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Dermatological ailments among Tribals and their traditional cure: A study in district Budgam, Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract

Both flora and fauna have been a source of food for mankind since earliest of civilizations. Besides usage as food items, these have also been used as traditional medicine to cure a wide range of ailments afflicting people across civilizations. Apart from fruit and leaves, which are the principle edible portion of plant, flower, root, stem, bark also form an essential part of this traditional medicine. The current paper describes the research findings as part of a Doctorate Programme aimed to study Health Practices in Kashmir, specifically traditional flora used in treatment of dermatological ailments afflicting tribals of District Budgam. The research findings revealed twelve dermatological conditions namely dryness, eczema, wound healing, bruise, blemish, tan and acne, carbuncle, prickly heat, shingles, felon and burns. These were taken care of using locally available floral and faunal resources, natural and chemical substances using simple procedures to obtain cure. Living in close proximity to nature, these resources act as a dispensary of sorts to people for whom public health care is difficult to avail most of the time.

Keywords: Traditional medicine, fauna, flora, dermatological ailments, tribal

Introduction

In the recent times there has been an impetus on researches that aim to study Traditional Knowledge in field of health, food, nutrition, agriculture, architecture etc. Traditional Knowledge has been defined as knowledge, know-how, skills and practices that are developed, sustained and passed on from generation to generation within a community, often forming part of its cultural or spiritual identity (WIPO). The World Health Organisation defines Traditional medicine as the sum total of the knowledge, skill, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness. Nearly 70% of the world living in developing countries depends on traditional medicines for their health care. In China, nearly 40% of all the health care delivered is based on traditional medicine. Same is true for 71% of population in Chili and 40% population in Colombia. In the Indian sub-continent there is reportage of utilization of Ayurveda and medicinal plants by 65% of the population in order to meet their primary health requirements (WHO, 2003) [8].

There is a robust literature available on use of flora for different ailments. Use of sesame seed in traditional health practices has been found to be particularly useful in treatment of diseases, prostatic diseases, urinary problems and gynaecological problems. It has reported use in treating ear aches, aiding digestion, optimal health care and addressing low haeme levels of body. (Nagpurkar and Patil, 2017) [5]. Similarly, *Curcuma caesia Roxb.* which is a perennial, erect rhizomatous herb with large leaves, commonly known as *kali haldi* which has been documented in a study in Jharkhand, India, for multipurpose medicinal use in treating leucoderma, asthma, tumours, piles, bronchitis, bruises, snake bites, etc. It belongs to the family *Zingiberaceae*. Both fresh and dried rhizomes are used in the traditional system of medicine of the region. The plant is also acknowledged to have, antifungal, antimicrobial, antioxidant and anti-asthmatic activities. Other medicinal properties are muscle relaxant, analgesic, locomotor depressant, anticonvulsant and anti-inflammatory. It is now considered as one of the potential sources of unique natural products for the development of medicines (Mahato and Sharma, 2018) [4].

In the context of J&K, the utilization of herbal flora in the State of Jammu and Kashmir has not only been documented in recent studies but also finds mention in oldest narratives available on the State. One such account dating back to 1879 by W. Wakefield titled 'The Happy Valley', 'Sketches of Kashmir and Kashmiris' states that shrubs, ferns and flowering plants are found in abundance in the valley with several varieties like aloes, chiretta, wormwood etc used in medicine can be found in luxuriant profusion. While there is extensive literature available about the State, one Chapter – 4 Results and Discussion 161 of the most authentic and sacrosanct account is 'The Valley of Kashmir' by Sir Walter Roper Lawrence in 1895 who was appointed as the first Settlement Commissioner of Kashmir. Across the nineteen chapters, the author provided explicit details about the geology, political and physical history, social life, religion, agriculture, livestock, industries and occupations, trade, old administration etc. The fourth chapter is a fifty-four page account of extensive detailing of regional flora. It is pertinent to quote verbatim, 'The hakims of Kashmir, the native physicians attribute some property to every plant' which underscores the importance of local flora in the lives of the people since the oldest of times. Some common medicinal herbs among these are *Aconitum heterophyllum*, *Hyoscyamus niger*, *Macrostomia benthamii*, *Viola serpens*, *Artemesia*, *Peganum harmala*, *Picrorhiza kurroa*, *Berberis lycium*, *Senecio jacquemontiana*, *Salvia sp.*, *Adiantum capillus*, *Cuscuta sp*, *Urtica dioica*, *Allium sp*, *Aesculus indica*, *Nymphaea stellata*, *Pyrus cydonia*. It has also been stated that the thistles, nettles and wild chicory, dandelion and virtually all plants go into cooking. (Lawrence, 1897) [2]

