



International Journal of Fauna and Biological Studies

Available online at www.faunajournal.com

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International
Journal of
Fauna And
Biological
Studies

ISSN 2347-2677

www.faunajournal.com

IJFBS 2021; 8(1): 22-24

Received: 09-11-2020

Accepted: 16-12-2020

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Ethno zoological knowledge and its present status among the Tai-Ahom people of Sivasagar District, Assam

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22271/23940522.2021.v8.i1a.787>

Abstract

Sivasagar district, the capital of the Ahom kingdom of Northeast India is a part of Indo-Burma, Eastern Himalayan biodiversity hotspot enriched with traditional knowledge. Among the various ethnic diversity Tai-Ahom is the dominant community of the study area. As the traditional knowledge specially ethno zoological knowledge and practices has been eroding among the Tai-Ahom people; An attempt has been made to explore the indigenous ethnozoological knowledge and ascertain the present status in the district.

Keywords: Hotspots, Assam, ethno zoological knowledge, tai-ahom people

1. Introduction

Assam is an imperishable repository of various categories of faunal and floral resources. Sivasagar district of Assam has been recognized as "Iconic Heritage Site" in 2014 by the Government of India due to the rich historical background. As per 2011 census, the Sivasagar district covering an area of 2668 Sq Km with a total population of 1,150,253 is comprised of three subdivisions, viz. Sivsagar, Nazira and Charaideo. The urban population was 9.55% and rural population of the district was 90.45%. of the total population. About 70% of the Tai - Ahom population inhabit in this district. Tai-Ahom people entered into this area in the 13th century A.D., followed by other communities and tribes viz. Koch Kalita, Tea-Garden Communities, Indigenous Muslims, Moran, Motok, Chutia, Mising, Bengali, Bihari, Punjabi, Nepali, Rajasthani, Mech – Kochari, Brahamn- Ganak, Nath- Jogi, Koibortta, Kanayak-Naga, Aao-Naga, Tai-Phake, Tai-Turung, Tai-Khamiyang, Monipuri, Sonowal, Kachari, Barahi, Garu, Deori, Auranachali [Nokty], Moria, Hira. Actually Sivasagar district is the central part of the Tai-Ahom community, according to the historical survey with varied ethno-zoological background. The ethnic mosaic of Northeast India specifically Sivasagar of Assam offers a fascinating area of academic discourse which needs to be examined for a clear understanding of the elements of traditional knowledge. The Tai-Ahom people are well acknowledged with the ethno-zoological concepts. They have vast knowledge about the uses of diversified fauna from their ancestors who learned through a long series of observations in nature by trial and error experiments. They heavily rely on faunal resources for food, medicine, rituals, ornaments, weapons and even for aesthetic and ceremonial purposes. But this indigenous knowledge is on the brink of extinction for most of the practices are obsolete now.

According to Millennium Ecosystem Assessment the total number of species on earth ranges from five to thirty million and only 1.7 -2 million species have been formally identified. IUCN has access to various kinds of information on the species. Recently, some ethno botanical research had been worked out in various parts of Assam (Hazarika *et al*, 2014) and on Indigenous Knowledge among Tai-Khamiyangs by Sonowal & Boruah in 2012 ^[8]; but very few attempts were made to know the scientific approach in reviving the already eroded ethno zoological knowledge of Tai Ahom people.

At present exploration and systematic documentation of traditional knowledge (TK) of the tribal communities is globally considered as a high priority research area. The nature based TK has been responsible for maintaining man- nature equilibrium and has permitted the knowledge holders to utilize the resource sustainably. (Sonowal & Boruah; 2012) ^[8].

The global economy is in transition to a "Knowledge Economy", where knowledge resources are considered as important economic resources and its protection through Intellectual Property Right [IPR] assumes great significance.

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Traditional knowledge has immense value in life support system of the ethnic communities, which are crucial for the - survival of human life.

