



# THE HISTORY OF INDIGENOUS HEALTH CARE PRACTICES AMONG RAJBANSHI COMMUNITY OF NORTH BENGAL

**Prasenjit Sinha**

Student of Ph.D.

Department of History, University of North Bengal,

Raja Rammohunpur, Dist- Darjeeling, West Bengal, India.

**Abstract:** Health is the important universal asset for human. According to the WHO Global Report on Traditional and Complementary Medicine (2019), various systems of traditional medicine being used around the world include acupuncture, herbal medicines, indigenous traditional medicine, ayurvedic, Unani medicine etc. And several WHO Member States have reported on the use of traditional medicine by their populations. So, Northern part of Bengal is not an anomaly, it has been home of several distinct indigenous groups and tribes. This region is having distinctive climatic, ecological condition, rich collection of numerous herbs. Every community evolved their own indigenous health care practices based on their knowledge, traditional beliefs, cultures and practices to prevent and cure different health diseases. Here case study of Rajbanshi community is taken as they have rich cultural history, customs & they are majority people of the region. Their medicines are said to have cured hundreds of ailments and is still very much in practice among the group along with modern medical institutions. The paper is descriptive & exploratory in nature for better understanding of their various traditional and modern healthcare practices. The purpose of the study is to focus on the distinct medical practices, explore the concept of health, disease and treatment procedures among the Rajbanshi population. Thus, it will help to restore the medical system, the culture and heritage of the ethnic people of North Bengal.

**Keywords:** Health, Indigenous, Rajbanshi, Traditional, Disease.

## I. INTRODUCTION:

The distinctive geographical features of North Bengal significantly influenced its population structure. North Bengal resembled an ethnological museum of India, where people from diverse religious, caste, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds coexisted. The majority of North Bengal's population consisted of tribes and sub-tribes, who were also the original inhabitants of the area. These communities primarily lived in close proximity to nature, including the hills, jungles of Duars and Terai, tea gardens, and certain parts of the plains. The principal indigenous communities are the Nepalis, Lepchas, Sherpas, Chakmas, Totoes, Meches, Dhimals, Garos, Rajbanshis, Ravas, Oraons, Mundas, Santals, etc.

In North Bengal's villages, various professionals such as vairs, purohitas, ojhas, astrologers, fakirs, and pirs played the role of medical practitioners. Religion had a significant influence in village society, even extending to the treatment sector. Deities like Sitala, Kali, Manasha, Dharmathakur, Chandi, Durga, Shiva, Sanithakur, Olabibi, Satyapir, and Tistaburi were believed to bring well-being but could also cause harm when displeased. To appease these deities, villagers conducted daily, monthly, and annual worship rituals, offering sacrifices and oblations. Flowers and amulets were also used as preventive and remedial measures for diseases.

## II. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF INDIGENOUS MEDICAL SYSTEM:

The topic has vast coverage as different community has been practising this. So this article coverages few similar aspects on the health practices of indigenous people of Northern part of West Bengal and give detailed picture of Rajbanshi community. While some tribal communities had a high birth rate, others faced low growth rates that threatened their existence. It is essential to study

the health care and medicinal practices of North Bengal's indigenous population. With industrial development, new diseases are emerging, necessitating innovative approaches and a review of historical remedies.

The importance of traditional medicine is very immense such as- 1. It is very low rate and normally curable. So, it can give better scope than others in the days of acute medicinal crisis. 2. As western medicine is suitable for the cold countries where the indigenous medicine is suitable for the vegetarians of tropical countries like India. 3. The traditional medicine has totally side effect less. Because the WHO (World Health Organization) has been banning few western drugs for their dangerous side effect. 4. At the present time few indigenous medicine men are demanding that some deadly diseases like tuberculosis, cancer and AIDS can be cured by dangerous drugs. So, it should be examined seriously (Das, 2015, p. 199).

The folk medical system existed in an unwritten form, with its fundamental theory rooted in both natural and supernatural concepts. Typically, practitioners and ingredients for folk medicine were sourced locally. This system was passed down through generations, following a teacher-pupil tradition. Folk medicine incorporated elements such as magic, prayer, incantations, sacrifices, sorcery, and various herbal, animal, and mineral remedies. While the primary principles were consistent across various tribes in North Bengal, there were minor variations in terms of medicinal ingredients, magical mantras, deities, beliefs about treatment, and the rules governing their application.

The indigenous people had evolved their own medicinal system based on traditional beliefs, cultures and practices. (Hunter, 1882, p.74). As the indigenous people lived close to nature, they sought medicinal remedies from natural sources and revered nature for their physical well-being. However, when these natural remedies proved ineffective, they turned to deities for assistance. On one hand, they attributed their ailments to these deities, while on the other hand, they worshipped them for healing. Many emphasized the importance of maintaining a clean environment, physical purity, and domestic tidiness, rooted in traditional beliefs. Additionally, some aspects of their health system had a scientific foundation.

