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**People, Not Symptoms: A Visual Ethnography of Ayurvedic Doctor Ashlesha Raut**

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Dr. Gearhart Mafazy

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**Introduction:**

The term Ayurveda, which comes from “ayu” meaning life and “veda” meaning specific knowledge, is the science of healing for the body and mind (Holistic path, n.d.). Ayurveda focuses on treating patients as a whole rather than as a set of symptoms. It is an ancient, evidence-based medical science that focuses on health as it relates to nature. While the first Ayurvedic texts were recorded around 5000 BCE, making the practice at least 7000 years old, the knowledge of health, nature, herbalism, and even surgery has been part of Ayurvedic healing tradition for possibly around 10,000 years. (Mukherjee et al., 2016, p. 12). Ayurveda was formally established during the Samhita period of India in 1000 BCE when all the knowledge from the previous Vedas were compiled into two textbooks, the Caraka (all Ayurvedic medicine) and the Sushruta (surgery) Samhita (Jaiswal & Williams, 2017, p. 51). These texts are still used today by many Ayurvedic doctors as they detail not only treatment, but diagnostic procedures for understanding a patient so that they can be treated holistically.

Dr. (Vaidya) Ashlesha Raut is an Ayurvedic doctor with a Bachelor’s degree of Ayurveda, Medicine, and Surgery (B.A.M.S.) and a M.D. in Ayurveda. She studied at Mumbai University and Podar Ayurvedic Medical College, the #1 rated medical college in Maharashtra, India. She was inspired by her father, a Vaidya himself, to continue practicing medicine. When Dr. (Vaidya) Raut first moved to the United States 25 years ago, she struggled with America's lack of understanding of Ayurveda. She described this as a painful experience, as she had studied for years to become an MD in Ayurveda. Yet despite her studies in Ayurveda, she was shunned by the American medical system. Ayurveda is a clinical science, and like all sciences, it has to constantly grow. Ayurveda is the “mother of all sciences,” which is why Dr. (Vaidya) Raut believes “in integration— you have to constantly grow, and that’s how Ayurveda stays alive” in the modern world (interview, 03/25/22). The desire to educate and heal people— to see her patient’s health improving as they feel better and happier under her care— led Dr. (Vaidya) Raut to establish her own practice, Ayurveda for Healing. Dr. (Vaidya) Raut often teaches others across the country about Ayurveda in order to best encourage people to live their healthiest, happiest lives, shown in figure 1. Dr. (Vaidya) Raut is the director of Ayurveda for Healing which has locations in Bloomington, IL, Chicago, IL,

Kalamazoo, MI. She is an educator of Ayurveda at many colleges in the United States, including Andana Ayurveda Academy in Chicago.

With the word “diagnosis” comes potential for misunderstanding due to the way a diagnosis is conceptualized in Western biomedicine. Unlike a diagnosis in western medicine where symptoms are isolated, a diagnosis in Ayurveda is more about knowing the constitution of a person, all of their health history, their personality, and understanding them. By understanding the inner workings of an individual's prakruti and their doshic type through the diagnostic process, Dr. (Vaidya) Raut can understand where illness may have developed and how one can maintain health in balance with nature's law. Dr. (Vaidya) Raut's way of analyzing patients is unique to her, and her diagnostic process is extremely detailed and catered to her specific senses. The nature of an Ayurvedic diagnosis is to understand the individual on multiple different levels, with doshic types, prana, diet, lifestyle, and many more. Doshas are the elemental combinations that arise from a person's constitution. Individuals are often one prominent dosha type, and when doshic imbalances occur, illness can result. For example, individuals with a pitta type dosha will have to balance the fiery nature of their dosha with cooling elements. The prominent dosha of an individual is determined by their prakruti, which Dr. (Vaidya) Raut refers to as the body-mind-type of an individual. Everyone is born with their set elemental balance in the form of prakruti that doesn't change. The flow of prana through nadis is based on one's doshic balance, with total overall balance contributing to health. People can be diagnosed and treated specific to

their dosha prakruti in a holistic manner, visualized in Dr. (Vaidya) Raut's logo in figure 2.



