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Correspondence

Richa Baniya
Medical Student
Patan Academy of Health Science,
School of Medicine, Lalitpur, Nepal.
Email: gal_richa@hotmail.com
Phone: 9841694058

Peer Reviewed By

Mrs. Ira Shrestha
Patan Academy of Health Science
Email: irashrestha@pahs.edu.np

Dr. Sumana Bajracharya
Patan Academy of Health Science
Email: sumanabajracharya@pahs.
edu.np

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Traditional Healing Practices in Rural Nepal

Richa Baniya

4th Year Medical Student, Patan Academy of Health Sciences-School of Medicine,
Lalitpur, Nepal

ABSTRACT

Traditional healing practices in rural Nepal has emerged together with its culture and tradition. In the rural areas traditional culture is still predominant and western allopathic medicine has yet to reach those areas. People of rural societies are reluctant to accept changes in their cultural practices. There are also a lot of factors that make people choose traditional healers in lieu of modern hospital/health post services. However, modern health services are slowly replacing traditional healing practices in rural parts of Nepal.

Keywords: dhami/jhankri, healing, prevalent, traditional

People of primitive societies were mainly dependent on the nature for survival and believed nature to be their mother. When natural calamities struck their surrounding environment, they interpreted them as 'God's Anger'. When people became sick, they couldn't explain it rationally and believed it as the 'Curse from the Gods' or 'The Punishment of the People's Sins'. So, people started to worship rivers, forests, mountains, etc. as God.¹ Likewise, people assumed the physical body of a person would die but not their inner soul. So, they started worshipping the soul of their deceased ancestors as '*Kul-Debta*'. This belief was passed from generation to generation.

The concept of witch or '*Bokshi*' developed simultaneously with this notion. A witch is supposed to keep ghosts with her and orders it to enter a person's body, at first, causing minor illness, progressing towards severe condition and finally death. To get rid of it, faith healers were introduced. They were called '*Dhami* or '*Jhankri*'. They were believed to act as mediator between the spiritual world and the material world and suck the offending spirit from sick person's body.²

As human beings advanced, they became more intellectual. They started to understand that lack of sanitation was the cause of illness. They started to use cow dung to clean their house every day and used cow urine as an antiseptic. They bathed everyday and rooted it in their culture. Some people became vegetarians as meat could cause various diseases. To prevent illness they took proper diet, fruits and even embedded them in their culture, E.g. intake of curd mixed with beaten rice is supposed to keep them cool, and a specific day, during summer, was created to take it.

Being a medical student, it is important to know how traditional healing operates. These deep-rooted traditions have beliefs that can lead a person even towards death, e.g. a traditional belief that people suffering from diarrhea must not be given water/fluid.³ If we know the traditional practices of treatment, then we can make people aware of the risks of these treatment methods. We will also know where to intervene and also tell people the benefits of modern health facilities and encourage them to utilize those facilities. Now-a-days, due to cultural transformation, even '*Dhamis*' have started to recommend patients to hospitals in case of emergency.⁴

The practice of traditional healing in Nepal is gradually decreasing these days. Modern medicine was introduced in the seventeenth century but became dominant only during the last fifty years.⁵ Some years ago, even the case of snake bites was carried to '*Dhami/Jhankris*' but now patients of this case prefer going to health posts. However, due to lack of modern health facilities, in

most parts of the rural areas, people still visit traditional healer.⁶ Mostly, due to the cultural beliefs people are psychologically convinced that, if they are treated by the traditional healers, they get well soon. People of rural societies don't easily accept the scientific innovation. Their culture has created a deep faith in traditional healers.

Educated people now believe that traditional healers treat the sick people only psychologically.⁷ Sometimes the illness might also be only psychological. In this case, the traditional healers will help to make the person psychologically stronger. Even today, in rural society traditional healers are practicing their jobs and somehow they are successful in treating people. Whether psychological or not is yet unknown, because I have myself witnessed, a healer calm down a baby, crying for hours, just by chanting his '*Mantras*' without touching her. There was no rationality behind it nor it was any trick, but it happened.

The '*Dhami/Jhankri*' has no qualifications. They could be either literate or illiterate. They learned the treatment methods from their parents or by being disciples of senior '*Dhamis*'. Some '*Dhamis*' even say tales of being trained by the people of the jungle for several days to become a healer. However, people trust them and visit them mainly because it has been their cultural practice and are cheaper and available when needed. Being a part of the culture, is what makes traditional healing special.

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