ARThRITIS in ANCIENT INDIAN LITERATURE

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Arthritic diseases have been known to exist since great antiquity. Probably the earliest detailed description of arthritis occurs in Atharvaveda, having been composed about 1000 B.C. Caraka Samhita, written in the post vedic period, has dealt more accurately with the aetiology, symptomatology, diagnosis and treatment of arthritis. Caraka has prescribed, both, local and systemic medicaments for the treatment of arthritic diseases. Prognosis of these disorders, as proclaimed by ancient physicians of India, still remains unaltered.

Recently a new compound has been isolated from gum-guggulu (Commiphora mukul) under the name of Fraction A, which has been found effective as an antiarthritic and hypocholesterolaemic agent. These findings support the ancient India physician’s concept and suggest that many of the ancient Indian medicaments can be made useful therapeutic agents, if properly screened with the help of modern research techniques.

The earliest evidence in India that arthritis crippled human life is accorded in Atharvaveda which was composed about 1,000 B.C.¹ as is evident from the following verse.

पादाश्यां ते जानुष्यां श्रीवर्णां परिमंससः
अनुकारद्वर्णोहिविज्ञायः श्रीवर्णा रोगमनोशायः ॥

"I remove the acute pain and its causative factors from the feet, legs, buttock, thigh, back bone, neck joints and head (which are known to cripple thy life)."²

Of the four Vedas, Atharvaveda could possibly have been compiled last hence it encompasses deeper thought on the aetiology and management of diseases.

In the post-Vedic period two noble books were written under the name of Caraka and Sutra Samhitas, which record profound depth of ancient medical knowledge. Caraka is one of the greatest scientist philosophers of antiquity, who lived about 2,500 years ago. He has dealt in a great detail with the aetiology and management of arthritis. Describing the sign and symptoms of arthritis, Caraka mentions:

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"Contraction, stiffness of joints, aching pain in the bones and joints, horripilation, garrulousness, spasticity of the hands, back and head, limping and lameness, hunch-back, atrophy of the limbs and insomnia" (these are the signs of arthritis).³

Caraka classified the rheumatic conditions into two sub-groups such as 'superficial and deep' as is evident from the following quotation.

‘The two varieties of rheumatic conditions are ‘superficial and deep’.⁴

Regarding the sign and symptoms, of arthritis, Caraka mentions further

“Pruritus, burning, pain, extension, aching or throbbing pain and contraction, accompanied with the dusky red or coppery coloration of the skin are considered the symptoms in the superficial type of rheumatic conditions.”⁵

“In the deeper type, there occurs swelling, rigidity, hardness, agonizing pain inside the joints, dusky-red or coppery coloration, burning, pricking and throbbing pain, and tendency to suppuration.”⁶

“Swelling, excessive pain, pricking pain, coppery coloration, tingling sensation, non-yielding to either unctuous or dry treatment and accompaniment of pruritus and softening, are the symptoms in a conditions of vicitation of blood.”⁷

According to tridōpa or tridiscordance theory, Caraka considered that arthritis is born due to the disturbances of vāta, as is evident from the following quotations.
Rheumatoid arthritis is the disease of small joints but it may involve knee, elbow and other bigger joints. The small joints of hands are especially involved. Caraka described the site of manifestation of rheumatoid arthritis in the following words.

"The sites of its manifestation are hands, feet, fingers, toes and all the joints. It establishes its base first in the hands and feet and then spreads in the entire body".12
disease, involving many organs such as liver, spleen, heart, lung, and kidneys, etc. although these names are not mentioned here. It appears that these pioneers were well conversant with the fact that blood circulating through circulatory channels served as a vehicle for the spread of toxic material in the entire body. Biochemical variation in the metabolic processes, occurring in the body, were not unknown. Following is an excellent example to indicate the depth of knowledge of biochemical mechanisms occurring in the body.

\[
\text{यात्रत: पुख्ये मृतिमलो भाविविशेषतायात्त्व एवास्मन्}
\]
\[
\text{लोकसंप्रकारभीषण्।}
\]
\[
\text{सबे भावाःहिंसके नात्तरण लोकतंत्रभिमिनिर्वांते,}
\]
\[
\text{क्षयं वायुभिमिनिर्वांतः।}
\]
\[
\text{स्त्रीपरिणामकारणसमाहिता।}
\]
\[
\text{धातुतांमिनिर्वांति भवत्त्वयनाथेन।}
\]

