Bhishagratna Achanta Lakshmiopathi: Pioneer of Ayurveda in Public Health

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Achanta Lakshmiopathi
1880-1962

'The doctor of the future will give no medicine, but will interest his patients in the care of the human frame, in diet and in the cause and prevention of disease.'

—Thomas Edison.

Despite agreement that “prevention is better than cure” and *Ayurveda*’s potential in preventive and social medicine (PSM), its uses in this sector have been ignored until recently. The colonial period did not encourage the growth of Indian knowledge, particularly in the case of *Ayurveda*.^[1] Even independent Indians could not make effective use of their own healthcare system. One of the few who identified the potential of Ayurveda in PSM, and endeavored to introduce its principles into society was *Bhishagratna* Achanta Lakshmiopathi. The reason is given in Former President of India, Honorable VV Giri’s proclamation that

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“Dr. Lakshmiopathi’s autobiography is a factual narration of the resurgence of *Ayurveda* in India.”^[2]

Lakshmiopathi started his career as clerk in a Taluk office, becoming a graduate in modern medicine, and later a scholar of *Ayurveda*, devoting his life to its propagation. Born on March 3, 1880 in Madhavavaram, a village in Andhra Pradesh’s West Godavari district, Subbarayudu, his learned grandfather, and his high school teacher, Kandukuri Veeresalingam, the social reformer, were chief influences in his childhood. An illness of his mother led to Lakshmiopathi meeting Dr. Sitaramayya a *Vaidya* at Rajamahendravaram, who taught him the rudiments of *Ayurveda*. After completing his Bachelor of Arts in 1904, he won a scholarship to study medicine at Madras Medical College, where he completed his M.B & C.M. in April 1909. As a medical student, Lakshmiopathi used to treat poor patients using his knowledge of *Ayurveda*.^[3,4]

In 1910, he started his medical practice in Madras, soon becoming physician to the elite like the Raja of Venkatagiri. *Vaidyaratna Pandit* Deevi Gopalacharyulu, Principal of an *Ayurveda* college in Madras, where students came from the Punjab, Rajasthan, and Sri Lanka, invited him to become Professor of Anatomy and Surgery, and continue his Ayurveda education from 1914 to 1919 under his guidance. In 1914, the Madras Government passed the “Madras Medical Registration Act” to brand *Ayurveda* as an unrecognized system of medicine and abolish its practice. In protest, Dr. Lakshmiopathi declined to enroll in the Allopathy Medical Register. During the shortage of allopathic medicines in the worldwide influenza epidemic of 1919, Lakshmiopathi prescribed Ayurvedic medicines like “*panchiktika* or *triphala kashayams*,” finding them effective. Thereafter, he dropped allopathic medicines.

In September 1920, on the demise of his mentor Gopalacharyulu, whom he had greatly influenced, he became Principal of the College, continuing until 1928. He also took over his role as chief exponent and promoter of *Ayurveda*, devoting his life to its growth and development along scientific lines.^[3]

AAROGYA ASHRAM

In 1926, Lakshmipathi established *Aarogya Ashrama Samithi*, a charitable trust, in Avadi, near Madras, a “Health village” to protect and preserve people’s health. Its aim was advancement of preventive medicine, by inculcating the public with principles of positive health of mind and body. *Panchakarma* and *rasayana* treatments were offered in the ashram according to classical guidelines and protocols e.g. *Prameha* (~diabetes) and *Rajayakshma* (~tuberculosis) patients stayed in the cowshed and goat-shed, respectively.

The area was unfortunately requisitioned during the 1939-1945 war for manufacturing tanks, but Lakshmipathi bequeathed all his properties and compensation received to the *samithi* which has perpetuated his name and that of Ayurveda and Medical science in general. The various institutions have continued to flourish and immortalize the man and his ideals.^[3,5-7]

INFLUENCE

A student at Madras Medical College, Dr. Yellapragada Subbarao,^[8] fell ill, with symptoms of no appetite, poor digestive capacity, burning sensation in the abdomen, dysentery, and uncontrolled purging. He was treated for sprue by the distinguished Dr. Guruswamy Mudaliar with no improvement. Lakshmipathi diagnosed *Grahani Roga*. And, as directed by classics, treated him with buttermilk whenever required, which soon brought relief. Dr. Rao became a great admirer of *Ayurveda*, joining the *Ayurveda* College physiology faculty, and attending classes in *Ayurveda*.

