

Ethnobotany of *Rajbanshi* Community in Duars of Jalpaiguri District, West Bengal, India: 1. Traditional food

**Dipanwita Debnath¹, Dibakar Choudhury, Monojanan Chowdhury
and A. P. Das**

Taxonomy & Environmental Biology Laboratory, Department of Botany, University of North Bengal,
Siliguri-734013, West Bengal, India

¹Communicating author, e-mail: dipannitadebnath1@gmail.com

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Abstract

The Rajbanshi Tribe living in Duars region in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal are very rich in their traditional knowledge. Present article recorded the traditional food prepared by them. There is wide variation in food types, taste and ingredients. While some minor ingredients are procured from the market, major plant materials are generally collected from the surrounding vegetation. The new generations of Rajbanshis are, however, gradually loosing taste for their traditional food. Procured data has been presented in the tabular form.

Key word: Ethnobotany, Traditional food, Rajbanshi community, Duars, Jalpaiguri District

INTRODUCTION

The term “Ethnobotany” means study of the relationship of botany with primitive human race or those who have particularly no written language (Pal 2007). However, importance of studying ethnobotany, vis-à-vis survey and conservation of traditional knowledge is now well understood. And, many sincere major projects are now in progress in different corners of this planet. In India also there are several groups, almost in all states, engaged in ethnobotanical works.

India is a big country and at least 53.8 million tribal people belonging to 550 communities, coming under 106 different linguistic groups representing different traditional communities are living here from the time immemorial (Pal 2007; Sarkar 2011). They represent 7.5 % of the country’s total population. Major part of tribal communities still survive in remote areas and almost completely dependent on natural resources for to meet up their all sorts of requirements.

Northern part of the state of West Bengal is endowed with extremely rich vegetation cover and different groups of tribal people living there from the time immemorial maintaining perfect harmony with the surrounding nature. Terai-Duars and the adjoining hills of Darjeeling are sheltering large number of tribes including Mech, Rabha, Toto, Santal, Oraon, Lepcha, Sherpa, Dukpa and Rajbanshi (Mukherjee *et al.* 2007; Sarkar 2011).

In Duars among the tribes Rajbonshi community is represented by largest population structure. They are referred as Koch Rajbongshi, or Rajbanshi. The word “Rajbongshi” literally means “royal community”. They have a rich cultural heritage and their own language. Their culture include folk dance, drama, songs and folklore are integral parts of the culture of

the Duars region. They share many cultural activities with other communities like the Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Manosha Puja etc. of the Bengalese. Popular folk dramas of Jalpaiguri include the '*chor chunni*' and '*dham gaan*' and folk songs of Rajbanshi's. Their most popular songs are referred as '*Bhawaiya Gaan*' – devotional and love songs – which is very famous in Bengal (Sanyal 1965). In West Bengal, Rajbanshi community has been placed in the list of scheduled caste (SC) (www.rajbanshipride.blogspot.in/2016/02/social-issues-scst-status-of-rajbanshi.html).

Rajbongshis are distributed throughout the present Assam and other nearby states like West Bengal (Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Malda and Murshidabad districts), Kishanganj in Bihar, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and other states of Northeast India; Nepal and Bangladesh (Rangpur, Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Bogra and Mymensingh districts). However, they are mainly concentrated in the Terai and Dooars regions in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri Districts of West Bengal. The present study area is only the Duars region of the Jalpaiguri district (Sanyal 1965).

Rajbanshis are completely dependent on nature. Rajbanshi farmers cultivated many grains and vegetables in their own lands for their daily needs. Some plants are used in the

