

Maternal Health among the Tai Khamtis of Narayanpur, Assam

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Abstract: The study aims to explore the experiences of Tai Khamti women regarding traditional beliefs and practices related to pregnancy and childbirth, as well as their interactions with the formal health system in modern times. An exploratory study conducted in Bar Khamti Gaon in Narayanpur area of Lakhimpur District, Assam, India. The Tai Khamtis are a significant ethnic group in Northeast India, originally belonging to the Shan race and migrating from Upper Burma to Assam in the 18th century. The Narayanpur Khamtis, specifically, are noted for their cultural richness and indigenous medicinal knowledge. Therefore an attempt has been made in this paper to delve into various aspects of antepartum (before childbirth), intrapartum (during childbirth), and postpartum (after childbirth) care among the Tai Khamti community and provides an insights into the intersection of traditional cultural practices and modern healthcare systems and its access among the Tai Khamti women.

Keywords: Tai Khamti, Maternal Health, Tribal Medicine, Preservation of Traditional Knowledge

Introduction

The North-eastern region of India consists of a diverse combination of tribes who still practice their age - old traditional medicine to prevent or combat diseases and maintain wellbeing. Most tribal communities of the state of Assam have their own local traditional health care systems; one of them being the Tai Khamtis.

The Tai Khamtis, followers of Theravada Buddhism, are a culturally rich tribal community. This community, belonging to the Shan race, migrated from their original seat in Mung Khamti Lang in Upper Burma and settled in Assam in between 1750 – 1850. The Narayanpur Khamtis were settled near the Dikrang River in 1843. Although they migrated to Assam, they still maintained their own heritage and custom. The Tai Khamtis have a rich knowledge on the utilisation of locally sourced resources and its application for ensuring well – being.

Now, the Tai Khamtis are a major tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, inhabiting in the Namsai district with a few settlements in the three districts of the state of Assam viz., Lakhimpur, Tinsukia and Dhemaji. In the present study, the Tai Khamti community of Narayanpur area in the district of Lakhimpur were approached to understand the traditional practices and beliefs related to maternal health within the community.

The Tai Khamtis possess traditional medicinal knowledge developed and passed from generations to generations, shared through oral or written literature, based on the folk beliefs of their community. The Khamti healers provides affordable and easily accessible medicine prepared through this pre – existing knowledge system. People from far off areas still visit the Khamti healers for their cures, especially, in cases of dog or snake bites, bullet wounds, fractures and joint pains, diarrhoea and other several gastrointestinal issues, piles and jaundice. The Khamti people also prefer to cure their common ailments with the local remedies prescribed by their traditional medicinal knowledge system.

This paper studies how the Tai Khamtis traditionally handled issues related to maternal health, that is, the health of womenfolk during and after pregnancy as well as during childbirth. The study tries to explore the age – old techniques, beliefs and rituals followed by the Tai Khamtis to ensure a successful pregnancy and its application by the Tai Khamtis in contemporary times.

Objectives of the Study

- To study the traditional practices and beliefs related to maternal health among the Tai Khamtis of Narayanpur, Assam
- To explore changes, if any, in these age - old practices and beliefs over time
- To understand the factors that have contributed to changes in the traditional system?

Material and Methods

This paper is an exploratory research to study the maternal health amongst the Tai Khamtis of Narayanpur in the Lakhimpur District of Assam. It aims to understand the popular traditional beliefs, practices and experiences of Khamti women in relation to maternal health. The study was conducted in the Barkhamti Village, one of the rural settlement largely inhabited by Tai Khamtis in Narayanpur area. Earlier, the village had around 150 households. But, due to increasing geographical mobility, only 80 households remain presently.

The village elders and healers, and the Khamti womenfolk who still possess the age – old knowledge on maternal health were chosen as respondents. The *Pathek* (reader of ancient scriptures), *Chau Chewaka* (expert in local medicine) and *Ya Phan* (midwife)

and *Bhante* (Buddhist Monk) are key holders of the knowledge on the medicinal herbs and varied rituals which are prescribed in the Tai Khamti community. New mothers were also interviewed to understand their perception on the traditional methods and practices.

Primary data was collected through in – depth interviews as well as telephonic interviews and data was analysed identifying the similar theme, repeated ideas and patterns within the data collected from the respondents.

