INDIAN SYSTEMS OF CURING DISEASES AND INTRODUCTION OF WESTERN MEDICINE
CHAPTER-IV

INDIAN SYSTEMS OF CURING DISEASES AND INTRODUCTION OF WESTERN MEDICINE

In the previous chapter we have discussed about the poor living conditions of the common people, and the prevalence of various diseases among them in Colonial India. The present chapter will explore the facts how the diseases were cured through traditional methods by the people. Two major themes will be discussed—religious and spiritual impact upon these systems and traditional mother care.

Generally there were two systems of medicines, the *Ilm-ul-Tib* (Unani)\(^1\) and the *Ayurved*.\(^2\) Their practitioners were known as *Vaid* and *Tabib* (*Hakim*). Their methods of treatment were to diagnose the disease by reading pulse or examining the urine of the patient. They had respectable position in

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1. It is a Greeko-Arab system of medicine. It is based on four humor theory of Hippocrates as *blood* – Phlegm, *yellow bile*, *back bile*, and the diagnosis is carried out in the following manners.
   (i) Temperature is measured by pulse.
   (ii) Pulse examination and Urine inspection.
   (iii) Observation & percussion are used to diagnose disease.
   (iv) Treatment is done by natural herbs, animal mineral and marine drugs.

2. It is classical ancient system of medicine crystallized and systematically organized into a large corpus of writing. In Sanskrit – *Ayurved* means ‘Knowledge of long life or longevity’. It is based on the theory of Tridosha – *Vatta* (motion) *Pitta* (energy) *Kapha* (Inertia) and diagnosis is carried out in the following manners.
   (i) Pulse, Urine, Tongue examination & examination of tactile stimulation.
   (ii) Treatment is done by medicines prepared by local and natural herbs.
the society, who followed the medical traditions created by Ibn Sina (Avicenna) Razes, Charak and Sushruta.

The village Vaidis and Hakims got their own herbal medicines which they prepared and dispensed themselves. The Vaidis and Hakims used many vegetable parts as drugs including roots, stalk, Pith, leaves, flowers, thorns, juice, milk, oil, etc. These products were collected from forests with great care. Camphor, rhubarb, musk, tamarind, nutmeg, cloves and sandal wood were also used. Many admired and good physicians had their own botanical gardens adjoining their houses.

Apart from vegetable products many earthly products were also used as drugs. The medicines were prepared with these products by different methods and were prescribed in different forms. They would also give instructions about diets as use of honey, milk, gur and radish etc, and would

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4 Abu Ali Al Asayn Ibn Abdullah, born in 980 at Bukhara (Present Uzbekistan), is regarded as the father of Modern Medicine. His work on Medicine is compiled as ‘Al Canun’.
5 Mohd. Ibn Zakaria al Razi, was born in 865 in Persia. His work on Medicine is compiled as ‘Al-Havi’.
6 He was born in 300 BC an eminent Physiologist, Etiologist and Embiologist. His work on Medicine is compiled as ‘Charak Samhita’.
7 He was born in 800 BC and is regarded as father of Surgery. His work on Medicine is compiled as ‘Sushruth Samhita’.
9 Vaidis used to prescribe a drug called Silajit which contained tin, led, copper, gold and iron.
10 These medicines included- Churans (powders), Svarasa, (Juice), Kalka (paste) Kwatha (decoction) Vatika (pills), Ghritas (Medicated oils).
also suggest not taking two foods of opposite effects together.\textsuperscript{11} Inhalations and heat applications were also common in the treatment done by Vaids and Hakims.

