

Notes on Traditional Uses of *Khair* (*Acacia catechu* Willd.) by Inhabitants of Shivalik Range in Western Himalaya

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Abstract

The article deals with the importance of *Khair* (also known as Catechu) in the life of rural and tribal communities inhabiting Shivalik range in western Himalaya, India. Catechu, a multipurpose tree species is widely used by the inhabitants for fodder, fuel, building material and in health care. Information on traditional uses and socio-economic importance of *A. catechu* were provided with reference to natives inhabiting foot-hills of Shivalik range in western Himalaya, India.

Key words: Traditional Use, Catechu, Shivalik range, western Himalaya

Introduction

Acacia catechu Willd. (Mimosaceae), locally known as Khair, is a medium sized deciduous tree with crooked and forked trunk. It is found growing in both natural and plantation forms in most of the parts of country up to an elevation of 1300m above mean sea level.

In Himachal Pradesh, catechu is widely distributed in Mandi, Hamirpur, Kangra, Solan, Sirmaur, Una, Chamba, Shimla and Bilaspur districts below 1300 m elevation (Chowdhery and Wadhwa, 1984 and Chauhan, 1999). Generally, *A. catechu* forms pure patches of *Khair* forests but it is also found in association with *Acacia modesta*, *Pinus roxburghii*, *Mallotus phillipensis*, *Dalbergia sissoo*, *Zizyphus* and other species (Champion and Seth, 1968).

In India, there are 3 varieties of *A. catechu* namely, *Catechu*, *Catechuoides* and *Sundra*. *Catechu* is commercially used to obtain *Katha* (a concentrated filtered extract) in North India. It is found widely distributed in Jammu, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. *Catechuoides* is found in terai region of Sikkim, Assam and West Bengal, whereas *Sundra*, generally known as Lal Khair (red catechu) is found in Deccan, Gujrat, Rajasthan and southern Maharashtra (Brandis, 1984).

A. catechu is a multipurpose tree species. The heartwood of the tree is mainly used for extracting *Katha* and *Cutch* (decoction obtained after filtration) which are sold in the market. *Katha* is commonly used in ayurvedic preparations. Besides this, it serves as one of the major components in masticatory i.e. chewing of betel leaf (pan) in India.

A. catechu is a valuable bioresources and has been exploited commercially in tannin and Katha

industry for decades (Annon., 1985). Besides its commercial importance, it is equally significant for the people particularly rural communities living in the vicinity of catechu forests as it is a subsidiary source of income to them. To a certain extent, these people are dependent on this plant to fulfill their day to day need of fuel, fodder, building material and others. This is the reason that catechu has become an integral part of socio-economic and cultural life of the people inhabiting the Shivalik range.

Though, information on traditional uses of catechu has been reported earlier by some workers like Kirtikar and Basu (1975), Jain (1991), Chatterjee and Pakrashi (1992) and Singh (2000), but, information on indigenous uses of catechu tree from Shivalik region has not yet been reported. That is why the present study was undertaken.

Study Area

The present work is confined to Sirmaur and Solan districts of the state Himachal Pradesh in western Himalayan region. The area comes under Shivalik range, located at $31^{\circ}11'$ - $35^{\circ}57'$ north latitude and $76^{\circ}52'$ - $77^{\circ}20'$ east longitude between the elevation of 500m–1200m amsl.

Methodology

In order to document *Khair* associated traditional knowledge, various field surveys were conducted in *Khair* dominating forests in different localities like Nallagarh, Subathu, and Solan areas of Solan and Dhaulakuan, Poanta Sahib, Markanda and Nahan areas of Sirmaur districts. While interacting with rural and tribal people (Gujjars) during field studies, information was gathered through interviews following Jain (1989). Observations recorded on different traditional use are enumerated categorically and the lesser known uses are marked with an asterisk (*) mark.

Traditional Use

Medicine

- The decoction of bark mixed with milk is taken to cure cold and cough.
- The bark decoction is either alone or used in combination with opium to cure severe diarrhea.
- *Katha* after drying is applied on lemon slice and taken regularly with empty stomach to cure piles*.
- Heartwood of khair is boiled with other ingredients to prepare the decoction. It is taken as tea by the pregnant ladies to keep warm their body. It is also given to cure fever due to cold during the pregnancy*.
- A decoction is served to women after 2-3 days of child delivery, prepared by boiling *katha* along with Ellachi (cardamom). It is believed that it provides strength to the body* and also helps in secretion of milk.
- The water boiled with the heartwood chips of *Khair*, is used to take bath by women after delivery. It is considered beneficial to cure the body pains*.
- *Katha* or decoction of heartwood is applied in mouth and on tongue to cure mouth ulcer*. It is also applied externally on ulcers, boils, skin eruptions and on gums as disinfectant.

Fuel

- The dried logs, twigs and branches are largely used as fuel.

Fodder

- The trees are lopped heavily for their leaves used as fodder particularly for sheep and goats.

Building and Furniture Material

- The wood is considered durable and widely used by the inhabitants for house building material as poles and to prepare furniture like bed poles, tables etc.

House Hold Articles

- Wood of khair is preferred to prepare various parts of local plough, handles of axe, saw, sickle, hammer, spade and combs.

Socio-Religious Beliefs

- Khair is considered one of the sacred trees by the natives and wood is used in the religious ceremonies at the time of havans (yagna)*.
- Wood is considered sacred and used as one of the religious plants along with bhojpatra (*Betula utilis*) at the funeral ceremony. It is believed to provide *mukti* or *moksha* (peace to the heavenly soul)*.

Masticatory

- ***Katha*** (cutch) is widely used as a major ingredient in masticatory i.e. chewing of betel leaf (pan) by local people.

Fencing

- Cut branches are extensively used for fencing purpose by the farmers to protect agricultural fields and local grasslands from domestic livestock and wild animals.

Tanning

- The cutch is used locally for tanning leather and as dye to a great extent*.

Economic Importance

Besides traditional utility, *A. catechu* is widely utilized commercially for extracting **Katha** from the heart wood which costs around US \$ 4-6 per kilogram in Indian markets. Cutch is used as adhesive in plywood industry and it is also used in preparing polishes and paints.

Conclusion

From the present study, it is envisaged that *A. catechu* has a great socio-economic importance as it is widely used for different purposes by the natives of Shivalik range. Besides, traditional and commercial importance, it has tremendous ecological significance. Because of its leguminous nature and soil binding abilities, it could be a suitable species for wasteland development.

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