

Minds and Traditions: Exploring India's Indigenous Healing Systems for Mental Wellness

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ABSTRACT

Background: In India, traditional healing systems have long been integral to managing health and psychological well-being. With growing gaps in formal mental health services, especially in rural and tribal areas, many individuals continue to seek support from traditional healers, spiritual leaders, and indigenous health systems. The integration of these culturally rooted practices into modern care frameworks could potentially bridge accessibility gaps and promote holistic well-being. **Objective:** This secondary research paper examines literature published from 2020 to 2025 to assess the contributions of Ayurveda, Yoga, expressive therapies, and indigenous practices to mental health care in India. The study also explores the potential roles of shamans, gurus, and oral traditions in facilitating mental healing. **Methodology:** A review of secondary sources was conducted using academic databases such as PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The selection focused on systematic reviews, randomized controlled trials (RCTs), and narrative studies related to traditional healing and mental health outcomes. **Findings:** Recent research highlights significant outcomes: **Yoga-based interventions** have demonstrated efficacy in alleviating symptoms of anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders, and substance dependence. Research from institutions like NIMHANS supports their physiological and psychological benefits. **Ayurvedic treatments**, including Nasya Karma and herbal formulations, have shown potential in managing insomnia, stress, and mood disorders (Sharma & Sharma, 2023). **Yoga Nidra**, a meditative relaxation practice, has been associated with reduced anxiety and enhanced emotional regulation. **Oral traditions and cultural narratives**, especially among tribal groups, continue to shape perceptions of mental well-being and healing. Studies also reveal that a large proportion of people prefer consulting traditional healers or spiritual guides before seeking clinical interventions. **Discussion:** Traditional healing offers culturally resonant, cost-effective approaches that may complement formal psychiatric care. However, challenges such as a lack of regulation, varying quality standards, and gaps in mutual understanding between traditional and modern practitioners must be addressed. **Conclusion:** India's diverse healing traditions, if systematically evaluated and ethically integrated, have the potential to enrich mental health care delivery. Policymakers and health professionals should consider inclusive frameworks that respect cultural identities while ensuring evidence-based practices.

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India faces a high burden of mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and substance abuse. These conditions have a significant impact on individuals, families, and society, resulting in a reduced quality of life and economic strain. Social stigma, poverty, gender inequality, and cultural beliefs around mental illness worsen the situation. Access to mental healthcare is limited, especially in rural areas, due to shortages of professionals, poor infrastructure, low awareness, and weak integration with primary healthcare services (Meghrajani et al., 2023). Mental health refers to emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It influences how one thinks, feels, acts, manages stress, and builds relationships. It is essential at all stages of life. Mental and physical health are linked together, and one can impact the other (Santosh, 2022). Mental health is not just the absence of mental illness but a state of overall well-being. According to the WHO, it includes physical, mental, and social wellness. Key aspects involve self-awareness, emotional resilience, autonomy, competence, and the ability to handle daily stresses, work effectively, and contribute to society. Traditional medicine, also known as indigenous or folk medicine, includes the medical knowledge and practices developed over generations within different cultures, long before the advent of modern medicine. According to WHO (2008), it encompasses the collective knowledge, skills, and practices rooted in cultural beliefs and experiences, whether scientifically explained or not, used to maintain health and prevent, diagnose, or treat physical and mental illnesses.

Since ancient times, human cultures have developed diverse healing traditions to understand and address illness, often blending physical, psychological, social, and spiritual elements. These traditional medicines, rooted in local beliefs and passed down through generations, either through written texts or oral practices, form culturally rich systems of care that vary widely across regions and communities. In today's globalized world, healthcare providers increasingly encounter patients who use both traditional and modern medical treatments for healing (Lichtenstein, Berger, and Cheng, 2017). Indian conventional healing systems have long been integral to managing both physical health and psychological well-being. These systems, deeply embedded in the country's diverse cultural and spiritual traditions, include Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, yoga, naturopathy, and a wide variety of folk healing practices. Traditional and spiritual healers are often the first point of contact for health concerns in many rural and tribal communities, particularly where formal health infrastructure is limited or absent (Gururaj et al., 2016). These healers provide not only physical remedies, such as herbal formulations and body therapies, but also spiritual and psychosocial support through rituals, prayers, and community engagement, which are often perceived as more accessible, culturally consonant, and holistic by local populations (Patel et al., 2011).

