

Some Folk Uses of *Peganum harmala* in India and Pakistan

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The zygophyllaceous bush, *Peganum harmala*, grows in abundance in the plains around Lahore and vicinity in West Pakistan. In the Punjabi dialect, the plant is known as *hermal*. The dried black seeds are sold in the native drug market. The seeds and roots are reported to contain four alkaloids that are considered to be identical with vasicine from *Adhatoda vasica* of the Acanthaceae (1).

In India and Pakistan the seeds are employed as an anthelmintic and narcotic (1). Their physiological effect has been studied by Gunn (2) who found the principal effect to be a stimulation of the motor tracts of the cerebrum, and in poisonous doses resulted in a depression of the central nervous system.

In one of the Indian medicinal plant catalogs (3), *P. harmala* is listed as a drug which, when taken orally, excites sexual appetite, increases the menstrual flow and mamillary lactation. It is further described as an abortifacient in large doses, and it is said to be used in treating asthma, as a diuretic and febrifuge, and for genito-urinary disorders.

An interesting use not hitherto reported, as far as I know, is the almost ritual burning of the seed following a birth in

northwestern India and West Pakistan. The seeds are placed on burning charcoal, and the fumes are allowed to permeate the room for several days where a baby has been born. It is possible that the fumes from the seeds may possess some disinfectant properties. However, the older people in these regions insist that the reason for this ritual is the magical freeing of the new-born from ill health.

I have heard likewise from close friends from eastern Punjab in India that the seeds of *P. harmala* are burned likewise in rooms where a marriage ceremony is taking place. Undoubtedly, ritual purification is the underlying reason for the burning in both cases.

These few notes on folk uses of *P. harmala* are offered in view of the relative paucity of ethnobotanical data concerning this species.

Literature Cited

1. UNESCO. 1960. Medicinal plants of the arid zones. Arid Zone Research-XIII. Paris. p. 44-45.
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3. Das, Sudhir Kumar. Medicinal, economic and useful plants of India. Parachi Gobeson, P. O. Barrackpore, Calcutta, India. p. 28.

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Received for publication September 16, 1966.