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Female Graduate of British Empire

Kadambini Ganguly

1861-1923

KADAMBINI Ganguly (née Bose) (1861-1923) 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 18 July 1861 in Bhagalpore in a Brahma 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). Kadambini 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. Among her children Jyotirmayee was a freedom fighter and Prabhat Chandra was a journalist.

Education and Professional Career

Kadambini initially received English education at the Brahma Eden Female School, Dacca; subsequently, at Hindu Mahila Vidyalay, Ballygunj, Calcutta which was renamed as Banga Mahila Vidyalay in 1876. In 1878 the school merged with Bethune School (f. 1849). At the Bethune School, Dwarakanath Ganguli, a staunch Brahma 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



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from Dehra Dun called Chandramukhi Basu also applied to CU for permission to appear at the Entrance Examination. Dwarakanath Ganguly fought practically tooth and nail for obtaining the required permission from CU and 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 (The College was 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 and in 1882 both of them graduated from the University heralding a new era of women's education in the country. When the two Bengali women received their degrees in 1883, they became the first women graduates in 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 Ganguly fought for the admission of Kadambini at CMC and 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 at her admission at the Medical College. With all these adversities she continued her study. It is said that one Bengali professor was dead against female education and 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) diploma 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 20 February 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, Kadambini was appointed at the Lady Dufferin Women's Hospital, Calcutta on a decent salary of Rs. 300 per month. Soon she realized that she was being looked down upon by the British lady doctors as she did not have the MB degree. She started private practice but was not successful. At times she had to suffer humiliations.

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 Ganguly took the matter seriously and went to 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 a judgment in favour of Kadambini. Mahesh Chandra Pal, the editor of the journal Bangabasi, was slapped a fine of Rs. 100 and six months imprisonment.

It seems the prevailing circumstances practically forced Kadambini to take a momentous decision to go to England to acquire further medical degrees. In 1893, it was not at all easy for an Indian lady to travel to England, especially leaving behind a number of children. Her indomitable will, Dwarakanath's untiring efforts, unwavering support from Brahm 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 GMCB 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 specialized in gynaecology and pediatrics as well.



After her return from England with the Triple Diplomas, the situation turned 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 deserves 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.

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Other Activities

Kadambini combined her professional duty as a doctor with her social and political responsibilities. Dwaranath Ganguly had been agitating for women's participation in the annual sessions of the Indian National Congress. His efforts bore fruit in 1889 when Kadambini along with five other ladies were allowed to attend the Bombay session of the Indian National Congress. 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 Indian National Congress (1890) also Kadambini delivered a lecture in English. She organized the Women's Conference in Calcutta in 1906 in the aftermath of the partition of Bengal. In 1908, she

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organized 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 heavily exploited by their employers. Dwarakanath Ganguly 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.

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.

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."

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