

BOOK REVIEW

M.S. Valiathan, **The Legacy of Suśruta**, Hyderabad, Orient Longman, pp. xxix + 830, Price Rs. 875.

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The book consists of 87 chapters and an epilogue, arranged in 15 broad topical sections such as “Food and Drink,” “Poisoning,” “Birth and Development of a Human Being,” and “Rules for Healthy Living.” There is a substantial introduction of 34 pages. A pleasing feature of the book is the list of 42 gnomic quotations from Suśruta that capture particular nuggets of ancient medical wisdom and wit. These are given in English translation, and in Sanskrit (both Devanāgarī and romanization). The book contains many helpful tables and lists throughout, and the first half of the book contains several newly-prepared line drawings that illustrate various themes including the surgical instruments and techniques, suturing, bandaging, and bone fractures. The book is completed by an index of botanical names, a glossary of Sanskrit medical terms, and a subject index.

The typesetting is excellent, and the author has used the international standard for the scholarly transliteration of Sanskrit words with care throughout.

It is a pleasure to see a scholar at the height of his professional powers turning to the history of his subject. One thinks immediately of Subrahmanyam Chandrasekhar’s last book *Newton’s Principia for the Common Reader* (1995), in which the great physicist returned to the roots of his discipline. In the book under review, Prof. Valiathan, whose professional career has been dedicated to cardiac surgery, analyses and explains one of the founding works of Indian classical medicine, the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*. Although its relationship to modern medicine is more complex and indirect than that of Newtons’ *Principia* to contemporary physics, it is undeniable that the

Suśrutasamhitā is a world classic in the history of science and medicine. This is the author's second such book: in 2003 his pen gave us *The Legacy of Caraka*, that was widely welcomed by scholars.

The author's introduction provides brief information about the date of the *Suśrutasamhitā* (and a presumed *Suśrutatantra* that preceded it), about the historical survival of some surgical techniques such as rhinoplasty and cataract couching, followed by a general survey of the main themes of the work. Here, and throughout the book, the author stays very close to the original text. Every assertion is footnoted to a particular passage in the *Suśrutasamhitā* itself. It is in these passages that the book is at its strongest. In his preface, the author notes that he has eschewed extensive study of the secondary literature on the *Suśrutasamhitā*, preferring to focus on what *Suśruta* himself had to say. While this is perfectly understandable, and even one of the strengths of the book, it is also somewhat precarious. The *Suśrutasamhitā* is not always clear, even in the original Sanskrit, and many scholars over the years have struggled to do exactly what Prof. Valiathan has attempted: to understand, interpret, and present the work. It is a pity to pay no attention at all to previous labourers in the same field, especially when their findings have advanced the understanding of the work in important ways. And in fact, it is impossible to do so completely. No act of literary interpretation is untainted by presuppositions, and to posit a pure or direct engagement with a text is to suppress an examination of the assumptions and surmises that perforce inhabit our readings and interpretations. In other words, to reject an explicit engagement with secondary literature is to silently embrace beliefs based on some involvement with secondary literature that is undeclared and unstructured, a scattered literature that has been absorbed unconsciously by osmosis over a lifetime. To take an example, when discussing the date of Suśruta, the author cites the opinions of Franz Hessler (*Ayurvédas*, Erlangen, 1844-55) and Theodor Goldstucker (*Pāṇini*, London, 1861). While these nineteenth-century scholars made important contributions for their time, they were also wrong about a lot of things. Major advances in all fields of classical indology have taken place over the last 150 years, and these old scholars can no longer be cited as if nothing new had been discovered since their time. The opinions of heart specialists in 1850 would not be acceptable as the last word on the subject for a cardiologist today. The same applies to the humanities discipline of indology; we simply know much, much more

now than did Hessler and Goldstucker, both about the date of Suśruta and the date of *Pāṇini* (and *Kātyāyana*) on which some arguments for the origin of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā* hang. Furthermore, we are in the fortunate position of having a superb and up-to-date survey of all the research ever published on the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*, the life's work of Prof. Jan Meulenbeld, published as *A History of Indian Medical Literature* (Groningen, 1999-2002). Meulenbeld devotes 400 pages of text and notes to the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*, and every worthwhile argument and opinion between Hessler and today has been summarized, evaluated and placed in context. The appearance of *A History of Indian Medical Literature* has brought about a revolution in the historiography of Indian medicine, and we cannot, and should not wish to, ignore its profound insights, or exclude it from our consideration when writing about the history of Indian medicine.

One of the greatest strengths of the book under review is the fact that the author has read and considered every passage of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā* in the original Sanskrit language, together with its main commentary, the *Nibandhasaṅgraha* of Dalhana. This gives the present work incomparable value, and places it in a category far above most writings on the history of Indian medicine. The authority of the original Sanskrit text of *Suśrutasaṃhitā* shines through on every page of *Legacy*.

