Caste and Conceptual Kaleidoscope of Traditional Toxicological Treatises from Kerala

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Abstract

The paper introduces and interprets three traditional toxicological treatises from Kerala as verbal manifestations of the entrenched and ascriptive institution of caste. Without questioning their therapeutic powers and efficacy in any manner, it seeks to show that the works under consideration reflect and reproduce all the structural and thematic currents that have shaped intellectual projects all over India. With a view to demonstrating how seemingly disparate works partake of the same epistemic restraints, a medieval manual of sexuality is brought in and analyzed in terms of taxonomical methods dictated by a heightened sense of varna.

Keywords: Kerala, caste, toxicology, Rati Rahasya, ideology, hegemony, taxonomy, varna, miscegenation

Introduction

Nearly 30% of land in Kerala, the southernmost state in India, is forests which abound in a wide variety of flora and fauna. Some of the animals and reptiles fatally endanger human life, property and agriculture, especially in the case of peasants and populace who have settled in the verdant hilly terrains which form the eastern boundary of the state . The elephant, the pig, the tiger and the snake are typical examples. Thus it is quite logical and natural—in fact inevitable—that predators prominently and persistently figure in our folktales, myths, legends, anecdotes, proverbs, community narratives and reli-

gious imaginings, most of the time anthropomorphically.

An important demarcation needs to be made at this juncture. While animals such as the elephant, the tiger and the pig are ensnared, tamed, crippled or killed (or occasionally released back to their sylvan habitat) by humans, snakes have always enjoyed a central position in our collective unconscious and popular imagination. Though the first instinct to neutralise a venomous snake is to whack it to death, snakes are granted an exalted and hallowed position in the oldest literary corpus, divine pantheon and religious texts of Kerala, and for that matter most parts of the world . In almost all the temples in Kerala, snakes are worshipped in the form of stone idols, mainly as tutelary deities, and periodically propitiated by devotees through the offering of milk, banana and turmeric. There are at least two temples—Ameda in Ernakulam and Mannarasala in Alleppy—where snakes are the principal gods . Among most Christian denominations in Kerala, St. George (the patron saint of England who is standardly visualized as an equestrian knight slaying a dragon and saving a damsel) is widely venerated as a divine soul protecting people from the menace of snakes; it is a common practice of Malayalis to dedicate votive figurines of snakes to St. George if they are afraid of harm caused by snakes and other reptiles. Another indicator of the unique position locally enjoyed by snakes is the profusion of toxicological treatises written, translated, paraphrased, adapted or collated by indigenous practitioners of medicine hailing from divergent social strata, often anonymously or pseudonymously.

Against this cultural and cognitive backdrop, the present paper (without considering/judging their curative efficacy in any manner whatsoever) a) contextually introduces three toxicological treatises from Kerala b) reconceptualises them as verbal manifestations of entrenched social institutions and hierarchical principles which have structured and saturated our society as far back as one can ascertain c) argues that the new popularity of ancient toxicological treatises are an indirect attempt not only to validate indigenous systems of medicine/knowledge but to reposition them as superior to Western streams of thought, and d) suggests that on balance they seek to reject those elements which propelled the cluster of social changes commonly sub-

sumed under the rubric of 'Kerala Renaissance'.

Three Treatises

In Kerala, toxicology occupies a unique position, rich heritage, religious centrality and communal traditions, as attested by the staggering range of treatises in the discipline. Some of these texts are in Sanskrit, others in Tamil, whereas the majority have Malayalam as their linguistic medium. The provenance of some of these texts can be traced back to the ancient Tamil culture while the rest have their roots in North Indian and Sanskritic knowledge systems. Needless to say, it is almost difficult and at times downright impossible to accurately date these treatises because most of them were not conceived as a single book at a given point or period of time but have achieved their present form through constant oral transmission, temporal evolution and incremental additions. In other words they are innately dynamic, transformative and amorphous. It was with the advent of printing in the 19th and 20th centuries that these works began to achieve a semblance of semantic stability: many physicians and organizations made it a point to vet and standardize old treatises with a view to making them more authentic, reliable and presentable before putting them to print. Such concerted efforts, however, have not prevented our toxicological treatises from continuing to be a fertile source of hermeneutic debates and exegetic contentions.

