



MAGICO-RELIGIOUS HEALING TRADITIONS AMONG THE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES OF PANGI VALLEY, DISTRICT CHAMBA, HIMACHAL PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

Man's intellect, which has developed over the years has not only simplified the process of finding ways & means of pacifying diseases, but has also helped in the survival of age-old belief which unfolds the cause of illness. Every culture has rationalization for ill health and in case of magico-religious healing the somatic symptoms are often cured through ritualistic performances. The distinction between natural and supernatural exists in every society and people have evolved diverse illustrative models for explaining physical wellbeing. Even today, the indigenous communities living in the tribal areas have their own systems of healing with sociocultural milieu and institution of village deity as its foundation. The perception regarding the cause of disease, its dynamics and treatment are unique in each society. An effort has been made in the present paper to present the magico-religious beliefs and practices related to healthcare system among Pangwals inhabiting the Pangi valley, district Chamba, Himachal Pradesh. The paper is an outcome of study carried out in Pangi valley, which reveals that Pangwals approach the traditional folk healers, having the knowledge of curing the ailments caused due to evil-spirits and other supernatural phenomenon.

Keywords: Pangwals, Supernatural, Magico-Religious Healing, Folk Healers, Ritualistic Performances

INTRODUCTION

Faith in oneself and divine forces is the foundation of any curative technique, which assumes numerous forms, from physical healing to emotional alleviation, to a step toward mental serenity and wellbeing. Faith healing or curing through devout means, avow that ailing can be healed by mystical reliance together with prayer and/or rituals that, according to the believers, invoke a divine with the power to rectify bad health (James, 1989; Selberg, 1995). Strong conviction in supernatural agencies, intervene with infirmity and speed up the process of healing. In common usage, magico-religious healing refers to conspicuous, explicit and ritualistic practices of prayer & gestures where mystical intervention heals the ailing. Miraculous recoveries have been credited to several magico-religious. Socio-cultural milieu of every community governs its methods of healing. Beliefs, attitudes and social ethos existing within a community help in the development of its healing traditions (Conwell, 2003). Dependence of people in supernatural entities is one of the most influential factors governing the wellbeing and health care systems (Alver, 1995; Jakobsen, 1999). Surviving in close association with nature has helped people in becoming inquisitive for its resource wealth. Himalayas, characterized by diverse biophysical environment, rich cultural milieu, innumerable ethnic groups and indigenous communities, has sustained life, since times immemorial (Gupta, 2012).

METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on in-depth interview, observations and survey carried out in the study area. The relevant data for study was collected from the indigenous communities inhabiting Pangi Valley. The data were collected mainly from villagers, elderly people, folk healers, traditional medicine-men, whose magico-religious practices and ritualistic performances are believed to be very useful. The aim of the study was to gather the impression of people's perceptions and beliefs on illness, besides documenting the practices and methods opted for getting relief from health problems.

Study Area

The study was carried out in Pangi sub-division of Chamba district in Himachal Pradesh. The Chamba is located in the higher hilly region of Himalay. Different valleys of Chamba are inhabited by different tribes, viz. Chambyals, Brahmauris, Pangwals, Bhattiyats and Chaurahis, etc., based on the valley they inhabit. Pangi and Bharmour are the two tribal areas of Chamba. Pangi is an inaccessible valley situated between the *Pir Panjal* and Zhaskar mountain ranges. Spread over 1600 square kilometres, the valley is located on the banks of River Chenab. Owing to the tough topographical settings, inaccessible and narrow trenches, high mountain ranges, with extreme winters, this valley is one of the most rugged terrains of Himachal Pradesh. Pangi valley is divided into Sural, Saichu, Hudan, Bhattori and Kumar-Parmar valleys (Chaudhry, 2002). Due to heavy snowfall, the valley remains cut-off from rest of the world for about six months. Pangi valley is mostly inhabited by Pangwal and Bhoti tribes. The term '*Pangwal*' has local connotation and designates the inhabitants of Pangi valley. Pangwals are mostly engaged in agricultural and allied activities (Kumar, 2016).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

