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Atharva Veda as a Source of Indian Medical Science

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Science of Medicine, known by the name ‘Ayurveda’ was given great importance from very ancient period in India and was considered as a secondary part (upangata) of Atharva Veda and sometimes a secondary Veda itself (upaveda). Ever since the advent of mortals there had been diseases and death and the theory of Karmaavipaka (retribution of deeds) in Hinduism made men believe that the sins in the earlier existences take birth in them in the form of ailments and diseases. It is said that a killer of brahmana suffers from leprosy. One who kills a king is affected by the deadly disease rajayajaksma. A robber of white materials suffers from leprosy and so on. In the long list of crimes and diseases there appears to be the principle of sympathetic magical relation of cause and effect. Hence according to the ancient religious texts including the Atharva Veda, committing a sin in this or the past life, disrespect to gods, magic and witchcraft of the enemies and evil spirits of different types are some of the major factors that lead to different sufferings in the form of physical and mental ailments. It was also believed that different gods, singly or collectively, by themselves or through the agency of various demons make man suffer for his wrong doings. For example, Varuna, the cloud God could cause many diseases and the one particularly attributed to him is dropsy (swelling up of the whole body). Since people had deep faith in the magico-religious aspects of physical and mental ailments and also the treatment thereof, gods like Varuna, Indra and others were praised by means of hymns and holy rituals performed to drive away the diseases. Vedas, particularly the Atharva Veda is full of such mantras invoking gods even medicines to get rid of the diseases.

Of course, in the hoary past, Indian thinkers proceeded to study what a man should be and what he should pursue for the benefit of himself and of the society. After coming to the conclusion that all the human goals can be grouped under dharma, artha, kama and moksha, they accepted the collective term purusharthas to denote all the four. Man’s every action was oriented towards the achievement of these purusharthas and so health was given primary importance to enable man to pursue his aspirations. Man is the product of body, mind and soul. Ever since the creation of man there had been death and diseases. Our primitive ancestors acquired by chance the knowledge about the properties of many valuable and medicinal drugs by following the examples of lower animals and birds in diseases. In the Rg Veda there is a verse which says that the lower animals were the preceptors to man in matters of selecting food stuffs and medicinal samples to alleviate many ailments and diseases. Individual experience in the realm of care and hygiene were collected gradually and codified and they formed the base of Ayurveda. The verses in the Vedas clearly mark each step in the progress of medical knowledge. Verses related to medicine, hygiene, surgery etc. lie scattered throughout the Vedas. Those having bearing on medicine proper are found most in the Rg Veda and perhaps for this reason Agnivesa, the well known physician has ascribed the origin of Ayurveda to revelations in the Rg samhitas. Precepts related to the art and practice of surgery are found most in the Atharva Veda which amply accounts for the fact of Susruta’s opinion of holding Ayurveda as subdivision of Atharva as he was preeminently a surgeon. Of course, as in all other branches of study, the ancient Aryans claim to have derived their knowledge from the gods through revelation and the origin indeed is lost in dim antiquity.

In the Vedas several gods are invoked for the grant of good health and remedies from ailments. The Aswins, Varuna and Rudra are often invoked and worshipped as the physicians of gods. The Aswins are declared to be able to restore to health the blind, the sick, the lame and the emaciated among mortals. A number of legends are found illustrating the power of Aswins in healing the sick and assisting those in trouble. The big hospital (Aasadhalaayana) of Varuna is also mentioned where a thousand physicians were available. Many other legends throw light on the fact that physicians and surgeons were available even during the ancient Vedic period and health was taken care of by the people.

