

Guardians of Healing: Herbal Knowledge and Traditional Healers in Kerala

Dr. Niju P.¹, Resmi A.²

¹Assistant Professor of History, PG & Research Department of History, Sree Narayana College, Kollam, Kerala

²Assistant Professor of Botany, Post Graduate Department of Botany, Sree Narayana College, Chempazhanthi, Trivandrum, Kerala

Abstract- Kerala's healing traditions combine Ayurveda, folk practices, and tribal ethnomedicine in a distinctive way. The Western Ghats' ecological richness has allowed healers, including those from Ayurveda's Ashta Vaidya lineages to village nattu vaidyars and tribal shamans, to develop, transmit, and preserve complex herbal knowledge. The focus of this paper is on the history, features, and contributions of traditional healers in Kerala, as well as providing detailed case studies on 17 medicinal herbs, their therapeutic uses, and their cultural significance. The study emphasizes the importance of healers as cultural custodians, ritual specialists, and agents of social resilience in their roles as medical practitioners and cultural custodians. The continuity of indigenous herbal wisdom is also underlined in spite of modern challenges, such as the loss of biodiversity and the marginalization of herbalists.

Keywords: Traditional healers, Nattu vaidyar, Tribal medicine, Paleobotany, cultural heritage, Kerala culture.

INTRODUCTION

Kerala is known for its lush greenery, fertile soil, and biodiversity, and it has been associated with healing traditions that are deep rooted in its landscape for a long time. Kerala had a fusion of Sanskrit, folk, and tribal medical systems, unlike many regions of India where Ayurveda was mainly practiced by the elite Sanskrit community. This convergence resulted in a comprehensive healthcare network that met the needs of both kings and peasants, as well as tribal communities. Kerala's traditional healers were not just doctors, but also ritual specialists, counselors, midwives, and custodians of sacred ecological knowledge. The use of herbs grown in courtyards, sacred groves (kavus), forests, and mountain ranges was a key component of their treatments. The incorporation of Ayurveda's textual knowledge, local

oral traditions, and tribal wisdom led to the continuous evolution and adaptability of Kerala's herbal medicine.

METHODOLOGY

A multidisciplinary approach is used in this study, which combines history, ethnobotany, and cultural anthropology.

1. Palm-leaf manuscripts, temple inscriptions, colonial medical records, and oral narratives form the basis for historical analysis.
2. An ethnographic field study involves interviews with folk and tribal healers, observation of treatment practices, and recording of ritual contexts.
3. A study that examines the similarities and differences between Kerala's healing traditions and other regions in India.
4. Examining Ayurvedic books like Charaka Samhita and Ashtanga Hridaya, along with regional treatises like Vaidya Ratnam.
5. Scientific validation is the process of linking traditional herb use with modern pharmacological research.

By blending traditional wisdom with modern scholarship, this methodology allows for a comprehensive reconstruction of Kerala's healing heritage.

The history and features of traditional healers in Kerala

Eight branches of Ayurveda have been practiced by Ayurvedic families, such as the Ashta Vaidya families, to preserve medical knowledge for generations. Oral transmission was the method used by village doctors (natty vaidyars) to combine Ayurvedic and folk wisdom. Through rituals and apprenticeships, tribal

healers such as Kani, Mannan, Paniya, and Kurichiyan passed down ethnobotanical knowledge.

Holistic approaches, community-centered service, oral transmission of knowledge, integration with rituals, and specialized skills like bone-setting, snakebite treatment, and midwifery were all aspects found in traditional healers. By adapting to the local flora and geography, these healers developed region-specific pharmacopeias. Their position was a symbol of the continuity of indigenous knowledge, ecological wisdom, social bonding, and resistance to colonial medicine.

Historical Evolution:

- Ashta Vaidya Families: Thaikkat, Pulamanthole, Alathiyoor, Vaidyamadham.
- Village healers are trusted for fevers, fractures, and chronic ailments.
- Kani, Kurichiyan, and Mannan are all tribal healers.

Gender roles: Women acted as midwives and custodians of household remedies, which were vital in childbirth and child care. European medicine's impact on colonization involved challenging and borrowing from local healers, with records of Portuguese and British relying on them during epidemics.

