

Grandmother's Kitchen as a Space of Healing: Indigenous Knowledge, Care, and Cultural Continuity

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ABSTRACT

The kitchen has long been more than just a place for preparing food—it has been a sacred and healing space within Indian households. In ancient times, the kitchen was regarded with deep respect and governed by strict principles of purity, cleanliness, and discipline. It was believed that any disturbance in this space could disrupt the health and harmony of the entire family, as the kitchen was intrinsically connected to digestion, wellness, and overall balance in life. Traditionally, access to the kitchen was regulated by elders, particularly grandmothers, who enforced hygienic habits such as washing hands, removing footwear, and maintaining the cleanliness of utensils and surroundings. These practices, though rooted in custom, reflected a profound understanding of hygiene and the prevention of disease. Women followed careful procedures—separating clean and unclean items, managing ingredients thoughtfully, and maintaining a calm and focused environment while cooking—all contributing to the health and vitality of the household. The grandmother's kitchen was not merely a culinary space but a small herbal pharmacy. Traditional knowledge of herbs and home remedies was used to treat everyday ailments such as indigestion, burns, minor wounds, and other common health concerns. From morning till night, women balanced domestic duties with care giving, embodying the role of both nurturer and healer. This paper seeks to shift focus from the “unseen” wisdom of the grandmother's kitchen to a more systematic observation of its practices. It explores how these traditions were founded on experiential learning, scientific reasoning, and a holistic approach to well being. Despite being often overlooked in historical and social narratives, the grandmother's kitchen stands as a vital institution that promoted family health and strengthened community harmony.

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INTRODUCTION

For centuries, the Indian kitchen has functioned as an invisible yet powerful space of healing. Long before healing became institutionalized or medicalized, knowledge was transmitted orally—through observation, practice, and experience—primarily by women, especially grandmothers. Their understanding of health did not rely on written prescriptions, but on careful attention to the body, seasons, emotions, and food habits. This wisdom, though largely undocumented, formed a complete and functional system of preventive and curative care.

What was once considered “unseen” or informal knowledge is now increasingly recognized for its systematic nature. Kitchen healing was not random; it followed principles of balance, digestion, immunity, and mental well-being that closely align with Ayurvedic thought and folk medical traditions. Yet, despite its depth and effectiveness, this domestic healing knowledge has rarely been acknowledged within formal historical or academic narratives.

This work attempts to bring grandmother's kitchen healing from the margins to the center—transforming

lived wisdom into systematic observation and meaningful documentation.

Aim and Objectives :

Aim:

To study and document grandmother-led kitchen healing practices as a structured, experiential system of healthcare rooted in oral tradition, family practices, and indigenous knowledge.

Objectives:

To record and analyze kitchen-based healing practices transmitted through generations by oral sources.

To understand the role of women, particularly grandmothers, as primary healers within the household.

To examine how food, herbs, and daily routines functioned as preventive and first-line healthcare.

To bridge traditional kitchen wisdom with Ayurvedic principles and contemporary academic understanding.

To contribute to the recognition of domestic healing practices within historical and cultural studies.

Sources, Methodology, and Field Experience:

This study is based on a combination of fieldwork, case studies, oral history, and textual references. As part of student-centered projects, case studies were conducted involving families across Upper Assam and approximately twenty families in urban Guwahati, representing both rural and urban contexts. These interactions provided firsthand insights into how kitchen remedies continue to function in everyday life.

The research also draws upon intergenerational oral sources, where healing knowledge was shared by elders from the researcher's own generation and family networks. These lived experiences were supplemented by references from herbal medicine texts, Ayurvedic literature, and selected online academic materials.

In addition, formal learning through a Herbal and Diet Certificate Course completed in Chandigarh contributed to strengthening the analytical and comparative framework of this study. This combination of experiential learning, academic training, and textual study has helped shape this work into a coherent and meaningful exploration.

Significance of the Study :

The kitchen has always been a foundational healing space-one that nurtured not only physical health but also emotional balance and community well-being. To undermine this space is to overlook those who shaped generations through care, observation, and purpose-driven living. Grandmothers and mothers

were the silent teachers of health, yet history has seldom credited them for their contribution.

