

# **Cultural Diversity, Childbearing and Childrearing in Pakistan: A Study in Change**

*Anwar Shaheen*\*

## **Abstract**

Childbearing and childrearing as quintessential activities of human groups have been laced by a host of rituals and customs engendered by their religious and cultural beliefs and worldviews, expressed uninhibitedly in their folklore. This study takes Pakistan, owing to its rich diversity of cultures, as a universe. Here 18 ethnic groups have been studied to make their profile of customs and rituals associated with childbirth and infancy, through interviewing 144 mothers. It helped in having an insight into deep seated emotions, desires, fears, hopes, as well as their celebrations or otherwise, as is seen in case of baby girls. By comparing old and young mothers, a trend of change is detected, confirming the flattening of diversity as the global culture is taking over.

---

## **Introduction**

Pakistan is a land of diversity. Here different ethnic groups live mostly concentrated in their own regions. With the passage of time, due to many factors—development in transportation, employment, urbanization, rural-urban migration and globalization—there has been a conglomeration of multiple ethnic groups living in the cities, which have intensified the multi-ethnic, culturally plural, and according to some thinkers, multi-cultural environment.<sup>1</sup> Villages, even today, have little variety of the cultural practices associated with life-cycle events. Even if

---

\* Dr Anwar Shaheen, is Professor at Pakistan Study Centre, University of Karachi, Karachi.

<sup>1</sup> Cultural pluralism is not equated with multiculturalism; the former has been a character of societies where different cultures live side by side without conflict, but 'existence of plurality at the societal level does not imply that multiculturalism as a value prevailed in these societies. ... multiculturalism ... entails more than the mere presence of different communities or the attitude of tolerance in society. Multiculturalism is concerned with the issue of equality; it asks whether the different communities, ... co-exist as equals in the public arena.' Gurpreet Mahajan, *The Multicultural Path Issues in Diversity and Discrimination in Democracy* (New Delhi: Sage, 2002), p.11.

a small cultural group lives in a different cultural community, the former naturally starts showing signs of absorption, and the degree of tolerance for difference, therefore, develops on both sides. Despite ethnocentric feelings and pride, people in the urban and town areas also enjoy variety hence the mosaic of rituals, customs, values, beliefs and practices stays rich and is sometimes further enriched with absorption of new colors from the surrounding—other groups, media, and exposure to the globalization effects, etc.

### Review of literature

Literature available on the subject reveals a good deal of diversity among world cultures and proves that the role of culture is influential in determining childrearing practices.<sup>2</sup> The differences come from various definitions of being a successful adult who is an effective productive member of society. Such definitions in turn are determined by ethical values, mores and standards preferred by that group. Also the principles of individualism or collectivism, whatever the preferred path of a family could be, compete for gaining ground. Children are welcomed in this world in a lot many ways.<sup>3</sup> A three-volume encyclopedia by Williams (2016), with self-explanatory title, *Celebrating Life Customs around the World: From Baby Showers to Funerals* is relevant here. Its first volume explains the customs and rituals related to two stages, before and after birth. Such customs have a lot common if one sees the world trends. The birth is welcomed in many ways to show happiness. The processes of naming, raising and saving the baby from evil, and to ensure best health are also based on common concerns of the family around the world.

An NPR<sup>4</sup> report revealed in a survey of childrearing in China, Japan, Denmark, Norway, France, Spain, Philippines, Polynesian Islands, Vietnam, Argentina, Kenya, Zambia, Malawi, and USA a wide ranging diversity among cultural notions and practices concerning childrearing.<sup>5</sup> It is understood that cultural impact is substantial and it creates different parenting styles, philosophies and patterns. There is found variation in degrees of emphasis on discipline, morality, early toilet training, safety from cold, moving about unattended, comfort

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.tuw.edu/health/child-rearing-practices-different-cultures/#sthash.iS5aVuCJ.dpuf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.parentmap.com/article/welcoming-baby-birth-rituals-provide-children-with-sense-of-community-culture>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/08/12/33982>

<sup>5</sup> Emily Lodish, Global Parenting Habits That Haven't Caught on in the US, 5261/global-parenting-habits-that-havent-caught-on-in-the-u-s

through physical touch/closeness, obedience and lifesaving skills. The Asians emphasize upon high academic achievements, but the Dutch avoid teaching reading before school starts; they train children to tight schedule of activities instead.<sup>6</sup> The cultural aspect of childrearing is likewise different among the nations of the world.

In rather old books, an encyclopedia of customs and rituals of castes in Punjab, compiled by Maclagan and Rose,<sup>7</sup> was published in 1911. It was based on the census of 1892 held under British regime. This provides a digest of life-cycle customs of Muslim Punjabis. Their pregnancy related activities are explained to show the time, rituals, omens, charity, gifts, songs and activities of celebration around an expecting mother. It is not only a time for enjoying but also saving the mother and the fetus from evil effects. Similar details are available about birth rites especially the wording of songs printed here reveals the cultural notions and beliefs about this important stage of family cycle. It is interesting to note the detail about every step of celebration in which brothers, husband and mother of baby's mother and professional singers and dancers were involved. Area wise variation is also given within the British Punjab province. It seems bit strange that many such customs and activities have fast disappeared, though the core concepts and superstitions still prevail.

No doubt, giving birth and raising a child is extremely vital function of a human group, hence its celebration. However, the colours of celebrations have been changing with time inevitably, as the literature review confirms. A major factor seems to be the Partition of India in which non-Muslims almost disappeared from the Punjab and gradually the birth-related songs of Hindu origin were discarded by the Muslims, though some rituals survived.

