Review Article

‘Swapna’ in the Indian classics: Mythology or science?

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Abstract

There are many concepts in Ayurveda as well as the ancient sciences that are untouched or unexplored. One such concept is that of the Swapna (dreams). Being an abstract phenomenon it makes it difficult to be explained and understood; probably because of this the descriptions related to Swapna in the Indian classics are supported by mythology, to make them acceptable. Variations in these explanations are seen according to the objective of the school of thought; that is, in the ancient texts where dreams are used to delve into the knowledge of the Atman and are related to spirituality, its description in the Ayurvedic texts evolves around the Sharira and Manas. Although all these explanations seem to be shrouded in uncertainty and mythology; there definitely seems to be a logical and rational science behind these quotations. They only need research, investigation, and explanation on the basis of logic, and a laboratory.

Key words: Indian classics, mythology, science, Swapna, dreams, ayurveda, upanishad.

Introduction

Ayurveda is a science that is completely based on its eternal and consistent principles and concepts. Even with the changing era and modernization these principles have stood their ground. The literature on some of these concepts shows significant similarity with the other oriental ancient texts like the Vedas, Puranaas, Darshanas, and so on. In fact for a detailed understanding of the principles propounded in the Ayurvedic texts, the Acaryas have also advised the study of these texts. But what if the principles and concepts elaborated in these texts are obscure and mystic? What if these concepts seem to be jaded with mythology giving them a very unscientific and illogical outlook? Could they still be considered worthy of studying, to understand and explore the scientific aspect of Ayurvedic principles?

One such concept that has been shrouded with myth and philosophy and is hardly applied and evaluated on a scientific basis is ‘Swapna’ or dreams. The description of Swapna is found abundantly in the ancient oriental classics, specifically the AtharvaVeda, Upanishadas, Puranaas, Darshanas, and Ayurveda. However, with the exception of Ayurveda, its description in the other texts seems to be more philosophical. A detailed analysis of these descriptions, however, leaves a lingering thought that there could be a strong scientific indication behind this mask of mythology.

Aims and objectives:
The present study was aimed for compilation of the description of Swapna (dreams) in the Indian classics and an in-depth evaluation of these concepts.

Materials and Methods

• Classical texts of Ayurveda and the allied Indian sciences were scanned for references regarding dreams.
• These references were compiled, analyzed, and discussed for a thorough and in-depth understanding of the concept of Swapna.

Conceptual review

The literature available could be divided into that of the Vedas, Upanishadas, Puranaas, Darshanas, and Ayurvedic scriptures.

Vedas

The earliest Indian reference to dreams is in the Rg Veda (4000 or 6000 BC). In this text a nightmare is described; Rg-Veda also explains the waking dream, which is mentioned as an evil that wishes to visit one’s enemies. Yet another verse tells of an incubus who bewitches a sleeping woman in her dream. References regarding Swapna are also available in the Sama Veda.[1]

The significance of the content of the dream was particularly the subject of the sixty-eighth appendix of the Atharva Veda, composed in 1500 BC. This text organized dreams with reference to the objective, waking world — for example, according to the physical temperament of the dreamer (i.e., the Doshika dominance in the Prakriti of the person),[2] the time of the night the dream took place, and so forth, which was...
very much in synchronization with the description of Swapna available in the Ayurvedic texts.

**Upnishadas**

By the time of the Upanishadas (700 BC) the question of the reality of dreams was approached in a more systematic way. The Mandukya Upanishad spoke of four states of the Atman; waking, that is, Jagati, dreaming (Swapna), dreamless sleep (Supta), and the supernatural, transcendent fourth state, (Turiya) the identity with ParamAtman. Other Upanishads including the Manduka, Katha, Brahma, Taittiriyopanishada, Yogasara, Kenopanishada, Paringala, and so on added certain significant details to the outline of these four states mentioned earlier, to emphasize the importance of the soul and to understand its Karma better.

Mandukyopanishada has further given the nomenclature for the Atma in each of these stages; Jagati, where the soul is called Vansvanara, is the soul in wakefulness, and it enjoys gross things. Swapna, where the soul is Taijasa, sunk in its own light in the state of the dream, where it enjoys subtle things. Sushupta, where the soul Prajita, that is, it inspires man even while he has fallen into deep sleep and he enjoys mere bliss. Lastly Turiya, wherein the soul is called Atma; it is the pure self conscious soul constituting the four dimensions of metaphysics and enjoys nothing but its own state and is tranquil in its singleness.

