

IS VEDIC MEDICINE RELIGIO-MAGICAL? (ANALYSIS OF A NARRATIVE SET BY HISTORIANS)

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Abstract

Medicine is as old as life itself. The fundamental requirement for the survival of the species is that simultaneously with the appearance of disease, all creatures must have also evolved the system of medicine to combat the disease. The remedies were available in the form of plants and herbs, and by instinct the living beings could identify such life saving vegetation. The man with his higher intelligence must necessarily have extended the scope of this search for remedies. So if we recount the myth of a Garden of Eden which man had to abandon when he fell from grace, “the thousand ills that flesh is heir to” must have afflicted man from his birth and the dawn of medicine must have synchronized with the dawn of disease. Every human society must have developed a basic system of medicine, whether based on spells, incantations; magic or rituals, and materia- medica which to us in this scientific age may appear meaningless. The progress from this primitive stage to an established system of medicine has not been on the same lines everywhere. The civilization and the environment has a vital role in the development of a system of medicine and it depends on various factors; its form and content are decided by the environment in which it is born.

In my present paper, I have tried to analyze the comments of historians on the Hindu tradition of Medicine or more appropriately Vedic tradition of medicine. Most historians have advanced a few arguments while writing on the Vedic tradition of medicine. The first argument is that Buddha’s philosophy of the middle path and

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Buddhist medicine influenced Ayurveda to develop the empirical and scientific approach.

Second argument is that Vedic medicine was purely religio-magical whereas in other ancient civilisations such as Mesopotamian, Egyptian and the West, traditions of medicine were empirical and scientific. Third argument is that the Vedic tradition of medicine was separate from the Ayurvedic tradition and both are independent and different from each other.

In view of the above arguments, first I would like to briefly introduce the Vedic tradition of medicine including Ayurveda, and afterward take up the arguments of historians in the light of the available facts and a comparative analysis of other ancient traditions of medicine.

Key Words: Ayurveda, Tridosha, Triguna, Rig Veda, Vedic Medicines

A brief introduction of Vedic medicine including Ayurveda

References to medicine are found in the earliest texts including the Vedas. The concept of Tridosha and Triguna, and several diseases with their treatment are for the first time found in the Rig Veda. *AushadhiSukta*, mentions 125 herbal medicines to be found at 107 places, used for treating diseases and also as preventive medicines. Atharva Veda, contains 114 hymns related to medical topics such as - fever, consumption (tuberculosis), vidradhi (wounds), leprosy, heart disease, epilepsy, insanity, eye and ear diseases, worms, etc.¹ The treatment of disease (Chikitsa) in the Atharva Veda is both religious and ritualistic as well as physiological. Under religious and ritualistic treatment, emphasis is on practices such as reciting sacred mantras, penances (niyama), amulets (mani), sacred oblations (mangalahoma), fasting (upavasa), and purificatory rites (prayaschitta), but Atharva Veda also contains material about human anatomy, herbal medicines (bhaisajya), and the classification of diseases (lingivyadhi). Reference is made to wandering medical practitioners (charan-vaidya) and those who are trained in medical sciences (Vaidya).² The legendary version of the origin of the Ayurvedic system is that Brahma reminded it to Prajapati, who handed it down to Atreya Punarvasu etc. In Rig Veda there are references to the first divine physician Rudra and of how the Aswini Kumaras cured Chyavana Rishi of his senility. There are number of Richas dedicated to Marut, Vayu etc., in which the reference to medicine is obvious. Although such references are found in the Rig Veda, but systematic and extensive description of medicine is to be

found in the Atharva Veda only. Ayurveda is the system of medicine that evolved in India and has survived as a distinct entity from remote antiquity to the present day. The literal meaning of Ayurveda is , *The Science of Life*.³ Ayurveda involves a logical convention of harmonious living, and its beginning can be drawn from ancient information in Rig Veda and Atharva Veda. The source of Ayurveda has been lost in ancient relic, yet its ideas and methodologies have been idealized in between 2500 and 600 BCE in India .⁴ The utilization of natural resources for advancement through generous experimentation and experiences of day-to-day life has been a regular practice of Ayurveda in India right from its inception. The fundamental rule of ayurvedic treatment contains two basic parts - to keep the reason for illness and to make the patient more mindful about the reason for the sickness. The central objective of ayurvedic treatment is "Ayurveda deals with happy and unhappy life. It explains what is appropriate and what is inappropriate in relation to the life, as well as it measures the life expectancy and the quality of life." ⁵It is a holistic arrangement of medical services with the idea that the human body is a network of seven fundamental components ("Rasa," "Rakta," "Mansa," "Meda," "Asthi," "Majja," and "Shukra") and the waste results of the body, such as- excretion, urine, and sweat, which are derived by the five fundamental components fire, water, air, ether, and earth and three effective energies or functional philosophies "vata, pitta, and kapha" (Tridosha). Any unevenness or unsettling influence in these fundamental standards of the body may cause a disease.⁶Ayurveda treats a patient comprehensively and not the sickness alone. This system of medicine highlights the uniqueness of every individual with respect to social conservative status, bio-personality, biosynthetic, and physiological conditions that may lead to a specific kind of ailment. Further, this facilitates investigation with present-day logical methodologies for tending to different human service issues.

