

ETHNO-MEDICINE AND INDIGENOUS THERAPEUTIC PRACTICES OF THE NICOBARESE OF KATCHAL ISLAND

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The natural endowment of the horticultural communities is successfully managed not only for subsistence needs but the requirements of ethno-medicine as well. The Nicobarese of Nicobar Island are one of the indigenous inhabitants in India still pursuing the horticultural mode of production and depended on aquatic and terrestrial resources for their survival. The rich natural diversity is badly affected by earthquake and tsunami in 2004 and the islands are inundated with modern health care systems with the initiation of World Health Organization, NGOs and Government to save them from the spread of untoward epidemics. Though the external intervention assisted the affected people in providing the primary relief especially in health and sanitation, but in long run it have had mixed repercussion on their society. Still there are some remote islands where modern health care is a distant dream. They are still depended on native medicine to a great extent in treatment of illness and various seasonal diseases. However, the native flora and fauna used for treatment of diseases are varying from one island to another and even in the same island it varies from one settlement to another. As such, the Nicobarese of the Katchal Island possess traditional knowledge of different native herbs in treatment of various diseases. With this background, the present paper highlights the complementary and alternative indigenous medicine which is conspicuously utilised by the Nicobarese of Katchal Island. The study also highlighted the existing medical pluralism in treatment of common diseases with various methods like use of liquor extracts of various wild herbs, herb mixed oils, healing with warm sacrificial blood after mixing herbs, chants and spiritual appeasement by the Nicobarese community and how these ethno medicinal knowledge is embedded in their socio-cultural practices and handed over to the generations.

Keywords: Andaman, Ethno-medicine, Katchal, Nicobarese

INTRODUCTION

The Katchal Island has come into limelight with the new millennium sunrise on 1st January 2000. It is located on 7° 56' north longitude and 93° 22' east latitude. It is approximately 1600 kilometers from mainland India and 305 kilometers from south to the Port Blair. It is having an area of 174 km². The Katchal Island was inhabited by both Nicobarese and non-tribal settlements. It is remotely located and takes two hours journey on sea from its Headquarter *i.e.*, Kamorta. Even the Kamorta also an interior island can be reached by ship for about two days on sea from Port Blair. Transportation on boat is the only way to reach the island from Kamorta twice or thrice in a week depending purely on weather conditions. It is also accessed by helicopter service frequently which is meant for patients and dignitaries. The majority of the population in Katchal Island consists of Nicobarese followed by the

Tamil Sri Lankan settlers who were brought to work in Rubber Board, the Ranchi community of Central India to work as labourers in forest and the mixed non-tribal population as Government servants. The other communities like Telugu, Bengali, and local population from other parts of India also residing in this island on account of business, forest labour and fishing.

The Nicobarese

The total population of Katchal Island is 5312 consisting 2847 men and 2465 women. Of which, the Nicobarese population is only 2662 consisting 1372 men and 1290 women (Prasad and Haider, 2011). They exhibit Mongoloid features in their physical appearance. Their social organization could be understood from its maximal lineage system as it facilitates cooperation of its members. It is popularly known as *tuhet*. It is a consanguine group related by birth wherein no individual possesses exclusive

inheritance rights over the land and resources but it is the *tuhet* as a whole that possess rights over the resources within their territory. When certain lineage members of a *tuhet* separate themselves from the parent one on account of serious disputes and establish a separate identity as a new *tuhet* it is referred as *kinem* (Justin, 1990). As per established customary norms, separated lineage members of the parent *tuhet* shall have no access to the coconut and areca nut plantations and horticultural gardens and the same is true for all members of the newly established *tuhet*. They are being allotted land in their ancestral property. The life cycle of the Nicobarese ranging from *kunhango* (birth), *vinokonvio* (naming ceremony), *kunhahng* (removal of first hair), *in-hoinyo-nyio* (initiation ceremony), *takirangsakam* (puberty), *pihoore* (marriage) and *panyap* or *kinpaha* (death).

