

The theory of Surgery in Ancient India with Special Reference of *Suśruta Samhitā*

Hiyashree Ray

Research Scholar, Department of Sanskrit, Gauhati University, Assam, 781014

Abstract

Āyurveda is one of the oldest systems of medicine in the world and has played a significant role in preserving the health of the Indian people for thousands of years. Every nation possesses its own traditional system of healing which aims at maintaining the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of its people. In India, Āyurveda occupies a prominent position among such traditional medical systems. Its principles have been applied not only to human health but also to veterinary medicine, which indicates the universal applicability of its fundamental concepts. The origin of *Āyurveda* can be traced back to the Vedic period. The Vedas contain references to various methods of healing and rejuvenation associated with divine physicians such as the Aśvinīkumāras and Indra. Although many of these descriptions are symbolic and not fully understood today, they reflect the advanced medical knowledge and health consciousness of ancient India. The Vedic sages aspired to live a complete life of one hundred years with health, prosperity and happiness. This aspiration led to the development of a holistic healthcare system that emphasized the physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual dimensions of human life. The term Āyurveda literally means *the science of life* or *the knowledge of life*. It is regarded as the foundation of many natural and alternative systems of medicine. The Ayurvedic approach to health is comprehensive and includes *Ācāra* (conduct and lifestyle), *Vicāra* (thought and mental attitude) and *Āhāra* (diet and nutrition). Thus, Āyurveda presents a complete philosophy of healthy living and continues to remain relevant in the modern world.

Keywords: Āyurveda; Vedic Medicine; Traditional Healthcare; Holistic Health; Vedic Literature; Indian Medical Science.

Introduction:

Āyurveda is traditionally divided into eight principal branches, namely Śalya Tantra (surgery), Śālākya Tantra (diseases of the eye, ear, nose and throat), Kāyacikitsā (general medicine), Bhūtavidyā (psychological and spiritual disorders), Kumārabhṛtya (paediatrics), Agadatantra (toxicology), Rasāyana (rejuvenation therapy) and Vājīkaraṇa Tantra (aphrodisiac therapy). These branches reveal the comprehensive nature of the Ayurvedic system. In ancient India various disciplines such as physiology, pathology, pharmacology, therapeutics, paediatrics, hygiene, dietetics, pulse science, veterinary medicine and the treatment of horses, elephants and cattle developed under the influence of Āyurveda. Among the early authorities of Āyurveda, Ātreya, Hārīta, Kāśyapa, Agniveśa, Bhela and Jīvaka occupy an important place. Their contributions laid the foundation for the later development of medical science in India. Caraka,

Suśruta and Vāgbhaṭa are regarded as the most distinguished contributors to Ayurvedic literature. The *Caraka Saṃhitā*, the *Suśruta Saṃhitā*, the *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya* of Vāgbhaṭa, the *Mādhavanidāna* of Mādhavakara and the *Āyurvedadīpikā* of Cakrapāṇidatta are among the most important works in this tradition.

The surgical aspect of Āyurveda attained a highly developed form in ancient India. Suśruta is generally regarded as one of the earliest surgeons in the history of medicine. He discussed surgery in a systematic and detailed manner. His work includes descriptions of surgical procedures, gynaecology, obstetrics, ophthalmology, plastic surgery and artificial limbs. He also described a variety of surgical instruments and their uses. Vāgbhaṭa contributed significantly to the classification of diseases and presented a comprehensive account of numerous ailments and their treatment. The teachings of Āyurveda were preserved in the form of *sūtras*, concise Sanskrit verses that contained the essential principles of medical science. These verses served as aids to memory for students and practitioners. Sanskrit, being the language of Āyurveda, reflects the philosophical foundations of this system. It possesses a rich vocabulary for describing both physical and psychological states of existence. The term *Āyurveda* itself signifies the knowledge of *āyus*, that is, the integrated existence of the body, senses, mind and vital force (*prāṇa*).

Āyur asmin vidyate anena vā āyur vindati iti Āyurvedaḥ.

This definition indicates that Āyurveda is not merely concerned with the treatment of disease. It also seeks to strengthen the natural resistance of the body and prevent the recurrence of illness. Through its doctrine of the *Pañcamahābhūtas*, Āyurveda establishes a close relationship between the human body and nature. This holistic approach distinguishes it from many other systems of medicine and contributes to its continuing relevance. Among the classical Ayurvedic texts, the *Suśruta Saṃhitā* occupies a unique position. It is recognised as one of the greatest works of Sanskrit scientific literature. The credit for transforming surgery into a practical science is generally attributed to Suśruta. References to remarkable surgical practices are also found in the Vedic literature. The *Aśvinīkumāras*, the celestial physicians, are described as possessing extraordinary medical skill. According to the *R̥gveda*, they fitted an iron leg to Viśpalā after she had lost her leg in battle and restored her ability to fight. Such references indicate the antiquity of surgical knowledge in India.