Five encyclopedias have been published by Institute of Folk Heritage, Islamabad, focusing on the cultural areas of four provinces and Gilgit-Baltistan.<sup>8</sup> These carry wealth of information about the folklore of

---

<sup>6</sup> Amy S. Choi, 'How Cultures around the World Think about Parenting, available at: <http://ideas.ted.com/how-cultures-around-the-world-think-about-parenting/>

<sup>7</sup> E.D. Maclagan and H.A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of Punjab and NWFP*, transl. by Yasir Jawad, *Punjab kay Rasm-o Riway ka Encyclopedia* (Lahore: Book Home, 2005). See pp. 52-78 for Muslim birth rites.

<sup>8</sup> Syed Muhammad Ali (ed.), *Pakistan ka Saqafati Encyclopedia Shumali Ilaqajaat Silsala Karakoram, Himalaya, Hindukush*, 2004, pp. 86-8, 238, 339-40; Inam ul Haq Kosar and Ali Kamil Qazalbash (eds.), *Pakistan ka*

cultural groups within Pakistan, and somewhat information is available in them on usual cultural practices and priorities regarding childbearing and childrearing among other details. These include old and new methods of caring, special feeding during pregnancy, celebrations on birth, religious rituals soon after birth, ritual purification of mother on 40<sup>th</sup> day after childbirth, visiting a *mazar*/saint for seeking blessing on such important occasions, and *aqiqa* ceremony involving slaughtering one or two goats along with first head shaving. Also mentioned is '*kongrian*' (boiled corn topped with sugar) distributed on childbirth, and special food namely '*kanchakan*' (sweet rice) distributed to children as thanks after a child recovers from sickness in Peshawar region.

Singing and dancing also become a part of celebration especially in connection with birth of sons. The Gujjars distribute charity called '*niari*' after child birth. These encyclopedias also mention use of certain herbs by women to ensure conception, or their vowing at saint's grave, or using some magical tricks (*taweez-totka*). Such tricks are also used for babies who have health problems, or ailments believed to be caused by supernatural reasons. Similarly there are mentioned cares taken for protection of fetus and mother from evil spirit, jinni, or evil eyes, such as magical/herbal smoke (called *dhooni*) and keeping knife below the pillow. Pregnant women are sometimes forbidden to go near a dead body or a place where it was kept lest spirits of the dead may overpower them. They also take special care at the time of moon and sun eclipses. For getting more breast milk, removing pain in breast, shaping soft skull bones into a preferred shape (flat or round), some tricks and methods are mentioned. Further detail is also provided about weaning and cure using traditional ingredients from kitchen or folk medicine procedures.

A book by Razzaqi (1965)<sup>9</sup> presents a collection of customs and rituals of childbirth and childhood of nine major ethnic groups of Pakistan. Though such customs still linger on in traditional families, but certain superstitions and special foods have been abandoned. Although an old book, yet it contains good deal of information on cultural diversity

---

*Saqafati Encyclopedia Balochistan*, 2008, pp. 143-50, 272-3, 320-24; Syed Asim Mahmood and Aamir Hameed (compl.) *Pakistan ka Saqafati Encyclopedia Sindh*, 2014, pp. 71-2, 147-55; Yasir Jawad and Aamir Hameed (compl.), *Pakistan ka Saqafati Encyclopedia Punjab*, 2012, pp. 123, 185; and Syed Muhammad Ali (ed.), *Pakistan ka Saqafati Encyclopedia Sarhad*, 2007, pp. 91-2, 163-6, 407-10, all published jointly by Lok Virsa, Islamabad and Al-Faisal Nashran, Lahore.

<sup>9</sup> Shahid Hussain Razzaqi, *Pakistani Musalmanon kay Rasoom-o Riwaaj* (Lahore: Idara-e Saqafat-e Islamiya, 1965).

in Pakistan. There are some more books on culture, society and history, mentioning the customs and practices of individual cultural groups, such as the one by Bray<sup>10</sup>, Marri, and Abdul Haq. Marri<sup>11</sup> has explained how much a daughter is unwanted in a Baloch society, and relates a ritual to ensure birth of a son, then he gives the lullabies, prayers and curse showered on newborn daughter. No wonder, the Baloch tribes still have not forgotten the practice of burying women alive. Big sound of shooting announces birth of their son. Magical and superstition-oriented acts to safeguard against evil are rarely performed for daughters. Anyhow the females' names indicate some positive wishes, since they are found prefixed or suffixed by words like: *Gul* (flower), *Lal* (red), *Bakht* (fortune), *Mehr* (love), *Ganj* (treasure), *Jan* (life), *Noor* (light), *Zar* (money), even the words like *Hayat*, meaning 'life'. Abdul Haq explains the concepts and rituals in Thal desert of central Punjab. The daughters are wished well by saying 'May God keep you forever *suhagan* (happy with living husband)'; 'May God bless you with seven sons'. If a son is born, colours are sprinkled on fathers' clothes and big feast is arranged.<sup>12</sup> About Sindhi culture, an old book (1<sup>st</sup> print 1959) by Thakur<sup>13</sup> explains the rituals related to conception, fertility, childbirth, discrimination to daughters, naming, taboos, head shaving, and entering into religious community. Interestingly, the names and philosophy of such rituals of Hindus have lot common with that of Muslims.

