

Research Paper

Understanding The Impact of Religiosity and Spirituality on Substance Use Disorder Among Tribals: A Descriptive Study

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ABSTRACT

Substance use disorder (SUD) remains a major public health concern among tribal communities, where patterns of substance use are shaped by cultural traditions, social norms, economic marginalization, and historical experiences. At the same time, religiosity and spirituality are deeply embedded in tribal life and may influence both the prevention of substance use and pathways to recovery. The present descriptive study examines the impact of religiosity and spirituality on substance use disorder among tribal populations through a review of relevant literature published between 2015 and 2025. Using scholarly databases including PubMed, Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, and ResearchGate, seven peer-reviewed studies were selected based on their focus on tribal or indigenous communities and their examination of spirituality, religiosity, and substance use. The findings reveal a high prevalence of alcohol, tobacco, and other substance use in tribal communities, often normalized through cultural and ritual practices. At the same time, religiosity and spirituality emerge as important protective factors by providing moral guidance, social support, emotional resilience, and culturally grounded coping mechanisms. Indigenous healing traditions, spiritual rituals, and participation in religious practices were found to contribute positively to prevention and recovery processes. The review further highlights that culturally insensitive interventions may have limited effectiveness in tribal settings. Therefore, prevention and treatment strategies should integrate indigenous spiritual beliefs, engage tribal elders and spiritual leaders, and address structural challenges such as poverty, unemployment, healthcare inaccessibility, and social exclusion. The study concludes that community-based, and spiritually informed approaches are essential for effectively addressing substance use disorders and promoting wellbeing among tribal populations.

Keywords: *Religiosity, Spirituality, Substance Use Disorder, Tribals*

Substance use disorders (SUDs) represent a significant public health challenge among tribal populations in India, where unique cultural, historical, and socioeconomic factors influence patterns of substance use and recovery (Murthy et al., 2019). Despite the implementation of various intervention strategies, substance abuse continues to be a pressing issue in these communities, necessitating a deeper understanding of culturally

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relevant protective factors and recovery pathways (Chavan & Arun, 2018). Among the cultural dimensions that may influence substance use behaviors in tribal communities, religiosity and spirituality have emerged as potentially significant but often overlooked factors (Jiloha, 2017). Traditional spiritual beliefs and religious practices are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of tribal societies, shaping community norms, individual behaviors, and approaches to healing (Narasimha et al., 2021). These spiritual frameworks often provide meaning, purpose, and social support—elements that have been associated with both substance use prevention and recovery in various populations (Patel et al., 2020). The relationship between spirituality, religiosity, and substance use disorders in tribal contexts remains understudied, particularly in the Indian subcontinent where tribal communities represent a significant demographic with distinct cultural traditions (Nadkarni et al., 2017). This gap in research is concerning, as conventional intervention approaches that fail to account for these cultural dimensions may be less effective or, at worst, culturally inappropriate (Basu et al., 2016).

This study aims to explore the traditional spiritual beliefs, religious practices, and their relationship to substance use behaviors in tribal communities in India. By examining how these cultural dimensions function as both protective factors against substance use and as pathways to recovery, this research seeks to contribute to the development of culturally sensitive intervention approaches that honor and integrate tribal spirituality while addressing the unique challenges faced by these communities (Winkelman, 2021).

The findings from this study have important implications for substance abuse treatment providers, public health officials, and policymakers working with tribal populations, potentially informing more effective, culturally integrated approaches to prevention and intervention (Ghosh et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive research design to analyze the impact of religiosity and spirituality on substance use disorders and its prevention among tribal communities. It is based on an extensive review of existing literature. Relevant studies were selected based on their focus on tribal communities, their exploration of the influence of spirituality and religiosity on substance use behavior, and their empirical contributions to understanding addiction recovery. The research utilizes scholarly databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, and ResearchGate to identify key studies.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria for the study were as follows:

Inclusion Criteria

1. Peer-reviewed research articles, systematic reviews, meta-analyses.
2. Studies published within the last 10 years (2015-2025) to ensure relevance to contemporary tribal contexts.
3. Research focusing specifically on tribal or indigenous communities.
4. Studies that explicitly examine the relationship between at least one of the following:
 - Religiosity/spirituality and substance use patterns
 - Traditional spiritual beliefs and addiction recovery
 - Religious practices and substance use prevention
 - Cultural healing practices related to substance use disorders

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5. Methodology: Both qualitative and quantitative research designs, including ethnographic studies, surveys, interviews, case studies, and mixed-methods approaches.

