



Rites de Passage in Bangladesh: Nilphamari Perspective

Research Paper

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Abstract

The study investigated the rites and rituals throughout the life-cycle of man in Nilphamari district. The study found them influenced with local customs, beliefs and religious values as dominant over the passages of life in Nilphamari district. The transitions i.e. childhood-puberty-adolescence-coming of the age-adulthood-marriage-death involve distinguished customs and conventions which also resemble practices countrywide. The study was qualitative in nature. Most of the data are qualitative. Mostly, interview, focus group discussion (FGD) and content analysis methods have been used for collecting data. Secondary sources include books, articles, research papers and websites. Finally, the study gathered all the rituals and rites of the people of Nilphamari district of Bangladesh after a keen investigation.

Keywords: Passage of life, rites and rituals, transitional stages, Nilphamari

1. Introduction

In the passage of life, every human being journeys up over a series of phases. Birth, maturity, marriage and death are the most distinguished stages that every man usually experiences through a voyage of transitions. Every transitional point receives some rites and rituals maintained by members of society. Arnold Van Gennep, writing in 1908 (*Les rites de passage*) adduced evidence for universal occurrence of ritual sequences whenever a passage from one state to another occurred in a society through natural transformations or through community affairs (Mair, 1965 & Bossard and Boll, 1950). Mitchell (1968) interpreted the transition both in spatial and social senses.

Although Mitchell (1968) referred to the re-entry of individual into group and to public recognition of man's changed status, man has to pass through transitional stages: birth, adolescence, maturity, marriage and death. In every point he experiences different rites i.e. ceremonial activities associated with the rites de passage by which man takes a new social position (Ibid.). However, this paper attempts to find out and describe the rites of passage over life that men go through.

The study focuses on rites especially of the Muslim community of Nilphamari district of Bangladesh. Therefore, the primary objective of the present study was to find out, enlist, depict and describe all rites and rituals related to the people's passages of life especially in the Nilphamari district of Bangladesh.

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2. Operational Definition

2.1. Rites of Passage

A rite of passage is a ritual that marks a change in a person's social or sexual status. Rites of passage are often considered ceremonies all through events such as childbirth, menarche or other milestones within puberty, coming of age, weddings, menopause, and death.

2.2. Rites

The rites are the actions symbolic of important social values which are themselves objects of important common interests linking together the persons of a community or are symbolically representative of such objects rested on recognition of the fact that social occupation in human societies depends upon the efficacy of symbols of many different kinds (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952).

2.3. Rituals

A ritual is a set of actions, performed mainly for their symbolic value, which is prescribed by a religion or by the traditions of a community. A ritual may be performed at regular intervals, or on specific occasions, or at the discretion of individuals or communities. It may be performed by a single individual, by a group, or by the entire community; in arbitrary places, or in places especially reserved for it; either in public, in private, or before specific people.

2.4. Customs

The term custom refers to established modes of thought and action. M. Fortes stresses that 'the paramount concern of social and cultural anthropology is with the phenomenon of custom (Fortes, 1963: 94).

3. Background Information of Nilphamari District

Nilphamari, district has an area of 1640.91 sq km. It is bounded by Kuchbihar district of West Bengal (India) on the north, Rangpur district on the south, Lalmonirhat district on the east, and Panchagar and Dinajpur districts on the west. Population of Nilphamari is 1550686; male 51.03%, female 48.97%; Muslim 82.64%; Hindu 17.17%, Buddhist 0.02%, Christian 0.07% and others 0.10%; ethnic nationals: Santal population 2000. People involved in Agriculture are 45.28%, agricultural laborer- 27.81%, wage laborer- 3.42%, commerce- 8.65%, service holders- 10.07% and others 8.77% (Banglapedia, 2019). Archaeological heritage and relics are Binna Dighi (Nilsagar), Neel Kuthi, Saidpur Church (1893), Dimla Rajbari, Garh (Fort) of Raja Dharmapal and the remnants of his palace (18th century, Jaldhaka), remnants of the palace of Raja Harish Chandra (9th century, Jaldhaka), three domed Jami Mosque at Bherberi (18th century, Kishoreganj) (Ibid.).

4. Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature and has been conducted through interview, focus group discussion (FGD) and content analysis methods. Interview and focus group discussion (FGD) have been used for collecting primary data from the study area. Secondary sources include books, articles, research papers and websites. Random sampling method has been used to select the population for the purposes. Total sample size of the study is 25.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Birth

Birth is a matter of welcome in the world. In most cultures, childbirth is considered to be the beginning of a person's life, and a person's age is defined relative to it. Like that of every place and other areas of the world childbirth is welcomed in the area being studied. Male child is more expected than a female baby though ultimately affection does not seem remarkably lacking to

any. There are customs, convention and beliefs for the woman carrying child in the study area. Before delivery, the childbearing mother is kept into restrictions. She is prohibited to go near the pond area, near the graveyard or *Swasan Ghat* (burial place for Hindus), under the banyan or certain trees, to the twist where three or more roads meet called *Tinmatha* or *Charmatha*. Child bearing mother's movement after evening is strictly prohibited. Eggs, fishes like *Hilsha*, *Boal* etc. and fruits such as pineapple, papaw etc. are not to be eaten by her. Some works or household chores such as sewing kantha (quilt for baby), rolling bread, twisting ropes or cloths after washing, tearing papers or cloths or ropes are not to be done by her because these might harm the baby she bears. Eating anything during the eclipse of moon or sun is considered to be seriously harmful for the baby into womb. Tearing, breaking or cutting anything in eclipse time is believed to cause a cut or disability to the conceived baby. The pregnant lady has to avoid seeing, meeting or receiving strangers like beggars, travelers, disabled persons including the insane ones, dumb or hysteria patient lest the baby should be affected.

5.2. Childbearing Feed (*Swaad*)

The pregnant lady usually stays at in law's house. In the 7th month of the period, a ceremony of feeding her different foods and fruits takes place in her in law's house. Different items of foods like *Payesh* (sweet meat made of rice, milk and sugar), *Muri* (puffed rice), *Pitha* (homemade cakes of rice), including varieties of fruits like apple, orange, banana, grapes, pear etc. are offered to her. Parents and relatives of the bride have to bring foods and fruits, minimum of seven items, to her in law's house. They have also to bring rice, meats, fishes, curries, vegetables, oil, even fuel like wood to cook food in bride's in law's house where the groom party already arranges a feast in which neighbors, relatives, friends and the respected persons of the residing area are formally invited. All join the feast enthusiastically.

In some houses of Nilphamari area, *Milad Mahfil* (a ritual of offering prayer for peace upon the soul of the holy prophet) is held. The guests of the ceremony are cordially entertained with delicious foods and they also pray for the welfare of the forth coming baby and its future parents. Thus, the forthcoming baby and its prenatal position obtain a social recognition through the ceremony of *Swaad*. In Nilphamari, after the *Swaad* Feeding ceremony, the bride goes to her parents' house to give birth specially in case of the first issue.

5.3. Birth and Post-natal Activities

Birth of children often takes place at home instead of any clinic or nursing home especially in the rural areas. In urban areas also the same thing happens sometimes but now a days, babies are usually born in a hospital or clinic for modern medical amenities. At home, in most cases, a separate room called '*Antur Ghar*' (the child bearing room) is arranged for the delivery. An experienced '*Dhai*' (Midwife), is the main operator in the *Antur Ghar*. Midwives are experts in normal birth. Midwives believe that childbirth is a normal process that is best accomplished with as little interference as possible. Midwives are normally trained to assist at births, either through direct-entry or nurse-midwifery programs but the midwife being mentioned here is not with such training. She acts through experience and doing it practically. She is sometime assisted with one or two helping hands.

The total function of the childbirth takes place under her instructions and guidelines. She maintains even mother's foods, procedures of taking care and all the atmosphere of the *Antur Ghar* after the baby is born.

Having the baby born, *Ajan* (call for joining prayer, here as declaring the childbirth) is pronounced at his or her ears. The *Ajan* is delivered louder for a male child and meek for the opposite one because there is link of *Purdah* with the female race.

