

**Tuberculosis is a disease which can be cured completely with proper attention and care. But the ignorance and negligence of the Aadivaasis in the tribal areas in Idukki serve as a roadblock in the timely diagnosis and proper treatment of tuberculosis.**

## **Tuberculosis Can be Eliminated Tuberculosis in Edamalakkudi\***

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29-12-2018

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Kuthirayalakudi is a tribal village in Idukki district, Kerala.

This area, which is part of the Western Ghats, is mostly inhabited by the Mannaan and Mudhuvan Adivasi tribes with rich cultural heritage. These tribes have their own food habits and treatments. Just some while ago, Shivan (not the real name) from Kuthirayalakudi suffered a bout of strong cough and breathlessness. Shivan, aged only 24 years old is the second of three children took care of his family working as a laborer. Despite the local medicines and traditional treatments, there was no respite in his illness. On advanced investigation, Shivan was confirmed to have TB or tuberculosis. He was admitted to Adimali Taluk Hospital for treatment and administered medications. After two months of medicines, there was remarkable improvement in his condition. Later, Shivan did not pay proper attention to medication. A few days later the drug was completely stopped because Shivan and his family did not know anything about TB and its seriousness.

### **Disease Transformation**

Due to improper medication routine, Shivan's tuberculosis took the form of multi-drug resistant tuberculosis (MDR TB). This made the disease condition worse. By that time apart from Shivan, his brother also started showing signs of TB. The brother was also confirmed to have TB on advanced investigation. This is not the story of only one family in the tribal areas. Many families are in the grip of TB in tribal areas, especially in Idukki District.

### **The Reasons**

Shivan and his brother had a number of reasons to get TB. Shiva was found to have contracted TB from a North Indian laborer who worked with him. Earlier another person had contracted the disease from this man. Siva was unable to work after having TB. Five persons including Shiva were staying in a small cottage. It later became evident that the brother also contracted TB because they lived together in a house with limited ventilation.

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\*Edamalakkudi is the only Tribal Panchayat in Kerala, located in the middle of the forest.

### **Tuberculosis: A Disease Needing Extreme Attention**

The presence of TB that is resistant to multiple drugs is a challenge in the treatment of tuberculosis in Kerala. When the bacteria *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* achieves resistance to antibiotic drugs used in the initial stage of TB treatment, it gives rise to the MDRTB state. This makes treatment more difficult. MDRTB will be transferred from those afflicted with MDRTB. This is dangerous. MDR TB may arise in many ways. One of these is direct transmission from those with the disease. There is a possibility that MDRTB may affect those discontinuing drugs midway or taking improper dosage in the first phase of treatment. That is what happened in Shivan's case.

### **Tuberculosis in Edamalakkudi**

Persons with tuberculosis have been identified also in Edamalakkudi, the only tribal panchayat in Kerala. This year, two of them have been confirmed to have tuberculosis. The total population of this tribal panchayat is only 1830. The health authorities and panchayat officials in this sector are concerned with the fact that two have been diagnosed with tuberculosis. Tuberculosis has also been confirmed in Padikkappukudy, Kurathikkudy, Korangatty, Marayur, Chinnakanal, Bison Valley and Kanthallur. In Idukki district there are total 540 TB cases reported this year. This includes the figures in the adivasi and urban areas. The total number of cases was 597 last year. There are 4 TB units in Idukki district. In addition, there is a special CB-NAAT (Cartridge Based Nucleic Acid Amplification Test machine) system for detection of tuberculosis in Adimali and Thodupuzha.

### **Why in Tribal Areas**

Studies have shown that tuberculosis mostly affects people with immunodeficiency. When the immune system is suppressed, tuberculosis can quickly infect the human body. Immunodeficiency can be due to malnutrition. Inadequate malnutrition in tribal areas is the reason for TB to a certain extent. The noncooperation of certain sections of adivasis poses a setback for health workers. Smoking and the consumption of excess alcohol also reduces immunity.

### **Understanding Tuberculosis**

*Mycobacterium tuberculosis* is a bacterium that causes tuberculosis, or TB. The inhalation of tuberculosis bacterium particles present in the air leads to transmission of this disease. Potent microorganisms and immunodeficiency of the patient can make the disease worse. Highly immune patients can be resistant to microbes. In others, the bacteria immediately multiplies and in turn produces symptoms of TB. About 85% of people, TB affects the lungs. Today TB is a disease that is completely curable with medicines. Consuming

medicines in the initial six months can cure tuberculosis. The effective DOTS treatment for TB is provided free by the government.

### **Reduction in Patients**

Idukki district TB officer Dr. K. Anoop says that various camps are being organized to eradicate tuberculosis in the tribal areas of Idukki District. The number of tuberculosis cases has decreased from last year. The ignorance about the disease poses a hindrance in the treatment of TB in the adivasis. It is also a challenge that the adivasi communities living in adivasi villages and inland areas are less connected to the mainstream. Special camps are being conducted by the District TB Center to identify them. Special camps have been conducted recently in the towns of Korangatti, Marayur, Chinnakanal, Padikkappukudy, Kuruthikudi and Bison Valley. Separate camps are being conducted to timely identify patients at the earliest and to make treatment available. About 1200 to 1500 sputum tests per month is conducted here. Domestic awareness is also being implemented as part of tuberculosis management.

### **Special Plan for Tuberculosis Management**

The state government has set up a special scheme for the management of tuberculosis in adivasis. The project will be implemented stage by stage in association with the tribal welfare department and will be extended to all the tribal communities across the state. The scheme will be implemented in Wayanad in the first phase and the second phase will be implemented in Palakkad, Kannur and Idukki districts. The healthcare workers in the patient's neighbourhood should be the healthcare supervisors. They should ensure that the patient takes the medicine on time and also ensure access to nutritional diet. They should collect the sputum sample of symptomatic people who are unwilling to go to hospital. It is also the healthcare supervisor's responsibility to examine these samples. The inability to properly complete the therapeutic regimen is the main challenge of tuberculosis management in the tribal areas.