Alleviation of zinc induced oxidative stress by polyamines in Plantago ovata Forsk

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Research Article

Keywords: Metallothionein, Putrescine, Spermidine, Spermine, Zinc, Oxidative stress

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-335842/v1

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Abstract

Zinc causes toxicity to the plants in an excess concentration and it is manifested by chlorosis, rolling of leaf margins, and disruption of membrane integrity. The heavy metal stress also triggers the stimulation of enzymatic and non-enzymatic antioxidant systems. Polyamines are naturally occurring, secondary metabolites, protecting plants from heavy metal-induced stress. Plants also up-regulate the mRNA expression of *Metallothionein* in response to heavy metal-induced oxidative stress.

The alteration in *Metallothionein* type 2 (PoMT2) expression of a medicinally important herb *Plantago ovata* in presence of polyamines like Putrescine, Spermidine, and Spermine in addition to ZnSO\(_4\).H\(_2\)O by the semi-quantitative and the quantitative methods have been demonstrated in the present study. We have observed reductions in the expression of the *Metallothionein* type 2 gene in the presence of the aforementioned polyamines which implies their protective and antioxidant properties to fight against the zinc induced stress.

1 mM Put has been more efficient in increasing the total chlorophyll content (compared to 2 mM Put) by about 36% each in 1000 µM ZnSO\(_4\) treated *P. ovata* seedlings. Spermidine also enhanced chlorophyll content. 2 mM Put and 0.5 mM Spm have shown even better efficiencies in increasing the total antioxidant and DPPH radical scavenging activities.

The lipid peroxidation has been found to decrease in Put and Spm supplemented samples by up to about 47% in both cases. Significant reductions in lipid peroxidation and down-regulation of PoMT2 gene expression indicate the roles of polyamines in partially alleviating Zn-induced oxidative damage.

Introduction

Abiotic stresses are deemed responsible for the reduction in global crop yield which may account for as high as 70% reductions (Liu et al. 2015; Rouphael et al. 2016; Singh et al. 2016). Among the various abiotic stresses, heavy metals are enlisted as the priority pollutants by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (Morkunas et al. 2018). Heavy metals are classified as essential and non-essential. Non-essential heavy metals like Pb, Cr, Cd, Hg, and As are toxic even at low concentrations.

Essential heavy metals (Cu, Zn, Fe, etc.), are required by plants for cellular metabolic and physiological processes. However, zinc, like other essential heavy metals, causes severe oxidative stress, senescence and is detrimental in an excessive concentration in plants (Sunitha et al. 2014; Feigl et al. 2015). Heavy metals cause oxidative damage by producing Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS) and free radicals in plants. In a study made by our group in *Plantago ovata*, the manifestation of Zn stress is indicated by the stunted growth, chlorosis, reduced chlorophyll, and carotenoid content, and increased lipid peroxidation (Pramanick et al. 2017).

However, plants have adapted various strategies to acclimatize and combat these inclement conditions. Polyamines are the secondary metabolites produced by all plants in response to oxidative stress which
includes heavy metal-induced stress. Polyamines being polycationic compounds, bind to the negatively charged phospholipids, and proteins of the membrane and thus protect them from losing structural integrity (Calzadilla et al. 2014).

The three most abundant polyamines in plants are Putrescine (Put), Spermidine (Spd), and Spermine (Spm). They have specific functions to perform. Putrescine is known to play a vital role in response to abiotic stress, and maintains the water status of a leaf during drought stress by increasing the proline content (Pál et al. 2015). According to some reports, the levels of Put could be restored only with the exogenous supplementation of Put (Takahashi and Kakehi 2010; Pál et al. 2015). Putrescine aids in stress tolerance by activating the antioxidant system, regulating abscisic acid, and activating Flavonoid synthesis by inducing Phenylalanine ammonia lyase (Takahashi and Kakehi 2010). Spermidine is known to function in plant growth, and development. Mutations of Spermidine synthases result in defective embryo development in the heart stage of Arabidopsis (Imai et al. 2004). Spermine has a varied role in mitigating oxidative stress. It is known to combat the oxidative stress caused due to free radical generation and scavenges the same in the nucleus.

Lovaas (1997) reported that polyamines are known to form complexes with metal cations like Cu$^{2+}$, Co$^{2+}$, Zn$^{2+}$, and Ni$^{2+}$ and are also able to inhibit metal-catalyzed oxidations or prevent singlet oxygen ($^{1}$O$_{2}$) or hydroxyl (·OH) radical formation. The chelation and metal-polyamine-complex formations are directly proportional to the number of nitrogen-groups present in the polyamine and also the polyamine chain length (Lovaas 1997). Lomozik and Wojciechowska (1989) reported that Put forms a seven-membered chelate ring structure with Cu$^{2+}$. This Put-Cu$^{2+}$ chelate is not thermodynamically very stable. The higher polyamines like Spm and Spd form metal-complexes much easily than Put given the higher nitrogen content in them. Spm is also known to form a similar seven-membered chelate ring (Lomozik and Wojciechowska, 1989).

