

HEALTH CARE IN THE VILLAGE

Autobiography of M.H. Panhwar
(First ten years of my life seventy chapters, 250 pages.)

Like all villages in Sindh there was little awareness or care for the community health. Even if some people knew, they were totally indifferent as convincing the community needed special efforts and training. There were three depressions right within the village formed by borrowing of clay for constructing walls of mud houses and floor. Two of them used to get filled by seepage from rice fields and rain water and the third was filled by irrigation water from adjoining fields in summer. As the last had fresh water it produced some fish in autumn, but there after, lack of fresh water spoiled fish game and water became equally smelly for couple of months before it dried out. Some people also threw all kinds of kitchen and domestic rubbish in the first two of them anaerobic digestion of them produced methane, hydrogen sulphide and other smelly odours. By the end November all of them became fertile ground for mosquitoes and flies. This coincided with the time of break up of malaria in its epidemic form. Although many people knew the cause, but no body took any initiative to fill the pits. Domestic animals resided next to human houses or within the houses. It facilitated in feeding and milking them and protecting them from thieves, but it also made every house smelly and source of diseases. There was no joint or co-operative effort to make common shed for animals of the whole village away from residential area. This situation had started at Mehrgarh 8,500 years ago, with little no improvement in many a millennia.

Luckily ground water was brackish and there were no hand pumps. Every such pump or well would have been polluted by seepage of animal and human excrete to this source. People threw their rubbish in nearest streets and invariably along the walls leaving narrow depression in between which became drainage line during rains. When rain water fell on this rubbish, it produced odours like to those of rotten eggs or rotten meat of dead animals. Smell came from anaerobic digestion of organic matter in the rubbish. It also attracted flies and mosquitoes. After rains, breaking up of one or other epidemic was certain and it invariably took place repeating year after year. The filth left along the out-side wall included dust, broken clay pottery pieces and organic matter like straw, wooden pieces, kitchen ashes, pieces of clothes, children's excrete. Since it was thrown along the walls, streets became narrower. Originally designed for bullock carts to pass, they could hardly do so, when I saw them first.

While constructing houses earth from excavation of foundation was also left in the streets. Thus no street was at proper level to drain rainwater out from the village. There was lack of initiative and leadership to motivate the villagers to clean living. The collective effort to keep the village healthy was missing and individuals were trapped into problems of streets in the frontage and back. Joint efforts could refill three depressions in the village in a maximum of two years, simply by throwing rubbish in them, but petty mindedness, individual house-hold jealousies and quarrels and lack of sensible leadership, lead to unhealthy environments. Even in villages where a single Wadera was all powerful, at the best he kept his house clean and left rest of the people to rot exactly in the same manner, as our village.

There was no light after sun-set. Wood fired kitchen hearth provided light to the women cooking food. Hurricanes lanterns were a few and kerosene was costly. Every body had some vegetable oils from sesum and chamboo. Their use was limited to applying it to skin, face and hair and if surplus, it was fed to animals by putting directly down their throats with discarded whiskey glass bottles. Occasionally it was also used in clay wick lamps but only in utter necessity. Life in the village usually came to an end after sun-set, except the presence of a few Mullas invariably prayed to God to make the sun-rise regularly.

Glare of the sun was too excessive and blinding, through out the summer. It had depressing effect on me. I preferred to remain indoor in dark spot as even looking out-side the door to sun-shine was uncomfortable. The climate was harsh. From June to September humidity along with temperatures was high, perspiration was continuous and sweat would not dry. Bathing in canal water was comfortable in the mornings after sunrise and before sun-set, but rest of the day even canal water got warmed up. In winter humidity was low and it dried the body, and the worst affected were lips and heels of feet which cracked up. The villagers applied vegetable oil to it but it was no solution. I found that by early February, if I came out in sun, skin of my legs started cracking so badly that I had to run under the shade. It was low humidity and increase in temperatures which had dried the skin.

The streets were smelly with animal excrete and urine scattered every where and when collected in heaps, which were not far from houses and methane and hydrogen sulphide gases coming from them, smelt all over the village. Children were excreting in the streets and so were the animals. The thorny fences around the houses were also being digested slowly at ground level by contact with ground which was moist due to high water table in winter and water logging caused by rice cultivation. Decaying organic material of

fences was also abode of insects, on which thrived, snakes, scorpions, rats, lizards, wasps, flies and mosquitoes. One or other thorny fence would catch fire every two or three years burning up houses and movable property. High heat of summer and consequent perspiration to keep body at low temperature, caused loss of salts in body resulting in low blood pressure in me. It also caused head aches, body pains, exhaustion, and lethargy.

There was no concept of building houses to counteract heat. In my child hood I saw three houses and two Otaqs having a single room built on the top floor to be used against the summer heat, but I found that rooms below this room on the ground floor were cooler than them. Jhali or Pankha was first invented by a European clerk of Warren Hastings (Governor General of India 1773-1774) office, around 1783 and in next 100 years every government office and every wadera's Otaq had one, but nothing in the house. Some houses had one cradle which could move and create breeze but only one or two members of family could sleep in it. Another trouble with cradles through out Sindh was that they were not long to match height of person. In summer from first April to end September, every one slept out-side the house building, in open under the sky. High heat was not without casualties. Sun-stroke deaths in July-August were well known although hottest month in whole Sindh was May. Delayed strokes probably were caused by body's gradual loss of stamina as summer advanced. Winter too was not comfortable. People had no woollen clothes, sweaters, coats and shoes, but winter kills were less known. Unfortunately again, mild weather from October to March in Dadu taluka was plagued with mosquitoes and malaria. High heat of summer caused severe mortality of mosquitoes but not their eggs. This was the village and life, not worth envying and country life was not sweet as in Europe.