It would be of great interest to study the history of Ayurveda, and trace its origin to assess its place in the corpus of world medicine. The study of the genesis and evolution of ideas in any science is an interesting and often serves as a learning process. But the study of Ayurveda is not to be viewed solely as an intellectual exercise. Despite the amazing results attained by modern medicine, mainly through progress in the physical, chemical and natural sciences, there are vast areas of diseases which have eluded its therapeutic ambit and the study of a system of medicine that has stood the test of time may contribute fruitfully to overall alleviation of human suffering. All primitive societies evolved a system of medicine through error and

trial methods, accidents or by inspiration and thus got a collection of remedies for common illnesses. But such remedies were not based on any logical understandings of illness and drugs; rather they had been purely empirical. As late as the 17th Century, Moliere, referred to physicians as people, “who poured medicines of which they know little into bodies of which they know less”.⁷

Ayurveda, the Indian system of medicine, evolved as a system with a sound rationale and logical foundation. There are a few charges against the Ayurvedic/Ayurveda system of medicine by its critics’ such as- its basic concepts were not re-examined in the light of the greater understandings of the human environment, for centuries its methods of treatment hardly incorporated little change, and that there has been no new literature composed for a long time. It has to be accepted that after the 8th century A.D no new book of exceptional merit was written and the literature from then to about the 16th century consisted mainly of commentaries on the original texts. The last perhaps among the original books was by Bhava Prakash Mishra, which is also more than 400 years old. The basics on which the Ayurvedic system of medicine is based are essentially true for all times and do not change from time to time. These basics are based on human factors on intrinsic causes, and not extrinsic causes. Changes may take place in civilization, human habits, and environment but humanity remains unchanged. Changes in the environment, new modes of living, new avocations, all might contribute to certain changes in a disease or the origin of new diseases. But disease attacks the human, and as long as the human being is very much the same as his ancestor, the reactions to the disease, signs and symptoms would be same.⁸ The methods adopted to cure the disease may differ in their form but not in their basic approach.

Atharva Veda, the last of the four Vedas, contains an adequate description of diseases and the cure of them as we have mentioned earlier. As an example, we might cite the ancient view of disease consumption in Tuberculosis. It is characterized as a disease of not one organ but of several organs, heart, lungs, spleen, intestines, rectum, even of the bones and marrow. This modern view surprisingly in Atharva Veda is in the form of prayer – the form in which medical instructions are visible in Vedic literature. And even we find a greater degree of anatomical and other knowledge in certain Upanishads – particularly in the Yogapanishads, which are twenty in number and belong to a later period than the Vedas. There are also references to drugs, diseases and health care in the other epics. We find in the Ramayana, that expert physicians attended on kings and they

were capable even of preserving dead bodies. In the Mahabharata we find references of surgeons attending on the wounded and the disabled, with all the appliances and equipments in the battle field. The tradition of medical knowledge is further developed during the puranic period.

The systematic development of the Vedic tradition of medicine is associated with a few renowned names, of which two distinguished pupils of Indra, Dhanvantari and Atreya were great contributors to the ancient Vedic medicine. Dhanvantari, the divine physician, is known as the father of Vedic medicine. Atreya Samhita is the oldest existing work on Hindu medicine, written by Atreya Punarvasu that contains 46,500 verses in all.⁹ Agnivesa, his pupil was another great contributor after these two whose period is fixed around 1000 BCE. The Agnivesha Tantra or Agnivesha Samhita written by him is a classic text on Indian medicine and Ayurveda. The lost text was revived and has survived to this day; due to Charaka's (a principal contributor and pupil of Agnivesha) contribution that has made the text available to the world. Historically it would appear that during Charaka's time, the Agnivesha Samhita has fallen into background or partly perished, and Charaka undertook the great task of restoring the work, filling up the gaps and re-writing the parts of the work which had become obscure. This is clear from the subscription to each chapter in which the Charak himself states that he has redone the chapter (Pratisamakrita). The work was further revised by Dridabala, who rewrote at least the last 17 chapters devoted to Chikitsa and the whole Kalpa and Siddhi as mentioned in the colophon of each chapter. Charaka Samhita is written partly in verse and partly in prose and its language resembles to that of the Brahmanas. The text is the record of teaching by Atreya Punarvasu to his students and Agnivesha being one of them. Traditionally Charaka, the period of Charaka is fixed between 1000 to 800 B.C.¹⁰ But western historians and most of the Indian historians consider him of 4th-3rd BCE which is still a matter of debate. In any case, the Charak Samhita probably reached its present form in the 3rd or 2nd century. The popularity of the work remains intact to this day. This work is a perfect compendium of medical knowledge, dealing with medical aspects, such as-etiology, symptomatology, treatment and medical care in health and disease.

