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## 1. When The Forest Was A Pharmacy And Every Home A Dispensary

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***Dr. Maguni Charan Behera***

*Retired Professor of Tribal Studies*

[mcbehera1959@gmail.com](mailto:mcbehera1959@gmail.com)

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A National Conference on “Harvesting and Sustainable Utilisation of Medicinal Plants for Farmers and Traditional Healers” was held on 2nd and 3rd November 2025 in Bhubaneswar, organised by the Central Ayurvedic Research Institute in collaboration with Vivekananda Kendra AICYAM, Bhubaneswar. A large number of traditional practitioners and scientists of national repute participated in the event.

The panel discussion focused on the preventive aspects of health. Traditional practitioners highlighted the threats posed by deforestation, which endanger the availability of medicinal plants, and spoke about their efforts to cultivate and preserve these plants for the future. The scientists, on the other hand, discussed the activities and future plans of their formal research institutions. However, none of the speakers directly addressed the main theme of the session.

During the question–answer session, a lady scientist candidly admitted the limitations of current institutional approaches but insightfully remarked that true prevention begins with our food habits—an area where we have become slaves to the market, moving away from traditional dietary wisdom.

And perhaps, one may ask—isn’t that true?

We are told on different occasions that “*Prevention is better than cure.*” But today’s world seems to have flipped it on its head. We spend thousands curing what we could have prevented by a handful of green leaves growing wild beside our homes. In school, children are taught to memorise the periodic table and the life cycle of a frog, but not the leaf that could soothe a fever, or the root that heals a cut. They learn the formula of glucose, not the plant that keeps it in balance.

### **The Vanishing Knowledge**

In villages once upon a time, the backyard was not just a place to dry clothes; it was an herbal garden. Tulsi near the doorstep, neem behind the cowshed, turmeric drying under the sun, and aloe vera waiting quietly in a corner. Even the roadside weeds had meaning. *Guduchi* or giloy for dengue and [www.theresearchers.asia](http://www.theresearchers.asia)

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immune boosting, *gaish* for skin ailments, *bhuin anla* for respiratory issues, *apang* for dysentery, *dantun* (neem twig, etc.) for teeth, *bhringaraj* for hair, *arjun bark* for the heart, *patharchatta* or *amarpoi* (*kalanchoe pinnata*) for kidney stones; every shrub was a teacher.

Children learned not by textbooks but by imitation. They watched their mothers mixing neem leaves with turmeric paste for wounds, grandmothers boiling tulsi with black pepper for cough, and elders advising what not to eat in a particular season. That was *indigenous health education, the home remedy for many ailments*: continuous, oral, practical.

Now, what is taught in school? Chapters on chlorophyll and photosynthesis, but no mention of how chlorophyll helps cleanse blood; names of medicinal plants appear only in a paragraph under “Biodiversity Conservation”. There’s no connection between what grows under one’s nose and what keeps one healthy. And home as a traditional pharmacy and dispensary all combined together has lost curriculum!

### From Mothers to Machines

Knowledge that once flowed through mothers, grandmothers, and midwives has dried up in the nuclear family tap. The joint family, for all its quarrels and nosy elders, had one priceless function — it transmitted wisdom. The young bride learned recipes not just for food but for wellness: when to drink jeera water, how to balance the body in monsoon, what leaf cools the stomach, what paste relieves pain. The home-knowledge has shifted to market!

Now, the modern kitchen is a showroom of stainless steel and instant mixes. The mother knows how to Google symptoms, not how to recognise the bitter leaf of *chiraita* that prevents them. When illness comes, she rushes to the clinic, pays for a scan, and buys a tablet made from synthetic compounds what the forest or weeds once freely gave.

The older generation’s role has become decorative. Grandmothers, who once stored herbs in earthen pots, now store memories of them. Their hands no longer crush leaves on a stone grinde; instead they scroll on a phone screen.

### The Irony of Glorification

Ironically, the same society that dismisses indigenous wisdom glorifies it in festivals, documentaries, and tourism. A new elite vocabulary has appeared: “organic,” “eco-friendly,” “Ayurvedic.” Urban

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people buy “herbal” soaps at triple price while ignoring the neem tree outside their flat. Yoga mats made of imported cork cost more than the entire health system of a village.

This is how the proverb “*Prevention is better than cure*” becomes satire. We praise prevention but invest in cure. We celebrate turmeric latte in cafés but forget *haldi doodh* at home. We promote “Herbal India” in advertisements, but our children cannot identify ten common medicinal plants growing in the courtyard!

