

A Literary Review on Vedic Serpent Mythologies and its Cultural Semantics Reflected in Indigenous Medical Texts in Sri Lanka

D. L. Perera
PGIAR, University of Kelaniya
danister@mobitelnet.lk

The serpent is a universal symbol in mythologies that prevail in all civilizations and folklore throughout the world from prehistoric times. Vedic cosmological legends describe the sacred mythical serpent icons and the heavenly genesis of nectar (*amrita*) and venom (*visha*) in the war between the gods and demons (*Sura-asura*) where with the help of the great celestial serpent (*vasuki*) a churning of the ocean of milk took place. In this study the main objective is to understand roots of Vedic mythologies fabricated in indigenous medical literature and demonstrate its cultural semantics reflected in such literary sources. Baseline data were collected from authentic ancient medical textbooks written in Sinhala and unpublished sources like palm-leaf manuscripts and handwritten documents. Several semi-structured interviews with indigenous snakebite healers were conducted for data verification and data analysis was completely based on textual references published by anthropologists or historians related to scholarly works on Vedic literature and proto-Indo-European mythology. Anthropological knowledge, attitudes and practices of indigenous medicine is mostly a cultural repertory embedded in belief systems which have been influenced by Indian Ayurveda as a medical science. In indigenous medical literature this influence is reflected in many ways and Ayurvedic fundamentals and basic theories, in turn, are included in the Sri Lankan tradition. Findings of this study show that the Vedic mythology has a direct influence on indigenous medical lore in description of primordial serpent venom, origin of celestial serpents, effect of venom, classification of cobra, mythical recites, rituals, beliefs etc. Ethos related to deities and divine powers administered in snake venom treatment processes are also acculturated from Vedic legends. Epistemology and cultural traits of Vedic serpent mythologies reflected in indigenous medical literature can be found in community belief systems as well.

Key words: *Vedic mythologies, Serpent, Indigenous medical literature, Cultural semantics*