

CHARAKA-THE GREAT LEGENDARY AND VISIONARY OF AYURVEDA

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ABSTRACT

Ayurveda, the upaveda of Rigveda as mentioned in Charana-Vyuha and an upaveda or upanga of Atharvaveda as mentioned in Ayurvedic classics, is the unique system of healing the ailments, has crossed many mile stones in due course of time because of its valid and scientific principles propounded by divine personalities like-Brahma, Dakshaprajapati, Ashwinis (the twins), Indra and later by Bharadwaja, Punarvasu Atreya, Kashiraja Divodasa Dhanvantari and their disciples. Brahma is considered to be the original propounder of Ayurveda. The order of transmission of the knowledge of Ayurveda, as described in the Charaka-Samhita is as follows-Brahma, Dakshaprajapati, Ashwinis, Indra, Bharadwaja, Atreya Punarvasu and his six disciples (Agnivesha, Bhela, Jatukarna, Parashara, Harita and Ksharapani). Agnivesha etc. studied Ayurveda from Atreya Punarvasu and wrote Ayurvedic treatises in their own name. Agnivesha, the disciple of Punarvasu Atreya composed a book named "Agnivesha-tantra" which was later on improved and enlarged by Charaka and named "Charaka-Samhita". Original work of Agnivesha is not available now. Therefore it is very difficult to ascertain the portion subsequently added, deleted or amended by Charaka. After a lapse of time, some of its contents were lost which were reconstituted and restored by Dridhabala. It is not difficult to identify the Subject matter added by Dridhabala as he has clearly mentioned about it at the end of Charaka-Samhita. No history of the earliest writers on medicine in India would be complete without a mention of Charaka and Sushruta, who are considered by the natives to be the highest authorities in all medical matters. The book redacted by Charaka is famous by the name Charaka-Samhita till date and considered the best reference book to study Ayurveda. It is included in the list of three most authentic books of Ayurveda called "Brihat-trayee" viz. Charaka-Samhita, Sushruta-Samhita and Ashtanga-Hridaya. Charaka has not introduced himself anywhere, so different views are available in the history regarding his personality yet his great work is his shining identity. This article deals with the personality and special contribution of Charaka as a great legendary and visionary.

Key words - Ayurveda, Agnivesha-Tantra, Charaka-Samhita, Krishna-Yajurveda, Patanjali, Vaishampayana, Brihat-trayee.

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INTRODUCTION

The Charaka-Samhita, as available in its present form containing eight sthanas or sections such as-Sutrasthana, Nidanasthana, Vimanasthana, Shareerasthana, Indriyasthana, Chikitsasthana, Kalpasthana and Siddhithana, is originally the work of Agnivesha who composed his Tantra on the base of the teaching of his teacher Punarvasu Atreya¹. The second and prominent stratum in the Charaka-Samhita is that of Charaka on whose name the book is known². The term 'Charaka' is derived from the root 'car' means to move about. Charaka has propagated his knowledge and gave relief to the patients by moving from place to place. He stands

after Agnivesha in the period when Buddhism was prevalent side by side with Brahmanic culture in which worship of different deities like Shiva, Vishnu and Kartikeya was in practice. Charaka has also prescribed oblations to Dhanvantari who emerged as medicine-god in Puranas and was worshipped as god at that time³. After a lapse of time, some of its contents were lost which were reconstituted and restored by Dridhabala. It is not difficult to identify the Subject matter added by Dridhabala as he has clearly mentioned about it in the last chapter of Charaka-Samhita that he has added 17 chapters of Chikitsasthana and whole the Kalpasthana and the Siddhithana in Charaka-Samhita⁴. The

compendium of Charaka is well accepted up to the date today by medical fraternity because of its gravity in the form of valid fundamental principles, psychosomatic approach, scientific ideas and multidimensional approach to treat the patient, but who is Charaka? It is not clear even today. So let us discuss in the depth of history about such a great legendary and visionary.

