

HEALTH AND HYGIENE IN MEDIEVAL ANDHRA AND THE REMONSTRATION BY VEMANA

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ABSTRACT

Vemana the revolutionary poet of medieval Andhra travelled throughout Andhra observing the social customs and traditions. He warned the society against superstitious beliefs and customs with regard to health and hygiene as in the case of other social evils and tried to divert the society into right path through his natural and easy flow of verses in a simple language. He noticed that the people were not able to understand the scientific way of treatment prescribed in the medical texts and were blindly following the irrational traditional methods which were full of misunderstandings and superstitious notions. He warned the people that this kind of trend in the field of medicine was very harmful and advocated that the diagnosis and treatment should be done in a scientific way.

Vemana opposed the miraculous powers which are ascribed to the mineral drugs and *rasausadhas*. He preached that those powers are impossible to be achieved and should be regarded as mere superstitions which would cause harm to the science of medicine and to the society. He refuted the use of lovepotions which was a common practice especially among the womenfolk. He propagated that the people who took these medicines would definitely fall ill and die on account of the unhygienic ingredients. In many of his verses, Vemana stressed the importance of taking well-balanced diet. He also preached some other fundamental things essential for everybody to maintain one's own health. He suggests that the physicians should treat the patients with compassion and mentions that the physicians who dedicated their lives for social service would become free from *karma* and attain salvation. Thus the references from the verses of Vemana not only reveal his knowledge in medicine but also give a glimpse into the beliefs, customs and practices with regard to the maintenance of health hygiene and healing art of the people in the then society.

Under the rule of Kakatiya, Reddy and Vijayanagara Kings, medieval Andhra region became famous as an abode of learning and prosperity. If the history of this period is observed keeping in view the royal court and the cultural development, it seems to be regarded as a golden period. At the same time, it seems to be an age of confusion and chaos

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in the context of common man's life in the *janapadas*. There are several causes for this contradiction. Especially it was a period which witnessed a wide gulf between the intellectual high caste and the illiterate low caste people. The 'three-crore deities' and many village goddesses were driven on to the society by the preceptors and Pīṭhādhipatis of the former class and the Gaṇācāryas of the latter class respectively. Just as the pious social principles had disappeared and the mean and narrow religious traditions took their roots in the society, many irrational practices had developed in the field of medicine also. It was at this time that Vemana, the great social reformer started his remonstrations against all the social evils. He travelled throughout Andhra observing the social customs and traditions and repudiating in sharp terms what he had considered not proper. He warned the society against superstitious beliefs and customs and tried to divert the society into the right path with his natural and fluent verses in a simple language. He can be regarded not only as a great social reformer, a prophet or a great humanist but also as a revolutionary poet who inaugurated the revolutionary form of poetry in Telugu literature.

In medieval Andhra many books were written in Ayurveda; not only the books on medicine but the general literary works of the period reveal the scholarship of the court poets in the science of medicine. The common people also were proficient in the art of healing for their petty diseases with the knowledge gained out of previous experience. But many superstitious customs had crept into this traditional system of treatment. Vemana noticed that the people were not able to understand the scientific way of treatment and were blindly following the irrational methods and their knowledge gained out of their experience was full of misunderstandings and superstitious notions. He warned the people that this kind of trend in the field of medicine was very harmful and advocated that the diagnosis and treatment should be done in a scientific way.¹

Some ancient Indian physicians with the aim of highlighting the virtues of some medicines relating to *kāyacikitsā* and *rasāyana* tantra, ascribed miraculous powers to them.² Some people misunderstood it and tried to get *kāyasiddhi*, *adrśyakaraṇi*, *ākāśagamana*, *kāmarūpa* etc. It seems that they wandered in the forests eating leaves and roots, so that they could discover those herbs and get those extraordinary powers. Vemana refuted these and conveyed the people that these were impossible things to be achieved and should be regarded

as merely superstitions which would cause harm to the science of medicine and to the society.³

According to Vemana, both living creatures and the medicines consisted of *Ṣaḍdhātus*.⁴ He tried to prove the fact that it is irrational to think that one mortal thing can make another an immortal.