i. Belief System of Pangwals: For the indigenous communities inhabiting the villages of Pangi Valley, small diseases of short duration, such as, abrasions, wounds, common cold, stomach-ache, headache, etc., are not of much concern and accepted as a part of life. The harsh ecological conditions are often considered as the cause of headache, fever, cough, body-aches, etc. Of the various assumptions made, the possible causes foreseen by the folk healers are supernatural powers, evil-spirit, evil-eye, ancestral wrath, magic, etc. For Pangwals, the supernatural world is believed to consist of numerous spirits and local deities. Based on community's opinion, the causes of sickness are classified into two categories- diseases caused by supernatural entities and those due to human intervention. Indigenous people believe in the existence of spirits, which they believe causes sickness.

According to the indigenous communities living in the Pangli, illness and misfortunes are results of supernatural forces for instance attacks of good or bad spirits, witches, wrath of ancestors, fury of local deities, evil-eye, etc. Majority of them explain, detect and treat the distress and physical ailments in terms of sorcery and annoyance of spirits. The reason for disease may be random aggression or disciplinary action of malicious or disrespected supernatural beings. These spirits are often feared, because of their role in causing sickness. The fear of these spirits shapes the belief system of indigenous communities. The communities in Pangli avoid standing at the corner of roof top at the time of sunrise and sunset. They also avoid getting water from public tap. The people do not make noise at night time and prefer not to go out during midnight. The people keep away new born babies and milch animal from practitioners of black magic. Having familiarity with socio-cultural setup, the folk healers in the region, tackle the health problems of people and hold a high position in the society. Pangwals still believe in ghostly spirits, evil-eye and magico-religious practices. People talk about the role of village deities in the region, who are believed not only to govern the tribal society but also help in getting rid from diseases, infliction of ghostly and evil-eye. Pangwals believe that black magic and evil-spirits can harm or kill any individual or domestic animal. Pregnant woman, new-born, elderly, sick people, crops and animals are easily victimized by evil-spirits. In order to avoid the impacts of witchcraft, worship of local deities, burning of incense, lighting of lamps, and observing fast, are common among the communities in Pangli. People seek the help of 'Baid', the person who by making use of enchantment and sorcery, liberates from the spirit. It is held that malevolent people employ magical tactics to harm victim, particularly in case of rivalry, which is achieved by pursuing ritualistic practices and sometimes by invoking spirits to have negative effect on victim. Magic may be bewitchment, summoning or invoking ritualistic killing, etc. *Khyacharam*, a form of black magic is common in the valley and its practitioners are known as 'Khyachar' for woman and 'Khyacharu' for man. These practitioners acquire the powers to execute supernatural performance which is either inborn or attained after continuous practice. Feeding enchanted eatables suffused with magic, burying enchanted stuff under victim's house; raising spirits to chase victim and summoning spirits to impinge on prey are several mysterious tactics employed by any magician or sorcerer to harm people. The impact of evil-spirit often results in disease, restlessness, nightmares, loss of appetite, general body weakness, etc. In domestic animals the mystic manoeuvres often affects the feeding habits of animal, milk yield and even the death of animal. The inflicted animal and individual becomes unwell and no medicine works. The Pangwals believe that after death, the spirit wanders, especially in case of untimely death or murder. The evil-spirits and ghostly powers are believe to reside in the isolated places, forests and secluded places and valleys. The wandering spirits are known by as 'Alho' and 'Mishann' and harm a person. 'Banasht' are the wild ghostly spirits. Pangwals believe that apart from sorcery, the demonic spirits also harm people and can only be cured by the 'Baid's' or priests through ritualistic performances. A number of oral narratives describe about black magic, ghosts and the harm caused by these. In order to get rid of various impacts of black magic and ghostly powers, various techniques are practiced. These practitioners can feel the presence of evil-spirits, catch hold of them and make them, enter a person or house instigating displeasure, which often results in disease and restlessness. In some cases, people narrate that because of evil-spirit's attack, condition of patient became so severe that person even thought of committing suicide rather than suffering from disease.

