CHAPTER VI
INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND NOTION OF ILLNESS AMONG THE HILL SAORAS

The chapter intends to introduce the importance of indigenous therapeutic knowledge in the health care services of the indigenous communities not only grant good health but also to strengthen their economy in a self sustained manner. The core objective of this chapter is to explore and examine the concept and causes of illness existing among the indigenous communities in general and the notion of the Hill Saoras in specific. It intends to highlight the socio-cultural, supernatural and environmental factors responsible for the occurrence diseases and ailments in the context of the Hill Saoras. It also highlights the conditions of modern health care services and the associated problems in the locality. In other words, how the concept of disease and supernaturalism affects the economic life and social well-being of Hill Saoras is the major focus of this chapter.

Health is one of the most vital aspects of human life and survival. In the physical world the concept of good life and prosperity is practically depending upon two main factors: good health and economy. The economy of the society prospers if the body and mind of the individual prosper. It is most relevant in a society where populations are directly involved in the process of production and self sustained economic practices. However, this is basically important and inevitable for the indigenous than the mainstream societies where supernaturalism plays a vital role not only for the cause and cure of diseases and ailments but also for receiving the 'power of assurance' for good life and social and material well being.
In the era of globalisation and competitive market culture the role of government to take care of and fulfil the need of considerable number of poor people of this vast country is an arduous task. The health care facilities and services provided to the poor indigenous population by the government institutions are significantly insufficient. It is not only the problem of insufficiency but also the insensitive and inefficacious functioning of the government institutions and its officials to provide the already (whatever) available health care services in the rural, especially tribal, areas. The attitude of the health care personnel is very much urban centric and apathetic to serve in rural and interior tribal pockets. To minimize the dependency on the services of the government the practically useful indigenous system of therapy may be helpful to tackle these situations. But the fact is whether the existing knowledge on indigenous therapeutic practices to tackle and solve the necessary health care problems of the community, sufficiently and viably, needs to be explored.

The problems of accessibility, affordability, acceptability, etc., to the modern health care facilities are some of the other problems faced by the indigenous people of this vast country, India. Poverty, lack of proper communication facilities, very poor service of the hospitals, long absence of doctors and medical staffs, lack of minimum support service are some of the associated problems in the health care sectors in the tribal areas. Therefore, to tackle all these problems at the local level the knowledge on indigenous systems of therapy available with the people may be one of the potential alternatives to provide necessary health care services in a self-sustained manner.

The importance of indigenous systems of medicine have been realised to be used in the health care services of not only for the indigenous
communities but also for the services of the population of the nation as a whole. Its proven capacity and holistic effect to cure the diseases and ailments have been significant. There have been growing interests in the indigenous systems of medicine and therapeutic practices by the medical scientists, policy makers, administrators, and practitioners to accept and practice the therapeutic aspects of indigenous systems of medicine in managing the illness and disease for maintaining positive health and total well-being. It has been recommended in many developing countries for its inclusion in Primary Health Services because it can be well fitted into the socio-cultural and economic background of the people.

Indigenous system of medicine includes a holistic knowledge and practices, oral or written, functioned in diagnosis, prevention and curative aspects of illness and disease to promote total well-being, entrust explicitly on practical experiences and observations or know-how techniques with or without local/regional culture having resonance of religion. It is based on the system of beliefs and practices of a community. Through this system the worldview of the people are interlinked with the concept of disease and illness. The causation of illness and a society's worldview too has greater reflections in other spheres of life of indigenous forest dwellers.¹

Since antiquity, the indigenous people had some rudimentary system of medicine to ameliorate pain and disease in order to promote a productive socio-economic life in the society. Over the ages their experience led to empirical techniques and methods of healing, which in due course of time crystallized into distinct system of medical practices. More so, the early therapeutic agents were mainly derived from their immediate environment

that consisted of plants, animals and other naturally occurring substances, often assisted by a touch of magic or mysticism. What began as a just healing art gradually became a science and over the years different systems of medicine established themselves in various regions depending upon their ecosystem and cultural needs.

The supernatural powers are identified with a group of powerful forces and deities, which they believe, control and influence the happenings in the community. The deities have their own respective departments and areas of influence, effect, and control, as well as nature of actions. The different socio-cultural and economic activities of indigenous communities revolve around the gods and spirits. If the gods and spirits are happy then there is no fear of illness. All are well if the ‘spirits’ are blissful.

The material aspects of life are determined by the ancestral and supernatural forces. As they play a major role in the community’s well-being and happy life by providing good monsoon, good crops, good harvests and good health and so on. They can also bring calamity, poverty, epidemic and disaster in case of disobedience and negligence. The life of Hill Saora is no exception to this rule like any other indigenous communities. There may be certain variations or differences in the said principles from community to community but the life of all the indigenous communities are certainly guided by the actions and wishes of the supernatural powers.

The economy of the indigenous community is also protected and strengthened by the supernatural entity. The agricultural and forest-collection activities are associated with rituals and religious performances to seek the mercy and good eyes of gods and ancestors. It is believed that they protect

---

and watch the croplands from the evil eyes, animals and insects if they are appeased ceremonially. They also provide good health and good energy to work. Because good physical health can not only support good physical strength to work and raise the family economy for better survival but also more importantly to reduce the frequent expenditure on healing rituals. Different deities and spirits are believed to be connected with different types of diseases. That needs huge and unaffordable sacrifices and ritual offerings to appease the deities and spirits which put much financial burden on the indigenous people. Hence, religion and supernaturalism are closely linked with the economy and livelihood of the indigenous community.

6.1 THE BACKGROUND SCENARIO OF HEALTH AND ASSOCIATED PROBLEMS IN THE HILL SAORA VILLAGES

Before proceeding to examine the concept and causes of illness it is imperative to have an understanding about the background scenario of health and associated problems in the villages of Hill Saoras under study. It aims to develop a broader understanding on socio-cultural, environmental and economic factors associated with health and the factors responsible for the occurrence of disease. These factors include the living environment, hygienic conditions, food, water, personal habits and behaviour patterns like bath, defecation, clothing, cleanliness, etc. besides belief systems. Hence, before going into detailed discussion about the indigenous concept of illness and methods of therapy, it is pertinent to have an idea about the overall health scenario of the Hill Saoras.