Exclusion Criteria

1. Non-peer-reviewed articles, opinion pieces, newspaper articles, and unpublished theses or dissertations.
2. Research focusing solely on non-tribal populations with no relevance or application to tribal communities.

After a comprehensive search and screening process, seven related research papers were identified from different sources that met the inclusion criteria.

These following researches were carefully analyzed to extract relevant information regarding the intersection of spirituality, religiosity, and substance use disorders in tribal populations.

1. Chaturvedi et al. (2016) highlights the high prevalence of substance use among tribal populations in Northeast India, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh, with an overall rate of 53.1%. The study found that substance use was significantly higher among men (67%) compared to women (38%), and alcohol consumption often began as early as 14 years old due to its social acceptance as a 'holy drink' within tribal communities. Tobacco (37.9%) and alcohol (39.1%) were the most commonly used substances, while opium use was reported at a lower rate (6.6%). Multiple substance use was particularly common among men, with 36% consuming both alcohol and tobacco. Socio-demographic factors played a significant role in substance use patterns, with the highest prevalence observed among the Tutsa tribe (77%) and individuals following Indigenous religions (71%). Older age groups (≥ 45 years) showed the highest prevalence ($\geq 75\%$), and substance use remained high among illiterate individuals (61%). Marital status also influenced consumption, with widows and widowers exhibiting a prevalence of 71%, while smaller households (1-3 members) reported a higher prevalence (63%) compared to larger families. The study found that cultural and social norms strongly influenced substance use, with alcohol being deeply embedded in traditions and peer influence playing a major role in initiating tobacco and opium use. Given the deeply rooted nature of substance use in these communities, the study suggests that conventional educational efforts may not be sufficient in reducing consumption. Early awareness initiatives, particularly targeting primary and high school students, could help mitigate the long-term public health impact of substance use in tribal populations.

2. Chaturvedi et al. (2017) examines the relationship between religiosity, cultural traditions, and alcohol use among tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh, India. Conducted in the Changlang district, the study analyzed data from 3,421 tribal respondents aged 15 years and older, revealing a high prevalence of alcohol use at 39.1%. A significant gender disparity was observed, with 49.3% of males consuming alcohol compared to 27.9% of females. Among different tribal groups, the Tutsa tribe had the highest alcohol use at 76%, followed by the Tangsa tribe at 42%, while the Singpho (13.6%) and Khamti (11.4%) tribes had considerably lower prevalence rates. Religion played a crucial role in alcohol consumption patterns, with individuals following Indigenous religions reporting the highest prevalence (65%), followed by Hindus (55.1%). In contrast, Buddhists (24.7%) and Christians (10%) exhibited much lower alcohol consumption, suggesting that Christianity

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might serve as a protective factor due to religious restrictions. The study highlighted the deep cultural acceptance of alcohol, as it was widely consumed during social gatherings, religious ceremonies, and traditional customs. Alarmingly, the average age of initiation into alcohol use was 11.5 years, with males starting at an even younger age than females. Sociodemographic factors also played a role, with older individuals, particularly those aged 35 and above, exhibiting higher alcohol consumption rates. Education had little impact in reducing alcohol use, emphasizing the dominance of cultural acceptance in sustaining drinking behaviors. Given the strong cultural and religious influences on drinking habits, the study stresses the need for targeted interventions that move beyond traditional awareness campaigns. Instead, a more effective approach would involve engaging religious leaders, tribal elders, and youth organizations to promote responsible drinking behaviors. Community-based initiatives that respect tribal traditions while educating individuals about alcohol's health risks could provide sustainable solutions. The study underscores the importance of culturally sensitive strategies, calling for collaboration between healthcare professionals, policymakers, and community leaders to effectively address substance use disorders among tribal populations.

