



Sowa-Rigpa: a traditional knowledge system of healing and its relation with natural surroundings

Bhavya Kaushik, Rahul Kaushik

Abstract:

India is an ecologically oriented land with a wide variety of plant species, used by human civilization for food, medicine and other benefits. Over time, communities have developed considerable traditional knowledge and practices in relation to their way of life and their particular rural environment. These practices are recognized as intangible cultural heritage by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). With the inclusion of the 2003 Convention, museums and other associated organizations have identified the needs of intangible cultural heritage in the development of underdeveloped and developing nations.

Indigenous communities from different regions are rich in traditional knowledge systems concerning nature and the universe. One of them is the Tibetan community in the Trans-Himalayan regions that have developed their own health system based on the natural resources available to them. This system is known as Sowa-Rigpa which shares significant similarity in both theory and practice with an Ayurvedic system of medicine. It is based on the theory of *Jung-Wa-Ina* (panchamahaabhoot/ five elements of the body) and *Nespa-sum* (Tridosha) and *Luszung-dun* (Saptadhatu). High-altitude areas and harsh climate have brought the community to shape their unique art, culture and traditions. This paper will address the plant and mineral species used as medicines in Sowa-Rigpa practice to cure some of the diseases that occur due to imbalance of five elements of the body. It will discuss how important it is to protect these species and maintain these practices. In spite of the development of the modern medical system, traditional knowledge is strongly supported and fostered by people. Such practices ensure sustainability and for this reason it is always necessary to preserve and promote the local knowledge system. In addition, this study will determine the means to preserve and safeguard the traditional healing system of Sowa-Rigpa.

Key words: Communities, Traditional, Environment, Intangible, Tibetan, Indigenous, Sowa-Rigpa, Preservation, Sustainability.

Introduction

Over time, communities have acquired significant traditional knowledge about their particular rural lives and surroundings. They have extensive knowledge of traditional health practices, water management practices, rituals, etc. Social practices and rituals are believed to play a key role in building the social fabric in an inclusive way. Similarly, traditional knowledge, values and practices have led human societies to interact with the natural environment. Cultural heritage does not limit itself to monuments and collections of objects, but also to traditions and cultural practices inherited from ancestors. A UNESCO¹ Convention 2003 describes intangible heritage as the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills, including the instruments, objects, artifacts, cultural spaces that communities, groups and individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature

and their history and provides tradition bearers with a sense of continuity.

India's intangible cultural heritage reflects the ideas, practices, beliefs and values that its communities have shared from time immemorial. Among the different domains of ICH, Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe include knowledge, knowhow, skills, practices and representations developed by communities by interacting with the natural environment. Here, practices such as Yoga² and Ayurveda³ can be well adapted which work for the well-being of individuals and societies. Indigenous communities have been responsive to their environment and developed their own health systems. Various traditional healing practices have emerged across different regions to cure and relieve physical and mental illness by using various plants and plant-driven products. For example, medicinal plants and folk healers from the Mishing tribe⁴ in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam are well known for their healing practices.

The history of healing practices dates from the Vedic era. Rig Veda⁵ refers to plants

¹**UNESCO:** United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation is a specialized agency of the United Nations to promote world peace and international cooperation in education, arts, science and culture.

²**Yoga:** It is a spiritual practice for promoting physical and mental well-being. ³**Ayurveda:** It is a system of traditional medicine native to India.

⁴**Mishing tribe:** commonly known as Miri, settled around the southwestern belt bordering Assam.

⁵**Rig Veda:** The earliest of the four Vedas and an important text of Hindu Tradition. 2

such as *Bombex Ceiba Linn* (Semal) and *Ficus religiosa Linn* (Peepal). Likewise, Atharva Veda⁶ contains detailed information of approximately 2000 medicinal herbs. It is a common notion that Bauddha Bhikshus (monks) propagated the knowledge of Ayurveda among different regions, including Ladakh, Lahaul-Spiti, Tibet, etc. Thus, one can say that the original teachings of the ancient Tibetan medical system are generally attributed to Lord Buddha⁷, who is believed to have taught the roots of this tradition of *Medicine Buddha*⁸. The major contribution in this context is made by the Mtho-gling Monastery with the later Buddhist text being translated from Sanskrit to Tibetan. (Kala, 2005)

The Traditions of Tibet

The land of Tibet has acquired Buddhist philosophy since ancient times. Until 1728, Tibet has always been an independent nation and the only one to develop and preserve a functional Buddhist theocracy. After that, the Chinese claim on Tibet was the biggest threat to the survival of Tibetan culture. In 1959, the 14th Dalai Lama, Tibetan spiritual and political leader, fled with thousands of Tibetans to India. Since then, all political control of Tibet has remained with the Chinese government.

