



Therapeutics to Cosmetics: Reviving a Knowledge Tradition

K.P. GIRIJA
GIRIJAKP@GMAIL.COM

KEYWORDS: AYURVEDA, COSMETIC, KNOWLEDGE, MEDIMIX, CHANDRIKA

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This paper looks at some of the endeavours by Ayurvedic practitioners to survive and to preserve their family medical legacy by manufacturing products other than Ayurvedic medicines. The transformation of Ayurveda from a medicinal field to a cosmetic field was fascinating in many ways because, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the division between a cosmetic and a medicinal product was a very fine line within Ayurveda. The cosmetic industry had not bloomed in the way it has now in this globalised era. The conditions under which knowledge is mediated through technology also shape the nature of that knowledge. Cosmetic products can easily be described as Ayurvedic products by tweaking with the addition of a few ingredients. For instance, all the products of the Biotique Company are advertised as those following Ayurvedic formulas. They include moisturizers, lightening serums, face packs, tan removers etc. and are cosmetics meant for different purposes. On the labels of the bottles/containers, the company mentions that 'this is not a cosmetic product, it has therapeutic properties'.¹

The difference between an Ayurvedic product and a cosmetic product becomes obscure when they both are sold under the label of Ayurvedic products. This is striking because taxonomy and the subsequent differentiation of practices and products are an obsession in the modern world even



though this separation was not significant in Ayurveda. What are the additional qualities that transform an Ayurvedic product into a cosmetic product in the process of making it appealing and marketable? What kinds of products and practices in Ayurveda are projected through the market and what is made visible in them as valuable? What are the historical conditions that force a practitioner to move into production and selling of a cosmetic product, rather than selling it as an Ayurvedic product/medicine? What are the kinds of claims that practitioners make to market their products? These are some of the concerns that the paper will address demonstrating the entrepreneurship effort of select practitioners in producing Ayurvedic cosmetic products.

Medimix soap and Cholayil family

It was by mere coincidence that I ended up reading a blog on the manufacturing of Medimix soap. I had no clue about the soap and its connection to the Cholayil family where the famous Ayurveda practitioner of the previous century, Cholayil Brahmasri Kunjumami Vaidyan (1865-1933) belonged.² When I googled for more information on, I found that Dr. Sidhan, one of the descendants of Kunjumami, was the founder member of the Medimix company. The website introduces the launching of the soap with the title, it all began with Medimix soap [...]

The birth of Medimix dates back to the time when the Cholayil family used *viprathi* oil as a cure for skin ailments. The year 1969 proved pivotal to the family legacy as Dr. Sidhan combined a timeless tradition with his sharp business acumen to develop a green bar of soap that could both nourish and protect our skin. Strongly rooted in Ayurveda, this amalgamation of 18 herbs continues to protect and nourish skin effectively to this day in the most natural way possible. Over time, Medimix has grown synonymous with 'skin care, the natural way' and for generations women, indeed entire families, have placed their trust on the Medimix range of products. Currently available in 4 variants of soap, 3 variants of body wash, 5 variants in the facial cleansing range and a few other products, Medimix is expanding its range and bringing natural skin care to more people across the world.³

Now, the company produces a range of products like face wash, body wash, hygiene wash, *Lakshadi* gel (for nourishing and moisturising), nourishment shampoo, powder, etc. Their brand includes Medimix soap, Cuticura powder, Dr. Sidhan's Herbal Formulations and Sadayush Wellness Clinic.⁴ The fascinating aspect in the manufacture of Medimix was that Dr. Sidhan, an



Ayurveda practitioner, had used an ingredient that (it was claimed) could cure skin problems. This was a secret family formula and part of their Ayurvedic practice which he used to popularise a product not only in Kerala but also across India and abroad. Sidhan was the founder member of the Cholayil group and he claimed that the prime ingredient of Medimix soap, *viprathi* oil, was a secret knowledge of the Vaidya (Ayurveda practitioner) family of Kunjumami handed over from generation-to-generation.⁵ Kunjumami was a traditional Ayurveda practitioner from the Ezhava caste, a lower caste in Kerala.⁶ The Ezhava Ayurvedic practitioners had a considerable contribution in the treatment of children (*balavaidya*), for the ailments of eyes and noses (*netravaidya/modern ENT*) and for vital spot massages and bone settings (*kalari vaidyam*). It took a third-generation lower caste practitioner to establish the legacy of his great-grandfathers, and the family's Ayurveda practice through the manufacture of cosmetic products and toiletries. A specialisation called *Ottamooli vaidyam* prevails in Kerala and it is usually transferred from one generation to the next and only within the family. It consists of one specific medicine or a compound of medicines for particular diseases like jaundice, piles, kidney stones etc. and the family would be well-known for that particular treatment (Varier 1980; Unnikrishnan 2011). In other words, the specialisation and expertise of *Ottamooli* practitioners are strictly limited to curing one or two diseases and the formula for the medicine is protected stringently through the family lineage. Sidhan's claim of using *viprathi* oil from his secret family tradition/ formula has to be seen in this context of preserving knowledge within families.

