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Indigenous Knowledge Pertaining to Health, Illness and Healthcare Seeking Behaviour Among Tribes of Chhattisgarh, India: A Comparative Explanation



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Abstract: Tribal population in India constitutes about 8.6 percent of the country's total population and there are 705 recognized scheduled tribes in the country out of which 75 are declared Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). Tribals reside in the hilly terrains, dense forests in the remote areas perched away from the mainstream depending upon the forests for their routine needs. The interaction of tribal people with nature is intertwined with their indigenous knowledge system, the knowledge which is held by the members of a particular community and evolved through many years of regular experimentation. It is handed down through generations by the mode of cultural transmission. The characteristic feature of indigenous knowledge is that it serves the day to day needs of the tribals and some crises situation of life including health. Health is an inevitable prerequisite is influenced by some common beliefs, practices and customs in any society. Like every culture, tribals as well have their own beliefs and practices with respect to the concept of health, disease and illness. The present study is conducted among tribes of Surguja district of Chhattisgarh and lays emphasis on highlighting the perceptions pertaining to health & illness and beliefs associated with their indigenous knowledge system.

Keywords: Health, Illness, Indigenous Knowledge, Hill Korwa, Gond

1. Introduction

Health is a vital prerequisite and essential correlates of human life. It is defined as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of any disease (World Health Organization, 1980). In common parlance, health refers to the total fitness of an individual, that would ensure performance of social roles to an individual's optimum efficiency. Disease, in a common way can be understood as a form of pathology or medical problem while illness is a manifestation of that pathology or issue. However, the perception of health, well-being and illness varies across cultures (Sonowal & Ponch, 2021). When the concept of health among tribal societies is concerned, it covers a much broader canvas encompassing the broader social fabric, assets and dependents apart from the individual (Joshi, 2019). Moreover, tribal people and their cultural context of health and illness is a broader known fact. Indian scheduled tribes are extremely heterogeneous communities of people counting about 705 and consisting of more than 100 million. Being enormously diverse people in terms of language, ethnicity, material culture, economic and political organization, myths customs and traditions, this diversity is also reflected in their understanding of health and illness.

Tribal health has been a major concern for researchers and scholars since long. The tribes in India have divergent health problems, mainly governed by multidimensional factors such as habitat, difficult terrains, isolation, varied ecological niches, deforestation, superstitions, illiteracy and poverty. Tribal health is intertwined with their living environment, culture and social structure that can be observed from their cultural and medical system of classifying diseases. Kumar et. al (2020) emphasize that healthcare for tribal people is included in rural healthcare settings though it has been assumed that they have poor health and huge unmet needs. Kaushal (2004) emphasizes that disease etiology makes health, disease and medicine linked with the social relationship and 'magico-religious world of tribals. According to Sonowal and Prahraj (2007). the belief system of tribal communities is surrounded by



four types of supernatural powers, viz. protective spirits which always protect them; benevolent spirits which are worshipped at the community and familial level that they may otherwise bring diseases or even death; malevolent spirits that are the evil spirits which control diseases like smallpox, fever, abortion, etc.; and ancestral spirits which are the spirits of the ancestors who always protect them. The understanding of the tribal ecosystem becomes easier when indigenous knowledge of the tribal communities is targeted to study and explore. The meaning to say here is indigenous knowledge being a collective body of knowledge and belief (usually handed down through generations by cultural transmission) supports to understand the tribal health system and the related ecosystems well. This knowledge is often known by different connotations such as traditional knowledge, traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), local knowledge, indigenous technical knowledge (ITK), ethno-ecology, farmer's knowledge, indigenous science, people's wisdom, etc. This indigenous knowledge somehow determines their routine beliefs, practices and understandings of how to deal with the understanding of health and illness.

1.1 Area and population of study

India is home to tribal people that constitute about 8.6 percent of the total population of the country. Nearly half of the country's tribal population resides in the Central Indian states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha. Out of the 705 recognized scheduled tribal groups of the country, 75 tribal communities in 30 States/Union Territories are declared as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) that were formerly known as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs). Chhattisgarh state has one of the highest shares of scheduled tribe population in the country and as per 2011 census and nearly 30.6 percent of the total population of state constitutes scheduled tribe. According to census 2011, 42,98,404 of the total scheduled tribe population are Gonds (54.95%) and out of the total Gond population, 4,39,926 (10.23%) live in Surguja district. Contrary to this, Hill Korwa tribe is a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) having a total population of 34,122 which is 23.30 percent of the total population of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups of Chhattisgarh state.

