

Asia's First Ayurvedic College Was in Kolkata: Its Nearly Forgotten Founder, Jamini Bhushan Ray

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For a long time, the house at 29 Fariapukur Street had been lying neglected. It was, quite literally, in a dilapidated state. Then suddenly, repair work began. The lime-plastered walls were refurbished. Tables, chairs, and benches began arriving by van. These developments created quite a stir in Fariapukur. What was going on? Rumours spread that some Baidya - a traditional physician - was going to open a medical college there. Although some people applauded the idea, others continued to mock and ridicule it. Could such a thing really happen? But that is exactly what happened. Within a short time, the educational institution began functioning and students started arriving. Free medical treatment also commenced. The founder of the college himself came there every day to treat poor patients.

From today's perspective, the idea of a medical college on Fariapukur Street may sound surprising. Yet it was there, in 1916, that the Ashtanga Ayurveda College and Hospital was established. The man behind it was Dr. Jamini Bhushan Ray. It was the first Ayurvedic educational institution not only in

India, but in all of Asia. Today, of course, the institution is known as the J. B. Roy State Ayurvedic Medical College. But why was there a need to establish an alternative Ayurvedic hospital when Calcutta Medical College already existed? And who exactly was J. B. Ray?

The year was 1879. Jamini Bhushan was born in what is now Khulna district in Bangladesh. His father, Panchanan Ray, was a well-known Kaviraj of Khulna. Although Jamini Bhushan grew up in East Bengal, he later moved to Kolkata in order to study Sanskrit. He lived in a rented house in Bhowanipore while continuing his studies. After obtaining good marks in his undergraduate examinations, he enrolled in postgraduate studies as well. But somehow Sanskrit could no longer hold his interest. By then, after coming to Kolkata, he had become acutely aware of the inadequacies of the healthcare system. He became determined to become a physician.

He acted upon that decision. After completing his Sanskrit studies, he enrolled at Calcutta Medical College in 1902. At the same time, he continued learning Ayurvedic medicine from his father. In 1905, Jamini Bhushan passed the Bachelor of Medicine examination with a gold medal and became a specialist in gynaecology and midwifery. Although opportunities were available to work in hospitals under the British government, he chose not to follow that path. He decided instead that, like his father, he would become an Ayurvedic physician.

There were objections from his family, and his classmates also greeted his decision with ridicule. Ayurveda, of all things! If he followed that path, they said, he would starve to death. Jamini Bhushan's straightforward reply was: "If I cannot earn a living, I shall survive by selling herbal digestive mixtures!"

To many, this rejection of conventional medicine might seem eccentric. But if one looks at the matter from Jamini Bhushan's perspective, the picture changes. The system of medicine now widely practised in India — Western or allopathic medicine — had entered the country under British rule. Ayurveda, by contrast, had existed in India for centuries before that and was deeply rooted in the country's cultural traditions. Jamini Bhushan believed that although allopathic medicine could bring rapid relief, it often found chronic diseases difficult to control, whereas Ayurvedic treatment could gradually cure even obstinate illnesses.

In 1906, he once again began postgraduate studies in Sanskrit at the University of Calcutta. At the same time, he commenced formal Ayurvedic training under the renowned North Kolkata Kaviraj Bijoy Ratna Sen. He also began practising medicine at the Bagala Marwari Hospital, where his monthly salary was forty rupees. Within a short time, his reputation spread throughout India. Invitations began arriving from the royal houses of Baroda, Gwalior, and Kochi. He also received substantial financial contributions from nawabs.

Measured by present-day standards, he had effectively become a very wealthy man. Yet a life of luxury never attracted him. Instead, he used his wealth to establish the Vaidyaraj Pharmacy for the benefit of the poor. Ayurvedic medicines were manufactured there using modern methods, and poor patients received those medicines free of charge. Proper Ayurvedic medical treatment was also provided there. This led him to wonder: could such an infrastructure not be created in Kolkata on a larger scale?

The very next year, he rented a house on Fariapukur Street and established a specialised hospital and medical college devoted exclusively to Ayurvedic treatment. It was the first Ayurvedic educational institution in India. Until then, renowned Kaviraj-s had generally taught Ayurveda privately in their own homes.

About nine years later, Jamini Bhushan himself constructed an entire building on Raja Dinendra Street. The Ashtanga Ayurveda Hospital was shifted there from its rented premises. He later planned to establish a separate medical institution for the treatment of tuberculosis, but that project could not be realised during his lifetime. He died in 1926 at the age of only forty-seven.

Before his death, he donated all his movable and immovable property for public welfare. In addition to the Ayurvedic

medical research laboratory and museum he had established, he donated a vast garden estate spread over twelve bighas of land at Patipukur. Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy later established a tuberculosis hospital on that property. It became widely known as the Patipukur TB Hospital.

Even today, Jamini Bhushan Ray's contribution to medical science cannot be denied. Whether in the diagnosis of childhood diseases or in toxicology, the books he wrote continue to be regarded as authoritative works. He also helped point the way forward in the field of ENT treatment.

Yet such a remarkable personality has today almost completely disappeared into oblivion.

Curiously, the birthday of this legendary Ayurvedic physician was July 1. Yes, Bidhan Chandra Roy was born on exactly the same date.

That, too, seems like a remarkable coincidence.