

PLANTS USED IN FOLK MEDICINE BY THE *KOTAS* OF NILGIRI DISTRICT, TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT: *The present report deals with 34 plants of ethno botanical significance used as food and medicine by the Kotas of Nilgiri District, Tamil Nadu. Dietary and medicinal applications of plants are briefly summarized and presented.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, studies on ethno botany in regard to primitive tribal communities are on rapid increase. Every tribal group in this country is unique in the sense that they are characterized with certain special knowledge and skills about medicinal plants used in their traditional system of medicine to cure a wide range of disease. Many scholars are of the view that there should not be any delay in the documentation of the useful data of the traditional medical practices and plant usages by tribal groups lest, such valuable information would be lost for ever, as populations become more and more receptive and dependent upon technological advancements in medicine. A great deal of emphasis has been laid on ethno botanical research in primitive groups (W.H.O. 1978).

There exist meager published reports on ethno botany in connection with tribal groups of Tamil Nadu. However, the following are some of the earlier research works attempted in the area of ethno botany in tribal groups of Tamil Nadu including Nilgiri District, Raghunathan, 1976, Abraham, 1978, Janaki Ammal, 1978, Janaki Ammal and William Jebhadas, 1978, Ramachandran and Nair, 1981, Lakshmanan and Kalyani, 1984, Lakshmanan and

Sankaranarayanan, 1984, Subramanian, 1986 and Dawre, et al., 1987.

Kotas from one of the earliest inhabitants of the Nilgiri District. They are distributed in several villages viz; New Kotagiri (Aggal), Kil Kotagiri, Kundah, Kollimalai, gudalur, Trichigadi and Sholur Kokal of Nilgiri District. The total population of kotas is 1188 (Census, 1971), Against this background, the authors of this paper have felt it worthwhile and desirable to attempt a study on ethno botany of the kotas of Nilgiri District.

Methodology

We have collected some important data on the plants that are now widely used by the kotas of Nilgiri District. The information furnished there is based on three field surveys conducted by us in two kota villages namely Sholur Kokal and Trichigadi located in the District. The help of an elderly kota tribal man was sought during the data collection. Further, various individuals who have a knowledge in the matter of medicinal application of plants to cure disease were also interviewed by us. The plants are arranged in alphabetical order by their

botanical names along with their family and kota names. A short description of the plants is also attempted.

Achyranthus bidentata Blume
(Amaranthaceae) Kota name: **Naiyur**

An erect herb. Flowers in spikes: green, common.

Uses: The fresh leaf juice is mixed with tobacco and applied externally to skin disorders including scabies.

Ageratum conyzoides Linn. (Asteraceae)
Kota name: **Pugudu thalai**

A Small herb with pink or whitish flower heads, common.

Uses: The fresh leaf juice is applied as poultice on the wound for quick healing.

Aroyreia hirsute Wight & Arn.
(Convolvulaceae)
Kota name: **Meenidal**

A climber with silvery hairs. Flowers pale-purple, common.

Users: The plant is used in religious ceremonies by kotas. The mature leaves are cleaned and used as a plate to offer honey, ghee and dosha etc., to God during worship. Further, according to popular belief, food kept on this leaf should be given to a male child after worship in the next morning.

Berberies tinctoria Lesch. (Berberidaceae)
Kota name: **hekkuvan**

An evergreen small tree. Flowers yellow, nature fruits reddish-blue, common in shoals.

Uses: The leaves and fruits are edible.

Brassica Juncea (Linn.) Czen. & Coss.
(Brassicaceae)
Kota name: **Kadugu Sop.**

An erect, branching herb. Flowers yellow. Cultivated, some times runs wild.

Uses: The leaves are cooked as vegetable and eaten. The mature seeds are used for seasoning foods.

Cantella mollis Wight & Arn. (Fabaceae)
Kota name: **Kirdur**

A large climber. Flower purple to lilac.

Uses: The mature beans are used as vegetable.

Centella asiatica (Linn.) Urban. (Apiaceae)
Kota name: **Kidth Kot**

A perennial herb with long creeping stolones; common in moist places.

