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The Rediff Special/George Iype

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Members of the Kani tribe, a small nomadic community based in the Western Ghats in Kerala, have reason to be pleased. They believe they made a small difference at the ten-day Earth Summit in Johannesburg, which concluded over a month ago on September 4. A unique profit-and-benefit-sharing experiment that the tribal folk have successfully implemented at home made waves among the United Nations agencies and multilateral financial institutions.

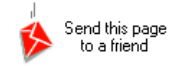
Kuttumathan Kani, a leader of the tribe, is much excited after his return home. "My trip to the Earth Summit was a great experience. I never knew that the rare plants that we made herbal medicines with could make a difference globally. We are proud of our tribal heritage in India."

At the United Nations-sponsored World Summit on Sustainable Development, Kani and a leading scientist, Dr P Pushpangadan, explained to a jury of 60 from multilateral financial institutions a novel global model of benefit sharing, which the scientists and global financial experts present at the summit hailed for its novelty and utility.

The benefit-sharing model is the result of 15 years of effort made by the Kanis, scientists in Kerala, and the state government.

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The benefit-sharing model is the result of 15 years of effort made by the Kanis, scientists in Kerala, and the state government.

Kani says the story begins with a wild plant called arogyapacha (scientific name: *trichopus zeylanicus*). For many years, when allopathic medicines failed to cure critical liver diseases, the local population in and around Thiruvananthapuram used to get cured with a concoction called malamarunnu (literally, medicine of the mountain) that the Kani elders prepared out of arogyapacha.

"Even though people used to come to our mountains for our malamarunnu, we continued to live in penury as we never charged any money for the treatment. We even treated dozens of patients who could not get their various diseases cured in various medical college hospitals across Kerala," reveals Kani.



The penurious plight of the Kanis, numbering about 16,000, continued till a team of scientists working on the All-India Coordinated Research Project on Ethnobiology, led by Dr P Pushpangadan (*left*), went trekking through the tropical forest hills way back in December 1987.

Says Dr Pushpangadan, "We went were to survey the Kani tribal settlements, but we got exhausted after a long walk. When they saw us tired, some of the Kani tribesmen, who were our guides, offered us fruits of a plant. We ate them and found that we could go on trekking for hours without fatigue." It was the beginning of a remarkable discovery. The tribals said they got the fruits from a magical plant, which the scientists identified as arogyapacha.

Dr Pushpangadan, who then headed the Thiruvananthapuram-based Tropical Botanic Gardens and Research Institute, immediately realised the potential of arogyapacha. "The tribal knowledge of forest plants holds the key to several new discoveries and wonder drugs," he points out. The scientist lost no time in convincing the Kerala government about the importance of joining hands with the tribals.

Soon a team headed by Dr Pushpangadan conducted detailed chemical and pharmacological investigations on arogyapacha. The investigations showed that the leaf of the plant contained various glycolipids and some other non-steroidal compounds with profound adaptogenic and

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other non-steroidal compounds with profound adaptogenic and immunity-enhancing properties. Pushpangadan's research institute successfully developed a scientifically validated and standardized herbal drug based on the traditional knowledge of the Kanis.

In 1995, the Tropical Botanic Gardens and Research Institute sold the herbal drug formula to the Arya Vaidya Pharmacy in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, for a licence fee of Rs 1 million to produce the drug for seven years. While transferring the technology for production of the drug to the pharmaceutical firm, TBGRI agreed to share the licence fee and royalty with the tribal community. The licence fee and the 2 per cent royalty on profits from the formulation were to be shared equally by the TBGRI and the Kani tribe.

The herbal medicine that the pharmacy produced clicked in the market as the demand for the arogyapacha-based formulation called Jeevani zoomed. Today the medicine is sold at the rate of Rs 160 for a jar of 75 grams. Officials at the Arya Vaidya Pharmacy reveal that the bulk of their exports to southeast Asian and Western countries consist of Jeevani.

Kani says the prime concern of their community members in the beginning was to evolve a viable mechanism for receiving such funds. "So we formed a registered trust called the Kerala Kani Welfare Trust with the help of the Kerala government and voluntary groups."

Every year, the amount due to the Kani tribals from Jeevani trade is transferred to the trust and the money is used for welfare activities of the Kanis. In between, TBGRI also trained dozens of tribal families to cultivate the plant around their dwellings in the forest. In the first year itself, each family earned about Rs 8,000 per mensem on the sale of leaves from cultivation of arogyapacha.

Sufficiently impressed, the United Nations shortlisted the Kani tribal venture two years ago as a global model for a benefit-sharing experiment. The UN noted that this was the first time a local community was being compensated for imparting the secrets of a rare medicinal plant, which had led to the development of a successful herbal drug.

"It is a remarkable venture in material transfer and benefit sharing from tribals. I do not think a similar project has happened elsewhere in the world," Dr Pushapangadan says.

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Jeevani continues to be an effective herbal drug for many common illnesses. It is a general tonic for all kinds of exhaustion, fatigue, feeling of weakness, and mentally stressful situations. The tonic increases fresh energy and vigour in a system worn out because of any constitutional disease or from overexertion.

Hailing the successful experiment, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research Director General Raghunath A Mashelkar recently wrote, "India has pioneered one of the first models of benefit sharing."

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