According to Lisette Austin,<sup>14</sup> the importance of rituals and ceremonies is to highlight and consolidate one's connections with community, heritage and culture. These make people authentic and indicate their origin. These are the ways of announcing inclusion of the child into a clan, tribe or community. For families with multicultural background choosing from either culture becomes inevitable. A book by Mufti<sup>15</sup> explains the value of folklore in understanding the ethos of a culture. Mufti holds that Pakistan is a crossing point of multiple cultures, nationalities, beliefs and ideas. Its multiplex disposition has been

<sup>10</sup> Denys Bray, *Life History of a Brahui* (London: Royal Asiatic Society 1913, Reprinted 1977, Karachi: Royal Book Co.), translated as *Brahui Rasoom*.

<sup>11</sup> Shah Muhammad Marri, *Baloch Samaj main Aurat ka Maqam* (Quetta: Sangat Academy of Sciences, 2005), pp.15-42, 145-52.

<sup>12</sup> Mehr Abdul Haq, *Thal* (Islamabad: Lok Virsa, n.d.), pp.115-18.

<sup>13</sup> U.T. Thakur, *Sindhi Culture* (Delhi: Sindhi Academy, 1959, Reprinted 1977), pp.164-73.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.parentmap.com/article/welcoming-baby-birth-rituals-provide-children-with-sense-of-community-culture>

<sup>15</sup> Uxi Mufti, *Pakistani Saqafat* (Lahore: Al-Faisal Nashran, 2014).

cultivating this diversity since centuries, and till this day, diversity sees no threat of extinction. It needs not to be preserved, for it is growing day by day due to its internal vitality, which is reinvigorating our lifestyles, values, intellectual development and above all social development. The living reality has made Pakistan a living kaleidoscope of great interest.

This paper has a special objective to highlight and contribute to the folklore studies in Pakistan, a neglected field of research. As folklore is a product of the 'commoners', unsophisticated plain people, hence it does not catch as much attention as the high culture enjoys. Folklore encompasses creative and symbolic output of the cultural beings and the activities which they learn during informal performing and participating in cultural life, and which are usually learnt orally. Folklore can be defined as: a set of 'common orally transmitted traditions, myths, festivals, songs, superstitions, and stories of all peoples'. Whatever survives of the folklore is essentially what could retain functional value. It also has historical, ethnological and sociological components,<sup>16</sup> which can be studied scientifically. Folklore is also meant as 'the entire body of oral literature, dance, music, sayings, and folk beliefs'.<sup>17</sup> At its heart lie the tested and preferred ways of performing the most basic and essential life functions, such as childrearing, and lullabies, too. It refers to the cultural complex around childbearing and motherhood, which is enmeshed in superstitions, supernatural assumptions, and practices to remove evil effects. To treat the topic of childrearing in folklore studies is therefore justified, as folklore provides a blueprint for all basic functions of folk life, defines their cultural significance, and, therefore, embodies the cultural ethos expressed in words, actions and preferences.

### **Childrearing as a cultural activity**

This paper deals with how culturally diverse practices evolve over time and are endeared by groups, big and small; indicating their worldviews, methods of solving life problems, and approaches to make their life meaningful and enjoyable. In its very nature the subject is related to the cultural, religious, psychological, historical, economic, demographic, and anthropological aspects of the cultural groups coexisting in Pakistan. Interestingly, there are observed ethnocentric as well as pluralist attitudes in this aspect. People generally do not feel threatened or

---

<sup>16</sup> Charles Winick, *Dictionary of Anthropology* (Ames: Iowa: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1958), p.217.

<sup>17</sup> Melville Jacobs and Bernhard J. Stern, *General Anthropology* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1955), p.309.

estranged due to this variety because raising one's own child is largely in the control of one's family, so there can be just difference of opinion, but not any serious reason of conflict among the people. If one group packs its infants tightly to keep their limbs straight, it may sound strange or cruel to others, yet no reason to be afraid. However, other aspects of cultural diversity, expressed by the group in many ways, have links with the group's identity, pride, struggle for equal rights and relinquishing discrimination, etc.

The subject of childrearing is multidimensional. It has links with the value of children, parent-child relations, notions of ideal family size, survival rate of children, status of women in family, and willingness to use contraception. Moreover it is also determined by the notion and level of marital satisfaction and marital adjustment, planned parenting, child spacing, son preference, joint conjugal role relationship, place of family in the socioeconomic hierarchy, and patriarchal or otherwise control on children. The connection between childrearing and personality-building is crucial. With time the patterns of childrearing have been changing.<sup>18</sup>

This paper is based on a survey conducted with 18 ethnic groups having different customs, rituals, notions and practices regarding childrearing, a seminal activity of the human society and survival.

## Objectives

The study aims at discovering the rich diversity of cultural practices observed by various ethnic groups in Pakistan. A culture encompasses the whole life-cycle, but only the aspect of childrearing is selected here. One main point to investigate in this study is: whether there is growing any commonality among the diverse groups under the influence of globalization which is reflected in outlook and consumption patterns related to childbearing and childrearing. To this aim, the study is designed to elicit change between the views of old and new generation mothers to see how modern day environment has affected their concepts and practices.

Childrearing starts from childbearing, which in turn is affected by the notions of motherhood, desirability of children, precautions during pregnancy, effects of supernatural forces on the newborn and mother. Feeding, weaning and provision of toys are important aspects of child-raising. The practices indicated by rituals and customs associated with childbirth and infancy are also indicative of the notions which are deep-

---

<sup>18</sup> Gerald R. Leslie, *Family in Social Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, 4<sup>th</sup> edn.), pp.482-91.

rooted in culture, superstitions and religious framework of the observing people. With modern education and knowledge of health and hygiene, these notions, values and practices are bound to be affected. This aspect will also be elaborated in the analysis of this study.