The practitioner of this science of life is known as the Vaidya (traditional physician or doctor in modern terms). The four basic pillars of the Ayurvedic tradition of medicine are- the physician, the medicine, the attendant, and the patient. The responsibility of the

physician was to exercise good judgement about his practice, the duty of the attendant was to prepare medicines and perform nursing duties while the patient's role was to provide accurate history of the disease, and follow the physician's instructions. It was also the responsibility of the physician to examine his patients and observe his assistants carefully because if therapy failed, the physician's competence would be questioned and only he would be responsible.

Charak, Sushruta and Bagbhatta all claim that they hold the original Ayurveda as revealed by Brahma which is an Upanga of Atharva Veda, and the original text consisted of eight parts:

1. Surgery (Salya Tantra): This part deals with the description and uses of the various surgical instruments and appliances, the preparation and properties of caustics and actual cautery, the methods of removing foreign substances introduced into body from outside or formed inside the body.

2. Salakya Tantra or minor surgery: It treats diseases of parts of the body situated above the clavicles, such as the diseases of the eyes, nose, mouth, ears, etc., and their treatments.

3. Kaya Chikitsa or medicine: It deals with the inner medicine, i.e. the constitutional diseases of the body such as fever, diarrhoea, haemorrhage, consumption, insanity and all such disorders.

4. Bhuta Vidya or demonology: Equal importance is given to mental health, for which a regime of Sadvritta (ethical life) is prescribed. Strict mental discipline and strict adherence to moral values are considered a prerequisite for mental health. It dictates the rules to be observed in performing the various religious procedures, in offering sacrifices to the gods and in conciliating the planetary influences, etc. in order to cure the mental derangements due to being possessed by a Deva, or an Asura, or a Gandharva, or a Yaksha or Rakshasa or a Pitr (an ancestral spirit) or a Pishacha or a Naga.

5. Kaumarabhrtya or the science of Paediatrics: It is the treatment of infants and advice to the means of rectifying the morbid conditions of milk of the wet-nurse, and of curing various diseases caused by unwholesome milk, and planetary influence.

6. Agada Tantra or Toxicology: It deals with the methods of diagnosis and treatment of the poisonous bites of snakes, insects, spiders, scorpions, mice, etc. and with the means of curing patients suffering from poisoning due to an incompatible combination of food.

7. Rasayana or the science of Tonics: It deals with medicines that preserve youth, prolong life, promote intelligence, strength, and empower to resist the diseases.

8. Vajikarana Tantra or the science of Aphrodisiacs: It treats remedies for increasing the quantity of semen when it is scanty, rectifying its morbid conditions, revingorating when it is wasted, regenerating its losses, and also stimulating sexual desire.

The primary objective of the science of life was the maintenance of health, rather than the treatment of disease. Health was not simply the absence of disease, but a state attained and enjoyed only by vigorous pursuit of an elaborate, individualized program of prophylactic measures prescribed by the Ayurveda doctor. So the approach to disease and medicine is very holistic and positive in Ayurveda. This verse from Charak Samhita is worth quoting:

नरोहिताहारविहारसेवीसमीक्ष्यकारीविषयेष्वसक्तः।
दातासमःसत्यपरःक्षमावानापतोपसेवीचभवत्यरोगः॥
मतिर्वचःकर्मसुखानुबन्धंसत्वंविधेयंविशदाचवृद्धिः।
जानंतपस्तत्परताचयोगेयस्यास्तितंनानुपतंतिरोगः॥¹¹

Shushruta defines beautifully about health and a healthy person.

समदोषःसमाग्निश्चसमधातुमलक्रियः।
प्रसन्नात्मेन्द्रियमनाःस्वस्थइत्यभिधीयते॥¹²

From the above brief and basic details, we know that the origin of Ayurveda is associated with gods in every text from Rig Veda to Atharva Veda and from Charak Samhita to Asthanghridaya. And later on, it transmits through sages to Vaidyas for the welfare of mankind. Why it is associated with the gods? This question gets different answers and most of the historians term it as mythological, magical and so on. But it indicates that how ancient and original the knowledge of disease and medicine is? It is as old as the human race, the gods and more importantly belief in gods is. The transmission of the medicinal knowledge is also recorded and it transmits through the sages who were spiritual and did penance in the Himalayan region which is the repository of diverse precious herbal medicines even today. Also since it is amply clear that Ayurveda has been accepted by almost all the Vedic scholars and historians as an Upanga of Atharva Veda, and we know that Vedas were composed by sages dwelling in the forests after observing, examining, and knowing minutely about the flora and fauna, so their knowledge about the same is quite original, empirical and scientific. The Ayurveda declares Brahma to be the source of all medicinal knowledge. Indeed he is said to have composed the original Ayurveda in a lakh slokas or verses. This is so because in the Hindu tradition, Brahma is credited with the creation of the Universe and Ayurvedic medicine is all nature-based, hence Brahma

