

Ethno-ophiology - A traditional knowledge among tribes and non-tribes of Bastar, Chhattisgarh

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In India, snakes are one of the most sacred second only to the cow. Snakes pose threat to human beings by their appearance and specific characters. In reality both poisonous and non-poisonous types exist, but people dying of fear are more than of poison. Modern medical science has taken the use of snake venom as medicine from the traditional one, but much more is there to be analyzed, studied and incorporated in to the modern medicine for the better of the mankind. The paper deals with traditional medicinal knowledge of the venomous creature, practiced among tribals and non-tribals of Bastar.

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Mother Nature has ever served the man kind with all her best. The creations possess both negative and positive face, the goodness lies in the logical use. An old synonym for snake is serpent (*serp*=to creep)¹. In some parts of the world, especially in India snake charming is a roadside show performed by a charmer. Snakes belonging to the Class Reptilia, Order Squamata, and Sub-order Ophidia among Chordates pose threat to human beings. Deaths resulting from snakebite are common and in absence of prevention of snakebites and first aid treatment, these numbers are increasing. India supports 270 species of snakes, out of which about 60 are venomous. In size, colour and habits, they can be very different from each other. In some cultures, consumption of snake for their medicinal property is acceptable and even considered a delicacy. In India religious status is also assigned. Out of the 252 essential chemicals selected by the World Health Organization, 8.7% comes from animal origin²⁻³. Many attempts have been made to elucidate medicinal significance of animals and/or animal products in certain tribal communities from the Indian sub-continent but less of this reflects the medicinal properties of snakes⁴⁻¹⁹. Most of the knowledge

accumulated by the aboriginal and tribal people is unknown to scientific community, and now it has reached the point of disappearance due to lack of documentation²⁰. Therefore, the study aims to elucidate Bastar's traditional knowledge in the treatment of various ailments using snakes and /or snake products.

Methodology

The study area, Bastar is located in the southern part of Chhattisgarh and situated at a height of 609.6 m plateau from sea level at a Longitude of 19°5' and Latitude of 82°1'. The beauty of Bastar district lies in its natural forest area and various types of cultures. The inhabitants of Bastar were both tribals and non-tribals with their own traditional living ways. Mostly, they depend on medicinal plants and animals for their healing practices, snakes also play an important role. The indigenous knowledge and cultural aspects of Bastar has always aroused interest of researchers, But focus on ethno-ophiology practices has not been reported. The information documented is based on data collected from both tribal and non-tribal medicine men. The people of Bastar had a strong belief that the efficacy of the therapy will be lost if it is disclosed to strangers. The

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snake derived remedies and the manner in which the medicines were prepared and administered were recorded. Most of the species are very common and identified by, using zoological references. Ethnophiology studies were carried out among all the inhabitant communities.

Results

Medicinal uses of snakes and snake products in Bastar region, in various kinds of diseases are as follows:

Ptyas mucosus, Common rat snake, *Dhamana saap*

Uses: Fats and oils of these snakes are used to cure joints pain; meat is cooked and eaten in weakness. Blood is used as remedy in arthritis pain.

Naja tripudians, Cobra, *Naag*

Uses: Blood of cobra is drunked to increase sexual virility. The blood is drained while the cobra is still alive when possible, and is usually mixed with rice liquor, and is used as tonic to increase sexual performance. Fats and oils are applied to cure hair loss; externally applied on head to cure migraine and also for rapid healing of fractured bones.

Python molurus, *Ajgar*, *Boda saap*

Uses: Cooked flesh is used to cure weakness. Its bile duct is used as an antidote against spider and snakebite. Roasted flesh is given to children to cure malnutrition. Fat is applied to relieve bodyache, rheumatic pain and burn wounds pain. Bone of tail is worn as locket to cure from evil things.

Vipera russelli, Russel's viper, *Nag*, *Daboai*

Uses: Scales are kept to the side of patient suffering from fever as remedy; often kept inside locker room as a belief to gain much in earning.

Lachesis gramineus, Bamboo sarp, *Bans saap*

Uses: Flesh of the snake is kept with fermented rice drink *landa* and used as tonic to improve appetite, and to strengthen bones, tendons and muscles.

Eryx johani, Black earth boa, *Domuha saap*

Uses: Fat and oil of the snake are applied on chest region to cure asthma.

Discussion

In the present study, information on snakes used by traditional healers and local population of Bastar district is highlighted. In several other countries, different species of snakes are taken as nutritious

food. But in India, only in selected places, some snakes are used as food and as medicine. The new generation is not much interested in medicinal properties of snakes and their products, so there is need to record such ethnomedicinal uses of snakes before they are lost.

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