

AN INVESTIGATION OF ANCIENT MEDICAL EQUIPMENT AS REFLECTED IN TEMPLE COLLECTIONS OF THE CENTRAL PROVINCE OF SRI LANKA

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Introduction

The aim of this study is to investigate the medical equipment in the Buddhist monastic establishments in the Central Province of Sri Lanka during the Late Mediaeval Period (16th c to 20th c AC).

The Objectives of this study are to: a) identify the sites where medical equipment are located, b) facilitate cataloguing and documenting of the equipment medically important for the benefit of future researchers, and c) suggest improvements for the preservation of the objects.

Materials and methods

Oriental Ayurvedic texts such as Susruta Samhita and recent books such as 'A history of medicine in Sri Lanka' by DR C.G Urugoda were consulted in the course of literary research. Several monasteries in the region were the main focus of this investigation. In addition to the selection of primary monasteries where medicine was practiced during the period under discussion, individual houses of physicians were also selected where applicable and relevant. Several museums of the Central Province, which are repositories of such objects, were also included in the study.

Criteria for selection were established primarily in consultation with the Commissioner of Indigenous Medicine of the Central Province, but other physicians and specialists were also consulted. Individual visits were undertaken to a total of 15 sites, 3 of which are museums, 8 temples and 4 houses of physicians. Interviews were conducted with the custodians of the sites and

others who have specialized knowledge on the subject.

Results

The types of equipment found are varied and some types such as pottery and grinding stones are found in abundance in a number of sites, while some others such as surgical instruments appear to be rare. There was equipment that varied in terms of material, which sometimes performed the same function in general. i.e., ivory and cattle horn utensils; some that had different categories of users such as elite and ordinary, etc. In addition, there is also equipment with very sophisticated and nuanced use for specialized medical application. Finally, there is a level of sophistication relating to equipment with multifunctional use. i.e., a walking stick comprising 12 compartments for storing different types of medicine.

It is significant that a number of temples in the region were involved in the treatment of patients for diseases such as mad dog bites, and mental illness despite the fact that Buddhist monks are discouraged from making a livelihood out of medical practice. This clearly indicates that the monks used to practice medicine as a requirement of society.

Discussion

The study revealed that there is potential for research on a number of aspects of this particular field of investigation.

The need to make a systematic investigation of the medical equipment with their proper documentation will be a vital requirement as a group study.

While studying medical equipment, there needs to be a typology that can be used as a base for the investigation. However, because one was not available for reference, I made an attempt to prepare a typology as a preliminarily model which needs further discussion.

Most of the material found is in a state of neglect due to reasons such as unsatisfactory infrastructure, improper maintenance and inadequate training of the caretakers.

Conclusion

The crucial precondition for the protection and study of these artifacts is the widespread acknowledgement that these are invaluable and essential elements of our cultural past that needs to be recognized and learned from. This change in attitude should come from government, responsible institutions and academics, etc. These artifacts can teach us not only about medical practice during the Late Mediaeval Period but also about such

issues as monks' involvement in attending to contemporary social needs.

There are several steps to be taken to protect and display the equipment under consideration for the purpose of the study and research. Of these, the establishment of a museum set apart exclusively for history of medicine in Sri Lanka is most important.

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References

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