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## **Role of Folk Medicine in Primary Health Care :A Case Study on West Bengal, India**

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### **Abstract**

Traditional wisdom and knowledge often restores the cultural heritage and establishes the identity of a group in a particular society. Folk medicine or traditional medicine is one of the popular terms of traditional knowledge in our society. It is based on folk education system, philosophical thought and cultural origins of a society. Generally it is derived from local medicinal plants, minerals, different types of organic matter and spiritual belief. Traditional belief is a key factor of use of folk medicine. The current review mainly focus on traditional use of different plants as folk medicines in West Bengal. This paper will discuss the benefits of primary health care with the use of folk medicines and how to develop it's knowledge by the sustainable uses.

**Key Words:** Folk medicine, Traditional Knowledge, Primary health care

### **Introduction:**

A traditional health care practice of folk people is termed as folk medicine or folk treatment. It is used of the folk, by the folk and for the folk. Folk medicine refers to the traditional medical wisdom or knowledge or folk education this is known as ethno-medicine, community medicine, household medicine and any other forms of local medicines. According to World Health Organization (WHO), the traditional medicine is described in the following way: “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<sup>1</sup>”. Generally the knowledge of folk medicines is transmitted from one generation to another through oral communication or oral traditional culture and it is the outcome of bold experimentation through trial and error method over hundreds of years. Folk medicine is the mother of all other systems of medicine such as Ayurveda and modern medicine. The traditional medicine men/women are part and parcel of the folk community and they have gained some traditional experiences of human health problems from social environment and practical life experiences of human beings. Not only the health problems but also they acquired some traditional knowledge of human anatomy by the folk education. So, they are in a better position to deal with their day-to-day health problems. In fact the native healers take care of the common ailments of the folk in their home setting<sup>2</sup>.

The folk medicines may have been generated from the contribution for a particular ethnic group or from a specific locality or may have coevolved with age-old culture. Worldwide, folk medicine practices are widespread especially on the traditional societies<sup>3</sup>. The traditional medicine men/women specialize in their particular localities because they use some common plants these are founded in their residential area. Generally they are expert in injury healing, poisonous snake bites,

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neurological disorders and some others healing like eye diseases, skin diseases, fever, allergies, headache, arthritis, diabetes, diarrhea, stomachache and nervous disorders. They use different parts of medicinal plants in reducing common health problems. Among the different plant parts, the leaves were most frequently used for the treatment of diseases followed by whole plant parts, fruit, stem, root, stem and root bark, seed, flower and latex<sup>4</sup>. The methods of preparation fall into four categories. These are: a) Plant parts applied as a paste, b) Juice extracted from the fresh plant parts, c) Powder made from fresh or dried plant parts, d) Some fresh plant parts and decoction.

### Materials and Method

The researcher in this paper used both the primary and secondary data collection methods. For the secondary information the researcher took the help of both the printed and electronic documents. However for the primary data the researchers used observation, interview, schedule and case study methods. To do that I took help of the group of folk medicine man /women of west Bengal and at the same time I talked with the local experience persons who involve folk treatment.

### Results and Discussion

#### Folk medicine and treatment contributions to primary health care (PHC)

Folk medicines play an important role in rural sectors. Rural poor and marginalized people in India depend on herbal remedies and folk treatment. In fact in remote areas this is the only source of health care available<sup>5</sup>. At first they try their traditional knowledge to cure non savior health problems in their home background. When they do not get any positive response about regarding this health problem then they go to “Ojha or Gunin or Kobiraj”. Only when they feel severe problems they go to primary health center.

#### Specialized fields of traditional practice

**Kobiraj or Bidya (Herbalist)** – They have traditional botanical and pharmacological knowledge about plants and fauna. Their practice can be highly influenced in remedies for common disease of human beings.

**Gunin or Munshi (Diagnosis specialist)** – They involve communication with spirits, the supernatural and the physical entities that assist in the diagnosis. They identify the ailments, remedies or ceremonies that are required to restore good spiritual, emotional, and physical health, and well-being<sup>6</sup>.

**Medicine men/women** – They usually engage in ritual, ceremonial activity and prayer. They are also conductors of community ceremonies. It is normative for these individuals to sacrifice their daily lives to ritual, prayer and healing<sup>6</sup>.

**Ojha (Healer)** – They have deep connection with healing culture. They are known as the god gifted individuals of our folk society who may heal snake bites as well as common disease in a different ways, like touch and stroke method. Naturally they use ritualistic approach. They have a great power to use a variety of therapies to heal snake bite infection.

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**Peer (Spiritualist)** – This type of practice mainly focuses on the spiritual health of an individual. Generally Spiritualist applies different kinds of benevolent spirits that have good ends. They solve various health problems with the help of supernatural force. They are totally different from sorcery. They belong to Muslim community.

**Shaman (witch doctor)** – Shamanistic medicine is a spiritual form of medicine where a person's illness is believed to be caused by the spirit possession<sup>3</sup>. They use sacred songs or charms to cure the diseases. It is good exercised of supernatural power.

### **Customary use of folk medicine in primary health care (PHC)**

The main source of knowledge in folk treatment or folk medicine is our traditional cultural. This knowledge helps in reducing primary common health disease. Different medical plants play significant role to constitute major form of folk medicines. A particular medical plant has a specific medicinal value but that must have been selected after countless hits and trials of treatments. Beneficial species were treasured as medicines where as non-beneficial species must have been discarded. The useful information about the plant and associated knowledge of its efficacy were thus acquired through ageless experience<sup>3</sup>. Some of these traditions are briefly described in Table 1.

