

Protective Deities of Goa and DaivavyāpāśrayaCikitsā: An analytical Study

Rajesh Pramod Korde

PhD Scholar

Shri Balmukund Lohia Centre of Sanskrit and Indological Studies,

Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Pune

Abstract

Ayurveda recognises that certain diseases arise not from observable physiological causes alone, but from *adr̥ṣṭa* (unseen) factors such as fear, psychological trauma, karmic impressions, and spirit-related disturbances. For such conditions, classical texts prescribe **DaivavyapāśrayāChikitsā**, a therapeutic modality based on ritual, mantra, *bali* and deity invocation as structured forms of treatment.

This paper examines the textual foundations of DaivavyapāśrayāChikitsā in the *Charaka Samhitā*, *SuśrutaSamhitā*, and *AṣṭāṅgaHṛdaya*, and its close relationship with *Bhūtavidyā*. It further analyses living deity-centred healing traditions in Goa, focusing on **Betal**, **Ravalnāth**, **Kṣetrapāla** and others as therapeutic agents through whom diagnosis and psycho-social healing are mediated. The paper discusses that Goan deity-based treatments are not superstitious practices, but community-based continuities of classical Ayurvedic therapeutic logic addressing disorders beyond pharmacological intervention.

Keywords

Ayurveda, DaivavyapāśrayāChikitsā, Goan deities

1. Purpose

The primary objective of this study is to examine the folk-deity traditions of the Konkan region, specifically Goa, Sindhudurg (Maharashtra) and Karwar (Karnataka), in relation to the formal Ayurvedic framework of DaivavyapāśrayaCikitsā (divine or spiritual therapy) in curing diseases and disorders.

In the modern medical paradigm, wellness is often reduced to biochemical balance. However, in the cultural landscape of Goa, wellness is an equilibrium between the individual, the community and the divine protectors. By setting this study at the intersection of cultural anthropology and Ayurvedic clinical theory, we aim to demonstrate how Goan traditions regarding invocation of deities such as **Betal**, **Ravalnāth**, **Kṣetrapāla** and **Śānterī** serve as a legitimate psychosocial and spiritual intervention for ailments that *Yuktivyapāśraya* (rational / drug-based therapy) may fail to address.

2. Approach

The methodology adopted for this research is interdisciplinary, combining classical textual engagement with field-based cultural inquiry. It follows a dual approach:

a) Textual study of Ayurvedic Samhitās and Indological literature:

The study undertakes a focused reading of foundational Ayurvedic texts such as the *Caraka Samhitā*, *SuśrutaSamhitā*, and *AṣṭāṅgaHṛdaya*, with particular attention to concepts such as *DaivavyapāśrayaCikitsā* and *Bhūtavidyā*. The approach primarily involves the identification and contextualisation of relevant references to understand traditional concepts of mental and psychosomatic disorders. This textual engagement is further supported by insights from modern Indological scholarship, which provide historical context and interpretative frameworks for understanding indigenous traditions.

b) Ethnographic observation of Goan folklore and temple rituals: Complementing the textual study, the research incorporates ethnographic observation of ritual practices, oral traditions, and community beliefs associated with temple traditions in Goa, particularly those linked to deities such as Ravalnath. This includes attention to healing rituals performed during specific occasions such as Daśarā, interactions between devotees and ritual specialists, and local interpretations of illness and cure. This field-based inquiry is further informed by regional socio-cultural and Indological studies on Goa, which trace the historical evolution of temple institutions, modes of deity worship, and the continuity of ritual healing practices, thereby providing a critical contextual framework for interpreting contemporary observations.

Meaning and etymology of DaivavyapāśrayāChikitsā

Classical Ayurveda conceptualizes treatment as *trividhamauśadham* (त्रिविधमौषधं - threefold therapy), comprising *Daivavyapāśrayā* (spiritual or divine measures), *Yuktivyapāśrayā* (rational and medicinal interventions), and *Sattvāvajaya* (psychological regulation and counselling). These three approaches are not mutually exclusive but function as complementary modalities within a holistic framework of healing, as stated in the *Caraka Samhita*:

त्रिविधमौषधं—दैवव्यपाश्रयं युक्तिव्यपाश्रयं सत्त्वावजयश्च ॥

(*Caraka Samhitā*, Sūtrasthāna, Chapter 11; Chowkhamba ed.)

