

Gomti Bai revives baby by Placental Stimulation

In 1978 when I lived in Hoshangabad District of Madhya Pradesh, once I was called at night to a birth being handled by Gomtibai, a very old and experienced dai of the *basod*¹ community. Gomtibai was now nearly blind, with a tiny bird-bone frame. But for generations in this *kahar*² household all the babies had been born through her hands without mishap and the family had unshaken faith in her.

Entering the room I couldn't see much at all – there was only a small wick lamp on one side. Groping towards a sound of groaning my hands dropped at a point where I sensed a woman lying down. Behold, it was the dai herself with a stomach ache, taking a break! Then hearing some separate sounds I saw the birthing woman a short stretch away – reclining against her husband who held her from behind. Gomti got up and said the labour had already gone on for many hours. She said there was a problem and asked me to see for myself. Through the woman's belly between contractions my hands could feel only the baby's limbs. The back, it appeared, was turned inside – a position I knew as 'posterior lie', that could correct itself through a hard and slow process of labour so the head and body turns to the front and birth can be normal. But sometimes it doesn't correct...

Gomti said the waters had burst about an hour before and she had checked inside with her fingers. Now I checked myself and I found the cervix fully open. But instead of the top of the baby's head I felt its soft lips and nose – a 'face presentation'. I was alarmed. In such a case I had been taught that only caesarean section will save the baby and mother. Talking it over with Gomti, she conceded that something like that might be needed. After convincing the family members I took one of them along to arrange a vehicle to convey the woman about 90 kms away to the District Hospital at Hoshangabad. Meanwhile

Gomti stayed with the woman.

The vehicle was arranged in awhile. I was in my quarters getting ready myself when someone of the family came running from the village – the child had been born! A few minutes later, back in that room, the dim lamplight revealed a pale immobile baby stretched out and limp, with the placenta to one side still attached by the navel cord – the baby’s face swollen. Quietly the dai was asking a sister-in-law to bring *baaber*³. Taking small bunches of that dry rope-grass – blind as she was – she lit them from the lamp and arranged it all around, above and below the placenta. Then she took hold of the cord and gently pressed it in the direction of the baby. She turned and said to me, “Just watch.” She kept on doing that and in a few minutes there was some movement on the baby’s face and mouth – moments later some tiny peeping sounds, then regular breathing... After continuing the cord massage awhile more, she said, “You know, I just *pulled* him out!”

But not only had Gomtibai completed the difficult birth without a vaginal tear, she had also revived the apparently stillborn neonate by stimulating the placenta with heat. The recovery of the baby and mother was uneventful. I last met that child in 1995 when he was a hefty youth of 17 years.

¹ At the basement of caste hierarchy here, considered ‘unclean’, the *basods* are traditional bamboo weavers, caretakers of scavenger pigs, drum-beaters at weddings and funerals and their women are the village dais.

² A low but ‘clean’ caste, the *kahars* are traditionally river-flat cultivators and catch fish; in upper caste land-owning homes they do menial tasks – fill water, lay out and pick up bedding, clean food grains etc.

³ A dry grass (*baaber*) is made into strong rope but when old and broken is used as kindling to light a fire.