

Indigenous knowledge depicted in palm leaf manuscripts in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Palm leaf manuscript culture in Sri Lanka has a long history. According to Sri Lankan chronicles which were composed around 5th century A.C.E. writing on palm leaves started in the 1st century B.C.E. As mentioned in those chronicles, during the reign of King Vaṭṭagāmaṇi Abhaya (89-77 B.C.E) Buddhist monks used palm leaves to inscribe the doctrine of the Buddha. In the later periods, in addition to religious texts, secular subjects were also written on palm leaves, like indigenous medical practices, astrology, palmistry literature and various kinds of black magic. Indigenous medical practices include medical treatments for human beings as well as animals. Ailments such as diarrhea, vomiting, snakebites, fever, and mental disorders were commonly treated using indigenous medicines. The Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Kelaniya Sri Lanka has established a Palm Leaf Manuscript Study and Research Library (PLMSRL) to preserve those manuscripts, especially to preserve manuscripts that are damaged due to various causes. Currently, there are more than 3000 (800,000 images) manuscripts preserved by this library. The present study was carried out by using these manuscripts. The methodology used for this research is to examine those manuscripts thoroughly and the main objective is to recognize the major areas of the indigenous knowledge which prevailed for more than twenty centuries throughout the history of Sri Lanka. The study aims to examine manuscripts that belong to other Asian countries as well.

Key words: Palm Leaf Manuscripts, Indigenous Knowledge, Chronicles, snakebites, Astrology

Introduction

Palm leaf manuscript culture in Sri Lanka has a long history. According to the great chronicle of Sri Lanka, the Mahāvamsa, engraving on palm leaves has started in the 1st century. B.C. E, during the reign of king Vattagāmani Abhaya (89 - 77 B.C.E). who ruled in the Anuradhapura kingdom, the 1st kingdom of Sri Lanka, which existed from 4th century B.C.E to 10th century.A.C.E. The chronicle explains that the teaching of the Buddha (Tripiṭaka) and the commentaries, (Aṭṭhakathā) of the Tripiṭaka brought forward by the Buddhist monks (Theras or Elders) by heart (mukhapāṭha or by memory) for about 5 centuries, (Mahāvamsa, Tr.by Gurage, Ananda, W.P. Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited, Lake House, Colombo, Sri Lanka, (1989) 33; 102, 103)

The chronicle and other historical sources further explain that there had been seven year lasting drought at the reign of king Vattagāmani Abhaya and all crops in the country were destroyed by that drought and the people had to face a severe famine. At the same time seven invaders from South India landed to the island. (Mahāvamsa. 33; 39, 40 and Rahula, Walpola; History of Buddhism in Ceylon. Buddhist Cultural Center, Nedimala. Dehiwala.Sri Lanka (1993) pp 81 - 84). Due to this natural disaster and the political instability, thousands of people died and even thousands of Buddhist monks also passed away. At the period of famine, some Buddhist monks fled to India and some Buddhist monks stayed in the country facing severe difficulties. When the disaster ended, the thēras who fled to India, returned and met those thēras who stayed in the country and they chanted the Tripiṭaka to check whether there are any dissimilarities and found that there are no any changes of the Tripiṭaka, of both parties, The Dhamma was protected by memory. However, they all decided to write the Tripiṭaka and Aṭṭhakaṭṭhās (commentaries) on palm leaves to prevent any harm that could occur in future. Having decided that, the Buddhist monks assembled in a huge cave located near Mathale in the Central Province and engraved all Buddhist canons on palm leaves (Nikāyasamgraha, Nanayakkara Gunawardhane, S. Godage and brothers, Colombo, Sri Lanka. (2001) p. 25). This incident had taken place during the years of 89 B.C.E - 77 B.C.E.

Since then, not only religious texts, but other secular subjects were also engraved on palm leaves, such as medicine, astrology, palmistry, literature etc. And at the same time, the preparation of palm leaves for engraving, also was a special industry, which followed a traditional technical procedures

and used some chemicals which were extracted from trees. These procedures of preparation of palm leaves helped to preserve them and prevent damages caused by insects, and natural damages. Well processed palm leaves can exist for 500 years, if not exposed to water and direct sunlight.

