Chapter - 6

*Herbs and Medicinal Plants*
HERBS AND MEDICINAL PLANTS

India has always been a land of natural plantation. The topography or the geographical condition and its climatic changes have been very favourable for the growth of the plants and trees which are great sources of herbs and medicines. On the other hand the Indian soil, water resources, rain and other natural occurrences provided much stronger environment for the growth of natural plants in India. A considerable number of plants species have been identified and many of these were used in the form of medicine by the Indian people right from ancient times onwards.

This is a known fact that during the time of Mughals the herbs and plants were used in the form of medicine to cure various diseases. We have many references which prove that the herbs and plants were used much before the Mughal rule in India. The plants of medicinal value were also described in Atharvaveda, while tradition of two medicinal works namely susruta and charak samhita appeared in Arabic by the ninth century.¹ Similarly during Delhi Sultanate Firoz Shah Tughluq is said to have had a comprehensive work on medicine, the Tibb-i-Firozshahi which was compiled under his personal supervision. He also established a hospital (daru 'sh shifa'), where the common people were treated. Firoz, in fact, adapted quite a moderate approach by gathering mentally ill patients and having them detained in the hospital for treatment. Barni mentions Ayurvedic practitioners at Delhi in early fourteenth century, such as “Mah Chandra, the physician” and “Magoris Brahmans, and

¹ B. V. Subbarayappa, ‘Medicine and Life Sciences in India’, History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization, PHISPC, Vol. IV, Part II, p. 608
Jayatis (Jains) Sultan Mahmud Khilji also built a hospital at Mandu (Malwa) in 1442-43.²

Similarly during the Mughal period Ayurvedic medicines had long been recognized as a parallel and effective system. It seems that there was a tendency to regard European medicine too in similar light. Danishmand Khan, the scholarly noble of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb, employed Francois Bernier at Delhi (1659-66), and the latter explained to him at length Harvey’s discovery of the circulation of blood, and Jean Racquet’s discovery of the conversion of chyle into blood.

In the same way, the 16th and 17th centuries in India appear to be a period of interactions between the Indian and European systems of medicine. It was the period when a number of European ‘physicians’ visited India. An example can be given of Francois Bernier, Niccolao Manucci, Garcia da O’rta, John Ovington, John Fryer, Hemilton and Linschoten who not only wrote extensively on medical practices of India but also revealed the knowledge which was known and practiced by them. They also wrote about the climate and conditions of people during the period of their stay. It should, however, not be forgotten that many of these ‘European physicians’ who came to India were self-taught and learned and not exactly ‘men of medicine’.³ A case in point can be Niccolao Manucci, who himself admitted his limited knowledge of the medical science. They came to India attracted by the new opportunities which India offered. However these European ‘physicians’ have left behind their


comments which help us to get a better understanding of the medical knowledge as it was known and practiced in India and they gave full information about the herbs and medicinal plants which they had seen, during their stay in India, and their uses for the cure of various diseases.

Niccolao Manucci was convinced that the tabibs had no knowledge of medicine and were definitely not in position to cure the stone. Paralysis, Apoplexy (Epilepsy), Dropsy, Anemia, Malignant fevers or other difficult complaints and Indian physicians ‘cured hot complaints with cooling remedies’.4

Jan Hugghen van Linschoten, the Dutch traveler of sixteenth century, sailed from Spain to Goa and 1596, the account which he left in his, the Itineratio of Voyage of Jan Hugghen Van Linschoten to east of Portuguese Indies. He speaks very favourably of the Indian physicians and says they made no distinction in treating the Indian and Europeans alike.5 According to him the Portuguese hospital (the kings hospital) at Goa was reserved for the portguese while the “Indians have a hospital by themselves”.6

Linschoten mentions various diseases like fever, cholera, dysentery etc. and says that Garcia de orta was the first European who described the disease i.e. cholera in 1563.7 This disease was quite common and Portuguese had no remedies for it, while the Indian physicians were able to cure it by herbs,

7. Ibid., p. 237.
sunders, other ointments. The bloody “flixe” (dysentery) was common and very dangerous. Mentioning cholera he writes:

In the field of medicine we have much information contained in our sources. Linschoten in his survey has identified many plants and disease, and stones also. He mentions about Indian Figge (in Sanskrit call it ‘Keli’) which he calls ‘Paradise apple’. The Indian physicians, he says, do use this fruit as medicine for fever and other diseases. Pepper a medicinal plant is good for a cold maw, the Nucken (Freakishness), the pain in the liver, and the dropsy. Cinnamon was used for the colic and other diseases proceeding of cold, it was also a good cure for foul smelling. The water and oil of cinnamon on the other hand, he says, was helpful for all the inward parts as head, heart, maw and liver. Ginger according to Linschoten is useful to a man to go easily to the stool and good against humurs ‘that darkens the eyes’ and is used in many medicines. Clove he mentions strengthens the liver, the maw, the heart and procure evacuation of the urine. Nutmeg, on the other hand sharpens the memory, warms and strengths the maw and drive down urine, stops the diarrhea and is good against all common colds. Maccis is especially good for a cold and weak maw, it also procures digestion of the meat. Cardamom is very good against a foul smelling and evil humors. It is supposed to be eaten with betel, to purge the head and maw of slime. Amer cured the sick and was

8. Ibid., pp. 235-36.
9. Ibid., p. 236.
10. Ibid., pp. 235-236.
12. Ibid., p. 75.
13. Ibid., pp. 76-78.
15. Ibid., pp. 83-84.
16. Ibid., p. 86.
17. Ibid., p. 86 in Hindi called ‘Javatri’.
especially good for recuperating mothers’ old men and for every cold complication.\textsuperscript{18} Alimi scar (Muske) cleaned the white spots of the eyes: it comforted the head and the cold arches.\textsuperscript{19} Benion because of the sweet smell comforted the heart, the head and the brain.\textsuperscript{20} Mirre was used in medicines for cold coughs; ‘laskes and bloody flixes’.\textsuperscript{21} Mannan eased and moistened the harshness of the throat, the breasts and stomach.\textsuperscript{22} Sanders were of three sorts, i.e. white, yellow, and red. The white and yellow were used against the hot pains in the head: they were good against hot fever and also used to strengthening the heart, therefore used as a cardiac medicine.\textsuperscript{23} Snake wood found mostly in the island of Ceylon was specially used against the sting of the snake. It was also used to kill rats and mice.\textsuperscript{24} Lignum aloes, which in India was called Calamba, is good for stinking breath and is used to strengthen the liver.\textsuperscript{25} He also mentions the Root China which was used in India to cure the poxes. The poxes were a common disease in India. The root China called Guaiacum in India was according to Linschoten not only good for piles and pocks but also for cramps and all cold diseases. It resisted evil humours and strengthened the liver. Its heated water was used for ‘dropsy, filthie, ulcer, scurfes, and leprie’.\textsuperscript{26} Camphor is also mentioned by him as a medicine.\textsuperscript{27} Linschoten further says that tamarinio grows in most parts of India and Indians call it ‘ambilii’. The physicians use it in purgation and medicines compounded

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., pp. 86-88.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 94, Amber in Arabic called Ambar and in Latin ‘Ambarium’.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 95.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., pp. 96-97.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., pp. 100, ‘Mirve’ in Hindi called ‘Loban’.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 101.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid., pp. 102-103.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p. 104.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., pp. 105-107.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid., pp. 107-112.
\end{itemize}
with other herbs. The Turks and Egyptians also used it for hot diseases and fevers. Microbalances according to him were also found in many places of India. They purge the stomach from choler and are good against tertian and hot burning fever.

Aloe, by the Arabians called Sebar, by the Decaners Area, by the Camarijns cate, comer, and by the Portingales Azeure, is made of the Tuyce of an Herb, when it is dried, the Herb is called by the Portingales Herba baboza, that is Quil herb. Aloe pure the stomach from choler, and tough fleagme, specially (a water and weak stomach), it took away all stopping and consume the rawe moistures, preserving from foulenesse: besides this, it strengthen the stomach, it is made stronger by adding to it cinnamon, Mace, or Nutmeg. Aloe is good specially against Kooren and rawness, and for such persons as have their stomach full of raw moisture, it is also used outwardly against sores (that break forth of the body) and for the eyes.

The fruit called Anacardi, is in many place of India, as in cananor, Calicut, and the Deccan, and indiverse other places. The Arabians call it Balador, the Indians Bibo, and the Portugale Faua de Malacca, that in Beans of Malacca, because it is like a beans, but somewhat greater than the beans of these countries, they are used in India with milk, against a short breath, for the wormes and for many other things.

