



A Study on Ethnomedical and Health Practices among the Malayali Tribes of Tamil Nadu

Jaiswal A^{1*}, Bhara S¹ and Jaiswal S²

¹Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, Central University of Tamil Nadu, India

²Department of Anthropology, Madras University, India

***Corresponding author:** Ajeet Jaiswal, Associate Professor, Department of Epidemiology and Public Health (EPH), Central University of Tamil Nadu (CUTN), Tamil Nadu, India, Email: rpgajeet@gmail.com

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Abstract

Disease and ill health have become significant focuses of human beings since immemorial. Health and sickness are biological concepts. But traits like beliefs, religion, philosophy, education, socio-economic conditions etc. also assess how people feel about health and sickness. This study aimed to study the health and ethnomedical practices among the Malayali Tribes of Tamil Nadu. The research involved a general household survey of 113 houses and covered 534 individuals of various age groups of Malayali tribal communities in India's Villupuram district, Tamil Nadu. The present's primary stress was finding how reality is socially constructed and using participant observation to understand people's emic perspectives. Unstructured interviews with open general questions were conducted to go into greater depth of data. The present study's findings discussed the health and well-being among Indigenous people, the health and illness of the Malayalis Tribe, their health-seeking behaviour, and the various indigenous medicines practised by the Malayali tribe for various illnesses and diseases. Malayalis well understand the concept of health. They link it with the economic condition, nutrition, food habits, work pressure, etc. They also relate it to biological needs. They also differentiate between illness and disease. Their ways of identification of diseases are appreciable. But there is a straight decline in their ethnomedical practices with the emergence of state initiatives, various plans, and schemes.

Keywords: Health; Ethnomedical Practices; Malayali; Tribe, Health Seeking Behaviour

Introduction

Disease and ill health have become significant focuses of human beings since immemorial. Each community has a unique medical system based on ecological conditions, available resources, and cultural norms. It has developed its concept and methods for coping with various diseases and ailments. They have a unique system of treatment and healing that incorporates culturally perceivable ideas, beliefs, herbal medicine, and magico religious practises (MRP). Hence, knowledge of traditional communities' health and disease has attracted anthropologists' attention and has become a fascinating subject of anthropology [1,2].

Health and sickness or diseases are biological concepts. But traits like beliefs, religion, philosophy, education, socio-economic conditions etc. also evaluate how people feel about health and sickness. The health among the tribals and their medical systems always involve social, cultural and environmental issues. People in every society, whether simple or complex, adapt to their environment by combining various biological and socio-cultural resources. The tribal people's views on health, illness, treatment, and even life and death are as diverse as their culture. As a result, everyone in the tribal culture is expected to follow the established customs that have existed for a long time. The interplay between people and the invisible forces that interfere in

human affairs determines their fate as individuals and as a community. The mysterious forces punish men who offend them with sickness, death, or other natural misfortunes. The indigenous people are familiar with various herbal concoctions and lotions used as natural medicines. This indicates that the tribal people had a drug list for treating ailments including malaria, scabies, smallpox, yaws, venereal disorders, intestinal problems, ophthalmology, etc. [3].

One such human need is to lead a healthy life. Health is not just a biological or psychological phenomenon; instead, it is equally a social construction. These socio-cultural parameters surrounding the building of health include lifestyle, food and nutrition, environment, personal hygiene and sanitation. In the same way, the disease also has social construction and recognition. Each tribal group knows the notions of health and illness. These indigenous societies have developed their indigenous methods of treating a disorder. Such an indigenous system is called ethno medicine [4,5].

Ethnomedicine involves disease causation, material medica and pharmacopoeia. The origin of the word tribe can be traced from the Latin term 'Tribus', initially referred to as any the division of societies and recognizable as tribes in the modern sense. In a standard view, it is associated with "primitivism" and "backwardness" [6]. The members of a tribal group refer to themselves as sharing the same name, language, and common territory and are primarily small in number. This study is done among the Malayali tribes. The term Malayali is coined by the combination of the two terms 'malai' and 'ali'. Malai means the hills, and ali means the people or the rulers. That means the people of the hills or the hill people.

Materials and Methods

India has been reported to have the world's most significant tribal communities [7]. Tribal peoples predominantly reside in rural locations around the nation; most people are illiterate and employed as unskilled labour for meagre wages [8]. The present study was conducted among the Malayalis tribes of Tamil Nadu's Villupuram area. The Malayali tribes make up 45.05% of all the tribes in Tamil Nadu. Most Malayalis are Tamil-speaking hill farmers who cultivate thinai and samai (types of millet). They originated from the vellala caste of cultivators and moved from Kanchipuram to the hills of southwest Tamil Nadu a few decades ago. Evidence of the Malayali tribe's migration to the Jawadhu hills was found in Kanchipuram during the Palaeolithic era. The main cuisines of the Malayali tribe include ragi, rice, samai, and millet. Malayalis marry in a variety of ways. The Malayali tribes are meat-eaters who prefer to consume beef, mutton, pig, and rabbit. Men are the only ones who consume alcohol and always drink the

regional varieties of alcoholic beverages.

