

## Changing Status and Emerging Challenges of Traditional Healers among the Myasabeda Community in Karnataka

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### Abstract:

*Traditional medical knowledge is a vital component of indigenous healthcare systems in tribal and rural India. The Myasabeda community of Karnataka possesses rich ethnomedicinal knowledge transmitted through oral traditions and experiential learning. However, rapid socio-economic changes, modernization, environmental degradation, and the expansion of biomedical healthcare have significantly affected traditional healing practices. This study examines the changing status, emerging challenges, and continuity of traditional healers among the Myasabeda community using qualitative analysis of secondary sources, including ethnobotanical studies, academic literature, and government reports. The findings indicate that traditional healers continue to play an important role in rural healthcare, especially in areas with limited access to modern medical facilities. At the same time, these practices face challenges such as declining knowledge transmission, loss of medicinal plant biodiversity, limited institutional recognition, and increasing dependence on biomedical systems. Despite these pressures, ethnomedicine remains culturally significant and continues to serve as an accessible and affordable healthcare resource. The study highlights the need for systematic documentation, policy support, and conservation efforts to sustain traditional medical knowledge.*

**Keywords:** *Traditional medicine, Ethnomedicine, Traditional healers, Myasabeda community, Indigenous knowledge*

### Introduction

Traditional medicine continues to play an important role in community healthcare across many parts of India, particularly in

rural and tribal areas where access to biomedical services is limited or culturally less preferred. In India, traditional

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medicine includes both codified systems such as Ayurveda as well as non-codified community based healing practices that rely on medicinal plants, inherited knowledge and ritual elements. Ethnobotanical studies have shown that these healing systems are deeply embedded in local ecological knowledge and cultural traditions, making traditional medicine both a healthcare practice and a socio-cultural institution (WHO, 2013; Upadhyaya et al., 2014). Among tribal and forest dependent communities, traditional healers have historically served as important knowledge holders who mediate between illness, nature and cultural belief systems. Research from different regions of Karnataka, including Uttara Kannada, Dharwad, Chitradurga and Belgaum has documented extensive use of medicinal plants and the continued relevance of local healers in treating common ailments (Harsha et al., 2003; Hebbar et al., 2004). These studies suggest that traditional medicine remains a living and adaptive healthcare system rather than merely a remnant of the past. However the status of traditional healers is undergoing significant change. Existing research indicates that factors such as modernization, expansion of biomedical healthcare, migration, environmental degradation and restrictive forest regulations have affected both the practice and recognition of traditional healing (Upadhyaya et al., 2014). In addition declining interest among younger generations and the reduced availability of

medicinal plant resources have created challenges for the continuity of indigenous medical knowledge.

Karnataka represents an important region for ethnomedicinal research because of its rich biodiversity and diverse tribal communities. While several studies have documented medicinal plant use across districts such as Bellary, Gulbarga, and Uttara Kannada, most of these studies focus primarily on plant species and remedies. Relatively fewer studies examine the changing social status of traditional healers and the challenges affecting the continuity of ethnomedicine. Within this context the Myasabeda community of Karnataka provides an important case for understanding how traditional healing systems are evolving in contemporary society. By examining existing literature and ethnomedicinal studies, this article explores the changing status of traditional healers, the challenges they face and the continuing relevance of traditional medicine in sustaining community health and cultural knowledge.

### Literature Review

Harsha, Hebbar, and Hegde (2003), in their study "*Ethnomedical Knowledge of Plants Used by Kunabi Tribe of Karnataka for Wound Healing*," documented several medicinal plant species used by the Kunabi tribe in the Uttara Kannada district. The authors observed that traditional healers relied on plant-based remedies to treat wounds,

infections, and skin-related diseases. The research revealed that healers possessed detailed knowledge of plant identification, preparation techniques, and therapeutic applications. The study also emphasized that ethnomedicinal knowledge is transmitted through oral traditions and practical experience within families and communities. This work highlights the strong foundation of indigenous medical knowledge in Karnataka and its continued relevance to rural healthcare.

Hebbar et al. (2004), in *"Ethnomedicine of Dharwad District in Karnataka, India: Plants Used in Oral Health Care,"* documented approximately 85 medicinal plant species used to treat oral diseases such as toothache, gum infections, and mouth ulcers. The study demonstrated that traditional healers play an important role in addressing everyday health problems, particularly in rural areas where modern healthcare facilities are not easily accessible. The authors also noted that local communities possess extensive knowledge of medicinal plants and preparation methods, closely linked to the surrounding environment and biodiversity.

