



Understanding Health And Health-Seeking Behaviour Studies: A Critical Review Of Health Care Practices Of The Tribal Communities In India

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Abstract:

Achieving the essential sustainable development goal of health requires a deep understanding of community health practices and behaviors. The unique socio-economic practices and geographic isolation of each tribal community shape their healthcare practices, thereby influencing their health outcomes and health-seeking behaviors.

The study's foundation is the body of literature that was examined during doctoral research on tribal groups' health and health-seeking practices. To comprehend the ideas holistically, it has drawn on a variety of subject-specific literature, mainly from the disciplines of Anthropology and Public Health, that address diverse facets of health and health-seeking behaviors.

The literature shows that in tribal communities, healthcare practices are strongly influenced by traditional beliefs. People often rely on ethnomedicine, which is a major healthcare system that is accessible to tribal communities. The reviews also noted that these communities lack knowledge about communicable and non-communicable diseases. Factors like education, household finances, and a limited understanding of health and illness impact their health-seeking behavior. Poor nutrition, unsanitary menstrual practices, inadequate maternal care, and poor hygiene are common issues. Barriers to accessing healthcare include a lack of facilities, financial constraints, and cultural beliefs. The study suggests using a bottom-up approach and government interventions in preventive and curative care to improve healthcare access for tribal populations.

Keywords: Health, Tribal Communities, Traditional Medicine, Health Seeking-Behavior

INTRODUCTION:

India's tribal populations have rich cultural traditions that are frequently separated from the country's mainstream. The cultural traditions of tribal communities encompass folklore, rituals, art forms, political structures, economic systems, kinship, and more. The traditional knowledge systems of tribal cultures are incredibly valuable, especially in areas like traditional medicine and sustainable living practices. Understanding the concepts of health and illness of different tribal groups gives enough insights to understand the health-seeking behavior of the concerned communities. The most significant issue, in the tribal communities, is access to healthcare, as many indigenous areas lack even the most basic facilities. Common health problems include malnutrition, high rates of infant mortality, and the prevalence of illnesses like tuberculosis and malaria. Additionally, the adoption of modern healthcare practices can sometimes be hindered by longstanding beliefs and traditions. The issues with knowledge of tribal communities regarding communicable and noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) are also concerning areas as the prevalence of NCDs is becoming more prevalent. Despite existing government policies and interventions in healthcare, challenges remain due to issues such as poor implementation and policies that don't align with cultural beliefs. This shows the need to integrate traditional knowledge systems and modern medicine.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

1. To understand the health and health-seeking behaviors of various tribal communities and the components such as perceptions of illness, health and healthcare practices, nutritional levels, maternal health, and menstrual hygiene.
2. To look at the Government Interventions on health and healthcare accessing barriers.

MATERIALS OF THE STUDY:

The paper used the existing literature which is suitable for review from various platforms such as Google Scholar and Semantic Scholar. The literature utilized primarily comes from the fields of Anthropology and Public Health and it has covered tribal community of the major parts of the country. The components that need attention such as concepts of health and illness, nutritional levels, traditional medical knowledge systems, government interventions, and maternal health were focused on while searching for the literature and the most relevant literature has been used. Downloaded 80 articles from different journals of which 53 have been used for the literature ranges from 2007-2023.

