

Indigenous medication used by *Himachali* women to cure pregnancy discomforts

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The research work is an effort to document and explore the indigenous knowledge of *Himachali* rural women used to cure various pregnancy discomforts. Although great strides have been made in bringing modern medicines to clinics in rural areas, indigenous /traditional medication continues to flourish in this region. It is, therefore, necessary for the scientific community to adequately document and validate this knowledge, so that it merges with the scientific stream of knowledge. The paper attempts to document and scientifically validate the indigenous practices followed by rural women to cure various pregnancy discomforts. The information regarding type of food preparation, method of preparation and consumption, etc. was gathered using questionnaire based survey along with informal discussions. It was observed that for curing different pregnancy discomforts, various locally available plant parts are utilized. These plants possess certain medicinal properties, which provide the basis for further use. The data accrued is expected to serve as a tool for the development of herbal drug industries.

Keywords: Traditional knowledge, Traditional medicine, Indigenous medicine, Medicinal plants, Pregnancy discomforts, Himachal Pradesh

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The state of Himachal Pradesh with its difficult topography makes villages inaccessible and provision of basic health amenities more expensive and difficult. Besides this, there are areas, which are snow bounded and remain cut off for long period of time. Thus, the benefits from the advancement in medical sciences have not yet touched the rural areas. The indigenous system of care with age old procedure is still in vogue among them since pre-historic times. Maternal healthcare, too, draws extensively from the fund of indigenous knowledge, and a peep into this basket of time tested knowledge would reveal that the list of maternal health practices is both long as well as exhaustive. Almost every rural household is a repository of maternal health related indigenous knowledge, due to the common, everyday use of indigenous materials for preventive, protective, and curative purposes. Since due to various reasons, many indigenous knowledge systems are depleting at an alarming rate, therefore there is an urgent need to explore and document this unique knowledge before it is lost forever.

Documentation of such practices not only helps in probing the past but also helps in bringing to light even fragmentary information on traditional methods

of our ancestors. Besides this, it would help to preserve for posterity the age-old practices, which would otherwise disappear, as most indigenous practices remain unrecorded and undocumented. Rural women certainly constitute a storehouse of indigenous knowledge by virtue of their accumulated experiences and practices that are unique to their culture and environment¹. Thus documenting and validating the indigenous knowledge of rural women will be helpful in modifying these indigenous methods of treatment on the basis of scientific validation, through blending of common local ingredients with modern technologies/methodologies in order to investigate different food preparations or practices, ingredients added and method of preparation. An attempt has, therefore, been made to document the indigenous knowledge/medication used to cure various pregnancy discomforts and to verify scientific rationale of the documented indigenous knowledge.

Methodology

The study was conducted in district Kangra of Himachal Pradesh. In order to document the indigenous practices followed by rural women to cure

pregnancy discomforts, 4 villages namely Saliana and Deogran from Panchrukhi block, and Samloti and Ustehar from Nagrota Bagwan block were selected. Desired information was tapped from rural women of the district by using questionnaire based survey along with informal discussions². The method of preparation and consumption of the food given along with their dosage were recorded and compiled. Given that indigenous practices have their roots in local beliefs and customs, which are internally consistent and logical to those who use the same, it was necessary to objectively deduce this knowledge for its validation. Thus, for verifying scientific rationality of indigenous practices followed by rural women, the experts from the field of nutrition and gynecology were consulted. The documented data was also validated by referencing with the available literature.

Observations

The physical and psychological disorders of a pregnant woman are no different from any other individual. However, the principles of management differ, as strong medicines would harm the foetus. In the state of Himachal Pradesh, rural women use indigenous medication to a considerable extent for curing various pregnancy discomforts. The present investigation revealed the use of various plant materials for curing the pregnancy discomforts and maintaining the health of women during the vulnerable period. The plant resources being used by the rural people may be because of the fact that they are non-narcotic, have no side effects, easily available at affordable prices and sometimes the only source available to the poor³. The information regarding various foods taken/practices followed to cure the pregnancy discomforts, method of preparation and consumption of a particular food preparation along with scientific rationality has been presented (Table 1). The food preparations/practices were followed by the respondents to cure a number of pregnancy discomforts like morning sickness, constipation, abdominal pain, cold and cough, backache and blemishes on face.

