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"TRADITIONAL HEALTH KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM IN GARHWAL HIMALAYAS: ROLE OF WOMEN IN RESERVATION AND TRANSMISSION OF MEDICINAL PLANTS"

Suneel Prasad*
Dr. Ram Singh Samant**
*Assistant Professor, Dept. of English
Mahayogi Guru Gorakhnath Govt. Degree College
Bithyani Yamkeshwar, Pauri
Garhwal, Uttarakhand, E-mail- suneelprasad78@gmail.com, Contact No-897921615
* *Assistant Professor, Dept. of Sociology,
Mahayogi Guru Gorakhnath Govt. Degree College, Bithyani Yamkeshwar
Pauri Garhwal, Uttarakhand
E-mail- ramsamant007@gmail.com, Contact No-7409150642

Abstract

The preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge is very important in the present era as covid-19 taught us to prepare for the coming disasters. Change in environment has made us to ponder over the upcoming issues such as global warming and living habits of the human being.

The rural women play a significant role in every nook and corner of the society. To transmit and preserve the traditional knowledge, one should need to apply the same in day-to-day life. The present research paper focuses on various aspects of indigenous knowledge that our forefathers and our ancestors followed. Rural women have rich knowledge of natural world, health related consciousness and other cultural aspects. Women always have been responsible in preserving and transmitting this traditional knowledge which keeps this knowledge alive.

Through this paper, the importance of rural women in preserving the medicinal plants that are available in the Himalayan regions which are still used by them would be discussed. For this paper, a structured questionnaire was administered to the respondents living in this region. It was found that maximum of the women have knowledge about the medicinal herbs and plants available in their locality and they still use them as first-aid methods.

Keywords: *Traditional Knowledge System, Preservation, Transmission, Women, Herbs, Health.*

Introduction:

In the period of Covid-19, many examples of traditional medicines were seen which were used by people all over India to protect themselves against this dreadful disease. There were various medicinal plants and herbs and seeds which were used to keep this virus away from their houses. This was the period which showed that the right traditional knowledge can indeed help to fight various diseases and unforeseen events. Women in particular have been using this traditional knowledge including plants and herbs in their families as first aid to treat their family members through generations. This knowledge has been passing from one generation to the next. This

study tries to have an empirical- research as to whether women of villages belonging to Yamkeshwar Block of Pauri Garhwal of Uttarakhand are still practicing these traditional medicines at their homes.

In the remote villages of Uttarakhand's Garhwal and Kumaon regions, women are the primary health providers within families. With limited access to modern healthcare, particularly in high-altitude and interior hill areas, women have relied on the medicinal plants found in nearby forests, fields, and home gardens to treat common ailments. These treatments range from simple remedies for fever and cough to more complex conditions for reproductive health and chronic conditions.

As evident from the term Traditional Knowledge, United Nations states that, it refers to the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous peoples. This knowledge is developed from the experience which has been gained over the centuries and slowly adapted to the local culture and environment, traditional knowledge is often transmitted orally from generation to generation. It tends to be collectively owned and can be expressed in stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, cultural values, beliefs, rituals etc. It is also the source for the traditional use and management of lands, territories and resources, with indigenous agricultural practices that care for the earth, without depleting the resources. Traditional knowledge is at the core of indigenous peoples' identities, cultural heritage and livelihoods. Traditional knowledge underlines indigenous peoples' holistic approach of life, which is a central element of the world's cultural and biological diversity.

The definition of traditional knowledge used by the World Intellectual Property Office (WIPO) includes indigenous knowledge relating to categories such as agricultural knowledge, medicinal knowledge, biodiversity related knowledge, and expressions of folklore in the form of music, dance, song, handicraft, designs, stories and artwork.

