Chapter VI

Summary and Conclusions

The beliefs and practices of people regarding health and illness are rarely arbitrary. They are grounded in observations, interpretation, and emphases of experienced reality (Worthman 1995). The study of indigenous medical systems is of great theoretical and practical interest. Besides enriching medical and pharmaceutical science, it provides a systematic and comparative understanding of different ways of conceiving and treating illnesses. Research in this field should be considered with some urgency now that industrialization, technological development threaten to extinguish traditional therapeutic knowledge and natural resources. In addition to its obvious interest for science, a systematic understanding of pharmacopoeia and traditional therapies, can contribute to the well-being of indigenous populations. It can be incorporated into planning public health policies for the regions they inhabit.

Indigenous treatments, in non-western societies, often combine various medications, herbal or animal extracts, and other therapeutic actions of psychosocial or psychosomatic and/or physical nature. The rites, chants, healing rituals, amulets, prayers and worshiping of deities also form part of the therapeutic processes. This complexity of healing acts is not always taken into account by the bio-medical practitioners and they look down upon the indigenous medical practices.

It is argued that scientific medicine is superior to non-western medicine. However, an important limitation of the western medical paradigm when it is used to explain the working of non-western medical traditions, as Young (1976), points out, is it uses only one sense of the term 'work'. That is, the achievement of 'hoped for' results from the therapy. But, with this limitation it is not possible to understand many of the disease concepts of indigenous medical systems without also taking into account the second sense of 'work'. That is, indigenous therapies are not only means of curing sicknesses but, equally important, they are also means by which specific kinds of sickness are defined and given culturally.
identifiable forms. It is incorrect to say that non-western medicine, does not ‘work’, at least when viewed through the lens of its believers. In defining ‘work’, Young, further makes the differentiation between what people hope will happen, and producing what people expect may happen. That is: treatment, as hoped and expected, restores the patient to health and sometimes, it does not. But treatment has ‘worked’ in the sense that, it has met the expectations of family and friends as to what should be done and it has perhaps produced expected clinical evidence that the diagnosis has been correct. Further, whether or not it has enabled to bring a cure, even in case of failure, the failure indicates the direction of the next resort to be opted in order to restore health.

Understanding health and illness among Kumbri Marathi leads to the understanding of not only the beliefs and practices about illness-causation but also, a great deal about their worldview. For them, dealing with ill-health is a continuum; from a point which is bejār to sik or roga and corresponding resorts to various measures to restore health. In the process of understanding this continuum, one also comes to learn about preventive measures, in the form of rituals, food restrictions, and religious practices.

Health among Kumbri Marathi, is not only affected adversely by the conditions within the person's physiology but also by external factors like climate, food, on a natural level (equilibrium between hot and cold), and by other people on a social level (that is in the form of evil eye); deity and spirits on a supernatural level. When illness is supernaturally caused, due to affliction of spirit māru or effect of evil eye, not only will they create physiological problems but also the symptoms present do not respond to treatment provided on a natural level. The presence of the effect itself shows that there is imbalance in the relationship with the ‘supernatural world’. This imbalance may be, owing to the non-observance of taboos or the effect of evil eye. Ill-health conditions are thus caused due to natural and supernatural reasons. Health problems caused due to supernatural reasons are termed as ‘sik’ and those due to natural reasons as ‘roga’.

Etiology, diagnosis, and treatment among Kumbri Marathi are so intricately related to each other that they often overlap with each other. Therefore, they
cannot be understood independently of each other. Etiology guides treatment and in course of diagnosis the suspected etiology changes which in turn, results in a shift in the treatment. Supernatural powers are at the core of ill-health causation and many a time, conditions caused by natural reasons spill over and overlap with the ill-health, caused due to supernatural affliction.

