

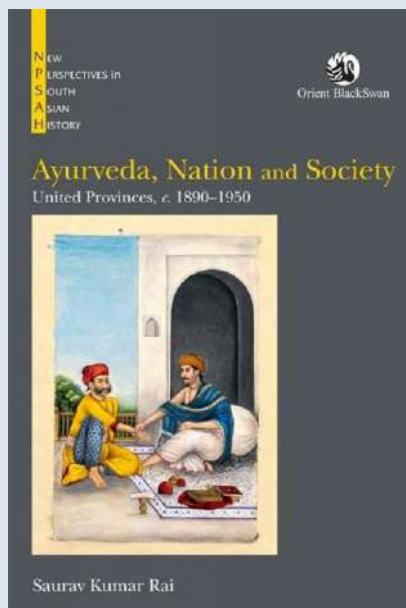
REVIEW

The Story of an Indigenous Medical System

By [borderlessgl](#) | September 16, 2024 | No Comments

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Book Review with Bhaskar Parichha



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

Author: Saurav Kumar Rai

Publisher: Orient Blackswan

The ayurvedic revivalist movement significantly influenced medical nationalism in the [United Provinces\[1\]](#) during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This period saw a concerted effort to re-establish ayurveda as a legitimate and valuable medical system in the face of colonial dominance and the growing influence of Western medicine

The revival of ayurveda was intertwined with the broader nationalist movement in India. Proponents of this school sought to assert an indigenous identity, positioning ayurveda as a symbol of cultural pride and resistance against colonial rule. This was particularly important as the demand for swaraj (self-rule) intensified, necessitating a projection of India as a modern and scientifically progressive nation.

The formation of groups like the All India Ayurvedic Congress in 1907 created an opportunity for the practitioners to come together, exchange insights, and push for the acknowledgment of their stream in the broader national conversation. These meetings encouraged dialogue on blending ayurvedic and Hindu

western medical approaches, positioning the indigenous school as a legitimate alternative to the colonial healthcare systems.

In a way, the proliferation of ayurvedic literature in various languages during this period helped democratise access to its content. This literature aimed to transform ayurveda from a specialised knowledge system into a shared cultural heritage, reinforcing its relevance in contemporary society. The revivalist discourse often emphasised the scientific basis of ayurveda, thereby aligning it with modernity and progress.

Fascinatingly, the ayurvedic revivalists critiqued colonial medical practices, often blaming external factors, particularly the 'Other', for health crises affecting the Hindu population. This narrative not only served to unify the community around ayurveda but also reinforced a sense of collective identity against colonial narratives that marginalised indigenous practices.

Also, the movement led to the commercialisation of ayurvedic medicine, with an increase in its products and practitioners. This economic aspect played a crucial role in embedding ayurveda within the social fabric of the United Provinces, making it a part of everyday life and health practices

It is in this backdrop that this book holds significance. *Ayurveda, Nation and Society: United Provinces, c. 1890–1950* by Saurav Kumar Rai explores the historical and socio-political dimensions of ayurveda during a transformative period in India. It is part of the *New Perspectives in South Asian History* series by Orient Blackswan. Saurav Kumar Rai is Research Officer, at Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti, New Delhi.

Says the blurb: "Ayurveda enjoys a growing global appeal, and is often touted as 'true' and 'time-tested' by contemporary political actors, governments, social groups, practitioners and NGOs in India. With 'indigenous' healing systems enjoying increasing state support today, an examination of the socio-political aspects of medicine, in particular Ayurveda, and its role in nation-building is critically important. *Ayurveda, Nation and Society*, the latest in Orient Blackswan's 'New Perspectives in South Asian History' series, captures the late nineteenth and early twentieth century growth of 'medical nationalism' through the Ayurvedic revivalist movement in the United Provinces, and observes the ensuing change and continuity in the attitude towards 'indigenous' medicine in independent India."

This study investigates the emergence of medical nationalism as reflected in the ayurvedic revivalist movement within the United Provinces, focusing on its role in the nation-building process. It offers a critique of the social dynamics of the era, drawing attention to the caste, communal, class, and gender biases that permeated ayurvedic discussions. The author contends that advocates of ayurveda played a significant role in the reconstruction of both tradition and society, frequently attributing health crises affecting the Hindu male demographic to external 'Others.'

The book contextualises ayurveda as an indigenous medical system, delving into its complexities during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It examines the involvement of the Indian National Congress in the ayurvedic movement, illustrating how political groups harnessed this school of medicine to foster national identity. The author further explores the influence of print media and organisational initiatives in shaping ayurvedic discourse and rallying societal support. Additionally, the commercialisation of ayurveda is analysed through its print and pharmaceutical markets, investigating the impact of economic factors on health practices. The narrative also encompasses the period surrounding India's independence, evaluating the evolution of ayurvedic practices during this pivotal transition.

This book stands out as an important resource for those looking to deepen their knowledge of health and medicine during colonial India, attracting both scholars and general readers who are curious about the development of ayurveda and its relevance today.

[\[1\]](#) Present day Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand in India was called United Province during this period

Bhaskar Parichha is a journalist and author of Unbiased, No Strings Attached: Writings on Odisha and Biju Patnaik – A Political Biography. He lives in Bhubaneswar and writes bilingually. Besides writing for newspapers, he also reviews books on various media platforms.

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