

INFLUENCING DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONALITY THROUGH BIRTH RITUAL: A STUDY AMONG BENGALI COMMUNITY

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Abstract

The development of the personality can be divided into three categories, biological, psychological and social aspect. The rituals influence each of these aspects of the individual. The way socialisation are linked with the direct development of the child in the same way rites of passage or to be limited to the issue of the elongated birth ritual serve the function of developing a child in a particular way. Such studies are not concerned with the religion but with function and nature of the symbolism and its relation to social and individual behaviour. Different colours are used while painting a picture similarly different rituals are performed to form the character of the individual. According to Rajballi Pandey, instead of letting the character of the individual take shape in the disorganized way, the Hindu sages upheld the requirement of consciously moulding the personality of the individuals, thus they utilised the rituals existing in the society for this purpose. The rite of passage which the present study is concerned is the Birth rituals among the Bengali people. The paper uses literature of customs of Hindu and compares it to the present context to assert the hypothesis.

Key words: *development of personality, birth rituals, Bengali community, agency, social coherence, changes.*

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An enquiry into the origin and real purpose of the ancient institution like that of Hindu rituals is set with many difficulties. Firstly the unusual circumstances under which they originated are submerged under the thick crust of time and mass superstition has gathered around them and then national sentiments which views only glorious and bright side of the past. But the more inflexible vision is that of the modern mind that anything which is ancient has to be superstition and myth. Thus in such situation the need of the hour is an imagination which is well trained and which accompanies a thorough inquiry of facts to deal with the problem. (Pandey 1949, 39)

There are different authors who site different reasons for the practices of rituals, according to Rajballi Pandey (40-41) in his book *The Hindu Samskara*, cited many purposes of the *Samskaras*. According to him the purpose may be divided into two folds. Firstly the popular and the superstition, which is influenced by blind faith and naive simplicity of the primitive mind. The second category is priestly and cultural. Its origin is when the social beings want to improve upon nation due to conscious efforts governing the evolution and development of the society. Rituals of both the type continued to exist since the very beginning of the society and have also collaborated on each other when time demanded and are still represented in Hinduism. The rituals were never regarded as ends in themselves they were considered as the means to grow and ripen into the moral virtue. It can be said that the cultural and the moral purpose which evolved from ancient rituals and ceremonies altogether leads to the development of the personality.

Birth (*janma*) in the cycle of the *Samskara*; it is by birth that a person is said to receive his body. Since the body is the central symbolic and defining feature of kinship in Bengali culture, birth is the central symbolic action and therefore highly valued. At the same time, Bengalis are aware of the fact that birth is a dangerous, painful and messy process. Yet, as the action through which a person receives his body, birth is the paradigm for all of the other *Samskara*. (W.Nicholas, Kinship in Bengali Culture 1977)

A short field study has also been conducted in the city called Siliguri in West Bengal. A total of 15 families have been studied irrespective of caste and class with the help of snowball sampling. Both primary sources and secondary sources were utilised for the analysis. The whole issue is looked through phenomenological approach.

The rituals cover the full life span of the individual and even after the death by influencing and impressing the cult of the soul. But the ritual which we are to concentrate here only focuses on the rituals surrounding birth. They are arranged in a peculiar situation where rituals can create suitable impressions since the very beginning of an individual's life. The rituals are the guide that directed the life of an individual according to his growth.

Let us start with detailed discussion from the very beginning of the rituals, the ritual called *Garbhadhana*, a pre-natal *Samskara*, is observed following a particular time and condition. The influencing of the personality through rituals begins much before the conception in form of *Garbhadhana* ritual, a ritual where a man places his seeds or semen into a woman. The *Garbhadhana* ritual was performed at the proper time when the couple is physically and mentally fit. Raj Bali Pandey in his book *The Hindu Samskara*, basing his source from the ancient Hindu literature pointed out a prescribed way of conceiving a child. From the fourth day to the sixteenth day of the menstruation course the conception of the baby is considered to be vital. There were many hymns and verses for the performance of the ritual. Each day after menstruation was considered to give specific characteristic to the child. There is a concept of odd and even, a female child is considered to be conceived on the odd days while the male child is considered to be on the even days. A son who is conceived on the fourth day is short-lived and without wealth, and a female born on the fifth days generally gives birth to female children, a boy conceived on a sixth day generally becomes a mediocre, a girl conceived on the seventh day becomes barren, a boy conceived in the eighth night becomes a lord or prosperous, a girl conceived on the ninth night is auspicious, a boy conceived on the tenth night becomes wise, a girl conceived on the eleventh night is irreligious woman and a son conceived on the twelfth becomes the best man, on the thirteen an adulterous woman and on fourteenth a religious, grateful, self realized and firm in vow, a son is born, on fifteenth a mother of many sons and devoted to her husband is born and on sixteenth a learned auspicious, truthful, self controlled and a refuge of all creature is born. (Pandey 1949, 87). Thus here we can see that the more away the day of conception of the child from menstruation, the more auspicious a child becomes, this is because of the impurity