is credited with the composition of Ayurveda too. As the Vedic sages were all spiritual people doing penance in the lap of nature, always meditating, concentrating, and observing the nature, its diversity and beauty, searching, and realizing God in nature, so it is but natural that their inspiration is Supreme God. Thus the knowledge, and in present case, knowledge of medicine is derived by sages directly from Brahma, the Supreme God through diverse nature, its flora, and fauna. In the early Vedic period only a few deities were, more or less, in relation with medicine and disease: the Rudra, Ashvins and other gods. But later on due to the growing population, expansion of agricultural land and activities, animal husbandry, more and more areas came under the influence of human activity. It is in this process, later on, new deities related to new activities as well as with medical functions or pest gods. Thus it is from God, the physician derives his inspiration, light of knowledge; it is on Him he calls for succour. The origin and cessation of life manifest His power. Therefore, in this sense the ancient Hindus regarded medical science to be of divine origin, and even today in critical cases, the modern doctors also ask patients to pray to God and have faith in Him. This is the spiritual tradition that ultimately seeks to resort to divinity. We may note that almost all the issues related to human health and its cure are dealt with in detail in the Ayurveda or the ancient Hindu medicine as it is termed by many historians of Indian medicine.

In this background, we note that the majority of modern historians of medicine or science highly criticize Vedic medicine as magico-religious, unscientific, or superstitious. Deepak Kumar agrees with Zysk when he quotes him, "The Atharvaveda was probably the first repository of ancient Indian medical lore and these were later transmitted through the Brahmana texts. It was magico religious in nature and incantations (mantras) were frequently resorted to."¹³ Such inferences by historians about Vedic tradition of medicine need to be examined and explained. They consider that if anything scientific or rational knowledge is in Ayurveda that is due to Buddha and now a cult of Buddhist medicine has come up on the sectarian lines to discard Vedic tradition as unscientific and superstitious. To quote Deepak Kumar again, "Ayurveda as the 'science of (living to a ripe) age,' sans mantras, appeared around Buddha's time. The concept of humours or *doshas* which is central in Ayurveda is nowhere seen in Vedic literature. Nor does it reflect Hippocratic or Galenic thinking. Ayurveda's emphasis on humoral balance, moderation, etc., seems closer to Buddha's 'Middle Path'."¹⁴ This inference is little bit unconvincing. First of all, it is widely accepted that Ayurveda

is a part of Atharva Veda, 'Upanga' and it is also unanimously accepted by most of the historians that the later Vedic period lasted up to 800BCE at the most, so how it could be possible that Ayurvedic concept of humours was influenced by Buddha's 'Middle Path'? The Vedic chronology as fixed by most of the historians is now being questioned in view of recent researches and now there are few buyers of the same. In the light of new archaeological sources from Saraswati sites, it is almost clear that the Vedic civilization was the precursor of the Harappan civilization and thus the date of Atharvaveda would be pushed back by more than 2000 years.¹⁵ Thence Ayurveda was already in existence before Buddha saw the light of the day. So it cannot be contemporary to Buddha in any case. Secondly, as we have mentioned earlier that Charak, Sushruta and Bagbhatt agree on the point that they all hold the original Ayurveda which is an Upanga of Atharva Veda consisting eight parts, and this came from Brahma, so it cannot be associated with Buddha who hardly finds any mention in either of these. Moreover, Buddha preached Dharma and due to his compassion and wisdom, he could diagnose the root cause of all mental and physical malaise. In Mahayana Buddhist texts he is addressed as *Bhaisajyaguru* (Medicine Buddha) for the first time.

In Buddhist tradition Buddha himself is the first and primordial healer who is popularly known as the Medicine Buddha. He is said to have revealed the teachings embodied in the sacred bodies of texts known as the Four Medical Tantras.¹⁶ The complete Buddhist medicine is believed to have been derived from this sacred scripture. Buddha's connection with health goes as far back as the Pali canon, the primary collection of early scriptures that was first written down in Sri Lanka beginning in the first century. B.C.E. and is assumed to represent an earlier oral knowledge from India. While medical knowledge is not the primary concern of these texts, it is mentioned tangentially in a great number of medical metaphors, similes, and analogies, such as the frequent comparison of Buddha to a physician and his teachings to medicine. Buddha is considered to be a physician sometimes, but he was a physician for the treatment of diseases in the world, and was not at all a doctor treating physical ailments. Thus, this is significant to note that almost five centuries after his death; Buddha was given the epithet of Medicine Buddha by Buddhist monks. This is how Buddha and Buddhism got associated with medicine and hence the birth of Buddhist medicine took place as late as the first century B.C.E. No doubt, Buddhist monks spreaded the Indian medical knowledge, of course, the Ayurvedic one to Greece, Rome, Tibet, China, and from there it transmitted to different parts of the continent as Buddhist medicine. This has

become vogueish to dub Vedic medicine as religio-magical, devoid of any scientific approach as well as empirical knowledge and if anything scientific is there, immediately it is claimed as Buddhist medicine. Buddha himself was a born Hindu who was well aware of Vedic-Upanishad tradition. He opposed the superstitions, useless rituals, and imposters which in the name of Dharma shrouded the original Sanatan Dharma of Vedas and Upanishads.

