

## Forest Resources – An Ideal Alternative for Tribal Development and Health Care

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**ABSTRACT**

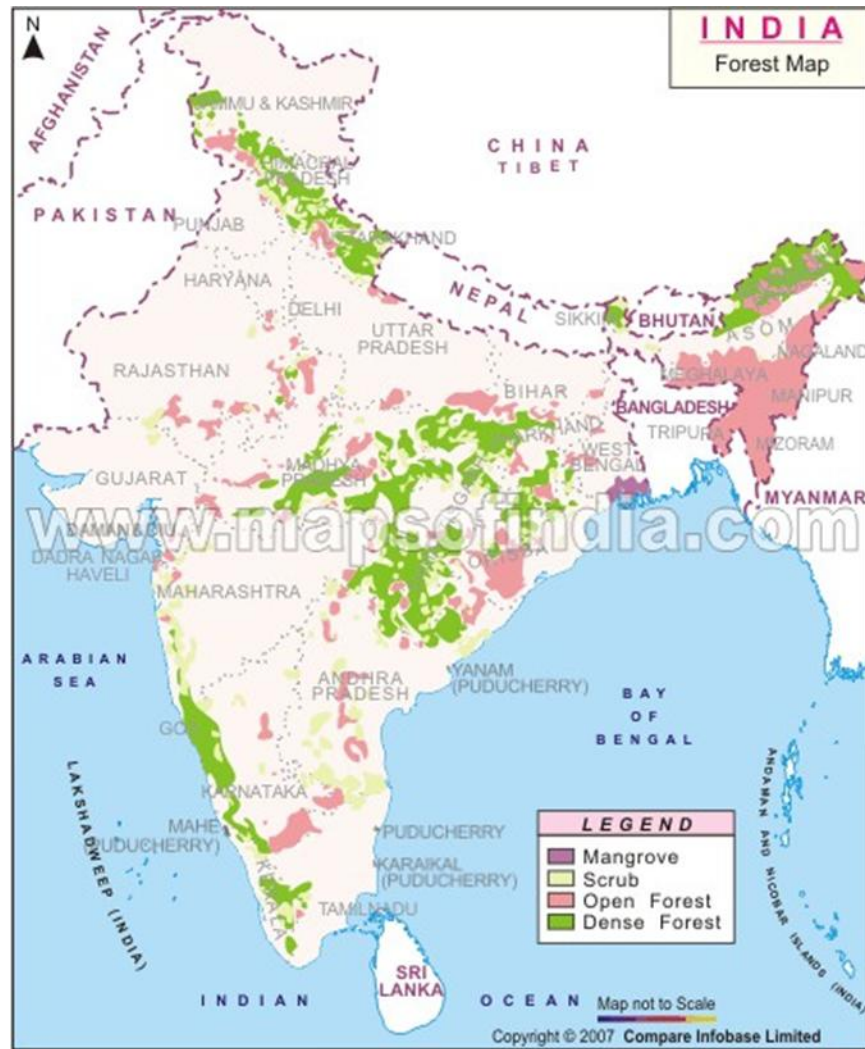
*The Indian sub-continent is inhabited by 53 million tribal populations belonging to over 550 tribal communities that come under 227 linguistic groups. They inhabit varied geographic and climatic Zones of the country. Their vocation ranges from hunting, gathering, cave dwelling nomadics to societies with settled culture living in complete harmony with nature. Forests have been their dear home and totally submitted themselves to forest settings. Their relationship with the forest was symbolic in nature. They have been utilizing the resources without disturbing the delicate balance of the eco-system. Tribals thus mostly remained as stable societies and were unaffected by the social, cultural, material and economic evolutions that were taking place with the so called civilized societies. But this peaceful co-existence of the tribals has been disturbed in recent years by the interference in their habitats. Traditional communities living close to nature have, over the years acquired unique knowledge about the use of living biological resources. Modernisation, especially industrialization and urbanisation has endangered the rich heritage of knowledge and expertise of age old wisdom of the traditional communities. A study on the utilization of local tribals revealed that they hold precious knowledge on the specific use of a large number of agents of wild plant and animal origins, the use of many are hitherto unknown to the outside world. The tribal people are the real custodians of the medicinal plants and thus by using their talents they can be developed as real custodian of Health Care in Indigenous field.*

*The present paper explains how medicinal the knowledge of medicinal plants can prove to be an ideal alternative for tribal development especially in the area of Health Care.*

**Introduction**

The Indian sub-continent is inhabited by 53 million tribal populations belonging to over 550 tribal communities that come under 227 linguistic groups. They inhabit varied geographic and climatic Zones of the country. Their vocation ranges from hunting, gathering, cave dwelling nomadics to societies with settled culture living in incomplete harmony with nature. Forests have been their dear home and totally submitted themselves to forest settings. Their relationship with the forest was symbolic in nature. They have been utilizing the resources without disturbing the delicate balance of the eco-system. Tribals thus mostly remained as stable societies and were unaffected by the social, cultural, material and economic evolutions that were taking place with the so called civilized societies. But this peaceful co-existence of the tribals have been disturbed in recent years by the interference in their habitats. Traditional communities living close to nature have, over the years acquired unique knowledge about the use of living biological resources. Modernisation, especially industrialization and urbanization has endangered the rich heritage of knowledge and expertise of age old wisdom of the traditional communities. A study on the utilization of local tribals revealed that they hold precious knowledge on the specific use of a large number of agents of wild plant and animal origins, the use of many are hitherto unknown to the outside world.

