



The First Cadaveric Dissection in India

– Calcutta Medical College circa - 10th January, 1836

Abstract

The first cadaver dissection in India in the 19th century after millennia of social prejudices took place in the recently established Calcutta Medical College in 1835, the first medical college in Asia imparting western medical education to British, Anglo Indians and Indians in the empire. The first scientific approach to medical sciences commenced following this landmark event and set the trend for future liberal attitudes in society and contributed to the Bengal Renaissance of the 19th century. This is a fictional account of the day when it happened. Only the characters and the fact that the dissection occurred are real.

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10 AM

Baboo Pundit Madhusudan Goopto quickly cast his eyes around the room. It was a small office with sparse furniture in a building just opposite the Sanskrit College in a plot of land owned by Baboo Ramcomul Sen. This was where on the 20th of February, last year, the first classes of the new Calcutta Medical College were held. The room had 2 windows through which bright light of a very pleasant and glorious January day poured in. In the room were his colleagues Henry Hurry Goodeve, chief of the Materia Medica, Charles Eggerton the surgeon, William Brooke O'Shaughnessy, the chemist, the secretary of the college David Hare and John Elliott Drinkwater Bethune, the noted educationalist. Plus there were 4 of his students Dwarkanath, Umacharan, Rajkrishno and Nobinchunder and his anatomy colleague demonstrators Nobin Goopto and Ramisswar Avasti. Four young progressives from Derozio's Young Bengal were guarding the door along with a company of the Gordon Highlanders and paiks from the local thana. The doors of the College were shut. Security was important because he was going to raise hell today.

Outside the crowd had swelled to thousands and they were in a violent mood chanting, 'death to the infidel'. Although clad in a choga and an achkan and wrapped in a shawl, he shivered slightly. In exactly 2 hours from now, he would do something that would challenge the Hindu establishment. Yesterday, the very patrons who were instrumental in establishing Calcutta Medical College, the members of the Dharma Sabha, Baboo Radhakanata Deb and Baboo Ramcomul Sen came to his modest lodgings in Colootola Street and threatened him with dire consequences if he went ahead with touching and desecrating a dead body. He tried hard to reason with them that in ancient Hindu scriptures, cadaver dissection had been

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prevalent and indeed endorsed by Susruta but to no avail. Only his friend Mutty Lal Seal spoke for him. And then came the 4 muscled men from the Young Bengal who guaranteed his safety. The Governor General Charles Metcalfe promised him an army security detail and the principal Joseph Bramley mobilised the local police force.

Goodeve, a large man with sideburns matching his personality joked, *"You look like a man condemned to death Baboo"*. He swallowed and tried to smile. Maybe his fear was too palpable. David Hare, a visionary and a small diminutive man but a man with a colossal personality and personal courage said, *"I know that you are afraid. It is good to feel fear because that will guide you to break centuries old taboo and superstition. Remember Baboo, with fear comes courage"*. He sighed and looked through the window. He could see as far as the ghats of the Hooghly and the Fort William ramparts. And he could see and hear the crowd baying for his blood.

11 AM

The small party in the office led by him slowly trooped out of the room. They had to go to the shed just besides the main building that doubled up as a store room. It was a somewhat ramshackle annexe with thatched roof that leaked rain water. The walls were pockmarked with neglect that allowed slithers of the sunlight in. But it was quite large. This had been cleaned and a central marble table laid out with a smaller wooden table containing surgical instruments by its side. There was a gong and a hammer to be struck when the time arrived. A pitcher with washing facilities and soap were also provided for. There were no windows but the space made up for the claustrophobia. Lanterns and hurricanes illuminated the room.

On the table lay the corpse of a 12 year old boy, white and Caucasian and parched white with wide staring eyes in a gaunt face. No one from the Hindu burning ghats would donate him anybody to practice what he intended to. In desperation, Bramley turned to the Honorable East India Company for help. Metcalfe who had done more for the College than anybody else readily agreed and ordered Messrs Bathgate and Company, a firm based in Edinburgh now with branch in Calcutta to supply the body. This body of the boy was prepared after death with injections of arsenic, gelatine and mercury as discovered by the Belgian chemist Burringraeve and then preserved in alcohol. It was shipped from Southampton and arrived only yesterday on the HMS Excelsior.

They all entered the room one by one and the security detail followed them to be posted outside. He went near the table and looked at the boy. He told his students, *"This is a dead body that has no cast, creed and religion. Medicine should be like that, so today, we will defy our religion who forbids us to touch dead bodies. We shall prove that doctors are above everything. Our only trade is to treat mankind and follow the truth. Be proud to be a part of this and there can be no better students than you. Umacharan, you are a Tantubai, Dwarkanath, you are a Vaidya, Rajkrishno, you are Brahma and Nobin, you are a Kayasthya. All different castes and yet you are here. Calcutta Medical College makes no distinction"*.

