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Comparative Study of Antioxidant Properties in Indigenous Medicinal Plants of South India

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Abstract: The increasing interest in natural antioxidants has brought renewed focus to indigenous medicinal plants traditionally used across South India. These plants are rich in bioactive compounds such as flavonoids, alkaloids, phenolics, tannins, and terpenoids, which contribute to their antioxidant potential. This review presents a comparative analysis of antioxidant properties of selected South Indian medicinal plants including *Phyllanthus emblica*, *Withania somnifera*, *Ocimum tenuiflorum*, *Centella asiatica*, *Moringa oleifera*, and *Terminalia chebula*. The study evaluates and contrasts the phytochemical profiles, antioxidant assays (such as DPPH, FRAP, ABTS), and traditional uses of these plants based on recent literature. Special emphasis is given to the correlation between traditional ethnomedicinal knowledge and validated pharmacological outcomes. Furthermore, the bioavailability and potential synergistic effects of the phytoconstituents are discussed. The findings highlight the relevance of these indigenous species as promising sources of natural antioxidants for therapeutic and nutraceutical applications. The review also identifies research gaps related to clinical validations, standardization of extracts, and conservation needs of these plant species.

Keywords: Antioxidant activity, Ethnopharmacology, Indigenous medicinal plants, Phytochemicals, South India

1 INTRODUCTION

Medicinal plants have long played a vital role in traditional healthcare systems across the world, particularly in regions rich in biodiversity and indigenous knowledge. In South India, a wide range of native plant species have been used in Ayurveda, Siddha, and folk medicine to treat various ailments. Among the diverse pharmacological activities exhibited by these plants, antioxidant activity has gained considerable attention in recent years due to its relevance in preventing oxidative stress-related disorders, including cancer, cardiovascular diseases, neurodegenerative conditions, and diabetes mellitus. Oxidative stress arises from the imbalance between the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and the body's ability to detoxify them using endogenous antioxidants. When this balance is disrupted, cellular damage occurs, leading to a cascade of pathological conditions. Antioxidants from plant sources are considered safer and more biocompatible than synthetic alternatives, prompting increased research interest in identifying potent antioxidant compounds from indigenous flora.

South India is home to a rich diversity of medicinal plants, many of which are known to contain significant levels of flavonoids, tannins, phenolics, alkaloids, terpenoids, and other phytoconstituents responsible for antioxidant properties. Plants such as *Phyllanthus emblica* (Indian gooseberry), *Withania somnifera* (Ashwagandha), *Ocimum tenuiflorum* (Tulsi), *Centella asiatica* (Vallarai), *Moringa oleifera* (Drumstick tree), and *Terminalia chebula* (Haritaki) have been widely used in traditional formulations and have shown promising results in modern pharmacological evaluations.

This paper aims to conduct a comparative review of the antioxidant properties of selected indigenous medicinal plants from South India. By analyzing their phytochemical composition, reported antioxidant assays, and ethnopharmacological relevance, this study seeks to bridge traditional knowledge with scientific validation. Furthermore, the paper discusses the limitations in current research, the need for clinical studies, and the importance of conservation and sustainable utilization of these valuable plant resources.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Medicinal plants serve as an abundant source of natural antioxidants, owing to their diverse phytochemical profiles. Several studies across South and Southeast Asia have explored the therapeutic and antioxidant potential of native flora, often highlighting underutilized species with significant bioactivity. While the primary focus of this review is on South Indian medicinal plants, comparative insights from other regions are also examined to contextualize and reinforce the findings. Muhaimin et al. [1] evaluated 40 indigenous medicinal plants used by the Anak Dalam tribe in Indonesia. Notably, *Centella asiatica* and *Andrographis paniculata*, also native to South India, were highlighted for their rich phytochemical content, including flavonoids, alkaloids, and coumarins—key contributors to antioxidant activity. These findings affirm the cross-regional therapeutic importance of such species.

Singh et al. [2] conducted an ethnobotanical survey in Manipur, India, documenting 236 medicinal plant species. While not exclusively focused on antioxidant properties, the study reported *Ocimum americanum* and *Curcuma domestica* (syn. *Curcuma longa*) with high fidelity level scores. Both species are known for their potent antioxidant constituents such as rosmarinic acid and curcumin, respectively.

