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DISCUSSION

Confused mystification of Ayurvedic concepts

G L KRISHNA

Abstract

Charaka Samhita, the foremost of ayurvedic classics, categorically states that observations and inferences drawn therefrom are the primary means through which ayurvedic knowledge has been acquired and codified. It declares that, of all types of evidence, that vouched by direct observations is the most dependable. This being the case, it is baseless to suppose that ayurvedic knowledge was derived from the deep meditative experiences of ancient sages. The supposition, in addition to being a brazen insult to the reason-based (yukti-vyapashraya) character of classical ayurveda, has caused unspeakable damage to ayurveda's revival along evidence-based lines in current times.

Keywords: Ayurveda, evidence-based, rational, occult

The paper "A qualia-centric approach to Ayurveda and Hindu knowledge systems can address modern science's blind spot" [1], authored by Anand Venkatraman, takes bits and pieces from Indian philosophy, mystical traditions, ayurveda and modern science, mixes them up with a heavy dose of the author's own speculations; and, advances an idea that is too weak to stand the test of logic.

Fundamentally, the idea articulated in the paper is that ayurvedic knowledge is "primarily derived from systematising the experiences of people capable of advanced meditation, who used their expanded cognitive faculties to study the external world, their own bodies, and their own minds from the first-person perspective." [1]

The idea is old, and its variants have been advanced by enthusiasts repeatedly in different forms. Its earliest variant in the ayurvedic context, put forward by G Srinivasa Murti, appeared a century ago, in The Report of the Committee on Indigenous Systems of Medicine (Usman Committee Report), Madras, 1923. Murti's view and my critique of it are available in the essay "The history of a superstition". Philosophically speaking, the points articulated therein are valid in refuting the present paper too. Interested readers may kindly consult that piece [2].

Suffice it to say here that *Charaka Samhita*, the foremost of ayurvedic classics, categorically states that observations and inferences drawn therefrom are the primary means through which ayurvedic knowledge has been acquired and codified. It declares that, of all types of evidence, that vouched for by direct observations is the most dependable: *sarvachakshushaam etat param yadaindrum chakshuh* [3]. While emphasising the distinction between texts that are evidence-informed (*drishtaartha*) and those that are occult (*adrishtaartha*), Charaka places ayurveda in the former group [3]. Further clarifying the point, Chakrapani, the commentator on *Charaka Samhita*, says that ayurvedic knowledge is wholly within the ambit of observations and reasoning — *pramaanantara-upalabdhi-yogyarthah*. Nowhere do ayurveda classics refer to deep meditative experiences as the sources of the knowledge they codify. It must be noted that the present paper too quotes not a single primary text of ayurveda to substantiate its argument.

The paper has other factual and logical inaccuracies too. "Tejas links to vision, the feet, and walking," the author says [1]. This is factually wrong. Ayurvedic texts clearly associate tejas with vision; but there is no special association of *tejas* with either the feet or walking. Moreover, walking is expressly associated with *vayu*. In fact, etymologically, *vayu* means movement. When the ayurvedic perspective is so clear on the matter, summoning unrelated texts to justify such fundamentally wrong associations is unacceptable.

The author then comes up with a fantastical problem and an even more fantastical solution for it. He writes,

One might wonder why the feet, which are at the bottom of the body, should come higher than the anus and genitals. From my perspective as a neurologist, the simplest explanation is that embryologically speaking, the feet arise from a "higher" position on the mammalian Bauplan than the anus and genitalia. The remnants of this origin are still evident in the fact that nerve supply to the feet is from the lumbar nerve roots, whereas the anus and genitals rely more on the sacral nerve roots. Therefore, when an advanced meditator explores their embodiment, they will

notice that the legs seem "higher up" than the anus and genitals, even though on the physical plane they are positioned lower. [1]

The problem is fantastical because ayurveda does not in any way place the feet higher than the anus — whatever that might mean! While ayurvedic texts are certainly valuable for the wealth of observations on health promotion and illness management that they meticulously record, the fact is that their authors were not quite aware of even basic physiological connections. They did not know, for instance, that the kidneys are connected with urine formation or that the lungs have a central role in respiration. This is understandable because they were working on the subject at least two thousand years ago. But here, in the fantastical solution the paper proposes, we are asked to believe that advanced meditators in those far-off ages had an inkling of even the subtle realities of embryological development! That expectation can only leave us speechless.

Based on such hollow arguments, the paper sides with the view that "the fundamentals of Ayurvedic physiology will never be transcended by modern science." [1] The view is dangerously misleading and the havoc it has caused in the field of ayurveda has been detailed elsewhere [4].

Ayurveda was conceived as a reason-based discipline. *Charaka Samhita* coined the memorable term *yukti-vyapashraya* to designate precisely this feature. May we stop indulging in baseless mystifications and further dilute the reason-based character of ayurveda!

Author: G L Krishna (krishnagl@ncbs.res.in), National Centre for Biological Sciences, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Bengaluru, INDIA.

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