

## EVOLUTION OF WET NURSING - AYURVEDA AND WORLD

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**ABSTRACT**

In ancient science of *ayurveda* the concept of *dhatri* (a wet nurse) is mentioned by many Acharyas like *Charaka* as *Sushruta* and *Kashyapa*. In deficiency of breast milk, the concept of *dhatri*-a wet nurse- to feed the baby gains relevance. According to *Ayurveda* breast milk is considered as nectar to the child and there is no alternative or substitute for the breast milk. A wet nurse is a lactating woman who breast feeds and cares for another's child. If mother is not live or unable to breast feed her baby due to her illness or opting not to feed because of her aesthetic consciousness. In *Ashanga hridaya Vagbhata* has advised to appoint two wet nurses while others has not specified the number. Probably in *ayurvedic* texts child management is advised keeping in mind the children of kings and rich people as these authors were braced by the kings and the queens might not be preferring for the breastfeeding. That's by wet nurses were arranged for the same, *Sushruta* advices not to change the wet nurse too frequently as this practise will be not congenial for the child and he may suffer from various disorder as he receive milk of different quality. *Ayurvedic* classis emphasises on appointment of wet nurses after thorough physical and psychological examination.

**KEYWORDS:** Dhatri, wet nurse, breastmilk.**INTRODUCTION**

*Ayurveda* being one of the oldest sciences of life which explains in detail the nourishment of new born and infant.. *Ayurveda* considers breast milk is formed by the essence of *rasa dhatu*(first of seven *dhatu*s) and is called as *upadhatu*. According to *Ayurveda* breast milk is considered as nectar to the child and there is no alternative or substitute for the breast milk. If mother is unable to feed her child due to physical and psychological disorders, alternative arrangement for the wet nurse has been advised in *Ayurveda*. In such situations providing human milk which is species specific instead of animal milk was thought long back since Vedic period.<sup>[1]</sup> Although animal milk is readily available, *Ayurveda* emphasises on "*dhatri*" as an immediate next choice of feeding for newborn and infant in the non availability of mothers breast milk. *Ayurvedic* scholars were well aware of baby specific and species specific nature of the breast milk. Providing *dhatri*'s milk is the best option as it fulfils species specific nature of breast milk which an animal milk can't provide. She is also called the *upamata* or step mother, who looks after the baby in the absence of mother and become the second mother of the child. By analysing the importance given to the *dhatri* in the *Ayurvedic* classics, one can infer that the role of *dhatri* is not just limited to feeding the infant, but carries even more responsibilities. Probably one who looks after the baby and performs the

basic daily needs related to the baby like bathing, playing, caring also referred as a *Dhatri*. *Lord Krishna* was also fed with the *dhatri* milk of *Yashoda*, as his mother *Devaki* was in prison.<sup>[2]</sup>

The word "Milk sibling" was used to address relations of such children and families have a unique relationship of "milk kinship". Mothers who nurse each other's babies are engaging in a reciprocal act known as cross-nursing or co-nursing.<sup>[3]</sup> Before the development of infant formula in the 20th century, if mothers milk was not available then wet nurse is the saviour for that infant. Mother is not able to feed her infant due to various reasons like no lactation, insufficient milk, severe, chronic and psychological illnesses, temporary difficulties, mothers medications, working mother and reluctant to breastfeed. As a substitute to the mothers milk there will be high demand for the wet nurses in case of maternal death, abandonment by mothers and even mothers of higher economical backgrounds who are not willing to feed their infant due to social reasons. There was also an increased need for wetnurses when the rates of infant abandonment by mothers, and maternal death during childbirth, were high. Some women choose not to breastfeed for social reasons. Probably for such mothers consider breast feeding unfashionable as their physical beauty may get ruined by which they can't able to wear fashionable clothing of their time and choice.<sup>[4,5]</sup>

### History and Cultural Practices

Wet nursing is an ancient practice, common to many cultures. It has been linked to social class, where monarchies, the aristocracy, nobility or upper classes had their children wet-nursed for the benefit of the child's health, and sometimes in the hope of becoming pregnant again quickly. Exclusive breastfeeding inhibits ovulation in some women (Lactational amenorrhoea). Poor women, especially those who suffered the stigma of giving birth to an illegitimate child, sometimes had to give their baby up temporarily to a wet nurse, or permanently to another family. The woman herself might in turn become wet nurse to a wealthier family, while using part of her wages to pay her own child's wet nurse.

