



Traditional Health Care Practice Among The Mishing Tribe Of Golaghat District In Assam

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Abstract:

The use of plants and animal as a source of medicine is as old as humanity. Traditional medicine is widely used by the tribes of Assam as well as North East India and of India as a whole. The Mishing tribe is an indigenous group of people living in some districts of Assam. Among these districts Golaghat is an important one. A study on practice of traditional medicine was carried out among the Mishings living in two villages of Golaghat district. The paper includes the traditional knowledge of medicine, which is prevalent in the study area and also aims to provide information on the concepts like health and disease and how the people cure diseases and drive away illness and sickness by traditional medicine as well as religious beliefs and practices.

1. Introduction

In Assam the tribal groups form an important element in its ethnically, linguistically and culturally heterogeneous population. Their population constitutes 12.8% of its total population usually living in eight plains districts and in two hills districts. Problems of health among the tribal groups of diverse socio-economic, socio-cultural and geographical conditions in Assam pose a challenge as much as in India as a whole. On the one hand, the tribal groups have had centuries old health care system while in course of increased interaction with the non-tribal modern health care system has been influencing their traditional health system, on the other. The emerging scenario of tribal health poses a host of problems in terms of conception of health, disease, etiology, health status, health seeking behaviour, health care system and changes, and health needs and problems in India as a whole as well as in Assam.

Health and disease are measures of the effectiveness with which human groups, combining cultural and biological resources, adapt to their environment. Every culture irrespective of its simplicity and complexity has its own beliefs and practices concerning diseases. The culture of a community determines its health culture. Health problems and practices of any community are profoundly influenced by interplay of complex social, economic and political factors. Due to the belief in supernatural elements and religion in matters concerning health, the tribals are almost invariably found to repose faith in diviners or the traditional medicinemen.

Like their own way of living, the tribal people in Assam have their own concept of health within social and cultural moorings, purely governed on the basis of local conditions and ethos. Lack of proper health care and ailments, irrational belief system are some factors said to be aggravating the health and nutritional problems of these people which needs special attention. The system of folk medicine like that of modern system has its own way of diagnosis and treatment. Treatment is directly concerned with causation of disease. They are particularly interwoven with magic, religion and traditional social values and they serve multiple cognitive functions. During the treatment, different types of magico-religious activities are performed.

On the other hand, the herbals occupied a distinct place in the life right from the primitive period till date and provided information on the use of plants parts as medicine. Today, most of the tribal people use plants as a source of medicine in their own medical lore. The Mishing tribe of Assam has also been practicing the use of medicinal plants available locally for curing some common illness. Utilization of this traditional

knowledge of medicinal plants is not only useful for conservation of cultural traditions and biodiversity but also for community healthcare and drug development. Therefore, documentation of this traditional knowledge is inevitable to throw light into the field of herbal research and to improve socio-economic development of the people.

In this study, an attempt has been made to find out the beliefs and practices related to health care system among the Mishing tribe of Assam with special reference to the Golaghat district.

2.The People And The Location

The present study was carried out among the Mishing tribe of two villages; namely, Baghedhara and Namtemera in the district of Golaghat. The village Baghedhara is situated under Gamariguri development block whereas the village Namtemera is situated under Golaghat West Development block, Bokakhat. The villages are located 20 KM and 35 KM in East and West in the district respectively. Ethnically the Mishing people are Mongoloid and belong to the Indo-Tibetan group. Though the Mishings are Tibeto-Burman in origin, they are not short stature like the neighbouring Dafala tribe. They are tall with well developed body and have charming features characteristic of the Mongoloid type of people. They are simple, straightforward and firm. The Mishing people are regarded as Scheduled Tribe under the Indian Constitution. They are patriarchal by nature and divided into two broad divisions; namely, Barogam and Dahgam. As reported in the Assam Census Report of 1881, 'the Miri (Mishings) are divided into two mutually sections which are respectively known as Barogam and Dahgam. But the division is not water tight, and there is no disharmony on the basis of these divisions. They practice tribal endogamy and clan exogamy. In Assam they are mainly living in seven districts; namely, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Sonitpur. Of course, a small segment of Mishing people are also found in the other districts of Assam.

2.1.Objectives

The main objectives of the present study are as follows:

- (a) To understand the conception of health, disease, etiology and treatment in the Mishing tribe.
- (b) To know the health status of the Mishing tribe.
- (c) To identify the indigenous medicines used by the Mishing tribe.

(d) To understand the magico-religious beliefs of Mishing tribe. etc.

