

The Medicinal Practices of the Rajbanshis of North Bengal

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The atypical environmental characteristics of North Bengal have left profound impact on its population structure. North Bengal is like an ethnological museum of India. People of different religion, caste, culture and linguistic group are living side by side in this region. Majority part of the population of North Bengal are the tribes and sub tribes who are also the original inhabitants of the area. They mainly reside close to nature in the hills, in the jungles of Duars and Terai, in tea gardens and some parts of the plains also. Some of the principal indigenous communities of North Bengal are the Meches, Totoes, Dhimals, Garos, Rajbanshis, Ravas, Malpaharis etc.¹

The purpose of the paper is to focus on the health practices of one of this important indigenous population of northern part of Bengal, the Rajbanshis. In North Bengal among the indigenous communities the Rajbanshis had acquired an eminent position from the point of view of population, social customs, language and cultural practices.² The Rajbanshis predominated in Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur, Goalpara in Assam and Rangpur districts. Basically they were agriculturists.³

The Rajbanshis developed a unique medicinal system from time immemorial. The purpose of the paper is to focus on the distinct medical practices of the Rajbanshi population of North Bengal. The medicinal plants and herbs were the main ingredients of medicine of the Rajbanshis of North Bengal. Today the forests are going to fade away and it led to the destruction of various medicinal plants also. Consequently their medicines are also going to be lost with the forests. As hunting also became prohibited the Rajbanshi practitioners could not get animal ingredients for preparing their medicines. Thus the principal objective of the paper is to focus on those issues.

The Rajbanshi medicinal system was the oldest system and still now is very much prevalent in different areas of North Bengal bearing the tradition of the past. The Rajbanshi 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.⁴ 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 satisfy 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.⁵ Sometimes the ojhas took liquor from the patient as fees. They often collected a black goat, a red cock and rupees 1.50.⁶

The Rajbanshi people had evolved their own medicinal system based on traditional beliefs, cultures and practices.⁷ As they were close to nature they used to seek their medicines in the nature and also worshipped the nature for physical healthiness. But when that failed they started to devote some deities. On the one hand they considered the deities responsible for their ailments and on the other hand also worshipped them for eradication of diseases. Most of them emphasized on cleanliness of environment, physical sanctity and

domestic tidiness and that were based on traditional beliefs. In some cases their health system had some scientific base also.

Sometimes the Rajbanshi 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 some one when they got disappointed. They were not visible, but their existence could be perceived. Now and then they also deluded human being by getting different shapes and figures.⁸

In Rajbanshi society the tribal people were influenced by the impact of magic especially black or harmful magic. The disease created by black magic could be cured by the use of white or efficacious magic. The magician after creating an image of the specific person by mud or sand pierced an incanted iron skewer on it. The person began to ill within a few days. In certain cases the charmer also bewitched a distinct part of the body of a particular person and made him ailing. Some people, efficient in black art also applied a special kind of medicine (made of herbal, animal or mineral products) in the body of the person with his or her food or drink or any other medicine.

Apart from supernatural causes, the Rajbanshi 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. Dysentery and diarrhoea appeared due to germ infection and poisonous food. Syphilis was the outcome of intemperance in practice and conduct. In those cases the tribal people took the help of the ojhas who treated the patients by applying various herbal, animal and mineral drugs.⁹

In Rajbanshi 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 otherhand, magic, illusion, prayer, sacrifice, use of herbal, mineral and animal drugs, incantation were adopted as part of remedial measure. The chief diseases of the Rajbanshi people were dysentery, diarrhoea, fever, and different kind of sores, malaria, leprosy, eye disease and several venereal diseases.

