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Rajmohan Sharma

Assistant Professor, Department of Genetics & Plant Breeding, JNKVV, College of Agriculture, Ganjbasoda, Madhya Pradesh, India

Mujahida Sayyed

Department of Maths and Statistics, JNKVV, College of Agriculture, Ganjbasoda, Madhya Pradesh, India

Rajkishor Bhatnagar

Department of Soil Science and Agriculture Chemistry, JNKVV, College of Agriculture, Ganjbasoda, Madhya Pradesh, India

Conservation of medicinal plants: A review of threats and strategies

Rajmohan Sharma, Mujahida Sayyed and Rajkishor Bhatnagar

Abstract

Medicinal plants encompass a wide array of species, each harbouring unique bioactive compound that contribute to their therapeutic properties. Importance of Medicinal Plants in health care and livelihood is well known fact. However, due to various factors severe depletion of the medicinal plant resources has been reported all over. Therefore, conserving medicinal plants is vital not only for the country's ecosystem, but also for its thousands of ethnic communities. There is a need to take corrective measures to conserve and augment the medicinal plants resources in the State. In present study various methods of conservation of medicinal plants and available biodiversity is discussed. So that a proper road map prepared for conservation of rich biodiversity available in medicinal plants. This will also help in protecting the endangered species.

Keywords: Conserving, ethnic communities, medicinal

Introduction

India is a treasure trove of medicinal plants, boasting a rich biodiversity that has given rise to a robust tradition of herbal medicine. In the realm of natural remedies and traditional healing practices, medicinal plants have played an indispensable role for centuries. These botanical treasures have been utilized by diverse cultures worldwide to address a myriad of health concerns, ranging from minor ailments to more complex medical conditions. Rooted in the ancient wisdom of herbalism, the use of medicinal plants continues to hold a significant place in modern healthcare systems, complementing conventional medicine and often offering holistic approaches to wellness. Medicinal plants encompass a wide array of species, each harboring unique bioactive compounds that contribute to their therapeutic properties. These compounds, which include alkaloids, flavonoids, terpenoids, and more, interact with the human body in intricate ways, influencing physiological processes and promoting healing. Throughout history, civilizations across the globe have harnessed the power of these plants to alleviate pain, fight infections, boost immunity, and even support mental and emotional well-being.

The resurgence of interest in medicinal plants in recent decades can be attributed to various factors, including a growing awareness of the potential side effects and limitations of synthetic pharmaceuticals, as well as a renewed appreciation for traditional knowledge and sustainable healthcare practices. Researchers, scientists, and healthcare practitioners are increasingly exploring the scientific basis behind the efficacy of these plants, striving to bridge the gap between traditional wisdom and modern evidence-based medicine.

Importance of Medicinal Plants in health care and livelihood is well known fact. However, due to various factors severe depletion of the medicinal plant resources has been reported all over. Therefore, conserving medicinal plants is vital not only for the country's ecosystem, but also for its thousands of ethnic communities. There is a need to take corrective measures to conserve and augment the medicinal plants resources in the State.

Need for conservation

India is home to a rich diversity of plant species with medicinal properties, many of which are currently endangered due to various factors. These endangered species play a significant role in traditional Indian medicine systems like Ayurveda, Siddha, and Unani, as well as modern pharmaceutical research. The loss of these plants could have serious implications for both healthcare and biodiversity. Here are a few examples of endangered medicinal plants in India Conservation efforts for these endangered medicinal plants in India include establishing protected areas, implementing sustainable harvesting practices, promoting cultivation in botanical gardens, and raising awareness among local communities about the importance of

Corresponding Author:**Rajmohan Sharma**

Assistant Professor, Department of Genetics & Plant Breeding, JNKVV, College of Agriculture, Ganjbasoda, Madhya Pradesh, India

these species. Collaboration between government agencies, research institutions, and local communities is essential to ensure the preservation of these valuable plants and the ecosystems they inhabit.

Conserving medicinal plants is essential to safeguard their biodiversity and ensure their availability for future generations. Here are some strategies for the conservation of medicinal plants.

Habitat protection and restoration

- Identify and protect areas with high biodiversity and concentrations of medicinal plants.
- Implement reforestation and habitat restoration projects to create suitable environments for medicinal plant growth.
- Promote sustainable land use practices to prevent habitat degradation, such as deforestation and overgrazing

***In-situ* conservation**

- Establish protected areas, national parks, and reserves specifically for conserving medicinal plant species.
- Encourage the participation of local communities in managing these areas and their resources.

