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Roots of *Āyurveda* in *Atharvaveda*

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Abstract: The present paper aims at expounding and examining the Roots of *Āyurveda* in *Atharvaveda*. The origin of *Āyurveda* is attributed to *Atharvaveda* where several diseases are mentioned with their treatments. *Āyurveda* traces its origins to the *Vedas*, which are the ancient Indian testimonials, give references into illness, cures and other health-related issues. The present paper attempts to highlights the Roots of *Āyurveda* in *Atharvaveda*.

Key Words: *Āyurveda*, *Atharvaveda*, *Vedas*, *Upāṅga*, *Upaveda*, *Suśruta*, *Caraka*.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is universally accepted that the *Vedas* are the store-house of knowledge. Therefore, later Indian literature belonging to any branch of knowledge is entirely, based on *Vedas*. There is always a struggle within the human mind between its sensorial ephemerals and transcendental experience, between the desires of its inseparable associate (the body) and the need to overcome their deleterious effects as and when they arise by restoring the mind-body balance or harmony. This is one of the most enduring foundational ideas of *Āyurveda*. Its roots are found in *Atharvaveda*. The canvas of *Āyurveda* is indeed wide enough encompassing plant and animal life. *Āyurveda*, therefore, emerged as the science of life in its diverse forms and its medical armamentarium, though comprised largely of plant extracts, also includes some animal products. From its beginnings about thousand years ago in India, *Āyurveda* has traversed a long way in both space and time. But its basic concepts and practices which have remained practically unchanged are more relevant now than they were before.

II. *ĀYURVEDA* AN *UPĀṅGA* OF THE *ATHARVAVEDA*

Suśruta says that *Āyurveda* is an *upāṅga* of the *Atharvaveda* and originally consisted of 100,000 verses in one thousand

chapters and was composed by *Brahmā* before he created all beings (*Suśruta-Samhitā*, 1.1.5). What *upāṅga* exactly means in this connection cannot easily be explained. Dalhana (A.D. 1100), while in explaining the word in his *Nibandha-Samgraha*, says that an *upāṅga* is a smaller *aṅga* -“*aṅgam eva alpatvād upāṅgam*.” Thus, while hands and legs are regarded as *aṅgās*, the toes or the palms of the hands are called *upāṅga*. If *upāṅga* is to signify a small appendage, then it may be said that *Āyurveda*, was more than ten times as extensive as the *Atharvaveda*.

Caraka, says that there was never a time when life did not exist or when intelligent people did not exist, and so there were always ample of people who knew about life, and there were always medicines which acted on the human body according to the principles which we find enumerated in the *Āyurveda*. *Āyurveda* was not produced at any time out of nothing, but there was always a continuity of the science of life; when we hear of its being produced, it can only be with reference to a beginning of the comprehension of its principles by some original thinker or the initiation of a new course of instruction at the hands of a gifted teacher. The science of life has always been in existence, and there have always been people who understood it in their own way; it is only with reference to its being first systematized comprehension or instruction that it may be said to have a beginning (*Caraka-Samhitā*, 1.30.24). Again, *Caraka*

distinguishes *Āyurveda* as a distinct *Veda*, which is superior to the other *Vedas* because it gives us life, which is the basis of all other enjoyments or benefits, whether they are of this world or of another.

The *Mahābharāta*, II.II.33, speaks it as an *upaveda* and explaining this *Nilakantha* says that there are four *upavedas*, *Āyurveda*, *Dhanurveda*, *Gāndharvaveda* and *Artha Śāstra*. *Brahma-Vaivarta*, a later *purāṇa*, says that after creating the *Ṛk*, *Yajus*, *Sāma* and *Atharva*, *Bharmā* created the *Āyurveda* as the fifth *Veda*.

We thus find that *Āyurveda* was regarded by some as a *Veda* superior to the other *Vedas* and respected by their followers as an *upaveda* of the *Atharvaveda* or as an independent *upaveda* or as an *upāṅga* of the *Atharvaveda*. It can be understood from these different opinions is that it was traditionally believed to be a *Veda* known as *Āyurveda* which was almost co-existent with the other *Vedas*, was held in high respect, and was associated with the *Atharvaveda* in a unique way. It seems, however, that the nature of this association consisted in the fact that both of them dealt with the curing of diseases and the attainment of long life; the one principally by incantations and charms, and the other by medicines. What *Suśruta* understands by calling *Āyurveda* an *upāṅga* of the *Atharvaveda* is probably nothing more than this. Both the *Atharvaveda* and *Āyurveda* dealt with the curing of diseases, and this generally linked them together in the popular mind. *Dārila Bhaṭṭa*, in commenting upon *Kauśika-Sūtra* 25.2, gives us a hint as to what may have been the points of contact and of difference between *Āyurveda* and the *Atharvaveda*. Thus he says that there are two kinds of diseases; those that are produced by unwholesome diet and those produced by sins and transgressions. The *Āyurveda* was made for curing the former, and the *Atharvaveda* intended for the latter (*Dārila on Kauśika-Sūtra*, 25.2). *Caraka* himself counts penance (*prāyaścitta*) as a name of medicine (*bheṣaja*) and *Cakrapāṇi*, in commenting on this, says that as *prāyaścitta* removes the diseases produced by sins, so medicines (*bheṣaja*) also remove diseases, and thus *prāyaścitta* is synonymous with *bheṣaja* (*Caraka-Samhitā*, 6.1.3).