This fruits hath her name from the heart, because in colour and likenesse, it resembles the heart, specially being dry. The same operation that is

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28. Ibid., pp. 117-118.
29. Ibid., pp. 119-122.
30. Ibid., pp. 123-125.
31. Ibid., p. 126.
32. Ibid., p. 127.
in prepared Mirobalans, is also in them, they heat and drie, they strengthen are
memory, the brains and sinews, sharpen the wits and are good against cold
infections of the head.\textsuperscript{33}

The calamo Aromatico called in Gusurate viz. in Deccan vache, in
Malabar vasabu, in Malacca Daringoo, in Persia Heger, in Cuncan (which is
the country of Goa and there abouts Northwards) vaycan, and in many places
of India, as in Goa, the country of Gusurate and Balaghat, where it is sowed
and so growth, it hath so smell at all, until it be gathered. The women use it
much in India, for the mother, also for pain in the sinews, it is also much used
for horses, for when it is cold weather, they give it horses in the morning to eat,
being beaten and mixed with garlic cumin seeds, salt, sugar and butter. The
receipt they call Arata, which is always used in India, for horses, wherewith (as
they says) they do them great good.\textsuperscript{34}

Costus which the Arabians call cost or cast, the Gusurates of Cambaia,
and they of Malacca Pucho, whether it is much brought and also into China and
other places. I have many kinds of costus, the Indian, described by Garcius
with all her tokens. The Arabian and Syrian with her right mark, and also an
other sort, much like ginger. The Indian costus is the best of them all, it health,
drive down the urine and the stone. It is good against the byting of snakes, pain
the breast, and the worms.\textsuperscript{35}

Cubebeus so called by the Arabians, and also Quabes, by all the other
Indians cubachini, or Cubachini, Cubebeus is a fruit like pepper, about the same

\begin{footnotes}
33. Ibid., p. 127.
34. Ibid., pp. 127-28.
35. Ibid., p. 128.
\end{footnotes}
bigness, the best are such as are close, full, heavy and sharp, although less than Pepper, somewhat bitter and smell well, in a manner sweet. They warme and comfort the stomock, which is weak by reason of superfluous or windie matter, they cleanse the breast from tough fleagme, they strengthen the taile, breake winde, and help cold diseases of the mother, being chawed, with masticke, they cleanse, the brains of fleagm and strengthen them.36

The leaves called Folium Indum, which the Indians call Tamalapatra, are like orange leaves, but somewhat sharper and of a dark green colour. They have a sweet smell, almost like cloves. This is good to provoke urine and against a stinking breath: also they lay them between their apparel, cloths and linen, for it keep them from worms, and say it serve in all things as spiconardi doth.37 Similar information is provided to us by the ‘Indian’ physicians. Hakim Kamala Khan in his Risalardar Khwasut-adwiyas-i-hindiyan 18th century, for example he mentioned some Indian herbs and mendicaments.38 Maulvi Hakim Yahya Nudrat in his treaties Manazirul Abdul of 19th century described the properties and peculiarities of various medicinal herbs and flowers.39 Spices like cumin, cinnamon, pepper etc. were valued for their warming qualities while tea and coffee were considered aids to digestion such medicines were in common use in Europe.40

Information is also available on ‘medicinal stones’. Linschoten for example describes precious stone and their medicinal use. Alakecca is called as blood stone

36. Ibid., p. 129.
37. Ibid., 130
38. Ibid., pp. 131-32.
40. Ibid., p. 135.
because is quickly stanched blood. Milk stone was good for lactating women. Emerald and lubie stones were used in medicine and drugs.\textsuperscript{41} Some Indian medicines were thought to have almost magical properties. The Fabled Bezoar (snake, stone), was used for curing snake bites.\textsuperscript{42} Do orta says that a concoction of the benzoar ground with treade cured the Portuguese Bishop of cholera Orta believed that the stone had a Persian origin, the name being derived from Persian \textit{pad-zahar}, or antidote to poison.\textsuperscript{43} Bezoar was also mentioned later by European travelers like Thevenot. Inayat Khan gives an account of the Bazoar stone's successful employment against a pestilence which swept the Emperor's court in 1654.\textsuperscript{44} Tavernier in his account also mentioned Bazoar stone but did not describe its medicinal properties probably as he was not well versed in anatomy.\textsuperscript{45} The stone was also reputed to be a specific remedy for fever, plague, skin diseases, and a host of other acute and chronic ailments.\textsuperscript{46}

Thus, we see these were the herbs and medicinal plants which were commonly used in India. The European travelers discussed in detail about these plants and properties and their uses for medical purposes. While discussing the India's herbs and medicines especially of the Mughal period, we come to notice that interaction between Indians and Europeans played a very significant role in this field.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{42} Linschoten, vol. II, op.cit., p. 141.
\bibitem{43} Cf. Patti & Harrison, op.cit., p. 47.
\bibitem{45} J.B.Tavernier, \textit{Travels in India}, Tr. V. Ball and ed. William Crooke, Vol. II, pp. 115
\bibitem{46} Patti & Harrison, op. cit., p. 47
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