
PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS IN INDIGENOUS HEALING TRADITIONS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

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Abstract: Illness and healing are such basic human experiences. So, it would be apt to discuss indigenous healing traditions in India which works mainly to restore from illness to holistic mental health. These indigenous healing traditions existing for years in India have been emerged naturally in and through religio-cultural traditions and still exist to contribute significantly for the mental health of the person. These traditions tend to offer healing based on certain traditional spirits and spirituality. So, this paper deals broadly with the fusion of two major themes of how both psychology and spirituality interface in indigenous healing traditions. The objectives of this paper are such as; to articulate the important indigenous healing traditions and its functions, to find out the psycho-spiritual dimensions of Indian indigenous healing traditions based on psycho-spiritual theories, and to identify the implications of these traditions in order to promote alternative healing traditions in India.

Key words: Healing, Indigenous Healing Traditions, Mental Health, Psycho-Spiritual Theories

Introduction: Holistic mental health is a great concern for all. Uniquely different indigenous healing traditions are available in India to restore mental health of the disturbed persons. Indigenous healing traditions are typically sacred therapies as it functions based on spirits, and spirituality. Having exist for long years and contributing very significantly to the mental health of the person lot of studies have been done by anthropologists, psychologists, religious professionals extra. However, this article is a new approach to find out the psycho-spiritual dimensions of these indigenous healing traditions in order to create awareness and to promote these alternative healing traditions in India.

The background of this article is that as regard form Indian context there are mega-technologies and super specialization hospitals along with high cost of medicine, made health care a rare commodity for the vast majority. The increasing cost of health care make a health service an impossible dream for the crowded millions of India due to poverty. At the same time challenging the curative treatment of the body in India without tackling the psycho-spiritual and social factors underlying the ailment was the main approach in treating the sickness. The criticism of above approach in healing markedly, the institutionalized approach has its focus on a curative and preventive approach is being challenged by the emerging new trends which focus on a holistic and integrated approach in health promotion. Hence, there is a need to reframe its approach and opt for total health and holistic healing for the welfare of the people in the country. In this context 'A new crisis in health care is needed [1]' is proposed after analyzing the Indian medical system by Eliza Kuppuzhakkal. Despite crisis in health care these primitive religio-cultural healing traditions like Shamanic, Ayurvedic,

Yogic, Temple healing which have been contributing meaningfully to restore mental health and healing.

In this background this article attempts to answer these questions such as; how do indigenous healing traditions contribute to the mental health of the person? What are the psycho-spiritual converging themes in these healing traditions? Finally how do these healing traditions imply today to Indian scenario? So, this paper deals briefly the understanding of mental health, healing and illness, theoretical underpinnings from psycho-spiritual theories, psycho-spiritual dimensions in these indigenous healing traditions and finally concludes with implications for Indian scenario.

Mental Health, Illness and healing: Mental health, illness and healing are the important terms to be understood clearly before trying to capture the meaning of psycho-spiritual theories.

The standard definition of mental health by WHO states that mental health is: ... 'a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. [2].' According to Kakar the meaning of mental health is a broad concept which he explains in his book *Shamans, Mystics, and Doctors* 'as the absence of incapacitating symptoms, integration of psychological functioning, effective conduct of personal and social life, feelings of ethical and spiritual well-being, and so on [3].' In his definition Kakar adds the ethical and spiritual well-being as an important aspect concerning mental health of the person. This article claims that the broad understanding of mental health in which the ethical and spiritual well-being along with the physical, emotional and social dimensions of life are part of the holistic health of a person.

According to Lars Thielmann explains that 'the prominent quality of a fully healthy person is peace of soul. Disease and illness can damage the physical stability of life, thus ruining its quality and diminishing the integrity of health. Health is also modified by a person's experience of purpose and of community of purpose. Health is also related to cultural, economic, legal, spiritual dimensions [4]. In his definition health is fundamental and basic which also leads into the higher dimensions of life. Thus, Healing is a process which restores health to an unbalanced, diseased or damaged organism. Healing may be physical or psychological. Healing is done by a healer. It is a therapeutic modality delivered by a practitioner to a client. With this understanding of healing this article focuses two important indigenous healing traditions in India.

