"Ethnobotanical Studies of Algae in Traditional Indian Medicine"

***Shakeel Ahamad**

Abstract

Ethnobotanical studies of algae in traditional Indian medicine focus on the significant role algae play in health and healing practices, particularly in systems like Ayurveda, Siddha, and Unani. Algae, especially marine and freshwater species, are recognized for their therapeutic properties and are used in treating a range of ailments, including skin conditions, respiratory issues, digestive disorders, and as detoxifying agents. Species like *Spirulina*, *Gracilaria*, and *Sargassum* have long been incorporated into remedies for their nutritional and medicinal benefits. Traditional texts such as the *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita* mention the use of algae for their rejuvenating and anti-inflammatory properties. Ethnobotanical research identifies various methods of algae collection, preparation, and administration, which often include drying, powdering, or making decoctions. The study of bioactive compounds in algae, like polysaccharides, carotenoids, and phycocyanin, has revealed their antioxidant, antimicrobial, and anti-inflammatory effects. These traditional uses, validated by modern pharmacological studies, highlight algae's valuable role in India's cultural and medicinal heritage.

Keywords: Ayurveda, Siddha, Charaka Samhita, Sargassum, antioxidant.

I. Introduction

Ethnobotany, the study of the traditional knowledge and uses of plants within specific cultural or ethnic groups, provides a vital link between biodiversity and human well-being. While traditionally focused on terrestrial plants, the scope of ethnobotany has expanded to include aquatic organisms such as algae, which are an essential component of the biosphere. Algae, a diverse group of photosynthetic organisms, have long been recognized for their ecological importance, serving as primary producers in aquatic ecosystems. Beyond their ecological roles, algae hold significant ethnobotanical relevance, particularly in traditional medicine systems where their bioactive compounds are harnessed for health and healing.

In India, the use of algae in traditional medicine is deeply intertwined with ancient practices like Ayurveda, Siddha, and Unani. These systems of medicine, rooted in centuries of empirical observation and spiritual understanding, emphasize the holistic approach to health. Algae have been incorporated into these systems for their therapeutic properties, including their roles in detoxification, rejuvenation, and disease prevention. For example, species like *Spirulina* (a type of cyanobacteria) have been used as a nutritional supplement due to their high protein and micronutrient content, while *Gracilaria* and *Gelidium* have applications in wound healing and as

laxatives. This ethnobotanical knowledge not only highlights the cultural and medicinal importance of algae but also underscores the need to study and preserve this traditional wisdom in the context of modern healthcare challenges.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore the ethnobotanical aspects of algae in traditional Indian medicine, focusing on their diversity, uses, and cultural significance. Specific objectives include:

1. Documenting the types of algae utilized in various traditional Indian medicinal practices.
2. Understanding the methods employed for collecting, processing, and applying algae in these systems.
3. Investigating the bioactive compounds present in these algae and their potential therapeutic effects.

II. Historical Context

The utilization of algae in traditional Indian medicine is deeply rooted in ancient texts such as the *Charaka Samhita* and the *Sushruta Samhita*, foundational treatises of Ayurveda, one of the oldest systems of medicine in the world. While the explicit term "algae" may not appear in these texts due to historical linguistic limitations, descriptions of "water-borne flora" or "aquatic medicinal plants" often correlate with species that we now classify as algae. For instance, substances derived from freshwater bodies, like blue-green algae and certain types of green algae, were described as having cooling, detoxifying, and nourishing properties. These were recommended for treating skin disorders, enhancing vitality, and improving digestion. The *Charaka Samhita* emphasizes the importance of water-based remedies, suggesting that certain aquatic plants were used to purify blood and balance the body's doshas (Vata, Pitta, and Kapha). Although not directly naming specific algae, these references align with the properties of species like *Spirulina* and *Chlorella*, known for their detoxifying and nutrient-rich profiles. Similarly, the *Sushruta Samhita*, a text focused on surgical and therapeutic practices, mentions the use of aquatic substances in wound healing and inflammation reduction, which could include algal extracts rich in bioactive compounds.

In Siddha medicine, predominantly practiced in South India, algae hold a more explicit place. The Siddha system, which emphasizes the five-element theory (earth, water, fire, air, and ether), acknowledges aquatic resources as vital for maintaining health and harmony. Seaweeds, for instance, are recognized for their cooling and detoxifying effects, used to treat conditions like ulcers, skin ailments, and gastrointestinal disorders. Unani medicine, influenced by Greco-Arabic traditions and practiced widely in India, also incorporates algae in formulations for their antimicrobial and nutrient-boosting properties.