From family lineage to entrepreneurship

The Cholayil group acquired the world-famous brand Cuticura in March 2001 from Muller and Phipps.⁷ Cuticura was a celebrated talcum powder known for its skincare properties. The older company claimed that it was an 'all-purpose talcum powder' and it 'soothes, comforts and beautifies'.⁸ Cuticura also claimed that they had been producing the best skincare products from 1865 onwards. Their advertisement says, 'The fragrant British legacy customised for your skin needs' and,

Cuticura Soap was launched in 1865 by Potter Drug and Chemical company. Renowned for its antibacterial and skin soothing properties, our very first innovation has truly stood the test of time with its formulation remaining relatively unchanged through to today.⁹



Cuticura products had been made by Potter Drug and Chemical Corporation of Boston, U.S.A. The brand name persists even today as a symbol of the '1865 fragrant British legacy' as shown in one of their advertisements. Potter Drug and Chemical Corporation used allopathic ingredients to produce a mild antibacterial, medicated soap and powder and claimed that they were 'skin health experts since 1865'.¹⁰ The soap contained an antibacterial agent, triclocarban. When Cholayil group bought this brand in 2001, they did not change the brand name. Instead, they started producing a range of products under the brand name Cuticura with the same tag, 'the fragrant British legacy customised for your skin needs'.¹¹ Apart from talcum powder, they included bathing bars and deodorants. None of the products produced under the brand name, Cuticura has been projected as Ayurvedic products by the Cholayil group. Instead, they say, 'ingredients from mother nature' and 'equipped with healing properties'.¹² So, the transition of the products from a chemical ingredient to a "mother nature" product by the addition of herbs and oils extracted from herbs such as olive, primrose, almond, saffron etc.¹³ is quite appealing. Simultaneously, they claimed to retain 'the fragrant British legacy' too through the name 'Cuticura'. Thus, an amalgamation of two legacies can be seen in this new strategy: the British fragrant legacy and the Cholayil Ayurveda family legacy. The transition of a chemical product into an herbal product happened here without addressing the distinctive logic of two different systems. However, the production of soap involves chemical reactions.

In 2005, Godrej attempted to buy Cuticura. Godrej had managed to acquire the U.K.-based Keyline brand famous for its cosmetics and toiletries and was selling Cuticura in the U.K.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Godrej does not have the right to market Keyline's products in India. When Godrej had eyed Cuticura, the turnover of this brand in India was Rupees 100 million. However, the Cholayil family did not want to forgo Cuticura at that time and they continued to be the manufacturers.¹⁵

In the 1960s, Sidhan worked as an Ayurveda doctor in Perambur, Tamilnadu with the Central Railway. It is notable that an Ayurveda doctor was appointed as the medical doctor for the Central Railway staff in the 1960s when Ayurveda was struggling to establish its lost authority and seemingly lost legacy in the competition with modern (allopathy) medicine. The reason for his venture into making soaps is described as follows. In the late 1960s, conservancy labourers of the Central Railway were employed to clean human waste from the railway tracks without proper protective measures. They often suffered from occupational hazards and skin disease



was one amongst them. They would consult Sidhan for treatment and the practitioner would prescribe some medicinal oil for their skin disease which was effective. The workers found it difficult to carry the medicinal oil with them when they moved to other places. Some friends advised Sidhan to produce an accessible product using the medicinal oil. Then Sidhan started making soaps on a minimal scale for the labourers.¹⁶ Initially, he and his wife Sowbhagyam produced the soap themselves. She remembered that they, together with a helper, made each batch of soap consisting of 200 individual bars. Sowbhagyam and the labourer boy together did the pressing, cutting and packing work of the soap production. They would make a new batch of soap only when the already made ones were completely sold out because of lack of money to buy the ingredients to make new batches of soaps. At that time her husband's salary from the railway job was Rupees 350/- and he would use the money to buy medicines, coconut oil and perfume needed for the making of the soaps.¹⁷

At first, the soaps were made at their railway quarters. After two years, the family rented a house at Ayanavaram, Tamilnadu and increased the making of the soap from two batches to four batches of 120 numbers each. Sidhan used his bicycle to carry the soaps and distribute them to the nearby Parvathy medical shop and the other pharmacies belonging to his friends.¹⁸ During the initial years, the soap was available only through prescriptions by doctors, both Ayurvedic and allopathic.¹⁹ The business gradually progressed from soaps to powders, face washes and gels. The first advertisement of Medimix appeared in 1972 and till the 1990s the company remained a single brand company. Now Medimix products have a market not only in the four South Indian states but also all over India. The products are exported to Middle Eastern countries, Taiwan and Lithuania. Pradeep Chalayil, son of Sidhan manages the Chalayil Private Limited with the right to sell the products in the northern part of the country and overseas. Anoop, the son-in-law of Sidhan has the right over AVA Group (Ayurveda Treatments & Personal Care Products) and the company sells products in South India.²⁰ The company claims that they produce the soaps manually without relying much on machines. But, in their factory manually-operated machines are used along with large scale human labour.