The categorization of ill-health is dependent on the causative factors, and symptoms, and they in turn guide the course of treatment. The label attached to the condition, is crucial in order to understand why a particular line of treatment is sought for a particular ill-health condition. The minor ailments, whether supernaturally or naturally caused, are referred to as bejär. It is neither a healthy state nor an ill-health condition. Bejär may not necessarily result in either sik or roga. Or it may also result in sik or roga, in spite of seeking treatment. Bejär can be said to be an initial stage of any ill-health condition. Therefore, labels are indicators of what sort of ill-health condition a person is suffering from. This is crucial, because it indicates the perceptions about the cause and the next course of action people are likely to take. But in modern medicine there is uniform labeling irrespective of the cause of the condition perceived by the people. As a result, an outsider observing the treatment seeking behavior of Kumbri Marāthi may find it difficult to find a pattern.

The shifts in treatment indicates that up to a point in the treatment seeking, one may consider a condition to be naturally caused (when the treatment being given is natural), but when one has tried out all resorts, the explanation is sought at the supernatural level. Beyond a certain limit, which varies from disease to disease, the cause 'becomes' supernatural in origin. People find it essential to give an explanation for the way in which the condition is caused and is responding to the treatment not only to reduce the level of anxiety but also to resort to alternative measures. This explanation is derived from the explanatory model of diseases of the people.

The natural and supernatural forces not only act in isolation but also act in a combined interplay of two or more factors. The aim of the resorts is to restore health. In this process, indigenous medical practices play a predominant role.
Modern medicine is, in most cases, a secondary resort or a complementary resort. This is due to their faith in the healing powers of the indigenous medical system—natural as well as supernatural treatments. This is reflected in their expectations that modern treatment has to heal quickly. That one injection or a couple of tablets should cure the person of his ill-health condition.

'Supernatural forces' are dominant in the indigenous medical system of Kumbri Marāthi etiology, diagnosis, and treatment. In the supernatural realm, the spirits can be seen on four levels: individual level, lineage segment level and, lineage level and community level. On all levels, it is the individual on whom the effect is found. The spirits act as a means of directing and controlling social behavior. They either help the people directly as in the case of patulachemaru, tantri, marirav or rangole or indirectly control the behavior through afflictions of various kinds. Some of the malevolent spirits that affect frequently are chali, challi, hennugole gandugole devati, and murchi. Most frequent illnesses occurring as a result of affliction of malevolent spirits is fever and body pain.

The diagnosis of ill-health is done on the natural level, at two levels: individual, and social (natural) level. On an individual level, the process of defining oneself as being ill can be based on one's own perceptions, on the perceptions of others, or on both. At the level of social environment, the individual seeks advice and diagnosis if he is not able to decide on the individual level or if the self-treatment has not brought about the desired result. Apart from diagnosis on the individual, social level, it also takes place on supernatural level. If there is no cure on all these levels—individual, social and supernatural ultimately, every thing is left to the deities. This is done in two ways, one is, by taking vow with deity and the other is the last resort of leaving everything to the design of the deity. Even when ultimately things are left to the deities, when symptoms become severe, or unbearable, to deal with symptoms present, one resorts to indigenous or modern medicine.

When it is a supernatural power that has caused a particular health problem, this power has to be sought to seek the relief. Supernatural powers are very crucial in the understanding of not only etiology but also, diagnosis and treatment of
Kumbri Marathi because of the belief that most of the health problems are caused due to supernatural powers. Beliefs about the supernatural powers is thus a major theme in the indigenous medical system of Kumbri Marathi.

Apart from the indigenous remedies, people also take certain preventive measures, to promote health and also prevent ill-health. Preventive measures are employed for both natural and supernatural illnesses but the kind of elaboration found in supernatural realm are not found in natural realm. Supernatural powers like spirits, evil eye can affect an individual and cause physiological as well as psychological symptoms. Performance of rituals and festivals, performance of life cycle rituals (sotave, cholangi, kan chonchonche, muny) are all believed to be the preventive measures for ensuring the well-being of the individual. The preventive measures for the naturally caused diseases are more specific to the disease themselves. The preventive measures at supernatural level are meant for the well-being of not only individuals but also of the community.

