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Opium: The Panacea for Colonial India

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Abstract

Today we have 16 AIIMS and many other multi-speciality advanced hospitals. We have advanced medical facilities at district headquarters and even at block headquarters. Medical facilities are also provided by many private hospitals in cities and towns. In most of the states, it is easily available. Prime Minister's Ayushman Bharat scheme also ensures the health facilities to poor, lower section of the society and the vulnerable population. Apart from these facilities, we have also a first aid box (Medical Kit) in most of our homes for day to day remedies. We also use some kitchen herbs to get rid of minor medicinal problems. But nobody can think of such medicinal facilities and medical aid in colonial period. They had their own medical kit, known as opium or goli. Surprised, you are right. Yes it was opium, the most dangerous drug. Can anybody think that opium may be used or prescribed as medical aid for household remedies? Due to lack of medical facilities, colonial inhabitants were dependent on this dangerous intoxicating drug. It was used not only for household remedies but also prescribed for malaria like epidemics disease. This paper will give an image of colonial medical facilities and the use of opium in household remedies.

Keywords: Domestic medicine, intoxicating drug, colonial inhabitants, opium dosage, malarial epidemic

Introduction

Dixon declared the opium as "virtually universal use throughout India as the commonest and most treasured of the household remedies accessible to the people" ^[1] in Colonial India. It was largely employed all over India as a common domestic medicine of people ^[2], and centuries of use had familiarized the inhabitants with its administration, both as an internal remedy and as an outward application. It was resorted to in the manifold ailments incidental to damp and malarious climates-in diarrhoea, dysentery, chills, recurrent febrile attacks, and the neuralgic troubles of the malarial cachexia. It was also their chief resource in asthma, chronic coughs, rheumatic pains, diabetes, gravel, and indeed in all painful wasting diseases of every kind ^[3]. It was also regularly administered to unweaned children.

Opium as an intoxicant

The practice of opium-eating was confined to persons of advanced years. After the age of 40 when the power tails, people took opium as an intoxicant. It was said that it improves their digestion and keeps up their vital powers ^[4]. The representatives of large and influential classes, such as the merchants and landed proprietors, and a great majority of the Native medical practitioners, were unanimous in their view that "though opium is not to be recommended to young men except in a strictly medical sense, or in special circumstances, it is properly used in moderation, with beneficial results, by those past middle age, who feel themselves in need of a stimulant of some sort, to serve as a prop to a falling house ^[5]."

Opium was taken very commonly with a view to lessen fatigue and hunger in prolonged hard work or long marches. The Bhutia and Gurkha coolies were stipulated for opium in their rations, because they were accustomed to it. They believed it lessened fatigue in carrying heavy loads during long distances in the hilly area. The authorities wisely allowed them to have a fixed daily opium ration ^[6].

Opium as a Remedy against Malaria

India was more or less malarious from end to end, and suffered severely from the diseases incidental to such climates. A glance at the official statistics of the causes of death in British India shows that malarial fever overshadowed all other causes of mortality.

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In the provinces of Bengal, Bombay, Punjab, and the North-Western Provinces these fevers accounted for about 70 per cent; in the Central Provinces, for about 60 per cent; in Assam, for about 50 per cent; in Berar, for about 45 per cent; and in Madras, for about 38 per cent, of the total deaths. The main fact is that malarial fevers dominate the death-rate in every province of British India. Such being the dominant conditions of morbidity, it is easy to understand how opium has come to be regarded by the Natives of India as a general panacea for their health troubles. The people had learnt from long experience that opium is to them a help in need, both to alleviate their sufferings, and, more or less, to prevent a recurrence of their feverish attacks.

Opium is a very complex substance, containing not less than 16 or 18 different active principles. The two most important and abundant alkaloids, or active principles, of opium, are morphia and anarcotine/ narcotine. Morphia represents the anodyne and hypnotic properties of the drug. Anarcotine is a bitter crystalline alkaloid resembling quinine, and, like that substance, possesses tonic and antiperiodic properties. As regards the suggestion made by Dr. Roberts that narcotine may be possibly be the alkaloid which has anti-malarial properties^[7].

Report of Dr. Gordon which was mentioned in Royal commission on Opium 1895, may give some idea about it. Dr. Gordon treated altogether 684 cases of malaria with narcotine and gave details of 194 cases. According to him "187 were rapidly cured and only in 7 cases the alkaloid failed to produce any effect." Moreover, he asserted that "narcotine cured some cases in whom quinine had failed."^[8] The dose employed by this author ranged from 1.5 to 3 grains and he expressed the view that narcotine is not of equal value to quinine but has a claim to the next place in the ranks of anti-periodics. After this work narcotine continued to be in large demand and was regularly supplied from the Government factories until 15 or 20 years ago when quinine became cheaper and more abundant.

Use of Opium in Infancy

One of the most singular outgrowths of the opium habit in India was the custom of giving opium to infants. The practice was an ancient one. Amongst the Rajputs and the people of Merwar, the Central Provinces and Bombay infants were born with opium pills in their mouths, and the practice was often observed in Calcutta amongst three classes of men^[9]. About 60- 90 per cent, of the infants were dosed with opium, and with some castes the custom seems to be universal^[10].