Upadhyaya et al. (2014), in *"Non-codified Traditional Medicine Practices from Belgaum Region in Southern India: Present Scenario,"* examined the socio-economic conditions of traditional healers and documented the plants used in their healing practices. The findings showed that most practitioners depended on forest resources for medicinal plants and practiced healing as a part-time activity

alongside agriculture or other occupations. The study also reported that modernization, migration, and declining interest among younger generations are major factors affecting the continuity of traditional medicine. Furthermore, environmental issues such as deforestation and biodiversity loss were identified as key challenges for traditional healers.

Bhat, Hegde, and Upadhyaya (2013), in *"Traditional Knowledge of Medicinal Plants in the Western Ghats Region of Karnataka,"* documented a wide range of medicinal plant species used by local communities in the Western Ghats. The authors highlighted that the region is rich in biodiversity and supports diverse ethnobotanical knowledge systems. Traditional healers in these areas possess detailed ecological knowledge of plant habitats, seasonal availability, and preparation techniques. However, the study also pointed out that environmental degradation, deforestation, and increasing human activities threaten the sustainability of medicinal plant resources.

Patil and Kumar (2011), in *"Ethnomedicinal Plants Used by Local Communities in Bellary District, Karnataka,"* documented plant-based treatments used across several villages. The research found that medicinal knowledge is not restricted to specialized healers but is also shared among community members. The study demonstrated that traditional medicine continues to be practiced alongside modern healthcare systems, especially in

rural and tribal regions where it remains culturally significant.

Ragupathy et al. (2008), in “*Valorizing the Irulas’ Traditional Knowledge of Medicinal Plants in the Velliangiri Hills of South India*,” applied systematic ethnobotanical methods to document medicinal plant knowledge among tribal communities. The study used structured interviews and consensus analysis to identify commonly used plant species. The findings demonstrated that traditional medical knowledge among tribal communities is well organized and based on long-term interaction with the natural environment.

Ragupathy, Steven, and Maruthakkutti (2009), in “*Consensus of the Malasars’ Traditional Knowledge of Medicinal Plants in the Velliangiri Hills*,” analyzed the distribution of medicinal plant knowledge among tribal healers and identified a high level of agreement regarding plant uses and treatments. The authors concluded that traditional medicine represents a systematic knowledge system that plays an important role in supporting both healthcare and cultural identity within tribal communities.

### Research Gap

Although several studies have documented medicinal plant use and ethnomedicinal knowledge in different regions of Karnataka, most research has primarily focused on plant species documentation and ethnobotanical

inventories. Limited attention has been given to understanding the changing social status of traditional healers, the socio-economic challenges they face, and the continuity of traditional healing practices within specific tribal communities.

In particular, there is a lack of detailed research on the Myasabeda community in Karnataka. Therefore, examining the changing status, emerging challenges, and continuity of traditional healers among the Myasabeda community is essential for understanding how indigenous medical knowledge systems are transforming in contemporary society.

### Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the changing status and social role of traditional healers in contemporary society.
2. To identify the ecological, socio-economic, and institutional challenges faced by traditional healers.
3. To explore the necessity and continuity of traditional medicine in maintaining community healthcare systems.

### Significance of the Study

Traditional medicine remains an important healthcare resource for many tribal and rural communities in India. The study is significant because it highlights the role of indigenous medical knowledge in sustaining community health systems. By focusing on the Myasabeda community in Karnataka, the research

contributes to the understanding of how traditional healing practices are adapting to changing socio-economic and environmental conditions. The study also provides insights into the challenges faced by traditional healers, including declining recognition, ecological pressures and limited institutional support. Understanding these issues is important for developing policies that support the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems and promote sustainable use of medicinal plant resources.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study is based on the interaction between traditional knowledge systems, ecological resources and socio-cultural institutions. Ethnomedicine is understood as a system of healthcare that is shaped by the relationship between people, nature and cultural traditions. Traditional healers possess specialized knowledge about medicinal plants, healing rituals and treatment practices that are transmitted through generations. This knowledge depends on the availability of natural resources such as forests and medicinal plant biodiversity. At the same time the social recognition of healers within the community determines their authority and role in providing healthcare. However processes such as modernization, environmental degradation, migration and the expansion of biomedical healthcare systems influence these relationships. These factors may lead to changes in healer status, knowledge transmission and

the sustainability of ethnomedicinal practices. The conceptual framework therefore examines how these interacting factors affect the continuity and transformation of traditional medicine among the Myasabeda community.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study is guided by the theoretical perspectives of indigenous knowledge systems and medical pluralism. Indigenous knowledge theory emphasizes that local communities possess valuable knowledge developed through long-term interaction with their environment. Traditional medicinal knowledge is an important component of this system and reflects the ecological understanding and cultural practices of indigenous communities.

