

# Researchers archive vanishing Ashtavaidyas

Courtesy NCBS



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**Bangalore:** They are the last of the Ashtavaidyas — the great Ayurvedic scholar-physicians of Kerala. Preserving their knowledge for posterity is certainly a hallmark of cultural sensitivity.

Thanks to two scholars of the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), Annamma Spudich and Indudharan Menon, health scholars and medical practitioners around the country and world will still have access to the medical practice and tradition of

## Healers Of Old

- ▶ Ashtavaidyas, the traditional physicians of Kerala, are so called for they are **supposed to be prominent** in the eight branches of Ayurvedic system of medicine
- ▶ Belong to legion of disciples of Vagbhata Acharya who was one of the **three great scholars of Ayurveda**, the other two being Caraka and Susrutha
- ▶ Contrary to popular belief, Ashtavaidyas do not belong to eight families, **they are 18 in number**
- ▶ It is believed that the word 'Ashtangavaidya' was commuted to **Ashtavaidya over time**

the legendary but fading Ashtavaidyas of Kerala.

With very few of the original 18 Ashtavaidya families left, Spudich and Menon undertook interviews of the last of these great scholar-physicians and documented their tradition of medicine. They say the Ashtavaidya tradition of Ayurveda could last a decade at best, and if it had to survive, preservation had to begin instantly.

The Ashtavaidyas are unique in that they are scholars as well as physicians — theoreticians and practitioners — of ayurvedic medicine. "Their medical tradition is a combination of text-based Ayurveda practices and regional-folk medical practices born out of Kerala's rich medicinal flora," points out Geoff Hyde, visiting scholar at NCBS, writing about the Ashtavaidya project.

### SPUDICH'S DOCUMENTATION

Researcher Spudich observes that the Ashtavaidyas were responsible for Kerala becoming a prominent Ayurvedic

centre, but were compelled to give in to change. "Changes in contemporary certification requirements for Ayurveda physicians in India today have not helped perpetuate this ancestral system of transmission and practice. As a result, this centuries-old scholar-physician tradition is about to die out."

Spudich interacted with two Ashtavaidyas of Kerala, Olassa Chirattam Narayan Moos and Vayaskara Aryan Moos for four years, between 1997 and 2001. Inspired, she decided to document their vanishing scholar-physician tradition.

Spudich teamed up with Indudharan Menon and conducted extensive interviews with the community last year. They interacted with Vaidyamadham Cheriya Narayanan Namboodiripad, "the doyen of the remaining Ashtavaidyas of Kerala", his brother, junior physicians of his family and other associates. They recorded all aspects of Ashtavaidyas' training in "the art and science of healing, their practices and culture of spirituality in the Ashtavaidya tradition".

### TAILORED TO SUIT TODAY'S WORLD

The interviews revealed interesting changes in the Ashtavaidya community and tradition. Says Spudich: "They have been obliged to adapt and sometimes even abandon their ancestral practices, owing to the expectations of contemporary health care. Consequently, their traditional method of learning has taken a hit, and application of many therapies that were part of individual lineages are being lost."

Spudich explains: "We are losing a unique aspect of the traditional practice of the Ashtavaidyas - individualized therapy. The therapy and medicines prescribed by them focussed on particulars of each individual patient. Limitations of the current education system and standardized medicinal preparations do not allow such individualized therapy."

### HAPPY MIX OF OLD AND NEW

The Ashtavaidya physicians, writes Geoff Hyde, have suggested a cooperative medical culture, combining traditional Indian medical system like Ayurveda with biomedicine to form a new public health system altogether. Given the rich experience and history in Ayurveda and biomedicine, this system would be unprecedented in the country.