

Vedic Origins of Medical Science : A study of Brahmanical Literature

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ABSTRACT

There is a grave misconceptions about the origin of medicine in the Vedas. In fact the Vedas contains illusions about the concept of medicines and it can only be roughly equated with the primitive system of curebearing very little or no scientific evidence as found among the earliest tribal inhabitants. In the present article a very humble attempt been made by me with various passages contained in the Vedas relating to this grave illusions. My main attempt has been to remove the cobwebs of doubt.

Keywords : Vedas, Medicine, Science, Ayur Veda, Atthar Veda.

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In ancient India, medical science was known as Ayur Veda (Veda of Health or longevity). Owing to the word Veda in Ayur Veda, many wrongly attribute this branch of science to Atharva Veda. But the fact is that the word Ayur Veda has nothing to do with the Atharva or any other Veda. This word is not found in any of the Vedas. This word in fact is conspicuous by its absence even in the Brahmanas and the Upanishads which were written after the Vedas. The word Veda in Ayur Veda means compendium. The Sanskrit dictionaries give the meaning of the word Ayur Veda as 'the science of health of longevity' or it may mean : a compendium of health or longevity.

In the Brahmana literature, there are other Vedas (branches of knowledge) such as Sarpa Veda, Pishacha Veda, Itihasa Veda and Purana Vedas.¹ In this passage of the Gopatha Brahmana, the word Veda means branch of knowledge. While defining Ayur Veda. Charaka writes : That branch of Knowledge which tells which things are conducive and which are harmful to life is called Ayur Veda.² Sushruta defines the Ayur Veda as the branch of knowledge which enhances life.³

The early books on Ayur Veda, which are extant today, are the Charaka Samhita and the Sushruta Samhita. The former is a composition of Charaka who live about 200 B.C. The latter was composed by Sushruta much later.

The word Ayur Veda was perhaps first used in the Charaka Samhita where it is stated : 'Rishi Bharadwaj went to Indra to know the Ayur Vedas. Brahma was the originator of the Ayur Vedas. He taught it to Prajapati who in turn taught it to the twin-born Ashwani Kumaras. They taught it to Indra'⁴

The other Vedas are supposed to have been handed over to mankind through Agni, Vayu, Aditya and Angira. But the Ayur Veda came through Brahma, Prajapati, Ashwani Kumaras and Indra. This difference supports the conclusion that according to Charaka, the Ayur Veda was an independent Veda (collection or compendium). Besides, Charaka also remarked that it was superior to the other Vedas, for this branch provided knowledge about life, which was the basis of all pleasures and joys and good deeds.⁵

Sushruta overwhelmed with the popularity or the pressure of the Vedas in his times, subordinated the Ayur Veda to the Vedas. Finding no affinity what so ever between the Atharva Veda and the Ayur Veda, he declared that the latter was an upanga, minor part of the former.⁶ That is there are imitations of the Atharva Veda in the Sushruta Samhita, undermine the importance of scientific data contained in the latter.

The following scholars refused to accept the subordination of Ayur Veda to the Atharva Veda.

Vag Bhatta Said : Ayur Veda is not an upanga

(Sub-part) but an Up-Veda (a secondary Veda).

The Mahabharata also says so,

The Brahma Vaivarta Purana calls the Ayur Veda 'The fifth Veda'.⁷

The statement of Sushruta was not a balanced one, for he himself says that the Ayur Veda was composed of one lakh verses whereas the Atharva Veda contains some six thousands verses and one thousand proselines. To brand such a vast thing, an upanga of such a tiny book, is illogical.

Let us study a few prescriptions given in Vedas to get an idea about what they contain:

For the cure of cough, the prescription in the Atharva Veda is a prayer to cough:

Just as an arrow, sharpened Will.

Swift to a distance flies away,

So even, O cough, fly away

Along the broad expanse of earths.⁸

For the cure of leprosy, the Atharva Veda prescribes another prayer :

Born in the night art thou, O herb,

Dark coloured, sable, black of hue;

Rich-tinted, tinge this leprosy,

And stain away its spots of grey!⁹

And the prescription for long life is :

If life in him declines or has departed,

If on the very brink of death he totters,

I snatch him from the lap of dissolution,

I free him now to live a hundred autumns¹⁰.

The Vedas, the 'repository of all knowledge,' also suggest to devotees, prayers for securing good luck in gambling.

The prayer to dice is :

O dice, give play that profit brings,

Like cows that yield abundant milk;

Attach me to a streak of gain,

As with a string the bow is bound.¹¹

While all the state govts. Are spending huge amounts on defence, the Atharva Veda offers a way to strike terror in the enemy out spending a single paisa :

Arise and arm, y spectral forms,

Followed by meteoric flames;

Ye serpents, spirits of the deep,

Demons of night, pursue the foe!¹²

Interested in securing the love of a woman?