5.4. Precaution against Supernatural Forces

In Nilphamari district, room of the newborn baby is restricted for anyone's entry. Anyone coming from a distance is not allowed to enter the baby's room because (s) he is suspected to have brought a rapture or charm of Doshi (bearing temptation for Gene or any supernatural being). In this connection, the baby has to bear a Maduli (an amulet shaped like Tom-tom) at the waste to be protected from any intention of supernatural evil power. Some leaves of mango or jackfruit trees are often seen hung at the thresh hold of the baby's room as safeguard so that Doshi cannot enter and influence or harm the baby. A pot of fire is also kept on at the corner of the room to prevent any probable harassment by Doshi. Every kind of oil fried food or the persons eating that food such as *pitha* or *chop* cannot enter the room for the belief that Doshi might enter with them. The infant is given a *Najor Fota* (a finger-tip, a dotted mark with sandal paste etc. put on the forehead as a mark of sanctity) at the corner of the forehead so that people's sight or evil motif of any supernatural power can no more affect the baby.

5.5. Prohibition on Mother's Food

There are impositions for the new mother in taking foods after giving birth to the baby. There being the belief that her womb is still unripe (not fully recovered from wound), she is not allowed to take normal foods as rice, fishes, meat or food like broth or soup. She is rather given dry foods such as *chira* (food from dried and pressed rice), *gur* (molasses), fried *Chira*, or *muri* etc. In recent period, old conceptions are gradually getting fainted and healthy food items are getting replaced, yet; fish, biff, chicken, gourd, papaw and any kind of food with spice are strictly restricted.

5.6. Post Natal Activities

5.6.1. Navel Cut

The baby's navel is cut with a blade. In recent past, navel was used to be cut with a blade from bamboo shoots. It is a belief of Nilphamari district that the navel should be steadied under earth and a patriotic nostalgia would arise in the baby's heart for that particular place wherever his or her navel is kept under. There is also another belief that if the navel is kept under water, the baby would grow up as cool headed as water and if it were preserved in a worm place (s) he would grow crazy. So, it is steadied under a shady ground or below the bottom of a pond.

5.6.2. The First Haircut

The first haircut of the baby has cultural and religious significance. It is a rite of passage or a milestone. After one, two or three weeks (highly 6 weeks) of the child, the first haircut (called *Matha Kaman*) is held. A barber is hired for. He also cuts the first nails of the baby. Rice, beetle nut, beetle leaf, some coins etc. are kept on a Kula (a flat vessel made of bamboo slips) and offered to the barber. He is also offered money as tips. Only the nearest relatives and neighbors are invited in this ceremony. No food is cooked to entertain the invitees who join the function. But the function does not lack the enthusiasm and joyfulness and a festive air is hung everywhere. The visitors are entertained with sufficient beetle leaves and nuts. The shaved hairs and cut nails are put on a tender banana leaf with some fresh green grasses. The hairs and grasses are weighed, and rice of same weight is given to the barber. Now similarly to that of the cut navel, the hairs are kept under earth with same belief that if it were kept under a cool place the baby would grow up cool headed. The function is well-enjoyed by the visiting neighbors and relatives.

5.6.3. Naming Ceremony

The Naming Ceremony, called '*Aqiqqa*' is generally held after a week from the birth of the kids. It can also be held taking a longer interval, a few days or months in the present study area. The root of the word '*Aqiqqa*' is '*Aqqa*' which is used especially in regard to the cutting off of an

amulet when the boy becomes of age. The naming ceremony is actually a kind of registration to the home of God. Normally one goat for female child and two for a male child are sacrificed. The solvent parents arrange the function in a large-scale inviting neighbors, friends and relatives in the ceremony. A *Milad Mahfil* is arranged. The guests bring gifts, join the *Mahfil* and offer prayer and blessings for the baby.

5.6.4. Circumcision

Circumcision cuts the foreskin (prepuce) from the penis. The frenulum may also be cut away at the same time, in a procedure called frenectomy. The origins of the practice are lost in antiquity. Theories include that circumcision is a form of ritual sacrifice or offering, a sign of submission to a deity, a rite of passage to adulthood. Circumcision of males is a religious requirement in Muslim and Jewish faiths. At a growing stage, a male child is taken into circumcision according to Muslim convention, which is considered *Sunnat* (following the acts done by the holy prophet). When the boy is between 4 to 8, circumcision is held. It is compulsorily held. The function involves an arrangement of feast, invitation, *Milad Mahfil*, offering prayer for the child etc. Guests join the function with gifts or money for the baby. The circumcision is done by a reputed barber (usually not a doctor except some exceptions in urban areas). A *Kshur* (sharp blade of metal) is used to do the job and burnt ashes and some conspicuous things like ashes of wood, cow dung etc. called *Ghoshi Chai* are given as anti-septic sedatives in most villages. Few minutes later of the operation, the boy is given fried rice to eat so that the wound dries up faster. Since then the boy is kept devoid of taking normal and juicy foods or fruits. With rice, fried potatoes etc. are given. Brinjal, meat of chicken or duck, Hilsa fish, etc. are prohibited.

