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Indian spices: Traditional and medicinal use

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Abstract

The history of spices is the history of humankind itself, with empires rising and falling based on the trade of exotic spices from distant lands, their intoxicating allure changing and shaping the very foundations of our society. Every Indian kitchen has characteristically a score of spices and condiments for seasoning food, and to enhance palatability. The term "spice" has been originally derived from the word "species," which was applied to groups of exotic foodstuffs in the middle ages. Indian culinary system has traditionally developed dietary practices where food has nutritional as well as medicinal value. Spices play an important role as flavouring coloring or preserving agents in the diet and are used throughout the world. Ayurveda, the classic medicinal system of India, proposes that food has as much therapeutic value as drugs and even uses similar processing techniques for their preparation. If we are suffering from stomach, muscles or head ache and immediately go for drugs in order to get relief from it. Instead of it we use our kitchen ingredients those will help to calm, soothe and relax for minor ailment.

Keywords: Spices, medicinal value, spices in Indian food

Introduction

The history of spices is the history of humankind itself, with empires rising and falling based on the trade of exotic spices from distant lands, their intoxicating allure changing and shaping the very foundations of our society. The spice trade developed throughout South Asia and Middle East by at least 2000 BCE with cinnamon and black pepper, and in East Asia with herbs and pepper [2]. In whole world, India is the most recognized country for the spices and traditional medicine; these are having a wide range of physiological and pharmacological properties. A spice is a dried seed, fruit, root, bark or flower of a plant or an herb used in small quantities for flavor, color or as a preservative [4].

The term "spice" has been originally derived from the word "species," which was applied to groups of exotic foodstuffs in the middle ages. Aromatically scented herbal products have been used since ancient times to flavour foods and for preparing incenses and perfumes. Spices are used for flavour, color, aroma and preservation of food or beverages. Rare spices were utilized in cooking as a sign of wealth in Rome, and later in Medieval and Renaissance times, and the privileged developed an exaggerated taste for spicy foods [8].

The Rome was lured by Indian spices, silks, brocades, Dhaka Muslin and cloth of gold, hence was spending a fortune. After the arrival of the Muslims, Indian spices took a special place in Muslim dishes also and became famous throughout the country. Even in the ancient and medieval ages, Indian spices played a significant role in better economy. States like Kerala, Punjab, Gujarat, Manipur, Mizoram and Uttar Pradesh are considered as the hub for growing spices. Being rich in medicinal value, these spices are good for health [13].

Indian culinary system has traditionally developed dietary practices where food has nutritional as well as medicinal value. Ayurveda, the classic medicinal system of India, proposes that food has as much therapeutic value as drugs and even uses similar processing techniques for their preparation [15]. Indian kitchens have several vegetable preparations for use as spices, condiments or flavouring agents for seasoning food and to enhance acceptability of kitchen preparations [7].

Spices play an important role as flavouring coloring or preserving agents in the diet and are used throughout the world [14]. Spices are important ingredients in our daily diet although they are used in small quantities [3]. Spices and herbs have occupied an important place in the culinary preparations of several ancient and modern kitchens from time immemorial [1].

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According to the International Organization for Standardization of Spices “Spices and Condiments” are defined as “such natural plant or vegetable products or mixtures thereof in whole or ground form which are used for imparting flavor, aroma and piquancy to and for seasoning foods” [6].

Spices are stronger than herbs but they can be used in combination without loss of flavour. 4 No country in the world produces as many kinds of spices as India with quality spices coming from Kerala, an Indian state.[9] Spices depending on the origin and active principle present are classified as pungent spices – pepper, ginger, chillies and mustard; aromatic fruits – cardamom, nutmeg, mace, fenugreek, aniseed, caraway, dill, celery, cumin, coriander, etc.; aromatic barks – cinnamon and cassia; phenolic spices containing eugenol – clove and pimento; and coloured spices – paprika, saffron and turmeric [11].

The basic classification of spices based on the parts used is as follows

- Leaves and/or branches of aromatic plants; all or part of the plant can be used. Examples include basil, bay leaf, parsley, rosemary, tarragon and thyme, oregano and chervil.
- Ripened fruits or seeds of plants. Examples include dill, fennel, coriander, fenugreek, berberis, mustard and black pepper.
- Roots or bulbs of certain plants. Examples include garlic, onion, celery and ginger [1].

Spices are used traditionally for aroma and as preservatives. Spices are used to mask spoiled meat flavour, improve colour and flavour and of late to improve shelf life of foods [3] Hot and spicy foods create a niche for healthy foods. Spices, herbs and chillies will be increasingly used to enhance foods that have reduced or no salt or fat, such as snacks, sauces, salad dressings and marinades [5].

The spices do not contribute significantly to human nutrition as these are used in smaller proportions. Their main utility is as flavouring, coloring, and/or seasoning agents to render food attractive and appetizing by evoking a combination of sensations: visual, gustatory and/or olfactory [7].

