



## Contribution of Agasthiyar to Kerala

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### Abstract

Sage Agasthya was the founder of Tamil *Sangham* that encompass three Kingdom - *Chera*, *Chola* and *Pandya* in which the *Chera* Kingdom denoted *Keralaputra* comprising the districts of Malabar, Cochin and Northern Travancore that was well recognized in epics and manuscripts. The major contribution of Agasthiyar to south zone is the martial art *Kalari* which lays more emphasis on unarmed combat and *Varmam* techniques; that includes *Varma* therapy, *Kalari* healing procedures and *Silambam*. This manuscript recalls the literary evidences and landmarks of Sage Agasthiyar's eternity in Kerala. This article enlightens the devotion to the Sage Agasthiyar in Kerala by through idols and temples. Moreover this manuscript exemplifies the most advanced tribal practice in Agasthiya hills which are Centuries old Traditional knowledge of Saints – disciple of Agasthiyar promulgated in Kerala.

**Keywords:** sangham, keralaputra, varmam, kalari, silambam

### 1. Introduction

Agasthiyar is one of the Seven Sages, well-versed in Vedas and Sciences as well as skilled in the usage of diverse weapons. Agasthiyar is considered to be the author of the first Siddha literature and he was supposed to have lived in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century [1]. About 96 books are attributed to him and that includes writing in alchemy, medicine and spirituality. *Agasthya Muni* dating back to the distant ages of past, describes the Goddess as energy that pervades even the sub atomic particles within the matters, i.e., *Paramanu* (*Paramanu* is the sub atomic particle) [2].

It is believed that the great hermit Agasthiya who had performed wonderful deeds by the merits of his penance, is still doing penance in the Agasthiyar kooda mounted above the Agasthya hills in Kerala [3]. Agasthiyar who had travelled throughout the length and breadth of *Bharatha*, had several hermitages. In the *Valmihī Ramayana*, *Aranyakanda Sarga* 11 a description is given of a beautiful hermitage of Agasthiyar and the peaceful atmosphere that prevailed in and around it [3]. In *Rigveda*, the conversation between Agasthya and his wife Lopamudra had been elaborated in certain verses.

There is a legend in Tamilnadu that Agasthiyar was a member of first two Sanghams of Tamil Literature. He has written the Tamil Grammar on Music, Literature and Drama. It is believed that the following works in Sanskrit have also been composed by Agasthiyar [3].

- Agasthiyar Gita; in the Varchapurana, Pasupalopakhya
- Agasthiya Samhita; in Pancaratra
- Agasthiya Samhita; in the Skandapurana
- Siva Samhita; in Bhaskara Samhita
- Dvaidha-nirnaya Tantra.

The life history of Agasthya has been described in Malayala Text 'Puranic Encyclopaedia'. The books namely *Agasthya Siddha Vaidhya Rathnaharam*, *Agasthya Maharishi*, *Agasthya Katha*, *Agasthya Vaidhyachandrika* are in Malayalam Language. The literary movements in the South are associated with Sage Agasthya whose Agastyam (*Akattiyam*) is supposed to have consisted of 1000 Sutras or aphorisms [4].

This article discusses in detail about the history of Kerala and the perspectives of Keralites in *Sangham* Age illustrated in Tamil poetry. Moreover it explicates the martial arts of Agasthiyar which are being practiced in Kerala.

### 2. Sangam age and Kerala

The sage Agasthiya is the father of Tamil grammar and Literature. The entire social world of Kerala, as part of Tamilakam (Tamil land) is reflected in the rich collection of secular poems which form the characteristic legacy of the *Sangham* age. According to tradition, the first *Sangam* was founded by Sage Agasthya. The earliest reference to the *Chera* (*Keralaputra*) kingdom cards in the Ashokan inscriptions. It comprised the districts of Malabar, Cochin and Northern Travancore [5].