Indian Healing Traditions: There are several healing traditions which exist since long ago in India. However, this article highlights mainly on shamanic, ayurvedic healing for deeper analysis of the study.

Shamanic healing is thought to be one of the oldest healing practices, stretching back thousands of years and linking to indigenous cultures across the globe. Shamans generally specialize in 'spirit ill-ness' and a salient characteristic of many shamans are their ability to go into a voluntary and controlled trance in their diagnostic or healing efforts [5]. Kakar mentions different image of the shaman in Western is, full of contradictions because shamans are seen as a mentally ill person to whom a wide variety of psychiatric labels have been attached [6]. The other side of the picture portrays the shaman as a religious specialist who connects his community with everything that is sacred and gives meaning to life.' He is the mediator between the supernatural and the community who makes the desires of one known to the other. Kakar quotes that the recent anthropological literature mentions that these shamans have social wisdom, praises his intellectual qualities, and his admiring of his creative and innovative capacities [7]. The 'symptoms' of the shaman may in fact be the result of learning and practice.

Shamanic healing is based on holistic approach to health and balanced interconnectedness of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual realms in humans. **Shamanic** healing tools include guided meditation, breath practice, pressure point work, psychic surgery, journeying, ritual, aromatherapy, precious stone

therapy, bodywork and sound therapy including chanting and drumming. These can be used in conjunction with other natural therapies such as herbal medicine, counseling and meditation. Its holistic nature means that it can be used to treat people with a range of conditions including physical and emotional pain, depression and addictions.

The term **Ayurveda** in Sanskrit means "life-knowledge". Ayurveda is 5,000 year old healing system originating from India that extols intuitive and holistic health. Ayurveda has influenced many of the older traditional methods of healing including Tibetan, Chinese and Greek medicine; and thus has been called the mother of healing. It is based on the belief that health and wellness depend on a delicate balance between the mind, body, and spirit. The primary focus of Ayurvedic medicine is to promote good health, rather than fight disease. But treatments may be recommended for specific health problems. According to Ayurvedic theory, everything in the universe -- living or not -- is connected. Good health is achieved when your mind, body, and spirit are in harmony with the universe. A disruption of this harmony can lead to poor health and sickness. The philosophy behind Ayurveda is that human beings are part of nature, it describes three fundamental energies that govern our inner and outer environments: Known in Sanskrit as *vata* (wind), *pitta* (fire) and *Kapha* (earth) these primary forces are responsible for the characteristics of our mind and body. Each of us has a unique proportion of these forces that shapes our nature [8]. So, treatment in ayurveda is to create balance between these forces within the human being.

Having explained these two important indigenous healing traditions the author focuses the psycho-spiritual theories in order to understand the converging dimensions.

Psycho-Spiritual Theoretical Underpinnings: The theoretical underpinnings of this paper are derived mainly from the psychology of religion, and transpersonal psychology.

Psycho-spiritual theories emerge from transpersonal psychology. According to Michael Washburn 'it is a project that attempts a true synthesis of spiritual and psychological approaches to the psyche, a synthesis that involves a through rethinking of each of these approaches in terms of the other [9]. It integrates uniquely the spiritual potential of human beings to move beyond the ego to both heights and depths of the human psyche. It is mainly the study of transpersonal experiences and behaviors.

The prominent scholar in 19th century William James in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James, 1902/1958), identified two types of religious expression, the "religion of the sick soul" and the "religion of the healthy-minded soul." The former is a

product of a damaged psyche, expressed as “a sort of psychological neuralgia wholly unknown to healthy life”. In extremes, this includes hatred, irritation, frustration, self-mistrust, self-despair, suspicion, anxiety, nervousness, and fear. The latter is grounded in “the tendency which looks on all things and sees that they are good.” Healthy-minded religion is the faith of the literally healthy minded whose psyches are implicitly hopeful, optimistic, positive, kind, and prone to happiness [10].

