



# The ethno medicinal practices and herbal heritage of kani tribe in Thiruvananthapuram district

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## ABSTRACT

Tribals are the indigenous population of a country. They are the social group usually with a definite social area, dialect, cultural homogeneity and unifying social organization having several subgroups, such as clans or sibs. Most of the Tribal's were originally food gatherers and all of them made a living from the forest. Kanikkars are a prominent group among the tribal's in Kerala mostly found in western parts of Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam Districts. The Kani tribes, the method of health care system is immensely associated with their religious believes along with the interference of soul, spirit and deity. Their livelihood depends upon a number of natural resources, in this regard; the traditional health care practice needs attention. In case of any health issue or its method of treatments is transformed in a community matter. The Thiruvananthapuram District is largely covered by a forest and several other natural resources are used by the local population in every perspective of their life. They have a strong belief in supernatural powers and its impact on their health ailments. The traditional healers 'are using a number of locally available plant resources for treatment. The present study was initiated with the prime objective to identify the relationship between traditional cultural practices, environmental resources and indigenous knowledge of health care system among the kani people.

## INTRODUCTION

Tribals are the indigenous population of a country. Kerala is a homeland of a number of tribal communities. They are the social group usually with a definite social area, dialect, cultural homogeneity and unifying social organization having several subgroups, such as clans or sibs. Most of the Tribal's were originally food gatherers and all of them made a living from the forest. A large number of tribal people in Kerala live in the forest and mountain regions of Western Ghats. Kanikkars are a prominent group among the tribal's in

Kerala mostly found in western parts of Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam Districts. The Kanikkars have a worthy traditional culture and way of living. They have their own unique customs in every aspect and event of life. Though these customs among the Kanikkars have some variations according to the locality. The cultural and religious life of the people is also really interesting with their typical beliefs, ceremonies and customs and convention. The tribal communities in general and Kanikkars in particular tried to preserve their own religious and cultural homogeneity. The Kani tribes, the method of health care system is

immensely associated with their religious believes along with the interference of soul, spirit and deity.

The Kanikkars have a well-developed system of hereditary medicine. There are many opinions about the beginning of traditional treatment in Kerala. Ayurveda treatment system started at least 2,000 years ago. It is based on the three humors namely vatha, pitha and kapha of the human body. Balanced state of these three denotes health and their imbalance leads to diseases. <sup>1</sup>It is said that there are about 60,000 treatments among tribals. <sup>2</sup> According to the tradition of Kanikkar, many medicinal plants are used for medicine. There were a number of drugs among the tribal's made out of the herbal plants. The traditional medicines had to tell only their generation. The composition and method of preparation of the medicines are kept secret by them. There were many medicinal plants on the Agasthyar hills. Most of these herbs are found in the deep forest. Special climate and geographical structure have contributed to the growth of medicinal plants. <sup>3</sup> Agasthyarkudam, the habitat of the Kanikkars is a treasure house of Ayurvedic medicines. There are some 3,500 species of plants. Scientists are not able to locate many plant species. Pothigaimalai is known as Agasthyamalai. Agasthyarmalai is a mountain of 130 square kilometers. There are several kinds of orchids in the Agasthyarkudam.

According to the Botanical Survey of India, almost 150 rare indigenous plant species are there. About 4000 flowering plants of the Western Ghats are found in the Agasthya forest. There are three dams in the Valley of Agasthya Mountain. Buddhist believed that the Agasthyamalai is the seat of Lord Buddha. So pilgrims from Tibet also visit Agasthyakudam. The primordial Guru Agasthiyar was a master in yoga, traditional medicine and material arts. It is said that the Pandavas visited Agasthyarkudam. According to the Buddhist tradition, Agasthiyar was responsible for the development of Siddha Medicine. He became the father of Siddha Medicine. The Siddha system is the earliest system of medicine which was regarded as a divine system of medicine. It can be described as a way of life which brought unity, peace and harmony on earth. <sup>4</sup> The early days, they all depended on the forest for food and medicines. Honey, tubers and fruits were obtained from the forest. All of them got a lot of medicinal value. Only those who know the plants can pick it up. The turmeric plants were used for all the treatment related to delivery.

The Kanikkars have a sound health because they used a lot of tubers and greens. There is a saying among them that faith in the treatment is essential. <sup>5</sup> Different types are tubers also assume an essential of their diet. Karimkizhangu is considered the king of tubers among the Kanikkars. Varieties of greens are also used for food. Each tribe had different kind of diseases and they use their own medicines and treatments. Studies have shown that ten thousand of plants breeds are used by tribal people for their health care. <sup>6</sup>

The tribal people are specialized in medicine for various types of diseases. In addition to medicinal plants, they collect fungal, alga, ferns etc. useful for medicine. <sup>7</sup> It is common among these people to eat different green leafy vegetables that grove in the forest when they are not sure what the actual diseases. <sup>8</sup> The ulcer in the mouth is more commonly treated with the tubers of the herbal plant called Amrutupala. <sup>9</sup> One of the main sources of mythology is that the cultural heritage of the tribal clans of geomagnetic fields and the use of terrestrial climate and the use of medicinal properties. Introduction of fast foods through globalization process decreases the traditional food habits of local tribe. <sup>10</sup> It leads to many diseases including cancer, ulcer particularly to pregnant and lactating women. <sup>11</sup>

