



Ethnic Traditional Healing Practices in the Tribal Systems of India

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Abstract

Traditional medicinal practice is a deliberate effort to grasp, recommend, educate, exercise, and execute the traditional forms of ethno-medical practices. India is a conglomeration of multi-lingual communities belonging to varied societies and tribal groups. Traditional Healing practices in India encompass the studies of different societies, cultures, customs, plants, animal products, and their interrelationship with health and illness. The aboriginal people of India shared different geographical locations, food patterns, cultures, traditions, practices, and customs. The Shamans or traditional healers of India are found in the hilly terrains of the Himalayan Range in the North, the Deccan Plateau in the West, tribal forests, and highlands in the North East of Tribal India. The study included Parengi Porja Tribes from Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh, Baiga Tribes from Chhattisgarh Central India, Chuktia Bhunjia tribes from Odisha Eastern India, Mizo tribes in the Champhai district of Mizoram, North-East, Mahadeo Kolis, Thakars and Katkaris from Western Ghats. Innumerable ceremonies, cultures, traditions, customs, folklores, legends, and myths, empower the mental and physical stability of these Tribal, delivering them an advantageous life. The study concluded that as humanity uncovered the secrets of the natural world, traditional medicines, ethno-medicine, cultures, rituals, and practices in the varied pockets of India that constituted the primordial forms of basic remedial therapy and medications that evolved from the primitive societies of mankind, and helped the tribal to get rid of 'Diseased Body'. Ethnic Healing practices in India are observed as cultural interpretations, beliefs, and healing practices among the Indigenous

Aboriginals of India.

I. INTRODUCTION

Tribal, Aboriginal and their Ethno-medicines

The term Ethno-medicine of the Aboriginals or the Tribals explains the area of the study that deals with different societies, their cultures, the concept of health in their communities, the various ethnic treatments of plants and animal products which also including shamanism and folk culture. Ethno-medicine studies British Medicine, Bavarian Medicine, Massai Medicine, Mayen Medicine, and so forth (Nelman 1978). In other words, it's a deliberate effort to grasp, recommend, educate, exercise, and execute the various traditional medicines and folk tales all over the world into the modern day concept of medicines. The basic medicinal extracts of these primitive societies includes plants and animal products. Ethno-medicine is distinguished and practiced exclusively in tribal societies or communities inhabiting in remote areas of the world including the hilly terrain of India. They have a common history or origin because of which the whole community can be termed with the similar maiden name originated from a single ancestry. For example, Kolis, the Tribal of Western India are the Tribal in the coastal region, who are basically the fishermen and are found in the deep jungles of Sahyadri range in the Western Ghats of India. The practice of ethnomedicine is observed among the aboriginal people or the Tribal of India, sharing more or less similar geographical locations in small pockets all over the world, dwelling in remote areas of thick jungles and high mountains, sharing common ancestry, food patterns, cultures, traditions, practices, and customs. Often they are found cut off



from the mainland and devoid of all perks and privileges offered to them by the government of that particular country.

Ethnicity in India

India present day population is a mixture of people belonging to different racial groups who poured in India from all over the world at different timescale, adjusting themselves in India. Hence India can be taken as a meeting point of different races and tribes where all the races of the world are found here (Ethnicity and Ethnic Groups 2019). The other ethnic groups accounted for the minor communities that emerged and embraced the admixture of various castes, cultures, and intermarriages and also due to dominant invasions of Arabs, Mongols, Persians, Turks, Afghans, and lastly the British communities (Watters 2006). All these gave rise to diversified, miscellaneous ethnic groups along with their specific ethnicities such as Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis, Sindhis, Iranies, and Tribal Cultures, with their customs, traditions, health, illness, and ethno-medicines.

