

Caring and Curing: A Study on the Health Care System and Its Reflection among the Life of the Manipuris in Sylhet Region

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This paper attempts to figure out the healthcare system among the Manipuris an ethnic minority living in greater Sylhet area of Bangladesh. In the present day world, different societies have various healthcare preferences. From among these, people choose options for treatment which are compatible with their religion, beliefs, rituals, economic conditions etc. This paper tried to provide a brief description on the caring and curing processes the Manipuris follow at different point/moments of their life cycle which mirror their cultural pattern. By analyzing the healthcare system, this article specifically focused on the folk healing procedure/practices of the Manipuris in Bangladesh.

Introduction

From time immemorial, the land that constitutes Bangladesh today has accommodated people of different caste, creed and color from different regions of the world. Though majority of its population is homogenous in nature i.e. Bangla speaking Muslims of same racial stock, a small segment of the population has different culture and racial diversity. Manipuris are one of such ethnic community that from historical past has been contributing in enriching the Bangladesh society and culture. Their healthcare system is as fascinating as their colorful life pattern. In any society, different alternative preferences for healthcare and healing could be traced depending on the cultural and economic situations of the society. From these alternatives, people choose their options for caring¹ and curing² of health and illness.

Manipuris practice their indigenous treatment process and personal hygiene care in their community side by side along with modern treatment, but the indigenous treatment process that they follow is heavily influenced by their cultural pattern.

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1 Caring is the process of looking after someone, especially because they are weak or ill (Longman 1995:190)

2 Curing is the process of treatment where someone who is ill well again (Longman 1995:332)

This article is an outcome of the research work that had been carried out by the author among the Manipuri community known as *Meiteis* in Sylhet district of Bangladesh. *Meiteis* are one of the branches of larger Manipuri community which has three groups namely *Meitei*, *Bishnupria* and *Pangan* (Muslim Manipuri). Members of all these three groups assert their claim as to be part of the Manipuri community. *Meiteis* claim that they are the original Manipuris who follow the unique Manipuri culture and tradition. Their claim has been supported by different ethnologists who suggested that among all the three groups mentioned above, the *Meiteis* are the original Manipuri ethnic group (Ahmed and Singh, 2007). As such, the term '*Meitei*' has been used as synonym to the term 'Manipuri' in this article.

The Manipuris of Bangladesh had migrated from the eastern state of India called 'Manipur' during seven years war between Manipur and Burma, from 1819 to 1826. This period in the history of Manipuris, is known as *Chohi Taret Khuntakopa* or seven years devastation. During this period large scale exodus of Manipuris from their original habitat in Manipur state of India to neighboring territory including the territory which constitute Bangladesh today occurred. In Bangladesh, these migrated Manipuris settled down in different locations of the country for example in Dacca City, Mymensing, Comilla and Sylhet. But largest segments of Manipuri population took shelter in an around Sylhet region (Sheram 1993:5).

The study population *Meiteis* belongs to *Kuku-Chin* group of Tibbeto-Burmese section of Mongoloid group. By religion, they are Hindu and follow Vaishnavism along with their early religious beliefs. *Meiteis* have their own dialect known as '*Meiteilon*'. They are hard working people and many of the *Meiteis* are technically skilled persons in occupation such as jewelers, carpenter, motor mechanics etc. Their marriage system is 'exogamous' and they have patriarchal family pattern. *Meiteis* eat rice, fish, vegetables etc. But because of their religious restriction, they never eat meat. *Meiteis* have rich cultural heritage and are rich in their traditional dances and games.

Like their way of life, *Meiteis* also have traditional health care and healing system, which, in spite of the advent of modern medicine and treatment still is prevalent among the *Meiteis* and is fascinating in nature. This paper is an attempt to analyze the different options of healthcare system prevailing among the *Meiteis* and also is an attempt to evaluate the health seeking behavior of the Manipuris in Bangladesh.

Methodology

In preparing this paper, several techniques of data collection were adopted. During the long field study, in-depth observations and interviews, FGDs, survey were carried out among the study population. Information were gathered from key informants such as *Maibas/ Maibis* the priest cum medicine men and women

Along side, a quantitative analysis was also carried out to assess the socio-economic condition of the *Meiteis*. For the purpose, a short survey on household size, literary condition, occupational and marriage profile etc were collected. In total 40 sample respondents were randomly selected for interview. Of the total selected respondents, 22 were males and the rest 18 were females. Secondary sources were also consulted and reviewed to get an idea about the historical background of the *Meiteis*.

