

History of the Traditional Medicine of Ancient India

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ABSTRACT

Humanity has been tiling, hard to conquer pain and death since the dawn of civilization. It can be held that human life and knowledge of preserving it as a going concern must have come into being almost simultaneously. In India too, development and growth of such knowledge known as Ayurveda associated with this activity began early with the history of mankind in the sub-continent. Vedas which are considered to be the repositories of recorded Indian culture, have mention of this knowledge both in theoretical and practical form. There are discussion or theories about the composition of living and non-living matter, the physical, biochemical, biological, psychological and spiritual components of man and the vital native forces working both inside and outside the body. Ayurveda was regarded as one of the upvedas closely associated with the Atharvaveda. The charms of curing ailment through magical powers which have been narrated in the Atharveda and Ayurveda have formed the basis of this indigenous system of medicine since the earliest history of India. The present study is an attempt to trace the history and development of ancient Indian medicinal science.

Introduction

The science of medicines is of fundamental importance of man's well being and survival and so it must have originated almost with man and developed gradually as civilization advanced and the development of medicine has been an on going continuous process for all times. No system of medicine is a discovery or an invention in the conventional sense but a gradual evolution in successive periods of human history. Traditional Ayurvedic Medicine is one of the important part of the splendid cultural heritage of our ancient civilization. The materia medica of Ayurveda is extensive and utilizes substances from the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms. Vegetable products from the major sources of their Pharmacopoeia (aushadh-sanskar granth; aushadh kosha). Most of the plants, trees mentioned as source in the earlier texts can be identified and a large number of them are still being used as curative drugs.

Herbs

In the Vedic age, men had intimate contact with the environment, particularly with plants, as he depended on them not only for his day to day nourishment but also for necessary appliances and instruments for use in medical science, plants played a great role in various forms in the rites, ceremonies, and sacrifices, which were to be performed by the Vedic aryan. The ancient sages identified various plants and classified them from various angles. According to form and size they were classified as Vanaspati, Vanaspatya, Virudh and Osadhi. The vegetable products used as drugs are mainly collected from the forests.¹ Whether any cultivation of these was done cannot be categorically stated.

As stated earlier, the Harappan people used Acacia, Pipal and Neem trees as a source of remedial drugs for various ailments.² They also have been profusely depicted on their seals. In the Rigveda, the somā plant has been praised as the elixir of life or amrita and was considered as the king of plants. The Rigvedic aryan believed that by drinking the juice of this plant they could conquer death. The whole of the ninth mandal of the Rigveda terms with the description of the preparation of the soma in different varieties and the apparatus used in the methods, filters, vessels etc.³ Soma is also praised in the Rigveda as the healer of the sick and giver of sight.⁴

The 'Osadhi-Sukta' of the Rigveda is an authoritative document on the knowledge about plants in that age. It says that plants came into existence much earlier than the Gods. Plants are like a mother who protects the people and acts for their all round welfare. They have potency like horses by which they conquer diseases in patients by circulating through all parts of the body of the patient.⁵

The Atharvaveda also mentions a number of herbs used as drugs including the following:

(i) Satavara- which is said to cure the disease of piles, destroys consumption and germs.⁶ Satavara has been identified by the botanist as 'asparagus racemosus'

which is useful in dysentery, diarrhoea, tumours, inflamatiuous, biliousness, diseases of the blood, kidney, liver and eye, throat complaints, tuberculosis, leprosy, epilepsy, night blindness, scalding, urines, rheumatism, dyspepsia, gleet and gonorrhoea.⁷

(ii) Apamarga- which is said to cure diseases viz. the excess of hunger and thirst, impotency and childlessness.⁸ Apamarga has identified as "Achyranthes Aspera" which is the useful remedy for various dise ases. Its juice is given in cases of diarrhoea, dysentery, piles, rheumatism, inflammation of internal organs skin diseases etc. A paste of the fresh leaves of apamarga can be applied over insects bites, the paste mixed with black pepper and garlic is a useful antibiotic. An infusion of the roots is a mild astringent. It is used in bowel complaints, night-blindness and rheumatic affections.⁹

(iii) Rohini- it is said to cure the diseases including the broken bones of the body, bone fractures and all sorts of wounds caused by weapons and stone's.¹⁰ Rohini has been identified as "Soymida Febrifuga". It is a lso given to the patient of intermittent fevers, general debility, dysentery and diarrhoea. The decoction, is efficacious in malarial fever, gargle, vaginal infection and enemata and wash for rheumatic swellings.¹¹

(iv) Nitatni-is said to cure all sorts of hair diseases. The plant has deep roots and therefore supposed to strengthen the roots of the human hair as well. According to Raj Nighantu the plant denotes six hair medicines namely (i) Moorcha (ii) Spreekka (iii) Sehdevi (iv) Devdroni (v) Kesar (vi) Aditya Bhakta.¹²

(v) Kustha-is said to cure all diseases of head, eyes and body and all kinds of fever.¹³

(vi) Pippali-is said to cure rheumatic ailments, wounds and severe wounds caused by missiles.¹⁴

(vii) Rajani-which is said to cure all kind of leprosy whether in the bones or on the skin. It also removes white spots on the body.¹⁵

(viii) Anjana-cures eye diseases, fever, cough and snake bite.

