

In the Siddha medicine system use of metals, minerals and chemical products is predominant. The use of metals started from the period of Vagbhata (6th Century AD). Alchemy actually has its origin in the Siddha system which was connected with the Tantrik culture, aimed at perfection of man not only at the spiritual level but also at the physical level. The use of human urine in medicine also started with the Tantrik culture and became popular in the medieval period.

The dates of most of alchemy texts are generally uncertain, but they belong possibly to a period between the 9th and the 18th Centuries AD, the period between the 10th and the 14th Centuries being perhaps the most flourishing one. Generally these texts come under the category of the rasasastra, signifying systematic treatments of the new knowledge and practices relating to the use of mercurial compounds and a host of other substances as medicine. The following are among the important rasasastra texts in Sanskrit: Rasahrdaya by Govinda Bhagavat, Rasaratnakara by Siddha Nagarjuna, Rasarnava (author unknown), Rasaratnasamuccya by Vagbhata, Rasaratnakara by Nityanatha Siddha, etc.

There are also some tantrik texts, which deal with alchemical ideas as part of their psycho-experimental-symbolic treatment for the tantrik goals and related practice. These texts are not only in Sanskrit language but also in other languages like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, etc. About two hundred works in Tamil on the Siddha medicine having alchemical ideas. Of special importance are Amudakalainjanam, Muppu, Muppuvaippu, Muppucunnam, Carakku, Guruseynir, Paccaivettusutram and Pannir-kandam by Agastya; Kadaikandam, Valalai-sutram and Nadukandam by Konganavar; Karagappa, Purva, Muppu-sutram and Dravakam by Nandisvar; Karpam and Valai-sutram by Bogar etc.

The name of Agastya and Bogar have been mentioned as the authors of alchemy works in Tamil language. The writings of Bogar contain a number of references to his contacts with China. Whether he was a Chinese who imparted alchemical knowledge to the Tamilians is a moot point.

The alchemical literature in Sanskrit is presented as a dialogue between Siva and Parvati in their different forms, of which perhaps the most significant are the forms of Bhairava and Bhairavi. Siva is also worshipped in the form of known as linga. In Tamil language lingam also means cinnabar (mercuric sulphide) also, and that cinnabar forms one of the constituents of a composition (astabandha) used during the installation of divine idols. Traditionally cinnabar is the source of divine energy and possesses the creative principles.

One of the Siddhars of Tamilnadu, Ramadevar, says in his work on alchemy (Cunnakandam) that he went to Mecca, assumed the name of Yakub and taught the Arabs the alchemical arts. It is significant that some of the purification processes and substances of alchemical significance are common to both Islamic and Indian alchemy.

Basics of Siddha Medicine

Generally the basic concepts of the Siddha medicine are almost similar to Ayurveda. The only difference appears to be that the Siddha medicine recognizes predominance of vatham, pitham and kapam in childhood, adulthood and old age respectively, whereas in Ayurveda it is totally reversed: kapam is dominant in childhood, vatham in old age and pitham in adults.

According to the Siddha medicine various psychological and physiological functions of the body are attributed to the combination of seven elements: first is saram (plasma) responsible for growth, development and nourishment; second is cheneer (blood) responsible for nourishing muscles, imparting colour and improving intellect; the third is ooun (muscle) responsible for shape of the body; fourth is kollzuppu (fatty tissue) responsible for oil balance and lubricating joints; fifth is enbu (bone) responsible for body structure and posture and movement; sixth is moolai (nerve) responsible for strength; and the last is sukila (semen) responsible for reproduction. Like in Ayurveda, in Siddha medicine also the physiological components of the human beings are classified as Vatha (air), Pitha (fire) and Kapha (earth and water).

Concept of Disease and Cause

When the normal equilibrium of three humors (vatha, pitha and kapha) is disturbed, disease is caused. The factors, which affect this equilibrium are environment, climatic conditions, diet, physical activities, and stress. Under normal conditions, the ratio between these three humors (vatha, pitha and kapha) is 4:2:1 respectively.

According to the Siddha medicine system diet and life style play a major role not only in health but also in curing diseases. This concept of the Siddha medicine is termed as pathya and apathya, which is essentially a list of do's and dont's.

Diagnosis

In diagnosis, examination of eight items is required which is commonly known as astasthan-pariksa. These are:

1. na (tongue): black in vatha, yellow or red in pitha, white in kapha, ulcerated in anaemia.
2. varna (colour): dark in vatha, yellow or red in pitha, pale in kapha;
3. svara (voice): normal in vatha, high pitched in pitha, low pitched in kapha, slurred in alcoholism.
4. kan (eyes): muddy conjunctiva, yellowish or red in pitha, pale in kapha.
5. sparisham (touch): dry in vatha, warm in pitha, chill in kapha, sweating in different parts of the body.
6. mala (stool): black stools indicate vatha, yellow pitha, pale in kapha, dark red in ulcer and shiny in terminal illness.
7. neer (urine): early morning urine is examined; straw colour indicates indigestion, reddish yellow excessive heat, rose in blood pressure, saffron colour in jaundice and looks like meat washed water in renal disease.
8. nadi (pulse): the confirmatory method recorded on the radial artery.