

## **WOMEN'S ILLNESSES - THE INDIAN MALE PERSPECTIVE A SEARCH FOR LINKAGE WITH VEDIC CONCEPT OF HEALTH & HINDU MYTHOLOGY**

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### ABSTRACT

A multicentric ICMR study was done in rural north India during 1996- 1999. Qualitative data was gathered from adult males of the study area regarding their views on women's illnesses. 'Heat' emerged as the chief etiological factor for most of the reproductive health problems of women. Diet was told as the major source of this heat. A linkage between *Vedic/ Ayurvedic* concepts of diet/heat and our respondents' view on women's illnesses has been described in the article. Similar references in Western literature have also been quoted. As per Vedic concepts blood and bones are intermediary products of food assimilation between chyle and semen, Respondents view that, melting of bones leads to vaginal discharge (equated to semen) has been traced to this concept. Leucorrhoea emerged as a significant morbidity of women. These views of the respondents reflect their culture. Any attempt to change these should take into account the overall cultural aspects of the concerned population.

Habits and beliefs of people in a given community are not separate items but are the elements of a cultural system which determines their response to any disease. Each culture has its own ways of organizing experiences pertaining to health and disease. *Vedas* are an integral part of our rich heritage passed down from generation to

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generation through words of mouth or traditional teaching. Quite understandably, the attitudes and beliefs of Indians, particularly the rural illiterates, are considerably affected by the *Vedic* concept of health and disease.

Every society has its own set of beliefs regarding aetiology and other aspects of various diseases. For women's illnesses also people have their own opinions. In patriarchal societies like India, low status of women, in general, makes them dependent on their male counterparts for seeking treatment for their illnesses. Male attitudes on women's illnesses significantly influence the status of women's health. Present article describes the conceptual framework and the views of rural north Indian men about their wives health and women's illnesses in general and attempts to trace its linkage with *Vedic* concept of diet, health and disease.

The data was collected during an ICMR sponsored multicentric study at four centres in India. It was conducted during 1996 - 99. (*Singh, 2000* ). This report pertains to the findings of the qualitative research phase of our study at Chandigarh centre. The study area comprised of Kot primary health centre villages, about 30 - 35 Km. from Chandigarh. Literacy rate of the area was 47% for men and 28% for women. Hindus were 79%, Muslims 6.5%, Sikhs 12%, and the rest 2.5% were Christians. Eighty two percent of the respondents were married. Majority (85%) were from lower or lower middle class. Major occupation of the respondents was laborer (48%) or farming (31%) . The study aimed to cover 500 women each in study as well as control area of each centre. Present study is based on the interviews of the adult males in the study villages. Focus group discussions (5) were organised for these males. Some case studies (8) and key informant interviews (10) were also conducted.

Excess heat (*Garmi*) emerged as the central theme in aetiology of almost all diseases of women as perceived by our respondents. White discharge, excessive menses, ulcers in the genital region, early menarche, burning during micturition and internal swelling, all were considered to be caused by this *Garmi*. This in turn was perceived to be the result of consumption of heat producing diet (Fig.1). Thus there was a considerable diet and heat fixation in the thinking of rural north Indian males as far as women's illnesses were considered. *Dhat* (passage of semen) and 'weakness'

were other associated dominant themes. This is in consonance with our heritage of *Veda and Ayurveda*. Even in Hippocratic medicine, treatment was primarily dietetic. (Siegrist, 1987).

*Agni* (fire/heat/ energy) is the primary concern of man as a species as described throughout the *Vedas*. *R̥gveda* (said to be originated from *Agni*) begins with the memorable verse we worship *Agni*. Fire is recognised as the primordial element for maintaining cosmic order (*R̥ta*). The concept of fire as energy is at the root of all thought. As body heat and energy, *Agni* is seen as the expression of the invisible and intangible God. (Vannucci, 1994).

The concept of 'fire' and 'heat' are central in much of the description in *Vedas* and Hindu mythology pertaining to creation, destruction and diet.