Documented accounts from tribal regions, coastal villages, and rural areas reveal a profound understanding of algae's medicinal and nutritional benefits. In the northeastern states, where freshwater resources are abundant, communities like the Khasi and Garo tribes traditionally use algae for medicinal and dietary purposes. Coastal communities, especially in regions like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Gujarat, have a long history of using seaweed, a form of marine algae, in their daily lives.

Species like *Gracilaria* and *Gelidium* are processed into pastes or decoctions for treating ailments such as joint pain, respiratory conditions, and digestive issues. In the Himalayan foothills, where cold freshwater streams abound, indigenous groups utilize algae such as *Spirogyra* and *Cladophora*. These algae are considered a natural source of energy and nutrition, especially during harsh winters.

III. Algal Diversity in Indian Ethnobotany

India's rich biodiversity encompasses a wide variety of algae, both freshwater and marine, that have been traditionally utilized for their medicinal properties. These algae are not only culturally significant but also ecologically vital, forming an integral part of traditional medicine systems.

1. Freshwater Algae Used in Medicine

- **Spirulina** (*Arthrospira platensis*): A cyanobacterium often referred to as "blue-green algae," Spirulina is widely known for its high nutritional content, including proteins, vitamins, and antioxidants. In traditional Indian medicine, it has been used as a general health tonic to improve immunity, energy levels, and detoxification.
- **Chlorella** (*Chlorella vulgaris*): Rich in chlorophyll and nutrients, Chlorella is utilized for its detoxifying and anti-inflammatory properties. It is often recommended in traditional practices for cleansing the liver and promoting skin health.
- **Cladophora** (*Cladophora spp.*): Common in rivers and lakes, this green alga is used in folk medicine for its cooling and soothing properties, often applied to burns, rashes, and wounds.

2. Marine Algae Used in Medicine

- **Gracilaria** (*Gracilaria spp.*): A type of red seaweed, Gracilaria is renowned for its applications in wound healing and as a natural laxative. It is also processed to produce agar, which has numerous pharmaceutical and cosmetic uses.
- **Gelidium** (*Gelidium spp.*): Another red alga, Gelidium is utilized in traditional remedies for digestive issues and as a demulcent in throat ailments.
- **Sargassum** (*Sargassum spp.*): A brown seaweed, Sargassum is used in coastal medicine systems for its anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. It is particularly valued for its ability to alleviate joint pain and respiratory disorders.

Distribution and Ecological Significance

The distribution of these algae spans diverse ecosystems across India, from freshwater rivers and ponds to marine coastlines and estuaries.

- Freshwater algae like Spirulina and Chlorella are commonly found in nutrient-rich ponds and lakes across central and southern India. Their abundance in these regions makes them accessible for traditional medicinal use.
- Marine algae such as Gracilaria and Gelidium thrive along the Indian coastline, particularly in Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, and Kerala. The intertidal zones of these regions provide ideal conditions for their growth, supported by tidal movements and saline waters.

IV. Medicinal Uses and Applications

Algae have been valued for their diverse therapeutic properties in traditional Indian medicine, where they are used to treat a wide range of ailments. This section highlights the key health benefits of algae, supported by traditional practices and case studies.

1. **Antioxidant Properties**

   Algae are rich in antioxidants like carotenoids, phycocyanins, and polyphenols, which combat oxidative stress and protect cells from damage caused by free radicals.

   Example: *Spirulina* is recognized for its high concentration of phycocyanin, a potent antioxidant that supports liver detoxification and boosts immune function. It has been traditionally used to treat chronic fatigue and improve general well-being.

2. **Antimicrobial Properties**

   The antimicrobial activity of algae is attributed to their bioactive compounds such as polysaccharides, fatty acids, and phenolics, which inhibit the growth of bacteria, fungi, and viruses.

- **Example**: *Gracilaria* extracts are used in traditional remedies for treating skin infections and wounds. Its polysaccharides also aid in forming a protective barrier, preventing secondary infections.

3. **Anti-inflammatory Effects**

   Algae possess natural compounds like omega-3 fatty acids and sulfated polysaccharides that reduce inflammation in the body. These properties make algae beneficial for conditions such as arthritis, respiratory ailments, and gastrointestinal disorders.

- **Example**: Coastal communities in Tamil Nadu use *Sargassum* decoctions to alleviate joint pain and inflammatory skin conditions, reflecting its anti-inflammatory potential.

4. **Nutritional and Immune-Boosting Benefits**

   Algae like *Spirulina* and *Chlorella* are nutrient-dense, providing essential vitamins, minerals, proteins, and fatty acids. These nutritional benefits are often harnessed to boost immunity, address malnutrition, and improve recovery from illnesses.