Chandrika Soap, indigeneity and Kesavan vaidyan

The production of an Ayurveda soap named Medimix in the 1970s can only be documented through another historical intervention of equal significance: the production of Chandrika soap in the 1940s. Harminder Kaur



points out that by the mid-twentieth century, Indian newspapers and periodicals were filled with advertisements of soaps (Kaur 2010: 246). She asserts that the history of industrially-produced soaps in India is to be foregrounded within the colonial perceptions of corporeal cleanliness (ibid.: 248). In the 1940s, Kesavan Vaidyan, another practitioner from the *Ezhava* caste, initiated the production of Chandrika soap as a cottage industry. He along with his wife started making soaps completely manually. This was a time of transition when the lower castes were accused of lack of consciousness regarding cleanliness and hygiene. It is equally important to remember that in Europe, through public health policies, an attempt was being made for "the deodorisation of Europe" (ibid.: 249).

The existing discourse in India on the caste-based purity and pollution was being gradually shifted into a modern discourse on health, hygiene and cleanliness. In the nineteenth century, schools and textbooks were sites through which the government intervened in the arena of health and hygiene. The formalisation and legitimisation of these new concepts through communal places like schools and craft learning centres and their implementation through corporeal practices were asserted. The students were taught about the importance of hygiene, an idea that permeated the discursive field of public health and missionary activities in the context of and alongside the fear of contagious diseases. Literature also had references to hygiene and cleanliness, from the magazines to novels. This lesson on hygiene was not equivalent to the existing indigenous notion of health and *vrithi* (cleanliness). The classes were meant to imbibe the students with the colonial idea of hygiene and cleanliness.²¹ In these places, on many occasions, cleanliness was projected as the solution to remove caste-based pollution. In other words, cleanliness was equated with the purity of the body.²²

Gradually, the prevalent notions on purity and pollution discourses were superimposed by modern ideas of hygiene and cleanliness. The older ideas were not completely eliminated but absorbed into the new notions. As and when required, they emerged along with the new ideas carrying the baggage of traditional taboos of caste plus the modern concept of hygiene because certain communities and class of people were seen as unclean. The close connection of their occupation and socio-economic status with cleanliness was obscured in this new discourse of hygiene. Cleanliness was viewed as something acquired through the use of consumer products like soap and hand wash. The medium of water—the basic purifying element—is essential here to attain corporeal cleanliness through these products.



Soap as such does not have the capacity to clean or purify. When it works with water, the purifying medium, the body becomes doubly purified. Soap on its own is not an object that purifies anything. When it is used with water, the potent soap reveals its purificatory property. Water acts as a catalyst that brings out the purificatory property of soap because water itself is a medium that is used for corporeal purification/cleanliness. When water, the basic purifying medium is used with another product that cleanses the body, it becomes a double purification process. The socio-cultural context under which people did not have the luxury of being clean had been circumvented through these novel discourses on consumer products like soaps and scents which were handy and through debates like hygiene, cleanliness and public health.

When Kesavan initiated the production of soap in a small place in Kerala, companies like Godrej, Pierce Leslie, Tata, Unilever etc. were already there in the market. Prior to this period, the European soaps or the imported toilet soaps were a costly commodity and a luxury affordable only to the affluent classes. But laundry soaps were available all over the country for the purpose of washing clothes.²³ Kaur points out,

[...] Elite Indians played an active role in co-opting European soaps by borrowing from the existing and rich Indian repertoire of grooming products such as scents and traditional cleaning agents, thereby giving European-inspired industrially produced Indian soaps a distinctly Indian dhoby mark. In engaging in this dialogue of borrowing from the West while at the same time drawing from India's traditional grooming/cleansing heritage, Indians indigenized European soap and also consumed it. (Kaur 2010: 248)

The author of *A History of Hindu Chemistry*²⁴, Prafulla Chandra Ray, had founded the Bengal Chemical and Pharmaceutical Works in 1899. They produced soaps and related products including hair oil by using indigenous ingredients. Ray used Western technology and Indian perfumes to produce a variety of soaps meant for the modern as well as the traditional Indian. Ray's Glycerin soap competed with the glycerin soap of Pears (ibid.: 258). Godrej set up its soap manufacturing unit in Bombay in 1918. After the First World War, soap production increased. Madras and Mysore government set up their own soap factories in 1916. By the mid-twentieth century, toilet soaps produced in India became a commodity that was affordable to a large section of society. Kesavan's endeavour to produce soaps as a small-scale industry has to be seen in this historical context.



