

Babies made-in-India - 1. Fertility & Contraception

For starters, a small overview of childbirth and culture(s) in India...



At the beginning, I felt a little guilty of bringing into the world one more Indian (1): they are already so many... And they breed like rabbits, I thought! But not so much actually! The rabbits have seriously been controlling themselves in the past two decades...

Think of this: Indian women had 2.5 children each in 2012 – which is far from the 4.5 children they had just 20 years ago! (2) In fact the current rate is getting dangerously close to the minimum rate of 2.1 children per woman below which, without immigration and after a gap of thirty years, the population begins to decline.

Moreover almost all Indians I know have decided to have only one child because they want to "provide the best" for him and it is damn expensive to raise a child, with the education fares and all.

So how have they managed to change the trend? To start with, Indians have a radical enough, although controversial (because not always chosen freely) method: sterilization. And they don't do things half way: 37% of married

women are sterilized (for 1% of men)! Sterilization represents thus more than two-thirds of contraceptive means – and only one out of two couples today use a child birth control method.

There is a real lack of information: only 15% of the Indians between 15 and 24 have received some kind of sexual education. Not surprising when you know that the conservative parties (like the one currently running the country, whose leader (the Prime Minister) ~~is incidentally not married~~ lives without a female companion) have banned it in some States seven years ago, because sexual education would "give ideas to the youth"!

Among the (relatively few) couples who use a method of contraception that is not sterilization, the pill is not popular at all, even in cities – so that when I mention the pill to friends, it is common that they don't know much about it. However, the i-pill is taking off quite fast; thanks to good marketing campaigns, girls swallow it as candy, ignoring (or choosing to ignore) its side effects.

(1) But in reality, technically, the baby is French since Indians do not recognize dual citizenship and a European passport has its charms... And he will have a PIO/OCI card, some sort of lifelong visa allowing him to buy and all.

(2) For reference, the French women have 2.0 children, the Chinese 1.7, the British and the American 1.9.

Sources: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN>; <http://www.theglobalmail.org/feature/what-happens-when-half-the-world-stops-making-babies/573/>; <http://www.geocurrents.info/population-geography/indias-plummeting-birthrate-a-television-induced-transformation/#xzz3Q1R1nOej>; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-29999883>; <http://www.icmr-cami-health.org/articles/presentations/Session2-Speaker2-SKSikdar.pdf>; <http://world.time.com/2013/07/10/world-population-focus-on-India-part-1-sex-education/>

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Babies made-in-India - 2. Abstinence

In order not to have children without using a birth control, there is also abstinence... Forced abstinence because sex before marriage is not allowed. Abstinence due to physical incompatibility of spouses who have not chosen each other. Or when woman are forced to marry stray dogs (cf [article](#))... The reasons are multiple.

To give an idea of the context, I would like to quote my Gynec and her theory on the benefits of episiotomy for Indian women [from middle and high class I presume].

My Gynec likes it very much, comparing Indian and Western people. For example, on the question of the weight (an obsession with her) she told me many times (every time I would climb on her weighing machine actually) that Indian women are genetically programmed to put on more weight than others. And since they think they should



"eat for two" the weight gain can go far... Like over fifty kilos for my landlady who simply doubled her weight during pregnancy!

To go back to our main topic, to pass time while she was quietly stitching my vagina, she gave me her theory on the elasticity of the organ in question depending on the species. According to her, Indian girls are virgin when they get married. They get pregnant during the first intercourse, or quite rapidly, then stop indulging in this sinful activity during the nine months of pregnancy. So when they give birth, they are almost in the same state than Virgin Mary. So it hurts! And so it is better to cut a bit to be sure that the baby comes through...

