

# Cultural System in Ancient India

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**Abstract – The present research uses immoderately the original Sanskrit, Pali and Tamil sourcebooks. The boggy stereotypes current in the theme abstain from this reappraisal to provide more expansive and more focused perspectives on health and healing in ancient Indian societies. This orientation towards the history of medicine appears critically justified since the available literature on medical history in India largely continues in a desideratum.**

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## INTRODUCTION

The medical arts and their practice have played so important a part in the development of our civilization that they constitute a branch of historical studies second to none in utility and interest. Besides, as development of medicine remained a domain where practices of population groups interacted freely, an examination into the growth of classical Indian medicine may show how far Indian culture represents an amalgam of diverse social streams and how far it reflects a monopoly of the so named Dravidian or Aryan cultures only.

Theoretically, it accepts that the ways in which a community copes with illness are central to the beliefs and practices of that community and also bear a close relationship to its major social, economic and cultural institutions. Since ancient India consisted of a multitude of social and cultural complexes it also attempts to highlight the conditions that influenced the rise of new concepts of health and healing and permitted the continued existence of the old patterns of medicine among diverse population-pockets.

The poor standard of ancient Indian medical history is partly due to the dearth of sources which permit the reconstruction of different stages of the evolution of the system of medicine. India lacks the kind of historical records of medical systems and prescriptions compatible to those unearthed in Assyrian sites (Steinmann 1990: 32).

In the case of Egypt, there is multiplicity of survived original papyri works, numerous wood and other engravings, demonstrating various medical scenes. Here as well as in further west, one finds remains of skeletons

preserved safe, thanks to the dry climate. Such remains facilitate investigation of possible diseases leading to death or cases of operated surgery. With the help of such remains marvelous works have been done on Egypt and connected regions.

The modern notices on Indian medicine start appearing from the early 19th century. Dr. Ainslie, a surgeon in Madras, published his *Materia Medica of Hindustan* in 1813. He was followed by Wise who produced a scientific narrative on *Hindu System of Medicine* in 1845. These works discuss the medicinal items, anatomy and physiology of Ayurveda.

Such introductory works on ancient Indian medicine hinted at the apparent resemblance between ancient Greek and Indian medicines. Partly due to this and partly because of the general trends of Indian historiography, the later works on ancient Indian medicine. One group of scholars demonstrated European bias while the other was strongly nationalistic. The European prejudice is betrayed in such points as unwarranted stress on the role of ancient Greece in the introduction of the science in medicine. An example of this is the apocryphal opinion of Johann Hermann Bass that the name of Susruta was in reality a transmutation of Socrates and that his birth place of Kasi was a mutation of Kos.

## REVIEW WORK

The Greek origin of Ayurvedic science was a favorite subject of such deliberations. Scholars like Albutt were also involved in announcing that the medicine of India did not contain even the rudiments of science. The European bias in historiography of ancient Indian medicine is reflected also in newer write-ups. For example Krumbhaar

says that medicine in ancient India was 'different from the Greek one was in primitive state.

For the orientalist medicine in ancient India apparently offered a strong point to magnify the ancient glory of India. Mr. Colebrooke declared that in the field of medicine, the Hindus were teachers and not learners. Similarly, Mr. Pocock was of the opinion that Pythagoras- 'father of healing art' in Greece - was originally an Indian called Buddha guru. Prof. Diaz opined that Egyptian medicine was of Hindu origin. Prof. Filliozat tried to prove that Ayurveda was of Vedic origin. Besides, his work also involved narrative of the fundamentals of Ayurveda as well as its Greek parallels.

Apart from the foreign orientalist there were the nationalist scholars. They were concerned not only with countering of the theory of Greek origin of the Ayurveda but also to maintain that its decline in the country was the consequence of discouragement by the colonial rulers who supported only the allopathic system of medicine.

Sinha Jee argues for the Aryan origin of Greek medicine and opined that Hypocrates, the ancient Greek medical theorist himself had to come to India to learn the craft. He suggested that if the medical sciences of India in its palmy days had directly or indirectly assisted the growth of medical science in Europe, it was but fair that the latter could show its gratitude by rendering all possible help to the former, old as it was, and almost dying for want of nourishment. In his opinion Aryan medicine declined as a result of the unfavorable policies of Mughal emperors.

