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Role of Kavirajas in the Practice of Ayurveda during Colonial Murshidabad

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Abstract:

The history of Bengal during the colonial period is very important from the point of view of public health and medical care services. So many changes were seen in people's health and medical care systems along with social, economic and political changes. Diseases like cholera, smallpox, malaria and kala-azar came again and again as epidemic form. Western Medicines such as allopathic and homeopathy were introduced under government patronage, as a result indigenous medical systems especially ayurveda faced various challenges. The colonial government's attitude towards Indian traditional medicines was not good. A strong desire to introduce European medicines in India was always work in their minds. There was a concept called 'Anglicist-orientalist controversy' regarding the introduction of western education in India. This concept also influenced British rulers in introducing public health system in India. Colonial government stopped practice of native medical science in Calcutta Madrasa and Sanskrit College through the establishment of the Calcutta Medical College. After this incident few eminent ayurvedic practitioners of Bengal played important role in the renaissance of ayurveda. They played significant role in preparing medicines, publishing journals and by establishing ayurvedic training schools. A few ayurvedic practitioner of Murshidabad district also played significant contribution in this regard.

Keywords: Ayurveda, Colonial, Bengal, Kaviraj, Murshidabad.

Ayurveda is one of the oldest healing systems in the world and was developed more than 3000 years ago in India. The term ayurveda is derived from the Sanskrit word *ayur* which

means ‘life’ or ‘longevity’, and *veda* means ‘knowledge’ or ‘science’.¹ We can learn ayurveda’s glorious history from ancient Indian medical texts. We get written information about it from the Vedic period.² The practitioners of Ayurvedic medicine were generally called Vaidya or Kaviraj. Before the establishment of modern day ayurvedic medical college they used to take ayurvedic education from their guru or from tols³. Murshidabad was a special place in the practice of ayurveda since long before. Various accounts indicate that the practice of ayurveda in Murshidabad district was began from the time of King Shashanka for royal needs. Pala Kings and Nawabs of Bengal relied on indigenous Ayurvedic medicine. Indian ayurveda faced adversity when Unani system of medicine in the middle ages and western medicines such as Allopathic and Homeopathy in the colonial period had gained patronage from the rulers.⁴ The colonial government stopped the practice of native medical science in Calcutta Madrasa and Sanskrit College through the establishment of Calcutta Medical College.⁵ However, after doing many inquiries regarding Indian traditional medical systems the company government started to practice native medical sciences in Sanskrit College and Calcutta Madrasah. But the colonial government’s attitude towards Indian medical science was not good, moreover, there was a concept called

This paper was presented at the 82nd Session of the Indian History Congress, Kakatiya University, Warangal, Telangana, India.

¹ Dr. R.D Lele, *Ayurveda and Modern Medicine*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1986, p. 1 ; Dr. P.K Sanyal, *A Story of Medicine & Pharmacy in India*, Calcutta, 1964, pp. 47-51.

² *Rigveda* is the oldest known Vedic Sanskrit text where various types of herbs and metals have been mentioned for the treatment of various ailments. But *Atharvaveda* provides rich information, it contains about 6000 verses and mentions the name of various ailments including fever, paralysis and tuberculosis and various types of remedies. *Atharvaveda* proves that Indian ayurvedic medicine is one of the oldest medical systems in the world. Important medical texts like *Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, *Astanga Samgraha*, *Astanga Hridaya* etc were composed later.

³ Tols: Elementary Schools of Learning run by individual teacher.

⁴ See-Meheub Hossain, “Health and Environment in the 19th Century Murshidabad”, *Proceedings of the Bihar Itihas Parisad*, Bhagalpur, 2022.

