

The Concept of Dreams and Dreaming: A Hindu Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The present paper presents Hindu approaches to dreams. In the west there are numerous concepts, theories, schools and information with regard to dreams. Hindu concepts about and approaches to dreams, though, are relatively untouched and unexplored and are thus largely unknown to westerners. The main concept of dreams and dreaming is closely linked to Hindu philosophy, mythology, and ancient writings such as the Puranas, Vedas, Upanishads, and so on. The major essence of the eternal self (atman), the seven fold classification of dreams and dreaming, dreams associated with the sex of the unborn child and human nature (“prakriti”) as based on the ayurvedic personality temperament theory (“tridosha”) form the major Hindu concepts of dreams. These are presented and discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Dreams, Dreaming, A Hindu, Perspective

Down through the ages dreams have always been seen as fascinating and mystifying human experiences. Human beings have thus been curious and inquisitive about them throughout recorded history. Their nature has been investigated and pondered by many ancient civilizations for centuries. Ethnic and cultural beliefs about dreams are varied and complex and the concepts, beliefs, attitudes and interpretations regarding them differ considerably across various cultures. Certain cultures consider dreams to be important sources of information about the future, about faith and the spiritual world, or even the dreamer. In other cultures, though, it is believed that dreams are fantasy figments that are irrelevant with regard to the important concerns associated with day-to-day life.

In Hindu mythology and philosophy, which are based on the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and many other religious and holy books, like the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Shrimad Bhagwat Gita, Padmapurana, Yoga vasistha, etc..., there are age-old knowledge and understandings ripe with lots of incidents related to dreams and also their relevance. Those in the west are not very much aware about Eastern notions of sleep and dreams. There are numerous concepts

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concerning sleep and dreams which are untouched or unexplored, and most of these concepts tend to be totally unknown to westerners and even among western dream research workers.

Dreams and dreaming: Hindu historical and mythological perspectives

One encounters the concept of dreams or dreaming (termed “swapna”) repeatedly in ancient Hindu classics, specifically the Upanishads, Puranas, Darshanas, Ayurveda and Atharva Veda (for more information about these and other terms, see the glossary at the end of this paper). Nevertheless, except with Ayurveda, the descriptions there tend to be more philosophical. The earliest Hindu reference to dreams can be found in the Rig Veda (dated back to 4000 BCE or perhaps 6000 BCE) which touched upon the themes of nightmares and waking dreams. Another significant text, the SamaVeda, was composed at around 1500 BC and it gives considerable importance to the content present in dreams.

According to the Upanishads (ca. 700 BCE), dream realities were approached in a more systematic way. The Upanishads eloquently provide two main viewpoints on dreams: The primary one holds that dreams are only expressions of inner desires (as in Freudian wish fulfillment) while the secondary view is similar to a Chinese belief that the soul leaves the body and is being taught right up to when the dreamer is awakened. The Mandukya Upanishad lays out four major states of the true self (“atman”): waking (“jagrath”), dreaming (“swapna”), dreamless sleep (“sushupthi”) and a supernatural, transcendent fourth state (“turiya”).

In the Chandogya upanishad, rites are described that are usually performed for the fulfillment of a wish. Seeing a woman in dream at a certain time, for instance, is definitely an omen of success. In the Brihadaranyaka upanishad, there is no distinction between the atman and the objects affecting desire and it states that the spirit serves as a light intended for itself. Within the Prashna upanishad, Maharshi Pippalada expresses the view that within the dreaming state (“swapnawastha”), the individual soul (“jivatman”), along with the rational faculty (“manas”) and the exterior senses (“sukshmaIndriyas”), encounters its beauty. In addition, inside their narratives, the Hindu epics and puranas incorporated many of the traditional ambitions analyzed throughout other philosophical and medical texts. In Valmiki's Ramayana, when Sita was abducted by the demon Ravana and is being held captive on the Island of Lanka, the ogress Trijita had this kind of dream which symbolized the defeat of Ravana at the hand of Rama.

