

# PLASMODIUM FALCIPARUM: DETECTION AND STRAIN IDENTIFICATION OF INDIAN ISOLATES BY POLYMERASE CHAIN REACTION

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**Abstract.** The polymerase chain reaction (PCR) was employed for detection and strain identification of *P. falciparum* in a comparative field study of Indian isolates. The primers were selected from highly conserved regions flanking the variable, tandemly repeated regions of highly polymorphic cell surface antigens, major merozoite surface antigen-1 (MSP-1), major surface antigen-2 (MSP-2), circumsporozoite surface antigen (CSP) and ring-infected erythrocyte surface antigen (RESA). Out of the 52 microscopically positive *P. falciparum* infected field samples, 47 samples were positive by PCR. Variation in the size of the amplified products was observed using MSP-1, MSP-2 specific primers respectively in different field isolates of *P. falciparum*, but CSP and RESA did not exhibit any variation in size of the amplified product. The multiplex PCR results demonstrated that amplified products from these surface antigens vary in size and there is a specific pattern for each strain and this could be utilized to identify a particular field isolate. One *P. falciparum* infected field sample detected by the above PCR method was found to be a mixed infection by two different strains. Five microscopically positive *P. vivax* infected samples were also analyzed by PCR method using *P. falciparum* cell surface antigen (MSP-2) specific primers. PCR results showed one *P. vivax* infected sample was positive when *P. falciparum* specific primers were used, this could be due to inaccurate and reduced limit of detection of *Plasmodial* species by microscopic examination.

## INTRODUCTION

Malaria is a major cause of morbidity and mortality in many tropical and subtropical countries, affecting more than 300 million people each year (WHO, 1992). The major problem in recent years has been development of drug resistant parasites and appearance of various new strains within pre-existing *Plasmodium* species. Diagnosis and epidemiological surveillance are essential elements in the management of the malaria infection both at the level of treatment of malaria infected patient and to control the spread of the drug resistance strains. Traditional diagnosis of malaria, which is based on microscopic examination of Giemsa-stained thick and thin blood smears, has drawbacks due to its labor intensive nature, inability to identify drug resistance strains, strain heterogeneity and to monitor the efficacy of chemotherapeutic treatment of malaria (Makler *et al.*, 1998a). Hence the development of new diagnostic methods for identification of low level of infection and of different strains is of utmost importance.

The polymerase chain reaction (PCR) has been widely used to monitor treatment response in human immunodeficiency virus infection (Hamed *et al.*, 1993), *P. falciparum* and *P. vivax* infection (Kain *et al.*, 1993; Irion *et al.*, 1998) and other antimicrobial chemotherapeutic treatments (Aurelius *et al.*, 1990, Degraeve *et al.*, 1994). The PCR amplification of highly polymorphic cell surface antigens (Edoh *et al.*, 1997; Wooden *et al.*, 1992), a small-subunit rRNA gene (Ciceron *et al.*, 1999; Das *et al.*, 1995), highly repeated subtelomeric sequence (rep20) (Urdaneta *et al.*, 1998), the DHFR-TS (dihydrofolate reductase-thymidylate synthase) gene (Wataya *et al.*, 1991) and p126 gene of *P. falciparum* (Zalis *et al.*, 1996), is another alternative highly sensitive and non-radioactive method for diagnosis of the malaria parasite. Due to its high specificity and sensitivity PCR can detect parasite level which is below the microscopic threshold and also is very useful in genotyping of different *P. falciparum* strains from different geographic origins.

Genes that encode cell surface antigens, eg major merozoite surface antigen-1 (MSP-1; Mackay *et al.*, 1985), major surface antigen-2 (MSP-2; Fenton *et al.*, 1991; Smythe *et al.*, 1991), circumsporozoite surface antigen (CSP; Dame *et al.*, 1984) and ring-infected erythrocyte surface antigen (RESA; Favalaro *et al.*, 1986) which are considered potential vaccine

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candidates, are generally used to identify different strains of the *P. falciparum*. The genes have conserved 5' and 3' ends but contain a region with blocks of tandemly repeated sequences which vary in size and DNA sequence from strain to strain of *P. falciparum* (Kemp *et al*, 1987). The highly conserved DNA sequences in the 5' and 3' regions flanking the variable repeats have earlier been used to design primers that amplified the products spanning the repeats (Wooden *et al*, 1993). These primer pairs for four different surface antigens were used in this study to identify polymorphisms and rapid sensitive typing of different field isolates from India.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Materials

*Thermus aquaticus* (Taq) DNA polymerase and dNTPs mixture was purchased from Promega (Madison, USA) and all other materials and reagents were of highest quality procured locally. Chelex-100 was purchased from Sigma Chemical Company (St Louis MO, USA).