***Ex-situ* conservation**

- Create botanical gardens, arboretums, and seed banks to maintain living collections of medicinal plants outside their natural habitats.
- Develop strategies for seed germination, propagation, and cultivation of endangered medicinal plant species.

Traditional knowledge integration

- Collaborate with indigenous and local communities to document traditional knowledge about medicinal plants, their uses, and conservation practices.
- Incorporate traditional ecological knowledge into conservation efforts to ensure a holistic approach.
- Promote community-based enterprises centered around the sustainable use of medicinal plants, providing economic incentives for conservation.

Education and awareness

- Raise public awareness about the value of medicinal plants through workshops, seminars, and educational campaigns.
- Educate local communities about sustainable harvesting practices and the importance of maintaining healthy ecosystems.

Research and monitoring

- Conduct research to assess the status and distribution of medicinal plant species, including their population size and health.
- Monitor changes in populations and habitats over time to identify potential threats and evaluate the effectiveness of conservation measures.
- Collaborate with governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, and international bodies to pool resources and expertise for conservation initiatives.

Molecular techniques for conservation of medicinal plants

Molecular techniques have significantly advanced the field of plant conservation by providing precise tools for identifying, characterizing, and preserving genetic diversity in medicinal

plants. Here are some molecular techniques used for the conservation of medicinal plants.

Micropropagation

Micropropagation is a *in vitro* plant propagation method. Main approaches are organogenesis and somatic embryogenesis. Somatic embryogenesis has advantages over organogenesis with respect to the yield of plantlets. Various explants can be used to regenerate plantlets including, shoot tips, nodal and leaf segments, ovular and nucellar tissues and zygotic embryos, protoplast and immature pollen. As an alternative to other vegetative propagation methods, the attraction of tissue culture lies in its aptitude to multiply elite clonal materials very speedily round the year and in short span of time. This is especially desired in commercial production of medicinal and aromatic plants as conservation of rare and endangered medicinal and aromatic plants using tissue culture is highly desirable.

DNA banks and gene libraries

Extraction of total DNA and generation of gene libraries provide a mechanism for the preservation of a portion of the existing gene pool of important crop plants. Total DNA extracts can be stored for long periods at low temperature. Establishment of DNA banks and gene libraries for crop plants provided method of choice to conserve a large number of species in a very small space. However, they should not be used to replace field gene banks as whole plants cannot be regenerated from the total or fragments of DNA. DNA banks and gene libraries assume as an important source for development of diagnostic probes for photochemical screening and for gene transfer experiments. These banks also facilitates exchange of genetic materials of crop plants for specific purpose between countries.

DNA finger printing

DNA finger printing, also known as DNA profiling or genetic fingerprinting, is a technique used to identify and compare individuals based on their unique DNA characteristics. It's a powerful tool in forensic science, paternity testing, and various other fields where precise identification of individuals is necessary. DNA profiling helps in tracking and identifying endangered species and monitoring illegal wildlife trade.

RFLP and PCR based markers have immediate application in the verification of clonal identity and checking genetic similarities or dissimilarities of *ex situ* including *in vitro* collections of plants

DNA Barcoding

- DNA barcoding involves sequencing a specific region of the genome (usually the chloroplast or mitochondrial DNA) to identify and differentiate species.
- It aids in the accurate identification of plant species, even when morphological characteristics are unclear or misleading.
- Helps prevent misidentification and ensures the conservation of true medicinal plant species.

Genetic diversity analysis

- Techniques such as microsatellite markers (SSRs) and single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) are used to assess genetic diversity within and between populations of medicinal plants.
- Genetic diversity analysis helps identify unique populations and prioritize areas for conservation efforts.

Overall, these molecular techniques play a crucial role in advancing the conservation efforts of medicinal plants by ensuring their genetic diversity and accurate identification.

Genetic mapping

- Genetic mapping involves identifying the locations of specific genes on a plant's genome.
- It helps in understanding the inheritance patterns of traits and genes related to medicinal properties.
- Useful for breeding programs aimed at developing improved medicinal plant varieties.

Cryo preservation

- Cryopreservation involves freezing plant tissues at extremely low temperatures to preserve genetic material for long periods.
- It is particularly useful for conserving rare or endangered medicinal plant species.
- Cryopreservation maintains the genetic diversity of plant species in case of catastrophic events or extinction in the wild.

By integrating these molecular techniques into conservation efforts, researchers can make informed decisions, devise effective conservation strategies, and ensure the preservation of genetic diversity and medicinal properties in endangered and valuable medicinal plant species.

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