

Traditional Medicinal Practices and Practitioners of the Tai Khamtis of Narayanpur, Assam

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Abstract: The Tai Khamtis have inherited traditional medicinal knowledge passed over generations. People from faraway places visit the Khamti healers for certain cures. This valuable ancient knowledge is based on the use of locally available resources and cost – effective and natural skills. The present study observes the different techniques and methods of treatment in Khamti medicine as well as the role of the traditional practitioners of Khamti medicine.

This traditional medicinal knowledge is an integral part of the Tai Khamti community. Over the years, varied factors have influenced the overall functioning of the traditional medicinal system. The study tries to understand this nature of changes in the system and the major factors responsible for such deviations.

Keywords: Traditional Medicine; Tai Khamti; Local Healing System; Tribal Medicine and Change

Introduction

There is a diverse combination of tribes in the north-eastern region of India who still believe and practice their indigenous medicinal system to combat diseases and maintain good health. The Tai Khamtis are one such tribal community who have their own traditional health care systems and rely on their local traditions rather than on modern medicine in most cases. Followers of Buddhism, the Khamtis are a part of the Shan race. This community has their own language and are far advanced in arts, literature and knowledge.

The word *Khamti* comes from two words; *Kham* meaning Gold and *ti* meaning place. That is, a land full of gold. The Tai Khamtis are a tribal community who immigrated to Assam in the second half of the 18th Century. Their original seat was in Mung Khamti Lang or Manche in Upper Burma, near the source of the river Irrawaddy.

The Narayanpur Khamtis settled near the Dikrang river in 1843 and was granted a mauza as lakheraj and they still preserved their own habits and custom.

This culturally rich community possess traditional medicinal knowledge to curb various ailments. For instance, the Narayanpur Khamtis are popular within the region for providing medicine for snake and dog bites. People from faraway places visit the local healers for their cure. Although they migrated to Assam, they still maintain their own heritage.

In the Tai Khamti community, traditional beliefs and practices are still relevant. The local healers and medicine men have a vast knowledge on plants and cures. With their ecological based knowledge, the existing experts of local medicine still provide treatments to maintain wellbeing. This study aims to explore the well-kept traditional knowledge of the Tai Khamti community of Narayanpur, Assam. It reflects on the medicinal preparations and rituals, role of the herbal doctors and their significance in the contemporary time.

Statement of the Problem

The Tai Khamtis are known far and wide for their traditional remedies. The Khamti people in Narayanpur area of Lakhimpur District, more specifically, Bar Khamti Gaon, still preserve this age – old medicinal system. People around Narayanpur trust the local healers and often approach them for cures for dog and snake bite, for broken limbs, gun wounds, diarrhoea and other ailments. The Khamtis still opt for the traditional medicine in case of minor ailments or injuries and, sometimes, even for specific major conditions. This Khamti medicine is made from local resources, is cost friendly and sustainably procured. However, with change in outlook and lifestyle, there tends to be changes in the traditional medicinal system, an integral part of the rich Tai Khamti Heritage.

The study focuses on this traditional medicinal system preserved by the Tai Khamtis of Narayanpur, Assam over generations. It enquires the changes in this local folk medicinal system and its relevance in contemporary times.

Research Gap

Review of related literature reflects on the limited studies on traditional medicine system based on age old rituals, practices and belief systems that has been utilized by the Tai Khamtis to prevent disease and maintain wellbeing.

Most of the books on North Eastern tribes deal with the rites and rituals concerning childbirth and not extensively on other health issues. The ceremonies, enchanting mantras, sacrifices and other rites and beliefs related to prevention and even, the varied treatments of diseases need to be documented as well. Similarly, there is the need

to document the traditional medicinal practitioners amongst the Tai Khamtis, their nature of work and their relevance in the contemporary society as well for a holistic understanding of their traditional knowledge system.

There are only a few informative resources on the Tai Khamtis. Most of them discuss about their lifestyle, occupation, housing and dressing style and only a few relevant discussions on the traditional medicinal practices, more specifically of the herbal medicine prepared and utilised by the Khamtis. However, the non – material medicine practiced among the Tai Khamtis must also be included to provide a clearer picture. It is essential to note the role of these medicine men in maintaining health and well – being within the community as well as the change in its role over the ages.

