

A History of Subaltern Healing in South Asia

The focus of attention in South Asian medical history has been almost entirely on the biomedicine that came with the British, and the supposedly 'classic' South Asian alternatives – Ayurveda, Unani Tibb and Siddha. In the process, the therapeutic experiences of large numbers in South Asia are ignored or marginalised. Even today, biomedicine in its legitimised form is still hardly available for many, either on grounds of cost or because of lack of facilities. Ayurveda, Unani Tibb and Siddha – in their more erudite, textually grounded forms – have been, and still are, largely inaccessible for the mass of the people. This situation has allowed for a range of healing practices to flourish alongside each other.

There are unqualified or so-called 'quack' healers who mix allopathy and popular remedies together eclectically, local bonesetters and masseurs, cauterisers, village midwives, travelling mendicants with their cures, priest at healing shrines, faith healers, diviners, exorcists, and herbalists. Many cures are carried out within the home, using charms, rituals, and plant-based remedies. There has been and is, in other words, a vast domain of subaltern healing – and we may define it as 'healing' rather than 'medical' practice. On the whole, this has been a subject for anthropological rather than historical investigation. The medical anthropology of India has revealed that there is immense potential for the study of the history of the subaltern domain of healing, and this is the task that has been set in the present project. The aim is to establish the terms and conditions for a field of study that sets itself apart from most of the existing studies in South Asian medical history and social science, which focus either on the history of biomedicine, particularly colonial biomedicine, or the classical systems of Ayurvedic, Unani Tibb, and Siddha as practised by elite South Asian physicians. The study of subaltern practices of healing opens up a vast and complex field of historical study that provides a critical intervention within the field of Subaltern Studies. As with Subaltern Studies – a project that is taken as the model – this is approached as an open-ended venture.

The project began with a working group consisting of David Hardiman (Warwick), Helen Lambert (Bristol University), Guy Attewell (UCL), and Projit Mukharji (MacMaster University, Canada).

