



Pre-Natal and Post-Natal Avoidance, Acceptance, Antidotes and Taboos Among the Vasāvā Bhil Tribe of the Western India

Robert Gabriel Mac-Machado

Institute of Indian Culture (ICC), Trinity Community Center, Antalia, Bilimora East, Gujarat.

E-mail : drrobert_machado@yahoo.com

Abstract: The Vasāvā Bhil tribe is the sub-section of the Bhils, mainly dwelling in between two major rivers of the South Gujarat in the Western part of India. The belief in the celebrations of rites and rituals of life cycles (Rites of Passage) are universally practiced but their number and the stages vary from society to society and even tribe to tribe. For Vasāvās culture it has a vital social significance thus these are conducted in a solely religious framework This article investigates pre and post natal acceptances, avoidances, antidotes, related taboos and other rites and rituals the community celebrates at large. The study was conducted in Vandari village of Narnada district of Gujarat. The findings reveal a dominant magico - religious approach with the help of traditional folk remedies to ward off the endangering threat to mother and child health.

Keywords: Life cycles, Pre/post natal care, Taboos, Antidotes, Vasāvā Bhil

Received : 29 March 2022

Revised : 29 April 2022

Accepted : 11 June 2022

Published : 17 June 2022

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Robert Gabriel Mac-Machado (2022). Pre-Natal and Post-Natal Avoidance, Acceptance, Antidotes and Taboos among the Vasava Bhil Tribe of the Western India, *Society and Culture Development in India*, 2: 1, pp. 161-181. <https://doi.org/10.47509/SCDI.2022.v02i01.11>

Introduction

The life cycle commencing from conception, with a birth and ends with a death, ensures the rites of passage in the society. However, these rites of passage have been explained by number of anthropologists, social scientists and others differently. As Van Gennep (1909) believed them as universally practiced but their number and the stages vary from society to society and even tribe to tribe (see Troisi, 1978: 156). It is similar among the Vasāvā Bhils tribe the rites of passage have a vital social significance. In addition they are considered as religious events and acts therefore, these are conducted within a religious framework. Nevertheless, the Vasāvās'

dependence on their deities is manifested in each stage of an individual's life-cycle. However these rites of passage are observable even in their expressions to the great extent. The changes in tribal society, as the present case also indicates, are bound up with biological rhythms in consonance with the annual seasons. In a specific context, Van Gennep himself defined the rites of passage as, "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (see Turner, 1979:234). He has shown that all rites of transition are marked by three Phases: separation, margin (or limen or transition) and aggregation (or incorporation). "Rites of separation are prominent in funeral ceremonies, rite of incorporation at marriages, Transition rites may play an important part, for instance, in pregnancy, betrothal, and initiation; or they may be reduced to a minimum in adoption, in the delivery of a second child, in remarriage, or in the passage from the second to the third age group" (Kimball, 1960: viii).

Apart from the above two, the third phase is transitional or liminal phase which has special significance in the tribal society. These rites of passage take care of critical moments of transition in individual's or community's life. The most prominent type of rites of passage is connected with a Vasāvā person's movement through his/her life time, especially birth, initiation, maturity, wedding, old age and death. Right from birth to death, the Vasāvās take up different statuses in life such as childhood, youth, marriage and parenthood. All these changes in positions of life involve different responsibilities and so, each of these changes disturbs the individual's equilibrium in relationship with the family and community. While moving from one state of life to another state, there is a change in social status and the social relations of the people concerned. Hence, such kind of disturbances (changes) particularly leading to the marked changes in the habitual interaction rates of individual, are known as crisis. To meet these emerging social situations, various rituals are performed so that the concerned person may pass through these stages without much stress and strain. Through the rites of passage, a person is put at ease without any social disruption in the time of transition to take up changed social role (Michael, 2003:369). "Rites of passage are indeed valuable transformatory rituals that serve to regenerate the cosmos and restore harmony in it. During these rites, religious fervour in the society reaches a high pitch, and everyone is thereby made to become aware of their responsibility to fulfill their proper roles in the society" (Koonathan, 1999:26). During pregnancy and after the birth of a child the mothers are said to be easy victims of the evil eye *Najar Padehel/Rad Lagi* (Mac-Machado, 2010:199). The harmful effects of the evil eye are virtually similar in all the cultures...In fact, it can even bring harm to the baby while it is in the womb (Qamar, 2016 : 409).

'Taboo' (*tabu* meaning 'to forbid and forbidden') is closely associated with primitive religion and the case of the Vasāvās is not exception. In the tribal world the taboos are rituals. Taboo is designated with all the restrictions which are being communicated through the verbal 'don't' and generally associated with ritualistic behaviour to which a member of a primitive society has to submit and adhere. Taboo is the unwritten law of primitive society. The belief in taboos is a universal phenomenon is quite evident from several studies conducted in the different parts of the world (see Sir James G. Frazer 1911; Durkheim 1915; Freud 1913; Radcliffe-Brown 1979; Evans-Pritchard 1939; Margaret Mead 1935; Steiner 1956; Mary Douglas 1966; Levi-Strauss 1963; Edmund R. Leach 1969; Melvin Ember 1975; Marvin Harris 1974; Robin Fox 1980; Roy Wagner 1987; Brent Berlin 1992). When it is violated, the violator fears a calamity and brings sickness, death, or some unnamed misfortune. The message signified is that establishing contact something is forbidden, the risk being pollution (Slater, 1996:1279-80). Therefore, it is believed that the taboo has a supernatural or magical sanction behind it. The taboo ensures limit and make an individual to follow the norms of his/her society (D'Souza, 2005:77-8). The life cycle (from birth to death) of the Vasāvās is governed by a number of taboos. Life among the Vasāvā Bhils is shrouded with number of rituals and taboos. Right from conception (birth) to death, each stage of life is accompanied by several socio-religious rituals and taboos; which is guided by the means of traditions, assumed beliefs rather than science and reason. "In all great moments of life, and in the most trivial, rituals are observed: birth, puberty, marriage, war, sickness, divorce, eating, cooking, planting, reaping, herding, house-building, departing and arriving, entering and leaving a house, buying and selling and so on" (Anderson, 1989:35). Here we are concerned with the various socio-religious rituals and ceremonies which are associated with conception (pregnancy), birth, initiation, maturity, marriage, death and post-death journey of the Vasāvā.Bhils. Culture as celebrations of an experience was explored from an anthropological prospective. To make the study meaningful, an in-depth research was required. Hence this article is part of my research on pre/post-natal belief practices among the Vasāvā Bhil tribe. During my research, I found the various avoidances, antidotes and observed taboos related to child birth and child health care. The research articles also includes some broad-based topics like conception taboos, avoidance, observances and rituals (ceremonies) of conceptions, giving birth and post-natal; naming ceremony. Rest other passage of rites are not included in this articles due to limitation of space.

