



livelihoods

today and tomorrow

May 2018

‘Sukshetram’

Traditional Healers

The world needs more healing hands, but our very own roots of revival are on the verge of losing the craft to the definite, unable to shellac the shell in the contexts of changing scenario. Folk wisdom is a collective and accumulated knowledge base of a society which is rooted in experience and practical considerations. In India, the folk wisdom manifested in the traditional healing practices is, indeed, based on complex and cohesive systems of thoughts and beliefs, derived from philosophical texts and scriptures. Livelihoods ‘Sukshetram Supplement’ explores the traditional healers, their practices and plight!



The world needs more healing hands, but our very own roots of revival are on the verge of losing the craft to the definite, unable to shellac the shell in the contexts of changing scenario. Folk wisdom is a collective and accumulated knowledge base of a society which is rooted in experience and practical considerations. In India, the folk wisdom manifested in the traditional healing practices is, indeed, based on complex and cohesive systems of thoughts and beliefs, derived from philosophical texts and scriptures.

Since time immemorial, mankind has used extracts from different plants to cure many diseases and thereby relieving them of physical agony. Many countries have their own traditional or indigenous forms of healing. Traditional healing is holistic, and aims to achieve overall well-being of the person. India is blessed with a rich and diverse heritage of cultural traditions. These traditions are also associated with use of wild plants as medicinal herbs. The use of medicinal herbs is still a

tradition adopted by indigenous communities living in undulating hills and at the foothills of dense forests. Indian medical knowledge comes in two forms: traditional or indigenous system and the allopathic or cosmopolitan system. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines traditional medicine as "the sum total of the knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness". Across the

Traditional Folk Healers in India		
S.No	Traditional Folk Healers Medicine - man	Art of healing
1	House wife and village healers	Home remedies
2	Traditional birth attendant ((Mid wife)	Normal Delivery
3	Herbal healers	Common ailments
4	Ojhas & Amchis	Common ailments
5	Bone settlers	Orthopaedics and bone fracture
6	Hakims & Vaidas	Common ailments
7	Vish Vaidya (snake bite, scorpion - sting, dog bite, & fish poison)	
8	Special healers _ Vaidyas	Eye, Skin, Dental, Arthritis , Liver, Wounds,Piles, Kidney, Bowel

world, traditional medicine is either the mainstay of healthcare or serves as a component to it. Traditional medicine, traditional treatments, and traditional practices are widely used in India. In rural areas where 70% of the Indian population lives, the traditional methods become the main & sometimes the only, source of health care. Thus, traditional medicine is, by default, the first choice.

Indian practitioners began evolving the art of healing thousands of years ago. These practitioners or individuals have been healing the communities through nature and are generally called by varied names such as medicine men or women, traditional healers, holy men or women, ethno-medical practitioners, indigenous healers or folk healers. The traditional medical practitioner or healer can be defined as "someone who is recognized by the community in which he lives as competent to provide health care by using vegetable, animal and mineral substances and certain other methods based on the social, cultural and religious backgrounds as well as the prevailing knowledge, attitudes and beliefs regarding physical, mental and social well-being and the causation of disease and disability in the community". They are scattered across the country and are a very heterogeneous group of people. They often belong to the same clan and subscribe to the same belief system. The power to heal comes unsought to many healers. They are not formally educated to practice their art but learn it through apprenticeship and by assisting their gurus. They rely on the wealth of forests and the knowledge that has travelled down through the generations. Most of the healers belong to an oral tradition, but family manuscripts also play a part in the transmission of knowledge. They have extensive knowledge on the use of plants and herbs for medicinal and nutritional purposes. The traditional healers are involved in healing their patients through various traditional medicines available in their vicinity. They have separate spiritual and herbal healing practices. In rural areas, biomedical facilities are often not

