

# A SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES

## Organising Vaidus in Gadchiroli

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*Gadchiroli, a predominantly tribal district in Maharashtra is currently witnessing a new experiment in providing appropriate health care. The vaidus, local healers, of the area have come together to revive and even reformulate an ancient system of healing which is fast vanishing in the face of exploitative inappropriate medicare. A report.*

Experiments in community health initiated in the seventies have now come to stay. There have been several attempts of evaluating such projects, the latest being by Sumathi Nair (SHR II.2.) With due acknowledgement of the contributions of these projects to community health, their limitations are being increasingly identified. The multiplicity of such models is low due to the requirements of heavy inputs in terms of resources like finance, know-how and skills, drugs, training and referral facilities and personnel and so on. In most cases, the political component of health/life of community is ignored, sidetracked or played down. Most such projects revolve around 'Allopathy' which brings with it its inherent limitations, moreover, although allopathy is the 'least unscientific' method, it remains culturally alien to most people.

It has thus become imperative to search for new alternatives, free from the above constraints. In this article, I wish to describe one such experiment of organising vaidus (traditional health workers) undertaken by the 'Paramparagat Vanaushadhi Vikas Va Samshodhan Kendra' (Centre for Development and Research in Traditional Herbal Medicine) in the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra. However, neither the author nor activists of the 'Kendra' wish to claim that it is the only alternative. It can, at best, be one of the several alternatives. The form and content of each such attempt could depend upon local conditions and priorities of the experimenting group.

Gadchiroli (formerly a part of Chandrapur) is a predominantly tribal district on the borders of Maharashtra with MP and AP. In the 'fifties' it was a stronghold of socialists when Narayansinh Uike, the first tribal graduate from Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, organised tribals around issues of land distribution, education and atrocities by ruling classes. Recently, some activists of Chhatra Yuva Sangharsha Vahini (the same group which supports the Kendra) have succeeded in organising

large numbers of landless labourers and peasants working under the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS). Attempts are being made to launch a broad-based 'Nisarg Bachao, Manav Bachao' (save nature, save humankind) agitation to oppose the proposed Inchampoli dam, which is expected to cause largescale deforestation and evacuation of many tribal villages in the nearby districts. Sukhdevbabu Uike, a follower of Narayansinh Uike and an activist associated with EGS and Nisarg Bachao has recently been elected to the Assembly from this area. All four MLAs from this district belong to opposition parties, much due to influence of activists in EGS and Nisarg Bachao.

The same team of Vahini activists has, for the last three years, undertaken the task of organising vaidus, with a view to evolve an alternative system of healthcare service which can be made available to the needy as and when required. It is not just a revival of an ancient system crumbling against the pace of changing times, but an attempt to evolve a dynamic system challenging the monopoly and mystification of established medical system. It would be integral to the cultural milieu of people and within their reach. It would be a system based on experimentation, experience sharing and an urge to serve the people (and not for profiteering). The team is trying to evolve democratic methods to achieve this object without the use of foreign aid or even possibly full-time workers. Judging by the meagre input of time, finance and people, it would be unjust to pass any judgement about this venture. However, their experiences undoubtedly point towards newer sign-posts in community health.

### Vaidki in Gadchiroli Today

Vaidus are traditional experts in diagnosis and treatment of diseases; collection, processing, compounding and dispensing of medicines without any economic incentives. For them, this is a noble service, not a profession. They are mainly responsible

for health care of poor people, patients with chronic ailments and in far-flung areas yet inaccessible to modern health services. The transfer of knowledge is mainly from father to son or to other worthy male member of community. In exceptional cases, where sons are unwilling/unworthy the knowledge is passed on to the daughter-in-law (but not to a daughter as she 'belongs' to a different family). Many vaidus, specially the educated ones, try to enrich knowledge gained from the Guru through experimentation and study of Ayurvedic texts. Vaidus in this area use drugs from plant, mineral and animal origin as well as mantras (chants) for treatment of physical and psychological disorders. They have their specialisation such as asthma, snakebite, veterinary diseases and claim to cure diseases untreated by modern medicine-tetanus, cancer etc. Although it remains to be seen how many of these claims stand scientific scrutiny, there are many instances confirming this skill in diagnosis and treatment. They follow several guidelines laid down in Ayurveda regarding the day, time and season of plant collection, diagnosis of diseases and processing of crude drugs. Some formulations used by vaidus are referred to in Ayurvedic texts.

#### **Current Issues confronting Vaidki**

The processes of 'development' and 'modernisation' have disrupted the socio-economic-cultural fabric which sustained and nurtured tribal life and specially their system of medicine and posed grave threats to their very existence. Like its counterparts everywhere, Gadchiroli has witnessed massive butchering of trees, disruption of the intricate eco-balances triggered by profit-hungry commercial interests hand in glove with government officials. An interesting example of 'modernisation' with total disregard to people's real needs is a dairy recently set up after destroying several acres of rich forest. Its premises have been declared as 'prohibited area' for outsiders. Hence vaidus are denied access to the few medicinal plants which have managed to survive in the compound. It's an agony to watch a patient suffer due to non-availability of a drug whose whereabouts are known, but which cannot be procured. The dairy has not in any way helped the tribals. It has only resulted in a complete drought of milk in the villages.

Large strips of forests are burnt by contractors for a better yield of tembhurni leaves (used for making bidies). Moh trees, of great economic, cultural and medicinal significance are burnt down and truckloads of coal sent to cities. The rich, symbiotic flora is being replaced by large scale

plantations of monocultures of teak and eucalyptus. Many valuable medicinal herbs have become scarce, some extinct. Ironically, such 'modernisation' has encouraged superstitious practices. Due to the depletion of herbal medicines, many vaidus are resorting to more non-drug 'therapies' like mantras, talismans, animal-sacrifices and so on.