Figure 1. Dr. (Vaidya) Raut teaches Ayurveda across the country and oftentimes does presentations at conferences. In this photo from the 2019 National Ayurvedic Medical Association in Scotts Valley, California, Dr. (Vaidya) Raut presented on Ayurvedic management of anxiety and depression. She spreads the message of healing with Ayurveda and shares her perspective with other healers. (Photo credit: Dr. (Vaidya) Ashlesha Raut and Elizabeth Baranski)



Figure 2. Dr. (Vaidya) Raut holds events for the community in Bloomington. In June of 2018, she demonstrated asanas (yoga poses) to the public and led Yoga. She stands next to the logo for Ayurveda for healing, which illustrates the combination of the mind, spirit, and

the body to sustain life (ayu). (Photo credit: Dr. (Vaidya) Ashlesha Raut and Elizabeth Baranski)

### **Assumptions and early hypothesis:**

Before I had heard lectures on Ayurveda or read any literature, I had never even heard of the healing system. If anything, I went into the class with a bias against it due to my background with biomedicine as a pre-med student who has been involved with the biomedical system my whole life. Ayurveda being considered complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) at first made me hesitant. American education, especially with regards to science, tends to discredit other modes of thinking, with most CAM being dismissed as for “hippies or anti-vaxxers”. As a result, my initial thoughts about Ayurveda was that it was non-scientific and based in folk medicine, when in reality the opposite is true. As an anthropologist, I put my biases aside to learn more about Ayurveda from the practitioner’s perspective.

Many sources act as overviews on the basic principles of Ayurveda due to the complexity of the science. However, these worked to build a very solid foundation on my knowledge of Ayurveda before I met with Dr. (Vaidya) Raut. The sources each dove into one small aspect that was fairly uniquely mentioned in that source, and these unique focuses drove my perspective on Ayurvedic diagnosis. One of the main sources, for example, details the history of Ayurveda as well as some of its basic principles. Jaiswal & Williams describe that Ayurveda is based around five elements— Vayu (Air), Jala (Water), Aakash (Space or ether), Prithvi (Earth) and Teja (Fire) (2017, p. 51). These elements, while not often talked about in other sources, compose the composition of

doshas. Jaiswal & Williams also describe that body constitution, health history, lifestyle, and environmental conditions affect how an individual will be treated and understood with Ayurveda in addition to the doshas alone. The source compares Ayurveda to other practices, as well.

Mukherjee et al. expands on the concept of Ayurvedic history as well as the doshas, incorporating the original Sanskrit medical texts into their article (2016). The balance of tridoshas are an important part of the medicine they analyze in the article. Doshas are the combination of not only the elements that Ayurveda is based on, but also the three bioenergies of the sun, wind, and earth which are constantly in fluctuation with each other in an effort to maintain homeostasis (Mukherjee et al., 2016, p. 12). The article, however, spends much of its time focused on biomedical based evidence to prove that Ayurvedic treatments work. This was a topic I noticed in many sources, which may be somewhat problematic for the image of Ayurveda, since it is always viewed as being pitted against biomedicine. Other sources focused on Ayurveda on its own instead of comparing it to other healing traditions. The book *Light on pranayama: Pranayama dipika* explains many concepts of health from an Ayurvedic lens (Iyengar, 1981). I used the chapter on Nadi and Chakras, in particular, though the book was very detailed on many aspects of Ayurveda in order to explain pranayama. Prana, which is often conceptualized as life force or energy, is oftentimes a hard concept to understand for people unfamiliar with Ayurveda. The entire book gives an understanding to the reader based in nature and Ayurveda's concepts. According to Iyengar, Prana flows through channels called nadis, which are both body channels like veins, arteries, bronchioles, etc. as well as channels for sensations, cosmic energy, and spiritual energy (1981, pg. 33). While the Siva Samhita mentions 350,000 nadis, it names 14 as the most important, and there are three most vital nadis, pictured in figure 3 (Iyengar, 1981, pg. 33). Lastly, in order to understand a person fully, one has to have a great wealth of knowledge not only about the human body but of the patient, nature, and the environment. Brooks' work defines the term yukti, which is a basis of knowledge, one's sensory perception, and experience (Brooks, 2018, 106). Yukti helps to inform Ayurvedic physicians like Dr. (Vaidya) Raut by drawing on a vast system of experiences

and knowledge. Using yukti, imbalances of the tridoshas can be discovered through the diagnostic process.



Figure 3. Prana flows in channels called nadis. The three main nadis, the sushumna (yellow line through the spine), the ida (blue curves), and the pingala (orange curves) flow through the body and through key energy points on the body, known as the chakras. Prana flow through these nadis and chakras contribute to overall health and personality. The green dots around the body are marma points, which are located along nadis. (Photo credit: Elizabeth Baranski and Dr. (Vaidya) Ashlesha Raut)