Some of the aforementioned works are in the form of manuscripts (in palm leaf or paper) preserved in private libraries while others are available in print and at times as electronic copies in public domain. The purpose of the present paper is not to clinically evaluate the potency of medicines and efficacy of treatment listed therein but to subject their worldviews and paradigms regarding snakebite to a cultural critique, mostly in terms of the underlying structures of caste. Neither do we try to contrastively assess the relative merits and demerits of modern medicine and indigenous systems as the task calls for meticulous research, experimentation and fieldwork. We take the position, largely derived from personal testimonies and our own observations, that ancient toxicology is not a case of charlatanism but a conglomerate of heterogeneous curative practices generated though a long trial-and-error method; so we have no intention to malign what

is often derided as 'primitive' and 'tribal' medicaments either.

Predictably, toxicology in Kerala has numerous sub-branches and traditions of practice mainly predicated on the quasi-divine position that the snake enjoys in religious discourses and the scary reality of snakebite. These sub-branches and traditions can be understood on the basis of binary opposites such as Arya/Dravida, regional/national, savarna/avarna, scientific/ unscientific, etc. Although these dichotomies help us gain a primary footing on toxicology, they are inherently unstable because they have evolved not from ratiocination but from the desperate need for making some sense of the mysteries shrouding snakebite and its consequences. The diversity of toxicological treatises in oral and verbal formats convinces us of the existence of disparate, and often isolated, therapeutic practices with their unique methods, medications, perceptions, economies and cosmologies. However, on closer examination it transpires that they are more complementary than contradictory because all of them are based on raw data derived from lived experiences which were orally transmitted for long before crystallizing in print format as teachable wisdom.

Jyotsanika

The axiomatic and authoritative treatise Jyotsanika belongs to that school in toxicology which is generally (but inaccurately) described as 'Arya', a generic term for toxicological schools which attach greater importance to medicine than mantras, incantations and rituals. As in the case of most treatises already mentioned, it is extremely difficult to locate the spatio-temporal frameworks of its origin and evolutionary trajectories. Legend has it that the work was composed or compiled by the acclaimed toxicologist Karattu Namboothiri. Certain scholars and practitioners conjecture that Karattu Namboothiri belonged to an illustrious Brahmin family which used to provide priests to the famous Siva temple (Vadakkumnatha Kshetram) in Trichur in Kerala. It is also probable that he was not a member, but a disciple of this family. Since the Malayalam of Jyotsanika displays an unmistakable Malabar (that is north Kerala) flavour in terms of vocabulary and idioms, some scholars deduce that he hailed from the northern parts of Kerala .

Influence of Sanskrit works such as Lakshnamrutham, Narayaneeyam and Udeesam is pronounced in Jyotsanika. A good number of physicians used to treat snakebite by vicariously idolizing Karattu Namboothiri as their guru and preceptor. Prominent among them was Kokkara Namboothiri (believed to have lived in the early 19th century) who was perceptive enough to exemplarily and holistically integrate marginalized-subaltern systems of medicine into his therapeutic universe and pharmacology. The Cochin royalty, who were instrumental in popularizing treatment methods which are predominantly or exclusively based on medicine (devoid of supernatural intervention), are believed to have acquired their therapeutic knowledge from him. Subsequently, the Cochin royalty logically approached the age-old beliefs and reformed/reformulated them by incorporating precepts, tools and techniques of modern science and medicine in the opening decades of the 20th century.