This research is focused on the indigenous knowledge depicted in palm leaf manuscripts in Sri Lanka and hence, Pāli Tripiṭaka and their commentaries as well as texts of literature are not been taken to consideration. So this research is limited to explore the knowledge in palm leaf manuscripts on indigenous medicine, mantras (black magic) and palmistry etc. And another limitation of this research is that it used only the palm leaves manuscripts belonging to the Palm Leaf Manuscript Study and Research Library of the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, which has about 800 original palm leaf manuscripts and about 600,000 images (2000 books) taken from the various places in the country. (www.kln.ac.lk/http://ss.kln.ac.lk/units/plmsrlj/) The research methodology used in this research is study the original manuscripts, in depth to examine the indigenous knowledge included in those manuscripts.

The majority of the collection of palm leaves manuscripts belonging to the library are related to indigenous medicine, out of which a large number cover the medicine for mankind and there are also some manuscripts related to animal treatments, most of them are on cattle cure, a few for elephant cure and another few for domestic pets like cats and dogs.

One palm leaf manuscript which copied from a Buddhist Temple in Kurunegala District (D.W.0056) gives a recipe for stomach - ache. According to a legend one Arahant (Buddhist Thera) named Maliyadēwa was suffering from a stomach - ache and a physician whose name was Chūlagalla prepared a medicinal starch using some herbs, and having drunk it the disease was cured. The manuscript mentioned above, says that the recipe of herbs used for preparation of that medicinal starch is identical. If it is correct, this recipe has a long history about 22 centuries, because the Arahant Maliyadēwa had lived in the 2nd century B.C.E according to the sources (Mahāwaṃsa 32; 48 - 56). The recipe included roots of wood apple (beli), garlic, brassica, orris and some other herbs mixed with ricinus communes oil and a special variety of a kind of rice called "heenaeti". Most of these herbs are used to cure stomach - aches even today as home remedies.

There are several palm leaf manuscripts providing recipes for treatment of diabetes. From ancient times, diabetes was a very serious non communicable disease. In Buddhist texts, diabetes was named as "Madhumeha" (the disease originated from sweetness), (Girimānanda Sutta, Pali

chanting book (Maha pirith pota), The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, Taipei Taiwan (2008). Hundred thousands of people including young school children in Sri Lanka are suffering from diabetes. The situation all over the world is also same.

According to those palm leaf manuscripts, ancient Sri Lankan physicians had practiced simple treatments using some medicinal herbs which found in their surrounding areas. They had commonly used garlic, ginger and some herbs to cure diabetes (D.M.A 0005). Actually if researchers conducted their research testing these herbs, they might get significant results and it is clear that they may be able to produce new medicines or treatments cheaper than insulin used today.

The Palm Leaf Study and Research Library of the University of Kelaniya also possesses some manuscripts which have treatments for snakebites. As an agricultural society in a tropical country it is natural that in ancient times, (even present times) snakebites were very common in Sri Lanka. There are a number of most venomous snakes like cobra, viper and other species. Annually it is reported that more than 80,000 snakebites and about 600 deaths due to snakebites in the country. But in the South Asian region situation is worse than Sri Lanka. (PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases <http://journals.plos.org/plosntds/article?id=10.1371/journal.pntd.0000603>). So in the past, treatments for snakebites were very important.

In one manuscript copied from a traditional physician in Dambulla, Mathale District of Central Provinces (WSMR 0099) mention that, a victim bitten by a cobra should be inhaled the juice extracted from a creeper called “puswel”, and also this patient should be given ghee to drink and his body should be massaged by using some boiled herbal bundles. The manuscript mentions that the herbal extract for different venoms should be given to the patients with different mixtures. For example, patients who get bitten by a viper should be given medicine with lemon juice while those who get bitten by a cobra should be given breast milk and in some other instances, ginger juice also is recommended (D.M.A.0002). Some herbal extracts have been recommended to cure viper’s venom with lime juice and the same extracts with orange juice for cobra’s venom (D.M.A.0002).

