



TOUCH THERAPY: SOCIO-CULTURAL BELIEFS MAINTAINING HEALTH OF TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

The life of Ethnic communities residing in this region, mainly pivot round their rich Phyto-diversity, of which they are a part. They have deep faith in supernatural powers of the plants; this may be due to their intense knowledge about their ambient phyto-diversity. Touch therapy, is a process of treatment in which medicines (i.e. locally available plant parts) are made to touch a specific part of the body (superficially), of the patient or domestic animals and thus cure various ailments. It is one of the common socio-cultural beliefs & being practiced mainly by the women & herbal healers of the tribes, mainly the Santhal and the Paharias, of Santhal Parganas. These plants are mainly, associated with festive and auspicious days, riddance from disease, safeguards against animals and evil spirits. The present paper deals with such ethno-medicinal plants, which is being used in touch therapy. Also it highlights this prospect for further researches for its impact, along with the constructive scientific application of this traditional knowledge in the area and our country as a whole.

Keywords: Ethnic communities, Touch therapy, medicines, herbal healers.

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Introduction

Santhal Parganas, the south belt of newly created state of Jharkhand, primarily dominated with different tribal and indigenous population. Santhal Parganas is very rich in its biodiversity where most of the ethno-botanically and ethno-medico-botanically important plants are growing either wildly in the pat forests or in remote undisturbed areas. The tribal communities of Santhal Parganas mainly depend on the herbal medicines for treatment of numerous diseases (Fig. a.-f.). They mainly use to practice their traditional & self managed system of folk medicines. Ethno-medicines or folk medical claims are an important component of their traditional knowledge (Das and Bondya, 2013). This traditional knowledge is gained basically on their necessities,

instinct, observation, trial and error and long experiences.

Treatment through contact therapy is also a part of this valuable traditional knowledge, in which a part of a locally available medicinal plant is made to touch the body superficially, either hung around the neck of the patient or tied to other parts of the body (Fig. g.-h.). The diseases cured mainly, through contact therapy are easy deliveries, post-delivery complications, abortions, preventing miscarriages, chicken pox, jaundice, fever, relieve headache, prevention of sunstroke, reduce rheumatic pain and various intricacies with newly borne babies.

Materials and Methods

Thorough and extensive field work was carried out in

different tribal and indigenous community prominent Blocks/Villages of Santhal Parganas. The survey was conducted in the Blocks namely, Dumka, Gopikandar, Kathikund, Raneshwar, Maslia, Nala, Kundohit, Rajmahal, Shikaripara. Voucher specimens and ethnobotanical information were collected following the methods of Jain (1965) and Jain and Rao (1976). Ethnobotanically, the area has been poorly investigated. The plants species being used by these ethnic communities in touch therapy, not recorded earlier (Kirtikar and Basu, 1935; Anonymous, 1948-1976; Chopra *et al.*, 1956, 1969; Maheshwari and Singh, 1965; Agarwal, 1986; Nayar *et al.*, 1989 and Jain, 1991) are given in this communication.

Knowledgeable persons or herbal practitioners practicing contact therapy were interviewed for recording local name, part used. The specimens have been deposited in the herbarium of P. G. Department of Botany, S. K. M. University, Dumka, Jharkhand- 814101.

Results and Discussions

Different plant species used for the purpose of the touch therapy are documented. Plant names have been arranged alphabetically. The sequence of documentation is as such. The botanical name of the plant species is followed by family within “()” parentheses, local name, voucher specimen number in “[]” parentheses, plant parts used, ethno-medicinal uses and part of the body which is touched with it.

- a. *Achyranthes aspera* L., (Amaranthaceae), Chirchiri, [AD-560].**

Parts used- Roots.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

A 6-7 cm long piece of fresh root, pulled out in one breath is stuck to the lock of hair of the expectant mother or tied around the waist to induce labour pain. Immediately after delivery, the root piece is removed and thrown into running stream water. Small pieces of the roots of this plant, along with the root of *Smilax proliifera* and stem of *Psidium guajava* are tied in a cloth and hanged or fixed above the

main entrance of the home to keep the diseases and evil-spirits out of the home.

