UTILITY AND CONSERVATION OF MEDICINAL AND AROMATIC PLANTS IN INDIA

Abstract

In this book chapter, we examine the enduring and multifaceted relationship between humanity and plants. Over the course of biological and cultural evolution, plants have been integral to meeting our fundamental life needs. They have provided sustenance, medicinal remedies, flavorings, and materials for clothing and shelter. We delve into the rich tapestry of traditional systems of medicine, such as Ayurveda, Unani, and Siddha in India, as well as indigenous healthcare practices worldwide, highlighting their continued significance in addressing healthcare needs, especially in developing countries. Furthermore, we explore how pharmaceutical and chemical sciences have harnessed the potential of medicinal plants. Through rigorous analysis, bioactive compounds have been isolated, leading to the discovery of new drugs. Currently, approximately 125 prescription drugs, each with known structures, are derived from over 100 plant species. Additionally, roughly 5,000 plant species globally have been examined as potential sources of novel treatments. India's pharmaceutical industry has been at the forefront of producing modern drugs from plants, underlining the importance of traditional knowledge in contemporary medicine. This chapter underscores the profound influence of plants on human existence and healthcare, both historically and in the present day, while also acknowledging their continued role in shaping our future.

Keywords: Medicinal plants, Traditional medicine, Ayurveda, Pharmaceutical science, Bioactive compounds.

Authors

Brijesh Kumar Agri
Department of Botany
Soban Singh Jeena University
Almora, Uttarakhand, India

Prawal P S Verma
CSIR-Central Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants
Regional Research Centre
Uttarakhand, India.

Amit Kumar Tiwari
CSIR-Central Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants
Regional Research Centre Pantnagar
Dairy Farm Nagla
Uttarakhand, India.

Sonveer Singh
CSIR-Central Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants
Regional Research Centre
Dairy Farm Nagla
Uttarakhand, India.

Dipender Kumar
CSIR-Central Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants
Regional Research Centre Pantnagar
Dairy Farm Nagla
Uttarakhand, India.

RC Padalia
CSIR-Central Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants
Regional Research Centre Pantnagar
Dairy Farm Nagla
Uttarakhand, India.

I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the course of human biological and cultural evolution, humanity has acquired an extensive knowledge of harnessing the power of plants to meet a myriad of fundamental life needs. These versatile organisms have played a central role in sustaining human existence by providing us with a rich array of resources and solutions. Plants have been our source of sustenance, offering diverse and nutritious foods that have been integral to our diets since time immemorial. In addition to nourishment, plants have been harnessed for their medicinal properties, offering remedies and treatments for various health ailments. Traditional systems of medicine in India, such as Ayurveda, Unani, and Siddha (Singh et al., 2019), have relied on plant-based medicines for centuries, recognizing the healing potential of botanical ingredients. This deep-rooted knowledge has been a cornerstone of healthcare in many cultures. Plants have not only influenced our physical well-being but have also enriched our sensory experiences. They have provided us with an assortment of condiments and flavorings, enhancing the taste and variety of our culinary creations (Swathi & Venkatesh, 2022). From aromatic herbs to spices that tickle the palate, plants have made our meals more flavorful and enjoyable. Beyond sustenance and healthcare, plants have been vital in providing raw materials for clothing and shelter. Fibrous plants like cotton and flax have been woven into fabrics for clothing, while timber from trees has been used in construction for dwellings and other structures (Mukherjee, 2001). This reliance on plants for shelter and clothing has deep historical roots, demonstrating our intricate connection to the plant kingdom. Plants have further served as a source of tools and implements, enabling humans to shape their environment. From ancient farming implements to modern machinery, plant-derived materials have been instrumental in crafting the tools necessary for survival and progress. Additionally, the utilization of plants extends to furnishings, as wood and other plant-based materials have been employed in creating furniture and household items. This practice highlights the integral role of plants in enhancing our daily lives and surroundings. In the realm of medicine, plants continue to play a crucial role in three distinct systems of healthcare in India: Ayurveda, Unani, and Siddha. These traditional systems of medicine rely heavily on botanical ingredients for healing and wellness. Furthermore, the field of homeopathy, originally developed in Germany, incorporates plant-based substances into its remedies. Even in the modern era, the western medical system, practiced widely worldwide, relies on plant-derived compounds for pharmaceuticals and treatments. This illustrates the enduring importance of plants in contemporary healthcare.

