

Traditional Phytotherapy among the Nath People of Assam

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ABSTRACT The present paper documents the wealth of 62 medicinal plant species used by the indigenous Nath community of Assam in different types of health treatment. The botanical name, family name, vernacular name, parts used and their application has been provided in the present paper. Out of 62 plants studied, parts of 8 (13%) plants are found to be used in snakebite, 7 (11.3%) are in asthma, 6 (9.6%) in jaundice, 5 (8.0%) each in dropsy and gynecological problems, 3 (4.8%) each in piles, elephantiasis, bronchitis, rheumatism, 2 (3.2%) in leprosy, one (1.6%) each in cancer, pneumonia, paralysis, hysteria, pharyngitis and the rest for curing different other ailments like ulcer, skin disease, fever etc. The present documentation can be used for the betterment of human society.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional medicine include all kinds of folk medicine, unconventional medicine and indeed any kind of therapeutic method that had been handed down by the tradition of a community or ethnic group. It is customary to find all kinds of practices grouped under the common heading 'traditional medicines' - mainly because they do not emanate from the biomedical paradigm. The medical traditions in the traditional system are diverse in their historical background, theoretical logic and practices, their contemporary social realities and their dynamics (Bhasin, 2007). The traditional health care system of 80% population of the developing world is still dependent on their surrounding vegetation/ forests and pastures. They rely on medicinal plants because of their effectiveness, lack of modern healthcare alternatives and cultural preferences (Caniago and Siebert, 1998). Nichter (1994) has focused on the approach by which this health care system of different ethnic communities can be documented. Northeast India, which is known for its rich bioresources and ethnocultural diversity, is also a source of various medicinal plants to various ethnic communities. It has a valuable heritage of herbal remedies. Its rural people and tribals living in remote/forest areas still depend to a great extent on the indigenous systems of medicine and cultivation. A wide range of plants with ethnomedicinal value against some very important diseases have been reported but much larger numbers of folk medicines have remained

endemic to certain tribal pockets in North East India. Various works have been undertaken to document different types of medicinal plants used by various ethnic groups in all over India (Negi et al., 2002; Patil and Bhaskar, 2006; Prakasha and Krishnappa, 2006; Varaprasad and Gangadharam, 2006) and also in North east India (Medhi, 1995; Medhi and Paul, 2004; Dutta and Dutta, 2005; Bhardwaj and Gakhar, 2005; Kala, 2005; Das and Tag, 2006) to mention a few. The beliefs, practices and treatment of various diseases by different communities inhabiting in this part of India help us to understand the human nature relationship from its long past. Each and every community has developed their individual device to cure various illnesses and in this context they take the help of different kind of plants available in their surrounding environment. Though understanding the vast experiences of different health care system by documenting the different plant species has been carried out at different intervals but most of the works were concentrated among the tribal communities inhabiting different geographical regions. Very few studies have been conducted among the caste populations of India who also have developed such ethnomedical practices in conjunction with the age old interaction with the nature. The present study is thus an attempt to document different plant varieties used by the Nath community of Assam in different kinds of health treatment. Standard anthropological methods have been applied to document the same. Information was gathered using a semistructured questionnaire on type of ailments

cured by the traditional use of medicinal plants and plant parts. The data were cross checked with respondents from different age classes as there is not a single medicine man available in the present investigated area. Identification of the plants was done with the help of standard literature.

The People and the Location

The present study was carried out among the Nath community of Raja Mayang village lying between 26°12' – 26°15' N latitude and 90°2' – 90°5' E longitude under Morigaon district, Assam. The village is situated near the Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary and as a matter of fact the villagers use to collect most of the medicinal plants from the Sanctuary itself. Earlier the village was known for its various black magical rites. The Nath people are regarded as Other Backward Community under Indian constitution. They also referred themselves as Yogi. They think that they are the descendents of Lord Shiva. They are patriarchal by nature and have two (*gotras*) clans namely *Siva* and *Kashyap* (Guha, 2003). They practice caste endogamy and clan exogamy. They speak Assamese and use Assamese scripts. They are mainly distributed in the Kamrup and Barpeta districts but they can also be found scattered in Morigaon and all over Brahmaputra valley.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the study area documentation of only 62 plant species belonging to 35 families for their medicinal value was possible. The different plants which have been documented during the present investigation along with their mode of use in different health treatment by the Nath community is being depicted in the table number 1. Among these plants the *compositae* family is mostly used by the villagers. These plant species are generally used by most of the villagers as there is not a single traditional healer left out in this village and they don't have any formalized or therapeutic institution. The women are found to be more familiar with the use of various medicinal plants. It is apparent that the community is rich in ethnomedicinal knowledge and the knowledge is being transmitted from generation to generation. It has been found that some individuals have become specialized to prepare the medicines from this plants owing to prolong practical experience. As the economy of the village is not well enough,

