ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to analyse aspects of ancient Indian society pertaining to the medical profession, illness and healing as reflected in the two medical compendia. The medical treatises, which are the primary sources for this study, represent a growing body of knowledge. The multiple layers in the texts render the task of dating the compendia difficult. Apart from the two main specialised streams of medicine and surgery, there are references to other branches of specialisation.

Physicians ascribe the position of dvijas (twice-born) to themselves in the texts by virtue of formal education and training, and claim a respectable status for their profession which is in contradistinction to the brahmanical law books. The inclusive nature of medical education is noticeable for śūdras can be taught surgery and no distinction is made among students drawn from different varṇas. The system of registration of physicians is also known.

The empirico-rational basis of disease aetiology is central to Āyurveda. Yet the extra-rational perceptions in the texts persist and are generally evident in those diseases that are difficult to treat or inadequately comprehended. Ethical behaviour, ritualistic and magical practices are incorporated as a part of therapeutics. The importance of hygiene and dietetics in recuperation and prevention of disease have been recognised.

Social prejudice towards certain diseases is evident but not in medical therapeutics. The physician could, however, refuse treatment to certain patients. Class and gender bias in treatment is significant, particularly in the choice of medicines and surgical procedures. The absence of a branch of medicine devoted to female diseases points to the marginalisation of women.

The role of assistants in various capacities is significant. Drug management and the trade network in drugs throw up interesting possibilities of research. This study has also investigated role of religion in medicine.

Our texts reveal an open-minded perception of society. Friendliness and compassion towards all is a cornerstone of medical ethics. Physicians do not form a caste group; they regard themselves as members of a professional group guided by professional ethics.