Vignettes

What is needed to keep Ayurveda growing? An interview with Prof. R H Singh

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 29 April 2018
Received in revised form 15 June 2018
Accepted 26 June 2018
Available online 16 November 2018

1. Introduction

Prof. Ram Harsh Singh is a renowned physician and teacher of Ayurveda belonging to the current age. He had remained one among the most influential and respected personalities from Ayurveda. While practising Ayurveda, he served in many key positions of variable nature ranging from clinic to academics and also administration. After graduating from the School of Ayurveda at Banaras Hindu University, he served under his alma mater for over 40 years in various capacities at faculty of Ayurveda. Begined his career at BHU as a lecturer, he eventually served as Professor and Head, Dept of Kaya Chikitsa and also as Dean to Faculty of Ayurveda. Subsequently, he became the first and founder Vice-Chancellor (2003–2006) of Rajasthan Ayurveda University, Jodhpur, where he inculcated a distinct work culture in the campus that eventually helped the university to become a prestigious centre of higher learning in Ayurveda. After his superannuation, BHU conferred him with Professor Emeritusship initially and a Lifetime Distinguished Professorship, subsequently, a rare honour enjoyed only by a few faculties at BHU. Prof. Singh had been conferred with many prestigious awards in recognition to his services to mankind through Ayurveda. Vaidya Sri Ram Narayan Sharma National Research Award (2005), IASTAM Award (2005), and Vaidya Brihaspati Dev Triguna Award (2015) were noteworthy among them. He was conferred with prestigious civilian award ‘Padma Shree’ in year 2016 by the President of India for his noble services to humanity through Ayurveda. Prof R H Singh is one among the few highly accomplished intellectuals and scholars who are well versed with Ayurveda and scientific medicine, and hence are in a unique position to present Ayurveda in tune to the contemporary needs. Prof. Singh had been a strong advocate of keeping the Ayurvedic fundamentals preserved while choosing the scientific path to make a progress in Ayurveda. He always had an opinion that the Ayurvedic science cannot be judged adequately by the existing tools of modern research and hence some insightful newer tools and methods to do research in Ayurveda are required. Prof. Singh also worried about the declining interest of the newer generation towards Ayurveda and also the qualitative decline of its education and practice. He proposed that passion and hard work along with a genuine scientific temper are the key steps that can help in bringing Ayurveda forward in the new millennium.

The life of Prof. Singh and his accomplishments in Ayurveda had been a source of motivation and inspiration to many aspirants of Ayurveda globally. I got an opportunity to interact with him at his residence in Varanasi. During this interaction, I tried to unearth his own inspirations in Ayurveda, his perception about Ayurveda, its people now and then and the future prospects of Ayurveda. The idea of the interaction was to get a feel of the process of becoming a most accomplished academician and to present it before the readers, as a source of inspiration for continuous move in forward direction without loosing hope. Excerpts of this interaction in the form of an interview were presented here.

SR 1. Sir, I have seen many generations of ayurveda scholars being benefited by you through your writings, teachings and scholarly debates. Your admirers are not limited to Ayurveda or India but are available across the world and discipline. This looks amazing to see someone from Ayurveda reaching at such heights, when on the contrary, we see that still Ayurveda and its people are striving hard to find a respectful place in the society. I was therefore...
very much eager to know about the beginning of your journey in Ayurveda and what exactly had kept you motivated for so long despite all odds you might have faced in your journey. I wish to present your own saying as one of the strongest motivation to the aspirants of Ayurveda, who wish to change the way of Ayurveda that is projected currently. To begin the interaction, kindly allow me to ask about your early life, parents, family and education.

**RHS 1.** I am happy to see that I could serve to the cause of Ayurveda in the least capacity I had. I will be happy to share about this journey if this brings any benefit to the people who are striving to find a career in Ayurveda. I was born on Jan. 10, 1942 in Village Kaniyarpur PO Kopaganj, Mau District. My father Thakur Foujdar Singh was a farmer and Jamindar with over 100 Acres of fertile land. My mother Smt. Bhagirathi was a housewife and expired early in life when I was only 10 years old. I was brought up by my grandmother who lived long up to 85 years. So mine was a modest upbringing in a rural backdrop with bare minimum facilities comparing to current day amenities.