Methodological Approach

Society has to be organized in order to help human beings to cope the changes within themselves as well as in the surrounding environments, which is why theories are necessary. These valued anthropological theories allow for new and challenging cultural interpretations. Various Anthropologists, social scientists and others have proposed many theories such as; Cultural evolutionism – primitive religion grow out of ignorance and intellectual inadequacy (Tylor, Morgan, Spencer and others), Structural-functionalism and structuralism – religion is essential to social cohesion and community feeling in the society (Durkheim, Radcliff-Brown, Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard and others). They all believed in the ground universal laws, to understand culture and humanity in the wider tribal context. Life is both pulsating and rhythmical as well as a combination of breaks and re-unions, thus every change and every event is celebrated in the society in order to make life more meaningful and acceptable. Geertz was also convinced that all the cultures are different, as are human beings. All over the world human beings grapple with the big issue of life, death, fate, etc.; and each culture addresses the human conditions itself (Sodder, 2016:43). In practice Geertz elected religion to represent an epitome of the culture. Religion has to be treated as cultural system. Religion tells us that loss, suffering, injustice and death have a hidden meaning (Kuper, 1996:100). Benjamin Paul observes, “Participation implies emotional involvement; observation requires detachment. It is strain to try to sympathize with others and at the same time strive for scientific objectivity” (Misra, 1971:105-6). I am being a non-tribal person but for seven years worked among the tribe called Vasāvā Bhils (sub-section of Bhil) villages as a catalyst to promote development and educational projects and programmes. For the research purposed I stayed with the Vasāvā Bhils community of the Vandari Village for two years. During those days I was dwelling along with Rajjibhai Vasāvā’s family (my host family) and eating from the same family hearth. My acquaintance and familiarity with the tribals was a plus point for me which helped me to overcome the cultural barriers as well as made easy to adopt to the harsh and inhospitable tribal living conditions among the Vandari villagers for the purpose of doing ethnographic research.

My research skills and experiences helped me to be comfortable and confident as a participant observer as well as a in-depth interviews as my primary research methods. I interviewed several elderly village Shamans *Badvas/Mondavi*, mid-wives *Tongi Hiyarki*, as well as lactating mothers of the new born babes. There were no social sanctions laid upon on meeting the women folk of the village. Native

linguistic fluency allowed me easily to intermingle with the group in order to collect the information and data. My extensive field work, longer stay in the village Vandari and in later part some short follow-up trips to village to collect missing links (data) and verification of the processed data was done in presence of the village women association *Mahala Mandal* the cross-checking was carried out. The personal talks in the leisure time (topic concerning private areas) uncovered the beliefs and taboos associated with the pre/post-natal rites and rituals. The interviews with the elderly shamans and the parents of the new born babes to understand their perception regarding the pregnancy, birth, post- birth observances, rites and rituals, protective care and avoidances in the Western region of India. The source for the secondary data was collect from the available literatures.

The Setting and Culture of the Vasāvā Bhils

Tribals by nature are peace-loving people. Their life mainly depended upon *Jal* water, *Jamin* land, *Jungle* forest and *Janvar* animals. It is said that they are the original dwellers (*Adivasis*) of India along with the Dravidians. When faced with centuries of outside invasion mainly from Aryans, after giving a tough fight they preferred to withdraw rather than confront. Here Srirama states by quoting references from the *Rig Veda* “Finally they were vanquished and were either absorbed in the lower rungs of society or driven away from their dwellings and had to shelter in the dense forests and other inhospitable regions. A poet says: ‘Indra kills Dasas and increases the might of Aryans’” (1999:50). As a result of that the non-Aryans (*Dasas*) were pushed to the remote hills and interior forests. In their struggle to preserve their noble identity, rich culture, and age old traditions, they had to give up fertile lands of the plains they once possessed. The Vasāvās are a subsection of the largest tribe of India called Bhil, which is spread across different States, Specially Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The traditional habitat of the Vasāvā Bhils is the region between two rivers, Tapti and Narmada (Reva), which is in the Western part of India. The majority numbers of theirs live in Narmada, Bharuch and Surat districts. In the most olden time before settling down in the forests of the mountainous regions, the Vasāvās, according to their oral traditions, have always been wandering from one place to another living like the ‘Gypsies’ or *Vanjharas* like the nomadic society. As they moved from one place to another, a nominal reciprocal influence was simultaneously exerted by them on the new group with which they came into close contact. There is evidence from oral traditions that the Bhils (including the Vasāvās) have come into contact with the Indian main stream majority.

