Samuel Browne, a surgeon attached to the Military Hospital at Fort St George, Madras (1688–18), collected plants from villages around Madras (c. 30 km radius) and once from Tirupati (120 km). The collected plants were sent to the Royal Society of London, where James Petiver – an apothecary, botanist, entomologist, natural historian – determined and later published them in the Philosophical Transactions (of the Royal Society of London) between 1698 and 1703. Presently, the materials sent by Browne are stored at the Natural History Museum, London, under Sloane’s collections, because Hans Sloane acquired Petiver’s plant collections, which include Browne’s dispatches from Madras sent in 1696. By the present standards, the descriptions of plants provided by Petiver are awkward and complex, because of the then prevalent system of polynomial system of nomenclature using Latin descriptors, mixed with Indian vernacular (Tamil) names as supplied by Browne in his notes. Nonetheless, this set of papers is a valuable source of information for understanding the nature and diversity of the flora in the dry, semi-arid segments of the present Tamil Nadu and adjoining segments of Andhra Pradesh of the 1700s. The purpose of this article is to highlight some of the forgotten and ignored pages of the botanical history of Madras and clarify the basic details available in these papers, so that they could be explored extensively by competent botanists of the Coromandel to bring out the science of plants they include.

Samuel Browne and James Petiver

Browne was recruited by the Council at Fort St George as a relieving surgeon in 1688. This became necessary because of the sudden death of the then officiating surgeon John Heathfield and the nominated successor Edward Bulkley (also spelt as Buckley, Bulkly) could arrive from England only much later. Further to executing surgeon’s duties, Browne was commissioned to collect medicinally useful plants from within and around Madras area (referred as Fort St George) and send them to England with appropriate notes on their usefulness (referred as vertues). Initially housed in the rooms of the Royal Society in London, these materials were later shifted to the British Museum, and to the Natural History Museum (of London) in the 19th century.

Browne’s biographical details are available in Dandy’s pp 99–102. The following note, published in the 20th volume of the Philosophical Transactions, p 100 is self-explanatory:

‘The Honourable the East-India Company, having received from Mr Samuel Browne, a Physician who has liv’d Seventeen Years in their service at Fort St. George, or Madaras (Madras), in the East-Indies, a very considerable collection of dried specimens or Samples of Plants, Fruits, and Drugs, together with an Account (notes) of his observations of the Uses of them, by the Natives and others of those Parts, both in Physick (health), dying (dyeing, colouring, staining), etc. have very generously and for the Publick (public) Good, presented them to the Royal Society of London for improving Natural Knowledge: Who considering the great Use and Improvement may be made of such Collections, have ordered that the Publick shall have the Benefit of this Present (gift), by receiving the whole Account that came with them, from time to time in these Papers, and by taking care that the things themselves shall be preserved from Corruption in their Repository, where recourse may be had to them by the curious, so soon as they are put into such a Condition, as not to suffer by being handled.’

Browne’s medical career was in jeopardy when James Wheeler, Member of the Fort St George Council, died because of a medication dispensed by Browne in 1693. Wheeler’s death was later found to be due to inadvertent poisoning of the medication in the same mortar, in which arsenic was pounded previously for another patient. Browne went on trial, but was acquitted. He died in Madras in 1698.

Petiver (1663–1718) trained as an apothecary at St Bartholomew’s Hospital, London. By 1692, he was running his own apothecary shop in London. He was a passionate natural historian with a keen interest in insects and plants. By 1697, his plant collection numbered to 6000. He was a close associate of John Ray, remembered for his three-volume Historia Plantarum. Petiver assisted Ray when Ray was writing Historia Plantarum. From 1709, Petiver taught botany at the Society of Apothecaries. He has published several papers in the Philosophical Transactions. His Musei Petiveriani: Centuria Prima Rariora Natura Continens (1695–1703) deals with the descriptions...
of several plants, animals, and fossils. Britain sees Petiver as a ‘promoter of natural science’.

Browne’s commission to collect plants in Madras

Browne was commissioned by the English East-India Company (EEIC) to collect seeds and plants from Madras for introduction into Britain, mostly as elements of curiosity and, where possible, for medicinal use. In 1696, he shipped several seeds and plant cuttings, and well-preserved herbarium sheets to England. The seeds were planted in the most ‘curious’ gardens of England (note 2), one of them being the Apothecaries’ Garden at Chelsea, London, established in 1673, which later came to be known as the Chelsea Physic Garden. No details are available whether the introduced seeds survived and grew.

