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## Selfless Treatment and Spread of Homeopathy: Rajendra Dutta and Nineteenth Century Bengal

Tusar Kanti Saha<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar,  
Department of History  
Visva-Bharati  
Santiniketan,Birbhum,West Bengal,India  
email id: [tusarkantisaha7@gmail.com](mailto:tusarkantisaha7@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** *In nineteenth century, while Bengal was in the forefront of various social reform movements, it did not lag behind in medical science, especially in the field of Homeopathy treatment. The pioneer of Homeopathy treatment in Bengal was Rajendra Dutta (1818-1889). Calling him the pioneer of Homeopathy treatment in India would not be an exaggeration. This article shows how he, through his own efforts, brought Homeopathy treatment to the general public as well as the contemporary middle class society. Rajendra Dutta devoted himself to treating poor without receiving any remuneration. His Homeopathy treatment had been praised in various contemporary and later journals and he was able to cure the incurable disease of the respected people of contemporary society and save the lives of people. His treatment was able to gain trust of contemporary British officials and he chose the path of selfless work. He was a 'swadeshi' man of Homeopathy practitioner and later his followers speared Homeopathy all over India. Hence, all these issues are discussed in this article in the perspective of nineteenth century Bengal.*

**Keywords:** *Conventional, Disciple, Glorious, Indigenous, Legendary, Medical*

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## Introduction

History of medicine has emphasized the historiography methods of the historicism, history of great man, history of health, social history and intellectual history. Scholar Charles R. King in his article had mentioned “great man” theory on the perspective of medical history.<sup>1</sup> It was also emphasized on social and intellectual interpretations of history. In the nineteenth century, Bengal occupied an important place in Indian history. Bengal stirred the whole of India by the political movement and social reforms. That’s why G. K. Gokhale said, ‘what Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow’. In addition to politics and social reforms, Bengal was well ahead in medical science, especially in the treatment of Homeopathy. Homeopathy has an ambivalent relationship with modern medical science.

The word Homeopathy is derived from the Greek word ‘Homois’ which means similar and the word ‘Pothos’ means suffering. The originator of Homeopathy was German physician Samuel Christian Hahnemann. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, European and Christian missionaries brought Hahnemann’s Homeopathy to India. Later in indigenous society, treatment through Homeopathy by indigenous practitioners or doctors was able to gain the trust of the indigenous people and also Englishmen. According to one scholar J. N. M. Majumder, “Calcutta then was the first city in India where Homeopathy was first introduced and from here it gradually appeared into the different provinces of Bengal and finally into the other states in India”.<sup>2</sup>

Rajendra Dutta and his nephew Ramesh Chandra Dutta’s Beriegny and the Homeopathic Pharmacy of Company was probably India’s first Homeopathic pharmacy.<sup>3</sup> Rajendra Dutta (also known as Babu Rajendralal Dutta) was one of these native Homeopathy practitioners of Bengal. Prominent Bengali personalities like Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), Radhakant Deb (1784-1867), Ramkrishna Paramhans (1836-1886), Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), Raja Digambar Mitter (1817-1879), Pery Charan Sircar (1823-1875) etc., benefited from his

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treatment. He even treated many Englishmen of the time. His Homeopathy treatment had been praised in various contemporary and later medical journals. Inspired by his Homeopathy treatment, many engaged themselves in Homeopathy. They were like Mahendralal Sircar (1833-1904), Loknath Mitra and Sambhu Charan Mukherjee. He was the pioneer in the Homoeopathy treatment of Bengal. Gradually, the treatment was able to achieved stability and popularity. With the patient's social status, Rajendra Dutta was able to make Homeopathic treatment credible. His indigenous medicine helped cure cholera, kala-azar, malaria and various other deadly diseases. Although in nineteenth century, Bengal as well as India, Homeopathy existed as an intermediate position between official Allopathic practice and indigenous medical practice.