The precise role of polyamines in ameliorating heavy metal-induced stress may also be traced back to its function in inducing elevated levels of glutathione (GSH) in plants and subsequent production and accumulation of Phytochelatins both of which are potent metal chelators (Hasanuzzaman et al. 2019).

Sengupta et al., (2013) has reported that high doses (50 Gy and 100 Gy) of gamma radiation on imbibed seeds of Vigna radiata resulted in the production of high levels of endogenous polyamine.

When it comes to heavy metal stress in plants, the first two molecular entities that happen to come in our mind are Metallothioneins and Phytochelatins, because of their metal-chelating and detoxification properties (Cobbett and Goldsbrough, 2002). Plants undergo hormesis in response to oxidative stress. Metallothionein (stress-responsive protein) biosynthesis is one such hormental activity (Morkunas et al. 2018). It showed up-regulation of its mRNA in response to diverse forms of stresses like exposure to an excess of heavy metals, drought, cold, heat shock, radiation, salinity- among the abiotic stresses (Cobbett and Goldsbrough, 2002; Ghoshal et al. 2013; Moulick et al. 2013).
In the present study, we have determined how plants cope with zinc induced oxidative stress. Metallothioneins bind heavy-metal ions with mercaptide bonds, while polyamines function in ameliorating the harmful effects of the same in a similar manner. The objective of the present study is to decipher the roles of two important entities- polyamines (Putrescine, Spermidine and Spermine) and Metallothionein type 2 (expression) under zinc stress in Plantago ovata Forsk which has not been reported earlier. P. ovata Forsk is a medicinally and commercially vital herb, cultivated in certain districts of Gujarat and Rajasthan, India. The plant is commonly called psyllium. P. ovata seeds are very interesting because of their husks with huge water-absorbing capacity are used to treat patients with constipation, irritable bowel syndrome, diabetes, and diarrhoea.

Material And Methods

Plant materials, growth conditions and stress treatment:

P. ovata seeds (cultivar HI-5) are procured from Madhya Pradesh, India. They are surface sterilized using 10% (v/v) Sodium hypochlorite (NaOCl) for 20 minutes and then washed extensively with autoclaved deionized water to remove traces of chlorine. The sterilized seeds are transferred to autoclaved agar-sucrose media (pH-7.6-7.8) composed of 3% sucrose (w/v) [Sisco Research Laboratory (SRL), Mumbai, India], and 0.9% agar-agar (w/v) [SRL, Mumbai, India] contained in plant tissue culture capped glass jars (250 mL). The growth conditions used for maintaining the cultures are- 1. Temperature: 22–25ºC, 2. Relative humidity: 55–60% and 3. Illumination: 1500 Lux for 16 hour duration of photoperiods in a plant tissue culture laboratory. In the case of Zinc Sulphate (ZnSO\(_4\).7H\(_2\)O) [Merck, India] treatment, 25, 40, and 50 µL solutions of 1M ZnSO\(_4\).7H\(_2\)O are added to 50 mL of agar-sucrose medium so that the final concentration comes to 500, 800, and 1000 µM, respectively before sterilization by autoclaving. The lethal dose 50 (LD\(_{50}\)) of ZnSO\(_4\).7H\(_2\)O in P. ovata determined earlier is 1000 µM (Pramanick et al. 2017). In addition to ZnSO\(_4\).7H\(_2\)O, the media are supplemented with 1 and 2 mM Putrescine Dihydrochloride (Put) [Himedia Laboratories, Mumbai, India], 0.5 mM Spermidine (Spd) [Himedia Laboratories, Mumbai, India] and 0.5 mM Spermine (Spm) [Himedia Laboratories, Mumbai, India]. The Put, Spd, and Spm solutions are filtered using the 0.2 µm acrodisc syringe filter [Acrodisc® 25 mm Syringe Filter, Pall Life Sciences, U.S.A] and then added to the autoclaved media (when the media was still liquid; temperature of media-65°-70°C). Media without ZnSO\(_4\).7H\(_2\)O treatment and polyamines supplementations are treated as control. The ZnSO\(_4\).7H\(_2\)O treatment and polyamine supplementations are carried out for 7 days to observe the biochemical and MT2 expressional changes.

