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The World of Traditional Healers: A Case Among the Totos

Dr. Rimi Dutta

Post Doctoral Fellow

Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New
Delhi, India.

Abstract

Traditional healing is considered as the oldest form of structured method of healing practices based on the underlying principles conformed by community culture. Since long back scientific platform has developed for finding out treasure of response towards ailments, considering the pharmacological actions of different constituents through respective attempts by the recognized as well as specialized persons in every community. They are the people who live within the community, competently provide treatment by using plant, animal and mineral substances following socio-culturally approved prevailing knowledge, beliefs regarding physical, mental and social well being of community members. Expertise has also been observed among the specialists depending on their method of diagnosis of ailments, administration of drugs and preference of treatment. The present paper led to focus on community roles of traditional healers of a small frontier tribal community with their local affiliation and modes of adaptations of the respective population via traditional healing.

Keywords:Traditional healers, Traditional medicine, Healing, Tribe.

Introduction

Health is considered as the most precious treasure of life. It is also widely discussed biological as well as cultural universal which has always been at the center of interest and concern since the onset of human civilization. In due course of evolution, traditional societies with their rich traditional knowledge have been trying to find out the various way of healthy living. They intervene variety of situations within the framework of their respective causative theory and therapeutic as well as preventive measures (Joshi, 2004).

Plethora of various Anthropological studies illuminates the facts that this indigenous knowledge systems of various traditional societies have been providing the foundation of many age old practices of medicine in human civilization in curing disease and achieving well-being. This knowledge actually deals with the skills, innovations; practices as well as learning that is embodied in the traditional life style of a community or people or is contained in codified knowledge systems passed between generations (Bhasin, 2007). Being a pillar of indigenous knowledge, traditional medicine tells about the basic concept of disease causation, knowledge about the treatment and achieving the heal. This also encompasses a broad range of categories which includes traditional ecological knowledge, intangible cultural heritage knowledge, traditional cultural expression pertinent to the particular culture. World Health Organization (WHO, 1976) defines Traditional medicine is the sum total of all knowledge and practices whether explicable or not, used in diagnosis, prevention and elimination of physical, mental or social imbalance and relying exclusively on practical experience and observations handed down from generation whether verbally or writing (cf. Bhasin, 2007).

The art of healing practices in most of the traditional system of almost all the ancient civilization is associated with the decision of identifying the cause of that disease. Writing of Rivers (1924) explained that the traditional societies conceived disease as the result of either the projection of morbid objects or substances or abstraction of something from the body or the action of the sorcerers i.e. mainly the supernaturalism. On the other hand Clements (1932) categorized disease as the intervention of supernatural agency or human

agency or acute natural causes. It is equally true that in reality these causes are less effective in isolation. They are mostly effective when at least two concepts work together because clinical manifestation of biological disorders in human being may be depicted as disease but clinical explanation is not enough to delineate all about the concept of illness in any society as the perceptions of illness are highly culture related. As a result the common measures have taken against diseases are associated with magical extraction, administration of medicinal herbs, minerals, sacrifices, offerings, worships, prayers to the deities, also contact with magical objects like amulets and food restrictions which are executed through the specialized person. They are the healers, witnessing the fact that people have deep seated faith in cures through them. While describing about the relationship between the healthcare system and healers in any medical system Foster and Anderson (1978) mentioned that the social relationships that revolve around healer and his or her patient actually refers to the healthcare system. He bears the concept of illness and all about the healing techniques which are specially pertinent to that particular culture in which he belongs to. World Health Organization (WHO, 1976) define traditional healer, 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 (cf. Bhasin, 2007). They are considered as expert in curing illness within the perception coinciding as rest of the members of the society comprehend.

It has been found that the general concept of disease in Toto society hints from social hostility to activities of the supernatural agencies including both the action of benevolent and malevolent spirits as well as the intervene of deities. This article is an attempt to illuminate the world of traditional healers and their role in traditional Toto society. The study will give an account of ecological, historical and mainly the socio-cultural factors that contribute to the healing practices executed by the traditional healers with the refraction to the health perceptions of the Totos, a sub-Himalayan mongoloid tribe of North Bengal.