So in this background the issue of domination of religion and magic over Vedic medicine is to be critically examined. Out of the eight parts of Ayurveda, only one is dedicated to demonology which deals with mental problems and the rest seven parts are completely rational and scientific.

Rahul Peterdas also terms Vedic medicine as essentially a magico-religious system.¹² He further elaborates that in Vedic medicine, causes of diseases are not attributed to physiological functions, but rather to external beings or factors of a demonic nature that enter the body of the victim and thus comes the sickness. The removal of such malevolent entities usually involved an elaborate ritual, often drawing on aspects of the dominant local religion and nearly always necessitating spiritually potent and efficacious words, actions and devices. According to him the empirical medicine evident during this period, on the other hand, involved both observation and experience in order to determine the cause of disease and provide an effective treatment.

Summing up his ideas on Vedic medicine, Rahul concludes that, the Vedic Indians' attitude towards disease, therefore, was dominated by the belief that evil spirits, demons and other malevolent forces invaded the body and caused their victims to exhibit a state of disease. These demons were often personified and deified which leads to the rise of an entire pantheon of gods of disease. The reason for the attack may have been a breach of a certain taboo, a sin committed against the gods, or due to witchcraft and sorcery. In case of injuries—such as broken bones or wounds, however, were considered to be caused due to accident or warfare. Other external diseases and afflictions were supposed to have been caused by toxic insects and vermin, often considered to be of demonic character. But this was the only aspect of Vedic medicine that was not unique to it; rather it had been overwhelmingly present and practiced in the entire ancient and a few medieval traditions of medicines.

Let us have a brief overview of other ancient traditions of the medicine world over. In primitive medicine, the supernatural is involved in all aspects of disease and healing across human history. Because disease and misfortune are attributed to supernatural agents,

magic is necessary to prevent, diagnose, and treat the disease. All events must have a cause, visible or invisible. And, diseases for which there are no obvious immediate causes are essentially caused by the infliction of ghosts, evil spirits, gods, sorcery, witchcraft, or the loss of one of the individual's special souls. Illness needs consultation with those who could control the supernatural agents of disease such as the shaman, medicine-man, wise woman, diviner, witch-smellers, priest, chief soul-catcher, or sorcerer. If we closely examine the roles and powers assigned to such characters, we notice several specific differences, but generally, the term healer is accepted. However, we should notice that most communities differentiate between healers and herbalists, who dispense ordinary remedies and the shamans or priest-like healers who can intercede with the spirits that influence weather, harvests, hunting, warfare, conception, childbirth, disease, and misfortune.

We know that in Mesopotamia, illness was considered as a divine punishment for sins committed by the patient, and healing required the spiritual and physical catharsis derived by combining confession, and exorcism with purgative drugs. Bands of demons and devils were supposed to cause disease and misfortune. The separation of magical and empirical aspects of medicine is quite a recent development. So, it is not surprising that Mesopotamian patients considered it prudent to defeat the disease with a combination of magic and medicine. A healer used to be both a priest and a physician who could increase the efficacy of drugs by chanting effective incantations. Although the healer needed some knowledge of anatomy and drug lore, but precise knowledge of magical rituals was highly significant because errors in this part could alienate the gods. Similarly, the Egyptians also used magic and healing to get rid of diseases and priests/physicians were required to conduct a thorough examination of patients in order to notice symptoms and elicit signs. Not all Egyptian healers were priests but physicians and magicians also offered healing services to the sick.

In the epics of Homer, the gods are depicted to play an active role in every aspect of life, including health and sickness. We find that Apollo sends arrows that cause disease and death (*Iliad* 1.9–52), and *daimones* (unseen supernatural powers) might be similarly dangerous as well (*Odyssey* 5.394–97). The early Greeks regarded disease as punitive, the result of having offended a god or violation of a sacred taboo. Only after the offense was taken care of, the purification of community, and the gods appeased, would the disease be staved off. *Iatromanteis*, shaman-like healers were called for by the Greeks

to heal supernaturally caused diseases that used to travel from city to city and purify communities from divine pollution, as in the early sixth century B.C.E. We note the Cretan Epimenides, purified Athens, thus ending a plague that had fallen on the city because a magistrate had committed a sacrilege by killing several men who had taken a resort in an Athenian temple.

The basis of Western medical theory for the 2000 years prior to the Enlightenment and scientific revolution was the Greek humoral theory articulated by Hippocrates of Cos in the fifth century B.C.E. His medical theory was grounded in metaphysics wherein the body and cosmos are coterminous.¹⁷ Early Greek and Arabic Medicine assimilated many Ayurvedic concepts. Ancient Greek diagnostic and therapeutic methods are similar to those of Ayurvedic medicine in addressing the proportionality of elements constituting patient, medicine, and pathogenic substances. Just as in Ayurveda, the goal of diagnosis in the Hippocratic tradition was to obtain a total unified picture of the patient's condition because the whole body was supposed to be involved in any illness that befell it.¹⁸ In Greece, as in India, the doctrine of humours is a medical formulation of cosmic physiology influenced by the themes of circulation of fluids and a chain of successive cooking of nutriment by the sun, fire, and the digestion. Ayurveda's conceptualization of a vast combinative system of humours and qualities is also noticed in the divergence of the ancient Greco-Latin medical traditions. Both, Indian and Greek traditions of medicine treat the patient not merely as a body, but a person with consciousness and unique circumstances, who is physically and in other ways part of the world. On such an interpretation of the person, the healing art is concerned with restoring equilibrium within the patient and between patient and environment and potentiating the body's innate power to heal. In the early modern period beginning in the seventeenth century, the rise of empirical science brought a revolutionary change in medicine's approach to the body, symbolized by the study of cadavers, and marked by an emphasis on the concrete structure of the body regarded as an intractably, a complex machine.