As per the description in the Mandukyopanishada, the Taijasa or Swapnavastha is inwardly cognitive, having seven limbs, 19 months, enjoying the exquisite (Pravivkta Bhujja).

The Upanishadas articulate two perspectives on dreams. The first maintains that dreams are merely expressions of inner desires. The second closely resembles the Chinese belief of the soul leaving the body and being guided until awakened. It was also thought that if the sleeper was awakened abruptly, the soul might not return to the body quickly enough and the sleeper could die.

Brihadaranyaka sees no distinction between the Atma and the objects seen in the dream and states that the spirit serves as a light for itself.[8] It states that the Atma itself takes the form of the objects in the Swapna. In this process when the Buddhi is initiated toward seeing the dream, the form taken by the Buddhi is also adopted by the Atma, as it along with Buddhi initiates toward the dream.[9]

In Prashnopanishada, Maharshi Pippalada states that in the Swapnavastha, the Jiv/Atma along with the Manas and Suksha Indriyas experiences its glory. Whatever was seen, heard, and experienced by it in the past births, is again seen, heard, and experienced by it in the dream state.

Descriptions of dreams signifying omens are also elaborately available in the Upanishadas. Chhandogya Upanishada mentions that if rites are performed for the fulfillment of a wish, the seeing of a woman in the dream at such a time is an omen of success.[10]

In the Brahma Vaivartya Purana[11] also Shubha Swapna are described. It is enumerated here that seeing of Brahmins, God like men, merchants, Gods guiding the path, the sun, a Samyasin, a Brahmacarya, cows, fire, Gurus, elephants, lions, white horses, and so on, implies a good omen.

**Puranas**

The Hindu Epics and Puranas also incorporated into their narratives many of the traditional dreams analyzed in other philosophical and medical texts. In Valmiki’s Ramayana, when Sita had been stolen by the demon Ravana and is being held captive on the island of Lanka, the ogress Tripita has such a dream that symbolized the defeat of Ravana at the hands of Rama.[7] Likewise the dreams of Bharata symbolizing the death of his father and that seen by Lord Hanuman also are described in detail.

In the Mahabharata the Swapna of the Kurus signifying their defeat at the hands of the Pandavas is described.[8]

**Darshanas**

All Astika as well as Astika Nastika Darshanas describe dreams. However, the Nastika Darshana, Charvaka do not contribute in this aspect.

Kanada defines dream-cognition as the consciousness produced by a particular conjunction of the self with the mind (Manas), in co-operation with the subconscious impressions of past experience, like recollection.[9]

Although, Prasastapada describes Swapna as, “Swapnas are such sensations which are experienced only from the Manas, which are similar to those experienced by the external sense organs in the sleeping state when the external sense organs are inactive and the functions of the Manas are also declined, that is, it is in a Pralnavastha”.

He further states three causes of Swapna; first Samskarapatavata, which includes those objects or people in the environment, experienced during the day. Second, those dreams seen due to Dhatudusti, that is, the dreams which are seen due to the Doshika dominance in the Prakrti of the person. They are again divided into three according to the Vata, Pitta, and Kapha Prakrti. finally the Adrishta dreams, which arise from an unseen agency, due to Dharmadharma. The phenomenon of Swapnantiya Jnana ‘dream-end cognitions’, or dreams within dreams are also described here.

The commentators of Vaisheshika Darshana namely, Prashastapada, Shridhara, Shankara Misra, Shivaditya, and others, also recognize the central origin of dreams, similar to the original author. Although they hold that certain dreams are produced by organic disorders within the body, they do not recognize the origin of dreams from the external sense-organs. Thus the Vaisheshikas and the ancient Naiyiyikas generally advocate the presentative (i.e., that they are direct and immediate presentations of a definite and determinate character) theory of dreams.

The commentators Nyaya, Bhasarvajna, and Keshavamisra described the dream consciousness to be a kind of false recollection. Jayanta Bhatta seems to regard them as recollections of a past experience, whereas, Jagadisha adds that they are also due to the merit and demerits of his actions as well as intra-organic disorders.

Patanjali in the Yoga Darshana, also gives the description of Swapna when describing Prasanna Chitta Sthairiyopaya. Texts like Yoga Vasishtha denote the whole universe to be a Swapna. It states that as the objects that are seen in the dream lie in our Hridor, similarly the objects of the universe lie in the Hridor of Brahma who is watching this big dream, that is, the universe,
which is as false as the object seen in the dream.

