



RESEARCH ARTICLE

BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF PRE-NATAL AND POST NATAL RITUALS OF THE MEITEIS IN MANIPUR

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Abstract

Rituals are a series of actions that are performed during rites as a part of a religious ceremony. Religion and life cycle rituals are the core elements of culture. The Meiteis perform many life cycle rituals. It is the event or ceremony that marks the important stages of an individual's life. There are birth rituals, marriage rituals, and death rituals. This paper discusses birth rituals among the Meitei Hindus in Manipur. Being focused on the concept of Epanthaba and Swasti Pujah, the present paper describes in two terms as Pre-Natal and Post-Natal rituals. Pre-natal rituals are performed to decrease risk during pregnancy for both the baby and mother. Post-natal rituals are performed for the well-being of both mother and newborn baby after childbirth. The Meiteis believe that performing these rituals would help the baby to be healthy, intelligent, and longevity by the blessing of God.

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Introduction :-

Every community adopts one religion and performs many rituals according to the religion and culture of that particular community. Durkheim (1912) defined religion as a unified system of belief and practices relative to sacred things. As a part of cultural beliefs and practices, rituals are performed and observed in the life cycle from birth to death. Life cycle rituals are the ceremonies or events that mark the transitional stages in an individual's life, such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death, known as Rites of Passage. These rituals are found in every human society. In every community child is regarded as a precious gift from God. The birth of a child can be an auspicious and sacred time for a family. The sacredness of a child's birth is shown by the customary religious practices performed before and after the birth of a baby. The customary religious and symbolic act performed at the time of birth of a baby is regarded as a birth ritual. Birth practices and rituals are gently influenced by the religious practices of the particular community. The present paper will discuss the birth rituals among the Hindu Meities. Hinduism, as we see now among the Meiteis in Manipur, is a fusion of two religious traditions, represented by classical Hinduism and the other by the primordial religion of the Meiteis.

Manipur is a state in north-east India with the city of Imphal as its capital. It is bounded by the state of Nagaland to the north, Mizoram to the south, and Assam to the west. It also borders two regions of Myanmar, Sagaing Region to the east and Chin State to the south. According to the 2011 census, the Meitei people constitute 53% of the

population of Manipur state and followed by various ethnic groups. Out of these, 41.39% of the Meiteis are Hindus, and the remaining follow Sanamahism. Manipur was known by various names of different countries and states in the past. In the past, Manipur was known as 'Poirei Meitei Leipak' or 'Kangleipak'. Manipur, as per the Royal Chronicle or Cheitharol Kumbaba, was established in the first century A.D. when Nongda Lairen Pakhangba ascended the throne in 33 A.D.

Ethnologically and linguistically the Meiteis are Tibets-Burman Mongoloid with Australoed, Aryan and Thai admixture (including some Negreto and Dravidian elements) Sociologically, Meiteis have absorbed these foreign elements and completed integration in their social structure (Kabui, 1988).

Hinduism was accepted as the state religion in Manipur in 1714 A.D. when King Garibaniwaz (1709-1748) enforced it on all his subjects. It brought various forms of structural changes in the Meitei society. Singh (2013) views that during the reign of King Garibaniwaz, seven clans of the Meiteis were equated with the Hindu Gotras, and at the time of rituals, it is still prominent to use Hindu Gotras. Chatterjee (1979) expressed that "Manipur Hinduism gradually became a synthesis of the old legends and traditions, its social customs and usage, its priests and ceremonials, and Brahmanical Hinduism with its special worship of Radha and Krishna."

Every society has its own life cycle ritual associated with religious performances. Life cycle rituals are actions performed as common practices that are the result of folk beliefs developed based on religious faith by the people of a community. Life cycle rituals are performed when an individual enters into different stages of his/ her life. Birth ritual is one of the important life cycle rituals. It is a culture-bound ceremony performed by different groups of people as a mark of welcoming newborn babies into their respective communities and also of caring for them.

Objectives:

The main objective of the present study is to explore the perception regarding the beliefs and practices of the Pre Natal and Post Natal Rites of the Meiteis community.

Methodology:

For the present study, participant observations are carried on and conducted interviews with local elders of Utlou Mayai Leikai, a village of Bishnupur district in Manipur as a source of primary data. Necessary secondary data have also been collected from books, journals, etc.

Pre-Natal Rites:

The Meitei community has been practising certain rituals during the pregnancy of women. It would be observed as a pre-natal birth ritual. It is done with the belief that a baby can become a perfect human being in life if proper care is given from the time of its conception. For this purpose, the community observes various forms of ritual during the period of pregnancy. Just after the confirmation of the pregnancy, both spouses have to maintain taboos. For example, both spouses should not kill even an insect in the view that the reverse action may occur to the baby. However, such an idea is acceptable for professionals in army, butcher, etc.

Parratt (2013) found that after the fifth month of pregnancy a ritual called kokthok- chamthokpa used to be performed by a priest (Maiba) to avoid any unwanted complication to both the mother and child at the time of birth. Commonly, first child pregnant woman goes to temple in third or fifth or seventh month of pregnancy to pray to God for successful delivery and blessing for son preference with having panchamitra, a mixture of milk, ghee, sugar or juice of sugarcane, honey and banana or curd. During first pregnancy, chafu, uyan and khonghampul (chafu = utensil for cooking rice, uyan = for cooking curry and khonghampul = utensil for boiling water) are offered to the pregnant women by her maternal family members when she attains seventh month of pregnancy. At ninth month, she is served to lunch called Tha Mapal Chak kouba with the fish curry of Sareng (Wallago Attu / Helicopter Cat Fish) and Laphu (Plantain tree) with a belief that a special dish will give strength to the expecting mother at the time of child delivery. It is also performed at her maternal home and observed to be compulsory.