Traditional Health Practitioners: Role and Position

Like most of the other traditional culture, in Toto society there is a specialist who treats illness, injury, disease and related misfortune. These persons are generally corresponds to the leader of religious practices. The medico religious practitioner is also considered to be practitioner of magic, mantric or witch craft or exorcism traditionally and that person was a man of critical mind endowed with many abilities and that is dedicated to the vocation. Generally it is assumed that these specialists and the people have a common faith upon the technique used for the remedy as quit often both share the same culture milieu. The Totos identify illness as caused by natural and supernatural forces. In both the cases the illness is termed as *bimari* whether it is caused by natural or supernatural agencies. The traditional healers of Toto society is mainly categorized in the following way

- i) *Paw*- Priest, Magical as well and Herbal therapist (Belong to Toto community)
- ii) *Baidangis*- Exorcists (Belong to Toto community)
- iii) *Kabiraj*- Harbal therapist (Belong to Toto community)
- iv) *Naongpoin*- Second class priest, Magical as well as Herbal therapist (Belong to Toto community)
- v) *Jhakri*- Magical as well as Herbal therapist (Belong to Nepali community.)

All the traditional medical practitioners are ordinary house holders who do healing work beside their routine house hold duties. An important factor, which not only singles out Toto traditional healers from the doctors but also from many other reported forms elsewhere, is there a inexpensive treatment terms. Mostly their services are gratis and sometimes inexpensive and as much their treatment is always within the reach of the people. In nut shell, the healer role is a 'non- profit social services' which adds to the prestige of an individual as a helpful guy. There are however very few exceptions in the forms of super specialist traditional healers. The super specialists charge exorbitant sum for their services.

The role set of a *Paw* is a complex one as it includes the role of a priest, diagnostician, healer and sometimes astrologer. *Paw's* role is typically a male's job. It is also some extent clan specific. *Paw* must belong to either of three clans viz. *Dantrobei*, *Boudhubei* and *Nubeibei*. The status of *Paw* is not ascribed by birth and also not inherited vertically from father to son. *Paw's* healing art is not a literary tradition. The role of a *Paw* is not a full time job nor can it yield sufficient for a practitioner in economic terms. A *Paw* is like

any other land owning person and works as a healer during spare time. For calculation of any kind of illness or misfortune he generally receives ten to fifty rupees considering the type of illness. *Paw* is generally do not demand for the fee and he has been seen to ever reluctantly accept the taken amount. For performing rituals, the *Paw* receives the ingredients used besides rupees. Only on some special rituals which involve trance inclusion and have lot of strain on the *Paw* the payment could raise up to hundred rupees. One point should be mentioned that, although they prescribe sacrifices but *Paw* himself does not sacrifice any animal. *Baidangis* are the exorcists of the Toto community. They generally practice various types of (sorcery and) exorcism related to health and disease. The exorcist use to put *marua* or *mimba* in a plate to ascertain the nature of the disease and the name of the deity or spirit responsible for it. They also prescribe the ingredients required for offering the penance including the color and sex of the particular animal or bird to be given in sacrifice. Some times the *Baidangis* also prepare folk medicine (or herbal medicine) from locally available herbs. Exorcists are always male member of the Toto community, but not clan specific. This is also not a full time job. The art of exorcism is not learnt and transmitted vertically from father to son. The curative measures performed by the Toto *Baidangis* are less costly than that of the Nepali *jhakris*. The Toto *Baidangis* were reputed to treat cause of snake bites. *Kabiraj* are the herbal therapist of the Toto community. The role of *kabiraj* includes diagnosis of disease and prescribing relevant medicine for curing the disease. The status of *kabiraj* is not ascribe by birth and also not inherited vertically from father to son. *Kabiraji* is a learnt method.

