

## Folklore and taboos interrelated to Dentistry

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**Abstract :** India, a developing country, faces many challenges in rendering health needs to its countrymen. The influence of culture is seen in every discipline of health and medical practices, and dentistry is no exception. Dentists usually face many myths and other untested beliefs which are passed from one generation to another. Some of these myths had a significant impact on the oral health of the population. Understanding the myths and misconceptions about oral diseases is of prime importance in providing excellent care and health education to both patients and healthy individuals. It is a fact that cultural beliefs are still affecting the oral health of the population. They may reflect a combination of limited knowledge regarding the care are rising dramatically, understanding the myths and misconceptions about oral diseases is important in providing excellent care and health education to both patients and healthy individuals. If community is educated about proper prevention and cure, the myths relating dental concepts will vanish from the society and over all dental health status of the community will improve. Hence the aim of this review is to shed light on oral health related myth and taboos prevailing in our communities.

**Key words:** Myths, False beliefs, Taboos, Dentistry, Culture.

### INTRODUCTION-

India is a developing country, and it faces many changes in delivering oral health needs. The majority of Indian population lives in rural areas<sup>[1]</sup>. India is a vast majority of people who thrive on myths and taboos which are woven around dental and medical science. Most of the time people inherit these myths and hand them over to the next generation. Myths are defined as stories shared by a group of people which are a segment of their cultural identity. They have significant effect on the life of people and their way of living including seeking treatment during illness<sup>[2]</sup>. A myth is commonly held but a false belief, a misconception or a fictitious or imaginary understanding and unquestioned false perspective. It breeds on humans

ignorance and imagination about what he/she does not know<sup>[3]</sup>. Myths are deep seated in the society, so it is difficult to break the chain.

Taboo is a strong social prohibition relating to any area of human activity or social custom that is sacred and forbidden based on moral judgment and religious belief<sup>[4]</sup>. It was found that traditional Indian beliefs and taboos were correlated inversely with preventive dental health behavior in the population<sup>[5]</sup>. Though myth and taboo is seen in every discipline of health and medical practices, and dentistry is no exception. The aim of this review is to shed light on oral health related myth and taboos.

## DENTAL MYTHS AND TABOOS-

Myths are part and parcel of everyone's lives. Gradually with the development of education, taboos and false beliefs may disappear, but still they persist and are commonly encountered. The field of dentistry is not exceptional to these cultural beliefs<sup>[6]</sup>. Following are the various false beliefs, myths related to oral hygiene:

### FALSE BELIEF RELATED TO ORAL HYGIENE-

- **BELIEF:-** Stoppage of brushing due to bleeding gums

**FACT:- It shouldn't be** as it will aggravate the problem by more accumulation of calculus and plaque which further increases inflammation leading to progressive gum disease<sup>[7]</sup>.

- **BELIEF:-** Brushing teeth using finger rather than toothbrush

**Fact:-** Finger can't reach all the tooth surfaces while toothbrushes can reach most of it and can clean better than finger.

- **BELIEF:-** Using neem twigs or charcoal or ashes and salt rather than toothpaste for brushing.

**FACT:-** Charcoal is coarse and salt also is abrasive so usage of such things may lead to abrasion of teeth and may cause damage to Periodontal ligament causing sensitivity. And, use of neem twigs or dattons may cause gingival trauma, though it is better to use for massaging and its antimicrobial and antiplaque property useful to decrease caries activity.

- **BELIEF:-** Flossing harms the gums

**FACT:-** Flossing helps to clean those tooth surfaces where even toothbrush can't reach. Thus it maintains good gingival health too<sup>[8]</sup>.

- **BELIEF:-** Longer and vigorous brushing makes your teeth more clean and white.

**FACT:-** Maximum time spend on brushing your teeth is 2-3 min, increase in duration may lead to attrition, abrasion and damage to gums.

- **BELIEF:-** Poor cleanliness of teeth is the only reason for foul odour or bad breath.

**FACT:-** Main reason for foul odour can be systemic disease or stomach problems/ acidity inspite maintaining the good oral hygiene.

### FICTITIOUS STORY RELATED TO TOOTH DECAY:-

- **BELIEF:-** Caries is caused by the amount of sugar eaten.

**FACT:-** Not only the sugar intake amount but its sticky form or frequent eating habit are the main culprit behind causing caries. On the contrary dental problems can be even worst if oral hygiene is poor even though sugar consumption is too low<sup>[9]</sup>.

- **BELIEF:-** Once restored tooth do not require future treatment.

**FACT:-** If not maintained restored tooth may develop caries again.

- **BELIEVE:-** Worms causes dental caries<sup>[10]</sup>.

**FACT:-** People believe tooth decay is caused by worms and demands to show them after removal of caries due to the fake stories they heard.

