

Traditional treatment of skin diseases in South Travancore, southern peninsular India

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The paper deals with some medicinal plants used in the treatment of skin diseases in South Travancore, southern peninsular India. Thirty plant species belonging to 29 genera and 22 families of angiosperms reported along with dosage rate and mode of administration have been enumerated.

Keywords: Medicinal plants, Skin disease, South Travancore, Peninsular India, Ethnomedicine

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South Travancore (77°05'–77°36'E and 8°03'–8°35'N), because of its geographical location, stable geological history, equable climate, heavy rainfall, and good soil condition supports a variety of tropical forest ecosystems¹. It harbours a prosperous and distinctive flora including many species of medicinal plants, which may be a source for gainful exploitation of natural resources. The area occupies 1672 sq km and is inhabited by 16,69,763 people. Topographically this district may be broadly classified as coastal, middle and mountainous region. The climate of the district is favourable, agroclimatic, rainfall varies from 103–310 cm and elevation from sea level to 1829 m asl². Ethnobotanically, the area remains unexplored and no comprehensive account of local tradition is available. Some researchers have studied the medicinal plants of this area with limited objectives^{3,4}. In view of this, the present work was carried out. An extensive survey of the medicinal plants, which are used for the treatment of skin diseases, was recorded.

Methodology

An ethnobotanical survey of South Travancore (Kanyakumari district) was conducted during 2003–2004. During the study trips information was gathered by making repeated queries time to time through interviewing the aged people of the area. The medicinal property of each species was accepted as

valid if at least 4 or 5 separate informants had a similar positive answer in their reply. Plant specimens were identified with the help of regional and local floras^{5,6,7}. The voucher specimens were deposited in the Herbarium of Botany Department (SCH), Scott Christian College, Nagercoil.

Enumeration

Plant species, which are used in traditional medicine, are enumerated with their botanical and vernacular (Tamil) names, family and use of the plant parts in the various treatments.

Acorus calamus Linn. (Araceae); *Vasampu*

Uses: Pounded rhizomes along with *Curcuma aromatica* rhizomes and *Azadirachta indica* leaves are applied on the affected parts to cure eczema twice a day for one week.

Aegle marmelos (Linn.) Corr. (Rutaceae); *Vilvam*

Uses: Fruits crushed with seeds of *Strychnos nux-vomica* and *Pongamia pinnata*, boiled with coconut oil is applied on the affected parts to cure scabies and other kinds of skin diseases twice a day till the recovery occurs.

Anacardium occidentale Linn. (Anacardiaceae); *Kollamaram*

Uses: Powdered bark mixed with honey is taken orally for leprosy continuously for 6 months.

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Andrographis paniculata Nees. (Acanthaceae);
Nilavembu

Uses: Leaf juice is mixed with cow milk and taken orally for tinea cruris (Dosage: Twice a day for 6 to 8 days).

Argemone mexicana Linn. (Papaveraceae);
Premathandu

Uses: Pounded seeds along with the rhizomes of *Curcuma aromatica* and *Acorus calamus* made into paste are applied on all types of skin diseases.

Asparagus racemosus Willd. (Liliaceae);
Thannervittankizhangu

Uses: Tubers along with the leaves of *Plumbago indica* made into paste is applied on various skin diseases.

Azadirachta indica A. Juss. (Meliaceae); *Vembu*

Uses: Flowers are boiled in gingili oil (*Sesamum indicum*) and applied on the head against dandruff.

Cassia alata Linn. (Fabaceae); *Seemai Agathi*

Uses: Pounded leaves along with coconut oil and bee wax are made into a paste and applied on the affected parts to cure *tinea versicoloris*, once a day in the night for 4 days.

Cassia auriculata Linn. (Caesalpiniaceae); *Avarai*

Uses: Paste of dried leaves with vinegar is applied on various skin diseases.

Clerodendron inerme Gaertn. (Verbenaceae);
Changukuppy

Uses: Paste of leaf juice mixed with bee wax, resins of *Vateria indica* and *Nigella sativa* seeds kept in hot water bath, cooled are applied on various skin diseases.

Clitoria ternatea Linn. (Fabaceae); *Shankupuspham*

Uses: Leaf juice is given orally twice a day for 6 days for scabies.

Corallocarpus epigaeus Hk. f. (Cucurbitaceae);
Kurudankixhangu

Uses: Tubers boiled in coconut oil are applied on the affected parts continuously for 6 months to cure leprosy.

Crinum defixum Ker. (Amaryllidaceae); *Vishanarayani*

Uses: Pounded bulbs mixed with hot water are given orally for curing *tinea cruris* twice a day for 3 days.

Curcuma aromatica Sal. (Zingiberaceae);
Kasturimanjal

Uses: Rhizomes along with the seeds of *Terminalia chebula* made into paste is applied on the affected parts

to cure impetigo twice a day for till the recovery occurs.

Cynodon dactylon (Linn.) Pers. (Poaceae);
Arukampullu

Uses: Pounded leaves boiled in coconut oil are applied for various skin diseases.

