Traditional Health Systems and Public Policy

Proceedings of an International Workshop, Ottawa, Canada, 2–4 March 1994

Edited by Anwar Islam and Rosina Wiltshire
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CONTENTS

FOREWORD ......................................................... v

WORKSHOP REPORT
  Preamble ..................................................................... 1
  Goals and Objectives .................................................. 2
  Session 1: Workshop Opening ...................................... 3
  Session 2: Traditional Health Systems — Issues and Concerns ........ 6
  Session 3: Health Systems — Traditional/Western Dichotomy ........ 10
  Session 4: Gender and Indigenous Knowledge Issues ............. 15
  Session 5: Traditional Health Systems in Different Cultures ........ 19
  Session 6: Research and Policy ................................... 23
  Session 7: Future Directions ..................................... 29
  Summary and Conclusions ......................................... 31

TRADITIONAL HEALTH SYSTEMS — ISSUES AND CONCERNS
  Law and Traditional Medicine in Kenya .......................... 33
    Arthur Okoth-Owiro
  Traditional Knowledge and Gender: the Caribbean Experience .... 58
    Jeanette Bell
  Models of Health Care Pluralism .................................. 62
    David E. Young
  Understanding Traditional Health Care Systems:
    A Sociological Perspective ........................................ 71
    Anwar Islam

HEALTH SYSTEMS — TRADITIONAL/WESTERN DICHOTOMY
  Traditional Health Systems and the Conventional System in Uganda .... 86
    S. Amooti-Kyomya
  Developmental Therapeutics Program at the Division of
    Cancer Treatment: A Short Description .......................... 91
    Gordon M. Craig
  Traditional Health Care and Public Policy: Recent Trend .......... 96
    Gerard C. Bodekar

GENDER AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE ISSUES
  Traditional Health Systems: Challenges in the Philippines ........ 110
    Ma. Chona L. Segismundo
TRADITIONAL HEALTH SYSTEMS IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

Ayurveda — Fundamentally Based on the Study of Substances ............... 115
   P.K. Warner
The Unani System and Traditional Health Systems in Bangladesh ........... 121
   Hakim Azizul Islam
The Indigenous Health System of the Peruvian Amazon ...................... 129
   Juan Reategui S.

RESEARCH AND POLICY

Traditional Health Systems and Primary Health Care ....................... 131
   Vanaja Ramprasad
WHO's Policy and Activities on Traditional Medicine ....................... 139
   Xiaorui Zhang
Traditional Health Systems: National Policy Issues and Directions ........ 143
   Hakim Mohammed Said
Quranic Concepts for Eliminating Negative Emotions: Another Aspect of the Healing Effect of the Quran ...................... 148
   Ahmed Elkadi
Traditional Health Services in the Middle East: Spiritual Aspects of Healing and their Scientific Bases ...................... 168
   Ahmed Elkadi

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS ................................................. 175
Ayurveda - Fundamentally Based on the Study of Substances

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Ayurveda is the medical system developed in India with its roots in the antique past history. It has always advanced with the times, enriched by new ideas, techniques and medicines that reached from outside or that come up with frequent renaissance in the country itself. It has spread its messages to outside countries also. The advent of western medicine, though at first was a challenge, has only helped to encourage its progress, absorbing new knowledge and techniques and modifying itself without sacrificing its fundamental tenets. As professor Needham, in his introduction to his monumental work "Science and Civilization in China" stated that the oriental approaches have now come up with more value to modern researches as well. According to him, what the modern science now looks for after three centuries of scientific materialism, is for an organic philosophy, which the oriental sciences already possesses. So, although Chinese medicine and Ayurveda are grouped as traditional systems, they are not to be classified as tribal medicine.