Methodology

In the present study, tribal villages (Sitaharan, Mujpatri, Drass) were randomly selected in three Blocks (Khag, Khansahib, Hard Panzu) of District Budgam in the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to garner information and also Focussed Group Discussion was used to derive information from the beneficiaries. Beneficiaries were approached using Purposive Sampling – Hakeems or traditional health practitioners, Traditional Birth Attendants or *Varin* as they are colloquially

known, men and women of the community. Subsequently their responses for dermatological ailments and the cure identified and used by them were recorded, consolidated and analyzed for discussion.

Results and Discussion

There is a great deal of literature available on Traditional use of flora and fauna as medicine. Different parts of plant, say root, stem, leaf, flower, bark, seed are used. Similarly, faunal use has been reported to be that of body part, excreta, bi-product. These are used in myriad ways to achieve therapeutic effect from a particular ailment or diseased condition. Synthetic material, natural material and chemical substances have also been reported to be used in Traditional Health Practices. Therapeutic baths have been in vogue since the earliest of civilizations. They are a traditional means to keep disease at bay and also cure many.

A total of 11 dermatological conditions like Dryness, eczema, wound healing, bruise, blemish, tan and acne, carbuncle, prickly heat, shingles, felon and burns were reported by beneficiaries under the study. Flora namely *Senecio graciliflorus*, *Ziziphus jujube Mill*, *Cedrus deodara*, *Rheum rhabarbarum*, *Valeriana jatamansi Jones*, *Allium cepa Var Aggregatum*, *Trigonella foenum graecum*, *Brassica oleraceae var Kashmiricus*, *Artemisia absinthium*, *Anagallis arvensis*, *Linum usitatissimum*, *Philonotis fontana (Hedw.) Brid. populus spp.* were identified for remedy. Fauna like *Gallus galus domesticus* and *Capra aegagrus hircus* were also found to be helpful in treatment of skin disorders along with animal products like milk. Chemical substance like Potassium Alum along with natural substance like Kaolin and Water also surfaced in treatment of skin ailments (Fig. I)

The floral resources used include whole plant, root, stem, leaf, fruit, resin, seed (Fig II). Sometimes these are meted out various treatments before they are actually used as remedies by human beings. They are used as extract, powder, paste, poultice, decoction extract and seed infusion (Fig III.). In most cases where rhizomes are used as remedy, the root is first rendered free from moisture by drying it in the sun and then ground to powder for consumption. A tabular representation of these ailments and their identified cure is given below

