



## A Systemic Review on Traditional Indian remedy 'miracle' fish medicine for asthma

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### Abstract

Asthma, a disease classified as a chronic inflammatory disorder induced by airway inflammation, is triggered by a genetic predisposition or antigen sensitization. Drugs currently used as therapies present disadvantages such as high cost and side effects, which compromise the treatment compliance. Alternatively, traditional medicine has reported the use of natural products as alternative or complementary treatment. The aim of this review was to summarize the knowledge reported about the use of fish medicine for asthma treatment. Every year lakhs of people suffering from asthma, bronchitis and other respiratory illness visit Hyderabad with a hope of a miraculous cure. The Telangana government has made elaborate arrangements for the 'Fish Prasadam' exhibition held in Hyderabad. A herbal yellow paste is prepared with a secret formula and stuffed inside a live Murrel fish which is 2 to 3 inches long and slipped into the throat of the patient. The Baithini Goud family, who have been administering the fish medicine since 1845, say the cure is scientific.

**Keywords:** Asthma, Fish medicine, treatment, miraculous cure.

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### Introduction.

The search strategy included scientific studies published between January 2006 and December 2017, using the keywords "asthma," "treatment," and "natural products."<sup>1</sup> The inclusion criteria were as follows: (i) studies that aimed at elucidating the antiasthmatic activity of natural-based compounds or extracts using laboratory experiments (*in vitro* and/or *in vivo*); and (ii) studies that

suggested the use of natural products in asthma treatment by elucidation of its chemical composition. Studies that (i) did not report experimental data and (ii) manuscripts in languages other than English were excluded. Based on the findings from the literature search, aspects related to asthma pathophysiology, epidemiology, and conventional treatment were discussed. Then, several studies reporting the effectiveness of natural products in the asthma treatment were presented, highlighting plants as the main source. Moreover, natural products from animals and microorganisms were also discussed and their high potential in the antiasthmatic therapy was emphasized. This review highlighted the importance of natural products as an alternative and/or complementary treatment source for asthma treatment, since they present reduced side effects and comparable effectiveness as the drugs currently used on treatment protocols<sup>2</sup>.

This 'fish prasadam' ritual takes place every year during the arrival of monsoon. The members of the Bathini family drop a live murrel fish filled with a yellow herbal paste into the throats of patients suffering from respiratory illnesses.

A herbal paste is placed in a live murrel (snakehead) fingerling fish, which is then slipped into the mouth of the patient and swallowed without water. It is believed that fish prasadam cures asthma. Thousands of people from across India gather at the Nampally Exhibition Grounds in Hyderabad to gulp down a medicine-infused murrel (or snakehead murrel) fish medicine that will supposedly cure them of asthma. Popularly known as fish prasadam, this ritual has been continuing for 173 years now. This year, the event began on June 8 and like every year, it was administered by the Bathini family. This ritual takes place every year during the arrival of monsoon. The members of the Bathini family drop a live murrel fish filled with a yellow herbal paste into the throats of patients suffering from respiratory illnesses. If the patient is a vegetarian, the medicine is given with jaggery instead of fish. They also prescribe a particular diet and are asked to take the fish prasadam for three consecutive years<sup>3,4</sup>.

### **.Is there a permanent cure for asthma in India?**

Asthma is a highly treatable disease, but there is no permanent cure for asthma at present. Though asthma is a lifelong condition, it is possible to live a healthy life. Using effective treatments and lifestyle changes, you can reduce the symptoms of asthma<sup>5</sup>.

### **Why is fish good for asthma?**

It's all about the omega-3 fatty acids, especially in fatty fish like salmon, herring, tuna, and sardines. They help lessen the amount of IgE your body makes. That's an antibody that causes breathing problems in some people with asthma.

Every year in June asthma patients gather in the southern city of Hyderabad to gulp down the fish stuffed with a yellow herbal paste, hoping it will help them breathe more easily. The wriggling

five-centimetre (two-inch) murrel fish are slipped into the throats of patients in a bizarre treatment that leaves them gagging. The Bathini Goud family, which administers the treatment, says the fish clear the throat on their way down and permanently cure asthma along with other respiratory problems. But the family has declined to reveal the secret formula which they say they got from a Hindu saint in 1845. Parents are often forced to pry open the mouths of reluctant children who cry at the site of squirming fish, while others pinch their noses, tip their heads back and close their eyes. Thousands of people travel from across India for the free medicine during a two-day period, the specific dates of which are determined by the onset of the monsoon every June. Rights groups and doctors have complained that the medicine is "unscientific", a violation of human rights and unhygienic, claims rejected by the family.

The Indian government arranges special trains for the "fish medicine" festival every year and extra police are on duty to control crowds. After digesting the treatment, patients are told to go on a strict diet for 45 days.