Since the tribals live over here in the original form from the ancient time on the hilly tracks and mountains, the group lived in a cluster of huts (hamlets) scattered in the thick vast and dense forest. They made a living through fishing, hunting, food gathering and zoom cultivation. The tribal community owned the land and the forest but along the course of time the forest become the property of the government, which led to a drastic change in their life style and pattern of living. In the remote mountainous and hilly areas, they lack even the basic amenities like primary health care centre, basic primary education, public transportation and communication facilities. The immense majority of the tribals depend upon the agriculture for their daily sustenance. Many of them possess small land holdings of the cultivable land, too small to produce enough for the sustenance of the family for the entire year. With the growth of population the land gets divided and fragmented. As a result the land available for each family for food production becomes meager and smaller in size. Due to sloppy terrain and the quantum of rainfall the fertile top soil gets eroded, thus hastening the degradation of the land. From last few years monsoon has become more and more erratic and most of them who do rain-fed cultivation are faced with starvation. As a result there is rampart migration in urban areas in search of work elsewhere to earn bread for the living. Since they are illiterate and unskilled they work as casual laborers, exploited by the contractors and forced to live in unhygienic health conditions. Though the tribals are distinctly different from the rest of the population in Gujarat, they have to get into the main stream of Gujarat, if they want to survive. Formation of the republic of India brought the group in contact with the outside world through the government and forest departments; police and judiciary system; politics and election processes, education, etc. Media has also played a vital role in changing their thinking pattern. The people usually live in a rather big size thatched roof houses mixed of mud and cow-dung plastered walls with wooden logs. Each house has wide- open courtyards where they have sufficient sunlight diurnally and fresh air. The poor people's ailments are commonly found in this area but during the monsoon season cholera and diarrhea are a problem. Along with the folk herbal remedies *Deshi Darwadaru* the young people of the village prefer modern allopathic medicines.

The parents and elders of the villages arrange marriages of their young children within the same tribe (endogamy) but with other clans *Jatula*. (clan exogamy). The prevalent belief is that a boy and girl of the same (father's) clan are considered as brother and sister because of the blood relation. The wedding within the same clan is considered as taboo. The female child is considered as an asset of the family whereas the male child is considered as a liability of the family. During the marriage

the boy (bridegroom) has to pay large amount of bride-price to the girls' parents *Chhori Vechi Khadi*. With the passage of time there is the scarcity of resources, thus the most of the families members do not prefer to live under one roof but on the various social events and occasions the entire community remain deeply connected with each other. The relatives and families share their materials resources in a form of an aid in this time of need. Traders from outside come to sell provisions, to buy agricultural products as well as to purchase forest by-products (on the cheapest rate) from the tribals. They also plundered the timbers and thus took away most of the resources from the tribal land. New development policies of the government also result in displacement and rampant migration (Narmada dam, wild sanctuary, etc.). The so called major culture of the main stream imposed by the invaders does serious damage to the tribal culture. The employed sections of the community ape the culture of the outsider thinking that their culture is superior. The culture taught through the school text books is alien to them but as a part of their curriculum they are forced to learn. On one hand due to modern education they are cut off from their oral traditions (ethos of minority) on other hand they are forcefully taught the ethos of majority this has resulted in 'Sanskritization', assimilation and social adoption. In this situation, they have to venture into unknown sphere of economic, socio-cultural and political main stream, leaving their familiar surroundings (home land). This is possible only if they are made aware of their glorious ancient traditions by imparting right education in order to retain them for the posterity.

Period of Pregnancy

Since life begins with conception, hence this stage of life is discussed here first. During the period of conception, both potential parents observe several taboos in their day-today lives. In this regard, some of the significant taboos are mentioned here while explaining the life-cycles.

Pre-natal Avoidance, Acceptance and Taboos

When a woman comes to know that her menses *Nahavan/Matha Maili* has stopped and she is pregnant, at that moment she informs her spouse regarding the same. About four months prior to her delivery, the couple evolves common consensus to avoid cohabitation/sexual congress on the pretext of endangering the expected baby's health. However, this observance continues thereafter the delivery for about six weeks as a post-birth avoidance of sexual union. As soon as the husband comes to know about the pregnancy, he takes some pre-natal precautions and avoids

eating coconut *Parasadi* (*Devno Bhagaro*) and cooked ritual meat *Nodmaha*. And even consuming liquor (offered to deity) at both household and community levels religious functions and celebrations are terminated. But he is allowed to participate wholeheartedly in such functions and even is permitted to perform them. If he deliberately consumes the food offered to deity or drinks at any such gatherings, the worshipping family (third party) will have to face the consequences and the expected fruit of their worship is believed to remain unattained. In this situation, the worshipper's family has to once again conduct the same *Vidi* to get the desired fruit as well as to minimize the harm.

When the expecting mother *Dedivali Bai* craves for something of her taste to eat and does not get the desired eatables, her hands, legs and face get swollen *Sojoh Chadehe*. Thus the pregnant woman is expected to express her desire to consume some particular food of her tastes. The expectant mother of this kind is called *Hadwali The*. She develops an insatiable appetite and craves for tasty food, even she desires to have honey but it is not given to consume because on pretext of that the child after birth will continuously keep on dropping saliva from its mouth. The husband of the pregnant woman cannot tie a handkerchief or towel or a piece of cloth around his neck. It is believed that the similar knot around the neck of the fetus will appear at the time of its birth. He even avoids cutting anything that grows as well as planting a pole into the ground as all these avert proper delivery. The expectant woman also avoids tying knots with a bamboo rope, cotton strings and hemp fiber cords *Gath Na Valay Ke Bandhiya Na Bandhy*. In case she even unknowingly ties a knot, she will be unable to deliver the newborn baby until the said knot is not fastens by herself. This assumed belief is also associated with the shadow *Chhay* of a pregnant woman and her husband as if it falls on a snake and it turns blind for a while, the blind snake is pitied upon, hence it must not be killed by husband of the expectant woman. In the status of pregnancy and in menses *Mathamaili* women are not suppose to walk under the bunting *Toran* which is tied across the two trees of *Hambaro* at the entrance of the village in honour of the village protector deity *Toran Dev*, *Ujamanio Dev* or *Gamdevati*. They have to avoid the bunting by using a side road while crossing the village entrance. If it is not followed, *Toran Dev* may be defiled *Hetho Padehe* and the villagers may experience the adverse consequences in their day-to-day lives.

An elderly person, Rumabhai, from Vandari village narrated one of the such incidence in a form of a tale:

“A horse was grazing in a field near the roadside. A long string Daman with which the horse was tied, was lying across the road and the horse was grazing at a distance.

A pregnant woman crossed the string of the horse as she walked down the road. On completion of nine months, nine days and nine hours Nov Moina An Nov Dihi An Nov Vela, the same woman was lying down with an acute labor pain but she could not release the baby from her womb. Realizing the seriousness of the problem, the village elders got hold of a horse's string Daman and waved the string in the air over the groaning woman for a single time Utariyu. They then cut the string into small pieces. On doing this the woman delivered the baby safely."

