

ETHNOMEDICINE: INDIGENOUS BELIEFS AND SYSTEM OF HEALTH AND ILLNESS

Sadashiv S. Kamble

Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Karnatak University Dharwad.

ABSTRACT

The research has focused on the diagnosis of ill – health condition of Kumbri Marathi. It attempts understand the meaning of health for Kumbri Marathi and the causes of ill – health (etiology). The study has under gone one ecological year in-depth field study using anthropological research methods such as participative observation, interview, genealogical. In this article analysis is done on treatment seeking behavior depending up on diagnosis. Kumbri Marathi community people depend on agriculture in interior forest place where they do not have easy access to the modern health services. The disease is diagnosed at home level, and supernatural diagnosis level called *nota*. Most of time disease/illness diagnosed by divine *gadiga* but the treatment for the ill-health overlaps with modern medicine, herbal medicine and supernatural treatment by warding off evil eye and spirit/s by divine *gadiga*.

Keywords: Kumbri Marathi, health, supernatural diagnoses, indigenous medical system, ethnomedicine.

The research conduct on Kumbri Marathi conducted in Karnataka state. The population of Kumbri Marathi is distributed in Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka state. The population of Kumbri Marathi around 15000 in 1997. They live in the interior forest areas. As Kumbri Marathi says that they have migrated from the Maharastra state. One of the folk tales related to their migration is that during the period of Shivaji’s rule in Maharashtra, Kumbri Marathi served in Shivaji’s military. When Shivaji was defeated by another ruler, Kumbri Marathi ran away from the military and settled in the interior forest areas of Uttara Kannada district. There after they depended on ‘slash and burn’ kind of cultivation and it is called *Kumbri* in their language. A patch in the forest was cleared and was cultivated *nasani*. Such cultivation was done for two to three years in one patch of clearing. After every two or three years they shifted from one area to another where more water and more productive land were available. Currently they are settled

and doing cultivation in forest area for livelihood. Kumbri Marathi hard to access the modern health facilities. So the ecological research has done on Kumbri Marathi.

As anthropologists study culture with a holistic perspective, looking at health and illness in the broad spectrum of culture, provides an in-depth understanding of peoples ethnomedical practices. A hallmark of social – cultural Anthropology has been its insistence on cultural relativity in the analysis of ethnographic materials. Medical Anthropology is about how people in different cultures explain the causes of ill-health, the types of treatment they believe in and to whom they turn if they become ill it is also a study of how these beliefs and practices relate to biological and psychological changes in the human organism, in both health and disease.

As often pointed out by anthropologist, any society's medical system cannot be studied in isolation from other aspects of the society, especially its cultural, religious, political and economic organization. It is interwoven with these, and is based on the same assumptions, values and view of their world. Understanding ethnomedical approach of a people involves, viewing medical problems as socio-cultural phenomena. It is evident from the various studies conducted that ethnomedical research provides useful insight into health needs assessment of the people particularly in cross-cultural setting (Young 1976). The ethnomedical approach itself, is to study how a particular group of people recognize health and ill-health and to understand how they deal with ill health conditions and what they do to prevent ill-health. Pokarna (1994) denotes that culture defines health, disease, illness and the belief systems regarding the causes and practices associated with it and also the "sick role". Understanding health and illness among Kumbri Marathi almost amounts to the understanding of not only the beliefs about disease causation but also a great deal about their worldview. For them, dealing with ill health is continuum; from a point which could be a condition of ill health leading to a point where one actually call it as ill – health condition and resorts to various measure to restore health. In the process of understanding this continuum, one also comes to learn about preventive measures, in the form of rituals, taboos, food habits and religious practices.

For Kumbri Marathi a healthy person is one who is not suffering from problems like economic problems, quarrels with siblings or others in the settlement; nor suffering from *sik* which is supernaturally caused that is not affected by spirit *maru* or evil-eye *chak*; or psychological disturbance *kitikiti* and *roga* which is physiological in nature caused due to natural reasons.

