

Traces of Ayurveda in Garcia de Orta's Treatise (Portuguese India of 16th Century): An Essay

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Abstract: *This essay explores the traces of Ayurveda in Garcia de Orta's 16th century medical treatise, Colloquies on the Simples and Drugs of India, which was published in Portuguese India. The essay categorizes the references to Ayurveda into general testimonials, concepts and diseases, and terminology. By examining Orta's work, the study provides valuable insights into the cross-cultural exchange of medical knowledge between European and Indian traditions during the early modern period. This research sheds light on how Orta engaged with Indian medical practices and the significant role Ayurveda played in shaping his understanding of medicine in the tropics.*

Keywords: Garcia de Orta, Ayurveda, Goa, Portuguese India (16th century)

1. Introduction

Since the conquest of Goa in 1510, the Portuguese began having more regular contact with Indian culture, observing its cultural practices and customs. This interaction culminated in the first printed publication on Indian medicinal plants and the practice of medicine in the tropics [2, p. 32], and the first non-religious work to be published [4, p. 1593]. It was acclaimed as the first scientific work by European writers on this subject [5, p. 371].

The name of this medical-botanical treatise is "Colloquies on the Simples and Drugs of India" published in Goa in 1563. Garcia de Orta (c. 1500-1568), its author, was the earliest European physician who practiced in India, starting in 1534 for 36 years [2, p. 32]. His work is the first medical and botanical record describing the various medicinal applications of plants and minerals from Asia [6, p. 92], with particular relevance to Indian materia medica [7, p. 131].

The work is written in the form of 59 colloquies, a dialogue between two or more people. In this work, the dialogue is primarily between Dr. Ruano, who has just arrived in India, and Orta, who has lived there for many years. Other characters also appear, including his servant girl and an Indian physician named Malupa. Each colloquy deals with a drug or simple. In each case, he normally describes the drug, its place of growth, and its therapeutic uses. It is an excellent study of Indian materia medica and botany in general, not just medicine. It describes how this materia medica was used for treatments, incorporating knowledge he gathered from the *hakims* (Unani practitioners) and *vaidyas* (Ayurvedic practitioners) practicing in Goa [8, p. 4].

It mentions for the first time to a European reader the names of plants, their uses, the first descriptions of some diseases like cholera, and the habits of natives [3, p. vii]. Since Ayurveda¹ was practiced in Goa at that time [1, p. 226][7, p. 124][9, p. 51], Orta witnessed it through the practices of the *vaidyas*.

This essay intends to show some of the traces of Ayurveda in the treatise named "Colloquies on the Simples and Drugs of India" written by Garcia de Orta in Portuguese India during the 16th century.

2. Methods

In this essay, 8 books and 7 scientific articles were selected based on their relevance to the subject, providing the reader with an idea of the topic in question while maintaining the necessary scientific rigor.

3. Garcia de Orta, his treatise named Colloquies on the Simples and Drugs of India, and the traces of Ayurveda

Before the arrival of the Portuguese in India and their conquest of Goa in 1510, this state was governed by various Hindu dynasties such as the Kadamba (11th to 13th centuries) and the Vijayanagara emperors (14th to 15th centuries). There are various fragmentary records of Ayurveda that attest to its practice. At that time, Ayurveda was taught in Goa in *agraharas* [1, p. 225-226], most likely based on texts such as the *Caraka Samhitā* [10], *Suśruta Samhitā* [11], and *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdayam* [12].

After the conquest, due to the scarcity of Portuguese doctors, Portuguese noblemen and missionaries began to rely on Goan *vaidyas*, who spoke Konkani, the language of Goa, and *hakims*, the Muslim doctors. These practitioners became crucial in the exchange of medical knowledge between Portugal and India as they held the understanding of local diseases [1, p. 227]. Garcia de Orta witnessed the practices of Indian medical knowledge during his time in India and had a deep respect for the Goan doctors, calling them "great physicians". However, for diseases such as syphilis, introduced by the Portuguese in India, they had no knowledge, as it did not exist in Ayurvedic canons. Syphilis is mentioned for the first time in an Ayurvedic treatise called

¹The diacritical mark of the word Ayurveda has been omitted as it is a common word in the English lexicon. All other Sanskrit words are

transliterated according to the international transliteration system known as IAST.

Bhāvaprakāśa, where the author, *Bhāvamiśra*, named it *phiraṅga roga* [14, p. 560], meaning "the disease of the Europeans".

The references to Ayurveda in *Colloquies on the Simples and Drugs of India* can be organized into three distinct categories: general testimonials of Ayurvedic practices, Ayurvedic concepts and diseases, and Ayurvedic terminology. General testimonials offer insights into how Ayurveda was practiced and perceived at the time. Sentences like "the Indian physicians I talked to" [13, p. 137] indicate direct interactions with Indian physicians, while "I ask these things to the great physicians, both arabs and gentiles [i.e., *vaidyas*]" [13, p. 143] [13, p. 143] demonstrate a quest for knowledge among both Arab and local Ayurvedic physicians. The "dialogue with Malupa" [13, p. 206-207] reveals discussions with a specific Ayurvedic doctor [15, p. 4], Malupa, providing valuable insights into their practices. Additionally, questions such as "why do Indian doctors use it" [13, p. 77] in reference to the use of turmeric show a curiosity to understand the reasons behind Indian practices. Phrases like "and this is also the custom of Indian physicians" [13, p. 118] reinforce the observation of common practices among Indian physicians.

The next category, Ayurvedic concepts and diseases, details descriptions of specific substances and treatments used in Ayurveda. The "description of turmeric" [13, p. 76-78] addresses the properties and uses of turmeric. The "description and treatment of diarrhoea" [13, p. 118-120] offers a view on how fever was diagnosed and treated by Ayurvedic physicians. The sentence "and by the pulse they say whether there is fever or not, and whether it is weak or strong, and which humor predominates, whether it is blood or choler, or phlegm, or melancholy" [13, p. 144] highlights the pulse diagnosis technique, an essential practice in Ayurveda to determine conditions such as fever, weakness, or stiffness, as well as the state of the humors. Finally, the "treatment of diarrhoea with quinces" [13, p. 222-223] exemplifies a specific treatment for diarrhoea, showing the practical application of natural ingredients.

Lastly, the category of Ayurvedic terminology reveals the richness of the vocabulary used in the practice. Terms like "Xarach" [13, p. 150] refer to *Caraka*, one of the most important sages of Ayurveda who composed the *Charaka Saṃhitā*. "Imgu" [13, p. 37] or *hiṅgu* describes asafoetida, a common ingredient in Ayurvedic medicine. "Nimbo" [13, p. 153] or *nimba* refers to neem, a plant widely used for its medicinal properties. Finally, "Adrac" [13, p. 115] or *ārdraka* denotes ginger, underscoring its use and importance in the Ayurvedic tradition.

These categories allow for a structured and detailed understanding of the practices, concepts, and terminology of Ayurveda as observed and documented by Garcia de Orta in his seminal work entitled *Colloquies on the Simples and Drugs of India*.

4. Conclusions

Garcia de Orta's treatise, *Colloquies on the Simples and Drugs of India*, offers invaluable insights into the interaction between European and Indian medical practices during the

16th century. By documenting Ayurvedic knowledge, Orta's work provides a critical reference for understanding the cross-cultural exchange of medical ideas. The study of substances, terminology and treatments used in Ayurveda, as observed by Orta, offers a unique perspective that continues to influence modern interpretations of historical medical practices.

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