessary to comprehend their culture, tradition, beliefs, and social values. Consistently, it has been argued that the degree and nature of women's choice and control depend on the structure of the society in which they give birth. Gender, caste, class, power, social status, geography further influence women's ability to choose and control childbirth. These factors, known as social determinants, have played a crucial role in reducing maternal and newborn mortality in developing nations. In the majority of South Asian regions, childbirth is a socially and culturally significant event with its own traditions and rituals. Even after migrating to other countries, many women continue their traditional practices during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postnatal period. Common factors such as the concept of purity and pollution during and after childbirth, the use of traditional healers, the belief that health and illness are related to deities, food-related beliefs, and myths about what is now accepted and influences pregnancy and childbirth have been found to have a significant impact on childbirth experiences.

It is believed that among the Bengali Hindus, spanning all castes (*jati*) clans (*kula*), and regions (*desa*), there are ten Samskaras generally followed. Most Bengali Hindus, irrespective of their caste, clan or place of living, follow rules found in the Sastras (Inden and Nicholas 1977). Rituals have a shared meaning and form a part of a non-verbal system of communication. Ritual behaviour signifies basic cultural themes, and ritual actions are seen representing cultural values that find verbal expression in statements about the time, space, being, duty, in a society. Rituals also relate to beliefs and are expanded in narratives and myths. The established correlation between the ritual and belief is rooted in the shared relation to the concerned cultural elements expressed by both (Fontaine 1972). The paper will try to engage and understand the contemporary socio-cultural practices related to birth among Bengalis.

The context of social and cultural changes in Bengal

To trace the changes in the rituals, the socio-cultural history needs to be explored. The spread of *VaichGavism* in Bengal stood to be the last stage in the evolution of the doctrine of the *Bhakti* movement. During the 15th and 16th centuries with *Chaitanya* as the prominent figure, *Gaudiya VaichGavism*, the other name for Bengal *VaichGavism*, was the effervescent and principal religious movement in Bengal. Here we can see how the ideas of *Chaitanya* in the *VaichGavite* movement worked for establishing an egalitarian society (in terms of religious rights) which had a huge impact on the upliftment of the status of women. This movement could also be the reason behind the discontinuation of the rituals that were mainly devoted to the birth of the male child. *VaichGavism* is still considered significant in the geographical area of this study and the respondents who had adopted the *Vaishnavism* showed signs of rituals that gave equal importance to the birth of the girl and boy child. The period of confinement for the mother of a newborn baby is still practiced among the *Vaishnavites* but the duration has been reduced. The practice of *Kirtan* (the gathering done for the collective rejoice of Lord *Krishna*, mainly in the form of singing and using few musical instruments) is also prevalent among the *Vaishnavites* after the birth of the child.

Another significant event in the history of Bengal, after the *Chaitanya* movement, was the Bengal renaissance. The Bengal renaissance had an immense contribution towards the socio-religious reforms in Bengal. An integral part of the Bengal renaissance was the *Brahmo Samaj* movement. *Brahmo Samaj* was established by Rammohan Roy in 1828 in Kolkata. Another organization under *Brahmo Samaj* was *Sadharan Brahmo Samaj*. The social reforms in *Sadharan Brahmo Samaj* were initiated by Keshab Chandra Sen. The special contribution of this organization was the initiative for women's emancipation in Bengal by promoting higher education and, at the same time, ensuring economic freedom for them. *Sadharan Brahma Samaj* identified absolute equality of women not just in theory but also in practice (Das 1958: 479). One of the major contributions of the movement was to free the Bengalis from Hindu orthodoxy and irrational ritual practices. Here we can see how the ideas of *Chaitanya* in *VaicGavite* movement worked majorly for an egalitarian society which had a huge impact on the upliftment of the status of women. This

movement can also be the reason behind the non-practice of the rituals that are mainly devoted to the birth of the male child or after the son is born, for example *Pumsavana* and *Jatakarma*.

The 1990s was a time of rapid changes in India. Different urban centers experienced changes in social, cultural lifestyles and practices. With the opening of the market to global forces, the process of migration, urbanization, social, spatial and cultural changes have happened in Siliguri. With the influx of goods, media, new job opportunities in industries and the growth of the service sector, the rise of the consumerist middle class has acquired certain structural changes and cultural identity formation. Several members of the middle class enjoy the advantages of these changes brought by economic reforms. In the context of economic mobilities and growth of the private sector, the service sector has created new discourses of medicalized childbirths, kinship and family roles, the transformation of childbearing and adoption of new ideas about agency and modernity.

Ogburn (1923) has argued that although it is difficult to pinpoint the origin of change, historically, breakthroughs in technological inventions have always left an impact on society and culture. Civilization is a compound of interrelation between social institutions and customs on the one hand and technology and science on the other. He says that the sources of technological innovation are “demand” and “social valuation” and “cultural base”. His theory provides insights to understand how technology helps in shaping the culture and society in a given time and space (Ogburn 1923). Yogendra Singh too has argued that in the secular and sacred domain, the folk cultural tradition also changes over time and that the major reason behind this is the breakthrough in technologies of communication and production in India (Singh 2012).