My early education was at Govt. upper Primary school and Bapu Inter College Kopaganj, four kilometers away from my village. I had to walk on foot daily to the school. These were good schools. I was a good student in the school and got a Merit scholarship. I had very good and loving teachers since the beginning. I had not been very outward and hence my family and my teachers considered me an introvert.

**SR 2.** What were your inspirations in childhood? The favorites and unfavorities, the likings and dislikings?

**RHS 2.** My inspiration in childhood was the honesty and systematic hard work of my father. Although he was not much educated, this lack of education did not come in his way. He was well off and was highly respected by his fellow men. My initial likings were music and sports, but I largely avoided them because of being shy in nature. Somehow, this aversion from worldly affairs pushed me deeper into the studies.

**SR 3.** How was your professional education? How you became interested in Ayurveda? What was your experience of Ayurveda education as a student? Whom did you find as a role model? Kindly share your own experiences as a student of Ayurveda with your teachers.

**RHS 3.** Ayurveda came to me as a destiny. After completing my early education and passing High School, I was brought to Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi where my elder brother was already studying second year of BA. Ayurveda had not been known to me till then. It was neither my choice nor did I know how to choose the career. It was all a pleasant compulsion of the family. My elder brother was of the opinion that the Ayurvedic College was offering the best and most useful program at BHU. My brother met Dr. P.J Deshpande who was a product of that college and worked as a teacher at that time. Neither we knew nor could we think of any other city or Institution to further my education. It was only Varanasi and BHU which was meeting to our affordability. We visualized that after seven and a half years of training in this unique college I will become a good doctor. Uptil 2nd year of my studies in Ayurveda College, I did not know that there are other kinds of medical institutions too. There were only two medical colleges in Uttar Pradesh, one at Agra and the other at Lucknow.

By this time, as I was a top rank student, all my teachers started knowing me by face and also by the first name. My introversion started gradually disappeared. My role models in the Ayurveda College during my college days and later as faculty member at BHU, were 1. Prof.P.V.Sharma as a scholar, 2. Prof. K.N. Udupa as a research guide and Prof.P.J.Deshpande as a capable teacher and a good clinician.

**SR 4.** How did you begin your career? Was it as per your plan or as per destiny?

**RHS 4.** I began my career, not by plan. It was all by destiny and by family compulsion.

**SR 5.** How were your experiences at BHU as a student and subsequently as a faculty member? How BHU ideology and environment helped you to grow and to expand your inner self?

**RHS 5.** My experiences at BHU were always pleasant. The BHU ideology and atmosphere were highly inspiring and optimistic although conflicts and contradictions had also surfaced sometime, I did not allow them to become a hurdle to the ultimate progress.

**SR 6.** What differences did you perceive in Ayurveda as a beginner and as a veteran?

**RHS 6.** Ayurveda then and now has huge differences. I see now much less enthusiasm and initiative among teachers and students. There is more noise, crowd and frustration now than before. In those days we knew that we need to achieve more and to develop a lot, for which we were struggling and hopeful. Now we have achieved a lot but are not satisfied and more importantly we do not know what we want and what is good for us and what is good for survival of Ayurveda. We are standing on the crossroads without having a clear idea where to go?

**SR 7.** You have represented Ayurveda globally. How did you feel of common global perception about Ayurveda?

**RHS 7.** The global community is interested in the pronature personalized and holistic approach of Ayurveda besides good herbal drugs which are free from heavy metals. They are not critical about how scientific or unscientific Ayurveda is. They are very much aware that Ayurveda is different than Allopathy and hence its philosophy and approaches may not be completely understood through scientific principles. The best thing about Ayurveda as they find is that it works and currently, the entire world is convinced about this. The complementarity of Ayurveda is even proposed by global leaders in modern medicine. The current global conviction considers Ayurveda as a predictive, promotive and preventive science. Although this is also emphasized many times that its methods of reaching a cure are yet to be standardized.

