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Sustainable health systems development through the integration of Ayurveda and Yoga into the conventional health system of Nepal: Enhancing health equity and community well-being in Nepal.

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ABSTRACT

Background: According to a WHO report, 80% of the Nepali population relies on traditional medicinal practices for primary healthcare, particularly in rural and remote areas. The Government of Nepal has officially recognised Ayurveda, Naturopathy, Yoga, Homoeopathy, Sowa-Rigpa, and Acupuncture as part of its national traditional medicinal system. It is essential to integrate these traditional practices into the overall health system to develop sustainable healthcare solutions and improve health equity and community well-being. This narrative review aims to explore holistic healthcare approaches such as Ayurveda and Yoga integrating into Nepal's health system for sustainable health system development from a development studies perspective.

Materials and Methods: This review utilised various published literature related to Ayurveda, Yoga, and Sustainable Development Goals. Searches were conducted on platforms such as Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, DOAJ, and ScienceDirect using keywords including "Ayur-veda," "Yoga," "Ayurveda or Yoga," "Ayurveda and Yoga," "Ayurveda and Yoga for Sustainable Development Goals," and "Sustainable Development Goals." The collected data were analysed and described qualitatively.

Results and Discussion: The government of Nepal should integrate Ayurveda and Yoga into the country's health systems. This integration is an important step toward creating a sustainable healthcare system that promotes health equity and enhances community well-being. This combined model has the potential to empower individuals and communities, ensuring that health systems are inclusive, culturally relevant, and sustainable in the long term.

Conclusion: The integration of Ayurveda and Yoga helps address gaps in the formal healthcare system, particularly in promotive, preventive, and rehabilitative care for chronic diseases related to pain and stress. This approach is especially beneficial for populations residing in remote areas with limited access to western medical facilities. This integration has greatly helped to improve overall well-being by focusing on holistic health.

Keywords: Ayurveda, Yoga, Sustainable Health Systems, Community Well-being

INTRODUCTION

According to a WHO report, 80% of the Nepali population relies on traditional medicinal practices for primary healthcare, mostly in rural and remote areas.¹ In the past few years, there has been a growing interest in integrating traditional health practices into mainstream health systems to address western healthcare challenges. In Nepal, Ayurveda and Yoga, deeply rooted in our social and cultural traditions, are gaining recognition for their positive influences on health and well-being.

The United Nations General Assembly, in December 2014, officially proclaimed June 21 as

International Yoga Day, emphasising the role of Yoga in physical and mental health.² The resolution stated that Yoga supports the enhancement of physical and mental health, as well as the overall well-being of individuals. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) highlights the importance of ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all individuals at every stage of life. Integrating traditional practices such as Ayurveda and Yoga supports this goal by providing complementary methods for enhancing health and wellness. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has emphasised that traditional medicine, such as Ayurveda and Yoga, plays a crucial role in providing primary health care, particularly in countries with limited access to standard medical services.

This narrative review aims to explore the integration of holistic healthcare approaches, specifically Ayurveda and Yoga, into Nepal's health system from a development studies perspective.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This review draws on primary and secondary sources from standard academic references. It uses a doctrinal research method to attain its objectives. The review focuses primarily on qualitative data. Information from various online published literature regarding Ayurveda, Yoga, and Sustainable Development was gathered from platforms such as Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, DOAJ, and ScienceDirect. The search utilised keywords including "Ayurveda," "Yoga," "Ayurveda or Yoga," "Ayurveda and Yoga," "Ayurveda and Yoga in Sustainable Development Goals," and "Sustainable Development." The collected data were analysed and described qualitatively in this review.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ayurveda and Yoga have been central to Nepali culture and health for many centuries. Ayurveda is an ancient system of medicine in the Indian subcontinent that focuses on a holistic approach to health, balancing the body, mind, and spirit through diet, herbal remedies, and lifestyle choices.³ Yoga, which comes from ancient philosophy, emphasises physical postures, breathing exercises, and meditation to improve overall well-being.⁴