5.7. Teenage and Maturity

A teenager or teen is a person whose age is a number ending in "teen" in the English language i.e. someone between thirteen to nineteen. The stages of maturity consist of puberty, adolescence and the coming of age. Puberty refers to the processes of physical changes by which a child's body becomes an adult capable of reproduction. Adolescence is the period of physical, psychological and social transition between childhood and adulthood. Coming of age is a young person's transition from adolescence to adulthood. In Nilphamari children below 12 year are considered infant. The religious ethics is that after 12, children's sleeping room must be separated from parents. At this stage, children begin practicing religious ethics and social norms and values. After the period of adolescence, a boy has to wear Longy (cloth tightly wrapped around waist) and a girl wears *pajama* and *kamij* (long upper dress). Using *Orna* (a long cloth covering breast) is a must for a girl.

5.8. Marriage and Relevant Customs

Marriage is an institution of society. It is defined as 'a socially sanctioned sex relationship involving two of the opposite sex, whose relationship is expected to endure beyond the time for gestation and birth of children (Mitchell. Ibid, 98). Socially however, there are added to the sexual and parental ideas of marriage other elements: marriage is given the hallmark of social approval; it becomes a legal contract: it defines the relationship between husband and wife and between parents and children: it has to be concluded in a public and solemn manner, sometimes receiving, as a sacrament, the blessings of religion, and as a rite, the good auspices of magic (Ibid). Marriage system in Nilphamari inherits certain traits of social rites like other areas of Bangladesh. First, proposal is exchanged between families of bride and groom and if acceptable, the elderly members of the families move to see bride or groom. Usually importance is given on aristocracy, reputation, wealth and properties, social position and family background. Monetary, educational, social and political bases of family have preferences. However, the bride party is

more watchful on these factors. Their queries also rest upon the groom's character, manner, and personality. Generally, the groom is expected to be above the bride in social hierarchy. However, the bride and groom being chosen primarily by the elderly members of the family, secondly, they both finalize the choice. This is generally practiced in urban areas but in rural areas guardians are the absolute authority.

5.8.1. Engagement

Selection being finalized, the Engagement ceremony, locally called '*Panchini*' is held. Family members, and relatives of bride and groom visit one another's houses and wear the bride and groom golden rings as symbols that they are formally engaged to marry each other. The function of engagement being over, dates of Yellow Ceremony and marriage are fixed.

5.8.2. Yellow Ceremony

Yellow Ceremony (*Gaye Halood*) is a common and compulsory aspect in the marriage culture of Bangladesh. It comes as the 4th step before the marriage is finally held. Turmeric, as symbol of newness, is offered to both the bride and groom by family members, friends and relatives. The Yellow ceremony involves festivity. The sisters in law grind turmeric with singing *Geet* (madrigal songs) in chorus accompanied with women of neighborhood. Paste of yellow is also thrown and sprinkled among the nearest ones as a part of expressing joy and spontaneity. A stage is set for the bride and the groom in respective houses to sit. Both the groom and bride parties visit each other's houses to offer the bride and groom turmeric. Elderly people like grandparents, and brothers, sisters, sisters in law, niece etc. come with turmeric, sweets, soap, oil, comb, towel, yellow sarees, a big fish with coins inside its stomach etc. to execute the function. Women and girls wear yellow sarees, yellow blouses and yellow flowers on hairs. The groom party offers turmeric paste on bride or groom's foreheads and cheeks and also offer money and sweets as token of blessings.

5.8.3. Clothing and Ornaments in Wedding

Usually, the groom wears a *Sharwani*, pajama, marriage shoes and a *pagri* (marriage cap) and the bride wears Saree, usually red and gold ornaments. The groom must provide a ring (called *Nolok*) for the bride and she must have to wear the *Nolok* at the tip of her nose. The bride's hands and feet are painted with Mehedi (*Hena*).

