

Route to folk medicines: A study in health care geography of Madhya Pradesh

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Abstract

The practice of folk medicine and its faith have always been an integral part of Indian culture since long back. The vast majority of people in rural areas, particularly dominated by tribes, rely heavily on folk medicines and its adherents are also in urban areas. According to 2011 census 20.3% of state's population is tribes and it is rank first in India. It is also reported highest in Jhabua district with 86.8% followed by Barwani, Dindori and Mandla.

The study focuses on probable causes of diseases and procedure of treatment. Wrath of Gods, mischief of evil spirits and magic of human being are regarded as the main causes of diseases which also forms the basis of folk medicine. It has its own diagnostic techniques which lean heavily on foretelling that is divination. Treatment is based upon the removal of causative factor through appeasing Gods, exorcism (deliverance from evil spirits) counter magic, use of charms and amulets (*Tabeej*) *Jharafuki* and of course some herbal preparations. The study also focuses on the health care delivery through folk medicines in tribal of Patakot, district Chhindwara.

Keywords: folk medicine, tribal, non-tribal, rural areas, indigenous, herbal remedies

1. Introduction

Health Care Geography, an important branch of Geography has two broad component: (i) The epidemiology and ecology of the diseases and (ii) The location and utilization of services. Folk medicine, a part of later one is the integral segment of Indian culture which is widely practiced since ancient times. It is a non-codified system which is locally developed and confined to a relatively a small group of people. But, it is not surprising to find similarities between two traditional medical systems which prevail in two isolated areas thus having much wider extensions. A vast majority of population in rural areas, particularly dominated by tribes, rely heavily on folk medicine and its adherent are also in urban areas. They have total faith on it and the treatment of their ill health condition starts with this system. It is only when this fail, they seek for alternative curative health care.

2. Materials and Methods

Madhya Pradesh extends from 21° 21' to 26° 87' north latitude and 74° 02' to 82° 48' east longitude in the central part of India, nick named as "Heart of India". The length of Madhya Pradesh from east to west is 870 kilometres and 605 kilometres from north to south. It is second largest state in area and sixth largest in population of the country. At present the state consist of 51 districts. The total population of the study area is 7,26,26,809 (2011) out of which 3,50,14,503 are females and 3,76,12,306 males. The sex ratio is 931 females per thousand males, while literacy rate is 69.32%. A detailed study focuses on Patakot region located between 22° 24' and 22° 29' north latitude and 78° 43' and 78° 50' east longitudes in the Satpura ranges, Chhindwara district of the Madhya Pradesh. It is a deep depression in the hilly region and the approach is extremely difficult. The area spreads over 79 square kilometres with a horse shoe shape surrounded on three sides by hilly ridges and open on northwest towards Dudhi River. The area is rich in forest resources as well as in

medicinal herbs. Bharias and Gonds are the important tribes of the area. There are twelve villages and thirteen hamlets with a population of 2012 (1017 males and 995 females).

The study is based on the field survey conducted by author in the rural areas of randomly sampled districts: Chhindwara, Mandla, Hoshangabad, Damoh and Sagar. Former two districts are dominated by tribal people while latter three gives the glimpses of folk medicine popular among non-tribal population of the study profile. For the relevant information "Tribal Welfare Department", of state and bulletins of "Regional Medical Research Centre for Tribal Health", has also been consulted. The population data has been gathered from the regional office of Census of India.

3. Results & Discussion

Folk medicine was practiced since Atharvedic period and this medicine could be traced from ancient manuscripts, such as Atharveda, Kautilya Arthasastra, and even in the Ayurvedic Samhitas of Charaka and Susruta, in the writings of Alberuni and the later Muslim and European writers. This is still practiced in the present century in rural India and particularly in areas which are dominated by tribal groups, its adherents are also found in urban areas. Madhya Pradesh is not isolated from it. It ranks first with 20.3% population as tribes in the country. Which is highest in the Jhabua district of the state with 86.8% followed by Barwani, Dindori and Mandla districts. There concentration is also high in Chhindwara, Betul, Seoni, Shahdol, Shivpuri, Dhar and West Nimar district. The main tribal groups are Bhils, Gonds, Baiga, Bharia, Saharia, Bhumia, Kol, Korku, Pardhan and many more.

These groups differ from one another in some way or the other, yet they have few common characteristics and one among them is health care delivery system. They have their own beliefs on causes of diseases, diagnosis and procedure of treatment. This folk medicine is still widely practiced in rural

areas of the state, particularly in tribal zones where traditional values are still evident. It is also predominantly practiced in villages of non-tribal areas. The number of distinction is found in the treatment system, diagnostic tools and differences in causation of diseases in the tribal and non-tribal rural areas. So, the present communication emphasis broadly into following two groups on the traditional knowledge of curing, diagnosing and treatment of various health disorders:

- a. Tribal Folk Medicines
- b. Village Folk Medicines

The study will be incomplete if a detailed study of a particular area/tribe is ignored, as it has its own unique characteristics, so Patakot, the home of Bharia tribe in Chhindwara district is given a special focus.