Chandrika, "the moon-light"

Kesavan Vaidyan from the Travancore state²⁵ was a disciple of Narayana Guru (1856-1928), the spiritual leader, poet, philosopher, Ayurveda practitioner and a social reformer. Kesavan was an ardent promoter of Guru's ideas. Another guru, his Ayurveda teacher, Ramananda Swamikal taught *siddhavaidyam* to Kesavan.²⁶ Ramananda Swamikal had made a medicated paste to treat the skin disease of a rich man. Later, Kesavan used this ingredient with Ramananda's permission, to produce soap. He named the soap Chandrika, which means 'the moon-light'. He and his wife used to manufacture the soap manually as a small-scale business in 1940. Kesavan's endeavour to manufacture and distribute an Ayurvedic soap was not the first of its kind in Kerala. In 1910, Sadananda Ayurvedic Medical and Soap Works of Kottarakara started producing cosmetic soap. By that time, many companies like Dutt & Co., Deva & Co., etc. had started soap production from within Kerala as 'swadeshi soap'.²⁷ This was occurring concurrently with missionary activities of educating and civilizing the natives through their schools, and training them in crafts, which also included soap-making. For instance, Basel Mission was manufacturing laundry soap in their factory at Feroke, Malabar. They were also providing training to people in making laundry soaps (Malayala Basel Mission 1934: 186).

Kesavan started a *Siddhavaidyasramam* (a *siddhavaidyam* practicing place/pharmacy) in Irinjalakuda of Cochin princely state on 28 June 1940. The pharmacy was in the building of the Sree Narayana Bhakta Samudayodharani Samajam office (Sree Narayana Devotees Community Promotional Association) (Velayudhan & Panikkassery 1984: 79-88). Though the pharmacy was a small one, the inaugural function was grand. Dignitaries like advocates, the municipal chairman, the editor of *Gomathy* newspaper, the editor of *Yukthivadi* newspaper, a high school teacher and a number of journalists attended the function. Because of their presence, the news of the inauguration was published prominently in most of the newspapers of Kerala (ibid.: 80). Fairly immediately, he shifted his pharmacy from the above-mentioned building to a rented building and started manufacturing medicines to be sold outside of the locality.

Within 13 years, while still practising *siddhavaidyam* at Irinjalakuda, he started making Chandrika soap and Ayurvedic medicines such as *Chandrikasavam* (a liquid medicine), Chandrika balm (for curing headache), Chandrika *oushada* castor oil (medicated castor oil), Chandrika kajal (for eyes), *Devasudha*, *Balanidhi*, *Balamridham* (for children), *Netrabindu* (eye



drops), 72 types of *sindhurs* (powders), 92 types of pills, 92 types of oils and massaging oils, 14 varieties of *arishtaasavangal* (liquid form of medicinal compounds), 33 types of medicinal compounds for rejuvenation and 31 types of medicated ghee (ibid.: 79-88). The demand for his medicines was more than he could supply.

In 1953, Kesavan was awarded the title of *Vaidyaratnam* by K.C. Manavikraman Raja, the Zamorin of Calicut.²⁸ At that time, the other Ayurveda practitioners who had received the appellation, Vaidyaratnam were P.S. Varier of Kottakkal Aryavaidyasala in 1933 and Ashtavaidyan Thaikattu Narayanan Mooss in 1923. Both were conferred the title by the British government. In 1953, in the post-independence period, the three states had not yet been geographically united as the present Kerala state. Kesavan lived in Irinjalakuda which was under the princely state of Cochin. As he treated and cured the Kozhikode Zamorin, the appellation was bestowed by the Zamorin Raja. Mooss and Varier added the appellation Vaidyaratnam with their names as well as with their pharmacies and enhanced the social capital through it. Thus Mooss was known as Ashtavaidyan²⁹ Vaidyaratnam Thaikattu Narayanan Moos and Varier was known as Vaidyaratnam P.S.Varier. Their Ayurvedasalas (pharmacies) were named as Vaidyaratnam Oushadasala and Vaidyaratnam P.S. Varier's Aryavaidyasala respectively. The appellation Vaidyaratnam given to Kesavan was not used by him as a permanent social capital as in the cases of Mooss and Varier. By 1953, the power and authority of the Raja who was under the parliamentary system had become negligible. This could be a reason why Kesavan Vaidyan was never known as Vaidyaratnam Kesavan as in the case of Varier and Mooss. He did not bank on the title Vaidyaratnam as additional social capital to sell his products or his image as an Ayurvedic practitioner. It is equally important to note that While Mooss was a Brahmin and Varier belonged to the Sudra upper caste, Kesavan was an Ezhava, a lower caste and yet did not rely on the social capital of the appellation.

Initially, Chandrika soap was used only as a remedy for certain skin diseases and was prescribed by both Ayurvedic and allopathic doctors. Later it began to be used without prescription by the doctors as a free-floating product for skin diseases and as a toilet soap. It was also distributed amongst the lower caste communities to conscientise them about cleanliness (Sanu 1964: 1-6). This was the time when Narayana Guru advised the lower castes to abstain from liquor making and drinking, superstitious and extravagant rituals, and to clean themselves after work (Menon 1986: 457-98; Bhaskaranunni 2000). The lower castes were



reproached for paying less attention to matters of hygiene and cleanliness, and soap was projected as an easy remedy to cleanse the body.³⁰ Even today, in the context of the presence of any contagious disease such as Covid-19, one of the prime instructions given by governmental institutions and health sector to the general public is to wash one's hands with soap as soon as one reaches home. Soap is a symbolic medium for corporeal cleanliness and hygiene maintenance. However, there were many indigenous methods to cleanse the body like using *thaali* (juice of certain leaves), *incha* (the smashed bark of *Acacia caesia*), soap nuts,³¹ gram flour, clay etc. Kaur suggests that the attraction towards European sensibilities of cleanliness increased the regional production and consumption of soaps. This led to the sprouting of the soap-making cottage industry in the early twentieth century (Kaur 2010: 255). The Indian Congress included soap making in one of their swadeshi products in 1906.

