

Tribal Healing Practices in Sikkim



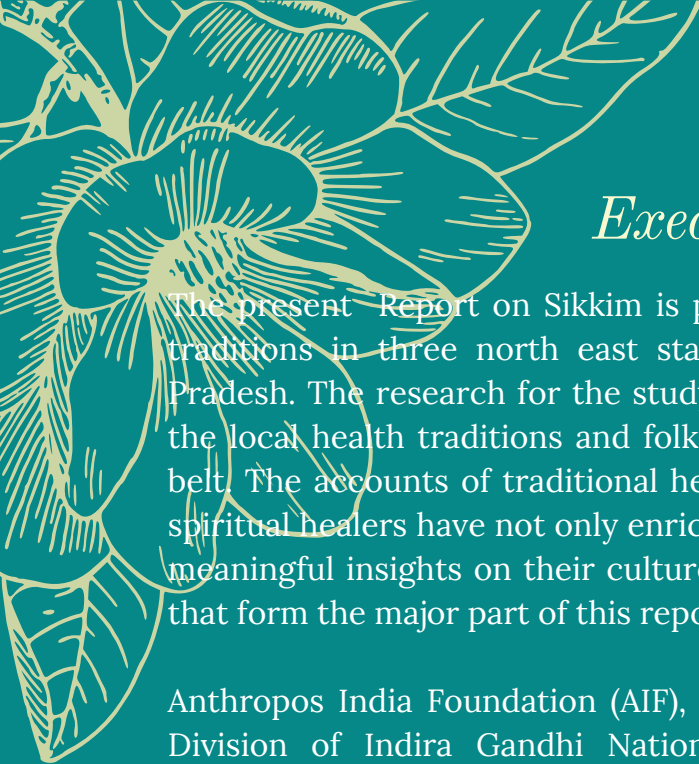
Executive Summary



Supported by Indira Gandhi Centre
for Art and Culture (IGNCA)

Dr. Sunita Reddy





Executive Summary

The present Report on Sikkim is part of the study conducted on the local health traditions in three north east states of India including Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. The research for the study has been carried out meticulously to decipher the local health traditions and folk and healing practices among the eastern tribal belt. The accounts of traditional healers that included herbalists, bone-setters and spiritual healers have not only enriched the ethnographic journey but have provided meaningful insights on their culture and healing practices and it is their narratives that form the major part of this report on the State of Sikkim.

Anthropos India Foundation (AIF), New Delhi in collaboration with the Kala Nidhi Division of Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi conducted the study in east, west and north districts of Sikkim, is an attempt to document the Folk and Tribal Healing Practices of the indigenous people of the state. The rich biodiversity of the state has nearly 6000 different species of flowering plants out of which 700 are medicinal plants. Of this rich gene pool, nearly 488 species of aromatic and medicinal plants are used by the indigenous communities. It is understood that the tribal communities have been using various natural resources as medicines since time immemorial. The classic ethnographic and anthropological work focused on the shamanic and magico-religious healing practices, along with many studies on the aetiology of diseases and the role of healers among the tribes. It is established by the anthropological ethnobotanical and ethnopharmacological studies that the tribal communities have been utilizing various flora, fauna and natural/mineral substances for healing. Also the contribution of local healers serving a large section of the population is well recognised.

Though there is ample anthropological literature on the traditional healing practices and plurality of the health system, there has been growing concern about the state regulation on the use, access and control of the biodiversity. The use of flora, fauna and other natural minerals by the healers has become difficult either due to deforestation or due to government regulations that now prohibit the healer's access medicinal plants especially from the forest. Moreover promotion of only certain type of plants and involvement of private players has led to commercial growth of certain kinds of herbs that have demand in the market.

Though the Indian Biological Diversity Act (2002) and Indian Biological Diversity Rule (2004) have laid down the provisions for Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) that essentially regulate access of genetic resources and also ensure equitable benefits to the healers, it becomes imperative to capture the ground situation. Also it seemed essential to determine the role of local healers in the state bodies such as Forest Department, State Biodiversity Board, State Medicinal plant Board, AYUSH, The Mountain Institute etc.



