



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Roots Of Remedy- The Historical Evolution Of Tribal Medicine In Kerala

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### Abstract

The curing practice of tribal communities in Kerala include a deep historical connection of ancient South Indian Medical knowledge. This study tries to find the origin of tribal medicinal knowledge from ancient period subsistence and religious ritual worlds to its complex entanglements with Ayurveda and present day bio-medicine. Focusing on the *Kani*, *Kurichiya*, *Malayaraya*, *Paniya*, and other tribal groups, it reconstructs continuities in plant lore, diagnosing ideas, Ritual practice, and Ecological ethics. Findings on oral histories, Colonial Ethnographies, and recent Ethnobotanical Studies, the study points out that tribal medicinal knowledge is a surviving archive preserve health in forest and peasant communities while offering models of ecological reciprocity and community care. The scope, specificity, and durability of this knowledge can be demonstrated by a comprehensive catalogue of medicinal plants, which includes uses, targeted ailments, and historical notes. The *Kani* are believed to be the most advanced in medicinal knowledge among Kerala's tribes, according to a comparative analysis, while other groups possess notable specializations in bone-setting, fever management, and ritual healing.

**Index terms:** Tribal medicine; Kerala; ethnobotany; Ayurveda; colonial encounters; oral tradition; historical method

## I. Introduction

The forested escarpments of the Western Ghats are the foundation of Kerala's cultural history. The development of medical practices in these biodiverse zones was preceded by the Sanskrit consolidation of Ayurveda by indigenous communities. Tribal medicine relies on close observation of the environment, oral transmission, and ritualized care. Throughout time, this understanding interacted with vaidyars, monastic institutions, temple economies, and later colonial botanical science and missionary clinics. The purpose of this article is to situate tribal medicine in Kerala's tongue puree and to track how plant lore and ritual healing have remained, adapted, and occasionally hybridized with classical and biomedical systems.

## II. Methodology and Sources

The main sources are tribal elders/healers' oral testimony, palm-leaf notes, local pharmacopeias, and shrine inscriptions.

2. The Colonial records are a collection of gazetteers, medical/botanical surveys, and missionary journals.

3. Secondary literature includes medical histories, ethnographies, and ethnobotanical compilations that are specific to regions.

4. Comparative method is to evaluate correspondences and differences between tribal therapeutics and Ayurvedic nosology/pharmacology by reading.

Source critique involves paying attention to colonial bias, translation loss, and confidentiality standards surrounding sacred/ritual knowledge.

### III. The foundations of the environment and society

Generations have discovered pharmacologically active species, seasonal efficacies, and synergistic preparations in the green laboratory of the Ghats due to high rainfall, layered canopies, and altitudinal niches. The distribution of knowledge was facilitated by apprenticeship, ritual guides, and women's household care. Healing encompassed a holistic approach that included diet, taboos, avoidance, massage, steam, fumigation, chants, and offerings, which connected the social and spiritual to the physiological.

### IV. Practice Worlds: Diagnostics, rituals, and techniques.

Diagnosis involves observing pulse, tongue, stool/urine color, fever pattern, and situational triggers (such as mosquito fevers, field injuries, and snakebite season).

Ritual interfaces involve praising grove deities/ancestors, wearing protective amulets, singing healing songs, experiencing trance, and engaging in exorcistic techniques for possession-type afflictions.

Techniques include decoctions (kashaya), powders, fresh-leaf poultices, medicated ghee/oils, smoke/fumigation, fermented tonics, bone-setting splints, and steaming with aromatic leaves.

### V. Colonial experiences and exchanges of knowledge

Tribal plant lore was mined by surveys in the nineteenth century, but its cosmologies were often devalued. In the same manner, tribal guides enabled European collectors to locate and categorize pharmacological species. Tribal regimens for musculoskeletal injuries, dermatological conditions, chronic fevers, and postpartum care persisted despite the introduction of quinine and vaccination by mission dispensaries, which altered disease ecology. The 20th century saw selective formalization, such as commercial tonics based on tribal leads, and community-kept secrecy coexist, resulting in uneven benefit-sharing and intellectual property tensions.

A detailed table of medicinal plants used by Kerala's tribal communities, with their uses, ailments, and historical/cultural notes, is provided below.

