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Traditional Indian Medicine- A Study of Buddhist and tribal Medicine

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Traditional medical science in India, is to some extent, gradually accumulated practical and systematic knowledge. They are (viz. Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, etc.) very ancient, deep rooted and codified. They have their origins in the remote past, their systematisation and canonisation gave rise to the elite (the Greater Tradition) medical science.

This project has been organized around two interrelated themes: (a) to track the development of traditional Indian medicine, in general, like the Ayurveda, tribal medicine, Buddhist medicine, etc.; and (b) then, in particular, trace the evolution of the Tibetan Medicine (Sowa Rigpa), a hybrid Buddhist medicine as a creative combination of Ayurveda, the Himalayan (Tribal) medicine and the Buddhist medicine.

This work attempts to investigate the development of both philosophy and scientific ideas in India in the context of its cultural background. This is envisaged to be a cooperative study in philosophy, science and culture with a hermeneutic approach. Therefore, a study of vast ancient literature and analysis of variety of archaeological data became imperative. However, unconventional sources of history like study of 'popular culture' or 'folk culture' also formed a very significant part of this work. The basic idea of this work was an inter-disciplinary and comprehensive exploration of the Scientific, Philosophical and Cultural Heritage of India. Emphasis has been laid on showing the relevance of the past to the understanding of the present and the future. That India's heritage is not only rich in spiritual and philosophical insight but also has been sustained by the scientific and technological innovations especially in the medical field, has been highlighted in this work.

An Overview

Among all sciences, medicine was the most advanced considering the fact that the Atharva Veda, (about 1500 BC) one of the four ancient scriptures of India, mentions certain herbs with curative powers. Several ancient texts on physiology identified factors as those, which determined good or ill health. The traditional Indian medicine Ayurveda, focused on longevity and prescribed several remedies for the same. Gold, silver, mercury, neem, garlic and honey are described as having specific curative powers in the vast treasury of India's pharmacopoeia, medical texts of ancient India. Modern scientists have subsequently credited some of these with the same curative powers.

Yoga stressed the holistic approach to health based on proper diet and physical exercise. Today, even modern scientists accept its efficacy as one of the most efficient ways to stress-free, healthy living.

Charaka, the great Ayurvedic physician of the 1st Century AD, had written Charaka Samhita, the first scientific medical text. Charaka's work consisted of eight chapters devoted to pharmacology, diet, treatment of major diseases like fever, diarrhoea, consumption, leprosy and tumour among others. He also wrote on such specialised subjects as pathology, embryology and anatomy.

In the fourth century, came Sushruta, who is considered the father of surgery. In his treatise Sushruta Samhita, he lists about 125 surgical instruments used by him in his surgeries, details methods of operations among other subjects. In his time he is believed to have performed Caesarean sections, done plastic surgeries and set compound fractures.

Veterinary science was another field, which had been developed, well in ancient times, with hospitals for horses, elephants and cattle. A special branch of Indian medicine was devoted to the treatment of elephants and was called Hastyayurveda.

Besides Ayurveda, Buddhist & Jain medicines, Unani&Siddha, and tribal medicines have also played a major role in Traditional Medical Science of India

Siddha medicine is the oldest and the foremost of all other medical systems of the world.

This system, which has been in practice since 750 A.D. is also based on the Tridhatu physiology

and the Tridosha pathology similar to Ayurveda. Treatment involves use of mineral compounds in preparing medicine. Herbs and medicinal plants are used to a limited extent.

Therefore, we have two ancient system of medicine in India. The Siddha, which flourished in South India and Ayurveda prevalent in North India.

The Unani medical system flourished in Persia and India. Today, it is strong in India and Pakistan. The Unani system is sometimes called Hikmat or Unani-Tibb. Its medical practitioners are called Hakims. The Unani medicine system was introduced into India in the thirteenth century by Arab scholars. Originally a Greek achievement based on and confined to pragmatisms, it received its scientific character from Hippocrates (460-377 BC). The system involved four elements, thus differing from the Ayurvedic system of three doshas and the Chinese system of five elements. The original Greek and the resulting Unani systems involve these four elements: earth, air, water, and fire; along with four natures: cold, hot, wet, and dry; and four humors: blood (which is hot/wet), phlegm (cold/wet), yellow bile (hot/dry), and black bile (cold/dry). Unani medicine, like Western medicine (which also arose from the Greek background) owes its origination to Hippocrates (460-377 B.C.) and his numerous followers. Unani medicine arrived in the Arab world in the eighth century, was further developed by Rhazes (865-925 AD), author of *Al Havi Libre Continents*, and Zahravi (born 946 AD) author of *Al-Tasreef*, a comprehensive surgery text. Many theories of Ayurveda were incorporated into the Unani system prior to the thirteenth century.