6.1.1 The Settlement of Hill Saora and Sanitation: The villages of the Hill Saoras are the dirtiest of the tribal village. The village roads are very nasty with animal excreta and dirt of the pigs, fowl, cow dung, debris, and dirt peelings, which are thrown in the streets here and there. During the month of
February and March the village are full of corns of millets and other such refuse items. It seems to be a habit of the Hill Saoras to urinate in front of their house during night and none of them even go for a little distance. Besides, the pigs, fowls and cattle continuously move around and make the place dirtier. No Saora even thinks of cleaning his village roads. As a result, all these refuses and garbage got decomposed inside the village which provide an exceptional breeding ground for mosquitoes, flies and bacteria. It becomes more dangerous during rainy season. Hence, malaria, viral diseases and gastrointestinal disorder are common occurrence. Mohanty in this context has observed that Anopheles mosquitoes are plenty in this area and fever is a common feature of the land. Added to it are the habits of Saoras, who throw all their dirt and debris on the village roads. The excreta of the pigs and dirt emit foul odour and provide breeding grounds of the germs.3

6.1.2 The In-House Environment, Life-Style and Behaviour Pattern: The traditional living house of the Hill Saoras a single room. Earlier the house was not only meant for human habitation but also shared by pet animals and birds particularly pigs and fowls. In the past, the pigs were having the share of accommodation in the single roomed houses with humans. Even today, after the spread of Christianity, it is still found in some few of the traditional house who are sheltering pigs inside their houses. In one corner (immediately after the entrance) of the houses there is a shelter build for pigs and fowls are called Gungusing. That creates a very unhygienic and unhealthy environment inside the house. The fowls are now kept either in building a small cave below the veranda. But in many cases they are still found hanging in the bamboo baskets inside the Saora houses. Surprisingly, the fowls are found

hanging inside some of the Christianised households who are supposed to maintain hygienic standard of living and to remain neat and clean, as per their teaching about the way of life, in departure to the traditional one. The pigs, fowls and pet dogs also have frequent and free access to enter into the house and make dirty (defecate), which creates an unhygienic and unhealthy environment inside for human. The Saoras mostly sleep on the floor, which might be a cause of their suffering from several skin related diseases.

6.1.3 Personal Habits: Looking to their daily life the Hill Saoras usually do not take bath in the morning but in the evening after coming back from their working field. It was in fact not a common following in the past. Even today some traditional aged Saoras do not regularly take bath and after defecation they do not wash in the water. They either clean themselves with the leaves or by rubbing themselves on the rocks. Skin diseases are, therefore, common among the older traditional generation of the Hill Saoras. In this context the opinion of Sarata Sabar a Branch Post Master, a 43-year-old convert needs attention. He said, “in the past the people of our traditional Saoras rarely used to take bath. Even today some older people are having the same habit in their life style. While working in the swidden field they defecate and do not wash themselves with water. Either they clean by rubbing themselves on the rock or wipe with the leaves.” He also stated that this unhygienic practice led to not only serious skin related diseases but also other associated diseases.

The children are also not taken care of sufficiently from hygienic point of view. Most of the parents do not give bath to their children and keep them unclean may be because of their serious engagement in daily economic activities and lack of awareness. Otherwise they are very loving and fond of their children. Due to lack of awareness, illiteracy and poverty of the parents the hygienic care of many of the children appear unconsciously ignored.
Hard work has been the inevitable pattern in the daily life-style of the Hill Saoras. Working in the swidden fields, terrace and paddy lands and engaged in the collection of forest works are strenuous and involve much physical labour. As it is an inevitable part of Saora life and survival no one can escape out of this. However, working on the difficult hilly terrain for the whole day makes people tiresome and causes many physical ailments.

6.1.4 Food and Nutrition: Mention has already been made on the food pattern of the Hill Saoras in the previous chapter hence need no repetition. Only the nutritional aspect of the food needs to be mentioned here. The Hill Saora is a traditional shifting cultivator produces many crops in swidden field besides homestead land which provides minimum nutrition balance. As food gatherers they also collect varieties of fruits, roots, tubers, leaves and other sources of nutrition from the forests. Some vegetables have also been cultivated in their homestead land (Kutta). The most important thing is that they get plenty of animal protein because of their frequent animal sacrifices in the rituals for a common and small illness. The staple food of the Saoras is Uabkul prepared from rice and mixed with sour leaves called Sunsunab. The Uabkul is moistened rice taken frequently in a small quantity about five six times daily. Besides all these they used to drink toddy of Sago palm (Caryota urens) which has rich ingredients of starch that provides energy to work in the difficult swidden fields. However, despite the availability of good nutrient products the cases of malnutrition and diseases are not uncommon to the Hill Saoras. The first reason may be the exploitation through their tradition of sacrificial offerings because major parts of the produces are given to the local traders to repay the heavily bargained loans brought by the Saora at the time of ritual. Nothing much is left for family consumption among majority of the poor adivasis. Another reason of low nutrition intake may be because of the
fact of the mismanagement of nutrition intake, which leads to ailments or diseases.

With the promotion of horticulture the swidden and homestead lands have been covered with cashew-nuts as it gives good amount of cash income in comparison to other crops. Therefore, the lands that were producing varieties of balanced crops for family consumption are sizably reduced. Only the rich family having possession of more land can produce some varieties for their family consumption. Many poor family got affected more by this even if they produce some few quantity of legumes, pulses, beans, etc., swidden and homestead lands they exhaust it in a few days or sale it to their monetary need.

6.1.5 Drinking Water: The problem of drinking water is also very acute. The water used by the people for drinking and cooking purposes are collected from stream, dug well and tube well. Although, Public Health Division and other development agencies have established tube wells to provide drinking water to the villagers their maintenance and care are hardly looked into. In almost 90 percent of the tube well's water are not suitable for drinking purposes. Some of them are lying dried and damaged for long time. There are more than half of the tube well in the villages are with a heavy layer of iron with reddish colour water are not even eligible for bath. However, dug well water and water from the natural stream are practically the main sources used for cooking and drinking and all other purposes. The chances of contamination of these two sources of water especially in rainy and summer season are many. Hence, there are many cases of gastrointestinal disorder such as stomach disorder, diarrhoea, dysentery, etc. and are reported in large number during rainy season may be because of water.
6.1.6 Impoverishment: Poverty leads to poverty. The people live with minimum survival are hardly able to see the money therefore could not afford to meet the expenditure for their health. Although there is a positive attitude to take modern allopathic medicine for treatment of sick the expenditure required could not allow the people to go for care. The treatment outside are expensive and the quality of treatment and free medicines given in the government hospitals are better not to comment. Therefore, very often the people ignore the disease for a long time which gets prolonged at the end due to their impoverishment. It is also observed that Hill Saoras show little concern to go to the hospital for check up immediately after he or she suffers from an illness.

6.1.7 Awareness: Illiteracy blocks the road to awareness and due to low level of awareness access to modern medical treatment becomes difficult. Due to the spread of Christianity and migration to Assam some degree of awareness has been developed among the people. In spite of that the people are not well motivated to go for treatment immediately they fall sick. Some sign of mental laziness is found to be the cause for this. Non-familiarity with the modern health care facilities is also another problem. Besides, there has been a strong belief in supernatural cause and cure of illness among the non-convert section of the Saoras that makes them to take the help of sacrificial healing than the modern medical therapy. This will be discussed detailed in later part of this chapter.

6.1.8 Communication: One of the most practical and serious problems faced by the people for not taking the early treatment is because of the long distance and lack of minimum communication facilities to the hospitals. The villages are situated at difficult hilly terrains and forest clad. Difficult road communication in hilly terrain makes difficult for a patient to reach the
hospital at distance places. The serious patient sometimes dies before reaching at the hospital. The long distance also some times compels the family to ignore or delay to bring the patient for treatment in the initial stage of the disease. In some cases a poor Saora ignore the disease because he or she cannot afford to loss the man-days from his daily work to come for medication in the hospital.