Added to that, number of psychoanalytic thinkers who followed Freud, such as Erik Erikson wrote that the superego represents the transcendent part of the mind that can resolve dialectics and paradox, and make moral choices [11]. Another important thinker Carl Jung, a disciple of Freud, argued that religious experience could play a *positive* role in human psychological health. Jung proposed the concept of the collective unconscious, which contains imaginable categories or archetypes, namely, aggregates of metaphorical representations and meaning that can be accessed by the minds of individuals and cultures, without necessarily having had previous exposure [12]. The views of humanistic and transpersonal theorists like Viktor Frankl, Abraham Maslow are brought substantiate religion as meaning-giving system fostering the growth of the individual. Maslow viewed the spiritual mind as the peak of mental development, which arises after the basic needs of life have been met. Clearly, the spiritual mind is a powerful aid in coping with existential crises, resolving paradox, adapting to the environment, and providing a source of creativity [13]. These theories claim that religion can play a positive role in restoring mental health.

With this theoretical background this article focuses the main objective of highlighting the psycho-spiritual dimensions based on these theories.

The Psycho-Spiritual Dimensions of Indigenous Healing Traditions: Interestingly, the author has identified different psycho-spiritual dimensions based on the psycho-spiritual theories. Such as;

- **Transpersonal dimension** – These traditions apparently recognize and believe in an unseen human composite, variously termed “spirit”, “soul”, or “heart.” The existence of this transpersonal component cannot be proved instead, it must be believed as existing and necessary in order to experience the highest form of healing. Most ancient healers, the shamans, for example, seem to have believed strongly in a world of spirits [14].

- **Existence of the higher power-** These traditions believe that the spirit or soul within humans is capable of moving on to higher modes of being. That a higher mode of existence is possible is demonstrated in the shaman’s journey to the land of

the Gods or goddess. It is vivid that in all healing traditions the finite and fallible nature of life is recognized. So, in the moment of sickness they seek for god’s assistance.

- **Relationship between self and a higher power-** The infinite is present in finite being, because the infinite being cannot be comprehended by finite beings. It is capable of revealing itself of those who build a relationship imaginatively by simply believing in its existence. The individual self is capable of merging with the Absolute self and becoming eternal because it reflects the nature of the eternal self. When the created human self merges with the eternal self, the process of healing culminates.

- **Process of Healing** - Healing is not an end in itself; only part of a process. Healing techniques have been primarily utilized as means to ends, not ends in themselves. Once healing the body and later to the mind has been accomplished in the process of healing. Traditions may label this experience as a took annihilation, unconditional state, union with the object of desire, oneness experience, merger with the Eternal self, union of the soul with its creator for whom it is created, or the union of the receiver and the giver.

- **From conscious to unconscious** – in order to arrest the distractions of body and the thinking mind gradually, shamans begin by drumming themselves repeatedly with sensory/imagery methods. Once their concentration effort holds the attention of the conscious mind on a single point, they begin accessing the unconscious mind on a single point; they begin accessing the unconscious mind. Where part of physical and emotional healing may be taking place.

- **From the unconscious to the spiritual unconscious** – The healing of the spirit appears to occur in an area deeper than the unconscious, perhaps what the transpersonal psychologist Victor Frankl called ‘the spiritual unconscious’, or the ‘superconscious’ as Assagioli termed it, which is a mode of operation beyond comprehension taking place in the spirit’ quoted by Loyola Amalraj [15]. It is the human spirit, soul, or self-merging with the absolute, the eternal self, or God. This spiritual unconscious is perhaps the area where the spirit enters into a communion with the Absolute and goes through a profound spiritual healing, affecting or transforming the body and psyche as well.

