



Sesquicentennial Birth Anniversary

Anandibai Joshi

First Indian Woman Doctor

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WHEN Anandibai Joshi became the first woman doctor in India, Queen Victoria sent her a congratulatory message. It was a recognition of an Indian woman who had surged far ahead in this field in comparison to the rest of the world despite many odds. It was a matter of pride that the first British woman doctor Elizabeth Anderson was a contemporary of Anandibai Joshi and Kadambini Ganguly. Even the world's first woman doctor Elizabeth Blackwell passed her degree in Medicine in 1849 in USA.

Anandibai was the daughter of Ganpatrao Amritaswar Joshi and Gungabai Joshi. She was born in Pune on 31 March 1865. On the eleventh day of her birth as per their custom she was named Yamuna, in short Yamu, which means the "Daughter of the Sun", after the sacred river Jumna. She bore this name until her marriage.

Ganpatrao Joshi hailed from the family of the Peshwas and is described by Yamu's cousin Ramabai as "a rich landholder of Kalyan, a town a little to the north of Bombay, where he was warmly regarded by the high caste people". Yamuna was a loving daughter to her father, and her happiest hours were

passed upon his knee, under a tree in the Kalyan garden, where his father went to rest every day after dinner.

Gopal Vinayak Joshee was appointed as a clerk in the Postal Department of Bombay in 1870, when Yamuna was only five years old. As he was a stranger in this part of Maharashtra, he eagerly sought the acquaintance of a family of his own caste. Ganpatrao was an educated man and was eager to provide education to his beloved daughter Yamuna. He allowed Yamuna to take Sanskrit lessons from Gopal.

Soon Gopal was promoted as post-master at Alibag, with an increase of salary, and at once prepared to leave that place. This made Yamuna disappointed. But the disappointment did not last long.

The Joshis were highly orthodox and in those days it was the tradition in orthodox Brahmin families to get the girl married before she reached puberty; otherwise it was considered a public disgrace. So when Yamu grew up, it became a harrowing task for the Joshis to find a suitable bridegroom for their loving Yamu also because she was dark in complexion, hefty and pockmarked.

When Yamu turned nine and was nearing puberty, the parents became desperate. When a matchmaker suggested the name of Gopal to Yamu's parents, they immediately jumped at the offer. Gopal was a progressive thinker, and supported the education of women, which was not very prevalent in India at that time. But Gopal was an unimpressive-looking widower and more than twenty years

older than Yamuna. His first wife Savitri died because he bullied her to read and write Marathi.

Yet, despite his many deficiencies, the family members still agreed to the marriage because they knew Yamuna liked him and was keenly interested to study more. The only condition that Gopal imposed was that he should be permitted to educate her as per his will.

While the preparations for the marriage started, Gopal suddenly changed his mind. Since he was a firm believer in widow remarriage, he wanted to marry a widow. In a shockingly callous manner, he went away to Pune without informing anybody and did not turn up even on the wedding day. He finally arrived in Kalyan after the muhurat was over.

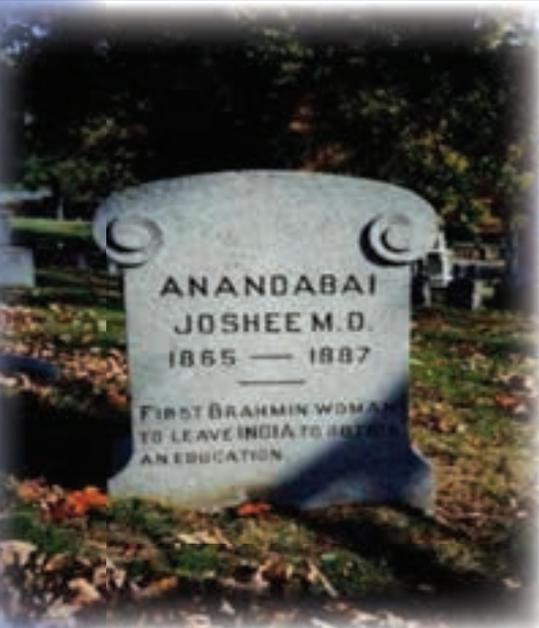
So, another suitable muhurat was arranged and the marriage eventually took place on 31 March 1874 and as per the tradition then Gopal gave her the name "Anandibai", or "joy of my heart". (It was later learnt that Gopalrao went to Pune to get married to a widow but returned to Kalyan after having been ditched by the widow who refused even to see Gopalrao after hearing that he was an ordinary clerk in a post office.)

