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Ashtavaidyas: Adepts In Ashtangas Of Ayurvedic Tradition

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Abstract: The tradition of Ashtavaidyas holds a unique place in the annals of Ayurveda, the ancient system of Indian medicine. Originating in Kerala, the Ashtavaidyas are a distinguished group of physicians who are custodians of a lineage-based practice rooted in classical Ayurvedic texts. Known for their deep knowledge of the eight branches of Ayurveda (Ashta-anga), they are revered for their ability to diagnose and treat a wide array of illnesses through a holistic understanding of health, including body, mind, and spirit. This article explores the historical significance, training, and methodologies of Ashtavaidyas, emphasizing their role in preserving and propagating traditional Ayurvedic practices.. The resilience of the Ashtavaidya tradition in contemporary society, despite the challenges posed by modernization and globalized healthcare systems, highlights its enduring relevance as a cornerstone of traditional medicine.

Index Terms - Ashtavaidyas, Ayurveda, Kerala, Traditional Medicine, Ayurvedic Lineage, Classical Texts, Ashta-anga, Indian Medicine.

Introduction

The history of Kerala is a product of many unclear doubts and not clearly defined. No one has clear and defined evidence to the history of Kerala. Even the history of the presence of Ayurveda in Kerala is of the same way. Clarity is not in the best of its form. Under any circumstance, no one can avoid the importance and the presence of the Ashtavaidya family in the history of Ayurveda in Kerala. Legendary says that Vagbhata, the author of the 'Ashtangahridaya' came to Kerala and taught the eight branches of Ayurveda to eighteen Nambutiri families. The eight branches are:

1. Kaya Chikitsa or General Medicine
2. Bala Chikitsa or Pediatrics
3. Graha Chikitsa or the treatment for disease affecting the mind.
4. Urdhwanga Chikitsa or Treatment of the eyes, nose ears etc. i.e the ENT treatment.
5. Shalya Tantra or Surgery
6. Damstra Chikitsa or Toxicology
7. Jara Chikitsa or old age treatments.

The name 'Ashtavaidyas' can be explained in two ways. The one is as "Ashtangavaidyas" which means 'a person who has studied the eight branches of Ayurveda and practiced them thoroughly'. The second is the "Ashtangahridayavaidya", which means a person who did the practicing based on what they learnt from the text, Ashtangahridaya. Even though there is no clear evidence, it is presumed that the term "Ashtavaidya" must have been derived by shortening the middle part of Ashtangavaidyas or Ashtangahridayavaidyas. Vagbhata's period is presumed to be between 6th CE and 8th CE. The history and legendary suggests the fact that the traditions and practices of brahmins were totally different from others and therefore they lived secluded with their own manner. It is considered that they were people who migrated to Kerala from different places. The article 'Ashtavaidyas' written by Raghavan Thirumal pad states that brahmins originally hails from a small village in Andhra Pradesh named Rayila Seema. They shifted their location from Rayila Seema to Karnataka and finally settled in Kerala. Their arrival in Kerala is considered to be around 4th CE approximately. Another migration by Brahmins to Kerala was around 8th CE. Raghavan Thirumal Pad the great theoretician of the Ayurveda opines that Vagbhata should have come to Kerala in any one of those migrations. It is widely believed that much before the period of Vagbhata i.e is during the 3rd BCE itself Buddhism spread in Kerala. However, there is no clear evidence about their existence or contributions to Ayurveda as no authentic Ayurvedic texts of theirs' have been discovered or excavated.

After the entry of Vagbhata and Brahmins into Kerala there was a resurgence of the scientific studies related to Ayurveda. Each royal family of Kerala had a physician from an Ashtavaidya family as their court physician. The health and well-being of the royal family's were the responsibility of these Ashtavaidyas. Theses royal family Ashtavaidyas had under them lots of assistance who were not scientifically qualified in Ayurveda, but knew how to prepare and use medicines made from their specific regions.

These regional medical practitioners under the royal Ashtavaidyas were not at all well versed in Sanskrit. Texts like "Alathiyur Manipravalam" must have helped them to know more about the prevalent Sanskrit texts. Traditional Vaidya families dealing with Paediatrics, Netracikitsa and Toxicology might have been derived and formed through this way is a presumption of Raghava Thirumalpad. The regional medical practitioners who worked under the royal family Ashtavaidyas upgraded their Sanskrit and scientific knowledge clearing their doubts from the royal Ashtavaidyas.

