Kadambini Ganguly

Mains: *GS I | History*

Why in News?

Recently a magazine spotlighted Dr. Kadambini Ganguly (1861–1923) under its "Say Her Name – Women in Science" series, revisiting her journey as India's first practicing woman physician in Western medicine.

Who was Kadambini Ganguly?

- **Born on -** July 18, 1861, in Bhagalpur (Bengal Presidency, now in Bihar) to a Bengali family originally from Barisal (now Bangladesh).
- She was raised in a reformist household shaped by the **Bengal Renaissance** and the **Brahmo Samaj**.
- Her father, **Braja Kishore Basu**, was a headmaster and co-founder of the ***Bhagalpur Mahila Samiti (1863),*** an early organization for women's emancipation.
- **First Female Graduate -** Studying at *Banga Mahila Vidyalaya* and *Bethune School*, Kadambini alongside **Chandramukhi Basu** passed the Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) examination from the **University of Calcutta** (1882/1883).
- She became the first female graduates in India and the entire British Empire.
- **Supportive Partnership-** In 1883, she married Dwarakanath Ganguly, a dedicated Brahmo social reformer and educator who actively campaigned for women's equal access to higher education and medical college admission.

What are the breaking barriers in medical education and practice?

- **First Woman at Calcutta Medical College-** Despite fierce opposition from conservative faculty and society, Kadambini became the first woman admitted to Calcutta Medical College in 1883/1884.
- **Qualification -** In 1886, she earned the Graduate of Bengal Medical College (GBMC) diploma, qualifying her to practice Western medicine.
- While Anandibai Gopal Joshi earned her medical degree in the United States the same year, Joshi tragically died of tuberculosis in 1887 before she could practice making Kadambini Ganguly the first Indian woman to practice modern Western medicine.
- **Global Recognition -** Even **Florence Nightingale** praised Kadambini's dedication in a 1888 letter, noting her exceptional attendance and recommending her for medical posts serving women in Calcutta.
- **Advanced Training in Scotland -** Kadambini traveled to the United Kingdom in 1892 and earned the prestigious **Scottish Triple Qualification** (LRCP Edinburgh, LRCS Glasgow, and LFPS Glasgow/Dublin) within months.
- Upon returning, she served at **Lady Dufferin Hospital** and built a thriving private practice even treating the Queen Mother of Nepal in 1895.

Comparative Overview - Kadambini Ganguly vs. Anandibai Joshi

Dimension	Dr. Kadambini Ganguly (1861–1923)	Dr. Anandibai Gopal Joshi (1865–1887)
Educational Milestone	First woman admitted to Calcutta Medical College; earned GBMC (1886) and Scottish Triple Qualification (1893)	First Indian woman to earn a Western medical degree abroad (Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania, USA, 1886)
Professional Practice	First Indian woman to actively practice Western medicine; worked at Lady Dufferin Hospital and in private practice for decades	Appointed physician-in-charge at Albert Edward Hospital, Kolhapur, but died at age 21 before practicing
Public & Political Role	First woman speaker at the Indian National Congress (1890); active in Brahmo Samaj and labor welfare	Symbolized Indian women's potential abroad and inspired early reform debates

What is the role in India’s freedom struggle and social reform?

- **Indian National Congress Pioneer -** In **1889**, she was among the first six women delegates at the Bombay session of the Indian National Congress.
- In **1890**, she became the **first woman to address a Congress session** in Calcutta a milestone that **Annie Besant** hailed as proof that India's freedom movement would uplift Indian womanhood.
- **Workers' Rights and Women's Welfare -** Alongside poet Kamini Roy, she served on a government inquiry committee investigating the harsh working conditions of women coal miners in Bihar and Odisha.
- She also supported Mahatma Gandhi’s struggles in South Africa, heading the Transvaal Indian Association in Calcutta.
- **Lifelong Dedication -** Balancing a demanding medical career with raising eight children, she continued practicing until her final day performing a surgery on October 3, 1923, shortly before passing away that evening.

What are the key challenges she overcame?

- **Social Ostracism and Ortho-Conservative Backlash -** Traditionalist sections of society ridiculed and attacked her publicly for stepping outside domestic boundaries, yet she persisted without abandoning her work.
- **Institutional Bias -** Even after qualifying in India, she had to earn British medical diplomas to gain equal professional standing and senior hospital roles.
- **Persistent Gender Gaps in STEM Leadership-** While women now make up a large share of medical students in India, underrepresentation in top surgical specialties, medical leadership, and scientific recognition remains an ongoing concern.

What is the way forward?

- Integrate figures like Kadambini Ganguly into school and medical curricula so young students see diverse role models in science and healthcare.
- Ensure safe workplaces, equitable leadership opportunities, and family-friendly institutional policies in hospitals and research centers.
- Carry forward Kadambini’s legacy by prioritizing accessible maternal and women’s healthcare, especially in underserved and rural communities.

Reference

The Hindu | Kadambini Ganguly