### **Ethnographic methods:**

I conducted my research as a collaborative visual ethnography, a form of visual anthropology wherein I can highlight the experiences of Dr. (Vaidya) Raut in a visual style where she gets to see all the steps of my project. Whereas other forms of anthropology or ethnographies may be through the lens primarily of the researcher, collaborative visual ethnography allows for collaboration in a non-exploitative manner. Before I connected with Dr. (Vaidya) Raut, I did research in the form of literature reviews to seek out secondary sources about vaidyas and Ayurveda as a whole. It was through my initial research when I learned how ancient a system Ayurveda really is, and how throughout centuries of practice, branches of Ayurveda have developed and grown. It was because of this depth and history that I chose Ayurveda to study. Once I had a general understanding of Ayurveda, Dr. (Vaidya) Raut and I scheduled a meeting. I went to her Bloomington office for an hour-long meeting where I showed her the resources I had gathered. I also showed her examples of visual ethnographies so that we were on the same page for the project. We talked about modern Ayurveda and she told me about core principles of Ayurveda and how she interprets them and how specific people

vary in their lifestyles and doshic makeups. Our second meeting was a brief 20 minute conversation after class on campus one day. She gave a guest lecture on Ayurveda, so I took the opportunity to chat. I showed her examples of the visual ethnography so we had a more clear idea of where to go. It was here that we narrowed down the topic to the diagnostic process of Ayurveda. Unfortunately due to the sensitive nature of topics discussed and patient privacy, I could not observe her with a client, but she invited me to participate in a diagnosis for myself. Our third meeting was the participative experience where I had my prominent doshas diagnosed. I experienced most of the diagnostic process for myself while my friend took photos of the process. Later, I conducted an interview over zoom where I asked her about her life and any details I may have missed. We also talked about the images I was producing at this time. The images my friend took during my diagnosis were good, but diagnosis is not a very visual process— luckily, Dr. (Vaidya) Raut gave me permission to use photos from her website for my project. With Dr. (Vaidya) Raut's input, I edited the images we took together and from her website to be representative of her practice. After I made the poster, we talked on the phone for about twenty minutes so she could edit my poster. She instructed me on how to refer to Ayurvedic doctors like herself in text due to the laws regarding health in the United States.

### **Findings:**

The diagnostic process is different for every vaidya. There are three main aspects of diagnosis: observation, palpation, and interrogation. Beyond that, there are multiple layers to consider: one's nadi, urine, stool, the tongue, how you sound or speak, vision, skin, one's body structure, and their gait. All of these layers to one's physiology are hints to their dominant dosha and their health. Before anything, patients are greeted warmly by Dr. (Vaidya) Raut as she steps into the waiting room, walking with them to her office and offering them a seat. When one goes to start the process of healing with Dr. (Vaidya) Raut, she will explain doshas to the patient and how prakruti is unchanging. The patient's dosha at their time of birth is going to be indicative of prominent doshas throughout their life, so she may inquire about the circumstances of the patient's birth. As Dr. (Vaidya) Raut invites her patients into the room, the



observation process has already begun; we notice subtle things about people when we see them, and Dr. (Vaidya) Raut uses her senses to determine easily observable traits that are indicative of a prominent dosha; one's gait, their disposition, skin tone, and a glance at their eyes. To truly begin the observation, she starts by checking the fingernails, where she will observe the presence or absence of moons on the nails, nail health, etc.. Skin is checked next, with factors like transparency and redness playing a part in determining one's constitution; for example, my skin is extremely transparent and you can see my veins. There are multiple layers to consider with skin, since there are the layers most are familiar with (epidermis, dermis, hypodermis), but there are also specific dhatus sitting above the tissue. Dr. (Vaidya) Raut specifically checks Rasa Dhatu, which is analogous to plasma or lymph. After checking the skin and associated Dhatus (there are many types of Dhatus), she reads nadi, visualized in figure 4. While palpation of the pulse is happening, she also interrogates by asking questions about the patient's constitution for clues about what's happening in the body. Connecting the dots of issues or problems in the past or with family history, she uses her senses to gain an understanding of the patient's prakruti and current dominant doshas. The temperature of the hand is felt during this process. Then, another important aspect of diagnosis in understanding the internal system of the body takes place, the tongue visualization, shown in figure 5. The rest of the diagnosis comes from exploring more aspects of diet and lifestyle through discussion, the interrogation phase of patient analysis, which really feels more like a discussion.

