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Books and Tracts by Officers of the Indian Medical Service (IMS, 1600-1947) on Islamic Topics

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Abstract: A brief overview of the history and role of the Indian Medical Service (IMS) is presented. Several books, reports, and tracts by officers of the IMS (1600-1947) deal with Islamic topics – unani system of medicine, places, cultures, language, literature, etc.; some are written in Farsi (Persian), some in urdu (Hindustani), and some in Arabic. Texts in these languages have also been translated into English by IMS officers and vice versa. IMS documentary contributions include handbooks, dictionaries, catalogues and other reference sources relating to medicine – western, ayurveda, unani, siddha systems - in India. Other notable contributions include services (practice of medicine), the hospitals established and services rendered therein, the medical schools established that enabled the further dissemination of medical knowledge.

Keywords: Indian Medical Service; IMS; History; Books; Tracts; Reports.

1. The Indian Medical Service (IMS) of the East India Company

The East India Company came into existence on 31 December 1600 when Queen Elizabeth of England granted a charter to the Association of Merchant Adventurers of London to trade with the East. Prior to this there was a long struggle among various nations of Europe – Venetians, Portuguese, Spaniards, the Dutch, and the French – for control of the lucrative spice trade.

East India Company’s first fleet of four vessels sailed under the command of Captain (later Sir James) Lancaster in December 1600. Each ship had on board “Surgeons two and a Barber”. These were the forerunners of the Indian Medical Service (IMS). The three presidency services – Bengal, Bombay, Madras – were formed in 1764 and amalgamated into the IMS in 1897. The IMS ended on 15 August 1947 when India attained independence. At that time the total number of regular officers who had served in the IMS was 6932 of whom 404 were Indians and 6 Burmese (MacDonald, 1955)

Focusing on the Indian subcontinent, Douglas Peers (2005) wrote:

“Military officers and surgeons played a critical role in the collection, analysis and dissemination of knowledge in colonial India. Yet the little attention to date that has been directed at scholars with military backgrounds has treated their army service as incidental to, rather than formative of, their contributions to knowledge of India. While not all were actively engaged in intellectual pursuits, a surprisingly large number of orientalists came from the army. In some cases, this can be attributed to the military's need for specific information. But such strictly utilitarian motives were not always at work; boredom, curiosity and professional aspirations encouraged officers and surgeons to take up scientific, literary and artistic activities. Military service also offered opportunities for travel, as well as technical training, which
furthered such pursuits. Consequently, much of the colonial knowledge that was generated in the first century of colonial rule was tinged with military values and it was sometimes framed in language redolent of the army. This would in turn help to popularise certain readings of Indian society, particularly those which stressed the medieval and fragmented nature of Indian society. The boundaries between fact and fiction became blurred as romanticism came to influence British aesthetic, historical and scientific encounters with India.

The evolution of the IMS and its contributions are discussed in a paper by Donald McDonald and in the books by members of the IMS (cited under References)

Thanks to its ever expanding maritime entrepreneurship “Europe was placed at constant ecological and maritime health hazards. Quarantine as the principal means of prevention proved inadequate to counteract the trans-oceanic spread of diseases. The net result was the enormous increase of maritime morbidity and mortality, a serious concern to the maritime nations of Europe. The synergy between the maritime disease syndrome and disease situation in Asia, Africa, America and Europe largely determined the course of medical research in north western Europe since 1500 CE. The period from 1500 to 1800 CE was most crucial for the progress of Euro-Indian medical interactions and multi-medical culture.

The demand for junior surgeons interested in serving abroad or aboard ships increased significantly due to the European inter-oceanic expansion of commerce. These surgeons became powerful channels for disseminating anatomical, surgical and pathological knowledge in India. “Naval or ship surgeons found ample opportunity to gain experience and valuable leg-up into the profession. Naval surgeons’ longer maritime experiences contributed significantly in two ways: It provided a broader basis to surgery, and it introduced inter-oceanic bio-medicine into Euro-Asian pharmacology. The process was further catalyzed by a 17th century British maritime tradition. After the 17th century, every merchant ship of more than 500 tons bound for trans-oceanic destinations was required to carry at least one regular surgeon and one assistant surgeon. By early 18th century, the British fleet had 247 vessels each carrying a surgeon and a mate. These surgeons were expected to have an experience of one or two years in the hospital of their cities to be fully qualified to practice on the high seas. Other maritime nations of Europe followed the British practice.