Methodology

Ethnographic study has been carried out to understand how Bengali women experience childbirth in the midst of social and cultural changes. The research area is located within the Siliguri Municipal Corporation. The study's universe is Siliguri, the most important city in North Bengal. Because of its expanding geopolitical importance, it features both urban market

characteristics and a complicated administrative framework. As a crucial centre of regional market and urban activities, it is important to investigate the nature of social development and transition in cultural areas such as customs, rituals, and so on. In-depth interviews with eighty women were carried out to elicit experience-based narratives regarding the topic. A detailed questionnaire with open and closed-ended questions was utilised to conduct the interviews. All of the women interviewed were married and had childbearing experience. These women, ranging in age from twenty to eighty-five, were chosen to capture their lives throughout the decades. The women in the study are mostly from the middle and lower-middle classes, and they all speak Bengali. I have used purposive and snowball sampling procedures to choose the female respondents.

Maushart (1999) observed that in societies dominated by men, women's experiences as mothers are frequently omitted from history. She emphasizes further that while the act of giving birth is lauded globally, the process of becoming a mother is virtually neglected. She also notes that, despite the fact that becoming a mother is a huge personal shift, it is largely socially invisible. Although this conclusion is generally supported by her expertise in western society in the United States of America. In India, maternity is celebrated via numerous rites that are more social than private in nature. The organization of such activities falls primarily within the province of women. The ethnographic data was gathered by aiming to capture the social and cultural experiences of women and their practice of customs and rituals in relation to birth.

Changing experiences of birth giving and associated cultural practices

One of the key rituals of birth among the Hindus is *Garbhadhana*¹. Surprisingly the existence of the ritual of *Garbhadhana* on the ground was rare to find, so much so that even the terminology was alien among the people. Although few respondents claimed that *Garbhadhana*, as a *samskara*, was taught in the preaching in *Geeta Path (lessons and sermons)* in the ISKCON temple by the *Vaishnavite* Prabhu, they also informed that they do not practice the ritual. Bhaktashakti Prabhu, a *VaichGavite* guru in the ISKCON

temple, during an interview with me, gave an insightful information². He discussed all the methods and purposes involved in the process of the ritual of *Garbhadhana*. He started his interview by describing the process where he asserted that the role of the husband and the wife is equally important in conception. The day when both the husband and the wife want to conceive, both the spouses should chant “*Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Ram Hare Ram, Ram Ram Hare Hare*” not less than five times before they begin the sacred act of conception. The *mataji*(woman) is required to keep fast the entire day, but the *Prabhuji* (man) can consume *prashad* (food offered to God). The ritual of *Garbhadhana Samskar* should only take place during the night and should be avoided during the daytime. Cleaning of the body is necessary for the spiritual act of producing a child who will be the complete devotee of god, thus bathing becomes a compulsory act for both the husband and the wife before performing the ritual. Adorning of new clothes is also prescribed for *mataji*. They should pray to god to send a “*sudh bhakta*” (pure devotee) in the form of their offspring, a child who can help in building a better world.

He explained the purpose of getting married is to have an offspring who should be a *Krishna Bhakta* and for this purpose *Garbhadhana* is important. The *putra* (son) received by following *Garbhadhana* would save both the mother and father from going to hell. But when asked about the contribution of the daughter, he answered “it is only the will of the God whether he would send a girl or a boy, the gender is not important, but what is important is the devotion of the child to *Krishna*”. He narrated by giving several examples and stories. He explained about a strict disciple of Lord *Krishna* named *Bhittasur* and his views on the importance of becoming a *Krishna Bhakta*. According to him, the child who is not a *Krishna bhakta* is next to “*mutra*” (urine), as both the child and the urine is delivered from the same part of the body. Thus, the child should be a *Krishna Bhakta* or they along with their parents will be granted hell. *Bhaktashakti Prabhu* showed his concern for the non-practice of Vedic rules in the present society. He narrated that because of the non-practice of Vedic rituals like *Garbhadhana Samskara*, the present society has high deviants thus “*arajakta*” (restlessness) is more prevalent. The child born without *Garbhadhana Samskara* results in the birth of those deviants who

can never contribute as a positive functionary of the society. Thus, both the mother and father should follow Vedic rules for “*jagatermangal*”, (betterment of the society), and “*nijer mangal*” (self-betterment).

He further says that *Garbhadhana* distinguishes humans from animals. Humans have culture and thus should follow *Garbhadhana*, while animals do not have culture, thus cannot follow the particular *Samskara*. He said there are different methods by which a son could be born, one of which begins with the *Mataji* being on the right side of *Prabhu*. Hence with this, we can conclude that the importance of *Garbhadhana samskara* as a *laukika samskara* has little significance as it is not popularly practiced by the locals. Although we can find the revival of these rituals among the cult of *Vaishnavism*, it would be ignorant to say that only socio-religious changes bring changes in the ritualistic life of the people. Some political changes can also bring about changes in the rituals.