'Development' has brought to tribal towns a new exploiting species — 'doctors' who, posing as demi-gods, promise instant relief and cure-alls through miraculous modern drugs, ushering in a culture of injections and antibiotics. The 'modernophilia' has lured people to spend their meagre resources on unnecessary (often harmful) drugs and cultivated in them distrust for their traditional system of medicine. (The is not to deny the utility of modern medicine but to protest against its present misuse).

Even then, established medical professionals often feel threatened by the skill and knowledge of vaidus. There was an interesting case of a veterinary doctor who extracted large sums from people and was still unsuccessful in a number of cases. The cases given up by him were then successfully treated by a young, dynamic vaidu. The people jeered at the doctor, who, in turn, lodged a complaint against the vaidu for practising medicine without registration. However, the village people unitedly stood behind the vaidu and did not allow the police to arrest the vaidu. With growing assertiveness and awareness in vaidus resulting from their organisation, more such attacks from medical establishment are likely to follow.

Vaidus manage to earn their living in difficult summer days by selling crude drugs to traders who take full advantage of the situation. Arjuna bark bought at the rate of 5-10 paise/kg is sold by middlemen to drug companies at the rate of several rupees/kg (that too after considerable adulteration).

The depletion of flora has forced vaidus to spend considerably more time and energy in collecting medicinal plants thus making them increasingly difficult to practise vaidki merely as a social service. Moreover, people now tend to visit them only when allopathic medicines fail. Even if they are completely cured by a vaidu's medicine, they follow the 'tradition' of not paying him, vaidus too follow the tradition of not asking for payment. In a society where status is increasingly being equated with money, vaidus are fast losing their respectable place in the community. All this has distracted the young generation from vaidki. In most cases, the

present generation is the last practising one. Various taboos have further restricted the transfer of knowledge e.g. the taboo on allowing a 'shishya' to part with information before his guru's death. Many learned vaidus have died without passing on knowledge to anybody. Thus, some valuable information has vanished for ever. Vaidiki, today stands on the brink of extinction.

### Vaidus' Organisation

Organising vaidus has been a great challenge for the group. Professional jealousy and mutual suspicion, complacency, taboos on information-sharing, lack of lively contact with the outside world and prejudices among vaidus obstructed them from coming together. However, there have been some favourable factors too. The growing realisation of the gravity of situation by vaidus, consciousness gained through their experiences (direct/indirect) of organisation of EGS workers or on forest issues the ability of activist to relate individual/professional problems of 'development' and 'ecology' have helped vaidus to come out of their shells and join hands for a common cause. There have been several camps for mutual information sharing and frank discussion on common problems.

There are greater challenges ahead: initiating sustaining democratic processes of decision-making and implementation, evolving short and long-term programmes to give an expression to their organised might, cultivating a spirit of experimentation and enrichment of knowledge, arranging for their continuing education through interaction with other vaidus and experts in the field, carrying out field trials for verification of claims made by vaidus and most important, helping the movement develop independently without dependence on the activist group and yet retain its linkage with the wider struggles.

At present, the vaidus, on their own initiative have decided on the following programme:

- i) To spread organisation to a wider area.
- ii) To organise a series of camps — for information sharing on diseases and remedies discussion on common problems.
- iii) To set up a co operative for storage and processing of crude drugs (processed drugs fetch a much higher price) to directly bargain with drug companies so as to eliminate the middlemen.
- iv) Felicitations of senior vaidus at the hands of reputed vaidyas (ayurvedic practitioners) and making other efforts to create awareness in society about the role of vaidus.

The organising group wishes to try out a scheme

wherein five acres of land obtained from the forest department under the Social Forestry Scheme will be used for cultivation of important medicinal plants. The cultivator will receive a small regular sum of money from the forest department for developing a forest on the land plus a part of the forest yield. This experiment, if successful, would help reduce the shortage of medicinal plants and also provide some monetary benefit. This may help to preserve the spirit of 'social service' intensely prevalent in vaidus. We believe that the spirit of selflessness is the one we wish to develop in tomorrow's society. So, this spirit already present in Vaidus should be encouraged. However, it is not yet clear whether it would be possible to nurture this spirit without their exploitation in present system.

It is difficult to say whether vaidus, long used to confirming to a particular system of healing will be open enough to freely discuss with others their understanding of diseases and drugs and perform experiments with scientific objectivity and make suitable changes in their practice. It also remains to be seen how formation of new forms of mystification of knowledge, and hierarchy could be prevented.

There are no readymade solutions to these problems. However, there is room for hope as experiences reveal the intelligence, innovation, scientific objectivity and passion for knowledge hidden in semi-literate folks. Natthuji's, is a glorious example. An illiterate shepherd boy, he used to leave his cattle for grazing outside the school building so that he could overhear alphabets chanted by school children and revised them with help of friends fortunate enough to attend school. He learnt reading from the names of tins at a grocer shop. He cultivated his interest by purchasing books. He had the guts to experiment on himself and his son to gain confidence about his experiments. Today, he is assertive enough to tell the patient to choose between him and the doctor. It is a pleasant surprise to see him at such an age, scan through books in search of new information. So, when Natthuji says, "Well, it's not impossible to build and sustain vaidus' organisation for peoples benefit", there should be at least some reason for hope.

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