



Biography
Anandi Gopal

by
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(Translated and abridged from the Marathi by Asha Damle)

Based on the true story of Anandibai Joshi, India's first woman doctor, the novel depicts the incredibly constricted world of the Brahmin orthodoxy in the late 1800s. With her husband Gopalrao's support, Anandibai is educated. At the age of 17, she travels alone to America to study medicine.

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We present an excerpt from the book:

The year 1883 started without promise. There was no denying that Calcutta did not agree with them. It had started raining, and was hot too. Anandi was restless. She felt very weak and sometimes breathless. Often, she had a slight temperature and constant headaches. Heat made her skin come out in blisters. Her American aunty sent some medicines but nothing worked. Anandi continued to read. She knew nobody in town, which was a help in a way. The Joshis used to go for walks, which caused other troubles. In Calcutta, people were not used to seeing a lady walking on the street. The purdah system was very strong and Anandi was the only woman who tried to flout it. People stared at her, and rich people in their carriages instructed their drivers to slow down as they approached Anandi. Once, when they were walking down the Esplanade, she was the only woman on the road. People jeered and a policeman stopped them and asked Gopalrao who the woman with him was. Gopalrao's anger knew no bounds when the policeman refused to believe that Anandi was his wife. She could be nothing but a slut. Gopalrao pounced on the policeman and held him by his throat and said he would lodge a complaint at his police station. Realising that Gopalrao was speaking the truth, the policeman freed himself from his grip and whispered that nobody walked with his wife in this part of Calcutta.

Like two wounded animals, they came home. They did not eat but lay on the bed speechless. For a long time, they could not sleep. Gopalrao said in a low voice he was filled with disgust at his country. He wished to go far away. If they could not go to America, they could go to Rangoon or may be Aden. He would rather give up his job and work as labourer in another country.

His depression became contagious. They spent the whole night talking. In a couple of days, he got transferred to Serampore, which was near Calcutta; they could not settle there either. It was a very small town and though they faced no problems, Anandi's education did not progress. They were both unhappy. Once day, when Anandi was reading a book in English, Gopalrao declared there was no point in reading English any more. Just as Lokhitwadi's Shat Patre had convinced him that Sanskrit was no longer of any use, he now felt the same about English. Anandi listened, shocked, while Gopalrao continued, "Whatever is useful is knowledge. That's what I think. It's no use reading books aimlessly. It's hypocrisy. It makes you pretentious. It is better to be ignorant than to have knowledge that is useless."

Anandi asked what they should do then. Gopalrao replied, "Try and go to America somehow. I want you to be a doctor. No Indian lady has as yet gone to America, not for education surely."

Gopalrao looked into Anandi's eyes. His eyes glowed with a new thought. He could not bear the speed of his own thoughts. He got up and stood near the window. Outside, the blue sky streaked clear right up to the horizon. He stared at the expanse. Then he turned back quickly with a few steps and came near her. He put both his hands on her shoulders. "Instead of both of us rotting here, what if you go to America?"

"Alone!" she looked up at her husband. The light of a thousand suns shone in his eyes. His image grew so large that it seemed to fill the entire world around them. Her eyes were dazzled. She could not bear it. She was lost, not knowing where she was and what she was doing. What a terrible thought! Frighteningly enormous but iridescent and bright! She was scared but attracted towards it at the same time. Like a shining yellow cobra with his hood spread out, the thought demanded her whole attention. She closed her eyes. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Gopalrao insisted that she go ahead first and then he would follow her. That way, no time would be wasted. He started pacing up and down in the room. He had solved the problem. But was it the right way? Brahmin women did not go out in the streets in front of their own houses alone. They needed someone to chaperone them from Bombay to Kalyan and this girl barely 17, did he dare to send her all alone that far off? What kind of people would she meet? What situations would she have to face?

When he looked at Anandi, he found that she was reading again. He added, "You should go alone, set an example before the people. People say women are weak. You will prove them wrong. When you go to a foreign country, you need not give up all your ways of life."

There was silence in the room. Gopalrao seemed exhausted. Sitting down, he asked her if she would be able to go alone. With her gaze on the floor, she said, "Yes, I will go."

Gopalrao was filled with admiration. He declared, "There are few women like you. You have put me to shame. I thought of it a few days ago but I dared not disclose it to you. I don't know what gives you this courage."

Anandi looked at her husband. She smiled. "I know that this is an adventure. The whole world is full of sorrow and ill-meaning people. I know that, but I am a real Hindu. I believe in destiny. If we run away from risks, danger catches up with us. Mrs Carpenter is there. Aunty Carpenter, I will be all right."

"I won't be there."

"The religious pandits have already told us. Whatever will be, will be. You know that. If it is our destiny to be separated, then we will suffer that even here. Death snatches a person from right in front of you."

She was cool and collected. Gopalrao thought that she was quite a different person from what he knew her to be. He felt she was much greater than him. Only yesterday, he had sown the seed that became the plant. He was worried the little plant would have to brave the storm, the heat, the rain. How could it survive? And now, before his very eyes, the plant had grown up into a strong creeper, so tall, it almost reached the sky.

Anandi continued, "This life is like a flower. We bloom and we fade. Everyone is alone. Why depend on someone else? You can come when you have enough money. We don't waste time now. We will raise money by selling whatever we have and can. And I will go.'

Next day, she wrote all that had happened to Mrs Carpenter. She explained why she would be going alone. They were busy for the next few days organizing the finances and finding out more about America. It was decided that she should go directly to New York from Calcutta. Dr Thorborn and his wife, who was also a doctor, informed the Joshis that the Pennsylvania in Philadelphia was a medical college for women. There were two more English lady acquaintances of Dr Thorborn who were going to America. They would be good travelling companions. Finally, the day was fixed. The ship was leaving Calcutta on the seventeenth of April. Anandi was to board that ship.

(Taken from Chapter 15, page 140 to 144)