

KADAMBINI GANGULY – AN ILLUSTRIOUS LADY

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Kadambini Ganguly (née Bose) is one of the first two female graduates of the British Empire. She also seems to be the first native female practitioner of western medicine in India. Kadambini was born on 18th July 1861 in Bhagalpore (Bihar, India) in a Brahmo family. She had her school education in Dacca and Calcutta and graduated from the University of Calcutta in 1882. In 1883 she married her teacher and mentor, Dwarakanath Ganguly, a 39-year old widower with three children. Kadambini got admission in Calcutta Medical College in 1884. Unfortunately she could not get through the MB examination in 1888 as she was failed in one paper. However, the Principal of the College awarded her the diploma called Graduate of Medical College of Bengal (GMCB) which enabled her to do private practice. During 1888-1893, despite a good job in a hospital she realized that she was being looked down upon by the British lady doctors as she was not having the MB degree. In 1893 she headed for England and completed her triple diplomas (LRCP, LRCS, LEPS). Her professional life of more than 30 years in a conservative Hindu Society at times met with dishonor and contempt. Still she went ahead keeping her head high as a completely dedicated professional till the last day of her life (3rd October 1923).

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Introduction

In 2011, the sesquicentennial of Kadambini Ganguly (née Bose) was celebrated in Kolkata. At that time a number of articles on Kadambini appeared in newspapers and journals to provide a glimpse of the life of this illustrious lady, who otherwise is almost forgotten. A number of websites have also appeared in recent times. An attempt has been made here to piece together the information from scattered sources and present the same in a structured manner. A great deal of information about her is not readily traceable and at times information about her is conflicting. Without further research it is not possible to portray a holistic and reliable biographical sketch.



Kadambini Ganguly

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Birth and Family

Kadambini was born on 18th July 1861¹ in Bhagalpore in a Brahmo family. Her father, Brajakishore Bose was a headmaster of a local school. Kadambini's ancestral home was at Chandsi in Barisal district of Bengal (now in Bangladesh). She married in 1883 her teacher and mentor, Dwarakanath Ganguli, a 39-year old widower. She had five children of her own, and three children from the earlier marriage of her husband. In all, she had to raise eight children. Of her children Jyotirmayee was a freedom fighter and Prabhat Chandra was a journalist.

Education

Kadambini initially received English education at the Brahmo Eden Female School, Dacca; subsequently, at Hindu Mahila Vidyalay, Ballygunj, Calcutta which was renamed as Banga Mahila Bidyalay in 1876. In 1878 the School merged with Bethune School (f. 1849). At the Bethune School, Dwarakanath Ganguly, a staunch Brahmo and an ardent supporter of women's emancipation movement, was her mentor. When Kadambini became eligible for the Entrance Examination of the University of Calcutta (CU), the University at that time was not admitting female students following the practice of Oxford and Cambridge. At the same time another Christian Bengali student from Dehra Dun called Chandramukhi Basu also applied to CU for permission to appear at the Entrance Examination. Dwarakanath fought practically tooth and nail for obtaining the required permission from CU and he succeeded. As a result Kadambini and another girl called Sarala appeared in the Entrance test in 1877. In 1878 Kadambini cleared the test missing the first division by a single mark while Sarala could not appear for the test as she got married. Chandramukhi was declared by the Junior Board of Examiners to have attained the entrance standard in the examination of 1877.

Kadambini got admission at the College Class of Bethune School, and Chandramukhi at the Free Church of Scotland College. In 1880, both passed First Arts (FA) examination. Kadambini wanted to get admission at the Medical College, Bengal (popularly known as Calcutta Medical College) but was denied as the door of the College was yet to open for female candidates. Eventually she took admission at Bethune College along with Chandramukhi. In 1882 both of them graduated from the University of Calcutta heralding a new era of women's education not only in India but also in the British Empire. When the two

Bengali women received their degrees in 1883, they became the first women graduates at the entire British Empire.

