

MAHONIA LESCHENAULTII – A TODA PLANT

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ABSTRACT: *The present communication deals with a valuable plant Mahonia leschenaultia used by the Todas of Nilgiris in their religious and medical practices.*

INTRODUCTION

The Todas are one of the most important aboriginal tribal groups living in the Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu. Traditionally, they are pastoralists and dairy-men. The whole Toda community is divided into two major groups viz., *Tarthar* and *Telivali*. No inter marriages between *Tarthar* and *Teivali* are permissible. Further, there are distinct sects like *Peiki*, *Pekkan*, *Kuttan*, *Kenna*, *Jodi* and *Taral* among Todas (Rivers, 1906; Raghunathan 1976; Walker 1986). According to their own conceptional framework of social stratification, *Peikis* enjoy the highest social status than other groups. Todas live in villages called *Munds* which means herds. Their population in the Nilgiri district is 1600 (Census, 1981).

The plant *Mahonia leschenaultia* is known in common parlance as Holy-leaved Berry belonging to family Berberidaceae. This plant is of potential value as a medicine besides its use in religious ceremonies. In Toda term it is called *Thovari* which means Purifier. The stem bark of the plant is made into paste in water and administered orally as an effective remedy to newly delivered women against fever, cold and

also to arrest other complications during post-natal period.

In Toda community females are forbidden to enter their temple. The leaves are soaked in water and this holy water is sprinkled during annual temple festivals as a purification ritual to get rid of the bad effects caused by women trespassers into the temple.

Mahonia leschenaultii (Wall. Ex. Wight & Arn.) Takeda in Notes Roy. Bot. Gard. Ednb. 6:221. 1917; Dunn in Gamble, Fl. Pres. Madras 1 :32.1915; Nair & Henry, Fl. Tamil Nadu 1: 9. 1983. *Berberis leschenaultia* Wall. Ex Wight & Arn. Prodr. 16. 1834; Wight, Ic. T. 940. 1815. *B. nepalensis* Spreng var. *leschenaultia* (Wall. Ex Wight & Arn.) Hook f. & Thomas in Hook f. Fl. Brit India 1 : 109. 1872.

Tamil Mullu Kadambu

A shrub on small tree upto 6m; branches with persistent leaf-bases. Leaves even pinnate, leaflets ca 6 pairs, opposite oblong, ovate-lanceolate, coriaceous, glabrous, glossy above, base obtuse, margin serrately-spiny,

apex acute; stipules in pairs. Racemes terminal ca. 20 cm., sepals 3+3, ovate, petals yellow 3+3, subequal oblong notched at apex and shortly 2-lobed, with 2 basal glands within. Stamens 6, adnate to the base of petal. Ovary oblong 1-celled. Berry globose to 8mm., glaucous, 1-seeded.

Flowering : April – June & September – November. Fruiting : May – June and November – December.

Distribution : Indigenous to Nepal. Temperate Himalaya, Himachal Pradesh to Khasia Hills and Nilgiris.

Medicinal Use : The berries are edible, and considered diuretic, demulcent in dysentery (Kirthikar & Basu, 1935).

Alkaloids : The root, stem-bark and wood contains Umbellatine and Neprotine (Wealth of India, 1962).



Mahonia Leschenaultii L. A Toda Sacred Plant



Toda Tribal in Traditional costume in front of Temple (Garden Mund)

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