

Cultural Determinants of Health: Understanding The Role of Beliefs, Practices, and Traditions

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ABSTRACT

Health is a dynamic and multidimensional concept that goes beyond the mere absence of disease and encompasses physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being. As defined by the World Health Organization (1948), health reflects a complete state of well-being, which has evolved from the traditional biomedical model to more comprehensive ecological, psychosocial, and holistic approaches. These evolving perspectives highlight that health is influenced not only by biological factors but also by environmental, social, cultural, and economic contexts.

Within this framework, cultural determinants of health play a crucial role in shaping individuals' perceptions, behaviours, and health outcomes. In the Indian context, traditional beliefs and practices have long contributed to maintaining health and wellness. The use of organic and seasonal foods, consumption of nutrient-rich seeds such as sesame and flaxseeds, and the practice of drinking water from copper vessels reflect an indigenous understanding of nutrition, hygiene, and disease prevention. Additionally, daily lifestyle practices like waking up early, aligning routines with natural cycles, and offering water to the Sun (Surya Arghya) demonstrate the integration of physical, mental, and spiritual health. Indian society has traditionally placed great emphasis on health in its food practices and dietary traditions. The millets and various types of seeds such as sesame seeds and flax seeds, which are widely recognized today by modern nutritional science as highly beneficial for health, have been an integral part of Indian food culture since ancient times. In rural and traditional Indian households, foods such as flaxseed chutney, flaxseed laddoos, maize roti, jowar roti, and bajra roti have been commonly consumed for generations. These food items are not only rich in nutrition but also provide essential energy, fiber, protein, calcium, iron, and omega-3 fatty acids to the body. Thus, Indian food traditions are not limited to taste alone; they also play a significant role in maintaining health and strengthening immunity. All these aspects clearly indicate that cultural determinants of health have a profound influence on human health and well-being.

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Furthermore, the psychosocial model emphasizes that cultural, social, and economic factors significantly influence health, while the holistic approach integrates all dimensions into a unified understanding of well-being. Thus, traditional cultural practices are not merely rituals but essential determinants of health.

The present study adopts a sociological and descriptive research approach using both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were collected from 100 respondents selected from urban and rural areas of Patna district through purposive and stratified sampling methods. The study examines how socio-cultural beliefs, traditional healthcare practices, educational status, food habits, sanitation behaviour, and awareness levels influence healthcare decisions and preventive health practices.

The findings reveal that 58% of respondents preferred home remedies and traditional healing practices during the initial stage of illness, while 32% associated certain diseases with spiritual or supernatural causes. Around 64% respondents regularly followed traditional health practices such as yoga, fasting, herbal remedies, and consumption of seasonal foods. The study further indicates that education and socio-economic conditions significantly affect awareness regarding preventive healthcare and sanitation practices.

The study concludes that integrating culturally rooted practices with modern healthcare systems can promote sustainable, inclusive, and effective health outcomes in contemporary society. Recognition of cultural determinants within public health policies can strengthen preventive healthcare, improve community participation, and contribute to holistic well-being.

Keywords: Cultural Determinants, Society, Culture, Health Behaviour, Holistic Health, Public Health, Traditional Practices, Community Health, Disease Perception, Wellness.

INTRODUCTION

Health is a multidimensional concept that includes physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being. According to the World Health Organization (1948), health is not merely the absence of disease but a complete state of well-being. Modern perspectives emphasize that health is influenced by social, economic, environmental, and cultural factors.

Culture shapes food habits, hygiene practices, healthcare decisions, and perceptions regarding illness and treatment. Cultural determinants of health include

beliefs, traditions, religion, rituals, and social practices that influence healthcare behaviour and preventive healthcare awareness.

In India, traditional practices such as yoga, meditation, fasting, herbal treatment, and consumption of seasonal foods have historically contributed to health maintenance and disease prevention. Similarly, practices like drinking water stored in copper vessels and following natural daily routines reflect indigenous understandings of hygiene and wellness. In Indian civilization, the tradition of waking up during Brahma Muhurta and offering water to the Sun (Surya Arghya) is also associated with physical and mental well-being.

Indian culture has traditionally emphasized the relationship between environment and health. Cultural traditions such as the worship of Peepal, Banyan, and Amla trees symbolize environmental protection and ecological balance. Similarly, Chhath Puja, widely celebrated in Bihar, represents nature worship and discipline through cleanliness, fasting, and exposure to sunlight, which are considered beneficial for health.

The relationship between culture and health has become an important area of study in sociology, anthropology, and public health. Traditional systems such as Ayurveda, Unani, Siddha, and folk healing practices continue to influence healthcare behaviour in Indian society.

