

Ethno-Medicinal Practices: A Case Study among the Sonowal Kacharis of Dibrugarh, Assam

Farida Ahmed Das, Indira Barua and Deepanjana Dutta Das

Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh 786 004, Assam, India

E-mail: dutta_deepanjana@yahoo.com

KEYWORDS Sonowal Kacharis; health problems; health care system; Dibrugarh; Assam

ABSTRACT The present study makes an attempt to find out the beliefs and practices related to health care system of the Sonowal Kachari tribe of Assam. The study reveals that the Sonowal Kachari believes that certain diseases are caused by malevolent super natural forces and they try to cure them by pleasing the supernatural powers through prayers and sacrifices. They also use various locally available medicinal herbs for treating diseases. Village medicine-men locally known as 'Bez' who have a good knowledge about the herbal plants usually treat the patients. Many elderly persons of the village are also aware about the importance and use of such herbal medicine.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropology as an integrated science of man deals with biological and cultural aspects of man. Presently anthropologists are more involved in applying their knowledge and techniques for human welfare. During the last two or three decades anthropologists are taking keen interest in understanding various problems of health and disease of the people. As a consequence 'Medical Anthropology' has emerged as an important subdiscipline of Anthropology. Anthropological studies have revealed that every known human society has its own concept regarding health and disease and also methods of coping with them. In the simpler societies it is mainly based on magico-religious theory of disease causation and they seek devices through supernatural forces. Ethno-medicine refers to "those beliefs and practices relating to disease which are the products of indigenous cultural development and are not explicitly derived from the conceptual frame work of modern medicine" (Hughes, 1968, cited from Misra et al, 2003). Various institutions are now concerned with the traditional health care system and means of traditional treatment.

In recent times with the increased knowledge of life and culture of the tribal communities, the social scientists are taking interest in ethno-medicinal studies. Many works have been reported specially from among the rural and tribal communities of India (Choudhury, 1986; Bhadra and Turkey, 1997; Sharma Thakur, 1997).

Ray and Sharma (2005) have given a description of ethnomedicinal beliefs and practices prevalent among the Savaras, a tribal community

of Andhra Pradesh. Kumari (2006) gave an account on the concept of illness and disease and the application of folk medicine among the Saureas of Jharkhand. However, ethno-medicinal studies are relatively less in Northeast India. Guha (1986) has reported from among the Boro-Kachari tribe of Assam. A glimpse of indigenous health practices among the plain tribes of Assam is given by Sharma Thakur (1999). The socio-economic condition of some of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and their problems of health and indigenous methods of treatment has been reported by Choudhury (2000), Duarah and Pathak (1997), Kohli (1999), Bhasin (1997, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2005)

In this study an attempt has been made to find out the beliefs and practices related to health care system among the Sonowal Kacharis of Assam.

THE PEOPLE

The Sonowal Kacharis is an endogamous group of Kachari tribe and a popular plain scheduled tribe population of Assam. Waddel (1901) says that the section of the Kacharis that live in Upper Assam is the Sonowal or Sadiola who were mostly goldwashers in erstwhile Lakhimpur district of Assam. Now they are mainly distributed in Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Golaghat districts of Assam. The area is mainly plain with a very high rainfall. According to 1971 census their total population in Assam is 1,98,619 (male – 1,02,547; female – 96,072). They belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family but at present they had adopted Assamese language.

The Sonowals are medium statured people their skin colour is yellowish, black and straight hair, broad and flat face and mesorrhine nose (Das, 2006). They display a high incidence of HbE gene (above 50%) (Das et al, 1975). The age at menarche is 12.77 ± 0.12 years (Deka, 1976, cited from Sengupta, 2003).

Rice is their traditional food. Clan exogamy is the general rule of marriage. Traditionally, they were in favour of joint family system but now a day there is a tendency towards nuclear family system. They are basically agriculturist.

METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on in-depth interview, observation and case study method. The relevant data for this study were collected from two villages namely Rowmari and Gazai Gaon of Dibrugarh district, Upper Assam. The villages are situated at a distance of 20 kms south-west of Dibrugarh town. The two villages are entirely inhabited by the Sonowal Kachari people. The data were collected mainly from the village medicine-men whose treatments are believed to be very effective and also from some elderly persons of the community who have got a good knowledge about indigenous herbal medicine that they have acquired from their elders. Data collection was carried out during the month of December 2005.

