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The Concept of Parturition in Vedic Literature: An Analysis of Ṛgveda 5.78.7–9

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Abstract

Vedic literature contains several references to human reproduction, pregnancy, fetal development, and childbirth, although these subjects have received comparatively less attention than ritual and philosophical themes. Ṛgveda 5.78 is particularly significant in this context. Attributed to Saptavadhri Ātreya and addressed to the Aśvins, the hymn consists of nine *ṛks*, of which the final three (5.78.7–9) present a prayer concerning the safe emergence of a mature fetus. Sāyaṇa designates these three verses as the *Garbhasrāviṇī Upaniṣad*. The present paper examines the concept of parturition expressed in these verses, with particular attention to the terms *garbha*, *daśamāśya*, *jarāyu*, and *garbhasrāva*, and compares their meanings with corresponding concepts in Ayurvedic literature. The imagery of wind moving a lotus is considered in relation to the Ayurvedic association of *vāta* with movement and parturition. The reference to a ten-month gestational period and the use of *jarāyu* also reveal significant conceptual and terminological parallels with later Ayurvedic literature. The paper further examines the apparent semantic difficulty in Sāyaṇa's designation *Garbhasrāviṇī*, since *garbhasrāva* is generally used in Ayurveda in the sense of abortion or premature loss of the fetus. The study argues that the Ṛgvedic passage is better understood as a prayer for safe parturition rather than as a description of abortion. It also distinguishes this passage from the *Garbhopaniṣad* of the Atharvavedic tradition, which is primarily concerned with fetal development. The study concludes that Ṛgveda 5.78.7–9 is an important source for examining early Vedic conceptions of childbirth and the semantic history of terms subsequently employed in Ayurvedic obstetrics.

Keywords: Ṛgveda, parturition, childbirth, *garbha*, *jarāyu*, *daśamāśya*, *vāta*, Ayurveda, Sāyaṇa, Vedic medicine

1. Introduction

The Ṛgveda is an important source for understanding the religious, ritual, linguistic, social, and intellectual traditions of early India. In addition to hymns concerned with deities and ritual practices, it preserves observations concerning human life and the natural world. References to pregnancy and childbirth are particularly valuable because they provide glimpses into early Indian perceptions of reproduction and the difficulties associated with parturition. Ṛgveda 5.78 is noteworthy in this regard. The hymn is attributed to Saptavadhri Ātreya and its deity is the Aśvins. It contains nine *ṛks*. The first part of the hymn concerns the invocation of the Aśvins and the rescue of the seer, while the final three verses employ explicit imagery of pregnancy and childbirth. Sāyaṇa identifies these three verses as the *Garbhasrāviṇī Upaniṣad*. The present study focuses primarily on Ṛgveda 5.78.7–9 and examines how parturition is represented in these verses. Particular attention is given to the expressions *daśamāśya* (“of ten months”), *jarāyu*, *garbha*, and the terminology associated with the emergence of the fetus. The discussion also considers parallels with Ayurvedic literature, while avoiding the assumption that the fully developed Ayurvedic medical system can simply be projected backward onto the Ṛgveda.

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2. Context of Ṛgveda 5.78

Understanding the final three verses requires brief consideration of the preceding portion of the hymn. The first three *ṛks* invoke the Aśvins to the Soma sacrifice and request their favour and prosperity. The fourth verse refers to the assistance provided by the Aśvins to Atri in the *ṛbīsa*, understood as a difficult or deep place.

The fifth *ṛk* is particularly relevant:

vi jihīṣva anaspate yoniḥ sūṣyantyā iva |

śrutam me aśvinā havam saptavadhrim ca muñcatam ||

The verse invokes the *anaspati* or “lord of the forest” and asks it to open like the womb of a woman who is about to give birth. The Aśvins are then requested to hear the seer's invocation and release Saptavadhri.

This imagery of opening, release, and emergence provides an important connection with the final three verses. Thus, the references to childbirth in 5.78.7–9 need not be regarded as an isolated insertion; rather, they form part of the broader imagery of confinement and release present in the hymn.

3. Ṛgveda 5.78.7: Movement of the Fetus

The seventh *ṛk* states:

yathā vātaḥ puṣkariṇīm samīṅgayati sarvataḥ |

eva te garbha ejatu niraitu daśamāsyah ||

“Just as the wind moves the lotus in the lotus-pond on every side, so may your ten-month-old fetus move and come forth.”

The verse employs a natural phenomenon as a simile for parturition. The movement of the lotus is attributed to the wind, and this movement is compared with the movement of the fetus before its emergence from the womb. The expression *daśamāsyah* is significant. It indicates a fetus that has completed ten months. The verse therefore appears to refer to a mature pregnancy rather than premature expulsion. The verb *ejatu* indicates movement, while *niraitu* expresses the act of coming forth or emerging.