2.2. Methodology

The present paper is based on the data collected on traditional health practice as well as use of indigenous medicine and religious practices among the Mishings of Golaghat district. The study was conducted in two villages namely, Baghedhara and Namtemera, situated in two opposite directions in the district. The two villages are entirely inhabited by the Mishing people. The data were collected mainly from the village medicinemen and also from some elderly persons of the villages who have good knowledge about indigenous medicine through indepth interview, observation and case study method.

3. Result And Discussion

Traditional medicine could be defined in a number of ways taking into account the concepts and practices. The system is so comprehensive that it is very difficult to put the form in a particular slot of medical science of traditional medicines broadly: (i) small and indigenous traditional medicines which include mostly folk system based on socio-cultural aspect as well as magico-religious aspects of smaller groups of people and (ii) the second system is called the great traditional medicine or system based on the concept of ayurvedic, unani, sidh, nature cure and yoga medical system. This form of medicine takes into consideration homoeopathy, as well, in the Indian context.

On the other hand, as Bhasin (2007) mentioned traditional medicine includes all kinds of folk medicine, unconventional medicine and indeed any kind of therapeutic method that had been handed down by the tradition of a community or ethnic group. It is customary to find all kinds of practices grouped under the common heading 'traditional medicine' - mainly because they do not emanate from the biomedical paradigm.

In case of health and treatment in the study area, traditional medicine or ethnomedicine is considered as an important aspect and this is the major factor which is discouraging the villagers from going to the hospital. They believe that their traditional system of medicine can cure them from all illness. Moreover, it is locally available and economical. They also believe that there is no effective medicine for certain categories of diseases like smallpox, chickenpox, etc. which are supposed to be originating from supernatural causes. Generally, ethnomedicine denotes the medical beliefs and practices found in primitive and folk societies, which has two main components, i.e. herbal and magico-religious therapy.

3.1. Herbal Medicinal Practices

The Mishings of Baghedhara and Namtemera villages have their own indigenous methods of treating different kinds of diseases. For treating diseases various type of locally available herbs and leaves of wild plants are used by them as medicine. These medicines are prepared by herbal specialists of the village, who have considerable knowledge about the herbs and its medicinal use. Of course, it has also been observed in both of the villages that many elderly persons known and prepared some herbal medicines for some common diseases such as fever, dysentery, jaundice, liver disease, stomach trouble, headache, body ache, piles, etc. However, it is observed in the study that several herbs or various parts of several plants have been used for treating different kinds of ailments. In the following an attempt has been made to enlist some diseases and their corresponding herbs treatment in the Mishing society.

3.1.1. Fever

Lime (*Citrus aurantifolia*) juice mixed with sugar is applied on the forehead of the patient to get relief from fever.

3.1.2. Dysentery

Lime (*Citrus aurantifolia*) preserved in salt for 20-30 days is given once or twice in a day. Ripe wood apple (*Aegle marmelos correa*) is used. Root of Satmul (*Asparagus racemosus*) is also useful. Leaves of Dupartenga (*Bryophyllum pinnatum*) are used. Bormanimuni (*Centella asiatica*) is used. Sarumanimuni (*Hydrocotyle rotundifolia*) is also used. Seeds of Bon tulusi (*Ocimum canum*) are used as remedy for dysentery. Young leaves of Bon amlokhi (*Phyllanthus niruri*) are good for dysentery.

3.1.3. Jaundice

Seeds of Sialkathahi (*Argemone maxicana*) are used for the treatment of jaundice. They also use the leaves of Dupartenga (*Bryophyllum pinnatum*). The juice of roots of Kehraj (*Eclipta alba*) is also used for jaundice. The plant of Bon amlokhi (*Phyllanthus niruri*) is also used for this disease. A glass of sugar cane (*Saccharum officinarum*) juice twice daily is prescribed for this purpose. A wild herb known as Durun ban (*Lecas aspera*) is also prescribed for the jaundice patient.

3.1.4. Liver Disease

Taking raw or ripe papaya (*carica papaya*) daily can cure liver. The plant of Bor manimuni (*centella asiatica*), the plant of Sarumanimuni (*hydrocotyle rotundifolia*), the whole plant of Durunban (*lecas aspera*) are also used for the treatment of liver disease.

3.1.5. Headache

The medicine is prepared by pounding the seeds of Bon tulsi (*ocimum canum*) to get relief from headache.

3.1.6. Toothache

Powder of 4-5 fruit stalk of jack-fruit (*artocarpus heterophyllus*) is applied on gum. They also use the paste prepare from the roots of Tita bhekuri (*solanum indicum*) to reduce toothache.

3.1.7. Piles

Ripe fruit of wood apple (*aegle marmelos*) is given to patient. The whole plant of Lata kapalphuta (*cardiospermum halicacabum*) is made paste with water and use in piles. They also use leaves juice Lajukilata (*mimosa pudica*) with milk as a good remedy for piles. Sometimes, pounded leaves of Kunjalata (*ipomea quamo clit*) are also used in piles.