This practice was began in the first few weeks or months of life, sometimes even from birth, and was continued up to the end of the third year, and sometimes to the fourth. The dose was usually one-sixteenth to one-twelfth of a grain. This was gradually increased to a quarter or half a grain, and even to one or two grains, according to the age and necessities of the child. The dose was generally given at night and morning, sometimes once a day. In most parts of India it was given by the mother in the form of crude opium. A speck about the size of a poppy seed or pin's head was put into the child's mouth or mixed with its milk. Sometimes suckling mothers smear their nipples with opium. In Bombay children's pills or *bala-golis*, were extensively sold for this purpose^[11]. These pills were manufactured, in order to ensure purity and constancy of strength under the supervision of the licensed vendor. These

were made of two degrees of strength and contain respectively one-sixth and one-third of a grain of opium each, mixed with a variety of harmless spices. When the child reaches the age of two or three years the practice is discontinued. The weaning from opium was usually done gradually, but it was quite complete and any resumption of the habit in adult life was entirely disconnected from the practice in childhood.

The common purpose for which opium was given to infants by the poor and cultivating classes was to keep the children quiet and free from fret while the mothers go about their work in the house or in the field. Dr. Keegan, at Indore, gave us the following touching glimpse of the practice- "A peasant woman who has to work in the fields gives her child some opium and puts him in a basket in the corner of the hut, or perhaps, she takes her child with her to the field, puts him in a small basket and gives a little opium to keep him quiet."^[12]

But this custom was by no means confined to the poor and the peasantry, who could not afford to provide the mother with additional help in the charge of her children. It was followed pretty generally among the well-to-do classes, and even in the zenanas of the rich, where there was no lack of servants to attend to the duties of the nursery. The reason given for the practice by the native witnesses were, that the opium not only kept the children quiet and comfortable, but also helped them to digest their milk, that it prevented diarrhoea, warded off chills and fever, served to alleviate the troubles of dentition, and generally helped to keep the children in good health^[13].

Opium as a Veterinary Medicine

Opium was used as a veterinary medicine for horses and cattle in intestinal disorders, such as diarrhoea and dysentery; also in cattle plague, "rinderpest." The poppy-heads were used as a decoction in the case of sprains and painful bruises as an anodyne fomentation. The use of opium for these purposes was chiefly confirmed to fairly well-to-do people. Its price put it beyond the reach of the poorer class of cattle owners. Small quantities of opium were used with the spices "masalas" that were given to horses and ponies when going on a long journey by Ekka drivers. These "masalas" were given to the horse or pony before starting on the journey and at intervals on the road when they stop to rest^[14]. The small quantity of opium given in these cases acts as a stimulant, and enables the animal to undergo a greater amount of fatigue than he would be able to do without it.

Importance of Opium as a Household Remedies

Opium had a special importance in India at that time due to lack of medical facilities. The mass of the population was beyond the reach of advanced medical aid, or even of the district dispensary system. The better class of Native practitioners, the Hakims and Vaidis were only found in towns. They were chiefly resorted to by persons in easy circumstances. The poorer sections of the community and especially the agricultural classes had to prescribe it for their own ailments. In the absence of veterinary aid, people also used opium for the ailments of their cattle^[15].

The Hakims and Vaidis who follow the Arabic and Hindu systems of medicine, were without any regular training. They were self-taught and self-appointed. The knowledge of medical matters possessed by many of them was not much

greater than that of the people among whom they practice. The consequence is that the medical aid available for the sick, especially among the poor, was often solely that of the housewife, or of the wise woman of the village.

Dr. Maynard, Civil Surgeon at Nuddela district in Bengal, give a brief description about the European Medical aid. He was possessed an area of 3404 square miles with a population of over 2000000. He was the only European Medical officer with an assistant-surgeon and a number of native unqualified hospital assistants, in that district ^[16]. Practically, the great majority of population was beyond the reach of medical advice. Not 10 per cent of the population all over India ever consulted a medical man of any nationality practicing the European system of medicine. Surgeon Major General Rice reported to royal Commission on Opium about the administering of opium by the local medical men:-

“The consequence is that either they must consult Hakims or Vaidis, who invariably administer opium for these torments, or they have discovered its beneficial effects and take it themselves. They soon have to take it regularly, for these torments are ever present in one form or another, and seriously hinder the people in their work. The effect in such cases is magical. A man literally disabled from these ills, after a dose of a quarter or half a grain of pure opium, in a few minutes becomes a new man, and is able to do a full day's work. He knows that if he cannot do this he and his family must starve.” ^[17].

Conclusion

Opium was first introduced into the East, no doubt, as a medicine. Its use as a stimulant and restorative was engrafted upon and grew out of the medicinal use. And it is still probably true that the larger part of the opium consumed in Colonial India was used for the mitigation of suffering and the prevention and cure of disease due to lack of medical facilities. So, it is not difficult to understand how, under these circumstances, opium, with its unrivalled power of alleviating pain and producing sleep, and of controlling the intestinal fluxes which the natives so justly dread, should have become an indispensable article in Indian households. It was the only medicine or „Panacea“ of any value that was available to them.

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