The Himalayan region has been home to many prominent proponents and sages in Ayurveda and philosophy, including the well-known sage Nagarjuna, a major philosopher in Mahayana Buddhism who also made important contributions to Ayurvedic medicine, as his teachings have inspired many Ayurvedic practitioners, emphasising that healing involves not just the body but also the mind and spirit. He is often credited with developing the concept of *śūnyatā* (emptiness).⁵

Historically, these practices have been used to prevent and treat various health issues, relying on traditional knowledge passed down through generations.⁶ In rural areas, Ayurveda has often been the main source of healthcare, especially where western medical facilities are hard to access. Traditional healers, known as *vaidyas*, play an important role by using local herbs and treatments tailored to individual needs.⁷ Different tribal communities have their own ways of practicing traditional medicine. The Tharu people use herbal remedies like margosa (*neem*) oil and turmeric for common

health problems. The Tamang community follows Tibetan medicine to keep their body's energies balanced. The Newar people cook with local spices and eat special foods during certain seasons and celebrations, showing how their health is closely connected to their culture. By using spices like turmeric, cumin, fenugreek, cloves, cinnamon, ginger, and garlic in their daily cooking, Nepali people not only improve the flavour of their meals but also support their overall health and well-being. This practice reflects a deep-rooted understanding of the medicinal properties of these ingredients, aligning with Ayurvedic traditions.

Today, Ayurveda and Yoga continue to be popular in Nepal, with increasing recognition of their benefits. The Nepali government promotes traditional medicine alongside western healthcare and has integrated these practices into national health strategies.⁸ This is evident in the establishment of Ayurveda hospitals and Yoga centres in both urban and rural areas.

Research indicates that practicing Yoga regularly can improve physical fitness, reduce stress, and enhance mental health.⁹ Ayurvedic treatments have also been shown to effectively manage chronic conditions like diabetes and hypertension.¹⁰ Moreover, younger generations are increasingly embracing Yoga and Ayurveda as holistic and preventive health options.¹¹ Largely, these days Ayurveda and Yoga have played a significant role in promoting physical, mental, and spiritual health in Nepal, providing valuable tools for well-being in a rapidly changing world.

Ayurveda: A Holistic Approach: Ayurveda emphasises balance among the body, mind, and spirit. It focuses on prevention and considers individual differences in physiology and lifestyle. Rooted in the ancient Vedic texts, it is often attributed to the sage Charaka, who states, "स्वास्थ्यं हि सर्वसिद्धिनाम्"¹² (*Svस्थ्यam hi sarva-siddhīnām*), meaning "Health is the foundation of all achievements." This highlights the essential role of health in achieving a fulfilling life.

Another prominent sage, Sushruta, known as the father of ancient surgery, emphasises the importance of balance in health: "शरीरस्य सुखदुःखं च धर्माश्रकाममोक्षतः"¹³ (*śarīrasya sukha-duḥkham ca dharmā-ārtha-kāma-mokṣataḥ*), meaning "The body is the source of pleasure and pain, essential for dharma, artha, kāma, and mokṣa." These teachings focus on Ayurveda's emphasis on prevention, personalised treatment, and the balance of physical, mental, and spiritual health, making it an ongoing approach to well-being. Ayurveda offers valuable approaches for promoting overall health and well-being:

Preventive Care: Ayurveda promotes *Dinacharya* (daily routines) and *Ritucharya* (seasonal practices) that encourage healthy living. By emphasising diet, herbal remedies, and lifestyle adjustments, Ayurveda helps prevent chronic diseases, reducing the burden on healthcare systems.¹⁴ The Charaka Samhita outlines, "सर्वं च रसा यथा"¹⁵ (*Sarvam ca rasā yathā*), meaning "All flavours should be included". This focuses on the importance of a balanced diet incorporating various tastes to ensure proper nutrition and harmony within the body.