We now possess the treatises of *Caraka* and *Suśruta*, as modified and supplemented by later revisers. But *Suśruta* tells us that *Brahmā* had originally produced the *Āyurveda*, which contained 100,000 verses spread over on thousand chapters, and then, finding the people weak in intelligence and short-lived, later on divided it into eight subjects, viz. surgery (*śalya*), treatment of diseases of the head (*śalākya*), treatment of ordinary diseases (*kāya-cikitsā*), the processes of counteracting the influences of evil spirits (*bhuta-vidyā*), treatment of child diseases (*kaumāra-bhṛtya*), antidotes to poisons (*agada-tantra*), the science of rejuvenating the body (*rasāyana*) and the science of acquiring (*vājīkaraṇa*) sex-strength (*Suśruta-Samhitā*, 1.1.5-9). The statement of *Suśruta* that *Āyurveda* was originally a great work in which the later subdivisions of eight different kinds of studies were summarised seems to be fairly trustworthy.³ The fact that *Āyurveda* is called an *upāṅga*, an *upaveda*, or a *vedāṅga* also points to its existence in some state during the period when the *Vedic* literature was being composed. We hear of

compendiums of medicine as early as the *Prātisākyās*. It is curious, however, that nowhere in the *Upaniṣads* or in the *Vedas* the name "*Āyurveda*" occurs, though different branches of studies are mentioned in the former (*Mahābhārata*, II. II.25, XII. 342. 86, 87, XII. 210, 21).

At the time of the *Atharvaveda* there were hundreds of physicians and an elaborate pharmacopoeia, treating diseases with drugs, is indicated by a *mantra* which extols the virtues of amulets, and speaks of their powers as being equal to thousands of medicines employed by thousands of medical practitioners (*Atharvaveda*, 2.9.3).¹ Thus it can hardly be denied that the practice of medicine was in full swing even at the time of the *Atharvaveda* and, though we have no other proofs in support of the view that there existed a literature on the treatment of diseases, known by the name of *Āyurveda*, in which the different branches, which developed in later times, were all in an undifferentiated condition, yet we have no evidence which can lead us to disbelieve *Suśruta*, when he alludes definitely to such a literature. The *Caraka-Samhitā* also alludes to the existence of a beginning less traditional continuity of *Āyurveda*, under which term he includes life, the constancy of the qualities of medical herbs, diet, etc., and their effects on the human body and the intelligent Enquirer.² The early works that are now available to us, viz. the *Caraka-Samhitā* and *Suśruta-Samhitā*, are both known as *Tantras* (*Caraka-Samhitā*, 1.1.52.). Even *Agniveśa-Samhitā*, which *Caraka* revised and which was available at the time of *Cakrapāṇi*, was a *tantra*. What then was the *Āyurveda*, which has been variously, described as a fifth *Veda* or an *upaveda*, if not a literature distinctly separate from the *tantras* now available to us. It seems probable, therefore, that such a literature existed, and the systematized works of *Agniveśa* and others superseded it and that, as a consequence, it came ultimately to be lost. *Caraka*, however, uses the word '*Āyurveda*' in the general sense of "science of life" Life is divided by *Caraka* into four kinds, viz. *sukha* (happiness), *dukha* (unhappiness), *hita* (good) and *ahita* (bad). '*Sukham āyuh*' is a life which is not affected by bodily or mental diseases, is endowed with vigour, strength, energy, vitality, activity and is full of all sorts of enjoyments and successes. '*Hitam āyuh*' is the life of a person who is always willing to do good to all beings, is truthful, self-restrained and works with careful consideration, does not transgress the moral injunctions, takes to virtue and to enjoyment with equal zeal, honours revered persons and does what is beneficial to this world and to the other. The object of the science of life is to teach what is conducive to all these four kinds of life and also to determine the length of such a life (*Caraka-Samhitā*, 1.1.40).