The nationalist accounts failed to impress upon the historians and as late as in 1962 we discover Kutumbiah, a physician by profession, producing his *Ancient Indian Medicine* for the purpose of bringing 'knowledge of the achievements of ancient Indian medicine to a much wider reading public' and 'establishing its legitimate place in history'. Nevertheless, the historiography of ancient Indian medicine remains indebted to the above studies, particularly for the materials they offer on Ayurvedic authorities and the details regarding the scientific aspects of Ayurveda.

In the available literature on ancient Indian medical historiography, books on their scientific aspects number the most. Mention must be made first to the Banaras Hindu University series on 'Surgery in ancient India' by Singhal and his friends (1972 onwards). Based on the text *Susruta Samhita*, the series displays true Sanskrit scholarship and sound surgical knowledge which were lacking in previous works on the theme.

It is hardly enough to serve up verbatim extracts from the ancient Ayurvedic texts, without adding onto any material respecting the problem of chronology of the treatises. The major fault of this volume is that it has nothing new to say.

It is meant more for a widely-read amateur and hence lacks original efforts which are much wanted in this area of academics.

## RESEARCH STUDY

Generally, caste system was popular in Indian society before the period of Mauryas and discrimination between four castes became serious and fierce. While analyzing the Indian social factor, it needs to be kept in mind that the history of ancient India has been the history of the upper castes. By the beginning of the Buddhism, caste system with its gross inequalities was well entrenched in India and it had become both functional and hereditary. Four castes are known as Brahmins, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. Among these castes, Brahmins were considered as the highest people, who enjoyed every social privilege and their ascendancy as an inalienable birthright. And they came to be viewed as gods in human form and kings were obligated to place themselves at their service.

The *matrikas* appear to have belonged to a very low status because they were mostly the aged prostitutes or courtesans. The *dasis* were engaged generally in maternity services as well as in conducting abortions.

Different passages describing these three types of craft persons in the *Arthashastra* indicate that in social terms they equaled the rank of domestic servants only. The staff of an *aturaaya* i.e. 'the house of sick' included besides the nurses, the drug compounders, musicians, singers and cooks. The presence of musicians and singers on the staff of a *uaidya* suggests that the ancient Indian doctor was much more thoroughly concerned and involved in the overall recuperation of his patients than his modern counterparts.

In the Madhura Sutta, the Brahmins consider themselves as the most distinguished and three other castes as inferior. The Brahmins alone are accounted pure and those who are not Brahmins impure. The Brahmins are sons of Brahman, born from his mouth and the heirs of Brahman. Such a haughty attitude of Brahmins was certainly protested by Buddhism and Jainism as all men have the power to become perfect. As a result, all members of the society were admitted into Buddhist sangha and then they were treated equally in the Buddhist Order.

Again, the claim to superiority by the Brahmins against the rest of the castes was challenged by the Ksatriyas, who took lead in the struggle against the Brahmins' attitude as their powers as the ruler of the state increased. Ksatriyas were responsible to rule and maintain social order as well as to defend the country. This caste consisted of kings, mandarins, officers and soldiers. In the time of Buddha, Ksatriyas were placed higher than Brahmins. Vaisyas, the third class, traded and held an important part of social

properties. This caste included landlords, businessmen, and small traders, etc. Sudras included workers, hunters, menials and serfs, etc.

This was the lowest class in the society and they were the property of three higher castes. It means that they were subservient to other castes. Generally, they lived and died like animals. According to D.N. Jha<sup>4</sup>, the first three castes, Brahmin, Ksatriya and Vaisya, were twice-born and they were more privileged than Sudras and untouchables who were outcaste. Generally speaking, ancient Indian rulers used the ideology of Brahmanism to consolidate their authority to run the social order. Asoka, the great king of Mauryas, embraced Brahmanism before converting to Buddhism. Though he followed Buddhism, castes system still existed in his empire. The caste division was, however, not severe in his kingdom. D.N. Jha holds that during the reign of Mauryas, four castes became endogamous and their rigidity, which generated tension, would not be found.

