

# Buddha's Birth and Mayadevi's Death Were not Normal

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## Introduction :

ततः प्रसन्नश्च बभूव पुष्यस्तस्याश्च देव्याव्रतसंस्कृतायाः  
पाश्चात्सुतो लोकहिताय जज्ञे निर्वेदनं चैव निरामयं च । ९ ।  
ऊरोर्यथौर्वस्य पृथोश्च हस्तान्मान्धातुरिन्द्रप्रतिस्य मूर्ध्नि ।  
कक्षीवतश्चैव भुजांसदेशात्तथाविधं तस्य बभूव जन्म । १० ।

बुद्धचरित, प्रथम सर्ग <sup>1</sup>

This is a Sanskrit text extracted from the 2000 year old epic *Buddhacharit*,<sup>2</sup> written by Ashwa Ghosh. It talks about the event of the birth of Bodhisatwa (Prince Siddhartha, who became Buddha later). It says, "At the rising of *pushya nakshetra* (i.e. an auspicious heavenly body) he was born for the welfare of the world from the *parshwa* (i.e. a rear side) of the queen (Mayadevi), who had purified herself performing a holy fasting on that day and dedicating to the full moon. She did not suffer any pain. Siddhartha was born celestially (i.e. without using the birth canal) and as Lord Aurva was born from the thigh, Prithu from the hand, Mandhatra, a legendary-like Indra, from the head, and Kakshivat from the armpit."

*Buddhacharit* was written almost 700 years after the birth of Buddha.<sup>3</sup>  
This was the time when Mahayanism, a cult of Buddhism, was already at

<sup>1</sup> *tataḥ prasannaēca babhāva puṣyastasyāēca devyā vrataśauṣkṛtāyāḥ |  
pārēvātsuto lokahitāya jajñe nirvedanaṁ caiva nirāmayam ca || 1.25 (1.9)  
āroṛyathaurvasya pṛthośca hastān māṇdhāturiṇḍrapratimasya mūrdhnai |  
kakṣāvataścaiva bhujāṁśaśaśattathāvidhaṁ tasya babhāva janma || 1.29 (1.10)*

(At that time the constellation Puṣya was auspicious, and from the side of the queen, who was purified by her vow, her son was born for the welfare of the world, without pain and without illness, 1.25 (1.9). As was Aurva's birth from the thigh, and Pṛthu's from the hand, and Māṇdhātō's, who was like Indra himself, from the forehead, and Kakṣāvata's from the upper end of the arm, so thus too was his birth miraculous -- The Buddha Carita, or The Life of Buddha by Āśvaghoṣa, edited and translated by Edward B. Cowell

<sup>2</sup> *Buddhacharita* ("Acts of the Buddha" बुद्धचरितम्) is an epic poem in the Sanskrit *mahakavya* style on the life of Gautama Buddha by Āśvaghoṣa, composed in the early second century CE. -- Willemen, Charles, transl. (2009), *Buddhacarita: In Praise of Buddha's Acts*, Berkeley, Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, p. XIII.

<sup>3</sup> The times of Gautama's birth and death are uncertain: most historians in the early 20th century dated his lifetime as circa 563 BCE to 483 BCE - L. S. Cousins (1996), "The dating of the historical Buddha: a review article", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (3)6(1): 57-63.

its height and glorifying the Buddha as a supernatural god. And so for a text dedicated to the celestial Buddha, it must clearly include such supernatural miracles as those which ensured that he was born from the *parshwa* of the mother i.e. without using the natural birth canal.

The Sanskrit word *parshwa* literally means “a rear side” and is used with the same connotation in all kinds of sources that depict the birth of Buddha. Almost all ancient icons show Buddha emerging behind the right side of his mother’s waist. The conclusion that Buddha was not born in a natural way would seem logically to indicate a painful rupture of the mother’s womb. But the scriptures do not record any such sorrowful accident and in fact claim that the mother suffered no pain at all during labour.

Another source, *Lailtbistar*, says that Mayadevi died seven days after the birth of Buddha, at the Lumbini garden.<sup>4</sup> It indicates that Mayadevi did not die instantly of a fatal womb rupture and that she was not taken to any shelter following the incident. It seems therefore that Mayadevi may well have died of a very serious birth-related rupture, while being compelled to wait for her imminent death at the place where she had given birth.

All these denote that Mayadevi must have died of a very complicated natural birth-related delivery at Lumbini. However there are no scriptures recording this and there is not a single word about the cause of her death. I believe that once we can agree an interpretation of the mysterious *parshwa*, a true nature of Buddha’s birth and Mayadevi’s death can at last be understood.

