



EXPLORING THE VARIOUS FACETS OF ETHNOMEDICINE AND TRADITIONAL FOOD HABITS

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ABSTRACT

Throughout human history, food and medicine have been inseparable components essential to our well-being. Since ancient times, humans have been exploring their surroundings in search of natural resources for sustenance and healing purposes. This exploration extended to the realms of plants and animals as early humans sought to diversify their food sources and find remedies for various ailments and discomforts. The pursuit of vitality and longevity further motivated these early humans to experiment with whatever resources were available in their immediate environment. Through a process of trial and error, careful observation, and empirical reasoning, they consciously selected a wide array of biological materials to improve their health, alleviate pain, and address both physical and mental afflictions. This article provides an exploration of the diverse dietary practices which hold significance as ethnomedicine.

KEY WORDS: *Ethnomedicine, Dietary practises*

INTRODUCTION

Ethnomedicine refers to the age-old traditional knowledge of utilizing plants for medicinal purposes, practiced by ethnic communities. In India, ethnomedicine operates through two social streams. One is the local folk stream, predominantly found in rural and tribal villages across the country. This tradition is carried forward by numerous housewives, traditional birth attendants, bone setters, acupressure practitioners, specialists in eye treatments, snakebite remedies, and the village-level herbal physicians known as "vaidyas" or tribal physicians in tribal regions¹. These local healthcare traditions form an independent community-supported healthcare system at the village level, running parallel to the state-supported system. The potential of ethnomedicine often goes unnoticed due to the dominance of Western medicine.

The next tier of the traditional healthcare system is the scientific or classical systems. This category encompasses the structured and systematized medical knowledge with well-developed theoretical foundations and philosophical underpinnings, which are documented in numerous classical and regional manuscripts covering various branches of medicine and surgery. Examples of such systems include Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, Amchi, Tibetan, and others. While ethnomedicine is primarily transmitted orally, certain systems like Ayurveda, Siddha, and Unani have a documented framework, which was historically practiced by the privileged class in society.

1. Native Cultural Tuning in India

A plethora of guidelines, originating from the collective wisdom of ancient times, regulated the lives of individuals in diverse ethnic groups across India.

Different regions and socio-cultural settings within rural societies had their own distinct systems. The socio-religious prescriptions, as outlined in the time-honored "Shodasa Samskaras" of India, provided the framework for leading a healthy life. Starting from the conception of a child (Garbhadhanam), the proper environment, precautions, mental states, and herbal remedies, along with the rituals of the third month (Pumsavanam) and the fourth month (Seemantham), accompanied by appropriate dietary supplements, all detail the steps to be followed for ensuring the well-being of the child². Stages such as Brahmacharya, the practice of celibacy for young adults, Grihasthasrama, the path of householders, Vanaprastha, the partial withdrawal from active life, and Sanyasa, the complete renunciation of worldly affairs, were created to cater to the needs of both individuals and society. However, in recent times, these stages have faced challenges due to the cultural homogenization brought about by the Western model.

The process of sprouting grains, such as Bengal gram and green gram, after soaking them in water, is a well-known traditional technique in India. This method enhances the nutritional value of the grains, with the body's assimilation of protein increasing by 10 to 60 percent compared to non-sprouted grains. From a nutritional perspective, this process also provides various enzymes that are easily absorbed by the digestive system. Sprouted grains are commonly consumed by pregnant and lactating mothers due to their benefits. In addition, there are other customary



practices observed among rural communities in South India, such as consuming rice that has been fermented overnight. In traditional societies, farmers who worked in the fields would consume "pazhankanji," which refers to rice from the previous day. When rice is left to ferment overnight, it undergoes a transformation that results in an increased concentration of diverse antioxidants. This property provides protection to farmers who work under the scorching sun. Additionally, fermented rice has been found to contain isolated vitamins such as B6, B12, and more. Unfortunately, in recent times, the significance and utilization of fermented rice have diminished, and its usage is now limited.

The absence of traditional food preservation techniques in rural areas has resulted in a loss of nutrition. In the past, there were methods for drying and preserving seasonal foods, which allowed for year-round availability until the advent of canned foods. For instance, during the mango and jackfruit season, there was a rural tradition of sun-drying the fruit pulp, layer by layer, on herbal mats each day. Once dried, it would be stored in sealed containers with native herbal preservatives. This preserved fruit pulp served as a pure and nutritious supplementary source of food for both young and old individuals. Additionally, there were techniques for preserving raw mangoes in salt and storing dried jackfruit seeds in containers, among others. These affordable and highly nutritious food items have largely vanished, leaving behind no alternative practices. As a result, significant quantities of surplus seasonal food now go to waste.

