

IMPORTANCE OF MEDICINAL PLANTS IN THE RITUALS OF ASSAM: A STUDY ON THE ECOLOGY OF ASSAM

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Abstract : In the post human age where everything we get in a single tip, technologies are replacing humans and human emotions but somehow the society is still preserving its ritual by its own kind. Rituals and nature are interconnected just like totemism and animism are still prevalent in our society. In the name of development and globalization we can't let anyone to destroy the environment, from prehistorical days also it can be studied that how nature was useful to human beings in many ways, medicinal plants are the blessings of the nature as its usefulness has also written in many ayurveda sashtras of India. The broader foodscape of India also can be seen through the different plant ecology related to it.

Key words - Medicinal Plants, Rituals, Culture, Ecology, Development

Introduction:

Assam is home to a good number of plants having in Ayurvedic, Unani, homeopathic and even modern medical practices. India is one of the 17 megabiodiverse countries in the world and the state of Assam is a constituent unit of the Eastern Himalayan Biodiversity Region; one of the two biodiversity "Hot spots" in the country. The climatic condition and wide variety in physical features witnessed in Assam have resulted in a diversity of ecological habitats. The array of floristic richness has promoted many a scholars to describe Assam as the "Biological Gateway" of North East. The Eminent plant taxonomist and plant geographer Arman L.Takhtajan observed, 'Cradle of flowering plants lies between Assam and Fiji'. Only in Assam 952 plants species have been identified which have uses in medical practices in some form or other. *Emblica officinalis*(*bel*), *Terminalia* species (*Hilikha, Bahera*), *Ocimum* species (*Tulsi*), *Zinziber officinalis*(*Aada*) are some of the most commonly used medicinal plants in the rituals of Assam. Lord Hanuman cured Lakshmana by the sanjeevani, which is also known as *bishalyakarani* in the folk stories.

During the pandemic of Covid19, where COVID-19 vaccine was not available prior to all the people in this needy hour, many people are busting their immunity by taking these herbs as medicine. In Assam various rituals have been performed by these medicinal plants.

Review of literature:

Hariprasad Neog and Lila Gogoi in the book 'Asomiya Sanskriti' mentioned that in Assamese society the effect of folk culture can be seen very precisely. It can be said that the culture of Assam is mostly in compound in nature than mixture of all. When Syu-Ka-Pha establishes the territory in Brahmaputra valley then geographically the culture of Assamese gradually had expanded. The folk culture and folk belief are not exactly related to science but these are the identity of a folk mind. The plant worshipping is a very old concept; predominantly it can be found in Africa, Greece, France, Polynesia, America and have grown in India also. It is believed that the God or deity resides in the plants. In India the symbols of plant worshipped can be seen

in the Mohenjo-Daro and Harappan civilization. Today also the Hindu people worship ,*aahatgas*, (*Sacred fig*) *bellgos*,(belgiri tree) and *tulsi* (*Holy basil*).The Buddhist people worship *bodhidrum* in a very respectful manner. The *silikha* (*Myrobalan plant*) tree is a symbol of reverence for the *baishnavs* of Assam. Saint Sankardev wrote many masterpieces under the shadow of this tree, the *panchapallav* also needed in many religious activities. The tress of neem (Indian lilac)is worshiped by the Tamils besides their temple and the devotees of *kaali gokhani* (the goddess Kaali)also take the branches of it. In Assam it is a folk belief that to drive away the ghosts the neems is the best medicine. The Assamese Hindu person plants a *sijugos* (Indian spurge tree)to get relief from rain and thunderstorm. There is a daakor boson-

“*Xutika nikote rakhiba ostro/Griho sari suke dwar mukhot/
bas siju aani ruiba hokot/*”

Most of the Rig-Veda mantras are also related to the nature.

From Vandana Shiva’s *Staying Alive*: The problem with GNP is that it measures some costs as benefits (eg.pollution control) and fails to measure other costs completely. Among these hidden costs are the new burdens created by ecological devastation. Ecology as the revival of Prakriti, the source of all life, become the decentered powers of political and economical transformation and restructuring. A forest for example, provides inexhaustible supplies of diverse biomass over time if its capital stock is maintained and it is harvested on a sustained yield basis. The heavy and uncontrolled demand for industrial and commercial wood, however, requires the continuous over felling of tress which exceeds the regenerative capacity of the forest ecosystem, and eventually converts the forests into non-renewable resources. The second law of thermodynamics predicts that resource intensive and resource wasteful economic development must become a threat to the survival of the human species in the long run.

In the book “*Bharatar uttar purbanchalar loko sanskriti*” Dr.Nabeen Chandra Sarma stated that bamboo has a special value in the rituals and it is also known for its medicinal values also. If insects bite any domestic animal then *bijuli bah ulta pab* is used, and the part is given in the neck of that animal. When small pox disease attacks in body then the anger of the children increases, in this case another medicine is *khoris*a produced by *bholuka baah*. Turmeric used in the weddings also do have a very effective medicinal value, it’s a natural anti oxidant. According to William Crooke “*bangsloshan*” or “*tabshir*” is a good folk medicine.(William Crooke,op-cit,P.113)

Rationality for the topic:

The rituals are performed in the Assamese society traditionally, using some of the medicinal plants. But many of the community people are using this from traditional perspective not from an ecological perspective. In modern time, people are detaching from nature but these medicinal plants can be studied from socio-ecological perspective also as a contribution to the greater Assamese society.

