

Asian Indian Culture: Influences and Implications for Health Care

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Asian Indians, who also refer to themselves as East Indians or Indo-Americans, are mostly South-Asian Indians from the present-day Republic of India; they are also from the areas that are now Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.¹ A large group with a voluminous history and culture, this article is an introduction to the culture and the implications for health care of this population.

Background

Early in the 20th century, Indian immigrants followed the railroads south from Canada to the United States, and began working in the lumber industry in Washington State. Recent migration from India to the United States began in 1965, and has mostly included educated Indian citizens from the upper-class. Due to India's University IT system many citizens have received top-rated engineering educations, however, a previous lack of infrastructure in the country led to few jobs for these students. Frequent power outages, unreliable network concerns and little commerce opportunities drove many qualified engineers to the United States for jobs in computer software development. Seattle in particular is a hub for Indian immigrants as direct result of Microsoft's recruitment.

World View

India's past involves a political structure of several dynasties and empire-building attempts resulting in a conglomerate of cultures and religious throughout India's society. Hindu is the predominant 'culture' among the majority in India and among American immigrants, as both a religion and a language. Sikhs are only two percent of the population in India, yet make up 30 to 40 percent of the population in California.² The North East area of the country, approximately 5 percent, is generally Muslim; Indian Christians occupy the third largest group. Tensions exist between the Hindu and Muslim majorities along the border of India and Pakistan.

India's South side is coastal land on the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. North East India borders Pakistan, and on the West, China, Nepal and Bangladesh. As a former British Colony, English is spoken as the preferred second language to Hindu by many citizens. The structure of India's Parliament and political party system is very similar to those of the U.K. India has a prime minister and a cabinet that make the general statements. There is no royal family.

¹ Thentrom, S. (Ed.). 1994. Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups. Harvard University Press: Massachusetts.

² Thentrom, S. (Ed.). 1994. Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups. Harvard University Press: Massachusetts.

Religion

Religion is central to life in Indian families. Approximately 80% of Indians practice Hinduism.³ In the Hindu tradition, methods of prayer, ritual cleansing, social order, and familial harmony are based on religious teachings. The belief in 'Karma,' or repercussions for actions and judgment errors in past lives is strong. The Bindi, worn by many women, is a Hindu sign of honor, intelligence, and marriage⁴; though in modern times it has become a kind of ornament.⁵ Many American-Indians continue to wear this sign depending on age and assimilation. Meditation is a form of Hindu prayer. Hindus tend to be more liberal than practicing Muslims in outward social expressions of religious values. Religion has acquired more importance because it is a way of maintaining Indian culture.

Language

East Indians from various regions are primarily distinguished by language. The Indian government recognizes 15 national languages. The main languages of the Indo-Aryan family are Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, Urdu, and Gujarati. In the Dravidian family Tamil is the most common language. English, also an official language in India, is often the common medium of communication.⁶ Each of the languages has its own body of literature, and some are written in more than one script.

Social Structure

The Caste system created India's social determinism. The system consisted of our 'castes' or levels in ranked order. The highest caste was the 'Brahmans' or priests. The lowest caste was called the 'Untouchables' and were not allowed to look at, touch, or speak to members of the upper caste. Intermarrying between castes was unacceptable. The Caste system was originally intended for classification of services rendered to the society as a whole, such as defenders of the nation, those dedicated to economical development, etc. but was cunningly interwoven into religion by vested interests.⁷ The Caste system has since dissolved, but the aftermath of rights and privileges protected by a small group of people still resonates in Indian society today.

Family Structure

Families are multi-generational entities in Indian society. Respect for elders is highly valued. After marriage, the daughter typically moves in with her husband's family. Gender roles are very distinct. Women manage the house, finances and family while men are the breadwinners and family conduit with outsiders, such as health workers.⁸ Children are often reared by their grandparents. In Seattle this remains consistent, though there are a number of families moving towards the more western 'nuclear' family model. In keeping with modern times and financial necessity, both men and women have started

³ Knipe, D. M., (1991). Hinduism. New York, N.Y.: Harper Collins

⁴ Knipe, D. M., (1991). Hinduism. New York, N.Y.: Harper Collins.