to be found within a reasonable distance and if available, are often of bad quality or not affordable. Traditional medical practitioners treat all age groups and all problems, using and administering medicines that are readily available and affordable. Their treatment is comprehensive and has curative, protective and preventive elements, and can be either natural or ritual or both, depending on the cause of the disease. The therapies provided by traditional healers contain many medicines for one ailment. Several plants are identified and used against one disease and are used according to their availability in the region. Out of the various medicines, one medicine is selected by these healers against a particular disease according to the symptoms and secondary effects. Most of the traditional healers are specialized as snake bite healers, bone setters, jaundice healers, midwives, etc., as well as those who treat a spectrum of common and chronic ailments such as paralysis, joint pains and knee pains, itching, cough, fever, wounds including burns and asthma. They perform the healing treatments for physical ailments by using plants and herbs, steam bathing and a sauna-like treatment for detoxification.

Apart from being a first line of resort for the treatment of common diseases and a few chronic ailments, the folk healers have offered alternatives for certain diseases for which the biomedicine has no cure. Folk healers also offer alternatives for biomedical treatments that patients cannot afford. Their services are generally affordable for people with limited finances. Along with providing treatment to diseases, elderly women of the villages as midwives perform deliveries and provide herbal medicine to menstruation related diseases for the girls and women. The healers are also involved in providing treatment to cure diseases and wounds of animals. Presently, people in rural areas still prefer traditional healing systems as a better alternative to allopathic medical system because traditional healthcare systems are affordable and accessible to them. The healers are also exploring the possibilities of healing the mental disorders and are emphasizing on putting continuous efforts for the betterment of the community.

India is a country inhabited by a large number of people belongig to diverse ethnic groups. . There are over 700 different tribes & other ethnic groups residing mostly in rural areas in India. Most of them are still living in the remote forest areas, and depend to a great extend on the indigenous systems of medicine. The knowledge of traditional medicine has been transmitted orally from generation to generation since time immemorial.. The traditional medicine in the tribal areas usually has some or the other relevance with the plants that are found to be in these areas. The Central India comprises states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Orissa and Jharkhand. The ethnic people of this region are Baiga, Bhariya, Bhil, Gond, Hill korwa, Birhor, Khairwar, Rawat and Sahariyas. They use a wide range of wild plants for their healthcare.

Known as “Folk Healers” in the Ministry of AYUSH, and called by region specific names such as “Nati Vaidya” in Karnataka, “Vaidyan” in Kerala, “Cittarakal” practitioners of Siddha Medicine in Tamil Nadu, the “Hakims” who practice Unani, Maibas and Maibis of Manipur and so on. In fact, it is likely that every State in India has its own unique traditional healing system, which uses plant species and methods that are native to its region. The extent of combined knowledge of these systems is vast. A count of the plants used for medicinal purposes shows that the Ayurvedic texts cite some 400, while the documentation of folk practice and ethno-botany reveals about 6000 species in use across the country! (Source: The Status and role of Ayush and local health traditions in public health. IAS Journal, 2012)

1. Thottianaickans of Tamil Nadu
2. Nagas of Nagaland
3. Meitei community in Manipur
4. Nishi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh
5. Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh
6. Khonds of Andhra Pradesh
7. Bhil tribe in Madhya Pradesh
8. Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh
9. Miris of Assam
10. Mizo tribes of Mizoram

Quacks

Genuine traditional healers will not defend or support quacks, especially if you stress that quacks damage the reputation of all good healers and of traditional medicine. Decide with them what can be done to oblige the quacks to stop their bad and dangerous practices. The good healers may not know what to do but at least they will understand that you want to protect them and their medicine by opposing the quacks. They do not want to turn the quacks into their enemies. They are afraid that the quacks will seek revenge and make them become sick or even die. Sometimes a treatment that is widely practised by healers, and not only by quacks, may be controversial or dangerous. Discuss such treatments with senior health workers or camp administrators if possible. Examples of treatments that could be dangerous include burning or cutting the skin, and wrapping babies with a high fever in warm blankets and extra clothes.