Genesis of Ethno-medicines

Traditional medicines, termed ethno-medicines, constitute the primordial forms of therapy and medications that materialised from the primitive societies of mankind and have gradually taken the appearance of contemporary medications and treatment today. About 30 to 40 thousand years ago, with the awareness of various ailments and diseases various methods and treatments also curbed out slowly which took the shape of ethno-medicines. Through ages, shamanism or ethno-medicine branched and diversified all over the world, and prevailed today in many small pockets of ethnic groups and societies. The comprehensive speculation on health, ailment, and disease amidst ethno-medicine mystifies not just the fact of the physical body but also of the spiritual and mental stability that is paramount to having a disease-free life. The folk healers or traditional healers, perform innumerable ceremonies, cultural traditions, processes, folklores, legends, myths to empower mental and physical stability, to have an advantageous life over the disease as humanity as continuously striven which attempts to uncover the secrets of the natural world. The traditional healers believe that the nature would not only provide us with necessities like food, clothing and shelter but also offers a plethora of herbal medicines to treat numerous diseases. A famous quote by Norwegian Artist Edward Munch states, "Nature is not only all that is visible

but also include the inner pictures of the soul". Chattopadhyay explained "Ethno-medicines are the study of natural resources traditionally used to cure or manage ailments in diverse ethnic groups or communities and is thereby collectively termed as Ethno-medicine" (Khan and Chattopadhyay 2018). Indian *Ayurveda Yoga*, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) with acupuncture, *Tai Chi*; African Traditional Medicine (ATM), *Unani* Medicine of Mughal India, are traditional medicines practiced and observed all over the world (Jiang, et al. 2013).

Magnitude of the Tribal

Bio-medical anthropologists unwrap and divulge the ethno-medical facts that developed thousands of years ago and are yet observed and practiced as indistinguishable recuperation manner which is virtually homogenous across indigenous societal practices of China, Africa, and India. The Anthropologists recognize the study and explore the ethno medicine in different societies which endeavoured to acknowledge and appreciate the precious parameters for catalysing the numerous indigenous healing systems all over the world. The study ventures to explore the epidemiology of the disease in different societies from biological, socio-cultural, and historical perspectives and redefines the disease from its root or materializing point of view. The study investigates the existing angles, twists, and blends of health problems persisting in particular societies, affecting innumerable individuals and thus contributing to the development of further complications. This field of study delves into the analysis of various types of epidemic or pandemic diseases within specific societies, the role of Public Health and their Policies in managing such pandemics, and the nutritional aspects related to different ailments and diseases. The study also portrays how culture, customs, and traditions, influence and shape the epidemiology of any ailment or disease in a particular society, community, or ethnic group, thus expressing the individual's attitude towards the society along with the other ailments, thus inhibiting a particular disease. The study features and highlights, the various Indigenous treatments meted out to the diseased person in a particular society along with or without the English medicinal treatment.

The present paper engages with selected case studies in the field of ethnomedicines to reflect on the 'ethnomedical mirror-images of the lives of Tribal populations. The Tribes under study include: Parengi Porja Tribes from Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh;



Ethno-medicine in Baiga Tribes from Chhattisgarh, Central India;
Encountering Illness among the ChuktiaBhunja tribes of Odisha;
Ethno-medicines study by Mizo tribes in the Champhai district of Mizoram.

Tribal Reasoning and Discussion

Practices of ParengiPorja Mothers

ParengiPorja tribe is an aboriginal small population, colonised and located in the Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh. The study was focussed on the *ParengiPorja*'s tribal ladies and their health conditions during pregnancy. The study reflected on the young mothers of Purja tribes and their ethno-aetiology, ethno-symptomology, ethno-gynaecology, ethno-obstetric practices, thereafter the various modes of regaining health after pregnancy. The reasoning and discussion about ParengiPorja, reflected the fact that the tribal strongly believed in evil spirits and warding them off as a process of curing illness. Twenty different types of illnesses were observed among them where five inseparably female-related health problems were related. The various modes of ethnic practices to cure the disease were followed up and were transferred from one generation to the other. The study revealed that the practice of ethno-medicine was culturally acceptable, meaningful, and provided relief, and care to the affected person at an advanced pace. The medical facilities received from the Government doctors were less accessible due to unacceptable ecological and harsh environmental conditions as these Tribal were prone to heavy rains, and cyclones. Also the ethnic language, at times stood as a big barrier in communicating with the doctors and nurses who hailed from other places. The homemade remedies such as magical religious rituals, application of pressure therapy with metals such as copper wire or needles, if needed, were all a part of their treatment and therapies. The Tribal handled the medical cases very well and confident where post-partum uneasiness required vivid recognition and appreciation. The ethno-medical treatment meted out by the tribal included warming up the body when observed in a decrease in temperature during pregnancy, avoiding wrong consumption of food and drinks during pregnancy, applying turmeric paste all over the body when patients complained of itching and body ache, accompanied with a massage of hot herbal oil which they prepared, during the same. The tribal religiously vowed to their deities with offerings such as bangles, sweets and coconuts to aid in relief from