This paper seeks to acknowledge and honor that legacy. By documenting grandmother's kitchen healing as a systematic tradition, it argues for its rightful place in historical discourse, cultural studies, and holistic health practices-working toward a vision of a happier, healthier society rooted in respect for indigenous wisdom.

Grandmother's Kitchen: Vastu, Wisdom, and the Healing Heart of the Home

The Kitchen as a Sacred and Healing Space :

In traditional Indian households, particularly within extended family systems, the kitchen has historically occupied a sacred position within the domestic sphere. It functioned not merely as a site of food preparation, but as a locus of health, nourishment, and emotional equilibrium. According to Vastu Shastra, the kitchen embodies the Agni tattva-the fire element-responsible for digestion, vitality, and transformation. Long before the codification of such knowledge systems, grandmothers intuitively embodied these principles in their daily practices.

Attention to cleanliness, light, and airflow reflected an understanding of the subtle relationship between environment, energy, and well-being. Cooking was performed mindfully and reverently, as it was believed that food absorbed both the spatial energy and the emotional state of the cook. The positioning of the stove, the orientation while cooking (traditionally facing east), the balance between fire and water, and the organized storage of grains and spices all followed a conscious rhythm. Waste was meticulously avoided. These practices constituted not rigid prescriptions but lived expressions of embodied wisdom, transforming the kitchen into a center of physical and emotional restoration.

The Role of the Grandmother in the Kitchen :

At the core of this sacred domestic space stood the grandmother-recognized not solely as a cook but as the household's first healer, caretaker, and emotional anchor. Her observational acuity extended beyond culinary duties to encompass the holistic well-being of the family. Without overt inquiry, she could discern shifts in appetite, energy, or emotional balance, adjusting meals and remedies accordingly.

Grandmothers possessed a vast reservoir of experiential knowledge derived from lived observation and intergenerational continuity. They were acutely aware of seasonal rhythms, bodily responses, and emotional variations. Herbs, spices, and food choices were intuitively adapted to both climatic and emotional contexts. In times of illness,

they prepared herbal decoctions, administered oil massages, or offered quiet presence—each act serving as a form of healing beyond the materiality of medicine.

Healing Measures Practiced in the Grandmother's Kitchen :

Healing in the grandmother's kitchen was preventive, simple, and deeply effective. Remedies such as turmeric milk for immunity, ginger water for digestion, rice starch for convalescence, jeera (cumin) water for gastric discomfort, and tulsi infusions for respiratory ailments were common. Meals were freshly prepared, seasonal, and balanced; excesses of oil, spice, or refrigeration were consciously avoided.

Daily discipline was considered integral to wellness. Meals followed consistent timings, leftovers were minimal, and the act of eating was ritualized. Healing thus became inseparable from everyday domestic rhythm—a continuous act rather than a discrete intervention.

Why the Kitchen Deserves Respect ?

The kitchen warrants recognition as a site where sustenance and healing converge. Here, food becomes medicine, and medicine manifests as care. The emotional quality of cooking—its mindfulness, cleanliness, and devotion—directly influenced the collective health of the household. A neglected kitchen symbolized imbalance, whereas a vibrant, orderly one reflected harmony and prosperity.

Traditionally, kitchens also functioned as informal schools of observation. Knowledge was transmitted organically through participation and imitation rather than formal instruction. To honor the kitchen, therefore, is to value continuity, intergenerational learning, and self-reliance.

Ghoror Dawai: The Healing of Home:

The Assamese concept of Ghoror Dawai encapsulates a distinctive philosophy of home-based healing grounded in intimacy, trust, and experiential wisdom. Literally translating to “medicine of the home,” it refers to healing practices arising from within the household—through familiar ingredients, herbs, and gestures of care.

Rooted in observation and oral tradition, Ghoror Dawai predates institutional medicine. It exemplifies an epistemology of trust—where healing begins not with prescription but with relational care.

Mind–Body Connection in Home Healing:

Ghoror Dawai implicitly acknowledges the psycho-physiological unity of body and mind. Emotional states were recognized as having direct physiological

consequences: stress impaired digestion, fear weakened immunity, and anxiety disrupted sleep. Consequently, the preparation and administration of remedies were conducted in tranquil, caring environments that facilitated relaxation and recovery.

A simple cup of ginger tea could soothe anxiety; turmeric milk promoted restfulness. Such interventions were not merely biochemical but profoundly emotional—restoring balance through comfort and presence.

