

## Some belief, practices and prospects of folk healers of Sikkim

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*Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepalis*, three ethnic groups of Sikkim practicing traditional medicines have a strong belief of different supernatural forces and deities. The study is an attempt to focus on the beliefs, practices and prospects of folk healers of Sikkim. The study was conducted in whole Sikkim and the data were collected by the field survey and personal interviews of 102 identified folk healers. In the study the age, sex, educational qualification, source of knowledge, experience, generation of practice and collection of herbs in different days of 102 folk healers are presented. The treatment principles, beliefs and medical ailment are more or less similar in three different ethnic groups. The study shows a declined trend of new generation to adopt this practice as profession. There is a greatest challenge to revitalize the traditional health and to promote the folk medicine in rural poor people of Sikkim for their primary healthcare.

**Keywords:** *Lepcha, Bhutia, Nepalis*, Folk healer, Traditional medicine, Sikkim

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Sikkim is known to *Lepcha* (primitive tribes of Sikkim) as *Nye-mael-liang* meaning paradise. It is also called *Ren-Jong* meaning *Land of Ancestors*. The present name Sikkim is of *Nepali* origin & derived from *Sukhim* meaning new house or new place. The Himalayan state of Sikkim is joined in Indian union in 1975 and is regarded as smallest mountain state, adjacent to *Kanchenjunga* the third highest mountain, with a geographical area of 7,096 sq km. The altitude is the key factor for the large variation of rain fall and temperature in the state. The state can be classified into three climatic zones, i.e. Cultivation zone (8.9%), Forest zone (46.00%) and Alpine zone (39.00%). Nearly 424 medicinal plants are habitat in Sikkim due to this high altitude variation and climate. Sikkim is prevalent of ancient medical system which is still popular nurtured by the Buddhist groups for the traditional Tibetan pharmacopoeia. The relation of culture with medicine is very strong because disease is related the beliefs of different super natural forces and deities. The people of Sikkim believed people with evil eye, are said to be able to harm others by looking at them both physically and mentally. The three ethnic groups (*Lepcha, Bhutia* and *Nepali* communities) traditionally practice folk medicine in different ways which are related with Ayurveda and Tibetan System of Medicine.

### Methodology

The study is mainly focused on health traditions beliefs, practices and prospects of folk healers in these three ethnic groups (*Lepcha, Bhutia* and *Nepali* communities). The study area is whole Sikkim in four districts. Extensive literature survey was carried out for compilation of various health practices of Sikkim in three communities. Different trips were arranged to different places of Sikkim to identify the folk healers. The State Medicinal Plant Board helped to identify the folk healers. The raw materials used for curing for different ailments and their beliefs by the folk healers were collected and complied by dint of field survey and workshops during Jan 2007 to Dec 2008. Semi-structured questionnaire were prepared for folk healers. Age, sex, educational qualifications, source of knowledge, types of practices, experience and generation of practice, transformation of knowledge and collection of herbs in different days were studied in identified 102 folk healers from different areas of Sikkim.

### Results and discussion

The *tantrik* forms of religion and medicine is believed to have been popularized in Sikkim by *Guru Pamasambhava* or commonly known as *Guru Rimpoche*. He is considered to be a master in healing. In this *tantrik* form as the Medicine *Buddha* he is called *Ugyen Menla*. As *Mahaguru Dewache*, he is

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able to heal mental depression and psychological problems. Different kinds of illness are treated with worship and devotion with animal sacrifice. The notion of scared is prominent exorcism-the magical means of treating diseases. Scared not only includes Gods & Goddess but also spirits of ancestors and forests, the spirit and demons present every where. There is a prevailing supernatural basis of folk healer treatment, even where the chief means of treatment is herbal. The folk healers claim that unless a medicine concoction has been empowered by special benediction, it will have little effect. The folk healers collect the herbs in auspicious time because for better efficacy. The practices of traditional medicine with their cultural values are based on the three major communities of Sikkim as follows:

