



Ayurveda Across Civilisations: A Historical Perspective from Antiquity to the Contemporary Era Samrat Mandal*

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Abstract

The ancient Indian medical system known as Ayurveda is one of the most enduring, comprehensive, and intellectually complex therapeutic systems in history. It is a comprehensive life science that aims to comprehend health as an ever-changing balance between the physical organism, the psychological self, and the surrounding natural world. It has its roots in the intellectual and spiritual milieu of early South Asian civilisation. Ayurveda has evolved throughout millennia via processes of adaptation, commentary, and multilingual discussion, continually changing itself in response to changing social, intellectual, and scientific circumstances rather than staying a static legacy from antiquity. From its early manifestations in the Vedic corpus to its current rearticulating within health worldwide discourses, this work provides a comprehensive historical and analytical overview of Ayurveda. The study highlights the adaptability and tenacity that have allowed the Ayurvedic system to survive across shifting civilisations by following intellectual lineage of Ayurvedic knowledge via ancient treatises, mediaeval scholastic traditions, marginalisation during the colonial era, and postcolonial rebirth. It also looks at how Ayurveda interacted with various medicinal traditions, including Persian, Greco-Arabic, and later Western biological systems, leading to intricate processes of absorption, trade, and reinterpretation. The study makes the case that Ayurveda's lasting vitality stems from its integrated view of life, which sees health as a harmonious interaction of body, mind, mentality, and environment rather than breaking the human person down into discrete biological parts. Its resurgence in academic studies, institutional healthcare systems, and global wellness movements is evidence of the system's philosophical universality and depth of adaptation rather than just a sentimental return to tradition. Ayurveda must thus be viewed as a living, developing knowledge system whose principles continue to connect with modern desires for healthy, sustainable, and meaningful forms of living rather than merely as a historic medical legacy of India.

Keywords: *Ayurveda; History of Medicine; Vedic Tradition; Holistic Health; Traditional Indian Medicine; Cross-Cultural Medical Exchange; Integrative Medicine; Doṣa Theory; Medical Philosophy; Colonial and Postcolonial Knowledge Systems; Global Wellness Movement; Sustainable Health Practices*

Introduction:

Every civilisation develops unique knowledge systems over the course of its history, which eventually come to represent its intellectual nature and cultural temperament. These customs act as lasting reminders of a society's attempts to comprehend life, including its thoughts on well-being and misery, its reactions to the natural world, and its pursuit of philosophical and spiritual clarity. Among the many and varied traditions of the Indian subcontinent, Ayurveda

is one of the most vibrant and lasting. It is more than just a collection of medical information; it is a huge storehouse of collective memory that has been moulded over centuries of observation, introspection, and life experience. Ayurveda developed into a comprehensive system that combined spiritual reflection with scientific investigation. Its lessons were preserved in well-written aphorisms, extensive classical compendia, and the useful insights of generations of healers who honed their craft by working closely with both patients and the natural world. Ayurveda defined a picture of health that was inextricably linked to moral behaviour, seasonal cycles, dietary discipline, and the harmonic balance between the human body and the larger cosmos. It was by no means an isolated or merely technical profession. In this way, it served both a philosophical compass and a medicinal system.

As a result, the history of Ayurveda is a story of intellectual continuity and cultural resiliency rather than just a list of medicinal doctrines. Its core books were revisited by academics and medical professionals throughout history, who preserved their intellectual essence while reinterpreting them to reflect modern circumstances. Ayurveda was able to survive as a living tradition rather than a remnant from the past because to this continuous process of regeneration. Therefore, studying Ayurveda involves experiencing a civilization's persistent endeavour to balance physical well-being with moral behaviour, environmental consciousness, and spiritual understanding. Its survival over millennia is a testament to the resilience of knowledge traditions that are firmly anchored in the ecological sensibilities and cultural fabric of the communities that foster them. It serves as a reminder that such wisdom, when rooted in lived reality, has the capacity to withstand the eroding force of time.