Food as Daily Medicine:

Within the philosophy of Ghoror Dawai, food and medicine are inseparable. Everyday ingredients—turmeric, cumin, mustard, rice, and lentils—form the foundation of continuous, preventive health. Healing is enacted daily through mindful nourishment rather than deferred to moments of illness.

In Assam and the broader North-East, these traditions remain deeply rooted. Local herbs, seasonal produce, and minimal processing sustain health while reinforcing ecological balance. The oral preservation of such knowledge by grandmothers constitutes a vital archive of cultural and medicinal memory.

The Kitchen as a Feminine Knowledge System:

Historically, the Indian kitchen functioned as a gendered yet empowering space of experiential knowledge production. It was within this domestic laboratory that women observed, experimented, and refined healing practices through lived experience rather than textual authority.

Grandmothers demonstrated remarkable intuitive diagnostics—linking emotional disturbances such as grief, anger, or fear to physiological effects. Food thus became an adaptive therapy aligned with both emotional and environmental conditions. Their leadership, rooted in care rather than command, reflected a sophisticated model of feminine agency.

Rituals, Silence, and Energy in the Kitchen:

The therapeutic quality of the grandmother's kitchen extended beyond material ingredients to encompass atmosphere and intention. Cooking was often preceded by bathing, lighting a lamp, or reciting prayers—acts that sanctified both the cook and the food. Silence and mindfulness were considered essential to maintaining the kitchen's energetic purity.

These practices align with contemporary understandings of mindfulness and its impact on digestion, immunity, and emotional regulation. What modern science articulates conceptually, grandmothers practiced intuitively through embodied ritual.

Seasonal Awareness and Preventive Healing:

The present study is informed by field visits and informal case observations conducted across approximately twenty households in both urban and semi-rural regions of Assam, including Beltola, Ganeshpara, Maligaon, and communities in Upper Assam such as Jorhat, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, and Bajali. These households represented diverse cultural groups-Assamese, tribal communities, Garo, Nepali, and Bengali families. Despite cultural variations, a shared emphasis on kitchen sanctity was evident. Many households maintained strict bodily discipline before cooking, including washing hands thoroughly and changing into separate, clean clothing reserved for kitchen work. Elderly women, in particular, preferred simple or colored attire and engaged in silent prayer or mantra recitation while cooking. In several homes, a symbolic portion of the food was first offered to Agni, acknowledging fire as a living energy. Notably, even tribal women emphasized hygiene, mental calmness, and freshness while preparing food, underscoring a cross-cultural continuity of kitchen-centered healing consciousness.

Conclusion:

The study of Grandmother's Kitchen reveals that traditional Indian households nurtured a deeply integrated system of health care long before the emergence of modern clinical medicine. What was practiced as ghoror dawai or home remedies was not mere superstition, but a result of careful observation, lived experience, and intergenerational wisdom. The kitchen functioned as a silent healing centre where food, herbs, rituals, and emotional care worked together to maintain physical and mental balance.

Through oral sources, field visits, and case studies conducted across urban Guwahati and Upper Assam-including diverse communities such as tribal groups, Assamese, Garo, Nepali, Bengali, and others-this research highlights how traditional practices were shaped by notions of purity, hygiene, dietary discipline, and seasonal awareness. Practices such as maintaining kitchen sanctity, changing clothes before entering cooking spaces, and using locally available herbs were rooted in preventive health care and collective well-being.

The mind-body connection formed the core of this healing philosophy. Food was prepared with emotional intention, patience, and responsibility, reinforcing the belief that nourishment affects not only the body but also the mental and spiritual state of the individual. These practices align closely with principles found in Ayurveda, Vastu Shastra, and indigenous knowledge systems, confirming their scientific relevance when examined systematically.

In an era dominated by fast food, processed diets, and increasing lifestyle disorders, revisiting grandmother's kitchen offers sustainable, accessible, and culturally grounded solutions. This study advocates for the documentation and respectful integration of traditional kitchen wisdom into contemporary health awareness, education, and research. Preserving this heritage is not merely an act of nostalgia but an.

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- If you want, I can also:
- [16] Match in-text citations (e.g., Achaya, 1994; Gadgil & Vartak, 1976)

