**ETHNOMEDICAL TRADITION IN INDIAN TRIBAL COMMUNITIES**

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**Abstract**

Traditional healing is the prevalent norm of the primitive communities among Indian tribes. It is the medicine system of the common man. It employs plants and natural ingredients to cure a wide range of ailments. This article explores the concept of ethnomedicine, the causes of illness listed in ethnomedical accounts, various components of ethnomedicine, in what ways ethnomedicine is practiced, uses and misuses of ethnomedicine.

Keywords- Ethnomedicine, wrath of gods, traditional healers,

**Introduction**

Across the globe, indigenous communities have long maintained intricate ethnomedical traditions, rooted in their unique cultural and spiritual beliefs. (Johnston, 2002). These traditions, often overlooked or misunderstood by Western medical frameworks, offer a wealth of knowledge and effective healing modalities (Mohatt & Elk, 2000) (Johnston, 2002). India with its vast diversity of tribal communities, is a prime example of the richness and resilience of ethnomedical practices. Traditional healers in these communities possess deep understanding of local medicinal plants, rituals and holistic approaches to well-being, often passed down through generations. (Naaz, 2019).

***The Concept Of Ethnomedical Tradition***

Folk medicine is the medicine system of the common man. It is such a set of beliefs and behaviors that the members of the group have a common belief in. People in simple and undeveloped societies have practiced this system of medicine. Close proximity to nature and use of locally available floral and faunal resources is the essence of the ethnomedical system.

Folk medicine employs plants and natural ingredients to cure a wide range of ailments. Practitioners of folk medicine prepare traditional remedies in the form of powders, ointments, poultices, decoctions and other forms of treatments.

***Ethnomedicine As a Concept***

The term ethnomedicine is used to refer to “those beliefs and practices relating to diseases which are the products relating to diseases which are the products of indigenous cultural development and are not explicitly derived from the conceptual framework of modern medicine.” (Hughes,1968). The domain of ethnomedicine is indigenous medical features or that of folk medical roles. Etymologically speaking, the term refers to the medicines that are traditionally associated with specific ethnic groups. Thus, it can also be conceived of as Folk medicine, Traditional medicine or Indigenous medicine etc. (Mibang and Choudhari, 2003:1)

**Ethnomedicine** is a society’s cultural knowledge about the management of health and treatments for illness, sickness, and disease. This includes the culturally appropriate process for seeking health care and the culturally defined signs and symptoms of illness that raise a health concern. Ethnomedical systems are frequently closely related to belief systems and religious practices.

It is commonly known as folk medicine, popular medicine and popular health culture.

The subject of ethnomedicine focuses on the nature of illness as is conceived by the natives; their own methods; criteria of classification of diseases; the causes and cures; types of therapists and healers who seek to alleviate illness, and their skills and social roles; preventive measures; the relation between medicine and religion; cultural aspects of medicine and also ethnopsychiatry (Hughes, 1968 and Foster, 1978).

In a broad sense it refers to the interdisciplinary study of the healing systems

The primary concern of ethnomedicine is thus with the description of notions people have about health and illness and about the behavior they undertake in search of cures. The concepts and practices in folk medicine are based upon the humoral theories, cosmological speculations, magic in learned/oral medicine or religion.

Causes of illness listed in the ethnomedical accounts-

1. ***Angry deities who punish wrong-doers.***

It is a common belief in all major Indian tribal communities that wrath of gods and goddesses invites diseases. When people do not give due recognition and reverence to gods and goddesses, they become angry and in their wrath, cause, disease and death.They portray the goddesses as being very touchy and prone to getting into a rage soon, bringing diseases, death and destruction among them. The goddesses are appeased when appropriate offerings and sacrifices are made with due respect.

1. ***Ancestors and other ghosts who feel they have too soon been forgotten or otherwise not recognised.***

Ancestor worship is coined by the famous British philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer in the year 1885 and is referring to a ritualized summoning of deceased kin. According to Edward Burnett Tylor, one of the founding fathers of anthropology, the spirits are separate entities from the body and a human has two souls, i.e. free soul and the body soul. The free soul remains alive after the death also whereas the body soul will disappear after the post burial ceremony. In all primitive tribal communities

1. ***Sorcerers and witches***

Witchcraft and Sorcery are used for harming the individuals, and seen as anti-social. Black magic is equated with witchcraft and sorcery, and these have negative sanction of the society and individuals on whom it is practiced. The source of supernatural power in case of a witch remains in the body of the witch that is often inherited also. The sorcerer acquires the art and does not necessarily pass on to the next generation. The witch generally wills in death and destruction, whereas the sorcerer performs magical rites to achieve evil ends. Witchcraft is seen as an evil force bringing misfortune to members of a community.