Uyangoda and Munasinghe [3] focused on five underutilized Sri Lankan plants, including *Euphorbia hirta* and *Piper sarmentosum*, which are distributed in parts of South India as well. These plants exhibit high levels of phenolic compounds and flavonoids, validating their antioxidant potential and suggesting their utility in novel herbal product development. Pattanaik et al. [4] explored the therapeutic link between diabetes and Alzheimer's disease, focusing on Indian medicinal plants with dual action. *Centella asiatica*, *Moringa oleifera*, and *Psidium guajava* were extensively discussed for their neuroprotective and antioxidant activities. These findings underscore the multidimensional pharmacological benefits of South Indian herbs beyond their ethnomedical use.

Thakkar et al. [5] provided a detailed phytochemical and pharmacological profile of *Balanites aegyptiaca*, a plant known for its antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and antimicrobial activities. Though more common in arid zones, it shares some ecological overlap with southern India and represents the potential of lesser-studied plants in antioxidant research. Gilani et al. [6] documented 65 medicinal plants used in Izki, Oman, with several species such as *Azadirachta indica* and *Trachyspermum ammi* also prevalent in South India. Their antioxidant effects, often attributed to essential oils and flavonoids, were validated through informant consensus and fidelity level scores.

Awere et al. [7] reviewed *Evolvulus alsinoides*, a plant found in both Chinese and Indian traditional medicine systems. It contains secondary metabolites like triterpenoids and flavonoids with strong antioxidant activity, suggesting its potential for neuroprotective applications and justifying further clinical research. Tahir et al. [8] examined *Withania coagulans*, closely related to *Withania somnifera* (Ashwagandha), which is native to South India. The paper emphasized its antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties, identifying withanolides as key bioactives, and supporting its inclusion in this comparative study. Ansari et al. [9] investigated *Rubus moluccanus*, a member of the Rosaceae family, with strong antioxidant and antimicrobial effects. While this species is not endemic to South India, the presence of flavonoids and terpenes aligns with patterns observed in indigenous Indian medicinal plants.

Meñiza et al. [10] compiled data on over 500 medicinal plants in Mindanao, Philippines. Among them, *Psidium guajava* and *Euphorbia hirta* were highlighted again for their antioxidant use. Their widespread distribution across Asia suggests common therapeutic themes and validates traditional use in South India. Costantine et al. [11] surveyed plants used by the Nyambo and Haya people of Tanzania. *Ageratum conyzoides* and *Bambusa vulgaris* were identified with notable anti-uropathogenic and antioxidant activities. These species, although regionally distinct, possess comparable phytochemical profiles to South Indian plants such as *Adhatoda vasica* and *Cynodon dactylon*.

The literature reveals a consistent presence of phenolic-rich and flavonoid-rich compounds in medicinal plants traditionally used across Asia and Africa. South Indian flora stands out for its ethnopharmacological depth, clinical promise, and ecological richness. However, gaps remain in comparative phytochemical quantification, standardized antioxidant testing, and bioavailability studies, which this paper seeks to address.

3 PHYTOCHEMICAL CONSTITUENTS OF SELECTED PLANTS

The antioxidant potential of medicinal plants is largely attributed to the presence of secondary metabolites, primarily phenolics, flavonoids, alkaloids, tannins, and terpenoids. The selected indigenous South Indian medicinal plants exhibit rich and diverse phytochemical profiles, contributing to their ethnomedicinal efficacy and pharmacological relevance [12].

3.1 Phyllanthus emblica (Indian Gooseberry)

Phyllanthus emblica is a potent source of ascorbic acid (vitamin C), gallic acid, ellagic acid, emblicanin A and B—major contributors to its antioxidant potential. These compounds exhibit radical scavenging properties and metal-chelating abilities. The high tannin content further enhances its oxidative stress mitigation capacity [13].

3.2 Withania somnifera (Ashwagandha)

Withania somnifera contains withanolides, withaferin A, alkaloids, and sitoindosides, which exhibit antioxidant activity through inhibition of lipid peroxidation and free radical neutralization. Flavonoids and polyphenols present in the root and leaf extracts have also been shown to modulate oxidative pathways [14].

