

Review Article

'Swapna' in the Indian classics: Mythology or science?

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Abstract

There are many concepts in *Ayurveda* as well as the ancient sciences that are untouched or unexplored. One such concept is that of the *Swapna* (dreams). Being an abstract phenomenon it makes it difficult to be explained and understood; probably because of this the descriptions related to *Swapna* in the Indian classics are supported by mythology, to make them acceptable. Variations in these explanations are seen according to the objective of the school of thought; that is, in the ancient texts where dreams are used to delve into the knowledge of the *Atman* and are related to spirituality, its description in the *Ayurvedic* texts evolves around the *Sharira and Manas*. Although all these explanations seem to be shrouded in uncertainty and mythology; there definitely seems to be a logical and rational science behind these quotations. They only need research, investigation, and explanation on the basis of logic, and a laboratory.

Key words: Indian classics, mythology, science, *Swapna*, dreams, ayurveda, upanishad.

Introduction

Ayurveda is a science that is completely based on its eternal and consistent principles and concepts. Even with the changing era and modernization these principles have stood their ground. The literature on some of these concepts shows significant similarity with the other oriental ancient texts like the *Vedas*, *Puranaas*, *Darshanas*, and so on. In fact for a detailed understanding of the principles propounded in the *Ayurvedic* texts, the *Acaryas* have also advised the study of these texts. But what if the principles and concepts elaborated in these texts are obscure and mystic? What if these concepts seem to be jaded with mythology giving them a very unscientific and illogical outlook? Could they still be considered worthy of studying, to understand and explore the scientific aspect of *Ayurvedic* principles?

One such concept that has been shrouded with myth and philosophy and is hardly applied and evaluated on a scientific basis is '*Swapna*' or dreams. The description of *Swapna* is found abundantly in the ancient oriental classics, specifically the *AtharvaVeda*, *Upanishadas*, *Puranaas*, *Darshanas*, and *Ayurveda*. However, with the exception of *Ayurveda*, its description in the other texts seems to be more philosophical. A detailed analysis of these descriptions, however, leaves a lingering thought that there could be a strong scientific indication behind this mask of mythology.

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Aims and objectives:

The present study was aimed for compilation of the description of *Swapna* (dreams) in the Indian classics and an in-depth evaluation of these concepts.

Materials and Methods

- Classical texts of *Ayurveda* and the allied Indian sciences were scanned for references regarding dreams.
- These references were compiled, analyzed, and discussed for a thorough and in-depth understanding of the concept of *Swapna*.

Conceptual review

The literature available could be divided into that of the *Vedas*, *Upanishadas*, *Puranas*, *Darshanas*, and *Ayurvedic* scriptures.

Vedas

The earliest Indian reference to dreams is in the *Rg Veda* (4000 or 6000 BC). In this text a nightmare is described; *Rg-Veda* also explains the waking dream, which is mentioned as an evil that wishes to visit one's enemies. Yet another verse tells of an incubus who bewitches a sleeping woman in her dream. References regarding *Swapna* are also available in the *Sama Veda*.^[1]

The significance of the content of the dream was particularly the subject of the sixty-eighth appendix of the *Atharva Veda*, composed in 1500 BC. This text organized dreams with reference to the objective, waking world — for example, according to the physical temperament of the dreamer (i.e., the *Doshika* dominance in the *Prakriti* of the person),^[2] the time of the night the dream took place, and so forth, which was

very much in synchronization with the description of *Swapna* available in the Ayurvedic texts.

Upanishadas

By the time of the *Upanishadas* (700 BC) the question of the reality of dreams was approached in a more systematic way. The *Mandukya Upanishada* spoke of four states of the *Atman*; waking, that is, *Jagrita*, dreaming (*Swapna*), dreamless sleep (*Supta*), and the supernatural, transcendent fourth state, (*Turiya*) the identity with *ParmAtman*. Other *Upanishadas* including the *Manduka*, *Katha*, *Brahma*, *Taitiryopanishada*, *Yogasara*, *Kenopanishada*, *Paingala*, and so on added certain significant details to the outline of these four states mentioned earlier, to emphasize the importance of the soul and to understand its Karma better.

