

Indigenous Knowledge of Kani Tribe on Herbal Medicines

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ABSTRACT

Kani, is known as one of the tribal communities dwelling at Tirunelveli district in Tamilnadu. The Kani tribes, who are the landowners and possess a dark complexion, typically stand between four and a half to five feet in height, and their hair is characterized by its deep black colour and curly texture. Indigenous populations residing in the hill areas hold extensive knowledge in terms of the use and preservation of herbal medicinal plants. The Kani tribes are familiar with several herbs to cure various ailments. There are trained Kani people dwelling at the settlements in i) Karayar, ii) Adukkaiarai, iii) Chinnamayilaru, iv) Inchikuzhi, v) Kannikatty and vi) Periyamayilaru in Thirunelveli district, for treating those who affected by diseases, and snake bite and scorpion sting using medicinal plants growing in and around their settlements. This paper unearths the herbal remedies they employ to treat various diseases.

KEYWORDS: Kani tribe, herbal medicinal plants, roots, leaves, stem barks, rhizomes.

INTRODUCTION

The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines the term 'tribe' as "a group of individuals who communicate in a shared language, adhere to consistent social organization rules, and collaborate for mutual objectives such as trade, agriculture, or warfare." Other common characteristics include a shared name, a continuous territory, a relatively uniform culture or lifestyle, and a tradition of common ancestry. Thus, 'tribe' refers to a collective of individuals who share customs, language, and territory. Moreover, a tribe is led by a chief, possesses a belief system that teaches all members are descendants of a common ancestor, and shares a common language and culture. A tribe is often small in scale, has limited interactions with other societies, and tends to have an ethnocentric perspective of the world. The primary criteria for defining a tribe remain linguistic and cultural similarities (Funk and Wagnalls). The Advisory Committee on the Revision of SC/ST (1965) outlines the following essential characteristics for a community to be recognized as Scheduled Tribes: i) Geographical isolation - They reside in clusters within exclusive, remote, and uninhabitable regions such as hills and forests; ii) Backwardness - Their livelihoods are based on primitive agriculture, and they maintain a low-cost closed economy reliant on

low-level technology, resulting in poverty, along with low literacy and health levels; iii) Distinctive culture, language, and religion - They have developed their own unique culture, language, and religion on a community basis; iv) Shyness of contact - They exhibit a limited degree of interaction with other cultures and peoples.

The Scheduled tribes: At glance

According to the 2011 census of India, the estimated population of scheduled tribes stands at 1.4 million, which constitutes 8.6 percent of the nation's total population. This positions India as home to the largest proportion of the world's tribal population, estimated to be around 370 million. The total population of Tamil Nadu, based on the 2011 Census, is 72.14 million. Among this population, 7.9 lakhs (1.1 percent) are identified as Scheduled Tribes (STs). The tribal communities in India predominantly inhabit forests, hills, and plateaus. Regions that are naturally isolated are referred to by various terms such as Adivasi (original settlers), Adimniwasi (the oldest ethnological sectors of the population), Adimjatti (primitive caste), Aboriginal (indigenous), and Girijan (hill man). Globally, there are a total of 427 tribal communities. It is estimated that the major

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tribal regions account for approximately 15 percent of the country's total geographical area.

In Tamil Nadu, there are 36 scheduled tribal communities residing across 13 districts. Among these 36 communities, six have been recognized as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) by the State government, namely the Toda, Kota, Kurumba, Irula, Paniya, and Kattunaicken.

Kani tribe

The Kanikaran or Kani, is known as one of the tribal communities in Tamilnadu identified by state government dwelling at Tirunelveli district. The Kani tribes, who are the landowners and possess a dark complexion, typically stand between four and a half to five feet in height, and their hair is characterized by its deep black colour and curly texture. The language they speak is a heavily corrupted variant of Tamil, distinguished by its unique accent. Indigenous populations residing in the hill areas hold extensive knowledge in terms of the use and preservation of herbal medicinal plants. The Kani tribes are familiar with several herbs to cure various ailments. This traditional wisdom, which has evolved through years of observation and cultural transmission, has predominantly remained with the indigenous Kani tribal people. Kani tribes traditionally sought refuge under rock overhangs and in caves, which until recently served as their shelters. They have been regarded as nomadic or semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers residing in hilly forest regions, maintaining a distance from outsiders and avoiding close relationships with them. Their means of subsistence primarily relies on gathering various types of roots, tubers, leaves, wild fruits, in addition to fishing and hunting small game (Gardner, 1972). They also cultivate edible plants such as tapioca, bananas, and millets, along with cash crops like pepper, coconut, areca nut, and cashew nut. Additionally, they participate in the seasonal harvesting of honey, beeswax, and various minor forest products. Each tribal faction is led by a tribal chief. Now a days, they inhabit various tribal settlements, each comprising between 10 to 30 families scattered throughout the forested regions of the Tirunelveli hills. The Kani tribes residing in the following areas of Tirunelveli are taken up for the present study. They are: i) Karayar, ii) Adukkapara, iii) Chinnamayilaru, iv) Inchikuzhi, v) Kannikatty and vi) Periyamayilaru.