### **Rajendra Dutta and his Selfless Treatment**

Rajendra Dutta was born in 1818 in the Dutta family of Wellington Square at Calcutta. His father was Parbati Charan Dutta. Uncle Durga Charan became his guardian when his father died early. He was educated at Hindu College and was a student of David Hare. After graduating from Hindu College, he attended Medical College but he did not complete the degree here.<sup>4</sup> From this time onward he became particularly fond of medical education. He briefly assumed charge of the family business in the post of secretary and later established an Allopathic pharmacy in his home with the legendary doctor in his times, name Durga Charan Bandyopadhyay. But while still involved in this work, he turned his attention to Homeopathy treatment.<sup>5</sup> During this time several European doctors came to Calcutta, one of them being French Homeopathy doctor C. F. Tonnere. Doctor Tonnere came to Calcutta in 1851. According to one scholar B. K. Sarkar, Dr. Tonnere came to Calcutta through the efforts of Rajendralal Dutta.<sup>6</sup> He made special efforts to established Dr. Tonnere at Calcutta. As a result, a native Homeopathy hospital and a free dispensary were opened at Calcutta in 1851.<sup>7</sup> Dr. Tonnere was appointed the first health officer of Calcutta due the efforts of Rajendra Dutta and with the help of then Deputy Governor of Bengal, named Sir John Hunter.<sup>8</sup>

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This native hospital did not last long and Dr. Tonnerre failed to establish himself as legendary doctor. At that time Rajendra Dutta decided to practice Homeopathy himself. In 1861, his well-established journey of Homeopathy treatment was started and as a result, the process of Homeopathy treatment in Bengal began with a 'glorious victory'. One writer Sarat Chandra Ghosh wrote that 'Homeopathy was in its early infancy India, specially Calcutta, and while the late revered Babu Rajendralal Dutta who was regarded by all of us to be the first missionary of homeopathy in India.'<sup>9</sup> Rajendra Dutta believed that he would be able to devote himself to serving the poor. By practicing Homeopathy, he became convinced that through this treatment he would be able to do good to the poor. This thought was for ever ingrained in his mind and he acted according to that belief until death.<sup>10</sup>

The cast system was an important issue in contemporary Bengal. But he did not recognize the cast system and gave equal importance to all people in the field of medical treatment. It was written in *The Calcutta Journal of Medicine* that, 'At his own cost and expenses and day and night moved about town, treating hundred patients without the remuneration...he always opened his purse-strings to his indigent patients.'<sup>11</sup> In 1864, a well-known French Homeopathy doctor named Thiennete Beriegnny came to Calcutta and together with R. Dutta, wanted to expand Homeopathy treatment. The first Homeopathy hospital was established at Calcutta in 1866 through the efforts of Dr. Beriegnny.<sup>12</sup> Rajendra Dutta was standing alone in his medical field, relying on Dr. Beriegnny. By assisting Beriegnny, he devoted himself and to promoting Homeopathy and to the next benefit.<sup>13</sup>

During this period Eastern world was seen as weak against the superior knowledge of medicine in Western culture and the influence of Allopathic medicine was increasing. Allopathic practitioners despised Homeopathy practice and tried to present themselves as 'modern'. Doctor Mehendralal Sircar (1833-1904) was one of the legendary men who was inspired by Rajendra Dutta, embraced Homeopathy treatment. Dr. Sircar later established the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science in 1876. It was India's first National Science Association. In 1863,

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Mahendralal Sircar passed his M. D examination from Calcutta Medical College. At first, he was not enthusiastic about Homeopathy treatment. In the same year, the Bengali branch of the British Medical Association was established at the initiative of doctor Gudiv Chakraborty, became the first Indian professor at Calcutta Medical College.

On the founding day of these meeting Mahendralal Sircar delivered a speech and condemned the treatment of Homeopathy. Rajendra Dutta was present at the meeting and he delivered his argument to Dr. Sircar about Homeopathy.<sup>14</sup> Mahendralal wrote in reminiscence that as when Rajendra Dutta would know about Mahendralal's speech he found something in it, as R. Dutta told Mahendralal afterwards, which inspired him with the hope that he had at last found a professional whom R. Dutta would be 'able to bring over to his side. That is, to the side of truth.'<sup>15</sup> One author Sarat Chandra Ghosh wrote that, 'This speech attracted the attention of the late Rajendra Dutta, who thought he found out the right man who, if convinced and converted, would prove to be a veritable giant to hoist the banner of Homeopathy throughout the length and breadth of India.'<sup>16</sup>