A Primary Health Centre (PHC) established at Puttasingi is far away from other villages and one has to pass through several ghats and rocky forest roads to reach there. Many of the villages such as Abada, Sindhuba, Kulusingi, Sankirdi, Kurudi, Abati, etc., are situated at more than 15 kms distance without proper communication and no conveyance. Only Sagad and partially Angra have a minimum Kachcha road about 7 and 10 kms respectively from the Puttasingi PHC. The villages like Karanjasing, Rungrungba and Tarbel and Anjarsing are situated on opposite of Sagad hills 3 to 4 kms ahead of passing a big ghats a steep and zigzag rocky paths. It is about 10 kms distance from the local government PHC. Manengool, Basengarjang and Gailung is situated at about 6 to 7 kms away from Puttasingi and is situated on the hill top. In comparison to all other villages Ladde is most vulnerable in communication because one has to cross four top hilly ghats about 13 kms distance to reach at Puttasingi. However, among all the above villages most of the villages are situated at more than 10 kms with very difficult Ghats. To reach at the Puttasingi PHC with a serious patient becomes really a risky and adventurous effort by passing the big ghats and without any convenient road.

6.1.9 Language: The language is another barrier as a medium of communication between the hospital workers and the people. Language is the basic medium to communicate the problem clearly on which proper diagnosis can be made and the doctor can give better treatment. Learning the language
and health culture of the people are essential for the doctors and health workers who are working specifically among the Adivasis. This is the only way through which the communication gap can be reduced and the problems of patients will be better understood by the doctors and health workers. Because the patient can communicate better in his own dialect or mother tongue than any other medium. The doctor and health workers in this area are almost non-Saoras who rarely understand Sora. The Hill Saoras in contrast are very fond of interacting in their own dialects and very few of them knew Oriya. Basically the women are very poor in communicating in other languages. Majority of the Saora women and can not understand and speak Oriya except a very few young girls. So to explain the physical problems to the doctor is a very difficult task.

6.1.10 Health Infrastructure and Services of PHC: The PHC situated at Puttasingi, 7 kms from Sagad, is very inadequately equipped. The infrastructure facilities are very poor. Some minimum facilities such as medical equipment's, modern instruments upto minimum standard, pathological laboratory, technician, etc. are almost non-existent. First aid facilities for some serious patients to save their life till they reach a good hospital in far away places are also not available. Hospital buildings, rooms for the patient and the overall surroundings are not suitable for good health. The wards are not even cleaned for five to six months. Apart from that the residence of the doctors and medical staffs are very poorly constructed and many of them are enjoying all the 'seasonal cycle' of weather inside their house.

6.1.11 Doctor and Health Workers: One of the major problems found in this area is the availability of doctors. Most of the hospitals are surviving without doctors. They are not willing to stay in the area citing reasons of lack of
modern facilities for their family and for their career. They appear once in a full moon and remain absent for a long time with no accountability. The pharmacist, attendant, dresser, etc. are confused as doctor by the people. They are backed by their political bosses and petty politicians of the locality. In Puttasingi PHC, the only medical centre in the area, there was no doctor since October 2002 to January 2003, the period during which the researcher was conducting his fieldwork. It was informed that the doctor who was here went on study leave for his Post Graduation at Sambalpur. Since then, there is no doctor in the PHC. The pharmacist who comparatively stays in the hospital more than any other is known as the ‘real’ doctor as per the information of the people of that area. He is not only irregular in his duty but also remains absent without leave for a long time.

Living in the long distance and difficult terrain common cold and fever does not motivate the people to come for treatment. For little serious and persistent problems the villagers took pain to come to the PHC where they got only referral to the Gunupur Government Hospital than any thing more. Of course, the health staffs in the village levels are some extent helpful to the people in whatever facilities they have at their hand.

6.2 CONCEPTS AND CAUSES OF ILLNESS AMONG THE INDIGENOUS SOCIETIES

In indigenous and folk societies the concept of disease and illness requires more supernatural rather than physiological or biological explanation. These societies are guided by traditionally laid down customs and every member of the society is expected to authenticate to it. The fate of individual and community at large depends upon their relationship with unseen forces, which intervene in human affairs. Offending those unseen forces invites sickness, death or other natural calamities as a punishment by
mystical power. Sickness is the routine punishment for every lapse and crime meted out to him or her by the spirits. Disease is caused by the breach of taboo or by hostile spirits, the ghosts or the dead.⁴

Clement has classified the primitive concept and cause of disease into three: (i) supernatural cause—soul loss, spirit intrusion, spirit of sickness, breach of taboo; (ii) human cause—evil eye, evil touch, evil mouth, sorcery; and (iii) natural cause.⁵ River has classified the concept of disease into two categories: concept of supernaturalism and sorcery as an expression of contagious magic. He has stated that “a person falls sick due to the projection of morbid object or substance into the body, abstraction of something from the body and acts of sorcery.”⁶

The idea of the causes of illness and death are closely intertwined with the supernaturalism everywhere in primitive society.⁷ Invariably, among the indigenous communities, disease is more frequently given a supernatural interpretation. The naturalistic interpretation of pathology is quite uncommon among these indigenous communities. Therefore, the dominant methods and techniques of treatment of pathology are also supernatural. The societies that are still living considerably with traditional-cultural practices, even after the impact of several external forces, follow the method of supernatural healing. Norbeck has mentioned three important and prominent causes of illness: (i) the ideas of intrusive harmful spirits, intrusive objects, and loss of soul; (ii) breach of taboo, failure to meet ritual requirements and sin; (iii) witchcraft i.e.,

the harmful act by chronically malevolent spirits, and disarrangement of internal organs brought about in various ways or occurring spontaneously.

The belief in intrusive evil spirits is nearly worldwide. Although it is seen more frequently in ‘primitive’ societies, it is also found in some complex societies such as China, Japan and India with intrusive spirits giving rise to disease. Many forms of pathology, whether of the body or the ‘mind’ in indigenous folk societies may be attributed indiscriminately to spirit intrusion and receive the same therapy.

The harbouring in the body of a harmful spirit has its impersonal counterpart in the belief in intrusive objects as the cause of illness. The idea of intrusion by objects is extremely widespread and is probably universal among Indian tribes of the America.8 Foreign substances are projected into the body by witchcraft by harmful spirits or in unspecified manner. Substances that enter the body are extremely varied. An example, given by Dixon among the Northern Maidu of California given the accounts of many intrusive objects such as broken glass, broken crockery, arrow points, bugs or worms of various kinds, young mice, deer-bones, fragments of rock, buttons, bits of wood, bear’s teeth, squirrel bones or teeth, grasshoppers, or bits of iron or nails, insects, etc. These objects are removed from the sufferer’s body by the witch man/shaman.9 Witchcraft may cut across other types of supernatural pathogenesis by causing intrusion of spirits, loss of soul and so on. It makes extensive use of contagious and imitative magic to bring about its effects.