This reveals that, it is not only physiological well-being that determines health but also economic, supernatural and psychological well-being. Economic well-being is involved because if a person is suffering from financial problems, it is going to create anxiety *manisk* and worries *chinta* which will again lead to *kitikiti* and further, if a person is suffering economically, then the

person will not be able to afford health care which in turn aggravates the ill-health condition. When a person is affected by spirit *maru* or evil eye *chak*, not only will it create physiological problems but also the symptoms present may not respond to treatment provided at home or by the doctor. The presence of the effect itself shows that there is imbalance in the relationship with the 'supernatural world'. This imbalance may be, because of the non-observance of taboos or the effect of the evil eye. *Maru* also affects because it is its nature to cause trouble to the people. The natural environment is also a crucial factor according to Kumbri Marathi in influencing health as well as ill-health.

Kumbri Marathi the cause for health condition is categorized based on natural and supernatural cause. The natural cause which is categories on the equilibrium between elements like hot *garmi* and cold *thandi*. To great extent, this equilibrium is believed to be dependent on external and internal forces. The external forces are ecological factors, and diet. The internal forces are *roga prakriti* (body constitution prone to disease), *raggat dosh* (impurity of blood), hot and cold nature of the body and age.

The departure from healthy condition can be categorized according to Kumbri Marathi as follows;



The categorization is depend on the causative factors, and symptoms, which in turn guide the treatment of the health problem. The label attached to the condition therefore, is crucial in order to understand why particular line of treatment is sought for a particular ill-health condition.

Bejar, *sik* and *roga* are state of being, which are regarded as away from a healthy condition. It is essential to first understand the meaning of *bejar*, *sik* and *roga* as understood and used by Kumbri Marathi. In this direction and understanding of the socio-cultural approach to illness in ethnomedicine is essential. It may be gained by contrasting the concepts of illness and disease in ethnomedical perspective.

Fabrega's eminent distinction between the two emphasizes that, whereas the criteria used by nonprofessional in identifying illness are social and psychological, disease in biomedicine is an abnormality in the structure and/ or function of any system of the body and evidences of biological system malfunction serve as indicators of disease (cited in Lieban 1973).

According to Kumbri Marathi, a health problem before it is diagnosed as either illness *sik* or disease *roga* is referred to as *bejar*. They make a differentiation of ill-health conditions caused due to natural and supernatural reasons. Thus, using the people's categories we can attribute health problems caused due to supernatural reasons as *sik* and those due to natural reasons as *roga*. In the discussions therefore the term illness will be used to refer to supernaturally caused conditions and disease to natural caused conditions. Etiology has been the guiding factor in differentiating and use of the concepts of illness and disease. Therefore, minor ailments, whether, minor ailments, whether supernaturally or naturally caused, are referred to as *bejar*. It is neither *sik* or *roga*. Or it may also result in *sik* or *roga*, in spite of seeking treatment. *Bejar* can be said to be an initial stage of any ill-health condition.

When a person is in a state of *bejar*, he resorts to home remedies *gharvakari* since the person is feeling ill-at-ease. As a result of which, he may be cured. *Bejar* can be managed at the level of home remedy itself. But if he is not cured within the expected time period for the particular ill – health condition, then there is a speculation as to what must be wrong with him/her. Therefore if *bejar* continues it may result in *sik* or *roga* in spite of treatment taken. There are often suggestions and advice from neighbor, kin, elders, and peers as to what must be wrong.

Then, a person suffering from the ill-health condition tries to know whether the condition is the result of spirits *marava* affect. Hence, person seeks the diviner *gadiga*. Diviner through the supernatural process, is able to tell the person whether or not his condition is due to malevolent spirits. If it is due to the affliction of spirits, then the label of the condition shifts from *bejar* to *sik*. In case, diviner finds out that the condition is not due to spirits, then the person is directed to indigenous medicine man *vakatalli* or the modern doctor. In this case the label of condition shifts from *bejar* to *roga*. Based on the symptoms of *roga* people seek indigenous medicine man *vakatalli* or modern doctor for diagnosis and treatment. If not recovered at this stage, they shift from natural to supernatural treatment.