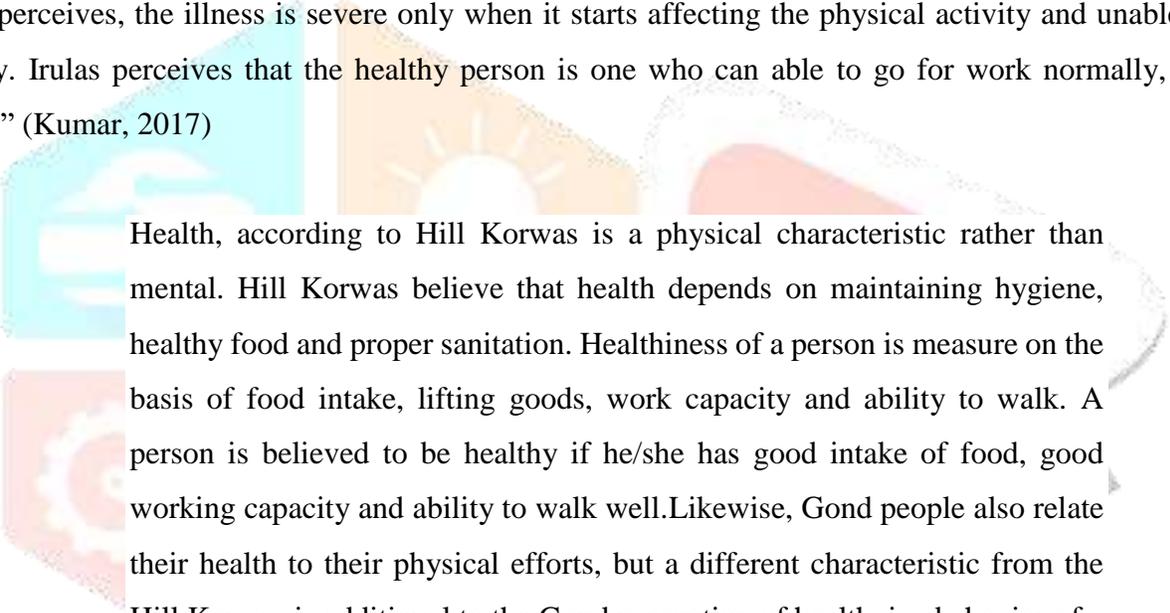
OBSERVATIONS:

Health and Health-Seeking Behavior:

“Health defined as a state of ‘well being’ is understood from a functionalist perspective among tribes – a perspective which considers a person as afflicted by disease often only when one’s capability to perform one’s expected roles in life is impeded either partially or completely.” (Islary, 2014)

“Health is seen as a person’s ability to work according to his/her role; sleeping well, having a healthy appetite and being active. Illness is identified as a condition that interferes with normal daily activities.” (Suchismita Mishra, 2015)

“Irulas perceives, the illness is severe only when it starts affecting the physical activity and unable to eat food properly. Irulas perceives that the healthy person is one who can able to go for work normally, without any disease.” (Kumar, 2017)



Health, according to Hill Korwas is a physical characteristic rather than mental. Hill Korwas believe that health depends on maintaining hygiene, healthy food and proper sanitation. Healthiness of a person is measure 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. (Harshdeep Singh Dhanjal, 2022)

Health service choices were shaped by spiritual beliefs, dissatisfaction with public healthcare, and trust in indigenous medicine. This highlights the need for health professionals to consider cultural factors and improve communication skills to enhance patient care. (Naoko Takeyama, 2022)

“Health Behaviour of the consumers influences Health Information Seeking Behaviour. And this relationship is strongly affected by Gender whereby the affect is strongly among females compared to males.” (N. Jaafar, 2017)

“Perceptions of mental illness vary across urban, rural, and tribal populations, as well as by education, occupation, and family type. People with better education and occupations tend to have more knowledge about mental illness.” (Saurish Hegde, 2022)

Traditional Medical Knowledge Systems:

Health behavior is complex, influenced by psychological, biological, cultural, social, and economic factors. Different beliefs and practices shape perceptions of disease causes and treatment. Traditional and modern health behaviors coexist, significantly impacting health outcomes. (Farhana, 2017)

The Karbi people had a strong belief on different supernatural powers and its impact on their health. Meanwhile, particularly in the cases of reproductive mother-child health, a number of faunal resources are also used by them. Thus a number of locally available plant and animal resources bear a special resemblance in the context of their traditional medical practices. It has the prime objective to reveal the relationship between traditional cultural practices, environmental resources and indigenous knowledge of the healthcare system among the Karbi people. (Bhattacharjee, 2022)

“The tribal people are having their ancestral wisdom to cure many diseases. These indigenous practices of healthcare found to be appropriate an account of low cost, good efficiency and easy locally available.” (Singh V. , 2015)

