PREFACE

Religious domains and realms of therapeutics are thought to be distinct fields of human endeavor. But the highly personalized needs of well-being of body and mind necessitate certain junctures where both these domains are invariably entangled in a close proximity. Religion and medicine serve the common purpose of helping persons with transitions though their stages of living and dying, and they share the aim of remedying human suffering. Contemporary interest in religious therapeutics is evident in the expansion of research activity under the rubric of religion and medicine. For instance, in the article “Mantra in Ayurveda” Kenneth Zysk writes: At all times and in almost every culture, a connection between medicine and religion is demonstrable. The belief that by soliciting divine intervention through prayer and ritual no disease is incurable cuts across cultural boundaries”. Zysk’s emphasis here is the medical application of religious renderings in Ayurveda. Although religious therapeutics may include religious means of treating health problems it requires more nuanced sociological exposition. Is it possible to address a comprehensive domain where belief system, healing and body come together to form a knowledge paradigm? While addressing, it is imperative to enquire how the conglomeration of the aforementioned works in a specific group of practitioners of traditional Ayurvedic medicine in Kerala. This study is premised precisely on these domains where the specificities of practice become significant in informing an altogether different sociological phenomenon. Because the study is not about the Ayurvedic healing therapy but, about a
traditional group of *Vaidyas* who have inextricable influence on the socio religious location of traditional healing practices in Kerala.

This work is a sociological study of Ashtavaidy system of medicine of Kerala. The Ashtavaidyas are those who studied and followed the ‘Ashtanga Hridayam’ and the ‘Ashtangasangraham’ the famous Ayurvedic texts written by vagbhata. These texts are very popular among the Ashtavaidyas in Kerala. Ashtavaidyan does not mean that the eight designated families of physicians, but eighteen *Ashtanga vaidyans*, each one designated to eighteen *Sabhaamadhams* (Vedam Schools) serving the thirty two Grammas of Kerala. These families were become proficient in all the eight branches (Astangas) of Ayurveda system (*Poorna Vaidyan* or complete physicians). In the later period, the word ‘Ashtaangavaidyans’ shortened to ‘Ashtavaidyans’.

Among the Ashtavaidyas, only four families are practicing *vadiyam* now. They are Thrissur Thaikkattu (Pazhanellippurathu Thaikkattu Moss), Elayidath Thaikkattu Moss (Ollur Thaikkattu Moss), Chirattamann Moss (Olassa Moss) and Pulamantol Moss. And there is divergent opinion among Ashtavaidyas vaidya’s themselves about the Vaidyamadham. In this study, we included Vaidyamadham also as an Ashtavaidy family. It is a belief that the lineage of this Vaidyamadham family goes back to Aalathiyoor Nambi Illam,one of the Ashtavaidya families.

This study deals with the religious beliefs and medical practices among the Ashtavaidyas which played a vital role in their treatment and diagnosis methods. Ashtavaidyas’ practice of medicine is mainly based on traditional
knowledge which gets transmitted from generation to generation. Although their medical practice (vadiyam) stands within the framework of Ayurveda, we can rightly detect number of specialties in their healing methods. Apart from medical knowledge, rationale (yukthi), meditation (upasana) played a vital role in their vaidyam. The study proposes that the Ashtavadiya system closely linked with the religious practices and it paved the way for the development of Kerala Ayurveda system.

The first chapter engages with the sociological understanding of religion as well as medicine in order to provide a basic premise of the traditional healing practices. However, I limit the scope of the use of tradition into Ayurveda and argue that Ayurveda the Indian system of medicine is not only a scientific term but also a way of life. Apart from the theoretical underpinnings of the relation between religion and medicine, the chapter also addresses how the notion of body (sariram) acquires a central position in the larger gamut of traditional Ayurvedic healing practices in India.

The methodological framework of the study is dealt in the second chapter. As an ethnographic study it was impossible for me to employ usual research techniques other than the interview method. The third chapter deals with the medical practices of the Indian society and its changes over the period. Moreover it also looks into how Ayurveda is located in the context of the emergence of modern medicine.
The historical location of Ashtavaidyas and their significance in Kerala have been dealt in the fourth chapter. An analysis of their system of medicine is detailed in the last chapter.