

FESTIVALS AND MEDICAL RELEVANCE (WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MEDIEVAL ANDHRA SOCIETY)

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ABSTRACT

The physicians of indigenous medical science believed that the climatic changes are one of the causes for diseases. They observed that severity of a disease depends on the movements of the planets. Thus, they prescribed ritucharya as a remedy to their evil influence and also, made the people to follow some of the important regulations for the maintenance of health by incorporating them into the religious rituals by instituting some new festivals and customs like Vinayakachaturthi, Ugadi and Dasara etc., in course of time. The primary data regarding the subject can be found available in the contemporary literary works, medical texts, travellers accounts, inscriptions and the temple monuments.

The indigenous medical science had an indispensable relation with astronomy during the ancient and medieval days. The physicians believed that, seasons of the year have also got an effect on the tridhātus. The climatic characteristics of heat and cold of various seasons were considered as one of the causes for diseases. They observed that, the severity of a disease depends on the movements of the planets and thus prescribed herbs or the diet to be

taken by the patient as a remedy to their evil influence. Hence the dietetic habits changed in accordance with the change of seasons. This modification in the dietetic regulations which undergoes according to the change of seasons was called as rtucaryā. The physicians have divided the year into six seasons and prescribed the dietetic regulations to be followed in accordance with the changes in dhātus (vāta, pitta and kapha).

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The indigenous medical scholars put forth the purpose of Ayurveda as the science for protection of the health of the hale and the alleviation of the ailing.¹ To maintain the health of the body and mind, one was expected to perform his duties properly and within the appropriate time prescribed in the śāstras. The learned people and the ruling class followed the scriptures with regard to the maintenance of the regimen of life. But it was very difficult to make the common people maintain all these, due to various reasons. Especially, illiteracy and incessant hard work for livelihood did not allow them to think beyond the traditional customs and beliefs prevailed around them. But the medical scholars did not leave them to their fate. They made the people to follow some of the important regulations for the maintenance of health by incorporating them into the religious rituals, by instituting some new festivals and customs in course of time. In this context, let us observe some of the festivals and their medical relevance. The primary data regarding the subject can be found available in the contemporary literary works, medical texts, travellers accounts, inscriptions and temple monuments.

A significant feature of the religious life of the people in India is

the celebration of the festivals in different seasons of the year. The celebration of the festivals aims at achieving socio-religious harmony among the people and to cultivate a disciplinary way of life conducive to the maintenance of good mental and physical health. Among such festivals Vināyaka caviṭi or caturthī must be mentioned in the forefront.

According to the paurāṇic story, this festival is celebrated in commemoration with the coronation of Lord Vināyaka as the Commander-in-chief of the Divine Army. The story which must be read or heard on the day tells us how he got back his life after fixation of an elephant's head on his neck immediately after he was beheaded. It is said that he was cured with many kinds of herbs. If we observe the method of worship keenly, we can find that it bears a greater medico-religious importance. It is celebrated on the fourth day of the bright fortnight of the month Bhādrapada every year. Lord Vināyaka is worshipped on this day, to be blessed with good health and success. People worship him with 21 kinds of herbal leaves and many kinds of flowers. The leaves of the following plants are used in the worship :

