

History of Medicine

The Institute of History of Medicine in Bengaluru: A lost opportunity

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The study of the history of medicine—for long considered ‘a hobby for retired practitioners’—was transformed as a social science when Karl Sudhof started ‘Institut für Geschichte der Medizin’ (Institute of History of Medicine) at the University of Leipzig, Germany in 1905.¹ This was followed by the establishment of similar institutes around the globe. This article attempts to provide a historical context to the events that transpired in the 1960s. We use primary sources that are part of the archives of the Major General S.L. Bhatia Museum for the History of Medicine at St John’s National Academy of Health Sciences, Bengaluru.

The first proposal to start an Institute of the History of Medicine in India was made by Henry E. Siegerist, the second Director of ‘Institut für Geschichte der Medizin’ (the first Director was Karl Sudhof), and subsequently, the Director of Johns Hopkins University Institute of the History of Medicine, in his position as the member of the Health Survey and Development Committee, popularly known as the Bhore Committee. The committee was appointed by the Imperial Government of India in 1944.² In 1955, the Medical Education Conference in New Delhi, presided over by Dr B.C. Roy, suggested that provision should be made in the curriculum for 12 lectures each in the History of Medicine and in Medical Ethics.³ However, no formal resolution was passed at this conference. The first Department of the History of Medicine was started in 1956 at Andhra Medical College, on the proposal made by Major General S.L. Bhatia, CIE, MC, IMS when he was the Surgeon General of Composite Madras State.⁴ General Bhatia in 1972 received the prestigious Dr B.C. Roy Award for his contributions to the field of History of Medicine.

General Bhatia envisaged an Institute of the History of Medicine in Bangalore (presently Bengaluru) where he had settled down after retiring from the erstwhile Indian Medical Service (IMS) in 1950. He joined the IMS as a Regimental Medical Officer in 1917 after obtaining a Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians (LRCP) and Membership of the Royal College of Surgeons (MRCS) from England. He was awarded the Military Cross (MC) for his services in the 105th Maratha Light Infantry (Kali Panchwi) in Palestine and Syria during the First World War—the only medical person to be awarded the same in 1918.⁵ Later, he taught Physiology and Hygiene as Professor at Grant Medical College, Bombay (present Mumbai), and then became the first Indian Dean of the same college (Fig. 1). He was the first Indian Medical officer to become a Fellow of the Royal Society (Edinburgh).

With the outbreak of the Second World War, he was appointed Deputy Director General, IMS and assigned to recruit medical personnel for military hospitals in India. In 1943, he was appointed a member of the Bhore Committee. The other members of the

committee were the Nobel laureate A.V. Hill, who was General Bhatia’s tutor at the medical school in Cambridge; and Henry Siegerist.

In 1944, towards the end of the Second World War, the Japanese Army along with the Indian National Army (INA) under Subhash Chandra Bose approached the India–Burma (present Myanmar) border. This resulted in almost total disruption of medical facilities in the border states of Assam and Nagaland. In 1945, Dr Bhatia was appointed as the Inspector General of Civil Hospitals and Prisons in Assam, and within 2 years, he helped to restore the war destroyed hospitals at Kohima, Jorhat and Tezpur. He upgraded the Berry White Medical School in Dibrugarh to a medical college and thus put medical services in the region on their feet again. In recognition of his services, he was awarded the ‘Companion of Indian Empire (CIE)’ in 1946 by the Imperial Government of India (Fig. 2). In 1947, he was appointed Surgeon General of Madras Presidency and retired with the rank of Major General in 1950. After his retirement, he settled down in Bangalore, but his services were required in Hyderabad where he was appointed Secretary to the Ministry of Health and Director of Medical and Health Services (DGHS) in 1950. In 1953, he was appointed Chairperson of the Pharmaceutical Enquiry Committee by the Ministry of Commerce and Industries, Government of India.

In 1958, the Government of Mysore (now Karnataka) asked him to visit the state medical and health services and make recommendations on possible improvements in medical education, hospitals and health services. In his report titled ‘A report on the re-organization of medical education and health services in Mysore State’ submitted in 1960, Major General S.L. Bhatia recommended that every college in Mysore have a ‘Department of History of Medicine with a good Library... A good Museum of History of Medicine may be established in Bangalore’.⁶

