

CONTRIBUTION OF *MADANAPĀLA NIGHANṬU* TO THE KNOWLEDGE  
OF INDIAN MATERIA MEDICA WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE  
TO FIG (*AÑJIRA*)

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“Fig” is the dried fruit of the common cultivated fig-tree, *Ficus carica* Linn. (Family; Moraceae), commonly met within the Indian markets in grocer’s or dryfruit seller’s shops under the name of ‘añjira’. The fruits are imported like garland strung in camel-hair thin ropes, which are hung in shops forming a conspicuous scene. In its binomial nomenclature, the *specific* name ‘*carica*’ is based on its main area of production, Caria, an old geographical region in Asia Minor, of which it is one of the most important economic products till to-day.

The fig-tree is native of Mediterranean region. It grows wild or nearly wild over a vast-region in which Syria is about the Centre, that is to say from the east of Persia, or even from Afghanistan across the whole Mediterranean region. The pre-historic area of the fig-tree covered the middle and the southern part of the Mediterranean basin from Syria to the Canaries. From North to South, this zone varies in width from 25 to 40-42 parallels. As a rule, the fig stops like the olive at the foot of Caucasus and the mountains of Europe which limit the Mediterranean basin. The species grew wild in Greece, at least in the Archipelago, before the introduction of cultivated varieties of Asiatic origin (ref. 1).

Even in the time of the Cretans, from the earliest of ages, the fruit that was good to eat was obtained by caprifigation from the fig trees (ref. 2, p. 10). Large pots full of beautiful figs were found in Royalvilla in Hagia-Tagia and at Pylos and the fruit was known to Neolithic Thessaly. It was pre-Hellenic word that the Greeks used for a green fig (ref. 2, p. 162). The fig trees are mentioned to have been planted in the gardens of Methen, a great official in the third dynasty of Egypt (ref. 2, p. 77). There is also mention of fig in the lists of offerings on the tomb chapels of the Old Kingdom. The fruits eaten by the Egyptians at the end of the meal consisted of figs, Sycamore figs, and a juicy fruit called ‘Sekhept’, probably the large green-striped melon so often figured among the offerings, (ref. 2, pp. 86-87). The epithet ‘Sycamore’ is indicative of discrimination suggesting syrian (Suria-kos (Suria) Syria), i.e. Asiatic (origin). Fig tree finds distinguished mention in the Mesopotamian Chronicle (ref. 3, p. 13). Sargan in the third year of his reign

marched against a town in Cappadocia (an old region in Asia Minor), whence he sent to Akkad for plantation two species of fig tree, vines, rose tree and other plants (ref. 3, p. 29). Through Greek sources, we know that after the death of Alexander, the Great, his vast territory, the first largest Kingdom in the history, extending from Macedonia to the North western frontiers of India, was divided amongst his three generals, Antigonus, Ptolemy and Seleucus. Being unable to control such a vast area, Seleucus had to cede some of his eastern Satraps (Arachosia, Aria etc.) to Chandra Gupta Maurya and he also married his daughter to him; and thus a friendly relation was established between the Mauryan Emperor and the Greek Rulers, which was also maintained by the successors of Chandra Gupta Maurya. This had a great impact in the to and fro transit of trade, ideas, things, cultural elements and etc. King of Syria and king of Egypt (circa B.C. 285-247) sent Envoy to the Mauryan Court. Bindusāra (*Amitrochates*) wrote to Antiochus King to buy and send him sweet wine and *dried figs*" (ref. 4, p. 266). This is perhaps, the first record of the imported fig. This also suggests the asiatic mediterranean region as the native place of the good varieties of the fig.

The *Ficus* species held an important place in the mythology and religious life of the ancient peoples of, both, the East and the West. In this regard the holy *pippal* tree, the banyan tree and the gular fig (*udumbara*) are recognised since the Vedic period (Vedic Index Vol. I), whereas the fig holds much the same place in the mythology of the West. It has been regarded from pre-historic times as an anthropogonic tree and valued amongst nutritious fruits. It is mentioned frequently in the sacred books of the Hebrews, and by early Greek and Latin writers. Hippocrates notices it in several places as having aperient, emollient and nutritious properties and useful as an article of diet in phlegmatic affections. Figs were used in illustrations by the Greeks. In the worship of Dionysus, the fig played an important part, the phallus was made of its wood and the fruit was a necessary offering to the God.

In the early Christian mythology, this phallic tree became accursed. The "tree of Judas" was supposed to be haunted by the evil spirits (ref. 5, pp. 342-343).

