

METHODS OF STERILIZATION AND SEX-DETERMINATION
IN THE *ATHARVA-VEDA* AND IN THE *BṚHAD-
ĀRAṆYAKOPANIṢAD*

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The *Atharva-veda* and the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* refer to some surgical methods and certain herbal drugs, as well as some dietary preparations for the sterilization of man and woman and also for ensuring the birth of a child of a particular sex and endowed with faculties according to one's desire.

In the context of population problem birth-control has become a theme of topical interest in many countries, particularly in India. It is, therefore, intriguing to know that in the *Atharva-veda* and in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* one comes across with many verses and passages suggesting methods for sterilization and sex-determination. The origins of these two works (i.e., *Atharva-veda* and *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*) may be traced to a date not later than eighth century B.C.

I

STERILIZATION

In the *Atharva-veda* some mechanical and surgical devices have been described with a view to preventing conception. This appears, however, rather too crude to be considered at the present time. Besides these surgical appliances this treatise also prescribes some medicinal herbs for the sterilization of the males and females.

In the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*¹ some semi-psychological processes also have been described for the same purpose.

(i) Sterilization by methods of operation:

The *Atharva-veda* expresses in some hymns the idea of surgical methods of sterilization of both males and females.

The following hymns furnish this idea thus:

Male :

(a) *Ānṛtyataḥ śikhāṇḍīno gandharvasyapsarāpateḥ
Bhinadmi muṣkāvapi yāmi śepaḥ.*²

‘Of the hither-dancing crested Gandharva Apsaras-lord, I split thy testicles, I bind fast the member.’

This verse clearly describes an operation for sterilization in which the testicles are split and the *śepa*, the male organ, is bound fast. But the details are wanting.

(b) *Ye te nāḍyau devakṛte yaostiṣṭhati vṛṣṇyam*
*Te te bhīnadmi śamyayāmuṣyā adhi muṣkayoḥ.*³

‘The two channels, fashioned by the gods in which man’s power rests in thy testicles . . . I break them with a peg (club).’

Here the operation of two channels holding the vital fluid is suggested clearly.

(c) *Yathā naḍam kaśipune striyo’bhīnantyaśmanā*
*Eva bhīnadmi te śepo’amuṣyā adhi muṣkayoḥ.*⁴

‘As women break reeds for a mattress with a stone thus do I split thy member.’

Here the operation of the testicles with a sharp-edged stone (*aśman*) is suggested.

(d) *Klībaṃ kṛdhyoपाśīnamatho kurīriṇam*
*Athasyendro grāvabhyāmubhe bhīnattvāṇḍau.*⁵

‘Turn him into a eunuch that wears his hair dressed, and into one that wears a hood. Then Indra with a pair of stones shall split his testicles.’

Here the means of operation is stated as pressing the testicles between a pair of stones (*grāvabhyām*).

From all the methods described in the *Atharva-veda* it is assumed that the people of that age had some knowledge, though in crude form, in making a man impotent with the devices consisting of *śamyā* (peg), two *grāvas* (two pressing stones) and *aśman* (sharp-edged stone).

Female :

For the sterilization of woman an interesting technique has been formulated in the *Atharva-veda* :

(a) *Imā yāste śataṃ hirāḥ sahasraṃ dhamaniruta*
*Tāsāṃ te sarvāsāmahaśmanā vilamapyadhām.*⁶

‘Of these hundred entrails of thine as well as of the thousand canals of all these have I closed the openings with a stone.’

This method consists in the closing of the openings of a hundred fine *nāḍis* (veins) involved in conception and those thousand *dhamanīs* (channels) of uterus with stone-pieces.

(b) *Paraṃ yoneravaraṃ te kṛṇomi tvā prajābhī bhūnmota sātuh*
*Aśvam’tvāprajasam kṛṇomyaśmānaṃ apīdhānaṃ te kṛṇomi.*⁷

‘The upper part of the womb do I place below. There shall come to thee neither offspring nor birth, I render thee sterile and devoid of offspring; a stone do I make into a cover for thee.’

Here by method of operation the upper part of the womb (*yoni*) is placed below so that no birth is possible. It also suggests the cover of the space meant for womb with a stone.

