

## Ethnobotany of Kirat Festival of Magar Community in Buxa Duar area of West Bengal, India

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This paper deals with *Kirat festival (Parab) of Magar* community living in Buxa Duar area of West Bengal. *Magar* tribe has a rich tradition of religion. As may as 12 plant species have been recorded which are directly or indirectly related with this festival. Significance of the rituals related to the ceremony are not only to protect the traditional knowledge but also linked to the biodiversity conservation.

**Key Words :** Ceremony; *Magar*; Buxa Duar; West Bengal

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### Introduction

The Buxa area is a mountainous tract of the district of Jalpaiguri in West Bengal, situated on Chotta Sinchula range of Eastern Himalaya. Buxa Duar is located between 27° to 26° 16' N latitude and 89°53' to 88°4' Longitude at an altitude of 795 m amsl. The area is mostly covered with densely wooded deciduous forests and grasslands. Northern boundary runs along the international border with Bhutan, Assam State in the east, Coochbehar District and Bangladesh in south and the plain region of Darjeeling district and small part of Bangladesh lies to the west. It forms the entire forested area of Buxa National Park. Numerous rivers and streams intersect this extensive tract of forests reaching up the hills. However, Buxa is famous for Buxa Duar Fort, used as a prison by the British rulers. Many freedom fighters, including Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, were imprisoned here. After independence, it served as a refugee camp for Tibetans and Bangladeshis (Kar 2005). Temperature of the region fluctuates between 37.5° C during summer to about 6°C in winter. Rainfall occurs mainly due to south-west monsoon wind and begins from the month of May and continues till the first quarter of October. The average annual rainfall of the region is about 374 cm. There are several examples of trees being worshipped traditionally in many parts of the world

under all religions and beliefs. The main objective behind plant worship has always been their conservation and utilization in the most sustainable manner.

*Magars* were originally living in the low altitude hills of eastern Nepal and were immigrated later to Darjeeling Hills and nearby Duars region to settle down permanently (Anonymous 2001). They used local plant resources for their sustenance from the very beginning. They were tree dwellers and also living in caves, situated in the dense forests. Their food included mainly fruits, tubers, rhizomes, honey, etc. collected from forests. From there, the *Kirat festival (Kirat = son of the land)* started among the *Magars*. It is celebrated on the first day of month of *Magh* (in local calendar), which generally falls in the middle of January.

On this day there is the ritual of Holy bath in the nearby river/pond in the morning before talking to anybody. Different types of tubers of *Dioscorea* species (Tarul) are collected (Plate I, Fig. A), boiled, cleaned and offered to the Sun God (Plate I, Fig. B). This is mainly confined in the morning session of the day.

### Materials and Methods

During the course of the present investigation, a large of elderly people of Buxa Duar were

Table 1 : List of plants, their common and botanical names, families and parts used during Kirat festival

Plant name, Family and Voucher Specimen No.	Local Name	Part used
<i>Dioscorea alata</i> Linn. (Dioscoreaceae) [Ajita & AP Das-054]	'Bag Tarul'	Root-tuber
<i>D. belophylla</i> Voigt ex Haines (Dioscoreaceae) [Ajita & AP Das-074]	'Pani Tarul'	Root-tuber
<i>D. bulbifera</i> Linn. (Dioscoreaceae) [Ajita & AP Das-075]	'Githa'	Root-tuber
<i>D. deltoidea</i> Wallich ex Kunth (Dioscoreaceae) [Ajita & AP Das-087]	'Charpale Tarul'	Root-tuber
<i>D. esculenta</i> (Loureiro) Burkill (Dioscoreaceae)	'Ghar Tarul'	Root-tuber
<i>D. hamiltonii</i> Hook. f. (Dioscoreaceae) [Ajita & AP Das-046]	'Ban Tarul'	Root-tuber
<i>D. pentaphylla</i> Linn. (Dioscoreaceae) [Ajita & AP Das-060]	'Bhyagur'	Root-tuber
<i>D. pubera</i> Blume (Dioscoreaceae) [Ajita & AP Das-055]	'Panglang'	Root-tuber
<i>Ipomoea batatas</i> (Linn.) Lamarck (Convolvulaceae) [Ajita & AP Das-141]	'Sakar Kand'	Tuber
<i>Manihot esculenta</i> Crantz (Euphorbiaceae) [Ajita & AP Das-101]	'Simal Tarul'	Root-tuber
<i>Sesamum indicum</i> Linn. (Pedaliaceae) [Ajita & AP Das-145]	'Til'	Seeds
<i>Sterculia villosa</i> Smith (Sterculiaceae) [Ajita & AP Das-146]	'Simali'	Root
<i>Xanthosoma brasiliense</i> (Desf.) Engler (Araceae) [Ajita & AP Das-148]	'Sikume Pindalu'	Rhizome