Schools of Surgery in Ancient India

According to traditional accounts, the science of medicine was first imparted by Indra to Ātreya, while the science of surgery was taught to Dhanvantari. This tradition suggests that Ātreya and Suśruta were regarded as the principal founders of medicine and surgery respectively. Dhanvantari is said to have taught surgery to six disciples, namely Aupadhenava, Aurabhra, Pauṣkalāvata, Gopurarakṣita, Bhoja and Suśruta. Each of these disciples composed a separate *tantra* on surgery. These works formed the earliest body of medical literature and served as the basis of instruction in ancient medical schools. Caraka refers to the existence of numerous medical schools and treatises before his own time. He mentions that several works on medicine were already in circulation and discusses the characteristics of an ideal medical treatise. The

tradition of the Dhanvantari school gave rise to several surgical texts such as the *Suśruta Tantra*, *Pauṣkalāvata Tantra*, *Vaitaraṇa Tantra*, *Bhoja Tantra*, *Karavīra Tantra*, *Kapila Tantra*, *Gopurarakṣita Tantra*, *Bhālulukīya Tantra*, *Aupadhenava Tantra*, *Aurabhra Tantra* and *Gautama Tantra*. Similarly, the Śālākya tradition included texts such as the *Nimi Tantra*, *Videha Tantra*, *Gārgya Tantra*, *Gālavya Tantra*, *Satyāki Tantra*, *Karāla Tantra*, *Bhadraśaunaka Tantra*, *Cakṣuṣya Tantra* and *Kṛṣṇātreya Tantra*.

Āyurveda is traditionally regarded as an *Upaveda* associated with the Atharvaveda. According to ancient legends, Brahmā originally composed Āyurveda in one hundred thousand verses divided into one thousand chapters. Considering the limited lifespan and intellectual capacity of human beings, this vast body of knowledge was later condensed into eight principal branches, namely Śalya Tantra, Śālākya Tantra, Kāyacikitsā, Bhūtavidyā, Kumārabhṛtya, Agadatantra, Rasāyana and Vājīkaraṇa Tantra. Both Caraka and Suśruta describe Āyurveda as an *Upāṅga* or *Upaveda* of the Atharvaveda and acknowledge it as the source of their medical knowledge. This indicates that the Ayurvedic tradition existed prior to the establishment of the schools associated with Ātreya and Suśruta. Thus, Āyurveda represents a long and continuous tradition of medical knowledge that has contributed significantly to the development of healthcare in India.

Susruta's Concept of Surgery

Suśruta was one of the greatest surgeons, teachers and philosophers of ancient India. He is widely recognised for his remarkable contribution to the development of surgery. His achievements earned him a distinguished place in the history of medicine. The golden age of surgery in ancient India is closely associated with the work of Suśruta. His celebrated treatise, the *Suśruta Saṃhitā*, established his reputation as the Father of Indian Surgery. He was among the earliest physicians to organise surgery into distinct branches and to present its principles in a systematic manner. Suśruta is especially renowned for his contributions to plastic surgery. He is often regarded as the pioneer of rhinoplasty. In addition to plastic surgery, he is credited with the development of cataract surgery, laparotomy and lithotomy. His fame rests primarily upon the *Suśruta Saṃhitā*, one of the most important medical texts of ancient India. This work existed nearly two millennia ago and represented one of the most advanced surgical traditions of the ancient world.

The exact date of Suśruta remains a subject of scholarly debate. Since the original manuscript of the *Suśruta Saṃhitā* has not survived, historians depend upon later copies and revisions. The Bower Manuscript, preserved in the Bodleian Library of the University of Oxford, is regarded as one of the most valuable sources for the study of ancient Indian medicine. Some scholars place Suśruta around 1000 BCE on the basis of Vedic traditions, while others consider him to be a contemporary of the Buddha during the sixth century BCE. Although his precise date remains uncertain, his contribution to medical science is universally acknowledged. One of the most significant aspects of Suśruta's work is his detailed discussion of surgical instruments. He described their structure, qualities, manufacture and practical application. Such systematic treatment of surgical instruments is rarely found in earlier medical traditions. His descriptions demonstrate a remarkable understanding of surgical practice. Many scholars consider him among

the earliest surgeons to describe a wide variety of surgical instruments, including instruments that resemble modern endoscopic devices.