The Atharva Veda has prayer for that too :

As round this heaven and earth, the sun,

Goes day by day, encircling them,

So do I go around thy mind,

That, woman, thou shalt love me well,

And shalt not turn away from me.¹³

The remedy for 'curse disease' in the Atharva Veda is :

Bend round and pass us by,

O curse,

Even as a burning tire alike;

Here strike him down that curses us,

As heaven's lightning smites the tree¹⁴

The Atharva Veda also offers a prayer to see the demons :

"O Medicine, I use you so that you may enable me to see the goblins and demons."¹⁵

"O Medicine, show me the demons that take shelter in they sky, in the heaven and on the earth respectively."¹⁶

For longevity the prescription is :

"If Darbha (a kind of sacred grass, also known as Kusha grass) is tied to a person, he is expected to live long."¹⁷

In the same chapter of the Atharva Veda, there is a prescription for the good health of hair and heart. The verse of the Atharva Veda says :

"If water is sprinkled with the Kusha grass along with its leaves on the head of someone, his hair will remain black and he will have no heart trouble."¹⁸

In the 28th Sukta of the 19th chapter of Atharva Veda, we are told about yet another disease removed by the use of Kusha. The verse says :

"The knot of the root of Kusha grass (which, it is said, comes into being only when the plant is one thousand years old) destroys the enemies and disturbs their hearts, when a person ties it to himself. It also increases the life span and lustre."¹⁹

In the 31st Sukta of the 19th chapter of the Atharva Veda, there is a medicine which sweetens the voice and brings riches to the one who bears it. The medicine is nothing but a knot of an old plant

called Udumbra.²⁰

In the third Sukta of the 10th chapter, we read :
 “This Varuna Mani saves from the nightmares, from bad luck brought by sneezing and from the terror caused by awe-inspiring voices of ominous birds.”²¹

In the 32nd Sukta of the 2nd chapter of the Atharva Veda, there is a prescription for destroying pests :

“O worms, germs, we crush you with the Mantras (sacred verses) composed by the Rishi August.”²²

The Veda tells the following remedy for impotency :

“O Medicine, the Gandharvas uprooted you for the Varuna who was impotent. To you now I uproot to get potency.”²³

There is yet another prayer to deal with the rival mistress :

“O Medicine, you have upward leaves. You tolerate heat and cold. You obliterate my co-wife and remove her from my husband.”²⁴

In the Rig Veda (1-50-1 1)²⁵ there is a ‘prescription’ for removing heart trouble and jaundice. It runs as follows :

“O Sun, destroy my heart trouble and abolish jaundice.”

A long list can be drawn on these lines. However, if we analyze all the prescriptions, we can divide them into mainly three categories :

(1) There are some verses wherein only the word *oushadhi*, medicine, is used. What that medicine, is not clear. So, such verses are of no use from the point of view of medical science.

(2) Some other verses only dictate to the diseases to go away or pray to the gods to remove the diseases. Apparently, it is expected that magic power contained in the verses would cure a sick person or a god would accede to his prayer and help him get well. This is nothing but superstition. Hence these verses are of no use to the modern man.

(3) However, there are some verses which mention the name of the medicine. But most of the verses are not concerned with healing properties of the medicines. Instead, they rely on the super natural powers associated with the medicine. For example, the knot of Kusha grass is supposed to destroy enemies and the knot of Udumbra brings good luck to the

wearer. That is why the A. V. says that no old or recent medicine can equal to amulet of Janginda (name of herb).

The reason for the reliance on the supposed supernatural powers of the medicines was the belief prevailing then that the diseases were caused by the evil influence of some demons or spirits. A study of the Atharva Veda would give the impression that the earth was densely populated by demons and spirits and they interfered with human activities very often. It is not surprising then that the treatment of diseases, in good part, consisted in propitiating demons or spirits or trying to ward them off by various devices - amulets, charms, incantations and prayers. Drugs, perhaps, came last.²⁷

In short, it can be said that the approach off the Vedas to the treatment of diseases is based on magic, demonology and witchcraft.

Though Ayur Veda is supposed to be medical science, it is also clouded by demonology - the doctrine that diseases are caused by demons.

Demonology, in fact, constitutes one of the eight parts of Ayur Veda. Demons are recognized as originators of diseases, and incantations as remedies, just as we find in the Vedas. This is called Bhoota Vidya.

Explaining this Vidya, the Sushruta Samhita says : The Vidya (knowledge) which deals with the offerings and sacrifices meant to avert the on slaught of the gods, demons, demi-gods, goblins, imps, fiends, snakes, cruel planets, manes etc. is called the Bhoota Vidya.

At another place, the Sushruta Samhita prescribes the following method to avert the on slaught of the Bhootas (ghosts/demons) :

“Spread the mustard around, light a lamp and place fire nearby. Then perform a sacrifice (Havan).”²⁸

Ayur Veda too, contains impossible gossip just like Vedas. The qualities of Soma plant are stated in hyperbolic language in the Sushruta Samhita.

“Who so ever uses the Soma plant lives for ten thousand years. His body remains ever in youth. He cannot be killed with fire, water poison, Weapon etc.

The Sushruta Samhita also believes, like the

Vedas, in amulets, itsays:

“If Mooshika and Arjuha are tied to the wrist of a kind, poisonous food does not affect him.”

Like wise in the Charaka Samhita many things are enumeratd which if tied to the body, counteract poison. Among them is Mani(snake’s gem). It says that Mani, if tied to one’s body, counteracts poison. But the recent researches have shown that there is no such thing as Sarpa-Mani (snake’s gem).²⁹

Conclusion :

In a nutshell, we can say that though the Ayur Veda is an independent branch of knowledge, it remained eclipsed for a long time by the primitive crudity of the Atharva Veda. In this way, the Vedas, instead of being the originators of the medical science, proved a big hindrance to the progress of medical science. Therefore, it is wrong to claim that Vedas contain all knowledge about medical science. Had Vedas contained such knowledge, all the Vedic pandits would have been doctors of eminence. To run after the Vedas in search of medicines for diseases would yield no result. And any one who studies Vedas with this end in view in bound to be illusioned.

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