Healthcare Options among the *Meiteis*: An Overview

It has already been mentioned earlier that the *Meiteis* have different options of healthcare which are influenced by their cultural heritage. These different healthcare processes could be analyzed with the help of the Kleinman's model. Kleinman has suggested three interrelated sectors of healthcare options which are: (a) **the popular sector**, (b) **the folk sector** and (c) **the professional sector** (Helman 1994: 64)

The popular sector:

The popular sector includes all therapeutic options and advices that people utilize without any payment and without consulting either folk healer or medical practitioner. Among these options are: self treatment or self medications, advice or treatment given by a "...relatives, friends, neighbors or workmates healing and mutual care activities ...or consultation with another lay person who has special experience of a particular disorder, or treatment of a physical state" (Helman 1994:65). The main providers of general healthcare among the *Meiteis* are normally the family members, friends, neighbors, relatives and others. For example, in certain instances, the popular belief among the *Meiteis* prohibits intake of certain foods during pregnancy, lactation and menstruation. They believe that during lactation the supply of breast milk could be increased by sufficient intake of liquid foods and at the same time by avoidance of any kind of spicy foods. For generations, the *Meiteis* have also been using certain herbal plants such as, leaves of Arum, Tulsi, Nim etc as medicinal plants.. And for healthy health, they also take honey. They believe that special prayers, rituals etc can cure illness. *Meiteis* also take amulets and religious medallions to avoid 'bad luck' including unexpected illness and to attract 'good luck' and good health. Without consulting any medical practitioner, they also take allopathic medicine available over the counter in case of treating minor ailments such as common cold, cough, and fever and so on.

The folk sector:

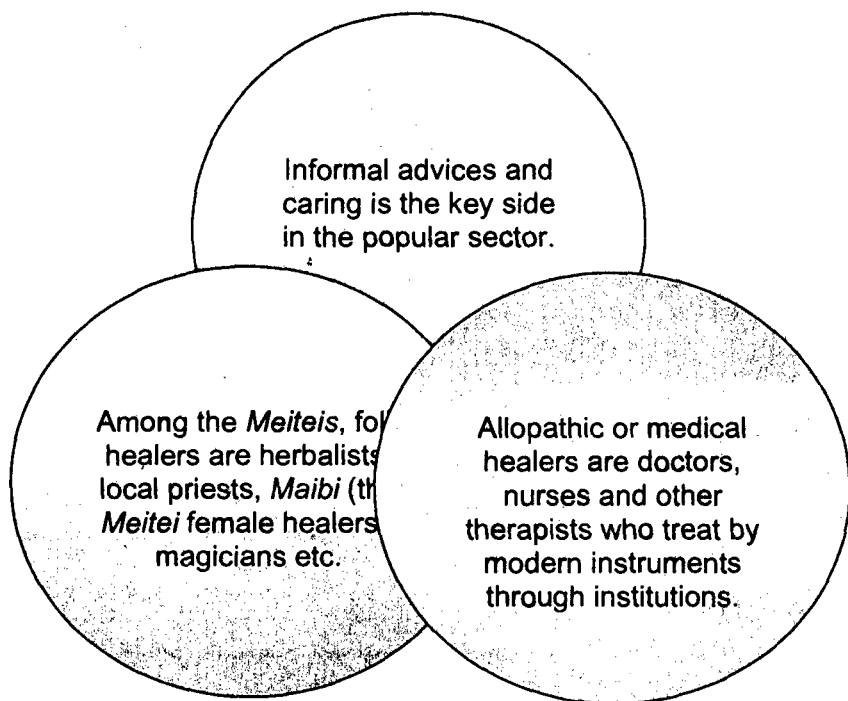
Folk treatment is also a common and popular sector of health care options among the *Meiteis*. Through folk treatment the *Meiteis* seek relief from different diseases. Among them, childbirth is performed by *Chabokpi Maibis* (Traditional Birth Attendants) who are community midwives or nurses. *Chabokpi Maibis* also supervise different care; perform important rituals during pregnancy and birth.