Mandukyopanishada has further given the nomenclature for the *Atma* in each of these stages; *Jagrita*, where the soul is called *Vaisvanara*, is the soul in wakefulness, and it enjoys gross things. *Swapna*, where the soul is *Taijasa*, sunk in its own light in the state of the dream, where it enjoys subtle things. *Sushupta*, where the soul *Prajña*, that is, it inspires man even while he has fallen into deep sleep and he enjoys mere bliss. Lastly *Turiya*, wherein the soul is called *Atma*; it is the pure self conscious soul constituting the four dimensions of metaphysics and enjoys nothing but its own state and is tranquil in its singleness.

As per the description in the *Mandukyopanishada*, the *Taijasa* or *Swapnawastha* is inwardly cognitive, having seven limbs, 19 mouths, enjoying the exquisite (*Pravivikta Bhuja*).

The *Upanishadas* articulate two perspectives on dreams. The first maintains that dreams are merely expressions of inner desires. The second closely resembles the Chinese belief of the soul leaving the body and being guided until awakened. It was also thought that if the sleeper was awakened abruptly, the soul might not return to the body quickly enough and the sleeper could die.

Brihadaranyaka sees no distinction between the *Atma* and the objects seen in the dream and states that the spirit serves as a light for itself.^[3] It states that the *Atma* itself takes the form of the objects in the *Swapna*. In this process when the *Buddhi* is initiated toward seeing the dream, the form taken by the *Buddhi* is also adopted by the *Atma*, as it along with *Buddhi* initiates toward the dream.^[4]

In *Prashnopanishada*, Maharshi Pippalada states that in the *Swapnawastha*, the *JivAtma* along with the *Manas* and *Suksma Indriyas* experiences its glory. Whatever was seen, heard, and experienced by it in the past births, is again seen, heard, and experienced by it in the dream state.

Descriptions of dreams signifying omens are also elaborately available in the *Upanishadas*. *Chhandogya Upanishada* mentions that if rites are performed for the fulfillment of a wish, the seeing of a woman in the dream at such a time is an omen of success.^[5] In the *Brahma Vaivartya Purana*^[6] also *Shubha Swapna* are described. It is enumerated here that seeing of Brahmins, God like men, merchants, Gods guiding the path, the sun, a *Sanyasin*, a *Brahmacharya*, cows, fire, Gurus, elephants, lions, white horses, and so on, implies a good omen.

Puranas

The Hindu Epics and *Puranas* also incorporated into their

narratives many of the traditional dreams analyzed in other philosophical and medical texts. In *Valmiki's Ramayana*, when *Sita* had been stolen by the demon *Ravana* and is being held captive on the island of Lanka, the ogress *Trijita* has such a dream that symbolized the defeat of *Ravana* at the hands of *Rama*.^[7] Likewise the dreams of Bharata symbolizing the death of his father and that seen by Lord *Hanumana* also are described in detail.

In the *Mahabharata* the *Swapna* of the Kurus signifying their defeat at the hands of the *Pandavas* is described.^[8]

Darshanas

All *Astika* as well as *Astika Nastika Darshanas* describe dreams. However, the *Nastika Darshana*, *Charvaka* do not contribute in this aspect.

Kanada defines dream-cognition as the consciousness produced by a particular conjunction of the self with the mind (*Manas*), in co-operation with the subconscious impressions of past experience, like recollection.^[9]

Although, *Prasastapada* describes *Swapna* as, “*Swapnas* are such sensations which are experienced only from the *Manas*, which are similar to those experienced by the external sense organs in the sleeping state when the external sense organs are inactive and the functions of the *Manas* are also declined, that is, it is in a *Pralinawastha*”.

