

Health Beliefs and Protection Practices in the Hindu Community in Portugal

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Abstract

Healthcare plays a major role in migrant communities. Initially subject to drastic changes in their lives, they are subsequently confronted with significant differences in access to healthcare and with practices they do not know and do not identify with. The concept of health itself is called into question, causing incomprehension and insecurity that lead to less secure options and a distance from the healthcare offered by the host society. At the same time, the health beliefs and practices transmitted by their parents and grandparents, despite being present, are questioned, creating imbalances at physical, mental, emotional, social and cultural levels. The Hindu community residing in Portugal is able to articulate ancestral health-related practices, inherited from their ancestors, with practices advocated in the host society in a continuous symbiosis that enhances the alliance of empirical and scientific knowledge. The use of traditional health and protection practices contributed to the maintenance of the Hindu cultural identity in a migratory context, consolidating the connection to India, to the ancestors and showing the respect and pride for being part of an ancestral culture. The present study seeks to identify beliefs and protective practices used by Hindus residing in Portugal and to recognize how these beliefs and practices are perpetuated throughout the generations. It is a qualitative study in which semi-structured interviews, film observations and photographic observations were conducted, directed at the health and protection practices carried out in the temples and in the homes of Hindu families. The data collected in the interviews was subjected to content analysis and, through the images collected, practices related to health and protection were analysed. The results obtained reveal that Hindus initially resort to the practices transmitted by their ancestors in solving simpler health problems, demonstrating a strong connection with the culture of origin and respect and appreciation for the wisdom of the older members of the community. Intergenerational transmission is done informally through observation, the teaching of older elements and participation in rituals in a mutual recognition of ancient wisdom and the adaptive potential of younger people. It is mainly women who dominate health knowledge and practices and popular medicine.

Keywords: Health Beliefs; Health Practices; Hindus in Portugal; Immigration; Health and Culture

Introduction

Health as a fundamental value assumes a prominent role in the lives of individuals, and more generally, of a community. The balance between its various aspects is responsible for welfare and, consequently, for social, political and economic development. Cultural aspects are also decisive in understanding the concept of health/disease, in the relationship of proximity and trust established with the health

professionals and in access to healthcare. This reality has come to the attention of several researchers [4,9,11-14] who have developed work with several immigrant communities analysing the main health problems of these communities, the linguistic and communicational barriers and the way they perceive popular health practices transmitted by their ancestors. In a society where globalization and migratory paths are unlimited, valuing health as a universal good must be defended and protected. The knowledge of the person in a holist perspective, with a cultural aspect that integrates beliefs, practices and behaviours that arise from their experience and that change according to their experience and perception, constitutes the starting point for the recognition of health as everyone's right. The Hindu community residing in Portugal is a living example of the association between two distinct cultures, the culture of origin and the host culture, where respect for the singularities of each culture overrides the attempt to level them. The analysis of the identity elements of Hindu culture, which are manifested in terms of language, religion, gastronomy, clothing and different practices, contributed to a deep knowledge of the values and principles of this culture, enhancing mutual learning and sharing knowledge that enriched and brought together these two cultures. The recognition of health practices practiced by Hindus as enhancing health and well-being extended to the Hindu culture itself, which was reinforced and valued by Portuguese society.

Materials and Methods

Health-related beliefs and practices are associated with individual and collective representations, subjective interpretations, memories and teachings passed down through generations. Their knowledge presupposes an in-depth study, in which the qualitative methodology analysed the concept of health and identified the health practices used by the Hindu community in solving their health problems. The way in which the intergenerational transmission of health beliefs is carried out allows us to analyse the evolution of these beliefs and the way they are being adapted to the reality of each person. 60 semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals from the Hindu community who speak Portuguese, and film and photographic observations of the practices carried out in the temples and in the homes of Hindu families were analysed. Most of the interviewees are female, which corroborates the role of women as caregivers and guardians of Hindu tradition and culture.

Initially, an in-depth documentary research was carried out aimed at Hindu culture, identifying the most significant identity elements, such as religion, history, migratory paths and culture. In order to experience the Hindu cultural reality, there was a need to participate in lectures and workshops, and in cultural activities, observing gestures and behaviours and assigning meanings to the observed practices. After this initial period, interviews were conducted with experts from the community, followed by interviews which were carried out through snowball sampling. The data collected was subject to discourse analysis. Subsequently, film and photographic observations were initiated. The images collected were analysed, considering the defined categories, paying particular attention to practices and gestures related to health, as well as the transmission of these practices to younger people.