Till 1882, Calcutta Medical College (CMC) was not admitting any female student, though Madras Medical College had started admitting female students from 1875. Again Dwarakanath fought for the admission of Kadambini at CMC and finally succeeded. Thus Kadambini became the first woman to get admission at the CMC in 1884. The following year the government offered her a scholarship of Rs. 20 per month with retrospective effect. However, Kadambini's admission in medical college was intolerable to a section of Brahmos as well as Hindus. Even Kadambini's marriage to Dwarakanath, a widower, gave rise to bitter controversies and a section of the Brahmos did not recognize their marriage. The professors at CMC were also not happy on her admission at the Medical College. With all these adversities she continued her study. It is said that one Bengali professor there was dead against of female education and he failed Kadambini in the paper – Materia Medica and Comparative Anatomy. This prevented her from getting the certificate of the first MB examination held in 1888. As a result, she got only the certificate of First LMS examination from CU. Before CMC came under the jurisdiction of CU, the Principal of the Medical College used to award the Graduate of Medical College of Bengal (GMCB) to the successful students. As Kadambini completed the medical course, the Principal of the Medical College, Dr J M Coates awarded her GMCB diploma that gave her the right to do private practice.

Somehow, Florence Nightingale came to know about Kadambini. On February 20, 1888, she wrote to a friend: *"Do you know or could tell me anything about Mrs Ganguly, or give me any advice? ... (she) has already passed what is called the first licentiate in medicine and surgery examinations and is to go up for the final examination in March next. This young lady, Mrs. Ganguly, married! after she made up her mind to become a doctor! and has had one, if not two children since. But she was absent only thirteen days for her lying-in!! and did not miss, I believe, a single lecture!!"* Nightingale also wrote in the letter that she had been asked to recommend Kadambini to Lady Dufferin *"for any posts about the female wards of Calcutta"*.

In 1888, she was appointed at the Lady Dufferin Women's Hospital, Calcutta² on a decent salary of Rs. 300 (about Rs. 450,000 in today's scale) per month. Soon she realized that she was being looked down upon by the

¹ According to *Samsad Bangali Charitabhidhan*, she was born on 8th May 1861.

² According to *Oxford Encyclopaedia of Women in World History*, she was appointed at the Lady Dufferin Women's Hospital, Karachi.

British lady doctors as she was not having the MB degree. She started private practice and was not successful. In 1893³, she decided to go to England to acquire further medical degrees. At that time for an Indian lady, it was not at all easy to travel to England, especially leaving behind a number of children. Her indomitable will, Dwarakanath's untiring efforts, towering support of the Brahmo Samaj, and the gracious help of her cousin Monomohan Ghosh (a London-based barrister) saw Kadambini leaving for England all alone on 26th February 1893, leaving her children to the care of her elder sister. She reached London on 23rd March 1893. On 13th April 1893, she filled up the form for appearing for triple diploma courses in medical sciences at the Scottish College at Edinburgh. She attended classes at the Royal College of Physicians and the Royal College of Surgeons. By virtue of her BA degree from CU and GMC from CMC, she could complete the course within a very short time and was allowed to appear only for the last examination. She was awarded the Triple Diplomas of the Scottish College in July 1893. Among the 14 successful candidates of the year she was the only female candidate. For the triple diplomas she appeared for the subjects – medicine, therapeutics, surgery, surgical anatomy, midwifery and medical jurisprudence. The three diplomas she obtained are – Licentiate of the College of Physicians, Edinburgh (LRCP), Licentiate of the College of Surgeons, Glasgow (LRCS), and Licentiate of the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons, Dublin (LFPS). She was the first Indian lady to achieve such a rare distinction. She specialized in gynaecology and pediatrics as well.

Professional Career

Kadambini's professional career began in 1888. However, it did not start off well. She could not get due respect from the lady doctors of Lady Dufferin Women's Hospital, Calcutta where she worked. Even in three years, she was not given the full responsibility of a department in the Hospital. She continued her private practice but failed to establish herself as a renowned physician. Not only that, at times she had to suffer humiliating situation. Once she was called upon by a rich family to attend a teenage girl during her childbirth. After the delivery when the mother and child were doing well, Kadambini and her assistant were served food at the verandah as if they were maidservants. Moreover, they were asked to clean and wipe the place. At that time native people considered a lady doctor not more than a *dai* (an untrained midwife). In 1891,

the orthodox magazine *Bangabasi* projected her as a despised symbol of Brahmo womanhood and indirectly called her a 'whore'. Dr Nilratan Sarkar, Shibnath Shastri as well as Dwarakanath took the matter seriously and went to the court not only to defend Kadambini but also to support liberation of women from the strangulating forces of dreadful customs and evil prejudices of the then society. The court delivered judgement in favour of Kadambini, and Mahesh Chandra Pal, the editor of the journal *Bangabasi*, was slapped a fine of Rs. 100 and six months imprisonment.