### **How does fish medicine work?**

The treatment involves swallowing a 'live' fish filled with a yellow paste stuffed inside it. The patients are made to gulp down live 'murrel' fish with a yellow herbal paste in its mouth, which is believed to provide relief, if taken for three consecutive years. The medicine is given with jaggery to the vegetarians

### **What are the benefits of fish therapy?**

Potential benefits of fish pedicures

As with traditional pedicures, fish pedicures exfoliate the feet and can diminish calluses. This can leave the skin feeling softer and improve the appearance of the feet

A 159 year old traditional remedy of offering "fish medicine" to cure asthma has been challenged in the Indian courts. The Indian Medical Association has questioned the secrecy surrounding the ingredients of the medicine, invoking the provisions of the Drugs and Magical Remedies Act 1954. Thousands of people with asthma travel to Hyderabad for the annual gathering where the medicine is delivered free to the patient in the mouth of a live fish.<sup>6</sup>

"Any substance other than food used for curing [people] falls under the category of a drug and its ingredients must be disclosed to the consumers," says Dr C L Venkata Rao, secretary of the Charminar branch of the Indian Medical Association in Hyderabad, who filed the writ in the Hyderabad High Court.

The herbal medicine is placed in the mouth of a 5-7 cm long murrel fish and the patient is made to swallow the live fish, repeating this ritual annually for three years. The medicine's ingredients have been guarded zealously by the Bathini Goud family, which claims a saint gave its formula to their ancestor Veeranna Goud in 1845 forbidding them from making the ingredients public.

“The medicine would lose its efficacy if we broke the pledge and it will fall prey to unbridled commercialisation,” Bathini Harinath Goud said. “We have been offered unlimited money in the past in return for disclosure of the formula by pharmaceutical companies, but we prefer to spend money from our savings and give the medicine free to all the patients,” said Mr Goud.

“Hundreds of thousands of people have been completely cured of asthma with this medicine,” claims Mr Goud. He said that some 650 000 patients with asthma took the medicine this year, a figure disputed by Dr Rao, who says that according to official records only 52 000 fish were sold.

“There is no evidence that it works,” Dr Ajit Vigg, head of respiratory and critical care medicine at Apollo Hospital, Hyderabad, said. “On the contrary, we have seen 10-15% patients whose condition has worsened.”

Dr Vigg says they had sent some dozen chronic asthma patients to be treated with fish medicine a few years ago and monitored variables such as their forced vital capacity and forced expiration volume before and after the treatment but found no improvement. “In my practice of 20-25 years, I have not seen a single patient whose condition has either improved or who has got completely cured with fish medicine,” he said. Both Mr Goud and the critics concur that there are no records to verify the claims and counterclaims.

Under the court order, samples of the medicine have been sent to three different laboratories for analysis. The laboratory reports have to be filed by 1 July. Dr Rao says his association has demanded that the contents of the fish medicine be made known to the recipients. It has also called for prosecution of the Bathini Gouds for violating the provisions of the Drugs and Magical Remedies Act and a ban on government spending in promoting fish medicine. Dr Rao added that as the medicine was administered without using gloves to a large number of people, communicable diseases could be spread<sup>7,8</sup>

### **The Potent Formula**

It is believed that disclosure about the medicine will result in the medicine losing its efficacy. This herbal medicine (yellow paste) is distributed by the Bathini Goud family after performing some rituals to patients who reach Hyderabad from far and near for this treatment. The medicine is given across special counters in the large exhibition ground. The medicine has to be taken for three consecutive years for permanent cure from respiratory ailments or asthma<sup>7</sup>.

### **Well, what if you are a vegetarian?**

Do not worry for you can take the medicine with unrefined sugar or jaggery.

### **History of this Herbal Medicine**

Ancestor of the Goud family (great grandfather Bathini Veeranna Goud) learnt this medicine from a saint in the year 1845 and was advised to distribute it free of charge. He passed it on to Shiva Ram Goud who taught it to Shanker Goud. The popularity of this treatment increased manifolds during Shanker Goud's time who later passed it on to his five sons. The 'healing' family now comprises of Harinath Goud, Sri Vishwanath Goud, Uma Maheshwar Goud (earlier late Somalingam Goud and late Shivram Goud). Many scientific and laboratory tests later, some claim that though the medicine is not harmful, it is not useful either! Around 50,000 fishes are supplied from the fisheries department during the 'event'.

### **How is the Treatment Administered**

The treatment entails swallowing of a 2 inch live fish which is loaded with the herbal medicine. Known as Bathini fish medicine or also as Bathini Mrugasira fish, it is very slippery and swallowing it is not tough.

A strict diet is also prescribed over the next 45 days. If taken for consecutive 3 years, asthma is cured, or so is the belief.