In the collection of data, no structured question was used. However, following major questions were kept in mind while collecting the required data.

- (i) How do people perceive illness and what are the beliefs and practices influencing the health behaviour of people.
- (ii) What is the role of indigenous medical practitioners and folk medicine in relation to health and medical care ?
- (iii) What are the different herbs and shrubs used for treatment. Their method of preparation and treatment. What are their opinion towards the herbal medicine ?
- (iv) In their daily intake how much medicinal herb they consume ? Their knowledge and awareness about it.

INDIGENOUS METHODS OF TREATMENT

Herbal medicinal practices

The Sonowal Kacharis have their own indi-

genous methods of treating different kinds of diseases. Various types of locally available herbs and leaves of wild plants are used by them as medicine. Like many other communities of the region, there are few herbal specialists among the Sonowal Kachari. These specialists or medicine-men have considerable knowledge about the herbs and its medicinal use. Normally they learn about these medicinal plants and its uses from their ancestor. These medicine-men are referred by different term according to the cultural norms. Among the Sonowal Kachari's they are called as *Bez* (Barua and Phukan, 1958: 334). Of course in rural Assam, they are mainly known by this term. It has been observed in the two villages that use of herbal medicine for curing certain diseases are quite known to the people and besides medicine-men, many elderly persons known about the use of herbal medicines. Some of the diseases and their indigenous methods of treatment are given below:

- (1) *Fever*: Lime (*Citrus auran tifolia*) juice mixed with sugar is applied on the forehead of the patient to get relief from fever.
- (2) *Diarrhoea*: Dry goose berry (*Embllica officinalis*) powder and black salt mixed with cold water is taken. Bark of Long Pepper (Pipoli tree) mixed with Misiri water is also used to cure the disease.
- (3) *Dysentery*: Lime (*Citrus auran tifolia*) juice with hot water and little salt is used in dysentery. The juice of black Tulsi leaves (*Ocimum sanctum*) and Sirata (*Swertia chirata*) is also used for the purpose. The juice of tender leaves (three numbers) of mango (*Mangifera indica*), black berry (*S. cuminii*) and goose berry (*Embllica officinalis*) (equal proportions) together with honey are mixed with goat milk and is taken to cure blood dysentery. Honey together with the juice of Dubari grass (Family-*Gramineae*) can cure blood dysentery and need to be taken for three / four days. They also use a kind of wild herb, locally called Manimuni (*Centila asiatica*). The juice of this herb mixed with sugar or honey should be taken continuously for a month to cure the disease. They also use lime water (chun pani) mixed with juice of turmeric (*Purcuma domestica*) leave to get relief from blood dysentery and mucous.
- (4) *Blood Vomiting*: A table spoon of carrot (*Dancus carota*) juice mixed with honey can cure blood vomiting.

- (5) *Liver Disease*: Two to three raw or ripe Papaya (*Carica papaya*) daily can cure liver disease. A curry prepared from the bud of banana (*Musa paradisiaca*) and the meat of pigeon is also used as a medicine for the purpose.
- (6) *Jaundice*: The medicine is prepared by pounding five or six number of Silikha (*Myroballum*) mixing with jaggery and it can cure jaundice. A glass of sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum*) juice twice daily prescribed for the purpose. Boiled raw papaya (*Carica papaya*) is said to be good for curing the disease. Kardoi (*Averrhoa carambola*), Goose Berry (*Embllica officinalis*), Sugar cane (*Saccharum officinarum*), Neem leave (*Azadirachta indica*), a wild herb known as Durun ban (*Lecas aspera*), Brahmi sak (*Herpestis monnieria*), Purakol (*Musa sapientum*) are prescribed edibles for the patient.
- (7) *Nose Bleeding*: Flower of Pomegranate (*Punica granatum Linn*) is crushed and 3-4 drops of juice is poured inside the nose to give immediate relief.
- (8) *Tonsillitis*: Juice is prepared by mixing one Amara seed (*Sponolias mangifera*), one Silikha seed (*Mysoballum*) and a piece of Turmeric (*Purcuma domestica*) and advise the patient gargles for a week regularly.
- (9) *Worms*: Paste of five lemon seeds (*Citrus aurantifolia*) mixed with water and is prescribed to eat in empty stomach for a few days. The twigs of Chirata (*Swertia chirata*) is soaked in the water overnight and the water is prescribed to drink in empty stomach in the morning for one week regularly.
- (10) *Scabies*: Lemon juice (*Citrus aurantifolia*) mixed with coconut oil is massaged for curing scabies. To remove scabies they take bath with hot water in which leaves of Neem (*Azadirachta officinarum*) were boiled. Twigs of Chirata (*Swertia chirata*) are crushed into paste with water to be used as an ointment and applied on the skin. Chirata water is prescribed to drink in the morning in empty stomach.
- (11) *Pain in the Ear*: Juice of Tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*) is boiled and put it in the ears to heal earache.
- (12) *Piles*: Ripe fruit of wood apple (Bel) (*Aegle marmelos*) is given to patient.
- (13) *Fungal Infaction*: Paste of Jetuka (*Landsonia*

