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A study on ethnogynecological knowledge of Mannan tribes in Kerala

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to bring an idea about the ethnogynecological practices of Mannan tribes in Kerala. It mainly focuses on the puberty, prenatal and postnatal care of Mannan tribes. This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork. This study discussed the herbal plants and their application in the ethnogynecological practices of Mannan tribes. Also, this study covered the area of challenges and issues faced by the tribes in ethnogynecological practices and indigenous systems.

Keywords: Ethnogynecology, herbal medicine, pre-natal and post-natal care, Mannan tribe, etc.

1. Introduction

Ethnogynecology originated from the traditional approach of indigenous tribes to deal with reproductive health issues with the use of herbs. Ethno-gynecological knowledge is mainly used to treat gynecological problems such as abortion, menstrual pain, menopause, morning sickness, leucorrhoea, infertility, and delivery problems by tribals, local healers, and traditional practitioners. Each tribal group has its indigenous healing system and it differs from other tribal communities. The Indigenous medical knowledge systems of India have not been properly documented with special reference to ethnogynecology. This study aims to bring out the indigenous medicinal knowledge of tribes in India in general, and particularly this study focuses on the ethnogynecological practices of the Mannan tribes in puberty, pre-natal and post-natal stages of women.

Methodology

The study area is covered Mannan settlements in Idukki District, Kerala. This study is based on ethnographical fieldwork. The data was gathered from community vaidyas, midwives, community shamans, and women from different Mannan settlements in the Idukki district of Kerala. The main objective of the study is to understand the ethnogynecological knowledge and practices of Mannan tribes.

Ethnogynecological practices of Mannan tribes.

Health Care Practices in puberty: Mannan tribes give some special care to puberty attained girls through food and herbal care practices.

Herbal bath: They do not give a head bath to the girl on the first day of puberty attainment. However, on the second day, they apply a little bit of oil and give the head bath very softly, because the Mannans believe that during this period the head portion of the girl will be soft. Therefore it should be handled softly and gently to avoid water entering the head and causing illness. They use herbal warm water including turmeric and mundanthi (snake jasmine) leaves for a bath. On the seventh day, they conduct a purification ceremony and ceremonial bath. They apply coconut oil/sesame oil on the head of the girl and give a head massage. Then they apply turmeric paste and oil on her body and give the body massage. Then they use herbal shampoo which is made with hibiscus leaves named 'thaly' on her head and hair. They also apply 'incha' (natural herbal scrubber,) on her body to clean. Then they pour the herbal water (prepared with turmeric, neem, and mudanthi leaves) over the girl's head and body. Then the girl takes the purification bath and wears a new dress as a bride.

Food: Foods served to the puberty-attained girl are nutritious and it gives include foods like (chonthapul kanji), banana, and (uluvakanji) for strengthening the reproductive organs and cooling the body.

- Ragi porridge ('Chonthapulkanji') is one of the main traditional food given at the time of puberty. It is prepared with coconut and palm jaggery and the main purpose of this is to strengthen the woman's reproductive organs.

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- Fenugreek porridge (uluvakanji) is used to enhance getting physical structure and beauty, especially for a girl with a lean body and a lack of breast formation.
- Turmeric rice (Manjal chor) is the other important food that is given every day.
- **Eggs:** They are given half-boiled eggs with gingerly oil on empty stomach in the first month for strengthening the reproductive organs.
- Plantains (Ethakkaya)- it gives for getting nutritions.
- **Sweets:** The Mannans believe that the menstruation period is an impure stage. So they give many sweets to the age-attained girl to remove all the bad blood from her body.

Food Taboos: The Mannans observe food taboos during puberty, pregnancy, and the delivery stage of the woman. They avoid hot and non-vegetarian food during this stage because they believe that, (1). it increases the body temperature level, (2) increases the passion for sex and (3)it causes a bad odor and increases bleeding. The practice of menstrual huts is gradually vanishing now. In the settlements, which are near the non-tribes, the women stay in separate rooms in their houses. But they followed the same methods as per their custom