The Tamil literary works of the *Sangam* Age provide valuable information of the life of the people in the early centuries, explains the social, cultural, political and economic life of ancient Kerala. They reflect the picture of a settled society. They spoke an archaic form of Tamil. The remnants of *Sangam* civilization were still visible in Kerala linguistically, culturally and socially. The words used in *Sangam* like '*angadi*' are still popular in Kerala [5].

The last phase of the *Sangham* age coincided with a silent

revolution that was brewing within the social system in Kerala. By about the 8<sup>th</sup> century, a chain of thirty two Brahmin settlements had come up, which eventually paved the way for the social, cultural and political separation of Kerala from the Tamil country, in due course. These colonies were capable of producing a great philosopher, Sankaracharyawho was born in *Kaladi* of Ernakulam District [6].

During the *Sangham* age, Sage Agasthiyar cult was flourished in southern parts of India mainly in Travancore as cited in *Vedic* literatures.

### 3. Martial Arts of Agasthiyar

Agasthiyar is the Divine father of certain arts like *Kalari* that includes *Silambam* and *Varma* points which are currently being practice in southern Kerala.

#### 3.1 Silambam

*Silambam* is one of the ancient martial art of southern region which is closely linked with the *Kalaripayattu* of Kerala. Oral tradition and Ancient palm leaves that have dissipated with time are witnesses and there are references to the art in *Sangam* literature “the Tamil epic *Silappathikaram*, for instance has reference to *Silambam*” [7].

Oral folklore traces *Silambam* back several thousand years to the Siddhar (enlightened sage) Agastya. Agastya discussed Hindu philosophy with an old man he met, said to be the Lord *Murugan* in disguise. The old man taught him of *kundalini* yoga and how to focus *prana* through the body's *nadi* (channels). Agastya practiced this method of meditation and eventually compiled three texts on palm leaves based on the God's teachings [8]. One of these texts was the *Kampu Sutra* (Staff Classic) which was said to record advanced fighting theories in verse. These poems and the art they described were allegedly passed on to other Siddhar of the *Agastyamuni akhara* (Agastya School) and eventually formed the basis of *Silambam*, Siddha medicine, and the southern style of *kalaripayat* [8].

References in the *Silappadikkaram* and other works of *Sangam* literature shows that *Silambam* has been practiced as far back as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. The bamboo staff - along with swords, pearls and armor - was in great demand with foreign traders, particularly those from Southeast Asia where *Silambam* greatly influenced many fighting systems. The Indian community of the Malay Peninsula is known to have practiced *Silambam* as far back as the period of Melaka's founding in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and likely much earlier [8].

An expert of *Silambam* will be familiar with *Varma adi* also. Even in the art of *Silambam*, (bamboo staff fencing) there are many instances in history, where opponents were defeated by blows or prodding attacks with the stick, to vital spots on the body in historical descriptions and in quite a number of manuals on this art [9].

#### 3.2 Kalari

*Kalaripayattu* is the exclusive martial arts legacy of Kerala, taken to China by the Buddhist monks which became fabled model for the modern martial arts. *Kalaripayattu* also includes the '*marma*' treatment which identifies the vital nodal points (*marmas*) in the body for suitable pressing and nudging in order to correct the muscular and neurological problems.

The massaging may involve standing full length over the patient and applying pressure with the feet. The system is acknowledged superior to any other method of massages [9].

The *Kalari* tradition is at once a cultural experience too. The folk-lore of Kerala is woven around legendary exponents of *Kalaripayattu* and their exploits. The vocabulary of the rural people, especially of northern Kerala, is studded with *Kalaripayattu* jargon [10].

Basically the martial art of *Kalari* in southern region is originated via the Divine power of Agasthya. The concept, Philosophy and background of southern style *Kalari* art are different from Northern and Central style. The way of teaching is short and in practical form, based on Siddha Medical system, contains the simple rituals of Dravidian groups [10].

