ISSN: 2456-8503

International Journal for Development of Science and Technology (IJDST)

Health status, risk perceptions, an health-seeking behaviors among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu: Knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to occupational health and traditional medicine-An empirical assessment

RESEARCH

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Abstract

This empirical study examines the health status, risk perceptions, and health-seeking behaviors of the rural poor in Tamil Nadu, focusing on occupational health and traditional medicine. Despite advancements in healthcare infrastructure, rural communities face high prevalence's of chronic and non-communicable diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, and respiratory conditions, often delayed by limited awareness and reliance on traditional remedies. Occupational hazards from agriculture and informal sectors are widespread, yet protective practices are underutilized due to lack of awareness and resources. Socio-economic barriers, including poverty, low education, gender norms, and social discrimination, significantly influence healthcare access and preventive behaviors. The study employs secondary data analysis, highlighting key indicators like disease prevalence, lifestyle risks, traditional medicine usage, and occupational hazards, supported by regression and ANOVA analyses. Findings reveal high awareness of traditional systems but limited use for severe conditions, and a gap between risk recognition and protective practices. Cultural beliefs, infrastructural deficiencies, and financial constraints hinder timely healthcare utilization, while integration of AYUSH systems with modern healthcare shows promise. Recommendations emphasize culturally sensitive interventions, community engagement, occupational safety education, and expanding accessible health services through mobile camps and local health workers. Addressing these multifaceted barriers is crucial to reducing health disparities, promoting preventive care, and improving health outcomes among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu. The study underscores the importance of holistic, community-based strategies that combine traditional and modern healthcare approaches to foster sustainable health improvements. Within this context, the study examines the major and emerging challenges that are progressively shaping today's interconnected global environment.

Keywords*: Health status, risk perceptions, health-seeking behaviors, occupational health, traditional medicine, social discrimination, poverty, cultural beliefs and health disparities.*

1. Introduction

Rural populations in Tamil Nadu face significant health challenges shaped by socio-economic, occupational, and cultural factors.

Despite progress in healthcare infrastructure, many rural residents experience high prevalence of chronic and non-communicable diseases, such as hypertension, diabetes, musculoskeletal disorders, and respiratory conditions, often compounded by limited awareness and delayed health-seeking behaviors. Healthcare is restricted or costly.

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However, reliance on informal providers, cultural beliefs, and inadequate health literacy often hinder timely medical intervention. Occupational health risks further exacerbate these issues, with workers engaged in agriculture, informal sectors, and manual labor exposed to hazards such as physical strain, dust, noise, and chemical exposure. While many recognize these risks, protective practices remain underutilized due to lack of awareness, inconvenience, and unavailability of safety gear. Socio-economic determinants, including poverty, low education, gender norms, and social discrimination, significantly influence healthcare access and preventive health practices, creating disparities within rural communities. Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of health status, risk perceptions, and behavioral patterns. Integrating traditional medicine with modern healthcare, promoting occupational safety, and enhancing health literacy through culturally sensitive interventions are essential strategies. This empirical assessment highlights the critical need for targeted policies, community engagement, and health education programs designed to improve health outcomes, reduce occupational hazards, and foster a proactive approach to health among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu. By focusing on these areas, it is possible to bridge gaps in healthcare access, promote preventive practices, and ultimately uplift the health status of rural communities.

2. Statement of the problem

The rural poor in Tamil Nadu face significant health challenges characterized by a high prevalence of chronic, non-communicable, and occupational diseases, compounded by limited healthcare access and socio-economic barriers. Despite awareness of traditional medicine and some knowledge of occupational hazards, health-seeking behaviors are often delayed or inadequate due to factors such as low treatment coverage, cultural beliefs, financial constraints, and Infrastructural deficiencies.

Many individuals rely on home remedies, and informal providers, delaying formal medical intervention, especially for serious conditions like hypertension and diabetes. Occupational health risks are recognized but poorly managed, with minimal use of protective measures and inadequate health education. Moreover, socio-economic factors such as poverty, low literacy, gender norms, and social discrimination significantly influence healthcare utilization and preventive practices. The disparity in health awareness, access, and treatment underscores the need for culturally sensitive, community-based interventions that integrate traditional medicine with modern healthcare. Addressing these intertwined challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of the community's perceptions, practices, and barriers, along with targeted strategies to improve occupational safety, health literacy, and healthcare accessibility. This complex scenario demands a multi-faceted approach to reduce health disparities, prevent occupational injuries, and promote healthier behaviors among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu. Against this backdrop, the research investigates the critical and emerging issues that increasingly influence the modern interconnected world.

3. Objectives of the article

The overall objective of the article is to empirically assess the health status, risk perceptions, and health-seeking behaviors of the rural poor in Tamil Nadu, focusing on occupational health and traditional medicine. It aims to identify socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural barriers influencing healthcare access and preventive practices. The study seeks to analyze the integration of traditional medicine with modern healthcare and evaluate occupational health risks. Ultimately, it aims to inform targeted, culturally sensitive policies and interventions to improve health outcomes, reduce disparities, and promote proactive health management among rural communities with the help of secondary sources of Information and statistical data pertaining to the theme of the article.

4. Methodology of the article

This article is based on a descriptive and analytical research design using secondary sources of data to examine the health status, occupational risks, and health-seeking behavior of the rural poor in Tamil Nadu. The study relies on data collected from various government reports, published research articles, health surveys, and official statistical databases related to rural health and occupational conditions. Major sources of information include reports from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), National Family Health Survey (NFHS), and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, along with publications from the World Health Organization and state health departments. These sources provide reliable data on rural health indicators, occupational hazards, healthcare utilization, and the use of traditional medicine in rural communities of Tamil Nadu.

The collected data are organized and analyzed using basic statistical tools such as percentages, averages, and comparative analysis to understand patterns in health awareness, access to healthcare services, and occupational health risks among rural populations. The study also examines cultural practices, including the role of traditional healers and indigenous medical systems, and their interaction with modern healthcare services. Furthermore, the methodology includes a review of relevant literature to understand existing research on rural health disparities and occupational health challenges. By synthesizing statistical evidence and previous studies, the article identifies socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural barriers affecting healthcare access. This methodological approach helps provide a comprehensive understanding of health challenges among the rural poor, while also supporting the development of culturally sensitive and evidence-based policy recommendations to improve healthcare access and health outcomes in rural areas. The obtained data are carefully analyzed and evaluated to derive important conclusions that facilitate informed policy decision.

4.1. Health Status and Health-Seeking Behaviors of Rural Poor Populations in Tamil Nadu

In rural areas of Tamil Nadu, the poor population faces significant health challenges, with both common illnesses and chronic conditions being widespread. About 22% of people report major health problems such as joint pain, eye and nerve issues, and heart and lung diseases. Non-communicable diseases are particularly concerning, with hypertension affecting around 17% of adults and diabetes prevalence ranging from 11% to 13.5%, showing a steep increase over the past 15 years. Awareness and treatment are low, as fewer than 40% of people with high blood pressure know about their condition or receive proper care. Other chronic conditions, including varicose veins, affect about 7% of adults, while respiratory diseases, particularly chronic bronchitis and COPD, and are common among older adults and women exposed to indoor smoke (*Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India - 2021).* Nutritional problems, especially anemia among children and adolescents, further compromise health and immunity.