The concept of medical pluralism explains the coexistence of multiple healthcare systems within a society. In many rural and tribal regions of India, traditional medicine operates alongside modern biomedical systems. Communities often use both systems depending on accessibility, cultural beliefs and the nature of illness. This theoretical perspective helps explain how traditional healers continue to function within a broader healthcare landscape despite the growing influence of modern medicine.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a Qualitative research approach based on secondary data analysis. The research relies on previously published academic literature

and ethnomedicinal studies related to traditional medicine practices in Karnataka and other parts of India. The collected data were systematically reviewed and analyzed to identify key themes related to the changing status, challenges and continuity of traditional healing practices.

### **Research Design**

The research follows a descriptive and analytical research design. The descriptive aspect focuses on documenting existing knowledge about traditional healers and ethnomedicinal practices, while the analytical component examines the socio-cultural and environmental factors influencing the transformation of traditional medicine. Through the synthesis of existing studies, the research seeks to develop a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics affecting traditional healing systems.

### **Study Area**

The study focuses on the Myasabeda community in Karnataka. The Myasabeda community is traditionally associated with forest-based livelihoods and possesses rich indigenous knowledge related to medicinal plants and healing practices. Karnataka is known for its ecological diversity and is home to several tribal and rural communities that continue to practice traditional medicine. Many communities in the region rely on locally available medicinal plants for treating common ailments, particularly in rural and forest areas where access to modern

healthcare facilities may be limited. The traditional healers of the Myasabeda community play an important role in preserving ethnomedicinal knowledge and providing primary healthcare services. However socio-economic changes, environmental pressures and modernization are gradually influencing the continuity of these traditional practices.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### ***Changing Status of Traditional Healers***

Available literature on indigenous health systems indicates that traditional healers once held a prominent position in tribal and rural societies. Studies on ethnomedicine in India highlight that traditional healers were regarded as custodians of medicinal knowledge and played an essential role in maintaining community health. However several scholars have noted that the expansion of modern healthcare services, biomedical education and government health programs has gradually reduced the social authority of traditional healers. Research conducted in different tribal regions of India suggests that although traditional healers continue to practice their knowledge, their influence within community decision-making processes has diminished over time.

#### ***Continued Relevance of Traditional Medicine***

Despite the expansion of modern medical facilities, Traditional medicine continues to be widely used in rural and

tribal communities. According to the World Health Organization, a large proportion of populations in developing countries rely on traditional medicine for primary healthcare. Ethnobotanical studies conducted in India demonstrate that local communities often prefer traditional treatments due to their accessibility, affordability and cultural familiarity. Traditional medicine therefore continues to function as an important complementary healthcare system.

#### ***Socio-Economic Conditions of Traditional Healers***

Studies examining indigenous healers frequently highlight the economic challenges associated with traditional healing practices. Traditional healers typically do not charge fixed fees for their services and payments are often voluntary or symbolic. As a result traditional healing rarely provides sufficient income for practitioners. Many healers depend on agriculture, forest-related occupations or wage labour as their primary source of livelihood. Researchers have observed that this lack of economic stability contributes to the declining interest among younger generations in learning traditional healing practices.

#### ***Declining Transmission of Indigenous Medical Knowledge***

The transmission of traditional medical knowledge has historically occurred through oral traditions and apprenticeship within families. However several studies on indigenous knowledge systems indicate

that this process is gradually weakening. Modern education, migration and changing employment opportunities have altered the aspirations of younger generations. As a result fewer young individuals are willing to learn traditional healing practices. Scholars warn that the loss of intergenerational knowledge transfer poses a serious threat to the survival of ethnomedicinal knowledge.

#### ***Environmental Challenges and Loss of Medicinal Plants***

Ethnobotanical literature consistently emphasizes the relationship between traditional medicine and biodiversity. Traditional healers rely heavily on forest ecosystems for medicinal plants used in treatment. However environmental changes such as deforestation, agricultural expansion and urban development have significantly affected the availability of these resources. Several studies report that many medicinal plant species are becoming increasingly scarce due to habitat loss and overexploitation. This ecological decline directly impacts the ability of traditional healers to continue their practices.

