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Some Scientific Customary Health Practices of Hindu Brahmins of Nalbari and Barpeta Districts of Assam, India.

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Abstract

The customary practices among various communities are a result of accumulation of knowledge of many generations over a long period of time. Many customary practices are associated with the health of human in some way. The Assamese Brahmins also practice many customary health practices, which affect the overall health of the human body in many ways. In this study, the customary health practices of Brahmins of Nalbari and Barpeta districts of Assam have been studied. Many practices related to various daily and seasonal activities are prevalent among the Assamese Brahmins. Some such practices are associated with daily activities like cooking, bathing and eating. Customary practices associated with seasonal activities like festivals, Puja and Naam-Kirtan also finds an important place in their lifestyle. Modern day research has elaborated the scientific bases of many such practices followed by Assamese Brahmins. Some practices like fasting can help in keeping the body metabolism in check, leading to a healthy life. Many practices related to children, women and men helps in maintaining the childhood ailments, pregnancy and overall health of the people. The stringent customary practices, which are hard to follow in the present day world, are losing the frequency of use during the present days, leading to extinction of such practices, which evolved over long periods of time. Such customary practices can be utilized effectively for preventing present day ailments and also for cure without the use of any additional medicines or medical therapy.

Keywords : *Customary, Assamese, Brahmin, health practices, scientific.*

Introduction

Assam is the second largest state of northeast India, located between 24°2'–27°6' N latitude and 89°8'–96° E longitude, covering a total area of 78438 sq. Km (www.assam.gov.in). The population of this north-eastern state shows lot of heterogeneity, ranging from Australo-Asiatics, Dravidians, Negretos, Tibeto-burmese, Indo-Mongoloides and the Aryans. All these groups together form the community Ashomiya (Assamese) which have contributed to the region in various spheres. The Brahmins of Assam Valley belongs to the group of Indo Aryans,

with their origins from far away places like Odisha, West Bengal and Kannauj (assam.gov.in). Agriculture is the main occupation and rice is the main staple food of the Assamese people. The customary practices among various communities are a result of accumulation of knowledge of many generations over a long period of time. They are related to various spheres of human life and society. Many such customary practices are associated with the health of human in one way or the other. The Assamese Brahmins also practice many customary health practices, which affect the overall health of the human body in many ways. In this study, the customary health practices of Brahmins of Nalbari and Barpeta districts of Assam have been studied. Every Brahmin family among the community belongs to a definite Gotra (Brahmin Identity Surname), which is unique to every family depicting their lineage. The Assamese Brahmins are identified by characteristic surnames which include Sharma/Sarma, Goswami, Bhagabati, Barooah, Chakravarty and many others, Assamese Brahmins follow the legacy practices of Hinduism similar to the rest of the sect in mainland India. The customary practices are many and it requires lots of additional efforts to adhere to them. The practices find widespread uses, ranging from daily activities to seasonal, yearly, and decadal or spanning even longer. Customary rituals of first menstruation are found in most of Sri Lanka's many ethnic groups (Winslow, 1980). Though all the practices do not find their efficacy in health, many of the practices are associated with health in various ways. A challenge to follow these practices and the impact of globalization has taken the toll on many such practices, resulting in diminishing frequency of use of such practices by the Assamese Brahmins.

Study Area:

The study was done in the Nalbari and Barpeta districts of Assam, India. The study was done in the area between two districts Nalbari and Barpeta. The geographical location of the study area is 26.4758° N- 26.5119° N and 91.1809°- 91.2674° E longitude. A total of six villages Kshudra Bhaluki, Bebejiapara, Tihu, Makhibaha, Konimara and Haribhanga are taken for the study. The altitude of the area ranges from 50 to 89 metres above mean sea level. The nearest national highway is NH 37; still some of the nearby regions could see the face of electricity only two years back, indicating the prevalence of traditional customary practices among the Assamese Brahmins. The total population of the study area is 79000 (Census, 2011) of which almost 16% are Assamese Brahmins. The data were collected through interaction with the villagers with the help of questionnaire method and open ended interviews of semi-restrictive nature, group discussion and site visitation by the author. The study was done during the year 2010-2016.