- **Case Study**: A study in Gujarat documented the use of *Spirulina* among tribal communities to combat malnutrition in children. The algae were administered in powdered form mixed with milk or water, showing significant improvement in health indicators.

Recent scientific studies validate the therapeutic properties of algae, highlighting their potential for integration into modern medicine. For example, the antioxidant properties of *Spirulina* and the antimicrobial effects of *Gracilaria* have been extensively researched, aligning with their traditional uses.

V. Bioactive Compounds in Medicinal Algae

5.1 Phytochemical Analysis

The medicinal properties of algae stem from their rich reservoir of bioactive compounds, which contribute to their therapeutic effects. These compounds are synthesized as part of the algae's metabolic processes and play critical roles in health promotion and disease prevention.

1. Polysaccharides

Polysaccharides such as agar, alginate, and carrageenan, derived from algae like *Gracilaria* and *Gelidium*, are known for their medicinal and functional properties.

- **Therapeutic Role**:
  - Enhance immune response by stimulating macrophages and natural killer cells.
  - Exhibit antiviral properties, blocking the attachment of viruses to host cells.
  - Support gut health by acting as prebiotics, promoting the growth of beneficial gut flora.
- **Example**: Sulfated polysaccharides from *Gracilaria* have shown anti-inflammatory and anticoagulant effects in preclinical studies.

2. Carotenoids

Carotenoids such as beta-carotene, astaxanthin, and lutein are abundant in algae like *Spirulina* and *Chlorella*.

- **Therapeutic Role**:
  - Potent antioxidants that neutralize free radicals and protect against oxidative stress.
  - Support eye health, particularly in preventing age-related macular degeneration.
  - Enhance skin health by reducing UV-induced damage.
- **Example**: Beta-carotene in *Spirulina* is a precursor to vitamin A and has been traditionally used to improve vision and treat skin disorders.

3. Phycocyanin

Phycocyanin, a blue pigment unique to cyanobacteria such as *Spirulina*, is one of the most studied bioactive compounds.

- **Therapeutic Role**:
  - Exhibits strong antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties.
  - Protects the liver and kidneys from toxic damage.
  - Acts as an immune modulator, enhancing the body's defense mechanisms.
- **Example**: Traditional remedies using *Spirulina* have highlighted its effectiveness in detoxification, which aligns with the antioxidant effects of phycocyanin.

4. Phenolics and Flavonoids

Phenolic compounds and flavonoids are found in both freshwater and marine algae.

- **Therapeutic Role**:
    - Provide antimicrobial effects, particularly against drug-resistant pathogens.
    - Protect cardiovascular health by reducing cholesterol levels and improving circulation.
- **Example**: Phenolic compounds in brown algae like *Sargassum* have demonstrated significant antibacterial activity, supporting their traditional use in treating infections.

5. Omega-3 Fatty Acids

Marine algae are a primary source of omega-3 fatty acids like EPA and DHA, which are essential for brain and heart health.

- **Therapeutic Role**:
    - Reduce inflammation and support joint health in arthritis patients.
    - Lower triglyceride levels and prevent cardiovascular diseases.
    - Support cognitive function and mental health.
- **Example**: Traditional diets of coastal communities, rich in algae, have long been associated with lower rates of heart disease and improved overall health.

5.2 Modern Validation

Modern scientific research increasingly validates the therapeutic claims of traditional Indian medicine regarding algae. Pharmacological studies have revealed a strong correlation between traditional knowledge and the bioactive potential of algal compounds.

1. Pharmacological Studies on Indian Algae

- **Spirulina**:
    - A study conducted in Tamil Nadu demonstrated that *Spirulina* supplementation significantly improved hemoglobin levels in anemic patients. This aligns with its traditional use as a nutritional supplement.
    - Its antioxidant properties have been validated in studies showing reduced oxidative stress markers in patients with chronic diseases.
- **Gracilaria**:
    - Polysaccharides extracted from *Gracilaria* have shown potential as anticoagulant agents, supporting their use in traditional remedies for improving blood flow and preventing clots.
    - Experimental studies highlight its antiviral activity, particularly against herpes and influenza viruses.

- **Sargassum**:
    - Research on *Sargassum* extracts has confirmed their anti-inflammatory and antibacterial properties, validating their use in treating joint pain and skin infections.
    - Recent studies have also explored its potential as a natural source of biofuels, demonstrating its ecological and economic significance.

2. Bridging Traditional and Modern Knowledge

Traditional Indian medicine emphasizes the holistic use of algae, often in combination with other herbs and treatments. Modern research corroborates this by demonstrating synergistic effects when algae-derived compounds are combined with other bioactives.