Herbal medicines for puberty care and menstrual disorders

S. No.	Local Name	Scientific Name/Common Name	Purpose
1	Sathavarikizangu (Fig 1)	Asparagus racemosus	They also give the roots sathavirikizhangu, boiled with cow’s milk and drink to prevent urinary problems, and regulation of periods. It is also used to prevent infertility problems.
2	Changalam pirandi	<i>Cissus quadrangularis</i> (Veldt Grape)	They used the stem paste to reduce the menstrual disorders
3	Manjal	<i>Curcuma longa</i> (Turmeric)	They apply this paste to the body of a puberty girl for purity of the body.
4	Incha (Fig 2)	<i>Acacia caesia</i>	The stem of the plant is smashed, and use this fiber for herbal bathing instead of soap. The main purpose of this is to prevent the anti infections.
5	Mathayila	Cucurbitaceae (<i>Pumpkin leaves</i>)	The cooked leaves give to puberty attain girls maintain reproductive health.
6	Karuva	Cinnamomumzeylancium	They use this bark and prepare boiled water for a drink to reduce the pain and regulation of periods.
7	Mudanthi	<i>Rhinacanthus calcaratus</i> (Snake jasmine)	leaves of this plant are used for herbal bath
8	veppu	<i>Azadirachta indica</i> (Neem)	Neem leaves to use for herbal baths.
9	Kallor vanchi (fig 3)	<i>Rotula Aquatica</i> (Aquatic Rotula)	This plant is seen in river areas and rocks. The dried root of this plant is used for urinary infections.
10	Kalluruki	<i>Scoparia dulcis</i> (Stone breaker)	The juice of this plant is used for kidney stones and bladder infections. (Make a juice from the dried plant and mix it with cow milk and orally give to prevent kidney stone



Fig 1: Sathavari



Fig 3: Kallorvanchi



Fig 2: Incha

Pre-natal care

The pregnant woman is known as ‘pillaitadichi’ in their dialect. Pregnancy is considered a natural process. So, they do all types of work during pregnancy such as fetching water, cooking, washing the dishes, and collecting fuel from the forest.

Foods: They used mainly the vegetables available in their surroundings in this period. Spinach is one of the main parts (muringa, thakkali cheera, chencheera, etc.) in their food. And they are not given much care at this time.

Food Taboos: During pregnancy, they avoid eating certain foods like meat, fish, and oily foods. They also avoid potatoes, yarm, and fruits like papaya and pineapple. They also avoid taking alcohol.

List of herbs used for prenatal care

S. No	Herbal medicine	Purpose
1	Muringa (<i>Moringa oleifera</i>)	To increase the production of breast milk
2	Kurunthotty (<i>Sida cordifolia</i>)	They made a kashaya with milk, to strengthen the body, especially since it is used for mental health.
3	Manathakkali (<i>Solanum nigrum</i>)	Production of milk & removal of acidity
4	Karuppatty (<i>Borassus flabellifer</i> /palm jiggery)	They prepared kashyam with karipatty, ginger, and Jeere. It is used for over bleeding

Abortion: In some critical situations, Mannan uses some herbs for abortion. They are given below

List of medicines used for abortion by Mannan tribes

S. No	Name of herbal plants	Method of use
1	Ana chunda (<i>Solanum lasiocarpum</i>)	They prepare juice from half-boiled leaves and give it orally to induce abortion.
2	Atha (<i>Annona reticulata</i>)	This plant seed paste gives orally on empty stomach.
3	Kappalam (<i>Carica papaya</i>)	latex of raw fruit given orally for 5 days.
4	Kattumuthira (<i>Dolchius trilobus</i>)	The juice twice a day
5	Koduveli (<i>Plumbago indica</i> Linn)	This root paste (5ml) orally
6	Nilappana (<i>Curculigo orchoides</i> Gaertn)	Take the tuber on an empty stomach for one week
7	Mathayila (Cucurbitaceae)	The half-boiled leaves will take orally.
8	Anashi/pineapple (<i>Nanas comosus</i>)	This fruit eats regularly for abortion.

Post-natal care

The Mannan tribes consider delivery as a natural process. They have a midwife known as 'vayattaty', and she assists the post-natal care treatment.

Herbal bath: The herbal bath is known as vethukuly. It is the main part of post-natal care. The main purpose of these

baths is to reduce the swellings from the body, prevent infections, reduce backache and muscle pain, bring uterus contraction to the normal stage, and strengthen the body. The specific herbs are boiled in high flame and used for this bath. On the first day they use five leaves for the bath, then continue the order 5, 7, 9, and turmeric is used as common in all baths.