(ix) Laksa-which is said to cure wounds and burns.

(x) Rsabhaka-herbs for obtaining a son.

- (xi) Haridra-cure jaundice.
- (xii) Chipudru-which is said to cure heart disease and cancer.
- (xiii) Guggulu-the smoke emitted by Guggulu has the power to kill the germs of tuberculosis and all sorts of curses.¹⁶ Guggulu has been identified by the botanists as 'Commiphora Mukul' which is useful in chronic catarrh of the bowels, rheumatism, skin disease and diseases of the genito-urinary organs. Its gum also contains medicinal properties.¹⁷
- (xiv) Aswatha-the plant has been used as a source of medicine since prehistoric period. It is said to be an effective medicine to fill up the wounds.¹⁸ Aswatha has been identified by the scholar as pipal (*Ficus Religiosa*) which is useful in gonorrhoea and scabies, inflammatory swellings, relieves toothache and strengthens the gums, promotes granulation when dusted over sores. The figs are digestive and laxative, their powder is given in asthma.¹⁹ This show that the plants were explored for their medicinal properties. Some of those mentioned here have not been identified so far.

The other important text to give us extensive information on the herbs is Kautilya's Arthsastra. The Arthsastra mentions the following herbs:

- (i) Kaidarya, Puti Sesame-removes madness when used in the nostrils.
- (ii) Kustha and Lodhra-have been stated to cure graying of hair and consumption.²⁰ Lodhra has been identified by the botanist as "Symplocos Racemosa", which is commonly used in bowel complaints, menorrhagia, discharge, dropsy, eye diseases, liver complaints, fever and for skin diseases.²¹
- (iii) Priyangu and naktamala-their mixture is said to cures leprosy.
- (iv) Kataphala, Dravanti and Vilanga-their powder when used as snuff, removes headaches.
- (v) Prigangu, Manjisthi, Tagara, lac-juice, liquorice, turmeric and honey-is a means of bringing back to consciousness those who have lost it through rope (strangling) water (drowning), poison, beating or fall.²²

A perusal of the plants mentioned here evidences that some of the plants familiar to the Atharvaveda continued to be used. However, at the same time we find that a number of newer herbs have also been included. This indicates that the physicians continued to research into finding newer source for finding drugs for curing ailments.

Later Charaka also details the plants which could be used for drugs. According to him the plants could be divided into four kinds: (i) trees bearing fruit; (ii) tree having blossom and bearing fruits; (iii) plants living for one year and (iv) creepers and bushes. Their roots, bark, bud, solid, interior, gum, stalk, juice, twigs, potash, milk, fruit, blossom, ash, oil, thorns, leaves, bud-covers, clods and shoots are used as medication. This shows that almost every part of the plant was having medicinal properties. Charaka further specifies 16 plants among medicinal plants whose roots could be of use; 19 the fruits of which are used; 3 the juice of which is used; and 3 other plants the bark of which could be used to treat various ailments.²³

Sushruta also mentions over 700 plants. These were divided into 37 Gana's according to the diseases for which they were to be applied.²⁴ A number of minerals were also used to make drugs. Silajeet is one of the earthy products used as drug. Silajeet is a kind of gelatinous substance secreted from the sides of the mountains when they become heated by the rays of the sun in the months of June and July. It contains tin, lead, copper, silver, gold and iron, hence, it is also called as Shadyoni (derived from six sources).²⁵ Charaka also mentions some faunal drugs. These included honey, milk, excretas, fat, marrow, flesh, faeces, urine, skin, bones, sinews, horns, claws, hair and the gallstone of the cattle. He however, does not specify the use of those products for the particular ailments.²⁶

Conclusion

Thus, it becomes clear from the above description that plants provided the natural and traditional drugs for the ancient Indians. People in ancient times had close association with nature. They obtained their food and found remedies for their illness in nature. In its earliest beginning herbs seems to have sprung into existence largely because of utilitarian reasons. Thus plants, minerals and animal products were used as a source of medicine to remove the pains and suffering of human being like in the present times. Most of the plants, trees mentioned a source in the earlier texts can be identified and a large number of them are still being used as curative drugs as Ayurvedic medicine.

References

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