3. Sadath et al. (2021) examine the impact of religiosity and spirituality on substance use disorder among tribal populations, revealing a high prevalence of substance use, with 17.2% for alcohol consumption, 18.8% for smoking, and 47.6% for daily betel quid chewing. The study identifies male gender, increasing age, and employment status as significant predictors of substance use. Among different tribal subgroups, the Paniya tribe exhibited the highest substance use rates, highlighting the role of socio-cultural and economic marginalization in shaping consumption patterns. Religiosity was found to influence substance use behaviors, with certain religious groups exhibiting lower consumption due to spiritual beliefs and cultural restrictions. Additionally, individuals with no formal education were more likely to engage in smoking and betel quid chewing, emphasizing the link between literacy levels and awareness of health risks. The research also highlights the impact of the work environment on substance use, as some employers provided alcohol as an incentive for laborers.

4. Hassan et al. (2023) investigated the impact of religiosity and spirituality on the progression of substance use disorder (SUD) using data from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions-III. The study found that attending religious services was associated with a slower progression from substance initiation to heavy use for alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis. Specifically, the frequency of religious service attendance was linked to an 8% to 15% reduction in the progression of tobacco use, a 5% to 26% reduction for cannabis, and a 9% reduction for alcohol use. Additionally, religious importance significantly slowed the progression to heavy cannabis use by 16% to 21%, though it had no statistically significant impact on the progression of tobacco or alcohol use. The findings suggest that religiosity, particularly through public religious engagement, serves as a protective factor against substance use escalation, as individuals who regularly attended religious services showed lower probabilities of progressing to daily or heavy substance use. However, while religiosity slowed the transition from substance use initiation to heavy use, it had a more limited effect on preventing the progression from heavy use to full-blown SUD. Notably, religious service attendance and the perceived importance of religious beliefs slowed the transition from heavy alcohol use to alcohol use disorder (AUD) by 8% and 27%, respectively. These findings highlight the role of religious and spiritual engagement as a social support mechanism that discourages excessive substance use. The

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study suggests that incorporating religious and spiritual elements into community-based prevention programs could be an effective strategy for mitigating substance dependence.

5. Nisanth M. Pilai and Harikrishnan S. (2024) examine the intersection of vulnerabilities contributing to substance use disorder (SUD) among indigenous communities in Southern India, emphasizing the role of religiosity and spirituality. The study highlights that substance use is shaped by socio-economic marginalization, cultural traditions, and historical oppression, which contribute to addiction patterns within tribal populations. Alcohol and tobacco are the most commonly used substances, often introduced at an early age and normalized through social and ritualistic practices. The study suggests that higher levels of religious involvement correlate with lower substance use prevalence, as religious and spiritual beliefs discourage excessive consumption of alcohol and tobacco. However, the influence of religiosity varies across different tribal groups, depending on the extent of religious syncretism, traditional healing practices, and missionary influences. Additionally, spiritual rituals and indigenous belief systems act as coping mechanisms for trauma and socio-economic hardships, potentially reducing reliance on substances. The study underscores the need for culturally tailored intervention programs that incorporate religious and spiritual elements into substance abuse prevention strategies. Engaging tribal elders, spiritual leaders, and local religious institutions could enhance the effectiveness of de-addiction efforts. Furthermore, addressing broader structural inequalities—such as limited healthcare access, unemployment, and land displacement—is essential to mitigating substance abuse risks among tribal populations. The findings advocate for a holistic approach that integrates socio-economic empowerment with spiritual and religious engagement to effectively combat substance use disorders in indigenous communities.

6. Rowkith and Bhagwan (2020) explore the role of spirituality in tribal communities in India, emphasizing its deep connection to nature worship, animism, and totemism. Tribal spirituality is rooted in the reverence of natural elements such as trees, mountains, rivers, and animals, shaping beliefs, healing practices, and social structures. Unlike mainstream religious traditions, these spiritual teachings are passed down orally through folklore, songs, and rituals rather than written scriptures. The study highlights that spirituality acts as a protective factor against substance use and other social issues by fostering resilience through communal rituals and traditional healing practices. Ritualistic prayers, music, and dance play a vital role in spiritual identity, promoting emotional healing and reinforcing social bonds. Traditional healers, known as Vaidyas, are central to tribal healthcare, utilizing Ayurvedic medicine derived from indigenous plants to provide holistic healing approaches distinct from conventional medical systems. The research highlights the importance of integrating tribal spirituality into social work and intervention programs, as it offers a culturally relevant framework for addressing substance use disorder and other challenges.

