Chapter-3
Ethnobotany in Kerala

3.1 Historical Account

India is one of the countries where ethnobotanical knowledge existed from time immemorial. The country has about 53 million tribes, it is perhaps the largest country possessing a good treasure of accumulated indigenous tribal knowledge (Pushpangadan, 1994). There are three major sources of ethnobotanical knowledge in our country. They are: Archaeological sources—include mural paintings, drawings, remains of ancient constructions etc. Traditional sources—include ethnobotany of indigenous religions and medical practices and are based on old works in Sanskrit. Tribal sources—Tribals are the aborigines who first inhabited the land. They have their own indigenous knowledge and is associated with their environment. Written records of the use of plants for human and animal diseases can be traced back to the Rigveda (5000-1600 BC), the earliest scripture of the Hindus (Jain, 1994). The Vedic Aryans were familiar with a lot of medicinal plants. The Indian indigenous system of medicine named Ayurveda, dating back to the Vedic ages (1500 – 800 BC) became most popular within the country and abroad.

Ethnobotany is the direct use of plants by man. The ethnobotanical knowledge is therefore associated with the elder generation and tribals who lived in a time where the modern medical facilities were less developed. In Kerala earlier there existed several traditional physicians called ‘Vaidyan’ who were authoritative in the use of local plants for healing many diseases including snake bite. The first monumental treatis ‘Hortus Indicus Malabaricus’ by Van Rheede, itself an evidence for this. He composed the text with the help of local physicians like Itti Achutan, Ranga Bhat, Vinayaka Pandit, Appu Bhat etc. (Mohanan & Daniel, 2005). The tribal groups of Kerala numbered about 53 (Velappan, 1994), and is about 1.14 percent of the total population of the state (2001 census). They inhabit along the forests of Western Ghats, has a rich traditional knowledge. The tribals of Kerala can be broadly classified based on their inhabitance into seven major zones (Velappan, 1994). They are as follows.
1. **Kasargod**: This zone includes two taluks of Kasargod district, Kasargod and Hosdurg. The major tribal groups in this area are Koragars and Maradis.

2. **Wayanad**: This zone include North and South Wayanad, and the area include high altitude mountains. The major tribes inhabiting this region are Paniyars, Kurichiar, Mullukkurumar, Kattunayikkans or Thenkurumars, Wayanad Kadors, Adiyar, Kunduvadiyar, Kanaalaadikal and Thachanadans.

3. **Attappadi**: This region includes Mannarkkad taluk of Palakkad district and has high altitude forests coming under the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. The chief tribal groups in this region are Irular, Mudugar and Kurumbar. The government implemented Attappadi Hill Area Development Scheme for the socio-economic upliftment of the tribals and also for rejuvenating the lost greenery in the area.

4. **Nilambur**: This region comes under Mancheri Taluk of Malappuram district. The renowned “Cave Men of Kerala” a less civilized tribe, ‘Cholanaykkkan’ inhabit here. They are located in Forests ranges of Nilambur namely, Karulai and Chunkathara. They are living in caves and are away from the main stream. The other tribal groups in this region includes Aranadans, Aalaar, Paniyar, Kurumar and Kadar. They are mainly inhabiting the peripheral regions.

5. **Parambikulam**: This zone comes under Chittur Taluk of Palakkad district. The tribal group living in this zone are Kadar (Muthuvan), who resemble the Negritto race.

6. **Idukki**: This region comes under 4 taluks of Idukki district namely Devikulam, Peerumedu, Udumbanchola, and Thodupuzha. The tribals inhabiting this region are Malayar, Uralis, Ulladar, Mannan, Muthuvan, Paliyar, Kurumbappulayar and Karavazhippulayar.

7. **Travancore**: This zone includes the rest, upto Thiruvananthapuram includes part of Idukki, Pathananthitta, Kottayam, Kollam and Thiruvananthapuram districts. The prominent tribal groups in this region include Malavedan, Kanikkar, Ulladar and Malaarayan.
3.2 The major tribal people inhabiting the forests of Kerala

The major tribal people inhabiting the forests of Kerala state are the following.