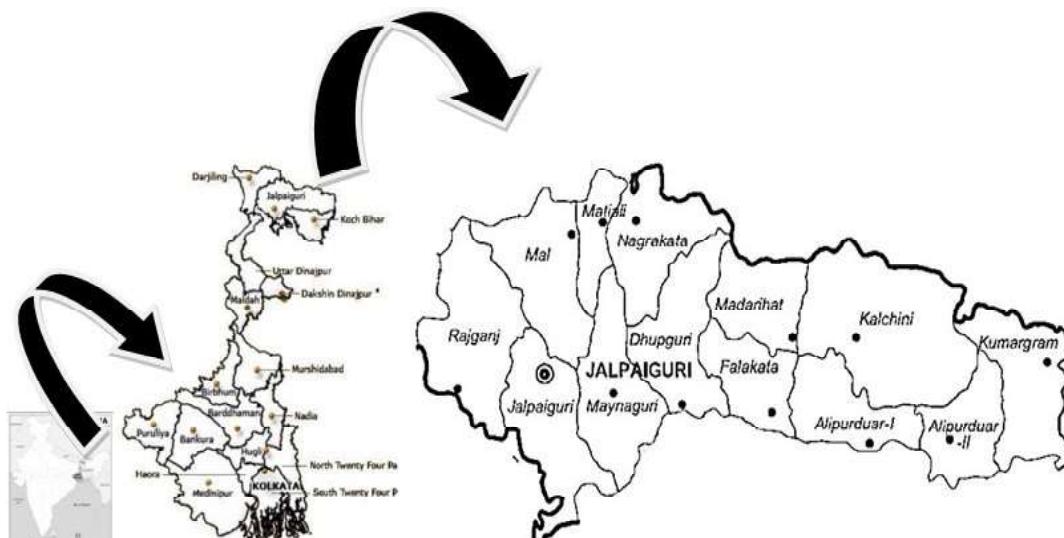


Fig. 1. Location map of study area (not to the scale)

preparation of their special food items like *Chaka*, *Payalka*, *Fok-Doi* etc. Rajbanshi – Plant relationship is very strong.

Except the generalized account of Sanyal (1965) there is almost no detailed work on the ethnobotany of Rajbanshi community. Some ethnobotanical works covering Nepal, Terai and Duars has partially covered Rajbanshi community like Shrestha (2003), Siwakoti et al. (2005), Kunwar et al. (2006), and Dey et al. (2015). However, Roy & Das (2015) documented the special type of food prepared by them. In addition Roy (2015, 2016) published two small reports on the ethnobotany of Rajbanshis mainly in the Coochbehar district of West Bengal.

The present work is a part of the detailed and in-depth ethno-cultural studies on Rajbanshi community in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, India.

Study Area

The present study area is only the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, India (Figure 1). It is situated between $26^{\circ} 16'$ and $27^{\circ} 0'$ North latitudes and $88^{\circ} 4'$ and $89^{\circ} 53'$ East longitudes. The district was established in 1869 and is situated in the northern part of West Bengal sharing international borders with Bhutan and Bangladesh in the north and south respectively and it borders with Darjeeling hills in the west and northwest and Alipurduar and Cooch Behar districts on the east.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For ethnobotanical survey the methods adopted by Schulters (1962), Rai & Bhujel (1999) and Sarkar (2011) were mostly followed. A questionnaire was prepared on the model suggested by Jain and Mudgal (1999). The field work was carried out in Different villages of Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, India. The survey was conducted during the years 2014 – 2015. The purpose of the study was the record of the traditional knowledge of the Rajbanshi people related to the use of plants. However, the present article covers only on their traditional food i.e. the edible plants. Conversation was made mostly in Bengali as almost all of them could speak and understand this language very well.

Using some known and helpful contact persons close understanding was developed with many elderly persons including ladies. Necessary PIC was obtained from the community heads in different villages.

In Rajbanshi society food is prepared mostly by the ladies, so reliable information was expected from them. They provided different data using their local vernacular plant names. However, after the discussion, they were asked to recognize those plants in the vegetation. The recorded data also include the method of preparation of each food item.

After recognition of each plant by the respondents, voucher specimens were collected which were then recorded in the field note book and then processed into mounted herbarium-sheets following Jain and Rao (1977). Specimens were then identified in the laboratory using local floras (Prain 1903; Hooker 1875 - 1897; Grierson & Long 1983 – 2001; Noltie 1994, 2000) and confirmed by matching at NBU-Herbarium. For nomenclature www.theplantlist.org was followed for all the plants. A set of voucher specimens has been deposited in NBU-Herbarium.

RESULT

Different types of food prepared by the Rajbanshis are recorded and the methods of preparation have been observed. Their food can be grossly divided into two main types: (i) Breakfast, & (ii) Principal meals that include lunch and dinner.

However, before taking food in the morning they prepare themselves and the main part of it is the cleaning of teeth. For this they generally use the young but fibrous branches of *Jatropha curcas* (Bak Varendar), *Azadirachta indica* (Neem), *Vitex negundo* (Nishinda), *Mangifera indica* (Aam), *Bambusa tulta*, etc. and the wood-ash from the oven (*Chula* or *Akha*). After this they take the first food of the day or the break-fast.

