

Traditional Healer in Gorkha Community in Assam: A Study

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Abstract

The Gorkha community in Assam has preserved a rich tradition of indigenous healing practices deeply rooted in spiritual beliefs and cultural rituals. This study explores the role and significance of traditional healers- *Dhami-Jhakri*, *Pandit*, *Jyotishi*, *Gossain Achhat* and other spiritual practitioners- within the Gorkha society. These healers are not merely involve themselves to cures of physical ailments but are revered as mediums of divine energy, entrusted with restoring balance between the body, spirit, and cosmic forces. The healing practices often involve diagnosing *graha-dosha* (planetary afflictions) interpreting omens, conducting rituals like *Achhat* (sacred rice offerings), and invoking spiritual powers to dispel malevolent forces. Through ethnographic observation and community interviews, the study reveals how faith healing continuous to thrive alongside modern medicine, serving not only health-related needs but also guiding moral and spiritual life. The research highlights the resilience of traditional knowledge and its ongoing relevance in the socio-cultural fabric of the Gorkha Community in Assam.

Keyword: Beliefs, Cosmic power, Culture, Divine energy, Healer, Tradition, Sacrifice.

1.0 Introduction

The indigenous system of healing reaches back to time immemorial. It requires and complex apprenticeship. This indigenous system of diagnosis, treatment, and healing has evolved in a process of trial-and -error, empirical observation, and experimental procedures over the millennia, and is an on-going process, not dissimilar to modern medicine. Indigenous diagnosis and treatment use the natural resources at their disposal as well as the attitude, values, beliefs, and ritual in their healing technology. The traditional Nepali concept of disease does not include the germ theory. The Nepalese see illness as external to the body, caused by malevolent powers that make an unwelcome entry into the body which disturbs the normal balance creating a host of sickness. The person suffering does not know for sure what the ailment is all about and how soon it could be done away with. Because the sickness has come from an external source, through external agents, the solution to problems must be found in the cosmic system, in the indigenous cosmology that controls the breadth of our movement and our relationship with the cosmic order. It is believed that the essence of the body has been captured by some power causing disease, destruction, and often, death. It is the healer who will try to release the soul or balance the system and make it function normally.

2.0 Limitation of the Study:

In the context of Gorkhali culture, the expression “traditional healing” may include several methods that

are applied by experts to cure the patients. They may include: i. *Dhami/Jhakri*, traditional *tantric* shamanic healers; ii. *Vaidya/Jyotishi/Astrologist*; iii. Local priest, *ayurvedic* expert; iv. Simple use of herbs, *jadi-buti*. For the purpose of this article, though, the writer will focus on the first category with some references to the rest.

3.0 Objectives of the study:

The main objectives of the paper are:

1. To explore the role of traditional healers in the Gorkha society.
2. To study how the tractional healing practices relevant to the present context of the society.
3. To investigate the belief system on traditional healing within the community.

4.0 Methodology:

to study the present topic adopts a qualitative research approach rooted in ethnographic methods to understand the complex spiritual and cultural dimensions of traditional healing practices. The study based on primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through participants observation and in-depth interviews with elder member of the society along with Dhami-Jhakri, Jyotishi, and Gossain Achhat etc. these interactions helped in capturing the lived experiences and belief systems surrounding divine energy and healing rituals. The secondary sources such as local folklore, previous research studies were also reviewed to provide a broader cultural and historical context.

5.0 Traditional therapies

5.0.1 Faith Healing:

It is found traditional healers (*Dhami- Jhakri, Pandit- Lama- Pujari- Gubhaju, Jyotishi and Gosai Achhat*) are still highly respected in Gorkha society and many people go to these healers for the primary treatment of diseases and disorders before going to the doctors or while they get weary from going to doctors. The healers help the diseased person by providing herbal medicines with which they are quite familiar. All these therapies were culturally intertwined. However, traditional knowledge and the plants for folk therapies are gradually being endangered due to changing lifestyles, perceptions, social transformations, and acculturation.

