

Traditional Knowledge On Healing Of The Bodos: Significance And Role In The Society

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Abstract: Traditional knowledge refers to the practice of inherited body of customs and belief that has been transmitted from one generation to another, throughout the ages. The traditional healing system and traditional medicines in the Bodo society are deeply rooted with the traditional religion, belief system, customs, social values and ecology which therefore make it necessary to study it in a historical context. The healing practice includes indigenous methods like performing rituals, animal sacrifices and certain characteristic of magico-ritual. The healer in the Bodo community is referred as *Oja*. They perform the rituals, chant mantras and provides various kinds of medicines, amulets etc. The paper tends to discuss the origin of the traditional healing system among the Bodos and highlight its relevance in the society. The study is based upon the extensive field studies and interviews. Attempts have been made to understand the concept of medicine and healer, globally, in order to study the origin of medicine and traditional healers.

Keywords: Traditional knowledge, *Oja*, Traditional medicine, Magico-ritual, Bodo.

Introduction:

The Bodos belong to the Mongolian race of people and linguistically it includes the large group of Tibeto-Burman speaking group who are inhabitants of North Bengal, East Bengal, Assam and Burma. They are known by different names in different place. Bodo, Boro, Kachari, Meche, Dimasa, Lalungs, Sonowals, Deuris etc, depending on the region they live and variation in their language and culture. Bodo in general determines the Tibeto-Burman speaking group of people. They belong to a group, who has been generally designated as Kiratas, contemporary of the Aryans of Early India. They were known as the inhabitants of the Himalayan slopes and mountain ridges of the East, particularly Assam.¹ The paper is a micro study of the Bodos living in the Lower Assam. Like every other primitive society, the Bodos also developed the art of traditional knowledge in various aspects with respect to the environment they lived in. Traditional medicine as another art form they created in order to overcome with the day to day sufferings, pains, diseases etc. The traditional healing system was attached to certain belief system that was created as a part of their social system. The influence of the traditional religion, Bathou could also be seen.

The paper basically focuses on the history of traditional healing practices among the Bodos. The study is based on analyzing the data, on both historical and contemporary context. There is no material source and written sources, but it has been preserved in the form of tradition. The traditional practice of healing shows the influence of religion and belief system which is an element of primitive age. Belief generally was an inherited attributes and acceptance by the people, which were followed while practicing rituals. Religion, as River defined, was an efficacy through faith, which depended on the will of some higher power, some power whose interventions are sought by rites of supplication and propitiation.² The traits of the Ojas and the set of institutions they believed in have been discussed in the paper. The traits of the Bodo healers have been compared to various healers like Vedic healers and other contemporary healers or sorcerer of the world and the parallel process that went through. So, it is safe to say that there was a nature of magico-ritual and religion playing a dominant role in the history of medicine in case of every ancient community.

The aspects of the traditional healing practices and traditional medicines of the Bodo community are deeply rooted with the traditional religion, customs, belief, culture and environment. The healers, who were referred as Oja used all kinds of materials living and non-living that were available in the environment they lived in. Tracing back to the ancient Vedic scriptures of Yajurveda and Atharvaveda, it informs us about the Vedic healing practices, which may be characterized as magico-religious in nature. Yajurveda and Atharvaveda also further informs about the Kiratas, the ancestor of the Bodos as the cave dwellers, on the mountain ridges of Himalayas,

who the Aryans obtained drugs, herbs and soma plants.³ However, certain traits of the Vedic healers could be seen similar with that of the Ojas'. The Vedic healers performed the rituals in order to restore the patient; the same nature was seen in the healing practice of the Bodos. The Oja performed the ritual, chanted the mantras and charms and sang songs dedicated to their chief God Bathou.

Influence of customs and belief in the healing system:

There are no written sources or documents about the traditional medicines of the Bodos, but the tradition is believed to have been transmitted orally from one generation to the next generation. D.D. Kosambi on emphasizing the study of scientific study of the primitive people, has stated that primitive elements survive in the religious beliefs and rituals practiced by the people.⁴ The folk songs and ritual practices furnish about the age old traditions being practiced since ages. In order to study the history of medicine and the traditional healer of the Bodo community, it is very important to understand the concept of disease and medicine in their context. Disease was believed to be cause of an external factor that is by the agent of celestial phenomenon. The mantras chanted by the Ojas indicate about it, they have always referred to the maleficent god. The maleficent god causes sufferings when he or she is angry with the victim. With reference to the Greek medicine, the cause of disease put by Hippocratic and later physicians of Hellenistic century was the effect of cold, warmth, sun, air and climate upon the human body.⁵ While sun, air, cold, warmth and climate are also the elements of nature, they were expressed equivalently religious by the Hellenistic historians.⁶ Rivers, with the study of Melanesians, has stated that sorcerers were responsible for the cause of injury or disease. Disease was a practical consequence of sorcerer's activity where he would even take the form of snake sometime to bite the victim or produce an illusion to kill the victim.⁷ The same belief was said to have existed in the Bodo society. This concept in Bodo is known as *Daina Rainai*, where the Ojas were held responsible for the cause of the disease or misery in the family. It was believed that such actions were taken in order to seek revenge or were taken out of jealousy. So, in that case the diagnosis would consist of the discovery of human agent and essential element of nature in order to put an end to the sorcerer's activity and its maleficent effects. In contrast to the superstitions and irrationality held as the cause of the disease, Plutarch has emphasized on

deconstructing the reason for why the particular person is sick.⁸ The belief that nature healed the disease proves that, nature was treated as physician. The way the healer performed rituals dedicated to the elements of nature like water, sun, fire etc, shows its responsibility of treating or healing the disease. Such theory has been rejected by the scientific physicians stating it as a destruction of medical art.⁹

The traditional healing practice comprised of psychological element as well, where healer would chant the mantra, stroke off and hypnotize the patient. There could be several factors for the psychological involvement in the treatment. The psychological illness would be treated as *bar garji lwgw mwnnai* (often when you cross the path of maleficent god). Though, the scientific reasons could be due to emotional aspects which were the effect of certain incident or some kind of instinctive disturbances. The Oja would stroke off the patient with *sal daokhumai* (wild ferns), bath the patient with holy water or sometimes would just sprinkle it over the patient's body, chant mantras and connect with the god chanting some prayers. The holistic approach could be seen in the technique which included hypnotizing the patient. The phenomenon of hypnotism is prevalent in today's medical context also which is popularly referred as psycho-therapy. W.H.R. Rivers has postulated Sigmund Freud, a Viennese physician's work on psychology and hypnotism as "unconscious dispositions as the antecedents of changes in consciousness, but was enabled by the knowledge derived from his analysis to formulate a definite scheme of the unconscious region of the mind and of its relation to the conscious."¹⁰

The knowledge of healers had either been taught to them by the family ancestors or they have themselves struggled to learn the traits from the master healer and sometimes even blessed with it¹¹. The songs and the mantras being chanted, reflects the aspect of magico-ritual, the beliefs and sacrifices that existed among the people of the community. The rituals performed and offerings are made to the chief God Bathau. As the rituals are being performed, the songs are being sung by the Oja. M. M. Brahma's "*Folk songs of the Bodos*" has the collection of various kinds of folk songs being sung by the community in various occasions. The book also includes folk songs sung by the Oja while making offerings to the God. There is one song that goes:

*Ohm zol khubir, Dakha Khubir, Nal Khubir, Dahala Khubir, Nonsra phisa okhra don phisou don, Bisorkhou nonsor adai badai khatam, Nonsorno goy pathoi hogon an; dohayyde nonsoro amokhikhou mojan khalamnangon, oi aphaphor, dahala khubir, dakhli amokhia udoi cananoi aihan baykhan zabay baybla, bekhon mozan khalambla goy phathoi, rana dekhra hono honnanoi phao phuja hono honnanoi raithikhanaiya donoi noncorno honay zabai.*¹²

Free English translation:

Oh lord of water and curd, you who are black and white, you have foolish sons, you have foolish grandsons, hold back their mischief; I shall give you betel nut and leaf, and this red hen I have shown; mind you well; mind you well this our girl shall have to be cured presently of her stomach ache, if you cured afterwards, this red hen will be sacrificed and beheaded.

The song is being sung to the lord of water and curd, while the girl is suffering out of stomach ache. Here, water the natural element has been called upon to cure the ailing child. The lord is being offered betel nut and leaf and the promise has been made to sacrifice and behead a red hen, when the girl is cured.¹³ It is usually believed that the children are attacked by the malevolent gods which becomes impossible to treat them with just a medicine, so offerings and sacrifices are made. This, however shows the existence of magico-ritual to certain extent, where disease is believed to be caused by an external force rather than by an internal physiological function.¹⁴ The same belief was said to have existed during the Vedic period.¹⁵ Dr. Hugo Magnus with reference to the origin of Greek medicine, stated that prior to its origin, before the 6th century B.C., it was believed that supernatural agencies could treat the pathological manifestations.¹⁶

