

Mahatma Gandhi at Ashtanga Ayurveda Vidyalaya (1925)

Mahatma Gandhi



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17. *SPEECH AT ASHTANGA AYURVEDA VIDYALAYA*

CALCUTTA,
May 6, 1925

FRIENDS,

It was not without greatest hesitation that I accepted the invitation to lay the foundation-stone of this great institution. You know that some years ago I performed the opening ceremony of the Tibbia College^[1] whose presiding deity was my esteemed friend and brother, Hakim Ajmal Khan^[2]. Even then it was not without hesitation that I performed the ceremony. I could not resist the invitation that was given to me by a bosom friend and little could I resist a similar invitation coming again from a bosom friend. But I would be untrue to myself and untrue to those assembled if I did not express my deepest thoughts about medicine and particularly about Ayurvedic and Unani medicines and the profession in general. It was in 1908^[3] that, for the first time, I reduced to writing my views about medicines and the medical profession, and I am not able, looking at it after so many years, to alter a single word of what I have said there. No doubt what I wrote in 1908 was compressed; it was a passing reference to a subject which was included among so many others which I had to deal within a mere booklet. Since then I have expanded the same thought, but I have not diminished the strength of the

thought that I expressed in 1908. Every time I approach medical men and their medicines, I do so in fear and trembling, and it takes nothing away from my fear that I submitted to the living knife of a surgeon whom I only knew perfunctorily in the Yeravda jail.^[4] I had the fullest confidence in Col. Maddock^[5] as a man and as a friend but I had not the fullest confidence in his ways and in the medicines that he prescribed. If you were to go to him today, he will issue a double certificate—one in my favour and the other against me. He will certify to you that to a certain extent I was a willing, obedient and a loyal patient, a more loyal patient he could not wish for. But he will also say and certify that I was one of the most difficult patients he had to deal with. He had to deal with my prohibitions. I will take this and I will not take that and my negations were far more than my ayes. And, therefore, he always came to me in despair whenever he felt that he wanted me to put a little more weight. It was with the greatest difficulty that he could persuade me to take so many of the medicines that he thought I should take and that I thought I ought not to take. (Laughter.) Well, there it is. I have merely given you a skeleton of my views about the profession, but perhaps you will better understand my views when I tell you that I belong to that noble, growing, but the still small school of thought which believes more in prevention than in cure, which believes in Nature doing things for herself even for suffering humanity if we would but let Nature take her course. I believe in that school of thought which considers

that the less interference there is on the part of doctors, on the part of physicians and surgeons, the better it is for humanity and its morals. I belong to that school of thought among medical men who are fast coming to the conclusion that it is not their duty merely to subserve the needs of the body, but it is their bounden religious duty to consider the resident within that body, which is after all imperishable. And I belong to that school of thought among medical men who consider that they will do nothing in connection with that body if whatever they do is going to impair, in the slightest degree, the soul, the spirit within. And it grieves me so often when I find some of my best medical friends—and you will accept my word—but I assure you that it grieves me when they discuss with me the question whether there is such a thing as soul and when they tell me that, if there was a soul, it would not escape their deadly knife. Little do they know that the soul survives the knife and that the soul is not to be found by any probing of knife, however deep it may be. (Laughter). Therefore, it was with the greatest hesitation that I have approached this function.

I wonder whether it is a real sign of civilization when the number of hospitals in a particular place is larger than in another place. I wonder whether it is really a test of growth to find in the catalogues and in the directories of medical men that every year their sales are increasing by leaps and bounds and that the inmates in the hospitals and dispensaries are increasing. I really wonder whether it is a sign of real progress. However, I know that there is the

other side of it. I don't want to labour only on one side of this question. But, in all humility I have placed [these] for the consideration of those who are put in charge of the management of this great institution. I have hitherto confined my remarks to medicine and surgery in general, but when I come to the Ayurvedic and the Unani systems, I am filled with greater doubts. You may not know that, even from my boyhood, I have come in contact with many physicians, some of them known to be distinguished in their own localities. There was a time when I used to swear by the Ayurvedic medicine and used to commend it to all my friends, who went in for Western medicine, to go to these Ayurvedic physicians. But I feel sorry to have to own to you that I was undeceived and I found that our Ayurvedic and Unani physicians lack sanity. They lack the humility. Instead of that I found in them an arrogance that they knew every- thing (Laughter), that there was no disease which they could not cure. (Renewed laughter.) I found that they believed that the mere feeling of the pulse could enable them to understand whether the patient was suffering from appendicitis or some such other disease. When I found that their diagnosis was false, that it was incomplete in most cases, I felt that it was nothing short of humbug. When I turned to the advertisements of medicines—I shall not say from *Kavirajas*—but Unani Hakims and *Vaidyarajas*, I felt humiliated. I felt a sense of shame coming over me—these advertisements which pander to the basest passion of humanity, disfigure our news- papers and magazines. I have handled magazines devoted to the education of ladies. I

have seen magazines devoted to the education and information of young men, and I have found these advertisements alluring, no doubt, profitable, no doubt, to those who advertise these nauseating things. I felt that they are cutting deep into the vitals of the suffering humanity.

Therefore, whilst I am going to perform this ceremony of laying the foundation stone of this noble institution and whilst I do so with a prayerful heart and wish it all success, I want the organizers to note my limitations, to understand the note of warning that I have uttered to those who are called upon to devote their wealth to this institution. I utter in all humility this note of warning. May this institution be of use to the real sufferers. May this institution take care not merely of the need of the body but of the imperishable soul that resides in that body. May it never be said of this institution that it panders to the basest taste of humanity, that it panders to the basest taste of the youths of Bengal—and I know the youths of Bengal. I know how their fair life is being sapped by the medicines that are poured down their throats by physicians who, in the words of the Lord Justice Stephen, "introduce drugs of which they know little into the bodies of which they know less".^[6] And so I plead, as I pleaded in Madras at a similar function, for sanity, for humility, for truthfulness, for fear of God among those who are the present organizers of the institution and those who follow. With these words I shall have much pleasure as soon as you give me room to go to the place where I have

to lay the foundation and I shall have equal pleasure in praying for the success of this institution.

Amrita Bazar Patrika, 8-5-1925

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1. [↑](#) *Vide* Vol. XIX, pp. 356-8.
2. [↑](#) 1865-1927; eminent Muslim physician and politician who took a leading part in the Khilafat movement; President, Indian National Congress, 1921
3. [↑](#) *Slip* for 1909; for Gandhiji's observation on doctors and medicine in *Hind Swaraj* (1909); *vide* Vol. X.
4. [↑](#) Gandhiji was operated upon for appendicitis in 1924; *vide* Vol. XXIII.

5. [↑](#) Surgeon-General, Sassoon Hospital, Poona, who performed the operation
6. [↑](#) *Vide* also Vol. XI, p. 435.

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