The *Kalari* has got a unique way of harmonizing the humours in the living body by applying various therapeutic massaging techniques. The modalities are used for maintaining good health, strengthening the body environment, for rejuvenation, and the therapies are used for treating various afflictions of musculoskeletal and neurological origins. The therapeutics are collectively known as '*Kalari Chikitsa*'. The therapeutic application includes various means for positive health giving therapy, corrective Musculo-skeletal applications, Treatments for specific injuries or pathological conditions including bruises, joint dislocations, bone fractures, emaciation of muscles and limbs and post-operative orthopaedic rehabilitation. The therapies also includes the emergency counter-applications for potentially deadly shocks or blows to the body's vital spots – *Marma / Varmam*.

Sage Agasthya, one of the seven immortals according to the Hindu mythology is credited with the discovery of these vital points and his works have been documented by his disciples in the forms of beautiful Tamil poetry [10].

#### 3.3 Varmam

*Varmakkalai* is the mother of all martial arts which is slowly disappearing. All the other martial arts are direct or indirect descendants of *Varmakkalai*. Sage Agasthiyar who lived in the southern hills is the founder of *Varmakkalai*. This art existed in the spoken-form and he formulated and gave a written-form by writing in the palm leaves (manuscripts). Only after him other sages (Siddhar) like *Theraiyar*, *Pogar*, *Pulipani* etc... have written other manuscripts [11].

*Varmam* or *Marmam* are locations in the body where vital life force is seen in high concentration, it is being applied in the ancient Science of healing. Sage Agasthiyar in one of his manuscripts clearly says that we should learn the practical form and then the therapeutic form to treat the victim.

"*Appanae varmathil adi pidi vettu kuthu katru pin varisayudan varma ilakku seyyae*"

Practitioners used *Varma*-point massage to stimulate healing in areas that corresponded to the injuries. For example, if there is a blow in lower abdomen, the *Varma* point on the back of calf, which corresponds with the transverse part of large intestine, is massaged to trigger flow of energy to induce healing.

The understanding of *Varma* points is extremely beneficial in treatment of various illnesses and during diagnosis of diseases.

Further, they will learn the correct methodology of stimulation of different *Varma* points and how it relaxes and rejuvenates the entire body during a massage, providing a sense of positivity and vitality to the subjects.

In fact, the stronghold of *Varmam* art is in the areas in and around Travancore - Kanyakumari district and borders of Southern Kerala, where the *Thekkan Kalari* (Southern Style *Kalari*) system which devotes lesser time to weaponry and lays more emphasis on unarmed combat and *Marma Adi* techniques than the other two styles of *Madhya Keralam* (Central Style of *Kalari* in Palakkad-Cannanore- Malappuram areas) and *Vadakkan Kalari* (Northern Style of *Kalari* in Malabar areas) [12].

### 3.4 Naadi Astrology

Naadi Astrology (*nāḍi jyotiṣa*) is a form of Dharma astrology practiced in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and adjacent regions in India. It is based on the belief that the past, present and the future lives of all humans were foreseen by Dharma sages in ancient time. They were written in palm leaves by a *Rishi* called Agasthya who had a highly developed consciousness [13].

These Manuscripts (palm leaves) containing the astrological inscription were initially stored in the premises of *Thanjavore Saraswati Mahal* of Tamilnadu State in India. Nadi Astrology is a form of Hindu Astrology called as *Jyothisham*, is currently being in *Vaitheeswaran Koil* and some of these leaves were obtained in auction during the British rule by the fore-fathers of the founder of *Sri Agasthiya Naadi Jyothishalayam* in Trivandrum, Kerala, who were living in *Vaitheeswaran Koil* more than three hundred years ago [14].

*Agasthya Nadi Astrology* based on *Rishi* Agasthya's school of thought is also being in practice in certain other areas of Kerala.

