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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? I try below, to give my version of what her answers might have been to these questions today, 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 Kalyan, but had lost their riches. I got married when I was 9 years old and my name was changed to Anandi.

Before my marriage, I could manage to read Marathi; education of girls was not common then. But my husband, Gopalrao, was an ardent supporter of widow remarriage and women's education. In fact, he married me on the condition that he would be allowed to educate me. 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 to Calcutta. Once I started learning, I was soon also able to read

Sanskrit and also read and speak English.

Learning from my husband was not an easy task. He would hit me with pieces of wood; throw chairs and books at me in anger. I remember him threatening to leave me when I was 12. Years later, when I wrote to him from America, I asked him whether this was right. I had always wondered if it was good behaviour on his part. What would have happened, for instance, if I had left him then? I explained to him in the letter that I would always be grateful for what he had done for me. But at the same time, I couldn't help but wonder how a Hindu woman had no choice but to allow her husband to do what he wished.

After my rapid progress, my husband was insistent that I should acquire higher education. I realized that most women in our country had no access to female doctors, and women who were 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 be a doctor. Even the subject I picked for my thesis later was "Obstetrics among Aryan Hindoos".

My husband tried 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, came to know the story by chance and was moved by the correspondence in the *Missionary Review*, and wrote me a letter. She offered to host me, and soon Mrs Carpenter and I started writing to each other a lot. I felt very close to her and started calling her 'mavashi' (aunt). In these letters, we discussed various issues; I could write to her about my wonderings on matters which I don't think I could have expressed in public. We discussed early marriages and how they affected women's health. I recall, in one letter to her I wrote about how a legislation similar to the suttee ban would be desirable in case of child marriage too. Similarly we discussed the status of women in the society.

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 escorted by American missionary women, and was met by my Carpenter mavashi.

In America there were many things that I thought were strange and many that the Carpenters found strange about me. But Carpenter mavashi took care of me as if I was her 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 and were impressed that I had come to study from so far away. They even offered me a scholarship of \$600 for the three years I would be there.

The first problem I faced in America was the 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 not something I was completely comfortable with. At the same time, I remembered 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! My health was severely affected by my stay there. After around two years in the U.S.A., I had sudden spells of faintness and 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. My health, however, grew worse day by day. My husband admitted me to the Women's hospital in Philadelphia and I was diagnosed as having Tuberculosis. But the disease hadn't yet reached my lungs. The doctors advised to go back to India. I decided to do that, and accepted the offer for the post of Lady Doctor in Kolhapur”

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 who also refused to treat her as according to him, she had crossed the boundaries of society. Finally on February 26th, 1887, Anadibai succumbed to her disease at the age of 22. She was mourned throughout India. Her ashes were sent to Mrs. Carpenter who placed them in her family cemetery in Poughkeepsie.

It is incredible how far the 15-year-old Anandibai had reached in her perception of the society then. Her letters to Mrs. Carpenter show that she had formed her own opinions on issues that today would be considered feminist. Feminist writings like Tarabai Shinde's 'Stree Purusha Tulana', Pandita Ramabai's 'Stree Dharma Neeti', and Rakhmabai's letters under the name 'The Hindu Lady' to the Times of India also date from the same period. It is amazing that Anandibai was just 15 when she held very similar opinions.

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

References

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