Indigenous medicines of *Raji* tribes of Uttarakhand

Keya Pandey*1* & Suresh Pandey

1Department of Anthropology, University of Lucknow, Lucknow; 2Military Hospital, Kota, Rajasthan

E-mail: pandey_k@lkouniv.ac.in

*Received 5 July 2007; revised 21 August 2008*

The paper is an outcome of the extensive fieldwork conducted in the state of Uttarakhand among the tribals. The tribe is socially and economically backward community of Central Himalayan region of Pithoragarh and Champawat district. The paper includes the traditional knowledge of medicine, which is prevalent in the area and also aims to provide information on the concepts like health and disease and the way these simple people cure diseases and drive away illness and sickness.

**Keywords:** Ethnomedicine, Indigenous medicine, *Raji* tribes, Uttarakhand

**IPC Int.Cl.:** A61K36/00, A61P1/02, A61P1/10, A61P1/16, A61P11/10, A61P11/06, A61P13/00, A61P13/02, A61P17/00, A61P17/08, A61P39/02

Tribes in India have their own way of living within social and cultural moorings, purely governed on the basis of local conditions and ethos. Lack of proper healthcare and ailments, irrational belief system are some factors said to be aggravating the health and nutritional problems of these people which needs special attention. The system of folk medicine like that of modern system has its own way of diagnosis and treatment. Treatment is directly connected with the causation of disease. They are particularly interwoven with magic, religion and traditional social values and they serve multiple cognitive functions. During the treatment, different type of magico-religious activities is performed. It is generally observed that the concept of health and disease in a society vary according to the socio-cultural levels of the different states. The higher income groups with higher education, standard of living and better knowledge have different concepts of health and disease as compared to the predominantly illiterate lower income group, which hardly had adequate concept of health and illness.

The *Raji* are socially and economically most under developed tribal community of Central Himalayan region of Uttarakhand. They are one among the 72 primitive tribal groups of India, who live in an extremely under-developed stage. They are also described as Van Rawats (king of forest), Van Raji (royal people of forest) or Van Manush (wild man or man of forest), who claim themselves to be Rajputs and the original inhabitants of Central Himalayas. The *Rajis* are multilingual. They speak a language which belongs to the Himalayan group of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. However, they communicate with other neighbouring community with Indo-Aryan language, Kumauni and Hindi. They use the Devanagiri script. Their average stature is 159.42 cm, which is the upper limit of the short type and their head shape is long. They are believed to be the descendants of *Kirats*, who ruled over this area in prehistoric times. The *Rajis* are also considered as a living link between *Kirats* of somewhat Tibetan physique and the *Khasas* of equally pronounced Aryan form and habits.

**Methodology**

Field surveys were conducted for systematic recording of ethnomedicinal practices of *Raji* tribes of Uttarakanch.

**Results and discussion**

In Pithoragarh, ethnomedicine has an enduring and indispensable part in the social life of the *Raji* tribe. Attempt has also been made to discuss how much the traditional means of healing has influenced the modern medical system. The members of *Raji* tribe are on verge on extinction and they require conservation. They have good knowledge of flora and fauna. They also know the remedial properties of plants. There is a need to conserve the vanishing *Raji*
tribe, who have good knowledge of forests and its produce, and therefore, may be associated with herb collection and cultivation programmes. Vague ideas about herbs which have curative effects are known to almost every Raji tribal. This knowledge has been gain either from ones own family or from the village elders. The local treatment is administered by the local medicine man. Lack of education and acute poverty combined with isolation has made the way the Rajis are today.

In the medicine system of Rajis, a different kind of classification or concept prevails which classifies diseases into different categories. An attempt has been made to explore the indigenous system of Rajis.

Rajis have classified into three categories of diseases on the basis of their knowledge of disease and illness. They have placed different diseases and illnesses under sub-head, which are particular to their own culture. Deity-linked diseases include genetic abnormality (sar bada, muhkata), boils (phuria), chicken pox (devi ka aana), weak eyesight (bhoot chadna), sudden bleeding with cough (khoon phekna), and leprosy (kodh). Spirit-linked diseases include high fever (bushaar), severe headache (saro dard), and severe headache with red eyes (lalima). Body-linked diseases include cough and cold (khanst), cut and wounds (chot aur khoon nikalna), dysentery and diarrhoea (paani aana), ear ache (kaan pakna), stomachache (peit dard), eye ailments (aankh dukhma), toothache (daant pirana), asthma (saans phoolna), urinary disorders, i.e. painful urination (peeshaab mein dard), and internal injuries, i.e. bleeding from the nose (nakseer phootna). Tribals were aware of only the above mentioned diseases and problems. When the patient becomes unconscious or they feel to take him/her to the hospital then only they run for it else they treat them with their indigenous medicines or shamanism. Some diseases and their cure by the tribals through their indigenous medicines are mentioned below.

