

Indigenous Healing Practice and Beneficiaries' Perception

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Indigenous healing has been regarded as a non-invasive medical practice for centuries, and despite the development of clinical treatments, many still depend on Indigenous healing practice for mental health. It is estimated that 80% of the population living in rural areas in developing countries depend on Indigenous healers for their health care needs (WHO, 2001). Despite the development of hospitals and educational institutions, people from the southern region of Karnataka, believe that entire unnatural occurrence is due to Bhootas (Spirits) and a certain portion of the population attribute mental illness is due to witchcraft and supernatural causes. In order to over from such obstacles, people approach healers for a miracle solution. Acknowledging the significant role of the belief system of people seeking the help of traditional healers for various problems, the present study was conducted to understand the perception of beneficiaries' on Indigenous Healing. A cross-sectional, interview survey was adopted and purposive sampling technique was used to select the 30 beneficiaries' approaching Indigenous Healing healers in Udupi and Dakshina Kannada District of Karnataka State. It was found that most of the beneficiaries approached Dharshana cult artists (Spirit Dance) (40 percent) to seek the solution for various problems, such as spirit possession (10 percent), the curse of the serpent (16.66 percent), health issues (53.33) and so on. The Herbs / Coconut/Lemon/ Kumkum were the common treatment method adopted by the healers (60percent), exorcism was a method of treatment adopted for spirit possession (30percent). Based on the findings it can be concluded that, belief system remains prominent in every aspect of the life of individuals who seek the help of healers while indigenous healers need be trained in order to provide better mental health care to the patients.

1. Introduction

Beliefs and help-seeking behaviours are highly correlated with each other and are greatly influenced by the culture¹. The culture contributes a major part in determining the different causes of mental illness and shapes the treatment process accordingly². It provides an explanation of the causes for the sufferings of the people and way through which they can heal their problems³. Culture contributes to the manifestation of mental illness and attributes the cause of mental illness as a supernatural power, magical spirit, or possession by evil spirits⁴. More than two thirds of people with mental illness and their family members have a strong belief in the supernatural causation of mental illness, and this belief forces them to consult traditional healers before resorting to modern health care. Belief on super natural causes on mental illness exists even today in many cultures in rural as well as urban societies for which, people seek the help of priests, mystics, shamans, and diviners, who practice magic, sorcery, and rituals to alleviate social, economic as well as moral crises.

2. Traditional healing

South India is a land of temples, where the belief in the efficiency of 'pujas' and 'temple worship' is very strongly rooted⁵. The practice of Traditional healing at these region found in every nook and corner of the society, which follows the belief that "various supernatural influences operating in the environment affect an individual's physical and mental health",

and then pursues treatment for the health problems through rituals and spiritual healings performed by the healers⁶.

The concept of Traditional healing has been regarded as a non-invasive medical practice for centuries, and despite the forms of clinical treatments available, many still respect this alternate medical practice. traditional healing is, 'the sum total of all the knowledge and practices, used in diagnosis, prevention and elimination of physical, mental, and social imbalance and depending on practical experience and observation handed down from generation to generation⁷. As stated by Siddharth, traditional healing as community accepted specific rituals, carried out by designated figures with the aim of relieving symptoms of distress⁸. According to Struthers R, traditional healer is "a person who is recognized by the community in which he lives as competent to provide health care by using vegetable, animal and mineral substances and other methods based on the social, cultural and religious background, as well as on the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs that are prevalent in the community regarding physical, mental and social well-being and the causation of disease and disability"⁹. Traditional healing is the oldest form treatment method which functions based on underlying philosophy and set of principles.

