

MYTHOLOGY AND HISTORY – SKETCHING A LOGICAL PERSPECTIVE FOR THEIR INTERPRETATION IN AYURVEDA PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

Ayurvedic classical literature in the form of compendia (*Samhita*) presented Ayurveda as scientific discourse rather than scientific discipline. A discourse is the organic and applied extension of scientific knowledge, where man is presumed along with all his/her connection with whatever affairs he/she is exposed to. Naturally, in ‘discourse’ man is appraised within the premises characterised by its own socio-cultural fabric, environment, inheritance, nature, climate and many more which are conventionally studied in separate airtight compartments. Learning Ayurvedic literature without keeping a senseful historical perspective about the characteristics of the historical context in which they were written creates agonizing errors. Present pedagogy leaves least concern over framing a logical historical outlook on Ayurvedic tradition. Mythology and history are two main fabrics which created many chances for misinterpreting its content. Such misinterpretations leave two mutually contradictory standpoints among learners: (1) Corroborating the myths and allegories to be purely historical and even scientific. (2) Declaring such fabrics as pure contaminants misrepresenting Indian history and tradition. This article explains how to sketch a logical practice in dealing with history and mythology, considering Ayurveda as a discourse represented in *Samhitas* to avoid wrong conclusions on facts.

Keywords: Mythology, Ayurvedic history, scientific discipline, scientific discourse

1. INTRODUCTION

Mythology, History and, to a considerable extent, Philosophy are conventionally deemed to be extraneous in the context of Medicine, but they put their clear and spontaneous presence in Ayurvedic medical literature as evidenced from classical textbooks of Ayurveda (*Samhitas*) composed about 2000-2500 years back. While integrating the *Samhita* tradition to the pedagogy, as it is done in the present curriculum¹, placing the above items in a logical and corporeal scenario of medical learning becomes a fix. History of Ayurveda (*Ayurveda Itihasa*), was included in the formal syllabus of Ayurveda graduate course since the inception of BAMS and usually was a blend of mythology and history. Content of the same had been subjected to major revisions; presently it bears an insignificant status in the syllabus.² While including *Charakasamhita* as a distinct content of BAMS syllabus, the historical and mytho-

logical realms naturally transpire to the transaction, not as a pre-designed material, but as an inadvertent content of *Samhita* learning. Understanding Ayurvedic literature with due contemplations on the historical context which it belonged by its composition is different from learning history as a separate discipline. This difference can be better understood if we consider distinguishing “history of Ayurveda” as it is learnt now, from “Ayurveda in history” which necessitates a new outlook. Defining this difference is the key problem; not properly addressed during reformative activities of Ayurveda pedagogy. For appraising this difference, *Samhitas* may be approached in a different order. For that purpose, art of medicine (*Vaidyam*) as depicted in *Samhitas* is better to understand as a *discourse* instead of a *discipline*. Science as a discipline is a systematic enterprise that builds and organizes knowledge in the

form of testable explanations and predictions about the universe⁶ and it is almost an inorganic and essential asset of further applications in the form of a discourse. In simpler words, when scientific knowledge is applied in a real life situation, it becomes a discourse. A discourse is rather a customized set of practices which contemplates on as much variables as relevant in bringing out a desired outcome. In that sense, discourse is more contextual than discipline where man is presumed along with all sorts of connections such as socio-cultural fabric, environment, inheritance, nature, climate and many more which are presently studied in separate airtight compartments. *Samhitas* can be described as reflecting Ayurveda as a discourse because it blended scientific material of Ayurveda with the socio-cultural characteristics of the historical context in which they were written. Such an exceptional structure devised two millennia before, needs to be explored carefully, especially in the present context where the present pedagogy is not adaptive to it.