Henceforth it is believed that if a pregnant woman crosses the string of a grazing horse, the duration of the pregnancy is extended from nine months and nine days to twelve months which is the same as that of a horse's gestation period. So an expectant woman is forbidden to cross over the string tying a horse, but can pass by side ways. In similar instances even fallen trees including bamboo (dry or green) on the road are not allowed to cross, if any compulsion stands then the said woman places a small pebble on the fallen objects as witness to her crossing *Jamin Mekehyo*. It is done that various deities and goddesses (especially *Vanvaha Dev* or *Vanasi*) dwelling in the objects (tree and bamboo) might not be defiled by her touch.

The Vasāvās usually neither take *Dedivali Bai* pregnant women with them nor allow them to go to cities, towns, bazaars *Hat* and fairs *Melo/Jatro*. As the woman with child must not look curiously *Navai Najare* at obscure *Jathar-Vathar* pictures, images and photographs of gods and goddesses; such as Ganpati, Hanuman, Kali, elephant, etc. While outing, it is very likely that several images, pictures, photos, objects, things of novelty, beggars with physical deformities, masks *Moro* and uncommon animals may be sighted. Which are not commonly seen in a tribal setting. If such things are stared at, the fetus in the womb will take the shape of that seen object and the baby will be born similarly. In case the pregnant woman has to go for the outing (for votive offering or any other reasons), the accompanying elderly person always makes her conscious to avoid such obscure objects constantly by reminding and telling her *Ye Vel Nokhi Palati, Aay Vel Palajo* (do not look this side, look that side). So much so, she is constantly instructed to cover her eyes by her head cloth *Udani*.

Birth Predictions

The Vasāvās say that the gender of the child is fixed once for all, and cannot be changed, however in this regard attempt can be made to predict about the gender of the fetus (Naik, 1956:106). It is generally believed if the expectant mother becomes physically thinner *Sukai Jay/ Levai Jay*, birth of a baby girl is predicted. If the same thing happens to her husband's cheeks, the birth of a baby boy is expected. If the

pregnant woman's breast nipples get dark black in colour in the final phase of her pregnancy indicates the delivery of a male child. There is a common belief that *Jamu Pag Aagal Mekin Chane Taba Eyo Theia Poir Vehe* (while walking if the pregnant woman keeps her left leg in front then she delivers a baby boy). Some even believe that a boy is born exactly after nine months, nine days and nine hours *Vela* from the date of conception whereas a girl is born exactly after nine months. Couples mainly having only female issues and are now interested in having a male offspring, visit the village Shaman *Badavo* to get his advice (piece of oracle), through divination to have a male child via his magical enchanting while looking at the grains *Dana Pale*. His prediction usually comes true in most cases.

In the cases where the couples are issueless (infertility, miscarriage and infant mortality), the husband and wife together pay a visit to the abode (shrine) of their goddess Pohani Pandhar / Yah Mogi (regional goddess) where mighty deeds of dexterity and valour are accomplished. She is believed to bring fertility, hence keep vow to her *Mantas / Mangur* for the blessing/boon (begetting) of a child. There they promise of a votive offering to the goddess on fulfillment of their wish (vow) of an offspring. Then the main *Punjaro* of the shrine prays:

“Vanzian Bal Aapehe.....Bal Mage To Bal Apehe,..... Sukh-shanti Rakhuhu To Yah Mila Aavuhoo Ha Bah. Je Dharné Kamehe Bana Jojaveh...”

(...ask for a child and a child will be granted ...if things are well they will come to pay a visit, Oh *Bah* (o fatherly mother), when the articulated wish is fulfilled by you).

Sometimes the predictions are made on the basis of the dreams *Himanu Podiyu* of the expectant mother or her husband or the village Shaman *Badavo*. The informant Rajibhai narrated his experience of a dream related to his wife's pregnancy. While dreaming he saw a fair baby boy with lots of silver coins were spread around the newborn. The village *Badavo* saw the same dream a couple of months prior to the birth of a male child. And as per the prediction based on the dream, a male child was born.

Child Birth

The Time of Giving Birth

The Vasāvās definitely know that the birth of a child takes place after its own time. In the state of *Ded Paki Vibi* a pregnant woman is likely to have an abnormal delivery *Khali Nokhi Vehati*, in such state a few grains (*Dana*) are waved seven times in the air around the woman (from the backside of the head towards the face) and

wrapped in a *Khakhara* leaf packet (*Pudi*) which is later taken to a village *Mondavi* (medicine man cum clairvoyant) for prediction *Dana Paline, Dakhalo Hode*. If the *Mondavi* picks up an uneven number of grains five consecutive times, it is understood that a solution has been obtained from the concerned deity, this is called *Panch Panch Vakati*. Thereafter a few *Dana* are to be handed over for tying to the head cloth *Udani* of the woman, as a *Kol* (promise band). Henceforth, the *Mondavi* prays to concerned deities for blessing her with a normal delivery. If there is a normalcy, then the *Mondavi* promises to the deity for a votive offering. He prays thus:

“*Marag Devonu Chipati Aapoho, Jagya Aapajo.*
Nasib Dev- Karim Dev, Shantithi Suwavad Vi Jahoo Jojaveh.
(Chhaththi / Pecharo) Hatho Punji Te Dibi Tun Ake Indo(Katario Kukkad), Nario,
Panch Agarbatya, Ake Hawaio, Ake Hibili Horo Aaphi.”