Results and Discussion

The wealth of Hindu culture is undeniable. Its antiqueness allows it to accumulate knowledge and practices over time that translate into behaviours and values that are perpetuated through the generations. The multiplicity of gods, mantras and practices are fused in the simplicity of the values that Hinduism defends, considering the human being as the essential element of life, in its individuality and in its entirety. The egocentric perspective resulting from an interactive dynamic between the body, the mind and the spirit allows a deep introspection, which contributes to the transcendence of the human being as a unique being, placing it in a continuous connection with the world and with others. Transposing this significance to health, the human being must be responsible for the care of his body, mind and spirit, and inherently responsible for the health of the other and the community he is a part of. The beliefs and health practices that are being internalized reveal a constant concern with individual and collective health, resorting to religious and popular practices in the prevention and treatment of diseases. In a migratory context, the Hindu community residing in Portugal adopted some Westernized

practices, valuing their speed and reasoning. The bond created facilitates the integration and the understanding of a new reality, where science overlaps tradition, but where culture does not retreat in the face of knowledge.

The Hindu community in Portugal and health

The revolution that took place on April 25, 1974 gave rise to different migratory movements, and one of the most significant was the arrival in Portugal of communities that inhabited the Portuguese colonies. This journey, carried out in the Hindu community, initially by the male elements, later joined by the rest of the family [1,5], presented evident difficulties in terms of the language, religion, gastronomy, climate and the very dynamics that Hindu families had created [1,4,7,10,12-14]. The obstacles encountered in accessing healthcare, ignorance and the very communicational and linguistic barriers imposed the use of health practices that they knew and dominated in solving their own health problems. The knowledge acquired by observing mothers and other older women in the community has been applied to less serious situations such as fever, muscle pain, breathing problems, gastro-intestinal disorders, ensuring the continuation of these practices [15] and postponing the visits to health services. The spirit of cohesion in the Hindu community allowed a sharing of knowledge, identifying people in the community who had a greater command of these cultural practices and whom they used whenever necessary. Little by little, the Hindu community was integrating some Western practices, in order to enhance their health condition.

Health practices

The concern with health is a constant in the life of Hindus. This concern manifests itself at two levels: at a preventive level through the daily pujas that are performed early in the morning or through meditation and performing yoga exercises; or at the healing level, through teas, mixtures of herbs and spices that have medicinal properties and help to treat or at least relieve symptoms. In daily pujas, performed in front of the domestic mandir after the morning bath, a particular blessing is requested, to protect against adversities, such as illness, suffering or poverty [3]. This relationship of proximity and esteem that Hindus seek to maintain with the gods through good conduct, worship and daily recitation of mantras, the offering of flowers and food contribute to the gods being satisfied and benefiting those who remember them. Yoga and meditation allow an elevation of the soul and a purification of the body leading to the enhancement of the human essence. Although Hindus want the disease to be removed, it is understood as a consequence that results from this life or others and that we have to go through. Acceptance of changes in health status does not affect the use of Ayurvedic medicines used to relieve symptoms and to enhance the individual's health response. The effectiveness of this medicine has been proven by the fact that Hindus use it regularly. The use of saffron for strengthening of the immune system or for the treatment of feverish conditions, the wide use of fennel to facilitate digestion or even the option for vegetarian food, in order not to carry the karma of other animals [2], contribute to overcome the disease. Although this knowledge is common sense, women, in their role as caregivers and family unifiers, assume the domain of health practices, taking care of the health of the whole family. The flexibility, the ability to adapt and the very essence that result from being a woman allows them to assert themselves as experts in care during motherhood, child care and practices that help overcome the disease. Some Hindu women have small notebooks, inherited from family ancestors, with written practices and guidelines for quick cures and mantras considered to be effective in alleviating certain symptoms.

Protection practices

The popular and the religious converge in an immensity of beliefs and practices that are being strengthened simultaneously. These beliefs are not supported by scientific evidence, but are based on empirical knowledge and people's experience. The Hindu culture, rich in its symbolism, is characterized by the existence of countless mantras and gods that protect the human being, the individual, the person itself in a convergence between the physical, psychological and spiritual aspects. Each person's belief leads to a personal interpretation of each teaching and the grandeur it places on each gesture. If there are rituals that are trivialized and are commonly visible, there are

practices that are not disclosed, nor are they shown to external elements of the family, at the risk of decreasing their effectiveness and prolonging bad energies. In this way, it is in the privacy of the houses that these rituals are performed, often in an isolated room, away from incredulous and disbelieving eyes.

