

Birth Rites

3.1 General Remarks

All over the world, human beings share basic experiences related to family life. Some occasions are in themselves deemed happy, such as the birth of a healthy baby, or a marriage. Other occasions are by their very nature sad, such as the death of a family member, or of anyone who was part of the community. Yet while the experiences are the same, the importance given to them, or the way they are marked, is quite different with different peoples and cultures. There have also been changes in the various rituals over the thousands of years they have been practiced. In this chapter we will look into the details concerning the birth of a Rai child.

3.2 Birth

The birth of a Rai child takes place in the house of the husband, infrequently in the house of the wife's parents. Also, because of the fair distribution of work in Rai households, a woman generally looks after the livestock. If she goes into labour at this time, the birth is likely to take place in the shed where the person in charge of the grazing livestock stays. If such is the case, the new mother will go home to her husband's house next morning with her new baby.

Some women seek the help of an experienced woman, but there are no recognized midwives. If the husband is around, he helps with the preparation for the delivery (e. g. it is his job to make a cradle or repair the one used by older siblings), but he leaves the place before the actual birth takes place. He may then come back to cut the umbilical cord, but generally, the mother cuts it herself. The mother also disposes of the afterbirth herself. The Khaling Rai keep the umbilical cord in a tree near the house and later it is used as a lucky charm. The Athpaharia Rai bury it in a nearby field (Dahal, 1985:86). Bantawa Rai keep it in a bamboo cane.

A newborn infant is wrapped in old skirts of the mother and kept close by her. As a general characteristic, we may say that there are no specific rites for birth itself¹¹. Birth is considered by the Rais as a strictly biological and natural event. There are no chants during labour, no prescribed methods and no particular place for the delivery. There are certain times which are considered auspicious, but overall, the birth is not in itself a ceremonial event.

For a period of four days after the delivery the mother and the house in which delivery took place are considered ritually unclean. The new mother must not cook, neither for herself nor for others. She is supposed to rest and not leave the small area allotted to her and the new baby in the rear portion of the house. Nobody except the newborn infant may touch her. She is given especially nourishing food prepared by female relatives. No persons outside the immediate family members are permitted to enter the house, and the area allotted to the new mother and child may not be visited by any male family member.

3.3 Purification Ceremony

On the fourth day after birth a purification rite is performed. On this occasion the family members of both

parents are expected to attend. Each household represented brings a chicken and some beer. The new mother washes all her clothes and cleans the area inside the house which she and her newborn infant had occupied. A priest is summoned for the occasion and performs the rite of 'lifting up the heads' of mother and child. This is to exorcise any evil spirit which may have been present at the time of birth. Among the Bantawa Rai, the house is purified by sprinkling water with the leaves of a certain plant all over the house. Later, a feast is given and all the people present at the rite participate.

After the ceremony of the 'lifting up the heads' there are no more restrictions on outsiders entering the house. The mother, however, cannot cook the meals for the family nor sit anywhere inside the house except in her specified area, nor can anyone other than the mother and the infant occupy that place for four more days. On the eighth day after confinement, this special area is again cleansed by the mother who also again washes all her clothes. After this, without any further ritual proceedings, all restrictions are lifted.

3.4 Name-giving Ceremony

This ceremony is performed on the third day after birth for a daughter and on the fourth day for a son by the Athpaharia Rai (Dahal, 1985:84). Other Rais do not make any distinction concerning the number of days. The Kulung Rai perform no special ceremony for name-giving as the infant is named on the purification ceremony itself. There are no particular rules as to who has the decisive voice in the name-giving. Even so, the given name is seldom used by family members but rather the children are called by rank names, e.g. 'Jetha', eldest son; 'Jethi', eldest daughter. 'Maila', second son; 'Maili', second daughter; and so on. Moreover, among friends and acquaintances, nicknames

are commonly used and often an adult is exclusively referred to and addressed by this nickname. Again, there is no specific person who would be entitled to suggest such a nickname, rather someone with a strong enough personality and an interest and liking for the person to be named will find a name and everybody starts using it. The general time to acquire a nickname is as a teenager; for some popular boys or children of popular parents, it may be even in childhood.

Besides this casual approach to name-giving, there are also an increasing number of Rais who follow Hindu customs and invite a Brahmin (or a shaman) to find a name according to the horoscope of the child. Such names follow the commonly used Nepali names. They may be any of the following:

- names of gods : Indra, Durga, Krishna, Rudra, Shiva, Vishnu, etc.
- martial : Rhandhoj (champion of war), and especially as the second name, Bahadur (brave).
- legendary : Bhim Bahadur.
- astrological : Tula (scales), Kumbhasing (water carrier).
- birthdays : Tika (born on Tikaday).
- weekdays : Aitabir (born on Sunday), Sombahadur (born on Monday).
- quality : Prem (love), Shanta (peace).

The Athpaharia Rai have a special name giving ceremony. It seems to follow Hindu customs to a large extent. In this ceremony, first the verandah of the house is smeared with cowdung. Then cow's urine is sprinkled all over the house and the family members also purify themselves sprinkling cow's urine on themselves. The person who had cut the umbilical cord of the newborn child is

invited. She bathes mother and child and rubs mustard oil on them (Dahal, 1985:85). Many northern Rais do not know such a ceremony, a fact which points to the Hinduization of the Athpaharia Rai.

3.5 Rice-eating Ceremony

The Athpaharia and Bantawa have a special rice eating ceremony similar to the general Hindu custom. The northern Rai groups (e. g. Khaling, Kulung, Mewahang) do not have such a ceremony as they are considerably less Hinduized. Also, for them rice is by no means their main staple and thus symbolic for any type of solid food, but they have a variety of cereals (e.g. millet, corn, buckwheat, wheat).

The rice-eating ceremony is a happy occasion and is celebrated when the daughter is five months old, or a son is six months old. All relatives are invited, as well as friends and neighbors. A variety of dishes are prepared. A special dish, rice cooked in milk, is prepared for the child. Before feeding this to the child, the father puts a tika mark of uncooked rice mixed with curd on the forehead of the child and gives him or her one rupee. All the relatives also put a similar tika mark on the child's forehead and give presents. In addition to rice cooked in milk, other soft food, including curds and meat, are also fed to the child. All who were invited partake of the feast prepared for the occasion.

3.6 Hair-cutting Ceremony

As a son turns three years old, he will have his first hair-cut. This ceremonial act is performed by a maternal uncle. Again, as with the rice eating ceremony, this is not an original custom with the Rais. To this day, it is not at all common among the northern Rais, but it is more popular with the southern Rais (e.g. Athpaharia, Chamling,

Bantawa) who are more Hinduized because they live among Hindu neighbours, whereas the northern Rais mostly live in exclusive villages. Even among the northern Rais, some of the former Gurkha soldiers tend to adopt this ceremony. But then it is much less elaborate than among the southern Rai groups.

