



THE ORIGIN OF MEDICINE IN THE ATHARVAVEDA: SACRED HEALING AND MEDICINAL HERBS IN EARLY VEDIC THOUGHT

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Abstract

The Atharvaveda represents the earliest systematic articulation of medical thought in India, combining ritual, theology, and empirical knowledge of medicinal plants. Unlike the Rgveda, where healing is largely divine and hymnic, the Atharvaveda introduces concrete therapeutic practices, disease classifications, and the explicit invocation of herbs (oṣadhayah) as agents of cure. This paper examines the origin of medicine as presented in the Atharvaveda, focusing on its cosmological foundations, concept of disease, and the role of herbs as living, divine powers. A consolidated list of medicinal plants named in the Atharvaveda is provided, demonstrating the text's significance as a precursor to classical Ayurveda.

1. Introduction

The history of medicine in India begins not with classical Ayurvedic treatises such as the *Carakasamhitā* or *Suśrutasamhitā*, but with the Atharvaveda. Often described as a repository of “magic” and “folk religion,” the Atharvaveda is in fact a foundational medical text that preserves early Indian understandings of disease, healing, pharmacology, and psychosomatic health.

The Atharvavedic vision of medicine (*bheṣaja*, *bhaiṣajya*) integrates three domains:

1. **Divine healing** (through gods such as Rudra and the Aśvins),
2. **Ritual healing** (through mantra and rite),
3. **Herbal healing** (through the agency of plants).

This paper argues that the Atharvaveda represents the **origin of Indian medical science**, where medicine emerges as a sacred discipline grounded in cosmology and practical therapeutics.

2. Concept of Disease in the Atharvaveda

2.1 Disease as Cosmic and Moral Disorder

In the Atharvaveda, disease (*yakṣma*, *takman*, *kṣetriya*) is often conceived as an intrusive force—sometimes demonic, sometimes divine—that disrupts bodily and social harmony.

“I bind and drive away the disease.”¹

Diseases are treated as entities that can be expelled, transferred, or neutralized, reflecting a worldview in which health is the restoration of balance.

2.2 Fever (Takman) and Systemic Illness

One of the most extensively discussed diseases is **takman** (fever), described with remarkable clinical awareness. “Fever, homage to you; homage to Rudra.”²

Here fever is simultaneously feared and ritually placated, showing an early attempt to conceptualize disease as both physiological and divine.

3. Origin of Medicine (Bheṣaja) in the Atharvaveda

3.1 Divine Origin of Medicine

Medicine is repeatedly said to originate from the gods, especially **Rudra**, **Varuṇa**, and the **Aśvins**. “Rudra became the lord of medicines.”³

This establishes healing as a sacred science, sanctioned by divine authority.

3.2 Emergence of Herbal Medicine

The Atharvaveda marks a decisive shift by granting **independent healing power to herbs**, not merely as ritual adjuncts but as active agents.

“The herbs are ruled by Soma.”⁴

Herbs are presented as living beings endowed with consciousness, potency, and moral force.

4. Theology of Herbs (Oṣadhi-Sūkta)

The most important hymn for understanding Vedic medicine is the **Oṣadhi Sūkta**.

¹ Atharvaveda 1.22.1 *apa yakṣmaṃ vi badhnāmi*

² Atharvaveda 5.22.1 *takman namas te rudrāya*

³ Atharvaveda 4.9.7 *rudro bheṣajānām adhipatir babhūva*

⁴ Atharvaveda 8.7.19 *oṣadhayah somarājñīḥ*

“The herbs are mothers.”⁵ This metaphor establishes plants as nurturing, protective, and life-giving entities.

“May all healing powers be present in you.”⁶The hymn anticipates later Ayurvedic pharmacology by recognizing multiplicity of medicinal effects.

5. Names of Medicinal Herbs in the Atharvaveda (Sanskrit)

Below is a **consolidated list of herbs explicitly named** in the Atharvaveda, with traditional identifications where possible:

Sanskrit Name	Atharvaveda Reference	Traditional Identification
Oṣadhi	AV 8.7	Generic medicinal plant
Apāmārga	AV 4.17	<i>Achyranthes aspera</i>
Kuṣṭha	AV 5.4	<i>Saussurea lappa</i>
Soma	AV 8.7	Sacred plant (ritual/medicinal)
Arjuna	AV 6.24	<i>Terminalia arjuna</i>
Pippalī	AV 6.109	<i>Piper longum</i>
Aśvattha	AV 6.23	<i>Ficus religiosa</i>
Nyagrodha	AV 4.12	<i>Ficus benghalensis</i>
Yava	AV 6.50	Barley (nutritive medicine)
Tila	AV 6.140	Sesame
Śaṇa	AV 2.4	Hemp/flax
Darbha	AV 6.112	Sacred grass

These plants are invoked not merely as substances but as **conscious healers**, indicating a proto-pharmacological understanding.

6. From Atharvaveda to Ayurveda

Many foundational Ayurvedic concepts originate in the Atharvaveda:

- **Bheṣaja** → medicine
- **Bhīṣak** → physician

⁵ Atharvaveda 8.7.1 *mātaro oṣadhayaḥ*:

⁶ Atharvaveda 8.7.3 *viśvā bhaiṣajyāni vo astu*

- **Rasa** → potency
- **Doṣa-like imbalance** (implicit)

The *Carakasamhitā* explicitly acknowledges Atharvavedic medicine as authoritative, describing Ayurveda as an **upaveda of the Atharvaveda**.

7. Conclusion

The Atharvaveda represents the **earliest origin of medicine in Indian intellectual history**, where healing is conceived as a sacred science integrating cosmology, ritual, and empirical plant knowledge. Its hymns reveal a sophisticated understanding of disease, therapeutics, and pharmacology, forming the conceptual foundation upon which classical Ayurveda was later constructed.

Rather than being marginal or magical, Atharvavedic medicine is **systematic, theological, and deeply ecological**, recognizing plants as living partners in human health.

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