In the district of Bihar and Patna, F. Buchanan finds about seven hundred families of Brahmans and sixty Mohammadans who possessed some medical knowledge.\textsuperscript{12} Sometimes these Vaids were employed by the Rajas and other wealthy Zamindars.\textsuperscript{13}

In the Rajasthan region practice of medicine was basically in the hands of four classes of medical men. (1) Vaids (2) Hakims (3) Attars or Pansaries who were prescribing chemists (4) Ascetics who claimed to have power over diseases controlled by evil spirits.\textsuperscript{14}

There were traditional healers also who were usually grocers, herbalists, priests’ exorcists, makers of charm-amulets, boil and wound experts, barber surgeons village dais and village magician who practiced Jhar – phoonk. There were Jarrahas also who used to heal wounds but medically there treatment was bad.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{11} Vaids suggested that- Milk should not be taken after eating vegetable and fish. Honey, Ghee, fat, oils should not be mixed all together.
\textsuperscript{12} F. Buchannan, \textit{An Account of the Districts of Bihar and Patna} Vol.-I, 1811-12, p.303.
\textsuperscript{13} Buttler Donald, \textit{Topography and Statistics of Southern Districts of Awadh}, 1839, \textit{op.cit.}, p.175.
\textsuperscript{14} Dhoundiyal B.N., (compiled) \textit{Gazetteer of India, Rajasthan, (Ajmer)}, Director, Jaipur, March 1966, p.629.
\textsuperscript{15} Buttler Donald, \textit{Topography and Statistics of Southern Districts of Awadh}, 1839, \textit{op.cit.}, p.175.
Francis Buchanan, during his surveys in the Eastern region finds about 150 Jarrahas or Surgeon barbers who used to cup bleed and treat sores.¹⁶

The Folk Medicine ¹⁷ practiced by the tribal people of Assam, Bengal and Bihar, Orrisa, Madras, Kerala, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Andhra and Uttar Pradesh was completely rational.

The medicine men would ask the patient about his dreams, manners of living and about any sudden change. He further used to inquire about the different spirits in the laboratory procedures by using winnowing fans, rice, leaves, oil lamps and seeds etc. and would prescribe for different defensive amulets to wear.¹⁸ The poor people especially, tribal people assigned the disease to the supernatural cause as – Wrath of goddesses, evil spirits, sorcery¹⁹ (Soul loss) witchcraft etc.

The poor people specially the tribal people believed that different goddesses caused different illnesses and so different offerings or sacrifices wee offered to them.


¹⁷ Folk Medicine- It is being practiced in the country since the Atharvavedic period. It has its own concepts about causation of disease: wrath of goals, evil spirits, magic witch craft etc. It has its own diagnostic tools and techniques which lean heavily on deviation. The treatment is based on – removal of the causative factor through the propitiation of goods, exorcism, counter magic use of charms and amulets and of course of some herbal preparations.


¹⁹ People feared the magic of the enemy as much as they feared the evil spirits. An enemy might be a neighbour or a relative, who would obtain something of a person’s body as nail hair, excrements, clothes, food etc. and would do some Jhar-phook.
1. *Sitala* caused small pox; to her were offered cloves, bitternuts, coconuts & *Hom* (fire sacrifices).

2. *Durga* caused cholera; to her were offered a red flag and an iron tripod alongwith *hom*. At some place goats were also sacrificed.

3. *Jawala* caused fever; to her was offered *hom*.

4. *Purva* caused din sanity; to her was offered *hom*.

5. *Parwati* caused severe headache; to her was offered *hom*.²⁰

Generally the village healers as magicians, snake bite curers and others like thorn pullers boil healers and bone setters did not depend on their earnings through healing to run their households. They had their own vocations, upon which they were depended. It is found that generally they were farmers and cultivators.²¹ Sometimes they were nomads also.

All these systems including house hold remedies were quite prevalent in the villages of India. The Report of Health Survey and Development Committee say:-

‘These systems however exercised not merely over the illiterate masses but over considerable sections of the intelligentsia. We have also to recognize that treatment by the practitioners of these systems was said to be cheap and it was claimed that the empirical knowledge that had been accumulated over centuries has resulted in a fund of experience of the properties and

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empirical use of minerals herbs and plants, which is of some value.\(^\text{22}\)

Apart from such rational measures, the village healers would use some herbs and animal products for the treatments of the diseases caused by natural factors. We may call it tribal or magico-religious medicine as tribal people have gathered such knowledge from the ancient treatises. O.P. Jaggi in his work ‘Folk Medicine in India’ has given detailed information about the use of the herbs and other substances for the treatment of the diseases by the tribal people.\(^\text{23}\) He has also discussed in detail about the diagnosis, causation and treatment of the diseases.

