

Disease and Illness in Folk Healing Practice: An Ethnographic Study Among the Mishing Tribe of Assam

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ABSTRACT

Folk medicine is the non-written or non-codified medicine system of any indigenous community. There are two types of folk medicine in folk healing system- one is Natural and another is Magico-Religious folk medicine. The Mishing tribe of Majuli, Assam possess separate conception regarding the causes of the disease and accordingly they approach to the folk healing. The faith on Nature-spirit and deities is crucial among this society for which they organise many ceremonies and rituals to make pleased to the deities and wish for their good health. However, the importance of the folk healing is gradually lessened among the young generation due to various factors.

Keywords: Disease and Illness; Folk medicine; Health seeking behaviour; Magico-religious practice; Tribal society.

INTRODUCTION

Among different kinds of healing like codified traditional healing, modern medicine system another practice is 'folk healing' which is one important area of the Medical Anthropologists. Folk healing is the practices of 'folk' in disease treatment which is in contrast to the modern medicine system. It is the non-dominant culture of the society whose knowledge is not recognised under the codified medical system of India- AYUSH. Folk healing practices include herbal remedies, use of own botanical knowledge, religious and magical therapies etc, specially this kind of medicine is carried by the tribal groups and these are the indigenous to the tribes (Pordie, 2007). These are traditional knowledge because this knowledge are transmitted historically from one generation to another through oral as well as various customary practices (Mathur, 2003). Instead of presence of codified medical approaches tribes have their own knowledge on health and medicine because their joining in the gradual modern civilisation is comparatively very late and it helped them to preserve their own and indigenous faith on healing practices. Along with, their living style, locality as well as their socio-economic status force them to be indigenous. Accordingly, they have been succeeding to define health, healing according to their own social context (Mandal, Bhattacharya , 2023). Being inhabitants of remote side like forest, hill top or river side area tribes develop some co-existence to the Nature or surrounding environment and acquire knowledge about the medicinal knowledge about the plants surrounded by them. Accordingly they create their folk knowledge on health which is original to them. The tribes have their own knowledge on songs, stories, dreams, method and practices. Such practices based on environment and believes create a separate cultural identity as an indigenous groups. In their indigenous healing practice, the natural and supernatural treatment is intertwined. Specially in terms of taking indigenous treatment, determining the causes of illness is very important for which the traditional healer practice the many religious rituals in healing (Genani, 2022). At present it becomes the prime interest of the researcher that how the ethnic groups especially tribes have performed their own indigenous folk medicinal system. Intertwining ethno botanical knowledge (Knowledge on plant or herbs in disease treatment) with

ritualistic practices introduces unique folk healing using folk medicine in a specific community, especially to the tribal groups. Therefore research seeks to study the folk healing prevailed among the tribe of Mishing in Assam.

Conceptualisation of folk healing: Although India have its rich traditional or indigenous knowledge on health like Ayurveda, Unani, Sidha, Homeopathy, the ethnic groups have also created their own knowledge system on health and health care on their own which are very indigenous to them (Genani, 2022). The healing practices using the folk herbs or rituals are culturally framed and it is drawn from community's resources, knowledge, belief, customs and behaviours and that is why it is considered as indigenous. In such case 'healing' is a part of culture which is closely linked to the faith and religion in folk healing practice (Channa, 2021). The medicine or healing practices used by the indigenous community is considered as 'folk' when this kind of knowledge and practices transmit and learned from one generation to another orally and it does not possess official statuses in the local cultural context. It has only the unofficial status in comparison to the other medicine system (Ayurvedic, Yunani, Siddha, Homeopathy, and Allopathic) which is officially recognised. This unofficial status and oral transmission is the vital consideration for a medicine system to be called as 'folk'. This folk medicine is closely tied to a specific indigenous community (O'Connor and Hufford, 2001). These are little traditional medicine system which are opposite to the great traditional medicine like Ayurvedic, Homeopathy, Allopathic or non-codified medicine which do not have any written form and these are practiced on the basis of local observation, experience, and believes and the locally available flora and fauna (Rath, 2007).