The purpose of studying this medical care from geographic prospective is to gain insights into the spatial health care of the folk population. Each group has its own view of origin, causes, concepts, diagnosis and practical therapies of sickness. It includes all kinds of herbal medicines, religious beliefs and therapeutic methods.

3.1 Tribal Folk Medicines

The study area has many tribal groups which differ from one another with particular similarities in health care delivery. The wrath of Gods, mischief of evil spirits and magic of human being are regarded as the main causes of diseases which also forms the basis of folk medicine. It has its own diagnostic techniques which lean heavily on foretelling that is divination. Treatment is based upon the removal of causative factor through appeasing Gods, exorcism (deliverance from evil spirits) counter magic, use of charms and amulets (Tabeej) Jharafuki and of course some herbal preparations.

3.2 Probable Causes

1. Except for a few diseases, all the other disorders are believed to be caused by super natural agencies when goddesses are not given due recognition and reverence they get angry and in their wrath cause disease and death among them. The most widely held example in this regard is causation of small pox by "Sitala Mata" or devi of seven sisters (*Durga, Jwala, Kalaka, Hulka, Purwa* and *Parwati*) who is said to produce various postular diseases and it was perceived that every tribal group of the state believes in this causation of diseases.

Another goddess called "Mari Mata" is believed by few of the tribal group of the study unit to cause cholera. The only way to escaping from this disease is to perpetuate the great mother. The twenty one sisters born of "Murra Deo" and "Piri Deshahi" causes various diseases according to their names like "Mirgi Devi" causes epilepsy, *Gala Devi* causes mumps, *Jappi Mata* causes sleeping disease and so on.

2. From cradle to the grave, tribal man feels surrounded by evil-spirits of various kinds. He is afraid of them because they cause disease, death and destruction. He offers sacrifices to appease them, fear, not devotion is the basis of his worship. They called them by different names as Demons, *Bhuts, Churels, Dakin* etc. They are generally believed to dwell in cremation ground, graveyards, desolate places, old broken or dry trees. The treatment is done by uttering some magic formula and sacrificing a

goat or a fowler offer some liquor and request the spirit to leave the victim.

3. The tribal people fear the magic, as much as they fear the evil spirits, an enemy be it a neighbour or a relative, through magic of his own or with the help of sorcerer, can bring disease and destruction upon another. If the condition remains undiagnosed and untreated, it can lead to death.
4. Other than these, there are many socio-cultural superstitions, taboos, totems, past and present sins and evil eye which also result into the causation of few diseases.

3.3 Procedure of Treatment

When cause of diseases is known, the diagnosis process starts which is now the matter of rituals, sacrifices and incantations. The medicine practiced by them is completely removing the basic cause of the illness.

The treatment of disease depends upon what is held to be the cause of that disease. If a tribal man believes, the cause of a disease to be the wrath of god, influence of an evil spirit, sorcery or breach of a taboo, then to treat that particular disease, he takes such measures as are appropriate for its cure, to prevent further attacks, he wears a defensive amulet or takes such other precautions as may be necessary. The treatment goes with magical charms, prayers and herbs.

This diagnosis and treatment is done by the local medicine man called by different names like *Gunia, Baiga, Badwa, Ojha, Panda* etc. These local medicine men have superhuman knowledge, which he acquires in each particular case by various methods and devices. The *Gunia* never falls in a trance. His task is to diagnose a case, to play an intermediary between man and superhuman power by revealing to his clients, what exactly these invisible powers demand from them. Apart from being doctor, he plays the roles of judge, soothsayer, magician, fortune-teller and priest as well. He is very respectable person among the tribal and they have full faith in him. When tribal get well the credit goes to the *Gunia*, who was powerful enough to drive the angry god. If they don't get well, the *Baiga* does not get the discredit, and it is assumed that the evil spirit was too powerful, or the god was too angry. Neither the *Gunia* nor the method of treatment comes into disrepute. This is why they believe in folk medicine has never been shaken.

3.4 Village Folk Medicines

The health of non-tribal communities dwelling in rural areas is affected by many rituals, superstitious and unhygienic way of living. They generally believe that good health is a reward for a life of honesty, religious piety, moral rectitude and sexual restraints.

3.5 Causes and Cure of Sickness

The main cause of the diseases can be classified broadly into two parts i.e. Physical and Spiritual Causes:

3.6 Physical Causes and their Curative approach

1. Villager believes that ritual impurity can bring ill-health conditions like women in menses are regarded impure, so she remains isolated. If low caste people touch the food or eaten before taking bath can cause diseases.

