

CHAPTER 3

THE PROPOSED WORK

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3.1. The Present Work

Over a period of time, ethnic people have acquired generous knowledge of activities and products related with plants and animals like gathering, hunting, growing and their many uses. Thousands of years ago, native people had great centers of learning due to the presence of oldest civilizations on this part of the planet. With turn down of these civilizations and arrival of invaders, several native cultural practices including the tradition of information declined or were excluded entirely (Pushpandagan 1994).

Traditionally ethnic communities worldwide are extremely knowledgeable about the huge uses of local plant and other natural resources with which they are closely related (Jain 2000a). Ethnic and the cultural diversity have helped in generating vast knowledge based systems about usage of their bio-resources (Goel 2004). Cultural evolution is the very important source of future development and the conservation of natural resources. In many parts of the World traditional conservation practices have weakened by cultural changes due to increased human needs and numbers by a shift to cash economics. Some resources are being over exploited due to fast cultural and economic transformations (Laird 2002).

The present study is basically a survey work aiming for the record of the traditional knowledge of the *Mech* people related to the use of plants. It is partly experimental as well as reflective in nature that was carried out spreading over a period of four years from 2004 to 2009. Like most of other tribal groups, *Mech* people also prefer to live near or inside the forests. They are maintaining this forest-dependent life-style since the time immemorial. The population structure of *Meches* is quite high. It was expected that the *Mech* society is a rich store house of ethnobotanical knowledge those they developed during their stay in the area with close interaction with the local biodiversity. But, the present *Mech* society is now adapting to the facilities of modern civilization very fast. This has endangered their long acquired and much useful traditional knowledge. The present work was undertaken with an aim to record endangered *Mech* traditional knowledge for future evaluation and any possible benefit for the civilized modern society. The wide range of information those included in different chapters were

gathered from numerous sources. The queries were gathered about the uses of plants of *Mech* people through field visits, observation, informal discussion and open-ended interview methods with the informants and knowledgeable persons of different age groups of both sexes.

Folklores including folksongs are present almost in every traditional society. *Mechs* are not the exception. Through these they not only express the joy and/or joyful feelings of their mind, they also express many of their activities, acquired knowledge. These are beautiful medium of teaching the people of the same and future generations and act long lasting repository of traditional knowledge. During the present dissertation collection of folklores was also in mind.

3.2. Different Aspects of Present Study

The generalized survey of uses of plants by *Mech* community included:

- (i) Edible plants
- (ii) Medicinal plants (for people and their pets)
- (iii) Fodder plants
- (iv) Dye yielding plants
- (v) Fibre yielding plants
- (vi) Aromatic plants
- (vii) Poisonous plants
- (viii) Plants used in house building, making tools and implements, musical instruments, etc.
- (ix) Religious and witch-craft plants
- (x) Ornamental and decorative plants
- (xi) Plants used in liquor preparation
- (xii) Plants related to Birth, Marriage and Death and other social ceremonies
- (xiii) Folklores, songs, etc.

In addition, their attitude towards the sacred groves, - patches of forests where vegetation is protected in the name of God or a deity and the folklore related plants also studied.

3.3. Importance of the Present Work

It is evidenced from the study that the *Mech* tribe of Duars of West Bengal and the lower part of Assam is the earliest settlers in these parts of the country and living there for over four hundred years using local and natural resources. So, it is expected that during this period of their stay in

Duars region and adjacent part of Assam, they have been successfully generating and accumulating considerable amount of knowledge on the usefulness of the plants of these regions. Their lifestyle and traditions depend upon the forests and their cultural pattern itself has considered using biodiversity in order to conserve it. They have deep concern for maintaining diversity in their surrounding environment and their general concern for the quality and sustainability of natural system.

Intergenerational transmission of information about useful plant species handed over to forthcoming generations in traditional communities by oral citation is still a living tradition. Such patterns are prevalent among many indigenous or ethnic cultures all over the world. But they are generally hesitant to reveal or share indigenous knowledge with the outside world. However, these are limited within families or tribes, which may not be even relayed properly to the younger generations. Moreover, with modernization, young generations have least interest or no inclination towards their cultural heritage and exhibit ignorance and no interest in learning and continuing these systems.

Thus, much of the valuable knowledge of the tribes is perishing with the loss of the elders of the family. In recent decades, this multidimensional effect on the culture and lifestyle of the *Mech* society and mingling with people of outside culture is causing severe threat to the maintenance of their accumulated knowledge. The exposure of *Mech* community with modern education, new lifestyle and impact of multi media has also caused reduction of some people who are direct beneficiaries through indigenous knowledge system and bioresources. Such new cultures are slowly spreading over the *Mech* villages.

Under this situation, it becomes extremely important to record their knowledge systems related particularly to the use and need of plants in their life immediately. This is a blow to the search of new resources of herbal drugs, edible plants and other aspects of plants including conservation. Such knowledge once lost cannot be restored and creates a void in multidisciplinary goals such as anthropology, culture, literature etc. of the *Mech* tradition.