### **Methodology**

The study is based on a survey and interviews with informants who had good knowledge about the cultural practices of their groups. Personal experiences and observation of the author is also fairly relevant to judge the authenticity of data.

### **The Universe: Pakistan**

Pakistan, being the sixth largest populous nation holds large variety of ethnicities, which are mostly concentrated in geographical regions, not necessarily matching with the provincial boundaries, which were drawn for administrative purpose. The dominant linguistic groups of the regions later were taken as representing the region, whereas the diversity is much richer, deeper and more enduring than the arbitrary political divisions. The ethnic groups have been showing varied levels of physical and social mobility, depending upon their economic, political and cultural conditions, thus the Pakhtuns have been moving within Pakistan perhaps more than any other group. Punjabis are also adventurous enough to seek greener pastures like the Pakhtuns, hence exposure to other ethnic groups and residing with them must have caused adoption or variation in cultural practices as well. Cities in Pakistan have been a centre of ethnic diversity; Karachi being at the top of the list. At least eight major ethnic groups are identified in Pakistan, while further variation is found in small groups. Balochs are a big group found largely in Balochistan, as well as scattered in Sindh province. Brahvi are a linguistic group concentrated in a particular region in Balochistan. Pakhtuns are concentrated in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, in the upper part of Balochistan, and scattered all over the country. The region previously called Northern Areas, now named as Gilgit-Baltistan, has a variety of ethnic groups who speak Broshiski, Shina and Balti languages. They belong to different sectarian denominations of Islam—Sunni, Shia, Khoja Ismaili and Aga Khanis. In Pakistan two major sects of Islam—Sunni and Shia—are found; the latter estimated as being 20 per cent of the total population.

Punjabis are found in the upper Punjab in a large number, and in small number in Karachi city and all other parts of the country. Sindhis are concentrated in Sindh, its adjacent areas of Balochistan and in a very small number in other parts of Pakistan. A linguistic group of Siraikis is found in the central region of Pakistan and its area overlaps Punjab,



Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Siraikis are also found in other parts of Pakistan mostly they migrate due to economic reasons as their own region is resource-poor. Job related migration has brought people to other areas in a large number in the recent decades. An important group in this regard has been of people of northern areas, who come to southern areas in search of education, jobs and better prospects. A large group of them is found in Karachi. Kashmiris, though found largely in Azad Kashmir, live also in other parts of Pakistan due to historical and economic reasons. Two small communities, Gujaratis and Kachhis, originated from the Gujarat and Kathiawar area of India, are mostly found in Karachi as well as in other parts of Sindh province.

Ethnic origins are important regarding life-cycle rituals, customs and beliefs which shape and govern people's behaviour and outlook. The group calling itself Mohajir today, in fact comprises descendants of those who migrated from India at the time of Partition in 1947. The culture of different areas of India, therefore, is still reflected in this group. The communities of Bengalis and Biharis, mostly concentrated in Karachi, are also carriers of their own original cultures. Among some families of Bengalis, there are migrants who were born and raised in what is now Bangladesh, so they cannot even read Urdu, though have learnt a part of it, and cannot integrate with the mainstream population easily. Needless to say that under the circumstances of migration and changing economic opportunities, the cultural space available to an ethnic group determines alteration, innovation as well as rejection of old cultural notions and practices. Religion, no doubt, providing a large contingent of cultural activities, also undergoes change hence change can come inevitably in the core cultural practices as well. Education, media, and other sources of modernization contribute to this change in religious and cultural notions.

### **The survey and sample**

The survey was based on a multi-stage sampling. The first stage was to identify different ethnic groups living in rural and urban areas of Pakistan with researcher's own judgment. The second stage was to select a small sample again through judgmental method, from each group to represent the common beliefs, values, rituals and practices associated with childrearing. A small number, ranging from 3 to 20, was considered enough because within the group not much variety is found; generally the notions and practices are similar, anyhow further studies with bigger samples may reveal even finer shades of variety and richness. Mothers of all ages were included in the sample. Care was taken to select enough number of older mothers for comparison. In total 144 women were

interviewed with the help of a questionnaire, which was deemed necessary for collecting data from different parts of the country.

The study has taken a national sample, from all the four provinces, Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir. Since it has a particular focus upon cultural diversity, the sample taken from the cosmopolitan city of Karachi has been unique in its variety. In total 18 ethnic groups are studied.

The selection reveals largest sample from Sindh, for which the urban-rural proportion has been of 57:7. The rural sample being exclusively Sindhi or Siraiki, while in the urban included Balochis, Sindhis, Bengalis, Gujarati, Kachhis, and Urdu speaking (Biharis, Mohajir as a composite group, and Urdu speaking Shias and Khoja Ismailis, to represent their particular religious content of rituals and beliefs in childhood-related aspects of life). On the whole a big sample was taken from Sindh (44.4%) due to high ethnic diversity, followed by Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (20%), Punjab (13.9%), Balochistan (17.4%), Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan (7.6%). The sectarian representation was ensured through taking a sample of 17 respondents of Shias/Ismaili/Aga Khani sects which are major subdivisions, though in detail there are found further denominations. Non-Muslims are not included in the study. The author collected qualitative data by discussing the details of cultural practices and customs with well-informed persons, at least one in each of the selected ethnic groups. This was to know the details which are mostly camouflaged in the survey data and the hidden perceptions and beliefs which can also be elicited through this.

