

## REVITALIZATION OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE AND THE CONTRIBUTION KANIKKAR TRIBES IN THIRUVANANTHAPURAM DISTRICT OF KERALA

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### Abstract

Indigenous medicine is widely practiced among the tribal and aboriginal populations in our country. These primitive societies followed a unique herbal remedies for the treatment of various ailments and health disorders from the time immemorial. Kanikkar is one of the major tribal communities located in the extreme South India especially in Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam Districts of Kerala. They are the torch bearers of traditional medicinal knowledge and well versed in using various herbs to cure various diseases. They are cultivating and preserving the rare medicinal plants in and around their settlements. In the present study, the values of indigenous medicine and the contribution of Kanikkar in the field of modern medicine are evaluated.

**Keywords:** Indigenous medicine, Kanikkar tribe, TBGRI, KIRTADS, Plathy, Chattu song, Jeevani

### INTRODUCTION

India is one of the nations which stood for systematically document traditional and folk medicinal practices. The best practise of healthcare system is prevalent among the different communities including tribal communities in India. The traditional knowledge is the wealth of a community living in natural habitats, sustainably utilising the locally available natural resources for their health and livelihood. India has one of the oldest, richest and diverse cultural traditions and healthcare system called 'folk tradition' in associated with the use of medicinal herbs. Kanikkar is one of the advanced tribal communities among the Scheduled Tribes of Kerala. They have their own culture and tradition associated with their natural habitats. They are following a unique method of healing art. They developed their own indigenous diagnostic procedures to detect the diseases and different treatment methods. Their treatment is mainly based on the utilization of locally available medicinal plants and drugs.

### TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

The traditional medicine or the indigenous medicine refers to the traditional knowledge on healthcare system that existed before the arrival of modern medicine. It is incorporated with the traditional knowledge, believes, skills and customs of a primitive community. In that sense, approach to the health tradition of each country which is handed down from generation. The term traditional knowledge implies to the knowledge, believes, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities around the world. The primitive man moulded their culture and lifestyle along with a plant based healthcare system and diagnostic procedure.

Traditional medicine is widely used in India, especially in rural areas. While tracing the history

several classical systems such as Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani and innumerable local folk medicinal traditions also existed in our country. Folk or the tribal medicine is a part of Traditional medicinal system. The folk medicinal practice includes midwifery, bone setting and treatment for snake bite etc. They use natural herbs, roots, plants and other natural things in the forest. The knowledge of such medicinal plants and preparation of medicine are still transmitted mostly in oral form to the next generation of such practitioners<sup>i</sup>.

Our knowledge of medicinal plants can be traced back from Vedic period. From the very beginning we have recognised the value of medicinal plants in our forests. The Rigveda and Atharvaveda which dated back to the 2000-1000 BC and several post vedic treatises such as Charaka Samhitha (CE 100AD), Susrutha Samhitha (CE. 800-900 AD) Ashtanga hridaya Samhitha (CE. 700 AD) etc. are important sources of information on medicinal plants. These medicinal treatises are the fine documents of primitive knowledge and experiences. They acquired this knowledge from forest environment on the ground of close association with nature.<sup>ii</sup>

With the advancement in technology and civilisation, the traditional systems of medicinal practices and healthcare system lost its popularity. The allopathic based diagnostic system and medicines occupied the field of medication with its quick effect. Subsequently, the knowledge on traditional medicine is in the stage of deterioration. Today, there is substantial work is going on India to documenting the traditional knowledge and its values through various plans and measures by the Government. The Tropical Botanical Garden and Research Institute and the Forest Research Institute have taken the initiative to fulfil this idea.

### **TRIBAL MEDICINE IN KERALA**

Kerala has a rich and valuable collection of forest medicinal plants and a number of tribal practitioners. They possess a lot of knowledge about the curative aspects of these medicinal plants. The valuable natural resources of Kerala have not been used properly so far. If it is properly utilized, it can solve many of the social and development problem of the tribes in Kerala.

According to the present list there are 43 communities of Scheduled Tribes in Kerala serially numbered from 1 to 43. As per the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act 2002, (Act 10 of 2003) five communities have been excluded and two communities have been clubbed with an existing community. As such there are only 36 tribal communities in Kerala<sup>iii</sup>. Most of them are primitive and a few of them are advanced. Kanikkars of Agasthyakutam follows the tradition of medicinal practices. It is believed that their system of medicinal practices is the sacred abode of the great saint Agasthya and the heaven of medicinal herbs<sup>iv</sup>. The tribes have vast knowledge about traditional medicine for various diseases. Along with this, the tribes have some superstitious beliefs also. Normally, they do not reveal the medicinal treatment. Hence it will be lost with the death of the knowledge holder. Agasthya forest is abounds in variety of flora and fauna. It is one of the biodiversity hot spots of the world.

The medicinal system of tribal community reflects its ability to combine the cultural and biological endowments effectively with their eco-system. Each tribe has its own specific health issues. But it is free from most of the harmful diseases of the modern society. The term ethno

medicine or tribal medicine denotes the medical beliefs and practices of tribes that have evolved in their own cultural and ecological background. It also involves beliefs, acknowledge and methods of diagnoses and therapeutic practices.<sup>v</sup>

The tribal people take the medicine either with fresh cold drinking water or with country liquor, rice beer, or with honey as advised by the medicine men. Most of the tribal medicines are prepared in combination with the fruits of either long pepper or black pepper. Sometimes they also add ginger. They believe that addition of pepper seeds in drug make the medicine more therapeutically effective.<sup>vi</sup>

The folk medicinal system in Kerala is still in its primitive form and follows the ancient systems and practices. The folk knowledge on traditional medicine are not recorded anywhere. The younger generation shows a reluctance to accept it as a profession. At the same time other traditional systems in India like Ayurveda, Sidha and Unani are adopted with modern scientific and technological methods of treatment. All these gained a wide acceptance. But the primitive tribal medicine pays negligence to accept the modern and scientific methods of treatment. In short, the traditional form is continuing by the tribes in their healing art.