III. CONNECTION OF ĀYURVEDA WITH ATHARVAVEDA

But, if *Āyurveda* means "science of life," what is its connection with the *Atharvaveda*? We find in the *Caraka-Samhitā* that a physician should particularly be attached to the *Atharvaveda*. The *Atharvaveda* deals with the treatment of diseases (*cikitsā*) by advising the propitiatory rites (*svastyayana*), offerings (*bali*), auspicious oblations (*mangalahoma*), penances (*niyama*), purificatory rites (*prāyaścitta*),

fasting (*upavāsa*) and incantations (*mantra*) (*Caraka-Samhitā*, 1.30.20). *Cakrapāṇi*, commenting on this says that, since it is advised that physicians should be attached to the *Atharvaveda*, it comes to this, that the *Atharvaveda* is partly *Āyurveda*. *Atharvaveda* deals with different kinds of subjects, and so *Āyurveda* is to be considered as being only a part of the *Atharvaveda*.

When we see in the view *Cakrapāṇi's* interpretation, it seems that the school of medicine to which *Caraka* belonged was most intimately connected with the *Atharvaveda*. This is further corroborated by a comparison of the system of bones found in the *Caraka-Samhitā* with that of the *Atharvaveda*. *Suśruta* himself remarks that, while he considers the number of bones in the human body to be three hundred, the adherents of the *Vedas* hold them to be three hundred and sixty; and this is exactly the number counted by *Caraka* (*Caraka-Samhitā*, 4.7.6.). *Atharvaveda* does not count the bones; but there are with regard to the description of bones some very important points in which the school to which *Caraka* belonged was in agreement with the *Atharvaveda*, and not with *Suśruta*. Dr. Hoernle, who has carefully discussed the whole question, thus remarks: "A really important circumstance is that the *Atharvic* system shares with the *Charakiyan* one of the most striking points in which the latter differs from the system of *Suśruta*, namely, the assumption of a central facial bone in the structure of the skull. It may be added that the *Atharvedic* term *pratiṣṭhā* for the base of the long bones obviously agrees with the *Charakiyan* term *adhiṣṭhāna* and widely differs from the *Suśrutiyan* *kūrca*." *Śathapatha-Brahmaṇa*, which, as Dr. Horenle has pointed out, shows an acquaintance with both the schools to which *Caraka* and *Suśruta* respectively belonged, counts, however 360 bones, as *Caraka* did.⁴ The word 'veda-vādino' in *Suśruta-Samhitā*, III.5.18 does not mean the followers of *Āyurveda* as distinguished from the *Vedas*, as *Dalhana* interprets it, but is literally true in the sense that it gives us the view which is shared by *Caraka* with the *Atharvaveda*, the *Śathapatha-Brahmaṇa*, the legal literature and the *purāṇas*, which according to all orthodox estimates derive their validity from the *Vedas*. If this agreement of the *Vedic* ideas with those of the *Ātreya* school of medicine, as represented by *Caraka*, be viewed together with the identification by the latter of *Āyurveda* with *Atharvaveda*, it may not be unreasonable to suppose that the *Ātreya* school, as represented by *Caraka*, developed from the *Atharvaveda*. This does not preclude the possibility of there being an *Āyurveda* of another school, to which *Suśruta* refers and from which, through the teachings of a series of teachers, the *Suśruta-Samhitā* developed. This literature probably tried to win the respect of the people by associating itself with the *Atharvaveda*, and by characterizing itself as an *upāṅga* of the *Atharvaveda*.

Jayanta Bhaṭṭa in his *Nyāyamañjarī*, argues that the validity of the *Vedas* depends on the fact that they have been composed by an absolutely *āpta* (trustworthy person). As an analogy he refers to *Āyurveda*, the validity of which is due to the fact that it has been composed by a trustworthy person (*āpta*). That the medical instructions of the *Āyurveda* are regarded as valid is due to the fact that they are the instructions of trustworthy persons (*vyato yatrāptav ādatram tatra prām ānyam iti vyāptir grhyate*).

Although it may be argued that the validity of *Āyurveda* is not because it has for its author trustworthy persons, but because its instructions can be verified by experience. *Jayanta Bhaṭṭa* in reply says that the validity of *Āyurveda* is due to the fact that it has been composed by trustworthy persons; and it can be also verified by experience. To this, *Jayanta Bhaṭṭa* further argues that the very large number of medicines, their combinations and applications, are of such an infinite variety that it would be absolutely impossible for any one man to know them by employing the experimental methods of agreement and difference. It is only because the medical authorities are almost omniscient in their knowledge of things that they can display such superhuman knowledge regarding diseases and their cures, which can be taken only on trust on their authority. His attempts at refuting the view that medical discoveries may have been carried on by the applications of the experimental methods of agreement and difference and then accumulated through long ages are worth examining but the same is neither possible nor relevant here. *Atharvaveda* or the *Brahmaveda*, deals mainly with curatives and charms. *Rgvedic* hymns; for never, probably, in the history of India was there any time when people did not take to charms and incantations for curing diseases or repelling calamities and injuring enemies. *Rgveda* itself may be regarded in a large measure as a special development of such magic rites. The hold of the *Atharvanic* charms on the mind of the people was probably very strong, since they had occasion to use them in all their daily concerns. Now a day when the *Rgvedic* sacrifices have become extremely rare, the use of *Atharvanic* charms and of their descendants, the *Tāntric* charms of comparatively later times is very common amongst all. A very large part of the income of the priestly class is derived from the performance of auspicious rites (*svastyayana*), purificatory penances (*prāyaścitta*), and oblations (*homa*) for curing chronic and serious illnesses, winning a law-suit, alleviating sufferings, securing a male issue to the family, cursing an enemy, and the like. Amulets are used almost as freely as they were three or four thousand years ago, and snake-charms and charms for dog-bite and others are still things which the medical people find it difficult to combat. Faith in the mysterious powers of occult rites and charms forms an essential feature of the popular Indian psyche.