Sometimes the tribal people considered certain evil souls or sinister spirits responsible for different diseases. It seemed to them that the human society was engirted with various souls which used to live in forests, deserted house or graveyard. They made harm to people directly or influenced by someone when they got disappointed. They were not visible, but their existence could be perceived. (Ghosh, 2011, p.115).

In indigenous societies, people were influenced by magic, particularly harmful black magic. Diseases caused by black magic could be cured using white or beneficial magic. Magicians would create an image of a specific person from mud or sand and then pierce an incanted iron skewer into it. The person would fall ill within a few days. In some cases, charmers would bewitch a specific body part of an individual, causing illness. Additionally, some skilled practitioners of black magic would administer special herbal, animal, or mineral-based medicines to people through their food or drink. The tribal community attributed many evils, such as sudden child deaths, snake bites, and other ailments, to witches or dains.

Apart from supernatural causes, the tribal people had also been attacked with diseases occurred due to natural reasons like climatic disorder, change of weather, spread of bacillus, poisonous food, untidiness, indiscipline in life style etc. In tribal medical system two types of treatment was prevailed - preventive and remedial or curative. As a preventive medical system armour, amulet, talisman, herbal drugs, occult method of charming, enchantment were experienced. On the other hand, magic, illusion, prayer, sacrifice, use of herbal, mineral and animal drugs, incantation were adopted as part of remedial measure. The chief diseases of the tribal people were dysentery, diarrhoea, fever, different kind of sores, malaria, leprosy, eye disease and several venereal diseases. (Ghosh, 2011, p.116).

The traditional medicine of North Bengal can be categorized into two main parts: the health care and medicinal practices of the indigenous population, often referred to as folk medicine, and the other established medical systems such as Ayurveda, Unani, Homeopathy, and Tibetan medicine. The indigenous system of medicine, with its ancient roots, continues to be widely practiced in various regions of North Bengal, preserving the rich traditions of the past. The folk medicine had become popular mainly in the villages. The villagers were indifferent to the political developments and commotions due to their relative self-sufficiency, comparative freedom and independence of the village society. Thus, some practices of the ancient Indian culture were visible in the villages as also some practices of Ayurveda (Roy Chowdhury, 1988, p.134).

They believed that a good number of causes like impurities, bad weather, disappointment or anger of gods, evil spirits were the root causes of various diseases. For treatment of various diseases local ojhas were called. The ojhas (village exorcists) by chanting mantras tried to satisfy the disappointed gods. They also took effort to please the offended gods and goddesses by offering both vegetable and animal products. In most of the cases the deities were the goddesses. For the treatment of the village communities herbs and shrubs were utilized immensely as raw materials for preparing medicines (Roy Chowdhury, 1988, p.136).

### III. INDIGENOUS HEALTH CARE PRACTICES OF RAJBANSHI COMMUNITY:

In North Bengal the indigenous communities the Rajbanshis had acquired an eminent position from the point of view of population, social customs, language and cultural practices. The Rajbanshis predominated in Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur and Rangpur districts of pre independent India. The Rajbanshis experienced a variety of illnesses consistently throughout the year, such as fever, cough, cholera, night blindness, small pox etc.

The Rajbanshi medical practitioners demonstrated exceptional skill in treating various diseases. The Rajbanshis, like other indigenous communities in North Bengal, believed that diseases were caused by evil spirits. They employed various methods to neutralize these spirits, including prayers, worship, and magic words. One such method was 'Mohanti Kora,' which involved

expelling evil spirits. If the initial incantations failed, they would repeat the process the next day. If that too was unsuccessful, they arranged another prayer, often dedicated to Lord Shiva. The purpose of these pujas was to eradicate the evil spirit and incorporate the disease within the practitioner. These rituals were typically conducted during the daytime, and the knowledge of montros and puja rules was passed down through generations within the exorcist community.