Hans Sloane, Secretary of the Royal Society and editor of the Philosophical Transactions, in Petiver’s Article 2 (Table 1) announces that only the ‘first book’ (first part) of Petiver would be published in the Transactions and the subsequent ‘books’ would be made available at the Gresham College (note 3). In fact, all of them were published in the Philosophical Transactions (Table 1). These papers, written by Petiver, are based on the observations of and notes made by Browne in and around Madras in 1696, with plant determinations and supplementary interpretations made by Petiver. When received in London in 1697 (note 4), the specimens were well preserved and included detailed hand-written notes by Browne. Petiver’s notes and descriptions were attached to the folios, and, with Browne’s labels, were published in the Philosophical Transactions. The following remark by Sloane, inserted within the Browne and Petiver article, in his capacity as the editor of Philosophical Transactions, illustrates the level of interest shown by the British on seeing foreign (here, Indian) natural materials (note 5):

‘That they may be of great use to the public, is manifest from this one particular. Some years ago, I think ever since the year 1672, a root was made great use of with some success in epileptic, convulsive or head diseases; it was called by Dr Peachy, a Physician since dead, Cassumuniar (note 6), and a sheet of paper was then printed of its virtues. It seemed to be a kind of sedoary (note 6) better than ordinary, but whence it came, or how to come by it (the name being feigned to hide it) and the person dead, none could tell. When I saw this collection at the East-India-house, I found among other things this root by the name of Bengalle (Bengal, Calcutta) and an account that it was much used by the Natives in the Indies.’

Interest in plants, especially in medicinal plants in India

That ancient Indians knew of plants as valuable materials of food, fibre and shelter is well known. Equally well known is that Indians knew plants as useful materials in managing human health. Ayurveda evolved into a sophisticated system by the 1st and 2nd century AD several volumes of Indian heritage articulate this point, including the Śrāngadāra Samhīti (32 cantos, 2600 verses) in which the canto Bhaśaśāyakaṇāṇa refers to collecting medicinally useful plants. It alludes to the ‘time’ for collecting the best-quality material, methods of collection, and how seasons influence and alter plant metabolism, and thus, the
compounds useful in treating diverse illnesses. So much so, Indians have catalogued plants of other uses in agriculture and horticulture, and documented them: notable among them is Vriṅka Ayurvedā, which technically speaks of plant-health management\textsuperscript{10}.

The earliest acclaimed book – based on Western scientific thinking – from India that lists plants and their medicinal values is the 12-volume *Hortus Malabaricus* (HM) compiled by the Dutch Governor of Cochin, Hendrik Adriaan van Rheede tot Drakenstein (1636–91), co-operating with a team of Indian intellectuals such as Itty Açutan, published between 1678 and 1693 (refs 11, 12).

Several Western science-based materia medicas, exploring Indian plants and their potentials, appeared in India in the 18th and 19th century\textsuperscript{13}. Technically, plant exploration and medical practice went hand in hand\textsuperscript{14}. For example, Samuel Benjamin Cnoll, a Halle-trained surgeon and a Moravian evangelist, established Laboratorium Chymicum (= pharmacy) in Tarangampadi (11\textdegree 1’N, 79\textdegree 50’E) near Tanjavur in 1732, from where he compounded and dispensed medications using locally available raw materials, most of them of plant origin, but following the then popular Danish Pharmacopeia: Thomas Bartholin’s *Dispensatorium Hafniense*\textsuperscript{15}. A majority of the British and Continental surgeons working in India evinced a deep interest in knowing about Indian plants and their therapeutic potential. Contributions of William Roxburgh (1751–1815)\textsuperscript{16}, Robert Wight (1796–1872)\textsuperscript{17}, and Joseph Hooker (1817–1911)\textsuperscript{18} – trained medical doctors – to Indian botany need to be reckoned here.

The Petiver articles

Article 1 (Table 1) is a verbatim reproduction of the letter Petiver wrote to Samuel Browne in Madras on 24 September 1698, after receiving the (first?) consignment of dry plant materials (note 7). The following passage from article 1 (pp. 313; 335) demonstrates the reciprocal nature of relationship between the London-based Petiver and Madras-based Browne:

‘My opinion of the plants you collected at Unanercoonda, about twelve miles (19.3 km) from Fort St. George.

