

Chapter 6

Cultural Perspectives on Health Communication: The Case of Katkari Tribals in Western Maharashtra, India

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ABSTRACT

Communication is a fundamental aspect of human existence, serving as a platform for sharing information and conveying symbolic meaning. Public health communication is crucial for disease prevention, health promotion, emergency preparedness, and vaccine advocacy. A qualitative study applied the framework of 'Communication Anthropology' to understand cultural sensitivity, contextual nuances, recommendations within a specific tribal community in western Maharashtra, India. Themes "Uncovering the Sources of Health Communication Dynamics in a Tribal Community," "Impact of Media and Technology on Tribal Community Health and Lifestyle," and "Cultural Influences on Tribal Health Behavior" emerged from the study. Enhancing health communication for India's tribal populations requires culturally tailored strategies. Involving local communities is recommended, leveraging traditional art and local artists to convey health messages effectively. Integrating multimedia such as radio jingles and videos, incentivizing healthcare workers, and utilizing visual aids with simplified language can further enhance health communication.

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COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNICATION

Communication lies at the core of our human existence, an essential aspect of our identity. It aids as our platform of sharing information and echoes our symbolic prowess. These dual functions align with James Carey's distinction between the transmission and ritual perspectives of communication. Carey acknowledged that communication not only plays an instrumental role, such as facilitating knowledge acquisition but also fulfils a ritualistic function, emphasizing our role as participants in a social community (Rimal and Lapinski, 2009). Consequently, we can define communication as the symbolic exchange of shared meaning, encompassing both transmission and ritualistic elements within all communicative acts (Rimal and Lapinski, 2009). This aligns with the Oxford English dictionary's definition, which defines communication as "The imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing, or using some other medium" and as "The successful conveying or sharing of ideas and feelings (Oxford)." Both definitions highlight the exchange of information and the shared understanding of ideas and emotions as central components of communication.

Healthy People 2010 offers a definition of health communication as "the art and technique of informing, influencing, and motivating individual, institutional, and public audiences about important health issues." Simultaneously, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) defines public health as "what we, as a society, do collectively to assure the conditions in which people can be healthy." By combining these two perspectives, a new definition emerges: Public Health communication embodies the scientific advancement, strategic distribution, and meticulous evaluation of pertinent, precise, easily accessible, and comprehensible health information conveyed to and from intended audiences, all with the ultimate aim of promoting public health. Public health communication is an indispensable tool in safeguarding the health of individuals and communities. It serves several critical purposes, including disease prevention, health promotion, emergency preparedness, and vaccine advocacy (Bernhardt, 2004). During disease outbreaks, it provides vital information on preventive measures and vaccination campaigns. In everyday life, it encourages healthy behaviors and discourages risky ones, reducing the burden of chronic diseases (Bernhardt, 2004).

Public health communication is also essential in emergency situations, disseminating evacuation instructions and updates during natural disasters and crises. It supports policy development by conveying scientific evidence to policymakers and the public, influencing the adoption of health-promoting policies (Bioterror, 2013). Additionally, it addresses health disparities by targeting vulnerable populations and engaging communities in tailored interventions (Horowitz and Lawlor 2008). Moreover, public health communication empowers individuals to make informed decisions about their health, fostering behaviour change and reducing misinformation. It plays a pivotal role in managing public panic during crises by providing accurate information (Porat et al., 2020) Continuous research and evaluation refine communication strategies, ensuring they are evidence-based and effective. In today's information-rich environment, public health communication bridges the gap between healthcare providers, policymakers, and the public (Hartley, 2004). Its success lies in its ability to inform, educate, and motivate individuals to prioritize health, ultimately contributing to the well-being of society.

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