

6. Supernatural Deities and Spirit of Health— A Study among the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Every society has different way of interpreting health and diseases which often is different for different societies. In this paper, the supernatural factors related to illness as viewed by the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh is discussed. Various types of explanations are given why some people get sick and others donot.. These explanations are formed from belief in witchcraft, spirits, a broken taboo, wrath of God etc which exist in their society. The present study was conducted five villages of West Kameng and Tawang districts of Arunachal Pradesh.

Key words: Supernatural, Deities, Spirit, Health, Monpas, Arunachal Pradesh

Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh, the largest state in terms of area , lies in the extreme Northeastern corner of the country lies between 26 28' N to 29 31' N latitude and between 91 31'E to 97 30'E longitude. It covers an area of 83,743 Km and shares its border with Tibet and China on north; Bhutan on West; Tibet and Mymmar in the East; with the state of Nagaland and Assam in the South East and South. It has a population of about 1383727 (male 713912 and female 669815) with an average density of 17 persons per sq km. (Census of India, 2011). It is scattered over 17 towns and 3862 villages. The state has the lowest density of 17 persons per sqkm. The Sex ratio of Arunachal Pradesh at 938 females to 1000 males is lower than the national average of 940 as per census of India 2011.

The state of Arunachal Pradesh consists of 25 districts. Each district is composed of different tribes having their own rich culture and tradition. They have different racial affinities, customs, tradition etc. At present Arunachal Pradesh consists of 26 major groups and number of sub-groups. All the tribes of

Arunachal Pradesh are of Mongoloid origin and are settled down in different ecological settings and distinct territorial base., such as Bangni, Monpa, Miji, Sulung, Aka, Sherdukpens, Khowas and Bangro of Tawang, West and East Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh; Nishi, Tagin, Apatanis, Hill Miris, Sulung in the Papumpare, Lower and Upper Subansiri districts; Adi, Tagin, Membas, Miri, Khamba in the west and East Siang district; Mishmi- their sub groups and Khampti in the Lohit and Changlang district; Wancho, Nocte, Tangsa, Sinphos in the Tirap district.

The Monpas, a major tribe of Arunachal Pradesh is concentrated in Tawang and West Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The word Monpa is derived from the Tibetan language. The term '**Mon**' means lower country and '**Pa**' means people and thus Monpa is used to address the people living in south of Tibet. (Choudhury, 1996). Thus Monpas have migrated from Tibet long back. The Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh are divided into three geographical groups on the basis of their settlement, namely – Tawang Monpa or Northern Monpa, Dirang Monpa or Central Monpa and Khalengthang Monpa or Southern Monpa. The Tawang Monpa is also called *Brahmi* Monpa while Kalaktang Monpas and Dirang Monpas are commonly known as *Tsangla* Monpas. The *Brahmi* Monpas varies from other group in respect of their language and other cultural traits. The dialects of the different sections of the Monpas belong to the Bodic group of the Tibeto-Burman family. The Monpa is very different from other tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh on basis of their habitation, religion, dialect, dress, food habit etc.

Methodology:

The study was conducted in five homogeneously inhabited Monpa villages under West Kameng and Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh. The villages Sangti, Senge, Khassow in West Kameng while the village Seru and Kitpi in Tawang district. All these villages are established long back. Total number of households is 576. The total population of five villages is 2427. Out of which 1209 are male and 1218 are females. The present study is based on field survey conducted in the year 2018. Most of the important information were taken from Bonpu, lama and elderly people of five villages.

