



## Comparative Study of Ethnomedicine among the Tribes of North East India

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### Abstract

*The term Ethno-medicine is used to mean the traditional health care methods which are based on indigenous cultural beliefs and practices and are not derived from the conceptual framework of modern medicine. World Health Organisation (WHO) estimated that about 80% of the world's population depends on traditional medicine for their primary health care needs. Many rural communities of the world are far away from the reach of modern medicines and doctors and such communities still rely on traditional medicinal systems. For primary healthcare still many people of modern world go for ethno-medicine at the basic level. North East India is the homeland of a large number of ethnic groups belonging to different racial stocks, speaking different languages and having varied socio cultural traditions. The present paper tries to highlight the indigenous knowledge related to different medicinal plants used by different population of North East India. An attempt has been made to see the common medicinal plant species used by different communities of North East India.*

**Keywords:** Ethno-medicine, medical anthropology, traditional health care, common medicinal plants, North East India.

### Introduction

Illness is culturally defined. Western world is accustomed to think of illness in terms of germs, viruses and assumes it to be a biological constant, a pathological condition to be verified by laboratory tests or clinical examinations. From the cultural point of view illness is quite different; it is a social recognition that a person is unable to fulfil his normal role properly and he should be brought back to normalcy<sup>1</sup>. There are numbers of medical systems each specific to its own culture and region. The medical doctor and anthropologist Arthur Kleinman writes that the health care system includes people's beliefs (largely tacit and unaware of the system as a whole) and patterns of behaviour. Those beliefs and behaviours are governed by cultural rules<sup>2</sup>. World Health Organisation (WHO) estimated that about 80% of the world's population depends on traditional medicine for their primary health care needs<sup>3</sup>. Ethno-medicine is a contemporary term that encompasses the whole gamut of ethnic beliefs and practices and behaviour towards health and disease as conceived in the tribal, peasant and pre-industrial societies<sup>1</sup>. Ethno-medicine has been recognized as an important field of Anthropological research today. Many rural communities of the world are far away from the reach of modern medicines and doctors and such communities still rely on traditional medicinal systems. For primary healthcare still many people of modern world go for ethno-medicine at the basic level. In his book *Medicine, Magic and Religion*, WHR Rivers argued that indigenous medical practices, which might seem irrational to Westerners, were rational when placed in the wider context of local beliefs and culture<sup>4</sup>. Medical anthropology an important branch of anthropology. It is chiefly concern with the relationship between health disorder on one hand and with cultural factors, belief and perceptions on the other. Applied

medical anthropology is now interdisciplinary in nature which works with sociology, medicine, demography and sociology. The most important fact about traditional medicine is the way it is integrated into a whole culture. Anthropology explains how the emic perspective of a community regarding health shapes their health behaviours.

In India around 16000 species of higher plants are found and out of these 7500 species are used for medicinal and health care purpose by different ethnic communities<sup>6</sup>. North East India is the homeland of a large number of ethnic groups belonging to different racial stocks, speaking different languages and having varied socio cultural traditions. North East India politically consists of seven states: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The region has diverse ecotypes ranging from humid evergreen forest to temperate and alpine vegetation. North East India is the homeland of a large number of ethnic groups who came from different directions at different historical times. These groups belong to different racial stocks, speak different languages and have varied socio cultural traditions. North East India witnesses 130 major indigenous communities and is house to a number of archaic societies like Abor, Khasi, Mishing, Rabha, Naga, Apatani etc.<sup>10</sup>. The traditional communities of North East living here for thousands of years have built a precious knowledge base about the use of the rich bio resources of the region. This region has a strong heritage of herbal remedies and is very much an integral part of indigenous culture of North East India. Each tribal group has a particular medical culture or 'ethno-medicine' which forms the culture medical common sense or logic. In India the importance of 2416 plants of ethno-medicinal purpose has been recorded. Among which about 1963 plants are used by different tribal societies of North East India alone<sup>11</sup>.

## Methodology

The research is based on secondary data. To capture as many as relevant sources as possible, scientific literature on ethno-medicine field studies conducted in North East India were searched to identify primary studies. Relevant secondary literary sources in the form of books, journals and articles have been intensively read and studied in the preparation of this paper.

