



## Treatment of diseases in the *Atharvaveda* : an observation

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### Abstract

A high quality of Medical Knowledge was prevalent in Vedic society. An analysis of the material in the Vedas reveals that, all the four Vedas viz., *Rgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda*, and *Atharvaveda* provide the references regarding various aspects of medicine. The *Atharvaveda* gives more information regarding medical science than the other three Vedas. It is also known as '*Bhaisajyaveda*'. It gives information regarding plants, minerals and animal products with their usage for medical purposes. For example, 'Apamārga', a plant is useful for cough, piles, itching and abdominal pain, whereas 'Lavana' is useful for pimples; and 'Mriga Shringa' is useful for pulmonary consumption and other chronic diseases etc. *Āyurveda* (the science of life) is considered as *Upaveda* (supplementary subject) of the *Atharvaveda*. The *Atharvaveda* represents the charm system of the *Āyurveda* of the Vedic age. The refrain of *Atharvaveda* is that, charms and amulets are more efficacious than herbs and medicine. *Kāyacikitsā* (general medicine) is one of the eight branches of *Āyurveda*, which has exhaustive mention in the *Atharvaveda* and helps to establish the continuity of medical tradition in the Vedic period.

A few glimpses of medical Science as prevalent in the *Atharvaveda* have been presented here.

**Keywords:** *Atharvaveda*, treatment, diseases

### 1. Introduction

Medical science includes a variety of health care practices evolved to maintain and restore health by the prevention and treatment of illness. All human societies have medical beliefs that provide explanations for birth, death, and disease. Among the literary sources on medical science, Vedic literature is the oldest, which includes four Vedas viz., *Rgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda* and *Atharvaveda*. Out of all the four the *Atharvaveda* is the youngest and the richest in terms of medical science. It is a collection of 731 hymns containing nearly 6000 verses which are divided into twenty books or *kāṇḍas*. They are represented by two recensions, i.e. *Saunaka* and *Paippalāda*. It deals with medicine mostly. That is why this fourth *Veda* is also known as *Bhaisajyaveda*.<sup>1</sup>

### 2. Analysis

2.1. *Atharvaveda* is the first Indian text which contains prescriptions of herbs for various ailments. The use of herbs to treat ailments

would later form a large part of *Āyurveda*. *Āyurveda* (the science of life) is considered as *Upaveda* (supplementary subject) of the *Atharvaveda*. *Suśruta*<sup>2</sup> also thinks that *Āyurveda* is an accessory of the *Atharvaveda*. It represents the charm system of the *Āyurveda* of the Vedic age. It gives information regarding plants, minerals and animal products with their usage for medical purposes.

A correlation which can be established with regard to medicines in *Atharvaveda* and *Āyurveda*. *Atharvaveda* contains mantras which have to be chanted to empower the medicines. Modern medical research does not make use of mantras. The commentator *Sāyaṇācārya* wrote commentary to every *sūkta* of the *Atharvaveda*. He has given introduction to each '*mantra*' and the usage of *mantra*. In

the absence of medicine being mentioned in the *mantra*, the *viniyogagraṇṭha* i.e., *Kausikasūtra* mentions the medicine. Through research and experiment, we have yet to find the infinite values of the medicines which find mention in the *Atharvaveda*.

- 2.2. The germs of the later medical science are found in the *Bhaiṣajyasūktas* of the *Atharvaveda*. Medical science includes a variety of health care practices evolved to maintain and restore health by the prevention and treatment of illness. Jaundice, fever, dropsy, diarrhoea, consumption, leprosy, scrofulous swellings, wounds and fractures, paralysis, poison of all kinds are the chief diseases mentioned in the *Atharvaveda*.

*Takman* (fever) - It has been described vividly in the *Atharvaveda*. It is periodic fever with rigors and can be correlated with malarial fever. *Arjuna*, *kuṣṭha* etc. are used to treat *Takman*<sup>3</sup>.

*Yakṣmā* - The disease *Yakṣmā* affects almost all part of the body. *Kuṣṭha*, *Arundhati* etc. are used for treating *Yakṣmā*<sup>4</sup>.

*Hṛdroga* - The term *Hṛdroga* is mentioned in the *Atharvaveda* as *Hṛddyota*. Water has been mentioned as the remedy for *Hṛddyota*<sup>5</sup>. It was also treated with rays of morning sun and the drug *cīpudru*.