- **Example**: Combining *Spirulina* with turmeric (curcumin) has been shown to amplify anti-inflammatory effects, a practice already observed in traditional formulations.

3. Challenges and Opportunities

While the bioactive potential of algae is well-documented, several challenges remain:

- The variability in bioactive compound content due to environmental factors.
- The need for sustainable harvesting and cultivation to prevent overexploitation.
- Limited awareness and acceptance of algae-based remedies in mainstream medicine.

However, advancements in biotechnology and pharmacology present opportunities to enhance the production and application of algal bioactives. Techniques such as microalgae cultivation in bioreactors and extraction optimization are paving the way for large-scale utilization.

VI. Challenges and Conservation Efforts

6.1 Overexploitation and Habitat Loss

India's rich algal biodiversity faces mounting challenges due to human activities, environmental degradation, and climate change.

1. Impact of Human Activities on Algal Diversity

- **Pollution**: Industrial effluents, agricultural runoff, and untreated sewage contribute to eutrophication in water bodies, altering nutrient levels and disrupting algal ecosystems. Excessive nutrients can lead to algal blooms, which harm overall biodiversity by depleting oxygen levels and releasing toxins.
- **Overharvesting**: The increasing demand for algae in pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, and food products has led to unsustainable harvesting practices, particularly in coastal regions.

Species like *Gracilaria* and *Gelidium* are often harvested indiscriminately, reducing their populations and ecological roles.

- **Habitat Destruction**: Activities like coastal development, sand mining, and dredging destroy critical habitats for marine algae, while deforestation impacts freshwater ecosystems that support algal growth.

2. Threatened Species of Medicinal Algae in India

Several species of medicinal algae are now under threat due to these pressures.

- **Marine Algae**: Species such as *Sargassum wightii* and *Gracilaria edulis*, valued for their medicinal properties, are experiencing population declines in areas like the Gulf of Mannar due to overharvesting and habitat degradation.
- **Freshwater Algae**: Rare species like *Batrachospermum*, found in clean streams, are at risk from water pollution and reduced streamflow caused by damming and water diversion.
- **Cyanobacteria**: Medicinal cyanobacteria, including *Spirulina platensis*, are affected by climate change, which alters the temperature and salinity of water bodies, impacting their growth and productivity.

6.2 Sustainability and Conservation Strategies

Efforts to conserve algal biodiversity require a multifaceted approach, combining community engagement, scientific research, and policy implementation.

1. Community-Driven Initiatives

Local communities play a vital role in conserving algae, particularly in regions where traditional

knowledge about algal harvesting and use is prevalent.

- **Sustainable Harvesting Practices**: Coastal communities in Tamil Nadu and Gujarat have adopted rotational harvesting, allowing algae to regenerate before the next harvest. This practice helps maintain algal populations while providing a continuous livelihood.
- **Awareness Programs**: NGOs and academic institutions collaborate with local communities to raise awareness about the ecological importance of algae and the risks of overexploitation.
- **Community-Based Aquaculture**: Initiatives like the cultivation of *Gracilaria* and *Sargassum* in artificial ponds provide an alternative to wild harvesting. These programs empower communities, especially women, by providing training and access to markets.

2. Role of Government and NGOs in Promoting Algal Conservation

Both governmental and non-governmental organizations are essential in supporting conservation efforts through policies, funding, and research.

- **Government Policies**:
  - The Indian government has established marine protected areas (MPAs) in regions like the Gulf of Mannar to safeguard marine ecosystems, including algal habitats.
  - Schemes such as the National Mission for Sustaining the Himalayan Ecosystem aim to conserve freshwater biodiversity, including algae.
- **NGO Contributions**:
  - NGOs like the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation work with coastal communities to promote sustainable seaweed farming and biodiversity conservation.
  - Organizations such as the Centre for Environment Education (CEE) run campaigns to highlight the importance of algae in maintaining ecological balance and supporting livelihoods.
- **Research and Development**: Collaborative projects between government agencies and research institutions focus on identifying threatened algal species, developing cultivation techniques, and restoring degraded habitats.

3. Innovative Conservation Techniques

Advances in science and technology offer new tools for conserving algal biodiversity:

- **Cultivation in Controlled Environments**: Microalgae cultivation in bioreactors minimizes the need for wild harvesting, ensuring a consistent supply of bioactive compounds without harming natural populations.
- **Genetic Conservation**: Biotechnological approaches like cryopreservation are being used to store algal genetic material, safeguarding diversity for future restoration efforts.
- **Restoration Projects**: Efforts to rehabilitate degraded coastal and freshwater habitats, such as replanting seagrass beds and cleaning polluted streams, indirectly benefit algal species by improving their environments.

