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ANALYZING THE ROLE OF MALAYALI WOMEN IN THE PRESERVATION AND TRANSMISSION OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINAL KNOWLEDGE IN INDIA

Dr KG Suresh[1] and Dr Juby Thomas[2]
[1]India Habitat Centre, Delhi
[2]Kristu Jayanti University, Bengaluru

Abstract
Malayali women, as primary caregivers and active participants in community life, have been at the forefront of preserving and transmitting India's indigenous medicinal knowledge in the state of Kerala. Every child who is born into a malayali family knows the names of basic medicinal plants and its values in their life because of their mothers and grandmothers. A new born baby is welcomed to this indigenous knowledge tradition with a popular gesture of feeding them with sweet flag (Vayambu) and gold mixed with honey to prevent them from probable fungal infections on tongue that may originate through feeding. Women in Kerala continue to ensure to up bring their children in this knowledge system by adding Coleus barbatus (panikoorka), Holy Basil (Tulsi), Aloe Vera, Curcuma aromatic (Kasturi manjal), Nutmeg (Jathika) and many more to their home gardens. Unfortunately this oral tradition is not much recognized and documented. The shift towards modern lifestyles and urbanization, loss of biodiversity and lack of documentation makes it a vulnerable heritage. For this study, researchers interviewed 30 women from different age groups and strata to understand the patterns and practices of indigenous knowledge transmission among women in Kerala. This study unleashes the critical roles played by women as agents of traditional knowledge and underscores the importance of supporting and recognizing their contributions. This study also proposes various strategies for strengthening community-based initiatives that involve women in the documentation and dissemination of traditional knowledge, highlights the requisite for effective policies to recognize and reward the contributions of women and the need for leveraging technology to document and archive traditional knowledge.

Keywords: Traditional medicinal knowledge, medicinal plants, role of women in knowledge transmission, women in Kerala, Malayali women, indigenous knowledge

Introduction

The preservation and transmission of traditional medicinal knowledge have played a crucial role in the healthcare practices of various cultures worldwide. In India, where traditional systems like Ayurveda, Siddha, and folk medicine are deeply rooted in its diverse cultural heritage, the role of women, particularly among the Malayali community, remains significant. Malayali women have historically been the custodians of knowledge related to the use of medicinal plants, healing rituals, and home remedies. This knowledge has been passed down through generations, not only as a means of treating ailments but also as a vital aspect of cultural identity and self-sufficiency. This research seeks to analyze the pivotal role of Malayali women in the preservation and transmission of traditional medicinal knowledge within their communities. By examining the methods through which this knowledge is passed—such as oral traditions, hands-on learning, and community practices—the study aims to shed light on

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how these women continue to maintain and adapt ancient healing practices in the face of modern medical advancements.

Objectives

- To identify the critical roles played by Malayali women as agents of traditional knowledge
- To understand the patterns and practices of indigenous knowledge transmission among women in Kerala
- To document the traditional knowledge and propose various strategies for strengthening these community-based initiatives

Methodology

For the current study, researchers adopted a qualitative approach and conducted in-depth interviews of 30 women based on two major strata which is a combination of religion and age groups. The age groups selected for the study are: 20-30, 30-40 and 40+. There are three major religions in the state of Kerala which is Hindu, Muslim and Christian and 10 women from each of these strata were included to different age groups. For analyzing the data textual analysis was adopted.

Findings and analysis

This study underscores the pivotal roles women play in preserving and promoting medicinal plant knowledge and practices, which are deeply interwoven with cultural heritage and community health. Women act as ***orators***, sharing traditional wisdom through storytelling, thereby keeping cultural narratives alive. As ***resourceful participants***, they incorporate medicinal plants into their daily lives, promoting sustainable and holistic health practices. Their role as ***custodians*** involves cultivating medicinal plants and passing this knowledge to future generations, ensuring its survival. Within their families, women often take on the role of ***healers***, using their expertise to address health needs. Many women also emerge as ***social entrepreneurs***, transforming their knowledge into economic opportunities by producing and selling items such as herbal hair oils and soaps. Additionally, as ***preservers***, they engage in the drying and storage of plants, maintaining the longevity and usability of these resources. These roles highlight the multifaceted contributions of women in balancing ecological preservation, cultural continuity, and community well-being. Their efforts not only safeguard biodiversity but also drive economic empowerment, emphasizing the need to recognize and support their contributions to sustainable development and cultural preservation.