The healing process however varied from one Oja to another but their nature was same. An Oja would even counsel on any kind of health related issues including psychological problem. The patient would be washed internally by making him vomit by letting him eat certain kind of tablet made by Oja. Then, he would be bathed with holy water and taken for puja. The puja includes offering and sacrifice to the traditional god Bathau, then the healer would chant the mantras and stoke the patient with some kinds of wild plants like fern and prepare the medicines using herbs, roots, stems and there were even reference of using insects in some cases.¹⁷ The mantras chanted by the healer suggested that he possessed special kind of knowledge. The incantation chanted has been believed to have produced certain kind of psychological effects. The similar traits have been mentioned by Lucien Levy Bruhl, with reference to the Australian aborigines in his book "Primitive Mentality" where, the primitives had the ability to contact with the unseen world¹⁸. W.H.R.Rivers, a British doctor and an ethnologist in his book "Medicine, Magic and Religion" mentions about the psychological involvement in the belief system with reference to his study of the tribes in the region of New Guinea and Australia. He has tried to draw a conclusion on how medicine and religion belong to the same discipline and how the institution of belief governs the mind of the people.¹⁹ These show that there was certain parallelism in cultural practices of the world.

There are healers who are specialized at fixing bones. Their traits were quite different from the healers, who treated other kinds of illness. Their method was simpler in comparison to the rest which included just stroking off the part that is broken, applying an ointment that has been made out of various herbs or

oil extracted out of it²⁰. *Sal dakhumai* (wild fern), would be used for stroking off, while the patient would either be made to lie down or sit depending on the severity of the patient's condition. The ointment included mixture of mustard oil, paste made out of jackfruit leaves and *sanduri bilai* (wheat grass used during Hindu pujas). Sometimes the tablets made would even be made to consume. However, the technique varied from healer to healer. Some would just apply the ointment followed by a prayer, while some would start it by reciting some kinds of mantras. The following words are chanting:

Zantar mantar jharidwng

Daosa mase gang dong

Mwnla ni aithing bainaiya

*Thab ham thab hamm...*²¹

Free English translation:

Oh wild bird come soon and take away the pain of Mwnla's broken feet...

The similar kind of healer was also made reference in Rig Veda.²² The translation for Vedic mantras goes as follows:

You, the rohani, are rohani, the healer of the severed bone. [Therefore] make this [limb] grow, O Arundhati.....²³

It has been stated by Kenneth G. Zysk that the anatomical knowledge in Ancient India made its way from the Ashvamedha sacrifice.²⁴ Prior to that, there is an evidence of trepanation performed in the two sites of Indus Valley Civilization, the archaeological evidence of two skulls from Harappa and Kalibangan suggest it.²⁵ The performance of surgery has been practiced in the animals. Though there is no evidence of surgeries performed by the Bodo Ojas, there are evidences of them being expertise in fixing broken bones. Though there is variation in the process of healing among the Ojas the common thing found was the use of eggs of the cellar spiders. It is believed that it has a significant property which helps in treating the fractured bones or injury. Similarly, the Vedas also mention about the *laksa* or *silaci*, a kind of lac, as an important remedy to mend injury or fractured bones.²⁶ Besides, there were other kinds of healers, those that treated animals. Domestic animals like cows, buffaloes, goats and pigs would frequently be infected externally, in that case there were special herbalist who took care of it. Infections would be treated using

kharwi (alkaline which were extracted from mustard plants), mixed with some kind of herbs and applied to the wound.²⁷

The Role of Environment in Traditional Healing:

One important aspect of the traditional healing system was the environment. The healer used all kinds of materials that were locally available in their surroundings. The plant sources like leaves, roots, stems, bark of the tree, fruits, seeds etc and the animal sources like skin, nails, fats, bird feathers etc were all that were available around them. Most of the locals usually have the knowledge of treating themselves from fevers, flu, typhoid, jaundice and migraine. Although not everyone would be an expertise in it, but most of them would have a brief knowledge about it.²⁸ It shows the healer's knowledge of the local flora and fauna and their dependence on it. The healer did not just have the knowledge of herbs or plant or animal sources but they were aware about their nutritional value as well. They were well aware about the food sources that were to be consumed during the supposed time.²⁹ It was clearly seen that the Bodo community being agro-pastoral community, would still be relied on gathering forest products for food.

The evidences of seals found in the Prehistoric phase in India, the seals were believed to have worn as an amulet to ward off the evils³⁰. The seals contained the various pictures of animals and plants, which shows the significance of nature. Nature was being worshipped and it is believed to be the foundation of primitive belief, the very root of traditional practices.