Herbal baths & Post-natal care

S. No	Local Name	Scientific Name/Common Name	Purpose
1	Poovarasu (Fig 4)	<i>Thespesia populnea</i>	antiinflammatory- use to prevent skin diseases
2	Perayila	<i>Psidium guajava</i> (Guava)	abdomen issues and skin care
3	Pullannji (Fig 5)	<i>Getonia floribunda</i>	reduce scratches and skin care
4	Puliyila	<i>Tamarindus indica</i> (Tamarin tree)	pain relief
5	Karinechi (Fig 6)	<i>Vitex negundo</i> (Five chasted tree)	reduce backache
6	Panabila (Fig 7)	<i>Uvaria narum</i> (Indian Uvaria)	fitness of body
7	Plavila	<i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i> (Jack fruit tree)	anti-inflammatory
8	Mavila	<i>Mangifera indica</i> (Mango tree)	skincare and reduce the fat
9	Kodiyila	<i>Schinus molle</i> (Pepper tree)	antioxidant – pain relief
10	Veppu	<i>Azadirachta indica</i> (Neem)	Skin care
11	Mayil ellu	<i>Vitex altissima</i> (Peacock chaste tree)	body fitness & reduce the size of the stomach
12	Manjal	<i>Curcuma longa</i> (Turmeric)	anti-inflammatory



Fig 4: Karinechi



Fig 5: Pullani



Fig 6: Panal



Fig 7: Poovarasu

Food: The mother who has just delivered is not given any solid food on the day of delivery. For the next seven days, she is given ragi porridge (chonthapul), sauce with chilli and tamarind (kudampulikari), and rice and chilli water (chorum mulukutanniyum) to eat. These specific foods help in increasing the secretion of breast milk and healing her internal wounds.

Food Taboos: After delivery, they avoid foods like tuvardhal, papadam, and certain roots (eg. potato, tapioca e). that are known to cause gastric indigestion for three months. In addition, they consume herbal concoctions these days.

Herbal medicine for Postnatal-Care

S. No	Local name	Common name	Purpose
1	Chonthapul/ Raggi	<i>Eleusine coracana</i> (Finger millet)	To increase the lactation level
2	Kudumpuly (Fig 8)	<i>Garcinia gummi-gutta</i> (Malabar Tamarind)	The fruit of this tree is used for Healing internal wounds and lactation
3	Vellila thali (Fig 9)	<i>Mussaenda frondosa</i> (wild mussaenda)	The leaves are used to reduce lactation problems.
4	Karuppatti	Palm jaggery	To reduce over bleeding



Fig 8: Malabar tamarind



Fig 9: Wild mussaenda

Result and Discussion

Challenges in ethnogynacological practices

Mannans treat illnesses and diseases with their indigenous healing system. Most of the herbs are collected from the deep forest and prepared by the community vaidyan and vayattaty. But nowadays these practices are facing major problems. They are mainly

Deforestation and lack of availability of herbal medicines

Mannan tribes are the part of Western Ghats, an ecologically sensitive region. The region is transforming and loosening its bio-diversity due to habitat changes, over-exploitation, pollution, climate change, etc., which create a lack of availability of medicines.

Limation of the knowledge

The knowledge depends upon only the older generation and a few persons like vayattai (midwife), community vaidan (community healer), and vichakkaran (community shaman) the knowledge transformation is not happening to the younger generation.

Absence of written document

Mannan tribe's indigenous system is based on oral tradition. Their illiteracy and absence of written documents are major factors in loosening the indigenous system of these tribes.

Effect of urbanization and occupation change of younger generation

Impact the urbanization and deforestation the younger generation is forcefully moved to new occupation patterns.

Due to the various problems, Ethnogynological practices and knowledge of the Mannan tribes are losing. There is a need to take emergency steps to protect this indigenous system and it should focus on:

- Reduce the exploitation
- Protection of western ghats
- Documentation
- Awareness creation and related job opportunities for tribal youth.

Conclusion

This study tries to bring an idea about the Ethnogynological practices of Mannan tribes in Kerala. They have their indigenous system of health care practices and they are a very emotional attachment to their habitat. We need to preserve their traditional knowledge and implement strategies that are tailored to their needs to preserve and protect the community. There is a need multi approach the study for documentation and preservation.

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