



The stomachache

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I had been experiencing colic before, during, and after passing stools, for over a week. There were spasms when I ate something. A constant, uneasy, burning sensation in the upper tummy region, day and night. At the office, in the kitchen, sitting or standing, I kept having to bend forwards while my hands involuntarily held my abdomen trying to alleviate the pain.

People were full of advice:

'Mix finely grated fresh ginger with a teaspoonful of lemon-juice. Take it morsel by morsel over an hour.'

'Chew roasted, lightly-crushed cumin-seeds, as often as possible.'

'Don't roast, eat them raw for best results.'

'Oregano seeds and asafoetida work, not cumin-seeds.'

'Cinnamon powder plain.'

'Cinnamon powder with nutmeg...'

'...or cardamom, chewed well.'

'My eighty-year-old father-in-law swears by brewed mint and basil leaves.'

'Egg-whites beaten with cold water, salt and lemon-juice will stop diarrhoea.' (Ugh, but perhaps the albumin binds loose stools).

Unsurprisingly, many said 'take such-and-such medicine'. From any chemist. Without a prescription. In India, prescriptions don't always matter.

Turmeric in milk, drinking two glasses of hot water first thing in the morning, avoiding tamarind and tomatoes, meditation, breathing exercises, yoga: none of these worked. Well-wishers offered prayers, chanted mantras, gave me blessed threads/beads/charms, and addresses of swamis/priests who took healing sessions.

The pain continued.

Therapies that involved magnets, aromatic incense-sticks, flower-based 'remedies' proved useless. Sweet little globular pills containing ingredients diluted thousands of times, holy ash smeared on my forehead and visits to places of worship, did not work either.

None suspected waterborne infection or advised taking medical advice. Apparently, one went to a practitioner of evidence-based medicine only when seriously ill. If one died

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due to delayed treatment, one's relatives blamed toxic 'modern' chemicals and, of course, Fate/Karma.

The word 'medical' in India does not necessarily refer to the health system understood by the rest of the world. Our Ministry of AYUSH (acronym for Ayurveda, Yoga & naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy) says 'these systems are based on definite medical philosophies and represent a way of healthy living with established concepts on prevention of disease and promotion of health'. Belief/tradition versus evidence. 'Practice' could be passed on from housewife via neighbour to office-colleague. Years ago, a 'cure' for intestinal worms - mustard seeds ground in sour buttermilk (administered by my mother as advised by her sister-in-law) - had led paradoxically to baby worms prospering into robust adulthood in my intestine. I remember the itchy anus. My classmates found it funny. Eventually, the chalky evidence-based tablets forced down my throat ensured they (worms, not classmates) exited, wriggling, in a couple of days.

Anything connected with modern medicine is the last resort of people around me. Indians of my generation will tell you how castor-oil was administered to children to keep 'the system clean'. An elder sibling or parent pinched the nostrils so one had to open one's mouth to inhale. A spoonful of the worst tasting compound on earth was poured into the gullet; one cried out to whichever God one believed in. A thwack on the bottom dealt with flailing limbs. After the ordeal, one got a bit of jaggery to chew. Kind words were rare.

I read on the internet: 'India ranked 112th out of 190 countries, ref. the WHO 2000 report.'

As I wait my turn, my village's Primary Healthcare Centre's part-time nurse is involved in ante-natal care. My stomach-ache doesn't worry her. The patients sitting on the wooden bench outside her room

exchange symptoms and tell me which local, (untrained/unqualified) 'doctor' is helpful and cheap. Who goes to the public-tax-funded government-hospital in the city? The very, very ill. By tractor, local bus or even someone's borrowed bicycle or handcart.

Under the National Urban Health Mission, I could get reimbursement for some treatment, but to run around from office to office, desk to desk, and maybe borrow bribe-money to move the files, wasn't possible with this stomach-ache. I'm not below poverty-line, so I'm not entitled for Government insurance. The television said India has First World medical facilities at Third World prices. Didn't say how it would help stop my stomach from hurting.

More voices:

'It's indigestion from eating horse-gram.'

'Worship Devi Annapurna, Goddess of Food, and all will be well.'

A cousin said I was lucky I didn't have malaria, dengue, or leptospirosis, just a stomach-problem. 'It's not multi-drug-resistant-tuberculosis,' was her input. 'Shut up and put up'

I suppressed a moan. She was right. Going to a doctor would cost at least five-hundred rupees. Better to bear it.