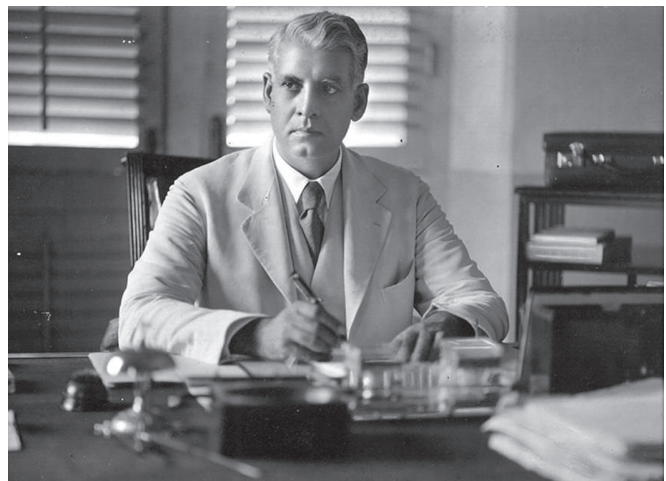


FIG 1. Major General S.L. Bhatia, CIE, MC, IMS

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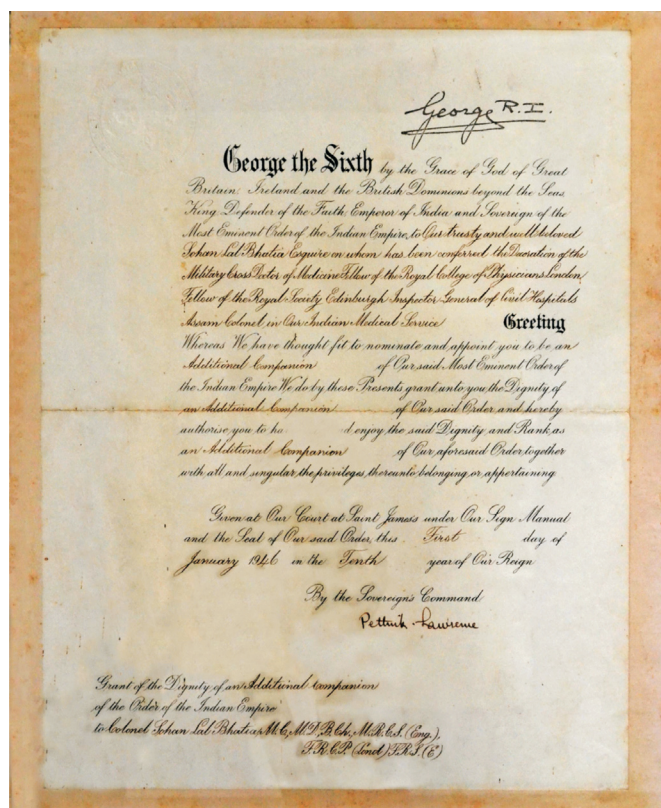


FIG 2. Declaration issued by the British Crown awarding Major General Bhatia the title 'Companion of Indian Empire'.

Due to General Bhatia's persistence, the Government of Mysore issued a notice on 25 November 1966, while he was serving as Chairperson of the State Board of Medical Research (which was his own brainchild and among the first of its kind in India), sanctioning the following:

1. 'Opening of a Department of History of Medicine in collaboration with the Department of Preventive and Social Medicine at the Bangalore Medical College;
2. Appointing Maj. Gen. S.L. Bhatia as Honorary Professor of History of Medicine in the Bangalore Medical College;
3. Sanctioning the necessary staff;
4. Sanctioning purchase of equipment, library books and furniture.'⁷

General Bhatia took charge of the Department of the History of Medicine as Honorary Professor on 1 December 1966.⁸ Dr K. Nagappa Alwa, then Minister of Health in Mysore state, wrote to the Union Minister of Health, Dr Sushila Nayar, a freedom fighter and an expert in the field of public health and history of medicine, informing her about the initiative of the state government to start a department of History of Medicine at Bangalore Medical College and requested central assistance for the same.⁹ In the note attached to the same letter, the necessity of including History of Medicine in the medical curriculum and of an Institute which would undertake research work in the area especially, History of Medicine in India from the Vedic to modern times; impart undergraduate and postgraduate courses in History of Medicine and have a strong collaboration with the science of Preventive and Social Medicine in order to take effective methods of control of diseases, was briefly, yet strongly outlined.

Meanwhile, General Bhatia also met the then Governor of Mysore who promised to use his offices in Delhi to make the Institute of the History of Medicine a reality.¹⁰ He also had preliminary discussions with the Union Health Minister and the DGHS.¹¹

On 3 May 1967, Dr H. Shamasastri, Director of Health Services, DGHS, Bangalore, wrote to M.K. Venkatesan, Secretary to the Government of Mysore, Planning, Health and Social Welfare Department informing him that 'no information regarding the claiming of central assistance was passed on by the Director General of Health Services in New Delhi' and Major General Bhatia was asked to 'intimate the nature and extent of central assistance and the rate at which same was expected.'¹¹ General Bhatia discussed this matter with Dr S.T. Putanna,¹² the then Dean of Bangalore Medical College and the proposals were sent to Dr Shamasastri.¹³

