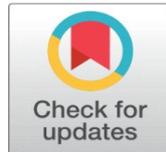
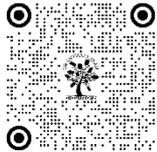


ROLE OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE IN MEGHALAYA'S HEALTH CARE SYSTEM: A REVIEW AND REFLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Since time immemorial plants have been used for a variety of purposes in the life of mankind, particularly as food, and medicines for nutrition and the treatment of diseases for both humans and animals. They are utilized across various cultures globally and have been depended upon for several millennia to support, promote, and restore human health. India has a long history of traditional medicine and Ayurveda is the most representative system. Ayurveda is a life science derived from experience. The North-East region of India, especially Meghalaya, is rich in biodiversity, making it an ideal setting for practices of traditional medicine. Traditional Healers in Meghalaya employ a diverse range of healing methods that are based on plants, which demonstrate significant potential, despite the lack of adequate scientific research to support these practices. Integration of traditional and contemporary healthcare systems is becoming increasingly popular as more and more people seek out alternative forms of healthcare, especially post-pandemic.

Against this backdrop, this paper discusses the traditional medicinal knowledge that exists in Meghalaya and its uses to cure various ailments. This study explores the role of Traditional Medicine in the healthcare system in Meghalaya. Focusing on integrating traditional knowledge into modern medicine, the article aims to elucidate the benefit of integrating traditional knowledge into modern medical practices, fostering comprehensive healthcare solutions.

Keywords: Traditional Medicine, Traditional Healer, Ayurveda, Life Science.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional Indian medicine is considered one of the oldest healing systems in the world. Ayurveda, the predominant system within traditional Indian medicine, emphasizes a holistic approach to healing that recognizes the interdependence of the body, mind, and spirit. It is based on the principle that individuals attain physical, mental, and emotional well-being by living in harmony with nature.¹ Traditional medicine serves as a holistic paradigm encompassing the collective knowledge, skills, and practices deeply rooted in the rich tapestry of theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to diverse cultures across the globe. It is gaining worldwide recognition; there is an increasing demand as

¹ Yu Shi A, Chao Zhang, *et.al.*, "Traditional medicine in India" 8 *Journal of Traditional Chinese Medical Sciences* (2021).

patients seek greater agency and ownership of their health and well-being and more compassionate and personalized health care.²

Meghalaya, a state in India, is famous for its breathtaking natural scenery. The state possesses a considerable abundance of plant resources that have not been fully utilized for commercial purposes. Proper exploitation of these resources could offer numerous benefits to local farmers. The region's favorable agro-climatic conditions and suitable soil provide great potential for the cultivation of medicinal plants. Meghalaya is richly endowed with a diverse array of vegetation, encompassing everything from tropical and subtropical to temperate or near-temperate varieties.³

Traditional medicine is highly valued by the people of Meghalaya. Many individuals rely on remedies provided by traditional healers. Traditional medical knowledge holds social, cultural, and scientific significance, making it vital for numerous indigenous groups and local communities. Knowledge about the utilization of medicinal plants is frequently linked to genetic resources.

North-East India, including Meghalaya being rich in biodiversity, serves as an ideal place for the sustenance of traditional medicines. The indigenous people of Meghalaya have many traditional healing practices ranging from the use of plants and animal products to invoking spirits and chanting. For centuries, traditional, indigenous has been an integral resource for health in households and communities, and it continues to form a significant part of healthcare in the region.

2. MEANING OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Traditional Medicine is a subset of traditional knowledge. Its protection and sharing of benefits have been under debate at both the international and domestic levels for decades. For centuries, traditional medicine has been an integral resource for health in households and communities.⁴

Traditional Medicine is defined by the WHO 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”.⁵The comprehensiveness of the term traditional medicine and the wide range of practices it encompasses make it difficult to define all to describe especially in the global context.

