



# Interface between Mysticism, Tradition and Modernity in Ayurveda

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## Abstract

Evidences show that even before 5th century BC, different philosophies co-existed in the ancient Indian sub-continent. They are broadly divided into two categories: *astika* and *nastika*. *Astikamat* believed in the infallibility of Veda and established their validity on the authority of Veda. However, *Nastikamat* did not believe in the authority of Veda. Based on it, the Indian school of thoughts are secular and non-secular. This paper deals with the secular practices of Ayurveda medicinal system in India. While doing this we will cover a few examples which may reflect the scientific practices of Ayurveda and reasons for its degradation.

The Ayurveda medicinal system is indigenous to Indian sub-continent and it has been traditionally passed from one generation to another. It becomes difficult to carve out the science from the mythical stories associated with Ayurveda which, as some, say, are made for larger acceptance for public. However, this has caused the modern scientific brains to prevent themselves from the interaction with traditional knowledge. The reason behind this has not dealt in academia. This leads us to our research problem that is the quest of Ayurveda to reestablish itself, locally and globally, in the post TRIPS era. In order to explore this problem we will discuss it in two facets. Firstly, we will talk about the traditional medicinal system namely Ayurveda and its documentation over a period of time. Then we will discuss the upsurge of Ayurveda medicinal industry and its development in various political milieus. We have taken hermeneutics as method for our paper. We conclude that this tendency of moving back and trying to proof mythical stories is taxing. Else Ayurveda cannot take full advantage of this time.

**Keywords:** Ayurveda, Traditional Medicine, Indian Philosophy, Scientific Practices, TRIPS Era.

## 1. Introduction

Evidences show that even before 5th century BC, different philosophies co-existed in the ancient Indian sub-continent. They are broadly divided into categories: *astika* and *nastika*. *Astikamat* believed in the infallibility of Veda and established their validity on the authority of Veda. However, *nastikamat* did not believe in the authority of Veda. Based on it, the Indian school of thoughts are secular and non-secular. This paper deals with the secular practices of Ayurveda medicinal system in India. While doing this we will cover a few examples which may reflect the scientific practices of Ayurveda and reasons for its degradation.

In the global scenario, there is an increase in demand of the alternative medicinal systems as it is observed that allopathic medicinal systems is problematic, whether in terms of costs and/or side effects. Moreover, the rise in

demand of Ayurvedic medicines and food supplements in the international market has given opportunities of Indian Ayurveda medicinal industry. However, we have seen that despite the rich traditions it is held back by reasons which are not always open to rational inquiries. Going back to the scholars like Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya and Prafulla Chandra Ray, we have observed that they have criticized the advent of religious authorities and its tussle with ancient sciences and technologies. Ray mentioned that the stagnation in science and technology can be traced back from Sankara's period (Ray, 1982(1918)). On the other hand, Chattopadhyaya critically analyses the scientificity and religiosity of Caraka-Samhita. It was time and again discussed that if science is in the clutches of any religion, it ceases to grow. Ayurvedic sciences are surviving since 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and have experienced political upheavals. This turmoil has resulted in addition of many developments and degradation of Ayurvedic sciences. These things are also interdependent on cultural practices of the land. Nonetheless, culture is different from sciences and we could justify a part of it. Culture and traditions are passed from one generation to another but they are influenced by political changes. In the current scenario, we have seen the exaggeration of ancient sciences to the extent that fictions and fables are failed. Stories of Ganesh head surgery, plastic surgery, genetic engineering, existence of airplanes (vimana), etc. are responsible for holding back this science where amplification of past glory is taking place. On this backdrop, the paper deals with the mixing of superstitions with science and some contradictions found in the texts. At the end of the paper, we discuss the protection of traditional knowledge and regulation making processes.

## 2. Ayurveda Medicinal System: An Introduction

*Ayurveda* is a combination of two words *Ayus* and *veda* which implies the 'knowledge of life and longevity'. The term *veda* should be taken to mean knowledge in its secular sense as it does not stand for scripture or *sruti*. There is no unanimity among the scholars in the origin of Ayurveda, however, mostly it is considered to be 5000 years old. Medicinal system (*chikitsa*) would have existed since the time when civilisation has started its course but a few authors opined that it is a part of Atharv-Veda while others said it to be an *upveda* of Rig-Veda.

### 2.1 Contradiction in Diet

Some said that it is completely herbal whereas Zimmerman (2011) argues that Ayurvedic sciences identified and classified different species of animals with classifications of geography, vegetation and animal specification. The author mentions "...we are constantly obliged to read "animals" where the texts say "meats." Is it a question of fauna, then, or of dietary prescriptions?" (Zimmerman, 2011:100). Moreover, several formulations are made up from animal sources, minerals and metals as well. The beef like certain other varieties of meat is an important medical prescription for certain diseases (Chattopadhyaya, 1991:472). This being a fundamental proposition for the physician, s/he has no scope to introduce any religious or other consideration into his view of food (Chattopadhyaya, 1991:474).

