

Some Medicinal Plants of Kishtwar district, Jammu and Kashmir, (India) : Biodiversity and Ethnosacred significance

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Abstract

Kishtwar is a district of Jammu region, in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, which is cragged placed commonly referred as "**Land of Sapphire, Saffron and Shrines**". Denizens of the rocky terrain are highly spiritual and believe in a veritable smorgasbord of religions. The rites and rituals related to worshipping and veneration performed in various ways by the people are known, in which various plants or their parts play a significant role. The present paper purports to document and limelight 20 sacred species of plants pertaining to 19 different families. While carrying out the research, the sacred plants are observed and documented from different religious places like Has Astan, Bun Astan, Shiv Mandir, Ram Mandir (Sarkot), Neelkanth Mandir, Bhandarkoot Astan of the district Kishtwar of Jammu and Kashmir, (India). The investigation divulged that the different kinds of these religious places are covered with significant ethnosacred plant species.

Since long time, humankind has realized the meditative attributes of plants and permeated trees, plants and animals; Most of them are employed for sacred and ceremonial occasions to explore the spiritual world. The use of these plants was obtained from native cultures, whose members have traditionally sought approach the supra normal by virtue of the ingestion of the plants and their preparations. These plants differ from a coeval religious point of view in a key way⁶ For a religious supplication, rites and communion are engrossed to propitiate God and Goddesses and the use of sacred plants is destined to give worshiper and direct access to the divine

providence, but the difference is radical not slight. In a literal sense, the term sacred means Holy or Deserving reverence and the plants which behold such admiration are preferred to as "**Sacred plants**". Apart from being regarded as an integral part of biodiversity, these play the vital and significant role in human spirituality, religion and culture. The concept of sacred plants found its origin in human civilization. Ancient literature and the Holy Scriptures of all the, major religions provide the clear cut evidences of the significance of the plants and flowers. The association of sacred plants with human culture seems to be an abstract affinity which indicated good and

bad power of plants, plant folklore and plant worship¹⁴. The study of these plants and their product formation are associated with belief and tradition from the discipline of divine botany. Divine botany also symbolizes the plants which are mentioned in religious text like the Quran, Gita, Guru Granth, Bible as well as plants of supernatural and spiritual levels associated from birth to death of a person³.

The Jammu and Kashmir state of India lies in the Western Himalayas. It is highly rich in biodiversity and is also store house of several medicinal plants, herb-charms and sacred plants¹⁰. District Kishtwar lies 240 kms in the North east of Jammu (winter capital of state), 284 km South East from Srinagar (summer capital of state) it lies in the lap of great Himalayan Pir Pangal range and is highly terrain properly know as “**Land of Sapphire, Saffron and Shrines**”. It is very diverse in all its form. Being essentially merged with the state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1821, it was a region used to be an independent hilly terrain. The climate extends from temperate to alpine with some subtropical elements. Resulting from the marked variation in topography conjugated with climatic conditions, the area is characterized by wide range of vegetation consisting of trees herbs, shrubs, grasses, climbers, lianas, mosses, ferns etc. Sacred plants are used by man in ritual and marriage ceremony, havuns, prayers, magic, opening fast and casting away the shadow of black magic. However there is not a single report on sacred plants from this till date. The main focus of the present work is to explore the traditional knowledge of the sacred plants in Kishtwar district.

Flowering plants were gathered within the present boundaries of Kishtwar district. The places explored include road sides, river sides, river banks, forests, meadows, valleys, rock crevices, cultivated fields and wet lands. Some areas having rich biodiversity such as Sinthan Top, Green Mughal maidan, Sarthal, Drabshalla, Atholi, Sigdi bhata, Gulabgarh, Malipath, Trak goori, Chengam, Girinagar and other areas were visited many a times in every season of the year. Besides that many rural areas of the district were also visited for screening of plants which are being applied for curing of diseases as per religious beliefs. Middle aged and older people were consulted during the visit, most of them were hakims (old people having profound knowledge of ethno botanical plants), Pandits, Molanas. Apart from these, information was also received by the local residents of the area who have witnessed changes over the years in atmosphere and environment⁷. For each the local people were interviewed about the medicinal and sacred value, as well as the knowledge regarding the common name of the plants in their usage and preparations. Digital photographs and herbarium specimens were also made use of during the field trip⁸. The time limit of each visit was 5-10 days and each trip of 1-2 days where executed either alone or one or more helpers. In this way, it was necessarily possible to raise the collection from rich plant diversity areas of Kishtwar district in all seasons of the year. A questionnaire showing abstract relationship of the ethno sacred plants with various groups was framed in the collections of samples during the field work; which are,

- a. What is native name of the sacred plants?
- b. What are those parts of the plants especially used for the religious practices?