Loss of the soul as the cause of illness, which involves no act by witch or supernatural being, may come about in many ways. The soul might escape through orifices of the body while an individual is asleep. In primitive

8 Edward Norbeck, 1961, op. cit., p. 213.
9 ibid.
societies where the soul is conceived as normally wandering while sleeps, death might come from failure to find its way back to the body before the individual is fully awake.

In his study on Parajas of Orissa Dash has observed that in the perception of Parajas living in the nature human life is governed by the natural agencies and supernatural or unseen forces. Such unseen forces guide the insecurity in every walk of human life. The ways and forms of manifestations are many and variable from society to society. The occurrence of illness is due to the physiological or abnormal conditions of the body as well as aberration of mental, moral or spiritual orders of the individuals in the society. He has reported the basic concept of illness among the Parajas moves around their magico-religious beliefs. Illness and sufferings are caused due to the wrath of the gods and goddesses or debtas, spirit intrusion, sorcery, casting of evil eye or breach of any socio-cultural taboo. Abnormal functioning of the body systems in response to weather, physical environment or any other responsible factor is very rarely attributed as primary cause of illness.

Pal, Bhattacharjee and Guha have classified folk traditional system of medicine of India into three: (i) written traditional system of medicine such as Ayurveda, Sidha, Unani, etc; (ii) oral traditional system of medicine- tribal, family medicine, household remedies, professional and semi professional; and (iii) some components of western medicine. Professional medicines are practiced by specialists like herbalist, midwife, bone-setter, cauterize, cupper, etc., and the semi-professional by the wandering sellers of miracle drugs,

11 ibid.
dentists, snake bite curer, charmers, gunin, etc. However, in their clear observations a lot of medicinal plants employed as drugs in written traditional system of medicine and in modern medicine seek their origin in oral traditional medicine, particularly in the tribal medicine.  

Mann and Mann have subscribed the human sufferings due to the affect of supernaturals and seen the protection and remedial measures for certain things by the same supernatural agency. In the tribal society, they observed, the malevolent and benevolent powers of the spirits causes illness. During the course of treatment enticement, appeasement or prayer and aggressiveness go hand in hand. Because, supernatural elements overpower human beings and human beings too show their opposition at the time no rationale works for them to calm down supernatural. Besides, offering of various kinds, music, dance, sacrifice, etc., remain major contents of such form of gratification of spirits.

In a common observation Sills has mentioned that in all human groups there exist a body of beliefs about the nature, causation and cure of diseases and their relations to other aspects of group life. Religion, morality, disease and its cure are frequently supposed to be interlinked.

Anima Guha has studied the concepts, diagnosis and treatment of diseases among the Boro-Kacharis, a plain tribe of Assam. In her observation good health is an outcome of an honest and pious life, whereas disease and suffering are results of dishonesty, immorality, incest, etc. The Boro perception of illness is that a person falls sick both due to natural and supernatural

13 ibid, pp. 168-169.
causes. She also reported both herbal-natural and supernatural healing methods used by the Boro to cure the invalids. She also divided the supernatural agencies that cause disease into six categories: wrath of God, evil spirits, witchcraft or sorcery, evil eye of the living person, sin committed, and breach of taboo.

Bhattacharya and Sengupta have explored the concept of disease and its treatment among the Birhors of Purulia. In their observation disease is caused by supernatural agents are categorized into four causes: (i) caused by sorcery; (ii) disease is attributed to the evil eyes of the person who have some magical power, mostly affected to the children; (iii) disease caused by object intrusion for susceptible condition of life owing to fatigue and weak health; and (iv) disease caused wrath of Bonga (God) and can be curable through propitiation of spirits. They also found three common measures taken to cure the diseases: magical extraction; administration of medicinal herbs; sacrifices, offerings, prayer to the Bonga; and contact with magical objects like amulets, dietary restriction.

6.3 CONCEPTS AND CAUSES OF ILLNESS AMONG THE HILL SAORAS

The disease and ailments, including major and minor, are always associated with supernaturalism. Even a small cuts or burns or a little ache in the body is viewed as the cause of affliction by the supernatural. Every aspects of social well being of the Hill Saoras immediately refer to the mercy

---

17 ibid., pp. 194-195.
19 Ibid., p. 206.
of supernatural and ancestral deities. Within the supernatural power, the power of ancestral spirits or the dead are very often causes illness in the Saora society. They are called Sonnums in Sora. In his extensive study of the Hill Saoras, Elwin has noticed three important means of the causes of disease: disease caused by the gods, by the dead and by the sorcerer.

The Hill Saora concept of illness is strongly associated with the supernatural cause. Diseases are caused due to the anger and wrath of ancestral and supernatural spirits to whom Hill Saora called Sonnum. In the perception of Hill Saora diseases are inflicted by the supernaturals upon their living kins because of the violation of taboos (Ersee), delay in mortuary rites, disrespect and disobedient to the ancestors, adultery with ones own Birinda relatives, not celebrating harvesting festivals and so on. Besides, the sorcery is another evil acts in Hill Saora society. Sorcery is commonly known as Tanai. A Saora got afraid of once he or she listen the term Tanai because it is such a dangerous act which causes dreaded illness. There has been a strong faith on supernatural healing and no cure is possible without the mercy of supernaturals; even whatever the quantity and kinds of medicine one may take.

In the understanding of Hill Saora the term Asu refers to fever. Suda is understood in two different ways the first meaning is pain and the other is burning sensation in the body. Ruga is the nearest meaning of the term disease. However, all the diseases are named after the Sonnums or using the suffix 'sum' after the illness. Although the term Rugaboi (Ruga + boi) means the woman who brings disease it seems some similarity with the local Oriya language. Regam is understood as antidote or medicine.

Elwin's classification of the agencies that causes disease and illness is based on his extensive and more consistent study of the religion of the Hill
It seems while exploring the cause of illness he has over emphasised on supernatural factors than the natural or physical causes. Although it has entirely agreed on the classification made by Elwin, it has some reservations about his complete rejection of the physiological or natural cause. The researcher during the course of his fieldwork has reported some cases of direct treatment of illness with herbal and natural methods to cure the patient without any supernatural help. As per the information of the traditional healers their forefathers were having the knowledge of practical herbal medicines and were curing the illness in early days which have been transformed from generation to generation. There are cases of giving treatment for dysentery, bone-setting, massage therapy for abdominal hardness and pain, snake bite, dog bite, epilepsy, fertility, contraception and family planning, cough and cold, dysentery, diarrhoea etc., are reported directly from the fieldwork. But there is no specific mention about the natural cause of disease reported by traditional group of the Hill Saoras, although in existence the natural-herbal treatment have been observed. During the course of the fieldwork among the traditional group of the Hill Saoras we have hardly came across any explanation given by the Hill Saoras on the natural or physiological cause of illness. However, as far as the worldview and perception of the Hill Saoras are concerned supernatural come first and the causes of illness are very much the act of magico-religious or supernatural forces, although instances of practical remedies are reported. The following agencies are found to be the cause of illness in the perception of the Hill Saoras: (a) disease caused by celestial

---

20 There is another group within the Hill Saoras who are Christianised have developed a different perception. The natural or physiological cause has taken a front step in their perception. Of course, continuous impact of the way of life of the converts and modern medical facilities, the traditional section of Saora is also following both the modern and their own methods of treatment and physiological perception of illness has started coming in their mind.
apparition; (b) disease caused by dead or ancestral spirits; and (c) disease caused by witchcraft/sorcery.

