

# BIRTH AND SATHI RITES OF RANA THARUS

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## **Abstract**

*This paper shows that the animistic beliefs and practices make the Rana Tharus enthusiastic and resilient to antagonistic forces of nature. The rites of passage of Rana Tharu are occasions of community participation and reciprocity that help in maintaining their social order and social solidarity. The Rana Tharu is one of the aboriginal tribes of far-western Nepal, which falls under the Mongolian race. The population of this tribe is concentrated in the far western Terai region of Nepal, mainly in Kailali and Kanchanpur district, which is also their homeland. This research aims to portray the traditional ethnic practices of Rana Tharu with the focus on the purifying rituals of birth and Sathi that is performed after the umbilical cord drops off from the baby, which is then followed by name giving ceremony with various ceremonies offering ritual feast. The paper explores the necessary elements, ritual meanings and processes of each of these rituals.*

**Key words:** Birth, Sathi Rites, Daibudhni, Sudhini, Bahari, Tapta, Rusaiya.

## **Introduction**

The Tharus are one of the groups of people scattered east to west across the low land, Terai portion of Nepal, including the *Uttar Pradesh* of India. The Tharus are mostly concentrated in the mid-western and far-western Terai regions, especially in Dang, Baki, Bardiya, and Kailali. The present population of the Tharu including the Rana Tharu according to the census of 2011 is 1,737,470 and 6.6 percent of the total population of Nepal, which secures fourth position. But they remain the least known group of Nepal as they have always been engaged in agriculture. Krauskopff (1995) and McLean (1999) stated that there are several endogamous sub-groups of Tharu that are scattered over most of the Terai. The major sub-groups of Tharu are- Rana, Kathariya, Sonha, Dangaura, Paschuhan, Rautar, Purbaha, Aarkutwa, Kochila, Chitwania, Lampuchwa, and Pahalman.

Krauskopff (1995) further mentioned that the spiritual beliefs and moral values of the Tharu people are closely linked to the natural environment. The pantheon of their gods comprises a large number of deities that live in the forest. They are asked for support before entering the forest. Krauskopff (1995) again declared, the Tharu people are an ethnic group indigenous to the southern foothills of the Himalayas; most of the Tharu people live in the Nepal Terai (Bista; 1972, Rajaure; 1981, McLean; 1999, Guneratne; 2002). Supporting previous writers Verma (2010) opines that some Tharu groups also live in the Indian Terai, foremost in Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The Tharus are recognized as an official nationality by the Government of Nepal (Lewis,

2014). Similarly Verma (2010) writes that the Government of India recognizes the Tharu people as ascheduled tribe.

A lot of works have been done on the Tharus by Indian anthropologists (Majumdar, 1944; Srivastava, 1958) who confined their works only to the Tharus of India. Similarly many foreign and Nepalese anthropologists McDougal, 1968; McDonough, 1984; Krauskopff, 1995 confined their studies to the Tharus of Dang valley of western Nepal which is assumed the original homeland of the Dangaura Tharu. Nepali anthropologist Rajaure, 1977; a pioneer, has studied about the Dangaura Tharus of Dang district likewise as senior sociologist Pyakurel, 1982; has studied about the Tharus of Chitwan district of Nepal. Other anthropologist Guneratne, 1994, 2002 also carried out the detailed study about Chitauniya Tharu of Chitwan district. The anthropological studies of the different Tharu groups of the different part of the country followed by the various native and foreign scholars. Among them Bista, 1972; Regmi, 1978; H. O. Skar, 1999; Gurung, 1994, 1996, Odegaard, S, 1997; Anne Buggeland, 1994, Kittelsen, 1999; Mayer and Deuel, 1999 contribute about the detailed studies of the Tharus in general and particularly the Rana Tharu. Besides these anthropologist and sociologist, some native Tharus like Singh, 1988; and Panjiyar, 1993 have also written some articles about Tharu history. Skar and Gurung, 1996 have carried out studies on some aspects of the Rana Tharus of Kailali. However the study done by Skar (1992) a Norwegian anthropologist on the plight of the Rana Tharus is very important contribution. The present study fills in knowledge of and owes its authenticity to first hand experience with the Rana Tharus in Nepal. But no depth studies have been done so far on the Rana Tharus of Kailali and Kanchanpur district of the far western region of Nepal.