Therapeutic interventions: Ayurveda offers a variety of treatments, including *panchakarma* (detoxification) and personalised herbal

therapies, which can manage existing conditions effectively. Studies have shown that Ayurvedic treatments can improve quality of life for patients with chronic illnesses.¹⁶ Furthermore, the use of herbal remedies and detoxification methods is integral to Ayurveda. As stated in the Ashtanga Hridaya, “द्रव्याणां गुणानां च चेष्टयाः”¹⁷ (*Dravyāṇām guṇānām ca ceṣṭyāḥ*), meaning “*The properties of substances and their actions*”, this highlights the therapeutic benefits of natural ingredients and their roles in healing.

Yoga: A Complementary Practice: Yoga is an ancient practice that combines movements, breathing exercises, and meditation to improve overall well-being. The ancient sage Patanjali, in his important work, the Yoga Sutras, encapsulates the essence of Yoga, stating, “योगश्चित्तवृत्तनिरोधः» (Yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ)¹⁸, which translates to “*Yoga is the cessation of the disturbances of the mind.*” This foundational principle highlights role of Yoga in achieving mental clarity and tranquility. Additionally, the Bhagavad Gita emphasises the importance of equanimity and self-discipline, asserting, “योगस्थः कुरु कर्मणः (Yoga-sthaḥ kuru karmāṇi)¹⁹, or “*Perform your duty equipped, O Arjuna.*” These texts not only underline the mental and spiritual benefits of Yoga but also advocate for its practice as a means to attain harmony, self-realisation, and overall health. Through these teachings, Yoga has evolved into a comprehensive discipline that nurtures both body and mind, fostering a balanced lifestyle.

In today’s fast-paced world, Yoga reduces stress, increases flexibility, and promotes mental clarity. Many people practice Yoga to find balance in their busy lives and improve their physical health. Its importance continues to grow as more individuals seek ways to enhance their physical and emotional well-being. It’s essential to understand that Yoga is not just physical exercise; it encompasses a holistic philosophy that includes breathing techniques, meditation, and ethical practices. Adding Yoga to one’s daily routine provides many health benefits:

Stress Reduction: Regular Yoga practice has been shown to lower stress and anxiety, which are major causes of chronic diseases. A study by Khalsa²⁰ found that Yoga can improve mental health outcomes, leading to lower healthcare costs associated with stress-related conditions.

Physical Health: Yoga enhances physical fitness, flexibility, and strength, contributing to better overall health. This can reduce the incidence of lifestyle-related diseases, further alleviating pressure on health systems.²¹

Sustainable Health Systems: Sustainable health systems are designed to provide equitable, efficient, and high-quality healthcare while minimising environmental impact. These systems focus not only on treating illness but also on preventing disease and promoting overall well-being. Integrating traditional practices like Ayurveda and Yoga can enhance the sustainability of health systems through their promotive, preventive, curative, and rehabilitative care. Sustainable health systems are defined by their ability to provide comprehensive, equitable, and affordable healthcare while adapting to changing health needs.²² Ayurveda and Yoga provide ways to prevent and treat health issues, which can help make health systems more sustainable by decreasing the

need for medications and tackling health inequalities.

Former Nepali Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal ‘Prachanda’ emphasised the significance of traditional medicine for health and well-being. He stated, “Ayurveda and other traditional healing practices are vital for our cultural identity and play a significant role in achieving holistic health. He announced that hospitals, wellness clinics, and Yoga and meditation centres will be established to promote health tourism, with a policy decision already in place.²³ Similarly, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi remarked, “Ayurveda and Yoga are not just practices; they are a way of life that promote holistic well-being and harmony with nature. By embracing these ancient traditions, we can pave the way for a healthier and more balanced future for all.^{24,25,26} These perspectives highlight the potential benefits of integrating Ayurveda and Yoga into western health practices to enhance overall wellness. By incorporating these traditions into health systems, the following advantages can be realised:

Reduced Healthcare Costs: Promotive and preventive care can lower the frequency of hospital visits and the need for expensive medical treatments. A focus on lifestyle and prevention can lead to healthier populations.²⁷

Environmental Impact: Ayurveda often uses locally sourced herbs and natural treatments, minimising the ecological footprint associated with pharmaceuticals. Yoga practices encourage a lifestyle that promotes environmental consciousness.