### **Findings of Survey**

The sample mothers belonged to both rural and urban areas of Pakistan. Their educational qualification varied; as there were 28.5 per cent illiterate, 2.1 per cent Quran literate, 2.1 percent literate below primary, 12.5 per cent primary, 8.3 per cent middle, 15.3 per cent matric, 12.5 per cent intermediate, 6.3 per cent graduate, and the rest as master or professional. Their age distribution shows 59.7 per cent as of 18-40 years and 40.3 per cent above 40 years of age, the oldest being 75. Majority (78.5 per cent) of the women were housewives, as the ratio of women involved in economic activities outside homes is in general very low and it is found even lower in the sample due to the inclusion of older women in particular. There were 31 out of 144 (i.e. 21.5%) women in earning. There were 132 married (91.7%), 5 (3.5%) widowed and 1 (0.7%) divorced women in the sample. The number of children also varied. Due to inclusion of young mothers in the sample and adoption of contraception rising with time in the society, the number of mothers with

1-2 children was the highest (34%), followed by those having 3-4 children (32 %), followed by 5-6 (20%), 7-8 (7%), and 9-10 (4%). The rest had no children any more. None had above ten children. This number clearly shows a decline with the age of mother; those of above fifty ages had the highest number. The ages of children are also a good indicator for their practice of spacing and son/daughter preference.

According to the income level, the sample families were relatively concentrated in the lower and middle income brackets; as there were 58 (41%) with monthly reported income below 20,000, another 30 per cent or so had the income level of lower middle class, having income between 21,000 to 50,000 (45%) and the rest fell in higher income category, up to 400,000 per month. On the other extreme one respondent had no family income.

Regarding the value of children there was an overwhelming response (83%) in favour of 'very high value'; no one called the children totally worthless. This confirms a 'pro-natalist' character of Pakistani society. Regarding importance of sons or daughters, a changing trend is observed, with 54 per cent in favour of sons, 15 per cent in favour of girls, and 31 per cent in favour of 'both equally good and desirable'. This shows a decline in son-preference and it is surprising that illiterate poor class women are declaring girls as more wanted than boys mainly due to their earning role. The reasons in favour of boys are traditional, well-known; such as his being a bread-winner, support in old-age of parents, source of continuing the name of family in genealogy and family tree, etc. These qualities are believed not to be found in girls, since they leave parents' house; they are 'others' property'; an obligation to be raised and given away in marriage, etc. Such traditional thinking is very much contrasted by those who called girls as desirable as they find daughters more caring, supporting and close to heart of parents, especially the mothers. Here a worth-noting point is that the sample included women only; had it included men as well, then one could have compared the views about value of daughter or son in total.

Coming to the child-bearing aspect, a good hospital is preferred by majority (73 %) of women, maternity clinic by 9 per cent and a trained birth attendant (TBA) by 22 per cent. The women preferring TBAs are those who had delivered their babies at home, were mostly poor, lived in rural areas, or who said it was shameful to go to hospital.

Regarding feeding, mother's milk is mostly favoured; none said it is not to be given. As alternate food milk of cow, buffalo or goat is preferred in reverse order. There is a fear about all such milk to make the baby ill; however, fresh milk is more favoured (55%) than the powdered canned milk (35.4%). Only one respondent said she preferred liquid

sterilized packed milk, while 17 (12%) rejected the idea of giving any milk other than breast feed. The preferred length of breast-feeding was two years for majority of the mothers, who took it as a divine command to follow, whereas some said it was baby's right, was good for health and building immunity. An interesting aspect is that of variation for overall and minimum length of breastfeeding and its difference for boys and girls. There were some mothers flexibly relying on baby's choice, or 'when the baby starts eating', or the onset of new pregnancy. The concept of *Shariah* (Islamic prescribed way) about length of breastfeeding was also not uniform; it varied across the sects and within the sect as well, due to overlapping of cultural notions. For instance one woman said: 'It is *haram* (prohibited, highly detestable) to continue breastfeed beyond two years', others said, 'it must be minimum 2.5 years, or even 1.5 years'. Whereas the Quranic verse does not discriminate about boy or girl and makes it obligatory for mother to continue breastfeeding for two years, the women of Shia sect categorically called it 1.75 years for girl and 2.25 years for boy.

A common notion about longer breastfeeding duration for girls (2.5) than boys (2 years) also prevailed among some women of Punjab. For both boys and girls 3 years was also reported. All such variations show that despite one clear verse of the Quran, its multiple interpretations, sectarian difference, son- or daughter-preference and an admixture of cultural notions is inevitably found in these beliefs and practices. The divine words, however, do not make any discrimination. Whatever people practice, take it as *Shariah*, without bothering to look into the details.

About child-spacing, women's views also differed but largely they declared three years of spacing as the best (52%), followed by 2 years (21%). A very small number preferred a gap of 2.5 (2.7%), four years (11%) and 5 years (10.4%). With gradually growing use of contraception, the beliefs and practices about spacing seem to be coming closer.

There are diverse cultural notions about the first-ever food for the newborn. It is largely the breastfeed (40%), followed by honey (28%), or honey mixed with other things like *gur* (brown sugar lump), rose-water, *desi-ghee* (purified butter-oil), warm water, date, milk, and *gotlai*. Other foods include *arq-e-shireen*, *gur* only, *gur* and *desi-ghee*, *gur* and milk-tea, *gur* and *ajwaine* (a herb), *ajwain* tea, *misri* (sugar crystal), *ghutti* made by hakeem, Hamdard brand *ghutti* (available in

packing). The Shia families have a tradition of feeding *Khak-e-Shifa*<sup>19</sup> with honey and date. Feeding honey is a very popular ritual among all ethnic groups. All such foods were considered necessary as the baby cannot get sufficient breastfeed for the initial three days.