Objective of the Study

The present review explores the role of Ayurveda, Yoga, expressive therapies, and indigenous practices, including shamans, gurus, and oral traditions, in supporting mental health care in India.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative secondary research approach by reviewing scholarly literature, reports, and relevant publications from 2020 to 2025. Sources were identified through databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, and government or institutional repositories. Keywords used included "Ayurveda and mental health," "Yoga therapy," "indigenous healing in India," "expressive therapies," "shamans," and "oral traditions."

Selected studies were analyzed to identify key themes, practices, and contributions to mental wellness.

- **Inclusion criteria:** Peer-reviewed articles and credible reports related to Indian traditional systems and their role in mental health care.
- **Exclusion criteria:** Non-English articles published before 2020. Blogs or personal views.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- **Ayurveda and Mental Health**

Triguna and Tridosha are ancient concepts, over five thousand years old, rooted in Ayurveda's philosophy and practice. This study explores their foundational roles in the body and mind. Trigunas, Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas represent qualities influencing behavior and consciousness, while Tridoshas, Vata, Pitta, and Kapha, are metabolic principles vital for physical and mental balance (Chandra, 2024). In India, traditional healing systems like Ayurveda, Unani, and faith healing play a vital role in mental health care alongside modern medicine. Shaped by cultural beliefs and social contexts, these practices offer unique approaches to understanding and treating mental illness (Biswal et al., 2017). Thakre, Ade, and Parwe (2021) mentioned that Ayurveda, India's ancient system of medicine, is both an art and a science that guides life from conception to death. The term combines "Ayu" (life) and "Veda" (knowledge), meaning "The Science of Life." It focuses on maintaining physical, mental, and spiritual health, recognizing the interconnectedness of mind (Manas), body (Shareera), and soul (Atma). Ayurvedic psychiatry emphasizes the mind-body connection, where physical imbalances affect mental health and vice versa. Manas collects sensory information, Buddhi processes and understands it, and Ahamkara (ego) interprets it for the self, helping create clear and unique awareness. Ayurveda highlights the crucial role of mental health in diagnosing and treating illnesses, identifying psychological stress as a major contributor to various disorders. It offers validated treatments for a range of mental and neurological conditions, including Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, epilepsy, and schizophrenia. Ayurvedic herbal therapies are valued for their accessibility, affordability, and minimal side effects, using different plant parts like roots, leaves, bark, flowers, and seeds, either alone or combined. Ayurvedic therapy offers a natural and effective approach to treating psychiatric conditions. Its texts emphasize proper behavior, thoughts, actions, and lifestyle, highlighting the importance of mental balance for overall well-being (Thakre, Ade, and Parwe, 2021).

- **Yoga and Psychological Well-being**

Well-being reflects a positive state of an individual or group. Psychological well-being combines happiness (hedonism) and self-fulfillment (eudaimonia). Yoga supports well-being by reducing stress and anxiety, improving sleep, and enhancing body awareness through regular practice (Ashwathi and Sindhulakshmi, 2021). Recognizing this reality, scholars and public health experts have increasingly called for the integration of culturally rooted healing practices into modern mental health care frameworks. Rajkumar (2023) argues that Yoga-based interventions (YBIs) are gaining attention as a promising complementary treatment for depression. YBIs may influence biological markers like increased brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) and reduced cortisol and interleukin-6 (IL-6). The mind and body are closely linked, constantly influencing one another. Emotions affect thoughts, and thoughts shape emotions, making their balance essential for overall health. When mental well-being is compromised, it can lower immunity and lead to both psychological and physical conditions. Preserving mental and emotional health is crucial for individual effectiveness and broader societal progress. In Yogic philosophy, the mind is

referred to as Chitta, and disturbances within it, known as Vrittis, stem from internal afflictions called Kleshas, such as false perceptions, attachments, and desires. These mental disruptions are viewed as the source of suffering. Yoga outlines various mental states (Chittabhūmis) and explains how stress (Adhi) can result in physical illness (Vyadhi). To overcome mental distress, Yoga recommends consistent practice (Abhyasa) and detachment (Vairagya) to restore harmony and well-being (Morarji Desai National Institute of Yoga, 2023). Yoga has been practiced for centuries as a means of self-development, aiming to unite individual and universal consciousness. This paper highlights yoga's role in enhancing mental health, with benefits including improved focus, reduced stress, and mood elevation. Specific poses like Shavasana, Adho Mukha Vakrasana, and Natarajasana are effective in managing anxiety and stress. Today, yoga is widely used as a standalone or supportive therapy for both physical and mental health issues (Panth and Mishra, 2023).