Hill Korwa tribe is a branch of Munda tribe that belongs to Austro-Asiatic sub-family of Austric family. They have a typical settlement pattern; each farm yard has its house perched away in some distant spot on the hillside. They are presently spread over Surguja, Korba, Jashpur and Balrampur districts of Chhattisgarh (Vaishnav, 2008). The Korwas of Khudia region (one of the earliest settlement areas of Korwa tribe) were divided into two-sub groups, Dihari Korwa and Hill Korwa; the former dwelling in the lowland and the latter on the hilltop. In earlier days Korwas, were considered as a criminal tribe, as they were very ferocious and dangerous to the travelers and traders. Mostly they used to be involved in committing theft and robbery (*loot-paat*) for which they were called "*Wild Hill Tribe*".

Gond refers to the tribal people who reside over the Deccan Peninsula of India. They are amongst the largest tribal groups in South Asia and possibly in the world. Most of the Gond people describe themselves as hill people or *Koi (Koitur)*, i.e. people who settled in the Gondwana region of the present-day eastern Madhya Pradesh and western Chhattisgarh. Presently, Gonds live all over the central India around Satpura hills, Son-Deogarh uplands, Maikala range and Bastar Plateau. They must have been nomadic hunters and gatherers originally, but as of now, they switched to shifting cultivation. Gond people are engaged in agriculture or related work in the forests.

2. Methodology

The present study is based on widespread fieldworks carried out in twenty-eight villages of seven development blocks of Surguja district, Chhattisgarh, India. The study was conducted using the pre-tested schedules followed by in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The information was collected from both young and old men and women of Hill Korwa and Gond tribal communities and a total of four hundred knowledgeable individuals (two hundred each from both tribal communities) were purposively selected.

3. Objectives

The study has been conducted to explore perceptions pertaining to health and illness, understand the healthcare seeking behavior and explore similarities and differences in perceptions of the aforementioned attributes among Hill Korwa and Gond tribes residing in Surguja district, Chhattisgarh, India.



4. Results

4.1 Perceptions of Health and illness among Hill Korwa and Gond

The perception of health & illness and the associated responses varied among the individuals depending upon gender and age of the respondents. Health, according to Hill Korwas is a physical characteristic rather than mental (Figure 1). Hill Korwas believe that health depends on maintaining hygiene, healthy food and proper sanitation. Healthiness of a person is measured on the basis of food intake, lifting goods, work capacity and ability to walk. A person is believed to be healthy if he/she has good intake of food, good working capacity and ability to walk well.

Likewise, Gond people also relate their health to their physical efforts, but a different characteristic from the Hill Korwas is additional to the Gond perception of health, i.e. behavior of a person. Gond perception of health and illness is associated with body functioning and *state of mind*. Among the factors associated with the ill health among Gonds are lack of concentration in doing any work is a major, consumption of stale food, laziness, loss of appetite, weakness in body, etc. In addition, they also believe that health depends on the way of living, type, quality & quantity of food consumed, hygiene, sanitation and the water they drink.