The image is especially noteworthy because the process of birth is conceptualized through movement. The fetus is not merely described as being expelled; it is represented as moving and emerging in a manner comparable to a natural object set in motion by wind.

This observation invites comparison with Ayurveda, in which *vāta* is associated with movement and plays an important role in the process of parturition. The comparison, however, should be regarded as conceptual rather than as evidence that the Ṛgvedic verse directly expresses the later Ayurvedic theory of the *doṣas*.

4. Ṛgveda 5.78.8: The Fetus and Jarāyu

The eighth *ṛk* continues:

yathā vāto yathā vanaṁ yathā samudra ejati |

evā tvaṁ daśamāsyah sahāvehi jarāyunaḥ ||

“As the wind, as the forest/trees, and as the ocean move, so may you, O ten-month-old one, come forth together with the *jarāyu*.”

The verse expands the imagery of movement through three comparisons: wind, forest or trees, and ocean. The fetus is addressed directly and is instructed or encouraged to come forth together with the *jarāyu*. The word *jarāyu* is particularly important. In later Ayurvedic literature it is employed in relation to the fetal covering or placenta. Its occurrence in Ṛgveda 5.78.8 therefore represents an important early occurrence of terminology that later acquires technical significance in medical literature.

At the same time, semantic caution is necessary. A Vedic term and its later Ayurvedic technical meaning cannot automatically be assumed to be identical in every respect. Nevertheless, the context of the verse clearly associates *jarāyu* with the process of birth and with the fetus at the time of its emergence. This provides a significant basis for comparative study.

5. Ṛgveda 5.78.9: Safe Delivery of Mother and Child

The ninth *ṛk* states:

daśa māsaṁ śaśayānaḥ kumāro adhi mātari |

niraitu jīvo akṣato jīvaḥ jīvantyāḥ adhi ||

“May the child, having lain in the mother for ten months, come forth alive and unharmed from the living mother.”

The verse expresses a clear concern for successful childbirth. Three aspects are especially significant. First, the child is said to have remained in the mother's womb for ten months. Second, the child is described as *jīva*, “alive.” Third, the term *akṣata*, “unharmed” or “uninjured,” expresses the wish that the child should emerge physically intact. The mother is likewise described as *jīvanti*, “living.” Thus, the prayer is concerned with the survival and safety of both mother and child. This is significant because it indicates an awareness of the risks associated with childbirth. The prayer seeks not simply the birth of the child but a successful delivery in which both participants survive. The use of *kumāra* also indicates that the desired child is male. This may reflect the social importance attached to male offspring in the cultural context represented by the verse. However, this particular reference should not be generalized into a comprehensive statement about all Vedic attitudes toward gender.

6. Ten-Month Gestation and Ayurvedic Parallels

The repeated reference to ten months in Ṛgveda 5.78.7 and 5.78.9 is one of the most significant features of the passage. The Vedic expression *daśamāsyah* corresponds broadly to the concept of a mature gestational period.

Ayurvedic literature similarly discusses the appropriate period for childbirth. The *Aṣṭāṅgharḍaya* recognizes a range of eight to twelve months as the natural period (*prākṛtakāla*) for delivery. The Vedic reference to ten months consequently falls within the later Ayurvedic understanding of the normal period of gestation.

This parallel is noteworthy, but it should not be interpreted as proof of a direct textual relationship. Rather, it suggests a continuity of interest in the duration of pregnancy and the

identification of a normal period for delivery within Sanskrit intellectual traditions.

The expression *daśamāsyā* is therefore important both linguistically and historically. It demonstrates that the conception of a ten-month gestational period has an early Vedic attestation.

7. The Lotus Simile and Vāta

The simile in 5.78.7 deserves particular consideration: *yathā vātaḥ puṣkariṇīm samīṅgayati sarvataḥ*. The wind causes movement in the lotus-bearing pond, and this natural movement is compared with the movement of the fetus. In Ayurveda, *vāta* is fundamentally associated with movement and is particularly important in physiological processes involving propulsion and downward movement. The comparison becomes especially interesting in the context of parturition. Ayurvedic descriptions of childbirth associate the downward movement of the fetus with *vāta*. The Vedic verse does not present a developed medical theory, but its use of wind as the causal principle of movement creates a striking conceptual parallel.

The simile can therefore be regarded as an early poetic representation of physiological movement. It demonstrates how an observable natural process was used to explain or conceptualize an internal biological process.

8. The Semantic Problem of Garbhasrāva

Sāyaṇa's designation of R̥gveda 5.78.7–9 as the *Garbhasrāviṇī Upaniṣad* raises an important philological question. In later Ayurvedic terminology, *garbhasrāva* generally refers to abortion or premature loss of the fetus. The three *ṛks* under consideration, however, apparently concern the delivery of a fully developed fetus.