At the time of that incident, a friend of Mahendralal's asked to write a critique of the philosophy of Homeopathy, written by Morgan, for a journal that was *Indian field*. The criticism was supposed to be published in an edited paper by respectable man in contemporary Bengal, Kishori Chand Mitra but when Dr. Sircar read Morgan's writing, he through that it would not be right for him to express his opinion without seeing the results of Homeopathy treatment. So, he met Rajendra Babu to realize the results of Homeopathy treatment and he started treatment of the patient.<sup>17</sup> Rajendra Dutta happily took him along to show him the treatment of some different difficult disease. Dr. Sircar began to check the condition of those patients according to medical rules and he took all such steps to ensure that he did not make mistakes. So, after reading Morgan's book on Homeopathy and being inspired by Rajendra Dutta's treatment, Dr. Sircar was fascinated and considered Homeopathy was the best in the treatment system. Even in the speech at the fourth session of the British Medical Association in 1867, he criticized the

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conventional medical system and considered Homeopathy to be the best of medicine.<sup>18</sup> After the death of Rajendra Dutta, Mahendralal was expressed with sorrow. We can know about Rajendra Dutta from personal writings of Dr. Mahendralal that:

Rajendra Dutta used to call Dr. Mahendralal his “father and son”, and describe himself in all the letters he wrote to Dr. Mahendralal as “your son and father”. The love that Rajendra Dutta bore to Dr. Mahendralal was not a whit less than that of a father to his son...Rajendra Dutta’s reverence for Dr. Mahendralal was that of a son...Dr. Mahendralal’s personal loss in Rajendra Dutta’s death was more than that of any other man.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to Mahendralal Sircar, Loknath Mitra and Sambhu Charan Mukherjee both become enthusiastic about the treatment of Rajendra Dutta’s Homeopathy. In 1867 when Homeopathy hospital was established at Banaras, Loknath Mitra was appointed as a physician in-charge of this Hospital.<sup>20</sup> It was the first Homeopathy hospital in Banaras established by a Bengali person. So, it had to be acknowledged that he was given this responsibility because of the proper connective. Sambhu Charan Mukherjee, a journalist came close to Rajendra Dutta and was inspired by Homeopathy. He published his results even outside the country. His personal writings tell us that, “In association with Rajendra and Romesh Chunder Dutta he threw himself with ardour into the study of the then (1861) novel science Homeopathy... his study became a laboratory, and communicated the results of his experiment with no little pride to the leading Homeopathy of Chicago and Philadelphia.”<sup>21</sup> Sambhu Charan Mukherjee received his M. D degree from an American University in recognition of his research.

One could rely on something only when one realizes its usefulness. Rajendra Dutta’s followers realized the effectiveness of Homeopathy and that’s why they were able to institutionalize Homeopathic medicine. However, the idea of indigenous medicine had infused by them. Rajendra Dutta belonged to a middle class family and contemporary Bengal a number of middle class people were engaged in trade and commerce. Although R. Dutta was belonged to business family but he not interested to business and he became involved in service of the

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people. With expansion of the medical system, the British expanded its dominance. On one side the Britishers developed western medical system in this country and other side they did not oppose the indigenous medicine.

Rajendra Dutta brought Homeopathy treatment to contemporary middle class society and honoured individuals by curing disease such as Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), Radhakant Deb (1784-1867), Ramkrishna Paramhans (1836-1886), Swami Vivekananda (1836-1902) and others. According to scholar B. K. Sarkar, “A land mark in history of Homeopathy in Calcutta, nay in India, was the year 1863 when pundit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar of hallowed memory placed himself under the treatment of Rajen Babu and was miraculously cured of his chronic illness which had baffled all the leading Allopaths of the time.”<sup>22</sup> Vidyasagar received inspiration of Homeopathy treatment from Rajendra Dutta. A friend of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar named Rajkrishna Bandyopadhyay, his terrible disease was cured by Rajendra Dutta’s treatment. This led Vidyasagar to develop firm belief in Rajendra Dutta’s medical practice. Fascinated by this facility, Vidyasagar himself became a supporter of Homeopathy treatment and also began to practice this treatment.<sup>23</sup> Due to the treatment of Rajendra Dutta’s Homeopathy, Radhakant Deb Bahadur’s gangrenous leg was cured.<sup>24</sup> Radhakanta Deb was a notable person in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. He was associated with British Indian Association. He wanted to give gift of some money after he was healed but Rajendra Dutta did not accept it. Rajendra Dutta said that, he was happy to cure his disease through Homeopathy treatment and that as the popularity of Homeopathy treatment increased, prominent people like him would recover.<sup>25</sup> It was understood that Rajendra Dutta actually engaged himself in the service of people. Aspect of selfless human service observed in him.