He further states three causes of *Swapna*; first *Samskarapatava*, which includes those objects or people in the environment, experienced during the day. Second, those dreams seen due to *Dhatudusti*, that is, the dreams which are seen due to the *Doshika* dominance in the *Prakrti* of the person. They are again divided into three according to the *Vata*, *Pitta*, and *Kapha Prakrti*. finally the *Adrishta* dreams, which arise from an unseen agency, due to *Dharmadharma*. The phenomenon of *Swapnantika Jñana* ‘dream-end cognitions’, or dreams within dreams are also described here.

The commentators of *Vaisheshika Darshana* namely, *Prashastapada*, *Shridhara*, *Shamkara Misra*, *Shivaditya*, and others, also recognize the central origin of dreams, similar to the original author. Although they hold that certain dreams are produced by organic disorders within the body, they do not recognize the origin of dreams from the external sense-organs. Thus the *Vaisheshikas* and the ancient *Naiyayikas* generally advocate the presentative (i.e., that they are direct and immediate presentations of a definite and determinate character) theory of dreams.

The commentators *Nyaya*, *Bhasarvajna*, and *Keshavamisra* described the dream consciousness to be a kind of false recollection. Jayanta Bhatta seems to regard them as recollections of a past experience, whereas, *Jagadisha* adds that they are also due to the merit and demerits of his actions as well as intra-organic disorders.

Patanjali in the *Yoga Darshana*, also gives the description of *Swapna* when describing *Prasanna Chitta Sthairyopaya*. Texts like *Yoga Vasishtha* denote the whole universe to be a *Swapna*. It states that as the objects that are seen in the dream lie in our *Hridaya*, similarly the objects of the universe lie in the *Hridaya* of *Brahma* who is watching this big dream, that is, the universe,

which is as false as the object seen in the dream.

The commentators on *Yoga Darshana* also state that the *Sakshi* or *Atma* keeps a watch over the dream, arousing mechanism, initiating, and inhibiting it.^[10]

In the *Yogika* physiology, these *Manovaha Srotas* are called the *Manovaha Nadis*. These are described by Dr. B.N. Seal, as “A generic name for the channels, along with centrally initiated presentations (as in dreaming or hallucination) that come to the sixth lobe of the *Manaschakra*.” Here Dr. B.N. Seal further states according to the writers on Yoga and Tantras that, “The *Manovaha Nadi* is the channel of communication of the *Jiva* with the *Manaschakra* at the base of the brain. It has been stated that the sensory currents are brought to the sensory ganglia along different nerves of the special senses. However, this is not sufficient for them to rise to the level of discriminative consciousness (*Savikalpajnana*). A communication must now be established between the *Jiva* (in the *Sahasrara Cakra*, upper cerebrum) and the sensory currents received at the *Manas*, and this is done by means of the *Manovaha Nadi*. When the sensations are centrally initiated, as in dreams and hallucinations, a special *Nadi* (*Swapnavaha Nadi*), which appears to be only a branch of the *Manovaha Nadi*, serves as the channel of communication from the *Jiva* (soul) to the *Manas*.” These *Manovaha Nadis* are termed as *Swapnavaha Nadis* by *Shamkara Misra*.

In *Yogvasishtha* again, detailed descriptions of dreams that are seen due to *Shlesma Atma*, that is, when the *Atma* enters the channels which are filled with *Shlesma* and *Rasadi*, *Annarasa* are available.^[11] Furthermore, dreams that are caused due to all three *Doshas* (*Sannipata*) and activated by *Vayu* are also described in *Yogvasishtha*. These dreams seem to be more destructive and represent a more disturbed psyche.^[12]

Again descriptions of dreams wherein the *Annarasa* is vitiated by *Mani*, *Mantra*, *Aushadha*, and so on, are also seen in the above-mentioned text.^[13] This cosmic mind acts in the cosmic world in a similar manner as the individual *Manas* acts in the personal life of an individual. The seven stages of the cosmic mind are described in *Yogvasishtha*, two of which are *Swapna Jagara* and *Jagrt* *Swapna*.

