PLANTAIN OR EDIBLE BANANA (MUSA X PARADISICA VAR – SAPIENTUM) SOME LESSER KNOWN FOLK USES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT: Plantain Or edible banana (Musa X paradisiacal var. Sapientum), an important commercial fruit item of the tropics, is known in India since time immemorial. Apart from its use as a valuable food item, banana fruits and the different part of plant find diverse uses in various folk practices, customs, religious rituals and medicine among the villagers and tribal communities of the country which are oral in tradition. A study conducted on various medicinal applications of banana has shown that they are very effective and can be used by all as simple and safe home remedy for treating a number of common ailments which are reported here.

INTRODUCTION:

Plantain or edible banana (Musa X paradisiacal var. sapientum L. Family Musaceae) is one of the most important commercial fruits of the tropics. It is a cheap and energy rich delicacy relished by both rich and poor alike. Known since antiquity, banana occupies an important place among Indian fruits and find diverse uses in food, medicine, religious rituals, customs and festivals. It forms the staple food for man villagers and tribals of eastern and southern India. The primitive tribals living in the Western Ghats are known to subsist mainly on the wild bananas of the forests. Banana is generally consumed as a dessert or cooked as vegetable or made into various confections. In addition to these uses of banana as a highly nourishing delicacy, banana fruits as well as various other parts of banana tree find diverse uses in medicine, fibre making, religious rituals etc., Of these varied uses many are lesser known and are practiced only by certain villagers or tribals who follow mostly oral traditions. Such rare or lesser known, but age old uses of banana like many other age old oral traditions and practices are fast changing life style and civilization of people. It was in this context and against this background that the authors have attempted to record some lesser known /rare uses of banana in different parts of the country.

Materials and methods

Much of the information regarding the lesser known medicinal and other uses of banana are gathered from the various ethnobotanical tours conducted by the authors as well as from the observations and experience of the senior author during his various visits to different parts of India. Folk-lore survey was conducted in many villages and tribal areas of the country. Many elderly and knowledgeable persons of villages and tribal areas were interviewed and only authentic informations on various medicinal uses of banana. Some effective medicinal applications of banana leaves, stem and fruits for treating some stomach troubles like diarrhoea, dysentery, flatulence etc., were witnessed by the authors. The senior author had successfully tested some of these medicinal applications of banana in treating some common ailments.
especially stomach disorders. Information on
ancient literature were gathered from different
travelogues, old gazetteers and similar
publications.

USE OF BANANA IN ANCIENT INDIA

India being considered as one of the centres of
origin of Banana, the ancient Indians were
acquainted with this fruit from antiquity. There
are references of this fruit in “Rigveda” and the
great epics “Ramayana” and “Mahabharatha”.
Ancient Roman writers like Pliny referred this
fruit as “Pala”. Which perhaps derived from the
word “Palam”, the vernacular name of banana
fruit in south Indian states like Kerala, Madras
and Karnataka, where this plant is found both in
cultivated and wild forms. Alexander the Great
and his men while camping in India (BC 326)
were reported to have observed the Hindu sages
living on banana fruit alone and sleeping under
the shade of trees and called banana as the fruit
of the wise. The botanical name of banana is
Musa sapientum (means: food of the wise) is
perhaps owes to this story. The vernacular name
for the banana plant is “Vazha” in Tamil,
Malayalam and Kannada. Dutch and portughese
who reached the western coasts of India near
Cannanmoor in the 18th century reported the
poplar use of banana by the local inhabitants as a
staple food and called it as “Fig of Cannanmoor”.
Ancient Egyptians and Assyrians were known to
have been familiar with bananas. Egyptian
believed that when bananas were offered by the
messengers of Death to Dead persons, the late
never returned to this world but processed
straight into spirit land and therefore, called
banana fruit as “fig of paradise”. The name
Musa paradisica (Means food of the paradise
spirit land) probably owes to this belief.

BANANA IN INDIAN CUSTOMS,
CEREMONIES & RITUALS

Being known to Indians from time immemorial,
bana, occupies a unique position in many
religious rituals, customs and ceremonies. The
banana tree laden with fruiting bunch are placed
at the entrance houses and temples on special
religious functions and ceremonies like
marriages, to signify plenty and fertility. In
south India banana fruits and other parts of the
banana tree find diverse uses in different
religious rituals and worship. It is a common
practice by Hindus to include fried paddy, sugar
candy or jaggary, tender coconuts and banana
fruits served in a freshly cut banana leaf tip,
known locally as “Dooshan Ila”. After the pooja
again the “Prasad” after the pooja is over for
distribution among the devotees) is to be
distributed in banana leaf plates, Most of the
temples in south India use banana leaves as
plates for keeping flowers and other offerings
meant for pooja. The priests of temples of
kerala and parts of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka
are particular in using the thread made from
banana leaf sheath fibres for making flower
garlands meant for deities. The villagers of
Kerala and parts of North Karnataka region use
banana tree as live refrigerators. The fresh betel
leaves, leafy vegetables, small fruits etc,, are
kept between the banana leaf sheath of live
banana plant. The articles thus kept remain
fresh for over months. It is a time honoured
tradition in Kerala to serve food only in banana
leaves during religious and other ceremonial
feasts, Banana, in general is considered as an
ambrosia and is the fruit of choice for offering to
God, Goddesses and to saintly persons in all
over the country.