so they prefer herbal treatment in comparison to allopathic treatment. Their medicinal use is preventive in nature and most of these plants are said to improve immunity to the diseases and capacity to convalesce. Apart from this, the phytotherapy is used to treat various types of diseases, ailments, injuries and pains. It has been found that the Nath people apply their traditional knowledge of different medicinal plants to cure as simple as cold and fever to as complicated as cancer. It is interesting to note that the roots and leaves of *Catharanthus roseus* are used as anti carcinogenic medicine. Other major ailments which are treated by the medicinal plants include leprosy, jaundice, dropsy, pneumonia, asthma, elephantiasis, piles, hysteria, malaria, bronchitis, pharyngitis and rheumatism. The highest numbers of plants are found to be used against snakebite. Several parts of a plant such as roots, leaves, flowers, seeds, tubers, stems are used as medicine. The different parts of plants used by this community according to their preference are being presented in the figure number 1. Among the different parts of the documented plants they utilise the leaves mostly (43%), followed by roots (28%), some times the whole plant (17%), seeds (4%), flowers (4%), stems (2%), tubers (1%) and fruits (1%).

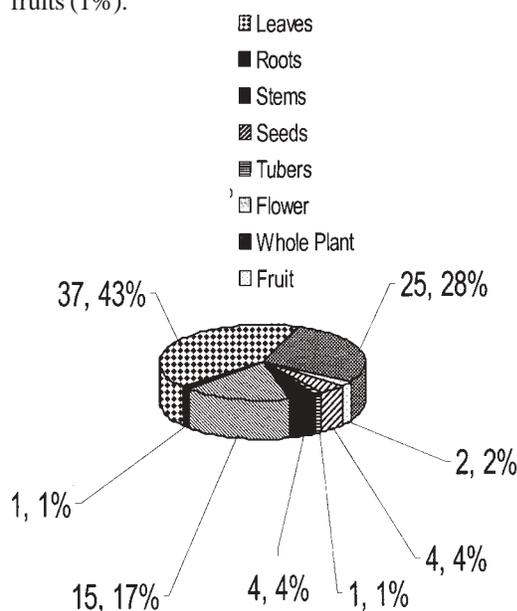


Fig.1. Different parts of the documented plants used by the Nath community according to their preference.

Table 1: Use of different plant species by the Nath community in their health treatment.