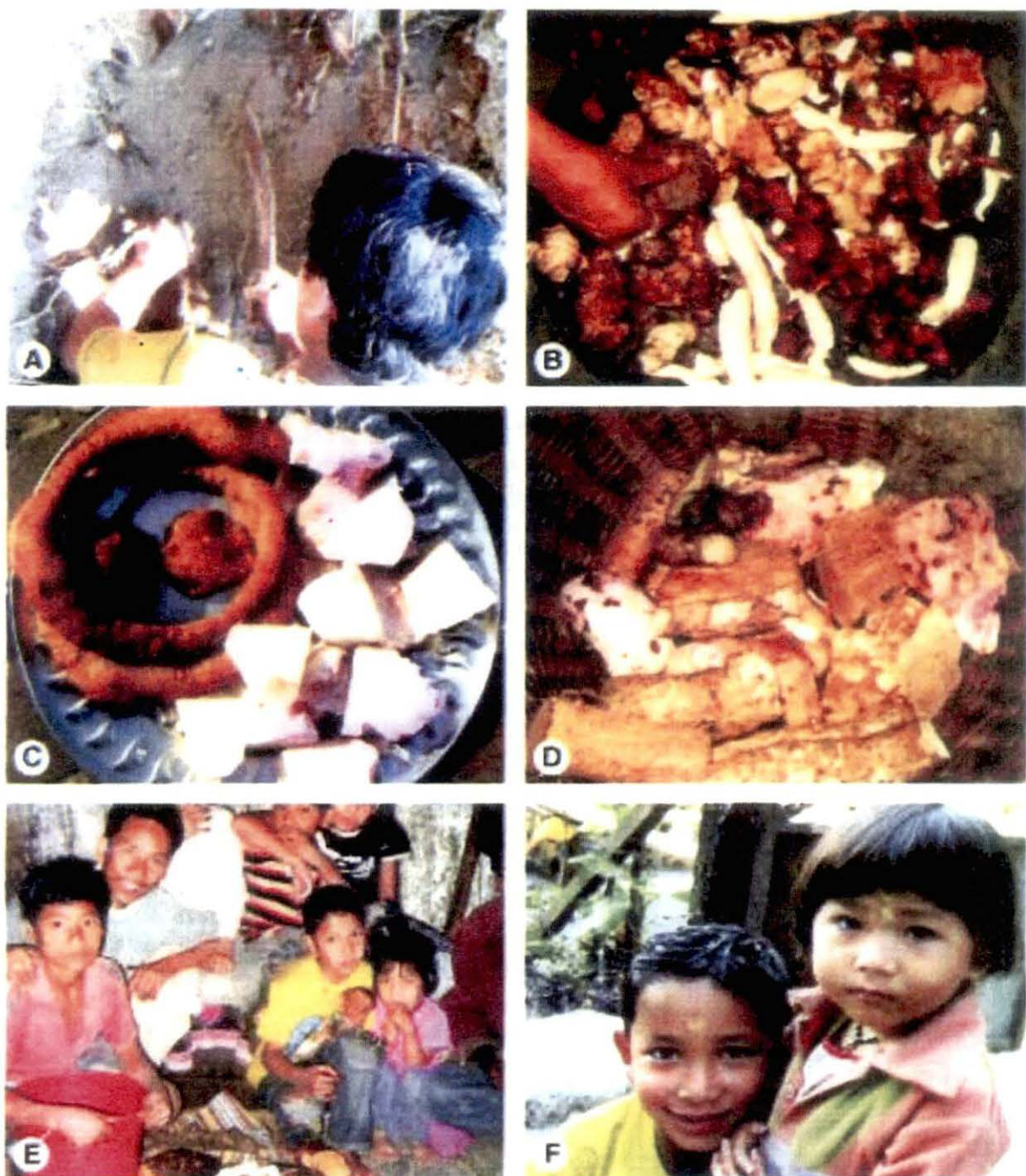
interviewed about *Kirat festival* using a short questionnaire. The common names of different plants were noted down and the specimens are spotted by the native people. Some local priests, commonly referred to as 'Dami', were also contacted and were pestered to gain knowledge about the ceremony.

