

## **Rites and Rituals in the Life and Death Cycle of the Mangar**

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[Editorial Note: The present paper provides an insight into the historical origin of the Mangar Community and also explores the various life, death and similar other significant rites and rituals revolving around the lives of the community.]

**Abstract:** *The history of origin of Mangar or Magar in India is shrouded in obscurity. Some scholars emphasized on the fact that the Magars or Mangars, are one of the aborigines of Sikkim and Nepal, belong to the Kirata community of the Eastern Himalayas. They are one of the oldest tribes of Sikkim. Rajesh Verma has reasonably stated that the Kiratis include Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Mangar and Tamang tribe of Sikkim. S.R. Timsina has also mentioned that the Mangars, Limbus and Lepcha are the earliest settlers of ancient Sikkim. J.D. Hooker has also described them as the aborigines of Sikkim. Hence, the rites and rituals of Mangars settlers of Sikkim, Darjeeling or sub- Himalayan region has a close affinity and can be found with similarity with other castes, yet holding its uniqueness and ethnic values. The paper here tries its best to bring out expansively the prevailing rites and rituals of Mangar among the inhabitants of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts in respect of life and death cycle.*

**Key Words:** *Society, Culture, Tradition, Rituals, birth, death.*

### **Introduction**

Society refers to an encompassing network of social interaction and interrelationship and encloses innumerable individuals and phenomena. Social relationship and social behavior form the essence of society. The social environment of any human group plunges into culture. It is the culture, which guides the people- what to eat, what to be done and how to be done, how to talk and how to think. Human behaviors are grossly determined by culture as the individuals are born, raised and live in it. A person can never be free from cultural influences. These Phenomena have been explained by Leslie White as ‘cultural determinism’. Every human society either literate or illiterate has a distinctive culture which governs the behavior of its members. (Roy, 2003: pp. 516 & 660) Melville J. Herskovits in his book, “Man and His Works” (1947) tried to relate culture and individuality in terms of enculturation. Enculturation is the process by

which an individual learns the forms of conduct acceptable to his group. He (1955) points out that in diffusion, the transmission of culture is a gradual process of culture change of which acculturation is one expression which occurs when any two are in historic contact. According to Felix-Keesing, "Culture change may be defined broadly as a reformation in group behavior, such reformation may be seen occurring from the level of individual experience, as being an innovator or accepting an innovation to that of the total functional and integral setting of a culture system." (Kumari, 1999: p. xxxi.). According to White, culture is the matrix, which is governed by its own laws of growth and operation. Neither human biology, nor human psychology can analyze the principle of its reality (Roy, 2003: p.660).

### **Mangars as an aboriginal of India**

The history of Mangar or Magar in India is shrouded in obscurity. Michael Witzel mentions, 'Magars were apparently known already to the Mahabharata as Maga, to the Puranas under the name of Mangara and in a Nepalese copper plate inscription of 1100/1AD as Mangvara' (Witzel,1991, p.18).

The mythological narratives describe Mangar as the descendants of 'GanaDevta' of the Lord of Kirateshwar (Shiva). It tries to bring the fact that the entire tribes of Himalayas as descendants of Kirateshwar, ranging from the Kashmir Himalayas range to Myanmar and from Tsangpo river of Tibet to the Gangetic Plain (Tilak Pradhan, 1996, p.4). A Copper Plate Inscription of Shivadeva, dated 221 Newar Era (1110 CE) has been discovered (The Gazetteer of Sikkim, pp.10 and 38). On it is mentioned the name of a *vishaya*, or province, called Mangavara. Scholars believe that the name was an archaic form of Magar. They came into prominence as a great power in about 1100 A.D., when Mukunda Sena, the Magar King of Nepal invaded and conquered the Nepal Valley and committed terrible atrocities during the reign of Hari Deva, King of Nepal (Kumar Pradhan,1991, p.35).