⁵ See- Dr: Sankarkumar Nath, *Kolkata Medical Colleger Gorar Kotha o Pandit Madhusudan Gupta*, Sahitya Samsad, Kolkata, Reprint 2019. p. 56,112; Jahan Ali Purkait, *Recasting Unani Medicine in Aliah Madrasah*, Rupali, Kolkata, 2014; The company government took a decision to spend one lakh rupees for the development of Indian education through the Charter Act of 1813, they also wanted to spend some of this allotted money for the development of Indian traditional medical sciences. A large number of European troops and servants died due to the cholera epidemic of 1817-24, the Company government was shocked. For this reason the Colonial Government took some initiative in health and medical matters. In order to overcome the medical crisis, the School for Native Doctors was opened in 1822, but this institution did not last long due to the reluctance of the native students. Finally, Ayurveda medical practice was introduced in Sanskrit college in 1826 and Unani in Calcutta Madrasa in 1827. The British had little faith in Indian medical science, moreover, they had a strong desire to import western medical science and technology to this country and gain profit from it. For this reason, the practice of indigenous medical science in Calcutta Madrasah and Sanskrit College did not last long.

‘Orientalist-Anglicist Controversy’ regarding the introduction of Western education in India, this concept also influenced British rulers in the introduction of public health systems in India.⁶

One more thing should be discussed here; a large numbers of Indians as well as Europeans lost their lives due to the widespread outbreak of various epidemic diseases in Bengal during this period. Diseases like smallpox, cholera, malaria etc. became so deadly. These diseases were not being controlled by the traditional medical systems in most of the cases. Moreover, there was a lack of doctors, so the company government had to focus on alternative medical systems such as western medicines for the sake of imperialism. Modern historians, especially David Arnold⁷, Anil Kumar, Poonam Bala and Arabinda Samanta’s⁸ research shows how the British ruling community wanted to occupy the civil society of this country through medicines. The Calcutta Medical College was established to practice only western medicine. When two indigenous medical institutions were closed down, the little efforts made by the government to promote the practice of indigenous medicine became futile. Scholarships, job confirmation and free travel abroad were offered to Indians students to attract them to practice western medicine. Madhusudan Gupta, a professor of Ayurveda at the Sanskrit College, joined Calcutta Medical College with his colleagues in 1835. He disobeyed traditional conservatism and cut a death body for medical observation in his own hand on 10 January 1836.⁹ The government did welcome him with a fifty gun-salute from Fort William. Company government saw this event as a victory of Western medicine against indigenous medical practices. Although this event was considered as an important milestone in the field of medical science, but many ayurvedic lovers of Bengal considered this event as an insult to the native medical science. But the popularity of ayurveda could not be suppressed, because most of the people used to take indigenous treatment. After this incident few eminent ayurvedic practitioners of Bengal played important role for the renaissance of ayurveda. They played significant role in preparing medicines, publishing journals and establishing ayurvedic training schools. Kaviraj Gangadhar Roy of Murshidabad and Gangaprasad Sen of Calcutta played a leading role in this regard.¹⁰

The ayurvedic practitioners like Gangadhar Roy, Annadaprasad Gupta, Indubhushan Bhattacharya, Satish Chandra Bandapadhyaya, Ranjit Kumar Bandapadhaya, Joytish Chandra Sarkar, Sricharan, Joytindramohan Sarkar etc. of Murshidabad district got reputation by treating according to ayurvedic formulas. According to the census of 1872, the numbers of Kaviraj in Murshidabad district were 2,258.¹¹ This time Kavirajas played a

⁶ Arabinda Samanta, *Rog Rogi Rastro- Unis Satoker Bangla*, Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2004, p. 22.

⁷ See- David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth Century India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1993.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Dr: Sankarkumar Nath, *op. cit.* p. 112.

¹⁰ Subrata Pahari, *Adunik Banglai Ayurved, Chikitsa*, Rachayita, Kolkata, 2015. p. 100; Subrata Pahari, *Unis Satoker Banglai Sanatani Chikitsa Babosthar Swarup*, Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, Reprint 2011. p. 81.

