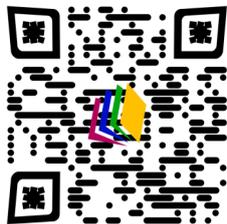




e-ISSN: 2582-502X

Asiatic Society for Social Science
Research. 1(1): Dec, 2019, 52 - 54.

Research Article



www.asssr.in
(Peer Reviewed)

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Received on 14.09.2019

Modified on 20.10.2019

Accepted on 10.11.2019

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Oral Traditions: Tuloni Biya and Some Other Practices

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ABSTRACT:

The practice of celebrating the phase of transition from being a girl into adulthood is Tuloni Biya. Tuloni Biya is a marriage ritual in Assam. Tuloni or Tula / Tuliluwa means to be lifted. It connotes an elevation of a girl from childhood to adulthood. It is also called Shanti Biya. Biya in Assamese language means marriage and the word Shanti denotes the relief of parents when their daughter menstruate which implies her capability of getting married and producing children. The girls after puberty are married to a banana tree (symbolizing the girl's mock husband) with all marriage rituals. After the ritualistic bath on the seventh day of her menstruation, the girl would be dressed like a bride and a big feast would be arranged for the family, friends, and neighbours. However, the practice of celebrating menstruation is not only confined to Assam. Various rituals and ceremonies marking the onset of first occurrence of menstruation is practice in different parts of India. G. Roheim highlights that such ceremonies and rituals were also performed in ancient Greece and Rome. In India this practice is visible in some parts of South India, Maharashtra and Orissa. At her first menarche, a girl in Karnataka is fed with dry coconut, milk, ghee, certain fruits and a mixture of jaggery and seeds. In Manipur, when a girl first bleeds, the cloth into which she bleeds is safely kept aside by her mother and gifted back to her when she gets married. This cloth is believed to be powerful that it will protect the girl and her family from poor health and other ills. Young girls of the Noctes and Wanchos of Tirap district tattooed their faces and parts of body such as the chest, naval, thighs and calves with lines and dots after they attain puberty. Similarly, in Assam we find the prevalence of celebrating the first occurrence of menstruation.

KEY WORDS: Tuloni Biya, Assam History, Gender History, Women History, Childhood, Oral Tradition

Tuloni Biya in Assamese society is a marriage ritual which is mostly rooted in the oral tradition. There is no written ritualistic text on its performance but through oral tradition only it is transmitted from one generation to another. As Jan Vansina has put it, "Oral Traditions are verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation". In the present assignment an attempt will be made to look into the beginning of menstruation rituals or puberty ceremonies in India as recorded in the ancient sources and will try to see the extent of this practice in Assam in the form of Tuloni Biya. The performance of the ceremony informs the people within the kin group and the Jati that the girl has come to age. Thus the ritual is also

performed to gain social recognition and social respect.

The menstrual rituals can be looked at from different dimensions. For some it is an auspicious ceremony celebrating the phase of transition from being a girl into adulthood. However, some see the menstrual blood as 'suwa' meaning 'dirty' and 'waste'. Thus, while menstruating if they touch any substance, it becomes impure too. The menstruating women are made to believe that they are polluted beings who need to hide from society for three days a month. There are yet others who believe that during the menstruation, women are considered to be physically weak and thus the following of rules and restrictions atleast some of it allow her ample 'rest'. Thus people have a second way of explaining the need for existence of such rituals i.e., 'to make woman rest'. The regulation regarding the diet and movement are diverted towards future fertility.

The Vedic texts of India are full of mythological explanations on why woman bleed. In this connection Mitoo Das and Janet Chawla have brought out the myth of Indra slaying Vrita. Mitoo Das quotes F.M. Smith as follows, "menstrual blood is regarded as impure and dangerous because it was the result of Indra curse to women. Women the bearers of the discharge, the curse, the danger and the impurity were in turn subjected to various restrictions". It is mentioned in the *Tarttiriyasamhita* (a Vedic text); "when Indra killed Visvarupa, the son of Tvastri, he transferred one third of the stain of murdering a Brahmin to woman... the text reveals that this took the form of woman's menstrual periods and concludes: 'therefore one should not converse with stained garments, nor should sit with her or eat her food when she has emitted the colour of brahmahatya'".