### 2.2 Contradiction in Texts

*Vajikarana-Tantra*<sup>1</sup> prescribes medicines for good sexual health is devoted to aphrodisiac therapy. Whereas there is a section in Caraka-Samhita recommending people to follow celibacy and men should practice *brahmaccarya*<sup>2</sup>.

### 2.3 Emergence of Trade

Sharma (2014) writes about the exchange of knowledge through different means, and one of the strongest reasons behind it was a trade. There were several substances traded from India to Arab and from other places to India. The author observes that musk melon originated in Baluchistan and West Africa. It was not mentioned in any of

<sup>1</sup> It is one of the branches of Ayurveda and it deals with the aphrodisiac treatment.

<sup>2</sup> *Brahmaccarya* means celibacy.

the *bruhtrayi*<sup>3</sup>. However, it was mentioned in Madanpal-nighantu and Bhavprakash-nighantu which gives an idea that it came here in 12<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century AD (Sharma, 2014: 378-379).

### 3. Logic, Rationality and Free Thinking

“Indian Philosophy is freedom-intoxicated as it were. Every fibre of it is a protest against bondage” (Chattopadhyay, 2015:565). A fundamental characteristic of Indian philosophy is freedom in thoughts that is the reason various philosophies co-existed though it was not always peaceful. Ayurveda is not an exception of it. There were free thinkers (*haituka*) who firmly convinced that there is no after life, no merit in offering gifts to the priest and no efficacy of the sacrificial offerings, so free thinkers (*haituka*) are disbeliever (*nastika*) (Chattopadhyaya, 2015:186).

Chattopadhyaya (1991:151) argues Caraka-Samhita has an emphasis on direct observation of facts (*pratyaksha-phala-darsanat*), collection of empirical data and transformation from magico-religious therapeutic (*daiva-vyapasraya bhesaja*) to rationalist therapeutic (*yukti-vyapasraya bhesaja*). Instead of following the scriptural version, enchants, charms, magic, etc., ancient *vaidyas* formulated the methodology of science (*vimana-sthana*). Collins (2009:85) argued that Western science is just one among many belief, that why “Western-style medicine” should not be brought to societies with entirely different beliefs. The imposition of only a certain kind of belief on radically different belief cannot be justified. In India, there are various beliefs so only one kind of medicinal practice cannot be held on across Indian society. In the same way, Ayurveda science can be seen as also one of belief which may be suitable in Indian society.

Prescribing natural substances as diet or drug is based on the rationalist therapeutics (Chattopadhyay, 1991: 177). However, this transition from magico-religious therapeutic to rationalist therapeutic challenged all sorts of deities, magic rites, and rituals who were believed to prevent and treat diseases (Chattopadhyaya, 1991: 185). Thus, rationalism is obligatory for all physicians (Chattopadhyaya, 1991: 269). It could be seen that ancient doctors and surgeons were a mix of free thinkers. Medical texts take a science oriented position rather than magical rites. As we know that ritual and *moksa* (liberation) represent the two branches of Vedic orthodoxy known as *karma-kanda* and *jnana-kanda*. As we discussed above that medical science is based on scientific and rationalist therapeutics consideration. In this case, “no proposition belonging to the context of ritual or that of moksa is to be allowed in medicine” (Chattopadhyaya, 1991:481).

### 4. Superstition, Science, and Politics

The changes in socio-political scenario influenced all philosophies, and Ayurveda was no exception. There was censorship by the law-givers<sup>4</sup> which were not limited to the medical sciences only, but it happened in astronomy also. Chattopadhyaya cites the visiting scientist al-Baruni to highlight this point. Around 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, there was strong pressure of the Brahminical orthodoxy on the scientists that no question on the validity of scripture was possible. For instance, Varahamihira uses the mythologies like Rahu and Ketu to explain the eclipse. Similarly, Brahmagupta, with full knowledge of eclipse, he opened his work of astronomy with a defence of mythological-religious views of the eclipse. There are many problems faced by ancient scientists across cultures. For e.g., in the medieval Arabic period, the medicinal system depended more on religious and fundamentalistic concepts which became the foremost reason for the decline of the Galenic system of medicine. Burgel (1998: 55) argues that the 'belief in predestination' became important due to which the intervention of secular therapy was looked down. It became prominent that scholars like Bukhari defended medicine through holy traditions which

<sup>3</sup> *Bruhtrayi* means the three important textbooks on Ayurveda namely, Caraka-samhita, Sushruta-samhita and Ashtanga-hrudaya-samhita.