3.1.8. Pneumonia

The root of Kasidoia (*hedyotis lineate*) as juice with water is used against pneumonia.

3.1.9. Cold And Cough

Leaf juice of Tarua kadam (*acacia farnesiana*) mixed with sugar is given once in a day for a week in cough. The flowers of Akon (*calotropis gigantean*) are also considered as digestive remedy for cough and cold.

3.1.10. Gastric Trouble/ Acidity

Rhizome juice of turmeric (*curcuma longa*) mixed with sugar is given once daily in empty stomach early morning for a forth night in acidity.

3.1.11. Tonsillitis

Juice is prepared by mixing one Amara seed (*sponolias mangifera*), one Silikha seed (*mysoballum*) and a piece of Turmeric (*purcuma domestica*) which is to be gargled for a week regularly.

3.1.12. Diarrhoea

The seed of Gongu moola (*capsella larsa pastoris*) is used as astringent in diarrhoea. Bark of long pepper (*pipoli tree*) mixed with misiri water is also used to cure this disease. Sometimes they also use a kind of juice prepared with dry goose berry (*emblica officinalis*) powder and black salt mixed with cold water for this disease.

3.1.13. Injuries

The paste prepared with the leaves or roots of Gandhuaban (*ageratum conyzoides*) is used.

3.1.14. Stomach Trouble

Juice prepared with the leaves of Matikanduri (*alternanthera sessilis*) is used. The plant called Bormanimumuni (*centella asiatica*) is also used. They also use Sarumanimumuni (*hydrocotyle rotundifolia*) as a medicine for stomach trouble. The plant called Durunban (*leucus aspera*) is good for this. The juice of Saru tengesi (*oxalis corniculata*) is also used to get relief from stomach problem. Leaves of Bhebelilata (*paederia fotida linn*) is very good for this.

3.1.15. Kidney Trouble

The juice prepared with the seeds of Bonhariah (*nasturtium indicum*) is used for this. The plant of Bhebelilata (*paederia fotida*) is very good for kidney trouble.

3.1.16. Urinary Trouble/ Disorder

Juice prepared with the leaves of Dupartenga (*bryophyllum pinnatum*) is used for quick healing of urinary trouble. Leave juice of Pani kolmou (*ipomea aquatica*) is also used for this. Juice prepared with the whole plant of Bonjaluk (*oldenlindia corymbosa*) is use for urinary trouble of children. Juice prepared with the roots or leaves of Agora (*xanthium strumarium*) is also used for urinary trouble.

3.1.17. Malaria

Juice prepared with the roots or leaves of Agora (*xanthium strumarium*) is used for long lasting malaria fever. Leaves of Dhopat tita (*clerodendron infortunatum*) can be used against malaria fever.

3.1.18. Skin Disease

Paste prepared with the leaves of Medelwa (*cassia occidentalis*) is used as a remedy for skin disease such as itches, ringworm. The juice prepared with the whole plant of Bormanimuni (*centella asiatica*) or Sarumanimuni (*hydrocotyle rotundifolia*) may take with milk for skin disease.

In the study it is observed that the Mishings rely heavily on herbal medicine in case of disease and illness. Among these medicines some are prepared in household and some are specially prescribed by herbalist or medicinemen available in the village or in the nearby villages. It is also observed that these medicines are not restricted to this tribe only. Studies conducted by Bodding (1925), Redcliffe Brown (1948), Sukla (1959), Das (1981) and Mathur (1982) also show that similar methods are being used by many tribal and non-tribal people all over the India.

3.2. *Magico-Religious Practices*

As observed magico-religious practice is also an important aspect of ethnomedicine or folk medicine. Besides using herbal medicines the Mishings try to cure some diseases through magico-religious beliefs and practices. They offer prayers and sacrifices to appease the supernatural beings, which may be responsible for the disease.

As believe by the villagers, there are four major causes of illness; namely, (i) anger of god, (ii) anger of ancestral spirits, (iii) breach of taboo and (iv) possession of evil spirits. In their society pox, hysteria, snake-bite, insomnia, convulsion, emaciation of children, mental disease and deformity of limb, congenital malformation, blindness, impotency, barrenness and prolonged illness are some of the conditions supposed to be supernaturally caused. Wrath of deities, influence of evil spirits and evil eye, magic of human being, sin committed and breach of taboo, etc. are believed to be the cause. Such diseases are treated through magico-religious therapy which varies with the type of cause identified. It mainly consists of either the propitiation of respective deities or driving away the supernatural bodies. Both magico-religious as well as herbal therapies are

sometimes found necessary by the Mishings to cure certain diseases like pox and snake-bite.

