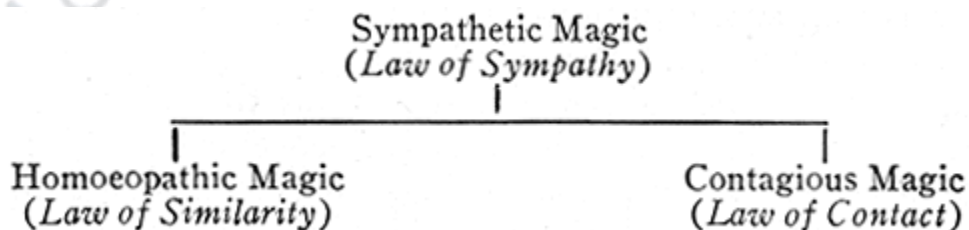


Tribal Healing Practices

Introduction: Folk healing practices had its origin since time unknown. It is believed that human evolution had its origin in the tribal society. People in the traditional period were unable to explain the cause of natural calamity as well as the diseases that inflicted them. Therefore, men in the tribal societies started to create numerous ways and practices that were believed to heal the sufferers. The healers gained a superior position in the society and claimed to possess the power by which men could be healed from his suffering. Therefore, it is very important to study the tribal healing practices as it is from these practices that many contemporary healing practices are inspired to heal the people across the world.

Theoretical Perspective on folk practices of the Tribals: Different theorists in the anthropological as well as sociological dimension did studies based on the tribal practices. These practices included the various life patterns, medical system, healing mechanisms, food habits, dressing patterns and so on. Theorists such as Edward Tylor introduced the concept of animism. According to the concept of animism, the non-material elements also contain spiritual essence. It is an indigenous tribal practice. In his 1871 book *Primitive Culture*, in which he defined it as "the general doctrine of souls and other spiritual beings in general." According to Tylor, animism often includes "an idea of pervading life and will in nature i.e., a belief that natural objects other than humans have souls. Animism focused on all approaches to healing which are connected with the soul. It promotes that we are answerable for each and everything. The main concept that prevailed at that time period was that the healing of one is the wellbeing of all the members of the tribal group. Emile Durkheim in his famous book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* promoted the concept of totemism. Totems are any plants or animals that are believed by the tribal group members to possess supernatural powers. The tribals, according to Durkheim, believe that the totems must be worshipped by the group members as they protect the tribal group from all dangers. Therefore, we can draw the connection that a totem acts as the healer of the tribal group. Another dimension was highlighted by James G Frazer in his most famous book named as *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion*. He emphasized on the concept of magic. There are two types of magic—Homeopathic magic and Contagious magic.

1



These systems of magic are believed to provide healing to the members of the society. Therefore, noted scholars have penned down their thoughts on religion and have emphasized

¹ Source: <http://www.bartleby.com/196/5.html>

that people puts their utmost faith on religion as they believe that these supernatural powers can provide them with healing and rescue them from all dangers.

Exploring the Meanings of Traditional healing and traditional healers: Traditional Healing implies that it is one of the oldest forms of well throughout medicine. Traditional medicine has a fundamental set of ideologies according to which it is practiced. WHO² has defined traditional medicine as — “it is a sum total of knowledge, skill and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences, indigenous to different cultures whether explicable or not, used on maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis and improvement of treatment of physical and mental illness” . It is through the traditional medicine that all other forms of medicine developed later. Traditional healing was meted out to the members of the society by the traditional healers. According to The Free Dictionary a traditional healer is “A person in a primitive society who uses long-established methods passed down from one healer to another to treat a person suffering from various illnesses, many of which have psychological underpinnings. Methods used by traditional healers include the use of roots, fetish dolls, voodoo dolls, and the smoking out of a possessing spirit or spell”³. The traditional healer, as defined by the W.H.O. (1976), is a person who is recognized by the community in which he lives as competent to provide health care by using vegetable, animal and mineral substances and certain other methods based on the social, cultural and religious background, as well as on the knowledge, attributes and beliefs that are prevalent in the community, regarding physical, mental and social well-being and the causation of disease and disability (Cited, Bhasin 2007). Traditional healers are present all around the world and they are respected by the members of the society as they are believed to possess supernatural powers and the power to transcend themselves with the “spirit world” and it is through these powers that they provide healing to the members of the society. There are various healing practices present all around the world but in this module we will focus on the tribal healing practices that are present solely in India.⁴

Tribal Healing Practices across India: Tribals are those people across the world whose life patterns are indigenous in nature. India is termed to provide shelter to 84.4 million tribals. Therefore, it has the largest amount of tribals than in any part of the globe. They are also known as “adivasi”⁵. Some of the major tribal groups in India include Gonds, Santhals, Oraons, Mundas, Khasis, Angamis, Bhils, Bhutias and Great Andamanese and many more.