In India, as in other countries, curative spells and healing mantras preceded medicines and the first man of medicine in India was a priest a bhisag Atharvan who held a superior position to a surgeon in society. In the Vedic literature we find references to different types of surgery such as the amputation of legs and replacement by iron substitutes, plucking out of injured eyes, etc. Arrow shafts were extracted from the limbs of Aryan warriors. From these information we have every reason to believe that many difficult surgical operations were successfully performed though some of them sound almost incredible. Vedas mention names of hundreds of medicinal herbs and drugs. Verses eulogising the virtues of water as an all healer and of certain trees and herbs as purifiers of the atmosphere are found in the Vedas. For example, in the Atharva Ved Veda Kanda 1, it is said, “O, Waters, since you are beneficial so help us to strength with your most auspicious sap. O, Waters, filled with medicine, keep my body safe from harm that long I may see the sun.” Invoking the kuushtha plant for blessings against fever the Vedic sages were praying, “O kuushtha, restore and relieve him and render him free from disease.” Headache, inflection in the eye and bodily ailments are all relieved by kuushtha, a powerful divine remedy. Similarly the plant laks is invoked as remedy for wounds. “If a wound is made with a staff, with an arrow or by a flame, of that thou art the remedy, do thou cure this man here.” From many Vedic mantras we get the information that even the rudiments of embryology, midwifery, child management and sanitation formulated in the age of the Vedas.

Atharva Veda consisting of twenty kandas presents the secular as well as intellectual aspects of our ancient culture. The terms trivritsiddhi or the three fold knowledge comprising of the Rk, Yajur and Samaveda, indicates that Atharva Veda was of a later period. But scholars are of opinion that some of the hymns of Atharva Veda are as old as those of Rg Veda. It is highly philosophical and deals more with the present life in this world. Major part of this Veda is concerned with diseases and their cure, rites for prolonging life, for fulfilling one’s desires, for good health etc. It prescribes medical remedies in the form of drugs, herbs, magic charms, mantras, amulets for removing diseases, evil omens, exorcism
of evil spirits etc. Atharvaveda, though deeply concerned with the problems of the Absolute and contains sublime theological thoughts also in a large number of highly philosophic hymns and known as Brahmanavada, it remains as one of the richest heritages representing the mundane and secular aspects of our ancient life including health care and medication for diseases. It serves as a source of medical thoughts propounded by caraka and Susruta including those of later medical experts.

Atharvaveda is known by the name Bhaisajya Veda as it contains more number of sukhas related to the cure of diseases, medicines etc. In almost all the twenty kandas of Atharvaveda we find mantras related to the treatment of diseases, long and healthy life, destruction of harmful insects, toxicology, treatment of snake bites, curative effects of mantras on different ailments etc.

Indian system of medicine, which is practised even today, has gained popularity as Ayurveda. The union of body, senses, mind and soul is termed Ayu and the knowledge related to it is called Ayurveda.

Theoretically, the Ayurveda consists of eight branches or disciplines which are also well known as its characterstic members that the word stag has been used to denote the science of medicine. The eight specialised branches are Kayatantra, Urdhangatantra, salyatantra, grahatantra, Balatantra, Agadatantra, Janatantra, Vrishtantra. All these eight branches deal with the prevention of cure of diseases and morbid conditions in their respective specialised fields. In the Atharvaveda we get almost all the information related to Astanga Ayurveda. The materials related as astanga are found scattered here and there and if they are grouped together it becomes clear that Atharvaveda no doubt serves as a source of all eight branches of medical science.

Kayatantra is administration of medicine or medical treatment in general for fevers and ailments related to all parts of the body and is one of the branches of Ayurveda. Several mantras related to this branch is found in Atharvaveda. Fever is called Tikun who makes all men pale hearing them up as fire. A number of other diseases are also mentioned in this Veda as well as the remedial herbs and medicines including mystic chantings. Nearly a hundred diseases are mentioned. In the 9th Kanda we find actually a list of diseases starting from the diseases related to the head, the headache, earache, anaemia, body pain, yasuka, colic, jaundice and so on. By means of different incantations these diseases afflicting the entire body are said to be driven away. For stopping bleeding application of Prsnima Parshu is prescribed. For kidney and urinary disorders a decoction called Prshna is prescribed. Apart from the incantations, many other medicines in the form of fruits, herbs, oils, milk etc. are mentioned. Thus we find lot of information in Atharvaveda related to the branch of medicine ‘Kayatantra’.