1. Loss of soul
2. ***Possession of spirit or the intrusion of an object into the body.***

Possession is an ancient concept which we find in almost all societies and cultures of the world. (Coon, 1993). Possession is defined as domination by something as an evil spirit, a passion, or an idea. It is a psychological state in which an individual’s normal personality is replaced by another (Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary). Possession can be categorized as 1) non-trance possession belief where the individual or close observers believe that one is possesses usually by the devil or demons, 2) trance possession where an altered state of consciousness usually of a god or spirit, alternates with the individual’s normal identity, 3) and ritual trance possession where possession occurs within a ritual usually religious in nature (Bourguignon, 1976).

Possession of a human body by a hostile spirit or intrusion of an object into the body is said to be a cause of disease in primitive Indian tribal communities.

1. ***Loss of basic equilibrium in the body usually because of the entry of excessive heat or cold into the body.***
2. ***Evil eye***

Evil eye is the ‘look of malicious intent’ that a person casts upon another to harm his or her well being. In the tribal communities, evil eye is considered a major source of misfortune and causal factor of poor health.The belief in evil eye states that some individuals with an evil eye cause illness or some misfortune by simply looking at others.

***What are the components of ethnomedicine?***

***Faith Healing***

As indicated by the name of the method of treatment, the art of healing is based on the faith reposed by the common folk in the abilities of the traditional healer who will cure the afflicted.

The art of faith healing, in a large measure, is based on the belief that the diseases are caused by different supernatural agencies. People have full faith in the competence and skill of the medicine man to cure diseases by means of his own supernatural counter measures. People in India still believe in evil spirits, magic and witchcraft to be the cause of different diseases. Wrath of the gods and goddesses is considered a major cause of epidemics. When goddesses are not given due recognition and reverence, their anger causes disease, death and misfortune. Illiterate people are afraid of evil spirits. They are supposed to cause disease, death and misfortune. Illiterate people are afraid of evil spirits. They are supposed to cause disease, death and destruction. Witchcraft is also greatly feared. The role of the evil eye in causing disease is believed all over. Omens and dreams are believed to be harbingers of illness by many people in the villages. The treatment of a disease depends upon what is held to be the cause of that disease. In the case of wrathful gods and goddesses, propitiation is done through religious prayers, incantations, offering animal sacrifices. In the case of evil spirits of various types, different measures are adopted which include propitiation driving away the evil spirit and exorcism. A disease suspected to be caused by magic is cured through counter magic. The role that faith plays in bringing about relief or cure is witnessed by practitioners of every system of medicine.

***Divination***

Divination comes from the Latin word, “divinare” which means to predict. A range of techniques for arriving at knowledge of uncertain, incomplete, or unrevealed information. Common techniques involve the interpretation of celestial arrangements, dream analysis, augury, casting of objects or reading the results of animal sacrifice, among others.

Divination is a highly stylistic drama. Divination proceeds through a set of actions directed towards self-purification. The place of divination has to be clean. Divination is a session of question and answers. *Divination is basically of three kinds.* First there is a dialogue based divination where a client asks questions one after another and the diviner explains the causation or the course of events to him. This is the most commonly practiced style of divination. This style of divination is termed as ***chhant-lana***. Second, there is a mechanical divination called ***purji-lana.*** The literal meaning of purji-lana would be “keeping the rice”. It is performed during divinations, generally in between the course of a chhant. It is specifically useful when there appears to be some confusion in the minds of the clients with regard to the exact causation or the most appropriate procedure to appease the angry superhuman force. In such situations, the diviner asks the client to keep rice grains at two places and remember the cause these stand for. The diviner then turns his face away, so as not to see what the rice grains stored at two places stand for. After a while, the diviner disperses the rice grains kept at one place and this is taken to mean the actual cause. Mechanical divination in various other forms is also practiced by the diviner during chhant. Many diviner throw rice grains in the air and catch them. They then count the number of rice grains in their palm to ascertain the cause of trouble. *The third form of divination is to induce the client into trance by means of throwing rice grains at him.* In this kind of divination, the client himself speaks about his dos.