- c. Which plants are liked by the local people to grow in their vicinity?
- d. How do people make use of particular plant for rites and rituals?
- e. What is the myth, if any, related to the plants?
- f. Any other ethnobotanical use?

The ethnoreligious significance of the plants under observation was considered only after the proper consultation with 6-8 persons. Besides, the sacred plants are also made use for healing purposes. True healing is connected with the body, mind, spirit with the present and future⁵. Such combinations are possible by various means including the ceremonial use of the sacred plants. These plants have been also employed to antagonize the disorders of body, mind and spirit.

Humans, since their existence on planet, Earth, have relied on Nature for their basic needs medicines and religious beliefs². Plants forming the basic of the traditional medicine system are called “**Medicinal Plants**” that continue to provide mankind with new remedies. The use of the medicinal plants in many countries, is often associated with witchcraft and superstition, due to the lack of scientific insight to explain the curative action of the plants¹. The appearances of such plants have been assumed to give clues to their medicinal properties. It is interpreted as God’s signature on the plants. Red juice and sap, for instance, is associated with blood and menstrual ailments, yellow flowers with bile and jaundices⁴. This belief got more rooted with the use of many medicinal herbs in sacred ways for religious purpose. Sacred herbs and their uses for religious rituals are traceable in

almost every single continent on the Planet, including ancient civilizations like Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece.

The religious importance of Nature, Medicinal plants and Herbs is associated with the worship of the basic elements of Nature *i.e.*, *Prithvi* (Earth), *Agni* (Fire), *Jal* (Water), *Vayu* (Air) and *Akash* (Space), as per the Hindu mythology. The tree of *Cedras deodara* is believed to be the “**Tree of God**” and is planted around the temples. Due to this, the entire landscape represented by a Variety of species and ecosystems, has been considered sacred, and conserved in their pristine condition by forbidding the use of any resource from it¹¹.

As per the Kishtwar is concerned, it is known for its vast range of vegetation and medicinal plants of ethnosacred importance. Some of the plants like *Capsicum annuum* L., *Vigna mungo* Linn. Hepper., *Citrus limon* L., are being used to counteract harmful omens like evil eyes and witchcrafts. A few plant species are regarded auspicious like *Platanus orientalis* L., and some are considered as inauspicious such as *Opentia vulgaris* Mill. People of the Kishtwar district use sacred herbs in different ways, however to-date there has been almost no such work reported that emphasizes on the documentation of Ethnosacred plants of Kishtwar district. Much work has been discussed regarding the importance of plants in human life as food, fiber and cosmetics, but the religious aspects of plants have not gained much attention and hence not much explored. Certain work glimpses, although are reported from some parts of India. Nargas *et al.*¹² pointed out that *Azadirachta indica* is worshipped in India,

and its leaves are used to keep away the evil spirits. While in case of Rajasthan, the sacred herb is associated with the farmers' tradition method of weather forecasting. Besides this, the diversity of vascular plants of Kishtwar High Altitude National Park, Jammu & Kashmir, *i.e.*, Northern Himalaya, have been reported for their ethnomedicinal uses⁹. Also the phenology of vegetation of Pulwama Kashmir, stresses on the medicinal use of those plants. But Kishtwar, Jammu and Kashmir, is totally unexplored as per the sacred plants study point of view.

from the local people, religious Pandits and Molanas, Hakeem, Vaidhs, the present work aims at the compilation analysis and documentation of the sacred plants of Kishtwar region. From the taxonomical point of view, each plant is assigned a correct authority and family name. The Nomenclature has been updated in accordance with the latest version of ICBN. The documentation of 20 plants species of Ethnosacred value, belonging to 19 families, have been done in the present work. Almost all the plants studied and documented, posses medicines properties. (Table ESP-1)

Based on the information gathered

Table ESP-1 : Showing Sacred uses and Medicinal Properties of some of the Ethnosacred plants found in Kishtwar District, Jammu & Kashmir, India

1	Botanical name : <i>Adiantum capillusveneris</i> L. Local name : Gaotheer Family : Adiantaceae	Sacred uses Leaves of plant are dried and ground into the powder, are being used as one of the ingredient in dhoopsamagries. This Dhoop is preferred for its inscence in the temples of the area, so, the plant is regarded as auspicious and symbol of purity. <hr/> Medicinal Properties Leaves are boiled in water with cardamom and is used to cure cough, cold, and fever in infants
2	Botanical name : <i>Amaranthus caudatus</i> . L Local name : Saval Family : Amaranthaceae	Sacred uses Seeds of the plant are used as food in Navratra fasts. The seeds are roosted and cooked in milk and relished as "kheer" or taken as such. <hr/> Medicinal Properties The seeds are rich in carbohydrates and given to young children. The seeds act as a quick energizer and preferable used in fast.
3	Botanical name : <i>Coriandrum sativum</i> . L. Local name : Dainwal Family : Umbelliferae	Sacred uses A special dish namely "Tahar" is often garnished with coriander leaves and then offered in Shrines (Ziyarat). <hr/> Medicinal Properties The local people consider the leaves of the plants as a good appetizer and digestive tonic