5.0.2 Basic Principle:

The perspective of this paper is the theory of the Veda, more specifically the *Atharva Veda* and its *tantra*. *Atharva* was the name of a seer of early times. The spiritual healing system rests on the following major theoretical premises:

- **Theory of Cosmic Unity:** A healer has his own cosmos in which man is a part of the great system.
- **Human Vulnerability:** Man is a weak being; he has to surrender to the striking force, he has to follow what the experts recommend;
- **Human destiny:** A way to reconcile with the loss; accepting it as a result of what has been done unknowingly, previously;
- **Recognition of the Unseen Power:** Veneration of the Power of the unseen;
- **God-Human relation:** Man speaks for God; God helps him with care.

In the final analysis healing rests on the principle that balancing the influence of the unseen with the seen world is essential to maintain order against chaos that may lead to human sickness and other problems including losses of all kinds and dimensions.

5.0.3 Phukphak – Jharne: In Assamese Nepali community *phakpuk garne*, blowing of air into the body of a patients or *Jharne*, who chanting mantras by blowing air into the patients' body. It is very popular within Nepali community that diseases like jaundice, headache, and sprain of any part of the body will be cured by the *phakphuk* or *jharne*. These people also have the knowledge how to please God through mantras. According to the diseases he will provide *tantra*¹². A *mantra*'s energy can be preserved in the *yantra* like a storage of energy.

5.0.4 Shamanistic System (faith Healing System) in Gorkha Community in Assam:

In the traditional health belief system of the Gorkha community particularly among the Gorkhas, the concept of disease differs fundamentally from the biomedical model based on germ theory. Instead, illness is often attributed to the intrusion of malevolent or supernatural forces into the human body. These disruptive forces are believed to cause not only physical ailments but also psychological distress, misfortune, and even death. The role of the healer, in this worldview, is to identify the spiritual cause of the disorder and restore balance-either by releasing the trapped soul or by neutralizing the harmful influence- thereby re-establishing normal bodily and spiritual function.

This faith healing system, commonly referred to as the shamanistic system, relies on spiritual practices, rituals, and intense devotion rather than on modern clinical methods. It is essentially a form of treatment that draws on prayer, ritual performance, and unshakable belief in divine or cosmic intervention. These healing methods are usually excluded from the formal healthcare infrastructure but remain deeply embedded in local cultural and continue to be widely practiced and respected.

Within the Gorkha community in Assam faith healers are generally categorized into four major types, each with distinct roles and ritual functions:

1. *Dhami-Jhakri* (Spiritual mediums and shamans),
2. *Pandit-Lama_Pujari-Gubhaju* (Priests of Hindu-Buddhist traditions)
3. *Jyotishi* (astrologers and cosmic interpreters),
4. *Gosai Achhat* (spiritually possessed mediums who offer divine messages)

These healers address a variety of afflictions caused by specific spiritual agents, which, according to community belief, include:

- *Lagu*: Invisible, mobile forces or spirits that enter the body and disrupt health;
- *Vayu*: bad or impure air thought to carry malevolent energy;
- *Bhut-pret*: ghosts or restless spirits of the dead.
- *Grahadosha*: afflictions caused by unfavourable planetary alignments and celestial influences.

5.0.5 Dhami-Jhakri: The Shamans as Spiritual Warriors:

Among the most prominent traditional healers are the *Dhami-Jhakris*, who serve as spiritual intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds. These shamans are believed to possess the extraordinary ability to diagnose and treat illness caused by spiritual forces. Various titles for these healers exist across communities-*Amchi*, *Ojha*, *Deuba*, *Deuma*, *Bijuwa*, *Fedangma*, and *Guruba*- but they all perform similar roles with deep cultural significance.