Sik and roga entail their own treatment seeking behavior. And at times, they overlap and at times they follow an exclusive line of treatment that is, either only natural (indigenous or modern medicine) or supernatural (nota, warding-off evil eye, and tying amulets). The conditions caused by natural reasons are few compared to those caused by supernatural reasons. Apart from purely supernaturally caused symptoms, naturally caused symptoms can also be due to the effect of supernatural. For instance, fever not only is caused due to natural reasons but also can be caused due to supernatural reasons. In the same way, all naturally occurring diseases can be caused by the supernatural powers. In the process of treatment, if the diviner or indigenous medicine man is not able to cure the condition, it is not on the healer who is blamed, but the supernatural powers.

In those settlements where, there is no diviner, treatment begins with home remedies as it does in case of settlement where diviner is present. In case of no cure, modern doctors or the indigenous medicine man is sought. When modern doctor diagnoses and suggests the treatment then, the condition is labeled as roga. If the person has not recovered by the end of specified medication period, then diviner in the nearest settlement is sought to find out the cause. His diagnosis
again may shift the label of the condition as well as treatment. Therefore, diviner plays a crucial role. The only difference in the settlements with and without diviner is that, in settlements where diviner is present, he is sought first and then other options are resorted to. In case diviner is not present, he is resorted to if the condition does not respond to either indigenous or modern medicine.

Further, when the people gather for the performance of notā, by the diviner, it provides the person affected and the family members moral support to deal with the problem. It also provides an opportunity to know from others as to what recourse has to be taken. Thus provides an occasion for commenting, reflecting analyzing, becoming socialized about health, illnesses, diagnosis, treatment, and related beliefs. The participations in notā and notāchekambal help in learning, transmitting and reinforcing health and illness beliefs.

The ‘healing rituals’ whether nota/notačekambał or warding-off evil eye, apart from treating the condition, also provide explanations for the illness in terms of the cultural worldview of the person suffering and those who are concerned about him. The rituals transform the confusion and suspicion of symptoms and signs into a recognizable, culturally identifiable condition. Once, the condition is recognized and labeled the pathway to treatment becomes defined. Thus they provide a standardized ways of explaining and controlling the unknown.

The supernatural diagnosis among Kumbri Marāthī, is not only a process of understanding what has caused the ill-health but also a process of treating it. Once the condition is given a label by diagnosing it on the supernatural level, it acts as a guiding factor to seek further treatment if need be. Thus supernatural powers play a very crucial role in not only etiology but also diagnosis and treatment.

Home remedy is employed as the first resort depending on the symptoms. When it comes to administering home remedies, and for warding-off evil eye, elderly female members of the family provide treatment. In case, this indigenous remedy does not bring the desired effect, the treatment involves either the medicine man or modern medicine purchased in the pharmacy or going to the modern doctor. Modern medicine is taken for quick relief from ill-health. When the symptoms disappear the medication is discontinued. The indigenous healers
like the medicine man and the diviner are not only easily available, but also not expensive in terms of spending money or time. Further, the healers and the affected person share common beliefs regarding etiology and the resort rationale. This helps the affected person and his family to not only deal with the symptoms present but also take corrective action in case of disequilibrium with the supernatural world.

Thus a modest attempt has been made to understand the indigenous medical system of Kumbri Marathi from the people's own perspective. An attempt has also been made to bring forward the chemical composition of the herbal medicines used and found to be effective by Kumbri Marathi. This effort can be an aspect of further research, which can be of immense value to the pharmaceutical knowledge. This study is not just in the direction of understanding the direct cause and effect of herbal medicines and cure of diseases, but also to understand the whole spectrum of resorts and their underlying beliefs in a holistic manner. Such studies in ethnomedicine thus are of enormous significance, not just because they enable to understand the indigenous medical system, but also because they provide meanings to actions of the people; which is of immense value to not only social scientists, but also to public health planners, health professionals and to the pharmaceutical industry. This ethnomedical study has enabled to obtain a better understanding of the life and the worldview of Kumbri Marathi.