



Research Paper

Vaidyaki: A Traditional Occupation in Himalayan Region of Uttarakhand

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ABSTRACT

Vaidya means a person that works as physician in the society on the basis of traditional knowledge of botanical herbs and Ayurveda. The basis of Vaidyaki (profession of physician) is Ayurveda and folk medicine. Ayurvedic practitioners are also called Vaidyas and the word Vaidya is also used for folk medicinal practitioner. Along with the development of civilization, different professions and occupations also originated. Vaidya are called Bhishak in Rigveda¹. This profession is as old in the Himalayan region as it is in the Indian subcontinent. The profession of Vaidyaki has been going on since ancient times in different areas of Himalayan region of Uttarakhand. It developed as an ancestral profession in many families in the region, and even at present it is in the form of a major accessible means of medicinal system in remote rural areas.

KEYWORDS: Vaidyaki, Himalayan region, herbs, Ayurvedic prescriptions, Occupation

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I. AREA OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to bring to light Vaidyaki, an ancient medical profession prevalent in Himalayan region of Uttarakhand. Uttarakhand is a state of India. It lies on the southern slope of the Himalaya range. Uttarakhand is known for the natural environment of the Himalayas, the Bhabar (lower Himalayas and Shivalik Hills) and Terai (lowland) regions. It borders the Tibet Autonomous Region of China to the north; Nepal to the east; the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh to the south and Himanchal Pradesh to the west and North West. The state is divided in to two divisions, Garhwal and Kumaon with a total of 13 districts. Archaeological evidence supports the existence of humans in the region since prehistoric times. Uttarakhand's name is derived from the Sanskrit words Uttara meaning "north" and Khanda meaning "land", altogether simply meaning "northern land". The name finds mention in early Hindu scriptures as the combined region of "Kedarkhand" and "Manaskhanda" (present day Garhwal and Kumaon). Uttarakhand was also the ancient Puranic term for the central stretch of Indian Himalayas². Most of the northern part of the states is covered by high Himalayan peaks and glaciers. The lower Himalayan region has been inhabited by humans since ancient times. The climate and geography of the region is such that it has nurtured a rich biodiversity, cultural tradition and mythology. The population and tribal communities residing here have been dependent on natural resources for their primary needs of life since ancient times.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- Historical study of Vaidyaki, an ancient medical occupation practiced in the Himalayan region of Uttarakhand.
- This occupation is today's scenario is confined to certain areas although it had a vital role in the area. The aim of this study is also to enlighten this role.

III. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

In the present study, the information obtained from the research topic through the interviews of local scholars, herbalists and professional physicians (Vaidyas) during field visits, has been used as a primary data.

Various research papers, books and literary sources or evidences have been used as secondary sources to know the traditional features and practices of the region.

IV. VAIDYAKI: A TRADITIONAL OCCUPATION

In ancient Indian literature, the word Vaidya has been used in various senses, like the court physicians who treated the rulers were also known as *Vaidyas* and the who treated the general public were also called *Vaidyas*. Those who practiced medicines based on Ayurveda are called *Vaidyas* and folk medicinal practitioners were also known as *Vaidyas*. In the Ramayana, there is a name mention *Sushena*, the *Rajvaidya* (court physician) of *Ravana*. While in the *Bhishma Parva* of the Mahabharata, it has been said about the presence of *Vaidyas* on battlefields³.

Vaidya is also mentions as an occupation in the various professions mentioned in the Vedic literature. The description of this occupation is also found in *Puranas* and *Smiriti* texts. In the Ramayana, there is a mention of such well-versed *Vaidyas* who lived in court, who were prefect in healing as well as preserving the dead body⁴.

There are many descriptions of the appointments of Raj *Vaidyas* (court physician) by Mughal emperors in the medieval period⁵.

The *Nawab* of Bengal *Mir Jafar* had his own physician (Vaidya) named *Ramsen Kavindramani*. In modern period, medical literature written by earlier *Vaidyas* was adjusted, in which foreign scholars also played an important role.

The relationship of *Vaidyaki* has been with the Himalayan region of *Uttarakhand* since ancient time. *Dhanvantari* had given the teachings of Ayurveda to the disciples *Sushruta*, *Aaushadhenava*, *Karvirya*, *Gopurrakshita*, *Vaitaran* etc. at a place called *Uttarakashi*⁶.

It is said in the Mahabharata that the *Khas* people of the Himalayan region presented *Piplik* gold, *Chanwar* (a kind of brush made by *Nilagay* tail) and honey to *Yudhishthira*⁷. The gold found in the sand of *Alaknanda* river Valley is called *Piplik* gold and the ashes made from this gold are considered best for treatment in Ayurveda. During the period of Aurangzeb (1658-1707 C.E.) a woman from the royal family who was suffering from colic was treated by a well-known Vaidya *Moti Singh Bartwal* of *Syupuri* village of *Chamoli* district. The people of *Bartwal* Caste of district *Chamoli* are considered to be the descendants of *Jagdev Panwar*. According to legends, fifty years after the king *Kanakpal*'s⁸ *Chandpur Garhi* deputed, *Jagdev Panwar* came to *Garhwal*, *Uttarakhad* from *Dharnagari* (*Rajasthan*) and settled here. He also brought with him, servant like black smiths, weavers, *Vaidyas*, *Vaadi* (traditional singers and dancers), *Haliya* (ploughmen). The description of *Jagdev Panwar* is also found in the folk songs of this Himalayan region. *Bartwal* caste is known for *Vaidyaki* since ancient period. Even today, in their houses *Kharal* (pots in which herbs were brewed), *Harad* (pebbles for crushing medicines), earthen pots for preparing medicines etc. can be seen. Agriculture and animal husbandry have been the main means of livelihood in this region. Along with this, many people used to live as traders, temple priest, astrologers, *Ouji* (entertainers by singing and dancing), *Jagaria* (priests of local deities), *Hudkiya* (traditional musical instruments players), *Tamota* (black smith), *Halia* (plowman), *Charmakar* (leather man), *Maunpal* (fisherman) etc.