The practice of traditional or indigenous medical systems is a global phenomenon, reflecting the distinct cultural traditions of each nation. These systems are rooted in specific principles and traditions that have been passed down through generations. They have evolved over time and can be traced back to the earliest days of human civilization when ancient people employed various methods and therapies to address health concerns. As humans migrated to different environments, these practices underwent transformations, eventually solidifying into recognized medical systems within various civilizations (Redvers & Blondin, 2020). The acceptance of these medical traditions has been greatly influenced by cultural factors, making them challenging to transplant from one culture to another. In spite of the progress made in modern medicine and the development of synthetic drugs, indigenous, traditional, and folk medicine persist as valuable cultural legacies in societies worldwide. These systems continue to play a significant role in meeting the healthcare needs of many developing countries, home to approximately 80 percent of the world's population (Castillo-

Santana et al., 2017). Additionally, there has been a renewed interest in herbal remedies in recent times. Global organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) acknowledge the potential of traditional and folk medicine in promoting healthcare self-sufficiency. WHO actively promotes and encourages the integration of herbal medicines into the healthcare programs of all nations. Two of the world's oldest and most well-established traditional or indigenous medical systems are Chinese traditional medicine and Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine. Chinese traditional medicines have contributed to the maintenance of the health of the Chinese population, with more than 80 percent of Chinese people utilizing these traditional remedies, which number over 10,000 (Xiong et al., 2020). Ayurveda, a centuries-old traditional system of medicine, has maintained its prominence in India over many generations but experienced a somewhat diminished application in the previous century. India stands out globally due to its diverse population practicing several well-recognized indigenous medical systems. These encompass Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, Homeopathy, Yoga, and Naturopathy, collectively providing comprehensive healthcare. Ayurveda, often referred to as "the science of life," is one of the world's oldest documented medical systems, dating back to the dawn of civilization and the Vedic period. It operates on a holistic approach, addressing the physical, chemical, biological, and spiritual aspects of life (Redvers, 2021). Ayurveda's primary goal is not only to cure diseases but also to maintain a positive state of health encompassing the body, mind, and spirit, all in harmony with the environment and the universe. The Siddha system of medicine, with its origins in the pre-Vedic period, focuses primarily on therapeutics. Its principles closely resemble those of Ayurveda and emphasize iatrochemistry. Siddha medicine is predominantly practiced in the southern states of India, particularly Tamil Nadu. An essential aspect of Siddha medicine involves the liberal consumption of metals, minerals, such as mercury, sulfur, and specific salts, alongside herbal drugs. Unani medicine, or the Graeco-Arabic system, was introduced to India during the medieval period by the Arabs. It amalgamated with Ayurveda and became known as "Unani Tibb." Unani medicine is rooted in the four-humor theory of Hippocrates, as developed in the Arab world (Hoosen et al., 2022). It assesses a patient's needs based on temperament, with the aim of maintaining a proper balance between the innate power of self-preservation and adaptability. Homeopathy, a system of medicine introduced to India only in the mid-19th century, has seen sporadic use. In India, these diverse medical traditions collectively contribute to the rich tapestry of healthcare, embodying a blend of ancient wisdom and contemporary understanding (Mujeeb, 2017).

The Ayurvedic system of medicine extends its influence on neighboring countries such as Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh(Pandey et al., 2013). Furthermore, the principles and practices of traditional medicine systems in other cultures and countries within the region, such as Tibet, Mongolia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia, seem to have roots in Ayurveda. These systems share common features with Ayurveda and the Chinese medical system, as well as the Kampo system practiced in Japan and Korea. They make use of substances derived from plants, animals, and minerals, both in simple, single-drug preparations and complex compound formulations. Typically, practitioners of these indigenous therapies prefer compound prescriptions, believing them to be more effective due to synergistic interactions (S. B. Tiwari et al., 2021). This preference makes it more challenging to meet international standards compared to simpler preparations. In India, until a few decades ago, medicines in indigenous medical systems were generally prepared by the practicing physicians themselves. However, in recent decades, this practice has largely transitioned to the establishment of organized indigenous drug industries. Currently, there are

approximately 10,000 licensed pharmacies for the Indian system of medicine and nearly 400,000 registered practitioners of Ayurveda, Siddha, and Unani medicine (Kaliappan et al., 2013).