The rise of a large number of professional navies in the 17th century England necessitated the introduction of a “new naval medical institution – the hospital ship – a vessel equipped primarily to receive sick and wounded sailors, to provide them with interim treatment and to transport them to the hospitals or lodging houses on shore. “The hospital ship surgeons were required to provide the Commissioner of Sick and Wounded to the Company of Barber Surgeons a journal / record of the diseases attended to. These journals / records were of great use to pursue medical practice by professional and non-professional doctors and technicians. While the medical knowledge of these surgeons was limited, their surgical and dental skills were ‘extraordinarily advanced’ for the time.”

Euro-surgery was more useful to Ayurvedic physicians. Doctors called upon to attend the medical and surgical needs of Mughal emperors and other high officials in the government and their families gave them opportunities to get commercial favours (cf.. John Woodal, Samuel Archer, Edward Whiting, Dr.Brown, Edward Bulkeley, Buckley, etc.) (Singh, 2002).

A series of invasions of northern India devalued the then existing medical practices and saw the development of imported variants based on Persian and Arabian practices. Unani was introduced into India around the 11th century CE by the Mughals. Siddha partially replaced Ayurveda. These, in turn gave way to modern western medicine with the arrival of Europeans to the subcontinent.
The Portuguese were the first to set up a hospital amid a medical school in Velha Goa (Neelameghan, 1963). The present Goa Medical College is a continuation of that effort. The first western medical book in India was Garcia d'Orta's *Coloquios dos simples, e drogas de cousas medicinais da India*, published in Goa in 1563. Danish, Dutch, and French settlers made no serious effort at propagating their medical systems. The credit for establishing western medical science on a permanent footing throughout India goes to the British. The IMS started in the mid-18th century in Bengal to provide medical care for the soldiers and officers of the East India Company’s armies, as well as for civilians. Motivated by the need to provide medical attention to their native Indian soldiers and conserve the energies of British physicians to care for their own countrymen who fell victim to tropical diseases, a school for native medical doctors was set up in Calcutta in 1835. A similar school followed in Madras in 1837. A detailed account of the development of medical education in India from ancient times is given by Keswani (1970).

A hospital had been set up in Madras as early as 1664, another in 1688 during the governorship of Elihu Yale (of Yale University fame), and by 1700 Madras had three hospitals. Bombay had its first hospital in 1676 and another in 1784. The first hospital in Calcutta came up in 1708 and by the end of the 18th century three more hospitals were established.

The governor of the Bombay Presidency, Sir Robert Grant, and his advisor, Dr Charles Morehead, decided to set up a medical college in Bombay with a difference: its medical education to produce doctors on a par with those from Britain. The Grant Medical College (and its associated Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy Hospital) was founded in 1845 and these more than fulfilled their expectations, attracting a tribute from the *Lancet* when it eulogized Dr Bhau Daji Lad, one of the first graduates from the college.. The Government, helped by donations from wealthy Indian merchants, ran all three medical institutes. Homeopathy made its entry into India when John Martin Honigberger was invited to treat Ranjit Singh, ruler of the Punjab, for paralysis of the vocal cord and edema. The first Homeopathy College was started in 1881 in Calcutta. ****

Some of the physicians and surgeons of the IMS were also employed in activities other than medical services. Such officers included naturalists who studied the fauna, flora of India and other countries; astronomy, surveying and mapping, etc. Some learnt languages such as Urdu, Hindi, Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic and became interested in the local cultures and practices. Their scholarship enabled them to study the more scholarly treatises in these languages and translate them into English or vice versa. A few of them became professors in colleges in India and England to teach in these languages. MacDonald writes: In the field of language and literature the achievements of some of the IMS officers were remarkable. For instance, John Leyden of Scotland (1775-1811), after three years in India was appointed Professor of Hindustani at Calcutta. He prepared grammars of Malay and Prakrit; translated the Bible into Pushtu, Baluchi, Maldivian, Macassar and Birjis, and on the Indo-Persian, Indo-Chinese and Dekkan languages. Horace Wilson (1786-1860) is reported to have published over thirty books and tracts on the Eastern languages and Translated the Vishnupurana into English. On retirement he was appointed Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford. Aloys Sprenger (1813-1893, entered the services in 1842, and spent a great deal of his’ time in studying and teaching languages, including oriental languages. After retirement he was appointed Professor of oriental languages in Berne. Medico-topographical accounts, and descriptions of the culture and practices in the countries they were on mission were of particularly helpful to subsequent missions into these countries.