(A pinch of grain for the way deity, make way. Deity of destiny and maker of destiny, a safe and peaceful delivery must take place; then only on the (sixth day/fifth day) seventh day of worship, you will be offered - an egg, a coconut, five aromatic sticks, coin- money and a bottle of liquor.) During the time of delivery, all knots of the inner and outer garments (*Ghaghara* or *Fada*) are unfastened, as it is generally believed that any tied knot can cause an obstacle for a smooth delivery. To have normal delivery a root of plant called *Arpesinda Mul* to be inserted the hair. As the effect, the root helps smooth delivery of the baby. In an instance where there is a prolonged labour pains and the delivery is delayed, then the portion of feet heels *Pago Khetavvu* of her husband's eldest brother *Jethoho* are thoroughly washed with fresh water and the expectant mother has to be given this water to drink in order to have a speedy delivery. A belief associated with this is : *Nani Vahu* the younger sister-in-law had mistakenly forgotten to cover her head with an *Udani* (head cloth) in the presence of her *Jeth* that caused the delay in delivery. The job of washing the legs of the *Jeth* with fresh water is done by the *Hiyarki*. Since the expectant mother can not touch her *Jeth* traditionally, therefore the washing of the leg is done by the *Hiyarki* (mid-wife).

In case of a delayed delivery the expected baby does not get a proper passage to come out of the womb, the *Hiyarki* asks for an old railway ticket *Gadio Tiket* used for coming down towards (Ankleshwar, Rajpipla or Netrang railway station) Dediapada. This used ticket is dipped *Bolin* in water and this water is given to expectant mother. With a belief that like a ticket which helps a passenger to get down from the train and reach his expected destination, in a similar manner, the unborn baby will find an easy passage *Marag* to come out (get down). When the

pregnant woman finds it extremely difficult to deliver the child *Chhuti Na Veye* the *Hiyarki* suspects something and initiates some queries:

*“Jo To Dibi Mundako Cholyo To Dibi Tun Hari Kodu Chhinali Koi Giyo Ya Nam
Aapihi De, Na Te Tu Aakhar Tu Movanari. Koda Ded Hay?”*

[The day you washed your head (to indicate the menses period is over) you had a sexual union (deceptive sex) with someone other than your companion (partner). Reveal the name or else you will perish. Whose child is it?] The Vasāvās believe that if a menstruating woman after washing her head *Mundako Chole* [this is a kind of social indication that the menses period is over and the woman is once again pure and can get involved in household activities] has had sexual intercourse with someone other than spouse and the fetus formed in womb is not of her husband, she then only faces problems while delivering the child. If the woman however reveals the name of not yet born baby’s real father, the baby gets an open passage for a safe delivery. The mid-wife in any way keeps this information of the child’s illegitimate father secret.

When the expectant mother goes into intense labour pain, the *Tongi Hiyarki/Dohani Dayari* is immediately called home to assist the woman in easing her pain and to ensure the safe delivery of the child. When delivery is abnormal it is called (instead of a head the legs comes out first) *Chhokaru Aadu Aavehe* then the mother undergoes unbearable pain and the lives of both mother and baby are in danger. Then placing the fetus in a normal position is essential in order to avoid risk of losing lives. The mid-wife rubs the woman’s stomach with her smooth hands; this is called *Hego Kare*. If she finds it extremely difficult to handle the case, she then requests the head of the family or the husband to call upon a *Badavo* from the village to perform the *Mangur Vidi* ritual of keeping the promised vow. The *Badavo* while facing the east, places a few pinches of paddy seeds *Chipati Dana Mukehe* to *Khapatyo* (this deity makes a way for the new born baby). He says “*Dev Marag Chane Aevi Vat Padajo, Jago Aapajo*” (lead on the way which is god’s own path, please give place) and some *Dana* are placed on the *Punj* (offered articles are placed on the spot of worship) in the name of the goddesses *Yab Mogi* and *Umbarawanu*. If they act as the mediators to grant the safe birth of the fetus, then *Badavo* promises to offer them a coconut or a fowl or a goat sacrifice on the fifth or seventh day *Hatho* at the time of naming ceremony. In order to be free from the vow as well as to appease the deities before unfastening the promise thread *Kol*. The *Punjaro* places the *Punj* on the floor, next to the expectant mother. Thereafter, these *Danas* are tied as a *Kol* vow and tied in a cloth rag around the arm of the mother.

Cutting the Umbilical Cord (*Nol Kapehe*)

As soon as the fetus comes out of the womb, a piece of a dry bamboo pole *Chimbi Chipato* from the garret is used as a knife to cut the umbilical cord *Nal Kapehe*. A small knot is tied with the same umbilical cord around the end of the cut portion of the cord (it is considered as a first *Nallachhoddi*- a cotton thread is tied on a wrist in honour of deity) and the wound is smeared with some herbal disinfectant or ash of dung. The *Hiyarki* places a vessel of fresh water on the family hearth to prepare warm water to give the baby a bath. A coin is dropped into this water as an offering to *Pae Janjali/ Pae Devati*, the goddess of water. A smaller quantity of lukewarm water is fetched in a green *Khakhara* leaf cup and poured on the body of the baby and mother. Then she gently washes away the impurities. Special care is taken to make sure that the water does not enter the umbilical cord since it may get infected with pus (purulence) *Pak Aapehe*. Therefore, a piece of cloth is tied around the umbilical cord *Nal*. After the wash, the baby is well wrapped in a cloth, except the face and placed on a cot over the quilt. After detachment of the umbilical cord the mother is not allowed to consume some pulses like, *Chana, Val-Papadi, Ulad, Vatana*, etc. It is a common belief that these legumes enhance the chances of infecting umbilical cord. Hence, light food is advised to take like soup or porridge of rice or thick gruel of maize and *Tuver*, boiled rice water *Pej, Bhadaki*, hand bread *Mando* made of *juwar* millet and preparations from inferior grains like *Mor* and *Banty*.