In the western world wet nursing began as early as 2000 BC and was practiced till 20<sup>th</sup> century till bottle feeding was popularized. In this period need of wet nurse changed to choice with designed regulatory laws and established as a profession.<sup>[6]</sup> Breast feeding was considered as a religious obligation in Israel before 2000BC though the lactation was not possible due to maternal death and lactation failure.<sup>[7]</sup>

In ancient Egyptian times lactation failure was prevalent and wet nursing was the substitute to this problem.<sup>[8]</sup> Wet nurses had higher accountability and authoritative over slaves as they were in high demand from women of higher society in Greece circa 950 BC,<sup>[9]</sup> Archives of Disease in Childhood.

The **Bible** has several references of wet nurses, most famous being the woman hired by Pharaoh's daughter to nurse Moses, whom she found in the bulrushes.<sup>[10]</sup>

**Soranus of Ephesus, Galen of Pergamus and Oreibasius** medical authors from approximately 100AD-400 AD had set some qualifications for the appointment of wet nurses. Soranus in his obstetrical and gynecological treatises consisting of 23 chapters provided model for infant feeding which includes regime for wet nurse. A test to assess the quality of breast milk was described in the treatises. When a drop of breastmilk was placed on a fingernail and the finger moved, the milk was not supposed to be so watery that it ran all over the surface of the nail. When the fingernail was turned downward, the milk was not to be thick enough to cling to the nail. The consistency of the milk should range between the two extremes. He also set some physical standards to identify good mothers milk like, should have pleasant odour; smooth, having homogeneous composition; moderately dense, taste should be sweet and pleasant, moderately white in colour; and it does not easily turn sour if stored. This criterion to test breastmilk was used for next 1500 years to assess the quality.<sup>[11,12]</sup>

**Ibn al-Jazzar al Qayrawania muslimarab** physician in his writings on Islamic medicine has stated that the quality milk contain the three elements watery, cheesy

and oily should be in balance state, moderate quantity, good colour, smell and taste.<sup>[13]</sup>

The Roman physician **Oribasius** (325 AD to 403 AD) advises wet nurse should be involved in grinding, walking and weaving kind of physical work were their shoulder and chest are involved by which the milk flow is enhanced. He also mentions wet nurse should have delivered male child recently and she should be of 25-35 years.<sup>[14]</sup>

**Bartholomeus Anglicus**, a Franciscan friar, (1220 AD and 1250 AD) written some qualities and duties of wet nurse like "A nurse rejoices with a boy when it rejoices and weeps with him when he weeps, just like a mother. She picks him up when he falls, gives the little one milk when he cries, kisses him as he lies, holds him tight and gathers him up when he sprawls, washes and cleans the little one when he makes a mess of himself...."<sup>[15]</sup>

In spite of these recommendations appointing wet nurses was opposed in this era for the first time. In the Middle ages there was a belief that the physical and psychological characteristics of wet nurse will be transferred to the child due to magical qualities in breast milk. Because of which once again there was a protest against appointing wet nurses for the breast feeding and the mothers who are breast feeding their own children are highly valued in the society.<sup>[16]</sup>

Though the mothers breast feeding their children were respected in the society compared to wet nurses in the middle ages of Renaissance period, wet nursing was remained best substitute to mothers milk in case of non-availability.<sup>[17]</sup>

An Italian **Omnibonus Ferrarius** authored the Treatise on children, published in 1577 was suggested mothers milk is the best choice for her child and in case of her illness or if she is unable to breast feed then only, one can opt for wet nursing. He opines that the bonding between wet nurse and infant will be much stronger than that with mother.<sup>[18]</sup>

**Jasques Guillemeau** a French obstetrician of 17th century in his book preface "The Nursing of Children" advice to opt a wet nurse in unavoidable circumstances and the female should be healthy, happy, sober, well behaved, diligent to breast feed can be appointed. He specifies she should not have auburn hair as it is believed that such women have hot temperament which affects the breastmilk. He objected the appointment of wet nurse because as he believed that child may be switched, mother and child bonding may be reduced, child may inherit the bad condition from wet nurse and bodily imperfections of wet nurse can be transmitted to child and then to parents.<sup>[19]</sup>

Despite the recommendations, wet nursing remained a popular, well paid, and highly organized profession

during the Renaissance period. Thus, the occupation became a prime choice for many poor women. A common practice among young, unmarried or married women was to have a child and then get rid of it prior to seeking employment as a wet nurse. As a result, in France, wet nurses were registered at a municipal employment bureau, and laws were developed and enforced to regulate their employment. The laws required a wet nurse to undergo a medical examination and forbade her to breastfeed another child until her own infant was 9 months old.<sup>[20]</sup>

