

The Ashtavaidya medical tradition of Kerala

Ashtavaidya, a unique practice of Ayurvedic medicine is an amalgamation of the codified Ayurvedic medical knowledge and non-codified folk medical tradition of India, and is practised by a few physician families in Kerala. Like many other forms of indigenous knowledge, the Ashtavaidya tradition suffers from lack of support, and the rapidly diminishing numbers of practitioners threatens its very existence. Annamma Spudich and Indudharan Menon of the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), Bangalore, have been interviewing the remaining Ashtavaidyas since 1997, and recording the details of their training and practice in an effort to preserve their knowledge for posterity. The following is from an interview with Spudich and Menon about how they started working with the Ashtavaidyas, the unique aspects of the Ashtavaidya medical tradition, and the challenges that lie ahead in preserving their knowledge.

On how they began working with the Ashtavaidyas

You were a cell biologist at Stanford working on cytoskeletons and signal transduction. How did you come to work with the Ashtavaidyas?

Anna Spudich (AS): I grew up in Kerala in a family where there was a lot of respect for indigenous knowledge. At the back of my mind, I think I always wanted to find out more about this system. But I did not have the opportunity because I left India when I was 17. Much later, I was at Cambridge for two years, and at the Cambridge University library I came across an early European '*Herbal*' by John Gerard, published at the end of the 16th century. Herbals were some of the earliest books published after Gutenberg's press was invented; they were recordings of what people were using for medicines and so on. Paging through the book, I came across a picture of the *Ficus* tree. It was obviously the native Indian *Ficus* tree, and I was quite intrigued. So I looked through the rest of the book over the next few months and I found that almost 200 plants of 'the Indies' were described in it. Gerard in his Introduction says that he had never been

to India. He collected the information from what was circulating in Europe at that time, and Gerard specifically talks about how medicines and plants were brought to Europe. That set me on this path of thinking as to why the Europeans were interested in Indian knowledge. What were the sources? How did they get it? Who collected it? Eventually in 1997, I decided that I should really go to the source of knowledge in India and find out. I took a leave of absence from the Stanford University, where I was working. I had someone in my extended family who knew the Ashtavaidyas of Kottayam. There were two Ashtavaidya families there, and I went and met them. Initially there was some trepidation because I was also doing some consulting work for a biotech company, and that alarmed them. I had to reassure them that this was completely my own personal quest and had nothing to do with anyone else.

How did you get interested in the Ashtavaidyas?

Indudharan Menon (IM): I was born in an old village, and vaidyas (traditional doctors) used to come and stay in our house. I learnt basic Ayurvedic concepts and about medicinal plants and preparations from them. After I completed my Masters (in philosophy), I was supposed to go to the US to study existential philosophy. But I was dissuaded by a man who gave me some books and put me in

touch with a number of people, who in turn introduced me to many others. One of them was a famous Ashtavaidya. There were also a number of other vaidyas. Some of them were polymaths. One was teaching martial arts, but was at the same time a famous Sanskritist, and he also used to treat elephants and snake-bites. Then there were people who were experts in temple architecture, mathematics, astronomy and astrology. The vast knowledge of these people opened my eyes. This was in the 70s. Ayurveda was not so popular. Even the children of the Ayurvedic physicians were shy to say that they were studying Ayurveda. So when somebody like me arrived at their homes, when their own children were not interested in traditional knowledge, they just opened the doors. I stayed with them, studied with them, travelled with them...

On the Ashtavaidya tradition

It is said that there were originally 18 Ashtavaidya families...

IM: No. That's just a way of saying – 18 is a number we come across in many traditional contexts in India. There were many families.

How did the tradition begin?

AS: Long before the Common Era, South India was a very active trading region



Indudharan Menon and Annamma Spudich at NCBS, 18 May 2010

IN CONVERSATION

and a cradle of culture and intellectual development. In fact, a book called the *Peripus of the Erythraean Sea*, which is dated 76 CE and was written by a Greek mariner, talks about the route to the western coast of India, and its different ports. It attracted people from many places, and physicians were among them. Also, folk medical knowledge in South India was very strong because parts of southwest India are biodiversity hotspots and we have a very large collection of medicinal plants.

