PSYCHIATRIC THOUGHTS IN THE TAMIL CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The significance of psychiatric thoughts in Tamil culture is brought forth with relevant historical and literary evidences: psycho-physiological aspects of emotions, descriptions of severely disturbed individuals, attitude of the society towards the mentally ill and epigraphic material describing hospital care of psychiatric patients in the first millennium are alluded. These references unravel the advanced psychiatric medical knowledge in the Ancient Tamil system of Medicine namely the Siddha system. The mythical origin of Siddha Medicine, attributes of the Siddhars (knowledgeable persons) and short biographical notes of eminent siddhars like Agathiyar, Bogar, Therayar and Thirumoofar are cited. Ancient theories of etiopathogenesis, namely the Panchaboothas and Tridoshas are detailed. Agathiyar’s descriptions, classification and treatment of mental illnesses and Yogi Siddhar’s contribution to psychiatry require significant mentioning. Siddha system has proved its potential effect by displaying promising results in treating HIV and Hepatitis-B. Likewise the author encourages similar discoveries in Siddha Medicine with relevance to psychiatry.

Key Words: Ancient Indian medicine, insanity, Tamil

Two of the presidents of Indian Psychiatric Society have discussed in detail Mental Health issues of Ancient India in great detail and erudition (Venkoba Rao, 1978; Shiv Gautam, 1999). Kutumbiah (1969) has discussed the same in his monograph. Mental disorders in particular have been considered by Deb Sikdar (1961) and Varma (1965). In all these writings the contributions of Tamil culture and the Siddha (Tamil system of medicine) system are not considered, due to the unfamiliarity of the writers with Tamil language, literature and difficulty in procuring the translations. Hence it is proposed to herewith discuss some of the aspects of Psychiatric Medical knowledge from this viewpoint. The Siddha System of Medicine is a contribution of the Dravidian culture, which is one of the oldest cultures in world. Historical sequences in this context could be exemplified. Tholkappiam- Literally the Ancient literature (circa 1 century AD), probably the oldest extant text dealing with customs, habits, polity and grammar of the olden days, describes in detail the psycho-physiological aspects of human emotions. Emotions are classified in this text into eight types. Nagai- Laughter, Azhugai-Melancholy, Ilivaral-Dejection with guilt and deistic for living, Marutkai-Wonder, Aachham-Fear, Oovagai-Jubilation, Veguli-Anger, Resentment, Perumidham-Buoyancy, Elation For detailed description see Somasundaram (1991 a &b).

A buddhist poet and philospher Sathanar wrote Manimeghalai in the second century AD. His scholarship extended not only to his mother tongue but also to other ancient languages of India - Sanskrit and Pali, the language in which most
of the Buddhist religious codes and logic were written. These principles were applied to the consideration of illusions, hallucinations and disorders of thought both form & content (Somasundaram, 1998). He also describes in another part of the classic the heroine-Manimeghalai’s encounter with a severely disturbed individual. The song unfolds describing her encounter with a mad man on the way to the flower garden:

“Shoulders adorned with a garland of pink ‘allari’
Neck adorned with a garland of bad odoured errukai* flowers
Twigs of the mighty free has he gathered to hold together,
tatters on this person, his entire body smeared with white paste of ash and sandal.
Talks he with others in a senseless blabber, he cries, he falls, he blurts,
he shouts, he worships, he bellows, he gets up, he twists, he circles, he runs,
he moves to a corner and lies down, he shouts and picks up a quarrel with his shadow
And verily behind the mad young man, who is hapless to functionless
The people stand around and gape at this tragedy.”
- Sathanar

* wild flowers

From these lines we get a good idea of catatonic schizophrenic’s hypermotality, incoherence of thought and speech. We also notice the attitude of the public, which is one of compassion and a desire to help. There is no sense of fear, frivolity or prejudice or stigmatization of the mentally ill (Somasundaram, 1987).