Settlement

A settlement is characterized as any human dwelling that is permanently occupied. While a solitary occupied hut can be referred to as a settlement, the term more commonly denotes a community

comprising multiple dwellings and related structures, which can range from a small hamlet to a large conurbation. The primary types of Kani settlements include traditional thatched mud houses, which may or may not feature a door, as well as modern concrete houses that are typically constructed with the assistance of governmental development programs. There is a trend of migration towards villages and urban centers in the Tamil plains, leading to significant transformations within Kani culture (Gardner, 1972).

Herbal Medicinal plants

India possesses the second largest tribal population globally, following Africa. Even in contemporary times, tribal communities in India continue to gather and conserve both wild and cultivated plant species available in their regions, utilizing herbal medicine to cure a range of ailments. As far as the Kani tribal community dwelling at Thirunelveli district is concerned, there are trained Kani people traditionally in terms of treating affected persons using medicinal plants growing in and around their settlements. The herbal remedies they employ to treat various diseases are detailed below:

Aaṭaatoṭai

The young leaves of *Aaṭaatoṭai* are crushed, and half a glass of the resulting leaf juice is combined with honey and consumed orally as a treatment for cough. Additionally, it serves as a digestive aid and is beneficial for bronchitis.

Aamaṇakku

A single teaspoon of the mixture, which consists of ground shade-dried leaves of *Aamaṇakku* combined with a few shade-dried leaves of *Keelanelli*, is consumed with ghee three times daily for a duration of one week to remedy jaundice.

Aalamvilutu

The root of the banyan tree is used to brush relieving from the tooth sensitiveness.

Aliṅki

The fresh fruit juice of *Aliṅki* is given for the persons affected by eye ailments.

Avarai

The extract of boiled water from the roots of *Avarai* is consumed two times daily for a duration of one month to manage diabetes.

Caṅkumuḷ

The juice made from five to ten grams of *Caṅkumuḷ* leaves mixed with two hundred ml of water is consumed orally in a single dose for one day to stop vomiting.

Cemmarikilaṅku

The juice prepared using a piece of *Cemmarikilaṅku* is taken daily for five days to treat jaundice.

Ciriyaanaṅkai

A paste made from *Ciriyaanaṅkai* leaves combined with hot water is utilized for treating Cobra bites. It also helps to control excessive menstruation.

Coorrukkarraalai

The leaves of *Coorrukkarraalai* are used for the treatment of leucorrhoea and venereal diseases. The juice extracted from the leaves, when applied externally, alleviates burns, wounds, and cuts. Additionally, a paste made from the leaves is externally applied to the legs of a pregnant woman to enhance coolness.

Cuṭakkuttakkaali

The leaf juice of *Cuṭakkuttakkaali* along with honey is taken once in a day for four days to get relief from gastric ulcer. The juice extracted from the plant of *Cuṭakkuttakkaali* is given orally twice a day for one week so as to relieve from the cough.

Elluttiṭṭai

The liquid form of stem bark of *Elluttiṭṭai* is applied on hair to wash dandruff.

Erukku

The paste made from *Erukku* leaves is utilized for treating boils and cancerous wounds. A mixture of three to five drops of leaf latex combined with ten drops of honey is administered to eliminate worms. The leaf paste is also used as an antidote for snake bites and insect stings.

Iṅji

The rhizome of *Iṅji* weighing three grams is crushed along with warm water and it is taken orally for three days to relieve from stomach ache.

Kaaraicceṭi

The leaves of *Kaaraicceṭi* are used to defuse inflammation and swelling within the body. Additionally, the leaves are employed in the treatment of dysentery.

