

Concept of Health and Health and Healing in Tribal Culture

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Concept of Health:

Health is an integral part of human existence. Since time immemorial, health care practices have been reported from the ancient literatures of cultures like Indian, Chinese and Greeks. Health in these literatures is normally conceived as a balance between a person and the environment, the unity of soul and body and the natural origin of disease. It was also conceived as harmonious functioning of organs thus emphasizing the physical dimension of body and its parts being in harmonious relation.

Health thus may be considered as the state of well being. It is also seen as a state of being free from illness. In this sense it is seen to be conceptualized in a bipolar spectrum with disease being at the other end. Health is assumed to be a positive state, essential for the carrying out day to day activities with ease. Basu (1993) states that health is a function not only of the overall development of society: cultural, economic, educational social and political. But it is also conceived as the product of many factors that influences the body and environment. Health has been understood in various ways by conceptualizing different factor responsible for its outcome. These are

1. Biomedical concept
2. Ecological concept
3. Psychosocial concept
4. Holistic concept

1. The Biomedical Concept

This concept conceive health in a organic perspective where in body is viewed in mechanistic manner which need to be corrected by repairing the part and restoring the original status. Absence of disease is considered for the recognition of healthy body. Its genesis lies in the germ theory of disease. And it emphasizes on the cure of disease disregarding other aspect of life.

2. Ecological concept

The Ecological perspective consider human being as situated within their ecosphere where in environment greatly influences the body. It espouse for a dynamic equilibrium between man and environment for a healthy life whereas, maladjustment to them cause disease which disturbs this equilibrium.

3. Psychosocial concept

The psychosocial concept of health recognizes human being as social organism who is profoundly affected by the social and psychological factors. Human beings are tied to a web of relationship which influences their social, cultural, economic and political environment with a great impact on human psyche. The bruised human psyche, with disturbance in any of these aspect lead to unhealthy condition affecting the body. It thus considers health both as a social and biological phenomenon.

4. Holistic Concept

The holistic concept of health conceptualizes human being in adjustment within biotic, abiotic and social environment. Since human life is related to its environment in multidimensional way, any discrepancies in any aspect lead to maladjustment resulting in less than normal health. It thus see human being in holistic manner. Thus livelihood pattern like agriculture, profession, food, development initiatives all influences the well being. Health is thus a relative state in which one is able to function well physically, mentally, socially and spiritually to express the full potential of its being within the environment in which one lives.

Defining Health

Looking into various aspect of health, WHO (1948) gave a broad definition of health as “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well being and not only an absence of disease or infirmity”.

As this definition was very idealistic in approach for ‘complete’ state of physical, social and mental well being is unattainable, the more pragmatic concept of health was presented in 1977, which view

“Health as an ability, to conduct a socially and economically productive life”.

WHO revised its definition in 1984 and defined health as

"The extent to which an individual or group is able to realize aspirations and satisfy needs and to change or cope with the environment. Health is a resource for everyday life, not the objective of living; it is a positive concept, emphasizing social and personal resources, as well as physical capacities’.

Svalatoga et al (2017) has presented the layman’s perspective on health wherein health overall appears to be characterized by the qualities of wholeness, pragmatism and individualism.

Wholeness refers to health as holistic phenomena interwoven with all aspects of life including working life, family life and community life. Thus in addition to satisfaction of one's life it also focus on the liberty to live according to one's personal value.

Pragmatism reflects the health as relative phenomena. Health is experienced and evaluated according to what people find reasonable to expect given their age, medical condition and social situation it thus not necessarily look into freedom from the disease or loss of functional abilities.

Individualism refers to health as a highly personal phenomena. It value one closeness to other person choices and strategies in improving one's health. (ibid).

Health and Healing in Tribal Culture

Tribals though constitute around 8.6 percent of the population, are distributed across the country. There are 635 schedule tribe communities and 75 particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) each with a distinct culture. Culture as we know is a unique way of living of a particular ethnic group. Tylor (1871) has given a very comprehensive definition of culture. Campbell (2000) defined culture as a web of information that a person learns and which guide each person's action, experience and perception. Avruch (1998) while emphasizing the culture as experience learned, it also highlighted that it is created and interpreted from past generation and also from the contemporary one.

Tribal's Concept of Health

Health being a part of the cultural aspect of the community, varies greatly across the societies. In tribal communities too, it is a complex phenomena rooted in their socio cultural milieu. There exist an organic relation between the individual and their culture. Hence it is difficult to see health only in biological or medical context. Culturally and socially rich practices encompass the management of health which is quite at variation with the general population. Differentiating the perception of health and ill health among the tribal and non tribal, Verma and Shah (2014) highlighted that in tribal society these are classified on the basis of causation and supernatural causation whereas in non- tribal societies ill health issues are considered from the physiological natural phenomenon and malfunctioning of the body. Moreover it is has been observed that cultural factors such as social status, relationship of individuals with the social members, nature of relationship with super natural play asignificant role in the evolution of perception of health in tribal societies (Jain and Agrawal, 2005). According to Mahanti (1994) "these healing practices or health care systems were

almost always assisted or supported by the touch of mysticism supernatural and magico-religious rites”.

