Historical development of basic concepts of Ayurveda from Veda up to Samhitā

Introduction

Glimpses of the concepts expounded in Ayurvedic Samhitās have been given. Whether their roots are found in earlier works and whether they have been revised and improved in subsequent periods is worth examining, so that a clear picture of the stage-wise historical development may emerge. Our earliest literature is the Vedaś. Shivadasa Sen, a commentator on Charaka, has aptly explained the meaning of the word Veda. He says that Veda denotes knowledge which has two forms—Shabdārupa Veda and Arthārupa Veda, one is in verbal form and the other is in object form. The Veda in the form of words is contained in Mantras (and other subsequent literature). Veda in the form of objects is the whole universe. The objects in whole universe are denoted by the word ‘Veda’ or the meaning of the word Veda is reflected in or represented by the whole universe.

Ayurveda is an Upaveda of Atharva or Rigveda according to some schools or is a Panchama Veda. It is also considered as Upanga of Atharva Veda i.e. it is not imposed or added from the exterior but is a part and parcel of the main body of the Vedas. If so, the basic of these discourses and commentaries, it should exist in Mantras and Brahmanas. We find that the present samhitās are in the form of Vyākhyāna—discourses or commentaries. The basis of these discourses and commentaries should either be Mantras or some Sutras. Though there is mention of Rishis as Sutra Kara, none of the work in Sutra form is mentioned or found anywhere. The Brahmanas, Upanishads are considered as literature meant for explaining the procedures described in the Mantras, and later works like the Mahābhārata, Ramayana, and Purānas are also considered as a collection of explanatory notes with illustrative cases or episodes. Ayurvedic samhitās fall somewhere between these two chronological landmarks. The method of exposition is of question-answer type followed in the Upnishads. Similarity of non-technical and easy flow of language is seen in Ayurveda samhitās. The Rishis mentioned in samhitās are in majority, authors of different sutras of Darshan and are also mentioned in Adi Parva of Mahābhārata. Therefore they may be considered of post-Upanishad and pre-Mahābhārata period.

Review and Discussion

It is interesting to note that the concept of a living person as a man living in a city with nine gates and as a lamp of life shining within a luminous case is given in Atharva Veda (Brahma puri navadwara devanama pooh ayodhyapuri hiranyayakosho deepah). The word Purusha is defined in this way. One who resides in para is called Purusha. The same idea is expressed in connection with Swasthavritta. In Charaka Samhitā, we can find the words Kshetra and Kshetrajna and kachakoshastha deepa, which similes to express the intimate relationship by words Nagar and Nagari (synonyms of Para and Purusha).

Imperishable Atma and perishable Panchabhautik body are the two main constituents of the Purusha. They are mentioned in Yajurveda in question-answer manner as “combining and mutually supporting during life and disintegrating and uniting with elements of the universe at the time of death.” The same concept is established more clearly as Shad-dhatukā Purusha and Pancha mahabhoot Shareeri Samavayh Purusha, and Panchatva prapti at death by Charaka and Sushruta respectively.

Similarly, description of physiological concepts, viz. Tridhatu i.e. Tridosha and Saptā Dhatu, five divisions of Vāyu, or its twin forms are also mentioned in the Vedas succinctly or by name clearly— Ye Tri-saptah (Atharvaveda), Prnaya Swana apanaya Swaha etc. (Yajurveda), Tri Dhatu Sharma (R.K.I-734/6).

We also come across a reference wherein the word Vāyu is replaced by Ayu and Commentator Uvata explained that here the letter V of Vāyu is to be understood as ‘apostrophe.’ A reflection of this is found in Charaka Samhitā in Chikitsa sātana, 28th chapter- “Vayayurayur balam Vayur- Vayurdhata Shareerinam.”

Saptā Dhatu- Seven dhatus are also mentioned in a covert and overt manner as Sāpta sayas staying in the body and also categorically as Tvačcha, Lohita, Mamśa, Asthi, Mājja and Shrūtra. Hemachandra says in his Abhidhan Chintamanikosha cited the names of Rishi Bharadwaja etc. as synonyms of respective Dhatu.

