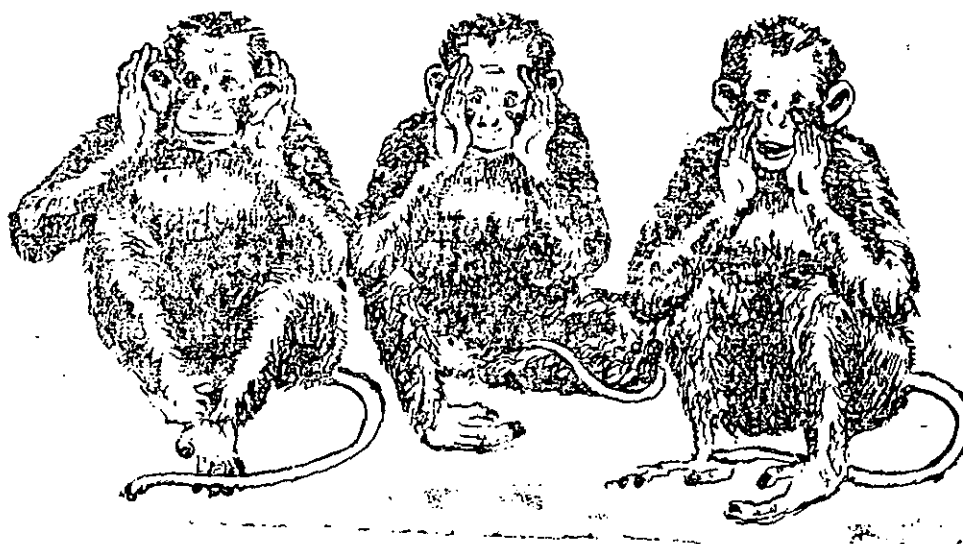


HEARD, SEEN AND SPOKEN



Baidyaraj was very busy as usual when we approached him for his contribution for this special number. Naturally therefore he said he would not be able to oblige us, much to our regret. As a compromise, however, he agreed to give us an exclusive interview which is as follows.

The Greatest Paediatrician of Nepal

Baidyaraj claimed to know the first and greatest paediatrician of Nepal. He also said that "she is also the best of all", perhaps in the whole world. "She is very old—at least many thousands of years old", he continued, "but you people cannot make out her age simply because she knows the secret of life, and so she keeps herself young and beautiful".

We wondered who is she, and why at all "she" and not a "he"? At this sex-consciousness of our 'little minds' (so he said) Baidyaraj curled up his lips in contempt only to

give us a big lecture the gist of which is like this. "Why not?", he demanded, "After all, this life is produced and sustained by nature, the mother-figure. The male counterpart is worse than useless, whereas the mother conceives, lets the baby grow in her womb with her own blood, sweats and tears, and later, after birth, with her milk and love. I wonder why a male is created at all?"

We were more interested in the discovery of the "oldest, greatest and best paediatrician" than his lecture. We wanted to see her in person. Dreading that Bajdyaraj might refuse to comply with our request we just nodded our 'wise' heads as if we agreed with his view. This helped us and so we succeeded in obtaining the '*Darshan*' (audience) of the paediatrician.

Baidyaraj really gave us a treat later by taking us to the precincts of local Swayambhunath temple. Although we had our doubts we imagined 'her' to be living in a dark corner of a cave, in Tibetan costumes with blue smokes of incense floating around her. Instead, what we were shown much discomfited us because of the obvious incredibility. However some of us became thoughtful and subsequently valued Baidyaraj's volatile opinion issuing out of his lips with vertiginous rapidity!

We entered a temple which contained a woman-deity squatting on the floor with rather too many children hanging around, most of them climbing different parts of her body. Her attendant volunteered, "She is our '*Ajima*', the grandma, full of love & kindness for her children i.e. all children of all countries rich or poor, good or bad, handsome or ugly, old or young, and certainly regardless of colour, creed, caste or religion. she is very democratic, you know."