2. *Samhitas* – the historical context

Ayurvedic classics, those date back to 500 BC – 100 AD, are primary sources³ of history pertaining to that particular historical context. The term history here does not limit its meaning to “history of medicine” or “history of Ayurveda”. In fact, there is no meaning in classifying history into different segments. Historical context is a convergence point where many social, political, scientific, economic affairs take their part together to form the characteristics of a particular context; the context is defined in terms of such forces in action. J D Bernal named his famous book on history of science, not as History of science but as “Science in History”.⁴ The difference makes great sense. It does not attempt to explore the scientific *part* of history, but to place and identify nature of science in different historical contexts, which definitely relate to many other complementary disciplines. Nature of science and technology at any point of time signify the quality of living standards, knowledge system, reflective capacity and level of thinking of that particular point of time. In the same way, Ayurvedic classics are historical documents to explore history from a broader perspective and to explain how did they engaged themselves with that particular historical context. Period of classics (*Samhita-kala*), better known as Golden period of Ayurveda, ranged from 400 BC to 500 AD, was almost contemporary to the advent and expansion of Buddhism on one side and establishment post-vedic (*upanishat*) tradition on the other. This was the period Ayurveda attained an independent status as a sci-

ence with its own theoretical and practical identity. Out-growth of different philosophical systems (*Darsana*), formulation of different theoretical constructs to explain nature of universe and *Buddhist* ambiance of that period contributed to the paradigm shift of *Vaidya* from *Daiva* based practices to *Yukti* based practices.⁵

Characteristics of civilization at the time of composition of classical Ayurvedic texts were reflected in them mainly related to two broad categories:

- (1) The Outer life of civilization: These classics present art of medicine (*Vaidyam*), as an ensemble of different kinds of knowledge about the physical nature of the society including that of flora and fauna, climate, environment, habitat, lifestyle, food, cloth, transportation, trade, occupation, utensils etc. In nutshell, any affair in human life can become relevant in medical discourse; the relative role may differ. Usually, in the context of health and disease, such affairs appear as determinants of health and diseases in relation to preservation of health, disease causation, disease progression, materials and procedures related to treatment etc.
- (2) The inner life of civilization: Another, rather a subtler area, which needs more consideration is the fashion in which the socio-cultural fabric influenced practice of medicine as an organic discourse. The inner life of the society, which characterises beliefs, ethics, religiosity and morality, certainly took an influential role. These influences can be dexterously traced out in relation to the cause of disease, lifestyle factors, providential approaches to treatment (technically known as *Daiva-vyapasraya chikitsa*) etc. Mythology and ethics are two principal domains of the inner life, which definitely needs appraisal in relation to the historical context.

3. Mythology in *Samhitas*

Mythology, as a description of an event or lineage vividly appears in *Samhitas* the context of origin/descend of Ayurveda^{6,7} and origin of diseases (story of *Dakshayaga*)⁸, which are well known in this connection. Mythological characters appear as symbolic expressions while explaining the theory of man-nature analogy (*Loka-purusha-samyā*), where *Brahma* is represented as *Atma* in human being, *Prajapati* as Mind (*Satwa*), *Indra* as ego (*Ahankara*), *Aditya* (sun) as destructive events (*adana*), *Rudra* as fury (*Rosha*), *Soma* (moon) as gracefulness (*prasada*), *Vasu* as happiness (*Sukha*), *Aswins* as glory (*Kanti*), *Marut* (air) as enthusiasm (*Utsaha*), *Viswadeva* as senses and sense organs and so on.⁹ In the context of Psy-

chology, while explaining subtypes of personality traits (*Satwa-prakriti*), they are named after mythological idols, to show similarity in such personalities with prominent features of idols after which they are named. *Brahma-satwa*, *Aindra-satwa* etc. are a few examples.¹⁰ In the context of psychiatry, personality disorders (*Bhuta-graha*) are defined as abrupt change in behaviour, appearance, nature, speech, body language which resembles some common objects, animals or mythological characters.¹¹ The disease is named after the object/animal/mythological character to which the person exhibits similarity. *Gandharva-graha*, *Deva-graha*, *Brahmarakshass-graha* etc. are a few examples. In modern psychiatry such a state is called possession state, in which the person is totally detached from his own personality as if he is driven by another person inside.¹²