Weaning was preferred to be started mostly by 6 months, followed by 4 month, 8 months or rarely five, three, or seven months. Some (only 4 mothers) believed it can start after one or two or three years. The practice involved a large variety of food under various notions about baby's need. It has to be a soft, easily digestible food. The highest score was for cereal, then *kitchhri* (lentil+rice), Nestle brand Cerelac, followed by banana, *suji ka halwa*, boiled potato, boiled rice, egg, and *sagodana*. Foods prepared especially for weaning are diverse; it is *churi* in Punjab made of *desi-ghee* bread and sugar, *hareera* (desi-ghee mixed with sweet oily meshed bread), *sharbat* (drink) of dry-fruit in the Gilgit-Baltistan region, and most common items of *kheer*, soup, custard, etc. The baby is given bones to lick on, meshed vegetable, biscuits, etc. Such variety shows that mothers prepare traditional food, use ready-made bazaar food, or rely on natural fruit, or adopt the adult food with little variation for the baby.

For bottle milk water from the tap/well/hand-pump after boiling is preferred (60%), or mineral water (9%), and normal water without boiling (5.5%). A very small number (5 out of 144) said they did not give bottle, while 8 respondents told they did not take water from other sources. Rarely was it a bottle, as the baby was trained to take the cup. Children are allowed bottle-feeding usually up to two years. However, responses in favour of '4 or 5 years' or 'until the baby wants' were also received, showing less restrictive attitude. Mothers thought that the baby would stay hungry otherwise. In certain other cases, the respondents gave it as an advice to leave bottle and force or train the baby for using cup and eating normal food. A small number of mothers (9) had clearly stated that bottle is harmful so it was not used; it is inevitable for those babies whose mothers either cannot feed due to any reason or they are working and have to leave the baby at home for long duration.

Nursing mothers are advised to eat a variety of food to enhance milk-production and their health. The items in descending order include milk and dairy products, fruit and vegetable, protein diets. On the whole they are advised to eat nutritious food, have full diet, more fluid, juices, multi-vitamins, etc. The cultural variety also reflects in it. The areas where dry fruits are grown in abundance, advise using them, too. In the

---

<sup>19</sup> It is believed to bring health and protection to the baby, as it is holy dust.

agricultural areas mothers are advised eating food containing sesame seed, *desi-ghee*, local fruit, *pinjiri*, *nishasta*, *achhwani*, *makhanay*, *bateesa*, etc. Mostly oil, sugar and flour are taken in excessive amount to ensure health. Branded supplementary formula for mothers is the latest addition to the list. The traditional foods are regularly advised despite doctor's warning against their bad effect. Certain foods (hard stuff, grams, corn, citric fruit, etc.) are forbidden for lactating women lest the baby get some trouble in stomach.

The methods to save baby from wet clothing have been varying with time. The most common and popular method has now emerged as use of pampers (46%), which is used by mothers for the sake of safety, hassle of changing bedding every now and then. But still it is a costly item, and those who cannot afford its extensive use try alternate home-made napkins, etc. (11%). Early toilet-training was advised by those who cannot afford pampers, otherwise it was taken easy. The methods reported by old-generation mothers (using plastic/rubber sheet, absorbent cloth-pads, multi-layered bedding, changing pants/bedding frequently, are also reported in large number. Some old methods used in winters were of keeping a bowl nearby, using chaff or sand to be thrown in the morning. The poorest method of drying such clothes in the sun without washing has been still reported by poor women of certain remote rural areas. Pampers, though costly, are used by some mothers at night time only. Working mothers are also found adopting modern convenient practice of pampers more than the non-working mothers. The respondents have, however, commented that mothers can guess about baby's need before time, and mothers should not show laziness in this matter. A Pushto-speaking rural woman of older age reported that: 'There was no such practice of cleaning children or packing them. The baby used to lie down unattended very often on the cot without any sheet on it'. This shows the casual nature of childcare a generation ago among certain groups or families.

The concept of useful or desirable toys for children varies immensely, as the babies can demand anything from the shop, whereas it is the parent's prerogative to select the right one for baby's age and need. A good deal of comments has been received about toys which are desirable or otherwise for children. The long list of desirable toys characterize them as toys which are educational, instructive, colorful, helping build motor skills and identify colours. Good toys can be noisy, re-assemblable, washable, aesthetical, and appealing. Cloth, wood and rubber are favorite material of toys. Plastic is liked by some and disliked by others, since it is of two types: hard and soft; only the latter is liked. Toys which can pinch, injure, terrify, choke, strangle, teach

violence/war, have rays/bright lights, give blasting sound, or work with batteries, are not liked. Material like glass, iron, or even stuffed are not liked by some. Toys with small parts are not acceptable for certain ages. The most frequently mentioned item is gun, bullet-spraying gun, and any weapon like sword, knife, as mothers think these nurture violent tendencies among children. Video games, bats, small glass balls, even bicycles and balloons are thought harmful. Human shape dolls or animal models are not liked, since these are considered as idols, and playing with them would mean playing with idols. Rubber-toys to chew at the teething stage are favoured. Coins and video games are not approved. Some old women called for clay toys which, they thought, were harmless. There have been revealing comments, too, such as: 'It can be anything, if the baby is pleased by it, it is okay'. The child should not cry, no matter if he is asking for a gun'. However, costly toys are also not worth purchasing by one respondent. Gender difference also echoed in responses when a few women mentioned their preference of 'dolls and crockery for the girls and cars for the boys', anyhow it seems a rare case only.

