Traditional lore on the preparation of *Marcha* in Sunsari district, Nepal

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The paper communicates the indigenous method of preparation of the starter culture or *marcha*, for the fermentation of the traditional liquors. There exists high consumption of alcoholic beverages among mooshar, tharu, limbu, magar, newar, rai, sunuwar communities of Sunsari district, Nepal. They use nearby different plants growing in the vicinity as part of ingredients in the preparation of *marcha* leading to the production of two types of alcohols, viz. jand and raksi, having distinct flavour, concentration and taste, depending on the types of the plants used while preparing *marcha*. Such plants are collected from nearby forests, grassland, wasteland, cropland, roadsides and riversides during off season. The flour obtained from grain of rice is commonly used as a stock medium in the *marcha*.

**Keywords:** *Marcha, Jand, Raksi, Ethnic communities, Sunsari district, Nepal*

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Since time immemorial, the ethnic communities, through their traditional knowledge have inferred what to eat and what not to eat. In fact, the food habit of mankind developed on the basis of experiences and survival through successive generations. The earliest generation gathered fruits, nuts, moss, tubers and shoots in season for various forms of food and sustenance and down the ages they became thoroughly acquainted with the exclusion of harmful substances from wild plants in the preparation of food and beverages for consumption. Learning about edible plants, processing of new foods and medicines and how to prepare and process them safely and effectively, has been in large part incremental and cumulative among the societies living in close connection with nature. Consumption of rice beer is a common practice among all tribal communities. Most of the tribes have been preparing rice beer since time immemorial.

Sunsari is one of the districts in the eastern part of Nepal, which has a total area of 1,257 sq km. It lies between latitude 26°52' - 27°52' N, and 87°19' - 87°59' E longitude. The elevation in the region ranges from 152-1,420m. The soil texture varies from sandy to sandy loam impregnated with the boulders. It has rich floral diversity under the influence of monsoonic sub-tropical and temperate climate. The major ethnic groups identified and studied with respect to their various plant uses in Sunsari district included the magar, rai, limbu, newar belonging to the Tibeto-nepali stock and satar, tharu and mooshar belonging to the Indo-Nepali stock. These ethnic groups have a common Nepali dialect but magar, rai, limbu, newar, mooshar and tharu have their respective dialect too. These ethnic groups have immense plant lore and folklore, which they have traditionally maintained just through oral conversation without keeping any written records. In the lives of the above ethnic communities, locally prepared liquors like *jand* (local beer), which has low concentration of alcohol and *raksi* (local liquor) having higher concentration of alcohol, form an integral part of social structure of the communities and are considered obligatory in the festivals and ceremonial activities. The communities generally prepare these alcoholic beverages on a regular basis to meet their domestic consumption but there are instances where some ethnic groups trade in them for their livelihood, without legal permission.

**Methodology**

The data based on ethnobotanical information were gathered through regular bimonthly visits made to different villages like Gadedanda, Panmari and Bajagaar of Sunsari district during 2006-2007. During field visits, frequent interviews and discussions were held with elderly people, particularly women of the...
villages for collecting information involved in the preparation of marcha. Critical observations were made on the mode of preparation of starter culture. Data were recorded on the plant parts used, local name, place of collection, process of preparation. The voucher specimens were collected and identified. Herbarium specimens are lodged in the Herbarium of Kathmandu University.

Results
The method of preparation has been observed to be more or less the same in all three villages in which the surveys were conducted. The starter cake, marcha plays an important role in the preparation of the two types of alcoholic beverages. In the collection of the different plants used in the preparation of marcha, it is generally the womenfolk along with their elder children who are involved. The visits into the nearby forests, grasslands, riversides are made with an earlier knowledge of the locations, where the particular forests, grasslands, riversides are made with an earlier knowledge of the locations, where the particular plants are found growing. The collected plants are carried in small sized doko or conical shaped backpacks made-up of bamboo (Dendrocalamus hamiltonii) splints, supported by a namlo or strap, made-up of hemp fibre (Cannabis sativa) placed on the forehead.

In the preparation of the marcha, different parts of the plants or as in some cases, whole plant is used. The different plants are chosen for imparting different flavours, for determining the strong, bitter or sweet taste of the final product and due to their property to act as intoxicants. Therefore, more than one type of plant or plant-parts are generally included in the preparation of marcha. In most cases, young tender leaves and stem are dried, and powdered as part of the ingredients of marcha. After the plants are collected and brought back to the village, they are washed clean with spring water and spread out on straw mats and left to dry in the shade for a couple of days. Generally, as much as ten different wild species of plants are collected at a time, but rice and wheat that are used as stock material, are available domestically. The plants are listed as follows with their botanical name, followed by family name in parenthesis, and local name in newar (N), magar (Ma), and rai (R) and parts used.

Artocarpus heterophyllus Lamk. (Moraceae), Katahar (N)—leaves and tender shoots.
Blumea lacer (Burman fil.) de Candolle (Asteraceae), Kopile jhar (Ma,R)—whole plant.

