

Ayurveda A Historical Perspective

- Sri T.K.Sribhashyam

O Rudra, may we not make your furious!
You are indeed generous!
We hear that you are the best among physicians;
And, may our children grow up with your remedies!
----- Rig Veda 2.33.4

The word 'Ayurveda' is composed of two Sanskrit terms, viz., 'Ayus' meaning 'life' and 'Veda' meaning the 'knowledge'. Taken together, it means the Science of Life. However in a limited sense, it is always used to imply 'the Science of Medicine'. Ayurveda is a science through the help of which one can obtain knowledge about: the useful and the harmful types of life, happy and miserable types of life, things which are useful and harmful for such types of life, the span of life as well as the very nature of life. Ayurveda is thus not only an individual medicine but also a social one dating back to 2500 years.

Ayurveda does not deal exclusively with the treatment of human beings. It also deals with the treatment of diseases of animals and plants. It provides rational means for the treatment of many internal diseases which are considered to be obstinate and incurable. Simultaneously, it lays a great deal of emphasis upon the maintenance of positive health of a normal or healthy person.

Indian medicine has come down to us in several strands: The first strand is composed of professional physicians, called Vaidya. The second consists of wandering peddlers who collect herbs and drugs from forests and mountains and sell them in villages. The third group comprises temple priests mostly belonging to Vaikhanasa School who are also required to function as physicians. The fourth strand is the family knowledge transmitted by the elderly lady of the house.

Health was one of the major preoccupations of Indians. Their concern with health is as old as life on earth. That the body should function efficiently was as much of a necessity as it is now. Added to this was the fear of the unknown.

One of the early medical authorities, Charaka, has been credited with two statements that are apparently conflicting. One of them is that as long as man lived a natural life, he was altogether free from ailments. A time came when man's life was not longer natural, and then the ailments broke out. The second statement is that diseases and mankind have been co-existent all along. In other words, ailments and medicines have always existed. Health has been a continuing concern of man.

Professional medicine in India has four major lines of development, all of which go back in their origin to a very remote past. Two of them, one represented by the physician Charaka and the other by the surgeon Sushruta are collectively designated Ayurveda (or the Science of Life). They constitute but one tradition. The third line of development is the system of therapeutical alchemy known as Rasavaidya (or the Rasayana School) in which the use of metals and mercury is extensive. The fourth line of development is the Siddha (the adept) system, the origin of which is attributed to South India, especially Tamil Nadu.

The fear of death which has always haunted man has been the most potent motivation for the development and discovery of techniques to prolong life. If death generates a strong sense of fear, disease is likewise a major source of concern. Death is inescapable, but diseases could be prevented and cured.

Ayurveda has made marvellous progress in its diagnostic methods. To cite some: therapeutic procedures, employment of a large number of articles, discovery of the excellent medicinal properties of herbs, plants, trees and spices and the determination of the dosage and the manner of taking medicines were codified and systematised.

Ayurveda has also developed a neat and consistent philosophy. This philosophy is free from the magical practices.

The two lines of development of medicine in India represented by Charaka (2nd century BC) and Sushruta (6th Century BC) are together known as Ayurveda. It is also regarded as the fifth Veda¹.

The characteristically Ayurvedic ideas like the circulation of multiple breaths (Prana) inside the body, or the three pathogenic factors (Tridosha), or the medical properties of the herbs and plants (Oshadhi) in the Vedic literature are frequently found in the Vedic literature also.

Rudra was considered the first Vedic Physician². Ashvins, the twin-Vedic deities are also considered the first physicians.

For the Ayurvedic physicians, health was of the highest consideration. Clean life, good food, normal pleasures and vigorous health constituted the major part of Ayurvedic Ethics: deprivation and over-indulgence were equally wrong in this outlook. Austerity was prescribed in consideration of health and not because of religious reasons. A physician was expected to understand human constitution and human nature and secure efficiency of the physical apparatus (called the body).

There are two kinds of diseases, one caused by eating unwholesome food, and the other caused by evil spirits. Ayurveda treats the former, while the latter are dealt with in Atharvana Veda. Diseases caused by unnatural conditions and beyond precise diagnosis were generally ascribed to the anger of spirits, infection of unwholesome elements, influence of evil forces, effect of magic. The treatment of such ailments include magical spells (Mantra), wearing of amulets or precious stones, expiation, magical potions, purificatory rites, fasting and pilgrimage. One of the eight branches of classical Ayurveda is the

¹ Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharvana Veda are the four Vedas

² Refer to the invocation at the beginning of the article.

treatment of ailments caused by supernatural agencies (Bhuta Vidya). The other branches of Ayurveda are: Toxicology (Agada Tantra), Rejuvenation (Vajikarana), general therapeutics (Kaya Chikitsa), Surgery (Shalya Tantra), Diseases of Ear Nose and Throat (Shalakyata Tantra) and Pediatrics (Kaumaryabhrutya)

It is customary to recognise two major lines of development in Ayurveda, one specialising in general therapeutics (Kaya Chikitsa) and the other in favour of surgery (Shalya Tantra). The two branches have much in common and the basic theoretical framework is the same in both. The former is attributed to a great work called Sushruta Samhita whereas the latter is ascribed to Charaka Samhita.

It is unfortunate that much of the medical treatises have been lost. Apart from the above mentioned texts, Ashtanga Hrudaya by Vagbhata (7th c AD) which incorporates the view of both Charaka and Sushruta. Similarly, Ayurveda today possess an excellent work on diagnosis known as Madhava Nidana. Like wise, we have Harita Samhita that deals with the pathogenesis of our daily food.

Ayurveda continued to grow vigorously till about the thirteenth century. Ayurveda as a growing discipline appears to have lost its vitality about this period.

During the foreign invasions and internal frictions many original works were destroyed. Whatever remained had to be preserved and explained to people through commentaries. It is in the late nineteenth century that the people of India started thinking afresh about the development of Ayurveda. Yet, with the introduction of Allopathic Medicine, Ayurveda started losing its identity. In spite of long and hazardous study of Ayurveda, its recognition was degraded while the recognition of Allopathic Practices gained importance.

Constant and sustained patient effort by Ayurvedic practitioners helped this ancient medicine to revive even if it did not win back its formal status. Now, Ayurveda is slowly picking up its lost ground. The growing interest that the western countries are showing both in the medical and the non-medical circles has also contributed to the revival of this science in India. Both the East and the West are trying hard to bring out the little available materials of Ayurveda.

Western medical science can use to its own benefit some of the particularities of Ayurveda like: the diagnostic methods, the pharmacological studies on plants, roots etc.; its logical prognosis etc., At the same time, Ayurvedic concept on food can be complimented to our classical treatment. The Ayurvedic medical preparation may not be applicable here. Yet, already some enterprise has been underway to introduce Ayurvedic medicines in dry form of tablets or powders.

For a common man, Ayurveda provides ample information on the hygiene of life, on the properties of food (whether vegetarian or not), and drinks, the modifications according to the seasons and such other important matters without affecting the daily life.

For a Yoga teacher, knowledge of Ayurveda is a necessity, since all the physiological concepts of Yoga are based on Ayurveda. Moreover, it helps the teacher to understand the intricacies of Asana and Pranayama and other parts of Yoga.