The Ojas of today has however reported to face some problem due to the unavailability of certain sources. For example, earlier the materials and sources required for making medicines would easily be available to them. But now due to human encroachments and population growth several forests seemed to have disappeared which made it difficult for the Ojas to find their raw materials.³¹

Significance of Oja:

Ojas and traditional medicines have played a major role in the lives of the people during the absence of the advance medical system. Though some of their approaches were believed to be holistic, it served relief to the mind and soul of the people there was certain kind of irrationality as well. Other tribal societies throughout the world saw the same approaches in the healing system. There was a strong

influence of religion and customs which were seen influencing and was seen reflected in the tradition they followed while performing the ritual. Ojas besides removing evils and diseases, also were believed to have destructed their enemies and for bringing some people under their control.

The Ojas did every bit to help the ailing person. In the society there was belief that gods and goddesses roam invisibly and sometimes troubled them when they crossed the paths. So to protect the people from troubles, Oja came as a savior.³² They took several steps like *Kasini ganhonai* (thread worn around wrist), *doi jharinai* (sprinkling of holy water), *jharinai* (stroking with wild leafs and grass). There were also evidences of sorcery practiced. Disease was believed to be the influence of the witchcrafts.

The effort put by Oja could be seen in the performance. In case he fails to cure the ailing patient he is suspected to be under evil influence of *Derah* (a malignant spirit). In such case, following chants are being read to regain *Dehrah*'s favor:

Ohom dehrah burai derah borai

Khari khata buroi khari khata borai

Noncorha phica akhra don picou akhra

Dong aday khalam nangon

Phap nangon dohay aiphor aphaphor

Amokhi khou non mozan khalamblano

Noncorni namoi khazi bukhri

Sonnanoi baogon an, hamabla

Nathay noncore buli monzanay

Nona, dohay aiphor aphaphor nancorno icrbla, maha phorbu

Tharblea khulumo an noncorkhou

Goley goley, dohay noncor dano amkhikhou

*Cokha nangon.*³³

Free English translation:

Oh you *Dehrah*, you who are wood cutters, you have foolish children and grand children; dissuade them from all the mischief. Oh father, cure the child soon for which you shall be entitled to offerings. If truly, you are Great Lords, I pray to you to cure our child instantly.

Here spirits have been held responsible for the failure of Oja's performance. There were instances where an Oja in order to trivialize another Oja, would take such step so that he fails. These show the presence of irrational causes and blind forces that influenced the diseases or misery in people's life.

Ojas held a very important position in the society. Besides just taking care of the people, they had strong ethical principles, who believed that it was their responsibility to foster life in all forms and alleviate people's suffering. However, Oja's main job was to take care of people's life but later it has been found that people adopted it as a source of livelihood. Oja as a profession for livelihood was also referred by Dr. Kameshwar Brahma.³⁴

Conclusion:

The primitive people have significantly contributed to the society, particularly in the field of culture and religion. It has been reflected in various aspects of traditional practices that are still practiced today. Traditional medicine is the oldest form of medicinal practice, by the tribal people around the world. During the absence of advanced medical system, traditional healing practice has proved to be a boon for the people. There was certain element of irrationality, which was seen as global phenomenon in the history of medicine in every part of the world. Religion played a dominant role, whose influence was seen in the practice of rituals performed during the healing ceremony. Belief also played its part with some aspects of superstition and irrationality. Another important significant part of traditional healing practice was the environment. The resources available in the environment provided the materials to the healers to make it possible for them to perform their rituals.

Oral tradition serves as an important source while reconstructing the roots of the traditional practices, especially when there is lack of material evidences. Analysis is done based on both historical and contemporary context. The traditional healing practices of the Bodos has been studied empirically with the help of oral sources.

Religion was seen as an important aspect that influenced the traditional practices. The aspect of Bathou, the traditional religion of the Bodos was seen influencing the traditional healing practice.

The ceremonies and offerings done performed by the Ojas were done on the basis of Bathou rituals. Though there are some amount of irrationality and superstition in the traditional healing practices of Bodo, there is certain element of rationality in it. The traditional healing practice is still relevant today. During the time of advance medical facility people still rely on Ojas. It has been seen that the traditional medicines holds the root of advance medicine. Initiatives have been take by leading health organizations like AYUSH and various others, to work with the traditional healers of various parts of the country and do an in-depth research in their field. The western scholars are also seen interested in traditional Indian medicine either to understand the living tradition of healing or as a problem in the history of medicine.³⁵ In the West also the scholars have suggested that, ancient form of medical practice is the root of advanced medical science.

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