

Taboos and Myths Associated with Pregnancy among the Bodos of Assam

Minakshi Gogoi

Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Email - minakshig353@gmail.com

Abstract: Pregnancy is a vulnerable period. Fear of negative outcome for the pregnant woman and the unborn child is universal. Taboos during pregnancy have been a part of Indian society and culture since a long time. In many communities, especially in a rural setting, pregnant woman are restricted from doing some particular activities and eating certain foods which adversely affect the health of the pregnant woman. The study is based on restrictions on food, movement and certain acts during pregnancy that people follow because of socio-cultural prohibitions followed by health concerns and the study was made among the Bodos of 'Nic-Chinakona village' of Udalguri district in Assam.

Key Words: Pregnancy, Taboo, Myth, Misconception, Cultural prohibition.

INTRODUCTION:

The Bodo people are recognized as one of the most important tribe of Brahmaputra valley and other North Eastern part of India. They are the natives of the land. They are distributed mainly in Udalguri and Kokrajhar district of Assam and recognized as a plain tribe in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution. Historically almost all the Bodo people have been practising *Bathouism* (Hinduism) as their religion while only a few of them practise Christianity as their religion.

Taboos during pregnancy are universal in many Indian societies. The pregnant woman are restricted from eating certain foods and doing particular activities because they believe that consuming of those restricted foods and performing prohibited activities may cause harm to the unborn child and the expectant mother. Such types of restrictions are a set of rules which have been made and followed by their ancestor for generations after generations. Here an attempt has been made to explore food taboos as well as other prohibited activities and related misconceptions associated with pregnancy that people follow because of the cultural and religious prohibitions followed by health concerns. The study was undertaken among the Bodos of 'Nic-Chinakona village' which is situated in Khoirabari, Udalguri district of Assam, India.

MATERIAL AND METHOD:

Data for the present study were collected at two levels; firstly, materials of extent literature were collected through library search, reading of newspapers, articles, journals, periodicals and internet as in accessing online sources (such as library databases and online journals) etc. Secondly, basic ethnographic materials pertaining to the present study were collected through field studies among the Bodos of Nic-Chinakona village. In the second phase of work, both qualitative and quantitative empirical data were collected by employing various methods and techniques like case studies, interviews, observations, life histories and household census method.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS:

The entire population of Nic-Chinakona village were inhabited by the Bodo people. The study was made among 100 Bodo families out of which number of male is 246 and number of female is 222.

Table 1: Population by Age and Sex

Age Group (in years)	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
0-4	17	6.92	15	6.75	32	6.84
5-9	17	6.92	14	6.31	31	6.62
10-14	23	9.34	19	8.56	42	8.97
15-19	26	10.56	18	8.11	44	9.40

20-24	20	8.14	28	12.61	48	10.26
25-29	22	8.94	29	13.06	51	10.89
30-34	33	13.42	21	9.46	54	11.54
35-39	15	6.09	20	9.01	35	7.48
40-44	17	6.92	20	9.01	37	7.91
45-49	14	5.69	17	7.66	31	6.62
50-54	18	7.31	4	1.80	22	4.70
55-59	4	1.62	4	1.80	8	1.71
60-64	9	3.65	5	2.25	14	2.91
65-69	4	1.62	5	2.25	9	1.92
70-74	4	1.62	2	0.9	6	1.28
75-79	-	-	-	-	-	-
80-84	2	0.82	-	-	2	0.43
85-89	1	0.41	-	-	1	0.21
90-94	-	-	1	0.45	1	0.21
95-99	-	-	-	-	-	-
100-104	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	246	99.99	222	99.99	468	99.99

TABOOS AND MYTHS DURING PREGNANCY:

Taboo means forbidding one from doing something due to customs and traditions as it is believed to bring bad luck. Every society has its own perceptions towards taboos. Whether rural or urban, people have their own set of beliefs and practices. Some are based on centuries of trials and errors and have positive values while others may be useless and harmful.^[1] The study revealed that people of Nic-Chinakona village were already familiar with some common taboos related to foods, movements and certain other activities. Although there is not enough practical reason in supporting of these taboos, but these was very rigidly followed by the people of Nic-Chinakona village. For example, a pregnant woman is not allowed to go to the cremation ground and the room where a dead body is kept. The villagers believe that the evil spirit might attack the pregnant woman and may do harm to the unborn baby. Going to forest and uphill, travelling after dark, killing any living creatures and telling lies etc. are prohibited by a pregnant woman. Similarly crossing a river bridge, crossing tethered rope of animals near the roadside, making round of a house, travelling without taking a knife etc. are avoided by them. While taking interview one respondent explained:

“Pregnant woman should not leave their hair open; it makes the evil spirit easier to come in touch with the pregnant woman and may affect the unborn child if she leaves her hair open specially at night” (a 47 years old woman from Nic-Chinakona village).

The villagers believe if the pregnant woman see the solar and lunar eclipse then the baby will be born deformed. The pregnant woman is restricted to make contact with certain people who have special powers. According to them pregnant women should not steal and they are also forbidden to gossip, fight with the elders because these behaviours are believed to have a negative effect on the unborn child. They are forbidden to hit and slaughter any birds and animals like duck, chicken, pork etc. Restriction like walking at certain times of a day and avoiding certain people who have special powers are common for them. Apart from these some taboos are there for the husband also in certain activities. As for example, the husband is not allowed to hunt any animals and birds during wife’s pregnancy or to attend funerals. Similarly they are prohibited to come home late at night because the villagers believe that evil spirit may follow him and affect both the unborn child and the expectant mother.

Table 2: Restricted Activities during Pregnancy

Sl. No	Restricted Activities	Reasons for Restrictions
1	Walking at certain times of day	Penetration by spirits
2	See the solar or lunar eclipse	May give birth to deformed baby

3	Attending funerals	Evil spirit may affect the unborn child
4	Leaving hair open at night	Evil spirits which become powerful at night may target the pregnant woman
5	Travelling after dark and going to jungles	Penetration by evil spirits
6	Make round of the house	Cause umbilical cord to wrap around the baby's neck
7	Sewing and stitching	Cause the baby to have birth defects

FOOD ITEMS TABOOED DURING PREGNANCY:

Because of different societal structures and myths woman are not permitted to consume certain food items during pregnancy. The restrictions imposed on women forces them to abstain from certain food and drinking items as these things are embedded into the cultural and religious threads. These taboos are a set of rules and regulations which allow us to eat or avoid certain kinds of eatable or drinking items.^[2] These prohibitions are varied in different phases and special events of life and thus associated with menstrual period, wedding, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, funeral et cetera.

As we all know that the poor health of the mother affects the growth and development of the baby. Poor maternal nutrition may cause the new born baby to low weigh, anaemic, susceptibility to various infections and also increases the risk of still birth and death of the baby; so proper dietary attention should be given to the expectant mother for growth and development of the foetus. The expectant mother should take an extra amount daily in addition to her normal diet and it should include cereal, pulses, milk, meat, fish, egg, leafy vegetables, and fruits etc. It is certain that some foods may have negative implications on health, but due to unawareness and socio-cultural beliefs and prohibitions people avoid many healthy food items during pregnancy. According to Haslam, Laurence and Haefeli theoretically, pregnancy restrictions may be seen as having both positive and negative impacts on health related quality of life.^[3] Jackfruit and pumpkin may cause stomach ache, ripe papaya may cause abortion, and bitter guard can simulate miscarriage.

Table 3: Food Restricted During Pregnancy

SI No	Name of Food	Reasons for Avoidance
1	Papaya(ripe)	Abortion
2	Cucumber	Cough and cold
3	Apple	Cough and cold
4	Pumpkin	Stomach ache
5	Bitter guard	Simulate miscarriage
6	Jackfruit and pineapple	Miscarriage
7	Taro and urad bean	Miscarriage
8	Litchi	Simulate miscarriage

Martin in his study on food restrictions in pregnancy among mothers of Hong Kong reported that, in order to maintain harmony within the body (interpreted as a good state of health), pregnant women should avoid eating “wet-hot foods” (e.g., shrimp mango, lychee, longan, and pineapple); as doing so will produce a “poisonous” energy which will manifest itself as allergic reactions or skin eruptions in the baby.^[4]

