

Gondhsorai Goss (*Cinnamomum cecicodophne* Meissn), Tong-Loti (*Eupatorium Cannabinum* L and Athia/Bhim Kol (*Musa Paradisiacal* L): Sacred plants of Sonowal Kachari Tribe of Assam, North East.

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Abstract:

The Sonowal Kachari tribes are one of the indigenous tribal people belonging to Schedule tribes community who practice different superstitions and cultural traditions. The paper represents three sacred plants which are used in various cultural festivals and also symbolize the use of plants to cure various diseases. Thus sacred plants signify the ethno-ecological knowledge system of the indigenous communities.

Key words: *Sonowal Kachari, Baithow Puja, Bohua Dance.*

Introduction:

Indigenous and Tribal people use several plant parts in magico-religious beliefs and rituals to worship their traditional gods and goddesses, village deities as well their ancestors for the protection and betterment of human life. Their beliefs and spirituality of the people are intimately linked to the natural environment. The Sonowal Kacharis are one of the major indigenous known tribes of Assam. They are a branch of the great Bodo Kacharis who unknowingly migrated from Brahmaputra valley from their original abode in Tibet and Western China. 'The Sonowal Kachari forms the third largest plain of Assam. The total population of this tribe is about 3, 50,000. They are Mongoloid in origin'. (Bordoloi & Sharma, 1988).

The sacred plants have been protected since ages by traditional societies through their socio-cultural and religious practices and beliefs. A number of ethnobotanical studies on different tribal communities of NE India have been undertaken by different works (Jain and Borthakur, 1980, Das & Tag, 2006; Sarma et al.2008; Das et. al 2009, Roy Burman, J.J., 1995). The traditional knowledge of medicinal plants helps in conservation of cultural practices and biodiversity and also in finding new alternative drugs (Pei, 2001). The ethical aspect of TEK deals with the cultural

spiritual and religious belief systems centred on the concepts of the sacred species, sacred groves and sacred landscapes (Ramakrisnan, 2001).

R.Sonowal (A Gondhsorai Goss (*Cinnamomum Cecicodopne Meissn*) is used to worship Baithow puja among the Sonowal Kachari tribes of Assam. The Baithow puja is a four day annual ritual ceremony which is customarily held in the month of Falgun, on the second Monday (after the Hindu festival of Maha Shivratri). According to the Gregorian calendar, the day falls in either February or March. The trunk of the sacred tree is symbolically worshiped as the Baithow- the supreme deity who is formless, omnipresent and omnipotent. The tree trunk is confirmed in the ground as the central (wooden) pillar or post and at its base an altar is prepared (baithow head) where sacrifices of domestic fowl are made during the ritual. The top of the sacred tree is considered a central high pillar curved into the shape of a banana heart (Kol dil) which is considered as a symbol of male fertility and it extends over the temple roof into open air. The bottom of the pillar has two wooden arms facing opposite directions – North and South. The wooden arms hold earthen lamps with four side open mouths representing all species of life on earth and one large earthen lamp representing the traditional deities namely Khring Raja or Bithow, Gojai, Monai and Phulkonwar. The plant has many characteristics of curing diseases. It believed that while offering god these plants, like to cure diseases of blood sugar, purifies the blood, it acts as an antibacterial/ antiseptic to cure chicken pox diseases or any other skin diseases. While praying they whispered the diseases to cure.

Tong-Loti (*Eupatorium Cannabinum L (Asteraceae)*) is used to worship Baithow puja. During Baithow puja, fresh tender leaves are put in a copper plate along with traditional rice beer (jhul mod) for preparing shanti jol or holy water, which is sprinkled over everyone present in the ritual. Rice beer with tong loti leaves is used to purify in the death rituals and other traditional beliefs at the time of death. In Bohag bihu, tong loti leaves are used to sprinkle a mixture of pitha-guri (raw rice powder and water) all over the houses, granaries, and cowshed as a mark of spiritual cleansing. The new rope which used to tie the cow at the time of Bohag bihu is purified by using tongloti leaves and flowers to it. The roots of these plants are used to cure scurvy disease by making a paste from it.

Athia/Bhim Kol (*Musa Paradisiaca L (Musaceae)*): Banana is used to perform a traditional dance namely Bohua dance. It is a primitive dance of Sonowal Kachari Tribes. A total 101 banana leaves are tied together in a single stripe and worn in the waist of the body like a skirt. This dance is only performed by male. The other part of the body is painted by black colour. After performing the dance, they all go to the nearby pond or river to wash them and to wash away the banana leaves in the water. This act symbolizes washing away the evils, diseases from the villages and the lives of the people. It signifies the new beginning of life. The fruit of bananas used to cure them while having dysentery. The cover of the banana fruits is kept dried and made into a liquid (Khar) to cure

digestive disease. The plantain banana is also used to cure thyroid disease of thyroid, digestion, and blood purification.

Basically the rituals show the survival of primitive symbolism. It shows the union between man and nature along with supernatural mutual co-existence. R.Sonowal (2013) in his studied about the medicinal plants of Sonowal Kacharis of Dibrugarh District in Assam, NE found that 'ethnomedicinal use of most of the recorded plants species by Sonowal Kacharis were previously unreported. It plays an important role in providing primary health care to the rural people of Sonowal Kachari tribes'. The Sonowal Kachari tribe, since time immemorial have been practising their traditional indigenous system to diagnosis, treatment and control of several diseases. Therefore, the current study will be very helpful in preserving the Indian Knowledge tradition and cultural heritage of Sonowal Kachari tribes.

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