Since Anandi was too young then, the newly married stayed with the Joshis at Kalyan. During his leisure hours Gopal started teaching Anandi how to read and write Marathi. In course of time, he taught her English, Sanskrit, several of the scriptures, Geography, etc. Within a



Letter of Anandibai Joshi to Alfred Jones

Change took place in the face of stiff opposition by her parents and frequent bickering in the family and the stubborn and capricious attitude of her husband. He would take his young wife for long walks during which his teaching sessions continued. He was convinced that learning English was more important than learning Sanskrit.



The resting place of Anandibai Joshi in Poughkeepsie, New York

enough money to purchase a ticket to America. He therefore purchased a ticket up to Rangoon, worked there for some time as a porter in the docks, and earned enough money to finally reach America.

When he reached Philadelphia and joined his wife after about three years, Anandi was overjoyed. By that time she had completed her M.D. in First Class and in the Convocation held on 11 March 1886, Anandi received a tremendous ovation when the President of the College cited: "I am proud to say that today should be recorded in golden letters in the annals of this college. We have the first Indian woman who is honoring this college by acquiring a degree in medicine. Mrs. Anandi Joshi has the honor to be

the very first woman doctor of India." The Philadelphia Post wrote, "Little Mrs. Joshee, who graduated with high honours in her class, received quite an ovation." Even Queen Victoria sent her a congratulatory message.

It was rather unfortunate that during the latter part of her stay in America, Anandi frequently suffered from severe cough and quite often fell sick. This was subsequently diagnosed as tuberculosis, which became serious in course of time. Anandi therefore decided to return to India in 1886. When the ship carrying Anandi and Gopal Joshi reached Bombay, a tremendous reception was arranged in honor of Anandi.

In course of time the disease worsened with no prospects of recovery. Anandi, though a qualified doctor from America, insisted on her being examined by the then well-known Ayurvedic doctor Dr. Mehendale staying in Pune. She was taken to Pune but Dr. Mehendale refused even to see Anandi even though he was told that the patient was in the throes of death. Adding insult to injury, he was cruel enough to say: "This woman went to America. She lived alone with strangers, ate food forbidden to Brahmins by religion and brought shame on Brahmins." Anandi returned home dejected and disappointed with profuse tears in her eyes.

Members of the elite in Pune came to see Anandi, flattered by her achievements but no one came forward with any financial help to the family which was in extreme penury. One fine day Anandi received a letter from Lokmanya Tilak, Editor of Kesari, saying:

"I know how in the face of all the difficulties you went to a foreign country and acquired knowledge with such diligence. You are one of the greatest women of our modern era. It came to my knowledge that you need money desperately. I am a newspaper editor. I do not have a large income. Even then I wish to give you one hundred rupees."

When Anandi saw Tilak's letter, tears flowed out profusely and she said, "This penury, this begging for charity, no, no, I can't bear it any more. What was I and what has become of me? I am not a beggar's daughter. None of my family was ever a beggar. I am a landlord's daughter. That people should take pity on me and offer me money for my bare existence, how can I live with all this? God is so cruel, why does he not relieve me of all this?"

Within a few days after uttering these pathetic words, Anandi Gopal passed away at the young age of 21 years on 26 February 1887, a month short of her 22nd birthday. Her last words were: "I did all that I could do."

Her death was mourned all over India. Her ashes were sent to Theodicia Carpenter, who placed them in her family cemetery in Poughkeepsie, in New York.

Anandibai is a true inspiration to all the young girls who strive hard to get their education. She has made us believe that dreams are within your reach and you can make it real if you are determined.

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