More or less in each and every Indian society hot food items are avoided during pregnancy because people believe that taking hot food may cause miscarriages. Study revealed that it's applicable among the villagers. As for example, taking excessive amount of hot foods like papaya, banana, pineapple, coconut, jackfruit, taro, urad bean, red chillies, meats, chicken, eggs and fish etc. are avoided. Similarly cold food item during lactation period is avoided as it is thought that it might affect the quantity and quality of breast milk production. Moreover, consuming of cold foods like apple and cucumber may cause the child from suffering cough and cold. Consumption of alcohol causes diarrhoea in infants and hence the lactating woman taboos it. Similarly, consumption of items like salt, chillies, wheat, black gram, dal and beans is believed to make the breast milk indigestible to the child, hence the mother avoids these items.

A few more instances of societal beliefs and prohibitions were recorded during the study. Eating palm and pear is avoided by a pregnant woman because the villagers believe that it will make the child blind. Any twin fruits like banana, cucumber, mango and attached betel nut are not eaten by pregnant woman as it is thought that eating such twin fruits and any items may cause twin pregnancy. Kruger and Gericke made observation that although mere avoidance of potential foods does not in itself signify a food taboo, it is easy to see how regular avoidance can turn into a tradition and eventually end up as a food taboo.^[5] One respondent during the fieldwork described:

“We never eat any joint fruits like banana or cucumber or mango during pregnancy, because it is a belief in our society that if we take anyone of these restricted items during this particular time, we will have twin baby in our womb, which none of us wish to have” (a 36 years old woman from Nic-Chinakona village).

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Although these taboos seek the well-being of the pregnant woman, but since these taboos, i.e. restrictions on food items, are not scientific, so it may have adverse effect on the pregnant woman. So proper inspection is needed to ensure the safety of the woman as well as the unborn baby.
2. Education is very important which will help them to understand the scientific explanations of health implications of consuming certain foods and that they can observe food and movement restrictions accordingly, instead of observing them due to rigid societal beliefs and prohibitions.
3. Government and NGO's should come forward to undertake more research on misconceptions on food and movement during pregnancy considering cultural backgrounds for the benefit of the community as a whole.
4. Government should adopt definite measures to enlighten the villagers about pros and cons these taboos. And also, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the Government of India should come forward with various schemes to fulfil the need of security and welfare of the pregnant women and the unborn child.

CONCLUSION:

Various taboos during pregnancy are still prevailing among the villagers. These are mainly on food, movement and certain acts. They basically practice these taboos to prevent any misfortune from happening. Although the proper reason behind practicing these taboos cannot be proven practically, it can be said that the villagers have great concerns about the society's unique values and thus the villagers still maintain their old traditions. During pregnancy many healthy food items are avoided by a pregnant woman; illiteracy, innocence and lack of proper nutritional information may be a major reason for their avoidance of certain foods during this important period of a woman's life. Mere avoidance of restricted food items does not mean that the villagers are completely unaware about the health implications of consuming these foods; and thus while avoiding food they consider certain health related issues of the unborn child and expectant mother. Similarly, prohibiting certain activities as discussed above basically means restricting one from being violent toward others and for the safety of the pregnant woman as well. Thus the overall result of the study is that traditional socio-cultural beliefs to a large extent followed by health concerns motivate the adherers to practice these taboos.

REFERENCES:

1. K. Park, *Park's Textbook of preventive and social medicine* (Jabalpur: Bhanot Publishers, 2011). (1)
2. S.W. Mintz and C.M. Du Bois, The Anthropology of food and eating, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31, 2002, 99-119. (2)
3. C. Haslam, W. Lawrence and K. Haefeli, Intention to breastfeed and other important health-related behaviour and beliefs during pregnancy, *Family Practice*, 20(5), 2003, 528-30. (3)
4. D. Martin, Food restrictions in pregnancy among Hong Kong mothers, in David Y.H. Wu and Tan Chee-Beng (Ed.), *Changing Chinese Food ways in Asia*, (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2001) 97-122. (4)
5. R. Kruger and G.J. Gericke, A qualitative exploration of rural feeding and weaning: practices, knowledge and attitudes on nutrition, *Public Health Nutrition*, 6(2), 2003, 217-23. (5)