In November and December 2018, a cross-sectional study was carried out in a village in the Villupuram district that was home to members of the Malayali tribes. The town is roughly 170 kilometres from Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, and 36 kilometres west of Pondicherry. This study is a qualitative research conducted to study the customs and habits of another society and culture. The present's main stress was finding how reality is socially constructed and using participant observation to understand people's emic perspectives. Unstructured interviews with open general questions were conducted to go into greater depth of data.

Various questions regarding family, literacy, marriage, occupation, and health were asked related to their traditional knowledge of belief systems and the curing of multiple disorders. The questions were asked to understand all aspects of life and how those influence people's health status and health-seeking behaviour. Secondary data were collected from various sources like census reports, books, gazetteers, articles on health-seeking behaviour and ethnomedical practices published in unpublished writings on Malayali tribes. A general household survey was done among all the 113 houses. The study area covered a total number of 534 individuals of various age groups (Table 1).

Age Group (Years)	Male	Female	Total	%
0-5	26	19	45	8.4
06-Oct	30	31	61	11.4
Nov-17	37	28	65	12.2
18-55	157	138	295	55.2
56+	26	42	68	12
Total	276	258	534	100

Table 1: Distribution of Malayali tribes According To Their Age and Sex Groups.

Results and Discussion

Health and well-being among Indigenous people

Most cultures share a common concept of health [9]. Every community has a culture that influences how they see health. Some cultures define being in good health as being at peace with oneself and the community. "Health is the fundamental condition not just for realising one's potential as a human being, but also for enjoying a higher standard of living. It is also essential for the individual's healthy development within the family and their integration into society at large.

Health and illness for the Malayalis Tribe

Health and disease co-exist in all kinds of societies, and each culture has its understanding of health and illness. The categorization of good and bad health among people is based on varied phenomena. From the emic perspective, the Malayalis denote health as their ability to carry out their daily activities without any problem. As most of the people of this community are daily workers, their wages will be affected if they get sick. Unless they fall severely ill, they don't miss their work. And during this, family members support and help restore the normal condition. Under the impact of inherited and environmental variables, a person's biological condition includes health and nutrition characteristics. Nutrition is one accurate problem of tribal communities in India. They have an understanding of food and relate to health conditions. Excessive work and poor diet lead to ill health and malnutrition conditions. A state's mental and physical components can be made more tolerable through "healing" and its connections to the patient's health-belief system. While the holistic healing approach aligns with indigenous medicine, "curing" is more frequently linked with clinical biomedicine. Curing and healing can occur in any method of seeking or delivering health. Therefore this is not a strict distinction.

Health Seeking Behaviour

Health and illness are continuous processes linked with all communities' health-seeking behaviour. Health-seeking behaviour is critical in dealing with society's health structure. As it is intricately intertwined into every social, economic, and biological event, the concept of health-seeking behaviour in a society cannot be studied in isolation from that community's social network. Simply put, health-seeking behaviour can be understood as a part of illness and health

behaviour. It describes the procedure from starting stage up to treatment, including delay, decision making, prompt actions, behavioural patterns and other social factors. For these people, methods of identifying any disease or disorder differ from different tribes. With so many difficulties, they manage to meet their ends. Sometimes they overwork to get surplus for their easy survival. At times they are not able to work as daily and feel fatigued. They feel very lonely. If it continues for some days or increases, they consider it a starting stage of illness. During this period, if they don't take care of themselves, their body will become weak, and other things will attack their biological system. Then those follow like cold and body pain. That leads to another stage that they consider a disease, i.e. Fever [10,11].

We can sum up it as follows:

Fatigue (corvaka) → cold (salei) → body pain (odamba vali) → fever (jwaram) → disease (noyi)

The Malayali tribes have strong knowledge of ethno medicinal practices; they have earned this knowledge through their interaction with their natural environment. Most of the villagers are aware of these restorative practices. Medicines were made in juice, paste, powder, and decoction. Additionally, it was noted that various plants were used in the cooking process. Several plants were used as a powder [12]. Some plants are used in decoction, paste, and juice; in some cases, fresh and dried fruits are utilised medicinally. The leaves are the most used plant parts among the Malayali tribes in the Kalrayan hills for medicinal purposes. The creation of medicine typically makes use of new aspects of plants. Dried plant components are also employed when fresh plant parts are not accessible. The Table 2 below shows the indigenous medicines practised by the Malayali tribe for various illnesses and diseases.

