

## Chapter-III

# **Birth and Growing Up as a Girl-Child**

The year 1991-2000 are designated as the Decade of the Girl-Child jointly by the seven SAARC countries. These countries have defined a girl as a female between 0 and 20 years of age (Dhagamwar, 1997: 30). However for methodological reasons I have taken female child between (0-18) years of age as center of observation for this study.

A girl-child is first of all a child. Oldman (1994: 44) claims that children constitute rather more than a minority group defined by an absence of rights, although minority status is certainly an emergent feature of childhood. He considers adult and children as constituting classes, in the sense of being social categories which exists principally by their economic opposition to each other and the ability of the dominant class (adults) to exploit economically the activities of the subordinate class (children).

The traditional Indian society has down graded the role of women and this is reflected in male domination and female subservience. This gender value differs down to all spheres of life and is shared by both sexes. As a result, the woman has adjusted to her lower role, adopted a life style that depicts her as subordinate to man from her very childhood. In India where children constitute 42 per cent of the total population girl-children are about half of it (Indira, 1996: 296). Mittal (1991: 14) opines that girl-child in India is a neglected lot. She is a victim of sexist bias, which gets reflected in various spheres of her life. She is perceived as a burden to be passed on to another family. Her contribution to the household economy is never acknowledged.

Coming to the tribal setting the situation of girl-child varies from tribe to tribe. In Bhil society right from birth a girl gets differentiated treatment in terms of ritual observation and in terms of offerings given to the gods. Birth is a happy occasion and a girl is as welcomed as a boy but still a boy in the family is a must. They can however, do without a girl. As soon as the girl is able to play herself, she is considered fit to help in the household works. But in Khasi society though the boys are welcome, a girl is a must in family because it is through her that clan title runs. In the patriarchal base a boy is welcomed on the plea that the girl has to go away after her marriage while in the matriarchal Khasi society the youngest daughter does not leave her mother's house, and it is here that she is joined by her husband (Mann, 1987: 57-65).

### **Birth and Initiation**

The first few years of a child are crucial for its all round development. As the child grows, the physical requirements to grow create a demand for a multitude of services in terms of health, nutrition and education, etc.

Very interesting is the way a girl-child is greeted and treated in the Juang society. The same kind of jubilation takes place in the case of birth of female child as a male child. In her case the umbilical cord is cut with the help of a knife. The father buries the placenta behind the house. Then the *satrunihari* (traditional birth attendant) smears the stump with turmeric paste and ties a protective cord round the infant's neck and another round the mother's neck. These are worn for about two weeks. The *satrunihari* is given remuneration that consists of five to ten *pai* of paddy, one chicken and

leaf cupful of cooked-rice and curry. In case a son is born she may be given an extra amount of one to two rupees and a brass bangle for her service.

The birth makes both the parents ritually unclean. For this reason they are not allowed to enter anybody's home or touch anyone in their own home or handle things of common use. They are to observe a ritual purification the very next day to come out of this taboo.

While mother is engaged in taking care of the child the father is also not left behind. He is assigned with the task of *uthiary* (first hair cutting). He does it with the help of a knife after seven days of childbirth.

Childhood in the Juang community starts with the *Nimincha* (name giving ceremony). *Nimincha* is the function they celebrate after twenty-one days of birth of a child. This function refers to both boy and girl-child. All the aged men and women in the village are invited by the child's parents to assemble at their resident and give the name of the child. The aged women gathered out there do the *bandhana* ritual that is called *Juripakeiba*. Here they pray to *Dharam Deota* and *Basumata* for the well being of the child.

Now they all kiss the child and give money according to their capacity as blessing. The aged men sitting out there then play their role. All the aged men present there throw together some rice on the ground. Then the aged women carefully watch the shape of the thrown rice. According to the shape of it they give a name to the child. But this name depends on the well being of the child. Once there is a health or other problem the Juang change the name of the child. They feel that all miseries have come due to the present

name. There is no age restriction for the change of name. Any person at any age is allowed to go for it if there is a necessity.

