Herbalist: The traditional healers in North-East India

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India, the land of ayurveda, is recognized world over as a rich source of medical and aromatic plants. However Northeastern region of the India comprising states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura still follow the age old traditional healing systems based on Ayurveda, Unani and other allied practices. This part of India is very rich in plant diversity as well as in ethnic diversity. The ethnic communities of this area maintain a great traditional knowledge base in herbal medicine. They also practice different types of traditional healing practices. The tribal communities use various method to treat illness by using herbs in many form mainly as fresh drug, juice for oral consumption and powdered medicine and use as paste to apply on wounds and various skin diseases. The herbs they use are locally available medicinal herbs and also cultivated drugs from different habitat as well as cultivating

Depleting medicinal plants, they have also faith on divines and supernatural powers, and worships for cure of ailments. Various studies shows that the traditional healers in this region belong to different categories like herbalist, diviners and birth attendants etc.

All traditional healers do not perform the same functions, nor do they all fall into the same category. Each one of them has their own respective field of expertise. Even the techniques employed differed considerably. There are different types of traditional healers in north east India. Like other parts of India, Herbalists are also common in every states of north east India. Common people believe that they wouldn't be able to become a good herbalist because it needs some spiritual power. They use natural methods as treatment to many diseases, because they believe that these were the resources that have nurtured human beings since time immemorial.

Traditional healers used to be taught by other traditional healers with many years experience from generation to generation. They are generally dependent on wild source of medicinal plants they use. However, several groups have individually developed their own herbal garden in their land available in their vicinity. Their treatment is long and comprehensive and has various aspects like protective, curative and preventive and can be either ritual or natural, or sometimes both, depending on the genesis and cause of the disease. Malaria, Jaundice and female menstruation problems are the prominent diseases as most of the traditional healers are prescribed medicine for these treatments. After formulation most of the products procured from plants are used orally, whereas for bone facture and other severe diseases medicines are not prescribed for consumption. The traditional healers combine various parts of a tree or different trees with some other herbal products. The healers mixes various plants which all may not contain the properties to cure and relief from particular disease but they can be used to reduce side effect on treatment. Some important species used for traditional healing practices in North east India are Mishimi teeta, Manimuni, Satmul, Kardoi, Patharchura, Siju, Titabahak, Mahaneem, Golancha, Agar, Leteku, Sarpagandha, Nephaphu, Dron, Vang, Erapat, Teetachampa, Nilaji, Vatghila, Jhilimili, Meteka, Narasingha, Monisal, Nilakantha etc. Most of the herbalist are involved in this profession for economic benefits, whereas few of them are bound to do this practice due to the scarcity of any recognized medicine systems in that area and rest of the traditional herbalists feel it as a part of social work and moral obligation. Two factors mainly contribute to the less

interest of the younger generation in the traditional healing practices. First and the most prominent one is modernization of the society due to globalization and poor financial gain. Some traditional herbalist were found to take help from the Ayurvedic products and use raw materials from the markets for preparing their medicine. Another section of these traditional healer does their jobs and other activities as well as they are earning money from this profession. They are not wholly dependent upon this profession and

their income from this profession is not stable and fluctuating every now and then. Some of the traditional healers are doing this practice as per their requirement and economic condition. There are many people with extensive knowledge about plans don't want to include this service in their profession and they are doing this practice due to the absence of any other affordable alternatives in the remote areas of northeastern region. They utilize their vast knowledge of herbs in traditional healing processes as a part of social obligation. Folk healers are easily available and affordable and acceptable and existing in all the villages and their services depends upon local resources like flora, fauna, minerals, etc.

The traditional healing system is neither organized nor streamlined and still it is practiced as an assortment of natural medicine, superstition and religion belief. Therefore, the exploration of this indigenous knowledge and its scientific validation, recognition in the system of medicine and its popularization is urgently required for upholding this highly potential traditional healing practice of north east India. Northeast India has India's richest reservoir of plant diversity and supports around 50% of India's total plant diversity and harbours 40% of India's endemic plant species. The medicinal plant sector has got great potential to boost the economy of Northeastern India. For successful cultivation and processing of medicinal plants, some core issues like identification of species-specific pockets through surveys, proper documentation and identification through DNA barcoding, isolation of active compound, conservation, production of quality planting material, agro technique development, market survey, establishment of storage facilities and market channels, awareness and capacity building, etc needs to be addressed. The TERI North East Centre is working on not only finding out unexplored medicinal plants of the region, but also on conservation aspects of the known plants and providing quality planting material to farmers for large scale cultivation. Making pharmaceutical companies in other parts of the country dependent on raw material from the Northeastern region for formulation of certain products can turn out to be very promising for Northeast India in many aspects.

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