

The Success of Meghalaya Traditional Healing Clinic: A Story of Empowerment and Cultural Preservation

Traditional Medicine and Healing in Meghalaya

In Meghalaya, traditional medicine and healing practices are deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of its indigenous communities. The state's rich biodiversity, combined with centuries of knowledge passed down through generations, has made traditional healing an integral part of daily life for many residents, especially in rural areas.

Traditional healers, known as "NongDawaikynbatr" or "Kabiraj," play a vital role in the communities, using natural resources such as plants, herbs, minerals, and even animal products to treat various ailments. These healers are often revered for their deep understanding of nature and its healing properties, and they rely on oral traditions to preserve this knowledge.

Herbal medicine is widely practiced, with locally sourced plants being used to treat conditions ranging from common colds and fevers to more chronic ailments. The Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes have developed distinct healing practices, often incorporating rituals, prayers, and spiritual healing alongside medicinal remedies. In many instances, the treatment is seen as a holistic approach, addressing both physical and spiritual well-being.

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in integrating traditional healing with modern medicine, particularly in the realm of research into medicinal plants. Despite the rise of modern healthcare systems, traditional medicine continues to thrive in Meghalaya, offering an alternative, culturally significant form of healing that resonates with the state's indigenous values and traditions.

The Bio-Resources Development Centre (BRDC) in Upper Shillong, in line with its mission to promote traditional healing systems in the state, recognized the need for a unified platform where traditional healers could offer their medicines and treatments. This led to the conceptualization of a traditional healing clinic in every district. In Ri-Bhoi District, the Meghalaya Traditional Healing Clinic (MTHC) was established in Pahamsyiem Village. Working alongside the healers, the Centre created a space where their expertise could flourish, providing the community with access to time-tested healing methods.

On October 3rd, 2023, this vision became a reality. The clinic officially opened its doors, offering a sanctuary for those seeking natural healing. More than just a physical space, it became a symbol of hope—preserving age-old traditions while paving the way for a healthier future for all.

Background

In the beautiful state of Meghalaya in northeastern India, traditional medicine has been practiced for generations. Local healers have long used a variety of plants, herbs, and minerals to treat illnesses and improve well-being. One of their most well-known treatments is the Khasi Traditional Massage, an ancient technique that helps people relax and recover from various health issues. Over time, these massage therapies have grown in popularity, benefiting both rural and urban communities and contributing to the local economy and tourism.

Despite their valuable knowledge, traditional healers have faced many challenges. They lacked proper recognition, had limited facilities, and struggled to sell their herbal products. To address these issues, MTHC was established. This clinic, located in Ri-Bhoi District, provides a shared space where healers can work together, improve their skills, and reach out to more people. It also allows them to connect with the Ri-Bhoi Traditional Healers' Association (RBTHA), ensuring that their ancient healing practices continue to thrive while becoming a recognized part of the healthcare system.

Problem Statement & Baseline Indicators

Prior to the establishment of the MTHC, traditional healers in Meghalaya operated in an unorganized manner. The following problems were identified:

1. **Lack of Infrastructure:**Traditional healers lacked proper facilities and equipment to practice their healing techniques, as well as to prepare and store medicinal or herbal products, making it difficult for them to maintain consistent quality and service.
2. **Limited Reach and Recognition:** Despite their valuable contributions, traditional healers struggled to reach a wider audience, and their practices were largely confined to local markets and rural communities.
3. **Lack of Preservation & Conservation:**The lack of documentation poses a threat to the preservation and conservation of indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage.
4. **Limited Access to Training and Capacity Building:**There was a gap in capacity building for healers, including training in modern techniques such as herbal product preservation, packaging, labeling, value addition, sanitation, and hygiene. Additionally, a lack of communication skills hindered the marketability of their products, as well as the promotion of their traditional healing wisdom, skills, and practices.
5. **Best Practices**

The establishment of the MTHC was a pioneering step in addressing these challenges. The model that was adopted can be broken down into several key best practices:

