

HEALTH HABITS OF SOUTH INDIANS AS RECORDED BY ABBE J. A. DUBOIS

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ABSTRACT

- Abbe J. A. Dubois, worked as a Christian missionary in India for thirty one years from 1792-1823. He observed the people very closely and also collected information from books and recorded his investigations. The article presents the food habits and traditional practices of the people of interest to health like personal cleanliness, tooth brushing, and bath. Practices of tribal women after confinement, the midwife, post-natal practices, childcare, details of rules of conduct for women during menstruation and pregnancy and use of Tulasi are also described.

Abbe J. A. Dubois, a christian missionary, was born in France in 1765: was ordained in the diocese of Viviers in 1792 at the age of twenty seven and left France in the same year. The Abbe laboured as a christian missionary for some thirty one years in India striving to fulfil the task which his sense of religious duty imposed upon him. He recognised from the very first day of his arrival that the christian mission work included among its chief essentials to success a long thorough study of the innermost life and character of the people amidst whom the work was to be carried on. To gain the confidence of the people of India, he adopted the Indian style of clothing and lived as the Indians did, by which he was able to ensure a free and hearty welcome from all. The Abbe Dubois spent about 31 years, i.e. from 1792 to 1823 in the Dekhan and in the Madras Presidency. He was well acquainted with Tamil literature.

The Abbe was a close observer of the people and during the long sojourn in India, he fully utilised the opportunity of collecting materials and particulars in order to write the results of his investigations. He also collected information partly from the books which are held in highest estimation among the people of India and partly from the scattered records containing facts which can be thoroughly relied upon. But the majority of material he offered in his book was based on his own researches, having lived in close and familiar intercourse with persons of every caste and condition of life. The Abbe's observations extend to that part of India that lies south of the Vindhya Range.

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The original French manuscript of the work, entitled “Moeurs, Institution et Ceremonies des Peuples de L’ Inde,” was purchased by the Madras Government in 1807 and transmitted to London for translation and publication. The English translation was published in 1816 with the sanction of the East India Company and under personal supervision of Major Wilks.

The manuscript was sent back to the Abbe in 1815 for his additions, excisions and corrections. When he sent it back it was different, and superior work altogether. This was translated by Henry K. Beauchamp and was published in 1899 alongwith necessary notes and observations in line with later developments and research. The present book is composed of a recital of the broad facts of Hindu religion and sociology with many descriptions of the people among whom the Abbe lived. He died in 1848 at the age of 83.

The present book entitled “Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies” is divided into 3 parts:

Part I. General view of society in India and General remarks on the caste system containing 14 chapters.

Part-II. The four states of Brahminical life containing 36 chapters.

Part-III. Religion containg 9 chapters. There are also six Appendices.

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1. Nomads and Tribes :-

- a) Pakanatis :- They are the quietest and best behaved of all wandering tribes. Many of them are professional herbalists. They collect, while wandering through different countries, plants, roots etc which can be used as medicines or dyes or for salves. They sell their collections in the bazars and the little money they thus earn helps them considerably.
- b) Kadu-Kurumbar:- It is a wild tribe living in jungles and mountains in the south of India-Malabar Hills or Western Ghats without any fixed abode. The women of this tribe, even on the very day after the confinement, are obliged to wander in the woods, with their husbands to find the day’s food. Before starting on this search, they feed the new born child and lay the child in a hole in the ground filled with *teak* (*Tectona grandis*) leaves, till they return in the evening. These leaves are so rough that if they rub the tender skin even gently, they draw blood. On the 5th or 6th day after birth, they begin to accustom their infants to eat solid food and in order to harden them at once to endure inclement weather, mothers wash them every morning in cold dew, which they collect from the trees and plants. Until the infants can walk, they are

left by themselves from morning till night, quite naked, exposed to sun, wind, rain and air and buried in the hole which serves them for cradle.

2. Kudumis:- This is a class of village servants called kudumis. Their business is to collect medicinal herbs and other plants required by the people. They are also professional snake-catchers and are supposed to possess infallible antidotes against snake-poison.

