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Dipsikha Dutta Bhuyan
Department of Zoology
Sibsagar Girls' College P.O. &
Dist: Sivasagar, Assam, India

The role of traditional knowledge among ethnic community specially Tai- Ahom people of upper Assam

Dipsikha Dutta Bhuyan

Abstract

Assam is one of the biodiversity hotspots of North East India. The upper Assam is a land of multi- ethnic identity. The people have a historical continuity of resource use practices for various purposes. This age-old wisdom and traditional knowledge are regarded as ethno- zoological knowledge which is being eroded with time due to many natural and anthropological factors. Ethno- zoological knowledge blended with latest technology can help in sustainable development of the biodiversity as well as the environment.

Keywords: Hotspots, upper Assam, ethno zoological knowledge

1. Introduction

Assam is one of the mega hotspots of North Eastern Region of India. The region is a homeland of ethnic diversity. The ethnic people use the faunal resources for various purposes. The use of animal body parts in diverse traditional methods has not been studied in North Eastern Region in general and upper Assam in particular, in a systematic manner. In view of the significance of the topic, an attempt has been made here to study the ethno- zoological aspects of faunal resources in diverse ways.

Solanki and Chutia reported that in Arunachal Pradesh different products of animals such as hide shield locally called 'Khuk' (made up of dry skin of bear or yak) coat (made up of dry skin of Sambar and other wild animals), cap (locally called 'Yama', made up of tail hair of yak), hat (made up of monkey hair, skin) and dao (made up of dry skin of goat) were used in various socio-cultural practices.

The use of insects as human food (entomophagy) especially by indigenous people in the third world is well documented. (Berlenheimer F.S.1951). The traditional use of insects as food is wide spread in tropical and sub-tropical countries as they provide a significant nutritional, economical and ecological benefit for rural population. In the north eastern region of India particularly the tribal communities of Manipur, Assam and Nagaland use larvae of insects, silk worms late instar larvae and pupae, chiefly *Philosomia ricini* (eri silk worm) and *Bombyx mori* (mulberry silk worm) as food.

The use of animal products in folk medicine (Zoo therapeutics) in different religious and cultural practices, various recipes etc. have become common and routine practices among the ethnic people of Upper Assam.

Variety of materials is found to be used for purposes of adornment or ornamentations. Bone, shells are used for making beads bracelets, collars and ornaments for the ear, nose, lips and hair. Strips of fur for anklets or waistbands, feathers are used in various ways including to elaborate head dresses in entire North East including Upper Assam.

Assam is an imperishable repository of various categories of animals and natural vegetation. The Deodhai Assam Buranji presents an interesting accounts of the various past times of the Ahom monarchs, such as hawk-fights, elephant fights, buffalo fights, tiger-bear contests etc.. Among the Kacharies the worship was carried out by the sacrifice of swine, buffaloes, he-goats, pigeons, ducks and cocks and by offering of rice and liquor and the dancing of woman (deo-dhai). A curious practice of animal sacrifice is in vogue even now in the Siva temples and Devi temples of Assam.

Animals have been associated with the socio-cultural life of human being since long. The earliest wind-instrument used by the people probably Singa, the horn or trumpet. They are chiefly made of buffalo horns and have many names according to their use as Khan Singa, Rana Singa (war trumpet). Singa is blown not only for amusement but also for ritual purposes.

Correspondence

Dipsikha Dutta Bhuyan
Department of Zoology
Sibsagar Girls' College P.O. &
Dist: Sivasagar, Assam, India

Among some communities Sankha or the conck-shell (shell of Molluscs) is another very ancient instrument, being associated with Vishnu (Vishnu Puran) and is blown in performing many domestic rites.

Doutara (made up of reptile's skin), Dhol, Khol (made of dry skin of cow), Nagara, Doba are essential instruments of various rituals and festivals.

