

A Woman with a Stethoscope: Exploring the Life and Legacy of Dr. Jamini Sen

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Abstract

In the late nineteenth century, the intersection of colonial policies, social reform, and nationalist aspirations led to growing concern about women's health in India. Social constraints such as purdah and the seclusion of women in the zenana made access to medical care particularly difficult, prompting a demand for indigenous women physicians. This paper examines the life and contributions of Dr. Jamini Sen, one of the earliest Indian women doctors trained both in India and abroad. It traces her educational journey, including her distinction as the first woman to receive a prestigious medical degree from Glasgow University, and explores her work in advancing women's healthcare across India while combating male domination and racial discrimination.

Keywords: Dr. Jamini Sen, lady doctor, WMS, racial discrimination

In the late 19th century, the British colonial government tried to spread Western medical care among Indian women. At the same time, many educated Indians believed that only healthy and educated mothers could raise healthy sons, who were needed for building a strong nation. This made people more concerned about women's health. However, social customs like purdah and keeping women inside the zenana made it hard for women to get treatment. In many upper-class families, women were not allowed to be treated by male doctors or even by European female doctors.

It was acutely felt that the country needed female doctors to treat female patients. Dr. Robert Harvey, Professor of Midwifery at the Medical College of Bengal, informed that female doctors were mostly needed in mofussil:

It is in the mofussil the lady doctors are most required, but it is in the mofussil also, unfortunately, the old prejudices have strongest sway, and one of the strongest of these absurd prejudices is that women who go out of the ordinary grooves are not respectable. Time will change all this...but the customs of a nation cannot be changed at a rush.¹

Among the pioneering women who carved a path in the field of medicine was Dr. Jamini Sen, one of the earliest Indian women doctors trained both in India and abroad. At a time when women were discouraged from studying medicine, she worked hard to follow her dream and help other women. This paper explores the journey of Dr. Jamini Sen as a powerful example of how education and public service can contribute to women's empowerment. It examines her path as a medical student, her achievement as the first woman to receive a prestigious degree from Glasgow University, and her significant contributions to women's healthcare across India. Her life shows how she faced discrimination but continued to serve with courage and dedication. Dr. Sen's life helps us understand how women challenged unfair systems and created their own path in colonial India.

Reformers in Bengal especially Brahmos, supported the promotion of medical science among female students. But there were some Brahmo leaders who could not accept that the girls of their family would be medical practitioners. Chandicharan Sen, father of poet Kamini Roy and Jamini Sen, was one of them. He was not willing to admit his daughters to Medical College. Kamini Roy, the poet, also wanted to be a doctor. She failed to fulfil her wish as her father disapproved of this proposal. Chandicharan Sen felt that it would be better for his daughters to involve themselves in writing at home rather than to treat the human body. But Jamini Sen was so firm in her determination that her father gave her permission. Dr. Jamini Sen completed her F.A. (First Arts) examination from Bethune College in 1890 and subsequently enrolled in Calcutta Medical College. She graduated in 1896, earning both the L.M.S. (Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery) and the M.B. (Bachelor of Medicine) degrees. Notably, she was the only Bengali woman in her cohort at the medical college. During her fourth year, she distinguished herself academically by securing a first-class mark in *Materia Medica*. Although she did not receive the top academic honor, she was second only to her peer, Rachel Cohen, who was awarded the Gold Medal in Botany and achieved a first in Anatomy.²

Then she started private practice in Calcutta but encountered many problems as a female practitioner. Usually, female doctors were not called for treatment except at the reference of male doctors. It was difficult for Jamini Sen to depend on male doctors for her practice. She went to Sholapur in 1898. In 1899, she took the charge of a female hospital of Nepal at the recommendation of principal of Calcutta Medical College and went to Kathmandu. She attended to the royal family.