ii. Magico-religious Healing practices: In magico-religious healing, diagnostic process seeks answers to queries of what or who caused disease and why has it an effect on particular person. Conventional diagnosis being both an art and system investigates the reason for appearance of disease and accordingly plan a treatment, which is inclusive, having curative, protective and preventive elements. It may be natural or ritual, or both, depending on the cause. The traditional healing process follows subsequent stages of:

- i) Identification of cause with the help of folk practitioners
- ii) Removal or tackling antagonism with the help of sorcery, and
- iii) Pleasing deity or asking for the forgiveness of supernatural entities by making sacrifices or rituals

Some of the magico-religious performances undertaken in Pangi to find the cause of disease and cure it are discussed. In *Dhoonni-deoni*, the magico-religious performance, the *Baid* or the priest gives consecrated material/grains to the person suffering from the effect of ghostly or unseen powers. The victim is advised to put the consecrated material/grains on burning embers or hot pan and made to inhale its smoke after covering the body with a shawl. After this, the ash is applied on the body and head. This is known to be the initial remedy and is tried for ailing domestic animals. Another technique used for reducing the impact of unseen powers and ward-off evil-spirits is *Pataha Chakhn* or *Pattah Alaikanna*. In local dialect '*Patah*' connotes the sacred ash and *chakhan* stands for taste. During this, the *Baid* visits victim's house and gives the sanctified ash, which is blown on victim's body and made to taste the holy ash. The holy ash can also be obtained from the temple of local deity and is believed to be effective against witchcraft and evil-eye. *Bannah Kanna* is another ritual meant for ensuring the wellbeing of a family. Whenever a family perceives any impending danger or ailment, the head of the family keeps aside some offerings in form of money, sheep or goat, flour, clarified butter, etc. and pray to specific local deity. These offerings are made to the deity when the temples open. While performing *Pani Shonanu*, the *Baid* gives some sanctified water to the person suffering from toothache, stomach-ache, headache or dizziness. This method is believed to give quick relief the patient. At times, the *Baid* is not able to identify the cause of the disease; hence, '*Shashtar Chhanna*', a folk foreteller is invited to make prediction on Tuesday or Saturday. The food grains touched by the victim are placed before the foreteller, who, after making the calculations and using the intuition power, predicts the cause of disease. After this, on auspicious day the *Baid* starts the treatment, keeping in view the seriousness of illness. *Chheera-kahan* is a ritualistic performance undertaken to find the cause of disease. In this, the victim visits the temple of local deity empty stomach and sits in temple courtyard. The *chela* or oracle of deity is invoked and the victim is made to sit before the oracle. During the possession, the oracles either bang their bare back with sacred chains or pierce *trishul*, a trident, in their cheek. During these ritualistic performances the oracle seeks the cause of disease from the local goddess. This process is called *Gyanhinna*. *Hath-thana* performance is undertaken on Tuesday and Saturday. In the evening, the *Baid* visits the house of a victim and produce smoke in a close door room by burning fragrant *guggal* incense. The *Baid* thumps the earth with a sickle or pair of tongs after circumvallating over the head of victim. This involves the chanting of mantras. The locally available aromatic herbs are dried and kept for these performances. Another similar performance is *Feru chhanane*, which is undertaken on Saturday or Tuesday. The *Baid* visits victim's house and burns incense followed by chanting the mantra. After this a ram or goat is circumvallated over the head of victim and kept back to the sheds.