### Patient isolates

A total of 52 Giemsa stained blood smears were collected from Malaria Research Center, New Delhi, India. These smears were detected positive for *P. falciparum* infection based on smear examination. Blood smears from 7 normal individuals were also collected from the same area. Five Giemsa stained blood smears that were detected positive microscopically for *P. vivax* were obtained from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) New Delhi, India.

### DNA Isolation

For detection and strain identification of *P. falciparum* Giemsa stained thin blood smears from infected patients were used for DNA extraction by chelex-100 method as described by Masatsugu *et al* (1995) and Wooden *et al* (1993).

### Designing of PCR primers

Based upon the conserved regions in the *P. falciparum* surface antigens, MSP-1, MSP-2, CSP and RESA, four different sets of highly specific primers were used (Wooden *et al*, 1993). The primer sequences used for MSP-1 were 5' Primer (5' GAAGATGCAGTATTGACAGG 3') and 3' Primer

(GAGTTCTTTAATAGTGAACAAG 3'), for MSP-2 the 5' Primer (5' GAGTATAAGGAGAAGTATGG 3') and 3' Primer (5' CCTGTACCTTTATTCTCTGG 3'), for CSP the 5' Primer (5' ATAGTAGATCACT TGGAGA 3') and 3' Primer (5' GCATATTGTG ACCTTGTCCTA 3') and for RESA the 5' Primer (5' GATCAAGGAGGAGAGAGAACC 3') and 3' Primer (5' CAGCATTAACACCAACACC 3') were used.

### Polymerase chain reaction

PCR was performed with parasite DNA from different Giemsa-stained thin and thick smears with Taq DNA polymerase (Promega), 200 µM of each dNTPs, 1x PCR buffer and 0.25 µM of each primer. The reaction mixture was incubated in a thermocycler (PTC-100™, MJ Research Inc, USA) at 95°C, 52°C and 72°C for 1 minute, 30 seconds and 1 minute respectively for 30 cycles respectively. PCR product was analysed on the 1.8% agarose (Seakem Me FMC Bioproducts, USA) gel.

## RESULTS

The *P. falciparum* strain specific polymorphic genetic markers merozoite surface protein 1 (MSP-1), merozoite surface protein 2 (MSP-2), circumsporozoite protein (CSP) and ring-infected erythrocyte surface antigen (RESA) were used in field genotyping of *P. falciparum* strains. PCR was performed on 52 samples which were reported positive by microscopic examination for *P. falciparum* and out of these 47 samples were observed positive for *P. falciparum* infection by PCR using different set of primers representing the surface antigens.

PCR was performed on 16 samples collected from patients that were reported positive for *P. falciparum* infection by microscopic examination, using MSP-1 specific sense and antisense primers (Fig 1 A). Lanes 1-13 and 21-23 show variation in the size of the MSP-1 amplified PCR product when DNA from different field isolates were used as templates. The size of the PCR product varied from 200- 300 bp. Lanes 14-20 represent samples from normal individuals and no PCR product was observed when MSP-1 specific primers were used.

Fig 1B shows PCR products from a total of 17 samples of infected blood smears using the primers for MSP-2. As with MSP-1 primers, MSP-2 specific primers yielded products of different sizes ranging from 400-500 bp when the DNA from these isolates was used as templates. Interestingly