⁵ Thentrom, S. (Ed.). 1994. Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups. Harvard University Press: Massachusetts.

⁶ Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/Indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

⁷ U. Patel, MD. (personal communication, July 7, 2006)

⁸ Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

putting their labor and talent to work to contribute to the family. This is generally effective and incorporated into the lifestyle of the Indian society.

Health Beliefs

Treatment and medicine mixes fluidly with religion in Indian culture. India has a variety of medical systems, of which Western medicine is only one. The medical heritage of Muslim practices, called *unani tibbi*, integrates Arabic medicine, homeopathic systems, and regional and local health practices.⁹ *Ayurveda*, roughly translated as "the science of life," is a complex medical system that emphasizes physical, mental, and spiritual health. This includes a regulated daily life, rejuvenating measures, and the practice of yoga. The most commonly practiced Ayurvedic treatments in the west are massage, dietary and herbal advice, due to the strong regulations surrounding medical practice. Ayurveda classifies patients by body types, or *prakriti*, which are determined by proportions of the three body humors, or *doshas*. Contrary to scientific understanding of germs, viruses and genetic faults, illness and disease are considered to be a matter of imbalance in the doshas. Disease is caused by an imbalance of the bodily humors, and cured by a restoration of the balance through meditation, diet, and natural medicine.¹⁰

Society prefers to treat patients holistically, emphasizing prevention. The majority of Indians use herbal remedies to cure illness. Root causes for diseases are considered to include many things such as physical ailments, stress, and karma. Treatment for illness mostly involves changes in diet, herbal remedies, massage, application of oil to key areas and rest.¹¹

Women's Health

In rural India, girls were often married at a very young age and experience medical problems from closely spaced multiple pregnancies.¹² It was uncommon for Indians to want to take western modern medicines, thus acceptance for birth control pills and depopovera is low.¹³ This has now significantly changed by government laws prohibiting child marriages and incentives for birth control.

Pregnancy is considered a 'hot state,' meaning "a time of increased body heat."¹⁴ It is believed that one should not 'over-heat' with 'hot foods' such as meat, eggs, nuts, herbs and spices.¹⁵ The fetus is believed to be vulnerable to evil spirits during pregnancy, so the woman should remain safe at home during this time. Labor and delivery is often assisted by an elder female family member often assists in labor and delivery. Men are traditionally not present in the delivery room, but this is also changing in modern times.

⁹ Themstrom, S. (Ed.). 1994. Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups. Harvard University Press: Massachusetts.

¹⁰ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ayurveda> accessed July 2006

¹¹ <http://www.indianherbs.com/herbalist.html> accessed May 2006

¹² Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

¹³ Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

¹⁴ Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

¹⁵ Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

Breast feeding is highly valued and strongly encouraged. The use of cow's milk diluted with sugar water is a common supplement. Indian women that have difficulty breast feeding use traditional feeding cups called *paladai* which have long, grooved spouts.¹⁶ Following birth, recuperation time is believed to be forty days long, where the mother is encouraged to stay at home, rest, and eat special foods.¹⁷

Traditionally, Hindu families perform a ritual on the sixth day after delivery called "The Sixth". This ritual includes wrapping the newborn in a religious blanket and the application of a mixture of holy red powder and water to the feet and hands of the baby. Often prayers are recited, following which the baby is to remain untouched while the Holy Spirit descends with a blessing¹⁸ and to "write the fate" of the baby.¹⁹ There is also a "Cradle Ceremony" on the eleventh day where the baby is officially named.²⁰

Death and Dying

There is a preference among Hindus to die at home, many prefer to go back to India. Belief that sickness or suffering is a direct result of karma from a past life can impede symptom control.²¹ Family members will desire to be present for a dying patient. The process includes chanting, prayers and incense.²² Upon death, the body should be touched minimally by health care workers. The family will desire to clean the body and wrap them in red cloth.²³ Hindus tend to prefer cremation so their ashes can be spread over the holy river Ganges, which is credited for creating the essence of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism.²⁴ Mourning family males may shave their heads. A Brahman is usually requested at the funeral to recite holy chants.²⁵

