

Special Article

Unsung Heroes — Ancient Vaidyas to Modern Doctors

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This article explores the under recognized contributions of healthcare professionals in society through the narrative of Sushena, a vaidya from the ancient Indian epic, Ramayana. It highlights the timeless and boundaryless nature of medical ethics and compassion, drawing parallels between Sushena's story and the challenges faced by modern medical professionals in India. Despite their critical role in healthcare, these professionals often lack societal acknowledgment and sometimes face violence. The article proposes the construction of a temple dedicated to Sushena in Shri Ram Janmbhumi Complex, Ayodhya as a symbolic and tangible tribute to the medical profession, urging society to value and recognize their contributions more deeply. [J Indian Med Assoc 2024; 122(5): 71-2]

Key words : Vaidyas, Ayurveda, Ancient Medicine, Modern Medicine.

The history of medicine is filled with the stories of many unrecognized heroes who have spent their lives treating and saving others. Often, their contribution to society is overlooked or forgotten over time. One such example is the story of the vaidya (doctor) in the Ramayana, an ancient Indian epic, who saved the lives of Lakshmana and others. People familiar with the story of Ramayana mostly remember that Lord Hanuman flew all the way to Himalaya and came back with the entire mountain as he could not identify the exact herb that saved lives. Despite playing a key role at a crucial point in the story, the vaidya's name, Sushena, is rarely remembered. This reflects a common reality for many medical professionals today, who work hard and make significant contributions without widespread recognition. This story serves as a reminder of the countless individuals in medicine whose efforts are fundamental to our health, yet often remain unseen and unacknowledged. This story also highlights the rich heritage of ancient Indian medicine having expertise and resources to manage critically wounded warriors.

The story of Sushena :

Ramayana, one of the two most important epics of Hinduism is the story of Lord Rama, the seventh incarnation of the god Vishnu. He along with his brother Laxmana and the vanar-sena (an army of monkeys)

was at war against Ravana (the king of Lanka) who had kidnapped Rama's wife, Sita. During a battle Ravana's son Meghnatha hurls a powerful weapon at Laxmana making him unconscious.

In Lanka Kand of Ram Charit Manas¹, Goswami Tulsidas narrates the story when Jamuvanta advises that someone bring the vaidya Sushena from Lanka, following which Hanuman was commanded with the task to bring Sushena from his home.

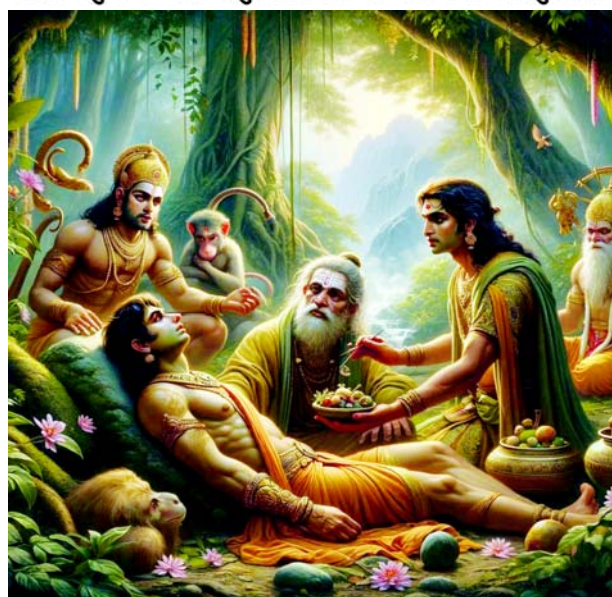
राम पदारबिंद सिर नायउ आइ सुषेना

कहा नाम गिरि औषधी जाहु पवनसुत लेन॥5॥

Sushena then instructs Hanuman to bring a particular herb from a specific mountain, which was going to be used for saving the life of Lakshmana.

जामवंत कह बैद सुषेना। लंकाँ रहइ को पठई लेना॥

धरि लघु रूप गयउ हनुमंता। आनेउ भवन समेत तुरंता॥



Vaidya Sushena treating Lakshmana. Image generated using Chat GPT 3.5

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There is mention of Sushena and his role at a few places in Valmiki Ramayana as well. Lord Rama has been described speaking to Sushena in despair questioning his own power and valour and the whole purpose of war². Sushena consoles Rama and saves the life of Laxmana using some special herb brought by Hanuman. Lord Rama praises Sushena for attending the wounded Lakshmana. He further asks him to treat Vibhishan and other warriors³.

स तं भ्रातरमाशवास्य पारिष्वज्य च राघवः ॥ ११-६-१९

रामः सुषेणं मुदितः समाभाष्येदमब्रवीत् ।

सशल्योऽयं महाप्राज्ञः सौमित्रिर्मित्रवत्सलः ॥ ११-६-२०

यथा भवति सुस्वस्थस्तथा त्वं समुपाचर ।

विशल्यः क्रियतां क्षिप्रं सौमित्रिः सविभीषणः ॥ ११-६-२१

कृष वानरसैन्यानां शूराणां द्रुमयोधिनाम् ।

ये चान्येऽत्र च युध्यन्तः सशल्यो ब्रणिनस्तथा ॥ ११-६-२२

तेऽपि सर्वे प्रयत्नेन क्रियन्तां सुखिनस्त्वया ।

Sushena, the royal vaidya of Lanka, is summoned during a dire moment when Laxmana is near death. Despite being from the enemy's land, Sushena advises the remedy that ultimately saves Laxmana, showcasing the timeless and boundaryless nature of medical ethics and compassion. This story also highlights the rich heritage of traditional Indian medicine which existed in the form of Sushruta Samhita⁴ and Charak Samhita^{5,6} believed to have been written in 6th century BC and 2nd century BC.

Contemporary Reflections :

In modern times, the medical profession continues to be indispensable, with healthcare workers at the forefront of battling global health crises. While formal recognition, such as India's Padma Awards, exists, the societal acknowledgment of these contributions often lacks the depth and visibility it deserves.

Just like Lakshmana, thousands of lives are saved daily by the medical professionals, but their contribution to society still goes unrecognised like that of Sushena. Despite its huge population and scarcity of resources, the Indian medical system is still able to provide medical services 24 X 7 in public as well as private health care sector unlike many western countries that have a long waiting list. Doctors of Indian origin continue the tradition of dominance with their presence in various parts of the globe.

Despite their tireless, round-the-clock services under challenging conditions, instances when the modern-day Sushena fails to save a life, often lead to he/she being blamed for negligence. Medical professionals in India often face verbal abuses and

physical violence sometimes leading to death^{7,8}. A recently published study concluded that 63% of medical practitioners in India fear of violence⁹. The story of Sushena reminds us of the importance of recognizing and valuing the silent, critical contributions of healthcare professionals.

Proposal for Recognition :

We propose inclusion of a temple dedicated to Sushena along with proposed temples of Shabari, Nishad and others in Shri Ram Janmbhumi complex, Ayodhya. This temple would not only honour a key figure from the Ramayana but also serve as a lasting tribute to medical professionals' invaluable role throughout history and in contemporary society. It represents a step towards acknowledging the profound impact of healthcare workers in a manner that is both symbolic and tangible.

CONCLUSION

The inclusion of a temple for Sushena would symbolize the recognition of the silent, yet monumental contributions of healthcare professionals across generations. It serves as a call to action for society to remember the heroes from our epics and recognize those heroes in our hospitals and clinics. This proposal urges a re-evaluation of how we value and recognize the medical profession, advocating for a deeper appreciation of those who dedicate their lives to healing others.

FURTHER DETAILS

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