As you desired, are as follows; in the same order (= sequence) and under those Malabar names and numbers you sent them to me (p. 313) … . Thus, Sir, I have given you my Sentiments of this your Unanercoonda Collection, and if herein I can be further Serviceable to you, be pleased freely to Command (p. 335).’

This relationship seems to have changed subsequently. In article 2 (Table 1) Petiver includes Browne as the first author, but in the later published articles (3–8), Browne’s name figures only in the title, and not as an author, suggesting a subordinate role of a collector. Browne’s death in 1698 could have been a reason. Table 2 provides a summary of dates and names of localities travelled to by Browne for collection of plants in and around Fort St George.

**Remarks**

Most likely, Browne was interested in plants to the extent that they were useful in managing human health. Also because the EEIC commissioned to him to obtain plants of Fort St George (i.e. Madras), he must have explored the villages listed in Table 2. From Petiver’s articles, it is clear that Browne supplied comprehensive notes to him. Browne provides details of the landscapes he travelled. For example, in article 2 (Table 1) he indicates that plants were collected from a village, which he identifies as Hinguer Pollum (not identifiable by me, although
Figure 3. Samples of p. 579 and p. 588 from Browne and Petiver (1700–01).

Table 1. List of papers on the ‘flora’ of Madras, 1698–1703*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>First Publication Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Petiver, J., An account of some Indian plants, &amp;c. with their names,</td>
<td>Philosophical Transactions, 1698, 20</td>
<td>313–335</td>
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<td>descriptions and vertues; communicated in a letter from Mr James</td>
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<td>Petiver, Apothecary and Fellow of the Royal Society to Mr Samuel</td>
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<td>Brown, Surgeon at Fort St George.</td>
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<td>curious plants and drugs, lately given to the Royal Society by the</td>
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<td>East India Company.</td>
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<td>India Plants, with their names, vertues, description, &amp;c. By James</td>
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<td>Petiver, Apothecary, and Fellow of the Royal Society.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Petiver, J., An account of Mr Sam Brown, his third book of East</td>
<td>Philosophical Transactions, 1700–1701, 22</td>
<td>843–862</td>
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<td>India Plants, with their names, vertues, description, &amp;c. By James</td>
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<td>Petiver, Apothecary, and Fellow of the Royal Society to which are</td>
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<td>added some animals sent to him from those parts.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Petiver, J., A description of some shells found on the Molucca</td>
<td>Philosophical Transactions, 1700–1701, 22</td>
<td>1007–1029</td>
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<td>Islands as also an account of Mr Sam Brown, his fourth book of</td>
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<td>East India Plants, names, vertues, description, &amp;c. By James</td>
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<td>Petiver, Apothecary, and Fellow of the Royal Society.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Petiver, J., An account of Mr Sam Brown, his sixth book of East</td>
<td>Philosophical Transactions, 1700–1701, 22</td>
<td>1007–1029</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>Petiver, J., Mr Sam Brown his seventh book of East India plants,</td>
<td>Philosophical Transactions, 1702–1703, 23</td>
<td>1055–1068</td>
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<td>Petiver, Apothecary, and Fellow of the Royal Society.</td>
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*Full papers are freely downloadable at: [http://rsfl.royalsocietypublishing.org](http://rsfl.royalsocietypublishing.org)*

the second word Pollum may be read as Palayam), 20 miles (c. 32 km) off Fort St George. Browne describes the landscape of this locality as ‘plain’, ‘clay’ soil, somewhat ‘stony’, unsuitable for agriculture, and a ‘mere (spelt as ‘meer’) wilderness’.

Article 2 (Table 1) includes details and descriptions of 47 plants. As a sample, Box 1 reproduces the description supplied for ‘cherry-mango’.

What is described as moruttan–chidde above is possibly Lawsonia inermis (Lythraceae), because moruttan–chidde can be read as maruthãni-chédi (Tamil), viz. henna. The reference to pleasant-smelling flowers additionally suggests this determination. Today we know that the petals of *L. inermis* smell sweet, because of α- and β-ionones. Some old literature on India, loosely refers to the
whole of peninsular India as ‘Malabar’. That the term ‘Malabar’ meant Tamil country and the Tamil people occurs in Jensen14, p. 495.