Maibas (Male healers among *Meiteis*) also practice different healing procedures in their community. *Puk-Shuba* (one type of healing process among them) healers, worshipers, spiritual healers and herbal practitioners all these categories of folk healers, practice to heal people from illness. Some of them also have chambers for treatment. To counter the black magic, there are also white magicians in their community. These folk healers have little formal training but they accumulate knowledge of folk medicine and treatment procedure by an older healer or another person who are experienced in folk treatment. Folk healers also consult their holy scripts, popular books and much of the traditional medical literature (or folk literature) as references.

The professional sector:

Meiteis also take allopathic treatment or modern scientific medical treatment, where healers are doctors, nurses, midwives (who are paramedical professional), therapists etc and healing institutions are government hospitals, private clinics etc.

From the above discussion, three options of healthcare system among the *Meiteis* are available and could be presented diagrammatically. As follows.



Different sectors of Healthcare among the *Meiteis*, which are co-

Among different options of healthcare, let us discuss folk sector as an icon.

Treatment by folk system

There are different kinds of folk healings among the *Meiteis*. For instance, '*Puk-Shuba*', 'White magic', 'herbal' '*Kabiraji*' etc. This paper dealt with these different folk healing processes which exist among the *Meiteis*. It is now difficult to locate authentic spiritual healers among them. Though, some healers are still continuing the practice of these spiritual healings but with great difficulties. In the following passage a brief description of some of the traditional healing process is presented.

Rules and treatment in *Maiba* system

Maibas are the male healers among the *Meiteis*, who are very often also been called as *Amaiba*. Usually *Maibas* follow different types of treatment approach dictated by different rules and customs for providing better services to the patients. For a *Maiba*, it is indeed necessary to keep him clean and he should be well versed in his religious set of guidelines. According to the Manipuri religious customs, the first and foremost duty of a *Maiba* or even for a person who belong in *Meitei* culture is to be an early riser from bed and should take his shower to become clean. After taking shower, a *Maiba*, has to worship his God and goddess. For offering prayer to '*Tulsi*' goddess, they put a China rose in a vase and ignite the candle in another vase. A *Maiba* must perform this worship for purifying himself and keep himself worthy of the profession. A *Maiba* also spent quite a long time in meditation to achieve the divine power for treating patients. One has to study for long under the guidance of a '*Guru*' or teacher from the early age to learn the treatment process for establishing himself as a learned *Maiba*. It is still a prevalent belief that, the nearer a learners can come to the '*Guru*' the better they learn about the treatment process. At the end of the learning, an apprentice has to prove his ability and attainment before his teacher. If he could satisfy his '*Guru*' then only his teacher would certify him as a *Maiba*. If a learner could accomplish his teacher's recognition only then he is allowed to treat patients as a *Maiba*. In Manipuri community, many of the healing processes are so rigorous especially '*Puk-Shuba*' healing process, many learners quit when they become unable to adapt with the rigorous learning process in *Guru*'s house. Sometimes, the learners fell sick and consequently could die a premature death. The advent of modern medicine and expansion of allopathic medical care in the nook and corner of rural Bangladesh today, the importance and role of experts *Maibas* among the *Meiteis* is gradually diminishing. It is now difficult to locate an expert *Maiba* among them, but still their very presence among the *Manipuris* carry deep, social and religious meaning.

An expert *Maiba* has to have a perfect conception about human body and soul. In the folk healing process, the *Maibas* try to find out the causes behind the diseases and with the help of treatment they try to relieve the patient from illness. *Maibas* try to heal different kinds of ailments. Even they provide treatment to a

patient believed to be under the spell of black magic. In the treatment of some ailments, *Maibas* use oil and purified water as sacred elements for healing patients. They also offer 'Tabiz' (amulet), 'Koboj', 'Maduli' etc to a patient.

During the study, the scribe could identify three types of treatment procedure in the *Maiba* System among the *Meiteis*, these are as follows:

- Treatment by feeling the nerves (*Puk-Shuba*).
- Treatment by herbal medicine.
- Treatment by worshipping and rituals.

In the following passages the above treatment procedures have briefly been narrated which are basically interrelated.