The Magaras or Mangars, one of the aborigines of Sikkim and Nepal, belong to the Kirata community of the Eastern Himalayas. They are one of the oldest tribes of Sikkim. Rajesh Verma has stated that the Kiratis include Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Mangar and Tamang tribe of Sikkim (Verma, 2015, p.7). As per Kirat Mundhum, Iman Singh Chemjong states that a place called Shin in the northern part of the Himalayas was the original home of the Mangars. They were headed from north to South by Shin (Chemjong, 2003, p.138). The Magars (Mangars) are described by Hamilton (1819) as a Himalayan Tribe "Wallowing in all the ancient abominations

of the mountaineers”, and found anywhere in the Himalayan region (Vansittart, 1896, p.104). S.R. Timsina has mentioned that the Limbus and Magars were identified as ethnic groups in Sikkim in 1642 (Timsina, 1998, pp.22 & 42).

John Dalton Hooker, who conducted a scientific exploration in Sikkim in 1848-49, has mentioned that “Mangars, a tribe now confined to Nepal west of Arun, are the aborigines of Sikkim, whence they were driven by the Lepchas westward into the country of the Limboos and by this latter further west (Nepal) still. They are said to have been savages and not of Tibetan origin and are now converted to Hindooism” (Hooker, 1855, Vol. I, p.180).

### **Mangars as Early Settlers in West Bengal**

The Mangars and its existence with its unique culture in India especially in Assam, Sikkim and West Bengal (Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar Districts) have come into limelight in the last decades of the previous century. The 1901 Census figures for the Magars or Mangars were 3214 in Jalpaiguri and 11,174 in Darjeeling (*Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol-3, part-, p.206). J.F. Grunning mentioned that there were 3709 Mangars in Jalpaiguri district as per the 1911 Census figures (Grunning, 1911, p.41). As per the census of 1931, the Mangar population in West Bengal was 24,042, out of which 14,613 were in Darjeeling District alone. The Census of 1951 gives the figure of Mangars in West Bengal as 42,663 and in Darjeeling Hills as 34,350 (Mitra, 1954, pp. 72-92). The article therefore describes the customs and rituals of Mangars inhabited in these areas from time immemorial.

### **Rituals of Mangars**

The life cycle of human beings consists of different phases and different changes that he passes through commencing from birth to death. The life of an individual in any society is a series of passage from one age to another and from one occupation to another. Transition from group to group and from one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence. Hence, it encounters a wide range of social ceremonies like birth, childhood, marriage, pregnancy, parenthood, death rites etc (Gennep, 1977: pp.2-4). The Mangars inhabiting these areas have their own basic rites and rituals which differentiates them with other castes of Nepali community.

## **1. Birth Ceremonies**

The observance of birth rituals of Mangars are different from the other caste of Nepali community. Though some of the taboos are similar to some extent, it is generally prevalent among them and strictly followed by all the members of the community.

### **(a) Pre- natal Care and Taboos**

This life cycle begins with the union of two adult male and females through matrimony. Pregnancy of a woman is a natural desire as among other communities and believes that a good infant is born in a good atmosphere. A woman without an issue is looked upon as inferior in status. The desire to get a child is also strong among the Mangar women as well. However, there are certain restrictions or taboos when a woman gets pregnant.

### **(b) Restriction of food**

- (a) A pregnant woman is prohibited from eating twin bananas or any sort of adjoined fruits. Consumptions of such fruits are believed to have been delivered in twin children.
- (b) Consumption of Papaya and bottle gourd are prohibited items to a pregnant lady in order to avoid any mishap or miscarriage of child.
- (c) Chopping of any fruit or vegetables into halves is also banned to an expectant mother for fear of any mishap to the child in womb.
- (d) A pregnant woman should never eat the flesh of wild animals like Leopard, else the child would snarl like Leopard (Allay, 2003: p.71).

### **(c) Social Restrictions**

An expectant mother and father are entangled with various social restrictions before the birth of a child.

- (a) An expectant mother is not allowed to chop off her hair till the delivery of a child.
- (b) The expectant mother and father duo are disallowed to kill or harm any living creatures.
- (c) An expectant mother, henceforth not allowed touching or looking at the corpse except the nearest one of the family but, if possible, to avoid doing so. Similarly expectant fathers should avoid attending the funeral process

during the time. They believe that if they do not follow such restrictions the new born may be born wrapped with numerous threads like hairs as that of cloth wrapped to a corpse.