Plant ( Local / Scientific)	Tribe / Area	Plant Parts Using	Preparation of plant	Medicinal Use and Ailments	Historical and Cultural Notes
<i>Arogyapacha</i> (Trichopus zeylanicus)	Kani <i>Agasthyamala</i>	Plant Leaves	Chewed, tonic	Stamina , fatigue , Stress	Basis for Jeevani drug; Bioprospecting case
<i>Neem</i> ( <i>Azadirachta indica</i> )	( All Tribes	Leaves, bark, oil	Paste , decoction	Malaria- skin diseases - wounds	Purificatory rituals
<i>Turmeric</i> ( <i>Curcuma longa</i> )	All Tribes	Rhizome	Paste, Decoction	Wounds, digestion, skin infections	Applied on newborns and Brides
<i>Tulsi</i> ( <i>Ocimum sanctum</i> )	Across Tribes	Leaves	Juice , Decoction	Cough, Cold, Asthma	Sacred Household Plant
<i>Kurinji</i> ( <i>Strobilanthes kunthiana</i> )	<i>Kurichiya</i> (Wayanad)	( Roots	Decoction	Rheumatism and Fever	Mentioned in Sangam Literature
<i>Adalodakam</i> ( <i>Justicia adhatoda</i> )	General Use	Leaves	Juice, Decoction	Cough, Asthma, Bronchitis	Absorbed into Ayurveda
<i>Iruveli</i> ( <i>Plectranthus vettiveroides</i> )	General Use	Roots	Decoction	Stomach Ache & worms	Roots tied as Newborn amulets
<i>Chittamruthu</i> ( <i>Tinospora cordifolia</i> )	General Use	Stem	Decoction.	Fever, Jaundice, Diabetes	Called <i>Amruthavalli</i> (vine of Immortality)
<i>Kurunthotti</i> ( <i>Sida cordifolia</i> )	General Use	Leaves , roots	Paste	Rheumatism- fractures	Symbol of Endurance
<i>Perumthumpa</i> ( <i>Leucas aspera</i> )	General Use	Leaves	Paste,- Decoction	Snake bite- fever	Applied with Chants
<i>Kattumaram</i> ( <i>Alstonia scholaris</i> )	Malabar region	Bark	Decoction	Malaria , Fever	Colonial Records
<i>Hadjod</i> ( <i>Cissus quadrangularis</i> )	Wayanadu	Stems	Paste , Soup	Fractures , Sprains	Bone-setter Plant

## I. Comparative Traditions in Medicinal Practices

In a historical and comparative perspective, it is evident that although all tribal groups in Kerala contributed to medicinal heritage, specific tribes stood out due to their advanced specializations.

Arogyapacha, Arogyapacha, and other plants are all known by the Kani Tribe (Agasthyamala Hills) to be their systematic knowledge of plants. Their healing process involves using herbs that enhance stamina and ritual chants. Acclaimed as the most advanced, especially when it comes to pharmacologically validated knowledge.

Kurichiya Tribe (Wayanad) has a wealth of knowledge on bone-setting and musculoskeletal remedies that incorporate Kurunthotti and Hadjod. Their healing was a combination of martial culture and ecological adaptation.

The Malayaraya Tribe (Idukki/Pathanamthitta) maintains sacred forests where medicinal plants are kept safe. It is worth noting that it focuses on postpartum care, fever remedies, and the integration of ritual healing with ecological stewardship.

Fever management (particularly malaria) and ritual healing ceremonies are credited to the Paniya and Adiya tribes (Malabar/Wayanad). Perumthumpa and fumigation herbs can be used as practical adaptations to monsoon fevers.

The Kani tribe's plant knowledge, scientific validation, and global recognition make them the most advanced overall. Kerala had a wide medical history enriched by the division of expertise that was exhibited by the Kurichiya, Malayaraya, Paniya/Adiya, and Paniya/Adiya in bone healing, among others.

## VII. Results and Discussion

1. Tribal pharmacopeias are flexible, with plants switching by season and preparations being adjusted to the patient's constitution, in contrast to textual standardization.
2. Hybrid care ecosystems emerged from the 19th century onward, when people pragmatically combined shrine rituals, herbal decoctions, and clinic visits; this hybrid approach provided greater accessibility while maintaining cultural traditions.
3. Knowledge governance: The commercialization of tribal leads brought visibility, but it yielded uneven returns. Recent discourse on community rights and benefit-sharing is looking for corrective frameworks.
4. Different tribes in Kerala's tribal healing landscape displayed diversity in their medical expertise through comparative specialization.
5. To address antimicrobial resistance and chronic disease burdens, plant-based adjuncts, community prevention, and ecological ethics are significant in today's world, and provide historic tested pathways for integrative public health, provided safety, dosage, and evidence standards are adhered to.

## VIII. Conclusion

Kerala's tribal medicine is not just a curiosity, but a fundamental historical element in the region's medical landscape. It is resilient, adaptive, and has an ethical dimension. The long duration reveals the ways in which marginalized communities curated biodiversity into therapeutic systems that enabled survival and social cohesion. By examining the comparison, it is clear that each tribe specialized in specific areas: Kani in pharmacology, Kurichiya in bone-healing, Malayaraya in ritual medicine, and Paniya/Adiya in fever control. By responsibly documenting, community stewardship, and fair collaborations, we can preserve this heritage while also enriching contemporary health strategies.

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