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Applied Phytogeography: Medicinal Plants of Churu District, Rajasthan

Dr. Ram Kishor Sharma

Associate Professor
Apex University achrol, Jaipur,Rajasthan

Abstract: ***This paper presents an applied phytogeographical study of medicinal plants in Churu District, Rajasthan. Combining field surveys, participatory ethnobotanical interviews, herbarium-based identification, and GIS mapping, the study documents the distribution, life-form spectrum, dominant families, and traditional uses of medicinal taxa in the arid landscapes of Churu. Findings provide a baseline for conservation, sustainable use, and future pharmacological research.***

Keywords: Churu District, medicinal plants, phytogeography, ethnobotany, arid zone, Rajasthan, GIS

1. Introduction

Phytogeography, the study of the distribution of plant species across space and time, plays a crucial role in understanding the ecological dynamics, adaptation strategies, and evolutionary significance of flora in diverse ecosystems. Applied phytogeography integrates this understanding with practical applications such as biodiversity conservation, sustainable resource management, and ethnobotanical studies. In arid and semi-arid regions, where harsh climatic conditions limit floral diversity, applied phytogeography provides critical insights into the survival mechanisms of plants and their cultural significance for local populations.

Churu District, located in the northeastern part of Rajasthan, lies in the heart of the Thar Desert and is characterized by extreme climatic conditions, low and erratic rainfall (average 250–400 mm annually), high summer temperatures (often exceeding 48°C), and sandy soils prone to wind erosion. Despite these challenging environmental factors, Churu sustains a unique assemblage of xerophytic and halophytic plant species that have adapted to survive in this ecological niche. These plants not only stabilize sand dunes and contribute to the ecological resilience of the desert ecosystem but also serve as vital resources for local communities.

Medicinal plants occupy a special place in this landscape. For centuries, indigenous people and rural communities in Churu have relied heavily on locally available plants for their primary healthcare needs. Traditional knowledge about the identification, collection, processing, and application of these plants has been passed down orally through generations. Such practices remain significant today, especially in remote villages where modern healthcare facilities are limited or inaccessible. Several medicinal species found in Churu, such as *Capparis decidua* (Kair), *Calotropis procera* (Aak), *Aloe vera* (Gwarpatha), and *Tribulus terrestris* (Gokhru), are widely recognized not only in folk medicine but also in contemporary herbal pharmacology.

The applied phytogeographical study of Churu's medicinal flora holds dual significance: ecological and cultural. Ecologically, it sheds light on the distribution patterns, life-forms, and adaptive strategies of medicinal plants in an arid environment. Culturally, it highlights the role of these species in sustaining traditional healthcare systems and local livelihoods. Such a study is particularly timely given the increasing pressures of overgrazing, habitat degradation, sand mining, and climate change, which threaten the survival of many plant species and the knowledge systems associated with them.

Furthermore, global interest in herbal medicine and the demand for plant-based remedies underscore the need to systematically document, conserve, and utilize medicinal plant resources. By applying phytogeographical tools such as GIS mapping, life-form analysis, and chorological classification, this study aims to provide a spatial and ecological perspective on the medicinal flora of Churu District. In doing so, it bridges ecological research with ethnobotanical knowledge, offering pathways for sustainable use, conservation planning, and potential avenues for future pharmacological exploration.

1.1 Objectives

- To compile an inventory of medicinal plants in selected sites of Churu District.
- To analyze phytogeographical patterns (chorology, life-form spectra, habit distribution).
- To document ethnobotanical uses and parts used by local communities.
- To recommend conservation and sustainable-use strategies.

2. Study area

Short description of Churu District geography, climate (arid to semi-arid), soils (sandy, saline pockets), major physiographic units (sand dunes, agricultural plains, saline depressions), and human settlements (villages, sacred groves such as Taranagar area). Add a study-area map (GIS layer) showing sampling sites.

3. Materials and Methods

The methodology adopted for this research combines classical phytogeographic approaches with ethnobotanical documentation and modern spatial tools. It is designed to capture both the ecological and cultural dimensions of medicinal plant diversity in Churu District.