The Ayurvedic system of medicine does not restrict the use of any plant substances as medicines, and there are approximately 1,000 single drugs and 8,000 compound formulations of recognized merit in use today. Similarly, Siddha, Unani, and Amchi systems of medicine employ around 600, 700, and 600 medicinal plants, respectively(Kumar et al., 2022). While there are common plants used across these systems, quantifying the usage of individual plant materials in traditional medicine is challenging due to the absence of reliable data on the availability, supply, and demand of medicinal plants in the country.

In recent times, pharmaceutical and chemical sciences have played a significant role in harnessing the potential of medicinal plants. Through rigorous chemical analysis, researchers have isolated and thoroughly assessed bioactive compounds from these plants, leading to the discovery of new drugs and expanded applications for these compounds. Presently, there are approximately 125 clinically useful prescription drugs, each with known structures, derived from around 100 different species of higher plants. This underscores the rich pharmacological diversity that nature offers. Additionally, an estimated 5,000 higher plant species worldwide have been meticulously studied as potential sources of novel drugs for various human ailments. Over the past three and a half decades, India's pharmaceutical industry has made substantial progress in producing modern drugs derived from plants. Notable pharmaceuticals produced in India include opioids like morphine, codeine, and papaverine extracted from *Papaver somniferum*; antimalarial drugs such as quinine and its derivatives from various plant sources; gout medication colchicine obtained from several plant species; heart medications digoxin and lanatoside sourced from *Digitalis lanata*; caffeine from tea (*Thea sinensis*) and coffee (*Coffea arabica*); berberine from species of the genus Berberis, Coptis, and Coscinium; xanthotoxin from plants like *Ammi majus* and *Heracleum lanatum*; psoralen from *Psoralia corylifolia*; rutin from *Fagopyrum esculentum*; vinblastine, catharanthine, and ajmalicine from *Rauvolfia serpentina*; ephedrine and pseudoephedrine from Ephedra gerardiana; diosgenin from various Dioscorea species; solasodine extracted from Solanum species; sennosides from *Cassia angustifolia* and *Cassia acutifolia*; cephaeline and emetine from *Cephaelis ipecacuanha*; podophyllotoxin from *Podophyllum hexandrum*; guggulipid sourced from *Commiphora wightii*; artemisinin from *Artemisia annua*; and taxol derived from certain Triticale plant species (Krupa Samuel et al., 2022). Furthermore, beyond isolating pure chemical constituents, various crude and standardized extracts from medicinal plants are utilized as medicinal agents. These include extracts from belladonna (*Atropa acuminata*), opium (*Rheum emodii*), aloe vera (*Aloe vera*), and valerian (*Valeriana species*), among others. This comprehensive exploration of medicinal plants and their compounds continues to drive advancements in pharmaceutical science and the development of new treatments for various medical conditions.

II. CONSERVATION CHALLENGES

Conservation efforts for medicinal and aromatic plants face an array of formidable challenges, with the looming threat to these plant species in their natural habitats at the forefront. Factors such as rampant urbanization, deforestation, and the relentless expansion of agriculture pose existential risks as they encroach upon and diminish the habitats critical for

the survival of these vital species (Heywood, 2017). One of the primary challenges is overharvesting and habitat degradation, which represent twin perils that demand urgent attention. The insatiable demand for these plants, whether for their medicinal properties or aromatic allure, has led to indiscriminate and unsustainable collection practices that can deplete populations and disrupt fragile ecosystems (Breman et al., 2021). Concurrently, habitat degradation resulting from practices like deforestation and land-use changes further exacerbates the problem, pushing many species perilously close to the brink of extinction. In addition to these immediate threats, the far-reaching impacts of climate change cast a long shadow over the conservation efforts. Shifts in temperature and precipitation patterns directly affect the growth and reproductive cycles of medicinal and aromatic plants. These changes challenge the adaptability of these species, posing substantial threats to their long-term survival. Furthermore, legal and ethical issues loom large on the conservation landscape. Concerns over biopiracy, where traditional knowledge is exploited without adequate recognition or fair benefit-sharing, underscore the need for robust legal frameworks that safeguard the interests of local communities and indigenous peoples who have been stewards of these plants for generations(Rai & Singh, 2021) . The conservation of medicinal and aromatic plants is a complex and multifaceted challenge. Addressing the threats posed by urbanization, deforestation, overharvesting, habitat degradation, and climate change while ensuring the protection of traditional knowledge and the rights of local communities is essential for the continued existence of these valuable plant species. Effective conservation strategies must be holistic, interdisciplinary, and guided by a strong commitment to preserving both biodiversity and cultural heritage (Agrawal et al., 2022).