Tibetan culture is an amalgamation of diverse traditions, rituals, arts, literature, sacred Buddhist beliefs, etc. Prayer wheels⁹ and flags¹⁰, festivals like *Losar*¹¹, *Sho Dun*¹², bathing festival, Buddhist chants are some of the integral practices of the Tibetan community. Apart from this, Tibetan medicines focus on spiritual factors for curing any illness. It was passed down from one generation to the next. There are various treatment techniques which include in Sowa Rigpa like puncturing of veins, cold and hot water bath, fire therapy, rubbing therapy which is supplemented with medicines. In Ladakh, the Tibetan population is mainly located along the Indus Valley, followed by Changthang plateau and Nubra Valley. Moreover, Tibetan culture is strongly observed in areas like Sikkim, Darjeeling, Lahoul-Spiti, Dharamsala, etc.

⁶**Atharva Veda**: is a collection of 20 books, with a total of 730 hymns. It is also known as the fourth Veda.

⁷**Buddha**: Siddhartha Gautam, commonly known as Buddha, was a religious teacher who founded Buddhism.

⁸**Medicine Buddha**: is among one of the many incarnations of the Lord Buddha. ⁹**Prayer wheels**: are a cylindrical wheel on a spindle made from metal, wood, stone, leather, or coarse cotton, widely used Tibetan traditions.

¹⁰**Flags**: have prayers inscribed on it to promote peace, compassion, strength and wisdom. ¹¹**Losar**: also known as Tibetan New Year, is a festival in Tibetan Buddhism. ¹²**Sho Dun**: also known as Shoton, celebrates eating yogurt, meditation and dramatic operas.

The Tradition of Sowa-Rigpa

Buddhist scholars traveled to different regions for the propagation of Buddhism, one such region was Tibet. It is believed that the first Ayurvedic influence was observed in Tibet during the 3rd century AD. It leads to the origin of Sowa Rigpa, which means the *science of healing*. This tradition resembles the practices of Ayurveda. Most theories believe that Sowa Rigpa became popular around the 7th century with the Buddhist approach to Tibet.

It is one of the oldest systems of medicines, currently witnessed in different parts of Tibet, Bhutan, China, Himalayan ranges, and Nepal. In India, diverse regions where Sowa Rigpa is practiced includes Ladakh, Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kalingpong (West Bengal), Lahoul-Spiti, Dharamsala and a few other Tibetan settlements. The Himalayan range is well known for its rich fossil remains of vertebrates, plants and molluscs, which help to sustain diverse communities.

Sowa Rigpa is locally known as Amchi system in Ladakh. It uses a different type of ethno-medicinal preparations for curing diseases. The materials of plant species are major ingredients in different medical formulations. Apart from this, animal based materials, minerals, salts, powder (*Chema*), tablet (*Rilvo*), paste (*Degu*), ointment (*chukma*) or decoction (*Thang*) are the main ingredients for preparing medicines. Medicines are an integral part of this practice, which is usually made up of plants, animal products and minerals and salts.

Basic theories and relation with natural surroundings:

Sowa Rigpa is based on the theories of *Jung-Wa-Ina* (panchamahabhuta/five elements of the body), *Nespa-sum* (Tridosha) and *Luszung-dun* (Saptadhatu). The concept of *Luszung-dun*/Saptadhatu refers to the seven fundamental tissues or components of the human body. These *Dhatus* are responsible for the nourishment, structure, and functioning of the body. The Saptadhatus are formed in a sequential manner, with each Dhatu serving as the raw material for the subsequent one. The seven Dhatus are as follows:

- **Rasa Dhatu** (Plasma): Rasa is the first Dhatu and represents the plasma or the extracellular fluid in the body. It nourishes the body and provides the foundation for the subsequent Dhatus.
- **Rakta Dhatu** (Blood): Rakta refers to the blood tissue. It is derived from Rasa 4 Dhatu, where the vital nutrients are absorbed from the plasma and transformed into blood cells. Rakta nourishes all the tissues and organs, carries oxygen and nutrients, and removes waste materials from the body.
- **Mamsa Dhatu** (Muscle): Mamsa represents the muscular tissue. It is formed from Rakta Dhatu, where the nutrients from the blood are transformed into muscle tissue. Mamsa provides strength, stability, and movement to the body.