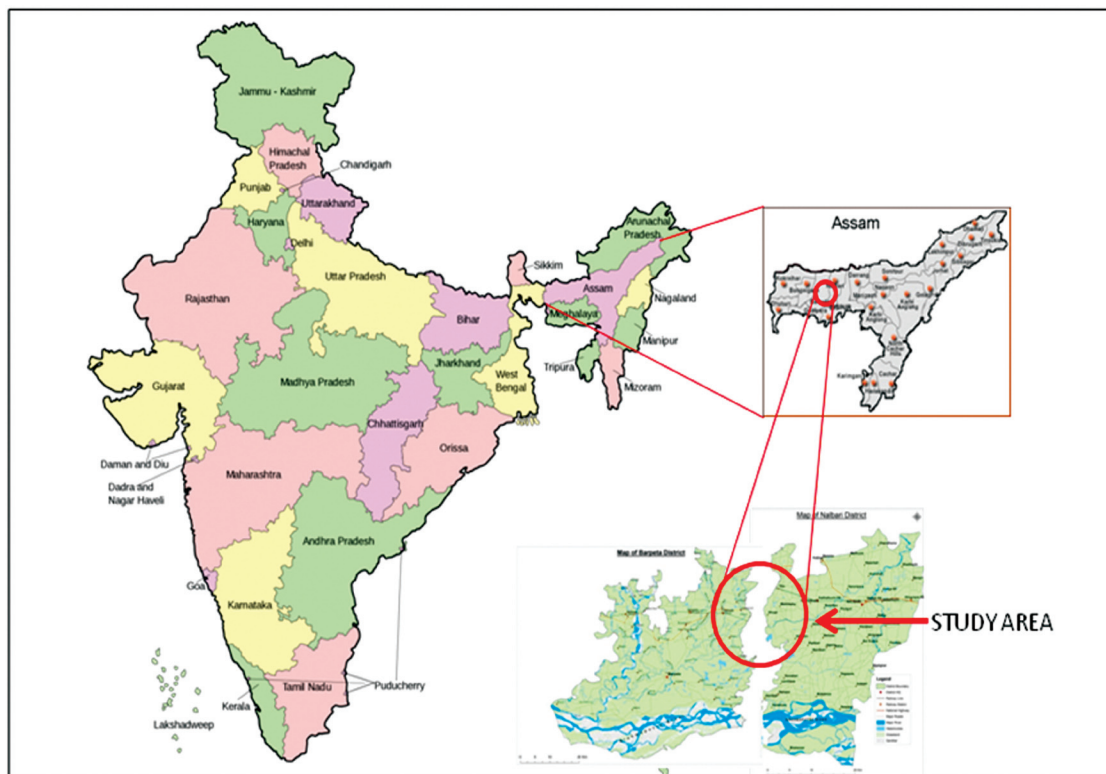


Fig: Study Area map (not to scale). (Courtesy: assam.gov.in)

Results

Customary practices related to pregnancy and childbirth

Many customary practices were related with the birth of a child. The practices include taking care of the mother since conception. The assessment of time of conception was done by the traditional last menstrual period. In addition to rest, many activities and food habits are restricted during the period of conception till the birth of the baby. The pregnant women are not allowed to cook in their advanced stages and are permitted to do light nature of works only. The eating of papaya and pineapple is prohibited till the birth of the baby. Intake of fruits and vegetables is encouraged during pregnancy. Fish protein and meat is also fed to such women at regular intervals. The Parents of the conceived women visits her house to feed her various delicacies and food items on the 5th or 7th month of pregnancy. Other close relatives also visit the house to feed the conceived women various delicacies.

Customary practices during festivals, e.g., bihu.

During Bohag Bihu, which represents the onset of spring and the Assamese New Year, celebrated during the month of April, a cooked recipe of 101 different varieties of Saak (leafy vegetables) is to be taken along with food. Different types of Pithas (cakes) made from rice,

jaggery, til, coconut and other delicacies were consumed during Bohag Bihu. Some of the Bihu folk songs, the Bihu Naam is practiced during Bohag Bihu. The Magh Bihu, another type of the three Bihus is celebrated during the month of January, characterized by grand feast. The Grand feast, which is usually the best throughout the whole year, includes varieties of meat, big fish, eggs, yam (*Dioscorea* sp.). Yam is one of the major components of the feast, which is not usually taken during other times of the year.

Customary practices related to kitchen hygiene

As the society consists of the men doing the outdoor works, the kitchen is maintained by the womenfolk. The womenfolk, after getting up from the bed in the morning will go for the usual morning activities like brushing the teeth and going to the toilet. Afterwards, they can enter the kitchen only after a full body bath. It is considered irreverent to enter the kitchen without proper bath. Moreover, the menstruating women are not allowed inside the kitchen. During those days, the male member of the family cooks the food.

