

## Remedies in their antiquity: a peep into the history

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### Abstract

In spite of the progress of modern medicine and technology in India there is still a larger part of our country where the boon could not have been applied. The immediate 'Why' can be answered by the socialist and the economist. These backward regions till date handle diseases in their own way which more often is a non-scientific one. What they rely on, to get rid of diseases, are millennia old beliefs and knowledge. And that knowledge part, though shrouded in magic-cum-religious activities, sustains them. Ocular diseases are not exceptions. Often quack remedies take a leading part. This article wants to rethink these homely treatments that have been applied to ocular diseases because these ancient methods need a support from modern science and technology. These so called 'quack medicines' need to be explored for any scientific value in it by modern science. Their easy procurement coupled with scientific base, if any, can serve the mass better.

**Keywords:** Ocular disease, glaucoma, alternative medicine.

*"I protect eyes by not letting them ache and shed tears – I protect eyes by making them pure and clear." - [written / translation by Amoghavajra]<sup>1</sup>*

This sequel to an ancient invocation, though claiming to cure eyes of cataract<sup>1</sup>, represents nothing medicinal but the spirit which had been nourishing the ocular concern. Worldwide research activities have brought many ancient medical texts into light. And amongst them ophthalmology has acquired an esteemed status. Apart from the *Susrutasamhita*, the *Carakasamhita*, treatise of Nagarjuna, works of Jivaka, Chakradutta et al there are various other texts which documented ancient Indian endeavour in ophthalmology. The texts like *Nimitantra*, *Astangahrdayasamhita*<sup>2</sup> have mentioned eye diseases with their symptoms and respective treatments. The fact which puts another feather to ancient Indian ophthalmology's cap, is that it has, to some substantial extent, influenced and shaped contemporary Chinese ophthalmology<sup>1,2</sup>. Through the spread of Buddhism it reached China and eventually penetrated into their medical culture and took a leading role. There is quite a substantial amount of research and writings of Vijaya Deshpande celebrating this issue.

In all these texts other than the cataract surgery of Susruta, some anomalies as severe as glaucoma, rheumatism, 'Gambhirika'<sup>3</sup> (the secondary glaucoma due to iritis, uveitis) to as common as conjunctivitis have been dealt with in

details. Diseases that were described both in Indian and India influenced Chinese treatise unmistakably present themselves as serious social concerns as 'nayanam pradhanam'<sup>3</sup> – eyes are the cardinal issue. Let us now reconsider their remedial tales.

#### *The Handling:*

An ancient Chinese document records the loss of eye sight due to excessive weeping which can be related to 'acute congestive glaucoma'<sup>2</sup>. Indian examples are also there. Thus stress and strain were identified by them as cause of glaucoma. To compare their understanding to modern time reference can be made of Ludwig Laqueur, who introduced Physostigmine into the glaucoma treatment, had also made 'emotions' responsible for his glaucomatous attacks<sup>4</sup>. Susruta opted for venepuncture, bloodletting to cure glaucoma<sup>2</sup>. The knowledge of increased IOP was not known to Susrut but he had the idea of an excess fluid, within the eye, which ought to be drained out to get rid of the disease. So minor to major surgeries were prescribed. Hence he was in tune with modern ophthalmology<sup>2</sup>.

Susrut and some Chinese doctors used to prescribe animal livers in diet, especially of cow, goat, rabbit etc for obtaining bright eyesight<sup>2</sup>. Fishes were been made an essential also. Interestingly the vitamin A, found in animal livers, is thought important by modern scientist and men of medicine. This brightens eye sight and prevents visual deterioration and diseases like Xerophthalmia<sup>2</sup>.

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The seed of *Cassia tora* or *Cassia obtusifolia* or *Cassia auriculata*, an abundantly and largely growing legume, was used to make ophthalmological drugs in medieval India and thus also in China<sup>2</sup>. Medicines from these legumes were made to brighten the eyesight which had been dimmed due to ill liver, for dilating pupils, relieving red and dry eyes, to treat purulent ophthalmia and conjunctivitis etc<sup>2</sup>. Till date these seeds are thought useful as alternative medicine and substitute food, though in rural and undeveloped areas.

To treat glaucoma, texts like *Nimitantra* suggests the use of milk mixed with medicine<sup>2</sup>. The uses of ghee (clarified butter), butter, honey along with distilled water and human milk are very common prescription in these ancient texts<sup>3</sup>. Interestingly clarified butter has an anti-inflammatory<sup>3</sup> feature which had been manipulated for eyes. Till date a kind of homemade collyrium (*Kajal*), obtained by burning clarified butter is applied to babies for acquiring bright eye sight throughout Indian subcontinent. Human milk was regarded a medicine and an ingredient for preparing ocular medicines and its substitution was goat milk<sup>3</sup>. It is till date used in rural areas. This application, as we know, has a millennia old history. The ancient doctors did not know that milk with its immuno-globulins<sup>3</sup> can defend infections.

As part of treatment often leeches were applied to suck impure blood, again in some cases snake-venom and snake-fat were being used to treat ocular diseases<sup>3</sup>. We can put the leech story aside but Snake venom has a property that breaks blood cells and this very property might

have been manipulated to serve doctors in controlling eye diseases<sup>3</sup>. Mustard leaves and mustard oil have also been considered as good potions for weak eyes.

#### *To Conclude:*

As a field of study, medicine in ancient India, was reared mostly by unscientific principles. Still some approaches, some treatments, some medicines survived just because they had won the challenges put before them by the diseases. These so called 'quack medicines' need to be explored for any scientific value in it by modern science. Their easy procurement coupled with scientific base, if any, can serve the mass better.

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