

Mental Health in Ayurveda: Thinking through Premodern, Modern and Postmodern Categories

Dr. Ravi Shankar Mishra, Assistant Professor (Sociology), St. John College of Humanities and Sciences, Palghar,

Abstract

Ayurveda, the ancient medicine system of India, continues to flourish as a living and vibrant tradition in the country under the tutelage of Experts/*Vaidyas* from various famous centres across different parts of the country. And as the Indian state itself actively takes an interest and promotes its development as an alternative system of medicines under AYUSH, it has become a force of current to be reckoned with in the field of health and medicine, all the more in the so-called “modern” and “postmodern” situations. The very word “ayus” in Ayurveda conceptualises the association of mind, body, senses and *atman*, and so mental wellbeing has always been an integral goal of this system of medicine as opposed to the modern medicine system that primarily focused on physical wellbeing until recent time where mental health has also gained a place. The modern system of medicine made its penetration and hegemonic presence from the colonial time, and hence there has been marginalisation of the other indigenous systems of treatment that were available in the Indian subcontinent. This has been well documented in the literature of the sociology of medicine and the history of medicine. However, the revival of ayurvedic practices and hence other alternative medicines did not mean that they were carried out in an orthodox way; the practitioners have adopted modern technologies and sometimes have pushed it to the other extreme of making the ayurvedic medicines as herbal consumer products. Based on the literature in this field of study, the present paper thus explores these pluralistic associations, flexibility, openness and sometimes unwanted modification in the Ayurveda system through the premodern, modern and postmodern categories and attempts to understand the categories themselves.

Keywords: modern, postmodern, mental health, alternative medicine, sociology of medicine

Introduction

Ayurveda is said to be an ancient medicine system of India. Yet, it continues to flow as an eternal source of knowledge and a set of practices rooted in its holistic treatment of mind and body, even in the present times. Even though it may have adopted some of the modern medicine's terminology,

practices, and techniques, its core philosophy of treating the body as a whole, of which the mind is an integral part, has never swerved. And as the Indian state itself actively takes an interest and promotes its development as an alternative system of medicines under AYUSH, it has become a force of current to be reckoned with in the field of health and medicine in the present time, despite the so-called “modern” and “postmodern” situations.

The terms “ancient/pre-modern”, “modern” and “postmodern” are not just terms to refer to different epochs of the history of the world, but they have wider connotations in social sciences. As distinctive epochs, they are not only temporally distinct but they also serve as complex concepts for theoretical deliberations to understand various social phenomena and conditions of mankind. For example, “tradition” is primarily referred to the practices and phenomena that have existed for a long time in past but also has its existence in the present. While it reminds us of our past practices, it is also extended in terms of its continuity in present and understood variously as “continuity of tradition”, “revival of tradition”, “invention of tradition”, etc. Thus, Ayurveda has been a system of medicine of ancient India and part of the great tradition of India, but exists in the present time as a living and vibrant tradition of the country.

The modern era announced its advent in the West by its revolutionary potential to question the irrational and unscientific religious dogma and superstitions. Thus, modernity referred to the condition of reasoned argument, scientific temperament and critical inquiry. However, as it emerged in west and emphasized instrumental rationality, it was driven by the superiority of west to the exclusion of other kinds of rationalities. It questioned and dismissed everything that was associated with other parts of the world as “irrational” and “unscientific”, defeating its own revolutionary potential to be open to other kinds of thoughts and ideas, and so the idea of “alternative modernity” developed for the revolutionary ideas that emerged in other parts of the world. Yet, some of the votaries of modern medicine have been quite dismissive of the indigenous medicine systems such as Ayurveda, Siddha, Yunani, etc., as superstitious and unscientific.

Still, some of the critiques of Western modernity (of which many emerged in the Western world itself, such as Weber, Lyotard, Frederic Jamesons, Bauman, Deleuze & Guattari, etc.) preferred to question it for its monolithic understanding of rationality and dismissal of other ways of thinking and pluralism. Postmodern thinking and postmodern phenomena were associated with this rejection of snobbishness inherent in Western and colonial rationality, its grand narratives, and

closeness to other ways of thinking. Postmodern phenomena are thus often associated with the celebration of plurality, openness and differences. In the context of Ayurveda, postmodern characteristics of openness to other ways of thinking are seen in terms of its flexibility to adopt and incorporate some of the modern medicine's terminologies and practices. But this openness and adaptability in Ayurveda were quite present even before the advent of modern medicines as has been noted by historians of science and medicine in its adoption of some of the ideas and practices of the Yunani system and other humoral medicines¹. Ayurveda thus have been showing postmodern characteristics of openness to other modes of thinking and practices since ancient times only. And the term 'postmodern' becomes a new term for identifying some of these characteristics of openness, acceptance and revolutionary potential of any system/institution/individual. Yet, some of the thinkers, such as Beck, Giddens and Reitzer, express their doubts about these changes as a dramatic break from modernity and consider the new changes as a mere extension of the modern characteristics only. Adopting modern ideas and thinking has, after all, a result of revolutionary thinking.

