

History : Remembering the stalwarts

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Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) was one of the greatest health professionals to have ever adorned the surface of the earth. This year (2020), we are celebrating her 200th birth anniversary.

The birthday of Florence Nightingale (12 May) is celebrated as the international Nurses' day. Nurses all over the world now take the "Nightingale Pledge" at the beginning of their career. But we think that categorizing Florence Nightingale as only a nurse is a gross injustice to her memory. She was an excellent scholar of medical statistics and also a social reformer. She was also a prolific writer on versatile topics from religion to feminism. In fact, historians say that the full impact of Nightingale on medical history has only recently been uncovered fully.

Florence Nightingale first came to prominence during the Crimean war when she cared for the British soldiers and helped reduce the death rate in military hospital substantially. She was the first to scientifically demonstrate that simple hygienic measures like hand-washing can reduce military wartime mortality significantly. Her moniker, "Lady with the lamp" was coined after description of her activities in "The Times" newspaper and an 1857 poem by Longfellow.

Florence Nightingale was a prolific writer. Collections of her letters are digitized and available online. These letters reveal her interests in various topics. They also reveal her extremely modernistic outlook. For example, in a letter to Dr. Thomas Gillham Hewlett, the Sanitary commissioner of Bombay, she writes that the native women in India must be educated



Florence Nightingale

(This picture is in public domain in its country of Origin)

about sanitation and hygiene in order to make any government health program successful. Such thoughts about female empowerment and public engagement were not prevalent at that time. She also regularly read reports on sanitary conditions of other Indian cities like Ahmedabad and Calcutta and advised the government officials on ways to improve the situation.

Nightingale was highly interested in improving public health in India and reducing the impact of epidemics. She was well-versed in all the contemporary events in India. For example, when Kadambini Ganguly started practice as the first female

physician of India. Nightingale wrote :

"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!"

In 1878, when a terrible famine occurred in India, Nightingale criticized the British government severely:

"We do not care for the people of India... Between five and six million have perished in this famine... How can we realise what the misery is of every one of those figures: a living soul, slowly starving to death?"