Bloomfield suggests that due to this operation there occurs no flow of blood.⁸

(ii) Medicinal herbs suggesting as the means of sterilization of man and woman:

Male :

In one hymn of the *Atharva-veda* a plant is invoked to make a man sterile. This indicates that this plant has the power of making a man sterile by its use though it is not clear if the plant is to be used internally or employed externally.

*Tvam virudhām śreṣṭhatamabhiśrutasyośadhe
Imam me adya puruṣam klībamopāśanam kṛdhi.*⁹

‘O plant, thy form is spread abroad as best of all the herbs that grow.
Unman for me today this man that he may wear the hair of a horn.’

Kau. Sū.,¹⁰ the allied *Gṛhyasūtra* of the *Atharva-veda*, in its discussion of this hymn, mentions this plant as *Kakuca*, which is identified by Dārila, the commentator of *Kau. Sū.*, as ‘*Timiraphala*’. *Timira*, according to Sanskrit to English Dictionary of Monier Williams, is a kind of aquatic plant.

Female :

For the sterilization of women with medicinal herbs, two hymns with an obscure sense are found in the *Atharva-veda* which though not clearly indicates this purpose, yet implies this sense in a roundabout way.

A co-wife here employs a plant towards another co-wife so that she might be shunned by her husband like a barren cow by a bull.

The hymns are as follows:

(a) *Trṣṭike trṣṭavandana udamūṃ chīndhī trṣṭike
Yathā kṛtadvīṣṭāsonuṣmai śēpyāvate.*¹¹

‘Rough one: thou of rough creepers, cut up the woman, O rough one,
that the woman mayest be hateful to the men of virile power.’

(b) *Trṣṭāsi trṣṭike viṣā viṣātakyasi
Pariṣṭā yathāśṛyaśabhasya vaśeva.*¹²

‘Rough art thou, a rough one, poisonous one art thou, do so that the
woman may be avoided as a barren cow of a bull.’

The commentator Sāyaṇa explains the second line of the second hymn in this way, 'as a sterile cow is not enjoyed by a bull so this woman should not be enjoyed by this man.'

Probably these hymns suggest the sterilization of women with the plants described as *Trṣṭavandana*, i.e. rough creeper and *Viṣā*, *Viṣātaki*, i.e. poisonous plant (not identified).

The *Kau. Sū.*¹³ refers the first plant as '*Bāṇaparṇi*' which Dārila, the commentator of the said book, explains as '*Śarapuṅkhā*' identified as *Thephrosia purpura*,¹⁴ as *Vananīla* (Bengali); *Kamukki-belari* (Tamil); *Vespati* (Telugu).

In connection with this hymn the *Kau. Sū.*¹⁵ recommends the sprinkling of a mixture consisting of powder of the leaves of '*Bāṇaparṇi*' water and milk of she-goat of red colour in the bed.

Besides all these verses with the idea of sterilization of both males and females, there occurs also some hymns on the same topic. In one such hymn¹⁶ the relaxation of the vigour of the member of a male one to make him impotent is clearly stated. But the methods are not expressed here.

In another such verse¹⁷ the closing of the vulva (*bhaga*) of a woman, to deprive her of her womanhood, is clearly indicated. Here also the methods are not stated.

The *Kau. Sū.*¹⁸ refers to another method in which the urine of the she-mule having been mixed with cooked rice should be given to the woman for eating.

II

FOR THE BIRTH OF A MALE CHILD

For the birth of a male child the *Atharva-veda* prescribes a drink '*garbhakarana*' and some plants having the properties of ensuring the birth of a male child. The hymns are as follows:—

- (a) *Yad veda rājā varuṇo yad vā devī saraswatī*
*Yadindra vṛtrahā veda tad garbhakaranaṃ piva.*¹⁹

'Drink thou the procreative draught well known to Varuṇa, the king, known to divine Saraswatī, and Indra, slayer of the foes.'

The composition of this drink has been given by the *Kau. Sū.*²⁰ as made up of rice and sesame seed boiled in water, which should be taken by a woman on the fourth day of her menstrual period.

