

# **Kadambini Ganguly and Women Empowerment in 19<sup>th</sup> Century India**

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## **PROLOGUE:**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century British India went under age-old Indian religious and superstitious beliefs on the one hand and the modern ideologies induced by British thinking on the other. The question of gender equality and women empowerment had found no place at that period. The country itself was struggling for freedom, men were themselves not free and as such, they were not in the position to think about women. In the traditional patriarchal society, women were suffering from illiteracy and conservative orthodox dogmas, owing to which women themselves became the enemies of women. One popular belief was that, education would bring widowhood into the lives of women. This was one of the main reasons for discouraging women education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian society. The practice of heinous crime, called *Sati*, child marriage, polygamy and the exploitation of Hindu widows in the name of obtaining merit in the eye of God made the situation more deplorable. At this juncture, few great thinkers and reformers came in India society, like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Raja Rammohan Roy, Sri Dwaraka Nath Ganguly, Durga Mohan Das, Kesab Chandra Sen, who started to spread women education as well as fought for gender equality and women empowerment.

Among all these great thinkers and social activists of the then India, Sri Dwaraka Nath Ganguly had not only supported gender equality and women empowerment theoretically, but practically implemented these in his life. His wife Smt. Kadambini Ganguly was the first lady graduate from University of Calcutta and the first lady doctor from Calcutta Medical College. Her story of graduating from the Calcutta Medical College was itself a portrayal of the denial of gender equality and women empowerment in the then Indian society. She had given a tough fight for becoming the first lady doctor of Bengal. Her challenging performance was the evidence of bringing women empowerment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian society.

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In this backdrop, the present study would like to analyse the role of Smt. Kadambini Ganguly to generate women empowerment in the socio-legal conditions of 19<sup>th</sup> century India. The study would also like to highlight the then social impediments for women empowerment in India as well as to compare the position of 19<sup>th</sup> century and present India.

### **KADAMBINI GANGULY: BIOGRAPHY**

Kadambini was born in 18<sup>th</sup> July, 1861 in Bhagalpur, Bihar (Sadhya, 2020, p.963). She was born in a brahmo family, her father's name was Braja Kishore Basu and he was a school teacher in Bhagalpur. Later on, she came to Calcutta for her studies and was admitted in the Banga Mahila Vidyalaya, which was later merged with Bethune School. She passed her Entrance Examination for the University of Calcutta in 1878 (Sadhya, 2020, p.963). She was graduated from the University of Calcutta in 1882 with a degree in arts (Sadhya, 2020, p.963). She was one of the first two lady graduates from the University of Calcutta. After graduation, she concentrated into medical studies, because she wanted to be a lady doctor from the Calcutta Medical College. But, the authority of the Calcutta Medical College was against the admission of a female candidate therein. There was a strong opposition against her admission therein from the male professors of the said medical college. Despite all the odds, she succeeded to take admission in the Calcutta Medical College in 1883 as the first female candidate owing to the efforts of her husband Sri Dwaraka Nath Ganguly (Sadhya, 2020, p.963). She tried her best to become a good doctor and scored good marks in almost all the examinations of the medical college. But, one professor was totally against the concept of women becoming doctors simultaneously with men and he had failed Kadambini in one subject in the final MB examination (Sadhya, 2020, p.963). Though Kadambini applied for her five years' performance review, but that was not allowed in the Medical Council. Consequently, she got only the Certificate of First LMS examination from the University of Calcutta (Sen, 2014, p.54). Before the coming of Calcutta Medical College within the jurisdiction of the University of Calcutta, the Principal of the college used to award the Graduate of Medical College of Bengal (GMCB) Diploma to the successful candidates. As such, the Principal of the Calcutta Medical College, Dr. Coates awarded her the GMCB Diploma for the successful completion of the course by her and that diploma gave her the right to do private practice (Sen, 2014, p.54). During her studies of medicine, she got Rs. 20/- per month scholarship from the Dufferin Fund (Sen, 2014, p.54).

