

CULTURAL LEADERS OF INDIA

Scientists

DHANVANTRI * CARAKA * SUŚRUTA

VARĀHAMIHIRA * ĀRYABHATA * BHĀSKĀRACĀRYA

DHANVANTARI

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One of the earliest and outstanding leaders of Indian culture in the field of medicine in general and surgery in particular was Dhanvantari. His personality and identity are shrouded in the mist of antiquity. According to some authorities, he was the giver of Āyurveda or the science of life to the world.

Though some names like Aśvins (the celestial physicians), Kāśirāja Divodāsa and terms like Bhisak and Bhesaja occur frequently in the Vedas, the name of Dhanvantari does not occur in them. As we shall see, Dhanvantari is considered to be a divinity and the god of medical science. Another Dhanvantari was the king of Kāśi and the preceptor of Suśruta. A study of the purāṇas, the *Harivaṃśa* and some later works shows that there were, in addition to the divine Dhanvantari, three other Dhanvantaris who belonged to different periods of time. They were: (i) Śrī Dhanvantari who, according to *Brahmavaivarta*, was one of the 16 disciples of Bhāskara, the sun-god, under whom he is stated to have studied Āyurveda; (ii) Kāśirāja Divodāsa, surnamed Dhanvantari, an incarnation of the divine Dhanvantari who, it is said, was no other than Lord Viṣṇu, the preserver and protector of the universe; and (iii) Śrī Dhanvantari who was one of the 'nine jewels' that adorned the court of Samrāt Vikramāditya. Some authorities think that the last-mentioned Dhanvantari was the author of the well-known lexicon on drugs—the *Dhanvantarinighaṇṭu*.

Outstanding authorities on Āyurveda, specially surgeons and experts in the treatment of the eye, ear, nose and throat, were honoured in ancient and medieval India with the honorific Dhanvantari. It will thus be seen that the term Dhanvantari

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refers not only to the progenitor of Āyurveda but is also associated with a rich medical tradition and a hierarchy in the history of medicine in India.

Little is known about the lives of the several Dhanvantaris except for a few references available in the Āyurvedasamhitās and the Purāṇas. These sources have referred to Ādi-Dhanvantari, Kāśirāja Divodāsa Dhanvantari and Dhanvantariyas, i.e., the school of surgeons. According to these sources, Bhagavān Dhanvantari emerged from the milk-ocean when it was churned by the warring Suras and Asuras. He has been described as the twelfth incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu who is stated to have carried in his hand a kalaśa (pot) containing amṛta (ambrosia, nectar) "by drinking which even one who is in the jaws of death would become an immortal". According to the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, it was Bhagavān Dhanvantari who revealed Āyurveda to the world. This Dhanvantari, who is said to be the original or the first, has been known as Ādi-Dhanvantari. He is worshipped even today as the presiding deity of medical science.

According to the *Brahmavaivartapurāṇa*, the creator of the universe, while studying the four Vedas, separated Āyurveda from them. He is then stated to have imparted the knowledge of this science to Bhāskara (sun-god). Sūrya, thereafter, wrote his own *Samhitā* on Āyurveda and taught the same to 16 disciples of whom Dhanvantari was the foremost. Each one of these 16 disciples, in his turn, wrote a separate treatise of his own.

According to Ācārya Suśruta Divodāsa, Kāśirāja and Dhanvantari are different names of the preceptor under whom he studied Āyurveda, and surgery in particular. Divodāsa, the king of Kāśi (Varanasi), was held to be the incarnation of Ādi-Dhanvantari, "the celebrated physician of gods in heaven who first propounded the art of healing to the world". He was, therefore, surnamed Dhanvantari. He is a prehistoric figure who founded the famous school of surgeons.

That Kāśirāja Divodāsa Dhanvantari was a prehistoric figure derives support from the internal evidence provided,

among others, by the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*, the *Agniveśasaṃhitā* the *Carakasamhitā*, the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* and the *Harivamśa*. The *Viṣṇupurāṇa* and the *Harivamśa* have, between them, furnished credible and consistent genealogical accounts of the dynasty to which Kasiraja Divodāsa belonged. The *Agniveśasaṃhitā* has made frequent references to the views of Dhanvantari, Dhanvantariyas and the discipline of surgery as representing a speciality.

Genealogical tree

(According to *Viṣṇupurāṇa*)

Purūrava
.
Kṣatravṛdha
.
Kāśa
.
Kāśirāja
.
Dīrghatama
.
Dhanvantari
.
Ketumāna
.
Divodāsa
.
Pratardana

The genealogical accounts, referred to above, show that Kāśirāja Divodāsa belonged to the royal line founded by Purūravas of the lunar dynasty. According to the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, Divodāsa belonged to the fifth generation from Kāśa and was the grandson of Dhanvantari who was himself a grandson of Kāśirāja.

According to the *Harivamśa*, Kāśirāja Divodāsa belonged to the line of Anena who was himself a descendant of Purūravas. Kāśya, referred to in the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* genealogy, represents the

fifteenth generation from Anena; Dhanvantari the third from Kāśya and Divodāsa the third from Dhanvantari. According to the *Harivamśa*, Dhanva—the ancestor of Divodāsa—is stated to have performed a putrakāmeṣṭiyāgya and prayed to Abja (Ādi-Dhanvantari) to be born to him as his son. The prayer was granted and the son born to him was named Dhanvantari, after Abja. He subsequently became a pupil of sage Bhāradvāja who taught him Āyurveda and Bhesajakriya. Later, he (Dhanvantari) is stated to have divided the entire range of Āyurveda into eight divisions (the Aṣṭāṅgas), each division representing a speciality. These specialities are:

- (i) Kāyacikitsā (Internal Medicine)
- (ii) Kaumārabhṛtya or Bālacikitsā (Paediatrics)
- (iii) Bhutavidyā or Grahacikitsā (Psychiatry)
- (iv) Śālākyatantra (Otto-Rhino-Laryngology & Ophthalmology)
- (v) Śalyatantra (Surgery—major and minor)
- (vi) Viṣatantra (Toxicology)
- (vii) Rasāyanatantra (Geriatrics)
- (viii) Vājtkaraṇatantra (Therapy for male sterility, impotency and the promotion of virility)

In his turn, he is stated to have imparted the knowledge of these specialities to his pupils. This Dhanvantari, whom we may refer to as the Senior, was the great grandfather of Kāśirāja Divodāsa Dhanvantari.

It is not known if Kāśirāja Divodāsa Dhanvantari himself wrote any treatise on Āyurveda, specially on śalyaśālākyatantras. The *Brahmavaivartapurāṇa* has attributed the authorship of *Cikitsātattvavijñāna* and *Cikitsādarśana* to Dhanvantari Divodāsa and that of *Cikitsākaumudī* to Kāśirāja. It was seen earlier that these names refer to the same person, i.e., Kāśirāja Divodāsa Dhanvantari. These works are, however, lost. The only available work which fully reflects the contribution made