Whereas disease *roga*, is believed to be physiological in nature it is believed to be caused due to natural causes like seasonal changes, changes in body temperature (hot – cold), heavy work, irregularity in food consumption, impurity of blood *ragatdosh* and *rogaprakruti* a body constitution that is susceptible to disease.

Conditions, which are considered as minor disease *bejar* are cold, cough, and fever, different kinds aches and pains, wounds and boils, vomiting, loose motion, weakness, worms, indigestion. Disease which are considered as major *roga* are severe respiratory problems, fever epilepsy, skin diseases and piles. The minor diseases *bejar* can also become *roga* if they are not cured within the expected period of time. Or they are thought to be initial symptoms, which could develop into a major disease.

Apart from the minor diseases mentioned above, *bejar* also refers to conditions when a person experiences the following symptoms and is generally identified as symptoms leading to *sik*. The person does not feel well enough to do any work in the house or in the field, is not interested in talking to others, always feels like sleeping, has an aversion to food, experience vomiting sensation and emotionally *mansik* the person does not feel well. If the person is exhibiting such symptoms, people generally remark saying *ekka maru jhala kay* meaning 'has he been affected by spirit'. Apart from the symptoms that are believed to be typical effects of *maru*, the effect of *maru* can also produce symptoms, which appear to be caused due to natural reasons.

When a person is not feeling well, that is in the stage of *bejar*, home remedy is employed as the first resort depending on symptoms that he exhibits, such as the nature of pain, or hotness, or appearance of ailing part. These home remedies may be given by laypersons like elderly family members as parents and grandparents. Generally when it comes to home remedies, and when it is a question of warding – off or evil eye, it is the elderly female members of the family who provide treatment. Also when the indigenous medicine *vakatalli* has to be prepared with the herbs available in the house, or in the vicinity of the house, women of the household provide the remedies. However, when herbs have to be brought from the forest, men bring the medicines and women prepare them. The experiences of all members of the family come into play in providing remedies.

In case, this home remedy does not bring the desired effect, the treatment may involve indigenous medicine *gavantivakat* from medicine man or modern medicine *kampanyvakat* purchased in the pharmacy or going to the modern doctor in addition to home remedy.

In spite of these measures, if the person does not recover, then people seek supernatural diagnosis *nota* to find the cause for *bejar* if a person is affected by spirit, then the state of being is considered as *sik*. If the person is not affected by spirit, then it is considered as *roga*. The label given to the condition not only identifies the departure from health as a particular ill-health condition that is either as *sik* or *roga*, but also indicated the kind of treatment to be resorted to.

It is not however always possible to know whether *bejar* will turn into *roga* or *sik*. Only after the condition has progressed, one can label it as either *sik* or *roga* and seek the appropriate treatment.

