



First Human Dead Body Dissection in the History of Medical Education in India & Pundit Madhusudan Goopta (1806-1856)

Dr Sankar Kr Nath

On January 28, 1835, the then Governor-General William Bentinck passed a government order (G.O. No. 28, dt.28.1.1835) declaring the establishment of the first medical college in India --- MEDICAL COLLEGE BENGAL and a bunch of rules and regulations (35 in number) was made in black and white although in this bunch there was no definite name of this medical college; it was only denoted as new medical college.(1)

But almost from the beginning, the college was called as MEDICAL COLLEGE BENGAL, CALCUTTA MEDICAL COLLEGE, MEDICAL COLLEGE OF BENGAL, MEDICAL COLLEGE OF CALCUTTA etc. But the first Principal of the college officially called it as Calcutta Medical College in his report, from the beginning.(2)

Three previous medical schools, viz., the Medical Class in Sanskrit College (Estd: 1827), the Medical Class in Calcutta Madrassa (Estd: 1827) and the Native Medical Institution (Estd: 1822) were abolished according to a recommendation of a committee on 20 October 1834. This committee was formed by the then Governor General Lord William Bentinck on October, 1833 and was consisting of 6 members viz. Dr. John Grant, J.C.C. Sutherland, C.E. Trevelyan, Thomas Spence, Dr. M.J. Bramley and Ram Comul Sen, the only Indian member.(3)

So the medical education in its true sense, started in India with a scientific approach, the medium of study was of course in English language and the curriculum was fashioned at par with the European medical institutions. Medical College Bengal became affiliated with the London University.

Thus Medical College Bengal was founded at Calcutta but due to want of adequate buildings initially the classes were started on June 1, 1835 at the house of Ram Comul Sen, situated north to Goldighi at College Square (now where coffee house stands).

And then the College was shifted to the present site (88, College Street) on 17 March, 1836. *Bengal Hurkaru* wrote on 18 March, 1836 as below :

“The opening of the new native Medical College, which took place yesterday, was very fully attended. Among the distinguished visitors were the Governor-general, the Commander-in-chief, the Members of Council, the Law Commissioners, the heads of several of the departments and several natives of rank...”(4)

At the onset, the College began with 3 European Professors Dr. M. J. Bramley, Dr. H. H. Goodeve, Dr.

W. B. O'Shaughnessy and 3 native physicians, Pundit Madhusudan Goopta, Nabakrishna Goopta, and Ram Issur Awasthi, the last three persons became demonstrators in Medical College. They had learned Ayurvedic



medicine along with western medicine at Medical Class in Sanskrit College previously. Since inception of the Medical College, Dr. Bramley had been the Superintendent. On August 5, 1835, the post of superintendent was abolished and the post of Principal was created. Dr. Bramley became the first Principal of Medical College Bengal. In fact he was the first Principal of any medical college in India. After the death of Dr Bramley in 1837 the post of principal was abolished and the great philanthropist David Hare, the Secretary of the College, held the highest post of the Medical College. (5), (6)

The number of foundation pupils was fifty. Although the medical classes were started from 1 June, 1835, the dissection of human dead body, the most essential part of the medical education, could not be started until January 10, 1836.

January 10, 1836 is a red letter day in the history of medical education in India when Madhusudan Goopta, the teacher of the Medical College Bengal, rising to the occasion keeping aside all the prejudices and threatening from the *Samajpatis* of the society, dissected human dead body for the first time in the history of modern India for the cause of medical education. This event is indeed a most important part of the Indian renaissance. Thus, by this act, it made the way to link between the Eastern and Western nations in the context of same medical science.(7)

A vivid description of the first day dissection was given later on by another great philanthropist Drinkwater Bethune, the then President of Council of Education, in a lecture at Medical College Bengal on 15 June, 1849 after inaugurating an oil-painting of Pundit Madhusudan Goopta painted by renowned painter Madam Belnos. We can well imagine that Pundit Madhusudan Goopta was present at the function. Mr. Bethune said :

“The 10th day of January, 1836, the date which I have affixed to the picture, a day for ever memorable in the annals of Bengal, was the great day, on which Madasuden Gupta rose up superior to the prejudices of his earlier-education, and boldly flung open the gates of medical science to his countrymen.

I have had the scene described to me. It had needed some time, some exercise of the persuasive art, before Madasuden could bend up his mind to the attempt; but, having once taken his resolution, he never flinched or swerved from it. At the appointed hour, scalpel in hand, he followed Dr. Goodeve into the godown where the body lay ready. The other students, deeply interested in what was going forward, but strangely agitated with mingled feelings of curiosity and alarm, crowded after them, but durst not enter the building where this fearful deed was to be perpetrated; they clustered round the door; they peeped through the jilmils; resolved at least to have ocular proof of its accomplishment. And when Madasuden's knife, held with a strong and steady hand, made a long and deep incision in the breast, the lookers-on drew a long gasping breath, like men relieved from the weight of some intolerable suspense.”(8)

Another remarkable day is October 28, 1836. On this day, amongst the students, the first human dead body

dissection in India was performed by Rajkrishna Dey, a foundation pupil of Medical College Bengal.(9)