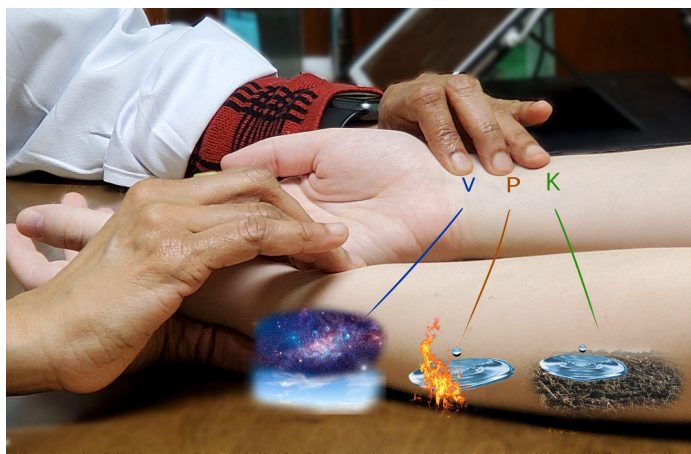


Fig. 4: Dr. (Vaidya) Raut examines my pulse, called *nāḍīparīkṣā* or reading nadi. It involves feeling prana moving through nadis. Each of her fingers correlates to a dosha: vata, pitta, or kapha, and those doshas are associated with certain elements (air and ether, water and fire, and water and earth, respectively). Using her fingers on both of my wrists, she feels the flow of prana

and which dosha is most dominant. (Photo credit: Elizabeth Baranski and Dr. Ashlesha Raut)

After gathering an understanding of the patient's prakruti and prominent doshas, Dr. (Vaidya) Raut will explain them and what it means for the patient's health. This is still part of the interrogation phase of the diagnosis, as she is still learning more as she describes her findings to the patient. She interprets what their dosha has meant for health in the patient's life so far, making educated guesses as to certain aspects of the patient's constitution. For me, she was able to tell that I am very frugal with my money, I like sweets a lot over sour foods, I am extremely empathetic, and a lot more. It was seriously amazing how pretty much everything she asked me about I was able to say that it applies to me! As she understands the client, she can make suggestions as to how to improve their diet and lifestyle to improve overall health. Getting closer with nature is always recommended, as in society today we stray further from nature and grow sicker because of it. If diet and lifestyle recommendations don't improve health in the presence of an illness, she will then prescribe herbs.

Dr. (Vaidya) Raut teaches us that Ayurveda— an ancient medical science based on the natural wisdom of health— practices the art of living in harmony with nature's law to promote health. According to Dr. (Vaidya) Raut, at least 50% of deaths in the US today are due to preventable diseases caused by industrialization moving humans, products of nature, away from their origins. This creates a lack of mindfulness regarding nature. To Dr. (Vaidya) Raut, "nature is healing because we are microcosms of nature" (interview, 03/25/2022). The characteristics of nature that we are born with determine who we are. If one lives in balance with nature and their prakruti, balance and health are achieved. Dr. (Vaidya) Raut is a firm believer that one cannot simply treat the symptoms of an illness and claim that it is healing. To heal, one has to work from the inside out, not the outside in. Instead of recommending an anti-inflammatory for an inflammatory response, for example, she will find the source of the inflammation in the first place and work to encourage the body to heal. The treatment of the inflammation doesn't come from the anti-inflammatories, rather one should "work so that the body's response will change" (interview, 03/25/2022). It is a core idea of Dr. (Vaidya) Raut that "healing comes from within, since the body knows how to heal itself" unless blocked by mental or physical toxins, which she seeks to remove in the treatment of her patients (interview, 03/25/2022). The body and the mind are inseparable in Ayurveda— in fact, Dr. (Vaidya)

Raut often referred to *prakruti* as the body-mind-type (BMT) of an individual. The body and the mind, when obstacles towards healing are removed, are capable of healing the body.



Figure 5: Dr. (Vaidya) Raut examines my tongue as part of the analysis. This noninvasive procedure gives her a map of my internal organs and whether any digestive problems exist. She takes a picture of the patients' tongue the first time they meet in order to track the progress

of their digestive health, in addition to discussing diet and lifestyle. (Photo: Elizabeth Baranski and Dr. Ashlesha Raut)

### **Data analysis:**

While all healers are alike in their diagnostic process and their methods of healing, there were similarities I saw between Dr. (Vaidya) Raut and the literature I researched prior to meeting her. These similarities come from the standardized teaching of Ayurveda in India, mostly, since it is based on a foundation of knowledge of historical Vedas. Lots of concepts we had talked about without naming them specifically. One such concept was that of *ama*— the toxins mainly produced by faulty bodily processes— can come from anywhere and harm one's overall health (Mukherjee et. al, 2016). I asked what Dr. (Vaidya) Raut thought are the biggest contributors of *ama*, and she told me that the main problem is missing mindfulness. She noted eating with a lack of mindfulness as especially problematic, since one isn't allowing their body to focus on digestion. Eating is a key time when *ama* can accumulate, and certain foods are better for some people (figure 6). She cited people eating in cars, as people eating while driving are usually only eating in their car out of necessity or boredom, not allowing their bodies to communicate with their brain on levels of fullness or nutrition. Dr. (Vaidya) Raut also draws on *yukti*, without naming *yukti* in particular. In Brooks' (2018) piece on

the diagnostic process of Ayurveda, she notes that different Vaidyas have different primary methods of diagnosis and primary senses they rely on. For Dr. (Vaidya) Raut, her most important sense she relied on was feeling, specifically in regards to feeling the flow of prana through nadis.

