

Betel Leaf- A Social/Natural Science Tool & Homoeopathy

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Abstract

The plant arrived in India by sea from distant land. It was not mentioned in any religious scriptures. It emerged on the wall of a temple in Karnataka. After that it became a symbol of the trinity. It also became a vehicle for goddess Lakshmi & God Yama eventually. It became a metaphor/grammar for human relations. That's how India absorbs the foreign completely while forgetting the memory of the absorption. It is the betel leaf that the paragraph & the article refers to. In marriages especially in Eastern India, betel leaf is hold over fire for a few seconds & put on the cheeks of the bride & groom as a blessing for the couple. To protect the betel vines in Odisha state, people did not allow the POSCO steel company of South Korea to set up a steel plant in eastern Odisha. This was to ensure that the land on which the betel vines are grown is not given for setting up the steel plant. The incident reminds us that the betel leaf is so much inter-wined in the lives of Indians. It is very hard to find a place in India that does not have a paan/betel leaf shop. The current article blends the leaf with its various associated modalities & finally links the homoeopathic system of medicine to the leaf & its accompaniments. It discusses the homoeopathic medicines prepared from all these accompaniments. Homoeopathy was foreign to India as it came from Germany where as betel leaf was also foreign to India as it came from Indonesia & Malaysia. Currently both are part of the very essence of the Indian culture.

Keywords: Betel Leaf, God, Tambula, Culture, Religion, Sociology, Homoeopathy.

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INTRODUCTION

This section has been divided into four sections of social science domain. These are centered around culture, religion, philosophy & sociology. Each of the section has been written in the context of the betel leaf.

The Leaf & The Culture

The Tambula or betel leaf does not get any mention in the Vedic Samhitas, Ramayana or the Mahabharat but on the outer walls of the Chennakeshava temple in Belur town of Karnataka state in India built by the Hoysala kings in the 12th century. On the wall, a

woman stands holding the betel leaves. Betel leaf entered India in the 4th century Christian Era (CE) during the Gupta period through the eastern coast. It came from the Indonesian archipelago & the Malay peninsula. It ceased to be a foreign import very soon as it was carved in stone in to the temple wall in the state of Karnataka. Further it became a part of the Indian culture as no Hindu ceremony was complete without the use of betel leaf. It is no wonder that chewing betel leaf is integral to the Muslims as well. [1-5]

Prior to the documentation of betel leaf in Sanskrit language, the betel leaf & the areca nut were extremely popular in East & South India. The Tamil culture has a stronger root with the betel leaf. Tamil Sangam poetry has a connection with betel leaf that is 2000 years old. Tamil poems like Pattinappalai mentions the busy markets of Puhar area where betel leaves were sold. Further, poems like Maduraikanchi focuses on the cultivation & sale of the leaves. Poems such as Kuruntogai explains how the offering of the leaf with the areca nut turns out to be a symbol of hospitality & affection.[1-5]

The Leaf & Religion

Like culture religion also absorbed Tambula with equal intensity. The leaf is used to sprinkle holy water, offered to deities (Pan Chhadhe – means betel is offered- in the famous Bhajan of Ganesh, the Hindu god- Jai Ganesh Dewa) & also included in the Daksina (gift) paid to priests. Temples of medieval south India incorporated into their daily liturgy. Philosophy also entered in the betel leaf as in the betel quid (leaf eaten with its accompaniments) theologians found the symbol of the Hindu trinity. The areca nut representing Brahma, the Creator god, the betel leaf represents Vishnu, the Preserver god & the lime representing Shiva, the destroyer. [1-5]

The Leaf & Philosophy

Philosophy does not stop here. Botany is also incorporated here in philosophy. Botanically the betel leaf is called Piper Betle. The anatomy of the leaf itself was related & mapped with the divine. The wealth goddess Lakshmi resides on the left whereas the music & culture goddess Saraswati resided on the right. In the stalk as well as the tip, the death lord Yama resides. Therefore, the stalk & the tip is discarded before the leaf is prepared for a holy activity. The remaining part is auspicious which is to be shared between ordinary couples, divine couples, the duo of host & the guest. [1-5]

The Leaf & Sociology

Tambula also entered sociology. It is a complete social language that is capable to signal welcome, rank & departure through the same leaf. In the state of Assam, betel nut is the first thing offered to a visitor. In Bhutan, the phrase 'Doma Zhes' is used for social gathering where it means please have betel leaf with areca nut. The

phrase is also used when two people met each other. In formal ceremonies the host offered betel with both the hands. It is a breach of social conduct if one chews the leaf without being offered to him/her. The caste based Indian society does not share food but sharing a paan/betel leaf is very easy. The leaf also was a ritual in the medieval courts. The Sultans & Nawabs used it heartily. [1-5]

The welcome & farewell related to betel leaf communicated rank as well. A king received 32 leaves, a prince received 24, a learned guy received 12 where as an ordinary guy received only 4 leaves. Royal courts made the betel bag bearer known as the Hadapavala which means a prestigious office conferred on people of high rank. Loyalty & public acknowledgement represented receiving betel leaf from a royal hand. On the other hand, in certain courts if someone was compelled to accept the leaf from a rival fellow it was humiliation. The issue of caste explains the phenomenon better. A betel leaf preparation handled by a person of impure caste was not received by a higher caste guy. Similarly, a woman offering the betel leaf/paan to a man is seen as soliciting. The Kama Sutra mentioned betel as an adjunct to romantic life. Further, in mercantile communities receiving Tambula from another party bounds both the sides to an agreement that was equal to any written deed. [1-5]

Uses at a glance

This paragraph reflects the use of the betel leaf in the context of natural sciences & here more specifically the therapeutic domain is the focus.