Treatment by feeling the nerves (*Puk-Shuba*)

'*Puk-Shuba*' is a folk treatment process among the *Meitei* population. It is a kind of massage therapy of bowel and nerves around the navel in human body. This treatment procedure is also named as '*Khutly Paiba*'. A section of male healers among the *Meiteis* known as *Maiba* perform this type of healing process.

In this treatment process, *Maibas* claim that they could diagnose the disease of a patient just by feeling the ill person's nerves only, and by the same way, a *Maiba* also could appease the disease. This kind of exquisite performance is possible only for the expert *Maibas* who gathered enormous experiences on treatment and medicine and also the processes. Even, by checking the nerves, an expert *Maiba* could determine the probable time of death of an ill person. When a *Maiba* fails to feel any pulse in any place of the body of an ailed person, he seeks for pulse very close to the navel. According to '*Puk-Shuba*' treatment procedure, the only pulse that remains alive even when all other pulses fail is the pulse nearer to the navel and by treating the same even a dying patient could be recovered. For healing a patient, *Maibas* put worm pressure on the nerve near the navel to ensure proper flow of blood throughout the patient's body.

Also a *Maiba* has to perform some religious rituals for a dying patient. By sitting beside the dying person, a *Maiba* speaks different verses loudly from their holy books and utter the holy name '*Hori*'. He stays beside the dying person till his death. In the funeral ceremony also, *Maibas* perform various rituals.

Treatment by herbal medicine

Some *Maibas* also cure patients by herbal medicine. As such the *Maibas* who treats patients with herbal medicine often is also called Kabiraj. For healing a patient, this type of *Maiba* practicing Kabiraji, extracts out the liquid from different types of leafy plants and mix it up with honey and other liquids. They prescribe these medicines for curing different diseases. Among the *Meiteis*, the Kabiraji treatment is very popular and this is the reason for which this particular treatment process of the *Maibas* has survived among the Manipuris, whereas the

other sorts of treatment have already been in the process of extinction. During the field study, the scribe observed that the basic reason for popular use of Kabiraji medicine by most of the *Meiteis* is because this particular kind of treatment is comparatively cheaper as compared to other kinds of treatment process and it can cure diseases. Manipuris believe that Kabiraji treatment can cure *Thonkak* (Jaundice), *Shonamhi Ten* (Jaharbath), *Lie Thoppa* (Pox) by using different herbs and its extracts, roots of herbs etc. Moreover the Kabiraj apply herbal treatment to remove the spell of black magic also. For protection from Black Magic spell, an ill person is required to follow the *Maiba's* rules and regulations. During the treatment period, a patient is not allowed to move anywhere and can not whatever he desires without the consent of the Kabiraj. If the patient fails to abide by the rules of the Kabiraj he or she is likely to fall in great danger.

A Kabiraj carry on his practice either at his own residence or in a chamber. It is also a part time profession for some people. For healing patients, a Kabiraj usually does not demand any fees rigidly from the patients. Kabiraj leave it to the patient and does not bargain. For all kind of treatment, 7 ingredients are used for preparing potions for healing patients. Like an allopathic doctor, a Kabiraj also at the very on set, ask for the symptoms that a patient feels and then judging the symptoms a Kabiraj prescribes medicines for the patient to eliminate the problems which makes the patient enervated. Afterwards to keep the patient fit, more treatments are suggested. The reason for preparing potion for healing patients with 7 ingredients is because the *Métiers* believe that the number 7 is a sacred number and they believe that preparing potion with 7 ingredients invariably would bring good luck for the patient and the patients will be cured. Besides the application of potion to the patients, the Kabiraj also give different other medicines to their patients prepared in tablet form, which are preserved in cool place. Patients are always advised to preserve the medicine properly. But for the treatment of Kabiraji and herbal system, the patients are to follow some regulations. In the format below, the ingredients used for preparing medicines and taboos related to specific diseases among the *Meiteis* is presented.

