

A picture of Reverend Boddling's work on Santal Medicine

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I

I shall deal here with a few points with some elaborations to portray a picture of Reverend Boddling's work on Santal Medicine as documented in his book, *Studies in Santal Medicine and Connected Folklore*. This book could be considered a cross-cultural contextualization of medical practices among the Santals. Reverend Paul Olaf Boddling mostly lived in Mohulpahari in Santal Parganas (Boddling 2016: 135) since his youth; to be exact, from January 1890 (ibid: 134) till his ripe-old age – a span of active life of around four decades as a Norwegian scholar-missionary. Primarily a student of theology, he spread his multi-faceted scholarship in the fields ranging from linguistics to ethnography of the people of his parish. Boddling's five-volume work, *Santal Dictionary* and his volume, *Materials for a Santali Grammar* are a testimony to the large Santal vocabulary as well as to his proficiency in the language of the people he studied.

The significant aspect of traditional anthropological studies is to look into the relationship between man's biological/physical and cultural properties. This is technically known as a holistic approach (Bhattacharya 2016: 7). Another aspect that can be added here is man's perception of psychosomatic or psychophysical condition. Reverend Boddling's treatise has precisely followed the above stated anthropological approach. To clarify the relationship of man's biological and cultural properties, let me state a few possible examples: culturally or more appropriately, traditionally a vegetarian even if hungry would lose appetite if served non-vegetarian food; the sight of slaughtering of animals for sacrifice or otherwise would differently affect people on the basis of their cultural/social background.

Regarding the psychosomatic aspect we know that the factor of trust is important while a patient is treated by a physician. The patient's trust in the physician has a positive impact on the curative process. The factor of trust also contributes to the perception of the medications prescribed as 'good' or effective. Here I copiously quote Boddling (ibid: 16), 'I have heard of otherwise really sensible medicine-men who had a fair knowledge of Santal medicine and used their knowledge to the best of their ability, and did not care to mix themselves up in performing

sacrifices and so on, but who were forced by superstition of their clientele to add *bonga*-worship to their medical practice, partly not to lose this, partly to keep their patients at ease. It is quite an interesting phenomenon to observe, how the parties in question influence one another.’

As I have spoken of *bonga*-worship, let me elucidate further. Bodding and W.G. Archer who are considered as stalwarts in studies on Santals have emphasized the collective aspect of Santal dwellings composed of fields, houses, men and women that at most constitutes a portion of their world. Beyond these, the presence of bongas and spirits is as real and the Santals are comfortable when they come to terms with the bongas and spirits.¹ This will be clarified in the next few sentences. Bodding writes that the bongas are ‘without exception evil and enemies of men... and are supposed to harass humanity’. (2016: 1). Carrin has nicely explained about bongas when she writes, ‘...*bongas* are supposed to be perverse, and they do not justify their attack.’ (2015: 83). However, the Santals ‘...never get exhausted with their veneration for them...’ (Andersen et. al 2011: 209).

One more word about the bongas. W.G. Archer (1974: 27) points out that the bongas are, in a special sense, a Santal creation and the prime concern of the bongas are the Santals; i.e., the Santals have monopoly over their bongas. Indeed these bongas appear to leave the neighbouring communities of the Hindus, Muslims and the Christians untouched!

II

Bodding’s ethnographic acumen can easily be discerned by reading his account of the training of Santal ojhas (2016 appendix I: 45-126). I may mention that it is essential to read Bodding’s text between the lines. Bodding has presented an emic or insider’s view of the process through which ojha training occurs and he is punctilious to detail when he describes the guru’s teaching to the neophyte ojha. Bodding, in his description has clarified that he had never been present during the training sessions; he based his descriptions on the knowledge gained through experience and interactions with the ojhas throughout his stay (2016: 49). This long association with the people and his knowledge of Santal practices made Bodding feel that this oral transmission of chants

¹ Bodding writes (2016: 429), ‘The Santals always live in villages, that is collectively; they are never found dwelling in isolation.’ W. G. Archer writes (1974: 25-26), ‘...fields, houses, men and women seem to constitute a Santal village,... Santals regard them as at most a portion of their total world...’. The Santals in their villages are never alone, ‘Here bongas and spirits roam and only by coming to terms with them can Santals be happy’. (ibid: 26).

