Chapter-2

Historical Review
The first ever report of the Yartsa gumba dates back to the eighteenth century when Torrubia a Franchisian Friar in Cuba described it as the trees growing out of the bellies of wasps. This is why Cordyceps is sometimes known as Torrubia in the honour of its inventor (Christensen, 1975). Cordyceps is one of the most rare and treasured herbs and it has been an important ingredient in Chinese medicine for thousand of years. It is found in isolated places in south western China especially in the provinces of Tibet, Sichuan, Qinghai, Guise and Yannan in locations over 3500 meters altitude. Traditional knowledge to explore the fungus at high altitude of Tibet and China is to watch wild yaks, usually the mushroom is found where the Yak grazes.

During the time of open Border between Indo-Tibet, before Indo-China war in 1962, traders of the Himalayan region in India visited Tibet-frequently. Prevailing traditional knowledge among the traders was the use of this fungus to make their pet animals (carrying loads) energetic during travel in high altitude. Cordyceps known to the Chinese as Dong Chong Xia Cao and to the Japanese as Tochukaso has been used in medicine for a long time. The first time written record of this herbal medicines was in the Ben-Cao-Cong- Xin (New compilation of Materia Medica) by the author Wu Yiluo written around the year 1757 during the Qing Dynasty (Zhu, 1998) and in this early medical text traditionally usage of Cordyceps has been listed as useful as a ‘Lung Protectorate’ for kidney improvement and as a “Ying/Yang double invigorant” Cordyceps in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) was usually still prepared by cooking the whole caterpillars/fructing body combination in chicken or duck soup (Tiera, 1998). It has been used this way for the treatment of
many diseases such as respiratory diseases, renal dysfunction, hyperlipidemia and hyperglycemia. (Zhou et al., 1998).

Review of literature reveals that Cordyceps has been reported to cure more than 200 disease like genetic asthma, cancers, antiagings, prosexual, aphrodisiac, immunologic, erythropoetic, antineoplastic, antiarrythymic, hypoglycemic effects etc (Arif and Kumar, 2003). Beside, it is also used as aphrodisiac an important nourishing tonic energy booster and adaptogen, which increases physical stamina by enhancing oxygen, supply to the brain and heart and thus improves the resistance to the hypoxia. This was recommended by ancient practitioners as ‘Panacea of all ills’, however, it got attention of people when Chinese athletes set the world record in Olympic games in 1993 who were found administered the doses of compounds extracted from Cordyceps. It is reported to have tonic astringent, expectorant and antiasthamatic properties. It is believed to tone up kidney and to be useful for weak back and knees, impotence and other deficiency symptoms. It is also said to be good for lung.

Cordyceps was discovered about 1500 years ago in Tibet by herdsman who observed that their livestock became energetic after eating a certain grass like mushroom even the older animals become vigorous and more youthful in their actions. About 1000 years later emperors physician in the Ming Dynasty learned about this Tibetan wonder and used this knowledge with their own wisdom to develop powerful and potent medicine (Sharma, 2004).

In Tibetan medicine system Cordyceps valued very highly and used to increase vitality and in restoring regenerative fluid, especially the fertility of sperms, kidney and heart. It is also known to suppress r-lung (vata) and alleviate m-khrispa (Pita). Tibetan mixture Cordyceps with alcohol or traditional green tea and drink is for vitality and to cure
stomach ailments and this is considered to be very safe drug and care be taken for extended period of time.

Tibetan scholar wrote detailed description of Cordyceps in 15th and 18th century texts. Cordyceps was introduced to Europe at a scientific meeting in Paris in 1726 and first imported to Japan in 1728 (Sharma, 2004) for the traditional use of Cordyceps to improve circulation as well as health of lungs, heart, kidneys and liver.

The Tibetan name Yartsa gunbu (dbyar rtswa dgun bu) means ‘Summer grass winter worm’ apparently grass (rtswa) is also found to denote other mushroom such as Ganoderma lutescens which is also collected as a medicinal mushroom for the Chinese market in some Tibetan areas. Boesi (2003) noted that this term describes the life stages of Cordyceps. Ancient Chinese, about 2000 years ago, are said to have placed stone effigies of insects with C. sinensis in the mouth of their dead hoping to revive them or to prevent decomposition as in the care of fungal mummified insects (Gee, 1918; Hofmann, 1947; Mains, 1958; Kobayashi, 1941; Mc Coy, 1988; Steinhaus, 1956; Tiera, 1998 and Chatterjee, 1957). In China it is also believed that Cordyceps when boiled with pork, cures opium addiction, poisoning, Jaundice and even tuberculosis (Gee, 1918). The historical uses of Cordyceps as an antiaging herb in traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) dates back to 1700 B.C. during China’s Chin Dynasty. One of the emperors is said to have paid an ounce of gold for a three days supply of the precious fungus.

In India particularly in Dharchula and Munsiyari areas of district Pithoragarh local people consumes Cordyceps with alcohol. Cordyceps are immersed in local breavage alcohol for some time before consumption. At the Stuttgart world Championship Chinese women took gold medals for the 1500-3000 and 10000 meter events and set new world
records. Due to use of an amazing medicinal extract of Cordyceps there has been an international sports record. A team of Chinese women runners shattered nine word records, breaking the records for the 10000-meter run by an unprecedented 42 second (Chinese National Games Beijing 1993). The female Chinese long distance runners surprised the world by winning all the distance events at the world outdoor track and field championship in Germany. Their coach (Ma Zunren) attributers their amazing performance to intensive training and a special stress relieving tonic (diet) containing Cordyceps prepared from caterpillar fungus. At present Cordyceps is taken by a number of athletes for endurance. In other examples a Boston Marathon runner who had been taking Cordyceps cut an unbelievable 25 minutes of his time and placed in the top ten winners.

In the beginning, collection and trade of caterpillar fungus from Tibet to China was done for the exchange for tea or luxury goods like silk, confirming its economics importance. Bacot (1912), Wilson (1913) and Bailey (1945) brought the first photo of Yartsa collection taken in Lithang in 1911 to the West. In the spring and summer months Tibetan also dig plants and collect fungi and other articles of medicinal value for export to the Chinese market.

Historically 60% of China’s Chong Cao supply came from the Tibetan areas of Sichuan. During the cultural revolution and the commune phase the Chong Cao market cooled off, however, it resumed with the economic liberalizations in the early 1980s and since then caterpillar fungus has developed into one of the most important ‘Cash Crop’ on south Eastern plateau. Its small size, easy preservation and high value made transportation very easy. Dried specimens offered much higher price in winter. Cordyceps is traded in several categories. The