Parts of Plants Used For Spices

Spices may be derived from many parts of the plant: bark, buds, flowers, fruits, leaves, rhizomes, roots, seeds, stigmas and styles or the entire plant tops [10].

The spices and condiments are basically plant preparations comprising of mostly seeds (anise, cumin, mustard seeds, poppy seed, coriander, fennel, cardamom, fenugreek), fruits (capsicum, chillies, thyme), flower buds (clove), roots/rhizome (ginger, turmeric) or their dried exudates (asafoetida), bulb(garlic), stigmas (saffron), bark(cinnamon) or leaves (sweet bay, Peppermint). Fenugreek, peppermint and coriander leaves are also used as fresh herbs [7].

Medicinal role of spices

In our society we don't wait for too much if we are suffering from stomach, muscles or head ache and immediately go for drugs in order to get relief from it. Instead of all this we should go for natural relief. Within our kitchen we possess all that is needed to calm, soothe and relax whatever minor ailment may arise [16].

- **Clove (Laung):** Clove is famous for its anti-fungal and anti-microbial properties. Clove oil is beneficial for

coping with tooth ache and sore gums. It is also beneficial remedy for chest pains, fever, digestive problems, cough and cold [12].

- **Cinnamon (Dalchini):** It supports natural production of insulin. Half tea spoon can reduce blood glucose level in patients with type 2 diabetes [16].
- **Fenugreek (Methi):** Fenugreek seed tea or sweet fudge is good for increasing breast milk. It is also helpful for treating diabetes and lowering cholesterol.
- **Bishop's weed (Ajwain):** Used in GI ailments including: diarrhea, dyspepsia, flatulence, indigestion and cholera. In Ayurvedic medicine it is used as antiseptic, preservative, respiratory and GI ailments. Unani system of medicine as an enhancer of the body's resistance.
- **Cardamom (Elaichi):** Helps to control bad breath and digestive disorder. A whole cardamom chewed is good for coping with diabetes.
- **Turmeric (Haldi):** It helps deal with skin problems. Turmeric powder can be used for healing cuts and wounds. It also makes coping with diabetes easier.
- **Curry leaves (Curry Patta):** These leaves are beneficial for reducing blood sugar. Each part of the plant provides some benefit or the other. The dried leaves are extensively used in herbal medicines.
- **Lemon Grass:** It has medicinal properties and is used extensively in Ayurvedic medicine. It is supposed to help with relieving cough and nasal congestion. Antioxidant, anti-cancer properties, anti-inflammatory property [12].
- **Cumin:** Cumin is high in minerals like Iron, Copper, Calcium, Potassium and Zinc and contains high amount of B complex. Cumin is also used to help with sleeplessness and has many antiseptic properties.
- **Ginger:** The root of ginger has a stellar reputation for controlling nausea of all types. It is effective in curbing motion sickness post-operative and chemotherapy. Ginger is an excellent digestive, aiding in the absorption of food and elimination of gas. It is also good for cold hand and feet [16].

Spices role in Indian food

Spices are known as one of the most remarkable ingredients of the Indian Cuisine. In the absence of spices, the exotic flavours of the Indian food don't come out as such. Indian Spices and cuisine go hand in hand as the traditional food items of India are seasoned with a wide array of Spices. The common spices which are used to cook the Indian dishes are Golden turmeric, Ginger root, Cardamom etc. The spices are added during the cooking times depending upon the type of dish like Vegetable, Chicken, Fish or Red Meat.

- **Clove (Laung):** It is used as a cooking ingredient mainly for seasoning or preparing Masala. It comes with warm and strong flavours. It is cooked in the Ghee or oil to prepare Spicy dishes.
- **Cinnamon (Dalchini):** It is used for mainly for seasoning food and preparing Masala.
- **Fenugreek (Methi):** It is mainly used as a green leafy vegetable and seeds are used for seasoning and preparing Masala.
- **Bishop's weed (Ajwain):** It is used for seasoning and flavorant.
- **Cardamom (Elaichi):** Mostly in all Indian and other sweet dishes it used to give a good flavour and smell. It is also used widely in pharmaceutical sector.
- **Turmeric (Haldi):** It is used in cooking and skin care products.

- **Curry leaves (Curry Patta):** It is used as a main ingredient for seasoning in some countries. It has many medicinal uses.
- **Lemon Grass:** It is also used as an addition to tea, and in preparations such as kadha.
- **Cumin:** It is popular because of its earthy aroma. Popularly it is also known as Jeera.
- **Saffron (Zaffran/Kesar):** It is used for cooking as well as in beauty products. It is mainly used in sweet dishes.

Conclusion

Spices have been traditionally used as an essential ingredient in the preparation of food in many countries, especially in India. Since centuries spices are used to add flavor and taste to dishes. Spices are used in folk medicine, because of their beneficial effect on human health. Food based approaches for enhancing the intake of spices and phytochemicals can offer an avenue to greatly impact the onset and progression of chronic diseases, oxidant stress and ageing. Spices and herbs are natural sources of vitamins and minerals. Traditionally spices, as part of the diets, have holistic effects on human health.

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