TRADITIONAL HERBS FROM KERALA

1. Tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*) is known for its medicinal properties

Tulsi is regarded as the 'Queen of Herbs' due to its medicinal properties, which include treating coughs, colds, fevers, asthma, digestive problems, and stress. Essential oils, such as eugenol and ursolic acid, are present in its leaves and have been proven to have antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory effects.

Every traditional Kerala household had a Tulsi Thara (platform) that was used to worship the plant every day. Purity was the symbolism behind women lighting lamps in front of Tulsi plants.

Tulsi leaf juice and honey were administered by local vaidyars to children who had coughs and bronchitis. The preparation of decoctions for malaria and fever was also done.

Tulsi has modern relevance because it strengthens immunity, reduces blood sugar, and has adaptogenic properties, which is in line with its traditional use.

2. Neem (*Azadirachta indica*) belongs to the botanical family of Azadirachtaceae:

Neem, also known as Nature's Pharmacy, is used for treating skin diseases like eczema, psoriasis, boils, wound healing, fever reduction, and blood purification. Neem oil is an effective insect repellent and antiseptic.

The symbolism of purification and protection is achieved by tying neem leaves at the entrances during temple festivals and rituals. Neem twigs were put in homes for their protective aura during chickenpox and smallpox outbreaks.

Neem paste was prepared by tribal healers for wounds, and neem water baths were used for fever and skin eruptions. The belief was that the smoke from dried neem leaves would repel evil spirits and infectious diseases.

Neem compounds such as azadirachtin and nimbodin are utilized in pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, and organic farming.

3. Amla (*Emblica officinalis*)

Amla has medicinal benefits that include boosting immunity, digestion, vision, hair strength, and longevity, as well as being a rich source of Vitamin C. The consumption of amla fruits can be either fresh, picked, or preserved in lehyams. It is central in Chyawanprash, an Ayurvedic tonic.

Powdered dried amla was suggested by Vaidyar to treat anemia, gastritis, and skin pigmentation. Amla juice was used for the treatment of liver disorders.

According to modern research, amla reduces cholesterol, improves insulin sensitivity, and prevents oxidative stress.

4. The spice turmeric (*Curcuma longa*)

Anti-inflammatory, antiseptic, and antioxidant properties are some of the medicinal properties that turmeric is known for. The purpose is to deal with wounds, arthritis, respiratory issues, and skin diseases. Turmeric paste is a symbol of purification during marriage ceremonies in Kerala. Auspiciousness is also represented by it in rituals.

Folk healers employed turmeric and coconut oil as remedies for skin infections, coughs, and sore throats. The use of turmeric was directly applied to cuts and insect bites in tribal regions.

Curcumin, the active compound, has been shown to be beneficial in cancer prevention, arthritis treatment, and cardiovascular health.

5. The spice ginger (*Zingiber officinale*)

Ginger can be utilized medicinally to treat indigestion, nausea, motion sickness, arthritis, and respiratory infections.

Ginger plays a significant role in inji curry and puli inji, which are served during Onam feasts in Kerala cuisine. The use of ginger tea as a remedy is common among households.

Folk healers used ginger tea and pepper as a treatment for colds and flu. Headaches were alleviated by applying ginger paste to foreheads.

Scientific studies have demonstrated that ginger has modern relevance due to its ability to reduce nausea (particularly during pregnancy), improve digestion, and reduce inflammation.

6. The spice known as Black Pepper (*Piper nigrum*)

Black Gold Pepper can be used medicinally for indigestion, asthma, and colds. Piperine is a compound that enhances the bioavailability of other drugs and nutrients.

Kerala's cultural economy was once known for its highly valued black pepper export, which enhanced its historical spice trade.

Vaidyars developed Trikatu, which is made up of pepper, ginger, and long pepper, to improve digestion and metabolism. Patients with asthma were treated with pepper and honey.

Due to its modern relevance, pepper's antioxidant and anti-obesity properties have been extensively studied.

7. Ashwagandha is known as *Lithuania somnifera*

Reduced stress, improved stamina, enhanced fertility, and nervous exhaustion can be achieved through the use of adaptogens. The term Indian ginseng was used to describe Ashwagandha, which was considered rejuvenating in Ayurveda. The healing practices of tribal healers included mixing powdered root with milk to treat weak patients and postnatal women. Its benefits for anxiety, sleep, and muscle strength have been highlighted by studies, making it modern and relevant.