History of traditional healing practices in India:

Initially, traditional healing practice was an integral part of semi-nomadic and agricultural tribal societies. As per the archeological evidence, the existence of traditional healing can

be dated back to only around 6000 BC¹⁰. The history of traditional healing can be traced back to the ancient period, where the reference to the evil spirits, possession, black magic and traditional methods of treatment found in Veda's. According to Atharva Veda, committing a sin in the present or even past life, the transgression of the normal divine prescribed a course of life, disrespect of gods, witchcraft of the enemies and evil spirits of different types are some of the major factors that lead to different diseases¹¹. It is also noted in the literature that, the God himself or collectively, or through the agency of a number of demons, make a man suffer for his mistakes. Apart from Atharvaveda, the ancient Indian science of medicine known as 'Atharvaveda' speaks about positive health. The Ashtanga Ayurveda, which builds on the idea that health and illness are determined by the balance of various elements, humour, and qualities in the body. Besides the gross physical body, the person is conceived as consisting of two other bodies, the subtle body and the causal body of which only the subtle body is relevant with respect to mental illness¹².

Characteristics of Traditional Healing:

Traditional Healing has its own unique characteristics. As observed by the Dala K, one of the distinguishing characteristics of the healing practices in rural India is the role of the sacredness¹³. The whole weight of the community's religion, myths, and history enter sacred therapy as the therapist proceeds to mobilize strong psychic energies inside and outside the patient. The sacred may be evoked in the form of, local versions of Lord Shiva and Devi, spirits of ancestors, and demons.

Traditional healing is considered to be holistic and aims at the overall well-being of the person and it takes body, self, and society within a framework of dynamic equilibrium. The holistic approach takes into consideration the values, passions, beliefs, social interaction, and spiritual orientation of a person in their healing practices. Most of the healers are mediators between the physical and the metaphysical. One can frequently find healers who are known for their ability to host a deity or spirit and under whose spell they acquire supernatural powers to control the minds of their visitors and to heal them. The healer becomes the medium through which others can communicate to deities and spirits. They get visions and can dispense away favours at will. As diviners, they are presumed to be in direct communication with the supernatural and derive their healing powers through divine grace. They are both feared and revered by the local communities¹⁴.

It is implicit in all folk therapies that the illness is held as a social problem. Social customs, traditions, moral strictures, mode of interaction and role expectations give rise to pathologies which vary from culture to culture. The psychogenic nature of individual suffering is a widely accepted fact, in mental health literature. The healing practices are integral to the beliefs and practices of the local communities. The explanatory system which a healer employs is most congruous with the thinking of the masses. Evolved over centuries and verified in a countless number of cases, these beliefs about pain and suffering are compatible with the beliefs about life and the supernatural. The theory of supernatural

causation is widely believed and is frequently invoked to explain a wide range of events.

Types of traditional healers:

Traditional healers neither always perform all the same functions, nor do they all fall into the same category, each of them employ their own techniques in the therapeutic process. Generally, traditional healing can be grouped into two types; they are 'Swasthik' and 'Tamasik'. They differ in the methods and materials used in healing. A Swasthik form of healing is commonly practiced by the people belongs to a higher caste. They are well versed in Sanskrit and have knowledge about the Vedas. A Tamasik form of healing is practiced by the lower castes. They worship evil spirits and bhootas. Most of these healers are not well read, even the little knowledge what they possess may be outdated or misinterpreted according to convenience. They indulge in violent practices. Their occult practices are held after midnight or on new moon days and in places like a burial ground¹⁴. The practices of traditional healing vary from region to region and they are identified with various names. In Rajasthan, folk healers are called bhopas, and mantarjanawals, boops get possessed by a deity and speak directly to the supplicants. They are usually attendants of a shrine¹³. Mantarjanawals possess secret and powerful charms through which they treat their clients¹⁵. In central India, healers are called as Jankas and Barwas. The jankars treat through divination and these healers are believed to be able to find out the causes of various problems through divination. The barwas work with the assistance of a superhuman force and they get into a self-induced trance deliberately and intentionally by consuming liquor and inhaling camphor¹⁶. The curing ceremony of the Baba in Uttar Pradesh includes divination jharna (swapping), mantra (incantation), jantra (magical formulae and diagnosis) prescription of jarebuti (curative herbs), dietary restriction and giving of babuthis (ash from the fire sacrifice). In Tamilnadu, the devil dance is performed by the mistress of the community. This form of worship and healing is similar to the bhutharadana of Dakshina Kannada and Teyyam of Kerala, which propitiated and believed that illness and misfortunes are caused 'Bhootas and spirits'¹⁷.