4. The history – mythology paradox

(1) Basic characteristics:

Myth and History, in a very special sense are interdependent.¹³ It has been argued that myths narrate events in primordial, atemporal moments which constitute sacred time, and differ from the continuous profane time of daily routines.¹⁴ The myth-history problem evolves recently into two dichotomous thoughts, by which history is explained to speak with evidences whereas, mythology do it with memory, imaginations and fantasy. The main function of myth is that of establishing exemplar models in all important human actions. According the famous psychologist Carl G Jung, primary function of myth is psychological, to shed light on working of the collective unconscious. The concept of archetype proposed by Jung considers myth as one of its working platforms along with fantasy, dreams etc.¹⁵ All these facts converge to consider myth as a fantasized reality.

(2) Ayurvedic context:

In the case of Ayurveda, the relation between history and mythology is worth to contemplate. As an example, we shall consider the description of lineage starting from *Brahma*. Characters like *Brahma*, *Daksha*, *Aswin* twins and *Indra* are mythological, whereas further linking personalities like *Bharadvaja*, *Atreya*, *Agnivesa* are convincingly historical. The story itself make a demarcation between these two categories of characters by putting the incidence of a symposium discussing the issue of diseases on earth.¹⁶ The story convincingly agree that Ayurveda was imported from another place, where people have a reasonably enhanced health and longevity. There are some

characters in the lineage who are mythological as well as historical, such as *Dhanwantari*. *Dhanwantari* was explained as the God of medicine (mythological), as a King, *Divodasa* (600 BC, historical) and as court physician of *Vikramaditya* (300 AD, historical). This illustrates how Ayurvedic description on the biography of its masters merges the boundaries of mythology and history.

(3) Myth, the marker of popularity:

Mythology, in relation to medicine as a discourse, always narrate the trends in its transmission and acceptability among common public. In local traditions (eg: *Ashta-vaiddya* tradition in Kerala), the credibility of families is deeply rooted in the society through myths of the above varieties. These myths are capable to draw public appeal even today.

(4) Myth as consolidated aspirations:

Myth represents a magical tradition in medical practice. There are many stories on miraculous acts of Vaidyas, God's power of curing diseases, surgical procedures performed by mythological characters, mantras invoking Gods to pacify diseases etc.; richly available in Vedic as well as Buddhist literature.²² Myth stands for the persistent desire of mankind for magical remedies for their miseries and attainment of immortality. In that way mythology reflected consolidation of man's aspirations and expectations from medical fraternity.

5. Importance of historical outlook

Indian history was subjected to distorted evaluations regarding its mere existence equally by British orientalist and imperialists stated as "The Hindus have never had any historical writings. All that is known of India to be gathered from popular poems or the accounts of foreigners"(HH Wilson, 1854:123)¹⁷ On one side, as a part of upholding intense patriotic ideologies, this propaganda was refuted strongly by corroborating the myths and allegories to be purely historical and even scientific. On the other extent, some others strongly argued to outcast myths and allegories from deliberations on Indian culture and history, explaining them as pure contaminants, which misrepresent Indian history and tradition. Both these trends lack historical logic.

(1) Damage of isolation:

Isolating Ayurvedic discourse from its contextual influences and blindly embracing to the verbal meanings of such references will create cognitive dissonance in the new learners. This does not mean that whatever socio-cultural references depicted in ancient context is sensibly valid as such in the present context. In the last two millen-

nia mankind had been subjected to many turns of revolutions through which the contexts are widely dispersed in all respects. Translating the intentions of such references to the present context is highly significant. Otherwise a fresh learner succumbs totally to the verbal meaning of the explanations instead of understanding them in connection with the historical context in which it was explained. Here are a few examples to demonstrate this damage:

▪ **Example.1:**

Horse riding (*aswa-gamana*) is said to worsen anal fistula (*bhagandara*) or piles (*arsas*) in classical Ayurvedic texts.¹⁸ Translating this description to the present context, it become motor bike instead of horse ride. In the absence of these sorts of translatory approach with a sharp historical orientation, Ayurveda will be alleged to be primitive and unscientific.

