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# The significance of Sanskrit names of medicinal plants used in Ayurveda

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#### **Abstract**

In ancient India, seers, sages, and Ayurveda practitioners would name traditional medicinal plants based on their pharmacological activity and scientific observations using Sanskrit, one of the oldest and most sacred languages of the world. In the present study, 23 medicinal plants used in Ayurveda have been analyzed to decipher the real meaning of each Sanskrit name by breaking down each name into its root word(s). The Sanskrit names of each medicinal Ayurveda plant have been cross-checked using a Sanskrit-English dictionary and five other online Sanskrit dictionaries. Each plant species was then placed in one of four categories based on their pharmacological activity. Translating and analyzing the Sanskrit names and relating them to their meaning in modern English, as well to pharmacological reports published on the respective medicinal plants, led to a number of results for each of the 23 species. After carefully analyzing the Sanskrit names, it was concluded that the ancient Indian seers, sages, and Ayurveda practitioners accurately named these 23 medicinal plants based on their bioactive compounds and pharmacological properties. However, further phytochemical and pharmacological investigations are necessary to confirm the uses mentioned within the Sanskrit names of plants.

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## Introduction

Sanskrit is among the most ancient languages of the world. Dating back to roughly 5,000 B.C., this Indio-European language has been considered philosophical and sacred as it has been used throughout Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain scriptures. Indian seers, sages, and practitioners of Ayurveda, that practiced traditional medicine in India, meaningfully gave specific names to medicinal plants based on their pharmacological activity and scientific observations using the Sanskrit language. In the present study, the authors have attempted to decipher the real meaning of Sanskrit names by breaking down each Sanskrit name into its root word(s). The critical examination of these names and their derivation proves an interesting study for those captivated by history and linguistics.

In the Sanskrit language, the characterization of medicinal plants based on etymological derivation of names and synonyms is known as *namarupajnanam*. Acquaintance with names (*nama*), characters (*rupa*), and knowledge (*jnanam*) births a very important element for the identification of plants and reminds us of its recognition by the ancient seers and sages. The names which are still unknown or used in various regions of the world in different ancient languages and cultures should be investigated to discover their hidden meanings. This is extremely important to understand the names of Sanskrit medicinal plants since around 40% of pharmaceutical products today reflect nature and traditional knowledge<sup>[1]</sup>. By understanding the reasoning behind the naming of select medicinal

plants, you can then apply that knowledge elsewhere and begin better analyzing and understanding the world around us through recognizing covert linguistics, symbolism, and rationalization hidden in plain sight. Sharma<sup>[2]</sup>, an Indian historian and Indologist, wrote a book on namarupajnanam in which he describes the characterization of medicinal plants based on the etymological derivation of names and synonyms. Similarly, Singh[3] has pointed out loopholes in Sanskrit synonyms of Indian medicinal plants. Sensarma<sup>[4]</sup> ascertained the botanical identity of many plants described in Sanskrit literature. Salve & Mishra<sup>[5]</sup> have identified the plants used in Madhava Cikitsa for the treatment of diarrhea in Sanskrit language. Madhava is regarded as a seventh-century Indian physician who composed two treatises in Sanskrit on Ayurveda: The Madhava Nidana and the Madhava Cikitsa. Thomas et al. [6] captured information from 200 texts, namely six samhitas (text treated according to euphonic rules), 57 Nighantus (Ayurveda pharmacopeia), and 140 vyakhyas (explanations) written in Sanskrit verse. They discovered that controversy existed within the correct botanical identification of medicinal plants since multiple Sanskrit names were assigned to a particular plant. Tiwari & Ittadwar<sup>[7]</sup> approached Sanskrit names of certain Indian medicinal plants through a philological lens to establish the authenticity of the original names to properly determine the meaning of the plant names.

The present work has been undertaken by the authors because literature surveying reveals that there are very few reports available on assessing the validity of Sanskrit names of plants. Additionally, it is very important to recognize that Sanskrit names are more than just language labels; they actually represent coded generational wisdom and heritage that can be used to further understand medicinal knowledge while also preserving the knowledge through the Sanskrit name. The present study may reveal novel uses of plants not described in the Sanskrit Verse of Ayurveda.