The specific doses of ZnSO\(_4\).7H\(_2\)O and polyamines (Put, Spd, and Spm) used in the experimental design are given in Table 1:
Table 1
The dosages of ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O and polyamines (Put, Spd and Spm) that are used for performing the biochemical assays, Reverse Transcription PCR and Real Time (q) PCR

| Concentrations of Polyamines | Doses used in experimental design                                                                 |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 mM Putrescine (Put)       | Control (0 mM Put + 0 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O), (1 mM Put + 0 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O), (1 mM Put + 500 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O), (1 mM Put + 800 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O), (1 mM Put + 1000 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O) |
| 2 mM Putrescine (Put)       | Control (0 mM Put + 0 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O), (2 mM Put + 0 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O), (2 mM Put + 500 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O), (2 mM Put + 800 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O), (2 mM Put + 1000 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O) |
| 0.5 mM Spermidine (Spd)    | Control (0 mM Spd + 0 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O), (0.5 mM Spd + 0 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O), (0.5 mM Spd + 500 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O), (0.5 mM Spd + 800 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O), (0.5 mM Spd + 1000 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O) |
| 0.5 mM Spermine (Spm)       | Control (0 mM Spm + 0 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O), (0.5 mM Spm + 0 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O), (0.5 mM Spm + 500 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O), (0.5 mM Spm + 800 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O), (0.5 mM Spm + 1000 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O) |

The experiments have been designed using 1 and 2 mM Putrescine but only 0.5 mM each of Spermidine and Spermine as higher doses caused shrinkage in *P. ovata* seedlings.

**Preparation of Plant Extracts:**

The plant extracts are prepared following the methods of Brolis et al., (1998). 100 mg of 7 days old untreated, ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O treated, and Put, Spd, and Spm supplemented seedlings of *P. ovata* are homogenized with 1 mL of 50% aqueous ethanolic solution [HPLC grade, Merck, Germany]. The homogenized mixtures are subjected to ultrasonication [Sonic Vibra Cell VC300, Connecticut, U.S.A] in ice for about 20 minutes. The ultrasonicated samples are then centrifuged at 10,000 *g* for 5 minutes. Then the supernatants are collected and kept at -20°C and further used as 50% ethanolic plant extracts for the determination of total antioxidant content and DPPH radical scavenging activity.

**Estimation of Chlorophyll and Carotenoid Contents:**

Total chlorophyll, chlorophyll a, chlorophyll b, and carotenoid content are determined following the method developed by Sestak et al. (1971) and Lichtenthaler (1987). 100 mg each of untreated, ZnSO$_4$ treated and polyamines supplemented shoot and leaf tissues of *P. ovata* are crushed and homogenized in 5mL of 100% ice-cold acetone [SRL, Mumbai, India] in a mortar. Then the homogenate is centrifuged at 7728 *g* for 10 minutes at 4°C in an ultracentrifuge [HERMLE Z383 K, Hermle Machine Company]. Then the clear supernatant is taken in a glass cuvette and spectrophotometric absorbance is measured in the wavelengths of 662, 663, 645, 646, and 470 nm using UV-1800 SHIMADZU UV Spectrophotometer.
Estimation of Total Antioxidant Activity:

To determine the total antioxidant content of the plant extracts of *P. ovata*, the phosphomolybdenum assay performed by Prieto et al. (1999) is followed. Appropriately, 0.3 mL each of the 50% aqueous ethanolic extracts of untreated control, ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O treated and polyamines supplemented 7 days old seedlings are added to 3 mL of Phosphomolybdenum buffer. Then the reaction mixtures are incubated at 95°C for 90 minutes in a water bath. Then the absorbances are measured at a wavelength ($\lambda_{max}$) of 695 nm. The observation of the total antioxidant activity is expressed in terms of milligrams (mg) of ascorbic acid equivalents (AAE) per gram (g) FW tissue. An ascorbic acid [Sigma Aldrich] calibration curve is plotted to calculate the concentration of antioxidants present in the ethanolic plant extracts.

Estimation of 1,1-Diphenyl-2-picrylhydrazyl (DPPH) Radical Scavenging Assay:

The DPPH radical scavenging assay is performed by the method followed by Brand-Williams et al., 1995. The reaction mixtures are prepared by adding 0.15 mL of each of the 50% ethanolic extracted samples of *P. ovata* to 2.85 mL of the working stock of DPPH solution. The reaction mixtures are allowed an hour of incubation in dark at room temperature. Then the spectrophotometric reading of each of the samples is measured at a wavelength ($\lambda_{max}$) of 517 nm.

The percentage radical scavenging activity is measured using the following formula:

\[
\left[ \frac{(A_{control} - A_{sample})}{A_{control}} \right] \times 100\%
\]

Where $A_{control}$ is the absorbance of the DPPH reagent without any 50% ethanolic extracted samples and $A_{sample}$ is the absorbance of the DPPH reagent with each of the 50% ethanolic extracted samples.

Estimation of Oxidative damages:

The Lipid peroxidation assay is performed following the method of Issawi et al (2018). The amount of malondialdehyde (MDA) produced is indicative of the amount of membrane lipid oxidized. 7 days old *P.*
*P. ovata* seedlings of untreated control, ZnSO$_4$ treatment and polyamines supplementation are homogenized in 0.1% (w/v) Trichloroacetic acid (TCA) [SRL] solution, in a mortar. Then the crushed samples are centrifuged at 17,388 $g$ for 10 min. 1 mL of supernatant from each sample is added to 4 mL of TCA-Thiobarbituric acid (TBA) solution composed of 0.5% (w/v) TBA [SRL] and 20% (w/v) TCA. The mixture is heated at 100º C in a hot water bath for about 30 min. and then immediately cooled on ice to stop the reaction. The absorbances are measured at 532 nm against a blank containing TBA-TCA solution. The degree of Lipid peroxidation is expressed as MDA equivalents in micromoles per litre per gram FW. The extinction coefficient of MDA is 155 mmolL$^{-1}$cm$^{-1}$.