Discussion and Major Findings

Pregnancy is considered a natural and desirable process in the Tai Khamti community. In this community, in earlier times, the womenfolk used to be deeply involved in case of pregnancy. The respondents stated that there is no concept of midwife in Tai Khamti Society since time immemorial. It's the village women folk, commonly called *Ya Phan*, take care of maternal health, by looking after the pregnant woman, applying certain changes on the woman's diet and even restricting certain activities for the couple expecting. They would also provide assistance and services according to the need of the new mother.

Prenatal Care

In the Tai Khamti community, these womenfolk called *Ya Phan* identify pregnancy with the stopping of the menstrual cycle. Additional identifiers include fatigue, dizziness, nausea, and loss of appetite or the increasing urge to eat a certain food item. No special ceremonies or ritual or animal sacrifices are done after the news of conception is announced. The pregnant woman is expected to continue her physical work in the agricultural field and community as well as her daily household chores. However, prohibited from using axe or other heavy tools to cut trees, dig holes or carry loads as it may put pressure on the womb.

Certain restrictions are also placed on the husband and wife who are expecting a child. For instance, the pregnant women were not allowed stay out of their homes after sunset. They were asked to not go out in the darkness. Also, they were not allowed to touch dead bodies or attend funerals. The husbands were prohibited from going for hunting or fishing or killing snakes in this duration so as to prevent them from committing a sin when their partners' were expecting.

In terms of food practices, the pregnant woman is prescribed to eat less rice but ample amount of low fat milk, ripe fruits and green leafy vegetables along with fish and chicken. Overall, nutritious and protein rich diet is ensured. They are advised to have only three meals a day and not eat bellyful so that the baby born is smaller in size and have low body weight that will help in an easy and normal delivery. A few food taboo

for pregnant woman are practiced: hot and sour food, fermented items as well as excess amount of meat is prohibited. Also, undercooked or contaminated food is restricted. Moreover, they are forbidden to eat sticky rice, taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) leaves, raw or unripe fruits, and wallago catfish (*Borali Maas* in Assamese).

With the greater adoption of Buddhist principles and ideologies over the previously held Animistic beliefs, the current informants believe that there are no evil spirits who create complications for pregnant women, but, for a healthy and successful pregnancy, a *May Plot* (sacred thread) maybe tied on the arm or neck of the expecting mother. The Buddhist monk or *Bhante* may also prescribe certain mantras to chant for overall well – being.

Intrapartum Care

The elderly ladies of the village used to take care in all the maternity related issues like dislocation of baby in the womb, sudden white discharge or bleeding. For instance, in case of white discharge, several plant roots are boiled and given to the pregnant woman. The Bibhitaki (*Terminalia bellirica*) root is one such herb used in case of white discharge. To stop excessive bleeding during pregnancy, the extract from the Pomegranate (*punica granatum*) twigs are utilised.

They handle the delivery of the child as well. The *Ya Phan* normally delivers the baby at home and also provide the aftercare like cutting of the umbilical cord with a sharp bamboo blade and cleaning the baby using hot and cold water. The placenta is either disposed by digging a hole in the ground or thrown in the river for fishes to eat. A few women even dry and store the placenta as they believe in its medicinal properties.

Postpartum Care

The mother and the new born are in postpartum confinement as they recuperate after the delivery. In case of a girl child, the mother and child need to be isolated for four days and in case of a boy, five days. Food prohibitions are applied on the new mother to restore her health gradually. In the first week after delivery, she is asked to have only rice, salt and water. After the week passes, fish is allowed. However, chicken and duck is still prohibited.

The *Ya Phan* has a few other services to provide after delivery. The new mother receives regular body massage with mustard oil. The womb is also lightly massaged. She is also advised to tie a cotton cloth (*Gamosa* in Assamese) around the womb for ten days so as to avoid the feeling of emptiness in the womb area. For the new mother to develop more milk and evade iron deficiency, consumption of *musa balbisiana* inflorescence is recommended. They check the new-born baby and prescribes if any steps are to be taken for the well – being of the mother and the child.

After the delivery of the child, the elderly women folk of the village gather in its house to perform a divination ceremony to check if the new born has good or bad luck. They select an egg, boil it and cut it in half to see the yolk inside. If it is yellow in colour, the baby has great fortune and if the yolk is brown in colour, it indicates something bad is to befall on the baby. In such rare cases, the *Pathek* (reader) is consulted who prescribes which *Liks* (sacred texts) to be donated in the *Bapuchang* to appease the God and ensure the child's wellbeing.

