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Atharvavedic measures for treatment of diseases and longevity of people

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Abstract

The Vedas are believed to be the earliest literary record of the Indo-European race. The whole Indian thought and their traditional methods are represented in the Vedas. The Atharvaveda, which has no direct connection to the sacrificial performances, was connected to the belief and religion of common people. Through two classes of hymns namely, *Bhaisajyāni* and *Āyusyani*, the endeavor of the Atharvavedic seers or priests to cure diseases and to cause long life with the help of some herbs or medicinal plants, amulets, *rakṣāsūtras* etc. has been reflected. These hymns along with their concerned practices reflect an interesting picture of primitive Hindu medicine.

Keywords: Atharvaveda, health, disease, treatment, longevity

Introduction

The Vedas are the primordial sources of human civilization and culture. Every Indian, the lay man as well as the priest and the philosopher consider the Vedic texts as the highest authority and find in them the standard of all that is worth-living. Vedas, comprising four classes of literary works namely the *Sāṃhitās*, the *Brāhmaṇas*, the *Āraṇyakas* and the *Upaniṣads*, deal with various aspects of human life that come across or experienced and thus, is considered as the earliest record of human civilization. Among the four Vedas viz. the *R̥gveda*, the *Yajurveda*, the *Sāmaveda* and the *Atharvaveda*, the *Atharvaveda* is placed in the fourth position as it was considered as a Veda at a later date. The reason is that the connection of this Veda to the sacrificial performance is very less while these are widely discussed in other three Vedas. The *Atharvaveda* is connected to the belief and religion of the common people. It portrays the life of common man, in all its light and shade, hopes and fears in all its vicissitudes from womb to the tomb indeed from the pre-natal to the post mortem condition [1]. This Veda refers to a work which is used both to bless and to curse. It is evident from the contents of this *Sāṃhitā* that it embraced all aspects of life physical, vital, mental and spiritual comprehensively. Some of these hymns contain an inexhaustible mine of ideas relating to personal and interpersonal needs of mankind in every walk of life including social, political, hygienic and psychological. Though it is a composition of later times it embodies in itself certain primitive beliefs. Its oldest name *Atharvāṅgirasah* which is a compound word of the two words *atharvan* and *aṅgiras*, denote its relation with the two seers of the said names, signify the two types of magic, viz. holy magic (*śānta*) and unholy or black magic (*ghora*). Thus though magic and religion belong to different spheres, but in the *Atharvaveda* it is seen that there is a mixture of these two trends. Among the different classes of contents included in this Veda there are two classes namely *bhaisajyāni* and *āyusyani*, the former is for the treatment or cure of diseases and the latter is for the attainment of longevity. Both of these classes are closely related to the health.

Health is a term which is difficult to define. One of the oldest definitions of health is 'absence of disease'. In other words health is the condition of being sound in body, mind or spirit, especially freedom from physical disease or pain. World Health Organization defined it as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely an absence of disease or infirmity' [2]. Again disease is a state of body and mind which cause damage to both of them. Webster defines disease as a condition in which body's health is impaired, a departure from a state of health. An alteration of the human body interrupting the performance of vital functions [3]. The ancient seers were very aware of keeping the body and mind healthy.

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Measures for treatment of diseases

The Atharvavedic seers and priests tried to get rid of the diseases and to make people long-lived. The main constituent of the *Atharvaveda* are charms for healing diseases. This class of mantras are called *bhaiṣajyāni sūktāni*. These charms are directed against various diseases. It is notable that people at that time believed that diseases are caused not for physical inconsistency, but due to the influence of demons *rākṣasa* and *piśāsas* which afflict and torture their victims from outside to inside. That is why Atharvavedic priests used or praised some herbs or medicinal plants to drive away the demons and thus to cure the diseases. Here in this Veda remedy goes by the name *bheṣajam*, the healing plant *bheṣajī*, the water by the name *bheṣajīh*. We find the mention of so many diseases in the *Atharvaveda* like fever, jaundice, cough, diarrhea, leprosy, dropsy, scrofula, pythisis (tuberculosis), ophthalmia, fracture and wounds, lack of vital power, constipation, and retention of urine, the bite of snakes, scorpions and other venomous creature etc. with some of their symptoms. In this connection the herbs namely *kuṣṭha* or *kuṭhu*, *arundhatī*, *silācī*, *ajaśṛṅgī* or *meṣaśṛṅgī*, *prśniparnī*, *pippalī*, *nitani*, *rajanī*, *śyāmā*, *lākṣā*, *jaṅgida* etc. are mentioned for healing different diseases. According to modern scientists also most of these wild plants possess alcohols, glycosides and tannins etc. which produce a specific physiological reaction in the human body. Likewise the water, which is believed to possess the curative qualities and the fire, which is believed to be the powerful frightener of demons are also praised.