There are two types of folk medicinal practices- one is Natural folk medicinal practice and another is Magico-Religious folk practice. Natural Medicinal Practice is done through using Natural elements like plants, herbs and magico- religious practice is associated to magic, charms, rituals, sacred oaths etc (Hemalatha and Reddy, 1982). Even the traditional healers who are considered more knowledgeable in folk medicine, both in natural and spiritual it seems seeking guidance and permission from the ancestors and deities. Various rituals and religious ceremonies are performed for the satisfaction of the spiritual agents as folk healing. However, the traditional healer is the prime provider of the folk medicine in different forms. There are some healers who provide care carrying out animal sacrifices, some heal the illness using plants and herbs with belief, some use rituals and religious *tantra mantra* etc which are rooted in their own cultural context (Kumar and Jain, 2023). The folk medicine and healing used by any community is tight to their social and cultural context because in the concept of occurrence of disease itself communities possess special attitudes which are culturally specific to a community (Jocano, 1966).

Concepts of disease and illness in folk medicine and related belief among the tribe: The scientific community of medicine considers disease as the pathological condition of a person where the doctor objectively diagnoses the pathological state of the body function and treats as 'disease'. However, 'illness' involves the psychological condition of the disease suffered by person. But the fundamental concept of occurring of disease is different in terms of folk medicine. In traditional healing practice redefine illness as 'disease' as the traditional healer's healing is based on people's subjective experience on the malfunctioning of the body (Eisenberg, 1977). In folk medicinal system of knowledge, getting ill is considered as punishment of any sin committed by person or there are any supernatural forces or other believes behind the occurrence of disease. The community considers the etiology or cause of disease and the treatment is determined by the considering cause or etiology defined to the disease (Beltran, 1969). The study of Santals by Karua (2015) brings many instances about Santal's belief regarding the cause of disease. Although they consider some natural causes of health issues, but they have fully belief on supernatural power or agent of disease for which herbal medicines in combination with the ritualistic practices are performed as the remedies for the illness. Gaioni(1989) mentions in the study of Tingyans of Phillipine that they believe in supernatural spirit as the factor of occurring disease. Some symptoms such as vomiting, fainting spells, fever, inflammation, bleeding, and accidents are caused by the spirit or due to the dead kin one. In this context they approach to the ritualistic folk healing. However, in terms of some disease like malaria they do not consider it due to the bad eye of spirit or supernatural power. They consider it due to the Natural causes and in such context they use herbal remedies, the natural folk medicine. In the study of health seeking behaviour Ravi (2015) in the study shows that people adopt the health seeking behaviour according to the concept or perception of illness and its causes. Ravi mentions that in Assam, it is believed that skin pox occurs due to the anger of deity called 'Marianmman' and accordingly people adopt the treatment behaviour and

perform ritual to make satisfaction to the deity. Various research studies about the people's perceptions regarding illness and the treatment behaviour accordingly. Similarly, Kumar and Jain (2023) mentions that many tribal communities believe that diseases like small pox, chickenpox, pneumonia, malaria, fever, seizures are brought by the evil spirit or evil eye. As the indigenous communities possess different believes regarding the causes of illness, therefore the treatment pattern is also indigenous to them. There are the cause and effect factors about the health and illness among the indigenous communities which is the part of their culture as the cause of disease is considered according to their faith (Mutakar, 2021).

Folk remedies among the tribal groups: Various studies show that the tribes have developed their own indigenous folk medicine to cure the disease. Tribal people consider the factors of disease in two ways –one is related to body and another is divine and spirits. If it is related to body then they use herbal or ethno botanical medicine and in terms of disease caused by spirit they access to the magico-religious practice (Vedavathy, 2002). Vedavathy. et.al, (1998) studied about the folk medicine used by six tribes of Andhra Pradesh where it was found that the tribes specially the hill tribes tried to cure the suffering of diseases using herbal medicine, magical practice and *tantra mantra*. They adopt their unique technique to cure the illness. For instance, tribes like Yanadis, Chenchus, Nakkalas adopt heat therapy to reduce pain. Tribe Sugali treat fever using ginger-garlic on their own way. Ganesh and Gudivada (2013) mention that Yanadi tribe in Andhra Pradesh uses seventy plant species as medicine in different forms. Likewise, Kurku tribal community takes action of healing according to the probable causes and the symptoms of the disease. Basically disease and its occurrence is associated to the deities. Accordingly they call or invite the deities to heal the specific disease (Kokane, 2020). Karuwa (2015) shows about the faith of Santals on disease occurrence due to either physical factor or supernatural factors. Therefore in treating the disease they use the herbal medicine which are indigenous to them as well they worship to the disease creating supernatural factors also. The natural elements like soil, amulet of shell, wood, water, fire, plants, herbs, etc are taken into consideration for treatment of disease among the Santals. Many tribal communities have their own dream theory and own interpretation regarding the dreams. Interpreting the dreams they consider the symptoms of disease and dreams also influence to create indigenous knowledge also (Ward, 2014).