Individual in tribal society while suffer with the unease and discomforts because of physical problem, he is not alone to deal with it, rather the cause is to be seen in various behaviours at the community and family level which is believed to play a role in the manifestation of disease. As Sachchidanand (1994) has pointed out that they usually believe in some reason behind the disease like malfunctioning or imbalance of the their humorous faulty diet, lack of harmony with supernatural world activities of ghost and witches, displeasure of diets, imbalance of forces which control health and inappropriate behaviors in physical, social and economic matters etc. Among the Bhils of Rajasthan, ill health issues are not only due to physical, chemical or biological process but also due to a number of socially and culturally determined factors such as age old customs, values, impact of education, unhygienic food water and sanitation (Jain and Agrawal 2005). The health culture and practices thus vary in myriad manner along the spectrum of diseases.

Concept of health in tribal society is basically understood in terms of withdrawal from work. That is a person is not considered to be afflicted with some disease unless and until the individual feels incapable of doing normal work assigned to the respective age and sex in that culture (Mahapatra 2003). The same is also echoed by the adolescent Oraon girls when they opined that ‘health is an asset, for when it takes toll, it will adversely affect their subsistence and ultimately prove fatal to their existance’ (Rj and Nayak 2018). Thus only when functionality of the individual is under constrained, then he/she is taken as ill. Health thus is taken as functional rather than a clinical one in approach.

Factors that influences Health:

Tribal communities are entrenched into their physical and social surroundings. Health is believed to be balance between various natural, physical and supernatural realm of space and human body. Broadly they are seen to be influence by four factors.

1. Being a staunch believer in the role of nature and its various element in harmonizing relation with man, disease is supposed to be an imbalance between them.
2. There would have been some act of omission and commission in observing certain social and religious norms
3. Belief in God, deities, Ghosts and malevolent and benevolent spirits, that pervades the space and inflicting pain and injury when they are angered.

4. Involvement of human agency which is manifested through Sorcery, witchcraft, evil eyes and black tongue.

In the first case they believe that human life is governed by the sun, rain, wind and other element of nature. Any maladjustment with these element make person liable to be affected by disease. Hence all possible steps are taken to restore the balance. Among Irula tribe short term illness is supposed to be caused by some physical factors such as rain and climate but long term illness is believed to be caused by supernatural power. Kondh of Odisha conceives a symbiotic relationship between Man, Animal, birds and reptiles and disturbance in this relationship is considered disastrous.

In the second case if certain rules or taboos are violated it not only brings disease to the concerned person only but many a times it also affect the whole village. Most of the epidemic like small pox are seen within this context (Mahapatra 2003). Hence illness and the consequent management of disease is not always an individual or familial affair, but sometimes the decision about the nature of treatment is taken at the community level. All the other families in the village are expected to observe certain rituals, taboos and norms related to intake of specific food. The non-observance of such practices often calls for action by the Village Council/ Caste Panchayat. Incestuous relation and moral impropriety too leads to affliction of misfortune in the form of famine/epidemic on the village. Santals people also believe that touching the clothes or food of ill person can also cause certain illness.

Belief in ghost , spirit and deities are part of their supernatural world that controls the life and livings of the tribals. Spirits of Dead ancestors are to be adequately propitiated so that health and prosperity will be ensured. Broadly, the tribal people believe in four types of supernatural powers. These are

- (1) Protective spirits who always protect the humans and is constituted of various deities located within their home and outside. Hence village deity, mountain god, forest God or Marung Baru, Jahera Bonga in Santal are worshipped. Among the Santals of Mayurbhanj dist in Odisha majhi Budhiand Majhi Hadam are believed to Keep Evil spirit away.
- (2) Benevolent spirits who are worshiped at the community and familial level regularly, otherwise they may bring diseases or death;
- (3) Malevolent spirits - the evil spirits who control smallpox, fever, abortion, etc. Among many tribal communities it is also believed that these spirits tries to invade human body and

possess them, jeopardizing their life. In North east Indian Tribe soul loss is one of the phenomena wherein soul of the human being is captured or controlled by the malevolent spirit or sorcerer resulting into sickness. If the soul is not recalled and restored then it may cause death of the person.

(4) Ancestral spirits are the spirits of their ancestors who always protect them and are thus regularly worshipped for the fortune and prosperity.

