

CHAPTER IV

Beliefs and rituals associated with womanhood among the Karbis of Dimoria block.

While many folk beliefs are common to men and women, many other practices are only related to women. According to some folk beliefs some rites and rituals practices are only performed by young ladies, some are by married women and also there are some rites which cannot be performed by all. For example: childless wives, widows and those women who are suspected to be engaged in some evil practices according to the Karbi community are believed to be inauspicious.

Karbi women are hard-working and laborious. Whether the collection of wood, cultivation clearing the jungle for jhum fields, women work equally with the men. She has a significant contribution to make towards the family.

4.1 Beliefs related to menstruation (*abong own ay*): In many culture menstruation restriction are distinct. For many cultural groups menstruating women possess a spiritual power or thought to be a source of pollution during menstruation and are feared and respected for the effect they might have during this period of time, and in response menstrual taboos are set in place (Dale, 2006). Menstruation is described in medical texts as a failure, more specifically a failure on the women's part to reproduce. Almost all of the vocabulary in medical texts concerning menstruation is negative and includes terms as "degenerate", 'decline', 'withdrawn', 'spasms', 'lack', 'weakened', 'leak', 'deteriorate', 'discharge', 'ceasing', 'dying', 'losing', 'denuding' and 'expelling' (Emily, 1987). Many folk beliefs go across communities certain taboos are applicable to menstruating women in Karbi community. They are supposed to be impure during their periods. There is 'deliberate seclusion' of the menstruating women from every ritual. The process begins from the puberty rituals where the girl is supposed to stay inside the house and follow certain strict rules and

restrictions as the priest (who examine her day of puberty) suggest. When a girl attains puberty she is considered a taboo and she is not supposed to come out in public for few days. They don't celebrate puberty ceremony like mainstream Assamese community. But there is a belief that if any young boys see the girl during her puberty days he will not be able to grow beard. After this as the girl is considered to impure, she has to perform purification ritual (*Birkillut*) in some family.

When the woman in the family is having her menstrual cycles then she restrains herself from cooking and also not allowed to touch cow dung, go to the cowshed (*Gohali*) and to the Mandir (*Gokhainghar*). During her cycles to work or even go to paddy field is strictly prohibited as they are believed goddess *lakshmi* resides in the paddy field. There are some beliefs such as in her cycle period if she goes to the backyard garden or near the bamboo plants it is believed that after coming back home some unseen spirit will come along with her and will cause harm to the lady and the family. If she behaves abnormally then she is taken to the *Ojah*.

When I enquired about the beliefs prevalent in relation to hygiene during menstruation cycles it was seen that the elderly women are using traditional way. The use pads are limited to the young girls. It is believed that cloths like petticoat and undergarments are soaked in a different rope in the backyard of the house so that it is not visible to a male or it is supposed to be cause harm if any male member walk across the rope by mistake.

4.1.1 Folk belief related to food during the menstrual cycles:

Folk beliefs of food and indigenous habits of eating and cooking foods constitute intangible cultural heritage of a community which are followed among different cultures throughout history. These folk beliefs of food are also termed as old wives tales as it tells stories of origin of a food, probable health hazards and benefits of consuming a particular food. These

beliefs of foods have religious overtones, orthodox and are followed till today which may or may not have any scientific reasoning. According to Karbi women fermented rice (*poita bhat*) is included for the belief that it keeps the stomach cool. Fermented rice which is a good source of nutrients is included during that period. Spices, chilli and pepper are considered as hot foods and for some women it may cause gas retention. These foods are mentioned as avoided by the Karbi women for stomach cramps. Dry fish especially *hukati*, meat is avoided during the period of menstruation for foul smell from the body (Goswami, 2016.). Banana and pineapple is avoided among fruits. It was found that the enzyme (bromelain) found in pineapple may cause excessive bleeding (Harsoliya *et. al.*, 2011). Among the sour foods, tamarind contains phobatanins which causes nausea and vomiting among girls (Harsoliya *et. al.*, 2011).