Māchīpattrī	:	(<i>Artemisia absinthium</i> , Linn.)
Bṛhatī	:	(<i>Solanum indicum</i> Linn.)
Bilva	:	(<i>Aegle marmelos</i> Corr.)
Dūrvā	:	(<i>Cynodon dactylon</i> Linn. Pers.)
Dattūra	:	(<i>Datura alba</i> Nees.)
Badarī	:	(<i>Zizyphus jujuba</i> Mill. & Lamk.)
Apāmārga	:	(<i>Achyranthes aspera</i> Linn.)
Tulasī	:	(<i>Ocimum sanctum</i> Linn.)
Cūta	:	(<i>Mangifera indica</i> Linn.)
Karavīra	:	(<i>Nerium indicum</i> Mill.)
Viṣṇukrāntā	:	(<i>Evolvulus alsinoides</i> Wall. & Linn.)
Dāḍīm	:	(<i>Punica granatum</i> Linn.)
Devadāru	:	(<i>Cedrus deodara</i> (Roxb.) Loud.)
Maruvaka	:	(<i>Origanum majorana</i> Linn.)
Sīnduvāra	:	(<i>Vitex negundo</i> Linn.)
Jātī	:	(<i>Jasminum grandiflorum</i> Bailey.)
Gaṇḍaki	:	(<i>Pandanus odoratissimus</i> Willd.)
Śami	:	(<i>Mimosa pudica</i> Linn.)
Aśvattha	:	(<i>Ficus religiosa</i> Linn.)
Arjuna	:	(<i>Terminalia arjuna</i> W. & A.)
Arka	:	(<i>Calotropis gigantea</i> (Linn.) R.Br.ex Ait.)

Thus every leaf prescribed for worshipping the deity on each of his different names is a medicinal one esteemed by the medical scientists in their prescriptions against many health disorders. The literary works of medieval Andhrādesa refer to many home remedies of the common people. For petty disorders such as cold, cough, body pains etc., people did not go to the physician. They depend upon elderly women at home who were experts in identifying different drug-substances and were great healers in case of many diseases which occur in common in the family. Every member in the family was expected to be in good touch with various kinds of plants and trees of medicinal value and must be able to collect the same. The festival of Vināyaka caviṭi offered an opportunity to gain such knowledge. On that day, the elderly

people used to take their children to the fields after taking bath early in the morning. They roam about in the fields and in the vicinity of the village to collect the twenty one varieties of leaves, identifying them by name. At the time of worship, they offer each kind of leaf by name according to the recited name of Lord Vināyaka, which indicates the nature and efficacy of the leaf. Likewise the 21 kinds of leaves would be offered on the reciting of the 21 names of the deity. Without performing this pūjā (worship), it is propagated by the religious preceptors that one should not look at the Moon on that night.

By this we understand the following things: this festival is prescribed to be celebrated in the rainy season because all the plants grow healthily with leaves, flowers, and tender

fruits during this month. Every plant can be observed with all its contents and products such as roots, bark, gum, stem, leaves, flowers, tender fruits etc. As the elderly people train their children in identifying and offering 21 kinds of leaves and different flowers at the time of worship every year, the children could be able to identify them easily by the time they become ten or twelve years old.

The condition that one should not look at the Moon on that night without performing the pūjā indicates the fact that, one should not visit a pharmacist or a physician without knowing the basic knowledge about the herbs. The literary works refer to the Moon, as the Lord of herbs and medicines.² Some home remedies were propagated among the common people through folk-songs. In one of such songs, we find a reference to a healing technique. It runs thus: "Oh Moon – Tell me the remedy for the relief in the broken leg of a mischievous lad!" The answer follows in the same verse thus: "Grind the neem leaves, turmeric and garlic along with 101 drops of oil into paste and apply it on the leg twice a day." In this context, we can understand the reason for the prohibition of looking at the Moon. People believed that Lord Vināyaka should be worshipped for the success in any of their endeavours. That is why, they had chosen this day as the day of initiation to impart practical training to their children.

'Ugādi', the first festival in the Andhrādesa was celebrated on the occasion of the commencing of the new year i.e. on the very first day of the month Caitra (March 15 – April 15). Even today, every housewife prepares a prasāda popularly known as Ugādi-pacchadi. The ingredients are neem flowers, the juice of tamarind mixed with jaggery, small pieces of mango and sugarcane and poppy seeds. Since all these ingredients have medicinal value, the preparation seems to be a medicine. The humour kapha, which accumulates during the cold season is provoked in Vasantha ṛtu. That is why, the above mentioned prasāda or preparation is prescribed by the intellectual class to be taken during the Vasanta ṛtu to maintain the equilibrium of the tridhātus.