But the fig has always been praised and valued by the Arabs and the Persians, to whom it appears to have been known from pre-historic times. In the sacred *Qurān*, there is a chapter of a specific *Sūrah* (*Sūratuttīn*) devoted to fig. It is mentioned along with olive. "God", say the commentators, "swears by the two fruits, because of their great use and virtues; for the fig is wholesome and easy of digestion, and medicinally good to carry off phlegm and gravel in the kidneys or bladder, and to remove obstructions of the liver and the spleen; and it cures piles and the gout and etc." Dried figs were brought to India from Arabia and Persia, long before the tree was cultivated in this country, by the Arabs traders to the Western Coast, and overland from Persia and, perhaps, it is the latter route and the Persian intermediaries who are mainly responsible for its propagation

into India and after the Mohammedan domination in India during the medieval period, the fig, became popular in the whole of the northern India under its Persian name *añjira* which continues its popularity as such till to-day. With the advent and development of the Unani System of medicine and inflow of distinguished Unani physicians from the various regions of persia, there took place a brisk to and fro infiltration of knowledge and mutual exchange of ideas between the both systems, the Āyurvedic and the Unani systems of medicines (9 to 16). Along with many such other useful items, *añjira* was included by Madana Pāla in his famous work *Madanapāla Nighaṇṭu* a leading work on Indian Materia Medica belonging to the c. 14th-15th century A.D. At this juncture a pertinent question arises as to why the mention of the fig disappears in the Indian tradition for a very long span of period, despite the fact that India had trade relations with the Far West and the Far East regions from the very ancient times. One answer to this question we can get, if we make a perusal of the religious history of the past ages. Buddhism and Jainism, the staunch believers in the faith of *ahimsā*, especially the latter had their dominating influence on the Indian population notably in the trading areas. The Jainas avoided five kinds of fruits, as gular fig, the fruits of the pippal tree, the banyan tree and *Ficus lacor* Buch. Ham. (*Plakṣā-Pākaḍa*) etc., all belonging to the genus *Ficus*, under the wrong notion, that they took these fruits as the breeding grounds of organisms (cf. *jantuvrkhā*, *kṛmiphala* — Sanskrit); *Samare-pashsha* (Persi) or the gularfig tree or the country-fig tree). The notion must have prevailed for the fig also which is, a member of the same group.

The second reason (answer) may be looked for in the inter-mingling and confusion about the specific botanical identity of the common 'cultivated fig' (the actual source plant of *añjira*), the 'wild fig' and the 'country fig' or the 'Gular fig', which are represented by altogether different plant species with different habitat areas; but have intermixed antecedents.

Thus, for the purposes of mutual comparison, contrast and discrimination of their individual entity *Añjira* group of plants can be placed under three categories, viz. (1) *Ficus carica* Linn., the common cultivated fig (confined to the Mediterranean basin, represented by the *vilāyatī* and the *bāgī* garden varieties of the Unani Materia Medicas, along with its inferior varieties growing in the mountainous regions of Iran representing the 'Kohi' pahari varieties of the texts); (2) *Ficus palmata* Forsk, the wild varieties (*Jaṅglī añjira-ānjirī*) of the Unani texts and *phalgu* of the Āyurvedic *Samhitās* (esp. of *Caraka Samhitā* (Sū., 4/40) followed by *Aṣṭāṅga Hṛdaya* (Sū. 6/120). This plant is distributed in the North-western Himalayas and still known in various localities under the names *phāg*, *phāgrā* and *phagavārā*, a direct distorted form of the sanskrit *phalgu*, seems to be the Sanskritised form of the Hebrew 'fag' which seems also the basis of the names of the fig in all European languages including the Generic name (Latin) 'Ficus'; (3) *Ficus glomarata* Roxb. representing *añjira* (Hindi) or 'deśī *Añjira*' of the South Indian languages and the Siṃhales (*atti-Tāmil*, Telugu, Can., *attika*-Siṃhalese). *Añjira* is represented

in South Indian languages by prefixing some form of *śīmai* (*śīmai-atti-Tam.*, *śīma-atti-Tel.*, *śīme-ati-Can.*) where the epithet *śīmai* stands for *Vilāyatī*, or by prefixing *tene* (*tēn-atti-Tam.*, *tene-atti-Tel.*), where *tene* is the Arabic name of *añjira*. All the semitic names of the fig centre on *tīn* (*tīn-Phoenician*; *tīnu*, *Ēēnāh-Hebrew*, *tīn*, *tīn-Arabic*; *ts' inta*, *tena-Armatic*, *tittu* (from *tintu*—Assyrian). In Pahlvi *tīn* is semitic loan (ref. 1). In the Iranian and Persian tradition fig is represented by its own name *añjira* (or its modified form) which further on entered into the Indian tradition and displaced *phalgu* to be merged in the gular fig group in the post-*saṃhitā* period and onwards (refs. 9, 10, 12), where it is equated by the learned commentators on the *saṃhitās* (refs. 6, 7, 8) with *kākaudumbarikā*, *kaṣṭhaudumbarikāmalyu* etc. recognised as a therapeutic agent only and not as a dessert fruit.