Every societies has different views of understanding causation of diseases which is influenced by many factors- social, cultural, economic, environmental etc . Foster and Anderson (1978) viewed that every society has clear idea on diseases causation, identification and treatment. Their way of understanding the diseases is mostly based on certain assumptions and experiences. The explanation

offered by these traditional societies may also very different from the explanation by western Medicine. According to Ackernecht (1947: 25-45) "Disease and its treatment are only in the abstract purely biological processes. Actually, such facts as whether a person gets sick at all, what kind of disease he acquires and what kind of treatment he receives depend largely upon social factors. "

In social factor, religion plays an important role in influencing health and health behaviour of any community. Samuel Weiser (1984:41), one of the pioneers of Tibetan Medicine viewed that there is a very close relationship between Buddhism and Medicine. He holds the view that "Since body and mind are seen as a composite whole, all manners of diagnosis and treatment takes this into account. On the most physical organic level, the body is understood in terms of humoral theory. The three humors are air, bile and phlegm. The three humoral constituents of the body are understood to have evolved from three primary faults of obscurations of mind: phlegm from ignorance, air from carving, and bile from hatred. On the physical plane it is the balance or imbalance of these which is responsible for health and disease. These humors can be influenced by all sorts of natural factors like diet and seasonal changes. They are also said to be influenced by life activities, psychological conditions, astrological and unseen forces, and spiritual conditions, Karma, existing from the present or previous lives."

Many scholars also have acknowledged the influence of Mahayana Buddhism on medicine. The Tantrik forms of religion and medicine is believed to have been popularized by Guru Rimpoche (Guru Padmasambhava). He is considered as the Master of Healing. Tibetan medicine is also practised with the combination of tantra with alchemy .It is believed to have linked astrological methods with the existing etiology. (Roy Burman, 2003).At present, Monpas follow the Medicinal practice which is combination of Buddhism and Bon religion. Bon religion is the earlier religion exists among the Monpas before the advent of Buddhism. In Bon religion a large numbers of mountain-gods, water god and gods guarding their immediate natural surroundings were appeased. They believe that the diseases, calamities and casualties were the handiwork of these Gods. They worship these Gods to protect themselves from any calamities by doing rituals as prescribed by the lama. They use to follow certain prescribed rituals for propitiation of these deities. They take the assistance of Lama who would prescribe certain rituals for propitiation. Though they worship Bon gods but they follow Buddhist way to worship.

Niranjan Sarkar (1980) also mentioned in his book about such practices by the Monpas. He viewed that sacrifice of animals for propitiating these deities were an important practice of the Monpas. After the advent of Buddhism these deities were still worshipped by the Monpas but the ritualistic performance were transformed in Buddhist style and the sacrificing of animals for propitiating these deities were not accepted. But for few deities who cannot be fitted in the new mode of rituals were worshipped by the Bon functionaries by following Bon rituals. The Monpas still pay offerings to some deities and evil spirit like *Braksen* (hill god), *Tsan* (rock), *Lu* (water), *Kelah* (Big hills), *Doot* (forest) etc.

Monpas believe that the person is healthy if he can do his normal work and activities and can consume normal food. In case of women, who have the capacity to do household works as well as in the fields and can bear children are usually considered as possessing good health. They believe that good health also depends on many factors like the food habit, disease and illness, and above all, the blessings of Gods and spirit. Though they are Buddhists, still they believe that malignant spirits, black magic, breach of taboo, sorcery etc may cause illness and affect the health of a person. They strongly believe that if the spirits remain satisfied one does not suffer from any disease or ailments and lead a happy life.

Monpas believe that disease as a disturbance in their work or unable to do daily chorus. They viewed the disease hampers their mind and body. They identify diseases on the basis of symptoms. There may be one or more symptoms for Diseases. They view that some diseases are due to action of some supernatural power and some are due to physical means. According to them when a person suffers from any irregularities relevant to his body, feels weak, and is unable to eat normal food is considered as ill. They fear that if they donot follow social norm or breach of religious duties, God will punish them. In most cases of serious illness, the first consult Lama who suggests special prayer. Religion is viewed as a central source of support in times of mental and physical illness. The diseases are identified on the basis of symptoms. There are some special symptoms for each disease. They decide the treatment basis on the identification of these symptoms. There are few number of diseases which cannot be identified on the basis of symptoms. They then consult lama who can identify the diseases through the divination. They confirm the cause of such illness and take necessary remedial measures in the traditional way. The cause of disease can be grouped as – Natural and Supernatural.

