
Social History of Folk Medicine Practices Among Rajbanshi Community of Colonial Northern Bengal with Special Reference to Dinajpur

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Abstract: *Rajbanshis, the descendants of Koches, are living in the Terai and Brahmaputra valley of the eastern Himalaya for thousands of years. This area is a treasure house of biodiversity. Traditionally being settled agriculturist, people under this community have a vast array of awareness on the uses of medicinal plants. They inherit the knowledge of using plants for the Folk medicinal treatment of common diseases prevailed in this region. Local medicine men in their community called ojha or Mahan are expert in this form of treatment. However, present generation Rajbanshis are reluctant to their inherited knowledge and local resources of plants for therapeutic purposes. This warrants urgent documentation of their indigenous folk medicinal knowledge and conservation of the fast depleting plant resources. In this study, on the basis of archival data and secondary vernacular documents were analyzed to record Folk Medicinal knowledge of Rajbanshi people of Colonial Dinajpur region of Bengal.*

Keywords: Diseases, Folk Medicine, Indigenous, Medicine, Rajbanshi, Treatment, Vernacula.

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Introduction

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History of Folk/ Herbal medicinal practice of indigenous communities of South Asia is closely associated with the origin and development of Human Civilization itself¹. Folk medicine practices of indigenous peoples like Rajbanshi communities of Northern Bengal, now days mentioned as ethno- medicine which is an unexplored topic till now. Discussion on health and medicine history took important place in present scenario by diligent research work by eminent scholars like David Arnold, Mark Harrison, Deepak Kumar, Chittabrata Palit, Poonam Bala, Biswamay Pati, Kabita Ray, Arabinda Samanta, Anil Kumar, Achintya Kumar Dutta, Sujata Mukherjee, Projat Bihari Mukherjee and so many others. Folk medicine of Rajbanshi Community as a separate discipline had a small scope in the above narrated topics. The word ethno- medicine is used as a synonym word for traditional medicine. But traditional medicine should be divided into two separate parts, which is folk medicine and tribal medicine. There was long history of folk medicine culture which still prevalent in rural parts of Northern Bengal especially in Dinajpur region and it has mostly a religious undertone².

Geographical division of Rasbanshi Community Dinajpur

Rajbanshis are the leading indigenous community of Colonial Northern Sub-Himalayan Bengal; they were the main sufferers of a variety of infectious diseases frequent in this region. Before the advent of Colonial Healthcare system and early colonial days, Rajbanshis as an indigenous community of this region were mainly relied on their own traditional folk medicinal practices. However, with the beginning of Western healthcare system especially after the development of Colonial rule in Bengal as well as in the Dinajpur district (1776 ce); culture of traditional healing practices among Rajbanshis of this region began to be discouraged. Despite all these adversities, the Rajbanshi community of rural areas of Sub-Himalayan Bengal have able to maintained their conventional knowledge on medicinal plants, herbs, and food practice. They have developed their (i) own mechanism in making herbal medicine and drugs with available natural elements, (ii) foodstuff for consumption for healing, and (iii) magical means (exorcism) for healing illness. In such a background, this research work seeks to highlight the subsequent points for historicizing the medicinal practices of the Rajbanshis of colonial Sub-Himalayan Northern Bengal specifically in Dinajpur region and their continuity in the post-colonial period, i.e.(i) to make a preliminary idea about the serious diseases and common ailments prevailing in the Sub-Himalayan Northern Bengal and specially in Dinajpur, (ii) to understand the changing attitudes of

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the Rajbanshis towards disease, (iii) to construct a brief history of folk medicinal practices of the Rajbanshis, and (iv) to highlight the continuity and prosperity of folk medicine of the Rajbanshis along with the process of transmission of knowledge of traditional medicine³.