In-depth interviews revealed unanimous agreement among respondents that they serve as key agents of traditional knowledge within their families. However, the findings indicated a lower frequency of involvement in activities such as documentation and the integration of traditional knowledge into religious practices, particularly among younger age groups. This suggests a generational gap in the active participation and preservation of traditional practices, highlighting the need for targeted efforts to engage and empower younger individuals in sustaining cultural heritage.

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Table 1: Role played by the women in transmission of traditional knowledge			
Stage 1	Stage 2 codes	Major theme	frequency
I am an agent of traditional knowledge transfer to my family	Various role played by the women	Transmission of information	30
I take part in cultural or religious practices to expand and share my knowledge			21
Medicinal plants are integral part of my home garden			19
I have narrated stories about the healing power of medicinal plants usage			28
I use medicinal plants in my healing process			30
I have documented, the practices			03

The study found that 28 respondents actively shared success stories and highlighted the healing properties of medicinal plants, demonstrating their role as advocates of traditional knowledge. Additionally, 19 respondents reported continuing the legacy of preserving medicinal plants by cultivating them in their home gardens. However, urbanisation and the prevalence of apartment living were identified as significant barriers for others, limiting their ability to maintain such practices.

Women below the age of 30 demonstrate a notable shift in perceptions regarding the use of medicinal plants, driven by several factors. Increased exposure to personal or anecdotal experiences has reinforced their belief in the efficacy of modern medicine over traditional remedies. Additionally, higher education levels are linked to a preference for evidence-based medicine, emphasising the need to create more content that integrates traditional knowledge systems with scientific validation. Younger women also tend to favor quick-fix solutions, making the holistic and time-intensive approaches of traditional medicine less appealing. Social media trends significantly influence their choices, as traditional medicine is often portrayed by elders in outdated formats. This highlights the necessity of adopting modern communication strategies on social media to present traditional practices in an engaging and accessible way. Addressing these factors is crucial to preserving traditional medicinal knowledge and bridging the generational gap in its usage.

Research findings indicate that traditional medical knowledge and practices among Malayali women are disseminated through various methods. Key patterns of information transmission identified include storytelling, mentoring or hands-on training for children at an early age, incorporation into rituals, and the use of recipes and cooking, where spices and herbs play a central role. Additionally, these practices are perpetuated through adaptation and peer learning, often facilitated by observation within their social and cultural environments.

Through interacting with these 30 women representatives the current study successfully documented more than 50 medicinal practices among them. These include Tamarindus indica (tamarind) leaves and buttermilk as a treatment for diarrhea, Syzygium aromaticum (cloves)

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for alleviating toothache, Aloe barbadensis miller (aloe vera) for soothing burns, and Morus alba (mulberry) leaves for managing blood sugar levels.

The study documents the traditional use of various plant-based remedies among Malayali women for specific health issues. These include Vernonia amygdalina (Pazhutharakolli) for insect bites, Euphorbia hirta (Thottavadi) for asthma, and Clerodendrum philippinum (Mailanchi) for treating kuzhi nagam (a condition believed to be related to joint pain or rheumatism). The use of Zingiber officinale (ginger) for throat infections, Citrus limon (lemon) in tea to treat diarrhea, Azadirachta indica (neem) for skin conditions and chickenpox, and Tribulus terrestris (Kallurukki) for kidney stones are highly practiced. These practices showcase the use of ethno botanical knowledge for health management in the community.

The shift towards modern lifestyles and urbanization, coupled with the loss of biodiversity and the lack of systematic documentation, has rendered traditional medicinal knowledge a vulnerable heritage. As communities become increasingly detached from nature and traditional practices, valuable indigenous wisdom risks fading into obscurity. The decline in the availability of medicinal plants and the diminishing role of women as transmitters of this knowledge further exacerbate this challenge. Without concerted efforts to document, preserve, and integrate these practices into modern healthcare systems, the rich tapestry of traditional medicine faces the threat of irreversible loss. It is imperative that steps are taken to safeguard this cultural legacy for future generations, ensuring that it remains a relevant and accessible resource in the face of rapid societal change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while there is a growing integration of medicinal plants within the oral tradition and academic framework, practical applications remain limited. The study highlights that many individuals experienced a fusion of traditional medicinal practices with modern healthcare methods, leading to a dilution of the authentic essence of these practices. Furthermore, the absence of cultural festivals and competitions at the school and college level has hindered the promotion of traditional knowledge among younger generations. To foster a deeper connection to these practices, it is recommended that such initiatives be encouraged to facilitate learning and appreciation of medicinal plants. Additionally, establishing brands and adopting branding techniques can help preserve and promote these traditional practices, ensuring their relevance in both academic and practical contexts.

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