“The study brings to light that, how unique and innovative they were and how, over a period of time, the practices and knowledge is losing its ground and its impact on mankind, and environment, It has also raised pertinent questions on sustainability and the increased vulnerability of traditional healers.” (S, 2022)

“Traditional healing is still in practice among the Warli tribe. Head of the family and gender play an important role in making decisions in households in relation to health matters and treatment-seeking. They have limited knowledge on modern healthcare services.” (Singh K. , 2016)

“Women are having their ancestral wisdom to cure many diseases. A range of indigenous fruits and tubers are utilized during drought and food scarcity to meet nutrition requirement for maintaining health. These indigenous practices of health were found to be appropriate on account of low cost, good efficacy and easy local availability.” (Ranjay Singh, 2009)

“In the Indian subcontinent community, systems of traditional codified medicine such as Ayurveda and Siddha continue to influence peoples’ health related decisions.” (M. Sivaramakrishnan, 2017)

“Traditional healers are no longer preferred among the tribal population but they are reluctant to avail them because of the loss of valuable time. Home delivery is still prevalent. With improving socioeconomic status, people are going further away from government services as private practitioners, and quacks take less time.” (P. Taraphdar, 2022)

Maternal Health and Menstrual Hygiene:

“The Irula tribe in Tamil Nadu have unique cultural beliefs and practices in maternal and child health care, highlighting the need for improved interventions and incentives.” (M. Lakshmi, 2022)

“This study revealed that utilization of ANC services and child care services are far better by rural women than the tribal women. The role of antenatal care and child care being influenced by difficulties of accessibility, and availability of these services at tribal areas are exposed from this study.” (G. Sreekanth, 2020)

“Community partnerships between medical students, community stakeholders, and general community members significantly improved awareness and knowledge of maternal and child health services in rural India.” (K. Patil, 2022)

“The study could identify that about a quarter were low-birth-weight babies. The study also showed that overall reproductive wastage is quite significant in the tribal communities in the study area, even though the women in the area were found to be avoiding marriages at a very young age. By and large, the study reveals that maternal and child health practices are relatively satisfactory in the tribal communities in the study area.” (B. V. Sharma, 2023)

“To promote utilization of maternal health care services among Saharia tribes, this study highlights the importance of developing gender sensitive interventions that addresses the individual, community and health care facility level barriers of male involvement and do not reinforce existing gender norms.” (S. Nair, 2020)

Nutritional Status of the Tribal Communities:

“The study reveals that shortage of land and forest resources, lack of suitable job opportunity at local level and exposure to non-tribal domain has made tribal people suffer from lots of health and nutritional problems. (Sonowal, 2010)

Although the trend exhibits an overall improvement in the nutritional status in India over the years, the tribal children are yet to catch up with their non-tribal counterparts, and the ST children belonging to the poorest households are yet to catch up with the ST children belonging to rich households.” (S. Rekha, 2023)

Integration of Modern and Traditional Medicine:

“The structure of religious beliefs prevalent among the Lepchas, including traditional animistic as well as Buddhist practices, greatly influence forms of treatment sought for specific ailments. Even today, the use and maintenance of traditional health care with syncretized Buddhist religious belief among residents of Lingthem act as a vital source for understanding the influence of religion on traditional health care practices. Despite the presence of a few modern health care agencies, the traditional treatment of Bongthing (Lepcha shaman) and Buddhist monks remain widely popular as primary means of health care.” (M. Thapa, 2021)

Communicable and Non-Communicable Diseases:

“The tribal population in Gudalur and Pandalur taluks lacks awareness of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Health promotion is needed to reduce NCD burden, and urgent strategies are required to improve their knowledge, attitude, and practices toward NCDs.” (Dsouza, Sunny, & Sambhalwar, 2021)

Diabetes and hypertension have observed that the prevalence and severity in tribal communities are no less than those in the mainstream populations and they need effective strategies to tackle the issue. (S. Sathiyarayanan, 2019)

“Capacity building and, procurement and distribution of equipment, drugs, and information systems to track NCD as they are the obstacles in managing non-communicable diseases.” (P. Kaur, 2022)

