



Tale of a traditional midwife

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As she recalls, she is nearing her sixties. Srimati (Mrs) Mastamma is a traditional midwife, popularly known as *Sulagithi*, *Dais* or *Herigae madisuvaru*. She lives in a hamlet called Hebbala Haadi in Hunsur, Mysore, southern India. Her attributes are her confidence in her practice, belief, her sharing and learning attitude, and her zeal to extend her service. Committed to serve, Mrs Mastamma has been contributing her expertise in pre- and postnatal care for over 35 years. She is ready to help anyone at any time, and her service extends to 25 villages in various districts. Her present practice as a midwife earns her social respect and whatever her patients can give to her in kind.

Mastamma started learning and practising midwifery at the age of 25. Her mother was her mentor. Being eldest daughter of the family, she had the responsibility of taking care of her eight sisters and brothers, and running the daily errands. In addition she used to assist her mother when she conducted a delivery. Later on she started to handle cases independently. Regarded as the main traditional birth attendant in her region, she has handled over 1000 births, ranging from easy to very complicated ones. In 2001 she underwent training in reproductive health and childcare.

Mastamma feels that saving a life means saving a God, thus attaching sanctity to her work. For her, medicine is her God. She offers prayers to the medicine. Every time she handles a delivery, she remembers and thanks her mother for sharing her wisdom, and making her a useful human being.

Mastamma's expertise

Mastamma conducts a delivery at the patient's home and first ensures the place is clean. To estimate the time of delivery, she examines the mother's stomach and pulse using a special technique. To induce labour she gives the woman betel leaf to chew, filled with leaves and seeds of a specific plant, as well as *ghee*, or clarified butter. Then a glass of hot water is drunk.

Delivery is conducted in a squatting posture. Mastamma feels this is the most convenient position as it gives enough pressure. The complications she has encountered include delivering twins, entanglement of the umbilical cord, presentation of limbs first, folded

knees, appearance of only two fingers, child facing the sky during delivery, and a child with disproportionate limbs and head. With her skilled hands she has managed to remove a dead foetus from the womb without harming the mother, treated prolapsed uterus, and removed retained placenta. She also takes care of minor problems related to mother and childcare. To ensure a safe delivery she uses gloves and a clean blade for cutting.

Apart from deliveries, she also addresses other health conditions, such as fertility problems in men and women, abortion and breast problems. She treats a range of paediatric problems related to growth, cold, cough, fever and indigestion.

Keen observer

She is a keen observer and emphasises the importance of proper diagnosis of a condition. Based on her experience and instinct, she can confirm pregnancy at two months by observing the mother's activities, her likes and dislikes, facial features and expressions. Based on the position of the foetus, she can indicate the time and day of delivery. She can predict the gender of the baby based on the formation of stomach, and indicate whether it is twin babies or not. In serious conditions, she can identify whether the foetus is alive

or not.

She has her own ways of explaining how the human body responds and works. She has observed, for example, that 15 days prior to delivery, the mother can experience labour-like pains. This should not be considered as the onset of the actual delivery, but as a pain occurring due to re-positioning of the foetus.

She recalls each and every case she has handled, and emphasises confidently that none of them have gone awry. She can tell of a few challenging cases too. For instance, in Bettapura, Billu Halli, a couple finally conceived a baby after nine years of marriage. Mastamma's prescription worked and now they have two children. Even today, the entire family is thankful and has given her the status of a mother. Another remarkable incidence occurred in Udupura, when a mother was saved by removing the dead foetus, which had been strangled by the umbilical cord.



Reaction of Ayurvedic doctors

Mastamma is a storehouse of traditional wisdom. In case of need, she prescribes a combination of medicines, usually accompanied by recommendations about food and activity restriction. For instance, specific food is prescribed for weaning mothers. She also demonstrates how to apply medicine to stubborn people. Only when they are convinced about the treatment will she treat them. As she puts it: "A person should have belief and faith in the healer or doctor; only then will the medicine work."