Datura metel Linn. (Solanaceae); *Ummattai*

Uses: Paste of leaf juice mixed with *Curcuma aromatica* rhizomes is applied on the swellings for quick remedy till the swelling reduces.

Euphorbia hirta Linn. (Euphorbiaceae);
Ammanpaccharisi

Uses: Latex is applied against skin parasites twice a day till it is cured.

Glycyrrhiza glabra Linn. (Fabaceae); *Atimaturam*

Uses: Paste of stem along with *Withania somnifera* roots is applied on the affected parts continuously for one year to cure leucoderma and other skin diseases.

Hygrophila auriculata (Schum.) Heine. (Acanthaceae);
Neermulli

Uses: Dried leaf powder mixed with castor oil is applied on the affected parts to cure skin diseases.

Indigofera aspalathoides Vahl. (Fabaceae);
Sivanarvembu

Uses: Powdered barks mixed with coconut oil are applied on the affected parts continuously for 6 months to cure leprosy.

Lawsonia inermis Linn. (Lythraceae); *Maruthani*

Uses: Leaves made into a paste are applied on the affected parts to cure impetigo twice a day till it is cured.

Madhuca longifolia (Koenig) Macbride. (Sapotaceae);
Eluppai

Uses: Pounded seeds mixed with *Ocimum tenuiflorum* leaf extract are applied on the affected parts to cure skin diseases.

Ocimum tenuiflorum Linn. (Lamiaceae); *Tulaci*

Uses: Leaves pounded along with *Curcuma aromatica* rhizomes are applied on the affected parts to cure *tinea versicoloris* once days in the night till it is cured.

Phyla nodiflora (Linn.) Greene. (Verbenaceae);
Poduthalai

Uses: Leaf juice mixed and boiled with equal volume of gingili oil is applied twice a week on head to remove dandruff.

Piper betle Linn. (Piperaceae); *Vettilai*

Uses: Leaves are pounded along with the bulbs of *Allium sativum* and applied on the affected parts to cure *tinea versicularis*.

Pongamia pinnata (Linn.) Pierre. (Fabaceae); *Punkumaram*

Uses: Crushed barks boiled in gingili oil are applied on the affected parts twice a day for 4 days to cure rash.

Saraca asoca (Roxb.) de Wilde. (Caesalpiniaceae); *Asogam*

Uses: Dried flowers boiled with coconut oil are applied on the affected parts with the help of cock feather thrice a day till it is cured as a remedy for scabies.

Terminalia bellerica (Gaertn.) Roxb. (Combretaceae); *Tanrikkai*

Uses: Seeds pounded along with seeds of *Terminalia chebula* and *Quercus infectoria* and mixed with coconut oil is applied twice a day against rash.

Trichosanthes lobata Roxb. (Cucurbitaceae); *Peppudal*

Uses: Paste of whole plant is applied on the affected parts continuously for one year to cure leprosy.

Wrightia tinctoria (Roxb.) R. Br. (Apocynaceae); *Veppalai*

Uses: Pounded leaves mixed with coconut oil are applied for psoriasis.

Results and discussion

Thirty plant species belonging to 22 families and 29 genera used for the treatment of various skin diseases have been recorded. Of these, 12 were tree species, 6 shrubs, 15 herbs and 5 climbers. Fabaceae with 5 species was the dominant family followed by Acanthaceae, Caesalpiniaceae, Cucurbitaceae and Verbenaceae, which had two species each, whereas 17 families were monospecific. The present study has given information on 12 kinds of skin diseases. Nine species are used to treat all kinds of skin diseases, 4 species in leprosy and 3 species in *tinea versicularis* and rest species for other types of ailments. *Aegle marmelos*, *Argemone mexicana*, *Asparagus racemosus*, *Cassia auriculata*, *Clerodendron inerme*, *Cynodon dactylon*, *Glycorrhiza glabra*, *Hygrophila auriculata* and *Madhuca longifolia* are used for skin diseases; *Anacardium occidentale*, *Corallocarpus epigaeus*, *Indigofera aspalathoides* and *Trichosanthes lobata* are used to cure leprosy; *Cassia alata*, *Ocimum*

tenuiflorum and *Piper betle* in *tinea versicularis*; *Andrographis paniculata* and *Crinum defixum* in *tinea cruris*; *Curcuma aromatica* and *Lawsonia inermis* are used to cure impetigo; *Pongamia pinnata* and *Terminalia bellerica* for rash and *Clitoria ternatea* & *Saraca asoca* for scabies. *Azadirachta indica* and *Phyla nodiflora* are prescribed for dandruff. *Acorus calamus*, *Euphorbia hirta* and *Datura metel* are used for various skin diseases; *Asparagus racemosus*, *Azadirachta indica*, *Argemone mexicana*, *Datura metel* and *Pongamia pinnata* are used for similar purposes in Uttar Pradesh⁸. *Wrightia tinctoria* is extensively used for psoriasis⁹. Peninsular India offers a great deal of scope for ethnobotanical research not only because of the richness of the flora but also because of the many indigenous people inhabiting the country. Since, a few reports on various ethnomedicinal plants against skin diseases are available, an intensive study on ethnobotany, phytochemistry and pharmacology is essential^{8,10-13}.

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