The footwears are not allowed inside the house. Though some leniency is there for bringing the footwear inside the other rooms, they are totally restricted in the kitchen.

Morning bath

Everybody in the house must bathe in the morning before taking food. After that the people go out for their daily works. After bath, prayer is to be done, which is practiced differently by different people, lighting agarbattis (fragrant sticks), and then blowing a shankha (conch shell). After Puja (prayer), a tikka is taken in the forehead, which is usually red Chandan, the paste made from the wood of *Pterocarpus santalinus*, white chandan (*Santalum album*) or some other compound. Bath is compulsory before attending a puja. The prayer should always be performed with bare foot.

Customary fasting rituals

Most of the people belonging to Assamese Brahmin community, especially the priests performing rituals, practice fasting on some day of the week. The women usually fast on Monday, which is the day of Lord Shiva, whom they appease for his blessings. Other auspicious days are Thursday and Saturday. Fasting types also vary according to occasions. During usual fasting, the person will not eat any cooked food during the whole day. He/she can take traces of fruits or liquid food like tea or fruit juice. Vegetarian food can be taken at night to break the fasting. In case of rigorous rituals, as during shraddha (a form of ritual), death rituals etc, the person concerned can take only boiled rice, potato and salt. Such practice is known as Hobish.

Customary practices during Puja (Religious rituals)

In every Assamese Brahmin home, certain rituals are performed over a specific time span. The rituals known as Pujas, are done to serve various purposes. A very common form of such Puja is Satyanarayan Puja, which is done at least once a year by most of the Brahmin families. Many customs followed during the puja are rigorous, requires many ingredients, processes, a pujari (the religious hymn pronouncing performer) and few audiences who are usually

the close aides of the person conducting the puja. Many other pujas are also performed which are Jagaddhatri, Laxmi, Saraswati, Kali, Durga puja etc. The form of puja may vary which may include praying the deity, without deity, naam kirtan etc. The time span of puja may vary from one hour to two days or even more in certain circumstances. The pujas include a sequential event of many rituals, performed with various materials derived from natural sources. Prasad (eatable to be served after the ritual), which is served to God, is distributed among all the people present. The prasad mainly comprise of Bengal gram (*Cicer arietinum*), moong (*Vigna radiata*) and pieces of miscellaneous fruits, with traces of rice, ginger and salt. Some additional dishes like payaas (sweet rice delicacy), bhog (prepared from flour, banana, ghee etc) and other items are also prepared depending upon the type of puja. A pinch of rice is to be taken on the head before eating the Prasad.

Practices during Naam-Kirtan

The people use to sing diverse religious and folk songs during various rituals (puja) and other occasions (bihu etc). Such programme, known as naam-kirtan, is supplemented by simultaneous clapping of both hands in various forms and at different intervals. The members present, be it men, women and children, take part in the clapping ritual. Subsequently after Naam Kirtan, Prasad is distributed among the audience.

Customary rituals during wedding

Among the Assamese Brahmins, most of the weddings are arranged by the parents or guardians of the bride and the groom, giving rise to the term arranged marriage. Most of the customary weddings are arranged marriages, but during present days, instances of the bride and the groom arranging marriage for themselves is also gaining prevalence. During customary wedding, many tedious rituals are to be performed, which involves members from both the families of the bride and the groom. The parents of both bride and the groom, a leader from the grooms side, usually a maternal uncle and the bride's brother plays certain roles, in addition to the roles by the common people from both families. The groom is assisted by his best friend, the Dara-dhara, who keeps an umbrella over his head and assists in every possible way during the wedding. In case of any untoward incident leading to the death of the groom, the Dara-dhara will have to marry the girl. On the auspicious night of wedding, the groom leaves for the house of the girl, performs 'hom'(wedding ritual in front of the Fire God), encircles the home along with the bride and brings the bride to his home. The event is rigorous and last a whole night.

Aathmangla

After marriage, the bride returns to her paternal home. On the eighth day, the groom, along with some of his friends to have a feast in the girl's home and then take the bride back to his home.

Customary practices related to men.

There are many customary rituals related to male gender. These include many practices, some of which are as described below:

Rituals during Surakaran

The hairs of the young boys are not cut until they are in the 3rd year of their life. In the third year, the long hairs of the boys are clean shaven, smeared til-maah-halodhi, or Sesame (*Sesamum indicum*), Black lentil (*Vigna mungo*) and Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) mixture, and then bathed under a banana (preferably *Musa pardisiaca*) tree. Prayer is offered to the God with a mention of directions and many mathematical calculations pertaining to the cutting of hair. The father, along with the boy performs the rituals including fasting. The bathing of the boy after haircut is done by the mother and the other female members of the family.

