

<https://scroll.in/article/1071181/how-ayurveda-led-to-the-growth-of-medical-nationalism-in-the-late-19th-and-early-20th-centuries>

BOOK EXCERPT

How Ayurveda led to the growth of ‘medical nationalism’ in the late 19th and early 20th centuries

An excerpt from ‘Ayurveda, Nation and Society: United Provinces, c 1890-1950’, by Saurav Kumar Rai.

Saurav Kumar Rai

5 hours ago



A physician checks the pulse of a patient, c 1825. | [Public Domain.](#)

The Indian subcontinent has traditionally been an abode of an extensive range of healing systems and practices, some of which date hundreds of years back in history. However, the “ancientness” of a healing practice nowhere connotes “changelessness” despite claims of being “timeless”. This study unravels changes and associated manifestations and politics, particularly during the colonial period, of one such proclaimed “timeless” healing system called Ayurveda. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century witnessed the rise and growth of “medical nationalism” in India. Consequently, “Indianisation” was sought after both in the medical profession as well as in the choice of healing system.

Besides the Indianisation of the medical profession, simultaneous attempts were made to write off Western medicine completely, thereby replacing it with “indigenous” healing practices. It was in this context that Ayurveda was posed by its practitioners and publicists as the worthiest “indigenous” system of healing and a “true” claimant of the “national healing system” of India. This soon precipitated into an Ayurvedic revivalist movement which altered Ayurveda fundamentally, thereby shaping a “modern” form of a so-called “timeless” healing tradition. Incidentally, the socio-economic context in which this entire politics of Ayurvedic revivalism unfolded bore huge imprints on the final outcome. This study ventures to capture these overlaps and intersectional musings of the modern transformation of Ayurveda, politics of a nation and overarching trends of contemporaneous society and economy.

In other words, likewise, Western medicine, the late colonial Ayurvedic and associated health discourse was not an isolated discourse on “science” and medicine; instead, it was simultaneously a socio-political discourse. Tropes of medical revivalism, social issues and political concerns got readily intertwined in it, thereby transcending the set medical boundaries. That is why, the Ayurvedic discourse of the period under discussion was not only about plague, malaria or any other disease; rather, it was also about *pardah*, *brahmacharya*, language, caste, class, community, nation, colonialism, etc. This work unravels these distinctive non-Ayurvedic engagements of the Ayurvedic revivalist discourse.

Furthermore, following the nationalist-communalist discourse, the Ayurvedic tracts stressed on the preservation of semen in the broader interest of the “nation” and “community” as well. In fact, the basis of the British paramountcy was also seen in the preservation of semen by the English. According to Jagannath Sharma, it was because of the valour associated with the preservation of semen that the English had been ruling India for more than 100 years. Similarly, Suryabali Singh in his text argued that it was because of the loss of semen that “we lost our independence and received all round disgrace”. It was claimed that until and unless the youth of India recognised the significance of brahmacharya and tended to preserve semen, India could never regain its independence.

These texts eulogised Hanuman and Bhisma Pitamah for their lifelong brahmacharya and the associated courage. Brahmacharya was seen as the greatest asset of a young male and loss of semen was seen as synonymous with death. Brahmacharya and ways and means to preserve semen (*viryarakshanopayah*) also figured as one of the topics of study in the syllabus of the Ayurvedic course conducted by the College of Ayurveda, Banaras Hindu University. Interestingly, attempts were made to shun the popular romantic characterisation of Krishna as well and to retrieve a chaste, celibate deity. In this regard, a reinterpretation of Krishna’s *raslila* (sensuous dancing) was attempted. It was argued that since Krishna

was an ideal brahmachari having firm control over his senses, people of respected families allowed their daughters and sisters to play with him.

One very remarkable feature of the Ayurvedic discourse on brahmacharya was that despite putting severe restrictions on male sexuality along with an uncompromising attack on the so-called “wrong” sexual habits (such as masturbation, night-fall, anal sex and prostitution), the “Hindu” male was rarely held responsible for indulgence in these “wrong” sexual activities. In other words, the “Hindu” male was often seen as an “innocent entity” contaminated by some external agency – be it “Muslim rule”, modern civilisation and institutions, or the immoral sexual behaviour of “*nautch girls*”, prostitutes and the lower orders, etc. Thus, the onus of contaminating the “Hindu” male was always on the “Others”; and it often exhibited caste, class, gender and communal prejudices. In other words, in such discourse, the “Hindu” male was mostly portrayed as a “poor”, “innocent”, and “vulnerable” character who could easily be “distracted”.

It is interesting to note that the “new” vaidis of the late nineteenth and early 20th century India particularly focussed on those aspects of the medical market which were either spared or overlooked by the practitioners of Western medicine such as the production of tonics and vitalisers, all-encompassing drugs or panacea, and aphrodisiacs – a trend which continues till today. These “new” vaidis were very well aware of the fact that the Ayurvedic movement could not sustain itself without proving its market potential and utility for the masses. That is why they often resorted to techniques which were alien to the classical system of Ayurveda in order to meet the demands of the consumer market. After all, unlike nationalism, Ayurveda was not an abstract ideology; it was a healing system producing consumable goods. Hence, it had to create its own market and “consumers” out of the “users”, besides the ideological and emotional mobilisation of the masses.

