



**BIRTH CONTROL IN  
ANCIENT AND  
MEDIAEVAL INDIA**

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नातश्चतुर्थं प्रसवमापत्स्वपि वदन्युत  
अतः परं स्वैरिणी स्यात् बन्धकी पञ्चमे भवेत् ।  
स त्वं विद्वन् धर्ममधिगम्य कथं नु माम्  
अपत्यार्थं समुत्क्रम्य प्रमादादिव भाषसे ॥

महाभारते, आदिपर्व,  
सर्ग १२३, श्लो० ७६-७७

*There should not be a fourth issue, even under adverse conditions; beyond this, a woman should be considered immoral; in case of five, she becomes a profligate, oh, learned one! You know the rules of conduct. How could you ask me for an issue, as if by ignorance.*

MAHABHARAT,  
Adiparva, canto 123, V. 76, 77

So sternly Kunti reproved Pandu, her husband, father of the Pandavas, when he demanded a fourth son of her. The attitude expressed in this sloka is certainly worth of our attention but not typical for ancient Indian society.

THE claim that birth control was practised in the hoary past by the institution of Brahmachari is true only by coincidence not by intent. Our attempts to find the faintest hint of contraception in the classical writings of Charak and Susruta were completely unsuccessful—no trace of it anywhere. The Shankaracharya of Puri, interviewed on my behalf by Pandit Devi Shankar Tiwari, stated that the fact, that a Brahmachari, upto the age of 24, had to live in celibacy was dictated exclusively by the intention of keeping him concentrated on his studies, not diverting any part of his thinking to the necessities of family life. Since Brahmacharis had to belong to one of the three high castes, and Sudras, the vast majority of the population, were excluded, this already would have prevented any effect

of the Brahmachari's late marrying on population control. Still more proof, that there was no intention of birth control or population planning is the fact, that in the earliest scriptures, Smritis etc. the inviolable rule was laid down that a girl must be married before puberty. On attaining of puberty her natural urges must be met by her own husband; an unmarried girl at this stage would become the victim of temptations far too powerful to be resisted, says the Shankaracharya. The explanation, that the marriage of girls before puberty developed after the Muslim conquest with a view to protect the girl children, is absolutely untenable since from times immemorial a most sacred duty of the householder was to secure marriages for all his daughters before they became mature.

Just as Brahmacharihood might have somewhat reduced the size of families by raising the marriage age of men to 24, the prohibition of widow remarriage had a similar effect, especially in the case of child-widows.

Population was controlled effectively by "natural means" or "acts of God" only. Incessant warfare, periodically, almost every ten years recurring famines, floods and, especially, epidemics took such a heavy toll, that, as far as we can guess, the population remained constant for centuries; about 200 years ago the population was estimated at 60 million, roughly one tenth of today's figure. And yet, according to the Shankaracharya, India always was a country of scarcity, deficient, especially, in cereals and salt. These chronic deficiencies had to be made

up by fasting, which, when not absolute, at least strictly prohibited consumption of cereals and of salt from Sambhar on fasting days. Only rock salt from Lahore could be used, which was scarce and costly. Instead of cereals, water chestnut (Singhara), lotus seeds (Makhana), tapioca (Sabudana) etc. were permitted. In this way the Ekadashi, every eleventh day, Chaturthi, the 4th day and Pradosh, the 13th day of every Hindu month, Nauratri, the 9 days of fast before Dassehra and Chaitra, helped in conserving provisions that were in short supply. In the same sense worked the injunction that Brahmins and Brahmacharis should eat once a day only. Many people, even to-day, are fasting once a week according to an astrologer's advice to placate a particular planet or, in the case of wives, to protect the husband's life. Thus, by various customs and rituals, India, always aware of her limited means of livelihood, worked out methods, anchored in religion, to make both ends meet without resorting to intentional birth control by contraceptives, abstinence in married life etc.

Since population remained more or less constant, living space was freely available and unemployment no problem in a rural society based on the joint family system, population planning by birth control was not a vital social problem as it is today; therefore, no provision was made for it in Vedic times while food scarcity was tackled on an all-Hinduistic basis, as discussed before. It should also be remembered that children, especially sons, were an asset in a joint family, particularly as an old age insu-

rance; they, as a matter of course, maintained their parents and other members of the family who were past the age of providing for themselves. They were both, working capital during the active phase of their parents' life and guarantee of a carefree existence after retirement, none of which family planning could have provided. Such considerations are even today powerful obstacles to family planning and will remain so until old age pensions will be granted to everybody as a matter of right as is the case in most developed countries.

