

Mahatma Gandhi at Ashtanga Ayurveda Vidyalyaya (1925)

Mahatma Gandhi at Ashtanga Ayurveda Vidyalyaya (1925) was a foundation stone ceremony and public address delivered by Mahatma Gandhi on 6 May 1925 in Calcutta, India. The occasion marked the laying of the foundation stone for the new building of the Ashtanga Ayurveda Vidyalyaya, an institution founded by Jamini Bhushan Ray that later became the J.B. Roy State Ayurvedic Medical College and Hospital. It has been discussed in modern scholarship on Jamini Bhushan Ray, Gandhi, and the institutional development of Ayurveda in Bengal.^{[1][2]}

Held during a period of renewed efforts to institutionalise Ayurveda in colonial India, the ceremony formed part of broader movements to modernise Ayurvedic education in Bengal.

Rather than offering an unqualified endorsement of traditional medicine, Gandhi used the occasion to explain his views on medical practice. He criticised what he regarded as arrogance, commercialism and insufficient scientific humility among some practitioners of Ayurveda and Unani medicine.^[3]

The address has attracted scholarly attention for what it reveals about Gandhi's evolving views on medicine and modern science. Historian Ramachandra Guha argues that, although Gandhi remained critical of aspects of Western medicine, he had come to recognise the importance of scientific research and intellectual humility while applying equally rigorous standards to indigenous medical traditions.^[2]

Background

By the mid-1920s, the Ashtanga Ayurveda Vidyalyaya had become an institution promoting the modernisation of Ayurvedic education in the Bengal Presidency. During this late colonial period, efforts were underway across Bengal to revive and institutionalise indigenous medical practices. Jamini Bhushan

Foundation stone ceremony



The Raja Dinendra Street campus in 1964, whose foundation stone was laid by Mahatma Gandhi on 6 May 1925.

Date	6 May 1925
Venue	Ashtanga Ayurveda Vidyalyaya
Location	Raja Dinendra Street, <u>Calcutta</u> , <u>Bengal Presidency</u> , British India
Type	Foundation stone ceremony
Theme	<u>Ayurveda</u> , <u>medical ethics</u> , public health and the medical profession
Participants	<u>Mahatma Gandhi</u>
Outcome	Foundation stone laid for the institution's new building



Jamini Bhushan Ray, founder and principal of the Ashtanga Ayurveda Vidyalyaya. ☐

Ray, a Sanskrit scholar who had also studied Western medicine, founded the Vidyalyaya in 1916. The institution sought to combine the teaching of classical Ayurveda with organised medical education, clinical work, and hospital service.

Gandhi had long expressed scepticism towards the medical profession. In Chapter XII ("Doctors") of his 1909 work Hind Swaraj, he argued that modern medicine often treated the consequences of unhealthy habits while allowing people to neglect personal discipline and responsibility for their own health.^[4] Later commentators have noted that Gandhi regarded this dependence on medical treatment as socially harmful because, in his view, it encouraged self-indulgence and diminished personal responsibility for health.^[5]

However, in January 1924, while imprisoned at Yerawada Central Jail, Gandhi underwent surgery for appendicitis performed by the British surgeon Colonel Maddock. Gandhi referred to that experience in his 1925 address, noting that although he had deep confidence in Maddock as a person and friend, he had not accepted all of his medical methods or prescriptions without reservation.^[3]

Historians Rajni Kant and Balram Bhargava have situated Gandhi's criticism of medicine within a broader public-health philosophy centred on disease prevention, sanitation, personal responsibility, and healthcare that was inexpensive and accessible to rural communities.^[6]

Gandhi had earlier participated in the opening of the Ayurvedic and Unani Tibbia College associated with Hakim Ajmal Khan. At the Ashtanga Ayurveda Vidyalyaya ceremony, he recalled that earlier event and stated that he had accepted both invitations with considerable hesitation.^[3]

Invitation and ceremony

A commemorative history published by the institution in 1964 described the foundation stone ceremony as an important episode in its early development. It attributed Gandhi's participation to what it called the "practical idealism" of the institution's founder, Jamini Bhushan Ray.^[7]

Gandhi opened his address by stating it was with the "greatest hesitation" that he had agreed to lay the foundation stone. He explained his presence by noting he had been unable to refuse an invitation from a person he twice described as a "bosom friend". The speech, however, does not explicitly identify the individual.^[3]

Gandhi made it clear that his participation in the ceremony did not prevent him from expressing serious reservations about the medical profession generally, and about Ayurvedic and Unani practices in particular. After delivering his critical address, Gandhi proceeded to lay the foundation stone and offered his wishes for the institution's success.^[3]

Themes

Rather than a conventional speech of praise, Gandhi structured his address around several core philosophical and ethical critiques of medicine.

Prevention versus cure

Gandhi described himself as belonging to a school of thought that placed greater emphasis on disease prevention than on cure. He favoured allowing natural processes to operate with as little medical intervention as circumstances permitted, questioning whether an increasing number of hospitals, patients, and medicine sales necessarily represented true social progress.^[3]

Moral responsibilities of physicians

Gandhi argued that medical practitioners must consider more than just the physical body. In his view, the physician held a profound ethical and spiritual responsibility and should avoid forms of treatment that might temporarily improve bodily health while harming the patient's moral or spiritual well-being.^[3]

Scientific humility and the reform of Ayurveda

Recalling his youth, Gandhi noted that he had once placed considerable faith in Ayurveda, often recommending Ayurvedic physicians to friends seeking Western medical treatment. However, he admitted to his audience that his confidence had subsequently diminished after observing practitioners whose claims he considered exaggerated.^[3]

He accused some Ayurvedic and Unani physicians of lacking "sanity" and "humility," pointing to their arrogance in claiming knowledge of cures for every illness. In particular, he firmly rejected claims that serious surgical conditions, such as appendicitis, could be reliably diagnosed merely by examining a patient's pulse. He condemned false or incomplete diagnoses of this kind as "nothing short of humbug".^[3]

Critique of commercial medicine

Gandhi also directed strong criticism at the proliferation of advertisements for indigenous medicines appearing in newspapers and magazines. He argued that these advertisements exploited public fear and sexual anxiety purely for commercial gain, which he found especially harmful to young readers. He regarded such commercial exploitation as a shameful violation of the ethical responsibilities inherent in medicine.^[3]



Mahatma Gandhi, who laid the foundation stone of the Ashtanga Ayurveda Vidyalaya on 6 May 1925 and delivered the address discussed in this article.

