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Pune, India

This summer I was given the opportunity to explore my passions in medical anthropology by conducting independent research on healing in Ayurveda in Pune, India. Ayurveda is the traditional medicine of India which takes a holistic approach to medicine by diagnosing an imbalance in energies in the body, rather than simply diagnosing a disease. I focused on how physical interactions between Ayurvedic doctors, or *vaidyas*, and patients build trust and relationships that are important to the healing process. Conducting research on Ayurveda in Pune, India allowed me to advance my academic passions in medical anthropology, while building relationships with people of different walks of life. Exploring a new corner of the world alone came many challenges, both anticipated and unforeseen. In the end I learned to become comfortable with unforeseen circumstances and understanding that challenges allowed me to experience India more fully and learn more about myself, my interests, and my surroundings.

I arrived in India fresh and eager to begin researching touch in Ayurveda, already with expectations of what I would be doing. Within my first 24 hours in India, my expectations quickly changed when I found out my housing with a host family had not been arranged as I previously thought. I was unsettled at first, but within the next few days I met hostel owners who went out of their way to call their friends and family until they found a family to host me. This was my first taste of the hospitality and friendliness of the people in Pune. Having overcome that obstacle, the next challenge to work through was getting my research started. When I arrived my only research contact in Pune was out of town, and no one knew when he would be coming back. I had to find other means through which to begin my research. After

making dozens of phone calls, I finally got hold of a vaidya in Pune. From there I asked each vaidya I encountered to refer me to other vaidyas in Pune.

Over time I built a network of Ayurvedic doctors and students who were eager to teach me and tell me about their experience in Ayurveda. I worked with eight vaidyas and five students, filling some days from sunrise to sunset with interviews and observations of consultations. Conducting interviews had its challenges, as sometimes people would arrive over an hour late, not come at all due to misunderstanding, or be too busy with patients to be able to talk. With persistence I was able to conduct dozens of interviews and observe dozens of consultations. The time I spent conducting field work was one of the most rewarding aspects of my time in India.

Nadi pariksha, a key element of diagnosis in Ayurveda, is a useful way to exemplify the dedication, skill, and experience of a doctor, which translates into healing. *Nadi pariksha* is a complex form of pulse reading that interprets the body's three energies or *doshas*. Most patients know very little about how *nadi pariksha* works, and some even admit to be unsure about turning to Ayurveda at first, but even so they come to trust in the vaidyas. This trust begins even before the initial consultation: friends and family refer each other to vaidyas they believe are good healers. When doctors are skilled in *nadi pariksha*, they can properly and accurately diagnose the imbalance of doshas. To become highly skilled in *nadi pariksha*, the vaidya must be mentored and study *nadi pariksha* for years, see thousands of patients, and constantly work to improve. During the pulse reading, a well trained doctor concentrates in silence as he or she feels the patient's wrist with three carefully placed fingers, one finger for each dosha. This with a combination of knowledge in medicinal plants and treatments makes it possible to properly treat

the patient, further establishing patients' trust and faith in the vaidya and Ayurveda. A well treated and healing patient is happy to return and recommend others.

While most doctors shared similar techniques in *nadi pariksha*, there were a few doctors with significant variations in their technique, which was reflective of their skill and dedication. Dr. Charan¹ used a technique which involved rhythmic pressing and lifting of his fingers on each of the patient's wrists. He explained that his technique was unique because he learned his guru, or mentor, had developed this technique decades ago. This goes to show the importance of practice under a mentor's guidance to develop expertise in *nadi pariksha*. Dr. Charan is highly respected for his specialization in cancer and heart disease treatment, and it is evident that he always puts patients first. On the other hand there was Dr. Tamboli² who was inconsistent with his *nadi pariksha* techniques and conversed the entire time he was pulse reading. It was as if he was going through the motions of what a patient would expect without properly employing the art of *nadi pariksha*. Furthermore, it was difficult to tell what he genuinely did in a typical consultation and what was altered due to my presence. For example, he would speak to his patients in English even if they only spoke Marathi, the local language, so that I could understand. The poor technique was reflected by Dr. Tamboli's scarce amount of patients. Being highly skilled in *nadi pariksha* makes it possible to diagnose and understand a patient even without the patient expressing what is wrong. A doctor who is better versed in *nadi pariksha*, is better able to diagnose, thus better able to heal thereafter.

The vaidyas I worked with ranged from seeing 5 patients a day to 30 patients a day, having 6 months of experience to 30 years of experience, and mentoring 15 students to being mentored by other vaidyas. Through these Ayurvedic doctors I was able to learn what it means to

¹ Name altered for anonymity of informant

² Name altered for anonymity of informant

be a true healer. To become a great healer, one must have a great passion for the patients and for the life of others. I am fortunate to have been taught by and witness such great healers.

Independent research in Pune, India was an opportunity to develop and explore my passions while constantly encountering new people and perspectives. The varieties in scenery, busy ambiance, and beautiful places in India have left me eager to return. I did not go a day without being struck with awe. In India it is possible to appreciate the beauty in simplicity and extravagance, from the one room home I shared in the jungle to the complex adornment and designs of saris I saw as I rode on a rickshaw. I could not think of a better way to learn than to be fully immersed and challenged with a different way of life. I learned to become comfortable with discomfort and to understand that great amounts of preparation can still leave me unprepared. The research is only one dimension through which I learn, the only way to truly capture my time in India is to experience it.