From various literature it is seen that the ethnic groups specially the tribal communities possess some indigenous concepts regarding their disease and causing factors and accordingly they adopt remedial methods which are also very specific to the community. Among various tribal groups the Mishing is one of the vital tribes living in plains of Assam. They are rich in their knowledge about the herbal medicinal plants. They use fifty five medicinal plants in the form of leaves, stem, root, bark to cure diseases which are also common to habitats (Shankar, et. al, 2012). In Mishing society a person is considered healthy if he or she is free from any disease and to keep away themselves from disease they believe to perform many religious rituals as well as worships to keep calm to the deities or supernatural powers which are considered as the source of some disease or unexpected happening in their lives. In the Mishing tribal society the causes of the disease are considered as spirit or ghost of dead one. Accordingly they approach to the traditional healers to perform some rituals. However, concepts of evil eye, evil spirit, influence of black magic, influence of dream on occurring disease are very prominent among the Mishing. The offering of pig, cocks, *apong*, the traditional liquor to the deities is considered as crucial part of their folk healing in terms of disease (Channa, 2021). Many studies have focused on the ethno botanical medicinal healing used by the tribal communities while very fewer studies have been done in believes and the magico-religious practices related to disease and illness especially among the tribe of Mishing. Very less ethno methodological studies have been done among the Mishing tribe in terms of their folk medicine. Therefore, this research seeks to study the role of faith and believes as well as various magico-religious practices prevailed among the tribe of Mishing especially in Majuli district of Assam. Two specific objectives have been taken for the study- first, to study the concepts of disease among the tribe of Mishing in Majuli and how they conceptualise the disease and secondly, how they consider the folk belief specially the magico-religious practices for their healing.

METHODOLOGY

Study has been done using both primary and secondary data. Study is done in Latibar Chuk Gaon located in Upper Majuli district of Assam. The village is purposively selected for the study because in pilot study it is found that this village is the witness of using many folk believes and folk healing for disease. One important point was

noted that the young generation is gradually getting away from the traditions due to education as well as assimilation to the other Caste Hindu Society. Therefore, to have better understanding about the traditional folk believe exists among the Mishings, it was purposively considered to access to the aged people whose age are above sixty. Data was collected within one year using observation and interview method. As the study is qualitative in nature therefore the researcher tries to collect some cases as evidences from the field. To attain the qualitative data researcher tries to get the narratives of the respondents regarding their folk healing practice. In this regard the researcher uses the 'emic approach' to have the complete ethnographical evidences. As it is an ethnographic study as well a qualitative study, the nature of this research lies in the post modern research through which it is tried to see how the Mishing community construct their own knowledge or the way of behaviour in terms of treatment of disease.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Mishing community, an indigenous ethnic group in Assam, India, has a rich tapestry of traditional beliefs and practices regarding health and illness. These practices are deeply rooted in their culture and have been passed down through generations. Various beliefs towards many deities like *Donyi-Polo*, Nature spirits, *Nisam Nam*, *Aai Nam*, sacrifices are prevailed among the Mishings. Hence, use of herbal medicine is very common to the Mishing folk medicine. Among the Mishing community it is found that they possess some beliefs regarding the causes of disease and they conceptualize meaning according to their own consideration.

Disease Occurs Due To Dissatisfaction of Deities and Dream

Disease and illness are often attributed to the displeasure of nature spirits or deities and due to the effect of dream among the Mishing tribe.

Snail Deity as causing factor of disease: They believe on Snail deity which is called *Apong Sonowal* or *Apong Pator* in Mishing language. It is believed that they suffer from any eye issue or eye problem due to the dissatisfaction of Snail towards them. They consider that eye problem is out broken due to the sin towards the Snail. In this regard a woman respondent was taken as a Case.

