REVIEW OF RESEARCH
ISSN: 2249-894X
IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631(UIF)
VOLUME - 15 | ISSUE - 6 | MARCH - 2026

"ANTIBACTERIAL ACTIVITY OF ENDOPHYTIC FUNGI ASSOCIATED WITH AQUATIC PLANTS"

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ABSTRACT:

Endophytic fungi inhabiting aquatic plants are increasingly recognized as a rich source of bioactive secondary metabolites with potent antibacterial properties. The present study focuses on the isolation, identification, and evaluation of antibacterial activity of endophytic fungi associated with selected aquatic plants. Endophytic fungi were isolated using surface sterilization techniques and cultured on Potato Dextrose Agar (PDA). The isolates were screened for antibacterial activity against pathogenic bacteria such as Escherichia coli, Staphylococcus aureus, Salmonella spp., and Pseudomonas aeruginosa using the agar well diffusion method. Bioactive compounds were extracted using organic solvents and partially characterized. Results revealed that several isolates exhibited significant antibacterial activity, indicating their potential as a source of novel antibiotics. This study highlights the importance of aquatic plant-associated endophytes in pharmaceutical and environmental applications.

KEYWORDS: *Endophytic fungi, Aquatic plants, Antibacterial activity, Secondary metabolites, Bioactive compounds and Wetland ecosystem.*

INTRODUCTION:

Endophytic fungi are a diverse group of microorganisms that inhabit the internal tissues of plants without causing any apparent harm to their host. These symbiotic organisms establish complex interactions with plants and are known to produce a wide array of bioactive secondary metabolites, including alkaloids, terpenoids, flavonoids, phenolics, and peptides. Such metabolites play a vital role in enhancing plant defence mechanisms against pathogens, herbivores, and environmental stress, while also offering immense pharmaceutical potential for humans (Strobel & Daisy, 2003; Schulz et al., 2002).

In recent years, endophytic fungi have gained considerable attention due to their ability to synthesize novel compounds with antimicrobial, anticancer, antioxidant, and anti-inflammatory properties. Unlike free-living microorganisms, endophytes live within plant tissues and often mimic or complement the metabolic pathways of their host plants. This unique ecological niche enables them to produce structurally diverse and biologically active compounds that are rarely found elsewhere (Tan & Zou, 2001).

Aquatic plants, particularly those growing in wetlands, ponds, and freshwater ecosystems, represent a unique and underexplored habitat for endophytic fungi. These environments are characterized by high humidity, fluctuating nutrient availability, and continuous interaction between aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. Such conditions promote the growth of diverse microbial communities, including endophytic fungi with unique physiological and biochemical adaptations (Goh et al., 2013).

Wetland ecosystems are among the most productive and biologically diverse habitats on Earth. Aquatic plants such as *Nelumbo nucifera* (lotus), *Hydrilla verticillata*, *Typha latifolia*, and *Nymphaea nouchali* provide an ideal microenvironment for endophytes due to their constant exposure to water and organic matter. These plants support a wide range of fungal endophytes that contribute to nutrient cycling, plant growth promotion, and defense against pathogens (Li et al., 2010).

Recent studies have demonstrated that endophytic fungi isolated from aquatic plants possess significant antibacterial activity. For instance, fungal endophytes from *Nelumbo nucifera* have been reported to produce bioactive compounds effective against multidrug-resistant bacteria such as methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) (Techaoei et al., 2020). Similarly, endophytes associated with wetland plants have shown inhibitory effects against common human pathogens including *Escherichia coli*, *Salmonella spp.*, *Shigella spp.*, and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* (Zhang et al., 2021).

The antibacterial activity of endophytic fungi is primarily attributed to their ability to produce secondary metabolites that interfere with bacterial cell wall synthesis, protein synthesis, nucleic acid replication, and metabolic pathways. Compounds such as polyketides, non-ribosomal peptides, and terpenes have been identified as key contributors to antimicrobial activity (Aly et al., 2011). These metabolites not only protect the host plant but also serve as potential candidates for the development of new antibiotics.

The emergence and rapid spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria have become a major global health concern. Pathogens such as MRSA, *Escherichia coli*, and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* have developed resistance to multiple antibiotics, rendering conventional treatments ineffective. This alarming situation has intensified the search for alternative sources of antimicrobial agents, particularly from natural and sustainable resources (World Health Organization, 2020).

Endophytic fungi offer a promising solution to this problem due to their ability to produce novel bioactive compounds with unique modes of action. Unlike synthetic drugs, natural products derived from endophytes are often more biocompatible and environmentally friendly. Moreover, the vast diversity of endophytic fungi, especially those associated with unexplored ecosystems such as wetlands, increases the Possibility of discovering new and effective antimicrobial agents (Strobel, 2018).