The term *DaivavyapāśrayāChikitsā* is composed of three Sanskrit components:

Daiva (दैव) – derived from *div* (to shine, to be divine), referring to divine forces, destiny, unseen influences, karma, or fate.

Vyapāśraya (व्यपाश्रय) – *vyapā* (completely) + *āśraya* (to depend upon or take refuge).

Chikitsā (चिकित्सा) – treatment or therapeutic intervention; the term for treatment of diseases, implies “taking away the disease”.

DaivavyapāśrayāChikitsā, therefore, literally means “a mode of treatment that completely relies upon divine, unseen, or non-material forces.”

Within the classical framework, particularly in contexts such as *UnmādaChikitsā* (*Chikitsa Sthana* Chapter 9, *Caraka Sam.*) – treatment of mental disorders – this approach encompasses a range of ritual and spiritual practices, including:

मन्त्रौषधिमणिबलिहोमस्वस्त्ययनप्रायश्चित्तोपवासव्रतादि दैवव्यपाश्रयम् ॥

Charaka Samhitā, Sūtrasthāna 11.54

The study aligns specific Goan rituals with the classical components of *DaivavyapāśrayāChikitsā* as defined in Ayurveda, including:

- **Mantra** (Sacred chanting), **Oushadhi** (Consecrated herbs/amulets), **Maṇi** (Wearing of protective gems/beads); **Maṅgala** (Auspicious rites), **Bali** (Offerings), **Upahāra** (Devotional gifts), **Homa** (Oblations into fire), **Niyama and Vrata** (Vows and observances), **Prāyaścitta** (Atonement), **Upavāsa** (Fasting), **Swastyayana** (Chanting / recitations of propitiatory hymns), **Praṇipāta** (Surrender / Prostration / submission), **Dāna** (Charity), and **Gamana** (Pilgrimage).

Some of the practices used in temples or places of worship indicate that *DaivavyapāśrayāChikitsā* operates through symbolic, ritual, and faith-based mechanisms that address dimensions of illness understood to arise from non-empirical or supra-physical causes.

In this context, the present study seeks to examine how such classical categories find resonance in contemporary ritual practices in Goa, particularly in temple-based healing traditions, alongside medicinal treatment, thereby suggesting a continuity, conceptual as well as functional, between Ayurvedic theory and lived religious practice.

3. Observations

The core focus:

1. **Case study location:** Treating psychosomatic and mental disorders at the Ravalnāth temple in Pedne taluka. One of the observational components of this study is centered around the ritual healing practices associated with the worship of Ravalnath and Bhutnath in the Pedne (Pernem) taluka; Shiroda (Ponda taluka); Mauxi village (Sattari taluka) of Goa, where individuals seek remedies for psychosomatic and mental health conditions through temple-mediated interventions. Lord Ravalnath is worshipped as a protector and guardian, while Bhutnath is known as the "Lord of Spirits."
2. **The 'Possessions':** Hundreds of devotees, particularly those feeling afflicted by "evil energies," black magic, or mental distress, gather at the temple. As the drums (*dhols*) begin and rituals commence around midnight, many enter a state of trance. This is often characterised by frantic movements and rhythmic swaying, which locals view as the "evil spirit" being forced to manifest so it can be expelled. Within this framework, conditions such as persistent anxiety, unexplained behavioural disturbances, or episodes interpreted locally as *bādhā* (affliction) are often understood not merely as physiological disorders but as disturbances in the individual's relationship with the divine or the unseen realm. Devotees and their families approach the temple with the belief that the presiding deity possesses both diagnostic and curative agency, capable of identifying the root cause of suffering and prescribing appropriate remedial measures. Oral accounts, local narratives, and publicly documented descriptions of Goan temple tradition indicate that such sites have long functioned as spaces where afflictions, particularly those perceived to arise from unseen, spiritual, or karmic causes, are addressed through ritual means rather than exclusively biomedical ones.
The role of 'specialists': Investigating the "Healer" profile. Unlike Vedic rituals, Betal rituals are performed by **hereditary non-Brahmin specialists** (Gurav, Ghadi, Gawda, Velip, Bhandari, etc.) who act as intermediaries between the human and the unseen realms.
3. **Field observations:** Analysing the **Prasāda** or **Kaul Prasāda** ritual for health and life decisions. Publicly available ethnographic descriptions and oral traditions of similar folk traditions in Goa suggest that these healing processes typically involve a sequence of ritual actions — consultation through *kaul* (oracle-like divination), offerings (*bali*, *naivedya*), vow-taking (*vrata*), and, in some cases, repeated visits over a prescribed period.