This study focuses on the traditional medicinal beliefs, practices and practitioners among the Tai Khamtis of Narayanpur, Assam, and the nature of changes in their traditional medicinal system and the major factors responsible for such changes.

Objectives of the Study

- What are the traditional medicinal practices and beliefs of the Tai Khamtis of Narayanpur, Assam?
- How did the usage of this indigenous medicine change over time?
- Which factors have contributed to these changes in the traditional medicinal system?

Material and Methods

This is a Focussed Ethnographic study focusing on the traditional Khamti medicine in Narayanpur area of Lakhimpur, Assam. Respondents were purposively selected from the Bar Khamti village, one of the biggest settlements of Tai Khamtis in Narayanpur area.

Primary data was collected through personal interviews and oral literature. The Buddhist priests, local herbal men and elders in the village still practicing traditional Khamti medicine were consulted. Secondary data is collected from books, journals and Census for understanding and supporting the data collected during the fieldwork.

Discussion and Major Findings

Traditional Medicine among the Tai Khamtis

Indigenous medicine is still prevalent in the Khamti villages of Narayanpur. Khamti medicine involves the use of local resources, herbs and various plant parts for their remedies. People in this region have faith in these treatments and cures provided by the local healers, mostly, in case of snake bites, dog bites, piles, asthma, loss of appetite, broken limbs, bullet wound among others.

There are two major types of medicinal knowledge possessed by the Khamti healers: material and non – material medicine. Material medicine is prepared and provided to patients suffering from diseases caused by pathogens like virus, bacteria, fungi, etc. To cure these conditions and restore the harmony of the elements of the body, the local medicine men may recommend intake of prescribed dosage or application of medicine in affected areas. Specific measures need to be taken into consideration before the medicine men gather the herbs for the preparation of the medicine.

One of the local healers explained that such precautions are important for the treatment to be effective. The *Pa Chang Ya* (that is, the local practitioner of medicine) also chants while concocting the mixtures or paste.

Few common herbs utilised in Tai Khamti medicine are mentioned in Table 1:

Table 1: Common herbs/ plants used in Tai Khamti medicine

<i>Local Name</i>	<i>Botanical Name</i>	<i>Part Used</i>	<i>For the treatment of</i>
Plai/ Moran Ada	Zingiber officinale Rosc.	Rhizome	Cough and cold, also used to heal fractures
Bor Thekera	Garcinia	Fruit	Dysentery
Padribha	Ageratum conyzoides Linn (Asteraceae)	Leaves	Rheumatic Arthritis
Nephaphu	Clerodendrum colebrookeanum	Leaves	High Blood Pressure
Tulosi	Ocimum sanctum Linn.	Leaves	Cough and Cold
Homen	Curcuma caesia Roxb.	Rhizome	Snake bite or scorpion bite
Dooportenga	Bryophyllum Calycinum Salisb	Leaves	Jaundice
Sepak	Euphorbia neriifolia Linn	Leaves and stems	Dislocated bone/ fracture or Joint pain
Myamuksi	Coleus blumei Benth.	Leaves/ Stems	Scorpion Bite

Non material medicine, on the other hand, is provided to cure any ailments caused by supernatural forces, for instance, in the case of influence of the spirits, black magic, possession, etc.

Tai Khamtis believe in the existence of spirits, residing in pond, trees or roadside, whose influence can affect a person or household. *Bhante*, that is, the Buddhist priest is invited in cases of possession. It also may require chanting of holy mantras and tying of *Phook Mai* (sacred thread) or amulet around the affected person's neck, elbow, wrist or waist. They also tie *May Plot* around expecting mothers to ensure a successful pregnancy.

In case of a person being affected by the Evil Eye, children being the most susceptible, sacred water is applied and hymns chanted. *Mo Phi* or the spirit doctor is consulted in

some cases to reduce the effects of black magic. The *Pathek* (reader of ancient Khamti texts) will also be approached to prescribe remedies according to the ancient scriptures. For instance, to curb any misfortune from befalling on a new born, the *Pathek* will ask a specific *lik* to be donated in the *Bapuchang*.

Additionally, ailments are believed to occur because of committing a sin. It may lead to allergies, paralysis, etc. As a remedy, in some cases, a feast is arranged and the head priest invited to perform rituals.

