

Short Communication

Some Folklore Medicines of the Sonowal Kachari tribe of Upper Assam, North East India

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Abstract: The present paper documents the use of medicinal plants in the folklore medicine of the Sonowal Kachari tribe of Assam. Intensive field research was conducted during January-February' 2014 in two Sonowal Kachari inhabited villages - Boiragimath Kachari gaon and Puroi Bhorali in Dibrugarh district. Personal interviews and in-depth discussions were held with the traditional healers to generate information on medicinal plants used in the treatment of various diseases. A total of 21 medicinal plants belonging to 18 families were recorded along with their local names, parts used, method of medicine preparation and administration. Further pharmacological studied of the documented medicinal plants may lead to the discovery and development of new drugs to treat human diseases.

Keywords: Sonowal Kachari, Traditional knowledge, Medicinal plants, Assam, North East India

INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, human beings have traditionally been relying on medicinal plants for treating various diseases. Many indigenous communities have a long-standing history of folklore medicine. They use medicinal plants that are mostly locally available, easily accessible and often cost effective in their traditional health care system. The traditional knowledge (TK) of medicinal plants and their properties have been generated over centuries based on trial and error method, belief and observations and have been orally transmitted from generation to generation. North East (NE) India, which is an important part of the Indo-Myanmar biodiversity hotspot, is one of the richest repositories of medicinal plants in the world. As such Assam, one of the 8 NE Indian states, is endowed with a wide variety of medicinal plant wealth. The state has 23 notified tribal communities with diverse cultural traditions and rich heritage of ethnomedicine. So far significant reports on the ethnomedicinal use of plants by the Mikir, Deori, Bodo, Tai Khamyang and Dimasa tribes of Assam have been published [1-5].

The Sonowal Kacharis are one of the aboriginal tribes of Assam predominantly inhabiting the upper Assam districts of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia; and sparsely in the districts of Dhemaji, Golaghat, Jorhat, Lakhimpur and Sivasagar. They are a scheduled tribe (plains) with a total population of 235,881. Since time immemorial, the Sonowal Kacharis have been using a number of locally available medicinal plants to prepare herbal medicines to cure different ailments. Thus,

indicating a strong linkage between environment and health. The present study attempts to document some of the traditional phytotherapies of the tribe, and to provide base-line data for further exploration and scientific study of medicinal plants. It is hoped that, the data contained in this paper will be a useful lead for further drug discovery process.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The present study was conducted during January-February' 2014 in two Sonowal Kachari inhabited villages viz. *Boiragimath Kachari gaon* and *Puroi Bhorali* located in Dibrugarh West Revenue Circle, Dibrugarh district, Assam. Extensive personal interviews and in-depth discussions were held with the traditional healers, who possess vast knowledge on medicinal plants. Data on the use of different medicinal plants - their local names; part/s used; form of usage (fresh/dried); methods of medicine preparation; mode of administration and disease treated were recorded. Plant species were identified and verified with the help of standard literatures on local flora [6-7]. The documented plants are arranged alphabetically disease wise along with their family and local names, parts used as well as method of preparation and administration of the drugs. Verbal consent of the knowledge holders was taken during the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study documented 21 medicinal plant species belonging to 18 families (Table 1) used for treating 13 different types of human

diseases/conditions. Caesalpinaceae, Euphorbiaceae and Liliaceae are represented by two species each; the rest of the 15 families are represented by one plant species each. Leaves were found to be the most frequently used plant part in the preparation of medicine. Stem, whole plant, fruit, seeds, roots, bark and latex are the other plant parts suitably used for remedy preparation. It was observed that most of the preparations include the combination of two or more plant species. They are crushed to a paste when applied externally or topically

(9 species); squeezed for juice (2 species), made decoction in combination with water (6 species) as well as cooked as vegetable (4 species) when taken internally. Dose regimen is determined by the type of disease and its severity. Most of the medicinal plants reported in the study were collected fresh from natural habitats just before use; while some were found to be used in dried form. Fresh materials are preferred to dry ones as they contain volatile oils, the concentration of which could deteriorate on drying [8].