The history of the origin of the Rajbanshis is a mystery. It has been said that they belong to the great ‘*Bodo*’ Family that entered India in the 10th Century B. C., from the east and settled on the Bank of the Brahmaputra and gradually spread over Assam and the whole of North and Eastern Bengal. The first introduction in the modern history of the Rajbanshi people living in the furthest north of Bengal is found in the account of invasion of Baktyar khilji when he entered Tibet in 1206 A. D⁴.

The first ever census report of Bengal conducted in 1872, 1881 and 1891 enumerated Koch, Rajbanshi and Palia etc., under one Koch. O’Donnei in the census report of 1891 enumerated 33, 472 as Koch in the district of Darjeeling, 297,852 in Jalpaiguri, 352,409 in Cooch- Behar 481,591 in Dinajpur and 522,604 in Rangpur. In the Breakup of Koch figures stated hereafter, the number in each sub-head in 1891 is stated.

In Dinajpur 86,351 were enumerated as Koch in first ever census of 1872. The number went up to 481,591 in 1891 and then dropped down to 6,163 in 1931 and to 2,252 in 1941. The number of Paliyas was 326,971 in 1872 and it dropped to 4,219 in 1941. The figure of Rajbanshi was recorded as 429,525 in 1931.

As per surveyor Dalton theory there was a variety of mixtures amongst Rajbanshi community, he classed them amongst the Dravidian and probably a branch of the Bhuiya Family, Hunter, Risley, Gait and Hutton termed as Dravidian with admixture of Mongolian Blood, Price placed them amongst the Nisads having sub-divisions as Koch, Chatbhag, Paliya, Pania, and Rajbanshi; Maguire notes the Rajbansis ‘of the district (Rangpur) are descended from a Dravidian stock. They are now a distinct class of Rajbanshi who claimed to be classified as Bratya-kshattriyas’. In fact the present Rajbansis are a mixed race⁵.

F. W. Strong in his handbook mentioned that Dinajpur District has been notorious for unhealthiness. According to tradition, fever which is prevailing scourge was introduced into the district during the war between Krishna and Ban Raja about time of Alexzander’s invasion of India. Revenue Surveyor Major Sherwill in 1863 pointed that the climate of Dinajpur is very unhealthy, and is just held in great dislike by strangers, including Bengalis, on account of its insalubrities. At the time of second division revenue survey ordered from Burdwan into dinajpur, many of the oldest and best native Bengali surveyors resigned, rather than faced the dangers of

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so dreaded of climate. In the session of 1857-58 and 1758-59, this survey was nearly cancelled by sickness. As many as 13 surveying parties were unfit for work at the same time, and almost all were sick and weakly from the effects of fever, which is prevailing epidemic. The villagers have a sickly appearance, and many are annually carried off by fever and cholera. Natives are more easily affected by the climate than the Europeans, which are probably attributed to the free mode of living of the latter, which enables them the better to withstand its baneful effects, also to the greater exposure of native to the night air⁶.

F. Kennet in his book ‘Folk medicine Fact and Fiction, published in London (1976) pointed that Folk medicine is a basic term which covers a wide variety of traditional or supernatural practice. All of them have certain features in common which help to explain why they survive so long and why people have accepted them through the ages. The origin of folk medicine obviously link up with other significant areas man’s experience, such as his God worship or his understandings of the forest or nature. It has naturally inherited many magical elements from such background and effective cures are typically assumed to have no rational explanations. The apparent lack of causes of the major features of many folk remedies as is both strength and weakness. Because everyone loves a mysterious things and it is very easy to believe in a miraculous success. Secondly many people go on doing things to these bodies because they have faith in the ritual itself without acknowledging scientific evidence that the process is dangerous⁷.

Believe on Supernatural spirits

Rajbanshi Folk medicine practice 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. They believed that a good number of causes like impurities, bad weather, disappointment or anger of God; evil spirits were the root causes of various diseases. For the treatment of various diseases, local ojhas were called. The ojhas (village exorcists) by chanting mantras tried to make happy the anger of God. They also took an effort to satisfy the offended Gods and goddesses by offering both vegetable and animal sacrifices. In most of cases, the deities were the goddesses. For the treatment of the village communities’ herbs and shrubs were utilized immensely as raw

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materials for preparing medicines. Sometimes the ojhas took liquor from the patient as fees. They often collected a black goat, a red cock and rupees 1.50.