# Methodology

The following Sanskrit names were taken from Nighantu, a Sanskrit term referring to a thematically categorized collection of words, revised by Kamat & Kamat<sup>[8]</sup>, Leucas<sup>[9]</sup>, and web pages from www.efloraofindia.com<sup>[10]</sup>. These popular names have been carefully selected by the authors because they provide important clues to pharmacological activities of plants. Additionally, the meaning of these names were cross-checked by the authors through a Sanskrit-English dictionary by Apte<sup>[11]</sup> online Sanskrit dictionaries: www.learnsanskrit.cc; www.wisdomlib.org; www.wikitionary.org; www.hindwi.org; and sanskritdictionary.org. The authors have sampled recent pharmacological reports of plants to check the validity of their medicinal uses mentioned within the names of the plants. All plant names have been cross-checked for correctness by the Kew Medicinal Plant Names Services (MPNS, https://mpns. science.kew.org). Plant family assignments were done in accordance with The Angiosperm Phylogeny Group IV guidance<sup>[12]</sup>. The data was then compiled in tabulated form.

It must be acknowledged that Sanskrit names of plant species used as medicine in Ayurveda become conflicted due to: 1) one plant entity may have many other names; and 2) many plant entities have only one name. Therefore, when constructing this mini-review, only meaningful names were selected that indicated new pharmacological properties. This method was adopted to divert from any distractions from our main focus which concentrates on reporting new medicinal uses of Sanskrit plant names. For select plants in Table 1, commonly known Sanskrit synonyms for plants 4, 5, 11, 13, 18, 22, and 23 were included. However, these other names were only added for the reader's reference, and including the breakdown of their Sanskrit literary meanings were not part of the scope of this project since they do not possess literary relevance.

#### Results

Table 1 displays summarized data from the existing literature on plants and their Sanskrit meanings.

#### Discussion

This discussion is focused on validating the use of Sanskrit named Ayruvedic medicinal plants while also presenting an analysis of Sanskrit names that indicate pharmacological activity.

For the purpose of further discussion, the species have been categorized into the following types:

Category 1: Plants in which relevant pharmacological findings are not yet reported.

Category 2: Plants in which relevant pharmacological findings support the uses mentioned within the names.

Category 3: Plants in which active phytochemicals are reported and show relevant pharmacological activity.

Category 4: Plants in which pharmacological activity reported, chemical characterization, and status as local commercial, standardized and licensed plant-based drug provide a strong rationale for the uses mentioned within the Sanskrit plant name.

In category 1, there are three plant species: *Luffa echinata* (used as an antitoxic), *Cynodon dactylon* (used for improvement of virility/semen promoting activities), and *Juniperus communis* var. *saxatilis* (used as an antidote to remove poison from the body). There is no pharmacological activity reported for these species.

Category 2 contains 20 plants that show corroboration with reported pharmacological activity: Achyranthus aspera, Alpinia galanga, Baliospermum solanifolium, Berberis aristata, Carum carvi, Cassia angustifolia, Catunaregam spinosa, Centipeda minima, Croton tiglium, Datura metel, Euphorbia nerrifolia, Hellenia speciosa, Lepidium sativum, Leptadenia reticulata, Mangifera indica, Paederia foetida, Pueraria tuberosa, Sapindus emarginatus, Terminalia chebula, and Tinospora cordifolia. Achyranthus aspera is a popular medicinal plant that is used extensively in the treatment of a variety of medical conditions. Tinospora cordifolia is a versatile medicinal plant. The literary meaning of its name indicates that this plant keeps an individual free from pain, agony, and misery while also making them strong and energetic to help fight disease. Upadhyay et al.[39] reported that this plant is used as a rejuvenating tonic to cure many diseases, thus the Sanskrit terms within its name appear valid. Alpinia galanga is used for laryngitis and oral cavity diseases. Its use is supported by various reports of antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory activity documented by Rao et al.[14] and Subash et al.[16]. Hellenia speciosa is used as an anti-leprosy medicine which has been shown to contain antibacterial activity reported by Malabadi<sup>[29]</sup> and Roy et al.<sup>[30]</sup>. Lepidium sativum is used to fight against various skin diseases and is associated with antibacterial and antifungal activities[31] [1]. Leptadenia reticulata is used for improving good health, which in turn extends one's life span. Similarly, Paederia foetida contains antioxidants and nutritional value, also improving health. These two species reflect nutraceutical properties, indicating that these plants may provide prevention against chronic diseases, and are authenticated by reports from Naik & Acharya[33] and Upadhyaya<sup>[36]</sup> regarding their nutraceutical properties. Bailospermum montanum and Croton tiglium are reported to have purgative properties and are documented by Rout et al.[17], Cory[24], and Pillai[25]. Seeds from Catunaregam spinosa, commonly known as emetic nut, irritate the stomach and induce vomiting<sup>[22]</sup>. Datura metel is known to contain narcotic, hallucinatory, and poisonous properties due to the presence of bioactive alkaloids<sup>[26]</sup>. Singh et al.<sup>[34]</sup> have reported aphrodisiac qualities of Mangifera indica, commonly known as the mango, which further verifies its use as an aphrodisiac candidate boosting virility in men. Carum carvi is used against acid belching and when needing to detoxify the body. These uses are attributed to seed oil which improves digestion and relieves stomach and intestine spasms, which has been reported by Rasooli & Allameh<sup>[19]</sup>.