III. GENETIC DIVERSITY

Biodiversity encompasses the richness of species and the genetic variability inherent in all living organisms, spanning plants, animals, and microorganisms. This diversity arises from variations in their DNA content and sequences, giving rise to unique genetic traits and characteristics. Notably, different species are reproductively isolated from one another, and their adaptive responses to varying environments can diverge significantly (Nayyar et al., 2021). The importance of biodiversity is profound, as it offers essential ecological services to humanity. It plays a pivotal role in climate regulation, acts as a natural filter for purifying water, soil, and air, contributes significantly to food production through the vital process of crop pollination, enriches soil fertility, and serves as a linchpin for various life-sustaining functions within ecosystems. Each species represents a repository of distinct genetic information, and unlocking the secrets of their unique biochemical capabilities holds the promise of designing new products with medicinal, agricultural, and industrial significance for human use. Yet, in the face of these remarkable opportunities, understanding, harnessing, and preserving biodiversity stands as one of the greatest scientific challenges of our time (Vaishnav et al., 2023). The ongoing efforts to unravel the complexities of genetic diversity, exploit its potential benefits, and ensure its conservation are at the forefront of contemporary scientific exploration, as they hold the key to sustaining the delicate balance of our interconnected world.

IV. RICHNESS OF SPECIES IN INDIA

India stands as a beacon of both considerable biodiversity and cultural diversity. Geographically, it spans a subcontinent, enveloping an astonishing array of ecological

diversity. With 15 distinct agroclimatic zones, 10 vegetation zones, 25 biotic provinces, and 426 biomes, India has rightfully earned its status as one of the world's top twelve mega-diversity countries. It is a land of extremes, ranging from the blistering Thar desert to the icy expanse of the Himalayas (Wani et al., 2022), with all conceivable gradations in between. Remarkably, despite occupying only 2% of the world's land area, India hosts more than 5% of all known species of higher plants and animals. Yet, the full extent of India's biodiversity remains far from catalogued. While some reliable data exists for higher plants and land-dwelling animals, there remains a vast knowledge gap concerning microorganisms, lower plants, and terrestrial animal species. Similarly, the oceans surrounding India hold a wealth of biodiversity yet to be comprehensively explored (Deomurari et al., 2023). India boasts an estimated 15,000-17,000 species of angiosperms (flowering plants), 23,000 fungal species, 2,500 algae species, and 1,600 more within the realm of agri-horticultural crops, including a substantial number of endemic species. Additionally, over 800 species of ethnobotanical significance further contribute to the mosaic of India's rich biodiversity (Shrivastava et al., 2022). These numbers underscore the urgent need to continue documenting and understanding India's extraordinary biological wealth, a vital endeavor in the pursuit of conserving and harnessing its immense ecological and cultural treasures (Walsh et al., 2021).

V. THE RARITY AND PLANTS ENDEMISM

The profound impact of human activities across various domains has taken a significant toll on biodiversity, placing the future of numerous species in jeopardy. These detrimental effects have identifiable causes, including the loss and fragmentation of habitats due to urbanization, industrialization, and agricultural expansion, the haphazard introduction of exotic species, the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, inadequate management of water resources, and the pervasive pollution of soil, water, and the atmosphere(Carbutt, 2019). Compounding these challenges is the ongoing global climate change phenomenon, further imperiling delicate ecosystems and species. The rate at which species are vanishing is a cause for global concern, underscoring the urgency of conservation efforts. Distressingly, it is estimated that tropical forests alone lose one higher plant species daily (A. Tiwari et al., 2019). If this alarming trend persists, it is projected that roughly 25% of the approximately 250,000 higher plant species may be lost within the next few decades, with an additional 25% facing extinction by the close of the twenty-first century. One widely accepted estimate, endorsed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) and the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), warns that as many as 60,000 higher plant species could teeter on the brink of extinction or face near-extinction by the middle of the next century. These sobering statistics emphasize the imperative to take proactive measures to safeguard and preserve the extraordinary diversity of plant life that graces our planet.