Books, tracts, reports, and papers by officers of the IMS provide useful information and insights on the medical, health and socio-cultural conditions in India, Afghanistan, Persia, East Bengal, Sind, etc., during the 19th century in particular. The doctors’ observations, studies, and the acquired information and knowledge contributed to the preparation of bilingual dictionaries, which were helpful to other contemporary officers of the IMS and those who were posted in the sub-continent subsequently. A few
IMS officers translated into English some of the well-known fiction, drama, and poetry - from Persian (Farsi), Arabic, and Sanskrit - and authored some of their own. About one hundred books and tracts – in linguistics and language tools, poetry, fiction and essays. – were produced (Neelameghan; Nirmala, 1979). Such translations contributed to a wider dissemination of knowledge about and enjoyment of and further studies on, the original works. In an earlier paper I had presented a note on such literary contributions of James Atkinson (1780-1852), and in another paper reported on the documentation of plants especially medicinal plants and medical topography of various places in the Indian subcontinent by members of the IMS. Neelameghan and Ravichandra Rao (2007) demonstrated the use of analytical data derived from the IMS bibliography to trace the incidence of communicable diseases and the efficacy of public health preventive measures of those times in India.

2. The IMS Bibliography

The bibliography of the books, tracts and papers was compiled by the author during the late 1950s while preparing the book Development of medical societies and medical periodicals in India, 1780 to 1920, a publication of IASLIC, Calcutta (Calcutta: Oxford Book & Stationary Co., 1963). The bibliography remains unpublished; a dissertation by L. Nirmala (1979) based on the bibliography is also an unpublished document.

The bibliography covers the period 1600-1947 CE. Since then borders between countries have changed, so also names of some countries and of towns. Nirmala has given a cross-reference index from the earlier names to current names of towns. The 129 documents listed in the Annexure indicate the documentary contributions by IMS officers, dealing with Islamic topics. The entries are arranged alphabetically by name of the author (IMS officer). The main IMS bibliography lists about 1400 documents.

The Islamic topics dealt with relate to countries, cultures, medical topography, flora and fauna, language and literature. As already mentioned above, some books are translations from Urdu, Farsi (Persian), Arabic, etc., and a few are translations into these languages from the original. There are handbooks, manuals, dictionaries, encyclopaedias, indexes and travelogues. These documents were contributed by 75 IMS officers.

The following table lists IMS officers who have contributed two or more documents:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Count</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sprenger, Aloys</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gilchrist, John Borthwick</td>
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<td>Bellew, Henry Walter</td>
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<td>Ranking, George Spiers Alex</td>
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<td>Ranking, George Spiers Alex</td>
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<td>Atkinson, James</td>
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<td>Aitchison, James Edward Tierney</td>
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<td>Lord, Percival Barton</td>
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<td>Ainslie, Whitelaw</td>
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<td>Balfour, Edward Green</td>
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<td>Hunter, William</td>
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<td>Kirk, Kinloch Winlaw</td>
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<td>Leyden, John</td>
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<td>Mouat, Frederic John</td>
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<td>Tytler, John</td>
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These 14 officers (out of 75) contributed 82 documents out of the total of 129 documents (i.e. over 63%)

Besides India, the countries (and/or towns in the countries) written about or mentioned in the documents include: Afghanistan / Kandahar, Baluchistan, Barbary Coast, Bangladesh (present), Egypt, Ethiopia, Ismailia, North-West Frontier, Sind /Pakistan (present), Sudan, Turkey.
The languages dealt with include Arabic, Farsi (Persian), Urdu, Pushto, besides Indian languages such as Sanskrit, Hindi, Tamil and Telugu

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*Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*

Annexure

List of documents, mentioned above, authored by the Officers of the IMS


2. Ainslie, Whitelaw (1767-1837). Materia medica; or some account of those articles which are employed by the Hindoos and other eastern nations in their medicine, arts and agriculture, comprising also formulæ with practical observations on names of diseases in various eastern languages and a copious list of oriental books immediately concerned with general science, etc. 1826. 2 v.


4. Aitchison, James Edward Tierney (1835-1898). Catalogue of the plants of the Punjab and Sindh, to which are added some others that, from their present geographical proximity, may be found hereafter to occur in Punjab. 1869.


12. Atkinson, James (1780-1852), Translator. Customs and manners of the women of Persia, and their domestic superstitions. Translated from the original Persian ms. 1832.


35. Bird, James, *Translator*. Political and statistical history of Gujarat, Mohammed Khan to which are added copious annotations and historical introduction. Translated from the Persian work of Ali Mohomed Khan. 1835.


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97. Ranking, George Spiers Alexander (1852-). A guide to Hindustani in Persian and Roman characters: Specially designed for the use of officers and men serving in India 188?

98. Ranking, George Spiers Alexander (1852-1934). A primer of Persian, containing selections for reading and composition with the elements of syntax. 188?


100. Ranking, George Spiers Alexander (1852-1934). Introductory exercises in Urdu prose composition with notes and translations 188?

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105. Sprenger, Aloys (1813-1893), De originibus medicinae arabicae Sub Khalifatu. 1841.

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