6.3.1 Disease Caused by Celestial Apparition:

It is very difficult to define and equate the supernatural world and worldview of the Hill Saoras with the great religion like Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, etc. What is the concept of God among these great traditions is not same as in case of indigenous 'little tradition'. That's why we prefer to call it 'celestial apparition', although the term god has been commonly used in many places as there is no suitable single term for it. This needs a little more explanation to justify the concept.

The supernaturals agencies are both malevolent and benevolent in nature. When they bring diseases and dangers their effects are more dangerous than the ancestral spirits or ghosts. It is found that if any one mentioned the word Sonnum (the near synonym of god) to a Saora his first and often only response will be 'disease and danger'.

For example, Madusum causes leprosy, Kannisum epilepsy, Mardisum cholera, Kinnasum virulent attack makes the body as if torn by a tiger's claws, body ache with pierced by thorns, and Uyungsum (the Sun god) who causes leprosy, conjunctivitis, great abscess, fever and headache. They are all categorised not under ancestral spirits or dead but under supernatural deities or divine category or God by the Hill Saoras. But their cause and effects of inflicting human being are not different to the ancestral spirits or malevolent ghosts. Therefore, a preference is made to use the term 'apparition' in combination with the term 'celestial' looking to the Hill Saoras sense of understanding of their nature and effects over the life and health of the society.
The celestial apparitions are believed to be very sensitive to all kinds of neglect or disobedience in part of their living kin. They react immediately and cause illness to any violation of an established taboo. Sickness is the routine punishment for every mistake and crime in relation to gods. In this context Elwin has reported that “Many of the gods are sheer malice. They are furies or demons. The wrath of the gods is wanton and unpredictable; it flares out and destroys the innocent and simple, the most orthodox observer of taboos, the most attentive worshiper.”\(^1\)

A person may fall sick if he or she invades the territory of Kittung in an unauthorised manner. For instance, without offering sacrifice if a person goes to clear the forest patches for swidden he or she fall sick due to the attack of forest deity. Disrespecting the village graveyards (Genuar) while moving is attracted the evil desire of the Sonnums. In case of grazing or roaming alone in the isolated forest area where the abode of gods and spirits are located, the peaceful living of the gods are disturbed who, causes illness to punish the person. The example of Ramia Dalbehera of Dungdunar is worthy to be mentioned here. Ramia has narrated his story: “On the night of December 13\(^{th}\) (2002) I developed a high fever associated with stomach pain and headache. The next day I called my sister-in-law Putti to perform tedung to know the cause of my Fever (Asu). She informed me after tedung that I was seriously drunk last night and defamed my (paternal) uncle Apinda’s spirit by urinating in front of the Genuar (the funeral sites) where the spirit of his uncle was coming to rest.” However, she suggested performing Uyungpur, as demanded by the spirit of Apinada for Uyungsum. This was all known after the tedung (diagnosis through spirit trance) performed by Putti, a Kudanboi of the same village. Later Ramia invited Despa and organised the ritual offering.

Violation of taboos (Erssee) and customs are the frequent cause of illness. Taboos are classified into several types by the Hill Saoras such as sex taboo (incestuous), violation of religious code and customs, food taboo, etc. During 26th November 2002, the researcher observed a case of breach of taboo, in the village Kereba. Dalmati, a small girl aged about nine suddenly got stomach pain and high fever after coming back from the swidden field with her mother. The responsible Sonnum behind the illness was the Uyungsum (Sun deity) as diagnosed by the shaman-healer. The reason behind the attack was that Dalmati had plucked the Ragan (red gram) from the swidden field and ate in raw before celebration of ‘first-eating’ (Abdur) festival called Raganabdur. However, an apology was made by her mother Sirpani on behalf of her child and a cock was sacrificed in the name of the Sonnum and it was later informed that the child got well. The ‘first-eating’ festival that is a must in Saora tradition where the first harvested crop has to be offered to the ancestral and supernatural deities, then can be consumed in the family. To eat the crops without offering is the violation of religious taboo, which attracts serious punishment as a reminder to the offender or to their family members. Even ancestors could not excuse a small child like Dalmati from the breach of taboo committed ignorantly.

6.3.2 Disease Caused by Dead or Ancestral Spirits.

The frequency of illness caused by the ancestral spirits is found more than the illness caused by supernatural apparition. Among the Hill Saoras the motives of the dead to afflict humankind are interesting and more varied. A shade (Kulban) or ancestor can make his presence felt only by being unpleasant to the living kins. The dead are the great nuisance in the Saora society. They are a constant source of drain on the health and the pockets of the living. The more wearisome affair is that a shade (Kulban) after becoming
an ancestor rather creates more vexation. It causes illness for the purpose of not only food, drink and clothing but visits to perpetuate their names in newborn children.

They also create disease to seek company in the under-world because of their loneliness. Some of them need buffalo to plough in the under-world, some visits to see their ornaments and dress, another may need food for tutelary, and other may be angry at failure to repair a shrine erected in honour of them. However, each visit of the ancestors to their living kins is resulted in diseases to the living. Whatever their purpose, good or evil, illness is the medium by which it is understood that Sonnums (the ancestors) have come to express their desire or rage before the living to punish them for their misdeed, if committed by their living kin.

The period between man’s death and Guar—the second mortuary rite is often the period of ill health for the survivors. The status of the dead during this period is shade and it remains vulnerable without shelter, food and proper care in the under-world. After performance of Guar ceremony it is given the status of an ancestor. But during that period it frequently miss the living kins that it left and very often comes to make the family members ill. Therefore, observation has been made that the Guar ceremony is performed as early as possible to avoid frequent illness in the family by the shade (Kulban). The researcher had a chance to observe two events of Guar ceremony, one in village Guddaadaa and the other in Rebjingtal. The Guar ceremony in Guddaadaa was commemorated after 14th days and in Rebjingtal after 16th days of death. Unless there is any serious financial crisis the Guar ceremonies are undertaken as soon as possible to avoid the loss of happiness and good health in the family. For instance, in village Kereba the financial crisis of Ananta's
family his Guar got delayed for one year and performed on 27th December 2002.

Sometimes their survivors ignore the dead. To express their desire the dead use their chief weapons of sickness to their living kins and gives them ill health. In the perception of Hill Saora, ignoring or neglecting the dead means violation of taboo. Especially not offering to the dead ancestors in the socio-cultural occasions is a taboo. The spirits are very sensitive to neglect. They quickly respond by making the careless and forgetful ill. Forgetting to offer sacrifice, failure to mention a name in the invocation, failure to renew a dedicated-pot (Sonnumdang), ignore to draw an icon (Idital), etc., lead to various kinds of illness. The ancestors who are always conservative make their disapproval by making their descendants ill.22 This happens not only in violation of taboos but also in case of irregular marriage, incestuous relations or adultery.

