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Traditional Indian Medicine-the Curtain Raiser

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Ayurveda or traditional Indian medicine (TIM) is making dramatic, or Indian system of medicine (ISM), come back. Market studies and papers published in peer-reviewed journals back the revival of TIM in India. According to one estimate, 3000 branded Ayurvedic products are available in Indian market. Ayurvedic drugs worth 6,000 crore are manufactured annually in India, of which 1,500 crore are exported. TIM has not made advances as compared to traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) but therapeutic potential of TIM or ISM can't be ruled out.

Traditional systems of medicine, irrespective of the country of origin, have faced stiff resistance from the conventional pharmaceutical industry. Recently in, attempt was made to introduce curriculum of TIM in medical colleges but the proposal was strongly declined by the medical fraternity. Medicinal plants are screened for investigational drugs and several therapeutically important drugs have been extracted. Results of studies published in indexed journals like journal of Ethno pharmacology, Journal of Natural Products, Planta Medica and Fitoterapia favor used of plant based remedies in clinical practice.

Traditional Indian medicine is not popular in medical colleges and some medical experts refer it as 'quack medicine'. Whatever may be the prevailing condition, maximum work is being done on medicinal plants in departments of pharmacology medical colleges. The pharmacologists are interested in leads from medicinal plants, but not in drug as a whole. This is major point of conflict between modern medical sciences and traditional Indian medicine. A drug, tested in animal models, if found promising is approved for clinical trials. This tested drug is isolated active principle and in post experimental work researchers omit the name of medicinal plants, source of active constituents. On one side pharmacologists are comparing TIM with reverse pharmacology and on the other side TIM is being addressed as junk or roadside medicine.

The purpose of this write up is not to promote or rebuke modern medical science or TIM but to address critical issue related to future of TIM. Antidotal approach of the Allopathic alone can't be blamed for prevailing circumstances in TIM. Apathy on the part of AYUSH, CCIM, Ayurvedic colleges and even practitioners of Ayurveda is the major factor for non-popularity of TIM. 90% of Ayurvedic practitioners practice Allopathic in clinical practice and have least interest in research finding with Ayurvedic drug. Recently AYUSH has taken the initiative of reviving research and development in TIM, a welcome step for enhancing scientific validation of TIM.

Medicinal plants are being explored for investigational drugs in premier Indian institutes like NIPER, CDRI, PGIMER, CIMAP, NBR and RRL, Jammu. NIPER has recently initiated MS Pharma in traditional medicine and RRL Jammu, a concern of CSIR has been renamed as institutes of integrative medicine. Several universities in India have started diploma or degree courses relative to Ayurvedic pharmacy. What will be the outcome of introducing these courses, time will tell but it can be that constant efforts are required to harvest trained man power for Ayurvedic drug industry.

There is need for imparting knowledge of subject like pharmacognosy, natural product chemistry, pharmacology and toxicology for Ayurvedic students. BAMS is not included as eligibility criteria in entrance test of major institutes engaged in medicinal plant research. Further lack of awareness of recent finding in TIM among Ayurvedic students and practitioners has led to decline in advances in TIM. Present scenario is that majority of Ayurvedic colleges in India are not equipped with scientific instruments and lack quality faculty. A mandate should be past for upgrading education standards in Ayurvedic institutes. Further Ayurvedic practitioners should be included as faculty in TIM institutes running courses related to Ayurvedic pharmacy.

The cold war between modern medical system and traditional medicine must cease. Statutory bodies dealing with Ayurveda should adopt a flexible approach and join hands with modern researchers for enhancing of reputation of Ayurveda or TIM. Modern medical science should stop unnecessary criticism of TIM and investigate drugs used in Ayurveda with open mind. Propaganda like heavy metal limits, and lack of standardization of Ayurvedic products should be given required but not all importance.