In 1909, she returned to Calcutta and joined Dufferin Hospital. Realizing the need for deeper knowledge in medical science, she felt the urge to further improve herself. Dr. Sen wrote:

I have begun to feel that I have become thoroughly antiquated. The science of medicine is constantly advancing, but I have not been able to keep up with the times. I have fallen far behind, and this lost time must be reclaimed. In our country, the dearth of female doctors is a significant shortcoming. Women need competent female physicians. What I learned as a student regarding operative surgery and gynaecology is quite different from what is practiced now; both fields have advanced considerably. If I truly wish to serve the women of my country, I must acquire knowledge of all the modern methods. For this purpose, it is essential to study and observe the practices of the specialized hospitals in England.³

At a time when female representation in professional medicine was scarce, Dr. Sen envisioned her training as a means to address the acute dearth of competent female physicians in India. Dr. Jamini Sen applied for a scholarship under the prestigious Dufferin Fund and, remarkably, was awarded the grant. This was an exceptional accomplishment, given that such scholarships were ordinarily awarded to British or other Western candidates. With this rare opportunity, she embarked on a journey to Britain on 8 March 1911.⁴ During her time abroad, she obtained the Licentiate in Medicine (LM) degree from the Rotunda Hospital, Dublin, a renowned institution in obstetrics and gynaecology. She later qualified as a Fellow of the Royal Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons, Glasgow, by successfully clearing a competitive examination. This distinction was exceptional. Jamini Sen was the first woman to be conferred this honour not just in India,

but also among the women of Britain. Her admission as the female fellow of the Royal Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons was reported in *The Modern Review* of July 1912:

We are glad to learn from a Reuter's telegram that Dr. Miss Jamini Sen, after passing an examination of the Glasgow University, has become a Fellow of the Royal Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of that University. She is the first lady to obtain this distinction. Miss Sen is a licentiate of the Calcutta Medical College..... After graduating from the Calcutta Medical College, she served with great distinction in Nepal, winning the respect of all by her character and her medical skill.⁵

The news was also published in *Prabasi*:

Miss Jamini Sen is the daughter of the renowned historical novelist, the late Chandi Charan, and the sister of Smt. Kamini Roy, author of *Alo o Chhaya*. Many years ago, she passed the final examination of Calcutta Medical College and began her medical career. Recently, it has been reported that she has passed an examination at the University of Glasgow in Scotland and has been admitted as a Fellow of the Royal Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons. No woman had received this honour before.... After returning from Nepal in a severely weakened state, she underwent a dangerous surgical procedure. Though she eventually recovered, doctors advised her to remain cautious like a lifelong patient, warning against strenuous work. Yet, despite such health challenges, she travelled abroad and became the first woman of any nationality to attain this high distinction from the University of Glasgow.⁶

In June, 1912 with recommendations from Lady Dufferin and Sir K.G. Gupta of India House in Berlin, Dr. Jamini Sen travelled to Berlin for acquiring more knowledge. There, she acquired valuable practical experience through close observation of clinical treatments and surgical procedures conducted by Dr. Bremen and Dr. Mainzer. While she was in Germany, she received the news of the death of her adopted child, Bhutu, which caused her profound grief. Kamini Ray has mentioned, drawing from her diary, the painful circumstances under which Jamini Sen spent those days.⁷

In December 1912, Dr. Jamini Sen returned to India and commenced her independent medical practice. Despite their professional competence and training, Indian women physicians, were often subjected to racial discrimination faced both racial and gender discrimination. The medical field was mostly controlled by European and Anglo-Indian women. In the Indian Medical Service (IMS), Indian women were paid significantly less, sometimes less than one-third of what Indian men earned, even though they worked under similar conditions. British female doctors also received higher salaries than Indian women. Officially, salaries were based on academic qualifications, but Indian women often couldn't access the same medical degrees as British women because of barriers in education. In Bengal, many Indian women held the Vernacular Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery (VLMS), a qualification that didn't require English. However, this certification led to salaries that were less than one-tenth of those with MB or MD degrees.⁸

In 1907, British women doctors in India formed the Association of Medical Women in India. They pushed for the creation of a Women's Indian Medical Service (WMS), similar to the male-only IMS. They argued that Indian women had been neglected for long time from