**Total RNA Extraction from *P. ovata* Seedlings:**

The total RNA is extracted from 100 mg shoot tissues of each type of *P. ovata* seedlings using the PureLink RNA Mini kit [PureLink RNA Mini kit, Ambion by Life Technologies, New Delhi, India]. After completion of extraction, the Total RNA samples are stored at -80ºC.

**Reverse Transcription-Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR):**

To determine the expression level of *MT2* gene in untreated control and ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O treated seedlings (exogenously supplemented with 1 and 2 mM *Put*, 0.5 mM *Spd*, and 0.5 mM *Spm*) of *P. ovata*, RT-PCR [QIAGEN One-Step RT-PCR kit, QIAGEN, New Delhi, India] is carried out using gene-specific primers (Table 2). The RT-PCR reaction mixtures contained 2 µg/50 µL of total RNA. The reaction conditions are shown in Table 3.

| Name of gene | Forward primer sequence | Reverse primer sequence |
|--------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| PoMT2        | 5’ATGTCTTGCTGCAACGGAACT3’ | 5’CTATTTGCAATTGCATGGATTG3’ |
| β-actin      | 5’ATCATGAAGTGTGATGTTGA3’  | 5’ACCTTAATCTTCATGCTGCT3’  |

Table 2: The sequences of the gene-specific primers of *MT2* and *β-actin* of *P. ovata*.
Real-Time- Polymerase Chain Reaction (qPCR):

Total RNAs extracted from untreated, polyamine treated, and (polyamine + ZnSO₄·7H₂O) treated *P. ovata* seedlings are used for synthesizing the first-strand cDNA using RNA to cDNA kit [Invitrogen, Grand Island, New York, USA]. 1 µg/µL of cDNA is used in the reaction mixture as templates for performing real-time PCR. 2X POWER SYBR Green master mix [Applied Biosystems, Foster City, USA] is used for carrying out the qPCR reactions. β-actin gene is the endogenous control. Each of the reactions in this real-time PCR experiment is carried out in triplicates using Applied Biosystems Step One Plus Real-Time PCR system [Applied Biosystems, Foster City, USA]. The relative gene expression of the *PoMT2* gene is calculated by the $2^{-\Delta\Delta C_T}$ method according to Livak and Schmittgen (2001) (Livak and Schmittgen, 2001).

**Statistical Analysis:**

All the experimental results are represented as mean ± standard error of the mean (SEM) except for the Real-time PCR data represented as mean ± standard deviation (SD) shown in Figs. 7(a) (i), 7(a) (ii), 7(b) and 7 (c). The data are analyzed by calculating the variance by Two-way ANOVA using KyPlot (version 2.0) and Bonferroni post-tests are performed using Graphpad Prism software version 6.0. Graphs are prepared using Microsoft Excel 2007.

**Result**
Chlorophyll and Carotenoid Content

As depicted in Fig. 1(a), the total chlorophyll contents in 500, 800, and 1000 µM ZnSO$_4$ treated *P. ovata* got enhanced by 51.92%, 36.54%, and 2.09% respectively, compared to untreated control seedlings. This increase (though found decreasing with increasing doses of ZnSO$_4$) is evidence of the role of Zn in chlorophyll biosynthesis (Pramanick et al. 2017). 1mM *Put* supplementation increased the total chlorophyll content in 0, 800, and 1000 µM ZnSO$_4$ treated seedlings further by 8.2%, 4.48%, and 36.3% respectively, compared to polyamine untreated seedlings of *P. ovata*. 2mM *Put* could enhance the total chlorophyll content of 1000 µM ZnSO$_4$ treated samples only by 10.79%.

0.5 mM *Spd* increased the total chlorophyll content in 0, 500, and 1000 µM ZnSO$_4$ treated *P. ovata* seedlings further by 19.4%, 15.65%, and 13.36% respectively, compared to polyamine untreated samples as depicted in Fig. 1(a).

With 0.5 mM *Spm* treatment we observed gradual and statistically significant reductions in the total chlorophyll level (Fig. 1(a)).

*Put* supplementation reversed the effect of 1000 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O on *P. ovata* seedlings as we observe from Fig. 1(b). The carotenoid contents of 1000 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O treated plants got enhanced from (0.132 ± 0.0014) mg/g FW to (0.169 ± 0.0003) and (0.148 ± 0.0002) mg/g FW when supplemented with 1 and 2 mM *Put*, respectively.

