Abstract

Each society and folk community is remarkably unique for having its own culture and tradition. It is true in case of Sri Lanka as well. The present paper tries to throw light on the some customs and superstitions relating to childbirth with specific reference to Sinhalese society.

Children are the prospective members of the future generation, who are to take over the responsibilities of the entire country. Hence, the birth of a child is considered as one of the most joyous occasions as well as a great achievement for a family. Consequently, the pregnant women are given a special place in society and treated with respect. When the news of the pregnancy is expressed to the members of the family, they take all the steps to please the one, who is pregnant and to protect her and the child by performing family customs, rituals and meritorious acts. Until quite recent times, the childbirth was considered to be somewhat dangerous for the life of both the mother and the child. This uncertainty that surrounded the childbirth thus let many superstitions to be woven around this significant occasion and they still prevail in present society, where the birth of a child has become a safe and a happy occasion.

The childbirth is a symbol of a successful traditional marriage. In the Sri Lankan traditional society in the past, there were two kinds of marriages, namely; diga marriage and binna marriage. The diga marriage is performed by accompanying a bride to the groom's domicile. According to binna type of a marriage, the male partner arrives at the female partner's house and makes it their permanent residence after the marital affair is completed. Thereafter many customs prevailed to be performed, especially, when it came to the bearing of the child and giving a birth to a child and bringing up a child. Thus, in the occasion, where a woman had been brought to the man's house by a diga marriage, the marriage was considered to be a failure, if the woman is infertile. In such case, the husband resorted to an alternative step to bring another wife and perhaps the first wife was hence to be sent back to her parents. Even if this is a sad situation, there are and were many remedies, which has been made at this kind of situations relating to the matter regarding infertility. When a woman does not conceive during the early years of their marriage, there were many rituals performed by the certain members of the Sinhalese community in order to fulfill the wishes of the married couple and their elders. The most common among these rituals is, making of a vow at a religious shrine, which is believed to be producing effective results, in that respect. If the conception is late, people believe that it is due to the misdeeds, which the woman has committed in a previous birth. It is believed that the evil effects of misdeeds could be made ineffective or neutral by performing...
meritorious deeds in the present life, such as offering flowers, lighting lamps, bathing the foot of the Bo-tree (ficus religiosa) with water or milk, giving alms to Buddhist monks or beggars or to children in need. Most of the Sinhalese are of the opinion that all good things are the results of the Gods' will. When one transfers merit to the Gods by performing meritorious deeds, the gods will never make any obstructions over the path of fulfilling their wishes. Gods will safeguard the person from all the evil spirits. A married couple, who is expecting their child usually makes visits to temples of special significance such as the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy, the Sacred Bo-tree at Anuradhapura, shrines of Gods, such as those at Kataragama (God Skandha) and Aluthnuvara (Goddess Pattini) or Kelaniya (God Vibhishana). They make a vow for the sake of the child to be born and seek blessings for an uncomplicated birth. If their wishes are fulfilled, they visit the same shrine or the temple with the new born baby with the offerings they have promised while making the vow and the merits gained from them will be transferred to the Gods, who they believe, were their protectors during the period of pregnancy and the child's birth.

Some times in certain areas of Sri Lanka, rituals are performed in protection of the pregnant women in order to make her pregnancy as comfortable as possible. The Rata Yakuma and Riddi Yagaya is such a ritual, which is performed specially in the southern province of Sri Lanka. This ritual is performed to appease Rata Yaka, who is believed to be an evil spirit or a devil, who expects offerings to his satisfaction for the purpose of ensuring a successful child bearing and a delivery. This ritual is performed not only for the benefit of the health of the pregnant woman, but also for women, who have experienced miscarriages as well. According to the folk tradition, long ago, there were seven queens named Riddi bisav (Silver queens), who were barren, but after they offered a robe to the Buddha Deepankara, their barrenness was cured. This infertility in them is said to have occurred due to lack of previously performed good deeds. However, after performing meritorious deeds, they were able to conceive children. The ritual called Ratayakuma portrays the acts of a pregnant mother in the form of mime, while narrating the story of 'Silver Queens' by reciting the story composed in verses. When a husband receives the news of his wife's conception, he makes a vow to perform the Ratayakuma ritual with the expectation of ensuring the comfortable delivery of the child. In the process of getting ready to the ritual, he first prepares a pot with some coins, a betel leaf and some flowers on it and hangs it on a raft of the roof. If it would be a safe delivery, the Ratayakuma has to be performed and at the end the pot will be dashed in to pieces. The performance of this ritual represents mainly as an act of the seven barren queens, who got ready to weave a robe to the Buddha Deepankara and got their barrenness dispelled. This is a very elaborate ritual, mainly imitated in mime, where the acts of bathing, combing hair, adorning themselves with clothes and ornaments are imitated in front of an audience. This is followed by preparing cotton to weave the robe, washing it after and offering it to the Buddha. All these acts are presented in mime with the recital of descriptive verses. It is believed that these imitative actions could provoke the delightful emo-
Tions in the mind of the woman concerned. This ritual consists of actions relating to childbirth including bathing the newborn child, adorning the baby with ornaments, singing lullabies to let the baby sleep. This is followed by another sub-ritual known as Kumara samayama, which is performed in order to protect the infant from evil spirits, which is very important for the well being of the new born child.