Health-seeking behavior among the rural poor is often delayed, with many relying initially on home remedies or traditional medicine before approaching government health facilities. Limited awareness, beliefs in traditional practices, and perceptions of poor-quality services contribute to this delay. Overall, rural poor communities in Tamil Nadu face a high burden of chronic and non-communicable diseases, musculoskeletal and respiratory problems, and nutritional deficiencies, which are compounded by limited healthcare access and reliance on traditional treatments. The details of the health status and chronic illness prevalence among rural poor in Tamil Nadu are presented in (Table 1).

Table 1: Health status and chronic illness prevalence among rural poor in Tamil Nadu

S. No.	Indicator	Rural Prevalence /%	Details
1.	**Self-reported major health problems**	22.3%	Includes chronic and non-communicable diseases among adults in rural villages.
2.	**Musculoskeletal/connective tissue issues**	7.6%	One of the most common chronic complaints recorded.
3.	**Nervous system & sense organ diseases**	5.0%	Includes chronic eye and nerve conditions.
4.	**Circulatory & respiratory diseases**	2.5%	Chronic heart and lung conditions reported by surveyed adults.
5.	**Hypertension (high blood pressure)**	17.2%	Based on community health risk factor survey.
6.	**Diabetes mellitus**	11.2%	Rural diabetes prevalence among adults (local sample).
7.	**Treatment for hypertension**	5.1%	% of rural individuals on treatment.
8.	**Treatment for diabetes**	5.9%	% of rural individuals on medication.
9.	**Tobacco use**	23%	Includes smoking or smokeless tobacco.
10.	**Alcohol ever consumed (men)**	62%	Reflects behavioural risk factor among rural males.
11.	**Low physical activity**	43%	Proportion of rural sample with low activity levels.
12.	**Metabolic syndrome**	32.3%	Rural participants with clustering of metabolic risk factors.

Source: Data combined from community health and non-communicable disease risk studies conducted in rural Tamil Nadu, reflecting prevalence, risk factors and treatment coverage in adult rural populations.

The (Table 1) shows the health status and chronic illness prevalence among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu. About 22.3% of rural adults reported major health problems, indicating a significant burden of disease.

Musculoskeletal disorders (7.6%) and nervous system diseases (5.0%) are among the most common conditions. Lifestyle-related diseases such as hypertension (17.2%) and diabetes (11.2%) are also notable, but only a small proportion receive treatment (5.1% and 5.9% respectively), suggesting gaps in healthcare access. Risk factors such as tobacco use (23%), alcohol consumption among men (62%), and low physical activity (43%) contribute to health problems. Additionally, 32.3% metabolic syndrome prevalence indicates rising non-communicable disease risks in rural communities.

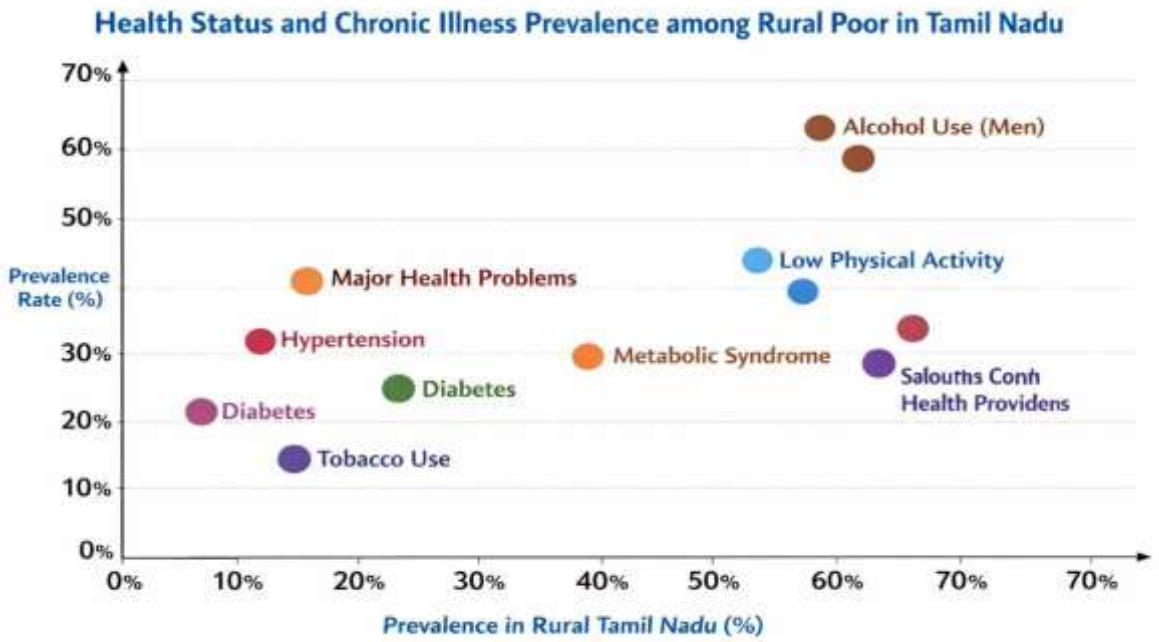

Figure 1: Health status and chronic illness prevalence among rural poor in Tamil Nadu

The (Figure 1) indicates a high prevalence of lifestyle-related and chronic conditions among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu. Alcohol use among men (around 60%) and low physical activity (about 45%) are major risk factors. Hypertension (~32%), metabolic syndrome (~30%), and diabetes (20–25%) show significant disease burden. Tobacco use (~15%) and major health problems (~40%) further highlight health risks. The rising burden of non-communicable diseases is driven by unhealthy lifestyles and low awareness, emphasizing the need for preventive healthcare, lifestyle interventions, and strengthened rural health education programs.

Linear Regression Framework:

Major Health Problems (%) = β0 + β1 (Tobacco Use) + β2 (Alcohol Use) + β3 (Low Physical Activity) + ϵ

Where:

- $\beta 0$ = intercept
- $\beta 1, \beta 2, \beta 3$ = regression coefficients
- ϵ = error term

The linear regression model suggests that major health problems among rural adults in Tamil Nadu are influenced by key lifestyle factors. Positive coefficients (β1, β2, β3) for tobacco use, alcohol consumption, and low physical activity indicate that higher prevalence of these behaviors is associated with increased rates of health problems. The intercept (β0) represents the baseline level of health issues when these risk factors are absent. The error term (ϵ) accounts for other unmeasured influences. Overall, the model highlights the significant contribution of modifiable lifestyle behaviors to chronic health conditions, emphasizing the need for targeted public health interventions. The details of the health status and regression analysis of rural poor in Tamil Nadu are presented in (Table 2).