Users: The leaves together with young stems are crushed in water and filtered. The juice is mixed with buffalo's milk and taken orally to relieve symptoms of stomach problems. It is also used as a refrigerant to causing cool the body.

Chenopodium album Linn.
(Chenopodiaceae)

Kota name: **Keer sop** A tall herb with white flowers, rare.

Uses: The leaves are cooked as vegetable and eaten.

Colocassia esculenta (Linn.) Schott. & Endl. (Araceae)

Kota name: **Cabe sop**

A tall tuberous herb. Flowers cream, cultivated for tubers.

Users: The green leaves are chewed to relieve the symptoms of stomach disorders and indigestion. It is also used as laxative and refrigerant.

Coriandrum sativum Linn.(Apiaceae)

Kota name: **Kothumull**

A small, erect herb, Flowers white cultivated.

Uses: The leaves are crushed in water and boiled. The decoction is taken orally as a refrigerant and diuretic. The tender leaves and seed are used in food.

Cynodon dactylon (Linn.) Pers. (Poaceae)

Kota name: **Nagirki**

A perennial with a underground rhizome. Spikes 2-4, common.

Uses: It is sacred grass of kotas and widely used in religious ceremonies and functions. Further, it is also used as a medicine to relieve symptoms of sudden sickness and vomiting, thought to be caused by the influence of the evil spirits. The grass is crushed in water and filtered. The juice is mixed with cow-dung (Kota name, Api), and also with ash (Kota name – Pudi) and taken internally to get the relief from sickness.

Dodonaea viscosa (Linn.) Jacq. (Sapindaceae)

Kota name: **Vilari thalai**

A bush or small tree. Fruits reddish or pinkish-brown, winged, common in sholas.

Uses: The leaves are warmed slightly in groundnut oil and used externally for wounds and injuries. According to their folk claim, the leaf paste when applied externally is very effective against joint sprains and bone fracture.

Elaeagnus kologa schlecht. (Elaeagnaceae)

Kota name: **Pulvan.**

A large, sometimes thorny climbing shrub. Flowers cream white; fruits orange-red. Common in sholas.

Uses: The ripe fruits are edible.

Eleusine coracana (Linn.) Gaertn (Poaceae)

Kota name: **Ragi**

An erect annual grass. Spikelets immature green, mature brown, cultivated.

Uses: The freshly harvested ragi is considered as hot and the stored one as cold. Mature ragi are used in food.

Euphorbia rothiana Spreng. (Euphorbiaceae)

Kota name: **Kapsi**

An erect glaucous herb with milky latex. Flowers green, common

Uses: The leaves of **E.rothiana**, **Rubus ellipticus** (Kota name, Penmulp) and **Rubus racemosus** (Kota name, Gundmulp) are chewed together to relieve symptoms of sudden sickness and giddiness thought to be caused by evil spirits. Further, the leaves of **E.rothiana** are used as a medicine for cattle. Kotas believe that when new-born calves of Cow and Buffalo get mixed, their mothers refuse to feed them due to overlapping colours from different cattle groups. The leaf paste of **E.rothiana** is applied to calves and given a bath to neutralize the odour.

Gaultheria fragrantissima Wall. (Ericaceae)

Kota name: **Ameerpan**

A woody shrub. Flowers white, common in sholas.

Uses: The leaf paste is applied externally to forehead as a cure for headache. The leaves

are boiled in water and used for taking bath to relieve body sprains and pains.

Girardinia diversifolia (Lamk.) Fris
(Urticaceae)

Kota name: **Thoyir**

An erect herb with strong stringing hairs. Flower whitish-green. Common in sholas.

Uses: Kotas believe that this plant was their original source in the past to extract fibre for clothing.

Lobelia leschenaultiana (Presl) Skottsbo.
(Lobeliaceae)

Kota name: **Bombari thalai.**

A tall biennial or perennial herb. Flowers purple-brown, common.

Uses: The plant is used as veterinary medicine to cure sickness in cattle. According to their belief, the animals are beaten with the stems and leaves of the plant to relieve the symptoms of sickness. Further, groundnut oil is administered orally to the animal as a laxative and the animal is made to inhale the smell of this plant.

Oxalis corniculata Linn. (Oxalidaceae)

Kota name: **Pulch**

A trailing herb with yellow flowers. Common in waste places.