Traditional medicine is experience-based, a culture-bound medical practice that relies on natural products to diagnose, prevent illness, treat disease, or maintain health, irrespective of explicability. Every civilian community has a comprehensive healthcare system based on its societal and cultural heritage. Traditional medicine mainly utilizes the benefits of natural products like plant, animal, and mineral substances. The treatment approaches are rooted in Indigenous beliefs, practical knowledge, and experiences passed down through generations.⁶

3. TRADITIONAL MEDICINAL KNOWLEDGE OF MEGHALAYA

Like any other tribal community, plants play a crucial role in providing essential healthcare to the indigenous people of Meghalaya. Meghalaya is recognized as one of the richest botanical regions in India due to its varying altitudes, topographical features, soil types, and climatic conditions that support different types of forests.⁷

The people of Meghalaya have a wide range of local health practices, with traditional healers depending on traditional medicine for many years. These traditional remedies are acknowledged and valued by the Indigenous communities of Meghalaya as well as across the country. Some of the traditional healers of Meghalaya called *nong di dawai konbai* are well recognized and provide the locals with primary

² WHO General Guidelines for Methodologies on Research and Evaluation of Traditional Medicine, Geneva (WHO/EDM/TRM/2000).

³ Karen r.r. Mihsill and Bela Keshan, “Ethno-zoological Practices by Khasis, An Indigenous Tribe of Meghalaya, India” 15(1) *NEHU Journal* 90 (2017)

⁴ Richard Wilder, Protection of Traditional Medicine, *available at*: <https://icrier.org/> (Last visited on March 20, 2024).

⁵*Supra* note 3.

⁶Dilip Ghosh, Diana Bogueva, *et.al.*, (eds.), *Nutrition Science, Marketing Nutrition, Health Claims, and Public Policy* 174 (Academic Press, Cambridge, 2023).

⁷J P Lyngdoh and D Syiem, “Pattern of Traditional Medicine use in East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya” 13(1) *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge* 190 (2014)

health care.⁸ They play an important role in providing the overall healthcare scenario of the state of Meghalaya. Lack of proper transportation and medical facilities are the factors that have been attributed to the rural folks of the state still holding onto their faith in the local traditional healer or practitioner. The rich traditional knowledge and its uses pass from generation to generation through oral means and remain exclusive. However, with the time and encroachment of modern civilization, there is persistent weaning of the indigenous from their dependence upon traditional medicine has resulted in erosion of the traditional medicine.⁹

The Meghalaya government enacted the Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Protection and Promotion of Khasi Traditional Medicine) Act in 2011 to safeguard Khasi traditional medicine, which faces threats from the decline of medicinal plants, insufficient documentation and transmission, and the prevalence of other healthcare systems. This Act has facilitated the creation of a traditional medicine commission aimed at both protecting and promoting Khasi traditional medicine. The Commission is made up of the following members: (a) a Chairman, (b) a Secretary, (c) Four distinguished practitioners of Khasi traditional medicine, preferably registered with the Commission, (d) Two renowned practitioners of alternative systems of medicine, (e) Four respected individuals from civil society, including those from academia, media, social work, cultural organizations, or other fields, and (f) one representative from a traditional medicine institute.

The Act has also established a voluntary registration system for traditional medicine practitioners. The Commission will register qualified Traditional Medicine Practitioners upon application to document the prevalence and practice of traditional medicine. To encourage the use of traditional medicine among the populace, various awareness and educational initiatives have been taken by the government of Meghalaya, which are (a) Dissemination of information about traditional medicine to the general public including the Government, institutions, and media. (b) Inclusion of appropriate material in textbooks for children. (c) Health clinics of Traditional Medicines, camps, exhibitions, and seminars.

Medicinal use of plants has been incorporated by people of all races and regions since time immemorial. These plants grow abundantly in the pristine and lush green forest of Meghalaya, that's the main reason the people of Meghalaya, used plants to treat almost all ailments known to the human race back then.

Be it city dwellers or villagers, all of them used traditional home remedies or visited a traditional healer for their ailments. Below are a few herbs and plants which are still used in the traditional treatment of ailments by the people of Meghalaya and by those who are in different regions of the world.

