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Vernacular Plant Names in Maharashtra (India): In Ethnobiological Perspective

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Abstract

It appears that ethnobiological study of vernacular plant names, which aids in revealing conceptual development in a human society, has largely remained neglected possibly due to more attention of botanists towards applied avenues of research. The present attempt to divulge bases of coining vernacular names in the State of Maharashtra (India) included interesting 31 vernacular plant names. These are founded on about 23 different criteria related to various plant features, human sentiments and observations. Each mankind endeavors to employ his mind almost for his every activity he performs. This hold true in this human society of the region, whether literate or illiterate, Earlier some attempts have been made to understand conceptual basis of indigenous knowledge of these region. The authors' appeals for conducting more research in this much neglected area of investigation. The authors' appeals for conducting more research in this much neglected area of investigation.

Keywords*: Vernacular names, Etymology, Ethnobiology, Maharashtra.*

1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, the ability of mankind to use the bio-resources in his ambience to his own advantage has truly rendered him the most powerful and successful animal on the blue planet. He was distinct from as other organisms due to his tendency to think and use the resources rationally. This good ability to communicate to others made him more successful. He developed his own language and coined words based usually on his knowledge of surroundings. He emerged from wild culture to a civilized one. This change in his status also enriched simultaneously his vocabulary, which in ancient time passed over generations orally and then in print form after advancement of writing and printing technology. With the modernity, the forces of acculturation are putting long strides, which in turn culminating into erosion of his past knowledge and experience. The present paper is one such attempt to look into the past association of people with the plant world in Maharashtra (India). The State of Maharashtra has been studied well floristically (*cf*. Cooke, 1958; Sharma, *et al*, 2001; Singh, and Karthikeyan, 2000; Singh, *et al*, 2001). The vernacular names although recorded as ancillary to the floristic study of the region, they have not received a desired attention from the perspective of their genesis. The present paper communicates some of them highlighting their significance and origin in ethnobiological perspective.

2. Aim

The paper is aimed at divuliging the hidden treasure of ethnobiological knowledge in vernacular plant names. This pristine source of ethnobiological information is being eroded on account of the forces of acculturation in this region. It is, therefore, necessary to tap and document it before it is lost.

3. Methods

Vernacular plant names have been borrowed from literature on floristics in the state of Maharashtra. Their root-words are unearthed with their correct meaning and utilities from ethnobiological standpoint. Thus underlying reasons for coining them are earmarked. The plant species are enumerated with their correct botanical names and family name (in parenthesis). The vernacular names are mentioned below separately along with their root-words or meanings and utilities/ criteria for their local nomenclature.

4. Results

4.1. Enumerations of Local Plant Names

1) *Millingtonia hortensis* Linn. f .(Bignomaceae):
   Akasnim: Akas- skys; nim- Azadirachta indica (Meliaceae). The foliage being somewhat similar of these two species, but the former is taller than the latter as if reaching sky.
2) *Rhus mysurensis* Heyne ex Wight & Arn. (Anacardiaceae):
   Amani: Aam- mango i.e. Mangifera indica Linn. (Anacardiaceae) unripe fruits of both taste sour.
3) *Spondias mangifera* Willd (Anacardiaceae):
   Ambada: Amba- Mangifera indica Linn. (Anacardiaceae) Habit, foliage and fruits nearly simulate each other. Unripe fruits also taste sour
4) *Tylophora asthmatica* Wight & Arn. (Asclepiadaceae):
   Anantmul: Anant- Unending, very long; mul- root. The roots are very long and used medicinally as a substitute for ipecacuanha.
5) *Terminalia arjuna* Wight & Arn. (Combretaceae) :
   Arjun- sadada: Arjun - a name of hero in the great Indian epic Mahabharata. Sadada- Terminalia tomantosa Wight & Arn. (Combretaceae). They belong to the same genus and have many common features. It is named Arjun to distinguish them from each other.
6) *Corchorus fascicularis* Lam. (Tiliaceae):
   Bahuphalli: Bahu- many; phal- fuit. Fruits are clustered, hence the name.
7) *Peucedanum graveolens* Benth & Hook. *f*. (Apiaceae) :
   Balantshep: Balant- A woman after child delivery is locally called `balant'or `balantin' The foliage is a good vegetable and consumed especially after delivery. It is thought medicinal for digestive purpose and good health of a lady.
8) *Quisqualis indica* Linn. (Combretaceae):
   Barmasi: Bara- twelve; mas- mounth, the plants produce flowers in all twelve month of a year.
9) *Kaempferia rotunda* Linn. (Scitamineae):
   Bhuichampa: Bhui- earth, champa- fragrent flower. The plant is stemless. The flowers are borne above the soil when the plant is leafless. Flowers are sweet fragrant like champak flowers i.e. Michelia champaca Linn. (Magndiaceae)
10) *Sebastiana chamaelea* Mueel.-Arg. (Euphorbiaceae):
    Bhui-erandi: Bhui- earth; erandi- a local name for Ricinus communis Linn. (Euphorbiaceae). Both plant species bear similar spinulate and subglobose fruits. The former species is just 1-3 ft. bearing fruits near the earth; and the latter is taller hence the name.
11) *Achras sapota* Linn. (Sapotaceae):
    Chikali; Chik-latex, the plant produces ample latex, hence denoted in the local name.
12) *Lagerstroemia indica* Linn. (Lythraceae):
    Chinai mendhi : Chinai - from China. It is cultivated in gardens for showy flowers but originaly a denizen of China.
13) *Ecbolium linneanum* Kurz. (Acanthaceae)
    Dhakta-adulsa: Dhakta- small; adulsa- Justicia adhatoda Linn. (Acanthaceae). The former plant species is somewhat similar to habit and foliage of the latter, but is smaller.
14) *Dalberghia torta* Grah. (Fabaceae):
    Garud-yel: Garud- Eagle; yel- climber. The scandent shrub chimb by means of lateral divaricate twigs with hooked ends. Its appearance is just like an flying eagle, hence the name.
15) *Phaseolus trilobus* Ait. (Fabaceae):
    Jangli-math: Jangli- wild; math- Vigna aconitifolia (Jacq.) Morechal, the habit, leaf shape, flowers, pods, etc. are of it are similar to V. aconitifolia
16) *Bombax malabaricum* DC. (Bombacaceae):
    Kate Savar: Kate - thorns, savar- Echidna, the pointed tubercle, present on entire plant reminds one Echidna.
17) *Careya arborea* Roxb. (Myrtaceae):