The *Mimamsakas* also recognize the representative character of dreams. *Kumarila Bhatta*, *Parthasarathimisra*, and so forth, support this theory. *Prabhakara* regards the presentative character of dreams, but adds the theory of obscuration of memory (*Smritipramosha*).

Literature on the *Advaita Vedanta* also describes dreams, but shows difference in opinions as compared to the *Nyaya Vaisesika* and their explanation of dream cognition.^[14]

Vedanta Darshana also accepts the terminology ‘*Taijasa*’ for the *Rajayukta Atma*, which experiences the dream. Here particularly the *Taijasa* experiences mental states dependant on the predisposition left by the waking experiences. In this state the soul fashions its own world in the imagining of the dreams.

Shamkara has also commented on the representative theory of dreams in *Shamkara Bhashya*.^[15] Accepting this theory he states *Swapna* exists according to the nature of recollection. However, his follower *Dharmarajadhvarindra*, advocates the presentative theory.

The *Bauddha* texts also carry descriptions of the several significant dreams seen by Lord Gautam Buddha before his enlightenment, and these were corroborated by the dreams of his father and wife on the night before his departure from the palace.^[16] Again the descriptions of the dreams of Emperor *Ashoka* in relation to his son *Kunala*,^[17] also feature in the later *Buddhist* texts.

The interpretation of dreams to enlighten a king was a recurrent *Buddhist* motif. In a Kashmiri text that contains many dream adventures, a *Buddhist* monk interprets a king’s dream in order to convert him.^[18] Another *Buddhist* treatise “The questions of King Milinda” also gives an elaborate explanation of *Swapna*.

Ayurvedic texts

The *Brihatrayi*, that is, *Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, and *Ashtanga Samgraha*, along with *Astanga Hridaya* has mentioned *Swapna*. Even as each treatise has mentioned its importance as the *Purvarupa*, *Rupam* and as *Arishta Lakshanas*; *Susruta* has described specific dreams denoting the sex of the unborn child; and along with both the *Vagbhata*s has mentioned it for assessing the *Doshika Prakrti*. *Charakacharya* who has given an in-depth description of the *Purusha* or *Atma*, has also described *Swapna* as its *Linga*. He also states that the absence of *Vaikrita Swapna* is an indication of health, similar to the description among the *Vikaropashamana Lakshanas*, according to *Sushruta*. *Swapnas* have also been described by the other *Acharyas* like *Sushruta* and *Sharangdhara*, as an omen, that is, *Su-Swapna* and *Duh-Swapna*, hinting toward recovery or the *Vyadhi Utpatti* or death stage, respectively. The regimen followed in case of a *Duh-Swapna* is also described.

Other books of the same time period like *Bhela* and *Harita Samhita* have also given the description of *Swapna*, especially in the context of *Prakrti*, *Purvarupa*, and *Arista Lakshana*. In fact in the *Harita Samhita* a whole chapter ‘*Swapnadhyaya*’ is devoted to the description of dreams.

A considerable description of *Swapna*, specifically in the mother, denoted the health of the child, is also seen in the *Kasyapa Samhita*. In the other texts like *Bhavaprakasha*, *Swapna* is described in the *Garbhaprakarana*, signifying the gender of the fetus, in relation to *Prakriti* and so on. In *Madhava Nidana* the description of *Swapna* is only pertaining to the *Purvarupa* of *Rajayakshma*.

Observations

1. The concept of *Swapna* is elaborately explained in the Indian classics.
2. The description of *Swapna* is more pronounced in the *Vedic*, *Upanishadic*, and *Darshanic* literature, as well as in the *Ayurvedic* literature of the *Samhita Kala*. Later the description of *Swapna* in the *Ayurvedic* and the allied texts decreased and very less description is found in the texts other than the *Brhatrayi* and *Laghutrayi*.
3. Although this literature in the ancient classics was written thousands of years ago, it seems to be scientific in explanation even when compared to modern science, if analyzed and interpreted in depth.
4. The description of *Swapna* in various texts differs in terms of the outlook or the angle of analysis on the part of the intellectual scholars. Hence the description of *Swapna* is observed to be in accordance with the theory propounded

by the scholars of that *Darshanas*. For example *Vedanta* described the world as an illusion as if in a dream, *Vaisheshika* exhibited the *Pañchabhautika* influence by stating the *Dhatudushti Janya Swapna*, and the like.