Medicine in traditional China comprised a range of health and healing practices, folk beliefs, Confucian philosophy, herbal remedies, food, diet, exercise, medical specializations, and schools of thought. Even today, modern medicine is not completely free from the influence of religion. In conclusion of a research article entitled, 'The Religious Features of Scientific Medicine', Vanderpool, writes, "The practice of medicine unknowingly manifests seven of ten

elemental features of religion which is fraught with danger and delusion. Physicians, scholars in various disciplines, theologians, and others may believe that scientific medicine should cast away its religious characteristics. Pragmatically, that is probably impossible. This exposition indicates that attempting at that would radically, and arguably, destructively transform medical practice. In lieu of that alternative, the religious features of scientific medicine should be acknowledged as the first step towards a new level of critical scrutiny and reform.”²⁰ Thus, we know that religion and magic have been a very basic component of medicine in all cultures and societies right from the beginning and Vedic society cannot be an exception.

Vijay Kumar Thakur criticized the lack of scientific temper in Vedic medicine and writes, “The process, which began with the Yajurveda and the Atharva Veda, though in the garb and under the spell of religious orthodoxy, matured by the time, the Charaka Samhita came to be compiled during the early centuries of the Christian era.”¹⁹ Thakur does not want to give any credit to Vedic sages who after meticulous experiments came up with one of the most ancient medical traditions. Charak and Sushruta express their gratitude to Vedic sages for their knowledge of medicine and duly acknowledge the same. We know that disease and medicine in all the ancient cultures evolved from religious scriptures and it was necessarily a part of their religious lives.

At all times and in almost every culture, a connection between medicine and religion is quite visible. The belief that by soliciting divine intervention through prayer and ritual, no disease is incurable cuts across cultural boundaries.²¹ In traditional medicine this element has a major role in all societies. Traditional medicine has often been dismissed as mere superstition, but it has much in common with the medical practices of ancient civilizations and with the folk beliefs that persist and flourish alongside modern medicine. Accounts of the medicine of traditional societies often prominently display exotic and medical aspects, leaving the impression that an unbridgeable chasm exists between such medical systems and those of modern societies. However, the customs that seem bizarre in other cultures are sometimes similar to our own quaint and charming folk practices.

While analyzing traditional and folk medicine, we apparently notice that the chaos of specific details can generally be reduced to a few almost universal themes. Folk medicine, just like traditional medicine, generally accepts disease as a malevolent invader and the body as a battlefield. So, we usually call the disease has attacked or we

are fighting off the disease to get rid of it. The doctrine of signatures is another leading principle of folk medicine. According to this principle, God has furnished the world with diseases and remedies, and has taught us that everything exists with a purpose. Therefore, we may assume that God has marked potential remedies with some clue pointing at their medicinal properties.

Folk remedies include charms, spells, prayers, relics, amulets, and images of gods and saints in addition to herbs, animal parts and products, and minerals. The healer, like the professional carpenter who fixes something that is broken was also known to be the one who repaired the fracture, suggesting that one of his professional activities was the setting of bones.²² Performance of a Vedic healing ritual always required the recitation of religious incantations or charms. An analysis of such verses indicates towards certain apostrophic devices which included the use of sympathetic magic of the rhetorical question, of onomatopoeic sounds, of the identifying name, of the esoteric word or phrase which, if uttered properly focused the demon's attention on the healer, leading to its weaker grip and power, disease-demons were often transferred from the patient to enemies or less friendly people, dispelled into the ground or carried away by birds to places where they could no longer be a danger to the community. Amulets or talismans (*mani*, literally jewel), usually made of vegetables, were ritually bound to drive out demons and to act as prophylactic measures in preventing further attacks. Fragrant plant substances were also burnt to help expel the patient's demon, to protect him, to make his environment pure and congenial for healing. Early morning (dawn), noon, and early evening (twilight) seem to have been the most auspicious times of the day to carry out healing rituals. Some rites were performed in the heavens, suggesting that astrology may have played an important role in Vedic medicine.