Santhals are the third largest tribe in India. They are mostly found in the states of West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand and Assam. **Munda** tribe mainly inhabit in the region of Jharkhand, although they are well spread in the states of West Bengal, Chhatisgarh, Orissa and Bihar. **Khasi** tribe is mainly found in the Khasi Jaintia hills in Meghalaya and in the states of Punjab,

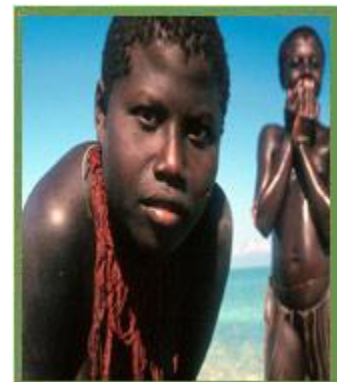
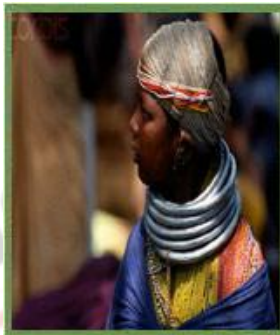
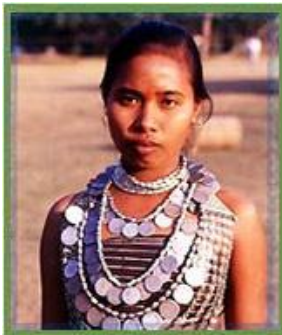
² World Health Organization .The World healthreport : Mental health : new understanding, newhope. 1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland, 2001.

³ <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/traditional+healer>

⁴ Source: <http://www.ecoindia.com/tribes/>

⁵ **Adivasi** is an umbrella term for a heterogeneous set of ethnic and tribal groups considered the aboriginal population of India. They comprise a substantial indigenous minority of the population of India. (Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adivasi>)

Uttar Pradesh, Manipur, West Bengal and Jammu and Kashmir. **Angami** tribe belongs to the extreme north eastern part of the country, in the state of Nagaland. The total population of the Angamis is around 12 million. **Bhils** are popularly known as the bow men of Rajasthan. They are the most widely distributed tribal groups in India. **Bhutia** tribes are of the Tibetan origin. They migrated to Sikkim around 16th century. In the northern part of the Sikkim they are known as the Lachenpas and Lachungpas. **Chenchu** inhabit in the Nallamalai hills, which have been the part of the Nagarjuna Sagar Tiger Sanctuary for centuries in Andhra Pradesh India. The **Gonds** are the tribal community mostly found in the Gond forests of the central India. They are one of the largest tribal groups in the world. **Great Andamanese** is the negrito tribe inhabitant in the Andaman group of Islands. They form the largest population among the other tribes found in these islands. (Cited, <http://www.ecoindia.com/tribes/>) These tribals are pictorially represented below—



There are a number of healing practices that the members of the tribals follow to this date. A few noted tribal healing practices in India are—

Sonowal Kacharis of Dibrugarh, Assam—This tribal group employs many medical practices in order to provide healing to their members from their suffering. For example, if a person suffers from fever then Lime juice mixed with sugar is put on the forehead of the sufferer to get relief from fever. During Diarrhea dry goose berry powder and black salt is mixed with cold water which is taken by the patient. Bark of Long Pepper (Pipoli tree) mixed with Misiri water is also used to cure the disease. During blood vomiting a table spoon of carrot juice is mixed with honey which is believed to cure blood vomiting (Das, 2008).

Lepchas and Bhutias of Sikkim: The primary function of Lepcha religion is to provide the people to deal with the problem of agony and to chalk out ways for receiving relief. They believe in the concept of shamanism. Sorcery, divination, black magic, fetishism, demonolatry, exorcism, ecstatic trance, spirit possession, and other supernatural powers were considered as the elements of *Bon* shamanism (Bhasin, 2007). Shamans are thus respected as healers of the society.

Santhal Tribe: The Santhal healers uses plants for the cure of diabetes, cuts and wounds, fever, respiratory tract disorders, skin disorders, bone fracture, sprain, physical weakness, gastrointestinal disorders, leucorrhoea, spermatorrhea, as well as pain. Diabetes was healed with the amalgamation of two plants, such as *Catharanthus roseus* and *Coccinia grandis*. Treatment of bone fracture as well as sprains is treated with *Cissus quadrangularis* and *Stephania glabra*. Few plants were used for the cure of various diseases or their associate symptoms. *Stephania japonica* was used for the healing of mucus in children along with (blood) dysentery. (Azad, 2014)