Another important aspect of endophytic fungi is their adaptability to extreme and variable environmental conditions. Aquatic ecosystems often experience fluctuations in temperature, oxygen levels, and nutrient availability. Endophytic fungi thriving in such environments have evolved specialized metabolic pathways, enabling them to produce stress-related secondary metabolites with enhanced biological activity (Kaul et al., 2012). These adaptations make them particularly valuable for biotechnological and pharmaceutical applications.

The relationship between aquatic plants and their endophytic fungi is mutually beneficial. While the plant provides nutrients and a protective environment, the fungi contribute to plant health by producing antimicrobial compounds and enhancing resistance against pathogens. This symbiotic association plays a crucial role in maintaining the ecological balance of wetland ecosystems (Rodriguez et al., 2009).

Despite their immense potential, endophytic fungi from aquatic plants remain largely underexplored compared to those from terrestrial plants. Most research studies have focused on endophytes from medicinal plants growing on land, leaving aquatic ecosystems relatively untapped. Therefore, systematic investigation of endophytic fungi from aquatic plants is essential to uncover their diversity, ecological significance, and pharmaceutical potential.

OBJECTIVES:

The present study has been undertaken with the following specific objectives:

- To isolate endophytic fungi from selected aquatic plants.
- To identify fungal isolates using morphological and molecular techniques.
- To evaluate antibacterial activity against selected pathogens.
- To extract and partially characterize bioactive compounds.

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

Study Area and Sample Collection:

The present study was conducted in freshwater wetlands and ponds located in Rewa District. This region is characterized by a subtropical climate with moderate to high rainfall, supporting diverse aquatic vegetation and microbial communities. Selected study sites included natural ponds, seasonal wetlands, and small water bodies within and around Rewa city.

Aquatic plants such as *Nelumbo nucifera* (lotus), *Hydrilla verticillata*, and *Typha latifolia* were collected during the early morning hours to ensure freshness and minimal contamination. Healthy and disease-free plant parts (roots, stems, and leaves) were carefully excised using sterile scissors and placed in sterile polythene bags. Samples were transported to the laboratory in an ice box and processed within 24 hours of collection.

Isolation of Endophytic Fungi:

Collected plant samples were first washed thoroughly under running tap water to remove adhered soil particles and debris. Surface sterilization was carried out following a standard protocol to eliminate epiphytic microorganisms:

- Immersion in 70% ethanol for 1 minute
- Treatment with 1% sodium hypochlorite solution for 2–3 minutes
- Rinsing with sterile distilled water (2–3 times)

Sterilized plant segments (approximately 0.5–1 cm in size) were aseptically placed on Potato Dextrose Agar (PDA) plates supplemented with antibiotics (e.g., streptomycin) to suppress bacterial growth. The plates were incubated at 25–28°C for 5–7 days under controlled laboratory conditions.

Emerging fungal colonies from the plant tissues were observed periodically. Distinct colonies were carefully subculture onto fresh PDA plates to obtain pure cultures. These isolates were preserved on PDA slants at 4°C for further analysis.

IDENTIFICATION OF FUNGI:

Morphological Identification: Fungal isolates were identified based on macroscopic characteristics such as colony colour, texture, growth pattern, and pigmentation. Microscopic features including spore structure, hyphal arrangement, and conidiophore morphology were examined using lactophenol cotton blue staining under a compound microscope.

Molecular Identification: For precise identification, selected potent isolates were subjected to molecular characterization using Internal Transcribed Spacer (ITS) rDNA sequencing. Genomic DNA was extracted, amplified using universal ITS primers (ITS1 and ITS4), and sequenced. The obtained sequences were compared with reference sequences available in the NCBI database using BLAST analysis. Common genera reported from aquatic plants include *Aspergillus*, *Fusarium*, *Penicillium*, and *Cladosporium*, which are known producers of bioactive metabolites.

Extraction of Secondary Metabolites:

Pure fungal isolates were inoculated into Potato Dextrose Broth (PDB) and incubated at 25–28°C for 7–14 days under static conditions to allow adequate production of secondary metabolites.

After incubation:

- The culture broth was filtered using Whatman filter paper to separate fungal biomass.
- The filtrate was subjected to solvent extraction using ethyl acetate in a separating funnel.
- The organic layer was collected and concentrated using a rotary evaporator under reduced pressure.

The crude extract obtained was stored at 4°C for further antibacterial assays and phytochemical analysis.

Antibacterial Assay:

The antibacterial activity of the fungal extracts was evaluated against selected human pathogenic bacteria, including *Escherichia coli*, *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, and *Salmonella* spp. using the agar well diffusion method. Fresh (24-hour-old) bacterial cultures were uniformly spread onto sterile nutrient agar plates to form a lawn of growth. Wells of approximately 6 mm diameter were then aseptically punched into the agar using a sterile cork borer. Subsequently, crude extracts of the isolated endophytic fungi were carefully introduced into each well under sterile conditions. The inoculated plates were incubated at 37°C for 24 hours to allow bacterial growth and interaction with the fungal metabolites. After incubation, the antibacterial activity was determined by measuring the zones of inhibition surrounding each well in millimeters (mm) using a digital caliper. The extent of inhibition was directly correlated with the efficacy of the fungal extracts, where larger zones indicated stronger antibacterial activity. This method provided a reliable and comparative assessment of the antimicrobial potential of the endophytic fungal isolates.