In conclusion, addressing the overexploitation and habitat loss of medicinal algae in India is not just an environmental imperative but also a cultural and economic necessity. By adopting sustainable practices and fostering collaboration among stakeholders, the conservation of algae can contribute to ecological balance, community well-being, and the preservation of a vital component of India's natural heritage.

VII. Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Findings

Key findings from the research include:

- **Medicinal Uses**: Algae such as *Spirulina*, *Gracilaria*, *Sargassum*, and *Ulva* have been used for centuries in treating a wide range of ailments, from skin disorders to digestive issues, and are revered for their antioxidant, antimicrobial, and anti-inflammatory properties.

- **Bioactive Compounds**: Medicinal algae contain key bioactive compounds like polysaccharides, carotenoids, phycocyanin, and essential fatty acids, which have been shown to provide health benefits. The bioactive properties of these algae support the claims made in traditional medicine systems, providing a scientific basis for their continued use.
- **Ethnobotanical Insights**: Local healers and traditional practitioners play a central role in preserving the knowledge of medicinal algae, with oral traditions and ethnographic records providing valuable insights into the historical and cultural significance of algae in Indian medicine.
- **Ecological Importance**: Algae are not only essential for human health but also play a critical ecological role in maintaining the health of aquatic ecosystems. They contribute to nutrient cycling, carbon sequestration, and provide habitat for various aquatic organisms.
- **Threats and Conservation**: Overexploitation, habitat destruction, and climate change pose significant threats to algal biodiversity in India. Species such as *Gracilaria* and *Sargassum* are particularly vulnerable, necessitating urgent conservation measures.

7.2 Recommendations

1. Preserving Traditional Knowledge and Sustainable Use of Medicinal Algae

- **Documentation of Indigenous Knowledge**: Efforts must be made to document and preserve the traditional knowledge related to the use of medicinal algae. This includes recording the ethnobotanical uses, harvesting methods, and medicinal applications as described by local healers and communities.
- **Promotion of Sustainable Harvesting Practices**: Community-driven initiatives that focus on sustainable harvesting should be encouraged and supported. This could involve implementing rotational harvesting practices, educating communities about the importance of maintaining algal populations, and promoting eco-friendly harvesting technologies.
- **Incentives for Conservation**: Governments and NGOs can provide financial incentives to local communities for practicing sustainable algae farming or harvesting. This could include grants for cultivating medicinal algae in controlled environments, creating cooperative models for algae-based businesses, and offering certifications for sustainably sourced algae products.
- **Strengthening Legislation**: There is a need for stronger legal frameworks to protect algal habitats and regulate overharvesting. These laws should enforce penalties for illegal harvesting, while promoting conservation efforts through incentives and community engagement.

2. Suggestions for Further Research

- **Exploration of Lesser-Known Algal Species**: Future research should focus on exploring the medicinal properties of lesser-known algae species, many of which are yet to be studied.

India's diverse ecosystems, ranging from the Himalayas to the coastal regions, offer a wealth of untapped algal species that may have significant pharmacological potential.

- **Integration of Traditional Knowledge with Modern Science**: There is a need for interdisciplinary research that bridges the gap between traditional knowledge and modern pharmacology. Collaborations between ethnobotanists, pharmacologists, and ecologists can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the therapeutic properties of algae and validate their use in contemporary medicine.
- **Climate Change and Algal Biodiversity**: As climate change continues to impact aquatic ecosystems, further studies are needed to understand its effects on algal biodiversity in India. Research should focus on how rising temperatures, pollution, and altered nutrient levels affect algae populations, and develop strategies for mitigating these impacts.
- **Development of Algae-Based Products**: There is significant potential for developing algae-based products, including nutraceuticals, pharmaceuticals, and cosmetics, based on their medicinal properties. Future research should focus on optimizing the cultivation and processing methods for these products, ensuring both their efficacy and sustainability.
- **Restoration of Algal Habitats**: Further studies on habitat restoration techniques for degraded coastal and freshwater ecosystems are essential. Restoration projects could focus on reintroducing native algae species, improving water quality, and rebuilding ecosystems to support the growth of medicinal algae.

The study highlights the deep connection between algae, traditional medicine, and the ecological fabric of India. With collaborative efforts from local communities, researchers, policymakers, and NGOs, medicinal algae can continue to thrive, benefiting both human health and the environment for generations to come.

***Assistant Professor**
Department of Botany
Shaheed Caption Ripudaman Singh Govt. College
Sawai Madhopur (Raj.)

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