Atharvaveda also mentions that most of the diseases are caused by infectious worms, insects and bacteria which are not visible. Along with a detailed description of such diseases, the insects or krti are also named and described. Several herbs are named, the smell of which drive away all the insects causing infection. Generally ‘Suryopasana’ is prescribed for viral diseases.

If we go through the Kesiakuta of the tenth kanda of Atharvaveda wherein the wonderful structure of human body is described, we find that our ancients were aware of the circulation of blood getting pumped in and out of the heart. Here blood is called jwhini apah that which carries iron in its hand. It is sometimes called dark, ruddy or turbid. Red coloured blood is the pure one which is pumped out of the heart and travels the whole body and copper coloured turbid coloured blood is impure, which reaches the heart after cleaning the body.

Urdhangatantra or Salakya, another branch of Ayurveda is the treatment of the diseases of the organs in places situated higher than the neck (diseases specific to supraclavicular region). Various types of treatment related to ailments of nose, ears, eyes are mentioned in Atharvaveda. Even for growth of hair, retention of the black glossy colour of the hair etc. prescriptions are found. In the mantras three names related to ailments above the neck are mentioned, namely. Srskti, Srsamya and Srsnya. For eye diseases different types of treatment are prescribed like Jalakitsa, Jangidamani, Ajarnamani, Kushta Kusadhi etc.

Salyatantra relates to the extraction of foreign bodies through surgery etc. (extraction of grass, stones, nails, pieces of wood etc.). There are many mantras in Atharvaveda which speak of performing surgery in removing harmful particles from the limbs of the body. Mention is made of fitting back the dislocated bones in the proper places like the parts of a chariot and making the person regain his health.

Yadi kartams amatras samasre yadi vama phratho jaghana
Rbhu Rathiya samagam sam dadhatparasya Purh || (4.12.7)

In cases of diseases related to kidney, blocked urine was released by prickings with a needle or stick.

Vidma sarasya paraiyam paraiyam satvrsnynam
Tena te tante sam karam prithyam te nisecanam
histe astb bolit || (1.3.1)

“We know the father of arrow-bearing hero, Parshya, of hundredfold power. With this charm may I make this body healthy. May it be well and not a thing evil happen to it.” In Rg Veda also there are instances of Asvinikumaras performing surgery in a miraculous manner.

Grahatantra is treatment of psychic diseases caused by demoniac seizures. Many mantras and rituals are described in Atharvaveda to cure mental disease caused by Yaksas, pisecas, assuras and naga. Similarly several methods of treatment related to Balatantra (treatment of children’s diseases) are mentioned. Agadatantra (toxicology) dealing with treatment of conditions caused by natural and artificial poisons are also mentioned in several mantras. Poisons caused by snake bites, by other venomous insects, by poisonous arrows and shafts are mentioned and mantras are chanted to ward off the poison. Atharvaveda advices that pollution or poison caused by fire, sun, earth, trees, roots and bulbs should be removed by chanting special mantras (10.4.22).

Atharvaveda mentions many incantations and treatment for diseases afflicting children. This branch of Ayurveda is called Balatantra or kaumararshita. All diseases related to women, childbirth, pregnancy etc. are included in this branch of medical science. Several mantras and rituals are mentioned.
for protection and nourishment of the garbha, easy delivery, warding off evil effects at this time of childbirth etc. Along with medicines and incantations, amulets, talismans etc. are also prescribed.

For example,
A vam prajam janayatu
prajapatirahoratrabhyam
samanaovatavyam |
Adur mangalam pati lokamavisa sam no bhava dvipade
sam catuspade || (14.2.40)
The nourishing effect of mother’s milk is also mentioned and it is said that mother’s milk brings health, virtue and happiness to the child.
Yaste stanah sasya yo mayo bhuryo ratnadia vasuvidyah
sudatra ||

Jaratana and vsrantra are other branches of Ayurveda. Jaratana is the administration of elixirs for the maintenance of youth and prevention of old age. This is also called Ramayanatantra. Treatment by water for longevity, for warding off old age ailments are mentioned. Vrsantra is the science of aphrodisiacs. Atharva Veda contains several mantras dealing with these branches also. Though there are not many mantras on Ramayanatantra under Paustika karma the treatment is indicated.