The father of the child offers two chickens to worship the ancestral spirits and local deities. He offers dried husked rice, milk, molasses, chicken and liquor to deities for blessing and a long healthy life of the child. Then the parents are requested by the aged women to anointing turmeric paste on the chin of the girl and kiss her. Generally the child's grandmother's name is given to her. Then the *Raulia* (ghost finder) performs rites to determine the name of the ancestor whose soul has reincarnated in the child. He measures three reeds from time to time by uttering the names of the ancestors and watches if the reeds tended to lengthen slightly beyond their actual length. When the length of the reed increased the name of the ancestor is uttered at the time of name giving to the child. The child is then identified with the villagers and blessed by the kinsmen. The mother of the child then cooks rice and chicken (slaughtered in the ritual) and distributes to the lineage members. Shares are also given to the villagers, but those who are not able to afford are not bound to it.

Juang have their own way of measures to avoid premature death. If the parents have lost their previous child they offer their very next child to the villagers. All the elderly men and women of the village assemble at the donor's house. The *Raulia* tries to detect the agency creating trouble in the family by making an earthen doll representing the evil maker. Then the *Nagam* (priest) makes offering to the doll. After that some women bath the child in turmeric water and keep the child on everybody's lap one after one. Each one of the present members then contributed one to two beads from their

own necklaces to make a necklace for the child. A new name is given to the child. All the people gathered out there then pour liquor on the ground in the name of their deities and ancestors and sprinkle a little over the head of the child, and make an announcement for the child belonging to the village. Though the child now belongs to the village she stays with her parents and after she attains puberty her parents get back her from the villagers by paying some rice, liquor and goat for a communal feast in the village.

First ear piercing is never associated with any ritual. It is done by an aged lady in the village with the help of *baluguna kanta* (a stick). It is interesting to see the girl-child's ear and nose pierced and adorned with brass pins purchased from the local market. Unlike the caste Hindu society, the Juang do not perform any ritual during the first hair cutting and first eating of solid food by the child.

There are separate and stringent prescription for dress, habits, mannerism and social relations for the girls in the Juang community. Moral values like silence, sacrifice and sufferance are advocated for girls. Considerable importance is given to the way a girl of this community carries herself like the way she sits, stands, talks and interact with others. Girls are expected to be docile, modest, less talkative and submissive. They are encouraged to speak softly and to avoid abusive language.

During the very childhood though some importance is given to all these things the real battle starts when a girl attains her puberty. *Lugakachichhun* is the local term for puberty of a girl-child. When a girl attains puberty for the first time her mother takes her inside the house. She

prepares some hot water and baths the girl with it. If there is irregularity in the cycle of a girl or any problem related to cycle then the mother of the girl confirms a good day. On that day she brings two pots full of water from the river Baitarani early in the morning. When she hears the shouts of the hen in the morning exactly at that time she starts dropping the collected water continuously on the head of the girl and thus the girl is believed to attain a regular cycle. Once a girl attains her puberty it is the responsibility of the parents to find her a match, getting her married, maintaining her virginity, good character, reputation till marriage, etc.

Pre-pubertal girls can generally play with children of both the sexes but with onset of puberty the compulsion of safeguard on female modesty restricts her movement. She can move and play only with girls. She should not go out after sunset. She should not move alone in the jungle.

Now the role of *mabahunki* (aged women) in a widow house begins. *Mabahunki* is assigned with a number of tasks. Some of the major tasks of a *mabahunki* (Case Study 1) are as follows:

- Taking care of the girls and keeping an eye as to what they do.
- Decide and select the village to which the girls should go on dancing visit.
- Accompany the girls in dancing visit.
- Help in courtship of the girls and the *bandhu* boys.
- Carry gifts sent by the girls to their *bandhu* boy and vice versa.

She is the person who trains the girl, the meaning of marriage and guides her at each step of her activity during this period. This is to check the girl from doing anything considered wrong in the society. She usually shares jokes, stories and songs with the girls and through these things she tries to teach them. The girls also are closer to her as they sleep with her. She accompanies the girls during their *changu* visit to other villages. She is the first one to know about their love life.

A training song of *mabahunki* is as follows:

*“Megamma, megamma osama gonad  
odasam gomamki lamama kire  
ubamedlunge dalummana  
duara jagehal chaghe tai ana dalam  
megamma megamna abamte megamna  
dalunte bhetaghata baina.”*

It means, “my dear girl now you are grown up and will get married. After marriage you will have to husk paddy, bring water, clean the courtyard sincerely. Eat rice poured water only after bath. If you need to see your father tell him to meet you at the river bank when you go for bath.”