The 'medicine' is administered on 'Mrigishira Karthi Nakshatra', a day fixed by astrologers (during monsoon), generally on the first or second week of June. Three doses of medicines handed over to patients has to be taken on Arudra Karthi, Punnavasu Karthi and Pushymi Karti, with a gap of 15 days between each, making it complete 45 days of treatment at one time.

### **Popularity or Just a Gimmick**

The Goud family believes that the medicine will lose its potency if commercialized. The treatment has got its share of popularity abroad too!

Rationalist organizations, court orders and controversies later, the medicine has been found to be safe for consumption without any trace of steroids or heavy metals. It should be noted here that this treatment is NOT given anywhere else except in Hyderabad at Exhibition grounds during Mrigasira Karthi day.

If people have belief in the treatment, even the court can't interfere, the medicine being safe. Paul Coelho has aptly remarked, *"None of us knows what might happen even the next minute, yet still we go forward. Because we trust. Because we have Faith."*

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### **What fish is good for asthma?**

Oily fish such as salmon, sardines and lake trout, as well as some plant sources such as walnuts and flaxseed, can be good, tasty sources of omega-3 fatty acids

For more than 150 years now, thousands of people have been gathering once every year in a bylane in the old city of Hyderabad, to avail of a secret herbal medicine that is placed inside a live murrel fish and administered on Mrigasira day, which falls in June and marks the beginning of the monsoon according to the Hindu calendar.

On June 8 this year, the five Goud brothers -- Shiv Ram, Somalingam, Vishwanath, Harinath and Uma Maheshwar -- who were given the recipe for the medicine by their forefathers, administered it to about 125,000 people from across the country and even abroad, gathered at their ancestral home in Doodbowli, Hyderabad. One of the Goud brothers claims even the late Indian President Rajendra Prasad tried their medicine.

However, allopathic doctors, medical researchers and even Ayurveda experts are sceptical of the cure. The president of the Asthma Bronchitis Foundation of India at New Delhi's National Chest Institute, Prem Sobti, says, "I doubt if there is any scientific basis for this alleged cure."<sup>9-10</sup> A senior medical researcher, based at the Capital's Patel Chest Institute, however, is not as dismissive. He points out, "More than 80 per cent of all bronchial asthma cases are psychosomatic at some time or the other, and all kinds of unlikely things have been known to help patients. I would reckon that just the fish, even without the herbal medicine, would work." H R Goel of the Central Council for Ayurveda and Siddha rejects the fish cure as folk medicine and says there are no references to the cure in the Ayurveda scriptures. "Moreover," he adds, "no studies have been undertaken by the Council to determine the efficacy of the treatment." A C Das, an ENT specialist in Guwahati who has been suffering from asthma patient since the last 12 years, says, "I have taken this medicine for four years, and I am now completely cured. It is really a miracle medicine for asthma." Sreedevi, a patient from Madras, recounts, "I have had serious spells of asthma for the last four years. I've tried allopathy and homoeopathy, but they only provided temporary relief. I lost my appetite and I was depressed, but after taking the fish medicine this year, there was a visible change within 24 hours."

The patient is made to swallow the live murrel fish, which measures about 4-6 cm in length. The Goud brothers contend it cleans the throat and air passages as it travels down to the stomach, where the herbal medicine begins to work its magic. Shiv Ram claims the medicine is effective in 90 per cent of the cases if taken for three consecutive years in conjunction with a strict diet. Though the medicine itself is administered free of cost, the patient has to buy the murrel fish, which costs between Rs 20 and Rs 50 a piece, from the local market. Murrel is a freshwater fish found in the coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh and is available in plenty on Mrigasira day.

For people who cannot swallow the live fish, the brothers also offer the Karti medicine, which is in the form of a paste. It has to be dried in the sun by the patient and split into six pills, which should be taken in lukewarm water, before breakfast and after dinner on three special days called kartis -- Arudra, Punarvasu and Pushyami - Occure 15 days apart.

The Bathini Goud family in Hyderabad hosts a peculiar exhibition every year, where they claim to provide Indians with free live fish medicine



**Fish prasadam, it is distributed by Bathini Goud family**

The annual event is known as Mrigasira Karthi

Murrel fish is stuffed with a yellow herbal paste

Come monsoon, and this is the time when thousands and thousands of people head to Hyderabad to get a dose of a miracle medicine, touted to cure asthma. This medicine is peculiar because it is no pill or syrup, but a live fish that you are made to swallow down your throat. Commonly referred to as 'fish prasadam' by the locals, it is distributed by the Bathini Goud family in an annual event known as Mrigasira Karthi. Apparently, the family has been conducting this event for over a century now, with more and more believers joining in every year.