The Suśruta Saṃhitā

The *Suśruta Saṃhitā* is primarily devoted to surgery, although it also contains extensive discussions on medicine, pathology, anatomy, biology, ophthalmology and hygiene. Suśruta attempted to collect the knowledge of earlier physicians and arrange it in a systematic manner. The work presents medical knowledge in a clear and organised form suitable for teaching and practice. The *Suśruta Saṃhitā* is divided into six major sections and covers nearly all branches of medical science known during that period. Besides surgery, it discusses hygiene, midwifery, toxicology, ophthalmology and psychosomatic disorders. Suśruta regarded surgery as the foremost branch of medicine because it produced immediate results through the use of surgical instruments and operative techniques. According to him, surgery possesses exceptional value since it alleviates suffering directly and contributes to the preservation of life. The text is broadly divided into two major parts, namely the *Pūrva Tantra* and the *Uttara Tantra*. The work deals extensively with *Śalya Tantra* and *Śālākya Tantra*, two of the eight principal branches of Āyurveda. *Śalya Tantra* concerns the removal of arrows and other foreign bodies from wounds. It also explains the use of surgical instruments and discusses the diagnosis and treatment of inflammation. *Śālākya Tantra* deals with diseases affecting the eyes, ears, nose, mouth and other organs situated above the clavicle.

The *Suśruta Saṃhitā* remains the most important source of information regarding surgery in ancient India. Although its principal emphasis is upon surgery, it also incorporates valuable material relating to other branches of medical science. The concise style of the work, its systematic arrangement and its scientific approach demonstrate the advanced state of medical knowledge in ancient India. For this reason, the *Suśruta Saṃhitā* continues to occupy a prominent place in the history of Āyurveda and world medicine.

Conclusion

Modern surgery has achieved remarkable progress through scientific research and technological advancement. Nevertheless, the contribution of Suśruta to the development of surgical science cannot be overlooked. At a time when surgical knowledge was still undeveloped in many parts of the world, Suśruta had already established a systematic and scientific approach to surgery. His achievements demonstrate the high level of medical knowledge attained in ancient India.

The study of *Suśruta* and the Ayurvedic surgical tradition reveals that many principles of surgery practised today have their roots in ancient Indian medicine. Several methods described in the *Suśruta Saṃhitā* continue to attract the attention of medical historians and researchers. The procedures of wound management, surgical preparation and postoperative care discussed by Suśruta reflect a deep understanding of surgical practice. Modern surgeons continue to follow similar principles while preparing patients for surgical operations. In the contemporary period interest in Āyurveda has increased considerably. Āyurveda continues to hold great relevance

because of its holistic approach to health and healing. Ayurvedic surgeons maintain that many surgical procedures can be successfully performed within the Ayurvedic system. They also emphasise that Ayurvedic postoperative care supports wound healing and promotes the natural immunity of the body. This integrated approach contributes to the recovery and well-being of patients.

The surgical tradition of Āyurveda demonstrates that ancient Indian physicians possessed advanced knowledge of anatomy, operative procedures and patient care. The achievements of Suśruta remain an enduring source of inspiration for medical science. His contributions to plastic surgery, ophthalmology and general surgery have earned him a distinguished place in the history of world medicine. At the beginning of his teachings, Suśruta advised physicians not to remain confined to the knowledge of a single discipline. He encouraged them to acquire learning from various branches of knowledge and to broaden their intellectual horizons. As he states:

Ekaṃ śāstram adhyāno na vidyāt śāstraniścayam / Tasmād bahuśrutam vijñāya cikitsakaḥ //

That means one who studies only a single science cannot attain complete understanding of knowledge. Therefore, a physician should acquire learning from many sources. Thus, the legacy of Suśruta continues to inspire scholars, physicians and surgeons even today. His works remain valuable not only for understanding the history of medicine but also for appreciating the scientific and cultural heritage of ancient India.

References

1. Bhishagratna, Kaviraj Kunjalal (trans.). *An English Translation of the Suśruta Samhitā Based on Original Sanskrit Text*. Vol. I. Calcutta: Published by the Author, 1907.
2. Krishnamurthy, K. H. *The Wealth of Suśruta*. Coimbatore: International Institute of Āyurveda, 1991.
3. Ellis, Harold. *A History of Surgery*. London: Greenwich Medical Media Ltd., 2001.
4. Wujastyk, Dominik. *The Roots of Āyurveda : Selections from Sanskrit Medical Writings*. London: Penguin Classics, 2003.
5. Kutumbiah, P. *Ancient Indian Medicine*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman Ltd., 1999.
6. Mukhopadhyaya, Girindranath. *Surgical Instruments of the Hindus with a Comparative Study of the Surgical Instruments of the Greek, Roman, Arab and the Modern European Surgeons*. New Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corporation, 2000.
7. Hoernle, A. F. Rudolf. *Studies in the Medicine of Ancient India*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1994.
8. Chattopadhyaya, Debiprasad. *Science and Society in Ancient India*. Amsterdam: B.R. Gruner Publishing Co., 1977.