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A Brief Study of Female Healthcare Preparations Used by the Koch-Rajbanshi Tribals of Barpeta District of Assam

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Introduction

The seven sister states of North Eastern India are the store houses of one of the world's richest biodiversity. Thousands of plant species are still waiting for to be recognized and their ethnomedicinal usage explored. But before this we have to work upon a number of plant species which although are common but their medicinal uses are unknown. Our country with its rich cultural diversity has unexploited treasure of such medicines for thousands of years. At a time when the world faces a stagnation in the chemical medicines leave aside the harmful side effects, the ethnomedicines offer a safe method of repair, cure and strengthening of body with no or minimum side effects.

Assam, with its vast and endemic plant resources and its rich traditional ethno-botanical knowledge has huge potential and possibilities in the field of phytomedicine (Kalita & Phukan 2010). Some of these medicinal species have been extensively used in the ayurvedic, unani and other traditional alternative medicine systems since the time immemorial (Satyavati et al. 1987). Like all botanically rich regions of Assam, the district of Barpeta is also known for its substantial diversity of plant species. Barpeta district is located in between 26° 5' N to 26° 49' N latitude and 90° 39' E to 91° 17' E longitude and occupies an area of 3245 sq km.

ABSTRACT

Barpeta district of Assam is rich in phytodiversity and the rural folk of the district are efficient practitioner of their traditional knowledge system, especially in connection with the use of phytomedicines. The present paper deals with the ethno-medicinal knowledge of Koch-Rajbanshi tribal people living in small settlements in the district of Barpeta with special reference to Female healthcare. This tribal group is among the ones with smallest population in Barpeta. Out of the 15 species belonging to 18 families documented here mostly are well known and used extensively by other tribes also.

Barpeta town, the district headquarter, is located about 90 km North-west of the state capital Guwahati. Barpeta enjoys a sub-tropical climate with chilly winters and hot and humid summers. The district is the gateway to Maman National Park, one of the largest forest patches of Assam and one of the Tiger Reserves of India. The tribal inhabitants of the district include Koch-Rajbanshi, Rabha, Boro, Tea-tribe, Santhal etc. Among these, the Koch Rajbanshis were made the subjects of study because of their small population and rich ethnobotanical knowledge.

Many researchers, round the world have worked on the traditional knowledge of curing gynaecological disorders using phytomedicines. These include Lukhoba & Siboe (2008), Bone et al. (1990), Khan & Khan (2003), Panduranga et al. (2011) and Sahu (2011). In North East India workers like Barthakur (1976), Sarma et al. (2001, 2002, 2006), Barua et al. (1999), Bhattacharjya & Borah (2006), Das et al. (2007), Borah & Bhattacharjya (2009), Kar & Bhattacharjya (2008), Das et al. (2009), Bhattacharjya et al. (2008, 2012), Sarkar & Das (2010, 2011), and Lepcha & Das (2011) have made valuable contributions towards enriching our knowledge regarding different diseases/ ailments and their treatment using different plant species in variety of formulations. However, studies on female healthcare in connection with the treatment with phytomedicines in

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the district are very few. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to focus on the phytomedicines and their use in the district of Assam.

Methodology

Extensive field tours were made to cover almost all the major areas for plant collection in the Barpeta district. As we know now that traditional knowledge of phytotherapy is largely confined to local healers or *vaid*s, a pilot survey of the study area was conducted and a list of well-known *vaid*s of Koch-Rajbanshi tribe, was prepared. Thereafter these informants were visited on a regular basis for 2 months and interviewed to gather phytomedicinal information using a questionnaire prepared for this purpose. Specimens were collected and processed as per Jain & Rao (1977) and identified using Bentham & Hookers system of classification. All species were observed in natural habitat in various places of the district to confirm their habitat preference.

Result

The results of the study have been tabulated in form of Table 1. In all we could enlist and identify 25 plant species belonging to 18 families. The table shows scientific names of plant, local name of plant, family to which it belongs, part of plant used to make medicine, and dosage of medicine used by the Koch-Rajbanshi tribal people of Barpeta for female healthcare. Some of the plants used are common household plants while others are relatively unknown ones. In some cases identification was confusing so they have been left out of the result. The authors do not claim that the list is complete and that no plant or preparation has been left out in the study. Infact the present paper is just an enlistment of the information that could be gathered on local level after interaction with a few local healers.

Discussion

In most villages of Barpeta there are one or two elderly people male or female persons who are conversant with the traditional phytomedicines. It is interesting to note that this knowledge has passed through generation and has yet remained unaltered and undocumented. In most of the cases, the traditional knowledge is protected from outsiders and it takes great persuasion to make them share it. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons that we are fast losing on our traditional

medicinal knowledge. Newer generations find city jobs more lucrative and they hardly bother to learn this art while the elders hide it from outside world. In this manner our traditional knowledge is bound to die a slow death.

As already stated, the practicing medicine men or women are locally known as '*vaid*s' or '*kabiras*'. This traditional phytotherapy is practiced mainly by persons of over 50 years of age. With their experience, they are capable of diagnosing and treating various diseases. These medicine men or women are great pharmacists also and know the exact concoction of any drug to be effective. They use different plant parts such as root, bark, stem, leaves, flowers, fruits etc to prepare phytomedicines for different diseases. They employ various techniques to make medicines out of these plant parts which include drying, crushing, boiling, soaking, mixing etc. The administration of the drug is also very different for different ailments. They may ask their patients to take their medicines with different supplements such as honey, cow's milk, goat's milk, sugar candy, fruit juice, warm water, cold water etc or may ask them to just swallow it. They give these phytomedicines in the different forms such as powder, paste, juice, oil, ash etc.

