



## Indigenous Health Care Practices among the Irula Tribes of Pannapatti Hamlet in Dharmapuri District, Tamil Nadu

K.Senthilkumar

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Periyar University, Salem – 636 011.

Dr.C.Gobalakrishnan

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Periyar University, Salem – 636 011.

### ABSTRACT

Since ancient times plants are being used medicines, foods, agrochemicals and by large number of tribal, rural and urban people. India has about 67.37 million tribal people belonging to 537 tribal groups living in different geographical locations. The present study is conducted among the Irula tribe of Pannapatti hamlet of Pennagaram taluk in Dharmapuri district, Tamil Nadu. The Irula tribal population is using various parts of plants for healing various ailments and this knowledge on indigenous health care practices should be saved for the future generation.

**KEYWORDS :** Irula Tribes, Medicinal Plants, Indigenous Health Care Practices

### Introduction

The indigenous medicine is also known as traditional or folk medicine which comprises knowledge system that developed over generation within various communities before the era of modern medicine. The traditional medicine may include formalized aspects of folk medicine i.e. long lasting remedies passed on and practiced by local people. The traditional medicine as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) "Sum total of knowledge, skills and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement of treatment of physical and mental illness" (Srinivasa, 2010). The practice of the indigenous medicine varies from group to group. The World Health Organization has stated that 80 per cent of the world's population depends on traditional medicine for its primary health care and has become indispensable for its survival (Hiremath and Taranath, 2013).

India is proud to be rich in biodiversity possess about 8 per cent of the estimated biodiversity of the world with around 12600 species. It is one of the 12 mega biodiversity centers with 2 hot spot of biodiversity in the Western Ghats and North-eastern region (Govidasamy Bosco and Arumugam, 2012). It is also rich in ethnic diversity, there are about 67.37 million tribal people belonging to 537 tribal groups living in different geographical locations with various subsistence patterns (Shanmugam, Rajendran and Suresh, 2012).

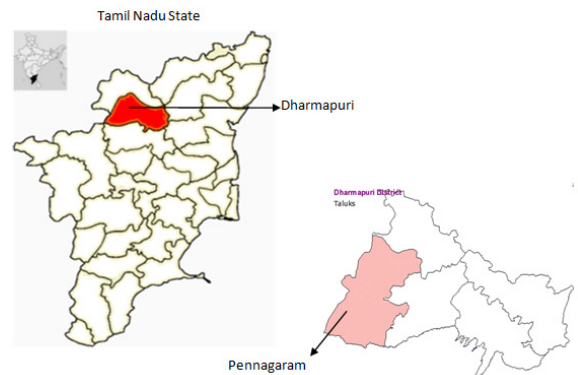
The health problem of any community are influenced by inter play of various factors including consciousness of the people, socio-cultural, demographic, economic, educational and political factors (Shiva Prasad et. al. 2010). The common beliefs, customs, practices related to health and disease in turn influence the health seeking behavior of the community. Tribal groups are homogeneous, culturally firm, have developed strong magico-religious health care system and they wish to survive and live in their own way (Basu, 1993). The main objective of this study is to assess the indigenous knowledge of medicinal plants used by Irula tribes of Pannapatti hamlets of Pennagaram Taluk in Dharmapuri District, Tamil Nadu for healing various ailments.

### Materials and Methods

The Dharmapuri district is located between latitudes N 11 47' and 12 33' and longitudes E 77 02' and 78 40'. Occupies an area of 4497.77 km<sup>2</sup> (i.e. 3.46% of Tamil Nadu) and has a population of 1,502,900 (as of 2011). It is bounded on the north by Krishnagiri District, on the east by Tiruvannamalai and Villupuram Districts on the south by Salem District and on the west by Karnataka's Chamarajnar District. The Whole district is surrounded by hills and forests. The climate of the Dharmapuri district is generally warm. The hottest period of the year is generally from the months of March to May, the highest temperature going up to 38 C in April. The climate becomes cool in December and continuous so up to February, touching a minimum of 11 C in January. On an average the district receives an annual rainfall of 895.56 mm.

The Dharmapuri District consists of five taluks namely Dharmapuri, Palacode, Pennagaram, Harur and Pappireddipatti. The study area of Pannapatti hamlet comes in the Kuththappady Village Panchayat of the Pennagaram Taluk. The Pannapatti hamlet is located in the two kilometer interior on the Pennagaram – Hogenakkal main road. There are 20 Irula families and 70 persons living in this hamlet. The data obtained from the 10 informants for the present study within the age group of 35 to 72 years and among them one is local tribal practitioner. The data are collected from the informants with the help of personal interviews and discussions during June – August 2013 and the collected data are verified with the subject experts.

### Fig. No. 1: Location of the Study Area



### Results

#### 1. HEAD – ACHE:

The ingredients of veli paruthi thalai [Pergulariadaemia: Forskchiov Linn.] or vela plant [veli flower] should be mixed with dried ginger (Zingiber officinale) and the mixture is boiled in hot water. After they have taken the concoction then they will feel that the menacing headache will disappear.

#### 2. STOMACH – ACHE:

Stomach – ache will disappear when a piece of Easel - veru is put into the mouth with little water.

#### 3. SNAKE – BITE:

The tuber paste [Cobra lily: Arisaema leschenaultii] applied to the site of snake – bite to get rid of the snake poison. It is given only once.

#### 4. SCORPION STING:

Crush Erukkan [Calotropis gigantea.] latex and shoots of Erukkan and put them in hot water and inhale the steam that comes out. This kind of treatment acts as an antidote to the sting of a scorpion.