Thereafter, she was appointed as a doctor in the Lady Dufferin Women's Hospital with a prestigious salary of Rs. 300/- per month (Sen, 2014, p.54). But, in spite of her enormous efforts she did not receive any recognition from the hospital as well as was forced to do minimal jobs. Even she was not given independent charge of any department of the hospital, because European doctors and nurses refused to work under her supervision. She was downgraded in comparison to the British lady doctors owing to the absence of her MB degree. She then left the job and started private practising. But, there also she had to suffer several odd situations. Thereafter, she made up her mind for pursuing higher studies in England. She went to England in 1893 and got admission in the Scottish College of Edinburgh. She successfully secured Triple Diplomas within three months in the form of Licentiate of the College of Physicians, Edinburgh (LRCP), Licentiate of the College of Surgeons, Glasgow (LRCS) and Licentiate of the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons, Dublin (LFPS) (Sadhya, 2020, p.965). She secured the Triple Diplomas in the subjects of medicine, therapeutics, surgery, surgical anatomy, midwifery and medical jurisprudence (Sen, 2014, p.54). After returning from England, she again joined the Lady Dufferin Hospital as a senior doctor. She was recognised as the first woman practitioner of western medicine having foreign degrees in the whole South Asia. She then, started private practising and became highly successful (Sadhya, 2020, p.965). The biography of Dr. Kadambini Ganguly has shown her never ending fighting spirit to become a doctor. But, she has got a great historical significance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century India. Next part of the study will concentrate on this.

### **KADAMBINI GANGULY: HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

Dr. Kadambini Ganguly was a very kind hearted lady as well as a social activist. During her college days, she started educating girl children with the help of the then Brahmo Samaj and her husband Sri Dwaraka Nath Ganguly. In fact, her husband was her teacher, mentor and a great supporter. Without his total support, it was not possible for Kadambini to become a woman medical practitioner. Sri Ganguly was also a freedom fighter as well as a social reformer. Kadambini followed his footsteps and started activities relating to social reformation. During her days in the medical college, she successfully treated several patients. Thereafter, in the Dufferin Hospital and while private practising, she had recovered many patients having serious illness. She tried to enlighten the poor ladies with her wisdom, so that, they would become independent. Even she helped few ladies to take admission in the medical college for studying midwifery and for pursuing their careers as midwives. She gave free medical treatment to a number of poor patients also. She fought for building crèche for the

children of working mothers of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation. When the Corporation refused to build up the crèche, she took the steps to build up the same from the funds of the Brahma Samaj with the help of her husband.

Her skills and efforts for the development of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian society, especially of the women were never ending. In fact, she studied medical science for the treatment of women patients of the society. At her times, women used to follow purdah system and treating of the female patients by the male doctors were prohibited in the society. That was the main reason for high female mortality rate in the then society. Moreover, use of dirty rooms and poor atmosphere during child birth increased the child and mother mortality rates. Dr. Kadambini started to change the scenario by spreading education regarding the need of cleanliness at the time of child birth as well as handling the delivery cases as a doctor in better manner than the midwives. In this manner, she tried to protect the right to life and health of women section of the society, because at her times, illness of the women was never taken seriously. Even the women had no right to life at all. Nobody had considered the high mortality rate of women during the time of child birth. Once a wife used to die during delivery, the husband used to take another wife. Polygamy was allowed in the society and men used to desert the wives having poor health condition or incapable of giving birth to a child. At this juncture, Kadambini fought for the protection of the interests of the women section of the society. Here lies the historical significance of her activities. Now it is necessary to find out her relationship with women empowerment. Next part of the study will clearly explain it.

### **KADAMBINI GANGULY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

“Empowerment is an active multidimensional process which should enable women to realise their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It would consist of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision-making, greater ability to plan their lives, have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free them from shackles imposed on them by custom, belief and practice” [Soni (ed), 2001, p.28].

Empowering women requires a fundamental and dynamic change in the perception of women, expectations from women in the society and a scientific and rational understanding of women’s problems and needs. Empowerment of women is the prerequisite for the sustainable development of any country [Rao (ed), 2005, p.168].

