

# SOME INTERNAL DISEASES AND THEIR MEDICINES OR TREATMENTS AS REFLECTED IN THE *ATHARVAVEDA*

**Maumita Bhattacharjee**

[Vedas are the store house of all kinds of knowledge. *Ṛgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda* and *Atharvaveda* are the oldest recorded documents on earth. They are not only a collection of religious text but also represent the various aspects of the ancient Indian civilization. Among the four Vedas, the medical topics have been dealt primarily in the *Atharvaveda*. The Indian medical science recognizes the *Atharvaveda* as its source. The *Atharvaveda* is a curious treasury of medicine in its various stages of evolution. *Atharvaveda* is a collection of spells which deals with diseases, demons and monsters, remedy of diseases, binding up of a vein, worms, jaundice, snakebite etc. These types of hymns of the *Atharvaveda* are known as *Bhaiṣajyāni Sūktāni*. This Veda identifies the causes of various diseases and a variety of incantations or plant-based drugs in order to counter the diseases. Charms to cure all these diseases are given in the *Atharvaveda* and practice concerning these charms is given in the *Kauśikasūtra*. In the *Atharvaveda*, the early beginnings of an art of healing and knowledge of healing herbs are found. Several diseases like *Yakṣman*, *Takman*, *Jalodara*, *Kuṣṭha*, *Atisāra*, *Balāsa*, *Hariman*, *Kṛmi*, *Kilāsa*, *Palita*, *Apacit*, Snake bite etc. are discussed in the *Atharvaveda*.

This paper is an effort to present some internal diseases and their medicines as reflected in the *Atharvaveda*.]

*Atharvaveda* is one of the most prominent treatises among the four Vedas. In this Veda, we find holy magic for securing well-being and spells for causing various types of harms to the adversary. This Veda is also known as *Atharvāṅgirasah*. Atharvaṅ and ṅgiras are two fire priests. They describe two different kinds of magic formulas. Atharvaṅ means 'holy magic' and ṅgiras means 'hostile magic or black magic'.

Like the other three Vedas, *Atharvaveda* is not so much concerned with sacrificial matters. The *Atharvaveda* occupies a very important place in Indian medical science. The *Ṛgveda* and

*Yajurveda* also deal with medicine, but not as extensively as the *Atharvaveda*. This Veda is a collection of songs and spells which deals with diseases, worms, jaundice etc. Such hymns of the *Atharvaveda* are known as *Bhaiṣajyāni Sūktāni* or the *sūktas* healing with medicines. There are many charms in different *kāṇḍas* of the *Atharvaveda* where we have found a brief description of all the diseases and how to cure them. The *Atharvaveda* deals with the treatment of diseases by advising the propitiatory rites or *svastayana*, offerings, auspicious oblations or *maṅgalahoma*, penance or *niyama*, purificatory rites or *prāyaścitta*, fasting or *upavāsa* and charms or *mantra*. Charms to cure all these diseases are given in the *Atharvaveda* and practice concerning these charms is given in the *Kauśikasūtra*. In this respect Winternitz writes 'One of the chief constituent parts of the *Atharvavedasamhitā* consists of songs and spells for the healing of diseases which belongs to the magic rites of healing.'<sup>1</sup>

There are several diseases described in the *Atharvaveda* like *Yakṣman*, *Takman*, *Jalodara*, *Kuṣṭha*, *Atisāra*, *Balāsa*, *Hariman*, *Kṛmi*, *Kilāsa*, *Palita*, *Apacit*, Snake bite etc. But it is not possible to discuss all these diseases in this paper. So a humble attempt has been made to discuss a few diseases like *Takman*, *Balāsa*, *Kāsa*, *Jalodara* and *Śvetakuṣṭha*.