1. **Community-driven Initiative:**The traditional healers from the Ri-Bhoi Traditional Healers' Association (RBTHA) took the lead in managing and operating the clinics. The association consists of 250 members, with 9 healers volunteering for administrative support and the delivery of holistic healing practices at the clinic. This ensured that the clinics were not merely healthcare facilities but also community-centered initiatives aimed at establishing a niche in traditional medicine and healthcare.
2. **Integrating Traditional Practices with Modern Healthcare:**The clinic was designed to integrate Khasi traditional massage and herbal remedies into the formal healthcare system. It provides treatment through self-formulated herbal medications alongside traditional Khasi massage, successfully alleviating various ailments and diseases. To date, the clinic has treated over 14,000 patients, achieving a 70% success rate, as reported by the Secretary of the association, who is also a practitioner of traditional medicine.
3. **Training and Capacity Building:**The MTHC serves not only as a treatment center but also as a training hub. Young, unemployed individuals are trained in herbal product preparation, therapeutic massage techniques, and herbal product preservation, ensuring

that the next generation of healers is well-equipped to sustain and carry forward these traditional practices.

4. **Financial and Structural Support:**With funding of Rs. 8.63 lakhs from BRDC, facilitated by the Planning, Investment Promotion, and Sustainable Development Department, Government of Meghalaya, the MTHC was constructed, and financial assistance was provided to develop the clinic's infrastructure. Since its inception, the clinic has generated a total profit of Rs. 2.5 lakhs.
5. **Documentation:**Documenting and recording traditional healers' practices and treatment methods have been crucial in authenticating their work. This process will further support healers in obtaining certification through a program facilitated by our Centre.
6. **Promotion of Health Tourism:**The MTHC has become a catalyst for promoting Meghalaya as a destination for health tourism. Visitors are drawn not only to the state's natural beauty but also to experience the clinic's healing practices, massage therapies, and wellness services.

Beneficiaries & Impact

The beneficiaries of the MTHC are vast, touching multiple levels of society and economy:

1. **Traditional Healers:**The clinic provided a platform for traditional healers to formalize their practices, empowering them through training and capacity-building programs. This has enhanced the quality and safety of traditional healthcare services. Healers now have access to better facilities, greater recognition, and a broader market for their herbal products and services.
2. **Local Communities:**Local communities, especially in rural areas, benefit from accessible, high-quality healthcare services that integrate traditional and modern approaches. Additionally, the clinics create employment opportunities for young individuals trained in herbal formulation, massage therapy, and clinic management.
3. **Tourists and Visitors:**The growth of health tourism in Meghalaya has attracted visitors seeking traditional healing therapies, drawing attention to the state's cultural richness. This has enhanced Meghalaya's global visibility as a premier wellness destination.
4. **Government and Policy Makers:**The success of the MTHC has led the government to recognize the value of traditional healing systems. This has sparked policy discussions on integrating these practices into the public healthcare sector and developing strategies for their protection and promotion.

The MTHC has improved livelihoods for traditional healers, enhanced healthcare access for rural populations, increased tourism revenue, and revitalized traditional knowledge and practices.

Key Learning & Takeaways

The success of the Meghalaya Traditional Healing Clinics offers several valuable lessons:

1. **Collaboration is Key:** The involvement of local healers, government agencies, and community organizations has ensured that the project remains both culturally appropriate and sustainable.
2. **Preserving Traditional Knowledge:** The MTHC underscores the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge systems. By documenting practices, providing training, and offering resources, the clinics help sustain and promote traditional healing practices for future generations.
3. **Driving Economic Growth via Health and Wellness:** Health tourism has the potential to transform Meghalaya's economy. By offering unique indigenous healing practices alongside its natural beauty, the state is carving out a niche in the wellness tourism market.
4. **Sustainable Business Models:** The MTHC operates under a sustainable business model, with traditional healers managing the clinics. This approach ensures the continuity of healing practices without reliance on external funding.

Conclusion

The establishment of the Meghalaya Traditional Healing Centre (MTHC) is a landmark achievement for both the state and its people. It celebrates the rich cultural heritage and wisdom of indigenous healers while successfully integrating ancient healing practices into the modern healthcare landscape. More importantly, it represents a vision for sustainable growth, economic development, and cultural preservation.

Through collaboration, innovation, and community-driven efforts, the MTHC has demonstrated that traditional knowledge can be a powerful tool for empowerment, health, and prosperity. As Meghalaya continues to develop as a hub for health tourism, the clinics stand as a testament to the healing power of both nature and tradition, paving the way for a healthier and more sustainable future for all.



A Meghalaya Traditional Healing clinic at Pahamsyiem, Nongpoh, Ri-Bhoi District