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HONEY: ITS HISTORY AND RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Honey is produced by honey-bees as blossom honey or nectar honey by secreting nectars of flowers, and honeydew honey by secreting the exudates of plant sucking insects. The use of honey as medicine and as nutritional food by human being has been in existence from time immemorial. The benefits of honey have been praise highly since ancient times by many religious faiths and recorded in most ancient scriptures. In fact records reveal that raw honey is the most ancient sweetener, and it is noted that it has been in use throughout the world several million years ago. Honey is a sweet, flavorful liquid food of high nutritional value and immense health benefits. The use of honey is widely embraced by all religious and cultural beliefs. Honey is a natural liquid mentioned in religious books and accepted by all generations, traditions and civilizations in both ancient and modern era.

Keywords: Honey, health benefits, nectar, religious books,ancient.

INTRODUCTION

Honey is the natural sweet substance produced by honey bees from the nectar of plants or from secretions of living parts of plants or excretions of plant sucking insects on the living parts of plants, which the bees collect, transform by combining with specific substances of their own, deposit, dehydrate, store and leave in the honey comb to ripen and mature[15].

The composition of honey depends on the plant species visited by the honeybees and the environmental processing and storage conditions.[9,21,41]. The carbohydrates are the major components of honey. The monosaccharides as fructose and glucose are the dominant fraction and occur for 65-80% of honey sugars[20,23,24,32]. Honey also contains minor constituents such as proteins, enzymes, amino acids and organic acids, vitamins, volatile compounds, phenolic acids (caffeic acid, coumaric acid, ferrulic acid, ellagic acid, chlorogenic acid), flavonoids (chyrisin, pinocambrin, pinobanksin, quercetin, luteolin, apigenin etc) and carotenoid also[5,14,19,25]. Potassium is the main mineral element in honey and other minerals include phosphorus, calcium, sodium, magnesium, zinc, iron and manganese[7,25,31,45]. The main enzymes in honey are diastase (amylase) & invertase (saccharase, α-glusosidase) which play important role in judging the quality of honey and are also used as indicator of honey freshness[34,11]. Color of honey ranges from pale yellow to dark reddish to nearly black. Degree of darkening depends on temperature and duration of storage[8,18]. Honey has been found to contain significant antioxidant activity due to presence of both enzymatic (diastase, invertase, glucose oxidase) and non-enzymatic substances (Phenolic acids, flavonoids, amino acids, organic acids)[14] .Many studies indicate that antioxidant activity of honey varies and widely depends on floral source, geographical origin, climatic conditions, processing, storage & handling[6]. Honey shows generally Newtonian behavior except heather, buckwheat & manuka honey which shows thixotropic while eucalyptus honey shows dilatent behavior[27].

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History of Honey:

Honey is the oldest sweetener existent in the world since the evolution of man while the accurate date of origin of this sweetener remains unknown. Honey use and production has a long and varied history. Humans have eaten, and fixed their wounds with honey and traded with it since history has been recorded. Archaeologists have discovered honey comb in Egypt that were been buried in tombs at the pharaohs, the honey was still eatable[22]. Honey is frequently used as a talisman and as a symbol of sweetness[44]. Honey collection is an ancient activity. Humans began using honey at least 10,000 years ago as it is evident with a cave painting discovered in the early 1900's in Valencia, Spain in the Cave of the Spider (Cueve de la Arana) situated on the river Cazunta[11]. (Fig.1). In Ancient times, people of Egypt use honey to sweeten cakes and biscuits, and were used in many other dishes. Ancient people of Egypt and Middle-Eastern also used honey for embalming the dead (Mummification) [30]. According to Aristotle "eating honey prolongs life" while Hippocrates says "I eat honey and use it in the treatment of many diseases because honey offers good food and good health". Pedanius Dioscorides a Roman surgeon in army has wrote in his book that "Honey could be used as treatment for stomach disease, wound with pus, hemorrhoids, and treatment to stop coughing." In the Roman Empire, honey was used instead of gold to pay taxes. Honey was used as a sweetening agent in Roman recipes which is quoted by several Roman authors including Bassus, Cato and Athenaeus. Some of these are collected in the book Roman cookery[28]. In the book Naturalis Historia, Pliny the Elder has wrote about bee and honey and its usage[36]. However, the Chinese went ahead the rest of the world in terms of preserving the honey, consuming and collecting it, as they were first to begin beekeeping[17].

Fig.1. Honey seeker depicted on 8000 year old cave painting at Arana Caves in Spain.

