

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF AYURVEDA (A BRIEF HISTORY)

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Abstract:-History of medicine is a fascinating subject as it is a saga of man's struggle against disease. As the civilization advances and as the disease pattern changes, the medical science also changes. Ayurveda is the system of medicine that evolved in India with a rationale logical foundation and it has survived as a distinct entity from remote antiquity to the present day. The fundamentals on which the Ayurvedic system is based are essentially true for all times and do not change from age to age. These are based on human actors, on intrinsic causes. The origin of Ayurveda is attributed to Atharva Veda where mention is made several diseases with their treatments. Later, from the 6th Century BC to 7th Century AD there was systematic development of the science and it is called Samhita period, when a number of classical works were produced by several authors and during this period there is evidence of organized medical care.

Medicine is as old as life itself. The survival of the species demands that simultaneously with the appearance of disease, all living things must have also evolved the means to combat disease. The higher animals are guided by instinct to seek remedies for illness in plants and herbs. Man with his superior intelligence must necessarily have extended the scope of this search for remedies. So if we discount the myth of a Garden of Eden which man had to abandon when he fell from grace, "the thousand ills that flesh is heir to" must have afflicted man from his birth and the dawn of medicine must have synchronized with the dawn of disease.

Every human society must have developed a rudimentary system of medicine, whether

based on material medica or in spells, incantations magic and rituals, which to us in this advanced age may appear meaningless. The progress from this primitive stage to a regular system of medicine has not been on the same lines everywhere. The development of a system of medicine depends on various factors; its form and content are decided by the civilization and the environment in which it is born.

Early development of Ayurveda as a complete System:

Ayurveda is the system of medicine that evolved in India and has survived as a distinct entity from remote antiquity to the present day. It would be interesting to study

the history of Ayurveda, trace its origin along with other Indian Systems of sciences and thoughts to assess its achievement and its place in the corpus of world medicine. The study of the genesis and evolution of ideas in any sciences is always interesting and often instructive. But it is not solely as an intellectual exercise that the study of Ayurveda is to be viewed. In spite of the spectacular results achieved by modern medicine, mainly through advances in the physical, chemical and natural sciences, there are vast areas of diseases which have eluded its therapeutic ambit and the study of a system of medicine that has stood the test of time may have a fruitful contribution to make in the overall alleviation of human suffering.

All primitive societies have had a collection of remedies for common illnesses, evolved through trial and error methods, accident or by inspiration. But such remedies were purely empirical, and not based on any logical understandings of illness or of drugs. As late as the 17th Century, Moliere, referred to physicians as people, “who poured medicines of which they know little into bodies of which they know less”. The Indian system of medicine, Ayurveda, was evolved as a system with a rational and logical foundation. That its basic concepts were not re-examined in the light of the greater understandings of the human environment, that for centuries its methods of treatment underwent little change, and that there have been no addition to its literature for a long time, are charges made against the systems by its critics. It has to be admitted that after the 8th century A.D no book of outstanding

merit was written and the literature from then on upto about the 16th Century consisted mainly of commentaries on the original texts. The last perhaps among the original books was Bhava Prakash, which is about 400 years old.

The fundamentals on which the Ayurvedic system of medicine is based are essentially true for all times and do not change from age to age. These fundamentals are based on human factors on intrinsic causes, not extrinsic causes. Civilization may change, human habits may change, the environment may change but humanity remains the same. Changes in the environment, new modes of living, new avocations, all might contribute to certain modifications of a disease or the appearance of new diseases. But disease attacks the human host, and as long as the human being is very much the same as his ancestor, the reactions to the disease, signs and symptoms would be same. The methods adopted to cure the disease may differ in their form but not in their essential approach.