Karicalaṅkaṇṇi

The leaves of *Karicalaṅkaṇṇi*, when boiled in hot water, are consumed with buttermilk two times daily for a duration of one week to cure jaundice.

Karipalai

Two to three leaves of *Karipalai* are given to the persons who suffer from tooth ache to chew at the infected tooth for relieving the pain.

Karpakakkiirai

The juice prepared from the leaves of *Karpakakkiirai* is taken orally so as to make smooth delivery while women get labour pain.

Karuṭakoṭi

The decoction prepared from the root of *Karuṭakoṭi* is taken orally for three days to control fever. The juice extracted from the leaves of *Karuṭakoṭi* is used by the Kani tribes as an antidote for snake bites and scorpion stings. Additionally, the powdered root is administered with honey to treat leucoderma.

Kiilaanelli

The juice extracted from the tender leaves of *Kiilaanelli* is consumed with boiled rice water two times daily for a duration of two weeks to treat jaundice.

Konneipattai

The juice extracted from the fresh stem bark of *Konneipattai* is given orally to the affected persons once in a day to get immediate relief from diarrhoea.

Kottamalli ilai

The decoction prepared from the leaves of *Kottamalli ilai* along with boiled water is taken orally for three days to treat fever and cough.

Koṭittuḷaci

The paste of leaves of *Koṭittuḷaci* mixing with coconut oil is rubbed on the affected place to treat skin diseases.

Koṭittutti

The decoction prepared from the root of *Koṭittutti* along with the leaves of *Aṭaatoṭai* is given to the persons affected from the snakebite.

Kuṇṭumaṇi

The seeds of *Kuṇṭumaṇi* rubbed with the betel leaves and paste is prepared and taken orally for three days, for male family planning. The paste is prepared using two or three grams of fresh roots from the *Kuṇṭumaṇi* plant, along with its seeds, and is consumed with cold water or cow's milk twice daily for a duration of five to seven days to treat any venomous bite.

Kuppaimeeni

The juice prepared from ten to fifteen grams of fresh *Kuppaimeeni* leaves mixed with fifty ml of water is consumed orally twice daily for a duration of two days to alleviate indigestion.

Kuriṅcaan

A regular intake of one teaspoon of *Kuriṅcaan* leaf powder mixed with water is utilized for the treatment of diabetes.

Kurumiḷaku

Three grams of fruits of *Kurumiḷaku* are granulated and taken with warm water orally for three days to get relief from indigestion.

Kuruvaṭṭi

The decoction prepared from the bark of *Kuruvaṭṭi* along with lime juice is given the persons of suffering

from tooth ache to gargle in order to relieve from the pain.

Mañattakkaali

The leaves of *Mañattakkaali* are warmed and the juice prepared in a dose of five drops per day is given orally for three days to cure indigestion.

Mañalkilañku

Two pieces of *Mañalkilañku* are ground in a form of paste and applied on the head before taking path for five days to relieve from sinusitis problem.

Milakaai vattal

The emptied seeds of tried fruit of *Milakaai* along with neem oil are warmed in fire and a few drops of cooled oil are dropped into ear to get immediate relief from ear pain.

Mulilavu

The leaves of *Mulilavu* with hot water are taken for two times in a day for arresting dysentery.

Mulikirayaan

The part of stem bark and leaves of *Mulikirayaan* are ground and the paste is smeared on the affected skin to relieve from skin disorder.

Mulmuruñkai

The bark and Inji of *Mulmuruñkai* are boiled in water, and the resulting extract is administered for the treatment of cholera.

Muntiri

The juice extracted from the stem bark of *Muntiri* in ten ml dose is given orally to treat colic problem.

Muruñkai ilai

The leaves of *Muruñkai ilai* are boiled along with water and is taken internally once in a day for three days to get relief from cough and fever.

Muṭakkaattaañ

The extracts from the leaves of *Muṭakkaattaañ* alleviate bodily pain. Leaves that have been coated with castor oil are utilized on rheumatic joints and swellings. Juice extracted from the leaves, when combined with cumin, is ingested to ease joint pain and during childbirth. Moreover, The leaves of *Muṭakkaattaañ* are effective in reducing obesity. A paste made from powdered leaves is utilized as a hair shampoo.

Muukkarattai

The water extracts derived from the root powder of *Muukkarattai* are applied externally twice daily for a duration of three days to reduce rheumatic pain.