Tribal health and culture are closely inter-related, with traditional practices and knowledge influencing modern medicine and promoting overall well-being. (Mutatkar, 2021)

Gender and Health Seeking Behavior:

“Factors such as control expectations, social networks, neighbourhood characteristics, and school context should be included as strategies to improve health behaviour in socially disadvantaged people.” (S. Weyers, 2010)

We used multivariable-adjusted logistic regression to study gender differences, stratified by age, race/ethnicity, and cardiovascular disease status. Disparities were most significant in younger (<45 years) and Black women, highlighting the need for equitable healthcare access. (Marilyne Daher, 2021)

“The study revealed misinformation and lack of knowledge on male sexual health along with lack of male-oriented reproductive health services are the impediments to male’s role and responsibility in the scheduled tribal population.” (K. Saha, 2007)

Language barriers:

“The low levels of education, strong cultural beliefs, and traditional cultural norms are the strong reasons behind poor access to quality health care, while communication in the local language, financial constraints, and geographical situations also impacts the accessibility to health care.” (D. Kumar, 2022)

Issues and Challenges:

“Tribal Health is further compounded issues by social issues like excessive consumption of alcohol, poor access to contraceptive, substance abuse and gender based violence. Besides other reasons, like poor budget allocation, difficult to reach, poor access to health care facility, severe shortage of qualified health workers and workforce led to poor governance of health sector in tribal areas. Present view point reflects on the issues of inadequacy of doctors in tribal area and suggests possible solutions.” (Mavalankar, 2016)

“Migration and urbanization the major cases epidemiological transition in tribal communities and the situation of the PVTGs in the state is even worse. The tribal communities are lagging behind the national average in terms of nutritional status, disease burden and availability of health care facilities.” (Priyanka Karnar, 2023)

“There are two primary issues with prioritizing health care: the first is understanding of non-communicable diseases (NCDs); other problems include a lack of healthcare facilities, out-of-pocket costs, trust in traditional healers, and misconceptions.” (Shantanu Birje, 2022)

The above study emphasizes the role of ASHAs as key links between the health system and the community, highlighting the importance of culturally appropriate information and training for effective NCD and cancer screening. It recommends using culturally relevant strategies in tribal areas, improving health facilities, and involving ASHAs in the NPCDCS program for better implementation.

The study found noncommunicable diseases common in these communities, linked to lifestyle behaviors. Locals faced issues like poor roads, lack of transport, unavailable doctors, and high costs. There is a mismatch between healthcare needs and service provision, needing aligned stakeholder efforts for development. (Ankit Chaudhary, 2023)

Government Interventions on Health and Healthcare:

The review on effectiveness of health interventions in indigenous communities has mentioned community engagement and culture-centredness among the studied communities. (Truely Harding, 2019)

“In this study, we found that use of ImTeCHO mobile- and web-based application as a job aid by government ASHAs and PHC staff improved coverage and quality of MNCH services in hard-to-reach areas. Supportive supervision, change management, and timely resolution of technology-related issues were critical implementation considerations to ensure adherence to the intervention.” (D. Modi, 2019)

“Maternal health care services for primitive tribal women in Dakshina Kannada district, Karnataka need improvement through community outreach and promoting village-level health workers. The number of the ANC visits and utilisation of TT should be increased by using community outreach activities and greater promotion of the village level health workers. In this study, early registration of pregnancy found as a crucial point of RCH services hence an effort should be made to motivate the tribal women to register their pregnancy with public health care institutions.” (Prakash Marpady, 2020)

Implementing a behavior change intervention in rural tribal India improved maternal health by increasing the use of maternity services and reducing distrust in the health system among marginalized populations. (Sengupta, 2019)

“Adapting the Mothers and Babies program respectfully to Indigenous cultures can extend its reach, reengage communities with cultural practices, improve health outcomes, and reduce disparities. Replicating this approach can enhance understanding of cultural adaptations and reduce health inequities. Future steps include evaluating its implementation in tribal home visiting organizations.” (Erin A Ward, 2022)