The non-existence of this ritual can be understood in functional terms. People traditionally wanted more children, especially sons since they were considered assets. The more children, the happier would be the father will be in heaven. The sons would repay the debt of the ancestor and carry the lineage forward. These were the conditions that made the performance of the *Garbhadhana* ritual a special one. Over time, however, the beliefs centering on *Garbhadhana* changed along with the change in the perception about the value of number of children and the value of male children.

Inden and Nicholas (1977) in their research dating back to the 1970s found some similar findings that this ritual is no longer performed by the Bengali Hindus as a separate ritual. *Pumsavana* can simply be understood as a ritual of producing a male child. Vedic rites recited on this occasion mention *Puman* or *Putran* (a male) favour birth of a son, performed in the third or the fourth month after pregnancy.

Pumsavana is another scriptural ritual that found no significance among the people studied in the study. According to Baby Sarkar, a respondent and a mother of two, referred to the term *Pumsavana* as a complete alien term, in her words, “*Eta ki ami thik bolte parbo na, kintu aamra kori na*”, (I can't exactly tell what did this ritual is but i am sure we don't do it). Sauromita Devnath, a fifty-two

years old lady told, “*hoyto aager kar log korto, kintu ekhon aamra kori na*”, (maybe the people of previous generations did that but we don’t do it now).

Panchamittra is an ante-natal *laukika* ritual: worldly or folk ritual. This ritual does not find a spot in the scriptural ritual but is very much present in the lives of the respondents to be specific among the community of the Brahmins. Litika Bhattacharya, Brahmin by caste and a first-time mother, shared her ideas on this aspect. She informed that her community conducts the ritual of *Panchamittra* in the fifth month of pregnancy. On the day of the ritual her first task is to take a bath and offer prayers to the Sun. She wears a new Saree and is fed *Panchagarba* and only after which she can eat the special food prepared for her. She told me that *Panchagarba* is made by the *Purohit* (priest) in the temple. The *Panchagarba* in her case was made by the mixture of milk, banana, cow-dung, cow-urine and clarified butter. The content of the mixture may sometimes be replaced by honey or yogurt although the total ingredients should always be five. She told me an interesting fact that before the performance of this ritual in the fifth month of pregnancy she is not allowed to eat bananas.

Ankita Ghosh, another Brahmin respondent also confirmed that they do practice the ritual by consuming the *panchagarba* prepared by the priest in the temple which is then fed to her by the five auspicious mothers. But there are also minor variations in the place of making *panchagarba*, like in the Case of Manisha Chakraborty, her *panchagarba* was made by calling the priest at home. The flexibility depends on the nature of the familial ties of a person with the priest.

Mampi Saha, who belongs to the trading caste, informed me that, “we do not have this ritual”. They have similar events done in the seventh month together with the main ritual of *Sadh*. The first thing that is fed to them is *payas* (rice pudding) after which they can eat the special food. Nandita Basak, who herself was a Brahmin but did not marry the Brahmin person, gave an interesting description. She told me that she did not do *panchagarba* at her mother-in-law’s place but they do in her own maternal place. Thus, as goes the rule of the society that she is supposed to follow the rituals of her mother-in-law’s place she did not perform the ritual. Although among them, the same composition of

panchagarba is fed at the end of the period of impurity in the postnatal period.

Simantonnayana is also a ritual of 'parting of hair' of the expectant mother. Inden and Nicholas (1997) found that this ritual is performed to bring easy delivery of the child. It is supposed to be performed in the sixth or the eighth month of pregnancy. Although just like in the case of the *Pumsavana*, there is no evidence that this ritual is practiced among Bengali women presently.

The folk ritual of *Sadh* can also be understood as "gratification of craving", which is performed at seventh or eighth month and it may be repeated on each pregnancy. In the research conducted, the ritual of *Sadh* has more engraved details attached to the lives of the Bengali population. With few narratives we can understand the importance and variation in the performance of the ritual of *Sadh* among different castes and classes in Bengali women. It was seen that rituals vary in practice even if it is performed by the people of the same caste and this fact is not different for people of different ethnic groups. Following a few case studies, we can elaborate on specificities and similarities at the same time.