The ignorant natives would class all kinds of inflammatory disease under ‘fever’. The result was attack of pneumonia with the first chills of winter which spread among a community, who was ignorant of most elementary principles of hygiene. Because they were poorly fed insufficiently clothed, destitute of Medical aid or appliances for nursing the sick they often attended with fatal results.\(^\text{24}\)

When cholera would break out among the Tharu tribes of Utter Pradesh, the medicine man extracted juice of onion and mixed it with liquor to


\(^{24}\) Crooke W., ‘The North-Western Provinces of India: Their History, Ethnology, and Administration,’ London, 1897, p.149.
give the patient three times a day. However in South Indian villages a mixture of butter, milk and camphor was given to the patient. But as the rapid industrialization occurred the nature of the spread of cholera changed and it broke out in a huge epidemic form in many parts of the country.

The household remedies of the poor could not facilitate them when the situation became chronic. Therefore the records show the heavy death toll in the cholera affected regions. Unawareness towards pure water supply and improper sanitation caused serious inconvenience to them.

It is quite interesting to note that in the states of Northern India, Opium was used for curing malaria. Royal commission on opium, inquired about its use. The physicians of western medicine suggested that due to the presence of narcotine, opium could be used to treat malaria. In South India Decoction of the leaves of holy basil, (Justeia adhatoda) margossa tree (Cocculus Cordifolius) were used by the native villagers, in the treatment of malaria.

Sometimes seven bedbugs, seven battle leaves, seven peppers and seven cloves were pounded together and were given to the patient for curing

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25 Ibid., p.136.
26 Martin M. M., describes about many places in Eastern Region where Choleras were frequent but never occurred in epidemic form. See. Martin M.M., History and antiquities, Topography and statistics of Eastern India, Vol.-V op.cit, P.484.
malaria. Among the tribal people it was believed that malaria was caused by evil spirits. But often Malaria was not recorded separately from other fevers. In 19\textsuperscript{th} century the extensive irrigation canal construction and labor migration gave opportunities for mosquito to breed the rural environment subjected to malaria fever frequently in some particular areas. For smallpox Devi Sitala was held responsible, and she was worshiped by the people of Eastern India. Even today people worship Mata Sitala.

Smallpox violation and inoculation had been a religious ritual for many people. It had its own practitioners and Tikadars in eastern India.\textsuperscript{29} Who would come from Banaras, Brindaban and Allahabad, but many other castes were also involved as Malies and Sinduries in Northern India and Napits in Dacaa.

Certain classes in India especially cow herders, shepherds, and many others used to collect and preserve the dry scabs of the pustules. They would place a little of it on the fore arm, and puncture the skin with the needle. As a result of this inoculation these classes used to create immunity from smallpox.\textsuperscript{30}

However, Hakims had the knowledge of recognizing smallpox by certain signs, and they would prescribe medicine cloves, which they gave to

\textsuperscript{29} According to Buchanan in the districts of Bihar and Patna these people were called Got Pachcha or Pachaniya. See F. Buchanan, \textit{An Account of the Districts of Bihar and Patna 1811-1812}, Vol.-I, \textit{op.cit}, p.304.

the patients with gold dust. There were numerous diseases which do not have any official record about their effectiveness and mortality, but as they were every time prevalent among the poor, so the traditional treatment only had the remedy for them. As for the treatment of *Syphilis* the fruit of *Bel* (*Aeglemar melos*) bark of *Dudhia* (*Halarrhena antidyseentrica*) seeds of black pepper, were dried, grind and mixed together by the tribes of *Baigas* (Madhya Pradesh)\(^{31}\)

