

PHYSICIAN AND SURGEONS IN ANCIENT INDIA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper briefly recapitulates the evolution of ancient medical classics, its origin, the Physicians and Surgeons and their contributions in its mythological and historical background. The significance of this science in the ancient days is also evidenced by the existence, of the two seats of learning – Takshasila and Kasi – in all its prolific profundity.*

India suffers today in the estimation of the World more through the World's ignorance of her achievements than in the absence or insignificance of these achievements⁽¹⁾. The ancient Indian Medical classics written exclusively in Sanskrit were not easily accessible to any but Sanskrit scholars. Even in India, very few were acquainted with these classics. An interest in Sanskrit studies was first roused in England and Europe by the efforts of scholars like Sir William Jones, H T Colebrooke and Wilson towards the close of the 18th century. Neuburger has pointed out that of all the ancient systems of medicine, that of India is undoubtedly the most important in intrinsic merit and historic value, especially as a source for the study of the evolution of medicine⁽²⁾. The works of these scholars, along with the archaeological finds obtained from the Indus Cites like Harappa, Mohanjodaro and many others, brought home to the World a vivid picture of the past greatness of ancient India. It is definitely known that the Indian Sciences had developed and achieved great eminence at a time when Europe was passing through the relative stagnation of the early middle ages.

It is traditionally claimed in India that Prajapathi, “Lord of the Creations”, passed on knowledge of Ayurveda to the Aswinikumaras, the Divine twin surgeons, the healers among the Vedic Gods. The Rig Veda abounds in reference to the medical skill and benevolent deeds of the Aswinikumaras which include restoration of the aged to youth, cure of blindness, sterility, leprosy and many other conditions too. They are believed to have learnt the Madhuvidya, the Science of restoring the dead to life from the Sage Dadichi. They are supposed to be the authors of the cikitsa Saratantra, Aswini Samhita, Dhathuratnamala and Nadinidanam. They are said to have passed on their knowledge to Indra, King of the Gods, and from Indra, mankind is held to have received Divine Wisdom. Thus tradition traces the genesis of medicine from a mythical through a semi – mythical to a historical beginning.

The quest for the understanding of the Universe, its nature, the study of the various physical phenomena, life and its purpose, death and its meaning, and of many more such problems, began quite early in India. Great thinkers sought for answers to eternal

questions life the relationship of man to the Universe around him and to the Creator. The Rig Veda refers to great thinkers Rishis who put to use natural phenomena for the benefit of man. Rishi Bharadwaja is credited with bringing the heat of the Sun to the earth and with practicing the Science of healing. Caraka Samhita describes an Assembly of Rishis on an auspicious slope of the Himalayas in which many from India and outside took part, learnt Ayurveda and resolved to spread it. The Rishis who were assembled in what may be considered one of the earliest medical conferences were Angiras, Jamadgni, Kasyapa, Bhrigu, Atreya, Goutama, Pulastya, Narada, Asita, Agastya, Vamadeva, Markendeya, Pareekshit, Bharadwaja, Bhargava, Chyavana and a host of equally hoary names. It is highly interesting to read about a symposium conducted by them to discuss the development of the embryo in the uterus. The presentations of the topic, the different points raised by the participants in discussing the development of embryo and the concluding remarks by the Chairman, Atreya are not only immensely captivating and interesting but also highlighting their scholastic outlook.

Dhanwanthari is a great Celebrity in the fields of Ayurveda about whom different views are found in ancient literature. He is regarded as a part of Vishnu and the disciple of Shiva, thus combining in himself the two branches of wisdom – one to maintain and attain long life; the other to cure one and control diseases and demons. An Ayurvedic physician who attains eminence in his profession and highest proficiency in his subject is often given the Title of Dhanwanthari.

Nimi, the great – grand father of Sita is held to have been an authority on the treatment of eye diseases. Two books, *Vaidya Sandeha*

Bhanjini and Janakatantra are ascribed to him. Ancient scientific literature presents a very different picture of Ravana, King of Lanka from that of the Epics which depict him as an immoral and unscrupulous ruler, notorious for his cruelties. But he is described as a master of many sciences, an expert in pulse – reading and paediatrics, an author of many treatise; one of them being adopted into the popular Ayurvedic Text “Bhaishajya Rathnavali” as a separate Chapter with the title “Ravanakritham Sukumara Thanthram”; the other to be mentioned is the treatise “Arkaprakasam”, an original work on different forms of distillation.