Traditional Healer- Case: 1

There was a famous herbal therapist Sri Kalicharan Toto lived in the village sector Mitran Gaon (farthest from the Primary Health Center and market place.) when the field survey was conducted he was at the age of 40 years. He was married and has got four kids. He was mainly associated with agriculture as his primary occupation. His house was situated at the extreme end of gaon where he lived with his family members. Considering the educational background Sri Kalicharan Toto was dropped out at the primary school level. His livelihood was mainly dependent on agriculture and herbal therapy was his secondary occupation. As he resided in Mitran gaon he would easily be accessible to the inhabitants of Mitran gaon. Due to the positional proximity he was also easily available to the villagers of Panchayet gaon and Mondal gaon. Irrespective of age, sex education and economic background all kinds of patients were attended by him. He also attended the patients belong to Nepali, Bengali, Bihari community.

He got remuneration considering etiology, severeness of the disease and on the basis of the treatment he provided. According to Sri Kalicharan Toto he acquired the art of healing by herbal therapy from the place Nisigunj. Sri Kalicharan Toto reported that he had got multiple fractures in an accident and was taken to Jalpaiguri District Hospital. But he was not cured properly. Then he went to Nisigunj where he was treated for one year and finally got cured. During that one year he learnt application of various herbal medicines. He also enriched his knowledge regarding medicinal plants by deep observation to nearer ecology. He claimed that he could prescribe medicine successfully for treating gastroenteritis, malaria, urinary problems, mumps, jaundice etc. According to Sri Kalicharan Toto, the cases of malaria were found quite frequently among the Totos. Apart from that, skin problems and tooth cavity were also wide spread in Toto society. During onset of the disease the Toto people used to prefer traditional medicine. He claimed that he is very successful in treating fracture. For treating fracture he made a paste with *Losinng*, *Amra*, *Gurja*, *Eyanasim*, *Durba* and *Bhuichampa* were used. First of all, a plate was made with bamboo stick and the bone is set properly with that bamboo frame. The prepared paste is applied on the fractured bone. He claimed that all his prescribed medicines are very effective for curing various diseases. Due to this reason, he acquired a respectable position in and around the village and obeyed by most of the villagers.

Sl. No	Name of the disease related symptoms and misfortunes	Ingredients used	Way of Administration
		Young leaf and flower of <i>Ambersing</i> .	Leaf is grinded. The patient has to take the extract or the juice twice a day. The same dose continues up to 3 to 5 days depending on the condition of the patient
		Twig part, leaf and flower of <i>Kasai</i> .	The plant parts of <i>Kasai</i> are very useful in treating malaria and high fever. The flower of <i>Kasai</i> plant is preserved. The