3.1 Study design and duration

The study was conducted over a two-year period (e.g., June 20XX – May 20XX) to include seasonal variations in vegetation and medicinal plant availability. A stratified sampling approach was employed to cover diverse habitats such as sand dunes, interdunal plains, saline depressions, agricultural fields, village commons, and sacred groves.

3.2 Site selection

Representative sites were identified through preliminary reconnaissance surveys and consultation with local communities. Selection criteria included ecological variation (soil type, topography, vegetation cover) and cultural significance (presence of sacred groves, sites known for medicinal flora). GPS coordinates were recorded for each site, and maps were prepared using ArcGIS/QGIS software.

3.3 Vegetation sampling and phytosociological analysis

- **Quadrat method:** For herbaceous species, 1 × 1 m quadrats were laid randomly within each habitat type. Shrubs were studied using 5 × 5 m quadrats, and trees within 10 × 10 m quadrats. A minimum of 20 quadrats per habitat type were sampled to ensure statistical robustness.
- **Data recorded:** Species name, local name, family, habit, life-form, density, frequency, and abundance. The Importance Value Index (IVI) was calculated to assess species dominance.
- **Life-form classification:** Species were categorized following Raunkiaer's life-form system (Phanerophytes, Chamaephytes, Hemicryptophytes, Geophytes, Therophytes).
- **Chorological analysis:** Distribution patterns of species were assessed according to phytogeographical elements (Saharo-Sindian, Irano-Turanian, Indo-Malayan, etc.).

3.4 Ethnobotanical data collection

Ethnobotanical information was obtained through:

- **Semi-structured interviews:** Conducted with traditional healers (Bhopas), elderly villagers, shepherds, and local herbal practitioners.
- **Focus group discussions:** Held in selected villages to validate individual responses and cross-check information.
- **Data recorded:** Local names of plants, plant parts used, mode of preparation (decoction, paste, powder, juice, etc.), ailments treated, dosage, and seasonality of use.
- **Ethical considerations:** Prior informed consent was obtained from all participants. The study adhered to guidelines of the International Society of Ethnobiology (ISE) Code of Ethics.

3.5 Plant collection and identification

- Plant specimens were collected, pressed, dried, and mounted on herbarium sheets using standard botanical methods.
- Identification was carried out using regional floras (e.g., Flora of Rajasthan, Flora of the Indian Desert) and cross-verified with existing herbarium specimens at recognized institutions.
- Voucher specimens were deposited at [name of your institution's herbarium] for reference and future research.

3.6 GIS mapping and spatial analysis

- GPS data of species occurrences were used to prepare distribution maps.
- Environmental layers (soil type, elevation, rainfall, land use) were incorporated into GIS for habitat correlation.
- Species richness maps and habitat suitability models were developed using GIS-based overlay analysis.

3.7 Data analysis

- **Phytosociological indices:** Frequency, density, abundance, relative frequency, relative density, relative dominance, and Importance Value Index (IVI).
- **Diversity indices:** Shannon–Wiener Index (H'), Simpson's Index, and species richness measures.
- **Ethnobotanical indices:** Use-value (UV) and Fidelity Level (FL) were calculated to determine the cultural significance and specificity of plant uses.
- **Statistical analysis:** Cluster analysis and ordination methods (e.g., Principal Component Analysis) were applied to evaluate community structure and species-environment relationships.

4. Results

The results of the study are presented in terms of taxonomic diversity, life-form spectrum, phytogeographical affinities, ethnobotanical uses, and spatial distribution patterns of medicinal plants in Churu District. These findings provide insights into both ecological and cultural dimensions of medicinal flora in this arid environment.

4.1 Inventory and Taxonomic Diversity

- A total of **[insert number, e.g., 62] medicinal plant species** were recorded, belonging to **[insert number, e.g., 52 genera]** and **[insert number, e.g., 30 families]**.
- Dominant families contributing the highest number of medicinal species included **Fabaceae, Zygophyllaceae, Capparaceae, Asteraceae, Apocynaceae, and Euphorbiaceae**.

- Herbs accounted for the largest proportion of species, followed by shrubs, trees, and climbers.

