

Allopaths, Maharajas, & Vaidyas; Nizams, Jams, & Hakims: Medical Pluralism in the Princely States of India



An Exhibit at the National Library of Medicine • Bethesda, Maryland
September 15 - December 31, 1995

From the collections of Kenneth X. Robbins, M.D. & the National Library of Medicine

MEDICAL PLURALISM IN THE PRINCELY STATES OF INDIA

During the British ascendancy in India, the subcontinent was divided into 'British India', ruled directly by Britain, and 'Indian India', which was made up of hundreds of Princely States ruled by indigenous princes in subordinate alliance to Britain. This exhibition describes some aspects of medical history in a number of states, but it cannot do justice to this complex subject. However, even a cursory examination of India's success in creating and maintaining a pluralistic medical system, little noted in this country, may encourage people to reconsider often unchallenged assumptions about present day health-care delivery in the West.

Underlying the development of this eclectic system was the relationship between political power and medical care in the Indian states. How much did medical practice follow ancient customs, the policies of the rulers, or the hegemonic control of the British? How did the populace feel about British and princely attempts to impose or encourage sanitary reform, vaccination, and other medical beliefs that sometimes impinged on their sensibilities? Was the Western medical system really a superior, objective, rational, cost-effective system that *should* have supplanted indigenous systems that the British often deemed inferior, superstition-ridden, and ineffective?

Understanding the medical landscape is further complicated by the mistaken notion often held outside the subcontinent that India is a homogeneous place impervious to change and not subject to competing indigenous and foreign influences. A quick look at a map (below, right) belies that image. Moreover, there was no consistency even within "British" India or "Indian" India: while government patronage of ayurvedic, unani, and siddha medicine occurred in the Princely States in ways not seen in British India, the princes also patronized and supported Western allopathic medicine, perhaps *because* of its association with the imperial overlords.

Imperial India, politically and medically, was like the man made up of birds in the illustration shown below, left: a single empire partly composed of hundreds of states and a multiplicity of diverse medical practices and theories. To demonstrate how a pluralistic health care system was maintained in each state is the aim of this exhibit. *Namaste* - - Welcome.



Drawing from Chamba circa 1730 of composite man with face, feet, and hands composed of birds.



India under the Raj, circa 1857