Figure 1(b) shows that 0.5 mM *Spd* has somewhat tried to take up the levels of carotenoid, especially in 500 µM ZnSO$_4$ treated *P. ovata* seedlings but, 0.5 mM *Spm* resulted in significant reductions in the carotenoid content of *P. ovata* (Fig. 1(b)).

Total Antioxidant Activity

500, 800, and 1000 µM ZnSO$_4$ treatment showed a dose-dependent increase in the total antioxidant activity in *P. ovata*. Exogenous supplementation of 1 and 2 mM *Put* enhanced the total antioxidant contents of (1 mM *Put*+ 0 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O) and (2 mM *Put*+ 0 µM ZnSO$_4$.7H$_2$O) treated *P. ovata* ethanolic plant extracts to (7263.67 ± 77.88) and (8139.33 ± 68.19) µg Ascorbic acid equivalent (AAE)/g FW from (5481.67 ± 49.38) µg AAE/g FW of the untreated control. 2 mM *Put* increased the total antioxidant activities in 0, 500, and 800 µM ZnSO$_4$ treated samples further by 48.49%, 38.31%, and 13.48%, respectively. The graphical representation in Fig. 2 depicts that 2 mM *Put* supplementation has been more effective than 1 mM *Put*, in increasing the total antioxidant content of the ethanolic plant extracts of *P. ovata*.

0.5 mM *Spd* supplementation showed reduced total antioxidant activity of the ethanolic plant extracts in *P. ovata*. 
0.5 mM Spm, when added exogenously to the media, showed an increment in the total antioxidant levels up to 52.49% in 500 µM ZnSO₄·7H₂O treated samples compared to polyamine untreated seedlings. On further increasing the dose of ZnSO₄·7H₂O, a decrease in the total antioxidant levels is observed (Fig. 2).

**DPPH Radical Scavenging Activity**

Exogenous addition of 1 mM Put to culture media significantly enhanced the DPPH free radical scavenging activity up to (89.14 ± 0.07) % in 1000 µM ZnSO₄·7H₂O treated samples.

0.5 mM Spd also enhanced the DPPH radical scavenging activity of 1000 µM ZnSO₄·7H₂O treated ethanolic *P. ovata* extracts to (89.565 ± 0.60) % (Fig. 3).

0.5 mM Spm, on the other hand, could increase the radical scavenging activity up to 800 µM ZnSO₄·7H₂O treated samples with a maximum of percentage radical scavenging activity of (89.875 ± 1.89) % in Zn untreated extracts (Fig. 3).

**Oxidative damages: MDA content**

Lipid peroxidation is one of the most important parameters to study in the case of abiotic stresses in plants. 1 mM Put supplementation resulted in about 0.36 fold decrease in malondialdehyde (MDA) production in (1 mM Put + 0 µM ZnSO₄·7H₂O) *P. ovata* seedlings. Although 1 mM Put could not reduce the MDA contents significantly in 500, 800, and 1000 µM ZnSO₄·7H₂O treated plants, the dose of 2 mM Put was potent enough in reducing the MDA concentrations. Exogenous addition of 2 mM Put decreased the MDA concentrations of 0, 500, 800, and 1000 µM ZnSO₄·7H₂O treated *P. ovata* seedlings by 0.4, 0.47, 0.39, and 0.4 folds, respectively compared to the polyamine untreated samples (Fig. 4).

Like 1 mM Put, 0.5 mM Spd was also not potent enough in reducing the rate of membrane lipid peroxidation as depicted in Fig. 4.

However, the exogenous supplementation of 0.5 mM Spm in the media helped in reducing the rate of lipid peroxidation efficiently. It decreased the MDA contents in 0, 500, 800, and 1000 µM Zn treated *P. ovata* plants by 0.14, 0.45, 0.47, and 0.43 folds, respectively compared to the polyamine untreated seedlings (Fig. 4).

**Reverse Transcription- Polymerase Chain Reaction- Densitometric Analysis**

ZnSO₄·7H₂O treatment resulted in an enhancement of the expression of the *Metallothionein* type 2 gene in *P. ovata*. It showed 1.38, 1.39, and 1.76 normalized fold increases in the 500, 800, and 1000 µM ZnSO₄·7H₂O treated samples of *P. ovata*. 1 and 2 mM Put supplementation resulted in statistically
significant reductions in the *MT2* gene expressions. The densitometric analysis shows that 1 mM *Put* decreased the expression levels of *MT2* from \(1 \pm 0.00\) to \(0.57 \pm 0.0045\) in Zn untreated control samples and \(1.38 \pm 0.0289\) to \(0.66 \pm 0.0062\), \(1.39 \pm 0.0239\) to \(0.57 \pm 0.0060\) and \(1.764 \pm 0.0286\) to \(0.64 \pm 0.0046\) in 500, 800, and 1000 µM ZnSO_4·7H_2O treated samples of *P. ovata*, respectively. Similarly, 2 mM *Put* also aided in reducing the *MT2* gene expression by 0.44, 0.64, 0.69, and 0.905 folds in Zn untreated and treated *P. ovata* shoot tissues (Fig. 5). Again, 1mM *Put* has been more efficient in decreasing the expression of *PoMT2*.

