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Traditional/Folk practices of Kerala Case studies - Part VII: Healing art of tribal/folk communities of Kerala

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Abstract

The significance of Traditional Knowledge (TK) is directly linked with the cultural heritage of the people and it has been handed over from generation to generation since time immemorial. The importance of TK is highlighted by the fact that more than 80% of the livelihood needs of the world's poor directly or indirectly depend upon the use of biological resources and associated TK. Due to changing life styles, environmental degradation and many other factors, TK is getting eroded rapidly among the tribal communities. There is an urgent need to document such valuable information for posterity before it is completely lost. Bio-prospecting of plants used for food and medicine is an important area of research, to develop commercially viable diverse novel products which are essentially required for taking care of human health. In this communication the authors have highlighted the historical perspectives of Malappandaram tribes inhabited in Kollam, Pathanamthitta and Idukki districts of Kerala including their traditional food, worship, concept of location specific hotspots (Kanakam) and three case studies related to treatment of snake bite, intestinal colic, lumbago, piles, retention of urine, anti-inflammatory and anti-allergic.

Keywords: Malappandaram, Kanakam, Traditional Cultural Expressions

Introduction

Traditional Knowledge (TK) and Traditional Cultural Expressions (TCE) associated with any component of biodiversity and related ecosystem is an outcome of the experience/observations made by different indigenous/tribal/local communities. This is location specific knowledge transmitted from generation to generation and is still being practiced in many countries of the World. TK and TCE are two sides of a coin maintaining an unique symbiotic relationship which is closely linked with their day to day life. In India, especially in Kerala, we have rich tradition of healing practices by different tribal communities inhabited in and around the forest areas. The recent studies carried

out by the authors in different localities of all fourteen districts of Kerala, shows that it is not well preserved, nurtured and practiced by the younger generation but the elders are still conserving their TK and TCE especially through oral tradition. It is highly essential to systematically document this knowledge, so that we can conserve this valuable knowledge for better utilization by conducting multidisciplinary research with a view to develop novel diverse processes/products including herbal medicines, nutraceuticals and modern medicines. In this series, the authors have highlighted three case studies related to plants used for food and medicine from the Malappandaram tribal

community inhabited in and around the Achenkovil forest areas of Kollam and Pathanmathitta districts in Kerala.

Historical perspective of Malappandaram tribes

Malappandaram is considered to be the descendants of nomadic primitive hunter-gatherers who once roamed on the hill tops and caves of Achenkovil forest areas belonging to Kollam and Pathanamthitta districts of Kerala. Even today, some of them are non-wood forest collectors living temporarily in the interior forest areas and lead a semi-nomadic life. During the collection, they dwell in natural rock caves or simple huts made of tree branches thatched with *Ochlandra* leaves.

There are no authentic records available to trace their origin. They claim that they are the *autochthons* of Kerala forest. The term 'Mala' or 'Malai' means 'Hills'; 'Pandaram' denotes the colour 'Pandurango' (Pale complexion). In this manner, probably they were named Malappandaram or Malaipandaram.

Anthropologically their physical appearance is short in stature, broad chest and forehead, wavy black hair, flat nose and residing chins. Their color varies from light to dark brown. Few of them have external features of primitives.

Elders among the tribes still speak a semi primitive dialect with many Tamil and Malayalam words and phrases. But, most of the youngsters are well versed with Malayalam language.

The Headman of the Malappandaram is known as 'Kani' or 'Ayya' or 'Mooppan'. Like other tribal communities in the past, the Headman was entrusted with various responsibilities related to overall welfare of the community. But nowadays, the instructions

of the Headman are not strictly followed due to the changing socioeconomic and political situations.

According to a Report on the socio economic status of Scheduled Tribes of Kerala (2013), the total population of Malaipandaram tribal community inhabited in Kollam, Pathanamthitta, Kottayam and Idukki districts of Kerala was estimated as 1662 in which 821 males and 841 females, belonging to 514 families.