Name of diseases	Ingredients	Taboos
<i>Thonhak</i> (Jaundice)	Oral (A kind of leafy herb) + Sugar, Hartaki + date juice + holy utterance	1) Beef, egg, (up to 21 days) 2) Use of Turmeric is prohibited 3) Oil and spicy foods are tabooed and never let the patient go to sun
<i>Lie Thoppa</i> (Pox)	Purified oil + others	1) To stay at home all day long 2) To keep fresh and pure 3) fish is also prohibited

Source: From field research

Treatment by worshipping and rituals

For treating patients In Manipuri community, there are many *Maibas* who perform certain rituals such as recitation form of religious books and sit for meditation. They utter different holy verses and do the meditation with rapt attention. *Maibas* also pour holy water (water with puff out by read holy verses) and oil to cure a patient.

During child birth to a woman, a *Maiba* prepare holy water by reciting some holy verses and spring the water on the pregnant woman. Then he rushes out from home and hit the ground for three times and goes away. He runs away so that he cannot hear the baby-screams, because, they believe that crying could bring bad luck. At that time, a *Maiba* recalls the name of his Guru (Master) with great respect.

Also for the Kabiraji treatment, a *Maiba* (Kabiraj) initiates his healing, by worshipping the God of the lineage that the patient belongs.

Treatment by the system of '*Bartika Ahumogy Khudam*',

In this treatment procedure, the *Maiba* ignites the *Bartika* (*Bartika* is made up of bamboo sticks rapt with cotton; it is to be drenched with oil before igniting it). When the *Bartika* is blown out and if it is found a little bit curled up at its front, then it is considered as a good sign and if it is found a bit curled up at its backside, than is considered as the bad sign. Even if it is broken up, that means the same. It is termed as '*Bartika Ahumogy Khudam*' or '*Tin Bartikar Lakkhan*'. In this treatment process, Kabiraj also utter holy verses along with the performing of rituals which are discussed above.

Roles of a *Maibi* and treatment in *Maibi* system

Maibis the female healers, also have great role to play in traditional folk medical system of the Manipuris. *Maibis* mostly performing their jobs as that of a female healer specialized in female diseases, pregnancy, child birth and child rearing. A *Maibi* basically advises the pregnant women about important issues of pregnancy such as on possible related complicacies and remedies. As in rural Bangladesh, in spite of availability of modern medical treatment, many people are still dependent on Traditional Birth Attendant (TBA) for child birth, in the same way; the Manipuris also depend greatly on the *Maibis* (female healer) for curing and caring of the females in their society.

Birth of a Child:

After the birth of a child, a *Maibi* follows some birth related rituals. A *Maibi* call '*Thowaymin*' (sacred soul) with holy verses and she cuts the umbilical cord of the baby by a piece of sharp bamboo. Then six days after the birth of the baby, *Maibi* cleanse new born child and mother with '*Tairel Pungfai*' (one kind of sacred leafs) that is called as '*Epan Thaba*' and the *Maiba* (Male healer or Priest) read sacred text, which is called '*Nahairule*'. Afterwards the '*Maibi*' spread

'seven' Banana leaves on a 'Kula' (*Jankong*) along with rice, vagitables, *Ngamu* (Taki fish) turn with fire, salt, chilly etc. The *Maibi*, with those items pretends, as if she is feeding the new born baby. This process is repeated for 'seven' times and after completion of the rituals, the foods are thrown for the *Sharoi* (evil deity). Then putting the child on the 'Kula' the *Maibis* circle the 'kula' with the baby over the *funga* (fire sport), which is kept on room. After completion of all these rituals, *Maibi* finally handover the child to mother of the baby. (Sheram 1996:53).

In the post natal period, a mother takes rice without any spice and salt. Sometimes rice with burned *Taki* fish (*Ngamu*) is offered to the woman. Honey with Tulsi leaves is also sometimes offered to the mother of the new born as nutritious food for her early recovery.

For the healthcare of a new born baby, Monipuris impose certain restrictions, such as :

- 1) No body is allowed to enter the room, where the baby sleeps at least for few days.
- 2) If it is highly necessary to enter the room of the baby, a person needs to touch fire before entering.
- 3) Food grain (white), iron made thing etc are kept beside the side of the bed of the baby so that no devils can act upon the baby.
- 4) During "Shoroshatti puja" the Thakur or the priest pour 'Sindur' on the baby's fore head and he (the priest) wear a 'Nozor mala" made by 'Chandon wood'.
- 5) It is not allowed to go out of the homestead with the new born in the noon.