### FOLK TALE RELATED TO EXTRACTION-

- **BELIEF:-** Extraction of teeth leads to weakening of eye sight.

**FACT:-** The bone harboring the tooth sockets is different from the eye orbit thus under no circumstance eyesight can be lost by extraction of teeth<sup>[11]</sup>.

### MISCONCEPTION RELATED TO SCALING-

- **BELIEF:-** Complete oral prophylaxis or scaling loosens the teeth.

FACT:-Removal of hard calculus, slight mobility can occur as calculus was binding teeth together, but it disappears as healing of supporting periodontal structures occurs<sup>[12]</sup>.

#### MISBELIEF REGARDING MILK TEETH

- BELIEF:-No treatment required for deciduous dentition or milk teeth. The most widely believed myths about oral health in India are milk teeth need not be cared for because they last only for a few years and these teeth will anyway be replaced by permanent teeth

FACT:-Care of milk teeth is very important, This is not entirely true as early loss of milk teeth will interfere with chewing and affect the child's nutrition, leads to drifting of the adjacent teeth and closure of some of the space that is required for the succeeding permanent teeth to erupt into. Such a loss of space will cause the permanent teeth to erupt in irregular position and result in crowding. In fact it is advised to visit dental clinic when the child is 6 month and also to clean baby's gum pad everyday by gentle massage.

#### FAIRY STORIES :-

- A false belief that worms, present in tooth decay is believed to be removed through ear in some rural areas and this is more convincing to people to belief that worms has been removed.
- To get stronger and more whitish tooth, exfoliated deciduous tooth to bury under soil or under tree or to throw on the top of the roof then in return permanent tooth will erupt straight.

#### DISCUSSION-

India is a vast country with varied cultural, socio-economic and geographical background. Every culture has

its own particular traditions and convictions some of which have a significant impact on oral health of the population. The explanation behind these social convictions and conventional practices are complex and multi-factorial.<sup>[13]</sup>

It was further observed that cultural factors are also deeply involved in matters of personal hygiene, nutrition, immunization and seeking medical care etc<sup>[14]</sup>.

Around a portion of the respondents (44.7%) accept that extraction of upper teeth perniciously influences vision Which was in agreement with that reported by Kumar et al 11 kocher et al and nagraj et al.<sup>[15]</sup> who reported a prevalence of 35.6%, 49.6%, and 52% respectively.

The presence of natal teeth was related with supernatural powers, ill-luck and most of them believed that the child would bring misfortune to the family and would become a witch. These kinds of beliefs are considered to be carried out from the ancestors. It was found that still 38.0% populace believes that there is no need to go to dentist until all the permanent teeth of child erupts, results found in some previous studies<sup>[16]</sup>.

It was found that older age groups have more taboos regarding oral health than younger ones<sup>[17]</sup>.

Most of the subjects think it is better to have artificial set of teeth than to repair the original ones. It may be because of multiple visits for dental treatments and also there is no appointment of dentist at primary health centre level in India. Nearly 46% assume that taking medicine during fasting is correct as in our country it is one of the important taboo and is equally acceptable both in urban as well as rural areas e.g. fasting which may have deleterious impact on health and oral health. When it was asked regarding diseases of oral cavity like cancer, still some people believe that these are due to wrath of gods and goddesses and administration of drugs is still considered harmful for treatment. Whatever may be the reasons for these cultural beliefs and taboos, they definitely have harmful effects on the oral tissues and hence have to be

discouraged. So, dental professionals along with primary health workers and school teachers can play a vital role in creating the awareness and to remove the misconceptions that hinder an individual from seeking dental services.<sup>[18]</sup>

Various dental myth and false perception still lurk in the minds of the population, to discourage the unhealthy practices. It would be prudent to familiarize professionals to understand these myths and beliefs as they act as barriers toward seeking treatment.<sup>[19]</sup>

### **CONCLUSION-**

Globally, oral diseases are highly prevalent, affecting a significant proportion of world's population. This burden of oral diseases specifically lies on poor population and majority of them are illiterate or uneducated. Their awareness and knowledge about importance is usually low. The studies in India, related to dental myths are scanty<sup>[20]</sup>. Basic concept regarding oral health and hygiene should be part of education in school.

Increase in conduction of Dental camps and awareness programs in the rural areas have benefitted people in wide range and helped in removal of such myths and taboos from their minds.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS –**

Provide adequate knowledge about dental health in school kids.

Awareness of dental health and treatments available can be spread through mass media like television, radio, advertisement, etc, in public.

These myths can be prevalent in a population due to a variety of reasons like poor education, cultural beliefs and social misconceptions. It is difficult to break this chain as it is deep seated in the society and understanding them becomes essential to provide a good care. Hence, importance should be given for

public health awareness regarding myths about oral health at the individual as well as community level.

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