Western medical care. However, they also claimed that there would never be enough trained Indian women to meet the demand and therefore called for more British women doctors to be brought to India, along with better working conditions for them. In 1907, British women doctors in India formed the Association of Medical Women in India and advocated for the establishment of a Women's Indian Medical Service (WMS), modeled on the male-dominated IMS. Their argument was grounded in the idea of Britain's "civilizing mission," claiming that Indian women, long neglected under colonial governance, urgently needed Western medical care. However, they also asserted that there would never be enough qualified Indian women to meet this demand and thus urged the recruitment of more British women by improving working conditions for them. The WMS was officially formed in 1914. Though it claimed to include Indian women, the system kept British women in higher positions and gave Indian women lower roles. In reality, the WMS mainly supported British women doctors rather than empowering Indian women. A major change only came after India's independence in 1947, when Dr. Lazarus became the first Indian woman to be appointed as Chief Medical Officer.⁹

Dr. Sen also faced racial discrimination in her workplace. Dr. Sen became affiliated with WMS. The records of WMS clearly indicate that very few Indian women were inducted into the service and for a short time. The List of members of WMS for the year 1914 furnishes the name of Jamini Sen.¹⁰ During her brief career in WMS, she worked in various places in the northern, western, and eastern parts of India including Agra (United Province), Shimla (Punjab), Shikarpur (Sindh), Betiah (Bihar & Orissa) and Akola (Berar) etc. But she never got the respect and facilities as she deserved. Despite her high qualifications as a medical practitioner, Dr. Sen's professional journey was marked by recurring instances of racial and gender-based discrimination. Several such experiences are recorded in her personal diary. In June 1914, due to an unpleasant incident, it became absolutely necessary to transfer three English women doctors from the Agra Women's Hospital. One was sent to Simla, and the others were transferred to different locations. During that intense summer, Jamini Sen was sent to Agra to fill their positions, and for some time, she had to manage the work of all three doctors on her own. However, six months later, when the situation had settled, she was transferred to Simla in December, at the height of winter, and the previously relocated doctors were brought back to Agra. The case of the transfer is documented in the Thirteenth Report of the Central Committee for the year 1914: 'Dr. Houlton has officiated for several months at Simla in the place of Mrs. Battersby, L.M.S. and has since returned to her former appointment at Agra... At Simla, Houlton has been relieved by Dr. Yamini Sen, W.M.S., from Agra'¹¹

While posted in Shimla, Dr. Jamini Sen was not provided with official doctors' quarters and had to manage her stay in a ground floor room of the hospital. This arrangement, however, was disapproved by both the Inspector General of Hospitals and the Civil Surgeon, compelling her to move into a rented house. Despite this, she was denied the sanctioned house rent allowance of Rs. 100 per month. During her tenure in Shimla, Dr. Sen played a significant role in establishing a dedicated female ward at the Ripon Hospital and became widely respected among the local population. Nevertheless, despite her contributions, she was abruptly transferred to Shikarpur in the peak of summer in 1916, just before the female ward was to be inaugurated. At the inauguration ceremony, Lady Chelmsford, who was scheduled to

inaugurate the ward, commented to an Indian woman that an Indian lady doctor was not fit to lead a hospital.¹² Perhaps, due to this reason she was transferred from Simla.

Nevertheless, Jamini Sen became a popular lady doctor. During her posting at the Zenana Hospital affiliated with the Agra Medical School in the early 1910s, Dr. Jamini Sen gained immense popularity among female patients. She became affectionately known as 'Shareewali Daktarin', meaning *the Lady Doctor in Saree*. She used to cover her head to look more 'dignified'.¹³ Jamini Sen was transferred to Shikarpur in May, 1916. In a letter dated July 11, 1916, the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Women's Medical Service (WMS) wrote to the Collector and the Secretary of the local WMS committee, expressing satisfaction with Dr. Sen's performance. The letter noted that the number of patients had risen significantly under her care, prompting the Committee to consider either expanding the existing hospital or constructing a new one. The Committee added that it had no objection if efforts were made to persuade Dr. Sen to remain in Shikarpur. In her diary entry dated February 6, 1917, Dr. Sen reflected on her tenure at the Zenana Hospital in Shikarpur, noting the hospital's remarkable rise in popularity. She observed that women from respectable families had begun to seek treatment there, with many opting to stay in the hospital's paid cabins.

