

THE WONDER ĀYURVEDIC DRUG *LAKṢMAṆĀ* FOR PROGENY: A HISTORICAL APPRAISAL

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In Vedic literature there is no reference of *lakṣmaṇā* to be used for infertility, while in Āyurvedic *Samhitās* Caraka does not mention it in *Pumsavana Karma*. *Lakṣmaṇā*, the name given to this drug, seems to have been coined originally for the particular plant due to its possessing some special marks on some of its part and/or causing prosperity. Later on, one more clue for its identification was given that it possesses red marks on leaves. Further, commentators and authors tried to identify the drug by adding more and more characters and synonyms which were applicable to the plants which they had seen or used personally or on some imagination. It is quite possible that all the characters combined together may not be applicable to one plant but may be the characters of different plants. Modern scholars, beginning from the later half of the 19th century equated this with Mandrake plant which is a famous drug of Europe to which all sorts of imaginary and fictitious legends were attributed. Further, Jaikrishnaji Indrajī, famous botanist of Gujarat, suggested *hanumānavela* (*Ipomoea sepiaria* Koen.) as its source which was accepted by Bapalal. Chuneekar suggested for Chinese wonder drug, Ginseng as *lakṣmaṇā*. Many more plants have been suggested by other authorities but none could be proved to be correct. This is clearly apparent from the review of literature on *lakṣmaṇā*.

INTRODUCTION

Lakṣmaṇā is a well-known drug in Āyurvedic literature. It is mentioned for *pumsavana*. It changes the sex of foetus, maintains a healthy pregnancy and cures infertility. Because of these facts, it has drawn the attention of almost all the Āyurvedic and other scholars from time to time. But, unfortunately this drug is still controversial due to non-availability of such drug in which the morphological features given by ancient scholars are applicable. Therefore, different plants were suggested by different scholars from time to time on the basis of some similar characters and properties. An exhaustive review of the available literature has been done and *Panax quinquefolia* (*Aralia quinquefolia*) has been suggested as the most suitable source of *lakṣmaṇā*.

REVIEW AND DISCUSSIONS

In the Vedic literature, only one reference of *lakṣmaṇā* is observed which is not for procreation.¹ The other reference which has been suggested to be for *lakṣmaṇā*

is actually for *prśniparñī*.² This is also not in relation with *pūṃsavana*. However, white flowered *siṃhī* and *brhatī* have been used for this purpose.³ This shows that *lakṣmaṇā* was not popular in the Vedic period but *śweta kaṇṭakāri* was well-known for its use in *pūṃsavana*. Macdonell and Keith⁴ and Suryakant⁵ have not mentioned *lakṣmaṇā* in their *Vedic kośas*.

In the Āyurvedic *Samhitā* period, Caraka has described *lakṣmaṇā* in the group of vegetables⁶ whereas Suśruta suggests to use it variously as *nasya* for *pūṃsavana*, by ladies, to be administered on the second day to a new born child in a *ghṛta* preparation, and to bear it on the body to ward off the ill effects of demons etc.⁷ The other two *samhitās*, viz. *Aṣṭāṅga Saṃgraha*⁸ and *Aṣṭāṅga Hr̥daya*⁹ have mentioned for both the uses, i.e. as vegetable and as a drug. Why Caraka did not mention its use as a drug for procreation? This is clarified by some commentators by equating the *amoghā* of *Prajāsthāpana* group of drugs mentioned in Caraka with *lakṣmaṇā*.¹⁰ Similarly, *lakṣmī* mentioned in Suśruta is also equated with *lakṣmaṇā* which is a multi-meaning name.¹¹ But again a question arises why Suśruta did not use it as a vegetable? This shows that either the vegetable and the drug were derived from separate plants or the leaves were used as vegetable and the root as a drug of the same plant. The later seems to be more reasonable. Some commentators like Indu¹² and Yogindra Nath Sen¹³ have suggested *madhuyajñī* as the vegetable *lakṣmaṇā* which does not seem to be correct because the root of *madhuyajñī* which is used in medicine was imported. In *pūṃsavana*, apart from *lakṣmaṇā*, other drugs including *brhatī* have been used in *samhitās*.¹⁴ *Lakṣmaṇā* being a name of female crane¹⁵ may suggest that either the drug is white in some of its part or it is like the shape of a crane. These are the only hints towards its morphology available from the earliest literature.

The root meaning of *lakṣmaṇā* suggests that the plant must have some special marks or signs¹⁶ by which it can be identified and possesses some special property giving prosperity¹⁷.