#### ***Lepcha medicinal practices***

The concept of health and illness among the *Lepchas* is fully guided by the belief in supernatural. The *Lepchas* have their own script, and distinct costume, language and culture. The uses of medicinal plants are found in the epics of *Lepchas* (*Namthar, Tengyur, Domang*). There are certain semi-divine beings or guardian spirits known as *Lungzee* which are not goods but respected like a huge tree, a cluster of trees, grass, a tarn, a cave or a special hillock, and other natural objects. If they are ignored or any disrespect is shown to them by defiling or polluting by answering nature's call, etc. may invite suffering to the village or the particular individual- they may suffer from serious sickness or even die. According to the *Lepchas*, the world is governed by good spirits; and evil spirits-*Mung*. All natural calamities such as ill health, bad harvests, drought, hailstorm and other misfortunes believed to be the actions of the evil spirits, i.e. *Mung*. In the other hand good health and vitality, good harvest and prosperity are believed to be the actions of the good spirits. Since, the *Lepchas* are basically Animist, traditionally only the *Bongthings* (male *Lepcha* priests) and *Muns* (female *Lepcha* priestess) are called during the sickness and in cultural and funeral ceremonies. After the introduction of Buddhism, even the *lamas* perform the *pujas* in close association with the *mun/ bongthings*. They, however, perform the rituals connected with super natural forces in which the *lamas* have no role. *Pougorip / Totola (Oroxylum indicum)* plays an important role in the *Lepcha* culture. The plant/tree is regarded the most sacred

tree/plant by the *Lepchas*. The buds are in bunch opens only at night and falls before the dawn. The *Lepchas* believe that *Tatola* is not even touched by the bees, signifying the purity and chastity of a virgin girl and it is used as liver tonic and anti diabetic medicine. The fruit of the plant is shaped like a very huge sword. The seeds are arranged in side the fruit and are flagellated like paper silk. It is the flagellated seeds which are used in any auspicious ceremony like *haldi* in Hindu culture. *Chi* (millet beer) plays a very important role in *Lepcha* culture. The *Lepchas* believe that the Good Spirit (God the creator) made the *Lepchas* from the snow of mount Kanchenjunga. Therefore, in the beginning of the harvesting festival *Chi* made from the first harvested grain is offered to Mount Kanchenjunga who is the guardian deity of the *Lepchas*.

#### ***Bhutia medicinal practices***

The *Bhutias* place a great emphasis on coercive rites of exorcising and destroying demons. Like the *Lepchas*, the execution of religion is in the hands of trained specialists like the *pau*, *neyjum* and *lamas*. The *pau* is a male and the *neyjum* is female. While curing, the *pau* goes into a trance, and communicates with spirits in order to discover why they have afflicted patients with illness. Sometimes he diagnoses by divination with the help of a plate full of rice. He goes on shaking the rice plate till the symbol of the evil spirit makes appearance. The *pau* performs *Phuphi* by offering money, eggs and clothes which have been circulated thrice over the patient's head to the malignant spirit.

These things are thrown out and only the clothes are brought back. It is believed that the persons will get cured within three days of this ritual. All Sikkim people's settlements are adorned with prayer flags, or *Dacho*, which are supposed to carry the luck of the individual through the air in very direction. These flags are of four types-the *Lungta* which is square in form, and contains a horse with mystic figure at the centre. It is hung on the ridges of the house and in the vicinity of settlements; the *chonpen*, long, narrow, oblong shape, are tied to twigs of trees or to bridges or to bamboo flag posts; the *Gyal-tsen dse-mo*, it is like *lung-ta*, but contains a larger holy text; and the vast luck charm, which is pasted on the walls of the house or folded up and worn around the neck as a charm for good luck. The luck flags are planted only after performing certain specific lamaic worship. Most

of the lamaic worship is derived from demonolatry, a few of the most intelligent *Lamas* become *Tsi-pa lamas* are astrologers. And all the laity have been led to understand that it is absolutely necessary for each of the three great epochs of life, viz. birth, marriage and death; and also at the beginning of each year to have a forecast of the year's ill-fortune and its remedies drawn out for them.

**Nepali medicinal practices**

Like *Lepchas* and *Bhutias*, *Nepalis* are also believed in super natural force in the creation of illness. *Dami* and *Jhakries* are performed the *puja* for physical and mental diseases and *Phedangba* are specially meant for *Limboo* community. The folk claims of herbs such as *Oroxylum indicum* (hypertension), *Fraxiknus floribunda* (gout), *Panax pseudoginseng* for longevity, *Ephedra gerardiana* for asthma, etc. The use of *Elshcolzia blanda* and *Mahonia nepalensis* in eye trouble and eczema and of *Urtica parviflora* (young inflorescence) as a clearing and invigorating agent after child birth by local women folk are of great value. Rhizome of *Budo-Vokati* (*Stible rivlaris*) is considered to be good for sciatica. It is crushed and taken as decoction after boiling in water or chewed as betel nut for reviewing body ache. The flower of *Pandanus nepalensis* found in Sikkim up to 1752 m elevation, are worn in the hair by the girl to win their lovers. It is said to be aphrodisiac and induces sleep. Its roots taken with milk are said to prevent abortion; flowers are considered to remove headache and weakness and seeds to cure wound in heart. The *Nepali* community has believed that *Cordyceps sinensis* has a power to fight for all kinds of diseases<sup>9</sup>.

