

The Ethnobotany of Snake Charmers in North India

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Overview

As the result of the increasing conflict between conservationists and snake charmers, a project was set up by the Wildlife Trust of India to study the Jogi-Nath snake charming communities in North India. The projects' aim was to study the existing livelihood strategies of the Jogi Nath and the impact of the Wildlife Protection Act on their way of life.

The Jogi-Nath snake charmers of northern India are renowned for their performances with wild snakes. The possession of wild snakes is illegal, but Jogi-Naths have no other livelihood alternatives. However, the Jogi-Nath also sell herbal medicines, lucky stones and amulets during their performances. For this reason, Rufford funding was acquired to enable an ethnobotanical study to determine the importance of medicinal healing to the Jogi-Nath.

The aim of my research project was therefore to investigate the socio-cultural significance of medicinal healing amongst snake charmers. This project was carried out as part of a larger project led by Bahar Dutt of the Wildlife Trust of India on snake charmer livelihoods in North India.

Fieldwork

Research was carried out between December 2003 and February 2004. The research team visited seven rural snake charmer villages in the states of Rajasthan, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. Whilst I collected data on medicinal plant use, the other members of the team collected data on the social-economic status of snake charmers, and herpetological and animal husbandry of the snakes.

Ethnobotanical data was gathered from the men (it is the men who carry out both the snake charming and herbal medicine professions, women have a limited knowledge of either) using semi informal interviews and snowball sampling.

Ten key informants were then chosen who were considered to have a good knowledge in the use and preparation of medicinal plants. Two generations of healers were sampled by interviewing at least one older (over 35 years of age) and one younger (under 35) healer in each state. Firstly, semi informal interviews were carried out with the informants to obtain information on the traditional knowledge, socio-cultural significance and economics of the medicinal plant profession. Secondly, the study wanted to focus on the wild harvested plant species used in herbal medicine. This information was gathered by freelisting, participant observation, and plant collecting excursions. A plant inventory was constructed by taking a 2-3 hour walk in the vicinity of the village to allow the healer to collect plants which were then discussed.

Plant specimens were identified with the assistance of Dr. Sanjay Kshirsagar at the Department of Botany, University of Delhi, and deposited in their herbarium.

Summary of Research Findings

This study showed that traditional medicine is a significant aspect of the culture and livelihoods of snake charmer communities. Snake charmers also appear to be providing an essential primary health care option in areas where there are no medical centres, or locals cannot afford to attend them.

Wild plants contributed substantially to medicines, with as many as 250 plants known by each informant. Over 70% of the wild plants used are common or weed species, and the efficacy of 71% of the plant species recorded is scientifically proven. Snake-bite treatments were among the most frequently mentioned ailments, with any one healer treating up to 50 patients per year. However, the effect of plant base medicines to treat venomous snake-bite probably lies in their placebo effect as opposed to anti-venom qualities.

However, although all of the men interviewed said they would continue to work as medicinal healers, many said that this was because they had no alternative. In addition, consensus was (84% of informants) that the number of healers is decreasing, for a variety of social, economic and ecological reasons.

To date, Jogi Nath have been considered solely as snake charmers, but traditional medicine is often as important as snakes, and the two professions are often inseparable. A re-assessment is therefore required of the image of the snake charmer, with a greater emphasis on medicinal plants.

Publications

Biodiversity, Livelihoods and the Law; the case of the Jogi-Nath snake charmers of North India. Wildlife Trust of India. (It can be accessed from their website).

Bahar Dutt, Rachel Kaleta and Vikram Hoshing. *From charmers to educators: Using indigenous knowledge for conservation education.*

Rachel Kaleta. *Snake charmers or medicinal healers? Medicinal healing amongst Jogi-Nath snake charmers in northern India.* Presented at the CONFERENCE? in Istanbul in August 2005.