S. No.	Plant species	Family	Vernacular name	Part used	Application
1	<i>Ageratum conyzoides</i> Linn.	Compositae	<i>Gondhuabon</i>	Leaves/ Roots	The juice is used in cut or injuries. It has healing properties.
2	<i>Alternanthera sessilis</i> R. Br.	Amaranthaceae	<i>Matikaduri</i>	Leaves	Juice used for growth of hair and stomach trouble. Given to mother to increase the flow of milk after birth.
3	<i>Amaranthus spinosus</i> Linn.	Amaranthaceae	<i>Hatikhutora</i>	Roots/ Stems	Used as antidote against snake-bite, given to cow to increase the flow of milk, root is good for menorrhagia, gonorrhoea.
4	<i>Amaranthus viridis</i> Linn.	Amaranthaceae	<i>Khutora</i>	Stem/ Leaves	Stem is used as antidote against snakebite. Leaves good against scorpion sting.
5	<i>Argemone maxicana</i> Linn.	Papaverceae	<i>Sialkatahi</i>	Roots/ Seeds	Used in leprosy, scabies, and syphilis, in gonorrhoea. Seed smoke in toothache and carriage. Oil is used as purgative and illuminating. Seed latex is used in dropsy, jaundice, cutaneous affections, healing of ulcers, herpes, skin diseases. Also used as antidote against snakebite.
6	<i>Argyrea speciosa</i> Sweet.	Convolvulaceae	<i>Takoria alu</i>	Leaves/ Tuber	Paste of the leaves, latex is used in small boil to suppress. Tuber is contraceptive. Also used in skin diseases.
7	<i>Artemisia vulgaris</i> Linn.	Compositae	<i>Chirota</i>	Leaves	Juice as blood purifier. Used against worm troubles, asthmatics trouble, brain disorder and nervous affections.
8	<i>Asparagus racemosus</i> Willd	Liliaceae	<i>Satamul</i>	Roots	Roots are used as demulcents; diuretic, prepared medicated oil is good for rheumatic pain, nervous disorder. Also useful in dyspepsia, diarrhea and dysentery.
9	<i>Bonnaya reptans</i> Spreng	Scrophulariaceae	<i>Kasidoria</i>	Leaves	Roasted leaves in banana leaves are used for cold bite and cut injuries.
10	<i>Bryophyllum pinnatum</i> Kuntz.	Crassulaceae	<i>Dupartenga</i>	Leaves	Leaves are useful in wounds, bruises, boils, jaundice, snakebite, dysentery, urinary trouble and quick healing of wounds.
11	<i>Calotropis gigantea</i> (L) R.Br.	Asclepidaceae	<i>Akon</i>	Roots/leaves/ flower	Heated leaves are in sprain and pain. Flowers are considered as digestive remedy for cough, asthma, and cold. Root bark is used in dysentery; cough, skin disease, cutaneous affection, and elephantiasis. Juice as purgative and good for tooth ace.
12	<i>Cannabis sativa</i> Linn.	Cannabinaceae	<i>Bhang</i>	Leaves/ flower	Dried flower used medicinally as sedative, analgesic, narcotic.
13	<i>Capsella larsa-pastoris</i> Medic.	Brassicaceae	<i>Gongamoola</i>	Seed	Seed oil is used as anti-scorbutic in dropsy. Used as astringent in diarrhea, and as diuretic in dropsy.
14	<i>Cardiospermum halicacabum</i> Linn.	Sapindaceae	<i>Lota kopalphuta</i>	Whole plant	The whole plant is made paste with water and rubbed to relief pain, stiff-neck, rheumatism, fever, piles. Leaves mixing with castor oil applied to lumbago, nervous disorder.

Table 1: Contd...

S. No.	Plant species	Family	Vernacular name	Part used	Application
15	<i>Cassia occidentalis</i> Linn.	Leguminasae	Medelwa	Roots/ leaves/ flowers	Leaves, roots flowers are good remedy for hysteria. Externally used in coetaneous disease. Roots are diuretic. Leaves are used as a remedy for dyspepsia, nervous disorder, itches, ringworm and skin diseases
16	<i>Cassia tora</i> Linn.	Leguminasae	Bon medelwa	Roots/ leaves	Leaves paste is used against ring worm and eczema. Decoction of leaves and flowers is externally used for bronchitis and asthma. Roots antidote against snakebite.
17	<i>Catharanthus roseus</i>	Apocynaceae	Nayantara	Roots/leaves	The parts of plant are used as anti-carcinogenic agent.
18	<i>Centella asiatica</i> (L) Urban	Umbeliferae	Bor manimuni	Whole plant	The whole plant has medicinal properties, used in dysentery, liver trouble, nerve disorder, and stomach problem and induces appetite, taken with milk to improve memory, good for skin disease and a blood purifier, given to women after childbirth.
19	<i>Clerodendron infortunatum</i> Gaertn.	Verbenaceae	Dhopat tita	Roots/leaves	Leaves can be used against malarial fever. Roots are used externally against tumors and skin disease.
20	<i>Clitoria ternatea</i>	Leguminasae	Aparajita	Leaves	Juice of leaves mixed with salt applied around ears in earache and swelling of adjacent gland to relive pain. Juice antidote against snake poison.
21	<i>Coffea bengalensis</i> Roxb.	Rubiaceae	Kothonaphool	Leaves	Young shoots and leaves used as medicine for cattle eye boil.
22	<i>Colocasia esculanta</i> (L)	Araceae	Kochu	Leaves/ roots	Leaves used for blood coagulation in small injuries, roots used in pharyngitis.
23	<i>Commelina bengalensis</i> Linn	Commelinaceae	Kana simolu	Roots	Juice is applied in eye-lid sore. Roots are useful in fever, bilious affection and snakebite, leprosy.
24	<i>Datura stramonium</i> Linn.	Solanaceae	Dhatura	Roots/leaves/ seeds	Smoke of leaves is used medicinally for asthma. A seed causes sleepiness. Poisonous and necrotic. Roots is good for tooth-ace.
25	<i>Drymaria cordata</i> Willd.	Caryophyllaceae	Laijabori	Whole plant	Juice of the plant is laxative and anti febrile. The plant has cooling property.
26	<i>Eclipta alba</i> Hassk.	Compositae	Kehraj	Leaves/ roots	It is believed that the herb taken internally and applied externally blackens hair. Fresh leaves are used in elephantiasis, affection of liver and dropsy. A type of hair tonic is produced from it. Juice is also used for jaundice and fever.
27	<i>Eclipta postrata</i> (L) Bhangra	Compositae	Kehraj	Leaves/ roots	Same as <i>E. alba</i>
28	<i>Erechthites valerianaefolia</i> DC.	Compositae	Bon kopah	Leaves	Juice of the leaves is used to cut wounds for quick healing.
29	<i>Erygnium foetidum</i> Linn.	Umbeliferae	Man dhania	Leaves	An aromatic herb used as a condiments in soups, meat etc.

