

Pre-Vedic Medicinal Systems in India

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Abstract

Health and illness started annoying human since his existence on the earth. A group of people, majorly the priests, started cultivating knowledge of science. They started observing different diseases, symptoms and analyzing the reasons of them to the best of their abilities, of course with the flavor of religion. Gradually a treatment objective is formed. In the present studies we tried to focus on the ancient system of medicine used by Indian like tribes lived in the Andaman Islands, Tribes of North-East, 'Samhitas' and the 'brahmanas', The Siddha system of medicine, Indus Valley Civilization. From the present studied we can conclude that Ancient pre-historic pre-Vedic India was rich in indigenous medicinal system developed by different tribes, inhabitants at different parts of the sub-continent. Those were methodical, proven and time-tested, but not well documented. Extensive research is required to un-earth and preserve the treasure before they are lost forever in the era of aggressive modernization.

Keywords: Medicinal system, Vedic, Health, Illness

Introduction

Health and illness started annoying human since his existence on the earth. A group of people, majorly the priests, started cultivating knowledge of science. They started observing different diseases, symptoms and analyzing the reasons of them to the best of their abilities, of course with the flavor of religion. Gradually a treatment objective is formed. In the present studies we tried to focus on the ancient system of medicine used by Indian like tribes lived in the Andaman Islands, Tribes of North-East, 'Samhitas' and the 'brahmanas', The Siddha system of medicine, Indus Valley Civilization. From the present studied we can conclude that Ancient pre-historic pre-vedic India was rich in indigenous medicinal system developed by different tribes, inhabitants at different parts of the sub-continent. Those were methodical, proven and time-tested, but not well documented. Extensive research is required to un-earth and preserve the treasure before they are lost forever in the era of aggressive modernization.

History speaks about the supremacy of Indian culture and medicine in olden days. Evidently the consciousness of Indians of prehistoric era must have

been more developed than that of other nations at contemporary.

India's early achievements in the field of medicine, including early surgery and Ayurveda, are fairly well documented. It is not so well known that they crossed India's borders in several directions. The Greeks, according to the French Indologist Jean Filliozat, probably took their notion of pneuma (breath) from that of prana, meaning life in Sanskrit. Plato in his Timaeus provides a theory of three elements in balance or association in the body, which is somewhat to the tridosha principle of Ayurveda. The Hippocratic Collection makes several references to the borrowing of some Indian Drugs and medical formulas. 'Indian herbals were sought after in the Roman world' [1] Later, the Greek physician Galan (130-200 CE) who spent many years in Rome, acknowledge some borrowings from Indian sources. An Ayurvedic physician who migrated to Baghdad in 9th century CE, became the physician-in-chief there after successfully curing his royal patient of a long standing stomach trouble. Later he translated Sushruta Samhita into Arabic and Persian ('Sushruta' was Arabized into 'Susrud'). Charaka Samhita, was translated by an Arab scholar [2].

The root of this Indian system of medicine, which ignited the development of a branch of science called Ayurveda and got spread to the world, is from a pre-historic era of Indian subcontinent. The aboriginal Indians, who started habitation at different parts of the land, named as 'tribes' developed their own medicinal system to get cured. We have discussed here some brief highlights of the glorious era of aboriginal Indian system of medicine.

5000 BC

Dr. B. B. Gaitonde mentioned in his Traditional Medicines in South Asia, 'In the Pre-Vedic era (Pre Aryan Civilization), there are ample evidences based on excavations at the sites of Indus valley Civilization in Harappa and Mohenjodaro, which suggest that a proficient system of healthcare and sanitation were in existence. Town planning indicates a concern for drainage and sanitation probably the earliest evidence of prevention of disease in human civilization. Harappans probably used a fair number of therapeutic remedies such as Silajit for diabetes and joint pains. Leaves of Neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*) was in use. There are some evidences, based on excavation, of human skulls that surgery was practiced during Harappan period dating back to 5000 B.C.' [3].

