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Ayurveda - Traditional Indian Medicine:A Preliminary Review on Prevedic to British period

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Abstract

The paper has been designed to give an insight into Indian system of medicine. Since the beginning of history, man has evolved several ways of coping with illness. All the ancient civilizations have developed their own medicinal systems which reflect not only specific philosophies but also appear to be influenced by the social beliefs and practices. Indian traditional medicine does not mean any single system of cure. It consists of different types of supernatural system of cure. They are ayurveda, Unani, Siddha etc. of which ayurveda is more compact and multifarious system of treatment. Unani and Siddha are bracketed with Ayurveda by the Government of India and General Public when referring to Indigenous medical systems. Ayurveda one of the ancient medical sciences in the world, adapt a holistic approach. Origin of Ayurveda trace it back over 5000 years ago. In the Vedas, there are references relating Ayurveda. There are three main texts in ayurveda, known as Brihat-Trayi, these are Charaka samhita, Susruta samhita and Astanga Hridaya. It provides rational means for the treatment of many internal diseases which are considered to be obstinate an incurable by other systems of medicines. During Buddhist period medical knowledge was more rationalized by great teachers. Many foreigners came to India to learn Ayurvedic treatment for healing. Practice of ayurveda fell into disuse after repeated foreign invasions of India. It was in late 19th century and the early 20th century that people started thinking about the importance of Ayurveda. After independence, the national Government took keen interest to set the affairs of ayurveda on scientific lines and develop it because of which Ayurvedic colleges, dispensaries, hospitals and pharmacies were established in different parts of the Country. Though Ayurveda is very ancient, it can even now be effectively used for the cure of many serious diseases.

Keywords

Susruta,
trepan,
Upanishads,
Rig veda,
Jataka

Introduction

“Health is the supreme foundation of virtue, wealth, enjoyment and salvation. Diseases are the destroyers of health, of the good in life, and even of life itself. Thus has arisen the great impediment to the progress of humanity.”

Since the beginning of history, man has evolved several ways of coping with illness. Different societies have looked for different ways which may reduce pain and elevate spirits. Thus all the ancient civilizations have developed their own medicinal systems which reflect not only specific philosophies but also appear to be influenced by then existing social beliefs and practices. According to leading scholars F. Kennett, R. Jalota and O.P Jaggi traditional medicine is a sort

of antique treatment based on both supernatural and natural cure.

WHO sponsored meeting at Brozzaville in 1976 has defined traditional medicine as

“.....the sum total of all knowledge and practices, whether explicable or not , used in diagnosis, prevention and elimination of physical, and social imbalance and relying exclusively or practical experience and observations handed down from generation to generation, verbally or in writing”

Several systems of traditional medicines like Greek medicine, Chinese medicine, Egyptian medicine, Indian traditional medicine were originated during ancient period. Indian traditional medicine is considered one of the oldest and compact systems of treatment. It is also believed that almost all of the said systems to some extent are highly indebted to Indian traditional medicine.

Traditional medical system in India is gradually accumulated practical and systematic knowledge. They are very ancient and deep rooted.

While the term ‘traditional’ sometimes carries the connotation of ‘pre-modern’ in the sense of ‘primitive’ or ‘outdated’, many of the traditional medical technologies were in fact quite advanced even by western standards as well as better adapted to unique local conditions and needs than their later ‘modern’ substitutes

Unlike other traditional systems, Indian traditional medicine does not mean any single system of cure. It consists of different types of supernatural system of cure. They are Ayurveda, Unani, Siddha etc of which Ayurveda is more complete, compact and multifarious system of treatment.

Unani and Siddha are bracketed with Ayurveda by the Government of India and General Public when referring to Indigenous medical systems.

Origin of Medicine

The art and science of medicine is as old as the mankind itself. Disease and injury have been part of our life and the measures taken to treat them coincided with the march of civilization. Many anthropologists who have recently worked with primitive people have been surprised to learn of some of their highly evolved and sophisticated medical systems.