Health as an element that enhances wealth and well-being can be the target of envy and bad thoughts by others. Often this envy is unintentional, being introduced in ordinary conversations as a habitual reference to the person's general state. However, the intention to highlight a certain characteristic such as appearance, work, material goods or family cohesion can trigger less pure feelings that attract bad energy. As a precaution, Hindus adopt protection practices that aim to protect the home and all who live in it, as well as the protection of the individual. Protection practices are based on cultural beliefs and representations and are usually passed on from generation to generation, in the privacy of the family [14]. By themselves, they constitute a strong family identity element, where gestures, beliefs, representations and practices are adapted to the reality that the family experiences at the moment, reinventing symbols and bringing old memories and behaviours to the present.

Protection practices used in Hindu houses

The home of the Hindus is considered as a place of retreat to which everyone returns after a day of work, but it is also a social place that provides for the interaction, the relationship and the learning between all the elements, new and old, sharing teachings, memories and new learning [10]. The particularity of a joint experience brings undeniable benefits in family growth and development, increasing cohesion, solidarity and instilling fundamental values of Hinduism. Others can envy happiness and family unity so most Hindu houses have a lemon with seven peppers or a black pot or jug hanging at the entrance that catches the eye and looks away from the person entering the house. Also, the incense used together with the domestic mandirs allows a purification of the house and of all those who inhabit it, attracting health and a life free of obstacles. The existence of representative images of gods, associated with wisdom and luck as Ganesha or Vishnu, responsible for maintaining the dharma, that is, a dignified and just behaviour, when they are the objects of pure and sincere devotion, protect and guide family members. Although these gods are part of the most known gods in Hinduism, most families have a deity, that is, a less representative goddess but with whom they have a close connection, resorting to her whenever there is a disease in the family or a situation that requires quick resolution.

Individual protection practices

The person as a social being who establishes connections with others and with the world can be the object of envy or greed. The belief in the evil eye led to the adoption of practices, mantras and the use of objects capable of warding off bad energies, generalizing the use of protective elements in Hindus and valuing people who know how to ward off the evil eye, believing they have a closer connection to protective gods. Usually, they are the oldest members of the family, and in particular women, who are responsible for the perpetuation of these protection practices and considered as wiser, with more experience and for having a greater inner strength.

Cajal

Hindu culture is rich in colours, which are always present in religious festivities, in saris and tunics and in the spices that season the food of this community. The strong and vivid colours attract attention and convey feelings of happiness, wealth and joy. In contrast, in Hinduism, the colour black is a colour associated with the lowest condition of being [17], translated by inertia, passivity and ignorance. It is little used because it has the property of absorbing everything, feelings and qualities, whether they are positive or negative. This characteristic makes it the colour of choice for protection practices that ward off the evil eye, assimilating bad energies and retaining bad thoughts.

The use of *cajal* (black powder) is one of the most common practices in the Hindu community and is usually used in the eyes. This powder, handcrafted by older members of the community using ghee and a silver spoon, is currently purchased in Indian stores, making it easier to use. The handmade preparation of the *cajal* is reserved for babies and young children, who are considered as more fragile beings and susceptible to impure feelings [6,7,16]. Its black colour deflects the attention of people with bad thoughts, who are restrained from a less sincere admiration. The greatest vulnerability of children results from their innocence and fragility and little capacity for defence, being considered an easy target for admiration that can trigger the evil eye. In Portugal, mothers put the *cajal* in their children's eyes, especially when they leave home, go to a festival and are more exposed to external influences. It appears that this powder is used in a more disguised way, behind the ears, on the scalp or on the palms of the hands, this practice being justified by the ignorance of the host population and the strangeness of the use of this black powder in a child as a mean of protection.

Bracelets and threads

Hindu children use ornaments as bracelets, earrings or threads since birth. They are usually made of a precious metal, like gold and have the meaning of light, immortality and truth. At the same time, amulets, bracelets or black threads are used, complementing the *cajal* and have the same intention, to ward off harmful eyes from the body. The combination of these two colours, black and gold, represents an antithesis where the exuberance and richness evidenced are broken by the black colour that looks away from that same exuberance.

“Remove the evil eye”

Envy, greed or any other bad thinking are sometimes strong, so it is necessary to resort to practices to ward off these bad energies. Although they are not well regarded by most Hindus, they occur in the privacy of their homes and are not widely publicized so as not to attract more harmful energy. There are specific days to remove the evil eye, considered to be more conducive. The use of salt as a purifying element and peppers (in variable numbers) is the most used resource. The only people who can remove the evil eye are the ones “who know”, that is, the ones who have a great inner strength that allows that evil eye not to be absorbed.