Further analysis showed that average score on modern practices<sup>20</sup> varied with ethnic group as well. The score of Pushto-speaking older mothers (of 40+ years) was 3.4 as compared with 5.7 of younger women (of 18-40 years). The score for the Punjabi women was 2.5 (older) and 6.2 (younger). Baloch women showed 6.5 for younger and 4.2 score for older. The same is 4.9 and 4.4 for young and older women respectively for the Sindhis.

### **Customs and superstitions**

Since children are important, they have to be saved from all visible and invisible dangers. From the time immemorial, humans have been applying certain methods for ensuring safety of unborn and newborn babies. This section deals with such practices related to both the mother and newborns. There are three types of dangers: evil spirits, jealous eye and illness. Children are saved from evil eye by casting-off ritual (*nazar utarna*) through *mirchi in pan* method. This is almost common in the subcontinent. Seven chilies, dried but not ground, are put in beetle

---

<sup>20</sup> This was counted on the responses of women favouring modern beliefs and practices; such as daughter-preference, preferring good hospital for delivery, notions about mother's feed as the best food and length of breastfeeding, use of boiled/mineral water in feeding bottle, pampers, cleaning the feeder and notion of child-spacing.

leaves, salt may also be added, then this packet is circled over the child's head seven times, while reciting some prayers, or without it, then this is put into the fire. The practice is found with little variation in other groups as well. Chili powder, added with salt, and dust from the home-door is taken in a paper and circled. Some more rituals are reported by the Urdu-speaking mothers, such as taking a thread seven times longer than child's height and reciting holy verses on it to burn it later on. Bengali women, like most other ethnic groups, recite Islamic prayers and Quranic verses to keep children safe from the spell of jinni, spirits, etc. Head-shaving of the newborn is usually performed on the fifth day by the Bengalis, sixth day by certain groups of Mohajirs, and even later day by certain other smaller ethnic groups. The hair thus coming off are not disposed carelessly but wrapped and thrown in clean running water of a stream, or sea; the practice is dwindling. *Aqeeqa*, as an Islamic ritual, is only observed if the family could afford it. Both, parents or the grandparents, or near uncles or aunts name the new born. Birthdays and Bismillah are rare, while Aameen at *Khatm-e Quran* is an occasion of distributing sweets and giving clothes to the Quran teacher. Relatives are called to pray and have feast. No specific rituals on appearance of first teeth or taking first step are reported among the Bengalis while it is common among the Punjabis. The only celebration worth-noting related to childhood is that of circumcision of boys which is performed at home or hospital, in both cases sweet is distributed. When the wound is healed up, then on some days the relatives gather to celebrate and have feast. Engagement in childhood is not in practice. Toys cannot be purchased in abundance as to make one think of their futility or bad effect; however, guns and fire-crackers type items are discouraged.

The inter-generational comparison of mothers shows that it is mostly the younger generation mothers observing more of the modern practices whereas it is the exposure and health-consciousness of the women, old or young, which affects the level of traditional or modern childrearing practices. The financial resources determine what level of celebration would be held. It also varies from child to child, and time to time. In a family, first birthday of first daughter was celebrated but no other child was later considered for it.

### **Customs of birth, infancy and childhood**

The people of culture observe customs at every stage of life, and they have their reasons to do so. Some customs are universal due to religious reason, while others are culture-specific, followed variably, depending upon the economic status, social pressure, own choice, or fear of unforeseen in case of non-compliance. These are meant to invite good



fortune, impress others by extravaganza, or to show own level of religiosity, etc. The force of customs is fairly strong as it is thought obligatory for the family to perform them for welcoming and protecting the baby.

The survey findings reveal the following details:

1. *Shaving head*: Though all Muslim babies' head is shaved, but rituals, customs and celebrations are performed by 91 per cent people; the missing 9 per cent reported un-affordability. Girls are generally less celebrated, so less spending is made on this occasion as compared to a boy's head-shaving.
2. *Aqeeqa* or *Chhati*: This custom is reported as an Islamic one. The slaughtering of two goats for a son and one goat for a daughter is also reported as Islamic. People generally observe this difference. A goat is not a must; bulls are also reported to be slaughtered if needed to feast the family in case a son is born. Interestingly, the difference of he-goat for boy and she-goat for girl is occasionally maintained. Some families cut goats at the same time the head is shaved to cast-off any evil or sickening influence. The meat is distributed among the poor, and cooked for the family and relatives as well. The poor know the custom but cannot observe it. Many families perform it only for the boys. The same can be done at any time in life before marriage of both boy and girl. *Chhati* is a ritual of same nature, named differently, if performed on the sixth day. The Bengali community observes it on the fifth day.
3. *Male circumcision*: Undoubtedly, this is a Muslim custom, necessary to make the boy Muslim. Normally it is performed in early childhood, in infancy or even in the first week, depending upon health of the baby or willingness of the family. Sometimes, fewer resources to celebrate it cause its delay. Only 4 per cent women reported that they do not celebrate it; the reason being poverty, otherwise most other poor women had at least distributed some sweet.
4. *Birthdays, Bismillah and Aameen*: These are not universally celebrated.
5. *Rituals related to first step and first tooth of baby*: These are also not observed universally.