In Varṣā ṛtu (rainy season), the digestive system is weakened; therefore, one was advised to keep to a certain diet, should avoid sleeping by day, and co-habitation, should drink medicinal liquor in small doses with honey, and should take massages and oil baths. We find that the people observed all these regulations in their daily life. They observed this season as the season of festivals. The first month in the ṛtu i.e. Āṣāḍha, prohibits the co-habitation of the newly married couple. On every Tuesday and Friday of the month Śrāvaṇa all the couples were prohibited from co-habitation, on the pretext of the festive days.

Sleeping by day during this month was believed as just inviting the Goddess of misfortune, medicinally it aggravates vāta, which may cause diseases. Vāyu naturally gets aggravated during the cold and rainy seasons. Then the germs and microbes also crop up in the nature and wait upon to attack the people. That is why, the worship of Tulasī (Holy Basil), the cleaning of the houses with cow-dung and decorating the houses with muggu and lime powder, the special baths, etc. were prescribed. Further, it is also interesting to note that the annual jātarās (festive celebrations) to the local deities mostly take place during the month Śrāvāṇa (August-September) to keep away from the epidemics. People smear the houses and the frontyards with cow-dung or buffalo dung, decorate the houses with neem leaves, put the benzoin on the fire, and perform pūjā to Tulasī during these days. They prepare the prasāda with cow-milk and offer it along with soaked bengal gram with sprouts emerging out.

'Dasara' is one of the important festivals which occurs in the month of Aśwayuja. It seems to be the festival of Mother Goddess which was taken from the popular culture by the later paurāṇic writers into their fold and propagated some stories about her achievements. These stories reveal the achievements of the Mother Goddess against the demons who caused troubles to women. A feature

of the folklore culture can be seen in the custom of worshipping the *Mimosa suma* tree after taking procession to the outskirts of the village (sīmollan-ghana) on the Vijaya Daśami day. The medieval medical scholars explained the medicinal value of *Mimosa suma* tree i.e. its leaves, trunk, bark, and root. Thus we observe that as in the festivity of Vināyaka cāvitī, some plants and flowers were deified and worshipped during Dasara festival also. In the cult of worshipping the village deities also people used to perform this custom with a slight difference.

In the Telangana region of Āndhradesa, only the women folk participate in the worship of the deity. She is worshipped every evening from the first day of the bright fortnight of month Aśwayuja till Navami, the ninth day of the month. About the festival, Nuniz writes thus: "Some say that they do this in honour of the nine months during which our lady bore her son in the womb."³ Thus, it is clear that the custom is continued in the society from the very ancient days. It is a custom celebrated out of regard towards the Mother Goddess who is the embodiment of womanhood. As the pregnant woman is carefully looked after and every month is celebrated on some pretext or the other, these nine days are celebrated as symbolic of the nine months of pregnancy. During the days she is worshipped in the form of the heap

of the flowers of *Cassia obovata*. These flowers are highly esteemed by the medical scholars as capable of keeping the three dhātus of the human body in balance and its roots are capable of curing all the diseases if taken in combination of other drug substances. As in the cult of the worship of the village Goddess, slaughter of animals was performed at the end of the Navaratri festival, i.e. on 'Dasara'. Men also used to join on that day and worship the *Mimosa suma* tree at the outskirts of the village. Though the practice of animal sacrifice disappeared, the other part of the celebration remained the same till today.

'Dīpāvali' is an important festival celebrated on the twenty first day counting from Dasara i.e. on the last day of the month of Aśwayuja. In the Hindu house holds the first twenty one days of the new born child were observed very carefully as they were believed to be prone to the attack of the evil elements. People believed that the labour room should be endowed with ever-burning fire in which medicinal substances were put and with a lamp of mustard oil. Caraka also prescribed such practices to prevent the evil elements to enter into the room. The people believed that if the child completed the twenty one days without any health hazard, there would not be any possibility of the attack of life-threatening evil elements (bhūtas). The successful

completion of these days are celebrated on a grand scale. The celebration of Dīpāvali is such an occasion.