It was in this vibrant and shifting intellectual environment characterized by conscious and concerted efforts to reconcile modern scientific ethos with traditional beliefs overlapping with religious tenets and scriptural injunctions, and to recast them on the basis of latest scientific knowledge, that the 1927 edition of Jyotsanika from the Princely State of Cochin was brought out. True to the propelling force behind the scene, it contained only a concise preface and the text proper. The work clearly stated that there had been previous print editions of the treatise in circulation most of which have become extinct (Jyotsanika 1927: 7). Despite its overall materialistic orientation, the 1927 edition does contain descriptions of mythical genesis of serpents, omens in connection snakebite, customary rights to treatment (the belief that select castes and families enjoyed a divinely ordained privilege to treat snakebite), etc., which negate the modern approach of considering snakebite and its treatment as an earthly/physical process. Nevertheless it needs to be acknowledged that, unlike many contemporary books, primary importance is accorded to medicines and the therapist's discretion in the work.

The ideological backdrop of this edition cannot be confined to the seismic slides experienced within the small state of Cochin alone but has to be more productively understood within an emergentist para-

digm. In the 19th century, the British colonial regime began to officially patronize Western systems of medicine, simultaneously stamping indigenous theories and practices as 'unscientific' and 'uncivilized'. As a corollary, governmental monetary support and patronization was denied to indigenous-traditional practitioners. The comprehensive support offered to them by local kings and rulers with minimal or non-existent political and economic powers was able to produce only limited beneficial effects. We have to remember that the unstinted support and encouragement offered by the predecessors of these rulers was decisive in the growth and recognition of indigenous systems of medicine including Ayurveda. In short Ayurveda and other systems of medicine had to face fatal and unprecedented crises of identity consequent to the antagonistic colonial policy. Traditional practitioners responded to the situation in conflicting ways. Even as reposing implicit faith in the antiquity and efficacy of Ayurveda, a number of local therapists were willing to admit that shortcomings like stunted research, absence of expert training and cognitive stagnation had decimated Ayurveda, and were prepared to assimilate the positive aspects of modern medicine. The Arya Vaidyasala, founded by P.S. Warrier in 1902, was the most concrete and powerful expression of this adaptive mind-set. The Vaidyasala undertook not only treatment and teaching, but also the printing-cum-publishing of annotated Ayurveda treatises. The King of Cochin used to regularly participate in the meetings and discussions at the Vaidyasala . By taking all these developments into consideration, it is plausible to postulate that the publication of Jyotsanika in 1927 was undergirded by the inspiration and modern insights that the Cochin royal family had gained from such gatherings and the overall urge for change.

After 13 years, Jyotsanika was republished from the other Princely State of Travancore as the ninth title of the Sri Vanchi Sethulakshmi Series in 1940. Exactly as in the case of its predecessor, this edition also stated that earlier versions of the treatise had been in circulation as part of similar projects undertaken by previous scholars, printers and publishers. The Travancore edition is radically different from its Cochin counterpart. Rich with a 'declaration' running into as many as 56 pages, an elaborate preface and a minute description of the circumstances of its production, it also stands out on account of

plentiful quotations from or references to other treatises in the sprawling discipline of toxicology. The 1940 edition is also notable for subtitles and notes intended to facilitate reading, predispose interpretations and to delimit conflicting applications. The most distinctive trait of this edition, however, is that it presents many beliefs related to snakebite as objective, empirical and demonstrable, and seeks to validate them.

The two editions of Jyotsanika under reference, despite differences in their positioning and worldview, share a few common features. One: both make it a point to highlight the factual, typographic and conceptual 'errors' in previous editions. Two: they claim to have attained authenticity and sustained accuracy by rigorously examining and collating a number of extant palm-leaf manuscripts as well as earlier print editions. Three: they suggest that toxicological principles and healing practices popularized by folk songs and visual performances by wandering troupes are entirely erroneous and misleading. Four: toxicology is narrativized as the preserve of the elite, in which subaltern social strata have no business whatsoever. But in reality, Kerala has always had an avarana school, so to say, of medicine. The overall sensibility that these works exudes has an uncanny resemblance to the cognitive matrices wrought by colonial modernity in that both sought, rather successfully, to ostracize and otherise indigenous knowledge systems. This is not to claim that indigenous systems were impeccable; the point is that the rejection of such systems was founded on an exclusionary and elitist worldview and that the relative social standing of the practitioners in each system was crucial in determining the degree of its reception, durability and impact.