Innermis) is applied on the infected area.

They also used it for ornamental purposes.

The study reveals that Sonowal Kacharis rely heavily on Ethno medicine in case of disease and illness. The patient is treated with available herbs, flora and minerals. Some of these are home remedies and some are specially prescribed by herbalist or folk medicineman available in the community.

Magico-Religious Practices

Sometime folk therapies are associated with rituals and beliefs. This is normally done by the priest or spiritual healers. Besides, using herbal medicines the Sonowal Kachari try to cure diseases through magico-religious beliefs and practices. From the present investigation it is also found that the Sonowal Kachari's believe supernatural forces for disease causation and seek remedies through magico-religious practices. 'Evil eye' is considered to be a cause for certain ailments particularly among the children. They offer prayers and sacrifices as per direction of the medicine-men to appease the supernaturals being, who may be responsible for the disease. They also use amulets to protect themselves from 'evil eyes' or malevolent powers. Table 1, projected by Barua et al. (1988) reveals that they propitiate various gods and goddess in their own way.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Sonowal Kacharis traditional health care practices and system of treating diseases are based on their deep observation and belief in nature. Therefore Sonowal Kachari people like many other tribes of North-East India rely more on the indigenous system of curing disease and on herbal medicines that are easily available around their locality for treating many common 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, Government health measures these people are becoming more interested in taking modern medicine instead of traditional herbal medicine. This study is based on the data collected from two Sonowal Kachari villages situated in the urban fringe. So these people can easily avail modern medical facilities from the nearby town and it is found that they are in favour of taking

Table 1: Diseases due to wrath of the supernatural

<i>Disease</i>	<i>Supernatural agencies</i>	<i>Pujas (Rituals)</i>
Dysentery, mental diseases, cancer	Deo	Propitiated by sacrificing two red cocks, one red hen, one egg, besides other items of feast. Arrangement is made in the forest.
Asthama, mental Disease, cancer	Lord of water	<i>Jalkhai puja</i> , worshipped by sacrificing one white duck and other items of feast, rice, salt vegetables, etc.
Accident, sudden illness	Burah-dangoria	No sacrifice. Only raw items, e.g. gram, rice, powdered rice, etc. are offered to propitiate Bura-dangoria.
Gastritis	Ancestral spirits	<i>Ai puja</i> , no sacrifice is made except offering of raw articles, powdered rice, gram with betel nut and leaves.
Epidemic and natural calamities	Mother goddess	Community level worship by arranging <i>bhur-utuwa puja</i> . One pair of betel nut and leaf is offered from each family. One red duck is offered on behalf of the villagers. All the offered articles are placed in a boat.
Epidemic and large scale death of men and animals	Mother goddesses of forest.	A white goat is a must for the <i>Puja</i> besides other offering.

Barua et al. (1998)

these facilities. However, the older generation still have inclination towards herbal medicine and indigenous methods of treatment.

The new generation are not very much interested in the indigenous methods of treating diseases. They are even not very concern about the importance of these herbal plants and its medicinal value. The growing disinterest in the use of the folk medicinal plants and its significance among the younger generation of the Sonowal Kacharis will lead to the disappearance of this practice. Educated younger generation of the Sonowal Kacharis should be encouraged by the Government to protect and cultivate these valuable herbal plants before they get lost due to the impact of modernization and urbanization and also due to deforestation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors are thankful to all the respondents of Sonowal Kachari communities for their cooperation. They are also grateful to Miss Kabita Rani Saikia for her help and cooperation in collecting the data.

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