

PHARMACY IN ANCIENT INDIA

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Ancient Hindus recognised pharmacy as a complimentary health care profession to obtain remedies mainly from vegetable sources. Hindu medical education was of high calibre in Vedic period both in theory and practice. Drugs have been classified in *Caraka Samhitā* according to their source and actions on body. In mid-centuries, art and science of metallic compounds developed. Apart from teaching diagnosis and treatment, the students were taught plantation, collection and preparation of drugs from various sources. The present day pharmacy and pharmacology seems to be influenced by experience accumulated over thousands of years.

INTRODUCTION

Pharmacy is a separate and complimentary health care profession concerned with collection, preparation, standardisation, and dispensing of drugs.

Ancient Hindus recognised 'Pharmacy' but in this object they were obviously deficient and even the works which survive are of little avail to the present generation, as they are very rarely studied and still more rarely understood by any of the practitioners. Early attempts were, however, made to obtain remedies from vegetable sources and to a lesser degree from animal and mineral kingdom.

Early Hindu medicine is divided into two periods. The first continuing from the earliest beginning until about 800 B.C. (Vedic period) and the second roughly from 800 B.C. to 1000 A.D. (*Brāhmāṇic* period). After 1000 A.D. large parts of India came under Islamic rule and Arab doctors took over the medical practice in the country.

VEDIC LITERATURE

Vedic medicine was primitive and archaic. Sin was viewed as the cause of disease and confession as the healing rite. Hindu medical education in the *Brāhmāṇic* period was of high calibre, with a wholesome balance between theory and practice. In sixth century B.C., two great universities existed in India, Kāśī in the East and Takṣilā in the West; Ātreya, the physician, taught in the latter university, and his younger contemporary, Suśruta, the surgeon, taught in the former. Three great classics of *Brāhmāṇic* medicine are the books of Caraka (beginning of Christian era),

Suśruta (500 A.D.), and Vāgbhaṭa (about 600 A.D.), based on much older Vedic material. Hindu medicine, like Chinese medicine, froze into dogmatism before the time of Christ and continued in static form through subsequent centuries.

CARAKA SAMĪHITĀ

Agniveśa tantra, composed by the sage Agniveśa, a student of Ātreya, was a huge treatise on Indian medicine containing eight divisions. This was later revised by Caraka to be called *Caraka Samḥitā*. This treatise chiefly deals with vegetable products, though animal and earth products are also included. All these drugs are classified into fifty groups on the basis of their action on the body.

The drugs were given various forms, such as powders, pastes, infusions, decoctions, pill, confection, roast, fermented, distilled, medicated and alcoholic drinks, medicated oils, inhalants as well as injections into rectum, urethra, female genital organ. Specific drugs were in practice for increasing vigour, restoring youth, improving memory and preventing diseases.

Caraka Samḥitā stands next in antiquity to *Ātreya Samḥitā* amongst reputed Sanskrit medical books.

TĀNTRIC CULT

With the decline of Buddhism in India, there appeared a popular philosophical and religious movement called *Tāntrism*, which flourished between 8th and 14th centuries. It was a pan-Indian movement through which the devotees sought deliverance with the help of *mantras*, *samādhis* and other practices.

With *tāntrism* developed the art and science of the use of metallic compounds, particularly of mercury and sulphur ; use of iron, silver, tin and lead began in 8th and 9th century. This was with the intension of making human body imperishable and ever young.

MEDICAL EDUCATION

In ancient India one could become a physician by working with the teacher at his house, or by joining a *gurukula* situated away from human inhabitation. One could also join medical centres at Takṣilā, Kāśī, or Nālandā.

The students were taught theory as well as practice of medicine. Practical training had three objectives :

1. Preparation of medicines.
2. Training in surgery.
3. Examination of the patient.

The student learnt the art of preparing flower juices, and extracting liquors, concocting different herbal combinations, making medicines using sugarcane and clarified butter, reducing to ashes stones, minerals, and like ; preparing combinations of minerals, making new compounds of minerals and extracting alkalies out of minerals.

Students were also trained in planting, grafting and general care of plants, as also identifying different herbs and when and how to cut and preserve them.

It is evident from the above that present day pharmacy and pharmacology has been built on experience accumulated over many thousands of years. The influence of these experiences on modern pharmacology can still be traced today. Some of the oldest known written human documents contain information about such drugs, their properties and use. Few hints may be useful as a background and as a link between modern pharmacology and the work founded by our fore-fathers.

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