Mythology also formed a significant part of the charms and hymns recited by the healer. Major disease-demons, in addition to being deified, were often mythologized, pointing to the important and long-lasting impact they had on the people. Likewise, certain curative herbs were given mythical beginnings, often personified, and worshipped as gods and more commonly as goddesses. The uttering of mythological stories about plant divinities imbued the herbs and plants used in the rite with supernatural powers, and therefore, made them extremely part of the Vedic Indian's medical tradition and gave rise to an elaborate pharmacopoeia which is evident in all phases of Indian medical history.²³

As far as we can gather from the texts, Vedic healers did not employ the ancient practice of divination but as a means other than astrology, often encountered in antique medicine. Diagnosis and prognosis were rather undertaken by the isolation and identification of dominant and recurring symptoms, many of which were considered to be separate demonic entities. This technique illustrates the importance which the recording of observable facts had in Vedic medicine. Various characteristics of a patient were noticed, named, and recorded. Plants and herbs were also similarly put under rigorous scrutiny and duly noted their important features and qualities. This technique was a method for recording valuable facts and is an example of the very beginnings of the Indians' empirical mode of thought, exemplified in their propensity for enumeration, very much prevalent in later Indian philosophical, religious, and scientific literature.

In addition to the evidence of a systematic, classificatory way of thinking, the Vedic healers displayed that they were familiar with more empirical procedures of healing. These therapeutic actions, however, are found in the context of the magico-religious rites, suggesting that their efficacy was inextricably connected with the magical or spiritual operation. The treatments were effective because the proper words were chanted, performed the right actions, and accurate devices were used. These ideas have survived in classical medicine but not in the focal points of its doctrines. They have been preserved mainly in the common beliefs and fold of the society and have been introduced in the medical texts by the pressure for the latter without being integrated into their systems of more scientific explanations. But the question arises as to why people follow and believe something which has no basis? In the present age of scientific progress and great achievements, we are not yet able to solve the vital question of life and death. There are many secrets that have not been and cannot be answered by science alone. Vedic tradition and philosophy provide solutions to tricky questions of human life. Mental peace and satisfaction are a must for good health and the Vedic way of life provides this. Harmony with nature and all living beings is the crux of the Vedic philosophy and the Vedic medicine.

The demonology or Bhutvidya of Ayurveda is not a unique practice; there are similar practices in western and other Asian cultures. Jesus Christ has been acknowledged as the greatest healer. Jesus is recorded as having performed several miraculous healings, which included restoring to health (among others) the blind, the dumb, the deaf, the lame, and lepers but there is no evidence of empirical method

adopted by Him for this. Generally, the nature of all forms of so-called primitive medicine is of supernatural orientation and the belief in magic. Magic, in this context, cannot be treated as trivial a concept; it has influenced and shaped human behaviour more deeply and extensively than the scientific or rationalist modes of thought, as we please to call our own way of explaining the world. In societies where both magical and scientific beliefs coexist, one cannot predict which will appear stronger or more influential. Indeed, people may vacillate between alternative systems of medicine as per the requirement of particular circumstances, perhaps relying on modern medicine for a broken leg and traditional medicine for joint pain.

Practitioners of modern medicine find it difficult to believe that the obvious superiority of scientific medicine could not cause the disappearance of all other traditional or alternative systems. Nevertheless, traditional and alternative medicines continue to flourish from Africa and China to England and America. On the other hand, traditional medicine has been influenced by modern medicine. We note that today's shamans may dispense both antibiotics and incantations to combat germs and evil spirits.

In modern times psychiatry takes care of this but still not fully and a large number of patients do visit healers for relief. In Medieval and pre-modern Europe, cases of mental illness were generally believed to be of spirit or demonic possession.

The treatment of mental disorders or psychiatric cases under scientific medicine is done by trained psychiatrists and no more people believe in demonological possession and visit healers. But this is far from the reality. In a recent research paper published by Rhodri Hayward, he gives a different picture. To quote him, "Despite the triumphalist myths of modern psychiatry, the doctrine of demon possession had never completely disappeared. It had endured as an explanation among Fundamentalist doctors and media men. In 1875 Sir James Risdon Bennett, the fiercely Nonconformist president of the Royal College of Physicians, defended the biblical veracity of Christ's diagnoses of demon possession and argued that this affliction persisted among the population of Britain's asylums."²⁴ This is not the case with Christians or Western modern society only, but it also applies to all modern human societies. Healers are also functioning as psychiatrists though trained traditionally, who heals the mentally traumatized or abnormal patients in their own method.

Vedic medicine is not completely dedicated to demonology and religio-magical measures, but it also speaks at length about herbs and plants, which is used as prescribed, cure the diseased persons.

Ayurveda is itself a part of the Veda and it has evolved out of the Vedic tradition of medicine. So a part in Ayurveda dedicated to demonology is also the continuation of Vedic medicine, but it does not make it heavily religio-magical and unscientific as dubbed by many of the modern historians in medicine.

In view of the above, arguments that Vedic medicine and Ayurveda are separate and independent traditions of medicine also do not hold any ground. The origins of Ayurveda are evident in the Atharva Veda in which both religious (mantric) and medical (pharmacological) approaches to healing are adopted.²⁶ The reverence for Vedic medicine in the earliest Ayurvedic treatises of *Bhela*, *Charak*, and *Sushruta* made it clear that the very fundamentals of *Ayurveda* originated from the Vedic medicine itself.²⁵ In actual practice, however, a few of these early techniques seem to have survived. As an example, magico-religious utterances or mantras, which form the basics of *Vedic* medicine, are found to have been used principally in the following five ways; treatment of swellings or tumours, and wounds or sores (*sotha*, *Varna*); the treatment of poison (*Visa*), the treatment of mental disorders (*unmatla*), the treatment of fever (*Jvar*); and the collection and preparation of certain medicines. Parallels in Vedic medicine exist for each category.