We did not agree with him any way and looked at Baidyaraj for support. He, however, completely flabbergasted us, he burst out, "Why do you differ with his view, you swollen-headed big-mouthed foreign-attired clowns of your culture!" His words rankled our hearts, but we replied, "Well, why not? She is a stone, isn't she?" Baidyaraj went almost mad at our blasphemy. He replied, "No, she is not. She is a living being just like you. But instead of living like a vegetable, which you people with all your pseudo-knowledge do, she works for the help of the suffering parents, comforts her kids, betters them, heals the wound up and cures the diseases. 'But mind you, if she is angered she makes the child convulse with oculo-gyric crisis and soon (to use your flourishing terminology); she lets her vomit, pass loose motions & even may make him unconscious. You wise 'owls' do not believe this, do you? But these simple folks do. They burn incense, throw some rice with vermillion in the air & pray to her. This makes the granny her old self again & then she smiles to cure, to heal"

Well, in our opinion, this is sheer nonsense, an example of a prehistoric man trembling with fear at the lightning & downpour, and

then trying to please the 'Big shot' with humble offerings. However we could not contradict Baidyaraj at that moment full of sound and fury as he was then. So we kept our lips closed till the 'heat' cooled off.

Later, politely, we asked him, "Who is the *via intermedia* through which granny works ?

The 'Guvaju'

"Listen", Baidyaraj said with a flourish, "You block heads ! The man-in-between, as you like to say, is the '*guvaju*'. When an illness visits the child it is he who is called upon for help. He examines the patient, diagnoses and prescribes treatment which may be one of the following: 1) he may burn incense and offer rice, flowers and vermillion to '*ajima*' or 2) he may offer silent prayers (inaudibly of course), use '*mantra*'s invoking god, and wave a broom at the patient's head all the latter responds by movement or awakening the '*guvaju*' may give this treatment for a few days or weeks or even for months depending upon the case; 3) he may infuse his '*mantra*'s in a cupful of water or 4) he may apply a '*tilak*' of ash upon the patient's forehead; 5) he may also tie a cloth-piece containing god-knows-what in the neck or abdomen depending upon which organ or organs the expert suspects to be wrong. And it works !

The 'Bhagvati'

Baidyaraj continued, "The other *via media* is the *Bhagvati*. She impersonates '*ajima*' herself. The '*Bhagvan*' is of two kinds—temporary, when '*ajima*' visits her for a short time (a few minutes to a few hours) or permanent, when donns clean clothes (usually red), lives secluded and then she is not to be defiled by any mortal touch (for she is holy). "During such visitations the '*Bhagvati*' can sense 'all' things around her or any place or country. As a treatment of the illness she may order the patient's party to do certain things which if carried out properly pleases her so that the illness disappears mysteriously.

"During such visitation-sessions she likes the burning of incense. She may swallow burning flames or may order a feast of fruits or '*halwa*' which all those present, including herself, are permitted to share. The end of the 'visit' is announced by her by verbally taking leave of people present there. As a result the 'visited' person suddenly goes quiet, queer and then becomes her old self again !"

"Then, how come ?..."

"No more question please ! I obviously can not answer all those 'intelligent' questions of yours ! But it is entirely correct if I say that whatever fact is volunteered by

the '*Bhagwati*' proves right, and whatever order she gives to people does them good, the poor patients most of all.

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We thanked Baidyaraj profusely and knocked off towards our respective 'dens'.

Baidyaraj's words didn't fall on deaf ears anyway. He stimulated us to think and forced us to search various instances of influence of local or regional or national culture upon the health or otherwise of the people concerned. One simply cannot ignore this influence, least of all a practising doctor.

The 'Jhankri'

Thus we soon discovered the 'witch-doctor', the '*jhankri*' who does an awful lot of work as a village psychiatrist. For example he kills black chickens or black sheep to save his patients from 'devils'. And one must submit that more often than not he succeeds! To quote Baidyaraj again, "And what the heck your modern psychiatrists do with their long 'tails' (i.e. diploma) anyway ? !!"

Hot bricks and Hot ashes

We also discovered a good method of hot fomentation. 'They' take out hot bricks from the fire, cover them with rags, and then apply them to various part/parts of the body e.g. back for backache, abdomen for abdominal pain & so on. Instead 'they' may use hot ashes. This is indeed a cheaper method than "your antiphlogistin or cupping method" — to quote Baidyaraj again — "which you with all your scientific knowledge still practise shamelessly !"

Pain Killer for Lumbago-sciatica Syndrome

The method is to tie the big toes with a strong cord of a patient who lies prone, to put two flat bamboo pieces with a hole in its centre upon the tendo achilles. And 'they' put burning bamboo stick-ends through the holes to burn the overlying skins !

To ward off the evil eye

Mixing the 'dirt' from her sole with saliva the mother puts a 'third eye' upon her child's forehead. Or she may carry a knife or a sickle in her child's person. If she has a single child she may dress him like a girl preferably in rags and give her an awful name such as 'blackie' or a 'cobbler' or a 'beggar' and so on !

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With these words we would like to invite better informed people than us under the title of "the impact of local culture on the illness."

Y. B. S.