

## **DR. MAHENDRALAL SIRCAR AND HOMOEOPATHY**

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Dr. Mahendralal Sircar is a controversial and astounding personality in the medical history of modern Bengal. He has unique contribution to both Allopathy and Homoeopathy. He obtained the highest M.D. degree in Allopathy, second only to Dr. Chandra Kumar Dey, his predecessor. He initially started his practice in Allopathy for some time and became its leading practitioner. He got converted to Homoeopathy on reading Morgan's Philosophy of Homoeopathy, and after apprenticeship with Dr. Rajendralal Dutta and Dr. Loknath Maitra, legendary homoeopaths of that time. He very soon established himself as a leading homoeopath of the city. From 1867 he campaigned for a national science association and in 1867 founded the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science (IACS), the premier nationalist association for science in India to be managed and funded by Indians themselves and dedicated to nation-building purpose in the absence of any Government sponsored institution. The IACS became the platform for many future scientists in India including the Nobel Prize winner Sir C.V. Raman, K.S. Krishnan and Meghnad Saha. Mahendralal is therefore acknowledged as the father of Indian scientific pursuits. It is not the purpose of the paper to highlight all aspects of his eventful life. It tries to tackle the question that naturally arises on reading the life and work of Mahendralal why Homoeopathy was never a research area or theme of any symposium at the IACS. Was it because he himself had any doubts about homoeopathy as a perfect science which at the beginning of his career, he had dismissed as mere quackery? This paper is an attempt to find an answer to this question with the help of his scientific papers, letters, clinical records and diary. It clearly establishes Mahendralal's contribution to the growth of Homoeopathy in India in both theory and practice. Some of it can be gleaned from his Calcutta Journal of Medicine, which he founded in 1866, especially, 'The Progress of Homoeopathy in India'. On a review of his whole career, the exclusion of Homoeopathy from IACS raises valid doubts about the status of Homoeopathy as science. In reply it may be pointed out that in the objectives of the Association, it was clearly stated that the pursuit of pure science like Physics, Chemistry, Botany, Astronomy, Geology and Physiology was the agenda of the IACS to create trained scientists. Dr. Nilratan Sarkar was invited to lecture on Physiology but Allopathy and Homoeopathy were not included in the curriculum of the Association. Therefore

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both find no place in the research and deliberations of the IACS. This was no aspersion on Homoeopathy. His faith in Homoeopathy was unflinching till his death.

**Key Words:** Calcutta Journal of Medicine, Dr. Mahendralal Sircar, Homoeopathy as science, IACS, Perfect Science, Progress of Homoeopathy, Quackery.

## INTRODUCTION

Dr. Mahendralal Sircar is a controversial and astounding personality in the medical history of modern Bengal. He has unique contribution to both Allopathy and Homoeopathy. His quest for scientific education led him to leave his studies in the prestigious Hindu College unfinished and join the Calcutta Medical College, which was the only institution then in Calcutta to teach science proper.<sup>1</sup> After six years of continuous study of medicine he first obtained the L.M.S. degree and three years later the highest M.D. degree, second only to Dr. Chandra Kumar De, his predecessor.<sup>2</sup> He initially started his practice in Allopathy for some time and became its leading practitioner. He got converted to Homoeopathy, on reading Morgans 'Philosophy of Homoeopathy' and after apprenticeship with Dr. Rajendralal Dutta and Dr. Loknath Maitra, legendary Homoeopaths of that time.<sup>3</sup> He very soon established himself as a leading Homeopath of the city and the famous European Homoeopath Dr. Berigny called him the 'rising sun' in the field of Homoeopathy.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from medicine, Mahendralal was versatile in other branches of science as well. In 1876 he founded the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science, the premier nationalist association for science in India. In 1866 he had already founded the Calcutta Journal of Medicine in the columns of which he had written many essays in various branches of natural science.<sup>5</sup> He was well up in Mathematics, Philosophy and Literature, almost a modern Aristotle. His great yearning for science and truth made him realise that cultivation of science was not open to the subject people. He had to imbibe science at the Calcutta Medical College in the absence of any other institution imparting it. He got determined to establish an Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science to be managed and funded by Indians themselves. His wish was fulfilled in 1876, after tireless efforts and resource mobilisation.<sup>6</sup>

The IACS became the platform for many future scientists in India including the Nobel prize winner Sir C.V. Raman. Mahendralal is therefore acknowledged as the father of Indian Scientific pursuits.<sup>7</sup>

It is not the purpose of this paper to highlight all aspects of his eventful life. It tries to tackle the question that naturally arises on reading the life and work of Mahendralal why Homoeopathy was never a research area or theme of any symposium at the IACS.

