

Letters to Editor

Life and times of Sushruta: Fact and fiction

Dear Sir,

Sushruta, the father of Indian surgery is generally believed to have lived around 600 BC [Figure 1]. However he has puzzled scholars regarding the period when he lived and practiced, with opinions ranging from 1000 BC to 1000 AD. According to Indian mythology he was the son of sage Viswamitra and a disciple of Dhanvantari, Divodasa Kasi Raja.^[1]

The ancient Indian epic, Ramayana tell us about the Sage Viswamitra and his relationship with Ram and his brothers. The chronology of the epic is placed somewhere in 1800 BC, so if Sushruta was actually the son of the sage then he lived far earlier to the times he is commonly associated with. Another misleading aspect comes from his own treatise, the Sushruta Samhita, in which he mentions Lord Krishna who is described vividly in the Mahabharata, another Indian epic which is dated somewhere in the 1300 BC. So it is possible that Sushruta was of the race of Viswamitra as represented in the Mahabharata – Anushasan Parva chapter 4.

Mythology takes us through the history of medicine in India. Brahma, the creator of the universe knew the basis of Avurveda through meditation and passed it to Daksha Prajapati, who in turn taught it to the Ashwini brothers.



Figure 1: Sushruta: a surgical genius of the ancient India

Lord Indra learned it from the Ashwini brothers and passed it to many sages including Sage Bharadwaj (Guru of Atreya) and the King Divodasa Kasi Raja (Lord Dhanwantari). Sushruta, approached Dhanwantari to accept him as his disciple. Under him Sushruta learned the basis of Ayurveda with special emphasis on Salya (surgery) and this is supposed to have happened in the Upanishadic age. After this, he started writing the Sushruta Samhita while teaching in the Benaras University, situated by the river Ganges in north India.^[2]

Nagarjuna's Upayahrdaya (500 BC) refers to Sushruta and this takes him to a period before him which was around 2000 yrs ago. Further he is mentioned in both Mahabhasya of Patanjali and the Varttika of Katyayana. No other Sushruta is known except the medical writer who was the propagator of salyantana. Hoernle places Sushruta at about 600 BC as he counts only 300 bones in the body and on this ground, Hoernle believes him to have lived before Atreya and Yajnavalkya and thus taking him to somewhere around 600 BC.^[3]

Also Johnston–Saint opined that the linguistic style of Sushruta belonged to the period of Buddha in 600 BC.^[4] However, Wise contended that the ancient form of Sanskrit used in the Sushruta Samhita was prevalent in the ninth century.^[5] The Bower manuscript, which was unearthed in the 1890 is probably the most authentic document of ancient India was studied carefully by Hoernle and placed its origin to around 500 BC.^[3] The fact that Sushruta's name is mentioned in it puts him in a period of between 600 and 800 BC.

In summary the figure 600 BC often mentioned in western literature as the life and times of Sushruta is more empirical than historical. It is quite possible that his actual time predates it by many centuries.

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Letters to Editor

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