## **Hypothesis:**

I am of the view that the *parshwa* is in effect a rupture of the birth canal in the real sense. The implication is that the birth canal was ruptured and became merged with the anal duct due to complications with the birth and led to the baby appearing to come out through *parshwa*, a rear side way. Eventually, the ailing mother died of heavy blood loss, caused by the associated rupture.

## **Discussion:**

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<sup>4</sup> Navasutra Sangrha : *Lailtbistar*, (g);"q;"@u/x M nltlj;t/\_ Translated by Bajracharya, Lotus Research Center, Lalitpur, p. 433.

Rupture of the birth canal leading to merging with the anal canal is a common phenomenon in a complicated birth. Such ruptures can be caused by the larger size of the baby, associated with overdue pregnancy. Breech presentations during delivery can cause an even worse tear including the tearing of vaginal tissues, perineal skin, and perineal muscles going even deeper into the anal duct as well as into the rectum. Such rupture is called fourth-degree tear<sup>5</sup>,

In this context I would like to highlight and analyse those aspects relevant to Mayadevi's delivery.

Normally full-term delivery of a child occurs within 286 days. In extreme cases the post-term delivery could go up to 294 days (42 weeks).<sup>6</sup> Mayadevi's pregnancy was already 10 lunar months, starting from *Ashad Purnima* (full moon of July) to the day of *Baisakh Purnima* (full moon of May). The total period adds up to 295 days plus 8 hours at the rate of 29.5 days.<sup>7</sup> Therefore Mayadevi's prolonged pregnancy was overdue by approximately 32 hours.

There are a number of known reasons which may cause a prolonged labour to occur<sup>8</sup> and most of them surprisingly resemble the case of Mayadevi. They are given in the following table.

SN	Reasons for a prolonged labour	In Mayadevi's case
1	It is more common with first time mothers.	It was her first time delivery.
2	It is more common with older mothers, over 35 years.	Mayadevi was 45 years old. <sup>9</sup>
3	Most mothers get tensed in unfamiliar surroundings, causing slowing down of the	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>She was travelling through a forest, away from home facilities and care</li> </ul>

<sup>5</sup> The tear can be caused by the size of your baby as well as other factors. 1st or 2nd second degree tears are usually more minor and have no longer term associated complications. However, both third degree tears and fourth degree tears can cause significant ongoing pain and other problems. Whereas a third degree tear includes tearing to the vaginal tissue, perineal skin, and perineal muscles a fourth degree tear goes even deeper, tearing into the anal canal as well as into the rectum. --<http://www.glynn.co.uk/birth-injury-claims/fourth-degree-tears.php>

<sup>6</sup> A post-term pregnancy is one that extends beyond 42 weeks (294 days) from the first day of the last menstrual period; as many as 10 percent of pregnancies are post-term. --<http://www.uptodate.com/contents/postterm-pregnancy-beyond-the-basics>.

<sup>7</sup> The synodic month, or complete cycle of phases of the Moon as seen from Earth, averages 29.530588 mean solar days in length (i.e., 29 days 12 hours 44 minutes 3 seconds); because of perturbations in the Moon's orbit, the lengths of all astronomical months vary slightly. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578490/synodic-month>.

<sup>8</sup> This often happens when a woman reaches the unfamiliar surroundings of a hospital and starts to feel anxious. When anxiety sets in, the uterus - which is a muscle - tenses up, which halts the progress of the contractions. For this reason, women are advised to stay at home for as long as possible in order to allow the labour to continue without the risk of undue anxiety or stress. -- <http://www.parentdish.co.uk/2010/04/15/p-what-is-prolonged-labour/>

<sup>9</sup> ædxdfaf6 \$% jif{df cf'gf} dfOt b]jbx hfgnfUbf af6}df Joyf nflu n'IDjgLS'~hdf Ps ;fnj[lfd'lg a'4sf] hGd eof] .Æ  
(Mayadevi gave birth to Buddha, when she was 45 years old at Lumbini Garden on the way to Devdaha, her parents home) -- Sharma, Chetonath; ed. Karnikar, Ghanashyam; *Buddhako jeevani ra Kaaryakshatra Buddhako Samjhana Kalyanko Kamana*; Mrs Deepa Tamrakar, BS 2054. page 18

	progress of contractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was an astounding earthquake at the time of her delivery<sup>10</sup></li> <li>• She was on a holy fasting that day and must have been exhausted as well.</li> </ul>
4	The baby could be bigger than the mother's pelvis.	Buddha as described in <i>Dirgha Nikaya</i> and <i>Majjhim Nikaya</i> , was a tall man with broad chest, thick hairs, long hands hanging down below the knees, etc. <sup>11</sup> These signs match the signs of post-term infants. <sup>12 13</sup>
5	Most common formidable cause could be the position of the baby's head. If the baby's head is not tucked into its chest, the chin can halt the progression through the birth canal.	The fact that her pregnancy exceeded the upper limit of 294 days, could only be associated with such implication.
6	The presentation of the baby could be in breech position. With such breech presentation, hands, buttock and even head can be twisted	It is said that the baby walked seven steps right upon his birth <sup>14</sup> , which I interpret as an indication of the breech birth with the feet first in the reality.

