

From the pages of History

Indian Women Doctors in the 19th Century

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Abstract

This is an account of the five women physicians of the 19th century and their interesting life stories in the field of medicine.

Key words: Indian women doctors, 19th century.

Gender equality and the role of women in medicine is always a matter of increasing interest to the medical fraternity. While we continue to debate about equal rights for women and equal pay in the current climate, it is intriguing to reflect on our history of the first few women doctors in India in the 19th century. It is unfathomable, that with the lack of equality of civil rights, that these women managed to get their names etched in the history of modern Indian medicine. However, they did it and in style. Their life accounts are not lacking in strength, struggle and tenacity.

Kadambini Ganguly (1861-1923)



PC: Wikipedia

Kadambini was born to a teacher father at Bagalpur.,who She was an ardent activist of the Brahmo movement that fought for women's emancipation and rights. She graduated from the Bethune college and was one of the first women graduates of the time. She then graduated in Medicine from the Bengal Medical College. She then went to the United Kingdom in 1892 after qualifying as LRCP (Edinburgh), LRCS (Glasgow), and GFPS (Dublin). She returned to India and then practiced medicine in a private practice after a brief period at the Dufferin College.

She was married to reformer Dwarakanath Ganguly and had eight children, a sign of the times. She was a social activist fighting for miners and took part in the Indian national Congress meetings too.¹

The American historian David Kopf has remarked, "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."² Such was her story founded on love, mutual respect and determination.

Chandramukhi Basu (1860-1944)



PC: Wikipedia

Along with Kadambini, Chandramukhi Basu was one of the first two women graduates in the entire British Empire, where it was proudly acclaimed that the sun never set. Although she graduated in 1876 and cleared the entrance examination, she was refused admission due to gender inequality and her Christian status. She went on to become the first woman postgraduate in subsequent years until she was admitted to the Medical College in 1880 with Kadambini.

She was married to Pandit Keswaranand Mamgayen. She progressed from her first job as a lecturer to become the first woman Principal of the Bethune College. She retired early in 1891 due to failing health. She inspired her sisters Bidumukhi and Bindubasini to become doctors too. Inspiration truly carries a ripple effect and Chandramukhi established a legacy for the early women doctors in India to look up to as an example and to believe in themselves in spite of all odds.³

Anandi Bai Joshi (1865-1887)



Anandi Bai from Thane, Maharashtra carries the dubious honour of being the first Indian woman to set foot in America and gain a Medical degree in 1886. She was married at the age of 9 to Gopalrao who was 20 years her senior. He helped her to be educated after her marriage. The defining moment in Anandi Bai's life was losing her baby at 14 years of age due to inadequate medical services. She then vowed to then become a doctor to improve the situation.

With her husband's help, and repeated pleas of help she sought admission into Pennsylvania Medical school. There was a huge pressure to convert her to Christianity to obtain funding but she did not relent and eventually had her way. The strange land, poor diet and the common problems of homesickness led to her failing health in the USA. She struggled on and completed her medical degree in 1886. She worked but for a year at Kolhapur before succumbing to poor health. She died in 1887 at the young age of 21 years. Her story of identity, perseverance and integrity is a moving one.⁴

Rukhma Bai



PC: Wikipedia

The story of Rukhma Bai is probably the most inspiring of all without belittling the other doctors' struggles of the time. She was married at the age of eleven years to a 19-year-old groom. She continued to live with her parents. When her husband took to the court to demand her return to his house, she refused on the grounds of her spouse's immoral ways of life. The court gave her an ultimatum to return to her husband or face imprisonment. She went through a string of court cases that all affirmed her marriage. She wrote to none less than Queen Victoria, the Queen of England who then overturned the courts and set her free from the clutches of her marriage.⁵ Thus, was born the law on the Age of Consent by a woman in 1891 that outlawed child marriages.⁶

She went to study in London with public funding due to her high-profile marriage case in courts covered by the Indian press. She returned after her graduation and worked as the Chief medical officer in Rajkot for 35 years before she retired.

Rukhma Bai's attitude to never give up in adverse circumstances and to believe in yourself is a true source of inspiration.

Muthulakshmi Reddy (1886-1968)



PC: Wikipedia

A story close to our hearts and homes is that one of Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy. While she graduated just after the turn of the 19th century, social conditions for women had not changed for the better yet. She was an epitome of determination and selfless service who truly believed in raising the standards of women's living and education.

Though she had an affluent birth and upbringing, she followed her heart to be educated. She was the first female student in her College and then subsequently the first house surgeon to work at the Institute of Obstetrics and Gynaecology. She pursued higher education out of the country and had an active medical practice.

She was a dreamer for big change. Dr. Muthulakshmi found her soulmate and married Dr. Sundara Reddy at the age of 28 years of age. He was supportive of her efforts and vision throughout his life. She took the opportunity to enter politics and took great strides in improving the lives of women of the time by abolishing the Devadasi system, creating safe abodes for destitute women and children and shaping political policy. The Cancer Institute, Chennai is the fruit of her labour to deliver exceptionally good healthcare for poor patients with cancer.⁷

She forewent the easy affluent life to struggle and elevate the living standards of many thousands of women of her time and leave a legacy of hope for aspiring women forever more.

The marked common theme among the physicians trained abroad bar one, was that they chose to return to the country and serve when they could have had comfortable lives with their education in the west. They realised that they need to be where they can have an impact on many lives. As modern day doctors if we think we have adverse circumstances to overcome, we only have to reflect on the lives of these five physicians, who were trendsetters of their times and paved the way for many generations of doctors to follow.

With a sad heart, we also realise that history is only the story of the victorious. Most notable is one of Abala Bose, who was not admitted to the medical college in Bengal due to her gender. She then moved and joined medical college in Madras but could not complete her degree. Just one of many lost battles of that time.

Throughout the world, there is a spontaneous move towards an increasing number of women physicians compared to male physicians. While we can debate if this is sustainable, good or bad, it is astonishing to know that the first five in India lived only a couple of centuries ago.

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