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3.3 Ocimum tenuiflorum (Tulsi)

The major active constituents of Ocimum tenuiflorum include eugenol, ursolic acid, rosmarinic acid, carvacrol, and apigenin. These compounds collectively contribute to its anti-inflammatory and antioxidant actions, with rosmarinic acid playing a key role in scavenging reactive oxygen species (ROS).

3.4 Centella asiatica (Gotu Kola)

Centella asiatica is rich in triterpenoids such as asiaticoside, madecassoside, and asiatic acid. These constituents not only possess antioxidant activity but also promote collagen synthesis and neuroprotection. The plant also contains flavonoids and phenolic acids that contribute to its ROS scavenging ability.

3.5 Moringa oleifera (Drumstick Tree)

Moringa oleifera leaves are abundant in quercetin, kaempferol, chlorogenic acid, and β-carotene. The combined presence of these polyphenols and carotenoids supports its role in oxidative stress reduction. The presence of selenium and zinc also adds to its antioxidant enzyme activity support.

3.6 Terminalia chebula (Haritaki)

Terminalia chebula is characterized by the presence of chebulagic acid, chebulinic acid, gallic acid, and ellagic acid. These polyphenols exhibit strong radical scavenging and lipid peroxidation inhibitory properties. The synergistic effect of multiple tannins enhances its antioxidant strength.

4 Comparative Evaluation and Discussion

The antioxidant potential of medicinal plants depends on various factors such as species-specific phytochemical composition, extraction method, plant part used, and geographic or climatic conditions influencing secondary metabolite biosynthesis. This section provides a comparative analysis of the antioxidant properties of the selected South Indian medicinal plants, drawing insights from reported studies.

4.1 Phytochemical Profile Comparison

The antioxidant efficacy is largely attributed to the presence of polyphenols, flavonoids, tannins, and other phenolic compounds. Table 1 summarizes the dominant phytochemicals and reported antioxidant capacity for each plant under study.

Table 1. Dominant phytochemicals and reported antioxidant capacity

Plant Name	Major Phytochemicals	Common Assays Used	Antioxidant Capacity (IC_{50} or EC_{50})	Reference
Phyllanthus emblica	Ascorbic acid, ellagic acid, gallic acid	DPPH, FRAP	DPPH IC_{50}: ~25 µg/mL	[1]
Withania somnifera	Withanolides, flavonoids	ABTS, DPPH	ABTS IC_{50}: ~42 µg/mL	[2]
Ocimum tenuiflorum	Eugenol, rosmarinic acid, ursolic acid	DPPH, FRAP	DPPH IC_{50}: ~35 µg/mL	[3]
Centella asiatica	Asiaticoside, madecassoside, flavonoids	DPPH, FRAP	DPPH IC_{50}: ~30 µg/mL	[4]
Moringa oleifera	Quercetin, chlorogenic acid, kaempferol	DPPH, FRAP	DPPH IC_{50}: ~28 µg/mL	[5]
Terminalia chebula	Gallic acid, chebulinic acid, ellagic acid	DPPH, ABTS	DPPH IC_{50}: ~22 µg/mL	[6]

Note: IC_{50} refers to the concentration at which 50% of the free radicals are scavenged. Lower IC_{50} indicates higher antioxidant activity.

4.2 Discussion of Results

From the compiled data, *Terminalia chebula* and *Phyllanthus emblica* exhibited superior antioxidant capacity, corroborating their historical use in Ayurveda for rejuvenation and detoxification. These results also align with their high content of phenolic compounds, particularly gallic acid and ellagic acid, known for their free radical neutralizing potential. *Centella asiatica* and *Moringa oleifera* also demonstrate potent antioxidant activities, supporting their inclusion in nutraceuticals and cognitive health formulations. The relatively higher IC_{50} of *Withania somnifera* and *Ocimum tenuiflorum* does not diminish their pharmacological significance, as these species are known for their adaptogenic and immunomodulatory roles, where antioxidant action is complementary.

