

PIONEERING WOMEN PHYSICIANS IN INDIA – A JOURNEY OF STRUGGLE & ACHIEVEMENT

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Abstract

In India, there has been a tradition to exclude women from various professions which required women to leave the four walls of her house. This can be attributed to the customs and traditions which have been prevalent through the centuries. The services related to medicine – considered to be the most noble profession also reflected this. It was only after the year 1880 that the women were allowed to practise medicine. In the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries certain measures were taken and it began the process of entry of women into the profession. The opening of medical colleges and schools was an important step, though women were allowed to join in meagre numbers. In this period one cannot forget the contribution made by Kadambini Ganguly and Rukhmabai Raut who broke the shackles of patriarchal mindset and worked as professional medical practitioners. Kadambini Ganguly was also one of the first female to graduate in the entire British Empire. She became the first female practitioner of western medicine not only in India, but in the whole of South Asia. Kadambini also worked for emancipating women from the ceiling sets on her freedoms. She also participated actively in India's freedom movement. Born on in the year 1864, Rukhmabai Raut also went on to become India's first qualified physician. She was one of the first women doctors to practice medicine in British India who also staunchly opposed the child marriage practise so prevalent in India. She was a major cause behind the enactment of Age of Consent Act in 1891. This paper would thus highlight the contributions made by the two female medical practitioner who broke the barriers of gender-stereotyping in medicine and emerged successful in their efforts.

INTRODUCTION

The status of women in India at the time of the establishment of British rule in India, was low. Many customs were practised in Indian society such as Sati, Female infanticide, Purdah, Child marriage, Dowry, Polygamy and Widowhood which resulted in denying basic human rights to women. She was often considered as illiterate, irrational and passive being with no authority to make her identity nor even to her life. In such a society shaped by patriarchal structures and colonial oppression, there were women who created history by breaking the then existing social barriers. Determined as they were both Kadambini Ganguly and Rukhmabai Raut refused to be stopped by the boundaries laid down by the society. They were known for their courage and determination who fought not only to achieve their dream but to bring about reform in the society.

KADAMBINI GANGULY'S LIFE & WORK

Kadambini was born in Bhagalpur on July 18, 1861. Her father was an influential member of the progressive reformist Hindu movement Brahma Samaj, as well as headmaster of Bhagalpur School and co-founder of India's first women's rights organisation. Under his guidance and motivation Kadambini could complete her education. She was one of India's first women doctors who graduated from Bethune College in 1883. Shortly after entering medical school Kadambini married her long-time mentor and friend, Dwarkanath Ganguly who was a staunch member of the Sadharan Brahma Samaj and an advocate of male-female equality. Kadambini marriage to Dwarkanath Ganguly was viewed with scepticism. He was not only 17 years older but a widower too. She also took a very unconventional decision as despite being married and raising eight children, she decided to study Western medicine at Calcutta Medical College. As this profession was considered as an area for males, Kadambini, faced discrimination. She was repeatedly failed by a professor who could not accept the idea of women in medical profession. She was also refused an MB degree (Bachelor of Medicine) and was awarded a Graduate of Medical College of Bengal certificate instead. Kadambini was also given lesser demanding tasks and nursing jobs as she was considered to be less qualified than the European and male colleagues. It was even difficult for Kadambini to start her own practice as it was considered a male dominated profession.

It was under such circumstances, that Kadambini decided to pursue her medical education in Edinburgh's Royal College of Physicians. A journey that was unprecedented for a married woman with children. With her dedication she obtained a triple diploma from Edinburgh's Royal College of Physicians, as well as the College of

Surgeons in Glasgow and the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons in Dublin. After her return from Britain, Kadambini began to practice obstetrics and gynaecology in Lady Dufferin Hospital in Calcutta. In 1886, she became the first lady physician who practised in south Asia trained in European medicine. However, according to her great grandson, Rajib Ganguly "Breaking social norms was not easy. Her profession demanded visiting patients at night and she attracted criticism from many corners. One popular vernacular newspaper even called her a whore but she and her husband fought a legal battle to win compensation and got the editor jailed for six months."

Kadambini along with her medical practise also actively campaigned for women's rights. During her college days, she started educating girl children with the help of the then Brahma Samaj and her husband Sri Dwaraka Nath Ganguly. Kadambini made lot of efforts to make women independent. She helped few women to take admission in the medical college for studying midwifery and for pursuing their careers as midwives. She also gave free medical treatment to a number of poor patients. She built a crèche for the children of working mothers of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation from the funds of the Brahma Samaj with the help of her husband which the Corporation had refused to build. Dr. Kadambini also tried to protect the right to life and health of women by spreading education regarding the need of cleanliness at the time of child birth and handling of the delivery cases as according to her illness of the women was never taken seriously and nobody had considered the high mortality rate of women during the time of child birth. Dr. Kadambini Ganguly also played a pivotal role in bringing a drastic change in the 19th century socio-legal scenario in India when the government appointed her to submit a report with respect to the Age of Consent Bill. Kadambini's advise was considered valuable as she was the first female medical practitioner of the country who was capable to express the pathetic health conditions of the girl children and also as she had treated a number of similar girl patients. Accordingly, she submitted her report in favour of raising the age of consent for cohabitation for females to 12 years. On the basis of her report, British government passed the Age of Consent Act, 1891.