All the three traditional systems, namely, Ayurveda, Siddha and Unani are based on common principles of understanding the human body. Diagnosis and treatment are also done on similar grounds - checking the pulse as a part of diagnosis, laying emphasis on diet regulation in treatment, use of herbs and medicinal plants for preparing drugs, etc., all focussing on treating the 'patient' and not the 'disease'.

Buddhist Medicine and Ayurveda

Buddhism and Ayurvedic medicine originated in India and both aim at eliminating suffering. Buddhism primarily concerns with the well-being of the mind and Ayurveda deals with the well-being of the body. While treating one aspect of a person, one cannot neglect the other because both are inseparably linked together. Both systems regard the body and the mind as

interdependent and interlinked. Similarly, with body and mind, both are interdependent and rely on each other. Both have healed the ailing mind and body throughout their history and will continue to do so in the future.

Tribal Medicine

However, some of the traditional medicine were passed down orally through generations and also became part of folklore. In this category falls the tribal medicine. We find that the tribals and rural folk in India use plants and herbs for curing common ailments at less cost. The tribal medicine is basically an indigenous system of medicine where the folk recipe for medicine has its own details of method of preparation, dosage, mixture of their herbs or ingredients used. Numerous, hitherto unrecorded uses of plants and herbs gets reflected in the tribal folklore. This has led to the development of Ethno-botany and Ethno-zoology in India. Over 10,000 wild plants used by tribals for varied uses have been recorded. Of these, 8,000 are used for medicinal purposes, with 2,000 new claims warranting scientific scrutiny. As many as 4,000 plant species are used by the tribals for food, with 800 new findings of edible use.

It has been found that more than 100 animals are used for food. Over-hunting is remains a problem as many of these are threatened. However, with adequate conservation inputs and captive breeding, many of medicinal uses of animals can be continued without causing any significant harm to their populations.

The tribal healer is also the medium through which they know what is happening. Different tribes use their own theories, like the concept of *tijio* among the Santhals of central India, which is similar to the modern day concept of 'bacteria'. Among the Kanis of Kerala, the concept of *visham* explains cause of disease and using steam with medicine expels them.

Tibetan Medicine

Buddhist Medicine : with specific reference to Tibetan Medicine

It is believed that Lord Buddha showed the path of liberation from disease and death and due to this reason he is also known as the great physician (*Mahabhisak*). He propounded the four noble truths that are nothing but medical logic. These four noble truths include disease, its cause, treatment and its ways and are collectively known as *Aryasatyacatustaya*. Diagnosis of disease and charitable distribution of medicines among the sick people were the regular programmes of the Buddhist sanghas. Buddhist monks and nuns also implemented the same in Buddha-viharas. Emperor Asoka who adopted the Buddha religion after the Kalinga war not only established many hospitals and dispensaries for the treatment of the sick but also ordered planting of medicinal plants at different places.

Viharas and medicine¹

Medicine was a popular subject of teaching in the curricula of the *Viharas* and *mahaviharas* as Buddhists treat it as an important tool for missionary service to humanity and animals. Medicine was an important and compulsory subject in all the universities. The University of Taksasila was famous for this subject where Atreya was a renowned teacher. Jivaka was a famous student of this university, who got proficiency in medicine as well as surgery. The Nalanda University had also medicine as one of the compulsory subjects of teaching. Medicine was also taught in Vikramasila University. *Tantras* as well as *Rasasastra* also flourished there in theory and practice.

Royal Patronage

Asoka states in his second Rock Edict that provision has been made everywhere in his kingdom for medical treatment for both men and animals, and that medicinal herbs suitable for both have been imported and planted. During the periods of Kings Asoka, Kaniska, Sri Harsa, Devapala (as well as Dharamapala of Pala dynasty) the Buddhist tradition flourished side by side with the Vedic traditions. These kings established many *viharas* in various parts of the country as well as far off places. As a result of this Buddhism spread to other Asian countries along with which Indian medicine also reached out there. Some valuable accounts given by Chinese travellers like Fahian, Hsuen Tsang and Itsing give a detailed view of Buddhist tradition in those periods.