They are non-vegetarian and eat pork, fish, mutton, beef, and chicken. They also consume traditional coconut toddy known as *kavut*. Cultivation of coconut, pandanus, banana, different varieties of tubers, and other horticultural crops is a main economic activity of the Nicobarese besides fishing and pig herding. The island economy is similar to the economic pattern of Polynesian community Tikopia. Now a day they are engaged in cultivation of areca nut for self-consumption and marketing. Apart from this, they do engage in making cane and bamboo baskets, canoes, wooden or iron spears. Inter-island exchange is a marked feature of the Nicobarese society which facilitates them to obtain scarce resources (Man, 1923).

The social life of the Nicobarese is governed by Tribal Island Council at first instance followed by traditional village Council known as *manula* (Village Council) in local parlance. The inter village disputes or problems are dealt by Island Council which consists of representatives from all the headmen from Nicobarese settlements. It is headed by Chief Captain, Vice Chieftain, Secretary, Joint Secretary, and members consist of all the village headmen of the island. The intra village disputes are dealt by *manula*. The nature of punishment ranges from imposing fines, community feasts, and ex-communication.

Though majority of the Nicobarese are converted to new religious faith *i.e.*, Christianity, and Islam still some of them are worshipping the fetishes known as *kareava* (fetish of human and animal figurine) and *hentukui* (a fetish

wooden board consists of sketches of their habitat and ecology), malevolent and benevolent spirits during ceremonial occasions. Elaborate ancestral worship, magico-religious treatment, and seasonal festival were part of their religious life are discussed at length in the following chapters.

The traditional dress of the Nicobarese like *ngong* (petticoat) and *kisat* or *ning* (loin cloth) are being replaced by modern dresses. But the traditional clothing for men is loincloth which is worn only during ritual occasions at present. The present dress pattern of women *i.e.*, *sarong* and a blouse, resembles the dress pattern of Burmese, Karen or Malay women. Nicobarese generally speak their own Nicobari dialect for communication within family and kin groups. The Nicobari language is classified as *hç*, *chiôi* and *hçchaai* by Grierson and grouped with 'Austro-Asiatic language' family along with Khasi, Munda, Mon-Khmer, Sakai-Semang, Palaung-wa (Grierson, 1928). This language is spoken in six variant dialects by the natives of Nicobar group of islands with marked difference in speech intonations and vocabulary.

Perception of health and illness

The Nicobarese perceive that health is purely a condition or state of performing personnel as well as economic activities in routine life. The case of illness is identified as failure or incapacity to undertake any physical labour. They perceive that the cause of illness to various factors pertaining to seasonal, natural, and supernatural. The disease like dreadful malaria, dysentery, loose motions, and filaria are frequent during heavy rains and are seasonal in nature. The natural causes are attributed to consumption of contaminated food and water, unhygienic habits. The supernatural causes are attributed to actions evil spirits, witchcraft, and sorcery. The high fever with shivering, bad dreams, loss of appetite is the consequence of the attack of spirits.

Indigenous diagnosis

Nicobarese generally identify the nature and type of disease after inspecting the affected bodily parts, eye, and tongue. Further, the patient explains verbally the nature of suffering to native medicine man. In some cases, the native medicine practitioner keeps some wild herbs under the

pillow of the patient. By doing so, they believe that name of the disease may be recalled in dreams. Based on the symptoms, Nicobarese prepare herbal medicine in different ways ranging from crushing in mortar, concoction or liquor, frying in oil, mixing herbs in warm sacrificial blood and consumed orally or applied over body.

Native classification of diseases

Nicobarese classify the illness or type of disease based on its symptoms and names them in their vernacular terms. The nomenclature is varying from one settlement to another and one island to another. By and large, these are widely recognized through Car Nicobar terms also. As such both native as well as Car Nicobarese terms are given below for proper understanding the diseases prevalent in Katchal Island.