This myth is found first in the Rig Veda and subsequently woven through various texts which are germane to an understanding of how female physiology is constructed, symbolically and narratively linked to the mythic slaying of Vrita and incorporated into Vedic sacrificial liturgy and ritual. It may be due to this that we have contrasting ways of understanding the menstrual blood and ceremonies related to it. It may be so that with the advent of brahmanisation in the Assam region, much of the brahmanical beliefs and customs were adopted with some modifications by the indigenous people of

Assam, thus believing that a menstruating woman is impure, because it occurs due to Indra curse to woman.

N. N. Bhattacharya writes that in the *Dharmasutra* of Gautama, it is prescribed that the girl should be given to marriage at puberty. He quotes; "A girl of eight is called Gauri; but one who is nine years old is Rohini; one who is ten years old is called Kanya; beyond this one is a Rajavala (i.e., one who has the experience of menstruation) ...If a person does not give away a maiden when she has reached her twelfth year, his pitrs will have to drink every month her menstrual discharge. The parents go to hell on seeing an unmarried girl becoming Rajavala".

The beginning of Tuloni Biya can be seen in this context. Due to adoption of much of the brahmanical beliefs and customs by the indigenous people of Assam, it may be so that they started organizing a mock wedding in which the girl is married to a banana tree, probably 'saving her ancestors from going to hell'.

Mitoo Das in trying to concentrate on menstrual taboo as a concrete on manifestations of the concept of purity and pollution employed the method of interviewing. In this context she interviewed the local priest of Simlitola, a village in lower Assam, Gowromgo Pathak who insisted that the origin of the rituals have been existing in various Hindu societies since the beginning of Kalyug. But there is no proof to support his claim. He is definite that the rules and restrictions were accepted and began to be practised strictly from the time of the Koch king Noranarayan (1540-1587 Mitoo Das in conducting her research came across a story which is relevant to our area of discussion.

"... King Noranarayan was the ruler of the Koch kingdom and his rule is said to be the most gloriousepoch... His brother Sukladvaj was the commander-in-chief... he once learnt from some priest of the Kamakhya temple that the Goddess Kamakhya visited the temple at night for four days while menstruating where she performed nritya naked. Sukladvaj wanted to make sure and find out if this was true... One night he hid himself inside the temple and waited for her to make an appearance. At midnight the goddess was there, beautiful and naked... She started dancing in abandon, all the while menstruating. Midway through her dance, her eyes fell on Sukladvaj. His presence angered her

and she immediately cursed him and his entire family, saying that from then on, if they look forward towards the Kamakhya temple or dare to visit it, tragedy would befall them... Sukladvaj was so ashamed of himself and guilt ridden, that to appease his sin he and his brother king Noranarayan introduced the tradition of conducting the Tuloni Biya (Italics mine) and made the menstrual taboo compulsory for every household. This way they thought would be able to please Mother Kamakhya”.

If we believe the above mentioned story, then it can be accepted that the Tuloni Biya started in the reign of the Koch king Noranarayan though the story of goddess Kamakhya and Sukladvaj might have been a later development probably in order to attach ideological and philosophical explanation to the ritual which they started.

Rituals are unique to every society and culture, but the spirit of the ceremonies of recognition and honouring are the same. Rituals are symbolic and meaningful, for instance, Tuloni Biya. At a time when menstruation was widely considered a taboo topic and hardly any discussion on the topic was made possible, some parts of India were in a unique position by celebrating Menstruation. The Assamese society celebrating menarche by arranging a grand feast which is seen as, Magolik Anusthan i.e., an auspicious ceremony. We do not have any ritualistic text on its performance, but it is widely performed since generations past. Thus we can conclude that this ritual is transmitted orally across generations and in order to give it philosophical and ideological background myth and stories were created which played important role in the continuation of the performance of the ritual named Tuloni Biya.

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