

**MANTRA AND YANTRA IN INDIAN MEDICINE AND ALCHEMY****ARION ROSU***Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Paris (France)***Received: 30 September 1987****Accepted: 18 December 1987**

**ABSTRACT:** *This paper was presented at the International Workshop on mantras and ritual diagrams in Hinduism, held in Paris, 21-22 June 1984. The complete text in French, which appeared in the Journal asiatique 1986, p.203, is based upon an analysis of Ayurvedic literature from ancient times down to the present and of numerous Sanskrit sources concerning the specialized sciences: alchemy and iatrochemistry, veterinary medicine as well as agricultural and horticulture techniques.*

Traditional Indian medicine which, like all Indian branches of learning, is connected with the Vedas and him *Atharvaveda* in particular, is a rational medicine. From the time of the first major treatises, those of Caraka and Susruta which may be dated to the beginning of the Christian era, classical Ayurveda has borne witness to its scientific tradition. While Sanskrit medical literature bears the stamp of Vedic speculations regarding physiology, its dependence on Vedic pathology is insignificant and wholly negligible in the case of Vedic therapeutics. The Vedic sources, notably those of the *Atharvaveda*, abound to magico-religious practices (prayers, charms, formulas and amulets), but these occur only rarely in the scholarly documents of the physicians (*vaidya*). Vestiges of his nature mainly resurface in the context of rites of delivery and birth, rejuvenation cures, therapy for poisonous stings and bites, and the treatment of mental and infantile disorders attributed to demonic possession (*Kumaratantra*.)

As bearers of spiritual traditions that drew upon a common Indian world-view, the medical authors could not contemplate the elimination of beliefs that might have been contradictory to their rational approach

possession, were deeply rooted in their consciousness. The presence of these in medical literature is less a result of direct Vedic recollections than of their persistence in the Hindu tradition, a fact to which testify non-medical Sanskrit texts (the Puranas and Tantra) with regard to infantile possession. Scientific doctrines and with one another in the same minds. The general tendency on the part of the *vaidyas* was nevertheless to limit, in their writings, such popular contributions so as to remain doctrines of Ayurveda, limits respected from the time of the classical sources down to modern medical compilations.

The study of the psychophysiological effect of mantric recitation, principally in yogic exercises, contributes to the understanding of the essentially psychosomatic use of sacred formulas and ritual diagrams in Ayurvedic medicine. These *mantras*, or instruments of thought, are applicable to the total man, in both his psychophysical and spiritual dimensions. The practice of this procedure is as much auditive and visual as it is gestural (*mudrai*) and graphic or figurative (*yantra, mandala*). Orientalists have not failed to draw a connection between the device of *mantra-yantra* and psychological introspection, observing as

they have the efficacy of this Indian practice for the reintegration of personality. Scientists have also undertaken physiological investigations of the poorly understood potentialities of *japa*.

The Vedic *mantras*, derived from the Vedas themselves, contain one or several verses, whereas the non-Vedic formulae, proper to Tantrism and inscribed on *yantras*, present appreciable differences. The garland formulae (*mala-mantra*), composed of phrases, become less frequent, whereas the use of phonic seeds (*bija-mantra*) unintelligible syllables whose value is less semantic than symbolic, increases. Among the classifications of such formulae, the *Agnipurana* introduces a threefold division according to gender; noteworthy among these are those termed as feminine (*stri*), which end with the interjection *svaha*, and which are especially employed in medical treatment (*amayadhyamsa*)

Ritual therapeutics continues to persist in modern India where, as anthropological investigations have revealed, medicine is often reduced, especially in the countryside, to an empirical or magical art, *Mantras* and *yantras* are brought into play at delivery, against the bites of poisonous snakes and incases of demonic possession. At the end of the last century, the Bengali *kavirajas* recited, as a means to enhancing the effect of medicines (antidotes, aphrodisiacs, elixirs), the esoterically syllabified formula *om hrim hrim krom* over drugs when they left the Ayurvedic pharmacy. Similar formulae were prescribed for the internal or external application of these remedies.

The present study on *mantras* and *yantras* is limited to the teachings of Ayurveda and related sciences, as these are contained in scholarly Sanskrit texts from antiquity down to the modern age. The medical *mantras*

which assume a number of forms vary-under the twofold influence of, first, the Vedas and then later of Tantrism- from long phrases and relatively concise texts to extremely compact formulae. The Ayurvedic formulae, bereft of any established typology, are not formally derived from the Vedas (even if they are sometimes indirectly inspired by them), but rather from non-medical Hindu sources. In the Tantric sphere, here flourished a rich literature of safeguarding charms called “cuirasses” (*kavaca*) as well as “protections” (*raksa*) or “supports” (*dharani*).