<sup>10</sup> yasmin prasāte girirājakālā vātāhatā nauriva bhāēcacāla |  
sacāudanā cotpalapadmagarbha papāta vŌñirgagaōādanabhrāt || 1.40 (1.21)

(When he was born, the earth, though fastened down by (Himālaya) the monarch of mountains, shook like a ship tossed by the wind; and from a cloudless sky there fell a shower full of lotuses and water lilies, and perfumed with sandalwood.) -- The Buddha Carita, or The Life of Buddha. Aëvaghōua, edited and translated by Edward B. Cowel

<sup>11</sup> The *Digha Nikaya*, and *Majjhima Nikāya* explains the 32 towering characteristics of the physique of Buddha as: 1. Level feet; 2. Thousand-spoked wheel sign on feet; 3. Long, slender fingers 4. Pliant hands and feet; 5. Toes and fingers finely webbed; 6. Full-sized heels; 7. Arched insteps; 8. Thighs like a royal stag; 9. Hands reaching below the knees; 10. Well-retracted male organ; 11. Height and stretch of arms equal; 12. Every hair-root dark colored; 13. Body hair graceful and curly; 14. Golden-hued body; 15. Ten-foot aura around him; 16. Soft, smooth skin; 17. Soles, palms, shoulders, and crown of head well-rounded; 18. Area below armpits well-filled; 19. Lion-shaped body; 20. Body erect and upright; 21. Full, round shoulders; 22. Forty teeth; 23. Teeth white, even, and close; 24. Four canine teeth pure white; 25. Jaw like a lion; 26. Saliva that improves the taste of all food; 27. Tongue long and broad; 28. Voice deep and resonant; 29. Eyes deep blue; 30. Eyelashes like a royal bull; 31. White *ūrṇā* curl that emits light between eyebrows; and 32. Fleshy protuberance on the crown of the head. -- Shaw, Sarah. *Buddhist Meditation: An Anthology of Texts from the Pali Canon*. 2006. p. 114

<sup>12</sup> A fourth degree tear can be caused by one of a number of factors, including, a large baby (over approximately 9lb's), baby's shoulder becoming stuck behind your pubic bone, a longer than average second stage of labour. Your first vaginal birth, An assisted birth (forceps or ventouse) -- <http://www.glynns.co.uk/birth-injury-claims/fourth-degree-tears.php>

<sup>13</sup> Some postterm infants have a distinctive appearance. The arms and legs may be long and thin. The skin may appear dry and parchment-like, with peeling and sometimes meconium staining. The skin may appear loose, especially over the thighs and buttocks. Scalp hair may be longer or thicker, and the fingernails and toenails may be long. Post term newborns are typically very alert, and may have a "wide-eyed" look. Few studies have examined long-term outcomes (eg, growth and development patterns, intelligence) of post term infants. In general, the outcome appears similar in both post term and term infants.-- <http://www.uptodate.com/contents/postterm-pregnancy-beyond-the-basics>; -- Epstein, Ronald. *Buddhist Text Translation Society's Buddhism A to Z*. 2003. p. 200

<sup>14</sup> anākulānyabjasamudgatāni niūpeūavaūtyāyatavikramāōi |  
tathaiva dhārāōi padāni sapta saptarūitārāsadŌeo jagāma || 1.33 (1.14)

(Unflurried, with the lotus sign in high relief, far striding, set down with a stamp, 7 seven such firm footsteps did he then take, 7 he who was like the constellation of the seven »ūis) -- The Buddha Carita, or The Life of Buddha by Aëvaghōua, edited and translated by Edward B. Cowel

	and trapped or stuck inside or above the pelvis.	
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When pregnancy exceeds the upper limit of 42 weeks (294 days), the risks of complications for both the mother and the fetus increase significantly.<sup>15</sup> If the labour exceeds 18 hours, it is taken as a complicated one.<sup>16</sup> So as this case had gone beyond 32 hours, it had become possibly fatal for both the mother and the baby.

