

THERAPEUTIC USAGE OF SOME ETHNOMEDICINAL PLANTS IN 'NUA-KHAI' (A
TRADITIONAL FESTIVAL OF WESTERN ODISHA, INDIA)

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ABSTRACT

"Nua-khai" or "Nabanna" is an important traditional festival celebrated by the people of Western Odisha (India) on "Bhadrab Suklya-pakshya Panchami" (5th light fortnight of August). It is an agricultural festival. The festival brings with it happiness, peace and friendship among the people. Six plants species are known to be associated with "Nua-khai". These plant species are also important in the culture of people of Western Odisha.

KEYWORDS: Therapeutic usage, Ethnomedicinal plants, Nua-khai, Western Odisha.

INTRODUCTION

Odisha is a state of temples and villages. Around 86.6% of its total population lives in villages scattered throughout the state.^[1] Odisha is one of the rice growing states of the country. People mostly depend upon agriculture. Rice, which is a major agricultural product, is naturally a staple food. The Western part of Odisha includes ten districts out of thirty districts in the state. The districts are Bargarh, Bolangir, Boud, Deogarh, Jharsuguda, Kalahandi, Nuapada, Sambalpur, Subarnapur, and Sundargarh. Besides, it includes the Athamallik subdivision of Angul district. The inhabitants live in harmony with nature. Their culture, tradition, rites, mythology and lifestyle are linked with the forest.

In Western Odisha folklore, fairs and festivals have a unique touch of nature. The tradition of joint family is a fascinating tradition in our country. 'Nua-khai' or 'Nabanna' is one such tradition that has been eulogized by social reformers within the country and abroad. Such a tradition enhances the special and spiritual development of a man. The basic idea behind celebration of festivals at different times of the year is worshiping "Mother" or "Matru Shakti". Most of the festivals in Western Odisha are agrarian. Festivals observed between "Chaitra and Pausa" (December and January) are agrarian. Mass worship and enjoyment are ideals of every village. During the festival, people express their wishes and pray to the goddess for better production. It is through these rituals that they express their gratitude to the mother goddess.

'Nua-khai' (a festival of consuming new rice after offering it to their deities) is observed in the month of Bhadrab (August/ September), the day after Ganesh Chaturthi festival. This can be known from the 'Pancha Jagna' of the Vedas that the food has been worshiped all the time. It is needless to say that worshiping food has an ancient origin. In spite of the advancement of science, men have never disfavored food, nor forgotten its importance. In accordance with financial status, people worship their deities and take Nabanna.^[2]

People and Culture

One day before the 'Nua-khai', *jhankar* or *desari* (the priest) goes to the crop field early in the morning. There he worships the paddy plant in the field with burning wicks and incense, uproots a paddy plant, washes its roots with milk and honey; coats it with sandal wood paste etc. and replants it. He cherishes that Goddess earth will continue providing vitality through food. The priest bows down, prays, then collects shelf paddy and distributes it among the villagers. Getting the new paddy people in every house make elaborate preparations to eat the new rice on the day of 'Nabanna'.

On the eve of 'Nua-khai', houses are decorated and various foods like 'phulki' (cakes) and 'jukha' (gruel) are prepared. The 'phulki' are prepared from mung (*Phaseolus mungo*) and rice and 'jukha' are prepared from rice, molasses and milk. On the day of the festival, the priest (*jhankar/desari*) of the temple prepares various food items to offer them to their local deities, like Samaleswari in Sambalpur, Bargarh, Bolangir, Jharsuguda, to Samaleswari and Shikharbasini (the

presiding deity of the erstwhile ruling family of Gangpur, the present Sundargarh) and to Pataneshwari in Bhawanipatna of Kalahandi district). After this, people worship and offer the new rice with other preparations to their deities in their respective houses. In the case of the Gouda (Milkman) caste, they worship 'Maha Laxmi' and 'Maui' in a corner of their houses. Tribals worship 'Bandevi' in the forest and tribals residing in villages worship a common deity such as 'Maui', 'Bhatparsa', 'Phalsatalen', 'Panrapat', and various manifestations of Mother-Goddess are worshipped in different places in the form of an icon, but mostly symbolized through stone or a shape of wood in the forest under a tree.

During the festival the tribals and non-tribals of Western Odisha have a tradition of offering various prepared food on the leaves of specific plant species to their deities. Six such plant species have been reported here which are linked with 'Nua-khai' festival of Western Odisha.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Information on the uses of plants during 'Nua-khai' festival was collected by visiting a number of villages in Western Odisha. Interviews and non-formal discussions were made with the temple priests (*Dehuri, Desari, Jani, Jhankar*), elder villagers, experienced *Vaidyas* (traditional medicinal practitioners) and some reliable informants to collect information on their customs, tradition and culture related with 'Nua-khai'. The related plant species were also collected during the field trips, which are deposited in the herbarium of Botany Department, Panchayat College, Bargarh. The plant species were identified with the help of published regional floras.^[3,4]

The recorded data on medicinal and other uses along with the beliefs of people on different plant species were analysed with some scientific literatures.^[5-13]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Traditionally, 'Nua-khai' takes place on "Bhadrab Suklya-pakshya Panchami", the day after "Ganesh Chaturthi". 'Nua-khai' is an important 'tihaar' (festival) of Western Odisha. It is important for tribals and poor farmers, because unless a family observes the rituals of

'Nua-khai', they can not eat any grains/ rice harvested from a new crop. Majority of paddy do not mature at this time. Many of the tribals harvest a new crop called 'Kudo' (*Paspalum scrobiculatum* L.), some harvest 'Maandia' (*Eleusine coracana* Gaertn.) and 'Janjala (Roksy)' (*Pennisetum sp*) and some new variety of paddy that mature within 40-50 days from sowing. These crops and some wild roots are the only hopes for the tribal and poor farmers during a time when hunger is at its worst. So 'Nua-khai' is the most eagerly waited festival for them, which brings in the joy of enjoying the new crop.