Discussion and Analysis

While modernity is associated with the disjuncture that happened in the history of the world to move away from the dogmatic speculative religious view to a scientific rationality that is based on empirical validity, it also meant a domination of a particular type of "instrumental rationality" that would increasingly diminish other kinds of rationalities, such as substantive, emotional or value rationality. This was the prediction of one of the fathers of sociology, Max Weber (2023[1981])². On the other hand, the postmodern situation is characterised by recognition of multiple kinds of rationalities that celebrate differences, creativity and diverse narratives³. It seems to transcend the rigidity and limitations of instrumental rationality to recognize the presence and significance of other kinds of rationalities and methods of sciences. But modernity in itself is promising in breaking the shells of ignorance and dogmatic thinking of an insular, tradition-bound mind. The terms "pre-modern/tradition", "modern" and "post-modern" are therefore more than mere categorical classifications/distinctions (as convenient and useful categories) that operate at the

¹ See, Kumar (2023)

² For a discussion on Weber's classification of rationalities, see Kalberg (1980), Ritzer (1996) etc.

³ Post modern situation and postmodern theories are associated with theorists like Lyotard (1984), Baudrillard (1975), Fredric Jamesons (1984) etc.

conceptual level to comprehend, compare and analyze the historical changes that have been occurring in the world over the ages. Paradoxically, the defining characteristics associated with these concepts often overlap and interpenetrate into each other. So, scholars like Ritzer (1996) wonder—Isn't 'postmodern' the same as that of 'modern'? In the context of these interpenetrating categories, the present paper explores the diverse literature in sociology, sociology of medicine, Indian Knowledge system and Psychology to understand these categories themselves and how they help understand the phenomena of alternative/indigenous medicine systems and their healing methods, with a focus on their take on mental health.

Ayurveda has been an ancient medicine system of India, drawing its philosophical content primarily from the two classical philosophical schools of thought, namely *Vaisesika* and *Samkhya*, which are logical, rational and scientific systems of thought, yet not divorced of religious references and connotations⁴. The dichotomies of religion and science, philosophy and science, thus seemed to be accentuated by the advent of modernity and what we associate with the Enlightenment era as “scientific rationality”. The very word “ayus” in Ayurveda conceptualizes the association of mind, body, senses and *atman*, and so mental wellbeing has always been an integral goal of this system of medicine as opposed to the modern medicine system, which primarily focused on physical wellbeing until very recent times. In modern medicine, mental health has received attention only recently. The modern system of medicine made its penetration and hegemonic presence from the colonial time, and hence there has been marginalization of the other indigenous systems of treatment that were available in the Indian subcontinent. This has been well documented in the literature of sociology of medicine, history of medicines and history of sciences⁵.

Yet, Ayurveda survived and maintained its rich repository of knowledge through its scattered Chikitsalya, research centres, and its passionate practitioners, who continued to provide their treatments to people seeking alternative healing methods. As modern medicine was making inroads into colonies through its discourses and institutions that asserted its scientific superiority over other medicines, it was also gradually gaining popularity amongst the Indian subjects (masses) for its characteristic results, such as “fast cure” and “immediate relief”. However, there

⁴ See, Manohar (2005) Mahadevan (2022)

⁵ See, Kumar (2023), Mahadevan (2022)

were still some sections of Western medical experts and officials who were influenced by the philosophy and healing power of the ancient medicine systems. Therefore, they would advocate the indigenous systems to be revived and would propose a fusion of both ‘exotic principles and local practices.’ Thus, Ayurveda continues to flow as a perennial stream on the one hand, and on the other, it was further supplemented by the flow of knowledge from the other streams, amongst which the surge of modern medicine has been quite impactful. Yet critique have often argued that there was never a full-fledged effort to encourage a dialogue between the two epistemics and colonial legacy and hegemony always suppressed these meaningful exchanges.