Mayadevi is portrayed in a standing position hanging on a tree branch while giving birth to Buddha. It denotes that there was no easy situation for this birth to be given in a normal position. There might have been even malicious accidents like bumping on the ground due to the loss of physical balance caused by the fright of the earthquake. It is obvious that Mayadevi had a hard struggle to enable her to stand up to relieve the pain by grasping the branch of a tree. All this might have contributed to make the baby stuck in the canal with a breech footing and to collapse down rupturing all of the internal muscles on its way. The apparent dreadful hole did not appear to be a natural path for a baby to come out and thus was described as 'coming out through *parshwa*, a rear side way'.

Furthermore, this also reveals the mystery of the death of Mayadevi. Postpartum haemorrhage can cause anaemia in an amazingly short period of time. In fact, even today, although equipped with modern medical facilities, fourth-degree tears cause a lot of deaths among prenatal mothers.<sup>17</sup> It is surprising how Mayadevi managed to live for seven days after the fatal incidence, even though she was in a forest, away from home facilities and carers.

## Conclusion:

It is concluded that

1. The connotation of the myth of *parshwa* is "fourth-degree tear" caused by the complicated birth of Buddha..

<sup>15</sup> Risks to the mother — Risks to the mother are related to the larger size of post-term fetuses, and include difficulties during labour, an increase in injury to the perineum (including the vagina, labia, and rectum), and an increased rate of cesarean birth with its associated risks of bleeding, infection, and injury to surrounding organs-

Risks to fetuses -- The incidence of stillbirth or infant death is increased in pregnancies that continue beyond 42 weeks.

<http://www.uptodate.com/contents/postterm-pregnancy-beyond-the-basics>

<sup>16</sup> "गर्भस्थ बच्चा २८०-२९४ दिनभित्र प्रसव सुरु भएपछि १८ घण्टाको औसत अवधिभित्र शीर्षोदयमा जन्मनु पर्छ। अन्यथा यसलाई असामान्य प्रसव मान्नु पर्छ।"

(The child should be delivered with head ahead, within an average of 18 hours of labor after the completion of the pregnancy of 280-294 days. Otherwise it should be taken as a complicated delivery.) -- Pandit, Dr. Vishnu Prasad; Where there is no Doctor. Page 202.

<sup>17</sup> Haemorrhage after delivery, or postpartum haemorrhage (PPH), is the loss of blood following a delivery resulting in hypovolemia or otherwise causing the patient to become symptomatic due to the blood loss. Some practitioners measure PPH by a blood loss of greater than 500 ml of blood following vaginal delivery, or 1000 ml of blood following caesarean section. It is the most common cause of prenatal maternal death in the developed world and is a major cause of maternal morbidity worldwide. -- Anderson JM, Etches D (March 2007). "Prevention and management of postpartum hemorrhage." *American Family Physician* 75 (6): 875-82. PMID 17390600.

2. The connotation of 'the walk of Buddha right after the birth' is the indication of 'breech presentation of the feet ahead'.
3. The death of Mayadevi was due to the heavy loss of blood, caused by the fourth-degree tear due to the overdue birth with breech presentation.

Furthermore, the question arises as to why this story was never told. I am of the opinion that the supernatural context was not an added factor for a few hundred years. However, due to the start of coexistence with the Vedic societies, supernatural beliefs entered Buddhism, particularly after the initiation of the Mahayana sect.<sup>18</sup> In those days no historical records were kept and the information was carried down by oral means. In this way, it is possible that many new myths were added and real facts omitted, or were related with misinterpretations and exaggerations. So, Ashwa Gosh, the poet of the text, used his best imagination to portray the righteous holiness of Buddha, omitting all unpleasant and sorrowful details that might sound earthly or of normal human origin.

Finally I would like to inform you that I have used this concept in my research-based novel *Mahabhinishkraman kaa Aswikrit Paailaa*<sup>19</sup>, published by LKDM in 2010. It is on Buddha's life and in the Nepali language. Later this year an English version entitled 'The Light of Himalayas' will be available.

Thank you.

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<sup>18</sup> The earliest *Mahāyāna sūtras* to include the very first versions of the *Prajñāpāramitā* series, along with texts concerning Akṣobhya Buddha, which were probably written down in the 1st century BCE in the south of India. -- Akira, Hirakawa (translated and edited by Paul Groner) (1993. A History of Indian Buddhism. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass: p. 253

<sup>19</sup> *Mahaabhinishkramana Aswikrit Paila* (Devanagari: महाभिनिक्रमणका अस्वीकृत पाइला Translation: Rejecting step of Renunciation), a research based novel on Buddha's life, By Dr Kavitaran Shrestha; Lumbini Kapilvastu Day Campaign, Kathmandu, 2010.