Prayogasamuchayam (Collection of Practices)

The canonical treatise Prayogasamuchayam, written by Kochunni Thampuran of the former Cochin royal family, was published in 1922. He was a reputed physician and toxicologist. This work has had many editions since its original publication. Puthezathu Raman Menon, in the preface to one of the editions indicates that it is actually the Malayalam translation of a Sanskrit work (Thampuran 1938:4). Composed in verse and spread out over 11 cantos, it vividly describes the genealogy of serpents, their longevity, possible causes

of snakebite, symptoms of poison in the human body, curative practices, omens related to snakebite and different reptile species (Thampuran 1938:216-18). Kudumbavaidyam: Vishachikitsa (Family Medicine: Toxicology)

There is no comparison between Kudumbavaidyam: Vishachikitsa and the ones discussed above in terms of stature and authority. This slender volume by the obscure physician Kelu Vaidyan, however, merits attention because it is specifically intended for laymen. Unlike Jyotsanika and Prayogasamuchayam (which are verse treatises) it is written is simple prose and is thoroughly pragmatic in orientation. Nevertheless, it directly and intensively echoes the worldviews, ideological moorings and sensibilities of the other canonical treatises. In all probability this work must have been more effective in entrenching them in popular imagination because of its easy accessibility and comprehensibility. It should be remembered that ideology is woven into the fabric of quotidian experiences and that it is better produced and propagated through works and agents which are apparently innocent and innocuous.

Conceptual Frameworks

Generally speaking, the three works under consideration—Jyotsanika, Prayogasamuchayam and Kudumba Vaidyam: Vishachikitsa—overtly tend to understand snakebite as a physical process which calls for equally physical interventions and medical remedies. In spite of their physicality, each of them does possess undercurrents which interpret snakes and snakebite as pre-destined, something ethereal and supernatural. No wonder, the works are replete with notions and claims which are illogical within the episteme wrought by modern science based on observation, documentation, verification, universalization and falsification. These ideational undercurrents can be more meaningfully understood as the aggregate of attempts to conceive of the scary and mysterious phenomenon of snakebite on the basis of available intellectual apparatus which was intimately intertwined with the prevailing structures of power and knowledge. It should also be remembered that this corpus of knowledge, having been beleaguered by the onslaught of colonial knowledge and reform movements, sought to legitimize itself. In the process, indigenous physicians

would validate and vindicate the tradition of which toxicology was a vital component. But, perhaps unaware of its ramifications, they were upholding all the mechanisms and institutions of stratification that perpetuated ascriptive inequality. In other words, the etiological narratives, varna divisions, biological-reproductive imagery, astrological tenets and micro categorization embedded in toxicological treatises were ultimately seeking to resist the social reorganization brought about by the agglomerate of changes in the decades around 1900 in Kerala and to keep the institution of caste intact.

The anatomical and physiological concepts in traditional toxicology reflect an inadequate understanding of the human body, which is imagined as a multi-layered configuration of the seven elements of skin, blood, flesh, fat, bone, marrow and semen. Alternatively, the body is visualized as composed of the skin, blood, bile, phlegm, air, marrow and vital force. It is connected to the number seven which is evident from mythical description of the seven worlds, virgins, mothers, and scales (in music). The simplistic belief that elements exist as layers in the human body is a cross-section of ancient anatomical consciousness. Indications of the aforementioned anthropomorphic thought and beliefs are present in the concepts with regard to the effect of venom in the human body. For example the aftermath of snakebite is described as a fierce race and wrestle between aggressive venom and the attempts of the soul (jeevan): the former chases the latter from the skin to the blood and finally to the locus of the vital force; at one point of time, soul finds no refuge and death occurs (Thampuran 1938:25-26; Vaidyan 32-33).

