

The Legacy of P. O. Boddington to the Study of Ethnomedicine

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Abstract

Rev. P. O. Boddington's book *Studies on Santal Medicine and Connected Folklores* is a comprehensive record of Santal ethno-medicine and practices. The book is not only one of the earliest ethnographic studies conducted on Santals but also a pioneering work which explores the ethnomedical practices of any indigenous community. Boddington provided with an in-depth insight into diseases, ethno-medicinal knowledge and practices, medicine men, folklores, super natural beings, and spiritual beliefs of the Santals. The book is well divided into three parts. The first part explores the beliefs of Santals surrounding the life and death, the malevolent and the benevolent spirits they believe in, their pantheon of deities, and their beliefs about the role of super natural forces on diseases. The second part provides a detailed record of the ethno-medicinal practices, listing diseases in human as well as animals and their treatments, along with the plants used by the medicine men. The third part delves into the livelihood of the Santal community, examining their agriculture practices, their subsistence on the collection of forest produces, their dietary practices and the methods of processing culinary oils. This paper is a critical review of the book which reveals that Boddington did not limit his work to understanding the community's knowledge of diseases and healing practices. Rather he took a holistic approach to the livelihood of Santals covering aspects such as mythology, food, religious beliefs, rituals and their daily practices. His work suggests a deep interconnection between the livelihood, and ethno-medicinal beliefs and practices of the community. Examining the book from contemporary perspectives points towards certain limitations, nevertheless, it is undeniable that long ago his work opened new areas for researches in the field of Medical Anthropology providing a valuable foundation for future scholars.

Keywords: *Ethnomedicine, Santals, Bongas, and Religious Practices*

Introduction

Reverend Paul Olaf Boddington was a Norwegian theologian and missionary. Apart from being a missionary he was a great linguistic, folklorist and ethnographer. He was born on 2nd November, 1865 in Gjøvik, Norway to a bookseller Edward Olsen Boddington and Betzy Emilie Wennevold. He was graduated in theology from the University of Kristiania (now University of Oslo), thereafter came to India in 1889 at the age of 24 as a missionary priest. He started as

a missionary priest under Lars Olsen Skrefsrud in Benageria Santal Mission known as The Santal Mission of the Northern Churches (formerly known as Den nordiske Santalmisjon) among the Santals in Santalistan (Santal Pargana).

Skrefsrud, himself an exceptional linguistic took great interest in the life and culture of Santal people and emphasized on learning their culture, traditions and language for the propagation of Christianity. Bodding also started learning Santali language with the help of Santal Gurus like *Biram, Khudu, Koleyana* (Skrefsrud 1887, Besra 2012). In 1914, he translated the Bible in Santali. In his journey as a missionary, Bodding observed the Santal society, the people and their culture and came to know that the community belongs to rich culture with unique social religious science. He was amazed by the plethora of indigenous knowledge Santals have, which only have been transmitted orally and were unwritten till then. In 1923, he left his position in the Santal Mission and completely dedicated his life to the study of Santals (KHM, 2022).

Bodding started documenting Santal folklore, folk tales, riddles, language, culture, customs, tradition and medicinal practices. He wrote several books on Santal community namely *Studies in Santal Medicine and Connected Folklore* (1925-40), *A Chapter of Santal Folklore* (OSLO-1924), *A Santali Grammar for Beginners* (1925), *Santali Folk Tales* (Vol- I,II & III)- (1925-1929), *A Santali Dictionary* (5 Volume)- (1933-36), *Santal Riddles and Witchcraft among Santals* (1940). He also edited a Santali Journal named *Hor Hopon Ren Pera* from the year 1890 to 1904 (Hembram 2007). The works he has done are classic and so extensive that they are still unmatched.

This paper is based on Bodding's most notable contribution '*Studies in Santal Medicine and Connected Folklore*'. The book, which was published by the Asiatic Society, Kolkata between the years 1925 to 1940, is a classic in the field of Medical Anthropology and is the first book written on Santal healthcare and associated performances. The book is rather a collection of three works which he had presented in the Asiatic Society. In the first part of this holistic book contains about the diseases known to Santals. The second part is about the prescription of the diseases which includes both human and veterinary, and also contains a detailed list of ingredients including plants, animal products and soils. The last part deals with the life of Santals covering all aspects from their village to their food and clothing.