Was it because he himself had doubts about Homoeopathy as a perfect science which at the beginning of his career, he had dismissed as mere quackery. This paper is an attempt to find an answer to this question with the help of his scientific papers, letters, clinical records and diary.

#### THE ADVENT OF HOMOEOPATHY AND DR. M.L. SIRCAR

The roots of Homoeopathy in India are not clearly known. But the surmise is that a German Geologist and a contemporary of Dr. Hahnemann, father of Homoeopathy brought it to India towards the beginning of the 19th century. Soon after Rev. Mullens of the London Missionary Society began practising Homoeopathy in Calcutta when Maharaja Ranjit Singh fell ill and there was no cure for his ailments in Ayurveda, Unani and Allopathic medicine. Dr. Martin Honigberger was invited from Germany in 1839 to try Homoeopathy on him, in which he was successful. Homoeopathy was used to fight Cholera once in Diamond Harbour at the instance of Judge De Latour of the Sadar Dewani *Adalat*. It was also unofficially used in some of the dispensaries in both Calcutta and the mofussil. Of the front-ranking European Homoeopaths of Calcutta, Dr. Cooper, Dr. Rutherford, Dr. Berigny, Dr. Salzar and Dr. C.F. Tonnerre deserve special mention.<sup>8</sup>

The role of Dr. Rajendralal Dutta in popularising Homoeopathy in Bengal is the most prominent. A scion of the famous *bania* Akrur Dutta of Wellington Square, Dr. Rajendralal Dutta studied Allopathy in his early life but decided to set up his practice in Homoeopathy. He was a legendary Homoeopath in his life time.<sup>9</sup> Dr. Lokenath Maitra is famous for popularising Homoeopathy outside Bengal. He saved the life of the wife of Lt. Governor George Ironside and became instrumental for the foundation of a Homoeopathic Hospital at Benaras.<sup>10</sup> Calcutta had its first Homoeopathic Hospital in 1853. Dr. C.F. Tonnerre was its first Superintendent. As Homoeopathy became popular, a cold war developed between Allopathy and Homoeopathy, the two streams of western medicine. We have the testimony of Dr. Mahendralal Sircar and his son Dr. Amritalal Sircar on this state of affairs. Dr. Amritalal Sircar once wrote in monthly *Basumati* that Allopathy had two weapons against Homoeopathy. Allopaths used the tirade that the Homoeopaths did not know either Anatomy or Pathology.<sup>11</sup> Mahendralal during his life time himself got involved in a battle of polemics with Allopaths. Mahendralal got his encouragement in Homoeopathy from Dr. Rajendralal Dutta and Vidyasagar.<sup>12</sup> Persuaded by the success of Dr. Rajendralal Dutta and patronage of Vidyasagar, Mahendralal engaged in a scientific study of Homoeopathy. In the meeting of the British Medical Association in 1863, Rajendralal was present when Mahendralal was denouncing Homoeopathy as quackery. Mahendralal later wrote,

When he read my speech he found something in it, as he told me afterwards, which inspired him with the hope that he had at last found a professional whom he would be able to bring over to his side, that is, to the side of truth.<sup>13</sup>

Rajendralal spared no pains to urge Mahendralal to investigate the practice of Homoeopathy and its efficacy and Mahendralal was unable to give time for the enquiry. His friend, Kissory Chand Mitra, the editor of the *Indian Field* requested him at this time to review Morgan's *Philosophy of Homoeopathy*. This gave Mahendralal a golden opportunity to go in depth into the subject.

While such struggle was going on between us, a lay friend ill-disposed to homoeopathy handed me a homoeopathic pamphlet for review in a periodical of which he was an editor. The pamphlet was Morgan's *Philosophy of Homoeopathy*. This I thought a good opportunity for me to smash Homoeopathy and silence Babu Rajendar.<sup>14</sup>

But surprise of surprise, Mahendralal was dumb-founded after reading the pamphlet and realised that the whole subject had to be reexamined before any rash remark was made. He himself writes:

But what was the impression after a cursory glance at the pamphlet? I was convinced that I could not do it properly before reading it a second time.<sup>15</sup>

This was followed by two years of intensive study of Homoeopathy, after which Mahendralal himself became its doughty champion.

