



HEALING HERITAGE OF LOTHAS TRIBES: INDIGENOUS MEDICINAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE TRANSMISSION OF TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous Medicinal systems represent a vital interplay of cultural heritage and ecological wisdom in Naga Society. This study explores the healing traditions of the Lotha Naga community. This exploration focused on three dimensions: 1. Knowledge and use of medicinal plants, 2. Traditional healing practices and herbal remedies and 3. Transmission across generations. Oral narratives and field observations were adopted to examine how traditional healers and elders preserve, practice as well as transmit this medicinal knowledge within the community. Existing literature supported the findings of the study. Findings revealed that spiritual healing with the use of locally available plants and natural resources make Lotha Naga tribe's traditional medicinal practices holistic. However, knowledge transmission remains predominantly oral which is sustained through the active involvement of elders and healers. Despite the growing influence of modern healthcare and changing social conditions, certain indigenous healing practices, particularly the use of medicinal plants, continue to be valued and practiced reflecting their cultural and therapeutic relevance. Therefore, the Lotha indigenous medical knowledge system needs to be documented and preserved as the cultural identity.

KEYWORDS: Indigenous Knowledge System, Medicinal Plants, Oral Tradition, Healing Heritage, Lotha Naga Tribes.

INTRODUCTION

Nagaland is located in the northeastern region of India, which is known for its rich cultural diversity and strong traditional knowledge system. The state officially recognizes 17 major tribes, each possessing unique cultural practices, languages, and customs. Among these communities are the Lothas, who identify themselves as Kyong, meaning "man." The tribe is predominantly found in Wokha district, an area characterized by its hilly terrain and numerous village settlements. Its population is over 166,000 as per the 2011 census of India, with a literacy rate of nearly 88 percent. Traditionally, villages were established on hilltops and ridges, for security and easy access to natural resources such as water. Today, the district comprises 133 recognized villages, where cultural traditions and indigenous knowledge systems continue to play an important role in daily life and community well-being.

Indigenous Knowledge is the local knowledge which is unique to a given culture and society. IK can also be perceived as the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous communities in matters related to agriculture, environmental management, medicine and health, among others. Therefore, IK is the anchor for survival and stability in indigenous communities and acts as the information base for local-level decision making in agriculture, health care, food preparation, education, and natural resource.

For generations, the Lotha people uphold a comprehensive indigenous knowledge system, particularly in health and healing. These practices encompass the use of medicinal plants, spiritual rituals, and holistic approaches to

well-being. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), health is not merely the absence of disease but rather a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, a perspective that aligns closely with traditional healing system of the Lothas. Further, health is defined in the Indian knowledge system as "*prasannātmendriyamanāḥ svastha ityabhidhiyate*" (Charaka Samhita, Sūtrasthāna 1.58; Bhardwaj et al., 2025), indicating that an individual is deemed healthy when the soul, senses, and mind are in a condition of contentment and equilibrium. Additionally, UNESCO has already recognized the significance of Indigenous Knowledge as a fundamental component of community cultural heritage. Indigenous medicinal Knowledge is essential for biodiversity protection and sustainable development and education. Furthermore, India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 promotes the incorporation of indigenous knowledge into education mainstream to ensure cultural preservation and sustainability in the society.

Furthermore, indigenous knowledge systems represent frequently ignored component of cultural legacy particularly among tribal communities around the world. These systems demonstrate insights into sustainable living, community-based health ensuring system and spiritual well-being approaches. The Lotha community in Nagaland is among those who live these ideas in their daily life (Warren, Slikkerveer, & Brokensha, 1991). Nevertheless, rapid advancement in society, growing social migration, industrialization and the pervasiveness of allopathic health systems have endangered these ancient indigenous medicinal



and health caring system. Consequently, transfer of significant Lotha community indigenous medicinal knowledge to the next generation is facing progressive reduction; particularly younger generations are increasingly estranged from ancestral healing wisdom (Singh & Singh, 2020).