## Result and Discussion

North East India is the homeland of many precious medicinal plants. Most of the communities of North East India rely on ethno-medicine for their health care practices. The local tribal people utilize different parts of plants to cure disease and illness. Cross cultural study on traditional health care practices of the North Eastern tribes reveals that the same plant is used by different communities to heal different diseases. Table-1. reflects the common medicinal plants used by different communities of North East India. In the present study 20 medicinal plants which were listed are *Amomum aromaticum* Roxb. common in 2 groups (Bodo Kachari and Apatani), *Andrographis paniculata* (Burm.f) by 2 groups (Bodo Kachari and Apatani), *Argemone mexicana* L. in 2 groups (Bodo Kachari and Apatani), *Asparagus racemosus* willd in 3 groups (Bodo Kachari, Lushai and Jaintia), *Centela asiatica* L. used by 9 groups (Bodo Kachari, Jaintia, Apatani, Chutia, Mishng, Bodo, Rajbongshi and Rangias, Lushai) *Colotropis gigantean* L. by 2 (Bodo Kachari and Apatani), *Clerodendrum Viscosum* vent by 2

(Bodo Kachari and Jaintia), *Curcuma longa* L. by 4 groups (Bodo Kachari, Jaintia, Lushai, Adi-Miniyong), *Hibiscus rosa sinensis* L. (Bodo Kachari, Apatani, Mishng, tribes of Manipur), *Houttuynia cordata* Thunb by 6 groups (Bodo Kachari, Apatani, Mishng, Santal and Goreswar and tribes of Meghalaya), *Murraya Koenigii* (L) Syn- *Bergera koengii* by 3 groups (Bodo Kachari, Apatani, Mishng), *Musa paradisiaca* L. (Bodo Kachari, Apatani, tribes of Meghalaya and Manipur), *Oroxylum indicum* (L) vent common in 8 groups (Bodo Kachari, Chutia, Apatani, Mishng, Naga, Nepali, Lepcha and Bhutia), *Oxalis corniculata* L.(Chutia, Apatani, tribes of Meghalaya), *Paedaria foetida* L. by 3 groups (Bodo Kachari, Apatani, Adi-Miniyong), *Plantago major* L. by 2 (Jaintia and Apatani), *Spilanthes paniculata* D.C by 2 groups (Jaintia and Apatani), *Terminalia chebula* Retz. by 6 groups (Bodo Kachari, Chutia, Apatani, Nepali, Lepcha and Bhutia), *Zanthoxylum oxyphyllum* Edgew by 2 groups (Bodo Kachari and Apatani), *Zingiber officinale* Rosc. by 2 groups (Bodo Kachari and Apatani).

The present attempts to highlight the most commonly used medicinal plant i.e. *Centella asiatica* (L). Jeeva et al., states that *Centella asiatica* (L) is used by different tribal communities of North East India against stomach disorder and as brain tonic. This plant is followed by *Oroxylum indicum* (L) commonly used by 8 groups of NE India. The most dominant medicinal plant family of North East India is Asteraceae<sup>13</sup>. The study reveals that 2 communities of North East India uses plant species of Asteraceae family for different disease problem.

**Table-1**  
**Common medicinal plants used by different communities of North East India**

Sl no.	Medicinal Plant	Family	Tribe/ Community	Local Name of the Plant	Parts Used	Ethno medicinal Preparation and Use	Sources
1.	<i>Amomum aromaticum</i> Roxb.	Zingiberaceae	Bodo Kachari	<i>Elaichi gidir</i>	Fruits	To cure cough and pox paste made of fruit is used	14
			Apatani	.....	Leaf, seed	Fever, Abortion	10
2.	<i>Andrographis paniculata</i> (Burm.f)	Acanthaceae	Bodo Kachari	<i>Sirata</i>	Leaf	Its dried leaves and stem are soaked overnight in cold water and taken in empty stomach in the morning to cure malaria	14
			Apatani	.....	Leaf	Dysentery	10
3.	<i>Argemone mexicana</i> L.	Papaveraceae	Bodo Kachari	<i>Siyalpadur i</i>	Leaf	In the cases of jaundice, malaria, leprosy the leaves are consumed	14
			Apatani	.....	Shoot	Skin diseases	10
4.	<i>Asparagus racemosus</i> willd	Liliaceae	Bodo Kachari	<i>Satamul</i>	Roots	Powdered roots are used for treating jaundice	14
			Jaintia	<i>Lamardoh</i>	Leaf	Urinary disorders and stomach ache are cured by consuming powder of dried leaves	11
			Lushai	<i>Uthinthang</i>	Leaf	Powder of dried leaves are orally taken to get rid of	23