The entry of toilet soap into the continent happened within a discursive field which was saturated with debates on health, hygiene, cleanliness, odour, dirt and contagious diseases. In a social space manifested by ritual and caste hierarchy marked on the bodies was complicated with a discourse on corporeal cleanliness and with the introduction of a product to clean the body. In the discourse, the body was the prime agent that had to be cleansed and purified. Sanitation and hygiene were taught in Indian schools in 1889. Handbooks and manuals such as *The elements of sanitary science* (McNally 1894), *Moore's manual of family medicine & hygiene for India* (Moore 1889) were also circulated amongst the literate class. *The Elements of Sanitary Science* was meant for the 'district, municipal, local medical and sanitary officers, members of local boards, municipal councils and others' (McNally 1894: 1). During the same period, in everyday practice in the 'Object Lessons' in the schools of Travancore, soap was introduced as an object to be familiarised with (Aiyar 1896).

Moreover, soap was a symbol of social status. For the affluent class, the particular brand of soap that they used, whether imported or made in India reflected a distinct status. For lower castes, soap symbolised a product that cleansed their "polluted body", especially after manual work in which their body was central in the labour process. This is notable, especially in the initial years, when some of the upper castes were reluctant to use Chandrika soap and they secretly called it "Ezhava soap". When companies from outside the state such as Godrej and Pears produced soaps, it was considered as a secular product, but when a person who was known as an Ezhava produced the same product, it was rejected in terms of its



seemingly lower (caste) status. Along with water that was always treated as something that purified the body, the soap also symbolised a product that cleansed the "polluted body".

Kesavan made the soap out of caustic soda, coconut oil, ayurvedic medicines and medicated oils. The moulds were made of wood and the solid blocks of soaps were cut into shapes using an iron thread. Then the soaps were placed in the dye and shaped by beating with a wooden stick. Kesavan and his wife did the final shaping manually by removing the protruding parts and covering it with butter paper (Velayudhan & Panikkassery 1999: 84). During the first few years, Kesavan sold the soaps by carrying them in an iron box placed on his head and meeting people individually. He travelled on foot, by bus and by train to sell the soap. On one occasion, the bus that Kesavan wanted to board was full by the time he reached the stop. So, he travelled by holding on to the ladder attached to the back of the bus. He was travelling from Thodupuzha to Thiruvananthapuram to participate in an exhibition. By the time he reached Pala, his body and his white clothes were coated with dust as the roads were not tarred on those days. He got down at Pala, took bath in the Meenachil river, washed his clothes and dried them. Only then did he continue his journey to Thiruvananthapuram and participate in the exhibition (ibid.: 84f.). He travelled to north and south Kerala to sell the soap. Within a few years, the soap had become popular outside Kerala also. He started exporting the soap to the Middle Eastern countries.³²

Kesavan also spent money to use unique methods of advertising to sell his soap. Initially, he advertised only in Malayalam newspapers and magazines. Later the advertisements started appearing in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Hindi and English newspapers (ibid.: 86). Cinema theatres exhibited slides of Chandrika soaps. Kesavan also produced attractive calendars with the advertisement of Chandrika soap. Boat races were an important seasonal festival in Kerala. Kesavan used the venue of those festivals to promote the soap. During boat races, one of the boats would display Chandrika's advertisement. Thrissur Pooram is a yearly famous festival in Kerala where a large number of elephants are displayed with colourful umbrellas held atop the elephants and special gunpowder crackers are burst. One year, a small pageant which was not part of the usual festivities was held during the *pooram* festival with Chandrika's advertisement (ibid.: 86). The elephant in the pageant carried the *thidampu* (a statue of God that people carry atop the elephant) of Chandrika soap. In the 1940s these were unique strategies and spectacles for the promotion of an Ayurvedic-



cum-toiletry product. Kesavan also showed the gallantry to send the soaps to newspapers for review. In those days, books alone used to be sent for reviews, not products like soaps. However, newspapers such as *Gomathi*³³, *Kerala Kaumudi*³⁴, *Snehithan*³⁵ etc. printed good reviews of Chandrika soap. Kesavan also sought endorsement from doctors by presenting them with sample soaps. He published these certificates in newspapers which promoted the sale of his soaps. The first certificate was procured in 1944 from Dr. H.N. Kammath, the civil surgeon at Irinjalakuda Government Hospital. Later, doctors from outside Kerala too gave certificates to Chandrika soap. They also advised patients having skin diseases to use Chandrika soap (ibid.: 87). One of the great poets, Vallathol Narayana Menon sent Kesavan a congratulatory poem. Kesavan used the venue of educational-industrial and agricultural exhibitions to promote his soaps.