They had a belief also that *Dispiri mata* give Syphilis and she was offered ears of buffalo\(^{32}\) The Vaidyas in Rajasthan generally treated syphilis with *mercury perchloride*.\(^{33}\)

The disease *gonorrhoea* was very common among the tribal people. It was prevalent in almost all around India. They believed that it was caused by getting high fever after going into the sun. For its treatment, they used to grind the Bark of dudhia and root of khamer (*ginelina arboria*) and give it with milk.\(^{34}\)

The intermittent and enteric fevers were treated in various manners, at different places *opium* was widely used by the common people in Northern western areas of Rajasthan. The *Balahis* simply drank plenty of water and covered themselves with heavy bed sheets after the intensive perspiration the

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\(^{31}\) Roots of Indravan (*Coccinia Indica*) were cut up and made into pills with *gur*.


\(^{33}\) Dhoundival B.N., *Gazetteer of India Rajasthan* (Ajmer) op.cit, p.628.

\(^{34}\) Roots of Bhawarsal (*Mymeno diction excel sum*) ripe fruits of dhan-baker (*cassia-fistula*) were crushed together and mixed with water by the Baigas.
fever broke down. In the South India regions the paste of the leaves of Justesia adhatoda (Acacia farnesiana) was willed on the forehead of the patient.\textsuperscript{35}

Unlike opium, \textit{Indigo} also served the purpose for the treatment of general fever. It was applied with the mixture of curd on the patient’s forehead to lower the temperature. The chief remedies employed in the cases of fevers in the eastern regions were preparations of the \textit{Raj gujar, parhi chit} and \textit{Karaiya plants}, bruised with black pepper.\textsuperscript{36}

For \textit{Dysentery} and \textit{Diarrhea}, there were several preventive measures which were based on house hold items. The mixture of cardamom and clarified butter was given to the patient. Sometimes warm cooked \textit{Khichri} with butter was given to them. At some places ripe banana, nutmeg and clarified butter was mixed together to give to the patient. Hakims of North Western provinces prescribed \textit{bel} fruit for \textit{dysentery} and \textit{diarrhea}.\textsuperscript{37}

The residency surgeons stationed at Indore found during his practice that \textit{opium} was used for using chronic dysentery and diarrheas. In Malwa the people used to say that they cannot digest milk unless opium is taken. \textit{Hakims} and \textit{Voids} used to prescribe some herbal medicines to the patients.

\textsuperscript{35} The decoction of black cumin was given by the medicine man to the patient.
\textsuperscript{36} Butler Donald, \textit{Topography and Statistics of Southern Districts of Oudh 1839, op.cit}, p.170.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Statistical, Descriptive and Historical Account of the North Western Provinces of India}, Vol.-IV, part-I, Agra Division, Government of India, 1876.
The Traditional method of treating leprosy is conserved in palm-leaf manuscripts that were preserved by the descendants of the ruling families. These palm-leaf manuscripts are found in Orrisa and in many other regions in which the usefulness of Bhramaramari plant for the treatment of leprosy is mentioned. The manuscripts list the various spices, leaves and portions of plant which were to be dried and converted into paste. The patients were prescribed to take it twice a day. The patient was also asked to avoid non-vegetarian food, milk and sour things. They were also asked to be isolated indoors.38

**Midwifery and Child Care:**

It is significant to note that child births were delivered by Local or traditional midwives or birth attendants, who were totally untrained. They had been called dais. Various traditional techniques were used by them as using snuff to make her (Pregnant woman) sneeze, giving her oil to drink, and opening drawers to hasten labour. For delivery, she would use the cutting tools including bamboo shell, broken glass, knife, scissors which were often not medicinally sterilized. She would clear the child throat and nose with her finger which often created infections.

