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Review Article

Holistic Healing in the Rigveda

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Abstract

Background

The Rigveda presents health as holistic harmony of body, mind, environment and cosmic order. It asserts that wellbeing results from the integration of physical, mental, ethical and natural dimensions into a holistic model of health. Medical humanities recognize lived experience of the people, meaning and context. It also focuses on how culture, emotion, narrative and social conditions shape illness. The objective of the study was to explore parallels between Rigvedic healing and medical humanities.

Materials and Methods

The research employs a qualitative approach and examines narrative review of primary text and relevant scholarly research articles as secondary text.

Results

Both models present health as multidimensional. Both include biological, psychological, social, environmental factors. Both emphasize meaning, ethics, lived experience. Differences appear in reliance on cosmic order versus clinical evidence.

Conclusion

Both models support holistic understanding of illness. However, the Rigveda does not introduce clinical application whereas medical humanities do.

Keywords: *Cultural context, Holistic health, Illness experience, Rigveda, Medical humanities*

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Introduction

The Rigveda presents healing as the outcome of harmony among body, mind, environment and cosmic order (rta). However, medical humanities focus on human emotion, culture and social relation for the treatment of illness. Both models go beyond biological model of treatment as prescribed by modern medicine. Scholar related to both approaches centralize this multidimensional view. Moving beyond biological condition, Byron Good defines illness as a system of meaning. It arises as a lived experience. Cultural beliefs, personal interpretations and social context shape it. It is not only a biological condition [1]. Cecil Helman argues that beliefs, traditions and norms shape cultural patterns that determine how health and disease are understood [2]. This research draws firsthand material from the translation of Jamison and Brereton. They present illness as disturbance within an integrated system and healing as restoration through herbs, ritual practice and ethical alignment [3]. Nancy Scheper-Hughes argues that social conditions such as poverty, violence and inequality shape pain, illness and distress and express them physically in the body as fatigue, illness and chronic suffering [4]. Didier Fassin notes that health depends on moral values and political systems that decide who gets care and resources [5]. Veena Das shows that daily life, relationships and social interactions shape illness [6]. Thomas Csordas argues that people experience the world through their bodies [7]. Judith Farquhar asserts that culture shapes how people understand illness and healing [8]. Anne Harrington traces that healing involves both mind and body [9]. Mark Nichter explores that People's social environment, including family, community and cultural norms shape their health behavior [10]. Ronald Frankenberg analyzes that society shapes how people define and understand illness [11]. Deborah Lupton shows that health is connected to social life and emotions [12]. These perspectives show clinical relevance and advocate for patient-centered care. They focus both psychosomatic and psychiatric practices, informing cultural competence in treatment. A gap remains in existing literature, with few studies examining Rigvedic healing models and medical humanities. Systematic comparison is lacking and this review examines parallels between Rigvedic healing models and medical humanities. It evaluates shared atten-

tion to experience, meaning, and context and assesses relevance for contemporary medical practice.

Materials and Methods

This research employs a qualitative comparative approach to examine concepts of healing in the Rigveda and contemporary medical humanities. This looks at the ideas of healing in the Rigveda and what people are saying about it in humanities today. The main source of information is the translation of the Rigveda by Jamison and Brereton. The study pays attention to the parts of the Rigveda that talk about healing like the use of herbs, rituals and divine healers. It also looks at the idea of rta. How is it connected to healing? The parts of the Rigveda chosen for this review are those that address health and illness and how to restore balance. The other sources used for this review are books and articles from experts in humanities, medical anthropology and the history of medicine. Only the sources that talk about health and the experience of being sick were used. Sources that do not have anything to do with health or medicine were not included. The study uses an analysis to look at the themes in the Rigveda and how they relate to ideas in medical humanities. The parts of the Rigveda that are relevant to healing were grouped into themes like holistic health and ritual healing. These themes were then compared to ideas in humanities using theories like Engels biopsychosocial model and Kleinman's ideas about illness. The comparison shows how the ideas in the Rigveda are similar to or different from the ideas in humanities and how they might be useful for holistic healthcare today. The study of the Rigveda and humanities shows that the Rigveda has some valuable ideas about healing that are still relevant today. The concepts of healing in the Rigveda can help us understand more, about healthcare and how to take care of our bodies and minds.

Results

From the review, there were six major themes that both the Rigveda and the medical humanities share: the research focuses on the holistic health model. In both cases, health is viewed as a multidimensional process rather than the absence of disease. It highlights herbal and natural medicine. While the Rigveda discusses the use of plants for treatment, particularly in the Aus-



hadhi Sukta, the medical humanities recognize the cultural value of traditional healing methods. It shows the connection between the mind and the body. In both paradigms, it is recognized that psychological disorders affect health and recovery from illnesses. It unveils the importance of rituals and healing processes. While the Rigveda employs ritualistic and mantric elements for healing, the medical humanities focus on the narrative aspects of healing, meaning, and patients' experiences. It also examines ethics and social responsibility. In both cases, the ethics of behavior is associated with health, but in the case of the Rigveda, it is related to the principle of *rta*, while in medical humanities, it focuses on social justice. Both models advocate integrated approaches that include biological, psychological, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions, although they differ in their explanatory foundations and methods of validation. All these thematic issues are discussed in detail in the following discussion section.