Traditional food

Their traditional/wild edible items include pith of *Arenga wightii* (Kattuthengu/Ayathengu), *Caryota urens* (Choondappana/Ulatti) tubers of *Schumannianthus virgatus* (Kattukoova), *Dioscorea esculenta* (Mukkizangu), *D. oppositifolia* (Kavalan), *D. pentaphylla* (Nooran) *D. wallichii* (Neduvan), wild mango, wild jackfruit, bamboo seeds and honey. Apart from the consumption of wild edibles, they cultivate rice and tapioca as their staple food. Nowadays, they are showing interest in cultivating cash crops like pepper, rubber, coconut, areca nut, etc., and also started domesticating cattle, dogs, goats, fowls, etc. The services of the dogs are employed to prevent wild animal attack including elephants while going for the collection of Non Wood Forest Produces (NWFP) inside forest areas.

Worship

Malappandarams are always afraid of the wrath of Hill deities. On the way to *Pulikkayam*, (once, this area was known as the homeland of leopards), they offer prayers to Load Ayyappa at *Kaserappara* (rock with the shape of chair) where, they believe that Load Ayyappa spent few hours to take rest on the way to Sabarimala. According to them, few tribes experienced the presence of Load Ayyappa at *Kaserappara* on many



Kaserappara



Malathaivam

occasions during their visit to the interior forest areas. Therefore, when they pass through this place, they light camphor and incense sticks and offer flowers. Another worship place of Malappandaram is located in the interior forest area at *Nedumkulam* of Kallar forest range. They offer prayer to '*malathaivam*' (hill deity) under the old huge tree *Bombax ceiba* (Illavu). Usually they offer betel leaves, areca nut, tobacco and locally prepared toddy to propitiate the hill deities. They considered Mother Nature as Supreme and took care of the forest with utmost divinity and respect. The permission is sought to the '*malathaivam*' before embarking on any activity in the forest.

Kanakam (Location Specific Hotspots)

The surrounding area of the above worship place is known as 'Kanakam'. Kanakam is the forest area ear marked to conserve the dense green forest area by the tribes exclusively for the animals, plants and other living beings without any disturbances. The tribes never enter into this area and are fully protected known as 'Location Specific Hotspots'. The tribes have a symbiotic relationship with the forest and used



Ethenomedicobotanical survey to interior Achenkovil forest

the forest wealth in a sustainable manner taking care of Nature and its inhabitants as a whole.

In this paper, the authors are focusing on the Traditional Healing practices of Malappandaram tribes located in the Achenkovil forest area which comes under the Pathanamthitta, Achenkovil and Kollam forest divisions.

Case Study 20 Treatment for Snakebite

According to Shri. E. K. Ramachandran Nair, President of the Achenkovil Dharmashasta Temple, quoting Kerala history said; "Parasurama, after creating Kerala consecrated five Sastha Temples in different parts of Sahyadri (southern Western Ghats) for the people/tribal communities to worship and also to ensure their protection. Achenkovil is one among them. The others are Dharmashasta Temples of Kulathupuzha, Aryankavu, Sabarimala and Kanthamala. Except Kanthamala, all others still exist. Various stages of Shri Dharmashasta have been consecrated in these temples. The stages are; 'Balya' (Childhood), 'Koumara' (Teenage), 'Grihastha' (Family), 'Sanyasa' (Renunciate) and 'Vardhakya' (Old age)".



Malappandaram tribe



Shri. E. K. Ramachandran Nair (Informant)



Achenkovil Dharmashasta Temple

Method of treatment and mode of administration

The onset of the treatment of snakebites in Achenkovil is obscure. Irrespective of time, the chief priest after bath will open the door of the temple on arrival of a person bitten by a snake. The sandal wood paste (*Santalum album*) placed on the right hand of the deity, which is held open, is taken and then mixed with the sacred water from the well located inside the temple along with the water poured in the morning on the deity as 'abhisheka' is given to the person bitten by the snake. Around 10 gms of sandal wood paste with sacred water is given twice daily in the morning and in the evening. The same paste is applied externally over the bitten part. The person is given water from the sacred well of the temple for drinking purpose. The process is repeated for three days.

Other restrictions

The person is not allowed to sleep on the first night of the treatment. He/she is not allowed to take any food except the sandal paste and the sacred water. Black tea without sugar is occasionally allowed. On the second day, the inflammation around the bitten site will begin to subside and the person is allowed to consume rice gruel. On the second or at the most on the third day, the person is allowed to go home completely cured. Irrespective of caste and religion any person bitten by snake is cured at the temple. Recently the authorities of the temple have started preparing a list of the patients treated at the temple. (This information was recorded on 08.01.2012).

