

The Whispers of the Ancients: Meghalaya's Journey in Preserving Traditional Knowledge and Healing Practices

Meghalaya holds a treasure trove of traditional knowledge that was passed down through generations. From ancient healing techniques to time-tested agricultural practices, this wisdom has been the backbone of indigenous communities of the State. However, with modernization rapidly altering lifestyles and priorities, these invaluable traditions faced an uncertain future.

Recognizing the issue of the state's disappearing repository, the Bio-Resources Development Centre (BRDC), in collaboration with partner institutes and organizations, implemented documentation projects.

Background:

Renowned for its rich cultural heritage and distinctive indigenous practices in Traditional Medicine, Agriculture, Fisheries, Handicrafts, Handlooms, and Veterinary practices, Meghalaya holds a vast wealth of Traditional Knowledge (TK). To preserve and promote this diverse knowledge system, documentation projects were initiated in mid-2022, aiming to ensure its continuity for future generations. These efforts involve comprehensive field research, which is strengthened by active community involvement and stakeholder collaboration to safeguard these traditions. Beyond preservation, the projects also focus on raising community awareness and integrating traditional knowledge into educational curricula, ensuring its continued transmission and long-term empowerment.

Problem Statement & Baseline Indicators:

The traditional knowledge systems of the indigenous communities in Meghalaya had been degrading over time due to various factors such as modernization, lack of proper documentation, and the gradual decline of the older generation of traditional knowledge holders. A major challenge was the limited recognition and integration of indigenous knowledge in contemporary educational, healthcare, and agricultural practices, which often led to the loss of valuable insights into sustainable development practices.

Key baseline indicators identified at the onset of the project included:

- A significant loss of indigenous knowledge in key areas such as traditional medicine and agriculture.
- A lack of documentation and structured database on traditional practices and knowledge holders.
- Limited awareness within communities about the value of their traditional knowledge and its potential for sustainable development.
- Decline in the numbers of active Indigenous Knowledge Practitioners and minimal youth engagement.
- No centralized platform to access and share this knowledge for education, policy-making, or practical application.

Best Practices:

Several best practices were implemented throughout the project to achieve its goals:

1. **Community Engagement and Stakeholder Meetings:** To ensure active community participation, district-level workshops were organized to engage stakeholders and local communities. These sessions highlighted key aspects of the project, underscoring the significance of documenting traditional knowledge and the urgent need for its preservation and protection from exploitation. Participants were also informed about Access Benefit Sharing (ABS) and the Prior Informed Consent (PIC) form. The workshops attracted approximately 263 participants from five districts, demonstrating strong community commitment. These sessions also served as platforms to address concerns, obtain consent, and share project objectives, fostering trust and facilitating knowledge exchange.
2. **Field Surveys & Documentation:** Extensive field documentation was conducted across five targeted districts of Meghalaya, covering diverse knowledge domains such as Traditional Medicine, Agriculture, Livestock, Pest Management, Beekeeping, Handicrafts, Handloom, and Fisheries. This included surveys and interviews with 263 Traditional Knowledge Holders (TKHs), among them 154 Traditional Healers (THs), contributing to a comprehensive record under these projects.
3. **Herbarium and Authentication:** A key aspect of the documentation process was the collection and authentication of 404 medicinal plant species, contributing to the preparation of herbarium specimens. The prepared herbarium plant specimens were authenticated by the Botanical Survey of India (BSI), Eastern Regional Circle Shillong to ensure scientific accuracy and preservation.
4. **Training and Capacity Building:** A series of training programs, including herbarium preparation, field data collection methods, GIS techniques, and interpersonal skills, were conducted for the project's staff. This capacity-building initiative ensured that the team was well-equipped to gather, communicate, document, and validate the Indigenous Traditional Knowledges (ITKs) effectively.
5. **Creation of Knowledge Portal:** A dedicated **online** platform, the **Meghalaya Traditional Knowledge Portal (MTKP)**, was developed to store and disseminate documented knowledge. This portal serves as a centralized repository for traditional knowledge related to medicine, agriculture, handicrafts, and more, making it accessible to a wider audience including researchers, policymakers, and educators. The **MTKP** was launched successfully by the Guest of Honour, Dr. M. Ampareen Lyngdoh, Hon'ble Cabinet Minister, Govt. of Meghalaya, Minister of Health and Family Welfare, Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare Department on the 22nd February, 2024.
6. **Sensitization cum Consultative Workshop:** Workshops programs were held for teachers and students, highlighting the importance of traditional knowledge and its role in modern society. Feedback from these workshops led to recommendations for

