

The Arabic interlude in the transition to East India Company rule: Unani healing in 18th century India

Seema Alavi

This paper focuses on the political culture of 18th century India, as it lay sandwiched between a dying Mughal Empire and a politically ambitious East India Company waiting in the wings. It looks at the way the Indo-Persian medical knowledge tradition, with its stress on aristocratic virtue and healing, and its practitioners, responded to the changes that threatened the Mughal way of life. I draw attention to the particular intellectual and imaginative histories of the medical practitioners to analyse the process by which the very illness and 'decline' of the imperial body led them to create a wider intellectual community occupying a newly envisioned conceptual space. This space was marked not merely by the impact of western forms, but also by Greco-Arabic traditions of healing with their stress on medical wisdom as science. The change was most noticeable in their turn to the Arabic language. This was thought desirable in order to recreate their monopoly over medical knowledge, which was under threat because the Persian language in which it was encased was becoming accessible to a larger section of society in the period of Mughal crisis.

I argue that the new turn to Arabic enabled a wider global outreach to Mughal scholar-gentlemen. Arabic learning resonated in Western scientific traditions. It offered the medical wisdom of the Indo-Islamic ecumene an instant connectivity with the idea of medicine as science that was gaining traction in 18th century England. This critical 18th century convergence shaped the transition to colonial rule in India.