Plants of festive and religious importance

Six plant species are found to be related to this ritual of 'Nua-khai'. The leaves of these plant species are used to offer to the deity along with the new rice and other preparations in them. The head male member of the family worships with these offerings to the deity. It is a tradition of 'Nua-khai' that on this day people take prepared food in the plates of specific leaves. The leaves of plant species used by different castes are 'Mahul' (*Madhuca longifolia* (J. Konig) J.F. Macbr.), 'Kure' (*Holarrhena pubescens* Wall. ex G. Don.), 'Phalsa' (*Butea monosperma* (Lam.) Taub.), 'Bheluan' (*Semecarpus anacardium* L.f.), 'Sargi' (*Shorea robusta* Roth.) and 'Siali' (*Phanera vahlii* (Wight & Arn.) Benth.). Though leaves of six different types of plant species are known to be used by different castes but basically people use the leaves of 'Mahul' and 'Kure'. Some of the non-tribal people of Western Odisha such as the 'Kulta' people use the leaf of 'Mahul', the 'Luhura' (Black-smith) use the leaf of 'Bheluan', the leaf of 'Sargi' (*Shorea robusta*) is used by the 'Brahmin' caste and 'Siali' (*Phanera vahlii*) is used by some other non-tribal people of Western Odisha.

Besides religious importance, all these plant species included in 'Nua-khai' are of economic values. These plant species are also utilized locally or commercially as medicine. And the idea behind utilizing them in the name of religious tradition is that people would take care of these plant resources properly. Such plant species are listed below in table-1.

Table 1: List of Plant Species and Medicinal Uses.

Botanical name and Family, Local name, Locality & Collection No.	Medicinal Uses	Religious belief	Social reforms and other uses
<i>Phanera vahlii</i> (Wt. & Arn.) Benth. (Fabaceae) 'Siali', Ramkhol- 166	Seed paste is applied externally in case of skin infection.	A piece of root is tied on the head to get sound sleep.	Leaves are used in preparation of plates and bowls.
<i>Butea monosperma</i> (Lamk.) Taub. (Fabaceae) 'Phalsa', Ramkhol- 378	Bark decoction used against fever, Flower is soaked overnight and given to children to get relief from worms.	Root is collected on a Saturday and tied to the arm of woman to cure from infertility.	Root is used as brush for white washing. Flowers are ornamentals and colour is prepared from it.
<i>Holarrhena pubescens</i> Wall. ex G. Don (Apocynaceae) 'Kure', Kamgaon- 247	Bark is used in dysentery Root paste is applied on eczema.	A necklace of seeds is worn to get relief from headache	In thread ceremony, twig is used as Brahma dandy (stick of Brahma). Branches are used

			in building hots.
<i>Madhuca longifolia</i> (Konig) J. F. Macbride (Sapotaceae) 'Mahul', Nrusinghnath- 186	Bark used against scorpion bite, bark powder- cut wound. Flower decoction for dysurea.	Planting a Mahul plant or sowing its seeds is believed to be disaster. A long narrow wooden pillar is placed in the cowshed and worshipped so that this will protect them from evil spirits.	A twig is placed at the marriage plat form to perform marriage ceremony. Flowers and fruits are edible. Oil cake is a good fodder for the cows and buffalos.
<i>Semecarpus anacardium</i> L.f. (Anacardiaceae) 'Bheluan' Khandijharan- 652	Fruit is used in backache, arthritis. Oil is used in dental problem	A necklace of fruits is hung around the neck of a mother cow for more lactation	Ripe fruit is edible.
<i>Shorea robusta</i> Gaertn.f. (Dipterocarpaceae) 'Sargi', Ramkhol- 377	Latex is used in kibe.	A small piece of root is worn on the neck to guard children from evil spirits.	Leaves are used in preparation of plates and bowls. Twigs used as tooth brush.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

'Nua-khai' is an auspicious occasion for social congregations in a clean environment with hope for a better future. The parental residence becomes crowded with the family members of the house coming from far and wide for the purpose. It is an annual get together of family members with the noble purpose of observing the grand socio-religious function. It is a festival which invites the people of Western Odisha with a promise to use their time, energy and resources to feed the underfed, clothes the unclothed, enhancing harmonious social relations. This ritual of Western Odisha awakens the slumbering humanity to dedicate themselves for social responsibilities to promote universal human fellowship.

At home, tutelary deities are worshiped with new grains and the patriarch gives away the grains to his younger ones. The younger ones pay their respect to the venerable seniors. All sorts of feuds and friction, differences and disagreements are forgotten. This festival pleads for mutual love, affection, understanding and social responsibilities. As family is the breeding ground of sacrifice, reciprocity, tolerance and mutual trust, 'Nua-khai' inspires people to cultivate these noble virtues.

This festival, besides making our social and family bonds stronger, the use of different types of leaves by different tribes also provides interesting information about the multi-coloured culture of our society. There are specific instances of 'patra-pooja', the offering leaves to God, which is an important ritual in many traditional forms of worship in India. 'Nua-khai' is such a ritual where the use of leaves during worshipping tutelary deities at home or outside is observed. Besides religious faith, this festival is as important as it provides the tradition of the use of specific leaves by various tribes of Western Odisha. It is also useful for knowing plant resources of common use and commercial potential around us, and by handling them in the name of 'Nua-khai'; we can take care of these potential resources properly.

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