and mantras often could sound like a ‘rigmarole’ (ibid.) and that the trainee only repeated what he thought the guru was saying; many years later, another scholar also made a similar observation though not from such a depth of observation as Bodding.²

Beyond this world of magico-ritual mumbling indecipherable mantras propitiating the maleficence or otherwise of bongas lies a world of pragmatic ‘wisdom’ of the Santals rooted in their deep and profound knowledge of their natural habitat with which the Santals from a very early age have an intimate interaction and awareness. The natural habitat is known and nature, for them is a bountiful resource. From a young age children, both girls and boys herd cattle (2016: 434) or take cattle to pasture, they are familiar with the variety of forest produce and are able to differentiate between what is edible, inedible, useful and valuable. They are trained in gathering/collecting/foraging. Women and girls collectively go to forests for the collection of leaves, firewood and forest produce; men and boys together go to the forests for hunting and collecting and through this learn the ways of identifying various plants that are known for their medicinal properties. Bodding has remarked upon this, “As a rule the average Santal ‘knows’ one or more of what they call *rehet ran*, lit. ‘root-medicine’” (2016: 9); “There is scarcely a grown up Santal man who has not some knowledge of the kind of medicine...” (ibid: 134); “The edible mushrooms are much used...The Santals somehow have no difficulty in distinguishing the edible from the poisonous varieties.” (ibid: 463).³

The Santals consider Chando (the sun) as Creator who has created the trees, plants and animals that contain remedies against all ills and according to them when “‘medicine and disease meet one another”, a patient will recover’ (ibid: 4). According to Bodding and I am sure all of us would agree, that this is not bad reasoning.

Bodding observed that the Santals would normally never say that somebody caught cold or other infection; instead they would say that the disease caught the person. From this expression their attitude to illness can be inferred (ibid: 4).

² Kumkum Bhattacharya (1995), ‘The Religion of the Santals’, p. 257

³ Ibid. see also p 140.

Let me mention about prescriptions of Santal medicines that Bodding recorded. Bodding's volume consists of 502 pages containing a classified list of 305 Santal prescriptions (ibid: 159-393) and 16 compositions of veterinary medicines (ibid: 394-403).

III

Bodding is often remembered most for his works on Santal Medicine and Santal Grammar as well as his annotated translation of *Traditions and Institutions of the Santals*. During the time of Bodding's stay in Santal Parganas the population of the Santals was roughly between 6 to 8 hundred thousand as per the Census records of 1891; 1901; and 1931. A large part of his treatise uncovers for us a rich description of Santal life, culture and society that too in anthropological terms, could be called 'thick description', the practice of which is on the decline in modern anthropology to be replaced by complex polemics and sub-texts. Bodding remained concerned about the Santals who he described as aboriginal people (ibid: 405). These days the Santals are considered as indigenes (adivasi) or tribesmen. Instead, I prefer the terminologies developed by Ferninard Tonnies (1887) - *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesselschaft*; the former could be used here to refer to the indigenes/tribesmen or aborigines while the latter to the larger society composed of many religious and linguistic groups or communities and different Hindu castes. The implications that are relevant in the context of *Gemeinschaft* are applicable to the Santals. Santals are more or less homogenous and their society is relatively non-stratified or non-differentiated in terms of livelihood and its associated status. Status among the Santal is ascribed⁴ on the basis of age, gender and kinship; it is contrasted with status that is achieved⁵ which is a characteristic of *Gesselschaft*. Further Durkheim's proposition of 'mechanical' and 'organic' ordering of people also conceptually corresponds with these two terms.

IV

Now a few final words, Bodding's aims and objectives were to record faithfully an account of what the Santals considered medicine and how it was prepared using a number of plants, trees and other natural objects; and how these were administered (2016: 405). Besides, his

⁴ For more details see Emile Durkheim, 1893, *The Division of Labour in Society*.

⁵ See Ralph Linton, 1936, *The Study of Man: An Introduction*.

anthropological and psychological interests were the other motivating factors for pursuing such an endeavour. He was optimistic that proper pharmacological investigation of the ingredients of Santal medicines unknown to western science would yield profitable knowledge (ibid: 44). Bodding's study was neither hasty nor a naïve understanding of indigenous knowledge of the Santals, a problem that besets modern day studies (cf. Carrin 2015: 73).

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