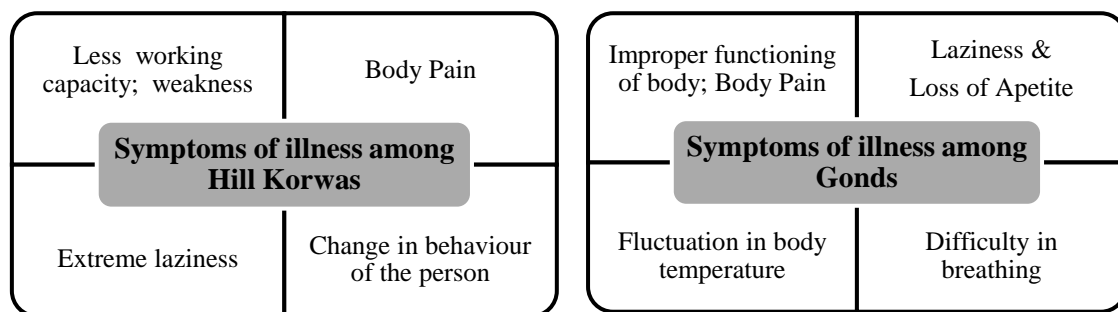


Figure 1. Categorization of symptoms of illness among Hill Korwas and Gonds

4.2 Cause of Illness

Illness among the Hill Korwa people is either due to physical (also referred as natural) and cultural cause. Physical or natural cause of disease is usually associated with certain physical activities of human body such as continuous laziness, difficulty in breathing, weakness, fluctuation in body temperature, change in consumption of diet, indigestion of meals, body pain, fatigue, etc.

In the same way, Gond people’s perception of illness can be divided into physical and cultural. Gonds consider improper functioning of body, indigestion of meals, inconsistency in dietary intake, body pain, fluctuation in body temperature, difficulty in breathing, etc. as physical factors for the cause of disease whereas cultural factors reported by them are associated with supernatural powers, dissatisfied souls of the ancestors, their clan or village, intrusion of spirit and devil in the body, evil eyes of any person, etc. Furthermore, sorceries and witchcrafts are also responsible factors for the cause of illness among Gonds.

4.3 Diagnosis of Disease and Mode of Treatment

Every society has its own method of diagnosing and treating the diseases. Similar trends were reported from Hill Korwa people. Some of the common issues of health are cured by the local people by themselves but when severe trouble which is out of control of the common people arises, traditional healer of the community, commonly known as Baiga is consulted. To assess the problem exactly, Baiga holds the wrist of the right hand of the affected person, closes his eyes and chants sacred mantras in a whispering manner. After completion of this practice, he reports the reason(s) behind the cause and uses some powerful magical procedures to reduce the effect of causal factor or in some cases, black magic. Sometimes, disease or ill health condition is diagnosed by the traditional healer by analyzing the symptoms narrated by the patient. In these cases, the practitioner/healer asks the patient to recall the dietary intake and routine activities carried out by him in the past week to determine the exact problem. Having a very strong faith in traditional healer of the community, Hill Korwas strongly report that the Baiga is a mediator

between people of their community and supernatural powers. They also believe that a pleasant relationship with their deities and ancestral spirits ensure for good health of the community members which is possible with the mediating act of the Baiga. Therefore, they perform various ceremonies to refurbish their relationship with the supernatural powers every year during some annual festivals celebrated by them. On the other hand, they strongly believe that if proper propitiation is not offered to them, their deities and ancestral spirits will get angry and send diseases and other calamities to their community members. Hill Korwas choose modern healthcare system only when the condition is uncontrollable by the traditional healer. It is interesting and notable to discover here that elderly people of the community are still depended upon the traditional healers for treatment as it is easier for them to freely discuss their problem with the practitioner as compared to the urban health specialists. Contrary to this, young individuals of the community have less inclination towards traditional medicine (Figure 2a & 2b). They are happy to choose modern medicine over the traditional as former is immediate remedy for the body whereas latter is time taking. But in some villages that are very hostile and located in remote areas, the young individuals have option of traditional medicine until the modern healthcare facilities arrive to their locale (commonly ambulance takes more time to reach to them).

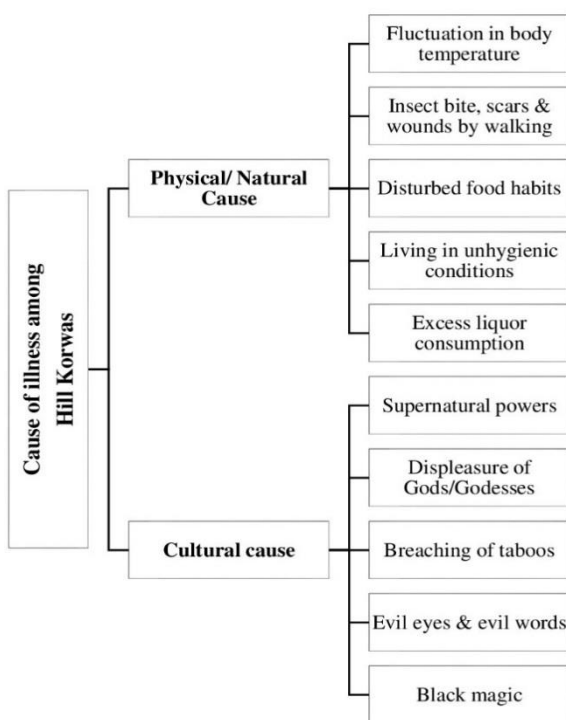


Figure 2(a). Categorization of cause of illness among Hill Korwas.