Another song of similar type is as follows:

*“Au selan masiana rebeda alaga parkara kalan Au  
sasusasura garabumana  
quinkamkite maminkite me mane aja meraena  
kamadama makhima  
au ainapila katul laragata mianda  
au ainana panimebuda ara.”*

The meaning of the song is, “dear girl now you will get married and go to in-laws house. Obey your in-laws and give them breakfast with tea early in the morning. It is different when you are a girl but after marriage do your work sincerely.”

The girl is now called a *selan* (local term for female at different stages of life is described in Table 4). As *selan* she has to perform certain roles and responsibilities. Those are as follows:

- Plastering *majang* (dormitory) and sweeping the plaza in every three or four days and positively on ritual occasions.
- Supplying leaf cups and plates on feast and festivals, for the guests and visitors.
- Grinding spices in feast (festive) occasions.
- Husking paddy given from the common fund of the village.
- Grinding cakes on certain village rituals.
- Dancing overnight on ritual and festive days.
- Obeying the village authorities, widows and the village elders.

The life of the Juang male and female is based on different age-grade classifications at different stages of life. The discrepancy between the biological and social age groups is bridged up within the framework of youth organization. The social norms do not favour an ordinary person to joke with anybody who stands in adjacent generation to him or her, but the *kangerki* and *selanki* of own, alternate, and adjacent generations are allowed to joke with each other within their own group. This is because, in a broad sense, all the *kangerki* (unmarried boys) are considered as brothers and all the *selanki* as sisters to each other.

A *selan* has to get herself detached from the membership of the youth organization after her marriage and before she sleeps with her husband. She visits the *kangerki* and *selanki* of her village to take farewell from them and offers them cakes, tobacco and a new mat.

Every age group is entrusted with special roles and responsibilities under the purview of the dormitory and youth organization. The boys and girls of the *majang* choose a sponsor of their own, known as *tandakar* who acts as their guardian and moral adviser. Failing to do the duty, as prescribed by the norms of the society, is considered as a deviation for which the village elders punish the offenders.

The punishments are of the following four kinds:

- Expulsion from the *majang*.
- Physical punishment like standing on one leg holding the ears, putting the second finger in excreta, etc. in minor offences, and beating in case of adultery and incest.
- Fines of money, liquor, goat and rice.
- Verbal scolding and caution not to repeat the work again.

The girls are punished for failing to discharge their duties properly. The boys are generally punished for not bringing firewood to the *majang* and for not obeying the village elders similarly the girls are found fault with if they do not plaster the *majang* and sweep the plaza regularly. If first attracts the attention of the village elders when the girls are found guilty in neglecting

their duties, they first accuse the *tandakar* for not supervising the work of the *kangerki* and *selanki*. Sometimes the *tandakar* is fined one or two rupees for the fault of the boys or the girls after which the blame falls on the actual offenders. One of the main features of the Juang youth organization is collective responsibility of its members. For negligence of one duty or for the failure to carryout any assigned task in case of one member of the dormitory, all the members of the organization are liable to be punished. They are fined, the fine being rice (generally one to two *khandi*), a goat or a pig, and about two to five rupees for liquor for the village elders. They collect these things from their own houses or borrow from some body on an arrangement to pay it off by working on the creditor's field. The fines are used for holding a feast in the village.

Every age group has its powers and privileges affiliated with its rights and responsibilities. In other words, each responsibility is rewarded in the formal structure of the society. Each status enforces certain duties and the rewards motivate the duties to be translated into action. The privileges and the remuneration of the various age groups associated with the dormitory organization are described briefly.

During marriages and *selanki* accompanied with the *kangerki* always associate with the groom's party (no special rites are observed in bride's village since the bride is taken to the groom's villager for marriage). The boys bring firewood and the *selanki* bring leaves to the groom's house. During the marriage period the groom's parents feed them.

A major portion of the bride wealth, which the groom's party gives to the bride's village, goes formally to the *selanki* accompanied with the *kangerki* of the bride's village, though all the villagers, in fact, share the amount. Two *khandi* of paddy and two *khandi* of rice (out of the total amount of seven *khandi* of paddy and six *khandi* of rice) are given for the *kangerki* and *selanki* as their expense for turmeric and oil (*kanger selan ojan sasang*).

For giving constant company to the bride in the groom's village, *selanki* accompanied with the *kangerki* get a special share of rice (about ten *Pai* or a *khandi*) and a goat or a chicken. The *selanki* associated with the *kangerki* cook it and distribute among themselves. After marriage the bride and the groom pay a visit to the bride's village with the bride-wealth. The *selanki* and *kangerki* accompany the married couple during their stay in the bride's village the bride's parents feed them.

