

Disease and Folk Medicine: A Study of the Santhals and the Birhors of Purulia District

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Abstract: *Disease, especially infectious diseases such as 'Covid-19' has now turned into an epidemic creating a terrible global crisis. It has compelled us to choose social distancing, lockdown and quarantine in self-defense. However, no permanent solution has been found so far. This great panic has proved just how helpless people are even in the twenty-first century. Different indigenous communities including the Santhals and the Birhors of Purulia district have been following their traditional methodology of treatment and folk medicines for curing diseases and ailments of time immemorial. Of course, in recent times, with the spread of education and awareness, modern methods of treatment and medicines have gained popularity among them.*

Key Word: Infectious, pandemic, social distancing, quarantine, Bongas, which craft, Ojha, Janguru, Folk- medicine, Immunisation

Disease, the particular abnormal condition with negatively affects the structure or function of any organism is unexpected and undesirable, but ultimately real over the ages. Different types of diseases, such as infectious, hereditary, or physiological, cause afflict, distress and even throw the individual to the brink of death. Sometimes there are outbreaks of various infectious diseases like cholera, plague, smallpox, dengue, etc. that terrify not only the individual or his/her family but also the entire society. 'Coronavirus disease 2019' (Covid – 19) is the latest addition to this list. This newly emerged infectious disease now has become a terrible threat to us and has plunged the entire human civilization into a horrific global crisis especially for its rapidly spreading mass infectious character.

The whole world regardless of race, religion, caste, colour and place, is now fighting earnestly against the pandemic called 'Covid-19'. From the statesmen to scientists, doctors, nurses, administrators and ordinary people all over the world are dedicated to the search for its true source, real nature and overall, way to get rid of it. In addition to treatment, people have chosen social distancing, lockdown and quarantine as a way to protect themselves from this epidemic. We have built the palace of modernity by destroying our motherly nature. We have flown the victory flag of urbanization, globalization and modernization all around. The Moon, Mars and many other planets and satellites are in our hands today. Nowadays, the world's foremost nations are endowed with unlimited power through various sophisticated weapons. But 'Covid-19' has shown us how helpless we are in the current situation. This type of helplessness reminds us of the dawn of human civilization when people were completely dependent on nature. That dependence on nature still exists largely, especially among different indigenous communities including the Santhals and the Birhors.

Health is an important parameter for the exhaustive development process of any caste and community. As per the definition of the world Health Organization (WHO), "Health is a state of complete mental and social well-being and not merely on the absence of disease or infirmity."¹ According to the concept of tribal communities of India good health means, "strong body built, the capacity to do manual work for at least 8-10 hours a day, body with firm flesh not too fat,

bright eyes, good appetite, sound sleep and may take an active part in household duties,"² They describe the disease as "an effect of bad spirits or due to breach of same taboos for which an individual becomes physically weak."³

In search of an accurate assessment of disease and folk medicine among the Santhals and the Birhors of Purulia district, 15 Birhor villages in different parts of 13 blocks and all the 5 Birhor villages in 3 blocks of the district have been selected for field survey investigation which was done between October 2018 to December 2019 in different seasons of a year. The Santhal villages are selected keeping in mind the location of their habitation, the nature of settlement pattern, educational status, the economic condition of the villagers and the presence of public health care facilities. Among these 15 villages, 7 are located far away from the urban settlement of Purulia town and are covered by small but dense forest. With the worst communication system, 3 villages are situated very close to the urban areas with better communication and health care facilities. The rest of the 5 villages are located between urban and rural areas. On the other hand, the Birhors who belong to the only Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) of Purulia district, reside in five such villages that are surrounded by forests and hills and are located 45-60 km. away from the district town. Sex-wise classification of the villagers' understudy can be shown in the following table (Table No. 1)

Table No.1
Sex-wise classification of the villagers' understudy

Category	No.of Person		Percentage	
	Santhals	Birhors	Santhals	Birhors
Male	345	182	53.1	47.8
Female	305	199	46.9	52.2
Total	650	381	100.0	100.0

Source: Field survey, 2018-19

From the above table, it is clear that a total of 650 Santhal (53.1% male and 46.9% female) and 381 Birhor (47.8% male and 52.2% female) persons have been investigated by placing a structured questionnaire before them regarding their age, sex, educational qualification, occupation, availability of health care facilities, major diseases, source of drinking water, food habit, attitude towards traditional and modern health care system, the medicines they use, etc. The results of the questions regarding the aforementioned issues are properly examined. It reveals the real attitude of the Santhals and the Birhors understudy about different diseases and their origin, various medical procedures they followed and several types of folk medicines they used.

