

## The ethical principles followed by *vaidus*

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Whilst working (as a member of a team set up by Jan Seva Mandal) with the *vaidus* of Nandurbar Taluka, Dhule District, Maharashtra, I witnessed the strict code of ethics followed by these traditional healers.

The educational process is interesting. *Vaidus* are initiated into the system when they are very young, and taught the art of medicine by the existing gurus, or by their own fathers. Students are chosen because of their uprightness of character. When they in turn grow older, they too choose a *shishya*, looking again for such uprightness. In fact today a number of *vaidus* are disappointed with their own sons, who they think are not worthy of carrying on the tradition handed down by their forefathers. Some of these sons are literate, but the influence of 'education' has made them look down on these traditions as superstitions and they are not willing to learn from their fathers. Others may not look down on the system, but their behaviour, influenced by their contact with city dwellers, is not pleasing to their parents. As a result, the number of *vaidus* is diminishing every year, to the loss of the tribals in the area.

When a *vaidu* is approached by a patient, the course of treatment is based on information gathered through questions, and sometimes a *Naadi pariksha*, rather than clinical examinations. The treatment itself is usually based on certain medicinal plants for which he must seek in the jungle. When the *vaidu* reaches the plant, he recites a *mantra*, speaking to the plant, asking it to do good to the patient. Before plucking it from the ground or breaking off a part of it, he will make an offering of a few grains of rice, turmeric, *kumkum* and

sometimes a five- or ten-paise coin. This last item he often asks from the patient, whose name he mentions before placing the money before the plant.

Except for this offering the *vaidu* asks no fee from the patient. Most *vaidus* are subsistence farmers or farm labourers; very few charge for treatment and earn from their healing work. Sometimes the *vaidu* may spend a whole day in search of the particular medicinal plant, incurring the loss of a day's labour. His family accepts this as part of a service to the community. If one of the components of the remedy, such as oil, has to be bought from the market, the *vaidu* expects the patient

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to supply it. If the remedy is to be taken orally, before administering it, the *vaidu* usually tastes it himself.

Sometimes when the *vaidu* is well-known for his ability to cure, he is in great demand far and wide. The relative or friend of the patient, who has called for him to visit the patient, will pay for his bus fare. However, sometimes there is no transport available to the village where he is called to assist the patient, and the *vaidu* will walk long distances without thought of compensation. He will accept whatever food and drink he is offered, but will make no demands.

Most *vaidus* have their own specialty, and treat only a limited number of ailments. If a *vaidu* is unable to treat a certain patient, he tells him so. He may send the patient to another *vaidu* or advise him to go to a doctor or hospital. However, most *vaidus* are wary of doctors because they have seen them eager to make money.

*Vaidus* are often accused of not wanting to share their knowledge. This

is completely untrue. As pointed out earlier, the *vaidu* is choosy of his trainees. So also he will not satisfy a person's curiosity unless he is sure that the knowledge he imparts or shares will not be misused -- used for personal gain. In the meetings that we had with *vaidus* they shared their knowledge, certain that we were using it only for the good of the people we were working with. At these meetings we had young men who were interested in learning from their more experienced elders. The younger *vaidus* were expected to share what little experience they had. But the elders always insisted that they not share information that they had read or heard from others -- only on whatever ailments they themselves have treated successfully. When they share information on a remedy which requires a complicated method of preparation, or which includes plants which are toxic and need a special method of preparation so that the remedy is not harmful to the patient, the *vaidus* insist that this information not be made public, because of the probability of mistakes by inexperienced persons. In fact, it was due to the *vaidus* sharing that our team compiled detailed information on 150 plants used in tribal medicine.

I personally have not interacted with those medicine men who only recite *mantras* and 'dance' around the patient, often demanding a fee of a chicken or liquor. However, there are some people who have great faith in them and the sick have been known to be cured of their complaints. These medicine men seem to be particularly effective for those who are mentally disturbed.

### Reference :

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