

THE MEDICO HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF VITILIGO (*Świtra*)

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ABSTRACT

The history of *Świtra* is as old as the human civilization. The earliest medical literature has given the description of *Świtra* in *ṛgavēda* and *Atharvavēda*. *Świtra* is also narrated in *Mahābhārat* and in *Vinayapīṭika*. A Roman physician known as Celsus first introduced the term Vitiligo in the second century A.D. Vitiligo is also known as Leucoderma. The history of psychosocial repercussion was described in Vedic literature and it is also found in our society. A population-based study was presented to understand the social implication of this disease. The detailed description of etiological factors and modalities of treatment is found in all *āyurvēdic* classics. *Bakuci* (*Psoralia cordifolia*) is still continuing as a photosensitizing drug in the treatment of *Świtra* from the time of *Caraka*.

Introduction

Vitiligo is a pigmentary disorder of skin and mucous membrane. It creates a considerable distress to the affected person because of its cosmetics and psychosocial repercussion. Disfigurations of the exposed part of body due to white patches are the greatest misery. Although the disease had global incidence and still the people of tropical countries are suffer more. Nearly 0.14 to 3% of the whole human population is unfortunate victims of this ailment and despised in the society¹. This study is an attempt to analyze the medico-social history of Vitiligo and its scientific validation in the present day.

Vitiligo is a known word since the days of Hippocrates. Celsus, a renowned scientist and physician of Rome first introduced the term Vitiligo in the second century A.D. This term has been derived from a Latin word *Vitilious* meaning calf, there by

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comparing the whiteness of the skin of calf to human skin. Vitiligo is also known as Leucoderma. Vitiligo refers to *āyurvēdic* literature as *Świtra*, i.e. “*Śwēta bhava micchanti Świtram*” means *Świtra* is a disease where whitish tinge of the skin is a predominant symptom. The synonyms used for this diseases are-*Kilāsa*, *Dāruṇa*, *Aruṇa* and *Śwēta kuṣṭha*. The history of *Świtra* is as old as the human civilization. The description of *Świtra* has been given in *ṛgvēda* (*ṛgvēda* 1/117/7) and *Atharvavēda* literature, the oldest literature in Sanskrit.² *Świtra* has also been narrated in *Mahābhārat* and *Vinaya Pīṭika*³.

History of Social implication of Vitiligo

The social implication of this disease is also well documented in *ṛgvēda* and also in *Manusmṛti*. Gosha's husband divorced her due to the infliction of *Świtra* in her body. Gosha was the daughter of *Kakṣavati*. *Aświni kumāras* treated and cured her disease and she regained her marital status⁴. *Manusmṛti* (3/7) mention that persons suffering from *Świtra* and their progeny are also disqualified from marrying others⁵. *Caraka* mentions *Pāpa* (Sinful act) is the main factor for the genesis of this disease.

The social implication of *Świtra* is still experienced in our country. A study was conducted at D.G.M. Ayurvedic Medical College, Gadag, Karnataka to know the social implication of *Świtra* in our society. It is hearting to find that nearly 50% female and 30% male suffering from social stigma with regard to their matrimonial prospect. About 25% female are not married because of this only. 50% relatives of Vitiligo patients asking weather the disease spread in close contact (infectious) or not. Nearly 70% of healthy people hate the Vitiligo patients directly or indirectly. Nearly 80% patients are depressed by their discoloration and social implication. Fifty percent people in our society are assuming *Świtra* as leprosy. Very few people (only 10%) think Vitiligo patient as *Pāpi* or sinner.

History of this disease

Darila first used the term *Świtra* when making commentary on *Kauśika Sūtra*. Both *Brāhmana* and *Upaniṣada* part of *Taitereeya* branch of *Yajurvēda* have mentioned the term *Świtra*. *Caraka* describes the *Świtra* in the chapter of *Kuṣṭha roga* with sign, symptom and treatment but not included in eighteen varieties of *Kuṣṭha*. *Suśruta* has narrated about depigmentation in *rasagāta kuṣṭha*. *Bhēla* briefly described about the