Post-Natal Rites:

After the birth, the new born child is held by the midwife (Wangon Amaibee) in case of delivery at home or the nurse in case of hospital. In the past, before cutting of umbilical cord the Wangon Amaibee calls in the spirit of the child by saying these three times:

"O! Five souls, the shadow also a sixth, come! Come". (Parratt, 2013)

After cutting the umbilical cord (Khoiree), it is put in an earthen pot wrapping inside with a changbilaa (a kind banana leaf) along with the placenta (Naopham). A one rupee coin is also put inside the pot. The pot is covered with an earthen lid and then buried underground. The hole should be around 14 inches in depth. Prayer is done to the Goddess known as Pitai-Khongtaibee for the well being of the child. It is also found that if the child is a boy the pot

is buried right side of the house. In case of a girl child, it would be the left side of the house. This task is done by the father or the male member of the family. While filling up of the hole he gently levels and carefully mops with water. After delivery of the child, the mother is given due care for a period of five days called Maning Kumba. During this period she is confined to the house until Epanthaba and Swasti Puja which is performed on sixth day. She receives best care and gets rest that even meal is prepared for her by the family members. It indicates that woman's health is taken care of in the Meitei Society.

Birth ritual ceremony of Epanthaba and Swasti Puja is done on the sixth day of child birth. Epanthaba is performed in the morning and Swasti Puja in the evening. Meetei (2011) views that "the main theme of Epanthaba is to propitiate the Goddess known as Pitai-Khongtaibee." She is mainly worshipped because the Meiteis believe that the Goddess look after the baby since the commencement of pregnancy. This ritual is conducted by a priestess (Maibee) or by a woman who has full knowledge about the ritual process. The necessary requirements for Epanthaba are one Yangkok (bamboo craft like a big plat used for winnowing, drying, etc), one Foudang Fou (a basket full of paddy), seven kinds of fruits, seven kinds of flower, seven kaboknachal (a handful of roasted flakes made from coarse meal of hulled rice), some vegetables mainly Heibee Mana (Meddler Leave), Yendem (Alocacia), banana stem, one NgamuPhumlou (roasted mud fish), a handful of uncooked rice, a pair of Meitei thum (traditional salt cake), a garland of seven Ngaree (fermented fish) known as NgareeParengAchumba, a tuber of ginger. A pair of salt plate and a pair of coins are placed above the foudangfou. A garland of seven Ngari known as NgareeParengAchumba are placed above the paddy. These items are specially offered to the deity Laklao Leima for the immunity of baby from cold and cough. Then Maibee prepares Singju (a raw vegetables mixture) with Ngaree. It is prepared in the plantain leaf and divided into seven parts. Then the Maibee pretends of feeding the singju to the baby. On each feeding Maibee pronounces these words Mum-mum-mum and followed by kuk-kuk-kuk to feed the baby with water. The Maibee carries away the Yangkok containing the Singju and other items on it outside the main gate of the house. They are then offered to the deity who dwell outside the household and prayer is made for the well being and longevity of the child.

After that Maibee brings the Yangkok inside the house. Then the baby is put on the Yangkok by the Maibee. She asks the mother to choose between the baby and the Yangkok. The Meiteis believe that the child is given birth by the mother, it will be brought up in the earth. The round shape of the Yangkok is compared to the shape of the earth. The second evening session of the birth ritual starts after the sunset. It is known as Swasti Pujah. The necessary requirements of this session are dress of the baby, one comb, mirror, necklace, bettle nut and leaf, banana, earthen pot, bow and five arrows, a handful of rice, seven kinds of flowers and fruits, a coconut, a handful of paddy, lamp, sacred thread, earthen tray, Horoscope (Janma Kuthi), etc. The Brahmin will chant mantras in Sanskrit language. This pujah is performed in the name of Goddess Swasti Devi, the consort of Vayu. While the pujah is going on, the Brahmin binds a small unstarched thread (putli) on the wrist of the baby with the small bundle containing some leaves of Bokul tree flower, rice, flower, a kind of herb TingthouAngouba (a kind of herb). For a baby boy, the bundle is tied on the right wrist and for baby girl it is tied on the left wrist. Maternal uncle also plays an important role in this pujah. The maternal uncle of the child will shoot arrows in the four directions. He first shoots to the east, second to the west, third to the south and fourth to the north. The last and fifth arrow is aimed at the sky and then to the Earth seeking life of the child. While shooting is performed, he should eat dry roasted pea nut also then he comes back inside the home with bow and arrow. He places bow and the fifth arrow near the earthen pot then he is offered Dakshina. This rites is performed for the purpose of driving away evil forces from the child. After the event, some eatable items are distributed to relatives and family members.

Conclusion:

It is found that birth ritual is unavoidable in the life cycle of the Meiteis. The Meitei community performs pre-natal and post-natal rituals to mainly seek blessing from God and Goddess for the wellbeing and longevity of both the child and the parents. Thus pre-natal and post-natal ritual form and important aspect of socio-cultural life of the Meiteis.

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