- (d) A pregnant woman must not be part of any rituals related to death ceremonies and avoid being near a sick person. The husband of the pregnant woman must avoid touching the dead bodies in order to avoid the miscarriage of the woman.
- (e) A Pregnant woman should also avoid being exposed during an eclipse. It is generally perceived that a child born with black spot is the result of a mother touching her womb during pregnancy at the time of eclipse. It is also believed that a pregnant woman and husband of the woman should never step over a rope with which a cow, buffalo or goat is tied with. If either he or she does so, it is perceived that the child will be born with great difficulty and will be hazardous at the time of delivery of new born (Kumari, 1999: pp. 37-38).
- (f) A pregnant woman doing heavy household work is likely to be bestowed with a healthy and strong child.

## 2. Birth of a Child and Expectation

Prognostication of an unborn child is a quite natural habit among the women of any society; hence it is not different from the case of Mangar society. In earlier days, the conception of pregnancy used to be determined on the basis of the stoppage of the menstrual cycle of women. It is commonly perceived that a woman with a bright face during her pregnancy is blessed with a girl child and vice-versa with the unclean face a male child. Sometimes on the basis of the shape of the womb, it is presumed whether she is having a boy or a girl child and sometimes on the basis of placement of the baby in lower or upper parts of the body. The delivery of a child generally occurs at the husband's house due to post rituals complication. After the birth of a child, if at home the midwife cuts the umbilical cord or *nal* for which she is provided with some money.

### (a) Naming Ceremony (Mi-Ar-Min / Aarmin Dake)

A house is considered as polluted, the moment the child is born and expected to be purified only after the naming ceremony. The length of time varies from one Mangar group to another. The naming ceremony is held on the 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> day of his/her birth. On that day, sprinkling of cow's urine did purification of the house earlier but sometimes the same ritual is performed with gold-dipped water also. The followers of Vaishnavite sects among them purify themselves by putting

holy ash on their forehead by a Sadhu or an ascetic (Subba, 2008: p.349). The whole household members remain secluded and live a life of isolation from other families in the neighboring locality. The term *Sutak* is highly considered as impious in Mangar family and observed with great care. The first priority of naming the baby is always given to the paternal aunt of the child. Henceforth, he or she is called as per the name given by the aunt.

The naming ceremony of a girl child is observed on 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> day, however for a boy child it is generally observed on 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> day (Ibid., p.349). On the day of purification, all the members of the family are required to undergo the ceremony. Besides personal purification, the house is also purified. The mother and the child are presented with new clothes and other materials by the child's maternal uncle. Due to influence of Hinduism some of the Mangars families observed this purification ceremony by the Brahmin whereas in absence of him, it is also done by the son-in-law of the family. However, in the interior areas, the Mangar Priest *Bhusal* or *Wapa* also concludes these ceremonies. According to their social beliefs, the god of destiny comes and writes the destiny of the child (Mangar, .1993: p.30). So, the guests stay awake the whole night, singing devotional religious songs. In the morning, the host presents any person who is able to remain till morning with rice, alcohol and money on a *nanglo* (winnowing fan). The alcohol and money are being accepted but the rice is left for the host.

#### **Purification Ceremony Prevailing among other Nepali Communities**

Sl. No.	Name of the Castes	Number of days for Birth Pollution (Sutak) Female child	Number of days for Birth Pollution (Sutak) Male child
1.	GURUNG	7 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup>
2.	TAMANGS	3 <sup>rd</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>
3.	THAMIS	5 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>
4.	NEWAR (PRADHAN)	5 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>
5.	CHHETRIS	7 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>
6.	KAMIS (Viswakarma, Lohars, Sunars)	5 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>
7.	DAMAIS, DARJIS, SARKIS	11 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>

(Sources: - Subba, J.R., *History, Culture and Customs of Sikkim*, 2008)