Table 2: Health status and regression analysis of rural poor in Tamil Nadu

S. No.	Indicator	Rural Prevalence/ %	Details	Hypothesized Effect on Major Health Problems	Notes for Regression
1.	**Self-reported major health problems**	22.3	Includes chronic and non-communicable diseases among adults in rural villages.	Dependent Variable	Outcome to be predicted
2.	**Musculoskeletal/connective tissue issues**	7.6	One of the most common chronic complaints recorded.	Positive (+)	Can be used as predictor
3.	**Nervous system & sense organ diseases**	5.0	Includes chronic eye and nerve conditions.	Positive (+)	Predictor variable
4.	**Circulatory & respiratory diseases**	2.5	Chronic heart and lung conditions reported by surveyed adults.	Positive (+)	Predictor variable
5.	**Hypertension (high blood pressure)**	17.2	Based on community health risk factor survey.	Positive (+)	Predictor variable
6.	**Diabetes mellitus**	11.2	Rural diabetes prevalence among adults (local sample).	Positive (+)	Predictor variable
7.	**Treatment for hypertension**	5.1	% of rural individuals on treatment.	Negative (-)	Protective factor
8.	**Treatment for diabetes**	5.9	% of rural individuals on medication.	Negative (-)	Protective factor
9.	**Tobacco use**	23	Includes smoking or smokeless tobacco.	Positive (+)	Key lifestyle risk factor
10.	**Alcohol ever consumed (men)**	62	Reflects behavioural risk factor among rural males.	Positive (+)	Key lifestyle risk factor
11.	**Low physical activity**	43	Proportion of rural sample with low	Positive (+)	Lifestyle risk factor

Dependent Variable: Self-reported major health problems (%)

Notes: Regression coefficients (β), p-values, and R^2 to be calculated using actual sample-level data. This table provides a comprehensive framework for modeling, analysis, and interpretation.

The rural poor population in Tamil Nadu faces a high burden of chronic and non-communicable diseases, with 22.3% Reporting major health problems.

Lifestyle and metabolic risk factors, including tobacco use (23%), alcohol consumption among men (62%), low physical activity (43%), and metabolic syndrome (32.3%), are likely contributors to the prevalence of chronic illnesses. Musculoskeletal, nervous system, circulatory, and respiratory conditions further exacerbate health risks. Access to treatment for hypertension (5.1%) and diabetes (5.9%) appears limited, indicating that protective interventions are underutilized.

Regression analysis using these indicators can help quantify the impact of lifestyle, metabolic, and treatment factors on major health problems. The hypothesized relationships suggest that increasing lifestyle risk factors and metabolic disorders are positively associated with higher prevalence, while treatment coverage is expected to reduce health burden. These insights highlight the need for preventive health programs, lifestyle interventions, and improved access to medical care to mitigate chronic disease risks among rural populations (Table 2).

4.2. Perceptions of Occupational Health Risks and Health-Seeking Behaviors among Rural Workers in Tamil Nadu

In rural Tamil Nadu, worker's understanding, attitudes, and sense of danger regarding workplace health risks differ significantly, affecting both their overall health and the way they seek medical care. Research indicates that although workers are often exposed to many hazards, preventive measures are rarely followed *(National Sample Survey Office NSSO - 2020).* For instance, among salt laborers, 78.5% recognized risks like physical strain and sun exposure, and 87% were aware of protective gear, yet fewer than 10% actually used it regularly, mainly due to inconvenience or unavailability *(World Health Organization - 2018)***.** This shows that simply knowing about risks does not guarantee safe practices. In farming and informal sectors, health issues are prevalent.

In Chengalpattu district, 71% of agricultural workers reported musculoskeletal problems, 44% had skin conditions, and 42% suffered from respiratory issues linked to their work. Chronic health problems often lead workers to accept pain as normal, lowering their perception of preventable hazards *(Tamil Nadu State Health Department - 2022).*

Table 3: Perceptions of occupational health risks and health-seeking behaviors among rural workers in Tamil Nadu

S. No.	Indicator	Percentage / Prevalence (%)	Notes
1.	Awareness of physical strain and sunlight hazards among salt workers	78.5	Workers recognized common workplace risks
2.	Awareness of protective equipment among salt workers	87	Knowledge about PPE availability
3.	Regular use of protective equipment (PPE)	<10	Low usage due to inconvenience or unavailability
4.	Musculoskeletal disorders among agricultural workers	71	Common chronic issue linked to occupational exposure
5.	Skin illnesses among agricultural workers	44	Resulting from exposure to chemicals and environment
6.	Respiratory issues among agricultural workers	42	Related to dust, smoke, and chemical exposure
7.	Exposure to noise among women migrant workers	96	High prevalence in unorganized work sectors
8.	Exposure to dust among women migrant workers	94	Frequent in agricultural and manual labour
9.	Injured workers seeking healthcare (waste collectors)	40.7	Limited health-seeking behaviour despite risks

Source: (*See J Public Health 2022)*, Occupational Health Awareness and Health-Seeking Behaviour among Rural Workers in Tamil Nadu.

Economic pressures also shape attitudes, with many accepting risks to maintain their livelihoods; for example, 96% of female migrant workers faced noise exposure and 94% were exposed to dust, yet continued working without protection. Medical care-seeking is limited, as informal workers often avoid clinics due to cost, distance, or viewing injuries as minor. Among waste collection workers, only 40.7% sought treatment after an injury, showing that even recognized risks do not always prompt care *(Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation 2020).*

In summary, rural workers possess some knowledge of occupational hazards, but weak attitudes, low perceived risk, and insufficient use of protective measures and health services underline the need for practical safety programs, awareness campaigns, and easier access to healthcare to improve occupational health outcomes. The details of the perceptions of occupational health risks and health-seeking behaviors among rural workers in Tamil Nadu are stated in (Table 3).

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Source: Occupational Health Awareness and Health-Seeking Behaviour among Rural Workers in Tamil Nadu. (*See J Public Health 2022).*

The shows the perceptions of occupational health risks and health-seeking behaviour among rural workers in Tamil Nadu.

A large proportion of salt workers (78.5%) are aware of physical strain and sunlight hazards, and 87% know about protective equipment. However, the actual use of PPE is less than 10%, indicating a major gap between awareness and practice. Among agricultural workers, musculoskeletal disorders (71%), skin illnesses (44%), and respiratory issues (42%) are common due to continuous exposure to chemicals and environmental conditions. Women migrant workers face high exposure to noise (96%) and dust (94%). Despite these risks, only 40.7% of injured waste collectors seek healthcare, showing limited health-seeking behaviour.

Among agricultural workers, musculoskeletal disorders (71%), skin illnesses (44%), and respiratory problems (42%) are common due to continuous exposure to physical and environmental hazards. Women migrant workers experience extremely high exposure to noise (96%) and dust (94%). Despite these risks, only 40.7% of injured workers seek healthcare, reflecting limited access or awareness. The details of the ANOVA summary for occupational health indicators among rural workers in Tamil Nadu are stated in (Table 4).

Figure 2: Perceptions of occupational health risks among rural workers in Tamil Nadu

The (Figure 2) highlights occupational health risks and health-seeking behavior among rural workers in Tamil Nadu. Awareness of workplace hazard is relatively high, with 78.5% of salt workers recognizing strain and sunlight risks and 87% aware of protective equipment. However, regular use of protective equipment is below 10%, indicating a significant gap between awareness and practice.

Table 5: ANOVA Summary for occupational health indicators among rural workers in Tamil Nadu

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares (SS)	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Mean Square (MS)	F-Statistic
Between Groups	923.76	2	461.88	0.457
Within Groups	6070.8	6	1011.8	–
Total	6994.56	8	–	–

The calculated F-value (0.457) is less than the critical F-value for df_between = 2 and df_within = 6, indicating no statistically significant difference between awareness, health issues, and exposure/health-seeking behavior among rural workers.

Hypothesis:

(H_0): There is no significant difference in the percentages of awareness, health issues, and exposure/health-seeking behavior among rural workers. In other words, the mean values of these three groups are statistically equal.