1) Botanical name: *Zingiber rubens*

Local name: Sying makhir (Khasi), Iching (Garo)

Part used: Rhizome

Zingiber rubens, commonly known as Bengal Ginger is a medicinal ginger cultivar that people have used for both culinary and medicinal purposes since olden times. It is native to the Eastern Himalayas and Northeast parts of India. In Meghalaya too, Sying makhir is used for the treatment of various diseases such as malaria, fever, cough, cold, blood pressure, dysentery, stomach ache, snake bites, etc.¹⁰

2) Botanical name: *Averrhoa carambola*

Local name: Soh pyrshong (Khasi) Amilenga (Garo)

Part used: Fruit

Carambola fruit juice prepared from carambola leaves is used to lower high blood sugar levels and high blood pressure. It also stimulates the appetite and has anti-diarrheal effects. In Meghalaya, carambola juice is mainly used to treat jaundice, gallstone, and malaria.¹¹

3) Botanical name: *Kaempferia galan*

Local name: Sying khmoh (Khasi), Wakpatra (Garo)

Part used: Tubers

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Sh. Vidyasagar Singh, S.K. Tripathi, *et.al.*, "Traditional Knowledge on Medicinal plant used in Khasi Hill District of Meghalaya" *Medicinal Plants of India: Conservation and Sustainable Use* 179 (2009).

¹⁰Medicinal Use of Plants in Meghalaya, available at:<https://www.zizira.com/blogs/plants/medicinal-use-plants-meghalaya-study> (Last Visited on March 29, 2024).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

In Meghalaya, galangal is mainly used to treat indigestion, food poisoning, rheumatism, mouth ulcers, etc. It is chewed to treat coughs and used as a gargle for sore throats. The leaves of galangal are also chewed to relieve sore throat. Externally, the root is applied as a dressing (keep it simple) to wounds, swellings, and ulcers, and is also used to treat dandruff and rheumatic joints.¹²

4) Botanical name: Piper longum

Local name: Sohmarit khlaw

Part used: Seeds

Piper Longum, commonly known as Long Pepper or sometimes called Indian Long Pepper (Pipli), is a flowering vine in the family Piperaceae, cultivated for its fruit, which is usually dried and used as a spice and seasoning. It is used to improve appetite and digestion, as well as treat stomachache, heartburn, indigestion, intestinal gas, diarrhea, and cholera. The traditional folk in Meghalaya use long pepper mainly for cough and sore throat.¹³

5) Botanical name: Fagopyrum esculentum

Local name: Jarain (Khasi)

Part used: Leaf

Kaempferia Galanga Kaempferia galangal, commonly known as Galanga, Aromatic ginger, or Sand ginger, is a monocotyledonous plant in the ginger family. Buckwheat is an herb that is frequently used medicinally because the leaves are a good source of rutin. Rutin is useful in the treatment of a wide range of circulatory problems. It dilates the blood vessels, reduces capillary permeability, and lowers blood pressure.¹⁴

In Meghalaya, the traditional folklore uses buckwheat to cure high blood pressure and constipation. It is also used for bone setting by applying a paste of ground leaves.

6) Botanical name: Centella asiatica

Local name: Khliang syiar (Khasi & Pnar)

Part used: Whole plant

While Centella is utilized in various cuisines around the world, it also serves as a medicinal herb in many traditional healing practices. In Oriental medicine, Centella is regarded as one of the versatile miracle herbs.

In Meghalaya, Centella is consumed both as a salad and for medicinal purposes. The raw leaves are ingested to address digestive issues such as stomach aches, diarrhea, and acidity. The juice extracted from the leaves is a crucial component in medical formulations, aiding in the treatment of hair loss, reducing baldness, and alleviating conditions like insomnia, asthma, bronchitis, and fever.¹⁵

7) Botanical name: Gaultheria fragrantissima

Local name: La thynriat (Khasi)

Part used: Leaves

Gaultheria commonly known as Winter Green or Indian Winter Green and Gandhupura in Hindi, is a medicinal shrub from the family Ericaceae. Wintergreen has a very high concentration of methyl salicylate which is an anti-inflammatory compound, thus helping in reducing inflammation in the body. In Meghalaya too, the traditional healers use wintergreen as medicinal herbs. Our ancestors used it mainly for rheumatoid arthritis, body aches, and even migraine.¹⁶

8) Botanical name: Aegle marmelos

Local name: Soh bel (Khasi), Selpri (Garo)

Part used: Barks, leaves, seeds, and fruits.