Following this, Major General Bhatia met Dr Chandrasekhar, the then Union Health Minister, whom he found positively inclined to the establishment of the Institute and he generously offered to donate a plot of land in the compound of his residence—'Tara Kutir', No. 8, Nandidurg Road, Bangalore-6 for the establishment of the same.¹⁴

Dr H. Shamasastri wrote back to Dr Putanna, to furnish once again the proposals for claiming central assistance for the department, already established at Bangalore Medical College and further particulars on starting the Institute of History Medicine including the type of building, and the requirements for staff, equipment and library material.¹⁵ In reply to this, General Bhatia suggested a meeting of Dr Shamasastri with Dr Putanna and himself at any place and time Dr Shamasastri felt suitable.^{16,17}

We are unable to determine whether this meeting ever happened as the descriptions in the proposal for central assistance for the department and the estimated budget of the Institute of History of Medicine hardly changed from the previous one. In addition to this, in his letter to the Dean dated 26 August 1967, General Bhatia repeats 'if it is considered necessary to have a personal discussion on this subject, I suggest that we may meet and discuss this matter with the Director of Health Services'.¹⁸

On 14 September 1967, S.B. Chikkamath, Under Secretary to the Government of Mysore, Planning, Health and Social Welfare Department, wrote to the Secretary to the Government of India, Ministry of Health and Family Planning stating: 'As this government are not in a position to incur the heavy expenditure involved, it is requested that the Government of India may please be moved to make available central financial assistance for organizing the Institute of History of Medicine at Bangalore'.¹⁹

This was followed by a long silence on the part of the central government which lasted almost a year, with S.B. Chikkamath writing four reminders dated 6 October 1967, 8 March 1968, 31 May 1968 and 22 July 1968.^{20,21} In the reminder of 31 May 1968, S.B. Chikkamath quotes from the Seventh paragraph of the Minutes of the Meeting of the Working Group on Health, which while considering the annual plans for the year 1968–69, made the following observation: 'Miss Johari mentioned that the proposal for establishment of the Department of History of Medicine at Hyderabad was also under consideration and it was the experience that hardly any students were forthcoming to study the subject and the centre at Hyderabad was likely to be taken over by the ICMR [Indian Council of Medical Research]. The chairman after discussion stated that the State Government may take this point into consideration while deciding the question of establishing such a Department'.²¹

Meanwhile Bhatia met M.K. Kutti, Deputy Secretary to the Ministry of Health at New Delhi on 14 March 1968 who told him that the proposals had not yet reached his office and added that the Mysore Government could send another copy to N.K. Madhok, the Joint Secretary. He also met Mr Narayan, Secretary to the Ministry of Health on the same day.²² After about 8 months of waiting, Major General Bhatia sent the proposals for the Institute of History of Medicine to the Chief Minister and Minister of Health, Mysore state requesting financial assistance.²³

By then, M.K. Venkatesan had been replaced by B.S. Srikantiah as Secretary to the Government of Mysore, Health and Municipal Administration Department; and Mr Narayan by Govind Narayan as the Secretary to the Ministry of Health, Family Planning and Urban Development, Government of India. B.S. Srikantiah wrote to Govind Narayan on 16 September 1968 requesting him to accommodate the establishment of Institute of History of Medicine in Bangalore in the Fourth Five-Year Plan.²⁴

In his reply, K. Deo, the new Under Secretary to Ministry of Health, Family Planning and Urban Development, Government of India sent a letter to S.B. Chikkamath, stating 'it is regretted that it would not serve any useful purpose if the scheme is established at this stage'.²⁵

On 8 November 1968, General Bhatia wrote to S.B. Chikkamath seeking the decision of the state government regarding the establishment of the Institute of History of Medicine as the Central Government had expressed its inability to establish the same.²⁶ This was followed by another long silence, this time on the part of the state government, which lasted for almost 10 months with General Bhatia writing two reminders dated 5 February 1969 and 9 June 1969.²⁷

Finally, on 5 September 1969, the new Secretary to the Government of Mysore, Health and Municipal Administration Department, B.S. Mudappa wrote to Major General Bhatia, informing him that the government was withdrawing from the project for the following reasons:

1. 'The huge expenditure involved could not be accommodated in the Fourth Five-Year Plan.
2. The Medical Council of India has not considered the inclusion of History of Medicine in the curriculum of basic medical degree.
3. It is understood that students did not come forward to take up this course in the Institute started at Hyderabad.'²⁸

General Bhatia withdrew his offer of land, which he had offered to build the Institute of History of Medicine,²⁹ thus ending a long saga of correspondence which lasted almost four years.

