

Traditional Healing Practices and Scope for Integration Within the Psychiatric Context in India

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to understand the present application of traditional healing practices within the psychiatric context in India and ascertain its implications towards psychological practices. Using the content analysis method, an attempt was made to identify the need and significance of Traditional Healing Practices in India at present time. The paper attempts to analyse the scope of integration of Traditional Healing practices with the Western Medicine model to create more holistic treatment approaches which are culturally sensitive, relevant, and relatable to the Indian population in the context of psychological treatment. Moreover, the author attempts to identify gaps, and hurdles during probable integration programs, and provides solutions to the identified problems.

Keywords: *Traditional Healing Practices, Complementary and Alternative Medicine*

What is Traditional Healing?

Traditional healing encompasses indigenous methods using herbs, rituals, and spiritual practices. WHO (2014-2023) defines traditional medicine as the sum total of the knowledge, skills, and practices based on the different theories, beliefs, and experiences that are indigenous to different cultures, and applied in the maintenance of health, prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of physical and mental illness.

Traditional Healing Practices in India

Prior to the introduction of western medicinal practices, traditional healers had been the primary source of treatment to illnesses (Joshi, 2023). The health care system in India is pluralistic in nature with the existence of multiple traditional healing systems along with Western healing techniques. Traditionally, these practices also integrate spirituality and address the imbalance between mind, body and spirit in improving health (Sundar, 2007). In areas with little to no access to biomedicine healthcare, people usually turn to traditional healers for treatment. One of the major focuses while studying medical pluralism in developing countries like India, has been the relevance of traditional healing practices in understanding, expressing and finding the meaning of human suffering or illness (Bhaskaran, 2010). The recognized traditional healing systems as per the Indian Government are Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, Sowa-rig pa, and Homeopathy (Government of India, 2014).

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Mental Health in the Indian Context

The adaptation of “Western” psychiatry at a global level is a recent phenomenon. Developing countries have shown little interest in creating a widespread access to mental healthcare (Chopra & Quack, 2011). Many people associate mental illnesses with supernatural phenomena, resulting in patients seeking various forms of religious treatments (Rajan et al., 2016; Sapkota et al., 2013; Worthington & Gogne, 2011). These belief systems result in people preventing patients from seeking psychiatric care (Peteet, 2019; Estrada et al., 2019). Thus, traditional healing systems as a form of patient care cannot be dismissed (Saha et al., 2021). According to the National Mental Health Survey of India (2016), the treatment gap of approximately 80.4% was estimated for common psychiatric conditions (NIMHANS, 2016).

Significance of Traditional Healing Practices Today

In a developing country like India, the majority of the population live in rural areas and the psychiatric services are located in major towns and cities. Consequently, traditional healers, who live and practise in villages, are often the first stop in the pathway of care for people with physiological as well as psychological disorders. The reasons for the popularity of traditional healers are that they are easily accessible and locally available. Traditional healing is thus an essential component of healthcare. (Puckree et al., 2002). In 2005, the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) was initiated by the Government of India aimed to ‘Revitalise local health traditions and mainstream AYUSH.’ This initiative of ‘mainstreaming AYUSH’ proposes the integration of indigenous healing practices into the public healthcare system (Shrivastava et al., 2015).

Integration of Traditional Healing Practices with Western Medicine Model

Western therapeutic models often overlook Eastern cultural and philosophical perspectives, which can limit their effectiveness in non-Western contexts. Cultural and economic factors shape the process of healing as well as the practice of biomedical psychiatry. Over-emphasis of the biological etiology of mental illness often diminishes the role of social, economic, and political factors. Incorporating indigenous healing practices may act as a valuable tool in addressing the broader social context in which mental illnesses arise (Quack, 2021). Several researches have concluded that traditional healing approaches can be successfully integrated with psychotherapeutic practices (Shawande et al., 2010).

Various different initiatives such as The Dava-Dua Program (Saha et al., 2021), the fieldwork in Mahanubhav temples in Western India (Ranganathan, 2014), Traditional Anishinabe Healing in a Clinical Setting (Maar & Shawande, 2010), one cannot deny the evidence provided by the above mentioned initiatives concluding that integration of traditional healing practices and Western medicine may provide refuge for those in distress. While traditional healing practices are an integral part of the Indian culture and heritage, a need exists to categorise and recognise various healing practices in order to create a database and increase the chances as well as options for integration and create health models that are specifically designed for the Indian population.

Challenges in integrating Traditional Healing Practices with modern medicine

While traditional healing practices have been accepted as more comprehensive, patient-centred, and holistic in their approach to mental disorders, the literature of these practices is largely descriptive, with very few experimental or large-scale studies and their efficacy in comparison to regular biomedical practices (Sen & Chakroborty, 2017). Thus, the author recommends a need for more structured and experimental set-ups in the form of clinical trials

of these practices to create reliable data in terms of understanding the safety and effectiveness of these practices. Due to insufficient knowledge of traditional medicine in the scientific community, integration of traditional healing practices could pose a challenge. Lack of regulatory bodies that structure processing techniques, personnel training, integration guidelines, and instrument utilization posit major problems in creating licensed professionals with credibility (Sen & Chakroborty, 2017). Another concern is the potential danger to the patient if administrative issues arise between the traditional healer and modern healer.

Moreover, perspectives regarding the aetiology of illness may be different in different healing systems, which can be a source of conflict between practitioners. Another potential source of conflict can be a lack of structure in traditional healing practices at a systemic level.

Traditional healing practitioners, as of now, do not require a licence to practise, which can be a potential source of harm or threat to patients. However, India is incorporating more institutions to regulate these practices; it is a long way to go. For successful integration, it is important that practitioners from the traditional healing community and Western medicine community actively collaborate in creating structured treatment plans for client-centric needs. Concerns regarding the ethics of the practice of traditional healing methods have also been pointed out from a biomedicinal perspective. Various ethical issues such as consent, administration, and principles have the potential to cause conflict with Western medicinal practices (Sarkar, 2014). Inadequate control measures for quality control of traditional healing practices may be a hurdle in minimising the gap between traditional healers and Western medicine practitioners (Sahoo & Manchikanti, 2013). Lack of awareness regarding guidelines often compromise the quality of traditional medicines. Thus, it is important to incorporate traditional healing practices, at least for now, as additive techniques, rather than alternative methods of treatment. This will help in providing a more holistic treatment to clients, creating a cultural sensitivity which caters specifically to the Indian population.

CONCLUSION

Traditional healing practices play a pivotal role in providing access to healthcare in India. Creating integrative structures will aid in creating culturally rich models of treatment which will provide a holistic healing experience to clients. While research shows the efficacy of Western models for various sections of the Indian population, the country is far too diverse and rich in culture, tradition, and philosophies to rely on the Western model of psychotherapy alone. Thus, it is important to learn from our philosophical roots and integrate more culturally relevant and relatable structures within psychotherapy in order to ensure best practices and holistic care in the field of psychotherapeutic practices.

While recent research has observed a rise in empirical testing regarding the safety and efficacy of traditional healing practices, the scientific community is in need of more structured clinical trials focusing on the efficacy of integrative treatment programs to understand application-based hurdles in a clinical set-up.

In conclusion, adequate knowledge about the system, high quality experimental designs, proper advertisement of information regarding traditional healing practices to the common people will aid in the promotion of traditional healing practices. Integration of traditional healing practices along with biomedical practice will aid in promotion of healthcare to a section of the population who are unable to access modern medicine.

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Conflict of Interest

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