Madhusudan Gupta: The Man who Carried out India’s First Dissection

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“THIS day will ever be marked in the annals of western medicine in India when Indians rose superior to the prejudices of their earlier education and thus boldly flung open the gates of modern medical science to their countrymen.” (Centenary Volume (1835-1935), Medical College Centenary Committee, Calcutta, 1935)

The historic date being referred to above is 10th January 1836 and it is very important from the point of view of the dawn and growth of western medical science in our country. Madhusudan Gupta, superintendent and lecturer of the military class of the Calcutta Medical College, performed a dissection of a human cadaver (corpse) at an outhouse of the college thereby breaking a religious and social taboo prevalent in our society for generations. With this dissection, he earned the distinction of carrying out the first cadaver dissection of not only modern India but of the entire Southeast Asia region.

The Calcutta Medical College (now known as Calcutta Medical College and Hospital) was founded on 28th January 1835, with the aim to train Indians in modern western medical science but there was a big problem in initiating the study of western medicine. Indian students at that time could only be trained in Ayurveda and Unani systems of medicines as social stigma was attached to touching a corpse leave alone its dissection. This taboo was broken within a short period of the foundation of the Calcutta Medical College.

In 2011, the doctors of the Anatomy Department of the Calcutta Medical College and Hospital unearthed documents relating to this first dissection. It is said that Hindu pandits were already alarmed at the foundation of the medical college and kept vigil on the college so that corpses were not brought in the college for dissection.

However, the then head of the Anatomy Department set the ball rolling for the start of the study of human anatomy by smuggling a corpse into the college and by getting it dissected by Madhusudan Gupta, the only non-European teacher of the Calcutta Medical College. Prince Dwarka Nath Tagore, the grandfather of great writer, poet and Nobel laureate Rabindra Nath Tagore, helped in smuggling the corpse of an unclaimed male body into the medical college for the purpose of the first dissection (Times of India, 13th January 2011).

Every step of the dissection was documented and notes were prepared for the students. Madhusudan Gupta who earlier practised Ayurveda and was a professor of medicine at the Government Sanskrit college was counselled and influenced to carry out the dissection by British doctors Goodeve and Bremley who respectively were the head of the anatomy department and principal of the Calcutta Medical College. Scottish philanthropist David Hare and educationist John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune also convinced Madhusudan Gupta who belonged to the
Bengali baidya community (high caste Hindu) to break this social taboo and be the torchbearer of western medical system of medicine.

However, it is not completely true that before Madhusudan Gupta dissection of cadaver was never carried out in India because in ancient India surgery was a common affair and Susruta was a master at it. Susruta’s great work Susruta Samhita is the oldest known work that mentions three hundred different operations employing 42 surgical processes and 121 surgical instruments. A note on examination of dead bodies for anatomy and C-sections can also be found in this great work.

When religious restrictions on touching dead bodies crept into the society dissection of corpses for understanding human anatomy ended and thus gradually surgery also fell into disuse and became a lost science. The father of modern Indian chemical industry and scientist of repute Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray who also taught chemistry at the Presidency College (Calcutta) in his work “A History Of Hindu Chemistry: From the earliest times to the middle of the 16th century A.D. Volume I” observes, “According to Susruta, the dissection of dead bodies is a sine qua non to the students of surgery and this high authority lays particular stress on knowledge gained from experiment and observation. But Manu (Law giver) would have none of it. The very touch of a corpse, according to Manu, is enough to bring contamination of the sacred person of Brahmin. Thus we find that shortly after the time of Vagbhata, the handling of a lancet was discouraged and anatomy and surgery fell into disuse and became to all intents and purposes lost sciences to the Hindus.”

Madhusudan Gupta and his four disciples – Dwarkanath Gupta, Raj Krishna De, Umacharan Seth and Nabin Chandra Mitra – showed exemplary courage by breaking the taboo and ushering in a new era of knowledge that was not bound by any religious superstitions and taboo. The East India Company Government welcomed this courageous act by firing a fifty-round gun salute from the guns stationed at the Fort William, Calcutta, thereby welcoming this great step.

Drinker Bethune an educationist of repute and after whom the Bethune College of Calcutta is named described this deed of courage of Madhusudan Gupta as follows: “At the appointed hour, scalpel in hand, he followed Dr. Goodeve into the godown where the body lay ready. The other students deeply interested in what was going forward but strangely agitated with mingled feelings of curiosity and alarm, crowded after them, but durst not enter the buildings where this fearful deed was to be perpetrated ...they peeped through the jhilmils, resolved at least to have ocular proof of its accomplishments. And then Madhusudan’s knife, held with a strong and steady hand, made a long and deep incision in the breast, the lookers on drew a long gasping breath, like men relieved from the weight of some unbearable suspense.”

After breaking the taboo and ushering in the study of western medicine at the Calcutta Medical College, Madhusudan Gupta translated the London Pharmacopoeia edition 1836 (a book containing an official list of medicinal drugs together with articles on their preparations and use) into Bengali in the year 1849 for the benefit of the students of medical science. Madhusudan Gupta died of diabetic septicemia on 15th November 1856.

The then principal of the Calcutta Medical College, T.W. Wilson in his obituary praised this great man as follows: “To him a debt of gratitude is due by his countrymen. He was the pioneer who cleared a space in the jungle of prejudice, into which others have successfully pressed, and it is hoped that his countrymen appreciating his example will erect some monument to perpetuate the memory of the victory gained by Muddoosoodan Gooptu over public prejudice, and from which so many of his countrymen now reap the advantage.”

From being an Ayurvedacharya to being an expert in western medical science is not an easy task but Madhusudan Gupta accomplished this with ease. Credited with the First Cadaver dissection almost hundred and eighty years ago, this great man lies forgotten today.

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