Discussion

The paper presents information regarding indigenous knowledge available with the rural women to cure various pregnancy discomforts. The people of district Kangra, like most of other indigenous people depend upon plant resources for their medicinal requirements for various pregnancy discomforts and

in this way a traditional system of folk recipes has evolved in the area over a period of time. In majority of the ailments, viz. constipation, abdominal pain, cold and cough, rural ladies prescribed decoction of locally available plant species/herbs like *Terminalia chebula* Retz., *Terminalia bellirica* Roxb., *Emblica officinalis* Gaertn., *Trachyspermum ammi* Sprague, *Mentha arvensis* DC., *Elattaria cardamomum* L., *Viola odorata* L. and *Glycyrrhiza glabra* L. While consumption of powdered mixture of different plant was suggested for morning sickness and constipation. The study also revealed that paste of some of the fruits or rhizomes was used as a face pack for curing blemishes on the face. Ailments like swelling of limbs was treated by fomentation with water boiled along with different parts of the plant like leaves or vine. In majority of the cases, a combination of plants, herbs and shrubs was used for best results. Different plants mentioned in the study for treatment of various pregnancy discomforts have also been reported for similar uses, e.g. alike rural women of Himachal Pradesh, people of Rajasthan also consume *Terminalia chebula* Retz. to relieve constipation; and in Karnataka, *Curcuma longa* L. is used to remove blemishes on face⁴⁻⁷. Same information pertaining to a particular remedy from different localities or group of informants reflects the accuracy and authenticity of the medicines.

It was observed that some of the plants like *Terminalia chebula* Retz., *Terminalia bellirica* Roxb., *Trachyspermum ammi* Sprague and *Elattaria cardamomum* L. have been used for treating a number of pregnancy discomforts. Therefore, efforts should be made to survey the region thoroughly for more such plants. Thus, documentation of the indigenous knowledge exhibits the fact that though the modern medicine system has made spectacular strides during the last century, many people still follow native or indigenous system of healthcare. As regards scientific rationality of the indigenous practices/food preparations suggested by the respondents, the experts presented various medicinal properties of the plants. Data were compared with the available literature on medicinal plants and validity of practices calls for merging this indigenous knowledge with the modern scientific mainstream⁸⁻¹³. Tapping of the rural knowledge in the indigenous herbal system may also be very well utilized for the preparation of medicine in combination with modern technique. The study has paramount importance as it restores and documents