Role of National Rural Health Mission in defining Health of Tribal Communities:

In 2005, the Government of India launched the National Health Mission to enhance healthcare delivery nationwide. The National Rural Health Mission, a component of this initiative, specifically targets rural and tribal populations. Several program elements are dedicated to tribal communities, including the use of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) who play a crucial role in ensuring healthcare access. The program also includes Mobile Medical Units to serve hard-to-reach tribal areas, and Health and Wellness Centers that provide preventive, promotive, and curative healthcare, focusing on non-communicable diseases. The Tribal Health Action Plan, a distinct part of the National Rural Health Mission, aims to improve health infrastructure and increase healthcare human resources for these communities.

DISCUSSION:

The perception of health among various tribal communities is largely functionalist, emphasizing the ability to perform daily tasks and fulfill societal roles. Health is often seen as a state where individuals can engage in work, have a healthy appetite, and maintain good sleep patterns. Illness, conversely, is perceived as any condition that interferes with these normal activities. This view suggests that physical activity and the ability to work are key indicators of health in these communities.

In some communities, such as the Hill Korwas, health is understood primarily in physical terms, with a strong emphasis on hygiene, healthy eating, and sanitation. The Gonds, however, expand this definition to include behavioral aspects, recognizing the influence of lifestyle and mental well-being on overall health. This broader perspective highlights the importance of mental health alongside physical health.

Cultural and spiritual beliefs significantly influence health perceptions and behaviors. Many tribes trust traditional and indigenous medical systems, often due to dissatisfaction with modern healthcare services. This reliance underscores the importance of integrating traditional practices with contemporary medical care to improve healthcare delivery and build trust.

Tribal communities possess a wealth of ancestral wisdom for treating various diseases, often relying on locally available resources. These practices are valued for their low cost, efficacy, and accessibility. However, there is a concern about the decline of traditional knowledge and its implications for both cultural heritage and public health. The use of indigenous plants and animals in traditional medical practices also illustrates the deep connection between cultural practices and environmental resources.

Despite the increasing influence of modern healthcare systems, traditional healing practices remain prevalent, particularly in areas where access to modern healthcare is limited. The coexistence of traditional and modern health systems presents an opportunity to develop integrated healthcare models that respect and utilize indigenous knowledge while providing access to modern medical treatments.

The utilization of maternal and child healthcare services varies significantly between rural and tribal women, with tribal women often facing greater challenges in accessing these services. Cultural beliefs and practices play a significant role in maternal and child health, and there is a need for culturally sensitive interventions to improve outcomes. Community partnerships and outreach programs have been shown to enhance awareness and utilization of these services, suggesting that localized and culturally relevant approaches are crucial.

Tribal communities often face nutritional challenges due to factors such as land and resource shortages, limited job opportunities, and exposure to non-tribal lifestyles. While there has been some improvement in nutritional status over time, disparities remain, particularly among children from poorer households. Non-communicable diseases, such as diabetes and hypertension, are increasingly common in tribal communities, similar to mainstream populations. There is a need for targeted strategies to address these health issues, including improved access to healthcare facilities and health promotion initiatives.

The integration of modern and traditional medicine is essential for providing comprehensive healthcare in tribal communities. The strong influence of traditional beliefs, including animistic and religious practices, shapes health-seeking behavior and treatment choices. There is an opportunity to develop healthcare models that respect these cultural practices while ensuring access to modern medical treatments, thus fostering a holistic approach to health.

Tribal health is affected by various social and systemic challenges, including substance abuse, poor healthcare access, and a shortage of qualified healthcare workers. The prevalence of diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, and emerging diseases like dengue highlights the need for improved healthcare infrastructure and services. Government interventions, such as the National Rural Health Mission, aim to enhance healthcare delivery in tribal areas, with specific programs targeting these communities. However, there is a need for more culturally appropriate and inclusive health strategies to address the unique needs of tribal populations.

Gender plays a significant role in health-seeking behavior among tribal communities. Women often face barriers to accessing healthcare, including limited knowledge about available services and cultural norms that may restrict their autonomy. Addressing these gender disparities requires targeted interventions that promote gender equity and empower women to make informed health decisions.

