‘AMRITHAPALA’ (Janakia arayalpatra, Joseph & Chandrasekharan),
A NEW DRUG FROM THE KANI TRIBE OF KERALA
*P.PUSHPANGADAN
Regional research Laboratory (CSIR), Jammu Tawi-180 001, India
And
A. RAJASEKARAN, P.K.RATHEESHKUMAR, C.R.JAWAHAR, K.RADHAKRISHNAN,
C.P.R.NAIR, L.SARADA AMMA & A.V.BHATT AICRPE, Regional Research Institute
(Drug Research), CCRAS, Trivandrum. India

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ABSTRACT: Amrithapala (Janakia arayalpatra), a rare and endemic plant species found in the
Southern forests of Western Ghat region of Kerala, is used by the local ‘Kani’ tribe as an
effective remedy for peptic ulcer, cancer-like afflictions and as a rejuvenating tonic. Search
made in Ayurvedic literature indicates that the plant may be the divine drug named variously as
MRITHA SANJEEVINI (the drug that can revive unconscious or dead) or SANJEEVINI,
THAMPRA RASAYANI in the Oushadha Nighantu (Dictionary of Medicinal Drugs) of Tayyil
Kumaran Krishnan (1906)

The health tradition of the ‘Kani’ tribe inhabiting the forests of Western Ghat
region of Kerala is having a rich knowledge
–system on tribal medicines of India. The
herbal lore of this tribal community is a
veritable storehouse of hitherto unknown
information on the medicinal value of a
large number of wild plants. We
(Pushpangadan et. Al 1988) had reported
earlier one such interesting rare plant,
Trichopus zeylanicus, used by the ‘Kani’
tribe calls this plant AMRITHAPALA and
use it as effective remedy for peptic ulcer,
cancer-like afflictions and as a tonic to
regain the lost strength and stamina.

Note on the Botanical identification and
Morphology of the Plant:

AMRITHAPALA is being identified as
janakia arayalpatra, a rare and endemic
monospecific genus of the family
periploaceae. The plant was first described
by Joseph and chandrasekharan of Botanical
Survey of India in 1978. As the plant was
found out to be an entirely new genus of the
family Periplocaceae, Joseph and
Chandrasekharan who first located this plant
at Kurisumali near Trivandrum in Kerala
named the genus as janakia in honour of the
great Indian Botanist Dr. E.K. Janaki
Ammal the specific epithet is after the
resemblance of its leaves with that of the
ARAYAL (Local name for ficus religiosa
Linn., family Moraceae), But till date
nothing was known about its medicinal
value. It was during the course of the
ethnobotanical investigation of ‘Kani’ tribe
that the authors have discovered the medicinal use of this plant.

Janakia arayalpatra joseph & Chandra sekharan (Fig.1) is a perennial undershrub with milky latex. Roots are moniliform, tuberous, highly aromatic and 30 cm. long in clusters. A single healthy plant yields upto 5kg of fresh roots. Leaves are decussate, long petioled; lamina broadly lanceolate to ovate, acuminate; lateral nerves parallel, arching below the margin and getting united or not to form a submarginal vein. Colour f the petiole varies form greenish yellow to deep red on maturity. Cymes are shorter than the leaves. Flowers are small, bracteates, pedicellate. Sepals are 5, quinquiscial with glands at the base within. Corolla tube is much shorter than be leaves. Lobes are 5 with epipetalous scales with thick discs. Filaments are free from the scales, short; anthers are elongate with anapical tetragonal appendage and pollengrains arranged in tetrads. Stigma is pentagonal and convex. Follicles are double, seeds flat and comaternal.

Tribal Claims:

The ‘Kani’ tribe considers the plants janakia arayalpatra as a very important drug with wonderful curative properties. Expressed juice or pounded mass of the fresh tuberous toot is mixed with equal quantity of the expressed juice of coconut kernel. The mixture is then boiled for sometime to attain a semisolid form which after cooling is administered per as a dose of 10-15 ml. twice daily for 15 to 30 days to cure all kinds of peptic ulcers and related afflictions. It is also recommended stamina as a roborant, collant and blood purifier.

The ‘Kani’ tribals call this plant, AMRITHAPALA meaning the plant which gives the milky ambrosia or nectar of immortality. AMRITHA –means ambrosia or nectar of immortality and PALA—means milk. AMRITHA is also the mythical antidote potion against poison. According to ‘Kani’ elders the plant is named as AMRITHAPALA on account of its great medicinal properties. According to an interesting local legend the plant AMRITHAPALA was one of the divine drugs brought by Hanuman along with other divine drugs like VISALYAKANA, SANDANAKARNI and MRITHA SANJEEVINI on the orders of Chiranjeevi Jambavan to revive Laxmanan who become unconscious after the NAGAPASA (a sort of magical noose made of poisonous snakes to entangle and make the enemy unconscious) during the war of Lord Rama with the demon King Ravana of the great Indian epic Ramayana. It is said that Hanuman (the trusted aide and lieutenant of Lord Rama) drunk the milky juice of this plant to relieve himself from the fatigus and restlessness that he experienced after his strenuous journey to bring the medicinal plants from the Himalaya to Lanka, the war site where Laxmanan was lying unconscious.
Search on the Identity or Reference of the Plant in Ayurveda Literature:

A thorough search was made to find out any possible reference of this plant in the classical Ayurvedic literature. But no direct reference about this plant could be found in classical Ayurvedic works of Charaka, Sushruta or Vaghbhata. However, the descriptions of a divine drug growing in similar habitat (growing in rocky services where there is deposition of some sand/soil), shape of the leaves (like that of ARAYAL – Ficus religiosa) and aroma of the tuberous roots (like that of SARIVA – Hemidesmus indicus) etc., as given in the Oushadhi Nighantu (Dictionary of Medicinal Drugs) of Tayyil Kumaran Krishnan (1906) shows striking resemblance to AMRITHAPALA. In Oushadhi Nighantu, the plant has been named variously as MRITHASANJEEVINI, SANJEEVINI or THANPRARASAYANI.

Ethnopharmacological Evaluation

A through investigation on the ethnopharmacology and phytochemistry of this plant has been initiated at the regional research laboratory, Jammu. The preliminary investigations have shown promising results and detailed investigations are in progress.

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