Prevailing lore about fish and fish products in the different communities in northeast India

12.1 Introduction

Indigenous people possess an immense knowledge of their environment. They have an understanding of the properties of plants and animals, the functioning of the ecosystem and techniques of using and managing them (Emery, 1997). Traditional knowledge in the field of healing and biodiversity conservation is well known (Aguilar, 2001). There are different important farming proverbs (Singh and Dorjey, 2004) and folk lores about food products prevailing in India. Many folk lores regarding therapeutic value of traditional fish products consumed by the different communities of northeast India are available which were not yet documented. Folk lores are supported by profound wisdom and ideas of great practical utility. Recently,
documentation and utilization of traditional knowledge in the field of medicine, healing has attained greater dimension. It is essential that science and traditional knowledge should go together to find naturally beneficial (Sekar and Mariappan, 2007). Against such a background, the present study was carried out to explore and document different folk lores about traditional fish and fish products prevails among three different communities viz. Rajbangsi, Mising, Keot, Bodo, Kachari, Manipuri and Khasi of northeast India, who regularly consumed the fish products in their daily diet.

12.2 Materials and Methods

Documentation of prevailing folk lores about traditional fishery products was done through a structured participatory interview using a questionnaire (Annexure - III) at the residence of rural people, where fish products were consumed in their daily diet as condiments or as the main food. Sometimes focus group discussion was conducted among the rural people. The survey was conducted during January, 2010 - December, 2012. Secondary information’s was collected from books, reports, electronic and non-electronic sources.

12.3 Results and Discussion

Traditional fermented fish products are used therapeutically by the different indigenous people of northeast India. Apart from that, the rural population believes that many fish preparations and fish products have nutritional and medicinal/therapeutic values. The following are some of the beliefs among the consumers:

- That, the regular consumption of Shidol and Ngari helps in the prevention of malaria.
- Homemade Hentak, a fermented fish product of Manipur, is tasty and is offered to the postnatal mother for its nutritional value.
- The Mishing community of Assam, believes that Namsing, a fermented fish product, has good medicinal value against malaria and small pox that prevail in their locality. The product is also offered to the postnatal mother for its nutritious value.
Tungtap is a popular fermented fish product of Meghalaya among Khasi and Jayantia communities and is believed to have medicinal value against the common cold.

Sukati Mach, a salted and smoked fish product, is ground to make fish powder. The fish soup prepared from the fish powder is believed to be helpful for the prevention of malaria.

Kha thad, a smoked fish product of Meghalaya is considered to be delicious by the local people and is believed to have medicinal value.

The bodo tribe of Udalguri district of Assam, uses Amblypharyngodon mola (Mowa) and Chella spp. for the treatment of jaundice. About 250 gm of mowa fish is boiled with a pinch of salt, so as to make it soft and the this preparation is eaten with rice by the person who is suffering from jaundice, as it is believed that this can cure the disease. In the case of severe jaundice, the fish is boiled with the pieces of star-fruit (Averrhoa carambola), locally known as Kordoi and is eaten with rice.

Schedule caste community of Marigaon district of Assam, believes that the scales of Chitala chitala fish are used for the prevention of skin cracking. After collecting C. chitala, the fish was descaled after washing. The scales were properly washed and dried. The dried scales and dried banana peels are burnt together to make ashes. The ash is mixed with coconut oil and applied on the skin. It is believed that it cures cracking and chapping of skin due to cold weather.

The viscera of Colisa fasciata, locally known as Kholihona fish is fried in a small amount of oil and then cooked rice is mixed with it and served as food. In some instances, the viscera and rice are fried together. Rajbanshi community of lower Assam, believes that the consumption of this preparation improves the eyesight.

The fresh skin of Wallago attu, locally known as Borali fish is removed and used by the people as face pack to remove pimples. The skin of the fish is ground with sandalwood and a paste is prepared. The paste is then applied on the face and kept for some time. The Rajbanshi and Keot communities of lower Assam, believe that it helps in curing pimples.
- Rajbanshi, keot and kaibarta communities of lower Assam believe that when people suffer from dysentery, a traditional fish curry prepared with Channa spp. (Cheng) is prepared and served with rice. This curry is prepared with a fruit called Amra (local name) which is sour in taste and the curry is then consumed by the patient to get relief from dysentery.

- People of Majuli, Assam, eat raw Channa gachua fish (Sengeli) without boiling or cooking, or as prepared as soup with piper nigrum and Asiatic Pennywort for asthma and body-ache.

- Specially dried Nandus nandus fishes (Gedgedi) are served with boiled rice for the cure of colour blind people.

- Soup prepared from Monopterus cuchia or prepared as dry fry or boiled with piper nigrum is administered for anaemia and for the cure of piles.

- Fried of Botia Dario or soup with Lygodium are used for anaemia, laryngitis.

- Soup of Amblipharyngodon mola (Mowa fish) with the medicinal herb locally called “Narasingha” is good for stomach pain, fever.

- Soup of Puntius Sarana with Lycopersicum and Atternanthera sessilis is used to improve eye sight.

The consumption of fish and fish products is recommended as a means of preventing cardiovascular and other diseases. This has greatly increased over recent decades in many European countries (Cahu et al., 2004). Besides this, fishes are a good source containing immense antimicrobial peptide in defending against dreadful human pathogens (Ravichandran et al., 2010). The medicinal and microbial properties of some fermented products were studied and documented by Sarojnalini and Singh, (1988).

Shidol is endowed with high food value and medicinal qualities. This fermented product is becoming more popular day by day. The high degree of hydrophobicity by some lactic acid bacteria (LAB) strains isolated from traditional fish products of northeast India like Ngari, Hentak and Tunglap, indicates the potential of adhesion to gut epithelial cells of human intestine, advocating their 'probiotic' character (Thapa et al., 2004). Lactic acid bacteria
are to be normally found in the complex ecosystem of the gastrointestinal tract (Holzapfel et al., 1998).

12.4 Conclusion

The present study includes information on fish species and fish products used in traditional remedies for malaria, small pox, jaundice, dysentery, anemia, dermal, deficient eyesight, common cold, pimples etc. The lore about the indigenous methods of treatment based on fish products and fish preparations still form an important part of rural social life. The claimed therapeutic values of the reported fish preparations and fish products are to be critically studied to establish their safety and effectiveness which may otherwise get lost with time.

Again, there is ample scope for researching and protecting our traditional knowledge by intellectual property rights and sharing of benefit with the indigenous people of our country.