The soap gained acceptance as a small-scale industrial project and as a medicated Ayurvedic product. Chandrika soap acquired a merit certificate in 1944, in the educational-industrial and agricultural exhibition conducted at Cherppu, Kerala. The stall of Chandrika soap was regularly designed by an artist, V.M. Balan and in many exhibitions, Chandrika acquired gold medals and trophies (ibid.: 87). When demand increased, Kesavan was forced to drop the production of the other Ayurvedic products. The company run solely by him and his wife slowly developed into a bigger entity named S.V. Products. In 1957, at Ernakulam, the company was renamed as Lal Products. In 1958, Chandrika Products was established in Coimbatore and Pothannur (Tamilnadu) and in 1960, S.V. Products was founded in Bangalore (Karnataka) for the production of Chandrika Soap (ibid.: 88). By 2000, Chandrika had a market in Singapore, Malaysia, the Middle East, England, America, France and Germany. From 1978 onwards, for three consecutive years, Chandrika Soap won the State award for exporting (ibid.: 88).

When Kesavan started soap-production, Ayurvedic ingredients were not used to produce cosmetic products on a commercial basis even though there was not much difference between cosmetics and some of the Ayurvedic products.³⁶ Cosmetics as a commercially viable business and as something totally different from the field of medicinal products had not yet evolved fully. The soap was advertised as 'the original vegetable oil soap, since 1940'.³⁷ This is significant because Chandrika soap claimed its distinctiveness from other soaps through the use of vegetable oil in its making, rather than animal fat. Thus, Chandrika was able to attract consumers who were strict vegetarians and reluctant to use any products that consisted of animal fat. Though he was a lower caste practitioner who had experienced



many hardships in the name of his caste, gradually Kesavan succeeded in selling his soaps across castes and communities. From a product marked by the caste of the manufacturer, Chandrika soap gained the exalted position of a secular product in the social space of Kerala. By this time, the changes in the consumption pattern also reflect a certain value system that is instilled in the consumer (Yanagisawa 2010: 52).

The consumption pattern demonstrates the social status and the class in which a person moves in or aspires to move to. A particular brand, the company which manufactures the product, etc. determine the status of the product and also the status of the consumer who uses the product. Now, the Company produces a range of soaps and shampoos. The five varieties of soaps available include Chandrika Ayurvedic Soap, Chandrika Sandal Soap, Sidha Soap, Chandrika Ayurvedic and Chandrika Glycerin soaps. The last two Ayurvedic soaps contain the same ingredients such as sandalwood, coconut oil and patchouli oil, but have different shapes. The company has two varieties of shampoos: the Sidha Herbal Shampoo and Sidha Hibiscus Shampoo. Their head office is in Bangalore, Karnataka state with an export office in Irinjalakuda, Kerala state and the main company is named S.V. Products. In 2015, the owners of Chandrika soap filed a case in the High Court of Madras against Wipro when the latter started producing a soap named "Oushadha Chandrika" (medicated Chandrika).³⁸ The case was won by Chandrika soap owners.

Institutions, practices and institutionalizing practices

The website of Medimix soap opens with these lines, 'The secret of Ayurveda. To enrich your skin naturally. Because there is nothing better than natural.'³⁹ Dr. Sidhan claims on the Cholayil website that he got the registration to produce Medimix in 1969 and they had been using 18 herbs and coconut oil to produce the soap through the cold process method.⁴⁰ Practitioners use diverse claims to establish the legacy of their family tradition as well as the uniqueness of their products. Also, many stories spread amongst the practitioners and proponents about the appropriation of secret family medicines and formulae, herbs and ingredients by established institutions. The negotiation between the practitioners and the institution varies. Sometimes it ends up in collaborations with individual vaidyas and utilisation of their labour and knowledge in producing medicines or cosmetics. It also leads to the transfer of knowledge and secret ingredients to established Ayurvedic institutions on payment of a lump sum of money as in the case of *Aarogyapacha*.⁴¹ At other times, it ends up in cases being



filed or threats to file cases as in the case of the Cholayil family. When Trivandrum Ayurveda College decided to produce a soap with the same formula as that used by the Cholayil family, the latter came to know about this and threatened to file a case for breach of trust against the college authorities. The soap had not reached the market and Trivandrum Ayurveda College withdrew from their project of producing soaps with *viprathi* oil.⁴² Interestingly it was also alleged that Medimix company had copied the ingredients of Chandrika Soap. Kesavan Vaidyan and Sidhan produced the soaps primarily as a remedy for skin diseases. Initially, both of them sold their soaps by meeting people and pharmacies in person to convince them to sell/buy their soaps as the case may be. The history is identical to such an extent that it is not clear whether Sidhan had indeed imitated Kesavan Vaidyan in the production of Medimix soap or such a narrative was produced later when he was interviewed by journalists.