The commentators on Yoga Darshana also state that the Sakshi or Atma keeps a watch over the dream, arousing mechanism, initiating, and inhibiting it. [10]

In the Yogika physiology, these Manovaha Srotas are called the Manovaha Nadis. These are described by Dr. B.N. Seal, as “A generic name for the channels, along with centrally initiated presentations (as in dreaming or hallucination) that come to the sixth lobe of the Manaschakra.” Here Dr. B.N.Seal further states according to the writers on Yoga and Tantras that, “The Manovaha Nadi is the channel of communication of the Jiva with the Manaschakra at the base of the brain. It has been stated that the sensory currents are brought to the sensory ganglia along different nerves of the special senses. However, this is not sufficient for them to rise to the level of discriminative consciousness (Savikalpajñana). A communication must now be established between the Jiva (in the Sahasrara Cakra, upper cerebrum) and the sensory currents received at the Manas, and this is done by means of the Manovaha Nadi. When the sensations are centrally initiated, as in dreams and hallucinations, a special Nadi (Swapnavaha Nadi), which appears to be only a branch of the Manovaha Nadi, serves as the channel of communication from the Jiva (soul) to the Manas.” These Manovaha Nadi are termed as Swapnavaha Nadis by Shamkara Misra.

In Yogavisistha again, detailed descriptions of dreams that are seen due to Slesma Atma, that is, when the Atma enters the channels which are filled with Slesma and Rasadi, Annarasas are available. [11] Furthermore, dreams that are caused due to all three Doshas (Sannipata) and activated by Vayu are also described in Yogavisistha. These dreams seem to be more destructive and represent a more disturbed psyche. [12]

Again descriptions of dreams wherein the Annarasa is vitiated by Mani, Mantra, Aushadha, and so on, are also seen in the above-mentioned text. [13] This cosmic mind acts in the cosmic world in a similar manner as the individual Manas acts in the personal life of an individual. The seven stages of the cosmic mind are described in Yogavisistha, two of which are Swapna Jagara and Jagrat Swapna.

The Mimamsakaras also recognize the representative character of dreams. Kumarila Bhatta, Parthasarathimitra, and so forth, support this theory. Prabhakara regards the representative character of dreams, but adds the theory of obscuration of memory (Smritipramosha).

Literature on the Advaita Vedanta also describes dreams, but shows difference in opinions as compared to the Nyaya Vaisesika and their explanation of dream cognition. [14]

Vedanta Darshana also accepts the terminology ‘Taijasa’ for the RajayuktAtma, which experiences the dream. Here particularly the Taijasa experiences mental states dependant on the predisposition left by the waking experiences. In this state the soul fashions its own world in the imagining of the dreams.

Shankara has also commented on the representative theory of dreams in Shankara Bhhashya. [15] Accepting this theory he states Swapna exists according to the nature of recollection. However, his follower Dharmarajadhvarindra, advocates the representative theory.

The Baudhha texts also carry descriptions of the several significant dreams seen by Lord Gautam Buddha before his enlightenment, and these were corroborated by the dreams of his father and wife on the night before his departure from the palace. [16] Again the descriptions of the dreams of Emperor Ashoka in relation to his son Kunala, [17] also feature in the later Buddhist texts.

The interpretation of dreams to enlighten a king was a recurrent Buddhist motif. In a Kashmiri text that contains many dream adventures, a Buddhist monk interprets a king’s dream in order to convert him. [18] Another Buddhist treatise “The questions of King Milinda” also gives an elaborate explanation of Swapna.

Ayurvedic texts

The Brihatrayi, that is, Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, and Ashtanga Samgraha, along with Astanga Hridaya has mentioned Swapna. Even as each treatise has mentioned its importance as the Purvarupa, Rajam and as Arshita Lakshanas; Susruta has described specific dreams denoting the sex of the unborn child; and along with both the Vaghbhatas has mentioned it for assessing the Doshika Prakriti. Charakacharya who has done an in-depth description of the Purusha or Atma, has also described Swapna as its Luga. He also states that the absence of Vaikrita Swapna is an indication of health, similar to the description among the Vikaropashamanam Lakshanas, according to Sushruta.