The Rajbanshis are rice eating people. They usually take three major meals in a day, all of rice. In the morning they usually take *Panta bhat* (fermented rice) i.e. cooked rice kept with water overnight that contain some amount of ethanol. However, in lunch and dinner they usually take freshly cooked rice. They eat cooked vegetables, pulses, fish and goat's meat. Milk and milk products, mainly, is also preferred by them. They used '*Chachi*

tel' (mustard oil) for cooking and for smearing on the head and body after bathing. They use no other edible oil.

The survey recorded different types of food items which are enumerated in Table 1.

Table 1. Recorded food items prepared by the people of Rajbanshi community living in the Duars of Jalpaiguri district

Rajbanshi name	Plant ingredient name		Plant part used	Preparation
	Local	Scientific; Family; voucher specimen		
BREAKFAST				
<i>Muri vaja</i>	Chaal	<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.; Poaceae; D.Deb -209	Rice grains	Partly boiled twice → dried → de-husk in <i>Sumgine</i> → moistened with salty water → dried and heated in a large earthen pan over chula → fried on hot sand
<i>Kacha Chira</i>	Dhan	<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.; Poaceae; D.Deb-209	Paddy	Soaked overnight in water → fried → de-husk and flatten in a <i>Sumgine</i>
<i>Chira vaja</i>	Dhan	<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.; Poaceae; D.Deb-209	Paddy (made to <i>chira</i>)	Kacha chira fried on a pan over a chula
<i>Chal bhaja</i>	Chaal	<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.; Poaceae; D.Deb-209	Rice grains	Directly fried on a earthen pan over a chula
<i>Chaler gunda</i>	Chaal	<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.; Poaceae; D.Deb-209	Rice grains	Dried rice grain fried → take into <i>Sungine</i> for powdering
<i>Talani cha</i>	Sorishar tel	<i>Brassica rapa</i> L.; Brassicaceae; D.Deb-216	Seed-oil	Masterd oil, Garlic, Onion, Ginger, black pepper are mixed → fried → water, salts & tea leaf added → boiled, strained and taken as tea
	Oshun	<i>Allium sativum</i> L.; Amaryllidaceae; D.Deb-243	Bulb (paste)	
	Piyaj	<i>Allium cepa</i> L.; Amaryllidaceae; D.Deb-220	Bulb (paste)	
	Aada	<i>Zingiber officinale</i> Roscoe; Zingiberaceae; D.Deb-223	Rhizome (paste)	
	Golmori ch	<i>Piper nigrum</i> L.; Piperaceae; D.Deb-234	Fruit (powdered)	
	Cha pati	<i>Camellia sinensis</i> (L.) Kuntze; Theaceae; D.Deb-239	Leaf (made tea)	
SPECIAL FOOD [for Lunch & Dinner]				
<i>Chhyaka</i>	Kola	<i>Musa x paradisiaca</i> L.; Musaceae; D.Deb-202	Rhizome	Rhizome of banana cut into small pieces → dried → burnt to ash → filtered with water in endocarp-shell of coconut [for use in different food preparation]
<i>Shidol</i>	Kalo Kochu	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> (L.) Schott; Araceae	Stem	Sun dried small fishes washed → dried → powdered → mixd with Arum & prepare small balls → powder of holud and Chhyaka is coated outside the ball → dried → preserved
	Holud	<i>Curcuma longa</i> L.; Zingiberaceae; D.Deb-233	Rhizome	
<i>Sunki Maachher Chochchori</i>	Sorishar tel	<i>Brassica rapa</i> L.; Brassicaceae; D.Deb-233	Seed-oil	Dry fish is washed in hot water → fried with mastered oil → all other ingredients added → boiled
	Halud	<i>Curcuma longa</i> L.; Zingiberaceae; D.Deb-224	Rhizome (paste)	