During the same time period, societal class tended to dictate breastfeeding practices. It was unusual for aristocratic women to breastfeed because the practice was considered unfashionable and because the women worried it would ruin their figures.<sup>[21]</sup>

From the end of the 18th century through the 19th century, the practice of wet nursing shifted away from wealthy families to laboring, lower-income families. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, entire families relocated from rural to more urban areas. The increased cost of living and poor wages forced many women to seek employment and contribute financially to their family, which made it virtually impossible for many mothers to breastfeed and attend to their children. Consequently, many of these children were farmed out to destitute peasant women. By law, peasant wet nurses were required to obtain a license from local authorities and to report the death of any infant receiving their care. Unfortunately, the laws were ignored and created little change with regard to the high infant mortality rate of all infants.<sup>[22]</sup>

Although wet nursing continued to exist at the end of the 18th century, the natural mother was still preferred for breastfeeding and raising her children. In 1779, **William Buchan** published *Domestic Medicine*, which displayed an open distrust of wet nurses and their use of home remedies. Opiates such as Godfrey's Cordial were among the home remedies. Wet nurses referred to opiates as "Quietness." Buchan wrote that the use of opiates as a sleep aid for infants was a great fault among wet nurses. In the 19th century, artificial feeding became a feasible substitute for wet nursing. Advancement in the feeding bottle and the availability of animal's milk.<sup>[23]</sup>

### Japanese Buddhist

In the Edo period (1603-1867) Buddhist of Japan had a custom of breastfeeding their children till the age of 6-7 years, as they believed extending breastfeeding will improve their children's health. If mother was not able to improve to breastfeed the baby wet nurse was hired when the baby was of two years of age. So that the baby till 7 years will be breastfed by the wet nurse. For the multiple children equal number of wet nurses were appointed. This was affordable by the wealthy peoples. In the Edo period there was a custom to evaluate the breast milk of wet nurse before appointing her.<sup>[24]</sup>

Roman times to till present day, philosophers and thinkers opine that emotional bonding between mother and child is at risk due to wet nursing.<sup>[25]</sup>

### Pali literature

The word **Dhatri** is found in Pali language. Its duty is said to take care of child and feed in the absence of mother milk. In Buddhist period, there was provision of appointing four types of dhatri.

1. Dhatri for breast feeding (*khiram payenti*)
2. Dhatri for giving bath (*Nhapeti*)
3. Dhatri for general nursing care (*Dharenti*)
4. Dhatri for holding baby in her lap (*Ankenna Pariharandi*)

### Muggapakkha jataka

In *muggapakkha jataka* (No. 538) qualities of good dhatri are described. In the story, it has been mentioned that the king of *Varanasi* has appointed 500 dhatri for care of his son. In the same story defects of dhatri and its effect on the child are mentioned.

Defects of dhatri	Effect on child
1. Too long	Neck become much longer
2. Too short	Drooped shoulder
3. Too thin	Pain in thighs
4. Too healthy	Bow legged

**Jain literature** has mentioned about five types of dhatri, for nursing of child. These are *ksira dhatri*, *majjana dhatri*, *mandana dhatri*, *kridana dhatri*, *anka dhatri*.

1. *Ksira dhatri*:- Colour of *Ksira dhatri* should be similar to that of child. In general, dhatri of dark complexion has been considered good, while milk of dhatri having black complexion has not been considered good. The breast milk of the dhatri having whitish complexion has been considered of less strength.
2. *Majjana dhatri*:- The work of the dhatri is to keep the child clean.
3. *Mandana Dhatri*:- The duty of *mandana dhatri* is to dress the child.
4. *Kridana dhatri*:- She plays with child. Her voice and personality affect the child. *Kridana dhatri* has the harmonious voice has been considered good. The duty of this dhatri is also to take care the child from putana.
5. *Anka dhatri*:- Any defect of *anka dhatri* may affect the child. The child may be of deformed foot if she is fatty; feels comfortable if she is lean and thin and may develop shy behaviour.<sup>[26]</sup>