Prevalence of people approaching traditional healers for Mental Illness:

The beliefs about mental illness held by both the patients and their relatives need to be studied, to provide the pluralistic approach to health care in India. The study conducted in Tamilnadu identified that female seek traditional help (52 percent) more than the male, 42 percent of the respondents consulted traditional healers for about 15 sessions and surprisingly 30 percent of them who consulted healers are graduates¹⁸. It is important to understand the health seeking behavior of the patients in order to provide better mental health care. It is no surprise to opine that a large number of the population considered traditional healers as the first priority for the treatment. As observed by the studies 35.2 percent of the respondents having mental illness visited faith healers first, before going to the psychiatrist and study revealed that black magic (83.55 percent) was the major reason for people approaching traditional healers¹⁹. In India, cultural norms and beliefs play a prominent role in the way people perceive mental

illness. The study reveals that, out of 200 caregivers of mentally ill attending District Mental Health Programme (DMHP) clinics of Kannur District, 69 percent of the respondents were currently following faith healing practices along with psychiatric treatment, 78 percent of them had sought faith healing at the first appearance of the illness, while 92 percent of them sought traditional healers at some point²⁰. People approaching traditional healers have a long history in India and is still widely used, including for mental illnesses

3. The Rationale of the study

It is estimated that in India, about 2-5% of population is suffering from severe mental illness and about 10% have minor mental illnesses, but mental health service to cater the need is very meagre and more over the utilization of psychiatric services purely determined by the knowledge and attitude of the patients and family members towards the illness. In spite of the advent of disciplines like behaviour therapy, psychotherapy, family therapy and other psychotherapies in the field of mental health in India, abnormalities are treated by using various religious practices and spiritual healing techniques. The coastal region of Karnataka has filled with several cultural and religious sites, where apart from deities or God, Spirits or Bhootas are also propitiated, and believed that illness and misfortunes are caused by 'Bhootas'. Despite the development of hospitals and educational institutions, people of this region believe that entire unnatural occurrences are due to Bhootas or devil spirits, and a certain portion of the population attribute mental illness is due to witchcraft, punishment for sins, supernatural causes. So to overcome such obstacles, people approach healers for the solution. The treatment of certain healers is physically painful and financially expensive. So acknowledging the significant role of belief system in seeking the help of traditional healers, this study has been undertaken in order to know the factors responsible for

people to approach traditional healer and type of treatment received by the beneficiaries of traditional healing.

4. Objectives of the study

1. To know the demographic details of the beneficiaries of traditional healing.
2. To find out the factors responsible for people to approach traditional healers.
3. To know the opinion of beneficiaries about the cause for their present problem.
4. Find out the remedies suggested by the healers.

5. Materials and Methods

In rural India, mental illness is believed as the cause of supernatural power and several types of rituals, vows, and offerings are performed in order to heal the illness. The present study was undertaken at Udupi District of Karnataka State, which has filled with several cultural and religious sites, where apart from deities or God, Bhootas (Spirits) are also propitiated and believed that illness and misfortunes are caused by Bhootas. The present study has adopted Descriptive research design, which described the demographic details of the beneficiaries of traditional healing as well as their opinion about causes for their problems and solution suggested by the healers. People from the rural and urban area of both the districts i.e., Dakshina Kannada and Udupi District, who sought the help of traditional healers were considered as samples for the study and selected through purposive sampling technique. Altogether thirty beneficiaries who approached Mantravadis (Shamans), Naga Patri (Spirit Dancer for Serpent), Kola and Dharshana Cult artists (Spirit dancer for Demi-God) and Astrologer for various problems were interviewed by semi-structured interview schedule at the shrine of the healers.