**Kanis**: They are inhabiting the forests of Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam districts around the Agasthyamala hills. They practice shifting cultivation and also collect hill produce. The "Moopan", chief of the group mainly practices herbal medicine. The use of “Arogyapacha” *Trichopus zeylanicus*, as a rejuvenating health tonic, is a traditional knowledge of this tribe. Many of the Kani families living around the Neyyar sanctuary is engaged in cultivation of rubber. They are now in a changing stage and the new generation is not interested in the traditional methods. Acculturalisation is eroding the traditional life style of this tribe.

**Kochuvelans**: They are residing at Ranni, Konni, Pathanamthitta and Sabarimala reserve forests. They are also called Malakuravans. They are mainly hunters. They are living inside the forests with little development.

**Malavedans**: They are settled at the places bordering Kollam and Pathanamthitta districts namely Kadameenchira, Narayanamuzhi, Kumarapuram, Katachira, Ottakkal, Thenmala and Achenkovil. They are primarily hunters but also cultivate rice and collect hill produce.

**Malapandarams**: A primitive hunting tribe lives along the deeper forests of Achenkovil, Sabarimala and Manimala. They used to wear ‘Maravuri’ the bark of trees, usually *Antiaris toxicaria* and gather hill produce while roaming around the forests.

**Mannans**: An agricultural tribe that inhabit the forests of Pathanamthitta, Kottayam and Ernakulam. They are generally found in elephant attacked areas and live in tree-top huts. Their settlements are scattered in Kanjirappally, Devikulam, Udumbanchola and Thodupuzha taluks.

**Mala Ulladans**: The name means peoples who live in interior forests (in Malayalam). They are nomads and live mainly by hunting and gathering hill produce. Women members spent their free time by making baskets and mats out of bamboo and men collect medicinal plants like roots of *Celastrus paniculatus, Rotula aquatica* etc.
**Karavazhis:** They are confined to Chinnar and Marayur in Anchanad Valley in Idukki district. This tribe is popularly known as Malapulayan (Hill pulayas), they are basically agriculturists.

**Kurumbas:** This tribe is seen in the Anchanad valley of Idukki and Attappadi of Palakkad districts. They were basically food gatherers who rely upon fruits, wild yams and fish. Most of them are now employed as forest labourers and changed their life style a lot.

**Mala Arayans:** As the name indicates, they are the kings of forests and are considered one of the earlier settlers. They inhabit the hilly tracts of Kanjirappally & Meenachil in Kottayam and Peermede in Idukki and Thodupuzha of Ernakulam district. They are mainly agriculturists, cultivating pepper on forest trees and also sustain on minor forest produce such as honey, wild fruits like gooseberry, mango etc.

**Muthuvans:** They are found only in Devikulam and Neriamangalam of Idukki district. They are more civilized and are engaged in different occupations like cattle rearing, agriculture, collection of hill produce etc.

**Paliyar:** This is another tribe confined to Kumily, Periyar and Vandanmedu of Idukki district. They were originally restricted to eastern slopes of Kerala, Cumbam in Tamil Nadu and are comparatively primitive. The women wear maravuri (bark of trees). They are mainly agriculturists, mainly depending on cultivation of cereals and pepper on forest trees and collection of forest produce. Now they are civilized and many of them are workers in the forest department.

**Chola Naikens:** The most secluded hill tribe of Kerala, Chola Naikens of Nilambur were unknown to outside world till recently as they live in caves in deep and inaccessible areas of forests (Sivarajan & Mathew, 1997). They live in colonies and their population is dwindling. They mainly depend on root tubers, yams, fruits, honey etc. They also collect minor forest produce.

**Naikans:** These tribal groups live in the fringes of Nilambur forests, and are more advanced groups. These people freely mix with outside world and often go inside forest for collecting minor forest produce.
The younger generations of these early inhabitants are not interested in preserving the traditional knowledge inherited from their forefathers. Hence there is an urgent need to properly document this before it is lost forever. In addition to the tribals in Kerala there exist a large number of traditional ayurvedic physicians and traditional home remedies. The present study also aims to compile all these data regarding the family Rubiaceae.