Strategies of marketing books are the least explored aspects of the early history of print culture in the Indian subcontinent. Nonetheless, an exploratory analysis of this aspect of print culture provides some interesting insights into the Ayurvedic print market. The best way to advertise an Ayurvedic text was through newspapers. Publishers like Naval Kishore advertised their forthcoming publications regularly in the much-acclaimed Urdu newspaper *Awadh Akhbar*. Other publishing houses also resorted to such techniques since newspapers and journals had the widest circulation among the printed materials. However, keeping in mind the cost of advertisement, the more convenient and cost-effective way to advertise the existing

and forthcoming Ayurvedic texts was the books themselves. One can often find a book list or announcements of forthcoming publications at the beginning or end of an Ayurvedic text. Some of the publishing houses also offered detailed catalogues (*suchi-patra*) that provided the names, prices and the basic content of the books published by them. One could order these catalogues through post as well.

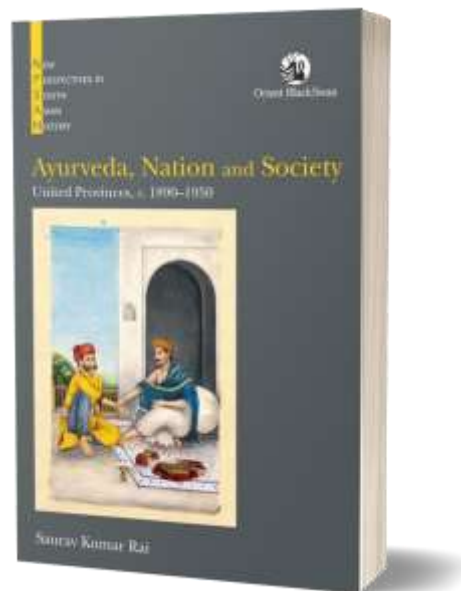
Such advertisements of Ayurvedic texts often carried eye-catching phrases in bold letters to attract the readers and to arouse their interest in the text. The author (who was simultaneously an Ayurvedic practitioner as well) often eulogised his/her achievements in order to convince the reader about the effectiveness of the treatment offered in the text. Some of the publishing houses also adopted the strategy of free-of-cost advance booking of the forthcoming Ayurvedic texts.

In fact, the vernacular Ayurvedic texts had tremendous commercial potential as they were targeting the non-specialist lay readership market which was really huge. These tracts were not just for practising vaidas but, as was often claimed, also for the common householder or *grihastha*. In fact, the very prospect of becoming “one’s own doctor”, which these texts were offering, was really attractive. Some of these texts claimed that they have been written in such an “easy language” and “lucid manner” that even a “fool” could understand them and get benefits from them. Further, the economic incentive was also there as these texts contained mostly household remedies for common as well as complicated diseases.

As the present work shows, the late colonial Ayurvedic discourse and movement were equally fraught with social and political content as well as intent. Nationalism and the anti-colonial independence movement were key factors grooming and shaping the Ayurvedic discourse during the period under discussion. This overall political context was significant for the movement to revive Ayurveda as the champion of “indigenous” medicine, often claiming the status of the “national healing system” of India. However, as it has been delineated, in its pursuit of creating a distinct “indigenous” identity different from that of “colonial” Western medicine, Ayurveda, in fact, imbibed many of the characteristic features of Western medicine itself such as institutionalisation, pharmaceuticalisation, standardisation and

professionalisation. Such ambiguity perhaps is the distinctive trait of any revivalist movement. Nevertheless, what makes the Ayurvedic revivalist movement more interesting is that while Ayurvedic practitioners incorporated many of the traits of Western medicine, they almost failed to inculcate its most important feature – the spirit of enquiry/experiment. In the absence of such spirit, the Ayurvedic practitioners remained focused on the blind adoption of what may be called “ancient received wisdom” in modern times. It was precisely this lack of spirit of enquiry which made even Mahatma Gandhi hesitant to fully endorse this “swadeshi” healing system (that is, Ayurveda) in the field of medicine. In fact, in many ways, Ayurvedic practitioners were trying to create their hegemony in the field of medicine without substance. They focused themselves on discourse, organisation, mobilisation, etc., to revive Ayurveda as “indigenous” medicine, but very few of them actually worked in the direction of advancing new research in Ayurveda.

The present work emphatically delineates the social dimension and content of the late colonial Ayurvedic discourse as well. Simultaneously, the economic context in which the Ayurvedic revivalist movement unfolded has been discussed with special emphasis on the Ayurvedic print and drug market. All this clearly establishes the connections between the emerging discourses on Ayurveda, the “nation” and various aspects of society (that is, caste, class, community and gender) in the late colonial period.



Excerpted with permission from Ayurveda, Nation and Society: United Provinces, c. 1890-1950, Saurav Kumar Raj, Orient Black Swan.