Barnali Sen Pal elaborated on how the ritual of *Sadh* was conducted in her case. She said it was celebrated at home only. There are phases of the *Sadh*. The charge of performing the ritual first was given to her in-laws in the seventh month. Next day *Sadh* was given at her mother's place and the ritual is called *Bashi Sadh*. Barnali described the performance of the ritual, right from the beginning of performance of this ritual as thus:

When I woke up in the morning I was directed not to participate in any chores at home. I was asked to take a bath and offer prayers to Sun God. My birth family gave me a new saree and blouse to wear on that day. They also gave things like *aalta* and *sindoor* as gifts (red colour paint and vermilion). When the natal's family gives us a saree and blouse on *Sadh*, we don't have to cut and sew them. Instead, we can wear a blouse that is already made. Among Bengalis, you have to make *Payas*, which is the most important part of *Sadh*. My natal's family gives my in-laws a certain amount of rupees to cook *Payas*. Not only that, but my natal's family also gives me the pot and plate that are used to cook the *payas* and serve it to me. We have to keep the fast and only break it when the priest

says it is a good time and we can eat Payas. The timing is set by seeing the *panchika*. Five women bring me the payas. These women must be "Nikut" (spotless) in every way. This means that they should all be mothers, that their husbands should all still be alive, that they shouldn't have had any miscarriages, and that all of their children should still be alive. After I break my fast with payas, they give me gravy made with *Katla* fish and prawns and five kinds of fries. They made sure I ate the whole fish, including the head. People say that this helps the child's brain grow and makes them smarter.

Following this there is a ritual of *Basi Sadh* that is celebrated just the next day of *Sadh*, but there are very few Bengalis among whom this is not celebrated and the family of Barnali Sen Pal are among them. Then again in the ninth month, among Bengalis, *Sadh* is celebrated. Her ninth month *Sadh* was celebrated at her mother's place where she cooked everything that she loved.

In her research in Tamil Nadu, Cecilia Van Hollen (2003) discovered a similar practice of gift-giving by the bride's family. She identified the bride's family's practice of gift-giving as an occasion to sustain the bride's standing in her family of procreation, inflicting a huge economic burden on the pregnant woman's natal family. The practice of gift-giving varies from family to family, depending on factors such as the place of residence at the time of delivery, the distance between the natal and in-law's family residences, the economic status of both families, the nature of the relationship, and, of course, the interest in performing the ritual. In the instance of Barnali, the most important ingredient in *Sadh* was provided by her natal family. Her natal family fully funded the two *Sadh* that followed. The financial burden, however, is not the same for every natal family.

Despite the fact that both families suffered the financial weight of the events in the field. It is mostly determined by the location of residence during pregnancy. Furthermore, *Sadh* was discovered to be mostly the responsibility of the spouse's family or the husband himself. In the case of Mampi Saha, who had invited approximately 300-350 people to her *Sadh*, she informed me that all costs were borne by her in-laws, even the saree she wore on the seventh month *Sadh*. It is important to emphasise that this is an issue of customary gift-giving within a family in one ethnic group. However, rituals

are altered when a person does not have good relations with their birth family. In the case of Sampa Pal, the in-laws were responsible for all gift giving and financial charges associated with the celebrations. According to her, she was born into a Brahmin family, and when she married someone from a lower caste than hers, her family severed all links with her. Thus, the nature of the relationship within both families influences how we conduct rituals.

The ritual of *Sadh*, that has immense importance among the lives of the Bengalis, differs widely from family to family in terms of inclusion of certain rites. For instance, Manisha Chakaraborty narrates the practice of *Sadh* ritual:

I tied five types of fruits, that is "*Nikhut*" (spotless and perfect) fruits are tied at the end of her *Saree*. My husband opens the locks the next day. I gave the fruits to my mother-in-law who then put them in the water. The fruits that float are picked and offered to God.

In *Sadh* there is another rite that is widely in practice and it may also be called a Bengali version of gender reveal. In the seventh month *Sadh* of Paramita Sarkar her mother-in-law placed two objects, *seel* (usually made of a cylindrical rock, used for grinding spices) and *deep* (small mud lamp) which are representatives of a male and female child respectively. The rite is initiated by placing the symbolic objects on the ground. Thereafter these objects are hidden by a big bowl (*patra*) separately. Then Paramita was asked to choose between the two *patra*. She chooses the *patra* with *Pradip*, so all expected to have a girl child. Their family had also selected a name for a girl child, but when she had a boy child, they would have to think of a name for him. Paramita with a blissful mood asked a pregnant Bengali woman what she had chosen, the woman replied "*Pradip*", to which Paramita replied by giggling and uttered, "then you will have a girl". The rite of prediction of the sex of the child holds different conviction among different people. Paramita Sarkar describes it elaborately in these terms:

After the completion of this rite, *seel* was given to me in my lap and I showed motherly affection to *seel* and thereafter it was then passed on to the mothers participating in the rituals who showed similar affection to *seel* pretending it to be the child. Although when showing

affection to the *seel* on the lap the *seel* is not perceived as a son but simply as a child.

The practice might be related to the theory of James Frazer (1958) of sympathetic magic; the 'law of similarity' which means like produces like. Imitation usually involves objects like effigies, fetishes or puppets to incur a particular result to the environment of the people sometimes on the people themselves (Frazer, 1958). Here the object which serves to be the puppet is *seel* which is implicitly representative of a male child or simply a child. She constantly focused on the term "*Hamare Bengali mein*" (among we Bengali people) while narrating all the rituals that has been practiced by her, though she also mentioned that they have a specific way of practicing the rituals in their in-laws as well as in their natal family. This suggests a strong sense of identity attached with the ritual that are practiced.