The Mishings believe that a cordial relationship with the deities and ancestral spirits will ensure good health for the members of their community. So, the villagers, particularly the villagers of Baghedhara, perform various ceremonies every year during the annual festival to renovate their relationship with the supernatural forces and thus ensure their protection. They also believe that if the deities and ancestral spirits are not satisfied, then they will get angry and inflict diseases and other calamities upon the villagers.

Some of the main magico-religious practices performed by the Mishings are as follows:

It is believed in the Mishing society that evil spirits are a group of supernatural entities which are always malevolent. They do a lot of harm to the people even without any provocation. Young children and pregnant women are believed to be more vulnerable to their attack. They may bring diseases to little children and may drink blood of a foetus leading to successive abortions. The Mishings believe that the spirits of people who meet with an unnatural death, like suicide or trampled by a wild elephant, or washed away by a flood or water fall etc. become evil spirits. Their attack can be averted by invoking the help of some powerful jungle gods which are benevolent towards people. Wearing of talisman charged with magical power also will be helpful to prevent their attack. The Mishings worship the spirits underlying thunder and lightning Mukling Teleng, earth and water Among Asi, air and fire Esar Emi,. These spirits have to be kept appeased with occasional offerings called Teleng Uie and Rokpu Done. There are various other evil spirits such as Asi Uie, Adi Uie, Umrang Uie etc. to whom all calamities are attributed.

The Mishings believe that the universe was created by a supreme heavenly power defined as 'Sedi Ba:bu' (The Father) and 'Melo Nanc' (The Mother) and consider themselves as the progenies of the Sun and the Moon. These deities are held to be omnipotent, omnipresent and always benevolent to mankind. Therefore, on every occasion of social and religious function, the Mishings offer prayer first for these deities. In fact, no auspicious function starts without the names of 'Sedi Melo' and 'Do:nyi Po:lo' (Doley 1998).

'Gumin Uie' is considered as a benevolent spirit of a family and in fact Gumin Uie is considered as another form of the departed soul. Thus, Gumin Uies are worshipped along with pujas meant for other spirits. In the villages Gumin Uies are worshipped at an interval of five years.

Besides this, the Mishings observe some other religious activities related to health such as Sarag Puja, Urom Posum, Rati Khowa Sampradan etc. in the study area. They observe Sarag Puja in the month of 'Chaitra' (April) at an interval of five years. Here, also, the family offers oblations to the Sun and the Moon for the welfare of the family. During these days of puja family members observed 'Genna' (taboo) for five days, i.e., during these periods the members of the family never go to other villages and never accept anything from their neighbours. Annual worshipping of the ancestral spirit (Urom Posum) is common feature of the religion of the Mishings. These ancestral spirits belong to both the genders. If the ancestral spirit is worshipped regularly, he brings health and happiness to the family.

Like this, the villagers perform 'Borsewa', the highest form of worship. It may also be called as 'Rati Khowa Sampradan' (the sect of nocturnal enjoyment). It is said that during Borsewa almighty Siva is worshipped at dead night, but as a matter of fact nobody except the participants know what kind of worship is performed in such close door function. Women are not permitted to participate in this ritual as it is observed in the night.

On the other hand, some of the spirits are known by their usual abode such as 'Yumrang Uie', spirit that live in forest, 'Taleng Uie', spirits that live above the Earth, 'Asi Uie', spirits that live in water and so on. Each type of spirit is believed to cause particular type of problem and this is detected by the 'Miboo' who is the traditional priest and seer of the Mishings. Whenever a person falls ill or meets misfortune or catastrophe a 'Miboo' is called in to detect the spirit responsible for the problem.

Besides, many more religious beliefs and practices have come into being among the villagers. Now a days, they have also been worshipping 'Satjanian', 'Najanian', '21 janian', 'Jalkai', 'PcjabUie'. 'Ghar Dangaria', 'Aipuja' etc. which are absolutely not traditional for the Mishings in general and for the villagers in particular. The terms designating these rituals are not of those of the Mishings but were borrowed from non-Mishing Assamese communities.

4. Conclusion

Traditional beliefs and religious practices occupy significant position in health care practices in Mishing society. Because, like any other tribal community, the Mishings also believe that evil spirits are responsible for various diseases. They have performed various religious rituals, which are traditionally prevalent in their society, to get rid of different

diseases. But, with the development of education and their awareness towards importance of health and health care and also with the advent of modern health care facilities, these people are becoming more interested in taking modern medicine instead of traditional herbal medicine.

5.Acknowledgement

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6. Reference

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