Table 1: Contd...

S. No.	Plant species	Family	Vernacular name	Part used	Application
30	<i>Eupatorium odoretum</i> Linn.	Compositae	<i>Germanhabi</i>	Leaves/ Flowers	Leaves and flower tops are used medicinally as emetic, cathartic, in cut wounds.
31	<i>Euphorbia hirta</i> Linn.	Euphorbiaceae	<i>Dudh bon</i>	Whole plant	The entire plant is considered as sedative, haemostatic, sop orphic, used medicinally in asthma, chronic bronchitis. The milky juice is useful in destroying warts.
32	<i>Euphorbia thymifolia</i> Linn.	Euphorbiaceae	<i>Dudh bon</i>	Whole plant	Same as <i>E. hirta</i>
33	<i>Gymnopetalum cochinchinense</i> Kurtz.	Cucurbitaceae	<i>Kawri korola</i>	Roots	Roots made into paste and rubbed on body in body pain.
34	<i>Hedyotis lineata</i> Roxb	Rubiaceae	<i>Kasidoia</i>	Roots	Root juice is used against pneumonia.
35	<i>Heliotropium indicum</i> Linn.	Boraginaceae	<i>Hatisuriya</i>	Whole plant	The juice of the plant is used in ulcers, wounds and local inflammation. Leaves paste is used against insect bite and boils.
36	<i>Hydrocotyle rotundifolia</i> Roxb.	Umbeliferae	<i>Sorumanimuni</i>	Whole plant	The whole plant has medicinal properties, used in dysentery, liver trouble, nerve disorder, and stomach problem and induces appetite, taken with milk to improve memory, good for skin disease and a blood purifier, given to women after childbirth.
37	<i>Impatiens roylei</i> Walp	Baslainiaceae	<i>Bijolkoria</i>	Leaves/ fruits	Leaf and fruit paste is used on head as a remedy in high fever.
38	<i>Ipomea aquatica</i>	Covulvulaceae	<i>Pani kolmou</i>	Leaves	Leaves juice is used in jaundice, also used in urinary trouble and nervous hindrance.
39	<i>Ipomea quamoclit</i> Linn.	Covulvulaceae	<i>Kunjalata</i>	Leaves	Pounded leaves are used in piles.
40	<i>Justicia japonica</i> Linn.	Acanthaceae	<i>Jooron</i>	Leaves	Leaves are used in ophthalmia.
41	<i>Jussiaea suffruticosa</i> Linn.	Onagraceae	<i>Bon jolokia</i>	Whole plant	Used in dysentery and fever.
42	<i>Leucas aspera</i>	Labiatae	<i>Duron bon</i>	Whole plant	Used against rabies, leaves juice with garlic are good in Stomach, liver, spleen etc.
43	<i>Melastroma malabathricum</i> Linn.	Melastomaceae	<i>Phutuka</i>	Leaves	Leaf powder is used in wound portion to prevent mark in skin; wood tar is used in for blackening teeth.
44	<i>Mikania micrantha</i> Linn.	Compositae	<i>Japanihabi</i>	Leaves/ roots	Juice is useful in insect bite and scorpion sting.
45	<i>Mimosa pudica</i> Linn.	Leguminasae	<i>Lajukilata</i>	Leaves	Leaf juice with milk is used as a good remedy for piles.
46	<i>Mirabilis jalapa</i> Linn.	Nyctaginaceae	<i>Godhuligopal</i>	Roots	Roots are used in dropsy.
47	<i>Nasturtium indicum</i> DC.	Brassicaceae	<i>Bonhariah</i>	Seed	Seed juice is used in Kidney trouble.
48	<i>Ocimum canum</i> Sims	Labiatae	<i>Bon tulsi</i>	Leaves	Leaves made into paste applied to the fingers to relieve from fever. Seed are used as remedy for dysentery. Leaves used in skin disease.
49	<i>Ocimum gratissimum</i> Linn.	Labiatae	<i>Bon tulsi</i>	Whole plant	Plant juice is used as insect repellent. Seed used in headache. Leaves are used in for gonorrhoea, rheumatism and paralysis.
50	<i>Oldenlandia corymbosa</i> Linn.	Rubiaceae	<i>Bon jaluk</i>	Whole plant	Juice applied in burning sensation of palms, juice is good for liver trouble, urinary disorder in children, jaundice, fever and bilious infection.