3. Midwives: They must be acquainted with good many *mantras* and they are sometimes called *mantradaris*, or women who repeat *mantras* essential at the birth of a child. Both the new born and its mother are susceptible to the influence of the evil eye, inauspicious combination of unlucky plants or unlucky days and a thousand other unpropitious elements. A good midwife well primed with efficacious *mantras*, foresees all these dangers and averts them by reciting the proper words at the proper moment.

4. Gynaecium:—In all decent houses there is a sort of small gynaecium set apart for the women, to be used during monthly period or child birth.

The mother of the newly born child lives entirely apart for a whole month or more during which period she may touch neither the vessels nor the furniture nor any clothes or any person. The house where a woman is confined as well as those who live in it are unclean for 10 days. On the eleventh day all the linen and clothes used during this period are given to the washerman and the house is purified. When a mother gives birth to a girl pollution lasts for 40 days; in the case of a boy only 30 days. When the time of her seclusion is over, the mother is immersed in a bath or else a great quantity of water is poured over her head and body. The ceremony Jatakarma removes all uncleanness. Details of the rules of conduct for women during periodical uncleanness are given in Appendix IV.

The period of seclusion is 3 days. The first day she must look upon herself as a pariah. The second day she must consider herself as unclean as if she had killed a Brahmin. The third day she is supposed to be in an intermediate state between the two preceding days. On the fourth day she purifies herself by ablutions. She may have no communication with any one during the three days. She must neither bathe nor wash any part of her body, nor shed tears. She must be very careful not to kill any insect or any other living creature. She must not travel by any means. She must not anoint her head with oil, or use any perfume of any kind. She must not play any game. She must not brush her teeth or rinse out her mouth. The mere wish to cohabit with her husband would be a serious sin. She must not lie on a bed or sleep during the day. She must not think of the

gods or sacrifice. If several women in this unclean state should find themselves together, they must not speak to or touch each other. She must not go near her children, touch them or play with them. She is forbidden to salute persons of high rank.

On the fourth day, she must take off the garments and immediately give them to the washerman. She must put on a clean cloth and another over it and go to the river to purify herself by bathing. On her way, she must walk with her head bent and must not glance at anybody for the fear of defiling them. After reaching the river, she must first enter the water and fill the copper vessel which she brought from the house. Then returning to the bank, she must thoroughly cleanse her teeth, rinse out her mouth twelve times and wash hands and feet. She must then enter the water and plunge twelve times into it, immersing the whole of her body. While doing this, she should not look at any living room, but turn her eyes towards the sun. On coming out of the water she must take a little fresh cowdung, *tulasi* and some earth; mix them with a little water and rub thoroughly with this her hands, feet and whole body. Again she must re-enter the river and completely immerse herself twenty four times. When she leaves the water, she must rub herself over with saffron (perhaps turmeric) and again dip three times in the water. Then mixing saffron in a little water, she must drink some and pour the rest on her head, after which she must put on some freshly washed cloth. She may then paint *kumkuma* on her forehead and return home.

On entering the house she should note that her eyes do not rest on her children. She must immediately send for a Brahmin priest for the completion of her purification. On his arrival, this person first plants together 32 stalks of *darbha* grass, to make a *pavitra*, which he dips in consecrated water brought with him. The woman then takes another bath, drinks a little of the consecrated water, places the *pavithra* on the ring finger of right hand and drinks some *panchagavya* or cow's milk. Her purification is complete.

5. Pregnant Woman :— She must avoid the company of women of doubtful virtue and of those who have lost all their children. She must drive away from her mind all sad thoughts, must be careful not to gaze at terrifying objects or listen to sad stories or eat anything indigestible. By observing these rules she will have beautiful children; by neglecting, she will risk a miscarriage.

A coconut is never broken in the presence of a pregnant woman.

6. Drinks : Curdled milk diluted with water (butter milk) is a very favourite drink with Hindus. They have an invincible repugnance to the liquor which is obtained by tapping coconut and other palms and several

other trees. This juice is sweet and refreshing if drunk before it has begun to ferment, but if taken in excess, it is intoxicating. A respectable Hindu will not touch spirits or any intoxicating drink considering that they cause one of the greatest internal defilement that it is possible to contract. Drunkenness is looked upon as a degrading and infamous vice and any one would be promptly and ignominiously expelled from his caste were he found guilty of giving way to it.