Uses: The leaves are crushed in water and the juice is filtered for oral use as an anti-emetic. The above extract is mixed with pepper and given to women after child birth as a restorative tonic.

Plantago erosa wall. (Plantaginaceae)

Kota name: **Kalthal**

A perennial herb with radical leaves. Flowers pinkish-green. Common in marshy places.

Uses: The fresh leaves are crushed and fried in buffalo's ghee and the paste is externally applied to wounds as an antiseptic.

Polygonum chinensis Linn.
(Polygonaceae)

Kota name: **Kehilvan**

A diffuse herb with pinkish-white flowers. Common in moist places.

Uses: The ripe fruits are edible.

Prunella vulgaris Linn. (Lamiaceae)

Kota name: **Kadthur**

An erect creeping root stock. Flowers purple, rare.

Uses: The root is crushed in water and mixed with fresh lemon juice and taken orally to relieve symptoms of skin disorders and it also acts as a refrigerant. According to their folk claims, it is considered as good haematanic.

Rhodomyrtus tomentosa (Ait. Hassk.
(Myrtaceae)

Kota name: **Thavuttupan**

A bushy shrub or small tree. Flowers whitish-pink. Fruits globose. Common in sholas.

Uses: Ripe fruits are edible and considered to cause cold. Children are advised not to take them in excess because it may lead to constipation possibly due to its stringent property.

Ricinus communis Linn. (Euphorbiaceae)

Kota name: **Amanaku**

An erect shrub or small tree, cultivated.

Uses: The leaf paste is applied to fore-head as cure to relieve headache. The oil extracted from the seeds is also used.

Rosa leschenaultiana Wight & Arn. (Rosaceae)

Kota name: **Bilarose annu**

A large climbing shrub. Flowers white, common.

Uses: The ripe fruits are edible.

Rubus ellipticus Smith. (Rosaceae)

Kota name: **Penmulp.**

A large straggling shrub. Flowers white. Common in sholars.

Uses: The ripe fruits are edible.

Rubus racemosus Rox. (Rosaceae)

Kota name: **Gundmulp**

A climbing shrub with pink mature fruits.

Uses: The mature fruits are edible.

Rumex nepalensis Spreng. (Polygonaceae)

Kota name: **Gundott** or **Sukktu Keerai**

An erect, annual herb. Flowers red-dish. Common in marshy places.

Uses: Root is crushed in water and the juice is filtered and taken internally as a refrigerant and laxative.

Siegesbeckia orientalis Linn. (Asteraceae)

Kota name: **Potaz**

An annual erect herb. Flowers yellow, common

Uses: Leaves are crushed in water and taken orally as a remedy for skin rashes, insect bites and allergies.

Solanum nigrum Linn. (Solanaceae)

Kota name: **Ikki sop**

An erect branched herb with white flowers. Common in waste places.

Uses: The fresh green leaves are crushed in water and taken orally to relieve symptoms of stomach disorders. The green leaves together with tender stem are cooked and eaten as vegetable. The leaf paste is applied externally for skin rashes or Akki (Kota name, Ann goeg).

Solaanum sisymbriifolium Limk. (Solaaceae)

Kota name: **Vadadana**

An erect, evergreen undershrub. Flowers white or violet. Common

Uses: The mature seeds are crushed in water and filtered. The extract is used as a vermifuge for three consecutive days.

Syzygium cumini Linn. (Skeels. (Myrtacease)

Kota name: **Neruvan**

An evergreen tree. Flowers greenish white. Berries ovoid-oblong. Common in sholas.

Uses: The ripe fruits are edible.

Toddalia asiatica (Linn). Lam. (Rutaceae)

Kota name: **Vaseri**

A prickly, climbing shrub. Flowers yellow. Fruits mature yellow, common.

Uses: The leaves or seeds are made into paste with water and the extract is taken orally as a vermifuge.

Triticum aestivum Linn. (Poaceae)

Kota name: **Godumai**

An erect annual grass. Spikelets green, cultivated.

Uses: The freshly harvested Godumai is considered as causing body-heat and the stored one as causing cold. The mature seeds are used as food.

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