Table 1: Tabular representation of skin ailments and the traditional tribal cure

S. No	Dermatological Condition or Ailment	Remedy	Common Name/Local Name
1.	Dryness	<i>Senecio graciliflorus</i>	Groundsel/ Mongolo
2.	Eczema	<i>Ziziphus jujube Mill</i>	Buckthorn/ Braiy
3.	Wound Healing	<i>Cedrus deodara</i>	Pine/ Deodar
		<i>Rheum rhabarbarum</i>	Rhubarb/ Pomb Haakh
		<i>Valeriana jatamansi Jones</i>	Indian Long Pepper/ Mushkebala
4.	Bruise	<i>Allium cepa Var Aggregatum</i>	Shallot/ Praan
		<i>Potassium Alum</i>	Alum/ Phatkar
5.	Blemish	Milk	Milk/ Dodh
6.	Tan and Acne	<i>Trigonella foenum graecum</i>	Fenugreek/ Methi
7.	Carbuncle	<i>Brassica oleracea var Kashmiricus</i>	Kale/ Haakh
		<i>Artemisia absinthium</i>	Sagebrush/ Tethwan
8.	Prickly Heat	<i>Anagallis arvensis</i>	Pimpernel/ Chari Saban
9.	Shingles	Kaolin	Clay/ Ale Myetch
10.	Felon	<i>Artemisia absinthium</i>	Sagebrush/ Tethwan
		<i>Linum usitatissimum</i>	Linseed/ Alish
11.	Common Burns or Scalds	<i>Philonotis fontana (Hedw.) Brid</i>	Brid Moss/ Hill
		<i>Gallus gallus domesticus</i>	Chicken/ Kokur
		<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>	Goat / Geb
		Woollen fabric Ash	Wobble Ash/ Munnun
		<i>Populus spp.</i>	Poplar/ Phress
		Aqua	Water/ Aab

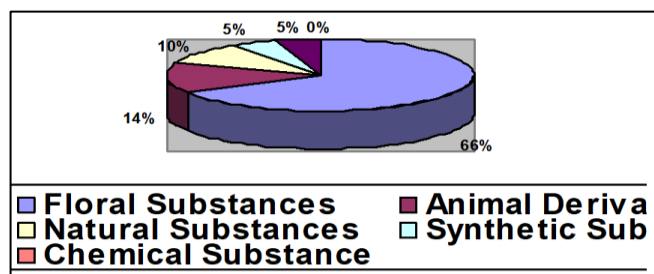


Fig I: Utilisation of Substances as Traditional Remedies among Tribals of Budgam

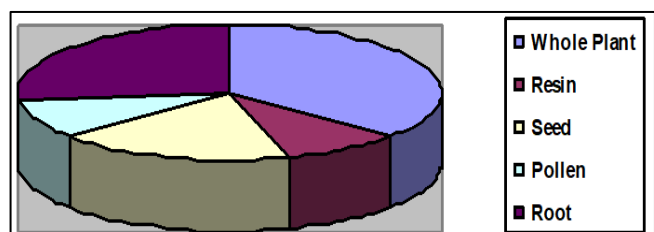


Fig II: Utilization of Parts of Plant used.

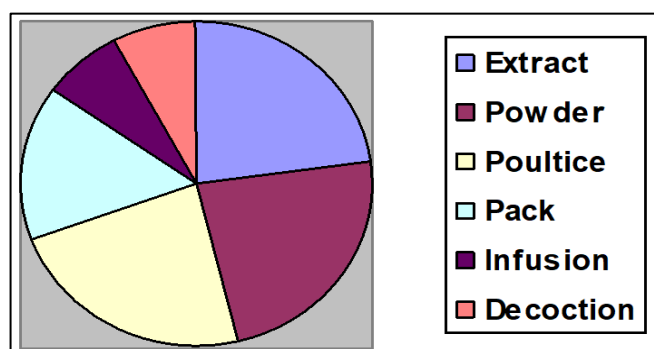


Fig III: Method of Utilization of Flora

One of the commonest ailment of skin is dryness and it is conveniently taken care of using *Senecio graciliflorus* or Mongolo – whole plant are rubbed between palms and massaged over hands, face and body to do away with dry skin. Similarly use of Buckthorn or *Ziziphus jujube* Mill is made for whole plant infusion that are used to wash skin parts like hands and feet afflicted with eczema. Known as ‘Braiy’ in Kashmiri it is highly popular among the locals. *Cedrus deodar* or ‘Deodar’ that make for the picturesque locales also feature as medicine in these areas and are utilized for the resin produced thereof which is put on the wound to expedite healing. *Rheum rhabarbarum* or Rhubarb root known as ‘Pomb tchalan’ are dried, crushed and sprinkled on wound to heal quickly. Root of Mushk-e-Bala or *Valeriana jatamansi* Jones is used for wound healing.

