
Practice of Folk Medicine Among the Aboriginal Tribes of Jungle Mahal in West Bengal – A Historical Study

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ABSTRACT

Folk medicine refers to experience-based, culture-bound healing practices incorporating natural, mineral and animal based medicines, spiritual therapies, manual techniques and exercises to treat, diagnose and prevent illnesses. Every civilization has a comprehensive health care system based on its social and cultural heritage. Folk medicine is the oldest form of health care system in the world. It is also variously known as alternative medicine, ethnic medicine or complementary medicine and it still plays a key role in many countries and it parallel running with the modern system of medicine.¹ In India, mainly the rural and tribal people have been following this system from time immemorial. Folk medical practices are still widely popular among the aboriginal tribes of the forest tract of this country. The present paper is an attempt to explore the nature, characteristics and methods of folk medical practices among the tribal people of Jungle Mahal in West Bengal and locates them firmly in modern socio-economic perspective.

Introduction:

Folk medicine is a combination of traditional healing practices based on herbal drugs and spirituality in order to treatment of diseases of human being.² Folk medicine is also known as alternative medicine,



traditional medicine, indigenous medicine and natural medicine.³ Chiefly, the rural tribal people of our country have been practising this system of healing since dateless antiquity.⁴ North-western forest tracts of Midnapore district is a part of Jungle Mahal formed by the East India Company in 1805 through Regulation XVIII.⁵ Besides the forest tracts of Midnapore district, Bankura, Manbhum and some tracts of Birbhum district are also known as Jungle Mahals.⁶ People of these areas believe in folk remedies since time immemorial. This tradition has been still going on even after the introduction of modern western systems of medicine.⁷

Methodology: Research method is very important for any research activity. The proposed study is conducted under the source method. Descriptive and interpretative methodology is used in this research paper. Besides, critical evaluation and historical narration methods are also used. The investigation of the research is carried on the basis of the available primary and secondary sources such as – district gazetteers, contemporary government publications, interviews, field survey, books and journals etc.

Objectives: The objectives of this research paper are –

1. To know the characteristics of the folk medicine.
2. Explore the nature and methods of folk treatment.
3. Find out the relation between tribal people and folk remedies.
4. Explore the impacts of folk medical practices among the tribal society of Jungle Mahal in West Bengal.
5. Find out the similarity between ayurveda and folk medicine.
6. Find out the cause behind the popularity on folk remedies among the tribal people of Jungle Mahal.

Practice of Folk Medicine: Jungle Mahal - the forest tract of Western Bengal is mainly inhabited by the tribals and few low caste Hindus. The aboriginal tribes constitute above 70% of the whole population of the region. The chief tribal groups of the region are - Santal, Sabar, Lodha, Oraon, Munda, Bagdi, Bhumij, Kora, Mahali etc.⁸ Tribals of Jungle Mahal still in vigorous poverty since colonial period. Malnutrition is common among aboriginal tribes of this region. Primary health centres are insufficient in number and communication is worse than other parts of West Bengal.⁹ Due to unavailability of modern medical facilities, rapid growth of urbanization, poverty, changes of socio-economic lives and also rapid spread of diseases, the tribals of the region depended more on folk remedies since colonial period.¹⁰

There are many branches of folk remedies such as - use of roots, fruits, leafs of medicinal plants, worship of God and Goddess, worship of natural forces, astrological rituals and use of incantation etc.¹¹



There is no doubt that, folk remedies is a kind of pristine, fanatic and unwritten system of remedy, entirely based on natural and supernatural rituals. It has neither any written text nor any scientific base, but oral base being conducting from generation to generation. It is hermetically related with the culture, beliefs and tradition of the tribal community.¹²

In the forest tract of Jungle Mahal, ojhas, saints, gunins, rosas, priests, pirs, jangurus, astrologers, dais, thinpus are recognised as the folk medical practitioners. They are using both natural and supernatural methods of treatment. Tribal communities believe that the causes of the diseases are two types - natural and supernatural. Changes of weather and climate, germs and physical factors belongs to the natural causes, whether evil spirit, evil eye, anger of Gods and contravention of taboo are the supernatural reasons of the illness.¹³

In the different districts of Jungle Mahal, when a member of tribal family felt ill, the chief member of the family first trying to treat the patient. If he or she fails, then they call folk medicinemen to treat the patient. Folk medicinemen uses both natural and supernatural methods of treatment.¹⁴ The practitioners of folk medicine, at the time of treating patients by natural methods, using some locally available medicinal plants. Actually they are enriching in ethno-medical knowledge owing to their intimate connectivity with medicinal plants in the surrounding areas.¹⁵ The following is a list of medicinal plants and methods of their uses.

