

7. THE GERM THEORY OF DISEASE - THE SEED AND THE SOIL

(A CRITICAL DISCUSSION WITH AYURVEDIC AND MODERN CONCEPT)

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There seems to be a general idea that the germ theory of disease which plays so important a part in modern medicine is not known to Ayurveda, I propose to examine the question at a little length as great importance seems to be attached to it in certain scientific circle; my argument will be that it is not true to say that the germ theory of causation of certain diseases was not known to Ayurveda, and that what is true that it did not and does not, occupy in Ayurveda the all-important position which it does in modern medicine.

We have seen that, according to Ayurvedists, causation of disease is twofold; viz. extrinsic (Bahya) and intrinsic (Abhyantara), and that parasitic germ are mentioned among the extrinsic causes, under the subhead “Agantuj” along with traumas and poisons of all kinds. There are two ways in which Agantuj diseases manifest themselves in the body, viz. (1) independently (Swatantrana) and (2) by infection or contagion (Sankramanena). Leprosy, other Kusthas and infectious diseases generally are instances of diseases conveyed by contagion. Pathogenic organisms (Krimis) are broadly divided into two classes, viz. those which are visible to the naked eye and those which are not; thus, Sushruta, in the chapter entitled Krimi-Roga-Pratishodha, speaks of twenty kinds of krimis, of which, the first thirteen kinds are mentioned as being visible to the naked eye, while keshada, Romada and Others are said to be not so visible (Keshadadyastvadrishyaste). Vagbhata is also clear as to the causation of Kushtha by invisible organism; his significant reference to them as living Anos (Jantvo anavah) is unmistakable as also his statement that some of them are invisible because of their minuteness (Ashtanghridaya – Nidanstan, chapter VII).

While there can be no doubt that the existence of microscopic organisms as also their definite causative relationship to certain diseases was distinctly recognized by Ayurvedists, yet, it is clear that they did not attribute to germs the all-important role, assigned to them by orthodox western scientists of today; they merely looked upon the germ as one among the many Agantuj causative factors, capable of producing disease, if the soil or the field (Kshetra) was suitable for the growth of germ-seed. It is when the bodily constitution was undermined by the non-observance of the Laws of health such as Ritucharya (hygienic rules for various seasons of the year), Dincharya (Hygienic rules for daily conduct), Bramhacharya (Hygienic rules of celibacy or regulated sexual life) and so on, that the kshetra (or soil) become suitable for the growth of germ-seed, which were powerless to do any mischief in the case of those persons who led pure and healthy lives, because the kshetra (or soil) was unsuitable for the germination and growth of the seed. Looked at from this standpoint, germ-seed is merely one among the many external causative factors of disease, like trauma, poisons, nutritional abnormalities and so on. This fact is, in a way, recognized by Western Medicine also; for, we still speak of large group of diseases, like Deficiency diseases, Nutritional diseases, Tumours, Malformations, and so on whose causation is not attributed to germs at all, although some germ-enthusiasts are hard at work to find out causative germs for all diseases in general; it is because of the undue importance attached to germs, that is sometimes appears as though the germ theory was the whole of our Western theory of causation of diseases, while the fact is that it but one among the many theories known to

Western Medicine. Thus, lack of vitamins is held to give rise to a group of diseases like Rickets, Scurvy and Beri-Beri; abnormalities of internal secretions, to other diseases like Myxoedema, Addison's disease, Acromegaly etc.; then again we have tumours, malformations etc., whose causation has not yet been satisfactorily known. Ayurveda prefers to have but one theory, viz., the Tridosha – Theory; as sub-heads of which it has not only the germ theory but also every other theory mentioned above. Hence, when people talk of the Tridosha –theory versus the germ theory, they are making the mistake of comparing the whole with a part; then again there seems to be such exaggerated views of “germ-theory” that it is worthwhile re-emphasizing the fact that, even in its own line, the present germ-theory is not the last word in medicine and that it is applicable to only one group of diseases. If one hundred people are exposed to the same bacterial infection or seed, it does not follow that all will contract the disease; in addition to the bacteria, you required a particular condition of the tissue – soil where the bacteria can take root and thrive. It seems as though **the Tridosha – theory looks at the question more from the standpoint of the soil, while the germ-theory looks at it more from the standpoint of the seed.**

“Keep out the seed – away with all germs and you are safe”. This is the slogan of the germ-enthusiast. “It seems impracticable to keep out the germ- seeds which are ubiquitous. Therefore **keep the soil in such a condition that no seed can grow, even if it gets in there.**” So urges the Ayurvedists. Moreover, can we definitely say that the Ayurvedists is wrong, even if he choose to assert that the bacteria are the result, rather than the cause of disease?

Sir James Goodheart, an honoured name in Western Medicine, was stated in early 20th Century, that **“Pathology is still shifting, we have not yet reached finality, even bacteria are probably results and not causes.”**

Thereafter a distinct tendency to get away from the present position of attaching exaggerated importance to the germ-seed and to take up instead more or less the Ayurvedic position of attending to the soil and keeping it in such a condition that the germ-seed cannot germinate or thrive therein. Thus new tendency is apparently gaining ground so fast while a decade ago it was confidently affirmed that if the ‘seed’ was present, the noxious plant could be counted on to grow; in other words that infection was the one essential preliminary cause to illness. This idea led to the active campaigns which were organized against various bacteria, the hope being that their abolition would result in the abolition of the disasters occasioned by them. Medicine has largely abandoned that hope, for it is now certain that the ‘soil’ as much as the ‘seed’ determines the outcome. There are in fact, disease proof individuals and other individuals whose susceptibility is much greater than normal. Susceptibility, too, can be won or lost. The minds of many workers are turning to this aspect of the subject, for it is already abundantly clear that control of human resistance offers a brighter future than direct attempts to eliminate disease. For example, it is easier, too, to supply children in winter with an adequate supply of butter or other animal fat than to sweep their nurseries clear of the germs of pneumonia or bronchitis. The butter in this case makes the ‘soil’ unsuitable for the ‘seed’. It will thus be seen that the Ayurvedic conception of germ-caused diseases, as of diseases generally, is essentially a sound one, even in the light of the most recent finding of Western Science.