



Traditional Knowledge Systems of Assam with Special Reference to Folk Medicine

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20774688>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 27-05-2026

Published: 10-06-2026

Keywords:

*Traditional Knowledge,
Assam, Folk Medicine,
Indigenous Communities,
Medicinal Plants,
Ethnomedicine.*

ABSTRACT

Traditional Knowledge Systems (TKS) represent the accumulated wisdom, practices, and beliefs developed by indigenous and local communities through long-term interaction with their natural and social environments. Assam, located in the northeastern region of India, possesses a rich repository of traditional knowledge owing to its diverse ethnic composition and abundant biodiversity. Among the various components of traditional knowledge, folk medicine occupies a significant place in the healthcare practices of rural and tribal communities. This article examines the traditional knowledge systems of Assam with special reference to folk medicine, highlighting its historical evolution, indigenous healing practices, medicinal plants, socio-cultural significance, and contemporary challenges. The study argues that folk medicine continues to play a crucial role in primary healthcare, particularly in remote areas where modern medical facilities remain limited. The preservation and scientific validation of these traditional practices are essential for sustainable healthcare and cultural conservation.

Introduction

Traditional Knowledge Systems (TKS) refer to the accumulated knowledge, skills, beliefs, and practices developed by indigenous and local communities through centuries of interaction with nature and society. These systems are transmitted from one generation to another through oral traditions, observation, rituals, customs, and practical experiences. Traditional knowledge encompasses various fields such as



agriculture, environmental management, handicrafts, food preservation, and healthcare. In recent decades, scholars and policymakers have increasingly recognized the importance of traditional knowledge in promoting sustainable development, biodiversity conservation, and community resilience (Gupta, 2007).

Assam, situated in the northeastern region of India, is characterized by immense ethnic diversity and rich biological resources. The state is inhabited by numerous communities including the Bodo, Karbi, Mishing, Rabha, Tiwa, Dimasa, Deori, Sonowal Kachari, and Tea Tribes. Each community possesses unique traditional knowledge systems adapted to local environmental conditions. Among the various domains of traditional knowledge, folk medicine occupies a particularly significant position because it directly contributes to healthcare and well-being.

Folk medicine in Assam has evolved through centuries of observation, experimentation, and interaction with the natural environment. Traditional healers and community elders have accumulated extensive knowledge regarding medicinal plants, disease treatment, preventive healthcare, and healing rituals. Even today, many rural populations depend upon folk medicine for primary healthcare because of its affordability, accessibility, and cultural acceptability. Therefore, the study of folk medicine offers valuable insights into the relationship between traditional knowledge, biodiversity, and healthcare.

Literature Review

The study of traditional knowledge and folk medicine has attracted considerable academic attention in India and abroad. Scholars have emphasized the importance of indigenous healthcare systems in preserving cultural heritage and providing healthcare services.

Jain (1991) highlighted that folk medicine represents a vast repository of indigenous knowledge accumulated through generations. He argued that many traditional remedies possess scientific validity and deserve systematic documentation.

Borthakur (1981) conducted pioneering ethnobotanical research in Assam and documented numerous medicinal plants used by tribal communities. His work remains one of the most important contributions to understanding ethnomedicine in the region.

Fabricant and Farnsworth (2001) demonstrated that traditional medicinal knowledge has contributed significantly to modern pharmaceutical development. They emphasized the need to preserve indigenous knowledge as a source of future drug discoveries.



Teron and Borthakur (2012) documented medicinal plants used by the Karbi community and highlighted the extensive ethnomedicinal knowledge possessed by indigenous groups in Assam. Their study revealed that traditional remedies remain important in treating common diseases.

Recent studies have also focused on the threats facing traditional knowledge systems. Researchers have identified modernization, environmental degradation, migration, and changing lifestyles as major factors contributing to the erosion of indigenous knowledge. These studies advocate documentation, conservation, and community participation as essential strategies for preserving traditional healthcare practices.

Objectives of the Study

*To document and understand the diverse folk medicinal practices prevalent among the indigenous communities of Assam.

*To investigate the significance of traditional medicinal knowledge in promoting community health and well-being in Assam.

*To assess the contemporary relevance of folk medicine and explore measures for its conservation and transmission to future generations.

Traditional Knowledge Systems of Assam

Traditional Knowledge Systems (TKS) in Assam have evolved through centuries of interaction between human communities and the natural environment. These systems are deeply rooted in the everyday life of the people and reflect their understanding of nature, society, health, and spirituality. Assam's geographical diversity, including hills, plains, forests, rivers, and wetlands, has enabled communities to develop specialized knowledge suited to local ecological conditions.