Diet and Nutrition

Most devout Hindus are vegetarians. However, some find eating eggs, fish, or even occasionally meat a necessity in modern urban American life.²⁶ Rice and tea are served at every meal.²⁷ Pujabi Sikhs also prefer a largely vegetarian diet, but they have no religious prohibitions against eating meat. Many Indians eat American-style meals for breakfast and lunch and traditional meals for dinner. Unleavened wheat bread, vegetables, fruit, yogurt-based food, and curries remain important in the diets of most Asian Indians.

Because sons are expected to take care of their parents in old age, in the past daughters were neglected or given less nutritious, smaller portions of food. Fortunately, this custom

¹⁶ Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

¹⁷ Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

¹⁸ Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

¹⁹ U. Patel, MD. (personal communication, July 7, 2006).

²⁰ Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

²¹ Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

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²³ Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

²⁴ <http://www.touristplacesinindia.com/ganga-ganges/about-ganga.html>

²⁵ Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

²⁶ Themstrom, S. (Ed.). 1994. Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups. Harvard University Press: Massachusetts.

²⁷ Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

is rarely found today. Indian children are rarely overweight, but tend to be underweight. Mothers do feed children frequently. This may be exacerbated by the use of Western pediatric growth charts. Indian children, who are almost always smaller than their American counterparts, may appear to have failure to thrive, when they are actually falling within genetic norms for their age. Urmila Patel, MD, a pediatrician in Pomona, CA, finds that she often must reassure anxious parents that 90 percent of Indian children will fall around the 50th percentile or lower. She encourages small, frequent feedings, and tells parents there is no cause for worry as long the child stays between the 5th and 50th percentile and is otherwise healthy.

Cultural Beliefs and Practices

Beliefs and practices are intended to honor and uphold the family. Families tend to be private and do not wish to invite shame upon themselves. Modesty is highly valued. Dating is generally allowed, but traditionally only with parental consent. Inter-marriage presents great strain in an Indian family regarding cultural and religious concerns.

Education is extremely important in Indian families. In India, education was only available for those who could pay. Immigrants often came to America for educational purposes and strongly encourage their children to excel in school. This may cause stress for some children.²⁸

Women prepare and serve meals, and may take their meals separately from the males in the family. Women traditionally are forbidden to cook during their menstrual period.²⁹

Eating with the fingers of the right hand is common. Hand washing before meals is a necessity. Overeating is generally discouraged because of the risk of decreased lifespan.³⁰

Implications for Health Care³¹

Family Dynamics and Structure

- * Because young children are rarely separated from their parents or grandparents, children will respond best with them in the room, particularly during frightening or invasive procedures.
- * Parents may not be aware of teenagers' dating histories.
- * Domestic violence is often well-hidden within the family structure.

Diet and Nutrition

- * Women may have particular concerns regarding eating certain foods during pregnancy. Be aware that they may wish to avoid certain foods, such as citrus because it is "hot." Be prepared with several alternatives.
- * Lentils, a staple of the Indian diet, often causes gas. They are not recommended for breastfeeding women.

²⁸ Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

²⁹ Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

³⁰ Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

³¹ U. Patel, MD. (personal communication, July 7, 2006).

- * Indian culture encourages increased fat intake, particularly after giving birth. *Ghee*, a food which primarily consists of heated butter, is made into a wide variety of foods. It is believed to aid in healing the uterus, and is taken in large quantities for ten days after giving birth. This is one cause of post-delivery weight gain, common in Indian women. Patients should be cautioned to take ghee in moderation.
- * *Methi* is another Indian food with medicinal value. It is believed to be beneficial for the back, for fibrous tissue, and to help the uterus involute.
- * *Honey* is an important part of the Indian diet. Physicians should be vigilant in cautioning parents not to give it to children under two years old. There may be conflict in the household between older and younger women about giving of honey to children. Older Indians are not aware of botulism, the physician should be sure to explain it to grandmothers as well.
- * Indian women may need to be evaluated for conditions such as protein malnutrition, beriberi or thiamine deficiency, pellagra or niacin deficiency, iron-deficient anemia, and lathyrism (see following) that may be related to a vegetarian diet.
- * Lathyrism is a disease specific to the region of Madhya Pradesh. It is caused by eating certain plants of the genus *Lathyrus* and is characterized by irreversible muscular weakness and paraplegia. Prevalence of lathyrus is decreasing.”³²