The present study examines how beliefs, traditions, and cultural practices influence disease perception, healthcare decisions, sanitation behaviour, and preventive healthcare awareness among respondents from urban and rural areas of Patna district.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To understand the concept of cultural determinants of health.
 2. To examine the relationship between culture and healthcare behaviour.
 3. To analyze the influence of traditional beliefs and practices on disease perception.
 4. To study the role of socio-cultural factors in preventive healthcare.
 5. To examine the impact of literacy, awareness, and socio-economic conditions on health behaviour.
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6. To explore the importance of integrating traditional healthcare practices with modern healthcare systems.

HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

1. Cultural beliefs significantly influence healthcare behaviour among respondents.
2. Traditional healthcare practices are more common in rural areas than urban areas.
3. Educational status positively affects awareness regarding preventive healthcare.
4. Socio-economic condition influences healthcare accessibility and treatment preference.
5. Traditional food habits positively contribute to preventive health behaviour.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The relationship between culture and health has attracted the attention of sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and public health researchers across the world. Different scholars have attempted to explain how socio-cultural factors shape health behaviour and disease perception.

Newman (1997) argued that culture influences almost every aspect of human life including beliefs, values, norms, food habits, and healthcare practices. According to him, individuals learn acceptable patterns of behaviour through socialization, and these cultural values influence perceptions regarding illness and treatment.

Mechanic (1962) emphasized that illness is not merely a biological condition but also a social experience. He explained that social norms and cultural expectations determine how individuals recognize symptoms, seek treatment, and respond to disease.

Parsons (1951), through his concept of the “sick role,” highlighted that illness is socially structured. Society determines how sick individuals should behave and how others should respond to them. This sociological perspective demonstrated that health and disease are closely linked with social expectations and cultural norms.

Durkheim’s sociological perspective also contributed significantly to understanding the social dimensions of health. He emphasized that social integration, collective consciousness, and social conditions affect mental and physical well-being.

The World Health Organization broadened the concept of health beyond biomedical definitions by including physical, mental, and social well-being. Later developments in public health research further expanded health to include spiritual and emotional dimensions.

Medical anthropologists such as Arthur Kleinman argued that healthcare systems are cultural systems. He differentiated between professional healthcare systems, folk healing systems, and popular healthcare practices. According to Kleinman, cultural beliefs strongly influence treatment preferences and healthcare accessibility.

Indian scholars have also highlighted the significance of traditional healthcare systems. Ayurveda, Yoga, meditation, herbal medicine, and spiritual practices have long been recognized as important aspects of preventive and holistic healthcare.

Research studies conducted in rural India indicate that traditional beliefs and local healing practices continue to influence healthcare decisions. Many communities initially rely on home remedies, herbal treatment, or faith healers before approaching hospitals.

Studies on nutrition and cultural practices suggest that traditional Indian food systems are often scientifically beneficial. Seasonal diets, fasting practices, use of spices such as turmeric, ginger, and garlic, and consumption of nutrient-rich seeds contribute to immunity and disease prevention.

Recent public health studies emphasize the importance of culturally sensitive healthcare programmes. Health awareness campaigns become more effective when they respect local traditions, languages, and community values.

The literature review reveals that cultural determinants continue to play an important role in shaping health behaviour, disease perception, treatment choices, and preventive healthcare practices.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study is descriptive and analytical in nature. It attempts to analyze the influence of cultural determinants on healthcare behaviour among respondents from urban and rural areas of Patna district.

Area of Study

The study was conducted in selected urban and rural areas of Patna district in Bihar.

Sources of Data

Both primary and secondary data were used for the study.

Primary Data

Primary data were collected through structured interview schedules and questionnaires.

Secondary Data

Secondary data were collected from books, journals, WHO reports, government publications, dissertations, and research articles related to sociology of health and public health.

Sampling Method

Purposive and stratified sampling methods were used.

Sample Size

A total of 100 respondents were selected for the study.

- 50 respondents from urban areas
- 50 respondents from rural areas

Methods of Data Collection

1. Structured Interview Schedule
2. Observation Method
3. Questionnaire Method
4. Informal Discussion

Data Analysis

The collected data were classified, tabulated, and analyzed using percentage method and descriptive interpretation.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1: Preference for Initial Treatment During Illness

Treatment Preference	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Home Remedies/Traditional Healing	58	58%
Government Hospital	24	24%
Private Clinic/Hospital	18	18%
Total	100	100%

Interpretation

The table indicates that 58% of respondents preferred home remedies and traditional healing practices during the initial stage of illness. Only 24% preferred government hospitals while 18% visited private healthcare institutions. The findings reveal that cultural beliefs and traditional healthcare practices continue to influence treatment preferences.