He expressed similar opinion with regard to the mineral drugs. A mineral known as '*Kāntalōha*' occupied an important place in the medical field. It is a good *rasāyana* medicine. About it the *tantrics* say : Kartavyam mantra ucyate. Amṛtodbhavāya svāhā ityanena lohamāraṇam.⁵

If the purification and calcination were done with the *mantra*, the *Kāntabhasma* would become equal to that of nectar. Another drug known as *Kāntasindūra* is the best one among the *rasāyana* medicines. It alleviates all the physical diseases and promises long life. And it was believed that it was an aphrodisiac drug and would not allow old age to enter into one's life who used this medicine. This kind of propaganda to the *rasāyana* medicines led to the common belief that the intake of *rasāyana* medicines would result in getting super powers. In this context Vemana said that '*Kāntasindūra*' cures only the diseases which happened due to the imbalance of *vāta* and *pitta* and could promise neither long life nor evergreen youth. In a verse he revealed the nature of power one would get with the intake of mineral drugs thus : Ukku sunnamu dina nuḷugunu kaṣṭamul. Ukku sunnamu dina nuḷugu kaṣayayu. Ukku sunnamu dina nuḷugunā Karmamul⁶

The mineral drugs alleviate the body from pains and tiresomeness. They cure the diseases like *rājayakṣma*, *uraḷkaṣata*, anemia and strengthen the body, but cannot remove the fate of the human beings. One should realise the fact that birth and death are natural in this world and one cannot escape from them. The philosophy of Vemana implied in this verse is that births and deaths cannot be removed by the medicines, but can be removed by the destruction of *karma*. It can be achieved only by the real knowledge i.e. the realisation that the world is impermanent.

In the same way as in the case of mineral drugs, some scholars in the science of medicine had attributed great powers to the *rasāyana* medicines. They said that by the use of *rasāyana* medicines, one could get the power of making miracles⁷ Some writers of the medical texts in

the medieval period wrote that if one took in the *rasāyana* medicine with the *mantras* (prescribed)⁸, he would be free from old age and would live for 10,000 years and after that he would get divinity⁹. In this way many miraculous things were ascribed to the *rasāyana* medicines. Vemana ridiculed the physicians who were misled by these and tried to educate the people thus in the following verse:¹⁰ Rasamu gandhakambu mesavi devatalaina, svargamela vere janamulāra, bhuvini vaidyula gani divi vaidyulelvaro.

In those days *rasavāda* or alchemy was very popular and it seems that many people tried to transmute the other basic metals into gold. Vemana ridiculed the people who were engaged in this pursuit and preached that it was impossible to be achieved.¹¹

Vādamañjari and Nāgārjunatantra mentioned many *tantras* to achieve *suvarṇa tantra*. Many people who followed these tried in many ways to make gold but did not succeed in that. On seeing these, Vemana felt pity for the ignorance of the people. He said in a verse thus:¹¹ Uppu cintapanḍu nūrūra nuṇḍaṅga hemamunaku neḷturellajanulu.

He opined that people require salt and soup and not gold to survive in this world. He wondered why the people took pains to get gold while salt and tamarind were available in every village.

Philters were very much popular and in vogue in medieval Andhra-desa¹². Some prostitutes and maidens had great belief in these love potions which were intended to impart sex attractiveness. They used to employ these potions through food or drink in various forms such as powder, oil, paste etc.¹³. In the making of the paste of this kind, the sweat of the particular lady was also mixed¹⁴. It seems that some housewives who were neglected by their husbands used to employ this kind of medicines on their husbands. Vemana abhorred these practices as evil and dangerous. He remonstrated that the people who ate these medicines would definitely fall ill and die on account of the unhygienic ingredients of those medicines.¹⁵

The practice of worshipping deities to ward off epidemic diseases was very much common in those days.¹⁶ Vemana mentioned in a verse that sheep were sacrificed to Ammavāru (goddess) to ward off cattle diseases such as *domma*, *pāru* etc. He abused these inhuman activities

and ridiculed the people that they would do such things with the intention of eating those animals on the pretext of a sacrifice to the goddess.¹⁷ In his opinion, insects would cause the disease in the plants and trees. Likewise, animals also fall ill on account of the attack of some germs and insects. Hence Vemana made it clear that this kind of diseases of animals and plants should be cured with the help of medicines and pesticides respectively.¹⁸

People believed that physical diseases were to be cured by Yoga which would promote self-control and self-concentration. Vemana supported this and propagated that the exercises would give strength to the body and mind, lustre to the skin and promote mental and physical health.¹⁹ But these are, in his opinion, not useful to get *mokṣa* as some people believe. In another verse he said that one could never get *mokṣa* merely by the physical exercises.²⁰ He gave primary importance to self-concentration through right and proper knowledge and secondary to that of physical exercises.

