

SOME NOTES ON VRKSAYURVEDA****This paper was presented at the Sxith Sanskrit conference in Philadelphia (1984)****RAHUL PETER DAS***Berliner St. 26, 2085 Quickborn, West Germany***Received: 24 July 1985****Accepted: 20 December, 1985****ABSTRACT:** *In this critical study on Vrksayurveda composed by Surapala of 12th century A. D., the author attempts to throw some more light upon arborial medicine.*

The term *ayurveda*, is as is well – known, not an equivalent of “medicine”. As its literal translation “knowledge of life span” implies, it deals ideally with the whole span of life allotted to an individual – in all its aspects. This is the reason why we find much in Ayurvedic works that we would never treat of under the heading of “Medicine”. However, Ayurvedic knowledge is not mere knowledge for knowledge’s sake, but serves a purpose; it aims at permitting the individual to live his full life-span in an optimal way, i.e. in a healthy and fulfilled manner – we could also say, in a ‘normal’ manner. This of course implies preventing or doing away with what is ‘abnormal’, i.e. diseases, disorders and the like, and to this end it is imperative that one study such ‘abnormalities’ and their prevention and remedies. Usually what is abnormal or uncommon tends to be treated more extensively than which is normal or common, as it requires more elucidation than that which is more or less well known through the mere fact of its being normal or common. This of course necessitates, in the case of Ayurveda, a focusing on what we usually term ‘medicine’. But it is good to remember that this is not what Ayurveda is primarily concerned with.

The reason for the foregoing discussions will become obvious once I begin to elaborate on the topic of my paper, for, though medicine does play a role in it, most of it deals with what we would never term “medicine”. Thus, were it not for the afore said, we would probably be at a loss to explain why it came to be subsumed under the term *ayurveda*.

When we speak of Ayurveda, we usually connect it with humans. But Ayurveda applies also to other living beings, for instance to elephants (*Hastyaayurveda*), horses (*Asvayurveda*), other animals and plants (*Vrksayurveda*).

Contrary to what we would expect after the foregoing, Vrksayurveda as rule does not encompass agriculture (“agriculture” is here used to denote the cultivation of crops). Knowledge on this subject is contained in texts whose generic name is variously given in *Krsisastra*, *Krsitantra*, *Sasyaveda*, *Phalaveda* and the like, and usually also dealing with animal husbandry. May be it was because the focus of interest in this case is more the produce than the welfare of that which gives the produce (even though the two are by nature inseparable) that we do not find such works titled “Ayurveda”. It

may be too that agriculture was something the higher classes of society did not usually bother to deal with, which precluded its being given the same sort of attention that Ayurveda usually received. For we do know that the human clients and patients mentioned in Ayurvedic works usually belonged to the upper strata of society, and it is surely no coincidence that we find Ayurvedic works dealing with elephants and horses but not, to my knowledge, with goats and sheep. This is not to deny that ailments of farm animals have been discussed in Krsisastra texts too; this holds good especially for cows, and there seem to have been independent texts such as the now extinct *Goraksasamhita* which we could probably class as Gavayurveda, but then the cow always was something special in India. But whatever the reasons in truth be, it is a fact that Vrksayurveda, in contradistinction to the above – mentioned, was one of the sixty – four branches of knowledge, i.e. a *kala*, which cultured upper – class people in ancient and Mediaeval India were expected to have mastered. It dealt with the laying out and care of gardens and groves can thus best be described as “horticulture” (in India one now seems to prefer “arboi – horticulture”), as can also be perceived from the term *Upavanavinoda*, i.e. “pleasure through or with groves”, that often appears as a synonym of Vrksayurveda. It is of course well known from Sanskrit literature that these gardens and groves usually served as pleasure grounds.

There appears to have been quite a voluminous literature on Vrksayurveda (and probably also on Krsisastra) in India, but for reasons unknown this knowledge more or less died out, and it is only modern times that have seen a revival of interest in this branch of knowledge. Yet research on this subject remains haphazard and uncoordinated, particularly as there is still

no good bibliography of primary and secondary literature on the subject, though there have been recent efforts made in this respect.

While preparing a critical editions and annotated German translation (with copious notes) of the *Vrksayurveda* (this is the title of the work) of Surapala, a Bengali living probably in the latter half of the eleventh or the first half of the twelfth century, I had to cope with the problem of the text’s being extant in only one manuscript which was corrupt or had gaps in quite a few cases. To help me in preparing my edition I set about searching for an, if possible, obtaining copies of editions and manuscripts of texts bearing on Vrksayurveda or containing relevant passages. I have since gone through over a hundred such editions and manuscripts of tens of texts and have also done my utmost to collect all the relevant secondary material on Vrksayurveda and Krsisastra; information on all these supplements my edition. I would like to point out that all information I am giving in this paper is the result of my studies while preparing the edition just mentioned, which is why I have dispensed with exact references and quotations here and beg my readers to consult the edition and its accompanying comments when my work has been published.