VI. THE ESCALATING PLIGHT OF ENDANGERED PLANT SPECIES IN INDIA

Unsurprisingly, the number of plant species facing endangerment or threats in India has witnessed a relentless rise, marking a stark contrast from a mere few hundred species just a few years ago to now encompassing thousands. The concern looms that a substantial portion, potentially 15-20% of the entire flora, equating to over 3,000 higher plant species, may now be classified within one of the categories reserved for threatened plants (Ravikanth et al., 2018).

1. **Extinct (Ex):** This category encompasses species that have vanished entirely from the wild, despite rigorous searches of their typical habitats and other known or probable locations. Additionally, in accordance with IUCN criteria, species declared as extinct in the wild but surviving through cultivation are included.

2. **Endangered (E)**: Species falling under this classification are teetering on the brink of extinction, with their survival highly uncertain if the factors driving their decline persist. Such taxa have experienced such severe reductions in population numbers that they face immediate jeopardy.

3. **Vulnerable (V)**: Taxa that are expected to transition into the endangered category in the near future due to ongoing causal factors for depletion are classified as vulnerable. This includes (a) taxa facing population declines due to over-exploitation, extensive habitat destruction, or other environmental disruptions, (b) taxa with seriously depleted populations whose long-term security is uncertain, and (c) taxa with still-abundant populations but under imminent threat from significant adverse factors throughout their range.

4. **Rare (R):** This group encompasses taxa with limited global populations that, while not endangered or vulnerable presently, are at risk. Typically, such taxa are localized within specific geographical areas or habitats or are sparsely distributed across a wider range. They may be endemic to a small island or single mountain, with their rarity often attributed to small population sizes.

5. **Indeterminate (I):** This category includes taxa known to be extinct, endangered, vulnerable, or rare but lacks sufficient information to definitively assign them to one of these four categories.

6. **Insufficiently known (K):** Taxa suspected of belonging to one of the categories but lacking concrete evidence due to insufficient information are classified here.

7. **Out of danger (O):** Taxa previously categorized in one of the above risk categories but now considered relatively secure due to effective conservation measures or the alleviation of previous threats to their survival are deemed out of danger or not threatened.

8. **Endemic:** This term is ascribed to taxonomic units or taxa confined to restricted regions, often isolated by geographical or temporal barriers. Various levels of endemicity exist based on theoretical and reproductive considerations.

VII. VARIETIES OF ENDEMISM

Endemism in the realm of biodiversity manifests in various forms, each bearing its unique ecological and historical significance.

1. **Relic Endemism:** This form of endemism harkens back to ancient times when geological and climatic conditions were markedly different. Relic endemics are species that once had a more extensive distribution but now survive only in specific isolated areas due to

changing environmental factors. These survivors offer glimpses into the past, providing valuable insights into the evolutionary history and adaptation of organisms. The pockets where relic endemics persist are often referred to as "living fossils," as they harbor species that have persisted virtually unchanged for millions of years.

2. **Neoendemics:** Unlike relic endemics, neoendemics are species that have recently evolved and are unique to specific geographical regions. These endemics may have arisen due to geographic isolation, genetic divergence, and adaptation to local ecological conditions. They exemplify ongoing evolutionary processes and contribute to the diversification of life forms. Studying neoendemics sheds light on the mechanisms driving speciation and the role of geography in shaping genetic diversity.

3. **Anthropogenic Endemism:** Anthropogenic activities, primarily human-induced changes in land use and habitat modification, have led to the emergence of anthropogenic endemics. These species have adapted to newly created environments, often influenced by human interventions such as urbanization, agriculture, or industrialization. Anthropogenic endemism highlights the profound impact of human actions on ecosystems and serves as a testament to nature's capacity for resilience and adaptation in the face of rapid environmental transformations.