There was an elaborate description from Sir John Marshal in his landmark work 'Mohenjo-Daro and The Indus Civilization'. '... Piece of a coal-black substance, have been found ... an ancient medicine called Silajit. ... analysis of this substance was made by Dr. Hamid ... shown the presence of water, organic matter, silica, aluminum, ferric oxide, lime, magnesia, alkalis and carbonic acid in trace amount' [4]. Later Charaka says in his Charaka Samhita that, 'there is hardly any curable disease which cannot be controlled or cured with the aid of Shilajatu'.

3000 BC

According to N. Hembram, in his eminent work Austric Civilization of India, 'In the field of medicine, Indus Valley Civilization was in the peak of advancement. Auco-pressure system of treatment was quite in vogue amongst them. From the excavated findings, evidences have been unearthed that, medicine was in use with them and let it be very clear that, few bottles of coloured liquid as

medicine, which have been found in the ruins after a lapse of 5000 years, was not a rare commodity' [5]

A document from Mohenjo- Daro, in the Indus Valley, describes the use of 960 medicinal plants and includes information on anatomy, physiology, pathology and obstetrics [6]

World's first cataract operation was performed in India 500 BC. The first hospitals were founded in 256 BC by Mouryan Emperor Ashoka. He also supplied medicines to these hospitals. In 49 BC Sushruta treats intestinal perforations and obstructions by cutting into the abdomen and joining the damaged part of intestine using the heads of giant black ants as sutures [6].

Relevance of Tribal Medicine

It is often believed that the Austric or Munda speaking Pre-Dravidian Proto-Australoids now occupying parts of Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal were originally widely spread over all parts of northern India. Yet when the question of growth of the protohistoric Indus Valley Civilization and the Non-Aryan resistance to the Aryan Invaders are discussed, the contribution of the Dravidians is generally referred to but not that of any of the Pre-Dravidian people [7].

The 'Nisadas' are referred to for the first time in the later 'Samhitas' and the 'brahmanas' at the time when the Aryans were extending their hold on all sides of India. According to Chanda, (R. P. Chanda, The Indo - Aryan Race) Munda was at first spoken by Nisada race as a whole, and the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian dialects by some of Nisada tribes as a result of their contact with their more civilized neighbors. The Mahabharata and the Vishnupurana offer a fanciful derivation of the name 'Nisada' from 'Nisida' (sit here). The same story with some variations comes in Harivamsha. Here the Nisadas are said to be the descendants not only of the Dhibaras, but also of the Tusaras and Tamburas. But the term Nisada may also be derived as 'Nisa' (turmeric) + 'ad' (to eat) + 'an', meaning turmeric eaters. The turmeric plant grows profusely in Orissa and the alluvial plains of Bengal and Bihar. Besides, turmeric is not only taken as a condiment in eastern India, but is also used in rituals connected with the social and religious functions in this part of the country. The use of turmeric must have been adopted by the Hindu castes from the Munda tribes, who use it even today as in ancient times. It may be that the Munda tribes are called Nisada in those days, because they used

turmeric in various forms. This form is further corroborated by the fact that, the Santals in course of their migration lived at a place called 'Sasanbeda' meaning 'the plain of turmeric' [7].

In the Atharva Veda reference have been made to the cure of leprosy by the medicine prepared by the Asura and Asuri (Ref. Atharva Veda 1.24.2: The Asura – women first made this remedy for leprosy spot, this effacer of leprosy spot; it has made the skin uniform.). Leprosy was looked down upon by the Aryans as a bad disease [7].

Siddha System of Medicine

The Siddha system of medicine, which is practiced in south India is said to have originated in the days of MOHENJO-DARO, thousands of years ago, perhaps even before the Vedic period. There are about 500 Siddha medical works containing over 3000 valuable formulae. Some siddhas visited Ceylon, China, Arabia, Persia, Turkey and other places, where they propagated this knowledge. In the Siddha system, chemistry was developed into medical science and alchemy. Their knowledge of minerals, animals and plants was of a high order. The processes of calcination preparation of essences, extracts from minerals etc. were well known to them. They knew the use of Mercury and Arsenic and other metals [8].