Ayurveda that make up the Vedic Imagination: Sacred Origins

The Atharvaveda's holy verses, where the art of healing is intricately linked to cosmology, ceremonial practice, and deep metaphysical contemplation, contain the first stirrings of Ayurvedic thinking. In these songs, disease was seen as a symptom of disturbance in the subtle symphony that tied the individual to the global order, or Oat, the cosmic principle of truth and balance, rather than just a bodily abnormality. In order to restore balance between the human body and the greater cycles of the universe, healing was consequently seen as both something physical and a spiritual effort. The healer was honoured not just as a practitioner of therapeutics but also as a mediator between the external environment and the unseen powers that ruled it. Medicinal plants were cherished as holy expressions of divine kindness. The more systematic Ayurvedic beliefs were eventually built on the intellectual foundation supplied by this early worldview. The five primal elements—earth, flames, water, air, and ether—that made up all of creation eventually led to the idea that the human body is a microcosmic representation of the cosmos. This fundamental basis gave rise to the well-known notion of the three of them doṣas—vāta, pitta, and kapha—subtle laws and regulations whose fluctuating balance was thought to influence a person's temperament, constitution, and vulnerability to illness. It was believed that disease represented the disruption of these forces, whereas health was the condition in which they remained in harmonious proportion.

Despite having its roots in philosophical conjecture, this framework demonstrated a remarkable sensitivity to observational evidence. In order to create a logical theoretical framework, ancient doctors meticulously documented seasonal fluctuations, nutritional influences, environmental factors, and patterns in body functioning. By doing this, they created a medical philosophy that was both symbolic and useful, able to provide specific techniques for diagnosis, prevention, and therapy while also taking spiritual cosmology into consideration.

Systematisation and Medical Humanism in the Classical Flowering

Medical scholarship flourished extraordinarily throughout the classical era of Ayurveda. The main compendia, the Charaka Saṅhitā, Suśruta Saṅhitā, and Aṣṭāṅga Hōdaya, combined disparate traditions to create a cohesive and pedagogically ordered science. These writings were philosophical meditations on the essence of life, pain, and the moral obligations of the medical profession rather than just collections of methods and recipes. A complex system of internal medicine that focused on nutrition, lifestyle, seasonal adaptability, and psychological equilibrium was presented in the Charaka Saṅhitā. It insisted that compassion, self-control, and intellectual humility were crucial components of medical practice and saw the doctor as both a healer and a moral philosopher.

The Suśruta Saṅhitā, which provided thorough explanations of anatomical features, reconstructive techniques, and surgical equipment, was equally impressive. The text's inventive surgical techniques, which range from cataract surgery to rhinoplasty, provide witness to a lengthy history of technical proficiency and empirical observation, challenging contemporary presumptions on the technological constraints of ancient medicine.

Later, the Aṣṭāṅga Hōdaya synthesised these extensive collections of information into a succinct yet thorough manual, guaranteeing that Ayurvedic knowledge would continue to be available to practitioners and students for years to come. Through these writings, Ayurveda became a medicinal system as well as a philosophical and ethical discussion of what it means to be healthy.

Ayurveda in Intercultural Circulation: Crossing Boundaries

Instead than staying inside the borders of the Indian subcontinent, Ayurveda travelled outside along the same paths that took textiles, texts, spices, and philosophical concepts across continents. Ayurvedic knowledge went to far-off cultural domains through thriving networks of marine commerce, intellectual communication, and the nomadic travels of Buddhist monks and scholars, where it met and conversed with other healing systems. As a result of this trend, Ayurveda became a part of a broader, transregional interchange of philosophical and scientific ideas rather than just a local medicinal practice. Indian pharmaceutical methods, surgical insights, and botanical knowledge found receptive audiences in areas like Persia and the wider Arab world. Scholars were able to integrate Indian therapeutic techniques into what would eventually become Greco-Arabic medicine by translating Sanskrit medical literature into Persian and Arabic. This conversation wasn't one-sided. Ayurvedic practitioners underwent a subtle but significant process of philosophical hybridisation when they interacted with foreign medical systems based on the traditions of Hippocrates and Galen. They also absorbed some conceptual and pharmacological aspects. In this sense, Ayurveda developed by broadening its interpretative possibilities rather than giving up on its foundations.

The Himalayan and South Asian areas were most impacted by the spread of Ayurvedic philosophy. Sowa-Rigpa is a unique medical tradition that emerged in Tibet from the blending of Ayurvedic theories, native Bon healing methods, and Buddhist intellectual concepts. Through Tibetan cosmology, monastic learning, and regional Materia medica, this combination produced a system that conserved the tridua doctrine while rearticulating it. Tibetan medicine continues to be a live example of the Ayurvedic principles' adaptability and vitality. Similar to this, deeply ingrained indigenous herbal knowledge blended with Ayurvedic techniques in Sri Lanka and other regions of Southeast Asia. In order to accommodate tropical temperatures and unique epidemiological patterns, local healers modified diagnostic and treatment methods and integrated local flora. Regional variations—dynamic medical cultures that preserved Ayurveda's philosophical basis while altering its practical applications in line with local natural and cultural realities—emerged as a result, rather than merely copying Indian Ayurveda.

