SEVEN SECRED HERBS OF UTTARAKHAND USED BY ETHNIC SOCIETY FOR MEDICAL AND RELIGIOUS PURPOSES

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ABSTRACT

The present study provides the information regarding seven herbs utilized by ethnic society of Uttarakhand of India in medico-religious activities. The ethnic society of Uttarkashi district of Uttarakhand, India was surveyed extensively to record medical, social religious and magical importance of seven herbs found locally. These herbs belong to Pteridophyte and Angiosperm divisions of plant kingdom and are utilized by ethnic society in various social, medicinal, magical and religious customs.

Keywords: Secred, Herbs, Ethnic society, Magico-religious, Medicinal uses.

INTRODUCTION

Uttarkashi district of Uttarakhand region encompasses many plant species which are being used as food, shelter, clothing and medicines by the ethnic society of village communities. Besides these, seven plant species are used by the people in different social, medical, magical and religious activities, are known as Socio-religious plants¹. The relationship between man and plant communities is as old as his hunger, and long before science was born, our ancestors studied the plants around them to meet their basic requirements, which laid the foundation of civilization². Many festivals are associated with the significance of plants in India³. Unfortunately, there is no written proof and information is available regarding the uses of those plants. Therefore, first priority must be given to study those plants and documented the traditional knowledge need to be popularized, so that all round awareness be made possible. An attempt has been made to record the medico-magical and socio-religious role of seven herbs found at Uttarkashi district of Uttarakhand region of India.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Location of Study Area:
The present study was conducted at the district Uttarkashi in Uttarakhand. As the name denotes, this place is the “KASHI” of “UTTARA” (North) and is located near the Varunawat hills between the rivers of Syalam Gad and Kaldi, also known as the Varuna and the Asi Ganga. The Uttarkashi lies in the northwestern part of the Garhwal Himalayas. District Kinnaur and the territory to Tibet form the northern boundary of the district. On the east, lies Tibet and district Chamoli. On the south, it is bounded by the district of Chamoli and Tehri Garhwal and on the west the district Dehradun surrounds it. The district is located at 30° 22’ to 31° 25’ North latitude and 77° 51’ to 79° 27’ East longitude and spreads over 154 Km. from east to west and 109 Km. from north to south. The total area of the forest division is around 8016 sq. km. The altitude of the study area varied from 1100 to 2700 m above mean sea level.

During the year 2013 and 2014 the different area of Uttarkashi district was surveyed and covered extensively to record the medico-magical and socio-religious role of seven identified plant species. The information collected on the basis of intensive interviews and long discussions with ethnic villagers of Uttarkashi region regarding the uses of plants in different medicinal, magical, rites and rituals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the above survey, medical, magical, social and religious uses of seven identified plant species have been enumerated and recorded in Uttarkashi district of Uttarakhand as follows:

1. Artemisia vulgaris (Mugwort):

Medicinal Uses: Leaf tea of A. Vulgaris is diuretic and induces sweating. It is utilized by ethnic society of Uttarkashi to regulate erratic menstruation and helps in menopausal symptoms. It is utilized in promoting appetite and bile production and as tonic for digestion. This plant is also used
for bronchitis, colds, colic, kidney ailments and fevers, bath additives and tired legs. It has high disinfectant and antiseptic properties.

**Household uses:** Powder of this plant is utilized as moth repellent.

**Traditional magico-religious uses:** In the middle ages, this plant was connected with St. John the Baptist, who was said to have worn a belt of the herb during his time in the wilderness. St. John herb, as the plant became known, had the power to drive out demons, and sprays the herbs were worn around the head on St. John’s Eve as a protection against possession by evil forces. In China, bunches of *A. Vulgaris* were hung in the home during the Dragon festival to keep away evil spirits. The Ainus of Japan burn bunches to exorcise spirits of diseases who are thought to hate the odour. This plant was planted at roadides by the Romans, who put sprigs in their shoes to prevent aching feet on long journeys. It is carry to ward other evil things from entering houses. It is said to cure madness and aid in astral projections. *A. Vulgarius* is used by priests of Chardham of Uttarakhand to worship God Vishnu and Shiv, and Goddess Ganga and Yamuna. This plant is given by priests of Char dham to worshippers to keep it at their homes.