The literal formation may be understood as *garbhasya srāvaḥ*, “the flowing out or coming forth of the fetus.” From a purely etymological standpoint, such an expression need not necessarily imply pathological or premature expulsion. A fetus may also “come forth” at the completion of gestation.

The difficulty arises because *garbhasrāva* becomes a technical term in Ayurveda with a more restricted meaning. The chronological relationship between the Vedic passage, Sāyaṇa's commentary, and the later medical terminology must therefore be taken into account.

One possible explanation is that Sāyaṇa uses *Garbhasrāviṇī* according to the literal sense of the expression rather than according to the later specialized medical meaning of *garbhasrāva*. If so, the designation can be understood in relation to the “coming forth of the fetus” rather than abortion.

This issue illustrates the importance of distinguishing between etymological meaning, contextual meaning, and technical meaning when studying Sanskrit terminology across different textual traditions.

9. Relation to the Garbhopeniṣad

The passage discussed here should not be confused with the *Garbhopeniṣad* associated with the Atharvavedic tradition, particularly the Paippalāda textual tradition.

The two texts differ substantially in their subject matter. The *Garbhopeniṣad* is principally concerned with fetal development and describes the condition of the fetus during the successive stages of pregnancy. R̥gveda 5.78.7–9, by contrast, is concerned primarily with the final stage of pregnancy and the emergence of the fetus.

The distinction may therefore be expressed simply: the *Garbhopeniṣad* focuses primarily on intrauterine development, whereas R̥gveda 5.78.7–9 focuses on parturition and safe delivery.

Consequently, similarity in the terms *garbha* and *upaniṣad* should not be taken as evidence of textual identity or direct relationship between the two traditions.

10. Parturition as Prayer Rather Than Medical Description

It is important to characterize the three *ṛks* appropriately. They should not be described without qualification as a “scientific description” of childbirth. Their immediate form and function are poetic and prayerful.

The verses seek divine or ritual assistance for the safe movement and emergence of the fetus. Their observations about gestation, fetal movement, *jarāyu*, and maternal and fetal survival nevertheless preserve information that is relevant to the history of Indian medical thought.

The distinction between medical description and ritual-poetic representation of physiological experience is therefore important. The value of these verses lies precisely in the fact that they demonstrate how physiological processes could be represented through ritual prayer and natural imagery in early Vedic literature.

11. Alternative Interpretation: Release and Rebirth

Although the literal context strongly supports an interpretation related to childbirth, the larger structure of R̥gveda 5.78 permits a further possibility.

The hymn repeatedly employs the ideas of confinement, opening, release, movement, and emergence. The Aśvins are invoked to rescue Saptavadhri, and the imagery of the opening womb appears in 5.78.5. Against this background, the language of childbirth in the final verses may also carry a metaphorical dimension.

The emergence of the fetus could potentially parallel the release or rescue of the seer. The language may thus operate at two levels: the literal level of parturition and the symbolic level of liberation or renewed life.

This interpretation requires a detailed study of the entire hymn and its commentarial and comparative traditions. It should therefore be treated as a possibility for further research rather than as a definitive interpretation of the three verses.

12. Conclusion

R̥gveda 5.78.7–9 provides an important early textual representation of pregnancy and parturition. The three

verses describe the movement and emergence of a mature fetus, refer to a ten-month gestational period, mention the *jarāyu*, and express a strong concern for the survival and physical safety of both mother and child.

Several aspects of the passage invite comparison with Ayurveda. The ten-month period corresponds broadly with later Ayurvedic discussions of the natural period of delivery. The term *jarāyu* has an important parallel in Ayurvedic obstetrical terminology, while the association of wind with movement may be compared with the role assigned to *vāta* in later medical thought. These parallels are significant for the history of ideas but should not be interpreted as evidence that the systematic Ayurvedic theory was already present in the *Rgveda*.

The designation *Garbhasrāviṇī Upaniṣad* given by Sāyaṇa presents a particularly interesting semantic problem. Since later Ayurvedic usage generally associates *garbhasrāva* with abortion or premature fetal loss, its application to verses apparently concerned with normal delivery requires explanation. A plausible interpretation is that Sāyaṇa employed the expression in its literal sense of the “coming forth of the fetus,” rather than in the later technical sense of abortion.

The passage should also be distinguished from the *Garbhopeniṣad*, which primarily concerns fetal development. *Rgveda* 5.78.7–9 is instead concerned with the process and safe outcome of parturition.

Ultimately, these verses are best understood as a Vedic prayer for safe childbirth that preserves significant observations concerning gestation, fetal movement, and delivery. Their importance extends beyond Vedic ritual studies to Sanskrit philology, the history of medicine, Ayurveda, and the study of early Indian ideas concerning reproduction and human life. The possibility that the language of childbirth also symbolizes the rescue or rebirth of Saptavadhri provides an additional interpretative dimension worthy of further investigation.

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