

# The Ancient History of Dermatology in India

by

**Prof. B. N. Banerjee, F. R. C. P.**

*Department of Dermatology, University College of Medicine,  
Calcutta University, Calcutta.*

The truth that "Dermatology, unlike beauty, is more than skin deep" as expounded long back by the celebrated English Scientist, Lord Adrian, is being tremendously realised consequent to rapid accumulation during the last three decades of explosively expanding knowledge of fundamental biologic significance of the skin. Dermatology, as the science of skin in its true, term, has now been established as one of the many specialities which emanated from internal medicine during the course of nineteenth century.

Hippocrates, the great architect of modern medicine (with all scientific insight, broad outlook, moral ethics and noble oaths very rightly) observed that the physician must know what his predecessors have known if he does not wish to deceive both himself and others. The exploration of the history of any subject is undoubtedly thrilling on one hand and thought provoking on the other.

An attempt would be made here to review very briefly the ancient history of dermatology in India from the period of the oldest human civilization on the basis of data as far as available from the works of various authors.

The practice of medicine in some form or other dates back to antiquity but the dermatology as a specialism did not shine through all the different historical era when the human civilization was claimed to have reached its peak excepting perhaps in the ancient Egypt. Nevertheless, the subject of dermatology as a part of medicine in general almost always received some attention from our predecessors even in the ages of either Vedic, Babylonian, Hebrew or Roman civilizations. However, the approach towards skin diseases and their interpretation in the then days were mostly clouded by religious prejudices and mystic beliefs as it was the case in relation to other diseases too. In fact, the practice of medicine as a whole remained too much under the influence of superstitions, intuitions, faiths and philosophical sophistries till the real foundations of the scientific study of medicine were laid by the Greeks under the leadership of the immortal Hippocrates (460-377 B.C.).

The oldest system of medicine which has survived through the ups and downs of centuries and is still alive with considerable dynamism is "Ayurveda," of which we have grounds to feel proud. It is in India that Ayurveda developed as long back as 6000-4000 B.C. or perhaps even earlier as might be suggested by the recent discoveries of Mohenjodaro. According to Basu (1889) the system of medicine as practised by ancient Hindus appears superior to that of Egyptians or Babylonians and not far behind the younger Grecian medicine in the extent and elaboration of its doctrines. The oldest and most celebrated treatise on Hindu medicine that are now available are the "Charaka Samhita" and "Susruta Samhita." Both these works referred to an older one, called "Ayurveda" which is supposed to be a part of "Atharvaveda," which in turn is believed to be originally composed by Brahma, the creator of universe even before human beings are created. The original "Ayurveda" is said to have consisted of thousand chapters but was later on abridged into eight chapters, namely (1) 'Shalya,' (2) 'Shalakyatantra' (ear-nose-throat and eyes), (3) 'Kaya Chikitsa' (general diseases like fever, cough, blood dyscrasias, dermatoses diabetes etc), (4) 'Bhutavidya' (evil spirit, demons, stans, yoga, mantra etc), (5) 'Koumarbhritya' (child care, diseases of the mammary glands, milk sterilisation etc), (6) 'Agada tantra' (Snake bite, insect bite etc), (7) 'Rasayan tantra' (increment of age, intelligency, memory etc) (8) 'Basikaran tantra' (sexual weaknesses, diseases of semen etc). This is known as 'Astanga Ayurveda. Although neither of these works is existent now-a-days, their contents are fully dealt with in the works of Charaka and Susruta, which along with their innumerable commentaries are easily available. It is difficult to ascertain the exact time of these but it appears that Charaka is the more ancient work, compiled about the time of Christ, while Susruta is of late origin and chiefly devoted to surgery. Charaka was said to have been prepared by Atreya (or Bharadwaj?), a disciple of Indra, while Susruta was instructed by Dhanwantari, also claimed to be a disciple of Indra. The art of medicine in ancient India was controlled by Brahmins as teachers and philosophers but the actual practice was performed by Vaidyas, a subcaste of such Brahmins. No specialisation was recognised among them. Alike other diseases skin ailments were also dealt with by physicians practising general medicine. Their conception of anatomy and physiology differed much from the present day knowledge. Skin was supposed to have consisted of seven layers and was looked upon as healthy when it was soft and hairy. The Hindu philosophy, based upon the conception of air, bile and phlegm was also utilised in understanding the skin diseases. Incriminating factors for certain diseases included many natural phenomena, such as exposure, climate, irregularity in food and exercise etc, while many others were thought to be caused by sins committed in the present or in a former life, such as one who killed a cow might suffer from lepra, a drunkard might suffer from a skin disease and incendiary by erysipelas etc.