In the time of Asoka, a section of Sudras for the first time in India history were aided by the state in setting down as farmers in the agricultural settlements and were granted lands and the fiscal exemption as well as the supply of cattle, seeds, and money in the hope of future payment. On the other hand, in industrial activities, artisans and craftsmen played their role in the production of commodities. On the basis of Milindapanh, D.N. Jha holds that in the time of Mauryas there were seventy five occupations, out of which nearly sixty occupations were connected with various kinds of crafts. And the rest were connected with mining of products such as gold, silver, lead, tin, copper, iron and precious stones or jewels. The artisans and craftsmen were largely drawn, in this period, from Sudras, who gained in wealth and status on account of the progress of crafts and commerce's.

During the reign of Asoka, Buddhism not only developed in India, it also was propagated in other Asian countries. N. Dutt asserts that after the third Buddhist council, Asoka's son and daughter were sent to Ceylon to introduce Buddhism in that island and the sacred books carried there by word of mouth that were reduced to writing in 88 B.C. in the form in which we have three pitakas of Ceylon to this day. D.N.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The Thought of Buddhism The system of Buddhist thoughts consists of Mahayanic ideas. It means sufferings and selflessness of all conditioned things. The absolute truth (Paramartha satya) has not been mentioned in their doctrines. The main doctrines of Hiragana are Four Noble Truths, the Theory of Dependent origination, five aggregates, karma, rebirth and Nirvana. All these doctrines are explained according to the relative aspects.

The universe was made by four material elements (earth, water, fire and air) and it goes on without maker, without the known beginning, continuously exists by nature of relations of cause and effects, and man was constituted by five aggregates. His body belongs to material and his mind consists of feeling, perception, mental function, and consciousness. The so-called body is subject to birth, old-age, sickness and death. Mind is always disturbed by sorrow, grief, sufferings and lamentation.

Theravadins regard the Buddha as a historical person, the historical Gotama. Theravada aims at the individual liberation and believes that only Gotama attained Buddhahood, and they consider nirvana as opposition of samsara. Hinayanists deny the Brahman, Êtman, God and soul. It only accepts gods (devas) as the good ones, who protect Dharma and to help good men. Especially they believe Arhats as the worthy men, who had already reached perfect NirvĒna and had nothing more to learn. Moreover, they believe that when desire, hatred, ignorance are absent from one's mind, he can attain Nirvana, free from rebirth in the realms of existence.

The means to the liberation, according to Theravadins, is the practice of precepts, meditation and wisdom. Sarvastivada also belongs to Hinayana, it branched off from Theravada, the orthodox school of Buddhism, because it did not admit the Theravadin theory that all things are unreal. Sarvastivadins hold that all things are real and exist at all times: past, present and future. In fact, they only mention that the attributes, which constitute all things, are permanent. For example, moisture of water, the heat of fire, the move of air, the solid of earth, all are existent according to cause and conditions but they never vanish. The self-nature or the absolute of all things has been not mentioned by the Sarvastivada as yet. Moreover, it believes in the theory of non-self, the absence of any permanent substance in an individual. And it believes in the plurality of all phenomenal things in the universe.

## CONCLUSION

Like Theravada, Sarvastivada denies the existence of God and soul. It believes that the world is constituted by cause and conditions. Especially, it does not believe Arhat as the worthy man, who had already reached perfect Nirvana. It thinks that the life of an Arhat is governed by good or bad karma and he must have something to learn more. Sarvastivada also considers the Buddha as a historical person. He attained Buddhahood and became omniscient at Bodh Gaya. Its concepts of bondage and liberation, and the means to liberation are the same as in Theravada.

Vaibhasika also belongs to Hinayana, it branched off from Sarvastivada on account of disagreement with the thought of Sarvastivada such as all things are real and exist forever. It advocated that everything is momentary like a

dream or a lightning and only the unconditioned things exist forever. According to it, impermanence is the attribute of all conditioned things. The unconditioned thing is the inner principle of all things that exist forever.

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