### 4. Landmarks of Agasthiyar in Kerala:

Some of the Landmarks and worship idol in Kerala depicts the cohort and innovation of Agasthiya therein. Sage Agasthya is one of the seven maharishis (*Saptarishis*) in Hindu puranas. There is a small shrine on the mountain top with an idol of Agasthya *rishi*. Most of his statues in Mountain depict him with a stone crusher in one hand and a bowl of medicines in the other. Kerala *Agasthyakoodam* peak is also a pilgrimage destination for Hindu devotees who believe that sage Agasthya meditated on the mountain.

#### 4.1 Agasthya Maha Kshetram

Once *Agasthya Muni* was praying in *Tapovanam*, on the banks of river *Vallapattanam*; and then the idol of Agasthya and Lopamudra Devi is being placed in *Valapattanam* of *Kannur* and worshiped with the Slogan and the recite of mantras in the name of Agasthya and Lopamudra [15].

“*Om agasthiya maharishi bhyo namah satyame agasthyam! agasthyamae satyam*”

#### The Mantra is as follows

“*Om Shreem Greem Sadguru Paada Kamalae Janma Karma Paapa Shaap Vimochanaa Sakala Runa Roga Mrityu*

*Ahankaara Dur-vimochanaa Sarva Deva Sakala Siddha Tejas Roopae Maha Jyana Vidhae Kumbha Sambhoota Brahma Nishtaya Dravida Divya Grantha Kaarakaaya Lopamudrambika Sahita Bhagwaan Sri Agasthya Guru swaminae Namah*”.

This is a prayer to sage Agasthya which describes the devotion and the worship to Agastya. These are with the meaning of *Agasthya Muni* will give you darshan in any form at any place that rejuvenates all nerves of the body and become enthusiastic [15].

#### 4.2 Padmanabha Swamy Temple

Shree Padmanabha Swami was not just the *Sthala Devatha* (Place deity) of Thiruvananthapuram, but was accepted as the supreme Sovereign of entire state of Travancore from 1750 AD. Shree Padmanabhaswamy is the tutelary deity of the royal family of Travancore.

The ancient late-Tamil-Sangam epic *Silappatikaram* (100 AD to 300 AD at the latest) speaks of that the Chera King *Cenkuttuvan* receiving gifts of gold and precious stones were credited in certain 'Golden Temple' which is believed to be the Pasmanabhaswamy Temple. Gold had been panned from rivers as well as mined in Thiruvananthapuram, Kannur, Wayanad, Mallappuram, Palakkad and Kollam districts for thousands of years.

The chamber B of the temple is considered to be fixed to the secret chamber with the '*naga bandham*' or '*naga paasam*' '*mantras*' by the then '*Sidda purashas*' who lived during the reign of king *marthandavarma* in the 16<sup>th</sup> century [16].

According to Siddha literature Sage Agasthiyar liberated himself and resided in *Jeeva samaadhi* at *Ananthasayanam* Temple in Thiruvananthapuram. It also finds a place in the *Samadhi Kshetras* of Indian since the belief holds strong that the Sage Agasthya's *Samadhi* (final resting place of an elevated personality) is located beneath the sacred feet of the main idol of Shree Padmanabha Swami.

#### 4.3 Agasthyamala

Agasthyamala biosphere reserve lies in the border between the Indian states of Kerala and Tamilnadu. The part of hill area with mist capped peaks in Tamilnadu is being called as '*Pothigai Malai*'. Agasthyamala in Kerala is mounted with Agasthyakoodam which is a pilgrimage centre for devotees of the Hindu Sage Agasthya, who is considered to be one of the seven *Rishis* of Hindu Puranas. There is a full-sized statue of Agasthiyar at the top of the peak and the devotees can offer *Pooja* themselves. Agasthyamala Biosphere Reserve is among 20 new sites added by UNESCO to its World Network of Biosphere Reserves in March 2016 [17].