He was particularly impressed by Lakshmipathi’s success in curing difficult cases of jaundice using the herb *Bhringaraj* (*Eclipta alba*) together with pepper and buttermilk. He became keen to integrate *Ayurveda* and Allopathy to improve healthcare. Subsequently, Lakshmipathi was instrumental in helping Dr Subbarao pursue higher studies in the USA, where he became a great research scientist—much of his work inspired by his early training in *Ayurveda*. Many others similarly moved to *Ayurveda* influenced by Lakshmipathi’s treatment successes.^[3,8,9]

Strong proponent of preventive *Ayurveda*

Lakshmipathi’s confidence in *Ayurveda* was based on his personal experiences and knowledge of its principles and philosophy, like its two objectives, “*swasthasya swasthya rakshanam*” (preservation of health), and “*aaturasya vikar prashanam*” (cure of disease), which he placed respectively first and second. Medicines are only a small part of cure, he would tell patients, emphasizing the need for beneficial

diet and lifestyle, including exercise. Of the two concepts of *Samanvayam* and *Sammelanam*, popularized by the Chopra committee; Lakshmipathi favored *Samanvayam*, harmonious blending of Ayurveda and allopathy. The reason: To reduce the rivalry between India’s two factions of doctors. In support of Gopalacharyulu’s proposal for blending, he made *Ayurvedic* students study science thoroughly, and join classes in additional subjects, to learn relevant scientific principles. He discussed such integration in two ways:^[10]

1. Absorbing scientific medical concepts as needed into *Ayurveda* for its benefit.
2. Scientifically analyzing Ayurvedic principles, diagnosis, methods of treatment, and drugs, the goal being to prove their efficacy and promote their adoption into Allopathy.

To achieve such blending, Lakshmipathi suggested that colleges of Ayurveda and biomedicine should be established autonomously alongside each other, and allowed to thrive unhampered as at BHU. To establish indigenous medicines’ efficacy, he proposed establishing a committee of Allopathic and *Ayurvedic* experts to identify active ingredients in Ayurvedic medicines corresponding to allopathic drugs, and establish their equivalence. He emphasized the need for government or rich philanthropists to fund such research.

Lakshmipathi’s leadership qualities brought him many important positions such as President of the All India Ayurveda Medical Society, the Andhra Ayurveda Board, and the “All India Ayurveda Maha Sammelan” (twice: Bikaner, 1933, and Kanpur 1947); the Usman Committee (1920-1924) noted *Ayurveda*’s waning practice, but concluded that “*Ayurveda* is based on genuine scientific theories”; when on Madras State’s Central Board of Indian Medicine (1939-1940), he led the movement against laws prohibiting *Asanas* and *Arishtas*; the Chopra Committee (1948) recognized ISM’s importance, advocating his integrative approach; his own “Lakshmipathi committee” (1954) in Andhra Pradesh strongly recommended *Ayurveda* education for students of biomedicine. In 1960, he became adviser on ISM to the Government of India’s Planning Commission. As a policy maker, he strongly advocated concentrating on preventive medicine to improve national health, specifically to educate people on their recommended diet, lifestyle, behavior, and exercise patterns.^[3,5,11]

He advocated *Vaidyas* learning western methods to maximize benefits in discharging their duties, e.g., Recommendations for village sanitation and maternity child health should be independent of *Ayurveda* or biomedical origins, rural progress should use common knowledge.

Aarogya Yatra

In 1938, just before his 58th birthday, inspired by the Gandhiji's thoughts on "rural uplift," Lakshmipathi initiated "*Aarogya Yatra*," a national "health pilgrimage" to improve the people's health. With about 100 physicians, he travelled on foot to villages, teaching simple principles of *Ayurveda*, offering guidance on diet, lifestyle, behavior, and exercise, and promoting cultivation of herbal gardens. Having learned the importance of *yoga asanas*, exercise, and *panchakarma* practices like *Abhyanga* (oil massage) to maintain health, and their correct uses, villagers took a pledge to follow guidelines on healthy recipes, consumption of milk and buttermilk instead of tea and coffee, and good lifestyle habits and hygiene to maintain health. Local physicians and volunteers were trained, and health centers opened as necessary. Every village was encouraged to start a herbal garden of at least one acre.^[3,5] In 1939, on Gandhi's invitation, he joined *Sevagram* in Wardha, Maharashtra, as a physician.

