
EPISTEMOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODOLOGY IN ĀYURVEDA: THE MEANS OF VALID KNOWLEDGE ACCORDING TO THE RASAVAIŚEŚIKA-SŪTRA AND ITS COMMENTARY BY NARASIṂHA

Christophe Vielle



Christophe Vielle (1967-), PhD (1996), Dr. habil. (2007), is senior Research Associate of the Belgian National Foundation for Scientific Research and Professor of Sanskrit at the Oriental Institute of the University of Louvain (Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium), where he carries on researches in Sanskrit philology (purāṇa, kāvyā and śāstra) and the historiography of Indology, with a particular interest in the sources and cultural context of premodern Kerala.

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the means of valid knowledge (pramāṇas) according to Bhadanta Nāgārjuna's Rasavaiśeṣika-sūtra (4,70), an ancient Āyurvedic 'philosophical' work (4th-5th centuries CE?), and its commentary by Narasiṃha (7th-8th centuries CE?). This unique text was preserved in a single old palm-leaf manuscript from Kerala edited for the first time in Trivandrum in 1928. Both the sūtra-author and the commentator appear to have been Buddhist physicians. Following the sūtra, the pramāṇas are six, viz. pratyakṣa (perception), anumāna (inference), upamāna (identification by comparison), āgama (tradition), arthāpatti (implication) and saṃbhava (inclusion). These are the same as in the Mīmāṃsā tradition except for the sixth. Quoted and parallel passages for this portion of Narasiṃha's commentary are found in the works of the Buddhist logician Dignāga and in Candrakīrti's Prasannapadā (a commentary on Nāgārjuna's Madhyamakakārikās), as well as in the Carakasamhitā, the Nyāyabhāṣya, the Yuktidīpikā and other early commentaries to the Sāṃkhyakārikās 4-5, and in Vyāsa's bhāṣya to the Yogasūtras (or Pātañjalayogaśāstra) 1,7. The examples provided for each pramāṇa are connected to medicine. Even if the same examples are commonly found in other epistemological, non-medical, sources, this feature is noteworthy and can be viewed as an indication of the milieu in which the pramāṇa theory originated or, at least, was used in a practical way. The interest of the commentary to RVS 4,70 and 3,44-45 also lies in its scientific approach to medical diagnostics, stressing observation (pratyakṣa) and logical reasoning (anumāna), and explaining, as in Carakasamhitā 3,4.5 (cf. 8.83), that traditional authority (āgama) itself depends on the former two, which in modern times could be termed 'empiricism'.