ABOUT CHARAKA

Charaka has contributed a lot in the field of medical science but no where introduced himself which creates problem in deciding the actual personality. Many scholars of history and other streams have tried their best to establish the identity but even today, it is doubtful that whether this Charaka was a person or a community. Few of the important views which are available exclusively in almost all the history books are as follows-Charaka is said to have been an incarnation of Shesha—the serpent-god with a thousands heads—who is supposed to be the depository of all sciences, especially of medicine⁵. In Bhavaprakasha Charaka is introduced as the son of Vishuddha and incarnation of serpent god. There is a fine legend about it mentioned in Bhavaprakasha, a 16th century work. Shesha or serpent god is adored as the embodiment of the knowledge of the Vedas including Ayurveda. Once he himself came to the earth to enquire about the welfare of the living beings here and found them in a miserable state of health due to the spread of diseases. Being very much moved by the pathetic scene, he himself took birth in a family of a learned sage Vishuddha. He redacted Agnivesha's work named "Agnivesha-Tantra" and renamed it as "Charaka-Samhita"⁶.

According to current tradition, Charaka is identified with Patanjali probably on two reasons- one, both are regarded as incarnation of Sheshanaga and the other, both are concerned with purification of body, speech and mind⁷. Patanjali is said to purify body, speech and mind by the precepts of the Charaka Samhita, the Mahabhashya and the Yogasutra⁸. In the 'Charaka Panjika' commentary of Charaka-Samhita by Swamikumar, Charaka is said to purify speech, mind and body by the precepts of the Vyakarana Mahabhashya, Yogasutra and Charaka Samhita⁹. Though it would be interesting to make a comparative study of these three texts, it is difficult to prove these texts as works of a single author (Patanjali) because of heavier points against it¹⁰. Patanjali name is not mentioned in whole Charaka-Samhita anywhere. There is no similarity in the pattern of mentioning the subject matter and different places mentioned in Mahabhashya are absent in Charaka-Samhita. The reason behind bringing these three texts together may be the similar role in the purification of

body, speech and mind respectively¹¹. Reference of "Patanjal-Vartika" on Charaka-Samhita is available in Patanjali Charita written by Ramachandra Dikshita¹². It also creates confusion that whether Charaka and Patanjali are single authority or two different authorities. In Vedic times, a branch of Krishna Yajurveda was known as Charaka. Charakas were disciples of Vaishampayana who himself was known as Charaka. Charaka might be one of the followers of this section¹³. The branch of Atharvaveda named Vaidyacharana may be related to medicine and Charaka may be a physician belonging to that section who roamed from place to place offering medical services to the people¹⁴. Sylvan Levi on the basis of Chinese translation of Buddhist text (Samyuktaratnapitakasutra) accepted that Charaka was attached as a physician to King Kanishka¹⁵. Julius Jolly, The writer of Indian Medicine writes in his text "Thus chronologically very little can be said against the identification of Charaka with Kanishka's court-physician"¹⁶. Most of the scholars are against with this idea as Charaka was physician of roaming nature and how he could have been bound to a court of a king Kanishka. In ancient time, the famous physicians were named Charaka, so there may be another Charaka as a physician in the court of Kanishka but not the Charaka who redacted the Agnivesha-Tantra.

It is also considered by the scholars that the actual name of Charaka was Kapishtala. Charaka was a resident of Kapishtala village in Panchanada (Punjab) which is situated between Iravati and Chandrabhaga rivers. It is not evidence based because Kapishtala is one of the twelve branches of Charaka out of 86 branches of Yajurveda. Kapishtala was a sage but there is no reference of his relation with Charaka-Samhita or Ayurveda¹⁷. Apart from this the word Charaka is used in different literature in the sense of messenger or Ayurvedic text¹⁸. Charaka word is used in the sense of ranger also in some of the texts. Gradually Charaka was established as sect comprising of wandering medicants who practiced medicine and mentioned along with Shramana, Tirthika and Parivrajaka (roaming ascetics)¹⁹. Alberuni (11th Cent.A.D.), a contemporary of Mahamuda Gajanavi and one of the poets of his court consider Agnivesha and Charaka as a single authority in his writing, but this view is not acceptable because in each and every colophon of the chapters of Charaka-Samhita (Agnivesha krite Tante Charaka pratisanskrite), reveals clearly that Agnivesha was the composer of original text and Charaka was the redactor of the same text and separate personality²⁰. After discussing all the views, it is clear that it is quite difficult to introduce the Charaka exactly, yet on the basis of the opinion of most of the