As regards the various texts consulted, a great many of these are of course texts dealing with Vrksayurveda or certain aspects of Vrksayurveda. However, hardly any of these deal society with this subject; in fact, Surapala’s text is one of the few dealing solely with Vrksayurveda (in appendices I have also prepared editions of several other unpublished Vrksayurveda texts). But Vrksayurveda has been treated of in several digests and compendiums, e.g. the *Sarnghadharapaddhati*, the

Sivatattvaratnakara and *the Manasollasa* or *Abhilasitarthacintamani*, as well as in various Puranas, and in works such as the *Brhatsamita* and *the Sukraniti*. I found out that much of this literature – including Surapala’s work – seems to consist either of borrowings or quotations or else of paraphrases of older works which are not only on the whole unknown, but will in all probability remain so. Even though we probably have to deal with several traditions and sub – traditions, in fact that these works have much in common can still be utilised to great advantage in the comparative study of these texts and in preparing critical editions.

The subjects Vrksayurveda deals with are often of such a nature that they can be dealt with in texts of a different nature too. Thus there are several passages dealing with the merit of planting trees and gardens (indeed, the planting and raising of a single tree was considered to be equal to begetting and rearing ten sons: *dasaputrasamo drumah.*). It is obvious that this a subject which also falls under the purview of Dharmasastras and allied works, and I have found several passages in Dharmasastra works and Smṛti texts which occur in various Vrksayurveda works including Surapala’s. I have even traced one parallel to the late Vedic *Gobhilaḥgrhyasutra*, which shows that at least some portions of the Vrksayurveda are quite ancient. Then again Vrksayurveda texts contain portions on astronomy, astrology and omens, and I have found parallels in texts dealing primarily with these (including a verse in the *Gargasmhita*, an as yet unpublished work predating the *Brhatsamhita*). Some portions of the Vrksayurveda deal with practices which we today would call ‘peculiar’, and it thus no wonder that a text such as the *Kautukacintamani* too has Vrksayurveda – like passages. Again, since gardens and the like are usually adjoined to palaces or

mansions, it is small wonder that one finds parallels in works on architecture too.

As regards the contents of Vrksayurveda texts in general, I can give only a brief outline here. Apart from giving reasons for making gardens and groves, the texts also describe the merit accruing through these and through planting and raising trees. They also classify plants as auspicious or inauspicious and give details on this and on where certain plants are to be planted or not to be planted. There is usually also a chapter on botanical classification, the usual classification of plants (*padapa*) being *vanaspati* (trees bearing fruit without flowers), *druma* (flowering trees), *lata* (creepers) and *gulma* (shrubs). Conspicuous through their absence are grasses (*trna* and the like), which shows again that it is especially gardens and not agriculture which is the main focus of interest here. Plants are also classified according to their mode of procreation. There is also usually a chapter on different types of soil, their characteristics and for which plants they are best suited, as well as on the signs for the presence of water, so that wells can be dug. There are detailed instructions, often quite elaborate and to us strange, on the preparation of soil, seeds and cuttings, for planting, sowing and transplanting (including the right seasons and auspicious times for doing so), for the care of plants, for the preparation and application of manures, on the means of ensuring good growth and fruits and flowers and for the creation of so-called “marvels”, i.e., changing the natural colour or smell of flowers or the taste of fruits, making plants bear fruits or flowers at times other than the usual, making creepers of plants not usually creepers, making dwarfish trees (the ancient Indians seem to have been well versed in the art of bonsai), making plants bear more than one sort of flower or fruit etc. It is

interesting to note the variety of substances used for nurturing plants: urine, stool, alcohol, milk, sugar, honey, sesame, oil-cake, beans and the like, as well as fish, blood, fat and flesh, not only of animals including cows – at times freshly slaughtered – but also of human corpses; the *Vrksaropanaprakaravyakhya* of Sadasivavyasa, which I have edited as an appendix to Surapala's text, interesting remarks (3, 23) that these corpses belong to those killed by weapons or at the stake.

What is also striking is the fact that plants are regarded as having all the characteristics and attributes of humans and animals including taste, sight, smell, hearing and feeling (cf. e.g. the Mahabharata, critical edition 12, 177, 10 – 18). Due to this we find, in the chapters dealing with plant – diseases and their cure, that these are discussed more or less on the same lines as human disease, including the application of the tridosas – theory. And in the so called *dohada* – passages – *dohada* here is probably to be translated as “intense (sexual) desire or longing” – we are told how plants can be made to flower by means of stimulating their desire – as a rule through embracing, scratching, kicking, kissing and

the like by young maidens, or through songs, music and alcohol.

Included in *Vrksayurveda* are also means, many magical, for warding against rain, hail, etc. and pests such as locusts, worms and so on. We also find discussions on the forecasting of future occurrences through the development of certain plants or crops.

This very brief summary is all that I can present here, but I hope that it will suffice as an introduction to this very interesting field of study and the many avenues of research it opens for us. I may here point out that I have dealt on many aspects of *Vrksayurveda* in far greater detail in my edition of Surapala's *Vrksayurveda*, though I must admit that my researches have shown me that, like in many fields on Indology, the deeper one delves into the matter, the more does one find that is needful of further research and elucidation. As it is, the number of scholars working on *Vrksayurveda* is very small, and studies on this subject would benefit greatly if more researchers combined their efforts in cultivating this fertile field, which is also of relevant for present – day India and its problems.