Discussion

The Rigveda defines health as a holistic balance of body, mind, environment and cosmic order (*rta*). Health is not viewed as the absence of disease. Rather it holds that an individual is healthy when aligned with internal stability and external order. Healing is closely linked with *rta*, the principle of universal order. This principle governs nature and life. If a person gets success to adopt this order, he/she can have healthy life. Disease occurs when one disrupts biological, psychological and cosmic balance. This disruption may result from environmental factors, spiritual imbalance or deviation from natural harmony. The Rigveda describes healing herbs as life-restoring forces that remove disease and restore harmony within the individual and nature [3]. The scripture does not focus on the elimination of a specific pathology, rather it stresses the need of restoration balance. Realignment of natural, ritual and spiritual means helps to approach illness. Thus, it emphasizes the holistic concept in which mind, body and environment get connected. This understanding aligns with George Engel's biopsychosocial model as he explains that health results from the interaction of biological, psychological and social factors rather than a single cause [13]. Similarly, Margaret Lock emphasizes that environmental and cultural conditions shape biological processes. She re-

inforces the idea that health cannot be reduced to purely physiological mechanisms [14].

The Rigveda presents herbal medicine to cure illness and protect life. Plants like *soma* (sacred plant) and *kusa* (a type of grass) are used as life-sustaining and disease-removing agents. The *Aushadhi Sukta* (RV 10.97) praises medicinal herbs as forces that cure illness, promote vitality, protect life [3]. Plants, physical remedies, are connected with sacred and cosmic energies. The text believes that herbs restore harmony by removing symptoms. Dominik Wujastyk asserts that early Indian medical traditions highlight plant-based remedies within broader framework of restoring health [15]. This insight aligns with phytotherapy, natural substances supporting well-being.

The text presents a mind-body relationship that focuses on the connection of mental, physical and cosmic states. Disorder in the body results from disturbance in thought, intention and emotional state. Ritual practices and mantras perform roles as healing agents for physical recovery. They calm down mind and restore psychological balance. Hymns to **Ashvins** (twin divine healers) are preached for the restoration of both bodily function and well-being while invocations to **Soma** (a sacred plant) promote vitality and clarity. The *Rigveda* describes that **Soma** generates strength, clarity and renewed life. It shows that healing involves balance between body and mind [3]. The scripture advocates for the transformation of consciousness alongside physical recovery. It introduces a holistic framework for the treatment of illness through mental and existential balance. This insight parallels Arthur Kleinman's view that illness involves both bodily and experiential dimensions, requiring attention to psychological and social factors in healing [16].

The scripture highlights ritual action and sacred speech as healing processes. Mantras are viewed as healing agents to restore order and remove illness. Ritual creates a setting in which the patient, the healer and the universal order are brought into harmony for healing to occur. The Rigveda describes sacred utterance as driving away disease and restoring the afflicted person to health, indicating the curative power of mantra in healing practices [3].

This insight emphasizes that treatment of illness can be done based on belief, meaning and social context apart from medicine. Mir-



cea Eliade notes that healing involves symbolic and spiritual transformation beyond physical processes [17]. The scripture assures that healing depends on cultural acceptance of ritual authority and shared belief systems in addition to psychological reassurance and communal participation. The scripture anticipates a holistic framework that promotes the treatment of illness through both material and non-material means. In the text, divine agencies perform their role as healer, protector and preserver. Deities actively remove illness and restore balance. The **Ashwins**, divine healers, restore sight, enable movement, and protect lives. Their acts go beyond clinical interventions, symbolically referring to the restoration of order and wholeness. Similarly, **Soma**, a sacralized medicinal force, grants vitality, clarity and renewal. It helps to transform both consciousness physical entity. The scripture attributes curative power to divine forces that remove disorder and sustain life [3]. Divine forces do not replace material remedies. Recovery involves the alignment between the individual and the cosmic order. It treats healing as physical and symbolic entity rather than biological phenomena. Margaret Lock explains that biological, environmental, and cultural conditions shape health, showing that healing operates across multiple dimensions [14].

The scripture defines healing from ethical point of view. The ethical framework is based on duty, responsibility and rightful conduct. The order of *ṛta* governs the guidelines of care. It asserts that discipline action is must in order to maintain harmony. If a person acts against truth and moral order, imbalance occurs. Hymns to Varuna teach moral accountability to establish order in life not deviating from truth. The Rigveda presents Varuna as releasing individuals from wrongdoing and restoring them to order when they acknowledge and correct their actions, indicating that ethical realignment is essential for well-being [3]. If person does not maintain ethical balance, he/she suffers from illness. Hence illness is not the only cause of physical disruption. Purification is another key force of ethics to drive away imbalance in life. **Agni** (fire) acts as a purifying agent to remove impurity and restore order. The ethic of healing requires purification, correction and renewal rather than technical treatment alone. Care reflects maintain harmony with natural and cosmic forces. This concept focuses on the integration of morality with heal-

ing practice, together with responsibility on the individual to conform to established norms. Paul Farmer argues that structural inequalities determine both illness and access to care, emphasizing that health is shaped by systems of power rather than individual factors alone [18].