Tridoshas and seven dhatus are mentioned as supporting agents of all living creatures in the mantra “Ye ‘Trī Saptah Vishva Roopanī Bibhrataḥ” of the Atharvaveda and Sayan the commentator explains them as Tridosha and Sāpta Dhatu. Both the Samhitās, Charaka and Sushruta have also called them Dhatu and compared with supportive pillars “Trī-Sthūna ”. Kashyapa too uses the same terms to describe them (Yajurveda-17-6-25-7 and Atharva 9-1-2-27,12-9-1-3).

The concept of Agni-Soma as pervasive forces equally controlling Loka and Purusha by creating bisexual creation is enunciated in Prashnopanishad. Ayurveda has applied the same in the description of Loka and Purusha, both being agni somiya characterize identity of Shukra and Shonita in human and Dwividha veerya in drugs viz. Sheeta and Ushna with these twin forces of universe.

Similarly, Kāla in the form of Savāntasār with its clear-cut six
Concept of Sharira (body)

Concept of body configurations which are condemnable was originally mentioned in Yajurveda a.30. In connection of Purusha medha, it is stated as those who are unfit for homa are analabhyam. The same eight are mentioned as condemnable body configurations in Charaka Samhita in the same order.

As regards the four constituents of Purusha, the first and most obvious factor is Shareera or Deha. Its description is given in Samhitas under two heads—structures and functions. Twacha, Loma, Lohita, Mansa, Asthi, Majja and Shukra i.e. seven dhatus are mentioned clearly in Yajurveda; and Sheersh, bahu, uroo, pada, nabh, hridaya, kloma, yakrit, pleeha, basi, vanisthu, matasna, antrani, purit, chakshu, shrotra, makha etc. organs, limbs and viscera too are referred in Purushashukta and other contexts. Pranam, vak, sravana, darshana, swapna, jagarana etc. functions are also mentioned briefly in the Vedas.

The second component of purusha is indriyas. They are located in shareera at specific sites (adhishthana) and are invisible and only are inferred by their respective functions. The buddhindriyas- shrotra, chakshu, twacha etc. and karmendriyas-pada, hastu, payu, vak, upasatha, are also mentioned in connection with ashwamedha, pashumedha, and purushamedha.

The third component of purusha, manas, is more subtle than the two incert ones referred above and is the instrument of Atma to communicate with the outer world, indriyas and body and to conceive the ideas of the past and future. Its dimensions and functions are poetically given in “Shiv sankalpa suktam” of Yajurveda.

The fourth component is Atma. It is described to be all-pervasive and one that enters into a physical body to take the form of a living creature; it is not different from the one that is universal, both are one and the same. This is described in the course of sarvamedha (Su.Yajura.32-mantra-11-12. and a.– 40,6-7).

These examples are sufficient to show that the basic concepts of Ayurveda are mentioned in the mantras of Vedas. They were developed in successive phases of Brahmmana and Upanishad eras not separately but during discussions on processes of yajna or philosophical topics. However, they were discussed in detail and systematically arranged in the post-Upanishad period or samhita period of Ayurveda. It is categorically mentioned in all samhitas that they are discourses or explanatory notes, the concise text of which is extinct or is found only in the mantras of the Vedas.

The same may be mentioned regarding diseases and drugs.

Diseases

Yakshma (denotes general diseases and specifically a disease characterized by consumption), Takma (Fever), Kasa (cough), Harima (Jaundice), Kila, Shwittas, sidhma etc. affecting the skin (varieties of Kushtha etc.) are diseases of physique; Unmada, Apriitipada, Amati, Durmati, etc. are diseases of the psyche; asu (vandyava-inferfertility), Atikadvari (prudara-excessive discharge red and white), Palikini (grey hairs) vijjaraya (laxity of the body tissues) etc., diseases of reproductive organs of women; and kleeba (impotent, the sexual debility in male) etc. disease are referred in a.30 of the Su. Yajurveda.