The failed attempt to set up an Institute of the History of Medicine reflects, in our opinion, a lost opportunity that pitted the passion and far-sightedness of a respected academic and former government servant against unyielding bureaucratic machinery mired in the immediacy of day-to-day issues.

Fortunately, Major General Bhatia's vision did not end there. Earlier, in 1964, General Bhatia was appointed as Professor Emeritus of History of Medicine at St John's Medical College (Fig. 3). The first dean of the medical college, Dr L. Monteiro, was also passionate about the history of medicine. An Association of History of Medicine was started in Bangalore on 15 October 1971, by Major General Bhatia, Dr Monteiro, Dr Y.P. Rudrappa (the then Dean of Bangalore Medical College) and some others.³⁰ The aims of the Association were to:

1. Bring together, on a common platform all persons interested in History of Medicine.



FIG 3. The first Honorary Professor of History of Medicine at St John's; General Bhatia along with Dr Manuel Fernandez, the first Tutor in the department

2. Arrange for lectures, discussions, exhibitions, museums and any other method of education to spread the knowledge of History of Medicine in general and of Indian Medicine in particular.
3. Publish a journal whenever possible, devoted to publication of critical studies or original researches in Indian Medicine, and lists of books dealing with History of Medicine in general and reviews of books dealing with History of Medicine and a complete bibliography of books and articles on the History of Medicine including Indian Medicine. The journal will be run by an editor, assisted by an editorial board.
4. Organize a library of old medical classics and books on History of Medicine and medical history journals and take such action as are necessary to obtain copies or extracts from rare books, manuscripts, etc., and provide other facilities for the promotion of knowledge of History of Medicine and to conduct research in History of Medicine.
5. Help teachers and research workers with references and extracts, manuscripts, etc., on the historical aspect of their special subjects relating to History of Medicine.
6. Establish contacts and correspondence with similar medico-historical associations and libraries in other countries and arrange for exchange of information books and lectures and Association may introduce fresh objectives if deemed necessary with the approval of the general body.'³¹

Several scholarly articles such as 'Medicine in Mesopotamia', 'Salerno: Its historical impact on the genesis of medical education', 'Surgery in ancient India', 'History of dissections as a teaching medium', 'The story of double helix', 'Charaka and Charaka

Samhitha', 'The discovery of vitamins', were presented in the meetings of the Association.^{30,32}

Attempts to start a museum at St John's Medical College were initiated in 1972, three years after the earlier attempt to start an Institute of the History of Medicine. General Bhatia gave St John's, a bequest that included his large collection of books, portraits, charts and other material collected during a lifetime. He also gave St John's his property 'Durga Nivas' in Banjara Hills in Hyderabad, to support the museum and to provide financial aid for medical education and medical research in general and for history of medicine in particular.³³

The museum, which was named S.L. Bhatia Museum of the History of Medicine, was inaugurated on 12 June 1974 by His Eminence Joseph Cardinal Parecattil, the then president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) Society for Medical Education, which runs St John's Medical College (Fig. 4). This museum is one of only three museums of the history of medicine in India (others being, the museum attached to the National Institute of Indian Medical Heritage,⁴ Hyderabad; and the medical library housed in the Central Library of Jamia Hamdard,³⁴ New Delhi). For many years the museum at St John's was housed in the

basement of the medical college and was relocated to the newly created Division of Health and Humanities, St John's Research Institute in March 2011 (Fig. 5). The museum has a permanent exhibit but also arranges thematic exhibitions periodically (Fig. 6). The museum also houses an eclectic library of over 2000 books on subjects such as the history of medicine, philosophy and history of science, medical education, economics and development, public health and policy, the natural sciences, religion, ethics, etc. Following Major General S.L. Bhatia's bequest, others have added to the exhibits and collection of books. Among the prized archives of the museum are the writings and correspondence of General Bhatia from the 1920s to the 1970s, letters and notes from Nobel laureates such as A.V. Hill and C.V. Raman, and many personally autographed books. The museum plans to open its doors to school students within a year. The Department of History of Medicine at St John's organizes the Major General S.L. Bhatia Memorial Oration every year where eminent speakers are invited to talk in areas of their expertise in the history of medicine and in the medical humanities.

Major General Bhatia died on 16 July 1981. His life was an exemplar of intellectual zeal coupled with great compassion. The museum established in his name continues to bear his legacy to the present generation of medical students.



FIG 4. The opening of the Museum of History of Medicine at St John's Medical College by His Eminence Joseph Cardinal Parecattil, 1974



FIG 5. Outside view of the Division of Health and Humanities, St John's Research Institute, which houses the SL Bhatia Museum of History of Medicine



FIG 6. SL Bhatia Museum of History of Medicine, an inside view

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