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Health sciences in the ancient Indian texts with special reference to the Atharvaveda Samhitā: An overview

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Abstract---Health science is a subject of great importance not only in the present era but since ancient time. A quick recap towards the ancient Indian literature tells the same story. With growing importance of health science, it has become very essential to study the path it has taken to come into the shape as we know it today. The perception our ancestors had about the medical system and health should be known to us. Though *Brhat Trayī* is thought to be the original source of idea of medical system but in reality, the *Atharvaveda Samhitā* a treasury of knowledge of health science is yet to be explored and which is actually the primitive source in the field of health science. Through this paper a modest effort has been made to get a glimpse of the health system in ancient Indian society with special reference to *Atharvaveda Samhitā*.

Keywords---*Āyurveda*, medicine, health, vedas, medical system, *Atharvaveda*.

Introduction

Health has always been an area of fascination for ages as it is associated with the wellbeing of mankind. One of the most popular Quotes “Health is Wealth” which is famous word to mouth testifies the same. An improved medical system is a boon for society and mankind. This topic has not become a matter of concern and interest recently, but can be traced back to the Vedic age. The ancient India had a well-orchestrated and extensive medical system that is more commonly known to all as *Āyurveda*. The ancient treatises are the records of the contemporary history and thus a glance to the ancient literature is very important in tracing the path different aspects have taken to come to the present form in which we see them today. Like all the other branches of knowledge the Indian medical system can also be seen to be a gift of the Vedas¹ and it is considered to be a subsidiary part of *Atharvaveda Samhitā*.² Of all the records available to the credit of text of Indian

medicinal knowledge treasure the three texts widely known under the cap *Br̥hat Trayī*, are *Caraka's Caraka Saṁhitā*, *Suśruta's Suśruta Saṁhitā* and *Vāgbhaṭa's Aṣṭāṅghr̥daya Saṁhitā*.

Āyurveda is the science for prolongation of life. It informs people about the health and lifespan and is thus called *Āyurveda*.³ Although our general notion about *Āyurveda* is that it a system of medicine but it is not so. It deals with the all-round development of not only the man but the entire universe. *Āyurveda* is the conclusive science and not a conventional medical science that deals with just the cure of disease. Rather it deals with human life, its good and bad effects, pleasure, happiness and unhappiness, healthy and unhealthy way of life. *Āyurveda* is the science of positive health and fulfilment of life.⁴ The foundation of the health science is three pillared, the first one being the cause or 'Hetu' which in therapeutics is the first step towards healing. The second one is the 'Linga' which means looking for the symptoms and then comes the accurate knowledge for the application of drugs. The conglomeration of all the three put together is what is *Ayurveda*.⁵

The topic mental health has always been a taboo for the society and even today also mental health is not looked upon like other diseases and mostly neglected. Mental health is not discussed openly and always under the cover but the thorough study of the *Vedas* and other ancient Indian texts and resources available shows that a time so earlier had a more outgoing and modern approach regarding mental health. Though the system of Indian medicine and its success has been mostly attributed to the credit of *Br̥hat Trayī* but a thorough study tells us that it is the Vedic texts which are the repository of the original idea of the health system were *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā* plays a pivotal role.

Concept of Human healthcare and welfare as mentioned in Vedas

Atharvaveda Saṁhitā though widely mistaken to be the treasure of spells, witch craft and black magic by many but for the learned it is an unending source of welfare of all aspects of life. Various problems related to the health and diseases along with their remedies and also spells for a prolonged lifespan reserves a special place in the *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā*. *Āyusyāni* hymns of the *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā* are thought to be capable of vouchsafe long life and sound health. These hymns are strikingly similar to the medicinal hymns of the *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā*.⁶ These hymns are not only restricted to escape from death and cure from diseases but also a long life with a sound health up to the old age.

Diseases mentioned in the *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā*

A detailed study of the *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā* gives us the mention of a wide knowledge our ancestors had on different kinds of diseases and the disease causing organisms. The earliest source of the word '*kṛmi*' popular even today in many local vernacular languages like Bengali, Assamese etc. which means worms and germs, that creeps or jumps, (*parisarpati* -AV. V.23.3), which multiplies and which enters human bodies from without.⁷ *Aṅvābtryam* means residing in the small intestine, *Śiṣanyam* means that which causes mania and lunacy. *Pārṣṭeyam* is germ causing disease in the ribs. *Avaskava* means causing

involuntary stimulation and contraction of muscles. And *Vyadhvara* is an epithet for a germ causing a particular disease.⁸ A description of worm which closely resembles that of round worm (*Ascaris*) is also found in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā*. The parasite is described to have 'floating head' (*triśīr ṣāṇam* – having three projections around the mouth).⁹