According to local belief, many illnesses stem from attacks by spirits, witches (*Boksis*), or evil energies. The *Dhami* begins the healing process by entering into a state of meditation known as *chinta basne*, a trance-inducing pose that helps him focus and communicate with divine beings. By invoking specific deities and ancestral spirits, the *Dhami* gradually enters a deeper trance state, becoming an instrument through which spiritual power flows. In this heightened state of consciousness by observers-he identifies the type of afflicting spirit and the ritual cure required.

The healing ceremony is vibrant and theatrical. Dressed in colourful garments, the *Dhami* performs a ritual involving drumming *Dhyangro* (a kind of drum with handle), chanting, dancing, and singing-each component designed to engage the spirit world. A vital instrument in some cases is the spirit bone, traditionally a human femur, which the *dhami* may use to draw out the spirit from the patient's body. In severe cases of possession or curses caused by black magic, the healer engages in intense spiritual combat to overpower the negative force. Once the evil is subdued or banished, the afflicted individual is believed to be released from suffering.

During the trance, it is not uncommon for spectators or community members to ask questions about their personal problems. The *Dhami*, acting as a spiritual medium, responds with insights believed to be drawn from divine sources. The ritual often concludes with a sacrificial offering, typically, a rooster or a black goat, especially in complex or severe cases. This act is believed to appease the spirits and ensure the complete recovery of the patient.

5.0.6 Gosai Achhat: *Gosai Achhat* is a deeply rooted spiritual healing practice prevalent in Gorkha community. This ritual involves a person, often referred to as a medium or spiritual devotee, who performs a sacred act of invocation directed towards local deities- both gods and goddesses- through prayer, chanting, and ritual gestures. The belief central to this practice is that, through intense devotion and ritual purity, the divine entities descend and temporarily inhabit the body of the devotee or medium. Once the divine presence is believed to have entered the individual, he or she enters a trance-like state. In this altered state of consciousness, the person is seen as no longer speaking or acting on their own, but as a vessel through which the gods communicate. During this period, the medium begins to reveal insights about the afflicted person's condition, recounting aspects of their past, commenting on their present situation, and often providing prophetic glimpses into their future. These revelations are accepted by the community with great reverence, as they are considered divine guidance rather than mere guesswork.

Key component of the ritual is the use of *achhat*, which refers to sacred grains of rice. These grains, once blessed during the trance, are given to the sick individual either to consume or to place under their pillow or bedsheet. The *achhat* is believed to carry the divine energy or blessings needed to protect the person from further harm, cure their illness, or ward off evil spirits that may be causing their suffering. Thus, *Gosai Achhat* serves as both a diagnostic and healing rituals, blending spiritual insight, cultural belief, and traditional practice into a unique form of community-based health care.

5.0.7 Pandit- Lama- Gubhaju- Pujari: They are the priest of the different ethnic and religious group in Nepal. *Gubhaju* are the priest of Buddhist Newar, Lamas are the priest at Buddhist monasteries. *Pandit* and *pujari* are the Hindu priest. Priest is responsible for religious rituals in temples and homes and is a person authorized after rigorous training in *Vedas*. They all diagnose and cure illness through prayers and rituals. They perform *havans* to please the God and fulfill the wishes of the host. They also try their luck in issues such as property loss, diseases, friendship, marriage and family conflict.

5.0.8 Jyotishi: one of the primary contributions of the *Jyotishi* in healing is through astrological diagnosis. When a person falls ill or faces persistent misfortunes, families often consult the *Jyotishi* to determine the cosmic causes behind the suffering. By analyzing the individual's birth chart (Janma Patri), planetary positions, and current astrological periods (*dasha* and *antar-dasha*), the *Jyotishi* identifies imbalances believed to be causing physical ailments or emotional distress. This is based on the understanding that celestial bodies influence human fate, health, and behavior.