2. Nourishing Food for Mother and Child

Reproduction and the continuation of cultural heritage across generations are fundamental aspects of any society. In agrarian societies, preparations for this process started at an early stage, and the birth of a child, especially a girl, held great significance. Engaging in practices such as offering prayers to conceive a girl and participating in ritual arts like 'theyyam' in Malabar. In traditional societies, the crucial period of pregnancy care begins as soon as the pregnancy is confirmed. The expectant mother is advised to adhere to a series of customary practices, with close monitoring from elder family members or villagers. In day-to-day activities, the pregnant woman receives special care, a practice that has been lost in modern lifestyles. The wealth of native wisdom on this subject is shared with the expectant mother, providing guidance and knowledge. Certain foods are considered taboo for pregnant women, while others are deemed mandatory. The do's and don'ts are all part of the folk wisdom surrounding pregnancy. For instance, specific household chores like sweeping the floor may be mandatory for those in the advanced stages of pregnancy, while other activities are restricted. These natural exercises were believed to facilitate easier

childbirth and are now endorsed by modern obstetricians. Many aspects of this traditional knowledge are unwritten but kept alive through intergenerational transmission, ensuring their preservation and continuity.

In most villages, pregnant women are typically not allowed to be outside during the night. They also face restrictions when it comes to visiting sick individuals or witnessing traumatic events. Additionally, in many families, there are guidelines for pregnant women to engage in activities such as listening to music, praying, and reading epics like the Ramayana. These practices reflect a profound understanding of the psychosomatic connections, which highlight the link between the mind and body. It is now recognized that turbulence in the mother's mind, fear, or extreme anxiety can have an impact on the unborn child. The traditional Indian science of Yoga offers various postures suitable for different stages of pregnancy, facilitating easier and more natural childbirth. There are also specific asanas and exercises for postnatal stages that help restore body tone after delivery. In conjunction with these practices, there are herbal preparations like medicated oils and herbal supplements that are used to support maternal health during pregnancy.

3. Child Wellness - An Indigenous Approaches

A distinct branch of Ayurveda focuses on the intricate procedures involved in traditional child care in India, similar to the field of pediatrics in modern medicine. In South India, there is a customary practice known as 'ora marunnu,' where a mild paste made from a combination of herbal ingredients like plant roots, dry fruits, and sometimes mixed with mother's milk, is given to newborns. Interestingly, this knowledge stems from the ancestral wisdom of elder women in the household and does not require medical intervention. 'Ora Marunnu' can be likened to a form of vaccination in modern medicine, as it is now understood that it helps prevent various childhood diseases while promoting enhanced brain activity. The coexistence of modern medical facilities and these native practices in South India today serves as evidence of the complementary nature of these two approaches. Other practices deeply embedded in the native culture include having pregnant women listen to music and religious discourses, as well as soothing children to sleep with lullabies. These practices cater to the well-being of both the mind and body, reflecting the holistic nature of the native traditions. Breastfeeding holds immense significance in infant care within Indian culture. Mother's breast milk is not only regarded as a vital source of nutrition but is also used medicinally, including as eye drops and for various aspects of baby care. Breast milk is believed to provide all the necessary nutrients and antibodies that a child requires. It fosters a bond of love between



the mother and child and establishes a strong connection. Studies have shown that individuals who receive prolonged breastfeeding tend to exhibit greater resistance to various illnesses. Native healers often utilize herbs such as Brahmi (*Bacopa monnieri* (L) Pernel) as stimulants in child care. Additionally, there are specific potions derived from animal sources that are administered to children during later stages. Since the foundation of good health is established during childhood, traditional healing practices assign great importance to child care. With the growing awareness of the detrimental effects of toxins and chemicals present in cosmetics, an increasing number of individuals are turning to herbal and traditional approaches in child care.

4. Traditional Food and Nutraceuticals

The key to the advancement of health foods, pharma foods, or nutraceuticals lies in enhancing the value of traditional natural diets. India boasts a heritage of health science spanning over 5000 years, where food has played a vital role in promoting a healthy life. People residing in diverse agroclimatic regions across the country have conducted experiments and developed a wide array of food, diet, and healthcare products, now referred to as ethnic foods and ethnic nutritional diets. As previously mentioned, Ayurvedic medicine encompasses a distinctive management system known as 'Rasayana,' which primarily involves a combination of food and medicinal herb recipes designed to rejuvenate the entire body system and restore its optimal health and functionality.

Phytonutrients, also known as phytochemicals, have a significant impact on the healthcare system and can offer various health benefits, including disease prevention and treatment, as well as addressing physiological disorders. Among the different groups of phytochemicals, polyphenols are widely distributed and contribute to the health-promoting effects of nutraceuticals. These polyphenols range from simple phenols to highly polymerized tannins. They not only protect plants from oxidative damage but also serve a similar role in humans by safeguarding tissues against oxidative decay, functioning as antioxidants. One remarkable characteristic of these phytonutrients is their capability to inhibit specific enzymes that trigger inflammation. Additionally, they can modify prostaglandin pathways, thereby safeguarding platelets from clumping.

served as a commendable initiative to bring together key stakeholders in the field of ethnomedicinal research within the country.

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CONCLUSION

The global demand for medicinal plants is on the rise, which serves as evidence of the widespread popularity and trust in herbal medicines and dietary supplements. This provides us with a significant opportunity to harness our abundant plant resources and traditional knowledge of medicinal practices for the betterment of humanity, while also contributing to the economic growth of our nation. In conclusion, the conference