Lord Siva is once shown to be telling Parvati during a fortunate connection the heat produced gives semen the quality of water and the air conveys it to the urethra of male, from which it passes into the vagina. When it enters the uterus it mixes with the heating qualities of the sun which the menses possesses and forms the embryo. Elsewhere it has been described mixture of menses and semen produces heat' (Wise, 1986). Fire and heat were perceived as the central force of life & most natural phenomena. (*Agni* = (Ag) अग् = the first (ni) नि = to lead).

Lord *Agni* plans for the future by blessing women with children and with motherly intelligence. *Agni* has also been described as the third husband of the bride after *Soma* and *Gandharva* the fourth being the human husband. As a girl child she is wedded to 'Soma' who teaches her home sciences. He then hands over the girl to *Gandharva* who imparts the refined cultural skills recitation, chanting and music. He then hands her over to Lord *Agni* when she is biologically mature/ready to become a wife and mother. (i.e. she is imparted with a creative fire the fecundity she is now ready to bear a child the fire manifests itself as onset of menses the menarche) - (Vannucci, 1994)

Greeks (Hippocrates) also spoke of heat as an inherent quality of certain elements, humors and foods. The 'heat' concept seems to be derived from religion. In all Indo-European religions sacred fire played an important role. It was worshipped in India

and Persia. The innate heat - the sacred fire of the body was kept burning in the heart. The body's hearth protected the individual against evil keeping it alive restoring health when it is lost. The innate heat is the essential part of a man's physiology. It is the nature that heals. There is a natural healing power of the body (*Siegrist, 1987*).

As per the *Vedic* concept, the food we eat gets sequentially converted into seven parts, of which our body is made.

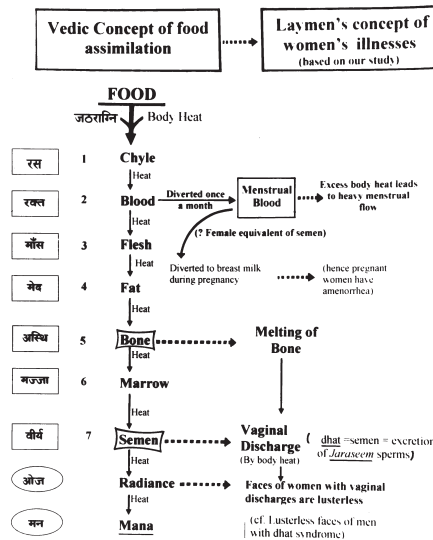


Fig. 1

1. First *Rasa* (chyle) is made and remains in body. The remnant is excreted as faeces. Thus, *Rasa* is the essence of food. Then blood is made from *Rasa*.
2. Thus, blood is the essence of *Rasa*.
3. Similarly, flesh is the essence of blood.
4. Fat is the essence of flesh.
5. Bone is the essence of fat.
6. Marrow is the essence of bone and
7. Semen is the essence of marrow.

The most/macro part is *Rasa* and the most micro is *Veerya* i.e. sperm (semen).

Our body has a fire *Jatharagni* ( जठराग्नि ) which keeps on churning the food so that from Rasa-to-semen, the seven parts are made one after the other i.e. heat brings out this conversion. Galen and Aristotle also had a concept of innate heat in this explanation of digestive physiology. (May, 1968).

For keeping the body healthy, the last part i.e. the semen needs to be preserved.

Even further refinement leads to acquisition of radiance. (*oja*) from conservation of semen. It further shapes the *mana* (thinking). This concept is at the root of an old saying 'Jaisa anna vaisa man' (Like food, like thinking) (Bhargava, 1999).

As per the *Vedic* concept there are 24 elements (*tatva*) in the body man as a microcosm possesses 25 elements (25th =soul= *Purusha*). *Agni* is one of these elements. It is responsible for production of form (*roopa*) and sense organ of vision. (Raina, 1991).

*Charaka Samhita* also states - the life span, complexion, vitality, good health, enthusiasm, plumpness, glow, vital essence, lustre, heat and life breaths are derived from thermogenetic process (fire in the body)... when this fire is extinguished the man dies. (*Charaka Samhita* 1949).

Hippocrates also said that an unlimited number of humors are found in the body. When their blend is perfect, the man is healthy. However, if wrong nutrition or some other mistake upsets the balance or if some humor is drained from the body - disease results. A driving force operates to generate humor from food i.e. innate heat based at left ventricle (*Siegrist, 1987*).