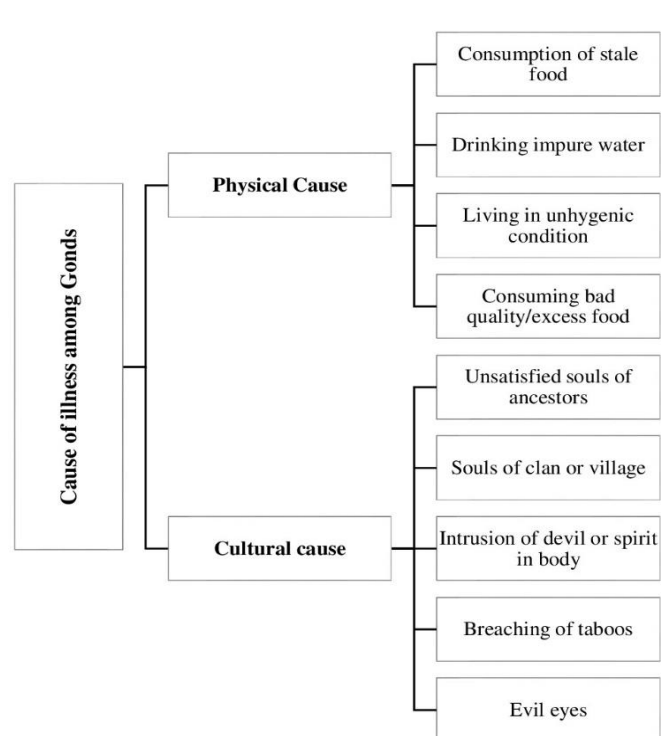


Figure 2(b). Categorization of cause of illness among Gonds.

The diagnosis of disease among Gonds occurs in two ways, i.e. traditional methods and modern methods. A person when ill approaches the traditional healer who is commonly known as *Devvari*. The traditional healer checks the pulse, observes the tongue and eyes of the sufferer that enables him to diagnose the problem. The traditional healer indicates the cause of the disease either physical or cultural. It is very much possible that a particular symptom may be associated with more than one disease. Instead, elderly Gonds are found to have a strong belief in evil spirits and God’s displeasure for the cause of diseases and misfortunes. But this perception is absent among the young individuals of the community. The illness connected with evil eye, evil words, evil touch and evil magic are also considered mild and can be cured by the healer with an ease. Few young people of the society directly approach the modern medicine system for treatment instead of going to the traditional healer. It is noteworthy to find that modern treatment methods have replaced the traditional medicine system among Gond people where youths choose modern ones whereas elderly have enormous faith in the traditional medicine.

4.4 Disease Classification System Among Gond

Gonds categorize illness into mild and severe. When mild illness is concerned, it does not require medical treatment whereas severe illness requires the same. The short-term illness is mild whereas prolonged illness converts to severe (Figure 3).