7. Cleanliness :—Cleanliness is the most important factor in preserving public health.

a) Personal :— Details have been given about the rules to be observed by a Brahmin when answering the calls of nature. Earth should be used for cleaning the private parts after the call of nature. There are several kinds of earth which cannot be used : earth of white ant nests; salty earth; potteries earth; road dust; bleaching earth; earth taken from under tree, from temple enclosures, from cemeteries, from cattle pastures; earth that is almost white like ash; earth thrown up from rat-holes and the like. He should wash his hands and feet and then his face and rinse the mouth several times.

The teeth must be brushed with a small twig cut from either an *udug* or *rengu* or a *neredu* tree, or a bit of wood cut from any thorny or milk shrub. A Hindu must not indulge in this cleaning habit every day. He must abstain on the sixth, the eighth, the ninth, the eleventh, the fourteenth and the last day of the moon, on the days of new and full moon, on Tuesday in every week, on the day of the constellation under which he was born, on the day of the week and on the day of the month which corresponds with those of his birth, at an eclipse, at the conjunction of the planets, at the equinoxes, the solstices and other unlucky epochs and also on the anniversary of the death of his father or mother.

He may however, except on the day of the new moon and on the *ekadashi* (eleventh day of the fortnight) substitute grass or the leaves of a tree for this piece of wood. On the day of the new moon and on *ekadashi* he may only clean his teeth with the leaves of the mango, the *juvvi* or the *neru*.

One bath every day is compulsory and is invariably to be taken. A Brahmin must bathe three times a day. A common practice is to anoint themselves occasionally from head to foot with either oil of sesamum or sometimes with castor oil. They remove the dirt which results from it by rubbing it off with certain herbs. They then have hot water poured over their bodies and finally bathe in cold water.

Hindus look upon a man who spat upon the floor as quite destitute of good manners. Spittons are to be found in houses, but not in Brahmin houses. If no spitton is provided, any one requiring to spit, should have to go outside.

b) General Pollution – A respectable Hindu is fastidious in the matter of pollution. The habits of the people tended to counteract the unhealthy consequences which produce diseases. In the search for the causes of the diseases, people think that the unwholesome nature of certain kinds of food might be an answer for it. Therefore the use of such food was forbidden. They also realised that some of these diseases were contagious. Therefore the persons who were attacked by them were isolated.

8. Virtues of Tulasi :- It is cultivated in the houses, and offered in daily worship and sacrifices. Its leaves have a sweet aromatic scent and act as a cough elixir and cordial; indeed Hindus think that it possesses many medicinal properties. One or two leaves are swallowed after meals as an aid to digestion. Some leaves are eaten both before and after performing the ablutions in cold water, in order to keep up the proper temperature in the stomach and to prevent colds and chills and other maladies which might attack without this preventive measure.

सारांश

अब्बे जे. ए. दुबोई द्वारा अभिलिखित दक्षिण भारतीयों की स्वास्थ्य की आदतें

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अब्बे जे. ए. दुबोई ने भारत में इकतीस वर्ष तक ईसाई मिशनरी के रूप में ईसवी सन् १७९२—१८२३ तक कार्य किया। उन्होंने लोगों को बहुत समीप से देखा और पुस्तकों से ज्ञानकारी संग्रहीत की तथा अपने अन्वेषणों को अभिलिखित किया। ये लेख लोगों के आहार की आदतों तथा परम्परागत आभ्यासों जो कि स्वास्थ्य से सम्बन्धित हैं जैसे : व्यक्तिगत स्वच्छता, दाँतों की सफाई तथा स्नान को प्रस्तुत करता है। जनजाति स्त्रियों में प्रसूति के बाद अभ्यास, दायी, जन्म के बाद का अभ्यास, शिशु-देखभाल महिलाओं के मासिक धर्म तथा गर्भावस्था में आचरण के नियमों तथा तुलसी के उपयोग का भी वर्णन किया गया है।