Medicine in Buddhist Literary Tradition²

The oldest literary source of the Buddhist medicine is the *Tripitaka*³. *Tripitaka* talks about (*chikitsa*) *tikiccha* in place of Ayurveda and disease is mentioned as *gilana* instead of *atura* as in medical text. It also reveals that *tikiccha* was one of the most important subjects of learning in Taksasila. Cullavagga⁴ has got enough material that gives a good view of daily life of monks and nuns, health and hygiene and the arrangements in the *viharas*. In the *viharas*⁵, there were systematic arrangements for the maintenance of privies and bathrooms. Personal cleaning as well as cleaning of the surroundings was strictly observed. A special care was also taken for water. A number of diseases are mentioned in *Tripitaka* texts while *kustha*, *ganda*, *kilasa*, *sosa* and *apasmara* are said to be the five prevalent *abadhas*. *Mahavagga* (MV) also gives valuable information regarding diseases and their treatment in the book (vi) on medicaments. In this book (*Mahavagga* viii.1.1-29) a detailed account of the renowned physician (of Bimbisara) Jivaka and his amazing medical and surgical skill is mentioned. Besides, Buddhist texts like *Dhammapada*, *Avadanas* like *Divyavadana*, *Milinda Panho* (the book which recorded the conversation between Indo Greek Meneander or Milinda and Nagasena), *Sadharmapundrika*, *Suvarnaprabhasasutra*, *Asvaghosha's Buddhacharita* and *Saundrananda* and last but not the least, *Vinaya Sutta* throw valuable light on Buddhist medicine system⁶.

Regional Variation in Buddhist Medicine

¹Vihara in early medieval eastern India, my Ph.D. thesis. DU, 2001

²P.V.Sharma (Ed). 1992. Medicine in Buddhist and Jaina traditions. In *History of Medicine in India*. New Delhi: INSA. Pp. 117-135.

³Pankaj Goyal, Lok Vigyan Kendra, Almora 263601 India

⁴ P. V. Shharma, Ibid.

⁵Vihara in early medieval eastern India, Amit Jha Ph.D. thesis. DU, 2001

⁶P.V.Sharma (Ed). 1992. Medicine in Buddhist and Jaina traditions. In *History of Medicine in India*. New Delhi: INSA. Pp. 117-135.

Among the many types of Buddhism are three overarching categories, all of which developed in India from c. 500 BCE to 1100 CE. The Buddhists consider the historical Sakyamuni Buddha to be the founder of the three main forms or "vehicles" of Buddhism: the Monastic or Individual (Hinayana/Theravada), the Messianic or Universal (Mahayana), and the Apocalyptic or Tantric (Vajrayana). Buddhism based on the Theravada model is found today in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos and Cambodia, while the Mahayana style went north into China and from there to Japan, Tibet, and Korea. Vajrayana Buddhism is a strand of Mahayana that blends the physical and spiritual world and engages both. Social scientists believe tribal integration through the process of Sanskritization or Aryanisation got manifested in the rise of **Tantricism** in Brahmanism (Hinduism) and **Vajrayana** sect in Buddhism⁷. It witnessed dominance of mystical ritual exercises.

Tantra in both Hinduism and Buddhism, led to an esoteric tradition of ritual and yoga known for elaborate use of mantra, or symbolic speech, and mandala, or symbolic diagrams; the importance of female deities, or Shakti; cremation-ground practices such as meditation on corpses; and, more so in Hindu than in Buddhist tantra, the ritual use of wine, meat, and sexual intercourse.

Mantra in Hinduism and Buddhism, mystic words used in ritual and meditation. A mantra is believed to be the sound form of reality, having the power to bring into being the reality it represents. There are several types of mantras. Sanskrit verses used in the Vedic sacrifice are known as mantras. Bija-mantra or "seed-sounds, used mainly in Tantra, are syllables without semantic value having an occult affinity for particular deities or forces; use of such mantras usually requires initiation by a guru.