With these preliminary thoughts and a review of available literature, the researchers aimed to study the role of healers in meeting the healthcare needs of the community, their experiences and challenges; the experiences of the local people who approach these healers for their health issues and the role of State in preserving the indigenous knowledge and integrating the local healing traditions to the mainstream.

The present study aimed at documenting the ways to preserve, conserve and integrate the traditional practices with the mainstream. It is understood that often these indigenous, non-codified systems might disappear with the expansion of professionalized, codified biomedical health care system. Presently great traditions of AYUSH and biomedicine dominates the current academic discourse and the indigenous systems which the tribal people follow receives little attention. It is also acknowledged that the local healers provide the local population their services where often the biomedical services have not reached or not well established. The growing concern however is that the number of practitioners is dwindling and the younger generation is not willing to learn due to non-recognition by the state and also because of non-availability of herbs owing to deforestation, displacement and migration of the indigenous people. Another unsettling debate surrounding the local healing practices and tribal medicine is the debate over science and superstitions, rights and recognition and autonomy and accreditations. Legitimacy and validity of both the tribal medicine and the tribal medical practitioners have been questioned and undermined time and again.

The study followed an ethnographic approach and a list of healers and medical practitioners which were to be interviewed was sourced from State Medicinal Plant Board, 2009. Before starting the project, a consultative meet and round table discussion on 'Folk and Tribal Healing Practices' was organised in collaboration with the Lepcha and Anthropology Department of the Sikkim University to get a holistic view of the situation. The seminar was attended by scholars and the faculty from various disciplines and it provided a base for the study by identifying the critical issues, understanding the outcomes of the previous studies and noting the likely challenges. Apart from taking the narratives of the healers, it was intended to interview various officials of different concerned Departments to gain their perspectives on the state provisions and efforts towards the subject.



The landlocked state of Sikkim ornamented by rivers, lakes, ponds, forests, hot springs and mountains has Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese as its inhabitants, Lepchas being the original inhabitants of the state who call themselves as the 'people of the valley'. The people live in harmony with nature and have great reverence for nature and believe in Gods and spirits. People either follow Christianity or Buddhism and religion and healing practices are interconnected, as people seek treatment from Bongthing (spiritual healers) and monks(for rituals and prayers). Bongthings have important role to play in the community as they are the ones who initiate the rituals. The healers use rice, egg, fruits , flowers and animal sacrifice(hen, cock, chicken) during the rituals which are done on different occasions like house warming, birth, marriage and death. Specific rituals are done during illnesses like depression restoring prestige of a person, or for growth, peace and prosperity of the individual and his/her family and also for the whole village and community. Certain food items like fermented rice beer called 'Chi' holds significant position and is present in all rituals and prayer ceremonies.



Another promising perspective that came from the State officials explained that there have been efforts by the government to document the herbal medicines and recognise the healing practices. There have been efforts to conserve the biodiversity of the State, sustainable use of the flora and fauna and benefit sharing with the healers and the community. Nearly 700 plants have been recognised as herbal plants by the state and different departments like the State Medicinal Plant Board and FRLHT, Bangalore are working together to document all the medicinal properties of various herbs. Steps are also being taken to avoid illegal sale and exploitation of the herbs, preservation of the gene pool and avert bio-piracy of the herbs. Different state departments like Tourism, Forest, Horticulture, Agriculture and Culture are being called to collaborate and this intra-sectoral association would ensure non exploitation of the herbal and medicinal plants. Efforts are being made to collaborate with the Quality Council of India to evaluate the healers and provide them recognition.