7. Amar, T., & Goswami, K. (2024) explore the relationship between spiritual engagement and spiritual well-being among tribal youth practicing the indigenous Donyi-Polo faith in Arunachal Pradesh, India. The study finds that tribal youth who actively participate in spiritual activities, such as prayer, meditation, and mindfulness, report significantly higher levels of spiritual well-being than those who do not engage in such practices. The results suggest that spiritual engagement plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of meaning, purpose, and emotional resilience, contributing positively to overall well-being.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that while spiritual well-being is generally high among the participants, there is a declining trend in spiritual well-being as individual progress from

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high school to doctoral education, suggesting that higher education and exposure to modern influences may impact traditional spiritual values.

The research underscores the significance of indigenous faith systems in promoting well-being and resilience among tribal youth. The study emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive interventions that integrate indigenous spirituality into mental health and well-being programs. Given the protective role of spiritual engagement, policymakers and educators should consider incorporating indigenous spiritual teachings into educational and community-based initiatives to enhance holistic well-being among tribal populations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The synthesis of findings from these seven studies reveals several important patterns and relationships between substance use, religiosity, and spirituality among tribal populations, particularly in India.

Religiosity and Spirituality as Protective Factor against Substance Use

The studies collectively suggest that religiosity and spirituality operate as protective factors against substance use through multiple mechanisms. First, as Hassan et al. (2023) demonstrated, religious service attendance and the importance placed on religious beliefs can slow the progression from substance initiation to heavy use. This suggests that the social support, moral guidance, and structured lifestyle provided by religious involvement may help individuals regulate their substance use behaviors.

As highlighted by Rowkith and Bhagwan (2020), indigenous spiritual practices—including ritualistic prayers, music, and dance—promote emotional healing and reinforce social bonds. These practices may provide alternative coping mechanisms for stress and trauma, reducing reliance on substances. Additionally, Amar and Goswami (2024) found that spiritual engagement is associated with higher levels of spiritual well-being, which may enhance resilience against substance use.

Religious and spiritual beliefs often provide meaning, purpose, and moral frameworks that discourage excessive substance use. As Nisanth and Harikrishnan (2024) noted, higher levels of religious involvement correlate with lower substance use prevalence, as religious and spiritual beliefs discourage excessive consumption of alcohol and tobacco.

Implications for Designing Effective Substance Use Intervention in Tribal Communities:

First, they highlight the need for culturally sensitive approaches that respect and incorporate indigenous spiritual practices and belief systems. As Rowkith and Bhagwan (2020) emphasized, intervention programs should engage spiritual leaders, elders, and local traditions.

Second, they suggest that leveraging religious and spiritual frameworks may enhance the effectiveness of prevention efforts. Rather than focusing solely on health risks or educational campaigns, interventions could incorporate spiritual elements that resonate with tribal communities' existing belief systems.

Third, they indicate that addressing broader structural inequalities—such as limited healthcare access, unemployment, and land displacement—is essential for comprehensive substance use prevention. As Nisanth and Harikrishnan (2024) noted, substance use in tribal

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communities is shaped by socio-economic marginalization and historical oppression, not just individual choices.

Prevalence of Substance Use in Tribal Communities

This analysis of seven researches examining substance use, religiosity, and spirituality among tribal populations reveals several key insights. Substance use, particularly alcohol and tobacco consumption, is highly prevalent in tribal communities and often deeply embedded in cultural traditions and social practices. Significant variations exist across different tribal groups, genders, and age groups, highlighting the need for targeted interventions. Religiosity and spirituality appear to function as protective factors against substance use through multiple mechanisms, including social support, moral guidance, and alternative coping strategies.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that effective substance use prevention and intervention programs in tribal communities should be culturally tailored, community-driven, and integrated with indigenous spiritual practices. Rather than imposing external frameworks, interventions should build upon existing religious and spiritual resources within communities while addressing broader structural inequalities that contribute to substance use.

By recognizing the complex interplay between cultural practices, religious beliefs, and substance use behaviors, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners can develop more effective and respectful approaches to addressing substance use disorders in tribal communities, ultimately enhancing wellbeing and resilience among these populations.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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