But *Madanapāla Nighaṇṭu* has projected the correct situation by the specific mention of the *añjira* and its separate inclusion in the *phalavarga* where it is described in the context of dessert fruits. And *phalgu* has been described separately in the *vaṭādivarga* synonymous with *kakaudumbarikā* and recognised for medicinal virtues only:

Udumbaraḥ kṣīrivṛkṣo jantuvṛkṣaḥ sadāphalaḥ  
Hemadugdhaḥ kṛmiphalo yajñāngaḥ śitavalkalaḥ  
(Madana./Vaṭādivarga 5)

Kākaudumbarikā phalgurmalyuścitra bheṣajam  
Kākaudumbarikā tadviśeṣācchitra nāśini  
(Madana./Vaṭādivarga 6)

#### Añjiranāmaguṇāḥ

Añjiram majjalam gyeaṃ kākaudumbarikā phalam  
Añjiram śitalaṃ svādu gurupitāstravātajit  
Tasmādanya guṇaṃ gyeamañjiram laghu vā guṇaḥ  
(Madana./Phalādivarga 7)

It may be of no less interest to discuss also the ethno-historical antecedents of various groups of these synonyms of the fig mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs. These synonyms converge into 3 groups, viz, (1) *tīn* and its various modifications may be designated as semitic names; (2) *añjira*—Iranian or Persian name (current in the major portion of the Indian sub-continent and (3) the South Indian names represented by compound word, where the root component is *atti* and the suffix is *tīn* or some word like *śīmai* standing for 'foreign'. Regarding *tīn* and its various forms attention of the scholars may be drawn to the epithets 'Thinite Dynasty' of proto-historic monarchy of Ancient Egypt and 'Thinis', 'Teni' or 'Tanis' which were the most ancient names of the nomes and their capitals in Egypt (ref. 4). This leads to the conjecture that the semitic *tīn* may be of ethnic importance, suggesting Egypt as the centre of the origin of this nomenclature. (2) *Añjira* seems to

be related with the Irano-Persian tradition which is sustaining its independent entity till today. In this connection mention may be made of the 'Anjirah' (Anjirak,) pass and town fall on the old routes of Western Iran (ref. 5). Reference 3 regarding 'atti' (which stands for 'Gular fig') also seems to be of ethno-historical importance suggesting its relation with the 'Attic- and old region of Southern Greece' and reflecting the East-ward movements of the Mediterranean tribes of the Pre-historical and proto-historical times and their settlements in the Western Indian Coastal areas extending further East to the Islands.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Indian system of medicine is the oldest system of medicine which is sustaining its perennial flow from the pre-historic times. Medical Science with the passage of time has made use of every knowledge irrespective of its source. This is how the corpus of *Materia Medica* also has continuously grown and enhanced. Practically there is no one *Materia Medica* for all or all in one, nevertheless, an ideal aspired for. From the point of give and take, the Indian system of medicine is marked by three *distinct phases*, (1) the ancient-cum-pre-medieval (2), the medieval and (3) the modern. In the medieval period both the Āyurvedic and Unani systems flourished as sister systems of medicine and a brisk and liberal to an fro infiltration of newer things took place in both. *Madanapāla Nighaṅṭu*, a leading work on the Āyurvedic *Materia Medica* belonging to about the mid-medieval period, exhibits many instances of this ideology. *Añjira*, a product of the Western Middle East, was introduced and popularised its nutritious food values and valuable therapeutic attributes leading to its inclusion in the *Nighaṅṭu* of Madana Pāla, *Ficus species* have played an important role in the religious and cultural life and the mythology of all the people inhabiting the Indian sub-continent in the East to the Mediterranean region in the West. An attempt has, therefore, been also made to project their chronological and relative features through historico-cultural eras and phases.

Thus, it can be concluded that *Madanapāla Nighaṅṭu* (in the Medieval period) makes a significant contribution to the knowledge of Indian (Āyurvedic) *Materia Medica* by clarifying the correct entity of the *añjira* and dispelling the confusion with *phalgu* (*phāg*, *phagvārā*) of the Āyurvedic texts.

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