

First Human Dissector of colonial India

Uma SV¹, Chaithra Rao BR²

¹Professor, Department of Anatomy, Sri Madhusudan Sai Institute of Medical Sciences and Research, Sathya Sai Grama, Mudde-nahalli, Chikkaballapur District, Karnataka-562101, India

²Associate Professor, Department of Anatomy, Nandi Medical college & Research institute, Chikkaballapura district, Karnataka

Anatomy teaching is never complete without dissection and medical education is incomplete without anatomy, which is the foundational basic medical science for all the branches of medicine. Moreover, practising medicine without understanding the human body is impossible [1]. It is a well-known fact that India has made many medical contributions to the rest of the world [1]. Almost 175-year-old dissection papers were unearthed from Calcutta Medical College and Hospital in the Anatomy Department in the year 2011[2], which are related to Asia's first hu-

man dissection carried out secretly in the city by a Bengal, Vaidya Pandit Madhusudan Gupta (1800-1856) [1,2]. He was trained in Western medicine and is credited with having performed India's first human dissection at Calcutta Medical College (CMC) in 1836, almost 3,000 years after Susruta. In fact, this is also Asia's first human dissection [3]. This act of dissection was a revolutionary move towards modern medicine. Unfortunately, Dr Gupta's name is mostly missing in the annals of historical medical records.



Pandit Madhusudan Gupta (picture courtesy: Wikipedia)

Corresponding author:

Dr. Uma SV. Phone: 998601861. E-mail: drsvuma@gmail.com

Submitted: March 19, 2024. Accepted: May 2, 2024

<https://doi.org/10.52083/COFW7942>

Dr Gupta was born into a Vaidya (traditional ayurvedic practitioners) family in Hooghly [1]. Being a Sanskrit scholar, he was teaching in Sanskrit college and was also an Ayurvedic practitioner. He voluntarily attended several anatomy and medicine lectures given by British doctors [1].

In 1833, the British army were not satisfied with the services of Kolkata's medical staff, who were trained in native medicine [2]. A committee was formed by the then Governor General Lord William Bentinck in October 1833, which consisted 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. This committee was to replace native medical institutions with scientific medical school, with English as the language of instruction, and the curriculum was fashioned at par with the European medical institutions [4]. As a consequence, the Ayurvedic and Unani courses taught at the Sanskrit College and Native medical institution were abolished [1,2]. The British replaced these native medical schools with a fully equipped Calcutta Medical College (CMC), to educate and train the natives in "the art of healing" in western medicine. 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, which became affiliated with the University of London [4].

The College began with three European Professors, Dr M.J. Bramley, Dr H.H. Goodeve, and Dr W.B. O'Shaughnessy, as well as three native physicians, Pandit Madhusudan Gupta, Nabakrishna Goopta, and Ram Issur Awasthi. These last three persons became demonstrators in Medical College [4]. In 1835, Gupta was transferred to the CMC, as a native teacher. Even as the course began, teaching anatomy dissection remained a problem because of religious taboo [3,5].

Pandit Madhusudan Gupta, on 10 January 1836 [4,5], carried out the dissection work on a dead body with the assistance of four students who were Rajkrishna Dey, Umacharan Seth, Dwarkanath Gupta, and Nabin Chandra Mitra [3, 5]. He held the knife with strong and steady hand, made a deep and long incision in the breast, and relieved

the stress of the spectators and his guides [1,5]. It was also revealed that Dwarkanath Tagore, successful entrepreneur and grandfather of Rabin-dranath Tagore, also helped smuggle the corpse in for dissection [1,5]. Outside the hospital, a crowd had gathered to protest this unholy act, so the administration secured the gates and guarded them [1,6]. Madhusudan Gupta was counselled, influenced, and guided to carry out dissection by British doctors Goodeve and Bremley, who were then Head of the Department of Anatomy and the Principal of Calcutta medical college respectively [5,7]. Scottish Philanthropist David Hare and educationist John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune also played an important part in convincing Gupta to break the social taboo and become the pioneer of the Western Medical system of medicine in India [5].

Following the first dissection, Gupta completed formal medical qualifications and received a medical degree, G.M.C.B. (Graduate of the Medical College of Bengal) on 26 November 1840 [7]. However, it is completely true that before Madhusudan Gupta, in ancient India, Susruta had conducted examination, surgeries and C-sections on dead bodies, which has been mentioned in *Susruta Samhita* (III CE). Later the handling of cadavers was discouraged, and the advantage of gaining knowledge through cadavers lost its scientific purpose for religious reasons [5].

Dr. Gupta also conducted extensive studies on puberty, medical uses of leeches and high neonatal and maternal mortality in Indian women, fought vaccine hesitancy concerning smallpox, and advocated for proper sanitation to reduce diseases [1]. He also wrote books like *London Pharmacopoeia* in Bengali, *Shoreer-vidya*, and also translated *Shusruta Samhita*, and Hooper's *Anatomist Vademecum*, etc. [4,6].

Madhusudan Gupta died of diabetic gangrene and septicemia on November 15, 1856 [3,4,5]. His contributions to the progress of the medical education in India should be remembered forever, as becoming an expert in Western medical science from being an Ayurveda practitioner is not an easy task [4]. Great honor should therefore be due to Pandit Madhusudan Gupta [6]. Appeals have been sent by various associations to the concerning authority to declare 10 January as "National

Medical Education Day”, to commemorate the day on which a dissection of a dead human body was practiced in modern India, in honor and respect for this great anatomist’s contribution to medical education [4].

“Pandit Madhusudan Gupta Memorial Lifetime Achievement Award” in Anatomy was awarded to Professor A.K. Dutta for his laudable work.

REFERENCES

1. Behind Asia’s 1st Human Dissection: The Doctor Who Brought Modern Medicine to India, Divya Sethu.2022
2. 175 years old dissection paper unearthed, Jan 13, 2011. Available from: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/175-year-old-dissection-papers-unearthed/articleshow/7272410.cms>
3. Pundit Madhusudan Gupta: The first human dissector of India. *J Anat Soc India*, (2012) 61(1): 60. doi:10.1016/s0003-2778(12)80018-9
4. SANKAR KR NATH (2017) First Human Dead Body Dissection in the History of Medical Education in India & Pundit Madhusudan Goopta (1806-1856). Available from: <https://aroiwb.org/pdf/ejournal/e-journal-jan-mar-2017/SankarNath.pdf> [Internet]. [cited 2023 Jun 6].
5. PANDEY S (2017) Madhusudan Gupta: The man who carried out India’s first dissection [Internet]. NISCAIR-CSIR, India; 2017 [cited 2023 Jun 6]. Available from: <https://nopr.nispr.res.in/handle/123456789/43018>
6. Asia’s first human dissection was by a Bengali doctor in colonial Calcutta, Tales, Talks, Walks, 16 March, 2022. <https://www.getbengal.com/author/ttw>
7. CHATTERJEE S, RAY R, CHAKRABORTY DK (2013) Medical College Bengal – A pioneer over the eras. *Indian J Surg*, 75(5): 385-390.