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Babies made-in-India - 3. Confinement



Let us go further with my doctor's assumptions (cf Babies made-in-India - 2) and consider the following scenario: an Indian girl is married by her parents and go live with her in-laws, to the delight of her mother-in-law who delegates (more or less kindly) the hardest chores to her (as her mother-in-law had done with her). At the age of 15, the young bride gets pregnant. Then she usually returns to her mother for the birth, where she would remain for several weeks, or even several months. Double advantage: 1. It is reassuring to have your mum not too far during this scary experience and 2. It saves the girl from her mother-in-law who could kill her by not relieving her from chores like breaking stones (or grinding grain, or looking for wood).

Then, according tradition (but it varies depending on regions, religions, castes, customs) the new mother remains confined for 40 days. What makes sense when we know that more than 3% of Indian babies do not survive the first 28 days (3). Disease, pollution, wild insects and beasts, evil spirits (not cool, evil spirits), it is recommended to keep the newborn inside instead of exposing him to such dangers... And like this, the relatives are also protected from the pollution of the mother and the infant, the process of birth being considered as extremely impure.

(3) According to a study by Unicef, 3.1% of Indian infants die before the 28th day (i.e., 15 times more than in France) and 4.4% before the first year – this rate was 8.8% in 1990, so imagine what it was hundreds of years when traditions emerged...



Sources: http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/health_workers/Indian-preg-prof.pdf . www.UNICEF.org/french/publications/files/SOWC2014_FR.pdf

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Babies made-in-India - 4. Naming



I was frequently asked, till the baby turned two months if we had already chosen his name!

Indeed, in India, the baby is named at the end of the safety period, generally 40 days. It gives time for the astrologer to find the name, or at least its first letter. Meanwhile, the baby is called baby, and evil spirits are kept at bay!

And if everything goes well, the family organizes at the end of the 40 days, a 'naming ceremony' during which the baby is introduced to the world and sweets are distributed to everybody they know (especially if it's a boy). It is usually on this occasion that *hijras* (cf my [posts](#) on the topic) come to claim their due, 'guarantee' that the evil eye will be kept at bay.

I was not too happy when the watchman let them, by the way better informed than the municipality, come up.

Some Indian local customs go even further by having the new mother observe complete bed rest (for example during the first 10 days in Kerala). During this period the new mums have nothing to do but get to know her baby and recover from this undeniably physical hardship. The idea seems good but hyperactive women might fear boredom...

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Babies made-in-India - 5. Versus French ways



Since there is nothing wrong in getting pampered, these customs of returning to the maternal fold, staying at home and keeping bed rest persist through the ages and social classes. Several times I have asked colleagues, newly elevated to the rank of fathers, if they were not too tired. And got the reply "no no, you know, my wife and baby are at my in-laws, they'll come back only after three months!".

New French mothers don't have this luxury of a 'safety period' (although apparently (according to Tracy Hogg) British ones do, for 40 days as well) and they soon have to do everything alone: cooking, cleaning, shopping, etc, in addition to taking care of the newborn. That is what I tried to explain to my Indian circle: being an independent businesswoman and daughter of an independent businesswoman, I was genetically programmed (except for medical complication) to get on my feet very fast. And on top of that, with the 'services' we avail in India, i.e. maids, home

delivery from shops and restaurants, it is even more manageable than in the West...

As for childbirth, fathers traditionally don't attend, as it was the case till the fifties in the West, where the necessity and benefits of the man's presence are still debated (but at least the choice is open). So in India, you usually have your mother or mother-in-law in the labor room...

After the delivery, help is generally required as some hospitals don't even serve food. So, my mother-in-law kindly offered to stay with us at night in the hospital (4)... As tradition has it, it was her role to get up at night when the baby would cry; not mine, nor her son's or the nurses'. To pass me the child for me to feed him. Well, to be precise, it was the role of my mother, who was with us but obviously not keen to sacrifice her sleep! My mother must have seemed quite irresponsible by spending more time dragging her counterpart to shopping sprees every day rather than squatting our hospital room! In fact she was doing her job as the mother of the Samurai, meaning she ensured that the three of us would get some privacy all three of us... (And 'Privacy', 'Intimacy' are definitely not Indian concepts, even though they were the key words of our birth plan!!).