Disposal of the Placenta (*Maili*)

On ejection of the placenta, the mother herself collects the *Maili* from the floor in a green *Khakhara* plate or in a bamboo basket. The *Hiyarki* drops a few grains of *Mor, Juwar* and paddy seeds on the placenta and silently says, “*Dado (Bayo) Pachhalo Rekh Bayo (Dado) Aavehe*” (Let the daughter come after the son or vice versa). If the mother is very ill or feeble and unable to stand, the mid-wife carries the *Maili* from the main door to the back yard of the house *Nimanio Thod* (in west direction) for burial. No one is allowed to look at it. A fairly deep (one and half feet) pit is dug, almost touching the wooden poles of the house. The placenta is put in the pit and on it a coin and a pinch of grains are placed and thereafter it is filled with mud and a big stone *Dhond* is placed over it. It is believed that if the placenta is buried on the ground surface in a shallow hole, the newborn baby vomits out the mother’s milk soon after breast-feeding; it is called *Buzali Ulatehe*. In some villages there is common practice to give on that day a bath to the mother on the place of buried placenta. But in this Vandari village the mother takes a bath with lukewarm water

outside the house. The *Tongi Hiyaraki* smears her own head with sour milk (*Khatu Guliyu*) and goes to the river for a bath. On her return she takes food at the newborn child's house. After the delivery, if the pain in the stomach persists, then half a cup of pure liquor is given as a medicine and on her stomach the warm paste of *Kukad Kando* (herbal root bulbs) is applied. If the woman has an easy normal delivery then the floor of the delivery room, especially a portion under the cot is plastered with fresh cow-dung. Thereafter, she washes the clothes and bed sheets with water in the front yard of the house. But another person fetches a pale of fresh water for her, in this regard helps are taken as mother avoids going to the river/*Khadi* to have a bath for about eight days. She takes a bath at home till the seventh day (sometimes fifth day or sixth day) ceremony *Hatho Punjan* is over. This is done in order to avoid a birth pollution. On the third day after delivery, the father of the child ties a piece of a red monkey's *Potiyo* hollow bone on the wrist of the child, the belief behind this is that the new born baby might not get an infection caused by white rash on the body.

The Naming Ceremony (Pichero Di/Hatho Punje / Hatho Chhutawano)

This is the first religious ceremony to initiate in the life of a newborn Vasāvā. On the seventh day (sometimes on the fifth day-*Pecharo*), the women from the neighbourhood are invited for the worship ceremony *Hatho Punjan*. However, in this ceremony there is no major role being played by men, hence either they are excluded or given some minor works. Generally, in this ceremony, the *Dhoti Dosali* or *Tongi Hiyarpi/Hiyarki*- an expert old lady acts as mid-wife and the neighbourhood women are assigned to assist the mid-wife during the time of delivery as the special guests. If on the delivery day the process of delivery had been too difficult and the expectant mother had passed under acute labour pain, then the midwife *Hiyarki* requests the husband (expectant woman) to call a shaman *Mondavi / Badavo* from the village to conduct a rite ceremony and promises a vow to the deity concerned. Looking at the case and situation, the *Badavo* vows to sacrifice a fowl to the deity. But in the case of failure he even goes a step further and vows (*Bhare Vidi*) a goat offering to the deity for a safe delivery. And certain secret incantation are recited near the expectant mother. During this course If the delivery is successful and the mother and newborn are safe then the promised vow must be fulfilled on the seventh day and a few village elders are invited to witness the celebration. Early in the morning a few family members to prepare ritual liquor set out for the river to prepare a *Bhati* hearth and about to the mid of the day they return home with a pot

of liquor *Mapi*. With the synchronization of the time *Badavo* also reaches home to perform *Hatho Punjana* (seventh day celebration). The ceremony is done by women sitting inside the house and men outside the house under the shady roof.

To worship the goddess Dhan Kokar (the daughter of Dariya Hiril Hevo), the backyard of the house is chosen by the *Badavo* and *Gowalio*. The *Punjaro* washes his face and hands and rinses his mouth with fresh water of the river. And head of the *Badavo* is covered with a piece of cloth, some drops of water are poured on the paddy seeds *Dana* which are mixed by the mother with both hands, this mixing is called, *Dana Chhibanowu*. Looking eastward he picks up a handful of paddy seeds in his right hand, offers them to the clan-deity and places them on the ground, which is repeated a number of times. A special prayer is offered to the goddess:

“Kodnari, Gunthanari, Dhana Yah Kokar, Chhathi Lekhatari, Lekhatri-Jhukhatri, Ishawar Parvati, Marg Dev, Nasib Dev.....”

(Creator of all things, doers of many things, scribe of destiny, O goddess of all the hills, deity of the way, deity of the destiny on this sixth day write the destiny of the newborn baby on its forehead.....)

It is believed that on this occasion the goddess Dhona Yah Kokare/Dhanvas Kokar sends her daughter (maid) Chhoti Akasor to scribe the fate of the child on his/her forehead. That determines the destiny of its life which cannot be changed and is called *Chhathi Lekhatari*. It is believed that as she writes the destiny the baby cries and suddenly laughs. The determined fate of the child *Chhatina Lekh* becomes a permanent fortune *Tagdir* that fixes its life line and the kind of death that would be met in future. The naming ceremony is further extended by offering a coin (*Pandor*) that is to be placed on the *Punj*. And the mother is asked to take position on the left side of the *Punjaro*. A small dose of liquor is poured near the worship site *Punj*. Some of the liquor is even poured in a green leaf cup, of which some drops are offered to the clan-deity and the remaining is handed over to the mother to consume. In a similar manner the *Hiyarki* (mid-wife) also gets her share to drink. The *Punjaro* offers an alive chick (young fowl) to deity and this chick and a bottle of liquor is handed over to *Hiyarki*. Another alive chick *Pichhalu* is also handed over by the helper to the performer after sprinkling fresh water on it. The *Punjaro* places the same *Pichhalu* in front of the *Punj* in a sleeping position, waves a few *Dana* over it and touches the tips of his folded hands to the ground. The helper plucks a couple of feathers from the neck of the young fowl and places them on the *Punj*. The helper strangles and hacks the neck of the young fowl. After spilling the blood on the ground, the severed head is placed on the *Punj*. From the other

liquor bottle, a bit is dropped onto the ground while he utters the names of favoured deities. At the end of the worship the *Punjaro* thanks the deity for sending *Hiyarki* to earth. All those assembled squat to make a final salute *Page Padehe* at the end of the ceremony *Punjana Vidi*. With this, the worship is concluded. In the presence of the *Hiyarki* and the village women the 'name giving ceremony' begins which may be performed either by the parents of the child or the *Hiyarki* or even by some elderly female member *Dabi* of the family. In this regard whichever person from the above initiates the ceremony, and any one of them is supposed to give a suitable name to the child.