The Tai Khamti community perceive pregnancy as a natural process that doesn't hamper the daily activities of life. Prayers and sacred amulets are used to ward off evil intentions and diet restrictions placed for a smooth term.

The Nature of Changes in the Tai Khamti Maternal Health System

In the past, there was a well – established system in the Khamti community, including precautionary measures and rituals, to ensure the well – being of the child and its mother. This traditional way of life has since had changed over time. With the spread of literacy, movement to urban areas, changes in occupation, better income and adoption of a modern lifestyle, certain ethno medicinal practices have taken a back seat. It is still relevant in the Tai Khamti community, but more and more mothers are inclining towards modern medicine.

Elderly Khamti ladies tend to recall yesteryear practices during their pregnancies. How they were strictly supervised regarding the food restrictions and how there movement was controlled for the well – being of the baby. But, in contemporary times, they believe many such customs are lost.

Spread of Literacy and Change in Lifestyle

With an increase in literacy rate and adoption of different occupations, there is a change in people's lifestyle and outlook and the gradual discontinuation of the norms of former times. The modern Khamti women, studying or working outside, return home late at night because of their busy schedule. Their work demands travelling and juggling both personal and professional life. Thus, they are unable to follow certain rules like of staying at home after dark during their pregnancy. Again, traditionally, abortion was not accepted or allowed in Tai Khamti society as it is deemed to be an unpardonable sin to kill an embryo in the mother's womb. The respondents believed that there were no abortion techniques recommended by the *Ya Phan* as it may endanger the life of the mother as well.

Generational Disconnect

There is a generational disconnect between the older and the younger generation. Due to rapid changes in society as well as swift movement of people from rural settings to

urban areas has led to a change in the relationship shared earlier within the community. As evident from the data collected, formerly, the womenfolk of the village were actively engaged in the maternity related matters. They acted as a community, bound together by common tradition & beliefs. That level of solidarity is declining with the younger generation adopting a more individualistic approach in life. Mostly, rational or contractual relations persist in the modern society as more and more women avail the public health facility and services due to increasing reliance on modern medicine as well as their intimacy with the village level health workers.

Access to Modern Healthcare Systems

The younger Khamti women folk prefer to access the available methods of contraception and the present-day maternal care provided by the modern healthcare systems. Several reasons have led to this shift including prevention of contagious diseases and unwanted pregnancies, to ensure safer pregnancies as well as to deter maternal and child deaths. One of the respondent complains how women nowadays do not follow the restrictions properly. That they approach modern medicine practitioner and follow their prescription throughout the pregnancy and opt for C – section rather than a normal delivery.

With such changes in outlook in the Khamti society, the role of the *Ya Phan* has declined. With decline in this role, the agent holding the age – old medicinal knowledge recedes to the background. A few respondents, actively engaged in their former times in maternity related issues, failed to recollect certain knowledge that their grandparents had regarding reproductive health. The informants had no idea regarding which contraceptive methods were utilised in the past. A few of them have also forgotten the specific leaves, roots or herbs that were used in earlier times in case of complications like white discharge or menstruation after conceiving. They believe that as they turn towards modern medicine practitioners for their gynaecological and obstetric matters, the old cures are forgotten.

Conclusion

The Tai Khamtis possess a rich cultural heritage and a vast medicinal knowledge. This knowledge system supplemented with valuable principles, age – old beliefs and rituals is still prevalent amongst the Tai Khamtis of Narayanpur, Assam amidst modern health facilities. The traditional system to ensure well – being of the mother and child is cost effective as the rituals performed and the medicine prepared are sourced from local, easily accessible resources. Pregnancy is seen as a natural process in the Tai Khamti society and in the past, well – established systems existed for warranting a smooth delivery of child at home. This understanding of the safety of the mother and child should be built

on by the modern health systems while also integrating traditional healers who have been important stakeholders of maternal health within the community.

In the contemporary time period, the maternal health care is handled in both traditional and modern ways. Most of the people takes into consideration all the facets of maternal health care from modern medicine perspective but also follows the customary norms, as much as possible, in regards to pregnancy and child bearing to keep their beneficial traditional knowledge system thriving in the ever - changing modern society. The elders of the village believe that there is the need to pass this age - old knowledge from generation to generation so that it doesn't extinguish with them. Further study on the functioning of maternal health practices and beliefs amongst the Tai Khamtis can help in understanding the specific requirements of the community while preserving the traditional customs and values.

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