

REVIVING TRADITIONAL MEDICINES

IMPCOPS





Around the world, long before the advent of Allopathy, civilizations have had traditional beliefs, and established practices committed to delivering good health, with their methods of diagnosis, treatment, prevention, procedures, and protocols. These also recommend consumption and application of preparations, and practices as part of daily rituals for improving and boosting health. In Ayurveda, this is referred to as dinacharya. Often these systems were based on the study of individual body constitution, local food habits, and native medicinal herbs. In many countries, especially where Western allopathic system of medicine is not easily accessible or affordable, these indigenous systems are trusted by large sections of the population as the mainstay for health. In countries like South Africa, Vietnam, Malaysia among others, there is an extensive effort being made to preserve and protect traditional medicine and knowledge. In India, this initiative was made long before Independence, by a group of farsighted vaidyars, practitioners of the Ayurveda and Siddha systems. The Unani system that found its way into India during the Mughal rule too had gained popularity and earned

a permanent spot. To propagate these indigenous systems and keep them thriving, a group of 224 practitioners came together to form a Cooperative Society that is now popularly called The Indian Medical Practitioners Cooperative Pharmacy and Stores, familiar to all as IMPCOPS. The current President of IMPCOPS, Dr. R Kannan states that, as far as traditional medicine is concerned, it is very easy to write out a prescription, but very difficult to find a high-quality preparation, with genuine ingredients, that is ready for use; IMPCOPS was founded in 1944, led by Captain Srinivasa Moorthy and Dr. Kondal Rao for this very purpose of procuring raw materials, preparing and distributing traditional medicine of the highest standards from their Adyar Headquarter. Within a few years, the membership of doctors increased to 800.

Despite this courageous initiative, post-Independence, Western Medicine has relegated the traditional systems into a category known as Alternative Medicines. To a large extent, society itself is to blame, as it relies heavily on quick, symptom-based cure provided by Western Medicine rather than the latter that addresses the root cause.

Traditional systems find their origin in texts, folk songs, and scriptures that are ancient and have no established evidence that is acceptable by science as we know it today. The knowledge available in these ancient origins is not on par with modern pharmaceutical research, which studies the physical and chemical properties, as well as the pharmacological effect that the drug has on the body. Traditional medicine uses methods wherein the particular dravyam (ingredient/matter to be used) in a preparation, is cured of its inherent toxic nature using prescribed additives and procedures, so as to make it useful in treating illnesses. This knowledge of converting the toxic property to curative property was acquired by the siddhars/ vaidyars of ancient times through divine knowledge that is not readily explicable. But the result of the treatment is available for all to see; it is the only presentable evidence. For instance, the use of nilavembu kashayam and papaya leaves as a means of increasing platelet count for the treatment of dengue was a breakthrough for Siddha medicine during an outbreak of the disease in India. More recently, the use of kabha jwara kudineer, for stabilizing the vital parameters in Covid patients thereby helping the immune system fend off the disease, has provided statistical evidence about the efficacy of the Siddha system. This has made way for many such simple remedies and treatments from Traditional Medicine to become popular, breaking the mindset that they are not reliable. During the pandemic, IMPCOPS had worked multiple shifts to churn out a steady flow of the kabha jwara kudineer packets. The product was a top seller online too!!

A direct result of this is that in the last decade the number of students taking Ayurveda, Unani, and Siddha studies has gone up threefold; an indication that people are aware of the reliability of TM, that young people and their parents are confident of a future in this system of medicine both, as care seekers and caregivers.

Remember that sometimes not getting what you want can be a stroke of luck- Dalai Lama.

