

A new prescription for tribal areas as modern medicine ties up with vaidyas

Mohua Das & Ranjan Dasgupta | TNN

They say, “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em,” and that is the strategy that’s come in handy in tribal areas where traditional healers or gram vaidyas tend to hold more sway than medical doctors. Instead of trying to sideline healers who treat illness using traditional methods passed down through generations, understand local customs, are trusted in tribal communities and are often present where regular healthcare isn’t, a group called the Tribal Health Collaborative (THC) has been using them as allies to modern medicine.

“In tribal areas, 60-90% of people turn to traditional healers because they don’t trust doctors or even anganwadi workers. Tribal healers are the ones they rely on. An initial assessment of 15,000 healers revealed that most were quacks, but around 10% were genuine,” said Aditya Natraj, CEO of Piramal Foundation that worked with Quality Council of India (QCI) to develop an assessment-certification programme to help weed out quacks and certify those with real knowledge.

This process tests a healer’s expertise in medicinal plants and treatments and carries out on-ground checks to see if they’re actually practising what they claim. “By connecting the trusted healers with mainstream healthcare, they become a link for referring patients to hospitals or clinics when serious treatment is needed. The idea isn’t to replace them but to empower them with the tools and knowledge they need to continue their work and collaborate with the public health system,” explained Natraj. He recounted that initially, the foundation had tried to bypass such traditional practitioners and introduce modern allopathic treatment, which they soon realised was a “key mistake”.

“Because locals only trust the healers. So, we decided to co-opt tribal healers and now a team of allopathic doctors is training them to identify symptoms of diseases like TB and malaria so that when they come across complicated cases, the tribal healers now refer them to public health facilities,” says Natraj.

For tribal communities living in the rugged terrains of Akkalkuwa, Dhadgaon, and Navapur—three of the most underdeveloped talukas in Nandurbar district of Maharashtra—local healers are often the first point of contact when illness strikes. With the nearest health centres located miles away, reachable only after long and difficult treks, it’s no wonder that villagers depend on these healers for everything from minor ailments to serious health concerns.

“We know the people trust us, and for



(Top) Tribal healer Kunvarsingh Maharaj from Barwani district’s Saluun village in MP was involved in a state govt initiative to distribute medicinal plants. (Above) Healer Angad Lohra from Ranchi district’s Rahe village in Jharkhand works with medicines prepared from dried herbs and plants

years we’ve successfully treated patients with forest herbs,” said Ashok Konkani, a healer from Navapur. He is one of 30 recently certified by the Nandurbar district collector Mittali Sethi, who told TOI that these healers are usually the first responders in remote areas.

Healers like Umeshsinh Vasave from Navapur still venture deep into the forests, braving snake bites and insect attacks, to gather the plants and herbs they need. And while they’re deeply tied to their traditions, they understand the limits of their knowledge.

“We’ve been treating people for generations, using what our fathers and grandfathers taught us. But we understand when it’s time to send someone to a doctor,” said Malsinh Padavi, healer from Dhadgaon. “It’s not easy, and we often have to explain the risks of not seeking treatment from qualified allopathic doctors,” adds Konkani.

The initiative covers communities in 25 districts across six states — Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Assam, Odisha, said Natraj. “While the certification might seem like an official stamp of approval, we’re not endorsing them as doctors, but rather using their trust within the community to guide people towards proper medical care when needed,” he added.

Since the project was initiated in October 2023, the collaboration has led to a boost in TB screening—with referrals jumping from 306 to 2,277—after the healers received training and certification. There’s also been an increase in institutional childbirth, especially for high-risk pregnancies that are usually managed at home in these communities.

Mangal Murmu, a traditional healer from Indrabani village in Jharkhand’s Dumka district, said he has recently learned the importance of documenting patient details and maintaining a stock register, which has also improved his ability to remember past treatments and plan follow-ups.

THC is also involving healers like him to improve nutrition by providing them an acre of land to grow micronutrient-rich gardens. These gardens aimed at improving the diet of tribal communities by boosting their ‘Dietary Diversity Score’ grow a variety of nutritious foods—nutrient-rich crops and traditional medicinal plants — based on the tribe’s specific food preferences, which are identified through a survey and provide a good portion of the recommended daily intake for protein, iron, calcium, vitamin A, and vitamin C.

This approach focuses on improving health and nutrition in the community by involving local healers in creating and managing these gardens; the food grown can also be used in their medicinal practices. “It’s a much more effective way to get people to change their diets than just telling them what to eat. When a trusted healer advises, people are more likely to listen,” says Natraj.