



The Perception of Disease by Tribal Women of India

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Abstract

Tribal women in India experience a unique intersection of cultural, environmental, and socio-economic factors that affect their health. Diseases are perceived in two major forms: supernatural and physiological. However, physiological ailments are often neglected unless they become chronic, while supernatural causes—such as evil spirits, the wrath of gods, and ancestral displeasure—are widely accepted and treated through spiritual or ritualistic means. These beliefs shape the healthcare-seeking behavior among tribal women, often delaying or replacing modern medical interventions. Taboos, poverty, gender inequality, and poor sanitation further exacerbate their health challenges. This study explores how deeply embedded cultural perceptions, superstition, and limited awareness contribute to a cycle of disease and neglect, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive health interventions.

Keywords: Superstition, sanitation, nutrients, spiritism

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Introduction

Disease and ill health have been the fundamental concerns of man since his emergence on the earth. Disease occurs in all societies, and every culture in one way or another makes provisions for understanding the occurrence of illness and for coping with it. Disease is a deviation from normal behaviour. Without disease, the existence of health is not admirable.

The notion of good health is a misnomer. No individual at any given point in time can claim to enjoy good health. A person who appears physically fit can suffer from mental issues. The reverse of the situation is also true.

A healthy individual is an asset to any given society at any given point in time. The human body is, by its nature, prone to

diseases. Good health is a birthright of every human being. It is the result of a balanced combination relating to fresh air, sunlight, a balanced diet, regular exercise, rest, relaxation and sleep, cleanliness- internal and external elimination of waste, right attitudes of mind, good habits and good patterns of living. Good patterns of living connote a healthy lifestyle and the right attitude of mind.

With the progress of civilization from the primitive to modern man, the concept of disease also evolved by stages from supernatural and deistic (celestial) origin to natural and “multifactorial” causation. There are people in many parts of the world, particularly the primitive, aboriginal and tribal people who even now believe that disease is due to supernatural and spiritual forces.

These concepts have a great bearing on the progress of civilization from the primitive to modern man, the concept of disease also evolved by stages from supernatural and deistic (celestial) origin to the natural and “multifactorial” causation.

An adequate definition of disease is yet to be found. The WHO has defined health, but not disease. Webster defines disease as “a discomfort, a condition in which bodily health is seriously attacked, deranged or impaired, a departure from a state of health, an alteration of the human body interrupting the performance of vital functions. The Oxford English Dictionary defines disease as “a condition of the body or some part or organ of the body in which its functions are disturbed or deranged.” These definitions are considered inadequate because none of them give a criterion by which to decide when the disease state begins and ends. The disease is not a state entity; it is a process with a dramatic or insidious (subtle) onset, a short or prolonged course and ending in recovery, death or disability.

From an ecological point of view, disease is considered the “maladjustment of the human organism to the environment.” The disease process is initiated by a disturbance of the balance between man and the environment.

There exists a primitive belief about disease causation. It is believed that supernatural powers have a great influence on the health and illness of people. Disease is thought to be an affliction of the soul of the sufferer caused by divine displeasure or sorcery, and can be cured by magic or faith. People are superstitious. They believe in devils, spirits, ghosts, and charms. In such a situation,

beliefs become a reality and hence supernatural agencies are reckoned to be better in treating many problems.

Folk people have concepts about the causation of disease: the wrath of gods, evil spirits, magic, and witchcraft. It has its diagnostic tools and techniques, which heavily lean on divination. Treatment is through the propitiation of gods, exorcism, counter-magic, use of charms and amulets, and administration of herbal prescriptions.

The health of tribal women in India is actually threatened by early age at the time of marriage, repeated pregnancies, high mortality among children and mothers, large-sized families, poverty, illiteracy, ignorance and prejudices and lack of material resources of food, shelter, clothing, and employment. Women enjoy the hegemony of reproduction. This facility is misused by patriarchal society to its advantage by forcing multiple pregnancies for the want of male children, either for progeny or labour. Some pregnancies may result in abortion, female foeticide, and a malnourished child, while others may lead to the birth of a girl child. The birth of a girl child in an Indian tribal community forces her into a vicious cycle of malnutrition, repeated pregnancies, and related gynecological diseases.