scholars, it can be assumed that he may be one of the followers of the branch of Krishna Yajurveda.

TIME PERIOD OF CHARAKA

External evidences

Vagbhata (6th century A.D.) has explicitly quoted Charaka²¹. Yagyavalkya Smriti (3rd Cent. A.D.) has taken many things from the Charaka-Samhita such as the concept of Shaddhatvatmaka Purusha, the signs of Paramatman, monthly development of foetus, six layers of skin, 360 bones, five Gyanendriyas, five Karmendriyas, ubhayatmaka Manas etc²². Navanitaka (2nd Cent.A.D.) has quoted many formulae from Charaka-Samhita though mentioning the name of Agnivesha and not of Charaka. Ashvaghosha, the contemporary of Kanishka (1st Cent. A.D.) has also borrowed many things from Charaka Samhita though he has mentioned Atreya and not Charaka. The Charaka-Samhita was translated into Pahlavi language in the early centuries of the Christian era, hence the original text must be quite earlier. Milindpanha (2nd Cent.B.C.) has many things similar to those in the Charaka-Samhita. For instance, the vedana which has got important place in Charaka Samhita has been described in detail in this text. The perception of rasa in contact with gustatory sense organ has been mentioned as the method suggested by Charaka. All this indicates antecedence of Charaka. Although Panini (7th Cent. B.C.) mentioned Charaka but it is in the sense of one of the Yajurvedic tradition and not as the author of Charaka Samhita. Hence Charaka may be placed after Panini (7th Cent. B.C.) and before Milindpanha (2nd Cent.B.C.) e.g. about 3rd-2nd Cent. B.C.²³.

INTERNAL EVIDENCES

Philosophical background- Philosophical material available in Charaka-Samhita indicates its existence before 2nd Cent.A.D. Samkhya philosophy mentioned in Charaka Samhita is the earlier than Samkhya-karika (2nd Cent.A.D). Names of three types of Anumana are not mentioned in Charaka Samhita which are found in Nyayasutra (2nd Cent.A.D)

Religious condition- There is number of references of Puranas which shows their dominance at that time. The Pauranika legend with regard to the origin of certain diseases like- Jwara, Rajyakshma etc. confirm this situation. Similarly sadvrittas mentioned in Charaka-Samhita are based on Dharmasutras.

Political condition-At many places king, Ishvara and Mahajana (rajamatramanyam va) are mentioned. It is also mentioned in Charaka Samhita that quackery becomes prevalent due to slackness of government and epidemics spreads due to negligence of the state. This shows the weak administration of the era. Charaka

Samhita took its shape when Buddhism was developing, Brahmanism was having upper hand. The religious literature was being given concrete shape in the form of Puranas and Sutras and religious sacrifices were commonly performed. Such condition is met with during the period of Maurya-Sungas (3-2nd Cent. B.C.).The description of hospital in Charaka-Samhita also confirms this view because number of dispensaries and hospitals were established during the tenure of King Ashoka. Shakas are mentioned by Patanjali and Vagbhata but not by Charaka, which shows that he was prior to Patanjali and Vagbhata. Thus on the basis of all the evidences, the time period of Charaka may be decided as 3rd or earlier 2nd cent.B.C. at the juncture of Maurya-Shunga periods²⁴.