Research Questions

1. Is it possible to establish rituals a relation between community sentiment and the ecology?

2. To know the Assamese community peoples' scientific or ecological way behind this plants or how they are related?

Objectives of the study

1. To be honest, to carry this work as a contribution to the Assamese community and for a greater society; also it will help the human kind in the near future. Because many people are not aware of these gifts of nature.
2. To make people aware of about this medicinal plants, this bio diversity heritage should be preserved
3. To analyze and understand the rituals from a scientific mindset so that culture and rituals can survive in a more scientific way to the generations to come along with the nature, culture, development and society.

Methodology

In this research this methodologies have been used

1. Observation: The study is compelled through participant observation. Because it enables to record "natural behavior "of the respondents (W.J.Goode and P.K.Hatt, 1981).During my fieldwork, I will use observation method to record the community people's viewpoint.
2. Group interview: Group interviews are especially productive, as the folk talk to each other. Memories can be triggered, facts can be verified, and more and more information and thoughts can be shared.
3. Personal interview: Interview is simply analytical conversation in nature (W.J.Goode and P.K.Hatt, 1981), because of the nature of unstructured interview the resource persons can share more information
4. Secondary data: Books that are related to the rituals, culture and development.

Findings of the study:

Bamboos in Assam altogether 38 naturally growing species of bamboo are recorded in Assam of which *Bamboosa masrtersei* is restricted in distribution to Dibrugarh district. In the areas of Kamrup the bamboo puja is performed in the month of *Bohag*. This is also known as '*Bhotheli*'. Rituals like *pooja, aainaam, , puspita xobah*, the ingredients like *til, (sesame) , halodhi, (Turmaric) saul (rice), narikol (coconut)* are most important. Each element used in the rituals not only a special value and good for our health but also these are very helpful for our environment. Plants such as *aamgos (Mango tree), Tulsi (Holy basil), dubori (Bermuda grass)* refines the air and produces oxygen. From the pollination process also the balance of biodiversity sustains and at the same time the honey and flower is needed for the rituals, thus how the ecological balancing is sustaining and the nature can be felt at its best. But it is high time for us to think for our plants towards a sustainable development for a beautiful earth. The beauty of nature will decrease if human adverse effect (including pollution) will increase. In some the Assamese rituals the *purohit (priest)* sprinkles the rice water and curd with *dubori bon, (Bahama grass)* rice water and curd is highly proteinous and *dubori bon* this medicinal plants helps to stop the minor bleeding cases. *Dhaan (rice)* is regarded as the Lakshmi of the home, even the

'*kher*' (rice hulls) is the prime food of cows. From the banana tree the *koldil* (banana flower) is used which is good for anemia patients. In the puberty rituals of girls in Assamese community the newly wedded bride have to bath on the front of the banana tree and have to pray the tree and the Sun. The *Kolakhar* (it is being produced from the banana tree, above all in the food chain also these all are helping. Almost end of every ritual a little *xilikha* is given to the people because this medicinal plant helps in digestion. In the rituals "*matir saki*" (earthly lamp) is used to lighten up the ground, these sakis are made of the soil which do not harm the environment. In the ritual of "*aainam*" (a ritual when the deity of small pox is being worshipped by women), the "*kathanda*" (a white flower) is used primarily. From the day of Lakshmi puja the *kesa mithoi laru* (a kind of coconut ladoos) is given to goddess Lakshmi so that wealth comes to that home, these plants are also used to produce various eco friendly joot products. In the rituals of Shiva the bell is used primarily this medicinal plant has a high value in digesting the foods we take. Most importantly the neem plants are known as the best air purifier and it also helps in recovering many skin and health issues. Environment and nature is also considered as feminist issue by the eco feminists.

The interviewed elderly women have narrated their story. The people were mostly in the age of their sixties and seventies. One grandma told me that they are not familiar with the medicines that their children are taking for curing the diseases. In their time their parents and they have the easy access to the medicinal plants to cure the diseases and they had not gone to visit a doctor quickly, she added these medicinal plants also can boost the immune power of human bodies.

Conclusion:

The word mother is also used as a metaphor to the nature as Mother Nature. We have to keep our environment sustainable for the generations to come. For worsening air pollution in 2019, according to Lancet study, almost 1.67 million deaths and an estimated loss of USD 28.8 billion worth of output were India's prices. From the chipko movement to the dam projects in the river the women's role is very important in keeping the biodiversity. In the time of displacements also it's the women and children that goes out in the most vulnerable situations because of the lack of resources. The thermal power plants station although contributes in the development sector but it creates a hazardous situation in the environment, where mostly the pregnant women, old age person, children are mostly seen as being effected. The state and central governments are taking steps for pollution but it's depending upon the people's mindset for a cleaner and greener globe. Medicinal plants can be said as the future of medicines. Medicinal plants are priceless sources of bioactive compounds and despite the contemporary progress in pharmaceuticals and drug developments; they remain a large proportion of our world. It has been proved that this medicinal plant has many biomedical values and it should be well preserved.

Appendix

Kolakhar: *Kolakhar* is basically an alkaline extract from the ashes of burnt dried banana peels or tree. It's an additive to Assamese cuisine.

Ainaam : It is a belief that there is a deity that should be worshipped during the chicken pox days, the prayers that the village women do to worship the deity is known as the Ainaam.

Puspita xobaah : Puberty marriage

Bhotheli : A spring festival of lower Assam. In lower (Eastern) Assam, particularly in Barpeta and Nalbari district, there is this festival in which the banyan tree is worshipped and people take pledge to protect it.

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