8. Brahmi (*Bacopa monnieri*)

Medicine aims to enhance memory, concentration, and learning ability. Used for the treatment of epilepsy,

anxiety, and insomnia. The cultural role of children in Kerala schools involves receiving Brahmi-infused oils and tonics. To maintain mental tranquility, it is suggested to combine healing practices with ghee. Tribal healers used it to treat epilepsy and nervous disorders. Clinical research has demonstrated that Brahmi aids in cognitive function and reduces symptoms of Alzheimer's disease.

9. *Justicia adhatoda* (Aadalodakam)

Herbal remedies can be used to effectively treat coughs, asthma, and bronchitis. They contain Vasicine, a bronchodilator. Cultural significance is attached to lung health in Ayurvedic kashayams. Leaves, pepper, and honey are commonly used to treat wheezing. Modern cough syrups and asthma medications have been inspired by Valerian.

10. Kattukodi (*Decalepis hamiltonii*)

Roots are used medicinally to provide energy, stamina, and digestive strength. Blood sugar levels are also under control by them. The preservation of tribal people's traditions occurs during hunting and long treks. Refreshing drinks can be made using healing practices to maintain digestive health and studies suggest the potential of anti-diabetic and antioxidant properties.

11. Arogyapacha (*Trichopus zeylanicus*)

This herb is well-known for its medicinal benefits, which include promoting energy and endurance. The leaves were chewed by tribes while trekking in forests as part of their healing practices. Ayurvedic The drug Jeevani is commercialized based on modern relevance.

12. Kurinji (*Strobilanthes spp.*)

Regulating menstrual cycles, enhancing fertility, and serving as a tonic for women's health are some of the medicinal functions of Kurinji. The Kurini's 12-year blooming cycle in the Western Ghats has cultural significance due to its symbolism of fertility and renewal. It is a practice practiced by tribal women. Use healing practices to enhance reproductive health.

13. Cheruthekku (*Alpinia galanga*) is a type of plant

The purpose of medicine is to cure throat infections, coughs, indigestion, and fever. Root decoction is employed in the treatment of persistent coughs and stomach upsets.

14. Vetiver is a common name for *Chrysopogon zizanioides*

Cooling medicinal herbs can be used to treat fever, urinary tract infections, and skin diseases. To store roots in water pots, one must weave them into mats. The use of decoction is recommended by healers for urinary tract infections.

15. Karunochi (*Vitex negundo*)

The herb known as Medicinal Role is used to combat inflammation in rheumatism, swelling, fever, and wounds. The leaves are. Applying swollen joints is done by healers, and smoke is used to repel insects.

16. Thippali, also known as piper longum

The use of it is for asthma, cough, indigestion, and rejuvenation. In Ayurvedic rasayanas, it is referred to as a restorative herb for healing practices. Chronic respiratory conditions can be treated by using powdered fruit and honey.

17. Shankhpushpi (*Convolvulus pluricaulis*)

The brain tonic is considered to enhance memory, reduce stress, and improve sleep. In tribal areas, decoctions are used to treat epilepsy and mental disorders. Today, they are still used. It is being studied as a treatment for anxiety and dementia.