- **Meda Dhatu** (Adipose Tissue): Meda refers to the adipose or fat tissue. It is derived from Mamsa Dhatu, where excess nutrients are converted into fat tissue. Meda provides insulation, energy storage, and cushioning to the body.
- **Asthi Dhatu** (Bone): Asthi represents the skeletal tissue or bones. It provides support, structure, and protection to the body.
- **Majja Dhatu** (Bone Marrow): Majja refers to the bone marrow, which is the soft, spongy tissue inside the bones. It produces blood cells, nourishes the bones, and plays a role in immunity.
- **Shukra Dhatu** (Reproductive Tissue): Shukra represents the reproductive tissue, including the sperm in males and ovum in females. It is derived from Majja Dhatu, where the bone marrow transforms into reproductive tissue. Shukra is responsible for reproduction, fertility, and vitality.

These are interconnected and reliant on each other for their proper functioning. The concept of *Nespa-sum/Tridosha* forms the foundation of understanding the body's constitution and its imbalances. Tridosha refers to the three fundamental bioenergies or doshas that are present in every individual: *Vata*, *Pitta*, and *Kapha*. These doshas are composed of the five elements (Pancha Mahabhutas), mentioned below:

- **Earth** (*Prithvi/Sa*): It represents stability, solidity, and structure associated with the tissues, bones, muscles, and organs that provide support and structure. It is also connected to qualities such as strength, groundedness, and nourishment.
- **Water** (*Jal/Chu*): It symbolizes fluidity, cohesion, and adaptability, associated with bodily fluids, such as blood, lymph, saliva, and digestive juices. It is connected to qualities such as hydration, circulation, and flexibility.
- **Fire** (*Agni/Me*): It represents transformation, energy, and metabolism, associated with processes of digestion, metabolism, and transformation of food into energy. It is connected to qualities such as warmth, transformation, and vitality.
- **Air** (*Vayu/Lung*): It represents movement, expansion, and circulation, associated with the movement of breath, circulation of blood and energy, and communication within the nervous system. It is connected to qualities such as movement, lightness, and communication.
- **Space** (*Akash/ Nam-kha*): It is associated with openness, expansion, and the potential for manifestation. Within the body, Space is related to the empty spaces within organs, channels, and the overall body structure.

All diseases that occur in the human body are thought to be the result of the imbalance of these five elements. To treat the disease, the Sowa Rigpa system uses minerals, animals and plant species which are locally available to them. Wild plants are the major ingredients in Tibetan medicines and around 1800 medicines are of plant origin in India. Each plant possesses some intrinsic potency to cure a number of diseases.

Below the table shows some diseases that happen with the imbalance of each element and the plant species (botanical name and Sowa Rigpa name) that are used to treat them. (Singh, Bikarma, and Yash Pal Sharma, 2021,pg8-25)

ELEMENT	DISEASE CURABLE PLANTS
AIR ELEMENT	<p>Digestive Disorders: bloating, gas, indigestion, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), constipation, or diarrhea</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Achillea millefolium L.</i> (NA) ● <i>Ailanthus excelsa Roxb.</i> (Mahanumb) <p>Respiratory Issues: asthma, allergies, bronchitis, sinusitis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Ajania fruticulosa Poljakov</i> (NA) <p>Nervous System Disorders: anxiety, stress, insomnia, migraines, tension headaches</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Alcea rosea L.</i> (MDog-Idan pho-Icam)
WATER ELEMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Allium carolinianum DC.</i> (Skotche) ● <i>Althaea officinalis L.</i> (Suzmool) <p>Hormonal Imbalances: menstrual irregularities, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), thyroid imbalances, or adrenal fatigue.</p> <p>Dehydration: dry mouth, increased thirst, fatigue, dizziness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Amaranthus spinosus L.</i> (NA) <p>Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Anaphalis nepalensis Hand.-Mazz</i> (Simula) <p>Kidney Stones</p> <p>Skin Problems : dryness, rashes, eczema, or acne.</p>