The term "Ayurveda" means "Science of Life". But this term came into vogue only with the classical Sanskrit texts called Samhitas, composed around 600 B.C. The available Samhitas are Charaka, Susruta, Bhela samhita and Kasyapa samhita although there are references to many more Samhitas. Charaka refers to general medicine, Susruta refers to surgery, Kasyapa refers to gynaecology and paediatrics and so on. But the Samhitas, as commonly known, are not original texts but redacted by later authors. All Samhitas have undergone reductions, modifications and enrichment with other branches of knowledge. It is with these Samhitas, the term Ayurveda come into vogue. Actually, the emergence of scientific medical discipline, separated from other branches of knowledge, begins only with these Samhitas. Before that, there were Vedic or Tanthric medicines to protect body and mind from diseases. Charaka has three approaches - Daivavypsraya, Satvaavajaya and Yuktivyapsraya. Daivavyapsraya is based on, divinity, magic, prayers, faith, treatment and others. Satvaavajaya means controlling of body and mind by yoga, meditation and similar techniques. Yuktivyapsraya is rationalistic treatment, considering human and universe constituted by materials (Dravyas). Ayurveda is based on the study of Dravya (substance).

There is a mythological story in Charaka on the origin of Ayurveda. Formerly, people were nomadic and subsisted on what they were
supplied by nature. They were happy and strong. But when settled life started with hoarding of food and materials, excessive use of them, lack of attention and proper responding to the calls of nature - the fourteen vegas - or natural urges as for urination, defecation, sneezing and indifferent attitude to the social duties, men become impure, and more and more defiled in body and mind. The new diseases caused by impure blood, cough, consumption, bowel problems, urinary troubles, diabetes or difficult micturition, Vata troubles and so on cropped up. Sages also suffered from these new diseases. So, they assembled on the Himalayas and one sage, "Bharadwaja", went to "Indra" to study Ayurveda. On coming back, he addressed the sages and appealed to them to divert the attention to the study of Dravya and its properties, the Samanya (general), Visesha (particular) and Samavaya (inherent), the material properties of Dravya according to tastes and their actions. This story points out how Ayurveda is different from the former approaches and how and original science of medicine emerged with a worldly outlook, based on its studies on the properties of Dravya or material substances.

Ayurveda is the science for promoting health, and for preventing and curing diseases. Diseases are due to imbalance of our internal organism due to lack of accord with environmental conditions. Ayurveda contemplates studies of man and the universe, both constituted by the same Bhutas (matter) - the five material substances but always in a changing, dynamic state. Man is a microcosm (a small universe) in the macrocosm (in the big universe) ever in motion. Man changes; has babyhood, adolescence, youth, old age. The environment changes, day and night changes, season changes. If our organism is in accord with the changing conditions, we have internal balance. If in disaccord, our internal balance is upset and diseases occur. The term "Ayu" means "a going on" (always moving). So in Auyurveda the study of the universe and man is directed to the functional aspect. It starts from presenting instructions to have a healthy life. It is to keep our body and mind together to be able to withstand the adversities due to the changes in the environment and living conditions to make the organism powerful to abate the new situations. Diseases occur due to violation of these rules. As man is a microcosm in the Macrocosm, everything in the external and internal environment are present among us and affect us. So, in maintaining and promoting health, and curing diseases, we have to consider all such factors and employ correcting factors holistically as well. Ayurveda is functional, field-oriented and holistic, and thus the study of the properties of Dravya are elaborated with such aim.

The Samhitas present the studies of Dravya, based on four philosophies, the Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya and Vaisesika which provide the epistemological background of Ayurveda. Some researchers say that these philosophies were developed by physicians themselves for the study of Dravya. According to Samkhya, Purusha or the man is a conglomeration of 24 principles evolved from primordial nature
Vayu.

Animates and inanimate materials.