The third category contains four plants: *Berberis aristata, Cassia angustifiolia, Pueraria tuberosa,* and *Euphorbia nerrifilia*. When isolating berberine alkaloids from *Berberis aristata,* it has

Table 1.	1. Summary of plants, pharmacological reports, and their Sanskrit meanings.	gical reports, and thei	r Sanskrit meanings.		
Sr. No.	. Botanical names	Plant family	References and page numbers	Sanskrit names and their literary meaning with references	Pharmacological reports
<del>-</del> -	Achyranthes aspera L.	Amaranthaceae	Leucas <sup>[9]</sup> , p. 211	<b>Apamarga</b> meaning a side way or another way <sup>[11]</sup> . Plant is used as a promising way to rid many diseases	Used for curing several diseases <sup>[13]</sup>
7	Alpinia galanga (L.) Willd.	Zingiberaceae	Leucas <sup>[9]</sup> , p. 32	Hatkanthmukh shodhani 1. Hat = injured <sup>[11]</sup> , p. 1361; 2. Kanth = Larynx (www.hindwi.org);	
				<ol> <li>Mukh = oral cavity or mouth;</li> <li>Shodhani = detoxifying agent<sup>[15]</sup>.</li> <li>cures infectious diseases of the mouth and larynx</li> </ol>	pleurisy rats, anti- orted <sup>[16]</sup>
m	Baliospermum solanifolium (Burm. f.) Suresh., syn., B.montanum (Willd.) Muell. Arg.	Euphorbiaceae	Leucas <sup>[9]</sup> , p. 202	<b>Nikhumba</b> meaning purging <sup>(15]</sup>	
4	Berberis aristata DC.	Berberidaceae	Leucas <sup>[9]</sup> , p. 66	Pachampaca (also known as Daruharidra) 1. Pacham = Digestion; 2. Paca = Cooking <sup>(15</sup> ). improves digestive process	Berberine alkaloid may affect the digestive process as it is known to affect cardiovascular, metabolic, renal, and hepatic disorders <sup>[18]</sup>
5	Carum carvi L.	Apiaceae	Leucas <sup>[9]</sup> , p. 22	Udgarashodhana (also known as Jeera) 1. Udgara = belching <sup>(33)</sup> ; 2. Shodhana = detoxifying agent <sup>(15)</sup> . relieves acid belching	Seed oil improves digestion and relieves spasms in the stomach and intestine $\Pi^{g}$
9	Senna alexandrina var. alexandrina	Fabaceae	Leucas <sup>[9]</sup> , p. 246	<b>Mrdurecani</b> 1. Mrdu = soft; 2. Recani = soften hard stools <sup>[11]</sup> , p. 861	Sennosides and anthranoids are present which causes a laxative effect $^{\{20\}}$
7	Catunaregam spinosa (Thunb.) Tirveng., syn. Randia dumetorum (Retz.) Poir.	Rubiaceae	Kamat & Kamat <sup>[8]</sup> , p. 62	<b>Chardana</b> meaning to vomit to empty stomach $^{[21]}$	Commonly known as emetic nut. The seeds irritate the stomach which causes vomiting <sup>[22]</sup>
œ	<i>Centipeda minima</i> (L.) A. Braun & Asch.	Asteraceae	Leucas <sup>[9]</sup> , p. 251	<b>Chikkani, Chikka</b> meaning sneezing <sup>[11]</sup> , p. 390	Used for treating allergic rhinitis <sup>[23]</sup>
6	Croton tiglium L.	Euphorbiaceae	Kamat & Kamat <sup>[8]</sup> , p. 86	Recakah meaning to evacuate bowel; purgative <sup>[1]</sup> , p. 861	Increases gut mobility and has violent purgative action [24,25]
0	Cynodon dactylon (L.) Pers.	Poaceae	Leucas <sup>[9]</sup> , p. 192	<b>Sahasravirya</b> 1. Sahasra = thousand <sup>[11]</sup> , p. 1354; 2. Virya = semen, virility <sup>[15]</sup> . increases semen production by 1,000	Not reported
1	Datura metel L.	Solanaceae	Leucas <sup>[9]</sup> , p. 154	Mahamohini (also known as Dhatura) 1. Maha = great <sup>[15]</sup> ; 2. Mohini = depriving senses and understanding <sup>[21]</sup>	Plant possesses narcotic, hallucinatory, and poisonous properties due to the presence of bioactive alkaloids <sup>[26]</sup>
12	Euphorbia nerrifolia L.	Euphorbiaceae	Kamat & Kamat <sup>[8]</sup> , p. 88	<b>Sakhakanda</b> 1. Sakha = branch <sup>(15)</sup> , 2. Kanda = a knot-like swelling <sup>(21)</sup>	Antimicrobial activity reported in a review paper <sup>[27]</sup> Anti-inflammatory activity of dried extract and isolated nerrifolione and cycloartenol were evaluated <sup>[28]</sup>
13	Hellenia speciosa (J. Koenig) S.R. Dutta, syn, Costus speciosus (J. Koeing) Sm.	Costaceae	eFloraofindia <sup>[10]</sup>	<b>Kushta</b> (also known as Kut) meaning leprosy <sup>[21]</sup>	Hexane and methanol extracts of leaves and rhizomes show antibacterial activity against seven species of pathogenic bacteria <sup>[29]</sup> . Roy et al. <sup>[30]</sup> reported a flavonoid which shows antibacterial activity <i>in vitro</i>
4	Juniperus communis var. saxatilis Pall.	Cupressaceae	Leucas <sup>[9]</sup> , p. 34	<b>Visaghni</b> 1. Vish = poison; 2. Aghni = fire $^{[21]}$ It removes/eliminates "the fire of poison" from the body.	Not reported
15	Lepidium sativum L.	Brassicaceae	Leucas <sup>[9]</sup> , p. 29	<b>Charmahantri</b> 1. Charma = skin(Apte <sup>[11]</sup> , p. 375); 2. Hantri = to remove or destroy <sup>[21]</sup> removes skin disease	Antimicrobial and antifungal activities reported by Shama Adam et al. <sup>[31]</sup> and Haj Bloukh et al. <sup>[32]</sup>