Irula Tribes of Pannapatti Hamlet in Dharmapuri District, Tamil Nadu: The Irula healers use the ingredients of *veli paruthi thalai* or *vela* plant [veli flower] with dried ginger. The mixture is then boiled in hot water. After the concoction is taken then the sufferer feels that the ominous head-ache has disappeared. Stomach ache is believed to disappear when a piece of *Easel veru* is put into the mouth with little water. In order heal a person from snake bite tuber paste is applied to the bite of snake in order to get rid of the snake poison. To cure a person from Jaundice the Irula healers Crush the fruits of the *Keelanelli* plant and eat the mixture with goat's milk. (Senthilkumar, 2013)

Tagin Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh: The Tagin tribe uses a variety of plants in order to provide healing to their group members. For example, they use the leaves of *Ageratum conizoid* and *Bryophyllum Calycinum* for the treatment of burn injury and wounds. *Paedaria foetida* is used for stomach disorder. *Tinospora cordifolia* is used for curing scabies. As Arunachal Pradesh is a centre of a large variety of medicinal plants, thus it is the global hotspot of biodiversity. The tribes too use these plants and herbs to heal themselves from their pathology. (Goswami, 2008)

Apatani Medical Culture: The Apatani tribe follows the method of bleeding tubes for the healing of the tribal members. According to this, the Apatani healers use bloodletting⁶ devices to cure the members of the tribe. These are small bamboo tubes which are called take-birii. This is applied on the face, nose and leg of women who come for healing. They put forward their affected parts to the suction of the bamboo tubes. The blood comes out profusely into the tube and the traditional female healer then comes round to collect it. She sucks it out and spits it into a bowl.

Badaga community in Nilgiri: The badaga community too follows the herbal way of healing the individuals of the group from their suffering. They use Seegai to treat Cuts and wounds; Utharanai to treat Asthma and inflammatory; Basambu for Respiratory, dental, diarrhea; Mullmothakka for Eye diseases; Munkil for Bone fracture; Neermulli for Fever; Thagara gidu for Pain during deliveries, fever and vomiting; Kolanganannu for Heart pain, fever against evil spirits; Papparatte for Tumor; Nannari for Blood purifier; Kallugannighe for Menstrual pain and many more. (Sathyavathi, 2011)

Tribal of the western Ghat in Satara district: The healers in the Western Ghat of Satara District too use herbal cures for the treatment of disease. A few medicinal plants that are used by the tribal healers in order to cure the respective diseases are as follows—Gajkarni, hatsura, Africanmillet to treat Ring worm loss of hair in circle; Limdo, Rui, Bavachi, hiptage, Bahava, Karvand for Itchnig; Ghasdoro, Maka, Karanj, Satodi for Ulcer; Umaro, Tarada garmalo for Lucoderma; Kher, Adad vdid for Lucoderma and so on.

Baigas of North Bastar, Chhattisgarh: The Baigas practices “ethno-healing”. The use of different parts of plants and herbs for the treatment of diseases is a traditional feature among the Baigas. These are used for restoring the self-healing process. The decoction of the bark of Acacia catechu is taken thrice a day for two days to treat Gynecological problems; Shadawar, Jamun, Ashok, Imli, Arjun is used to treat Gynecological problems; Bharand is used to heal abortion; Palas is used as a contraceptive; Bharmi, Sadabahur, Pitpappada are used for blood purification. (Tiwari, 2013)

Bhil tribe: The Bhils believed that some people – mainly women - had the ability to cause sickness, misfortune or death. It was considered that they were in touch with malevolent spirits, such as *bhuts* and *churails* (male and female departed spirits), and they could cause them to attack a person through their malign glance. They were known as dakini. Many Bhils wore charms or amulets on their right forearms or – with women especially – on their heads to keep such spirits at bay. The charms consisting of a piece of blue string with seven knots were tied by an exorcist while he chanted incantations (Cited, Hardiman, 2006). The health of the society depended on the conduction of witchcraft by the members of the society. In many cases the healers (known as BHOPAS among the Bhil members) demanded for bribes from the sufferers and it was on the basis of the bribes given to them that they were healed out of the suffering by

⁶ <http://fractalenlightenment.com/11982/culture/the-intriguing-apatani-culture>

the healers. Therefore, witchcraft is also believed to promote healing to the members of the group.

Bhotia: The Bhotias mainly use Atees to cure them of abdominal pain and vomiting; Gurbach for sprain in any region of the body; Piyaj to control vomiting; Lahsun for reducing ear ache; Jambu is applied on wounds; Gandrani for controlling vomiting as well as ulcer treatment; Ialjari for treating skin diseases; Dhak for curing urine infection; sarsoun is applied on burnt areas; mirch paste is applied on the part of the body bitten by dog. Thus, the Bhotias depend themselves on the herbal and medicinal plants for treating the diseases from which the sufferers suffer from within their group.