Shallots or *Praan* as they are known in Kashmir is popular in Kashmiri Cuisine. While it renders the unique taste to cooked meals it finds use as medicine also. A fried shallot (*Allium cepa* Var *Aggregatum*) poultice is used to treat bruise on skin. Skin rashes and skin tan are taken care of by boiling seeds of Methi (*Trigonella foenum graecum*) and utilising the decoction thereof for washing face. Leaves of *Brassica oleracea* var *Kashmircus* and *Artemisia absinthium* are boiled and used as poultice on carbuncles. They are believed to ripen the carbuncle, cause it to rupture thereby providing relief on the surface of the skin.

Anagallis arvensis is a tiny weed flora with even tinier orange flowers which when rubbed between palms creates soap-like

lather. Also, known as ‘*Chari Saban*’ or literally translating into ‘Sparrow Soap’ this whole plant is rubbed between palms and the lather/juice is then rubbed to soothe skin against prickly heat.

Felon is a painful condition of the thumb and is also commonly known as ‘*Dyog*’ among the locals. Alish or *Linum usitatissimum* or Flax seeds are used with mud as a poultice around the thumb in order to bring about relief. Similarly, Shingles or Herpes, popularly known as ‘*Maldarr*’ among Kashmiris, is a painful condition of nerves on any part of the body particularly, back, lower back, abdomen shoulders or head. Traditionally, this is taken care of by application of Mud or Kaolin. Mud is shovelled out from the earth, digging the shovel at least 6-7 inches deep into the earth. This is known as ‘*Aali Myetch*’ which is exposed to sun, crumbled well with hand and then passed through as sieve to obtain a fine residue. This is mixed with water and formed a paste to be applied on Shingles. When the pack dries out it is washed with water. This is pack is believed to bring about significant relief in shingle pain and itch.

Mud has been evidently reported in many cultures, particularly in Veds, for its use in traditional cures. It is simple, cost effective and efficacious. It has a basic method of extraction and has been used as packs to treat pimples, dark circles and also to relieve indigestion, intestinal heat and stimulate peristalsis (Rastogi, 2012) [7]. Recent studies have also reported use of hot mud and mustard application for pain relief against osteo-arthritis. In modern times there has been a demand for alternative therapies for pain management and mud as an old traditional element used in various remedies has been found to be useful (Kumar *et al*, 2016) [1]. Mud packs have also been used in controlled, comparative studies to find relief against many ailments accompanied by natural massages and mineral baths (Liu *et al*. 2015)

Common burns or scalds are met with a a unique remedy of nature. *Philonotis fontana* (Hedw.) Brid. or the moss on brooks is used to sooth skin from burns and so is populous spp. the pollen of which is burnt and then sprinkled on burns to obtain healing effect.

Water is the age old and commonest remedy for treatment against burns. Fauna like *Gallus galus domesticus* are used for their fat which is rubbed against common burns in order to obtain relief from burns. *Capra aegagrus hircus* or Goat milk derived ghee is rubbed gently on burns in order to obtain cooling effect in case of burns. Similarly, Ash of burnt wobble collected from warm fabric is also believed to be soothing for burns and is applied in case of minor burns.

The traditional skin regime has some cosmetic antidotes as well. Cream of unpasteurized milk is reported to lighten blemishes on face. Also, Potassium Alum is warmed in some water and then used to foment the bruised part of the body with in order to avail relief.

Conclusion

A total of 11 skin ailments were identified by Tribals of Budgam, which were addressed to using traditional flora, fauna, natural substances and chemical substance. The Traditional Health Practices among Tribals of Budgam work as a dispensary of sorts for people living away far from centres of research, technology and development. These traditional antidotes are rather a skin care manual for these people accessible to them from their elders who live with them or in close vicinity, suiting their pockets. It is cheap, natural and handy. It is interesting to note that there is almost

one cure for each skin ailment that one can identify with. The cause of worry perhaps is the significant number of young who have poor information about these. Since these are largely propagated through word of mouth, there is a need to document these practices as these are eco-friendly and safe which make them sustainable practice and also serve as a unique nexus with the history of a region.

Conclusions

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