PLACE OF CHARAKA

Charaka has nowhere mentioned his birth place or place of origin. There is mention of mainly north-west regions of India in Charaka-Samhita, such as- Himalaya²⁵, Panchala Kshetra²⁶, Kailasha²⁷, and Panchanadapura²⁸ etc. On the basis of this fact some of the scholars assume that he may be from north-west region of the India. Because there is no reference of birth place in whole text, so every Historian is silent about this fact. Some believe him to have been born at Benares 320 years B.C. He was the greatest physician of his day, and his Charaka Samhita is still held to be a standard work on Medicine²⁹.

CONTRIBUTION OF CHARAKA

It is very interesting to discuss that no other Samhita is renamed after redaction except Charaka Samhita. Again it is specific to comment upon that after the redaction done by Dridhabala, nomenclature was not changed. It shows that Charaka not only retouch or redact but thoroughly revised the Agnivesha Tantra, elaborated according to need on the basis of prevailing authentic knowledge and gave it new shape and wrote his own treatise. Contribution of Charaka can be decided on the basis of comparison with Bhela Samhita as Bhela was one of the colleagues of Agnivesha and composed treatises on the basis of their teacher's perceptions. So it can be supposed that Agnivesha Tantra may be more or less similar to Bhela-Samhita in size and contents. All the additions and improvements made particularly logical, development of basic concepts and philosophical discourses in the light of Buddhism etc. may go to Charaka's credit. The description of hospital also seems to be from him. The detailed classifications of drugs and pharmacological concepts also owe to him. Such descriptions are lacking in Bhela Samhita³⁰. Dr. Mahamahopadhyaya Satish ChandraVaidyabhushana in his history of Indian logic supposes without adducing any reason that the Charaka-Samhita gives a summary of the principal doctrines of Anvikshiki possibly as

propounded by Medhatithi Gautam. He further says that the doctrines of Anvikshiki evidently did not constitute a part of the original Ayurveda of Punarvasu Atreya, and that these doctrines seems to have been incorporated into Charaka-Samhita by its redactor Charaka in whose time they were widely known and studied³¹. On the basis of this statement it seems that Panchavayava, Vadamargas and Sambhasha Vidhi etc are included by Charaka. Swabhavoparamavada may be added by Charaka as Boddha dharma came into existence after Agnivesha and before Charaka. Description of hospital mentioned in 15th chapter of Sutrasthana of Charaka Samhita may be the idea of Charaka because such types of hospitals were being established at that time by Maurya emperor. Ayurvedavatarana or transmission of Ayurveda mentioned in 1st chapter of Charaka Samhita Sutrasthana may be added by Charaka. Ashtanga division of Ayurveda mentioned in 30th chapter of Sutrasthana of Charaka Samhita also seems added by Charaka on the basis of available edition of Sushruta with minor changes in the names. In other Samhitas, Ashtanga division of Ayurveda is at the very beginning. Varna Vyavastha and Ashrama vyavastha is developed during the period of Purana and Smriti granthas. Charaka stands near that period so may be Charaka included this Varna and Ashrama Vyavastha in the Charaka-Samhita.

CONCLUSION

After the historical study of Charaka, it is quite clear that this great personality in the field of Hindu medicine has not given his introduction anywhere which shows that he was fully concentrate on work and not worried for the name and fame. According to the view of most of the scholars, he may be one of the followers of the branch of Krishna Yajurveda who exists in between the period of 3rd-2nd Cent.B.C. Probably he was from north-west region of the country. The great contribution in the field of Ayurvedic medicine in the form of Charaka Samhita introduces his greatness. He has contributed a lot in the area of medicine specially the fundamental doctrines and unique approaches of treatment which differ him from other authorities of the same field and perhaps it is the cause why Charaka Samhita is considered as the best book for medicine. Even after the period of almost 3000 years, its utility is accepted more than the past years. Many scientists are working on its fundamentals and getting the results as mentioned. So it is the favorite book of the Vaidyas. All this credit goes to Agnivesha, Charaka and Dridhabala but especially to Charaka as he elaborated and renewed the text and gave the shape of Samhita which is more palatable. No doubt he is the great legendary and visionary in the field of Ayurveda

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