It is said that the originators of the Ayurvedic system of medicine did not base their practices on the experimental method if by this it is meant that there are no record of studies in anatomy, physiology, pathology and pharmacology, the criticism is not without meaning. But the development of surgery the classifications of disease, the observations on signs and symptoms, prognosis and the descriptions of the nature, toxicity and therapeutic value of drugs as described in the literature all clearly demonstrate high level of knowledge which

would not have been possible for men without the scientific approach. One thing we should not lose sight of is the fact that the men who gave the system to the world were drawn from the highest intellectual and spiritual hierarchy. Their motive was compassion. Their purpose as to alleviate human suffering and their recorded precepts were for their disciples whom they trained for the service of humanity. The emphasis therefore in the texts is on the practical aspects of medicine. It is also possible that these great seers through the practice of Yogic disciplines were endowed with the faculty of intuition which helped them to discover many truths. Students of chemistry will be familiar with the famous observation “Let us learn to dream; then perhaps we shall learn the truth”. We see that the experimental method has serious limitations, especially in the world of medicine. A medical journal of thirty years ago looks out dated and obsolete today. The so-called truths or findings given to the world yesterday with a wealth of experimental findings and statistical figures is controverted today with evidence which is no less impressive. While we should all believe in progress, we should fight the temptations to look on mere newness as a virtue. Nor should we under-rate the contributions made to human knowledge by seers endowed with intuition or some indefinable faculty that has enabled them to perceive the truth far ahead of their time.

Medicine in the Vedas and Puranas:

References to medicine are found in the earliest texts including the Vedas. The

legendary version of the origin of the Ayurvedic system is that Brahma reminded it to Prajapati, who handed it down to Atreya Punarvasu etc. In the Rig Veda there are reference to the first divine physician Rudra and of how the Aswini Kumaras cured Chyavana of senility. There are number of Riks addressed to Marut, Vayu etc, in which the reference to medicine is unmistakable. Although such references are found in the Rig Veda, as systematic and comprehensive treatment of medicine is to be found only in the Atharva Veda. The Atharva Veda is considered to have originated later than the Rig Veda, and contains a description of diseases and the cure of them. As an example, we might cite the ancient view of the disease consumption. It was characterized as a disease of not one organ but of several organs, heart, lungs, spleen, intestines, rectum, even of the bones and marrow. This surprisingly modern view appears in the form of a prayer – the form in which medical instruction appear in Vedic literature. An even greater degree of anatomical and other knowledge is displayed in certain Upanishads – particularly in the Yogapanishads, which of course belong to a later period than the Vedas.

The tradition of medical knowledge is further carried during the period of the puranas. References to drugs, diseases and health care are to be found in the epics. Thus we see in the Ramayana, that expert physicians attended on kings and they were capable of preserving dead bodies. In the Mahabharatha there are references to surgeons attending on the wounded and the

disabled with all the appliances and equipments in the battle field.

Beginnings of Systematic Development

We shall next consider the period when systematic development can be said to have taken place. This era is associated with a few illustrious names, the first of whom is Agnivesa. The Samhita written by him which is classic which has survived to this day has been made available to the world by Caraka, a redactor. Historically it would appear that during Caraka's time the Agnivesa Samhita has fallen into disuse or partly perished, and Caraka undertook the great task of restoring the work, filling up the gaps and re-writing the parts of the work, which had become obscure. This will be evident from the subscription to each chapter in which the author states that he has redone the chapter (Pratisamakrita). The work has undergone a further revision by one Dridabala: at least the last 17 chapters devoted to Cikitsa and the whole Kalpa and Siddhi stanzas have been re-written by Dridabala as stated in the colophon of each chapter.

Caraka Samhita:

It is not known when Agnivesa lived. The book is written partly in verse and partly in prose and the language bears a resemblance to that of the Brahmanas. The text is the record of teaching by Atreya Punarvasu to his students and Agnivesa was one of them. Caraka is believed to have flourished in the sixth century B.C. There is a Hindu tradition that Caraka and author of

Mahabhasya on vyakarana patanjali, are one and the same person. Many commentators, Vijnana Bhiksu, sivadasa and Bhavamisra, the author of the Bhavaprakasa, to name a few, subscribe to this opinion. The student of early Sanskrit literature is often confronted with some confusion in the identity of names owing to their imprecise use by commentators. It has to be admitted that there is some uncertainty about the identity of Caraka.

This however does not in any manner, detract from the greatness of Caraka Samhita. The popularity of the work continues to this day. No Ayurvedic physician of any repute would admit that he has not studied Caraka. The work is a complete compendium of medical information, dealing with medical aspects, as etiology, symptomatology, treatment and medical care in health and in disease.