Illness is caused by the deceased due to their anger and jealousy upon their survivors. For instance, a dead husband's spirit found his widow marrying again to a person who was not having good relations with him while he was alive. To show his anger he causes illness to his widow or her new husband. There are several such instances of causing illness informed by the Hill Saoras.

The ghosts of the people who committed suicide or were murdered in a dangerous situation are believed to be more troublesome not only to their own living kins but also for any one passing through their ways. However, these cases are found very rarely. If occasionally found their demands or desires are not so complex and difficult to meet. Of course, there are uncertainties over the kind of demands of the spirits. Some times they

---

demand cloths, wine or a small sacrifice or the things for which they were obsessed while they were alive. A case study of Verrier Elwin would reflect it:

"In the last week of January 1945, Sukhi the wife of Rajmo was taking her little son Mali from her home from Kerubai to visit relatives at Potta. On the way they had to cross a stream where, ten years before, there had been a drowning tragedy. A man called Jora had gone with his daughter from Rejingtalu to Sogeda for a sacrifice; both had got very drunk and on the way home they slipped in the mud of the stream and both were drowned. Although both Guar and Karja ceremonies had been performed, their ghosts continued to haunt the stream, and as Sukki and Mali were crossing, they caught hold of the boy and gave him fever. I (Elwin) was present in Rajmo's house when the shaman made this diagnosis. He passed into trance and the two ghosts came together and said, 'we are father and daughter. We went drunk one night, fell into the stream, and drowned. We had no clothes, for they were carried away by the torrent and now we live naked. We saw this woman and her child and we attacked them to get their clothes. Give us something to wear and we will let them alone.' They were given cloth and a sacrifice of a pig to be appeased and to take away the illness.

The Hill Saoras always live with their ancestors. The entire good and bad omen comes from and taken away by the ancestors only except some actions of the witchcraft. In the common perception all are well and everything goes all right if the living does not disturb the ancestors. But there are exceptions too. Some cases the spirits are visiting to their living kins or loved ones just for the shake of love and affection. Every presence of the ancestral or supernatural spirits is accompanied with some kind of illness, but causing fever is often seen as common symptoms. Of course, there are no

---

malevolent purposes of the spirits. Even for benevolent purposes the visit of
the ancestral spirit has to make some one fever or ill in the family and to make
aware of its presence to the living kins. For instance, a ghost's husband makes
his widow sick unto death does not necessarily mean that he has become
cruel and evil in the other world, but that he loves his wife so much that he
desires to have her with him. The children are the victims in many cases of
these types. The shade of the ancestors visits to children not because of wrath
or anger but because of affection toward their children.

6.3.3 Disease Caused by Witchcraft/ Sorcery

The term sorcery is understood commonly in Sora as Tanai. Ramamurthi, although explored many other similar and related terms in his
dictionary of Saora language, has agreed Tanai as the commonly and most
frequently used term for sorcery. He has also explored some other associated
terms like assola, which means to cast an evil eye; isangaa to ruin by witchcraft;
Kanidan refers to sorcery, molan means evil spirits, poru means to exercise an
evil influence by an evil eyes (Ramamurti: 1938). The people are also using the
local Oriya term Panginia to refer to sorcery.

The art of sorcery is a dangerous act, the illness caused due to this are
more serious in nature. The opinions vary about the existence of sorcery or
witchcraft among the Hill Saoras. For Elwin the fear of black magic plays
comparatively an unimportant part in Saora life; the real enemies of human
health and prosperity are the gods and the dead.24 Sitapati has observed the
prevalent of sorcery in Saora society. For him, there were secret classes of
sorcerer whose main business is to injure their enemies or the enemies of their
employers who are much dreaded and looked upon with suspicion and

contempt. The researcher has agreed on Elwin's statement that 'the enemies of human health and prosperity are gods and dead' may be because of their frequent nature of attack but greatly disagree on his observation that 'fears of magic play an unimportant part in Saora life'. What many of the Saoras informed to the researcher is that the damage done through the act of sorcery is deadly and more dangerous than the acts of non-magical ancestral and supernatural powers. However, Elwin, admittedly, could not observe any incidents of sorcery but had reported the prevalent of some dreadful events in Sagad, Ladde, Borai, Boramsingi (now Badangsing), Kittim (now Kittung), Dantara, and so on. Out of the above Ladde is the most vulnerable. In the past, there were several instances of death and serious physical illness caused by the effects of witchcraft or sorcery. In case of non-magical supernatural cause of illness the ancestral or supernatural spirits are given sacrificial offerings to withdraw their wrath and anger from the 'invalid'. They can be appeased by sacrificial worship and made happy. To seek the blessings or mercy for good-health is comparatively easier in this case. But illness caused due to the acts of sorcery which in some cases detected in late at the time the patient’s condition gets deteriorated. The affliction caused due to sorcery remains for long-time and serious in nature. The case study of Rimoni Karji of Sagad substantiates more explanation to this view.

Case Study: Rimoni Karji/ Sagad/ Female/45/ Traditional.

While explaining the dangerous acts of sorcery (Tanai) and its effects on human health Rimoni says, "Tanai (sorcery) is very dangerous and has a very deadly effect on human health. One can get escape from the disease or illness or fever (assu) caused by our Sonnums but can be very hard-some to get escape from Tanai. It sometimes takes a long time to know about the

application of sorcery. One can not know it as Tanai immediately after its application and takes long if the problem does not persist seriously. During that time the occurrence of physical ailments and illness is thought to be the act of Sonnums. As a result of which we arranged so many sacrifices and worships, one after another from lower sacrifice to the expensive sacrifice, to appease our Sonnums and get the person cure. If our fathers and forefathers cause illness we apologise and pray them with folded hands to take away the disease. They ask us fowl or pig or buffalo or goat and wine (Salap). We give them whatever they demand and they took away the disease. They bless us and assure us for protection from other evil eyed Sonnums. But in case of Tanai it will be very difficult only except the Tanaikummar (witch-shaman), who can detect and heal through his/her sorcery. We are afraid of in hearing about Tanai. The Tanaimar (the sorcerer) applies the sorcery to kill the person upon which he is angry. He sends dangerous bhutas to kill the person for his selfish motive. But now-a-days this practice has been reduced.”

Rimoni also added “The act of sorcery is always applied with ill intention to take revenge against the enemy. Tanai creates very serious and difficult illness in the body. If it is not detected early the person may die or face a death like situation.”

Second argument is that there were good numbers of cases of black magic or sorcery existing among the Hill Saoras. Three important factors that make us to believe the existence of witchcraft among the Hill Saoras:

First, there is reported information about the instances of Tanaipur. Tanipur (tonai + purpur) means witch-worship, the ritual undertaken to heal a person suffering from the actions of a sorcerer by a Tanaikummar. He or she is a special category of shaman who only performs rituals of witchcraft and expert in healing the afflicted by driving or extracting the intruded spirits or
substances from the patients body. They have also good number of presence in Hill Saora society. The very simple logic is that if there is no case of illness due to sorcery there will be no knowledge of remedy and no need of the specialists' healer- the witch shaman. As there is existence of the Tanaikummar (the witch shaman) there is existence of sorcery too, because the culture and systems of indigenous societies are originated on the basis of necessity.