white, red and mixed zone of Świtra. Vāgbhaṭṭa has written separate etiological factors for Świtra. Kilāsa is manifested in 4th layer (Tāmra) according to Suśruta. While Caraka considered as 3rd layer of skin. Actually melanocytes are situated in between the Keratinocytes of the basal layer of epidermis. Bhoja has narrated two types of Świtra as Dōṣaja and Vraṇaja. Dōṣaja is further divided into ātmaja (self-related like nutritional, occupational etc) and Paraja (positive family history). Vraṇaja refers to the discoloration that is started after scar tissue due to healing of wounds or burns. Fish, Meat, too much milk and śāka (green leaf), Mūlaka (Raddish), Pippali, etc is the dietary factors described by various Ācāryas. Among the nutritional factors, protein (Tyrosine), vitamin C, B complex, Copper etc. are theoretically assuming as the causation of Świtra. Vāgbhaṭṭa mentioned Garbhaja (Gestational) type of Świtra. Industrial chemicals and dyes contaminated food and water may be cause for Vitisigo, but there is no proof for the above. Rubber gloves and condoms are also suspected etiological factors. Vitisigo has been claiming as autoimmune disease for the presence of antibodies against melanin. Melanocyte exhaustion theory is widely accepted theory for the genesis of Vitisigo. According to this theory the tired and exhausted melanocyte fail to produce the adequate quantity of melanin, which causes Vitisigo.

Dhātugatatva (Involvement of Dhātu) is also found in Świtra. Aggravated dōṣas when settled in Raktadhātu then produce Raktavarṇa and similarly Tāmra varṇa when dōṣas settle in Māmsadhātu and śvētavarṇa when dōṣas settle in Medodhātu.

History of various modalities of treatment in Switra

In Atharvavēda and Kouśika Sūtra, Rāma and Kṛṣṇa are the medicinal plants for the treatment of Kilāsa. Indravārūni and Bhṛṅgarāja can be considered as Rāma, Kṛṣṇa respectively. Rajani is also a drug to maintenance of normal colour of skin.

External application in the form of lēpam and exposed to sunlight is the oldest treatment method used in Saṁhitā period. They knew well about the sunrays that stimulate the pigment of skin. They also knew the formation of blister in the hypo-pigmented areas after administration of lēpam. The drainage and management of blister is found in Caraka Saṁhita. Suśruta emphasized the external application of Khyara.

Both *Caraka* and *Suśruta* advised *LĒkhan karma* in a surgical instrument for the treatment of *Świtra*. The photosensitizing drug *Bākuci* (*Psoralia corilifolia*) as external application has been used from the time of *Caraka* till today. But the famous combination *Bākucyādi lēpam* is first mentioned by *Aṣṭāṅga Hṛdaya* followed by *Cakradatta*, *śāraṅgadhara Saṁhitā*, *Gadanigraha*, *Vaṅgasēna Saṁhitā* and *Bhaiṣajyaratnāvali*. *Caraka* also first described the internal administration of *Kakaudumbara* (*Ficus hispida*) that latter known as *Świtra bhasajya*. The minerals drugs like—*Manasila*, *Kāsīsa* and *Tāmra* (copper) are also mentioned in *Caraka Saṁhitā*. *Harita* mentioned that the donation of silver help in alleviating the disease.

Conclusion

The study of history of Vitiligo reveals much information regarding the social stigma of this disease. Therefore the patient and relatives should be assured about its non-infectious and non-hereditary nature, further that it has no relation with leprosy.

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सारांश

शिवत्र का चिकित्सात्मक इतिहास

अशोक कुमार पण्डा

शिवत्र रोग का चिकित्सात्मक इतिहास उतना ही पुरातन है, जितना कि मानव सभ्यता का। ऋक् और अथर्ववेद में शिवत्र रोग का उल्लेख किया गया है। इसके बारे में महाभारत और विनयपिट्टक में भी वर्णन मिलता है। लेकिन ई.सं. दूसरी शताब्दी में रोम देश के प्रसिद्ध चिकित्सक सेल्सस ने पहले इसके लिए भीटीलीगो पद का प्रयोग किया है। भीटीलीगो को कोई-कोई लीऊकोडरमा भी बोलते हैं। शिवत्र रोग की सामाजिक मानसिकता के इतिहास का वेद में भी उल्लेख है तथा हमारे समाज में भी देखने को मिलता है। इस रोग का सामाजिक स्तर पर असर जानने के लिए एक जनसंख्या आधारित गणना भी की गयी है। शिवत्र रोग के निदान तथा चिकित्सा का विधान आयुर्वेद शास्त्र में विस्तार से किया गया है। चरक काल से आज तक बाकुची त्वचा रंजक द्रव्य के रूप में जाना जाता है।