The child can be named after the days *Var* or natural objects or the seasons of the year or the festivals or a special occasion or after social events around which it is born. The *Vasāvās* often name the child after their forefathers or some other ways, viz; deceased grandparents, seasons, events, festivals, situations, social occasions, fair, animals, etc. For instance if a baby boy or girl is born on the day of the fair *Jataro/Melo* (Dev Mogara *Melo* or Sukalthirth or any other fair) then the name is given as *Jatrio/Jatar* (fair) and *Jatari* or *Mogara* or *Sukali* respectively. Some children are given opprobrious names or some other uncommon (rubbish) names by their parents or the mid-wife if the child's other siblings died just after birth or a little later. It is being practiced, as the *Vasāvās* believe that opprobrious name will repulse the evil power or deity visiting it with ill-favour and there would be no harm to the child including death. However in some cases, *Hiyarki* suggests a derogatory or malicious name for the new born baby such as *Binadi* (cat), *Vesto* (seller), *Chhinti/Huno* (dog), *Chhaniyo* (cow-dung), *Sanu*, *Kotwal* (Kotwalia – basket weaver), *Khalpo* (curer of animal skins), etc. In such cases, the newborn is placed in a bamboo basket (on a cloth), that basket was used for collecting the dung of livestock as a daily routine. The mid-wife *Hiyarki* carries the basket out through the main entrance of the house and goes to the back-yard; stands at the corner of the two joined *Hando* wicker walls partitions, locally called as *Kood*. There she with the help of the family head unfastens the tied bamboo ropes and opens the joints of the wicker walls *kood* to take entry inside the house with the baby. However, before entering the house she asks the child's mother,

“O, *Kowala!* *Aay Bal Vechuhu, Tehu Nehu Ka?*”

(O, house dwellers, this child has to be sold out, will you buy it?)

The mother immediately answers,

“*Aay Nenari.*” (I am buying it.)

Then *Hiyarki* immediately walks inside the house and removes the child from the basket and places it on the cot. Here *Hiyarki* is paid two or five rupees as per the

promise. Since the joint of the house *Hando* was opened by breaking the wicker partition *Kood* hence this is called *Hando Harkawin* and the child is named as *Handiyabhai* or *Handiben*. Sometimes the child is named as *Cbhaniyabhai* or *Suniabhai* because the child was carried in a cow-dung basket; in local society cow-dung is known as *Cbhan*. In olden days the baby that remains constantly sick then was handed over to the people of *Bonda* or *Kotwalia* or *Gowalia* (sub-group) and the parents used to buy the same child from them by paying a token amount of five rupees, thus the child used to acquire the proper names as *Bonda*, *Kotwal* and *Gowal*, in fact these were the surnames of the family (sub-sections) from where the child was sold symbolically by them. It is believed that giving such name(s) enhances the speedy recovery of the child as well improves its health.

Post-birth Taboos

Apart from the ceremonies related with conception, birth and its prediction, there are certain post-birth taboos (birth pollutions) which have to be maintained in the community. And in turn these taboos also shape their way of life. Hence, they need to be discussed here. The mother, under any circumstances, is not allowed to take up household routine jobs for five consecutive weeks (*Savva Mahino*) after delivery such as, grinding any grains, collecting firewood, cleaning vessels, washing clothes, bringing water from the river, sweeping the house floor, climbing the garret, etc. She remains at home thus takes bath there instead of going to the river. She even cannot visit any place of deity or places of reverence (*Sthanig*) otherwise to avoid wild animals like the tiger, bear and snake. In this context, an incident of a delivered woman *Suvavadwali Bai* earlier already had been taken place as the woman after delivery visited a place of deity *Dev Sthanig* just to drink water, but before she could even have taken a sip, a tiger appeared and chased her away from that place.

Child Constantly Cries (Rad Lage)

If the child constantly cries (*Rad Lage*) the tree of *Bedo/Behdo* (*Terminalia bellerica*) is used for its traditional remedy but it is considered as impure (defiled). According to the tribal notion, a ghost (*Put*) resides in this particular tree. The Vasāvās neither use logs of these trees to build the houses nor as fuel wood (firewood) not even to make household furniture. When the child keeps constantly crying at night (and during the day), the mother visits forest to throw a stone (*Dhogadatnu*) at the *Behdo* tree. According to tribal assumed belief, *Behdo* is considered as (unholy) a malevolent tree, the ghosts are believed to rest on it. When the tree is stoned then

the crying of the child stops. However, in this process the mother while stoning utters: “*Aaj Rekh Ma Poyaran Nokho Radavatu*” (from today onwards do not make my little one to cry). On stoning she walks back home but the said tree is not sighted during this process of returning. The prevalent notion is attached with this that the child is crying because his/her mother might have passed under the *Behdo* tree unknowingly (unconsciously) or touched the same unwarily. When the child is crying whole night and sleeps whole day, it is also called *Vel Lagi / Rag Lagi Goi*. There is another process to stop the crying of the child in which a special *Vidi* is conducted at home. In a locally made (*Deshi*) roof tile some burning coals are placed, a few hair from the crying child’s mother are put on the fire along with a fake egg (*Fokalu Indu*), dry red chilies and food grain (*Banti*). All these ingredients are waved in the air over the head of the child and lowered down (*Utarine*) to his feet. Then the mother goes out of the house to drop it all on a side of a road and at once the head of the family shuts the main entrance door. Once the *Vidi* is over, she returns and stands on the threshold of the shut door for taking entry, the head of the family asks her, “*Chhokarane Rad Lagi Hati Te Utari Gai Ke?*” (Has the constant crying of the child ceased?) She responds, “*Ha, Utari Gai.*” (Yes, it is ward off) Then only the main door is opened and the mother enters in.