Table 2: Belief Regarding Causes of Disease

Causes of Disease	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Biological Causes	52	52%
Spiritual/Supernatural Causes	32	32%
Both Causes	16	16%
Total	100	100%

Interpretation

The findings reveal that 32% of respondents associated diseases with spiritual or supernatural causes. Around 52% believed diseases occur due to biological causes while 16% believed both cultural and biological factors influence disease occurrence.

Table 3: Awareness Regarding Preventive Healthcare

Awareness Level	Number of Respondents	Percentage
High Awareness	41	41%
Moderate Awareness	37	37%
Low Awareness	22	22%
Total	100	100%

Interpretation

The data show that 41% respondents had high awareness regarding preventive healthcare practices such as sanitation, vaccination, exercise, and balanced diet. However, 22% respondents still demonstrated low awareness levels.

Table 4: Practice of Traditional Health Habits

Traditional Practices	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Regularly Followed	64	64%
Occasionally Followed	23	23%
Not Followed	13	13%
Total	100	100%

Interpretation

The data indicate that 64% of respondents regularly followed traditional health practices such as yoga, herbal remedies, fasting, and consumption of seasonal foods. This demonstrates the continuing importance of cultural practices in maintaining health and wellness.

Table 5: Educational Status of Respondents

Educational Status	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Illiterate	14	14%
Primary Education	21	21%
Secondary Education	36	36%
Higher Education	29	29%
Total	100	100%

Interpretation

The findings reveal that respondents with higher education demonstrated greater awareness regarding sanitation, nutrition, preventive healthcare, and healthcare accessibility. Less educated respondents were comparatively more dependent on traditional beliefs and local healing practices.

CONCLUSION

The present study highlights that health is not merely a biological condition but a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by social, cultural, economic, environmental, and spiritual factors. Cultural determinants significantly shape

healthcare behaviour, disease perception, treatment preferences, nutrition patterns, sanitation practices, and preventive healthcare awareness among individuals and communities.

The findings of the study reveal that traditional cultural practices continue to play an important role in maintaining health and wellness among respondents from urban and rural areas of Patna district. A significant proportion of respondents preferred home remedies, herbal treatment, fasting, yoga, meditation, and seasonal food habits as important components of healthcare behaviour. The study also indicates that cultural beliefs related to spirituality and traditional healing systems continue to influence perceptions regarding disease and treatment.

The research further demonstrates that educational status and socio-economic conditions greatly affect healthcare awareness, sanitation behaviour, and accessibility to healthcare services. Respondents with higher educational levels showed greater awareness regarding preventive healthcare, nutrition, hygiene, and modern medical treatment. On the other hand, less educated respondents were comparatively more dependent on traditional beliefs and local healing practices.

The study supports psychosocial and holistic models of health which emphasize that physical health cannot be separated from mental, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Traditional Indian healthcare practices such as yoga, meditation, herbal remedies, and balanced lifestyle habits contribute positively to holistic health and preventive healthcare.

However, the study also recognizes that certain misconceptions and supernatural beliefs may negatively affect timely medical treatment and healthcare accessibility. Therefore, there is a need to create a balance between culturally rooted healthcare knowledge and modern scientific healthcare systems.

The study concludes that culturally sensitive healthcare policies and community-based health programmes are essential for improving public health outcomes. Integrating traditional healthcare wisdom with modern healthcare practices can strengthen preventive healthcare, improve healthcare participation, and promote sustainable and inclusive community well-being.

SUGGESTIONS

Yoga, meditation, pranayama, and spiritually disciplined lifestyles should be promoted for improving physical and mental well-being.

Physically active lifestyles including walking, gardening, cycling, outdoor games, and regular exercise should be encouraged to reduce lifestyle-related diseases.

Excessive screen time among children and youth should be minimized, while participation in outdoor, creative, and physical activities should be promoted for healthy development.

Traditional preventive healthcare practices such as balanced diet, herbal remedies, fasting, yoga, and natural healing methods should be scientifically integrated with modern healthcare systems.

Health education programmes should focus on sanitation, hygiene, nutrition, vaccination, mental health, and preventive healthcare awareness among rural and urban populations.

Misconceptions related to supernatural causes of disease should be addressed through scientific awareness campaigns and community-based counselling programmes.

Educational institutions should incorporate health awareness, healthy lifestyle practices, and preventive healthcare education within the curriculum.

Traditional Indian dietary practices based on seasonal foods, natural ingredients, and balanced nutrition should be encouraged for maintaining holistic health and disease prevention.

Indian cultural traditions emphasizing harmony between nature and health, including environmental conservation and nature-based practices, should be promoted for sustainable well-being.

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