
Brain and its Concept in Tribal Medicine (A preliminary report)

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Abstract

Tribal culture has its roots deep into the soil, to which the tribe belongs. Modern man, however educated he might be still has links with tribal culture. It would be of interest to social anthropologists to unearth these links and analyse their impact on modern civilization. An attempt to find out, if various tribal cultures had any interaction with ayurvedic concept of brain, is made.

Key words -

**Daflas,
Noctes,
Gallong,
Miju,
Idu,
Singpo**

The tribal medicine would in a way be precursor to the prevalent form of medicine in a particular land, and if one wants to form a continuum in the understanding of various concepts and their evolution, one must identify various tribal cultures and analyse the concepts of medicine, prevalent in them.

In India for centuries indigenous system of medicine, which remained prevalent was Ayurvedic form. In an attempt to find out, if various tribal cultures had any interaction with Ayurvedic concept of brain, six tribes from Arunachal Pradesh were chosen.

It must be made clear that none of these six tribal languages had a script and so communication was quite difficult. These tribes resent any outside interference and have so far resisted all attempts by the Government at bringing them into the mainstream. Following observations are based on interviews with few people, who have watched them closely and have been associated with them from time to time. Tribes, chosen are miju [1], daflas [2], idu [3], gallong [4], singpo [5] and noctes [7].

Regarding medical care, there appears to be a uniform tribal pattern. The physician who treats is usually a priest. Amongst daflas, such priests are called 'najik nube'. Diseases are said to result from evil spirits possessing a particular person. These spirits are called wiyns and orums.

Because of the fear of the unknown, tribals have deified everything. Every small peak of a mountain, rivulet, tree or animal is supposed to contain a spirit. Each spirit has a different name, which keeps varying from tribe to tribe.

Treatment consists of diagnosing the particular spirit, that has taken possession of a patient. Elaborate rituals by priests

are required to diagnose a particular spirit. Common methods used amongst daflas are to look for changes in egg or chicken.

An egg is boiled and cut with a hair. Egg yolk is seen. All this is done along with certain incantations, that the priest recites. By observing changes in egg yolk, the priest diagnoses the nature of the spirit possessing that particular patient. Similar conclusions are drawn by sacrificing a chicken and observing changes in its liver.

Having arrived at a diagnosis, the priest decides about the nature of sacrifice. Sacrificial animals include bisons, fowls, dogs etc.

Amongst doctors, there are three categories in daflas. 'Nijik nube' is a priest, who treats ordinary diseases and looks for changes in egg and chicken liver. 'But nube' is a specialist, who is consulted for spirits that are difficult to control. 'Nyoki nube' is a priest, who serves as an intermediary between man and the spirits or wiyus and orums.

An attempt has been made to analyse the philological data on brain available in these six tribal languages.

MIJU [1]: Epilepsy does not seem to be recognised for there is no term, available for this. Headache has been recognised as 'Kunai'. Head is termed 'Kou' or 'tov', whereas brain is termed as 'net'. Heart has been termed as 'so'.

Dafias [2]: There is definite term for head i.e., 'Dumppo'. Skull has no equivalent in their language. For brain there is a definite term called 'atorr'. Amongst diseases, fever, dysentery, aches and madness have been described.

Indu [3]: Epilepsy again does not seem to be recognised, whereas headache is called 'ikuj'. For head in general, the term 'ikuya' is used. There is no equivalent term for brain though there are three for the heart i.e., 'hoso' 'ethro' or 'apobra'.

Gallong [4]: The principles of medical care are based on the same tribal culture. Headache has been clearly recognised as 'dumpi - dum - ci'. Skull is called a 'dumppo' and brain is termed as 'pini'. For head, again the term used is dumppo.

Singpo [5]: No clear idea about their knowledge regarding epilepsy could be obtained. Headache has been clearly recognised as 'bong mici-de'. Head is called 'bowong'. Brain has been termed as 'bowongnu'. Heart has been separately recognised as 'sintu'.

Noctes [7]: Here again, the basic principle of medical care is the same. A physician is again a priest and is called a 'somhata'. They clearly recognise headache as 'khosed' and epilepsy as 'wobu'. The term used for head is 'Khu' and heart is 'mon tu'. No word, equivalent to brain, could be found in their language.

Discussion

It is interesting to note the fear of the unknown amongst tribals. It is this instinct that had led them to deify every known entity around like mountains, rivers, rivulets, trees, creepers, animals, birds, snakes, stars, the sun and the moon etc. Among these, obviously, the sun and the moon, rivers and rivulets are good spirits whereas ferocious animals are bad ones. The good spirits must be kept happy and the bad ones ought to be propitiated, lest they create problems. Even a vestige of attempts at classifying diseases or even finding terms for them was not found in any one of them, but a serious attempt at diagnosing the spirit, possessing an individual was made. In Ayurvedic system, exogenous types of headache, epilepsy and practically every other disease have been described which means that the patient is possessed by a particular spirit. Again, for incurable diseases, propitiation of spirits has been

suggested, which obviously might be tribal influence over Ayurvedic system of medicine. It is however possible, that these could be parallel developments.

Another interesting fact that emerges is that there is a separate term for brain as it is understood today in most of these tribal cultures (Table - 1). After a detailed analysis of Caraka it was found that there was no definite term, which could be equated to brain. The only term, which could qualify for brain was found to be 'mustulunga'. It has been used only once in the whole text and has very vague connotations [8].

Table I - Philological Data on Tribal Languages

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Finding definite equivalent for 'brain' in tribal cultures becomes quite interesting in this context. No definite conclusions can be drawn at the moment but further studies are required to find its significance. It appears that non-Aryans knew about the 'brain' whereas Aryans did not. Further studies on a broader scale in other tribal cultures might yield important data.

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