



By AMITA KANEKAR

## Ayurveda and the Ills of Nationalism

Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh have set up Ayurvedic centres for producing ‘ideal progeny’, in terms of gender, skin colour, height, courage, and so on; this RSS-backed Garbh Vigyan Sanskar project has already delivered 450 ‘customised babies’, according to the office-bearers, is part of the University curriculum in Jamnagar, Gandhinagar, and Bhopal, and plans to set up base in every Indian state by 2020. In Maharashtra, meanwhile, one of the textbooks prescribed for the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the Bachelor of Ayurveda, Medicine, and Surgery (BAMS) course explains various methods to produce a male child.

If you think all of this nightmarish stuff is thankfully distant from Goa, think again. Goa is already an ‘Ayurveda hub’, according to the Goa Tourism Development Corporation (GTDC) website. And this is going to grow. The central government’s ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy (AYUSH) has begun the process of setting up various Ayurveda facilities here, including two district hospitals, AYUSH treatment centres in primary health clinics, and also institutes of education.

Why Goa? The ministry does not explain, but the GTDC website says that Goa is perfect for Ayurveda because of its greenness. This is actually ironic because if this government has its way, the greenness will soon be a memory. From the proposed golf course at Tiracol, which will up-end acres of wild forest, to the disastrous coal hub being planned for Mormugao, the second-home and vacation-home complexes eating up every plateau, the re-started mining havoc in the hills, the ever-widening roads, and so much else, this government is busy wreaking havoc on Goa’s green cover.

The real question though is: will Goans benefit from these new facilities? Of course, say the champions of Ayurveda, from the Baba Ramdev types who claim that Ayurveda can cure anything and everything, to the AYUSH Minister, Goa’s Shripad Naik, who recently declared that AYUSH will shortly have a cure for cancer and diabetes. There are also many who might not fall for these tall claims but feel that Ayurvedic or herbal remedies—for the two are one in the minds of many Indians—are better for health and have less side-effects than allopathy.



In strong contrast to such opinions, however, are the doubts expressed by the scientific fraternity about whether Ayurveda can cure anything at all. One major reason, as Priyanka Pulla points out (*Ayurveda: Hoax or Science?* Open, February 2013) is that there is very little serious research into Ayurvedic treatments. For example, many critical methods of modern research, like the placebo-controlled clinical trials, are not done with Ayurvedic formulations. The AYUSH and other Indian Ayurveda-related websites claim differently, but Pulla says that most of this so-called research is actually either preliminary and scattered—nothing close to the extensive and focussed research expected of allopathic drugs—or simply false.

She adds that the Drug Controller General of India actually allows Ayurvedic drugs to be manufactured and sold without clinical trials, so long as they are described in the ‘ancient texts’; this is apparently proof that they are fine. Thus, Pulla points out, there are thousands of Ayurvedic formulations being sold on the Indian market which have never been through modern scientific tests to check whether they really do as they (or the texts) claim.

Read More: “Yoga is for lazy people”.

Not surprisingly, none of them can be sold abroad for they fail most international tests. The Indian government’s failure to promote genuine research of international standards into Ayurvedic practises contrasts sharply, says Pulla, to the massive investment by the Chinese government into modern research in traditional Chinese medicines.

Ayurveda in fact, for all its followers in India, has always enjoyed some reputation for hoaxes and quackery. Practitioners often peddle tall cures mixed up with rituals and spiritual instruction. Some of the cures appear to be appropriated (without compensation of course) from tribal communities and their knowledge of the natural world. Today’s Ayurveda seems in fact to be a continuum from tribal and bahun knowledge, to brahmanical superstition (including the belief in babas and swamis with miraculous healing powers), and dangerous drugs. Fake Ayurveda rackets are busted across India every year.



It's a situation that calls for stringent regulation and better research. The problem though is that it's also a situation that suits Indian savarnas perfectly. Ayurveda may not be great at curing anything, it may be a great source of income for tricksters, but it is also a great conduit for Indian 'values', i.e. Brahmanism. Just look at the racist and patriarchal ideals fostered by the 'ideal progeny' project and the BAMS textbooks. And note the gaurakshak overtones of the recent AYUSH booklet on 'Mother and Child care', which advises pregnant women to avoid meat and eggs. This, in a country where anaemia is the norm among women, and infant- and maternal-mortality remains shockingly high. But this is less important than the fostering of Brahmanical values.

Ayurveda is thus today a great method to promote Brahmanism, conservatism, and nationalism, both theoretically and practically. It propagates the myth that India of ancient times (i.e. a time when India did not even exist) had scientific knowledge; Modi's claim that ancient Indians knew about genetic science and plastic surgery is just this kind of modern myth-making, so important for a society which in the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot provide universal health care or education.

Creating AYUSH treatment facilities in government hospitals, meanwhile, forces the poor to opt for Ayurveda, making them guinea pigs for untested treatments. AYUSH minister Naik goes one step further, accusing doctors who advise against Ayurvedic treatment of being anti-national. Why doesn't he then demand the closure of all the posh private allopathic hospitals in the country? Or is this nationalism only the burden of the bahujans, just like in the Medium of Instruction issue, where bahujans must use the bamon bhas in government schools while savarnas are free to study in private English schools? Questionable AYUSH treatments for the bahujans in government hospitals, and top-drawer allopathic ones for the savarnas in the private sector: a Brahmanical health-care system par excellence.

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