The local people have high trust in these traditional phytomedicines. They have been using these preparations since a long time even without knowing their effective constituents or their mode of action.

Women of rural area are very shy to share their gynecological problems even with their family members. In most cases they don't go to the doctor for their gynaecological problems such as irregular menses. In such conditions *vaid*s are like boons. They provide them with medicine without any fees and these medicines definitely have some effectiveness which gives them relief. It appears, however, that these medicines are not fully active against most of the diseases especially leucorrhoea because cases of recurrence are common. However, we could not record even a single case of side effect in any of formulation which is a noteworthy finding. Perhaps this 'not good at least not bad' attitude makes the people rely more on these medicines for longer periods of time.

The present study not only enlists the plants effectively used for female healthcare in Koch-Rajbanshi

Table 1: Plants used for various female healthcare problems in Barpeta by Koch-Rajbanshis

S.N.	Name of Plant	Family	Local Name	Plant Part used	Preparation/Dosage	Treatment of
					Consumed orally after heating	Sores
1.	<i>Deeringia amaranthoides</i> Merrill.	Amaranthaceae	Matak tuka	Leaves	Juice is given orally with sugar	Infertility
2.	<i>Centella asiatica</i> (L.)	Apiaceae	Bor manimuni	Leaves	juice is given orally with sugar for 3 days	Menstrual problems
3.	<i>Hydrocotyle rotundifolia</i> Roxb.	Apiaceae	Haru manimuni	Leaves	15 ml juice is given orally for a week	Uterine pain
4.	<i>Eclipta alba</i> (L.) Hassk.	Asteraceae	Keheraj	Leaves	Crushed branches to be taken orally for 1 month	General tonic
5.	<i>Caesalpinia crista</i> L.	Caesalpiniaceae	Lataguti	Soft green branches	Juice is given orally with milk for 2 days.	Abortion
6.	<i>Drymaria cordata</i> Willd	Caryophyllaceae	Lajjabori	Soft green parts	Juice given for 4-5 days	Bleeding during pregnancy
7.	<i>Coccinia indica</i> W & A	Cucurbitaceae	Belipoka	Root	Crushed paste for 5-10 days	Lactation
8.	<i>Euphorbia hirta</i> L.	Euphorbiaceae	Dudh bon	Young branch	Eaten as nutritious food	Recovery after childbirth
9.	<i>Manihot esculenta</i> Crantz.	Euphorbiaceae	Simalu	Root	Juice given for 3-4 days	Cold during pregnancy
10.	<i>Leucas aspera</i> Spreng.	Lamiaceae	Darun	Young branches	Eaten directly	Menstrual pain and general tonic
11.	<i>Ocimum sanctum</i> L.	Lamiaceae	Toloshi	Leaves	200 ml juice is mixed with sugar and given orally for 3 days.	Infertility
12.	<i>Asparagus racemosus</i> Willd.	Liliaceae	Satamul	Root	Leaf gel taken with honey for 5-6 days	Leucorrhoea
13.	<i>Aloe vera</i> (L) Burm.	Liliaceae	Kumari	Leaves	20 ml juice is given orally for 3 days	Irregular Menstruation
14.	<i>Hibiscus rosa-sinensis</i> L.	Malvaceae	Joba	Flower	paste taken for 3 days empty stomach	Leucorrhoea
15.	<i>Sida cordifolia</i> L.	Malvaceae	Saru-Borial	Root	Paste applied on affected area	Skin infection
16.	<i>Ficus benghalensis</i> L.	Moraceae	Aha	Leaf bud	1 fruit with one earthworm head is given orally for first 3 days of menstruation.	Infertility
17.	<i>Musa velutina</i> Wendle	Musaceae	Malbhog	Fruit	Fruit is given orally with milk for 3 days.	Menstruation irregularities
18.	<i>Musa balbisiana</i> Colla.	Musaceae	Bhim kol	Fruit	Pea-sized dried part is given twice daily for 1 week.	Painful menses
19.	<i>Nelumbo nucifera</i> Gaertn.	Nymphaeaceae	Podom	Rhizome	Dried leaf powder made into tablets given for 3-4 days	Excessive bleeding during menses
20.	<i>Eleusine tilda</i> Roxb.	Poaceae	Bah/Bans	Leaves	Crushed and taken with goat's milk for 3 days	Leucorrhoea
21.	<i>Cynodon dactylon</i> L.	Poaceae	Duburi-bon	Leaves		

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S.N.	Name of Plant	Family	Local Name	Plant Part used	Preparation/Dosage	Treatment of
22.	<i>Houttuynia cordata</i> Thumb	Saururaceae	Masendury	Root	Juice or dried powder to be used for 1 week	Swelling of uterus
23.	<i>Scoparia dulcis</i> L.	Scrophulariaceae	Seni bon	Whole plant	Juice is given orally for 3 days	Irregular menstruation
24.	<i>Abroma augusta</i> L.	Sterculiaceae	Ulat kambol	Petiole	Eaten directly	Infertility
25.	<i>Curcuma aromaticum</i> Salisbury	Zingiberaceae	Bon-Haldi	Root	15 ml juice taken for 3 days empty stomach	Leucorrhoea

tribal settlements of Barpeta district but also brings to light the reasons for their unending popularity. The study also calls for a careful phytochemical evaluation of the effective principle in these plants in order to prepare a better formulation. Besides this, there is also an urgent need for documentation of these plants, herbarium preparation and identification as well as their method of drug manufacture. In absence of this, we might very soon lose great knowledge that our past generations have given us.

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