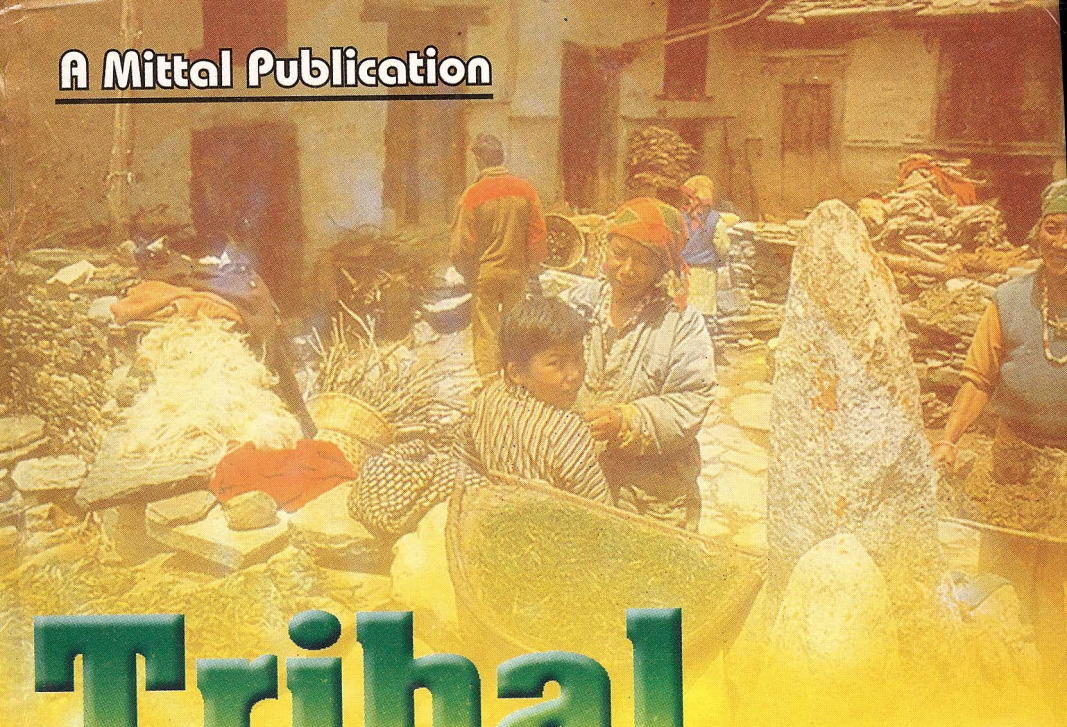


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Tribal Medicine

J. J. Roy Burman



This book is basically an exploratory study of the traditional tribal medicinal practices which are prevalent among the autochthonous tribal population of Sikkim: the Bhutias and Lepchas who constitute about 24 per cent of the population of the State.

Lepchas and Bhutias, the indigenous peoples of Sikkim, have from time immemorial adapted themselves to the vagaries of nature by evolving intricate social and cultural mechanisms. Their medicinal practices too were woven within these mechanisms. Contrary to the common notion of superstition and faith healing, the system by and large had a scientific basis. The system also traverses along political-economic dynamics of ethnicity and no wonder that with the rise of ethnic fervour a revival and reinforcement of traditional medicinal practices are to be witnessed in Sikkim. This study encaptures some of the vital issues of this subtle social dynamics.

Specifically, the book studies the concept of disease and sickness, the different methods of treatment, the official health policies over the years. It also documents the different governmental and non-governmental facilities as well as the recent changes in the health practices of the people.

Rs. 350

DR. J.J. ROY BURMAN (b.1955) is primarily an anthropologist having done his post-graduation from North Bengal University in Sociology & Social Anthropology. Immediately after obtaining the degree he worked on the impact of counter-insurgency among the Mizos in Mizoram as a fellow of Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, Chandigarh. After living there in a village for about one year he joined Help Age India as Project Adviser for East and North-East India. After almost eight years of his direct contact with social work and social engineering, he joined Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, as a member of the Faculty. Apart from teaching Anthropology, Roy Burman also carries out research mainly on the problems in rural areas. Forests, environment, mass religion have been his main areas of interest. He is the first person in India to have done Ph.D on Sacred Groves from the sociological perspective. Few anthropologists have had the opportunity to travel in the tribal and forest areas all over the country like him. Right now it has become his passion to portray the inter-ethnic harmonious relations in the country.