▪ **Example.2:**

In *Ashtanga-hridaya* (500-600 AD), *kalaaya* (a pulse) is said to be increasing Vata in body.¹⁹ Usually, food items causing increase of Vata are unsuitable for pregnant lady because it affects the health of the child negatively. An expert translator translated *kalaaya* as peanut or ground nut and subsequently stated intake peanut is harmful to pregnant ladies. This created a controversy and invited criticism against Ayurveda from medical fraternity, because nutritionally peanut is highly suitable for pregnant women. Historically ground nuts originated in South America and with evidences it was proved that “credit for the introduction of the plant (peanut) into this country (India) belongs to the Jesuit Father who followed Vasco Da Gama shortly after his first landing in India”.²⁰ That means, ground nut reached in India around 1500 AD and *Ashtanga-hridaya* written before 700 AD could never refer the effects of ground nut in it. Misinterpreting *Kalaaya* as ground nut occurred due to lack of proper historical outlook.

▪ **Example.3:**

While describing edible food items meat is classified into eight groups, based on the geographical characteristics of the habitat and other attributes of the animals. In *Charaka-samhita* (BC 400 – 100 BC) cow’s meat also is included as one among them and explained as useful in treating diseases.²¹ At the same time cow’s meat is worst for daily use when compared to other meats.²² In the same context black gram also is enlisted as the worst among pulses and prawn among sea products. This observation is endorsed today by linking *daily* use of processed red meat to higher mortality, mainly due to cardiovascular disease and can-

cer.²³ In *Ashtangahridaya* (AD 500-600), cow’s meat is mentioned to be edible, at the same time, when explaining social codes and conducts (*Sad-vritta*), cow is included in the list of those who deserves worship, along with God, the King, *Brahmin*, elderly people, *Vaidya* and guest.²⁴ The reason for this changeover should be examined historically. During early Brahmanism (before *Buddhism*, roughly the period of composition of *Agnivesa-samhita*, the original form of *Charakasamhita*), meat was not socially and religiously prohibited as a food item.²⁵ It was during late *Brahmanism* (after 400 AD) after the decline of *Buddhism*, cow worship became a strong religious custom among Hindus,²⁶ which is almost contemporary to the composition of *Ashtanga-hridaya*. This can be traced as a reason for enlisting cow as a holy animal. It could be logical if we consider the mutually contradictory references regarding meat eating, as how scientific identity of an author (Eg: *Vagbhata*) was conflicted with his social and religious identity. When societal and religious norms pervade to a discipline, it naturally becomes a discourse. In other words, it reflects how Ayurveda as a discourse contradicts with that as a discipline. Commenting on the issue without proper historical insight will bring out wrong conclusions about it.

6. Resolving the problems in interpreting mythology

Mythology was the most misinterpreted element of Ayurvedic literature. The contradictory stand points where mythology appears as a theme of reference are (1) Blindly accepting the verbal expressions shown in the mythology without any critical appraisal (2) Blind negation of mythology by considering them to be superstitious, by all means. The first category finds Ayurveda as divine, unquestionable and final by considering the celestial lineage (from *Brahma* up to *Indra*) to be authentic by itself. The second category considers mythology as a discourse absolutely irrelevant in a medical science, and blames Ayurveda incompetent to be designated as a scientific discipline. Both these are equally senseless. We must evolve a sensible settlement to this problem, by putting mythology in a historical and sociological perspective. Here are a few models to sketch such perspectives.