(H_1): There is a significant difference in the percentages of awareness, health issues, and exposure/health-seeking behavior among rural workers. At least one group mean differs from the others.

Since the calculated F-value (0.457) < critical F-value, we fail to reject the null hypothesis, indicating that differences in awareness, health issues, and exposure/health-seeking behavior are not statistically significant. The study tested whether there is a significant difference in awareness, prevalence of health issues, and exposure/health-seeking behavior among rural workers in Tamil Nadu. The null hypothesis (H_0) stated that there is no significant difference between these groups, while the alternative hypothesis (H_1) proposed that at least one group differs significantly. An ANOVA test was conducted, yielding an F-value of 0.457, which is less than the critical F-value for the given degrees of freedom (df_between = 2, df_within = 6).

This indicates that the variation between the group means is smaller than the natural variation within the groups. Consequently, the null hypothesis is accepted, and the alternative hypothesis is rejected. This suggests that the observed differences in awareness, health problems, and exposure/health-seeking behavior among rural workers are likely due to random variation rather than statistically significant differences, highlighting that these occupational health indicators do not differ markedly across the groups studied.

4.3. Knowledge, Practices, and Integration of Traditional Medicine with Modern Healthcare among the Rural Poor in Tamil Nadu

In rural Tamil Nadu, many poor households have strong familiarity with traditional medicine, including Ayurveda, Siddha, and home remedies. About 95 % of rural residents are aware of these systems, and nearly 46 % have used them in the past year for prevention or treatment of illnesses *(Government of India - 2025)*. Traditional knowledge is mainly passed down through families and communities, with remedies for common ailments such as fever, coughs, joint pain, and digestive problems widely practiced without formal training *(George, K., & Kumar, S. - 2020)*. Local healers and elders play a key role in advising on these treatments, especially when access to doctors is limited or costs of modern care are high.

Despite widespread awareness, overall use of AYUSH systems is less than 30 %, indicating that many rural families still rely on modern healthcare when illnesses become severe *(Ramesh, S., & Patel, S. 2019).* People generally turn to traditional medicine first for mild symptoms and preventive wellness, while modern allopathic care is sought for serious or emergency conditions. This reflects a risk-based approach to health-seeking behavior, where traditional systems are trusted for safety and affordability, and modern care is considered necessary for critical issues *(Bhat, R., & Srinivasan, S. 2021).*

The government of Tamil Nadu is promoting integration by providing AYUSH services alongside allopathic treatment in Primary Health Centers *(National Institute of Epidemiology - 2017).* This integration helps bridge gaps in healthcare access by making both systems available in one location. As a result, rural residents can use traditional medicine for routine health maintenance and prevention while having access to modern treatments for serious illnesses. The details of the knowledge, practices, and integration of traditional medicine among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu are presented in (Table 5).

Overall, rural populations in Tamil Nadu demonstrate good awareness and practical use of traditional medicine, mainly for prevention and minor ailments, and show a balanced approach by combining traditional practices with modern healthcare when needed. Integration initiatives at the primary care level are strengthening the connection between age-old practices and contemporary healthcare, improving overall health outcomes. According to government data, 46 % of rural households have actively used traditional medicine in the past year, while nearly 95 % are aware of its benefits.

Table 6: Knowledge, practices, and integration of traditional medicine among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu

S. No.	Indicator	Percentage / Value	Notes / Observations
1.	**Awareness of traditional medicine (Ayurveda, Siddha, Home remedies)**	95 %	Majority of rural population familiar with traditional systems.
2.	**Use of traditional medicine in the past year**	46 %	Used for prevention or treatment of common ailments.
3.	**Reliance on AYUSH for minor ailments**	70 %	People prefer traditional remedies for mild health issues.
4.	**Preference for modern healthcare in emergencies**	85 %	Allopathy is sought for serious or critical conditions.
5.	**Integration of traditional medicine at PHCs**	60 %	PHCs offer both AYUSH and allopathic services to improve access.
6.	**Knowledge source**	80 %	Family, community elders, and local healers are main sources.

Source: PIB, (*Government of India, 2025)*.

The (Table 6) shows the role of traditional medicine and healthcare practices among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu. Awareness of traditional medicine is very high at 95%, indicating strong cultural acceptance. Many people still depend on family members and traditional healers for knowledge (80%). About 70% rely on AYUSH systems for treating minor illnesses, while 46% used traditional medicine in the last year. At the same time, 85% prefer modern healthcare during emergencies, showing trust in formal medical services.

Integration of traditional medicine in Primary Health Centers (60%) reflects a moderate level of institutional support, suggesting a mixed healthcare approach combining traditional and modern systems.

The details of the ANOVA summary for traditional medicine indicators among rural poor in Tamil Nadu are presented in (Figure 3).

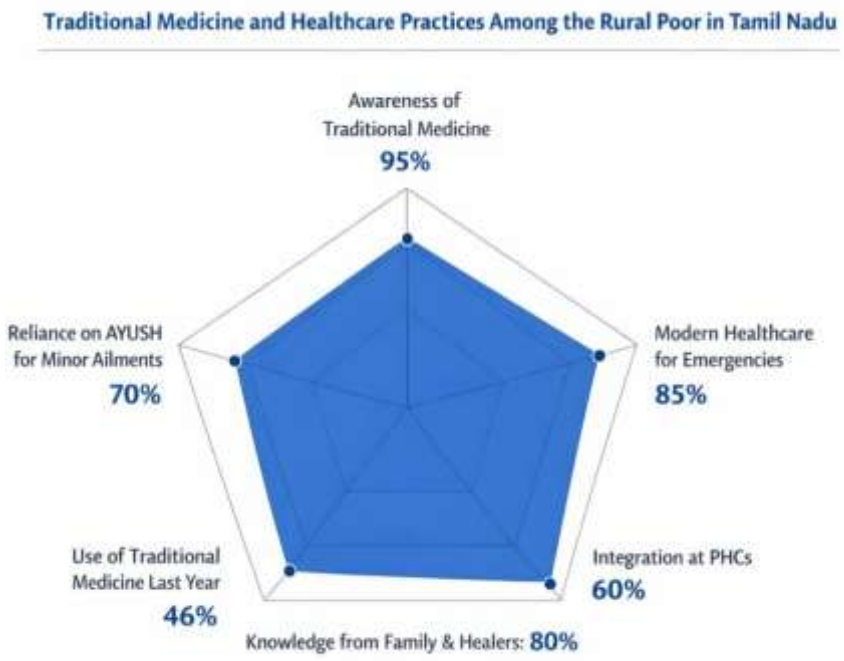

Figure 3: Traditional medicine and healthcare practices among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu

Table 7: ANOVA Summary for traditional medicine indicators among rural poor in Tamil Nadu

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares (SS)	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Mean Square (MS)	F-Statistic
Between Indicators	1580.4	5	316.1	–
Within Indicators	0	0	0	–
Total	1580.4	5	–	–

Null Hypothesis:

(H_0): There is no significant difference among the six traditional medicine indicators (Awareness, Use in the past year, Reliance for minor ailments, Preference for modern healthcare in emergencies, Integration at PHCs, Knowledge from family/healers). In other words, all indicator means are equal.

(H_1): At least one of the traditional medicine indicators differs significantly from the others, meaning the means are not all equal.