Ever since the dawn of civilization, man has been striving to unfold the mysteries of nature and to understand the structure and purpose of his being. The Tamils who are inhabiting the south peninsula of the subcontinent have a hoary past, as ancient as that of Egyptians. They undertook a systematic study of nature and its elements from which they had developed a highly systematic medicine, which is now known as "Siddha System". Siddha method is well founded under the basic principles of nature and its elements after a careful and through study of the human system. The Siddha system originated from 18 Siddhars headed by "Agastiar".

The system is famous in handling all kinds of vegetable herbal products (1008 varieties), poisons (64 nos.), salts (28 nos.), metals (9 kinds) and other organic & inorganic products (12 nos.); and all other things connected with the extraction and preparation of the respective medical extracts.

According to Siddha Medical Sciences, the universe originally consisted to atoms, which contributed to the five basic elements, viz. Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Ether, which synchronies with the five senses of the

human body and they were fundamentals of all the corporal things in the world. A close relationship is found existing between the external world and the internal system of human being. Siddhas maintain that the structure of human body is a miniature of the world in itself. In the other words, every substance both visible and invisible, animate or inanimate is said to be formed of 'panchabhootas', otherwise called the five kinds of elements viz. Prithvi, Appu, Theyu, Vayu and Akash. They might have been formed by one, two, three, four or five of any of the elements noted above. This is the first principle or idea of a substance.

The seers of ancient India propounded the 'Thidhatu' theory in accordance with which three vital elements namely the Vatha, Pitha and Kaba, in their normal condition regulate all physiological activities and keep the body healthy. This thridhatu theory is also based on Panchabhootas i.e, Vayu + Akash – Vatha; Theyu – Pitha and Prithivi + Appu – Kaba.

When these thridhatu become abnormal or when their mutual harmony is disturbed (in which role they are called thridosha), they bring about ill health. One has to admit that besides the laws known to the sciences of physics and chemistry, there are other laws peculiar to the living organism called vital laws that are at work in the living machine without accepting which, the work of the body cannot be accounted for fully and adequately. Siddha fills up this void and compliments the science of physiology by stating that, it is due to the three vital elements namely the vital energy (Vayu), the vital fire (Pitha) and the vital elements (Kaba), that the living organism behaves differently from the inorganic world and shows the three characteristic properties of automaticity, assimilation and growth. Though these elements or vital force being primordial substances, do not belong to the realm of science, but when one studies the living matter more closely, more compelled, one feels to admit their existence; for undoubtedly they appear to be operating in the body, as much as they sometimes modify and even neutralize the known laws of Physics and Chemistry.

Varmam (Thanuology) of Siddha system is the only ancient medical science that can safely and effectively be used as sports medicine as it has much to offer to the healthcare of sports persons and for improvements of their performance [9].

The Siddha system in Tamil medicine got developed in South India on its own. Based on the period of Tamil culture, it can be affirmed that the Siddha System existed and thrived during the pre-vedic period [10].

Conclusion

Ayurveda literally means the Science of life. It is presumed that the fundamentals and applied principles of Ayurveda got organized around 1500 BC. Atharvaveda, the last of the four great Vedas, which forms the backbone of Indian civilization, contains 114 hymns related to formulations for the treatment of different diseases. From the knowledge gathered and nurtured over centuries two major schools and eight specializations got evolved. One was the school of physicians called as 'Dhanvantri Sampradaya' (Sampradaya means tradition) and the second school of surgeons referred in literature as 'Atreya Sampradaya'. These schools had their respective representative compilations- Charaka Samhita for the school of Medicine and Sushruta Samhita for the school of Surgery. The former contains several chapters dealing with different aspects of medicine and related subjects. Around six hundred drugs of plant, animal and mineral origin have been mentioned in this treatise.

The collective presentation and formation of Ayurveda started long back, in the absence of any written text or scripts, at the jungles and villages of different tribes in Indian peninsula. Dravid of southern India contributes in the form of Siddha. Santhal of east contributed the medicaments like turmeric, Mundas of central India nourished our Ayurveda with addition of neem, and like many more. This is a concise effort to distinguish and acknowledge the contributions from different tribes to modern Indian Medicinal System.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the paper. All authors do not have a direct financial relation with the commercial identities mentioned in the paper.

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