Miscegenation and Snakebite

Given the pervasive and persistent nature of caste (whether as a rigid hierarchical mechanism, ossification of professional groups or a ritualized expression of purity) nothing could escape its influence. No system of knowledge, by definition, was free from the shadow cast by the institution of caste in the context of Kerala, and for that matter any part of India. The sense of purity and impurity, coupled with the relative social positioning of caste groups, is revealed (at times reified) directly and indirectly in rites, rituals, clothing, cuisine, marriage and ornaments. More often than not, it is the caste-varna con-

sciousness which determined the very contours and contents of sartorial practices and culinary habits. In this way there was an infallible semiotics in place: every single object on the human body would signify his caste and relative social rank.

Caste and varna are more productively understood not as mere social institutions but a concrete manifestation of the overall consciousness which conditions (and gets conditioned by) power structures and the mechanisms of social stratification. In this conceptual-explanatory model the foundation of caste is not simple categorization of people but a sense of inequality rooted in divinely ordained biological disparity, a belief clearly visible in traditional discourses in Kerala. This idea, openly expressed in many genealogies and originary myths, is powerfully present in the knowledge coordinates of traditional toxicology, especially in relation to therapeutic practices meant to cure snakebite.

Thus faithfully reproducing the four-fold varna system, Jyotsanika states that snakes are divided into Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vysya and Sudra varnas and that a seasoned therapist can infer the caste and gender of the snake by deciphering the signs, symbols and other omens of the messenger (doothan)who reports snakebite to the physician (Jyotsanika 1927:16-17, 1928; 22-24). Prayogasamuchayam holds that the great serpents (Maha Sarpangal) are the following: Ananthan, Gulikan (Brahmin), Vasuki, Samkhapalan (Khatriya), Takshakan, Mahapadman (Vysya), and Padman, Karkodakan (Sudra) (Thampuran 1938: 5-6). According to another belief, the venom and wickedness of a snake are directly proportional to the degree of racial mixing rendered inevitable due to the scattering of serpents by Garuda : greater the degree of miscegenation higher is the poison of the snake (Vaidyan 24). We can tabulate the attributes of snake from differnt varnas as depicted in the three books under reference in this way:

The Brahmin Snake is golden in colour and smells of Ashtagandha smoke, travels in the morning and eats air. They inhabit mountains and forests. The Kshatriya snake, white in colour, smells of Indian Crocus flower, travels at noon and consumes rat, milk, snow and water while inhabiting walls as well as holy places. The Vaisya snake which is dark in colour, smells of screw pine flower, travels in the evening and consumes frog, salt and meat while inhabiting streets

and trees. The Sudra snake, black in colour with an odour of honey and milk consumes anything and inhabits the nearby water bodies.

It is evident that the classification is nothing but a variant of the scripturally sanctioned division of human beings into four varnas in which the Brahmin occupies the highest echelon and the Sudra the lowest. These works also strongly suggest that the physical union between snakes of different varnas or other reptiles causes the birth of weird and dangerous creatures, just like the sexual union between a Sudra man and a Brahmin woman is believed to result in the birth of the most reprehensible of humans—the Chandala . For example, the sexual union between the snake and the iguana is believed to spawn the interspecific hybrid Gaudheram or golden iguana, a four-legged creature fabled to be as venomous as the cobra (Thampuran 1938:13-14). It is also believed that the scorpion is born from the mix of decomposed urine, faeces, semen and corpse of snakes (Thampuran 1938: 206; Warrier 1997: 2498-2500). Another interesting belief is that miscegenation of snakes leads to the birth of Venthiran (also spelt Vyantharan, Viyantharan and Vendran), a deadly hybrid snake.

Rathirahasya

One may be tempted to argue that the uncanny obsession with racial purity and the resultant fear of miscegenation that the above toxicological treatises betray was endemic to Kerala. But as we have stated at the beginning, these works were inspired by existing literature in Sanskrit and Tamil, and that some of them are unofficial translations or paraphrases. In other words, they have an intellectual lineage and thematic scaffold which can safely be described as pan-Indian. Therefore it is more logical to suggest that the ideas that animate these treatises are a microscopic manifestation of the zeitgeist and epistemological grids that dominated the whole of India in varying degrees and measures. The best method to identify this larger, abstract structures which possibilitated local articulations is to examine contemporary sources, preferably works from distant domains.