Rituals during Lagundani

One of the most auspicious ceremony, the thread ceremony or the Lagundani is next to marriage in terms of importance in a man's life. The Lagun, (thread encircling the shoulder and the body from left to right), considered very sacred among the Brahmins, prepares a boy to shoulder responsibilities as a man. Upon gaining the Lagun, the man must recite Gayatra Mantra (Religious hymn) regularly, practice self control, abstain from taking alcohol and making physical relationship with women, and regularly pray to God.

Customary practices related to women.

There are many customary rituals related to female gender. These include many practices, some of which are as described below:

Practices during menstruation.

The womenfolk practice certain rituals during their period of menstruation. During their menses, they do not sleep with the husband; rather they sleep on the ground or another bed during that period. Such period of menstruation is called as Sua-laga, during which they cannot cook food or pray.

The women are not allowed to touch any other person during their menstruation period. If someone wishes to give her something, he should drop the thing on the ground and she will pick it up from the ground.

Customary rituals during death

The dead are burnt on a pyre of wood to ensure their safe disposal, away from human habitation. The pyre is constructed in a cemetery located far away from the village. The children and the women are not allowed in the cemetery or view the burning ritual. The people who went to the cemetery for smouldering the dead, upon reaching home, will not enter the house. At first, he will take off all the clothes and bathe outside the house, washing his body completely. The clothes are not to be taken inside the house. They are to be kept outside, dipped in water and to be washed and dried outside the house. Only after that the clothes can be brought inside. Also, the person, after bath must enter the house only after warming himself on a fire lit on straw by the other family members. Post death of any person, the other family members much perform multiple rituals which span to 3 days, 10th day, 11th day, exactly one year after death and the same day on the subsequent years. Only boiled vegetarian items can be eaten by the family

members during the first 10 days of the incident.

Discussion

It was observed that the Brahmins of Assam Valley, especially from Nalbari and Barpeta Districts, practices many customary practices which are directly or indirectly related to individual as well as community health. A detailed discussion of the practices discussed above and their implications are described below.

Customary practices related to pregnancy and childbirth

One third of babies born in India are of low birth weight (< 2.5 kg) (Gopalan 1994, UNICEF 1998). The consumption of foods that are important sources of micronutrients, such as dairy products, meat, fresh fruits and green leafy vegetables is also low in rural Indian populations (Gupta and Sharma, 1980) as a whole. Various customary practices among the Assamese Brahmins aid in preventing malnutrition of child and the pregnant mother which includes taking physical and dietary care of the mother since conception. The pregnant women are not allowed to cook food and allowed to do light household works and take rest. Food habits of the pregnant mother differ from other members of the family, which includes certain restrictions like preventing the eating of papaya and pineapple till the birth of the baby. Papaya and Pineapple have abortifacient effects which may lead to abortion (Pakrashi and Basak, 1976). Encouragement of fruit and vegetable intake ensures micronutrient supplementation. Birth size was strongly related to intakes of green leafy vegetables and fruits at 28 wk gestation and of milk at 18 wk gestation. Specific micronutrients, or their combinations, are essential for fetal growth. For example, green leafy vegetables are a rich source of folate, iron, provitamin A carotenoids and antioxidants (Rao, et. al., 2001). Feeding ceremonies by the parents and the relatives further strengthen the dietary needs of foetus and the mother.

Customary practices during festivals, eg., Bihu.

Though in minimal amounts, vitamins and minerals play a very important role in maintaining various functions of the human body. Taking of various recipes, especially the mixture of 101 vegetables during Bohag bihu (Begam and Gogoi, 2006) ensures the dietary supplementation of any micronutrient in our body. Moreover the intake of various forms of rice in the form of pitha, especially red rice, provides antioxidants which can delay the ageing process. Red rice is rich in antioxidants (Walter et. al., 2013, Trindade and Goufo, 2014). Other food items like jaggary, til, coconut etc are used to make various delicacies, which are not consumed during usual days, supplements the body with various nutrients. Similarly intake of yam (*Disocorea* sp.) has many health benefits including boosting of immunological activity in the body (Zhao et. al., 2005). The low sodium but high potassium and total dietary fibre contents indicate the possible preventive role that *Dioscorea alata* could play in managing related chronic diseases. Thus, *Dioscorea alata* can be used as a functional food to supplement the fiber and mineral needs of consumers.