*Harimā* - It can be correlated with *kāmilā* (jaundice) in which yellowish colour of the body is seen and can be treated with morning sun rays<sup>6</sup>. Red cow's milk and the drug *Arjuna* are said to be efficacious in treating *Harimā*<sup>7</sup>.

*Balāsa* - It is an internal ailment. It affects the internal part of the body especially in the limbs and joints. The root of a pumpkin is used to cure the *Balāsa*<sup>8</sup>.

*Kuṣṭharoga* (leprosy) - The leprosy has originated in the bones, in the body and upon the skin. The drug *Naktamjātā*<sup>9</sup> and *Suparna*<sup>10</sup> are used to cure the ailment leprosy.

- 2.3. Like these we find many descriptions of diseases and their medicines in the *Atharvaveda*.

Many medicinal plants are also found in the *Atharvavedasamhitā*. As for example-

*Apamārga*<sup>11</sup> - This plant destroys worms and poisons.

*Asitam*<sup>12</sup> - It is one of the oldest plants of India and is indicated to cure contagious disorders.

*Silāci*<sup>13</sup> - It destroys bacteria, skin diseases and nourishes foetus. It is also used as external application in *kuṣṭha*.

*Kapitthaka*<sup>14</sup> - It is a plant which acts to promote virility.

*Nyagrodha*<sup>15</sup> - It is widely used in sacrifices and domestic rites. It is used to cure contagious disorders.

*Arjuna*<sup>16</sup> - It is a small herb and also known as *phalguna* and used as substitute for *Soma*. *Sāyana* interpreted it as a tree.

*Naktamālā*<sup>17</sup> - It is prescribed for *kilāsa*, *kuṣṭha* and other skin disorders.

*Nitatni* - This plant is used to promote the growth of hair<sup>18</sup>.

Pepper-corn<sup>19</sup> - It cures the wounds that have been struck by missiles, it also cures the wounds from stabs.

- 2.4. Different types of amulets are also mentioned to protect diseases in the *Atharvavedasamhitā*.

*Jangida* amulet - It is an amulet derived from the *Jangida*<sup>20</sup> tree. It is used to protect the pains of our body.

Gold amulet - The gold which is born from fire, the immortal, they bestowed upon the mortals. He who wears it as an amulet, his old age dies<sup>21</sup>. It is used for long life.

Pearl amulet - It is a life-prolonging amulet. It is used to protect us from straits<sup>22</sup>.

- 2.5. The water therapy is very popular today, use of water as a therapy takes us to a reference in the *Atharvaveda* which seeks healing medicinal quality sourced in water. It is stated in the *Atharvaveda* as -

*āpa id vā u bheṣajirāpo amīvacātānāṣiḥ/  
āpo viśvasya bheṣajistāste kṛṇvantu  
bheṣajam*<sup>/23</sup>

(The waters verily are healing, the waters chase away disease, the waters cure all diseases, and may they prepare a remedy for you!)

Dropsy, heart-disease, and kindred maladies are cured by the healing power of water<sup>24</sup>.

### 3. Conclusion

*Atharvaveda* thus describes the treatment of diseases by performing certain rites and rituals, paying offerings to the gods, penances, fasting, incantations or

the mantras. Though the magic and the religious part in the *Atharvaveda* is dominating, mention of water and its life giving properties, medicinal plants, amulets etc. are some of the major rational elements found. That is why *Caraka*<sup>25</sup> opines that a physician must be familiar with the medical science found in the *Atharvaveda*.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The *Atharvaveda* is also known as *Brahmaveda*, *Āṅgīraveda*, *Atharvāṅgīrasaveda*, *Kṣātraveda* etc.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Suśrutasamhitā* I.6

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Atharvaveda*.V.4, XIX.39, I.25

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *ibid.* IV.12

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *ibid.* I. 22

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *ibid.* I. 22.1

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *ibid.* I. 26.2

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibid.* VI.14.1-3

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *ibid.* I. 23.1

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *ibid.* I. 24.1

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *ibid.* II.31

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *ibid.* V.5

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *ibid.* VI.22

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *ibid.* IV. 4. 1

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *ibid.* IV.31

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *ibid.* V. 6

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *ibid.* VI. 26

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *ibid.* VI.136.1

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *ibid.* VI. 109

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *ibid.* II.4.1-6

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *ibid.* XIX. 26

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *ibid.* IV. 10

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *ibid.* VI. 91.3

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *ibid.* VI. 24

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Carakasamhitā* I.30.19-20

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