related to menstruation. Here we can see that every single day has something to give to the personality of the child to be conceived. The day has been consciously picked up in order to shape a particular type of personality.

Throughout the pregnancy the expectant mother is supposed to observe many restrictions and she is guarded and protected against evil influences. Her every conduct is supposed to regulate the growing child in the womb.

Raj Bali Pandey asserted two rituals like that of *Ayusha* (for long life) and *Prajnanana* (for talent) were the new born were blessed to become firm like stone and strong like an axe and grow into an intellectual man. On every occasion in childhood joys and felicitation of an optimistic life were thrown into the atmosphere, which was breathed in by the growing child.

The next ritual is called the *Pumsavana*, which is to cause the birth of the male child. This too like the earlier ritual of *Garbhadhana*, prefers male child than a female child. But this *Samskara* is no longer performed among the Bengali Hindus as a separate ritual according to Bose. (Bose 1929). In *pumsavana* a ritual was performed where a standard of beauty of a child could be maintained. The hymns like "*Suparna*" etc or "of beautiful wings" expressed the wish that a handsome child is born. (Pandey 1949). The ritual also contains the eating of the symbolic food of semen, *pancamtra*, five "immortal" liquids- yoghurts, milk, clarified butter, sugar, and honey. The reason for the feeding the expectant mother seminal food rests on the assumption that when the food is digested it will be converted into semen (responsible for the birth of the male child) and the likelihood of the birth of the male child would be increased.

A ritual called the *jata-karma*, "acts of worship", *karma*, "parturition" *jata*, which is performed at the time of parturition is also significant in the present context. It contains two major parts, after the son has been given birth but before the mid wife (*dai-ma*) cuts the umbilical cord and his mother feed him milk. The father of the child offers food to his ancestral father then enters the room where the son has been born where he views his face for the first time, he cleanses the baby's tongue with powdered rice and then with a piece of gold with honey and clarified butter on it and simultaneously he recites some hymns in his ears. This part of the ritual not only effects the removal of unfavourable birth defects which the son might have acquired from his parents, but most significantly it induces the quality (*guna*) of intelligence to be born in him. (Bhattacharya 1973/74). This ritual is called the *Medhajanana* which speaks of the high concern of the Hindus about the intellectual well being of the child, which they thought their first business with it. According to Pandey in the book

Susrutathe properties of ghee is to produce beauty, increases intellect, talent, lustre, good sound, semen and life.(Pandey 1949, 124). In the field work done, the people admitted to have fed honey before breast feeding so the way of talking of the child will be pleasant. The *jata-karma* is not found to be performed in the recent days as seldom any non-institutionalised birth is observed.

Niskarma (the first outing) according to Bhattarcharya though meant to be performed in the third and the fourth month, usually performed together with the *Jatakarma*. It is performed separately only by the Brahmans accompanied by the feasting ceremony of the Brahmans, relatives, and the poor. Pandey asserts that it is performed from the twelfth day to the fourth month. However the time of observance is less important than the purpose of observance of the ritual. Its purpose is for the first time to unite the child with its surrounding environment of the world outside the house in a manner favourable to the well being of the child by showing him the moon God. (W.Nicholas, Kinship In Bengali Culture 1977). The sight of the sun is also shown by the father to the son and going to the temple is also observed. The significance of the whole ceremony is linked with the physical necessity of the child and impressing on it the inspiring grandeur of the universe. It implies that after a certain period of time the child must be taken out and then in the fresh air and from then the practice should be continued. It also stress on the potential mind of the child that the universe is the sublime creation of God and should be respected duly.(Pandey 1949).

The prevalent ritual spread widely is *Sasthi-puja* which is performed on the sixth lunar day after the birth of the child. This ritual is important because it is believed that the God Brahma itself write the child's fortune on the forehead of the child, thus a light throughout the night is kept lightened, thus influencing a good fortune and character upon him.