Table: Traditional Herbs and Associated Uses

Herbs	Medicinal Uses / Diseases Treated
• <i>Tulsi</i> (<i>Ocimum sanctum</i>)	• Fever, cough, digestion, immunity
• <i>Neem</i> (<i>Azadirachta indica</i>)	• Skin diseases, wounds, blood purification
• <i>Amla</i> (<i>Emblica officinalis</i>)	• Immunity booster, digestion, hair health
• <i>Turmeric</i> (<i>Curcuma longa</i>)	• Wounds, inflammation, ritual purification
• <i>Ginger</i> (<i>Zingiber officinale</i>)	• Indigestion, Sore Throat, Cold
• <i>Black Pepper</i> (<i>Piper nigrum</i>)	• Asthma, Indigestion, Metabolism
• <i>Ashwagandha</i> (<i>Withania somnifera</i>)	• Stress Relief, Stamina, Fertility
• <i>Brahmi</i> (<i>Bacopa monnieri</i>)	• Memory, Anxiety, Insomnia
• <i>Aadalodakam</i> (<i>Justicia adhatoda</i>)	• Asthma, Cough, Bronchitis
• <i>Kattukodi</i> (<i>Decalepis hamiltonii</i>)	• Digestive Aid, Stamina Booster
• <i>Arogyapacha</i> (<i>Trichopus zeylanicus</i>)	• Fatigue, Energy Enhancement
• <i>Kurinji</i> (<i>Strobilanthes spp.</i>)	• Menstrual Health, Fertility
• <i>Cheruthekku</i> (<i>Alpinia galanga</i>)	• Coughs, Throat Infection, Digestion
• <i>Vetiver</i> (<i>Chrysopogon zizanioides</i>)	• Skin Cooling, Urinary Infection
• <i>Karunochi</i> (<i>Vitex negundo</i>)	• Rheumatism, Swelling, Insect Repellent
• <i>Thippali</i> (<i>Piper longum</i>)	• Respiratory Troubles, Rejuvenator
• <i>Shankhpushpi</i> (<i>Convolvulus pluricaulis</i>)	• Memory Loss, Stress, Sleep Disorders

Source: Compiled from Ayurvedic texts, ethnobotanical studies, and tribal oral traditions (Kurup 1986; Pushpangadan & Atal 1984; Unnikrishnan 1996)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to this study, Kerala's healing systems comprise textual knowledge, folk wisdom, and tribal ethnomedicine. Healers were not only focused on treating illnesses but also advocated for cultural identity and ecological awareness. Herbs are both medicines and ritual substances that represent a sacred ecosystem. The Kani tribe's introduction of Arogyapacha has contributed to modern pharmacology and demonstrates the power of indigenous wisdom in global medicine. The division of medical labor in traditional societies is reflected in the presence of special healers. The gendered transfer

of healing knowledge is highlighted in women's midwifery roles. Despite this, there are still challenges. The preservation of these traditions is in jeopardy because of destruction, loss of sacred groves, and neglect of folk healers. Integrating modern healthcare, ethically acknowledging tribal contributions, and managing sustainable biodiversity is imperative.

CONCLUSION

Kerala's holistic medicine is a legacy that is alive thanks to its traditional healers and herbs. They not only cure diseases but also embody the qualities of

community resilience, spiritual healing, and ecological wisdom. It's important to remember that medicine is a mixture of science and culture through its practices. Kerala's cultural identity and valuable lessons for sustainable and integrative global healthcare can be assured by preserving this unique heritage.

REFERENCE

- [1] Kurup, K. K. N. Folk Rituals of Kerala. Calicut: University of Calicut, 1986.
- [2] Venu, G. Ritual Theatre of Kerala. Natana Kairali, 2002.
- [3] Warrier, P. K. Indian Medicinal Plants: A Compendium of 500 Species. Orient Blackswan, 1995.
- [4] Pushpangadan, P., and Atal, C. K. "Ethnobotanical Studies among the Tribes of Kerala." Journal of Ethnopharmacology, 1984.
- [5] Unnikrishnan, P. M. Indigenous Knowledge of the Tribes of Kerala. New Delhi: ICSSR, 1996.
- [6] Gopalakrishnan, T. V. Kerala Ayurveda: History and Practice. Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 2001.
- [7] Varier, K. Raghavan Thirumulpad. Ayurveda Revisited. Chennai: EastWest Books, 2003.
- [8] George, K. M. Cultural History of Kerala. Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1972.
- [9] Chandran, M. D. Subash. "Sacred Groves of Kerala: A Synthesis of Ecology and Culture." South Asian Studies Journal, 1998.
- [10] Sen, S., and Chakraborty, R. Herbal Medicine: Past, Present and Future. New Delhi: Academic Press, 2016.
- [11] Kumar, B. Ethnobotany of the Western Ghats: Kerala. New Delhi: Today & Tomorrow, 2005.
- [12] Menon, A. Sreedhara. Cultural Heritage of Kerala. Trivandrum: D. C. Books, 2008.