Primordial Spirits and forces of nature (*Phi*) is revered among the Tai Khamtis as the spirits protect the whole village. The people tie Aewa Xuta (thread) around the village boundaries and sprinkle holy water, chanting mantras to combat any misfortune on the community.

Along with medicine and rituals, the Tai Khamti community also believe in the Panchashila, that is, the five moral codes:

1. Refrain from killing; especially human life
2. Refrain from stealing
3. Refrain from sexual misconduct or misuse of the senses
4. Refrain from lying and using false/ harmful speech
5. Refrain from intoxication

They have faith in these codes of ethic for ensuring their well – being. It is believed that negative elements like greed, lust, etc. causes physical and mental ailments. With more and more people deviating from these principles and indulging in meat and alcohol, more precisely, partaking in the consumption of pork and Apong (rice beer), there is an increase in lifestyle changes and rise in diseases.

Changes in the traditional medicinal system among the Tai Khamtis

In case of non – material medicine, there were a few characters who earlier used to played a significant role in maintaining good health and well – being, namely, *Bhante* (Buddhist Priest), *Pathak* (Reader of old, religious texts), *Chau – Chewaka* (Medicine man), *Fungki* (exorcises malevolent spirits), *Chau Mantan* (provides protection charms, etc.), *Mea – Aou – Fealuk* or *Ya Phan* (Midwife), and *Ok – Moot* (medium who answers people's queries after consulting deities or spirits).

For example, the *Ya Phan* used to provide the prenatal, intrapartum and postpartum care to the mother and the newborn. They were an important part of the society, taking care of varied issues like dislocation of baby in the womb, sudden white discharge and other complications. They would also massage the baby and its mother with mustard oil and provide the recommended diet during the different phases of pregnancy and motherhood.

However, nowadays, things have changed. The Khamti women folk prefer to go to the doctor or ASHA workers for their maternal health related issues. Instead of following the traditionally recommended diet, including lighter meals for an easy delivery, the modern Khamti women favour the meal plans and medication advised by the doctor. Moreover, certain prohibitions during pregnancy are difficult to follow by the modern women due to the change in their occupation and lifestyle. For instance, a working women is not able to get back home before dark from their office.

Similarly, in the contemporary times, many such roles have waned with change in people's lifestyle and outlook. However, a few characters still play an essential role in the lives of the Khamti people.

The Buddhist priest prescribes meditation, prayer and chanting to induce a positive mind-set and ward off illness as it is believed that the root of the disease is in the mind.

Altruism is also believed to help the person in recovery as when an individual voluntarily offer any goods or service, without any self – interest, it will cause positive impact on that individual.

Here, the role of the *Pathak/ Sowshili* (reader) is important who consults sacred and ancient texts like the *Sangkren Sa* and accordingly advice the seeker the items to be donated for the well – being of the individual or their household. It is a common believe that donating material items to the poor or offering spiritual gifts in the Buddhist temple will favour in the healing process. In Bor Khamti gaon it was observed that the villagers saved money to later, donate Buddha idols and *Liks*, make *Petisha* (a decorative item made to stick currency notes during religious procession), etc.

There are similar changes in case of material medicine. With more and more people opting for scientifically proven and easily accessible modern medicine, there is a decline in the demand for local healers whose prescriptions often involve long preparation, elaborate rituals or longer recovery time. Moreover, with changes in occupation and outlook, certain medicine are seen as unpalatable. Rather a quicker solution, in the form of a pill or a tonic or injection is preferred.

However, the local healers are still revered in the village as well as by people from nearby areas. For common ailments, many people still opt for the traditional remedies and antidotes.

Factors Responsible for the changes in Tai Khamti medicine

- 1. Loss of Therapeutic Plants and Herbs:** The local healers procure the required ingredients for their medicine/ charms etc. from the forest area or they grow certain essential herbs/ plants in their gardens. A few plants are also obtained from the road side or river banks. According to the villagers, due to increase in deforestation and agricultural practices, climate change and absence of preservation of certain

plants/ trees, there is a decrease in the availability of a few herbs with therapeutic properties. One of the elders mentioned that sometimes people have to go to Namsai in Arunachal Pradesh for their medicinal needs. Sometimes, rather than embarking on this long journey to Namsai, they try to find an alternative cure with the locally available items.