4.2 Beliefs and rituals on pregnancy:

Pregnancy and childbirth are important in the stages of life as they are associated with maternal and infant mortality and morbidity. Culture has a profound influence on beliefs and practices of pregnancy and child care. The soul of a baby, it is believed, first comes from heaven then falls in earth and then enters the womb of the expectant mother. Childlessness is considered as a sin. Worshiping of supernatural beings is seriously resorted to by a childless couple. The birth of a child is a delighted occasion for the whole family in Karbi society. Therefore special care is given to the pregnant woman and she along with her husband is thus bound by a number of taboos in her personal and their social life. A pregnant woman can carry on her regular household work such as weaving, making food, sweeping house, cleaning and washing clothes till the time of delivery. They believed that a pregnant woman should remain active to keep the circulation of blood. They should also remain active so that normal delivery takes place. The lady is not allowed to do hard work but she however

contribute to do all household chores until she deliver a child. It is believed that a woman should avoid crossing river during her pregnancy. It is said that there are some evil spirit resides in the river may affect the child.

The women folk in the Karbi community dominate the entire life cycles. Right from the rituals associated with birth of a child (*harchi kikla*) to funerary (*thikarhi*). The rituals meant for protecting the new born baby is called *harchi kikla*. The name of the very ritual is onomatopoeically derived from the dropping sound the newborn produced at the time of delivery on the floor made of chopped bamboo inside the stilted traditional Karbi house. The ritual is performed with a view to protecting the newcomer from any kind of impurity and all kinds of evil ghosts and spirit as well as satanic forces. Immediately after delivery of a child, the mother or close relative cuts the navel cord with a sharp bamboo blade. This process is called '*taarnuk*'. The mother is considered impure after the birth of the child till the umbilical cord falls off and purification ritual is done by a *kathar* means priest by chanting *adam assar* (mantras) as it is mentioned in the third chapter. *Anari kirat* (cutting of umbilical cord) is preceded by the *Daini puja* performed for the wellbeing of the new born by thwarting off the evil eye from harming the newborn. The supernatural entity is *Daini* who, it is believed, if wishes might throw her evil eye on the newborn or even protect from all evil forces. Thus, it becomes very important that the Spirit is propitiated through worship. It is performed by the *Kathar* (Karbi priest). The *puja* starts with the fixing of the image of (*Daini*) in the delivery room. Spells are chanted and she is requested to prevent from evil that is coming to pass on newborn baby. At the same time a crow (black bird) which is believed to possess mystic powers against evil forces is sacrificed as offering to '*Daini*.. The belongings includes the laying of a banana leaf in one corner of the room whereupon powdered rice and a lighted earthen lamp is duly placed with the *Kathar* then breaking an egg over this offering while chanting mantras to remove the '*Suwa*' (impurity) from room, the mother and the baby.

Guests are invited to a feast over *horlung* to rejoice the occasion. Nowadays they believed that delivery in hospital is more convenient, hygienic and good for the baby and the child.

4.2.1 Food practices during pregnancy:

Pregnancy period is another important phase in a women's life. Nutritional care in terms of food is required to attain a healthy baby. The Karbi women mentioned that duck and pork are avoided for fear that it will make delivery difficult as the Karbis women belief that pork and duck contains high fat. Avoiding pork during pregnancy may be beneficial as if pork is not cooked properly it may affect the intestines and may cause stomach disorders. Usually, pork is contaminated with bacteria (*salmonella*, *S. aureus*, etc.) which are killed by cooking the food well in high temperature. *Khar* (Alkali) is relished by Karbis in every dish for the belief that it normalizes digestive disorder. However, during pregnancy all pregnant women avoided it for the belief that it increases the blood pressure and reduces the nutrients found in the food. Among fruits, papaya and pineapple were avoided from conception till delivery for fear of abortion (Goswami, 2016.)