Case Study 21

Ramar aged 35, a Malappandaram tribe residing at Mahappara, Kanayar, Achenkovil, is well versed



Ramar (Knowledge provider)

*Caesalpinia bonduc* (L.) Roxb

with the flora and fauna of the Achenkovil forest areas. He has acquainted the knowledge orally from his grandfather and also learnt various uses of plant species including method of treatment and mode of administration for treating various ailments. (The information was recorded on 06.01.2012 at Kanayar, Achenkovil.)

Kayattikkuru

Botanical name	: <i>Caesalpinia bonduc</i> (L.) Roxb.
Family	: Caesalpinaceae
Habit	: Straggling shrub
Parts used	: Seed
Collection/harvesting	: March-April
Place of collection	: Kanayar
Storage method	: Kept in bamboo container
Ingredients	: Seed (dried)
Method of preparation	: Decoction, powder, paste
Mode of administration	
Dosage	: Decoction - 60 ml

- : Powder - 3 to 5 gm
 : Paste - 5 gm
Time and duration : Decoction – twice daily,
 7-14 days
 : Powder – twice daily,
 7-14 days
 : Paste – once daily for
 a month
Administration : Decoction – oral
 : Powder – oral
 : Paste – oral and external
Vehicle used (If any) : Paste along with rice gruel
 : Powder along with boiled
 water



Sasi (Knowledge provider)



Pellionia heyneana Wedd.

Indications

Local name of the ailment	Vayaruvudana	Naduvedana	Moolakkuru	Moothrathadasam
Ayurvedic terminology	Udarashoola	Kadishoola	Arsas	Moothrakrichram
Modern terminology	Intestinal colic	Lumbago	Piles	Retention of urine

Case Study 22

Sasi aged 48, a Malappandaram tribe, engaged in collecting NWFP resides at Kanayar, Achenkovil. He is well versed with medicinal plants and their uses in the Achenkovil forest areas. (The information was recorded on 24.04.2003 at Kallar).

Chakkilippan

- Botanical name** : *Pellionia heyneana* Wedd.
Family : Urticaceae
Habit : Herb
Habitat : Semi-evergreen/evergreen
Parts used : Root, Leaf
Collection/harvesting : No specific time
Place of collection : Chittar, Achenkovil
Storage method : Used in fresh form
Ingredients : Leaf and root (Fresh)
Method of preparation: Paste is prepared from the fresh root
 : Paste is prepared from the fresh leaf

Mode of administration

- Dosage** : Root paste – 2-5 gm
 : Leaf paste – sufficient quantity
Time and duration : Root paste – as and when required 1-14 days
 : Leaf paste – 1-3 days
Administration : Root paste – oral administration
 : Leaf paste – external application
Vehicle used (if any) : Oral administration along with water

Indications

Local name of the ailment	Pambukadi	Neeru	Chorichil
Ayurvedic terminology	Sarpavisham	Shobham	Kandu
Modern terminology	Snakebite	Anti-inflammatory	Anti-allergic

Pellionia heyneana (Chakkilippan): Antidote to allergic rashes caused by the plant 'Ottuplavu' botanically known as *Laportea crenulata* Gaud.

Scientific study

Scientific studies carried out on the crude ethanolic leaf extract of *Pellionia heyneana* (Vilash *et al.*, 2016) showed anti-hepatotoxic activity and substantially altered serum parameters were restored towards normalization significantly by the plant extract. The biochemical observations were supplemented with histopathological examinations of liver samples. All these results are comparable with the known hepatoprotective agent, Silymarin. Study further reveals that scientific evidence for curing liver disorders by the synergetic action of different mechanisms including radical scavenging, enhancing the level of both enzymatic and non-enzymatic, antioxidants and keeping the integrity of hepatocytes through anti

lipid peroxidation. Over all, this study provided novel insights into the therapeutic potential of *P. heyneana* as a hepatoprotective against paracetamol induced hepatotoxicity.

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