Objectives of the Paper

This paper aims to explore the cultural and social factors influencing the health of tribal women in India. It examines how beliefs in supernatural causes of illness shape health practices, highlights the impact of poverty, malnutrition, and poor sanitation, and investigates the role of gender norms

and traditional healing. The study seeks to identify key barriers to modern healthcare and promote culturally sensitive health interventions.

Literature Review

The health of tribal communities in India, particularly that of women, has long been influenced by a complex web of cultural beliefs, socio-economic conditions, and limited access to modern healthcare. Scholars have explored these dimensions through sociological, anthropological, and ethnomedical lenses.

Kalla and Joshi (2004) provide a comprehensive analysis of tribal health systems and indigenous medicinal practices. They highlight the central role of traditional healers and supernatural beliefs in shaping tribal health behaviours, with an emphasis on how illness is often interpreted through a spiritual lens rather than biomedical terms.

Banerjee, Bijon, and Jalota (1988) delve into folk illnesses and ethnomedicine, demonstrating how cultural interpretations of disease lead to unique diagnostic and treatment methods. Their work underlines the symbolic meaning of illness in tribal societies and how these beliefs influence community responses to sickness.

In a gendered context, Pandey (1989) and Rajshree (2007) examine the status of women within tribal and agrarian structures. Both studies identify the multiple layers of oppression tribal women face—ranging from economic dependency and illiteracy to social taboos and reproductive burden. Rajshree specifically notes how patriarchal norms reinforce a cycle of health neglect, malnutrition, and high maternal morbidity.

Srivastava (1976) provides an early sociological study focused on the interactions between tribal patients and modern medical institutions. His findings reveal significant gaps in trust, understanding, and acceptance of hospital-based treatments among tribal populations, largely due to cultural alienation and the perceived irrelevance of biomedical approaches.

Together, these studies underscore the pressing need for culturally informed health interventions that respect tribal worldviews while improving access to essential healthcare services. They also point to the deep-rooted nature of gender inequality, superstition, and poverty in shaping tribal women's health outcomes.

Individual Factors That Predispose to Disease

1. Poverty is a root cause of disease causation

Poverty is the root cause of all maladies, for diseases contribute to reluctance to follow health-promoting measures. Poverty and illness are bedfellows, and the poor people are the worst sufferers. The reasons are many. They cannot purchase drugs. Nor can they afford good and nourishing food, and preventive care. They live in poor-quality and substandard houses. When a tribal woman is ill, she not only takes the longest possible time to consult or seek advice and for hospitalization, but also keeps on working in complete disregard for her physical viability to do so. When hospitalized, she does not cooperate with the staff. A tribal woman is illiterate, ignorant, and unaware of the basic rules of health and hygiene. She has no concept of health as an asset. To her, preventive measures make no sense and

have no value. She is bowed down by the weight of far too many immediate problems of survival to bother about the preventive methods.

2. Status of Women in That Particular Tribal Community

Women constitute roughly half of the human population, but in India, the status of women is so determined that they remain inferior to the male members throughout their lives. Men have devised all the ways to put women under their control through different normative patterns, customs, rituals, religious beliefs and practices, and even through laws and literature. The mere birth of a son in the family is considered a day of joy and enjoyment, while the birth of a girl child is considered to be a curse, a sin, and a day of sorrow. All through the process of socialization, a sense of guilt and inferiority is inculcated and institutionalized in the personality of the women, and it becomes easy to deprive the women socially, culturally, economically, politically etc., and make the women consider these deprivation and discrimination normal and correct.