#### 4.4 Agasthiyarkoodam

Agasthiyarkoodam is a 1,868-metre (6,129 feet)-tall peak within *Neyyar* Wildlife Sanctuary, Kerala in the Western Ghats of South India. The peak lies inside Kerala near the border in Tamil Nadu. The lower elevations of this peak are known for their abundance of rare medicinal plants. Approximately 2,000 medicinal plants are found there and the tea gardens are established around the base stations of the mountain at Brimore, Bonacaud, and Ponnudi [18].

## 5. Tribal practice in Agasthya Hills

The tribes in Agasthya hills know about number of rare medicinal plants and their applications. This Manuscript explains few of the Traditional practices in Agasthya hill area, as they are believed to be the knowledge of Sages – disciple of Agasthyar proclaimed in that area.

In Kerala, the tribal communities are very primitive and most advanced, nearby 40 groups, the major groups of tribes are, *Kani*, *Adiyar*, *Paniyar*, *Kurichiar*, *Koragar*, *Kurumar*, *Kattunaykar*, etc. *Kanis* mainly inhabit the forests of Kerala–Tamil Nadu border, which is located in the southernmost part of Western Ghats known as *Agasthyar Koodam*. It is believed to be the sacred abode of the great saint *Agasthya* and the heaven of medicinal herbs [19].

*Kanikkars* are the inhabitants of the area around *Agastyakutam* and *Mahendragiri* peaks of the western in the *Adimali* hills of *Idukki*. They live in *Neyyattinkara* of Trivandrum district and Quilon district of Kerala. The term *Kanikkaran* means the hereditary proprietor of land. A story concerning them is that they derived the name *Malayarayan* from Hindu mythological Sage, *Agasthya*. They claim that once they were the rulers of the area comprising Trivandrum, Kollam and certain areas of Kanyakumari district and claim that they were here even before the Dravidians, and claim to be the original people of the land. It is a fact that they had a special place among the rulers of Travancore and they were treated without any discrimination. The herbs commonly used in tribal practice are explained with review.

### 5.1 *Trychopus zeylanica*

*Arogyapacha* found endemic to Agasthyar hills of Kerala is used by local “*Kani*” tribes as a health food for instant stamina, evergreen health and vitality. The tonic effect of the plant is comparable to that of the famous food/drug Ginseng.

The knowledge about the plant *Arogyapacha* – *Trychopus zeylanica* has been collected from *Kani* tribes and the R&D activities are successfully completed by TBGRI, Kerala. The plant has a sugar-fatty acid combination, a certain glycolipid fraction that boosts the body’s immune system and having anti-fatigue properties, hepato-protective, immunomodulatory, anti-stress activities.

The product *Jeevani* have been released by TBGRI, filed the Patent application in 1994 in cooperation with the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). The patent application (No. 2319/DEL/2008) was published in 2010 but a patent has not yet been granted. But it have been commercialised via *Arya Vaidya Pharmacy Ltd. (AVP)* of Coimbatore amongst the issues of access-benefit sharing with *Kani* tribes [20].

### 5.2 *Aristolochia SPS*

Two important species of plants, *Cheriya arayan* (*Aristolochia indica*, Linn) and *Valiya arayan* (*Aristolochia tagala.chan*) used by the *Kani* tribes of Agasthyar hills of Trivandrum district of Kerala against snake poison and insect bites. [21] The study has further revealed that the above mentioned plants were widely used against various ailments by the folk medicine practitioners of Kerala.

### 5.3 *Anaphyllum beddomei*

*Anaphyllum beddomei* Engl. (Araceae), commonly known among the tribes as *Keerikkizhangu* is found only in thick forest and used as an antidote for snake venom. The plant rhizome paste is given internally. The *Kani* people believe that, this plant has the power of God and people who are going to collect this plant must have a pure mind. It is also believed that to make it more effective, it is given with the urine of a man, if the patient is female and *vice versa*. This medicinal preparation is also used externally against snake poison by *Malayarayan* tribes in Idukki district of Kerala [19].