There is an epigraphic and historic evidence, dating back to the IX century AD, of residential care of the mentally ill. This inscription, found in the walls of the inner sanctuary of a temple dedicated to Lord Venkateshwarara at Thirumukkudal, Chingelpet District, TamilNadu dating the reign of Veera Rajendra Deva, mentions a hospital, a school and an account of expenses for maintaining the hospital and the festivals of the deities. This Veera Choleshwara hospital contained 15 beds with a physician-surgeon, 2 male and female nurses, servants, 1 gatekeeper, 1 washerman and 1 potter comprising of the team. The duty of the male nurse was to bring herbs and firewood and prepare medicines while the female nurse administered doses of medicines, fed the patients and attended the cooking. There was no specific mention about the segregation of the psychiatric patients (Subba Reddy, 1971).

For a long period in the history of ancient India, the Tamil Siddha Medicine flourished in the south side by side with the Sanskrit Ayurvedic Medicine in the north. The origin of the Siddha system is shrouded in Mythology, Tradition and Religion. Its mythical origin is as follows: according to tradition it was Lord Shiva who unfolded the knowledge of the Siddha system of medicine to his Consort Parvathi who in turn handed it down to Nandideva and finally passed from him to the Siddhars (Knowledgeable persons).

These Siddhars were men of erudition, who had attained ‘Aothma Siddhis’ by mastering the eight mystical powers:

| Powers       | Description                                      |
|--------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| ANIMA        | Shrinking to a speck                             |
| MAHIMA       | burgeoning                                       |
| ELAKIMA      | Assuming weightlessness                          |
| KARIMA       | Becoming leaden & ponderous                      |
| PRAATHI      | Flight to fanciful places                        |
| PRAGAMIMUM   | Transmigration into another body, walking on water|
| ESATHUVAM    | Assuming leadership                             |
| VASITHUVAM   | Charming, attracting others.                     |

All of them were humanists interested in the welfare of the living things and focused their interests in curing ailments and practicing medicine. Interested in rejuvenation and longevity (Kayakalpam) they prepared medicaments with herbs, metals, poison and other esoteric materials. They displayed keen interest in astrology & astronomy so that therapies could be started at an auspicious time with the favour of the stars. Masters in yoga and meditation, they extolled the curative efficacy of these therapies. The Siddhars belonged to a school of great
knowledge that originally consisted of 18 members known as Nandivarga Siddhars.

Sage Agathiyar, who was the chief of the Siddha School, was a celebrated philosopher, grammarian and physician. Some of his works are still standard textbooks of medicine in daily use for Indian Medical practitioners. The Kirigainool (diseases of mind-types and treatment). Mayanavathi (science of Optics), Balavadagam (Treatment of common & serious diseases of children) and Vaithiya Vallathi (pharmacy) are some of his significant titles. Biographical notes of other important Siddhars are

i. Bogar- was considered to be a Chinese philosopher who came to South India to learn Medicine. The Pharma Cognosy is the best of his treatises. His other works are on yoga, archery and glossary on Medicine.

ii. Theraiyar- was one of the 18 Siddhars and a disciple of Dharma Sowmiyar. He mostly suited the attributes of a Buddhist monk. His books The Materia medica, The examination of urine for clinical investigation and The preventive medicine are the best of his contribution. The lucidity and style of the language demonstrates his versatility in the subject.

iii. Thirumoolar- was the first siddhar who introduced fundamental philosophical ideas in the field of medicine. His contributions to yoga and meditation in the treatment of human illnesses is outstanding. His classic work, The Thirumandiram, is the canon of Saivite literature. He is one of the 63 apostles of Saivite Nayanars.

Ayurvedha and Siddha system of medicine could be considered as two faces of the same coin - because their concepts of etiopathogenesis were similar, probably modified each other. In this connection we could mention the concepts of Panchaboothas (five elements) and Tridoshas (3 morbid humors).