						stomach disorders	
5.	<i>Centela asiatica L.</i>	Apiaceae	Bodo Kachari	<i>Manimuni fisha</i>	Whole plant	Gastric patient are cured by consumption of the plant	14
			Jaintia	<i>Wangrake</i>	Whole plant	Eye injury is cured by decoction of leaves. In case of indigestion leaves of the plant are crushed and mixed with water with a tablespoon of salt and taken orally	11
			Apatani	<i>Ngyarikor</i>	Shoot	Constipation, gastricts, blood purification	10
			Chutia	<i>Bor-manimuni</i>	Whole plant	Cholera and dysentery are cured by consuming the leaves of the plant. In case of worms the whole plant is eaten as raw or by cooking	17
			Mishing	<i>Manimuni</i>	Plant	Plant mixed with plants of <i>Hydrocotyle javanica</i> made into paste and used as sause and dried cake is prepared	16
			Bodo, Rajbongshi and Rangias	<i>Manimuni</i>	Leaf	Curry prepared from leaves is eaten to cure dysentery	18
			Lushai	<i>Hnahbial</i>	Plant	Whole plant parts are crushed and are used to cure leprosy, tuberculosis and asthma	11
6.	<i>Colotropis gigantean L.</i>	Asclepiadaceae	Bodo Kachari	<i>Agandobongphang</i>	Leaf	Leaves helps in curing swelling of lever	14
			Apatani	.....	Root	Dog bite	10
7.	<i>Clerodendrum Viscosum vent</i>	Verbenaceae	Bodo Kachari	<i>Makhna bilai</i>	Leaf	To get rid of dysentery juice from the leaves is prepared and consumed	14
			Jaintia	<i>Jhr-khtung</i>	Leaf	Asthma, high blood pressure and diabetes are cured by consuming the raw leaves or mixed with vegetables	11
8.	<i>Curcuma longa L.</i>	Zingiberaceae	Bodo Kachari	<i>Haldai</i>	Rhizome	To cure gastric and stomach disorder, juice made from the rhizome given to take orally	14
			Jaintia	<i>Chyrmit</i>	Rhizome	Dyspepsia patient are given the pills made from the rhizomes before food to counter-act dyspepsia	11
			Lushai	<i>Aieng</i>	Rhizome	Pill made out of crushed rhizomes is taken orally before food to counteract dyspepsia	23
			Adi-Miniyong	<i>Keloti</i>	Rhizome	Extract of Rhizome applied to wounds and cuts for clotting of blood and as an antiseptic	15
9.	<i>Hibicus rosa sinensis L.</i>	Malvaceae	Bodo Kachari	<i>Joba bibar</i>	Bark and flower bud	To cure cholera the bark of the plant is crushed and given to consume. The bud of the flower are eaten to cure stomach pain	14

			Apatani	.....	Flower	Reproductive disorders	10
			Mishing	<i>Gokhai aphun</i>	Flower	Flower are mixed with talmisri and orally taken with water	16
			Tribes of Manipur	<i>Juba, kusoom</i>	Flower	Its extracted sweat from the flower is used to cure soreness of tongue and ulcer in mouth	19
10.	<i>Houttuynia cordata Thunb</i>	Saururaceae	Bodo Kachari	<i>Maisundur i</i>	Leaf	Fresh juice of the leaves is used to cure diarrhoea	14
			Apatani	.....	Shoot	Freshness, good sleep, heart disorders	10
			Mishing	<i>Masundari</i>	Root	To cure skin disease the root of the plant is pasted on the affected areas	16
			Santal and Goreswar	<i>Mochondori</i>	Leaf	Leaf curry is used to reduce bodyache	18
			Tribes of Meghalaya	.....	Root, leaf	Roots and leaves are eaten raw to treat amoebic dysentery	20
11.	<i>Murraya Koenigii (L) SS</i>	Rutaceae	Bodo Kachari	<i>Nwrshing</i>	Leaf	To get rid of high fever juice of leaves is consumed	14
			Apatani	.....	Leaf	Stomach trouble	10
			Mishing	<i>Norsingh Gachh</i>	Leaf	Juice made from leaves taken orally with water	16
12.	<i>Musa paradisiaca L.</i>	Musaceae	Bodo Kachari	<i>Athia thalit</i>	Stem	To get relieve from fever paste of underground Stem is applied on the forehead	14
			Tribes of Meghalaya	.....	Whole plant	Plant juice or crushed raw fruit mixed with curd is taken orally 2-3 times daily to treat diarrhoea and dysentery	20
			Apatani	.....	Fruit	Indigestion	10
			Tribes of Manipur	<i>Laphu</i>	Fruit, Stem, Roots	Unripe fruits are eaten to cure dysentery and diarrhoea. Roots and stems are cooked and eaten as tonic. Raw stems are mixed with common salt, chilli and dry fish or they are cooked as an item of curry for clearance of stomach	19
13.	<i>Oroxylum indicum (L) vent</i>	Bignoniaceae	Bodo Kachari	<i>Kharang khandai</i>	Bark, seed	To recover from snake bite the bark and seeds are used	14
			Chutia	<i>Bhat-ghila</i>	Stem, Bark	To cure diarrhoea and dysentery infusion of stem bark is taken orally	17
			Apatani	.....	Seed	Purgative, headache	10
			Mishing	<i>Bhatgila</i>	Stem	To recover malaria bark of the plant is consumed as powder	16
			Naga	<i>Tsungrem Noklangnok</i>	Bark, Leaf, Pods	Decoction is drunk for high bold pressure, diabetes and malaria	21
			Nepali, Lepcha and Bhutia	<i>Totola</i>	Flower, Seed,	To cure burns the flowers are burned and applied on the affected area.	22
14.	<i>Oxalis</i>	Oxalidaceae	Chutia	<i>Tengesi</i>		Plant paste is used	17