Several years past after this encounter with Homoeopathy. On 16th February 1867 the Fourth Annual General Meeting of the British Medical Association was held in Calcutta. Dr. Mahendralal Sircar was again the main speaker.

The audience eagerly awaited Dr. Sircar's speech 'On the Supposed Uncertainty in Medical Sciences and on the Relation Between Diseases and their Remedial Agents' in which he compared Allopathy with Homoeopathy. Four years ago he had denounced Homoeopathy as quackery but now he clearly stated:

A little experience convinced me that the system in which I was brought up was exceedingly defective and unscientific.<sup>16</sup>

He further said,

I believe nevertheless that Hahnemann had succeeded in discovering one of the very best guide laws of the selection of remedies.<sup>17</sup>

The heavyweight Allopaths of Calcutta could not sit idle any longer. They opposed Dr. Sircar encore. One of them, Dr. Waller became furious and howled:

Dr. Sircar, Dr. Sircar, if you speak a word more we will turn you out of the room. If Dr. Sircar is not (turned out) I would go out of it.<sup>18</sup>

He did not stop there and demanded that Dr. Sircar must not only be removed from the office of the Vice President of the Association but also from its ordinary membership or he will cease to attend its meeting. One other member tried to snatch away the text of Dr. Sircar's speech, an unprecedented incident in the history of The British Medical Association.<sup>19</sup> This incident reminds us of the occasion of 10th January (or 28th

October) 1836 when the dissection of corpse by Pandit Madhusudan Gupta in the Calcutta Medical College was greeted by cannonade from the Fort William for 50 times; to mark the conversion of a noted Kaviraj into Allopathy<sup>20</sup> or the meeting of the British Medical Association in 1863 where Homoeopathy was ridiculed by Mahendralal himself as a noted Allopath. But the context was now different. Famous Allopaths present were crestfallen. Medical history is not just the history of the diseases and their cure but also the encounter of one system with the other which makes it a social history of rich context.

Mahendralal returned home after the meeting broken-hearted and sighed:

*ami chasar chhele nahay samanya kaj kore khabo tate ar ki, kinto satya bole ya jenechhi ta to kortei habe ar baltei habe.*<sup>21</sup>

'I am a farmer's son and will better live by humble work, but what I have known as truth must be told and worked upon'

Events took their expected turn hereafter. He was ostracised. Conspiracy was rife to brand him as mentally unbalanced. For the next month he did not get any patient. Even those who used to get free medicine and treatment from him requested him to give them Allopathic medicine. The powerful Calcutta lobby of Allopathy consisting of Dr. Rathson, Dr. Ewert, Dr. Collis and Dr. Waller published tirades against him in Bengali and English newspapers; even an attempt was made to deny him the fellowship of medical faculty but this was finally withdrawn. One of his well-wishers commented that he would have to leave Homoeopathy after sometime and come back to Allopathy very soon.<sup>22</sup> But that moment never came in the life of Dr. Sircar. He was made of different mettle. Despite all vicissitudes, he never lost heart. Instead, he converted his medical journal into a mouthpiece of Homoeopathy. He reminded his opponents: 'I was sustained by my faith in the ultimate triumph of truth.'<sup>23</sup> The entire medical world was stunned by his devotion to truth. Those who had thought that he would come back to Allopathy were frustrated. Acharyya Srinath Sastri writes in his homage to Dr. Sircar's devotion to truth and self confidence thus:

*annya lok hole moner biswas mone rakhiya apanar artha uparjaner o sukh sachhandyer upay dekhiten kintu Mahendralal se dhatur lok chhilen na. Jaha ekbar satya baliya pratita haita taha tini hriday o maner sahiti abalamban kariten, loker anurag ba birager bhay kariten na.*<sup>24</sup>

'Any one else in his place would have kept one's faith in one's breast and resorted to earning money and happiness. But Mahendralal was not a man of that element. If he was convinced of something as the truth, he would pursue it with his mind and heart and be not afraid of people's likings and dislikings.'