The Rajbanshi medical system was in unwritten form, and its basic theory was based on natural and supernatural ideas. Usually the practitioners and ingredients of folk medicine were both collected from the local area. The medical system was continuing from generation to generation or teacher- pupil tradition. Magic, prayer, incantation, sacrifice, sorcery, and various herbal, animal and mineral medicines were incorporated in the scenario of Rajbanshi medicine

The Rajbanshis suffered from various diseases throughout the year like fever (jar), cholera (dhum) small pox (basanta), olaota (bhed boomi), measles (khesra), dysentery (bindisor), consumption (rajbiadi), jaundice (pandur), cough (kas, kop), giddiness (chok), rheumatism (bat rog), epistaxis (bleeding of nose), colic (bis), asthma (susai), night blindness (andha sula) etc.

In the period under review if anybody was attacked with a disease it would be termed as “deodhora”. The inner meaning of the term was that instead of doctor an exorcist would be called, because he could alone find out the causes of diseases and only his exclusive treatment could make the unhealthy completely in good health. The Rajbanshi medical practitioners excelled in the treatment of wound, pimple and fracture.

Like many other indigenous communities of North Bengal the Rajbanshis believed that diseases originated due to evil spirits. Thus they undertook many measures to inactive and to make disappear the evil spirits. One of them was the act of expelling evil spirits by prayers, worshipping or magic words.¹⁰ The method was known as Mohanti Kora. Treatment with herbs was another step undertaken by them to ward off the evil spirits. To eradicate fever the village exorcist worshipped to satisfy the evil spirit causing fever. It was a time taking process and the exorcist attempted repeatedly to exterminate the fever along with the evil spirit. The main ingredient of the worship was a pigeon. In the course of the puja (devotion) the ojha kept a

pigeon in a cage to transfer the evil spirit into its body from the patient suffering from fever. When the fever was very much high the exorcist recited the following montro (incantation) over a pot of clean water and gave it to the patient to drink. He also created an ambiance of magic by blowing some air from his mouth to the body of the patient several times after uttering a part of the spell.

Dhumtore akas, dhumtore patal
Nai tor pudzar porkas
Has khalo paro khalo
Sogger bura buri, soggo na gia
Soggo na gia colo

Its meaning was that the evil spirit used to conceal its real appearance always and it never showed its face even at the time when puja was going on. The exorcist ordered or requested the spirit to return back to the heaven with ducks, pigeons and all meats along with the disease.

Unfortunately if the montro could not work another montro was recited in the same style as the previous one on the following day. The sorcerer waited for about three days. If that failed, he arranged another prayer. At that time the worshipping deity was Lord Shiva. The purpose of the puja was same- to exterminate the evil spirit and to incorporate the disease within himself. The puja was usually organised at day time. The devotee inherited the montros and the rules and regulations of the puja from his father or grand father. The exorcists generally belonged to a class by themselves and their profession was hereditary continuing from generation to generation.

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 ect. 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. After then the exorcist took some water in a container and recited an incantation requesting earnestly to Lord Mahadev for driving away the evil spirit causing the disease. He also solicited the god to carry the disease with him while going back to his own kingdom at Kailas. Subsequently some water from the pot was offered to the patient for drinking.

Sometimes the Rajbanshi children up to ten years of age were suffering from the disease “pocchut kata” (ricket).¹¹ They gradually became debilitated and thus were continuously encircled with various diseases coming after one another. Some water collected from a river flowing towards north was cautiously kept in a mud vessel with exiguous gold and silver dipped in it and very small quantity of raw milk was mixed with it. An exorcist was summoned to the house of the ailing child. After reaching there he spoke some mystic words over the water and kept some dub grass on that water. The pot with the water was kept untouched overnight. During the following day when the sun was going to disappear from the sky the child was kept at a crossing of three roads and with him or her a plantain leaf and a knife were also taken. The child stood on the plantain leaf and placed on the tri-junction facing to the south. A robe was loosely tied round the waist of the child. The child was bathed with the processed water and then the string was cut. After that the child along with the mother would return back to home with out looking into the bathing place. The Rajbanshis believed wholeheartedly that after the aforesaid process of treatment the child would gradually regain good 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.