Kumbha: Kumbha- a rounded and collared water pot. The fruits are shaped like a 'Kumbha'.

18) *Eugenia rubicunda* Wight (Myrtaceae) :
Lendi-Jambhal: Lendi- Goat droppings; Jambhal- Syzygium cumini (L.) Skcels. Fruits have size, shape and blackish colour of S. cumini.
19) *Bacopa monnieri* (L.)Wettst. (Scrophulariaceae):
Nira- brahmi: Nir- water; brahmi- centella asiatica (L.)Urb. (Apiaceae). They are said to be similar medicinal uses and both have watery habitat. But to distingwish them, a word is added for the species under study. It certainly suggests its habit.
20) *Cissampelos pareira* Linn. (Memispermaceae):
Pahad vel: pahad- mountain; vel- climber. The species is generally inhabits mountain areas and it is a climber.
21) *Anisochilus carnosus* Wall. (Lamiaceae):
Panjiri: pan- water; jiri or jira- Cuminum cyminum Linn. The fruits are nearly similar in shape, size and colour. The species under study, however, inhabits watery places.
22) *Tephrosia purpurea* Pers. (Fabaceae) :
Sarpunka: sar- arrow; punka or pankha- wing. The arrows have winged structure at base. The leaves are shaped like it.
23) *Vitis tomentosa* Heyne ex Roth(Vitaceae):
Shend-Vel: shend- red colored as Red Oxide (Pb_3O_4); Vel- climber. The stems are covered with reddish trichomes, hence the name.
24) *Pithecelobium dulce* Benth. (Mimosaceae) :
Vilayati chinch: vilayt- forein; chinch- fruits of Tamarindus inlica Linn. (Caesalpiniaceae). Fruits bear similarity with the tamarind but it is exotic species in India.
25) *Hoya wightii* Hook. *f*. (Asclepiadaceae):
Dudh-yel: Dudh- milk; yel- climber. It is a climber yielding white latex when cut.
26) *Rhinacanthus communis* Nees. (Acanthaceae):
Gajkarni: Gajkarn- A local name for ringworm a disease of skin. The fresh roots are topically employed to treat the said disease.
27) *Clitoria ternatea* Linn. (Fabaceae) :
Supli: sup- A local winnowing pan used for cleaning food-grains. The flower is shaped like the `sup'
28) *Hiptage madablota* Gaertn. (Malphigiaceae):
Madhumalati: madhu- sweet fragrant. The flowers are so fragrant.
29) *Haldina cordifolia* (Roxb.) Ridsd. (Rubiaceae):
Haladu : Tumeric yellow. The wood is yellowish like turmeric powder. The feature of wood is also denoted in the generic name.
30) *Alstonia scholaris* R. Br. (Apocynaceae):
Saptaparni, satvin: Sapta or sat - seven; parni- leaved. The plants generally bear seven leaves in a whorl.
31) *Melilotus indica* (Linn.)All. (Fabaceae)
Vanmethi: van - wild ; methi- Trigonella foenum-graecum (Fabaceae) `methi' is a cultivated leafy vegetable. Leaves of these species resemble much to each other.

5. Discussion And Conclusion

The present authors studied vernacular names of 31 plant species belonging to 31 plants different genera of angiosperms occurring in the state of Maharashtra. These are analysed ethnobiologically to decode the hidden knowledge and wisdom of people in the region. A critical evaluation of these revealed that these vernacular names are founded on about 23 different criteria *viz.*, taste, colour, length, height, shape, fragrance of plants or their parts, plant product, medicinal utility, wild relatives, resemblance with other plant or animal organs or entire species, phenology, habit, habitat, geographical distribution, plant morphology, exotic nature of plants, luxuriant fruit-set, bearing flowers near earth, mythology, local utilities, etc. It appears that physical signature with colour, fragrance, taste, etc. of the plants, their products or parts is obvious while coining the vernacular names. The other criteria are, however, indicative of their better knowledge about the ambient plant world. The men and women in the region also appeared well-versed with plant morphology, phenology, habit, habitat, geography and characteristic plant features in their vicinity. The

observation on exotic species in the region is worth notable.

Each mankind endeavors to employ his mind almost for his every activity he performs. This hold true in this human society of the region, whether literate or illiterate, Earlier some attempts have been made to understand conceptual basis of indigenous knowledge of these region (*cf*. Patil, 1998, 2009; Patil and Patil, 2000, Pawar and Patil, 2000). It is to be further noted that indigenous knowledge is slowly changing over period of time. The undergoing changes can be progressive or regressive. It is essential to document and perpetuate past knowledge especially when the regressive trend operates in a region. This trend is further accelerated due to the rapid rate of acculturation in modern times. It is why the ethnobiological study is being geared up in recent times.

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