But his hard time was shortlived. Those patients who had left him soon came to him for effective relief from their sufferings. His period of starvation was over. He himself has written:

I had not to wait long. Uncured cases began to come to my outdoor clinic and they began to spread the cause.<sup>25</sup>

Recapitulating his ordeal of 1867 he further writes :

Thus the 16th of February 1868 has been memorable in the history of medical profession in this country. On that day a native member of this profession was the first Indian to stand up for a reformation in medicine and for this he met with opposition and even persecution similar to that which had attended the reform in the land of its birth and in other parts of the world.<sup>26</sup>

It is interesting to note Dr. Sircar's progress in Homoeopathy. He himself testifies to the teachings of Rajendralal, his master in Homoeopathy:

I followed the advice given with such kindness, warmth and affection. But I went on with my trials which had become necessary; with each trial, the truth of Homoeopathy was revealed in greater splendour.<sup>27</sup>

*The Calcutta Journal of Medicine* was edited by Dr. Sircar and published from 1866. He faithfully edited it till his final illness with great care. In its columns, he had discussed many theoretical problems of Homoeopathy and curative properties of medicine and each number is full of clinical records of successful treatments. Among medicines the following find special mention:

*China* (Cinchona), *Cinnabaris* (Vermillion), *Chelidonium Majus* (great elandine), *Clematis Erection* (Flammula jovis), *Brionia alba*, Kurchi.

His many papers include

1. Homoeopathy in the new edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1904)
2. New school or Homoeopathic treatment. Distinctive characteristics of the schools.
3. The progress of Homoeopathy in India.
4. Present position of Homoeopathy in India.
5. What about the lachesis, are we still depending upon Herring's original supply.

Among his many tracts the following deserve mention in connection with Homoeopathy,

1. Hahnemann—the Father of Scientific medicine
2. Physiological basis of Psychology
3. Therapeutics of plague
4. Sketch of the treatment of cholera

He also contributed articles and reviews to many national and international journals such as

1. Indian Medical Gazetteer
2. The British Journal of Homoeopathy
3. The Monthly Homoeopathic Review
4. The American Homoeopathic Observer

5. The Western Homoeopathic Observer
6. The American Homoeopathist.

*The Calcutta Journal of Medicine* became his main mouthpiece for propagating Homoeopathy in India. In his article, 'The Progress of Homoeopathy in India', he laments:

For strange to say, while Homoeopathy has charitable hospital and dispensaries in the north-west it is still in the lack of these in Bengal and in the Metropolis.<sup>28</sup>

He takes British Homoeopathic Congress to task for not sending him invitation to participate in it on time.

The British Homoeopathic Congress ought to be of more representative character than it is. The Executive Committee ought to invite papers from all parts of the world, where Homoeopathy has its professional votaries and the English language is spoken. The call if made in due time, will, we are sure be cheerfully responded. The British Medical Association counts its members from all parts of the World, why should not the British Homoeopathic Society and the British Homoeopathic Congress do the same.<sup>29</sup>

In the columns of the *Calcutta Journal of Medicine* he used to write the clinical record of the successful treatments of difficult diseases in each number. Three such cases are produced below :

### Case number<sup>30</sup> - I

A case of Hysteria, under the care of Dr. M.L. Sircar

Babu R.D.M. placed his wife (then mother of seven children) under my treatment. May 1870, her symptoms were hysteric fits every day in the afternoon or towards evening. The disease was at first mild in character. She was placed under Kaviraji treatment under which she was kept for three months. Inductions of various oils and numberless internal remedies were prescribed but without the slightest improvement. She was therefore placed under what is called English Medicine (Allopathy) and in the course of a month, her disease became so much aggravated that even the doctor pronounced the case to be incurable and could think of no better treatment than the application of the set on to the nape of the neck, and removal to a better climate. This alarmed the husband and compelled him to think of Homoeopathic treatment.

7th May - gave Aco - 30

13th May - gave Puls - 6

3rd June - gave Nux - 30

20th July - gave Puls - 30

25th July - gave Pur - 6

10th Sept - gave Aur - 6 + Puls - 30

16th Sept - gave Cupr - 6

**Case no<sup>31</sup> - 2**

A case of Diarrhoea under the care of Dr. M.L. Sircar.

Jogendra Nath Mukherjee, age - 15, - who has been suffering from malarious fever and enlarged spleen for nearly one year complained of heaviness of stomach. On Wednesday evening the 2nd July, he had copious diarrhoeaic stools.

Administered - China - 30, 4 doses, The stool becoming more and then copious, China was stopped. Gave Ac Phos - 6. There was no return of diarrhoea.

