

Editorial



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August Memories :

Doctors in Indian freedom struggle : The heroes of our Profession

“At the stroke of the midnight hour, while the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom.”

— **Pandit Nehru at Constituent Assembly of India , 1947**

India gained freedom from British colonial rule on Friday, 15 August, 1947. This day of transfer of power was the culmination of years of struggle by people of the subcontinent. Although there was unconscionable loss of lives due to the partition of the area along religious lines, the day of independence is still a proud day in the history of our country. This success was gained due to involvement of all sections of the society, including doctors. This editorial, on this 74th commemoration of our Independence Day, will look back at the contribution of doctors in the Indian freedom movement.

Freedom Struggle in India :

True Freedom has two components – Spiritual attainment and Political attainment. So the Indian freedom struggle had to be fought on two fronts. On one hand, there was the political struggle and on the other, there was the urgent need to improve the condition of the society as a whole. The political struggle was being driven along two different ideologies: armed uprising and non-violent civil movement. The societal movement was fought along multiple lines. The Indian society at that time was stringently divided according to caste (in Hindu community), religion, and gender and of course, socio-economic status. Superstition, lack of education prevailed in society. It was not an easy task to bring the maharajas and nawabs in same platform with the commoners (whom the royalty despised) or to bring the Brahmins together with Dalits (whom the Brahmins considered impure). Raja Rammohan Roy, Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda worked to bring changes in society in terms social and spiritual attainment. Freedom movement was a myriad of internal conflicts, ego clashes and antagonistic decisions. Everyone had to do their bit to make this movement a success. Doctors had a very important role in all the phases and sections of this movement. For example, the feat of Pandit Madhusudan Gupta in performing the first human dissection in India and thereby breaking the spell of cultural taboo or challenge taken by Dr Radha Govinda Kar following refusal of Indians to be Medical teachers in Calcutta Medical College to establish a Medical College (R G Kar medical college) entirely by money of Indians can't be underestimated. Ultimately Dr Kar died in Influenza Pandemic while serving patients during fearful crisis.

Mahatma Gandhi was the leader of the non-violent movement while luminaries like Netaji, Surya Sen, Bhagat Singh and Binay-Badal-Dinesh were fighting the British government with weapons. But the struggle for social movement was much more difficult. Indians wanted to get back the power to rule their country but what was their vision for the future? There was a lot of conflict. While people like Nehru and Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy wanted a modern country with a scientific outlook, there was a significant portion of the leaders who wanted to go back to the old days of glory.

Doctor's in Freedom Struggle :

Right from the beginning of Indian freedom struggle, lawyers, journalists and members of aristocratic Indian families established themselves to be the leaders. Other professions like doctors or scientists had very little scope of reaching the upper echelons of the political movement. But still, there are many doctors who had substantial contributions in this national movement and helped their countrymen in many ways. Sadly, subsequent Indian history has been unkind to these doctors who spent their lives struggling for the freedom of India. When Indian freedom movement is discussed by academics, the names of these doctors are never given prominence. The standard texts written by Indian historians are almost silent on the role of doctors in this movement. **But we, as doctors, have the duty to commemorate these heroes of our profession and remind the future**

generations of the selfless contribution of these legendary medical persons.

Sushila Nayyar :

She was a graduate (MD) of Lady Hardinge Medical College, Delhi. Thus, with her educational qualification, she could easily have become a very successful physician. But she chose to follow the Gandhian path and in 1939, came to join the Gandhian movement at Sevagram.

She became the personal physician of Mahatma Gandhi (thus, although Gandhi decried modern medicine, he had an MD specialist as his personal physician!). She took part in the 1942 Quit India movement and was imprisoned. She testified in the Kapur commission about assassination attempts on Mahatma Gandhi. After the eventual death of Mahatma Gandhi, she went to John Hopkins University, USA where she further did MPH and DrPH, being the first doctoral student of the Maternal and Child Health program of that prestigious institute. She came back to India and had important contributions in developing public health programs of India, including leprosy, tuberculosis and child health. One memorable contribution of Ms Nayyar was setting up of the famous leprosy institute at Agra near Taj Mahal. There was a lot of furore in the Indian society about setting up an “unclean” leprosy hospital near the so-called monument of love. But Ms Nayyar, uncompromising and no-nonsense as she was, just brushed aside these sentimental protests and set up this premier institute for leprosy at Agra.