It is presumed that much before the advent of the brahmin migration and Sanskrit scientific knowledge there should have existed another regional medicinal curing practice of their own regional tradition having medicinal curing techniques. Due to the traditional inherent knowledge, experience and

continuous experimentation with observation, there were greater chances for the then prevailing medicines and customs, to have joined and mixed with the Ayurveda. The way of treatment of the regional medical practitioners of Kerala is an ample proof of this mixed tradition. Most of the medicines used by them have not been mentioned in Sanskrit Ayurvedic texts. It is presumed that there was widespread use of such medicinal mixtures, which might have been highly effective. In Kerala, the traditional vaidya groups specialised in balacikitsa can be considered as a great evidence of this. People from the lower castes such as Ezhava, Mannan and the Velan took up balacikitsa as their familial and clan tradition and this clearly indicates the presence of regional medical practitioners. The various authors of the Indian classical texts have mentioned and discussed the eight branches of Ayurveda. However, it is interesting to note that each of them seems to be particularly interested and specialized in one of the eight branches. For example: Caraka specialized in general medicine, Susruta in surgery, Kasypa in paediatrics etc. While taking into account the history of Ayurveda, the Ashtavaidyas are specialized in all the eight branches of Ayurveda. They not only taught the eight branches but also practiced them with the same skill, power and expertise. People considered them as the supreme authority of Ayurveda. Raghavan Thirumalpad points out the authoritative nature of them thus, 'Using these regional medicinal practices would not always help cure all diseases. In such cases, there should be a scientifically skilled and knowledgeable person i.e is Ashtangavaidya who can solve all types of health problems'. Raghavan Thirumalpad clearly remembers the talk of elders about this in his childhood. The contribution of Ashtavaidya families in Kerala Kaumarabhrtya is of special importance. They contributed several medicines in the field of Kaumarabhrtya and are still practicing it.

Ashtavaidyas

Even though Ashtavaidyas were brahmins, the mainstream brahmins considered them as a secluded group. Customs and traditions of this group clearly prove the fact that Ashtavaidyas were pure brahmins. However, since they were more interested in practicing the clans' traditional knowledge and Ayurveda, instead of learning and getting in depth knowledge of Vedas, they made Ayurveda their religious text, which they respected and acknowledged the most. Surgery, post-mortem and disease diagnosis were the part of their duty. This they would not be able to do without touching their patients of any caste or clan. Due to this the mainstream brahmins secluded them as outcaste brahmins. Ashtavaidyas clan used to marry from their own clan. Rare instances of marriage with woman of other namboodiri families also occurred. Eighteen families of Ashtavaidya are given below:

Alathiyoor Nambi

Akalanathu Mooss

Cheerattamannu Mooss

Choondal Mooss

Ilayidath Thaikkattu Moos

Karathol Nambi

Kuriyedath Mooss

Kurumbepilly Mooss

Kuttancherry Mooss

Paduthol Mooss

Parappur Mooss

Pazhanellippurth Thaikkattu Mooss

Peringavu Mooss

Pulamanthol Mooss

Ubhayoor Mooss

Vatuthala Mooss

Vayaskara Mooss

Velladu Mooss



In the beginning, there were eighteen namboodiri families, which later got reduced by coilation or even extinction. Only seven Ashtavaidya families still exist. These families are:

Alathiyoor Nambi

Cheerattamannu Mooss or Olssa Moos

Ilayedath Thaikkattu Mooss

Kuttanchery Mooss

Pazhanellippurath Thaikkattu Mooss

Pulamanthole Mooss

Vayaskara Mooss

The emergence and wide spread influence of allopathy, which has a fast effect on diseases and the, made many members of the Ashtavaidya family to shift to allopathic medicines and other professional disciplines. Among these seven Ashtavaidya families Ayurveda practices are followed only by five families. Recently the Vaidyamadhoma family is also included in the Ashtavaidya family. So as a whole six Ashtavaidya families are there. They are practicing the traditional Ayurveda medicines also. Those are:

1. Alathiyoor Nambi
2. Cheerattamannu Mooss (Olassa Mooss)
3. Ilayedath Thakkattu Mooss
4. Pazhanellippurath Thakkattu Mooss
5. Pulamanthole Mooss
6. Vaidyamadhoma

Alathiyoor

The Alathiyoor Nambi's Illam was situated at Triprangod in Malapuram district. Tradition says, Nambi was examined by Ashwanidevas, the devavaidyas. Satisfied by Nambi's performance, Ashwanidevas presented some grandhas to him and as Nambi was having food, he received the grandhas from Ashwanidevas with his left hand. So the patients still believe that if they receive the medicines or oils from the Nambi's left hand it will be more curable. The Nambis started their Ayurvedic studies from Kuttancheri Mooss. A member of this family Narayanan Nambi received the Ayurveda Degree from the Kottakkal Aryavaidyasala and he practiced under Trissur Thakkattu Narayanan Mooss and Kuttancheri Aryan Mooss. His son Vasudevan was adopted to Trissur Thakkattu family. He got BAM Degree from Vaidyaratnam Ayurveda College and now he is the Managing Director of SNA Aushadhasala which is related to their family properties. Now Narayanan nambi, the younger son of Narayanan Nambi is the physician of this family.