integrating Traditional Knowledge of the state of Meghalaya into school curricula and the development of the book entitled; “**Meghalaya Traditional Knowledge: Supporting Document for Course Curriculum in Schools**” as per the Education Department's suggestions. The book was designed based on the National Educational Policy-2020 guidelines, it was successfully released and handed over to the Directorate of Education and Research Training (DERT) on the 22nd February, 2024.

7. **Financial aids:** The North Eastern Council, Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, Government of India, provided financial assistance of approximately ₹1 lakh per district to the Traditional Healer Associations across four districts. Additionally, each traditional healer received an honorarium during the documentation and interview process in recognition of their support in completing the project.

Beneficiaries & Impact:

The project has had a profound impact on multiple stakeholders, particularly in the indigenous communities of Meghalaya.

1. **Traditional Knowledge Holders (TKHs):** A total of 109 Traditional Knowledge Holders and 154 Traditional Healers took part in the documentation project. Their contributions were acknowledged, providing them with recognition, enhancing their visibility, and supporting the preservation of their knowledge.
2. **Community progress:** These projects have enhanced community awareness about their rich environmental resources and traditional practices. They have empowered locals to preserve indigenous knowledge while creating livelihood opportunities. Additionally, a book titled “Meghalaya Traditional Knowledge: Supporting Document for Course Curriculum in Schools” has been developed to introduce students to their rich cultural heritage and sustainable practices. This initiative aims to foster a sense of ownership and pride while ensuring the continued implementation of these traditions.
3. **Policy and Governance:** The project's success has captured the interest of policymakers and government agencies, creating opportunities for future collaboration between traditional knowledge holders, government bodies, and research institutions.
4. **Traditional knowledge hub:** The Meghalaya Traditional Knowledge Portal (MTKP) has offered ethnographers, traditional knowledge enthusiasts, heritage conservationists, researchers, policymakers, and educator's access to research papers, reports, and news on Indigenous practices in a single platform.

Key Learning & Takeaways:

The active participation of local communities and Traditional Knowledge Holders was crucial to the project's success, fostering trust and ensuring smoother data collection and engagement. This collaboration highlighted the importance of integrating traditional knowledge with modern scientific and educational systems, paving the way for more sustainable practices in healthcare, agriculture, and environmental conservation. To further

support this effort, a centralized digital platform (MTKP) and the book “**Meghalaya Traditional Knowledge: Supporting Document for Course Curriculum in Schools**” were developed, providing accessible resources to preserve and share indigenous wisdom globally. These initiatives were strengthened by the collective efforts of BRDC, TERI, IBSD, local government agencies, and stakeholders, including Traditional Healer Associations, demonstrating that a multi-stakeholder approach is essential for the effective preservation and promotion of traditional knowledge.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGE FACED

The road to success wasn't without hurdles, as the project faced numerous challenges, including the remote locations of many traditional knowledge holders with limited infrastructure, making it challenging to access and document their practices, which can create logistical hurdles. Additionally, recording traditional knowledge can be time-consuming, often necessitating multiple visits and interviews with the knowledge holders. This process can be difficult for researchers who have limited time or resources. Adequate funding, equipment, and personnel are crucial challenges that affect the effectiveness of documentation, thereby limiting the project's scope and quality.

Moreover, traditional practices are often evolving over time. Accurately documenting these practices is challenging because they may change or be lost. Finally, the limited recognition and support for traditional knowledge holders can hinder their willingness to participate in documentation projects.

Conclusion:

Documentation and preservation are the invaluable traditional knowledge of Meghalaya's Indigenous communities. These efforts have been realized through extensive fieldwork, active collaboration with communities and stakeholders, the establishment of a dedicated MTK Portal, the incorporation of traditional knowledge into educational curricula, and initiatives to revive these practices for future generations. This initiative stands as a model for similar projects in other regions, emphasizing the significance of collaboration, community involvement, and the integration of traditional wisdom with modern innovations.



Tradition met science: Herbs Secret Documented