Table 1— Indigenous food given/practices followed to cure pregnancy discomforts

Pregnancy discomfort	Composition of food given and method of use	Scientific rationale
Constipation	Decoction of one fruit each of <i>harad</i> (<i>Terminalia chebula</i> Retz.) and <i>bahera</i> (<i>Terminalia bellirica</i> Roxb.) and two fruits of <i>amla</i> (<i>Emblica officinalis</i> Geartn.) is administered once a day till problem persists.	<i>Harad</i> , <i>bahera</i> and <i>amla</i> are purgatives thus facilitate evacuation of bowels.
	Boiled and strained mixture of 1 teaspoonful of ground <i>ajwain</i> (<i>Trachyspermum ammi</i> Sprague), 2 cm piece of <i>gurlakdi</i> (<i>Cassia fistula</i> L.) and 1 teaspoonful of ground <i>meethi saunf</i> (<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i> Mill.) in a glass of water is given 2-3 times a day.	<i>Gurlakdi</i> is a mild laxative. <i>Ajwain</i> is carminative and antispasmodic. <i>Meethi saunf</i> is antidotal.
	<i>Sanai</i> (<i>Cassia augustifolia</i> Vahl.) leaves are chewed.	Helps in liver stimulation and in pushing down the excreta.
Abdominal pain	One teaspoonful of dried <i>isabgol</i> (<i>Plantago ovata</i> Forsk.) husk soaked in half glass of water is administered 2-3 times a day.	<i>Isabgol</i> is emollient, demulcent, laxative, helps in facilitating evacuation bowels.
	Vegetable prepared from spinach (<i>Spinacia oleracea</i> L.) and <i>dudali</i> (<i>Euphorbia hirta</i> L.) leaves is given.	Helps in digestion, pushes down the excreta, and stimulates liver and intestines.
	Powdered mixture prepared from <i>dalchini</i> (<i>Cinnamomum verum</i> Presl.), 2 teaspoons of small cardamom (<i>Elletaria cardamomum</i> L.) and 1 teaspoonful of <i>meethi saunf</i> is consumed early in the morning empty stomach with boiled water.	<i>Dalchini</i> is aromatic and carminative; <i>saunf</i> is antidotal.
Morning sickness	Banana is given to get relief from constipation.	Fruits provide bulk of roughage due to high cellulose contents, which prevents constipation.
	Decoction of 1 teaspoonful of <i>ajwain</i> is employed.	Helps in proper digestion.
	Decoction of 3 gm <i>bhabri</i> (<i>Ocimum gratissimum</i> L.), few leaves of mint (<i>Mentha arvensis</i> DC.) and 2 teaspoons of <i>ajwain</i> is consumed.	<i>Bhabri</i> is antifatulent; mint is carminative and stomachic; <i>ajwain</i> is stomachic and eupeptic.
Swelling of limbs	Decoction of <i>kakarsinghi</i> (<i>Pistacia khinjuk</i> Stocks) pod (4 cm whole) is given.	<i>Kakarsinghi</i> has febrifuge and carminative properties.
	Roasted and ground mixture (1 teaspoonful) of 50 gm <i>meethi saunf</i> , a piece of <i>mishri</i> and 10 gm <i>ajwain</i> is served with lukewarm water daily.	<i>Saunf</i> and <i>mishri</i> are cold in nature, increases appetite; <i>ajwain</i> helps in digestion.
	Mixture of crushed onions (2) (<i>Allium cepa</i> L.) and few mint leaves after adding a pinch of salt is given.	Helps in digestion and increases appetite.
Cold and cough	Mixture of <i>amla</i> powder (1 teaspoonful) and milk (1 glass) is given once a day.	<i>Amla</i> is refrigerant and reduces acidity.
	<i>Satavar</i> (<i>Asparagus racemosus</i> Willd.) juice is given to the patient.	<i>Satavar</i> is a diuretic and controls oedema.
	Fomentation with boiled water along with <i>akasbel</i> /vine (<i>Cuscuta reflexa</i> Roxb.) is recommended.	<i>Asakbel</i> acts as haemostatic, astringent and rubefacient.
Backache	Massage the feet with boiled water along with the leaves of eucalyptus (<i>Eucalyptus citriodora</i> Hook) and <i>akasbel</i> .	Eucalyptus acts as haemostatic, astringent, antiseptic, stimulating and rubefacient.
	Consumption of low salt foods is recommended.	Because of sodium content, high intake of sodium leads to swelling of body.
	Quantity of water intake is increased.	Increased urination leads to decrease in oedema.
Blemishes on face	Boiled two small cardamoms, half teaspoon of black pepper (<i>Piper nigrum</i> L.), bay leaves (<i>Cinnamomum tamala</i> Nees & Eberm.) and a pinch of salt in water is given about half glass per day after adding sugar and milk.	Cardamom is stimulating; bay leaves stimulate the nervous system; black pepper is an alexeteric and tonic.
	Two teaspoon decoction of ground cardamom, <i>banafshah</i> (<i>Viola odorata</i> L.) and <i>mulathi</i> (<i>Glycyrrhiza glabra</i> L.) is given.	Cardamom is stimulant and carminative; <i>banafshah</i> is diaphoretic and emetic, antipyretic and has cooling effect; <i>mulathi</i> is an expectorant and is soothing to irritated mucous membranes.
	Four teaspoon mixture of roasted and crushed <i>sonth</i> (<i>Zinziber officinale</i> Rosc.) along with ghee and sugar is given daily.	Provides strength.
Blemishes on face	<i>Methi</i> (<i>Trigonella foenum graecum</i> L.) seeds (2 teaspoon) boiled in a glass of milk are given at bed time.	Reduces pains and stimulates nervous system.
	Paste prepared from 1 teaspoonful of milk and 7-8 almonds (<i>Prunus amygdalus</i> Batsch) soaked in water is applied on face.	Almonds provide nourishment due to the presence of iron; milk clears the skin.
	Mixture of half teaspoon turmeric (<i>Curcuma longa</i> L.) and 1 teaspoon of gram flour (<i>Cicer aritinum</i> L.) is applied on face.	Turmeric possesses antibacterial and antiseptic properties, controls skin diseases and infection.

the fading out knowledge system of the rural areas and can help in providing a lead to new drug development for various ailments. It is hoped that this trend of indigenous knowledge, with the support of scientific validation, will result in this age-old knowledge regaining its legitimate place in modern society.

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