***Sorcery***

Sorcery is a theory of causation concerning good and evil in their society. Sorcery includes the use of certain materials to invoke supernatural powers to harm people. Sorcery is a voluntary matter and merely a technique which can be learned by anyone for offense or defense.

***Removal of evil eye***

Removal of the evil eye is an important element in the practice of ethnomedical tradition. Primitive men across all Indian tribal communities believed that evil spirits or supernatural powers were mainly to blame for all diseases. The people thought and ascribed diseases to hostile magic or evil spirits and demons. People in India still believe in evil spirits, magic and witchcraft to be the cause of different diseases. So it is the prime task of traditional healers to prepare charms, amulets, herbal preparation and concoction of animal extracts for removal of the effect of evil eye. For removal of poison of animal bite (for example snake bite) the same process is followed.

***Bone-setting***

In tribal India, where a large part of the population lives in poverty and without access to modern medicine, traditional healers (bone setters) provide a much-needed service, often without charge. Traditional bone setters are so-called “unqualified practitioners” who have no formal education or training in medicine and treat dislocations and fractures using methods that have been passed down for generations. Reportedly these traditions have survived for as long as 3,000 years. Accessibility is one of the main reasons for the popularity of TBS especially in rural areas, where a large population of the country resides, and where there are almost no orthopedic services available.

***Midwifery***

All human societies have patterned sets of beliefs and practices, concerning pregnancy and delivery. Pregnancy and motherhood are important milestones in a woman’s life. Here midwives play a very important role as the nature of dai-client relationship plays a very important role in this delicate phase of woman’s life. It is through supernatural calling, inheritance, or voluntarily by one’s own inclination that one may become a midwife. Midwives are commonly known as “dais” across all Indian tribal communities. Dais are one of the potent sources of health assistance to the ladies of the villages. They are self trained. They represent an elderly experienced lot, whose beliefs, attitudes and ideas relating to midwifery appear to be more or less flexible. The dais have a well-defined area of operation and she knows the area and people extremely well. She has established a good rapport with most families residing in her areas. She never faces any difficulty in detecting an early pregnancy.

The measures adopted by a dai for diagnosing early pregnancy are-

1. Palpitating the abdomen
2. Examining the general condition of the body
3. Examining the breasts and the color of the eye.
4. Taking history of morning sickness, including giddiness and vomiting.
5. Vaginal examination

The method adopted to determine the approximate date of delivery is to count nine months forward from the last menstrual period adding 15 days to it. The dais have a common belief that the male babies are delivered in the ninth month and female babies in the tenth month. They also believe that the birth of a male child is usually preceded by extended labor.

Two criteria employed by the dais for prejudging the sex of a male child are-

i) Twitching of mother’s left eye a few hours before the delivery.

ii) Larger size of the right breast.

***In what way ethnomedicine is practiced?***

The field of practice in this medicine is midwifery, bone-settling, supernatural cures of various types with main emphasis on utilizing natural herbs, roots, plants and other natural products in a given ecosystem.

***It is transferred from generation to generation***

The folk medical lore is transmitted from person to person and generation to generation. They learn it much as they learn other elements of their culture, as an incidental part of his everyday associations. If a remedy is tried and if it works no surprise is evinced, since that is what was expected. Folk medicine embodies a rich treasure house of folk wisdom. Handed down through the ages, from one generation to the next, this body of knowledge ranges from the simple home remedies based on wild plants and herbs to the treatment given by the sorcerers etc.

***Includes both magico-religious and mechanical and chemical procedures.***

It includes both magico-religious and mechanical and chemical procedures. Indigenous medical systems show an impressive array of practices that demonstrate empirical therapeutic knowledge including trephination, bone setting, obstetrics including cesarean section, laparotomy, uvulectomy, comparative anatomy, autopsy, cantery, inoculation, baths, poultices, inhalations, laxatives, enemas, ointments and cupping (Ackernecht, 1942; Simmons, 1955; Langhlin, 1963; Huard, 1969) etc.

***Ethnomedical tradition is practiced through the science of “nature cure” or naturopathy***

Some of the disorders of the human system are cured without any form of medication. This is as old an observation and practice as it is now. The science of natural therapeutics is based on the use of five elements that constitute the human body. They are: Water, Earth, Ether, Sunlight and Air. It can also be said to be a variant of folk medicine and Ayurvedic medicine. It was popularized by Mahatma Gandhi through his personal experiments and observations, with nature-cure methods. Gandhiji was one of the greatest enthusiasts of nature cure methods.

