

How a Haryana doctor upgraded Ayurveda to the digital age



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Unlike Kerala, where a solid heritage shapes contemporary practice, in northern India, Ayurveda doctors are compensating the lost legacy with entrepreneurial skill. Dr Pratap Chauhan, for instance, has a unique format centred on telephone consultations. Jiva Ayurveda, the company he has founded, has a telecentre staffed with 150 doctors. He also runs clinics across north India and owns a medicine manufacturing plant in Haryana.

‘Through the telemedicine centre, we provide free consultations to thousands of people in remote villages of India, who have limited access to medical facilities,’ says Chauhan enthusiastically. He leans forward, elbows resting on the large desk. The strong summer sunlight streams through the wispy jute blinds in his office.

Jiva operates from a three-storeyed glass facade building which stands between a party hall and a warehouse in the grimy industrial town of Faridabad, near Delhi. The interiors are done up in a unique rustic style with rough jute partitions, woven bamboo matting for cabin walls and dim lights.

When he is not in this office, Chauhan is travelling to teach Ayurveda or speak at seminars across the world. The 2019 schedule on Jiva Ayurveda’s website lists the dates for his visit to Poland, France and Japan. He seems to like the spotlight. On his daily television show, broadcasting across several Hindi channels, he eagerly listens to dial-in callers and offers advice.

Chauhan was born in a village not very far from his office. Starting his practice from a small clinic in his garage, Chauhan’s journey to success is fascinating. ‘Though we did not have many resources, my father ensured all his three sons get a decent education. He also insisted that we imbibe a sense of service,’ he says. As a young graduate of Ayurveda medicine from Delhi University in the early 1990s, Chauhan began his practice but was unsatisfied with his level of knowledge. ‘I decided to find a guru.’ He spent the next five years learning and practising under an experienced Ayurveda teacher.

While Chauhan was struggling to establish a practice, he was surprised to learn that what India regarded as a primitive and obsolete system was slowly gaining acceptance in the West. Chauhan thinks that Deepak Chopra, the famous Indian-born US doctor and alternative medicine advocate, should be credited for changing how we looked at Ayurveda. Deepak Chopra’s bestselling book *Perfect Health* came out at the time

Chauhan was setting up his clinic. The book used concepts from Ayurveda and mentioned three bioenergy elements called *doshas* in Ayurveda: *vatta*, *pitta* and *kaffa*, which constitute the human body. 'It struck me that there was a definite demand for Ayurveda in the international market.' Pratap Chauhan found a way to service that demand.

The foray into teaching and speaking outside India happened with the help of a little planning and a few coincidences. Chauhan's brother, an engineer from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi, had returned to India after working in the US for several years. Drawn to spirituality, he lived in an *ashram* in Vrindavan, the holy town in Uttar Pradesh dedicated to Lord Krishna. Through his brother, Chauhan found a foothold in the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) centre in Vrindavan and began giving free lectures. 'The people at ISKCON liked my work and arranged for me to talk about Ayurveda at some of their centres abroad.'

The trip abroad gave a new direction to Chauhan's life. He was exposed to the power of technology, especially the internet. He wanted to use it to propagate Ayurveda and decided to create a website. 'I made the world's first Ayurveda website in 1995. Internet was just starting. Somehow, we could get an internet connection from the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology. We had a tower put on the top of our house,' he laughs. Chauhan used the website to offer consultation to people across the world. 'I created a form for people to fill up. I gave online advice.' Chauhan says that he often suggested home remedies and sometimes even sent out packages of his formulations to patients in other countries. He also began an online Ayurveda awareness programme.

Chauhan's international initiative was more than just a smart business strategy. As a cultural outreach, it has played a role in promoting India's heritage outside the country. Soft-power diplomacy is often assumed to be a national level endeavour, but in his own way Chauhan too helped influence and shape the perception about India.

Cultural push abroad also helps build value and credibility of native traditions within one's own country. Jiva's prestige certainly grew after Chauhan's foreign travels.

Chauhan's achievements gave him the confidence to pursue some of his more ambitious ideas. 'When mobile phones became popular in the early years of the new millennium, I began to think of ways to harness the mobile platform to reach out to people in rural areas.' One of them was the development of a mobile application called Teledoc in 2003. A rather radical idea at a time when, for most people, an application meant a request letter; mobile telephony was limited to answering and receiving calls, and handsets had limited processing and storage capabilities.

The application worked on a Nokia mobile phone. A Jiva representative would collect patient information from remote villages and transmit the data through GPRS technology to the central clinic. Doctors at Jiva accessed this information through computers and typed in the prescriptions and treatments. The medical advice would then be transmitted back to the registered mobile phones and communicated to the

patient through the representative. The project was a success. It was regarded as pioneering work in the field of telemedicine and gathered international attention. In 2006, it won Chauhan a United Nations World Summit Award for being a 'low-cost, highly effective and broadly applicable networking solution'.

Despite the award, Chauhan faced difficulty in raising funds for expansion. 'I wanted to create a mass-scale telemedicine practice with Ayurveda. For that I needed money.' Ayurveda at that time did not have the attention it currently attracts, and he found investors wary of investing money in Ayurveda ventures. Characteristic to his nature, Chauhan converted the challenge into a new opportunity.

'In 2006, we started a TV show on a Hindi news channel. I was absolutely clear that this was the way forward. Television had reached almost every household in even the remotest parts of India and mobile penetration was increasing every day.' The television show educated people about the immense power of Ayurveda and the benefits of a traditional Indian diet. The telephone numbers of Jiva's clinic were flashed on the screen and the viewers were encouraged to call for Dr Chauhan's advice.

The idea achieved its objective. The number of callers went up every week. To cater to the growing number of calls, Jiva had to hire several doctors. 'We talk to 6,000 individuals every day from this office,' he says smilingly, pointing to the door indicating the call centre housed in the building.

Taking a tour of the facility, seeing doctors sitting with headphones in jute cubicles, one wonders if Ayurveda, with its personalized and customized system of clinical assessment, works on the telephone. 'Our doctors ask detailed questions and do a thorough analysis before diagnosis and prescription of medicine,' I am informed. This can be done either on the telephone or in-person at Jiva's clinics around the country.

Patients can also choose the option of a video or an online consultation. 'If we have the technology and can use it to reach out to the remotest of people and serve those who cannot come to our clinic, then why should we not use it?' asks Chauhan. He accepts that initially, he was a little uncertain about the efficacy of online and telephone consultations. 'I wondered if it will work but then I saw the results. Patients started getting better.'