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A Few Common Traditional Phytotherapies Among Nath (Yogi) Community of Majuli Island

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the use of medicinal plants by the Nath (Yogi) community of the river in island Majuli, Assam, India as their traditional phytotherapies. A total of forty two medicinal plants used by the Naths of Majuli are reported with their parts used and the process of preparation. Among the plants reported, leaves (40%), stems (9%), roots (12%), whole plant (26%), seeds/fruits (4%) and berks (9%) are used to treat different kinds of frequently occurring minor and major diseases. Among the reported plants, 20% used against jaundice, 19% against diarrhoea, 7% against fever, 16% in skin diseases and 9% in cough and asthma by these people of the island.

Keywords: Nath community, medicinal plants, phytotherapy.

INTRODUCTION

Plants are the basis of life on earth. Since time immemorial, plants have been an exemplary source of human needs including healthcare. The Ayurveda & other Indian literatures mention the use of plants in treatment of various human diseases. India has about 45,000 plant species & among them, several thousands have been reported for their medicinal properties. Traditional medicines 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. The healthcare practices in the traditional system are diverse according to historical background, their contemporary social realities and dynamics¹. About 80% population of the developing world is still dependent on their surrounding vegetations for their traditional healthcare practices. They rely on medicinal plants not only due to lacking of modern healthcare facilities but also for their effectiveness^{2,3}. North east India is known for its rich bio resources and ethno cultural diversity. It is also a good habitat of various medicinal plants to various ethnic communities. Different ethnic communities have valuable cultural heritage of herbal remedies for different ailments. Rural and tribal people living in remote villages still depend on a great extent on the indigenous systems of medicine and agriculture. Several studies have been reported on documentation of different medicinal plants used by different ethnic communities of India⁴⁻¹⁴. The beliefs and practices of different medicinal plants to cure common ailments by different communities of this region reveal a close relationship exists between man and nature from ages. Each and every community of this region has developed their own way to cure different ailments with the help of different plant species that are readily available in their surroundings. The present study attempts to document different plant varieties used by the Nath community of Majuli island in different kinds of health treatments.

The Nath people of Majuli are regarded as Other Backward Class under Indian constitution. They introduce themselves as Yogi (people with high meditation power) and believe as the descendents of Lord Shiva. Hence they claim as *Shiva gotra*. They practice caste endogamy and clan exogamy. They speak

Assamese and use Assamese scripts. There are 22 Nath villages and sub villages in Majuli with a population of approximately 20,000. More than 70% of Nath people in Majuli are agriculture based and rests are service holders and business man. Nath women are well-known for weaving, that is why some people use to call them “katani”. They celebrate Bihu, Rassotshav, Bhaona (drama with ancient characters of Hindu religion), Guru purnima, death anniversary of Shankar Deva and Madhav Deva every year. They have a good dynamic organization called “Yogi Sanmilani” which works for socio-economic and cultural development of the community.

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. Penetration of modern civilization in to most regions of the world weakened the primitive societies to break away from their age old traditional beliefs and practices. The gradual detachment from culture and traditions has eroded many of the traditional know ledges and practices of plants in their day to day life. Therefore, before these people completely lose the knowledge of their traditional medicines, proper documentation will help to conserve those plant species and their commercial utilization for manufacturing effective and newer drugs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

a) Study area

Though controversial, Majuli is the largest river in island in the world. It is in the north of Jorhat district of Assam, India, covering an area in between 26°40'N - 27°10' N Latitude and 93°37' E – 94°50'E Longitude. Majuli had a total area of 1,250 square kilometres (483 sq mi), but due to mass erosion by the mighty Brahmaputra, it has been left an area of only 421.65 square kilometres. The island is formed by the Brahmaputra river in the south and the Kherkotia Xuti, an anbranch of the Brahmaputra, joined by the Subansiri river in the north. Majuli is also famous as the seat of Assamese neo-Vaisnavite culture.

b) Methodology

Intensive field work had been carried out during the year 2012 covering almost all the seasons of the year. Information was mainly gathered from “purohitas” (persons engaged to worship God), medicine man, local old women and school teachers. Collected plants were arranged according to their use for different diseases as herbaria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the study area 42 plant species belonging to 33 families were documented for their medicinal properties (shown in table 1). Among them leaves (40%), stems (9%), roots (12%), whole plant (26%), seeds/fruits (4%) and berks (9%) are used to treat different kinds of frequently occurring minor and major diseases by Nath people of Majuli. Though majority Nath are to some extent aware of modern medical system, there are still a few who completely not aware of it. As some of these traditional medicines work effectively, majority of people use it as the primary treatment for most of the diseases. 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 these plants.