Customary practices related to kitchen hygiene

The kitchen is the source of food, which is the primary requirement of the body. Also,

food is one of the major pathways for entry of germs into the body. By maintaining cleanliness in the kitchen, many diseases in the family can be averted. Reports state that in mild, sporadic cases infection from *Campylobacter jejuni* may result from cross contamination from kitchen hygiene practices (Rodrigues et. al., 2001). *Campylobacter jejuni* is one of the most common cases of food poisoning in the developed countries like USA. Customary practices of entering the kitchen only after a full body bath ensures elimination of any contamination in the kitchen. The footwear is also a major carrier of germs from outside to the kitchen and home (Dalton, 2010). Restricted entry of footwear also diminishes the chances of contamination of kitchen by pathogens from outside the house.

Morning bath

Bathing in the morning before taking food reinforces the safety associated with eating as the pathogens are washed away from the body. The process of bathing is usually pleasurable and relaxing for most persons and, although it serves hygienic needs (Cohens-Mansfield and Parpura-Gill, 2007). Thus the morning bathing keeps a person cool and relaxing as compared to a person who do not undergo a similar process. Blowing a shankha (conch shell) tones up the muscles of the respiratory passage, thus helps in reducing snoring and obstructed sleep apnoea (Taneja, 2015). Moreover, the sound of Shankha is said to stimulate the hair cells of inner ear and helps in preventing the ageing hearing loss (Taneja and Quereshi, 2015). Red chandan (*Pterocarpus santalinus*) paste rubbed on the forehead by the Assamese Brahmins are proved to have free radical scavenging activity (Arokiyaraj et. al., 2008), thus acting as an antioxidant and delaying ageing. Moreover, the wood of red chandan is also found to have wound healing property (Biswas et. al., 2004). Thus the use of tikka as a customary practice finds its usefulness in the maintaining good among the population. The performance of prayer with bare foot, as done by the Assamese Brahmins, causes significant changes in heart rate and electroencephalogram changes. A study of finger acupressure on *planta pedis* (both soles) in the Japanese people (Sagihara et. al., 2007) indicated noteworthy changes with decreased heart rates and variation of EEG responses.

Customary fasting rituals

Dietary Fasting is a major component of the lifestyle of majority of Assamese Brahmins. Many recent scientific studies indicate relation of health to food and positive impacts of controlled fasting in maintaining good health along with prevention and control of many diseases (Spindler, 2009). In a study, mean plasma glucose decreased from 88 +/- 3 to 63 +/- 5 mg/dl and serum insulin from 16 +/- 1 to 10 +/- 1 microU/ml as a result of fasting (Boden, et. al., 2011). There are evidences of association of fast with lower levels of body mass, total cholesterol, LDL-C, and the LDL-C/HDL-C ratio in the Greek Orthodox Christian fasting periods (Tripanowski and Bloomer, 2010). Such effect of fasting may help in maintain a good health and controlling many diseases such as CDV (cardiovascular diseases) and diabetes. In addition to fasting during the day, the intake of simple vegetarian diets by the Assamese Brahmins on the evening of fast increases the efficiency of fasting in terms of control over these parameters.

Customary practices during Puja (Religious rituals)

The conduct of religious rituals involves many processes, some of which is associated with health. The systematic approach to conduct a puja develops cognitive reasoning and inculcates scientific temperament in the individuals. Use of chandan, movement in bare foot, fasting, and performing the rituals during the conduct of puja creates a positive impact on health as described elsewhere in this paper. The Prasad consisting of Bengal gram, moong and fruits is very nutritious and creates an opportunity for the people to supplement the dietary needs of the body which otherwise remains unnoticed, as fruit and vegetable consumption usually remains very low (Kollataj et. al., 2011). These eatables are not a part of usual diet and hence play an important role in the maintenance of health. The bhog prepared from flour, banana, ghee etc. also help to raise serotonin (Feldmen and Lee, 1985) levels, which keeps the mind pleasant.

Practices during Naam-Kirtan

Clapping of both hands during Naam Kirtan, also affects the acupressure points in the hands, which stimulates various organs of the body. There are evidences supporting reduction of postoperative nausea and vomiting after gynaecological laparoscopic surgery by Korean hand acupressure (Boehlar, et. al., 2002).

Customary practices during wedding

Arranged marriages among the Assamese Brahmins is mediated through the families of the bride and the groom, and creates a sequence of events which plays a very important psychological role in the maintenance of marriage between the couple. The rituals which are performed surrounding the 'hom' is succeeded by certain games which are played between the bride and the groom, and prepares the bride mentally to adjust to the new role and environment of a wife (Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton, 2001).