### 5.4 *Andrographis paniculata*

*Andrographis paniculata* Nees (Acanthaceae), known among the *Kani* tribes as *Kiriyathu* or *Nilavepu* is used as an effective medicine for the treatment of cough and fever. This medicinal treatment is also popular in among the *Mannans*, which is a tribal community in Idukki district of Kerala [22].

### 5.5 *Apama siliquosa*

The root of the plant *Apama siliquosa* Lamk. (Aristolochiaceae) is known among the *Kani* tribes as *Kuravan Kanda* or *Kuttilla vayana* and is used for the treatment of stomach ache, chest pain, and some skin disorders [19].

### 5.6 *Ceropegia spiralis*

*Ceropegia spiralis* Wt. (Asclepiadaceae) distributed in Southern and Western Ghats in Kerala and Tamil Nadu is commonly known among the *Kani* tribe as *Parayilpandam* [19]. The corm of this plant is used as food for blood purification and syphilis. The tribals believe that healing power of *Ceropegia spiralis* would be rendered ineffective if its healing properties are divulged.

### 5.7 *Chasalia curviflora*

*Chasalia curviflora* Thw. (Rubiaceae) is commonly known among the *Kani* tribe as *vellamundan*, is an effective medicine for the treatment of jaundice. It is believed to be three times more effective than the commonly used medicinal plant, *Keezhanelli* (*Phyllanthus fraternus*) [19].

### 5.8 *Curculigo orchioids*

*Curculigo orchioids* Gaertn. (Amaryllidaceae) tubers are used to induce lactation in nursing mothers. It contains a large quantity of starch and the *Kanis* believe that to make this medicine more effective, it should be prepared only by the patient [19].

### 5.9 *Emilia sonchifolia*

*Emilia sonchifolia* DC. (Asteraceae) - A small herb with leaves having the shape of the pinna of rabbit is called by the tribes as *Muyal chevia*. The *Kani* tribes apply the paste made from the entire plant body to wounds for fast healing and for chest pain. The *Mannan* tribe in *Iddukki* district also use this plant to relieve chest pain [19].

### 5.10 Other tribal practice

Leaf juice of the plant *Leea sambucina* Willd. (Vitaceae) *nekku* mixed with coconut milk is given orally, thrice a day for the treatment of dysentery with blood discharge.

*Kani* tribe use the juice extract of *Musa paradisiaca* Linn. (Musaceae) leaf sheath as a first aid medicine against snake venom; the juice prevents the spreading of snake poison in the body<sup>[19]</sup>.

*Ruellia patula* Jacq. (Acanthaceae) known as *Chilathi pacha* is used as a single drug remedy against the deadly poison of *Kaduva chilanthi* (Tiger spider)<sup>[19]</sup>.

### 6. Role of Agasthyar in Ayurvedic practice

The *Ayurvedic* medicine *Agasthya Rasayana* also known as *Agasthya Haritaki Rasayana* has been first described by Agasthya Rishi, is one of the very famous Ayurvedic medicine for Asthma and other Respiratory ailments. It is not only the medicine but also a Rejuvenative rasayana.

The *Ayurvedic* system also applies certain *Varma* points illustrated by Agasthya Rishi. The medicines like *Marma Kashaya* from the knowledge of Agasthya, are also being employed in therapeutics of *Ayurveda*.

### 7. Conclusion

The literary review concludes that the devotion of Agasthiyar is more renowned in southern parts of India. The landmarks like Agasthyakoodam mounted on Agasthiya hills with the idol of Agasthiyar and the temple with idol of Agasthya and Lopamudra Devi in Kannur district symbolize the entity of Agasthyar in Kerala. The very primitive and most advanced tribal practice in Agasthiyar hills may be gained from the knowledge of Sage Agasthiyar and be maintained as traditional confidence for centuries. The divine power of Agasthiyar has been exemplified as martial arts like *Kalari* in Kerala; the *Varma* points employed in *Kalari* is being used as therapeutic techniques in Kerala with the evidences in palm leaves.

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