Aegle marmelos Aegle marmelos was commonly known as Bael, also Bengal quince or golden apple, is used in the treatment of chronic diarrhea, and dysentery by reducing inflammation, and peptic ulcers,

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

as a laxative and to recuperate from respiratory infections in various folk medicines. In Meghalaya, the juice of the leave is used for indigestion and heart diseases. It is also used to treat diarrhea and dysentery. Consuming a large amount is to be avoided, as it may cause stomach upset and constipation.¹⁷

9) Botanical name: *Houttuynia cordata*

Local name: Jamyrdoh (Khasi), Macha duribak (Garo)

Part used: Whole plant

Houttuynia cordata commonly known as fish mint, fish wort, Lizard Tail, or chameleon plant, is one of the two species in the genus *Houttuynia*. Traditionally, in Meghalaya, fish wort is mainly used for the treatment of anemia and to check blood sugar levels. Leaf juice is taken for the treatment of cholera, dysentery, and blood purification.

10) Botanical Name: *Polygonum muricatum*

Local name: Jabuit (Khasi)

Parts used: Lea

Polygonum muricatum, commonly known as Knotweed or knotgrass is used to treat urinary tract infections. In Meghalaya, it is reported that juice from the leaves of the plant from *Polygonum* is used for the treatment of anthelmintic and diarrhea.¹⁸

Practitioners of traditional medicine play a crucial role in treating various illnesses, enhancing quality of life, and assisting patients with incurable chronic conditions. However, a lot of valuable information has been lost with older practitioners due to inadequate record-keeping and documentation. In Meghalaya, many traditional medicine practitioners view their medicinal knowledge as private property and operate under strict confidentiality. Therefore, it is becoming increasingly vital to document the medicinal applications of plants due to the rapid loss of natural habitats. This effort would help safeguard many medicinal plants and other genetic resources from disappearing before they can be documented.

4. ROLE OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE IN MEGHALAYA'S HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

Demand for medicinal plants is increasing in both developing and developed countries due to growing recognition of natural products being non-narcotic, having no side effects, easily available at affordable prices, and sometimes the only source of health care available to the poor.¹⁹ As such, there is widespread interest in promoting traditional health systems to meet primary healthcare needs. This is especially true in Meghalaya, as prices of modern medicines spiral and governments find it increasingly difficult to meet the cost of pharmaceutical-based health care. Traditional medicine plays a crucial role in providing healthcare services in Meghalaya, particularly in rural and remote areas where access to modern healthcare facilities is limited.²⁰ A large section of the population due to its effectiveness, affordability, and the absence of adverse effects commonly associated with modern medicine. Throughout the state, there is strong and sustained public support for protecting and promoting traditional medicine's cultural and spiritual values.

In many parts of the State, economic circumstances have made it difficult for people to access modern medicine. Moreover, traditional remedies are highly valued due to their effectiveness and minimal side effects. Recognizing the need for a viable alternative to expensive imported drugs, commercialization of traditional medicine using the abundant natural resources that are affordable and easily accessible, will pave the way for addressing social issues relating to health, economic growth, and development.

The use of traditional medicine in Meghalaya is thriving in both urban and rural settings and has the potential to be integrated into the public healthcare framework. There is a chance to promote it as a

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹Promotion of Indigenous system of medicine in Meghalaya, available at: <https://forestsclearance.nic.in/SkillDevelopmentandCapacityBuildingofTraditionalHealersofMeghalaya> (Last visited on Feb 26, 2024).

²⁰*Ibid.*

form of health tourism, aiding economic growth and improving livelihoods in districts, especially in tourist spots in line with the homestays.²¹

Meghalaya is very rich in floral diversity, a significant part of which comprises medicinal and aromatic plants and there is a long-standing tradition of use of medicinal plants in the State. The development of the medicinal plants sector in Meghalaya has a great scope for providing employment to the people as there is a huge and ever-increasing market for medicinal and aromatic plants and their preparations in the country and abroad.²² The Government of Meghalaya established the Meghalaya State Medicinal Plants Board to oversee all aspects concerning policy development, coordination among various organizations working with medicinal plants, the maintenance of local health traditions, the sustainable supply of medicinal plants, issues related to validation and certification, as well as the conservation and protection of medicinal plants in the State.