Besides the above folk treatments, *Manipuris* also follow other different healing processes which are influenced by the culture and those are still active among them. During the field study, it was observed that, in some cases people shift from modern professional sector to folk sector for treatment. The social and economic condition also influences this shift to folk treatment that patients can afford for their illness. Folk healers use their local technology for healing a patient. Many of their community members informed that Scribe that now a day's some folk treatment practitioners in Manipuri society though do not have proper training on the subject but they have been in practice.

Symbolic Life Cycle: A Reflection of Healthcare system among the Meiteis

The healthcare system among the *Meitis* is reflected in their life pattern, from the very birth to death. For sound health and sound mind, the *Meiteis* follow different rules and taboos about heath up till death. Birth, marriage and death –

these three events are most important to them. They carefully perform all functions related to these three events through different religious rituals to protect themselves against any evil spirits, which reflect their caring mind about the necessity of a sound health for themselves.

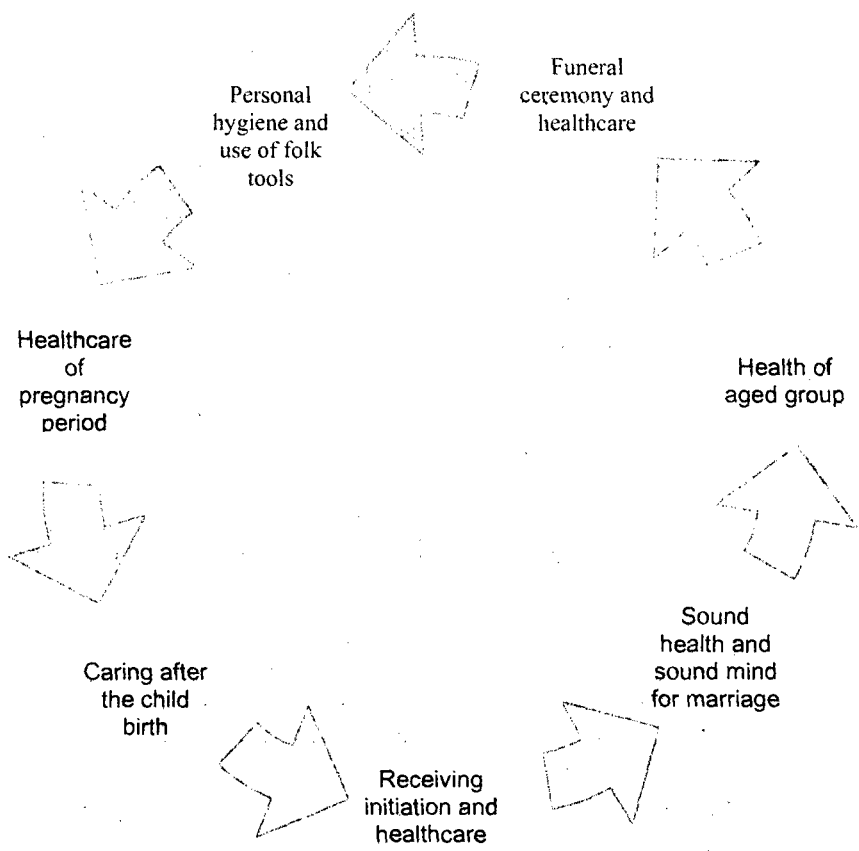


Diagram: rtetretetr

In the following passages discussion on different issues of healthcare among the *Meiteis* are narrated.

Personal hygiene and use of folk tools

As part of their religious rituals, Manipuri people keep themselves quite fresh and clean. It is customary for the Manipuris to bathe just after defecation in the morning after rising from the bed. Manipuris by nature are early risers and after taking their bath, they first their deities and then start their daily works. During the time of menstruation, women are forbidden to enter the kitchen and even cannot touch any religious books or objects or cannot perform any sacred rituals. Post pregnancy period of a woman-particularly for three months after pregnancy is also considered as a period of prohibition. For drinking and washing, *Meiteis* usually use tube-well water or boiled water. They always remain very careful about hygiene.

Mention has been made about different options of healthcare prevalent among the Manipuris earlier. Basically these people are dependent on the use of traditional healing techniques for their personal caring and use some folk tools for the purpose. Generally, these folk tools are offered by their relatives and neighbors or religiously provided or they use these tools inheriting from their forefathers.