- *chok viong* (Katchal) *laneen tochok elon* (Car Nicobar) Stomach ache
- *punkâyö* or *vmöi* - Fever
- *ehe* - Cough
- *kâpö to pçh* - Snake bite
- *kâpö to kuikuvoko* - Centipede bite
- *iso-ah* or *ueoav Isav* - Loose motions
- *to chiônnp-ngo* - Tuberculosis, TB
- *uhak nömö* - Asthma or Bronchitis
- *vahav ellon* - Cancer
- *kaleron maham* - Blood Pressure
- *ellonreinyab* - Stomach pain
- *rot ten kinpaha* - Heart attack
- *yonyore* - Stillbirth or birth defects
- *kuon maham* or *hilom* - Jaundice
- *hange-ere* or *key* - Epilepsy
- *chavilong elmat* - Giddiness
- *kiyos* - Boil or abscess
- *to-suktore* - Injury
- *ohokinmonö* - Limbs fracture
- *chok kanad* - Teeth ache
- *chok mat* and *elnang* - Eye and ear ache
- *otö kuonu* - Impotency
- *katekui* or *rango* - Spirit possession
- *misokö* - Fileria

Knowledge of curing

Nicobarese are expert in classifying different varieties of herbal leaves, flowers, roots, and fruits that are available in their eco-system based on the traditional knowledge which is passed on to them from their ancestors. However the usage of particular leaf, root, or flower for treatment may vary from one area to other. Due to fear of side effects of allopathic medicine, distant health care, and unawareness, the Nicobarese still depended on native medicine to large extent. As such, the status of knowledgeable native medicine practitioners is high in their society and hence treated with due respect wherever they confronts. No money transaction is involved, but it is customary to offer liquor or toddy and sumptuous food as a token of respect for their service. Though the knowledge of medicinal herbs is possessed by all the Nicobarese, very few persons have expertise in processing and preparation of herbs for medicinal purposes. Generally it is the elderly people who are engaged in treating the minor illness at their residence. Major illness is dealt by native medicine men that possess knowledge of magico-religious treatment along with herbs. In some cases, the herbal medicine is prepared by the concerned family and administered through fellow Nicobarese believed to be a good person.

Chok viong (Stomach ache)

To get immediate relief from the stomach ache, an herbal concoction is prepared with *sanuk* (*Ganophyllum falcatum*) and *kalitnaich* leaves by smashing in *sanöng ranun* (wooden or metal mortar). The concoction made with *panrapö*, *ollka*, *chanrevö* (*Lepisanthes rubiginosa*), and *tokuröt* also used for relief from the stomach-ache. This process is continued up to three days regularly morning and evening. During this treatment, the patient is given soft foods like roasted banana, tubers. They are barred to eat fish, oil, and spicy foods during treatment. The leaves of *vian*, *ukoh*, and *tihanloo* are cut into small pieces and macerated for long time as a remedy to stomach ache.

Punkâyö (Fever)

The herbal leaves known as *roi arek*, *roi mitakngöreyö* are thoroughly crushed in a *sanöng ranun* and mixed with coconut oil. The resultant pastry or mixture is added to a

bucket full of water. The patient is instructed to take bath in herb mixed water for two days. Further, the patient is also advised to gargle the same water twice a day. By doing so, Nicobarese believe that body temperature will be reduced. In case of high fever caused by malaria and typhoid, the method of treatment is different. The leaves of *arek* and *mitakngöreyö* are hand crushed and mixed with fowl blood. The mixture is also added by wild leaves known as *roi kimeuy*, *roi kachamai*, *roi misiyanga* (*ocimum tenuiflorum*), *matoak* (*curcuma longa*) in the form of pastry. Thus prepared mixture is daubed on the patient body for a period of eight days continuously.

Ehe (Cough and Cold)

The leaves plucked from *misiyanga* (*Ocimum tenuiflorum* or *tulsi*) are smashed in medicine mortar and mixed with ginger pastry to it. Later on some water is added and boiled for some time. Thus extracted liquor is administered orally to subside cold and cough.

Chok-kui (Headache)

The leaves of *lonuon* are smashed and it is added with *umvou* (lime) to make it pastry. It is applied on the forehead of the patient. Apart from this, in case patient experiences body pains are advised to take bath in sea water.

Chakarar (Back ache)

The leaves of *ingnak* (*Lawsonia inermis*) are powdered and added little quantum of water to make it pastry. This mixture is applied all over the pelvic girdle to relieve from back ache.

Tooth ache

The patients who are suffering from tooth ache are asked to chew the leaves of *paniyamma* to get rid of pain. In some places *panyom* leaves are chewed for relieving the toothache.

