

# The Hindi Lancet

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The *Lancet*, the highest-ranking international general medical journal originally published from London since 1823, has decided, on its two hundredth year, to publish bimonthly versions in Hindi, translating original texts in English. Two questions spring to mind immediately: is this part of a larger programme of vernacularisation of Western medical education in India? Who will benefit from such an endeavour?

The wisdom and the practicality of the former, distinct from teaching traditional Indian medicine in native languages, had been variously tested since the introduction of Western medical education in India. The need to teach Western medicine to Indians arose from the East India Company's requirement to populate newly-built hospitals, especially military ones, with skilled assistants to English surgeons. Between the Charter Act of 1813 for spreading basic education amongst the native youth and Lord Macaulay's famous Minutes of 1835, which specified English as the only medium in higher education, several models were tried to select the curriculum of medical teaching and the medium of instruction. The first models were designed by orientalist impressed by ancient Indian scriptures guiding native medical practices; consequently, they tried some hybrid models keeping room for classical Indian texts along with texts in English to deal with the evolving Western knowledge about human anatomy and physiology. Medicine was taught through the Native Medical Institution, a specialised college set up in 1822, and also through special courses for *ayurveda and unani* at Sanskrit College and the Calcutta Madrasa. These got abolished in 1835 with the foundation of the Bengal Medical College that taught medicine solely through English. Surprisingly, the native youth could take instructions quite profitably through the new system.

Necessities of the army and the expanding public health infrastructure however prompted the gradual introduction of supplementary courses like a military class that was taught in Urdu as well as in Bengali and hybrid classes to grant licentiate medical diplomas. These courses brought to the fore the raging controversy regarding the selection of the ideal recipient Indian language — Sanskrit or Arabic or Hindi, Urdu, Bengali — for foreign texts. Throughout the 19th century, scholars grappled with the problem of translating medical terms, many of which were in Greek or Latin, into native vernacular texts. On the imperial government's bidding, Rajendra Lal Mitra, the noted historian and scholar, published in 1877 *A Scheme for the Rendering of European Scientific Terms into the Vernaculars of India*, recommending the use of Sanskrit's "infinite capacity" to create new words and embed them into vernaculars. In 1906, the Nagari Pracharini Sabha of Benares published the *Hindi Scientific Glossary* for use of proper Hindi words while writing technical texts. The translators of *The Lancet* will obviously be better placed, catering to readers exposed to English terms for 300 years, choosing transliteration over translation, even using Roman scripts if required for technical words.

Is this then part of a larger plan to vernacularise medical education? The answer is an unequivocal yes. The college that will oversee the publication of *The Lancet* in Hindi has already declared a programme for granting medical degrees in the Hindi medium. The Union home minister, while ceremonially publishing Hindi medical books for this initiative, mentioned that the National Education Policy aims to use the vernacular language for higher education notwithstanding the fact there are 22 major regional languages in India.

But who will be benefitted by this? The medical fraternity appears confused. Surely it will not benefit the medical graduate from Bhopal who wants to pursue his career in AIIMS Hyderabad or wants to get his work published in national journals. A Hindi

*Lancet* can benefit only a hand-ful of doctors who will be satisfied with limited scope of work unless, of course, the government wishes to bring back licentiate practitioners of yore whom the Joseph Bhore Committee pronounced as “imperfectly trained”.

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