Research on ethnobotanical knowledge in Nagaland highlights the significance of indigenous medicinal practices among various tribes. Khruomo (2018) and Kumar (2018) emphasized the role of underutilized plants in nutrition and healing. Moanaro (2007) and Thejazhanuo (2015) documented the use of insecticidal and edible aroid plants, respectively, in traditional medicine. Pongener (2022) studied medicinal insects and their roles in indigenous health practices. Studies by Watienla (2019) and Lanusunep (2015) delve into the integration of spiritual beliefs and herbal treatments. Vadeo (2023) reviews the wide spectrum of ailments addressed by indigenous practices and stresses the importance of incorporating such knowledge into formal healthcare systems.

This study investigates the healing heritage of the Lotha Naga community, focusing on medicinal plant knowledge, traditional healing methods and the transmission of this information throughout generations.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design. Data were sourced from both primary and secondary sources. It was obtained from elders of the Lotha community, experienced indigenous medicinal therapists, and healing experts through the blend of structured and unstructured interviews. Further, existing literature such as books prior research studies, articles and ethnobotanical studies related to traditional medicine and indigenous knowledge systems. It included to support the current study and its findings. The data were thematically examined to identify repeating patterns and principal themes related to the use of medicinal plants and healing techniques.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Indigenous medicinal knowledge among the Naga tribes represents a holistic system of healing that integrates both spiritual and natural remedies. Illness is often interpreted through a spiritual lens, where ailments are attributed to the influence of evil spirits (*tsüngrhamü*) or the wandering of the patient's soul (*omon*). In such cases, a medicine man (*Ratsen*) is called upon to perform healing rituals. These rituals may involve extracting symbolic foreign materials like bits of earth, wood, or hair from the patient's body, or conducting ceremonies to retrieve the patient's soul. One such ritual is the *Montsai*, a traditional healing practice performed by a soul catcher. In earlier times, all illnesses were believed to result from the actions of evil spirits who captured human souls. The *Montsai* would locate the dwelling of these spirits and attempt to rescue the lost soul. He performed specific rituals to appease the spirits and asserted his authority by scolding them and threatening to bring warriors to destroy them unless the soul was released. He would then call out the victim's name and urge the soul to follow him. Along the way, he would stop frequently to call the name again, ensuring that the soul remained on the right path. Upon reaching the village, the *Montsai* would guide the soul back to the body, thereby restoring health.

Despite the strong spiritual component in healing, the Naga communities also possess a vast and detailed knowledge of medicinal plants and natural remedies passed down through generations. These remedies address a diverse range of diseases and are frequently founded on the utilization of locally sourced available herbs, trees, animal products, and traditional preparation methods.

Ageratum conyzoides, locally known as *Ronna*, is used as a haemostatic; its leaf juice is applied to cuts to stop bleeding, and the plant is also known for its anti-inflammatory and anti-allergic properties. *Centella asiatica*, called *Siyanorukho*, belonging to the Apiaceae family, is widely used as a tonic, diuretic, and stimulant, and is administered in cases of indigestion, nervousness, gastric disorders, and kidney troubles. *Passiflora edulis*, or passion fruit, known locally as *Bellthi*, is part of the Passifloraceae family and is used for its juice, which acts as a tonic for dysentery, while its leaves are used in the treatment of diabetes and high blood pressure.

Hibiscus sabdariffa, known as *Hantsurup*, has both its flowers and leaves used. Dried flowers are prescribed for dyspepsia and other stomach disorders, while the leaves are used as a hair lotion. *Eupatorium adenophorum*, locally known as *Burma lemon*, provides a leaf juice that acts as a haemostatic and is also applied as a paste on cuts and wounds. *Albizia chinensis*, called *Khokshithera*, and *Albizia lebbeck*, or *Khokshu*, both from the Mimosaceae family, are valued for their multiple medicinal properties. The bark of *Albizia chinensis* is known for its anthelmintic properties and is also used in fish poisoning, whereas the leaf extract treats skin diseases. *Albizia lebbeck* uses its bark, seeds, and flowers. the bark being expectorant, anti-inflammatory, and depurative, while the leaves are used to treat night blindness.