Various means of livelihood developed in the process of building a stable society from the nomadic life. In the *Taleshwar*⁹ and *Pandukeshwara* copper donations plates, the nature of various occupations is also mentioned along with local names. *Vaidyaki* also remained as an additional occupation and like *Vaidyaki*, there was also a business of gathering herbs. These two occupations complemented each other. In the *Taleshwar* copper plate, the person who collects the herbs is said to be a *Hartal* digger.

In ancient times, in the area of *Malla Nagpur*, *Penkhanda*, and *Joshimath* of *Chamoli* district, the *Bhotia* tribes and *Dolba* (people of Tibetan origin) collected and traded herbs. Before independence, the people of *Math* village of *Chamoli* district were authorized to collect herbs, which were tendered by the British government. *Vaidyas* of others regions used to get medicines from those who collected the herbs.

The profession of *Vaidyaki* was ancestral and traditional, and it also included the *Jajmani*¹⁰ system of *exchang* of services¹¹. Villages like *Thala*, *Kimotha*, *Gothinda*, *Simana*, *Rodu*, *Giriya*, *Kotama*, *Raduva* etc. of *Chamoli* and *Rudraprayag* are famous as villages of *Vaidyas*.

The work of *Vaidyaki* was generally done by all the castes of the region. At the time of seasonal diseases, *Vaidyas* used to visit villages with medicines manufactured by them. *Vaidyas* are given money along with ghee (clarified butter), honey, grains and other goods in return for their services. *Vaidyas* received medicinal knowledge form their elders till the nineteenth century. This type of knowledge was transferred on orally from one generation to next generations. The process of training the child starts from the very childhood. In this type of domestic training the child was taught to identify the medicinal herbs in the forests and extract their useful part, to know the proportion of different plants for the manufacture of medicines and to make herbal medicines, infusions, tablets, powders etc.

In the profession of *Vaidyaki*, a Vaidya who has knowledge of *Nari Shastra* (pulse science) is considered a best Vaidya. Vaidya is able to diagnose diseases on the basis of knowledge of *Nari Shastra*. Certainly the knowledge of *Vaidyas* was based on the scientific method. *Vaidyas* used to have the knowledge of *Rasashastra* or alchemy. They had vast knowledge of minerals, material science, and nature of minerals, places of find them and their merits and demerits. They had a detailed knowledge about medicines and their different strains, effects, method of purification, and method of preparations etc¹².

The tradition of *Vaidyaki* in the Himalayan region of *Uttarakhand* existed in both oral and written form. Some people also have manuscripts written on medicine by their ancestors. These manuscripts have been written in *Devnagri* script and in these manuscripts along with Garhwali and *Kumaoni* dialects; even languages like Hindi, Urdu, and Panjabi have been used.

During my research study, I also got such a manuscript which was given to me by Vaidya *Chaitram* of *Raududhar* village of district *Rudraprayag*. It is written in both *Devnagri* and *Gurumukhi* scripts. Along with Ayurvedic prescriptions, two tantric mantras have also been written in this manuscript. According to Vaidya *Chaitram* he never used the prescriptions written in *Gurumukhi* because he did not know the script or Panjabi language. He got this manuscript from *Kangara*, Himanchal Pradesh. In this manuscript, methods of diagnosis of various diseases, remedies related to treatment have been given.

On the basis of manuscripts received from the region and interviews of various *Vaidyas*, it can be said that the field of *Vaidyaki* was wide. Vaidya used to visit other region besides his own areas. The plants that they used for medicinal preparation were obtained from different regions. For example plants like *Ashwagandha* (poison goose berry or winter cherry), *Vaividang* (false black pepper), *Sarpagandha* (Indian snake root or devil pepper or serpentine wood), are found in the lowlands, while plants like *Karavi* or Caraway (meridian fennel and Persian cumin), *Atis* (*Aconitum Heterophyllum*), *Koot* (*Saussurea costus* or *costus* or Indian *costus*) are found in the higher Himalayan regions. *Vaidyas* used to move in different areas to get these medicinal plants. Various diseases of men, women and children, as well as the treatment of domestic animals were also done by them.

After the establishment of educational institutions and medical college in later period, many people went to different regions of the country for formal education of Ayurveda. The rules made by the government from time to time for *Ayurvedic* medicine also were compelling the people of Vaidya families for formal education¹³. In twentieth century, the number of *Vaidyas* with formal education increased and the came to known as *Ayurvedic* doctors and *Ayurvedacharyas*.

Many *Ayurvedic* colleges and educational institutions were established in this region during the British period. *Dhanvatri Ayurvedasharam* was established in the year 1917 C.E. by *Acharay Garnasen* in *Rishikesh* and at the same time institutions like *Mangladevi Ayurvedic* College in Dehradun, *Rishikul Ayurvedic* College in *Haridwar* were also established. Many *Vidyas* trained from these institutions are still serving in various villages and towns.

V. CONCLUSION

On the basis of the above description we can say that *Vaidyaki* was an ancient occupation of medicine in the Himalayan regions of *Uttarakhand*. This was a method of treatment with botanical medicines according to the *Ayurvedic* system of medicine, which was transferring on from one generation to another. When there were no means of transport and education in this region, then this occupation was the backbone of medicine. Traditional medical prescriptions written by *Vaidyas* are still used by the people of the region. Some people have preserved these prescriptions written by their ancestors.

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