In Karbi society there is a ritual when *pipali* (one type of pepper), *Gulmarish* (black pepper), some leafy vegetables like *kusia pat*, *bhebeli lota*, *hemsulang* or *dudhkasu*, *khukan sana maas*(dried fish), *rice and har*(Karbi drink) are taken for the pregnant lady from her maternal house in her fifth month of pregnancy. These things are considered to be good for the health of the lady according to Karbi belief. It is also believed that the consumption raw salt is strictly prohibited during pregnancy. After five days of delivery the new mom is given the chicken soup adding *pipali* in it. It believes that this soup will give the new mother strength.

4.3 Marriage related folk beliefs:

Marriage is one of the oldest socially recognised institutions. When people go and ask for a girl before that the boy family enquire about how many deities the girl family worship and who they are. They believed that there should have some similarities between two families. Karbi people give much important to the mother of the bride, at time of the marriage ceremony. it is believed that a '*thopa*' has to be carried by the groom's side for the mother of the bride which include *modor lao or harlung* (the traditional way of carrying the rice beer), dry cakes made of sweet rice (*bora chawol*), items made of dry fish, powdered rice (*Xandoh guri*), and the items what she ate at the time of her pregnancy, these are given as an honour to her mother for bringing up the bride so well. On all types of marriage mentioned in the third chapter it is believed that whether arranged or eloped, Karbi or non- Karbi, the marriage needs to be preceded by a *Parachilt* (purification) as required to facilitate her living as a new member in the boy's house and family.

There are some folk beliefs while going to select the bride: At the time of going to the house of the girl to give the proposal of marriage if a crow shouts out at the roof of the house or a dog behaves abnormally in the courtyard of the house (verandah) then it is believed to be a bad sign and the particular girl is not good for the family.

While coming to the girl's house if a member of boy's family sees a man carrying bamboo or fetching wood on the way, it is believed that the groom may expire early after marriage.

If any widow takes part in all the activities relating to a marriage, from the beginning of selection of the bride to end of marriage ceremony, her bad luck is passed to the new bride and it is believed that her husband may die early.

4.4 Religious beliefs and women participation in religious rituals:

the women or the weaker sexes of the Karbi enjoyed respectable status and recognition as portrayed in their oral narratives of the yesteryears, which in reality, was the inevitable outcome of the recognition and acceptances of the duality of the biological and elemental forces- their co-existence and compatibility, awareness and adoration that moulded their folk wisdom and worldview (Bori)

In a Karbi society, without rites and rituals festivals of the karbis is not complete. Main religious festival of plain karbis is *Dehal puja*. In this puja women are debarred from active participation in religious ceremony of feasting and worshipping but the preparation of making rice beer (*harlung*) is by the young ladies of Karbi society. seven days before the puja the young ladies have to perform the traditional purifying process called *birkilut* first. After that they are ready to make the *harlung* which is used in the puja. During the time of puja no woman are allowed to do weave.

the *Ai Gossani* or *Ai Gossain*, i.e. the supernatural deity for pox and measles is worshipped and entreated to protect their 'village' from this disease. It is performed in the *Than* presided by a women (*Ai Paloni*), Banana bark in the shape of a boat is made and therein offering to the goddess in the form of betel leaves, areca nut are laid which hereafter are set afloat in the nearby stream. No animal sacrifice is made.



Figure no 5: Karbi women during Ai-naam

It is observed on various dates of the months of *Ahin-Kati* as according to the Hindu practice. Goddess Lakhi is the heavenly bestowed of wealth and prosperity. Traditionally, Lakhi is believed to reside in the '*Numpe Armu*', i.e. the main pillar of the household which is considered to be sacred, along with the *Lakhi Koloh* which is a sacred earthen pot. Worshipping of the Goddess in a grand way may occur at the community level in the '*Naamghar*' / *Mandir* where the image of the Goddess is installed. The women folk gather there in the evening and sing hymns/ '*naam kirtan*' supplicating the Goddess and then distribute '*prasaad*' consisting of gram, pulse and fruits and sweets among the devotees. In the field work it is found that they still belief that there are some women who still practice witchcraft (*daini* practices), and they also believe in *bikhahari* or *sarpakanya* who can cure a person bitten by a snake.