Traditional knowledge in Assam covers a broad range of activities. In agriculture, farmers possess indigenous techniques related to seed preservation, crop rotation, mixed farming, and organic pest control. Communities have traditionally relied upon natural indicators such as bird movements, flowering patterns, and weather conditions to predict seasonal changes. Such knowledge has enabled them to adapt to environmental uncertainties and maintain agricultural productivity.

The state is also known for its rich tradition of weaving and handicrafts. Assamese women possess specialized knowledge regarding handloom weaving, natural dye preparation, and textile production.



Similarly, bamboo and cane crafts reflect generations of accumulated technical expertise. These skills are not merely economic activities but also represent cultural traditions passed from one generation to another.

Traditional healthcare systems constitute one of the most important aspects of Assam's indigenous knowledge. Local communities have developed extensive knowledge regarding medicinal plants, disease treatment, nutrition, and preventive healthcare. This knowledge is often preserved and transmitted by traditional healers, elderly community members, and women within households. Folk medicine therefore represents an integral component of Assam's traditional knowledge system.

Another important characteristic of traditional knowledge is its holistic nature. Unlike modern scientific approaches that often separate different fields of knowledge, traditional systems view human beings, nature, and spirituality as interconnected. Health is understood not only as the absence of disease but also as a state of harmony between the individual, society, and environment.

Historical Development of Folk Medicine in Assam

The history of folk medicine in Assam can be traced back to ancient times when communities depended entirely on natural resources for healthcare. Before the development of hospitals and modern medical institutions, indigenous populations relied upon medicinal plants, dietary regulations, and spiritual healing practices to cure diseases and maintain well-being.

The abundant biodiversity of Assam provided communities with access to a wide variety of medicinal plants. Through centuries of observation and experimentation, local people identified the therapeutic properties of different species. Knowledge regarding the collection, preparation, and administration of medicines gradually became an important component of community life.

Ancient Indian medical traditions such as Ayurveda also influenced healthcare practices in Assam. However, local communities adapted these traditions according to their ecological and cultural circumstances. As a result, unique forms of folk medicine emerged that combined indigenous knowledge with broader Indian medical traditions.

During the Ahom period, traditional medicine received considerable support. Herbal treatments, dietary therapies, and preventive healthcare practices became widely used. Traditional healers occupied respected positions within society and often served as advisors to local rulers and community leaders.



The colonial period introduced Western medicine into Assam. Nevertheless, folk medicine continued to remain important, particularly in rural and tribal areas where access to modern healthcare facilities was limited. Even today, many households continue to rely on herbal remedies for common ailments such as fever, cough, stomach disorders, and skin diseases.

The persistence of folk medicine demonstrates its adaptability and cultural significance. Despite modernization, traditional healthcare practices continue to provide valuable services to many communities across the state.

Folk Medicine among Major Communities of Assam

Folk medicine is an integral part of the cultural heritage of Assam and reflects the close relationship between indigenous communities and their natural environment. For centuries, various ethnic groups have relied on locally available medicinal plants, spiritual practices, and traditional healing techniques to maintain health and treat diseases. This indigenous healthcare system developed through observation, experience, and the transmission of knowledge across generations. Even today, folk medicine remains an important source of healthcare in many rural and remote areas of the state.

The Bodo Community

The Bodos, one of the largest indigenous communities of Assam, possess extensive ethnomedicinal knowledge. Traditional healers use a variety of medicinal plants to treat fever, cough, digestive disorders, skin diseases, wounds, and infections. Herbal medicines are prepared from leaves, roots, bark, flowers, and seeds in the form of decoctions, pastes, and juices.

Healthcare among the Bodos is closely associated with spiritual beliefs. Certain illnesses are believed to result from supernatural influences, evil spirits, or ancestral displeasure. Therefore, healing often combines herbal treatment with ritual ceremonies and prayers. Traditional healers serve both as medical practitioners and spiritual guides. Their knowledge is transmitted orally through generations and remains an important aspect of Bodo cultural identity.

The Karbi Community

The Karbi community of Karbi Anglong possesses one of the richest traditions of ethnomedicine in Assam. Living in forested and hilly regions, the Karbis have developed detailed knowledge of medicinal plants and their therapeutic uses. They utilize numerous plant species for treating malaria, diarrhea, dysentery, respiratory infections, wounds, snake bites, and reproductive health problems.



Traditional healers hold a respected position within Karbi society due to their expertise in plant identification, collection techniques, and medicine preparation. Knowledge is generally passed through family lineages and apprenticeship. The Karbis also follow specific rules regarding the harvesting of medicinal plants to ensure their sustainable use and conservation.