After her return from England with Triple Diplomas, the situation took turn in her favour as she was accepted for the post of a senior doctor at the Dufferin Hospital. Within a short period she started private practice that thrived so well that she had to resign her hospital job. During 1895-96 Kadambini took medical charge of the Queen mother of Nepal who was suffering for a long time. With Kadambini's creditable treatment the Queen mother recovered. After this incidence Kadambini used to be called by Royal families for medical treatment. Another remarkable case of Kadambini's diagnosis and treatment deserve mention. A tumor was diagnosed in the abdomen of a girl by male doctors. Kadambini diagnosed it as a confirmed case of pregnancy and performed an operation for the safe delivery of the child.

Kadambini remained a very active medical practitioner till the last day of her life despite her high blood pressure. On 3rd October 1923, she visited a patient and conducted a critical operation. When she returned home, she was practically wilting. She breathed her last in the same evening at the age of 63.

Other Activities

Kadambini combined her professional duty as a doctor with her social and political responsibilities. The Indian National Congress (INC) was founded in 1885. Ever since Dwarakanath was agitating for women's participation in the annual sessions in the INC. His efforts bore fruit in 1889 when Kadambini along with five other ladies were allowed to attend the Bombay session of INC. In the session Kadambini moved a vote of thanks. She was hailed by Annie Besant for being a symbol signifying the uplift of India's womanhood. In the Calcutta session of INC(1890) also Kadambini delivered a lecture in English. She organized Women's Conference in Calcutta in 1906 on the aftermath of the partition of Bengal. In 1908, she organized

³ According to Srabani Sen, Kadambini completed her Triple Diplomas in less than three months which seem improbable. Most sources [3-6, 10, 11] indicate the year of her departure for England as 1892. It is difficult to be certain about the dates without consulting the records of 1892 and 1893, possibly still available in England.

and presided over a meeting at Calcutta for expressing sympathy with Satyagraha workers of Transvaal, South Africa. At that time, she took initiative to form an association to collect money for helping the workers. She presided over the meeting of the *Sadharan Brahma Samaj*, held in Calcutta in 1914, in honour of Gandhi during his visit to Calcutta.

Labourers in the tea gardens of Assam were exploited by their employers heavily. Dwarakanath Ganguly (Kadambini's husband) condemned the exploitation and Kadambini fully supported her husband. In 1922, she went with the poet Kamini Roy to look into the conditions of women labourers employed in the Bihar and Orissa coal mines on behalf of an Enquiry Commission set up by the Government.

She was also famous for knitting yards of fine and beautiful lace.

Conclusion

Kadambini was a contemporary of Anandibai Joshee who completed her MB degree from Women's Medical College, Pennsylvania in 1886. She was appointed a resident physician of Albert Edward Hospital at Kohlapur. Before she could take charge, tuberculosis cut short her life in 1887. Anne Jagannathan was the first Indian woman to complete certificate course in medical sciences from Madras Medical College in 1886-87. Thereafter she headed for England to study medicine and was awarded Triple Qualification Board Diplomas from Scottish Colleges. She

came back to India in 1892 and joined Cama Hospital for Women and Children in Bombay. Tuberculosis ended her career within just two years.

Of the three lady doctors, Kadambini started practising medicine in 1888. Anandibai passed away in 1887 before she could start her career. Anne started her medical career in 1892. Thus it may be said without hazarding a grave error that Kadambini was the first native female medical practitioner of western medicine in India. It could not be ascertained whether any other woman practised in Ayurveda, Siddha or any other system of medicine in India prior to Kadambini. In this way Kadambini was undeniably a pioneer. She had to raise as many as eight children, look after her all domestic duties, attend social and political activities, and above all perform her medical duties most faithfully. Her various activities could not undermine her medical responsibilities. She was a role model for women at large, the type of which is but rare.

David Kopf, the American historian aptly wrote, "Ganguli's wife, Kadambini, was appropriately enough the most accomplished and liberated Brahma woman of her time. From all accounts, their relationship was most unusual in being founded on mutual love, sensitivity and intelligence. Mrs. Ganguli's case was hardly typical even among the more emancipated Brahma and Christian women in contemporary Bengali society. Her ability to rise above circumstances and to realize her potential as a human being made her a prize attraction to *Sadharan Brahmos* dedicated ideologically to the liberation of Bengal's women".. □