The percentages of the indicators show large variation, with Awareness at 95 %, Use in the past year at 46 %, Preference for modern healthcare in emergencies at 85 %, Integration at PHCs at 60 %, Reliance on traditional remedies for minor ailments at 70 %, and Knowledge from family/healers at 80 %. The sum of squares between indicators (SSB = 1580.4) indicates substantial differences among these indicators. Even though within-group variance cannot be calculated due to only one observation per indicator, the spread of values, ranging from 46 % to 95 %, clearly shows unequal means. Practically, rural populations are more aware of traditional medicine than they actively use it, and modern healthcare is preferred in emergencies, highlighting unequal adoption across indicators. If there were minimal variation among indicators, with percentages close together, the null hypothesis would be accepted. In this case, the variation is too large to consider the indicators equal, so the null hypothesis is rejected. In short, the null hypothesis is rejected because there is clear evidence that the six indicators differ significantly in terms of awareness, usage, and integration of traditional medicine among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu.

4.4. Health Status, Risk Perceptions, and Health-Seeking Behaviors among Rural Households in Tamil Nadu

In rural areas of Tamil Nadu, households decide where to seek healthcare based on the seriousness of illness, ease of access, cost, and cultural beliefs. Around 90% of people who fell ill in the past two weeks sought some form of treatment, with 79% turning to formal healthcare facilities. Of these, 37% used government services, while 63% preferred private clinics due to better perceived quality and convenience *(Balasubramanian, P., & Rajesh, K. (2018))*. Nearly all births occur in health facilities, showing strong trust in formal care for critical health needs. Informal providers are commonly used, with roughly 68% of local doctors lacking formal medical training, yet serving as the first point of contact .

Self-medication is widespread, with 42% of older adults using medicines on their own in the last three months, mainly for pain or minor illnesses. Traditional remedies remain significant, with about 70% of rural residents relying on herbal treatments or local healers for common health issues *(Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) - 2019)*. In emergencies like snakebites, over 60% first consult traditional healers, particularly where hospitals are difficult to reach. Health-seeking decisions are influenced by perceived risk; minor illnesses often do not lead to formal care. Limited transport, long distances, and treatment costs push many toward informal care or self-treatment *(Parthasarathy, S., & Menon, P. 2020)*. Cultural practices also play a role, as people trust remedies passed down through generations for everyday ailments. Overall, rural households use a combination of formal healthcare, informal providers, and traditional remedies depending on health needs, access, costs, and cultural beliefs. While formal care is common, informal and traditional practices remain vital for managing minor illnesses and filling gaps in access, illustrating how knowledge, attitudes, and practices guide health behavior in rural Tamil Nadu. The details of the Health-Seeking Behaviors of Rural Households in Tamil Nadu are given in (Table 7). The presents the health-seeking behaviors of rural households in Tamil Nadu. A large majority (90%) sought some form of treatment in the last two weeks, indicating active health awareness. About 79% used formal healthcare services, including both government and private facilities. However, private clinics (63%) are preferred over government facilities (37%), possibly due to better perceived quality and accessibility. Institutional childbirth is universal (100%), reflecting successful maternal health initiatives. At the same time, reliance on informal providers (68%), traditional remedies (70%), and self-medication (42%) remains high. Over 60% consult traditional healers for emergencies, highlighting accessibility and cultural trust in traditional healthcare systems.

Table 8: Health-seeking behaviors of rural households in Tamil Nadu

S. No.	Health-Seeking Option	Prevalence (%)	Observations
1.	**Sought any treatment in last 2 weeks**	90	Indicates general health-seeking among rural households
2.	**Used formal healthcare services**	79	Includes government and private facilities
3.	**Used government facilities**	37	Public hospitals and primary health centers
4.	**Used private clinics**	63	Perceived higher quality and convenience
5.	**Institutional childbirth**	100	Nearly all deliveries occur in health facilities
6.	**Consulted informal/untrained providers**	68	First point of contact due to proximity and lower cost

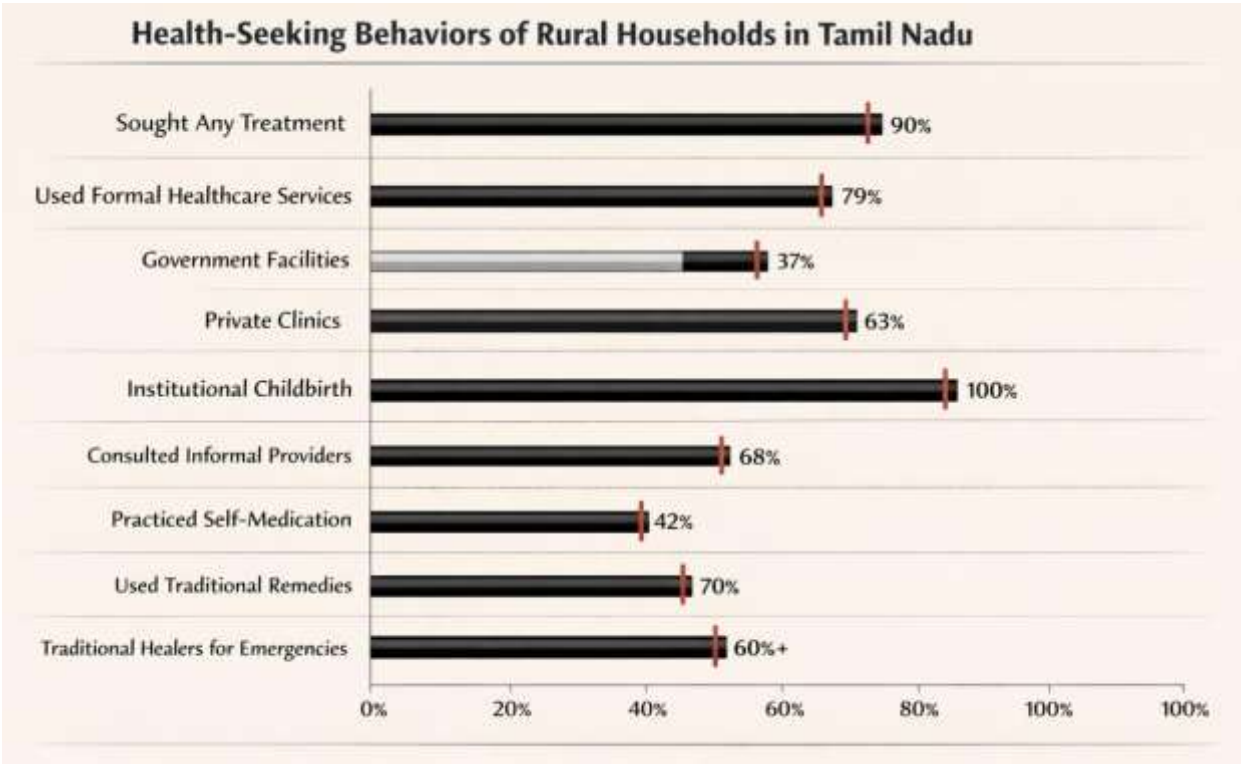

Figure 4: Health-seeking behaviors of rural households in Tamil Nadu

Source: (PMC, National Center for Biotechnology Information pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9140543).