Later on, in mediaeval times India manifested a vivid interest in sexual activities in all their varied forms, laid down in the Kama Sutra (IV cent. A.D.) and depicted to perfection on many mediaeval temples, of which the best known are Khajuraho (X-XI cent. A.D.) and Konarak (XIII cent. A.D.) These immortal creations of literature and sculpture prove beyond doubt that sex culture or the art of loving had developed such complicated rites as are not suitable or even applicable to the relatively simple relationship of one man and one wife united by marriage. Mistresses or prostitutes are required for such love feasts or orgies, and, where unstable relations are involved, creation of children is undesirable. Thus, we find contraceptive lore not in Susruta and Charak, these sages of highest ethical and moral standards, but in the rich mediaeval literature on sexology, produced for those living at courts or near them or those attempting to live in courtly style with concubines or courtesans; the latter polite designation points to their professional origin.

The oldest source of contraceptive advice, that we could trace, is dating some 1200 years back to the VIII century A.D. The time is that of the Rashtrakutas, ruling Central India including the Bombay area, the time also when the Kailash temple was cut out of the rock in Ellora. The source, to which we refer, is the *Bridhad-yogtarangini*, a collection of extracts from older works. The following means of contraception are there to be found :

1. One tola of powdered palm leaf and ochre taken with cold water on the 4th day of menstruation causes sterility. Acharya Dr. Shrinivas Shastri, on checking these recipes with the original Sanskrit text, found instead of "palm leaf", "Taleespatra tree" which R. N. Chopra (1933) identifies with *Abies webbiana*, a kind of fir tree, growing in the Himalayas. The needles contain essential oils; a decoction of them is used in chronic bronchitis, asthma and phthisis.
2. The seed of the Palasha tree mixed with honey and ghee and smeared inside the vagina during the menses causes permanent sterility.—Palasha or Palas is *Butea frondosa* or Flame of the Forest. The J. Ind. Med. Assoc. 55 : 60, 1970 published a paper by K. Kapila a.o. who showed that *Butea* has actually some antifertility effect; the crystalline as well as the alcoholic fractions were found fairly effective in reducing fertility in rats, although less so than the "pill".
3. A woman who has intercourse after menstruation, after treating the vagina with the smoke of Neem wood, does not conceive.—This, of course, fits well our knowledge of the "safe period",

which comprises the days following menstruation.

4. A prostitute, who has inserted into the vagina a piece of rock salt dipped into oil, never conceives.—This again is a rational method, since sodium chloride is a good spermicide, an 8% solution kills spermatozoa rapidly, while oil fixes them, preventing their further penetration, a method still popular in Poona.

5. The root of the Tanduliyaka tree, ground with rice water and taken for three days at the end of menstruation, causes sterility.—Tanduliyaka (*Amarantus spinosa*) is recommended for menorrhagia, gonorrhoea and snake bite (Chopra, 1933.)

An interesting light at the social indication of contraception in those days throws the following quotation: "A woman who has lost her husband or whose husband has abandoned her, may at her ease have intercourse with anyone, provided she inserts into her vagina a contraceptive tampon of Ajowan seeds and rock salt, ground in oil.\*—Whatever the effect of Ajowan seeds, topically applied, might be, rock salt and oil have their merits. Ajowan (*Carum copticum*), an anthelmintic and carminative, contains thymol (Chopra, l.c.). Ajowan water is used even today as abortifacients.

A few centuries later, we find the *Panchsayaka* or "the Five Arrows" (of the God of Love) by *Kavishekhar*, dating from XI-XIII centuries; although the author is known, the date of compilation cannot be fixed more precisely than

