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“The Construction of the Patient in Sanskrit Medical Narratives”

Storytelling is not a common means of instruction in the long history of Sanskrit medical literature. Yet there are a number of notable ætiological tales about somatic fitness and ailment in the classical Sanskrit medical compendia, such as, to name just three, the narratives of fever (*jvara*), miscarriage (*garbhapāta*), and the king’s disease (*rājayakṣman*). A remarkable feature of the Sanskrit medical narrative is the way in which the imposition of narrative time and logic onto the presentation of health and disease enlivens and defines the elsewhere largely indeterminate image of the patient, *rogin* (literally “one who has disease”), in the medical literature. In this paper, I discuss how Sanskrit medical narratives effectively breathe life into the conception of the *rogin* by chronicling the journey from implicit vitality, plunge into infirmity, and redux health of a patient. In general, the underlining message of these narratives is that personal agency and character are both reflections and sources of disease and wellbeing. In this way, I suggest that literary constructions of the *rogin* may be read as uniquely medical speculations on the human embodiment of *dharma*, whereby self-awareness, social agency, and religious practice influence biophysiological wellbeing and the incidence (or potential incidence) of disease expands well beyond the anatomical body into the world of socioethical relations.