- (b) *Yāsāṃ dyauḥ pitā pṛthivī mātā samudro mūlaṃ virudhaṃ babhūva*
*Tāstvā putravidyāya daivīḥ prāvanvoṣadhyah.*²¹

'The plants, of which heaven has been the father, earth the mother, ocean the root—let those herbs of the gods favour thee in order to acquisition of son.'

*Kau. Sū.*²² also gives the names of these plants as *adhyañḍa*, *vidārī*, *palāśa* and *br̥hatī*.

- (a) *Adhyañḍa*—*Flacourtia cataphracta* ;²³ *Paniāla*, *Tulis patri* (Bengal, Hindi); *Yaggam* (Bombay).
 (b) *Vidārī*—*Ipomea paniculata* R. Br.;²⁴ *Bhūinkumḍā*, *vilāikanda* (Bengal); *Matto-pal tiga* (Telugu); *Phal-kahala* (Bombay).
 (c) *Palāśa*—*Butea frondosa*;²⁵ *Gumbutea* (English); *Palāśa* (Bengal); *Palāśam* (Tamil).
 (d) *Br̥hatī*—*Solanum indicum* Linn.;²⁶ *Byākuḍa*, *Br̥hatī* (Bengal); *Badī-khatāi* (Hindi); *Tellamūluka* (Telugu); *Papparamalli* (Tamil).

The *Kau. Sū.*²⁷ recommends a mixture of milk (of a cow having a calf of its own colour), *yava* (barley), *vīhi* (rice) and two *adhyañḍas* (*Flacourtia cataphracta*) for a woman desiring a male child.

The *Br̥h. Ār. Up.*²⁸ prescribes different kinds of diet consisting of cooked rice and other ingredients to be taken by the parents before intercourse for the birth of a male or female child of a particular complexion, traits or temperament. The passages giving the composition of these dietary mixtures are given below:

- (a) *Sa ya icchet, putro me śuklo jāyeta, vedam anubhravīta, sarvām āyur iyād iti, kṣīra-udanam paçayitvā sarpiṣmantam aśnīyātām.*

If one wishes that his son should be born of a fair complexion, that he should study one *Veda*, that he should attain a full term of life, they should have rice cooked with milk and eat it with clarified butter.

- (b) *Atha ya icchet, putro me kapilah piṅgalo jāyeta, deam vedam anubhravīta, sarvām āyur iyād iti, dalhḡ-olama paçayitvā sarpiṣmantam aśnīyātām.*

Now if one wishes that his son should be born of a tawny or brown complexion, that he should study the two *Vedas*, that he should attain a full term of life, they should have rice cooked in curds and eat it with clarified butter.

- (c) *Atha ya icchet, putro me śyāmo lohitaḡḡo jāyeta, trīn vedān anubhravīta, sarvām āyur iyād iti, udolanam paçayitvā sarpiṣmantam aśnīyātām.*

Now if one wishes that his son should be born of a dark complexion with red eyes, that he should study the three *Vedas*, that he should attain a full term of life, they should have rice cooked in water and eat it with clarified butter.

- (d) *Atha ya icchet, duhitā me pañḍitā jāyeta, sarvām āyur iyād iti, tilolanam paçayitvā sarpiṣmantam aśnīyātām.*

Now if one wishes that his daughter should be born, who is learned, that she should attain a full term of life, they should have rice cooked with sesame and eat it with clarified butter.

(e) *Atha ya icchet, putro me paṇḍito vigītaḥ, samītiṃ gamaḥ, śuśruṣitaṃ vācaṃ bhāṣita jāyeta, sarvān vedān anubhrūvītā, sarvaṃ āyur iyād iti, māmsodamaṃ pācayitvā sarpiṣ-mantam aśnīyātām.*

Now if one wishes that the son should be learned, famous and having oratorical power, that he should study all the *Vedas*, that he should attain a full term of life, they should have rice cooked with meat and eat it with clarified butter.

In conclusion it may be stated that though the methods adopted for making a man or woman sterile were suggested to satisfy the jealousy of the individual against the rival and not actually as a measure for population control yet it reveals that in ancient India the device for sterilization was not unknown. As to the birth of a male child or of a child of particular complexion and mental qualities, the prescriptions given appear to be rather hypothetical; nevertheless experimental investigations are desirable. Anyway, all these will be found interesting to the students of social science or to those engaged in researches for birth-control.

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