Origin of Disease:

According to the Santhal views, three major causes are responsible for the origin of the disease. Although there is no inelastic line of delimitation between these. The three main causes are supernatural, human and physical.⁴ Various actions of different Bongas are supernatural causes. The Santhals generally believe in the existence of powerful Bongas who are malevolent and able to bring harmful phenomenon including disease. Witchcraft, the human cause of disease, has long been very significant in Santhal society. They strongly believe that witchcraft causes many unbearable diseases and even death.⁵ The Santhals concede six natural causes that may be

included in the physical category. The most common of the natural causes in several disorders in sir.⁶ To the Santhals sir mean the muscles, sinews, nerves, arteries and veins. If any of the sirs of the human body becomes disordered or sprained or displaced, physical illness is come down. Generally, blood flows through the sirs. So if these are damaged, the blood flow will be stopped. The best remedy in such cases is one type of massage which is known as Iskir. Some diseases are caused due to tejo, that is, larve or worm. A tejo may be fairly large or so small. The diseases such as Rabies, Leprosy, Epilepsy, Cancer etc. are caused by some tejos. A bad diet such as overeaten may be the cause of trouble in the stomach. Eating any unclean food also leads to some diseases. They believe coughs are caused by mist and fog. The use of dirty water for drinking and bathing becomes the root cause of several diseases.⁷

When someone in a Santhal family falls ill, at the initial stage, they take the policy of wait and see to let the disease 'become tired'. In the meantime, they apply various household remedies such as sekao (a kind of fomentation), Iskir (a kind of massage), tobak (pricking any swollen part of the body with a red hot sickle), etc. However, even after applying these for few days, if the disease worsens, they seek medical help from a 'doctor', a medicine-man or an 'ojha', a folk practitioner. The ojha tries to drive away from the disease by giving herbal medicines and as well as by applying his fabulous magical power and incantations. He is supposed to be able to perform extraordinary things.⁸ In the case of the witch, the Santhals usually 'expel' the witch on the advice of the "Janguru" (the witchfinder). This special individual is considered to have the highest authority in this regard. The Janguru is recognized as the 'High court' of the Santhals in witchcraft matters.⁹ In our study area we have found out few names of persons who act as Ojha and Sakha. Padalal kisku (63 yrs) of Bandowan block, Thakurdas Murmu (65 Yrs) of Purulia -II block, Bouridas Mandi (59Yrs) of Arsha block, Ananda Hembram (54 Yrs) are famous for treatment not only to the Santhals but also to the other tribal and even non-tribal communities of the area concerned. On the other hand, Aghar Tudu (58 Yrs) of Balarampur block and Surya Soren (48 Yrs) of Manbazar -II block are two popular 'Sakhas' in the district. No well-known 'Janguru' has been detected in the mentioned area. If necessary, they run to a neighbouring district or state in search of Janguru.

The Birhors of Purulia district strongly believe in the infinite power of different supernatural spirits or Bongas. It is also assumed that occurrence of various diseases is a certain evidence of negligence of these spirits. The Birhors worship and offer sacrifices to them from time to time so they could avoid diseases. It is reported that the general measures for the Birhors of the district against diseases are as follows: (i) magical extraction; (ii) administration of medical herbs; (iii) sacrifices, offerings, prayer to the Bongas and (iv) contact with magical objects such as amulets, dietary restriction.¹⁰ If a Birhor person gets sick and does not recover after waiting for a few days, the family members of the person go to the 'Kabiraj', the medicine-man or Ojha. Even nowadays at least in the early stage they much depend on their traditional Kabiraj to cure of the disease. Gurupada Shikari (62 Yrs.) of village Bhupatipally and Shatrughna Shikara (62 Yrs.) of village Bereriya perform their duties as 'Kabiraj' with great pride.

Causation of diseases varies with the variations in ecology and climatic condition. The Santhals and the Birhors understudy mostly reside in deep forests and hilly areas which are sometimes very remote and inaccessible also. Both the Santhals and the Birhors of this region frequently suffer from different types of diseases. The major diseases may be shown in the following table.

