

Medico-ethnobotanical sources of India

Medico-ethnobotany refers to the use of whole plants or their parts for medicinal purposes by indigenous people. It is also known as ethno-medicine or ethnomedicobotany and it refers to a wide range of healthcare systems, practices, belief and therapeutic techniques that arise from the cultural development of ethnic groups or tribes. Major medico-ethnobotanical sources of India are:

1. Literature: Ancient Indian scriptures such as Vedas, Puranas and Upanishads are probably the earliest known sources of ethno-medicobotany dating back to 4500-1600 BC. Atharva veda is considered to be the oldest encyclopaedia of use of plants for medicine. Detailed descriptions of medicinal plants are also found in 'Charaka Samhita'(1000-800 BC) describing uses of about 1,106 plants and 'Sushruta Samhita'(800-700 BC) which includes description of about 1,270 plants and 650 drugs. Another ancient treatise on the subject is 'Astanga-Hridaya' compiled by Vagabhata in the 7th century AD.

The work of Garcia-de-Orta, Physician and governor of Goa (1565) is considered as first systematic record of Indian medicinal plants. The Indian Indigenous drugs were first documented by Jones (1799) in his book titled 'Botanical Observations on Select Plants'. It was followed by many valuable contributions in the 19th century such as 'Materia Medica of Hindustan' by Aensy in 1813, 'Materia Medica of Western India' by Dr. Dimak in 1863, 'Farma Coppya India' by Varring in 1868 and 'Supplement to the Farma Coppya of India' by Dr. Mohiddin Sarif in 1869. Thereafter 'Indigenous Drugs of India' was written by Chopra in 1933 and after his publication, such contributions to the ethnomedicinal literature of India gained momentum. Other notable contributions include 'Glimpses of Indian Ethnobotany' by Jain (1981), 'Cultivation and Utilisation of Medicinal plants' by Atal (1982), 'Current research on medicinal plants' by Dhawan (1986), Medicinal Plants of India by Jain and De Fillips(1991) and 'Dictionary of Indian Folk Medicine and Ethnobotany' by S.K.Jain (1991). Literature on Indian Medico-ethnobotany is very vast and despite much research, there are still a large number of manuscripts in libraries, private and public collections which can serve as an important source for identification of medicinal plants unknown till date.

2. Tribal or folk systems of medicine: This system of medicine can be classified into the forms of folk medicine which are village based, region-specific, indigenous herb based, local resources based and in many cases, community-

specific. It is an age-old system guided by experience and mostly fresh plant preparations of locally available species are used for treatment by local healers.

3. Traditional Indian system of Medicine (ISM):

There has been a resurgence of traditional systems of medicine all over the world due to the holistic nature of their approach to healing. Their efficacy has been proved by clinical studies; moreover these systems of medicine are also cost effective and locally available. Some major traditional medicine systems practiced in India which use plants or their products for treatment of various ailments.

(i) Ayurveda:

This system is mainly based on drugs of plant origin. In India there are about 2,50,000 registered medical practitioners of Ayurvedic system and about 2000-2500 plants are used for various formulations.

(ii) Siddha

Siddha is the ancient traditional Tamil system of medicine dating back to 10,000-4,000 BC. The word 'siddha' means 'perfection'. Drugs used by the Siddhars are classified into three groups- Thaavaram (herbal products), Thaathu (inorganic substances) and Jangamam (animal products). About 13,00 plants are used in this system of medicine.

(iii) Unani

Unani medicine system originated in Greece and was introduced to India by the Arabs around the eleventh century. This system of medicine got enriched by imbibing the best from contemporary systems of traditional medicine in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Persia, India, China and the middle-east.