Dreams are well described in all orthodox schools of thought (known as “astikas”) as well as heterodox schools. The definition of dream-cognition by Kanada is explained as consciousness produced by a particular conjunction of self and mind (manas) in tune with the subconscious impressions of past experience, like recollections. Lord Gautama Buddha's birth was foretold by his mother's dream. Dreams are clearly mentioned in the brihatrayi, a collection of classical ayurvedic texts, i.e., within the caraka samhita, the susrutasmhita, the ashtangsamgraha and the astangahridaya. While each treatise has depicted their importance as warning signs of impending disease (“purvarupa”) along with other bad prognostic signs

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(“arista laksanas”), Susruta has clearly described specific dreams that denote the sex of an unborn child. Both texts attributed to Vagbhata have mentioned dreams for assessing the temperaments (“dosha”) that dominate a personality (“prakriti”). Carakacarya, who has provided an in-depth description of the purusa or atman, has also inferred and described dreams as its divine generative energy (“linga”). In his conception, the absence of transforming dreams (“vaikrita swapna”) is an indication of health.

The word for dream, “swapna”, literally means a decrease of touch or even ignorance. Two aspects of dreams have been joined together from the very beginning in India. One important aspect has to do with the contents of dreams (the images within the dream (the dream as “seen” and experienced) while the second has to do with the form of dreaming (the process of dreaming) which involves the relationship between a dream and waking life. Both of these concepts are usually included in the term “swapna” (dream).

Swapna can also mean sleep. Nidrā, śayana, svāpa, svapna, śṛaveśa are synonyms. The term swapna has been used instead of the word ‘sleep’ in numerous places in various texts. Its legitimate meaning is actually ‘the subject’s experiences within different states of sleep as are mentioned in various contexts in addition to instances within the carakasamhitā, an ancient ayurvedic text in Sanskrit.

Seven types of dreams

The seven-fold classification of swapna covers the waking experience, somatic impulses, imagination, and the influence of the supernatural. Acārya Caraka (13) has categorized the seven-fold dream classification as: seen (“dr̥ṣṭa”), heard (“śruta”), experienced (“anubhūta”), influenced by inner wants or desires (“prārthita”), created by the imagination (“kalpita”), manifested (“bhāvita”) and created by an imbalance of the temperaments (“doṣaja”).

A “dr̥ṣṭa” dream is of a thing we have previously seen in our waking life. If while asleep we are aware of hearing words such dreams are called “sruta” dreams while the dreams in which we are aware of other sense perceptions from external causes are termed “anubhūta”, or experienced dreams. Dreams where desiring any heard or experienced things which were earnestly desirable in wakefulness occurs is called “prārthita” or desired dreams. From time to time and from a supposition of things -- that are within the range of the actual senses – fantasies happen in the mind. Imaginations in sleep produce “kalpita” dreams or imagined dreams. Individual dreams which actually then happen in life are called “bhāvita” or manifested dreams. According to Hindu astrological science, dreams and signs are manifested on the palm based on past deeds and are indicators of the good and bad. Comprehensive and detailed descriptions of manifested or precognitive dreams are available.

Dreams experienced in vitiated states of temperament imbalance are called “doṣaja” which means diseased. According to Carakacarya, this seventh type of dream is additionally divided into those that do not affect the dreamer’s health and fitness (“aphala”) and those that do (“phala”). The effects of dreams are mainly divided into auspicious (“shuba”) and

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inauspicious or unfortunate (“ashubha”). Dreams have also been described by other ancient teachers like Sushruta and Sharangdhara as omens: those that portend good outcomes or happenings (“su-swapna”) and their negative counterparts (“duh-swapna”).

Acharya Haritha described dreams according to the duration of the impact after experiencing a dream. The impacts from the dreams we see in the first part of the night usually persist for a year while the impacts of dreams from the second parts and the third parts of the night persist for about six months and 90 days only. Impacts from dreams during the fourth part of the night or early morning can only remain for a duration of ten days in our mind. Dreams seen in the rainy season or during the day time persist for a period of six months. This is also described in the Bramhavaivarta Purana, a major Sanskrit text.