The hospital that we had chosen was topnotch. Which means that not only did they serve food, but they also had a nutritionist and a lactation expert to help us in the transition. Also, by imposing strict visit timings they were 'pro-intimacy' (which is very innovative in India because normally, once the baby lands in the world, the whole

family comes visit. Imagine the chaos!). And a plethora of nurses was there to ensure we would not lack help and that our intimacy would not be too complete...

(4) In India, each patient has the right to have a relative sleeping over; hospital staff even looks at you like you are some kind of alien (a lonely alien (like most of the expats)) if you don't have anyone staying in your room. And I am convinced that this type of moral support helps healing.

02/10/2015

Babies made-in-India - 6. Medicalization of birth



70% of Indian babies are born at home, with the help of a midwife (*dai*). Paradoxically, the 'modern' hospitals (which rank from very bad to at par (or even better) than Western infrastructures) do not recognize this profession! As a result, my (British) midwife was often denied access to the delivery room, or Gynec would refuse to team up with her (in any case, the Gynec would remain the boss and not consult her).

Indians tend to blindly trust doctors. Therefore, the practice of episiotomy (a preventive cut of the vagina), while in sharp decline in the West (5), remains widespread. Most mothers don't even know that it is optional. Worse, most new mothers don't even know it is going to happen to her! And they can't be blamed: even my Gynec never mentioned episiotomy and it is thanks to my midwife that I got to know about it...

Moreover, Indian women are not well aware of anesthesia during childbirth. To the point that I couldn't find statistics, except a small [survey](#) which confirms my opinion. When I mentioned the epidural to friends and colleagues, they generally had never heard of it and were

unable to understand how to deliver a baby without feeling contractions – a valid question I must say, that I could answer only after having my baby!

Nowadays nearly half of the deliveries in India are acts of surgery (compared to 21% in France, 25% in England)... And as much in the countryside as in the cities.

Even more striking is the increase in scheduled C-sections (vs. medically necessary ones). The culprits? A bit everyone. For doctors it is more profitable (they charge more for surgical procedures), easier to fit in the agenda and (some claim it) less risky for the patient. A for women, it is often reimbursed by private insurances, perceived as less painful, easier to fit in the agenda (especially when they have Astral imperatives and want the baby to be born with an auspicious star configuration (I am not kidding!)) and (some believe so) less risky.

(5) In France, "the episiotomy rate has decreased from 71 to 45% between 1998 and 2010".

Sources: <http://www.midwiferytoday.com/articles/india.asp> ; http://www.liberation.fr/vous/2011/10/18/70-d-accouchements-avec-peridurale_768628 ; <http://www.who.int/healthsystems/topics/financing/healthreport/30C-sectioncosts.pdf> ; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/16/c-section-rates_n_5161162.html?ir=India ; <http://qz.com/326402/cesarean-births-in-india-are-skyrocketing-and-there-is-reason-to-be-very-worried/> ; http://www.cesarine.org/front/etat_des_lieux.php . <http://www.hscic.gov.uk/catalogue/PUB12744/nhs-mate-eng-2012-13-summ-repo-rep.pdf> ; http://www.Liberation.fr/vous/2011/10/18/70-d-accouchements-avec-peridurale_768628

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Babies made-in-India - 7. The swaddle and the diaper



Another tradition going on strong is swaddling infants. The benefits are the creation of a sense of security for the baby (it reminds him the uterus), and comfort as it helps him control the reflex-movements that can bother him. For the mother, it's more convenient to carry the kid, a small quiet package. As a result, in India, infants are swaddled most of the time up to three months. On top of above mentioned advantages, it is also believed that it will enable the legs to grow straight. And the hip problems that can be created are royally ignored.