Unripe banana fruits are used as vegetable in
Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, Bihar,
Assam and Bengal.

Ripe banana fruits from one of the major
ingredients of a special sweet preparation called
“Panchamrutham” (means the five divine
sweets) and “Thrimadhouram” (the three divine
sweets), the traditional offerings given to deities in temples in south India. The recipe of “Panchamruthum” contains 1 kg ripe banana pulp to which added 1 kg cow’s milk, 500 gm pure honey, 200 gm pure ghee and 500 gm sugar candy. These ingredients are then beaten well to make a pulpy mixture. The ‘Trimadhuram’ is prepared by mixing 4:2:2 quantity by weight of ripe banana fruit pulp jaggary and ghee. “Panchamruthum” is considered to be an elixir of health “Palapradhaman” another important sweet preparation very commonly made in Kerala villages during festival occasions is pudding made out of ripe banana, rice, jaggary and coconut meat.

THE BANANA TREE

Banana or plantain, botanically known as Musa x paradisica syn. N. x sapientum (Wealth of India Raw Materials, Vol. VI. 1962) is a perennial tree like tropical herb belonging to the family Musaceae. The cylindrical stem like portion (pseudostem) of the plant is formed from the long convolute leaf sheaths and the real stem portion is the underground tuberous rhizome. The fruited banana tree stem has a tender inner core portion which in fact, is the stalk of the inflorescence.

A number of cultivated varieties occur in India of which many are indigenous and find endemic to certain particular regions. The cultivated varieties of banana are believed to be hybrid in origin form the purative parents, M. acuminate and M. balbisiana, both still grown wild in Assam, Bihar and Western ghats forests, India is considered to be one of the centres of origin of banana. The other centres of origin of banana are Burma, Malaya and Indo-china.

LESSER KNOWN USES OF BANANA IN MEDICINE AND OTHER PURPOSES

Banana is described to have many medicinal properties in Ayurveda and it is recommended as antiscorbutic, mild demulcent, astringent diet in case of diarrhoea and chronic dysentery. Banana is also used in traditional medicine to treat ulcerative colitis, coelic diseases, sprue, diabetes, uremia, nephritis, gout, hypertension and cardiac diseases (Mali et al. 1984). In addition to these recorded uses, there are many other lesser – known uses of banana which are being practiced by villagers and tribals in their folk medicines. The information gathered from different regions are given below.

Roots and Rhizomes

A fresh extract of the roots and rhizome of the ‘Nendran’ or “Monthan’ variety of banana (found in Kerala) is given internally and few drops dropped into the vagina to induce abortion by the traditional midwives of kerala. The extract of the roots of “Kadali” (another local variety of banana found in kerala) is said to be very effective in treating various menstrual disorder and venereal diseases. Fresh extract of root and rhizome diluted with warm water to which little common salt I added and used for mouth wash or gargled for few minutes twice daily for a week is said to cure pyorrhea and set right the loosened gums of the tooth.

The villagers of Karnataka and Maharahtra use the extract of the banana rhizome to treat piles, the extract is applied locally and given internally on empty stomach for 5 days to treat piles. It is also given internally (1 ounce in 3 split doses of 1 hr. interval) to treat food poisoning.

The villagers and hill communities of Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Poonch use the powder of dried banana rhizome and root to treat diabetes. The powder (1 gm) is given internally in hot-water or goat’s milk once daily for 10 days. The liquid pressed from the banana pith is given to drink after 1 hr of the administration of powder.
Leaf, Leaf sheath and stem

The leaves are used by the tribal communities of the western ghats for bandaging cuts, blisters and ulcers, the villagers of South India, Bihar, Orissa etc., use tender leaves for a cool and soothing dressing of blisters and burns. The leaf smeared with coconut oil is used for dressing the blisters. The dressing is sometimes bandaged again with dry banana leaf sheath. This dressing gives a pleasant soothing sensation and the blisters are reported to be healed within 4 or 5 days. The leaf sheath and leaves are burned and the ash dissolved in water is given to patients suffering from acidity, indigestion and flatulence, this alkaline solution made from the ash of banana leaf sheath or stalk is used as salt for seasoning curries by the tribals and hill communities of eastern India and even by some poor villagers of W. Bengal, Kerala and Bihar at times when there is scarcity of common salt. A strong alkaline solution made from the ash is also used by villagers for cleaning copper and bronze vessels.

The villager and hill people of Jammu bandage the stomach with tender banana leaves smeared with mustard oil to get relief from loose motion.

The tribals of Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland use a piece of fresh banana leaves as a cool and pleasant shade to eyes in various eye infections.