The most interesting fact is that ancient Sri Lankan physicians have used specific methods to identify the snake that bit the patient and the condition of the patient, whether he would be cured

or not without seeing him, by observing the features of the person who came to fetch the physician. According to some manuscripts, if the messenger sees the face of physician directly while informing the incident, it was a cobra bite and if the messenger touches himself his nose and open his mouth, the physician shouldn't visit the patient because he may not be cured. And if the messenger touches himself his belly it was a viper bite. (WSMR 0099). Although this sounds improbable today these treatments were highly accepted by the people who lived in the past.

In the past lustration, was very common in Sri Lanka as well as in other countries of the region, like India. The major reasons for that disease were use of expired food and contaminated water. To cure the children who are suffering from this disease one manuscript recommends some stems of herbs should be grinded to make powder and then bees honey and ghee should be mixed with that powder and should be given to those patients. (WMSR 0087) Bees honey has been used as a medicine for various diseases according to a large number of manuscripts. Some manuscripts have recommended recipes for dysentery as well. According to those manuscripts black seeds, lotus yams, dills, and some other herbs can be used to cure dysentery (D.M.A.0005).

Infertility of women was a huge social problem in the past, especially in royal families and noble families. However, infertility of males was not considered and females were blamed for not being able to conceive. Today, treatments for increasing fertility are expensive. There are treatments to increase fertility of women in palm leaf manuscripts. According to one of those manuscripts, coconut milk, cardamom, cinnamon and some more herbal plants should be boiled thoroughly and should be given to those ladies with infertility and their fertility would be increased definitely (D.M.A.0005).

Constipation is also a common illness in Sri Lanka even today. There are some manuscripts recommending treatment of constipation. According to those manuscripts buds of some herbal plants should be cut into small pieces and slices of red anion should be boiled with the castor - oil (*ricinus communes*) and should be drunk. And at the same time the manuscript has emphasized that having used this medicine salt and kinds of sour should be avoided (D.P.V.0010).

Rabies is also a fatal disease. However, today we are lucky enough to cure the diseases before getting caught by the virus, by using anti - rabies vaccines. In the past it is clear that death is definite if somebody is bitten by an animal affected by the virus, specially by the dogs. But in same manuscript there are recipes to cure rabies. The manuscript mentions that a root of a special kind

of a medicinal herb, that had led to the western division, should be grinded and mixed with ghee and gingelly (sesame) oil and should be given to the patient. The manuscript confirms that the death of the patient is preventable.

The same manuscript recommends another recipe also for the same disease. According to that starch should be cooked using some herbal extracts mixed with water of young coconut and should be given to drink the patient. And the same extract should be mixed with lime juice and apply all the body of the patient including the head (WMSR.0114).

Rabies was such serious disease that Sri Lankan physicians had used to use some kind of black magic also to cure the disease except the medicine. They had drawn some charts called “yanthras.” and used some chanting’s called “mantras”. We have no evidence today to prove that use of these kinds of black magic can cure the disease (not only rabies), but in the societies where the natural sciences had not been developed these kinds of methods of treatment were highly accepted. By conducting such ritualistic treatments they may have tried to strengthen the morale of the patient.

Suggestions and Conclusion

As discussed above the palm leaf manuscripts in Sri Lanka possess very important indigenous knowledge. Research on medical related fields can be conduct based on this indigenous knowledge. It is clear that some diseases can be cured using the indigenous knowledge with low cost and simple procedures. For example, the attention of researchers should be drawn to the treatments mentioned in those manuscripts on snakebites, the mortality rates could be reduced considerably, because one of the major areas covered by those manuscripts is treatments for snakebites. And there are also some more treatments for day to day ailments, which need very little financial cost. Hence, researchers who are interested in the fields of indigenous knowledge of Sri Lanka are invited to carry out their research using the P.L.M.R.S Library of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Kelaniya Sri Lanka. And at the same time, the present study wishes to draw the attention of researchers, to the collection of the palm leaf manuscripts of British Museum, which were taken from Sri Lanka during British Occupation.

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