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FOLKLORE MEDICINAL PRACTICES OF KANIKARS IN KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT

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Abstract

Kanikars are the tribal people in Kanyakumari district, Tamil Nadu, India. There are 48 Kani settlements in Kanyakumari district. Kanikars have good knowledge in folklore medicinal practices. Poisonous snakes like cobra, viper, krait etc. are found in Kani settlements and they are often affected by snake bites. They have good knowledge of snakes and plants used to treat snake bite. Jaundice, diarrhoea, cardiac diseases and bone fracture are common diseases affecting Kanikars. They have much knowledge in the plants treating these diseases. They are eminent in black magic. Traditionally Kanikars follow some rituals. They celebrate ritual ceremonies on the attainment of puberty, marriage, child birth, death and cultivation of crops. They relate plants to all ritual ceremonies.

Key words: Pilathi, Moothukani, Vilikani, Black magic and Rituals.

1. Introduction

India being a tropical country is rich in vegetation with a wide diversity. Tribal communities in dwelling the remote areas depend on forest resources to meet their livelihood and healthcare needs. The medicinal plants in the wild, to cater 80 % of the raw material used in the preparation of drugs Herbal medicines have been used since antiquity in treating diseases including infectious diseases. Therefore, documentation of traditional knowledge and ethno botanical information play an important role in scientific research.

India possesses a total of 427 tribal communities with splendid diversity of indigenous tradition. The knowledge base and the practice have been marginalized due to political, social and economical reasons. Of late, interest in traditional medicine has continuously been increasing and various ethnobotanical studies have been initiated to explore the knowledge base from various tribal groups (Jain, 2001; Kala, 2005; Sandhya *et al*., 2006; Ignacimuthu *et al*., 2006).

Many tribal communities in Tamilnadu meet their health care needs using plant products and preparations based on traditional knowledge that has been gained indigenously over a period of time or by practice (Patrick, 2002). It has been well established that herbal drugs obtained from plants are much safer, with fewer or no side effects in treating various ailments (Ayyanar and Ignacimuthu, 2005).

Kanikars are the tribal people in Kanyakumari district. There are 48 Kani settlements in Kanyakumari district. Each 'Kanikudi', (Kani settlement) has a Moothukani.The eldest son-in-law of Moothukani usually becomes the next Moothukani or another deserving person is selected Moothukani is the custodian of all the social affairs and he delivers

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justice. He takes care of all the problems pertaining to his people and presides over the meetings where solutions to the problem will be found.

There is a 'Pilathi' in each Kani settlement. He finds out whether evil spirits or harm done to God causes a disease. When a 'Pilathi' wants to select a new Pilathi due to his old age, the belief is that God will come in his dream and inform him who will be the next Pilathi. He teaches the Pilathi-Mantra to the new person whom God has selected. The new 'Pilathi' goes to the forest for meditation for 41 days by chanting the Mantras taught to him. When he returns from the forest, it is believed that he has received super power from God and acquired knowledge about the herbs of the forest.

There is a 'Vilikani' to assist Moothukani. 'Vili' means "to call" It is the duty of the Vilikani to make the Kani people assemble in one place (Chattumadam) and inform the orders of the Moothukani. Economically the Kanis are highly backward. Until the past century they had been hunters and collected wild edibles for their food. Later they started shifting cultivation of food crops in the mountain slopes.

2. Materials and Methods

Kanyakumari district, part of the Western Ghats is the richest biographic province of India. The district is bounded by Tirunelveli District on the North and East, Gulf of Mannar in the South East, Indian Ocean in the South, Indian Ocean and Arabian sea in South West and Kerala state in the West and North West. The tribal community called as Kanikars occupies the hilly areas of Kanyakumari district. Nearly, 5.2 percentage of the total population are Kanikars, who are living in forty-eight Kani settlements.

Information about the kani settlements in Kanyakumari district was collected from Adi Dravidar Welfare Office and the District Forest Office, Nagercoil. Resource persons were identified and selected with the help of the foresters and local Panchayat presidents. Repeated visits were made to all the ten study sites selected for this study. First the Pilathi and Moothukani of each study site was traced and then interviewed. Then, with the help of the Moothukani other resource persons were selected based on their willingness. Resource persons are utilized to collect the medicinal plants and find out the medicinal values of plants collected. Many social, religious functions and festivals were attended to observe the rituals of Kanikars.