### 1. *Takman* :

The word *takman* is found only in the *Atharvaveda*. In the *Ayurveda*, the word for *takman* is *jvara* and in English it is known as fever. *Takman* is regarded as the son of Varuṇa-- *varuṇāsyāsi putraḥ*.<sup>2</sup> Dr. N. J. Shende says that 'The idea in this conception is that fever is inflicted as a penalty on the wrong doers by Varuṇa.'<sup>3</sup> *Takman* or fever is due to rain which is referred to here by lightning (Agni) entering in the waters (AV.,1.25.1). In an Atharvaṇic charm, it is said that *takman* is the fire in the form of flame, heat or fire of chopped wood.<sup>4</sup> The effect of *takman* is burning and scorching heat in the body of a person.<sup>5</sup> In the *Atharvaveda* 1.25.4, the names of different types of fever have been found viz., *śītā* (cold fever), *rūrā* (delirious), *śociṣ* (heat), fever occurring on every next day, fever that returns for two successive days and the last one that returns on every third day.<sup>6</sup>

In the *Atharvaveda* 5.22.5, it is said that “its (takman’s) home is the Mūjavants, its home is the Mahāvṛṣas; as long as born, O fever, so long are you at home among the Balhikas.”<sup>7</sup> The worshippers pray to him to go away to the Mūjavants or to the Balhikas (AV., 5.22.7).

*Takman* has a very bad effect on the patient, because it consumes him like fire and makes him yellow.<sup>8</sup> *Takman* or fever that is spotted, is covered with spots like reddish sediment.<sup>9</sup> In an Atharvaṇic charm, *balāsa*, *kāsikā* and *pāpman* are regarded as his (takman) brother, sister and cousin respectively (AV., 5.22.12 ). Therefore, the Atharvaṇic priest prays to him thus—*takman bhrātrā balāsenā svasrā kāsikayā saha/ pāpmā bhrātrvyeṇa saha gacchāmumaraṇaṃ janam!*<sup>10</sup>

Prof. Whitney defines this charm as—“O fever, together with your brother *balāsa* and your sister the cough, together with your cousin the scab (*pāman*), go to you foreign people.”<sup>11</sup> The charm 5.22 of the *Atharvaveda* refers to the sacrifice offered on the altar with Soma. It is hoped that fever will be eliminated by the sacrifice offered to Agni.

Treatment or medicine : A treatment of fever prescribed in the *Kauśikasūtra* is that—an iron axe is to be heated and dropped into the hot water and this very water is to be sprinkled on the patient’s body who is suffering from fever.<sup>12</sup> And this treatment is to be done while the priest is reciting the charm 1.25 of the *Atharvaveda*.

In 29.18-19 of the *Kauśikasūtra*, Kauśika prescribes a different treatment of fever. While the priest is reciting 5.22 of the *Atharvaveda*, a gruel made of *lājas* is given to the patient to drink.<sup>13</sup> This gruel is poured in red (copper) vessel, in the fire derived from the forest tree.<sup>14</sup>

Again we find a charming performance in the *Kauśikasūtra* 32.17 in connection with fever—*namo rurāyeti śakunīniveṣikāñjimaṇḍūkam nilalohitābhyam sūtrābhyām sakakṣam baddhā*.

Bloomfield defines it as—“while reciting AV., 7.116, he does as in the case of the birds, i.e. he ties a frog that has stripes like reeds (upon the body) by means of a blue and a red thread by the armpits (to a low couch upon which the patient is made to recline and besprinkles him)”<sup>15</sup>

The *Atharvaveda* also mentions a medicine against *takman* viz. the *Kuṣṭha* plant.<sup>16</sup> This plant is born in the north of the Himavant mountains and is brought to the people in the east.<sup>17</sup> It relieves all the diseases like *yakṣmā*, head-disease, eye-disease etc.<sup>18</sup>

## 2. *Balāsa* :

In the hymn 6.14 of the *Atharvaveda*, the description of *balāsa* is given. *Balāsa* is a kind of internal disease that crumbles the bones, joints and heart. It remains in the limbs and joints.<sup>19</sup> The priest says that he removes *balāsa* and cuts its bond like the root of a gourd by this charm 6.14.2 of the *Atharvaveda*.

Treatment : According to Kauśika, "A reed is placed into the water of a river and then the patient suffering from *balāsa* is washed with this very water of the river by means of a branch of a tree,<sup>20</sup> so that water flows down upon the reed.