After *Chaiti*, *Navranis* performed to purify the mother and the child and to give a name to the newborn. The Brahmin or Bhusal provides the rashi-naam determined by its horoscope, which helps in making *Janam-Patra or Kundali* (birth chart) of the child. The brahmin priest whispers the name in his or her ears and then to his or her parents. A thread is tied to the child's wrist and neck. Apart from this the ceremony includes the touching of cow-dung and milk by the toes of the baby. The child-cries, during the ceremony is considered a good sign. After the consummation of *gaunt*, the mother and the whole household are considered to be ceremonially clean (Allay, 2003: pp.70-73). Serving of common feast to the other relatives is also done on the very day as part of celebration of welcoming the newborn in the family. However, the mother or (*sutkeri*, new mother who stays secluded for some time), is supposed to stay in an isolation period of 22 days when after offering *Sutkeri Puja* to *Kuldevtas* (Sectorial God), she may lead a normal life. It is generally perceived that some unpleasant incident might harm both baby and mother, if the puja is not performed.

#### **(c) Weaning Ceremony (Purbhade/ Cho Kaske)**

Mangar people also perform *Pasni* (rice feeding ceremony), which takes place in the case of girls after five months of their birth and six months in case of boys. It is also named as *bhat-khwai* (Magar, 2004: p.27). Before the feeding ceremony, the child is bathed in *sunpani* (gold dipped water). Generally, the first person to feed the child goes to the maternal uncle of the child, later carried by the eldest members of the family, then the parents and other relatives. After the bath, they feed the child with a variety of the food, however, with growing consciousness among them, they prefer sweet light dishes for the day which replaces the heavier food day after day. The child is commonly dressed up in the cloth given by the maternal uncle on this day. Apart from this, a big tray containing toys, paddy, ornaments, book, pen, metal etc is placed before the child. The child's future career is presumed from the nature of objects he picks up from among those items. At the end a grand feast is organized for all the relatives and neighbors.

#### **(d) Mundan Ceremony (Chhaewar)**

It is the initial hair-shaving ceremony of a boy child. This is performed when the child attains the age of three, five or seven years in odd number years or within nine years (Baral Magar, 1994: p.64). In Mangar community maternal uncle plays a very significant role in completion of any rituals. No rituals are possible without the

inclusion of maternal uncle in case of nephew or niece. Hence, a prior invitation to him is needed for performance of this ceremony. In absence of him, someone from the maternal side has to perform it. Some hinduised Mangars prefer a Brahmin priest for this ritual. For this ceremony an auspicious day is selected with the consultation of local astrologer or priest. On this day a ceremonial platform is set up for the performance of this customs. Some Mangars of these regions also prefers a *gai-goth* (a cow shed or stable), where the child sometimes entangled with the same rope used for knotting the animals, placing betel-nut in his mouth, and chopping of hairs by his *mama* (maternal uncle). He cuts the few locks of hairs and places them in a plate, which later on proceeds by the barber. The child is completely shaved off leaving only his *tupi* (topknot) on his head (Pilgrims, 2007: pp.33-34). The paternal aunts assist the *mama* throughout the process and they are presented with a new set of clothes. After the completion of hair shaving, the child is prepared in the clothes given by his maternal uncle. At last, the child is given *tika* on his forehead by *mama* and the close relatives. Some offer gifts and some also gives money to the child. Some people organize it with grand communal feast to all the invitee's at large scale. This first shaved off hairs is wrapped in a new cloth and disposed of at a holy spot, under a tree or in nearby river or stream. The people believe that it keeps the child away from evil spirits and also perceived the length of hairs become long like the water of the stream.