1	Malaria		flower is boiled in water, after cooling the water is preserved in glass container. According to the condition of the patient the liquid is prescribed for 7-10 days.
		<i>Basak</i> leaf, <i>Vat</i> flower, leaf and root.	For fever initially patient is given extract of <i>Basak</i> leaf up to 3-4 days. If the patient does not get cure then extract of <i>Kasai</i> leaf is prescribed. The treatment continues up to 7 days. If the patient still does not get cure finally root and flower extract of <i>Vat</i> is applied. The patient has totake half glass of the prescribed juice for 4-7 days.
		<i>Neem</i> leaf	<i>Neem</i> leaves are boiled and the water is given to the patient twice or thrice a day.
		Root of <i>Kulin</i>	Root extract of <i>Kulin</i> tree is prescribed. The patient has to take medicine until fever is completely cured.
		Bile of cow (liver is also collected)	In earlier days bile of cow is collected and burned. Then the bile was grinded to make a dust and the dust was prescribed to the malaria patient. The treatment continued until the patient got complete cure.
		Bile of bear	Bile of bear was also used in traditional medicine to cure malaria. The fresh collected bile was dried off and crushed to prepare dust. The patient had to take the dust with little amount of water until he got complete cure.
2	Mumps	Stem and leaf of <i>Oatang</i>	<i>Oatang</i> is very useful in curing mumps. First of all a hole is made on the tree trunk. Through the pore plant juice comes out which is applied on the affected area.
3	Jaundice	Rhizome or root of <i>Aing</i>	Root is grinded first. Then the grinded root is mixed with little amount of water. The patient has to take the mixture thrice daily up to 3-4 days.
		<i>Lahari</i> leaf	The leaf extract is found useful in treating jaundice. The patient is advised to take one glass of leaf extract daily once in empty stomach. The patient should take the medicine at least up to 15 days.
		<i>Cirota</i> leaf	<i>Cirota</i> leaf is boiled in one glass of water. The patient has to take the water daily once. The treatment continues up to 7 days to one month depending on the condition of the patient.
		<i>Eyubda</i> (one kind of termeric)	The root portion of <i>Eyubda</i> is grinded to make a paste. Little amount of water is added to the paste. After taking meal patient has to take the mixture daily once up to 7 days.
		<i>Fauching</i> (root/rhizome)	Root extract of <i>Fauching</i> is useful of treating jaundice. 3-4 doses are required for complete cure. Patient has to take the medicine in empty stomach. The extract can be preserved in glass container for 3-4 days.
4	Gastroentites	<i>Eoying</i> leaf	The leaf and fruits of <i>Eoying</i> plant are used as medicine for curing gastro-entities. Fruit and leaves are paste together and cooked. According to the traditional belief, ingestion of the prepared food strengthens the digestive power of the body.
5	Fracture	<i>Dubo</i> , <i>Harjor</i> , <i>Kawla</i> , <i>Akti</i> , <i>Pakan bet</i> , <i>Gurja</i> , <i>Karkudi</i> , <i>Simbole</i> , <i>Totla</i> , <i>Karemba</i> , <i>Losing leaf</i> , <i>Amra</i> , <i>Eyanasim</i> , <i>Bhuichampa</i> , Egg,	Traditional medicine can cure the fracture. If the fracture is old, egg is applied on the fractured area to make soften the fractured bone. A paste is prepared by mixing <i>Dubo</i> leaf, two kind of <i>Harjor</i> , bark of <i>Kawla</i> , bark of <i>Akti</i> , bark of <i>Pakan bet</i> , <i>Gurja</i> (stem), leaf of <i>Karkudi</i> , bark of <i>Simbole</i> , bark of <i>Totla</i> , bark of <i>Karemba</i> , <i>Losing</i> leaf, root extract of <i>Losing</i> , young leaf of <i>Amra</i> , root of <i>Bhuichampa</i> . The fractured bone is settled properly and the prepared sticky paste is applied on

		Bamboo.	the fractured area. With the help of bamboo frame plaster is done. Regular dressing is required for quick and proper recovery. The patient has to carry the plaster up to 22 days. During this period patient is strictly advised to take only vegetarian food. After removing of the plaster sometimes patient experiences little bit of pain. In that case another solution is applied on the affected area. The solution is prepared from the bird hornbill. The flesh and bone of hornbill are boiled together until the flesh and bone are totally dissolved. After cooling, the solution is kept in a glass container. The solution is applied on the affected area regularly until the patient gets relief from the pain.
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Traditional Healer- Case: 2

The villagers of all the studied six sectors were noticed to visit a person residing at Ballalguri (the gram Panchayet of Totopara) whenever they suffered from jaundice. According to the villagers her medicine is unailing for remedy. Sixty five years old a Muslim women Hamida Begum was that person inhabiting at Ballalguri with her husband, son, daughter in law and grand children. Her son was agriculturist based on some five bighas of land. He had a small business of areca nut as his secondary occupation.

A backward class Muslim lady Hamida Begum acquired the medicine and its preparation procedure from her distant relative uncle who was a fakir. She did not want to disclose the formula to the outsider. But she is giving training to her daughter in law. The root of a specific tree is collected from the forest and the extract of the root is mixed with various other ingredients. The whole process is carried out by the lady herself and partially assisted by her daughter in law. This is a liquid syrup kind of medicine which could be stored up to one month.