In this context it is instructive to have a provisional look at the manual of sexuality Rati Rahasya, written by Pandit Kokkoka. Probably composed somewhere between 8th and 10th centuries A.D., the work is a commentary of the earlier Kama Sutra (which is scholarly

and thoroughgoing, but not so easy for the laity to understand). Exactly as in the case of the toxicological treatises under consideration, Rati Rahasya also divides its main subject matter—women—into neat categories viz. Padmini, Chithrini, Shankini and Hastini. Most tellingly, they are arranged in descending order in terms of quality: the first category is identified with the Brahmin and the last with the Sudra.The women are identified and categorised with regard to types of their body, smell of their coition water, conduct, shape of their vagina, gait, voice, build, clothes, food, sexual behaviour especially the best posture as well as the best time for love making and how they can be won over. The four types are as follows:

Padmini who is thin, soft, has scarlet eyes, a delicate nose, worships Brahmans, preceptors, etc. She wears dignified white clothes as well as white flowers; possesses a Swan-like gait and pleasing voice like a swan. She has a cup-shaped vagina, like a lotus in bloom with coitus water smelling like Lotus. She eats little or moderately mild food always soft and clean. Nothing is specified regarding sexual behavior. Lotus posture and the 4th yama are the best time and posture for making love to such a woman who is beyond temptation and cannot be won over by aphrodisiac substances. Chithrini is thin but has crow-like legs and prominent lips. With an attractive, beautiful gait, thin build, Chokora-like voice, she knows dancing, singing; wears colourful clothes and has no specific preference for food. Her vagina is large; well-rounded; high; soft; well-lubricated, has sparse public hair and coitus water smells like honey. Fond of sexual union, her favourite posture is legs placed like a split bamboo and time is 1st yama. She can be won over by powdered nutmeg (with betel leaf) mixed with the juice of the banana tree. Shankini has big feet and waist; tall and depressed body; long legs and torso. Irascible; bilious conduct, undulating gait and voice not sweet, like that of a donkey are her features. Eating neither heavy nor light she prefers red garments and flowers. With generous pubic hair, her coitus water smells like Caustic acid. Her sexual behaviour features excessive nail marks and little bodily discharge. Her favourite posture is legs resting on the shoulders and time is the 3rd yama. Her favours can be won by Shriphala mixed with powdered root of Gandhatagari pant (with betel leaf). Hastini who has clumsy feet, crooked toes, tawny hair is extremely

fat. Of corpulent build, she is a glutton who consumes bitter or pungent food always more than required. She has a cruel disposition, graceless gait, choked , halting, indistinct voice and is sexually insatiable. With a large, very hairy vagina and coitus water smelling like Elephant rut, her best posture and time for love making are Nagara and 2nd yama. She can be won over by administering ash of the feathers of a pigeon and a buzzing bee mixed with honey (with betel leaf).

Thus we have two sets of works written/compiled under very different circumstances, for different purposes and meant for different reader communities. But they unmistakably demonstrate how our knowledge systems, thought processes and cognitive mechanics were constructed and conditioned by the overarching narrative of caste. In other words, treatises on lovemaking and snakebite have much in common though they are not areas we generally link with each other, let alone group together.