2. **Plantago major** *(Plantain)*

Medicinal Uses: The juice of this plant is utilized in nettle stings and insect bites. The roots and leaves help to urinary tract, kidneys and urinary bladder. It is also utilized in healing gastro-intestinal ulcers, as external wash in sores, boils, inflammations and ringworm infestation. Seeds are edible and can be ground in to flour, their mucilage lowers cholesterol. It is confirmed antimicrobial and stimulates healing.

Magico-religious Uses: Bind the whole plant with red wool to the head to cure headache. It can be placed in shoes to cure weariness on long trips. You can hand the plant in your car to prevent evil souls to enter. Carrying roots of plantain protects from snake bites. This plant is said to cause regeneration as Pliny claims that if several pieces of flesh are boiled in a pot with plantain, it will join them again.

3. **Nasturtium officinale** *(Watercress)*

Medicinal uses: This plant is rich in Vitamin C and Iron, excellent tonic. Fresh plant is an appetite stimulant. It is used for catarrh and bronchitis; make cough syrup from water cress and honey. Aids in eliminating retained fluid. It is also used to combat with freckles, pimples and other skin ailments. Water cress is an excellent diuretic but large doses are purgative. Leaves are edible and mustard flavoured.

Traditional magico-religious uses: This is a plant of Niflheim, land of water, ice and mists. Niflheim is one of the two primal worlds and in its care “Primal” has the connection not just of “first” but of “unfinished”. There is something shifting and malleable about Niflheim and is not just because a significant portion of it is ice floes and water. Solidity sometimes shifts there but not quickly. Water cress can be used to do this kind of slow shifting of reality, looking its icy solidity become watery and then as misty as the land of mists, and then, hopefully, you can shape it little by little. If you place it under your tongue, you will notice that it is peppery, even burns a little. Stay with the sensation. Breathe through it. See your breath come out as mist. Keep breathing and working with the spirit of the plant, until reality starts to blur a little. This will not happen due to some psychedelic experience. Water cress is certainly not psycho-active but only due to the work of plant spirit. Shape it quickly and accurately with a clear idea in your mind of what it should look like. Sometimes it shifts back on you and you have to do it again. If three tries fails give up.

4. **Matricaria recutita** *(Chamomile):*

Medical Uses: It is sedative, antifungal, antimicrobial, antispasmodic, anti-inflammatory. It provides relief in gas, heartburn and colic. Its ointment is used for eczema, genital and anal irritation. Mouthwash prepared from Chamomile heals mouth inflammation. Inhalation of steam with Chamomile is good for phlegm and hay fever. It ease colic pain in children when a mild tea is mixed with mother’s milk and giving them rest without the aid of allopathic drugs. It is also used as herb pillow.

Traditional magico-religious uses: It is a plant of planet Sun as it harness power of Sun and God BALDUR. It is used to attract money and a hand wash is used by the gamblers. It is used in sleep incenses and tea and makes the best sleep potion. It is used to remove curses and hexes when sprinkled around the property.

5. **Urtica dioica** *(Nettle):*

Medicinal Uses: Nettle has high Vitamin C and Iron content and therefore used as spring tonic. It is utilized in frost beaten skin. It was brought to the British Island by the roman Legions who would rub their arms with the Nettle leaves to keep their blood flowing in the cold and damp weather. Nettle juice is used to treat skin conditions. It is an antidote to the sting of the needles. It is given as tonic for anemia and diabetes. Tea is drunk for urinary problems and haemorrhoids. Nursing months can take it to keep their milk flowing. Tea is used for arthritis and rheumatism as it clears uric acid from the blood system. Powdered leaves are inhaled for nosebleeds.