Sanyal (1965, p.170) notes that Rajbansis of North Bengal believe that diseases are due to evil spirits and hence exorcism is the method adopted to drive out the spirits for the cure of the diseases. It is called Mahanti kora. Treatment with herbs is also resorted to. Now-a-days they are getting interested in modern scientific medicines. The other day, in 1955, in village Dhupguri in the Western Duars of Jalpaiguri District a preceptor (gurudev) came to the house of one of his clients. He was attacked with cholera. A puja was being performed to drive out the evil spirit that had taken possession of the said gentleman causing the disease. One of the social workers from the town happened to be there. The condition of the patient was going from bad to worse with starting of cramps in the limbs. He tried to call a modern doctor but the preceptor who was even then conscious, would not touch allopathic medicine. The worker gave a little bit of homeopathic medicine for the patient. But as soon as he came to know of it he refused to have any medicine. At last the preceptor succumbed to the disease. Instances of like nature may be multiplied. When the local District Board health officers went to the villages for vaccination against small pox and cholera the people resented and many fled to the neighbouring jungles to avoid vaccination lest the spirits become angry. Lately the epidemics have been largely controlled by mass vaccination under the threat of law. Now the people are realising the benefits of vaccination and the younger section is pressing the Government for introducing and continuing preventive and curative measures according to modern scientific methods but still recalcitrants are not inconsiderable.

And when the fever is high he recites the following incantation over a pot of clean water and gives it to the patient to drink. Also he blows some air from his mouth on the body of the patient several times after reciting a part of the montro.

The montro  
DhumTore akas, dhumtore patal  
nai tor pudzar porkas  
has khalo paro khalo  
muha mongso bhoikhon koro  
sogger bura buri, soggo na gia  
soggo na gia colo.

Additionally, they also used herbal treatments to ward off these malevolent forces. To eradicate fever, the village exorcist performed rituals with a pigeon, attempting to transfer the evil spirit from the patient. The exorcist recited incantations and created a magical ambiance to heal the patient.

In the prayer different kind of ingredients were required like two ripe plantain of two branches (about 32 bananas), five malbhog plantains, sugary puffed paddy (murki) of about half a seer, curd, milk-each one pot (about half a pound each), sugar (half pound), incense (dhup), wood-apple (bel), white flowers and one pair pigeons etc. The puja was arranged at the house of the ailing person. After the worship, some curd or milk was given to the diseased person to eat. Often a little sweetened puffed paddy, curd and plantain were mixed and a little bit was also offered to him. After the puja the pigeons devoted to the gods were either sacrificed or made them free to fly by smattering some water on their heads and by reciting some incantation (Ghosh, 2011, p.119).

Pocchut kata (rickets) is also a dangerous disease. Children are attacked with this diseases upto ten years of age. The child gradually becomes weak and always suffers from some diseases or other (Sanyal, 1965, P.172). To cure an ailing child, they performed a ritual involving water collected from a north-flowing river, mixed with raw milk and kept overnight. An exorcist would recite mystic words over the water, and the child would be bathed with it. The child stood on a plantain leaf at a tri-junction, facing south. The Rajbanshis wholeheartedly believed that this process would gradually restore the child's health. Night blindness or andha sula was a common disease among the Rajbanshi people. In that disease three living glow-worms were poured into three pieces of ripe banana. It was their belief that the afflicted would devour entirely each piece of the plantain one by one every day and as a result would regain the lost sight. A portion of dry intestine of a cow was mixed with a little saliva of the mouth and then it was kept in the inner canthus of the affected eye. It was like an emollient application. Instantly the person was asked to view the stars at night. After that the story of andha sula was recited in front of the patient (Ghosh, 2011, p. 120-121).

It is not unusual for complications to arise although very rarely they happen. They are supposed to be due to the evil influence of spirits. If the labour is delayed an exorcist (Ojha) is called. The 'Ojha' takes a cup of mustard oil and utters some montros. This oil is then rubbed by some other women on the abdomen of the mother. If it fails a cup of water is taken and some stronger montros are uttered over it. A part of the water is given to the mother to drink and the other part is rubbed on the abdomen. If this also fails promise is made to Duari Thakur to sacrifice a pigeon for his propitiation provided a safe delivery is effected. Sometimes the root of a particular tree is tied with a cotton string touching the abdomen or tied to the hair of the head. It is said that the root must be removed immediately after the delivery of the child, otherwise the whole uterus may come out. If all these fail the woman is left to her fate, in the meanwhile songs to propitiate the goddess 'Bhut Kali' are sung in the house to invoke her assistance. This is called 'Mahanti Kora'. At last a doctor from the nearest Health Centre or a private medical practitioner is called. Usually when he comes there remains nothing to do (Sanyal, 1965, p.65).

The "Bisua" festival was celebrated on first Bysak (the first month of the Bengali calendar) of every year with the object of uprooting unhealthiness in the family and also removing the existence of evil spirit (Sunder, Press, 1895, p.58).

During the cholera outbreak, the Rajbanshis worshipped and appeased the goddess Chandi, believing that she was the cause of diseases, including cholera. To pacify her, they sacrificed a buffalo calf or a goat. Among the Rajbanshis Chandi thakurani (Goddess Chandi) was regarded as a terrified goddess causing multifarious illness (Sunder, 1895, P.54).