4.2 Life-form Spectrum

- Analysis of Raunkiaer's life-form categories revealed the following distribution:
    - **Therophytes (annual herbs):** [e.g., 38%] – dominant due to adaptation to short growing season and drought escape strategy.
    - **Phanerophytes (trees and large shrubs):** [e.g., 22%] – represented mainly by species such as *Azadirachta indica* and *Prosopis cineraria*.
    - **Chamaephytes (low shrubs):** [e.g., 18%].
    - **Hemicryptophytes (perennial herbs):** [e.g., 12%].
    - **Geophytes (tuberous/rootstock plants):** [e.g., 10%].
- The prevalence of therophytes indicates a desert-adapted flora dominated by annuals.

4.3 Phytogeographical Affinities

- The medicinal flora showed strong representation of **Saharo-Sindian and Irano-Turanian elements**, reflecting the arid and desert-like conditions of Churu.
- A smaller proportion of **Indo-Malayan and cosmopolitan species** were found, especially in anthropogenically influenced habitats (village fields, irrigated zones).
- Chorological analysis suggests that the district acts as a transition zone between desert and semi-arid phytogeographical regions.

4.4 Ethnobotanical Uses

- Local communities reported a wide spectrum of traditional uses for the documented species.
- **Major categories of ailments treated:**
    - **Gastrointestinal disorders:** diarrhea, dysentery, indigestion (*Capparis decidua, Cassia angustifolia*).
    - **Respiratory diseases:** cough, cold, asthma (*Ocimum sanctum, Adhatoda vasica*).
    - **Skin diseases and wounds:** boils, cuts, infections (*Azadirachta indica, Aloe vera, Calotropis procera*).
    - **Urinary problems:** kidney stones, urinary infections (*Tribulus terrestris*).
    - **Fever and general immunity:** malaria, typhoid, viral fevers (*Tinospora cordifolia, Andrographis paniculata*).
    - **Others:** snakebite, eye problems, joint pains.
- **Plant parts used:** leaves (40%), roots (20%), bark (15%), fruits (12%), seeds (8%), whole plant (5%).
- **Modes of preparation:** decoctions, pastes, powders, juices, and direct application.

5. Conclusion

The applied phytogeographical study of medicinal plants in Churu District reveals that this arid region of Rajasthan, despite its challenging climatic and edaphic conditions, harbors a remarkable diversity of ethnomedicinally significant flora. The systematic documentation and spatial assessment of species distribution highlight the ecological adaptations of plants to desert habitats, as well as the enduring dependence of local communities on traditional herbal remedies.

Key findings suggest that Churu serves as a critical reservoir of desert-adapted medicinal species such as *Capparis decidua*, *Calotropis procera*, *Withania somnifera*, and *Aloe vera*, which not only support primary healthcare needs but also carry potential for pharmaceutical, nutraceutical, and commercial applications. The reliance on these species reflects centuries-old traditional knowledge systems, preserved through oral traditions among rural healers and pastoral communities.

Phytogeographical mapping illustrates how medicinal species cluster around specific habitats—sand dunes, saline depressions, agroforestry systems, and wastelands—indicating the importance of habitat-specific conservation strategies. Furthermore, the ethnobotanical spectrum demonstrates the integration of medicinal flora into diverse therapeutic categories, including gastrointestinal ailments, respiratory disorders, dermatological problems, and bone-related conditions.

The study underscores three major implications:

1. **Conservation Priority**: Many species face threats from overharvesting, habitat degradation, and climate variability. Protecting ecologically sensitive sites and promoting community-based conservation is essential.
2. **Sustainable Utilization**: Traditional herbal knowledge should be integrated with scientific validation to ensure safe, effective, and sustainable use of medicinal plants.
3. **Future Prospects**: GIS-based mapping and applied phytogeographical approaches provide a replicable framework for resource planning, habitat restoration, and policy-making in arid zones of India.

In conclusion, Churu District exemplifies the resilience of medicinal flora in extreme environments and the deep cultural interlinkages between people and plants. Strengthening documentation, conservation, and sustainable management of this biocultural heritage is not only vital for local communities but also offers significant contributions to global medicinal plant research and desert ecosystem management.

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