Lakṣmaṇā is suggested to be used into two forms, viz. powder and suspension (prepared either in cow's milk or water) and the route of administration is oral or nasal (either right or left according to the desire of having a male or female child). Usually 3-4 drops of the juice obtained by maceration of the root of *lakṣmaṇā* has been suggested for use by nostril but *Aṣṭāṅga Saṃgraha*, in addition, has suggested to use the pulp of the root in a dose equal to *udumbara* (fruit of *Ficus glomerata* Roxb.) orally.¹⁸ Kāśyapa has suggested to use it by the lady before sexual act¹⁹. Usually it is recommended for *pūṃsavana karma*.

In *Cikitsā granthas*, *lakṣmaṇā* and *śweta brhatī* or *śweta kaṇṭakāri* have been recognised for the treatment of infertility and for *pūṃsavana karma*²⁰⁻³⁰. Some of these authors have used this drug as a single drug therapy while others have included these in some preparations. *Puṣyānuga cārṇa*, *kalyāṇa ghṛta* and *phala ghṛta* are some of the important preparations which include these drugs. *Bhaiṣajya Ratnāvalī* has mentioned

different preparations of *lakṣmaṇā*, some of which contain large amount of it³¹. This shows the availability of *lakṣmaṇā* easily during that period. Some authors have suggested to use *lakṣmaṇā* in place of *ambaṣṭhā*. In some books, *lakṣmaṇā* is described as having circular marks on it³²⁻³³.

In most of the *nighaṅṭus* utility of *lakṣmaṇā* and *śweta kaṅṭakārī* in female diseases has been given³⁴⁻⁴². The oldest *Aṣṭāṅga Nighaṅṭu* mentions that *lakṣmaṇā* possesses red spots on the leaves⁴³. Most of the *nighaṅṭus* have quoted the same verse of Ḍalhaṇa⁴⁴ regarding its description. The root of *nilakaṅṭha* (*mayūrasikhā*) has been recommended as the substitute by Bhāvamiśra⁴⁵. It is well known that for helping to identify the plant which became a necessity due to urbanization and lack of contact with nature, several synonyms were coined in the later period, e.g. *raktabinducchadā*, *bastagandhā-kṛtī*, *bindupatrā*, *durālabhā*, *kaṅṭakārī*, *kṣetradūtī*, *lakṣmī*, *nāginī*, *putradā*, *putrakandā*, *raktā*, *sūlinī*, *tūlinī*, *kapāṭeśvarī*, *kumārtikā*, *kṣetradūtīkā*, *garbhadā*, *candrapuṣpā*, *priyaṅkarī* etc. Some of the synonyms seem to be applicable to both, i.e. *lakṣmaṇā* and *śweta kaṅṭakārī*⁴⁶.

All the ancient commentators (upto 18th century A.D.) accept the *lakṣmaṇā* for infertility. Some commentators also have given some morphological features to identify the plant. Cakrapāṇi's comment that it is well-known by the same name⁴⁷ suggests that either it was a commonly known plant or more correct, he had no definite idea about it.

The first addition towards the morphological features apart from the etymology (which suggests that it has some marks), is from *Aṣṭāṅga Nighaṅṭu* (8th century A.D.) which has added that the marks are of red colour on leaves⁴⁸. Ḍalhaṇa has given more details.

Accordingly, it is a plant like *bastagandhū* having leaves marked with red spots of the shape of mini-human form and which helps to get a male child^{49a}. The description given by Ḍalhaṇa along with a variant replacing 'chadā' (leaves) by 'sadā' (always) has been used by modern authors to identify *lakṣmaṇā* with different species by interpreting the meaning of this verse in different ways. 'Putrakākāra' has been applied to the part (root) instead of to the red spots. Any plant found useful for helping in conception was attempted to be proved as *lakṣmaṇā* on the above characters or even by adding a few more synonyms, depicting some new characters which were present in the plant being considered for proving as *lakṣmaṇā*. In addition to verse of Ḍalhaṇa, Ādhamalla (16th century A.D.) mentions that *lakṣmaṇā* flowers during the *śarat* (autumn) season and gives fruit thereafter. It should be collected under the influence of *Puṣya*, *Mūla* or *Hasta* stars after enchanting *mantrās*^{49b}. *Madanpāla Nighaṅṭu* has added that it has milky white flowers, it is a hairy climber and it (the part used) resembles *lakṣmaṇā* (crane) in shape⁵⁰. *Bastagandhā* (*ajagandhikā*), to which *lakṣmaṇā* resembles itself is not well identified. It is considered to be a plant of *Labiatae* family, being described as a variety of *barbari* by *Bhāvaprakāśa*^{51a}. Others equate it with

