

HEALTH IN GOA IN THE 17TH CENTURY : THE REPORTS OF SOME FRENCH TRAVELLERS

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ABSTRACT

The writings of the French travellers who visited Goa in the 17th century attest to the importance of Ayurvedic medicine, although the term Ayurvedic was never used at the time. The diseases affecting Goa were not different from those at every European trading post, and the remedies used were identical. However, at the end of the century, especially after 1685, Goa's population declined sharply, partly due to the precarious living conditions there, and also as a result of competition from the Dutch and English trading companies.

In the early 17th century, the trade in spices and other commodities such as textiles, gemstones, and Chinese porcelains and silks (with a monopoly on pepper, coral, and ebony)¹ attracted many European merchants and travelers to Goa. However, a striking lack of sanitary conditions in the harbor city prompted vivid comment from visiting French travelers who had read the work of the Portuguese physician Garcia da Orta, which had been published in French, in France, in 1602.

The population of Goa had mingled freely since the colony's founding by Alfonso de Albuquerque, and by the 16th century had reached over 60,000 inhabitants: merchants, "fidalgos", clergy, soldiers, artisans, prostitutes and slaves from the Hindu, Muslim and Christian cultures.

In 1676, when the French physician Charles Dellon was crossing the city to appear before the Inquisition tribunal that

was to condemn him, he remarked :

".....although the Nation which occupies it is presently in a state of decay and has sustained losses which can hardly be understood, with commerce only the shadow of what it once was, its houses are still quite beautiful..."²

But early in the century, the city was flourishing, although its sanitary conditions were in a state of relative neglect. No organized effort was made to improve the streets, which were awash with sewage and wastewater; slaughterhouses were functioning in the tropical heat; and the supply of drinking water was scarce, except for a few rare fountains and the sale of water carried in from the Baguenim mountains. Goa was overcrowded with inhabitants living without sanitation. The promiscuity, the overabundance of rich foods in the homes of its prosperous citizens, and lastly and most importantly the atmosphere of sexual freedom, in which

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prostitutes plied their trade almost officially, caused any outbreak of disease quickly to spread to epidemic proportions. Indians and Portuguese, foreigners passing through the colony or having temporarily settled there: all suffered from the tropical climate, conducive to malarial fevers, cholera, and dysentery; from the spread of venereal diseases due to sexual freedom; and from various parasitoses.

Observations of French travellers in 17th -century Goa :

The writings of chronicler Pyrard de Laval, apothecary Jean Mocquet, Carmelite brother Philippe de la Tres-Sainte Trinite, merchant Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, physician Charles Dellon, and another famous merchant, Jean Chardin, all contain references to the state of sanitation in Goa in the 17th century.

Early in the month of June, 1608, Francois Pyrard de Laval found himself a prisoner in Goa after a perilous journey III, he was treated at the Jesult hospital for three months and three weeks before being sent back to prison, where he stayed for one month. After being released, he made his way back to Laval in 1611. His Voyage...reported the diseases of the Portuguese in India and the use of datura. In particular, his dithyrambic description of the hospital at Goa makes for savory reading today.

Apothecary and botanist Jean Mocquet, who may also have practiced surgery, spent eight months in Goa, from May 27, 1609 to January or February 2, 1610. He lived in the home of the Christian Indian surgeon, Antonio Fernandes, a "casado" mestizo, on the "rue du Crucifix,"

not far from the house once occupied by physician and botanist Garcia da Orta. He observed the most common diseases and the remedies prescribed for them. Upon returning to France, he wrote the *Voyages en Afrique, Asie, Indes Orientales et Occidentales*, based in part on the writings of the Dutch explorer Linschoten and those of Pyrard de Laval, whom he had met in Goa. The book was published in 1617.

Philippe de la Tres-Sainte Trinite, a discalced Carmelite who travelled extensively in the Orient, stayed in Goa from 1634 to 1636, doubtlessly in the Carmelite convent. It was located outside the city, in healthy, well-ventilated surroundings according to the merchant Tavemier. Nevertheless, the account Philippe published in 1649 tells us that he found the climate far too hot, humid and unhealthy. Moreover, he remarks almost in self-defense that bleeding is excessively practiced.

Ten years later, in January 1648, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier made his second visit to Goa, in the course of his third journey to India. His opinion of the city, the harbor, and the private houses was still favorable. However, the hospital struck him as being in a state of dangerous dilapidation. He noted that bleeding was practically the only therapy applied there. In 1666, during another journey which included a stay at Goa, he observed that the Portuguese doctors were quite receptive to indigenous curative practices and were applying them in the hospital.³

In 1674, the doctor Charles Dellon, who had been engaged to serve the *Compagnie Francalse*, was imprisoned as

a victim of the Inquisition. In desperation, he feigned illness, and was seen several times by a “gentile” physician, a Pundit, who bled him repeatedly. From this we learn that the Jesuits willingly availed themselves of the services of Hindu doctors, at least for their European prisoners.