Susruta samhita:

Equal in importance to the Caraka Samhita is another treatise called Susruta Samhita. This work deals with surgical diseases, and diseases of the special organs such as the eye, ear etc. Just as by tradition Caraka Samhita is ascribed to Atreya Punarvasu. Susruta Samhita is ascribed to Dhanvantari Susruta has recorded the precepts of this puranic personage Dhanvantari, just as Agnivesa has recorded those of Atreya Punarvasu. The Dhanvantari of puranas is said to be one of the avatars of Vishnu. A historical personage by name Divodasa is also known as Dhanvantari, being an incarnation of Dhanvantari of Puranas. It is

more likely that the name of Dhanvantari was given to Divodasa of Kasi who was a celebrated physician Susruta Samhita like the Samhita of Agnivesa, has undergone recensions. It is generally believed that the famous rasarcharya, Nagarjuna, re-edited the book and that the Utterasthana, the last portion of the book, was completely written by him. This theory is based on Dalhana's statement in his commentary that Nagarjuna re-edited (Pratisamskarna). There is also an ambiguous reference from which some critics have inferred that originally Susruta samhita consisted of only five cantos, and the sixth is a later addition.

While enumerating the contents of the chapters and the cantos. Susruta mentions only 120 chapters in 5 cantos. There is no reason why he should have restricted himself to these numbers if the work really consisted of 180 chapters in 6 cantos. The 66 chapters in Uttarasthana are therefore evidently later additions by another author just as the last 17 chapters of Caraka samhita are additions by Dridhabala. The work was intended to be a inclusion of medical diseases would appear to be inconsistent with this purpose. It is true that in ancient systems of medicine, surgical and medical diseases were not divided into water-tight compartments, as they are found today. All the same, there was some specialization; Caraka remarks in many places; "Hereafter, hand the patient over to the Surgeons". It is therefore quite possible that the sixth canto, which deals mainly with medical diseases and diseases of the eye, was not the work of Susruta, but was added to the Samhita by Nagarjuna.

The age of Susruta is not known. It is generally believed that Susruta lived sometime around 600 B.C. Susruta Samhita could have undergone several revisions, the last of which was attributed to Nagarjuna Rajatarangini places him in the 3rd century B.C. The identity of Nagarjuna is also shrouded in antiquity. There appears to have been a number of physicians and alchemists with the name Nagaruna.

Astanga Samgraha and Astanga Hridaya

Next in the chronological order appeared another classical work, Vagbhata's Ashtanga Samgraha. Vagbhata probably belonged to the second century A.D. He has summarized both Caraka and Susruta and brought both medical and surgical diseases within the compass of a single treatise. Vagbhata follows the tradition of using both prose and verse, though there is more of verse than the prose in his work. From the stand point of analytical classification arrangement and exposition he excels other writers. The Astanga samgraha is for this reason more popular than other works among students and practitioners in the South. Vagbhata can claim to be the first author to have begun the syncretic school of bringing together information on all the branches of medicines within the ambit of a single work which as others he divided into eight parts (Astanga), and called it as such. The eight parts are general medicines, paediatrics, mental diseases, diseases of special sense organs, surgery, toxicology, gerontology and aphrodisiac. Ayurveda is the only ancient science where care of ole is described.

There is another important work, similar in the name and content called Astanga Hridaya. It is written entirely in verse and its author also bears the name Vagbhata. The opinion is held by many that, both Astanga Samgraha and Astanga Hridaya are the work of one and the same person. The method of presentation the classification of the subject under various chapters and even many of the Slokas are so strikingly similar in both works, that this view may be correct. After completing the first work, Samgraha the author must have summarized it in verse form and given it the name Hridaya.

There are no two opinions about the superiority of the book. Astanga Hridaya over most other treatises. Brevity and clarity of expression are the hallmarks of this work.

Bhela Samita

Among the works of great antiquity must be mentioned the Bhela Samhita. The main point of interest about this work is that it was probably written by a contemporary of Agnivesa. It is modeled on the pattern of Agnivesa Samhita. But it is a similar book than the former. Another book which has been published is Harita Samhita, which is claimed to have been written by one Harita, another contemporary of Agnivesa. The claim is incorrect and this Harita probably belongs to later times.

