EDITORIAL

THE PLANT OF OPIUM IS A GOD GIVEN HERBAL DRUG

Opium is a drug which is known to mankind since 3rd century B.C. It was mentioned by Theophrastus and his writing as poppy juice. The two ancient human centers where early man settled, where he learnt to use various herbal drugs are Egypt at the Nile Valley and Mesopotamia, the land of Summerian people.

The word opium has been divered from Greek word “option” which was used for the opium juice. The juice is obtained from the plant Papaver somniferum by incising the green unripe fruit. The fruit exudes milky substance or latex, which is accumulated on the edges of the cut surface. When it is intended to collect the juice a small pot or some other container is hanged, in which is juice is collected. This is highly effective in producing hypnotic effect on the user.

When man became conscious of his surrounding he realized that he is surrounded by different kinds of plant and animals. Some of them are harmful while others are useful. It must have taken thousands of years of his experience that he must have realized the difference between useful and harmful plants as well as animals. Whenever he moved in search of food he took the useful plant with him. Much later he must have learnt to cultivate the plants which were useful for him. Opium was one of them.

In the beginning he did not know to write but later when some kind of language developed he started documenting on tree bark, copper plates etc. Some of the old useful drugs, obtained from both plants and animals are used in the same way as thousand years before. Besides opium, plants like foxglove, Asgard, clove, zingiber, henbane and their products such as reserpine, insulin, penicillin, blood plasma are used even now. One of the old documents known as Eber Papyrus, published 16th Century BC contains many drugs and their uses.

Opium consists of dried latex from the unipe capsule (fruit). From the ancient Greek and Romans who knew this drug from remote past, it was directed through the Arabs into India as well as Europe. The practice of opium eating originated probably in Persia. Opium is collected mainly in Macedonia, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Persia and India.

The plant, from which the opium is obtained, is cultivated from a wild hybrid species, between Papaver somniferum var album and a violet gray form. The plant is grown, as a mixed crop with maize, tobacco and other crops, between September to April. They flower in May to June and the capsules are formed in June to July.

Incised are made carefully to cut across the laticiferous vessel, which exudes latex in small drops, which are scraped by a knife and dried as cake of different shapes (160-2252). The incision may be repeated after 2-3 days, about 3 times. China is the world’s largest producer of opium.

Opium contains about 25-30 different alkaloids, which are compound of C, H, O, N besides other substances, as mucilage, wax, sugar caoutchouc, salt, calcium and magnesium.

Different alkaloids such as Morphine (10-20%) codeine (0.3–0.4%) nicotine (2-8%) thebaine (0.2-0.5%) narcene papaverine are present. The crop yields 220-225-kg of seed per hectare.

Morphine (9.5%) is highly poisonous but very valuable drug and should be taken in limited quality. It is sedative, astringent and hypnotic, used to relieve pain, cause sleep, prevent abortion and in post–natal pain. It however leads to mental and physical fatigue, delirium, debility and may be fatal in extreme cases. Fruit are used in diarrhea and dysentery. Seed
contains tonic (post) as nutritive, used in Kebab, curries, bread and confectionary as condiment. Seed contain 50% of an odorless edible oil, which is free from narcotic properties.

Dioscorides wrote of opium and heard about mandragora which is essential ingredient of wine of condiment. The shape of Mandrake rhizome looked like man (anthromorphic) Mandrake was often worn as amulet.

Parcelsus the Swiss reformer of medicine put chemistry at the service of medicine. He popularized the use of opium in Europe.

Thomas Sydenham (1624-1689) the father of clinical medicine in England, introduced the liquid form of opium. In 1680 Sydenham wrote “among the remedies which it has pleased Almighty God to give to man to receive his sufferings, none is so universal and so efficacious.” A young German chemist, Friedrich Sert Turner in 1806, isolated an opium alkaloid that he named morphium (morphine) after Morpheus the Greek God of dream.

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