For the dressing of cords she would use substances like salt talcum, spider webs and other herbs and umbilical cord was usually tied with thread or plant fiber. All the process was treacherous and the mother was not treated nicely by the family

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members. However Hakims and Vaids used to prescribe some preventive measures and would ask to lay special stress on personal cleanliness.

In Unani Tibb and also in Ayurved, a pregnant woman was advised to maintain cleanliness, and to take bath with medicated water and after the onset of the labor pains, the pregnant woman was to be given an oil massage, hot soup with ghee and was to made to rest on soft bed. The diet especially from the first to the ninth month of pregnancy, with emphasis on consuming milk; meat soup of certain animals, ghee medicated with goksura and other drugs etc was prescribed. But the Hakims and Vaids did not train midwives and people did not use to bring their patients to their dispensaries as women were not allowed to discuss their personal matters with male members.

The Unani Tibb and Ayurved both prescribed many preventive measures for a new born child also. The eyes of newborn child were wiped with cotton applied with lemon juice, oil, onion or boric acid. In the first three days child was given sweet water or water with anise or some herbal extracts. To increase intellect immunity & longevity of the newborn, the Vaids would prescribe powered gold in a minute quantity with the paste of some drugs. Honey and ghee followed by breast milk was given to the child. Daily bath was also prescribed.

**Seasonal Diseases (Cough & Cold):**

During the changing weathers the cough and cold had been common numerous house hold remedies were used by the common people. Opium proved to be a boon for the people of Rajputana region. It was largely used in...
bowel troubles of all kinds, asthama and chronic cough and cold. And therefore the practice of giving opium to the infants in very small quantities, usually till they were three to five years old was quite wide spread.\textsuperscript{39}

The renowned Vaids used small quantities of \textit{Dhatoora} in the treatment of cough.\textsuperscript{40} And the Hakims used honey and pepper for the preparation of medicine. There were several purposes of the wild herbs and plants which the poor used to collect from the forest but after the forests were reserved under the forest Act.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
\textbf{Plant name} & \textbf{Uses} \\
\hline
\textit{Chir} & Plant resin is applied locally on the pimples \\
\textit{Sugarcane} & Its juice for jaundice patients \\
\textit{Apricot Khubani} & Fruits given to enemic patients \\
\textit{Bichu Buti} & Leaves are used to cure goiter vegetable is eaten to treat cough and cold. \\
\textit{Haldi} & Haldi mixed with milk given to cure backache. \\
\textit{Adrak (Zingier)} & Gastrics and toothache \\
\textit{Muli (raddish)} & Roots used to cure jaundice piles & liver complaints \\
\textit{Bhong (Chairs)} & Severe stomach ache \\
\textit{Mint} & Liver disorder \\
\textit{Tulsi} & Leaf decoction for fever whooping cough & cold \\
\textit{Methi} & Stomachache, gastric problem \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Indigenous House Hold Remedies of Forest Inhabitants: (sub Himalayan region)\textsuperscript{41}}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{39} Amar Farooqui, ‘Opium as a household remedy in 19\textsuperscript{th} Century Western India?’ in Harrison Mark, \textit{Social History of Health and Medicine in Colonial India}, pub. by Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2009, p.232.
\textsuperscript{40} Gazetteer of India, Rajasthan (Ajmer), \textit{op.cit.}, p.628
Table – 4.2: House Hold Remedies Prescribed by Traditional Practicioners in Rural India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diseases</th>
<th>House hold remedies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abdominal</td>
<td>Chewing battle leaves with coriander seeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Application of caster oil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diarrhoea</td>
<td>Bark paste of arboreactree Banana flower decoction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dysentry</td>
<td>Ashyanthers aspera leaf decoction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic coleb</td>
<td>Rovt paste of Emhilia ribes with lemon juice &amp; butter milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boils</td>
<td>Tender papaya fruit paste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cough</td>
<td>Boilding rice water with molasses honey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headache</td>
<td>Forrentation with bettle leaf to fore head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wounds &amp; cuts</td>
<td>Honey and paste of cassia Tora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insect bites</td>
<td>Turmeric powder with leaf pastes of lawsonia imemisa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