Nalanda *mahavihara* was the hotbed of ritual exercises of Vajrayana sect. Its believed this sect shifted its headquarter to Tibet after the Turkish attack on Nalanda mahavihara in the the 13th century A.D. (by Bakhtiyar Khalji). Till date, Tibet has preserved the basic tenets of this form of Buddhism in its purest form. Despite Chinese aggression, exile of Dalai Lama, etc., Vajrayana sect remains one of the most dominant as well as popular Buddhist sect closely linked to the Indian culture and medicine⁸.

Tibetan Medicine

The Tibetan medicine seems to be a creative combination of the Indian medical traditions, which it imported with Buddhism from India, and many forms of Chinese medicine. These multiple layers of medical knowledge and traditions merged with pre-Buddhist Shamanic traditions and have continued to develop up to the present as a thriving and highly effective indigenous medical system. . Tibetans use an ancient form of medicine known as Gso-wa Rig-pa or Sowa Rigpa based on Buddhism. *Sowa-Rigpa* means 'science of healing' and the practitioners of this medicine are known as *Amchi* (superior to all). It has been practiced in Tibet, the Himalayan regions and central Asia since ancient times. *Sowa-Rigpa* originated from India⁹ and it is still practiced in Ladakh and Paddar-Pangay regions of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Darjeeling-Kalimpong (WB), etc., In recent times, apart from Asian countries, Tibetan medicine has also become popular in the western world especially in the USA and many European nations. But it's popularity in the Indian mainstream is still awaited. Therefore, we have tried to discuss Sowa Rigpa, exclusively.

The concept of Medicine Buddha (Bhaisajya Guru)

⁷Traditonal Indian Medicine: with specific reference to Tribal and Buddhist medicine, Amit Jha, Research India Press, Delhi 2010

⁸Ibid.

⁹Central Council for Research in Ayurveda and Siddha, Deptt. Of AYUSH, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Govt. of India.

Originally, there was only one Buddha (Sakyamuni). However, according to later Buddhist doctrine an infinite number of Buddhas work in multiple universes (past, present, and future) for the benefit of all beings. About the third century A.D., the Medicine Buddha, also known as *Bhaisajya-guru*, was recorded in Buddhist texts as an emanation of the historical Buddha, who was considered the preeminent healing deity in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. The teachings of the Medicine Buddha have been orally transmitted for generations. *The Medicine Guru Beams of Lapis Lazuli Sutra* and *The Four Secret Oral Tantras on the Eight Branches of the Essence of Nectar*--both works were attributed to Sakyamuni Buddha. Sakyamuni is recorded as saying that by uttering the *Bhaisajya-gurumantra*, one is free of the nine untimely causes of death and of all suffering. All subsequent reincarnations will be "peaceful and joyous"¹⁰. One can also petition the healing powers of the Medicine Buddha by visualization practices to "invoke the spiritual force of that deity, in order to heal all diseases, inner and outer"¹¹. Intense identification with various characteristics associated with the emanation of the *Bhaisajya-guru* invokes a spiritual attitude which generates healing action along the devotee's psychosocial continuum. Even the name of the Medicine Buddha is believed to have the power to free one from the pattern of negative thoughts and emotions. Healing can occur just by speaking, hearing or concentrating on his name. As Buddhist believe---the mind is considered the origin of all illness and spiritual afflictions. Consequently, much of the healing that the Medicine Buddha promises lies within the mind. The mystical revelations into esoteric teachings regarding compassion, healing and enlightenment are too profound to express in ordinary speech or writing. Tibetan Buddhist art has transcendental implications which are "conveyed through the formal language of symbols, colors, gestures, and attributes [and] cause hidden chords to resonate in the depths of our being"¹².

In other words, the artistic depictions of the *Bhaisajya-guru*, which are rich in symbolism, reveal a deity whose skin is the deep, blue color of the gemstone lapis lazuli. The most distinctive feature of the Medicine Buddha is the deep blue color of his skin, painted from the blue of the gemstone **lapis lazuli**. An aura of mystery surrounds it, perhaps because it is very rare and comes from a remote area of northeast Afghanistan. Traditionally this beautiful stone was used to symbolize something that is pure or rare. It is said to have a curative or strengthening effect on those who wear it against the three poisons of desire, hatred, and delusion, and its natural smoothness allows it to be polished to become highly reflective. For all these reasons lapis lazuli is the principal color of the Medicine Buddha.

