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Anandi Gopal

Anandibai Joshi
(by Pooja Thakar)

In 'lot 216-A' of the Poughkeepsie Rural Cemetery, New York, amongst the numerous gravestones of Americans lies the rectangular gravestone of Dr. Anandibai Joshi. The inscription tells us that Anandi Joshi was a Hindu Brahmin girl, the first Indian woman to receive education abroad and to obtain a medical degree. How did she achieve this? What were the obstacles she faced? Why did she decide to become a doctor? And what would her response be to these questions today? I try below, to give my version of what her answers might have been, based on information gathered by reading about her and her times.

I was born on 31st March, 1865 as Yamuna Joshi in Kalyan, a small town near Mumbai. My family used to be the land lords in the town, but had lost their riches. When I was 9 years old, I was married and my name was changed to Anandi.

Before my marriage, I could barely read Marathi. Education of girls was not common then. But my husband, Gopalrao, was an ardent supporter of widow remarriage and women's education. After our marriage, he started teaching me. This was very difficult. In those days, a husband didn't even speak directly to his wife in front of others. In the beginning, my husband tried to enroll me in the missionary schools. But that did not work out. We had to move from Kalyan to Alibaug to Kolhapur and finally

to Calcutta where he was left free to teach me.

I didn't have much of a choice whether I liked to learn or not. He was my husband and I had to listen to what he said. I was terrified of him and the scoldings I would receive from him. But once I started learning, I was soon also able to read Sanskrit and also read and speak English.

After my rapid progress, my husband was insistent that I should acquire higher education. We were confused about what I should to study. But then I realized that female doctors were a non-existent facility to any woman in our country. Many women, ashamed or reluctant to approach a male doctor, would suffer a lot as a result. I myself had lost my infant son when I was 14. So I decided that I would like to be a doctor. Even the subject I picked for my thesis later was "Obstetrics among Aryan Hindoos".

My husband tried very hard to get me admission to some university in America. He even tried to pretend becoming a missionary to that end but it invited only ridicule. However, a Mrs. Carpenter of Roselle, New Jersey, by chance came to know the story and was moved by the correspondence and wrote me a letter. She offered to host me in the U.S.A. Since Gopalrao wasn't able to get a job there we decided that I should leave for America alone. We had to face a lot of opposition and criticism, to the extent of people throwing stones and cow dung at us. Finally after many trials and tribulations, in June 1883, I reached America and was met by my Carpenter mavashi (aunt).

In America there were many things that I thought were strange and many that the Carpenters found strange about me. For example, the Carpenters found it odd that I wouldn't sit down on a chair when Mr. Carpenter was in the room, as was the custom in India then and I was astonished that they didn't bathe every day. Other things like my clothes, my not eating non-vegetarian food was also very strange for them. Carpenter mavashi took care of me as if I was her own daughter. She cried like a child when she left me at the Women's College in Philadelphia.

The Superintendent and Secretary of the College were very kind. They were impressed that I had come to study from so far away, facing poverty and opposition of my people. They even offered me a scholarship of \$600 for the three years I would be there.

The first problem was the proper attire for winter. The traditional Maharashtrian nine yards saree I wore left my waist and calves uncovered. Wearing western attire, better equipped to handle cold, was unthinkable. In spite of my husband telling me that he would not mind if I ate meat and wore western clothes I was not sure he had meant it, what with the really strange and mean letters from him. I remembered also the verses I had read in the Bhagwad Gita which said the body is just a covering for the soul which could not be corrupted. I felt if this was true, then how would my wearing western clothes corrupt or destroy my soul? After much debate and wondering, I decided to wear the saree like the Gujarati women wore; I would cover my waist and calves and could also wear a petticoat inside. I decided not to inform Gopalrao as yet.

However, the room that was provided to me at the college didn't have a proper fireplace. The fireplace emitted a lot of smoke when lit. So it was a choice between smoke and cold! I tried to get another place, but that was not possible as no one was ready to rent a place to a brown, Hindu girl trying to be a doctor. After 1.5-2 years in that place, I had started having a constant temperature and cough.

Well, living in an alien culture, weather was always going to be difficult and I was ready to face it. What was most taxing was my husband's behaviour. After the first few letters, his letters had taken a strange turn. They had grown highly unpredictable, sometimes full of love and support and most of the times chiding and taunting me. Even in his nicer letters, there would be one nasty comment that would sour everything. He kept on taunting me that I was a free bird in a foreign land and that I had probably forgotten my 'poor', 'uncivilized' and 'incapable' husband who wasn't as 'great' as me. On seeing an innocent photograph I had sent him, he made a remark that I appeared to have forgotten my tradition and culture as my pallu was askew. I had no idea what the cause for this nastiness was. I was doing exactly what he had told me to and was only trying to fulfill his dream. But I had always found it difficult to figure out my husband. Sometimes I used to feel that he was way below me and pictured him at the bottom of a ladder while I was at the top. But then the next minute

I reminded myself that he was the one who had given me access to the ladder in the first place. He was my husband and my teacher.

My health was severely affected by my stay there. After around two years in the U.S.A., I had sudden spells when I used to feel very faint and get a high temperature. The cough never left me. By the end of the three years, my condition had worsened. I somehow scraped through the final exams. At the convocation where my husband was present and so was Pandita Ramabai, it was announced that I was the first woman doctor of India and got a standing ovation for that! It was one of the most rewarding moments of my life. Day by day I grew worse and nothing was working. My husband then admitted me to the Women's hospital in Philadelphia. I was then diagnosed as having Tuberculosis but the disease hadn't yet reached my lungs. The doctors advised to go back to India.”

The journey back home took a further toll on Anandibai's health as doctors on the ship refused to treat a brown woman. On reaching India, she stayed at her cousin's place in Pune to receive treatment from a renowned Ayurvedic specialist. He however refused to treat her as according to him, she had crossed the boundaries of society. Finally on February 26th, 1887, frustrated that all her achievements were in vain, Anadibai succumbed to her disease at the age of 22. She was mourned throughout India. Her ashes were sent to Mrs. Carpenter who wanted to place them in her family cemetery in Poughkeepsie.

Anandibai's efforts however, were not in vain. To this day, she is an inspiration to Indian girls from all walks of life. She enables us to believe that whatever our situations and circumstances, nobody's dreams are unachievable and that each of us has the potential to achieve whatever we wish to. Today the Maharashtra government has a fellowship in her name for young women working on women's health.

References

[1] 'Anandi.Gopal' by S.J.Joshi

[2] a blog on the net: rsparlourtricks.blogspot.com/2006/03/anandibai-joshi.html

[3] a book review of Anandi-Gopal by a Pratibha Ghogale-Kelapure, a San Francisco Bay Area based writer on a site called SAWNET (South Asian Women's NETwork) <http://www.sawnet.org/books/reviews.php?Anandi+Gopal>