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TRIBAL MEDICINE

TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AND CHANGES IN SIKKIM

J.J. Roy Burman



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J.J. ROY BURMAN

PREFACE

The present book is basically the outcome of a brief research which was undertaken between 1996 and 1997. It involves both primary information collected and collated from the field work which was carried out mainly in six villages and a few small towns of Sikkim, including Gangtok - the state capital. The data was personally gathered by me. Apart from the field work quite a substantial data was added through the secondary sources. I must, however, add that all the secondary sources data have not been used here, taking into consideration of the present project. The data so gathered may later be used for a more theoretical endeavour.

The present study has not attempted at making an ethnography of the practice of traditional medicines among the Bhutia and Lepcha people, among whom the work is concentrated, since quite a lot of work has been carried already out on this by the earlier ethnographers right from the colonial period. It rather attempts at revealing the extent of dependence of different medicinal practices as it exists now and examine if there has been any substantial change from the past. For this some description of the medicinal practices have been provided through review of literature. The trend which was noticed has been at the end linked to the issue of ethnicity, which is a key player in the social dynamics of the state.

Once again I would like to reiterate that the scope of the present study is of a limited nature. However, it provides certain indications which later can be made use of for a more substantive research.

J.J. ROY BURMAN

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INTRODUCTION

Tribal medicinal practices first came to be of interest mainly to the anthropologists and ethnographers from the western countries. The subject still continues to draw their interests world over. Their interests in the matter has mainly to project the indigenous knowledge base of the tribal regarding their health and survival. But more often than not the tribal practices have also been highly romanticized as exotic cultural elements mixed with voodoo and witchcraft. The role of the shaman, magic, divination and cure has thus been over hyped. Of late, of course the social and psychological support value of tribal aetiology is being widely project. Besides, the negative fall out of the western medicine too is leading many to seek solace in the indigenous medicines, including herbal and spiritual cure. This has led many scholars also from the medical science, psychology, social workers and policy makers to delve into the study of tribal medicines.)

(The interest in the tribal medicinal practices as evident in Sikkim has also followed more or less the same course as in other tribal areas. Initially the western colonial administrator/ethnographers like Waddell (1887) and Gorer (1915) documented in details about the medicinal practices of the Lepcha and Bhutias- the two main autochthonous tribes of the state, in their monographs that covered almost all the facets of tribal life. While Waddell dealt more with the Tibetan - Mahayana Buddhist influence on the Sikkimese people, Gorer stressed more on the influence of the earlier Bon religion and the ancient pre-Bon animistic religion on the

lives of the Lepchas. These two volumes more or less provide a very comprehensive picture of the ritualistic dimension of native aetiology. Similar descriptive accounts are also available in the later studies by some of the local people, like Foning or even in the western stints - as dealt by Barbara Aziz. Taking this into consideration the present study does not aim at repeating such descriptive accounts of the ritualistic dimension of medicinal practices of the local tribals. It tries to draw an emphasis based on a particular line of political economy - mainly to make an initiation into the topic. This is evinced from the detailed review of literature on medical anthropology and tribal medicinal practices.

The Objectives of the Study:

The present study is basically an exploratory study of the traditional tribal medicinal practices which are prevalent among the autochthonous tribal population of the state, i.e. the Bhutias and Lepchas (BL people) who constitute about 24% of the population. The study is kind of a pilot survey which provides with certain clues rather than providing any solution to the given problems. It, however, is by no means an ethnography documenting the methods of healing. It makes an attempt to present place the actual practice the BL people follow for their treatment of the sick people. The study places some of the recent changes which the communities are witnessing into their traditional practices. Some attempt has been made to link this with the evolution of the traditional system which is the outcome of a political shift from being a buffer land to that of a national state. It has been attempted at the end to rationalize the persistence of the system in term of the ethic shifts. The objectives of the study are broadly as:

1. To study the concept of diseases and sickness among the Bhutia and Lepcha people.
2. To study the different methods of treatment undertaken by the people.
3. To examine the health policies undertaken in Sikkim since the historical periods under the amorphous political kingship, protectorate status and after the amalgamation with the Indian state.

