



Review Article

## THE LEGACY OF DHANWANTHARI: THE FIRST MALAYALAM MEDICAL JOURNAL

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### ABSTRACT

In early 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala, Ayurveda faced a crisis of legitimacy due to the dominance of British colonial medicine and the decline of the traditional Gurukula System. As part of the revivalist efforts to address this Vaidyaratnam P.S. Varier launched the *Dhanwanthari* journal in 1903. This article examines the journal's role in unifying the fragmented practitioner community and spearheading the modernization of Ayurveda. **Methods:** A comprehensive retrospective review was conducted on the digitized archives of *Dhanwanthari*, covering 23 volumes and 274 issues published between 1903 and 1926. Using the *Dhanwanthari Prabhandasoochi* index, 2,065 articles were screened and classified to evaluate their clinical, academic, and social content. **Results:** The review identified the journal as a multi-dimensional platform that utilized comparative mortality statistics to highlight local stagnation, facilitated doctrinal debates, standardized education through published syllabi and examination results and integrated allied systems like Homeopathy. **Discussion:** The analysis suggests that *Dhanwanthari* was a calculated instrument of reform rather than a mere repository of knowledge and played a role to transform Ayurveda from a secretive oral tradition to a public printed forum, the journal democratized medical knowledge and adopted a strategy of constructive self-criticism. By prioritizing scientific validity over textual dogma, the journal established a precedent for scientific pluralism and created a verifiable identity that shielded *Vaidyas* from colonial labels of quackery. **Conclusion:** *Dhanwanthari* successfully institutionalized the Ayurvedic renaissance in Kerala. Its legacy lies in proving that the survival of indigenous medicine depended on engaging courageously with modern science and adapting to the present, a lesson that remains vital for the system today.

### INTRODUCTION

The dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in India was a period characterized by profound socio-political shifts in healthcare. As the British colonial administration entrenched Western medicine, traditional medicine faced a crisis of legitimacy [1]. Simultaneously, the internal structure of Ayurvedic education in Kerala, the *Gurukula* system was diminishing due to economic hardships, leading to a

fragmentation of knowledge and the proliferation of unqualified practitioners. In response to this crisis, revivalist efforts emerged to establish the scientific credentials of Ayurveda. While Kaviraja Gananath Sen led this movement in Bengal with institutionalized education, Vaidyaratnam P.S. Varier spearheaded the renaissance in the South, centering his efforts in Kottakkal [2].

To unify this fragmented community and transition Ayurvedic knowledge from the secrecy of oral tradition to the transparency of written evidence, he launched the *Dhanwanthari* journal in 1903 under the auspices of the Kerala Arya Vaidya Samajam [3]. Featuring a *Mangala Sloka* penned by Kerala Varma Valiya Koyithampuran and managed by Varier's brother, P.V. Krishna Varier, the journal was designed to document experience as evidence

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[4]. Serving as both editor-in-chief and publisher, P.S Varier created a platform that ran for 23 years (1903–1926), publishing over 2,065 articles. This article reviews these archives to understand the journal's pivotal role in shaping the modernization of Ayurveda.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is based on a comprehensive review of the digitized archives of the *Dhanwanthari* journal, covering all 23 volumes published between 1903 and 1926. The dataset comprises 274 issues and over 2,065 articles, obtained from the Publication Division of Arya Vaidya Sala, Kottakkal. To navigate this extensive volume of literature, the *Dhanwanthari Prabhandasoochi* (Journal Index), meticulously compiled by the eminent historian M.R. Raghava Varier, was utilized as the primary selection tool [5]. Articles were screened and systematically classified based on their primary subject matter to evaluate the diversity of clinical, academic, and social content published.

## RESULTS AND OBSERVATIONS

A critical review of the 2,065 articles published in the *Dhanwanthari* journal between 1903 and 1926 reveals that the publication functioned as a multi-dimensional platform. It served simultaneously as a clinical archive, a forum for theoretical debate, and an instrument for educational standardization. The analysis of the archives highlights four primary areas of impact.

- 1. Clinical Statistics and The Call for Modernization-** The journal served as a critical mirror for the Ayurvedic community, often using the advancements of Western medicine to highlight local stagnation. In an article published in 1909, P.V.Krishna Varier presented comparative mortality data under the title "Achievements of New Science" and noted that in Western medical settings, fracture-related deaths had been reduced by 40%, mortality related to *Kshayaroga* had dropped by 20%, and surgical mortality for uterine disorders became from two out of three to one in one hundred and used these figures to mock the Idleness of Vaidyas and express frustration regarding the lack of new studies and research in indigenous medicine.
- 2. Intellectual Discourse and Doctrinal Debates-** The journal fostered a culture of rigorous debate, challenging the dogmatism of the era. The most significant intellectual conflict was the controversy regarding the physiological seat of the *Manas*. This debate was ignited by Dr. Ravi

Varmaraja in a series of articles titled "Health Care and First Aid", where he argued, based on modern physiology, that the brain (*Siras*) is the seat of the intellect. This challenged the view held by scholars like Sri Vadakumkur Rajarajavarma, who adhered to the classical text placing the intellect in the Heart (*Hridayam*). The conflict was settled in October 1913 (Volume 11, Issue 3) when the editor, P.S. Varier, intervened with a landmark editorial titled "Our Opinion." Varier sided with the modern scientific view, declaring that if traditional texts contained defects, they should be corrected using knowledge from other sciences to ensure Ayurveda remained a complete system.