Health Remedies

There are many remedies used for the treatment of colic and gas. Many consist of varied combinations of grape leaves, grape seeds, grape water and water from dill leaves. These are swallowed to treat gas, and generally not harmful. However, a remedy used by both Hindu and Muslim Indians is known as *gussaro*. It is often a solid ball, but can also come in a powder form. *Gussaro* is a morphine derivative, usually obtained from Indian or Pakistan. Physicians should always inquire about any treatments or remedies given for colic, and what the remedy contains. If the patient or parent doesn't know, inquire as to where it was made. Many are now made in England without the morphine derivative and are acceptable for use. Anything obtained in India is likely to contain morphine and should be discouraged.

Cultural Practices

Muslim Indians use heavy homemade mascara made from soot and *ghee*. Similar to Egyptian kohl, it is used on their eyes and also their newborns' eyes. A circle on the side of the eye is used to protect them from evil eye. This mascara can block nasolacrimal ducts, causing multiple problems. The soot may contain herbs, but also ashes from metals and coal. This can lead to a higher incidence of lead poisoning. If wiped off before a medical visit, the mascara will usually leave a tell-tale residue. The physician should inquire about not only the use of the mascara, but also from what it is made.

Kagawa-Singer and Kassim-Lakha write "The function of any culture is to ensure the survival and well-being of its members within a particular ecologic niche. An extensive body of literature in the social sciences clearly indicates that health and the means to maintain, regain, or attain well-being are culturally defined. Every culture defines what health is for its members, determines the etiology of diseases, establishes the parameters

³² Kemp, Charles http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/indian_health.htm Accessed May 2006

within which distress is defined and signaled, and prescribes the appropriate means to treat the disorder, both medically and socially."³³ As we continue to grow in the understanding that the role of a patient's culture is fundamental to medical care, we can continue to adapt our approach and more effectively engage our patients in our everyday practice.

The Molina Institute for Cultural Competency is a department within Molina Healthcare, Inc. located in Long Beach, California. The Molina Institute researches, evaluates, and applies cultural concepts that are employee, provider, and patient-friendly. Molina Healthcare, Inc. is a multi-state managed care organization that arranges for the delivery of healthcare services to persons eligible for Medicaid and other government-sponsored programs for low-income families and individuals. Additional information about Molina Healthcare, Inc. can be found at www.molinahealthcare.com.

³³ Kagawa-Singer, M., and Kassim-Lakha, S. A Strategy to Reduce Cross-cultural Miscommunication and Increase the Likelihood of Improving Health Outcomes. Acad. Med. 2003;78:577-587.

CME POST -TEST
Asian Indian Culture:
Influences and Implications for Health Care

Please circle correct answer.

1. *Ayurveda*, roughly translated as "the science of life," is a complex medical system that emphasizes physical, mental, and spiritual health.

True

False

2. The use of cow's milk diluted with sugar water is a common breastfeeding supplement in Indian culture.

True

False

3. Because young children are rarely separated from their parents or grandparents, children will respond best with them in the room, particularly during frightening or invasive procedures.

True

False

4. Physicians shouldn't caution parents not to give honey to children under two because it is not an important part of the Indian diet

True

False

5. Muslim Indians use heavy homemade mascara on their own and their newborns' eyes made from soot and *ghee* which may contain lead.

True

False

6. Please rate this article on applicability and usefulness to your practice:

Very useful 1 2 3 4 5 Not useful