"Macrocosm vs microcosm" - Man (microcosm) is regarded as the Epitome of the world (macrocosm) - for what exists in the world of nature, Appu (water), Theu (fire), Vayu (wind), Piruthivi (earth) and Ahasa (ether), is contained within man (Balaramaiah, 1980). This is reflected in the very ancient sangam literature

'Three things, beginning with wind, say the experts, in excess or lacking cause disease'

Based on these concepts Sage Agathiyar has detailed psychotic, emotional and behavioral disturbances in his treatise called the 'Kingainool'. He classified the clinical variety of mental illness based on the phenomenology. Although given
separate names majority of the descriptions apply to the disturbed, excited, deteriorated, severely mentally ill. Attempting to classify the description using Kraepelinian phenomenology is as follows:

**CATATONIC WITHDRAWAL:** Under this head we can include

| Tamil Terms       | Equivalent English Terms          |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Vaada Kirigai     | Fearful insanity                  |
| Sletpana Kirigai  | Phlegmatic insanity               |
| Alar Kirigai      | Shouting insanity                 |
| Moodu Kirigai     | 'Light headed' insanity           |

**CATATONIC EXCITEMENT:** Herein are included

| Tamil Terms       | Equivalent English Terms          |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Munangal Kirigai  | Muttering insanity                |
| Valippu Kirigai   | Convulsive insanity               |
| Peiyapidi Kirigai | 'Possessed' insanity              |

**CHRONIC SCHIZOPHRENIA:** Under this head as many as seven categories are included:

| Tamil Terms       | Equivalent English Terms          |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Anal Kirigai      | Flaming insanity                  |
| Pitha Kirigai     | Bilious insanity                  |
| Echil Kirigai     | Spitting insanity                 |
| Booda Kirigai     | Demonical insanity                |
| Jalai Kirigai     | 'Water loving' insanity           |
| Kalleri Kirigai   | Stone throwing insanity           |
| Kumbidu Kirigai   | Saluting insanity                 |

**MANIAC EXCITEMENT:** Under this head we can include

| Tamil Terms       | Equivalent English Terms          |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Naddavindu Kirigai| Masturbatory insanity             |
| Mohini Kirigai    | Erotic insanity                    |
| Maruttu Kirigai   | Menacing insanity                  |
| Neerkudi Kirigai  | Water-drinking insanity            |

The individual descriptions of these typs of mental illnesses will be found in our earlier paper (Somasundaram, et al., 1986). The various behavioral and emotional abnormalities of the major mental illness are aptly described.

It should be mentioned here that it is not always possible to give the English equivalents for the various types of insanity listed by Agathiyar in his treatise. Some types of illness are based on supposed aethiology, for example Bilious insanity, Phlegmatic insanity, etc. Most of the types are based on symptoms like excessive water drinking, spitting, are menacing; some of them are based on behavior, for example erotic insanity, light headed insanity etc. Treatment of mental illness: In Manidar Kirigai Noof-64 Agathiyar describes 18 varieties of medicine for the clinical varieties. The pharmacopoeia include favorite oils, various herbals and esoteric animal preparation according to the route of administration of the medicine he divided them into 6 groups:

| Tamil terms       | Equivalent English terms          |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1.Thuvalai        | Anointing-external application    |
| 2.Vedu            | Fumigation                        |
| 3.Ulluku Koduthal  | Oral route                        |
| 4.Nasiium         | Nasal application                 |
| 5.Kalikkam        | Ocular application                |
| 6.Mandiram        | Psychotherapy                     |

Stress related disorders (Neurotic disorders) are elaborately dealt by Yogi Siddhar in his contribution the Yogi Chitamani 800. This book deals elaborately with both physical and mental illnesses. It describes functional psychoses, neurosis, somatoform disorders and toxic psychosis etc.

The catatonic withdrawal symptoms are described under the heading Veri Azhal Noy and Thamadha Azhal Noy.

The symptoms of catatonic excitement are described in Peruiya Noy.

**Chronic Schizophrenia** is described in MooduPitham.

Manic excitement is described in stanzas under the heading Azhal Pitham, Odu Pitham, Markeya Pitham and Veri Iyam. The understanding of human emotions, behavior and the associated psychopathology was in advanced stage in the Tamil land and comparable to the other ancient cultures of the world. The phenomenology could be easily fitted to the modern notions. The treatment though appearing rather esoteric has found significance after some of the recent discoveries, especially the usefulness of the natural herbs in the treatment of Hepatitis, is widely accepted and prescribed in all parts of the world. Treatment of HIV related complexes appear promising, as recent studies have revealed from the $T_4$ cell count increase after treatment with some Siddha medications. It is worthwhile to peruse these Siddha literatures and their pharmacopoeia so that similar discoveries could
be made in our specialty.

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