

TRADITIONAL MEDICINES OF KANI TRIBE IN PECHIPARAI (KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT)

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous medicine is considered to be the most important component of indigenous people which is widely practiced among the tribal communities. According to 2011 census about 1% of the total population in Tamil Nadu is tribal people. Out of which the majority were Kani people. They are largely found in Kanyakumari District. The chief places of Kani settlements include the forest areas of Pechiparai, Vilavancode, Kalkulam, Thovalai and Agastheeswaramtaluk. These indigenous people live in harmony with nature. The forest where they lived in was filled with herbal plants. The lifestyle of the people living here has a lot of medicinal value which makes the people to be healthy throughout their lifespan. They rarely get affected by diseases.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

Kanyakumari is located in the southern tip of Tamil Nadu. Out of the total district area about 30.2% of area is forest. These forest are about 75 million years old. The district was once a part of Travancore kingdom. It joined with Tamil Nadu only on 1st November 1956.¹ There were nearly 112 Kani settlements in Travancore kingdom but at present only 47 settlements were found in Kanyakumari district. The Kani people were found only in hilly areas living in harmony with nature. They are considered to be the natural protectors of forest.² The main occupation of the people is agriculture, fishing and honey collection. Among their occupation agriculture is the most important. They followed shifting cultivation. They abandon the place once the soil loses their fertility. In early days the people enjoyed the right of hunting in forest.³

They were the original inhabitants of the area and will live only in fertile area. 'VanaSastha' was the chief god and 'Kali' was their chief goddess. Their language was in unwritten form. They speak a language which is a mixture of 4 languages viz Kannada, Tuluva, Tamil and largely Malayalam. They call their language their as 'Malampaasha' or the language of the hills. Pechiparai, Kottur, Vithirai and Kallaram served as the headquarters of Kani settlements. These areas were locally called by the people as 'Kanipattru' which means Kani headquarters. Among them the most significant is Pechiparai.⁴

HISTORY OF THE TRIBE

The word 'Kan' means 'forest'. 'Kani' also refers to the measurement of land. They were also called as "Malaivelan", 'Malaiarasargal' and 'Malayaran'. The Travancore government had given them full rights in forest. They lived there independently and each person in the family was given 5 acres of land with patta. Once they served in king's army as experts in guerilla warfare. During kingship period once in a year, the people had the practice of visiting the king's palace with forest fruits (kanigal) to see the king. Therefore they came to be called as 'Kanikarargal'. In modern day the people of Kerala celebrate this day as 'Vishu'.⁵

The physical appearance of the people include dark skin, circular head, curly hair, broad flat nose and with short or medium height. Their origin is traced to Agastya. Kanikaras were the grandsons of Agastya. These people have inherited medicinal values from their forefathers.⁶

LIFESTYLE OF THE PEOPLE

The people lived in environment friendly Bamboo houses built with bamboo woods and filled it with dry leaves. These houses were locally called as 'vauezhaveedu'. Living in this type of houses has a lot of health benefits like breathing of pure and cool air. It is believed by the people that these trees will absorb the negative energies and energise the homes.⁷



The dry leaves in the below picture is mainly used for the construction of their houses.

The people follow a unique form of Stone boiling cooking. Firstly, they create a fire with woods. A flat stone is heated and the product to be cooked is kept on stone and cooked as the stone has the capacity to retain heat for a long time.



They were experts in honey collection. A kani can easily trace the honey wherever it is available. They are doing this for generations. The local person who prescribes medicine to the people was called as 'Vaithiyar'. They have deep knowledge about the use of medicinal plants.⁸ A kani tribe 74 years old women Lakshmikutty was awarded 'Padmashree' by Central Government who can prepare 500 medicines from her memory. She had saved the life of many from poisonous infections. As a member of kani tribe, she teaches in folklore medicines.⁹

The people mainly take tuber foods locally called as 'Kilangu vagaigal'. Their food always included fish. They also ate rice and forest vegetables, fruits, mushrooms and honey. The people also used natural resources in war.¹⁰ On an occasion the king refused to meet the kani people who went to see the king with fruits, honey and vegetables. So the malayarasan got angry and decided to bring the king outside the palace. For which they collected the leaves of plants which expels bad smell when burnt and set fire to it outside the palace. Immediately the palace was closed with iron gate. The tribal people collected the nest of 'eagle' and 'pullu' (oriental magpie robin) which will be built with medicinal plants. These nest were collected and dropped in water. It has the capacity to move in opposite direction of the flowing water and damages the Iron Gate. This shows the forest knowledge of the kani tribe people who lived like real kings in the forest and as its protectors.¹¹

A few most commonly used local medicines include

- Bidens Pilosa locally called as KutthanPaachilai which is used along with Aloe vera, honey and ghee to cure stomach ache.

- *Ficus Retusa*, locally called as Kottal – the fresh fruit of this plant along with honey is taken twice a day to improve body stamina.
- Padarkothamalli juice from the leaf of this plant is applied externally to stimulate hair growth.
- Kodithulasi and Naaithulasi are used locally to cure cough, fever and cold.
- *Trichopus Zeylanicus* Gaertn locally called as Arokkiapachilai is used to cure asthma long with honey.
- *Cholorophytum laxum* locally called as Neerooti Kizhangu paste is applied over swellings
- *Calanthes masuca*, *Curculigo orchioides* (Nilappanai) , *Hemidesmus indicus* var *indicus* (Nannaari) , *Kaempferia galangal* (commonly called as aromatic ginger or Kacholam in tamil), *Rauvolfia serpentina* (Civanavalpori), *Saraca asoca* (Ashoka Tree), *Trichopus zeylanicus* var. *Travancoricus* (Saashthan Kizhangu / aarogyapacha) and *Thottea siliquosa* (flowering plant in pipevine family) are the common plants found in this forest.¹²
- Karada Kodi is used to cure Snake bite and other poisonous infections.
- Veli Paruthi (*Pergularia daemia*) locally used to heal wounds.
- Keezhaneelli (*Phyllanthus niruri*) juice is given twice a day to cure Jaundice.
- Navarapachilei (*Oregano*) is commonly used by the people to cure cough and cold among children.
- Moodilla Thaazhi (*Cassytha filiformis*) and Mullilla Thottavaadi (*Mimosa pudica*) cures skin allergy.¹³

Most of the traditional medicines are used by tribal people. The Kani people believe that one who goes to collect medicinal plants must be with pure mind as these plants have the power of god. The people believe in herbal medicines and magic. They keep the combinations of medicines to heal as secret.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

It is apt to say with Engels, "If we corrupt nature once, it will spoil us several times". If we live in harmony with nature, it will protect us too by its medicinal value. The Kani people live as best example of living with nature. When there was cultural transition, the people got affected by various new and unknown diseases. Most of the deliveries are taking place at home because they live in an isolated hilly area which is separated from urban areas. Lack of hospitals and schools were the main problems that the present day Kani tribe faces. Though the people were offered 10 lakh rupees and a government job to a family, the people did not accept to leave the forest. They completely depend upon forest for their livelihood and the people keep their environment clean. The medicinal knowledge of the people was inherited from their forefathers. Even the people from urban areas visit the Kanivaithiyar to get medicines. This shows the greatness of indigenous tribal medicines. This worthy medicinal knowledge of the people, their culture and healthy lifestyle of the people are in declining stage in the name of development.

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