Kadambini accompanied by Bengali poet, Kamini Roy, also worked for a government committee to enquire about the conditions of women miners in the Bihar and Orissa areas. In 1908, she had also presided over a Calcutta meeting where she expressed her sympathy in support of the Satyagraha being practiced by Indian labourers in Transvaal, South Africa. An association was formed by her to collect money with the help of fundraisers to assist the workers. She was also one of the six women delegates to the fifth session of the Indian National Congress in 1889, and even organised the Women's Conference in Calcutta in 1906 after the partition of Bengal.

Throughout her life, Kadambini practised medical profession and was also an activist for women's rights and emancipation. Her contribution to the society had been immense as she served the nation through medicine, social activities and also as a role model to women. She passed away on October 3, 1923.

RUKHMABAI RAUT'S LIFE & WORK

The contributions made by Rukhmabai Raut also need to be highlighted especially as they were made at a time when it was unthinkable and had sowed the seeds of discourse. She was born on November 22, 1864 in Bombay and was married off at the age of 11 years to Dadaji Bhikaji. Though married she remained in her father's home. With the support of her family, she continued to study and passed the matriculation examination. When her husband Dadaji Bhikaji demanded that she should live with him, she refused. Further, Dadaji Bhikaji sued her for restitution of conjugal rights. The case was won by Rukhmabai but Dadaji Bhikaji appealed and the court ordered her to live with him or go to prison. The case caused a nationwide debate about women's rights and Rukhmabai is remembered for bringing the term 'consent' into the discourses and discussions on women's rights not only in India but in England too in the late 19th century.

Rukhmabai used the publicity and laid a strong attack on child marriage and promoted girl's education which can be understood from the letters (1885) she wrote to the Times under the pseudonym of "a Hindu woman", an unthinkable act for the times. Rukhmabai expressed, "For even a girl, who is so exceptionally blessed as to have parents holding the most liberal views on education, can only prosecute her studies for three or four years longer, for she is generally a mother before she is 14, when she must of sheer necessity give up the dream of mental cultivation, and face the hard realities of life."

According to Rukhmabai, it was hopeless to expect any advancement in the higher female education, till the custom of infant, or rather early marriage continues. She was of the opinion that unless the state of things is changed, all the efforts at higher female education would seem like putting the cart before the horse. She further expressed that "I am one of those unfortunate Hindu women, whose hard lot it is to suffer the unnameable miseries entailed by the custom of early marriage. This wicked practice has destroyed the happiness of my life. It comes between me and that thing which I prize above all others—study and mental

cultivation. Without the least fault of mine I am doomed to seclusion; every aspiration of mine to rise above my ignorant sisters is looked upon with suspicion, and is interpreted in the most uncharitable manner.”

Rukhmabai also put forward certain suggestions which according to her should be contemplated legally such as:

- (1) If any marriage is disputed within a certain period of time and does not have a sanction of the Government, then it should be declared null and void.
- (2) For marriage to be legal the bride should be 15 and the bridegroom should be 20 years old.
- (3) Admission to a University should be denied if any man be married before 20.
- (4) Marriages should be registered with the government and any neglect to be punished by fine. Further if the parties married are under the age sanctioned by law, they or their parents shall be liable for punishment.
- (5) Punishment should be given in case it is found that the parents have laid a tax on, or in other words sold, their daughters.

Under no circumstance shall the wife be older than the husband.

It is necessary for a law containing some such provisions to be passed and published as widely as possible. Rukhmabai's trial has also been read as one of the precursors to the Age of Consent Act of 1891 – legislation which raised the age of consent for girls in India from 10 to 12 years of age, making sexual intercourse illegal with a girl below the stipulated age by many historians of Indian culture and society in the nineteenth-century. In 1889 Rukhmabai Raut went to England to study in the London School of Medicine for Women and qualified as a doctor in 1894. She became one of the first Indian women to study medicine in England and on her return to India she started to practice medicine and advocated for women's rights. She established a hospital for women and children in Surat. She worked tirelessly during the 1896 plague epidemic and 1897 drought for which she was awarded the title 'Kesar-e-Hind' by the government. As an advocate for women's empowerment her works, includes 'Indian Child Marriage (an Appeal to the British Government)' and 'Purdah - the Need for its Abolition.' It showcases her commitment to social justice and women's rights. In 1918, Rukhmabai worked as the Chief Doctor of Saurashtra in the government hospital in Rajkot. She passed away on January 1, 1955.

CONCLUSION

It can thus be concluded that both Kadambini Ganguly and Rukhmabai Raut were pioneering physicians in India who had worked tirelessly to achieve their goals. They had also dedicated their life and work for social reform. Their achievements thus serve as an inspiration to all who believe in fighting for justice and equality. Their efforts had resulted in generating debates and also guided the making of legislation on issues related to women.

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