The Mediaeval Transformation, Alchemy, and Experimentation

The emergence of Rasa shastra, the pharmacological and pharmaceutical part of the Ayurveda, throughout the Middle Ages gave Ayurvedic medicine a startling new depth. Ayurvedic medicine's material and intellectual boundaries expanded during this time as researchers and medical professionals started investigating the medicinal possibilities of metals, minerals, and complex chemical compounds. Intricate procedures of purification (sadhana), calcination (Marana), and amalgamation were used in their work to convert materials like mica, gold, and mercury into medicinal formulations said to have strong healing effects. As a result, Ayurveda's pharmacological repertory greatly increased, encompassing carefully prepared mineral formulations in addition to plant-based treatments.

Advanced labs and a more methodical approach to pharmaceutical manufacture emerged during this stage of development. Drug manufacture, storage, and administration were described in detail in treatises that required both technical expertise and theoretical comprehension. The compendia of this era show a remarkable degree of chemical understanding, indicating a setting where metaphysical conjecture and practical experimentation coexisted. Rasa shastra represented a sincere attitude of inquiry and creativity while occasionally being chastised for its symbolic language and mystical connotations. In addition to curing illness, its practitioners aimed to increase vitality, postpone ageing, and fortify the body against deterioration. Rasa shastra therefore symbolised the pursuit of change, both of materials and of human existence itself.

These activities were not exclusive to India. Similar alchemical traditions developed in mediaeval Europe and the Islamic world, where intellectuals also experimented with metals to one another elixirs, and material transformation. Pre-modern cultures may have been intellectually fascinated by the hidden qualities of substance and the potential to increase human lifespan, as evidenced by the simultaneous growth of such practices throughout far-off civilisations. When seen in this larger global perspective, Rasa shastra is not an isolated mystery but rather a part of a vast and profoundly human attempt to discover nature's most hidden secrets and use them for renewal and healing.

Disruption of Colonialism and the Legitimacy Crisis

Ayurveda's historical course was drastically altered by the entry of European colonial forces in South Asia. Western medicine was institutionalised through hospitals, medical schools, and administrative policies, supported by the political power of the colonial administration and the reputation of contemporary science. Indigenous healing practices were steadily marginalised, and those who used them were frequently depicted as holdovers from a superstitious past. However, this time of turmoil also sparked an incredible intellectual renaissance. Ayurvedic academics started creating professional societies, translating traditional literature into contemporary languages, and participating in discussions regarding scientific validation. In light of anatomy, chemistry, and bacteriology, Ayurveda was reinterpreted, resulting in a nuanced conversation between tradition and modernity that still influences its development today.

Revival and Reconstruction in the Postcolonial Era

India began a purposeful and methodical endeavour to recover, maintain, and revive its rich legacy of indigenous perspectives systems after gaining independence in 1947. Among these, Ayurveda attracted special attention as a thriving medicinal tradition and a cultural asset. The newly established country aimed to elevate Ayurveda from the periphery of imperial disregard to the forefront of the country's medical and intellectual life. In order to provide Ayurveda institutional backing and academic validity, specialist universities, specialised research

councils, and official regulatory agencies were formed. While authoritative pharmaceutical standards and *Materia medica* were created to control the manufacturing and distribution of medications, standardised educational curricula were implemented to guarantee uniformity in training. Thus, this period represented a significant shift in Ayurveda's standing. It evolved into a publicly acknowledged and state-sponsored medical system from a community-sustained tradition that was frequently practiced in family or local contexts. Ayurvedic knowledge was not only preserved but also reinterpreted within contemporary institutional frameworks throughout the post-independence decades. Ayurveda eventually gained recognition as a live, developing field that could support the country's public health goals rather than just as a holdover from India's past. In this revitalised position, it became a source of medical diversity, intellectual continuity, and cultural pride, reflecting India's larger goal to reconcile its ancient legacy with the requirements of a contemporary, independent state.