Dutta & Bhattacharya in 2009 studied the indigenous fishing methods of River Kalang – Kapili and documented that small cat fishes (*Mystus Sp*) are caught in marginal areas of the river using raw meat of duck as an attractant. Besides this, earthworms, Larvae of various insects (Hornets and Wasps) are used as bait.

Presently, the loss of biological diversity and erosion of tradition knowledge system are issues of great concern. Most of these systems of knowledge are unique and are often known only to a few individuals or communities. Traditional knowledge encompasses belief systems that play a fundamental role in people's livelihood, maintaining their health and protecting and replenishing the environment. Traditional knowledge is dynamic in nature and is stored in culture in various forms such as traditions, customs, folk stories, folk songs, folk dramas, legends, proverbs etc. Traditional knowledge of the ethnic communities specially the Tai-Ahoms can help to increase the relevance and efficiency of bio-resources conservation efforts in various situations, such as in identification of potential species, documentation, revival and rejuvenation of lost varieties and those on the verge of being lost. (Gupta. 2000). Works on Socio-economy, folk culture, history and health care system of different communities and tribes of Assam by Bhuyan (1932). Gait (1967) were the important reports of communities and tribes of Assam. Sharma & Acharya (2004) documented the report on the folk-lore relating the medicinal plants of Sivasagar district. But very few works have been traced out on the ethno-zoological knowledge system of Upper Assam. There is an urgent need for documentation of these traditional knowledge.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted between 2016 and 2017 in various districts of Upper Assam. Before the survey, a pilot study was undertaken to gain background experience of the local communities and the resources available, helping the

researcher to establish rapport with the local people of village area. The study was carried collaboratively, involving local people at every step. Locals were encouraged and helped to share their knowledge about their resource management practices. The data were collected through a combination of methods: community observation, personal interviews, focused group discussion (FGD) and participatory appraisals of animal resources. One FGD in each village was organized, apart from the personal interviews, which helped to cross check the information gathered during the household interviews. In interviews semi structured set of questions had been used along with the informal and open dialogues and group discussions. All the interviews included an initial visit to the village and a series of follow up meetings. Moreover secondary data were collected from various published works

3. Result and Discussion

It has been found that traditional knowledge plays significant role among the ethnic people of Upper Assam. Most of the used species for traditional medicine were common in different districts. Edible species also showed similarity in most of the surveyed area with a few exception. In some cases the simple techniques perfected by different indigenous communities have come handy in tackling the minor problems. Both rural and tribal people of the surveyed area still depend on animals and plants for daily food, medicines, fuel and other domestic purposes including various rituals and ceremonial activities. Thus some species are at the verge of extinction due to over exploitation.

The recent loss of biodiversity especially the faunal diversity in the country as well as in the state due to natural and anthropogenic factors links with the erosion of valuable traditional knowledge associated with the animals. This strong link suggests a need to conduct ethno-zoological research and to document the faunal resources and the associated indigenous/traditional knowledge. Actually Upper Assam is an important spot of biodiversity enriched knowledge according to the historical diary. The research work tries to make an innovative approach, for it embraces various ethno-zoological knowledge which is purely indigenous. It is well known that involving the community in the application and monitoring of the management systems through criteria can enhance the sustainable development of biodiversity as well as the environment.



(i) Making of *Dhol*



(ii) A variety of musical instruments



(iii) Hornets Nest



(iv) Larvae of *Vespa cabro*

4. Conclusion

Age-old wisdom and traditional knowledge many a time have displayed an edge over the modern scientific technologies. Till now due emphasis are still not laid on the conservation of traditional knowledge. The State particularly Upper Assam is a treasure trove of traditional knowledge and wisdom. It is the need of the hour to bring out and record the unexplored traditional knowledge out of the closet and use it scientifically and judiciously. There is an urgent need for documentation of ethno zoological practices. An integrated scientific approach is utmost necessary in Upper Assam to prevent the erosion of traditional knowledge associated with the faunal resources, so that conservation, management and sustainable utilization of these ethno zoological knowledge based animals can enrich the local and global biodiversity simultaneously.

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