	<i>corniculata L.</i>		Apatani	.....	Shoot	Appetizer, headache	10
			Tribes of Meghalaya	.....	Whole plant	Paste of the whole plant is made together with <i>Drymaria cordata</i> , <i>Centella asiatica</i> and <i>Metha spicata</i> ; The juice extracted from the paste is used as a medicine in diarrhoea and dysentery	20
15.	<i>Paedaria foetida (L)</i>	Rubiaceae	Bodo Kachari	<i>Khiphibandang</i>	Young stems and leaves	To get relieve from dysentery and stomach ache the paste of the leaves and young stems are used	14
			Apatani	<i>Phadobas lodi</i>	Stem	Gastritis, diarrhoea, stomach disorder	10
			Adi-Miniyong	<i>Yepe-tree</i>	Leaf	Besides used as vegetable to cure diarrhoea and dysentery, the paste of the leaves applied to skin diseases	15
16.	<i>Plantago major L.</i>	Plantaginaceae	Jaintia	<i>Chhakur-blang</i>	Leaf	To cure jaundice crushed leaves and raw milk is mixed and taken in an empty stomach. In case of tooth ache and gum bleeding leaf extract is used	11
			Apatani	.....	Leaf	Constipation	10
17.	<i>Spilanthes paniculata D.C</i>	Asteraceae	Jaintia	<i>Santustem</i>	Flower	Cavity formation and tooth ache are cured by applying crushed flowers	11
			Apatani	.....	Leaf	Constipation	10
18.	<i>Terminalia chebula Retz.</i>	Combretaceae	Bodo Kachari	<i>Selekha</i>	Fruit	In case of gastric and stomach pain powder of the dried fruit is orally taken	14
			Chutia	<i>Silikha</i>	Seed	Asthma patients are given decoction of seed	17
			Apatani	<i>Ontyal</i>	Fruit	Cough	10
			Nepali, Lepcha and Bhutia	<i>Harra</i>	Fruit, Bark	In case of fever, indigestion and diarrhoea powder of crushed bark and fruits are consumed	22
19.	<i>Zanthoxylum oxyphyllum Edgew</i>	Rutaceae	Bodo Kachari	<i>Mejenga</i>	Leaf	Used as remedy for toothcare	14
			Apatani	.....	Fruit	Stomach disorder	10
20.	<i>Zingiber officinale Rosc.</i>	Zingiberaceae	Bodo Kachari	<i>Haizeng</i>	Rhizome	To get relieve from stomach disorder paste of rhizome is consumed. Also the rhizomes are used to cure cough, cold, fever	14
			Apatani	.....	Rhizome	Cough	10

## Conclusion

Medical systems are an integral part of culture. The efficacy of a medical system is not easily evaluated. Among the traditional societies the dividing line between medicine on one hand and

religion, law and society on the other are much less distinct<sup>1</sup>. The traditional medicine practiced by the indigenous communities is of great importance. Cross cultural study of ethno-medicine among the indigenous communities helps to

unearth much precious knowledge regarding health care. This type of cross-cultural study has been an ongoing process in medical anthropology. 20 plants with medicinal values were listed out and their medicinal uses were examined. It was found that some common medicinal plants are used to cure different diseases.

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