IM: Ayurveda as a coherent system of medicine emerged in northern India, especially in the Indo-Gangetic plains (see Box 1). Scholars migrating from the North brought Ayurveda and other sciences down to Malabar via the *dakshinapatha* (the route towards the south). In those days, when men of knowledge arrived in a new place, they had to prove their worth and find patrons. The social structure and the temple culture of the Namboothiri Brahmins in medieval Kerala provided a supportive environment for scholars to live and practise their sciences. The Ayurvedic physicians interacted with local vaidyas, adopted pertinent aspects of local therapeutic techniques and developed a new style of healing. That is how the Ashtavaidya tradition evolved.

Is Ashtavaidya different from Ayurveda?

IM: It is a name that has been given to this class of physicians in Kerala who practise the eight branches of classical Ayurveda. The only difference is, the Ashtavaidyas brought in a lot of local elements, which became the strength of their tradition.

So could we say that the Ashtavaidya tradition is an amalgamation of Ayurveda and folk medicine?

IM: Yes. There is a solid textual tradition – the classical tradition coming from the Indus Valley. And when you come to a new place, you do not have the same plants. So there was a big necessity for Ayurvedic physicians from the north to interact with the local folk medical practitioners or the vaidyas. In turn, the vaidyas also got knowledge from these texts – they had a dynamic exchange of knowledge and techniques.

Do you find parallel systems of medicine, like the Ashtavaidya tradition, in other parts of India?

AS: Bengal has a few Ayurvedic systems.

IM: Every region has its own specific approach – for instance, in some places, they use *bhasmas* (ash) and *gutikas* (tablets). In Kerala, it is more *asavas* (fermented medicine) and *kashayas* (decocctions). But the physicians are gen-

erally called by the same term, baid, or vaidya.

The Ashtavaidyas are called so because they follow the eight angas (branches) of Ayurveda. Do all of them practise all the eight angas or are they specialized?

(The eight angas are: general medicine, paediatrics, toxicology, surgery, medico-surgery dealing with supraclavicular diseases, promotive therapy, aphrodisiacs, and ailments caused by invisible agents¹.)

IM: They study the classical text that deals with all the angas, but for many different reasons, they have stopped practising all of them. Probably because of local competition... Once you have a good paediatrician, for instance, people would go to him. So of the *ashta angas* (eight branches), some of them have lost importance in the Ashtavaidya families.

AS: There was a story that was told to us – Vaidyamadham Namboothiri, one of the most important Ashtavaidyas, called a local vaidya to treat his grandson. When he was asked, ‘Why are you calling him?’ he said, ‘He knows more about this.’

Could you tell us about the Ashtavaidyas whom you have interviewed?

AS: I interviewed two of them between 1997 and 2001. But I talked with them

Box 1. Medical systems of India

India might well be called the treasure-house of alternative medicine – we have innumerable ‘types’ of medicine. Complementary and alternative medical practices in India – Ayurveda, naturopathy, herbal medicine, biopathy, home remedies, wheat-grass therapy, hydrotherapy, electroenergizers, auto-urine therapy, vipassana, yoga, massage, prayers, spiritual healing, tantra/mantra, astromedicine, gem therapy, hypnosis, acupuncture and magnet therapy have been discussed in ref. 2. There are also other medical systems that are popular in India, such as Siddha, Unani, Homeopathy and Tibetan medicine. Of these, only two codified systems originated in India – Ayurveda and Siddha; a brief account of these two systems is given here.