VIII. ENDEMICITY IN INDIA

Endemic species, characterized by their unique presence within restricted geographic regions, hold a pivotal role in the realm of conservation (Table 1). These species, owing to their distinctiveness and limited distribution, offer crucial insights into the intricate tapestry of biodiversity (Mukhopadhyay, 2016). Understanding and preserving them are essential for safeguarding our planet's biological heritage. Recent scientific studies have shed light on the prevalence of endemism, particularly among higher plant species, where approximately 35% are considered endemic (Patel et al., 2021). This statistic underscores the rich diversity of plant life confined to specific regions, highlighting the importance of focused conservation efforts. India, with its vast and varied landscape, stands out as a hotspot for endemic flora. Among the 18 globally recognized "hot spots" of biodiversity, India proudly hosts two: the Eastern Himalayas and the Western Ghats. These regions serve as the exclusive habitats for a staggering 3,500 and 1,600 endemic higher plant species, respectively. Collectively, these species account for over 5% of the world's total endemic higher plant species (Saha & Ganguly, 2021). The significance of endemic species extends beyond their uniqueness; they also provide valuable insights into evolution, adaptation, and ecological processes. These species often exhibit specialized adaptations to their specific environments, shedding light on the mechanisms of natural selection and survival. Moreover, endemic species are indicators of the health of their ecosystems. Their survival is intricately linked to the preservation of their habitat, making them valuable barometers of ecosystem stability. When endemic species thrive, it is indicative of a balanced and healthy ecosystem. However, the conservation of endemic species presents unique challenges (Shenoy et al., 2022). Their limited distribution makes them susceptible to localized threats, including habitat destruction, climate change, and invasive species. Therefore, protecting these species necessitates targeted conservation measures that address the specific risks they face.

IX. CONSERVATION OF MEDICINAL AND AROMATIC PLANTS IN INDIA

In the present era, many commercially important medicinal and aromatic plant species are facing the risk of extinction or significant genetic loss (Fig. 1). This alarming situation results from the growing global demand for their products, the rapid increase in the human population, and the extensive destruction of plant-rich habitats such as tropical forests, wetlands, Mediterranean ecosystems, and parts of arid zones (Negi et al., 2018). While there has been considerable focus on exploring the potential of medicinal and aromatic plants for discovering new drugs and commercially valuable compounds, there has been little to no coordinated effort to conserve most of these endangered or threatened species. Recognizing this pressing issue, several national and international organizations have taken the initiative to formulate policies and strategies for the conservation of medicinal and aromatic plants. Notably, organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) have made commendable efforts in this regard. Moreover, in 1992, over 155 countries, including India, signed the treaty on the conservation of biological diversity at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (Luiz-Silva & Oscar-Júnior, 2022). Article 7 of this convention mandates each participating party to identify and prioritize components of biological diversity essential for their conservation and sustainable use (Šatović et al., 2012). In 1998, WHO, IUCN, and WWF jointly organized an international consultation on the conservation of medicinal plants in Chiang Mai, Thailand, from March 21 to 27. This gathering brought together leading experts from various countries who discussed the challenges, identified priorities, and made recommendations for action. The outcome was the issuance of The Chiang Mai Declaration, emphasizing the significance of medicinal plants and urging the United Nations, its agencies, member states, and other international organizations to take proactive steps for their conservation. Subsequently, a report titled "Guidelines on the Conservation of Medicinal Plants" was published, aiming to establish a framework for the conservation and sustainable utilization of medicinal plants. The forty-first World Health Assembly in 1988 also highlighted the importance of the Chiang Mai Declaration and emphasized the need to ensure an adequate supply of medicinal plants for future generations. This underscored the vital role of medicinal plants, their rational and sustainable use, and their conservation within the realm of public health policy and concern.

X. STRATEGY FOR THE CONSERVATION OF MEDICINAL AND AROMATIC PLANTS

Certainly, here are the key points summarizing the strategy for the conservation of medicinal and aromatic plants: **1.** Develop a national strategy: Create a comprehensive national strategy that outlines the conservation and sustainable use of medicinal and aromatic plants, assigning specific tasks to the most suitable institutions; **2.** Collaborative effort: Engage experts from diverse disciplines and institutions to collaboratively address the multifaceted challenges of conserving these plant species; **3.** Identify and prioritize species: Identify medicinal and aromatic plants, map their distribution, and assess their abundance or scarcity. Prioritize the conservation of threatened species; **4.** Establish a comprehensive database: Develop a computerized database following international data standards to gather, manage, and continuously update information on these plants; **5.** Domestication and cultivation: Promote the domestication and cultivation of medicinal plants to ensure a stable

