



## Health Care System among the Gond Tribes of Tarandul Village, Chhattisgarh, India

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### KEYWORDS

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### ABSTRACT

*Health care system in India provides the facilities of both public and private sectors. The services of public sector are mainly accessible to all. Tribes of India in majority rely on traditional medical practices, however, they also rely on primary health care services. This study is an attempt to understand the health care system available to the Gond tribes of Tarandul village, Chhattisgarh focusing on the ethnomedical practices present among them and to analyse the viewpoints of the people of the Tarandul village to modern health care system. Methodologically, different methods of ethnography such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and case studies were used through two immersion processes in 2019. The health care system present in the village is mainly based on magico-religious treatment and herbal medicine. Modern medicine started intervening on some of the diseases however; the region is facing a major problem in accepting the modern medical system.*

### Introduction

The SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) by 2030 aims to elevate a healthy environment for everyone, the UN along with several other organisations work together to remove the barriers of poorer communities/countries to attain good health. For this, different countries have adopted different methods like spreading awareness/knowledge, poverty reduction, sanitary campaigns, healthcare services, etc. The Government of India and its respective states have initiated many programmes of health care particularly primary health care services. Services are available through various types of health care system present in India. Broadly, it can be classified into organizational structure and management, improvement of health and services (schemes), and prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation (Foster and Anderson 1978). The organizational structure and management can be discussed in the light of public and private hospitals. The tribes of India mostly receive their required health care from public hospitals or services which are mainly available at the primary care level. The other two levels, the secondary and tertiary care systems, are the least received by the tribes of India. Health care workers are least available on remote villages of India. The Gond tribes of India are known for their ethno-medical practices compensating the fact that they are ignored and neglected by services of the modern biomedical health workers. The indigenous system of medicine comprises various home remedies such as using of medicinal plants like tulsi and ginger to cure cold and cough and many more illnesses.

This paper aims to understand and discuss the health care systems available among the Gond tribes of Tarandul village, Chhattisgarh. The main objectives of the study are to find out the ethno-medical

practices present among them and to analyse the attitudes and viewpoints of the people of the Tarandul village to modern health care system.

## Reaching the problem through literature

Indigenous societies show a widespread prevalence of supernatural healing practices. For ages these societies have had their own indigenous healing systems to fight physical and social evils, and have endured the ravages of time and extraneous influences. It is difficult to measure the clinical efficacy of these medical systems – but anthropologists agree on the social relevance of these systems. These systems are highly successful in their own cultural milieu because of the optimistic orientation with which they function (Agarwal 2004). Complementary and alternative medical therapies ranging from acupuncture to yoga are becoming mainstream. Evidence of this is the December 2, 2002, cover story in Newsweek magazine which explored the science of alternative medicine. According to this feature article, almost half of American adults seek treatment from outside the modern medical system. An increasing number of physicians are integrating these therapies into conventional medicine. In addition, several leading medical schools have established centres for integrative medicine, and many more have established curricular offerings in complementary and alternative medicine (Crawford 2003).

## Study Area

Tarandul is a forest village situated in Bhanupratappur block (Gram panchayat ‘Tarandul’) in Kanker district, Chhattisgarh. Chhattisgarh is the ninth-largest state in India, with a total area of 135,192 km<sup>2</sup>. According to the census of India 2011, the state has a population of 25.5 million. Tarandul village is around 160km. away from the state capital, Raipur. The state has 28 districts namely with a tribal population of around 7,822,902 with 59.09% literacy rate. The Tarandul village has a population of 489 of which 238 are males while 251 are females (Census 2011). The majority of the population belongs to the Gond tribe categorised as scheduled tribe (ST); however, 52 members of the village belong to the scheduled caste (SC). In Tarandul village, the population of children aged 0-6 is 154 comprising 21.15 % of the total population of the village. Average Sex Ratio of Tarandul village is 1318 which is higher than the Chhattisgarh state average of 991. Child Sex Ratio for the Tarandul as per census is 1265, higher than Chhattisgarh average of 969. Tarandul village has a lower literacy rate compared to Chhattisgarh. In 2011, the literacy rate of Tarandul village was 66.38 % compared to 70.28 % of Chhattisgarh. However, the literacy rate of Tarandul is higher than the total tribal literacy rate in the state. In Tarandul male literacy stands at 74.39 % while the female literacy rate is 60.37%. As per the constitution of India and Panchyati Raj Act, Tarandul village is administrated by the Sarpanch (village head) who is the elected representative of the village.