SN.	Disease/ Disorder	Native Term	Scientific term	Etiology	Symptoms	Treatments
1	Fever	Jwaram	Pyrexia	Season change cold	-feeling weak -shivering -body temperature increase	-kadukkai paste is put on the forehead. -nochi leaves to boil in water and inhale -eucalyptus leaves to boil in water and take a bath
2	Cold and cough	Salei and irumal	Influenza	-change in climate -excess intake of cold items communicable	-cough -sneezing -running -nose headache	-Tudhavalai leaves to boil in water and inhale -dry ginger, jaggery, and coriander leaves are added with tea and drink -tumbachedi leaves, karapatara and Tulasi boil in water and drink

3	Bady heat	Odamba suda	Hyper thermal	-temperature change -irregular food -excess work	-tired -headache -eye burning	-muthukotai ; leaf's paste put on the body then take a bath -nannari plant juice is taken orally - they consume buttermilk, banana, watermelon
4	Headache	Thala vali	Cephalgia	-excess work -tension or angry -incomplete sleep	-pain in the fore and whole head -sometimes, side tooth pain	-Tumbailayi paste is put on the head. -bricks boil in water and take steam -small chilly and mustard paste put on the forehead
5	Sore throat	Thonda vali	Pharyngitis	-climate change -cold	-throat pain -common cold	-dry ginger with tea -gargling with warm water and salt
6	Diarrhoea	Beithi	Dysentery	-over food consumption -indigestion -water infection	-frequent loose motions -stomach ache -fatigue and weak -vomiting	-kadukkai leaf powder taken with water -light diet
7	Toothache	Pallu vali	Gums inflammation	-improper brushing -eating more sweet items	-pain in gums and tooth -pain when taking cold or hot items	-cloves put a tooth -gargling -vet palai leaves are applied
8	Joint pain	Muttu vali	Arthralgia	-old age -extra hard work -any hit in joints	-pain in various joints like knee, elbow etc	-mudukatankirei paste at the place of pain -boil eucalyptus in water and take a bath
9	Muscles pain	Tacai vali	Myalgia	-sprain -extra pressure on any muscle	Pain in various muscles like Neck, thigh etc	-notchi leaves boiled in water taken as inhalation
10	Stomach pain	Vaira vali	Gastralgia	-food allergy -indigestion -gastritis -constipation	-pain in the stomach -vomiting sensation	-Kasakasa with water -kalchakotai taken
11	Menstrual pain	Madha vitai	Dysmenorrhea	-monthly menstruation	-stomach pain -lower back pain -vomiting sensation -weak	-the eating of aloe vera gel -jaggery, coriander, pepper with tea -applying hot water bag on stomach and back
12	Jaundice	Manchal kaamarai	Icterus	-infection -Temperature change -excess heat	-yellow tinge on skin, eyes, urine -fever and -weight loss	-Kizhaanelli leaf's paste with goat milk. -muthukotai paste eat -veg food without spices
13		China ammai	'Varicella'	-excess heat -change in climate -strongly communicable	-raw pockmarks -itching fever and -headache -stays for 710days	-sleep on neem and banana leaves -eat only veg without spices -after cure, take a bath with neem and turmeric water and worship goddesses

14	Measles	Sinamuthuthu	Rubeola	-infection -strongly communicable -change in climate	-red rashes all over the body -Itching -high fever and headache -a cold, running nose, sneeze	-muthukotai paste on the forehead -sleep on neem leaves -veg food without spices -worship goddesses -after cure, take a bath in turmeric water
15	Diabetes	Nir ilu vai	Diabetes	-hereditary -more sugar in the blood -always eating sweet items	-loss of appetite -loss of weight -frequent urination -decline in immunity	-sirukurinji leaf's paste -nawalparam powder with water -food control
16	Skin rashes	Sori siranga	Skin disease	-bad personal hygiene -infection -easily communicable	-patches -itching -swelling -burning	-kattaikarantai paste and apply -neem, sandal, and turmeric paste apply to the body
17	Eye infection	Kan noi	Conjunctiva	-infection -change in climate -easily communicable -cold	-itching -burning -red colour patches and swelling	-puliaram fruits are taken orally. -personal hygiene and cleanliness
18	Fracture	Ilamba muriva	Fracture	-Any accident	-swelling -pain	-message with oil, put bamboo and maida, then wrap tightly with any piece of cloth
19	Cut/wound	Kaayam	Injuries	Working in fields, Cutting something	-bleeding -scratches -burning	-thumbailayi paste applied -unimailayi paste apply -earuku flower powder put externally
20	Burns	Nerupu kaayam		-any accident because of fire	-itching and wheezing -pus and boils -pain and burning at the place.	-katakotai leaves paste -charcoal powder -put at the place of burn.
21	Snakebite	Pamba kadi	Snakebite	Some accident	-vomiting -fainting -Fear and panic	-tie the place of the bite with a rope -put china nanga paste -put peria nanga paste
22	Dog bite	Naai kadi	Dog bite	Some accident		-heat cow dung and apply -muthukotai oil put at the place of cut

Table 2: Ethnomedical Practices of the 'Malayali' Tribes.

Conclusion

Malayalis well understand the concept of health. They link it with the economic condition, nutrition, food habits, work pressure, etc. They also relate it to biological needs. They also differentiate between illness and disease. Their ways of identification of diseases are appreciable. But

there is a straight decline in their ethnomedical practices with the emergence of state initiatives, various plans, and schemes. After the working of the PHC and the facilities being provided, the Malayalis' neglecting attitude toward their traditional medicine is found. The data acquired from the tribes is helpful for future ethnobotany, taxonomy, and establishing connections between plants and people studies.

This study came to a wide range of conclusions regarding the therapeutic herbs employed by the tribes. We might soon lose this wealth of information due to the younger tribes' lack of interest and propensity to go to cities in search of well-paying jobs.

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