Questions about starting training of *Salat* (Muslim prayer) revealed some answers 'as early as three or four years', and the time to force the child to pray regularly was mostly 'as early as 10' in most of the cases, as these are usual prescribed ages in Islam. However the reality of observing this much 'compulsion' is otherwise. Parents do show concern about it, but 'forcing' is rare.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The foremost point to discuss is the concept and actions of celebrations, which have to be understood in real sense. The celebration can range from distributing peanuts or even cheaper ‘*murmara*’ (sugar-coated boiled rice-flake cake) to a grand feast. The responses need to be read with care. Along with urbanization and modernization certain customs are changing shape. Now the celebration aspect is overpowering the religious or superstitious considerations. Educated mothers go more for scientific advice from professionals than pseudo-religious sources (*pir*, book of *totkas* (traditional tricks), prayers or following nanny’s advices. No doubt the trend of spending on celebrations is rising in the recent decades thanks to commercially prepared items and solutions. This depends on the financial position of the family, anyway. Those at the bottom of social hierarchy prefer continuing breastfeeding till three or four years; no discipline followed in feeding, weaning, even cleaning the bottle or the bedding. Simple tap water is usually used and weaning items are rarely prepared rather the baby is given soft food picked from the adults’ food.

Since there is a long list of customs of childhood, all of them are rarely observed for all the children and all the families. Mostly the first born or the first boy gets this chance. Childbirth is announced usually with sweets. The ‘sweet’ can be very cheap as well, depending upon the economic condition. Many families do not announce with sweets, and mostly the birth of girls, even the first born goes un-noticed. The proof is shown in less preference for girls, mentioned above. Due to poverty, large families, and unwanted children, celebration around birth is not so common. If a family says that it celebrates childbirth, it may actually be referring to one or two such events, even that of their relatives, or merely the desire to ‘celebrate’. Due to the general concept of modesty, people do not commonly refer to ‘circumcision’, but call it ‘*sunnat*’ (deed of the prophet), and in urban areas it is not even talked about except among very near relatives. Therefore, the reality is that if there is any celebration about male child, it is usually referred to by rural folk and celebrated as such; the urban people do celebrate *aqeeqa*, which is also a *sunnat*. These events are confined to near relatives only, and with time, any social pressure for celebration is vanished. The modern day hospitals, clinics and trained persons usually perform circumcision in medical facilities and in this way the celebration is also disappearing. About four decades ago such celebrations were common as the traditional ‘surgeon’ (*jarrah*) used to come at home. Now people have generally realized the worth of a professional surgery, and if this is not available then home surgery is performed. With large scale migration,

scattering of joint families and rising cost of living, people usually avoid spending money on such events now. Instead certain other events like birthdays, *Aameen*, *Milad*, *Eid* and *Moharram* are really ‘celebrated’ publicly, with religious fervor and in certain cases just for ‘demonstration’. The most expensive event of a person’s life is definitely his/her marriage; cost of its celebration is also rising. All the life-cycle celebrations have now got an added color due to availability of ready-made items, such as those of decoration, candles, gift-packs, etc., along with clothes, food and party-offers from the commercial venues and restaurants. Birthdays have no doubt become more colorful and enjoyable. Religious colour is also being added to secular celebrations such as the birthday.

Childhood engagement has been common among certain groups, mostly Balochs and Sindhis, and the practice is on, though it seems to be dwindling. It was reported by 22 per cent women that their families had this tradition. The reasons reported include: to book good boys or girls before someone else comes in the picture; to keep children in control and their feelings bound; to strengthen family ties in future, to save girls from unknown people, to continue the practice of exchange marriage—to manage two-way system of give and take, etc. The ethnic groups who follow this practice have their logic about its utility.

About the degree of social and cultural diversity found in the data, the observation by Qadeer holds true that: ‘Undoubtedly, there are common values and themes that permeate through all segments of society, but the forms in which they are expressed vary by ethnicity, caste, class, and geography’.<sup>21</sup> By a comparison with the practices, customs and rituals of childbirth and childrearing of fifty years ago, one finds rather a simplification and disappearing of many of the rituals, however the festivity, locale and style have undergone change. Though all the customs were not observed universally even before, but now they are fading among the well-off and cultured families of yore. This is so because people now seek fun and recreation in other innovative ways. Some old and home-made items used in rituals are replaced by commercially produced items which are more attractive, for example golden or silver cover basket to send fruits or sweets, paper decorations, caps, or celebration torches. Many superstition-oriented actions are now extinct, or found among very traditional families, such as leaving a small bunch of hair at the time of first shaving and then donating it to some

---

<sup>21</sup> Mohammad Abdul Qadeer, *Pakistan, Social and Cultural Transformations in a Muslim Nation* (London: Routledge, 2007), p.220.

*mazar* or *pir* after certain time, for which safety of the child is expected from the vow made at the birth. This was usual with the male children only. Such changes can be attributed to the spread of education, exposure to modern world through media, work-related migration to the Middle East, education of women, and role of the government policies in promoting new cultural trends. The cultural diversity is now disappearing slowly, for the globalizing cultural trends are commonly being adopted by all ethnic groups thus globalization produces cultural commonality.

Since cultural practices are the 'basic procedures and tools to respond to emerging needs in life',<sup>22</sup> commonality and differences among various subcultures of Pakistan indicate their fluidity in the face of change. The observance of traditional cultural practices, customs and rituals related to pregnancy, childbirth and infancy are highly class-specific. These can be called depending on the location of a family or group on the 'social and cultural hierarchy' of the society. One can expect very confidently that these aspects of life-cycle celebration and childrearing are heading towards a universal global culture, slow and steady and the local cultural diversity is fading.

\*\*\*\*\*

The author acknowledges the assistance provided by the volunteers and field investigators in collecting data from far and wide areas of Pakistan.

---

<sup>22</sup> B.B. Whiting (ed.), *Six Cultures Studies of Child Rearing* (New York: John Wiley Sons, 1963), p.5.