Traditional magico-religious uses: Whole plant yields a greenish – yellow bast fiber and can be ratted and prepared like flax known as Nessel Garn used in making rope and paper. The astringent young leaves are used in fadal steams, bath mixtures and hair preparation. The silica found in Nettle plant helps to check falling hairs. New leaves can be cooked and eaten as green vegetables like green mustard and spinach. Associated with Thor, Nettle sends curses back to their owners. Sprinkled around the house, it keeps evil away, thrown onto a fire, it averts danger, hled in hands, it keeps away ghost. It is considered a “carnivorous herb” and is used in purification baths. It is burn with exorcisms. Nettle is an aggressive defender, in the sense that it will not only absorb any harmful magic that is thrown at you or the space, it will strike back if you let it. Due to its difficult nature, its nearly impossible to handle fresh in ritual, but dried or cooked nettle will lose its sting. Nettle keeps its rabid – guard – dog energy when burned or sprinkled dry around an area.

6. **Myrrhis odorata** *(Sweet Cicely):*

Medicinal Uses: Infusion of this plant is used for flatulence and coughs. Roots have antiseptic action and are used to cure
the bites of mad dogs and snakes. This plant can be eaten as a general tonic.

**Magico-religious uses:** This plant is known as “Comforts of heart and increases a lust for life”, and thus it is most often used in conjunction. Tea of sweet cicely and fennel protects against elf-shot, tea to drink or salve rubbed on the afflicted area treats cases of it. Sweet Cicely also aids in the gift of sight, in this case the ability to see beauty beneath ugliness, power beneath simplicity and possibility beneath limitation. It is a useful plant when faced with clients who are living in swamp of negativity and you have to find them some hope. Drink in tea or smoke it or eat the seeds (preferably six).

7. *Foeniculum vulgare* (Fennel):

**Medicinal uses:** Soothes digestion, especially flatulence, constipation and indigestion. The fennel promotes milk production in lactating women and animals. Its seeds or leaves boiled in barley water and then drunk by nursing mothers to increase their milk and its quality for the infants. Infusion of this plant is used in gum disease, loose teeth, laryngitis and sore throats. Seeds can be chewed to relieve hunger pangs. Fennel has a mild stimulant effect. It reduces the toxic effects of alcohol on the system. Fennel seeds, when bruised and boiled in water and then added to syrup and soda water will relieve flatulence in infants.

**Magico-religious uses:** It is believed that snakes sucked the juice of the plant to improve their eye sight after shedding their skins. Some use this plant to magically reduce weight and grow thin. It is protective against evils if you grow fennel around your house or hung to doors. It also protects from ticks and bugs. It is also used against insanity. Fennel aids in the gift of sight, it gives the ability to see the darkness in life – the hidden anger and pains, the inner rot and the creeping deaths. You can drink in tea or smoke it or eat the seeds.

**DISCUSSION**

There is great importance of plants in human life as they provide all basic amenities of life as food, cloth and shelter. Other uses of plants as fiber, cosmetics, ornaments etc were discussed time to time by many researchers. But the local medicinal and magico-religious aspects of plants are not given more attention and are not much explored. Although some specific plants in human culture are explained by Nargas and Trivedi, who pointed out that *Azadirachta indica* is worshiped in India. The association of plants with folk songs was discussed by Manral and Pande. The symbolic and superstitious activities of Naga tribes in Manipur were explained by Mao. Sacred plants and their medicinal importance with special reference to Indian context have been discussed by Dhiman. The religious activities and use of these plants as medicines promote the conservation of these plant species. So, it is necessary to conserve and promote these religious and aesthetic values to conserve bio-diversity and nature, which will surely play an important role in the betterment of human beings.

**CONCLUSION**

On the basis of foregoing discussion it can be concluded that the seven sacred plant species have been enumerated which are being used in different medicinal and magico-religious purposes by the people of Uttarkashi region of Uttarakhand. People treat these plants like magico-religious entity and protect them. Their devotion to these plants is so high that they never think to cut these plants. If it happens so they try to expiation. It is hoped that the present study may be useful to mankind. It will inspire to conserve these plant species wherever possible.

**REFERENCES**


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