

Kadambini Ganguly: A Forgotten Legend

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Abstract

This article is a tribute to Dr. Kadambini Ganguly, the first practising female physician of colonial India and of entire South Asia. It presents her life sketch from early childhood, schooling and graduation to her medical education in India and overseas along with her multifarious professional and social activities. Glimpses of her personal life as obtained from various sources and anecdotes rightfully appear throughout the memoir of the pioneering figure.

Key words: Brahmo clan, Dwarakanath Ganguly, Dufferin fund, Kadambini Ganguly, Gynaecologist, Western medicine.

1 Introduction

The year 1861 is indeed a glorious year in the history of Bengal. Luminaries like Rabindranath Tagore, Acharya P. C. Ray, Nil Ratan Sircar were born on different dates of this year. The same year also saw the birth of another legendary figure, a pathbreaker in more than one ways, but relatively less known and less acknowledged. She is 'Mrs Ganguly' mentioned by Florence Nightingale in one of her letters to an acquaintance and described by Annie Besant 'as a symbol that India's freedom would uplift India's womanhood' (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Kadambini Ganguly (1861–1923).

1.1 Childhood and Schooling

On July 18, 1861 Braja Kishore Basu, the headmaster of a school in Bhagalpur, Bihar was blessed with a daughter (Karlekar 2012) who was named Kadambini. The family hailed from Barishal of Bangladesh and migrated to Bihar

in search of better living. Braja Kishore Babu was an enlightened gentleman ahead of his times and a strong advocate of female emancipation. He belonged to the Brahmo clan and with the help of other associates from Brahmo Samaj established the 'Bhagalpur Mahila Samity', one of the earliest women organisations in erstwhile India.

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Kadambini showed promise from an early age. Braja Kishore Babu on advice of his friends and associates got her admitted to 'Hindu Mahila Vidyalaya', a non-conventional boarding school for girls in Kolkata. The progressive school later named as 'Bangla Mahila Vidyalaya' and now Bethune School was established by Anne Akroyd with the help of Brahmos. The school believed in Western social etiquette and progressive thinking. The girls wore dresses, were required to speak in English during school hours and had meals at table with cutlery and crockery. Education was imparted in all subjects including science and mathematics, which in those days were considered to overtax the female mind. They were trained in music and needle work, took turns to be kitchen monitors and also learned to maintain school accounts. The teachers believed in learning through recreation as a supplement to classroom teaching and the students were occasionally taken to outings in carriages. A glimpse of the school is presented in the snapshot of Figure 2.

1.2 College days – into medicine

Dwarakanath Ganguly, belonging to the Brahmo clan and a radical thinker, was one of the founder teachers of the school. He made several contributions to the education system. Dissatisfied with the prevalent textbooks of the time, he wrote alternate books on mathematics, geography and health science. He was aware that the girls with sufficient intellectual and physical freedom liberated by progressive curriculum might be accused as anti-nationals and so composed a book of patriotic songs. Way back in 1877, when Tagore was a teenager and *Vande Mataram* was just written by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay as part of his novel *Anandomath*, this was indeed a novel venture. The progressive teacher had noted the spark in Kadambini and it was due to his efforts that Kadambini and Sarala, daughter of Durga Mohan Das were permitted to sit for the entrance examination of Calcutta University. In 1882, Kadambini and Chandramukhi Basu graduated from the University (Sarala had dropped out) and made history by being the first female graduates not only of India but also the entire British Raj. Encouraged by the success, Bethune College opened a course on Fine Arts and then introduced Graduation courses for girls in 1883.

Kadambini decided to pursue Western medicine. In

those days, a B.A. degree was sufficient to get admission to the course. By that time, the liberated minds had begun to realise the need for trained female doctors and nurses but were not yet prepared to accept female presence in the stereo type male domain. So she had to face a stiff resistance not only from the Brahmos and the upper strata of the Hindu society but also from the medical college administration. Dwarakanath was by her side and the administration had to relent finally after the duo threatened to take legal steps.

Unfortunately, a year before, another promising student of Bethune College, Ms. Abala Das (later known as Lady Bose) passed the entrance examination with a scholarship and tried to get admission in Calcutta Medical College. She was unsuccessful because she was a woman and moved to Madras (now Chennai) in 1882, where she studied medicine on a Bengal government scholarship. However, she fell ill before the result of her final examination was declared and never learnt of her success in passing the exam. In 1887, Abala married eminent scientist Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose and is well known as social worker and early feminist, who was a proponent of female education and financial independence for girls.

2 Promising Doctor in the making

In 1883, the same year of getting admission to medical college, Kadambini married Dwarakanath, 17 year older to her, a widower and a father of six children. The marriage was bitterly opposed by friends and allies alike. Disproving the conventional belief that the marriage would put an end to her professional career, Kadambini moved on, striking a synchronous balance between college, studies and household chores with six children, the elder not very young than her. It is learnt from the letter by Florence Nightingale that she became mother during her medical study but was in confinement "for only thirteen days and possibly did not miss even a single lecture". Kadambini continued to face hostility from faculty members and fellow students and after four years of intense study, could pass in all subjects of the course except the paper on Medicine. She could not be awarded a MB degree and was instead awarded the degree of GBSM (Graduate of Bengal Medical College) in 1886 which allowed her to practise Western medicine. At that time, the Dufferin Fund (Sen 2014; Majumdar 2011) (later known as the National Asso-



Figure 2 A glimpse of students at Bangla Mahila Vidyalay, now Bethune School.

ciation for Supplying Female Aid to the women of India) was set up and Kadambini was prompt enough to avail the facility. Florence Nightingale was requested to recommend Kadambini to Lady Dufferin ‘for any post about the female wards of Calcutta’. Kadambini joined the Lady Dufferin Medical college with a handsome monthly salary of Rs 200/- (some records show Rs 300/- per month), once more challenging the stereotype male dominance in mainstream economic activities. In fact, she used to receive a scholarship of Rs 20/- from her second year onwards in Medical College.