supply of high-quality materials and reduce pressure on wild populations. Develop agrotechnologies for species with high demand; **6.** Breeding programs: Launch urgent breeding efforts to develop high-yielding varieties, especially for medicinal crops used extensively in modern and traditional medicines; **7.** Ex-situ conservation: Give priority to establishing medicinal plant gardens and nurseries for ex-situ conservation; **8.** Regulate collection: Properly regulate the collection of medicinal plants, issue permits, and adopt sustainable harvesting practices. Entrust collection to trained individuals and implement effective management and rotational systems; **9.** Protect local interests: Safeguard the ethical, legal, and social interests of communities residing in areas with medicinal plants; **10.** Prohibit commercial exploitation: Strictly prohibit the commercial exploitation of threatened medicinal and aromatic plants from the wild; **11.** Habitat-based conservation: Focus on conserving medicinal plant species in their natural habitats (in-situ conservation). Designate protected areas like nature reserves and national parks and reintroduce depleted species; **12.** Ex-situ cultivation: Cultivate high-value medicinal plants outside their natural habitats (ex-situ conservation), especially for species with destroyed or safeguarded habitats; **13.** Seed banks: Develop seed banks for native and cultivated medicinal plants within the country; **14.** Gene banks: Establish gene banks for medicinal and aromatic plants to preserve their genetic diversity; **15.** Research and education: Use medicinal and aromatic plants as model systems for studying life processes, secondary metabolite biosynthesis, and discovering new therapeutic agents and industrial commodities and **16.** Public awareness: Promote awareness among the public through communication, cooperation, and education to garner broad support for conservation efforts.

XI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this book chapter has delved into the fascinating world of medicinal and aromatic plants, exploring their taxonomy, distribution, conservation challenges, and the profound impact they have on our lives. We have learned about the rich diversity of plant species, each offering unique bioactive compounds that play crucial roles in traditional and modern medicine, perfumery, and flavoring. India, with its diverse agroclimatic zones and unique ecosystems, stands as a global hotspot for biodiversity and endemism, particularly in the Eastern Himalaya and the Western Ghats. These regions house a significant percentage of the world's endemic plant species, highlighting the importance of conservation efforts in these areas. The book chapter has shed light on the threats facing medicinal and aromatic plant species, including habitat loss, overexploitation, climate change, and legal and ethical issues. It has emphasized the need for a comprehensive strategy to safeguard these invaluable botanical resources. In an ever-changing world, where the demand for medicinal and aromatic plants is on the rise, it is crucial to strike a balance between utilization and conservation. With concerted efforts, including those led by international organizations like WHO, IUCN, WWF, and UNESCO, we can hope to ensure the availability of these plants for future generations. In the face of ongoing challenges, it is imperative to recognize that the conservation of medicinal and aromatic plants is not only a matter of preserving biodiversity but also a vital component of public health policy and sustainable development. As we continue to unveil the secrets of these plants, their potential to provide solutions to global health and environmental challenges becomes increasingly evident. The journey of discovery, conservation, and sustainable use of medicinal and aromatic plants is a dynamic and essential endeavor that promises to benefit humanity and the natural world alike.