Among the diseases mentioned in the *Atharvaveda* the fever, *jvara* in the later medicine, personified as demon Takman, is regarded as the most powerful. Its symptoms are alteration between hit and chills. Sometime being very cold, it causes the patient to tremble. It is accompanied by various symptoms like headache, cough, constipation, herpes, itch etc. For the cure of fever the plant *kuṣṭha* is praised [4]. It is believed that the violent fever is also be cured by an amulet, viz. *daśabr̥kṣa kavaca* and amulet of *jaṅgida* tree. The Atharvavedic priest prays Takman not to come to one's body and torture him [5]. Likewise the cough is sent away from the patient to a distant place swiftly like a well sharpened arrow with the rays of the sun [6].

Jaundice, which is also mentioned together with fever, is believed to be cured by a peculiar method. Here the patient should be laid bare so that the rays of the sun fall on his body and he should drink milk of red cows [7]. As the patient of jaundice becomes yellow so he should be surrounded by red objects. To remove jaundice the use of the seeds of śuka tree is mentioned.

To be cured from *yakṣmā*, a serious disease, a divine forest tree named *varaṇa* is used.

varaṇ vārayatān ayam devo vanaspatiḥ/
yakṣmo yo asminnāvistamu deva avivaran// [8]

It has been supposed that this disease is caused by germs in the form of demons which were to be eliminated from all the vital parts of the body including the eyes, the nose, and the ears, the jaws, the tongue, the brain, the heart, the lung, the kidney, the entrails, the blood, the bones or indeed every part of the body including each joint and each hair. The seer expresses:

aṅge aṅge lomni lomni yeste parvaṇi parvaṇi/
yakṣman tvacasya te vayaṁ kasyapasya
vīvarheṇa viṣvañca vi vahāmsi// [9]

The disease *rājayakṣmā* is also mentioned along with curable method.

Again, due to failure of moral duty (*anṛta*), a disease named *jalodare* is believed to be inflicted by *Varuṇa* as a punishment. It has been combined with heart disease and related maladies and is believed to be cured by flowing water which is with the touch of homeopathy [10].

For the cure of the disease *kṣetriya* (believed to be heart disease) *babhru*, *arjuna*, barley, sesame etc, have been prayed. It has been referred that the horn and the skin of black antelope can remove this disease. Again *muñja* grass, *ādaṅgā*, *kubidaṅgā* are referred to be the medicines of excessive discharge.

There is also mentioned of *krimi* (worms) which are believed to be the cause of many diseases. In one mantra the priests expresses:

ye krimayah parvateṣu baneṣvoṣadhīṣu paśuṣvapsvantaḥ/
ye asmākam tanvamāviviṣuḥ sarvaṁ
taddhanmi janima krimiṇām// [11]

‘The worms that are in the mountains, forests, plants cattle and the water, those that have settled in our bodies, all that brood of the worms do I smite’

Among the charms against the external diseases, especially the skin disease, we find the mention of *Kilāsa* (leprosy). Two black colored plants *rajanī* and *śyāmā* are praised for the cure of leprosy and grey spot on the body. *Jalāsa* (the foam of cows' urine) has been regarded as a potent remedy of disease called *apacit* (scrofulous source)

Ophthalmia, an eye disease is mentioned in *Atharvaveda* and *ābayu*, which *Kausika* identifies with mustard, is addressed as the remedy of ophthalmia. Fractures and wounds are believed to be cured by the herbs called *arundhatī*, *lākṣā* and *silacī*. *Pippalī* (the pepper corn) also curiously figures as preventive cure for wounds [12]. For the luxuriant growth of hair, a herb *nitani* is used [13]. Moreover the water is taken to be dependent as cure of poisonous bites of snakes, scorpion insets etc.