Her medicine chest consists of herbs, roots, tubers, bark, and leaves collected from nearby forest areas. She also uses kitchen spices, raw drugs, metals and minerals. Due to entry restrictions for local community members imposed by the forest department, and the rapid destruction of the forests, these resources are no longer easily accessible. Hence, she collects plant materials when available, and stores them in powdered form. For instance, for treating infertility she has a powder consisting of 112 different medicinal plants, which can be mixed with milk and drunk. Most of the medicines she prescribes are palatable and tasty.

Dr Satyanaraya Bhat and Dr Poornima are both formally trained Ayurvedic physicians in Bangalore, who accompanied me during the visits to Mastamma. They were very surprised to see her work, and the way she could explain her experience, skills and knowledge. Over the years they have become impressed with her outstanding midwifery and many of her techniques for handling complicated cases. They could draw similarities between her healing traditions and the treatments known within Ayurveda and modern medicine. Many of the herbal remedies she prescribed are similar to those used in Ayurvedic medicine.

Mastamma's perspective

Her treatments have no community barriers. She feels her experience should be used to save lives, and bring new life into the world. She is empathetic with the needy and says: "Everyone encounters difficulties. During these difficult times we have to render support. The people we treat are like our own children. We will be remembered all through their life for our good deeds."

Passionate about her work, she has carried her own infants on her back on the way to conduct deliveries. She has had to face society, her husband, dead-end nights, wild elephants and scary

forests to serve the needy. She asks no monetary support from anyone. She says: "I accept what is given to me willingly: grains, clothes, fruits, vegetables or money, whatever the patient wants to give. I have come to this world to serve poor people and do not want to demand."

She recalls: "When I was called to treat a critically ill infant, the grandpa told me that he would give me a lot of money to save the child, which I felt could not be saved. I examined the infant and said, 'however much money you give me, I don't think I will take up this case, and give you false hope. If the child is not saved, then all blame will rest on me. I would rather treat her mother, who has a problem, so she can conceive again.' My point of view was that as a healer, I have to take righteous steps to save life, and not do anything out of greed and give false hope."

Mrs Mastamma will be honoured in September 2005 with an award for her service to traditional midwifery from Karnataka state folklore department (Karnataka Janapada and Yakshagana Academy). This is one of the most prestigious awards which the folklore department confers on people with committed service.

Healthy girls and children

Mastamma emphasises that a girl child should not marry early, but at an appropriate age, when she is able to bear a child. Special attention has to be paid to her at the time of puberty, and also after her child is born. This post-natal care is very important. These are the most important stages in a girl's life. Timely food, family support and work are essential for her. Her infant should be breastfed: breast milk contains all the nutrients required for a child's growth. A breastfeeding mother also requires extra care; she needs to eat nutritious foods and follow the prescribed regimen.

Regarding abortion, she indicates: "I do not conduct any abortions. God has sent me to save lives, so I cannot do any kind of abortions."

Numerous rewards

Mastamma willingly shares her experiences with people. In her absence, her daughter Gowri handles the cases; her



In the campus of DEED, Mrs Mastamma has collected some herbs which are used as medicine. She usually collects herbs from the forest areas.

son helps her in collecting herbs and processing the medicines. She has no objections to sharing her experience with other community members. She indicates: "When we die, we blend with the soil. We should leave our wisdom for the next generation. It will be of use to them. Many more people will benefit from our experience."

Besides being an experienced traditional healer, Mastamma is also a keen learner and keeps pace with developments. She takes part in the monthly meetings and training programme organised by a non-governmental organisation working with tribal people in Mysore, Development through Education (DEED). In the various field offices she shares her knowledge with the young minds. Her classes help students learn how to identify medicinal plants, diagnose disease, as well as practical ways to prepare medicine, all showing Mastamma's magnanimity.

Mastamma has received several awards from different organisations, such as the district-level award *Paramarya vaidya prashasti*, the state-level award *Parampika Sulagithi*, and the state-level *Natuvaidya* award. When asked how she feels about these awards, her reply is simple: "They are a motivation for me to further contribute to our society."

We would like to thank Mrs Mastamma for sharing her experience with us.

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