It may therefore be presumed on the basis of the above that a good number of *Atharvanic* hymns were current when most of the *Rgvedic* hymns were not yet composed. *Atharvaveda*, as *Sāyāna* points out in the introduction to his commentary, was indispensable to kings for warding off their enemies and securing many other advantages, and the royal priest has to be versed in the *Atharvanic* practices.⁵ These practices were mostly for the alleviation of the troubles of an ordinary householder, and accordingly the *Grhya-sūtras* draw largely from them. The existence of the *Cāraṇa-Vaidya* (wandering medical practitioners) *sākhā* reveals to us the particular *sākhā* of the *Atharvaveda*, which probably formed the old *Āyurveda* of the *Ātreya-Caraka* school, who identified the *Atharvaveda* with *Āyurveda*. The suggestion, contained in the word *Cāraṇa-Vaidya*, that the medical practitioners of those days went about from place to place, and that the sufferers on hearing of the

arrival of such persons approached them, and sought their medical help.

We have no proofs on the basis of which we say that the writer of the *Atharvaveda* knew the number of the different bones to which he refers; but it does not seem possible that the references made to bones could have been possible without a careful study of the human skeleton. Whether this was done by some crude forms of dissection or by a study of the skeletons of dead bodies in a state of decay is more than can be decided. Many of the organs are also mentioned, such as the heart (*hr̥daya*), the lungs (*kloma*), the gall-bladder (*halikṣṇa*), the kidneys (*matsnābhyām*), the liver (*yakna*), the spleen (*plīhan*), the stomach and the smaller intestine (*antrebhyaḥ*), the rectum and the portion above it (*gudābhyaḥ*), the larger intestine (*vanisthu*, explained by *Sāyaṇa* as *sthavirāntra*), the abdomen (*udara*), the colon (*plāsi*), the umbilicus (*nābhi*), the marrow (*majjābhyaḥ*), the veins (*snāvabhyaḥ*) and the arteries (*dhamanibhyaḥ*). Thus we see that almost all the important organs reported in the later *Ātreya-Caraka* school or the *Suśruta* school were known to the composers of the *Atharvanic* hymns.⁶

Three constituents *vāta* (wind) *pitta* (bile) and *ślesman* (mucus) as already mentioned are the base of the *Āyurvedic* treatment as disturbance or fault in any one of them causes diseases. This is indebted to the *Atharvaveda* (*Atharvaveda* 1.12.1). Here *Sāyaṇa* has explained 'tredhā' as *vāta*, *pitta* and *kapha*. The different organs as mentioned in the *Atharvaveda* (*Atharvaveda*, 1.3.6-8; 1.17.3; 7.35.2; 2.33; 10.2.1-8) have almost been accepted by the *Āyurveda*. Anatomy started by the *Atharvaved* has been enlarged by the *Āyurveda*. *Āyurveda* has borrowed the clues regarding *Kayachikitsā* and *Salyacikitsā* from the *Atharvaveda* and has elaborated and systematised them. *Āyurveda* has prescribed the utility of sun, fire, air, water etc. in the removal of diseases on the line of the *Atharvaveda* further it has adopted the herbal treatment as suggested in the *Atharvaveda*.

CONCLUSION

The origin of *Āyurveda* is rooted in *Atharvaveda* which is the first work dealing elaborately with therapeutics. The fundamental principle of three *dhātus* initiated by *Atharvaveda* 1.24.1, has been accepted by the *Āyurveda* as the very base of its treatment. *Āyurveda* has in fact extended and elaborated the medical tradition found in *Atharvaveda*. Hence the former has been designated as *upāṅga* or *upaveda* of the latter. According to *Āyurveda* a physician should be attached to *Atharvaveda*. The different organs mentioned in *Atharvaveda* have been adopted by *Āyurveda*. Most of the diseases as mentioned by *Atharvaveda* have been discussed in *Āyurveda* and medicinal herbs as recorded in the former have also been accepted in the latter.

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