Baiey Bharani is performed in case of serious illness severe. This is believed to be one of the most effective yet difficult and time-tested method treating illness or miseries caused due to ghostly or unseen powers. Only a few knowledgeable priests can accomplish this performance. The ritual is performed on Saturday or Tuesday usually in the midnight. This involves burning some incense, lamps and worship of idols or motifs made by using barley flour. Barley flour is used in ritualistic performances, for which the flour is heated and kneaded with water to give triangular ritual cakes. Flowers are placed on the top of ritual cakes. These ritual cakes after performing worship are stuck on doors, windows and entrance. Another way of using barley flour is mixing it with honey and clarified butter to give it a shape of ritual cake. The tips of triangular ritual cake are thrown in different directions for appeasing the deities and the remaining part is consumed. As a mark of honour, these cakes are used for welcoming the guests. Barley flour is blown on a burning lamp. The *Baid* takes the burning incense on roof top of victim's house. After completing the performance, the same is taken to a nearby water

source or a cremation ground and kept at these places. This ritual is believed to be effective in alleviating the problem. Thus, the socio-cultural milieu and the belief system of a community shape its traditional healthcare systems. The direct concerns, governed by the traditions, practices, beliefs, ethics, sacred taboos, etc. govern the thought process of Pangwals. Though the health is under the control of ecological factors, like, climate, topography, remoteness and accessibility to resources, but the socio-cultural factors, settlement pattern, personal hygiene and food consumption patterns too have direct health implications. In context of Pangwals, the native religious convictions, family's viewpoint and healthcare practices opted or practiced have indirect implications on their wellbeing.

Thus, the indigenous communities believe that the diseases are caused by malevolent supernatural forces and they try to seek the answer to these problems in the metaphysical world. Belief in spirits, demonic powers, sorcery and witchcraft causing disease and sickness is widespread among Pangwals. These convictions find support of various studies undertaken in different indigenous communities. The intrinsic connection between the supernatural world and belief system among indigenous societies has been discussed by various researchers. The studies on magico-religious healing practices help in assessing how traditional medical systems are part indigenous community; how disease and illness and ways of maintaining health and etiology are part of social system of indigenous societies. Tanguturi, 2017 after undertaking study on the magico-religious belief systems and curative practices among Savara primitive indigenous communities revealed that they cure diseases by pleasing the supernatural powers through prayers and by making sacrifices. Behura (1991) identifies three categories of disease causing agents among the primitive societies in India. These are mystical wraths and annoyances; witchcraft and sorcery; and natural phenomenon. Majumdar (1933) discussed the supernatural causes of disease and sickness among Tharus and Korwas. Thus, in order to understand the fundamental concept of faith-healing and healthcare ritualistic performance of a cultural group, the paranormal belief system must be analysed to correlate the similarities and differences between the same among various indigenous communities.

CONCLUSION

As most of indigenous communities, people in remote valleys of Pangi treat ailments by using magico-religious therapies. While following these healing techniques, patient is treated as integral part of family rather than as isolated individual. While performing ritualistic healing, all family members are involved and healer takes into account that patient is completely satisfied and his symptoms are dealt with seriousness, for which he is given enough time to express his problem and treated taking into account body and mind. Each deity has its own oracle, who is completely dedicated and take care of all ritualistic performances associated with deity. While performing rituals, ceremonial clothes are worn. Being old, psychotherapy is considered best for incurable diseases, particularly the psycho-somatic disorders and is usually practiced during nights depending upon severity of wrath. Hence, magico-religious healing is all about diagnosis and elimination of root cause of a physical or mental problem, which could be achieved with the help of virtuous folk healers and priests. Faith can move mountains, yes, this is very true, both for the conviction of indigenous communities and the skills of faith healers who left no stones unturned by taking the bull by the horns and helping individuals in alleviating health problems with the help of time-honoured tried and tested healing practices. They have utilized knowledge to best of their ability and tackled problems which were beyond redemption.



Fig. 1: Burning of incense during the ritualistic performance



Fig. 2: Ritual cake prepared for worship



Fig. 3: Oracle piercing trident during the ritualistic performance



Fig. 4: Oracle during the possession



Fig. 5: Ritualistic performance by an oracle at household level

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