



SRI LANKA'S INDIGENOUS MEDICAL TRADITION

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The traditional medicines and medical practices of the Sri Lanka's indigenous people are the common inheritance of every village mother. Generations of medical practitioners or physicians shared their knowledge freely with the entire village. They knew the pharmacology of the indigenous medical system literally by heart, handed down as it was by their forefathers from generation to generation. They were repositories of knowledge of a staggering variety of herbal and mineral varieties of medicines, proven for efficacy for millennia. Every part of a plant was used for specific remedies.

The indigenous physician or **vedarala** gave great importance to the precise diagnosis of diseases and ailments. The oral tradition of learning and teaching was further augmented by authoritative medical texts on old leaves indicating the dosage of prescriptions.

The vedarala or indigenous 'medicine man' also had knowledge about contagious and infectious diseases and knew how to control epidemics. His mode of treatment included the psychological and spiritual dimensions as well. Prevention was as vital an aspect as alleviation and cure. It was a **holistic** system.



In all their activities, indigenous people preserved a vital link with all the forces of nature, especially spiritual forces. To them, the environment was not limited to sensible phenomena and natural forces alone. They were aware and in direct contact with subtle spiritual forces and used these to cure and alleviate diseases of the mind and body.

Their pharmacopoeia included **guli, thaebum, kasaya, kalka**, and various oils and powders. They used raw as well as dried parts of medicinal plants. Decoctions, concoctions, confections, and extracts filled the shelves of the indigenous dispensary. A variety of psychological and spiritual treatments employed shanthi karma, khem, bali, thovil and mantras or incantations which had proved their efficacy down the ages and were compatible with the indigenous worldview and way of life.

The forests and fields were the sources of medicinal plants. Their deep familiarity with the environment enabled vedaralas to determine the auspicious times, chiefly in relation to the sun and the moon, for the gathering and preparation of remedies. The wind and its movements were also studied closely in working out specific treatments.

In the indigenous understanding, all disease is the result of imbalance in the total system of body and environment. Veterinary treatment was necessitated by the presence of domestic animals including elephants, cattle and dogs. Pest control was another speciality of indigenous men and women, who took the total picture into account in trying to understand disease and affliction.

The **Tun Dos** or 'Three Anomalies' (of wind, bile and phlegm) were reckoned to be the cause of bodily disease. Blood had all aspects contained in it and derived its strength and potency from the sun with the moon as modifying agent.

The local Veda Mahattaya or Veda Adura, together with the priest of the local **devale** or spirit shrine, handed over specialised knowledge to all the mothers who knew a host of home remedies for minor afflictions. The mother was the

home nurse and dispenser of medicines who also prepared the decoctions and other prescriptions that were issued by the village doctor or priest.

The **Ammawarun Hath Dena** or Seven Divine Mothers were to be invoked when combating the **ammawarunge leda** or diseases of the Seven Divine Mothers. Cleanliness, medication and isolation were all part of the nursing and preventive aspects of care.

The vedarala or native doctor maintained the indigenous community's health by treating the whole body. Specialist knowledge classed diseases into those above the neck and those below. The eyes, ears, nose and throat ailments had a ready repertoire of treatments. Even madness had special types of treatments, from **nasas** (nasal inhalations) to **laya virekas** (purgatives). The psychological and spiritual afflictions had suitable modes of treatment employing **wes muhunu** (masks), **naetun** (ritual dance) and **mantra** (incantation).

The indigenous medical pharmacopoeia or **ayushadha niganduwa** contained cures for colds, fever, stomach disorders, blood diseases, broken limbs and fractured bones. **Kansa** or **Triloka Vijaya** (cannabis) was a medicinal plant employed in over seventy percent of all indigenous medical preparations. Colonial interests banned this vital medicinal plant, which nevertheless continues to be an important part of indigenous medicine.

Sarpa visa or serpent bite curse is another important branch of indigenous medicine from western medicine could learn a great deal, having been developed over thousands of years.

Modern development has encroached dangerously on 'wastelands' which grew the highly efficacious medicinal plants employed by the indigenous people of Sri Lanka. Certainly the time has come to redress this great injustice by giving due place to a system of medicine that has discovered so much about the relationship between indigenous people and indigenous flora.