



Exorcism of Folk Healing : Rajbanshi Society of Sub-Himalayan Bengal

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Medication is regarded as one of the basic amenities for the sustenance of human life, all across the world. This essential feature of human civilization, still exists in now a days, both in pristine and institutionalized form. However, Medication in a traditional nature, best developed by the indigenous caste or tribal communities. Their own curative & preventive medicinal practices, encompasses self-mechanism in making herbal medicine with available nature elements and magical means (exorcism) for healing illness. In the context of folk medication, these constitutes 2 prominent aspects, in which the first one shows a substantial relevance in terms of the Ayurvedic field, while the other represents the traditional belief of the respective folk community. In terms of the wide knowledge on Folk Medication, especially on existential practice of magicoreligious form of healing, the Rajabanshi community of Sub Himalayan Bengal deserves special attention.

The Rajbanshis are regarded as a major indigenous community in the Sub-Himalayan Bengal region. This region which comprises 3 districts of North Bengal (Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri & Alipurduar) and extends to lower part of Assam & northern Bangladesh. However, the postcolonial concept of Rajabanshi (greater Koch Rajabanshi) means indigenous people who have adopted Rajabanshi /Kamtapuri language as their lingua franca. According to eminent British-h historian and statistician W.W Hunter, the Rajbanshis suffered common diseases like dysentery, malaria, spleen, goitre & venereal diseases. However, epidemics like Cholera (Garmari) & Small pox (Thakurani) became a matter of concern due to their fatal characters, in the preceding centuries. Besides, the Rajbanshis had been affected from simple fever, whooping cough, blindness, deaf-mutism and insanity, which they believed to be the work of evil spirits. Thus, apart from treatment with herbs, the Rajbanshis of North Bengal often resorted to Medical exorcism (Mahanti Kora). They had developed a distinctive tradition of propitiating certain malevolent spirits (Deo) whose bad gaze considered to be responsible for the outbreak of respective diseases. This includes 'bhuts1 (male spirits), 'Pettani' & 'Poiri1 (female spirits), 'Masan/Masna' (with large variations), 'dhumbaba', 'Jokha-Jokhi' etc. In the Rajbanshi society, the existence of a Shaman (Witch-doctor) is significant who generally propitiates the evil spirits, and conduct rituals of medical exorcism to treat the affected person.

Magical-religious beliefs are essentially linked with the folk medicinal practices of the indigenous communities, like in the case of the Rajbanshis. The Rajbanshis of Sub Himalayan Bengal believed in magical means, within the field of Medical exorcism, as offensive charms. They were very much superstitious and dependent on miraculous incidents. This tradition of magical belief of the Rajbanshis continued to survive since from the colonial period. However, belief in supernatural beings and propitiation of the demigods for healing resulted due to the inadequacy of modern medicinal facilities like hospitals, doctors & dispensaries. This non-availability of modern medication had compelled the Rajbanshis to be more dependent on the magical means of healing, which they considered sufficient for curing the ailments at least within their own community. In the context of medical exorcism, 2 types of traits are noticed- (i) magical means of healing, and (ii) black magic for charming. In the first case, the Rajbansh is worshipped the evil spirits/demi-gods/deities (Deo) for the sake of recovery. The actual worship is called 'Pak-kora/Amali-pudza/PakI, while the ritual which became fully conducted with the articles of worships taken together, termed as 'Pudza', in the local dialect. In the context of an elaborate ritual, the Rajbanshis often used certain incantations, which claimed very efficacious in driving of evil spirits. Most common of them namely 'Dzol-poraI (Sanctification by water) and 'Tel-poraI (Sanctification by oil), almost applied in case of propitiate all kind of spirits.