#### ***Impact of Forest Policies on Traditional Healing Practices***

Research on forest governance in India indicates that conservation policies sometimes restrict access to forest resources traditionally used by indigenous communities. Although these policies aim to protect biodiversity, they may unintentionally limit the collection of

medicinal plants by traditional healers. Scholars argue that policies should recognize the traditional ecological knowledge of indigenous communities and involve them in conservation strategies. Such inclusive approaches can help balance environmental protection with the preservation of traditional healthcare systems.

#### ***Changing Community Perceptions toward Traditional Medicine***

Attitudes toward traditional medicine are changing across many indigenous communities. Older generations often maintain strong trust in traditional healing practices due to their cultural and historical significance. In contrast, younger individuals are increasingly influenced by biomedical knowledge and modern healthcare systems. This shift in perception reflects broader processes of social change, modernization and globalization affecting indigenous communities.

#### ***Lack of Institutional Recognition***

Lack of institutional recognition for traditional healers Although traditional medicine contributes significantly to community healthcare, many healers operate outside formal healthcare systems. Scholars have argued that integrating traditional healers into national health policies could strengthen healthcare delivery in rural areas. Recognition and collaboration between traditional and modern healthcare systems may also help preserve indigenous medical knowledge.

#### ***Cultural Significance of Traditional Healing***

Several anthropological studies emphasize that traditional healing practices cannot be understood solely as medical treatments. Instead, they are deeply embedded within cultural and spiritual beliefs of indigenous communities. Healing rituals often involve prayers, symbolic practices and community participation. These cultural elements strengthen the social identity of communities and contribute to the persistence of traditional medicine even in the presence of modern healthcare systems.

#### ***Future Prospects for Traditional Medicine***

Despite the challenges identified in existing literature, many scholars believe that traditional medicine has the potential to continue as an important knowledge system. Documentation of ethnomedicinal practices, conservation of medicinal plant biodiversity and supportive policy frameworks are essential for sustaining traditional healing systems. Collaboration between researchers, policymakers and indigenous communities can help ensure that traditional medicine remains a valuable resource for future generations.

#### ***Limitations of the Study***

This study is based on secondary data obtained from previously published research, academic articles and ethnobotanical studies. Therefore the findings rely on the interpretation of

existing literature rather than primary field observations. Another limitation is that available literature specifically focusing on the Myasabeda community is limited, which restricts the depth of community-specific analysis. Additionally variations in research methods used by different scholars may influence the comparability of findings. Despite these limitations the study provides valuable insights into broader trends affecting traditional healers and ethnomedicine in Karnataka.

#### ***Policy Recommendations***

1. Documentation of Indigenous Knowledge Systematic documentation of traditional medicinal knowledge should be encouraged to preserve valuable ethnomedicinal practices for future generations.
2. Conservation of Medicinal Plant Resources Sustainable conservation strategies should be implemented to protect medicinal plant biodiversity, particularly in forest regions where traditional healers collect plant materials.
3. Recognition of Traditional Healers Government policies should recognize the role of traditional healers as community healthcare providers and include them in local health initiatives where appropriate.
4. Community-Based Knowledge Transmission Programs should be developed to encourage younger generations to learn traditional medicinal practices through

community-based training and awareness initiatives.

#### **Conclusion**

Traditional medicine continues to play an important role in sustaining healthcare systems within many indigenous and rural communities in India. The Myasabeda community in Karnataka represents one such group where traditional healers possess valuable ethnomedicinal knowledge developed through long term interaction with local ecological resources. The analysis of existing literature indicates that traditional healing practices remain culturally embedded and continue to provide accessible and affordable healthcare, particularly in areas where modern medical services are limited. However, the study also reveals that the status and practice of traditional healers are undergoing significant transformation. Factors such as modernization, migration, environmental degradation, declining medicinal plant biodiversity and the expansion of biomedical healthcare systems have influenced the authority and livelihood of traditional healers. In addition the weakening of intergenerational knowledge transmission and limited institutional recognition have created further challenges for the continuity of traditional medicine. Despite these pressures, traditional healing systems remain an important component of indigenous knowledge and cultural identity. The survival of ethnomedicinal practices depends on the preservation of both

ecological resources and community knowledge systems. Recognizing the importance of traditional healers and supporting the documentation and conservation of their knowledge is essential for sustaining community-based healthcare traditions.

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