The author has made one conspicuous choice of translation that I would disagree with. Amongst the meanings of the Sanskrit word *graha* are both "planet" and "demon." All authorities and dictionaries agree that the latter meaning is appropriate in Sanskrit medical literature (e.g., Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, vol. 2, p. 679 "-11A particular class of evil demons supposed to seize upon children and produce convulsions & c."). This is borne out by a study of *graha* literature in general both in the medical *saṃhitās* themselves and in other parts of medical literature (including the *Rāvaṅkumāratāntra*, *grahaśānti* literature etc.). For whatever reason, there are apparently no Greek loanwords in any of the ancient Sanskrit writings on medicine, with the exception of the word *horā* (Greek ὥρα), at *Suśrutasaṃhitā* 1.32.4, whose significance was discovered by Michio Yano ("Calendar, Astrology, and Astronomy," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, Oxford, 2003, p. 381). In this context, Yano discussed with clarity and authority the knotty issue of the meaning of the word *graha* that occurs in the same sentence as the word *horā*, along with related issues concerning

planetary knowledge in India, and the influence of Greek terminology and calendrical concepts. Except in this passage, and in three others (1.6.19, 6.39.266cd, and *Carakasamhitā* 3.3.4), *graha* always means “demon” in the early medical *samhitās*, as is - it has to be said - plain from the context. Valiathan rightly translates *graha* as “planet” at *Suśrutasaṃhitā* 1.32.4 (*Legacy* p. 230). But in the section XI of *Legacy*, chapters 61-64, “Diseases of Planetary Origin,” we are certainly dealing with demonic possession, not astrological or planetary influence. This is not a particularly long section of the book, but it covers insanity and seizures, topics to which, in my experience, students are strongly attracted, and that will make this section of the book prominent.

Another ayurvedic term that often leads to deeply misleading interpretations is *ārtava*. Valiathan thankfully translates this as “female seed” (Chapter 77). He presents *Suśrutasaṃhitā* accounts of conception very much as the original Sanskrit has it, as the union the woman’s menstrual blood and the man’s semen. The word *ārtava* is so often, and so wrongly, translated by other interpreters as “ovum” in a regrettable attempt to read modern reproductive theory into these ancient texts. With Valiathan, we are on safe ground here.

This is one of the two great virtues of Valiathan’s *Legacy of Suśruta*: on every page, on every topic, it remains very close indeed to the Sanskrit text.

The other virtue lies in Valiathan’s thoughtful rearrangement of the topics of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*. The original text is, if one is honest, a bit of a jumble. Valiathan has tightened and reorganised the topics of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā* and thus provided a treatise that makes sense from one chapter to the next. But he has done this in a subtle manner that somehow still preserves a lot of the original material in its original sequence. Yet, where topics logically belong together, for example the discussion of disease etiologies (*nidāna*) and their therapies (*cikitsā*), he brings them together, where the *Suśrutasaṃhitā* separated them. It is a masterful job, and makes the material of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā* far more accessible.

What books does *Legacy* compete with? There is *Suśrutasaṃhitā (A Scientific Synopsis)* by Priyadarajan Rāy, Hirendra Nath Gupta and Mira Roy (New Delhi, 1980). Although an excellent book that brings together a

great deal of information, *Scientific Synopsis* really does not do the same job as *Legacy*. It is shorter, and although it also summarizes a lot of the material in the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*, it gives no sense at all of the “voice of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*. That voice shines through in Valiathan’s work, which manages to remain much closer in style and arrangement to the original text. And his extensive use of tables to represent Suśruta’s many lists is a model of clarification. Valiathan’s tables are presented in context, i.e., in the place where they occur in Suśruta’s discussions, rather than being separated out as in *Scientific Synopsis*, where they function quite differently as a kind of deracinated audit of substances and categories present in the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*. Valiathan’s work is also a fuller account of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā* than *Scientific Synopsis*, including much philosophical and cultural material that is repressed in the latter work through the valorisation of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā* as ancient Indian science. Deconstructing, or reading against the grain of *Scientific Synopsis*, we perhaps find a text whose eagerness to rescue ancient Indian knowledge for modern science speaks of a deeper discomfort with ancient Indian knowledge in its own right and in its own world. In Valiathan’s work, we find a text that is comfortable in its own skin, that is not striving to change the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*, or to find different knowledges in the work than the knowledge it already has. What a relief. Another competitor, the *Synopsis of Ayurveda, Based on a Translation of the Suśrutasaṃhitā (The Treatise of Suśruta)* by G.D. Singhal and T.J.S. Patterson (Delhi, 1993) is also a fine book in its own way, and a useful shorter *vade mecum* for the student of Suśruta. It is tied to the specific presuppositions and style of Singhal’s translation of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*. Valiathan’s work is, again, fuller, more detailed, and more true to the spirit of the original *Suśrutasaṃhitā*.

The Legacy of Suśruta is a fine achievement, and deserves a place on the shelf of all students of ayurveda. It lets us breath the air of the original text of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*, and opens the work to scrutiny and understanding in a fresh and accessible manner. For anyone who cannot read Sanskrit, or who has not the inclination to wade through turgid, modernizing translations, for anyone who wants to know what the *Suśrutasaṃhitā* says, this is the book. Coupled with background reading, it will be exceptionally valuable as a text for use in courses on ayurveda and on medical history generally.