A betel vine is too costly to grow as it needs constant watering, plucking & constant monitoring. [6] Betel vine is cultivated for its heart shaped betel leaf which is deep green in color. It is cultivated for 20 million Indian & 2 billion foreign individuals for their annual consumption.[7]

The leaf adds to digestion & sweetens the breath as well. Post meals a quid of betel leaf is wrapped around some areca nut & lime by the betel leaf lovers. The quid is further perfumed with cardamom, clove, nutmeg, mace & camphor. These five aromatics are known as the Pancha Sugandha. Ayurveda uses it for filaria & headaches. To enhance their voice singers were advised to consume the leaf regularly. The stalk of the leaf smeared with oil like castor oil was used to relieve constipation & abdominal bloating particularly in children. [7,8]

Regarding the food and medicinal applications, the Piper Betel leaves showed antioxidant, antimicrobial, anticancer, anti-proliferative and anti-mutagenic activities, which can be attributed to its rich phytochemical profile.[8]

Using the principle of Doctrine of Signature, the betel leaf can be said to be beneficial for the heart since it is heart shaped.[9]

Homoeopathy & Betel Leaf

In this section, the betel leaf is described as the betel quid in the background. The leaf & its accompaniments used during consumption or during the holy activities are discussed. A link is established between the accompaniments & their therapeutic uses in the science of homoeopathic therapeutics.

A paan/betel quid has the betel leaf (Piper Betel), Khair (Acacia Catechu), Betel Nut (Areca Catechu/Nut) & Lime. Besides these Cardamom, Clove, Nutmeg, Mace (Myristica Fragrens- called as Javitri in Hindi) & Camphor are used as the five aromatics of the betel quid. These are known as the Pancha Sugandha in Sanskrit language. Mentha Piperita (peppermint) is also used in the quid. These all are used in homoeopathy extensively. Among these five, Nutmeg & Camphor are constitutional medicines & these two have many uses & are applied for a number of clinical conditions. Besides these, lime water & chlorinated lime are also used extensively in homoeopathy. [10-15]

There is no medicine from the betel leaf (Piper Betel) itself nor from Khair (Acacia Catechu) & not from mace either (Myristica Fragrens) in homoeopathy. Cardamom (Elettaria Cardamomum) is also not used as a medicine in homoeopathy. The medicines prepared from the other components are given below. [10-15]

There are eight medicines in homoeopathy that are related to the betel quid. Out of eight, two are broad spectrum medicines & the rest six are not categorized under broad spectrum. These are short spectrum medicines. [10-15]

Areca Catechu/Nut- clinically used for helminthiasis, myopia, glaucoma, parasites, salivation, tapeworms & worms.[10-15]

Calcarea Caustica (Lime Water)- clinically used for backache, corns, heel pain, hoarseness, jaw disorders, pain in malar bone, neuralgia, paralysis, rheumatism, spleen disorders, stiff neck, tapeworm, toothache. [10-15]

Calcarea Chlorinata (Chlorinated Lime)- clinically used for boils & carbuncles. [10-15]

Syzygium Aromaticum (Clove Oil)- clinically used for arthritis, asthma, bronchitis, rheumatism, sprains, strains, toothache. [10-15]

Mentha Piperita (peppermint)- clinically used for aphonia, colds, coughs, dyspepsia, flatulence, headache, hoarseness, indigestion, influenza, itching, stomach pains, sore throat, weak voice. [10-15]

As mentioned above, nutmeg & camphor are two medicines that have multiple uses in homoeopathy. The primary clinical uses of these two medicines are given below. There is no ailment for which these two medicines cannot be prescribed. This means for all ailments these two medicines can be prescribed based on the principle of homoeopathic therapeutics. Given below are the few highlighted clinical uses. [10-15]

Nux Moschata (prepared from nutmeg)- drowsiness, dryness, fainting, flatus, hysteria, narcolepsy, sleep, overpowering. [10-15]

Camphora (prepared from camphor) – chills, cholera, cold, collapse, diarrhea, fever, influenza. [10-15]

Camphora Bromata (prepared from camphor monobromide)- clinically used for ‘nervous excitability’. [10-15]

The above paragraphs demonstrate how the betel leaf with its accompaniments known as betel quid is an integral part of homoeopathic system of therapeutics. All these are in use since last two centuries.

CONCLUSIONS

Besides the four aspects of the betel leaf mentioned above, there is another interesting aspect to the leaf. It is the entertainment angle. Bollywood has popular & famous songs on betel leaf. Longa Elaichi ka bida lagaya from rang barse, khayi ke paan banaras wala from the movie Don, paan khayi saian hamaro are such examples. Similarly in Odia language the famous song ‘ae paan wala babu’ also comes to the mind. In a nut shell, the betel leaf is deeply embedded into our lives.

Using science to prove the efficacy of the homoeopathic system of therapeutics is one end of the spectrum. Till science comes out with an evidence based medicinal approach of homoeopathy the social science aspect show that it is used as it is clinically effective, cost effective, has no side effects & finally an integral part of the Indian culture itself.

The other modalities like the religion angle, sociological angle, philosophical angle will foster the cultural & therapeutic angle of the homoeopathic therapeutic system.

The journey of betel leaf is from a cult stage to a cultural stage. It is interesting to see that Tambula that came from South East Asia is currently an integral part of India to such an extent that all Hindu ceremonies are thought to be complete only when the betel leaf is an integral part of the ceremony.

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