CHAPTER V
INDIGENOUS HEALTH CARE PRACTICES

India is one of the largest producers of medicinal and aromatic plants in the world. There are hardly very few medicinal herbs of commercial importance, which are not cultivated or collected in this country. The country is, therefore, called the 'Botanical Garden of the world'. Medicinal herbs have been in use in this country for thousands of years, in one form or another, under the indigenous systems of medicine (Chemical weekly, 14th November, 2000).

The world Health Organization (WHO) has listed over 21,000 plant species used around the world for medicinal purposes, of which approximately 25 percent are cultivated commercially. WHO has estimated that at least 80 percent of all global inhabitants rely on the traditional system of medicine for their primary health care and as household remedies (Chemical weekly, 14th November, 2000).

In India there are four well recognized systems of traditional medicine—Ayurveda, Unani, Siddha and Naturopathy. Topmost importance is given today world-wide for the revival of medicinal plants/herbs because of their relatively non-toxic nature with reference to their side effects in different parts of the body.

The science of medicine originated in magic and religious rituals. India has an age old system of native methods of treatment for physical and mental ailments. In ancient India the medical science was highly honoured so much so that it was regarded as upveda. Fever was regarded as a demon (Verma: 1997). The human body consisted of three elements—cough, bile and air (the last being most important); disease could be the cause of an imbalance among these elements or due to entry of super human force.
Surgery was well known. Indian system of medicine remained almost stagnant except for development in the field of yoga. With the coming of the Muslims, a new system of medicine was introduced in the country known as 'Unani' (Gupta : 1998).

With the coming of the Europeans the modern system of medicine also reached the country. At a later stage homeopathy also claimed allegiance of many and so did nature cure as a reaction to all systems of medicine. These traditional India systems of medicine, the Hindu Ayurveda and the Perso-Islamic Unani are still very active. Both these systems though based in their classical form on false premises are pragmatically effective in curing and relieving many diseases and their drugs and therapy are less expensive than those of modern western medicine (Verma: 1997).

The tribals have their own systems. The tribesmen consider diseases as manifestation of evil spirit or the wrath of certain divine spirits (Gupta : 1993). There are hardly any plants which have no medicinal value. Only thing is to prepare a repertory of them. The indigenous system is widely practised in case of children's diseases (Sachchidananda: 1991). Usually the elderly lady in the family is supposed to possess adequate knowledge of all their diseases and remedies thereof. Important researches on native drugs mainly herbal are being conducted both at centres of Ayurvedic and Allopathic research. For certain categories of ailments which have much to do with basic metabolism, medicines do exist in native system which are yet to be developed or adapted by modern system.

Odebiym A.I. (2000) argues that hardly 35 percent of "population of Nigeria is effectively reached by modern health care facilities".

The North-Eastern region of India is also one of the largest centres of medicinal and aromatic plants. More than 50 percent of the total number of species of the entire sub continent is available in the region (Gupta : 1998).
However, most of the medicinal plants are available in the wild under different forest areas and a few varieties are found in non-forest area, including land under cultivation. The indigenous local people, mostly tribal, collect a variety of leaves, fruits, barks, seeds, roots etc. because they know their medicinal value (Gupta : 1998).

Due to lack of processing facilities in the region, most of the medicinal plants are exported (sold). It is estimated that raw medicinal plant worth about Rs. 156 crore exported from this region every year (Chemical weekly, 14th November, 2000).

Preparations from plants having medicinal value have significant effects on infant/child health. These local preparations are made out of some leaves of plants which are supposed to prevent certain diseases.

In the present study among Kayasthas and the Kaibartas it has been found that they use lots of herbal medicinal plants for minor ailment or health of their children.

When a poisonous insect bites a child, the upper portion of onion (Allium cepa) is cut and applied to the affected portion which gives relief to the child from pain.

The lactic stem of black kaladis (Colocassia) and leaves of marigold (Tagetes patula) are applied to stop bleeding of the wound occurring due to some accident.

For a healthy body, skin, and hair, a massage of mustard oil (Brassica campestris) is given to the babies. During the rainy season, and winter season a child suffering from cough and cold is given a massage of garlic (Allium sativa) fried in mustard oil.

A spoonful of juice extracted from the tender leaves of guava (Psidium guayava), pomegranate (Punica granatum) and pineapple (Ananus comosus)
is slightly warmed and mixed with a little honey. This preparation is given to the babies to get relief from ill effect of round worm, hook worm etc.

For relief from cold and cough, extracts from leaves of tulsi plant (Osimun sanctum) and ginger (Zingiber officinalis) are mixed with a little honey and the mixture is given to the children.

Fried "kaljira" black cumin seed (Nigella sativa) in mustard oil (Brassica campestris) is applied for body massage of the babies suffering from cough and cold.

Stem of "chirota" (Swertia chirata) soaked overnight in water is given to the child for worm treatment.

When a baby suffers from the uneasiness due to worms in the stomach the baby is given a little terpentine oil to smell for relief.