Since swaddling can indeed

be reassuring and appeasing for some infants, you can choose an intermediate solution, like swaddling the baby only during sleep time – it is also interesting to know that this practice after being out-of-fashion in the past decades in the West is now doing its come-back (6).

If you decide to leave the baby legs free when he is not sleeping, then you must be ready, when you enter a hotel carrying your newborn 'monkey-style' to face the outraged looks of doormen, or even their comments: "you should not wear him like that! Poor thing! His legs!!". Or to bear with the salesguy of Benetton who is likely to get offended and say so out loud, repeatedly, because you should not use a carrier during the first six months...



To get back to the topic of swaddling, I imagine that this practice goes hand in hand with the use of the Indian cotton nappy. Which is like a piece of cloth with a thread that you fill with other pieces of cloth. The advantages of this diaper is that it is softer for the butt of the child, cheaper and more eco-friendly (but I am not so sure because you need to do a lot of washing), and the child gets potty-trained faster since he quickly gets tired of having his ass wet all the time. Well, I tried several times at the hospital but I can't help it, I don't understand how poop and pee don't spread everywhere on the child and about everywhere else! Maybe it works better if the baby is kept tightly wrapped (hence moving less)?

Anyway, the only cheap and eco-friendly solution is to leave the baby barebutt... A solution still preferred in the countryside where kids are left very early to deal with themselves or at the signal where babies make people feel bad and more inclined to depart with a coin (hence some business of baby trafficking, cf this [post](#))...

(6) "Nine out of 10 infants in north America are now swaddled in the first six months of life. Sales of swaddling clothes increased in the UK by 61% between 2010 and 2011." (Source: <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/oct/28/swaddling-babies-blankets-hip-problems-doctors-warn>)

02/14/2015

Babies made-in-India - 8. Massage, bath & Breastfeeding



Once back home, almost everywhere in India, professionals called *maalishwali* come home to give massage and bath to mothers and infants.

And this technique is somehow spreading in the West, with an interesting twist: the parents massage the baby themselves. It is a good to create a bond, while developing the motor skills of the child. The problem with this 'twist' is that the mother rarely gets her massage, unless the father is really available (and talented)! Be careful in cold western environment though ;)

For the mother, the idea is that massaging helps the inside organs to get back in place and shape. Paradoxically the re-education of the perineum is not even addressed by the Gynec!

Finally, when I asked her, she told me to do some Kegel exercises at home. (I must add that my British midwife has also never heard of the type of perineum re-education prescribed by doctors and performed by physiotherapists in France.)

For the baby's bath, the masseuse sits on the floor with her leg stretched on which the infant lies. Less water wastage, less dangerous than a bucket which can fall off the table and from which the infant can swallow water (especially when he is slippery after a good massage!) but also less fun than a bathtub where he can turn and splash!

As for breastfeeding, beware! You shouldn't say you are thinking it over! Indians can not understand, for example, that only 56% of French mothers or 69% of British ones breastfeed.

So even if the World Health Organization and UNICEF recommend to "initiate breastfeeding within one hour following birth; practice exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months; and continue breastfeeding for two years and beyond, while starting from the age of six months a supplementary feeding [...]", it always sounds weird to hear a woman say that she is breastfeeding her 4 year old... And it is not uncommon here...

And now, I am done! Be happy that I have spoken only about the most widespread traditions! And not of the custom of eating the placenta for its hormones (which would be better assimilated if the placenta was consumed raw) and to reduce stress. Or of mothers giving girls "joyous genital tickling" and boys "full-on fellatio" (which for these people is not a sexual practice whereas kissing, even the cheek is...). I must say that these traditions are actually mostly Chinese but still present in some parts of India!

Sources: <http://www.llfFrance.org/Autres-textes-LLL/Epidemiologie-de-l-allaitement-Allaitement-et-contraception.html> ; http://www.unicef.org/french/nutrition/index_24824.html; <http://listverse.com/2014/05/03/10-weirdest-birth-customs-from-around-the-world/>

(The End)

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