The Mishing Community

The Mishing people inhabit the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra Valley and have developed healthcare practices adapted to floodplain ecosystems. They use medicinal plants collected from wetlands, forests, agricultural fields, and home gardens to treat common illnesses.

Traditional remedies are frequently used for fever, digestive disorders, diarrhea, skin diseases, respiratory infections, and joint pain. Household healthcare knowledge is particularly important among the Mishings, where women play a central role in preparing herbal medicines and caring for family health. Herbal teas, medicinal baths, and plant extracts are commonly used forms of treatment.

The Rabha Community

The Rabha community combines herbal medicine with ritual healing practices. Traditional healers use medicinal plants to treat physical illnesses while also addressing the spiritual dimensions of health. Diseases may be attributed to both natural and supernatural causes, requiring a combination of herbal remedies and ceremonial healing.

Rabha healers possess extensive knowledge of medicinal plants used for treating fever, stomach disorders, skin diseases, wounds, and respiratory ailments. Many remedies involve complex combinations of plant materials refined through generations of practical experience and observation.

The Tiwa Community

The Tiwa community possesses extensive knowledge of medicinal herbs found in both hill and plain ecosystems. Traditional remedies are used for treating stomach disorders, fever, cough, skin diseases, injuries, and body pain. Medicinal preparations are commonly made from leaves, roots, and bark collected from nearby forests and fields.

Community elders play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting medicinal knowledge. Traditional healthcare among the Tiwas emphasizes preventive measures and the maintenance of harmony between humans and nature.



The Dimasa Community

The Dimasa community has developed a sophisticated healthcare system based on local biodiversity. Medicinal plants are extensively used in treating infections, digestive disorders, musculoskeletal problems, fever, and skin diseases. Traditional healers possess specialized knowledge regarding plant collection, preparation, dosage, and therapeutic application.

The Dimasas emphasize sustainable harvesting practices and maintain a deep understanding of the medicinal value of forest resources. Their ethnomedicinal knowledge represents a valuable component of Assam's indigenous healthcare heritage.

Medicinal Plants and Their Therapeutic Uses

Medicinal plants constitute the foundation of folk medicine in Assam and play a significant role in the traditional healthcare practices of indigenous and rural communities. The rich biodiversity of the state, including forests, wetlands, grasslands, and riverine ecosystems, provides an abundant source of medicinal flora. For centuries, traditional healers and local households have relied on these plants for the prevention and treatment of diseases. Knowledge regarding the identification, collection, preparation, and therapeutic application of medicinal plants has been transmitted from one generation to another through oral traditions and practical experience.

Among the most important medicinal plants used in Assamese folk medicine is **Neem** (*Azadirachta indica*). Every part of the neem tree, including its leaves, bark, flowers, and seeds, possesses medicinal value. Neem is widely recognized for its antibacterial, antifungal, antiviral, and antiseptic properties. It is commonly used in the treatment of skin diseases, wounds, boils, fungal infections, and various dermatological disorders. Neem leaves are often boiled in water for medicinal baths, while leaf paste and neem oil are applied directly to affected areas.

Tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*) occupies a special place in traditional medicine and is valued for both its medicinal and cultural significance. It is commonly used to treat cough, cold, fever, asthma, bronchitis, and other respiratory ailments. Tulsi possesses antimicrobial, antioxidant, and immune-boosting properties. Fresh leaves are chewed directly or prepared as herbal tea, often combined with ginger and honey to enhance its therapeutic effects.

Another important medicinal herb is **Manimuni** (*Centella asiatica*), which grows abundantly in moist and wetland areas. It is highly valued for improving memory, concentration, and cognitive functions.



Traditional healers also use it to treat digestive disorders, improve blood circulation, reduce anxiety, and promote wound healing. The leaves are usually consumed as juice, salad, or herbal preparations.

Bhedailota (*Paederia foetida*) is a climbing plant widely used in Assamese folk medicine for digestive health. It is commonly prescribed for indigestion, gastric disorders, diarrhea, dysentery, and abdominal pain. The leaves are often consumed as vegetables or prepared as medicinal juices and herbal remedies. Its effectiveness in treating gastrointestinal problems has made it a popular household medicine.

Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) is one of the most versatile medicinal plants used throughout Assam. The active compound curcumin possesses strong anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and antiseptic properties. Turmeric is applied externally to wounds, cuts, and skin infections and is also consumed to strengthen immunity and reduce inflammation. It is frequently used in traditional remedies for joint pain and various skin disorders.

Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) is another widely used medicinal plant known for its effectiveness in treating cough, cold, sore throat, nausea, and digestive problems. Ginger tea and herbal decoctions are commonly prepared to relieve respiratory and gastrointestinal ailments.

Other important medicinal plants include **Amla** (*Phyllanthus emblica*), a rich source of Vitamin C and antioxidants that enhances immunity and overall health, and **Kalmegh** (*Andrographis paniculata*), traditionally used for treating fever, liver disorders, infections, and digestive problems.

The widespread use of these medicinal plants demonstrates the depth of ethnobotanical knowledge possessed by Assamese communities. Modern scientific research has validated many of their therapeutic properties, highlighting the continued relevance of traditional healthcare systems and the importance of conserving both medicinal plant resources and indigenous knowledge for future generations.

Role of Folk Medicine in Rural Healthcare

Folk medicine continues to play a crucial role in rural healthcare across Assam. Many villages, particularly in remote and tribal areas, lack adequate access to hospitals, doctors, and pharmaceutical services. In such circumstances, traditional medicine serves as an affordable and accessible healthcare resource.

One of the major advantages of folk medicine is its low cost. Medicinal plants are often collected locally, reducing dependence on expensive medical treatments. Traditional remedies are also culturally familiar and widely accepted within communities.



Traditional healers provide treatment for common illnesses, minor injuries, digestive disorders, respiratory infections, and skin diseases. In some areas, they also contribute to maternal and child healthcare by offering guidance regarding pregnancy, childbirth, and postnatal care.

The continued reliance on folk medicine demonstrates its practical significance in addressing healthcare needs. While modern medicine has expanded considerably, traditional healthcare remains an important complement to formal medical services in many parts of Assam.

Socio-Cultural Significance of Folk Medicine

Folk medicine in Assam is not merely a healthcare practice; it is a vital component of the cultural identity of indigenous communities. Traditional healing systems are deeply intertwined with local customs, beliefs, rituals, and social institutions. The knowledge of medicinal plants and healing practices has been transmitted orally from one generation to another, ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage.

Traditional healers, known by different names such as Bej, Kabiraj, Ojha, and village medicine men, occupy respected positions within society. They are regarded not only as healthcare providers but also as custodians of cultural wisdom. Their role extends beyond curing diseases to maintaining social harmony and preserving traditional values.

Many healing practices are associated with religious beliefs and ritual performances. Certain illnesses are believed to be caused by supernatural forces, evil spirits, or disturbances in the spiritual balance of an individual. Consequently, treatment often combines herbal remedies with prayers, chants, rituals, and symbolic ceremonies. These practices reflect the holistic worldview of indigenous communities, where physical, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions of health are closely interconnected.

Women play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting folk medicinal knowledge. In many households, mothers and grandmothers possess detailed knowledge regarding herbal remedies used for treating common illnesses, caring for children, and managing household health. This knowledge is transmitted informally through observation and participation in daily activities.

Folk medicine also strengthens community cohesion. Collective participation in healing rituals, medicinal plant collection, and healthcare practices fosters social solidarity and reinforces cultural identity. Thus, folk medicine serves as both a healthcare system and a mechanism for preserving cultural traditions.

Scientific Relevance and Modern Applications



The growing global interest in traditional medicine has increased the scientific significance of folk medicinal knowledge. Researchers recognize that indigenous healthcare systems represent valuable repositories of information regarding medicinal plants and therapeutic practices.

Numerous modern pharmaceutical products have originated from plants traditionally used by indigenous communities. Ethnobotanical research often begins with the study of folk medicinal practices because traditional knowledge provides important clues regarding biologically active compounds. As a result, folk medicine contributes significantly to drug discovery and medical innovation.

Several medicinal plants used in Assam have been scientifically investigated and found to possess antibacterial, antiviral, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and antifungal properties. Neem, turmeric, ginger, tulsi, and amla are examples of plants whose therapeutic benefits have been validated through scientific research.

The increasing popularity of herbal medicine and natural healthcare products has created new opportunities for integrating traditional knowledge with modern healthcare systems. Herbal formulations derived from traditional medicinal practices are now widely marketed and consumed across the world.

Scientific validation of traditional remedies can enhance their credibility and promote their inclusion in public healthcare programs. However, such integration must respect the cultural context of indigenous knowledge and ensure that local communities receive recognition and benefits from the utilization of their traditional wisdom.

The relationship between folk medicine and modern science should therefore be viewed as complementary rather than competitive. Both systems possess unique strengths and can contribute to improving healthcare outcomes.