Dreams associated with pregnancy

Some teachers have explained that certain dreams that pregnant women have (“garbha linga dharana”) can specify the gender of the child to be born. The objects observed in such a dream are evaluated as having masculine or feminine gender qualities based on which classification is used. For example, doing activities, taking food and drinks like a male, seeing fruits, a red lotus flower (“padama”), a blue lotus flower (“utpala”), a night blooming lotus (“kumuda”), thickened mango juice (“amrataka”), and seeing things like this (“padartha”) in their dreams means the new born will be male whereas doing things like taking food and drinks like a female, seeing sweet bananas (“kadali”), flowers like the taruni (a wildflower native to south India), hibiscus flowers (e.g., the rosejapa-shoe flower), or seeing similar things in their dreams denotes that the new born will be female.

Dreams classified according to personality temperament and behavioural nature

Different teachers have spoken about one's involvement in dreaming according to temperament types of human beings. This means the dominance of a good particular personality temperament can be considered responsible for the sort of dreams seen and the five basic elements dominating the characters in the dreams are homologous to those dominant in that particular temperament type. The dreams are described as follows:

Those with an air and space temperament type (“vatta”) will experience dreams of flying or rising high in the sky, climbing trees or mountains, of dried and crooked trees and rivers, or riding camels (animals). Those of the fire and water temperament type (“pitta”) will have dreams of gold, the sun, palasha (a famous ayurvedic herb) and wodier trees (“karnika”), red coloured sky, fire, falling meteoric and lightening, and bright flames and light. Those with a water and earth temperament type (“kapha”) will usually dream of lotuses, ponds, clouds and aquatic birds like geese or swans (“hansa”) and ruddy shelducks (“chakravaka”).

CONCLUSION

As a rule, the descriptions of dreams as mentioned in Hindu philosophy, mythology, etc., are largely unknown to westerners. Over the millennia Hindus accumulated a vast knowledge about them and sleep. Westerners tend to be more focused on the medical side of dreams and

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consider them to be the only mode available for access our unconscious mind. Various concept and theories based on Hindu philosophy can be helpful for obtaining a different understanding and point of view of these mysterious phenomena. The Hindu understanding of dreams can provide greater knowledge and insight into dreams and open new avenues for western dream research.

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Glossary

- AcāryaCaraka: may have lived at some time between 200 BCE and 200 CE and is one of the principal contributors to the ancient art and science of Ayurveda. He is widely known as the Indian Father of Medicine.
- Acharyas: (in south Asia) a Hindu or Buddhist spiritual teacher, leader or an influential mentor.
- Acharya Haritha: a legendary physician, one of the disciples of Atreya and a colleague of Agnivesa. He wrote the HaritaSamhita (see Samhita, below).
- Amrataka: thickened mango juice
- Anubhūta: sense impressions in sleep, i.e., experienced dreams
- Aphala: According to Carakacharya (see below), an aphala is the kind of dream which does not affect a person's health and fitness / living.
- AristaLaksanas: Bad prognostic signs, including the time of death.
- Ashubha: Inauspicious unfortunate or bad sign
- AstangaHridaya: An Ayurvedic medical text written by Vagbhatta (see below)
- AshtangaSamgraha: One of the great early classics in Ayurveda, written by Vagbhatta (see below)
- Astika: Orthodox schools of thought. Each is called a darshanas, and each darshana accepts the Vedas as authoritative and the premise that ātman (soul, eternal self) exists
- AstikaNastikaDarshanas: Nastika schools do not accept the authority of the Vedas of which four nāstika (heterodox) schools are prominent.
- Atharva Veda: The Atharva Veda is the fourth Veda in the usual order of enumeration following the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda and Sama Veda. However the historical analysis of the Atharva Veda shows that it is as old as the Rig Veda. Of all the Vedas, none has been more maligned than the Atharva Veda. Many historians have even gone so far as to say that it is nothing but "a manual of black and white magic".
- Atman: the innermost essence of each individual. The essence that is eternal, unchanging, and indistinguishable from the essence of the universe.