### Commercialisation of Wet Nursing

During *Renaissance period* though there was a resistance in the society for appointing the wet nurse, it became popular, well organized occupation with good income for many poor women. Due to which poor young, unmarried or married women were having the child then by abandoning it they use to get the job. Because of this in France law was made to regulate the employment and in

which wet nurses will have to get registration in Municipal employment bureau and according to the law the women should have infant of more than 9 months old and she should undergo medical examination.<sup>[27]</sup>

The aristocracy dictated breastfeeding practices during the 16th and 17th centuries. Women of the upper class refused to breastfeed, despite the earlier warnings of, for fear that it was unfashionable and would ruin their figures. It interfered with social activities, such as playing cards and attending theatre performances, and distracted women from her domestic duties. The wives of merchants, lawyers, and doctors also did not breastfeed because it was less expensive to employ a wet nurse than it was to hire a woman to run their husband's business or take care of the household in their place. Such social pressures prompted the majority of aristocratic women to hire wet-nurses.<sup>[28]</sup>

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, wet nursing was utilized by members of lower classes. More so than upper classes. Increased costs of living and lowered wages during the Industrial Revolution prompted many women to seek additional sources of revenue. Wet nursing became such a source. Wet nurse enabled two women to be employed at the same time: one woman was employed by a mother and a mother was employed in a factory setting.<sup>[29]</sup>

With advances in bottle feeding and the availability of nutritious and infant friendly animal milk, the use of wet nurses continued to decline.<sup>[30]</sup>

The protesting of wet-nurses continued throughout the Renaissance period. In 1577, in the *Treatise on Children*, Italian **Omnibonus Ferrarius** further stressed the importance of mothers breastfeeding their own children. Worrying that infants would "savour of the nature of the person by whom they are suckled" (Stevens, 2009)<sup>[31]</sup> Ferrarius was convinced that wet nursed children "would come to love a wet nurse because she had nurtured and cared for them more than their own mother."<sup>[32]</sup>

#### Ayurveda view- discussion and conclusion

##### Wet nurse (*upamaatha*) and their selection

If sufficient quantity of mother's milk are not available, a wet nurse should be selected from among the matrons of its own caste and possessed of these necessary qualifications. She should be of the middle stature, neither too old nor too young, of sound health, of good character, not fickle, ungreedy, neither too thin nor too corpulent, with lips unprotruded, and with healthy and pure milk in her breast. The breasts should neither be too pendulous nor drawn up. Her skin should be healthy and free from moles and stains etc. Being free from any sort of crime. She should be of an affectionate heart and all her children living. She should be respectable parentage and consequently possessed of good qualities.<sup>[33]</sup> She should be good looking, free from bodily defects. She should be of dark complexion (*shyamavarna*). She should

possess male children, born in the same place or country, pure in body and mind: she should be also most serviceable.<sup>[34,35]</sup> The breasts of the wet nurse should not be erect or upwards, too long over dangling, excessive corpulent, too emaciated and should have appropriate nipple which are comfortable for sucking.<sup>[36]</sup>

Child face or mouth will become terrible if he sucks over erect breasts, neck rigidity will be by corpulent breasts and child may die or asphyxiated or death can occur due to over dangling breasts which cover face and nose.<sup>[37]</sup> Apart from the characteristics of the breasts Ayurvedic classics explain the required qualities of wet nurse with an extreme minuteness.

Wet nurse should be of similar caste, middle aged (not too young nor too old) humble, free of impatience, not possessing deficit or accessory body parts not addict, beautiful, free from disgust, living in same geographical area belonging to same sub caste, neither mean minded, nor indulging in mean acts, born in high family, affectionate to the child, free from diseases, having good amount of breast milk and having alive male child, over cautious not habituated of sleeping, not married in low caste, expert in nursing, pious, clean and having hatred from unpiety or uncleanness and possessing good quality of breast and milk.<sup>[38]</sup>

*Sushruta Samhita* gives similar description of qualities of wet nurse as described above. Apart from that she should not have too long or protuberant lips, free from fickleness non-greedy, neither too thin nor too obese. *Sushruta* specifies that she should be of dark-complexioned woman as such woman possess profuse milk.<sup>[39]</sup>

*Kashyapa Samhita* being only available classical text of *Kaumarabhritya* (Pediatrics) advises that wet nurse should purify herself daily. The wet nurse with similar *satwa* (psychological entities) that off child has to be selected, as the opposite *satwa* is forbidden because she will produce uneasiness and troubles the child. The breast milk of wet nurse with identical *satwa* will give nourishment, longevity, strength and pleasure to the child.<sup>[40]</sup>

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