

Faults and Flaws: Therapeutic practices against the norm in South Asia

International Symposium
7-9 March 2008, French Institute of Pondicherry, India

Organized jointly by the French Institute of Pondicherry
and the Centre d'études de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud (CNRS-EHESS), Paris

Recourse to traditional methods of treatment is a fundamental characteristic of the health environment in South Asia. We observe in this region the coexistence and the entanglement of legally recognised medicines, popular therapeutic practices and healing rituals. Initially, research focused upon the normative systems to which the different therapeutic “associations” (or cliques, sects, organizations, “families”, “professional bodies”) adhere to, and the processes of legitimization that mould them. Whilst retaining this focus, recent complementary research is giving more attention to practices outside the norm.

The central concern of the proposed symposium is to examine the social and medical legitimacy of therapeutic practices with a negative approach, that is, by looking into cases where rules are breached, where values and codes of conduct are disrespected or transformed. Thinking about the faults and flaws in therapeutic practices opens up a vast field of enquiry concerning the relationship between lies and truth, between mistakes and accuracy, faults and merits, fraud and authenticity, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, legality and illegality. The participants will be invited to reflect upon the systems of norms and values, whether institutional or not, which define order and proscribe disorder. This approach will allow especially for an exploration of the normative dimensions of science and religion in present day therapies, and of the moral aspects of the medical systems. The overall objective is to better understand the reasons behind the transgression of established norms and the medico-social implications of such transgressions.

We are interested in addressing the question of relations between practitioners and their patients, of the diagnostic and the etiological systems, as well as of the therapeutic techniques and the politics of health and institutional regulations. The analytical approach will be inter-disciplinary. The symposium will bring together anthropologists, sociologists and historians, putting a range of different perspectives into contact, from the codification and interpretation of medical texts to the everyday therapeutic practices of healers across South Asia.

Thematic axes

1) *False knowledge:*

Colonial power and indigenous medicine. The identification of a therapeutic “alterity”, conceived as ineffective and incompetent, contributed substantially during the colonial period to the forging of a medical orthodoxy claiming to be compact, homogenous and universally valid. This symposium will consider the criteria by which the representatives of the colonial power defined local therapeutic practices as “superstition”, “magic”, “folklore”, or “popular”, in order to buttress their own colonial and imperialist ideologies. We shall also endeavour to understand how the stigmatisation of “inadequate” indigenous medicine helps to reinforce the identity of occidental medical knowledge as a system that is against everything outside of its own principles. The “falsity” and the local provenance of indigenous medical and therapeutic systems then only confirm the “truth” and the universality of the biomedical paradigm.

Marginalising medical knowledge. The processes of institutionalisation, standardisation and professionalisation taking place in Indian medicines in the modern period imply the rejection of forms of medical knowledge which do not conform to the norm. These norms are defined at once by institutional regulations, by conformity to international scientific standards, and by an ideology based on the “authenticity” of therapeutic knowledge defined as “Indian”. Contributions to the symposium will concern the knowledge and theories which have been marginalised or excluded in the process of the “normalisation” of Indian medicines. Existing negotiations and confrontations between the norms and the transgressions will be brought forward as evidence.

2) *Illegitimate practices:*

Therapies outside the medical systems. Therapeutic horizons in India are far wider than the fields of biomedicine and the institutionalised medical systems. A large number of practitioners such as gurus, exorcists, priests, astrologers and *folk healers*, as well as therapeutic institutions such as temples, ashrams, Muslim shrines and churches play a major role in the therapeutic landscape of India. The participants will be invited to think about the mechanisms of the legitimization or, in contrast, of the devaluation or rejection of these practices, often closely linked with religious or ritual acts. This will involve examining the conflict and the entanglements between two different paradigms of therapeutic efficacy, one defined by science and biomedicine, the other by religious authority or by the faith of the devotee. Practitioners who are considered as impostors, quacks, or simply incompetents by the medical authorities may enjoy great popularity and have good reputations as healers.

3) *Bad behaviour*

Prescriptions and proscriptions in therapeutic treatments. This section will explore the moral dimensions of therapeutic practices through an analysis of the forms of transgression from the normative systems, defined either by medical ideology or with reference to a system of values established by religious institutions. We shall address the question at the level of etiological and diagnostic theories, of the deontology of the practitioners, as well as of the behaviour of patients. What place do “faults” and bad behaviour occupy in medical and religious aetiologies? How may we define a good or bad practitioner, or define his or her deontology? Are transgressions of the norm by the practitioner always undesirable? Do they, in some cases, become institutionalised (in the religious domain, it is often by a transgression of the

norm that the practitioners acquire healing powers)? To what extent does therapeutic prescription define what is good or bad behaviour for the patient?

The organisers

The organization of this symposium joins the efforts of two multi-disciplinary research programmes about concerned with health in South Asia:

- **“Societies and Medicine in South Asia”** has been in progress at the IFP since 2004. This programme explores the political dimensions of health, social inequalities in access to treatment, therapeutic innovations, and the institutionalisation of indigenous medicines (<http://www.ifpindia.org/Societies-and-Medicines-in-South-Asia.html>).
- **“Healing, Remedies and Health Practices in South Asia”** was started in 2006 at the CEIAS in Paris. It focuses on the linkages between the religious and the therapeutic, both from an historical and an anthropological perspective (<http://ceias.ehess.fr/document.php?id=142>).

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Objectives

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From left to right (at the table):
Laurent Pordié; Kavita
Sivaramakrishnan; Caterina
Guenzi

Programme

[Download programme schedule.](#)

Organizers

- ▶ French Institute of Pondicherry
- ▶ Centre d'études de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud (CEIAS / CNRS/EHESS), Paris.

FUNDING

- ▶ French Institute of Pondicherry
- ▶ Centre d'études de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud (CEIAS / EHESS-CNRS)
- ▶ The Transversal Programme of the IFRE "Democratic Transformation", coordinated by the French Institute of South Africa
- ▶ Nomad Research Unit

Coordinators

- ▶ Caterina Guenzi (IFP / CEIAS)
- ▶ Laurent Pordié (IFP / CReCSS)
- ▶ Ines Zupanov (CEIAS).

Participants

- ▶ Madhulika Banerjee (Delhi University)
- ▶ Calum Blaikie (University of Kent)

- ▶ Pratik Chakrabarti (University of Kent)
- ▶ Burton Cleetus (IFP / Jawaharlal Nehru University)
- ▶ Caterina Guenzi (IFP / CEIAS)
- ▶ Stephan Kloos (UC Berkeley / San Francisco)
- ▶ Johannes Quack (University of Heidelberg)
- ▶ Harish Naraindas (Jawaharlal Nehru University)
- ▶ Laurent Pordié (IFP / CReCSS)
- ▶ William Sax (University of Heidelberg)
- ▶ Brigitte Sébastia (IFP / LISST, Toulouse)
- ▶ Kavita Sivaramakrishnan (Delhi)
- ▶ Martin Saxer (University of Oxford)
- ▶ Frederick Smith (University of Iowa)
- ▶ Richard Weiss (Victoria University at Wellington)
- ▶ Francis Zimmermann (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris)
- ▶ Ines Zupanov (CNRS / CEIAS)

Venue

Jawaharlal Nehru Conference Hall, French Institute of Pondicherry, 11, Saint Louis Street, Pondicherry – 605001.

Latest addition : 9 December 2008.