

India's 'healing' herb-dyed cloth

Cloth infused with the herbs of traditional Indian medicine is becoming increasingly popular as the country's stressed urban workers seek cures for conditions such as insomnia and eczema.

Wearing a special shirt is claimed to cure itchy or sore skin, while sleepless nights can be taken care of by putting a herb-infused sheet over your mattress.

The herbs are selected according to the traditional Indian medicine known as ayurvedia, with the infused cloth known as ayurvastra.

"We have selected 28 medicinal plants based on ayurvedic texts and theory - then we dip the natural cotton into it to make sleeping cloths," the chief dyeing technician of the ayurvastra project, Rajan Kay, told BBC World Service's Culture Shock programme.

"For skin problems we select a plant like indigo, and mix with the plant turmeric."

Proper effect

The main centre for ayurvedic practices is Kerala, where it has existed alongside Western medicine for two centuries.

The Keralan government is set to release a report on a local clinical trial that claims the clothes do indeed have health benefits.

And cloth which calms the nerves is certainly proving popular with stressed-out IT consultants from nearby Bangalore.

But Catherine Stubberfield, who has worked with textile manufactures all over the world before moving to work with ayurvastra, warned that the clothes must be combined with the right lifestyle to have the proper effect.

"I believe that wearing natural cotton, wool or silk which has been dyed naturally is going to obviously help your skin, but I think as far as the healing goes ayurvedia is a way of life," she said.

"Wearing a T-shirt made of ayurvedic dyeing is not going to cure you. What the government report will say is if you take it with ayurvedic medicine, it is OK. But it is very difficult for people from the West to understand this."

Meanwhile Dr K Ravi, who established the project, outlined that health benefits of ayurvastra cloth are only part of the story - he began the project not to promote health, but to sustain the traditional industries of rural Kerala.

"The tradition of the handloom is part and parcel of this land - and ayurvedia also," he said.

He pointed out that people in the area traditionally get only 35 rupees - \$0.6 - per day to live on. But the ayurvedia sheets will allow them to get more money in domestic and international markets.

"The major part of that that will be transferred to these poor people," he added.

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