Second, there were many cases of applying sorcery to make the rivals ill, though, could not be reported by Elwin in first hand. But we had an opportunity to observe a Tanaipur at Sagaad, the case study of Dasanti Karji, which is given in the next chapter. The application of sorcery is always ill intentioned and malevolent. As it is a secret and cunning act to make harm to the targeted person, to get access of the sorcerer while he or she apply it is indeed a very difficult matter. The sorcerer who practiced it do it secretly with full confidentially. However, the healing rituals performed by the witch shamans earlier were observed in many instances, are now reduced in great extent.

Thirdly, amongst the medicine men some good number of them knows the medicine for treatment of illness caused due to sorcery. The common people with whom the researcher was interacting to get the information about the knowledge and popularity of medicine men told that majority of the medicine men (Regammar) have the knowledge of Tanairgam (witch medicine). From the total number of 28 medicine men interviewed 7 persons have the knowledge of witch medicine. They are called Tanairegamar-witch medicine men. Out of 7 Tanairegamar, 2 of them are Tanaikumar, means witch shaman, who performs both the role of healing shaman as well as prescribe medicines. This fact is also cross-checked and verified from the experts/ medicine-men. The well-known and recognised medicine men such as Rama, Punda, Pasita,
Mansira, Jemburu, Bipin, and so on have the knowledge of witch medicine. They are basically herbalists but not witch shaman (*Tanaikummar*). The detailed of their practice is referred in their case studies in a tabular form given in the appendix. The most interesting fact is that many of the common informants who informed about the knowledge of these medicine men are Christianised. They are also scared of this black art and believe that the effect of sorcery is very dangerous than any other disease. Many of the plants have magical qualities and used for curing of the patients, who are afflicted by the power of sorcery, even, without any ritual incantations or performance. Therefore, the practice of sorcery (*Tanai*) still has a few appearances among the Hill Saoras, in contrast to the Elwin’s observation. Otherwise there would not have been any practitioners of witch medicine in the community.

The motives of the sorcerer are usually malicious. The learning of sorcery starts with a malicious or malevolent purpose. In cases of property conflicts, personal enmity, inter or intra-*birinda* feuds, zealously, displeasure, etc., this black art of sorcery is applied to take punitive actions or revenge of the rivals or the person of its target. The most usual intention was to cause serious illness that may lead to death or chronic ailments. In early days, it is informed that the incidents of witch practices were causing serious damages to individuals’ life and properties. Sometimes it was creating panic among the villagers. Some villagers were afraid of going another village due to the fact that the numbers of wizard were many and the villages were known for their act of witchcraft and mischievous qualities.

The fear psychosis that was prevalent among the people for the villagers who were practising the acts of sorcery gathered from our previous experience. The researcher was working in the Puttasingi and Sagad area during 1994-95 and was trying to gather the preliminary information about
sorcery and sorcerer in the areas to further explore the information accordingly. Of course we could not succeed in this matter because of the time constraints. When we enquired about the village and some of the name of the sorcerer our Saora friends were afraid of and shown reluctant for our visit to sorcerer and their villages. In the process of interaction, the immediate name they took was of village Ladde and the sorcerer, Dumbru. The way of their expression was very scaring as if the village Ladde is the synonym of the term sorcery (Tanai). Most of our informants discouraged not to go Ladde because the researcher was completely new to that place. Because the past record of the village was so notorious for the acts of sorcery even to talk the name of village or talk to a stranger against the village was a fearsome affair. But now after the death of Dumbru and the spread of Christianity the notorious character of the village has been changed. At least people are now visiting freely. The government officials, teachers, medical staffs are now camping in the village. There is no case of sorcery reported from the village.

The acts of sorcery are always applied through the 'intrusive' techniques to make a person ill. Both direct and indirect methods are employed in the process of applying the power of sorcery through 'intrusion'. The sorcerer causes illness broadly into two different ways or methods of intrusion.

The first method of causing illness adopted by the Hill Saora wizard is the 'intrusion of spirits' into the body. The art of black magic is applied through the spirits. The spirits are the carrier of the evil power or desire of the sorcerer to the individual concern or the person to whom it has targeted. The spirits are sent through the help of intermediaries or tutelary. The gods or ancestral spirits are motivated through whom the evil desires are sent to the person to make him or her ill. Every acts of sorcery is caused or manifested
with illness and damage to the life and property of the victims. The loss of property such as the attack of household animals, damage of crops, etc., are caused by sending Kinnasum (the god of the forest represents tiger god) in the form of tiger or any other wild animals. In many cases it has been informed that the ghosts of the persons who have died in dangerous or violent death are sent as the medium spirits to carry out the evil desire of the sorcerer. The spirits or ghosts of the persons died in suicide, murder, accident (falling from the trees), etc. are of this category. They are motivated and sometimes dominated or controlled by the power of the sorcerer to act according to his or her will and direction. The diseases or illness caused by spirit intrusion depends upon the kind of Sonnums or spirits sent and the purpose detected by the Tanaimar (sorcerer). Major afflictions are found in the acts of intrusion are leprosy, stomach disorder like stomach pain, swelling, high fever, blood vomiting, chronic dysentery, etc.

The second means and technique of making a person ill is through 'intrusion of alien objects'. This method is more common in comparison to the former. The numbers of victims by this method are many. The intrusion of the objects into the body of the victim is basically a direct method employed by the sorcerer to harm the rival of its evil target. In this case the help of intermediary also has not required. The objects of intrusion intruded into the body in two ways. First, way of the intrusion made with magical spell combine with the alien objects of intrusion but not with the help of intermediaries. Second the intrusion of objects or magical substances directly mixing with food drinks, etc. For instance, mixing of the magical elements in the wine of Sago palm (Caryota urens) is an easiest way adopted by the sorcerer. Because the trees are generally situated at the swidden field and nearby forests and hills, in a distance from the village, usually isolated from
public attention, where people generally go for drink daily. Apart from wine, mixing of the magical objects in food, especially with *Uabkul* (rice mixed with a sour leaves)—the staple food for the *Saoras*, as a means to cause illness by the witch.

The substances or objects used for the purpose of intrusion are not universal to every sorcerer. There are variations but many of the objects used by them are reported and can be better identified by the *Saora Tanaikummar* (witch shaman) and medicine men. The objects of intrusion commonly found, as informed by Ekep Dalbehera of *Dungdungar*, are hair, nail, spittle, fowl's bone, pig's bone, rice chilli, human bone stolen from funeral pyre, insects of different varieties, the roots and leaves of the plants, the magical and herbal substances, some excreta of animals, bristles of the pig, legs of the crabs, caterpillar, chameleon bone, lizard and so on. However, each sorcerer in the act of its black magic does not use all the objects. That depends upon the objects with which he or she has learning.