The exogenously added 0.5 mM *Spd* also reduced the relative expression of *MT2* mRNA in *P. ovata* by 0.405 fold in 1000 µM ZnSO_4·7H_2O treatment (Fig. 5).

The nutrient media supplementation with 0.5 mM *Spm*, could rather, more efficiently (than *Spd*) decreased the expression of *MT2* mRNA in *P. ovata*. It reduced the expression of *PoMT2* from \(1 \pm 0.00\), \(1.38 \pm 0.0289\), \(1.39 \pm 0.0239\), and \(1.764 \pm 0.0286\) to \(0.55 \pm 0.0077\), \(0.95 \pm 0.0097\), \(0.88 \pm 0.0086\), and \(1.05 \pm 0.0087\), respectively, in ZnSO_4·7H_2O untreated and ZnSO_4·7H_2O treated *P. ovata* shoot tissues (Fig. 5).

**Real Time PCR (qPCR)**

Exogenous supplementation of 1mM and2mM *Put* showed up to 0.26 and 0.675 fold decreases in the *MT2* expression, respectively, in *P. ovata* (Figs. 6(a)(i) and 6(a)(iii)).

0.5mM *Spd* and 0.5mM *Spm* supplementations showed up to 0.42 and 0.36 fold decreases in the relative gene expression of *MT2*, respectively, in *P. ovata* (Figs. 6(b) ad 6(c)).

**Statistical Analysis**

Results of two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) indicate significant changes in the mean values and interactions between the two independent variables ZnSO_4·7H_2O and Polyamines concentration (*Put*, *Spd*, and *Spm*) in all the cases of biochemical and molecular biological analyses. At 5% level of significance (\(\alpha = 0.05\)), we obtained F(cal) > F(0.05) which holds true for all the three polyamines. We, therefore, reject the null hypothesis (which says, there are no significant changes in the mean values and that there is no interaction between the two independent variables).

**Discussion**

Polyamines are often associated with plant growth, DNA and RNA stability, membrane stability, stress resistance, and survival of plant as a whole (Marco et al. 2012; Pál et al. 2015). The effect of exogenous addition of polyamines to alleviate stress depends on various factors like plant species, plant cultivars, duration of given stress, and the dosage of the stress, the tissue type, and also on the way of exogenous polyamine application, that is, through nutrient media supplementation or foliar spray (Soudek et al. 2016).
According to a report *Brassica juncea* plants exposed to Cd stress showed decrease in the chlorophyll content. Foliar spray of *B. juncea* with *Put* enhanced the chlorophyll a content whereas, that with *Spd* resulted in an increase of both chlorophyll a and chlorophyll b content (Kumar et al. 2014). Wang et al. (2003) also showed that Hg$^{2+}$ and Cr$^{6+}$ treatment decreased the chlorophyll content in amaranth leaves which was later reversed by exogenous *Spd* addition. In the present study, we have also observed that exogenously supplemented *Put* and *Spd* could alleviate the effect of ZnSO$_4$ to some extent and result in an increment of the chlorophyll and carotenoid content in *P. ovata*.

In a study by Howladar et al., (2018), endogenous *Spd* and *Spm*, which also enhanced GSH content conferred Cd tolerance in wheat plants (Howladar et al. 2018). Polyamines can act as antioxidants due to their dual binding properties with anions and cations (Groppa et al. 2007; Cicatelli et al. 2010). Polyamines bind to cations, thereby preventing the formation of ROS (Groppa et al. 2007; Lovaas 1997; Lomozik and Wojciechowska, 1989). As explained by Lovaas, the antioxidant properties of polyamines are attributed by the interaction between the positively charged polyamines and the positively charged metal ions which generate a Coulombic repulsive force and this repulsion is neutralized when negatively charged biomolecules (phospholipids, DNA, and RNA) adsorb polyamines on to them (Lovaas 1997).

Various reports say that polyamines like *Put*, *Spd*, and *Spm* are potent scavengers of free radicals like the superoxide (O$_2^-$), hydroxyl (-OH), alkoxyl (RO·), peroxy (ROO·) radicals, singlet oxygen ($^1$O$_2$), and ozone (O$_3$) (Lovaas 1997; Groppa and Benavides 2008; Marco et al. 2012). In this study, we observe an overall increment in the total antioxidant activity with 2 mM *Put* and 0.5 mM *Spm* supplementation. *Spd*, on the other hand, reduced the total antioxidant activity in *P. ovata* which is in congruence with the results of Mandal et al., (2013) (Mandal et al. 2013). *Salvia natans* treated with H$_2$O$_2$ showed reduced SOD, GPX, APX, and GR activities with exogenous *Put* supplementation. *Spm* also reduced the APOX activity of wheat leaves by 31% but restored the GR activity to the levels of control when added before Cd and Cu (Groppa et al. 2007). According to some reports, exogenous *Spm* completely restored the GR and SOD activities which were otherwise compromised under Cd$^{2+}$ and Cu$^{2+}$ treatment in sunflower plants (Chen et al. 2019).