It is an ancient prescription by the physicians which became a custom to lit the lights with mustard oil to avoid the influence of the virus, which they called as the influence of the evil-elements.⁵ But gradually, people started using the sesame oil in place of mustard oil. Peitro della Valle writes⁶, "This night, as infinite number of Torches and Candles were lighted, not only in all the temples but also in all the streets, houses, and shops. After lighting the lights, the people "begin to throw up many rockets, and many different sorts of fires", which were made with salt petre (nitrate of potash), sulphur and sulphate of copper, etc, which help in driving away the evil insects. According to purāṇas, this festival is celebrated as an occasion of the celebration of the Goddess's success over a rākṣasa.

The month of Mārgaśira (Dec. 15-Jan. 15) was considered as an inauspicious month to take up any auspicious function in the Hindu households. Abbe Dubois says⁷, "The feast of Pongal is a season of rejoicing for two special reasons. The first is, that the month of Māgha (not Māgha but Mārgaśira in which the festival is celebrated) or December, in which every day is unlucky, is about to expire; and the other, that it

is to be succeeded by a month, each day of which is fortunate. He further says, "For the purpose of averting the evil effects of this baleful month of Māgha, about four O'clock in the morning, a sort of sanyāsīs go from door to door of every house, beating on a plate of iron or copper, which produces a piercing sound. All who sleep, being thus roused are counselled to take wise precautions and guard against the evil presages of the month, by expiratory offerings, and sacrifices to Śiva, who presides over it." He described how the women of the house decorate the frontyards by smearing cow-dung and muggulu which were designed with lime powder. Putting the balls made of cow-dung on the muggulu is still a special feature of this festival. As previously referred to, lime and cow-dung were extensively used by them, almost every day, to keep the surroundings clean and to prevent the entry of the evil elements which they called as grahas and spirits. The festival is celebrated for three days i.e. Bhogi, Sankrānti or Sūrya Pongal and Kanuma. The Bhogi celebrations start with putting fire in front of the house. "The second day is called Sūrya Pongal or Pongal of the Sūrya (Sun) and is set apart in the honour of that luminary" who is regarded as the "Health-Promising God". The third day known as Kanuma is the festival of the cattle. "In a great vessel filled with water, they put some saffron, the seeds of pratti and

leaves of the tree vepa. After being well mixed, they go round all the cows and oxen belonging to the house several times sprinkling them with the water, as they turn to the four cardinal points..... men only perform this ceremony, the women staying away." Thus we find that the people used neem, turmeric and the cotton seeds in the case of cattle also so as to save them from being caught by any disease. They decorated the cattle by applying the paste of turmeric powder on their horns and sounding bells; flowers, etc. around their necks which were aimed at the protection of the cattle from the malignant grahas, evil spirits and poisonous creatures like snakes.

According to Caraka,⁸ during this month (Dec. 15 – Jan. 15), cold increases the digestive fire which enables one to digest heavy and rich food. One is advised to take recipes of milk, sweets, fats, oils, new rice and hot water. If we observe the celebration of festival, we understand that all these are observed. It is a compulsory practice at every home to prepare a sweet milky dish with new rice called as pongali and a sweet known as ariselu prepared of rice flour, jaggery and ghee. Taking oil bath with nalugu (application of a paste made with green gram flour all over the body after the massage of oil) was compulsory to both men and women on the very first day (Bhogi) of this three day festival.

It seems that there was a fear among the people about the evil influence of the viral and bacterial infections of which they believed as the wrath of the malignant grahas. That is why, they took many preventive steps throughout the month. The steps taken are: putting fire burning early in the morning, sprinkling water mixed with cow-dung, pouring limestone powder in the artistic form as muggulu around the house, arranging small balls of cow-dung along with turmeric and saffron powders in between the muggulu, by taking bath in the water mixed with the leaves of beans plant which works excellently on the minor skin problems. The sap of beans-leaves removes black spots which appear on the cheeks and nose during this season. Likewise, people believe that it brings back the normal glory to the skin after the cold season during which the skin becomes dry and loses its lusture. Till today it is a compulsory custom in the villages to take bath with the leaves of beans plant and fast till the Moon appears, on the Rathasaptami day which falls in this ṛtu.