Zeal for Minute Classification

Different from the taxonomical systems followed in modern sciences, traditional toxicology wallows in meticulous and microscopic differentiation between snakes. For example, the single genus of cobra is divided into twenty-six sub-groups viz. Krishnan, Swethan, Sankapalan, Sarvakrishnan, Valahakan, Kakodaran, Mahakarnan, Mahapadman, Kulasthan, Girikarnan, Varukarnan, Cheerakarnan, Bhritimukhan, Kapothan, Lohithan, Vepathu, Mahadardan, Kunthinasan, Mahasarpam, Kukkutan, Trinasheshan, Thithiri, Parisarpan, Vichithtakusuman, Akhantan, and Darbhapushpan. Contrastingly, modern zoology divides the cobra into limited groups such as Ophiophagus hannah (the king cobra), Naja naja (the common cobra), Naja nigricollis (the spitting cobra), Hemachatus haemachatus (ringhals or spitting cobras) and Naja haje (the asp). Traditional toxicology also holds that the rate, nature, effect and ways in which poison spreads through the human body differs from one group of cobra to another. Corresponding differences are witnessed in medicines and modes of treatment too. The rat, in its turn, is divided into sixteen groups: Kulachandran, Karaghnan, Vishakhathi, Bhayanakan, Ugran, Kruran, Doothakan, Theekshnakan, Meghanadhan, Kumudan, Simhasyan, Ekachari, Sunasan, Sudanthan, Subalan and Sugarbhan. Likewise, the spider is

classified into sixteen: Trimandhala, Swethakapila, Peethaka, Lala, Muthravisha, Kathina, Raktha, Savarnika, Lajavarna, Jalini, Ekapathi, Krishnavakthra, Agnivakthra, Kantha, Mala and Guni. Certain recensions give the number of spiders as ranging from 28 to 1000 (Thampuran 1938: 219, Warrier 1997: 2513).

There are commentators who justify such inflated—and apparently meaningless—divisions by arguing that they do not signify actual biological differences but rather the varying symptomatic effects of venom on the human body. This argument does not hold water; it is a position that religions and schools of thought enervated by the onslaught of modernity tenaciously cling to. The main strategy of this approach is to argue that unscientific ideas and illogical customs are in reality the corrupted versions of sublime and relevant precepts, that they are symbolic representation of Truth and that they are not in conflict with the fundamental principles and findings of modern science. We suggest that the plethoric proliferation of divisions directly mirrors the "ranking mania" (Dumont 2010:82) of caste system that set Kerala apart from other regions of India. In short, the terrain of traditional toxicological texts knowingly or unknowingly negates the possibilities of social restructuring and emancipatory streaks of modernity and selectively imbibes its exploitative/regressive aspects, thereby eliminating secular spaces and the modern sense of freedom and individuality.

Mythical Origins and Anthropomorphism

There are a surprisingly large, and often contradictory, number of stories about the origin and subsequent circulation of toxicological treatises. They can be reduced (at the risk of generalization) into something like the following. Though ancient therapists had amazing expertise in the treatment of a spectrum poisons and applied it for the well-being of the greater society, they would not record it as they feared the written receptacle of knowledge was liable to fall into the hands of unworthy and unscrupulous persons. They also had preternatural abilities in diagnosis and treatment, not to say anything about the gift to predict snakebite. The preceptors feared that unworthy and unscrupulous persons, instead of gaining direct experience and learning from gurus, would depend on the written sources and would cor-

rupt the whole system. Owing to the fear of writing things down, we have lost many a piece of invaluable knowledge and curative practice; the available books are merely the crumbs fortuitously collected and recorded by the posterity. Invariably, snakebite is couched in anthropomorphic images and terminology. For instance vendetta, fear, hunger, masth and excess accumulation of venom are often cited as the reasons for bite and it is also believed that each cause produces a corresponding variety of bite which can be identified by the distinctive marks on the victim's body or wound. This is a glaring instance of anthropomorphism wherein human emotions are attributed to inanimate objects and other living organisms as well as phenomena. The belief that the snake attacks humans due to masth might have been borrowed from our experiences with the elephant. Bite caused by excess accumulation of venom is based on the misconception that venom is continuously produced and stored in the gland of the snake and that unless it is released periodically, it discomforts and infuriates the snake.

These hagiographic-mythological narratives are structured by leitmotifs. For one thing they display an emotional obsession with a past supposedly full of philanthropic therapists possessing beneficial magical skills. Secondly, and more importantly, the said therapists are idealized and romanticized as sublime souls detached from and indifferent to monetary incentives and similar inducements. Thirdly, ancient toxicological treatises are eulogised as infallible as they are direct emanations of knowledge from the Almighty through the conduit of preceptors. Fourthly they have an urge to keep knowledge pure and pristine, and prescribe means to prevent it from getting diffuse. Fifthly they indulge in wistful and nostalgic memories of 'lost' treasures of knowledge. Sixthly, in a Platonic vein, they suggest that the perfect toxicology is an Idea which is beyond the confines of any book or human format of knowledge. In a nutshell, these leitmotifs oppose an egalitarian society and popular medicine.