The only local transport option available to access the village is the bus that leaves from Bhanupratapur. From there on, it is a beautiful ride of about one hour, filled with scenic views of the villages of the Bhanupratapur, the bus reaches at Korar. Korar serves as an important market and is a mid-point between Kanker and Bhanupratapur. Buses ply constantly between Kanker and Bhanupratapur, halting at Korar. From Korar one needs to either take a jeep or ask for a lift to reach the village. Tarandul is located 21 kilometres from Korar. A traveller can get a direct jeep service to Hatkarra and from there, there is also another option, whether to wait for another jeep service, which goes to Tarandul by 5pm in the evening or to get a lift from the bike riders going to or ahead of Tarandul. On the way, there is a village called Banoli, after passing the village, the hilly region begins, along with difficult terrain and weathered roads. This region has a beautiful river, flowing down the hills, which has also become a tourist site, and the forest full of different varieties of trees.

The village is completely isolated and its settlements are spread in seven paras (a *para* is a small cluster).

The seven paras are Borinjiya, Dubahari, Badepara, Harijanpara, Awaspara, Schoolpara and Nadiyapara.

## Methodology

For this study, in-depth and elaborate discussion with the village locals, *Gram Panchayats*, traditional healers, participant observation, case studies and focal group discussions were conducted. To gather the data, an in-depth survey was conducted with the tribal herbalists and patients residing in the village. The data was collected in two phases of field visits. The first phase (January-February, 2019) of the visit was mainly an immersion practice where, data collection could be happened without any conflicts; instead they accepted and treated the data collection process of the researcher as one of the important tasks. Spending the most part of a day with the children on playground and the adults of the village at different village commons made the mode of data collection easy and comfortable. Sometimes through informal conversations, interesting aspects of their views on the changing health care system could be gathered including major criticism over the modern medical services. The men of the para used to sit at '*Vishnu*' *bhaiya*'s (the head of the village) shop, for informal discussions. These informal discussions became a great source of information. The fellow men and adults were the regular informants as they used to share their cultural and traditional knowledge practices. On Fridays, visiting the *haat* (weekly market), where people come to buy respective items, herbs for themselves provided a better avenue to understand their strong association with herbal medicine.

During the second visit (October-December), there was no specific change observed, except a Jio (mobile company) tower without the wiring. There were some children who were still engaged with practicing *Volleyball*, but most of them, especially the youth, seemed busy in their respective schedules. Since the second immersion visit fell with the onset of Kharif season, most adults could now be observed following a routine different from the previous visit and they were busy with the agricultural activities. The activity to collect wood from the forest was now mostly completed, hence on Saturdays instead they focused on fields. The informal gatherings of the men occurred rarely or were non-existent.

In the second visit, there was some work done collaboratively with the participation of students, teachers, ladies, gents, other children and adults of the village for collective plantation activities.

## Findings

### *Concept of Health and Illness/Disease*

Like the other Gond tribes of India, the Gonds of Tarandul have their own set of traditional healing practices. Illnesses and diseases are closely related to the surrounding forests environment. For them, a person is healthy as long as they can perform their daily work without feeling exhausted. A person should be able to get some of the forests products whenever going inside the forests or surrounding areas. According to them, if a person can take a proper diet, perform his or her work effectively and efficiently, then that person might be called a healthy person. In some instances, it is not necessary that a person should perform a work with full efficiency; instead one can relax and return with minimal products such as few fruits and fuel wood. A person will be considered ill when there is a complete physical dysfunction. People with excessive physical problems such as paralysis, polio, etc. are generally considered to be ill. To them, both health and illness depend on factors such as climatic conditions, improper food intake, unhygienic conditions, intake of stale food, animal bites etc.

### *Causes of Illnesses and Diseases*

The causes of most illnesses and diseases are magico-religious and disturbances in the natural balance

of environment. They believe that illnesses and diseases are caused by supernatural powers and spirits, evil eyes and magic. The natural causes are mainly related to changes in temperature, consumption of hot and cold food items, insect /animal bites etc. The causes of illnesses and diseases can be categorized into the following sub-points.

#### *Wrath of Gods and Goddesses*

They believed that illnesses and diseases are caused by the wrath of Gods and Goddesses. It is caused by the disturbances made by people willingly or unwillingly on some of the places considered as the abodes of the deities in the forests and surrounding areas. Often, cases of headache and dizziness, blurred eyes are encountered when people go out searching fuel wood in odd hours; crossing the unexpected thick patches of forest land. Above all, going out in the night particularly in the forest may lead to any form of illnesses and diseases. Children of Tarandul village are exposed at different places alone or in groups thereby resulting into abnormal behaviours such as aggressiveness or complete silence. A child will remain silent throughout till recovery takes place. They believe that illnesses are the result of disturbances they caused to the deities and other supernatural powers residing and guarding their forest.

