

## Two opposite images of physicians in India, then and now

Abhijit Ghosh

**Abstract** (in 412 words)

References to doctors in literature and proverbs indicate that in India physicians have throughout been viewed from two different angles. Though praised for their medical knowledge, they started losing respectability very early. The connection with mundane matters may account for the baseness of medical science; the physician's contact with things considered impure (human excreta, cadavers, female genitalia) must be another reason. Contrarily, the need for cure from diseases attached importance to the science and profession, rarely also practiced by women, and accorded respect even to quacks.

This demand for doctors accounts for the elevated rank of barbers among occupation-based castes in Bengal and the Deccan, who acted as country surgeons. Their surnames etc. also indicate their significant social position. Sircar proposed that the Bengal Vaidyas – a small yet influential community which was once mainly engaged in medical practice and probably came with the Sena kings from the South – were originally barbers. This hypothesis has been challenged; however, *ambaṭṭam*, the possible source of the term *ambaṣṭha* – that is the alternative designation of the Bengal Vaidyas in genealogies, means 'barber' in Tamil. Though the medical profession was despised by Brāhmaṇas and followed by Ambaṣṭhas, Vaidyas call themselves Vaidya-Brāhmaṇas.

Contrarily, quacks were always ridiculed. In Kṣemendra's *Narma-mālā*, a doctor, 'devoid of [medical] knowledge', is characterized as causing people's death and compared with evil things/beings. For money, he visits, although exhausted, innumerable patients in quick succession. Fond of meat and liquor, he casts a covetous eye on the patients' wives. A fake eye-specialist is similarly represented. Making fun of laymen posing as physicians, the satirist presents a fortune-teller prophesying common diseases in the distant future, prescribing a common diet for the patient through his ordinary medical notions, offering cures by means of mantras, and making pseudo-astrological calculations with the aim to grab the patient's wife. Even a Śaiva guru assumes a physician's role by offering a harlot bewitching powders and distributing aphrodisiacs to a rich but aged merchant, who failed to gain sexual vigor through the application of anointments suggested by old libertines. Kṣemendra, however, reserves his harshest mockery for the barber who, originally a 'remover of stings [lodged in the body]', becomes a country-surgeon by 'extracting splinters or stones [in the bladder]', but through his application of wrong potions enlarges people's scrota and even transplants a portion of his wife's genitals to replace the nose of a patient. Remarkably, the characters are nameless here, being thus presented as prototypes of their respective occupation or caste.