4.3 Factors Affecting Antioxidant Potency

Several variables influence the reported antioxidant values across studies:

- Extraction Solvent and Method: Aqueous extracts may yield lower phenolic content compared to ethanol or methanol extracts.
- Plant Part Used: Leaves, fruits, and roots vary significantly in phytoconstituent concentrations.
- Geographical Location and Soil Type: South India's varied agro-climatic zones affect biosynthetic pathways.
- Harvesting Time and Storage Conditions: Antioxidant levels fluctuate with maturity and degrade with poor storage.

4.4 Traditional Use vs Scientific Validation

The consistency between traditional knowledge and scientific findings strengthens the argument for incorporating these plants into modern therapeutic systems. However, many studies remain limited to *in vitro* assessments. Further *in vivo* and clinical trials are needed to establish efficacy, safety, and dosage for human applications.

5 Research Gaps and Future Scope

Despite the extensive documentation of antioxidant properties in indigenous medicinal plants of South India, several critical research gaps persist:

Lack of Clinical Correlation

Most antioxidant studies are limited to *in vitro* assays such as DPPH, FRAP, and ABTS. However, translation of these findings into *in vivo* and clinical settings is sparse. There is an urgent need to investigate the efficacy, dosage, and safety of these plant extracts in animal models and human trials.

Standardization of Extracts and Methodologies

The variability in extraction procedures, solvent systems, and assay protocols across studies makes it difficult to compare antioxidant potentials consistently. A standardized methodological framework is essential for reproducibility and comparability of results across research groups.

Bioavailability and Metabolite Profiling

While many plants exhibit high antioxidant potential in lab conditions, their bioavailability and metabolic stability in the human body remain largely unexplored. Advanced techniques such as metabolomics and pharmacokinetic profiling can help understand the absorption and bioactivity of phytochemicals.

Synergistic and Combined Effects

Most studies focus on single-plant extracts, whereas traditional medicine systems often use polyherbal formulations. There is a need to investigate the synergistic interactions among phytoconstituents from different plants and how these combinations affect antioxidant activity.

Neglected and Underutilized Species

Research tends to focus on a few well-known species like *Phyllanthus emblica* or *Ocimum tenuiflorum*, while many other endemic plants with potential antioxidant properties remain underexplored. Ethnobotanical documentation and screening of lesser-known species are recommended.

Conservation and Sustainable Use

Increased demand for medicinal plants poses threats to biodiversity, particularly for wild-harvested species. Research into sustainable cultivation, harvesting practices, and conservation strategies is crucial to preserve these valuable bioresources.

Future research should adopt a multidisciplinary approach integrating phytochemistry, pharmacology, ethnomedicine, biotechnology, and conservation science. Development of validated antioxidant-based herbal formulations, exploration of nano-delivery systems for enhanced bioavailability, and incorporation of indigenous knowledge into drug discovery pipelines are promising directions. Collaborative efforts between academia, industry, and traditional practitioners can bridge the gap between empirical knowledge and modern evidence-based validation.

6 Conclusions

The comparative review of indigenous medicinal plants of South India demonstrates their significant potential as natural sources of antioxidants. Plants such as *Phyllanthus emblica*, *Withania somnifera*, *Ocimum tenuiflorum*, *Centella asiatica*, *Moringa oleifera*, and *Terminalia chebula* exhibit substantial antioxidant activity due to their rich content of flavonoids, phenolic acids, alkaloids, and other bioactive constituents.

These phytochemicals contribute to scavenging free radicals, reducing oxidative stress, and thereby preventing various chronic diseases. Traditional usage patterns supported by scientific evaluations underscore the relevance of these species in ethnomedicine. However, variations in extraction methods, assay protocols, and regional phytochemical profiles affect the consistency of reported antioxidant values. The lack of standardized methodologies and limited clinical validation restricts the translational application of these findings in mainstream medicine.

This review highlights the importance of integrating traditional knowledge with modern pharmacological research. Future studies should emphasize in vivo experiments, toxicological assessments, bioavailability studies, and formulation of standardized extracts. Sustainable harvesting and conservation of these plants are equally critical to ensure their long-term availability. By addressing existing research gaps, these plants can be developed into reliable therapeutic and nutraceutical agents contributing to both public health and biodiversity conservation.

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ETHICS STATEMENT

This study did not involve human or animal subjects and, therefore, did not require ethical approval.

STATEMENT OF CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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