6. Findings

Table 01: Demographic Profile of the beneficiaries

N=30

Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Age	20- 30	05	16.66
	31-40	14	46.66
	41- 50	08	26.66
	51 and above	03	10.00
Gender	Male	19	63.33
	Female	11	36.66
Education	No Formal Education	01	3.33
	Primary /secondary	09	30.00
	PUC	11	36.66
	Graduation	09	30.00
Marital status	Single	07	23.33
	Married	22	73.33
	Widower/ widow	01	3.33
Place of residence	Rural	22	73.33
	Semi Urban	07	23.33
	Urban	01	3.33
Type of family	Joint family	11	36.66
	Nuclear family	19	63.33

Occupation	Unemployed	03	10.00
	Student	01	3.33
	Housewife	04	13.33
	Agriculture	01	3.33
	Beedi rolling	03	10.00
	Self-employed	18	60.00
Type of healer approached	Kola Cult Artists	04	13.33
	Dharshana Cult artists	12	40.00
	Mantravadi	03	10.00
	Naga cult artists	04	13.33
Distance from house to hospital	Astrologer	07	23.33
	Don't know	08	26.66
	0-10	05	16.66
	11- 20	09	30.00
	21- 30	06	20.00
	31 and above	02	6.66

The socio-demographic profile of the individual has great relevance to various aspects of his/her life. The variables such as age, gender, education marital status, occupation, type of family, occupation, and place of the resident are discussed in the demographic details. The table represents the demographic variables of beneficiaries of traditional healing who sought the help of traditional healers. The researcher found that most of the respondents are male (63.33), 46.66 percent of the adults who sought the help of healers and most of them are self-employed (60 percent). Pertaining to the qualification of the respondents, it was noticed that, people from illiterate (3.33 percent) to graduate (30 percent) approached healers. The study has made an attempt to understand the type of healers approached by the beneficiaries and found that, 40 percent of them solicited the help of Dharshana Patris, 23.33 percent of them met astrologer and 13.33 percent of them sought a solution for their problems from Kola Cult artists. In order to know whether people seek the help of traditional healer for their health problems due to the unavailability of the healthcare facilities, the distance between the respective house of the beneficiaries to the hospital were assessed and found that for 30 percent of the respondents, the distance to reach hospital was 20Km, whereas 20 percent of them unaware about the availability of the healthcare facilities, and for 16.66 percent of the respondents, the distance is only 10Km from their home.

The demographic data of present study shows that people of all the age group and with diverse qualification background approach healers to seek help for various problems. The study denotes that, inspite of the availability of the healthcare facilities nearby, due to the cultural influence and belief in supernatural elements people depend on traditional forms of treatment.

Similar results have been found in the earlier study²¹, which denotes that, a large number of people depend upon traditional and complementary healing modalities for all sort problems and some portion of the population specifically depend on healers to seek a solution for psychological problems. This could be due to the fact that, the broad use of traditional and complementary healing modalities among people and belief on spirituality and less faith on psychiatric treatments are the major reason for people to depend on traditional healing.

Table 02: Reason for approaching traditional healers

Reason for approaching Traditional Healers	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
	Job-related	15	50.00
Curse of Serpent	05	16.66	
Health issues	16	53.33	
Future prediction	02	6.66	
Addiction	13	43.33	
Possession	03	10.00	
No hope in life (depression)	04	13.33	
Infertility	13	43.33	
Marriage issues	10	33.33	
Problem with relationship	02	6.66	
Foreign visit	13	43.33	

The study has made an effort to understand the various reason for people to seek the help of traditional healers. It was found that, people approach healers for various reasons such as job-related (50 percent), spirit possession (10 percent), the curse of the serpent (16.66 percent), marriage issues (33.33 percent), addiction (43.33 percent), health issues (53.33) and depression (13.33 percent). The findings clearly show the prevalence of people approaching healers for various reason and interestingly there are few mental illness cases were reported to the healers such as possession, depression, and addiction.

Most of the respondent opined that the major reason for their present problem is spirit possession and the result almost replicate in the similar study²², where it was found that most of the respondents attributed possession as the cause for their problem. The result significantly contributes to understanding the cultural beliefs of the people living in southern part of Karnataka. People of this region believe that illness and misfortunes are caused by spirits and traditional healers like Patris, Mantravadees are sought for the solution.