Elnang mat (Ear ache)

The jelly like portion of aloe vera like plant is extracted and squeezed strongly with two palms to extract its liquid. Few drops are slumped in the ear to cure acute pain.

Chok mat (Eye congectiveness)

The leaves of *lurong* (*Morinda citrifolia* L.) are roasted on fire and smashed in palm along with few drops of water. The resultant paste and liquid is applied to affected eye.

Key (Epilepsy)

When ever the affected person experiences bodily vibration, immediately he was forced to sit in front of fire to get rid of shivers. Later on concoction was prepared from the smashed leaves of *tavugnai* and administered orally to the patient in raw form.

Chavilong elmat (Giddiness)

In case any individual experience giddiness during day time, he is asked to lie down and the *singera* leaves are kept under the pillow for a while. By doing so, they believe that giddiness is immediately relieved and can resume routine work.

Constipation

Lanan kaap (*Ipomoea per-caprae*) are small plants widespread on the mouth of sea bed or beach. The tiny leaves of these plants are smashed in palm and its pastry is daubed on the stomach of the child. By doing so the child defecates freely. The same leaves are also kept under the pillow of the patient who is affected with giddiness for relief.

Blood Pressure

To reduce the high blood pressure, the drumstick (*Moringa oleifera*) leaves are pounded till it turns into juice form and it is administered to patient orally. The quantity may be depended on the age of sick. Depending on the age of the patient, the quantum of juice is prepared. Otherwise excess consumption may lead to side effects.

Uhaa nömö (asthama)

The saliva of *alow* (hawabill bird) is extracted up to a half cup and it is mixed with water (quarter cup) and the resultant pastry is boiled. The concoction is given to patient for a period of seven days to get relief from bronchitis. The medicine locally popular as *likup* (*Ocimum sanctum* L.) is prepared with powder of *kanap rev* (crocodile teeth),

water, and honey are given for asthma patient. The concoction prepared with the smashed *roi matka* is also used for its treatment. (Plate. 1)

Hilom or Kuon maham (Jaundice)

The leaves of *umhok* and *kal* are crushed and mixed with sacrificial blood of a pig. This mixture is applied to upper portion of the patient. *Kinfio-hayom*, *kanap-page* are crushed in palm and mixed with fresh cow or goat milk. This medicated drink is given to jaundice patient for cure. The patient is barred from eating fish during that time. Only green vegetables, papaya, red banana and sugar cane are allowed to eat.

Injury

To attach broken limbs, the *lurang* root is scrapped with cane scrapper and added little bit of water. This mixture is applied at broken place and kept small bamboo or coconut splits as a support to the kept pastry. Then they tie it properly with *beth* (cane) strings to the limb as bandage. It is removed after one week.

Ueoav Isav (loose motions)

The leaves of *tinyam* and *muyeuo* are crushed in *sanòng ranun* and soft flesh of tender coconut is mixed thoroughly. It is daubed on the stomach of the patient. The patient is barred to consume sour items, mango, lemon etc. Only boiled *laal khela* (red banana) is given as food. In some cases, the leaves of *takiting* and *takurotang* (*Lepidopetalam montanum*) are smashed together and poured cold water in it. After filtering it, the liquor is given to dysentery patient.

Pishih (Itching)

Turmeric root collected from horticultural garden is scrapped by using cane scrapper. Thus scrapped turmeric is added to *ngonado* (coconut kernel) to make a pastry and daubed on the skin where itching rashes are spread. After some time, the patient is asked to take bath with sea water.

Treatment for poisonous bites

The fish known as *tiyung* in Nicobar is considered as poisonous and confronted rarely to the Nicobarese while

in fishing. If anyone consume mistakenly, immediately the concerned person dies if he is not given antidote immediately. The leaves of *samak leh* are used for treatment of such cases by the Nicobarese. Further, *chamak* is a kind of poisonous fish type snake which is bitten during fishing. At that time, the same fish is roasted on fire and its ash is daubed on bitten place.

In case of snake bite, the wild leaves known as *roi chualö* crushed in mouth for some time and taken out. Then they add dried tobacco to this mixture and again chewed for some time. Thus chewed leaves pastry is daubed on the bitten place as first aid for not spreading poison and pain relief. Later on the smashed *roi pongamiol* are mixed with milk extracted from scrapped copra. This mixture is applied on the bitten spot of the patient.