Word spread in the neighbourhood that I was unwell. Passers-by dropped in.

'Gas.' 'Appendix.' 'Jaundice.' 'AIDS.' 'Cancer.' The diagnosis depended on who was talking. One chap - Twelfth-Standard-Pass, Commerce-Stream - had heard of Clinical Trials. 'You get free medicines,' he told everyone. 'And money, too, every time you go to the dispensary.'

That India spent 4% GDP on healthcare versus 18% in the USA meant nothing to me. I wanted respite. Had I been a high-risk

pregnant woman rescued by the Indian Army in a flood/earthquake-hit area, political party-workers would have rushed to help. Local news headlines would have had my name in them. I'm a self-employed male, a railway-station tea-vendor, like our present Prime Minister once was. I'm not one of the 300 million covered (according to 2020 statistics) by the Employees' State Insurance. Our public hospital system, entirely funded through general taxation, would have helped had I a communicable disease. Or had I been a medical tourist able to pay a pittance for excellent treatment here, which would cost an arm and a leg in their own country.

I stop thinking. My stomach still pains.

The National Health Protection Scheme (Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana, or PM-JAY) helps pay bills in private hospitals. It will no doubt get the current ruling party voted back into power. But, I don't know whom to approach or where to go to avail of it.

I read more on the internet: 'Specialists who work for the government are paid a salary and work at district or tertiary care hospitals. Government facilities operate within an annual budget. Private physicians are paid on a fee-for-service basis. Hospitals are divided into government and private hospitals. An estimated 10 percent of hospitals are government facilities, funded through an annual budgetary mechanism. Private hospitals charge on a fee-for-service basis. Tax-financed system allows low-income Indians to get cashless secondary and tertiary care at private facilities.'

I don't work for the Central Government/Defence/Railways, am not employed by another, nor am I a senior citizen. I'm a young, daily-wage earning hawker.

Finally, in the Public Hospital I go to, I find that prescription drugs on the essential drug list are free, although there are often shortages, a fellow-patient's relative tells me.

Immunizations, HIV drugs, and drugs for malaria and other vector-borne diseases are free.

'It's in your head,' a friend accompanying me says.

Psychosomatic? Mental health care resources are extremely limited. National health initiatives have established psychiatric centres within specialized public hospitals, but in general there are few hospital beds dedicated to inpatient psychiatric care. Most private insurance plans do not provide comprehensive coverage for such care; in the few that do, covered treatment options usually focus on short-term psychotherapy not long-term management.

'Never mind what's in my head,' I retort. 'Let's sort out my stomach problem for now.'

There are others clutching their stomachs, like me. We are told our problems are because of the filth surrounding our homes.

The government had started a universal sanitation coverage in an effort to make the country free of open defecation through the 'Swachh Bharat Mission'. Fellow villagers took advantage of the scheme, built toilets through grants given, and used the sheds for storing coconuts or old furniture. School-children made posters and wrote and recited poems glorifying dusting and sweeping.

Our fields still get free human manure.

Research money is spent on testing ancient 'magic-cures' like cow urine. Neem (*Azadirachta indica*) and bitter-gourd (*Momordica charantia*) extracts, like 'jamun' (*Syzygium cumini*) powder, could make India and the world diabetes-free. Bottle-gourd, carrot, beetroot juices are in the list of unpatented cure-alls. If the rich eat *Chinopodium quinoa*, and the poor eat ragi-*Eleusine coracana*, the government 'experts' say, you will be healthy forever.

Then, we could shut down the medical-colleges, no?

I stretch. The pain has reduced. The waiting, the litter, the acrid stench of stale urine and dried vomit, the crowd of under-nourished people around me, has helped. The doctor, who arrived an hour late, looks hassled and indifferent. My friend, whose brother-in-law's second cousin's neighbour's father-in-law's best friend works here as a technician ensures I am taken to the front of the queue. There is no queue anyway. Without a word, I am handed a crumpled piece of paper, torn from a stapled bunch, that says I need to get

an ultra-sonography test done.

'Outside', the nurse tells me. 'From the private laboratory.'

After I've paid five-hundred rupees in cash - no receipt, no report, just a 'photo' of my insides shown to me on the screen - I am told by the private laboratory that I do not have a kidney-stone, nothing abnormal. I need to drink boiled water to prevent such infections in future.

Time to invest in a liquid-petroleum-gas cylinder and stove.