

Bejuni and Dishari: Traditional Healers in Desia- A Case Study of Indigenous Healing Practices

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Introduction

The Desia community, one of the largest tribal groups in Odisha, has a rich heritage of indigenous healing practices, deeply intertwined with their cultural beliefs and traditions. These practices, passed down through generations, are pivotal in maintaining the community's health, especially in rural and remote areas. The traditional healers, known as **Bejuni** and **Dishari**, serve as the primary healthcare providers for the Desia tribe, often functioning in roles that blend medicine with spiritual and ritualistic practices.

Significance of Study

This study highlights the essential roles of Bejuni and Dishari healers in the socio-cultural and medical landscape of the Desia community. Their practices are integral not only for physical health but also for social cohesion and the continuation of cultural identity. Despite the growing presence of modern healthcare facilities, the influence of these traditional healers continues to be strong, particularly in rural settings where access to formal healthcare may be limited.

Objectives

1. To identify and describe the roles of **Bejuni** and **Dishari** within the Desia community.
2. To explore the methods and healing techniques they employ, which include both herbal remedies and spiritual practices.
3. To understand how these traditional healers influence community health and wellness, both in terms of treatment and preventive care.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach, primarily through ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, case studies, and observation. Data was collected from three Desia villages in Bissumkatak tehsils of Rayagada district, allowing for a detailed exploration of both **Bejuni** and **Dishari** roles, and how their practices are perceived and utilized by the community. Area and People

Odisha is a land of 62 different tribal communities among which the Kandha top the list in numerical preponderance. Considering the stages of economic development the Kandha are divided into several sub-sections such as- Kutia Kandha, Dongaria Kandha, Jharia Kandha and Desia Kandha. Bissamcuttack is a Tehsil in Rayagada District of Odisha, India. Bissamcuttack Tehsil Head Quarters is Bissamcuttack town. It is located 46 KM towards North from District head quarters Rayagada and 301 KM from State capital Bhubaneswar towards East. Field work has been carried out in three Desia villages; Bariguda, Hadsinkula and Dedipada; fall under Bissamcuttack Tehsil. Bariguda village has major population of Desia Kandha Tribe. Other than Desia, Sundi, Gauda, Mali, Telanga, Dombo, Paika, Sahu and Brahmin are also living. In Hadsinkulavillage number of households is 122. All are Desia households except five sundi households. Both villages have close proximity of Anganwadi centre, ANM,Panchayat office, railway station, post office, market, Utkal Gramin bank, taxi stand, Primary school, middle school, primary English medium school and Degree College. They are either in village or one km away and situated in Chatikana. Block office, police station and hospital are one km away in Bissumkatak. In Dedipada institutions as Primary school are running in the village. Middle school and high school, ANM, Seed sale centre, post office and gram panchayat office are minimumtwo km away and situated in Dukum. Intermediate collage and Degree College, Utkal Gramin Bank, Veterinary hospital, Police station, and Railway station are fifteen km away from the village and situated in Bissumkatak. Railway connectivity

has a manifold impact on Desia Kandha tribe in exposed setting from various perspectives like infrastructure, education, healthcare etc. It has also helped in better implementation of government's welfare schemes and various initiatives. Village has been benefited by various government programmes, IAY house, solar light, OTLEPⁱ, loan to the beneficiaries of different SHGs, Mamta Yojna, Mobile Health care unit, etc. While in unexposed setting the impact of railway connectivity and implementation of government schemes is not as good as in exposed setting. Literacy percentage is clearly seen in above table in both the settings.

Ethnographic Profile of Desia Community

The Desia tribe is primarily located in the Rayagada, Kandhamal, Koraput and Kalahandi district of Odisha, India. Their villages are situated in remote, forested areas, with limited access to modern healthcare services. The community is primarily agricultural, with a deep connection to nature and traditional rituals that guide their daily lives. The tribe consists of various subgroups, each with unique practices, yet united by a shared cultural and spiritual framework. The socio-economic status of the Desia people is often low, with most of the population relying on subsistence farming.

The Desia community is deeply rooted in its traditional belief systems, which include animistic practices, reverence for nature, and a strong reliance on spiritual beliefs for both healing and daily life. Healing practices are often based on the belief that illness is caused by spiritual imbalances, curses, or the wrath of deities. These spiritual and cultural practices shape the understanding of health and healing within the community, creating a unique system of healthcare that blends medicinal plants, ritualistic treatments, and divine intervention.

Bejuni and Dishari: Identity and Roles

Bejuni: The Bejuni is a female healer, revered for her expertise in herbal medicine, midwifery, and spiritual healing. Bejuni plays a central role in the community's health and wellness by treating a range of ailments through natural remedies derived from plants and other organic materials. In addition to physical treatments, Bejuni also engages in spiritual healing, offering rituals and prayers to appease deities and spirits believed to be responsible for illnesses.

Dishari: The Dishari, often a male healer, is responsible for diagnosing illnesses, prescribing remedies, and conducting rituals to treat physical and spiritual ailments. The Dishari's role is more multifaceted than that of the Bejuni, as he not only serves as a healer but also as a spiritual leader within the community. His knowledge of

medicinal plants and healing rituals is passed down through generations, often through apprenticeships and spiritual guidance.