The concepts and practice of this medicine are special diets, sunbaths, massages and some courses of exercises and medications. The use of such natural stimuli was stressed upon for the promotion of health and cure of diseases.

The primary cause of all forms of illnesses, according to nature-cure, is the conscious or the unconscious violation of nature’s laws. This may be in thinking, eating, breathing, dressing, working, resting as well as in moral, social and sexual conduct. Disease in reality is a self-purifying effort on the part of nature. The rationale of naturopathy is that all healing comes from within the body itself. There are self-therapeutic forces or powers inherent in the human body, which help to cure, preserve and promote health. The natural cure man does not “sell a cure” to a patient but he is taught the right way of living which would not only cure him of his illness but help him to prevent himself from being inflicted by any diseases. The nature curist is interested more in the study of health. Nature cure is thus just a way of life, not a course of treatment.

The procedures that naturopathy recommends and advocates for maintaining and restoring health are daily cleanliness, physical exercise, relaxation and regulation of diet.

***Physical Exercise***- Daily physical exercise is necessary for good health. It aids in the assimilation of food that is taken and the elimination of waste matter from the body.

***Diet***- A well balanced diet which contains proteins, fats, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals in proper proportion and quantitatively, according to the requirements of the persons, is essential.

***Fasting***- A fast while it reduces weight, simultaneously adds more to the zest, vitality and health

***Sunbath***- This is a very efficacious approach. Exposure of the uncovered body to the sun serves to invigorate the human system, for sun is the source of light and heat and if there was no sun there would have been no light or warmth. So, sunbaths are as useful as ordinary waterbaths.

If one cultivates the habit of living in the open, in midst of plenty of fresh air, right from infancy, the body becomes resistant to diseases and the individual never suffers from any form of ailment.

***Auxiliary Methods***- There are some other forms of treatment combined with naturopathy. They are termed as auxiliary as they do not use those stimuli on which life depends. They form valuable aids such as massage.

Naturopathy, as nature-cure, focuses on the body as a whole, and does not restrict its attention to a certain part or a particular function which is disturbed. Keeping fit or cured by naturopathy is a slow and a long drawn out process. Nature-cure demands personal exertion, self control and determination.

As regards the scope of nature cure, Gandhi has said, “the public should know that the speciality of nature cure methods lies in the fact that being natural, they can safely be practiced by laymen.”

***Uses of Ethnomedicine***

***Ethnomedical tradition is passed down from one generation to the next as kitchen home remedies***

Home kitchens are storehouses of ingredients used in ethnomedical traditions. The procedure of treatment often includes locally available herbs, spices available in the home kitchen or concoctions made by old and experienced members of the family. These procedures are not documented anywhere and may not have sanction of modern medical practitioners but they enjoy the trust of the “afflicted” on which these are administered.

***It is used to reaffirm the belief of tribals in their culture***

Proximity, or rather one should say, close proximity of the individual to land and nature in tribal societies has played a very important role in the development of the folk medicine system. The treatment of disease often

***It is an economical way to care for the sick.***

The benefit of ethnomedicine that is most obvious is that it is the most cost-effective way to treat the “ill”. Most of the traditional healers we find are ordinary “householders” who do healing work besides their routine household duties. Their services are gratis and sometimes inexpensive as their treatment is always within the reach of the people.

***Misuses of Ethnomedicine***

Ethnomedicine, the traditional medical practices and knowledge of indigenous communities, has long held a prominent place in global healthcare systems. However, the growing popularity of these alternative therapies has also led to instances of misuse and exploitation. (Obijiofor, 2002) One significant issue is the adulteration of herbal remedies, where synthetic or undeclared ingredients are added to increase potency or profitability, compromising the safety and efficacy of these treatments (Medeiros et al., 2012). Additionally, the lack of standardization in the production and quality control of herbal medicines can result in inconsistent potency and unpredictable side effects, posing a serious risk to public health.

Another concern is the inappropriate commercialization of traditional knowledge, where indigenous communities' intellectual property is exploited without their consent or fair compensation. This not only undermines the cultural and spiritual significance of these practices but also deprives the rightful custodians of the benefits. Furthermore, the indiscriminate harvesting of medicinal plants, often driven by commercial interests, can lead to the depletion of certain species and the disruption of delicate ecosystems, threatening the long-term sustainability of these natural resources.

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