My respondents do not seem to be practising Jatakarma³ ritual as well. The reason for its non-performance lies in the fact that largely all deliveries of the mother under the study was conducted in health institutions. Only five women in their sixties and one woman in her eighties had their baby at *AturGhar*. Although, *jatakarma* with its exact elaboration was not conducted by the respondents who had their childbirth at home. Thus, a ritual to be performed in a separate hut made especially for the delivery of the male child might have lost its significance due to institutional birth, although some of its forms still continue. For instance, Tulika Das's mother in-law secretly fed her grand-son honey a few hours after he was born in the hospital, while it can be argued that symbols and meaning attached to it might have changed, as this act is performed so that the child is blessed with a charming and sweet voice. With the difference in the association of the symbols, there is no preferred gender dependency.

Cha-shasti is also one of the birth rituals that is traditionally practiced by many Bengalis. This ritual is prevalent among all Bengalis. Olivia Das narrated how they performed the ritual of *Cha-Sasthi*. Olivia described the meaning of the word in the following way:

Shasti in Bengali culture is the Goddess who is responsible for the wellbeing and long life of the child. The birth of the child is followed by the period of confinement in a separate room. The ritual is carried out irrespective of the gender of

the child. A feast is arranged for the kith and kin and friends who are invited. The rite of keeping a mud lamp lit throughout the night is the responsibility of both spouses. This is done so that the light from the mud lamp can provide visibility to the Goddess *Sasthi* to annul any possibility of committing any mistake in writing the best fortune for the child.

According to Sukumari Bhattacharya (1990), women's vows related to *Sasthi* are visibly to increase their fertility, because she is the supreme deity of children and protect the child from all the odds. It is always not necessary that all women interviewed had clear idea about the performance of the ritual. The first-time mothers were mostly unaware of the conduct of post-natal rituals and had very vaguely described about how it would be conducted. Since birth, like death, is one of the most radical assertions of man's involvement with the organic processes of life that govern *Samskara*, it is consistent with the Hindu world view that birth should create severe pollution. This pollution, however, affects only the mother. The infant has not really activated its Karma and entered fully into *Samskara*, thus the ordinary rules of purity and pollution do not apply to them, this is not to say that the infant is without karma (Bennett 1983).

This period of impurity ends after the performance of the ritual called *Suddhikaran* or *Surjo Pooja*. This entire period is known as *sûtikâûauca*. Throughout this period the mother is kept in a special parturition hut (*sûtikâ-g[ha]*) also known as *Atur Ghar* in folk language. *Atur-Ghar* was constructed to deliver the child although in the present day they are kept in a separate room which is not outside the house but inside.

Tanya Karmakar described how the period of confinement works in their family in following manner: "the period of confinement depends on the gender of the child. Twenty-one days of confinement is maintained in the case of a male child and thirty days of confinement in the case of a girl child."

Although among the *Vaishnavites*, the period of confinement prevails but for a shorter duration of sixteen days. In the field work done it was found that the belief in pollution caused by birth is persisted among all sections of the Bengali community. The concept of such purificatory rituals is prominent among the

analysis of various cultures. Robert Redfield (1949) in his study in Tepoztlan, a Mexican village analysed a few rituals of birth where he explained that after giving birth to the child, the mother is kept in the separated bed, the new mother along with the other women who are looking after her should take a ritualistic bath every week. Pranee Liamputtong (2009) studied Hmong culture in Australia which also practices the period of confinement for thirty days. Inden and Nicholas (1977) asserted that sharing the same place of residence or living together initiates a certain relationship of kinship in Bengali culture. Thus, the residents maintain a certain period of impurity.

Few respondents claimed that they received ill-treatment due to the concept *janamasauca* (impurity due to birth). They narrated their experience of refusal to give or continue rent by the landlord as birth may cause severe pollution. Although few scholars (Naraindas, 2009) have argued that the simple understanding of purity and pollution cannot be applied to the analysis of the period of confinement. There exists a dynamic perspective of health and hygiene that can be employed. In the analysis of the folk ritual of *Suddhikaran*, it was found that the Bengalis were quite firm in retaining the nuances of confinement. As far as gender differentiation in the ritual is concerned, a clear distinction was noticed. The birth of the girl child suggested more days of the period of confinement in comparison to a male child. The rituals of postnatal mentioned in the ancient Hindu text as written extensively by Pandey also found a loose ground in the study. Some of the post-natal rituals were merged in the folk rituals like *Churakarana* (Tonsure ritual), *Naamkarana*, (ritual of name-giving) in one ritual i.e., *Cha-Sasthi*. Some other *vaidika* post-natal rituals like *Karnavedha* (boring of ears), *Niskarma* (the first outing) are entirely non-functional and hence are not practiced.