So what really is this alternative medicine to cure asthma? Well, it involves murrel fisherlings, which is also referred to as snakehead fish due to its close resemblance, and was declared as the

state fish of Telangana in 2016. The fish breeds in freshwater bodies, and is commonly found in ponds, lakes and rivers. In many native cultures, it is considered to be a health benefiting fish.

The Bathini Goud family makes the 'fish prasadam' by stuffing the fish with a yellow herbal paste, the secret recipe of which was passed down the family through a Hindu saint. They claim that the fish carries the medicine and wiggles its way through the throat to clear mucous, making it easier to breathe. The patients are advised not to drink water until 30 minutes after the medicine is administered. They are also asked to follow a strict diet post the 'prasadam'.

According to the fisheries department, about 60,000 murrel fish were stocked for this event. Though there has been no evidence to indicate its clinical benefits, many people who have received the treatment claim that it has cured the illness for them. Medical experts, however, are not in support of the treatment, stating that it is more a psychological effect. Since the people believe in it so strongly that after they swallow the fish, their minds make it feel real. The high court too ruled that they cannot term it as 'medicine'.<sup>11</sup>

**Hyderabad, India** — Tens of thousands of asthma-sufferers swallowed live sardines or murrel fish smeared with a yellow herbal paste in a ritual performed Wednesday that they believe will cure their breathing problems.

The Goud family that administers the traditional treatment in the southern city of Hyderabad says its ancestors received the secret formula from a Hindu saint about 170 years ago. They refuse to reveal the mixture's ingredients, and doctors say it is unproven.

Those treated are often poor, but many say it has benefited them, and the government helps make arrangements for the large crowds who come to Hyderabad, the joint capital of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh states

The fish is sold cheaply by the Telangana government and private groups, costing people 15 rupees, or about 7 cents, per fish.

The family offers the treatment annually on a day chosen by astrologers. Family member Bathini Harinath Goud said the treatment started Wednesday morning and will continue for 24 hours.

The herbal paste is slipped into the sardines and then put into the mouth of the asthma-sufferers.

People who swallow the live fish and paste are told to follow a strict diet for the next 45 days, abstaining from fried foods while only eating 25 different items, including lamb, rice, white sugar, dried mango, spinach and clarified butter.

An Indian member of the Bathini Goud family (L) administers 'fish medicine' to a patient at the exhibition grounds in Hyderabad. The medicine, which has been offered by the family of the southern Indian city to patients for the last 163 years as a cure for asthma and other breathing



disorders, is placed in the mouth of a live murrel fish and then slipped into the mouth of the patient. The medicine is administered on the auspicious day of 'Mrigasira Karti' which falls in June with the onset of the annual monsoon. The treatment, which is based on a secret herb formula, draws thousands of people from all over the country<sup>12</sup>.

**HYDERABAD:** With pinched noses and watery eyes, thousands of Indians have lined up to swallow live fish in a traditional treatment for asthma administered annually in the country's south.

Asthma sufferers gather every June in the southern city of Hyderabad to gulp down the fish stuffed with a yellow herbal paste, in hopes it will help them breathe more easily.

The wriggling five-centimetre (two-inch) fish are slipped into the throats of patients in a bizarre treatment that leaves them gagging.

The Bathini Goud family, which administers the treatment, says the fish clear the throat on their way down and permanently cure asthma and other respiratory problems.

But the family has declined to reveal the secret formula which they say they got from a Hindu saint in 1845.

Parents are often forced to pry open the mouths of reluctant children who cry at the site of squirming fish, while others pinch their noses, tip their heads back and close their eyes.

Thousands of people travel from across India for the free medicine during a two-day period, the specific dates of which are determined by the onset of the monsoon every June.

Rights groups and doctors have complained that the medicine is "unscientific", a violation of human rights and unhygienic, claims rejected by the family.

The Indian government arranges special trains for the "fish medicine" festival every year and extra police are on duty to control crowds.

After digesting the treatment, patients are told to go on a strict diet for 45 days.

### **Conclusion:**

While the Goud family and many people believe that fish prasadam cures asthma, there are many controversies around it. Hence, it becomes very important to have evidence to support its safety and effectiveness.

Though the Goud family claims that their medicine can cure asthma, some people come to the exhibition every year (for more than 8-10 years) and still take the prasadam. They

say that prasadam has not completely cured their asthma but is much better than allopathic medicines and provides long-term relief from symptoms. The Goud family has been questioned in court by the Indian Medical Association (IMA) on its ingredients. IMA claims that herbal medicine contains harmful chemicals like heavy metals, which can be very dangerous. However, the Goud family denies all the claims and says that their medicine is tested in laboratories and is said to be safe. Some doctors also believe that it is actually the fish and not the prasadam that is helping in curing asthma. According to them, N3, a type of fatty acid present in fish which helps manage coronary heart disease, could even help with asthma.

### **Conflicts of Interest:**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

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