The number of indoor patients increased significantly from 213 in 1915 to 478 in 1916. In 1915, 53 women came to the hospital for childbirth, and this number rose to 96 in 1916. This marked a clear indication of the growing trust placed in the institution under Dr. Sen's care.¹⁴ Dr. Jamini Sen's writings also reveal her deep sense of compassion and dedication to helping others through her medical work. She noted that although she wished to resign from her post, her sense of duty toward her patients ultimately prevailed. Once she witnessed the dire conditions faced by women, particularly the alarming rates of maternal mortality due to sepsis after childbirth, she felt morally compelled to continue.. She wrote, "Within a short time, I was able to understand and explain the causes of these deaths." Her time in Shikarpur was marked by nine months of relentless service, during which she not only provided medical care but also earned the trust and respect of local women, a form of recognition she regarded as the true reward for her labour. Her writings convey a deep awareness of the ethical dimensions of her role; she expressed an inner conflict between personal exhaustion and her belief in the possibility of continued service. The reflection, "Perhaps I could still be of some help if I stayed a little longer," speaks to a deeply rooted humanitarian impulse, one that transcended professional obligation and reflected a profound sense of social responsibility toward marginalized women in colonial India.¹⁵

In February 1918, Dr. Jamini Sen was transferred to a small hospital in Bettiah, located in northern Bihar. The following year, she was posted to Akola in the Berar Province of Central India, where she was entrusted with the responsibility of overseeing a hospital. She established a good working relationship with the local committee members and adjusted well to her new role. However, a personal crisis soon disrupted her service. When her niece Bulbul, the daughter of Mrs. Kamini Roy, fell seriously ill, Dr. Sen took a six-month leave to care for her. This leave was not approved by the authorities. Deeply hurt and angered by the decision, Dr. Sen chose to resign from Women's Medical Service (WMS).

In 1921, she went to England for second time. She received a diploma in public health from Cambridge University and a certificate from London School of Tropical Medicine. In 1924, she returned to India. At the request of Haridhan Dutta, Chairman of Calcutta Corporation of that time, she took charge of the newly built Buldeodas Maternity Home.¹⁶ Under the dedicated supervision of Dr. Jamini Sen, this facility soon gained immense popularity. Though originally intended as a free service for women from economically weaker sections, it began attracting patients from affluent families as well, especially those facing serious maternity complications, due to Dr. Sen's growing reputation.¹⁷ Jamini also trained nurses and midwives for the benefit of the hospital. She also wrote a Handbook titled 'Prasuti Tattwa' (Theory of Maternity). In 1929, due to declining health, Dr. Sen took an extended leave and moved to Puri to recover. However, at the request of Magistrate Mr. Senapati, she agreed to oversee a women's hospital there. As with her previous appointments, the hospital experienced a noticeable increase in the number of patients during her tenure. After a few months, Dr. Sen briefly returned to resume duties at the Baldeodas Maternity Home, but soon went back to Puri for further rest. She became critically ill and was died at Kolkata on 22 January 1932.

Dr. Jamini Sen died in 1932. In many cases, successful women of that era came from families where the male members were supportive of women's advancement. Throughout her life, she faced numerous challenges in her professional journey. For working women at the time, balancing family responsibilities with professional demands was extremely difficult, and society often showed little tolerance toward single women.¹⁸ To navigate these constraints, some women, such as Varginia Mary Mitra, who earned an MB degree from Calcutta University, chose to discontinue private practice. Others preferred to remain unmarried. Dr. Jamini Sen chose the latter path, devoting her life to medical service.

Dr. Jamini Sen's life stands as a remarkable example of courage, dedication, and trailblazing achievement in colonial India. At a time when women's presence in the medical profession was rare and often unwelcome, she defied social norms to become a highly trained and respected physician. Her overseas education and service under the Women's Medical Service reflect both her ambition and her commitment to improving women's health. Despite being highly qualified, she frequently faced racial and gender discrimination that limited her opportunities and undervalued her contributions. Yet, she remained undeterred. Dr. Sen worked tirelessly across various regions, from Shimla to Shikarpur, from Agra to Kolkata, serving women from all sections of society. By choosing to remain unmarried and devoting her life entirely to medicine, she challenged the patriarchal expectations of her time. Her story reflects the broader struggles and triumphs of early Indian women professionals. Dr. Jamini Sen was not only a doctor, but a pioneer in the ongoing fight for gender equity in medicine. Her life continues to inspire generations of women to pursue careers in service, leadership, and healing.

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