- 3. Academic Standardization -** *Dhanwanthari* played a foundational role in institutionalizing Ayurvedic education in Kerala. Functioning as the organ of the *Arya Vaidya Samajam*, the journal regularized medical training by publishing notifications for the *Madyama* and *Uthama* examinations. It disseminated comprehensive educational resources, including standardized syllabi and model question papers (Volume 17, Issue 1), and published examination results. By establishing designated examination centers in regions such as Harippad and Pattambi, the journal created a structured qualification network that effectively distinguished trained practitioners from unqualified quacks, thereby elevating the professional status of Vaidyas.
- 4. Engagement with Allied Systems-** The archives demonstrate that *Dhanwanthari* was not isolationist but actively embraced allied medical systems. The journal published 12 dedicated articles on Homeopathy, primarily by Dr. M.N. Pillai, and a series on Biochemistry by Dr. C.A. Gopalapilla. It anticipated modern therapeutic arts by documenting Music Therapy, where contributors like Thelappurath Narayanan Nambi linked specific *Ragas* to the treatment of neuropsychiatric disorders. The journal also explored Chromotherapy, recording case studies where solarized blue water was used to treat severe *Atisara* (diarrhea), and kept practitioners updated on global scientific discoveries such as Radium therapy and the role of bats in spreading plague. This breadth of content confirms the journal's mission to create a holistic, scientifically informed practitioner community.

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of the *Dhanwanthari* archives reveals that the journal was more than a mere repository of medical knowledge; it was a calculated instrument of reform designed to navigate the existential crisis of Ayurveda in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. By transitioning from the oral tradition to a transparent, printed public forum, the journal democratized knowledge that was previously locked within family lineages. This shift was essential for survival, as it allowed for peer review and public scrutiny concepts alien to traditional Ayurveda at the time

This strategy of reform was most visibly employed through the presentation of clinical statistics. The comparative mortality data presented by P.V. Krishna Varier in 1909 serves as a critical indicator of the journal's editorial philosophy. By highlighting that Western medical interventions had achieved a forty percent reduction in fracture-related mortality and a dramatic decrease in surgical deaths, the journal adopted a strategy of constructive self-criticism. The editors effectively argued that for Ayurveda to survive it could not simply rely on ancient authority, it had to match the empirical rigor and documented public health outcomes of its colonial counterpart, thereby shifting the community's focus from mere preservation to active evolution.

The spirit of scientific inquiry extended beyond statistics to fundamental doctrinal debates, marking a watershed moment in the history of Ayurvedic physiology. The conflict between Dr. Ravi Varmaraja's brain-centric view and the orthodox heart-centric view regarding the seat of the *Manas* represents a clash between distinct epistemologies: the authority of ancient texts versus the authority of modern anatomical observation. P.S. Varier's editorial intervention in favor of the brain theory signalled a radical departure from orthodoxy. By declaring that defects in traditional texts should be corrected using knowledge from other sciences, the journal established a precedent for scientific pluralism. It asserted that Ayurveda was not a closed divine revelation but an open scientific system capable of absorbing new truths, a stance that was revolutionary for its time.

Furthermore, the journal's role in publishing examination notifications, syllabi, and results was instrumental in the institutionalization of Ayurvedic education. Prior to *Dhanwanthari*, the distinction between a learned Vaidya and a lay healer was often

blurred by the lack of standardized certification. By establishing a public record of qualified practitioners and designated examination centers, the journal created a verifiable professional identity for *Vaidyas*. This standardization was crucial in shielding the community from the quackery label often used by the colonial administration to delegitimize indigenous practitioners, effectively laying the groundwork for the future statutory recognition of Ayurveda.

The journal's engagement with allied systems ranging from Homeopathy and Biochemistry to Music Therapy demonstrates that the renaissance envisioned by the editor was inherently integrative. The documentation of therapies like Chromotherapy and the regular updates on global scientific discoveries positioned the Vaidya not as a relic of the past, but as a modern man of science. Ultimately, *Dhanwanthari* functioned as the intellectual spine of the Ayurvedic revival in Kerala, utilizing Western statistical benchmarks to provoke internal reform and prioritizing scientific validity over textual dogma to ensure the system's survival in the 20th century.

## CONCLUSION

The *Dhanwanthari* journal was far more than a mere periodical as it was a scientific institution that spearheaded the renaissance of Ayurveda in Kerala. By hosting critical debates like the Heart vs. Brain controversy and facilitating dialogue with Western surgeons, it forced the reconciliation of ancient texts with modern truths, fostering a culture of critical inquiry. Although the journal ceased publication in 1926 due to budgetary constraints and political instability, its legacy is indelible. It fulfilled the fundamental duties of knowledge propagation (*Pracharana*) and professional unification (*Aikya Keralam*). The recent indexing of these archives reopens this treasure trove, offering modern researchers deep historical insights. Ultimately, *Dhanwanthari* proved that Ayurveda's survival lay not in retreating to the past, but in engaging courageously with the present a lesson that remains vital for the system today.

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