Annaprashana is a Sanskrit name that denotes "grain initiation" in its literal terms. This *Samskara* marks the beginning of the child when they start consuming food grains other than milk. Bengalis of all castes and classes perform the rituals, though the manner of practicing it, i.e. material investment in the ceremony, may vary depending upon the class. Certain respondents claimed that they celebrated *Annaprashana* like marriage, while there were other respondents who performed it by simply visiting a temple and feeding the child with *payas* (rice pudding).

The celebration of birthdays exists in Indian culture in the form of celebration of *Janmastmi* (the birthday of Lord Krishna), celebration of *Ramnavami* (the birthday of Lord Ram), and even *Buddha Jayanti* among Buddhists, although celebrating one's birthday as it is celebrated today was hardly visible in Indian tradition. Among the Bengalis, a birthday is called *Janmadin*, and it is celebrated by following their own unique rituals. According to one of the respondents, Sandharani Sarkar, aged around 88 and grandmother of four, said that in her time when she was a child the celebration of the birthday was not very prominent and she never celebrated the birthdays of her children. Remembering one's birthday was also not very common. She claimed that although she did not celebrate the birthdays of the children as it is celebrated today, she celebrated in some different way. The child was first made to take bath after he gets up in the morning. After symbolic cleaning of the body, the deity of the family was worshipped by them and *payas* (rice pudding) was offered to the deity. This proceeded with the touching of the feet of the elders to take the blessings. Then it was followed by different types of food that included varieties of vegetables and fish for the family. She also tried to donate food and clothing to the poor if she could afford it. According to her the celebration of the birthday of her grand-daughter was quite different from how it was celebrated for her sons and daughters when they were young. The first birthday of her first grand-daughter was celebrated with huge expenses. At times even when the celebration is not grand, the mandatory inclusion of a cake on birthdays has become the norm.

Rituals and their changing cultural importance

Cohen (1985) proposed two essential components for explaining the meaning of community. To begin, the collection of people claiming to be a community must have something in common that they share with one another. Second, the member of the group distinguishes himself/herself from other members of similar groups or communities. As a result, the community possesses both similarity and uniqueness at the same time. We must explore this understanding in the study of birth rituals and the functions they play in the lives of the community.

In other words, the cultural significance of birth rites manifests itself through the social construction of a community's relative similarity and distinctiveness. As a result, while they recognise the stark differences within their group, such as sects or sub-castes, they also desire to build on common and shared customs, such as birth rites, to be more similar to one another in comparison to others. Scholars have claimed that ritual and symbolism serve as the foundation upon which cultures order their behavioural routines and procedures, symbolising their essence of unity and thereby protecting their society's identity. The aesthetic frill expresses their society's ethical principles. This may be incomprehensible as the ostensible objective of the act, but it may be critical for the means by which the participants form a social reality.

In the backdrop of the fieldwork, rituals of birth are performed and are used to identify oneself as the member of in-group (local Bengalis) and the same rituals can be used by some to acquire the membership into the positive reference group who are identified as the 'other' and member of the out-group. There are multiple interpretations about the purpose of rituals and it is the abstractness of the ritual that makes the rituals and its symbols successful markers of community boundary. Cohen (1985) analyzed Victor Turner's idea of ritual and wrote that "some ritual - in particular, some ritual pilgrimages - have the capacity to create communities, an identification among members which is so absolute as to be tantamount to the stripping away of all those social impedimenta which would otherwise divide and distinguish them" (Cohen 1985: 55). Here we can find that creation of social identity is not unilateral but a two-way process. To understand this further we can take into account the analysis of Richard Jenkins (2000) concept of classification and identity. He says that two processes are significant for the purpose of classification and identity: those are similarities and differences. Both of these processes are interdependent and do not make sense in the absence of the other. There are two different methods for the manifestation of similarity and differences in process of interaction.

According to a study conducted by Amit Kumar Sharma (2001), the function of ritual is not exactly to symbolize or dramatize reality but the actual function of the ritual is to construct the constituents of the real. He claims that through ritual, the kinship identity is

asserted. Here we can also relate the use of the ritual by the Bengalis to assert the identity and beyond kinship relation, even the identity of the community. If we look through a sociological lens that though there have been changes due to advancement in modern methods of giving birth and other agencies, Bengali community have altered the way of practicing it. The traditional rituals are adjusted in line with the modern agencies like hospitals, doctors, *Maasi* (ANMs), health centres, schools, markets and many more. The performance of the ritual helps us in creating a “self-image” as well as a “public image” which thereby creates an identity (Jenkins 2000). And this identity received by the performance of rituals categorizes him different from the others who did not perform the rituals. For example, during an interview in the field people from East Bengal who migrated to West Bengal believed that by performing the rituals of birth by following specific rituals of the Bengali community, the ritualized child would be the accepted member of the society and considered one of them. Siliguri as an emerging city is geographically close to many states, within India and even shares international borders with Nepal and Bangladesh. Thus, it constitutes of people with various ethnic backgrounds and identities. Moreover, the Bengalis themselves perceive a great difference in society and culture between the metropolis of Kolkata and the rustic countryside of the other. Despite this diversity, the Bengalis commonly speak of the single “Bengali society”. Hindus constitute the majority of the population in West Bengal on which the study focuses.