Some natural calamities like heavy rain are also responsible for different diseases. But they believe that these physical happenings may also be caused by the wrath of deities and spirits. If the spirits gets satisfied, such unwanted physical happenings will not occur, and all can lead a happy and prosperous life. The people of the studied village live in natural surroundings and the objects of nature like hillock, rivulet, stream, huge stones, large trees, birds and animals have relation with them. Thus when a person disrupts its natural environment, he suffers from illness and ill luck. In order to maintain a balance and harmony with nature, some ritualistic performances are observed which have positive healing effect on the body.

They believe that every disease has specific deities/ Spirits are responsible for that specific disease. All accidents, evil eyes, unnatural happenings etc are caused when *Gomcha druge* is unsatisfied. They offer prayer and perform *Kangso* ritual to appease *Dam Chin* when someone suffer from paralysis, bone fracture, skin diseases etc. The people of the five studied village believe in supernatural forces for any unwanted or unnatural happenings. They believe that spirits reside in many natural places like forest, water, wind and mountain etc. Different spirit has different names like

- *Phu*. (mountain spirit): *Phu* is the spirit who stays in the top of the sacred mountain. Every village has their own *phu* who reside in the sacred mountain near the village. This spirit has control over all the area including the forest, water stream etc of the mountain . Any destroying or disturbing the sacred mountain suffers from madness, acute body pain and shivering. If anybody gets deadly illness after travelling to the mountain, they believe that they displease the mountain God
- *Sada or sadag* (earthly supernatural being) is regarded as the spirit of earth or land. If someone wounds land , he or she will suffer from deadly diseases.
- *Yul Zida* (divinity of region)
- *Lu* (supernatural deities lives in lakes and other water bodies) : The *Lu* dwells in water bodies. Anyone who pollutes or urinates near water bodies get the wrath of *Lu* in the form of diseases. The whole family may also get ill.
- *Dud* (forest demons): *Dud* is the spirit of forest. Among Monpas forest is an important area from where they acquire food, timber, medicine etc. But if anyone does any harm to forest, he or she suffers from diseases which they believe is the curse from forest spirit.

- *Nyans* (tree and rock God): Nyan is regarded as the spirits of the trees and rocks. Anyone destroying rocks or cuts trees in hills get punished from this God in the form of deadly disease specially plague or death. Mukherji (1995) viewed that *Nyans* spirit gets offended when the sacred trees are cut or someone dig the sacred ground or area. For appeasement of this spirit, some ritualistic rite are performed beforehand if anyone visit these area are cut the sacred trees.
- *Meh-hang* (Drought spirit) etc. They believe that if their abode is disturbed or if any persons come in the way of these spirits, they cause him to suffer from different diseases, illness or misfortune etc.

List of some deities/ spirit responsible for some diseases or misfortune

Sl no	Name of Deities/ Spirit	Diseases or misfortune
1	<i>Panden lamu</i>	Accident, natural calamities like storm etc
2	<i>Dam chin</i>	Paralysis, skin diseases, bone fracture etc
3	<i>Kelah</i>	Vomiting, pain in stomach, head etc
4	<i>Tsan</i>	Blood vomiting, malaria etc
5	<i>Duot/doot</i>	Mental instability
6	<i>Gomcho durug</i>	Evil eyes, epidemic , accidents etc
7	<i>Ongme lamu</i>	Unnatural death

They believe that one may fall ill if they don't follow the prescribed social norms and breach of taboo. There are some fixed social prescribed norms and taboos, which must be obeyed by the people. It is believed that one may fall ill if he or his kin neglects such taboos. They never spit in such areas where they believe spirit dwells. They also avoid throwing onion, garlic, hair, plastic etc in fire as they believe will offend God. So they also try to appease these spirits by offering prayer through *Bonpu* (the priest who follows *Bon* religion). The *Bonpu* worship these dieties with animal sacrifice, liquor

etc. But with the advent of Buddhism, the Lama performs these rituals in Buddhist way. The Lama, after performing ritual for curing a disease, prescribes a set of taboos. If the taboo is not followed one may fall ill again. Interpreting the various views by the Monpas in the study, it reflects that are largely the believer of supernatural powers which impact their health situation.

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