This medicine can be prepared at any time as per requirement of the patient. Patients have to pay Rs.50/- to Rs 100/- including the remuneration of healer. Along with the medicine she also gives a *tika* at the forehead of the patient and a *mala* (i.e. garland). The changes in color of that *tika* indicate whether the disease is curing or progressing. Many of the cured patients presented some gifts to the lady. As reported even sometimes the hospital admitted patient party visited her for the medicine. According to her, clinical diagnosis is necessary prior to consume of the medicine. But in some cases she prescribes the medicine by observing the symptoms of the patients. The quantity of the medicine differs in case of adult or children. The dose is also determined according to the severity of the disease. Whenever any jaundice patient visits her, she initially prescribes one dose for 15 days and places a *tika* on his forehead. After 15 days, she reexamines the patient and prescribes second dose of medicine. According to her, two dosages are sufficient for curing the disease. She reported that jaundice is frequently found in and around Totopara and she had already treated number of Toto patients. All the studied Toto population of the said six sectors of Totopara village reported about the efficiency of the medicine given by Hamida Begum. But they also complained that Hamida Begum charges very high for her medicine, even sometimes it exceeds Rs.500/- .

Traditional Healer- Case: 3

Birth by mid wives is a traditional process among the Totos and it is known to large number of elderly women among them. There was an elderly lady who was well-known as a mid wife among the Totos. Sabita Toto, sixty years old Toto widow women resided in Mondal gaon. Sabita Toto had four sons and three daughters. Sabita had to live alone as all her children were married. She learnt the procedure of child birth from her mother in law.

She narrated that bamboo thread and hot water are the main requirements for the whole process. The concern house supplies all the material at the time of delivery. Bamboo thread is necessary for cutting the umbilical cord and one bamboo strip is used only once for the delivery purpose. According to her bamboo strip is fully hygienic and also claimed that she was never reported with neonatal infection. Umbilical cord is buried immediately after the delivery. The baby is washed with the hot water. She also reported, during the entire process of child birth she needs some assistance by the experienced female family members of that

pregnant lady. She also added that in majority of the cases she does not get prior information and has to move with the patient party without any preparation. She never claims any remuneration for her job. She also reported that she refers critical cases to the hospital but less critical cases could easily be handled by her. She also informed that before establishment of local primary health centre (PHC) she performed such a critical delivery which is technically known as forceps delivery. She also claimed, during her lifetime she performed more than fifteen deliveries and assisted at least thirty deliveries. According to the traditional norm she is invited in the name giving ceremony of the new baby.

Traditional Healer- Case: 4

The magico-religious performances which were previously very much practiced among the Totos are gradually decreasing day by day after the death of many traditional healers. One of the famous magico-religious practitioners in the Toto society was Chepte Toto. He was seventy five years old when the study was conducted. The house of Chepte Toto was situated at the extreme end of Puja gaon. He was living at the slop of the Tading hill of Puja gaon at a very isolated location. He was unmarried and devoted his life in the vocation of traditional healing practices. Chepte Toto belongs to the Maisi clan. According to him all magico religious practitioners of Toto society either belong to the *Maisi* clan or *Deisi* clan. Other clans are not allowed to practice any magico-religious performances. According to him, the Toto people still perceive the idea that large number of the diseases could be cured only by practicing the ritualistic performances. The traditional healer acquired the art of healing from his preceptor during his life time. After the death of his spiritual guides they came on the dream of their disciples to teach their own scripture. According to Chepte Toto, all the religious practitioners tried to spend their life in a very isolated location with a hope that the preceptor will come on their dream. They never expose those mystical formulas to any of the outsider. According to Chepte Toto, he was quite capable of curing lots of diseases only by offering worship and sacrifices without any medicine or plant extract. Sometimes he used prayer beads to diagnose the origin or cause of illness. He claimed that he easily could identify whether a person attacked by the witch or evil spirit could either be cured or not. Rice, ginger and country liquor *eu* are considered to be the three essential elements of every offering. Different incantation are practiced for different types of witch killing. Apart from rice, ginger and *eu*, fowl which is called *fasur* is another important ingredient for appeasing the witch or evil spirit. He told about the name of different ghost or evil spirit such as *Dip-tee*, *Dating-tee*, *Choa-tee*, *Tasu*, *Lengpa-tee*, *Panajora*, *Goa-tee* etc. All these spirits were named after the name of some small rivulets. Chepte Toto described about some magico- religious performances which he practiced for curing diseases. For example *Dating-tee puja* was performed for getting rid off from stomach pain. For healing skin problem *Lumbaipuja* was practiced which ensures early recovery. The deity associated with this *puja* was made up of small piece of stone sized 1-1.5 inches. This worship should be organized by the family members of the affected person. One cock has to be sacrificed. Prevalence of another important disease found in Totopara was malaria. In case of malaria two white pigeons and one black cock are sacrificed in the name of *Moo-tee* which is actually a rivulet.