Drugs

There is mention of a chapter called Aushadhi suktam (12/75-101).

Vegetable source

Classification of Udbhid, vanaspati, vriksha, pushpavati, prasoovari etc. is given. There is mention of food grains (Anna) – Yava, Godhuma, Vrihi, Masha, Muddga, Upavaka (Yavaka), Tila, Priyangu, Shyamaka, Nivara etc.

Animal source

It is mentioned as the animals inhabiting villages and those inhabiting jungles (gramya and aranya). Those having abode in water (narmaya), and those having the sky or air as their abode (Vayavya). Man, horse, cow, sheep and goat are given as examples of village animals, while mayu (kinner), gavaya, sharabha, ushtra are of the aranya group. All these animals are used as foodstuff in Mamsavarga of Ahar.

As regards mineral source

Ashma, sikta, mrittika, hiranya, ayas, loha, shyama, seesa, trapa etc. are mentioned. These were developed in Rasashastra with the processes of shodhana, marana, apunarbhava, rasyana, transformation in later period.

As regards preparations

Food preparations

Food preparations denoting culinary art are also found in Vedas. They are – Yosha, Mansa pachana, Amiksha, Saktu, Laja, Masara.

Masara – is a combination of powders of Vreehi, Shyamaka, Odana etc., eatables.

Nagnahu – is a combination of the powder of the bark of Sarja and 26 other items.

Shashpa is the name given to sprouted Vreehi. Tokma is the name given to sprouted Yava.

Preparation of medicines

In the nineteenth Adhyaya of Su. Yajur Samhita in connection with Sautramani Yaga, detailed description of the extraction of Soma Rasa and its fermentation, and the instruments, equipments and utensils to be used, with instructions of measurements and doses of each item and processes to be followed are given.

As for causative factors

Words Yakshma and Anameeba are used to denote healthy condition. Mention of Ameeva is found to denote a disease and also as a causative factor of the disease in the form of an infectious germ. Similarly, Rudra, Rakshas, Yatudhana, Ariti, Sarpa etc. which are invisible yet attack man are mentioned...
to cause diseases through *Anna, Pana, Patra* (food, drinks and utensils) etc. They have their natural abode in environments in the outer world in air, rain water and earth; and they attack human beings with deadly results. Heat of the fire and Sun are also mentioned as capable of destroying them. *Anamaya* i.e. freedom from disease, of not only individuals but of the whole village with its population and cattle was desired and prayed for.

**Conclusion**

It is evident from the above that the *Vedas* are the original sources of the subject matter of Ayurveda. The concepts were occasionally conceived and commented on during casual discussions in *Upanishads* but they were systematically arranged and propounded during detailed discourses which were sequentially recorded in the *Samhitas* of Ayurveda; and even in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* during narrations of different events. During the pre- and post-*Buddha* era these concepts were in vogue in the theoretical as well as applied form and were well established in the society. Up to 1000 AD learned commentators and compilers like *Vaghbhatta* (old and younger), *Chakrapani*, *Jejjata, Gayadasa* and *Dallhana* kept this flame burning by collecting references and giving exhaustive explanations and sometimes introducing and adding new concepts. Concepts of *Avikarini vriddi* and *Vikararupa vriddi*, *Poshya* and *Poshaka dhatu* or *sthayi* and *asthayi dhatu* by Chakrapani and *Upachaya Lakshana Ojas* and *Shakti lakshana Ojas*; *jeerna Artava* and *Nava Artava*; *Stree Ojas* and *Stree Shukra*; along with their different functions respectively by *Dallhana* are some of the examples. Then the dark period begins. It is necessary to review and revive ancient Indian knowledge in light of modern science.

V. J. Thakar  
Founder Vice Chancellor, Gujarat Ayurved University,  
Jamnagar, Gujarat, India  
E-mail: ayujournal@yahoo.com