#### **TRADITIONAL MEDICINAL PRACTICES OF KANIKKAR**

Kanikkar is one of the important Scheduled Tribes of Kerala. The 'Kanikkaran' popularly known as Kani are found in the extreme South India, around the Agasthyakutam and Mahendragiri peaks of the Western Ghats in the Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam districts of Kerala, as well as in the adjacent areas of Tamilnadu<sup>vii</sup>. They have a distinctive culture and tradition. The Kanikkars are relatively more advanced than any other Scheduled tribe in the state.

Plathy is the medicinal man among the Kanikkar.<sup>viii</sup> Through the medicines and mantras Plathy cures the diseases. Fruits, roots, leaves and other parts of the plants, birds, animals and the other insects are used as medicines by the Kanis. Their medicinal practice is entirely depends upon their own ecosystem. They belived on the god and their medicine equally to cure their diseases. But magical medicinal practice is common among the Kanikkar. They believed in 'Chattu Song' an important ceremony prevailed among the Kanikkars to cure the incurable diseases. The mantra or chattu played an important role in the medicinal system. They prepare the medicine from various parts of plants such a flower, seeds, bark, leaves, roots and stem. The content of drug in a plant is influenced by locality, time of collection, stage of growth, young or mature leaves, season etc.

Today many of the tribal or folk medicine are to be scientifically validated through the research. In the case of Arogyapacha (*Trichopus zelanicus*), the basic medicinal plant of the newly developed medicine Jeevani is one among them. The traditional knowledge of Chakkarakolly (*Gymnema sylvestre*), a plant effective to control blood sugar, is also scientifically proved after successful tests and trials at the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR).

Jeevani, a new medicinal product is a real gift of their medicinal knowledge. The product came out of the effort and quest by the Tropical botanical garden and research institute, Palode. It creates a wide range acceptance of traditional and folk based medicinal system. But the problem of benefit sharing and trade vanished the marketing chances of the product. All these collapse

the dream of Kanikkars in Kottur region of Thiruvananthapuram. Today there is no any proof of the product. And the authorities have no any intension to reveal even the identity of the medicinal product.

For the social and economic benefit of the Kanikkars, the government has implemented several plans and measures. The joint efforts were taken by the government and the department of KIRTHADS (Kerala Institute for Research Training and Development Studies of Scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes) to revive the traditional knowledge of the tribal people on the medicine and healthcare system. They provide employment opportunities to the tribes also. They conducted several workshops and documented the important tribal healers in Kerala. The tribal Kani medicinal men in Travancore district, according to the report of KIRTHADS constitute the following. Appukuttan Kani of Njaraneeli, Iswaran Kani of Njaraneeli, Perumal Kani M of Njaraneeli, Lakshmikutty Kani of Mottamoodu Gopalakrishnn Kani of Kattilakuzhi<sup>ix</sup>etc. are the important local tribal healers in Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala.

Tropical Botanical Garden and Research Institute at Palode in Thiruvananthapuram district also takes an attempt to promote and preserve the endangered species of rare medicinal plants belongs to the tribal knowledge. They are giving training for planting and cultivation methods to Kanikkars. The rare medicinal plants were identified and the research were carried out for the protection and documentation of these herbal plants.

#### **PROBLEM FACING BY THE TRIBAL MEDICINAL SYSTEM**

The tribes have a well developed system of traditional medicine. They are very well known about the rare medicinal plants and their application. But, this knowledge is gradually losing by some superstitious beliefs of these ethnic groups. They do not reveal the knowledge to others. Because of the fear that, if they did so, the healing power of the plants may be lost. The folk knowledge on ethnographic medicine are not recorded anywhere. The younger generation shows a reluctance to accept it as a profession. The illiteracy of tribes and the deforestation is another reason for the deterioration of the tribal medicine.

There are fundamental issues also in the patenting of tribal medicine. Tribal medicine is not merely a product. It is a combination of mythology and sacred. Its healing efficiency is associated with faith and medicinal power of the herb. Isolating out the sacred nature and reducing it to a commercialised product slowly collapse the element of faith and takes away the fundamental ingredient of efficiency in tribal medicine or tribal healer. Anyway, a tribal healer may not match the professionalism of other healers of even other alternate systems of medicine.<sup>x</sup>

Due to the attack of tribal habitats by the other non-tribal populations, the tribal populations are displaced from their habitats. Conflicts over intellectual property and patent rights are likely to surface at the local and state levels. Many tribal healers are aware that they have to get their knowledge recorded in the biodiversity register. But it cannot be sure that it would in fact protect their ownership or lead to their alienation. Entry in a registry that brings the knowledge in to the public domain will work against obtaining patent for it. However, scientists point out that only about 5 per cent of the medicines in the tribal habitats are unknown to science. It is rightly that patent cannot be obtained without scientific intervention.<sup>xi</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Our land has a rich and valuable collection of forest medicinal plants and a number of tribal practitioners. They possess a lot of knowledge about the curative aspects of these medicinal plants. The valuable natural resources of Kerala have not been used properly so far. The tribal medicinal system which has evolved through centuries of observation. Now the tribal medicine has become treasure hunting ground for other medicinal systems. Even, professionals of modern medicine approach the tribal healers to collect the secret of their curing recipes. Preserving and protecting of traditional practices is very useful for next generation. The tribe's right over their knowledge on the medicinal plants and herbs should be safeguarded.

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