4	Botanical name : <i>Foeniculum vulgare</i> . Mill Local name : Badyaan Family : Apiaceae	Sacred uses The seed of the plant is used in “Janav (Yagnopavit) ceremony” its fruits are used in havans, and the fruit is offered to Agni Devta.
		Medicinal Properties The powdery form of seed is mixed with sugar and then added in warm water and is given in constipation
5	Botanical name : <i>Barberis lyceum</i> . Royle. Local name : Khumbalaya Family : Berberidaceae	Sacred uses Plant is used as guard to check over evil spiritto prevents them from entering houses. The common ethic related to the plant is that it keeps ghost away and acts as protection shield.
		Medicinal Properties The decoction of roots is used to cure scalp disease.
6	Botanical name : <i>Betula utilis</i> . D.Don Local name : Bhurzaj/Burzpatter Family : Betulaceae	Sacred uses The bark of this tree is well known, as the material on which ancient manuscript of India is written. All religious hymens had been written on this bark. Beside this, the whole plant is regarded as auspicious and highly valued for its ethnic use.
		Medicinal Properties Sap of stem is used to lengthen the hair, infusion of roots and bark is used for curing cuts and bruises.
7	Botanical name : <i>Brassica campestris</i> L. Local name : Sarsoo/ Saryaan Family : Brassicaceae	Sacred uses The plant has a long history of spiritual use, several references had been mentioned in two verses of different Suras (Quran). the seeds of the plant are used in slightly different ways, they are blazed and smoke is allowed to be inhaled by the hunted person.
		Medicinal Properties Oil is extracted from seeds and employed to treat dryness.
8	Botanical name : <i>Pisum sativum</i> L. Local name : Matter Family : Papilionaceae	Sacred uses Seeds are used in marriage ceremonies, these are soaked in water for two days and then given to the horses on which bride groom rides up to Bride’s house.
		Medicinal Properties Dish prepared from the seeds of this plant is eaten to reduce nervousness and trembling.
9	Botanical name : <i>Iris kashmeriana</i> L. Local name : Kaberposh Family : Iridaceae	Sacred uses The plant grows commonly in graves yards or in other words the gives representation of a graveyard. People do not prefer to grow such plants in front of their houses. A common myth related this plant is that this plant had originated from the eyes of “Hazrat Zuleikha ^{RA} ”

10	Botanical name : <i>Juglans regia L.</i> Local name : Dun/ Akhroot Family : Juglandaceae	<p>Medicinal Properties Flowers are preferred by the locals for their antiseptic value. Flower paste is applied to infectious eye.</p> <p>Sacred uses The walnuts are offered to Lord Shiva as Prasad on occasion of ShivRatri. Walnuts are kept in earthen pots, dipped in water and these pots are then buried into the earth for 4-5 days before Shiv Ratri. On the festival occasion, walnuts are taken out of the pots and offered as “Prasad” to people.</p> <p>Medicinal Properties Nuts are consumed by people and bark of the tree is used for cleaning teeth’s, and in the process lips get coloured.</p>
11	Botanical name : <i>Ajuga bracteosa Wall</i> Local name : Batien Family : Lamiaceae	<p>Sacred uses Dried leaved are aromatic and is an important constituent of commercial Dhoop. The plant is valued for its excellent purity and pleasant incense. This dhoop is regarded as purest form of dhoop and burned as incense in temples.</p> <p>Medicinal Properties Leaves paste is used to treat scalp related infection. It is also utilized to prevent baldness.</p>
12	Botanical name : Lawsonia inermis L. Local name : Maanz/ Mehndi Family : Lythraceae	<p>Sacred uses Crushed leaves in the form of the powder are used by both communities when both bride and groom are applied mehndi on hands and feet’s by their friends and relatives. Mehndi is also applied to pregnant women on the occasion of “Godbharaie”. Muslims prefers it because they believe that it originates in Heaven.</p> <p>Medicinal Properties The leaves are dried and ground into powder, to this is added some water, lemon juice and black pepper, a past thus formed is kept for 3-4 hours. After which is used by locals for dying hands, head and feet’s.</p>
13	Botanical name : <i>Ficus palmatae Forssk.</i> Local name : Fogkul Family : Moraceae	<p>Sacred uses There is a reference of fig in Quran under the name of “Teen” meaning significance. The reason for the mention of “fig” is that the fruit is highly useful. Muslim people of the area consider it as a gift of God.</p> <p>Medicinal Properties People suffering from long illness are advised to take its fruits. It is easily digestible and good for health.</p>
14	Botanical name : <i>Musa paradisiaca L.</i>	<p>Sacred uses The plant finds a mention in Vedas and Puranas where women</p>