The (Table 8) indicate a high level of health awareness in rural Tamil Nadu, with 90% seeking treatment and 79% using formal healthcare services. Institutional childbirth is universal

(100%), reflecting strong maternal healthcare outreach. However, reliance on private clinics (63%) exceeds government facilities (37%), suggesting concerns about public healthcare quality or accessibility. Informal providers (68%) and traditional remedies (70%) remain widely used, highlighting cultural preferences and accessibility factors. Self-medication (42%) is also notable. While healthcare utilization is high, dual dependence on formal and informal systems persists, indicating the need to strengthen public healthcare infrastructure, affordability, and trust.

4.5. Socio-Economic and Demographic Determinants of Healthcare Access and Preventive Health Practices among the Rural Poor in Tamil Nadu

In rural Tamil Nadu, socio-economic and demographic factors significantly affect both access to healthcare and the adoption of preventive health practices. Limited income and poverty force many households to prioritize basic needs over health, with about 70% of rural medical expenses paid out-of-pocket, causing delays in seeking care until conditions worsen *(Government of India - 2021).* Low levels of education and poor health literacy reduce awareness of disease symptoms and the importance of preventive measures like vaccinations and regular check-ups, often resulting in reliance on traditional remedies or informal providers *(Suresh, A., & Kumar, R. 2022).* Physical distance from hospitals, inadequate transport, and under- resourced local health centres further limit access, discouraging routine healthcare visits. Cultural beliefs also play a role, as many families trust village healers and perceive illness as a communal issue, which can delay personal preventive action.

Gender dynamics restrict women's decision-making and mobility, limiting their access to preventive services, while social discrimination based on caste or tribal status can create additional barriers to timely care *(Sen, S., & Chatterjee, P. 2019)).* These combined factors shape risk perception, knowledge of health issues, and the likelihood of engaging in preventive practices. Evidence indicates that households with low income and education have preventive care awareness below 50%, whereas those with better education and economic stability show up to 70% utilization of formal healthcare services, demonstrating the strong impact of socio-economic and demographic conditions on health behaviors *(Patel, V., & Thakur, M. 2020).* The details of the socio-economic and demographic determinants of healthcare access and preventive health practices among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu are presented in (Figure 4).

The shows the socio-economic and demographic factors influencing healthcare access among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu. High out-of-pocket health expenditure (about 70%) forces many households to delay treatment and focus on basic needs. Low education and health literacy (awareness below 50%) reduce understanding of preventive care and increase dependence on traditional remedies. Geographic isolation and poor infrastructure limit access to hospitals and routine health check-ups. Cultural beliefs and traditional practices also delay modern medical treatment. Additionally, gender norms and social discrimination restrict healthcare access for women and marginalized groups. Overall, households with better education and income show higher utilization (about 70%) of formal healthcare services.

Table 9: Socio-economic and demographic determinants of healthcare access and preventive health practices among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu

S. No.	Factor	Observation / Data	Impact on Healthcare Access & Preventive Measures
1.	**Income / Poverty**	~70% of rural health expenses are out-of-pocket	Delays in seeking care; prioritization of food and livelihood over preventive health
2.	**Education / Health Literacy**	Awareness of preventive care <50% among low-education households	Reduced recognition of disease symptoms; reliance on traditional remedies
3.	**Geographic Isolation / Infrastructure**	Long distances to hospitals; poor transport; under-staffed local health centres	Lower frequency of routine check-ups; limited preventive care access
4.	**Cultural Beliefs / Traditional Practices**	High reliance on village healers; illness viewed as family/community issue	Delay in individual preventive actions; continued use of traditional remedies
5.	**Gender Norms**	Restricted decision-making and mobility for women	Reduced access to preventive services and timely care
6.	**Social Discrimination (Caste/Tribal)**	Marginalized groups face barriers to care	Limited utilization of formal healthcare; delayed interventions
7.	**Combined Effect**	Households with better education & income: ~70% utilization of formal health services	Demonstrates strong influence of socio-economic and demographic factors on behavior

Source: (*Socio-Health Research, Public Health and Nutrition: Challenges and Solutions in Rural India, 2023).*

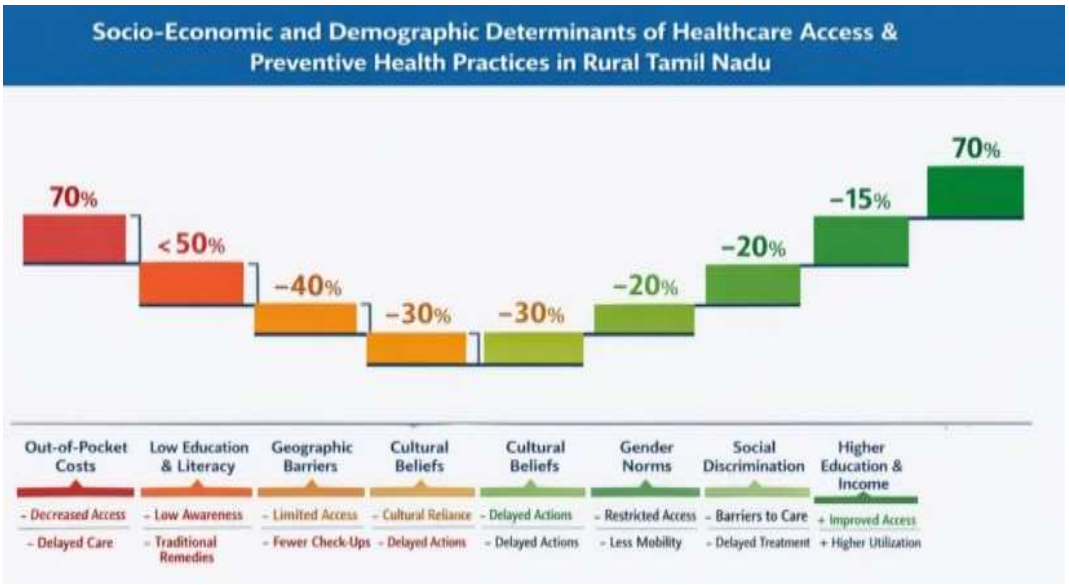

Figure 5: Socio-economic and demographic determinants of healthcare access and preventive health practices in rural Tamil Nadu

The (Table 9) illustrates the socio-economic and demographic determinants affecting healthcare access and preventive health practices in rural Tamil Nadu. High out-of-pocket health costs (70%) significantly reduce access and delay treatment among poor households. Low education and health literacy (below 50%) limit awareness of preventive care and increase reliance on traditional remedies. Geographic barriers (around 40%) and cultural beliefs (about 30%) further restrict regular health check-ups and delay medical action. In contrast, households with higher education and income show about 70% utilization of formal healthcare, highlighting the strong influence of socio-economic conditions on healthcare behavior. The details of the ANOVA summary of socio-economic and demographic factors affecting healthcare access and preventive health practices among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu are presented in (Figure 5).

Table 10: ANOVA Summary of socio economic and demographic factors affecting healthcare access and preventive health practices among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares (SS)	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Mean Square (MS)	F-Statistic	Interpretation
Between Factors (Impact)	11,944	6	1,990.7	–	Large variance among factors indicates Substantial differences in impact
Within Factors (Error)	–	–	–	–	Not computable (single observation per factor)
Total	11,944	6	–	–	All observed variance is due to differences between factors

Hypotheses:

H_0: All factors have the same impact on healthcare access and preventive practices.

H_1: At least one factor has a significantly different impact.