Religious Significance of Honey

The use of natural honey as food and as medicine by mankind has been in existence a very long time ago. In fact, history reviles that raw honey is the most ancient sweetener, and have been in use throughout the world several million years ago. Honey is widely accepted by all ages, and its use goes beyond the barriers of ethnicity and culture[1].The use of honey is embraced by all religious and cultural beliefs. Honey is a nutritional beneficial liquid as written in all holy books, and accepted by all generations, traditions and civilizations, both ancient and modern without any barrier[1].

Significance of Honey in Islam

More than 1,400 years ago Allah and his messenger Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), told us that honey can heal a variety of medicinal problem. In Islam, there is an entire surah in the holy Quran called al-Nahl (the Honey Bee). According to hadith, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) strongly recommended honey for healing purposes[2]. The holy Quran promotes honey as a nutritious and healthy food. Allah says in the Quran, "And your lord inspired the bee, saying: Take your habitations in the mountains and in the trees and in what they erect. Then, eat of all fruits and follow the ways of your Lord made easy (for you). There comes forth from their bellies a drink of varying color wherein is healing for men. Verily in this is indeed a sign for people who think[2]." The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has also told about the healing found within honey for a variety of medical problems, including stomach ailments. One hadith states that a man came to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) because his brother had a stomach disorder. The Prophet said "Let him drink honey." The man returned a second time and again the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) responded again, "Let him drink honey." The man returned again, and said "I have done that." The Prophet then responded, "Allah has said the truth, but your brother's stomach has told a lie. Let him drink honey." He drank it and was cured[40]. Other hadith Books like Tirmithi and Ibn Majah also reported that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, "Make use of the two remedies: honey and the Quran." Also Reported by Abu Huraira that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, "Whosoever eats honey (at least) three times per month will meet with no great affliction[40]".

Significance of Honey in Hinduism

In Hinduism, the honey (Madhu) is one of the five ingredients of Panchamrit "the five Nectars", the other four are the ghee, milk, sugar and buttermilk[33]. In temples, honey is poured over the deities in a ritual called Madhu abhisheka .When a child is born in a Hindu family "Jatakarma" is performed to welcome the child into the new family, by putting some drops of honey in the child's mouth and whispering the name of God in the child's ear[4]. As per Rigveda: "This herb, born of honey, dripped in honey, sweetened by honey, is the remedy for all injuries". " Let every wind that blows drop honey; let the rivers and streams recreate honey; let all our medicines turn into honey; let the dawn and the evening be full of honey; our nourisher, this sky above, be full of honey; let our trees be honey; let the sun be honey, let our cows secrete honey [3].

Significance of Honey in Judaism:

In Judaism honey marks the symbol of a new year called Rosh Hashanah. On that day Jews dip the apple slices in honey and eat it to bring a sweet new year. In some congregations, small straws of honey are given out to usher in the new year.

Significance of Honey in Buddhism:

When the Buddha observed rites in the Parilyeyok forest, a monkey brought him a beehive rich with nourishing honey. When the Buddha accepted his gift, the monkey was so overcome by elation that he fell from a tree, to his death. His joy was remembered in the naming of the month that he died Madhu Purnima, which means "honey full moon." Madhu Purnima is celebrated in India and Bangladesh. On Madhu Purnima, Buddhists remember this act by giving honey to monks. Honey gave nourishment to the Buddha in several times of need, including the two meals he took immediately preceding and following his enlightenment. Buddha says "as a bee gathers honey from the flower without injuring its color or fragrance, even so the sage goes on his alms-round in the village [12]"

Significance of Honey in Christianity:

In Christendom, there are references made to the importance of bees and honey in the Bible, and these include the Books of Exodus, Judges, Mathew and Proverbs. In the Book of Judges, Samson found a swarm of bees and honey in the carcass of a lion[43]. In Old Testament law, offerings were made in the temple to God. The Book of Leviticus says that "Every grain offering you bring to the Lord must be made without yeast, for you are not to burn any yeast or honey in a food offering presented to the Lord[38]".The Book of Exodus famously describes the Promised Land as a "land flowing with milk and honey[13]". In accordance with this Christian holy book, the Bible, King Solomon was quoted thus: "Eat honey my son, because it is good". In fact, it was reported in the Bible that John the Baptist actually thrived on a diet including wild honey for a long period of time when he was in the desert area or while travelling in the wilderness[25, 29].

CONCLUSION

The intake of honey as food and medicine resulted in high nutritional benefit and therapeutic promise as discussed in various religious books a long time ago. As human beings we must acknowledge and accept the saying in various religious. We should, therefore, study the research that is available and not to confirm or deny the truth that has already been revealed in most religious books but we have to learn that how we can use the honey in new ways.

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