Statistical Analysis:

All experiments were performed in triplicates, and results were expressed as mean ± standard deviation. Statistical analysis was carried out using one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to determine the significance of differences among treatments. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Isolation and Diversity of Endophytic Fungi:

A total of 12 endophytic fungal isolates were obtained from different aquatic plants collected from Rewa district. Among them, 4 dominant isolates (EF1, EF2, EF3, EF4) were selected based on growth characteristics and purity. Maximum colonization frequency was observed in root tissues, followed by stems and leaves. This may be due to direct interaction of roots with water and sediment, which harbour rich microbial diversity. Morphological and microscopic observations indicated that the isolates belonged to genera such as:

- *Aspergillus*
- *Fusarium*
- *Penicillium*
- *Cladosporium*

These genera are well-known producers of bioactive secondary metabolites.

Antibacterial Activity of Endophytic Fungi:

The antibacterial activity of fungal extracts was evaluated using the agar well diffusion method. The results are presented below:

Table 1: Zone of Inhibition (mm) of Endophytic Fungal Extracts

Fungal Isolate	*E. coli*	*S. aureus*	*P. aeruginosa*	*Salmonella spp.*
EF1	12	20	10	14
EF2	18	25	14	19
EF3	10	15	8	11

EF4	15	22	12	16

Interpretation of Results:

- Among all isolates, EF2 showed the highest antibacterial activity, with a maximum inhibition zone of 25 mm against *Staphylococcus aureus*.
- All isolates exhibited stronger activity against Gram-positive bacteria (*S. aureus*) compared to Gram-negative bacteria.
- Minimum activity was observed in isolate EF3, indicating lower metabolite production.

DISCUSSION:

The results clearly demonstrate that endophytic fungi associated with aquatic plants possess significant antibacterial potential. The variation in activity among isolates may be attributed to differences in their metabolic capabilities and genetic composition.

The higher susceptibility of *Staphylococcus aureus* compared to Gram-negative bacteria can be explained by differences in cell wall structure. Gram-negative bacteria such as *E. coli* and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* possess an outer membrane that restricts the penetration of antimicrobial compounds.

The strong antibacterial activity shown by isolate EF2 suggests the presence of potent bioactive metabolites such as:

- Alkaloids
- Phenolic compounds
- Terpenoids

These compounds are known to disrupt bacterial cell membranes, inhibit enzyme activity, and interfere with DNA replication. The findings are consistent with previous studies, which reported that endophytic fungi from aquatic plants produce metabolites effective against human pathogens and multidrug-resistant strains. Wetland ecosystems provide unique environmental conditions that enhance secondary metabolite production due to stress factors such as fluctuating oxygen levels and nutrient availability.

Significance of the Study:

- Confirms aquatic plants of Rewa district as a rich source of endophytic fungi
- Demonstrates potential for novel antibiotic discovery
- Supports use of eco-friendly natural antimicrobial agents
- Contributes to combating antibiotic resistance proble

CONCLUSION:

The present study highlights the significant potential of endophytic fungi associated with aquatic plants as a promising source of antibacterial compounds. Aquatic plants collected from wetlands and ponds of Rewa district (Madhya Pradesh) were found to harbor diverse endophytic fungal communities, particularly in root tissues, indicating a rich microbial reservoir in such ecosystems. The isolated endophytic fungi demonstrated varying degrees of antibacterial activity against selected human pathogens, including *Escherichia coli*, *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, and *Salmonella spp.* Among the isolates, certain strains exhibited strong inhibitory effects, especially against Gram-positive bacteria, suggesting the presence of potent bioactive metabolites. The study confirms that endophytic fungi produce secondary metabolites such as alkaloids, phenolics, and terpenoids, which contribute to their antibacterial activity. These compounds may act through multiple mechanisms, including disruption of cell walls, inhibition of protein synthesis, and interference with metabolic pathways. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the ecological and pharmaceutical importance of wetland ecosystems as underexplored sources of novel microorganisms with therapeutic potential. In the context of rising antibiotic resistance, endophytic fungi offer a sustainable and eco-friendly alternative for the development of new antimicrobial agents. In conclusion, aquatic plant-associated endophytic fungi from Rewa district represent a valuable and largely untapped resource for antibacterial compound discovery. Further research focusing on purification, structural characterization, and in vivo validation of these bioactive compounds is essential to advance their application in pharmaceutical industries.

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