¹¹ H.H Risley, *The People of India, 1915*, New Delhi, Reprint 1991, pp. 362-364; Census of India 1872.

major role in the field of medical services. During this time Allopathic and Homeopathy medical sciences were not as popular as they are today. Moreover, allopathic medicines and doctor's consultation fee were too much expensive. Compare to that, Ayurvedic medicine was easily available and side effect free. For that reason most of the people used to take indigenous treatment. Gangadhar Roy was known as the famous *kaviraj* of Murshidabad district, he was born in Magura village of Jessore district. He came to Saidabad in Baharampur in 1819 and started his career as an ayurvedic doctor. However, he had to move to Calcutta for some times. Later he returned to Saidabad permanently in 1836.¹² Famous ayurvedic physician Bhavaniprasad Sen Roy was his father, who was the chief physician of the royal family of Natore. Maharani Swarnamoye Devi of Cossimbazar and Nawab Bahadur of Murshidabad was successfully treated by Gangadhar Roy. They were suffering from serious illness. English doctor Kota tried to cure Nawab Bahadur but he could not.¹³ Gangadhar successfully treated many complicate diseases and got the status of 'Dhanvantari'. He was famous for his medical skills especially pulse diagnostics and for being a polymath. He used to do surgery in the necessary cases and also got *Kaviraj* and *Kaviratna* title. He learned Ayurveda from Ramakant Sen, an ayurvedic physician of Belgharia. Ramakant Sen used to teach Ayurveda at Belgharia tol near Natore.¹⁴

Gangadhar Roy established an ayurvedic tol in Calcutta where ayurvedic education used to be taught.¹⁵ Famous ayurvedic practitioner Madhusudan Gupta, Pareshnath Sen, Darokanath Sen, Sricharan Sen, Rajendranarayan Sen, Haranchandra Chakrabarty, Ishwarchandra Sen, was his student. Many students studied Ayurveda from his own house.

He wrote more than 41 books on Ayurveda. His commentary work *Jalpakaalpataru Teeka*¹⁶ was written on ancient *Charaka Samhita*, it is an oldest Ayurvedic text. This commentary work on Charaka Samhita can be counted as one of the greatest achievements of Gangadhar's scholarly career. He did not take money from poor people who used to come his own house for treatment. He used to prepare medicines through his own formula. His prepared medicines like 'Pachan' and 'Mustiyog' got special reputation in Kaviraj society for more than a hundred years.¹⁷ He had an herbs garden in Saidabad. He earned a lot of money from medical services due to his reputation as a renowned physician at that time. Through Gangadhar Roy and Gangaprasad Sen, the practice of Ayurveda in Bengal began to flow into two separate genres during nineteenth century.

Annadaprasad Gupta, a student of Gangadhar Roy, successfully treated smallpox, beriberi and stomach related diseases through ayurved formula. Annadaprasad Gupta

¹²Subrata Pahari, *Unis Satoker Banglai Sanatani Chikitsa Babosthar Swarup*, Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, Reprint 2011, p.83.

¹³ Indubhushan Sen, *Ayurved*, A Monthly Journal of Ayurveda,

¹⁴ Subrata Pahari, *op. cit.* p. 82.

¹⁵ Prakas Das Biswas, *Murshidabader Manisi*, Akash, Berhampore, reprint 2018, p. 27.

¹⁶ Dr. Shaktinath Jha, "Desoj Chikitsar Sekal- Ekal Ebong Murshidabad", Arup Chandra ed. *Murshidabad Itibritta* Vol. V, Basbhumi, Berhampore, 2018, p. 364.