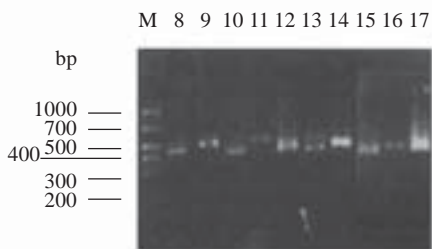
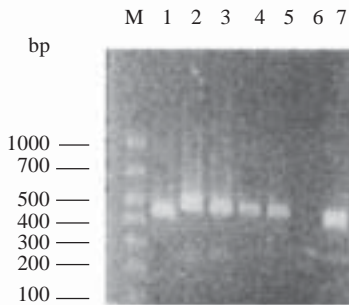
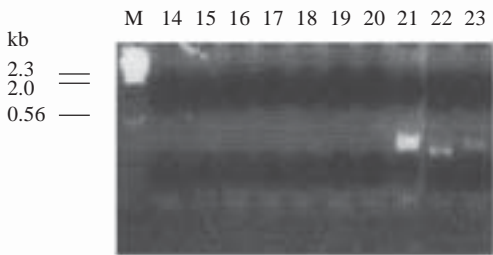
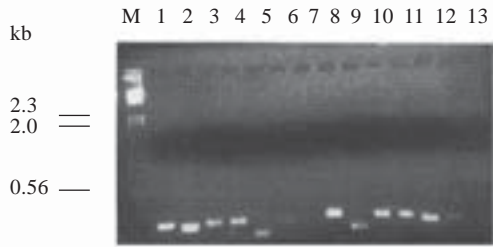
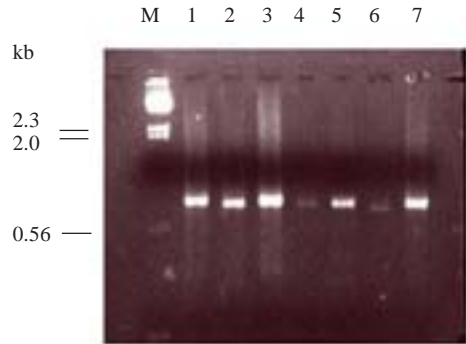
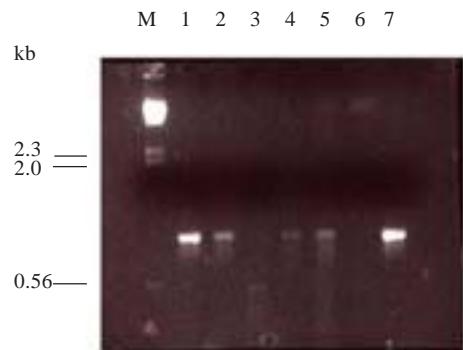


Fig 1—Gel photographs showing PCR amplified products of MSP-1 (A) and MSP-2 (B) from different *P. falciparum* infected isolates. The DNA size markers are *Hind*III digested lambda DNA and 100 bp ladder, shown on the left side.

lane 13 showed two PCR products ranging from 400- 500 bp. This may signify infection with two different isolates of *P. falciparum*. Thus variation in size of MSP-1 and MSP-2 PCR amplified product from different *P. falciparum* patient isolates shows that these two *P. falciparum* antigens, lo-



A



B

Fig 2—PCR amplified CSP (a) and RESA (b) products from different patient isolates of *P. falciparum*. The DNA size marker is a *Hind*III digested lambda DNA.

cated on the merozoite surface exist in numerous alleles in these field isolates of *P. falciparum* exhibiting length polymorphism in the tandemly repeated domain.

The amplified PCR products using CSP and RESA cell surface antigens specific primers and DNA template from different patient isolates are shown in Fig 2 A and B respectively. The expected size of the PCR product using CSP and RESA specific primers is approximately 600 and 900 bp, respectively. When run on 1.8 % agarose gel both CSP and RESA products were indistinguishable in all the strains assayed.

The multiplex PCR using the primer pairs for MSP-1 and MSP-2 and DNA from 6 different Giemsa stained *P. falciparum* patient isolates was performed. Each of these strains has a unique pattern of bands and this pattern can be used to identify easily the origin of the targeted DNA (Fig 3). The specific

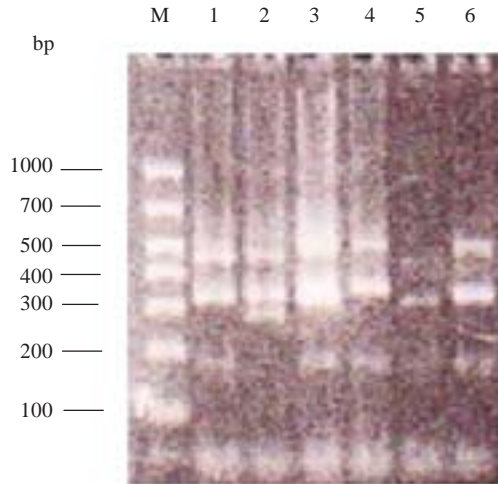


Fig 3—The amplified products from MSP-1 and MSP-2 genes of *P. falciparum* isolates by using both primer pairs together in the same multiplex PCR reaction. The DNA size marker is a 100 bp ladder.