The narratives of the healers in the present study has highlighted that the local people seek the help of local healers in all kinds of illnesses like depression, bone displacement or fracture, sprains, stomach pain and gastritis, jaundice, reproductive problems in women like infertility or UTI, snake bite, dog bite etc and some healers have claimed to have treatment for diabetes, infertility and even cancer. Mostly it is the healers who are consulted first for any kind of illness or even before seeking modern healthcare especially if the procedures are invasive. There were cases where healers were asked to even visit the patients in the hospitals and provide their services along with the allopathic treatment. The healers are seen with respect as they work for the betterment of the people and community and offer their services out of passion, commitment and an intention to serve the community and do not seek any monetary benefit. Most healers in various districts were seen to be living a subsistence life with minimum assets and some even had thatched houses. They did not charge any money for their services and mostly accepted what the patients offered as they believed that charging for their services would diminish the efficacy of their healing powers which they either learnt from their forefathers or in their dreams. Both faith based healers and herbal healers were concerned for the dwindling of their healing practices and reasoned that as they were not recognised by the state, the young generation did not find healing practice as an efficient means to earn a living. The non-commitment by the young generation, migration, less monetary benefit and non- recognition by the state were cited as the main reasons for diminishing number of the healers and it was mostly men who were observing healing practices along with their jobs or other small businesses. Only one women healer was part of the study as there was hardly any women healers in the community.

On the state's involvement in the promotion of their healing practices, most healers voiced that their knowledge of herbs and the process of healing was being taken away by the government officials or individuals and they are not benefitted in return. Neither their medicine nor their healing practices were recognised by the state and no monetary benefit was ensured. Some healers had attended various training programs conducted by different government departments and showcased their knowledge of herbs and medicinal plants, their procedures of healing and other practices, but such training programs proved to be less fruitful for the healers. They just received a certificate of appreciation but their healing techniques were not recognised and they were not supported for opening nurseries or their clinics. They demanded that a 'Healer's Hut' or 'Community Healing Centres' be opened at the panchayat level where healers could come and practice and this would ensure the preservation and continuation of their healing practices.

Further such steps of giving recognition if taken would also attract the young generation and would ensure preservation of their knowledge and their cultural heritage. The healers are the real custodians of the knowledge and the bio-resources of their area and with due recognition, credit and support and freedom to practice, the healers who address the primary level care can help in making healthcare services available at the ground level.



The present study is a humble attempt to outline the local healing traditions of Sikkim which is in tandem with the government's sharper policy attention to traditional medicine. The WHO Report on 'Traditional medicine: Growing needs and potential' (2002) identifies diverse health practices, approaches, knowledge and beliefs, incorporating medicine from plant, animal and/or mineral sources, spiritual therapies to have important place and advises that there should be efforts to promote such practices where the population /community depends on such healing practices. The Indian government's recent efforts to promote and preserve traditional and folk medicine and recognise birth attendants, bone-setters and poison healers needs documentation and concerted efforts are being done in this area. But the healers have not been given due recognition, financial benefit and support. These heterogenous forms of knowledge which are still non-codified and not certified have been unified under the broad category of 'local health traditions' wait for their due recognition, acceptance and preservation.

News Coverage

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Importance of Folk Healers in Primary Health Care: Need for Recognition and Support

Dr. SURESH REDDY & THIRUVENKATESH
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about a nexus between the police and the illegal liquor sellers. State Excise Minister Parimal Shuklabaidya has ordered a probe into the matter.
"The state government has suspended two excise officials after holding them responsible for the tragedy. We have also asked a four-member team, led by Additional Commissioner of Excise Department Sanjib Medhi, to probe the incident," said Shuklabaidya, who has been asked to submit its report to the government within three days.

called by SKM party on February 28 over its 35-point demand placed before the State government.
Addressing media here today at Press Club of Sikkim, SSWA president Mingma Ongchen Sherpa said the students' body is an apolitical organisation but the points raised by the opposition party is genuine and need of the hour. He maintained that the demands are for the overall welfare of the State and its people thus the citizens should support the strike on February 28.

members would visit all colleges and interact with the students and take their feedback on the strike call.
"We will also generate awareness amongst the students on the rights and role of students during elections and not let the students get misled by the political parties," he said.
Association general secretary Karan Silwal expressed that it has become a trend wherein the first priority of any government scheme is extended to Nar Bahadur Bhandari Degree College Sikkim.