Another thing to remember about traditional healing is its cost. People who go to healers may be desperate for help, either for themselves or for a member of their family. They may be prepared to pay almost anything for help. Some healers, and especially quacks, may take advantage of this and demand large amounts of money for their services. Before you agree to work with a traditional healer, get some idea of how much they charge their clients.

In most of the folk practices, healers are also mediators between the physical and the metaphysical. One can frequently find healers who are known for their ability to host a deity or spirit and under whose spell they acquire supernatural powers to control the minds of their visitors and heal them. It includes among others, ritual sacrifice to appease the ancestors, ritual and magical strengthening of people and possessions, steaming, purification (e.g. ritual washing, or the use of emetics and purgatives), sniffing of substances, cuts, wearing charms and piercing. The healer becomes the medium through which others can communicate to deities and spirits. They get visions and can dispense away favours at will. As diviners, they are presumed to be in direct communication with the supernatural and derive their healing powers through divine grace. They are both feared and revered by the local communities. Of course, they become diviners only when possessed by some spirit. Otherwise, they are like any other ordinary person. The traditional healers often know intuitively about the close symbiotic relationship between the mind and the body. No matter what the backgrounds of the healers are, they need long years of internal preparation to acquire a purity of body and mind.

Challenges faced by the traditional healers: Modern medicine and traditional medicine make unique contributions to health, but both also have their limits and shortcomings. The ethno-medical practitioners have been healing through nature since many centuries in our country and are the first line of resort for the treatment of diseases in rural areas. There are many pros and cons of being a traditional healer. The first and foremost hindrance is that they are limited to their vicinity and do not have access to knowledge. Secondly, they lack the identity and are not recognized in the outside world as they are scattered across in tribal as well as non tribal areas. The data or statistics related to them is very limited. The details of their existence in various tribes is also very little. A complementary challenge has been the loss of native forests due to which the availability and collection of sufficient quantity of medicinal plants, which is critical for the healing activities, is being reduced. The reason for the declining of the medicinal plants is due to commercial logging, fire accidents and also leaves are drying due to high temperatures. Biodiversity has been further diminished by the replanting of a restricted number of species exclusively for lumber and paper-pulp uses, resulting in the loss of medicinal plants.

Age also is a major constraint or factor for these traditional healers, as most healers are older than sixty and many are above seventy and even eighty. There are also indications that young people are turning away from folk medicine and are not showing interest in traditional healing systems, or are migrating to cities in search of other livelihoods. In a few instances in the past, the traditional healers were mistrusted. Sometimes, they were also accused of ‘branding children’ as both tribals and non-tribals have believed that a baby who is branded with hot bangle or nail is assured of good health. But it was illegal and made healers vulnerable to the punishable offence. Moreover, traditional healers are often confused with ‘quacks’. Quacks are those unqualified people, who previously worked in hospitals or private clinics, and after having gained confidence, set up their own practice as

‘Doctors’. Their inferior knowledge of modern medicine displays a false confidence. They are a bane to the communities they exist in. On the other hand, the traditional healers are a blessing to their communities which are generations and miles away from any remote semblance to a modern civilization. But the wrong portrayal of traditional healers as quacks continues to bring healers a bad name.

Regarding the treatment provided by them to their patients, i.e. the local people, the traditional healers face issues of explaining people to follow the prescriptions and proper diet in order to get cured completely. They are also sometimes blamed for the use of poor quality, adulterated or counterfeit products; and misdiagnosis, delayed diagnosis, or failure to use effective conventional treatments; and exposure to misleading or unreliable information which result in direct adverse events, side effects or unwanted treatment interactions. Unlike Ayurveda, Unani and other alternative system of medicine, the treatment procedures used by these traditional healers are not documented. It is implicit in all folk therapies that the illness is held as a social problem and not a private affair. Social customs, traditions, moral strictures, mode of interaction and role expectations give rise to pathologies which vary from culture to culture. This also creates a hindrance for the healers as they have to keep the patients’ information as confidential as possible. Most healers are not supposed to charge for their services. In fact, it is widely believed that if healers charge for their services their healing powers will go away. Hence, they treat the community without charging anything or offer their services at very minimum rate in order to sustain themselves. They also provide services to people with limited finances or who are very poor, free of cost and are happy with whatever people give them in terms of cash or eatables like rice or vegetables.