A well known medical historian, the late **Dr. Payne**, remark that

“the basis of medicine is sympathy and the desire to help others, and whatever is done with this end must be called medicine”

The ancient men were nomads. They used to roam in search of food both in the form of vegetables as well as animal. The ancestors of the present mankind had settled in few areas like the valley of the river Nile, Tigris-Euphrates, Indus and the Huang Ho rivers. Their needs were limited and they lived simple life. They passed through the same life-cycle of birth and death. They lived longer because of the unpolluted environment. But they fought against natural calamities and wild animals.

The first lesson came to primitive man by injuries, accidents, bites of beasts and serpents.....but, little by little such experiences crystallized into useful knowledge..... So gathering objectives with medicinal value was an important task in their life.

Many Egyptian mummies had been found with tuberculosis at various parts of the body like lungs, bone and lymphnodes.

Some of the trephined skulls left behind by the ancients of Europe and South America show clear evidence of tumours.

Gradually the primitive men established their own culture and society and developed primitive sciences like the life sciences at many centres of the world simultaneously.. They found medicinal plants in the forest by closely observing the animals who were the natural healers of their own diseases.

The primitive medicinal gatherers or ethnic botanists were pathfinders of ancient medical science or rather the “proto-therapeutics”.

Although there is no record to establish when plants were first used for medicinal purposes, the use of plants as healing agents was depicted in the cave paintings discovered in the **Lascaux caves** in France, which have been radiocarbon dated to between 13,000 and 25,000 BC.

Interesting Highlights of Ancient Indian Surgery

Ancient Indian Surgery which developed after the advent of Susruta (600 BC) can be compared to a great extent with modern surgery.

According to the laws of Manu every conceivable part of the human body could be cut off as a punishment.

So the severance of nose and ears were prevalent in ancient Indian judicial practice. Same practice is still followed in some Islamic countries, like Arabia, according to the prescription detailed in **Hadith**. Surgery was done in ancient India for reconstruction of those severed parts of the body.

The ancient women of India were in the habit of piercing their ear lobes for wearing ear hangings which can be traced back from the Mohenjodaro civilization. Those heavy ornaments used to disfigure the ear lobes and even cut through it in due course. Susruta suggested fifteen kinds of plastic operations for repairing those deformities

The ancient Indian surgeons were deft in the practice of trepanation of the skull as would be evident from the two trephined skulls collected from Burzaham in the northern Kashmir valley and Harappa located in the Indus Valley. Both those skulls have been carbon dated.

Historical Development of Medicine in India

Pre Vedic Period

Due to the absence of any written record of this phase, we have to depend on the cave paintings, remains of human beings and other associated artifacts and evidences for the possible existence of diseases and treatments during this period. In India, Bhimbetka caves provide an example of

continued habitation from 1,00,000 BC. The Paleolithic and Mesolithic artists depicted rib cages of animals and protective shields for head and chest indicating their knowledge of vital organs in the human, as well as, in animal's body.. In the tropical climate of India, no much human soft tissues were preserved. Only the human skeletal remains were left behind for our present scrutiny and study to detect the existence of any disease in the prevedic period and to surmise the treatment adopted. In **Pratapgarh** district in Ganga basin of Uttar Pradesh some skeletons have been discovered from the site. One such fossilised skeleton was studied .

Radio –carbon dating fixed it at Ca,8,110 B.C.

The skeleton seemed to be of a 40 years old male . According to Dutta P.C , Pal, A., and Biswas , J.N.

During his lifetime he suffered from partial paralysis of the left side of his body with shortening and atrophy of bones and thin limbs on the left side. Due to this, he might have had a limping gait.

This inference was drawn from the inspection of the skull which had an asymmetry on the two sides. His long bones were re-examined and a shortening and thinning of bones on the left side was confirmed.

Dr. Ray Chawdhury is of the view that

This primitive man might had some medical attention and careful upbringing in his childhood days, so that , he could survive to the adult age with the above infirmity on one side of his body.

This case provides the earliest record of medical disorder in India during Mesolithic period. A skull with holes (trephine holes) was found at **Burzahom** in Kashmir. There were eleven attempts for trepanation (making holes) on the skull. Five of these which were at close quarters, did not pierce the skull. The rest of the holes pierced through the entire thickness of the skull. X-ray picture of the skull indicated that a ring of thickening of bone developed around at least one of the holes. This indicates that while that subject was alive , his body tried to repair damaged bone.