Since every detail of the iconography associated with the image yields a teaching which is integral to the healing process, many elaborate forms of ritual worship have crystallized around the *Bhaisajya-guru*. Some examples of ritual involving the Medicine Buddha which are believed to have a curative or strengthening influence for the ill include meditating upon the deep blue color of lapis lazuli; making *puja* offerings of flowers and incense to the image of the deity; mentally or physically constructing an image of the deity; playing musical instruments and chanting; reading sutras; constructing altars, *mandalas* or banners; and lighting lamps.

Concludingly, Medicine Buddha is an enlightened being who has unbiased compassion for all living beings. He protects living beings from physical and mental sickness and other dangers and obstacles, and helps them to eradicate the three poisons – attachment, hatred, and ignorance – which are the source of all sickness and danger. He is a Buddha Doctor.

Ayurveda and Sowa Rigpa

The Tibetan medicine system is essentially based on the Buddhist philosophy. According to them the universe is composed of four basic elements: sa (prithivi-mahabhuta), chu (jala

¹⁰Birnbaum, p.88

¹¹Birnbaum, p.89

¹²Birnbaum, p.78

mahabhuta), me (agni mahabhuta), and rlun (vayu mahabhuta). But in Ayurveda (kshiti, jal pawak gagan sameera) the fifth element Gagan or akasa is also present¹³. The Tibetans also believed that the individual is an exact replica of the macrocosm.

As in Ayurveda, in the Tibetan medicine system also believes that a person suffers from diseases when there is a change (beyond a certain limit) in the equilibrium of Nes pas (dosas) and Lus zuns (dhatu). Drugs and food prescribed by the physician depend on taste and are of six types: sweet, sour, saline, bitter, pungent, and astringent.

The Tibetan system's use of ingredients also bears close resemblance to the Himalayan System. The Tibetan medicine mainly depends on herbal products although many animal products such as musk, bear-bile, cow-bile, and different types of milk, minerals, and metals are also used. Medicine is administered in the form of decoction, powder, pills, syrups, oils, wine, butter, or ash. The medicine may be constituted of a single herb or a hundred of them. For example, a medicine called Agar 35 (Agar sonya) has 35 different kinds of herbs. The physician is expected to be knowledgeable in the herbs, their characters, their potent effects, and their synergy.

The Ayurvedic system was well organized and reduced to writing and therefore was easy to incorporate in the Tibetan System, through the exchange of scholars and translation of texts. But there seem to be some common elements between the Himalayan and Tibetan systems¹⁴. During their journeys the Tibetan scholars and monks must have come across the Himalayan folk physicians too.

The Traditional Himalayan Medicine System (THMS) was a folk tradition and was transmitted through the word of mouth across the generations. They treat both humans and animals using traditional methods. They generally employ herbal products like resin, bark, and root, as well as soils, minerals, animal products, and tantric (Shamanic) practices. The Himalayan people use magico-religious therapies, like the Tibetans whose medicinal system is also basically based on Shamanic practices.

Thus, Sowa Rigpa¹⁵ is essentially a hybrid Buddhist medicine, an amalgam of the Ayurvedic medical tradition, the Himalayan System, and many forms of Chinese medicine. These different ingredients of medical knowledge and traditions merged with the pre-Buddhist Shamanic traditions. They developed many new concepts of health, disease, and treatment in addition to the ones used in Ayurveda. Their materia medica is a vast collection of many life saving drugs. Like Ayurveda, the Tibetan medicine system is more a way of healthy living than merely a system of treatment of diseases. In other words, Sowa Rigpa is more than merely the study of anatomy, physiopathology, and pharmacopoeia. It is also a guide to 'right living' and involves the spiritual aspects of healing as well.

*"It is already becoming clearer that
a chapter which has a western beginning will have
to have an Indian ending if it is not to end in
the self-destruction of the human race..."*

¹³Traditional Knowledge System in ancient India, Atlantic Publishers, New Delhi, 2002.

¹⁴ibid..

¹⁵ibid.

*At this supremely dangerous moment in history
the only way of salvation for mankind is the Indian Way. "*

- Dr. Arnold Toynbee

British Historian 1889-1975