Other Works:

Of lesser caliber than Caraka, Susruta and Vagbhata, but no less worthy of attention to

the student of Ayurvedic medicine are Madhavakara, Cakra data, Sarngadhara and Bhav misra. Madhavakara (8th Century A.D.) comes first in the chronological order. He has written Nidana which deals with aetiology, diagnosis, pathology and prognosis of diseases. The work is not original but a compilation from various earlier texts. Its chief virtue is comprehensiveness. Brndamadhava is a treatise on medicine. (Brnda being the real name of the author) which contains a number of Siddha yogas or prescriptions which have been tried and found useful.

Chakrapanidatta is well-known not only as a brilliant commentator of both Caraka Samhita and portions of Susruta Samhita or Cikitsa Sara samgraha. It is a treatise on treatment which is widely read even to this day. He has also written a book on material medica with the title Dravya Guna Samgraha. Cakrapanidatta belongs to the middle of the 11th Century A.D. Cakrasadatta Samhita follows the order of Madhava Nidana and Brndamadava. The Cikitsa sara Samgraha and the Dravya Guna samgraha have been the subject matter of brilliant commentaries by the gifted author Sivadasa Sena, who has clarified many abstruse passages in the texts.

Sarangadhara who flourished in the 11th Century A.D. has also written a Samhita. It contains a number of useful prescriptions and is very popular among practitioners all over the country for its valuable definitions of technical terms, called paribhasa.

Bhavaprakasa:

Bhavaprakasa, the last and perhaps the best work of the medieval age, is that of Bhavamisra. The period from the 10th to the 16th Century A.D. is singularly unproductive in the literature of Ayurveda. The stagnation is attributed to foreign invasions and internal turmoil. When Bhavamisra resumed the traditions of writing he reviewed the developments of the intervening period and incorporated in his work various new diseases and drugs. He is the first author to refer to the disease, 'Phirangaroga' which was evidently the contemporary name of syphilis. The word 'Phiranga' denotes Europeans in general and the Portuguese in particular, in many of the Indian languages. The term 'Phiranga Roga' must have come into use to describe syphilis, as the disease is believed to have been brought to India by Europeans. Another new introduction in his work is a chapter on Yakrt Pleehodhara, enlargement of liver and spleen, which is distinct from Yakrt and Pleehodhara. Bhavamisra included in his material medica certain drugs of foreign origin, for example, Chop Cheeni, (Madhusnuhi) the root imported from China which is indicated in "Phiranga Roga". He also mentions opium (ahiphena) and the method of its preparation, as also camphor from China and Parasika Yavani from Persia. He is the first to mention the use of mercurial compounds in the treatment of Phiranga roga.

One important point that is illustrated by Bhavamisra is that Ayurvedic medicines was not averse to adopting new theories and

ideas and had no hesitation including medicines of other countries in its armoury. The sole criterion for the selection of any drug or method of treatment was its ultimate benefit to the patient. With changes in the environment as new diseases and conditions appear, new remedies are also necessary. Caraka himself has stated that if a truth is to be taken even from an enemy for the good of the patient, the physician should not fight shy of doing so, Bhavamisra is a true exemplar of progress.

The history of medicine in India is not a history of uninterrupted development. The science and art of medicine existed from the vedic period and maintained a steady pace of progress during the early centuries of the Christian era. Thereafter, there was a decline in creative activity but revisions and commentaries of the earlier works continued to appear till about the 10th Century. The period from the 10th Century to the 16th Century there was a great lull till the appearance of Bhavaprakasha. There has been no major contribution to Ayurvedic literature after this new work.

The Organisation of Medical Care:

Side by side with the systematic development of medicines in ancient India, there was also organized medical help in the form of hospitals and dispensaries, and a certain measure of health propaganda. During the Buddhist period, monks travelled all over the country not only preaching religion and philosophy and dispelling ignorance, but also alleviating human suffering. King Asoka and his edicts are

famous. But even before Asoka's time evidence of organized medical care was seen in Caraka Samhita. Vivid descriptions are found about the location, building, personnel and amenities of hospital-Aturalaya, a maternity home, Sutikargriha, a nursery-sisugriha and a pharmacy.

It should be remembered that Ayurveda is not the science of health. Healthful living, prevention of disease, personal and social hygiene all come under its ambit, and not merely the cure of diseases.