

HISTORICAL BIOGRAPHY OF MEDICINAL PLANTS

P.V. SHARMA*

ABSTRACT

Medicinal plants, have been the chief source of drugs used in treatment of various ailments. It is observed that the position of medicinal plants is not the same as in Samhitas. There is a lot of addition of new synonyms and also recording of new observations in terms of actions and uses. Thus, it would be interesting to study such developments in case of each drug historically and scientifically under the heading of 'The Historical Biography', covering the entire life of a medicinal plant along with various changes taking place from time to time.

India is a country having history of thousands of years and a rich legacy of science and arts. The practices of today have developed in course of centuries and the present traditions could be traced for their origin in ancient past. This is more applicable in the context of Ayurveda which is the living system of medicine in India today having roots in early stages of creation. Medicinal plants are mentioned in Rigveda, the oldest document. The plants have been the chief source of drugs used in treatment of various ailments. The striking

feature has been the dynamic nature of Indian wisdom which has always been developing as to enable itself to tackle the challenges of the time. When Charaka says that Ayurveda is shashvata (eternal) he has the same idea to convey.

Not only the number of medicinal plants has considerably increased since the age of Rigveda, Atharvaveda down to the samhitas and nighantus but there has also been significant additions in names (synonyms) which helped in identi-

* 39, Gurudham Colony, Varanasi - 221057, India.

fication of plants and in actions and uses which were based on traditional observations and experiences. Infact, these books are repository documenting and preserving the knowledge acquired by the Vaidya community through constant practice and observation from time to time.

In this background, if one looks at the medicinal plants today it would be evident that their position is not the same as it was in samhitas. There is a lot of addition of new synonyms and also recording of new observations in terms of actions and uses. Thus, it would be interesting to study such developments in case of each drug historically and scientifically. I have named this new branch of study as 'The Historical Biography' which studies the entire life of medicinal plants recording various changes taking place from time to time. Here, as sample, I am presenting the sketch of two plants.

1. **Agastya** (*Sesbania grandiflora*-pers.) Agastya (or Agasti) is not found in Charaka samhita and the samhitas of Bhela and Kashyapa. It is Sushruta who recorded it first only among vegetables

Synonyms

Ashtangahridaya (U.13.89) mentions it as 'Kumbhayoni' which also comes in Ashtanganighantu (250) and Hridayadipaka (1.76). The synonym 'Muninama' is found in Ashtanganighantu while 'Munidruma' is mentioned in Nighantushesha, Rajanighantu and Bhavaprakasha. A significant synonym 'Vangasena' comes in Paryayaratnamala and Bhavaprakasha. Rajanighantu has added a significant synonym 'Vakrapushpa' denoting the characteristic papillion-aceous flower (and perhaps the source of Bengali name 'baka'.) The same nighantu has added 'dirghaphalaka' denoting the hanging long fruits.

Actions and uses

Sushruta indicates the use of agastya flowers as vegetable in wast-ing, cough and night blindness and its properties as tikta rasa, katu vipaka and moderate virya, not very cold or hot¹. Vagbhata recommends use of the leaves of agastya for frying ghee the intake of which is effective in night blindness².

Neither Vrindamadhava nor Cakradatta mentions its use in night blindness instead they have prescribed the use of leaf juice as snuff in quartan fever³. Madanapala nighantu (ch. V) records its use in both quartan fever and night blindness. Kaiyadeva nighantu differentiates the uses partwise - leaves in quartan fever, flowers in night blindness and fruits in enlargement of spleen, anaemia etc⁴. Bhavaprakasha

- nighantu mentions the use of agastya in quartan fever and night blindness particularly of flowers in the former⁵.

Conclusion

Thus it appears that

1. The plant agastya was introduced in use after the Charaka Samhita.
2. Among synonyms, kumbhayoni and munidruma were the earliest ones while vakrapushpa and dirghaphalaka were added later on. The synonym vangasena was popular in eastern region as it is mentioned, first by Madhavakara in Paryayaratnamala and later followed by Bhavamishra.
3. Flowers seem to have been used first then leaves and finally fruits.
4. Sushruta Samhita describes it as of moderate virya, but the later

1. Sushruta Samhita. SU, 46.2 81-82

2. Ashtangahridaya. U. 13.89.

3. Vrinda Madhava 1.238; Cakradatta 1.228.

4. Kaiyadeva nighantu 1.937.41.

5. Bhavaprakasha Nighantu pushpavarga 59.60. shakavarga 47-48

nighantus, Rajanighantu and Bhavaprakasha, mention it as shita-virya.