Muuñkil

The leaves of *Muuñkil* are ground together with gingelly oil and combined with chicken soup, which is consumed to defuse chest pain. The paste prepared

using the shoot of *Muuñkilkuruttu* is used to make bandage on the cut injury so as to stick the parts of cutting.

Naayuruvi

The leaves of *Naayuruvi* weighing five to ten grams are ground into a paste using a small amount of water. This paste is then combined with a little lime and applied externally to the affected area once daily for three consecutive days to treat a dog bite.

Naaval

The extract derived from the seeds of *Naaval* with hot water is consumed twice daily for a duration of one month to manage diabetes.

Niirprami

The powder composed of *Niirprami* is blended with milk and used as a brain tonic.

Nittiyakalyaani

Ten to twenty grams of fresh *Nittiyakalyaani* roots are ground, and the extract is consumed orally to treat fever and stomach ache.

Noovuppaccilai

The leaves of *Noovuppaccilai* are heated and ground as paste. The paste mixing with oil is spread on the surface of the skin in order to treat skin diseases.

Paagal

The juice extracted from the leaves of *Paagal* is prepared mixing with milk of mother and given to children for three days to treat abdominal pain. A few drops of latex of *Pappaañi* are applied on the tongue of the children to get relief from cough.

Paruttikkuruttu

The leaves of *Paruttikkuruttu* are warmed in fire and the juice prepared in a dose of ten drops per day is given orally for three days in order to cure indigestion.

Puñkam

The flowers of *Puñkam* are cooked in ghee, and when consumed with honey three times, they are used to manage diabetes.

Puunṭu

The bulb of *Puunṭu* weighing two grams is granulated and it is given orally mixing with water for three days to treat stomach ache and indigestion.

Tumpai

The extracted juice in a dose of twenty ml from the *Tumpai* plant is taken orally twice a day for six days to treat cough and cold.

Tuvarai

The extract of salted boiled water from the fresh leaves of *Tuvarai* is consumed on an empty stomach to treat jaundice.

Ulinkai

The leaves of *Ulinkai* are crushed in a form of paste and taken orally with warm water for relieving constipation.

Vallaarai

The juice prepared using *Vallaarai* herb along with milk of coconut is taken once in a day for three days to treat ulcer.

Veempu

The juice prepared from ten grams of fresh young leaves of *Veempu* and the stem bark of *Veembu*, mixed with water, is consumed orally on an empty stomach for two consecutive days in a single dose to alleviate indigestion and eliminate intestinal worms.

Veppanṇai

The seeds of neem tree are cut opened and grind in a form of oil and warmed in fire using small vessel and after cooling the oil, it cooled oil is dropped into ear to treat ear pain.

Vilvam

Five to ten grams of *Vilvam* leaves are ground into a paste with a few drops of water. This paste is then applied externally to the affected skin twice daily for a duration of two to three days to get relief from itching. Additionally, the juice extracted from fresh *Vilvam* leaves mixed with honey is consumed to treat jaundice.

Viṣakarappaan

The powder of leaves of *Viṣakarappaan* mixing with water is rubbed on the affected place for one month to treat skin diseases.

Viṣanaaraayaṇi

The paste prepared from the plant of *Viṣanaaraayaṇi* is placed on the spot of scorpion sting to reduce the pain of affected person.

Conclusion

The Kani tribes dwelling at Tirunelveli district are using medicinal plants in terms of roots, leaves, seeds, stem barks and rhizomes, for curing their ailments such as abdominal pain, brain tonic, bronchitis, burns, chest pain, colic problem, constipation, cough and cold, dandruff, diabetes, diarrhoea, dog bite, dysentery, ear ailments, fever, gastric ulcer, indigestion, intestinal worms, jaundice, labour pain, leucoderma, leucorrhoea and venereal

diseases, male family planning, poisonous bites, rheumatic pain, scorpion sting, sinusitis, skin diseases, stomach ache, tooth ache, tooth sensitiveness and wounds. They use medicinal plants in various forms as paste, powder, juice and decoction for curing their ailments. Since the Kani tribes are dwelling at hilly regions they know the medicinal value of the plants growing in and around their settlements. Thereby, with their indigenous knowledge on herbal medicines, they manage their day to day medical treatment without expecting the help of Government hospitals and mainstream people dwelling nearby tribal settlements.

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