<p>EARTH ELEMENT</p>	<p>Digestive Disorders : indigestion, bloating, gas, constipation, or diarrhea.</p> <p>Weight Management Issues : obesity or difficulty losing weight</p> <p>Blood Sugar Imbalances : insulin resistance or diabetes.</p> <p>Lethargy and Fatigue</p> <p>Immune System Dysfunction : weakened immunity, frequent infections, or autoimmune conditions.</p> <p>Musculoskeletal Issues : joint pain, stiffness, or disorders like osteoarthritis.</p> <p>● <i>Aconitum heterophyllum</i> Wall. <i>Ex Royle</i> (Bong-dkar)</p> <p>● <i>Ajania fruticulosa</i> (Ledeb.) poljakov (NA)</p> <p>● <i>Allium carolinianum</i> DC. (Skotse)</p>
<p>FIRE ELEMENT</p>	<p>Digestive Disorders: acid reflux, heartburn, excessive appetite, hyperacidity.</p> <p>Inflammatory Conditions</p> <p>Hormonal Imbalances</p> <p>Cardiovascular Issues: high blood pressure, heart palpitations, or poor circulation.</p> <p>Mental and Emotional Disturbances: anxiety, irritability, anger, or difficulty managing stress.</p> <p>Metabolic Disorders : diabetes, or weight management challenges.</p> <p>● <i>Acantholimon lycopodioides</i> Boiss. (Longze)</p> <p>● <i>Aconitum heterophyllum</i> Wall. <i>Ex Royle</i> (Bong-dkar)</p> <p>● <i>Ajania fruticulosa</i> (Ledeb.) poljakov (NA)</p>

SPACE ELEMENT	<p>Detoxification and Elimination: sluggishness, toxin buildup, or impaired elimination.</p> <p>Joint and Mobility Issues : stiffness, immobility, or joint pain</p> <p>Respiratory Disorders : Asthma, allergies, sinusitis, or lung congestion.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Achillea millefolium L.</i> (NA) ● <i>Alcea rosea L.</i> (MDog-Idan pho-Icam) ● <i>Althaea officinalis L.</i> (Suzmool)
------------------	---

Table 1: List showing the diseases which occur due to the imbalance of elements in the body, and plant species used to cure them.

These are some examples of plant species being used in a number of different ways. For example, the leaves and flowers of *Acantholimon Iycopodioides Boiss.* (Longze) are used to treat Cardiac disorders. Similarly, the branch of *Ailanthus excelsa Roxb.*

(Mahanumb) is used to cure asthma. Apart from these, roots, fruits, tuber¹³, and rhizomes¹⁴ of different plant species are used as medicines.



Fig 1: *Acantholimon Iycopodioides Boiss.*



Fig 2: *Ailanthus excelsa Roxb.*

In Ladakh, amchis play a crucial role in the treatment of individuals using medicinal plants and herbal formulation. They are completely dependent upon natural resources for a better and healthy lifestyle. There are many other techniques within Sowa Rigpa, but its relation to the natural environment may be well established with the natural resources they use for different practices. Plants are a good example of that because they are widely used, accompanied by animals, minerals and other natural sources. The philosophies of *Jung-Wa-Ina*, *Nespa-sum*, *Luszung-dun* and others indicate how they understand the disease and their way to heal.

Threats to this traditional system

With the advent of new technologies and the use of modern materials, medicines have also progressed and moved towards modernism, which is a major challenge for the traditional system of medicines. This practice of healing was served for the well-being of society free of cost. Unfortunately, this tradition is not practiced by the younger generation due to insufficient income.

The lack of transfer of this knowledge system, leading to the decline of this practice in the Indian Trans-Himalayas. The transmission of practices is slowly weakening, which may result in loss of significance as well as diminishing youth interest.

¹³**Tuber:** specialized storage stem of certain seed plants.

¹⁴**Rhizomes:** also called creeping rootstalk, horizontal underground plant stem capable of producing the shoot and root systems of a new plant.

Demographic issues are one of the main concerns, as the population continually migrates from rural to urban areas for various reasons. Despite these factors, a number of initiatives have been taken to preserve the traditional practice.

Initiative to Safeguard

Traditional knowledge testifies to the influence of India's Intangible Heritage on the well-being of people and societies. It is necessary to recognize the invaluable role of ICH in fostering a sense of identity of communities, which needs to be safeguarded. Although, various measures are taken to promote this practice, for example, In 1961, Men-Tsee-Khang (Tibetan Medical and Astrology Institutes, TMAI) was established in Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh with the aim to promote, preserve and practice the ancient Tibetan system of medicine to improve health and sanitation.

Similarly, in 1989, the Ladakh school of Tibetan Medicine came into existence. Some other encouragement had been made with the establishment of Amchis training centers in Dharamshala, Darjeeling, Ladakh and Manali, where proper training courses are conducted, (Kala,2005). The Traditional Medico-Cultural Association and the Yuthog foundation are dealing with the preservation and promotion of Tibetan Medicine. Apart from these, NOMAD, an NGO in Leh is also working for the revitalization of the Tibetan medical system. The community participation is active with the agenda to 'help the world' with Tibetan medicines. Ladakhi *amchis* serve without any charge and often train the younger generations.