5.8.4. Wedding

Marriage is executed by a clergy and a Qazi. The groom party has to travel to reach the bride's house which is called *Bor Jatra* (groom's travel). The main function is held at bride's residence. The groom arrives at the bride's house with a convoy of vehicles. He takes beetle leaves, nuts and *Tobaraq* (sweet meats for Milad) with him. With all of the companies, the groom is awaited but kept at an artificial blockade called the marriage gate by the bride party's younger generations. They demand money and after the money is paid, the groom can enter. The groom party is received with sweets and drinks. The groom is carried on the lap by his brother in law.

The bride and groom actually require social recognition and official approval of the state and religion for their relationship. Religious acceptance is stronger than a civil marriage. So, there remain a Qazi for the state to record and register the marriage and a *Maulavi* (clergy) to solemnize the marriage. The bride and the groom are seated side by side. The bride and the groom agree to join the bond of life. The *Maulavi* recites from the Quran. This is called the *Aqd* through which the marriage is religiously recognized. The legal act of marriage is held by signing a marriage bond. Everyone prays for the couple and sweetmeat is distributed among all. Offering the bride to the groom's hand on behalf of the bride's family is called '*Shnopi*'. The bride's parents hand over their daughter to the groom forever. The daughter departs permanently from this time and she with her family members begin to lament with a heavy

heart. This lamentation is also a part of the culture. The groom returns home with wife. Before he enters the bridal room, the door is held locked by younger brothers and sisters until he offers a satisfactory amount of money to them. It is called *Duar Khola*.

The wedding feast or '*Bou Vaat*' is a traditional ceremony. It is held at the groom's residence the next day of wedding. The program invites the relatives, friends, neighbors and well-wishers to let them be introduced with the bride. Guests join the function with gifts. They are entertained and pray for the pair.

Bride's Return or '*Atthara*' or '*Firanee*' takes place at the end of *Bou vaat*. The bride party returns home with the bride and the groom.

5.9. Termination

Termination is seldom expected in Nilphamari. Marriages usually end at the death of one of the partners, and the spouse is referred to a widow (female) or widower (male). Yet for the termination of marriage, divorce system is there. It is believed that only through pronouncing the word '*Talak*', a husband can sack his wife, but a wife cannot do so. To the common people divorce is a very obnoxious act and second marriage is treated as an uncivil act.

5.10. Death

Death is the end of life. Death is normally taken as an unexpected reality and thereby relatives and the progenitors of the dead person are shocked. Dead one's neighbors, friends etc. come to console his family members. They also involve clergies reciting from the holy Quran. The dead person is taken on to a wooden bed surrounded with a curtain. A pious man, assisted by two or three, carry out the bathing. They recite out scripture. After the bath, the dead person (male) is clothed (with three pieces) and women with five pieces of cloth. Ator (Otto) and rose-water are sprinkled on the dead-body. The burial should be done sooner. Having almost all the nearest ones arrived; the dead body is taken on to a *Musalli* (burial cot) which is carried on shoulders in a procession. Women are not allowed to join. All participants of the burial continue reciting scriptures loudly while carrying the corps. Now the dead person's face is shown to people for the last time and the burial prayer (*Janaja*) is said. Usually the eldest son of the dead person begs forgiveness on behalf of him/her for any mistakes. The day of funeral is announced for all to join and pray for the departed soul. Now the dead body is carefully lowered down the grave with loud recitation from the Holy Scriptures. The dead body is laid headed to north and facing to the west. *Karpur* (camphor) and rose water are sprinkled over the body. Every man put three handful of soil each on the grave top reciting loudly the Holy Scripture meaning-

Thou sprung from the dust and returned to the dust...

On the 3rd, or 5th or 7th day of death, the funeral is observed. People of all classes are invited. Recitation from the holy Quran is held and *Milad Mahfil* (hymnal chorus) is arranged and prayer is offered for the peace of the departed soul. The poor and helpless are entertained with especial preference. On 40th day after death, another ceremony is held in called *Challisha* with the same process. The death anniversary is held through a ceremony with same process.

6. Conclusion

The rites and rituals observed all through the cycle of life are various in the study area which are maintained in line with the cultural heritage. Besides the tradition, religious values are dominant in the factors of holding the rites and rituals all over the passage of life. Yet, from the commencing of life, including navel cut, haircut, circumcision etc. involve much of the local customs and believes. Anymore, the transitions especially; coming of the age, on the way of maturity, and marriage involve distinguished culture of the region.

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