Traditional and folk medicine practices are deeply intertwined with the use of mantras chanted by healers during treatments. This ritualistic chanting is often accompanied by a process of self-purification undertaken by the healer before administering any remedy. A key feature of these healing practices is the use of specific plant parts, with each remedy typically involving a single plant component but multiple preparation methods. Interestingly, many remedies incorporate different parts of the same plant species to address a variety of ailments:-

- **Andrographis paniculata** (Local name: *Bhuin Nimba*): The paste of the leaves is applied to treat poison bites, while the powdered leaves are used for managing diabetes.
- **Ricinus communis** (Local name: *Arandi*): The juice extracted from the leaves helps to stimulate milk secretion, and the oil derived from the seeds is used to alleviate stomachaches.
- **Azadirachta indica** (Local name: *Nimba*): The leaf paste is effective against smallpox, rheumatism, and various skin diseases, while the young twigs serve as a natural toothbrush.
- **Ficus benghalensis** (Local name: *Dimiri*): The stem latex is applied to heal cracked heels, and the young twigs are also used as a toothbrush.
- **Andrographis paniculata** (Local name: *Bhuin Nimba*): Used both for managing diabetes and for treating scorpion bites.
- **Trianthema portulacastrum** (Local name: *Bishkhapra*): This plant is used to treat asthma and constipation.
- **Moringa oleifera** (Local name: *Munga* or *Drumstick Tree*): This versatile plant addresses a wide range of health issues, including body heat regulation, indigestion, eye diseases, and it is also believed to improve sperm production.
- **Sida veronicaefolia** (Local name: *Nagabala*): Known for its use in treating snake bites.
- **Aerva lanata** (Local name: *Kurandaka*): This plant is commonly used for treating coughs, sore throats, and wounds.

- **Gymnema sylvestre** (Local name: *Gudmari*): Effective for diabetes management and treating poison bites.
- **Achyranthes aspera** (Local name: *Uttareni* or *Apamary*): The dried roots of this plant are used to treat snake and scorpion bites. According to the *Atharvaveda*, it is believed that *Apamarg* can eliminate chronic diseases, curses, black magic, and other forms of witchcraft.

In addition to plant-based ingredients, these traditional remedies often include non-plant substances such as water, salt, and honey, which play vital roles in preparation and application. The intricate blend of these plant-based treatments with cultural and spiritual beliefs highlights the depth and richness of indigenous healing systems.

Desia Traditional Healers



Bejuni (Hadsinkula Village)



Dishari (Dedipada Village)

Knowledge Transmission

Both Bejuni and Dishari acquire their knowledge through oral traditions and apprenticeships, learning from senior practitioners within the community. In some cases, this knowledge is considered to be a divine calling, passed down through spiritual means. The transmission of healing knowledge is typically a lifelong process, deeply embedded in the community's cultural fabric. However, the transmission of knowledge has faced challenges in recent times due to younger generations seeking education outside the community, leading to a decline in the number of traditional healers.

Healing Practices and Techniques

Herbal Medicine

Herbal remedies form the foundation of traditional healing practices in the Desia community. Plants like *Andrographis paniculata* (Bhuin Nimba), *Ricinus communis* (Arandi), and *Azadirachta indica* (Neem) are commonly used to treat various ailments. These plants are prepared in various forms, such as leaf pastes, powders, and juices, and are often combined with other natural ingredients such as honey or salt for greater efficacy.

Ritualistic Healing

Rituals play a crucial role in the healing process for both Bejuni and Dishari. These may include the chanting of mantras, the use of sacred objects (such as coconut, parrot feathers, and rice), and the invocation of deities and spirits. The rituals are designed not only to cure illness but also to restore spiritual harmony. In many cases, offerings like chickens or eggs are made as part of these healing ceremonies.

Community Engagement

The role of Bejuni and Dishari extends beyond treatment – they are also active participants in the preventive healthcare of their communities. They often offer advice on maintaining health through proper diet, lifestyle choices, and protection from negative spiritual forces. Bejuni, in particular, plays a central role in childbirth and maternal care, ensuring the health of mothers and babies during and after pregnancy.

Challenges and Transformation

Modernization and Western Medicine: The introduction of Western medicine and government healthcare programs has had a significant impact on traditional

healing practices. Although many community members continue to consult traditional healers, there is a growing trend toward seeking medical care in formal healthcare settings, especially for more serious or urgent ailments. Modern healthcare services have expanded, but they remain inaccessible for many living in remote villages.

Declining Knowledge Transmission: As the younger generations move away from the villages in search of education and employment, there has been a decline in the transmission of traditional knowledge. This poses a significant threat to the survival of indigenous healing practices, as fewer young people are willing to follow in the footsteps of Bejuni and Dishari healers.

Integration with Contemporary Healthcare: While traditional healers continue to hold an important role, there is potential for collaboration with modern healthcare systems. Integrating traditional and modern medicine could lead to better health outcomes for the Desia community. However, this integration requires mutual respect and understanding between the practitioners of both systems.

Findings

The roles of Bejuni and Dishari are critical to the Desia community's health and social structure. Despite the challenges posed by modernization and urbanization, these traditional healers continue to provide essential healthcare, combining herbal remedies and ritualistic practices with spiritual guidance. To ensure the preservation of this valuable knowledge, there is an urgent need for documentation and formal recognition of traditional healing practices. Efforts should be made to train younger generations in the arts of traditional healing to keep these practices alive. Collaboration between traditional healers and modern healthcare systems could help bridge the gap and improve access to healthcare for rural communities.

Governments and healthcare policymakers should consider integrating traditional healing practices into community health initiatives. This could involve providing platforms for traditional healers to collaborate with formal healthcare providers, recognizing their role in public health, and ensuring that their knowledge is preserved for future generations.

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¹OTLEP (Odisha Tribal Livelihood and empowerment programme)