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SU workshop on folk healers, folk knowledge

SE Report
GANGTOK, February 22: A workshop with the folk healers on folk knowledge, intellectual property rights and possible integration was held at the Anthropology department of Sikkim University here today. The event was organised by Anthropos India Foundation and supported by Indira Gandhi National Centre for Art and Culture, a press release informs.
During the workshop, herbal healers from different parts of East Sikkim spoke about their healing practices and challenges they face for gaining recognition of their knowledge. Their healing practices have been helping people in their communities for basic health care and sometimes even some serious ailments. They shared that they treat people with jaundice, piles, sinusitis, skin problems, stomach problems and also sprain and fractures.
However, the healers were apprehensive about their knowledge being taken away and in turn not being given due credit. The discussion over recognizing their value and also formation of model healing centres in their own communities were proposed.
The students and faculty gained different perspectives from the healers from public health point of view, the release mentions.

Call for English, a part of the launched a new Cambridge University Sikkim, here

The launch was additional chief secretary, Sikkim State Gopal Kumar Niraula guest of honour.
SRM University Sikkim Ch. Satish Kumar state to nurture young generation for enhancing skills of informs.
Addressing the occasion commended the endeavour forward more initiative facilitate quality education.
The SSU vice ch on global relevancy essence of it.
Manish Puri from said, "We are happy University, Sikkim at partnership ahead."
The programme (higher education) D achievement with at for the students in SCERT director

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Throwing light on 'healing practices' in North East

OUR CORRESPONDENT
A workshop on 'Traditional Medicine Systems and the Indigenous Healing Practices in North East India: Methodological Challenges' was organised recently at IGNCNA by Kala Nidhi Division, Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA) in collaboration with Anthropos India Foundation (AIF).
Dr Ramnar Guza, Director, Kala Nidhi, IGNCNA welcomed the participants and provided an overview of Kala Nidhi programmes and activities. He also talked about the genesis of the project.
Followed by the welcome address, Dr Sumita Reddy Associate Professor in PU and founder member of AIF introduced the project by sharing the conceptual understanding, objectives, methods and ethical aspects in undertaking this study, which will maintain the academic rigour and yet make it accessible to the general public, using audio visual documentation.
Dr Sachchidanand Joshi, Member Secretary, IGNCNA in his inaugural session gave very insightful remarks about the project. IGNCNA has richness in various knowledge systems, however, the project should focus on the traditional healing practices. He further suggested that emotional connect should be brought out which is the essence of any healing process. He also suggested that this research can help in designing Post Graduate diploma or a certificate course on traditional healing systems, which are so important given the wide use across communities.
The aim of the workshop was to create a platform for dialogue and to create a robust study in a state will act as the standard framework which will help in expanding this study not just to North Eastern states but can be taken up at the national level. Further, digitising the findings will be in the public domain for acknowledging the knowledge of the healers, the value of



Participants of the 'Traditional Medicine Systems and the Indigenous Healing Practices in North East India: Methodological Challenges' workshop organised at IGNCNA

Aim of the workshop was to focus on project taken up by Anthropos India Foundation and invite comments, suggestions, and challenges in doing an 'ethnographic' research in the selected three states of North East States (Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, and Manipur)
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such healing practices by the communities without impinging on the secrecy of their practice and giving them the intellectual property rights.
Dr Shilpa Chandra shared her experience researching with local health traditions in North East and also suggested IGNCNA should also organize a festival of healers in its premises.
During the workshop, in various sessions, interesting ideas came up along with many challenges to be faced. Use of SWOT studies, looking at healing as an integral part of local culture and interconnected with various festivals, rituals, taboos, natural resource base, and the practices needs to be written keeping the narratives intact for various interpretation. The intellectual property rights and the challenges in the integration of their knowledge was discussed at length. The challenges of language, limitation of interpretation, understanding of ethnic groups, local culture, diversity, and the wide geographic area need to be taken into account while doing research.
Following the workshop, an ethnographic research will be carried out bringing in 'emic' perspective and also from critical medical anthropology perspective, connecting the micro level reality to meso and macro factors influencing the traditional healing systems.