2. Methodology

The study was accomplished during the period of 2018-2019 in Sivasagar district among Tai-Ahom people of the area of Bokota, Nemuguri, Patsaku. The study was carried out in collaboration with the indigenous ethnic people with authentic resources. The primary data were gathered from knowledge providers specially the Tai-Ahom people, age-old family heads, traditional practitioners, experienced personalities and knowledgeable individuals dwelling in the transitional zone of the nearby forest and also from N.G.O. 'Japi' personalities. The data were collected through direct interviews and standard questionnaires. Secondary data were collected from forest department. Moreover, secondary data were collected from published works of Ghose (2009), Baruah and Gogoi (2010). The valuable suggestions have been achieved from various prominent organisations such as Ahom Sabha, All Assam Tai Ahom Association (ATASU), Tai Ahom Council, Lachit Sena, Tai Historical and Cultural Society etc. The Tai museum, established in 1992, at Sivasagar town had also enlightened the survey in searching the historical relevance with TK a certain extent.

3. Discussion

It is evident from the survey that the huge floristic and faunal biodiversity along with the traditional knowledge of the Sivasagar district has been unexplored and undocumented hitherto. There is always a need for an organised, well-designed collaborative effort among scientific communities and responsible authorities to make a scientific approach for proper documentation of traditional knowledge of the Tai-Ahom people. Appropriate national policy, action plan and program related to the conservation and sustainable uses of biodiversity specially faunal resources should be formulated taking into consideration both the needs of the people and sustainable management of resources. It is significant that Geographical Indications (GI) Right as a form of Intellectual Property Right (IPR) protects the products originating in a particular geographical region and its producers from unwanted duplications. Thrust should be given on having the Tai-Ahom communities living in the fringe areas as active stake holders in the preservation and protection of traditional knowledge; as these people constitute a vast pool of indigenous knowledge. Emphasis is needed in documenting the tradition as they run the risk of facing grave danger of extinction. Advent of modernity, changing lifestyle, growing urbanization and changes in cultural values among the people are the major causes responsible for the extermination. It is needed to document the living traditions which have been in transition from one generation to another with the words of mouth, which have not been articulated or documented historically. It is therefore incumbent on the concerned authorities to acknowledge the grim reality and intervene accordingly. In 1971, UNESCO launched Man and Biosphere (MAB) program to involve community participation in conservation process; but it is in a very initial state.

Bio piracy is a violation of the rights of traditional knowledge practitioners over their biological resources and related knowledge. The protection of TK innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities has achieved international

attention due to the adoption CBD in 1992. The issues of protection and preservation of TK at the international level has been brought to the forefront at the instance of developing countries because of different concerns and perspectives. Lack of motivation in the younger generation to learn the tradition is also an alarming factor. There is a need to enable the Tai-Ahom communities to harness TK for their economic uplift. Legal protection is the need of the hour. In this aspect the Indian Act on IK Biological Diversity Act, 2002; The Geographical Indications of Goods – Registration and Protection Act, 1999; The Patent (Second Amendment) Act, 2002, may be implemented by the competent authority for protection of knowledge of the ethnic people to a large extent. Another conservation measure is Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL). TKDL is a collaborative project of the National Institute of Science Communication and information Resources (NISCAIR) Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, Ministry of Science and Technology, Department of AYUSH, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare which is being implemented at NISCAIR.

Awareness training program can be organised in tribal localities in a planned manner.

Though of late, the government has shown interest in reviving traditional or indigenous knowledge systems, it is needed to be done in the war footing process. The state social forestry /Govt should take initiative for plantation of certain extinct plants besides planning for the tissue culture centre such as Biotech Hub. Strict punitive measures to be taken for killing of wild animals so as to traditional knowledge linked with the faunal resources can be protected.

Besides law enforcing forces and regulations of Government it is always better to involve the ethnic people specially the Tai Ahom people as an active participator considering the ethical issue. In this context, the setting up of the Institute Of Research & Documentation of Indigenous Studies (IRDIS) in Guwahati, Assam is a step in the right direction.

4. Conclusion

Traditional knowledge specially the ethno zoological knowledge plays a pivotal role among the Tai Ahom people of Sivasagar district. The study indicates that there seems to be a tremendous potential among the people regarding TK; so it is distinctly needed to design a web enabled information system leading to easily accessible database. IPR, GI mark, Bio piracy and TKDL must play a significant role in this respect. In the coming decades all the valuable information should be archived and disseminated among the future generation for the sustainable development of the natural resources.

5. Acknowledgement

The author is thankful to the local ethnic people; particularly to the informants for their kind cooperation and necessary guidance during the survey. Thanks are also due to the humble villagers, tribal communities and traditional knowledge providers. The author is also grateful to the library staff of Dibrugarh University & IRDES, Guwahati.

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