42 V.V. Subbarayappa (Editor) History of Sciences, Philosophy and culture in Indian Civilization – Vol.-IV – Part-2 ‘Medicine and Life Sciences in India’ – p.617.
### Table-4.3- Treatment of Diseases in South Indian Rural Regions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diseases</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Typhoid</strong></td>
<td>Decoction of betel leaves, nuts, garlic, pepper and cloves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Headache</strong></td>
<td>Application of Soda and lime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dysentery and Diahoreoha</strong></td>
<td>Mixture of ripe banana, nutmeg and clarified butter. Mixture of curbs &amp; ripe lime to take warm cooked rice with butter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fever</strong></td>
<td>Decoction of black cumin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wounds snakebite</strong></td>
<td>Mixture of powder &amp; Vaseline soak the leaves of margosa, grown in the vicinity of the temple in water and drink until vomiting starts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Measles</strong></td>
<td>Smear the patient with red earth and expose to the hot sun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Smallpox</strong></td>
<td>Propitiate the goddess Dyamavva (Devi) and offer a gift of oil and ghee (clarified butter) for 9 or 11 days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cholera</strong></td>
<td>Community worship of the goddess Dyamavva. Before sunrise go three times round the Calotropis gigantia and worship the tree on behalf of the patient. Silently approach a tree used by someone for committing suicide and take its bark to make a magical string to be worn by the patient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leprosy</strong></td>
<td>Worship the snake Get bitten by a cobra. Worship the sun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Malaria</strong></td>
<td>Decoction of the leaves of holy basil, Justeia adhatoda, margossa tree, Cocculus cordifolius</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Medicine and treatment of diseases was associated with culture and beliefs that was particularly amenable as these processes not only involved the concepts and terms indigenous to the regions but the treatment also

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suited to them. The poor people were deprived of these priceless and easily available plants and so the poor people could not cope up with the drastic situations during famines. Even today in many rural tribal regions household remedies are popular because they are easily and every time available to them.

With the arrival of the Britishers, there opened a new chapter of medical treatment that may be termed as tropical medicine at the end of 18\textsuperscript{th} century and thus we see a large amount of work submitted by the European travelers who were basically surgeons and physicians.

They studied the materia medica of the country and the changing nature of the disease in the wake of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. The nature of Tropical climates causation of diseases and their treatment was studied by renowned physicians as James Johnson, William Jones, John Fleming, D. Butler etc. William Jones towards of the end of 18\textsuperscript{th} Century wrote an article on the Botanical aspects of Indian medicine. Herman Bass in his book Outline of the History of Medicine and Medical Profession 1889, sums up Indian medicine by saying $^{44}$—

‘We must assign to it at all events a superiority over the Egyptians and Jewish; Indian Medical Culture was not far behind Greek medicine, both in the extent of its doctrines

and in its internal elaboration, furnished us only a very superficial comparison’.

Europeans borrowed from some indigenous medical practices as they found epistemological similarities between Indian and Western medical system. Western medicine, Ayurvedic or Unani system had much epistemological similarities between Indian and western medical system. Regarding basic notions of disease the three systems are same.

However all the medical researchers were done on the diseases that appeared in an epidemic form and proved dangerous to the economy of British India. So far as the number of other diseases is concerned they were not highlighted as they posed no threat to the health or commercial interests of the European community. Yet in long run the toll they took of human lives was probably and considerably greater. It is therefore the indigenous community had to go to the local practitioners for the treatment of disease.

However, the said Tropical Medicine was introduced in India in order to take care of the health of the Europeans and the British army, so the hospitals, dispensaries and clinics were confined to the areas where Europeans were settled. It was only in the later half of the nineteenth century, when British Government took interest in some public works.

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45 Fever Kala-azar, malaria and cholera were affecting the poor labor class and cultivators and so the plantation agriculture and factory work was being affected.