During the initial stages of pregnancy, women experience an unusual desire to eat a particular food or indulge in a certain act. Such a desire is known as Doladuka; it literally means the suffering of two hearts, i.e. Dauhrda duhkha in Sanskrit. Usually a pregnant woman craves to eat sour fruits or to visit a special religious shrine. The husband and the elders will take every possible effort to fulfill her desires as if, if it is not fulfilled the foetus inside the womb would be destroyed or the infant to be born will suffer from various illnesses or will be subjected to either physical or mental defects. The close relatives and friends visit her very often with a packet of boiled rice and curry wrapped in a banana leaf. Presenting of fruits with sour taste also take place simultaneously.

Paying homage to Buddha by offering flowers lighting of lamps at a Buddhist shrine and bathing the foot of the Bodhi tree with milk or water are also rituals associated with pregnant women. In this way, with the blessings of the Buddha, she accumulates merits to make her delivery more comfortable. It is believed that the chanting of seth pirith by the Buddhist monks would be benedictory in order to dispel evil influences and also to win the goodwill of the Gods. After fulfilling all the vows, which they have made prior to the conception of the baby, fresh vows are made again to have a safe and comfortable delivery.

Preparation of clothing for the expecting baby should be handled with care. In some families sewing of any of the clothing for the new comer in advance is prohibited. Sometimes, the pregnant mother herself is not allowed to prepare clothing for the baby and the others are doing it for her. Nevertheless, these items should not be completed before delivery of the baby. This sort of fear had embraced them due to the danger, which is involved in the childbirth from times unknown. Not only preparing of clothing but talking about the birth of the child is done with special care. The Sinhalese people would never use these phrases such as "when the child is born" or "when you get the child", when referring to a woman, who is expecting a baby. Instead they prefer to use "when these troubles are over" or "when we relief us from this burden" and so on. They believe that the birth of a child is none of their matters but a matter decided by the Gods. Any kind of pre-assurance could harm the safety of the baby and the mother.

Until recent past the floors of houses were smeared with the mixture prepared of clay and cow-dung. Even today the people living in rural areas cannot afford to cement the floor for their houses and use this preparation. The pregnant women are then not allowed to attend to the smearing of floors of their houses due to the belief that such an act would imprison the insects such as ants in any hole in the floor. When a woman is in labor in a house, all cupboards, drawers and boxes in the household are kept open as imprisoning of any insect might be sinful act, which harm the mother.
Even at present, laying foundation for a new house is not to be initiated if the wife of the household is bearing a child. Here too the concept of imprisoning any insect or worm might have taken place under the building.

When a woman is expecting the first child, it is a custom in Sri Lanka that she should go to her parents to spend the last three months of the pregnancy and be with the parents at the time of child birth. During the latter weeks of her pregnancy, two or three Buddhist monks are invited to the house to chant pirith (recital of benedictory stanzas from Pali Buddhist canon) to expel unfortunate occurrences, evil spirits or any other bad effects brought about by the planetary deities on the pregnant woman. As a result, an easy and comfortable delivery and the wellbeing of the baby to be born, is expected. At the time of child birth a special set of benedictory verses referred to as angulimala piritai will be recited expecting blessings for a comfortable delivery.