Agni, perceive them separately. We distinguish each Bhuta by which provides all the properties or from the effect they produce. Akasa provides space and sound is its property. Vayu has the properties of Akasa and it stands for movement and tangibility. Agni gives light, has the properties of Akasa and Vayu and gives sight faculty. Jala has the properties of all preceding Bhutas and is the one that lubricates, connects and cools, and taste is its faculty. Prithivi or earth has all the properties of the preceding four Bhuta and it is the Bhuta which provides structure, and its faculty is smell. Although we can distinguish each Bhuta by its property, since all the material articles are constituted by the five Bhutas together, we cannot perceive them separately. We call a material made of Akasa, Vayu, Agni, Jala, and Prithivi based on their predominance in the insistence on the material aspect of Bhuta (matter) and that of mind, soul, place, time and all material things. The properties of materials vary according to the proportion of Bhutas in it. For example, a Dravya with more Akasa, Vayu, Agni is lighter and moves up. On the other hand, one with more Jala and Prithivi is heavier and moves down. But there is nothing extraneous to matter in Ayurveda. Susruta says that nothing in medicine transcends Bhuta. Animates and inanimate are of the same Bhuta. But animates evolves from inanimate. The difference between inanimate and animates is that animates have sense organs whereas, the inanimate do not have. But the sense organs evolved from the Bhutas to the properties of which they have to respond. Ear is to respond to sound. Ear is constituted predominantly with Akasa Bhuta whose property is sound. Eye is to respond to light so, eye is constituted predominantly with Agni. Skin is the organ of touch and it is predominantly of Vayu. Tongue is the organ of taste and nose for smell and so earth for Jala. But life is a dynamic condition, wherein there exists a process of build-up and disintegration. Disintegration means loss of energy. To restore and increase energy, replenishing with external matter is inevitable. So, from the very beginning of life, when sperm and ovum meet, out life throbs, feeding starts - first from mother's food, then from mother's food and outside sources and then completely from outside sources. Food is an external matter introduced into the organism to replenish energy. But organism can utilize this materials only if it is transformed to a state assimilable by the body. This is done by the Agni in he body, the process is known as Paka (digestion). If the food, that is consumed, is not digested as required, it is not property assimilated in and utilized by the body. The body tries to push it out. In this state, if we try to push it again by some means to accomplish feeding, it causes all diseases. So, there is an elaborate study of the properties of medicinal and dietetic materials on the ways of eating, the rules to be followed, that is, properties and troubles created by good and wrong combinations of foods, the agreeable and disagreeable conditions for taking food,
including the seasonal, environmental, psychosomatic and all related conditions. Sex and sleep if abused also affects this process. Because of these, the study of properties of Dravya is the basic factor of Ayurveda. So the study of Dravya (Dravyavijnana) is the most substantial and useful part of Ayurvedic scientific literatures. But the study of Dravya in Ayurveda and in modern science has some different approaches. In Ayurveda, study starts from the total effects, experiences from properties and then to structure. Because as explained earlier, the utility of a substance, action or therapeutic step, depends on how it acts in restoring the upset balance, or maintaining the healthy functions of organism.

For understanding these, two theories are to be studied. The Thridosa theory, tells us on the factors and nature of the alterations in the internal balance. It says that, although the living body is constituted with five Bhutas, in life conditions we are concerned with the changes in the conditions of the organism. These three Dosas, although functional factors are constituted by Bhutas, Vata with Akasa and Vayu, Pitta with Agni, and Kapha with Jala and Prithivi. The changes in the internal system are produced due to excess, diminution or irregularity of three functional factors -- Vata, Pitta and Kapha. Vata stands for all movements, Pitta for heat, thermogenesis and transformation, Kapha for cold, structure and similar properties in general. These three Dosas when get upset vitiate the tissues, wastes or Malas, and create diseases. There are varieties of mixture and combinations of these Dosas. Each situation is studied by the symptoms. In health and diseases, three state of Dosas are important. So, materials, techniques and movements are meant to increasing, decreasing or regularising these Dosas. Similar properties increase them and dissimilar properties decrease.

