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## REVIEW - TRADITIONAL MEDICAL SYSTEMS ACROSS INDIAN HIMALAYAS

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### ABSTRACT:

Medicine and disease have had an undeniable effect in the history & culture of mankind. Every community responds to the health care ethics in its own way, because disease not only threatens, individual's well-being, but the well-being of the community as a whole. Traditional Health Care practices linked with human healthcare is as old as the human civilization. These comprise of belief, indigenous knowledge, practices and skills relating to healthcare and management of disease. Himalayan region has rich legacy of healthcare traditions which is the outcome of years of experience, tests and trials of indigenous communities living in the fragile mountain ecosystem. The conventional medicine makes use of plants, animal matter and minerals are readily accessible in the region. This paper gives a brief review of the traditional healthcare practices and its applications in the Indian Himalayan region.

**KEY WORD:** Traditional medicine, Indian Himalayas, Indigenous Knowledge.

### INTRODUCTION:

The Indigenous Knowledge (IK), which is the storehouse of ancient wisdom, has evolved from a vast stock of folklore. Long-established wisdom, being culturally oriented, is vital icon of cultural uniqueness of particular social group where it develops, functions and got preserved. The unique topography,

complex landscapes with rich cultural heritage offers a salubrious environment for the survival of diverse communities in India.

The Indian Himalayas extend along the entire northern boundary of India for centuries; people from all walks of life have been fascinated by this mountain chain. The Indian Himalayas cover a vast area along the northern frontiers of the country and span many Indian States from west to east. For the communities living in Indian Himalayas, the Himalayas continue to be the major factor in their lives. Being a natural and political barricade for centuries, the Himalayas have secluded a number of communities, cultures and customs. The rich and diversified flora of Himalayan region offers valuable storehouse of medicinal plants. The therapeutic properties of herbs have been known to man since time immemorial and are well documented in ancient manuscripts, which focus on the potential of these herbs in curing human ailments and diseases. Contemporary scientific community is now documenting and validating indigenous health-care practices based on plant drugs.

The traditional wisdom associated with plant-based medicines for treatment is linked with the medicine men or folk herbalists, who have inherited the art of healing from their ancestors or learnt it as apprenticeship. Skills and experiences are often passed on from one generation to another generation through word of mouth and are guarded like secrets. Modern healthcare facilities in the inaccessible areas of Himalayan region with tough topography are characterized by lack of proper infrastructure, qualified medical professional and medicine.

### **Traditional Medicine**

Until recently, it was traditional knowledge that provided a vast majority of population with the basic understanding of life thereby upholding its culture, ecology and food security. From bead and bangle making to wood and stone carving, from pottery and sculpture to architecture and building art, from spinning & weaving to culinary art, from literary arts to folk theatre and from local games to martial arts, all have materialized by making use of traditional wisdom <sup>[1]</sup>. According to World Health Organization, at least 80% of people in developing countries depend mainly on local healthcare practices for control and treatment of various diseases. The extensive practice of traditional medicine in developing countries and the rapidly growing demand for alternative and basic therapeutic means constitute the international relevancy of research and development in the field of traditional drugs. An additional motivation for such activities is the practical necessity to integrate the potential of traditional medicine into current practices of modern health care <sup>[2]</sup>. Medical systems have developed as a permanent response mechanism to the threat of disease. These systems evolve over the time, adapting to changes in the structure and philosophy of human society. Likewise, the underlying assumptions embedded in a society's health care system and the era in which it exists, helped in shaping these system <sup>[3]</sup>. Traditional medicine incorporates crude medicinal herbs, decoctions, infusions, syrups, etc. and is still practiced by some vendors, *hakims* and *vaids* in remote areas all over the world. Some folk preparations are of high curative value.

A large proportion of the population in a number of developing countries still relies on traditional practitioners, including traditional birth attendants, herbalists and bonesetters and on local medicinal plants to satisfy their primary health care needs <sup>[4]</sup>. There are many traditional therapies, which are practiced by many Indian tribes and rural people that are more effective for many incurable diseases and disorders. Magnetic therapy, magical therapies, yoga, herbal therapies, mud therapy etc. are some of traditional therapies practiced by the rural people for various health problems <sup>[5]</sup>. Plants and animals are used for therapeutic purposes by traditional healers around the world. Hence, scholarly studies on these should not be neglected and should be considered as important complementary knowledge <sup>[6]</sup>. Traditional health care system over the years has proved to be a valuable guide in the screening of modern drugs that have been discovered by following leads from folk uses <sup>[7]</sup>. The utilization of traditional systems of medicine in health care services depends on many factors.