Community Engagement: Both Ayurveda and Yoga emphasise community and collective well-being. Community-based programs can foster healthier environments, leading to sustainable health practices.^{28,29}

Integrating Ayurveda and Yoga can potentially address social determinants of health and improve health equity. Community-based programs that incorporate these practices can reduce health disparities by making health care more accessible and culturally relevant.^{30,31} Incorporating both into sustainable health systems offers promising preventive and therapeutic options. By focusing on holistic health, these practices enhance individual well-being and contribute to the overall sustainability of healthcare systems. By combining these holistic practices with western healthcare, we can enhance community well-being, address health disparities, and create a more resilient health infrastructure that serves the diverse needs of Nepal’s population. This collaborative model has the potential to empower individuals and communities, ensuring that health systems are inclusive, culturally relevant, and sustainable in the long term.

Key considerations for integrating Ayurveda and Yoga into sustainable Nepalese health system development: Integrating Ayurveda and Yoga into the Nepalese health system presents a unique opportunity to enhance healthcare delivery while honouring the country’s rich cultural heritage. These practices, deeply rooted in our traditions, can foster a more holistic approach to health and well-being. Here are key considerations for successfully integrating these ancient systems into the western health framework:

Socio-Cultural Impacts: The integration of Ayurveda and Yoga

aligns with the socio-cultural fabric of Nepal, where these practices are historically embedded. Their incorporation into the health system not only respects cultural traditions but also provides a platform for culturally competent care.³²

Economic Considerations: Integrating the existing traditional practices into the healthcare system can be a cost-effective strategy. Ayurveda and Yoga provide preventive care that can lower long-term health expenses and further help ease pressure on formal healthcare services.

Policy Implications: For successful integration, supportive policies are needed. The Nepali government should consider including Ayurveda and Yoga in national health strategies and provide funding and resources to support these practices.³³

Integrating Ayurveda and Yoga into Nepali health systems is a crucial step toward creating sustainable healthcare that improves health equity and community well-being. These programs have shown positive results, particularly in community engagement and health improvements.³⁴ Research indicates that Ayurveda and Yoga programs have enhanced access to healthcare for marginalised communities by providing affordable and culturally appropriate solutions.³⁵ In recent research, Basnet³⁶ highlights the significant benefits of community-based programs that integrate Ayurveda and Yoga. This study underscores how these programs enhance overall well-being by fostering physical fitness, mental health, positive lifestyle choices, and community cohesion. The findings illustrate Yoga's transformative potential in shaping individual and collective well-being through self-awareness, resilience, and connection among participants. Community-based programs that combine Ayurveda and Yoga have significantly improved overall well-being by promoting preventive, curative, and rehabilitative care, and ultimately holistic health. Participants in a previous study responded with better physical health, mental well-being, and increased social cohesion.³⁷

CONCLUSION

The integration fills gaps in the formal health system, particularly in promotive, preventive, and rehabilitative care for pain and stress-related chronic diseases. It is especially beneficial for populations living in remote areas where access to western medical facilities is limited. This approach has greatly helped to enhance overall well-being by emphasising holistic health, thereby contributing to the development of a sustainable health system in Nepal.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Incorporating Ayurveda and Yoga can enhance access to care for marginalised populations, promoting a holistic approach to health and fostering sustainable health outcomes. Future policies should prioritise the support and expansion of these integrative practices within the national health framework. Ayurveda hospitals, wellness facilities, and Yoga and meditation centres should be established to enhance and promote health and wellness tourism in Nepal.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

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