



Public Health in Ancient India: A Historical Review

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Ayurveda is perhaps the oldest medical science of the human civilization which is practised till today in its original form. It is more clearly the science of life as it not only emphasizes on individual health but also taken the health of community as a major concern, the community hygiene, sanitation, good water supply, and drainage system were given great importance right from the age of Indus valley civilization. Many of the public health concepts of today can be understood by the same age old principles and practices of Ayurveda. Public health as a discipline is mainly seen as a part of community medicine. But the classical texts of Ayurveda described public health in a wider dimensions that includes healthy environment, community hygiene, immunization and nutrition. Materials and methods : A systematic review aap scientific literature to compile, critically analyse and draw conclusion on the possible evidence substantiating Public health system of Ancient India.

Results: Public health practices, the awareness of hygiene and knowledge of community health was significantly prevalent in ancient India. Many ancient texts of Ayurveda highlighted about infectious diseases and mode of their spread.

Discussion: The high level of health status among the prehistoric Indians is a great evidence of the advancement of Community Health approach they had in those days. Many of the travellers visited India in the ancient days had also recorded the the advanced health practices they witnessed in India.

KEYWORDS: Public health, Community medicine, Social medicine, Ayurveda, Swasthavritta.

INTRODUCTION

Indian history is broadly divided into ancient, medieval and modern India¹. Ancient India was among a leading nation in terms of scientific advancement as compared to the contemporary world. Astronomy, Alchemistry, Architecture, Mathematics, Geophysics and Medical sciences were the key advances found in ancient India, Ayurveda draw its origin 2 ancient India, it is the science of life emphasized greatly on Public health, infact the descent of Ayurveda on earth was to protect the health of community, it is evident in charaka samitha that all the sages assembled in Himalaya for a conference to bring a solution for the sufferings of living being and hence decided to spread the precious knowledge of Ayurveda to mankind ². Ayurveda remained a solo system of medicine for generations that looked after public health in ancient India. Public health is defined as "the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and improving quality of life through organized efforts and informed choices of society, organizations (public and private), communities

and individuals”³. It is to protect the safety and improving the health of communities through education, policy making and research for disease and injury prevention. Public health has a long history of timeline, though modern medical system considers 16th century as the era of Public Health, this was the time when theory of contagion was accepted and cholera was attributed as the father of Public Health⁴, Paracelcius, Vaslicus, Fracastorius were regarded for theories of infective diseases. But in contrast Oupasargika Vyadhi (communicable diseases) and the importance of quarantine and isolation (Guptiratmanah, Staanaparityaga) were told in Ayurveda almost 2500 years earlier to that era⁵.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A systematic review of all scientific literature available in National and international journals, relevant text books, historic documents and the classical texts of Ayurveda. Keywords like Public health, Ancient India, Ayurveda were used in the meta-analysis, the outcome of the search were compiled, critically analysed and the conclusions are drawn.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Public health and its importance has reflected in almost all the the historical periods of India. Right from Indus valley civilization, where the excavations have proved the existence of advanced engineering techniques in town planning, water supply and sanitation during that period. A typical pattern where residential areas were built in higher altitude than the ground level called as Citardal was seen in those days, they also had mastery over agriculture, all the crops and grains were stored in granaries with hygienic measures, the great granary of Harappa City is an evidence for that⁶. A great bath of mahenjodaro was a place for public to take bath during auspicious occasions. Historians also records that there were no evidence of a single violence for over thousands of years inspite there were no kings ruled or any form of government which existed in Indus valley civilization, they were peace lovers and had a great harmony in the society. The Ayurveda principles of *soucha*, and *ardasantanata* [*fraternity*] were practised to highest in those days. The first ever evidence of Public Health in ancient India can be found through Vedas, all the four Vedas devote highest respect to the nature and cleanliness, environmental hygiene was of higher priority during Vedic period. They were nature worshipers and gave the slogan off Vasudeva kutumbakam which resonates even today as a core principle to establish peace around the world.