Laxmi Sehgal :

Born in Malabar, Captain Laxmi Sehgal passed her MBBS from Madras Medical College in 1938 and received further diploma in Gynecology soon. But she left for Singapore, met Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and was given the responsibility of forming the female battalion of Azad Hind Fauj. She was given the rank of “Captain” as they marched on to Burma. She fought valiantly in the war against the British. After Independence, she continued her Gynecology practice at Kanpur. She did spectacular social work, like helping Bangladeshi refugees during 1971 war, organizing medical camp after Bhopal disaster of 1984 and helping poor woman at Kanpur.

TSS Rajan :

TSS Rajan was a Tamil doctor from Trichinopoly. He was a brilliant student who worked at Middlesex hospital, London. He obtained MRCS in 1911 and started a private practice. But call of his country made

him leave the lucrative profession and join the Indian National Congress. He led Congress agitations against British rule and was imprisoned multiple times.

In 1931, he led the movement to disobey infamous salt laws at Tanjore and was imprisoned. He was a well-respected member of the Congress party and held multiple political portfolios.

Bidhan Chandra Roy :

Bidhan Chandra Roy was a legendary doctor in Bengal. He had the rare feat of earning both the MRCP and MRCS diplomas. He was a legendary physician in Bengal and India and was personal physician to many of the leaders of Indian freedom struggle, including Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru. He was very active in Indian freedom movement, held many prominent political positions in Bengal and was the first chief minister of West Bengal (after independence, till 1950, the post was known as Prime minister of Bengal. Prafulla Ghosh was the first Prime minister, followed by Bidhan Chandra Roy. Then after election, Roy became the first chief minister). After independence, he wanted to go back to his profession, but at the advice of Mahatma Gandhi, he relented and remained in active politics till his death.

His other prominent political positions included Mayor of Calcutta (1931-33), Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University (1942-1944), President of the Medical Council of India (1939) and the Governor of the United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh). He was imprisoned for his role in Indian freedom struggle in 1930. But along with his political activities, he continued his professional work and treated numerous patients for free at his home and clinic. **He was one of the rare Indian physicians whose death led to an obituary in the British Medical Journal (14 July, 1962). There, it was remarked that “at his professional zenith he may have had the largest consulting practice in the world, news of his visit to a city or even railway station bringing forth hordes of would-be patients.”**

Kadambini Ganguly :

Kadambini Ganguly was the first female graduate of the Calcutta Medical College and the first successful practicing female physician in India. But besides her duties as a doctor, she also had important social work. After the Indian National congress was formed, she became the first female speaker at any convention of the party (1890). After the Bengal Partition Act was passed in 1905, she arranged a women’s conference the very next year in protest. In 1914, when Mahatma Gandhi visited Calcutta, she presided over a

Brahmosamaj meeting held in honour of Gandhi. She also voiced strong opinion against the pathetic treatment of tea workers in Assam and coal workers in Bihar. These movements depict her strong sense of social activism.

Diwan Singh Kalepani :

Diwan Singh was a poet and doctor who worked in the army. He was posted at the Andamans as a punishment for his anti-British views. He wrote his poetry and discussed with the local people the evils of colonial rule. He also tried to educate the local people by forming a school. However, when the Japanese army occupied the Andamans during Second World War, Diwan Singh did not like this new foreign rule either. At first the Indian independence league was formed in the Andamans with Diwan as the president. But the relation between them and the brutal Japanese soldiers soured very quickly. He disobeyed the Japanese commander and was killed in Cellular jail by the Japanese.

Dr Bhupal Bose and Dr Narayan Roy :

The names of these two doctors are mentioned in the list of prisoners at Cellular jail. Dr Narayan Roy was a member of the Yugantar party and had skill in making bombs. He was arrested in the Dalhousie square bombing case. He spent around 9 years in British jail, including cellular jail.

Pattavi Sitaramayya :

Sitaramayya was a Physician graduating from Madras Christian College and developed a thriving practice in current Andhra Pradesh. But he found the call for his country to be greater than his vocation and joined the Indian freedom struggle. He was very active in Andhra congress committee and also served in National congress committee. Bengalis remember Sitaramayya as the candidate whom Netaji Subhas Bose defeated to become President of INC at Tripuri Congress in 1939. Sitaramayya also participated in 1942 quit India movement and was imprisoned for three years. He was active in many social and financial reforms in Andhra Pradesh.

Muthulaxmi Reddy :

Muthulaxmi Reddy is a name which should be known to every Indian. But sadly, following the deplorable tradition of our country, we tend to remember names of film artists and cricketers (with no contribution to the society) while people like Muthulaxmi Reddy are forgotten.