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.¹² Paddy, chura(parched rice), chaoler-burbhura(crushed rice), chaoler bhajer jhaiya(powdered rice after being roasted), soresar bhaji(fried mustard), sukatir bhaji(dry jute leaves fried), garlic, onions, ginger, and turmeric were collocated in a plate by the head male or female member of the family and were mingled properly. In that way a medicine was prepared, and each member of the family used to eat some of it. On the same day a few onion, ginger and garlic and 21 leaves of the jack fruit (*Artocarpus integrifolius*) tree were stitched together and were tied above the main entrance of each hut. Twenty leaves were kept for Bisua and one was for the knot of the string on which the leaves were tied as a witness.

The above process was performed to comply the deity with the hope that there might be no further deaths in the family throughout the year. Chirags (small earthen lamps) with mustard oil were also burnt over night. From the very first day of Bisua celebration a jhora had to be kept over the traditional tulsi tree. That consisted of tying an earthen pot was tied with a bamboo pole and was placed over the tree. A hole was made in the middle portion of the pot, and was filled with dub grass. The pot was then filled with water and it dropped through the grass on the tree. A lamp was kept lighting at every night, and water was poured every day in the mud vessel during the month of Bysack, with the belief that the tulsi tree might grow stronger and the deity would be pleased.

Among the Rajbanshis Chandi thakurani (Goddess Chandi) was regarded as a terrified goddess causing multifarious illness.¹³ During the time of cholera outbreak, atfirst goddess Chandi was worshipped and complied. They considered that she was the originator of diseases including cholera. A buffalo ,calf or a goat were sacrificed to reduce her anger. The people were also petrified by the goddess Kali. Because they thought that she always attempted to destroy them by causing diseases. Hence she was worshipped very often and offerings of buffalo, goat, etc. were devoted to her.

Gram thakur (God) was another deity who was very much popular in the villages.¹⁴ About 5 to 7 little huts were constructed for Gram thakur and his wife in the eastern side keeping some distance away from the houses. Some people erected a single hut for the two. It was believed that the Gram thakur brought sickness among children and was very much active during outbreaks of cholera. The people worshipped the deity with the offerings of dahi , chura etc and a lamp was also kept in his hut during the time of illness in the house. Almost in all parts of North Bengal the Rajbanshis used to worship an awful male deity called “Masan”. Masan was usually a god of village area. The intensity of the worship of Masan in the district of Cooch Behar was maximum .Probably it was due to the presence of majority number of Rajbanshi people in the region.

The Rajbanshis celebrated another festival called “Jitua” in the month of Assin (during October) by people who were involved in law cases or in whose house there might be sickness. A great number of green and ripe plantains were placed in a dala (plate or tray) and were devoted to the deity. The person who used to make offerings promised that, if he would win the legal case or if the ailing would regain his health, he would perform the Jitua ceremony for some days to satisfy Jit-bahah Tacur.

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 member¹⁵ because it was wrongly believed that medicine would not work if it was given by any female. In some families fathers were not allowed to give medicine to their off springs. In those cases neighbours were called to give medicine.

The Rajbanshis used various kinds of herbs for the treatment of different diseases. They used leaves of Tulsi or Basil plant (*Ocimum Santum*) and honey for cold and cough. Gulai (*Tinospora Cordifolia*), of

orange were used as medicine for cold and cough of aged people. The juice of red Amrul (*Oxalis corniculata* Linn) was a medicine for dysentery. The leaves of Seuli (a white fragrant autumnal flower) were utilized for the treatment of kala azar. The Rajbanshi medical practitioners used to prescribe leaves of Neem and honey as medicines for small pox. The leaves of Bas (*Bambusa arundinacea*) and pineapple were used to remove worms.¹⁶

Thus the Rajbanshi medicinal and healthcare system of North Bengal was a primitive and unwritten medical system. Its main theory was based on natural and super natural ideas. It had not always connection with science and reasoning. But this medicinal system had a close connection with the tradition, culture, believes and practices of the aboriginals of the soil and it was going on from the antiquity based on generation to generation tradition. But at present the hymns used for the treatment of several diseases had become extinct. Due to the lack of suitable descendents the Rajbanshi medical practitioners are not able now to continue their practices.

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