Challenges Facing Folk Medicine

Folk medicine represents an invaluable component of Assam's cultural heritage and traditional healthcare system. For centuries, indigenous communities have relied on medicinal plants, traditional healers, and locally developed therapeutic practices to maintain health and treat diseases. However, in recent decades, folk medicine has faced numerous challenges that threaten its survival, effectiveness, and transmission to future generations. These challenges arise from social, economic, environmental, and cultural changes occurring throughout the region.



One of the most significant challenges is the **erosion of traditional knowledge**. Folk medicine is primarily based on oral traditions, where knowledge is transmitted from elders and traditional healers to younger generations through observation, practice, and apprenticeship. However, modernization, formal education, migration, and changing lifestyles have reduced the interest of younger people in learning traditional healing practices. As elderly healers pass away, a considerable amount of valuable ethnomedicinal knowledge disappears with them.

Another major challenge is the **depletion of medicinal plant resources**. Assam's rich biodiversity is under increasing pressure from deforestation, urbanization, industrial development, infrastructure projects, and agricultural expansion. Many medicinal plants that were once abundant in forests, wetlands, and grasslands are becoming scarce. Unsustainable harvesting practices, overexploitation, and habitat destruction further threaten the availability of these important resources. The loss of medicinal plant diversity directly affects the effectiveness and sustainability of folk medicine.

The growing dominance of **modern healthcare systems** also poses a challenge. Government hospitals, private clinics, and pharmaceutical medicines have become more accessible in many areas. While modern medicine has significantly improved healthcare outcomes, it has also reduced dependence on traditional healing practices. Consequently, many people perceive folk medicine as outdated or less reliable, leading to a decline in its use and social status.

A lack of **scientific documentation and validation** is another important issue. Much of the traditional knowledge associated with medicinal plants and healing techniques remains undocumented. Without proper recording, research, and preservation, this knowledge may be permanently lost. Furthermore, limited scientific studies on many traditional remedies restrict their acceptance within formal healthcare systems and hinder opportunities for wider application.

Intellectual property rights and biopiracy present additional concerns. Traditional medicinal knowledge developed by indigenous communities is sometimes utilized by researchers or commercial organizations without adequate recognition or compensation. This raises ethical issues regarding ownership, benefit-sharing, and the protection of indigenous cultural heritage.

The **declining number of traditional healers** further threatens the continuity of folk medicine. Economic pressures, changing social values, and limited financial rewards discourage younger generations from pursuing traditional healing as a profession. As a result, fewer practitioners are available to preserve and transmit specialized knowledge.



Climate change also affects folk medicine by altering ecosystems, changing rainfall patterns, and reducing the availability of certain medicinal plants. These environmental changes may disrupt traditional healthcare practices that depend heavily on local biodiversity.

In conclusion, folk medicine in Assam faces numerous challenges, including the loss of traditional knowledge, depletion of medicinal plants, modernization, inadequate documentation, intellectual property concerns, declining numbers of healers, and environmental change. Addressing these challenges through documentation, conservation programs, scientific research, legal protection, and community participation is essential for preserving this valuable healthcare tradition and cultural heritage for future generations.

Conclusion

Traditional Knowledge Systems of Assam represent a rich and invaluable heritage developed through centuries of interaction between communities and their environment. Among the various components of traditional knowledge, folk medicine occupies a particularly important position due to its contribution to healthcare, cultural identity, and biodiversity conservation.

The indigenous communities of Assam, including the Bodo, Karbi, Mishing, Rabha, Tiwa, and Dimasa, possess extensive ethnomedicinal knowledge regarding medicinal plants and healing practices. This knowledge continues to play a significant role in rural healthcare and community well-being.

Folk medicine reflects a holistic understanding of health that integrates physical, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. Its continued relevance demonstrates the value of indigenous knowledge in addressing contemporary healthcare challenges.

However, traditional medicinal knowledge faces threats from modernization, biodiversity loss, inadequate documentation, and declining intergenerational transmission. Without effective preservation measures, valuable cultural and scientific resources may disappear.

Therefore, systematic documentation, conservation of medicinal plants, scientific validation of remedies, protection of indigenous intellectual property rights, and active community participation are essential for safeguarding Assam's folk medicinal heritage. By recognizing and supporting traditional healthcare systems, policymakers and researchers can contribute to sustainable development, cultural preservation, and improved public health.



The future of folk medicine in Assam depends upon achieving a balance between tradition and modernity. Preserving indigenous knowledge while encouraging scientific research and healthcare integration can ensure that this remarkable heritage continues to benefit future generations.

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