#### **(e) Cloth Giving Ceremony (Gunyu Cholo or Gaghar Yahake)**

Gunyu and cholo is an in general dress of an adult Mangar female which a young girl is ritually given to wear after they perform this ceremony (Sinjali,2014: p. 62). This is performed when the girls turn into odd numbers years like five, seven or nine. Most importantly this ritual has to be observed before the first menstrual cycle of the girl child. *Gunyu* means Skirt, the lower garment and *Cholo* means blouse the upper garment worn by the Mangar women. An auspicious day is being chosen by the Brahmin priest to conduct this ritual. All the relatives from both paternal and maternal sides get invitations on the day and after some rituals the girl is gifted with new clothes and blessed with *tika*. It is believed that the girl will have a blissful life if this ritual is conducted. The day onwards she can wear these clothes which are generally worn by the Mangar Women. However, in recent times, these customs are rarely observed but still in rural areas it is performed with full faith and beliefs for the better life of their daughters. In some of the places the Feet washing or *Gura Dhune pratha* of the girl is also done by all the elders including the maternal uncle and aunts. In other words, the girl is beautifully decorated like a bride. Some believe



that it gives an opportunity for their grandparents to bless their granddaughter as bride due to uncertainty in future.

### 3. Death Rites

Risley mentioned that the funeral ceremonies of the Mangars, which are the same as those of Gurung and Sunwars, are curious and interesting. The Hindu theory of the transmigration of soul and the law of *Karma* has an effect on the death rites among Mangars. They believe that the soul of a person, after death, finally goes to the abode of *Yama* and they receive reward or punishment according to their deeds during their lifetime. They also believe in the concept of natural death and unnatural death and accordingly the underworld concept (Kumari, 1999: p.95). The Mangars also followed this ritual and similarity is found with respect to this in the area. When death occurs, at first, he is kept on the ground and a brass plate with the rice and an oil lamp on it is kept close to the head of the dead person. The dead body is constantly guarded so that it cannot be touched by any pets like cats or dogs (Subba, 2008: p.354). Risley mentioned that one of the maternal relatives of the deceased, usually the maternal uncle is chosen to act as priest for the occasion and to conduct the ritual appointed for the propitiation of the dead (Risley, 1891: p.75). Before the burial the corpse is wrapped in a white cloth and pinned at nine places with tiny dry sticks. Their custom is that the corpse is carried by a son only, however in absence of by son- in law or close relatives as well. Due to the influence of Hinduism, Some Mangars have started the system of cremation but majority of them still prefer to burn on pyre. The funeral procession proceeds, the priest or a *Dhami* recites mantras and sprinkles coins and *akcheyta* while blowing a conch (Pilgrims, 2007: p.41).

After reaching the cremation site by a river bank, the white cloth is removed and the body placed on the funeral pyre. The deceased's son puts a burning camphor inside the mouth of body and some milk is poured. The process is called giving *daakbatti*. After the *daakbatti* the pyre is set alight with straw. While performing this ritual people utters these sentences,

*“Chiniliking, naku loho lam nungki, Danya manar debro dunki,*

*Loho bajyu, barajyu kush lam nungne, holak na nungki*

*Loho gehok jatche boilethang na kungki.”*

(Which generally means today onwards you go ahead your way, go left instead of right, go through the way from where the ancestors had gone, go to your universal creator)

During these whole death rituals, only Mangar people are allowed to handle the corpse. After the pyre has been burnt, the ashes are thrown into the river and the funeral pyre is washed. If they perform a burial, they bury the body in a secluded place. After completing the cremation or the burial, the sons and brothers of the deceased shave the hair on their body and their *tupis* (top knots). However, if the deceased is mother then the moustache is kept intact in respect of father; similarly, if the deceased is father, they keep their eyebrows in respect of mother. Then they bathe and wrap their bodies in a white loincloth. The abstention period is varied for 13 days and 10 days. Most of the Mangars, under the general guidance of the association, observed a period of 10 days in case of adult death, seven days in case of children under ten years of age and five days in case of new-born in both areas of settlement (Allay 2003: pp.85-87).

All the funeral goers have a ritual bath to cleanse themselves before they return home. Risley described that when the mourners return home, one of their parties goes ahead and makes a barricade of thorn bushes across the road midway between the grave and the house of the deceased. As they are about to leave, they burn a fire and cover it with a branch of a *Chautari* tree and some *titepati*. They walk over it, touching the fire slightly with their hands or feet. Some places a thorny bhalaio bush and rose bush branch over the fire so that the deceased spirit will not follow the *malami* (funeral goers). The Mangars believe that the deceased spirit may follow the man and roam the surrounding area until the final ritual gets completed. (Pilgrims, 2007: pp.42-43). Risley has also mentioned that the object of this curious spirit ceremony is to prevent the spirit of the dead from coming home with the mourners and establishing itself in its old haunts.