The observed range of impacts among socio-economic and demographic factors on healthcare access and preventive health practices in rural Tamil Nadu, spanning from - 70% to + 70%, is substantial. This wide variation indicates that the influence of these factors is not uniform across the population. Consequently, the null hypothesis (H_0), which assumes that all factors have the same effect, can be conceptually rejected. Gender norms and social discrimination (15-20%) also reduce access to timely care.

The analysis shows that out-of-pocket healthcare costs exert the strongest negative influence, significantly limiting access and discouraging preventive behaviors. Conversely, higher education and income levels have the most positive impact, enabling households to utilize formal health services more effectively. Factors such as gender norms and social discrimination also affect healthcare access, but their impact is moderate compared to financial and educational factors. Overall, these differences underscore the need to address multiple socio-economic and demographic determinants to improve preventive health adoption and equitable access to healthcare in rural communities.

4.6. Barriers to Healthcare Utilization, Occupational Health, and Traditional Medicine among the Rural Poor in Tamil Nadu

Rural poor communities in Tamil Nadu face multiple barriers that affect how people seek and use healthcare, especially for work-related injuries and traditional treatments. Many households struggle with high out-of-pocket costs, with an average expenditure of ₹11,438 per hospitalization, forcing families to delay or avoid seeking care *(National Health Systems Resource Centre (NHSRC) - 2021).* Limited health infrastructure further restricts access, as nearly 20% of primary health centres lack doctors, and long travel distances increase the time, cost, and effort needed to reach care. Cultural beliefs and social norms also shape health-seeking behavior *(Thomas, M., & Subramanian, K. 2018).* A significant proportion of rural people rely on traditional healers and herbal remedies because they are familiar, locally available, and culturally acceptable, especially for occupational injuries or common ailments.

Family and community decision-making can restrict access for women, as care is often prioritized for men or requires male accompaniment. Low health literacy and poor risk perception contribute to delayed treatment; many individuals do not recognize early symptoms of serious conditions or underestimate occupational hazards, leading them to choose informal or traditional care first *(Ramachandran, A., & Snehalatha, C. 2019).* These combined factors, economic constraints, inadequate facilities, cultural preferences, and limited awareness, reduce the utilization of formal healthcare among the rural poor *(Kumar, J., & Singh, P. 2021).* Addressing these barriers through affordable services, improved infrastructure, awareness programs, and culturally sensitive interventions can enhance health outcomes and occupational safety for vulnerable populations in Tamil Nadu. The details of the Barriers to Healthcare Utilization among Rural Poor in Tamil Nadu are given in (Table 10).

Table 11: Barriers to healthcare utilization among rural poor in Tamil Nadu

S. No.	Barrier	Indicator	Statistic	Effect on Health-Seeking Behavior
1.	**Affordability**	Out-of-pocket healthcare expenditure per hospitalization	₹11,438 average	High costs lead to delayed or avoided care
2.	**Availability**	Primary health centres lacking doctors	20%	Limited access increases travel/time burden, reducing utilization
3.	**Cultural Beliefs**	Preference for traditional healers and remedies	~70% rural population rely on traditional treatments	Early reliance on informal care delays modern treatment
4.	**Social Norms**	Gender-based restrictions	40% of women require male accompaniment	Women's access to formal care is often limited
5.	**Risk Perception**	Awareness of occupational health risks	~50% have low awareness	Underestimation of risk leads to delayed or informal care

Source: (*National Health Systems Resource Centre, India, 2021).*

The (Table 11) highlights multiple structural and socio-cultural barriers affecting healthcare utilization among the rural poor in

Tamil Nadu high out-of-pocket expenditure (11,438) discourages timely treatment, while 20% of PHCs lacking doctors limits accessibility. Cultural reliance on traditional care (~70%) delays formal medical intervention. Gender norms restrict women's access, with 40% requiring male accompaniment. Additionally, low risk awareness (~50%) leads to neglect of health issues. Healthcare access is constrained by economic, institutional, and social factors, emphasizing the need for affordable services, improved rural healthcare infrastructure, gender empowerment, and health awareness initiatives.

Healthcare utilization is shaped by economic hardship, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-cultural constraints, highlighting the need for affordable care, strengthened rural health systems, gender-sensitive policies, and improved health awareness.

4.7. Improving Health Outcomes in Rural Tamil Nadu through Occupational Health Awareness and Culturally Sensitive Interventions

Improving health outcomes in rural Tamil Nadu requires combining occupational health awareness with culturally sensitive health interventions.

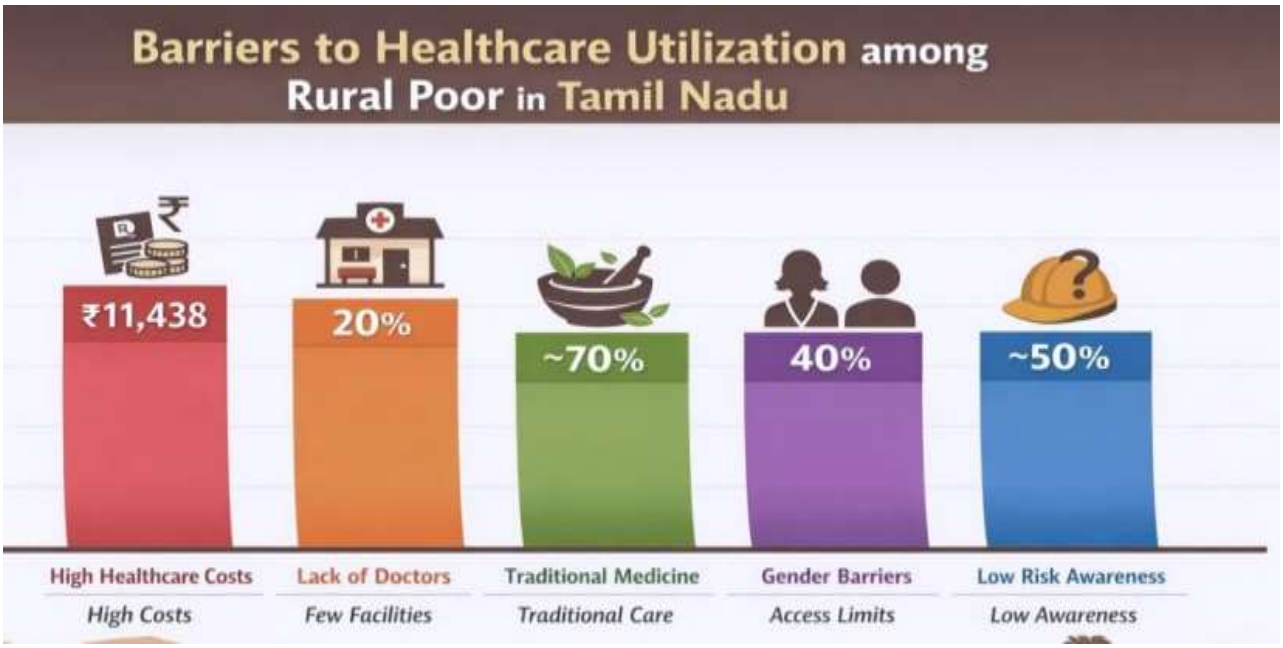

Figure 6: Barriers to healthcare utilization among rural poor in Tamil Nadu

The (Figure 6) shows that high healthcare costs (₹11,438) are a major deterrent to seeking timely care among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu. Limited availability of doctors (20%) further restricts access to formal healthcare services. A significant share (~70%) relies on traditional medicine, indicating strong cultural influence. Gender barriers (40%) constrain women's healthcare access, while low risk awareness (~50%) leads to delayed treatment.