Conclusion

Nowadays, scientific health services are widely available, but it is important to remember that traditional practices can greatly complement these services and promote sustainability. Such practices ensure a balance between economic growth, environmental care and social well-being. To keep them alive, they must be continuously learned, practiced and handed down to future generations. The tradition of Sowa-Rigpa is the art and science of keeping primary energies in balance and promoting a healthy lifestyle. It allows people to acknowledge the general health and well-being of communities. It is important to ensure that this practice is recognized for the promotion of health care. With this, it requires acknowledgement, respect and

understanding among younger generations. This study aimed to provide an overview of the traditional practice of Sowa Rigpa, focusing on some of its major theories, which highlight its importance in the society.

Through this study, it is clear that indigenous communities always have a close relationship with the environment around them. It leads to the development of traditional festivals, rituals and has become a source of their livelihood. To ensure the development of such practices, it is vital to protect the ecological environment around people. Initiatives have been taken at national level with the corporation of international organizations to safeguard ecological species and practices associated with it. Thus, human societies have to play a crucial role in it.

References

1. INDIAN CULTURE. 'Sowa-Rigpa (Knowledge of Healing or Science of Healing)'. Accessed 28 May 2023. <http://indianculture.gov.in/intangible-cultural-heritage/knowledge-and-practices-concerning-nature-and-universe/sowa-rigpa>.
2. 'The Survival of Tibetan Culture'. Accessed 31 May 2023. <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/survival-tibetan-culture>.
3. Shankar, Rama, G.S Lavekar, S. Deb, and B.K Sharma. 'Traditional Healing Practice and Folk Medicines Used by the Mishing Community of North East India'. *Journal of Ayurveda and Integrative Medicine*, 2012.
4. 'Traditional Tibetan Medicine'. Accessed 9 June 2023. <https://www.greattibettour.com/tibetan-culture/tibetan-medicine.html>.
5. SOTC. 'Tibetan Culture & Traditions in India You Should Know About | SOTC'. SOTC Blog (blog), 26 February 2020. <https://www.sotc.in/blog/destinations/india/tibetan-cultures-in-india>.
6. Singh, Bikarma, and Yash Pal Sharma, eds. *Plants for Novel Drug Molecules: Ethnobotany to Ethnopharmacology*. New Delhi: New India Publishing Agency, 2021.
7. Singh, Mansi, A.K Sinha, and Rajni Lamba. 'The Bonpa Indigenous Cure System of Sowa Rigpa or "Science of Healing" Practices: An Exploratory Study'. *Linguistics and Culture Review*, 2021, 1389–1401.
8. Kala, Chandra Prakash. 'Health Traditions of Buddhist Community and Role of Amchis in Trans-Himalayan Region of India'. *Current Science* Vol 89, no. No. 8 (October 2005).
9. Gurmet, Padma. "Sowa-Rigpa": Himalayan Art of Healing'. *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge* 3(2) (April 2004): 212–18.
10. Ballabh, Basant, and O.P. Chaurasia. 'Traditional Medicinal Plants of Cold Desert Ladakh- Used in Treatment of Cold, Cough and Fever'. *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, 2007, 341–49.
11. Angchok, D., SK Dwivedi, and Z Ahmed. 'Traditional Foods and Beverages of Ladakh'. *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge* 8(4) (October 2009): 551–58.
12. Hofer, Theresia. *Medicine and Memory in Tibet: Amchi Physicians in an Age of Reform. Studies on Ethnic Groups in China*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018.
13. Clifford, Terry. *Tibetan Buddhist Medicine and Psychiatry: The Diamond Healing*. 2nd printing. York Beach (Maine): S. Weiser, 1992.
14. 'Home -', 26 May 2023. <https://mentseekhang.org/>.
15. Jawanjal, Pravin. 'Sowa Rigpa Tibetan System of Medicine'. *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development* 2, no. 6 (October 2018).
16. 'Ailanthus Excelsa - Aralu, Indian Tree of Heaven - Ayurwiki'. Accessed 15 June 2023. https://ayurwiki.org/Ayurwiki/Ailanthus_excelsa_-_Aralu,_Indian_tree_of_heaven#/media/File:Ailanthus_excelsa_112.JPG.
17. 'Acantholimon Lycopodioides - eFlora of India', 16 March 2018. <https://efloraofindia.com/2018/03/16/acantholimon-lycopodioides/>.