Lastly, in 1680, the merchant Jean Chardin attests to a conversation with “a French doctor named Sequineau, accredited and married in Goa” on the subject of datura. Chardin had been in India since 1677, and upon returning to France, he wrote down a series of answers to questions asked him by Monsieur de Villerpont concerning the “drugs and spices of India.”⁴ He had been in contact with the Portuguese of the Malabar coast, and cited products which were in customary use there, such as cachou, musk, and amber.

The hospitals

Upon his arrival in 1510, Albuquerque ordered the construction of the Royal Hospital of the Holy Spirit, turned over to the Jesuits in 1591 and renovated in 1593. By that time, the three story hospital had beds for 1,500 Portuguese patients, with a separate women’s building, gardens, and a swimming pool. The facilities were reserved for Portuguese soldiers and civilians, other hospitals being available to Christian Indians and servants. The mortality, however, was considerable: fifteen to twenty patients per day - i.e. 25,000 soldiers between 1604 and 1634. Tavernier was forced to observe that it was deteriorating, and that the Portuguese doctors practicing there rarely effectuated cures. He also disapproved of the demands

of the “koukani” and “topa” staff who would not even provide water free of charge.

The chief diseases

According to Pyrard de Laval, the diseases most common in Goa were hot fevers, dysentery, and the venereal infections introduced by the Portuguese.⁵

Hot fevers

Pyrard no doubt applied this generic term to the various fevers which afflicted the inhabitants of Goa: intermittent, tertian, double-tertian, and quartan, including marsh fever, which was very widespread. The Italian name “malaria” or “bad air” does not appear until the 19th century.

Cholera and dysentery

In Goa, “cholera morbus” was known as “mordexi” among the Indians and “morxi” among the Portuguese, from the Konkani word “modachi,” “modshi”, or “modwashi,” which derived from the Marath verb “modern”, “to collapse,” a reference to the swift and certain death brought about by the disease. Garcia da Orta had already described a “choleric passio” which he attributed to debaucherie and overindulgence in cucumbers and shellfish. In 1610, Pyrard named it “mordessin” and in 1676, Dellon describes “mordechii”, which came to be known as “modechien” in French.

Goa was swept by its first cholera epidemic in 1543, a second in 1583, according to Linschoten, and an even more serious one in 1635. According to Garcia da Orta, the symptoms of the disease were diarrhea, vomiting, and cramps in the legs, with death ensuing in a matter of hours or days.⁶ All the European travellers who

visited India in the 17th century observed cases of "mordechi", but this can be interpreted as a reference to dysentery more often than to cholera.

Garcia da Orta, in his time, recommended the Indian practice of applying a hot iron to the feet and ankles, binding the legs, and administering an extract of rice containing pepper and cardamom.

However, Dellon, like Thevenot, expressed the opinion that "mordechi" was merely a severe form of indigestion causing headaches, vomiting, and stomach pain. He too thought highly of an Indian cure which he also describes as consisting of applying a red-hot iron spike ("brochette") to the arch of the foot. He claimed to have encountered success with this method, which he used on himself and on many other patients, after several other treatments had failed.⁷

Syphilis

The first mention of these infections would seem to date back to a 16th-century essay called the *Bhavaprakasha*, written by a Benares doctor named Bhavamishra. He accused the Portuguese of having introduced syphilis to India, to which he gave the Sanskrit name "phiranga roga", or "frank disease."⁸ Nevertheless, the Indians willingly admitted that venereal disease had always existed in India :

"Thus, the Hindus do not blame any nation for having brought the disease to their country, the way the Europeans do among themselves."⁹

Indeed, since no nation wanted to take the blame for the disease, the names for it vary. It was called "the Castilian disease"

by the Portuguese, "the Naples disease" by the French, "the Spanish disease" by the Dutch, and "the French disease" by the Italians.

In the 17th century, however, the Indians commonly believed that syphilis, like most of the venereal infections, had been introduced to India by Portuguese sailors. In Goa, where Pyrard reported that it was known as "srangui" or "sarangui", it affected every social class including that of the Inquisitors, and oddly, was not considered to be a shameful disease. According to Pyrard, the Indians were rarely victims of the disease, having "more moderate" habits. He cited "China wood" as a treatment.¹⁰

Dellon's *Traite*...mentions "esfalfados, people who have exhausted their strength in debauchery with women."¹¹ He describes the symptoms as being dryness, heat, alteration of the health, insomnia, nausea, and continual fever. A steady diet of meat, consommés, bread soups made with gravy, fresh eggs, and good wine would restore the strength of the "esfalfados."