There are references on similar lines from the West also. One of the drawings of Leonardo da Vinci shows heursection of a couple in coitus. It showed two channels in the penis - one stemming from bladder and the other from spinal cord (thought to be the source of semen). A channel was also shown between uterus and nipple- milk was believed to be comprised of menstrual blood since lactating women were seen to be amenorrhic (*The Lancet, 1999*).

*Dhat* or passage of white discharge with urine in men is a much dreaded symptom among Indian males so much so that Indian psychiatrists have defined a separate "dhat

syndrome” characterized by specific features. In India, semen is considered to be a power giving precious fluid in human body which needs to be conserved. *Dhat* has been said to be equivalent to spermatorrhea or spermaturia in allopathic medicine. In *Vedic* literature, *Dhat* is believed to be the essence of life and is said to be the most verifying element of body. (Sethi & Manchanda, 1979). Its passage with urine is considered to lead to seepage of power from the victim, who becomes weak.

Our respondents told that this occurs in women also. Similar views were reported in the study by Bang and Rang (1994). Leucorrhoea is also called as *Dhat* in India. As one of the respondent told, “In a woman with vaginal discharge, *Jaraseem* (sperms/micro organisms) are finished and these pass out (are excreted out) of the body with *Dhat*... the woman becomes weak and her desire (for sex) is lessened or finished...” Greeks also believed that men and women both secrete semen. When the two mix in sexual intercourse the semen is kept in the womb and pregnancy results (Siegrist, 1987).

*Dhat roga* is said to lower one’s sexual potency. Some men ascribed dietary aetiology to *Dhat* (consumption of hot things) e.g. “consumption of maize - flour *chapati* leads to *Dhat*” or “too much tea leads to *Dhat*.” Charaka also mentioned that all ills of the body arise from addiction to urban dietary... this leads to depletion of semen. (Sethi & Manchanda, 1979).

Semen (precious water) was seen to be a source of strength and cheerful disposition. ‘Heat’ was told as the causative factor for seepage of this precious water out of the body as vaginal discharge. As one of our respondent said. “Intake of hot things leads to *Garmi* (heat) which causes vaginal discharge... It leads to weakness... it also causes low birth weight ...since it is the water which gives strength... once water is removed through discharge... the strength is drained. Such women’s faces are pale...otherwise even simple diet (*sukhi roti*) is enough to maintain good health”.

Now, this line of thinking is in consonance with the *Vedic/Ayurvedic* concept of diet and heat. As per this concept semen is the ultimate seventh stage distillation/refinement of food, starting with conversion of food into chyle (*Rasa*). Thus, loss of a few drops of semen is considered to be an enormous loss of power. Since heat is the essential prerequisite for conversion of successive stages of food - assimilation, any

excess of heat (acquired through consumption of hot food) is said to be the cause of excessive production and discharge of semen. And since radiance is the essence of semen it is said that loss of semen leads to lustrelessness on the faces of people who suffer from 'Dhat syndrome'.

Like our study, *Bang and Rang (1994)* reported that women strongly believed that with white discharge the general health of the women deteriorates gradually. Like their study, our respondents also told that weakness may be both the cause and as well as the effect of vaginal discharge.

*Bang and Rang (1994)* also mentioned that the ascribed relationship of white discharge with weakness by respondents was due to their belief in *Ayurvedic* medical system which gives special importance to semen.

Celibacy and *Brahmacharya* are valued as having supreme quality in traditional Indian thinking. In our study also, virtues of celibacy were quoted from *Hanuman* and *Bhishma pitamah* were told to have exceptional powers because of celibacy.

White vaginal discharge (leucorrhoea) was considered to lead to many complications/adverse health effects in women as described by our respondents.