#### *Possession of Spirits*

Some people are believed to have an inborn character that shows an extraordinary attitude and behaviour. Such possessions are usually considered evil, causing sickness and illnesses to any members of the tribes particularly within and the nearby Para. The evil spirits travel during the day and night demanding eatables and valuable items from the sick person and the spirit(s) do not leave the body of the aggrieved until the demands are fulfilled. However, they become much more active during the night and their control could be handled only by a *Baiga*. To treat the sick, *Baigas* or the Priest performs certain rituals for appeasement.

#### *Magical practices*

Both white and black magic are present among the Gonds. The *Baigas* can perform both types of rituals. White magic is mainly used for the benefit of community or village such as calling the rain God for a good agricultural cycle. Black magic is not openly conducted except on rare cases. Black magic are performed against the enemies to gain power and resources, to harm the members of an ancestral foe, personal conflicts and to destroy the life of a childless woman.

#### *Breach of Taboo*

Each tribe from a different clan follows a totem plant or animal, and avoid eating them. The ancestral spirits are usually benevolent, however in case of a breach of a taboo, the ancestral spirits become violent, causing illnesses and misfortunes to a whole family and sometimes to the relatives of the person who didn't follow the taboo. Worshipping a village deity in all the festivals is a compulsory process and if this is ignored, misfortunes and diseases can make all the villagers suffer. They avoid eating beef; it is not a good gesture towards the ancestors to consume beef meat.

#### *Natural agencies*

They believe in the natural agencies as the cause of various diseases and illnesses. Change in a season is considered as a change in the taste and quality of water, body function and surrounding environment. An excessive exposure to the forest and fields, or the village commons leads to illnesses such as cold, cough, fever, headache, body ache etc. Food consumed during illnesses should be strictly checked from the perspectives of the hot and cold food items; any slight imbalance in the food intake will deteriorate the health condition of a person. Pregnant and lactating mothers should not expose too much to outside when there is a change in the weather, children should be checked for food intake, too less or much will harm a child leading to illnesses.

## Treatment of Illnesses and Diseases

Treatment systems can be broadly divided into two types, Traditional medical practices and Modern medical practices

### *Traditional medical practices: Home Remedies*

Home remedies become one of the best known sources of treatment in the village. Every old aged people particularly womenfolk are very much aware of the major ingredients used in common illnesses and diseases such as cold, cough, headache, itching of skin, indigestion, stomach ache, diarrhoea, dysentery, jaundice, swelling of legs, palpitation etc. Along with the ingredients available in the kitchen, they mix some herbs which are available in their kitchen garden. Among them, mention may be made of tulsi, neem leaves, amla, ginger leaves, bottle brush tree, garlic, black pepper etc. The villagers rely on the home remedies and people who are the providers and care-givers to finalise their mode of treatment system.

### *Magico-religious treatment*

Most diseases are caused by supernatural powers and spirits and for this they approach the *Baiga* of the village and relevant rituals are performed. The rituals are mainly associated with sacrificial ceremonies and the smearing the blood of the sacrificial animal on the forehead of the ill person is very common. The *Baiga* also uses magical incantations to communicate with the spirit world and find a solution of the illnesses under treatment. The *Baiga* also performs rituals such as the *Jhad-phook* to exorcise the evil spirits from the body of a sick person. Some of the rituals are conducted secretly while the majority of the rituals are performed in the presence of the ill person's family members and relatives. In magico-religious rituals, some of the ingredients are brought by the *Baiga* while the family members are asked to collect some of the items in specific sites of the forest on specific periods. Amulets are also given at the end of the rituals as part of treatment.