## 3. *Kāsa* :

*Kāsa* is a Sanskrit word. The English term for *kāsa* is cough. Only one charm is found in the *Atharvaveda* against cough (AV., 6.105).

Treatment : In 28.15 and 31.27 of the *Kauśikasūtra* a treatment of cough is given. A treatment of *kāsa* prescribed in the *Kauśikasūtra* (28.15) is that— the patient who is suffering from cough takes a few steps away from his home, having fed himself with a churned drink and porridge during the recitation of the hymn 6.105 of the *Atharvaveda*.

## 4. *Jalodara* or Dropsy :

In the *Atharvaveda*, *jalodara* is used for dropsy. It is said that dropsy is due to the wrath of Varuṇa (AV., 1.10.1). The priest, excelling in the enchantment leads the patient out of this disease.<sup>21</sup> Now owing to the spell of the priest he is freed from all these and can now live a hundred autumns— *śataṃ jivāti śaradastavāyam*.<sup>22</sup>

Treatment : Kauśika prescribes a treatment of *jalodara* as— the patient is sprinkled over the head with water by means of twenty-one tufts of darbha grass along with reeds taken from the straw of a house by the priest,<sup>23</sup> while reciting the charm 1.10 of the *Atharvaveda*.

Another remedy given by Kauśika in 30.13 is that – while the priest is reciting the charm 6.24 of the *Atharvaveda*, water is drawn from a stream along with its current and sprinkled upon the patient.<sup>24</sup> Kauśika prescribes another two treatments of dropsy during the recitation of 6.127 of the *Atharvaveda*. The first one is – the priest anoints the patient, suffering from dropsy with powder made by grinding a piece of *palāśa* wood of the width of four fingers.<sup>25</sup> And the second one is – dregs of ghee are poured upon the head of one afflicted with dropsy.<sup>26</sup>

### 5. *Śvetakuṣṭha* (white leprosy) and *Palita* (gray spot) :

In the *Atharvaveda*, two hymns have been found against leprosy (1.23; 24). White leprosy has its origin in the bones, in the body and upon the skin and here the priest claims that by his enchantment one can be cured from these diseases.<sup>27</sup> To remove these diseases viz. *kilāsa* and *palita*, hymn 1.23 of the *Atharvaveda* lays down the names of the plants like *rāmā*, *kṛṣṇā*, *asikni* or *nīlī* and *haridrā*. These plants are to be used for removing leprosy and the gray spots from the body of a patient and replacing it with the original colour of a body.<sup>28</sup> The *asthāna* or dwelling place of these plants is the dark.<sup>29</sup> These plants are said *naktamjātā* or ‘night-born’ (AV., 1.23.1).

Treatment : Kauśika mentions the use of these plants in detail at 26.22-24 of the Kauśikasūtra. He states that – during the recitation 1.23 of the *Atharvaveda*, these plants are to be pasted with dry cowdung and the white spots are to be messaged with this very paste till they become red.<sup>30</sup>

In the hymn 1.24 of the *Atharvaveda*, Sāyaṇa mentions another kind of plants viz. *āsuri* or *śyāmā* which is used against leprosy. It is said that the *Āsura*-women first made this remedy for leprosy – *āsuri cakre prathamedam kilāsabheṣajamidam kilāsanāśanam*.<sup>31</sup> N.J. Shende remarks that – “The parents of this plant are of like-colour, hence it can make the skin of the leper, like-coloured”<sup>32</sup>

From the above discussion we come to a definite conclusion that medical science is very much rich from the time of the Vedas. In that period, many diseases were discussed through which the later medical science improved. And it is very much astonishing to know that in *Atharvaveda* there is a discussion about the symptoms of the diseases, the names of the diseases and lastly the remedies of

the diseases. So, we can say that medical science is one of the most important branches of the *Atharvaveda* which became the source of later Ayurvedic system of Indian medicine. Caraka and Suśruta, the first expounders of Indian medical science admit the *Atharvaveda* as the source of medical science.