In the Age of Globalisation, Ayurveda

Ayurveda has become an internationally recognised cultural and therapeutic phenomenon in recent decades, surpassing its localised roots. Ayurvedic principles are now found in hospitals, spas, and research labs all over the world thanks to wellness tourism, herbal medicines, and integrative medicine initiatives. Yoga, meditation, and Ayurvedic diet are examples of practices that have become popular and have influenced modern conceptions of lifestyle medicine and preventative health. Globalisation has, therefore, also brought out fresh moral and intellectual difficulties. Discussions concerning cultural ownership and fair benefit sharing have been triggered by issues related to intellectual property, biopiracy, and the commercialisation of traditional knowledge. As a result, Ayurveda has become a place of both potential and contestation due to its global expansion.

Philosophy, Ecology, and Ayurveda's Current importance

Ayurveda's philosophical underpinnings offer a comprehensive understanding of health that is intricately linked to ethical lifestyle choices and environmental harmony. Ayurvedic philosophy places well-being within a broader ecological and moral framework, highlighting the necessity of living in accordance with natural cycles and universal principles, rather than seeing the human body as an isolated biological entity. In the modern world, where humanity is confronted with increasing ecological degradation, lifestyle-related illnesses, and pervasive psychological distress, its teachings on seasonal adaptation, mindful and sustainable dietary practices, and the cultivation of mental tranquillity take on new significance. Some of these ancient Ayurvedic principles have started to be echoed in recent decades by advances in contemporary biological research. Understanding the body as a dynamic, interconnected system is becoming more prevalent, as evidenced by the growing emphasis on personalised or precision medicine, the understanding of the critical role the gut microbiota plays in general health, the scientific investigation of circadian rhythms, and the growing field of psychosomatic research. Although they are articulated using a different conceptual and methodological vocabulary, these new scientific viewpoints are in line with Ayurvedic ideas like *prakriti* (individual constitution), *din Acharya* (daily rhythm), and the inseparability of mind and body.

This intellectual confluence does not prove that Ayurveda was a literal or technical precursor to contemporary scientific findings. Instead, it emphasises the breadth of its epistemological orientation—the knowledge that health results from the delicate balance of several interacting forces within the body, the mind, and the environment rather than only from the healthy operation of individual organs. In this way, Ayurveda articulates a systems-based vision of life in which harmony, adaptability, and equilibrium across intricate networks of relationships lead

to well-being, foreshadowing in spirit the integrative approaches that modern science is only now starting to methodically investigate.

Conclusion:

From the hallowed rhythms of the Atharvaveda to the modern world of international wellness centres, Ayurveda's history demonstrates the extraordinary persistence of human knowledge traditions throughout time. Few intellectual systems have managed to maintain their conceptual coherence while traversing such a broad historical landscape. Ayurveda endured as a living and evolving body of knowledge rather than as a fossilised relic during times of political turmoil, altering cultural hegemonies, and the emergence of rival scientific perspectives. Its ability to be reinterpreted, internally reformed, and creatively renewed in the face of shifting historical conditions is demonstrated by its longevity across millennia. Ayurveda is becoming more and more relevant in the current era as the shortcomings of rigidly reductionist scientific paradigms and the growing effects of ecological imbalance face modern healthcare systems. Instead of advocating for a romantic retreat into antiquity, it provides a framework for meaningful dialogue between ancient wisdom and modern scientific research. Its persistent focus on prevention, balance, and the interdependence of the body, mind, and environment promotes a more integrated understanding of health, one that strives to be both morally sensitive and empirically based.

Ayurveda's holistic approach encourages a rethinking of medicine as the development of well-being across the whole range of human existence rather than just the treatment of illness. It suggests a healthcare strategy that puts sustainability and long-term vitality ahead of symptomatic treatments alone by emphasising nutrition, lifestyle, seasonal awareness, and mental balance. In a time of chronic disease, environmental degradation, and rising public interest in individualised and preventive approaches to health, such viewpoints are highly relevant. As a result, the history of Ayurveda cannot be included in a single medical history chapter. It symbolises a continuing civilizational dialogue—a developing discussion about how people might age gracefully, live with dignity, and coexist peacefully with the environment that supports them. Its persistent relevance throughout ages and civilisations implies that the issues it tackles—health, balance, and the art of living well—are not specific to any one time period but rather are universal human problems.

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