Information collected regarding the medicinal uses of plants is confirmed by some traditional Sidha practitioners. The data collected is cross checked through the Dictionary of Indian Folk Medicine and Ethno botany (Jain, 1991) and some Ethno botanical Journals. Flora of the Presidency of Madras (Gamble, 1957) and flora of Tamilnadu (Henry and Chitra, 1987) are referred to find out the scientific names of the plants.

3. Results and Discussion

Kanikars are the tribal people of Kanyakumari District. Their existence is inextricably linked with nature and it seems as though nature has revealed its secrets only to the tribal's. Kanikars live in the hamlets of the hills of Kanyakumari district located at the southernmost part of the Western Ghats of peninsular India. They are socially and economically backward. They live in huts made of mud, bamboo, cane, etc. There are forty eight kani settlements in Kanyakumari district.

In this study 150 medicinal plants used as folk medicine by kanikars have been recorded. Among the 150 plants studied 40 % are herbs, 28 % shrubs, 23 % are trees and 9 % are climbers. The 150 plants studied belong to 71 families and among them Verbinaceae and Euphorbiaceae are dominant with seven species each. This study reveals that leaves form the major plant part used as medicine. Among the plants studied, leaves of 71 plants are used for medicine, roots of 41 plants are used for various folk medicine, the fruits of 39 plants are used for various medicinal purposes, the bark of 37 plants have medicinal value, the seeds of 31 plants are utilized for making medicine for various human diseases, the flowers of 29 plants are used in the production of folk medicines, shoot