Dr. Ray Chawdhury is of the view that

This hole was made during his life time and he lived for some time after the operation.

The discovery of an advanced drainage system, both inside and outside the house, with properly covered drains, toilets in the corner of the house establish the awareness about sanitation and hygiene for healthy living among the Harappans.

“Examination of the human remains from the twin great cities of Mohenjodaro, and Harappa and those from Lothal, Kalibangan and Nal , provided ample evidences for the existence of diseases, like metal poisoning, diseases

of brain and development of cranial surgery, degenerative arthritis, spinal deformities, senile changes, arteriosclerosis, dental diseases and changes in the jaw, including cancer. There were cases of injury, healed fracture, congenital diseases and hemiplegia or paralysis of one half of the body.”

Paleopathological and radiological studies of two Bronze Age skulls from early population of Harappa, unearthed from Cemetery R37, representing mature Harappan Culture, revealed that Cranial surgery was apparently practiced during that prehistoric period. The first case mentioned above had fixed lower jaw with the surrounding bones of face and head. The second case had congenital or acquired anomalies of bone. Trepanation of skull has also been found in ancient **Kalibangan** at least in two cases . One of them was an infant and the other an adult . The Kalibangan healer used small **red-hot trepan** of the nature of a circular saw with guard around a central pivotal pin to prevent excessive injury to the skull and brain. The trepan had some resemblance to a modern one used for cranial surgery. It is difficult to determine the medicinal preparations used during the Harappan civilization. Some soporific medicines might have been used by the Harappans before operation for the cranial surgery.

Vedic period

The term ‘Vedic period

“applies to that period of Indian civilization during which the four Vedas – the Rig veda Sama veda, Yajur veda and Atharva veda – the holy writings consisting of religions hymns and dogmatic principles were formulated

The traditions, wisdom, knowledge and culture of Vedic people were recorded as hymns in vedas. There are discussions on health related topics in all the Vedas. Various treatment for diseases, medicinal herbs and their efficiency for removing the ailments, have been described in vedas. The vedic people primarily considered treatment through application of sun rays, water, wind and medicinal herbs. During the Vedic period, the cult of medicine was at first supernatural invoked by prayers and offerings to the gods. Later, it involved magic as the disease was then taught to be due to cosmic influences or evil spirits. They praised **Soma** ,

“the custodian of medicines which grows there with the help of Agni under water”
(RV.I.23.20 I.65.9-10)

Some verses in Rigveda were addressed to God Rudra,

“Rudra, invigorate our descendents by thy medical plants”
(RV.II.4.1.4)

Out of these four vedas, the Atharvaveda is the first authentic record now available of the state of Medical knowledge during the Vedic period. Atharvaveda deals with human anatomy, classification of diseases, herbal medicine to cure these diseases. **Kausika – sutra** of Atharaveda is the earliest and

the most important section of medicines. Two types of healers were described in that. The first group must be the wandering healers whereas the second group often combined healing with priest-hood duties.

“Atharvaveda attempted to probe the structure of man by a rudimentary study of anatomy (AV.X.2) and to find out the important organs of the body(AV.II.33)”

In Rig veda many diseases, medicinal herbs and fundamental principles of Ayurveda have been discussed. Proper food and diet have also been given a predominant place in the Rigveda.¹ A hymn in the Rigveda contains the idea by pointing out that there was a threefold list of skilled professions namely carpenters (taksan), medical healers or physicians (bhisaj), and priests (Brahmin) (RV.9.112.1)

Atharva The medicinal therapy in the Vedic ages was subdivided into two categories; one was called Rasha Sadaka meaning treatment with the help of chemicals like mercury (parada), sulphur (gandhaka), copper (tamra) etc. and the other was Visa Sadaka.

In that method the physicians treated their patients with the help of various poisonous substances like snake venom in measured doses. Veda attempted to separate prophylactic treatment from curative treatment. **Ayusyanic** dealt with prophylaxes to keep good health and **Bhasajyani**, the curative treatment. Treatments mentioned in Atharva Veda included **Swastyana** (propitiatory rites, **Bali** (offering), **Mangala homa** (oblation), **Upavasa** (fasting) and **Mantras** (incantations)

The Brahmana literature gives us detailed information about outer body (head, ear, nose, mouth etc.), the inner body such as heart spleen, lung, liver, kidney, vein, foetus, various medicinal plants like apamarga, aswagandha, udumbara, khadira, bilva, bibhitaka etc.