In addition to diagnosis, *Jyotishis* prescribe various remedies rooted in Vedic and tantric traditions, these include wearing specific gemstones, performing *pujas* (ritual worship), reciting mantras, observing fasts (*Vrata*), or offering donations (*daan*) to counteract negative planetary influences. In many rural areas, people also believe that the *Jyotishi* can foresee impending dangers, identify spiritual afflictions such as *graha dosha* (planetary affliction), and suggest ways to avert them, thereby acting as a preventive healer. The *Jyotishi* also plays a crucial role in mental and emotional healing. When families suffer from prolonged grief, childlessness, frequent illness, or misfortune, the *gyotishi* provides reassurance and spiritual solutions. His presence and guidance offer psychological comfort, helping people feel protected and helpful through divine connection and ritual practices.

Further, *Jyotishis* often work in collaboration with traditional healers, shamans (*Dhamis*), and herbal medicine practitioners. Their combined efforts form a holistic system of indigenous healing in which *Jyotishi*'s predictions guide when and how to perform healing rituals, ceremonies, or herbal treatments.

6.0 Conclusion

The study concludes that traditional healers in the Gorkha community of Assam – such as *Dhami-Jhakri*, *Jyotishi*, and *Gossain* – hold a vital place in the spiritual and cultural framework of the society. Their practices, deeply rooted in the belief in divine energy, continue to guide individuals in matters of health, destiny, and spiritual well-being. Rituals involving *Achhat* and remedies for *graha-dosha* (planetary disturbances), which are believed to influence a person's health and fortune, reflect a rich tapestry of symbolic healing that transcends physical treatment and addresses emotional and cosmic imbalances. These healers are seen not just as medical figures but as spiritual intermediaries who maintain harmony between the natural and supernatural realms. Due to the cultural beliefs people are psychologically convinced that, if they are treated by the traditional healers, they get well soon. People and culture of rural societies has created a deep faith in traditional healers. Now people believe that traditional healers treat the sick people only psychologically. 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. Originating from ancient beliefs in nature worship, soul immortality, and ancestral reverence, traditional healing viewed as effective due to strong psychological and cultural faith. Despite lacking formal qualifications, these healers are trusted for their accessibility, affordability, and deep cultural significance passed down through generations. Despite the encroachment of modern healthcare systems, the trust and relevance placed in traditional healers remain strong, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. Therefore, preserving and documenting their knowledge is crucial for safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of the Gorkha community in Assam. On the one hand there is urgent necessity of preserving and documenting the endangered traditional practices of the community, on the other hand it is the need of the hour to eradicate superstitions from the society. But the education, science and technology are not being able to make the society free from the bondage of superstitions and black magic. People still believe in witches, *bokshi*, *daini* etc. and punished them to death. Even educated people are often reported to have taken part in humiliating the *bokshis*. If this is the case, we will have to wait for many decades to erase the *bokshi* mentality from average Nepali's mind and attitude.

Glossary

1. The word 'Gorkha' in general denotes the Gorkha or Gorkhali is used which implies a composite nat

ionality of generic category comprising a large number of communities, a cluster of endogamous groups belonging mainly to the Caucasian group (*Aryan*) and the Mongoloid stock of human races speaking difference languages and dialects of the Indo European as well as the Sino- Tibetan language family. However, for the bulk of this communities and group, is a branch of the Nepali language family, used the Nepali language as mother tongue and for others it is their lingua Franca.

2. Vaidya is the Ayurvedic Doctor
3. *Dhami and Jhakri* are among the popular traditional healers within the Gorkha community.
4. *Amchi* are also well known traditional healers of Gorkha.
5. *Ojha*- Gorkha spiritual healer.
6. *Deuba*- Gorkha spiritual healer.
7. *Deuma*- Gorkha spiritual healer.
8. *Bijuwa*- Gorkha spiritual healer.
9. *Fedangma*- Gorkha spiritual healer.
10. *Guruba*- Gorkha spiritual healer.
11. *Bokshi*- witch.
12. *Tantra - Mantra* and *Yantra* are the two divisions of an ancient sacred science. *Mantra* interconnects with *yantra*, and vice- versa. *Yantra* is a presentation of a mantra in a graphic or other substantial form like an icon. A *mantra's* energy can be preserved in the *yantra* as it is a battery.

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