### Research Surveys/Studies in Himalayan Region

Medicine and disease have had an undeniable effect in the history and culture of mankind. Every community has responded to the principles of health care, as disease threatens not only the individual's well-being, but also of their descendants, and the integrity of the community <sup>[8]</sup>. A number of researchers have surveyed the Himalayan region and documented the dependence of communities on traditional health care systems, which reveals a diverse range of findings on aspects of utilization of plants in Traditional health care systems.

Samal *et al.* <sup>[9]</sup> (2004), carried out study in ninety villages of Central Himalayan region, and documented the traditional knowledge system of medicine and its relevance in physical well-being of the local people, resource conservation and socio-economic development by using open-ended interview schedules. Documentation of more than fifty indigenous healthcare practices that are in practice among the local people revealed that females are the real custodians of indigenous knowledge system as 52% of them have the knowledge on thirty practices against that of 26% for males.

Bhatt and Negi <sup>[10]</sup> (2006) evaluated plants used for Medicare by the tribal people of the *Jaunsar* area of *Garhwal* Himalayas. Surveys were carried out in sixty villages of *Jaunsar* area. Information was gathered by using observation method and discussion with elder people. The study revealed the indigenous medicinal uses of 66 plant species. The study concluded that documentation of traditional knowledge on uses of plants is essential for conserving the plant resources and new drug development.

Pant & Pandey <sup>[11]</sup> (1995) studied the ethno-botanical wisdom of *Tharu* community living in Nainital district in Kumaon region. People and their medicinal practices were surveyed and 179 plants were collected out of which 42 were of importance in *Ayurveda* system of medicine. A study by Pandey <sup>[12]</sup> in 2004 gave an account of time-tested remedies, popular among the aborigines of Gonda, Bahraich and Balrampur districts from seed fume of *Solanum surattense* against tooth and gum disorders.

Sand and Badola <sup>[13]</sup> (1987) carried out a study of Jammu and Kashmir, which occupies the top most position in North-western Himalayas. Communities living in the area were depending upon locally available medicinal plants for curing various ailments. During the exploration of various forest areas, it was found that various folklore plants are being commonly used by the backward communities. Khan *et al.* <sup>[14]</sup> in the year 2004 recorded medicinal value of 27 plant species belonging to 20 families, in vogue, from Uri, Kashmir Himalaya. Gupta <sup>[15]</sup> *et. al.* in 1980, extensively explored district Ladakh and during the exploration, more than 800 plant species were collected from the different forest ranges and identified which included about 250 medicinal plants which were used by the tribal, local inhabitants and *Amchies*, the traditional medicine men.

Padam <sup>[16]</sup> *et al.* (2000) studied 22 medicinal plants of Sapi Valley of Kargil district of Ladakh Himalayas which are traditionally used for treatment of various ailments in *Amchi* System of medicine. These plants were collected above 3810 meters above mean sea level and were enumerated along with brief botanical notes, period of collection and their therapeutic uses.

Chauhan & Chauhan <sup>[17]</sup> (1988) carried out ethno-botanical surveys in Trans-Giri Area of Sirmour District, Himachal Pradesh to emphasize on the relationship between the usage of indigenous wild medicinal and aromatic plants growing in this area by the natives. Srivastava <sup>[18]</sup> *et. al.* (1991) reported 41 plants together with their uses from Lahaul and Spiti, Himachal Pradesh. Meenakshi & Chauhan <sup>[19]</sup> (2005) reported plant species with their ethno-botanical uses in Shilli Wildlife Sanctuary of Himachal Pradesh.

Kanwar <sup>[20]</sup> *et al.* (2006) carried out research in six villages of district *Kangra*, Himachal Pradesh to study the application of plants at household level in treating various kinds of ailments. Information was documented using questionnaire and PRA techniques with the help of village elders, key informants and local healers. The study revealed that thirty-one plant species are used by the villagers for the treatment of diseases at household level. Twenty plant species were used for curing more than one disease. The study also showed that elder people had more inclination towards herbal medicines followed by middle and young people.