Rajbanshi name	Plant ingredient name		Plant part used	Preparation
	Local	Scientific; Family; voucher specimen		
<i>Suntki macher charchchari</i> (contd.)	Piyaj	<i>Allium cepa</i> L.; Amaryllidaceae; D.Deb-238	Bulb (paste)	
	Oshun	<i>Allium sativum</i> L.; Amaryllidaceae; D.Deb-240	Bulb (paste)	
	Kacha Morchi	<i>Capsicum annuum</i> L.; Solanaceae; D.Deb-211	Fruit (paste)	
	Aada	<i>Zingiber officinale</i> Roscoe; Zingiberaceae; D.Deb-223	Rhizome (paste)	
	Jira	<i>Cuminum cyminum</i> L.; Apiaceae; D.Deb-256	Fruit (paste)	
	Darchini	<i>Cinnamomum verum</i> J.Presl; Lauraceae; 275	Stem bark (small pieces)	
<i>Shukati</i>	Paat	<i>Corchorus capsularis</i> L.; Malvaceae; D.Deb-301	Dried leaf	dried leaf of <i>Corchorus</i> , Garlic, Capsicum, Chhyaka, salt are mixed → cooked for eating
	Osun	<i>Allium sativum</i> L.; Amaryllidaceae; D.Deb-243	Bulb (paste)	
	Lal Morchi	<i>Capsicum annuum</i> L.; Solanaceae; D.Deb-210	Fruit	
<i>Payalka</i>	Nafa Sakh	<i>Malva parviflora</i> L.; Malvaceae; D.Deb-222	Young twig	All mixed → salt added → boiled
	Osun	<i>Allium sativum</i> L.; Amaryllidaceae; D.Deb-240	Bulb	
	Lal Morchi	<i>Capsicum annuum</i> L.; Solanaceae; D.Deb-211	Fruit	
<i>Fok-Doi</i>	Atop Chaal	<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.; Poaceae; D.Deb-209	Raw rice grains	All plant parts are mixed with chhaka & little amount of salts → boiled
	Sajina	<i>Moringa oleifera</i> Lam.; Moringaceae; 200	Leaf	
	Kochu	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> (L.) Schott; Araceae	Leaf	
	Nau	<i>Benincasa hispida</i> (Thunb.) Cogn.; Cucurbitaceae; D.Deb-219	Leaf	
	Oshun	<i>Allium sativum</i> L.; Amaryllidaceae; D.Deb-240	Bulb	
	Kacha Morchi	<i>Capsicum annuum</i> L.; Solanaceae; D.Deb-211	Fruit	
<i>Vaalka</i>	Nau	<i>Benincasa hispida</i> (Thunb.) Cogn.; Cucurbitaceae; D.Deb-219	Fruit	Little amount of salt mixed with plant parts → boiled
	Kalai daal	<i>Vigna radiata</i> (L.) R.Wilczek; Leguminosae; D.Deb-387	Seeds	
<i>Kanai patar bora</i>	Chaler gura	<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.; Poaceae; D.Deb-209	Rice powder	Plant parts mixed with little amount of salts & water → prepared small balls → balls are fried
	Morchi	<i>Capsicum annuum</i> L.; Solanaceae; D.Deb-211	Fruit	
	Aada bata	<i>Zingiber officinale</i> Roscoe; Zingiberaceae; D.Deb-223	Rhizome (paste)	

Rajbanshi name	Plant ingredient name		Plant part used	Preparation
	Local	Scientific; Family; voucher specimen		
<i>Dudh kochu</i>	Dudh kochu	<i>Xanthosoma sagittifolium</i> (L.) Schott; Araceae: D.Deb-212	Stem	Plant parts, chhyaka and salt mixed → boiled
	Kalo jira	<i>Cuminum cyminum</i> L.; Apiaceae: D.Deb-256	Fruit	
	Osun	<i>Allium sativum</i> L.; Amaryllidaceae: D.Deb-240	Bulb	
	Kacha morchi	<i>Capsicum annuum</i> L.; Solanaceae: D.Deb-211	fruit	
<i>Amoshi</i>	Aam	<i>Mangifera indica</i> L.; Anacardiaceae: -198	Mesocarp	Halud paste and salt mixed with slices of mango mesocarp of mango and then preserved after sun-drying
	Holdi	<i>Curcuma longa</i> L.; Zingiberaceae: D.Deb-224	Rhizome	
<i>Data sak</i>	Data sak	<i>Amaranthus blitum</i> subsp. <i>oleraceus</i> (L.) Costea; Amaranthaceae: D.Deb-167	Leafy twigs	Plant parts are mixed with water → boiled
	Nafa sak	<i>Malva parviflora</i> L.; Malvaceae: D.Deb-222	Leafy twigs	
	Botua sak	<i>Chenopodium album</i> L.; Chenopodiaceae: 253	Leafy twigs	
	Kacha morchi	<i>Capsicum annuum</i> L.; Solanaceae: D.Deb-211	Fruit	
	Osun	<i>Allium sativum</i> L.; Amaryllidaceae: D.Deb-240	Bulb	
<i>Machher shana</i>	Dhania pata	<i>Coriandrum sativum</i> L.; Apiaceae: D.Deb-199	Leaf	Koi fish & taki fish roasted → mixed with plant parts and salt to eat
	Piyaj	<i>Allium cepa</i> L.; Amaryllidaceae: D.Deb-238	Bulb	
	Morchi	<i>Capsicum annuum</i> L.; Solanaceae: D.Deb-211	Fruit	
<i>Kochu fuler dal</i>	Kochu	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> (L.) Schott; Araceae	Sheathed spadix	<i>Spadix</i> boiled with water to melt → added little salt
<i>Kochu patar vorta</i>	Kochu	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> (L.) Schott; Araceae	Leaf	Pieces of arum leaf and chili packed with banana leaf → tightened with jute-thread → Roasted in fire → taken out the mixture, then added salt & mustard oil
	Kacha morchi	<i>Capsicum annuum</i> L.; Solanaceae: D.Deb-211	Green fruit	
	Kola	<i>Musa x paradisiaca</i> L.; Musaceae: D.Deb-202	Leaf	
	Pat	<i>Corchorus capsularis</i> L.; Malvaceae: D.Deb-333	Jute-fibre	
	Sorishar tel	<i>Brassica rapa</i> L.; Brassicaceae: D.Deb-411	Seed-oil	
<i>Lauer dalma</i>	Nau	<i>Benincasa hispida</i> (Thunb.) Cogn.; Cucurbitaceae: D.Deb-219	Fruit	Pieces of fruit, mixed with salt and sugar → boiled properly → preserved for 10 – 15 days