3. Living Conditions of Tribal Women

The pitiable living conditions of women make them more prone to physiological diseases of all sorts. Housing and occupation also have an impact on disease. The tribal woman living in dilapidated, dingy, or congested houses is susceptible to infections of the respiratory system, skin diseases, neurosis, and psychosis. The houses in tribal areas of Indian settings are nucleated, permanent, and made of mud. The roof is gabled, sloping, and tiled. The houses are very small with hardly any arrangement for light and air. There is only one door and no windows. Every house has a small courtyard in the front, where the women and children generally sit and spend their time. There is

poor light at night and an absence of suitable exits for smoke. The houses are ill-ventilated. They sleep on the floor. Inside, there are one or two shelves for keeping things. The courtyard is also used for the storage of various implements and often as a place for sleeping for guests.

Various Factors Responsible for Diseases Causation in Women of Indian Tribal Origin

1. Diseases of Supernatural Origin

Women of any Indian tribal community believe that diseases are due to supernatural agencies, where a person becomes the victim of ghosts, the evil eye, or to wrath of god. These are not considered factors causing disease within the panacea of modern medicine. For curing the disease, a sacerdotal (priestly) path of cure for getting rid of evil spirits is adopted in varied forms across all tribal communities.

2. Diseases due to a deficiency of nutrients

Nutrients are substances that provide nourishment essential for the maintenance of life and growth. Women of the Indian tribe are actually malnourished. This is due to unavailability, unaffordability, and lack of awareness about what is to be eaten and when. There is no concept of a balanced diet in the mindset of the women of the Indian tribal community.

3. Diseases due to a lack of sanitation

Tribal communities often lack awareness or resources for basic dental hygiene. Those who clean their teeth use datoon. They do not have a bath regularly, and during the winter, they rarely take a bath. Most of them do not use soap or any substance for cleaning. Bathing, washing utensils, and clothes are done by the riverside. They have the habit of going outdoors for defecation.

Role of culture in the causation of disease

Disease in Indian tribal communities, apart from having a physiological dimension, has socio-cultural connotations. The tribals not only emphasize one cause but also the combination of causes. They continue living in an insular presence. They have not changed their beliefs and customs. The majority of the diseases are believed to be caused by supernatural agencies. If somebody falls sick seriously and suddenly, or when a disease takes a bad turn, the tribals assign it to a supernatural cause. These supernatural causes, individually or in a group, cause ill health, disease, and death.

Ideas and practices related to health, disease and illness do not exist in a social vacuum. They are culture-specific. Many cultures have the view that the body should be kept in equilibrium or balance, although the balance may entail varying elements and varying means to maintain equilibrium. Research shows that a majority of cultures believe that gods or spirits could cause illness to some degree. Illness can also be thought of as caused by the loss of one's soul, fate, retribution for violation of a taboo or contact with a polluting or taboo substance or object.

Wrath of God

According to the tribals, when gods and goddesses are not given due recognition and reverence, they get angry and in their wrath cause disease and death. The goddesses that bring diseases, death and destruction among them are portrayed as being very sensitive, liable to get into a rage soon, and are appeased when appropriate offerings and sacrifices are made with due respect.

Evil Spirits

From the cradle to the grave, the tribal man feels surrounded by evil spirits of various kinds. He is afraid of them because they cause disease and misfortune. He offers

sacrifices to them to propitiate and appease them. Fear and not devotion are the basis of his worship. If by sacrificial offerings he cannot avoid them, then he takes the help of the spiritist. It is he whom the villagers request for help in getting rid of the evil spirits. The spiritist uses various means to drive away the evil spirit. According to the tribals, spirits associated with particular diseases depart when specific sacrificial offerings are made. They also have the belief of the spirits of one's ancestors. These spirits are said to be the ghosts of dead relatives. The spirits of the ancestors are never far away. They take an active part in one's life, bringing good or bad luck. When a soul leaves the body, it may wish to come back to life by entering into some other body, thus causing illness.