Table 1: Contd...

S. No.	Plant species	Family	Vernacular name	Part used	Application
51	<i>Oxalis corniculata</i> Linn.	Oxalidaceae	<i>Sorutengesi</i>	Whole plant	Juice is used in stomach problem, used in intoxication of wine, used in dysentery.
52	<i>Paederia fotida</i> Linn.	Rubiaceae	<i>Bhebelilata</i>	Leaves	Plant is very good in stomach, kidney and liver problems. Decoction of leaves increase appetite.
53	<i>Peperomia pelludica</i> H.BandK	Piperaceae	<i>Ponownoa</i>	Leaves/ roots	Plant paste is used on head to reduce temperature.
54	<i>Phyllanthus niruri</i> Linn.	Euphorbiaceae	<i>Bon amlokhi</i>	Whole plant	Whole plant is used in jaundice. Young leaves are good for dysentery. Root juice is used in urino-genital troubles and gonorrhoea.
55	<i>Pouzolzia indica</i> Gaud.	Urticaceae	<i>Dudhmor goch</i>	Whole plant	Used against snakebite, convalescence of children, syphilis, gonorrhoea.
56	<i>Ricinnus communis</i> Linn.	Euphorbiaceae	<i>Era</i>	Leaves/ roots	Roots are used in urinary trouble; juice with lime is used to suppress newly formed boils.
57	<i>Siegesbekia orientalis</i> Linn.	Compositae	<i>Katampam</i>	Whole plant	Used in healing gangrenous ulcers and skin disease. Useful against worms.
58	<i>Solanum indicum</i>	Solanaceae	<i>Tita bhekuri</i>	Roots/ leaves	Roots are used to cure toothache, Asthma and in cough.
59	<i>Solanum nigrum</i> Linn.	Solanaceae	<i>Pokmou</i>	Roots	Roots juice is used against asthma and whooping cough.
60	<i>S. xanthocarpum</i>	Solanaceae	<i>Kantakori</i>	Roots/ leaves	Roots are used in asthma and in chest pain. Leaves juice with black peeper used in rheumatic pain.
61	<i>Urena lobata</i> Linn.	Malvaceae	<i>Bor sonborial</i>	Roots/ leaves	Roots are diuretic, good in rheumatic pain.
62	<i>Xanthium strumarium</i> Linn.	Compositae	<i>Agora</i>	Roots/ leaves	Used against long standing malarial fever, urinary trouble,

There are several methods by which the people prepare the medicines. Sometimes the different parts of the plant and sometimes the whole plant is being crushed and the juice is used as medicine and sometimes the decoction, smoke, powder or seed oil is used as medicine. The herbal treatment is said to be very much effective by them and the sustainable extraction of the medicinal plants from Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary is an indicative of their dependence on wild plants from their age old interaction.

CONCLUSION

The Nath community under study is still little bit away from the so called modern health care system. The concept of disease is governed by their understanding of the physical body and environment and thus they are still maintaining their traditional medicinal practices together with sporadic adoption of modern medical treatment.

To some extent the geographical location is also helping them to maintain their traditional value.

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