**SR 8.** You have represented Ayurveda at many scientific forums in India as well. What was your perception about the way the scientific community in India is looking at Ayurveda in general? Is there any change in the perception you have perceived during your journey through Ayurveda?

**RHS 8.** The Indian scientific community is much more critical and skeptical about Indian traditional wisdom. They have shown no much interest in Ayurveda principles. Sometimes, it was realized that they want to use Ayurveda completely reformed (Ayurvedic herbs minus the philosophy behind their use) as a truly scientific herbal medicine to strengthen Allopathy. We see that after much hard work in this direction, there had not been a real break-through success visible so far. Mushroom growth of weak pharma industry had not been a real break-through success visible so far. We have realized that science is not effectively reaching out to the people who are striving to help Ayurveda solving its inherent mysteries but rather comes to see what it can take from Ayurveda.

**SR 9.** What should be done in Ayurveda to make it more dependable and responsive in reference to the current health care needs of the people? What is your advice to the people in Ayurveda, the policy makers and various stakeholders at various levels?

**RHS 9.** Let us practice Ayurveda as Ayurveda in terms of its principles and medication. However, we have to ensure the safety level of our drugs besides minimally desired efficacy. A health care system cannot survive on placebo drugs. New drugs and formulations in Ayurveda customized to the current needs has to be developed.

**SR 10.** You have been an academician, researcher, physician, administrator and scientist in Ayurveda besides being a philanthropist.
Among them, name the roles that you have enjoyed the most and why?

RHS 10. Among the roles, that I have played during my career, I enjoyed the roles as a teacher and physician. These roles gave me maximum inner satisfaction. The possible reason for this satisfaction was the connectedness with my students and patients. Moreover, I found these two roles were most rewarding in the form of success achieved by a student or a cure obtained by the patient.

SR 11. We are seeing that Ayurveda education is expanding with opening a large number of graduate and postgraduate Ayurvedic Colleges in India. The students joining Ayurveda come with high expectations initially however do not remain optimistic when they end up with qualifications. What you perceive as a major reason of dilution in Ayurvedic education?

RHS 11. I am disappointed about the current status of Ayurveda education, But optimistic. However we need a radical reform and improvement in our education system. I shall plead for a strategy of disruption of wrongs and recreation. Private sector has to be strengthened logically and the really weak ones may require to be closed. They either have to improve or to relinquish. None should be allowed to raise a sick college just to earn for themselves. Similarly, the regulatory systems/institutions/organizations have to be honest and effective.

SR 12. What is your advice to the people specially students who wish to make their career in Ayurveda?

RHS 12. My net advice to our dear students is that they should play an Activist’s Role. They cannot remain passive watchers, rather should be active participants in the program and their career. Once they have accepted Ayurveda as a career they have to be honest to it. Ayurveda has a bright future if it is in proper hands. Our students should feel confident and self respected. Try to grasp Ayurveda to its core and look for the science behind it. Make it as a passion and avoid casual approach. Proper work culture and scientific temper are the basis of all success in life. Please don’t confuse scientific temper with science as crude branch of knowledge. Respect everybody and every profession but do reject dishonesty. Grow with Ayurveda as your dear profession and also help it to grow with you.

2. Conclusion

This was a highly illuminating interaction with Prof. R.H. Singh that opened many of the unfolded details of his personal life. It is always inspiring to look into the life sketch of a luminary specially to know about the extent of hardships faced in the whole process by him, and how he opted to resolve such difficulties without compromising his principles. Prof. Singh had a very clear opinion that Ayurveda had to preserve its fundamental values, lying inherent in the form of its principles. He is also of the clear opinion that merely herbs or their formulations do not comprise much of Ayurveda, as principally Ayurveda is much beyond the confines of a cure alone. When we call Ayurveda as a life science, we really mean it and this meaning gets reflected at every point of discussions which we encounter in ayurvedic texts. Ethics sails high in Ayurveda as a single most pervasive principle available at every corner of it. Although disappointed with the current state of affairs in its education, practice and research, Prof. Singh is hoping for a better future for Ayurveda, provided if the next generation sticks to the principles of Ayurveda with due respect to all other disciplines of learning including science.

Sources of funding

None.

Conflicts of interest

None.