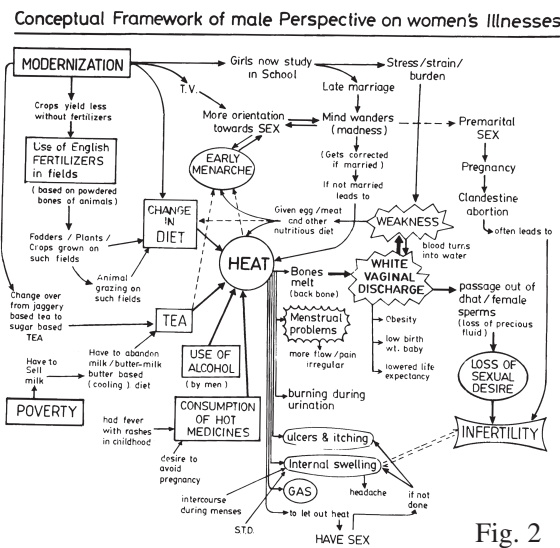


Fig. 2

“A woman with leucorrhoea will not develop a desire for a man... such woman is like a mule who can not conceive... women with leucorrhoea are infertile.”

Other responses pertaining to vaginal discharge were - “Leucorrhoea leads to obesity....” and “White discharge causes weakness of fetus. It also leads to lethargy and weakness”.

Melting of bones as a cause (as well as effect) of white discharge was told as a predominant factor causing weakness. *Bang and Rang (1994)* also mentioned that pain and aches in body were perceived by their respondents to be due to dissolving of bones. This linkage of melting of bones with vaginal discharge can also be explained by dietary concept of *Ayurveda* where bone is an intermediary product between chyle and semen. Further, semen is equated with vaginal discharge.

*Patel et al (1994)* also reported weakness, family planning operation or ulcer as the cause of vaginal discharge as told by their respondents. Eating of hot foods was also told by them as one of the reason of white discharge.

In our study also one of the male respondents told - “Some women have too much ‘heat’ within their bodies”. This ‘heat’ was said to be communicable as indicated by the views of our respondents - “women’s heat down below is more than that of men. Women’s heat leads to men’s heat.” Various gynecological symptoms were ascribed to heat... “Heat leads to yellow urine & burning during micturition...” Other statements made by respondents pertaining to heat were-

“Heat leads to loss of manhood in children” ...As per the *Vedic* concepts body heat helps in conversion of food into chyle... and ultimately into semen. Excess heat implies excess production and discharge of semen i. e. loss of manhood.

“Heat affects eyes...”. This statement is linked to the fact that fire is also said to form the organ of vision as per the *Vedic* concept. Some of the respondents said, “In women, heat leads to menorrhagia.”

Again, blood is an intermediary product between chyle and semen. Body heat helps in conversion of chyle into blood. Blood as per the *Vedic* concept, is directed to



menstrual blood every month. Excess heat implies more production and diversion of blood leading to menorrhagia. Other responses on this aspects were

“Some women get such illnesses when they take hot medicines to avoid pregnancy...”

“Heat leads to melting of bones.... it leads to leucorrhea”. (bone is an intermediary product between chyle and semen).

“ Heat leads to internal swelling. It gets well on its own... it leads to headache... intake of smoke of *Ajwain* (*Tachyspermum ammi* ) gives relief.”

Heat means sexual disease... due to shyness the problem aggravates... if heat is not let out in time (through sex) gas goes to one's head... leading to mental illness. Many doctors advise that girl should be married by 20 years of age... at such age the problem gets corrected even without medicines” (i.e. marital sex is a judicious and legitimate outlet for excess body heat thus averting problems of gas etc.).

### **Western Reference on Heat**

Comparable to the *Vedic* line of thought - there is somewhat similar evidence from writings of western medieval authors on sex and childbirth - “...men and women shared a common physiology... but in perfect (male) and flawed (female) version... A women's body was deficient in vital heat (cf. *Vedic* line of thinking as revealed through responses of one of our respondents - “... women's heat is more than men's heat”) which allowed the male to refine into semen (i.e. body heat helps in formation of semen... and discharge of semen = loss of body heat).

“The surplus blood which women shed in menstruation... likewise women produce milk instead of semen (cf. *Vedic* line of thinking... blood diverted to breast milk and to menstrual blood).”