Cheerattamannu or Olassayil Mooss

The Cheerattamannu Illam belongs to Angadippuram in Malappuram district. When Tippu started his invasion in Malabar they went to Travancore for some time and resided at Cherthala. Afterwards with the help of Travancore King they permanently settled at Olassayil near Kottayam. The reputed ayurvedic physician named Narayanan Mooss belongs to this family. His second son is well-versed in allopathy. He is the first member of the Ashtavaidya families to have scholarship in allopathic medicine. He is now practicing at United States. His younger brother is a specialist in the treatments of eye diseases. Another younger brother is a dentist. Their eldest brother Narayanan Mooss preserved the family tradition. His son Narayanan Mooss has got scholarship in Ayurveda (BAM) and now he conserves the family's tradition. His son Aryan mooss is now studying Ayurveda. Dhanvanthari is the tutelary deity of Cheerattamannu family.

Elayidathu Thykkattu Mooss

The Elayidathu Thykkattu Illam was situated at Idakkunni village of Trissur district. The Irankunnappuzha kuriyedathu Mooss and his illam (home) do not exist. On the verge of extinction, the family members have mingled with the Elayidathu Thykkattu Illam. The Narayanan mooss has received the Vaidyaratnam award from the Honorable Viceroy of India for his medical service. His son Neelakandan mooss is the founder of Thykkattussery Vaidyaratnam Aushadhasala and Vaidyaratnam Ayurveda College. The administration of the college is undertaken by the family. The Vaidyaratnam Narayanan Mooss' younger brother Divakaram Mooss is the founder of ETM Vaidyasala. Padmabhooshan E.T.Narayanan Mooss is the chief physician in the family. His two sons are also practicing ayurveda and their sons now study ayurveda. Durga Devi, with a pot of amrit in one hand and leech in other hand is the tutelary deity of this family.

Pulamanthol Mooss

The family of Pulamenthol Mooss belongs to Malappuram district. They were the court physicians of the Zamorins and Valluvakonattiris. There is a legendary which says that Vagbhata spent his last years in Pulamanthol mana. Rudra and Dhanvantari are the tutelary deities of this family. The present members of Vayaskara family are the descendants of the person adopted from Pulamanthol family. Now the physicians of Thykkattu family are related to Pulamonthol family. Now Sankaran Mooss is the chief physician in the family. His two sons help him in this field.

Pazhanellippurath Thykkattu Mooss

The Pazhanellippurath Thykkattu Illam is very ancient. It was situated in between Kuttippuram and Pallippuram. The Zamorins of Calicut used to have their treatment from Thykkattu family. The Zamorins and Saktantampuran of Cochin were enemies. Once Saktantampuran was in need of treatments from Thykkattu Mooss. The Thykkattu mooss had given him the treatment. But when Zamorian heard this incident from others the Thykkattu Mooss and his family members were compelled to leave their place. However with the help of a sage they reached Trissur and Saktantampuran helped them giving a house for their accommodation. The family of Parappur Mooss handed over its properties to Thykkattu family, because they had no descendants to hand over their properties. Thykkattu mooss had only one daughter. That lady was married to a member of Elayidathu Thykkattu family member. Narayanan Mooss of Thykkattu is the author of Sadacharavathi vartham and Sindooramanjari was written by his grandson. The last member of this family named Unni Mooss had a daughter who was given in marriage to Pulamanthol Narayanan mooss. They had no issues and so they adopted a child from Alathiyoor Nambi's Illam. Now P.T. Vasudevan Mooss is the chief physician of this family. Vettekaran (Kiritamurthi) is the tutelary deity of this family.

Vaidyamadam

The Vaidyamadam family differs from other Ashtavaidya families. Unlike other Ashtavaidyas they used to study vedas and do not conduct surgery. They were allowed to enter into the sacred yagasala and so are known as 'Yagasala vaidyas'. Because they kept themselves away from surgery, they were not considered as Ashtavaidyas. However in course of time Vaidyamadam is also known as Ashtavaidya. Sri

Valiya Narayanan Namboodiri was the well known physician of this family. Now, Vaidyamadam Cheriya Narayanan Namboodiri inherited his heritage. He is a well known Ayurveda physician of modern Kerala. He has a few books also to his credit.

Conclusion

The Ashtavaidyas represent the living legacy of ancient Ayurvedic wisdom, embodying centuries of holistic healing traditions passed down through generations. With their profound knowledge of the eight branches of Ayurveda, they have been instrumental in preserving the authenticity of this ancient science while adapting to modern health challenges. Their emphasis on individualized treatment, balance, and natural healing resonates deeply in a world that increasingly seeks sustainable and integrative healthcare solutions. As custodians of a rich cultural heritage, the Ashtavaidyas continue to play a pivotal role in promoting wellness, offering a path to physical, mental, and spiritual harmony. By integrating traditional Ayurvedic practices with contemporary medical advancements, they stand as a bridge between ancient knowledge and modern health, ensuring that Ayurveda remains relevant, accessible, and effective in today's world.

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