Popular medicine of plants which can be used by humans is based on thousands of year's experience. It is essential to make a complete inventory of the medicinal component of the flora of any country for conservation and sustainable use. Some information in the medicinal plants used by the Kanikkars for treating rheumatism is available in Thiruvananthapuram district. They are endowed with a rich knowledge of herbal the Kanikkars in the forest area. Ethno medicinal practices are part and parcel of the culture and folklore of Dravidian tribal communities <sup>12</sup>. Traditional medicines are practiced in an ancient manner mostly indigenous to country or regions. <sup>13</sup> The Kanikkars know about the use of very rare medicinal plants. Now-a-day's modern medicine has reduced the value of traditional medicines. It is a fault that they have not kept any records of the medicinal plants and its treatment. As time passes, the old system of traditional medicine is forgotten. Often the herbs are destroyed by the deforestation and urbanization. The main reason for not keeping records is that the old generation was unaware of writing and reading. In the circumstances, Ethno Botanical and Ethno Medicinal studies have great

significant in the collection of traditional knowledge. But today there are great changes in this way. But today's generation tries to preserve the documents. These medicinal plants are also useful for many experiments. They know not only the medicine but also the mantras. They believed that some sickness could be caused by the devils distress. People came to see the sick with foot items. With the power of tapas many monasteries were built by Agasthiyar. Valmiki Ramayanam and Aranyakandam refer about Agasthyarkoodam. It is believed that Rama-Lakshmana came to Agasthyamalai with Sita in search of the medicinal plants. Evidences prove that a traditional medical system has already developed here corresponding to the ecological, social and cultural conditions which later became enriched by absorbing the new knowledge of the Samhitas.<sup>14</sup> Many Kanikkars are now interested in adopting modern medical treatment of Allopathy, homeopathy etc. Primitive man and animals depended on primitive use of the stock of plants and herbs to avoid disease and to maintain health and vigor.<sup>15</sup>

The Kanikkars believe that various body parts of the animals are beneficial for the curing of their respective parts of the body. In the earlier time the Kanikkars used corpse of animals for their traditional treatment. They believed that, if the snake's oil (Perumpambu) on the body, the body would be able to bend it in any shape. They think that the blood and flesh of the tortoise, monkey, Varayadu would have power and vitality like theirs. One of the most tribal groups in the past has been the habit of treating elephant teeth for teeth pain.<sup>16</sup>

Arogyapacha was firstly introduced by Kanikkar in Tropical Botanical Garden, Thiruvananthapuram.<sup>17</sup> It is an amazing herb. It realized that it was a magical plant. People came from different parts of the world to find about the magical plant. People should learn more about this medicinal product.<sup>18</sup> The common name of the plant is Hemkilin plant. It is termed as Jeevani. These plants are increasingly growing in sandy areas, such as near the river valley. This plant is abundant in streams and lowland regions.<sup>19</sup> The unusual flowers are purplish black. It is helpful for curing liver disease, cardiac disease and to reduce mental tension etc. AIDS patients also used this plant. Perennial herbs are with several stems, arising from the rhizome. Fruits have anti fatigue properties.<sup>20</sup> Fruits are eaten during long trucks in the hilly region or when get tired. Fruits are given to promote vitality and

vegans. But the forest department has been hesitant to grant permission to the tribal's to grow and harvest the leaf of *Tricopus Zeylanicus*.<sup>21</sup> A senior citizen of the Kanikkars called Arogyapacha as Sasthapacha. Susrutha considered Varahi as one among the eighteen medicinal plants. It is said that the plants is similar to Arogyapacha.<sup>22</sup>

“Krishna sarpa Sworupena

Varahi kandha sambhava

Ekha Pathyam Mahavariyam

Bhinna Ajna samaprapha”<sup>23</sup>

This lines are refers to Arogyapacha.

Kani's treatments were commonly known as Vamsheeya Chikilsa. In the past there were good physician among the Kanikkars. There are a lot of changes occurred in the traditional medicines because of the contact with others. However, the nature of interaction between modern and Ethno medicine and subsequent social changes among various tribal communities are not similar everywhere.

### Conclusion:

The Kanikkars have a well-developed system of traditional medicine. They know about number of rare medicinal plants and their applications. But, all this knowledge is gradually lost 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. Even though these beliefs have certain advantages, a lot of valuable knowledge has been lost by this way. Another problem with tribal medicine is the absence of recorded data. Ancient knowledge has been lost by the absence of supportive literature. A major reason for this is the illiteracy of the tribes. Further, a large number of medicinal plants are being threatened due to deforestation and urbanisation. In these circumstances, ethno botanical and ethno medicinal studies have great significance in the collection of traditional knowledge, preparation of recorded data and in the conservation of endangered medicinal plant species. With the help of new technologies, the data could be scientifically proved, so that the scientific world will accept the traditional systems. Nature is providing what we need and our task is to save nature for posterity. Use value and fidelity level should be given priority to carry out bioassay and toxicity studies the high degree of consensus among the informants suggests that the current use and knowledge

is still strong. The efficacy and safety of all the reported ethno medicinal plants needs to be evaluated for photochemical and pharmacological studies, especially the plants with high informant consensus factor.

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