

# The Traditonal Medicinal System– Ethnobotany and Herbalism

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**Abstract:-** India, due to its unique variety of geographical and climatic factors, has a rich and varied flora of medicinal plants. No wonder that out of a total number of over 15,000 plant species in India, about 2,000 are known to have medicinal properties and some of them are used even as home remedies in the rural and remotest parts of our country. Traditional medicine may include formalized aspects of folk medicine, that is to say longstanding remedies passed on and practised by lay people. Folk medicine consists of the healing practices and ideas of body physiology and health preservation known to some in a culture, transmitted informally as general knowledge, and practiced or applied by anyone in the culture having prior experience.[2]

## Introduction

Folk medicine may also be referred to as traditional medicine, indigenous medicine, alternative medicine, or natural medicine. These terms are often considered interchangeable, even though some authors may prefer one or the other because of certain overtones they may wish to highlight. In fact, out of these terms perhaps only *indigenous medicine* and *traditional medicine* have the same meaning as *folk medicine*, while the others should be understood rather in a modern or modernized context. A traditional health care practice of indigenous people pertaining to human health is termed as Ethnomedicine. The knowledge of certain herbs, animals and minerals that have curative and palliative effects were transmitted from one generation to another and it is the outcome of bold experimentation through trial and error method over hundreds of years. Ethnomedicine is the mother of all other systems of medicine such as Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, Nature cure and even modern medicine. The traditional herbalists are part and parcel of the community and are often familiar with the details of each family and its environs, so that they are in a better position to deal with their day-to-day problems. In fact the native healers take care of the common ailments of the folk in their home setting<sup>1</sup>.(1,2)

## Discussion

The traditional medicinal knowledge is thought to be within every one's reach and does not require any study or training to practice it. In some families almost all the members are acquainted with some part or other of herbal remedies. The traditional healers specialize in particular areas of their profession. Thus we find some medical practitioners are expert in bone setting, wound healing, poisonous bites, neurological disorders, etc. and some others in spiritual healing, especially the use of incantations while others combine both in their treatment<sup>2</sup>. It is important to note that there is no doubt about the efficacy of herbal medicine among its users. Rural and urban poor people in India rely on herbal remedies since these are within their reach. In fact in remote areas this is the only source of health care available.(3)

The loss of language and traditional knowledge due to acculturation and plant habitat destruction is a major concern, particularly among smaller and more vulnerable tribes and indigenous groups. Serious dangers exist for the survival of such people and their cultures and the ecosystems which nurture them and provide western and traditional medicine with novel plant products for human well-being

everywhere. Loss of indigenous knowledge has an impact on the modern medicine. As indigenous cultures become increasingly fragmented and threatened by modern development pressures in developing countries, folk knowledge may be lost for ever. Like the current spasm of plant and animal species extinction, the practitioners of ethnomedicine appear to be at a great risk of extinction than even forests and other biomes.

Knowledge of the use of plants is disappearing faster than themselves [3]. In this race against ecosystem destruction, researchers in many disciplines must rally to provide the impetus to save global diversity while at the same time accelerating studies of ethnomedicine in consort with biomedical and chemical terms for developing new natural products and drugs needed by humans. It behooves us to study the practice of indigenous populations before they are lost, through either human indifference or our relentless ability to change and destroy the vegetation around us.(4,5)

Ethnomedicine denotes plants, animal products and minerals used by tribal communities of a particular region or country for medicinal purposes other than those mentioned in classical streams of the respective cultures.

Ethnomedicinal information/data is playing an important role for developing new scientifically validated and standardised drugs (both herbal and modern). In India, uses of more than 7500 plant species by different ethnic communities have been recorded so far.

An intensive ethnomedical survey conducted by the author and his team from 1987-1992 in the southern most state of India (Kerala), has provided rich and varied ethnomedical data recorded from the different tribal communities including Kani, Malapandaram, and Cholanaykan.(6,7)

The gathering of medicinal herbs, as well as the healing ceremonies themselves are usually accompanied by a more or less elaborate ritual. Copious amounts of Copal or Pine resin are burned as offerings to the Gods. Mayan healers place a great deal of significance on administering their herbs in doses that are based on magically important numbers such as 3, 9 or 13, often given in pairs to establish a balance of male and female energies. They also tend to identify herbs as either 'male' or 'female', though the corresponding parts of a given pair frequently belong to botanically quite unrelated families and the actual physical gender of the plants in question bears no relevance on this system of classification.

### **Utilization**

The techniques used to administer herbal remedies are quite varied. A common method of preparation is the decoction, whereby fresh herbs, roots or barks are placed in a pot of cold water, brought to a boil and then left to stew for a while. Such decoctions can be taken internally or if required, applied externally to wash wounds or to treat fungal infections and other types of skin conditions. Therapeutic bathing using various herbal decoctions for their medicinal properties, is also a common practice.

For wounds and aching muscles or bones herbal plasters are usually applied directly to the painful area. Salves and ointments are less common - perhaps because fatty substances have a tendency to go off or melt in hot climates thus losing their healing properties. So far most of the above mentioned herbal applications may sound pretty familiar since they are also commonly used in western herbal medicine. However, there are a number of methods used by indigenous people in Central America that may seem quite strange to many of us today, though in the past similar methods were also a common part of ethnobotany.(8,9)

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