The three principles which constitute Ayurveda or the Indian system of Medicine are
1) Adana, or rogahetu (etiology) which includes immediate and distant causes of diseases.
2) Nidana or rogalaksanam (symptomatology) includes the entire signs and symptoms of diseases and health.
3) Cikitsa is rogapratikara (knowledge of therapeutics), administration of medicines, treatments. In caraka Samhita, medical science is described as trisutra, having three principles, namely, hetu (etiologies), linga (symptoms) and ausadhaajnanam (knowledge of medicines).

Atharva Veda mentions or indicates all the three principles of Ayurveda. In Kausika Gṛhyasūtras a complete explanation of Baisajya-Vijnana (Medical Science) is found. The definition is given as lingyupatapo bhaisajya. Diseases are ascertained by linga or symptoms. Fever, pain and different ailments are the symptoms of diseases. After ascertaining the disease curing the disease by means of medicines and mantras are upatapa and this is called Baisajya. Since diseases are caused by sins committed or by food habits, if it is known that diseases are not caused by ahara and that medicines cannot be effective then they have to be remedied through Atharvanus method or Mantras. Diseases caused by food, water etc. can be cured by Angirasi method (administering medicines etc.).

Different types of medicinal treatment are also indicated in Atharva Veda.

Atharvanī Angirasthi Dāiviḥ Manusyaḥ uṣaḥ
Osadāyah Prajyāyate rtaḥ Svam Pranaḥ ānusvāra || (xi.iv.16)
This mantra indicates that medicinal treatment is classified into four groups:-
(Atharvanī): medicinal treatment prescribed by Rishi Atharva. Treatment by mantras etc. where there is no necessity of getting into contact with the body,
(Angirasi): supposed to be prescribed by sage Angirasa. Medical treatment consists of reacting with the seven dhatus like blood, marrow etc. inside the body.
(Dāivi): supposed to be created by gods. By the performance of religious rites, the bad effects of sins committed by the patient are warded off and the person gets cured.
(Manusvi): caused by men for the speedy recovery by means of providing clean atmosphere, mental peace and nursing and caring the patients.

In Atharva Veda all the four types of medicinal treatment are mentioned and for same ailments a combination of two or three of them. If any particular type of treatment is not possible, then other types should be applied. In later medical texts four types of treatment are mentioned:- dāivam, by administering rīsas; Manusvam by preparing medicines of herbs; asūram - made by surgical instruments or by burning; siddhāpravāyam - consisting of chanting of mantras etc.

Different names of medicinal herbs and flowers are mentioned in Atharva Veda like ajasragi, kushta, guggula, udumbha, upajita, darbha, pippali, renati, laksha, saraparni, sadapusp, and so on which are recommended for treatment of different diseases in Caraka and Susruta Samhitas. This Veda contains elaborate description of jalajikitsa, Surya Kirana cikitsa and even manasika cikitsa.

From the brief discussion of the contents of Atharva Veda related to treatment of diseases both mental and physical, we can conclude that all the aspects of Ayurveda or Indian Medical Science are found in Atharva Veda though more importance is given to rituals, rites and chanting. Susruta says:-

Acyurvedam namasy upanagathatharaivasya || (1.1.6)
And Bhavaprakasa says:-

Athsarantharagatham Sāmyagayurvedam ca Labdhavan || (1.58)

All such statements also prove that Atharva Veda is the main source of Ayurveda or Indian medical science.

Fond Notes:

(1) Purvaajama Krta paapam Vjādirupena Vidyate.
Śiṣṭādattavatnukara by Keladi Basava Bhupala Mysore 194 II.33

(2) Dharmarthakamakosanam arogyam mulamuttamam.
Ca Samhīta 1.1.15

(3) Rg. Veda - 1.166; 1.24.9; 2.33.4.

(4) Kausika Gṛhyasūtra - 25.18.

(5) Atharva Veda - 9.8.1

(6) A V 3.7.5; 6.24.2; also 3.7.5.7; 4.33; and 6.22-24 for water treatment