During 1000 BC India is identified with its 16 Mahajanapadas, which were the settlements of people ruled by their king. Mahabharata the epic text of that period also reveals few idea of the settlements of that time, Each court of king that period had a court physician who not only took care of royal family but also involved in making policies regarding the health of their state. Punarvasu Atreya and his disciples Agnivesha, Bhela, Haritha, Ksharapani, Jatukarna and Paraashara are the physicians of that era who started the earliest of medical literature. Ayurveda perhaps is the first science of ancient days that was totally dedicated for health care aspects, it strongly emphasized on lokapurusha (the theory of man as an integral part of nature), a healthy environment is crucial for healthy living of human⁷. Concept of hygiene of land, water, and air, methods of purification of land, water, air and suitable land for building construction are also mentioned in the earliest texts of Ayurveda⁸. Acharya Charaka belongs to a tradition of physicians called *Yayavaras*, who roamed around village to village to inspect community health and hygiene, they were well known for door step delivery of healthcare.

Many text of health emerged during 3rd Century BC to 6th century AD, Acharya Charka the court physician in the royal court of Kanishka, Acharya Dhanvantari in the court of Vikramaditya Chandragupta-2, Vaidyaraja Jeevaka in court of Bimbisara, Nagarjuna, Dridabala and Vatsa are few pioneer physicians wrote

their texts on medicine during their period. These physicians were also teachers in the ancient universities of Nalanda, Takshashila and Vikramshila.

Manusmriti highlights the clean environment and its role in healthy living. Many aspects of Public Health has also been described in the text of Chanakya which was written during the Mauryan era. The Arthashastra written by Chanakya explains about the role of king in citizens welfare, public hygiene and its importance were also seen in few quotes of Chanakya Neeti⁹, the literary epics of Kalidasa and Bhanabhatta have also thrown light on life and living of people in that period. A Greek visitor Megasthenes sent by the king Demetrius-2 visited India during that period has mentioned the glory of India in his book Megasthenes Indica.

Charaka Samhita explains about Janapadodwamsa (the destruction of community in Mass), he explains two Kaaranaas (causes) for disease Asadharana Karana which are unique to every individual and causes diseases to individual, however when the whole community gets diseased it is due to Sadharana Karanaas (the common factors) which are the air, the water, the land, and the season¹⁰. Charaka Samhita also has explained in detail about the features of unhygienic or spoiled soil, air, water and season that will cause mass destruction. The modes of disease transmission mentioned in Sushruta Samhita are the other evidence of the deeper understanding by the people of Ancient India on public health¹¹. Gaatra Samsparsha (Direct body contact), Nishwasa (Droplet), Sahabhajana (fecal-oral route), Sahashayya (sexually transmitted), Gandhamapanulepa (through infected substance) are the modes of disease transmission mentioned in Sushruta Samhita. The concept of Sadvrittha found in Ayurveda that emphasizes on moral and social code of conduct is an excellent example of idea of communal harmony they had in those days¹². The Sambhasha Parishad similar to the expert committee meeting of today were also seen in the ancient days for taking any kind of decisions. Similar example is seen in Vatakalakaleeya Adhyaya of Charaka Samhita, where the depth of knowledge about environment among the ancient physicians is evident through the discussion about air, the greater role of air in climatology and materialology, the power of cause any kind of calamity and destruction are discussed in that Sambhasha Parishad¹³. It is very similar to the conferences of parties and General Assembly of World Health Organization where discussions are done to take consensual decisions.

India suffered a dark era during its mediaeval history, many invaders brutally destroyed the Indian culture and heritage during this period, this gave a setback to the descent of Indian Medical system for a temporary period. Europe suffered from communicable diseases during the 17th and 18th century because of the improper industrial revolution, the need of sanitation was realised and England considers 19th century as the period of sanitary awakening, it passed the Public Health act in 1848¹⁴, the first Public Health commission was established in India during British Raj in 1867. Slowly and gradually the ancient classical texts of Ayurveda are coming to forefront in serving mankind, digitalisation of traditional knowledge sources acting as the guiding lamps for the modern world once again.

CONCLUSION

Public health has always been an integral part of Indian society throughout the antiquity, many evidences explain the existence of a superior civilization with hygiene at its highest priority. The ancient physicians have always trusted more over prevention than cure. Ayurveda elaborately tells about the importance of good environment, housing standards, safe water supply and the role of immunity in promoting the health and endure longevity. There are still many ancient classical texts with treasure of knowledge which are unexplored, there is a need to know and adopt the classical measures to build a healthy and prosperous society.

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