<sup>4</sup> Chattopadhyaya used this terminology “law-givers” referring to the Brahmin caste who were formulating rules of the society.

are also seen in ancient Indian traditions. As he says, "God did not send down any disease without also sending down a medicine (or cure)," (Burgel, 1998: 55). Suyuti writes, "Science is twofold: the science of bodies and the science of religions," (ibid: 56). However, it was criticized by two scholars who did not argue further beyond a point. Thus, the scientific spirit of medicine survived but it was intertwined with religious practices (Burgel, 1998: 60-61).

However, ancient Indian doctors flout prescription given by law-givers. This could be the reason physicians and surgeons from the ancient period were in under attack by law-makers and spokespersons of the vested interest (Chattopadhyaya, 1991:175). There was an intense ideological fight between the orthodox law givers and pioneers of medical sciences. Medical practitioners rejected the magical, religious and Brahminical orthodoxy. Due to which they became the objects of intense contempt in the eyes of the law-givers. So if the Indian medical literature has the unique feature of bold defence of the need for dissection, the Indian legal literature has also a unique feature of hatred for the doctors and surgeons. The main drive of ancient Indian medicine is thus towards direct observation which results in the accumulation of the amount of empirical data (Chattopadhyaya 1991: 215).

### **5. Evidences of Degradation and Confinement of Ayurveda**

Regarding the decadence of Ayurveda medicinal system, there are two kinds of the school of thought. One argues that it decayed due to the Islamic and British rule whereas another says that it degraded because of internal issues. Scholars have written that in British rule it was considered 'unscientific' and plans of its integration with modern medicine heaved. Another school of thought brings the point of argument to the internal fight within philosophies in the Indian subcontinent. When caste system started making its roots in the society ancient Indian doctors faced the consequences as they used to touch corpses for study (which was prohibited) and treat patients irrespective of their caste. This would have challenged the basic structure of society. So, the decadence started before the upsurge of dynasties of other belief systems. These arguments could not deny the ignorance of British rule. They believed that scientific portion would have been added when Indians interacted with Greeks or other Western scholars. Chattopadhyaya (1982) inspired by the seminal work of Joseph Needham enunciates that neglect and disregard of Asian science and technology are racism- consciously or unconsciously. According to Prasad (2001:3724) "Traditional medicines like Ayurveda and Unani, Gandhi felt, had unlike western science, maintained a relation between science and religion, body and soul, but had not inculcated the spirit of research that fired modern science and gave it contemporary relevance."

### **6. Challenges in the Policy Perspectives: Some Insights from Field**

As we have discussed already, the traditional medicinal system of Indian subcontinent, which is called as Ayurveda, has transformed from magico-religious to logic. After the advent of Sankara, we have witnessed the inter-mingling of superstitions with science. This took place in the neighbouring cultures as well, as mentioned above.

In the post-colonial policies of India, similar inert-mingling of mythologies (*purana* पुराण) can be seen in the educational system of Modern Ayurveda. As a result, the students of BAMS and MD (students we interacted in Jaipur) believe that *purana* and Ayurveda have a single soul. For long practitioners of Ayurveda are propagating that belief system should not be separated from the science. This is seen in the field visits of Jaipur. For instance, if we compare, narrations of two different faculties in Ras-shashtra department of NIA (Jaipur) we could find such contradictions. While a faculty told us that if one is a believer then any process, either traditional or modern, will be a success. Before starting any procedure one should take the name of the God (ईष्ट देव) whereas on the contrary another faculty without mentioning anything on religion and God, very particularly argued that if

standard operating procedures are not followed then the traditional and modern both are of no use. Thus, the scientificity could not be challenged or ad-hoc through religious practices.

Similar debates on education system can also be found whereby most of the students today believe more in the mythical (*puranic*) part of the ancient texts and less in the scientific part. As a result the students believe in the false stories like Ganesh's head surgery, etc. This could affect the over-all understanding of the student. In this case, the reasonable minds keep themselves away from such knowledge bodies. The above mentioned arguments are based on the religious mythological belief of practitioners and not on the fundamental principles of science, direct observation and rational therapeutics. Gandhi criticize Ayurvedic practitioners by saying that they were merely trying to capitalize on the ancient glories of Ayurveda for the market and personal profit without any serious and genuine research (Prasad, 2001:3725). He further argued that Ayurveda's lost glory could only be recovered if the *vaids* pursued the research spirit of the West and acquired honesty of purpose (*ibid*).

## 7. Conclusion

Tolerance and co-existence are part of Indian culture. There was exchange of knowledge which could be traced. The above mentioned examples especially an insight from the field gives an idea about the contradiction in understanding of Ayurveda and due to which its practice is effecting. The current political situation has also a role to play in it. Well, it is true that ancient surgeons were good in rhinoplasty, *vaisesika* philosophy developed the concepts of atoms, but rest is a mere exaggeration of the truth and science. Therefore, in order to develop science and technology, religion and politics should not restrict science. Science should remain open to freedom and to make choices. Only then it could make a contribution to human society.

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