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## LITERARY REVIEW OF ANCIENT METHODS OF BIRTH CONTROL

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### Introduction

Rapid population growth is presently a critical issue in most developing countries. Family planning matters save women's lives preventing unwanted pregnancies thus, conserving the resources, improving health and the standard of living. Family planning reinforces people's rights to determine the number and spacing of their children. Contraception prevents pregnancy by interfering with the normal process of ovulation, fertilization and implantation.

In ancient days, growing population was not an issue. On the other hand, due to availability of abundant natural resources and land as well as more deaths due to epidemics and natural calamities, multiplying the race was considered as a necessity and people used to pray for bearing a large number of children. Even then, people have tried various means to prevent pregnancy. It is observed that since ancient times, various methods of birth control have been practiced all over the world.

The history of birth control, also known as contraception and fertility control, refers to the methods or devices that have been historically used to prevent pregnancy. Planning and provision of birth control is called family planning. In some times and cultures, abortion had none of the stigma which it has today, making birth control less important. Abortion was one of the means of birth control.

### Ancient methods for birth control

Birth control and abortion are well documented in ancient times. Vedas describe Ashram Dharmas which regulate sexual life thus, limiting the population. The Eber's papyrus from 1550 B.C. and the Kahun papyrus from 1850 B.C. have within them some of the earliest documented descriptions of birth control. Direct references of contraception are not available in Samhitas but indirect methods of limiting sexual life and spacing of children are certainly present. The different methods include natural methods, ingestion of various substances, locally acting drugs having spermicidal properties, fumigation of vagina by different drugs, surgical practices etc.

## 1. Natural Contraceptive methods:

### a) Brahmacharya

According to the Ashram Dharmas, four Ashrams are described in many ancient Hindu texts which are Brahmacharya, Grihasthashram, Vanaprasthashram and Sanyasashram. Grihasthashram was the the period from the age of 25 years to 50 years. Only during this time period, an individual was allowed to enjoy sexual life. Rest of his life that is before 25 years of age and after 50 years of age, an individual was supposed to not indulge in sexual activity. This was one of the methods of birth control.

### b) Safe period

Ayurveda has divided menstrual cycle ie. Rituchakra into three stages as follows: Ritukaal (Follicular phase), Rituvyateetakala (Luteal phase) and Rajasrava (Menstruation). It is described in the texts that coitus during the Rituvyateetakala is considered as safe period. (Sushruta Samhita Sharirsthana 3:9, Ashtang Sangraha Sharirsthana 1:42, Ashtang Hridaya Sharirsthana 1:22,23)

### c) Improper position

Incomplete coitus with the female in left lateral or right lateral position (Charak Samhita Sharirsthana 8:16, Ashtang Sangraha Sharirsthana 1:59) or ejaculation of the semen over Sameerana naadi doesn't result in conception. (Bhavaprakash poorva 3:18)

### d) Lactational amenorrhea

Lactation i.e. breast feeding up to three years was also used for the birth control purposes in ancient time.

### e) Coitus obstructus

Vatsyayana Malanaga, a fourth century Indian physician has presented various contraceptive methods including coitus obstructus involving controlling the release of semen, in his classical text (2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.). This technique involved squeezing the base of the penis in an attempt to force the ejaculate into the bladder to be expelled later.

### f) Self prevention

According to Ratirahasya, an individual at the time of sexual enjoyment (orgasm), should press firmly with the fingers at the fore part of the testicles (base of the urethra) and divert his mind to other things. He is also advised to hold his breath while doing so. This delays the ejaculation of semen.

### g) Astrology i.e. Graha Dasha

According to Varaha Mihir, position of certain planets at the time of coitus determine whether conception will occur or not.

### h) Marriage Systems

Kautilya Artha Shastra advised Polygamy type of marriage system in special conditions only. But he indirectly prohibited this type of marriages and advised Monogamy which is a favorable measure for controlled reproduction.

Polygamy and Polyandry were not popularly practiced in ancient India.