Atreya stands supreme among the teachers of the science of life, a teacher conspicuous for clarity of definitions and correlation of drug to disease. Out of compassion to all beings, he taught Ayurveda to six disciples: Agnivesa, Bhela, Jatukarana, Parasara, Harita and Kshirapani. Among them Agnivesa was the most brilliant and was the first to complete a treatise – the Agnivesatantra. He was an expert in the Sciences to Drona of the Mahabharatha.

The Science of surgery was first taught by Divosasa, King of Kasi, who described himself as the incarnation of Dhanwanthari. He had six disciples, Aupadhenava, Aourbhara, Pushkalavata, Gopurarkshita, Bhoja and Susruta of whom Susruta stands out prominent. Susruta lived the life of a Rishi and wrote the treatise of Susruta Samhita dealing chiefly with surgery. The description of surgical instruments, the details of surgical operations, post – operative care and allied topics are lucidly and expansively dealt with in this classic. Surgery in Susruta’s times was far in advance of the Science in other parts of the World. Jurgen Thorwald has remarked that it remains one of the puzzles of history how

the idea of replacing parts of the human body emerged from the fables Orient⁽³⁾. Surgery was primarily associated with warfare for a long time and remained in a special branch distinct from the civil Science of Longevity.

The two seats of learning, Takshasila in Gandhara and Kasi in the basin of the Ganga, to which crowds of students resorted from all quarters of the then civilized World, taught a wide range of subjects and those medical schools enjoyed special reputation and a liberal share of Royal patronage. Yuan Chwang who resided at Nalanda describes the residential University in the latter half of the 7th Century as inhabited by 8,500 students and 1,510 teachers and related staff. The University provided lodge, food, clothing and tuition to its students free and, of course, medical attention too. It was supported by grants through Royal and private philanthropy. Foreign students from Korea, Mongolia, Japan, China and Tibet crowded this Centre for scholarly studies.

In the course of many centuries, different system of philosophy had been developed in India, which together now get referred to as the six systems of Indian philosophy. Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisesika, Mimamsa and Vedanta, each had its own particular contribution to make to the development of Ayurveda.

Ayurveda was indebted to Vaisesika for its physical and metaphysical views and to Nyaya for its logic and dialectics. Jeevaka, Charaka, Vagbhata, Patanjali, Nagarjuna, Amarsimha, Salihotra, Madhavakara, Poojyapada, Dridhabala, Sangadhana, Simhagupta, Indu, Chakrapanidatta and Bhavamisra are notable names among a long and illustrious line of scientists, philosophers, physicians and surgeons.

Jeevaka studied medicine for seven years at the famous University of Thakshasila under a renowned physician named Bhikshu Atreya. Jeevaka is described usually as the Court Physician of King Bimbisara. He is reported to have effected cures for dropsy, eye disease, swellings of the glands and to have performed cranial operations. He was the personal physician of Buddha and was greatly attached to him. He finally embraced Buddhism and built a monastery in Rajasthan and presented it to the Buddha and his Bikshus.

The identity, chronology and parentage of the celebrated Caraka still remained unsolved problems, his name is assured immortality through his celebrated classic, the Caraka Samhita.

Vagbhata who produced the great Ashtanga Samgraha and the Ashtanga Hridaya also accepted Buddhism as his religion. So did Nagarjuna, the great Indian alchemist. Nagarjuna was educated at Nalanda. He soon became proficient in all branches of Knowledge and undertook the pursuit of alchemy. Processes of distillation, sublimation, calcinations, colouring and alloying of metals, extraction of copper from pyrites and the use of metallic oxides in medicine are entirely the contributions of this reputed scientist.

Salihora was the Father of ancient Indian Veterinary Science. He is best known as a specialist in the treatment of horses and his treatise Salihotra Samhita is, a work containing 12,000 verses dealing mainly with the care and treatment of horses.

Amarasimha was one of the nine gems of the Court of Vikramaditya. His significant contribution of the "Amarakosa" is of particular interest to students of medicine as it contains synonyms of innumerable drugs,

part of the human anatomy and many other topics in medical sciences.

Madhavakara achieved an outstanding reputation in Ayurveda by the significant advances he made in the fields of pathology and diagnosis of diseases. His work is popularly known as Madhavanidanam chiefly deals with aetiology, symptomatology and prognosis of diseases.

Bhavamisra is perhaps the last in the list of the distinguished physicians of ancient times. He compiled a voluminous treatise called Bhava Prakasha in which he systematically deals with the origin of Indian medicine, cosmology, human anatomy, embryology, physiology, pathology, etc. This book throws a flood of light on many obscure and controversial views of ancient writers. It elaborately describes the Phirangaroga, i.e. syphilis, its cause, symptoms and treatment and it is in this Ayurvedic text that in India this disease is dealt with for the first time.