Medicinal plant-based traditional medicine is widely recognized in the State due to its proven effectiveness and cost-effectiveness. It is essential to enhance, promote, unify, develop, and fortify this system as it confronts numerous challenges, including a decline in herb availability resulting from over-harvesting and deforestation, alongside its inherent natural qualities and safety.²³ The Meghalaya government has established "Common Facility Centres" that provide the necessary infrastructure and services (such as treatment, processing, and packaging) for traditional healers to conduct their work and also promote these indigenous practices. Additionally, it has created a platform to support and enhance traditional health practices as an important source of livelihood, particularly in health tourism.²⁴ It will place the state of Meghalaya prominently in the realm of health tourism, attracting visitors who come not just for its picturesque landscapes but also to find relaxation for their body, mind, and spirit.

Traditional medicine plays an essential role in primary health care in Meghalaya, particularly in today's changing demographics, marked by an aging population and a notable shift towards chronic diseases and multi-morbidity. It aids in empowering individuals and communities while offering crucial approaches for prevention, health promotion, treatment, rehabilitation, and palliative care in primary health settings.²⁵ The generation, synthesis, and dissemination of knowledge and information on traditional medicine will be an important part of the successful integration of traditional medicine in primary health care implementation.

The Government of Meghalaya has constructed the "Holistic Wellness Centre & Skill Development Institute for Traditional Healers and Youths of Meghalaya" funded by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs under "Article 275(1)²⁶ of the Constitution of India" with the mandate to make available healthcare based on Ayurveda, Siddha, and traditional medicine of the State of Meghalaya to provide a holistic healing approach to the physical & mental care of the patients and also to promote health tourism in the State.²⁷

Traditional healers play an essential role in providing primary healthcare services to their communities, greatly improving the healthcare system. However, the over-reliance on wild medicinal plants for ethno-veterinary practices poses a risk to their sustainability due to the irresponsible use of rare or endangered species. Additionally, the modifications in traditional agricultural practices, like changes in cropping patterns and pest management, due to population growth and limited land

²¹*Ibid.*

²²Meghalaya State Medicinal Plants board, *available at*: <https://www.google.com/search?q=meghalaya+state+medicinal+plant+board&oq> (Last visited on March 7, 2024).

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Supra* note 19.

²⁶"Article 275(1) of the Constitution of India guarantees grants-in-aid from the Consolidated Fund of India each year for promoting the welfare of Scheduled Tribes. Infrastructure development schemes like protected drinking water, road connectivity, electricity, and housing are provided under this scheme."

²⁷ Inauguration of the Holistic Wellness Centre and Launching of the Meghalaya Traditional Knowledge Portal, *available at*: <https://shillongtoday.com/inauguration-of-the-holistic-wellness-centre-and-launching-of-the-meghalaya-traditional-knowledge-portal> (Last Visited on April 4, 2024).

availability, impact the sustainability of traditional burn cultivation methods among the Khasi and Jaintia tribes.²⁸

Moreover, the varying degrees of forest protection in Meghalaya influence the sustainability of traditional forest management practices, with sacred forests showing higher species richness and density compared to reserve and village forests.²⁹ Furthermore, traditional healers in the State are facing difficulties in processing raw materials. Prior to formulating an herbal product, it is crucial to process these raw materials. The processing includes steps such as sorting, grading, drying, and grinding the raw materials. Consequently, there is a need for the development of specialized technologies for the drying, grinding, and storage of these materials.

5. WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION'S (WHO) POSITION ON TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

In 1978, health was considered a fundamental human right by the Declaration of Alma-Ata of the International Conference on Primary Health Care. The declaration emphasized that achieving the highest possible standard of health is a crucial social objective with global implications and encompasses various socio-economic sectors other than modern health.³⁰ Thus, the established medical knowledge that forms the basis of traditional medicine is acknowledged as a crucial element that can aid in achieving universal health coverage. In accordance with the implementation of the Declaration of Alma-Ata, the governing body of the World Health Organization (WHO) and various countries has embraced multiple resolutions and declarations concerning Traditional Medicine in order to integrate it into mainstream healthcare systems.³¹

For centuries, traditional, indigenous, and ancestral knowledge has been an integral resource for health in households and communities, and it continues to form a significant part of healthcare in many regions.³² A total of 170 out of the 194 Member States of WHO have provided information regarding the utilization of herbal remedies, acupuncture, yoga, indigenous healing methods, and various other forms of traditional medicine. Many countries recognize the value of traditional medicine as a vital healthcare resource and have taken steps to integrate these practices, products, and professionals into their national healthcare systems.³³

Today, traditional medicine has become a global phenomenon; the demand is growing, with patients seeking greater agency and ownership of their health and well-being and seeking more compassionate and personalized health care. For many people, especially those living in remote and rural areas, it continues to be the most favorable choice for health and well-being, offering care that is suitable to their cultural context, readily accessible, and cost-effective.

The World Health Organization's work on traditional medicine is a response to the requests from countries for evidence and data to inform policies and practices, global standards, and regulations to ensure safety, quality, and equitable access.³⁴ It recognizes the diversity of traditional, complementary, and integrative medicine practices across countries of the world and its contribution to health, well-being, and people-centered health care and universal health coverage. Appropriately integrated Traditional and Complimentary Medicine can improve health outcomes by increasing the availability of services, especially at the level of primary health care. Many countries have a long history of traditional medicine and practitioners that are important in providing care to populations, and WHO recognizes that traditional, complementary, and alternative medicine has many benefits.³⁵

The World Health Organization (WHO) assists countries that want to embrace traditional medicine practices in a science-based manner to avoid patient harm and ensure safe, effective, and quality health care. An evidence-based approach is crucial; even if traditional medicines are derived from longstanding practice and are natural, establishing their efficacy and safety through rigorous clinical

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Omoleke Ishaq Isola, "The Relevance of The African Traditional Medicine (Alternative Medicine) To Health Care Delivery System In Nigeria" 47(1) *The Journal of Developing Areas* 322 (2013).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² WHO on Traditional Medicine, *available at*: <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/traditional-medicine> (Last visited on April 12, 2024).

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Unnikrishnan Payyappallimana, "Role of Traditional Medicine in Primary Health Care: An Overview of Perspectives and Challenges" 14(6) *Yokohama Journal of Social Science* 70 (2010).

trials is critical.³⁶ This not only guarantees that treatment is effective and safe but also provides the rigorous evidence needed to recommend traditional medicines in WHO guidelines. Non-medicinal therapies (e.g., yoga, acupuncture, etc.) provide an additional challenge in that their practice clearly demonstrates wide variability, and performing randomly controlled trials is extremely difficult, if not impossible. This means we must push hard to develop new methodologies that provide credible and robust evidence to recommend their use for specific conditions.³⁷

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Government of India signed an agreement to establish the WHO Global Centre for Traditional Medicine. This global knowledge centre for traditional medicine, supported by an investment of USD 250 million from the Government of India, aims to harness the potential of traditional medicine from across the world through modern science and technology to improve the health of people and the planet.³⁸

6. INTEGRATION OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE INTO THE MODERN HEALTH CARE SYSTEM AND ITS BENEFITS

Health is a dynamic and multifaceted concept shaped by factors such as genetics, environment, lifestyle choices, and access to medical care. It encompasses not just the absence of disease or disability but also the state of overall wellness. Health and well-being are interrelated and essential components of a person's overall quality of life.³⁹ An appropriate healthcare system is one that ensures high-quality healthcare to all individuals in a society and is easily accessible, affordable, and equitable and also prioritizes the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities at large. No healthcare system is perfect in it and has its own merits and limitations, rather these are complementary to one another. Hence, the integration of different healthcare systems is the way out.⁴⁰