When I started my research on Ayurveda, I knew nothing about it. My frame of reference essentially boiled down to assumptions about CAM that I have learned in school and from peers. Essentially, I have been taught that CAM– and by extension Ayurveda– is dangerous and pseudoscientific. After doing my research, I’m relieved to know that my initial assumptions were wrong, and I am grateful to Dr. (Vaidya) Raut for showing me that. Unfortunately, the overall consensus in America about healing methods like Ayurveda is that they are misguided, and American legislation lags behind the growing practice of Ayurveda in the United States.

A major issue for Dr. (Vaidya) Raut and other Ayurvedic practitioners in the United States today is the stigma towards non-Western medicine. Ayurveda for Healing is able to offer for their services to be covered by insurance, but many practitioners don’t have this option. Many insurance companies view non-Western medicine (or even some Western biomedicine that is considered non-medical, like hair loss) as frivolous and treatment isn’t covered by insurance. Since the United States does not consider Ayurvedic medicine to be legitimate or necessary, Ayurvedic doctors have to struggle with the stigmatization of their practice. Ayurvedic doctors who get an MD in India, like Dr. (Vaidya) Ashlesha Raut don’t have their degrees recognized in the United States. Ayurvedic doctors like Dr. (Vaidya) Raut aren’t allowed by law to use terminology like patient and diagnosis due to laws surrounding the hierarchy of medicine. People usually go to Ayurveda as a last resort in America, whereas it is used either as a primary healing method or in conjunction with biomedicine in India. In America, people usually pick and choose what aspects of Ayurveda they want to incorporate into their daily life. Following some aspects of their dosha or incorporating yoga poses are most common, but people rarely fully commit. Ayurveda is a lifestyle involving balance, and ignoring the other parts of the tradition effectively ignores the balance that the healing tries to provide in all of its many layers.



Figure 6. Diet is an important part of health and is used to help balance the doshas and encourage nutrition. Dr. Raut hosted the Ayurveda Nutrition and Cooking workshop in Willowbrook, IL in late 2018 as a part of the Andana Ayurveda Academy, where she teaches Ayurveda. Diet is the first step Dr. Raut uses to start her patients on the path to health after completing her diagnosis. (Photo credit: Dr. (Vaidya) Ashlesha Raut and Elizabeth Baranski)

### **Conclusion:**

When I began my research, I had never even heard of Ayurveda. For a long time in America, the biomedical healthcare system has been the dominant and only accepted form of medicine. Dr. (Vaidya) Raut seeks to change that— to introduce variety in how people heal and view their bodies in light of a rapidly developing world. With the assistance of Dr. (Vaidya) Raut, I conducted my research on Ayurveda. We wanted to, together, introduce others to Ayurveda and the holistic aspect of healing that the rigidity of American biomedicine lacks. I used visual ethnographic methods to conduct my research, as well as participating in an Ayurvedic diagnosis myself and incorporating Ayurvedic forms of wellness into my daily routine. Through my research, I learned about Ayurveda and Dr. (Vaidya) Raut's philosophy of working to treat the cause of illness, not the symptoms, and that being connected with nature is the best way to achieve balance and health. I gained a greater understanding of other healing traditions other than what I am used to and proved my initial assumptions about it wrong. It's extremely complex and based in science, with layers upon layers of information for every single aspect of health and the body. Working one on one with Dr. (Vaidya) Raut, I was able to understand how she practices Ayurveda here in Bloomington, IL— something I never could have learned from secondary research alone. Ayurveda today is extremely integrative— allopathic biomedical tools like X-Rays and bloodwork are used in conjunction with Ayurvedic techniques to provide specific, client-oriented care for individuals and their needs. While most secondary literature seeks to prove the efficacy

of Ayurveda, it would likely be most helpful for the practitioners and the researchers to instead show how Ayurveda can help individuals in our ever changing world. With Ayurvedic practitioners working in conjunction with biomedicine in the treatment of illness and the prevention of pain, clients can get more personalized, holistic care. As Dr. (Vaidya) Raut teaches us about Ayurveda, we learn more about how to treat ourselves and our bodies through sickness and in health.

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