5. Use of agastya in night blindness is the earliest one as recorded in Sushruta Samhita while its use in quartan fever was introduced later on near about 10th cent. A.D. as it appears in the works of Candranandana and Chakrapanidatta (10-11th cent. A.D.).

6. Gradually actions of different parts of the plant were studied and observed. Sushruta mentions use of flowers only, vagbhata indicates that of leaves and kaiyadeva of fruits also.

The relation of the sage Agastya with the autumn season and also prevalence of malarial fever therein may be one of the prompting factors in its use in quartan fever.

2. Aguru (Aquilaria agallocha Roxb.)

Aguru (or Agarú) is not found in

vedic literature. In the later works it is mentioned as being used as incense¹ and paste, the latter in cold season². Charaka prescribes application of the paste of aguru in hemantha season (early winter)³. Again aguru tops the list of Agurvadi gana containing hot aromatic drugs⁴. It was also used in smoking⁵.

Aguru grows in the North-eastern region of the country which is testified by the works of Kalidasa and Banabhatta. Raghu, while in his military expedition, tied his elephants in the trees of aguru⁶. Similarly king Harshavardhana received presents of aguru wood and its various products from the ruler of pragjyotisa (modern north-east)⁷

Synonyms

Jongaka and kalaguru or krishnaguru are used to denote aguru

1. Raghuvamsa 6.8 ; Ritusamhara 5.5

2. Ritusamhara 2.22

3. Charaka samhita SU. 6.16-17

4. Ibid. Ci. 3.267

5. Ibid, SU. 5.27

6. Raghuvamsha 4.81

7. P.V. Sharma: Indian Medicine in Classical Age, pp.134-35

in Brihatrayi. 'Loha' is also used which denotes heaviness and black colour of the wood. Originally the wood of the plant is light (aguru) which attains heaviness after it is infested with insects producing oil-resin. This fact is recorded by the terms 'krimija'¹. and 'krimijagdha'². which are found in koshas and nighantus and not in Brihatrayi.

Actions

In the ancient samhita of Charaka, aguru is mentioned as shitaprashamana (pacifying cold) as listed in shitaprasamana mahakashaya³. and agurvadi gana. Charaka has also prescribed it in cases of hic cough and asthma in forms of smoking⁴ and powder⁵. Vagbhata developed the use of aguru in respiratory disorders particularly cough⁶. More over, the drug has also been selected as Rasayana like asana etc.⁷ as in Charaka

Samhita. This indicates that the use of aguru was prevalent and its therapeutic jurisdiction expanding during the period of Vagbhata (6th cent. A.D.).

Conclusion

Though study has been so far largely concentrated on history of scholars and literature, history of drugs has remained almost an untouched field. A part from popular usage and commercial exploitation of drugs, it would be profitable to study developments in synonyms and actions. Keeping this in view, an attempt is being made to prosecute this work further, the two samples, of which are presented herewith. Study of the historical biography of plants would not only create a new vista in historical research but also enrich the area of dravyaguna at large in Ayurveda.

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1. Amarakosha 2.6.126 ; Sabdachandrika 1.212 ; Bhavaprakas nighantu 2.21
 2. Dhanvantari nighantu 3.25 ; Madanadinighantu 16.21 ; Shodhanighantu 1.378; Nighantusesa 1.21 ; Kaiyadevanighantu 1.1270
 3. Charakasamhita SU. 4(42)
 4. Ibid. Ci. 17.80
 5. Ibid. Ci. 17.123, 129
 6. Astangahrdaya, Ci. 3.47
 7. Ibid. U. 39.104

सारांश

औषधीय पौधों की ऐतिहासिक जीवनी

प्रियव्रतशर्मा

औषधीय पौधे जो कि विभिन्न रोगों की चिकित्सा में प्रयुक्त होने वाले औषध द्रव्यों के मुख्य स्रोत रहे हैं, उनका उल्लेख प्राचीनतम प्रलेख ऋग्वेद में मिलता है। यह देखा गया है कि औषधीय पौधों की स्थिति वैसी अब नहीं है जो संहिताओं में दी गई है। इनके संबन्ध में बहुत से नये पर्यायों, गुणकर्मों तथा प्रयोगों के विषय में अवलोकनों को जोड़ा गया है। अतः प्रत्येक औषध द्रव्य के विषय में ऐतिहासिक तथा वैज्ञानिक ढंग से इस प्रकार के परिवर्धनों का ऐतिहासिक जीवनी के अन्तर्गत औषधीय पौधों के सम्पूर्ण जीवन को आच्छादित करते हुए समय समय पर होने वाले विभिन्न परिवर्तनों सहित अध्ययन बहुत रोचक होगा।