The kinds of objects applied can be identified by other witch or witch shamans because of their familiarity with the objects found during the course of regular touch in the performance of rituals and about the learning of the sorcerer in the locality. The name of the sorcerer some times revealed but mostly avoided keeping in view of avoiding conflict and violence.

**6.4 THE CHANGING NOTION OF ILLNESS**

The notion of illness of the Hill Saoras has undergone a perceptible change with the flow of time. There are several factors responsible for the change the concept and causes of illness, which include modernization, spread of Christianity, migration, impact of education and development projects. Out of the above two of the most important factors have very
powerful impact on the changing perception and attitude of the Hill Saoras: the first and foremost is Christianity and the second factor is migration.

The convert Saoras have different notion of illness. They believe in practical and natural line of action. Missionaries have created awareness among the converts regarding the practical or physiological causes of illness and practical medicines to cure diseases. Christianity could make an inroad into the Saora territory mainly through the modern health care facilities provided by the missionaries to keep away the people from their expensive and 'superstitious'26 tradition of healing through sacrificial rituals. Living in close interaction with their convert kith and kins, the non-converts have shown some change in their attitude and taken the help of modern allopathic medicine. Thus, the impact of the way of life of the converts over the non-converts has changed their perception of the causes and cure of illness. The modern practices of medicine are found some good degree of acceptance today by the non-converts.

Migration of the Hill Saoras to Assam dates back to pre-Independence time. They have been in constant contact with many other communities and the outside world as well. Their attitude towards the way of life got changed and they are attracted towards the modern way of life. They came in contact with allopathic system of medicine. Whenever, they fall sick they took the help of allopathic treatment, because, organising healing rituals at Assam was a difficult matter. By this way the practical or natural cause of illness slowly entered into the notion of the Hill Saoras. Besides, the impact of education, development projects and modern health care services has developed some kind of awareness about the physiological cause of illness among the people.

26 The outsiders or modernist interpretation of the practice of healing the patient through rituals and sacrifices is superstitious and blind belief.
6.5 ECO-SYSTEM AND THE CONCEPT OF ILLNESS

Illness and disease have become perennial problems ever since the emergence of man on earth. To meet these challenges each society is found to evolve some kind of value system within its own ‘ethno-science’ for the concept and treatment of diseases. Apart from some universal common perception to all societies there are unique perceptions as well. The variable perceptions of health and diseases are defined according to the unique socio-cultural systems, environmental factors or conditions and perceptions.27

Regarding the origin of the large number of medicines nothing is known practically. The remedies resorted to in various diseases are quite startling. From ancient past the tribal have hit upon some herb in some way or another and found it efficacious. They have been tried the same for complaints other than those it was originally used for, and have in this way, been guided by experience. But their uses are not so far recorded in literature or at least that particular medicinal property which the tribal attribute to the plants is not known.

To the adivasis all fevers seem alike, which hardly makes any difference between simple fever, fever due to malaria, pneumonia typhoid, influenza, etc. Similarly he treats all stomach pains on the same footing whether it is dysenteric or constipation or other intestinal disorder. So far as diagnosis of the disease is concerned, the adivasis face great difficulty, particularly when they are confronted with anything different from common disease of everyday occurrence. Most of the diseases are symptomatic.

The occurrence of disease has always depends upon the conditions of local environment and eco-system. Although physical environment and its

conditioning contribute the occurrence and kinds of diseases, these causes are
not considered by the traditional Saora. But in reality local/ physical
environment is the determining factor for the occurrence of diseases and
ailments. For instance, there are some types of diseases that are vulnerable to
a particular area do not visible in other areas. Because, some climate may
suitable to breed one some type of diseases may not favourable to other
diseases. Therefore, the environmental conditions of the area are the
determinant for the occurrence of illness. Good environment promotes good
health and bad one makes vulnerable. Hence, the conditions of local
environment and ecosystem together with socio-cultural practices are the
responsible factors observed as the causes of illness among the Hill Saoras.

The common diseases found among the Hill Saoras are malaria, viral
fever, gastro-intestinal disorder, diarrhoea, dysentery, respiratory troubles
(bronchitis), hook warm and round worm infections, skin diseases, etc. Cases
of tuberculosis, rheumatism, epilepsy, etc., are also seen. Besides, there are
many cases of mal-nutrition reported in common among the children.

The territory of Hill Saora especially the village roads and forests are
dominated with the population of tamarind (Tamarindus indica) which even
people do not cut because of its economic value and good source of income
including household consumption. It is a common believe and perception that
the environment (air) tamarind tree is vulnerable to leprosy (Madu), therefore
there cases of leprosy found in this area. Therefore, the present medicine men
who are giving medicines for Madusum (leprosy) very strictly prescribe not to
eat of the tamarind product. It is said those, in early days, the number of
leprosy patients were many in Hill Saora villages of Gunupur area. This
researcher had a chance, during 1994-95, to observe many cases of leprosy
patient in Puttasingi and Sagad area, which were given treatment by The
Hainna, a voluntary organization working for free treatment and eradication of leprosy. The Hainna volunteers were working hard in the hill villages by creating awareness and identifying the patients visiting from village to village. In fact, the volunteers were from the same Saora speaking community. The treatment given by the doctors and health workers of the organization directly at the doorstep of the people became quite successful.

The great trouble in this territory of the Hill Saoras is malaria. Living in the forested highland the villages are surrounded with forest. The large area flooded for rice cultivation that provided ideal breeding ground for mosquitoes. The breeding grounds are close to villages as the Hill Saoras always choose to build their settlement near plenty of paddy lands and facilities of water stream. During rainy season the breeding of mosquitoes are comparatively higher and there are many more people suffered from malaria. Bell[28] through his investigation reported 44 species of anopheline mosquito to be found in India; no fewer than 23 have been discovered in the Koraput district from which the present Rayagada district has been created.

Working hard in the difficult hill terrain Hill Saora suffers many physical ailments related to bones and muscles frequently. Rheumatism-Rere, Danurja, Diasu, etc., are some of the common occurrence. There are many other related problems in the living surrounding of the Hill Saoras, which favour sufficient ground to cause diseases and ailments.

28 Bell was a doctor technician working in the health care system in Koraput district and several parts of tribal India. This description was given before 1950 in page 94 of his report, quoted by Elwin, 1955, pp. 219.
Summary

The chapter has examined the concept and causes of illness among the Hill Saoras. It is found that unlike the modern-mainstream societies the concept and causes of illness among the Hill Saoras is supernatural. It has explored three important agencies that causes illness in the perception of the people are: celestial apparition, dead or ancestral spirits and sorcery. In the traditional perception of the Hill Saoras no reference is made to the natural or physiological cause of illness. However, with the change of time and impact of external agencies like conversion, migration, education and modern health care services the natural cause of diseases have been slowly realised by all. The coverts' perception of illness is completely practical and physiological because the very idea of conversion started through the day people got the idea of modern medicine. Despite massive conversion there a noticeable sizes of population still are relying on the supernatural cause illness, which are evident in their practice of supernatural therapy. The next chapter which is the extension of this chapter will focus on different therapeutic practices prevailing in the indigenous healing traditions of the Hill Saoras.