Case 1: If the Apong Sonowal is pleased there is no chance of getting any eye issues. We get the eye problem if the deity is dissatisfied to us only. He is very kind hearted deity and even is pleased very shortly. If we unfortunately keep foot over the snail they get angry and after few days any eye issue outbreaks to us. At first, prior to the marriage to this village I could not believe in this fact. But gradually I noticed that I get eye issue when I feel any displeasing doing to the Apong Sonowal.

Study also reveals that the faith varies to the villages in spite of the same tribe too. In this context Eisenberg (1977) says that the folk belief as well as folk healing is mostly associated to the patient's psychological context. Being embedded in their own society they psychologically consider the trueness of the situation. On the other hand, it is their world of thinking and doing according to their community's belief and sentiment.

Believe on Agni Deuri (Fire deity): In the Mishing language, the fire deity is known as *Agni Deuri* or *Aging Deuri*. Mishing community in Latibar Chuk gaon believes on *Agni Devata* and they worship it. But they believe that if the *Agni devata* is dissatisfied to them it brings bad health to the family. Especially if the *Agni Devata* is dissatisfied to anyone, he or she suffers from *Gabo Lenga* (Tonsil) and he or she may get *Engel Dongo*. *Engel Dongo* describes the condition of having fish bones stuck in the throat or neck. They also believe that they may feel ill because of the effect of any evil spirit or evil eye.

Channa (2021) mentions that some diseases are not considered as clinical or like disease, it's like illness felt which is caused by some extra natural causes. Likewise some health issues like eye problem, tonsil, itching etc are not clinical disease. These are the illnesses considered by the Mishing people due to the effect of some deities or super power. The concept of disease is not clinical or laboratory diagnostic issue. On the contrary, it works basically on their psychological level through which they grasp the disease as the effect of some super power or super Natural power.

Dream as causing factor of Disease: Types and nature of dream indicate the occurrence of disease to a person in the Mishing village. They keep faith on dream as carrier of good and bad fortune to them. Dreaming of clean, flowing water is generally considered a positive sign, purification and good health. They feel good while they have such dreams on sleep. Dreaming of ancestors or deities such as *Donyi* (the Sun) and *Polo* (the Moon) is often considered a positive sign, indicating protection and blessings. Such dreams are believed indicating good health and well-being of person. They mention that “if they come to our dream we feel enlightened and it help us boosting our lives and actions for few days. When they come to us we give prayer to them from the sleeping itself whenever we are able to do so”. On the Contrary, dreaming of dirty water is often interpreted as a sign of illness or disease, possibly indicating that the dreamer needs to cleanse himself physically or spiritually as he or she is going to be sick. They have firm believe on this dream. In such instance one villager sixty two years old revealed his recent experience.

Case. 2. Few weeks before I had a dream of dirty water and I ignored it. But after two days I felt completely weak and suffered from severe dysentery. Although we sometime ignore the dream but we should not because dreams are shown by our ancestors. If I took immediate remedy against the dream I would not have suffered from such disease.

The Mishing tribe has their own faith on dreaming of coins. Dreaming of coins indicates evil happening to one's health. They mention that if they see coins in dream they suffer from skin disease, specially itching. They reveal in the interview that if someone is suffering from the skin itching he or she must see coins in their dream. Eight persons were found there who had suffered from itching and all the eight persons saw coins in their dream. They spoke that people who saw coins they must suffer from itching and eventually they must see coins in dream who have suffered from itching. Tribes hold a separate believes regarding the causes of disease.

In the Latibar Chuk it is found that traditionally they have been keeping the faith on that dreaming a fallen tree is considered indicating ill-health of someone. Even it indicates someone's death. Therefore when they see this dream they get afraid considering one's upcoming death in the village. They reveal their faith that “If someone has demised in our village it is obvious that prior to his death anyone of the village should see the dream of fallen tree”. Again, seeing snake, tiger in dream is considered as prior symptoms of bad health for the dreamer among the tribe of Mishing in Latibar Chuk village.

The Folk Healing Specially Magico-Religious Practice Against Disease and Illness

The Mishing tribe in Latibar Chuk village adopts their health seeking behaviour according to the concept of their illness they consider. The Mishing do worship to the deities, Natural spirits and take actions against the dreams happened during sleeping as they consider that due to the dissatisfaction of deities, Natural spirit people suffer from disease.