Table 1: Medicinal plants used by the Sonowal Kacharis in their traditional system of medicine

Disease treated	Botanical name; family	Local name	Part/s used	Mode of use
Arthritis and Rheumatic pain	<i>Crataeva roxburghii</i> R.Br.; Capparidaceae	<i>Borun goch</i>	Leaves	Fresh leaves are made into a thick paste and tied over the painful places with cloth till relief
	<i>Croton tiglium</i> Linn.; Euphorbiaceae	<i>Konibih</i>	Leaves	
	<i>Zanthoxylum hamiltonianum</i> Wall.; Rutaceae	<i>Teezmoi</i>	Leaves	
	<i>Tinospora malabarica</i> (Lam) Miers.; Menispermaceae	<i>Soguni lota</i>	Leaves, stem	Fresh leaves and stem paste is applied over the painful places
Bone fracture	<i>Cissus quadrangularis</i> Linn.; Vitaceae	<i>Harjura</i>	Whole plant	Paste of the whole plant is plastered over the fractured bone with banana leaf for 8-10 hours daily for 1 week. Thin bamboo sticks are used to hold the medicine and the affected area intact
Carbuncle	<i>Litsea salicyfolia</i> Roxb.; Lauraceae	<i>Dighloti</i>	Leaves	Crude paste of fresh leaves is applied over the affected area for 3-4 days and bandaged to prevent infections
	<i>Melastoma malabathricum</i> Linn.; Melastomaceae	<i>Phutuka</i>	Young leaves	
	<i>Rubus moluccanus</i> Linn.; Rosaceae	<i>Jetulipoka</i>	Leaf buds	
Chronic dysentery	<i>Piper longum</i> Linn.; Piperaceae	<i>Pipoli</i>	Dried fruit	Fresh leaf buds and the other plant parts are simply cooked with 2/3 <i>goroi</i> fish (<i>Channa punctatus</i>) and taken as curry
	<i>Plantago ovate</i> Forsk.; Plantaginaceae	<i>Singapat</i>	Seeds	
	<i>Ricinus communis</i> Linn.; Euphorbiaceae	<i>Era goch</i>	Leaf buds	
Constipation, upset stomach and stomach pain	<i>Asparagus racemosus</i> Willd.; Liliaceae	<i>Sotmool</i>	Roots	To increase bowel movements root juice extract of <i>A. racemosus</i> is regularly prescribed Infusion of fresh or dried plant parts mixed with salt is administered once daily in empty stomach for at least 1 week
	<i>Natsiatum herpeticum</i> Buch.-Ham.; Icacinaceae	<i>Oupat</i>	Young shoots	
	<i>Opuntia dillenii</i> Haw.; Cactaceae	<i>Nagphena</i>	Twigs, fruits	
	<i>Plumbago zeylanica</i> Linn.; Plumbaginaceae	<i>Boga agechita</i>	Roots	
	<i>Smilax macrophylla</i> Roxb.; Liliaceae	<i>Tikoni-borua</i>	Leaves	
Eczema, Skin infections	<i>Cassia tora</i> Linn.; Caesalpinaceae	<i>Bilokhoni</i>	Leaves	7/9 fresh leaves are ground to a paste and applied externally to the affected area for 3-5 days
High blood pressure	<i>Clerodendrum colebrookianum</i> Walp.; Verbenaceae	<i>Nephaphu</i>	Leaves	Tender leaves are steam cooked with garlic or fried and eaten as vegetable
Indigestion	<i>Alstonia scholaris</i> (L) R. Br.; Apocynaceae	<i>Chotiana</i>	Bark, latex	Decoction prepared with salt and black pepper is taken once daily in empty stomach
	<i>Cassia fistula</i> Linn.; Caesalpinaceae	<i>Sonaru</i>	Leaves, root	
Liver and Urinary trouble	<i>Averrhoa bilimbi</i> Linn.; Averrhoaceae	<i>Rohdoi</i>	Fruit	Juice of fresh fruits is taken 2-3 times a day regularly for 7-10 days

The elderly healers are the principal knowledge holders and are the primary means of knowledge transmission. Some of the medicinal plants were found to be grown by the knowledge holders in their home gardens (*Bari*). This is an important aspect of the TK of the people in preserving the plant genetic resource. Utilization of the medicinal plants from the natural environment is solely based on ethnomedical needs. The selective and judicious use of bioresource provides enough breathing space to the plant species to grow and propagate. This nature based TK has been responsible for maintaining the man-nature equilibrium and sustainable use of bioresources. Tribal societies of Assam and other parts of NE India harbor huge information on the traditional use of several important medicinal plants which can be further studied for their phytochemical/pharmacological properties. The findings can be instrumental in discovery and development of new bioactive compounds and drugs to treat diseases. Moreover, scientific studies of their TK vis-à-vis medicinal plants knowledge are essential for management strategies aimed at sustainable development and biodiversity conservation.

CONCLUSION

The present study reveals the rich TK of medicinal plants usage among the Sonowal Kacharis. However, there is a serious threat to the folklore medical practice of the people from the increasing influence of globalization, modern education and economic changes. This has made the younger generation, in particular, reluctant to learn and continue

their traditional folklore medicines. Hence, to preserve their oral tradition more comprehensive documentation and scientific studies of the ethnomedical knowledge needs to be conducted.

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