Ayurveda is often referred to as the oldest system of medicine in India. Its origins can be traced back to Vedic and Buddhist medical knowledge, which might have in turn originated from folk healing traditions. The texts that crystallized Ayurveda in its present form were *Sushruta Samhita* by Sushruta (probably before 700 BCE), *Charaka Samhita* by Charaka (1st century CE), and *Ashtangahrdayam* by Vaghbata (8th century CE)³. Ayurveda is based on the concept of the *tridosha* that are ‘a set of parameters, which are physico-chemical and functional in nature’, imbalances in which are thought to result in various ailments (see ref. 4 for a detailed account). Materials of plant origin were primarily used in the preparation of medicines, while those of animal and mineral origins were also utilized².

The Siddha system of medicine originated in South India, and is said to have been developed by 18 ‘Siddhars’. The fundamental tenet of this system of medicine is that food leads to the formation of the *tridoshas* and the various tissues of the body, and imbalances in the *tridoshas* lead to loss of health. Medicines in the Siddha system are largely mineral based (<http://indianmedicine.nic.in/siddha.asp>).

over and over again, because it was a slow thawing process. We talked at length about their education, about cross-referencing knowledge and information – how they learnt from each other, about how they trained their students and what their views were on being physicians and teachers.

I interviewed Olassa Chiratamon Narayan Moos, and Vayaskara Aryan Moos. They are from two famous Ashtavaidya families of central Kerala. I went first to Olassa Moos. For me, he represented the ‘scholar physician’ concept. I once asked him, ‘You have studied so much, so why are you still studying every day?’ He said, ‘Learning is life. Cessation of that is death’. That to me is totally inspirational. His knowledge extended beyond Ayurveda, the classical texts were at his fingertips; he peppered our conversations with quotes from the texts. For anything that I would ask him, even relating to matters that would be more from the perspective of experimental science, his answers were thoughtful and always meaningful. He was a product of a kind of cultural learning and scholarship in India. In fact, he inspired me so much that two or three years after I met him, I left working at Stanford University to devote more time to this.

The other gentleman was ill when I met him. So the conversations that I had with him were mostly about the history of the Vayaskara family in the healing tradition, the story of the founder of his family lineage, his daily schedule, education, etc.

IM: I interviewed three others. One was Plamanthol Moos. His family is very famous in the history of Ashtavaidya because legend has it that Vaghbata, the author of *Ashtangahrdayam*, one of the three fundamental texts of Ayurveda, came from Sind and settled in the Plamanthol home in Kerala. The other two were Alathiyur Nambi and Thaikattu Moos. There was also another Ashtavaidya that both of us interviewed – Vaidyamadham Namboothiri. He is the oldest living Ashtavaidya – he’s 80. He is the last of the Ashtavaidyas who studied in the old style. He did not go to school or college, but had the classical Gurukula education in Sanskrit literature, philosophy, etc. and medicine preparation.

(An Indo-Japanese project called the Programme for Archiving and Documenting Ayurvedic Medicine (PADAM)

is another initiative for preserving traditional Indian medicinal knowledge for posterity. Recently, they published a detailed interview with one of the Ashtavaidyas conducted as part of the programme. In this, the Ashtavaidya talks about his education, the history of the Ashtavaidya families, Vaghbata and the *Ashtangahrdayam*, other medical texts and manuscripts, etc.⁵.)

What kinds of patients come to them?

IM: They have specific areas, which they are well known for, especially locomotor disabilities, paralysis, arthritis and rheumatism.

AS: One of the physicians we interviewed was a specialist in infertility.

IM: They would treat other things too, but a particular Ashtavaidya would have a reputation for curing specific ailments.

What does the training of an Ashtavaidya include?

IM: They start by learning traditional texts by heart. They will master one or two texts thoroughly. And then there is a long apprenticeship under their father, a senior member of the family or a student of the family lineage.

Could you tell us about their mode of diagnosis?

IM: There are standard Ayurvedic procedures and guidelines that are traditionally passed down. And the development of an intuitive skill is part of their training. One can’t pick that up without having first mastered the tradition. They get that by observing their teachers diagnosing and prescribing medicines.

I read that they follow the Ayurvedic text – Ashtangahrdayam of Vaghbata. . .