Traditional Medicine (TM) is regarded by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage.



of preparation among other finer common aspects. Unani medicine gives a lot of importance to aromatics. The halls of the building though, are filled with the aroma of herbal preparations from the ground floor-bittersweet odours of kashayams of Siddha, heady herbal fragrances of ayurvedic arishtas and dense oily fragrances clashing for attention. Unani medicines we are told are all sugar and fragrance-based; interestingly some are even halwa-type preparations. One can only imagine that the employees and staff of IMPCOPS who soak in these medicinal odors day in and day out are unlikely to ever fall ill. On that point, it is interesting to note that, the employees and staff of IMPCOPS are vaccinated- where health is concerned, one must be discerning in picking the right option in time-

The plaque below the portrait of the Founder Vaidya Ratna Captain G Srinivasa Murthy pays heed to this- "Old things need not necessarily be good, nor the new things bad. The wise examine each and decide which to adopt." – translated from Kalidasa

The ingredients and methods of preparation being very similar make the procurement of the materials simple, but some of the ingredients court a few controversies and have made headlines in the past. IMCOPS stands up strong and remains committed to providing the most genuine products with the least harm to the environment, forests and fauna. Suppliers of the materials have to bid for contracts. The tenders are inspected carefully, as is the quality of the supplies. These range from milk, honey, oils, minerals, herbs to firewood, dung cakes, copper vessels and teak casks. Exotic ingredients like saffron, gold, coral and amber follow equally stringent procurement procedures. Forest produce includes wild herbs, the quality of which changes from time to time depending on weather conditions and soil composition from where it is acquired. It is pertinent to mention here that herbs are plucked with utmost reverence at prescribed times of the day in prescribed

seasons only. On the spot random testing is done at the storage depots to maintain quality. The staff here is handpicked and trained keeping in mind the high standards of the organization.

At the heart of the facility stands a huge furnace and boiler that supplies steam to the preparation chambers; this is strictly followed to maintain the high temperatures of cooking that cannot be otherwise achieved with gas burners. No modernization here! Some ingredients require extended hours and sometimes days of pre-preparation in the form of grinding to cure them before they can be used in powders and lehyams. While the grinding and cooking were done manually till around 30 years back, some level of mechanization was achieved during the times of India's own Edison, Shri G D Naidu. There are currently 100 such mortars made of special stones that run on mechanization. Effort is on to double the numbers shortly. The upscaling of the manufacturing process has been made possible through some concerted efforts to demarcate high activity zones from low activity zones such as storage depots. Recalibration of workspace and designing of modern storage units, customer care centers adds to the transformation that the institution is undergoing. A walk around the grounds

reveals old-worldly kutils or sheds that were the inpatient quarters, surrounded by herb gardens. IMPCOPS now has more modern treatment/ inpatient buildings

A traditional pooja being done in one building that will be the next scene of the upscaling efforts; a fully modernized and computerized inventory/ delivery area; a cowshed; a building under construction that will house the dining halls of the staff- a bit of rustic charm here and some dazzling new there- and above all the facelift to the Entrance, compels one to take a long and steady look at Chennai's jewel in the crown. IMPCOPS is a landmark organization- literally, as when giving directions to someone and metaphorically, as an organization that has stood the test of time and is carrying forward the essence of Indian Traditional Medicines to the future citizens of the World. . IMPCOPS boasts of a 100-bed hospital at Thoraipakkam, and outlets/ distributors in Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry, Andhra Pradesh, Telengana, Kerala and Karnataka. Efforts are being made to have OTC medicines available at pharmacies and malls all over India, and most definitely with eyes on the overseas market. Greetings on your success so far!! We wish IMPCOPS all success in the coming hundred years as well!!

Knowledge of Traditional medicines comes from old scrolls and scriptures. The Library at IMPCOPS is a repository of old leather-bound books like Charaka Samhitha and journals on anatomy, physiology, botany, chemistry, astrology, treatment protocols, and more in various languages including Sanskrit, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Urdu, Russian and many more. In the run-up to the Centenary Celebrations of the Organization, archiving and digitization of information has been given prime importance. The walls of the museum outside the library are lined with a collection of jars with botanical and zoological samples including roots, bark, dried flowers, skin, and bones. Ashwagandha roots and turmeric that were fought over in the Patent wars in the recent past lie side by side in all innocence. There is a neatly structured herbarium with pressed, dried, and mounted botanical specimens. The handwritten sheets give details regarding the geographical occurrence, botanical name, local name, and use of the plant. Flanking these are two research laboratories neatly arranged with apparatus. All of the above, highlight the fact that the 3 systems of TM in question; Ayurveda, Unani and Siddha, use similar ingredients, methods