• Expressive and Creative Therapies

Since ancient times, humans have expressed emotions through gestures, sounds, and words. Indian classical dance, one of the oldest traditions, evolved as a sacred ritual in temples and a cultural activity in festivals and gatherings. It is a complex art combining body movements, music perception, emotional engagement, memory, and rhythm synchronization, involving physical, mental, and spiritual aspects. Experts across medicine, spirituality, and science recognize dance's positive impact on overall well-being (Panda, 2025). Music, a universal language, serves as both a form of communication and a healing tool. Modern science now recognizes its therapeutic value, especially in treating mental, emotional, and cognitive conditions. Music therapy, widely accepted in Western medicine, uses vocal and instrumental activities to promote non-musical improvements in health and well-being. Rooted in Ayurveda, music has long supported holistic healing in India. The Raga Research Centre in Chennai is studying the therapeutic effects of Indian classical ragas on various health conditions. Music therapy, when applied systematically with accurate diagnosis and raga selection, can enhance peace, concentration, and overall quality of life (Sharma, 2024). Art, as a reflection of culture and emotion, includes visual, literary, and performing forms. Dance, like Bharatnatyam and Kathak, supports emotional release and physical well-being. Artwork, especially by children, aids in emotional expression and development. Both dance and art help reduce anxiety, build confidence, and improve social interaction by channelling emotions constructively. Tools like mandalas enhance self-awareness and relaxation. Overall, art serves as a powerful medium for healing, self-expression, and personal growth (Sarkar, Dasgupta, and Sah, 2024).

• Tribal and Folk Healing Practices

According to Ali (2023), traditional healers, especially in rural and tribal areas, are often the first point of contact for individuals with mental illness due to their cultural alignment, accessibility, and community trust. According to Longkumer (2020), in states like Nagaland and Mizoram, with high tribal populations and limited mental health infrastructure, traditional practitioners often fill the care gap. Sharmistha (2024) mentioned that traditional healing practices in India are deeply rooted in the cultural and ecological diversity of its tribal communities. Spread across regions like the Eastern Ghats, Central India, the Northeast, and the Western Ghats, tribes such as the Parengi Porja, Baiga, Chuktia Bhunjia, Mizo, Mahadeo Kolis, Thakars, and Katkaris rely on shamans and indigenous knowledge systems. These practices involve the use of medicinal plants, rituals, myths, and ceremonies to address mental and physical ailments, reflecting a holistic understanding of health shaped by centuries of ethnomedical tradition.

DISCUSSION

Health is a dynamic and holistic concept influenced by genetics, environment, lifestyle choices, and access to healthcare. In India, traditional healthcare systems such as Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, and Naturopathy have been practiced for centuries and are increasingly recognized worldwide. Supported by initiatives like the Ministry of AYUSH, these systems emphasize prevention, holistic care, and overall well-being, complementing modern medicine's focus on diagnosis and treatment (Nanda, 2023). The integration of traditional and contemporary healthcare offers a more accessible, affordable, and equitable approach aimed at improving individual and community health. This integrative approach has gained significant traction in mental health care, where traditional practices focusing on the balance of mind, body, and spirit complement conventional psychiatric treatments. Techniques such as yoga, meditation, and herbal therapies are incorporated alongside modern medicine to enhance treatment outcomes, reduce side effects, and improve patient adherence. Psychotherapy in India is undergoing a transition from primarily Western models toward more culturally sensitive practices that include indigenous narratives, mythologies, and spiritual philosophies. For example, teachings from Ayurveda, Hindu scriptures like the Bhagavad Gita, and stories such as the tale of Hanuman provide valuable insights and metaphors that enrich therapeutic processes and create a safe, nonjudgmental healing environment. Philosophical concepts such as karma and nirvana offer patients comfort and meaning, further supporting mental wellness (Sharma, 2024).