Infection can also be the cause of the spread of disease has been clearly mentioned in the Vedas.¹⁰ The idea of heredity being the cause of disease is also found in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā* though the mention is in an indicative form. Suśruta also mentions about heredity being the cause of the disease.¹¹ Among the seven classes of diseases described by him *Ādibalapravṛtta* diseases are inherited from the parents.¹² At a time so earlier when many regions of the world didnot properly know the way of life, the *Atharvaveda Samhitā* has huge scope of knowledge regarding complex diseases and even had mentions of seasonal diseases. For example 'takman' (fever) is such a fever that it occurs throughout the year and hence it is called 'Hāyana'. But the frightful nature of this fever is seen during the rainy season, summer and autumn.¹³ It endures all through the autumn.¹⁴

These are the name of a few diseases mentioned in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā*. Other diseases mentioned in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā* include odema, goitre, elephantiasis, headache, heart disease, jaundice, dropsy, diarrhea, leprosy, and many more along with their causes also. *Aibala* is a disease mentioned in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā*. It is a kind of eye disease.¹⁵ *Alaji* ; This is also a disease mentioned in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā*.¹⁶ which according to Wise, occurs at the juncture of the cornea and sclerotic. Its symptoms are burning and paining eyes. Williams refers it to be an inflammation of the eye.¹⁷ *Kāhābāha* – It is a disease mentioned in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā* which according to M. Williams is a rumbling noise in the bowels.¹⁸ *Kāsa* – It is a word onomatopoeic for cough is mentioned in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā* ¹⁹. *Kilāsa* and *Palita* – These are the two skin diseases mentioned in the *Atharvaveda*²⁰. Which according to the different authors are leprosy and white spots. *Kṛmi* is mentioned in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā* and is described to be a parasitic, crawling vermin.²¹ *Kṣipta* is a disease mentioned in both the *Ṛgveda Samhitā*²². And the *Atharvaveda Samhitā*.²³ According to M. Willams it is a wound caused by shooting or throwing, scattered distraction or absence of mind.²⁴ Likewise, a countless example of the mentions of different diseases can be shown in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā*.

Medicinal plants mentioned in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā*

Many medicinal plants find their honourable mention for their curative properties in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā* such as *Kuṣtha*, *Nitanī*, *Rajanī*, *Rohiṇī*, *Pippalī*, *Arundhatī*, *Ajaśṛṅgī*, *Lākṣa*, *Ābayu* *Viṣāṇakā* and many more. Medicine in its magnificent sense denotes ideas relating to diagnosis, causes and cure of illness as well as practicing of restoring and maintaining health. Amidst many plants mentioned in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā* here are a few plants discussed those have good curative and healing property- *Ajaśṛṅgī* – This plant is mentioned in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā*.²⁵ A good number of passages have been mentioned in the *Atharvaveda Samhitā*. This plant is known to eliminate *Kapha* and *Medas* (fat). It

eases headache and internal abscess, pacifies *Raktapitta*, destroys three types of inflammation, alleviates all types of *Prameha* and defects semen.²⁶ *Alābuka* – is also mentioned in the *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā*.²⁷ The *Suśruta Saṁhitā* explains its nature to be pungent, rough and sharp, it is useful for blood-letting in that is affected by *Kapha*.²⁸ *Apāmārga* - This medicinal plant gets a remarkable place in the *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā*.²⁹ According to *Sāyaṇa*, *apāmārgajanād apāmārga v iti saṁjñā*.³⁰ It is considered to be a magical plant which can do wonders. It is used against death caused by famine and thirst, failure to bear child and many more. *Vandana*: It is also mentioned in the *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā* which according to *Sayana* is a herb.³¹,³² *Tila* - This plant is which is widely popular even today and is used extensively in many Hindus ritualistic rites and rituals is also mentioned in the *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā* and *Suśruta Saṁhitā*³³ for its exceptional medicinal property.. In the *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā* it denotes sesamum plant, particularly, its grain. It pacifies *Vāta* and increases *Pitta*. It is very good promoter of strength, digestive power and intellect. It is applied on wounds as an external paste. It is also beneficial for teeth, skin and hairs. It reduces excessive urine.³⁴ *Udumbara* – The *Udumbara* is mentioned in the *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā*³⁵. It held a place of great importance here. According to Roxburgh, is the Glomerous Fig tree or *Ficus Glomentara*, a large tree. According to SS, it is beneficial for wound and astringent. It is union promoting and alleviates intrinsic haemorrhage, burning sensation fat and disorders of female genital tract.³⁶

Conclusion

Thus, from the above endeavor it can be concluded that our ancestors had a good knowledge about the health science with a conclusive view considering physical and mental health both equally important. The Vedas not only have hymns associated to the rituals but all the aspects needed for a good full-fledged life not only of an individual but of society. Also, although the prevalent notion about the *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā* is that it is the book of magic and spells, but in reality it is a book regarding the wellbeing of all aspects of life. From the above discussion it can be concluded that the *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā* has immense mention about disease and pathogens and parasites causing them and is also an imperishable source of knowledge regarding medicinal herbs and their medicinal properties.

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