### *A Ritual ceremony for treatment of Chicken-pox*

The *Mata-Pabuchani* is a religious ceremony for the treatment of chicken-pox in the village. This is performed in the presence of all the villagers including the outsiders. It is performed whenever the villagers are affected by Chicken-pox. At times of the ceremony, there were red and white flags, where red was the representative of the *Sheetla-mata* Goddess, and white for the cult God/Goddess. At least, one person from every household had come to attend the event with 'coconuts' and some others had also brought goats and chickens for the sacrifice. The procession started from the house of the affected person to a place almost 1 km from the village, where the sacrificial event took place. During the procession and the whole religious event, a large amount of *neem* leaves were used. There were four priests, who were known as the *Gaita* of the village. It was a strong belief among the villagers, that the *dev*, (God) would arrive in the *Gaita*'s body and he would heal the person affected. They used a chain of iron to beat themselves. In order to please the *dev*, sacrifices of goats and chickens were made and coconuts were smashed on the ground. At the end of the event, the social gathering took place to eat a communal dinner. This ritual is very important among the villagers as skin diseases are very common among them. This is mainly a religious ritual and it is separated from the magico-religious based rituals that are generally performed by the *Baiga*. A *Gaita*'s role is similar to the priest of a temple and thus looks after the temple and the ritual of the *Mata-Pabuchani*.

### *Herbal medicine*

Herbal medicine is very popular among the Gond people of Tarandul village. The villagers of Tarandul are very much aware of some of the medicinal herbs as these herbs are used on a daily basis for the treatment of some of the common illnesses and diseases (Table 1) while some are known to the

*Baiga* and experienced people of the village. Some insects are also used as medicine.

### **Modern medical practices**

There is one Primary Health Centre (PHC) with one male and one female RHA (Rural Health Organiser/*Gramin Swastha Sanyojak*) and 7 *Mitanins* (One *mitanin* for one para).

#### *The Role of Medical Staff*

There is a weekly market on every Friday and a stall working as the village health centre is available for the general health issues of the villagers. During the field work, there was a doctor available in the stall. He was an assistant medical officer, who was also responsible for five different villages. Many people from the nearby villages visited the stall of the health centre in order to treat their illnesses and diseases. The doctor appeared to be quite cooperative and helpful to the fellow villagers, but what concerned him more was the strong belief of villagers in the superiority of the indigenous knowledge health system / ethnomedicine the over modern-day health care systems. He rejected the very idea of 'Indigenous knowledge system' to be scientific. On asking him about the kinds of diseases common to Tarandul, he replied, 'Malaria' and 'Skin' diseases had been the most common diseases for 4-5 years. He also said that, due to lack of awareness, people were not aware of high/low B.P and sugar problems. According to him, it was due to the 'Ayushman' health scheme, people in this area were becoming aware and benefitted with it. He blamed the *Baiga* (a local Healer) for the deteriorating health status of the villagers, without acknowledging the *Baiga*'s efforts behind saving the lives of people for years.

#### *The Role of Mitanin in health care*

*Mitanin* in Chhattisgarhi means friend, a female friend. In most parts of this state there exists a traditional custom that a girl of a family is bonded to a girl of another family through a simple but enchanting ritual ceremony and from that time onwards they become *Mitanins* to each other. According to the custom, any girl can always count on her *Mitanin* in times of need, *Sukh me sabiya, dukh me Mitani* (both in good and bad days) goes the saying. As per the tradition, one *Mitanin* comes to aid her *Mitanin* in times of illness even if it's after a long time despite getting married and living in far-off households. It is this custom that was built on to create a new type of *Mitanin*, the *Swasthya Mitanin* especially the friend of the village for health care needs.

#### *Criticism of Modern medicine by the villagers*

As claimed by the healers, the scientific aspect as the trained doctors relate to illnesses and diseases are known to them, but this traditional knowledge system is considered to be the fruit of superstition and ignorance. The intervention of modern medicine, particularly specific programmes on maternal and child health, is not only destroying the traditional healing practices, but also destroying their culture and rituals. A *Baiga* gives a strong critique by saying that people who have spent generations living with the environment are now considered less learned by these so-called 'developed mind' doctors. His concern was also on how the traditional healing practices and herbal medicines provide the villagers free of cost medicines that they get directly or indirectly from the forest. With the introduction of new amenities, the villagers are not being prepared for any future they are likely to face; rather in a way they are becoming more and more dependent on the government policies and its development programs.

In the present scenario, people have started shifting from traditional practices to the modern-day medical system. The shift is very common among the children and adults, while ladies and elders of the village still believe in the indigenous healing practices. The ladies, especially the pregnant ones and who have new born babies, still visit the *Baiga* to heal themselves and their children.

## Discussion

The health care system present in the Tarandul village among the Gonds can be discussed in the light of the three sectors suggested by Kleinman in 1978. According to him, there are three sectors of the health care systems such as the popular sector, the folk sector, and the professional sector. Like the three said sectors, the health care system of the Tarandul Gonds follow the medical practices and we can further discuss on it depending on the viewpoints and experiences of the villagers.