On major ritual days the *selanki* bring firewood and leaves to the *tandakar* and he feeds them. The day a new *tandakar* is selected by *selanki* and the *kangerki*, the former gives one share of cooked rice and meat curry to *selanki* and the *kangerki* of the village. Similarly when a *tandakar* resigns from his office he provides cooked rice and meat curry to *selanki* and the *kangerki*.

When a man becomes a *kamanda* (an office by virtue of which he can take active role in ritual of the village) he gives a special share of cooked rice and meat curry to the *selanki* and the *kangerki*. On every ritual occasion the *kamandaki* get the head meat of the slaughtered animals which no other married people except them can eat. This meat and the rice grains used in the

rituals are cooked in the *majang* by the *kangerki*. Both the *kamandaki* and the *kangerki* eat this food. The *selanki* are not provided a share of this food. But, the *selanki* and *kangerki*, when hired as a working party are given rice and goat, which they cook and eat on any convenient day.

As it has already been pointed out that on major ritual or festive occasions *selanki* and the *kangerki* are given a meal by the *tandakar*. On the above occasions the *tandakar* is supplied with firewood and leaves by the *selanki* and the *kangerki*. When the *selanki* and the *kangerki* of a village receive gifts from their *bandhu selanki* or *kangerki* they give a share of their gifts to the *tandakar*. The *tandakar* has also got the right to ask the *selanki* and *kangerki* of his village to work on his field even though he cannot pay them anything for their labour.

In general the widow and widower do not get any remuneration from the village. Only those widows and widowers who associate more with the *selanki* and *kangerki* are given shares of the gifts the latter receive from their *bandhu* friends.

## **Education**

Little girls face the debilitating discrimination of all few chances of attaining any education. Either girls are not sent to school or at an early age their education is discontinued. In India, very conspicuous gender disparities persist in all the educational indicators, especially in regard to enrolment and retention at the primary, upper primary and higher levels of school education. Women's education in tribal India do not get any attention because of

traditional bias against girls going to school. This is also due to early marriages and poor economic condition of the family and lack of awareness about the importance of girl's education, etc. Evidences suggest that the tribal female children in India have received a raw deal in the matter of education. In this regard they are treated as species of lower and secondary importance compared to boys. The situation is much worse in tribal areas due to social attitudes, poor access to education and family oriented role and responsibilities of the girl-child. Girls form more than half of illiterate children in the age group of 5-9 years. Although girl's enrolment at various levels of school education has improved appreciably, girls account for only 43.2 per cent of enrolment at the primary stage and 39 per cent at the upper primary stage. The incidence of dropout and stagnation for girls is much higher than that of boys at primary and upper primary stage. It is estimated that every 10 girls who enter class Ist only 6 reach to class Vth. Access to education continues to be a major problem especially for girls. Female literacy is closely associated with reduction in fertility rates, population growth and shows positive association with age at marriage, life expectancy, enrolment, women's participation in development process etc. They are the last to be enrolled and first to be withdrawn (Balakrishanan, 1994: 28), if any contingency or crisis situation occurs in the family. There are widespread social prejudices against their education. The educational system in India has expanded enormously but the problem of girls especially girls of Juang tribe still persists.

Education of girl-child is the determinant factor of family health, income, fertility control, lower infant mortality, family planning and

empowerment of women. Thus girl's education directly influences the well being of a community leading to a better labour force participation in informal market and better home production. However the girl-child in the Juang community is deprived of adequate educational facilities. Even if they are enrolled in schools, they do not receive the required attention either in school or in family and that compels them to dropout very early. The reason is that many structural constrains coupled with the socio-economic reality and traditional attitudes and opinions hinder their access to the almost marginal and in some cases non-existent educational facilities.

The girl-child in a Juang family has to look after her brother and sisters. If she goes to school, her younger siblings will be neglected, as her mother has to go out either for doing farm activities or for wage earning. Those who are free from such obligations find the school at far off places. At the primary level they carry on schooling but for secondary education the far-reaching places compel their parents to drop them out from the school.

Further, if a Juang girl is highly educated then she may not accept her traditional roles and that may cause a hindrance in her marriage. So it is always taken as a matter of consideration by the parents. However, a few have managed to overcome such situations and are now well placed in their society.