Rituals aiming satisfaction to the deities: From the field study it was found that as they believe on curse of Snail on them for which they get eye problem therefore they worship to the Snail to please *Apong Sonowal* or *Apong Pator* (sanil deity). *Apong* generally refers to the fermented rice beer that is a traditional drink among the Mishing people, and it is also used metaphorically to denote something revered or significant. *Sonowal* or *Pator* are the terms that can denote a deity or spirit. They offer *Apong* to the snail deity to please them. They spoke that they do not need to go to doctor to cure the eye problem; instead it can be healed by the snail water only. They mention that as they live in the river side location therefore they have a close relation to such natural objects also. A study done by SCs and STs Research and Training institute, Bhubaneswar (2013) mentions that tribal consider the self healing as best healing and basically they adopt the healing from their climate, ecological environment they live.

In Mishing society displeasure of *Agni devta* is considered as source of disease or ill health therefore they perform some ceremonial believes to persuade *Agni deuri*. When they experience tonsil or having fish thorn on neck they directly pray to *agni*. In such context they use to make the fire placing the fire woods in opposite sides.



Figure 1. Firewood from opposite direction to please *Agni Devta*

One woman's narrative was taken into consideration in this regard.

Case 3. *If the agni is unpleasant to our home, one must have such kind of suffering like tonsil or fish thorn on neck. We should try to satisfy Agni devta. One year ago my husband suffered from tonsil. He used to do gargling with hot and salt water to get recovery, but did not cure off until I made the fire with woods from opposite direction. In such direction the cooking utensils do not get the heat directly; the hit comes from the side. By making fire in this way agni devta can be pleased. After doing it repeatedly for two days, my husband got recovery from the suffering of illness.*

For instance, Karua (2015) mentions that in the folk medicine the question of faith are centre question to be cured from a disease. People get cured due to the faith or trust kept towards the healing. However this faith is the integral part of their culture which is learnt through the generations. However, even if someone from that society has not the faith on those society and cultural system makes them believer to such practices (Selberg, 1995).

Rituals celebrated against Dreams: As response to the dreams the family of the dreamer consults with *Mibbu* (Shaman). The shaman can interpret the dream's meaning and suggest appropriate rituals or remedies to counteract any negative effects. Moreover, they perform many rituals like *Girib-Ganggang*. This ritual involves making offerings to the spirits or deities to seek their protection and blessings. It is often performed after a disturbing dream to prevent illness. They mainly offer cock following chanting and *puja* by *mibu* aiming satisfaction of deity.

As fallen tree is considered as indicator of ill health or death of anyone, people consult to the *mibu* regarding the upcoming misfortune indicated by dream. They said that in such situation *mibu* interpret the dream whether it was green leafy tree or dried leafy tree. Then he suggests that the dreamer should offer a cock to be sacrificed. The *mibu* consider a separate examining the Mishing Calender for the *puja* in which the cock is sacrificed and *apong* is offered in feast. *Apong*, sacred liquor is offered to the spirits to seek their favor in purifying the person's body and spirit. Moreover, when someone recovers from an illness, offerings of *Apong* are made as a token of gratitude to the deities and spirits for their assistance in the healing process.

During the field study two respondents were found who had been already delayed to organize such *puja*, but very shortly they would do it. Dreams are a vital aspect of the Mising community's traditional knowledge system, deeply intertwined with their understanding of health and spirituality. The interpretations and responses to dreams reflect a holistic approach to well-being, where the physical, spiritual, and environmental realms are interconnected.

Magico –Religious Ceremony related to the Spirit: Various ceremonies are performed to make please to the Spirit or God and Goddesses.

Nisam-Naam : One important ceremony performed by the Mishing is *Nisam – Naam*. It is a traditional healing ceremony where a local shaman or *mibu* performs some rituals to heal the sick person. In this ritual, *mibu* act like a mediator between the spiritual world and the human world where he seeks interventions of ancestral spirits to cure illness.



Figure 2. Offering cocks and pigs in *nisam-naam*

In such ceremony the ill-person and his family have to offer one cock to ancestral spirit or deity. *Sam Siam* (offering) of animal sacrifices, vegetables, liquor plays crucial role in the *puja* and several villagers do these offerings together. In the field study a few respondents were found who revealed their cured ill health after performing this *Nisam-Naam* where they offered cock also. It is the folk believe rooted in their culture.