IM: That is just a backbone. Through their knowledge of medicine, some of the Ashtavaidyas had also discovered formulations for specific disorders. So each family had its own set of special formulations. Many such formulations were gathered, put into verse and written down on palm leaves. Each family also has its own collection of such secret preparations.

So the family used to add to the literature?

IM: Yes. They also wrote erudite commentaries on the *Ashtangahrdayam*, few of which have been published. There are also technical commentaries on medicinal preparations of their own family lineage. Some of these have come out as publications. There is one which is very famous – *Sahasrayogam*. There are a thousand different formulations in that. It was written by an Ashtavaidya from the collected practices, and people added some more. It is said that some medicinal formulae were originally obtained from local folk practitioners.

Do the present Ashtavaidyas also add to the literature?

IM: In recent years, the only person who has been prolific in writing is Vaidyamadham. And the late Vayaskara Moos has written a lot in English and has also published some rare Sanskrit works on Ayurveda.

AS: Vayaskara Moos was a prolific writer on Ayurveda. He has written several works relating Ayurveda pharmacopeia to modern botany. He did not study botany, but learnt it on his own by reading botanical texts. Two books that I know he has published are *Single Drug Remedies* and *Ayurveda Flora Medica*. In both of those, he refers to specific plants in the *Hortus Malabaricus*. The two books are important reference works in *Ayurveda materia medica* (see Box 2).

In which language did the older Ashtavaidyas write their medical formulations, family secrets, etc.?

IM: Most of them were written on palm leaf, in Manipravalam, in verse. It is in Malayalam script, but the words are in Sanskrit or Malayalam, to fit the meter of the verse. So, Manipravalam is a kind of mixed language. The advantage is that vaidyas with a smattering of Sanskrit were also able to read from such works and obtain information.

Do the Ashtavaidyas still prepare their own medicines?

IM: Some of them do. Five families today have their own units. But they have to comply with government norms,

Box 2. Relevant books

1. *The Herbal, or General History of Plants* by John Gerard, originally published in 1597 and revised in 1633.
Currently available: *The Herbal, or General History of Plants* (ed. Johnson, T.), Dover Publications, 1975.
2. *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, originally written in Greek by an unknown mariner in the 1st century CE.
Currently available: *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean by a Merchant of the First Century*, translated and annotated by Wilfred. H. Schroff, Munshiram Publishers, New Delhi, 1996.
3. Heniger, J., *Hendrik Adriaan van Rheede tot Drakenstein (1636–1691) and Hortus Malabaricus: A Contribution to the History of Dutch Colonial Botany*, A.A. Balkema, Rotterdam, Netherlands, 1986.
Original work in Latin, *Hortus Malabaricus*, available at: <http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/b11939795>
4. Nishtheshvar, K. and Vidyanath, R., *Sahasrayogam – Text with English translation*, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, Varanasi, 2006.
5. Sharma, S. and Sharma, R., *Sahasrayogam – Original Sanskrit and Malayalam Verses with Hindi Translation*, Chowkhamba Samskritha Pratisthanam, Varanasi, 2002.
6. Vayaskara N. S. Moos, *Single Drug Remedies*, Vaidyasarathy Press, Kottayam, 1976.
7. Vayaskara N. S. Moos, *Ayurvedic Flora Medica: With Illustrations, Equivalents in Sanskrit and Regional Languages, Medicinal Properties, and Notes on Identification*, Vaidyasarathy Press, Kottayam, 1978.
8. Vayaskara N. S. Moos, *Ashtangahrdayasamhita*, Vaidyasarathy Press, Kottayam, 1956.
9. Vayaskara N. S. Moos, *Indu's Paribhasha or Discourse on Pharmaceutics*, Vaidyasarathy Press, Kottayam, 1979.
10. Vayaskara N. S. Moos, *Ayurvedic Treatments of Kerala*, Vaidyasarathy Press, Kottayam, 1983.
11. Jain, J., *Other Masters: Five Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists of India*, Crafts Museum and the Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India, 1998.

and the days when they plucked plants and prepared the medicines to suit the needs of each individual patient are over.