2. **Loss of Age – Old Medicinal Knowledge:** Along with unavailability of essential herbs, another problem has arisen, that is, only a few early medicinal texts written in old Khamti language are present. The respondents mentioned of a bonfire organized by their great – grandfathers where all the texts on magic were burnt to curb any issue of witchcraft in the area. But, along with the mantras related to black magic, many ancient cures were also lost in that fire.

The current generation is unable to decipher certain portions of the traditional records that still exist. One of the local healers pointed out how a Khamti word means three different things and thus, it is difficult for the existing healers to decipher what their forefathers had prescribed for a certain ailment. Additionally, the herbs or ingredients indicated for the cure of a particular ailment or the appropriate measures for the preparation of a specific mixture/ brew is unclear due to the instructions written in Old Khamti language.

The death of local health practitioners additionally leads to the loss of many remedies and cures as well. There is a generational disconnect between the older generation and the younger population. The inability of the older generation in providing clearer and concrete knowledge on the Khamti medicine as well as the disinterestedness among the young ones in learning about this ancient knowledge and skill disrupts the smooth flow of knowledge from one generation to the next.

3. **Decline of Non – material Medicine:** During the field study, it was observed that several animistic rituals and beliefs held by the Tai Khamtis have faded with time. There is a stronger inclination towards Buddhist principles and ideology. The people in Bar Khamti village are ardent followers of Buddhism while also adopting the values or following the principles of other religious sects like Sai Baba or other spiritual gurus. Many of their age old animistic beliefs like that of all natural things (like plants, animals, forests, roads and water bodies) having spirits that can influence human events have faded over the years.

For instance, although, the Tai Khamtis still worship *Phi Muang* (the guardian or territorial spirit) and *Phi Hun* (domestic deity) annually and acknowledge their impact on the people's life, the present respondents couldn't recall other spirits that their ancestors believed responsible for varied events like causing complications in pregnancy. Similarly, a few of the respondents disclosed that certain spirits dwelling

in the pond were offered obeisance before. But, in the contemporary time, such rituals have been discontinued.

Due to the declining of such beliefs, the agencies providing non – material medicine (charged water, talisman or charms) against malevolent spirits like *Fungki* and *Ok Moot* have also perished. Respondents informed that now the *Fungki*, rather than exorcising spirits, extend their service of providing energetically charged oil to relief joint pains.

Preservation of Tai Khamti Medicine

A few ethno – medicinal practices are disappearing gradually due to the unwillingness of younger generation to inculcate this ancient knowledge or hesitancy among families to transmit these knowledge system to their children, even though they are interested in reviving this indigenous system of medicine. The case maybe different in different households but, the problem remains the same, inability to maintain this ancient knowledge system. Furthermore, with the advent of modern medicinal facilities, spread of literacy, urbanisation, modernisation and lack of support towards these traditional healing practices jeopardizes its existence in contemporary times.

There is an urgent need for the preservation of the Tai Khamti medicine knowledge for the benefit of the future generation.

1. Extensive scientific research on the correct utilisation of medicinal plants, their appropriate dosage as well as the documentation of the suitable ingredients required in the preparation of different medicine is important. Proper written records can help in the revival of this ethno – medicinal knowledge system.
2. Local health practitioners work for a minimum fee. They do not have a proper working condition or flow of income. Providing financial assistance and training to these healers may help them to sustain themselves and further develop their work.
3. As mentioned above, varied factors have reduced the growth of certain thereupatic plants/ herbs. Thus, conservation of the habitat and revival of these necessary herbs/ trees is crucial. Through seed banks and formation of herbal gardens certain endangered plant species can be well-maintained.

Conclusion

The Tai Khamtis have preserved their traditional medicinal knowledge for ages and these local cures are well-regarded by people within and outside of this community. There is a need to preserve these unique customs and belief as well as the ecosystem based knowledge and skills. Due to varied factors like the absence of ancient text on Khamti Medicine or its destruction by the villagers, inability to decipher old Khamti

script, unavailability of different herbs and other ingredients in the region, inclination towards modern medicine for quicker recovery has led to a decline in the utilisation and relevance of the indigenous medicine system. But, many healers are still providing primary medical care to the villagers.

It is essential to consider these indigenous medicinal knowledge and research further on the conservation of this age – old beliefs and practices on health and nutrition. Also, there is a need to compare and study the traditional medicinal practices among the Khamtis of Narayanpur with other major Khamti settlements in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh to understand its nature across space as well as time.

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