During fever, a piece of wet cloth is put on the forehead of the baby and hands and feet are rubbed with wet cloth in regular intervals. When body temperature rises; a few drops of lemon (Citrus aurantifola) juice are added to mustard oil (Brassica campestris) and it is applied on the patient's head.

In diarrhoea, water mixed with a little sugar and salt is given to the babies to drink at regular intervals. In fact this serves the purpose of ORS (Oral rehydration solution) and protects the children from dehydration.

During loose motion and upset stomach the boiled green banana (Musa sapientum) is served with plain soft rice to the children.

To dry the umbilical cord of the new born baby mustard oil (Brassica campestris) is applied to the thumb of the mother and it is put above a burning earthen lamp. The warm thumb is gently pressed on the side of the umbilical cord. This process is continued for 3-4 days after birth.

During stomach ache a massage of terpentine mixed with kerosene oil is given to the belly of the child.
A green banana (Musa sapientum) soaked in water overnight and the water is mixed with a pinch of salt and is given to the child for relief from stomach trouble.

A curry of "Sokota" (dried leaves of jute plant) (Corchorus capsularis) is served for stomach trouble.

Leaves of "mochondori" (Houttuynia cordata) a kind of creeper is wrapped in banana leaf and roasted, the roasted "mochondori" is mixed with a pinch of salt and is given to the patient during diarrhoea.

Juice extracted from the leaves of "bahaka" (Adhatoda vasica) and "siju" (Euphorbia nerufolia) are given to the children for relief from cough.

After recovery from any disease a curry of "manimuni" Indian penny worth (Centella asiatica) and "Bhedai lota" (Paederia foetida) is given for good health and strength.

Seeded banana (Musa balbasinia) is deseeded and pulp is mixed with rice flour and milk and is given to the babies as weaning or supplementary food.

Regular suckling of breast milk leads the baby to form a white layer in its tongue. In order to clean the tongue the mother applies honey to the tongue with her finger tip.

After pregnancy to regain vigour of the mother a curry made of "bhedai lota" (Paederia foetida) "manimuni" (Centella asiatica), "narasinga" (Marraya koenigii) and garlic (Allium sativum) is given with soft plain rice.

When a woman gets dry skin after child birth she makes a paste of raw turmeric (Curcuma longa) milk and blackgram (Phaseolus mungo) and applies it to the dry skin.

After pregnancy the mother is given a mixture of one or two tablespoonfull of raw turmeric (Curcuma longa) juice mixed with cow milk to get relief from body ache.
During pregnancy if a mother suffers from high blood pressure, a paste of "jetuka" (Lowsonia inermis) is applied to her head and sole to get relief. Paste of Indian aloe (Aloe vera) locally called "pirali kuwari" is applied to get relief from high blood pressure.

"Durun" (Leucas linifolia) a kind of leaf is fried and taken with rice in low blood pressure.

During pregnancy the women are asked to take shallow water fishes like "Singhi" (Hetero pneustis), "Magur" (Clarias batrachus), "Koi" (Anabrs soandence) and "Goroi" (Canna pancutatus) etc. because these fishes contain less fat.

The above mentioned items are some of the indigenous foods, medicines and practices used by the mothers of both the caste populations for their minor health problems and problems of their babies. Besides these, there are also some beliefs and practices which play an important role is their daily life. Some of the beliefs are-

Sacred threads provided by ojas (local medicine men) are tied to the body of the babies to stop crying.

"Mukh laga jap" and "Narayan jap" (sacred threads) are commonly given to the babies to protect them from stomach trouble and evil eyes.

A garland of tulsi seeds is given to the babies around the neck in frequent cold and cough. Again some kind of sacred threads are tied on hands, ankle joint, neck and arm for good health, to get rid of the evil eye and weeping etc. These threads are prepared by local medicine men.

Mothers do not let their children play outside at noon and in late evening because they believe that the deities of the temples take rest in the big and sacred trees like "Dhup tree" (Boswellia serrata), "Neem tree" (Azadirachta indica), "Bel tree" (Aegle mermelos) 'Hibiscus' (Hibiscus rosasinansis) etc. during early morning, at noon and at late evening.
Mothers never cut their children's nails and hair on tuesdays, thursdays, saturdays and on birth days as, they believe that cutting in these days leads to short life to the children.

Mothers put some sacred thread before and after the delivery of their children. A 'Gao bandhani jap' (to protect the baby in the womb) is given during pregnancy. 'Baghini tabiz' (a special type of talisman) is given to the pregnant women to get rid of some kind of diseases like mental imbalance after delivery etc.

During pregnancy, the mothers never use to go out during early morning, at noon and in the evening near the river Brahmaputra.

Some pregnant women who are very keen to have a baby boy (male child) give food to a black dog on tuesdays and saturdays.

To get relief from pain in their legs after child-birth a heat therapy of sand or salt is given to the mothers. For this, sand or salt is roasted and is packed in a piece of cloth and with that packed cloth pressure is applied to the legs. Again to get relief from pain and cold the mothers wash their legs with hot water with a pinch of salt in it.

It is a regular habit of the mothers to treat their babies with mustard seeds and red chillies to protect them from evil eyes. They utter a special hymn also for that purpose and do it everyday.