2. Improper food can also cause illness. They divide the food in three categories; *Satvic*, *Rajasic* and *Tamsic* giving rise to purity, passion and wickedness respectively.
3. Villages particularly who are in contact with Unani Hakims have developed the concept of hot and cold. If the combination of both is not right they give rise to various disorders particularly related to respiratory and digestive system.
4. Over indulgence in sexual acts is firmly believed by the villagers as the root cause of physical and mental weakness, which ultimately leads to various bodily diseases for example – tuberculosis is thought to be caused if either man or woman who has fever and indulge in sexual intercourse he or she is liable to get tuberculosis.
5. Besides, the above mentioned causes there are other also like impurities in blood causes boils and eczema, congenital defects are attributed to the exposure of the pregnant mother to a solar or lunar eclipses and many others.

When diseases are caused, villagers take drugs mostly herbals either found in the kitchen of their family, grocers shop or with village *vaid*s / *hakims*. Other than these herbal treatments few massages are also common particularly for body aches.

3.7 Supernatural Causes and their Curative approach

1. Sins of previous life cause many diseases. Leprosy is totally correlated with sinfulness. Leper is thought to have committed a very heinous crime, childlessness, abortion, deformity of limbs, blindness and few skin diseases are believed to be caused due to sins of previous life.
2. Wrath of god and goddess causes many diseases. *Sitala Mata* and her sisters thought for bringing many diseases. Women worshiped in different ways to appease her during the outbreak of diseases.
3. Not only God/Goddess but religious people like saints as ascetics are believed to be possess healing power against diseases. Many *Samadhis* are made in that regard.
4. Evil spirits that cause disease among human being are of two different types; firstly ancestral spirits and secondly ghosts and *churels*. The diseases so caused are treated through different '*Mantras*', '*Jharaphuki*' and sometimes sacrifices are also done of different animals.
5. The village people also considered evil eye, breach of taboos can cause diseases along with this people belief in sorcery. Amulets are used for their protective efforts.

3.8 Medical Care in Patalkot Area

The cent percent tribal dominated area of twelve villages have about 80% of Bharia tribe. The area is an important reserves of herbs and tribal have extensive knowledge of herbs, roots and barks to cure their illness. The herbal practitioners are known as "Bhumkas".

The causes of diseases are somewhat same as believed by other tribal group of the state: wrath of god, mischief of evil spirit and magic by enemy. Due to poverty, illiteracy and ignorance, the health is very much affected by rituals, superstitious and unhygienic way of living. But, interesting enough are the procedure of treatment through various herbs, some of them are sum up as follows:

- They have their own methods of family welfare. Tribal Herbalist of Sidholi village claimed to terminate pregnancy by the use of "Gulhal".
- To terminate pregnancy (up to three months) root paste of "Rani Bhejri" (*Solaleum Incanum*) is applied around the naval of women, particularly in Bijori Jola area.
- Bharia's of Goldubba claimed that one grain of locally available particular 'dhan' is enough if taken on five successive Sundays to attain sterility in males.
- They collect Chapoda (*Occophylla Smaragdina*) for curing fever and cold.
- At the time of snake bite, they use "Austo Branch (*Seralpina Gsaneliflora*) for Jhar-fuk and utter some *mantras* in the ear of the sufferer.
- When Bharia's are suddenly afraid they termed as "Chamak" and it is due to ghost of various types, along with *mantras* hot iron piece is put on the body of sufferer which leaves a permanent mark locally called 'DAMA'.
- In case of Pneumonia the 'DAMA' of hot 'black bangle of a child is used and snake oil is locally applied on the chest.

In short, when a person falls ill in a village, firstly he takes the household herbs, then perpetuates and worship god, further he consults elders, friends, and neighbour and then consults village healers. If still the patient is not cured, he looks for *vaid*s and *hakims* and if they fail then only they go to the practitioners of modern medicine who is usually a Compounder in the village. Rare are the scenes for better health care utilization but now slowly and gradually, modern culture is making inroads into their deep-rooted beliefs.

4. Conclusions

On the basis of findings, following are the advisable steps for better health care delivery in the study area:

1. Government is providing health care facilities in rural and tribal areas but the residents are not fully utilizing them. The reason behind is the fear of the probable causes of diseases. This fear can be removed by awareness and education.
2. It should not be regarded as public responsibility, it is a group task and NGO's should actively indulge in delivering health care services.
3. Tribal particularly of Patalkot are skilled enough in using the plants of their area to make effective medicines. Their knowledge should be utilized at the maximum. 'Bhumkas' are usually skilled at making pulps and extracts of plants for curing illness. They have great potential which can be explored and used for manufacturing 'ayurvedic medicines'.

5. References

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