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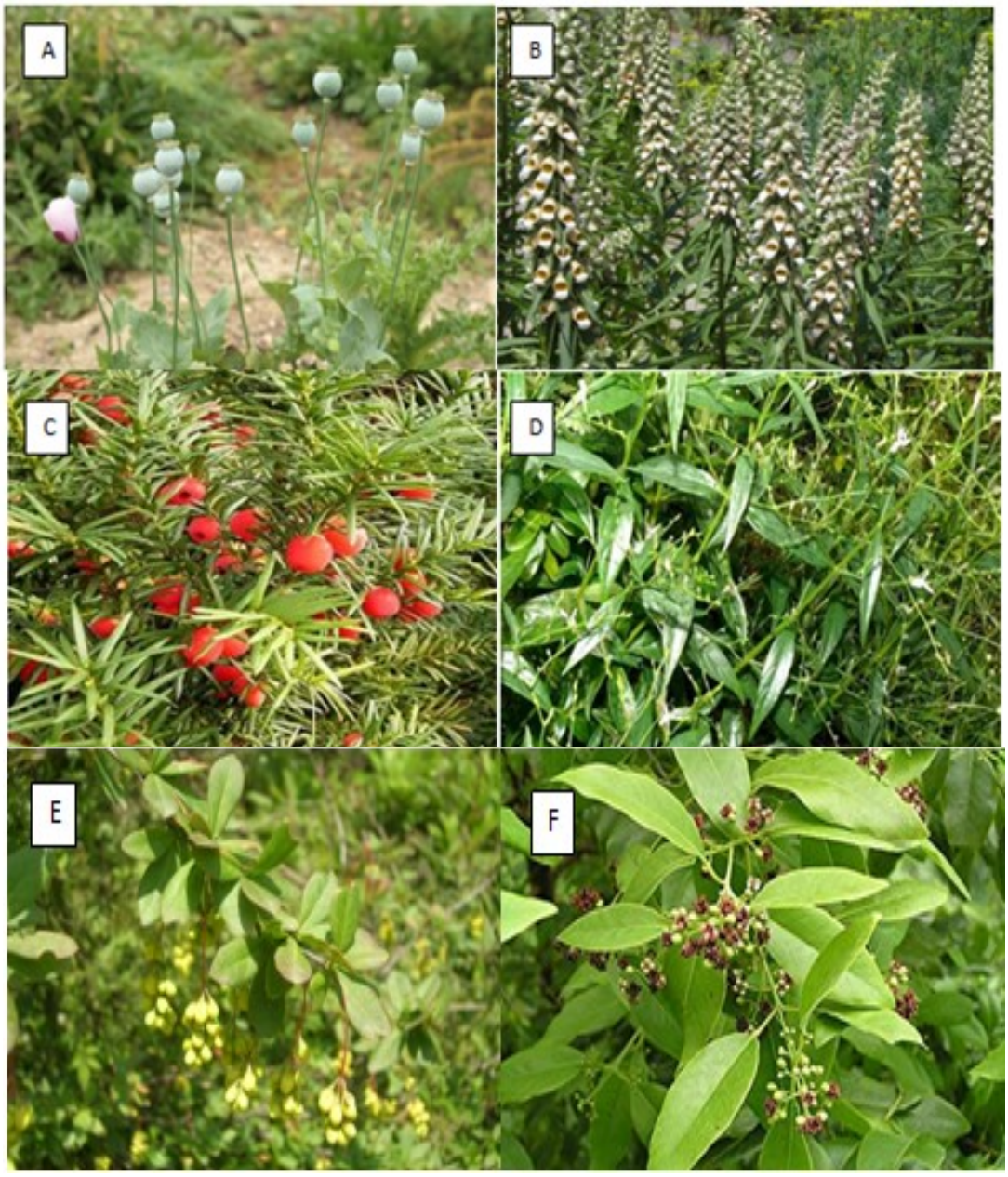

Figure 1: Images of endangered and rare species in the Indian subcontinent; **[A]** Opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum)*; **[B]** Foxglove (*Digitalis lanata)*; **[C]** Taxus (*Taxus baccata*); **[D]** Chirayita (*Swertia chirayita*); **[E]** Daruharidra (*Berberis aristata*); **[F]** Nilgiri Sandalwood (*Santalum album*); **[G]** Milkwort (*Polygala vulgaris*); **[H]** Dholi kapat (*Abutilon ramosum (Cav.) Guill. & Perr.*)

Table 1: Endemicity Categories in India

Category	Description	Examples	Reference
Relic Endemism	Species found in India and nowhere else, often relictual in nature	Neelakurinji (*Strobilanthes kunthiana*), Sacred Lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*)	(Lendvay & Kalapos, 2014)
Neoendemics	Recently evolved species unique to India	Nilgiri Balsam (*Impatiens nilgirica*) and Sikkim Gentian (*Gentiana sikkimensis*)	(López-Pujol et al., 2011)
Anthropogenic Endemism	Species that have become endemic due to human activities	Tea Plant (*Camellia sinensis*)	(Kessler, 2001)
Hybrid Endemism	Resulting from hybridization between native and introduced species	Eucalyptus Tree (*Eucalyptus globulus*)	(Berv et al., 2021)
Island Endemism	Species unique to specific Indian islands	Kokum (*Garcinia indica*), Nicobar Palm (*Nypa fruticans*)	(Cubas et al., 2019)
Habitat Endemism	Restricted to specific ecosystems or microhabitats	Rhododendron arboreum (*Himalayan region*), Desert Date (*Balanites roxburghii*)	(Fine & Baraloto, 2016)
Altitudinal Endemism	Found only in certain altitude ranges within India	Rhododendron (Alpine region), Khasi Pine (Pinus kesiya)	(Demissew et al., 2021)

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