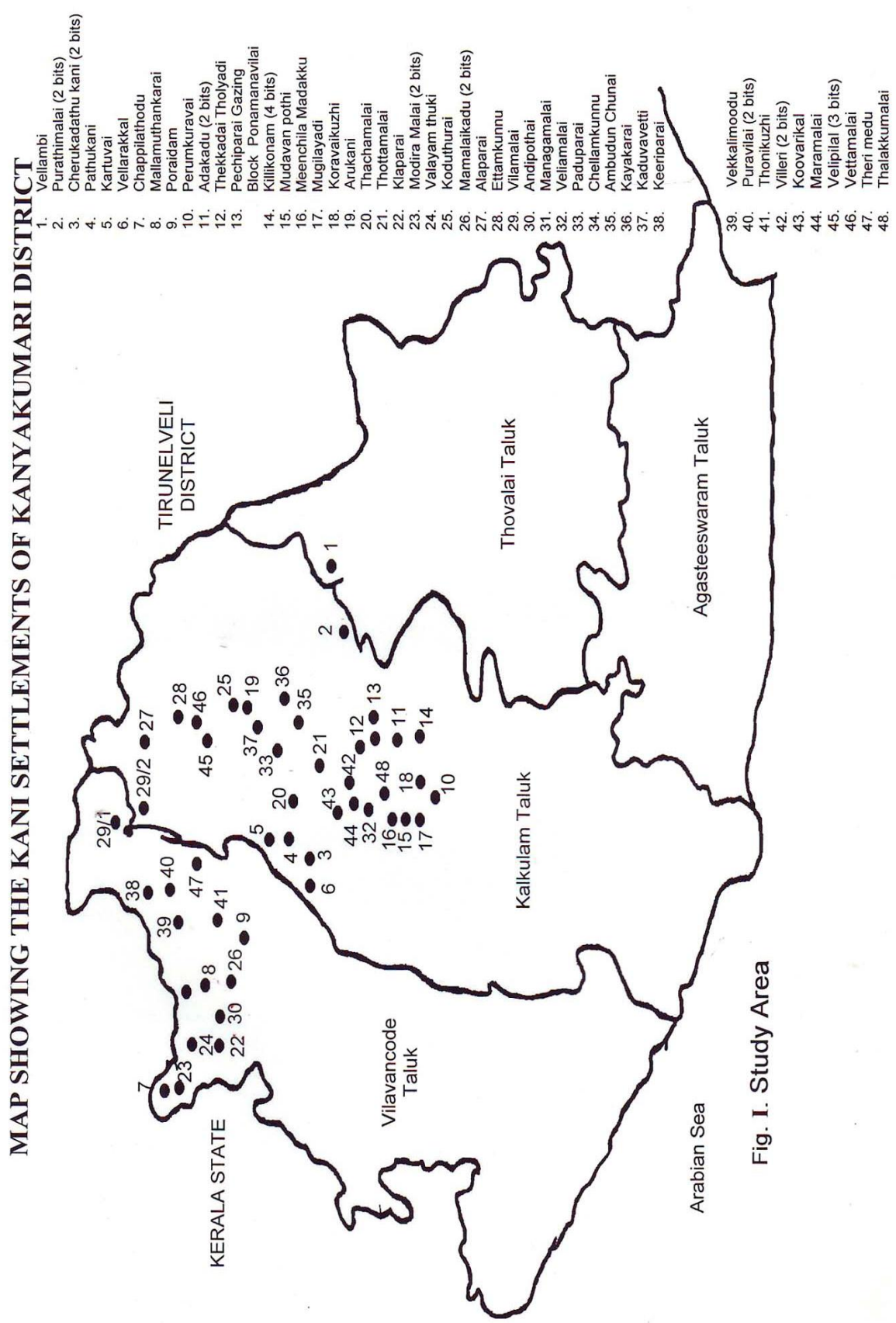

Fig. 1. Study Area

and latex of 28 plants are used as medicine and 27 plants are used wholly in the preparation of folk medicines.

Folk medicine for snakebite

The present investigation observes that kanikars have a good knowledge of snakes and plants used as antidote against snakebite. Poisonous snakes like cobra, viper, krait, etc. are found in the Kani settlements of Kanyakumari district. Fifteen species of plants have been identified in this study which is used as antidotes against snakebite by Kanikars. The Kanikars usually carry dried roots of *Polygala arvensis* and *Rauvolfia serpentina* with them and they use them as first aid when they are bitten by snakes or any other poisonous insects while they are roaming around the forest area. Plants such as *Aristalochia indica*, *Kaempferia galanga*, *Rauvolfia roxburghiana* etc. are grown around their houses and are also used as antidotes for snakebites.

Almost all kanikars have a good knowledge in treating snakebites. If a person is bitten by a poisonous snake, they tie a piece of cloth just above the wound, the wound is incised and the poisonous blood is sucked out and leaf extract of *Rauvolfia serpentina* is applied on the wound. In addition to that they take oral drugs prepared from *Aristalochia indica*, *Kaemferia galanga*, *Rhinanthus nastus*, *Sansevieria roxburghiana*, etc. The dosage depends on the type of snake, which has bitten the person.

Perumalswamy *et al*. (2000) reported that the extract prepared from *Aristalochia indica*, *Hemidesmus indicus*, *Rauvolfia serpentina*, *Andrographis paniculata* and *Kaempferia galanga* showed neutralizing effect against the snake venom.

Otero *et al*. (2000) reported that the isolated fractions of *Aristalochia indica*, *Hemidesmus indica*, *Gloriosa superba*, *Andrographis paniculata* and *Kaemferia galanga* effectively inhibited the toxic effect of snake venoms and act against the lethal action of snake venom.

Folk medicine for Jaundice

Jaundice is a very common disease among kanikars as well as in the rural areas of Kanyakumari district. Since, kanikars are very good in the treatment of Jaundice, people from nearby villages also approach the kanikars for the treatment of Jaundice. Kanikars prepared a decoction by using the *Phyllanthus niruri*, *Gnetum ula*, *Adathoda vasica* bark of *Thottea siliquosa* and roots of *Lantana camara*. The patient suffering from Jaundice was advised to take this decoction thrice a day for three days. The patient was advised to avoid non-vegetarian food and dishes prepared using turmeric powders.

Sivaprasad and Chandrasekar (2003) reported that the plants such as *Phyllanthus niruri*, *Adathoda vasica* and *Lantana camara* are widely used to treat liver disorder and Jaundice.

Folk medicine for cardiac diseases

This investigation finds that Kanikar produce a powder for cardiac problems and very familiar in rural areas of Kanyakumari district. Even in town areas people have begun to take this powder to avoid cardiovascular risk. Kanikars prepare this powder by using leaves of *Ichnocarpus frutescens*, tubers of *Hemidesmus indicus*, leaves of *Asparagus racemosus* and inflorescence of *Cannabis sativa*. The persons having high cholesterol and hypertension are advised to take this powder for twelve days once in a year.

Mittal *et al*. (2000) reported that the drug is produced by using the inflorescence of *Cannabis sativa*, tubers of *Hemidesmus indicus* and *Asparagus racemosus* called cholestronil, which has the hypolipaemic, hypoglycaemic, hypertensive properties and it avoids cardiovascular risk factors.

Paul *et al*. (1999) reported that the plants such as *Hemidesmus indicus*, *Cannabis sativa* are rich in ascorbic acid and it is a good source of antioxidant against cancer and heart diseases.