There is a controversy regarding the first female physician of India and now records show that Anadibai Gopalrao Joshi of Bombay Presidency was awarded the medical degree a year earlier from Philadelphia of US. Unfortunately, she suffered from tuberculosis and passed away in 1887, a year after her return to India with unfulfilled dreams of serving her motherland and opening a medical college for girls. Thus Kadambini Ganguly can be regarded as the first practising female physician not only of India but the entire South Asia. She was often summoned by the royal family of Nepal to treat the womenfolk and was lavishly gifted as a mark of acknowledgement. A pony received from the queen of Nepal (Sen 2014) was a prized attraction for her children and grandchildren to whom, she was an elusive figure different from the womenfolk around. Her study cum clinic which included a human skeleton held a mysterious aura for them.

‘Life is never a bed of roses’ and in the pinnacle of her career, she was often subjected to severe criticisms by peo-

ple unable to accept and appreciate her success. Fingers were raised at her commitment to the profession which demanded spending long hours outside home often at odd times. The most derogatory criticism was published in the Bengali newspaper *Bangabasi* where she was referred to as a courtesan (*Anondobajar Patrika* 11th July 2017). A severe criticism with counter arguments was published by Dwarakanath Ganguly and other enlightened Brahmos (who by that time had overcome their objection to the marriage) in the *India Messenger*, a Brahmo publication. It is said that Dwarakanath had forced the editor to swallow the piece of paper containing the cartoon. Kadambini and Dwarakanath also moved to the court and the editor Mahendranath Pal was penalised with a fine of Rs 100/- and an imprisonment of six months.

2.1 Overseas Education

In 1892, Kadambini decided to pursue higher studies (*Anondobajar Patrika* 11th May 2019). It is said that the constant opposition from her male colleagues and administrative staff had prompted her to take the bold decision. Leaving her family in care of her elder sister, she set sail for UK. There again she exhibited tremendous grit and hard work and was successful in obtaining licentiate post-graduate medical diploma in medicine and surgery from three medical colleges viz. LRCP from Edinburgh, LRCS from Glasgow and GFRS from Dublin.

2.2 Back home

On her return to India, she decided to opt for private practice, expecting greater freedom and relief from societal and judgemental interferences. She practised as a gynaecologist and most of her patients were women. Her major preoccupation used to be delivery cases in houses and hospitals. Usually, delivery cases in those days were handled by midwives and male English doctors were summoned at times by affluent families. A word of mouth anecdote mentions that womenfolk often regarded Ganguly as a midwife and used to offer her food outside the house. Once after a difficult delivery when she was having her food, the womenfolk instructed her to wash the utensils and wipe the floor before leaving (Sen 2014).

She had a passion for needlework, possibly imbibed from her school training and her infrequent leisure hours were occupied stitching laces. Even during her to and fro trips to attend medical calls in horse driven carriages, she used to remain occupied with her stitching passion (*Anondobajar Patrika* 11th May 2019).

3 Social Activities

Apart from medical practice, Kadambini was actively involved in several social and nationalistic movements. She was deeply moved by the condition of female coal miners in East India and worked relentlessly for their upliftment and general health. She also worked along with her husband for promoting female education and emancipation and was successful in providing women access to education at a time when society was rigged by orthodox customs like *Sati* and child marriage and women were supposed to be confined inside houses.

She was the President of Transvaal Indian Association formed in South Africa by Mahatma Gandhi to protest against anti-national legislation at a time when women were not even considered citizens of the country. On Dwarakanath's insistence, the Indian National Congress included a delegation of six women in the Bombay session in 1889. Kadambini Ganguly was one of them (Rao, Karim, Motiwala 2007). The following year in the Kolkata session, Kadambini Ganguly was called upon the dais to deliver vote of thanks to the Chairman in English. Once more she made history by being the first woman to speak on such an occasion. She organised the Women's Con-

ference in 1906 in the wake of Bengal partition. In 1914, she presided over a Sadharan Brahmo Samaj meeting organised to honour Gandhiji. She openly supported Satyagraha and mobilised people to raise funds. In 1915, she strongly criticised the Calcutta Medical College authorities for their practice of not admitting female students at the Medical Conference. The practice was discontinued after her provoking speech and girls were allowed to participate from the following year.

4 Treading alone

In 1898, she lost her better half, confidant, friend and mentor. She spent the rest of her life in loneliness and solitude, devoted to her regular duties and commitments but no one by her side to appreciate and advise her. As commented by Rajib Ganguly, their great grandson at an event organised by Lady Dufferin Hospital to commemorate her 150th birthday 'their extremely successful relationship (marriage) was founded on mutual love, sensitivity and intelligence'. Possibly the symbiotic relationship enabled her to achieve the impossible and penetrate the impregnable. She breathed her last on 7th October 1923, 15 minutes after returning from one of her regular medical calls. The lady reputed for never turning down any medical consultation left silently before any medical aid could reach her.

5 Epilogue

It's inspiring that Google had paid a doodle treat on the 153rd birthday of Anandibai Joshi for being the first Indian female doctor and to Rukmabai Raut as one of the first female practising doctors in colonial India. Their achievements are par excellence but sadly, Kadambini Ganguly remains an unsung laurel of the country.

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