India has a rich heritage of traditional knowledge systems of healthcare such as Yoga, Ayurveda, Naturopathy, Unani, and Siddha. Traditional medicine has been practiced in India for centuries and plays a vital role in the country's healthcare system. These systems of medicine are based on a holistic approach to healthcare, which focuses on the balance between the body, mind, and spirit.⁴¹

The integration of traditional medicine with the modern healthcare system is an ongoing process in India. The government has taken various initiatives to promote the integration of traditional medicine with modern healthcare, such as the creation of the Department of Ayurveda, Yoga, Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy (AYUSH) in 2003. The AYUSH department aims to promote and regulate the practice of traditional medicine in India and to integrate it with modern healthcare.

Integrating traditional medicine with conventional health care has shown significant potential in improving patient outcomes and satisfaction. The Benefits of Integrating traditional medicine into conventional health care are discussed below:

i) Cost-Effectiveness and Reduced Healthcare Costs

One of the major benefits of integrating traditional medicine into modern health care is the potential for cost savings. The overuse of pharmaceutical interventions in medicine often leads to high healthcare costs and adverse effects. Integrating traditional medicine can reduce the reliance on pharmaceuticals, thereby lowering costs and minimizing side effects.

ii) Enhanced Quality of Life for Chronic and Terminal Patients

For patients suffering from chronic and terminal diseases, including cancer, alternative medical practices can greatly improve their overall well-being. Holistic approaches such as aromatherapy, meditation, and acupuncture can help reduce anxiety, pain, and various side effects linked to conventional treatments like chemotherapy and surgery.

³⁶WHO's Position on Traditional Medicine, *available at*: <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/traditional-medicine> (Last Visited on April 15, 2024).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸World Health Organisation, *available at*: <https://www.who.int/news/item/25-03-2022-who-establishes-the-global-centre-for-traditional-medicine-in-india> (Last Visited on April 2, 2024)

³⁹Sapna Nanda, "Integrating Traditional and Contemporary Systems for Health and Well-being" 30(2) *Annals of Neurosciences* 77 (2023).

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

iii) Increased Accessibility and Equity in Healthcare

Integrating traditional medicine into national health systems can improve accessibility and equity in healthcare. In a country like India, traditional medicine has been a critical part of primary health care, contributing to universal health coverage. By regulating products, practitioners, and services, and including them in health insurance schemes, countries can ensure more equitable access to healthcare services.

iv) Strengthened Healthcare Systems and Resilience

The integration of traditional medicine can enhance the sustainability and resilience of healthcare systems. By leveraging the strengths of traditional medicine in managing infectious diseases and disasters, healthcare systems can become more robust and adaptable. This integration also promotes a more holistic, patient-centered approach to healthcare, which is essential for addressing complex health challenges.

v) Improved Interprofessional Collaboration and Education

Successful integration of traditional medicine into conventional health care requires effective interprofessional collaboration and education. Building mutual trust and understanding between conventional clinicians and traditional medicinal practitioners is crucial. This can be achieved through interprofessional education, shared patient charts, and regular communication. Such collaboration ensures that patients receive comprehensive and coordinated care.

7. CONCLUSION

Based on the observations made, we conclude that traditional knowledge serves as the foundation for every nation and represents its most significant strength. The people of Meghalaya State remain strongly connected to a rich heritage of traditional medicinal knowledge and practices. The prevalent acceptance of traditional medicine among the residents of Meghalaya can be attributed not only to its affordability and accessibility but also to their belief that it embodies the wisdom passed down from their ancestors, which reflects their socio-cultural and religious context.

Integrating traditional and complementary medicine into conventional healthcare offers numerous benefits, such as enhanced patient outcomes, cost savings, better quality of life for those with chronic and terminal illnesses, greater accessibility and equity, and strengthened Meghalaya's healthcare systems. However, the effective implementation of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Prevention and Protection of Khasi Traditional Medicine) Act, 2011 is essential, and the government of Meghalaya should take necessary steps in this regard. Moreover, due to the increasing commercial and scientific interest in traditional healing methods, it is the responsibility of the government of Meghalaya to take the initiative for documentation of oral healthcare practices of the region to protect and preserve them.

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