**Prospects of folk healers**

Total 102 folk healers are identified in four district of Sikkim, and maximum folk healers are habitat in East Sikkim district. The age & sex, educational qualification, source of knowledge, types of practices, experience and generation of practice, transformation of knowledge and collection of herbs in different days are presented (Table 1) as follows: Only 10% of folk healers are young in between the age of 20-40 yrs and 64% folk healers are above the age of 60 yrs. Therefore, it is mandatory to acquire the knowledge from the elderly. Folk healers otherwise it will be vanished from Sikkim. The study shows maximum (84.31%) are male folk healers and (15.68%) are female folk healers. The educational backgrounds

shows maximum 53 (51.96%) folk healers are illiterate and 20 (19.61%) are up to class 5 and 9 standard (8.82%) are below matriculation (Table 2). Folk healers have got knowledge from different sources, as maximum 53 (51.96%) have received traditionally from their parents, 20 (19.61%) are acquired knowledge from folk healer teachers in their respective locality. It is interesting to note that 6% folk healers received knowledge from dreams (Table 3) and 11 (10.78%) folk healers acquired their knowledge from manuscript and books. The data implies maximum folk healers are getting the knowledge traditionally from their family members. The expertise of different diseases (Table 4) shows maximum folk healers 52 (50.98%) are practicing

Table 1—Age & sex distribution of 102 identified folk healers of Sikkim

Age in yrs	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
20-30	02	01	03	2.9%
31-40	03	04	07	6.86%
41-50	02	01	03	2.9%
51-60	19	05	24	23.52%
Above 60	60	05	65	63.72%
Total	86	16	102	

Table 2—Educational background of 102 identified folk healers

Education	Number of folk healers	Percentage
Illiterate	53	51.96%
Up to class 5	20	19.61%
Below Matriculation	09	8.82%
Above Matriculation	20	19.61%
Total	102	

Table 3—Sources of Knowledge in 102 identified folk healers of Sikkim

Sources of Knowledge	Number of folk healers	Percentage
Traditional	53	51.96%
Guru (Folk healing Teacher)	20	19.61%
Own experiences	12	11.76%
Books/Manuscript	11	10.78%
Dreams	06	5.88%
Total	102	

Table 4—Types of Practices in 102 identified folk healers of Sikkim

Types of Practices	Number of folk healers	Percentage
Bone setting	52	50.98%
General treatment	30	29.41%
Vetenary medicine	12	11.76%
Birth attendant	07	6.86%
Poisoning treatment	01	0.98%
Total	102	

bone setting with one or two general treatment like jaundice, gastritis, problems related to women like *Kastartava*, *Nastartava*, *Bandhya*, infertility, etc. followed by general treatment 30 (29.41%) and 12 (6.86%) folk healers are practicing veterinary medicine.

The different community have different types of believes and practices (Table 5), the maximum number of folk healers 60 (58.82%) are from *Nepali* community followed by 30 (29.42%) *Bhutia* community and a very less number are from *Lepcha* community although the many *Lepcha* herbalist are found in North Sikkim. They don't want to expose to outside and express their claims due to their inherent shy nature. Fifty three folk healers are traditionally inherent knowledge from their ancestors. It is interesting to noted that 31 (58.49%) folk healers are practicing this healing practice as 3<sup>rd</sup> generation followed by 2<sup>nd</sup> generation 15 (28.30%) and only 7 out of 53 (13.20%) are practicing as 1<sup>st</sup> generation *Vaidya* (Table 6). The experience of the practicing folk healers of Sikkim shows (Fig.1), maximum folk healers 42 (41.17%) have more than 20 yrs experience followed by 21 (20.58%) no of folk healers have 16-20 yrs of experience and only 03 (2.94%) folk healers have 1-5 yrs of experience. It was found that maximum 49 (48.03%) folk healers have no discipline to carry forward their knowledge to the public, 36 (35.29%) folk healers carried forward their knowledge to their sons and 03 (2.94%) to their daughters. Only 14 (13.72%) have given their