AS: One of the major problems that all these people are facing is that there is shortage of medicinal plants. In the olden days, the Ashtavaidyas themselves would collect them. They also had their own trusted suppliers and sources and so on. But now, there's a market for medicinal plants. It's commercial, and that changes the whole thing.

The younger people whom I talked to are not familiar with how the medicines are made. In the previous generations, the families had their own medicine-preparing people. They had a universe of support system. Some of them still have their trusted people. But once that is finished, they too have to buy the medicines from the medicine manufacturer.

Preservation of the Ashtavaidya knowledge

Are the Ashtavaidyas themselves taking any steps to protect their knowledge?

AS: The two Ashtavaidyas that I spent time with have both passed away. In one

family, there are no more practising vaidyas. In the other family, there is one. Whereas the fathers were celebrated Ashtavaidyas in their own right, the children went to modern medical schools. The prestige of being an Ayurvedic physician, even of this high level, has diminished. There aren't any more takers for this. There aren't people who are willing to devote the time. I'm not saying that every person who became an Ashtavaidya loved it from the beginning. In fact, one of my interviewees said to me, 'For me there was no choice. I was the oldest son of a family that was doing this for centuries'. But over the years, he was so immersed in it that this was to him his life. Even when he was very ill and dying, his son tells me that his father used to come out and sit in the verandah for two or three hours and people would come to him to be treated.

IM: The Ashtavaidyas are trying to preserve their knowledge in their own way. But for some of them, establishing their financial security is more important than transmitting knowledge. They are trying to keep their tradition going – they are practising it, and maybe attracting some students. But that's not their primary concern.

Would it be a good idea to include skills that are unique to Ashtavaidya in the curriculum?

IM: There have been attempts. Moreover, people who have been qualified by a university spend a year or so with a practising Ashtavaidya. Recently, on the 80th birthday of Vaidyamadham all his disciples gathered at his home. There were about 45. But, some of them had just spent two months watching him treat patients. There are only about five people who are practising, and have spent a couple of years studying under him.

You said there are a few disciples still. Would that be a way in which this knowledge would be preserved a little longer?

AS: It is a complicated question, because it depends on what level of knowledge you are talking about. It is doubtful if there would be another Vaidyamadham among his disciples, because these people were products of a very specific, detailed and intense way of learning. They were also products of the culture in which they grew up. The whole milieu in which they were brought up and the kind of depth which they had is very difficult

to reproduce. But efforts are being made to continue scholarship in Ayurveda and to make it accessible to those willing to embrace the tradition.

How long would you say the Ashtavaidyas tradition would last?

AS: Everything is changing and modifying. What is here isn't what was there a hundred years ago. We are trying to point out the uniqueness of this tradition and to suggest that it is worth preserving in a form that is very similar to what it is now. We as a country, a scholarly society, have to put in effort to preserve it. But how long it is going to be there? I think that depends on what is done to take care of it.

Now that you have interviewed some of the Ashtavaidyas, what are you planning to do next?

AS: We are hoping to write a monograph. Indu will be talking about the Ayurvedic textual tradition, and I'd like

to look more at folk medical tradition. And hopefully interview some more such people. Actually, in addition to the Ashtavaidyas, I have interviewed a *visha chikitsa* person, who treats poisoning, in central Kerala. This person is a Carmelite monk. Carmelites in India have a long tradition of poison treatment; they have their own lineage. They pass on their books to the next *visha chikitsa* physician – a young priest who is designated.

There is this book by Jyotindra Jain called *Other Masters* which is about folk artists who are masters of their own craft. In some sense, that is what I would like to do at some point; to portray some of these 'other masters' as far as traditional botanical and medicinal sciences are concerned.

Is there anything that modern science could do to protect this tradition?

AS: My feeling is, it is important to have a dialogue – an open, unprejudiced dialogue about traditional knowledge. It is

important to realize that traditional knowledge has its own language... There has to be an effort to understand traditional knowledge in its own terms and in its own context.

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