Swapnas have also been described by the other Acharyas like Sushruta and Sharangadhara, as an omen, that is, Su-Swapna and Duh-Swapna, hinting toward recovery or the Vyadhi Utpatti or death stage, respectively. The regimen followed in case of a Duh-Swapna is also described.

Other books of the same time period like Bhela and Harita Samhita have also given the description of Swapna, especially in the context of Prakriti, Purvarupa, and Arista Lakshana. In fact in the Harita Samhita a whole chapter ‘Swapnadihaya’ is devoted to the description of dreams.

A considerable description of Swapna, specifically in the mother, denoted the health of the child, is also seen in the Kasyapa Samhita. In the other texts like Bhavaprakasha, Swapna is described in the Garbhapatrarana, signifying the gender of the fetus, in relation to Prakriti and so on. In Madhava Nidana the description of Swapna is only pertaining to the Purvarupa of Rajayakshma.

Observations

1. The concept of Swapna is elaborately explained in the Indian classics.
2. The description of Swapna is more pronounced in the Vedic, Upanisadic, and Darshanian literature, as well as in the Ayurvedic literature of the Samhita Kala. Later the description of Swapna in the Ayurvedic and the allied texts decreased and very less description is found in the texts other than the Brhatrayi and Laghutrayi.
3. Although this literature in the ancient classics was written thousands of years ago, it seems to be scientific in explanation even when compared to modern science, if analyzed and interpreted in depth.
4. The description of Swapna in various texts differs in terms of the outlook or the angle of analysis on the part of the intellectual scholars. Hence the description of Swapna is observed to be in accordance with the theory pronounced
by the scholars of that Darshanas. For example Vedanta described the world as an illusion as if in a dream, Vaiseshika exhibited the Panchabhautika influence by stating the Dhatu-dushtiti Janya Swapna, and the like.

5. The listing of dreams as Rupa, Purvarupa, Arishta, Suarez, Manas, Duh-Swapan, and so on, however, at times, seems to be lacking in logical explanation.

**Discussion**

In the Indian as well as the western ancient traditions, the available theories of Swapna are entwined with religion and mythology, wherein, they are considered to be premonitions or messages sent by God. However, these theories, if evaluated scientifically, show a strong hint of psychotherapy, which had only been modified to easily convince the less educated god-fearing people. The social condition at that time may have been such that science enveloped in religion and mythology was accepted better than science in its bare form.

The Vedas, Upanishadas, and Puranas elaborated tales of dreams related to the Gods and renowned men to underline the importance of dreams, especially as premonitions. All the same, dreams were ably used to prove the existence of metaphysical subjects like Atma or the illusionary aspect of the materialistic world, to the common man. Its somatic relevance was also equally highlighted, as in the AtharvaVeda, where dreams are described according to their Dominancy.

The descriptions of the Dosika dreams of the Atharvaveda or Yogavasishtha is similar to that in Ayurveda. However, the physiology described by Yogavasishtha that of the Atma entering the Vatika and so on, Dosika Srotas due to which dreams are seen, seem to be a bit different to the other texts. Ayurveda emphasizes on the Atma, Manas, and the Manovaha Srotas. Acharya Caraka has stated that the Srotas through which the Manas and Dusha travel are the same and all-pervading in the Chetana Shatira, that is, in the presence of Atma. The vitiated Doja hence tends to block the Manovaha Srotas. In the living body, the conjunction of the Atma and Manas is inevitable, hence in the Swapnavastha the Manas loses association with the external Indriyas and bonds with the Atma. Here it seems that Manas is only replaced by Atma in the Yogavasishtha, as they both lie in close association.

The Vedas, which mainly focus on the social ethics, values, norms, and spirituality, probably meant to portray the futility of seeing a day dream, by engaging in which the person only wastes time, hence it is described as an evil.

From the above it can be inferred that the description in the Atharva Veda was primarily concerned with the subjective symbolism of dreams, or rather, with the objective results of subjective contents. Although ancient, its approach and description about dreams in relation to Doshas and the like, are very similar to the later medical texts of Ayurveda and are in synchronization with the physiological Gunas and Karmas of the Doshas.

The impact of the physical constituents of the body and the effect of the Ahara and the Vihara on dreams is highlighted by Yogavasishtha. It has described the dreams caused due to the impact of the Ahara Rasa vitiated by Mani, Mantra, and Aushadha. It also underlines the impact of the Shabda Tanmatra on the Panchabhautika Shatira, which is a principle, which acts not only in the pathology, but also in treatment modalities like Sattwavajaya and Daivayapashraya.