## 2. Oral Contraceptive methods:

- a) Pippali, vidang and tankan in same proportion taken along with milk or water during rutukaal.
- b) Japakusum grinded in kanji to be ingested along with hundred year old jaggery (one pal) during three days of menstruation.
- c) Root of Tanduliyak grinded in rice water to be taken during the last three days of rutukaal.
- d) Taalis and Gairik in equal amount (one karsha), taken along with water on the fourth day of menses.
- e) Dhatri, anjan, and Haritaki ingested with water.
- f) Rasanjan, Haritaki and Amalaki to be taken with cold water.
- g) Leaf of Patha to be taken after rutusnana.
- h) Root of Mushakaparni situated in northern direction grinded in Tandulodak to be ingested for contraception.
- i) Gunja powder (six masha) along with oil (four tola) to be taken during three days of rutukaal.
- j) Mustard with flowers of Shimbali boiled together and ingested during rutukaal.
- k) Fruit of Kadamba taken along with Tuthodaka during three days after rutusnana.
- l) Ingestion of jaggery three times a day for fifteen days.
- m) Fruit of Bakul grinded with alcohol to be taken during four days of menstruation.
- n) Shweta marich (white pepper) powdered in sugar syrup to be ingested during three days of menstruation.
- o) Powder of seed of Palaash fruit along with honey to be taken during three days of menstruation.
- p) Vidanga powder along with cold water to be ingested from the fifth day of menses for fifteen days.
- q) In the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. thousands of gold contraceptive prescriptions were available for women who no longer want to bear children. This prescription, which was supposed to induce sterility, was made of oil, quicksilver heated together for one day and taken orally.
- r) Fruit of Kadamba – The fruit of Kadamba added with one fourth of honey in quantity, if taken for three days along with hot water produces sterility in the women.
- s) Turmeric (Haldi)- One piece of the node of the rhizome of turmeric should be taken every day for six days (three days in menses and three days thereafter). This is described to produce sterility in the women, but she will continue to have menses.
- t) Seeds of cucumber - After the onset of menses, if a woman takes seeds of cucumber for seven or eight days, she will not deliver any more.
- u) Castor seeds – Administration of the pulp of one or two castor seeds during the menses period is stated to prevent fertilization for one and two years respectively.
- v) Flowers of Jamun – Flowers of Jamun ground with the urine of the cow are stated to cause sterility in the woman when taken during the time of menstruation.
- w) Plants with contraceptive properties were used in ancient time from the seventh century B.C. onwards and documented by numerous ancient writers on gynecology. The Silphium plant is one such example.

### 3. Locally acting Contraceptive methods:

Various locally acting contraceptive methods have been mentioned in ancient texts. They are as follows.

- a) Placing Saindhav dipped in oil in the vagina before coitus. (Yoga Ratnakar Yonivyapad Chikitsa)
- b) Yoni Poorana with Dhatura root powder before coitus. (Yoga Ratnakar Yonivyapad Chikitsa)
- c) Yoni Poorana with Nimba taila or placing Nimba taila pichu (swab soaked in Nimba taila) in vagina before coitus. (Yoga Ratnakar Yonivyapad Chikitsa)
- d) Application of Palaashbeej powder along with ghee and honey in the vagina during follicular phase of menstruation. (Yoga Ratnakar Yonivyapad Chikitsa)
- e) The Eber's papyrus from 1550 B.C. has described the use of tampon made of honey, acacia leaves and lint to be placed in the vagina to block sperm and prevent pregnancy.
- f) Kahun Papyrus describes various contraceptive pessaries, including acacia gum which can produce lactic acid. Recent research has confirmed it to have spermicidal qualities and is still used in contraceptive jellies.
- g) Other birth control methods mentioned in the papyrus include the application of gummy substances to cover the mouth of the womb (i.e. the cervix) Thus, avoiding the entry of sperm.
- h) A mixture of honey and sodium carbonate applied to the inside of the vagina acts as a contraceptive.
- i) British women shared the recipe of 'Contraceptive Fudge' in olden days

which includes cocoa butter, borax, salicylic acid and quinine bisulphate. A piece of this fudge was inserted into the vagina to serve as a pessary. (Turning point: The myths and realities of menopause C.Sue.Furman]

- j) The prototype of IUD was probably described by the ancient Greek Hippocrates around 400 B.C. which was a hollow lead tube filled with fat and inserted into the uterus to prevent conception.
- k) Pessary made from crocodile dung was also used as a contraceptive method.
- l) Elephant's excreta – Ancient Indian women were believed to insert a paste made of elephant faeces in their vagina to act as a barrier between the semen and their cervixes. Some researchers think that the alkaline nature of the faeces could have killed the sperm.
- j) Potions ghee and salt- Readily available ingredients were used by ancient Indian women for contraception. They inserted potions made of powdered palm leaf and red chalk into their vagina. In the first century c.e. they used cotton dipped in a blend of ghee, honey and/or seeds of kinshuka/palaash tree. They also used rock salt as a spermicide which sounds excruciatingly uncomfortable but the women most likely ground the salt into small less sharp pieces.
- h) Magical device – Root of Dhatura plant collected during Krishna paksha chaturdashi or Pushya nakshatra was to be tied on the waist of the female during intercourse, these prevented conception. (Yoga Ratnakar Yonivyapad Chikitsa)
- i) In Ratirahasya, the semen of a male is described to be collected in a leaf of Alaktaka, covered with the bark of

Bhojpatra tree and tied to the foot of the bed, this was said to cause sterility in the male.

j) Root of opium collected at Pushya Nakshatra was tied around the waist of the female to avoid the conception. (Meghvi.11 pg.481)

k) First fallen milk tooth of child covered with silver was tied around the waist of the female was used as a contraceptive. (Meghvi.11 pg.481)

l) Fumigation of vagina with Neem stem i.e. Margosa (Brihat Yoga Tarangini 14:3:55), Triticum dicoccum (Robert Jutte) i.e. Emmer seeds at the end of Ritusrava serves as a contraceptive.

#### 4. Surgical Contraceptive methods:

Surgical procedure of crushing of testicles for birth control is described in Kaushika Sutra.