Conclusion

There is a position that caste is not a social institution and cultural construct but a natural division based on and necessitated by divinely ordained biological differences. While the scriptural interdic-

tions and customary practices in this regard are straightforward, well-documented and intensively studied, embedded discourses like toxicology are often overlooked in social sciences as detached repositories of pragmatic knowledge which are indifferent to ideological fissures and economic pressures. Even though there is no doubt that therapeutic practices primarily address and redress corporeal malfunctions, there is no reason to believe that medicine, as a system of knowledge, can completely erase the tint of social institutions it functions within. In other words, knowledge does not exist in a social-conceptual vacuum. On the contrary, every form of knowledge is imprinted with the larger but invisible structures of power and hegemony. The toxicological treatises we have discussed so far illustrate that human beings and their intellectual pursuits do not take place within hermetically sealed cubicles but in complex territories interspaced with interspersions and ruptures. There are many works of this sort and their rereading is sure to yield trailblazing insights not only into a given discipline but to our understanding of the complex ways in which we have fashioned our own realities and identities.

Notes:

i. https://fsi.nic.in/cover_2011/kerela.pdf

ii. Apart from the indigenous tribes and sparsely populated areas, the demographic composition of this zone was radically altered due to the mass migration of people from the southern parts of Kerala from 1930s to 1960s. For more details see Tharakan (1976).

iii. In all probability, the oldest references to the collective fear of poison and snakebite are found in the papyrus roles of Egypt. Ebers medical papyrus (c.1600 B.C.) contains remedies to the diseases caused by snakes and other reptiles. Egyptians also elevated the snake to the rank of gods and began to widely worship it. The Egyptian ideas and beliefs about poison in due course of time reached Greece. However, in Greek medical and religious discourses, the serpent also appears as a symbol of peace and convalescence; this happened because snakes in Greece were non-venomous and were frequently found in areas near 'divine springheads' which were imagined to have supernatural powers to cure diseases. It is amusing and instructive to note that some imaginations have flown over geographical boundaries. One intriguing example is the similarities between Basilisk (which is depicted as having the features of a rooster in European bestiaries) and Karinkoli (a similar snake) in Kerala. In fact the latter is graphically described as having been sighted by N. Parameswaran in his memoir Vanasmaranakal (Memories of Forest, 1958) which was a prescribed as a non-detailed text in grade 11 in Travancore.

iv. Snake worship in Kerala is entangled with the evolution of various religious groups and sects. Ward and Conner estimated the number of sacred groves (shrines where snakes are venerated) as no less than 30,000 in the 18th century. Snakes symbolically figure in many ritual arts and religious practices. For a

succinct description see Sasibhooshan (1988:247-250).

v. As everyone was exposed to snakebite, it was only natural that all social strata had their own medicines and curative practices. Thus we have physicians from Brahmins, middle-castes and lower-castes. Such divisions are visible in the case of barbers, priests and washer men too.

vi See Umaiban 39—41.

vii. To get a picture of the larger picture of the age , see Panikkar 168—188.

viii. The 'Adiparva' of the Mahabharata gives a story about the enmity between the mythical eagle Garuda and snakes. See Krishna 115-116.

ix. The hereditary occupation of Chandala is the execution the culprits condemned for capital punishment and pimping. He is to live outside th village, wear shroud and is not permitted touch others; he attains salvation if he dies for the sake of a Brahmin. The son born from the sexual union between the Sudra man and Kshatriya woman is known as Pulkkasan. He is a hunter. The son born from the Sudra man and Vysya woman is known as Ayogavan. His hereditary occupations are stage performance and sculpting (Mani 442).

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