The stages of the Atman described by the Mandukyopanisada including Swapna, not only represents the condition of the Atman, but of the person as a whole. The person exists in these four stages itself, throughout the sustenance of Ayu; and the other three factors, that is, Sarira, Suttra, and Indriya also play a role in the causation of three of these stages, except Turiya.

The importance given to the Atman in the process of dreaming by the ancient texts is similar to the opinions of the modern psychiatrists like Velappand and Carl Jung, who identified dreams as an interaction between the unconscious and the conscious. They also assert together that the unconscious is the dominant force of the dream.

These omens depict good or bad and their interpretation changes in the Ayurvedic as well as other ancient texts, with change of tradition, culture, and place. It is actually the combination of natural symbols, cultural restrictions, and the values of the author of the texts, which determines whether a particular dream will be interpreted as protending good or evil for the dreamer. For example, the texts on Ayurveda are primarily health-oriented and those of the Buddhist and philosophical texts are primarily Moksha-oriented. To an impressive degree, they agree on what people dream about, but they often differ about whether the dream pretends good or evil. The Puranas especially derive interpretations based on the situation of the dreamer.

The descriptions of dreams as good and bad omens may be the manifestation of the mental status of the person, but on the whole do not show much relevance or any scientific reasoning behind the specifications of these omens. It could probably be a list of dreams, which were seen in an exhaustive mass survey.

The Charylka has not described Swapna as elaborately as in the other Darshanas, probably because only Pratyaksa Pramana is accepted by them; whereas, Swapna cognition and analyses requires Anumana Pramana.

The description of dreams in the Buddhist texts reflect the actual Buddhist practice, other sources corroborate the tradition that Buddhists converted many Indian kings by a combination of public debate, private counseling, and a kind of primitive psychoanalysis, of which interpretation of dreams played a major part.

**Conclusions**

The descriptions of Swapna in the ancient texts including Ayurveda reflect an in-depth and methodical study. Some of the conclusions derived by the Acharyas in relation to Swapna, especially the listing of dreams according to omens and so on, seem to be derived from the analysis of physiology and pathology or a mass survey. The descriptions are given a mythological presentation only to be easily accepted by people of all intellectual gradients. Further in-depth evaluation of these descriptions could open more doors to the understanding of the physiology, pathology, and the utility of dreams.
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हिंदी सारांश

भारतीय साहित्य में स्वप्न – कल्पना या विज्ञान भी?

सोनाली स. तेंडुलकर, आर. आर. दिवेदी

आयुर्वेद में तथा पुरातन साहित्य में ऐसे बहुत सारे विषय हैं जिनपर अभी तक विचार नहीं हुआ है, या बिना अवस्थानन्द के रहे हैं। ऐसा ही एक विषय है स्वप्न। यह एक ऐसी घटना है जो दुर्विविध रहने के कारण समझने तथा समझने में कठिन होती है। विकसते कारण भारतीय साहित्य में स्पन्न के समन्वय में उन्हें जन समुदाय में अपनाया गया है। इसके स्पष्टकरण में विचारों को वैभवन्त न करने के कारण विचारक मानाया गया है। वैदिक तथा उपनिषद साहित्य, जो आधारपात से सम्बन्ध रखते हैं, उनमें स्वप्नों का वर्णन आता तक ऊपर महाद्वार को लगता है। यह विद्वान वे सभी व्याख्याएँ, अनिश्चितात्मक तथा पौराणिक कथाओं लिए कल्पनाओं या अभावात्मक आदर्शों की भी आयुर्वेद साहित्य में व्याख्या शरीर और मन के प्रकृति-वैकृत्य कमया के आधार पर की गयी है। विद्वान वे सभी व्याख्या वह, अनिश्चितात्मक तथा पौराणिक कथाओं न व कल्पनाओं तथा अभावात्मक आदर्शों की भी आयुर्वेद साहित्य में व्याख्या शरीर और मन के प्रकृति-वैकृत्य कमया के आधार पर की गयी है। इसलिए इसके कारण तक्षस्लेठ तथा प्रयोगशाला के आधारपात इस विषय पर अनुसन्धान तथा स्फूर्ति विकसयेण करते रहने लगते है। ऐसा ही प्रयास इस अध्ययन में किया गया है जहाँ व्याख्यात तथा प्रकाश दाला गया है।