	Local name : Kela Family : Musaceae	are emphasize to worship the tree on 4 th of Kartik for the long life of husband; beside, the bunch of the fruit are used in festivals and religious ceremony
		Medicinal Properties Its fruits is used to maintain chastity.
15	Botanical name : <i>Plantanum orientalis L.</i> Local name : Chinarkul Family : Platanaceae	Sacred uses The tree is held auspicious by every section of society, owing to bring its religious importance the tree is planted in the vicinity of the religious place. A fate big stone below the tree in this region is quite popular and reserved because the holy body of Saint Shah Asrar-ud-Din Wali was placed on that stone. When taken to funeral yard. This place is known as “Salam Kain”. Also a big Chinar tree is growing in front of Darbar-e-shah-Fareed-Ud-Din Sahib.
		Medicinal Properties The wood and leaves of the plant are dried, are used in winter as fuel.
16	Botanical name : <i>Punica granatum L.</i> Local name : Anaar/ Daan Family : Punicaceae	Sacred uses These are three reference of pomegranate in Quran under the name “Rumman”, an important advice has been given with regard to this fruit crop because it is good food and a medicine of great value. This plant is sacred and its fruits are offered to many Devtas in the region.
		Medicinal Properties It is a tonic for heart patients to increase hemoglobin content.
17	Botanical name : <i>Oryza sativa L.</i> Local name : Tammul Family : Poaceae	Sacred uses Emblem of wealth and fortune
		Medicinal Properties It is given in intestinal Rejuvenation, high blood pressure, digestive system disorder, skin inflammation. It’s used in treating diarrhea in children
18	Botanical name : <i>Curcuma longa L.</i> Local name : Leder Family : Zingiberaceae	Sacred uses Rhizome used in various religious activities, the rhizomes used in dyeing cloths in festivals. Turmeric mixed in water is poured on the god and goddesses. It’s the common belief among the Hindus that turmeric improves fertility.
		Medicinal Properties The dried turmeric roots in betel leaves are given to the women during the ceremonies as they are considered as fertile

19	Botanical name : <i>Nicotiana tabacum L.</i> Local name : Tambokh Family : Solanaceae	Sacred uses Shivites use it in chillum. The smoke is believed to be the pathway to the spirit world
		Medicinal Properties The hakims of the study area used tobacco's leaves as a plaster for snake bites. The most traditional form of using tobacco is to smoke its leaves, but they are chewed, taken in an infusion, ingested and inhaled as well. The tobacco is inhaled in low and humid valleys of the Kishtwar region. Extract of the leaf is taken orally to treat dysmenorrhea.
20	Botanical name : <i>Datura innoxia Mill.</i> Local name : Dattur buoil Family : Solanaceae	Sacred uses Sacred to Lord Shiva.
		Medicinal Properties It is used to treat diarrhea, asthma attacks and vomit, among others. Shamans consume it as a beverage for divination and witchcraft. The local people used it for medical purposes and as a poison.

From ancient times, plants and animals are the part of our life. Plants have formed the basis of the traditional medicine system and medicinal plant therapy. The medicinal properties are interpreted as God's signature on the plant. Plants are the oldest creation of God on Earth, and plant worshipping is one of the earliest religious trends since the ancient times. Various literature available reflect the fact where plants are treated as the abode of the Gods. Certain plant species are grown in sacred places because people believe that ancestors and deities reside in these plants and protect their life. Many plant species hold great traditional values related to ethnic, religious and cultural aspects.

One of the modern crisis is that the priceless ethnic and traditional knowledge of the plants is disappearing rapidly because of westernization, breakdown of traditional

cultures, and also the extinction of whole tribal sect. The Ethnosacred plants are facing a rapid loss of their natural habitats due to human activities. These factors demand an urgent need of conserving the over-harvested sacred plants to keep their benefits alive for future generation. The documentation of such plants with medicinal uses and religious values is also becoming increasingly necessary. One of the main purposes of the present work on Ethnosacred plants of Kishtwar district of Jammu and Kashmir, is to ensure that local natural history becomes a living tradition in communities, where it has been transmitted verbally for many years.

Cautionary Note :

Warnings: The present research is carried out purely for scientific aims. Some plants are toxic, in the aforementioned ones,

thus the author does not recommend ingesting or otherwise using any plant, plant extract, or plant product, and is not responsible for the effects on anyone. In some plants, the part used was first given specific treatment and then used. The sacred plants hold esteemed position in the culture from which they have originated, and are now drawing attention of explorers from all parts of the globe.

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