The Rigvedic framework presents healing as an ethical process shaped by duty, responsibility and alignment with a broader order. The text presents health as an outcome of the integration of biological, psychological and social-cosmic dimensions. Herbs and natural materials address physical conditions. Intention, clarity and emotional balance influence vitality. Ritual practices incorporate social dimensions. Shared norms, correct performance and joint participation strengthen healing. *Ṛta* governs all these elements to sustain holistic healing approach. The Rigveda presents Agni as a force that removes impurity and restores order, indicating that healing involves purification and renewal across multiple dimensions [3]. The scripture asserts that biology alone is not self-sufficient to understand illness. Understanding cosmology and ritual authority are essential factors to physical dimension for the treatment of illness. Healing involves coordinated responses across these levels. Nikolas Rose argues that modern understandings of life and health extend beyond biological processes to include social, cultural and regulatory influences. He further shows that health is shaped through multiple interconnected domains rather than a single dimension [19]. Medical humanities focus on the patient's experience, emotion, feeling, cultural context and ethical care. Herbs, ritual practices, moral order, and cosmic alignment (*ṛta*) are constituents for the treatment of illness in the rigveda. Medical humanities and Rigveda go beyond biological model. Both approaches focus on the proper balance of body and mind, whereas modern medicine emphasizes only body and treats patient as an object. Modern medicine underscores disease whereas medical humanities and Rigveda highlight illness. They encourage holistic approach, going beyond physical symptoms. For example, Hymns to Varuna attribute disorder to moral imbalance, suggesting that suffering arises from a cosmic and ethical order. Rigveda asking for release from inherited wrongdoing and from one's own actions, presenting healing as a process of moral renewal [3].

In the text, psychological and social dimensions



of care are addressed through ritual practices. Both medical humanities and the text recognize interaction among body, mind and community in order to carry out healing process smoothly. Rigveda emphasizes herbal remedies aligns with modern phytotherapy and pharmacology. It also focuses on mental states that correspond to the current psychiatric treatment of the patient who suffer from stress and emotional disorder. It views illness beyond pathology and considers ethical responsibility and cultural context in care. However, it depends on ritual authority and divine intervention for healing, limiting the role of direct clinical application. Modern medicine depends on empirical evidence and scientific validation. Yet, as Rita Charon argues that illness unfolds in stories and effective care requires attention to the meanings patients assign to their suffering [20], highlighting that healing cannot be reduced to biological processes alone. Rigveda enriches healing at the level of experience, ethics and holistic care.

If examined critically, The Rigveda presents health as an integration of body, mind, society and cosmic order. Modern medicine recognizes multidimensional models for the treatment. Psychosomatic medicine and psychiatry can be seen as multi-models of the modern medicine. Psychiatry deals with stress, anxiety and emotional imbalance. This parallels the Vedic attention to mental and moral conditions in the experience of illness. Arthur Kleinman argues that illness must be understood as a lived experience shaped by cultural and social meanings, not merely as biological dysfunction [7]. His view supports the broader interpretive framework seen in the Rigveda. The treatment approaches described in the Rigveda hold limited yet meaningful relevance to modern medicine when examined critically. The text presents health as an integration of bodily processes, mental states, social relations, and cosmic order. Modern biomedicine now recognizes similar multidimensional models in fields such as psychosomatic medicine and psychiatry. Stress, anxiety, and emotional imbalance influence physiological outcomes. This reflects the Vedic attention to mental and moral conditions in the experience of illness. Modern pharmacology and phytotherapy owe to the herbal medicines practiced in the Rigveda. Both medical humanities and the *Rigveda* recognize illness as more than a physical condition. Each approach attends to

subjective experience, emotional state, and social context. Their explanatory frameworks differ. Modern medicine relies on clinical science. The Rigveda employs moral and cosmic order. A point of correlation appears at the level of structure. Both approaches link illness to conditions beyond the body. The Rigveda locates this in moral order. Modern medicine locates this in social and environmental factors. Each view extends illness beyond biological mechanisms. Margaret Lock cautions that linking illness too closely to moral or cultural explanations can obscure structural inequalities and lead to unintended stigmatization [14]. This highlights a key limitation in applying Vedic frameworks directly to modern clinical contexts.

Conclusion

Both the Rigveda and medical humanities recognize multidimensional models of illness. They go beyond physical treatment for the betterment of the patients. They look into emotional, social and environmental dimensions for healing. The narrative form in medical humanities and ritual in Rigvedic practices are analogous. They focus on holistic approach, showing interdependence between body and mind. Both school of thoughts emphasize the role of external factors such as ethics, morality and social issues. They also focus on the experience of the patients. They share parallel structure for illness. Medical humanities and the Rigveda converge in viewing illness as a multidimensional experience shaped by body, mind, and social context. Both models support a holistic approach to healing that integrates meaning, experience, and interconnected dimensions of care.

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