Sr. No.	. Botanical names	Plant family	References and page numbers	Sanskrit names and their literary meaning with references	Pharmacological reports
16	Leptadenia reticulata (Retz.) Wight & Arn.	Apocynaceae	Leucas <sup>[9]</sup> , p. 142	<b>Jivanti</b> = alive; <b>Jivani</b> = vivifying <sup>[15]</sup> ; <b>Jiva</b> = $soul^{[21]}$ improves life span and health	Naik & Acharya <sup>[33]</sup> reported this plant as nutritious, having high protein content and fat energy value with phosphorous and vitamin A.
17	Luffa echinata Roxb.	Cucurbitaceae	Leucas <sup>[9]</sup> , p. 247	Garanasani 1. Gara = a factitious poison; 2. Nashini = to remove, destroy <sup>[21]</sup> Destroys poison in the body	Not reported
18	Mangifera indica L. x	Anacardiaceae	Leucas <sup>[9]</sup> , p. 326	Kamanga (also known as Aam) meaning sexual desire <sup>[21]</sup>	Singh et al.[34] reported aphrodisiac potential
19	Paederia foetida L.	Rubiaceae	Leucas <sup>[9]</sup> , p. 218	<b>Bala</b> meaning energetic <sup>[11]</sup> , p. 709	Antioxidant and nutritional value was reported by Osman et al. [35] and Upadhyaya [36]
20	Pueraria tuberosa (Roxb. ex Willd.) DC.	Fabaceae	eFloraofIndia <sup>[10]</sup>	<b>Vidari</b> meaning a swelling of the groin <sup>[21]</sup>	Isoorientin, and the anti-inflammatory active mechanism, was isolated and elucidated by Anilkumar et al.[37]
21	Sapindus emarginatus Vahl	Sapindaceae	Leucas <sup>[9]</sup> , p. 305	Garbhpatana meaning induces abortion  1. Garbha = fetus in the womb  2. Patana = falling down (www.sanskritdictionary.org)	Cytotoxic activity reported by Kumar & Kavmani <sup>[40]</sup>
22	Terminalia chebula Retz.	Combretaceae	Leucas <sup>[9]</sup> , p. 3	<b>Vayastha</b> (also known as Haritaki, Harad, Abhaya, Pathya) meaning looking young in the prime of life between ages $16-17^{[2T]}$ ; delays aging process and acts as a rejuvenator	Methanolic and aqueous extracts showed anti-aging effects <sup>[39]</sup>
23	<i>Tinospora cordifolia</i> (Willd.) Hook.f. & Thomson	Menispermaceae	Kamat & Kamat <sup>[8]</sup> , p. 2	<b>Visalya</b> (also known as Guduchi, Giloy, Amrutha) meaning free from pain, agony, and misery; <b>Dhira</b> meaning strong and energetic <sup>[21]</sup> ; Used as a strong, energetic tonic to keep a person healthy	Used as a rejuvenator tonic; claimed to cure several diseases <sup>[40]</sup>