Some medicinal plants or herbs and amulets are intended to expel or exercise the dominion being. For example the plants namely *ajaśṛṅgī* or *meṣaśṛṅgī* are supposed to have a magical efficiency in driving away the *rākṣasas*, *apsarases* and *gandharvas* out of a possessed person. The plant *prśniparnī* is supposed to be able to drive away the demon of disease called *kāṇva*, conceived especially as the devourer of the embryo in the womb. An amulet derived from the *jaṅgida* tree is used for the purpose. Besides these many other disease with reference to their removal ways by some plants, amulets and *rakṣāsūtras* are mentioned in the *Atharvaveda*. Some hymns or magic songs are directed against whole class of demons. Thus it is assumed that the Atharvavedic medicine passes over into demonology. This section of charms of the *Atharvaveda*, called *bhaiṣajyasūktas* related mainly to the disease and their removal methods, are important for the history of medicine. These hymns, along with their concerned practices, represent quite the most complete account of primitive Hindu medicine.

Measures taken for longevity

Every man has the desire for longevity of life. In the Vedic period people are found to express their desire to live a long life of hundred autumns [14]. In the *Atharvaveda* there is a class of hymns called as *Āyusyāni sūktāni* i.e. hymns causing long life. These hymns are not very much different from the medicinal hymns of the *Atharvaveda*. Because, diseases are connected to the body or health and the longevity is also connected to the health. Thus though the hymn 19.44 is

included in Āyusyasūktas, it exhibits a list of various diseases. Along with the prayer for the cure of disease and exemption from death, these hymns are mainly intended to secure the life unto the ideal old age with good health. These sūktas are mainly applied to the household ceremonies. Here prayers are found asking for life (*āyus, jīvana, asu, pānāpanau*) which shall last a hundred autumns, a hundred winters and a hundred springs ^[15]. Prayers for liberation from hundred or hundred one kinds of death and for protection from all sorts of diseases are also found ^[16]. The idea of one hundred and one death prevailing in the Atharvaveda is accepted by Suśruta also ^[17]. For this purpose Yama, the god of death, Nirṛti, the goddess of misery, decay and destruction, Mrtyu, Antaka etc. are pleased and cajoled by the priest politely.

Through the *Āyusya* hymns the special prominence is given to Agni, though other divinities are also not excluded. This Agni himself is *Āyu* 'alive'. The Atharvavedic seers referred to the use of amulets which are considered as life -bestowing and life- protecting. It is recommended that an amulet of pearls and gold secures and lengthens one's life without afflicted by any disease. Thus we have the mention of golden amulet in the *Atharvaveda* 19.26 the pearl and its shell in 4.10. Similarly sacred girdle (*mekhalā*) is considered as an *āyusyam*. Again, hymns, 4.9 and 19.44,45 are the adoration of salve (*añjana*), having the power of protection of life and ^[18] limbs destroying various diseases. The seer prays *añjana* to make life non-perishing, of chariot-swiftness, and free from offense ^[19]. Like the *Atharvaveda* the Kausika also refers to *añjanamaṇi, śankamaṇi* and *prāṇamaṇi*, in order to ensure prosperity, long life, virility etc. Moreover, to make their life lengthen the Vedic Aryans used *raṅgāsūtra* in their right hand. For the same purpose an amulet of *jaṅgiḍa* is also used. Thus it is evident from the above discussion that Vedic seers have thorough knowledge of all the parts of human body including brain, the sense organs, the organs of action, the heart, the entrails, the lung, the joints, the respiratory and digestive systems as well as the circulation of bloods. They knew the blood of different colors such as deep red, hot iron red, copper red and smokey circulate through the whole body through the veins like fast moving streams of water, they have also the deeper knowledge about the division of the air operating inside the human body into *prāṇa, apāna, vyāna, samāna* and *udāna*. The whole body is a structure of eight cakras and nine gates in with a golden chest shading divine light around it placed inside it.

Conclusion

From the above discussion about the *bhaiṣajya* hymns and *āyusya* hymns which contain the cure of disease and measures for longevity respectively we can know about the primitive system of treatment and healthcare. We find in this Veda the origin of anatomy, physiology, medicine etc. and also the treatment from the side of the consciousness i.e. *mantra cikitsā*. According to Luis Renou, *Atharvaveda* give us the first outline of Indian medicine. Caraka says the doctors should have studied the *Atharvaveda* as there are the causes and remedies of diseases ^[20]. Suśruta declares *Āyurveda* as one of the branches of *Atharvaveda* ^[21]. These medical charms reassemble in most cases German magic charms. Moreover the presence of foreign influence, especially the Greek upon the Hindu medicine, has been assumed.

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