AHS-6

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 (*upanga*) 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 *Karmavipaka* (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 consumption. One who kills a king is affected by the deadly disease *rajayaksma*. A robber of white materials suffers from leprosy and so on.[1] 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 *moksa*, they accepted the collective term *purusarthas* to denote all the four. Man's every action was oriented towards the achievements of these *purusarthas* and so health was given primary importance to enable man to pursue his aspirations.[2] 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 Atharvan 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 Asvins, Varuna and Rudra are often invoked and worshipped as the physicians of gods.[3] The Asvins 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 Asvins in healing the sick and assisting those in trouble. The big hospital (*Ausadhalaya*) 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 Veda Kanda* I, it is said, "O, Waters, since you are beneficient 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 *kustha* plant for blessings against fever the Vedic sages were praying, "O *kustha*, restore and relieve him and render him free from disease." Headache, infliction in the eye and bodily ailments are all relieved by *kustha*, a powerful divine remedy. Similarly the plant *laksa* 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 *trayividya* 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. *Atharva Veda*, though deeply concerned with the problems of the Absolute and contains sublime theosophical thoughts also in a large number of highly philosophic hymns and known as *Brahmavada*, 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 Susurta including those of later medical experts.

Atharva Veda is known by the name *Bhaisajya Veda* as it contains more number of *suktas* related to the cure of diseases, medicines etc. In almost all the twenty *kandas* of *Atharva Veda* 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 *Ayuh* 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 characteristic members that the word *astanga* is currently used to denote the science of medicine. The eight specialised branches are *Kayatantra, Urdhvangatantra, salyatantra, grahatantra, Balatantra, Agadatantra, Jaratantra, Vrsatantra*. All these eight branches deal with the prevention of cure of diseases and morbid conditions in their respective specialised fields. In the *Atharva Veda* 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 *Atharva Veda* no doubt serves as a source of all the 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 *Atharva Veda*. Fever is called *Takman* who makes all men pale healing 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, yaksma, 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 *Prsni Parna* is prescribed. For kidney and urinary disorders a decoction called *Phanta* is prescribed. [4] 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 *Atharva Veda* related to the branch of medicine *'Kayatantra'*.

Atharva Veda 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 *krimi* 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 *Kenasukta* of the tenth *kanda* of *atharva Veda* 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 *lohini apah* that which carries iron in its hand. It is sometimes red, 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.

Urdhvangatantra 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, eyes, ears are mentioned in *Atharva Veda*. Even for growth of hair, retainment 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, *Sirsakti, Sirsamaya* and *Sirsanya*. For eye diseases different types of treatment are prescribed like *Jalacikitsa, Jangidamani, Ajanamani, Kustha Ausadhi* etc.[5]

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 *Atharva Veda* 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 kartam patitva samsasre yadi vasma prahato jaghana |
Rbhu Rathasyevangani sam dadhatparusa Paruh || (4.12.7)

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

Vidma sarasya pitaram parjanyam satavrsnyam |
Tena te tanve sam karam prithvyam te nisecanam
histe astu baliti || (1.3.1)

"We know the father of arrow-bearing hero, *Parjanya*, of hundredfold power. With this charm may I make this body healthy. May be outpouring be on the earth, may it come out with a slash ....." In *Rg Veda* also there are instances of Asvinikumara performing surgery in a miraculous manner.

Grahatantra is treatment of psychic diseases caused by demoniac seizures. Many *mantras* and rituals are described in *Atharva Veda* to cure mental disease caused by *Yaksas, pisacas, asuras* and *nagas*. 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. *Atharva Veda* advises that pollution or poison caused by fire, sun, earth, trees, roots and bulbs should be removed by chanting special *mantras* (10.4.22).

Atharva Veda mentions many incantations and treatment for diseases afflicting children. This branch of *Ayurveda* is called *Balatantra* or *kaumarabhrtya*. All diseases related to women, childbirth, pregnancy etc. are included in this branch of medical science. Several *mantras* and rituals are mentiond

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 samanavatvaryama |

Adurmangalim patilokamavisema 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 sasayo yo mayo bhuryo ratnadha vasuvidyah sudatra ||

Jaratantra and *vrsatantra* are other branches of *Ayurveda*. *Jaratantra* is the administration of elixirs for the maintenance of youth and prevention of old age. This is also called *Rasayanatantra*. Treatment by water for longevity , for warding off old age ailments are mentioned.[6] *Vrsatantra* is the science of aphrodisiacs. *Atharva Veda* contains several *mantras* dealing with these branches also. Though there are not many *mantras* on *Rasayanatantra* 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* (etiology), *linga* (symptoms) and *ausadhajnanam* (knowledge of medicines).

Atharva Veda mentions or indicates all the three principles of *Ayurveda*. In *Kausika Grhyasutras* a complete explanation of *Baisajya-Vijnana* (Medical Science) is found. The definition is given as *lingyupatapo bhaisajyan*. 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 *Bhaisajya*. 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 *Atharvanis* method or *Mantras*. Diseases caused by food, water etc. can be cured by *Angirasi* method. (administering medicines etc.)

In *Ayurveda* by Caraka and others two kinds of treatment are mentioned *Daivavyapasrayam* and *yuktivyapasrayam*. That treatment consisting of chanting *mantras*, wearing gems, sacrifice, *homas*, fasting, charity, chanting of auspicious prayers etc. is called *Daivavypasrayam*. *Yukti Vyapasrayam* consists of treatment causing vomiting, purging which results in immediate remedy. These two types of treatment are prescribed in *Atharva Veda*.

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

Atharvanih Angirasih Daivih Manusyaja uta |
Osadayah Prajayante yada tvam Prana Jinvasi || (xi.iv.16)

This mantra indicates that medicinal treatment is classified into four groups:-

(*Atharvani*):- 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.

(*Daivi*):- 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.

(*Manusi*):- 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:- *daivam*, by administering *rasas*; *Manusam* by preparing medicines of herbs; *asuram* – made by surgical instruments or by burning; *siddhavaidyam* - consisting of chanting of *mantras* etc.

Different names of medicinal herbs and flowers are mentioned in *Atharva Veda* like *ajasrngi*, *kustha*, *guggula*, *udumbara*, *upajiva*, *darbha*, *pippali*, *revati*, *laksha*, *saharaparni*, *sadapuspa*, and so on which are recommended for treatment of different diseases in *Caraka* and *Susruta Samhitas*. This Veda contains elaborate description of jalacikitsa, 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 chantings. *Susruta* says:-

Ayurvedam nama upangamatharvavedasya (1.1.6)

And Bhavaprakasa says:-

Atharvanthargatham Samyagayurvedam ca Labdhavan (1.58)

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

Foot Notes

(1) *Purvajanma Krtam papam Vyadirupena Vidyate. Sivatattvaratnakara* by Keladi Basava Bhupala Mysore 194 II.33

(2) *Dharmarthakamamoksanam arogyam mulamuttamam. Ca Samhita* 1.1.15

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

(4) *Kausika Grhyasutra* - 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