Name of the folk tools (which they use for their good health)	Manipuri term of these tools	Bengali name of them
One kind of Necklace made of a kind of aromatic wood	<i>Urik</i>	Chandan khater mala
Amulet		Tabiz
Vermillion of Chandan (aromatic wood)		Chandaner shidur
Necklace for baby (generally they put the necklace to protect the baby from evil spirit/ eye)	<i>Mityengtadanaba-lik</i>	Nojarmala

Source: From field research

Healthcare of pregnancy period

A *Mironbi Nupi* (pregnant woman) needs to perform different types of customs and rituals according to Manipuri beliefs. With open hair, pregnant women are not allowed to go out side. At night, they should not move far from their residence for the sake of the expected baby (Sheram 1996:52). Keeping the pace with the changing situation, many of the Manipuris are gradually turning towards modern medicine though they still retained their faith on traditional healing process. Many of the pregnant women now consult specialist doctors (Gynecologist) and takes vaccine and advices for herself and her child. At the same time, some of them also seek advice of the folk healers and take pure water (*Pani pora*), amulet (Tabiz), Maduli etc for better health. They always try to take nutrias food and avoid all those foods which are tabooed as harmful by religion during pregnancy religious taboos.

Laiming Lowba in Meiteis and healthcare

In Manipuri community, new born babies are welcomed through religious ceremony which is performed by both *Maiba* and *Maibi* (male and female healer and the priest). For the new born baby, parents have to donate a kilo of rice, pulses or dal etc to the priest for offerings to the *Meitei* gods through a formal ceremony. The Thakur or the priest gives the child Urik (the necklace which made by *Chandhan* wood), which the child has to wear for five days at least. It is related to religious belief that is necessary for bringing happiness among their life and also for a sound health of the baby.

Sound health and sound mind for marriage

Wedding ceremony is being performed with the great care looking at the health and hygiene of both bride and the groom. Two women represent the ceremony from the part of bride and bridegroom. They set free three *Ngamu* ('Taki' fishes) into a large jar. One fish is considered as the guard of all evils and rest two is considered as bride and bridegroom. Two representative women carefully watch the movements of the fish. If the fishes swim together, it makes the sense that the bride and bridegroom will have a happy life. Many of the Manipuris believe that if anybody avoids this ceremony, they will never be happy in married life and may also suffer from illness and other misfortune.

Health of aged group

In the Manipuri society, the aged persons are very respectable. In the life cycle of the Manipuris, the adult people try to keep their health well. For that, they usually take different herbs and leaves like *Nim Pata* (one kind of leaves), *Tulsi pata* (the leaves of holy basil) with honey, vegetables etc. Generally in their community, the adult people normally suffer from cough, heart attack, high blood pressure, fever etc.

Funeral ceremony and healthcare

Among the Manipuris, after the death of a person, the dead body is kept lying north facing then, by performing some rituals the dead body is taken to the cemetery. The improvised cot used for taking the dead body called '*Kai*'. For burning the dead body the cremation bed is made ready in such way that the woods are kept by 'seven' layer as a symbol of their seven '*Yak Shalai*'. After burning the dead body, *Maiba* draws seven circles around the ashes of the burned body representing seven lives on the earth and closed the door for the possible evil spirit of the dead person. The *Meiteis* preserve a piece of burned up bone from the forehead of the dead body and keep the same hanging on the roof of the dead person's house. *Meiteis* believe that this will protect the house of the dead person from evil spirit. Then after sometimes they thrown away the bone to to river – *Gnaga.*, After one year of the death of a person a worshipping ceremony is performed by the family members for the peace of dead person's spirit in the future world.

Conclusion

The *Meitei* Manipuri have been enriching cultural heritage of Bangladesh from historical past. Like their cultural traits, their health care system has multi dimensional faced which are not only colorful but also in certain instances have scientific values too. They depend on one or more options from the available healing system at a time. Manipuris follow different rules and religious rituals and taboos for good health. In Manipuri society, every sphere of life of the people goes on within different ceremony and rituals which help them to keep free from all evil and danger that they believe may create problems in their life.

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