Folk medicine for diarrhoea

This study inferred that diarrhoea is very common in tribal area and often they suffer from this problem. So, the Kanis have good knowledge of plants which arrest diarrhoea immediately. They prepare two decoctions; first one was prepared using the dry seed kernel of *Terminalia chebula*, roots of *Emalia sonchifolia* and *Euphorbia hirta*. Other one is prepared by boiling the root barks of *Phyllanthus emblica*, seeds of *Syzygium cumini* and *Stercula urens*. The person suffering from diarrhoea was advised to take both the decoctions with one hour interval. It has the ability to arrest diarrhoea immediately.

Vijayan *et al*. (2003) reported that the fruit of *Terminalia chebula* has the ability to change the bacteria in the intestine from harmful type of *Bacilli* to beneficial acidophic group.

Arunarya (1982) reported that the plants possessed with high amount of fibre can restore normal bowl action and overcome the problems without resorting to laxatives.

Folk medicine for bone fracture

This study observes that Kanikars often fall from trees and suffer slight bone fractures. Most of them have the idea of treating bone fracture. They make a paste using leaves of *Ulmus wallichiana* and seeds of *Prunus cerasoides*. This paste is applied over the affected portion and is kept intact by enclosing with frames made of *Banbusa arundinacea*.

Arya and Agarwal (2007) reported that ethnobotanically important wild plant species of western Himalaya including *Boehmeria platyphylla*, *Debregeasia salicifolia*, *Ulmus wallichiana* and *Prunus cerasoides* are used for fractured bone healing.

Kanikars and Black magic

Kanikars, the tribal community of Kanyakumari district possess a very good knowledge of plants used for black magic. Most commonly black magic is practiced to keep off enemies or to destroy them, their families and possession like houses, agricultural products etc. Sometimes they even perform black magic to kill their enemies. Another common black magic performed is to attract the opposite sexes and this was commonly known as "Vasiyam".

This study found that Pilathi, one of the tribal leaders of kanikudi performs black magic. When an evil spirit possess a person, he or she is immediately brought to the pilathi, who arranges 'Chattu pattu' (folk song), while the 'chattu pattu' is going on the person possessed with evil spirit wears a garland made by the roots of banana (variety chenthuluvan), leaves of *Piper betle*, *Ocimum tenuifolium* and flowers of *Dillenia pentagyna* and bark of *Dysoxylum malabaricum*. The folk song continues until the evil spirit is driven away.

Subramanian *et al*. (2000) states that the Padukas, tribal community in the Palani hills strongly believe in the evil spirits. They perform offering pooja called 'Koduthi' on the last Fridays of every month. They offer banana fruit, leaves of Bettle nut, seeds of Arecanut and eatables to Karumpandiamman (God) who is believed to control the evil spirit.

Social rituals of Kanikars

Tribals are people who live close to nature. Their very existence is inextricably linked with nature. It seems that nature has revealed its secrets only to the tribals. They live in the lap of nature; their life, social functions and rituals have been influenced by nature. Traditionally they follow some rituals and sing a number of folk songs during the ceremonial occasions (Kumar *et al*., 1980). The present study observes the rituals of Kanikars by the repeated visits to the study sites selected and by interacting with the Kanikars.

Ritual on puberty

When a girl attains puberty, her father makes a shed using the stems of *Ricinus communis* and *Calycopteris floribunda* and asks the girl to stay there for seven days. Her mother informed this to her relatives. They offer honey, rice, eggs, jaggery, etc. to the girl. On the '7th day' they have a ceremony; the girl's cousin sister will bathe the girl by pouring seven pots of water containing the

leaves of *Ocimum sanctum* and *Piper betle*. During this ceremony, a folk song namely "Theralipaattu" is sung by the women. Then she is taken to the river for a bath and new clothes are given. Pilathi chants mantras and food is kept in seven banana leaves which is offered to God.

Ritual on marriage

Marriages of kanikars are arranged by parents. When they finalize a marriage, they inform this to the Moothukani. Moothukani consult the Pilathi and Vilukani and gives permission for conduct marriage. The Pilathi announces the date and time of marriage after chanting mantras. On the marriage day they have an offering worship. They offer a hen, banana and coconut, fruits of Arecanut and leaves of *Piper betle* to the Malankali (God). The bride worships the banana plant before she enters in to the marriage hall. The Pilathi sets fire in the centre of the hall and chants mantras. In the peak of the mantras women produce a sound (Kulavai). At that time the bridegroom's sister ties a yellow rope (thali) around the neck of the bride. Then, both the bride and bridegroom prostrate before their parents for their blessings. The bride's brother mixes rice, cooked vegetables, fish, etc. and prepares seven balls out of them and places them on a plate made of bamboo sticks (Muram). When the women sing a folk song "Kokkarai", the new couple shares the food. Then, they give the marriage feast to all.