“..... women are leaky vessels... (menstruating, crying, lactating)... menstruation was polluting... women are so full of venom in their time of menstruation that they poison animals by their glance... they infect children in their cradle... they spot the cleanest mirror... whenever man have sexual intercourse with them they are made

leprous... and sometimes cancerous” (cf. one of our respondent’s views “... man’s body is made up of gold. Women is a packet of poison. One woman can spoil 20 men.”) (*Porter, 1999*)

### Diet

Following statement by one of our male respondents gave an impression that common perception among ruralites in India is that, earlier, the problem of vaginal discharge used to be less severe. Change in diet has been implicated as a causative factor for aggravation of the problems of vaginal discharge. “It is seen more now a days since the diet has changed.... earlier women used to take milk/*lassi* (butter milk)... i. e. diet with cooling effect. Now they take tea ... and even that is taken with refined sugar (rather than raw jaggery)... it leads to heat ...which causes this problem...”

*Bang and Rang (1994)* also reported that all of their respondents said that excessive ‘heat’ bursting out from inside the body was the commonest cause of white discharge. Like their study our respondents also told that some women and some men had excessive ‘heat’ in their bodies. They transmit it to their respective partners through sexual intercourse. Both studies reported that increased sexual desire leads to increased heat in the body. They reported that consumption of hot foods leads to ‘heat’. Our study revealed these hot foods to be tea, chilly, pickles and alcohol.

Another male respondent in our study linked the passage of white discharge (*Dhat*) in urine to alcohol intake.

“ I used to take a lot of alcohol... I used to have yellowish urine and had white discharge per urethra (*Dhat*). It got corrected when I stopped taking alcohol.” Our respondents also told that if a man indulged in sexual intercourse with a woman after taking alcohol - the resultant heat generated in the male would be transmitted to female and will cause *Garmi*.

In consonance with dietary aetiology of *Dhat* the respondents told about its dietary therapy during a focus group discussion conducted by us - “use of coriander (*Dhania*) cures *Dhat*... one gets cooled down after one month course of *Dhania*. One of my

friends took this regime. After one month, he got too much cooled down (implying impotence)". The group had a hearty laugh at that joke.

In *Bang, and Rang (1994)* study, dietary aetiology of white discharge was told in the form of consumption of polished rice, milled chilli powder and milled wheat flour. Contrasted to this role of milling, respondents in our study ascribed use of English fertilizers (based on powdered bone of animals) as the causative factor.

"Compared to earlier times.... use of fertilizers has increased into eight times..."

"Most of the health problems in general and women's health problems in particular are due to the English fertilizers used in the fields.... it is bad for health... such fertilizers lead to heat... use of animal bones in making such fertilizers also leads to many problems. Consumption of food products obtained from animals grazing on fodder in field where such fertilizers are used also leads to problems like vaginal discharge or menstrual problems....".

As documented abundantly with reference to *Ayurvedic* concept of health and disease, considerable a dietary fixation' was observed in the thinking of our male respondents as far as gynecological disorders are concerned - "Consumption of heavy/ healthy diet (*Khurak*) leads to heat in men. It leads to boils on body down below. To avoid this.... it is necessary to go to women.... the body bursts.... leading to boils/ ulcers down below since a lot of heat accumulates inside....". Another respondent said -

"Heat results from consuming hot food.... it leads to excessive bleeding. Internal diseases (gynecological disease) also lead to heat...."

"Such diseases are due to carelessness of women... they drink too much tea.... it leads to discharge and ulcers down below." One male respondent said -

"sometimes there is burning during micturition when I consume *Jimikand* (yam).... it cause 'heat' ".

Another said -

"I had burning micturition.... I stopped taking tea... and got all right....."

Men were also aware about communicability of sexually transmitted diseases. To prevent these, they advocated abstinence -

“Those ladies who go to many men get such diseases.”

“If you get some infection from some lady... you should abstain from your wife.... such diseases spread from women to men.... and from men to women.”

Another one advised -

“Excessive heat leads to spoiling of blood... it leads to boils near urethral meatus... if a woman has some disease.... don't go to her... get her treated from a good doctor.... when she gets well.... you may go to her...”

Banishment of men with history of discharge per urethra has also been advocated in the book of the Canon laws of the Jews i.e. *the Talmud* (George and Stebbins, 1968).

Many respondents were of the view that age at menarche has changed to a lower age over a period of time. Reason of early menarche nowadays were told as “girls consume excess of sour things (pickles, chutney), excess of tea...egg/meat...use of English fertilizers in fields, use of hot medicines... heat of body, weakness, TV, *Kalyug* (bad times ) also lead to early menarche”.