Table No. I

Medicinal Plants Used for Folk Treatment

Sl. No.	Local Name	Botanical Name	Portion of the Plant Used	Effective on Diseases	Method of Uses
1.	Gritakumari	Aloe Vera	Fresh leaf	Skin wounds	Juice of the leaves applied to the skin.
2.	Shialkanta	Argemone Mexicana	Seed	Impotency	5 gram paste of the seeds taken upto one month.
3.	Iswarnul	Aristolochia Indica	Root and bark	Snake bite	Drink a cup of juice twice daily until cure.
4.	Karanj	Caesalpinia Crista	Leaf and seed	Diabetes and alopecia	Grind and take it once daily up to one month.



5.	Swet Aparajita	Clitoria Ternatea	Root	Infertility	Grind and drink one spoon juice with piper for three weeks.
6.	Swarnalata	Cuscuta Reflexa	Stem	Diarrhoea	Grind it and take it three times daily until cure.
7.	Ayapan	Eupatorium Ayapan	Leaf	Acne	Paste of the leaves externally applies.
8.	Bon-Kalmi	Ipomoea Paniculata	Leaf	Low blood pressure	Drink half cup juice once daily for two weeks.
9.	Golmorich	Piper Nigrum	Fruit	constipation	Powdered the fruits and mixed in a cup of lukewarm water and drink during night time.
10.	Rosun	Allium Sativum	Bulb	Cough, cold, and pain	Eaten raw bulbs to reduce cold and cough. Boiled with oil and apply over injured area for pain.
11.	Kalmegh	Andrographis Paniculata	Root and leaf	Bowel problem	Prescribed its juice before bed at night time.
12.	Akando	Calotropis Gigantea	Root, leaf and latex	Cough and tooth pain	Grind it and drink a cup for 15 days.
13.	Durba	Cynodon Dactylon	Whole plant	Diarrhoea, vomiting and piles.	Paste of the plant is recommended to use.
14.	Joba	Hibiscus rosa Sinensis	Leaf	Hair loss, menstrual problems of women	A cup of juice of the leaves is taken at least 15 days.
15.	Pudina	Mentha Spicata	Leaf	Indigestion problem	Decoction of leaves is taken for 2 weeks



16.	Nim	Azadirachta Indica	Leaf and Stem	Skin disease and hair fall	Paste of the leaves and stem taken one cup at morning for 15 days.
17.	Tulsi	Ocimum Tenuiflorum	Leaf	Cough and cold	Grinded leaves and mixed with honey and eat 15 days.
18.	Sada Chitta	Plumbago Zeylanica	Root	Problem of tonsils and nervous disorders	Juice of the roots is used at least two weeks.
19.	Bhringaraj	Wedelia Calendulana	Whole plant	Fever, boil etc.	Mixture of the plant prescribed for 15 days.
20.	Ada	Winthania Somnifera	Leaf and rhizomes	Diarrhoea, digest problem etc.	Juice of rhizomes is taken for two weeks for digest problem.

Sources:

- i) Medicinal Plant Resources of South West Bengal, (2005). Published by Research Wing, Directorate of Forests, Government of West Bengal, Kolkata, pp. 1-188.
- ii) Chakraborti, Barun Kumar. (2003). Loke Ausadh-O-Like Chikitsa, Pustak Bipani, Kolkata, pp. 35-58.
- iii) Ghosh, Ashis. (2008). Ethnomedicinal Plants used in West Rarrh Region of West Bengal, Natural Product Radiance, Vol. 7(5), September-October, pp. 462-465.

From the above description, a similarity has found between Ayurveda and folk medicine. Both the systems use some medicinal plants to prepare medicine and their aim is same; to remove illness from the body of human being. Beside these medicinal plants, some other ingredients are also use by the folk medical practitioners while they treating patients. All these are discussed one by one in the present paper.