Piercing of the Ears (Kan Vindhenu)

Piercing of the ears is known as *Kan Koche Ke Fade*. When the child is small, its earlobes are pierced either with a fine pointed thorn or by the vendors (who sells trinkets) or by the goldsmith who uses an iron tool or pincher. After piercing the earlobes, a small piece of cotton thread is tagged through. Sometimes the *Gowal* or *Kotawalia* may also do this job. Silver Jassmine bud-shaped (*Mogari*) ear rings are usually put in the ears by piercing it in, but if there is nothing to be worn, two tiny thin twigs of a Neem tree (*Nibadano Hulo*) are pushed into the holes of the earlobes. Somehow, if someone’s earlobes remain un-pierced till the time of death, then during the final death rite, the *Harwanio* (death ritual performer) pierces both the earlobes of the dead person with a sharp thorn. It is said, that *Jamarai* (carrier of the dead) pierces the earlobes of the demised person when carrying him along. If the dead man reaches to the God with the un-pierced ears, the God Himself heats the iron of the lower part of the plough and pierces the earlobes, certainly it would cause unbearable pain. There after that the dead person can travel further on his/her way to the divine abode (world of the dead). In local terminology it is said as, ‘*Topawin Hala Favala Kan Vidhi Denu Ta Ja Aagala Javay*’.

Conclusion

The life among the Vasāvā Bhils is shrouded with several number of socio-religious rituals and taboos, which guides them each stage of their community life. The Life cycle commencing from the conception (pregnancy), with a birth and ends with a death, ensures rites of passage in the society. The role they play in the life cycle of the Vasāvā Bhils have been elaborately described and discussed in this section of the chapter. For this tribal society the health of the pregnant mother and the safe birth of the healthy baby are the prime concerns. The children are considered very important asset of the family and in the future breadwinners for the family. For the parents the children are future security as well as support for their old age. Besides having a biological relation and emotional attachments, the birth of every child brings hope and joy to the family and the entire society. The Vasāvā community particularly believes that the birth of a female child or male child holds equal value in the society. On the birth of a male child the mid-wife *Tongi Hiyarki* expresses the wish (on behalf of the family) to have a female child (birth) in succession. On a birth of child the family and society at large observes all the traditional rite, rituals and ceremonies and avoids taboos and birth pollutions for the well-being of the mother and child. The taboos are the unwritten laws of the Vasāvā Bhil primitive society; when the laws are deliberately or unconsciously violated, the violator fears a calamity and the future repercussions, Therefore, it is believed that the taboo has a supernatural or religio-magical sanction (don't) behind it. The religion and culture shape the mother and child health-seeking belief practices in their both traditional and ritual cares are sought out to alleviate the problem. The traditional herbal medicines (pronounced spells) given by the village shaman grants at most satisfactions and confidence to the society the ultimate healing and prevention is sure. But due to modern education, migration, and influence of ultra-modern mass media the folk remedial practices are gradually and slowly diminishing. But at the same time the remote interior villages are still practicing the popular magico-religious healing methods.

In the case of pregnancy, as we have seen the taboos, norms and precepts that have to be observed by the pregnant mother to keep her away from susceptible evil influences and ensure a safe delivery. Significantly, the avoidance of certain things and the curbing of certain movements or activities can aid the birth of a healthy baby. An increase in the anxiety levels of the pregnant woman could endanger the life of the child and endanger her health. It must be emphasized that the pre-natal taboos and avoidances imposed on the pregnant woman are in order to free her

from her daily routine and give her the rest she obviously needs. Similarly, the post-birth avoidances (including that of sexual relations) ensure that the mother can concentrate on the care of the child for at least five weeks even as she gains some of her lost energy. The taboos thus protect the mother and ensure the safe birth of a child which is considered to be God's blessing for the growth of the Vasāvā society.

References

- Anderson, N. (1989). *The World's Religions*. Leicester: Intervarsity Press.
- D'Souza, Leela. (2005). *The Sociology of Religion: A Historical Review*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications.
- Dalits in Modern India. (2007). Vision and Values*. New Delhi: Sage Publication.
- Gennep, Van: (1909). 1960 (Reprint) *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (Reprint) London: Routledge and Keengan Paul Ltd.
- Kimball Solon, (1960). *Introduction, in Arnold Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage*. London: Routledge and Kengan Paul Ltd.
- Koonathan, Varghese P. (1999). *The Religion of the Oraons*. Shillong: Don Basco Centre for Indigenous Cultures.
- Kuper, Adam. (1999). *Culture: The Anthropologist's Account*. Cambridge: Harward University Press.
- Mac-Machado, Robert Gabriel. (2010). Witchcraft and Witchcraft Cleansing among the Vasava Bhils. *Anthropos*. 105.2010. 191-204.
- Mac-Machado, Robert Gabriel. (2018). The Bhils: Origin and Historical Glimpses with Special Reference to the Vasava Bhils. *North Bengal Anthropologist*, Vol.6. 23-39.
- Michael, S.M., (2003). Meaning and Significance of Feasts and festivals in Human Society. *Journal of Dharma*, Vol, XXVIII, No,3, (July-September), Pp.366-376.
- Misra, Bhabagrahi. (1971). Verrier Elwin's Field Method and Fieldwork in India: An Appraisal. *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol.XXX – 1, Pp.104-131.
- Naik, T. B. (1956). *The Bhils: A Study*. Delhi: Bhartiya Adimjati Sevak Sangh
- Qamar, Azher Hameed 2016 Belief in the Evil Eye and Early Childcare in Rural Punjab, Pakistan. *Asian Ethnology*, 75/2, 398-418.
- Slater, Marian. (1996). Taboo, in David Levison and Melvin Ember (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 4, New York: Henry Holt and Company, Pp. 1279-1285.
- Sodder, Mudita. (2016). *Reliving Christian Life in the Globalized World Today*. New Delhi: Christian, World In Prints.
- Sriram, (1999). Untouchability and Stratification in Indian Civilisation, in S. M. Micheal (ed.),
- Troisi, Joseph. (1978). *Religious Beliefs and Practices Among the Santhals*. Delhi: Manohar Publications

- Turner, Victor W. (1979). *Between and Between: The Liminal Period in Rite de Passage*. In William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt (eds.), *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*. New York: Harper Collin, Pp.234-43.
- Wagner, Roy. (1987). *Taboo*. In Mircea Eliade (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. XIV, New York: MacMillan and Free Press, Pp. 233-6.