- b. *Calamus latifolius* Roxb., (Arecaceae), Ghorua, [AD/SLB-246]**

Parts used- Branches.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

The delicate branches are coiled around neck against leprosy.

- c. *Calotropis gigantea* (L.) R. Br. ex Ait., (Asclepiadaceae), Akand [AD-312]**

Parts used- Leaves.

Ethno-medicinal uses:



Fig. a. A Santhal Women.



Fig.b. In Local Market “Hat”.



Fig. c. Kaviraj showing medicament.



Fig. d. Herbal healers.

A few leaves are stitched together to form a leafy cap, which is kept on head of the patient to alleviate fever.

- d. *Calotropis procera* (Ait.) R. Br., (Asclepiadaceae), Akand, [AD/SLB-348]

Parts used- Leaves, Fruits.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

The patient should take rest on pillows and mattresses stuffed with floss of fruits of the plant species to relieve rheumatic pain. The mature yellow coloured leaves are bandaged on head in the form of cap and also kept at soles of feet to prevent the effect of sunstroke.



Fig. e. showing utilizable herbs.



Fig f.-g. herbs used in touch therapy tied on arms as such.

- e. *Capparis sepiaria* L., (Capparaceae), Paitha, [AD/SLB-300]

Parts used- Roots.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

Root piece is stuck to the lock of hair of pregnant women to induce abortion.

- f. *Cayratia pedata* (Lam.) Juss. ex Gagnep.**, (Vitaceae), Ghoda bichati, [AD/SLB-392]

Parts used- Roots.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

3-5 cm root piece tied as an amulet on the wrist to reduce fever.

- g. *Clerodendrum infortunatum* L.**, (Verbenaceae), Bhant, [AD-338]

Parts used- Roots.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

Three small pieces of the roots with three grains of rice are tied in a cloth and hanged in the ear to overcome toothache. It is hanged in the ear of that side, which has the toothache. The packed of cloth is kept as such, till the pain is alleviated, generally 2-3 days.

- h. *Cyanodon dactylon* (L.) Pers.**, (Poaceae), Dhubghas, [AD-551]

Parts used- Leaves.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

The general weakness of health due to loss of appetite, particularly in children, is called "rogna". Three grains of rice with soil collected from under foot of an elephant, vermilion and leaves of *Cynodon dactylon*, each about 1 gm, are packed together in a piece of cloth, fumed by some incense and made to wear on the neck or arm of the patient, to improve appetite and health.

- i. *Dendrocalamus strictus* (Roxb.) Nees.** (Bambusaceae) Bans [AD-163]

Parts used- Stem (column).

Ethno-medicinal uses:

When a baby weeps frequently, accompanied by loss of appetite and sleep, resulting in general weakness of health, the symptom is popularly called "kohninaga" which literally means weeping sickness. It is supposed to be caused by touching a pregnant woman. A piece of the inner portion of the stem is tied on the neck, waist or arm of the child to cure it.

- j. *Entada rheedii* Spring. (Mimosaceae)** *Hanumanmura* [AD/SLB-362]

Parts used- Roots.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

Twig kept in cattle shed to ward off the diseases.

- k. *Euphorbia pulcherrima* Willd. ex Klotz.**, (Euphorbiaceae), Khir sagar, [AD/SLB-344]

Parts used- Leaves.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

Warm leaves placed on abdomen to cure burning sensation of micturation.

- l. *Helianthus annuus* L.**, (Asteraceae), Pitusing, surajmukhi [AD-354]

Parts used- Roots.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

A piece of the root is tied around neck or arm of the patient to check convulsions (Mirgi). It also cures malarial fever.

