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Ayurveda, Nation and Society: United Provinces, c. 1890–1950

by Saurav Kumar Rai (review)

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By Saurav Kumar Rai. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2024. Pp. 292.



India is a caste society; from an individual's birth to death, most aspects of their life are decided by the caste they are born into. Saurav Kumar Rai's *Ayurveda, Nation and Society* offers a historically rigorous and nuanced account of the transformation of Ayurveda, an ancient classical medical system of India, in late colonial and early postcolonial India, foregrounding caste as a key issue alongside its social, political, and cultural entanglements in its transformation. It is a significant contribution to the growing scholarship on Indigenous medical systems in South Asia.

The book maps the transformation of Ayurveda from an ancient set of healing practices into a standardized and sanitized discourse shaped by elite nationalist agendas, caste hierarchies, and state biopolitics during late colonial North India. It also explores Ayurveda's confrontation with the hegemonic Western medicine that came with the colonizers as a tool for not only controlling the colonized body but also for marginalizing the existing

Indigenous health and healing practices (David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*, 1993). Through a meticulous study of archival records, petitions, and vernacular sources—especially Hindi medical journals, tracts, advertisements, and popular literature—Rai illuminates the contradictions, aspirations, and exclusions embedded within the Ayurvedic revivalist movement in the colonial United Provinces (present-day Uttar Pradesh).

The book is organized in six chapters, each offering a layered analysis of the evolving discourse of Ayurveda. The initial parts investigate and problematize the “ancientness and indigeneity” of Ayurveda. It effectively contends that Ayurveda, far from being a timeless and unified medical tradition, was reconstructed in the late colonial period as a modern, nationalist project—one that was profoundly shaped by caste, communal, class, and gender hierarchies.

This work adds to the growing scholarship on the history of health and medicine by addressing gaps left by previous scholars, including Rachel Berger’s *Ayurveda Made Modern* (2013), Projit Mukherji’s *Nationalizing the Body* (2012), Madhulika Banerjee’s *Power, Knowledge, Medicine* (2009), and Kavita Sivaramakrishnan’s *Old Potions, New Bottles* (2006)—all of which examine aspects of Ayurveda’s transformation but often fall short of a thorough interrogation of its caste and gender hierarchies. Rai’s work fills this critical gap. It explores how Ayurveda as a discourse was reconstituted and legitimized through print culture and institutional organizations that were in sync with the nationalist sentiment, or what Rai terms “medical nationalism,” of that time. These efforts were primarily led by upper-caste practitioners, or Vaidyas, who sought to elevate Ayurveda by aligning it with Brahmanical ideals of purity and pollution, caste-based hierarchies, gender, and communal biases into the Ayurvedic discourse, which eventually led to the marginalization of other folk and lower-caste healing traditions.

The book also explores the role of the Indian National Congress and influential nationalist leaders like Gandhi, Ajmal Khan, and Govind Ballabh Pant in supporting Ayurveda as a symbol of Indigenous modernity and making it “modern” on equal footing with Western medicine. In making Ayurveda modern, rather than enabling pluralism, the patronage of Ayurveda reproduced upper-caste interests and excluded folk healers who lacked institutional affiliation or textual authority.

The further standardization of Ayurvedic discourse through print culture and social organizations, like the All India Ayurvedic Congress and its efforts to professionalize and centralize Ayurvedic education, reinforced social norms like the overemphasis on brahmacharya (celibacy), gendered norms of health, purdah (veiling), and the erasure of contributions of lower castes, including *dais* (midwives), reinforcing the prevailing caste and class norms in the medical discourse.

In the final sections, the book focuses on the marketization of Ayurveda, revealing how Ayurvedic practitioners and pharmacies engaged with capitalist

OCTOBER
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VOL. 66

logic through advertising, standardization, and branding using the language of swadeshi (Indigenous) and nationalist pride.

It concludes with a discussion on the fate of Ayurveda in the early years of postcolonial India (1946–50). Rai deftly makes a case for how the postcolonial state ultimately privileged Western medicine as the cornerstone of public health. Although Ayurveda was included in state plans, it was reshaped to serve the biopolitical interests of the postcolonial nation-state.

To sum up, *Ayurveda, Nation and Society* is a compelling contribution to the historiography of medicine, nationalism, and caste in modern South Asia; in other words, it's a social history of late colonial and early postcolonial South Asia via a prism of health and medicine. Rai's critical approach challenges the romanticization of Ayurveda and very efficiently reveals its exclusionary nature during its nationalist revival. While Rai had the opportunity to explore the epistemologies of subaltern healers, which were overshadowed by elite Ayurvedic discourse, he may have chosen to leave this for future historians or his subsequent project.

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