ON THE IDENTITY OF ‘KUMBHIKA’ OF ASTANGA-HRDAYA

(UTTARA 8/6)

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ABSTRACT: The author probes in this paper the identity of ‘Kumbika’ multifaceted plant-species mentioned in the Ayurvedic literature and establishes its identity by interpreting various classical texts.

Though the epithets Kumbhika (variants kumbhika, kumbha and etc.) and kumbha do not appear as plant-names in the Vedic literature and the early post-vedic ancient north-western frontier Indian texts like the Astadhyayi of Panini and the Arthasastra of Kautilya, but from the caraka samhita and onwards all through the Ayurvedic literature, tradition and Sanskrit lexicons they do appear but as multi-meaning plant-names representing different plant-species in their various specific context (1-8). The basis of nomenclature and ethno-geographical antecedental affiliations of kumbha which is particular to the Astangasamgraha and the Astanga Hrdaya samhitas and identified by their commentators with ‘danti/trst’, and of that read in the synonyms of ‘guggulu’ and also of ‘kumbhi’ representing ‘bhupatali’ and katphala’ have been examined and highlighted by the author elsewhere (9).

The epithet kumbhi in the sense of plant-species occurs once in the caraka samhita (10) (=Ca.) being enumerated with others in the kasayaskandha i.e., dravyas predominating in kasayarasa (Ca.vimana, chapter 8/146), which has been identified by Cakrapani with the then popularly known ‘kumbhika’. The epithets kumbhika, Kumbhika of the same affiliation seem particular to the flora of the Susruta Samhita and find more frequent mention (in various contexts and uses) than other samhitas, the Sanskrit lexicographers have mentioned these epithets representing plant-species in two different habitat areas, meaning also different plant species particular to each. In the group of epithets, kumbhi (kumbhika etc.) for ‘sthalakumbhika’ (Careya arborea) seem to be a later appellation adopted on the appearance of the fruit, which is globose green, about 3’’ diameter crowned with the calyx segments and the remains of the long filiform style and on account of the hollow on the top presents somewhat the appearance of water pitcher Kumbho Drdhayavo Alpa Mukho Ghatah. Without hollow and neck-like appearance at the top, but with persistent calyxcorona at the base, the pomegranate fruits also present to some
extent similar appearance, this probably prompted Dalhana to define the careya-fruit with the simile of pomegranate. But it should be borne in mind that the similitude here is confined only to the outward shape and contour of the fruits without any reference to their seeds.

In the susruta samhita in the section of salakya dealing with ophthalmology (uttarasthana = u.) in the chapter on tarsal diseases ‘Kumbhika-bija=seeds of kumbhi’ have been reference to their shape, size, colour, consistency and arrangement in the fruit in situ to explain the morbid features of one of the tarsal diseases ‘kumbhikapidika’ so named after the parent-fruit in the standard of simile (see. u. 3/5, 10). The endorsement of susrutas notice with a further very elaborate picture is met with in the analogous context in the Astanga Hrdaya (uttara 8/6)12. Despite the epithet being very clearly suggestive of plant-species, and as standard of simile bearing bilateral reflexive significance, seems to have been unnoticed by the scholars for the correct identity of the plant – species actually meant in this context , which has been examined and being reported in this paper, probably for the first time by the author.

The morbid features of kumbhikapidika of the Ast. Hrd. Compare well with ‘Meibomian granuloma’, a tarsal disease of the modern ophthalmology,(13) reflecting thereby the plant-species being meant by the standard of simile in this particular context rather altogether different from all mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs. It is also inferred that most probably this kumbhi might have the similarity of its fruit to that of Careya-arbonea. It may be mentioned that exact outward simulating features of careya (sthala kumbhika) are evinced in the fruit of the well-known water-Lily plant botanically represented by Nymphaea alba (Family: Nymphaeaceae). The fruit is a spongy berry, which though smaller in size, but looks exactly as duplicate of the Careya fruit and contains numerous minute poppy-like seeds which are striate, punctuate buried in the pulp of the fruit, and are reddish when unripe turning to blackish on ripening. These seeds are of great economic value as staple food from the far ancient proto-historic and pre-historic times making these plants of totemic significance also, have always been objects of attraction to the poets and writers of all ages for the their aesthetic features. The Sanskrit lexicons also recognize various plant-parts as independent entities recording separate epithets for each. But surprisingly enough, the kumbhi fruits of the water-lily do not find mention anywhere. The simple answer to this pertinent question is that these fruits are always in the water, and they also ripen in the same Ritu, which would have been the reason for their escaping the notice of the ancient poets, writers commentators lexicographer and others as well (13-16).

Based on the findings, facts and evidences in this investigation as highlighted in the foregoing paragraphs, the ‘kumbhi’ of Astanga Hrdaya as standard of simile in the tarsal disease of the same name should be identified with the kumbhi-fruit of the water-lily apart from the group of plants understood so far by the epithet complex kumbhi/kumbhika and etc. Astanga Hrdaya
also contributes a suggestive Sanskrit vocable for the fruit of the Water-Lily not noticed elsewhere in the Sanskrit lexicons or in other texts.

Note: This paper is based on the author’s book (unpublished) on the identity and initial appraisal of rare Indian plants/plant epithets (Ayurveda Samhitas to-date).

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