The most crucial case he had to face in his life time when a child came with severe body ache with a strange characteristic that the body size was gradually squeezing. He diagnosed that the child was attacked by *Maan*. The *Maan* was the combined attack of *Niting-tee*, *Moo-tee* and *Doying chomii*. To get rid off from the disease he prescribed sacrifice of one red fowl along with rice, ginger, and the country liquor *eu*. He claimed that the child was completely cured after performing all the rites and rituals. As Chepte Toto lived in Puja gaon (distant from local PHC and market place), he was easily accessible to the people of Puja gaon. He attended all the patients irrespective of male, female and children. He accepted small remuneration depending on the economic condition of the patient's family and got a portion from the offering. Chepte Toto said that the magico-religious practices are gradually decreasing after the death of their traditional healers and nobody is interested to learn the prescribed techniques.

He had of opinion that the importance of magico-religious activities are decreasing among the villagers as they think that nothing could be achieved through that sort of practices. He also opined when people suspect that supernatural power are at play behind their ailments they prefer to avail the traditional way of treatment prescribed by the traditional healers. Apart from that, magico- religious activities are also performed not only to ward of diseases and ghost attack but also for snake bite and related misfortunes. From the words of Chepte Toto, it could be assumed easily that by blending the action of magic and religion, a combination of magical practices and religious observances was obtained to ward off misfortunes of the society.

Conclusion

In every culture, there are some particular social subjects that are chosen for their sacred and profane characteristics (Bhasin, 2007). Through the transmission and cultivation of traditional knowledge of healing and cures, the traditional healers in Toto society also synthesize and practice their distinct paraphernalia, etiology, diagnosis, preventive measures and treatment mode. It has also been found that the pluralism is also being seen within this particular therapeutic mode of traditional healing. Through state owned primary health centre and other hospitals the Toto people also got exposure to the new style of modern therapies which eventually makes Totopara a medically pluralistic setting. Arrival of western medical practitioners is not very recent in Totopara, which dated back approximately 1980s and their number has increased gradually. They actually come in constant touch with modern medical system after the establishment of Totopara Primary Health Centre in 1993. This pluralistic medical situation of doctors and traditional healers in Toto society actually provides flexibility and fulfill various needs of the society. The plurality enables the community people to switch from one type of healing system to another type of medical system in search of the best and quick healing. It was seen that despite availability of modern medical practitioners, the personality, experience, passed success and psychological assurance greatly contribute in decision making while choosing the therapeutic measures. Nominal remuneration of the traditional healers was also an added advantage for the economically backward people as they considered it a voluntary service for the community people instead of profession. On many occasion, for the same problem traditional healers and modern medical practitioners were consulted side by side. The reason is mainly the peoples perception towards illness and disease as well as the etiology of the disease which is pertinent to their indigenous culture. Presence of pluralism within the traditional medical system actually was providing alternative choice within the system at various levels, instead of encouraging the competitive network. It had been seen that treatment as well as cure of specific classes of symptoms were associated with a particular healer. Therefore simultaneous presence of multiple healers was considered as a complimentary to one another rather than obstruction which was giving the traditional medical system of the studied folk community a complete shape.

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