

Leafy and Edible Plants of North-East India



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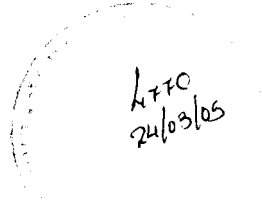


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Introduction

Man's need and his compulsory obsession to collect things have taken a heavy toll of the biodiversity. So long the interest accruing from the natural resource capital is utilised there is no danger of species loss. However, unmindful of the long large consequences of over exploitation man has been cause of irretrievable loss of species.

In the North East region of India which vavilov (1926) recognised as a primary centre of origin of 152 species of cultivated plants, several groups of tribals are still practising a life style which enables them to utilize plants as vegetables, medicines and other economic uses without causing destruction to the valuable species. In other words certain plants are considered culturally so valuable that they have been conserved till today.

A visit to biggest "Asian women's market in Manipur" will dazzle any individual with variety of leafy vegetables sold in the market. These leafy vegetables are not only cultivated but also collected from the forests without causing harm to the species and are utilized both by tribal and non-tribal inhabitants. Many of these vegetables are regarded as great delicacies by the local inhabitants.

Many of these vegetables are not known in other parts of the country. Arora (1981) listed more than 300 plant species out of the Native flora which are used as edible ones. Out of these more than 25 species provide tubers and rhizomes which are eaten either raw or boiled and other 50 species provide leaves and tender shoots which are used as vegetable others are edible fruits.

People in remote areas of the region depend upon the rich variety of these locally available edible plant resources. This has not only provided them with necessary food but also maintained their health. It will be seldom that a tribal will be found suffering from nutritional deficiency diseases. The bounties of nature, however, must be utilized carefully and care be taken to conserve them. The North Eastern region of the country still has good forest cover but the man in its greed is destroying precious forest wealth for selfish ends. And as a result of indiscriminate use the useful plants are getting extinct.

It has been suggested that there is need to preserve and also take up comparative studies of plant parts used by various tribal groups, I.B.P.G.R.I., New Delhi in their numerous reports have emphasised cataloguing and searching of less known resources of food still unknown with the objective of bringing them in cultivation for wide consumption. However, no systematic work has been undertaken by any of the Government agencies such as BSI, NBPGR, CRIR, U.G.C. or universities due to lack of communication, inhospitable terrain and conditions of insurgency. This, therefore, has lead to neglect of these useful plants. Recently a number of research papers have been published on the subject: Reference may be made to Gupta, Arora, Dam, Hajra, Kharkonger, Borthakur, and Joseph and also Rao, Dam and Hajra, Rao and Shanpru, Hajra and Baishva (ef. Glimpses of Indian Ethnobotany Edited by S.K. Jain, 1981).

The ethno-botanical aspect is very important in preservation and consevation of useful plants. The tribals which constitute a large percentage of population of the region have been utilizing plants not only for food and medicine but also for religious ceremonies. The inhabitant have been taking care that all plants needed by them are properly preserved and their needs are always met. This has unconsciously resulted in preservation of the plants and environment.

The use of these plants in confined to the limited local area. These are neither known nor available in mainland. This deprives the country from tasting and utilising these delicacies. The excess produced remain unutilized and wasted. If these plants could be grown on large scale and supplied to mainland then the tribals could earn more money which will give them a better quality of life and the people of mainland will have new variety of vegetables on theri table.

Since no detailed study has been doneon these plants. It is possible that these uncommon traditoonal leafy and edible plants may be come useful raw material for pharmaceutical and cosmetic industry in addition to their in food preservation industry. Large quantity of p-reserved bamboo shoots are exported. In the same manner other vegetable could be preserved and marketed both in India and abroad.

The present compendium has been prepared with a view to catalogue the existing material available. This may be helpful in conservation of these valuable plants and the information may also be useful to other of science as well as industry since no systematic work has been done on these aspects.

It was therefore necessary that a detailed study be taken up of regions rich in endemic species which forms a "getaway" for numerous alien species. Further the presence of large number of primitive flowering plants makes N.E. India "the cradle of flowering plants (Rao, 1993).

The information presented in this publication will provide new sources of food and food products. Some of the species may be wild progenitors of modern vegetables and may have genes for resistance to diseases, pests and stress condition. The information presented here will help in cultivation and conservation of rare and uncommon vegetable and edible plants of N.E. Region of the country resulting in greater economic benefit to the area.