

Birth Rituals in Hinduism

Hindu culture is full of rituals, traditions, and daily routines that seek to enhance and create the best circumstances for an individual while alive. These rituals are very orderly, taking place to move the individual from one stage of life to another. This personal movement, known as *samskara*, is ultimately to help the individual obtain liberation (*moksa*), and become free from the birth, death, and re-birth cycle. It is no surprise that birth would have many rituals surrounding it, as parents, extended family, and those involved with a new born would want to provide the best possible conditions for a baby to progress in life and achieve *moksa*. From the time of pregnancy until the child (if a boy) is 'born again' by the performance of the *upanayana* ritual, people near the new born perform many rituals and rites for the benefit the infant since it is not able to do so for itself. It is the purpose of this paper to describe some of these rituals that are performed from the beginning of pregnancy until the delivery, as observance to these rituals plays a key part in an individuals life.

Women in Hindu society are complex as they have a duality in their roles. On one hand they are viewed as fertile, compassionate caregivers, yet on the other hand, they can be viewed as hostile, malicious destroyers (Wadley 113). An examination of Hindu women in the context of caregiver shows that along with caring for herself, her primary role is to care for her husband and children; this is why we see such concern surrounding childbearing. When a women suspects she is pregnant, it is not announced immediately,

but rather the women leaves it to those around her to notice that, “she has not observed the usual monthly pollution period, is sometimes nauseous, or is widening at the waist”(Jacobson and Wadley 143). Once a women’s pregnancy is known, it is common that her brothers will take her to her parents home for the pregnancy (Tewari 259), however this is not always the case. No matter where the mother is located, she is treated and cared for in a special way to prepare for the coming child. Attention is paid to protect her and her unborn child from coming into contact with evil spirits, even to the point of abstaining from foods that could harm the baby (Jacobson and Wadley 143). The pregnant women, or *jacca*, is not to be out after dark, is not supposed to walk past *pipal*, or *babul* trees (since they are supposed to house evil spirits), and should always keep a piece of iron with her to ward off any spirits (Tewari 258). Upon learning of the pregnancy, one of the first rituals performed for the *jacca* is called *arathi*. *Arathi* serves the purpose of removing the evil eye, and is similar to a western baby shower, since it primarily centers on the *jacca* receiving gifts of good fortune, as well as special foods to eat (Dhruvarajan 88).

When the *jacca* enters into the seventh month of pregnancy, *arathi* is again performed, and further attention is given to prepare for the coming of the child. Other rituals such as *rit*, and *kanji* may also be performed, which are very similar in the gift giving nature of *arathi*. In preparation for the delivery, a special birth-chamber, or *sovar*, is set up for the *jacca* and her baby. The *sovar* is a room that is separate from the rest of the house, preferably without windows, as the delivery should be completely private and away from the public. Much care is taken in the placement of the bed, making sure that it

is not placed under the main beam of the house, and that it is not facing south, as these are believed to have a bad effect on the *jacca* (Stevenson 2).

When the time of delivery has arrived, the *jacca* enters the birth-chamber accompanied by her midwife (*dai*), and separates herself from everyone else in the household. This is because labor is a highly polluting experience, so polluting that the *jacca* is now referred to as a *jachcha*, or one in “a highly polluted and polluting state, similar to that of the lowest untouchable castes”(Jacobson, 144). Because of the highly polluting nature of delivery, the *dai* usually lives in a nearby low caste village, and travels to the home of the *jacca* at the time of delivery (Jacobson and Wadley, 144). If complications arise during delivery, a wide range of action may be taken, from breaking open the mouth of the great grain jar, to putting a lotus flower in water, hoping that as its petals expand, the mouth of the womb will also expand (Stevenson 2). While such traditional methods are preferred, if the *jachcha* faces complicated problems the *dai* may turn the pregnancy over to professional medical treatment.

Once the baby has been delivered, attention is given to what time the birth took place, as this will determine an accurate horoscope for the child, which, to a certain extent, will determine when other *samskara* rituals are performed. On the day of birth itself, the family Brahmin priest typically holds a small ceremony for the new mother, in which he ritually brews an herbal tea in the company of the women of the extended family (Jacobson and Wadley 146). During the time following the delivery, the mother and child continue to be separated from the rest of the household (as mother and child are still regarded as being in a highly polluted state). It is believed that nine months worth of

polluted menstrual blood is discharged at the time of birth, and therefore the mother and child must be purified before the return to the household. The main actions taken during this purification process called *sor*, are a series of baths and oil massages performed by the *dai*, each progressively removing more pollution (Jacobson and Wadley 147). When the mother and child are believed to have been sufficiently cleansed, the *dai*, “breaks the mother’s old glass bangles...[and] rubs the mother with an ointment of turmeric, wheat flower, oil, and water to cleanse her skin” (Jacobson and Wadley 147). The baby itself is similarly cleansed by being rubbed with a ball of turmeric and dough, and receives an oil message. The mother and child are then changed into clean clothes, with the dirty, polluted clothes and bedding being thrown away. The birth-chamber itself also undergoes a purification by the *dai*, who “[applies] cow-dung slip to the floor and up onto the base of the walls.”

Upon the completion of *sor*, the mother and newborn are returned into their household and further rituals are planned, depending largely on the gender of the baby. In the case of a boy being born family and friends are invited to celebrate with the family, however in some instances the birth of a girl has limited celebration, or none at all (Tewari 260). This is based on the fact that a boy is seen as being able to perpetuate the family line and be a provider, where the girl’s role is traditionally less dominant. However while further life rituals are conditional, the birth rituals observed are unconditional as they seek to provide the best conditions for the baby to be born into.

References and Further Recommended Reading

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