Aquilaria malaccensis, known as *Tssungza* and belonging to the Thymelaeaceae family, is appreciated for its carminative and stimulant properties, especially in treating bronchitis and headaches. *Allium cepa* (*piaz*), *Allium hookeri* (*Ruptso*), and *Allium sativum* (*sanran*) are widely used in traditional medicine. *Allium cepa* bulbs are used for their antibacterial, expectorant, and diuretic qualities, especially in the treatment of dysentery, jaundice, and malaria. *Allium hookeri* is used externally; its warmed leaf juice is massaged on the body to relieve aches, while *Allium sativum*, or garlic, is well known for its role in lowering blood pressure and cholesterol levels, and for treating wounds, colds, flu, and digestive disorders.

Aloe vera, referred to locally as *aloe*, is considered effective against piles, rectal fissures, ulcers, and purulent ophthalmia. *Dendrobium densiflorum*, or *Somhithera*, is used in the form of a leaf paste applied to fractured bones. *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*, known as *Judongbenthera*, is valued for its body cooling effects, and flowers mixed with sugar are consumed to reduce body temperature and help in ulcer treatment.

Sweet potato, or *khotheorho* (*Ipomoea batatas*), of the Convolvulaceae family, is recognized for its antidiabetic and dermatological properties. Tubers are administered for vomiting, asthma, and constipation, while the leaves are known for their high vitamin B and C content. *Musa paradisiaca* (*Yothithera*), of the Musaceae family, is widely used; the stem is eaten as an anti-acidity agent, flowers for



treating dysentery and diabetes, and the roots serve as anthelmintics used in scabies and leprosy.

Parkia timoriana, or *Yangchak*, from the Mimosaceae family, has seeds that are consumed raw or cooked and are used particularly for the treatment of dysentery and piles. *Plantago erosa*, locally called *Orhyuero* and also recorded as *Pholunghayi*, is used for treating dysentery, burns, and cuts. It is known for its astringent, cooling, febrifuge, diuretic, and tonic properties, and is also used for toothache and pile problems.

Psidium guajava, or *Maduram*, from the Myrtaceae family, uses both its bark and leaves in treating stomachache, headache, and fever. Pounded leaves are applied to rheumatic areas, and leaf decoctions are used as a gargle for toothache and gum infections. The flowers of *Rhododendron arboreum* (*Supenthera*) are traditionally consumed when a fishbone is stuck in the throat and are also used in the treatment of headaches and dysentery. *Ricinus communis* (*Aribatong*) uses its leaves, root, bark, and oil. Warmed leaves are tied on swellings, boils, and rheumatic joints, while the oil is used as a purgative and for treating skin inflammation and leprosy. *Schima wallichii* (*Nchungthera*) uses its bark as an anthelmintic and skin irritant, while its young leaves are antipyretic. Powdered dry bark is given to cattle to eliminate intestinal worms.

Solanum torvum (*Khumkho*) uses leaves, fruits, and roots; leaf paste is applied on wounds, and the fruits are beneficial in treating cough, liver and spleen enlargement, and piles. *Urtica ardens* (*Zukrha*) uses its root for diarrhea, while leaf infusions are used as expectorants and blood purifiers. The root paste is applied for minor fractures. *Zingiber officinale* (*Osung*), known for its rhizomes, is widely used for throat pain, stomach troubles, coughs, and colds. It is applied in the form of juice, crushed pulp, or dry powder.

Canarium strictum (*Jakronthi*) produces fruits that are sweet and sour when fresh, and develop a smoky flavour when boiled and dried. These fruits are taken as post-meal digestives and remedies for stomach ailments. Basil, locally known as *Rarakhüm*, from the Lamiaceae family, is considered a “living first-aid kit.” Basil seeds are inserted into the eyes to remove dirt or foreign particles, as they are believed to draw them out. *Chromolaena odorata* (*Mesanrong*), belonging to the Asteraceae family, is used when injured the leaves are ground and applied to stop bleeding and promote healing, and are also used to treat nosebleeds.