When we talk about oldest medicine system in the world, Tradition Medicine is found to be the oldest form of health care in the world and is used in the prevention, and treatment of physical and mental illnesses. Different societies historically developed various useful healing methods to combat a variety of health- and life-threatening diseases. Traditional medicine is also variously known as complementary and alternative, or ethnic medicine, and it still plays a key role in many countries today. Traditional medicine always has been very popular throughout the world at all times. In some Asian and African countries, a number of the population depends on traditional medicine, including for primary healthcare. In many developed countries, 70 to 80 percent of the population has used some forms of alternative or complementary medicine such as acupuncture. Many modern drugs and vaccines are based on natural resources and associated traditional knowledge. Traditional medical knowledge has social, cultural and scientific value and is important for many indigenous peoples and local communities.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines traditional medicine as “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 illnesses."

Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, the great Indian Scientist of all time, a multi-talented personality, and 11th President of the Republic of India had also shown his keen interest towards the use of traditionally used medicinal plants. In his address to 12th International Congress of Ethnopharmacology, "Dynamics of Ethnopharmacology," he emphasized towards the consciousness and law of nature. He further accentuates the benefits and value of the ancient Indian system of medicine i.e. Ayurveda. Even though the advance technology emerging these days, still number of people are getting ill and cost of healthcare is increasing rapidly which could only be reduced by the prevention, and the best way in this regard is Ayurveda. This is due to the comprehensiveness of this system as it is based on natural medicine which devoid toxicity. Moreover, he also emphasized on the medicinal and aromatic plants as emerging opportunities for farmers for the entrepreneurship. Cultivation of medicinal plants is very good income generation not only for the farmers of the plain area but also for the farmers of the mountain region.

Objectives:

The objective of this study are as follows,

1. To know whether women of this Himalayan regions still use tradition medicines at their homes.
2. To know important traditional home medicines used by them and their usage.

Methodology:

Study Area: Villages of Yamkeshwar Block of Pauri Garhwal district of Uttarakhand was chosen for the purpose of the study. As evident from various sources we know that women of these hilly regions head their families as the man move out for work to the bigger cities. Therefore, women have the responsibility to manage their houses and look after their children.

Data Collection:

A total of 30 women from the villages of Yamkeshwar Block of Pauri Garhwal were chosen as respondents. They were administered a structured questionnaire with basic questions regarding their knowledge of traditional medicinal plants and their use. Semi-structured interviews were also carried out to gather information about the medicinal plants used in the study area. Various information like local names of the medicinal plants, ailments and diseases treated, therapeutic effects, parts of the plant used and method of preparation were obtained from the respondents. Secondary, sources like research papers, information from internet, etc., were also used for the study.

Hill women of Uttarakhand are not just caregivers; they are scientists, herbalists, and stewards of ecological wisdom. Their deep connection to the land and plants sustains both health and culture in the region's villages. As the world turns back to nature for sustainable living and alternative medicine, it is imperative to honor, protect, and empower these women and their invaluable herbal traditions. They hold the green key to health and healing, both for their communities and for future generations.

Analysis:

Cent percent of the women respondents stated that they have been using traditional medicines at

some time or the other. Though there was hospital and doctors/compounder available in their area but it was quite far away, therefore, as part of first aid, they practiced home remedies through traditional medicinal plants. The following table illustrates their usage of medicinal plants for various diseases or ailments and the method of preparation of the medicines by these respondents:

Table 1

S.No.	Local Name of Medicinal Plant	Used in Diseases/Ailments	Method of Use
1.	Haldi (Turmuric)	Joint Pain/Inflammation	Drinking Haldi mixed Milk/Applying Paste of Haldi on Joints or Wounds
2.	Ajwain	Abdominal Pain	Chewing and Drinking with Warm Water
3.	Cold Water Strip	Fever	Applying in Forehead of Patient Suffering with Fever
4.	Kala Ghas (Black Grass)	Cuts/Wounds	Applying the Juice of the Leaves after Crushing them
5.	Kala Jeera	Abdominal Pain	Drinking the seeds of Kala Jeera with Water
6.	Leaves of Guava Tree	Cough	Chewing the Soft Leaves of Guava Tree
7.	Sahad (Honey)/Ginger/ Kali Mirch	Cough	Mixing Honey with Ginger Juice and Kali Mirch Powder and licking it