Therefore, the *Atharvaveda* can be taken as the first Indian text dealing with medicine.

### References :

- 1 Winternitz, M., *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. I, p. 129
- 2 AV., 1.25.3
- 3 Shende, N. J., *The Religion and Philosophy of the Atharvaveda*, Poona, 1952, p. 24
- 4 AV., 1.25.2
- 5 *yadi śoko yadi vābhiśoko...AV.*, 1.25.3
- 6 *namaḥ śītāya takmane namo rūrāya śociṣe kṛṇomi/ yo anyedyurubhyadyurabhyeti tṛtīyakāya namo astu takmane// AV.*, 1.25.4
- 7 Whitney, W.D.(trans), *Atharva-Veda-Samhitā*, Vol.1, p. 260
- 8 *ayaṁ yo viśvān haritān kṛṇoṣyucchocayannagnirivābhidunvan/ AV.*, 5.22.2
- 9 *yaḥ paruṣaḥ pāruseyo'vadhvaṁsa ivāruṇaḥ/ AV.*,5.22.3
- 10 AV., 5.22.12
- 11 cf. Whitney, W. D. ( trans ), *Atharva-Veda-Samhitā*, Vol.1, p.260
- 12 *yadagniriti paraśum japamstāpayati kvāthayatyavasiñcati/ Kau. Sūtra.*, 26.25
- 13 *lājānpāyayati/ Kau. Sūtra.*, 29.18
- 14 *dāve lohitapātreṇa mūrdhni sampātānānayati/ Kau. Sūtra.*, 29.19
- 15 Bloomfield.M. ( trans), *Hymns of the Atharvaveda*, p.566
- 16 *imaṁ me kuṣṭha pūruṣaṁ tamā vaha taṁ niṣkuru/ tamu me agadaṁ kṛdhi// AV.*, 5.4.6
- 17 *udaṅ jāto himavataḥ sa prācyām nīyase janaṁ/ AV.*, 5.4.8
- 18 *śīrṣāmayamupahatyāmakṣyostanvorapaḥ/ kuṣṭhastat sarvaṁ niṣkarad daivaṁ samaḥ vṛṣṇyaṁ// AV.*, 5.4.10
- 19 AV., 6.14.1
- 20 Kau. Sūtra., 8.15
- 21 *tataspari brahmaṇā śāśadāna ugrasya manyorudimaṁ nayāmi/ AV.*, 1.10.1
- 22 AV., 1.10.2

- <sup>23</sup> *ayam devānāmityekavimśatyā darbhapīñjūlibhīrovalīkaiḥ sārddhamadhiśiro vasiñcati/ Kau. Sūtra., 25.37*
- <sup>24</sup> *himavata iti syandamānādanvīpamāhārya valīkaiḥ/ Kau.Sūtra., 30.13*
- <sup>25</sup> *upottamena palāśasya caturaṅgulenālimpati/ Kau.Sūtra., 26.24*
- <sup>26</sup> *pañcamena varuṇagr̥hītasya mūrdhni sampātānāyati/ Kau. Sūtra., 26.39*
- <sup>27</sup> *asthijasya kilāsasya tanūjasya ca yat tvaci/ dūṣyā kṛtasya brahmanā lakṣma śvetamanīnaśam// AV., 1.23.4*
- <sup>28</sup> *28. kilāsam ca palitam ca nirito nāśayā pṛṣat/ ā tvā svo vīsatām varṇaḥ parā śuklāni pātaya// AV., 1.23.2*
- <sup>29</sup> *AV., 1.23.3*
- <sup>30</sup> *naktamjātā suparno jāta iti mantroktam śkr̥dā lohitaṁ praghr̥ṣyālimpati/ Kau. Sūtra., 26.22*  
*Palitānyāchidra/ Kau. Sūtra., 26.23*  
*mārutānyapihitaḥ/ Kau. Sūtra., 26.24*
- <sup>31</sup> *AV., 1.24.2*
- <sup>32</sup> *Shende, N.J., The Religion and Philosophy of the Atharvaveda, p. 27*

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