A compulsory practice during every religious festival or any ritual is to take up hygienic steps in the form of purification. Among such purificatory steps, the smearing of the floor with the cow-dung was the most important one. Its importance was realised by the foreign travellers also. Peitro della Valle observed the

habit and gave a graphic description of it. He says,⁹ "I took it for a superstitious rite of religion – indeed this is a pretty curiosity and I intend to cause trial to be made of it in Italy, and rather because they say for certain that the house whose pavements are thus sterocated, are good against the plague, which is no despicable advantage – and in brief, 'it is certain that it is no superstitious custom, but only for neatness and ornament; therefore, 'it is no wonder that the gentiles use it often and perhaps every day, in places where they eat, which above all the rest are to be very neat.'" Linschoten also observes this custom thus: "Their houses are commonly strewed with cow-dung, which (they say) killeth Fleas."¹⁰

Another custom relating to Hindu festivals and having medical importance is the observation of fasts on certain days. In Ayurveda, fasting is advised as a therapeutic measure. As the ṛtucaryā stresses on light food during grīṣma, pṛāvṛt, and varṣā seasons for the south Indians, certain days were chosen to observe fast during these seasons. For example, in Āndhradesa the Śrāvaṇa (Aug. 15 –Sep. 15) and Kārtika (Nov. 15 –Dec. 15) months were chosen to observe frequent fasts when purgatives were prohibited.¹¹ Peitro della Valle described the celebration on every Monday, New and Full moon days during the Kārtika month in Karnataka

area. It was a common practice in Āndhra region also. Even today, we find these celebrations in practice. People used to observe fast during the day and dine in the evening on seeing the Moon.

The threshold of every house was deified and was worshipped every day or atleast on Tuesdays and Fridays. They were washed cleanly, smeared with turmeric paste and decorated with saffron here and there and flowers at the corners. The top portion of the doorway is decorated with wreaths of mango leaves on the festive and auspicious occasions and with the neem and sacred basil leaves

on the special occasions, especially when the lady of the house was on the child bed and when an epidemic spreads in the village. Still the threshold is regarded as an embodiment of Goddess Laxmi and people believe that one should not touch it with foot. The frontyard leading to the threshold also was smeared with cow-dung.

Thus we find how almost all the instructions of the medical scholars with regard to the maintenance of the good health crept into the common practices of the people in various seasonal religious celebrations and festivals.

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सारांश

त्योहारों तथा आयुर्विज्ञान में संबद्धता
(विशेषतः मध्यकालीन आंध्र समाज के संदर्भ में)

—पी. हैमवती

भारतीय चिकित्सा विज्ञान के आचार्यों के मतानुसार रोगजन्य कारणों में ऋतु-परिवर्तन भी एक कारण है। उन्होंने यह भी अनुभव किया कि किसी भी रोग की तीव्रता ग्रहों की गति पर आधारित होती है। अतः ग्रहों के दुश्प्रभावों के निराकरणार्थं उन्होंने कई नये त्योहारों एवं प्रथाओं को संस्थापित करते हुए अनेक महत्वपूर्ण धार्मिक नियमों को उन त्योहारों में सम्मिलित किया जैसे कि विनायक चतुर्थी, उगादी तथा दशहरा इत्यादि में, ताकि लोग ऐसे कुछ महावर्णन नियमों का पालन करें। इस प्रसंग में प्रारंभिक आधार-सामग्री समकालीन साहित्यिक रचनाओं, चिकित्साग्रंथों, यात्रा-वृत्तों, शिलालेखों तथा मन्दिर-स्मारकों में उपलब्ध है।