



The Discovery of Bower Manuscript: Right Place, Right Time

Vadrevu K. Raju, M.D., FRCS, FACS

Founder and President, Eye Foundation of America
Clinical Professor of Ophthalmology, West Virginia Univ., Morgantown, WV
Chairman, Goutami Eye Institute, Rajahmundry, AP, India
Email: vkraju@comcast.net

Editors' Note: *Sushruta was a pride of India, especially for the medical professionals. Although well-known for his skilled surgical procedure for rhinoplasty, Sushruta was in fact a keen observing physician and pathophysiologist. Working about 2,500 years ago, he discovered diabetes mellitus (madhumeha) as a disease due to excessive sugar in the body. He also described obesity as a "disease" that leads to diabetes and heart diseases. He even prescribed dietary regimens and exercise to overcome these two ailments that are causing major health problems today. It should be noted that obesity has been officially recognized as a disease by the AMA in June 2013 only. In view of these historical facts this newsletter has been aptly named as Sushruta Medical News. What Hippocrates was to the Western Medicine, Sushruta was to the Indian Medicine, if not more. It is our duty to recognize our heritage in medicine. In this article, Dr. V. K. Raju presents how serendipitous discovery of Bower Manuscript opened up an entire treasure of ancient Indian Medicine and Surgery to the world. Note: Both Susruta and Sushruta are accepted spellings.*

The only thing new in the world is the history you do not know. – President Harry Truman

Today, both scholars and physicians study Ancient India and its teachings about medicine. We know, now, about the Golden Age of Surgery, which Susruta ushered in. For much of history, though, the Western world either didn't know or didn't care to know about Ancient India—at least not until the late 19th century, when one man made a discovery that would draw the attention of scholars across the globe and pique the world's curiosity about Ancient India. That man was Lieutenant Hamilton Bower, and his world-changing discovery was a complete coincidence. The Bower Manuscript, which was discovered by and named for Lieutenant Hamilton Bower, is "the oldest surviving manuscript on Ayurveda". Written on birch bark, it is believed to date back to the fifth century AD, but it was undiscovered in Kuchar until 1890. The manuscript mentions of eye drops, Susruta, and Charaka, a man sometimes called the Father of Medicine used. The manuscript is clearly a product of Ancient India. So how did it end up in Kuchar—and where is Kuchar anyway? And perhaps more importantly, how did Bower, an officer of the British India, originally sent to investigate a murder, come to find it?

Kuchar is in Central Asia; specifically, it's in Eastern Turkestan and was situated on "the great caravan route to China," which "skirt(ed) the foot of the Tien Shan Mountain Range." Long ago, Eastern Turkestan was a melting pot where the cultures of India, Western Asia and China met and mixed. In Kuchar, there was also a population of Buddhist monks, many of whom had made it their mission to carry Indian civilization and Indian literature into Central Asia. The Bower Manuscript was found in one of these Buddhist "viharas," or monasteries. Although some historians believe that the manuscript was written by monks in Kuchar, it was more likely written in Kashmir. Birch bark was commonly used as paper in North India, whereas palm leaves were used in South India. Although no one knows exactly how or why it ended up in Kuchar, we are lucky that it did, because the manuscript would have been much less likely to surface had it not been laid to rest in its dry, desert climate.

It was a sheer luck that the manuscript was found by a man who was able to recognize its importance and who shared it with great thinkers of the time. In fact, Bower was a textbook example of a man in the right place at the right time. He had traveled to Kuchar to find out who had murdered Andrew Dalglish, a Scottish man who had set his sights on the mysterious Eastern world and had been shot for unknown reasons. Supposedly, while Bower was conducting his search, he was approached by a merchant of Kuchar. The Kuchari had teamed up with another merchant from Afghanistan, and together they had excavated a Buddhist monastery. There, they had found some treasures of the ancient world, including the manuscript that would soon be named for Bower. The merchants either gave or sold the manuscript to Bower, who sent it to the president of Asiatic Society of Bengal, a society established in 1784 to encourage "Oriental Studies." A.F. Rudolf