Yoga, meaning to unite or yoke, has been practiced for millennia to connect individual consciousness with the universal. While its physical aspects are important, Sage Patanjali emphasized the mind as the main focus in his eight-limbed Ashtanga yoga system. Today, yoga is widely used to improve health and serves as a therapeutic tool, either alone or alongside other treatments, for various physical and mental disorders. Yoga-based interventions have demonstrated efficacy in alleviating symptoms of anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders, and substance dependence (Varambally and Gangadhar, 2016). Research from institutions like NIMHANS supports their physiological and psychological benefits. Strong evidence supports its role in lifestyle diseases and mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and psychosis.

Despite the promise of such integration, several challenges remain. The fundamental differences between the holistic, spiritual worldview of traditional healing and the biomedical, psychological focus of modern psychiatry complicate collaboration. Moreover, the lack of standardized protocols and limited rigorous scientific evidence for many conventional methods foster skepticism among healthcare providers. Regulatory, ethical, and safety concerns, communication barriers between traditional healers and modern clinicians, resource limitations, and resistance from both sides further hinder effective integration. Addressing these obstacles demands ongoing dialogue, research, education, and supportive health policies that respect cultural contexts and ensure quality care. India's rich cultural diversity, with its multitude of languages, traditions, and spiritual beliefs, deeply shapes its mental health practices. Indigenous healing systems provide essential social support and meaning that are vital to recovery. Bridging ancient wisdom and modern science through collaborative efforts promises a more inclusive, culturally relevant, and effective mental health care system. By fostering partnerships between traditional practitioners and contemporary healthcare professionals, India can continue to lead in developing holistic, personalized approaches that improve mental wellness across diverse populations (Nanda, 2023; Sharma, 2024).

In India, traditional healing practices such as Ayurveda offer specific treatments like Nasya Karma and herbal formulations that have shown promise in managing insomnia, stress, and mood disorders. Yoga-based techniques, including Yoga Nidra, a guided meditative relaxation practice, have been associated with reduced anxiety and improved emotional regulation. Beyond formal therapies, oral traditions and cultural narratives, particularly among tribal communities, continue to shape local perceptions of mental well-being and approaches to healing. Many individuals often seek help from traditional healers or spiritual guides before turning to modern clinical interventions, reflecting deep-rooted trust in indigenous knowledge systems. These practices, deeply embedded in India's diverse cultural fabric, contribute valuable social and spiritual support that complements contemporary mental health care, underscoring the need for integrative models that respect and incorporate such holistic approaches.

Implications

The implications of this study highlight the importance of integrating traditional Indian healing practices with modern mental health care to create culturally relevant and holistic treatment approaches. This integration can improve patient engagement, treatment effectiveness, and accessibility, especially in diverse communities. It also calls for increased collaboration, education, and research to address existing challenges, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and comprehensive mental health services in India and beyond.

CONCLUSION

The integration of India's traditional healing systems with modern mental health care holds immense potential to create a more holistic, culturally sensitive, and effective approach to mental wellness. India's diverse healing traditions, if systematically evaluated and ethically integrated, have the potential to enrich mental health care delivery. Policymakers and health professionals should consider inclusive frameworks that respect cultural identities while ensuring evidence-based practices. While challenges such as differing worldviews, regulatory issues, and resource constraints exist, these can be overcome through collaboration, research, and policy support. Embracing both ancient wisdom and contemporary science allows for personalized care that respects cultural diversity and enhances patient outcomes. As India continues to pioneer this integrative model, it sets a valuable example for global mental health practices that honor tradition while advancing modern therapeutic innovation.

This study has certain limitations. The limited scientific validation of some traditional methods contributes to skepticism among healthcare professionals. The vast cultural diversity and regional variations across India also suggest that a uniform integration model may not be practical.

Future research should prioritize rigorous scientific investigation to assess the safety and effectiveness of traditional healing techniques. Fostering ongoing communication and collaboration between traditional healers and modern clinicians is crucial for developing standardized and culturally appropriate treatment models. Enhancing cultural competence and integrative training for healthcare providers can improve acceptance and therapeutic outcomes. Additionally, policymakers play a key role by establishing regulatory frameworks and allocating resources to support integrative mental health initiatives.

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Minds and Traditions: Exploring India's Indigenous Healing Systems for Mental Wellness

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Conflict of Interest

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