In case of centipede bite, the dried *hukyak* (cane leaves) are burned in fire hearth and the resultant ash is applied on bitten spot of the limb. Later on light massage is done with palm over the spot for some time. Thereafter, no solid food is given to the patient for one hour. In some cases, tobacco ash is also used for its cure. The ash extracted from the burning of tobacco leaves are mixed with coconut oil and applied on the bite spot. The leaves of *chukiyavö* are used for wild pig bites and cuts on body due to knife by smashing in medicine mortar.

Magico-religious treatment

The Nicobarese could not venture alone inside the dense forest, or to grave yard, or to the places where person died by hanging are believed to be abode of dead spirits. In case anyone wander to such places alone are vulnerable to the attack of concerned malevolent spirits. Such affected individuals are terribly frightening in dreams, shivering while seeing outsiders, strange behaviors with family members and ultimately suffer due to loss of appetite. This spirit possessed persons are treated with magic by the Nicobarese in the form of knotting sacred talisman. At first instance cold water is sprinkled on eyes of the affected and offer worship at *kareava* along with affected person. Later on *neuimo* is also tied on neck or at upper hand. Up to two to three days the spirit affected is confined in the house and not allowed to come outside. The extreme cases are dealt by *menlouna* in front of *hentukui* and *kareava* by sacrificing a small pig (plate 2). The blood of the sacrificial

pig is mixed with wild herbal leaves are daubed on the body of the spirit affected. The children and the affected individuals do attend the event and apply the ritualized blood as they believe that by doing so they recover early from the illness or immune themselves from the attack of further diseases. To protect them from the attack of malevolent spirits and died souls, they apply ritualized or herb mixed coconut oil on forehead, fore arms, chest, and legs along with ritualized blood (plate 3).

Blood therapy

The smashed leaves of *tumhaha*, *lurong* (*Morinda citrifolia* L.), *tavuku* are mixed with warm blood which extracted from the cuts on either cheeks of live cock. It is so that small cut is made on the two sides of cock cheeks with sharp knife by holding it vertically. Furthermore the warm blood collected from the sacrifice of small pig is mixed with above mentioned herbs and this medicinal sacrificial blood mixture is smeared all over the patient body and kept it for a day (plate 4). Later on the patient is advised to take bath in sea water. By doing that they believe that body temperature is lowered. In some cases, the leaves of *takorotang*, *samyangnyi*, *kachamai* are smashed and mixed to the sacrificial blood of the cock. The resultant pastry is daubed on certain parts of the affected person's body where nerves are properly visible. It is believed that the spirits may not harm those persons who had undergone this therapy.

Apart from the above mentioned curing methods, Nicobarese also rely on *menlouna* (witch doctor) for treatment who treat the patients by pacifying the responsible spirits in the form of chantings, offering of rice and other daily consumable articles. Now a days they also rely on the talisman provided by the fellow Ranchi community as an alternative medicine. They believe that the efficacy of the herb or root comes when it is ritualized by a specific person by memorizing their ancestors. By doing so they are preserving the indigenous knowledge and transmitting it to their kith and kin. But it is the need of the hour to document their native herbs in scientific ethno-botanical names for the wider usage of the Nicobarese indigenous medicine to mainstream and the benefit of intellectual property rights should goes to the community.

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CONCLUSION

From the above data, it is evident that traditional knowledge of the Nicobarese of Katchal Island is facilitating them to adapt to the health problems posed by both natural and man-made disasters. The knowledge of various flora and fauna and the island eco-system facilitating the Nicobarese in coping the crisis through utilization of wild herbs since the knowledge of ethno medicine being used and transmitted from one generation to the other orally. Though some of the indigenous therapeutic practices like mixing of herbs warm oozing blood of the fowls and other animals seems to be in crude form, its scientific empiricism needs to be further investigated. The performance of magico religious practices for supernatural diseases treatment demonstrate their belief in the power of their ancestors and perpetuation of the age old traditions which ultimately projecting the Nicobarese cultural identity.

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