Goodeve, Eggerton, Hare, O'Shaughnessy and Bethune shouted, *"Hear, hear"*. Eggerton, a rotund man with the hands of God muttered, *"We expect nothing less from you Baboo"*. Bethune, a rather handsome man with wide eyes, said, *"Baboo, you will be breaking millennia of taboos and you are challenging a rather conservative society. Don't worry about the legacy that you are leaving behind. Posterity will remember you as a pioneer for advancement of science and a progressive liberal. We are here for you."* O'Shaughnessy, a genius and a polymath said under his breath, *"Show us the way, Baboo, we will all follow your example."*

His confidence soared and his fear vanished in a whiff of smoke. He looked at the faces around him especially his students. With a bunch like this he can challenge hell. And by a curious twist of providence, the sun through a slit in the wall illuminated his face in a glorious halo.

12 Noon H hour

The nearby St John's Church tolled its bell announcing the arrival of mid-day and the Fort William gun battery boomed 12 times. Baboo Madhusudan Gopto suddenly became oblivious to his surroundings. Nothing else mattered now but the pursuit of science and opening up a long repressed society to enlightenment. He picked up a scalpel from the table manufactured by WH Hillard and Sons from Glasgow and with steady, confident hands plunged an incision vertically at the centre of the chest of the boy and

curved it both ways on the left and the right just under the rib margin. The parchment like shrivelled skin parted its ways like a knife through butter and with it the ultrasocial conservatism of his society. The audience forgot to breathe.

And then a loud chorus of 'Hurrah' broke out in the room. David Hare, the redoubtable and indomitable free spirit rushed to the gong, picked up the hammer and gave it a mighty blow. The vibrations echoed across the room followed by a collective gasp from the crowd outside. The sound wafted in the divine wind to the Fort William gun battery 3 miles away. Out here were stationed Captain Robertson's Royal Navy 64 pounders. As if on cue and as ordered by the Governor General himself, these monsters opened up to the heavens. The roar of these guns with a 50 gun salute was heard throughout the whole length and breadth of the blossoming cultural and urban metropolis. The earth shook shattering the vestiges of dark attitudes and it struck fear in the social conservatives who woke up from their insecure slumbers.

He did not hear anything. In clear and crisp English, he was lecturing to his students as he was dissecting, *"So first we remove the chest wall, then the muscles followed by identification of the blood vessels – then we will enter the pleural cavity, dissect the lungs, trace the pulmonary vessels to the heart and finally dissect the heart."*

With deft hands and with a bone cutter, he split the sternum and identified the Pectoralis major et minor and the Serratus anterior. His knowledge in human anatomy was unparalleled as he knew Hooper's Anatomy Vade Mecum by heart and 4 years later would actually translate it to Bengali.

After 2 hours, he held the boy's heart and laid it on the table. He was physically and emotionally drained and was sweating profusely. Umacharan held the bowl containing water and Nobinchunder handed him a towel to wash his hands. Goodeve and Eggerton pumped him by the hands and Bethune said solemnly, *"And surely, if inanimate thinks could feel sympathy with the heart of man, this is a day when all the land of Bengal ought to leap up, and utter a loud shout of triumphant joy"*. O'Shaughnessy was beaming.

He remembered that he had been disowned by his family but still he was a practicing Hindu. He turned towards his students and asked,

"What do you think? Do I need to take a dip in the Ganges to wash my sins away?" Rajkrishno, the only non-Hindu of his students, answered,

"No sir, the moment you do that, you are actually telling the world that you have committed a sin. You have not".

He smiled and said,

"Today was my turn. Next will be yours. Next time, you will be the ones doing the dissection and I shall be your audience." Little did he know that this would become a reality on the 28th of October, 1836, where Rajkrishno along with the other 3 would dissect a human body as medical students for the first time. He hoped that the others Gobind Chunder, Kallachand, Gopalchander, Chummun, Nobin Chunder, Buddi Chunder and James will join them and the floodgates would open.

Unknown to him, there was a 15 year old young man who made the journey to Calcutta Medical College that day to be a witness to the historic moment. He was one of the very few outside in the crowd who came to cheer. He was a student in Sanskrit College and was living in Burrabazar. He was inspired by Raja Rammohun Roy and today he was inspired and felt driven by the example set by the Pundit. Fighting a mighty establishment laden with age old traditions was not easy and took a lot of courage and will. After the gun salute died down, as he was trudging home, he made it a vow to continue fighting against his conservative society the rest of his life and make it his life's mission.

His name was Ishwar Chandra Bandyopadhyay, later better known as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar who was destined to change the face of education in India and singularly bring about the Widow Remarriage Act.

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