Skar (1995) mentioned that the origin of the Tharu people is not clear but surrounded by myths and oral traditions. The Rana Tharus claim to be of Rajput origin and have migrated from the Thar Desert to Nepal's Far Western Terai region. Tharu people farther east claim to be descendants of the Shakya and Koliya peoples living in Kapilvastu. Among the different Tharu sub-groups the Rana Tharus is one of the indigenous tribes of far-western Nepal known and recognized by the tribe name of 'Tharu'. In terms of race, the Rana Tharu falls under the Mongolian race. The population of this tribe is found mainly in the far western Terai region of Nepal, Kailali and Kanchanpur district. These two districts are the original homeland of the Rana Tharu group. The spiritual beliefs and moral values of the Tharu people are closely linked to the natural environment. The pantheon of their gods comprises a large number of deities that live in the forest. They are asked for support before entering the forest (McLean, 1999). The Tharu ethnic communities are followers of animistic beliefs as defined by Tylor they believe in life after decease, about good and bad spirits, fetish, they are supporters of spirits that reside on stones, animals, trees, streams, mountains as in Vedic ages.

The study on the cultural aspects brings to light that religion is one of the most important beliefs and ideologies that ways human societies and escorts their social life patterns. Rana Tharu group of Kailali and Kanchanpur also obligate their specific spiritual beliefs and value system that are practiced from the very beginning. Rana Tharus have different rites of passage, which make them distinct from the other caste and ethnic groups. These specific practice and

beliefs shape the life of an individual in the community. Among the different rites of passage birth and sathi rite is first and significant ritual of an individual's life.

A function after birth is one of the chief rites of passage. In Hinduism, this is called the Sanskar. The literal meaning of Sanskar is religious refinement, rites and ceremonies for satisfying the body, mind and the intellectual of an individual so that she/he becomes a full member of the community. Among the RanaTharus there is no such terms of Sanskar, which is observed from the moment of the Sathi to Ghada of the individual. They do observe some important ceremonies related to birth, name giving, marriage, and Ghada. Among the important life cycle rituals, Sathi is first rites of an individual. Some scholars that are discussed above have done some studies on the RanaTharus. But no any scholars have done the research on the Birth and Sathi rites of RanaTharus precisely. Realizing this gap I tried to study about the 'Birth and Sathi Rites of RanaTharus'. This article is all about the birth and sathi rites of RanaTharus, which is discussed specifically in its context. A detail description about the concerning issue is discussed properly.

## **Objective and Methodology**

The main objective of the research is an attempt to present a depiction as well as a description of traditional ethnic practices of birth and *Sathi* rites of the RanaTharu that is prevalent from the very beginning among the RanaTharu community of far western Nepal on the basis of observed information collected during the course of anthropological field study. The fieldwork was carried out in different villages of Kailali district particularly inhabited by an ethnic group called the RanaTharu. The main assumption of the study is- " the practice of birth and *Sathi* rites of the RanaTharu which is followed by as their own ethnic identity and tradition for maintaining the distinct social and religious life among others in the area. The following research methods were used as tools in this study.

The present study is purely descriptive cum explorative in its nature. The study is qualitative in nature according to which required primary information are collected through the use of the various research tools- field observation, interview and ethnographic fieldwork. However necessary secondary data have been collected through documentary sources like published and unpublished sources.