Though the cause of sickness even if identified with the specific deity; the same deity can be responsible for various other diseases also. It has been reported that in Sherdukpen Tribe, a Buddhist tribe of North East there is one black water spirit called Basu Ta is believed to cause as many as 148 diseases (Sharma 1961). To overcome the unfamiliar disease and unseen spirits, the Apa Tani terrace cultivators of Arunachal Pradesh worship and appease Anguro Korlang who dwells in the plain of Assam to protect them against plains disease while visiting Assam for trading. Saora identify disease with specific deities. Thus there are deities associated with children's disease, cough, cold, sore throat, blindness, rheumatism etc. (Elwin, 1955). Similarly Bhattatra tribal women attribute causes of any type of disease to the ill-spirit and tried to take out the evil spirit from the body of a sick person which is done by the old lady of the household. Even the diseases such as gynecological disease, leprosy, TB, anemia, goiter, scabies and gastroenteritis are all considered to be caused by evil spirit (Mahapatro and Kalla, 2000)

Evil eyes are another factor that are associated with the affliction of disease. These are supposed to be caused by the power acquired by people to harm other person with some vested interest. Thus to punish the person for their own gain, they cast bad eye on the concerned person bringing in ailments and misery. Bewitchment, Bad air (bad spirits), black tongue are also cause illness to the person on whom it is targeted (Raj and Nayak 2018) Among *Saharia* while a strong belief is that a person emanating evil and having mystical powers like evil eye and evil touch can also affect or deteriorate the health of a person (Misra 2004)

In addition to above there are also physical factors that are closely related to health. They are identified within their physical world. Hence food, environmental factors also influence the health. Thus in Hill Bhuiyan and the Saora, Diarrhoea and dysentery in rainy season is attributed to substituted food of jackfruit seed, processed Mango kernel for lack of

availability of cereals during the period. In many tribal societies foods have been identified on the basis of their hot and cold attributes. Hot foods create heat within the body while cold food cause coolness inside. Thus if hot foods are taken during summer the excess heat inside the body leads to illness while cold food play havoc during cold season.

Opler (1963) lists the following as the most commonly believed causes of various diseases:

- Malfunctioning or imbalance of the three humours (Doshas)
- Faulty diet
- Lack of harmony with the supematural world
- Activities of ghosts,
- Imbalance of forces which control health
- Displeasure of deities
- Immoderation or in appropriate behaviour in physical, social and economic matters

Health Care Management in Tribal Culture:

Health care management in tribal society starts with the identification of illness. Illness is identified as short term and long term illness, among Irula tribes short term illness is believed to be caused by physical factors like rain, heat and other climatic conditions whereas long term illness is caused by the supernatural power (Kumar 2017). Causation of illness is seen to be manifested by the physical condition and behavior of the person. However, social relation of person and their kith and kin's role is also explored in determining the causation.

Social Construction of illness:

Among the tribal community the social construction of illness is very important in determining the curative action. Illness is not conceptualized as an organic event but it extends beyond the body and enters into the social realm of the individual and family.

It is believed that disease is caused not only by the individual but it also found in the web of various relationship. Hence own as well as affine kin groups are also seen to be involved in behavior like offending social norms by violating dos and don'ts, disrespectful to deity, breach of taboos. These reasons believed to leads the visitation of misfortune expressed as disease. Such behaviours also lead to the loss of soul or invasion by the spirits. Communities also have a varied explanation to the seemingly similar illness which again is explained in the context of individual and their varied relation in the respective social milieu.

Health care practices

System of medical and health care practices can be categorized as social system of communication for it integrates various level of symbolic communication-Knowledge, resources, economic exchange, industrial activities, value system, authority, power system etc.(Bell, B. 2007). The complex system of tribal health beliefs leads to multiplicity of health care practices to manage their health. The health care practices takes into the consideration of environmental factors and usages of indigenous herbs, taboos and propitiation of supernatural powers . Smith (1979) has categorized them into Primary, secondary and tertiary practices. In the primary health care practice, the self care behavior prevents the onset of disease. secondary prevention practices include those activities that lead to early detection of disease and tertiary practices which include the actual treatment seeking behavior. Generally the treatment procedure in tribal includes preventive and curative aspects. In preventive aspect, they perform rituals, use charms and amulets and animal sacrifice whereas in curative aspect help of sacred specialists, priests and medicine men are sought (Misra 2004). Thus spirit possession and exorcism through divination is most accepted way of getting rid of problem in almost all tribal community.

The Recent Trend:

Though there has been substantial believe in the supernatural and other causes of disease , the trend is gradually shifting to modern health care. Today tribes at large, especially those who are exposed to outside world, are less dependent on their traditional healing practices in most of the diseases. Education, migration and urbanisation has influenced the health culture of tribes. Places where accessibility of health services has increased, people are utilizing these services for their health problems.

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