Many diseases of the skin are mentioned by the ancient Sanskrit writers, and this in spite of the strict regulations that were given concerning personal hygiene and diet. Such regulations involved a daily bath and inunction with oil, especially about the head, ears and the soles of the feet. Their clothing had to be absolutely clean, as it was said that soiled clothes produced skin diseases. The nails, beared and hair were to be kept clean and cut every fifth day.

Of the many skin diseases described by the ancient Sanskrit writers, leprosy seemed to be of utmost interest. But the description of leprosy, as in every country, appeared to have included other harmless diseases of the skin. Three kinds of leprosy, black, white and red-manifesting in 18 forms were distinguished by them. Seven of those fell into the category of severe and eleven into mild forms (Maha-Kustha-7 and Kshudra-Kustha-11). The description of various forms shows that these included diseases like Ichthyosis, Dermatophytosis, Leucoderma, Psoriasis, Eczema, Seborrhoeic Dermatitis etc. In fact 'Kistha-Byadhi Samhara' included in its domain practically all the skin diseases known to them. Fish scaly skin and anhidrosis are mentioned in reference to Ichthyosis. Some part of the description undoubtedly points to leprosy, such as the hands and feet becoming stiff, insensible, ulcerating and dropping off, the nose falling in, the eyes becoming red, and the voice unnatural and hoarse. Leprosy patients were advised to bathe, to avoid wine and fatigue and to attend to diet, take a proper degree of exercise and wear clean clothes along with oral medicines made of turmeric powder. The seriousness of leprosy was too well recognised by them and it was included among the seven diseases of bad prognosis.

A brief reference is made of elephantiasis which was thought to be incurable after its persistence for over a year or when it involved larger areas. Small eruptions on the face at puberty, supposed to be caused by phlegm, wind and blood have been described which really points to Acne vulgaris of the modern times. Besides all these boils, carbuncles, abscesses, erysipelas, ulcers, alopecia, canities, urticaria, purpura, naevus, verruca, chickenpox, diseases of the nails etc. have been referred to. For dandruff, bleeding the individual was recommended by Susruta as a part of the treatment. Scrotal eczema has also been mentioned for which a paste consisting of iron sulphate, copper sulphate, sulphuret of arsenic and antimony as well as cow's bile made up in a paste with rice water has been suggested. Pediculosis (external worm infection) was also known to them for which a special preparation of sulphur and fluid mercury was advised externally. Other external remedies consisted of oils, plasters, poultices, baths, hot applications for inducing sweating, fumigation for ulcers and various skin lesions, and cautery. Use of heavy metals especially arsenic in cases of leprosy and many other diseases and mercury in divergent skin ailments deserves attention.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author gratefully acknowledges liberal consultation of the following works in compilation of the paper :

- Adams, F. : The Genuine works of Hippocrates, New York, II, 1886.
- Basu. J. H. : Outlines of the History of Medicine and Medical Profession, New York, 1889.
- Dutta, U.C. : The Materia Medica of the Hindus compiled from Sanskrit Medical Works, Calcutta, 1877.
- Garrison F. A. An Introduction to the History of Medicine, Philadelphia and London, 1913.
- Howard, F. : Dermatology of the Ancients, J. Am. M. Ass., LXV : 469,
- Sarkar. J. N. : 1915 Susruta Samhita, Calcutta, 1897,
- Wise, T. A, Review of the History of Medicine, London, 1887.
- Banerjee, B.N. : Cross section of Dermatology through the evolution  
and of history. Indian, J. Dermat., Vol. 13, No. 4,
- Dutta, A. K. : July, 1968.
-