## **Discussion and Findings**

In every society, there exist certain methods for purifying or blessing individuals and shaping the way of life of the people. Through the rituals, a person is supposed to proceed towards a better and more auspicious way of life both in this as well as the other world. These are the life cycle ceremonies or the rites of passage. Contact between RanaTharu and any other culture apart from that of the Hindus has been limited. Sandwiched as they were between the Hindus of the hills and the plains, they are almost closed off from any other cultural contact or influence. Therefore most of the RanaTharu life-cycle ceremonies have been influenced by Hindu beliefs. *Shathi* (purification ritual of birth pollution), *Magani* (marriage) and death are the major life cycle rituals among the RanaTharus but according to the objective of the study, only Birth and *Sathi* rituals are discussed here.

*Shathi* (purifying ritual of birth pollution or *Sutak*), marriage and death are the major rites of passage among the RanaTharus. A popular saying among the RanaTharu community is, “*Teen Pan, Teen Roti*” meaning- three important life ceremonies and the key informants mention three breads. This proverb means three stages of life birth, young and old are very special and all the stages are observed with special ceremonies with *Roti* (food items). There are some major rites and rituals existing among the RanaTharu community, which regulate the social and cultural life of the RanaTharus, are discussed as below.

### **Birth and SathiRitual** (Purifying Ritual of Birth Pollution)

As noted, birth is regarded as a very blissful occasion in RanaTharu community. When a RanaTharu woman gets pregnant, no ritual takes place during the pregnancy of women, though a pregnant woman is expected not to go towards the cremation site or a burial site or to step out alone in the dark nights. If a woman is in her house at the time of labor pain, she delivers her baby in her bedroom. When the pregnant woman happens to be there in the course of household work out side the house, baby is born in the fields, streets and courtyards where they are. Pregnant woman is usually seen doing her household work quite normally until the last hour before delivery. Individuals, other than the *Daibudhini*(traditional midwife) or those who have to care for the mother and the child, must not touch or enter into contact with a newborn baby and the mother. Those who have to have such contact must take a bath after the contact it is culture of impurity in RanaTharu community as birth pollution commonly named *Sutak*, as of the high caste Hindus tradition. The explanation given for this prohibition is that the newly born baby and the mother are polluted and unclean during the purifying day or ritual.

After the birth of a baby, attention is paid to whether the *Sal*(placenta) has come or not. If not, several traditional methods are applied until it comes out. Such practices are- giving her some water fortified with *Jharphuk*(incantation) by *Bharra* to drink and *Daibudhini* also massage in the stomach of mother, which help the placenta to come out properly. When the placenta has come out, the *Sal* (navel) is generally cut by the *Daibudhini* (RanaTharu) and *Sudhini* (DangauraTharu) with the help of a sickle and few *Daibudhini* have started to cut it with blade as well. The *Daibudhini* and *Sudhini* (mid wife) have been advised by the doctor to use blade in such cases. But these days, very few women have home birth. They also started to go to the hospitals for their delivery. It is practiced because of the policy of the National Government. Government has started the policy of *SurakshitMatritwaKaryakram* (Safe Motherhood Program) for the women. The woman who delivers in the hospital, govt. provides fifteen hundred rupees as maternity allowance and she does not have to pay for the delivery service provided to her.

The *Sal* (placenta) of the baby is buried into the *Tapta*(hearth) (RanaTharus) and the corner of the *Bahari*(open family space) the DangauraTharus put between leaves of *Sal* tree. After placenta cutting, the *Daibudhini* bathes the baby with some paste of mustard oil cake or soap and that the baby is given to the mother to nurse. Among the Rana Tharu community, there is a unique ritual related to childbirth. When the newborn baby’s naval is cut by the *Daibudhini*, she bathes the baby. After the finishing of bath, the next ritual known as *Gala Khwaune* is performed. For

this ritual, unhusked rice is put on a *Supo* which is supposed as *Anna Devata*(God of grain) and some money also put on the top of the rice as *Bheti* (money offered to God) then the new born baby is let to sleep on the top of this. After this ritual, when the naval of the baby is drop out then the *Sathi*(purifying ritual) is performed.