In the following two sections, first we delve into the content of the book and then we will go on throwing light on the legacy of Bodding in the field of Ethnomedicine.

Bodding on Santal Ethnomedicine

The first part of the book, titled *Santal and Diseases*, explores in details the belief of Santals surrounding the life and death, diseases, God and spirits, and their traditional healers and healing practices. As he narrates, Santals believe that diseases are due to the influence of supernatural power on human body and they thus heavily rely on their deities for their wellbeing. Their concept of 'Tejo' plays a key role in the diseases and Ojhas, the traditional healers, are entrusted with the treatment. He explains, Santali's way of bodily healing consists a combination of Ethnomedicine, and *jharni* and *mantar*.

Further, Bodding sheds light on *Dasae Daran*, a significant element of the Santals where men go around villages, dancing and singing songs of sorrow. This particular *Dasae Daran* also talks about the teaching and transmission of the indigenous knowledge of the ethnomedicinal practices. There is a relation of *Guru* and *Chela* where the *Guru* teaches his disciples the philosophy of life, health, Ethnomedicine, spells and much more. This knowledge is transmitted orally through this journey of *Dasae Daran*. He also mentions of Kamru Guru, the first ojha of the Santals, who is now revered as a god along with other deities of their pantheon during these sessions.

Santal Medicine, is the title of the second part. Here, Bodding introduces the types of diseases including both human and veterinary, the medicines used and the prescriptions of the diseases. He also discusses how he conducted this extensive field work, interviewing peoples and one particular aspect of the Ethnomedicine really astonished him. He noted that the Santal medicine is based on generations of experience rather than on scientific experimentation. Over the time, the remedies of the diseases were discovered by observing the nature, especially the wild animals. Through this process of observation, they were able to refine their knowledge on the Ethnomedicine.

In the book, Bodding have documented 305 prescriptions for human disease and 16 for veterinary. Each prescription includes the symptoms of the diseases and their corresponding remedies. Some of the diseases also have up to 20 possible remedies. The medicines are

prepared using various parts of plants like root, bark, fruit, flower, leaves. Additionally, the medicines may also include animals and human derived ingredients. He also noted that though some of the ingredients were procured from the non-Santal counterparts and markets, most of the ingredients are collected from the wild forest. This also sheds light of the vast knowledge of the nature the Santals possess. Bodding also took great effort of mentioning the scientific names alongside the local terms of the ingredients of the ethnomedicines.

In the last part, titled *How the Santals Live*, drawing insight from the *Kolean Guru*, Bodding offers a detailed account of the Santal life. He focuses on their settlement practices, agriculture, food habits, forbidden food, clothing and cultural customs. He observes that when Santals establish a new settlement, they perform specific rites and rituals to ensure the sustainability of the land. The Santal villages also establish a *Jaher* (sacred grove) for their deities. The villages are formed clearing an area of the forest, reflecting their close connection to the nature. A traditional village council known as *Ato More Hor*, is formed with the consensus of the villagers which maintains rule and regulations, manages village affairs and settles disputes.

Bodding also provide a detail on the agricultural practice of the Santals. He describes how the Santals classify their agricultural lands into categories like *Bad*, *Baihar*, *Goda* and *Barge*, each of which are suited for different crops. The community possesses rich indigenous knowledge, allowing them to optimize their agricultural practices, especially in rice cultivation. They use specialized tools depending on the land type and adjust their planting times according to weather patterns. Due to their beliefs in the supernatural powers, they also have rituals and worships aligned with the specific stages of the agriculture.

Speaking of the food habits of the Santals, Bodding noted that *Daka* (rice) is their staple food which is usually accompanied by various *Utu* (curry). The *utu* is prepared from vegetables, leaves, roots which they either grown or collected. They also prepare a variety of cereal using traditional methods. Santals also collect wild plants, mushrooms, roots and fruits. They hunt wild animals, bird and fowl, and they also catch fish. All these are also included in their diet. Bodding also noted that there are also certain foods that are prohibited to consume among the Santals due to their cultural beliefs. Their distinct clothing, their smoking and drinking habits also reflect on their cultural identity. Furthermore, the Santals also possess extensive

knowledge in animal husbandry. They keep cows, bullock, goats, sheep, pig, hen, fowl and pigeon as domestic animal and birds. This observation of Bodding captures the life of the Santals, which emphasizes in their deep connection to the environment and the richness of their traditions.