A Dravya is studied on how its properties act on Dosa - Dryness, lightness, coldness, hardness, subtleness, instability are the properties of Vata. Pitta has the properties of unctuous and acuteness, heat, lightness, odour, flowingness and liquidity etc. Heaviness, slowness, coldness, unctuousness, smoothness, denseness, softness and stability are the properties of Kapha. The properties of substances studied as of two categories. The material properties are twenty in number -- heaviness, lightness, slowness, fastness, coldness, heat, unctuousness, dryness, slippery, hardness, denseness, amorphousness, softness, roughness, stable, unstable, subtle, gross, transparent, and opaqueness. So, by applying materials or actions opposite to the properties of Dosas, we can decrease them, and with similar properties, increase them. Another category of properties is the taste or Rasas of the substances. There are six tastes -- sweet, sour, salty, bitter, acrid, and astringent. Of these, the first three acts against Vata, but increase Kapha and the latter three increase Vata but decrease Kapha, sweet, astringent and bitter decrease Pitta, sour, salty, and acrid increase Pitta. So, all articles are studied as per their
tastes. But we cannot rely on these primary tastes alone, since there are transform actions of properties when administered. There is Vipaka or post-digestion taste, Veerya or potency and Prabhava or higher peculiar properties which overwhelm the properties of taste, Vipaka and Veerya. Sweet and salty in Vipaka turns sweet, sour remains sour; bitter, acrid and astringent act as acrid. Again Veerya is of two extreme. Hot or cold (body building or reducing). Now substances with same type of Vipaka and Veerya in action transcend all these properties and show special actions. This is Prabhava. Acrid provokes Vata but ginger although acrid pacifies Vata. Sweet increases Kapha but honey though sweet is the best medicine against Kapha. There are many exceptions and such specialities. Still using these tastes we can guess the properties of herbs, dietetic articles, minerals and animal products. Above all, it is said that the substance has its holistic effect.

All substances, Dravya, herbs, materials or animal products are studied in Ayurveda to know how they act on the Dosas - help to maintain the balanced state, provoke or pacify them and help to purify them from the system. There are groupings as per their materials properties, taste properties (as sweet group and bitter group etc.) and various other categorical medical groupings. Ayurveda is immensely rich with studies of dietetic articles and medicinal properties of herbs and others. Classical texts start with such study on groups of medicines. If we follow the study from Vedic times we can see a gradual advancement in quantity and quality of studies. In Rigveda, there are references of 67 herbs, 82 of Yajurveda, 239 of Atarvaveda, 1800 of Charaka, 513 of Susruta, 602 of Vagbhata. In Charaka, we have classifications, based on the Dharma, Karma and Rupa. Identification and classification based on origin and form starts with Charaka. He classifies medicines as Jangama (derived from animals), Oulbhika (the plants) and Parthivas (minerals). Of these Oulbhida from plants, we have Vanaspati, Vanaspathya, Veeruth and Ulbijam.

Ayurvedic literature has always progressed with the times. The present Materia Medica contain more than 2500 herbs and other items. The studies of identification from origin, forms and others were developed later in Vrikshayurveda. We have references for that in Brihatsamhita, Arthasasthra of Chanakya. It became important when planned towns and cities came up during the Mourya period. Sir William Jones, an eminent scientist and scholar and was the president of the Royal Asiatic Society, said, "if Carl Von Linne had studied this ancient language and gone through these classifications (taxonomies) he would have accepted it without any further modification."

I would like to point out that the value of this treasure is practically lost due to the conditions through which we have passed. India is a continent with various climates and geographical peculiarities, so with the richest sources of herbal and other medicines. It is believed that there are already more than 2200
recognized species of medicinal plants recognised and thousands unrecognised in India. In Ayurveda, we use about 700 herbs and other are not studied even by us. Kerala is a tropical region with immense varieties of herbs. Because of the western education people are ignoring the values of these traditional knowledge. But with the current resurgence of interest on traditional health systems and knowledge all over the world, and the active support and cooperation of scientists, researchers, medical doctors and aid agencies, we are hopeful for a glorious future to preserve this rich health care systems and traditional knowledge.