The fact that polyamines act as free radical scavengers is well established. Polyamines and specifically *Spm* have the potential to protect DNA from free radical-induced oxidative damage (Groppa et al. 2007; Marco et al. 2012). Therefore, the observation of increased DPPH radical scavenging activity by *Put*, *Spd*, and *Spm* in *P. ovata* is evident in their function as antioxidants. According to the reports of Sengupta and Raychaudhuri (2017), exogenously added *Put* significantly increased the free radical scavenging activity of gamma-irradiated *Vigna radiata* seedlings in comparison to *Put* untreated seedlings (Sengupta and Raychaudhuri, 2017). Das and Adak, (2015) have found out that 2 mM *Spd* caused about 24.91% decrease in DPPH radical scavenging activity in *Marsilea minuta* L. treated with 200 µM CdCl$_2$ (Das and Adak, 2015). This is again in agreement with our results, where *Spd* initially showed a decrease in the DPPH radical scavenging activity in *P. ovata* as well.
Membrane lipid peroxidation is one of the important markers of oxidative stress induced by various abiotic sources. Zn exposure also led to an enhanced rate of lipid peroxidation in *P. ovata* (Pramanick et al. 2017). Foliar spray of *Put* and *Spd* decreased the MDA concentration in Cd treated *B. juncea* plants (Kumar et al. 2014). According to the reports of Groppa et al., (2001 and 2007) *Spm* efficiently reduced the TBARS produced during membrane lipid peroxidation in sunflower leaf disk and wheat leaves when exposed to both Cd and Cu (Groppa et al. 2001; Groppa et al. 2007). Putrescine supplementation also reduced the MDA levels in *H₂O₂* treated *S. natans* significantly (Mandal et al. 2013). Cucumber seedlings under hypoxia stress treated with exogenous *Spd* resulted in decreased malondialdehyde production (Chen et al. 2019). All these results are on par with our observation of reductions in the lipid peroxidation by *Put*, *Spd*, and *Spm* in Zn treated *P. ovata* seedlings.

This finding of reduced MDA production by *Put*, *Spd*, and *Spm* supplemented *P. ovata* seedlings can be correlated with the reduced expression of the *MT2* gene. The *Metallothionein* being a stress-responsive gene is induced by heavy metal exposure causing its up-regulation. However, on supplementing the nutrient media with *Put*, *Spd*, and *Spm* we obtained a down-regulation and decreased expression of the *PoMT2* gene. Metallothioneins are a group of cysteine-rich, low molecular weight proteins that aid in essential metal homeostasis, detoxification of excess heavy metals, and protection from oxidative damage induced by them. They are well-known for their superoxide and hydroxyl radical scavenging activities (Ruttkay-Nedecky et al. 2013). In a previous study by our group, *MT2* gene expression studied by qPCR technique showed an enhancement by 4.57 and 5.78 folds in 500 and 800 µM Zn treated *P. ovata* samples (Pramanick et al. 2017). According to Choudhary et al., (2012), 7 days old radish seedlings pre-treated with 1 mM *Spd* showed a 3.5 fold decrease in the relative gene expression of *RsMT1C* (*Metallothionein type 1* gene) and is similar to our findings (Choudhary et al. 2012).

According to Cicatelli et al., (2010), Arbuscular-mycorrhizal-fungal (AMF) association has resulted in up-regulation of both *MT* genes (*PaMT1*, *PaMT2*, and *PaMT3*) as well as polyamine biosynthetic genes *ADC* and *SPDS* in *Populus alba* clone AL35 grown in Cu and Zn polluted soil (Cicatelli et al. 2010). Although a direct relationship between *MT2* gene expression and exogenous supplementation of polyamines in nutrient media is not very well elucidated till date, the findings by Cicatelli et al., (2010) and many more gives an insight into how exogenous polyamines can regulate the expression levels of *MT* genes in plants and that *MT* transcriptional expression and action of exogenous polyamines are correlated (Cicatelli et al. 2010). According to Li et al., exogenous *Spd* supply enhanced *MT* gene expression in white clover under both well-watered and drought conditions but the same with dicyclohexylamine (DCHA), a secondary amine, resulted in a down-regulation of two leaf-tissue specific *MT* gene expression in *Trifolium repens* (white clover) supplied with 0.05 mM *Spd* (Li et al. 2016).