The Rajbanshi people had evolved their own medicinal structure based on traditional beliefs, cultures and practices. As they were close to nature they used to seek their medicines in nature and also worshipped 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 the eradication of diseases.

Most of them emphasized the cleanliness of the 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 houses or graveyards. They made harm to people directly or influenced by someone when they got disappointed. They were not visible, but their existence could be perceived. Now and then they also deluded human beings by getting different shapes and figures.

In Rajbanshi society, the rural 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 with mud or sand pierced and incanted an 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.

Diseases among Rajbanshis of Dinajpur

Apart from supernatural causes, the Rajbanshi people had also been attacked with diseases that occurred due to natural reasons like climatic disorder, change of weather, the spread of bacillus, poisonous food, untidiness, indiscipline in lifestyle 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 Rajbanshi people took the help of the ojhas who treated the patients by applying various herbal, animal and mineral drugs.

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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) etc⁸. Rajbanshis of villages believed that causes behind outbreak of different diseases can be two types, Natural and Supernatural causes. Natural causes are divided into 5 part- unhealthy climate, germ infections, unhygienic food, unprotected sex and physical weakness. The effects of unhealthy climate include colds, cough, and diarrhoea due to germs, diseases like syphilis and gonorrhoea due to unprotected sexual activities, stomach ailments due to poisonous food stuff, rabies when bitten by dogs or foxes. Folk practitioners, ojhas used to treat patient with herbal, animal o mineral rich medicine⁹.

Folk Medicine of the Rajbanshis:Practice, Practitioners and Institutions

Before Colonial era and colonial days, the Rajbanshi people used to treat small pox, chicken pox and measles with their indigenous Folk medicine and herbs. Consumption of blend of *neem* (*Azadirachta indica*) and honey in specific dose in early morning in an empty stomach was a common medicine used to cure Patients. To cure ulcer generated from pox, they do use the blend of *neem* juice and mustard oil [extracted by traditional method]. Simultaneously, water with leaves of *chepti kalai* and *neem* is used for skin disinfection of the patient. For remedial of cold fever, the Rajbanshis usually exercise the combine of *tulsi* (*Ocimum sanctum*) leaves and honey, *basak* (*Adhatoda vasica*) juice and the mix together of *kalo jeera* (*Nigella sativa*), garlic and mustard oil. Leaves of *shiuli* (*Nyctanthes arbortristis*) are very much useful and curative for black fever patient. In case of bowel complaint due to diarrhea, the Rajbanshis make use of the mixed juice of *patharkuchi* (*Kalanchoe pinnata* Pers) leaves and *gandhabhadal* leaves. In dysentery, they prescribe the use of the *thankuni* leaves (*Centella asiatica*), *boalida* leaves, blend of *golmorich* (black peeper), ginger and leaves of *sangibhar*, etc. For healing dysentery, they use