Cooking utensils: In fully traditional life-style Rajbanshis use only earthen pots, vessels and pans for cooking. But, now they use metal pans, mainly of aluminium, iron and brass. For stirring and sharing food also now they use metal instead of wood

De-husking: For de-husking of paddy, preparation of chira (flattened rice), powdering rice, and for powdering and pasting most of the food materials they use one wooden *Sumgine* or *Gahena-Cham*. This is one very useful instrument.

DISCUSSION

It is observed that preparation of most of the recorded food items are very simple. Rarely they fry or over-boil the ingredients thereby retaining the nutrient values of the prepared food very well. While they love to take freshly prepared food, but few items like *shidol* and *amshi* can be stored for a longer period. *Chhyaka*, prepared from the ash of dried and burnt banana-rhizome is not a food. This is one highly alkaline liquid and used in their different preparations.

The plants used in the recorded preparation are easily available here or are commonly cultivated. Mustard is the dominant winter oil-crop in North Bengal, every house-hold grow some chili plants in their courtyard, turmeric is produced in huge quantity in this region and ginger is also a common crop. Onion, garlic and cumin are rarely cultivated here and the people generally procure those from the local weekly markets. Every family generally grow few clumps of banana, pumpkins to climb over the thatched roofs or trail over the temporary support, drum-stick and mango trees planted along the margins and/or corners of their land in addition to the cultivation of Nafa (*Malva parviflora*) and jute. Taro (wild as well as different cultivars) and Dudh-kach (*Xanthosoma sagittifolius*) are quite common in the area. *Amaranthus blitum* and *Chenopodium album* are common wild plants and Coriandrum is also grown in different houses.

When compared the present observation with the previous publication by Roy and Das (2015), it is interesting to note some differences in ingredients of some food. For examples, *Fok-doi* in present record is prepared with raw-rice, drum-stick leaves, arum leaves, pumpkin leaves, garlic and chili. But, in previous work it was recorded to prepare with raw-rice, ginger, chili, arum. Baro & Chhoto Manimuni (*Centella asiatica* & *Hydrocotyle sibthorpioides*) and chhyaka. It indicates that they use the locally available edible plants for this type of preparation. And, it is also expected that with the increase of survey area many more types of preparations and many more species of plants as ingredients will be recorded.

Apart from these, now they have learnt to consume and cultivate large number of introduced crops and are widening their food habit.

CONCLUSION

The district of Jalpaiguri forms a small segment of the entire distribution area for the Rajbanshi community. At the same time, taking part to the area's numerous development programs they are now coming in close contact with the people of other communities even the marital relations between different communities are being established and, these, led to the mixing of their cultures. The new generation youths and minors are more interested to take spicy food and generally try to avoid their traditional food. However, it is believed that long duration survey over the much wider areas taking samples from different states and countries will lead to the record of much more unique food and ingredients from the Rajbanshi kitchen.

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