Therefore, in this study we hypothesized the ameliorating effects of exogenous Putrescine, Spermidine, and Spermine when applied against oxidative stress induced by *ZnSO₄·7H₂O* in *P. ovata*. From the results obtained we can infer that the total antioxidant activity, the free radical scavenging activity, and chlorophyll and carotenoid content get enhanced. On the other hand, the simultaneous down-regulations of malondialdehyde production and the *Metallothionein Type 2* expression are key symbols of alleviation.
of Zn induced oxidative stress. We, therefore, propose that excess Zn causes stress which induces the enhanced transcription of the MT2 gene in P. ovata. When confronted with doses of Putrescine, Spermidine, and Spermine against zinc stress, the Metallothionein Type 2 shows a reduced expression due to amelioration of stress by the polyamines.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable

Consent for Publication

Not applicable

Availability of Data and Material

The experiments were performed in replicates and experimental data were generated in our laboratory by us.

Competing Interests

There are no competing interests.

Funding

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the UGC- DAE Consortium for Scientific Research, Kolkata Centre, West Bengal, India (UGC- DAECRSR- KC/CRS/13/RB- 01/0808) for financial support.

Author’s Contributions

SSRC designed and supervised the research work. PP and SSRC conducted the experiments. AC helped with writing the manuscript. PP and SSRC analyzed the data and wrote the manuscript. All authors read and approved the manuscript.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to show sincere gratitude to UGC-CAS and UGC-DAE Consortium for Scientific Research, Kolkata Centre for their financial support.

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**Figures**
Figure 1

Total chlorophyll, and (b) carotenoid contents of 7 days old P. ovata with increasing doses of ZnSO₄·7H₂O in the absence of any polyamines and the presence of 1 and 2 mM Putrescine, 0.5 mM Spermidine and 0.5 mM Spermine. The data are represented as mean ± standard error of mean (SEM) (n=3). **** indicates (p<= 0.0001), *** indicates (p<= 0.001), ** indicates (p<= 0.01) and * indicates (p<= 0.05), N.S. indicates not significant (p>0.05)
Figure 2

Total Antioxidant content of 7 days old P. ovata with increasing doses of ZnSO4.7H2O in the absence of any polyamines and the presence of 1 and 2 mM Putrescine, 0.5 mM Spermidine and 0.5 mM Spermine. The data are represented as mean ± standard error of mean (SEM) (n= 3). **** indicates (p<= 0.0001), *** indicates (p<= 0.001), ** indicates (p<= 0.01) and * indicates (p<= 0.05), N.S. indicates not significant (p>0.05)

Figure 3

Features of the DPPH radical scavenging activity with increasing doses of ZnSO4.7H2O in the absence of any polyamines and the presence of 1 and 2 mM Putrescine, 0.5 mM Spermidine and 0.5 mM Spermine. The data are represented as mean ± standard error of mean (SEM) (n= 3). **** indicates (p<= 0.0001), *** indicates (p<= 0.001), ** indicates (p<= 0.01) and * indicates (p<= 0.05), N.S. indicates not significant (p>0.05)
DPPH radical scavenging activity of 7 days old P. ovata with increasing doses of ZnSO4.7H2O in the absence of any polyamines and the presence of 1 and 2 mM Putrescine, 0.5 mM Spermidine and 0.5 mM Spermine. The data are represented as mean ± standard error of mean (SEM) (n= 3). **** indicates (p<= 0.0001), *** indicates (p<= 0.001), ** indicates (p<= 0.01) and * indicates (p<= 0.05), N.S. indicates not significant (p>0.05)

Figure 4

Lipid Peroxidation with respect to Malondialdehyde content of 7 days old P. ovata with increasing doses of ZnSO4.7H2O in the absence of any polyamines and the presence of 1 and 2 mM Putrescine, 0.5 mM Spermidine and 0.5 mM Spermine. The data are represented as mean ± standard error of mean (SEM) (n= 3). **** indicates (p<= 0.0001), *** indicates (p<= 0.001), ** indicates (p<= 0.01) and * indicates (p<= 0.05), N.S. indicates not significant (p>0.05)
Figure 5

Densitometric analysis and the normalized fold change of MT2 gene in 7 days old P. ovata with increasing doses of ZnSO₄·7H₂O in the absence of any polyamines and the presence of 1 and 2 mM Putrescine, 0.5 mM Spermidine and 0.5 mM Spermine. The data are represented as mean ± standard error of mean (SEM) (n= 3). **** indicates (p<= 0.0001), *** indicates (p<= 0.001), ** indicates (p<= 0.01) and * indicates (p<= 0.05), N.S. indicates not significant (p>0.05)
Real Time PCR (qPCR) Analysis and the normalized fold change of MT2 gene in 7 days old *P. ovata* with increasing doses of ZnSO$_4$·7H$_2$O in the absence and the presence of (a)(i) 1 mM Putrescine, (a)(ii) 2 mM Putrescine, (b) 0.5 mM Spermidine, and (c) 0.5 mM Spermine. The data are represented as mean ± standard deviation (SD) (n= 3)
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