### **Approaches needed for the sustainable development of folk medicine**

Recently the uses of folk medicines are decreasing from our society as well as from among the local people. Generally local people buy the medicine from local medical store. They do not want to use folk medicine due to lack of traditional knowledge or belief and non-availability of plants. They get medicine easily from medical store. In this situation some approaches should be introduced in sustainable development for folk medicine. Some important points are given below:

- ▶ Both the governments (central or state government) should provide appropriate context or social environment for proper use of folk medicine.
- ▶ Traditional Health education should be introduced in school education. Curriculum should be developed in secondary and higher secondary schools on the topic of Indigenous knowledge and medicine.
- ▶ To introduce local public awareness campaigns about the traditional medicine.
- ▶ To ensure right to traditional practices necessary protection.
- ▶ Both the governments should provide financial and legal support to promote the potential role of folk medicine in primary health care.
- ▶ Both the governments should take responsibility for sustainable supply of medicinal plants.
- ▶ Botanical garden is necessary for the preservation and protection of traditional medicinal herbs.

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- ▶ Local government should take liability for social security of medicine man/women.
- ▶ Steps taken by various government departments and NGOs in this direction in recent years would definitely strengthen the traditional healthcare systems<sup>5</sup>.

These types of initiative will enable the development of folk medicine as well as traditional knowledge study. Lots of people can be saved from the side effects of imported medicines. Poor people can be released from huge economical pressure because imported medicines are very expensive. Both prime ministers Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Ghandi advocated the integration of the best of indigenous medicine with modern medicine. The government established a Central Council of Indian medicine; a statutory body with a mandate to ensure conformity of standards of education and regulation of practice in respect to the traditional system<sup>7</sup>.

### **Conclusion:**

From this study, it is clear that the folk medicines play a vital role against various common diseases. Folk medicine builds an extremely close relationship with the rural or marginalized society and socio-economical environment. Various herbal plants and plants' extracts have significant potentiality to cure primary health problems. Our review result shows that above-mentioned folk medicines and folk treatment process could prevent from common diseases like Small Injuries, Skin Disease, Fever, Dehydration, Ulcer, Diabetes, High blood pressure, Liver disease, Neurotic disorder etc. Hence the review study is concluded with the view that the folk medicines and treatments have important social values in our folk society and already this has been proved by folk and tribal folk society in our country. So in this circumstance it should be preserved and developed for the future generation.

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**Table 1: Plant and Associated Knowledge of Their Efficacy**

Sl.No.	Local name	Scientific name	Part used	Disease	Traditional use
1.	Arshwagondha	Withania somniferum	Roots	Headache & Neurotic disease	Roots of the Arshwagondha are used in reducing headache, insomnia problems.
2.	Nayantara	Catharanthus roseus	Leaf and Flower	Diabetes	It is used in anti-diabetes agents.
3.	Brahmishak	Bacopa monniera	Leaf	Neurotic & cardiac disease	Leaf extraction of the Brahmishak is a popular brain and cardiac tonic. It is also used for blood purifier.
4.	Shatamuli	Asparagus racemosus	Roots	Diabetes	Roots of the Shatamuli are used in diabetes disease.
5.	Thankuni	Centella asiatica	Leaf	Eye diseases & dysentery	Leaf juice of the Thankuni is used in eye diseases and dysentery.
6.	Nata Karanja	Caesalpinia Bonduc	Seed	Skin disease	Seeds oil from Nata Karanja is use to cure in skin disease.
7.	Kalmegh	Andrographis paniculata	Leaf	Liver diseases	Leaf extraction of the Kalmegh is used in liver diseases and used as remedy for fever and diarrhoea.
8.	Ada	Zingiber officinale	Stem	Gastritis & throat problems	It is used in dyspepsia, vomiting tendency, loss of voice, coughs and throat problems.

9.	Muktajhuri	<i>Acalypha indica</i>	Roots	Bronchitis and asthma	Roots of the Muktajhuri are used in bronchitis and asthma disease.
10.	Basak	<i>Adhatoda zeylanica</i>	Leaf	Fever & Lung disease	Leaf extraction of the Basak is used in cough, asthma and respiratory problems.
11.	Neem	<i>Azadirachta indica</i>	Leaf and Stem bark	Fever & eczema	Leaf and stem bark of the Neem tree is a one of the best antiseptic agent. It is used to cure in boils, ulcers, eczema and other skin infection.
12.	Sarpagondha	<i>Raulwolfia serpentina</i>	Roots	High blood pressure & Neurotic disease	Roots are used as remedy for hypertension and anxiety.
13.	Bel	<i>Aegle marmelos</i>	Fruit	Gastritis	Fruit of the Bel tree is a digestive agent. It is used in constipation and dysentery problems.
14.	Arjun	<i>Terminalia arjuna</i>	Stem bark	High blood pressure	Bark of the Arjun is used in hypertensive and cardiac tonic.
15.	Holud	<i>Curcuma longa</i>	Flower & Rhizome	Blood Sugar	Flower of the Holud is used in reducing of sugar diseases. It is also antiseptic agent.
16.	Aamla	<i>Emblica officinalis</i>	Fruit	Ulcer	Fruit extraction of the Amla is used in antiulcer agent.
17.	Rosun	<i>Allium sativum</i>	Bulb	Diabetes	Rosun is used in anti-diabetic agent.
18.	Am	<i>Mangifera indica</i>	Leaf	Diabetes	Leaf extraction of the Am is used in anti-diabetic agent.
19.	Gajor	<i>Daucus carota</i>	Root	Eye diseases	The Gajor is used in reducing of eye diseases.
20.	Arhar Dal	<i>Cajanus cajan</i>	Leaf	Liver disease	Leaf extraction of the Arhar Dal is used in liver disease.