- **Transference and objectification of illness** - In the treatment of sickness in many cultures find that an important part of the healing process involves transferring the illness from the patient to some object or to her being, sometimes to the healer herself. Ritually, symbolically or psychologically the sickness is removed from the patient and identified with some object (or being). It

is then condensed, objectified, and bound by the healer or the ritual; finally, the sickness is dramatically, ritually or symbolically destroyed or banished. Ex. changing new clothes

- **Healing for wholeness** - Kakar who describes that the pilgrimage journey itself is an experience of people for wholeness. He further describes that 'The very pilgrimages to the healing centres with his family members are considered to be a sacred journey, a pilgrimage in search of healing [16]. In cases of healing where healing involves travelling to a permanent sacred place, the process of a healing journey or pilgrimage becomes central and features in the healing process. Participation in a pilgrimage is a very effective way of mobilizing the whole being in the healing process. It is an active, energetic quest for healing by the patient herself.

- **Assigning meaning to illness** - One of the most important roles healers play is to assign meaning to illness. In many cases this means relating a patient's illness to some aspect of his life. Since illness is related to morality, the healers' task in such cases is to determine what the patient has done wrong, what deity, spirit, or ancestor has been offended, and what must be done to appease the offended party to allow healing to take place. The healer's job is to clarify the connection between the patient's illness and his behaviour. The centrality of confession on the part of the patient must be understood in this context. The very naming of an illness by itself has powerful healing effects.

- **Group solidarity healing** - In these healing scenarios presented, the presence of people or participants in addition to the healer and the patient is notable. Many healing procedures and rituals include, or even require, the presence of community members, family members or friends. It is the vitality of the group as a whole that supports the individual healers, in affirming on behalf of individual sick members of the group. While performing healing family and community members are encouraged to sing songs invoke prayers, and sometimes undergo purification rituals along with the patient. Kakar refers 'the significance of group in healing that The source of human strengths lies in a harmonious integration with one's group, in the individual's affirmation of the community's values and its given order, in his obedience to the community's gods and in his cherishing of its traditions [17].' Thus, the aim of these healing traditions is to restore balance, harmony and beauty in the cosmos and by extension to restore health to the individual.

Implications of Psycho-Spiritual Approach to Indigenous Healing Traditions

Health professionals: Harold G. Koenig a mental health scholar writes that "Health professionals must realize that religious beliefs and practices may be a

tremendous source of strength to patients, which continuous long after they leave the office. Consequently, they should encourage patients to actively participate in a faith community. This may reduce loneliness and isolation, and may reinforce religious beliefs that will help them to cope with the stresses in their lives [18].' As religion is an important resource for mental health, health professionals can develop assistance and referral networks with local spiritual therapists in their community. In this way, each may assist and educate the other in sorting out healthy uses of religion.

Spirituality Integrated psychotherapy: Religious beliefs and practices may be integrated with or used adjunctively to traditional psychotherapy when treating patients with depression or anxiety disorders extra [19]. Koenig based on his field experience pens that 'well-designed research now shows that integrating religious beliefs and practices into psychotherapy for depressed or anxious religious patients actually produces faster results than secular techniques alone [20].' Another scholar Moodley who studied shamanism elaborately concludes that 'Shamanism is responsible for maintaining the psychological and mental well-being of people in the societies that practice these healing methods [21].

The Role of Spiritual Counselors: Spiritual counselors can integrate healthy rituals and prayers in worships with a view to promote mental health of the congregation. As spiritual leaders have the platform in their own specific places they are encouraged to present a contemporary message and style of worship that meets spiritual and psychological needs of persons with health and social problems [22].

Promoting alternative medicine for the holistic health of the person: These alternative therapies do not seek to treat only 'illness' but to strengthen the health of the whole person. So, these healing offers deeper meaning and purpose of life as it gives importance to group solidarity and guidance of spiritual power. Therefore it has to be promoted further which still exists in different forms like, folk traditions and shamanic healing traditions.

Conclusion: The study of finding out psycho-spiritual dimensions in these indigenous healing traditions is to promote alternative healing traditions for holistic mental health. It is an awareness creating article with a view to give meaning and life to cultural healing systems. The salient findings of psycho-spiritual themes are identified such as; transpersonal dimension, existence of the higher power, relationship between the self and higher power, importance of imagery, relevancy of objects, from consciousness to spiritual consciousness, transference of illness, and group solidarity. Finally this article argues that these indigenous traditions have greater

implication today to promote holistic healing for mental health.

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