5. The listing of dreams as *Rupa*, *Purvarupa*, *Arishta*, *Su-Swapna*, *Duh-Swapna*, and so on, however, at times, seems to be lacking in logical explanation.

Discussion

In the Indian as well as the western ancient traditions, the available theories of *Swapna* are entwined with religion and mythology; wherein, they are considered to be premonitions or messages sent by God. However, these theories, if evaluated scientifically, show a strong hint of psychotherapy, which had only been modified to easily convince the less educated god-fearing people. The social condition at that time may have been such that science enveloped in religion and mythology was accepted better than science in its bare form.

The *Vedas*, *Upanishadas*, and *Puranas* elaborated tales of dreams related to the Gods and renowned men to underline the importance of dreams, especially as premonitions. All the same, dreams were ably used to prove the existence of metaphysical subjects like *Atma* or the illusionary aspect of the materialistic world, to the common man. Its somatic relevance was also equally highlighted, as in the *AtharvaVeda*, where dreams are described according to their *Doshika* dominancy.

The descriptions of the *Dosika* dreams of the *Atharvaveda* or *Yogavasishttha* is similar to that in *Ayurveda*. However, the physiology described by *Yogavasishttha* that of the *Atma* entering the *Vatika* and so on, *Dosika Srotas* due to which dreams are seen, seem to be a bit different to the other texts. *Ayurveda* emphasizes on the *Atma*, *Manas*, and the *Manovaha Srotas*. *Acarya Caraka* has stated that the *Srotas* through which the *Manas* and *Dosha* travel are the same and all-pervading in the *Chetana Sharira*, that is, in the presence of *Atma*.^[19] The vitiated *Doṣa* hence tends to block the *Manovaha Srotas*. In the living body, the conjunction of the *Atma* and *Manas* is inevitable, hence in the *Swapnawastha* the *Manas* loses association with the external *Indriyas* and bonds with the *Atma*. Here it seems that *Manas* is only replaced by *Atma* in the *Yogavasishttha*, as they both lie in close association.

The *Vedas*, which mainly focus on the social ethics, values, norms, and spirituality, probably meant to portray the futility of seeing a day dream, by engaging in which the person only wastes time, hence it is described as an evil.

From the above it can be inferred that the description in the *Atharva Veda* was primarily concerned with the subjective symbolism of dreams, or rather, with the objective results of subjective contents. Although ancient, its approach and description about dreams in relation to *Doshas* and the like, are very similar to the later medical texts of *Ayurveda* and are in synchronization with the physiological *Gunas* and *Karmas* of the *Doshas*.

The impact of the physical constituents of the body and the effect of the *Ahara* and the *Vihara* on dreams is highlighted by *Yogavasishttha*. It has described the dreams caused due to the impact of the *Ahara Rasa* vitiated by *Mani*, *Mantra*, and

Aushadha. It also underlines the impact of the *Shabda Tanmatra* on the *Panchabhautika Sharira*, which is a principle, which acts not only in the pathology, but also in treatment modalities like *Sattvajanya* and *Daivavyapashraya*.

The stages of the *Atman* described by the *Mandukyopanisada* including *Swapna*, not only represents the condition of the *Atman*, but of the person as a whole. The person exists in these four stages itself, throughout the sustenance of *Ayu*; and the other three factors, that is, *Sarira*, *Sattva*, and *Indriya* also play a role in the causation of three of these stages, except *Turiya*.