Table No. 2
Major diseases among the villagers under study (in %)

Diseases	Santhals	Birhors
Skin diseases	48	59
Gastro – Problems	29	52
Tuberculosis	14	21
Arthritis	12	25
Nutritional Problems	16	23
Joundice	8	12
Diarrhea	7	11

Source: Field Survey, 2018-19

The above table shows that skin diseases are very common for the people of both indigenous communities. The inability to take food regularly and excessive alcohol consumption have caused Gastro – Problems, Widely, especially among the Birhors. Tuberculosis and Arthritis also embarrass the people of both communities more or less. Malnutrition has become one of the indicators of their deteriorating health. Joundice and Diarrhea sometimes exacerbate their suffering. Poverty, illiteracy, lack of health awareness, lack of personal hygiene, unsanitary conditions and sometimes being confined to the traditional health care system only, are the causes of many other diseases such as Anaemia, Malaria, Mental disorder, Leprosy, etc.

Medicine:

Different tribal communities mainly apply their indigenous knowledge on the diversified uses of Medicinal Plants as a means of healing. The Santhals and the Birhors of Purulia district prefer to use traditional herbal medicines at least in the primary stage of any disease. While field survey investigation it is understood that few elderly Santhals and Birhors still know a lot concerning the use of leaves, roots, bark, fruits and seeds of different plants that have tremendous medicinal properties in treating different diseases. Several such plants and their medicinal potential have been identified during the conversation with some knowledgeable old Santhal.¹¹ and Birhor.¹² persons. The Santhals and the Birhors use the following herbs and plants for curing diseases under the direction of the Ojha or Kabiraj.

(a) In the case of skin diseases, both the Santhals and the Birhors apply the leaves of the 'Neem' tree on the skin and consume the pills made from the leaves of 'Kalmegha'. (b) For Arthritis (Bat) the Santhals use the roots of 'Satamuli', whereas the Birhors use 'Kundari' leaf. (c) In Joundice, the leaves of 'Apang' tree and 'Arahar' tree is used by the Santhals and the Birhors respectively.¹³ (d) The Santhals and the Birhors eat leaves of 'Guava' tree and fruits of 'Sal' tree respectively for the treatment of 'Diarrhea' (Laj Haso and pet kharap respectively). (e) For Headache (Hasu and Matha Dhara) the Santhals apply the leaves of 'Guava' tree, whereas the Birhors 'Marigold' leaves. (f) The leaves of 'Leman' tree and the bark of 'Sal' tree is applied as the remedies of 'Vomiting' by them. (g) Cold and cough (Reyar and Thanda laga) is a very common disease for which the Santhals use the leaves of 'Tulsi' and the Birhors leaves of 'Basak' plant as medicine. (h) The Santhals eat a special kind of Mushroom called the 'Karang mushroom', which according to them, is pox –preventive. On the other hand, 'Kachhim' (Turtle) meat is eaten by the Birhors to survive from small-pox. (i) If a Santhal person suffers from Fever (Rualli), leaves of 'Seuli' tree and leaves of 'Tulsi' are prescribed as medicine while a Birhor person takes leaves of 'Basak' tree or 'Tulsi' tree (j) Besides, in case of Anaemia, Mental disorder, snake-bite, etc., the ojha or kabiraj gives several medicines that are made from different plant or herbs.

Though the Santhals and the Birhors under study have knowledge about various folk medicines and also use them enough, nowadays they take them the advantages of modern health facilities they have. In effect of connection with neighbouring communities, the spread of modern education and campaigning of local administration and various Non-Governmental Organizations (N.G.Os) against different fanaticism and favour of present government health schemes, they have been able to realize the importance of modern health care system. Therefore, the interest in modern medical methods has increased among them, although many of them continue to follow their traditional methods of treatment.¹⁴ Their preference in the health care system can be highlighted in the table below.

Table No.3

Preference in health care system among the villagers under study (in %)

Category	Santhals	Birhors
Modern	70.5	46.8
Traditional	8.8	13.6
Both	20.7	39.6
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2018-19.

It is revealed from the above table that 70.5% of the Santhals and 46.8% of the Birhors under Study have expressed their faith in the modern health care system. On the other hand, the percentage, of such populations who believe in the traditional health care system is comparatively higher among the Birhors. 20.7% of the Santhals and 39.6% of the Birhors believe in both types of the health care system. Another point should be mentioned here that 39.6% of the Santhals and 78.4% of the Birhors under study have confessed to the existence of government hospitals (SHC and PHC) in their locality. But the majority of the villagers (78.4% and 100% of the Santhals and the Birhors respectively) did not admit the existence of non-governmental dispensaries in their area of residence. Lastly, it is a very interesting and promising matter that 100% of the people of both communities in the area concerned are nowadays availing child and maternal immunization and Polio-vaccination available in the government hospitals. So it is conceivable that belief in modern medical methods and medicines among the Santhals and the Birhors of Purulia district will keep them free from various infectious diseases.

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