Despite evidence indicating high returns to the society for providing girls with primary education, the bias against sending girls to school still continues (Case Study 7). Some exceptions are there where a few have struggled to attain their educational goal (Case Study 8). Most of the families

in all the sample villages have daughters. Many were of the opinion that girls should not study. However, the provision for free meal in the school has motivated many parents them to send their daughters to school. Majority of the Juang girls leave their school at the upper primary level and very few continue up to the high school level.

### **Responsibilities Shouldered up by Daughters**

Daughters play an important role in helping mothers both inside and so outside the house for which Juang women feel very much comfortable to carry on their economic pursuit. Daughters always from their childhood come as a helper to their mother in every kind of activities starting from child rearing to household maintenance and agricultural works. In this process they learn the skill to work that help them in future.

But the responsibilities shouldered up by the Juang girls are more in the form of household chores with helping mother in domestic works (i. e. fetching water, sweeping the house and the courtyard, cleaning utensils etc.), looking after their younger siblings when mother is engaged in some work within the home and also when she is going to the forest or any other work place. The Juang girls are also seen to be engaged in the caring the domestic animals in the form of grazing them, collecting fodder for them, cleaning the livestock shed etc. But in all these activities girls act as a helper to the mother. The Juang girl's participation in agricultural works is not out of choice, but still they do accompany their parents to the agricultural fields and help them as far as possible. They enjoy participating in community level celebration and festivals.

### **Discriminatory Practices Against the Girl-Child**

Not all the children are discriminated against. There are groups of children who experience more discrimination – the disabled, the female children, refugee children, migrant children and others. In a pre-industrial era, servants were to large extent children and there were considerable transfer of child labour between households according to need. In industrial era, older girls (again, often not family members) did the bulk of childcare and domestic chores. The historical residue of this tradition that crept into next century lies in the notion of a relatively non-serious way to their mother's domestic work (Oldman, 1994: 52).

As we have entered entering into the arena of 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we are struck by the painful realization that Indian traditions always prefer the birth of male child and hate the arrival of female child. The status of a married woman deteriorates if she gives birth to a daughter. Self-perception and birth right have persisted to be the most formidable maladies facing the girl child ever since she is born. Today's girl child is tomorrow's mother; however, she is discriminated socially, psychologically, economically and in violation of the law. She is discriminated at the age of her rapid social, physical and mental development. This gender differentiation is socially defined and continues from cradle to grave. Being the female children they are pestered with innumerable problems and victimized of social stigma in a rigid and traditional male dominated society.

Though the Juang girls are given similar care like that of boys in their infant stage, yet at tender age they are motivated to participate in household

works. Though such type of activities improve their skill and family's income, still it takes away from them their childhood. From early morning she acts as a substitute to her mother by taking care of younger brothers and sisters. When her mother is out to work she is the caretaker of the house. When she is ten to twelve years old she goes to the jungle with her mother to collect fuel-wood, fruits and leaves (for leaf-cups and leaf-plates). If she is not doing such activities she roams around, she has to graze the animals (Case Study 14), collect grass and leaves for their food. During agricultural season she helps in removing the unwanted grasses in the agricultural field.

In the Juang *pirh* the girl-child is always welcomed with jubilation. Her responsibilities inside the house, as we have discussed earlier, keep her away from the childhood activities, which a brother of her enjoys. There exist some discrimination in matters like playing after sunset, receiving education, health care, making friendship, playing with opposite sex etc. But here the parents put their own reason for such kind of a discrimination.

The grown-up Juang girls are always restricted by their parents to play after sunset to avoid any type of misdeed that will put the girl and also her parents in trouble. On the other hand there is always a fear of wild animals and evil eyes, those become more active after sunset. Education as we have discussed earlier is thought by the parents as a barrier for the girl to get married with a suitable person in future. The parents want their daughters to be trained in all those activities in the parental house that will help them in getting a good partner and also proving a good housewife.

The grown-up girls are to take care of themselves concerned to their health as the mother is engaged in a lot of activities throughout the day. The Juang parents always discouraged their grown-up daughter from making friendship with opposite sex within her own village. This is a kind of check on the girls and boys to avoid any kind of inclination towards each other as they all are considered as brothers and sisters being member of one clan.

The above analysis shows a clear picture of the birth and initiation process of a girl-child, the way she grows up and the actual treatment she receives from her family during this period of growth in a Juang *pirh*.