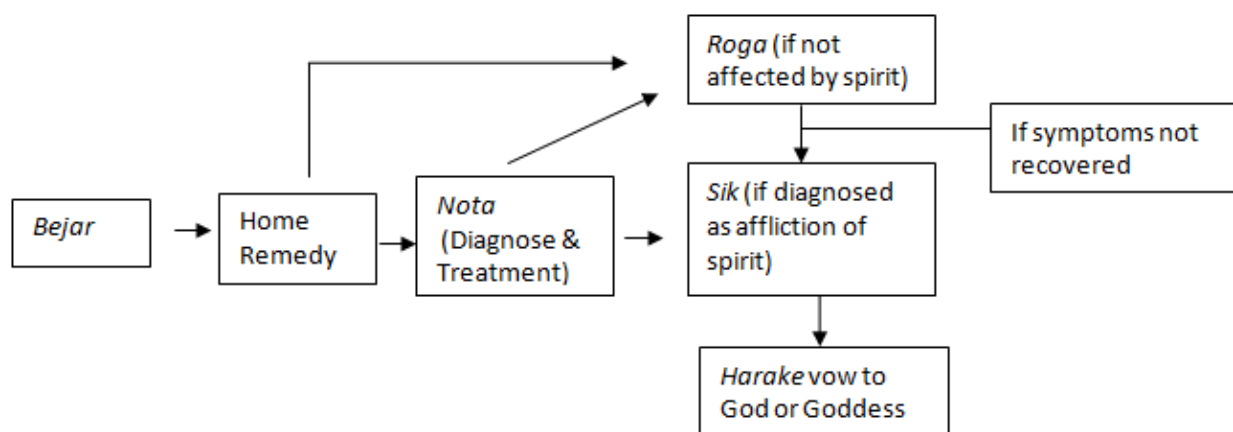
There is uncertainty about the condition, and about what is to be expected subsequently during the state of *bejar*. However, *bejar* related to seasonal changes or work, can be identified in the initial stage itself by symptoms they exhibit.

For *bejar* caused by seasonal changes and work, treatment involves taking home remedy or going to the modern doctor. If the person does not recover by taking the indigenous medicine or by going to the doctor, then *nota* is sought for. If the person is suffering from symptoms like becoming unconscious, talking in sleep, scolding others without any reason, not responding to others when he is spoken to, such symptoms are considered as symptoms of *sik* in the stage of *bejar* itself. For this, they seek the diagnosis and treatment through *nota*. If the person does not recover by the performance of *nota*, then they seek medicine from the medicine mar or from modern doctor. Therefore the label for a condition can shift with the kind of treatment sought. It is not always fixed through the entire period of treatment.

Hanigamann (1967) points out that there is ample evidence that people, who utilize both modern and indigenous medical systems tend to place illness in two broad categories that is, those that are likely to be cured by a physician and those more likely to respond to the ministrations of a healer. But considerable allowance must be made for flexibility in such perceptions. The course of an illness, the outcome of previous treatment for the same condition, and variety of other factors may cause the patient to redefine it, and shift from one medical system to another.

Within the indigenous system also, one shifts from natural to supernatural treatment back to natural in case of lack of remission from the symptoms. As a result, there is shift in the label of the condition.

Diagnose & Treatment seeking behavior of Kumbri Marathi:



Leiban (1973) indicating to such behavior among different cultures, points out that, considerable allowance must be made for flexibility of perception of the ill-health condition. In the course of an illness, the outcome of the previous treatment for the same condition, and a variety of other factors may cause a person to redefine and shift from one medical system to another. While it is true that, a label guides the sort of practitioner to consult. It is not necessarily fixed for the entire duration of the illness.

It is of importance to note that two people suffering from the same ill-health condition can be given different labels for the condition they are suffering from. For one, the cause may be natural and for the other, supernatural. Therefore, labels are indicators of what sort of ill-health condition a person is suffering from. This is crucial, because it indicates the perceptions about the cause and the next course of action people are likely to take. But in modern medicine there is uniform labeling irrespective of the cause of the condition. As a result, an outsider observing the treatment seeking behavior of the people may find it difficult to find a pattern.

Thus indigenous medical system consists of various kinds of medications used by the people. They use the available option on the basis of their rationale as to what would be more appropriate in treating what condition at what stage. As a healing indigenous remedies, and also modern doctors. Even if one remedy fails, another is tried since varied options are available. The herbs and supernatural healers are not only easily available, but also inexpensive way of treating sickness and are in coherence with the causation beliefs.

In all small – scale societies, the system of medicine is based on magic, religion and plants they are used for curing the sick either separately or in combination with each other. People have knowledge of the plants available in their surroundings, and they ascribe socio-cultural beliefs to these plants. In the Kumbri Marathi medical system also herbal medicines and even animal extracts are crucial in the treatment seeking process apart from spirits and religion.

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