within three centuries, the period reaching from the finishing of the temples of Khajuraho (1050 A.D.) to the construction of the Sun temple at Konarak (1250 A.D.). Jyotirishvara Kavishekhar gives the following advices. "The woman who drinks, on an auspicious day, palas, and fruits as well as flowers of the Salmali tree, together with ghee\*\* will certainly become sterile."—Palas, we have encountered before; it is *Butea frondosa* (Kapila et al.; l. c.). Salmali is *Salmalia malabarica* and might be worth-while investigating.—Other recipes found in the "Five Arrows" are a decoction of the root of the pavaka tree and sour rice water; taken for 3 days after the end of menstruation, this will make unfruitful until death. Pavaka tree has been tentatively taken as *Semecarpus anacardium*, the "marking nut" tree which contains 3 different powerful irritants in the black juice of the pericarp, causing blisters within 12 hours of contact. Dhobis use the juice for indelible marking of laundry and so cause in allergic people the "Dhobi mark dermatitis".—An alternate possibility is that Pavaka stands for *Pavak-kashedi*, the Madrasi name of *Momordica charantia* (cucurbitaceae), used, according to Chopra (l.c.), as emetic, purgative and in snake-bite.—Another contraceptive recommended here is Kadamba fruit of *Nauclea cadamba*.—Chopra (l.c.) mentions Kadamba bark as a source of a tonic, a febrifuge and an astringent in snake-bite; the active principle is similar to cinchotannic acid.—Yet another recipe,

\* *Bridhadyogatarangini*. Adhyaya, ch. 143 verses 53-61, Anandashram Sanskrit series.

\*\* Dr. Shastri found in the original text "wine" instead of "ghee".

which we mention because it remained popular for centuries, is molasses. "If a woman eats or drinks continuously for half a month a large pala of three years old molasses, the greatest of the poets (Kavishekhar) says that she surely will be unfruitful to the end of her life."

Quite different from all preceding ones are methods of contraception advised by *Koka* in the *Ratirahasya* or "The secret of Sexual Desire" antedating the XIV century. This author described several ways how to prevent seminal emission; the most rational is given here. "If one, at the time of sexual enjoyment, presses firmly with the finger on the forepart of the testicle, turns his mind to other things and holds his breath while doing so, a too rapid ejaculation of the semen will be prevented".—It seems that such a method was meant when Rhazes, the great Persian physician (died 924 A.D.) enumerates among the ways of preventing the semen from entering the uterus, coitus obstructus in addition to coitus interruptus, which he mentions first.

Finally, we find contraceptive advice in the *Anangaranga* or the "Stage of the God of Love," a collection of erotic poetry by *Kalyanamalla*, dating probably from the XVI century. Here we encounter again the 3 year old molasses, prescribed exactly in the same way as in the "Five Arrows"; here also the fruit of Kadamba, but enriched by the feet of flies, drunk with hot water for 3 days. New is the following recommendation. "The woman, who, at the end of her period, drinks daily for 3 days the root of agni tree cooked in

sour rice water will be barren." — The usual guesses what is meant by agni tree vary between *Semecarpus*, *Plumbago* and *Citrus acida*. To me it seems much more probable that meant here is *Ammania baccifera*, since among its vernacular names we find *agnigarva*, *agnivednapaku* and *aginbuti*. Similar to *Semecarpus*, the juice from the bruised leaves is a strong irritant used in indigenous medicine to raise blisters, though intensely painful ones.—Against my reading of agni tree should be mentioned that *Ammania* is not a tree but a herb, that grows upto a height of 24 inches; but then, *plumbago* is also not a tree but a shrub. With the *Anangaranga* we have reached Moghul times and so left what could be called mediaeval India.

Clearly superstitious or magic practices have been omitted, such as tying *Datura* root round the waist or drinking the flowers of the Japa tree at the time of delivery, so as to cause future fetuses to disappear.

Most of the contraceptive methods quoted here have been taken from N. E. Himes, Ph.D., "Medical History of Contraception", first published in 1936 and reprinted in 1963 (Gamut Press, N.Y.)

The plants mentioned in those recipes have been identified as far as possible, by consulting R. N. Chopra, "Indigenous Drugs of India" (Calcutta, 1933), the unmatched and inexhaustible mine of information on Indian Medicinal plants; they are amenable to pharmacological and clinical investigation. Whether any



useful results could be obtained remains to be seen.

Sincerest thanks are offered to Shri S.L. Kakar, to whom I owe the quotation from the Mahabharat, to the Shankar-

acharya of Puri, to Pandit Devi Shanker Tiwari as well as to Acharya Shriniwas Shastri, M.B.,B.S., M.A. (Sanskrit), who confirmed most of the recipes by checking with the original Sanskrit texts.

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