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Ayurveda:the traditional Hindu system of medicine (incorporated in the Atharva Veda, the last of the four Vedas), which is based on the idea of balance in bodily systems and uses diet, herbal treatment, and yogic breathing.

Bhavitha: dreams which actually happen in life are called bhāvita or manifested dreams. According to Hindu astrological science, dreams and signs are manifested on the palm on the basis of past deeds and are indicators of the good and bad.

Brahmavaivarta Purana: Voluminous Sanskrit text and a major Purana (Maha-purana) of Hinduism.

Brihadaranyaka: One of the Mukhya Upanishads and a highly advanced philosophical and mystical text

Brihatrayi: One of the classical texts in Ayurveda

Carakacharya: Sanskrit word meaning a teacher (acharya) of the carakas

Caraka Samhita: The Charaka Samhitā or Compendium of Caraka is a Sanskrit text on Ayurveda (Indian traditional medicine)

Chakravaka: is a ruddy goose, commonly called the Brahmany duck or goose.

Chhandogya Upanishad: The Chandogya Upanishad is a Sanskrit text embedded in the Chandogya Brahmana of the Sama Veda of Hinduism. It is one of the oldest Upanishads.

Charvaka: The Charvaka system of thought believed neither in God nor in the afterlife. Their doctrines are traced to an ancient scripture called the Charvaka

Darshanas: are schools of philosophy based on the Vedas. They were created between the 12th and 16th centuries by Vedantins. Each system of Hindu philosophy is called a Darshana. Thus the Sanskrit word 'Shad-Darshana' refers to 'the six systems of philosophy', namely Nyaya, Vaisesika, Sankhya, Yoga, Purva Mimamsa and Uttara Mimamsa.

Dosaja: Diseases originating as result of imbalance of the three doshas

Dosha: A dosha (bioelements), according to Ayurveda, is one of three bodily bioelements (vatta, pitta and kapha – see below) that make up one's constitution (similar to the four temperaments or humors of Greco-Roman medicine).

Dosikaprakriti: Which combination of the three doshas dominate in the prakriti (personality) of the person

Dṛṣṭa: Dream of a thing we have previously seen in our waking life

Duh-Swapna: Bad dreams

Garbhalingadharana: This ceremony is performed when a woman's pregnancy is at around 7 months. A Guru will bless and give an Ishtalinga (see below) to the pregnant woman on behalf of her unborn baby. She will wear this Ishtalinga along with her own and she will perform pujas (see below) with her own Ishtalinga until she delivers the baby.

Ishtalinga: an oval-shaped emblem symbolizing the absolute reality (parasiva), and is worn on the body by a cord hung around the neck.

Hansa: is an aquatic bird such as a goose or a swan.

Indriyārtha Sannikarsa: Contact of the sense organs with objects.

Jagrath: the waking state (consciousness)

Jivatman: The Jivatman is the individual soul, a reflection of Brahman in Avidya or the mind.

Kadali: Kadali is a small and sweet variety of banana.

Kalpita: the subject matter is imagined.

Kanada: Hindu sage and philosopher, who probably lived in the second century BCE, founded the philosophical school of Vaisheshika and authored the Vaisheshika Sutra.

Kapha: in Ayurveda, one of the three doshas (see above), condensed from the elements water and earth.

Kaphaprakarathi: Dominated by kaphadosha

Karnika: woder tree

Kumuda: night-blooming lotuses

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Linga: a symbol of divine generative energy, especially a phallus or phallic object as a symbol of Shiva.

Mahabharata: one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, composed between 400 BCE and 400 CE.

Mahabhutas: In Ayurveda, the five basic elements comprising all the matter in the universe—space, air, fire, water, and earth. The three body types or doshas are based on the predominance of one or more of these elements.

Maharshi Pippalada: Pippalada was an ancient, mythological Indian Vedic sage and philosopher. It is said that he wrote the Prashna Upanishad which is among the ten mukhya (main) Upanishads.

Manas: the rational faculty of our mind/mind/intellect

Mandukya Upanishad: is the shortest of all the Upanishads.