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two other methods: (a) Blend or mixture of *atia kala* or *beechi kala* (a kind of banana full with seeds, *Musa Paradisiaca*) (b) Blend of green leaves of *bhant plant* (*Clerodendrum vicusum*) and native guava (in tablet form). For blood clotting from an injury, the Rajbanshis generally use the juice of *bisallakarani*. Serum of *kalokachu*, leaves of marigold and *udarbhusi* plants and *durbba* grass are also very much helpful for blood clotting. Jaundice is very much common in Sub-Himalayan region and is known by different names like *kumli*, *kumali*, *kamela*, *haldiberam*, *kaun*, etc. among the Rajbanshis. The commonly used methods for healing jaundice are as follows: (a) use of *jambura/ batabi lebu* (*Citrus maxima*) and the juice from bark of *sajina/ sajna* (*Moringa oleifera*) tree, *swarnalata*, *neem*, *patal* leaves and *tauri kelai*, etc. as medicine. They also suggest the blend of green leaves of *kala khesari* and milk of goat in the early morning. (b) Second method is a combination of exorcism, medicine and therapy. In this method, they perform a ritual called *bharan*. This ritual is performed in the early morning and the patient is asked to keep a blend of leaves of *Bandar nauka* plant on his head for two to three hours. In case of non-availability of *bandar nauka*, they prefer to use the blend of mustard oil, *bhogmana* (*Colocasiaesculenta*). Along with this blend they do prescribe incantation. For whooping cough, Rajbanshis generally use the blend of juice of *basak*, *labanga* (*Syzygium*), *elachi* (*cardamom*) and *kalojera* (*Nigella sativa*). In case of ulcer and wound, the mixture of *neem*, oil extracted from *endi* tree, *kelai khesary* and mustard oil blend are the traditional medicines for them. The chapter three explores that the folk medicine of the Rajbanshis is largely based on the locally available plants and their sub-products including roots, fruits, flower, bark, etc. While some of the plants are well-known to others, some of them are very much indigenous. In many occasions, we could not trace their botanical name.

In our field survey it has been also noticed the use of local plants in folk medicinal practices of the Rajbanshis. Among them, mention may be made of *kankisa/ dandakalas* (*Leucas cephalotes*), *shati/ shuti*, *biskatali*, *kanta khuria*, *mongamari*, *mahabali/ buch*, *kanai dinga* [*surimala/ dingdinga*], *gultai*, *jharua narshing*, *dhola manamani*, *joka*, *pundi*, *darua haldi*, *bishmana*, *dharamana*, *charakmuni*, *bahutara*, *jatrasishi*, *havvina bish*, *gakghurkanta*, *jayatri*, *chai*, *kalamichri*, *damad*, *padma gulancha*, *pankira*, *bhuintinta*, *bakulkanta*, *hatubhnga*, *hanru gach*, *tokma*, *dhhulai*, *bhogmana*, *kur haldi*, *chanda*, *bhat*, *kechua bish*, *japsiri*, *bankapasi*, *hendar pata*, *rakhal nadu*, *kachuripana* (water hyacinth), etc.

The use of these plants in folk medicinal practices among the Rajbanshis is still prevalent. Rajbanshis also use of different types of minerals for medicinal purposes. Among

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them *phutkuri* (allum), *rasanjan* (sophuret of mercury), *sankha* (arsenic), *kharimati* (chalik), *tuta* (sulphate of copper), *hira-khas* (sulphate of iron), *raskapu* (colomel), *murdhan shankar* (oxide of lead), *sorali* (nitrate of potash), *tabashir* (silicate of potash), *sajimati* (carbonate of soda), *sohaga* (bicarbonate of soda), *Gandhak* (sulphur), etc. are very much common. Food habit is an important part of folk medicine. The third chapter explores that the Rajbanshis have developed a specific use of herbs and vegetables and their subproducts in food habits as a preventive measure of certain diseases. Food habits of the Rajbanshis (including a few special dishes like *chheka*, *pelka*, *horpa*, etc.) in many cases, they prevent the disease or contribute for healing. Making of *chheka* (or calcium carbonate) from the plantain tuber or bark of mustard seed was/ is a common tradition among the Rajbanshis of North Bengal and Assam. *Siddal* (dried cake of dry fish with vegetable substance), *pelka* (light juice made with different leaves and vegetables) and *chheka* were/ are closely associated with the food-culture of the Rajbanshis.

The folk medicine practitioners among the Rajbanshis are habitually rural people who are active in different occupations [including as cultivators, farming laborers, household workers, teachers, housewives and even the higher knowledgeable people]. They use their knowledge on Herbal medicine in their daily life with an examination of service or for self-requirement. Both men and women carry the knowledge on Folk medicinal herbs. It is being transmitted from generation to generation through oral and practical traditions within the family members of Folk practitioners. In ground work, we found that the practitioners of folk medicine usually do not be given any charge for their services especially wherever source of remedy [plants, leaves, roots, etc.] are easily available.