The tribal people are the real custodians of the medicinal plants. Out of 45,000 species of wild plants, 7500 species are used for medicinal purposes.



*Fig Showing Forests Density on State Wise in India*

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has been promoting a movement for 'Saving plants for saving lives'. This is because of the growing understanding of the pivotal role medicinal plants play in providing herbal remedies to health ailments. India is the home of several important traditional systems of health care like Ayurveda.

This system depends heavily on herbal products. Several millions of Indian households have been using through the ages nearly 8000 species of medicinal plants for their health care needs. Over one and half million traditional healers use a wide range of medicinal plants for treating ailments of both humans and livestock across the length and breadth of the country. Over 800 medicinal plant species are currently in use by the Indian herbal industry. However, barring some 120 species, all others are collected from the wild. This collection often involves destructing harvesting when parts like roots, bark, wood, stem and the whole plant (herb) are used. Unregulated wild harvest, alongside habitat loss and degradation is leading to resource depletion which in turn is endangering the very survival of these species. No wonder, many of these species listed in the red data book of the IUCN and the Botanical Survey of India are valued for their medicinal properties.

The tribal people of Orissa have been in the practice of preserving a rich heritage of information on medicinal plants and their usage.

These people have faith in their traditional system of health care and generally practice it. They have their own traditional physicians who use these plants as their material medica. They have rich and outstanding traditional knowledge and wisdom regarding material for healing of commonly occurring ailments. They have both the know-how and do-how for preparing the medicine and its administration. Unfortunately, this information is yet to be collected systematically and comprehensively and maintained in databases in a manner they would help in protecting their IPR.

### **Herbal History and Tradition in Indian Context:**

The Rigveda, the oldest document of human knowledge mentions the use of medicinal plants in the treatment of man and animals. Ayurveda gives the account of actual beginning of the ancient medical science of India, which according to western scholars was written between 2500 to 600 B.C. Charaka and Susruta wrote around 1000 B.C. Charaka concentrates more on medicine while Susruta deals with surgery in details along with therapeutics. After the invasion of India by the Greeks and Mohammedans successively, the Indian system of medicine came to decline and no original works were then undertaken. During and after the British rule, there were two opinions, one supporting the rich treasure of knowledge of Indian system of medicine and the other discarding it, calling it an old system based mainly on empiricism considering that this system has survived to such an extent the ravages of time, it cannot be brushed aside as "unscientific". It might be interesting to note that a large percentage, approximately 80% of the population of the world still relies on the old systems in some form or the other, and on the indigenous material medicine for human and animal treatment, due to cultural traditions and low buying capacity. When we combine this economic factor with proven efficacy, our herbal drugs stand out as the better choice for millions. History shows that many of our important pharmacopial drugs were known and were also used in some form or the other possibly long before they were introduced into the western medicine and before their actions were investigated on scientific lines.

Measures to conserve biodiversity have been taken in India since hoary past. Elements of this aspect of traditional wisdom can be gathered through analytical studies of the ethnic societies which are less influenced by the modern civilization and also by scrutinizing the ancient texts written in Sanskrit, Pali, Tamil, etc. The Vishnu Samhita is one of such scriptures in Sanskrit language. It appears that this work contains some direct instructions in connection with conservation of the bio-diversity.

According to the text of Vishnu Samhita, causing any harm to the plant(s)/animal(s) is a sin. Even purloining of part(s)/product(s) of any of these living beings is a crime. The sinner/criminal is liable to chastisement in this life and also after death. The punishment is of diverse nature :- pecuniary, corporal, expiatory and donation of specific article (s) to Brahmins. In this scripture there are some indirect instructions too, which can be gleaned by analyzing the dietary regulations and the use of bio-diversity in different religious rites.

Traditional and folklore medicine bequeathed from generation to generation is rich in domestic recipes for common ailments. Traditional medicine encompasses protection and restoration of health over millennia. The best known examples of Traditional medicine, differing in concept and protocol, are well developed systems such as acupuncture and Ayurveda treatments that have been widely used to sustain human health in India.

Developed countries, in recent times, are returning to use of herbal drugs and remedies. About 1400 herbal preparations are used widely, according to a recent survey in member states of European Union. Herbal

preparations are popular and are of significance in primary health care in Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands.

Such popularity of plant derived products has been traced to their increasing acceptance and use in the cosmetic industries as well as to increase public costs in the daily maintenance of personal health and wellbeing. Examples of such beauty oriented therapeutically are skin tissue generators, anti wrinkling agents and anti-age creams. Also among the poor, cures and drugs derived from plants constitute the main source of health care products.

Despite the increasing use of medicinal plants, their future is being threatened by complacency concerning their conservation. Reserves of herbs and stocks of medicinal plants in developing countries are diminishing several important species are in danger of extinction as a result of growing trade demands for safer and cheaper health care products and new plant based therapeutic markets in preference to more expensive targets-specific drugs and biopharmaceuticals. Such concerns have stimulated action in chronicling and conserving medicinal plants.

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