the uneasiness of pain during delivery. Along with these materials, freshwater crabs were also used for the treatment of severe illnesses for pregnancy. The study memorized the fact of that ethno-medical practices, to be a boon for the *ParengiPorja* tribe who had developed their self-assurance and self-confidence to survive even in the severity of complications during pregnancy and childbirth with the help of ethno-medicines they prepared. The Tribal mothers were also taken to hospitals in complications during pregnancy when they did not show any improvement in the household ethnic remedial treatments or surgeries. (Srividhya and Subramanyam 2019).

Ethno-medicine and Baiga Tribe

A Case Study of the Baiga Tribe and their Traditional Treatment method was put forth by Vikram Singh and Shailly Deewan (2018) from the Department of Social Work, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Chhattisgarh. Baiga tribes of India had conserved their biodiversity of their natural habitats and had maintained their tradition of curing diseases with the help of various medicinal plants which had been in practice for a long time. The Baiga tribes derived a substantial amount of their livelihood from the forests and also practiced agriculture through shifting cultivation. Baiga tribes depended solely on the jungle for their food and their diet pattern those included millets, coarse grains, and plant products such as tubers and animal supplements for survival. Thus, apart from leading a semi-nomadic life and practicing cultivation, they are also skilled hunters and woodcutters who believed themselves to be protectors of forests and thus engrossed themselves in the preservation and conservation of nature. Baiga tribes were skilled traditional healers in ethno-medicines and used different parts of plant products for their cure. Apart from tribal medicines, they were also talented experts in priestly practices (faith-healing) with the use of raw materials procured from their forest environment. They also preserved herbs and medicinal plants, not known for any obvious therapeutic value, both for curative and preventive measures. The study highlighted the knowledge of these Baiga tribes in the field of ethno-medicine in curing various types of diseases. Preliminary surveys were conducted by the authors in collection of data which included purposive sampling and the case-study method. The study reflected that the majority of the Baiga tribes were illiterate and relied heavily on the traditional, inherited knowledge about the forest for



their livelihood. They used shrubs, herbs, and trees like *Neeem*, *Shitla*, *Jamti*, and *Karanj*, depending on the different species of plants available on a seasonal basis, and were experts in treating body pain, cough, cold, stomach pain, and headache, fever, cut wounds or small accidents. The study also described the fact that the Baiga tribes preserved and conserved the Ethno-medicinal herbs. The *Baiga* believed in proper harmony of the body and stated that health and diseases were related to the body's overall functioning. The *Baiga* tribes differentiated healthy persons from ill people through their daily routine work where according to appearance and behavioural changes they differentiated the diseased from the healthy. The *Baiga* tribes considered the unhappy soul of the passed away progenitor, goddesses, evil spirits, and sorcerer's witch hunting to be the cause of illnesses". Treatment of various illnesses among the *Baiga* tribes was believed to be positioned on both traditional and modern methods of determination of the various health problems. The tribal healers were considered experts in diagnosing diseases by calculating the pulse, observing other body organs. These treatment methods helped in biodiversity conservation and the preservation of the forest product, inadvertently becoming a part of Global Biodiversity movement (Singh and Deewan 2018).