Regular and adequate (flow of ) menses were told as features of good health in a lady. There is a prevailing belief in rural India that menstrual blood is dirty and heat containing so it should come out of the body i.e. heat should come out. If the flow is less, it means there is some problem.... since dirty blood and heat is retained inside. One of our male respondent told-

“Scanty menses lead to pain. If menstrual flow is less... it means some illness is there ...”. *George (1994)* in her study in a Bombay slum also reported that the women considered menstrual blood as dirty and that inadequate flow lead to obesity.... since dirty blood was retained inside. One of our respondents said -

“If everything is OK inside.... the menstruation will come on time....”

One of the respondents told, "Intercourse during menses leads to swelling of uterus... this leads to venereal diseases (*Gupta roga*)".

Another respondent linked diet with menstruation "Use of pickles and sour things leads to painful and heavy menses."

Another one told about vulnerability of women to illness during menstruation. "A woman's body is weak and vulnerable during menstruation days. Strenuous work during menses leads to illness...."

#### **Changing times.....**

Unrepressed sexual desire, particularly in women.... due to modernization was seen as the root cause of many of women's ailments as one of our respondents said - "madness of girls is corrected after marriage.... earlier, a lady helping in abortion used to be jailed.... now even unmarried girls commonly resort to abortion...."

Another middle aged man said "we are passing through bad times.... if a girl of marriageable age is not married.... she may adopt a wrong path.... then pregnancy has to be aborted... following this some other diseases usually develop.... one may not even be able to conceive throughout her life...."

One of the respondents blamed TV for these changes. Excess heat (*Garmi*) has lowered the life expectancy .... TV has diverted kids minds towards sex. It leads to illness... indulgence in sex at an early age leads to diseases. If heat is less... mind will not be diverted towards wrong deeds/things.... .

Thus , our study findings indicate that the views of the Indian adult males from rural north India towards women's illnesses are culturally steeped in *Vedic/Ayurvedic* concepts of diet, health and disease. Their views are an integral part of little tradition of vast India rural populace. Any contemplated change in these views should be in consonance with overall change in the culture and society of rural India.

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## सारांश

स्त्री की बीमारियों के बारे में भारतीय पुरुषों का दृष्टिकोण - स्वास्थ्य सम्बन्धी वेदिक और हिन्दू पौराणिक धारणाओं से इसके सम्बन्ध पर एक खोज

- अमरजीत सिंह

प्रत्येक सभ्यता में स्वास्थ्य और व्याधियों के बारे में सोचने की एक अलग-अलग धारणाएँ होती हैं। यह स्वाभाविक ही है कि औरतों की बीमारियों के बारे में भारतीय ग्रामीण पुरुषों के विचार यहाँ की संस्कृति के अनुकूल ही पाए गए। वर्ष 1996 - 1999 के दौरान किए गए एक आई. सी. एम. आर. द्वारा प्रायोजित एक सर्वेक्षण में ऐसा ही पाया गया। गरमी औरतों की बीमारियों की एक मुख्य कारण बताया गया है। आहार को इसका कारण बताया गया है। आहार एवं गरमी के बारे में वेदिक, आयुर्वेदिक की विचार धारणाएँ और सर्वेक्षण में पुरुषों का विचार इस लेख में बताया गया है। इस तरह की उल्लेखों को पश्चिमी देशों का साहित्य से भी लिया गया है। वैदिक विचार धारणाओं से यह पता चलता है कि रक्त और अस्थियाँ आहार की जीर्ण प्रक्रिया में अन्नरस और शुक्र के मध्यस्थ परिणाम हैं। सर्वेक्षण के आधार पर पुरुषों का विचार से योनी के द्वारा द्रव (शुक्र के समान माना है) निकलता है। श्वेतप्रदर एक प्रमुख बीमारी की रूप में स्पष्ट होता है। यह विचार धारणाएँ उन पुरुषों का सभ्यता को प्रतिबिम्बित करता है। इस में किसी तरह के बदलाव लाने की सभ्यताओं का भी गणन में शामिल करना होगा।