Message to the institution

Despite the severity of his critiques, Gandhi referred to the Vidyalaya as a "noble institution" and performed the foundation stone ceremony with what he described as a "prayerful heart". He expressed hope that it would serve people who genuinely suffered and warned its organisers against professional arrogance and commercial exploitation.^[3] He concluded by appealing to the institution's organisers and their successors to uphold "sanity", "humility", "truthfulness", and "fear of God".^[3]

Scholar Shambhu Prasad places the address within Gandhi's broader attempt to reform Ayurveda from within. According to Prasad, Gandhi sought to encourage honesty of purpose, intellectual humility and a stronger spirit of research among Ayurvedic practitioners rather than reject the medical tradition itself.^[8]

Publication and reception

Publication

The version of the speech later reproduced in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* identifies the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* of 8 May 1925 as its primary source.^[3] The address survives both as a contemporary newspaper report and as an entry in the official collection of Gandhi's speeches.

Reception and Gandhi's response

Gandhi's uncompromising criticism of Ayurvedic practice immediately prompted objections from defenders of the traditional system. In a later response to a correspondent who accused him of ignoring conscientious practitioners, Gandhi defended his speech. He maintained that his criticism was directed squarely at professional complacency and the failure of indigenous practitioners to pursue new discoveries with the same rigour and humility demonstrated by modern scientific researchers.^[2]

Legacy and historical assessment

The longer-term legacy of Gandhi's address is closely connected with the subsequent development of the institution. Modern scholars have examined Gandhi's 1925 address as an important statement of his engagement with indigenous medical traditions during a transitional period in the history of Ayurveda. It reflects his willingness to support the institutional development of Ayurveda while subjecting it to rigorous ethical and scientific scrutiny.^{[1][2]}

Historian Ramachandra Guha argues that the 1925 speech illustrates that Gandhi did not exempt Indian traditions from criticism merely because they were indigenous. Rather, he applied a universal standard of ethical and scientific rigour, insisting that Ayurveda earn public trust through evidence, integrity and service.^[2]

The Raja Dinendra Street campus whose foundation stone Gandhi laid in 1925 remains the principal campus of the J. B. Roy State Ayurvedic Medical College and Hospital, linking the ceremony to the institution's continuing history.^[9]

The institution's 1964 commemorative booklet, published to mark the institution's transition from a private Ayurvedic college to a State Ayurvedic College and Hospital under the Government of West Bengal, reproduced portraits of both Gandhi and Deshapriya Jatindra Mohan Sengupta on the same page, identifying Gandhi as the person who laid the foundation stone of the Raja Dinendra Street campus and Sengupta as the inaugurator of the completed building. The page identifies their successive roles in the establishment of the institution's permanent Raja Dinendra Street campus.^[10]

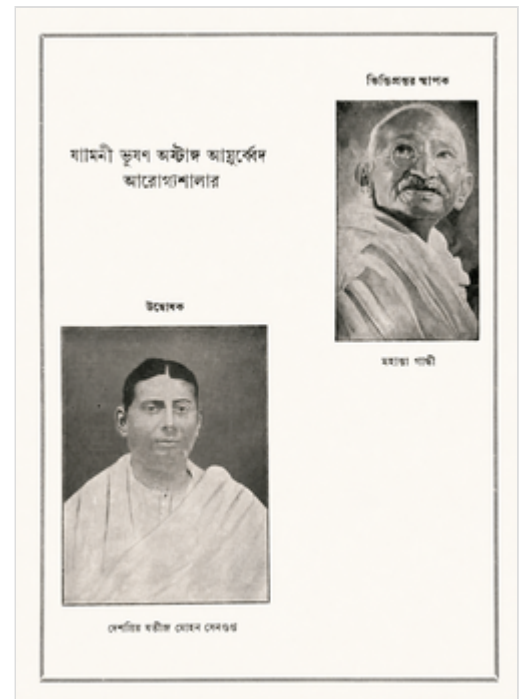
Modern scholarship has interpreted the event as an example of Gandhi's constructive engagement with indigenous knowledge traditions, supporting their institutional development while insisting upon reform, accountability and public service.^{[1][2][8]}

See also

- Jamini Bhushan Ray
- J.B. Roy State Ayurvedic Medical College and Hospital
- Ayurveda
- Swadeshi movement

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Portraits of Mahatma Gandhi, who laid the foundation stone of the Raja Dinendra Street campus on 6 May 1925, and Jatindra Mohan Sengupta, who inaugurated the completed building in June 1927. Reproduced from the institution's 1964 commemorative booklet marking the institution's transition from a private Ayurvedic college to a State Ayurvedic College and Hospital under the Government of West Bengal.

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Further reading

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External links

- "Speech at Ashtanga Ayurveda Vidyalaya" (https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org/cwmg_volume_thumbview/Mjc=#page/74/mode/2up) in Volume 27 of *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Gandhi Heritage Portal
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