4.5 Traditional belief practices concerning health problem among Karbi women: during the study it is found that Karbi woman suffers from variety of gynaecological problems. These problems are mainly because of excessive physical work, infection and the lack of knowledge for personal hygiene. For the treatment of such problems Karbi woman mainly dependent on ‘medicinal herbs’ or some domestic remedies, which are prescribed by ethno-gynaecologists or the midwife of the village. After discussion with some Karbi women they don’t really believed the connection of supernatural forces with their gynaecological problems. Because of shyness of undergoing a gynaecological examination from a stranger prevent them from the medical care. Interestingly the man or woman, who have limited knowledge of herbs, Karbi women blindly believed them more than anything else. An analysis of Karbi women based on age was carried out to focus on health problems. A sharp dichotomy exists with respect to gynaecological problems and other health issues. Cultural norms prevent pubertal and married women to visit the primary health care alone. For the gynaecological problems and the child birth acknowledged female specialist among the Karbis is the ethno gynaecologist (Das I. , 2007)

There are some domestic remedies prevalent among the Karbi women in some gynaecological problems such as dysuria i.e pain or discomfort when urinating. During the summer season the burning sensation occurs. They believed that consumption of food that generates heat inside the body such as red meat, excessive consumption of traditional drinks (*horlung*) are the major cause. To get relief from dysuria Karbi women believed that drinking of the leftover water after washing rice provides immediate relief.

Bogasap is commonly known as white discharge. Majority of women are affected by it and they believed that the heavy work load is the cause of white discharge. There is a traditional belief among the Karbi women that if the pubic cloth throws away in the jungle and if a snake

crosses across the cloth then the girl would be affected by severe gynaecological disorder or even be infertile. So they use herbal medicine prescribed by midwife of the village.

Menstrual cramps in Karbi language it is known as *maiki bhik*. Women affected by menstrual cramps suffer from loss of appetite. Lower back pain, vomiting, irritability, weakness are the symptoms. Application of hot water and consumption of ginger may give some relief.

nari lora it means severe abdominal pain. It is an Assamese term which means movement of the navel. Karbis of demoria region also use this term. They believed that the extreme physical work is main cause of the pain occurrence; consumption of a mixture of powdered mint leaves with water, salt and pepper helps in relieving the pain. This a popular home remedy prevalent among the Karbi women.

Other diseases like fever, common cold the Karbi women resort to allopathic medicine initially. But if the symptoms continued over a period of time, they shift to the ritualistic treatment.

Ethno gynaecologist: In all cultures have some sets of beliefs pattern concerning to the treatment of women's health problems including pregnancy and delivery. In concerning to these problems some societies have a specialist i.e. 'midwife'. During field work it is found that there are two categories of midwives – government trained midwife (*asha baideu*) and traditional herbalist or midwife. Traditional midwives are well trained within their indigenous cultural methods of treatment.

Ethno gynaecologist mainly performs the role of gynaecologist, herbalist and a kin member in image of mother for the emotional support during pre natal and labour stages. In Kamrup district they are called *dhai buri* in Assamese and *ani* or *abu* in Karbi dialect. They mostly

used the traditional tools for treatment and other local technology. For example, instead of using blade for cutting the umbilical cord they use a sharp piece of bamboo. Midwifery is not associated with any particular clan of the community. Women who are specialist in the skills of midwifery can take up this profession. They occupy a honoured position in the traditional Karbi society. They are extending their role by consulting in case of family problems beyond ethno-medical domain. Apart from assisting the delivery process she is also an herbalist, consulting friend to the pubertal, married, and unmarried and menopausal women of the study area.

It is seen in the study area that Karbi women have more trust on the traditional practitioner because they are assessable.