The Legacy of P.O Bodding's Study on Ethnomedicine

P. O. Bodding's extensive documentation of the Ethnomedicine and the various aspects of the livelihood of the Santals demonstrate deep interconnection between livelihood and healthcare in the life of the Santals. One significant contribution of his works is the exploration of the Santal myths through *Jamsim Binti*, *Karam Binti* and *Bapla Binti*. These myths often are interconnected with the stories of Ethnomedicine, shows how the Santals perceives the nature, the origin of life, the supernatural element and diseases. Bodding discussed how certain diseases are influenced by supernatural causes, with entities like *Bhoot* (ghost), *Bonga* (deities), *Dan* (witch), *Churin* (evil deity) and *Jugin* (evil deity) playing crucial role in illness (Sikdar, 2015). To fight this, Santals depend on their traditional spiritual healers such as *Ojha* and *Jan* who perform rituals, spells and incantations like *Tejo*, *Jharni* and *Mantar*.

Food and food habit of the Santals is also deeply integrated into the Santal Ethnomedicine. Bodding documents their diet which includes rice, fruit, vegetable, milk, honey, meat, fish. This illustrates how certain food in their diet not only provides nutrition but also have medicinal purposes. Traditional Santal dishes like *Lad*, *Rapag*, *Pitha*, *Dombog* and *Leto*, often have cultural and medicinal significance. He also noted that certain food is forbidden for cultural beliefs, while other are mandatory in religious rites. This further links the diet with health.

Despite the invaluable contribution of Bodding through this book, there remains certain limitation and gaps, when viewed in contemporary context. His work has not fully explored some of the rituals and habits of Santals that have evolved or endured over time. For instance, practices like *Lota Dah*, which gained a renewed relevance during the Covid 19 pandemic remained unexplored. Additionally, few other remedies like *Jugni Batiyao*, *Neem dah Madi*, and *Madela* were also not explored, although they continue to play crucial role in Santal healthcare. These practices, which blend hygiene, social customs, and medicine, underscore the importance of further study into Santal Ethnomedicine.

Bodding's legacy, however, is undeniable. His detailed documentation of Santal life and healthcare provides an essential foundation for future research. His work not only preserved the Ethnomedicine of the Santals but also highlighted how deeply their health practices are connected to their livelihood, culture, and environment. While there are gaps in his study, addressing these could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the Santal healthcare system and its potential contributions to modern medicine.

Conclusion

In his book, Bodding discusses Ethnomedicine of Santals and their way of life in details. He highlights the deep connection between the Santals' livelihood, culture, and medicine. Santal Ethnomedicine is an integral part of their lifestyle. This community, which relies heavily on the natural environment, directly gathers the necessary ingredients for their remedies from nature. They prepare medicines using natural elements such as plants, vines, leaves, and roots. Bodding notes that this medical practice is not limited to physical healing but is also deeply intertwined with the social and spiritual lives of the Santals. The use of these medicines in religious and social ceremonies is considered an inseparable part of their culture. The Santal Ethnomedicine system creates a holistic connection between their lifestyle and the natural world, solidifying it as a crucial aspect of their livelihood.

For further research in connection to the Santal health care can be done on the basis of this book. In this contemporary era, the rites of Santals become very relevant when it is found to be playing roles to deal with diseases. As *Lota dah* (Jug of water) is used in the traditional salutation of the community, attracted the attention of many during the Covid situation as distance is maintained even among close relatives through the practice. Several other customs of Santals must have some specific character to deal with any health concern. It is a great concern that language barrier often becomes a limitation for a researcher in understanding the livelihood of Santals. However, Bodding's work has overcome this limitation and has opened up a diverse field of studying Santal health care system. Besides being perhaps the first book on medicine and connected folklores, it has preserved diverse information and has laid as base bone in this field, which definitely will be a treasure to be explored for the present as well as future researchers.

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