Beyond plant-based remedies, several animal-based and unique indigenous treatments are employed. Fat pork is eaten as an aperient. A mixture of chicken dung and rat dung whipped with water is consumed as an emetic with strong purging effects. Roasted goat's hoof or the gall of a cow or pig is administered for diarrhea. The bark of *Nshitong* (*Stereospermum chelonoides*) is consumed as an infusion for stomach aches and intestinal worms. Porcupine stomach, dried and ground into powder, is mixed with water and taken for general stomach issues. For abdominal pains, poultices of wild lemon leaves (*Tsoshü*) and crushed leaves of *Maesa indica* (locally known as *Tsandhrammozü*, meaning “devi's medicine”) are applied.

The berries of the belleric (*Yenkuti*) are chewed to relieve cough and used as a tonic for weak children. In cases of lactation problems, bat flesh is fed to infants as a

strengthening tonic. Wounds are treated using a poultice made from the bark of young shoots of the *Nungnung* tree (*Callicarpa arborea*), which is believed to stop bleeding. Bark from *Taraktogenos kurzü* (*Hmhmti*) is prepared into a lotion for disinfecting wounds. When maggots infest a wound, a mash made from the body of the giant woodlouse (*Sharhi*) is applied. Live soot is used in treating skin diseases. Boils are treated by rubbing damp yeast (*Vamhe*) over them to bring them to a head before lancing with a bamboo splinter. Warts are removed by crushing a black-and-yellow beetle (*Potsow tsiro*, meaning “god's mithan”) over them, causing the wart to fester and fall off. For dog bites, a singed whisker from the biting dog is placed on the wound. Human breast milk is also applied to the eyes, and in some cases, human urine is used to treat eye ailments.

For sprains, traditional methods involve bloodletting. Minor sprains are scratched to draw blood, and a leech is applied. In more serious cases, a cupping method is used involving a serow horn. A bamboo splinter pricks the skin, and the horn, fitted with a withered leaf valve, is used to draw out blood, reducing swelling. This method is also used for bruises and dropsy. For the treatment of goitre, an indigenous remedy involves passing a red-hot umbrella wire through the swelling a drastic method that is rarely used due to its painful nature.

The result demonstrated that the Lotha indigenous healing system and medicinal knowledge are deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and effectively implemented through extensive knowledge of local indigenous flora, fauna and spiritual traditions. This knowledge is preserved and transmitted orally across generations, especially by elders, traditional healers, and community practices. Despite the availability of modern medicine, many of these remedies remain in use today, reflecting a resilient and adaptive indigenous knowledge system that continues to serve as a primary health resource in many rural and tribal settings.

The indigenous healing system of the Naga tribes reveals a deep-rooted ethnomedical tradition that integrates spiritual beliefs with empirical knowledge of nature. From ritualistic healing to plant-based pharmacology, their practices showcase a comprehensive understanding of health and illness.

Transmission of this knowledge occurs mainly through oral tradition, apprenticeship, and community observation, especially from elders and medicine men to the younger generation. Despite external influences, these systems remain resilient and adaptive, reflecting the cultural identity, ecological awareness, and practical efficacy of indigenous Naga communities.

CONCLUSION

The study has explored indigenous healing heritage and traditional medicinal systems among Lotha sub tribes of Naga community. The findings of the current study have demonstrated cultural legacy of Indian knowledge system (IKS) along with a living source of indigenous health and well-being. It offers holistic way of life that integrates physical treatment with emotional, spiritual and indigenous healing of Lotha sub tribes. Despite the increasing acceptability of various modern healthcare system in current

world, indigenous Naga Lotha sub-tribes' healing traditions remained valued and practiced. Indigenous Medicinal systems of this tribe demonstrated the robust interplay of cultural heritage of Nagaland and ecological wisdom of northeast India. It showed their significant cultural and therapeutic relevance in modern way of life.

Furthermore, the study suggested preserving this significant indigenous knowledge medicinal heritage and legacy by documentation of region originated medicinal plants, practicing rituals, and live healer narratives in digital as well as printed form. Additionally, this type of vulnerable indigenous legacy recommended to incorporate in school education curriculum and taught by teacher from middle stage of school education. Practicing healers need to be recognised by community platforms. Most significantly, forest conservation areas need to be prioritized which serve as the medicinal sources. Preserving incredible indigenous knowledge is not just about the past but it is the forward path towards more inclusive and sustainable health systems that respect indigenous wisdom, cultural dignity and ecological justice for Naga society.

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