"Bicho"

This is the Portuguese name for the disease caused by the parasitic worm *Dracunculus medinensis*, known to the French explorers in Arabia as "filaire de Medine." *Dracunculosis* was present in Goa and throughout India. According to Dellon, who had already observed the phenomenon in Brazil, the "bicho" was an earthworm or a long, skinny insect which settled in the legs, causing ulcers and gangrene. It could only be removed by making an incision in the skin and carefully

winding the worm around a small stick.¹² Several European travellers were afflicted with the “bicho,” like governor Francois Martin who caught it in Bengal at the end of the century.

Dellon says the Portuguese also call a second disease “bicho,” describing it as an “inflammation of the bottom,” apparently a tropical epidemic form of gangrenous rectitis, due in part to poor personal hygiene. Mocquet, like Dellon, described this abscess of the bottom “which fills with worms.”¹³

Scurvy

Many Portuguese seamen were treated for scurvy at the hospital in Goa. It seemed clear that they did not show signs of the disease unless they had been at sea for sixty-eight days without “refreshments”, which never occurred in the days of coastal trading.

Mocquet mistakenly understood the Portuguese “luenda” as referring to beriberi when it actually referred to scurvy.¹⁴ what the Portuguese called “berebere” was a lack of vitamin B. At the very beginning of the 17th century, botanist Martin de Vitre had resorted to lemon juice to combat scurvy, a treatment also recommended by Pyrard de Laval. However, the consumption of lemons and limes was not officially imposed aboard ships until much later, in the 18th century.

Drugs and remedies

The Portuguese were the first observers of Oriental botany. The *Coloquios dos simples e drogas...da India*, by Garcia da Orta, published in 1563, was translated into Latin by the French botanist Charles de I Ecluse in 1567. Later, the text was adapted

into French and added to by an apothecary from Lyon named Antoine Colin, who entitled the work *Histoire des drogues et epiceries...* by Monsieur Garcie du Jardin, published in Lyon in 1602.

Thus, in the 17th century, the Portuguese possessed considerable knowledge of Indian botany, and French travellers could procure an understandable translation of the work of Goa’s foremost physician.

Narcotics received a great deal of attention; they are the drugs most often mentioned.

Datura, or dutroa, a stramonium described by Garcia da Orta, was the subject of a long description by Mocquet, who recognized it as:

“a species of Stramonim, a big, tall plant which bears white bell-shaped flowers” whose effect lasts “about twenty-four hours at the most”¹⁵ or long enough for an unfaithful wife to engage in a leisurely tryst with her lover in her husband’s presence, because the narcotic plant caused loss of consciousness and was poisonous in large doses. Men also made use of datura to induce docility in women. Pyrard and Linschoten had already mentioned it, according to Chardin’s notes, in which he remarks that it is used to put jealous people to sleep.¹⁶

Opium, known as *afyun* in Arabic, had been given the Sanskrit name *ahipena*. The so-called “snake foam” was drawn from poppy-seed pods, and was a well known sleeping potion used by the pundits, Dellon seemed rather wary of it : he is frank in citing the case of one Father Gabriel, who was treated for dysentery by a pundit who administered a remedy consisting of a

mixture of opium ("amphiom"), oil, and jagre, or coco sugar. Dellon specified, with a certain dry wit, that "... the remedy did indeed end the illness of the Father, albeit with his death, on the twenty-seventh of June 1673." ¹⁷

Aphrodisiacs, including amber and musk, were also among the drugs in widespread use in Goa.

Ambergris is a substance secreted in the intestines of whales, and musk was a secretion of the abdominal glands of a mountain goat then found in the Pegu. Amber and musk were originally used as perfume by Indian women, but the Portuguese women wore them in small sachets on their navels to excite their husbands, according to Chardin.¹⁸

Catecambre or *cachou* was extracted from the seeds of a species of palm, the *Areca catechu*. It was consumed by the Portuguese "to be more of a man of pleasure" ¹⁹, to quote Chardin, but high doses could be lethal. In small doses it was also beneficial to the stomach.