Fig:1 Different parts of the documented plants used by Nath community of Majuli

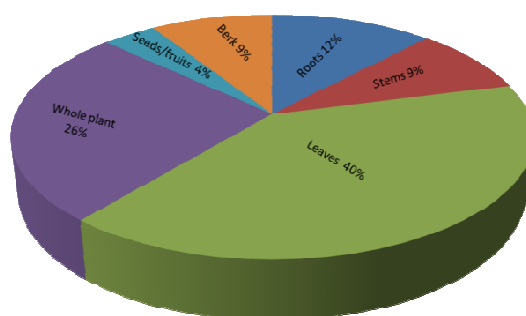


Fig:2 Plants used in some frequently occurring diseases

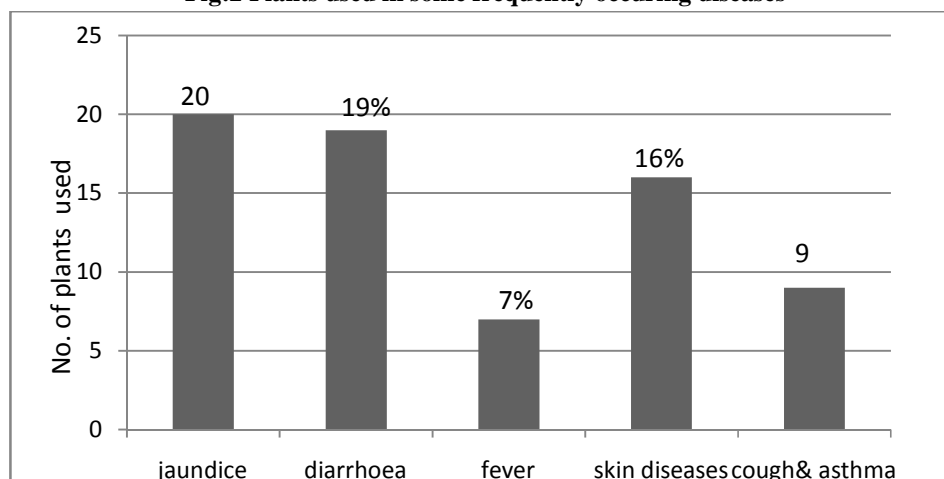


Table1: use of different plant species by Nath (Yogi) people of Majuli

	Botanical name	Family	Local name	Applications.
1.	<i>Ajuga bracteosa</i>	Lamiaceae	Nilakantha	Root juice is used against whooping cough.
2.	<i>Allium sativum</i>	Liliaceae	Naharu	Paste of corm is used against ringworm, fried corm is effective against cold fever.
3.	<i>Alstonia scholaris</i>	Apocynaceae	Satiana	Juice of bark is used to treat asthma and cough.
4.	<i>Andrographis paniculata</i>	Acanthaceae	Sirata	Leaf Juice as blood purifier. Used against worm troubles, asthmatics trouble, brain disorder and nervous affections.
5.	<i>Azadirachta indica</i>	Meliaceae	Mahanim	Leaf juice is used to treat skin infections, worm infections and pox.
6.	<i>Azanza lampas</i>	Malvaceae	Bon kapah	Paste of leaf is used as antihaemorrhagic.
7.	<i>Boerhavia diffusa</i>	Nyctaginaceae	Ponownua	Roasted leaves and stems are used against jaundice.
8.	<i>Bombax ceiba</i>	Bombacaceae	Shimolu	Root juice is useful against jaundice.
9.	<i>Bryophyllum calycinum</i>	Crassulaceae	Dupor tengal	Leaf juice is given daily two times to jaundice patient until cured.
10.	<i>Bonnaya reptans</i>	Scrophulariaceae	Kasidoria	Roasted leaves are used as antidiabetic.
11.	<i>Cajanus cajan</i>	Fabaceae	Rahar Dalil	Leaf juice is very much effective against jaundice.
12.	<i>Calotropis procera</i>	Asclepiadaceae	Aakan	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 ache.
13.	<i>Cassia alata</i>	Caesalpiaceae	Khor goss	Paste of young leaves is used to treat ring worm and scabies.