A major component of *Aarogya Yatra* was creating awareness of "*Panchashuddhi pranalika*," the five principles of cleanliness that maintain purity in five areas of life: *Deha* (body), *Desha* (environment), *Ahara* (food), *Manab* (mind), and *Atma* (soul). Doing this is a major responsibility of *Ayurveda* physicians, Lakshmipathi said; likewise, identifying four inimical vices viz. *ajnyan* (ignorance), *asuchi* (lack of cleanliness), *ashraddha* (idleness), and *avinithi* (immorality). He suggested four weapons to extirpate impurities of mind: *Atma nigrham* (self-control), *atma vishwasam* (self-confidence), *atma tyagam* (self-effacement), and *swayam krishi* (self-help). He popularized the system using films, toy shows, and *aarogya geetams* (health songs), stating that such Ayurvedic principles would reduce expenditure on hospitals. Gandhiji invited Lakshmipathi to conduct further *yatras* from Sevagram asking him to include information about use of roots, leaves, and tubers to promote village health in his syllabus; establishing a herbal garden at Sevagram itself. Lakshmipathi toured the country from Kanyakumari to Peshavar several times, and as part of "*Sarvodaya movement*" (progress for all) after independence, supported by Dr Rajendra Prasad, the then President of India, and VV Giri, Governor of Uttar Pradesh.^[3,8]

Books, tools for localization of Ayurveda

Ayurveda needs research to verify its texts, and, more importantly, to conserve traditional health knowledge at the village level. Village *vaidyas* are valuable links between laboratory and drug. Properly training them would solve India's health challenges. Government needs to take steps to improve their knowledge, and bring them up-to-date.

Lakshmipathi's greatness lay in his use of *Ayurveda* principles and whole system approach to the "common man," including guidelines for diet, lifestyle, behavior,

and treatment interventions, translating the original Sanskrit into easily understandable language. Recognizing its importance to maintain the tradition, he nevertheless recommended making the knowledge available in regional languages to bring society its practical benefits, devoting his whole life to the task. Of about 100 books that he wrote in Telugu and English, 63 are on Indian medicine. Under *Ayurveda Shiksha* (education), in addition to commentaries and translations of the classics, he published 16 volumes in English and eight in Telugu. He served as a secretary for Andhra *Sabitya Parishattu* in Madras, editing a two volume "Encyclopedia of *Ayurveda*," which he published in 1958.^[2,5] The complete list of Lakshmipathi's books speaks volumes for the pains he took to promote *Ayurveda* in diverse areas of healthcare.

Epilogue

Lakshmipathi saw *Ayurveda* not merely as a curative science, but one which teaches mankind proper ways to live a healthy life, incidentally preventing disease. *Ayurveda* should be taught not just to the medical profession, but as *seva* to preserve life and render society help. He was awarded many titles, e.g., *Ayurvedodharaka*, *Bhishagratna*, *Ayurveda Brihaspati*, *Pranacharya*, and *Ayurveda Vachaspati*.

Charaka says, "Leaving everything else, look after your body, since in its absence, all its attributes become void."^[12] Lakshmipathi strongly promoted this thought, not just preaching but practicing *Ayurveda* in its true spirit. He remained healthy and strong, physically and mentally, up to his death on 4 June 1962, aged 82 years, having dedicated some 50 years of his life to *Ayurveda*. Much can be learnt from his life; about the man, and customs and practices of his times; how one individual can unostentatiously contribute so much to public health. Lakshmipathi played a primary role in the 20th century revival of *Ayurveda*. The "Be all and End all" of his life was to revive and instill its eternal principles of good health and mental poise so elegantly expressed in its "science of eternal values."

Note

- i. Dr. Yellapragada Subba Rao was a world renowned physician scientist from AP, nominated for the Nobel prize. While at Harvard, where he was denied tenure, he discovered the role of folic acid as a vitamin, and ATP as a universal energy source. Known as the "Wizard of Wonder drugs" at Cynamid, he developed *inter alia*, the anticancer drug, methotrexate, the first tetracycline antibiotic, aureomycin, and an anti-filarial drug. The company, now part of Pfizer, named the fungus "*Subbaromyces splendens*" in his honor.

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