She was a doctor from Madras Medical College, where she passed with numerous honours and medals.

She had a promising career in Medicine but she gave it up for her country. She was greatly influenced by Sarojini Naidu and Mahatma Gandhi. While on one hand, she had important political activities, she also worked tirelessly for women and children emancipation. She also formed one of the biggest cancer hospitals of India, Adyar Cancer Institute, after independence. She also struggled successfully to abolish the notorious devadasi system of India.

Dr Binay Kumar Nandy :

Dr Binay Kumar Nandy passed from Calcutta Medical College and joined the Indian Medical Service in 1941. He was thus at first working for the British government and was posted in Singapore. After Singapore was captured by the Japanese army, he was taken prisoner along with the other soldiers. Then, when the Indian National Army was formed, he joined it under Subhash Bose and fought against the British Army in Burma. He was imprisoned after the INA lost the battle. He was detained in Bhopal and released in 1946. He later ran his own charitable clinic in West Bengal till his death.

Lt Colonel AC Chatterjee :

He was another legendary INA soldier. AC Chatterjee was a doctor of Kolkata who had it all. He joined the IMS during the First World War and was later transferred to various prestigious posts in Bengal. He was the director of Public Health in Bengal Province and worked tirelessly for malaria control. Then, suddenly, at the age of 50, he was recalled back to the army by the British government during the Second World War. He boarded a ship from Bombay and went to the Far East, where the British soldiers were fighting the Japanese army. He set up a medical unit there and tended to the fallen soldiers. But, as the British beat a retreat, he was captured by the Japanese and eventually joined the INA. He quickly became a close confidante of Netaji.

He was made the first finance minister of the provisional government of free India and later, foreign minister of this provisional government by Netaji. Chatterjee evaded capture by the British army in Saigon but was eventually captured and imprisoned a few months later.

After the government files pertaining to Netaji were made public, it was revealed that the British Government was wary of the return of AC Chatterjee to Bengal. The head of the Eastern Command of the British Army requested the Spy chief in Delhi to detain him as long as possible to prevent possible revival of the INA in Bengal. Thus, he was a freedom fighter whom

the British feared.

KB Hedgwar :

This Marathi Doctor studied at the Calcutta National Medical College. He actively participated in the activities of the Indian national Congress in the 1920s. He also was associated for some time with the Anushilan Samiti of Bengal. He was active in many social movements in India.

Medical College, Kolkata, the first institution of modern medicine in India, had significant contributions in the Indian freedom Struggle. Anti-British movement was implemented through Bengal Provincial Students' Federation (BPSF) the Bengal branch of All India Students' Federation (AISF). Many students of this college were imprisoned for participating in the Quit India movement. In 1947, a student, Sere Dhiraranjan Sen, was killed on Vietnam Day (24 January) British police firing. A plaque bearing his name was set up in the Students' common room of this college.

There were many doctors in India, who wanted to build their own institutions to teach medical science, separate from British government institutions. Traditional British institutions like Medical College Kolkata or the PG hospital were always headed by European doctors. Indian doctors, even if highly qualified, could never rise to the top of these places. Thus, these institutions set up by Indian doctors were symbols of Indian identity and Indian entrepreneurship.

Dr Sundari Mohan Das :

Dr Das, a son of Sylhet in erstwhile Bengal province, passed his MD from Medical College Kolkata. He went back to Sylhet but his practice there was marred by his social activity. He converted to Bramho religion and this angered the local upper caste Hindus, who drove him out of his place. But before being driven out by the fanatics, he had already managed to start a Girls' school in that area. He came to Calcutta and started his activity. He was a staunch nationalist. He was active in the Swadeshi movement of Bengal (starting 1905) and in his personal life, refused European consumer goods till his last days. He wrote a number of songs to inspire the public against British rule. He was instrumental in forming the Bengali technical institute, which later became the Jadavpur University.

He wrote books like "Municipal Darpan" and "Bridhha Dhatri Rojnamcha" which were Bengali books on public health. It was probably the first attempt to impart medical knowledge in Bengali to the public. He was also secretly helping the terrorist organizations of Bengal, which were fighting the British underground

and in fact, his home was one of the sites of bomb making! His house was a meeting place for many of the famous revolutionaries of that period like Bipin Chandra Pal and the "Swaraj Samity" was formed there only. He helped set up three famous hospitals in Kolkata: Chittaranjan Seva Sadan, National Medical College and RG Kar Medical College. He had a very flourishing private practice. But he still found time to contribute a lot for his country. When Chittaranjan Das became Mayor of Calcutta, Dr Sundari Mohan Das became the director of Public Health for the city. It is indeed sad that the contributions of this selfless citizen have been totally neglected by later historians of the country and his native city. When the early twentieth century history of Bengal is discussed, writers, musicians, politicians and members of the royal families are shown as sages. But the myriad contributions of doctors like Sundari Mohan Das are relegated to mere footnotes.