### Headache (sirdard)

It is believed that the headache is being caused by cold and in summers it is believed that it is being caused by the excessive heat. In both types of headache, the folk medicine is usually the same. During winter, they sit near the burning fire. Resin of shyarhee is applied on forehead to get relief from it. The other medicine is dalta. To relieve headache, the seed oil of dalta is used in massage. Root juice of khajima is also rubbed on forehead to get relief from headache.

### Bodyache (badandard)

The oil of mahua seed is applied over the entire body. The beer prepared from mahua is applied over the body to get relief from pain. Besides, resin of shyarhee, seed oil of dalta and root juice of khajima is generally used.

### Cold & Cough (khansi and sardi)

Root juice of binait is given in the treatment of cough and asthma. Seed powder with warm water is given in cold. The patient is also advised to take cold water. If the child is suffering from acute cough then the intestine of saura is rubbed on the stone and is given in it.

### Cuts & wounds (katna aur chot)

As soon as an individual meets a cut, she or he urinates over the cut. Juice of soft leaves of plants available nearby is dropped over the cut. Poultice made from mana bulb paste is applied on cuts. Resin of shyarhee or leaf juice of dhonjan is applied externally on cuts.

### Burns (jalna)

The Raji tribals use their own medicine to cure the burnt part of the body. In case of burning, the paste of nirbusi is rubbed on the affected part; wood paste is also applied on burns.

### Itching & other skin ailments

To remove itching and other skin ailments, poultice of mothya leaves is applied on various skin ailments. Paste of anygan young shoots and leaves is applied with mustard oil in various skin ailments. Leaves of lampatya are applied on itching and eczema. Ash from leaves and roots is applied externally on sores and various skin ailments.

### Dysentery & diarrhoea (paani aana)

They believe that it is due to severe cold, heat or sun stroke. Buds and flowers of kamoichan are cooked and given in the treatment of dysentery and diarrhoea. Fruit paste of timul is given with salt in acute dysentery. Seed powder with warm water is given in fever and dysentery.

### Stomachache (peit dard)

The patient suffering from stomachache is treated by giving him aqueous paste of entire kamoichan plant. The fruit paste of timul with salt and root decoction of pyaljar is given in stomachache.
Fever (bushaar)

The Raji tribals treat fever by aonlya seed powder along with the warm water. Seed water of katharhowle is given in fever and jaundice.

Earache (kaan pakna)

Leaf juice of bhwinlu or chamoree is also given for any sort of ear ailments.

Toothache (data pirana)

For treating toothache, katharhowle is smoked with tobacco; fruit paste is filled in decaying cavities of tooth.

Arthritis

Churya seed oil is massaged in sciatica pain; root paste of daiya is applied on swollen joints. Young shoots and leaves of seero are thoroughly washed, boiled and cooked as vegetable is recommended for arthritis. Tribals also use the extract of animal in the treatment of joints pain. The leg of kankar rubbed on a stone, changes its colour to yellow, which is then rubbed on the affected area.

Asthma (saans phoolna)

To cure asthma, they use root juice of binait in acute asthma. The hairs of rabbit (mushnula) are burnt and the smoke of it helps in curing acute asthma.

Eye ailments (aankh dukhna)

To treat eye infection/ailments, they usually apply root juice of kirmori and leaf juice of chamoree.

Urinary disorders

Extract of entire puneru plant is given in urinary disorders; fresh binait root is chewed in painful urination. Young shoots and leaves of sheroo are thoroughly washed, boiled and cooked as vegetable for treating urinogenital disorders.

Snakebite

To treat snakebite, acorns paste of banj is applied as an antidote.

Internal injuries

For the treatment internal injuries, they use root paste of keenga with milk; leaf juice of dhonyan is also given.

Conclusion

At present these tribals have also started using modern medicines only when they fail to cure the disease through their own system. It has been observed that there is a great difficulty in persuading the tribal people to avail modern medical treatment because they have firm, rigid and well developed system of primitive medicine. It could be worthwhile to state that besides progressive measures of economic and social development, the role of health providers is the most important factor in improving health status of the Raji tribals in particular and other tribal communities in general. The modern medicare services are not only very expensive but also have their alarming side effects. In search of the real alternative, we need to explore all indigenous medicines or tribal medicine practiced by communities living in close harmony with the ecosystem. There is thus an urgent need for documentation of not only the herbal medicines but also the tribal health practices in totality.

References

7 Pandey Keya, An ethnobotanical approach to the vanishing tribes of India, Proc 7th Indian Sc Cong, Pune, 3-7 Jan, 2000.