### Science and Its Discontents

It is not that laboratory science is wrong; it is that it forgot its roots. Indigenous knowledge is accused of being “unscientific,” yet many modern drugs have come from those very folk knowledge—quinine from bark, aspirin from willow, antibiotics from soil fungi. The village grandmother’s bitter decoction may not pass double-blind trials, but it passed something more enduring — generations of survival.

But yes, traditional knowledge also has limits. It often lacks dosage precision, can be misused, and sometimes harms when misunderstood. The tragedy is not that it was imperfect, all knowledge systems are but that it was abandoned rather than refined. Instead of integrating the lab and the leaf, we built walls between them.

### The Lost Seasons of Health

Traditional India knew that the body and the seasons were twins. Summer required cooling fruits, watermelon, cucumber, bael *sherbets* to prevent dehydration. Winter demanded heating spices, ginger, pepper, mustard oil, to keep circulation alive. The skin gets rough during winter due to insufficient Vitamin C. Citrus fruits and vegetables have Vitamin C and these fruits and vegetables grow in winter. The monsoon had its own rules of hygiene and fasting. Nature designed preventive medicine through seasonal rhythm.

Now, supermarkets have made every fruit “seasonless.” Tomatoes in summer, oranges in monsoon, strawberries in March and the body loses its dialogue with the soil! As the proverb warns us, when we ignore prevention, cure becomes the master. The cost of our ignorance appears in lifestyle diseases: diabetes, hypertension, obesity, all preventable, all cured too late. Nature grows fruits and vegetables that boost our immune, - but pizza, burger make us fatty without immune boosting which was recognised during COVID 19!

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### The Wild Classroom

If we truly believed in prevention, every school would have a *green classroom*: a patch of soil where students plant and study native herbs, record their uses, observe their seasonal cycles, and learn that the earth itself teaches biology. Let children crush tulsi and smell it, taste giloy juice and note its bitterness, draw diagrams of neem not just as a leaf but as a pharmacy.

This would be science — living, local, sustainable. It would also restore dignity to the traditional healers who were once the barefoot doctors of India. But in a world that chases grades and gadgets, prevention remains a moral slogan, not an educational vision. So, “who needs prevention when pills promise salvation”?

The hospital is the new temple, and the doctor the new priest. We go not for blessings, but for prescriptions. Our faith has shifted from plants to pills, from balance to chemical correction. The modern mind worships the cure: fast, branded, convenient.

### Cure Has a Market; Prevention Has a Memory

The problem is economic as much as cultural. Prevention doesn't sell; cure does. There's no profit in telling people to walk, breathe, and eat seasonal fruit. There's a fortune, however, in treating what the wrong lifestyle causes.

So, advertising tells us to “Live life king-size”: eat junk, skip sleep, chase success, and then depend on health insurance, hospitals, and multivitamins. Pharmacies grow bigger while the wild herbs wither unseen. The neem leaf gets replaced by imported green tea.

The satire is complete: the same person who refuses to eat bitter neem in childhood now pays for detox drinks made of kale and spinach. The plant didn't change; our attention did.

### The Disappearing Healer

Traditional practitioners such as *Vaidya, Hakim, Ojha, Dai* once stood at the centre of community health. They knew the land, the patient, the season, the temperament, and the plant. But their knowledge remained oral and unrecorded. The state did not institutionalise it, the market did not respect it, and the new generation did not inherit it.

The question at the beginning i. e. “*Is it true?*” compels us to pause and reflect, to confront the uncomfortable reality that we have indeed drifted away from our roots and become captives of the market.

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In all traditional medical systems such as Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, and various indigenous folk practices, food was regarded as the first medicine (*āhāra hi aushadha*). Health was never seen as an outcome of external treatment alone but as a daily discipline rooted in diet, environment, and moral balance. Seasonal eating, local crops, and plant-based recipes sustained not only physical health but also ecological and cultural harmony. The modern consumerist order, driven by market logic, has replaced this diversity with uniformity, convenience, and profit. The result is the rise of lifestyle diseases, loss of native crop varieties, and the erosion of self-reliant village economies.

In truth, we have moved away from the soil to the market, and now wander directionless, caught in the glittering web of consumer illusion, a *māyā* that entangles even formal knowledge. The market has become our new faith, while we have grown distant from the reality of our indigenous systems, which were once our source of pride, wisdom, and identity. The crisis is not of knowledge alone, but of disconnection between human and nature, body and spirit, tradition and science.

It is therefore not a time for one to prevail over the other, but a time to walk together. The ancient and the modern, the intuitive and the analytical, the indigenous and the institutional - all must converge into one integrated system of wellbeing. Only such a synthesis can heal both human health and ecological health, and restore the balance between knowledge and life that our civilisation once knew so well.