Dr Suresh Sarbadhikary :

One of the most eminent surgeons of India in his time. BaghaJatin, the famous Bengal Revolutionary, was wounded when a tiger attacked him near his native village. It was Dr Sarbadhikary who treated Jatin and cured him of the wounds. With Dr Radha Gobinda Kar, he was instrumental in setting up the Belgachia Medical School, which is modern day RG Kar Medical College. This institution was built up as an indigenous medical school, out of British influence.

Role of Doctors in Post Independence Period :

"In these days of joy and celebrations let us not forget that this freedom brings with it the great responsibility to every one of us. Freedom has got to be maintained and defended. Health is wealth to an individual as well as to a nation. On the medical profession in India falls the difficult task of maintaining the health of the People The responsibility rested on other shoulders before but now the responsibility will be ours."

EDITORIAL, JIMA AUGUST 1947

Thus, the onus was on the medical profession to educate the countrymen on the benefits of modern science. When India gained freedom, the average life expectancy of the population was around 40 years, malnutrition was rife and every known infectious disease from Tuberculosis to Cholera were ravaging through the society. Had India adopted the "return to Satyajug" theme, we would have seen a huge rise in

mortality in the country after independence. But it was through the tireless and often thankless work of multiple modern doctors that the health parameters of the country improved substantially after independence.

There are many other unsung heroes of our profession. Doctors had a very important role to play during those days. For example, after the partition, when millions of homeless refugees came into the country, many doctors organized medical camps for them for years to come. But such activities are mostly forgotten. So, we think a revision of Indian history should be done to acknowledge the important contribution of doctors in the history of freedom struggle and post independence era.

Doctors in COVID War :

Now, during the Covid pandemic also, doctors all over the country are doing selfless and tireless service for the countrymen. **At the time of writing of this editorial, more than 200 doctors have died all across the country while battling the pandemic and many more are infected and struggling for their lives.** But we are sad to see that this sacrifice is not being properly represented in the media and armchair intellectuals of the country are getting all the limelight. Dr Pradip Bhattacharya physician from a small town near Kolkata seen patients at same fees during Lockdown period even performed home visits of very sick and old patients. He suffered from COVID infection and succumbed to death inspite of all efforts of treating intensivist. To meet hospital bill even rickshaw pullers of locality contributed. Last journey of COVID sufferers are usually friendless, tearless, absolutely alone but here ignoring all fear and protocol thousands of people accompanied his funeral journey with tears and slogans. People gave him respect of martyr. But he deserved more from other corners. His sacrifice no less than sacrifice of a freedom fighter. But I know people may forget him, may forget sacrifice

of his wife who had not pulled back his husband during lockdown period from performing noble duty. Editorial board tribute sacrifices all doctor martyrs. As editor I have specially mentioned contribution of martyr – doctors with hope that even after 100 yrs if somebody open archive of JIMA will read great sacrifice our colleagues and their role will remain immortal in pages of JIMA.

যদি কাগজে লেখো নাম, কাগজ ছিঁড়ে যাবে
পাথরে লেখো নাম, পাথর ক্ষয়ে যাবে
হৃদয়ে লেখো নাম, সে নাম রয়ে যাবে

(If you write your name in paper will be torn
If you write your name in stone will be eroded
If you write in heart of mankind will remain forever)
— *Manna Dey*

We thus have a duty to preserve the historic feats of our profession. At the headquarters of IMA and in the office of JIMA, a permanent display of the pictures and quotations of these great patriotic medical men should be set up. Also, such exhibitions should be arranged during medical conferences of all disciplines, that will be our real tribute to them. Let us take an oath on the eve of Independence Day; we will give our blood to fulfill dream of Greats of our fraternity.

“The task is difficult – so is every noble work in the world. With the co-operation and good will of other free people of the world, we hope to come out successful in arduous duty. 400 million people are determined to march towards and nothing will stop it.”

EDITORIAL JIMA, AUGUST 1947

JAI HIND BANDEMATARAM JAIBHARAT