After *Gala Khwauner* ritual, fire is lit in the room, where the delivery took place and the mother and the newborn child are to be confined until the performance of *Sathi*. The fire is made to warm the mother and child during their confinement. Others than those concerned with the case must not touch the fireplace. The *Daibudhini* heats some mustard oil over the fire and rubs it over the body of mother and the child. Most portion of the mother's body is exposed to the fire to keep them warm. The *Daibudhini* washes the dirty clothes and sheets of the mother and the child too. After completing her job she takes a bath and returns back home. From next day on the *Daibudhini* goes to give her service to the mother and child twice a day up to the *Sathi* ritual. Each day after work, she takes a bath to purify herself from the pollution consequent on contact with the newly born baby and the mother. On the day of delivery, RanaTharus slaughter hen (on the birth of daughter) and cock (on the birth of son) for delivered woman and *Daibudhini*. They make separate food for delivered woman and *Daibudhini* and given in the banana leaf with tip it is because they are considered polluted.

When the umbilical cord over the baby's naval dries and drops away (generally after four-seven days) *Sathi* (purifying ritual of birth pollution caused by baby's birth or *Sutak*) ceremony is done to purify the mother and the child from their pollution as well as *kurma* relatives also. On this day, the straw, mat, firewood, charcoal and ashes 'contaminated by pollution' are thrown away and the room is plastered with cow dung. *Sathi* is one of the very important and very auspicious rituals among the RanaTharus. But *Sathi* takes five, six or seven days because RanaTharus do not performs this ritual until the umbilical cord is not dropped out. The ritual is performed on sixth or seventh day just after the birth of the baby but it is compulsory that *Sathi* should be performed only after the falling down of umbilical cord and the day according to their *Rusaiya*.

On the day of *Sathi*(purification), the ritual generally starts by the morning. It requires the auspicious day according to their *Rusaiya*, like- the *Sathi* is performed on Sunday, Monday, and Thursday who have *Rusaiya*(kitchen) in the north direction and Wednesday and Saturday who have *Rusaiya* in the south direction as their deity (*KulDevata*, kin deity). It is performed in that day when newborn baby's navel is fall down. They plastered their house first; the mother took the baby in her lap in *Kola*- the room of God, in *Rusaiya*- the kitchen and outside doors at scrubbed God's bumps. On the same time the *Daibudhini* followed the mother of the new born baby by throwing seven hands full of rice for boys and five for girls. She followed the new mother in *Kola*, *Rusaiya* and outside wherever she goes. The ritual is performed to make the Gods and Goddesses happy. Besides, the new mother pours water from *Kola* to bumps without any gap. In evening, a *Dal-bhat* and compulsorily fish curry party is offered to the villagers with invitation. Mostly, children join the party, and they are served food in banana leaf. According to RanaTharu tradition *Jacha*(delivered woman) and *Daibudhini* have food in banana leaf with tip on the day of *Sathi*. They do not consider banana leaf with tip auspicious. On the occasion of other religious and

cultural performances they pick and throw the tip of the banana leaf. But the old people enjoy with liquor. After the *Sathi* ceremony, the delivered mother is freed from her confinement. From now on she participates in household-works as usual. For a few weeks she does not do heavy works.

The *Jachais* given some money as *Neg* by her senior male member of her house, which is considered as a symbol of her importance in the continuation of the *Kurma*. Then the *Daibudhini* performs a small ritual by drawing two figures of *Behimaiya*, a Goddess helpful for delivery of the baby, in the wall of the delivered woman's room. According to RanaTharu myth, *Behimaiya* is considered first couple made by god from clay. But if sometimes delivery becomes problematic the family is encouraged to contact *Bharra* the Ranatharu priest or the *Guruwa*, a *Dangaur* priest.

The *Daibudhni* informed that after few days of *Sathi* on the same day either on Monday or Wednesday has to worship *Behimaiya* with the offerings of three chickens as baby's sex in front of the house in courtyard. The meat of offered chickens is not allowed to take inside the house and it is cooked outside the house and is eaten only by females of the family or outsider. On the occasion of the *PoojaGulgula*, toffies and sweets are distributed after lunch.