Child health

Children are considered a blessing for the woman, but also for the whole family. They are the personification of purity, goodness and authenticity, and as a result are permeable to bad energies, diseases and the evil eye. Their health must be preserved from the beginning by adopting protective practices that maintain the balance between the body, mind and spirit. The initial dependence of children requires that the responsibility for these three aspects be attributed to parents and grandparents, despite the fact that the whole family is responsible for the child's well-being. This responsibility manifests itself through advice and offers to the mother and baby, in the form of food, gestures or through conversations that make them happy. The spiritual aspect is never neglected and is formalized with the presentation of the baby in the temple and later continued with daily prayers in front of the *mandir* of each family. In these prayers, protection and health are requested for the child and for him to have a healthy growth and development and to grow respecting the values and principles of Hinduism. The idea of continuity, transference and renewal is very present in Hinduism, which is why Hindus believe that if a close relative does not have a good conduct, their actions can be reflected in the child causing illness. As previously mentioned, the use of *cajal*, bracelets and black threads that protect from the evil eye is a common practice in Hindu families. Frequent recitation of mantras is another common practice that can be observed in Hindu houses and its function is to help the concentration of the mind, and in the case of children, they constitute a protective shield against suffering, illness and all obstacles. In older children, mantras help to decentralize from the material level by connecting more closely with the spiritual level, helping to build character and affirming qualities such as attention and memory. The association between spiritual practices and festivities is a constant in Hindu culture, looking for coherent and reliable justifications that support gestures and rituals. Folk medicine, in which the Hindu women hold their knowledge and their action, needs no justification,

being reproduced naturally based on memories and beliefs that have become indisputable. It is a homemade medicine, in the literal sense, developed in Hindu houses, and in particular in Hindu kitchens, where plants and condiments play a prominent role. It is common to use ground cloves for toothache, ginger tea for sore throats or the placement of plasters for headaches. The high sensitivity and vulnerability of the children and the rapid evolution of the disease to which they are particularly sensitive, requires a quick application, using plants that help to lower the fever quickly or spices that help in the pains.

The most common health practice related to children in most Hindu homes is the massage. Its realization is attributed exclusively to the older women in the family, or to women specialized in this art, which, through their experience and sensitivity, know what strength to use in the movements and the correct order of the movements. Children's massage has the primary objective of releasing children's movements, working joints and muscles and stimulating circulation, favouring a faster and more harmonious development of the child. In addition to an important moment of interaction, children's massage has important medicinal properties, stimulating the immune and circulatory systems. Indian infant massage is usually performed with the child placed on the woman's legs, who must be sitting on the floor. This proximity position favours bodily, kinaesthetic and visual communication and allows the child to look at the woman who is massaging her and this woman to be able to interpret the child's gestures and behaviours, continuously assessing whether the child tolerates them or not. In a migratory context, it is observed that many of the massages are performed with the child placed on a bed, with some distance and adaptation to a new reality and social and cultural context.

The infinity of popular beliefs related to childcare leads to a diversity of health and protection practices that are dispersed, and that, due to ignorance or incredulity, are not verbalized by the caregiving mothers and grandparents.

Conclusion

The knowledge of the particularities related to the health of each community is essential for the prevention and early diagnosis of problems, but above all for a better referral, reception, and effective integration of these communities, where the immigrant takes an active role in the promotion of their health and in the health of their community. The underestimation of the health practices of migrant communities needs to be addressed and can be a link of mutual closeness and learning.

The Hindu community residing in Portugal found a balance between the traditional and popular health practices of their culture of origin and those used in the host society, using the former in situations of less severe illness and for a quick resolution of symptoms. The use of popular healthcare practices, through the use of plants or spices, is based on Ayurvedic medicine, considered to be one of the oldest in the world. It is mainly through the memories of parents and grandparents, by observing and using these practices that the younger members of the community internalize these knowledge's and practices despite showing some disbelief in them and relying more on Western medicine. The departure from the identity beliefs and healthcare practices of the Hindu culture, which can be seen in the younger generations, can lead to a lack of understanding and cultural discontinuity that refers to the abandonment of traditional practices and the adoption of practices considered more modern and prestigious, in an attempt to get closer to the host society. Knowledge about the beliefs and health practices of migrant communities must be documented, transmitted and disseminated, not only within the community itself, but outside it in an attempt to promote and preserve the cultural identity of the individual and the group and to generally enrich the community.

The development of effective healthcare policies and programs requires considering the social, economic, cultural and health realities of individuals, families and communities, as well as promoting access to healthcare services. It is also important to consider the representations, beliefs and practices of health and protection of individuals and groups and to understand their cultural logic and psychological function.

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