Now Kottakkal Aryavaidyasala produces a soap named *Vibha* and sells it through their pharmacies. Many small pharmacies run by practitioners also produce their own soap with gram flour, green gram flour, etc. along with vegetable oil or animal fat.⁴³ But soap was not their main Ayurvedic product; they would sell medicines and soap was only one of their products. In the case of Kesavan and Sidhan, they succeeded in the production and sale of a single product—soap—and developed it into a successful business by producing other toiletries; simultaneously they stopped practising Ayurveda. In order to focus on soap-making and the soap business, Kesavan dropped the job he had at a school as a teacher and also stopped making Ayurvedic medicines. Sidhan did not attempt to prepare any other medicine for sale. He focused solely on the production of soap, sanitiser and shampoos apart from his cultural activities of acting and directing dramas.

Across Kerala, both big and small pharmacies run by practitioners or their families produce their own unique medicines for sale through their outlets. Hundreds of small-scale Ayurvedic manufacturers sell medicines prepared by them incorporating their own traditional knowledge through Ayurvedic pharmacies that are seen in every village, small and big towns.⁴⁴ For the manufacture of medicine, the practitioners are required to obtain a license from the Drug Controller and need permission to buy restricted items like spirit, opium etc. from the Excise Department. After the separation of Siddha medicine from Ayurveda during the modernisation and institutionalisation of Ayurveda in the mid-twentieth century, hundreds of pharmacies started manufacturing and selling Siddha medicine as a



separate product. Earlier, the medicinal products were not separated as Ayurveda or Siddha medicines.

The detailed description of the above-mentioned unique products and pharmacies also indicate that Ayurvedic medicines were prepared and distributed till date not only according to the classical *Samhita* texts (*Charaka*, *Susruta* and *Ashtangahridaya*) but also on the basis of the directions given in hundreds of vernacular texts like *Sahasrayogam*, *Sarvaroga Chikitsaanool*, *Chikitsa Manjari*, *Chintamani Vaidyam*, *Chikitsa Kauthukam*, *Sindoora Manjari* etc. Medicines were also prepared using formulae kept secret within families of the practitioners. Multiple possibilities existed for the preservation and dissemination of knowledge in Ayurveda. Reducing them to a dichotomy of classical Ayurveda of scholarly tradition and folk or popular practices of the marginalised non-scholastic tradition will end up in producing a predictable pattern in scholarship. Our inefficiency in addressing the diverse field of practice and pinpointing the fascinating internal dialogues, tensions, appropriation, assimilation, erasure etc. need to be dealt with promptly by redesigning the methodological tools. Knowledge not only trickles down from top to bottom, from the classical tradition to the vernacular or folk tradition; it flows to and from in multiple directions when we re-imagine the reductionist idea of the vertical flow of knowledge.

Endnotes

¹ From <https://www.biotique.com/> [retrieved 21.02.20].

² *Vaidyan* is a term used for a male Ayurveda practitioner.

³ From www.cholayil.com/medimix-origin/ [retrieved 21.02.20].

⁴ From www.cholayil.com [retrieved 21.02.20].

⁵ From www.cholayil.com [retrieved 21.02.20].

⁶ *Ezhavas* are a powerful backward caste in terms of population, education, employment and land ownership. They are known as *Ezhavas* in the southern Kerala and *Thiyyas* in the northern Kerala. In the second half of the twentieth century, these two castes were classified under Other Backward Castes.

⁷ From <https://www.cholayil.com/portfolio/cuticura-2/> [retrieved 21.02.20].

⁸ <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/a3/97/8a/a3978adf0e756f1372cac3a576ea65ae.jpg> [retrieved 12.05.21].

⁹ <https://www.cuticura.co.uk/about/history> [retrieved 09.05.21].

¹⁰ <http://www.cuticura.co.uk/about/> [retrieved 11.05.21].



¹¹ <https://www.cholayil.com/cuticura-archives/> [retrieved 21.02.20].

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ http://www.business-standard.com/article/companies/godrej-buys-uk-s-keyline-brands-105110101002_1.html [retrieved 11.05.21].

¹⁵ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/Godrej-sets-its-eyes-on-Cuticura/articleshow/1285242.cms> [retrieved 11.05.21].

¹⁶ <https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/Behind-the-lather/article10805461.ece> [retrieved 11.05.21].

¹⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_Jv6uo_mRM [retrieved 13.05.21].

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ <https://www.financialexpress.com/archive/cholayil-group-eyeing-the-big-league/62404/> [retrieved 11.05.21].

²⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_Jv6uo_mRM [retrieved 13.05.21].

²¹ In the seventeenth century preference was given to heavy scents of musk and ambergris. By the nineteenth century, in Europe, the intense-smelling scents and perfumes were replaced by subtle smelling ones (Kaur 2010: 249).

²² Applying a variety of oils on the body and chewing of *paan* (betel leaves) and spitting out the juice were considered bad habits and were scrutinised. The smell of oil was described as 'foetid, disgusting and nauseating' [cit. in Collingham 2001: 147].