In many of his verses Vemana laid stress on the importance and necessity of well-balanced food for every living being to get strength and lustre. He explained that the food which was pleasing in appearance and alluring to the person would act as a nectar²¹ whereas the food with opposite qualities would act like a poison.²² Excessive intake of food would lead to death and lack of it also equally would effect the body. The food is capable of both giving life and killing a person.²³

Vemana abhorred in sharp terms the intake of food without ghee and curry.²⁴ He advocated the use of milk as diet because milk is an aphrodisiac and a good nutrient.²⁵

Vemana denied the habit of strict fasting.²⁶ If the digestive fire is not supplied with food, it destroys (digests) the *mala* present in the intestines, resulting in the fasting person enjoying the *mala* instead of food.²⁷

According to legendary references, Vemana was said to have gained knowledge in the art of alchemy, but failed to get *swarṇasiddhi*. Though he failed in it he gained knowledge in the art of healing and propagated the principles of health and hygiene in the society. He mentioned that the physicians who would serve the patients without expecting any reward would be free from *karma* and attain salvation in the end.²⁸

Vemana is a unique reformer who observed the truths of life in a proper perspective and in all aspects. He repudiated the evil customs and advocated the rational outlook

Thus the reference from the verses of Vemana not only reveal his knowledge in medicine but also give a glimpse into the beliefs, customs and practices with regard to the maintenance of health, hygiene and healing art of the people in the then society. He led a remonstrance against the superstitions in this field and advocated the importance of social service and humanitarian outlook needed in the medical ground. This kind of remonstrance is necessary even in the present society to educate the common-folk and to instigate the physicians to cultivate humanitarian outlook.

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सारांश

मध्यकालीन आंध्र में स्वास्थ्य एवं स्वस्थवृत्त और वेगना का प्रतिवाद

पि. हेमवती

मध्यकालीन आंध्र के क्रान्तिकारी कवि वेमना ने सम्पूर्ण आंध्र प्रान्त का भ्रमण किया और स्वास्थ्य एवं स्वस्थवृत्त के सम्बन्ध में अंधविश्वासी धारणाओं तथा प्रथाओं के विरोध में, अन्य सामाजिक बुराइयों की तरह, समाज को चेतावनी दी और समाज को सही मार्ग की ओर अपने स्वाभाविक, प्रवाही तथा सरल कविता द्वारा बदल दिया। उन्होंने यह देखा कि जनता वैद्यक ग्रन्थों में विहित वैज्ञानिक चिकित्सा पद्धतियों का समझने में अशक्त थे और गलत फहमी और अंध विश्वासी धारणाओं से पूर्ण विवेकहीन सांप्रदायिक पद्धतियों का अनुसरण कर रहे थे। फिर से चेतवनी देते हुए उन्होंने लोगों का मार्गदर्शन करते हुए यह प्रचार किया कि चिकित्सा के सम्बन्ध में लोगों का यह दृष्टिकोण हानिकारक होता है, अतः वैज्ञानिक पद्धति ही अपनायी जाए।

वेमना ने खनिज द्रव्यों एवं रसौषधियों के द्वारा असाधारण सिद्धियों की प्राप्ति का विरोध किया, उन्होंने यह बोध किया कि इन सिद्धियों की प्राप्ति असम्भव है और इन्हें केवल अंध विश्वास ही समझना चाहिए जो चिकित्सा विज्ञान तथा समाज को हानिकारक हो सकती है। साधारण जनता विशेषतः स्त्रियों में प्रचलित प्रेम औषधी (वशीकरणयोग) के उपयोग का भी उन्होंने खंडन किया। उन्होंने प्रचार किया कि इन औषधियों का उपयोग करनेवाले व्यक्ति अवश्य व्याधिग्रस्त होंगे और स्वास्थ्य नाशक घटकों के कारण उनकी मृत्यु होगी। अपनी बहुत से कविताओं में वेमना ने संतुलित आहार का ग्रहण करने पर बल दिया। उन्होंने प्रत्येक व्यक्ति के स्वास्थ्य की रक्षा के लिए आवश्यक मौलिक विषयों का प्रचार किया, उन्होंने सुझाव दिया कि वैद्य रोगियों की चिकित्सा सहानुभूति के साथ करे और कहा कि जो चिकित्सक सामाजिक सेवा के लिए अपने जीवन का समर्पण करते हैं वे कर्म से वियुक्त होकर मोक्ष को प्राप्त करते हैं। इस प्रकार वेमना की कविताओं के संदर्भ न केवल वैद्यक ज्ञान को ही प्रकट करते हैं अपितु तत्कालीन समाज की जनता में स्वास्थ्य, स्वस्थवृत्त तथा चिकित्सा कला के सम्बन्ध में प्रचलित विश्वासों, प्रथाओं और पद्धतियों की झलक देते हैं।