The villagers of Karnataka, coastal Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Orissa administer the juice of the banana leaf sheath to patients who spit blood or have nasal bleeding (epistaxis) and to cure symptoms of heat or sun stroke.

The “Vaidyas” (the traditional village physicians of Kerala) use banana for treating a number of ailments. For treating psoriasis, the fresh leaf sheath crushed well and the juice obtained is applied liberally on the body in the early morning for 1 hr. for two weeks continuously.

About 100gm or 150 gm raw banana stem pith (the tender inner portion or core of fruited banana) is also given to eat on an empty stomach followed by a spice free diet involving preparations of raw fruits and stem pith.

The banana stem pith of a local variety of banana, namely “Njali poovan” is considered by the local physicians of Travancore as a good diuretic to cleanse the kidney and to dissolve kidney stones. The raw pith is given to eat. The juice pressed from the pith is given liberally to treat persons bitten by poisonous snakes.

The village physicians of South Tamil Nadu region use the extracts/pressed juice of banana leaf sheath and stem pith to treat persons bitten by poisonous snake. The pressed juice of the banana leaf sheath is applied all over the body and the juice of banana stem pith is given to drink liberally-1/2 litre at every ½ hr. the juice is also dropped continuously on the bitten portion for 7 hrs.

Fruits

Banana fruit is considered to be the stomach conditioner and is recommended for all those having a delicate stomach.

The villagers of Karnataka, Northern Kerala and North West Tamil Nadu use raw banana fruit in treating blood dysentery. The raw fruit is buried in red hot ash and when the skin becomes nearly black it is peeled off and the pulp is given along with butter milk.

Ripe banana fruit is a very nourishing fruit item consumed by everybody in all seasons. Ripe banana fruit is used as medicine also for various ailments of the body by various tribals/ villagers in different parts of India.

It is a common practice in many parts of the country to use ripe banana fruit as a carrier of
bitter or unpalatable drugs. Bitter medicines are buried in the pulp and then swallowed.

Ripe fruits of a local variety, “Poovan” of Kerala is considered to be aphrodisiac and age stabilizer when taken with milk and honey. The ripe fruits of another variety ‘Rasathali’, found in Mysore and Kerala is used by the locals for treating various sexual disorders. When taken along with milk it is considered to be an aphrodisiac. The fruit is peeled off and cut into small pieces. Small cavities are invised in these pieces and a small pellet of the size of Bengal gram of calcium hydroxide is placed in this cavity and then closed with another cut piece of the fruit. This is then swallowed by woman having menstrual disorders like early mensus, excessive menstrual bleeding and to get relief from associated pain and discomfort. This remedy is particularly reported to be effective to treat the painful and excessive menstrual bleeding small pieces. Small cavities are incised in these pieces and a small pellet of the size of Bengal gram of calcium hydroxide is placed in this cavity and then closed with another cut piece of the fruit. This is then swallowed by woman having menstrual disorders like early mensus, excessive menstrual bleeding and to get relief from associated pain and discomfort. This remedy is particularly reported to be effective to treat the painful and excessive menstrual bleeding associated with the onset of menopause, for local application (smearing the vagina), the juice of flowers and leaf sheath (1:2) of the same variety of banana is used in menstrual disorder or malfunctions.

The villagers of Kerala and Karnataka prepare the following recipe as an effective remedy for severe diarrhoea, dysentery ad associated pain and discomforts. The recipe is made by grounding one ripe banana into pulp which is then mixed well with ½ ounce tamarind pulp, 1/2 once common salt and 1 teaspoon full of the ash made from the banana leaf stalk. The banana fruit of the local variety ‘Palayankodan’ is considered to be more effective in this preparation.

The villagers of Kurukshetra district (Haryana) effectively treat dysentery with a preparation of banana fruit with 50gm. opium is administered orally with cow’s milk.

‘Kadali’, a small variety of banana found in Kerala is accredited with special medicinal powers. The ripe fruits of this banana is a choice item for special offerings to deities and used in various magical remedies, exoricising to ward-off evil spirits etc., by the local tribals and village witch –doctors. The ripe fruits after incantation are given to cure patients suffering from mental disorders and skin diseases. The fruit of ‘Kadali’ variety is made to be bitten by an angry cobra-snake and this poisoned fruit is given to cure leprosy patients.

**NEED FOR CONSERVATION OF THE RARE ENDEMIC VARIETIES OF BANANA AND ITS FOLK-LORE USES**

From the above study we find that the medicinal properties claimed for banana plants are mostly belonging to the local varieties cultivated, wild or semi-wild found in Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa etc., Until few years back it was a common sight to see most of the village houses and tribal dwellings maintaining, growes of different local varieties of banana. But with the introduction of the high yielding varieties of bananas, these endemic varieties are becoming rare and if immediate steps are not taken to preserve/conserve the rare banana varieties there is every possibility of their extinction along with its old time tested folk uses.
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