There is another custom among the Sinhalese to perform a traditional rite known as Ran kiri kata gaema or the application of golden milk on the tongue. The golden milk is a preparation of milk, which is made by rubbing an article of gold such as a ring on a clean and rough surface and the gold dust is mixed with a few drops of breast milk taken from the mother. This mixture is applied on the new born baby's tongue at an auspicious moment. It is believed that this has a magical power of resisting disease and assuring long life to the new born baby.

Before maternity hospitals and modern medical facilities were introduced to Sri Lanka, all babies were born at home with the help of a midwife. Now, in this era, the child birth usually takes place in a hospital. In such instances the baby is taken to a Buddhist temple as the first journey of the baby out of the house. Some parents take this opportunity to cut a small piece of hair from the baby's head to preserve it until the baby starts talking. If it is not done that way, when the child is attempting to talk, people believe that baby's ability of talking could be affected. After the birth took place, each important event of the childhood of the baby begins at an auspicious moment prescribed by an astrologer. The stepping out of the baby to the outside world is an important event. In this case, the infant is taken outside at an auspicious day and moment by the father carrying the baby in his arms and attempt to walk in garden of the residence. Casting a horoscope for the baby is another important matter. The exact time of the birth of the baby is recorded and taken to the astrologer. On the basis of the calculations made on the planetary positions at the time of birth, the astrologer prepares the horoscope and predicts the baby's future. He determines suitable phonetic symbols or letters in order to give a suitable name to the new born baby. The naming of a child is an equally important task. It is believed that the name is addressed at millions of times during his life time, it affects him or her more than any thing else. The parents could use their discretion and choose any suitable name beginning with one of the prescribed phonetic symbols. A selection of a name may carry significance ranging from historical to religious. In any case, the name selected should be meaningful. Some are very much concerned about the arrangement of the syllables in the proposed name as it is believed that the proper use of sounds avert malevolent effects and get beneficial results. A group of three syllables compose a
foot (gana), and variations of the arrangement of these three syllables produce eight kinds of feet, four being benevolent and four malevolent. This is a meticulous procedure used in composing verses and it is seriously considered when selecting a name to a new born child. A name with three long syllables would bring prosperity to the child, whereas three short syllables ensure a long life. When the first syllable is short it serves good and successful enterprise, when the first is a long syllable it brings good health. On the contrary, certain sound combinations are believed to be inauspicious.

Wearing ornaments for good luck and protection is another practice, which prevails within the Sinhalese society. A small medallion called panchayudha or the symbols of divine weapons, which is made of either silver or gold is worn around the neck of the child. These symbols of five divine weapons include a sword, a spear, a bow, a battle axe and a shield engraved on it. This medallion is worn for the purpose of providing protection to the child and as a repellant against evil spirits generated as a result of evil eye, evil mouth and evil ear (es waha, katavaha and ho waha). In certain instances, children are dressed with bangles round the wrist and chains round the waist made with strains of black beads and yet certain other instances large black dot (tilaka) is placed on the middle of the forehead of the baby for the same purpose. When a baby keeps on crying without sucking milk, it is believed that it would be due to the influence of evil spirits. In such case, a notice has to be hung on the main doorway of the house, stating "the evil of baala giri is not today but tomorrow". It is believed that this would alleviate all sorts of evil influences and protect the baby.

The weaning of a child is another important ceremony. This usually takes place when the baby attains ten months of age. A variety of food specially, milk rice, sweet oil cakes, ripe bananas and other items of traditional sweets along with different kinds of toys, books, gold jewelry are placed on a mat. The importance of the event is indicated with lighting of traditional oil lamp. The child is left independent on the mat and let him to pick up what ever item he or she likes. It is believed that the choice of the child foretells his future, for instance if the choice is a book the child would be an educated person. This follows feeding the baby with solid food for the first time. This too is done at an auspicious day at an auspicious moment prescribed by the family astrologer.

Each and every ethnic group possesses its own customs, rituals and superstitions. Though they have not been economically productive, they keep the people together in a spirit of unity and cohesion. They make man's life picturesque and less burdensome and is they that confer on them the sense of identity among the rest of the mankind. As seen, all the Sinhalese community in Sri Lanka with their history of about two and a half millennia possess a rich array of customs, rituals and superstitions This paper is an attempt to bring together some customs and superstitions associated with child-birth in the Sinhalese society in Sri Lanka.

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