Encountering Illness among the Chuktia Bhunjia tribes of Odisha

Science of Healthcare Practices among the *Chuktia Bhunjia* tribe of Odisha, India, was put forth by Sabar and Dipak Midya (2022), Department of Anthropology, Vidyasagar University, India. The researchers related the fact that the folk or local knowledge-based healthcare practices of the *Chuktia Bhunjia* tribe of Odisha endeavoured to ascertain the socio-cultural factors and use of ethno-medicine, taboos, traditional practices to treat the diseased, reflecting the importance of existence of ethno-medicine and intensifying the substitute of modern healthcare facilities, in the rural tribal belt of Odisha. The study chronicled the associated beliefs, rituals, and practices concerned with healthcare in this tribal belt. Interviews, observations, and case-studies were carried out by the anthropologists, which revealed the fact that the healthcare practices of *Chuktia Bhunjia* involved customary beliefs, utilisation, and preservation of flora, fauna, and their pertaining laws which governed their access to various healthcare services. The study concluded that the science of tribal healthcare is ethno-

medicine among the *Chuktia Bhunjia* was inextricably associated with their own culture, beliefs, knowledge, customs, and traditions related to their immediate ecology. The customary laws, taboos, magic and rituals occupied significant space and influenced access to healthcare institutions. The ethno-medical knowledge was transmitted from one generation to another in the same family. The study reflected the science of Healthcare among the *Chuktia Bhunjia* which is inextricably associated with their own culture, beliefs, knowledge, and ecology, customary laws, taboos, magic and rituals which occupied significant space and influenced access to healthcare institutions. (Sabar and Midya 2022).

Ethno-medicine Study by Mizo Tribes in Champhai District of Mizoram

The ethno-medical study of the *Mizo* tribes in Champhai district of Mizoram, India was carried out by T. B. C. Laldingliani, and others (2022), who studied ethno-botany and horticulture. The study described the details of herbal plants in India, which had been widely used since ancient times to cure various ailments and diseases. The study described these plants as easily available plant products which had hardly any side effects when compared to modern medicine. The case-study highlighted the ethno-medical plants found in the Champhai district of Mizoram located in the Indo-Burman biodiversity region. Vast jungles of tropical semi-green forests, tropical wet evergreen forests and mountains of sub-tropical pine forests, were found in the North East Region (NER) of India, Mizoram. Since Champhai belongs to a remote rural area of Mizoram, a huge population of the tribal practice of ethno-medicine. The various techniques used for data collection for the research were interviews with many informants across 15 villages of the Champhai district, which led to the discovery of 93 plant species from 53 families and 85 genera were recorded for ethno-medicinal research by the researchers. The study highlighted that the *Mizo* tribes had their own means and way of treating and utilising plants to heal various ailments. Leaves were the most frequently used part of the plant body and were usually used in the form of decoction. The other parts of the plants were used accordingly when needed. Thus, tribal had extensive knowledge to grasp the medicinal properties of plants and they preferred them over the modern medicines when required to have a unique way of utilising these plant products to treat different kinds of ailments (Laldingliani et al.



2022).

II. Summary and Conclusion

The study reflected the gaping disparities in the health status of tribal when compared with the general population. The fact it unfolded that though government Institutions had been trying their best levels to improve the health care system of the Tribal, continuous attention is needed to improve the health status of these people in the rural areas as their habitation has inaccessibility to the roads, and these Tribal are found in the hilly terrain surrounded by jungles all around. Also Tribal language functions as a major barrier to the local communications. Most of the tribal were poverty stricken and dwelt below the poverty line as they spend very little on their healthcare. They usually had very little inclination to underestimate its severity of any disease. At times, high maternal and infant mortality rates were observed with tremendous amount of infectious diseases like dengue fever, malaria, pneumonia, and tuberculosis. However, depending on their ethnicity from different remote areas, they followed their own ethno-medicines of plants and animals which helped them to come up with innovative traditional medicines based from the Mother Earth and was found advantageous over the Modern medicine. This potent of ethno-medicine proved beneficial at times to fight against various diseases and were the originality of the natural products. This study reflected that these practises also eventually lead to the preservation and conservation of varied flora and fauna in the jungle world. The study thus summarizes the benefits and knowledge of ethno-medicines that opened the doors of various avenues to healthcare system, its sustainability and knowledge culturally transmitted from one generation to another.

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