Empowerment of women is the sole criteria for the development of women in a country and to make them free from the shackles of orthodox and conservative male dominated society. In fact, empowerment alone can make women to understand their capabilities and qualities as well as to encourage them to develop in their fullest extent. It is the instrument, which can bring women at the forefront, at the driving seat of the society. Education is the biggest device to bring empowerment of women in any given society and women, when empowered, can become a major source of the total workforce of a country. Though empowerment of women is a very serious issue, but none of the countries have given importance to it before the period of renaissance or reformation. Just from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ideology of women empowerment came in the forefront. Even the European and American countries were disinterested to provide equal opportunities to women for education and development. India, being a country under British colonialism, was lagging far behind them. But, at the then period, few reformists and the Christian missionaries started to speak for the education, betterment and equal opportunities for the development of women.

Kadambini Ganguly was a leading lady, who had not only developed and proved herself to be in the same position with men, but had also tried to develop the conditions of other Indian women. She started to speak and fight for the equal rights of women with men in every sector through her writings and social activities. In the Calcutta Session of Indian National Congress, 1890, Kadambini delivered a lecture in English (Sen, 2014, p.55). There she had spoken about the need of political participation of women in the activities of a country like India. She had also expressed her views regarding the need of active participation of Indian women in the sessions of Indian National Congress. She organized the Women's Conference in Calcutta in 1906 in the aftermath of the partition of Bengal (Sen, 2014, p.55). She was praised by Annie Besant for symbolising the upliftment of Indian womanhood as well as for playing a great role towards women empowerment thereof. The American historian David Kopf also praised her for being the most accomplished and liberated Brahmo woman of her time, who had played a great role for the liberation of the then Bengali women (Sen, 2014, p.55).

### **KADAMBINI GANGULY AND THE AGE OF CONSENT BILL**

The British government had introduced a bill in India during 1890, called the Age of Consent Bill, the purpose of which was to raise the age of consent for sexual intercourse for all girls, married or unmarried, to 12 years. There was no age of consent by the wife for cohabitation

prevalent at the then period, child marriage was practised among the Hindus as a religious rite and child sex was permitted in absolute manner. Owing to the early marriage and sex, girls were suffering from serious bodily injuries in their private parts, which were not even treated by the medical practitioners, because male doctors were not allowed to check the female patients. When the matter was reported as a serious issue, British government had brought the Age of Consent Bill. In order to survey the social scenario, the government had appointed Dr. Kadambini Ganguly to submit a report in this respect. As the first female medical practitioner of the country, she was entrusted to discharge that duty, because only she was capable to express the pathetic health conditions of the girl children of the country. She also treated a number of similar girl patients. She submitted her report in favour of raising the age of consent for cohabitation to 12 years. On the basis of her report, British government passed the Age of Consent Act, 1891, under which sexual intercourse with a girl below 12 years of age was called rape and was subjected to criminal prosecution. It amended the Section 375 (“Of Rape”) of the Indian Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1882.

This Act brought a drastic change in the 19<sup>th</sup> century socio-legal scenario in India and Dr. Kadambini Ganguly played a pivotal role in this respect. The Act was severely criticised by the orthodox Hindus for encroaching into their religious rituals. Kadambini Ganguly was also defamed by calling her a woman of bad character for taking important steps behind the passing of the Act. However, the function of Dr. Ganguly in this respect, was no doubt, praiseworthy and was proved to be beneficial for the future Indian women.

## **EPILOGUE**

The socio-legal scenario of 19<sup>th</sup> century India was anti women and Dr. Kadambini Ganguly had become a boon for those women. She played a pivotal role for bringing women empowerment in 19<sup>th</sup> century India, which ultimately led to the change in the socio-legal scenario of womanhood in India. The concept of women empowerment has morefully recognised and considered in post-independence and post-constitutional era in India. Since 1950, i.e. after the making of the Indian Constitution, the government of India has enacted a number of women favoured legislations as well as has taken social welfare policies for the development of women in all round manner. While comparing the position of Indian women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the position of present Indian women, it can be said that, women did not have the fundamental rights to life, equality, liberty, health, education, dignity and right to property at that period. Those rights of the women are recognised in the present India by

way of incorporating those in the constitutional provisions and women-centric legislations. In this respect, it can be said that, empowerment of Indian women has become possible to a great extent in the present day India. Hence, Dr. Kadambini Ganguly is the forerunner of women empowerment in India.

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