Ritual on child birth

During the time of pregnancy until child birth Kanikars conduct many rituals. Those who do not conceive within three years after marriage are advised to consume a paste prepared using coconut milk, leaves of *Ocimum sanctum*, tubers of *Dioscorea alata* and the fruit pulp of *Musa accuminata* for seven days. On these days they make offering worship to Lord Sastha. They believe it has the efficiency of giving the gift of child birth.

To prevent the attack of evil spirits on the developing child in the foetus, a ritual namely, 'Viyaakkudai' is performed for a woman on the seventh month of pregnancy. They also sing a folk song called "Vidupadathudi Sattu" to ward away the evil spirit. During this ritual seven mud pots are filled with water and some fruits of *Steruilia guttata* and *Arisaema barnesii*. The pregnant woman goes round the seven pots of water while the Pilathi chants the mantras, finally she take bath in the water present in all the seven pots. Pregnant woman are given food according to their own wish and this is called "Yakku". Shoot tips of *Caryota urens* and *Phoeonix pusilla*, banana fruit and mango fruits are given as 'Yakku'.

In the ninth month they arrange for an offering pooja to sun God and Kaalathu Thamburan to have a normal child birth. In this pooja they offer rice, sweets, banana fruits and tender coconuts. After the delivery the baby was bathed in the water containing leaves of *Piper betle* and O*cimum sanctum* and fed with a medicated mixture called 'Senai", which was produced by using jaggary, honey and the roots of *Clerodendrum inermi*.

Ritual on death

When any one dies in the Kanikudi, it is informed to Moothakani. The message of death is communicated in the Kanikudi by a folk song 'opari'. Moothakani and Vilukani make arrangements for the rituals and burial of the dead body. They dig a pit on the place selected and keep watching for birds and animals. They believe that it is dangerous to the family of the deceased, if birds fly over the pit or animals climb down in the pit. The Pilathi keeps an iron rod by chanting mantras to prevent the spirit coming to the pit before the body is buried.

They bathe the body, put on a new dress and the body is laid in the 'paadai'. The Pilathi prepares mixture containing coconut endosperm, rice and thulasi leaf; and this is kept in a banana leaf near the body. Ash and water are also kept near the body. While the Pilathi chants the mantras the persons attending the function go round the body and put the rice mixture in the mouth of the dead body. This ritual was called 'Vaikarisi'.

Then, they perform the ritual of cutting off the thali. If the wife is dead the Pilathi cuts the thali and gives it to her husband. If the husband is dead, the Pilathi cuts the thali of his wife and puts it on the dead body. The son and brother-in-law take up the 'Paadai'. They go round the pit thrice and place the body in the pit. While mantras are chanted by the Pilathi people put handfuls of soil into the pit and the whole pit is filled with soil. Then they sow rice, millet, maize and plant a coconut tree on it.

Ritual on cultivation of crops

The kanikars have the practice of shifting cultivation in certain places. Before they start clearing the virgin forest, they perform a ritual in which the spirits dwelling in the trees are driven away by prayers and offerings to Lord Brahma through the folk song. They perform this ritual during night. The Pilathi raise fire by using the three trunks of *Canarium strictum* and offer *Zingiber zerumbet*, *Smilax zylanica* and agricultural implements such as spade, pickaxe, knives, etc. to their god. They believe that at the end of this ritual all the spirits settled in the trees are chased away. Then they sow their favourite grains like *Sorghum vulgare*, *Oryza sativa*, *Gossypium herbaceu*m, etc. in the newly cleared area.

4. Conclusion

Kanikars, the tribal community of Kanyakumari District are closely associated with nature. They have very good knowledge about the medicinal plants and methods of treatment for the common diseases affecting the tribal people. They have good idea in the conservation of medicinal plants and prevention of soil erosion. Kanikars practice many rituals as our forefathers and we have to learn many things from them. This treasure of information is gradually disappearing as the younger generation is not showing any interest in learning these folk medicines. It is important that we must document this treasure of data urgently and utilize this information for further research and scientific pursuit.

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