Methods of Treatment: When a member of tribal family felt ill, initially starvation is recommended to him by the elder member of the family for few hours. After that they called folk medicineman. At first the folk medicineman tries to identify the diseases by examination of pulse, colour of urine and behaviour



of the patient and thereafter he prescribe medicines.¹⁶ While a person suffering from acute body pain, then the folk medicineman suggests massage with mustard oil and heat of fire to the patient.¹⁷ They binding bones of snake on the patient's waist to remove waist pain.¹⁸ Besides, tribal people eat flesh of boa snake to cure swelling of hands or legs.¹⁹ It is very much common to notice among the tribals of Jungle Mahal that, while a male person is suffering from sexual problems, the folk medical healer suggested to eat burn flesh of male sparrow to cure the disease.²⁰ Hepatitis is a common disease among the tribals of the forest tract of Midnapore district. Bholanath Das, a famous folk medical practitioner of Midnapore town treating hepatitis (local name kamol) by using roots of 'Sada Chitta' (*Plumbago Zeylanica*). At first he slit a small portion of the patient's forehead and then poulticed the grinded roots of 'sada chitta' on the slit portion of patient's forehead and he advises to remain abstain from meat and flesh at least for seven days. Within 7 to 15 days the patient becomes cure. Patients come here from Bankura, Purulia, Burdwan and other districts to treat their hepatitis. His grandfather late Maheswar Das and father late Sambhu Das also used same method of treatment while treated patients. Generation wise more than hundred and fifty years they were treating hepatitis with huge pouplarity.²¹

Besides using herbal remedies, tribals are trying to cure their diseases through supernatural beliefs and practices. When a disease is detected and found that it is caused by supernatural factor, therefore tribals call folk medicineman such as ojha, gunin, rosa, astrologer, pir, fakir, sakha, priest etc. The folk medicineman applies magico-religious methods to curing the patient. For example, in the cases of frequent fever, vomiting, dysentery and bowel problem, they perform soothsaying (jhar-phuk), water enchanting (jal-pora), oil enchanting (tel-pora), exorcism (atasi-patasi), sorcering (tuk-tak), salt enchanting (nun-pora) and paltry (totka) etc.²² These are the examples of invisible drugs, generally used by the folk medical practitioners while the patients felt ill due to the effect of evil spirit.²³ If such kind of treatment failed, then folk medicinemen would practise magic, worship, offerings and sacrifice, and suggesting to the victims for vow-making, bestowals etc.²⁴

Tribal people believe that the evil spirits are responsible for the epidemic diseases. Phantom, ghou, witch, bonga and tejo are the example of evil spirits.²⁵ According to Rev. P.O. Boddington, santal community believe that bongas are harmful for their community. Bongas also eat people, because they are always hungry.²⁶ Santal community believes that apart from natural causes, evil influences are also responsible for the harm of their society.²⁷ They do sacrifice animals for the bongas to calm down.²⁸ Santals also believe leprosy, cancer, skin and venereal diseases are caused by the influence of tejo. Tejo is one of the dangerous evil spirits.²⁹ To emancipate from the supernatural cause of the diseases, the tribal



people has been dependent upon the ojhas or gunins. According to P.O. Boddington, ojhas are the famous medicinemen to protect sufferers from evil spirits by using different supernatural methods, such as - charms, incantations, sorcery and magic. They also treat snakebite people.³⁰

Tribal people also believe that the effect of evil spirits can be reducing through magic. Magic is a kind of supernatural force through which folk medicinemen especially ojhas can do well or harm to the tribals.³¹ Magic is divided into two groups; white magic and black magic. In tribal societies, white magic is immensely practised to protect people from different diseases.³² According to the tribal belief, evil eye (kunajur) is also responsible for the diseases.³³ For example, if an evil eye of a certain person glances at a healthy child, abruptly the child becomes ill.³⁴ If they glance at somebody eating some sapid food, suddenly the eater falling down ill. If they glance at anyone's wound, gradually the wound transforms into gangrene.³⁵ Ojhas are the only person who can emancipate the victims from these herms causing by evil eye through performing some supernatural rituals.³⁶

Beside magico-religious practices, tribals and low caste Hindus of Jungle Mahal are also worshipping some Gods and Goddesses for the emancipation from harmful diseases.³⁷ They believe, as the God is supreme being, so man should follow his order.³⁸ They also believe some God and Goddess are responsible for causing some particular diseases.³⁹ When their deities become angry, then they cause natural calamities, diseases and deaths of the people.⁴⁰ Such ill-tempered deities has been worshipping by the low caste Hindus and tribals of Jungle Mahal since a very long time for curing victims from different diseases. Such as - ⁴¹

- i) Olai Chandi for cholera.
- ii) Sitala and Basanta Ray for pox.
- iii) Dharma thakur for asthma.
- iv) Shani thakur for leprosy.
- v) Jarasura for malaria.
- vi) Manasa and Ateswar for snake bite.
- vii) Sasthi thakur for child diseases.
- viii) Karma thakur for skin diseases.
- ix) Singbonga for all kind of diseases.