been shown to affect cardiovascular, metabolic, renal, and hepatic disorders<sup>[18]</sup>, which may help to improve digestion. Sennosides and anthranoids, when isolated from Cassia angustifolia, display laxative effects as reported by Aronson<sup>[20]</sup>. Isoorientin, when isolated from the tubers of Pueraria tuberosa, shows anti-inflammatory properties[37] and may be predicted to reduce inflammation in the groin. Euphorbia nerrifolia is used for healing knot-like swellings in the body which is corroborated with the antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory activities reported by Sultana et al.[27] and Ilyas et al.[28]. Hellenia speciosa is used as an anti-leprosy medicine and Lepidium sativum is similarly used to treat a variety of skin diseases. These uses can be corroborated by antibacterial activity reported by Malabadi<sup>[29]</sup> and Roy et al.<sup>[30]</sup>. Pharmacological investigations of Sapindus emarginatus indicate this plant as having cytotoxic properties<sup>[40]</sup> which may act as supporting evidence for its abortifacient use. Terminalia chebula is used as a tonic for retaining a youthful appearance between the ages of 16 and 17. Its methanolic and aqueous extract shows anti-aging effects and has been substantially reported by Manosroi et al.[38].

The fourth category includes just one plant species: *Centipeda minima*. This plant has been well documented as being used as a sneeze-inducing herb, curing allergic rhinitis.

Additionally, it must be addressed that we specifically looked at the linguistics of and analyzed the meaning of the Sanskrit names, rather than focusing on traditional medicine as a whole. This draws limitations to our study since we are only looking at linguistic break downs of each Sanskrit medicinal plant name. Since the present study was a mini-review, the study was limited to the analysis of the use of medicinal plants based on their Sanskrit name.

## **Conclusions**

The study of Sanskrit names of plants is a deep learning process through understanding the philology and etymology of names of plants, along with conducting rigorous literature surveying. The present study explores the hidden meaning of Sanskrit names of traditional Indian medicinal plants and justifies their uses in Ayurveda and traditional systems of medicine. Possible rationales for Sanskrit names of plants are offered in the present study through an analysis of the pharmacological activity of each plant species. The present findings reveal that bioactive compounds are present in these plants and display relevant pharmacological properties. It appears that these pharmacological properties were acknowledged and used by the ancient Indian seers, sages, and Ayurveda practitioners when they were assigning valid Sanskrit names to these plants. However, additional phytochemical and pharmacological investigations are necessary to further confirm the uses mentioned within the Sanskrit names of plants.

#### **Author contributions**

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: draft manuscript preparation: Garbe LA, Tiwari VJ,

Table 1. (continued)

Baez K, Schultz F; study direction: Schultz F. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

## **Data availability**

All data generated during this study are included in this published article.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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