²³ Jacob, Greeshma Justin. 2018. 'Soaps and Its Social Space in Late Colonial Malayali Society'. Paper presented at the workshop on *Therapeutic commodities: trade, transmission and the material culture of global medicine* organised by Department of History, Warwick University and Centre for Historical Studies, JNU at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 5-6 November.

²⁴ *A History of Hindu Chemistry from the earliest times to the middle of the sixteenth century, A.D., with Sanskrit texts, variants, translation and illustrations.*

²⁵ The region was territorialised and named as the state of Kerala in 1956. Till 1947, the area was largely known as *Malayala Rajyam* and included the two princely states of Travancore and Cochin along with British Malabar.

²⁶ Ramananda Swamikal was a hermit and the disciple of Sree Narayana Guru. He was the head physician of the *Siddhavaidyasramam* in Koorkenchery, Thrissur district of Cochin state. *Siddhavaidyam* is one of the codified indigenous medical practices of South India. The textual corpus of *siddha* is largely in Tamil. The *siddha* philosophy was initially critical of idol worship and temple systems. Later some *siddhars* merged with the *Saiva bhakti* tradition. *Siddhars* are a broad sect that includes devotees of Siva in the Deccan, alchemists in Tamil Nadu, early Buddhist *tantrikas* from Bengal, the alchemists of medieval India and alchemists and yogis of north India. (White 1996: 1-14). *Siddhavaidyam* had linguistic and geographical tags connecting it to Tamilnadu and southern parts of Kerala. In the early twentieth century it was known as Tamil Ayurveda.

²⁷ Jacob, 'Soaps and its social space.'

²⁸ *Vaidyaratnam* means gem of an Ayurveda practitioner.

²⁹ *Ashtavaidyas* are traditional Brahmin male-experts in Ayurveda (Abraham 2013). Their tradition is seen as a unique Ayurveda tradition of Kerala (Leela 2008; Menon & Spudich 2010). Even in the twenty-



first century, the appellation *Ashtavaidya* is a legacy that transfers only amongst male members, regardless of the presence of female Ayurveda practitioners in the family.

³⁰ Until mid-twentieth century, all castes regarded the caste below them less hygienic and polluting. When the Nampoothiris and Sudras viewed everyone 'below' them in the hierarchical ladder as low and polluting, the *Ezhava* community also perceived the Dalits, the people below them as polluting, unhygienic and untouchable.

³¹ Soap nut is known as *saboon kaya*, which could be an Arabic or Portuguese word given the connection between the Middle east and the coastal regions of Kerala as well as the Portuguese influence from 1498 to 1693.

³² From <http://www.chandrikasoaps.com/founder.html> [retrieved 11.05.21].

³³ *Gomathi*, a Malayalam newspaper, was started by Kunnathu Janardhana Menon in 1930.

³⁴ *Kerala Kaumudi* was initially published as a weekly from Mayyanad from 1911 onwards. Later, it became a full-fledged daily newspaper. During its initial years, *Kerala Kaumudi* was considered as the mouthpiece of the Travancore State Congress.

³⁵ *Snehitam* (friend) was published from Thrissur district. Other details about this magazine is not available.

³⁶ The website claims that at the time of the production of Chandrika soap, Ayurveda was not used for the preparation of non-medicinal products. <http://www.chandrikasoaps.com/founder.html> [retrieved 11.05.21]. However as mentioned elsewhere Sadananda Ayurvedic Medical and Soap works produced Ayurveda soaps but it could not sustain for a longer period like Chandrika soap.

³⁷ From <http://www.chandrikasoaps.com/> [retrieved 11.05.21].

³⁸ From <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/11018365/> [retrieved 11.05.21].

³⁹ From <https://www.cholayil.com/> [retrieved 21.02.20].

⁴⁰ Cold process soaps are made by combining sodium hydroxide lye and oils. After the saponification process, 1-2 days are required to solidify the soap. This is a creative process because one can improvise with the addition of ingredients like perfume, colour, medicinal oil etc. to the basic materials required for soap-making. In hot process soap-making, the chemical reaction is fast because of heating. The ingredients are the same, sodium hydroxide, oil and water.

⁴¹ The knowledge about the healing properties of an herb, *Aarogyapacha* was revealed by the Kani tribes of Kerala to the scientists of Jawaharlal Nehru Tropical Botanical Garden and Research Institute (JNTBGRI). The institute gave a contract to the Coimbatore Aryavaidya Pharmacy for making a medicine, *Jeevani* from the herb and shared the benefit with the Kani tribes (Bijoy 2007).

⁴² Interview with Dr. Ramankutty Varier, Vaidyaratnam Oushadhasala, Thrissur on 27.01.2019.

⁴³ 'Origin' soap is produced using green gram flour. From <https://www.originsoap.com/> [retrieved 11.05.21].

⁴⁴ *Thachil Vaidyanmar* of Angamaly (Ernakulam) had specialised medicines for throat and head related problems. Now due to the unavailability of ingredients they have stopped producing many of the traditionally handed-down medicines. Ayurvedic practitioners have also diminished in their family. Interview with Teena, one of the descendants of *Thachil* family on 24.05.19.



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