Classical Ayurveda introduces only a few examples of amulets for the newborn child or against the evil spirits that afflict infants with disease. Vagbhata, in the *Astangasamgraha*, gives a description of two *mandalas* of the latter sort. It is not until the 16<sup>th</sup> century that we find another *mandala*, which the compiler of the Ayurvedic section of the *Todarananda* an encyclopedia borrowed, along with certain *mantras*, from the alchemical *Rasarnava*. The earlier *Haritasamhita* contains a ritual diagram for easy childbirth another eutocic *yantra* is described by Vrnda in the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century and later by other compilers of more recent times. This latter diagram represents a magic square, of the order three, which is also found in the Arabic medical literature as early as A. D. 850 (*Paradise of Wisdom*)

Ancient Indian chemistry, known as Rasasastra, concerns, in its positive and classical facet, the chemical arts (pharmacy and metallurgy). On the speculative side it expounds the twofold alchemical quest; the transmutation of metals and the search for the universal medicine, that is at once a panacea and an elixir (*rasayana*). In the ancient period, Rasasastra was subsumed under Ayurveda as empirical pharmacy, in

the middle ages, it becomes a iatrochemistry.

The literary history of this little-studied subject begins before the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and the earliest of its Sanskrit sources (*Rasarnava*, *Rasarnavakalpa* and *Rasendramangala*) are connected with the Tantric textual corpus. Mantras occupy an important place in the medico-magical procedures of the Indian alchemists. The *Rasendracudamani* (12<sup>th</sup> -13<sup>th</sup> century), which describes a *mandala* employed in alchemical initiation rites, glorifies the earlier formulae, drawing in part upon the last book of the *Taittiriyaanyaka*. We encounter the same ritual in the thirteenth – century *Rasaratnasamuccaya*. Prescribed for the consecration of the equipment of an alchemical laboratory, formulae of Tantric resonance intended to insure the acquisition of wonderful powers and success in mercurial operations are recited in the aurifaction process and in order to increase the virtues of drugs (*Anandakanda* and *Rasaratnakara*).

Indian beliefs concerning the animal kingdom are legion; and veterinary practices (on cows, horses and elephants) are not lacking in magico-religious aspects, which reflect Vedic and Puranic sources as much as technical treatises. Very early, formulae were used in a veterinary medicine inspired by Ayurveda, which itself retains some preparations (*arka*) for horses and elephants (*arkaparakasa*).

According to the *Hastayurveda* which treats of elephant medicine (before the 11<sup>th</sup> century), fever is a single disease that afflicts humans and animals as well as plants and even the mineral kingdom. Every remedy, regardless of its directions for use, is to be consecrated by a *mantra*; and one is to accomplish pacificatory rites for every

disease. In the case of poisonous snake bites, elephants too are treated with *mantras*. A similar recipe may be found in the *Asvavaidyaka*, a manual of hippiatry which prescribes for a horse that has been bitten that an incision be made, together with a formula, in order to draw the poison out of the bite. Cows afflicted with excretory disorders (*maladosa*) are to wear bells marked with a formula capable of driving out the disease (*sarngadharapaddhati*)

Employed in human and veterinary medicine, magical formulae also appear in practices regarding the vegetable world. Considered as living creatures, plants have enjoyed since the classical period their own branch of medicine, known as *Vrksayureda*. This art of treating healthy and sick plants, while it quite faithfully follows certain Ayurvedic teachings, is also acquainted with the supernatural; for it too makes use of formulae to protect crops against natural dangers (diseases, inclement weather, noxious animals). This supernatural protection is insured by the recitation of a *mantra*, of which the written text is buried beneath trees (*sarngadharapaddhati*) or placed in the middle of cultivated fields (*Krsiparasara*).

The gathering of medicinal plants is sometimes accompanied by a mantric recitation, to which the ancient Ayurvedic texts allude (*Susrutasamhita*) or which they explicitly describe (*Sarngadharasamhita*). This latter medical treatise (13<sup>th</sup> century) gives an account of magical precautions taken for asparagus (*satavari*), whose ritual picking exemplifies that of all medical plants similar to it.

In connection with certain ancient concepts regarding plant sensitivity, one should mention botanical experiments conducted in South India after Independence to observe

the stimulation influence of musical sounds on the growth of plants. More recent experiments, in the same vein, have sought to discover a beneficial effect, produced in simples, by aerial vibrations emanating from the recitation of formulae, the *gayatri* in particular *Rgveda* (3.62.10).

While their use is limited in scholarly Ayurveda, the *mantras* and *yantras* occupy a preeminent place in a Tantrism which concentrates on corporeal and spiritual techniques, and whose traditions differ markedly from those of the *vaidyas*. These physicians must nevertheless have been somewhat open to certain contributions from Tantric ritualism (formulae and ritual diagrams). So it is that, according to the *Agnipurana*, the life and good health and procure a heavenly abode for mortals, while

the formula *om hrum namo visnave* constitutes the remedy par excellence of the god Visnu-Krsna, under his epithet of Hrsikesa, is necessary to the preparation and administering of drugs.

Indian supernatural therapeutics, which goes back to the Vedas, has its roots in the Indo-European art of healing, which is threefold in its procedures; in its recourse to the surgeon's knife, medicinal plants, and incantations. The curative power of magical formulae, especially when applied to chronic and incurable diseases, remains a iatrocultural reality in India where it was proposed, over a quarter of a century ago, that there be created throughout the country a network of therapeutic centers in which disease would be treated by means of Vedic hymns.

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