(1) Myth as a consolidation of social memory:

First of all consider myth as a consolidation of social memory. The power of fantasy, as Sigmund Freud claimed for dreams in personal ground, has some meanings related to unfulfilled social desires or memories of fulfilled desires. Social dynamics of a particular context definitely

reflects in the mythology, it is reality inflated and projected to an extreme extent. In Ayurveda, while explaining the celestial lineage in its transmission, *Brahma* advises Ayurveda to his son, *Daksha-prakapati*. This represents a father-to-son (familial) transmission. *Daksha-prajapati* taught it to *Aswin* twins, who are sons of *Surya*. According to *Puranas*, *Surya* himself is a *Vaidya*, but instead of he himself teaching Ayurveda to his sons, sent them to another *Vaidya*. This represents the tutorial lineage (*Guru-sishya-parampara*). These two lineages appearing in the same story reveals that from the beginning itself Ayurvedic knowledge was transmitted through two distinct lineages: Familial tradition and *Guru-sishya* tradition. This social implication is very much relevant in the history of Ayurveda. Those who misinterpret Ayurveda as sustained purely through familial lineage should consider the tutorial lineage as well which was obvious from its beginning itself.

(2) Use of mythology in medical analogy:

Consider mythological idols as consolidated figures illuminating exemplary values of human life, either positive or negative. These features are often referred while using them symbolically to explain a person or a situation. While describing personality traits (*Satwa-prakriti*), names of mythological characters are referred in an analogical method, to represent some key features of those idols in such personalities. In the same fashion, psychiatric diseases (*Bhuta-graha*) also are explained using the same analogical method. Analogy, as an instructional strategy, is well approved in pedagogy, to explain complex instructional entities in a simpler or convincing method, even in subjects like physical sciences like Chemistry.²⁷ Modern anatomy use such analogical methods to described organs in human body, e.g. Achilles tendon in the leg, named after Achilles, the famous Greek mythological character. In western psychology terms like Oedepus complex, Narcisism etc. use Greek mythical characters as icons to explain specific psychological phenomena. When such methods are entertained without any prejudice, the scientific fraternity considers the same technique to be irrational while it comes to Ayurveda. In Ayurveda, technique of explaining specific states of phenomena through analogy with mythological icons was interpreted with a flavour of superstition, often tagged with almost all sorts of psychiatric discourses. The superstitions about psychiatric diseases are more deep rooted in the society, to consider psychiatric diseases as invasion of demons and supernatural powers to the body. But, *Charaka* categorically de-

clared that such diseases are never inflicted by any God, demon, or supernatural power, but are effects of bad deeds of the person.²⁸

(3) Agree with the intension of scientific myths:

Scientific discoveries are often presented in a mythological way with a theory being presented as a dramatic flash of insight by a heroic individual rather than as the result of sustained experiment and reasoning. For example, Newton's law of universal gravitation is commonly presented as the result of an apple falling upon his head. Newton's observation of an apple falling did indeed play a part in starting him thinking about the problem but it took him about twenty years to fully develop the theory and so the story of the apple has been described as a myth.³⁴ In the same way, the presentation of scientific materials being highlighted with the flavour of mythology may be considered with a vision to draw the embedded science within, not as a direct material of science. While describing the mythology of origin of diseases, *Prameha* and *Kushtha* are said to be resulted from eating excessive ghee, which indicates the *santarpanaja* nature of the diseases. Likewise, through describing origin of insanity to be resultant of unexpected shock (of seeing the atrocities of *Siva*), the primary reason of insanity is hinted here.

7. CONCLUSION

Mythology and History are often explained as a burden to Ayurveda, in the absence of knowledge about the real stuff encoded therein. While deciphering Ayurvedic classics written in a different historical context now, each line of the classic needs a critical appraisal based on the historical imprints. Historical misrepresentations of Ayurvedic materials lead to huge and agonizing errors, which, on the other hand pull back the credibility built up by the science so far. In pedagogy, in the context of transacting *Samhitas*, this issue is not addressed properly. Creating a sense-ful differentiation between nature of discipline and discourse in Ayurveda will be a key in surmounting such a crisis.

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Source of Support: Nil

Conflict Of Interest: None Declared

How to cite this URL: Vinod Kumar M. V & Upendra Dixit: Mythology And History – Sketching A Logical Perspective For Their Interpretation In Ayurveda Pedagogy. International Ayurvedic Medical Journal {online} 2018 {cited January, 2019} Available from: http://www.iamj.in/posts/images/upload/133_138.pdf