- m. *Holarrhena pubescens* (Buch.Ham) Wallich ex G.Don**, (Apocyanaceae), Kurai, [AD-562]

Parts used- Roots.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

About 5gm of the seed paste is administered orally by the patient suffering from vomiting and diarrhea. At the same time, 2 piece of the root are placed on the ground at about a distance of three arms length of the patient. The patient is advised

to cross them three times by jumping from one end to the other, both before and after the medication.

- n. *Paederia foetida* L.,** (Rubiaceae), Gandhali, [AD/SLB-216]

Parts used- Roots.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

The roots cut into 5cm long pieces and are tied on the arms to cure diarrhea and indigestion.

- o. *Phoenix sylvestris* (L.) Roxb.,** (Arecaceae), Khejur [AD-399]

Parts used- Roots.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

A small root piece is wrapped in a cloth and tied to the hair of the expectant mother to induce labour pain and to make delivery easy. The root is removed immediately after the delivery.

- p. *Plumbago zeylanica* L.,** (Plumbaginaceae), Chitrak [AD-318]

Parts used- Roots.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

3-5 cm long piece of root tied as an amulet on the wrist against fever and pain.

- q. *Putranjiva roxburghii*, (Euphorbiaceae),** Pitonji, ***Putranjiva*,** [AD/SLB-360]

Parts used- Seeds.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

The fleshy fruit has a hard seed-containing stone within, which is strung into necklaces for putting on children, the belief being that they ward off evil and ill health. It is useful in curing allergies due to "pitta dosh". Hence the tree is also named ***Putranjiva***.

- r. *Rubia cordifolia* L.,** (Rubiaceae), Latur, [AD/SLB-395]

Parts used- Seeds.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

5 cm long piece of roots worn as amulet to relieve severe headache.

- s. *Tribulus terrestris* L.,** (Zygophyllaceae), Gokhru Kanta, [AD/SLB-368]

Parts used- Fruits.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

After making hole in the fruit, it is attached to the ear lobe opposite to the affected part to relieve hemicrania.

- t. *Woodfordia fruticosa* (L.) Kurz.** (Lythraceae) Dhatki [AD-335]

Parts used- Stem.

Ethno-medicinal uses:

A necklace made of stem pieces is made to wear around the neck to cure spermatorrhoea and general weakness.

The present work is the result of intensive and systematic ethnomedicinal survey conducted in Santhal Parganas of Jharkhand. All the 20 plant species of invaluable ethnomedicinal properties are documented after critical screening with the available literatures. Of these 20 plant species, in majority of diseases roots are found to be an effective medicaments, the number of which reaches up to 10, then the leaves, near about 4, after which is the stems, fruits and then seeds. In discussions with practitioners and informants, it is known that some of them are also blessed by god/ goddess or some super natural power to cure particular disease. The plant species they utilize mainly cures fevers and to promote easy deliveries. Intracacies with newly borne child, ward off evil spirits, treatment of headache and diarrhea comes next to them.

It is also a matter to point that women of tribal and indigenous communities, along with a part of urban population too, use to practice this therapy not only due to economic status but also out of shyness to share

their related complications elsewhere. They along with the majority of the indigenous and tribal population also rely on this traditional & self managed system of folk medicines, to maintain the primary health care. And thus this system of medicines is directly involved in maintaining the health of majority of the population of this district. And it's a fact that the traditional and cultural knowledge, gained from their ancestors is quite deep rooted in them and is quite significant in maintaining and preserving this vast floristic diversity over there (Rao, 1996).

The numerous plant species being utilized in this traditional & self managed system of folk medicines can no doubt prove the best medicines to discover new drugs or lead to molecules for the development of new drugs. However, it doesn't mean to substitute the scientific aspects of the biodiversity with their cultural and traditional approaches, in any way. But, both, namely the cultural & traditional dimensions and the scientific aspects of the bio-resources, have to be studied and evaluated for phytochemical/ pharmacological & nutritional analysis.

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