Table 03: Opinion of beneficiaries about the cause for the present problem:

Opinion about causes	Number of respondents	Percentage
Unaware	15	50.00
Black magic	03	10.00
Dhosha (Curse)	05	16.66
The curse of Serpent	03	10.00
Disturbed by the soul	03	10.00
Uncertainty about the future	1	3.33
Total	30	100

Table.03 denotes the opinion of beneficiaries about the cause for their present problem. The purpose of exploring the above-stated areas is to trace, what people think about the reason for their present problem and it was found that 50 percent of the respondents were unaware of the causes of their problem, 10 percent them believed that the curse of serpent, few opined that black magic (10 percent) could be the reason for their sickness, whereas 16 percent of them felt the reason for their present problem is Dosh (Curse).

The findings reveal that respondents attribute to a supernatural cause (spirit possession and curse of the serpent) for their difficulties. The similar results were identified in other research¹⁹, where it was noted that most of the rural people (83.55 percent) had an opinion that black magic is the major cause for their health problems. People of rural India perceive that mental illness is culturally influenced and they consider all sort of disabilities are due to black magic, spirit possession or curse of the serpent. So it is more important to understand the influence of cultural factors in understanding, presentation, diagnosis, management, course, and outcome of mental illnesses.

Table 04: Remedies suggested by the healers:

	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Remedies suggested by the healers	Herbs / Coconut/lemon/ kunkum	18	60.00
	Homa (Ritual wherein the religious offering is made into the fire)	03	10.00
	Prayer	06	20.00
	Visit to temples	12	40.00
	Talisman	03	10.00
	Serpent worship	15	50.00
	Consult doctor	03	10.00
	Exorcism	09	30.00
	Remove black magic	06	20.00
	Solution for dosha (Curse)	09	30.00
	Animal sacrifice	06	20.00

The study made an attempt to understand the various mental health treatment methods adopted by the healers and found that Herbs / Coconut/lemon/ kunkum were the common treatment method adopted by the healers (60 percent), exorcism was a method of treatment adopted for spirit possession (30 percent), 40 percent of the beneficiaries were

asked to visit temples such as Dharmastala and Subhramanya (Temples) and serpent worship was suggested for 50 percent of the respondents. The findings clearly show that healers suggest treatment based on the cultural beliefs of the patient. In south India serpent worship has its own significance in the treatment of mental illness; even in the present study most of the healers suggested the same remedy to their clients presented with the complaints of possession.

Couple of studies^{23,24}, have shown the similar result, where healers prescribed remedies for the problem based on cultural beliefs of the patient. It is believed that the various cultural beliefs and practices associated with mental illness persuade the patient and family members to delay in seeking professional help. Apart from the cultural beliefs, there are various factors associated with the method of treatment suggested by the healers such as their level of education of the healers, nature of the problem and financial status of the client.

7. Recommendations

This study reflects the influence of culture on the health-seeking behavior of the patient delaying in seeking psychiatric care. So there is a need for sensitizing healers in early identification and optimum management of mental disorders so that they are able to manage patients appropriately and ensure timely referral of patients to psychiatrists.

Mental health professionals need to come forward to enhance the knowledge of the general public on mental health issues which can ultimately benefit the patient to seek better mental health care.

The study recommends that proper mental health policies need to be developed with due consideration for cultural beliefs and practices of the people and healers.

The policy makers, planners, and higher authorities, at the state as well as local level, need to pay their attention in collaborating modern medicine with traditional healing.

The indigenous forms of psychotherapy may effectively treat certain psychological diseases, therefore, indigenous healers need to be trained in order to provide better mental health care to the patients.

8. Conclusion

The association between culture and mental illness is highly concrete in our country from the beginning and it continues until the society exists. In India, less importance is given to the mental health services and very few mental health professionals are working in this field makes the favorable circumstance for culture to dominant mental health practices. The present study denotes the strong cultural beliefs of rural people force them to depend on religious and spiritual healing. The study covered minimum population so it would be difficult to generalize the result but in spite of the availability of the healthcare service in the district like Udupi and Dakshina Kannada people depend on folk healing then undoubtedly prevalence will be more where there is no mental health service available. So it is highly necessary to create

awareness among people and orient them to follow modern mental health services.

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