While sometimes there have been amicable mutual exchanges of terminologies and methods between the two systems of medicine, sometimes they have been at loggerheads due to incompatibility and the problem of translation at various levels. Thus, Claudia Lang (2018) draws our attention towards the Ayurvedic concepts that are translated into or correlated with mild, moderate and severe depression at one end, the very characteristic of modern psychiatry. On the other hand, she also draws our attention towards the double process of incompatibility and translation that is characteristic of institutionalized Ayurvedic training. She maintains that while the Ayurvedic concept of mental health is understood as *doshic* (humoral) balance and involves mental health, self-control, equanimity and clarity, the doshas are not physical substances; they are seen as “principles”- principles of relationship or ways of thinking about the body. These principles are linked through an elaborate system of correspondence not only to bodily processes, but also to processes in the environment. The ideas of dosha thus circumvent the conceptual split between body and mind and body and environment, which is rarely overcome/transcended in the modern medicine system. At the same time, Ayurveda also seems to be exploring its rationality in the modern parlance of categorization of diseases and division of body parts, but yet retains its original intent of transcending the mind-body and mind-environment dichotomy. This provides Ayurveda with postmodern characteristics.

However, Ayurveda has also acquired the consumptive logic of postmodern societies. It has also not been free from the appropriation of many herbal products and spurious sprouting centres

claiming the authenticity of their products and services from renowned schools and experts of the Ayurvedic brand. This has been well researched by many sociological studies⁶.

Conclusion

The revival of Ayurvedic practices and other alternative medicines did not mean that they were carried out in an orthodox way; the practitioners have been open to adopting the modern medicines' terminologies and technologies. But, at the same time, they have also not been free from the logic of capitalism and consumerism. The term "Ayurveda" itself has been appropriated by the market of consumer products, which is flooded with a variety of herbal consumer products. This consumptive logic of modern capitalism gives it a postmodern character, but in the area of mental health, it seems to have not made much headway. Though Ayurvedic Psychiatry is a budding field of study, its practitioners and takers are very few. This paper thus deliberates on Ayurveda's holistic nature of mind and body connections in its pluralistic associations with modern medicines and other medicines, its flexibility to mould itself in the modern parlance on one hand and on the other hand, its refusal to be co-opted by the modern medicines' hegemonic presence and thereby lose its holistic characteristics. Yet, Ayurveda is vulnerable to the onslaught of the consumptive economy and therefore subjects it to a critical analysis through the premodern, modern and postmodern categories of sociology.

References:

Baudrillard, Jean. 1975[1973]. *The Mirror of Production*. St. Louis: Telos Press.

Chakravarty, Tina. Interface in Approaches to Mental Disorder in India: A Sociological Analysis. *Sociological Bulletin*, May – August 2015, Indian Sociological Society. 64 (2): 197–218

Islam, Nazrul. 2009. Reviving Ayurveda in Modern India: Prospect and Challenges, *International Review of Modern Sociology*, (Spring) 2009, Vol. 35, No. 1: 137-147

Islam, Nazrul. 2010. "Indigenous Medicines as Commodity: Local Reach of Ayurveda in Modern India", *Current Sociology*, September 2010. Vol. 58(5): 777-798

Jameson, Fredric 1984 "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review* 146:53–92.

Kumar, Deepak. 2023. *Science and Society in Modern India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶ See, Nazrul (2010)

Kalberg, Stephen 1980. "Max Weber's Types of Rationality: Cornerstones for the Analysis of Rationalization Processes in History." *American Journal of Sociology* 85: 1145–1179.

Lyotard, Jean-François. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lang, Claudia. 2018. *Depression in Kerala: Ayurveda and Mental Health Care in 21st Century India*. London & New York: Routledge.

Manohar, P. 2005. "Ayurveda as a Knowledge System", *Indian Knowledge Systems*, Edt.by Kapil Kapoor and Avadesh Kumar Singh. New Delhi: D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd.

Mahadevan, B et.al. 2022. "Health, Wellness and Psychology", *Introduction to Indian Knowledge System: Concepts and Applications*. Delhi: PHI Learning Pvt. Ltd.

Pandey, Anurag et al. 2015. Concept of Mental Health in Ayurveda, *World Journal of Pharmaceutical Research*. Issue 3, Vol. 4: 2004-2013.

Phull, Gaurav et.al. 2019. Ayurveda and Mental Health: An Insight, *International Journal of Research in Medical Sciences and Technology*, Jan-Jun. Vol. No. 7: 36-40.
<http://www.ijrmst.com>

Ritzer, George. 1996. "From Modern to Postmodern Social Theory". *Modern Sociological Theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies. 440-445.

Weber, Marx. 2023[1981]. *General Economic History*. London: Routledge Classic.