### *The popular sector*

The popular sector includes individuals of family members, neighbours, and relatives, and sometimes community. Their beliefs and activities are the first that might impact a person having an illness. The popular sector defines the illness, and functions as the major source and most immediate determinant of caretaking. Based on it, the choice is created whether or not to seek help of the skilled. If so, a lay person seeks health care by deciding where and whom to consult, choosing between treatment alternatives or they are happy with the quality of the treatment. This sector determines the points of entrance into, exit from, and interaction between the other sectors. Economically it is affordable to most of the people and people are more comfortable in expressing their health issues. In the case of Tarandul, people rely on home remedies and on those already experienced persons, also family members for all kinds of treatment and decision making about the choice of medical practices.

### *The Folk Sector*

The folk sector is a mixture of many different components, mostly related to popular sector. Few examples of the “folk” sector include mantras (incantations), rituals, some religious activities, blessings, etc. The popular and folk sector constitutes a large part of the health care system in the village. In other words, the “folk” sector is more important, when home remedies do not work successfully. People also rely more on this sector as the modern professional health sector are not easily available to them. The *Baigas* are able to treat most illnesses and diseases suffered by the villagers. The trust level between the patient’s family and the *Baiga* is too strong that villagers sometimes do not count on the modern medical facilities, instead many villagers blame modern medicine for destroying the indigenous tribal knowledge and practices.

In the case of Tarandul, understanding the role of the ‘popular sector’ and the ‘folk sector’ is essential in bringing interventions at village level. The inaccessible nature of the village, weathered roadways and isolated settlement sites and also lack of modern infrastructural amenities, hinder the adoption of professional medical advice and facilities. However it cannot be denied that some modern non-traditional practices are already accepted, such as vaccination and immunization programmes.

### *The Professional Sector*

The professional sector comprises organized healing professions mainly taken by the trained practitioners. In India, we are facing a shortage of human resource particularly in the health sector and this can be observed in the case of Tarandul as well. One doctor cannot treat all kinds of illnesses faced by the villagers of Tarandul and nearby. From the role of health worker mentioned above, it is known to us that this sector attempts to define the problems and meet the required solutions. However, it is not feasible to be entertained by the doctor for treatment of all the villages/illnesses present. Health professionals do not pay attention to the views of clinical realities held by other healers of both the popular and folk sectors. A place like Tarandul is far from achieving a successful doctor-patient relationship.

## Conclusion

The idea of healing practices needs to be granted the right attention and immediate promotion by leaders of government and institutions. Gonds are said to be the largest tribal community of India associated with a woodland environment. They could be the broadest community repositories of all the indigenous medical practices and knowledge. Their long term association with nature provided a rich source of information to maintain the biodiversity as well. We should be aware of the population size of our country and lack of medical support in all the nooks and corners of the country. The pluralistic form of medicine developing among the villagers should be monitored carefully so that future generations could retain the indigenous knowledge system for the overall health and well-being of the Indian population. The aim of SDGs by 2030 to elevate a healthy environment for everyone could be strategized considering the local situation of the tribal lifestyle and environment. An initiative to attain good health through local level participation and encouragement is a must for the Tarandul to carry forward their age-old tradition and accept the modern policies and programmes.

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Table 1: Herbal medicine commonly used by the villagers of Tarandul.

Local Name	Scientific Name	Plant/herbs	Part to be used	Process of preparation	Season	Disease
Neem	<i>Azadirachta indica</i>	Tree	Leaves	Grinded balls	All	Fever
Leem	Bhui-neem <i>Andragraphis paniculata</i>	Tree	Leaves	Boil/grinded balls	All	Malarial Fever
Soova	<i>Curcuma angustifolia</i>	Plant	Roots	Pluck and use	Rainy (Jul-Aug)	Sugar/ Diabetes
Cikni	<i>Pleurospermum angelicoides</i>	Plant	Leaves	Grinded balls	Rainy (Jul-Aug)	Skin Disease
Hucchi	-	Plant	Leaves and Roots	Grinded balls	Rainy (Jul-Aug)	Ear Pain
Mahua	<i>Madhuca longifolia</i>	Tree	Tree bark	Burn in Fire	Rainy (Jul-Aug)	Mouth Ulcers
Toroi	-	Plant	Fruits	Grinded Seeds	Rainy (Jul-Aug)	Stomach
Chitrak	<i>Plumago rosea</i>	Plant	Root	Grinded paste	Rainy (Jul-Aug)	Skin Disease
Chapoda	<i>Jumping Spider</i>	Insect		Grinded balls	All	Cold/Cough