Source: Data Collected from Women Respondents of Yamkeshwar Block of Pauri Garhwal of Uttarakhand

Haldi (Turmeric):

Turmeric is one of the most celebrated spices in Indian culture. Its vibrant yellow pigment comes from curcumin, a compound known for its anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and antimicrobial properties. Turmeric is widely used to treat wounds, sore throats, colds, and digestive issues. A popular remedy is "Haldi Doodh" (turmeric milk), used to boost immunity and promote healing. Beyond health, turmeric holds spiritual significance and is used in ceremonies and skincare routines due to its purifying effects.

On being asked about uses of Turmeric, the respondents have been already using it and they were aware about its benefits and when to use it. The local respondents told they are familiar with the healing benefits of Turmeric.

Ajwain (Carom Seeds):

Ajwain, or carom seeds, have a pungent, thyme-like aroma and are most noted for their use in aiding digestion. Traditionally, ajwain water or a simple paste is used to relieve indigestion, bloating, and flatulence. The seeds also have antimicrobial properties, making them useful in treating coughs, colds, and sore throats. In postpartum care, ajwain is often included in diets to strengthen digestion and relieve pain.

The respondents told they use Ajwain mixing with warm water when pain in stomach especially in abdomen. Local respondents also use it for their meals mixing with flour.

Cold Water Strips:

Cold water strips are applied by the respondents to lower the fever. It reduces the temperature and relieves the patient.

Kala Ghas:

"Kala ghas" is a term that can vary regionally, sometimes referring to dark-colored grass-like herbs or a specific wild medicinal plant. While not as commonly known or standardized as turmeric or ajwain, such herbs are often used in folk remedies for cooling the body, relieving fevers, or promoting detoxification. Further identification is needed to pinpoint exact properties, but many such herbs are rich in phytonutrients and used in traditional decoctions or poultices.

The local respondents have been using Kala Ghas for a long time. They use Kala Ghas not only for themselves at the time of ailment but also feed this to their live stocks for detoxification.

Guava Tree Leaves:

Guava leaves are a lesser-known powerhouse in natural medicine. Rich in antioxidants and tannins, they are particularly valued for treating diarrhea, diabetes, and dental health. A tea made from guava leaves can help regulate blood sugar levels, and the antimicrobial effects make it useful for oral hygiene and wound healing. Chewing the leaves or using them as a mouthwash is a common folk practice for toothaches and gum problems.

The respondents stated that they have been using guava leaves in various ways for relieving cough and toothaches.

Sahad (Honey)/Ginger/Kali Mirch:

Black pepper or kali mirch, is not just a spice—it's a therapeutic agent. The active compound piperine enhances the bioavailability of nutrients, particularly curcumin from turmeric. In Ayurveda, black pepper is considered a powerful stimulant for the digestive system, increasing appetite, relieving gas, and promoting the secretion of digestive juices. It also has expectorant properties, making it effective in remedies for coughs and respiratory ailments. Ginger has numerous health benefits such as relieving nausea and vomiting. It has anti-inflammatory properties too. Honey

(Sahad) is beneficial for inflammation and cough relief. It is known for its anti-inflammatory properties.

Women of the hill regions use all these three for (honey-ginger-black pepper) relieving cough by mixing honey with ginger juice and kali mirch powder and licking it.

Conclusion:

The use of traditional medicinal plants is being practiced not only in Yamkeshwar Block of Uttarakhand but almost around the world and its increasing demand is showing the widely emerging interest towards it. Women are being a strong force in preserving and transmitting this traditional knowledge. As a matter of fact, traditional medicine knowledge has an advantage over the modern medical system. Traditional medicinal plants are natural and have no side-effects over the body of the patients. That is why now people are more conscious about their health and are increasingly using traditional knowledge for their health issues.

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