The role of the eunuchs in the context of its importance in blessing the child is acknowledged and considered auspicious. The eunuch dances and sings for the well being of the child then the blessings to be the person of great virtue, intelligence, wealth and long life is given.

In the study conducted among the families the time of the name giving ceremony or '*nama-karana*' differed. It is to be performed on the tenth night after birth or more commonly on the occasion of *anna-prasana*. (Bhattacharya 1973/74, 444-45). On the study conducted people were also found who performed on the occasion of *Sasthi puja*, sixth day after Birth. There are many ideas responsible for determining names such as religious or even secular ideas and they represent a particular quality in a

person named.(Pandey 1949, 131). In the study conducted people consulted the priest and followed the day of birth, zodiacal sign and so on to fix the name. A pattern was observed that the names have meanings of a good character and quality. The reason interpreted by them was that they wanted the auspicious quality of the name get induce into the child.

The feeding ceremony also called the *Anna-prasana* is performed on the even months for boys and on the odd months of the year for the girls. The boys and girls are introduced to the adult sex roles at this time for example the caste *Kayastha* (writers and accountants by caste occupation) places inkpot pen and paper before a boy and for girls a container of vermilion which symbolises her future roles as a married women. This is how the character is consciously or unconsciously shaped. Some of the informant also gave the information that the hair of the child from the tonsure ceremony was buried in the field of some good college or school so that the child would have interest in studying in his future.

The *Vidhyaarambha*, also known as *Hate-khadi*, 'chalk in the hand' is performed before the child attends his schooling. The *purohita* (priest) of the family worships *Sarawati* the goddess of learning (*vidya*) and performs *homa* oblation. Then the Braham draws the character of the alphabet and causes the child to trace over them with a piece of chalk (*khaddi*), thereby transferring writing skills to the child. Victor Turner has put much attention to the symbols of rites of passage of a social being in the luminal phases. He also notes that such 'threshold people' while they are undergoing their own transition are usually 'passive or humble'. The social being that has undergone the rituals are observed to be the recipient of the symbolic action. They are acted upon, and when they act themselves it is under the explicit control of the external master. (Turner 1967, 95)

In the book *Kinship in Bengali Culture*, the author has explained how the word *Samskara* or ritual means development of personality. He explains "the word *Samskara* means to "complete," "prepare," "makeover," "fully formed", and above all to "purify" (*Shuddhi*). Every *Samskara* is regarded as a transformative action that "refines" and purifies" the living body, initiating it into the new statuses and relationships by giving it a new birth. A *Samskara* removes "defects" (*dosa*) from the body, such as those inherited "from the seed" (*baijika*) and "from the womb" (*garbhika*), and infuses "qualities" (*guna*) into it. These goals are accomplished by immersion, aspersion, or sprinkling, by touching various parts of the body, by donning new clothes, anointing and feeding with special substances, and by the

recitation of special words into the ear. Each *Samskara* in the sequence prepares the persons for the next; all of them cumulatively prepare him for the penultimate goal of attaining heaven (*swarga*), "rebirth" (*punar-janam*) in a higher caste, or becoming a proper "ancestor" (*pitr*), in preparation for the ultimate goal of "release" (*mukti or moksa*) from the cycle of birth and "life in the world" (*samsara*) by the separation of the persons (*atman*) from the body and its union with the *Braham*." (W.Nicholas, Kinship In Bengali Culture 1977)

According to the same author above the *Samskara* are believed to influence the overall personality of the recipient and not only a "spiritual" part. For an example, bathing is regarded purifying to the mind (*man*, *Mana*) and heart (*hydra*) as well as to the exterior surface of the body. The head and the heart are believed to be controlled by a person's body. In the *Samskara* it is usually seem that the persons head is sprinkled with water while the region of the heart is touched and these are conceived as an action that affects both the "material" and the "spiritual," or "physical" and "mental" parts of the body. Thus the Hindus *Samskara* are outward and visible symbols of a stage of refinement or perfection that is both outer and inner, both visible and invisible. (W.Nicholas, Kinship In Bengali Culture 1977)

The transformation which is expected from the individual undergoing rituals through which a personality modifies are the characters which are highly acknowledged behaviour of the society and it is beyond self. Consciously or unconsciously the anomic behaviour is meant to be avoided by the rituals. The purpose of other rites of passage is also to influence the most desirable character of the individual but birth ritual specifically tries to work on biological, psychological and social behaviour of the individual and altogether developed their personality.

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