4. To document the different facilities - infrastructure available in the state - provided by the state and private bodies.
5. Document the recent changes in the health practices of the people keeping in view of the government policies and infrastructural facilities.

Methodology:

Being basically an exploratory study, no hypothesis testing is involved in the study. However, a theoretical underpinning was added to the study that tribal medicinal practices are not merely superstitions, but are manifestations of the political economic situations. Their persistence to the present date is therefore is linked to certain extent the overall policy of the state not only towards the health policy but to the basis fabric of their social existence.

Taking the above view into consideration, the present study did not just orient to the field situation but it also looked into the general conditions of living and some of the key social issues which are effecting the two tribal communities. For this quite a bit of research was done through the secondary source material - by collecting the data from libraries and government departments.

The field data were collected personally by me by visiting the villages. Two of the four districts of the state were covered for this purpose - the South and North districts. These two were particularly selected as the North district has the highest percentage of tribal population (55.38) and the South district has the least (16.91). The three villages each were chosen on the basis of the distance from the district headquarters, and the concentration of the Bhutia and Lepcha people. While Kabi is a mixed village located at the southern corner of the district far from Mangan, the district headquarters, Dzongu and Lachung are preserves of the Lepcha and Bhutias respectively, in the North district. Dzongu is located right across Mangan, about 5 km away (the entry point). Lachung is located at the northern most point of the district, far from Mangan.

The three villages in the South district were similarly

selected on the basis of concentration of the tribes and their distance from Namchi, the district headquarters. While Dengchu, one of the three villages is just about 4 km from Namchi, Barfung is a Bhutia village located 25 km north of Namchi. Vok, the third village selected is a Lepcha village with a lot of Christian population and is located about 20 kms south west of Namchi.

I began my work first by spending about two weeks in Gangtok for getting to know the government system and make acquaintances with the people. I followed this up by a long stay - for about two weeks by staying at Kabi village. I had to particularly stay longer so as to build the rapport with the people. Kabi as such is located only 17 km away from Gangtok, but it is notorious for black magic and poisoning adversaries. Even otherwise the people in Sikkim are very suspicious about strangers and are afraid of the intelligence people. This is not very surprising as it is a border state and the military alert is high. Besides, the large scale migration of the Nepalese and ethnic tensions have made the people very tense.

In the other villages were for shorter durations - varying from a week to 3-4 days. In the village I first met the important BL people and interviewed the lamas and shamans. Subsequently I collected information by rapidly canvassing a questionnaire. Not the questionnaires provided me with detailed information, but it rather permitted to meet as many people as possible in a short while and cross verify the information. Apart from these I also interviewed key government functionaries present in the village. Also I sat with groups of people for discussion.

In each of the villages I also interviewed the people in group discussions, particularly where the lamas, bongthings (shamans), paus and the young people were present. I also adopted the participant observation method by being present in the rituals where the bongthings were administering their ways of treating the sick. I also witnessed the amchis or the Tibetan doctors at work in the clinics of Gangtok. I also witnessed the personnel of Dr. Pakhrin's hospital at work in their work at Kalimpong as well.

My study took me to some of the important monasteries as well apart from the six villages. I visited Rumtek monastery - the largest monastery near Gangtok. I also visited the Pemayangtse monastery in West Sikkim - one of the oldest monasteries of Sikkim which had a clear link with the Buddhist monastery of Mandolin in Tibet. Besides I also visited the Norbu Gang - the ritual spot where the lamas from three directions met and witnessed the coronation of the first Chogyal.

I did not use any mechanical means of documenting the data. I had, however, taken a number of photographs. But these were unfortunately damaged due to the heavy precipitation and landslides in Sikkim.

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