hulahula or *yavānī* or a wild *yavānī*^{51b}, *Putrakākandā* (*Rājanighaṇṭu*) indicates that the tuber is like a human form⁵². *Sodhala Nighaṇṭu* accepts that it has white flowers⁵³. In *Abhidhānaratnamālā* after the description of *lakṣmaṇā* another drug 'sūlinī', having *nāginī*, *lakṣmī* and *matsyākṣī* as its synonyms, is described⁵⁴. This is clearly a separate drug according to this *Nighaṇṭu*, but it seems that later compilers have included this or some of the synonyms with *lakṣmaṇā*. Bhāvamiśra has described *lakṣmaṇā* and *śweta kaṇṭakārī* both in the *Nighaṇṭu* part⁵⁵; but has suggested to use the *śifā* (root) of *nilakaṇṭha* as a substitute for *lakṣmaṇā* in 'miśra-varga', which has been equated as *mayūrasikhā* by the author himself⁵⁶. *Nilakaṇṭha* is also not a commonly known plant and *mayūrasikhā* is also a controversial drug. Many synonyms added by the later *nighaṇṭus* seem to be applicable to the white flowered *kaṇṭakārī*.

The oldest botanical identification of *lakṣmaṇā* as *mandrake* (*Mandragora sp.*) seems to be quoted by Watt⁵⁷. This has been followed by Dymock⁵⁸ and his followers like Desai⁵⁹ etc. Much imaginary and fictitious legends prevailed around this plant of Europe. It was taken out of the ground with the help of a dog with a belief that it may cause danger to the person digging the plant. It was supposed to be having root like a human form⁶⁰. One or two species of this genus are reported to grow in India and possess narcotic properties. The importance of this plant seems to have declined when it was correctly identified with particular species and the properties worked out.

The next plant which got much support was first suggested by the famous botanist of Gujarat, Jaikrishna Indrajī⁶¹. This is known as *hanumānaveḷa* in Gujarat due to similarity of its fruits with *gadā* (mace). The leaves are reported to possess reddish spots and the local people use the seeds of this climber for removing sterility. Bapalal, however, seems to have supported this plant as *lakṣmaṇā* in his earlier works⁶²; but later he changed his ideas and started to support ginseng⁶³. Kirtīkar and Basu⁶⁴ have mentioned *lajjālu* (*Biophytum sensitivum* DC.) for *lakṣmaṇā*, which is accepted by Biswas⁶⁵.

Chunekar⁶⁶ proposed to equate *Lakṣmaṇā* with the Chinese wonder-drug ginseng (*Aralia quinquefolia*) on the basis that the root is like a small human form (*putrakākāra*) and possesses wonderful properties. It is not clear that whether the leaves have any spots, but some species of *Aralia* or *Panax* which is the source of ginseng are reported to be used as ornamental plants for their foliage. In some *cikitsā granthas*⁶⁶⁻⁶⁹, the character of *lakṣmaṇā* is given that it is having only *cakras* (circles or rings) which is supported by the description of ginseng given by Lucas⁷⁰. There are different varieties of ginseng. In Nepal, traditionally, this ginseng is used as *lakṣmaṇā* by the name of *rensen*. Bapalal⁷¹ also appears to have supported this identification in his latest work on *Bṛhatrayī*. Some authors have suggested *Smithia geminiflora* Roth., as *lakṣmaṇā*.⁷² Sharma⁷³ has proposed a new plant *Cynoglossum lanceolatum* Forsk, known as *putariākanda* in Madhya Pradesh and used traditionally for similar purpose.

CONCLUSION

The critical review suggests that it is not possible to identify *lakṣmaṇā* correctly and to the full satisfaction, taking into consideration the different views of commentators and *nighaṇṭus*. On the basis of some available clues, ginseng seems to be quite nearer to *lakṣmaṇā*. However, after screening experimentally and assessing clinically, all the plants suggested as *lakṣmaṇā* in books as also the plants reported to possess fertility action after extensive field survey, it may be possible to establish a definite view for *lakṣmaṇā*. During the course of experimental process, it may be quite possible that a better plant may be found useful for procreation and change of sex in foetus. *Nighaṇṭus* have described tubers other than *lakṣmaṇā* having such properties.

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