However, knowledge of the Rajbanshis on folk medicine is slowly but surely receiving an institutionalized structure in Colonial Dinajpur, Cooch Behar, Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri districts. Shri Rajmohan Eshor [the Royal Physician of the Cooch Behar State (c1540–1949 ce)] had build a individual school of healing of fracture and arthritis and a few diseases at Nishiganj of Cooch Behar. This knowledge has been transmitted to the nearby generation of that family [and the disciple of the Eshore family]. The members of this family have opened up more than a few clinics at Nishiganj as well as additional places of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar. Patients normally move toward from different places of northern Bengal. The knowledge of Rajmohan Eshore on the particular branch of medicine has also been transmitted to his disciples and extended to almost entire Northern Bengal in the form of clinics where patients are getting services by paying a suitable amount¹⁰.

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Medicinal Herbs and Plants Used by Rajbanshis for Folk treatment

Herbal Plants	Preparation and application of Medicine	Applicable for Diseases
1.Tulsi Leaves (Ocimum sanctum)	Mixed With honey and consume	For Cold & Cough
2. Moot or mut or gulai (Tinospora Cardifoliamers), the Barks of orrange	Chocher muri (Kind of worm's abode found in wet places) is boiled in water and sieved in bottles and taken in certain amount in the evening.	For Cold and Cough of senior citizen.
3. Bhog Rice, roots of Durba grass.	Taken together and Grindded	Remedies of children Diarrhoea.
4. Chepti Kalai and leaves of Niltos Plants	Boiled with water for Shower	Small pox.
5. Juice of red Amrool (Oxalis Coriculatelin)	Is taken regularly	Dysentery
6. the leaves of Bat Barun (Crataeva Religiosa Hook)	Boiled with Shower water	For Arthritis Pain.
7. Jambura	Taken its juice	Cure of Jaundice.
8. Juice of Neem leaves	Juice taken in every morning with empty stomach	Small pox
9. The leaves of Noh Singh	Its leaves are wound round hot stone	For Pain relief
10. Thankuni Leaves	Mixed with honey taken with empty stomach in every morning	Dysentery, Cold, Gastritis, Diabetes, etc.

(Table Prepared after the Knowledge Gathered from field survey and Conducted Interviews of Rajbanshi Folk medicine practitioners of Rural Areas of Dinajpur Region (present South &West)

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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 disappeared the evil spirits. One of them was the act of expelling evil spirits by prayers, worshipping or magic words. When it did not work then forced to take further steps¹¹.

Conclusion:

However, due to deforestation and environmental changes many species of plants are no more available in this region. So the expert Rajbanshi healers are now importing them from other states of India or collecting them from the outside markets with expensive rate. Because of traditions and professional ethics, the knowledge of the Rajbanshi healers is classified within the community. It is being transmitted only through family traditions or through ‘teacher–pupil traditions’ (*guru-śiṣya paramparā*). So they generally don’t reveal the process of preparation of medicine to the outsiders. The practices of folk medicine were basically non-profiting and confined to providing services to their community members only. So they generally don’t receive a fee for their service except for cost of medicine as per the capacity of patients.

The indigenous traditional knowledge concerned with healing practices against various diseases and disorders by using different plants is our heritage and it must be conserved. In order to protect such Folk medicinal practice, appropriate scientific documentation is straight away essential. At the present time people are inclining more into allopathic and other synthetic drugs which may cause prolonged side effects due to over exploitation. In this situation a proper documentation of this indigenous Herb, flora Medicinal culture of Rajbansis will help and ensure further enhancement in standardization of new leads towards drug discovery. Many people are even opting for Ayurveda in present days. Formulation of proper resources and knowledge can bring about a revolutionary change in modern medicine worldwide, which will, in turn, help mankind.

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