Superstitions

Various superstitious beliefs are prevalent among the tribals. Among them, if a married woman does not give birth to a child, then it becomes a concern of a superstitious nature. Women who are in their family way are not allowed near cremation grounds. They are not allowed to eat or drink certain substances. Various other restrictions or taboos abound in the daily routine of tribal communities. Touching a woman who menstruates is not permitted among tribals. Having intercourse with a menstruating woman is not permitted. Breach of morality and social order

For the tribals, theories of disease generally have major relevance to the moral order; i.e., to control man's behaviour in society. Disease and illness are seen as a warning, a visitation from punishing agents for a broken taboo, a hostile impulse or an aberrant urge to depart from the approved way. In their community, the occurrence and imminence of disease is with the belief that it represents punishment for aberrant behavior and, therefore, is important in maintaining group cohesion.

Breach of certain taboos is believed to be responsible for certain diseases. Having illicit sexual relations with women of lower castes and during their menstruation is an unpardonable breach of taboo and is thought to be responsible for venereal diseases. During their menstruation the tribal women are not allowed to enter the kitchen. To abort a child is also considered an immoral act.

Spiritism

In every society, there exists a body of beliefs and concepts about the nature of disease and its treatment. Cultural patterns, religious beliefs, economy, morality, social values and medical beliefs are found together to form the health culture of a community.

The helplessness of the tribals against the intervention and interference of evil spirits in his day-to-day life forces him to resort to magical rituals and propitiatory and sacrificial measures. They believe in supernatural powers. Their beliefs in supernaturalism are reinforced by their illiteracy and poverty. Their belief regarding health and illness explains that certain diseases that are magically caused, maybe cured by magic and sorcery. The treatment of the disease depends upon what is held to be the cause of that disease. For the tribals, diseases that are due to evil spirits are treated by sorcery or magic. According to them, the evil spirits are of two types:

- i) **Ancestral Spirits:** The ancestral spirits pertain to the dead relations. The tribals are afraid of the dead. It is the soul that wishes to come back to life and enters the body of a relative, thus creating illness.
- ii) **Churel:** Churel is the spirit of a woman who dies during pregnancy. It is considered to be the worst of all the spirits. She has a very ugly appearance and hence this condition brings disease and illness.

The measures adopted for removing the evil spirits are propitiation and driving them away. The tribals believe in the powers of their deities and family gods. The deities of the Great Tradition include Kali, Vishnu, Santoshimata, and Durga and those of the Little Tradition include Sitala Mata, Bhawani and Parvati. They are all considered to be the mother of various diseases. It is the spiritist who is called upon to diagnose the complaints of a person. The diagnosis is based on trance, intuition and also through mediation. The spiritist in his trance calls the name of the patient and enters into a conversation with the spirit that caused the illness. He demands the spirits to vacate the body of the patients. The spirit is also located by feeling the pulse of the patients and by examining the fingers, one by one, beginning with the thumb. This method of diagnosing evil spirits is commonly practised by local spiritists. The tribals believe that if a disease is caused by spirits, medical treatment will not be effective unless the influence of the evil spirit is removed. The process of spirit healing is performed not by applying anything nor by administering any medicine but by reciting mantras (incantations) or by entering into a trance, or some form of Davis may be given to wear, which is prepared by reciting mantras. Once the spiritist cures a tribe of his illness, he feels very lively, full of vigour, zeal and joy and is tension-free. Thus, the spiritist plays an important role in the life of a tribe. For the tribals, the ideas of disease causation have taken root not because of any modern scientific thinking but because they are the products of age-old traditions, beliefs and practices. Since they are not fully aware of the cause of diseases, they attribute them to evil spirits. Therefore, the illness, the causes of which are not known to them, is attributed to the wrath of deities or the malevolent spirits. Moreover, the spirits are also held responsible for the protraction and intensity of natural diseases.

Conclusion

There has always been sickness, accidents small or technologically primitive, there exists a body of belief about the nature of disease, its causation and cure and its relations to other aspects of group life. Any malady is not considered a disease till the time either it affects the daily routine of the patient or it becomes chronic. Disease is a sign of *paap* or sin committed by the individual. Also, the effect of the evil eye is the most accepted cause of disease causation in all tribal communities across India.

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