"There is much functional diversity in the system of circulation in the human body as there is elemental diversity in the structural composition of the body. None of the elements in the body can flourish or decay independently of the channels of the circulation. It is indeed these channels that by conveying the body elements—which are undergoing metabolic processes—subserve the purpose of circulation."14

Arthritis has long been the cause of physical disability and mental worry to the sufferers. Inspite of the rapid progress in drug research, the contribution in this direction has rather been meagre. The value of indigenous drugs, remains unexplored. The ancient physicians of India used camphor, turmeric, medicated oil and local medicaments for the relief of the pain. In the history of medicine, they were the first to use gum-guggulu (Commiphora mukul) for the treatment of arthritis which is likely to prove a drug of choice in modern times as well.

Recently Sharma et al.15 have shown the clinical efficacy of Fraction A of gum-guggulu in the treatment of Rheumatoid arthritis, which has been reported to be superior to phenylbutazone. Similarly Fraction A has been found to be effective hypocholesteremic agent by Malhotra and Ahuja16. These interesting results have opened new vistas on the research of gum-guggulu, which has been used in Ayurvedic system of medicine for thousands of years.

Following are the few quotations from Caraka Samhitā, regarding the treatment of arthritis.

\[
\text{मुख्य किंचित् निला: कुष्ठ सुराइबं लवण नतम्।}
\]
\[
\text{दयाधीदीर्घु: स्नेही: सिद्ध स्वादुपावहनम्।}
\]

"The preparations made of nutgrass, yeast, śīla, costus, deodār, rocksalt and Indian valerian along with curd, milk and the tetrad of unctuous articles should be used as poultice".17
The physician should give on the painful part, a thick application prepared of pancakes, vasantac, preparation, milk, black gram, tila, cooked rice, castor seeds, wheat, barley, jujube and ticktrefoil groups of drugs, mixed with unnuminous articles. This application should be made at night and bandaged with castor leaves, and the bandage should be removed the next morning."

"The decoction of the holy fig tree (Pipal) taken as a portion mixed with honey, subdues rheumatic conditions quickly, even if caused by severe tridiscordance. The conditions may also be cured by a course of old barely, wheat, sidhu-wine, medicated-wine or sura-wine, or by a course of mineral pitch (sila) and gum-guggulu or honey."

"The use of all kinds of vitalizers is highly recommended. A course of mineral pitch (sila) and so a course of gum-guggulu with milk are specially beneficial."

"The unguent, prepared from kitchen, sweet flag, costus, til seeds turmeric and Indian berberry, is curative of rheumatic conditions associated with predominant provocation of vata-sam-kapha."

Regarding the curability and incurability of rheumatoid arthritis Caraka considers like a best physician of today, in the following manner.

"That condition is curable which is of recent origin, resulting from the provocation of a single humor. The condition resulting from bidiscordance is only palliable and the condition born of tridiscordance as well as the one attended with complications, are incurable."

**Summary**

The literature reviewed in this article amply shows that ancient Indian physicians had sufficient knowledge about the aetiology, symptomatology and
management of various arthritic diseases. The clinical efficacy of *gum guggulu* (*Commiphora mukul*), an Ayurvedic drug used for several thousands of years in the treatment of such disorders due to rearrangements of *vāta*, *vālarakta* and *āmvāta*, stands the test of modern research methodology, which all the more further necessitates research in this field.

**References**


3 *Caraka Samhitā*, Translated by Shri Gulab Kunvera, Ayurvedic Society, Jamnagar (1949).

----- *Su*. XXVIII-20.

4 ----- *Ct*. XXIX-20.

5 ----- *Ct*. XXIX-21.

6 ----- *Ct*. XXXIX-27.

7 ----- *Ct*. XXXIX-35.


9 ----- *Ct*. XXVIII-33.

10 ----- *Ct*. XXVIII-37.

11 ----- *Ct*. XXVIII-65.

12 ----- *Ct*. XXIX-12.

13 ----- *Vi*-V-3.


17 C. S. *Ct*. XXVIII-113.

18 ----- *Ct*. XXVIII-114-115.

19 ----- *Ct*. XXIX-158-159.

20 ----- *Ct*. XXVIII-241.

21 ----- *Ct*. XXIX-149.

22 ----- *Ct*. XXIX-30.