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Panacea from palm leaves

Lakshminarayana has been retrieving old palm leaf texts containing natural remedies for a farrago of maladies.

Photo: K. Bhagya Prakash



Lakshminarayana: single-minded pursuit

AN UNASSUMING man, quiet and self-effacing, holds up a lemon-sized stone. It is blackish with smooth, rounded contours that suggest the type of geographical erosion one sees in the natural topography. But looks belie. Both the man and the stone are remarkable.

Lakshminarayana collects *kuppimatr*s and *taadapatras* (palm leaf manuscripts) as a hobby, but his intentions are to "popularise our ancient traditional systems". He estimates that his *kuppimatra* is from Vijayanagar days of the 15th Century.

Kuppimatra is an ancient stone made of finely powdered medicinal metals ground with egg yolk into a hard ball. Due to the paucity of specialist physicians in remote areas, kings used to commission experts to create long-storing medicines for their subjects. These

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kuppimatras had no expiry dates. Each is a remedy for a particular type of ailment, whether of stomach or bone or any other part of the body, and the kings distributed them widely to local *vaidyas* or physicians. The stones would be rubbed in a circular motion on grinding stones with a little water (the dosage was half a round for a child, and one round or more for an adult), and administered. This method of treatment, now practically extinct, was prevalent from the time of Emperor Asoka to the reign of the Vijayanagar kings.

Though he has had no formal training, Mr. Lakshminarayana has an amazing knowledge of traditional systems. He has noted down and translated over 4,000 medical texts from rare manuscripts. These scrolls he buys from *vaidyas* and their descendants in the villages of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. "But money is hard to come by, so I try to at least borrow them to copy the texts," he says. His collection of palm leaf texts with beautifully carved protective teak binders is as exquisitely rare as the *kuppimatras*. Mr. Lakshminarayana rubs citronella oil on the leaves as a preservative. These texts are long forgotten, like the *Vaidya Saara Sangraha*, compiled between the 13th and 16th Centuries, for example. Compiled by a royal physician, Narasimha Shastri of Balachandrapura at Hrishanadesha on the banks of the Swarnanadi (today's Hassan district), as the manuscript notes, the *Vaidya Saara Sangraha* comprises translations of over 25 original Sanskrit texts on Ayurveda, with the author making cross-references to several manuscripts that have disappeared long since. What's more, there are more formulations for each disease in this scroll than is available in today's publication of the 2nd Century *Charaka Samhita*. And all this is written in Marathi script, but in Kannada language.

"I came by this scroll in Hassan from a family that was a descendant of ancient *vaidyas*," says Mr. Lakshminarayana, who goes on to explain that ancient texts those days were copied by *vaidyas* or gurus who would dictate to their disciples. "There was no publishing those days," he laughs and talks about the *Eka Mulika Vaidyam* (single drug therapy) manuscript. It is one of the 18 classical Siddhas, written by the Tamil physician, Romarushi, containing formulations — whether oil, syrup, ointment, or powder — for all types of diseases, using extracts of only one plant. "These are his own formulations, requiring the highest knowledge of both plant and human structure right down to the minutest cell," says Mr. Lakshminarayana in awed respect for a science that has practically vanished from our life.

Mr. Lakshminarayana then joined the Union Government's Ayurvedic Department in 1971. His love for the ancient texts began during his posting at Tirunelveli District of Tamil Nadu in 1975 when he came across a swami, originally from Karnataka, who travelled the country collecting such manuscripts, and translating them into Tamil in the Kannada script. When the swami died, his assistant asked Mr. Lakshminarayana's help in reading the Kannada script. That is was the beginning of a fascination-turned-vocation.

His life took a turn when he cured the arthritic sister of the then dean, C.V. Manoharan of Tamil Nadu's ISM College of Medicine, with the help of one of his translated texts. In turn, Dr. Manoharan taught him the basic principles of Ayurveda. He received further guidance from B.V. Holla, dean of the Bangalore-based RRI (WHAT'S THIS? REGIONAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE?/SUGANDHI), further guided him. Are the roots and plants mentioned in his palm leaf texts hard to

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him. Are the roots and plants mentioned in his palm leaf texts hard to find today? Not really, according to Mr. Lakshminarayana. In fact, even chemical contamination of soil does not really affect the efficacy of plant formulations, since most major extracts come from old trees such as banyan or asoka. Dried plant extracts keep well in airtight containers, explains Mr. Lakshminarayana, who is "ready to teach anyone interested in these formulations". He can be contacted on 5995554/6567546.

KEYA ACHARYA

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