### **(a) Abstention Period**

The Mangars believe in observing this abstention period with strict rituals and rites, failing in which they believe that it might bring troubles to their lives. Hindu Magar observes birth pollution for ten days (Bista, 1967: p.72). The abstention period differs in case of death of child and unborn child.

Sl.No.	CASTES	Abstention Period in case of death of <b>Adult</b>
1.	GURUNG	14 <sup>th</sup> . & 49 <sup>th</sup> (Buddhist)
2.	TAMANGS	49 <sup>th</sup>
3.	BAHUNS, CHHETRIS	13
4.	NEWAR (PRADHAN)	13
5.	THAKURIS	6
6.	KAMIS (Viswakarma, Lohars, Sunars)	7, 9, 13
7.	DAMAIS, DARJIS, SARKIS	11

(Sources: - Subba, J.R., *History, Culture and Customs of Sikkim*, 2008).

When the deceased son returns, they shave their heads and moustaches and are placed in a secluded part of their home, which is cordoned off from the rest of the living area of the house. They do it immediately after returning from the funeral for up to an abstention period of 10 days. The day onwards the one who starts *kuri* or abstention, stays secluded doing all his work by himself from cooking to washing his day-to-day wear cloth. During the period, he takes unsalted boiling food, generally boiled rice with ghee and fruits only. They offer food to the deceased before consuming by themselves. They take baths every day before offering and consuming food in nearby rivers or nearby water resources at home. They can only rest and sit in the *kuro* (secluded place that is built for them). They cannot be touched by anyone, not even by the family members except by the one who is in *kuri*. They keep themselves away from any domestic animals or pets, failing in which they might have to restart from day one. Married daughters and son-in-law are bound to observe partial pollution rituals varying from 3 to 5 days. The married daughters consume unsalted foods like boiled rice, potatoes and fruits for five days cooked by themselves but do not need to stay in a secluded area.

On the tenth day or thirteenth day, the people staying in *kura*, come out of the area and after performing different rites as said by the priest or *Bhusal*. Some offer *godan* (offering of cow calf) to priests. On the day, the family as per their capacity gives all the necessary articles from head to toe to the priest along with other necessary articles like umbrella, bed with all bed articles as *saiyya daaan*. Apart from this son-in-law also plays a crucial part in absence of priests by offering *nun tel* (salt, oil), and *Gaunth* (cow- urine) dipped with *titepati* or mugwort (sacred leaves used for purification (Ibid, p.44)). On the last day the ones in *kuro* are allowed to touch salt and oils which were the items on the banned list and they are purified

with sprinkling of *sunpani* (gold dipped water), *gaunth* (cow urine) and the drinking of a small quantity of this *gaunth*. The *malami* (funeral goers) are also given some of this *gaunth* to drink and then a feast is given to all there (Bisht & Bankoti, 2004, p.954). The family was announced as purified from death rites, however some partial obligation continues for a year. On the day the daughters prepare food for people observing abstention, also non-veg items as a mark of permitted consumption of all sorts of foods. But the son and daughter do not take milk for the whole year in respect of mother and curd in respect of father. They avoid consuming food in social functions and do not make pilgrimages for the next year.

### Conclusion

It is evident from aforementioned practices that the Mangars have distinctive rites and rituals regarding life and death cycles. They perform and observe all these rituals which differentiate them with other castes of Nepali community. Though, this can also be mentioned that they are not unaffected from Hinduism. Some of their basic cultures have similarities with other castes. But in spite of all, the community observes these rites with full devotion for avoiding any unintentional harm to the family in case of failure of observance. In the present-day society, a leniency can certainly be found in respect of some traditions but the efforts of the community in the preservation of these rituals have unified them either in hills or plains. In the interior places of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar districts, these are strictly performed in order to stay in social systematic order along with other castes in the society. It is therefore being carried forward from generations to generations from the time immemorial.

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