Lal and Singh <sup>[21]</sup> (2008) documented the medicinal importance of plants used to cure skin disorders by the native people inhabiting Lahaul-Spiti district of Himachal Pradesh. Information on 18 plants, used by the inhabitants for curing different skin disorders including boils and blisters, itching, skin infection, leprosy, skin eruptions, cuts and wounds, were recorded through interview schedules.

Rawat and Kharwal <sup>[22]</sup> (2011) reported the use of 22 medicinal plants by traditional healers of district Mandi in curing gynaecological problems.

Gautam <sup>[23]</sup> *et. al.* (2011) reported the diversity of plant resources of Bilaspur district of Himachal Pradesh, for their medicinal, traditional and edible uses. Total 98 plant species belonging to fifty one different families were documented for their multifarious uses by using the information collected by means of questionnaire surveys, participatory observations and field visits. About 70.40% plants were used for

medicinal purposes whereas, 38.77% in traditional and 34.69% for edible purposes. About ten types of diseases related to stomach, mouth, cough, cold, skin, blood, vitality & strength, bones, muscles, and other like memory, swelling etc. were found to be cured by plant based medicines.

Sajem and Gosai <sup>[24]</sup> (2006) documented the traditional knowledge of medicinal plants used by the *Jaintia* tribes residing in few isolated pockets of northeast India. The study was done through structured questionnaires in consultation with the tribal practitioners and resulted in the documentation of 39 medicinal plant species. The study underlined the potential of research in the field and need for the documentation of traditional knowledge pertaining to medicinal plant utilization for the greater benefit of mankind.

Jain <sup>[25]</sup> *et al.* (2007) enumerated the aquatic/semi-aquatic plants used in herbal remedies in the wetlands of Manipur, Northeastern India. Empirically formulated and accepted prescriptions by ethnic communities of Manipur for curing 45 ailments by using 43 aquatic/semi-aquatic plant species were documented along with methods of preparation, prescribed doses and administration. The information was recorded from the local healers and responses obtained from the patients.

A study on practice of Traditional Medicine (TM) was carried out by Goswami <sup>[26]</sup> *et al.* (2009) among the *Tagin* group of people living at upper *Subansiri* district of Arunachal Pradesh. The result documented 10 medicinal plants used by the Traditional Medicinal Practitioner (TMS) of *Tagin* tribe for use in traditional medicine. Fresh leaves, fruits, bark and stems are reported be used for treatment of ailments like diarrhoea, jaundice, wound healing, fever, etc.

A total of 47 plants species were reported by Rout <sup>[27]</sup> *et al.* (2012) from North Cachar Hills district of Assam to be used in the treatment of diseases like urinary disorder, diarrhea, malaria, etc. Among the plant types, herbs species were the most frequently used. Ferns also find usage in the traditional healing system. A complete account of species, parts used, mode of preparation and dosage for curing diseases like diarrhea, malaria, jaundice, diabetes, high blood pressure, snakebite, etc. was investigated in detail.

Thus, the entire Himalayan region is the repository of traditional knowledge and resource wealth, which has helped in the survival of mountain communities living in the region.

## CONCLUSION:

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the traditional knowledge systems are changing – the tribal society and culture is becoming increasingly endangered. Much of it has been significantly influenced by developmental activities. The components of modernization, i.e. industrialization, urbanization, social mobilization, differentiation, urbanization, secularization, media expansion, increasing literacy, education, increasing political participation, migration, market consumerism, technology, standards of living & economic wealth have changed the tribal societies. Modernization has gained significance in the modern society in the recent years resulting in social transition throughout the world. Modernization of a society has led to



the annihilation of indigenous [culture](#) and its substitution by a more westernized one. The research in the area can provide valuable information on both past and present relationships between plants and conventional societies. It is hoped that, in the future, the traditional medicine will play a significant role in sustainable development and biodiversity conservation. The status of the medically important plants needs to be evaluated so as to evolve strategies for their fortification.

India has fostered many civilizations which talk about the rich heritage of its science, technology, art and craft and associated knowledge systems. However, the present situation offers a state of dilemma as far as the future of traditional knowledge systems is concerned. There is little interface between modern and indigenous custodians, but traditional knowledge, being vital component of indigenous communities, influences their social and physical environment and hence, its preservation is of prime importance. Thus, the importance of upholding traditional knowledge and its cultural environmental resources is vital, particularly in the context of globalization and increased demand of natural resources worldwide.

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