Description of item 2 (article 2, Table 1, p. 584) refers to a plant with membranous pods as Madras’ flower fence. Petiver supplies supplementary notes as follows: Crista pavonis auriculata, non spinosa, siliquis Membranaceis è Madraspatan. In support of his determination, he draws from his own work Musei Petiveriani (p. 57). Linnaeus in Flora Zeylanica13 (pp. 64–65) places this taxon under Cassia, quoting Petiver’s above words as such. The Tamil name cited is avarae, which should be read as āvārā or āvāram (note 8). In this paper Browne and Petiver refer to the works of Leonard Plukenett20 and Ray21. Based on the Tamil name āvārā, other morphological details supplied by Petiver, and Linnaeus’ placement of this taxon under Cassia, in high probability, this is Senna auriculata (Linnaeus) Roxburgh 1832 (= Cassia auriculata sensu Linnaeus, 1753; C. densistipulata sensu Taubert, 1895).

Many notations in Petiver’s papers refer to the usefulness of the collected plants in medicine. For example, in p. 584, the note that a decoction from the root barks of the item listed under 11 (article 2, Table 1, p. 584), identified as ‘sweet-flowered Angola’ (article 8, Table 1), Odinjee or Odinjee (Tamil name) is indicated for treating common cold and stiffness of limbs; from the fruits an oil is extracted, which is indicated as useful in lighting lamps and pain-relieving massage oil.

Overall, these articles offer a list of plants, collected randomly and referred in vernacular names (mostly in Tamil) and naming them using a system delineated by either Plukenett or Ray, since Linnaeus’ Systema Naturae13 appeared much later in time. The polynomial system used by Petiver in these articles renders the text difficult to follow. Nevertheless, these papers offer fascinating insights into the Western science promoted by Madras in the 1700s.

Conclusion

In this article, I have endeavoured to bring to light some unknown (or forgotten, ignored?) elements in the history of botany in India and to clarify some of the associated details as evident in these Petiver papers (1698–1703). On purpose, I have refrained from making any critical remarks on them, because I am strongly hopeful that this article will provoke competent botanists of the Coromandel to explore the Petiver papers more incisively and meaningfully. In the last few days, I got to know that Ms Ranee Prakash of the Natural History Museum, London, has worked out the correct botanical identities of the Browne collections made in Madras and shortly she will be publishing those details in a professional botanical journal.

Notes

1. The Military Hospital located in Fort St George, later became the Madras General Hospital.
2. ‘Curious’ in early 18th century Britain did not mean ‘eager’ as we imply today. It meant ‘care’, ‘careful’ deriving from the term curiousus (Latin), which later evolved into cura implying ‘care’ (https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/curious, accessed on 24 May 2018).
3. Gresham College exists from 1597; see https://www.gresham.ac.uk/.
4. Browne sent two volumes of seven books (parts) of plants and notes to the EEIC Office, which were received in London in 1697. Browne requests in the cover letter included within that dispatch that James Petiver should ‘have a sight thereof’ of the materials sent. The received materials were consequently transferred to the Royal Society of London, where they remained until 1781 (ref. 2).
5. The text is exactly reproduced from the original. Minor changes have been made.
to offer easy readability in modern context. For example, wherever necessary, ‘I’ has been replaced by ‘i’ and certain nouns starting with upper-case letters have been changed to lower-case letters.

6. *Cassumunar* is Zingiber cassumunar (= Z. montanum, Zingiberaceae). This is variously referred in older literature: e.g. *Bengale radix*, *Bengalle indorum* (ref. 24, p. 146). Z *cassumunar* is a native of India, specifically restricted to Bengal and the North East. Many 19th century European materia-medicas refer to this medically useful plant24. Zedoary is *C. zedoaria* (= *C. zedoaria* Linnaeus, C., 1753) (Zingiberaceae). Modern studies on the chemistry and pharmacokinetics of *Z. cassumunar* suggest only a weak link of this material in managing epilepsy and convulsions: for instance, β-eudesmol, an essential oil of *Z. cassumnar* is possibly helpful in treating epilepsy and convulsions25.

7. By the time this article was published in the Philosophical Transactions, Samuel Browne had died in Madras.

8. It is important to read the Tamil names, āvarai or āvaram, with the ‘ā’ read as *aah*, since *avarai* (Tamil) is the vegetable Dolichos lablab (Fabaceae).

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HISTORICAL NOTES