At that time, Ramkrishna Paramhans, a famous Lord *Kali* worshiper began to have pain due to cancer of the throat. Then the devotees found a doctor who could visit Ramkrishna Paramhans every day. Finally, one of his disciples, Atul Babu sought to did treatment by Homeopathy and he brought Rajendra Dutta. Rajendra Dutta reduced his pain through medical

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treatment. He used to come every day and take care of the Ramkrishna Paramhans to make him comfortable. So, everyone was satisfied. One scholar B. Sanyal wrote about description of Rajendra Dutta's treatment as well as his humanity that, 'When he (R. Dutta) came to Thakur, he would bring in aromatic flowers, ripe fruit and bring what would be interesting to him (Ramkrishna). R. Dutta thought that heavy footwear would be difficult on a weak body, he would come with a soft footwear and put it on Ramkrishna's feet. As a result, his devotional treatment relieved Ramkrishna's ailment, and the fan rejoiced.'<sup>26</sup> Swami Vivekananda was suffering from 'gravel stone' disease since 1867 and he was cured through the treatment of Rajendra Dutta.<sup>27</sup>

### **Spread of Homeopathy**

In the nineteenth century, malaria fever was serious disease in Bengal. Apart from the people of Bengal, many European officer and military men were suffering from malaria fever. The treatment of Rajendra Dutta's contributes well to this special need.<sup>28</sup> Historian Mark Harrison mentioned that when cholera began to plague Europe in 1830, the views of Indian practitioner were increasingly explored and their views on the causes and prevention of the disease- 'which sometimes derives from indigenous medical knowledge-began to make an impression on British medicine.'<sup>20</sup> Dr. Mahendralal Sircar also wrote about malaria fever and its treatment that:

'The first patient presented himself to him was one suffering long from malarious fever and spleen..., could think of no other during gave to patient in question than quinine. But as the patient saw that he was going to have quinine, said that he had consumed several phials, and would not have more of it..., so as to individualize it to the best of his ability, and he prescribed some Homeopathic medicine; it was arsenicum present in the present case; and that what was the result? The man returned in three or four days to report that there was no return of the fever which had become his daily troublesome companion for a long, long time.'<sup>30</sup>

Dr. Sircar had also mentioned that, "...afterwards his dwelling house at Calcutta, came to be thronged with patients of all description but chiefly those suffering from malaria fever, patient



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who had derived no benefit from the old system. The majority of these patients recovered, and the fame of the Babu and the Homeopathy spread far and wide”.<sup>31</sup> Historian David Arnold and Sumit Sarkar also mentioned that, Rajendra Dutta’s success in Homeopathy was particularly attributed to his use of arsenic albumen to treat the many cases of malaria disease. It had increased with the eruption of ‘Burdwan Fever’ in Bengal in the 1850s.<sup>32</sup> He treated malaria patients very successfully. In India, it became the centre of medical service due to serious impact on the East India Company’s officers and troops. The disease had a major impact on poor people. Treatment with European medicine was expensive in contemporary times and Allopathy treatment facilities did not reach contemporary villages. As a result, Homeopathic medicine was able to reach the common people. Although R. Dutta did not follow the medical method in a completely scientific way, his medical method could be considered as part of the scientific activity which made a significant contribution to the contemporary society. Indigenous practitioners, as well as colonial authorities, had to fight the epidemic to save lives. In 1868 a separate civil medical department was formed in Bengal.

Evangelicals and Utilitarians were strongly believed in superiority of western rationalist thought and they spoke out stagnation of Indian scientific thought. Indigenous practitioners moved to a place of medical practice where the use of scientific medicine and indigenous medical remedies combined. They had diagnosed the disease according to the scientific medical method, employed the intervention of naming scientific medicine but in most cases they have treated the patients with indigenous medicine.<sup>33</sup> The practitioners derived their medical knowledge of remedy from traditional practitioners and traditional texts, “hence they negotiated and scientific aspects in their medical practice and also in their knowledge base” which was mentioned by historian Christian Hochmuth as a ‘plural Medicine’.<sup>34</sup> He said that in these medical practice was seen as plural in character ‘at least in the limited space of work in dispensaries’.<sup>35</sup> So, Rajendra Dutta could be called a ‘swadeshi’ man of Homeopathy practitioner. He followed the indigenous medical method and was successful.