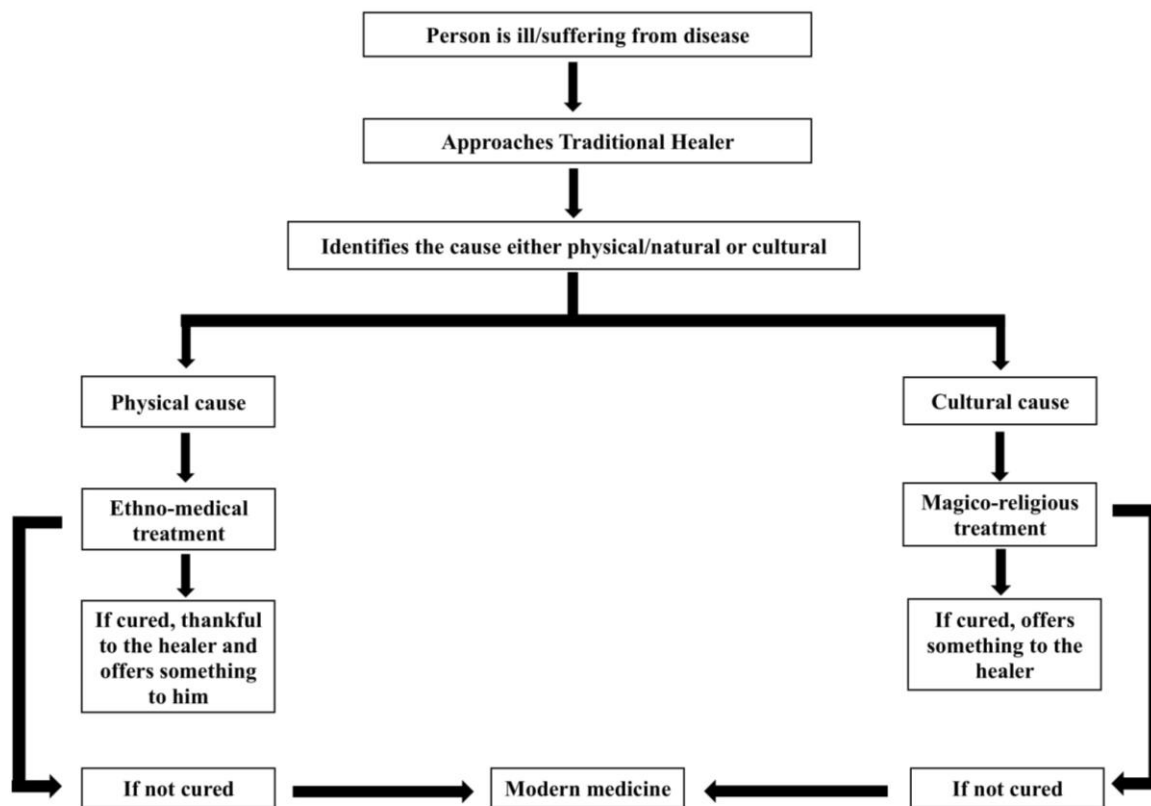


Figure 3. A conceptual healthcare seeking behavior model among Hill Korwas and Gonds.

For example, jaundice and paralysis are believed to be severe diseases whereas stomachache, abdominal pain, cold & cough, etc. are believed to be mild. Medical treatment for severe illnesses is preferred only if the traditional healer fails to treat the complication. These implications have not been reported from the Hill Korwa respondents.

5. Discussions

Perception of health among Hill Korwas and Gonds is stated as ability of a person to carry out his work and execute his role in the community, i.e. health is observed as functional rather than clinical concept which is in line with the idea of health explained by Mahapatra (2014). The elderly Hill Korwas and Gonds have strong belief in traditional health practices. Also, method of approaching the traditional healer is same among both tribal communities and cause of illness is categorized into physical or natural and cultural which is also reported from the previous studies conducted among different tribal populations by Mishra & Broker (2009), Shukla & Chakravarty (2010), Jaiswal & Premi (2014). One thing notable in the present study is Gonds have their own system of classifying diseases whereas Hill Korwas don't. One common perception found in both tribal communities is the classification of cause of illness which is differentiated into physical/natural and cultural. Causes of illness show variation in both tribal communities.

6. Conclusion

Still many rural communities of the world are isolated from the reach of modern medicines and rely upon their traditional medicinal systems. In the same way, the present study elucidates that Hill Korwas and Gonds possess a rich knowledge in perspective of health, illness and ethnomedicine. There are resemblances in some way & differences in the other in perception of health and illness. Likewise, the healthcare seeking behavior is almost



common among both tribal groups. This type of study requires to be conducted among more tribal communities of Chhattisgarh that shall enable to understand the indigenous perceptions of tribal people of the state. Moreover, studies on perceptions related to health and illness shall be carried out by researchers that shall be helpful in providing the scientific basis of understanding the disease pattern and etiology.

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