Garam puja is another important event among Rajbanshis. It is worshipping the village Deity. This is the community puja where the whole village takes part for the welfare of the villagers. This is invoking the blessings of Mahakal, Mahakali or Kali and Monosha Devi to drive out the evil spirits and to bestow good health and good crop to the village. Every 'puja' in South Bengal begins with the puja of 'Ganesh' but the Rajbanshis begin with the puja of 'Monosha' (Sanyal, 1965, p. 32).

Across most regions of North Bengal, the Rajbanshis commonly worshipped a formidable male deity known as 'Masan.' Masan was typically revered in rural areas. The intensity of Masan's worship was particularly high in the Cooch Behar district, likely due to the significant presence of Rajbanshi people in the region. The Rajbanshis celebrated the festival called "Jitua" during October. People involved in legal cases or those with sickness in their homes placed a large number of green and ripe plantains in a tray and dedicated them to the deity.

The indigenous people of North Bengal used a great variety of medicinal plants and herbs for eradicating various diseases. Sanyal (1965, p.173) writes:

For burns : Crushed unboiled potato is applied on the burnt limb. Hemkatsa (Bryophyllum-S. C. B.-Pathorkuchi ) leaves are crushed and applied.

Cold and Cough :- Turmeric ( curcuma longa ) is tied in a piece of cloth and allowed to hang round the neck with a string. The child's mother should not eat rice at night.

Fever :- Dzol pora.-Sanctified water.

Fractures :- Tel pora-Charmed oil. It is claimed that the fracture heals up in 48 hours.

Head-ache :- A green plantain is cut into small pieces, crushed with lime, honey and salt and pasted on the forehead.

Pain in the abdomen :- The tuber of a particular grass (kena ghas-Scirpus kysoor) is crushed and some juice is extracted. It is mixed with ginger and salt and taken by mouth slightly warmed.

Cholera :- ( dhum beram, bhedgormi ) :- Bhodro Kali is worshipped.

Small or chicken Pox :- (guti, puskora ) - Telpbra and dzolpora. (charmed oil or water).

Diarrhoea:- Parched rice ( muri ) is mixed with water, a little white dhup (incense ) and salt are added. It is taken by mouth.

A kind of small plantation containing many needs (Kangur-pir kela) is roasted, crushed in water and taken by mouth with a little salt.

Ulcers and wounds:- Roots of 'Kesrai ghas' and 'Bhomra-cita' are boiled in mustard oil. This oil when applied stops bleeding and dries up the wound. If the ulcer is big, a little green areca is crushed under the teeth and mixed with the boiling oil. Sometimes the entire herbal plants are boiled in mustard oil and applied.

Snake bite :- ( 1 ) Put at once a band of the earth raised by earth-worm over and around the bitten area and then call an exorcist (Odzha). This band prevents spreading of the snake poison.

(2.) The juice of leaves of Dulphi (Leucas Linifolia S. C. B-Dandakalas) is poured into the nostrils. Rabid dog and Jackie bite:- A suitable exorcist is called.

Certain superstitions prevailed among some of the Rajbanshis and those had affected the society in many ways. Like medicine could not be given to an ailing member of the family by a female member (Dev, 2001, p.68). But The British Government's Forest acts restricted the collection of medicinal plants by tribal medicine men. Unfortunately, these forest acts and deforestation activities had detrimental effects on the health of the indigenous people in rural North Bengal.

From the above discussion it is said that the traditional medicine did not free from the limitations. These are 1. Apathy of our present generation. They consider this system as primitive and empirical and their opinion that it may be used as an alternative but not as a frontline system of medicine. 2. Piracy of western druggists. Earlier they inappropriately included the names and the merits of different herbs and medicinal plants in the British Pharmacopocia, then they began to double profit for monopoly of drug trade. Now, they are directly demanding the patents of few valuable drugs and herbs like Neem (Azadirachta indica) Ginger (Zingiber officinate), Turmeric (Curcuma longa), Aniseed (Pinpinela anisum) of India as their own. If the government of India does not become careful at the right time. we shall lose the patents of other important herbs and drugs in near future. 3. It has no provision of ordinary cure, few significant medical texts on these systems are yet to be rescued and still to be expounded. (Das, 2015, p. 198-199).

#### IV. CONCLUSION:

The indigenous healthcare system in North Bengal is an ancient, informal, and unwritten medical practice. Its core principles are rooted in natural and supernatural concepts, often lacking scientific reasoning. Despite having so many drawbacks the health care system can be a potential alternative with the adaptation of latest scientific method to cure and prevent several diseases. This system is closely tied to the traditions, culture, beliefs, and practices of the local aboriginal communities, passed down through generations.

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