

Handling Childbirth with Dignity: An Ethnographic Enquiry into the Forgone World of Traditional Birth Attendants of Kerala, India

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Abstract

The traditional birth attendant known as vayatatti in Kerala played an important role in managing childbirth before the biomedical services gained popularity. This study relies on qualitative data generated using in-depth interviews of twenty-five Vayatattis identified through snowball sampling. The in-depth interactions with them helped in recreating the forgone world of vayatattis. The aim was to explore the conceptual understanding of normal childbirth and the methods/practices used by them to ensure a safe and dignified birthing experience. The findings show that vayatatti gave due consideration to the dignity of birthing women by considering childbirth as a natural event. The positive, humane and culture-specific elements of these traditional birth attendants if incorporated into the present childbirth practices in institutions will be beneficial as it will help to improve the quality of the entire process of childbirth and post-natal care.

Key Words: Traditional Birth Attendant, *Vayatatti*, Childbirth, Dignity, Kerala

Introduction

In India, women consider motherhood as an important experience since it represents such a life-defining status for most of them and childbirth is an important transition point (Fox & Worts 1999). In India, this natural, biological experience has become extremely medicalised and institutionalised; the role of obstetricians and other para-medical personnel is over-emphasised and the role of traditional midwives (who are addressed as *Dai*) is completely ruled out (Soman 2013). Earlier, as far as pregnancy and childbirth services are concerned traditional *Dais* played an important role. Starting from the 1800s onwards and continuing during the post-independent era, successive governments have gradually marginalised this age-old birthing tradition unilaterally, pointing at various aspects of its practice. Government programmes and schemes like

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