The Sutra literature and the Upanisads also contain a lot of information regarding body parts, their ailments, cause of ailments, treatments and food-habits. Kausika sutra also contains lots of information about the medicines of that time.

Later vedic period

The knowledge accumulated in the entire Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, Upanisads and Sutra literature perhaps took a perfect shape during later vedic period.

Buddhist period

Buddhism played an important role in the development of traditional medicine. The Indian Buddhist emperor Asoka states in his second Rock edict that provision has been made everywhere in his kingdom for medical treatment for both men and animal, and the medicinal herbs suitable for both have been imported and planted.

Buddha himself was a great physician who practiced medicine and attended nay sick person who sought his help. The Buddhist monks were often affected by seasonal diseases.

Buddha advised the monks to take four types of medicines like the kalika, Yamika, Saptahika and Yavajjivika.

In the Buddhist pharmacopoeia the Kalikas were the pulp of boiled rice or any other grain. The Yamikas were 8 types of drinks, like Cocapanam, prepared from cinnamon bark; Mocapanam prepared from plantain trees etc., The Saptahikas are Sarpi or Ghee; Taila or oil; Phanita, Juice of Sugarcane; Madhu or Honey; Sarkara or dry sugar. The Yavajjivikas were Mulabhaisajya or root medicine; Ganda bhaisajya or Tubers; Patrabhaisajya or leaf medicine; Puspabhaisajya or flower medicine; 5 Jatus or lac like silajatu; 5 Ksaras like alkalies; 5 Lavanas or salts and 5 Kasayas or astringents like haritaki.

The *Jataka* tales give some idea about diseases and their treatment during the Buddhist period. The origin of diseases there was traced to *Karma Vipaka* or abnormal activities of the person.

Diseases like jaundice, diarrhea, cough, indigestion, eye diseases and wounds were recorded. The medicinal plants and roots like turmeric, ginger, black hellebore decoctions like that of **Nimba, Kutaga etc.**, Madra- Muttaka, rock salt and medicated oil application for snake bite etc., were mentioned.

Jataka mentioned about **Jivaka Komar Bachcha**, a contemporary of Buddha and physician to the King **Bimbisara** of Rajagriha. He had medical training under **Atreya of Taxilla** for seven years.

Gradually, two schools, one under Atreya with 6 disciples, developing at Taxilla on the west, dealing mainly with medicine and another school of Dhanvantari with six disciples dealing mainly, with surgery developed in Kasi, in the east. They wrote specialized treatises (Tantras) and monographs (Kalpas) which were followed by Sanhitas, later on.

Muslim period

Unani system of medicine was introduced in India with the advent of Muslim rule in India. During the rule of Khiliji and Tughlak rule, this system was recognised officially. The Mugal emperor Akbar invited ayurvedic scholars to his court. But the new system affected the growth of Ayurveda.

British period

Indians who were skilled in Medical service were attached to regiments and civil stations under the name of 'Native doctors'. Calcutta Native Medical Institution was founded in 1822. The Ayurvedic classes were introduced in the Sanskrit college in the year 1827. In 1935 under the Advice of Lord Macaulay the Ayurvedic classes in the Sanskrit College were closed and a new medical college was established in Bengal to declare the European medicine as the only acknowledged system of medical study.

Modern period

After independence Ayurvedic physician began to organise into professional associations. The Central Council of Indian Medicine (CCIM) governs and recommends policies for the research and development of the systemⁱⁱ. Primary health care services has been provided and to control communicable diseases many health care programmes have been introduced. AIDS control programme had been launched in India in the year 1987. Nowadays medical tourism is growing sector in India. India is an inexpensive destination for medical treatment. Indian private hospitals have skilled doctors, nurses and technicians that attract medical tourists.

Conclusion

Every system of medicine promotes the adage 'prevention is better than cure'. Indian medicine gave much importance for hygiene and moral ethics. They took great care in preventive measures. Many of the medical practice had religious basis. Today we accept all medicines from the west because of the decline of Ayurveda and Unani due to further development.

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