Collected specimens were processed as herbarium sheets and were identified in the Taxonomy & Environmental Biology Laboratory of the Department of Botany, North Bengal University, using different floras, verified and deposited in the NBU Herbarium. Only the aerial parts of the plants were collected as voucher specimens and root-tubers were used by Magars as the availability of many of these plants were scarce. However, some of these plants were also introduced into the Garden of Medicinal Plants, University of North Bengal for their conservation.

#### Discussions

The interviews with natives provided interesting scientific and mythological information about the plants and the significance of *Kirat festival*. Among the tubers 'Ban Tarul' (*Dioscorea*

*spp.*) has its unique importance on this occasion because in earlier times 'Ban Tarul' was their principal food. Earlier, these plants were abundant in the surrounding vegetation and native people collected tuberous root-stock regularly. On the day of festival they offer tubers of different species to God in the morning (Plate I, Fig. B). After that they put a *tika* (mark on the forehead) made of a thin slice of uncooked Ban Tarul and de-coated seeds of Til (*Sveto til*) on the forehead (Plate I, Fig F) and eat first the uncooked Ban Tarul as 'Prasad' (Plate I, Fig. E). After that they take different other varieties of boiled root-tubers including *Manihot esculenta*, species of *Dioscorea* and *Xanthosoma* and 'Set Rooti' (a kind of traditional home made bread) (Plate I, Fig. C). They boil the yams in the previous night. 'Set Rooti' is made of rice powder. The rice powder is battered in water along the milk and sugar. Other essential ingredient is mucilaginous root juice of Simali (*Sterculia villosa*), which makes the rooti soft. The prepared batter is then left for about 2-3 hours and then given the shape of small rings and fried to golden brown in boiling mustard oil for 10-12 minutes.



**PLATE I:** Kirat Festival. A. Collection of *Dioscorea* root-tuber; B. Accumulation of all desired plant materials; C. A plate of ceremonial food; D. Plant materials after collection and cleaning; E. All family members taking part in the festival; F. Kirat children with *ika* on forehead.



Based on the observations made during survey, a list of plants which are boiled to consume, have been presented in Table-I along with the local and botanical names, families and parts used.

Yams (*Dioscorea* sp.), edible aroid (*Xanthosoma* sp.), tapioca (*Manihot esculenta*) and sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*) provide the stable carbohydrate source for over 500 million people in the world (Coursey 1983, O'Hair 1990). Sweet potato and *Xanthosoma brasiliense* are cultivated in localities in Buxa area. Yams are wildly grown primarily in this region and some of these are also cultivated. Yams are generally propagated with their bulbils and the upper part of the root-stock. Eating of fresh yam tubers supply a good amount of antioxidant in its natural form; and it prevents the free radicals related to human diseases like cancer and cardiovascular ailments (Bhandari & Kawabata 2004). The presence of diosgenin in certain species of *Dioscorea* converting into corticosteroidal drugs and hormones is helpful in curing many diseases (Basu & Gautam 2002).

Out of the recorded plants *Ipomoea batatas*, *Manihot esculenta* and *Xanthosoma brasiliense* are exotics but are widely cultivated in different tropical and subtropical areas of the world including foot-hill regions of Eastern Himalaya.

Most of the religious beliefs of the ethnic culture have some significance with their bases in

history of the community and its neighborhood. Due to the advent of modernization these beliefs are becoming weaker day by day and are likely to be forgotten in the near future. Recording the native culture by using modern techniques has thus become necessary.

#### Acknowledgements

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## भारत में पश्चिम बंगाल के बक्सा-दुआर क्षेत्र में मगर समुदाय के 'कीरत उत्सव' की लोकव्यवस्था

अजीता सरकार, किशोर विश्वास एवं ए.पी. दास

पादपवर्गिकी एवं पर्यावरणीय जीव विज्ञान प्रयोगशाला, वनस्पति विज्ञान विभाग, उत्तरी बंगाल विश्वविद्यालय,  
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इस प्रपत्र में पश्चिम बंगाल के बक्सा-दुआर क्षेत्र के मगर समुदाय के निवासियों के 'कीरत उत्सव,' (परब) के विषय में वर्णन किया गया है। मगर आदिवासी लोग धार्मिक परम्पराओं एवं रीति-रिवाजों के धनी होते हैं। लगभग ऐसी 12 पादप-प्रजातियाँ ज्ञात हैं जोकि प्रत्यक्ष एवं परोक्ष रूप से इस उत्सव से संबंधित हैं। उत्सव से संबंधित अनुष्ठान के महत्व से सिर्फ वनोपार्थीय ज्ञान का सुरक्षित रखना ही नहीं है बल्कि इसका संबंध जैव-विविधता के संरक्षण से भी है।