Kaul procedure in progress at the ShantadurgaKunkallikarin, Fatorpa. **Pic credit:** GSB Katte

A central element of the observed ritual framework is the practice of kaul (oracle), commonly referred to as prasāda-kaul, which functions as a form of divine consultation. In temple traditions associated with most deities in Goa, **kaul** is sought to obtain guidance or consent of the deity in matters of illness, uncertainty, or major life decisions. This practice, preserved through oral tradition and community custom, remains prevalent among several Goan groups, irrespective of caste, social status and even education.

The ritual is typically performed near the sanctum (*garbha-gr̥ha*) using a *murti* or a metallic plate known as the *prasāda-paṭṭa*, symbolically identified with the deity. Small flowers or buds or leaves are placed on marked points corresponding to specific concerns such as health, marriage, livelihood, or protection. The deity's response is interpreted through the falling of these flowers — immediate or delayed, directional or patterned — by an experienced ritual specialist (*pūjārī*).

Thus, prasāda-kaul operates as a culturally embedded mechanism of diagnosis and decision-making, where meaning is derived through ritual symbolism and interpretative expertise, reinforcing the temple's role as both a spiritual and therapeutic space.



Here Poojari uses very small flowers of a plant called “Tumbo” which they stick to the thick wooden platform using water and questions are asked to the God. The reply / response – positive or negative – from God / deity is decided by the dislocation of the flower. **Pic credit:** GSB Katte

The study yielded several key observations regarding the functional role of protective deities in Goan health-seeking behaviour:

- **The role of Ravalnāth:** Frequently invoked in the *Ravalnāth Stotra* for *Vyādhi-nāśa* (destruction of disease). In regions like Pedne, the deity is viewed as a supreme "Chief Physician" for mental disturbances and cases of *Bhūta-bādhā* (affliction by spirits or unseen forces).
- **Synthesis with Bhūtavidyā:** The practices observed align closely with the *GrahaCikitsā* or *Bhūtavidyā* sections of the *AshtāṅgaHṛdaya*, where the etiology of disease is attributed to external "unseen" entities that require spiritual appeasement (*Bali* and *Upahāra*).
- **The Kaul Prasāda as diagnosis:** The ritual of *Kaul* acts as a psychosomatic release. When a devotee receives a "favourable" petal or sign from the deity, it triggers a "placebo-plus" effect, significantly reducing cortisol levels and anxiety associated with chronic illness.
- **The communal healing space:** Unlike the isolated clinical environment, the Goan temple provides a community-supported healing atmosphere. The *Niyama* (discipline) and *Upavāsa* (fasting) prescribed by the deity create a structured lifestyle intervention that aids recovery.

4. Deities with specific 'healing portfolios'

In the Goan folklore and tradition, deities are viewed as "specialists" in wellness, each governing a specific domain of the human experience:

- **Betal (The destroyer of storms):** or Vetoba, a Bhairava form of Shiva is a popular god in Goa, Sindhudurg district & Kolhapur of Maharashtra and Karwar of Karnataka. Betal is a grāmadevatā, a protector deity of the local community. He is worshipped by fishermen and traders as the destroyer of evil spirits. Clinically, he functions as the guardian against *Bhūta-bādhā*. His "fierce" (*ugra*) nature serves as a psychic anchor for those suffering from deep-seated fear or trauma.
- **Ravalnāth (The Adhipati):** Ravalnath is a guardian deity who protects the locality from climatic disasters, witchcraft and snakebites. Invoked in the *Ravalnāth Stotra* for **Vyādhināśa** (destruction of illness). He acts as the "Chief Physician" of the village, consulted for chronic ailments that resist conventional medicine.
- **Kṣetrapāla and Śānterī:** Guardians of the physical boundaries and fertility. Their rituals (*Upavāsa* and *Bali*) focus on stabilising the environment and cooling the *Pitta* (inflammatory) tendencies of the mind and body.