The celebration of birthday as an event can be one example that shows how the performance of the ritual has been shaped through media, another example could be the selection of names in the name-giving ritual performed for a child. In my study I have found that Bengalis generally select names in congruence with Bengali culture but, at times, they select names that are typical of non-Bengali culture, being influenced by the media e.g. Rohan, Shekhar, Baby, Priyanka, while the same tendency of adopting more mainstream names is common in other cultures as well.

Technological advancements have also resulted in modifications in the procedures or technologies of childbirth. According to the National Family Health Survey-4, the proportion of institutional births in India increased from 38.7 percent to 78.9 percent between 2005 and 2015. The trend indicates an increase in the rate of

institutional births over home births. In West Bengal, around 79.2 percent of women in urban areas prefer institutional hospital birth over homebirth, whereas just 33.8 percent of women in rural regions do (West Bengal Development Report 2010: 126). This technological advancement will undoubtedly have an impact on birth rituals. Take, for example, *Jatakarma*, whose ritualistic performance in *Atur Ghar* is just eroded because the primary performers and location of performance are simply vanished. Traditional birth attendants and husbands are not permitted in the operating room during institutional birth. As a result, the possibility of ritual delivery is not possible. Aside from the changes brought about by technology, we may also see certain changes brought about by urban cultural consequences. The movement in residence from *Atur Ghar* to rooms within the home during the confinement period can also be seen in terms of dwindling urban areas. With a shrinking urban context and a shift to flats, the *Atur Ghar* building is beyond reality.

Changes in the approach towards childbirth over two generations

In this section, we will examine how childbearing and birth traditions have changed between the two generations. To examine the disparities between the two generations, we might examine the case studies of respondents Manorama Hazra and her granddaughter Karabi Hazra. Manorama Hazra was born in 1929 and wed at the age of fifteen in 1944.

Her parents orchestrated her marriage. She had eleven children, four of whom were girls, and seven of them were boys. They were separated by less than two years. According to her account, institutional births were uncommon during her lifetime. Having a baby at home was more prevalent. She observed all birthing traditions prior to and after delivery. She was aware of the beliefs that are seen during pregnancy. Her range of physical motion was limited. She avoided leaving her residence during the night. She also adhered to her mother-in-law's advice to remain indoors during solar eclipses and lunar eclipses. During the lunar eclipse, she followed certain rites with precision. During the lunar eclipse, she was not permitted to consume food or water. She was not even permitted to cut vegetables or fruits, since doing so would

negatively influence the unborn child, who would be born with particular cuts or missing organs or body parts. During the duration of the lunar eclipse, she was not permitted to sit. A thread equal to her height was attached to the entrance door's side. This was done to protect the thread from the evil eye (*dushi*) caused by the lunar eclipse, which would not damage the mother or child but would affect the thread. According to her, she was extremely obedient to experienced mothers and followed the measures they recommended. The primary focus of this modification is the method of childbirth. All of Manorama Hazra's children were born in the *Atur Ghar*. It was constructed prior to her birth on the house's Veranda. After consulting with the midwife, she was typically transported to *AturGhar* two days prior to the due date. She was forced to sleep on a bedsheet covered with dried hashes. Regardless of the season or the weather, the *Atur Ghar's* delivery protocol was followed.

Atur Ghar was constructed with hashes, which are temporary, and was dismantled when the required number of days had passed. Every object used within the *Atur Ghar* was cleansed before being utilised in daily life. She also followed a number of food-related taboos. She abstained from fish, which is considered a staple diet, for six days and had raw bananas boiled with cumin seed and garlic paste, which is said to be beneficial for making breast milk. Following *Cha-Shasti*, she was permitted to catch fish. During the whole duration of confinement within the *Atur Ghar*, only the midwife and her mother-in-law, who accompanied her at night, were permitted to enter the home. She laundered her own clothing and kitchenware. In the event that she was gravely ill, the midwife and her mother-in-law assisted her with her chores. After giving birth in the *Atur Ghar*, the *ojhas* (traditional healers) also gave her a black thread to protect her and her kid. During her pregnancy, she did not consult a physician. All of her pregnancies were carried out with the aid of a midwife. Some customs, such as burying the umbilical cord in the ground in the *Atur Ghar's* corner, were also of considerable significance. Karabi Hazra's grandma adhered to a different set of ceremonial practices than those of the current culture. The fieldwork undertaken revealed that the agency of women was more effective than in the past. Mothers and pregnant mothers had greater authority to observe rituals. The notion held by her grandmother regarding

solar and lunar eclipses was not shared by her. According to Karabi, these were antiquated views with no relevance to the current situation. Night time mobility outside the residence was also not prohibited. The most sociologically significant development is the older generations' transmission of their experiences to the younger generations. If a difficult circumstance arises, the ladies rely on doctors more than their mothers or mothers-in-law. This has altered, not only due to an increased understanding of western birthing practices but also due to the fragmentation of joint or extended families into nuclear families. The children of Karabi are a boy and a girl. She was married at the age of twenty-six and had her first child three years later.