Clematis buchananiana de Candolle (Ranunculaceae), Ghante phul (N,Ma,R)—whole plant.
Conyza japonica (Thumb.) Less., Salaha jhar (R)—Inflorescence.
Drymaria diandra Blume, Abijalo (Ma)—whole plant
Eupatorium adenophorum Spreng., Banmara (N)—whole plant
Natsiatum herpeticum Buch-Ham ex Arnott (Icacinaceae), Kali lahara (R)—whole plant.
Piper mulesgua Buch.-Ham. ex D. Don (Piperaceae), Chabo (Ma)—young leaves.
Plumbago zeylanica L. (Plumbaginaceae), Chitu (Ma)—whole plant.
Scoparia dulcis L. (Scrophulariaceae), Chini jhar (Ma)—whole plant.
Oryza sativa L. (Poaceae), Chamal (N,Ma,R)—grains for flour and brewing.
Triticum aestivum L. (Gramineae), Gahun (N,Ma,R)—grains for brewing.

The different plant parts, which are earlier dried are put in wooden mortar or okhli, made of wood from khumbri (Gmelina arborea) and pounded manually by wooden pestle or musli made of wood from rajbriksha (Cassia fistula). The mixture is continuously pounded by the musli till it attains a greenish powdery texture (Figs.1&2). The stock medium or flour that is to be mixed with the powdered plant parts are obtained by grinding chamal or rice grains, 2-3 kg at a time, which are soaked overnight in water while in the morning the soaked rice is semi dried in sun and is ground in wooden threshers or dhiki made of wood from khanyu (Ficus semicordata). The dhiki is operated by exerting pressure with the leg and foot to pound the grains. The grounded powder is taken out, sieved in a chalni-made up of wire mesh and bamboo (Dendrocalamus strictus) splints and the coarse particles are put back in the dhiki for further threshing. This process continues till fine white powder or flour is obtained. The flour is then transferred by wooden mugs to ari or wooden bowl made of wood from khamari (Gmelina arborea).

For every kg of flour, around 300 gm of plant powder mixed with spring water collected from a nearby pond is worked into dough manually. From this dough, small circular cakes of approximately 4-6 cm diameter and 0.8 mm-1cm in thickness are made by pressing in palms of hands. Some powder of starter marcha from previous preparation is sprayed
on the cakes and they are left to ferment. The cakes are then spread out on nanglo or winnowing trays made from bamboo splints of choya baas (Dendrocalamus strictus) for shade dry. At night, the nanglo containing the marcha cakes are kept on wooden planks about 2.5 m above the fireplace to facilitate faster drying. After complete drying, the cakes become hard and whitish in colour with greenish mosaic tinge (Fig.3). The fermentation duration of cakes varies according to season, which is generally faster during the summer. The dried fermented cakes are collected in shallow semi-conical bamboo baskets dalo and are finally stored under shade conditions prior to being used in brewing. It can be stored for about a month and can be used as and when required. The marcha cakes are prepared by some limited ethnic families, which they consume in the personal brewing of jand and raksi but whenever there is any excess or left over marcha, it is sometimes sold or exchanged in barter with other household commodities like vegetables, cereal grains, dried meat, tobacco, etc.

Discussion
The preparation of marcha cakes and the subsequent production of jand and raksi play a vital role in the socio-cultural lives of the ethnic communities of Sunsari district, being an integral part of various festivals such as baisakhe purne (rai), udauli (rai), bada dashami (rai, magar, newar, limbu, sunuwar), tihar (rai, magar, newar, limbu, sunuwar), rituals and household ceremonies like births, marriages, etc. In almost every tribal community, there are people who still know and understand the traditional values of ethnic foods and beverages. The consumption of the beverages daily in minimum limits is considered good for health and nutritious after a hard long day of toiling in the fields. The society, culture, traditions, ethics, ecology and food habit of any community cannot be seen in the isolated mode, because all are intermingled together and their interactions are very complex. The ecology provides a range of probability to select the plants for food, while culture decides the tradition and ethics of a particular society what to eat, when to eat, how to eat and how to preserve the related natural resources. While selecting and processing a particular food, the womenfolk of the communities consider many factors like food habit of whole family, resources available with them, duration of cooking and preservation, nutritional properties of recipes used in foods, customs and health of different age group of family.

The belief that minimal consumption of these beverages is good for the health may be attributed to medicinal properties of the plants used in the preparation of marcha. It is evident that Ayurveda constitutes a profile of alcoholic beverages with therapeutic properties. It is indicated that such alcoholic drinks, taken according to the prescribed procedure, in proper dose, at the proper time, along with wholesome food and according to the capacity of the individual produces effects like ambrosia. However, the nutritional and medicinal potentials of the plants or plant parts used need intricate, scientific study. There is still much scope to know about the health effects, medicinal and therapeutic properties of certain foods. How these foods complement each other, in what ways their use pattern and effects on metabolic activities may be genetically determined to understand the mystery of foods. This provides ample scope of scientific interest. Many of the tribal people have not carried out modern experiment as they still have an indigenous method of local liquor.
preparation. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to document and encourage the traditional practice of marcha preparation existing among the ethnic communities before it is forever lost in the annals of history.

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References