knowledge to the outsiders as disciple (*Sishya*) (Fig.2). An attempt was made to know the beliefs of occasions and the impact of *mantras*. Sixty two folk healers believed on the impact of *mantras* in efficacy of herbs (Table 7). The folk healers are picked up the herbs, flowers and fruits in different occasions believed as auspicious and non- auspicious. Full moon is believed as auspicious in 52 folk healers and *Astami* in 23 folk healers. New moon is believed as non auspicious by maximum folk healers. There is an increasing trend of not believing auspicious/non- auspicious among the folk healers (Table 7). The folk medicine is gradually declining its practice in this trans-Himalayan region, as new generation hardly

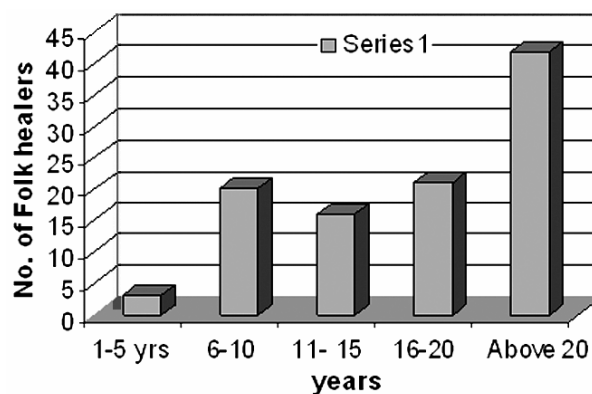


Fig. 1—Experience in years in 102 identified folk healers of Sikkim

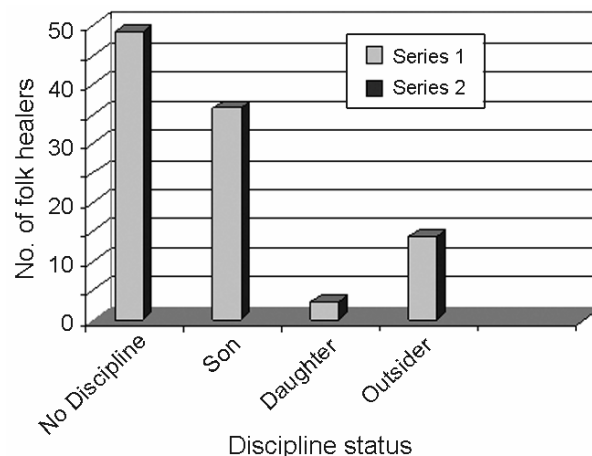


Fig. 2—Status of Transformation of knowledge to maintain the tradition in 102 identified folk healers of Sikkim

Table 5—Types of community in 102 identified folk healers of Sikkim

Types of community	Number of folk healers	Percentage
<i>Lepcha</i> community	12	11.76%
<i>Bhutia</i> community	30	29.42%
<i>Nepali</i> community	60	58.82%
Total	102	

Table 6—Generation of practice in 53 traditional folk healers of Sikkim

Generation of practice	Number of folk healers	Percentage
1 <sup>st</sup>	07	13.20%
2 <sup>nd</sup>	15	28.30%
3 <sup>rd</sup>	31	58.49%
Total	53	

Table 7—Beliefs in collection of herbs in 102 identified folk healers of Sikkim

Collection of herbs	Full moon	New moon	<i>Panchami</i>	<i>Astami</i>	Tues	Sat	Sun
Auspicious	52	Nil	16	23	5	3	26
Non Auspicious	Nil	60	4	10	2	15	2
No Comments	50	42	82	69	95	84	74

coming forward to adopt folk medicine as a profession. It is praise worthy that Department of AYUSH, Government of India, State Government, NGOs and many folk practitioners are doing their best to keep their tradition alive.

### Conclusion

All the three communities have their own system, treatment principles, believes, and medical ailments, though they have more or less similarity with each other. The primitive people have a good faith on their own system of medicine rather than other systems and western medicine. Need of scientific validation, reverse pharmacological and observational studies are required for different beliefs and treatment of these three communities. The greatest challenge in the new millennium is to preserve and promote the traditional knowledge and folk medicines in Sikkim. The knowledge behind the folk healing practice requires recognition, respect and understanding in the light of modern medicines. The revitalization of traditional health of Sikkim may promote the health of rural poor people of this region for their primary healthcare.

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