

Healing Indian Soldiers at the Dome

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You may have been lucky enough to have seen artist Chila Kumari Singh Burman's installation of colourful neon sculptures displayed on the Royal Pavilion from November to January 2024. The symbols and sculptures commemorated the Indian soldiers cared for in the Pavilion between 1914 and 1916, and included Indian medical instruments, or ayurvedic tools, as symbols of healing. As an Ayurvedic practitioner myself, I was fascinated by this inclusion in her installation.

During World War 1, the Royal Pavilion in Brighton served as a military hospital for wounded Indian soldiers who fought for the British Empire. The Pavilion's transformation into a medical facility was a significant development as it provided care and treatment for soldiers who had been injured in the war effort. One interesting aspect of this is the potential intersection between the medical practices of Ayurveda, a traditional system of medicine originating in India, and the western medical treatments provided to the injured soldiers at the hospital.

Ayurveda is a holistic healing system that has been practiced in India for thousands of years. It emphasises the balance of mind, body and spirit to promote overall health and well-being. The principles of Ayurveda include the use of natural remedies, herbal medicines, dietary changes and lifestyle modifications to treat various ailments and maintain health.

In India and most of South Asia, Ayurveda is a way of life. It is incorporated into our daily routines to ensure we maintain this balance for optimum health. The presence of Indian soldiers at the Royal Pavilion hospital may have provided an opportunity for the exchange of knowledge and practices between Western medicine and Ayurveda. While the primary medical treatments administered to the soldiers were likely based on Western medical practices of the time, it is possible that some soldiers may have used Ayurvedic remedies or sought out traditional healing methods during their stay at the hospital.

The integration of Ayurveda into the medical care provided to Indian soldiers at the Royal Pavilions hospital could have offered them a sense of familiarity and comfort during a challenging time. The soldiers would most likely have been struggling with physical and mental trauma and Ayurveda's emphasis on holistic healing and personalised treatment approaches could have complemented the more standardised medical treatments. According to Ayurveda, certain foods can eliminate toxins from the body and promote positive gut health which for thousands of years has been considered the cornerstone of optimum well-being in South Asian cultures. Many of the herbs and spices available in India would probably not have been available in Brighton, however rice – which is considered Satvic (pure) in Ayurveda – would have been a staple for nourishment and easily accessible. If available, ingredients such as turmeric could be turned into a paste and applied to wounds, or consumed in tea to alleviate conditions from joint pain to digestive disorders. Having the opportunity to practise their faith could also have further facilitated healing. This kind of exchange of ideas between different medical traditions could have enriched the overall care provided to the soldiers and contributed to a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to healthcare.

The significance of Indian soldiers living at the Royal Pavilion hospital in World War 1 and their potential connection to Ayurveda underscores the complex interplay of history, culture and medicine during a very difficult period. Hopefully, their experiences shed light on the shared humanity and interconnectedness of people from different parts of the world, highlighting the enduring legacy of their contributions to the war effort and cultural tapestry of the United Kingdom.