NagdoBetal in Loliem village, Canaconatalkuka, Goa. Pic: [Talking Myths Project](#)



Ravalnath, temple near Wados, Sindhudurg, Maharashtra. Pic credit: Wikipedia



© Rajan P. Parrikar

Large anthills are often regarded as a manifestation of the Earth Goddess, and are given names such as Sateri (Santeri), Bhoomika, Ela. **Pic credit:** [Rajan Parrikar](#)

5. The logic of the healing process

The study identifies a sophisticated clinical logic behind practices often labelled as ‘superstitious’:

A. The ‘Charaka protocol’

Caraka Samhitā specifies that *Daivavyapāśraya* is used when:

1. **Hetu (cause) is unclear:** Modern "idiopathic" conditions.
2. **Disease is resistant:** When *Yukti* (pharmacology) fails.
3. **Karmic or mental dominance:** When the mind (*Sattva*) is the primary site of pathology.

B. The social ecology of healing

A key observation is that Betal rituals are **non-Brahmanical**. These rituals involve:

- **Liminal spaces:** Boundaries, night rituals, and cremation grounds.
- **Direct communication:** Through trance, possession, and the *Kaul*.
- **Functional authority:** These ‘specialists’ handle the "fierce" energy of the deity, which provides a "**psychic shock**" necessary to snap a patient out of dissociative or depressive states.

C. The ‘Kaul’ as bio-feedback

The *Kaul Prasāda* acts as a divine diagnostic tool. When a devotee receives the "divine nod," it triggers an immediate reduction in stress (*Prasannata*). This mental clarity is the first step in Ayurvedic recovery, allowing the *Doshas* to stabilise.

6. Conclusion

The protective deities of Goa, such as the Betal (Vetala), Ravalnāth, Kṣetrapāla and Śānterī, are not merely symbols of faith but are integral to a functional, living system of **DaivavyapāśrayaCikitsā**.

- Betal, often perceived as a fierce deity, is observed as the "Destroyer of Storms", both literal environmental storms and metaphorical internal (psychological) storms. He is the protector deity, guardian of trade, commerce and the physical safety of fishermen, protecting them from the "evil spirits" of the sea.

- These folk traditions function as a culturally standardised response to psychological distress, offering predictability, reassurance, and communal validation.

In essence, the Goan deity-centered healing model offers a profound lesson in **holistic health**: it addresses the karmic, psychological and social dimensions of a human being, ensuring that "wellness" is a state of harmony between the seen and the unseen worlds.

Footnotes and References

1. **Charaka Samhitā, Suśruta Samhitā, Aṣṭāṅga Hṛdaya**: Sections on *Daivavyapāśraya Chikitsā* and *Bhūtavidyā*. (Charaka Samhitā, Sūtrasthāna 11.54; Vimānasthāna 8.87; Cikitsāsthāna 23.89. Sushruta Samhitā, Uttaratantā 39.)
<https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/charaka-samhita-english%26lang%3Den>
<https://www.planetayurveda.com/library/charak-samhita-sutrasthana-chapter-11-tistraishaniya-adhyaya>
2. **Mitragotri, V. R. (1992)**: *A Socio-Cultural History of Goa from the Bhojas to the Vijayanagara*. (pp 177-199; 218-225; 225-245 / Chapters VI, VII and VIII
<https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/31626>
3. **Prabhushastri, Indra Prakash (2022)**: *Image Worship of the Puranic Deities in Goa: A Critical Study* (pp. 231-240).
4. **Traditional liturgy**: *Vyādhi-nāśa* verses from the *Ravalnāth Stotra*.
5. Krishna Sahana, and Rajashekhar, CV – Unlocking the clinical utility of Daivavyapashraya Chikitsa a mystical therapy in the present era - A Bird View; Critical Analysis of Daivavyapashraya Chikitsa: a scientific examination of its efficacy, mechanisms and clinical applications; World Journal of Pharmaceutical Research;
<https://jaims.in/jaims/article/view/2751/4068>
6. Dr Raghuraman YS and Dr Manasa; Daivavyapashraya Chikitsa - Divine therapies in Ayurveda; EasyAyurveda; <https://www.easyayurveda.com/2020/08/13/daiva-vyapashraya-chikitsa/>
7. Shivani R Naxine, Harish Kumar Purohit, Brijesh R Mishra; The Role of Daivavyapashraya Chikitsa in Ayurveda: A Focus on Upavas Chikitsa; in Journal of Ayurveda and Integrated Medical Sciences;
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/386601319_The_Role_of_Daivavyapashraya_Chikitsa_in_Ayurveda_A_Focus_on_Upavas_Chikitsa

(Footnotes)

[1]: Cakrapāṇidatta on Caraka Samhitā Cikitsāsthāna 1(1).3.