In a lecture at Calcutta Medical College in 1868, Dr. Charles Francis, Professor of Medicine, said:

“My young friends.—There is a portrait in this theatre which tells a revolution in your country,--- not one of those revolutionary periods which are too often marked by bloodshed and disorder, but of an epoch pregnant with momentous blessings to India. It is an oft-told tale, but a tale which cannot be told too often, how your ancestor Baboo MODOOSOODUN GOOPTA, the pioneer of these blessings, in the courageous act by which he defied his country’s scorn, established that firm basis of sound medical education, which it is now your great privilege to enjoy.” (10)

After the first human dead body dissection at Calcutta Medical College, the reaction was manifold in the society but above all the science triumphed over prejudices. And that can be realized from the fact that in the next eight years total number of dead body dissected went up to 2151--- in the 1837 the number of dead body dissected was 60; in 1838 it was 120; in 1839 it was 120; in 1840 – 174; in 1841 – 521; in 1842 – 304; in 1843 – 344; and in 1844 it was 508.(11)

Another achievement on the part of Pundit Madhusudan Goopta was that he could engage muslim students of the Medical College in the dissection and thus a reviewer of *London Journal of Medicine* (1851) wrote:

“Such was the state of professional darkness among the Hindoos, until the institution of the Medical College in Calcutta in 1835; and, among the triumphs which are gradually being gained over prejudices, one of the most important has been the engaging the Mahomedan Hindustani students in the dissection of the human body. For this, the enlightened Hindoo practitioner will have to remember with gratitude the energy of Dr. Goodeve, and Pundit MODOOSUDUN GUPTOO.” (12)

A popular hearsay prevails in respect to the first day of human dead body dissection that, to make this day memorable, a gun was fired from the Fort William. Calcutta historian Raja Binaya Krishna Deb (1905) wrote :

“It is said that a gun was fired from the ramparts of Fort William in honour of the performance of the dissection of the human bodies by the Hindu student, Babu Madhu Sudan Gupta....” (13)

But this is not correct because whole event of the first day dissection was kept secret for fear of the *Samajpatis* and in this perspective story of gun fire does not suit at all. That is why there was no news of the first day dissection in any of the newspaper or journal at that time, rather the news of this event came to light much later.

First final examination was held on and from October 30, 1838 and continued for 7 days. Eleven students were allowed to sit for but only four passed. They were Umacharan Sett, Rajkrishna Dey, Dwarkanath Goopta, and Nabinchandra Mitra. In January 1839, one more student passed in a similar examination. He is Shyama Charan Dutta. They were the first Medical Graduates from any medical college in India. These five passed

students were given diploma G.M.C.B.(Graduate of the Medical College of Bengal) which was equivalent to M.B. of London University.(14)

It is worth mentioning that teacher Madhusudan Goopta became a pupil of Medical College Bengal and sat for the final examination of Medical College on 26 November 1840 and got G.M.C.B.(15)

Madhusudan Goopta was an outstanding teacher of Medical College Bengal. He was also the Superintendent of both Military Class and Bengali Class of the Medical College. He has written books like London Pharmacopoeia, *Sarira Vidya*, translated Shusruta, Hooper's Anatomist Vademecum etc. He was an ardent research worker in the field of medical science and an outstanding physician in his times.

Madhusudan Goopta died of diabetic gangrene on November 15, 1856. His contribution in the progress of the medical education in India will be remembered for ever. **HE LED THE WAY TO TRUTH AND KNOWLEDGE. THUS GREAT HONOUR IS DUE TO MADHUSUDAN GOOPTA.**

Our earnest appeal to the concerning authority to declare the 10 January as *National Medical Education Day in India* to mark the first day of human dead body dissection in modern India.

References:

1. *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*, 1835, Vol. XVIII, new series, Sept-Dec, p. 28.
2. *The Calcutta Monthly Journal*, for the year 1836, May, Calcutta, 1837, pp. 1-7.
3. *On the Education of People of India*, C.E. Trevelyan, London, 1838.
4. *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*, Sep-Dec, 1836, p.14.
5. *General Committee of Public Instruction*, Account Books Relating to Schools and Colleges, Hindu Hospital and Medical College 1832-1841, Vol. – 39.
6. *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*, Vol. XXIII, May-Aug, 1837, p. 199.
7. *The British Medical Journal*, 9 July, 1864, Vol. II, London, p. 35
8. *General Report on Public Instruction*, 1849-1850, p. 124.
9. Report of the GCPI, for the year 1836, pp. 54, 55.
10. A Course of Lectures on the Principles and Practice of Medicine, *The Indian Medical Gazette*, May 1, 1868, p.97.
11. *Calcutta Review*, Vol. III, Jan-Jun, 1845, p. xxxviii.
12. *London Journal of Medicine*, May, 1851, p.458.
13. *The Early History and Growth of Calcutta*, Raja Binaya Krishna Deb, 1905 p. 88 (footnote).
14. 'Hindu Medicine and Medical Education', in *The Calcutta Review*, Vol. XLII, 1866, p. 118.
15. Medical College, Bengal, Terjubilee Year of Medical College Bengal, 1984, p. 15.