Often the similarities between the ancient and the Ayurvedic uses of mantras are remarkable. Vertiges of Vedic medicine is fairly represented by the said five groups. The occasional use of magico-religious medicine, however, indicates that Ayurvedic medicine not only improved upon the Vedic medicine but also expanded the scope of yet, firmly established Vedic tradition of medicine. Sushruta accepts that he has acquired the knowledge of medicine from the Vedic tradition. Thus Ayurveda is an expansion, and continuation of the Vedic medical tradition, that is coupled with scientific methods. The theoretical foundation of early Ayurvedic medicine seemed to provide rather more rational than magical and religious explanations of diseases and cure. Although magical treatment in the form of *Tantric* rituals got its popularity among the public from the very beginning and developed as an essential part of the traditional healthcare system. Prasad in a research paper examined in detail the medicine in Atharvaveda and its contribution to the growth, or the evolution of Ayurveda, and surmised that Ayurveda is not separate from the Vedic tradition of medicine; rather it is the evolution of the same. To quote him, "It is, therefore, quite natural for us to look upon the Vedic Samhitas as a channel through which this continuous tradition of Indian Medical Science has reached down to the earliest

systematizers. Hence it doesn't come as a surprise if the Vedic Samhitas contain ample material bearing on diseases and medicines. Therefore, we are required to look upon Vedic medicine as a part of the tradition from which, probably Ayurveda was gradually evolved. To conclude, Ayurveda has been rightly referred as Upaveda or Upanga of Atharvaveda”²⁶

Notes

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2. Ibid., p. 5.
3. Prasad LV. Indian system of medicine and homoeopathy, In Chaudhury RR, Rafei UM edited Traditional Medicine in Asia, New Delhi: WHO-Regional Office for South East Asia; 2002. pp. 283-6.
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7. Ramaswamy, V.N, Ancient Science of Life, Vol.1, No.1, July, 1981, p. 2.
8. Ibid., p. 4.
9. C. Muthu, M.D., 'A Short Review of the History of Ancient Hindu Medicine., A paper presented in the section of the History of Medicine. May 28, 1913, published by SAGE Publications on June 21, 2016, pp. 180-81.
10. Magner, Lois N., A History of Medicine, Marcel Dekker, New York, 1992, P 41
11. हितकर आहार-विहारवाला, विचारवान, विषयोमें असक्त, दानी, समबुद्धियुक्त, सत्यनिष्ठ, क्षमावान, और बड़े लोगोंके प्रतिसेवाभाविव्यक्तिकोरोगनहीं होता। सुखदमति, मीठाबोल-चाल, सुखदाईकार्य, सच्चाईयुक्त, आज्ञाकारी, निर्मलबुद्धि, ज्ञान, तपपर्वयोंगमें तत्परव्यक्तिकोरोगोंसे नहीं गिरता। (चरकसंहिता, शारीरस्थानम् अतुल्यगोत्रीयशारीराध्यायः 46-47)
12. जिसमनुष्यके दोषवात, पित्त और कफ, अग्नि (जठराग्नि), रसादि सातधातु, सम अवस्थामें तथा स्थिर रहते हैं, मलमूत्रादिकी क्रिया ठीक होती है और शरीरकी सब क्रियायें समान और उचित हैं, और जिसके मन इन्द्रिय और आत्मा प्रसन्न रहें वह मनुष्य स्वस्थ है। (सुश्रुतसंहिता सूत्रस्थान १५/१०)
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16. Bechert, Heinz, Richard F. The world of Buddhism: Buddhist monks and nuns in society and culture, London, 1984. (Root Tantra – A general outline of the principles of Tibetan medicine, it discusses the humors in the body and their imbalances and their link to illness. The Four Tantra uses visual observation to diagnose predominantly the analysis of the pulse, tongue and analysis of the urine (in modern terms known as urinalysis
Exegetic Tantra – This section discusses in greater detail the theory behind the

Four Tantras and gives general theory on subjects such as anatomy, physiology, psychopathology, embryology and treatment.

Instructional Tantra – The longest of the Tantras is mainly a practical application of treatment, it explains in detail illnesses and which humoral imbalance causes the illness. This section also describes their specific treatments.

Subsequent Tantra – Diagnosis and therapies, including the preparation of Tibetan medicine and cleansing of the body internally and externally with the use of techniques such as moxibustion, massage and minor surgeries.)

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19. William Heidel, *Hippocratic Medicine*, 128-29, cited by Sheets - Johnstone "The Materialization of the body: A history of Western Medicine, A History in Process," *Giving the body its due* (ed). Sheets-Johnstone, 147.
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