Language barriers pose a significant challenge to healthcare access in tribal communities, where local languages and dialects are often different from the languages used in healthcare settings. There is a need for greater political commitment to providing non-discriminatory healthcare services, including the use of multilingual healthcare workers and translators. This approach will help bridge the communication gap and ensure that tribal communities receive the healthcare they need.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING TRIBAL HEALTHCARE:

Addressing Micro-Level Needs: To effectively address the unique health needs of Indigenous populations, action-oriented ground-level research with targeted goals is essential. This approach ensures that interventions are precisely tailored to the specific contexts and challenges faced by these communities.

Culturally Contextualized Healthcare Programs: State-recognized tribal members may require healthcare programs that are not only improved and increased in scope but also culturally contextualized. This includes respecting tribal sovereignty rights and ensuring that healthcare services are aligned with the cultural values and practices of these communities.

Primary Healthcare and Trained Manpower: While establishing more health facilities is important, the quality of healthcare in tribal areas also depends on having adequately trained manpower. This includes traditional healers, as well as local tribal individuals trained in modern healthcare practices. States should assess the specific needs and priorities of their tribal populations and implement proven public health strategies to meet these goals.

Reorienting Maternal Health Services: In order to better meet the unique requirements of tribal women, maternal health services must be reexamined. This entails encouraging domiciliary deliveries, fostering community trust, and maintaining advantageous customs. Maternal health treatments can be better accepted and used when culturally appropriate methods are used.

Health Promotion and Sociodemographic Factors: Effective health promotion must consider the diverse sociodemographic and personal characteristics of individuals. Understanding these factors can help tailor health messages and interventions to be more relevant and effective.

Bottom-Up Approach in Health Services: The health-seeking behavior of tribal communities is complex and influenced by a medical pluralistic context. A bottom-up approach, which starts with understanding and addressing the specific needs and barriers faced by these communities, can improve the utilization of health centers and services. Policymakers should ensure that programs are culturally appropriate and meet the perceived needs of the community.

Addressing Health System Barriers: There are several obstacles in the health system that need to be addressed, including erratic logistics, unfavorable outpatient scheduling, a lack of female physicians, and physician nonretention. To enhance healthcare access and outcomes, community-level obstacles such as low awareness, self-medication habits, insufficient health insurance coverage, and limited public transportation must also be addressed.

Universal Health Coverage and Public Distribution: Universal health coverage is crucial for all, especially for the most vulnerable groups, such as the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). Additionally, a more extensive public distribution system is needed to address high rates of undernutrition and ensure that basic health and nutrition needs are met for these communities.

CONCLUSION:

The exploration of health and health-seeking behaviors among tribal communities reveals a multifaceted and culturally rich understanding of well-being. Tribal perceptions of health are deeply rooted in functionalist views, where the ability to perform daily roles and maintain physical activity is paramount. This perspective, while primarily physical, occasionally incorporates behavioral and mental aspects, as seen in some communities. Traditional medical knowledge plays a crucial role in these communities, offering low-cost, effective, and locally accessible healthcare solutions. However, the gradual erosion of this knowledge poses a threat to cultural heritage and public health, highlighting the need for efforts to preserve and integrate these practices with modern healthcare systems. Maternal health and nutritional status are critical areas where disparities persist, often exacerbated by limited access to healthcare services and socioeconomic challenges. The prevalence of non-communicable diseases in tribal areas underscores the need for targeted health promotion and education efforts. The integration of traditional and modern medicine offers a pathway to more holistic and culturally sensitive healthcare. This integration, along with addressing systemic issues such as healthcare access, gender disparities, and language barriers, is essential for improving health outcomes in these communities. Ultimately, achieving better health outcomes for tribal populations requires a comprehensive approach that respects cultural practices, addresses structural barriers, and fosters collaboration between traditional and modern healthcare providers. Continued research and culturally appropriate interventions are vital to ensuring that these communities receive equitable and effective healthcare.

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