Though the community and patients are expected to compensate for their work, most of the healers also have some other sources of livelihood. They farm, rear cattle, have small businesses or shops, teach in schools. Moreover, lack of support from the government for preservation of medicinal plants, regeneration and development are also impacting their livelihood and so they tend to get involved in other livelihoods.

They also offer a wide range of services, and are consulted on family and community matters. They are fortune-tellers, medicine men, clairvoyants and key informers about the communities they serve. However, there seems to be a clear social hierarchy which determines their status, power and mode of therapeutic relationship.

They lack legal status and also there are a few regulatory regimes that are becoming a constraint for the traditional healers and project indigenous medicines in a bad repute. In some context, the healers are also accused of bio-piracy.

Traditional healers have an uphill battle to gain formal recognition from government authorities as legitimate providers of healthcare. This has limited the ability of traditional healers to advertise their services, to expand their outreach, or publicize their practices, meaning that patients have, for the most part, been referred by word of mouth. With the advancement in technology and interventions by the government in the form of Primary Healthcare Centres, the local people are slowly migrating or shifting towards allopathy and biomedicine. The concept of vaidyas prescribing and formulating medicines according to the need of an individual has been replaced by University-educated doctors prescribing OTC medicines. The healers also, do not have certifications in order to cure certain diseases. They also do not have intellectual property rights on their practices. They are vulnerable to both humankind and the natural environment.

Experts opine that folk healers have three challenges before them - retaining autonomy, revitalising the oral system of transmission of education, and generating evidence in a manner that does not interfere with their holistic nature. Though empirical research is needed, factors such as biomedicine’s social prestige, the aggressive marketing of biomedical drugs, the semi-legal status of folk practitioners, the absence of substantial financial investments, and lack of studies on the practice and effectiveness of Indian medicine, are probably responsible for the fact that folk medicine in India is under pressure.

Initiatives for the Traditional Healers: Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL) is a pioneer initiative of India to prevent misappropriation of country’s traditional medicinal knowledge at International Patent Offices, on which healthcare needs of more than 70% population and livelihood of millions of people in India are dependent. TKDL is an initiative by India to digitize and document knowledge available in public domain to facilitate systematic arrangement, dissemination and retrieval of information. While granting patents, authorities check invention to prior art in public domain. Documentation of knowledge helps trace invention in public domain and to know whether it is eligible for patents, preventing misappropriation of Traditional knowledge. Documentation helps in tracing the indigenous community with whom commercialization benefits are to be shared. This documentation process has to start at community level in the form of ‘People Biodiversity Register’ or ‘Community Biodiversity Register’.

TKDL is proving to be an effective deterrent against bio-piracy and is being recognized as a global leader in the area of traditional knowledge protection. In 2011, an International Conference was organized by World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) in collaboration with CSIR on ‘Utilization of Traditional Knowledge Digital Library as a Model for Protection of Traditional Knowledge’, at New Delhi.

In bid to preserve and document the knowledge, Central government had sanctioned Rs. 50 crore during the 11th five year plan for assessment, documentation and promotion of local health practitioners. In 2011, Indira Gandhi National Open University decided to honour healers with ‘gram Vaidya’ awards to encourage traditional healers. The project is aimed at helping the department of Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy (AYUSH) under the Union Health Ministry, document the traditional systems being practised for years in villages and to acknowledge traditional medical practitioners with over 25 years of experience. However, the certifications and awards did not give the practitioners any licence. It was only meant to document the traditional practices in the village and encourage people who have the knowledge.

The WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy 2014–2023, was developed and launched in response to the World Health Assembly’s resolution on traditional medicine to mainstream traditional medicine alongside allopathic (modern, western) care, with an emphasis on improving safety and expanding access. The report aims to set up traditional medicine for contemporary health needs, diseases and standards. The strategy aims to support Member States in developing proactive policies and implementing action plans that will strengthen the role traditional medicine plays in keeping populations healthy.

Working for and with Traditional Healers:

- Kovel Foundation, Andhra Pradesh.
- Mythri Speaks- Project Mythri (have an initiative named Healing Tree Network).
- Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT), Bangalore (established grassroot network of folk healers across 9 states in 1998).
- Gunis for Health is an initiative of Jagran Jan Vikas Samiti (JJVS), Udaipur, Rajasthan. It helps in supporting and extending the work of Traditional Healers in India.
- North Eastern Institute of Folk Medicine.
- Ministry of AYUSH, Govt. of India.
- The Traditional Healer Association, Chhattisgarh at Bilaspur (THAC) was initiated to address these challenges and to create an organized body for traditional healers to legitimize their practice and to reach remote populations in the greatest need of medical services.
- The Equator Initiative by UNDP.

Mainstreaming Traditional Healers-Roadblocks and Potential: The traditional lineage and healing touch of vaidyas is being lost. As civilization progresses rapidly, more and more areas of our country are being invaded by mobile phone towers and creation of special economic zones (SEZs). The natural order of the communities is crumbling, forcing mass exodus of rural folk to urban areas, with one of the results being decreased patronage of Traditional

Healers, leading to the phenomenon of amalgamation of traditional medicine and modern medicine. This, unfortunately, is an unhealthy trend. It is a serious concern and there is an urgent need to revive the systems along the lines of prevalent traditions and promote the usage of herbal medicines. It is unfair to simply take medicinal knowledge from the folk healers and integrate it into the formal systems, with little or no recognition to the practitioners. This is a Catch 22 situation for traditional healers who often work at the margins of legitimacy. They are not seen as their practices are not studied because they are ignored.

The challenge of keeping themselves updated regarding the knowledge of various diseases and its treatments is becoming out of scope for traditional healers. On one hand, there are practitioners of Indian medicine with an officially sanctioned degree, and on the other, we have approximately one to two million local herbal healers who have a semi legal status. Though their expertise and services are in demand, these healthcare providers are under pressure due to their semi-legal status, the aggressive marketing of biomedical drugs, and biomedicine’s social prestige. Because folk healers belong to the same village community as the patients, their accountability might be higher than that of doctors who have been assigned to a public health facility. However, the holistic and individualistic approach, one of the cornerstones of the systems, remains now critically antiquated.

There is a need to legalize traditional healers. The demand of trainings, certifications and establishments of proper traditional healing systems, protection of medicinal plants and good infrastructure has always been prevailing among the traditional healers. The local government should also support these healers for research and development, and preservation of important medicinal plants which are on the verge of extinction. The requirement of preserving data and statistics related to the healers is also very crucial. Traditional Folk Remedies from India go beyond Ayurveda, but for that traditional philosophy of medicine alone the country's healing tradition should be revered. It is important to protect this traditional medicinal wealth by providing them with training and institutionalizing them in an association.

To bring about some awareness, there should be a nationwide survey of the traditional healers, and a register should be maintained. Indeed, knowledge possessed by them should be studied in a scientific and organized manner and not just written off without due consideration. Beneficial aspects of such traditional practices should be integrated with mainstream medical system without much ado. Then, we would only stand to gain; after all, it is these people who have served the health needs of the communities for generations. This is also one area where there is a vast scope for research.

We need to protect the traditional healers who are healing us and are spreading happiness among the people. If they are given proper training and certification they would safeguard and keep this tradition alive. The urge to promote traditional healers in the right way is crucial. ❖