

The history of a superstition*

(The ministry of AYUSH, Government of India, recently issued an advisory that reiterated its long held official view that 'the principles, concepts and approaches of ayurveda are not at all comparable with those of the modern medical system'. This view of an absolute dichotomy between the two systems implicitly disputes the universality of the scientific method. The history of how this view gained wide currency in the ayurvedic world has been outlined in the present essay.)

Superstitions can be interesting; more so, when they are housed in the minds of influential men. This is the story of one such superstition that has held sway over every major twentieth century thought leader in the field of ayurveda.

The superstition under discussion is roughly this: ancient Indian sages, who formulated different philosophical systems, had special yogic prowess; these special prowess enabled them to examine nature closely and arrive at its secrets. These secrets were then codified as aphorisms in their respective philosophical treatises. That is to say, Indian sages did advanced science not by employing external techniques of investigation, but by employing internal yogic methods accessible only to those who were rigorously trained in them. Indian philosophical literature, therefore, is replete with advanced scientific knowledge much of which has already been corroborated by the methods of modern physics. Where there is no corroboration yet, wisdom demands that we simply wait and watch.

Why this is superstitious is plain. An ancient Sanskrit verse intelligently articulates the problem with this line of thought: 'If the Buddha is deemed all-knowing, why not Kapila? If both of them are equally all-knowing, how come they disagree?'.¹ The simple fact that, among philosophers, there are diverse views on the same topic of enquiry is enough to prove that their conclusions can claim no finality. In such a scenario, given that everyone does not have easy access to yogic methods, subscription to a particular viewpoint becomes more a function of personal fondness for the philosopher and less a function of the truth

his philosophy might contain. Thus, authority comes to replace common sense and the written word, to replace first hand enquiry. The penchant for clothing speculations, even sensible ones, as yogic insights, leads to privatization of common sense and total intellectual disempowerment – ingredients enough to throttle sincere science.

The historical roots of how this science-negating worldview gained currency in the field of ayurveda are worth exploring. The story dates back to almost a hundred years. In 1921, the then Government of the Madras presidency, constituted a committee to report on the question of recognition and encouragement to the indigenous systems of medicine. The committee, under the chairmanship of Muhammad Usman, did exemplary work and produced an elaborate report that is even today valuable for the vivid pictures of ayurvedic practice it documents.

Captain G. Srinivasa Murti, a well regarded doctor trained in modern medicine, was its secretary. His memorandum, appended to the committee's report, is perhaps the earliest formal attempt at juxtaposing ayurveda with western medicine and the modern scientific method. It also, ironically, represents the earliest intellectual efforts to institutionalize the science-throttling worldview elaborated above. What he unwittingly wrote a hundred years ago continues to be the governing worldview in the ayurvedic world even to this day: 'The methods by which the Hindus sought to cognize things beyond the range of the senses, differed in one vital respect from the methods of the West; in modern science, we seek to overcome the limitations of senses by equipping ourselves with various external aids like the microscope, and telescope, the spectroscope and the like; the Hindus however sought to effect the same results, not by providing their senses with external aids, but by improving their own internal organs of sense (sic), so that their range of perception may be extended by any desired degree; the way of effecting this improvement was by exercising the senses in certain ways indicated in the scriptures and taught by the Guru to the *shishya* when he was ready for it.' After trying to show some parallels between Indian philo-

sophical thought and modern physics, he goes on to hope, 'When one realizes how fully some of these theories have been justified by the most recent events in modern science, one cannot help entertaining the feeling that, as some theories have already proved true, the same may happen in the case of others as well'.²

This idea, supported by neither serious science nor serious philosophy, gained quick acceptance in the ayurvedic world. Stalwarts like Achanta Lakshminpathi³ and Pandit Shiv Sharma⁴ seconded the idea wholeheartedly. The New Age fancy of 'discovering' the ideas of quantum physics in Indian philosophical literature also contributed to the view gaining currency. What's more, the ayurveda syllabus was formulated on its basis and with this, the idea graduated to become the official ayurvedic view. The most serious repercussion of this view was to keep ayurvedic theories out of the scope of scientific scrutiny and this, in the fantastical hope that science has yet to adequately advance to be able to evaluate them! The official ayurvedic view thus came in brazen dissonance with the universality of the scientific method.

'Science is the belief in the ignorance of experts', Feynman famously said. The redemption of ayurveda for the clutches of institutionalized superstitions is dependent on whether its students are capable of this belief. Ayurveda's progress from being a proto-science to a full-fledged science depends on how effectively these institutionalized superstitions are challenged; unchallenged, this great medical inheritance will degenerate into a pseudo-science. May we be aware of this lurking danger.

1. The Tatvasangraha of Shantarakshita, chapter 26, text 3149.
2. Srinivasa Murthy, G., *A Memorandum on the Science and the Art of Indian Medicine*, Government Press, Madras, 1923, pp. 20–21.
3. Lakshminpathi, A., *A Textbook of Ayurveda*, Jain Bhaskarodaya Press, Jamnagar, 1944, vol. 1, section 2, pp. 542–544.
4. Pandit Shiv Sharma, *Ayurvedic Medicine – Past and Present*, Chowkhamba Krishnadas Academy, Varanasi, 1974, p. 209.

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