Priests are considered as the medium between deities and followers. After worship, leftovers (prosad) are distributed among the followers and victims and it is used as medicine against the diseases. Beside



worship, some preventive measures are taken against the attack of evil spirit and also diseases. Such as - amulets, rings, metals, fumes, horse ducts⁴² and astrological remedies are immensely using to keep away evil effects of the diseases from their lives.⁴³

Observation: Through the above discussion it is evident that, tribals, especially inhabitants of the forest tracts of Jungle Mahal in West Bengal have been following folk remedies since dateless antiquity. Folk remedy is divided into two groups i.e., natural and supernatural methods of healing. When folk medicinemen treated patients by natural method, they used various medical plants locally available in the forest tract. From this point of view a similarity has been found between Ayurveda and folk medicine. Both the medical system use medicinal plants for the treatment of patients and prepare of medicines. Foreigners, who arrived in this country, also studied about the indigenous medicinal plants and carried it with them into their country to increase the utility of their medicines. Nevertheless they did not concede the importance of these indigenous remedies.

On the other side, the supernatural method of folk treatment is highly criticized by the government and also by elites. The folk medicinemen when treated patients through supernatural methods, they used superstitious practices such as exorcism, black magic, sacrifices, worship of evil spirit and natural forces. Actually supernatural folk medical practitioners have neither any scientific base nor text, it is conducted through orally and generation wise from father to son and even grandsons.⁴⁴ Due to illiteracy, extreme poverty and also lack of proper medical facilities of the government, tribals depended more and more on folk remedies during colonial period. Actually, during colonial period most of the forest tracts of Jungle Mahal remained undeveloped and backward. Government did not try to develop the condition of the inhabitants of forest tracts. On the other hand, government took the initiative of cutting jungles for the purpose of fulfilment of their economic interest. Colonial intervenes also increased the growth of the diseases. In these circumstances deprived aboriginal tribal people became more dependent on folk remedies. In this point of view the importance of folk medicine is always notable. Because it was one of the easy medium in front of the tribals, through which they tried to save their near and dear ones. If proper medical facilities could reach to the forest tracts, the tribals could able to consume modern medical facilities, but unfortunately this could not happen in reality. Actually the colonial government was indifferent to the common people's health during the entire colonial period. But during post-colonial period tribals of forest tract of West Bengal still believe in folk remedies. Although, it cannot be denied that after independence modern medical facilities slowly reached every corner of the forest tract of Jungle Mahal in West Bengal. Actually the fact is, tribals are conservative. They always try



to preserve their culture. Therefore, they believe in folk remedies even after the spread of modern medical facilities.

Conclusion: Tribal people have been practising the folk medicine in our country since ancient times. Due to paucity of proper sources, we cannot give a patulous statistics of it. It is a fact that even in the modern times it has not lost its popularity even after the introduction of modern medicines, i.e., Allopath and Homoeopathy. Because it is closely associated with the culture and convictions of the tribal people and it is extremely suitable for the weather and climatic condition country like India which is situated in the Tropical Zone. Folk medicine has been tested for long time and passed among the tribals for its effectiveness. In the Jungle Mahal of West Bengal, near about 70% people depend on folk medicine.⁴⁵ Standing in recent time, it can be said that, the tradition of folk medicine goes far back in time. Nevertheless folk medicine continues to enjoy huge popularity not only in the Jungle Mahal of West Bengal but also among the tribal people of whole India. It is already said that folk treatment has been divided into two branches, one is natural method of treatment and other is supernatural method of treatment. In the natural method, tribals use some plants, which have a deep medicinal value.⁴⁶ By the use of these plants various modern medicines are prepared.⁴⁷ Considering the side effects of allopathic medicine, the herbal drugs are safe and low cost price.⁴⁸ Recently due to unplanned development issues, increasing modern healthcare facilities and rapid growth of modern civilization, natural resources as well as traditional knowledge and tribal cultures are exhausting rapidly at an alarming rate.⁴⁹ Therefore it is essential to explore and document this unique and indigenous traditional knowledge of the tribal community, before its defunct. Therefore, to preserve this culture, the World Health Organisation as well as the Government of India has decided to include folk medicine into their health programme and taken it for examining its natural ingredients.⁵⁰ More researches and investigations are needed, and only then, folk medicine and herbal remedies can be practised and documented properly. But another branch of folk medicine i.e. supernatural methods of healing is being highly criticized by scholars as it has not any scientific base and value.

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