A *Daibudhni*, for her service to the delivered woman, is provided with sixty kilograms paddy and five Kilograms of rice on the birth of a son and forty Kilograms paddy and five Kilograms of rice on the birth of a daughter. One pair of cloths must provide to *Daibudhni*. If the birth of baby in hospital she must be hired. She has to spend seven to nine days for the service if delivered mother required more days for the massage she takes one hundred Rs. Per days. The *Daibudhni* plays a vital role in delivery case and she has been invited in each house during this period as observed. After delivery, *Daibudhni* take care newborn baby till two to three months and *Daibudhni* comes to bath baby in each week and it is her duty.

Among the RanaTharus newly born male child gets high value by the parents, family members and society as among the caste Hindus. They strongly believe that the male child receives elderly treatment, which is not possible for the girl child. They express that the daughter is given in marriage to the other's son, whereas the son stays at his own home. This reveals that the RanaTharu society is also male dominated society it is because of the patriarchy.

### **Naming Ritual (Name Giving)**

Traditionally RanaTharus neither perform any name giving ceremony, nor there any special time of the year or age fixed for that. The name can be given at any time from the fifth day after birth until the age of eighteen months. Any person a member of the family, a neighbor, a respected man of the village, a hermit, and a pilgrim may help the family in selecting a name for their child. The name selected is used by all the family members and is later established as the real name of the person. Traditionally the names derived from the following sources- day of the week or the month of the birth, according to the name of Hindu god and goddess and sits of baby's birth. Likewise another sources of nomenclature of the baby are name of the place where the father was going or the occupation in which he was engaged on the day the baby was born and rituals for protection the child against infantile death. Another practices of designation of baby are events or

festivals, which occurred on or near the date of the child's birth physiognomy or attitude of the child. In some cases RanaTharus naming the baby according to the sweets name too.

The above-mentioned name sources however, are not all inclusive. RanaTharus coming from the elite group or those who are in contact with either the elite group or members of the traditional Hindu castes have abandoned such names. Rather they prefer to use common Hindu names like *Janaki*, *Sitaram*, *ShivaLal*, *Narayan*, and *Moti*etc.

RanaTharus do not like to be addressed by their proper names. Calling the elderly or respected persons with their proper names is considered as an insult to them and thus a most rude and impolite behavior. For their day-to-day use, Rana has calling names which are derived either from their position in the sibling hierarchy of the family (i.e. *Bado*= eldest, *Majhala*= second, *Sajhala*= third, *Chhoto*= youngest etc.). Moreover, each household of a village is given a nickname. This could derive either from the name of the previous village from where the senior household members came from the name of the place from where the wife of the household chief came. Sometimes the physical location of the household within the village determines its nickname.

## Conclusion

This paper shows that the animistic beliefs and practices make the Tharus enthusiastic and resilient to antagonistic forces of nature. The rites of passage as Birth and Sathi of the Rana Tharus are occasions of community participation and reciprocity, which help in maintaining their social order and social solidarity. In brief the social functions of rites and ceremonies permit them to entice the natural forces in their favor and support. Beside this, these practices meet their survival needs. This functionalist analysis of the culture of the RanaTharus shows similarity with Malinowski's (1948) theory of the social functions of religion, which is a part of culture. On the other hand, RanaTharus are basically followers of animistic beliefs as defined by E.B. Tylor.

The RanaTharu which falls under the Mongolian race is one of the indigenous tribes of far-western Nepal is commonly called as 'Tharu'. The population of this tribe is found to be dense mainly in the far western Terai region of Nepal, Kailali and Kanchanpur district. The main motive of the research was to portray the traditional ethnic practices of birth and Sathi rites of the RanaTharu Community. The birth or Sathi ritual is the purifying ritual performed after the umbilical cord drops off from the baby. It is done by replacing the various objects used by the baby and the mother and plastering the room with cow dung which is considered to be pious. The name giving ritual is performed after the fifth day up to eighteen months by anybody following various principles based on their birth month, god or goddesses etc. The above-mentioned rituals have been given a detailed description based on the anthropological study during field visits.

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