14.	<i>Catharanthus roseus</i>	Apocynaceae	Nayantara	The parts of plant are used as anti carcinogenic agent.
15.	<i>Centella asiatica</i>	Apiaceae	Bor manimuni	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.
16.	<i>Chenopodium album</i>	Chenopodiaceae	Jilmil shak	Roasted plant is used as antihelminthic.
17.	<i>Clerodendrum colebrookianum</i>	Verbinaceae	Nephaphu	Roasted leaves are consumed to treat high blood pressure.
18.	<i>Colocasia esculanta</i>	Araceae	Kochu	Leaves used for blood coagulation in small injuries, roots used in pharyngitis.
19.	<i>Clitoria ternatea</i>	Fabaceae	Aparajita	Root juice is useful in impotency and stomach pain.
20.	<i>Cynodon dactylon</i>	Poaceae	Dubori bon	Paste of whole plant is used to stop bleeding from wound, it is also used in problems related to menstruation. Plant paste is applied on forehead to reduce headache.
21.	<i>Celosia argentia</i>	Amaranthaceae	Chare maguri	Seeds are useful for diarrhoea.
22.	<i>Drymaria cordata</i>	Caryophyllaceae	Laijabori	Juice of the plant is used for sinusitis and fever.
23.	<i>Dracaena angustifolia</i>	Liliaceae	Jamlakhuti	Root juice mixed with the root juice of <i>Bombax ceiba</i> is used against jaundice.
24.	<i>Elsholtzia blanda</i>	Lamiaceae	Bon-tulasi	Leaf juice along with honey is a good remedy for cough.
25.	<i>Enhydra fluctuans</i>	Compositae	Helochi	Plant juice is used for skin diseases, nervous disorders and high blood pressure.
26.	<i>Lawsonia inermis,</i>	Lythraceae	Jetuka	Leaf paste and juice is useful against skin and hair diseases.
27.	<i>Leucas linifolia</i>	Lamiaceae	Doron bon	Roasted leaves are used against intestinal worms. Leafjuice is against sinusitis.
28.	<i>Murraya koenigii</i>	Rutaceae	Narasingha	Young leaf juice is useful against stomach pain, diarrhoea and vomiting.
29.	<i>Melia composita</i>	Meliaceae	Ghora neem	Bark and leaf juice is used against stomach and skin diseases.
30.	<i>Momordica charantia</i>	Cucurbitaceae	Kerela	Roasted fruit is antihelminthic, leaf juice is useful against skin diseases.
31.	<i>Nyctanthus arbor-tristis</i>	Oleaceae	Sewali phul	Juice of bark is used as anti haemorrhagic after delivery.

32.	<i>Oldenlandia corymbosa</i>	Rubiaceae	Bon jaluk	Juice applied in burning sensation of palms, juice is good for liver trouble, urinary disorder in children, jaundice, fever and bilious infection.
33.	<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.
34.	<i>Paederia fotida</i>	Rubiaceae	Bhebeli lota	Plant is very good in stomach, kidney and liver problems. Decoction of leaves increase appetite.
35.	<i>Phylenthus neuri</i>	Euphorbiaceae	Bon amlakhi	Extraction of whole plants mixed with cow milk is given to jaundice patient.
36.	<i>Phyllanthus fraternus</i>	Euphorbiaceae	Mati amlokhi	Considered good for liver function and used in treatment of jaundice.
37.	<i>Punica granatum</i>	Punicaceae	Dalim	Leaf juice is useful against diarrhoea.
38.	<i>Pouzolzia indica</i>	Urticaceae	Borali bokua	Paste of leaves is used as antiseptic agent.
39.	<i>Portulaca oleracea</i>	Portulacaceae	Malbhog shak	Juice of the whole plant is used in liver diseases.
40.	<i>Polygonum perfoliatum</i>	Polygonaceae	Bagh asora	Juice of leaves and young stem is useful against jaundice.
41.	<i>Stephania elegans</i>	Menispermaceae	Tubuki lota	Stem juice with salt is useful against jaundice.
42.	<i>Terminalia chebula</i>	Combretaceae	Shilikha	Fruit is useful for acidity and any other gastrointestinal problems.

There are several methods of preparation of traditional medicines. Generally they use water to make pastes as well as to extract the juice from different parts of the medicinal plants. Salt is a common ingredient for most of the medicines they prepare. Instead of water, some of them use juice of sugarcane for diseases like jaundice. Freshly prepared juice is warmed and given to the patient. Sometimes they prepare “**bori**” (round tablet like structure), which can be preserved even for 2-3 months. Besides these, in some specific diseases, they use urine of cattle to extract the juice or to make pastes and “**bori**”. Powdered form of medicines used for skin diseases are generally mixed with coconut oil. Sometimes mixtures of different parts of a single plant or different plants are used to treat different kinds of diseases. Individuals experts in this field usually hesitate to lick out the procedure to prepare medicines because, they believe that licking out will reduce the efficiency of such medicines.

CONCLUSION

The herbal treatment is said to be very much effective by Nath people of Majuli and the sustainable extraction of the medicinal plants from this area will help in discovery of newer drugs. As Majuli is isolated from the main land of Assam, its particular geographical location and isolation has also helped to maintain the traditional practices among the communities.

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