

Miscarriage in āyurvedic literature

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In the Western medical terminology, miscarriage, equated with spontaneous abortion, is defined as “the expulsion of the products of conception before the 20th week of gestation” – that is at a stage where the embryo or foetus is not able to survive – “without deliberate interference” (*Le grand dictionnaire terminologique*). The loss of pregnancy can be related to various causes, either physical or psychological.

In the āyurvedic literature, the chapters dealing with *garbhavyāpad* develop some specific terminology: a distinction is made between an early pregnancy loss, when the embryo or foetus is still in a fluid state (*garbhavicyuti* or *garbhasrāva*), and the loss of a child whose body is already firm (*garbhapāta*). Treatments against threatened abortion are also propounded according to the stage of the gestational process. The *vaidya* will consider different signs indicating the seriousness of the disorder: the absence of growth and/or movements of the foetus, the deterioration of the mother’s general state of health, and the products of conception that she expels. All these parameters can be interpreted as symptoms or prodroms of complete or incomplete abortion, of foetal death *in utero*, or of mother’s and child’s death. The diagnosis established therefrom will guide the practitioner to the adequate therapy. *Garbhavyāpad* appears as one of the trickiest cases of medicine, requiring not only a high degree of expertise, but also humility in recognizing the limits of the art of healing.

As expected, the medical *compendia* give some rational explanations of the disorders of pregnancy, pointing more or less to the parents’ responsibility, but they are not deprived of magico-religious material: some texts copiously illustrate the theory of the *bālagraha*, viz. the demons “seizers of children”. In this paper, I would like to compare the āyurvedic teachings on miscarriage to our common knowledge of the subject, with a peculiar interest for both vocabulary and aetiology, and to draw, possibly, some historical development inside the Indian medical corpus.