The Rajbanshis often classified the malevolent spirits (Deos), in terms of gender (Bhut as male & Poiri/Pettani as female), on the basis of nature (Amongst the bhuts, Mogor is considered as extremely dangerous), so on & so forth. Besides, they also believed some spirits as the manifestation of respective deities, such as the 'Gorbo Thakurani', an aspect of goddess Kali. Above all, the Rajbanshis claimed that these malevolent spirits took possession of the human body and caused outbreak of a common kind of malady, whose symptoms includes regular fits simulating hysteria (Cholona), blindness (sometimes night blindness or Andhashula), intense shivering and insane behaviour. The Rajbanshis also used different sanctified things as protective means such as anklet (moreha kharu), beads necklace (hoiddar mala), iron (as a protective metal), talisman (dhap), broom stick, fishing net, etc. Apart from these, there are some protective spells applied on a person (Deha bon/Gao bon), a house (Bari Bon) and sometimes the whole village (Goram bon) against the attack of evil eye. Comparatively, the latter is generally done when an epidemic of cholera or small pox breaks out. In this case, the ritual is conducted by sprinkling some charmed water or sand on the body of person/outskirts of a house/boundary of a village. Thereafter, the Rajbanshis believed that these incantations (Bon) shield them from any kind of harm. The Rajbanshis also practiced black magical charms such as throwing magical arrows, of invisible nature, especially to disturb their enemies, which became another common trend in the field of magical exorcism. These charmed arrows claimed to cause either positive or mental harm to its victims. Eminent scholar Charu Chandra Sanyal had recorded the types of charming arrows practiced by the Rajbanshi charmers of the late 20th century in his famous treatise "The Rajbansis of North Bengal ". The most common of them are 'Baro Gopaler ban', 'Tepa ban', 'Hawa-tepa ban', 'Masna ban', 'Meheri-buri ban', 'Juguni ban', 'Brahma banI etc. While the first 4 charmed arrows (bans) causes physical harms, ranging from severe headache with burning sensation, swelling of abdomen & Ulcers on the whole body, the 5th one

became responsible for affecting mentally, in form of insanity. However the last 2's effectiveness remains in question as one claimed its victim by making him pray of the vultures, while the latter strikes lightning on its victim.

The Rajbanshis worshipped a great many deities like 'Masan/Masna Deo', 'Basanta Thakurani', 'Bishahari Kanduni Deo', 'Bao Deo', 'Chandi', etc. They widely believed that the blessings of their deities helped them to overcome any kind of difficulties, especially recovery from any severe ailments. Amongst of their deities, Masan/Masna Deo remains much popular in this region. According to the legends, he is the offspring of goddess Kali & god Dharma. However, in terms of physical traits like his bluish skin colour, he is sometimes related to Lord Shiva. He is believed to be a great fighter and rides on a horse. The leech is regarded as his manifestation and hence if any one gets frightened at the sight of an approaching leech and in consequence gets high fever, a pak (ritual) is done to propitiate Masan. The attack of Masan consists of certain symptoms like diarrhoea, dysentery, indigestion, weakness, passing of urine & semen in the sleep, and ends ultimately in general oedema, dropsy and death. In the Rajbanshi community, about 16 varieties of Masan Dec's are worshipped, who are considered as different aspects of one single dreadful Masan. Some of them like 'Bisua Masan', 'Obua Masan', 'Sukna Masan', 'Demsu Masan etc. are worshipped in conducting medical exorcism. In the treatment against Masan's attack (Chutsia dhora), the mustard seeds are regarded as the perfect catalyst for absorbing the effects of Masan Deo. It is often said to be the most dangerous & most dreaded among the spirits who receives well reverence, in terms of it's fearful nature. Apart from Masan, other deities includes Basanta Thakurani & Bishahari Kanduni Deo who are regarded as manifestations of regional deities like goddess Sitala & Manasa, and worshipped to medical exorcising small pox and snake bite/venomous diseases. On the otherhand, Chandi is regarded as an aspect of goddess Shakti, but in this context, sometimes regarded as a spirit, whose presence resulted severe fevere of high temperature and insane behaviour to the victim. Due to this, the tradition of propitiating certain spirits, as well as, distinctive deities had developed as a common trend in medical exorcism of the Rajbanshi community.

The Rajbanshi rituals of medical exorcism considered to be helpful for improving mental strength of patients to fight against ailments. Though, the magical-religious means of folk healing is connected with tribal faith, an illiterate and superstitious community like the Rajbanshis wanted to sustain through clinging the supernatural beliefs, in recent times. However, the present generation of the Rajbanshis doesn't relied on magical-religious means of healing, instead, they now realised the benefits of modern medicinal facilities and resorted to it. Now-a-days, they merely maintained the traditions of worshipping & propitiating spirits as a part of their folk-culture. The magical charming is now extinct, but, treatment with herbs still continued to exist, as a part of a healthy diet, among the Rajbanshis. As the Rajbanshis applied the medicinal herbs in their dishes, their food became very much preventive & curative in nature. Although the present generation prefers to consume the popular foods of present day but the old generation of the Rajbansh is of Sub-Himalayan Bengal still praise their own food.

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