¹⁷ *Ayurved*, Falgun, 1369 B., p. 134,135.

contributed to the establishment of an ayurvedic clinic at Saidabad under the patronage of Maharaja Manindra Chandra Nandi in memory of kaviraj Gangadhar Roy. He served as a doctor in this institution for some time and was employed as a house physician in Cossimbazar and Lalgola Rajbari. His son Bimalendu Gupta and Gauranga Gupta were ayurvedic practitioner like him. People from different parts of Bengal used to come at his own clinic near Bhairabtalaghat in Khagra.¹⁸ Mathuramohan Chakraborty was the founder of 'Shakti Oasodhalaya',¹⁹ in Dacca, opened a branch of 'Shakti Oasodhalaya' at Baharampur in Murshidabad district. Kaviraj Indubhusan Bhattacharya was appointed as the first physician of this clinic.²⁰ He was born in 1897 at Vikrampur in the Dhaka district, got ayurveda's knowledge from his elder brother Adinath. He was in Berhampore from 1930 to 1982. Indubhusan was the family physician of many local Zamindars and elite families of Murshidabad and gained reputation from the people.

Kaviraj Satish Chandra Bandopadhyaya came Saidabad from Faridpur and got a job at Berhampore Municipality. This time he started an Ayurvedic clinic at Saidabad. He was well versed for the treatment of smallpox, snakebites and various types of wounds healing. He was also a family physician of the Nawab family of Murshidabad. His son Ranjit Kumar Bandopadhyay was educated in Ayurveda to keep the family tradition. He obtained his B.A.M.S degree in Ayurveda in 1938 and started Ayurved practice with his father Satish Chandra. He considered medical service as a social service and provided free medical services to the needy. Following the methods of Kaviraj Gangadhar Sen Roy, Kaviraj Jatindramohan Sarkar used to do Arurved practice at Babupara in Khagra. He was known as 'Baidyanath Kaviraj' in Murshidabad district. He had a big herbs garden at Banjetia where he planted various herbal trees. Like Gangadhar Roy, he used to prepare Ayurvedic medicine himself. Not only the people of Murshidabad district, but people from different parts of Bengal used to go his clinic for treatment. Also, kaviraj Sricharan, Gauranga Gupta, Kalicharan Bose, Durgeshnath Bhattacharya, Ram Manohar, Adhar Chakraborty of Murshidabad got popularity through Ayurvedic treatment.²¹

All these Ayurvedic practitioners of Murshidabad district contributed significant role in the renaissance of ayurveda in Bengal during nineteenth century. Gangadhar Roy and Gangaprasad Sen brought new tide in the practice of Ayurveda at that time and were also maintained by their followers. Kaviraj played a major role in the Indian medical systems since ancient times. They usually learned Ayurveda through generations or from tols. Although this tradition was followed in ancient and medieval time, later ayurvedic schools

¹⁸ Dr: Utpal Singh Choudhury & Ramaprasad Bhaskar, *Baharampur Sahorer Chikitsa Porisebar Sekal o Ekal*, Suryasena Prakasani, Berhampore, 2011, p. 21.

¹⁹ 'Shakti Oasodhalaya' is traditional ayurveda based dispensary, located in the capital city of Dhaka. Its main center is located in Patuatuli area of old Dhaka. Shakti Oasodhalaya was established in 1901, as the first ayurveda research center in the Indian Sub-continent.

²⁰ Dr: Utpal Singh Choudhury & Ramaprasad Bhaskar, *op.cit.* p. 22.

²¹ Dr: Utpal Singh Choudhury & Ramaprasad Bhaskar, *op.cit.* p. 27.

and colleges were established in modern period. However, the company government banned the practice of indigenous medicine in Calcutta Madrasah and Sanskrit College in 1835, but Ayurvedic practitioners and Ayurved lovers of Bengal became active in the revival of Ayurveda, but no such activity was noticed in the field of Unani medicine. Hakeem community of Bengal was indifferent to this matter, but Hakeem Ajmal Khan, Hakeem Afzal Khan and Hakeem Abdul Hamid in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh were very active to practice Unani. Many Unani health care, educational and research centers were established under their initiative; 'Hamdard Dawakhana' was one of them.