**5. LACTATION:**

"Pachcharisi chedi [*Euphorbia thymefolia*]" which can be found around lakes and towns increases lactation of milk. Leaves of this plant taken three times a day will help a lot.

**6. JAUNDICE:**

Crush the fruits of the Keelanelli plant (*Phyllanthus amarus*: Hepato-protective Plant) and eat the mixture with goat's milk for the cure of jaundice.

**7. DOG – BITE [HYDROPHOBIA]:**

When the latex that is obtained from a Jack fruit tree [*Artocarpus heterophyllus*] is taken in three times a day, hydrophobia can be cured. This medicine is anti-rabies in nature.

**8. WOUND**

Wounds that are caused by falling can be cured by the application of the juice that is obtained from a paste of well-grind *Vettugaya Poundu* (*Tridax procumbens*) and turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) and its leaves.

**9. BONE FRACTURE:**

Get the leaves of the plant that is exclusively used for setting right fractured bones. Grind them along with the whites of the eggs of a country - hen and pure turmeric [*Curcuma longa*] to paste form and apply it on the affected part and bandage it for a cure.

**10. GIDDINESS:**

Crush the seeds of the *Vilbathri* plant [*Aegle marmelos*] which is available in forest areas and apply them on the forehead for immediate relief from giddiness.

**11. PELVIC PAIN:**

Apply the gum of the plant named *Murudu bangam* [*Terminahia arjuna*] on the affected part for quick relief from pelvic pain.

**12. MAVALLI KIZHANGU:**

The plant named 'Mavalli Kilzhangu' [*Crateva religiosa*] is consumed by the Irulas who are aborigines of Pannappatti Village near Hoeganakkal. This tuber is used by these aborigines in large quantities for its energetic and nutritional value.

**13. SILANTHIPUN :**

Pluck the leaves of the plant 'Valuvatta cedi' [*Trigonopleura malayana*] and mix them with turmeric powder (*Curcuma longa*) and grind them to paste. Apply the paste on the wound.

**14. MOLE [Maru]:**

Moles on a human body can be cured by throwing castor oil seeds [*Ricinus communis*] along with pepper at the deity of Muthaiyan Temple when it is taken out in procession along the streets. After this, it is also suggested that the people having moles should also walk over the temple fire. This faith-healing has been with the Irulas since ancient times and this custom is handed-over from one generation to the next generation.

**15. DANDRUFF [Podugu]:**

Dandruff can be cured by worshipping deities such as Muniyappan Swami, Mariyappan Swami and Kottai Mariyappan located in the habitations of the Irulas who mostly confine their activities to the forest. The Irulas have been keeping this faith seriously.

**16. HEAT IN THE BODY OF WOMEN:**

When a paste of Kalkai, Kalpoo, Karum Seeragam [*Cuminum cyminum* – Cumin], Panai Vellam [*Borassus flabellifer*], Karkandu [White crystals of Sugarcane] is prepared and eaten the heat in their body of women can be cured.

**17. PUSS Oozing from the ear:**

Take the Outer Egg Shell of a country - hen and grind it to the texture of sandal wood paste (*Santalum album*) and mix it with lemon [*Citrus acid*] juice. Put a few drops into the ear for three days for relieving the ear pain and arresting the oozing of puss from the ear.

**18. INDIGESTION:**

For problems relating to indigestion powder both Vasambu (*Acorus calamus*) and sukku (*Zingiber officinale*) and mix them with water. At least half – a – tumbler of drink will produce the desired effect on the patient.

**19. MENSTRUAL PROBLEMS**

Crush [*Koravi Patti*] and *Seepan Thalai* [*Colocasia esculenta* – Arum] with Sunflower Plant [*Helianthus annuus*] and drink the mixture along with water. The disease can be cured. Besides, crush the bark of a 100 – year- old Neem tree [*Azadirachta indica*]. Soak it in water and mix it with seeragam [*Cuminum cyminum*] and drink with water.

**20. SMALL POX AND CHICKEN POX:**

Take the Fiber of Murudi Tree, Turmeric [*Curcuma longa*], leaves of neem tree [*Azadirachta indica*] crush and soak them. Apply the paste on the disease affected parts. Allow the smearing to stay for half – a – day and then have a bath. The disease can be cured.

**21. PHOBIA AND PANIC**

Take *Veppam Thazhai* [*Azadirachta Indica*], *Aghinj sed* [*Alangium salifolium*] and *Erukkan thazhai* [*Calotropis gigantea*] each a bunch and sweep on the affected person. The affected person will be cured of his/her panic. This kind of treatment is part of faith - healing.

**22. BITING OF SCORPION AND SNAKE BITE:**

For the cure, the sweeping of leaves as prescribed above will help a lot.

**23. HEAT IN THE BODY:**

A drink of goat's milk will reduce the heat in the body.

**24. MEDICINAL FOOD:**

The Irulas maintain that consumption of the flesh of *Udumbu* [*Varanus indicus*], Rabbit [*Leporidae*], Mongoose [*Herpestidae*], Jungle cat-Civet [*Felis silvestris*]

**25. PIMPLES:**

Take the tests of male and female jungle cats [*Punugu Poonai* or *Civet: Felis silvestris*] and soak them in groundnut oil [*Arachis hypogaea*]. Smear the oil on the pimples with a peacock feather. The pimples will disappear.

**Conclusions**

The Irula tribes are living in low socio-economic conditions and that leads them to heavily depend on indigenous medicines because of low cost. Due to destruction of forests and changing life style of this tribal population pose a threat on the process of degeneration. Therefore it urgent needs to safeguard the knowledge of the indigenous health care practices of this tribal population in order to understand the value of the healing practices by the young generation.

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