The importance given to the *Atman* in the process of dreaming by the ancient texts is similar to the opinions of the modern psychiatrists like Velappand and Carl Jung, who identified dreams as an interaction between the unconscious and the conscious. They also assert together that the unconscious is the dominant force of the dream.

These omens depict good or bad and their interpretation changes in the *Ayurvedic* as well as other ancient texts, with change of tradition, culture, and place. It is actually the combination of natural symbols, cultural restrictions, and the values of the author of the texts, which determines whether a particular dream will be interpreted as protending good or evil for the dreamer. For example, the texts on *Ayurveda* are primarily health-oriented and those of the *Buddhist* and philosophical texts are primarily *Moksha* oriented. To an impressive degree, they agree on what people dream about, but they often differ about whether the dream protends good or evil. The *Puranas* especially derive interpretations based on the situation of the dreamer.

The descriptions of dreams as good and bad omens may be the manifestation of the mental status of the person, but on the whole do not show much relevance or any scientific reasoning behind the specifications of these omens. It could probably be a list of dreams, which were seen in an exhaustive mass survey.

The *Charvaka* has not described *Swapna* as elaborately as in the other *Darshanas*, probably because only *Pratyaksa Pramana* is accepted by them; whereas, *Swapna* cognition and analyses requires *Anumana Pramana*.

The description of dreams in the *Buddhist* texts reflect the actual *Buddhist* practice, other sources corroborate the tradition that *Buddhists* converted many Indian kings by a combination of public debate, private counseling, and a kind of primitive psychoanalysis, of which interpretation of dreams played a major part.

Conclusions

The descriptions of *Swapna* in the ancient texts including *Ayurveda* reflect an in-depth and methodical study. Some of the conclusions derived by the *Acharyas* in relation to *Swapna*, especially the listing of dreams according to omens and so on, seem to be derived from the analysis of physiology and pathology or a mass survey. The descriptions are given a mythological presentation only to be easily accepted by people of all intellectual gradients. Further in-depth evaluation of these descriptions could open more doors to the understanding of the physiology, pathology, and the utility of dreams.

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हिन्दी सारांश

भारतीय साहित्य में स्वप्न –कल्पना या विज्ञान भी ?

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आयुर्वेद में तथा पुरातन साहित्य में ऐसे बहुत सारे विषय हैं जिनपर अभी तक विचार नहीं हुआ है, या बिना अन्वेषण के रहे हैं। ऐसा ही एक विषय है स्वप्न। यह एक ऐसी घटना है जो दुर्विज्ञेय रहने के कारण समझने तथा समझाने में कठिन होती है। जिनके कारण भारतीय साहित्य में सपनों के सम्बन्ध में उन्हे जन समुदाय में अपनाने योग्य बनाने के लिए पौराणिक कथाओं का आधार लेना पड़ा। इनके स्पष्टीकरण में विचारों की वैभिन्यता के कारण विविधता पाई गई है। वैदिक तथा उपनिषद साहित्य, जो आध्यात्म से सम्बन्ध रखते हैं, उनमें स्वप्नों का वर्णन आत्मा तत्व को समझाने के लिए किया जाता है; इसी स्वप्न की आयुर्वेद साहित्य में व्याख्या शरीर और मन के प्राकृत-वैकृत कर्मों के आधार पर की गयी है। यद्यपि ये सभी व्याख्याएँ अनिश्चितता तथा पौराणिक कथाओं व कल्पनाओं पर आधारित लगती हैं, फिर भी इन उद्धरणों के पीछे निश्चित रूप से तर्कशास्त्र तथा विवेक विज्ञान का व्यवहार लगता है। इसलिए जरूरी है कि तर्कशास्त्र तथा प्रयोगशाला के आधारपर इस विषय पर अनुसन्धान तथा सूक्ष्म विश्लेषण करते रहना चाहिए। ऐसा ही प्रयास इस अध्ययन में किया गया है जहाँ वास्तविकता पर प्रकाश डाला गया है।