Donyi (the Sun) and Polo (the Moon) Puja: Worship of *Donyi* and *polo* is the center of indigenous belief system among the tribe of Mishing. They worship these deities for the betterment and protection of their lives including their health. Prayers and chants are recited during the *puja*, often invoking the deities' names and attributes. These *mantras* are believed to have protective and healing properties, and reciting them can bring peace and positive energy and good health of the villagers.



Figure 3. *Donyi-Polo* Puja, chanting *mantra* for good health

They believe that if *Donyi* and *Polo* are dissatisfied to anyone it brings bad fortune including bad health. *Prasad* is taken in the form of feast with the offered cocks, pigs etc. by the villagers.

***Aai-Naam*:** It is a traditional prayer or hymn sung to honor *Aai*, the Mother Goddess, who is considered a guardian and protector of the community. This practice deeply intertwined with their health and illness beliefs. When a person falls ill, *Aai -Naam* may be performed to seek the divine intervention of *Aai* for healing. It is believed that the goddess can help cure physical ailments and restore health through her blessings. *Aai- Naam* addresses the spiritual dimensions, providing a holistic approach to healing. Respondents mentioned that through this *Aai-naam* they get the blessings of *Aai*. If once it is missed in a year, it creates problem to them. They offer cocks, pigs as sacrifices to *Aai*.

All these rituals have a spiritual and religious dimension in which they participate. From the study it was got to know participating in such rituals they get an emotional comforts and it reduces stress. Such rituals can give them an emotional support. It means such healing can give a psychological satisfaction to the community which also brings to the individual as well as community harmony also. Again, Malinawaski also mentions that the performance of magic and religious rituals helps to being stress free and give satisfaction to the community which may also bring good health them (Karua, 2015).

Religious beliefs and cultural patterns, moral codes have the effect on the consideration of the causes of disease. Society consider it according to their own knowledge and own religious –cultural value. Even they consider their healing according to the elements found in their surroundings. Therefore the traditional healing practice cannot be separated from their religious and cultural elements as well as their environmental surrounding. Being tribe, the tribal communities are originally related to the Naturalism and their religious practices also indicate their loyalty towards Nature (Channa, 2021). Such way, the Mishing community also has built their knowledge on health and disease relying the religious beliefs and culture, basically Naturalistic approach. Hence, they have their super belief on various *Puja*, sacrifices of cock, pig, offering of *Apong* and these are being linked to the curing illness. However, sacrifices of cock are very crucial in their cultural value.



Figure 4. Sacrifices of cocks

From the study it is found that in Mishing tribal society people adopt the treatment behavior according to their own concept of health and wellness. In this regard it resembles to the study of Ugent (2000), who studied in about the Myths, magic and the folk healers of a Mexican Market that treatment does not matter about the availability or sale of medicinal plant or drugs. It is highly affiliated to the so-called cause of the disease and illness occur because according to this co-called-causes the treatment behaviour is adopted in every society including the Mishing who have firm belief on dreams and deities in causing disease. From the study it is found that they seek to draw the healing from spiritual powers. Pordie (2007) mentions that it is the product of their thinking process about the events of the world where they live and do action according to their thinking process or their social context. Channa (2021) mentions that the social, economic, educational context of a group determines the health seeking behaviour they adopt. On the study it was found that all the respondents worked

as wage earner or fisherman or carpenter etc. Their educational qualifications are not also above upper primary level. Being inhabitant of riverside remote location of Majuli Island they had to depend on the traditional and locally available healing system for a long time in which they gradually become embedded.

CONCLUSION

The concept of disease and illness is very crucial among the Mishing society and their socio- economic conditions influence them to consider their concepts and healing. They have also constructed their own system of knowledge on health; again their socio-economic conditions also influence them to get attached to the traditional folk medicine. Although herbal medicine, ethno botanical medicine is highly associated to the spiritual ritualistic practice, however this paper only limits its study only to the spiritualistic healing prevailed among the Mishing tribe. However, the traditional belief is much prevalent basically among the older generation. They feel very protective while they access to the traditional folk health care. However, among the new generation the influence of folk belief has been lessened due to the impact of globalization, education and continuous touch with the non- tribal community as well as the influence of modern medicine.

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