Both of her children were born in Siliguri nursing homes, and she could not imagine giving birth at home. Thus, the practice of *Atur Ghar* has vanished and no longer exists in the current field of research. However, it cannot be argued that the ceremonies associated with *Atur Ghar* have not been substantially altered. Karabi participated in *Atur Ghar*-related rites in one form or another. She was provided with a private room for the duration of her confinement after leaving the nursing home following her first and second births. This chamber was not constructed outside the house, but rather it was an interior space, maintaining the rituals of untouchability. In the confinement room, she is not permitted to enter the kitchen or approach the well, as her body is deemed impure and untouchable throughout the confinement period. Until *Cha-Sashti*, only a few older women in the household were permitted to enter her room. In her first pregnancy, when she gave birth to a girl, she was confined for thirty days, and in her second pregnancy, when she gave birth to a son, she was confined for roughly twenty-one days. The paste of cumin seeds and garlic is still regarded as highly efficient and was consumed daily by Karabi. Therefore, we see a social context in which western and traditional practices are combined and adapted.

As Yogendra Singh has rightly argued, "most these changes do not as yet have meant the total replacement of the past forms. The new technology, new middle classes and metropolitan-globalized cultural styles of life that are emerging as an influential factor do not imply that most people who have accepted it are totally detached from the traditional religious and ritual moorings of their culture. Not only is the emergent global culture in India

linked with the local forms but it is also reshaping several of the traditional modes and forms of culture towards increasingly adaptive accommodation." (Singh 2012: 163). According to Singh, Similarly, the power of the Internet, the computer, and television not only extends towards new modes towards the new objective of modernization, but also celebrates and expands the reach of religious cultural forms with the newly acquired power of diffusion. Culture has changed noticeably as a result of the progressive increase in migration, the increasing strength of the global diaspora, the increasing strength of the multicultural and multinational nature of social and cultural contacts, and the globalisation of the market and work-culture. However, these instances also demonstrate the adaptability and resilience of traditional culture by accommodating innovation and change (Singh, 2012).

Conclusion

What follows from this study is that the rituals of the 'great traditions' or *vaidika*, such as *Garbhadhana*, *Pumsavana*, and *Simantayana*, are not commonly practiced among Bengalis today. However, due to socio-religious changes in the society, the ritual of *Garbhadhana* has seen a revival particularly among the *Vaishnavites*. However, the question whether these rituals were ever-present in Bengali ritualistic life or were restricted to the sacred books of Hindu rituals can never be answered. The current study clearly shows that even knowledge of the terms was lacking among the average Bengali Hindus. I could, however, see that as a mandatory Bengali folk pre-natal ritual they perform pre-natal rituals such as *Sadh* extensively. It is, thus, possible to conclude that among Bengali Hindus, regional folk practices (*laukika*) are more prominent than scriptural and textual rituals (*vaidika*).

In this paper, I attempted to make sense of how rituals serve both as a context and a medium for the affirmation of a society's fundamental organizational principles. I have observed that the religion-based identities as well as new class-based identities have altered ideas and practices associated with previous configurations and social hierarchies. I have examined how the gender ideologies shape motherhood, birth-giving, medicalized births, and celebrations of specific rituals construct symbolic and cultural

community identities. This in-depth examination of birthing practices would, perhaps, help us understand the 'Bengali Hindu middle class' in the light of their history and a shared lifeworld in which new markers of community identity coexist with old sensibilities to produce a newer approach to understanding birth practices.

Notes

1. Garbhadhana is a ritual through which a man places his semen (or seed) into a woman. Though there are several views in different scripts regarding the day of conceptions, scholars largely agree to the view that the auspicious conception of the child should take from fourth to sixteenth nights after the monthly course begins (Pandey 1949). It is generally believed that conceptions held at distance from menstruation would yield meritorious children. Menstruation, a significant point to note, is considered to be inauspicious for creating a spiritual being. The symbolic significance of menstruation has always altered the course of the performance of ritual.
2. The discussion is based on the interviews conducted in January 2018 in ISKCON temple.
3. The scriptures state that a *vaidika* ritual called Jatakarma is performed shortly after a baby is born. One of the most important *vaidika* rituals is jatakarma, in which the father performs the rituals while the child is still inside the mother's womb but still attached to her by the umbilical cord. The actual Jatakarma ritual was performed after the son was born, but before the mother could give him milk and before the naval cord was severed. In this ritual, the father performs the rites while the unborn child is still attached to the mother by the umbilical cord and inside the womb of the mother. The actual Jatakarma ritual was performed after the son was born, before the naval cord was severed, but also before the mother gave the child milk. The father enters the hut where the child is born and provides food for his ancestor.

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