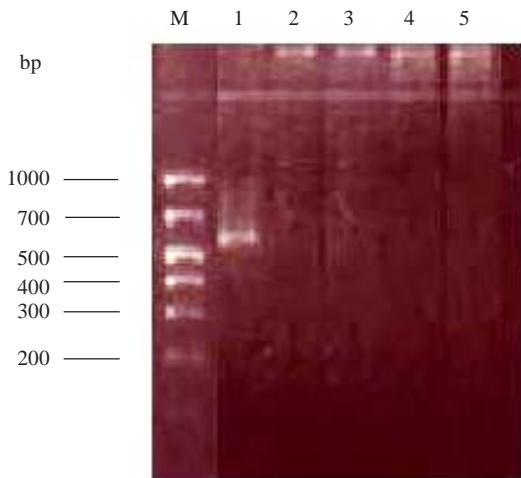


Fig 4—Gel photographs showing PCR amplified products of MSP-2 from different *P. vivax* infected isolates. The DNA size marker is 100 bp ladder, shown on the left side.

banding pattern obtained in multiplex PCR could be used to identify different strains.

Fig 4 represents 5 samples from infected individuals reported to be infected with *P. vivax* as identified by microscopic examination of the smears. The DNA from these samples was amplified using MSP-2 specific primers. All but one sample showed no product formation with MSP-2 specific primers. However lane 1 showed a PCR

product of 500 bp. This could be due to the infection of the patient with both *P. falciparum* and *P. vivax*.

## DISCUSSION

The different isolates of *P. falciparum* and of other plasmodial species exhibit a high degree of biological diversity in cell surface antigens. The allelic diversity that exists in certain genes of *P. falciparum* is due to an extensive degree of recombination in the parasite population which generates different strains with variable characters (Walliker *et al*, 1994). Due to limitations of microscopic diagnosis of malaria, now more advanced malaria diagnostic methods have been developed, which are based on the amplification of polymerase chain reaction (Edoh *et al*, 1997, Tirasophon *et al*, 1994), detection of trophozoite derived histidine-rich protein-2 antigen (ParaSight F antigen capture assay; Dipstick Test) (Genton *et al*, 1998; Humar *et al*, 1997; Schiff *et al*, 1993) and parasite-specific lactate dehydrogenase (pLDH, OptiMAL<sup>®</sup> assay) (Makler and Hinrichs, 1993, Makler *et al*, 1998b) by monoclonal antibodies have become available for sensitive detection, speciation, and quantitation of all human *Plasmodium* infections.

The PCR genotyping of the genes encoding the highly polymorphic loci MSP-1, MSP-2, CSP and RESA of *P. falciparum* provides a highly sensitive and specific method for the detection of malaria infection and strain identification of *P. falciparum*. The variations observed in various surface antigens in the present study, illustrate extensive allelic diversity in natural *P. falciparum* populations, however no size polymorphism was detected in these isolates in relation to CSP and RESA antigens. One *P. falciparum* infected blood sample which was identified by microscopic examination as a single strain was diagnosed by the PCR method as mixed infection of two different strains of *P. falciparum*.

A multiplex PCR approach using primer pairs for MSP-1 and MSP-2 simultaneously with different *P. falciparum* infected isolates showed different banding patterns for MSP-1 and MSP-2 due to genetic polymorphism in different alleles of these surface antigens. This difference in banding pattern obtained could be used to identify different strains of *P. falciparum*.

The primer pairs used in this study are highly specific for surface antigens MSP-1, MSP-2, CSP and RESA of *P. falciparum*, still they diagnosed

one *P. vivax* infected blood sample when amplified using MSP-2 specific primers. This difference in results from microscopy and PCR method is due to incorrect speciation. By microscopic examination of Giemsa-stained blood smears it is difficult to distinguish *P. falciparum* infection from *P. vivax* if only ring stage is present.

Out of a total of 52 isolates, 47 were identified positive by using different primer pairs for surface antigens MSP-1, MSP-2, CSP and RESA of *P. falciparum*. The five microscopically positive but PCR negative samples may be due to degradation of DNA during extraction or storage, inhibition of the PCR amplification by sample, insufficient amount of target DNA due to inadequate cellular lysis and most importantly incorrect species identification by microscopic examination.

It is conceivable from these studies that PCR method, using specific primers for four surface antigens of *P. falciparum* is an important diagnostic tool for identifying different strains of *P. falciparum* in the laboratory and in different field isolates, or where the possibility of mixed infections in the host needs to be identified or for epidemiological studies and heterogeneity studies of *P. falciparum* and also to identify the geographical distribution of different strains.

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