Cangé

This porridge made by cooking rice for a very long time was known as a "febricitant." Supplemented by sour clotted milk, it was a cure for dysentery, according to Dellon, who specified that in Goa, the recipe was used by pundits. ²⁰

"Limon"

The fruit of the *Citrus medica* tree is cited by Dellon and Mocquet as a cure for "bicho", or rectal abscess. Both recommended enemas using a decoction of "limons" and salt followed by the introduction into the rectum of small quarters of "limon". Should this fail to

bring about a cure, the linen could be imbibed with a mixture of gunpowder, rosewater and water of plantain. ²¹

Bois de Chine

According to Pyrard, "bois de Chine," identified as "Smilax China," was a remedy for the pox. When he went to Goa, Garcia da Orta had brought from Portugal a great quantity of a certain "Chinese root," known as "pao da China" or "raiz de Chine," the sale of which earned him a livelihood at the beginning of his stay.

Bezoars, or snake-stones

The mysterious bezoars and various other stones reputed to cure snakebite fascinated European travellers.

The word "bezoar", derived from the Arabic word "badizahr", means antidote or counter-poison. They were actually stones which formed in the digestive systems of various animals. In Asia, they were found in the stomachs of wild Golconda goats, Indian gazelles, or antelopes.

A "Goa stone" was also manufactured at Goa. It was an artificial bezoar made of powdered crayfish eyes and oyster shells, bound together with a gum and perfumed with musk and amber. ²² The high price of this commodity justified a profitable counterfeit trade. Chardin devoted an important passage of his *Réponse à Mr. Cabart de Villermont* ²³ to bezoars. His affirmation of their effectiveness as counter-poison, however, is slightly tinged with skepticism.

Tavernier's *Voyage* contained an entire chapter about the bezoar and musk, warning the reader against counterfeit stones and indicating how to detect, them. He recognized the existence of bezoars

from the Golconda goats, and explained that the Portuguese swore by this anti-toxin, because “they are always wary of one another, fearing that an enemy will try to poison them.”²⁴

The snake-stone said to have formed in the head of the “*cobra de capellos*” is, in Tavernier’s opinion, only a mixture of several drugs serving as a counter-poison. As a dinner guest in the home of the archbishop of Goa in 1648, he was given a snake-stone which had just saved the life of a palanquin bearer. Tavernier purchased several stones from the Brahmans, whom he suspected of manufacturing the stones themselves, and specified a way of gauging their authenticity, but included no tales of successful cures. In fact, the stones were pieces of bone which had been burned and carved.

Bloodletting

Nearly all the Frenchmen who visited Goa reported painful personal experience with the zeal of the doctors there for bloodletting. Pyrard de Laval was bled at the hospital in 1608, Philippe de la Tres Sainte Trinite in 1634-36, and Tavernier in 1648. The latter also mentions that the unfortunate European patients were rewarded with a dose of “*pissat de vache*” after the ordeal. Lastly, Dellon was bled in prison in 1674-76.

Ayurvedic doctors practiced bleeding by scarification and applying suction cups or “cornets”. They also applied leeches, up to twenty times in a row, according to Dellon.²⁵ However, only European doctors made use of lancets, since this medical act was forbidden to uppercaste Hindus.

Pyrard de Laval also mentions that in Goa, a vindictive husband might have his unfaithful wife bled by a barber, and then remove the bandage after the latter’s departure, “so that the blood would flow out until the poor wretch died.”

In sum, the writings of the French travellers who visited Goa in the 17th century attest to the importance of ayurvedic medicine, although the term “ayurvedic” was never used at the time; the poor quality of Portuguese medicine, which was almost exclusively limited to bloodletting; and the increasingly deplorable conditions at the hospital, where the lack of resources made it more likely for a patient to die than to be cured. The diseases affecting Goa were no different from those at every European trading post, and the remedies used were identical. However, at the end of the century, especially after 1685, Goa’s population declined sharply, partly due to the precarious living conditions there, and also as a result of competition from the Dutch and English trading companies.

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सारांश

१७ वीं शताब्दी में गोवा में स्वास्थ्य – कुछ फ्रांसीसी यात्रियों के यात्रा विवरण

– फ्रांकोइसे डी. वेलेन्स

१७ वीं शताब्दी में गोवा को आए फ्रांसीसी यात्रियों की कृतियां आयुर्वेद के महत्त्व को अनुप्रमाणित करती हैं, यद्यपि उस समय अयुर्वेद शब्द का प्रयोग कभी नहीं हुआ था । गोवा को प्रभावित करने वाले रोग, यूरोपीय क्रय-विक्रय केन्द्रों पर पायेजाने वाले रोगों से कदापि भिन्न नहीं थे । १७ वीं शताब्दी के अंत में विशेषतः १६८५ के पश्चात गोवा की जनसंख्या में आकस्मिकरूप से कमी आ गई । इसके कारण थे आंशिक रूप में वहां जीवन के प्रति पायेजाने वाली असुरक्षित परिस्थितियां तथा डच एवं इंग्लिश व्यापारिक कम्पनियों की परस्पर स्पर्धा ।