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After being introduced to Homeopathy, R. Dutta praised it as the best form of treatment. He took the responsibility to introduce it to people.<sup>36</sup> His self-awareness was maintaining the balance between the self-conceit and benefits of practice. On the one hand the colonial government was expanding their scientific medical knowledge and on the other Rajendra Babu was expanding his indigenous medical knowledge. During his treatment as the disease healed, every morning his patients regularly came at his house.<sup>37</sup> Scholar S. M. Bhardwaj said that in nineteenth century, there were various indigenous traditions of medicine but not European style professionalization and inter-professional hostility.<sup>38</sup>

Eminent people of contemporary society in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal such as Raja Digambar Mitter (1817-1879), Peary Charan Sircar (1823-1875), Rai Bahadur Juggodish Nath Roy, Peary Charan Mitter and others had faith in Rajendra Dutta's Homeopathy treatment.<sup>39</sup> Raja Digambar Mitra was one of the disciples of Derozio and first Bengali Sheriff of Kolkata. Peary Charan Sircar was an educationist, played significant role in the spread of women's education in Bengal and was called 'Arnold of the East'. Among the well-known Englishmen Lord Ripon, Sir Lambert, Father Lafont (he was editor of the statement newspaper), were Rajendra Dutta's usual patient.<sup>40</sup> British Judge of Varanasi named J. H. B. Ironside was also his disciple.<sup>41</sup> The proximity of all these high rank British officials to the treatment of Homeopathy suggests that they were able to rely on and benefit from R. Dutta's treatment. So, it was clear that the British did not ignore the reliance on indigenous Homeopathic medicine and he received encouragement from the colonial authorities.

Rajendra Dutta was able to gain the trust of the people by relying on indigenous medicine as he was not dependent on the medicine of the colonial government. The lower classes could not afford to pay the traditional practitioners, while middle class relied on R. Dutta's treatment. His reputation of popularity was spread as a result of successful treatments. The colonial government did not interfere in his native medical system. They tried to prove their dominance in every field including medicine to justify their rule of India. In this case, they also gave

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importance to Homeopathy treatment and they became dependent on Homeopathy. It could be called an example of 'modernity of indigenous medicine' and R. Dutta was a pioneer in its leadership. In 1854, colonial government began supplying equipment and medicines to growing network of small hospitals and dispensaries.

Rajendra Dutta had served the people through Homeopathy treatment till the last day of his life. He will always be remembered in the history of Homeopathy in India. As a result of his efforts, Mahendralal Sircar followed the method of Homeopathy by avoiding Allopathy. He chose the path of selfless work. During this time period he wanted to spread this medical method to all section of the society through his own efforts. He consciously wanted to make Homeopathy acceptable as an alternative tradition against the West. He treated by exploring the symptoms and establishing amiable relations with the patients. Shivnath Sastri, who was an author, social reformer and respected man in nineteenth century Bengal had seen Rajendra Dutta's medical treatment process.

### **Conclusion**

However, conservatism was found in one aspect of Rajendra Dutta's social thought. In early 1853, a prostitute's son was admitted in Hindu College, the people of Hindu society opposed it and decided to establish another college as like Hindu College. Rajendra Dutta was the main initiator in this regard and finally Hindu Metropolitan College was established in 1853, he became a member of its managing committee.<sup>42</sup> Rajendra Dutta became famous by composing many books such as *Joydev Charit*, *Nababharat* and *Bhismacharit* etc. All though he was belonging from business and an influential family but his activities were very kindly.

Rajendra Dutta eliminated many curable diseases through Homeopathy treatment. After the establishment of Calcutta Medical College in 1835, the importance of Allopathy treatment increased, but he brought Homeopathy treatment to contemporary society and succeeded. It is

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understandable that he had a kind of reluctant towards colonial treatment system. It is also a matter of fact that later Homeopathy treatment spread all over India, because efforts of Rajendra Dutta. Homeopathy spread all over India by his followers. It is actually reasonable to call him the 'father of Homeopathy treatment in India'. Therefore, as long as Homeopathy treatment is prevalent in India, he will always be remembered as a pioneer in Homeopathy treatment.

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