Customary practices related to men.

Rituals during Surakaran

Clean shaving the hairs of the young boys during surakaran helps in luxuriant growth of hair (Ogawa and Hattori, 1983). It stimulates the brain and nerves of the head. Rubbing of til, black lentil, and turmeric stimulates the hair follicles and facilitates healthy hair growth. Fasting and other related rituals during surakaran facilitate healthy mind and body as described above.

Rituals during Lagundani

Inclusion of new practices upon receiving the lagun, such as the reciting of Gayatri Mantra, makes a person disciplined, induces mental peace and keeps the body healthy. Abstaining from alcohol helps in keeping many diseases at bay, which may include liver diseases, hypertension and brain atrophy. Pathological and neuroimaging studies have shown that chronic alcohol abuse causes brain atrophy (McCorkindale, et. al., 2016). Restricting physical relationship with women until marriage helps in keeping a check on the sexually transmitted diseases (Diclemente et. al., 2007).

Customary practices related to women.

Practices during menstruation.

Sleeping alone during the menstruating period helps to check many sexually transmitted diseases in both the male and the female. Research has shown that the chances of sexual infection are very high if sexual activity or intercourse is performed during the period of menses. There is a strong statistical association between sexual intercourse during menstruation and self-reported STD (sexually transmitted diseases) history (Tanfer and Aral, 1995). Moreover, as HIV has been found in menstrual fluids, intercourse during menses places male partners at increased risk for acquiring HIV through heterosexual intercourse (Alexander, 1990). Abstaining from cooking, puja and other heavy works during menses ensures limited energy utilization, which is essential for the women, as she gets weakened at that period of time (Dalton, 1960). Infections due to lack of hygiene during menstruation may lead to many diseases, as reported in many studies (Khanna et. al., 2005, Mudey et. al., 2010). Thus, the period of menses or Sua- laga and the related customary practices plays a very important role in the maintenance of health in the Assamese Brahmin women. The restricted entry of women into the kitchen during menses also prevents contamination, as a menstruating female may facilitate entry of germs into the kitchen. The hormonal levels of the women during menses i.e., high progesterone due to presence of corpus luteum, results in increased chances of infection, and suppressed by the removal of corpus luteum or injection of estrogen (Rowson, et. al., 1953) . The practice of not touching any other people during menses can prevent contamination by contact, both to and for the women.

Customary practices during death

Burning the dead ensures the safe disposal of the corpse. Burning leads to total destruction of the body, any pathogens within and also ensures that no pathogen can survive as the dead body can be used as host for multiplication and transmission of disease (Watson et. al., 2007). The location of cemetery away from the village minimise the chances of contamination from the dead bodies or their remains. Studies have proven that the dead bodies can transmit various diseases and act as a complex setting for inter-specific transmission of pathogens (Ladnyj et. al., 1972). The restricted entry of women and children in the cemetery has a very important role in maintaining a psychological balance of women and children, as such disturbing views may disrupt their psychology (Ursano and Mccarol, 1994). Removal of clothes and bathing after coming from the cemetery guarantee proper sanitization, as cemeteries may be a source of dirt and pathogens (Grigaliūnaitė and Matalis, 2014).

Conclusion

Many customary health practices are observed the Hindu Brahmins of Assam Valley, especially the Barpeta and Nalbari districts of Assam. The customary practices are changing their form and nature with time. Most of the health practices described here play a major role in maintaining proper health of the populations. The health practices are related all sections of the family including men, women and children. The practices range from daily to annual rituals and include most of the stages of life from birth to death. Also, the rituals include many small but significant events like cooking, bathing, eating, daily activities etc. The practices described here

can be useful, if used consistently and with a true value. Modern day research has reinforced most of the beliefs practiced by Assamese Brahmins to be having specific importance and purpose for better survival of human beings. But adherence to such strict and stringent practices in the modern day world has led to dilution of these customary practices and resulted in their decreased usage among the present generation of individuals. Lesser use of such practices may lead to the extinction of the precious knowledge the ancestors of these people have incorporated in the form of customary practices. Further studies are required to look deeply into the customary health practices of Assamese Brahmins, so that more scientific relevance can be brought out through scientific studies. The accumulations of such knowledge over the generations, and their practice in maintaining a healthy living can be utilized for preventing present day ailments and also for cure without the use of any additional medicines or medical therapy.

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