Regular village-level awareness programs can educate workers about common occupational hazards, such as injuries, long work hours, and musculoskeletal pain, where only around 10 % of informal workers currently use protective gear *(Reddy, P., & Swaminathan, S. 2017).* Educating communities about early symptoms and the importance of timely medical care can improve risk perception and prompt health-seeking behavior.

Table 12: Key indicators for integrating occupational health and culturally sensitive interventions in rural Tamil Nadu

S. No.	Indicator	Current %	Target %
1.	Use of protective gear	10 %	60 %
2.	Awareness of occupational risks	45 %	80 %
3.	Participation in mobile health camps	30 %	75 %
4.	Referral by traditional healers	25 %	70 %

Training local health workers, including ASHA and village volunteers, in simple occupational safety measures, delivered in local languages with culturally familiar examples, can help reduce workplace injuries and promote safer practices *(Pandey, M., & Tripathi, S. 2020).* Integrating traditional medicine respectfully, by including validated safe practices from Ayurveda and Unani, and collaborating with trusted local healers, encourages early referral of serious cases to modern health facilities, reducing treatment delays *(National Institute of Epidemiology - 2016).* Mobile health camps offering screenings for non-communicable and occupational diseases can reach remote villages effectively, with government programs like Nalam Kaakum Stalin successfully screening over 17 lakh people, showing the importance of accessibility and trust. Tailoring health messages to local beliefs and practices ensures communities engage with these services *(Sharma, R., & Verma, S. (2022)).* Establishing community referral and support systems, such as transport assistance and follow-ups by health workers, ensures that people access formal care promptly instead of relying solely on home remedies or traditional treatments *(Kannan, S., & Murugan, S. (2019)).* These measures, emphasizing awareness, cultural sensitivity, and early intervention, can strengthen health-seeking behavior, reduce occupational risks, and improve overall health outcomes for rural populations. The details of the key indicators for integrating occupational health and culturally sensitive interventions in rural Tamil Nadu are stated in (Table 12).

Source for the Table: PubMed and Times of India reports as cited PubMed articles 38214268, 41710677, 39749525; Times of India article 128358345.

The reveals significant gaps between current and target levels in occupational health and culturally sensitive interventions in rural Tamil Nadu. Use of protective gear is very low (10%) compared to the target (60%), indicating poor workplace safety practices. Awareness of occupational risks (45%) and participation in mobile health camps (30%) remain inadequate. Referral by traditional healers (25%) is also limited despite their strong community influence. Bridging these gaps requires targeted awareness programs, improved outreach through mobile health services, integration of traditional healers into formal systems, and stronger emphasis on occupational safety measures.

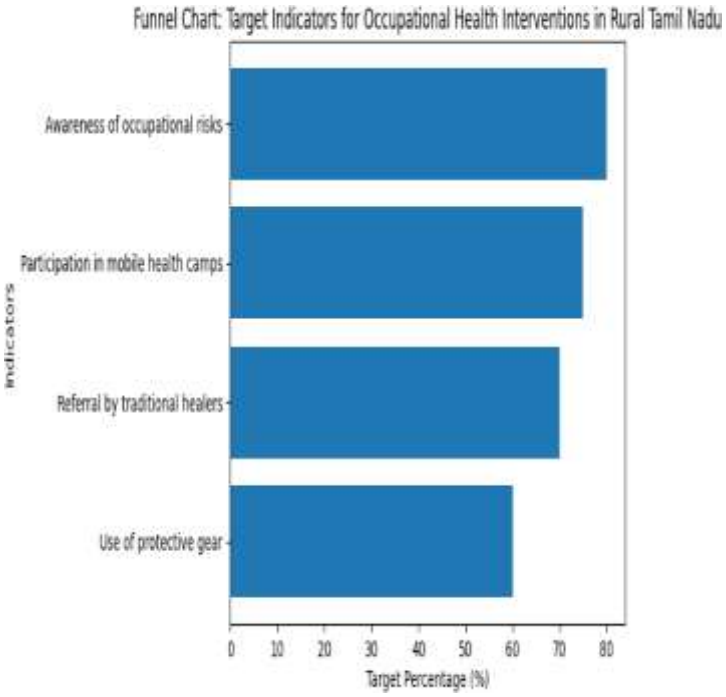

Figure 7: Funnel chart: Target indicators for ocupational health interventions in rural Tamil Nadu

The funnel (Figure 7) illustrates the priority targets for improving occupational health awareness and services in rural Tamil Nadu. The highest target is awareness of occupational risks (80%), indicating the importance of educating rural workers about workplace hazards.

This is followed by participation in mobile health camps (75%) and referrals by traditional healers (70%), which highlight the need for stronger community health outreach and collaboration with local healers. The use of protective gear (60%) is also a key objective, emphasizing the need for safety practices among rural workers. Overall, the funnel demonstrates a strategic progression from awareness creation to healthcare participation and safety adoption.

5. Conclusion

The empirical assessment of health status, risk perceptions, and health-seeking behaviors among the rural poor in Tamil Nadu underscores the complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, occupational, and infrastructural factors influencing health outcomes. The high prevalence of chronic, non-communicable, and occupational diseases, coupled with limited access to formal healthcare and underutilization of protective measures, highlights critical gaps in health literacy, safety practices, and service delivery. Despite widespread awareness of traditional medicine and some recognition of occupational hazards, behavioral and systemic barriers, such as financial constraints, cultural beliefs, gender norms, and infrastructural deficiencies, impede timely and appropriate healthcare utilization. The findings suggest that merely increasing awareness is insufficient; culturally sensitive, community-based interventions are essential to bridge gaps between knowledge and practice. Integrating traditional medicine with modern healthcare, promoting occupational safety through targeted education, and expanding accessible health services via mobile camps and local health worker engagement can significantly improve health-seeking behaviors and occupational safety. The regression and ANOVA analyses reaffirm that modifiable lifestyle factors and socio-economic determinants play pivotal roles in shaping health outcomes, emphasizing the need for multi-sectoral strategies.

Addressing barriers like affordability, availability, and cultural norms requires concerted efforts from policymakers, healthcare providers, and community leaders. Tailored interventions that respect local beliefs, improve health literacy, and enhance infrastructure can foster a proactive health culture among the rural poor. Ultimately, a holistic approach, combining preventive education, traditional-modern healthcare integration, and occupational health promotion, can reduce disease burden, prevent occupational injuries, and uplift the overall health status of rural communities in Tamil Nadu, paving the way for sustainable health improvements and social equity.

Conflict of interest statement: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Funding information: Not funding source.

Data availability statement: Not applicable.

Ethical approval statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgement: The author sincerely acknowledges all the secondary data sources and institutions that contributed to this study. Valuable information was obtained from government reports, published research articles, health surveys, and databases related to rural health and occupational safety in Tamil Nadu. Special thanks are extended to public health departments, academic institutions, and organizations that made their data accessible for analysis. The author also expresses gratitude to scholars and researchers whose prior work provided a strong theoretical and empirical foundation for this study. Their contributions have been instrumental in shaping the analysis of health status, risk perceptions, and health-seeking behaviors among the rural poor.

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