Nastika Darshanas: (see the Astika Nastika Darshanas entry above)

Nidrā, śayana, svāpa, swapna, smaveśa: synonyms of swapna (dream, dreaming)

Padama: red lotus flower

Padartha: The meaning of a word or the thing corresponding to it; category or predicament.

Padmapurana: Padma Purana (see below) is one of the eighteen major Puranas, a genre of Hindu texts.

Palasha: Palasha is a famous Ayurvedic herb.

Phala: means “fruit” of one's actions in Hinduism and Buddhism.

Pitta: In Ayurveda, one of the three doshas, condensed from the elements fire and water.

Pitta prakarthi: Dominated by a pitta dosha (in Sanskrit, “Vata”, “Pitta” and “Kapha” are responsible for all the physiological and psychological processes within the body and mind.)

Prakriti: An Ayurvedic concept which states that the basic constitution of a human being is determined at the time of conception.

Prārthita: A type of dream which gratifies those desires that could not be gratified in the waking state.

Prashnopanishada: is one of the earlier, “primary” Upanishads

Puja: An act of worship.

Puranas: This literally means “ancient”, “old” and it is a vast genre of Hindu literature about a wide range of topics, particularly myths, legends and other traditional lore

Purusa: denotes the knower

Purvarupa: Purvarupa implies preliminary signs of disease. These symptoms appear before the actual onset of any illness, and are warning signs that disease may soon manifest.

Ramayana: The Ramayana is a Sanskrit epic poem ascribed to the Hindu sage and Sanskrit poet Valmiki, a Hindu sage who lived around the beginning of the first millennium BCE. Along with the Mahabharata it is regarded as one of the two great works of Indian literature.

Rosejapa-shoe flower: Hibiscus flowers used in the worship of Hindu deities, especially Goddess Durga / Kali.

Sama Veda: The samaveda is the Veda of melodies and chants. It is an ancient Vedic Sanskrit text, and one of the Hindu scriptures

Samhita: a collection of mantras and benedictions

Sharangdhara: The earliest Hindu medical treatise to mention nadi-pariksha (pulse examinations); it is of the twelfth century CE. Written down in the 13th century, the Sharangadhara Samhita describes different types of pulses in different disease conditions.

Shrimad Bhagwat Gita: The Bhagavad Gita, often referred to as simply the Gita, is a 700-verse Hindu scripture in Sanskrit that is part of the Hindu Mahabharata epic.

Shuba: auspicious sign

Sruta: Perception of words, heard while asleep.

Suksma Indriyas: Exterior senses

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Sushruta: Suśruta(ca. 700 to 600 BCE) was an ancient Indian physician, known as the main author of the treatise of Suśruta-saṃhitā.

Sushupthi: A state of deep sleep

SusrutaSamhita:The SushrutaSamhita is an ancient Sanskrit text on medicine and surgery, dating from around 600 BCE, and one of the most important such treatises on this subject to survive from ancient times.

Su-Swapna: Good dreams

Swapna: dream

Swapnawastha: the state of dreaming

Taruni: Taruni is a wildflower native to south India

Turiya: pure state of consciousness

Upanishads:A collection of texts, probably composed between 800 and 500 BCE, that contain some of the central philosophical concepts of Hinduism, some of which are shared with Buddhism and Jainism.

Utpala: blue lotus

Vagbhata: Vāgbhata (ca. 7th century CE) was apparently Buddhist and one of the most influential classical writers of Ayurvedic texts.

VaikritaSwapna: Transforming dreams

vāta:in Ayurveda, one of the three doshas, condensed from the elements air and space.

Vattaprakarthi:Dominated by vattadosha

Vedas: The Vedas are a large body of texts originating in ancient India. Composed in Vedic Sanskrit, the texts constitute the oldest layer of Sanskrit literature and the oldest scriptures of Hinduism. They are said to date from ca. 1500 BCE to ca. 500-400 BCE.

Yoga vasistha:The Yoga Vasistha is a Hindu text attributed to Valmiki, but the real author is unknown.

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