

AYURVEDA AT CROSSROADS OF COVID19 RESEARCH : News Analysis

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Born of the Vedas, the broad based and comprehensive system of healthcare ‘Ayurveda’ is firmly rooted in the Shaḍ Darshanas, Triguna, Panchamahabhuta and Tridosha concepts. These terms seem to make no sense for the uninitiated in the Vedic Sciences or its technical terms, this lacuna leaves the whole system vulnerable to either ridicule, misinterpretation or to be left ignored. Even a collaborative effort to translate its wisdom in terms of today’s language is bound to leave us with a lot of untranslatables. Clinical studies and Phytochemical analyses are necessary to arrive at interpretable results, and is one of the common meeting grounds for the ‘grammatically’ different scientific systems that developed in different timelines of human history.

The story of Coronil is an example to illustrate the situation, Patanjali Ayurveda funded a research titled “Impact of Indian traditional Ayurvedic treatment regime for nCoV-2 (COVID-19)” and it was an Interventional, Randomised, Parallel Group, Placebo Controlled Clinical Trial, and the chosen study design was of internationally accepted standards. Inclusion and exclusion criteria, and intentions were clearly declared and available on the official website of CTRI – the National registry for Clinical Trials, under the MCI. The composition was of extremely well researched, safe, familiar and household herbs of India: Tulasī, Ashvagandhā, and Guḍuchī; widely used by *Ayurvedacharyas*, and has readily available pharmacological, toxicity and allied clinical research data from decades of earlier studies, probably this helped in skipping the time-consuming stages 1, 2 and 3 of trials. The end results were extremely promising and clinically relevant, to manage mild and moderate expressions of COVID19. The transparency levels of this study are so high that, none actually need to buy Coronil from only Patanjali, as the herbs in this non-secretive composition can be ordered individually from pharmacies anywhere in the world. Environmentally too, these herbs did not belong to endangered or red listed categories. Not surprisingly, with so many excellent qualifications, their extracts are already mass produced and sold as ‘immunomodulator drugs’ by the big modern pharmaceuticals, and these companies are fiercely at war to own patents for these herbs on the international arena.

A practicing clinician ‘*Ayurvedacharya*’, with a good fund of Vedic knowledge, would have predicted with some clarity the possible outcome of testing these 3 herbs in COVID19 infection, but things got even better when the clinical trials

revealed a total recovery in all patients in a short span of 3 to 7 days, where every observation is documented according to a set protocol. All good till now, the company went in for a hurried announcement of their newfound and precious information, a breakthrough in world wide COVID19 clinical research. They were only unaware of what would follow in a politically charged atmosphere. There is a huge difference between saying ‘Baba Ramdev claims’ and ‘Results of a scientific clinical trial’; and obviously the media and public chose what is convenient to their narrative. Clinical trials like this are very likely to show variations in results when scaled up to larger demographics and a multitude of variables like viral load, age group, co-morbidities, etc. So, if reproducibility or scalability of this study may not yield completely favourable results; harping on the phrase “100% cure” by the company on all media forums was indeed misleading and superfluous, and the naysayers took complete advantage of this limitation that applies for any scientific study.

While we need to admire the person who walked beyond endless theories and tall talk, collaborated cleverly, chose the right herbs from the collective wisdom of his team of *Ayurvedacharyas*, roped in a Medical Institute for the study, got access to COVID19 positive patients, and did what needs to be done, Patanjali’s paperwork and reporting formalities at the AYUSH ministry were not timely and remained inadequate until the announcement. A visible lack of co-ordination between ICMR and AYUSH probably made them keep the authorities semi-informed. Was there a fear of a counter-productive twist of slowing down to this enthusiastic project? we can’t say, but everyone were appalled by the ministry’s rudely worded press release threatening to invoke the ‘The Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, in response to this announcement. It was repulsive and sounded more like a frontal assault on Ayurveda itself, and triggered the social media to erupt with disgusting memes and shameful jokes not only on Swami Ramdev but on everything Indian. Armed with PIB release, a section of fact checkers and their followers reported this news, to Twitter, under self harm and suicide. A flurry of responses left a sense of contempt for Ayurveda in the back of people’s minds, a huge damage was done.

This reaction did not go well with a section of the Ayurveda fraternity, discussions pointed to why the AYUSH ministry itself has not yet conducted and announced results of such trials on 100 patients each, in at least 20 Government Ayurveda hospitals across India, in the last 4 months. In public opinion, the department was just going in circles, seemingly obsessed with preventive care awareness and ‘do it yourself’ hygiene programs that could very well be left to selected celebrities to effectively deliver the message. The world is looking forward to hear more from the ministry about their ongoing research, where it stands now, and which way to go forward in COVID19 studies. As I

write this article, there comes an announcement of approving Coronil as an Immune booster and not as a cure, okay something is better than a ban. In the opinion of most clinicians, a product that emerged from such a study could have been evaluated by AYUSH and categorised as “by prescription only”, and intended to go with patient specific professional advice, this could have greatly improved the connect between every individual and a qualified *Ayurvedacharya*, but the company is selling it as an OTC (non-prescription over the counter sale) product instead.

The entire announcement was cluttered and ended looking like an urgent commercial launch, but in reality, a price bracket of INR 545 per course of a clinically studied medication seemed just right for handling this Pandemic. This study demolished assumptions that a new drug discovery is almost always a multimillion-dollar Pharma program. Allegations were that the COVID19 cases were selective, but that falls flat when we see the exclusion criteria, nothing hidden, mild to moderate categories, with SpO₂ > 90%, without ARDS were considered for the study. When compared, Glenmark website said, their drug which showed clinical improvements in 88% of the tested 150 patients, had many similar exclusion criteria as that of Coronil. While Glenmark’s drug was respectfully granted approval under an accelerated process, though the study itself is yet to be published in a peer-reviewed journal, in sharp contrast, Patanjali’s Coronil and Ayurveda suffered slander at launch of this medicine.

When put to test, science being science, gives results as is, doesn’t differentiate between a Baba or a Bill. It is time for politics, contempt and propaganda to be brushed aside, and include this revelation of herbs for the benefit of humanity. A clinically proven medicine for COVID-19 is what separates decisions to frantically vaccinate the world population, and being able to effectively prevent and treat only the sick. In the following days, Ayurveda would give out plenty of success stories, from its timeless wisdom. While our own people loathe and remain contentious at an indigenous discovery, we are not new to our precious findings and clues getting rapturously picked up by international agencies for research and application.

Unfortunately, there is also an unhealthy trend to say Ayurveda can cure any disease, but in reality, the greatest of *Acharyas* have meticulously segregated diseases as *Sādhyā* and *Asādhyā* (curable and incurable, and their subtypes, with reasoning), transgression from this law of possibilities and limitations should be shunned. Across its vast timeline of existence, Ayurveda has continuously given us solutions ranging from preventive healthcare to managing a pandemic, it is time we realise its rich, unique and benevolent nature, and respectfully use its philosophy and *Aushadhi Yogas* – herbs and formulations, gifted by our *Rishi* Scientists of yore, for the betterment of mankind.