

# Unraveling Cultural Perceptions and Attitudes towards Dhat Syndrome in Asian American Communities: A Window into Diagnosis and Treatment Influences

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## Objective

Dhat syndrome is a culture-bound syndrome originating from South Asia, characterized by a strong belief in the harmful effects of semen loss on health. The fear is fueled by the belief that the loss of semen leads to physical and psychological problems, including a perceived loss of sexual potency and vital energy. This research aims to explore the cultural beliefs and attitudes surrounding Dhat Syndrome and its impact on Asian American populations. The goal is to examine the cultural attitude towards the diagnosis and treatment options of semen loss.

**Keywords:** Dhat Syndrome, Cultural attitudes, Asian American Population, Cultural-Bound Syndrome, Semen Loss

## Background

Dhat Syndrome is a culture-bound syndrome that originates from India and refers to strong anxiety and hypochondriacal beliefs associated with the discharge of semen. Similarly, in China, semen is viewed as the essence of energy or chi, so loss of chi is considered a sign of weakness [1]. The prevalence of Dhat Syndrome in Asian American populations is not well understood, but cultural attitudes towards semen loss play a vital role in the diagnosis and treatment of this condition. Exploring the cultural beliefs facilitates important insights into the overall management of individuals.

## Literature Review

This comprehensive literature review illuminates the intricate of Dhat Syndrome, predominantly observed in South Asian populations. As these communities experience increased diversity due to migration, delving into its multifaceted cultural interpretations becomes imperative. The interplay between traditional concepts of energy balance and sexual health, coupled with deeply ingrained societal taboos surrounding discussions on such matters, significantly shapes the nuanced understanding of Dhat Syndrome symptoms. It's crucial to recognize that the pervasive stigma attached to discussions about sexual health, especially within conservative cultural contexts, further impedes individuals' willingness to seek assistance and contributes to the syndrome's hidden prevalence.

Moreover, this review highlights the fascinating variations in

attitudes toward the syndrome across generations and diverse cultural backgrounds. While some individuals hold steadfast to traditional beliefs, others are adopting more contemporary biomedical viewpoints, resulting in a spectrum of perspectives. This complex interplay, coupled with the scarcity of culturally sensitive mental health resources, adds to the psychological distress experienced by those affected.

To address these multifaceted challenges, culturally tailored interventions emerge as a pivotal strategy. By harmoniously integrating age-old beliefs with modern biomedical insights, a platform is established for fostering candid conversations and dismantling deeply entrenched stigma. Importantly, community-based education initiatives and enhanced mental health awareness campaigns emerge as promising avenues for addressing the intricate landscape of Dhat Syndrome within the dynamic context of Asian American communities.

## Method

Highly impactful words like "Dhat syndrome," "cultural beliefs," "Asian American populations," and "culture-bound syndrome" were used as keywords and typed on Google Scholar search bar where multiple highly cited articles were screened. All data was compiled to offer an overview of how cultural attitudes impact the Asian American population in Dhat Syndrome.

## Results

Dhat Syndrome, characterized by a strong belief that semen loss

leads to loss of sexual potency and body energy, stems from Hindu mythology where many men believe in its detrimental effects. No specific treatment is available for this syndrome, and the clinical course remains unknown [2]. Research by Malhotra and Wig (1975) among 175 males in India (aged 30 to 50 yrs) reveals that a significant number of male participants perceived semen loss as harmful; 30% preferred no intervention, while 22.5% advocated for psychological and behavioral persuasion by relatives to avoid negative influences, masturbation, and erotic literature. Some men suggested dietary interventions, and 6% recommended marriage as treatment [1]. Asian American populations, being influenced by various cultures, have different beliefs. In Buddhism, belief is that an individual's problem is caused by his past actions/fate (karma). In Hinduism and Islam, belief is that one should control their desires and emotions, the problem is caused by God and that they should repent for their sins [3]. Based on these beliefs, for instance, an Asian American Hindu man experiencing Dhat Syndrome perceives his symptoms being caused by excessive attachment to sexual desire. The West-trained mental health clinician treats him with an antidepressant, making the patient feel more upset and dissatisfied, leading him to pursue traditional treatments such as yoga therapy, to help him detach from his sexual desire [4,5].

### Conclusion

Based on the research findings and the cultural beliefs outlined, Dhat Syndrome, a Culture bound syndrome, is a condition characterized by a strong belief in the harmful effects of semen loss on sexual potency and overall body energy [2]. The study showed treatment approaches of Dhat Syndrome, such as no intervention, psychological and behavioral persuasion by relatives to avoid negative influences, taking dietary interventions, and getting married [1]. The potential discrepancy between the treatment approach of a West- trained Mental health clinician and the preferences of the Asian American Hindu patient experiencing Dhat Syndrome proves that the influence of cultural beliefs on the perception and treatment of Dhat Syndrome differs based on cultural backgrounds [3,4]. The emphasis is mental health clinician and healthcare providers need to be aware of diverse cultural and traditional beliefs as it can impact how clients perceive their symptoms and what interventions they are willing to accept when addressing Dhat Syndrome considering the cultural nuances and individual's perspectives and preference of treatment. Understanding and respecting these beliefs can contribute to a more effective and culturally sensitive patient- centered medical care [5,6].

### Implications

The findings of this research have significant implications for healthcare professionals dealing with patients from Asian

American backgrounds. Understanding cultural attitudes towards Dhat syndrome can lead to more culturally sensitive and effective interventions, thereby improving patient outcomes and overall healthcare experience for Asian American populations. By incorporating culturally appropriate treatment approaches and considering individual beliefs and preferences, healthcare providers can offer a patient-centered approach that respects and addresses the cultural nuances of Dhat syndrome. Additionally, this research opens avenues for further investigation into the impact of cultural beliefs on other aspects of mental health and healthcare for Asian American populations.

### Declarations

#### *Availability of Data and Material*

Not applicable.

#### *Competing Interests*

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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#### *Authors'Contributions*

Chiraag Ashokkumar summarized the existing literature. Albert Starvin and Krittikka Dharmapuri contributed to the manuscript drafting and editing. All authors read and approve the final manuscript.

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