Chakma Communities of Chittagong Hill: The traditional healers in the Chakma Communities of Chittagong Hill too lay down their belief on the uses of the medicinal plants and herbs in order to heal the members of the group from their suffering. Allergy is cured by Ada; Agunitita for Dysentery; Amilani for Infant sickness; Amoloki for Insomnia; Anus for Leprosy; Arjun for Blister; Aulod for Blood disease; Barotora gach for Fever Bashoke pada Chest pain and asthma; Bishma for Stomach pain; Dalsini for Nausea; Dando upp for Tonsillitis; Deldipada for Eye infection; Faranga ludi, horinkan for treating cancer and insect bites; Gamari gulo for Anemia; Gazor for Piles; Khar tethoi for Jaundice. (Khisha, 2012)

Garó Tribe: The traditional healthcare practices among the Garó tribes are associated with religious rituals. Sangshareq is the oldest religion of the Garós which is believed to possess the Tantra and mantra in association with providing healing. They believe that Shushumi God blesses the people of the group with warding off their diseases, pain, shock and other dangers of life. The Garó people also lays their trust on ayurvedic practices for treating diseases like dyspepsia, flatulence, anorexia, chronic dysentery, gastric and sexual disease. It was the Garó tribe who went for an ayurvedic treatment for the cure of sexual diseases. The healers who treated people with Ayurveda generally provided treatments like medicinal herbs, armllet, water read and puff of breath for healing disease among the Garó tribes.

Conclusion: Thus, these are just a few tribes and their associated healing practices that are aforementioned. There are many other tribes in India who has their own unique ways of providing people with healing. The tribals use indigenous health care practices to treat them out of the diseases that they are suffering from. There are many tribes who doesn't go in for scientific medical system for their healing as they do not want to mix their culture along with the "civilized" people. They entrusts their full faith on the health care their own practices. Therefore, it is quite evident that the modern system of medical practices is influenced by the indigenous healthcare practices of the tribals.

References:

A.K . Azad, Md. Rubel Mahmud, Afsana Parvin, Amit Chakraborty, Farzana Akter, Sumaya Islam Moury, Inin Pervin Anny, Syeda Rehnoma Tarannom, Shahriar Kabir, Joy, Sadia Yeasmin Chowdhury, Shahina Akter, Mohammed Rahmatullah., Medicinal Plants of A Santal Tribal

Healer In Dinajpur District, Bangladesh, World Journal of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Vol 3, Issue 10, 2014.

Das, F A, Barua, I & Dutta Das D., Ethno-Medicinal Practices: A Case Study among the Sonowal Kacharis of Dibrugarh, Assam, Ethno-Med., 2(1): 33-37 (2008).

Dr. R. Sathyavathi, K.J.Janardhanan, Folklore Medicinal Practices Of Badaga Community In Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, Tamilnadu, India International Journal of Pharma Research and Development IJPRD/2011/PUB/ARTI/VOV 3/ISSUE-2/APRIL/007.

Bjerken, Zeff.: Exorcising the illusion of Bon 'Shamanism': A Critical Geonealogy of Shamanism in Tibetan Religion. Reveue d' Etudes Tibetaines, .Number Six-October (2004).

Dr. Veena Bhasin Kamla-Raj Enterprises 2007 Anthropologist Special Volume No. 3: 59-94 (2007).

Farida Ahmed Das, Indira Barua and Deepanjana Dutta Das Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh 786 004, Assam, India Ethno-Med., 2(1): 33-37 (2008).

Goswami, P et al., Traditional Healthcare Practices among the Tagin Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge, Vol 8 (1), January 2009, pp. 127-130.

Hardiman, D., Knowledge of the Bhils and their Systems of Healing, University of Warwick institutional repository, 2006.

Hendley, 'Account of the Maiwar Bhils,' 351-2.

Joy, Sadia Yeasmin Chowdhury, Shahina A kter, Mohammed Rahmatullah. Vol 3, Issue 10, 2014. World Journal of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences.

Khisha, T, Karim, R, Reza Chowdhury, S and Banoo, R., Ethnomedical Studies of Chakma Communities of Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh, *Bangladesh Pharmaceutical Journal* 15(1): 59-67, 2012.

Mehta, R & Tiwari AK., Ethno Phytoremedies Used For The Treatment Of Various Gynecological Problems By The Baigas Of North Bastar, Chhattisgarh, India, IJPAS, February, 2013, 2(2).

Sathyavadhi, R & Janardhanan, K J., Folklore Medicinal Practices Of Badaga Community In Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, Tamilnadu, India, International Journal of Pharma Research and Development, Vol. 3, Issue-2, April 2011.

Senthilkumar, K & Gobalakrishnan, C., Indigenous Health Care Practices among the Irula Tribes of Pannapatti Hamlet in Dharmapuri District, Tamil Nadu, GRA - Global Research Analysis, Volume : 2 | Issue : 10 | Oct 2013.

Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1871). Primitive Culture: Researches Into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom. J. Murray. p. 260.