Remark - The above case has shown most clearly how a medicine seemingly Homoeopathic to a disease fails to make the slightest impression upon it, when a truly Homoeopathic medicine arrests its progress and cures it like a charm.

**Case no.<sup>32</sup> 3**

A case of Jaundice under the treatment of Dr. M.L. Sircar

Babu S. Mukherjee age - 20. He was placed under the treatment of a doctor for a month and then under a Kaviraj for 15 days. I took on 16 June, gave Nux-V-6, 19th June Nux-V-6, 21st June, Bryo - 6, the improvement was rapid.

Remark - There are very few symptoms in the above case to enable one to select the appropriate remedy. We are entirely guided by clinical experiences, which in the absence of numerous symptoms, is not to be neglected.

Thus it will be found that Dr. Sircar was able to cure Cholera, Jaundice, Hysteria, Plurici, Herma, Cataract and Neuralgia patients by Homoeopathy with facility. In these records he has given the nature and symptoms of diseases, ways of treatment and defect for which the diseases may not be cured. Everything is recorded in clinical detail. If all these clinical records are compiled into a book some day, it will be a useful manual for homoeopathy at higher level.

Mahendralal also kept his diary regularly like many other noted medical practitioners. Here also information about many diseases and the administered medicines, health bulletins of patients are recorded in detail. We come to know his treatment of some Bengal celebrities like Vidyasagar, Radhakanta Deb, Dwarakanath, Nabinchandra Sen, Gopalchandra Lahiri, Thakur Ramkrishna and Lord and Lady Dufferin. But in all cases he was approached as a last resort.

During his morning walk with Dr. Salzar, he used to discuss with him all aspects of the diseases of the patients in hand and their treatment. He had a few paid snake charmers. They used to regularly supply him snakes. Mahendralal would experiment with their venoms on chicks and fowls. He reported this experiment in his article, 'What about the lachesis, are we still depending upon Herring's original supply'.<sup>37</sup> At home he used to conduct free treatment of some patients, but within a short while, the number of patients swelled so much that it had to be converted into a charitable dispensary.<sup>38</sup>

Mahendralal used to call Homoeopathy the 'new school' and Allopathy the 'old school'. In his article, 'Distinctive characteristics of these two schools, he commented,



The great merit of the therapeutic system of the new school is that it is based upon a law of nature. This law is the expression or enunciation of a relationship that exists between diseases and the remedial agents.<sup>39</sup>

It was a happy augury that not all Allopaths were opposed to him now as in the past. His many-sided genius, fortitude and devotion to truth attracted many among his rivals. Kenneth Mcleod, a famous Allopathic surgeon of his time said of him:

I am no admirer of Homoeopathy but I verily believe that, Dr. Sircar's espousal of Homoeopathy was honest and granted on the belief that it furnished with a fundamental scientific principle which placed medical practice on a higher plane.<sup>40</sup>

In 1874 the Editor of *British Medical Journal* wrote about him and his *Calcutta Journal of Medicine* in high esteem;

He has been left to fill his journal almost entirely by his own individual efforts. His credit is that he would now be able to present such excellent matters<sup>41</sup>

The Indo-European correspondence wrote even earlier in 1868 as follows,

We desire to return thanks for the first member of the Calcutta Journal of Medicine, edited by Dr. M.L. Sircar. We hope the publication may meet with the success that it deserves. The editor's name is already very popularly known to the public for his candid outspoken views on the subject of medicine.<sup>42</sup>

His fame as a medical practitioner spread so far and wide that in 1899 C.J. Halifax, Commissioner of the Plague Commission wanted to know from him his experience of the disease and whether the epidemic was at all a plague. He promised the Commission to publish his opinion on the same and his letter to Halifax bears testimony to his commitment to the national crisis:

To prevent misunderstanding I ought to state my own position in the profession. Ever since I have been driven by conscience by repeated observation, to look upon Homoeopathy as the most advanced point in the domain of medicine. I have become an outcaste in the profession. My professional opinion in any matter is not sought to prevent the unpleasantness of a rebuff. I do not obtrude my opinion either upon Government or upon my professional brethren, except that as a matter of public duty. I have to put forth my views in the pages of my journal.<sup>43</sup>

British civilians like Lord and Lady Dufferin and Lord Lytton also admired his genius. He was conferred the title of C.I.E. for his many-sided contribution to scientific knowledge. Besides, he was made a member of the Executive Council, Calcutta University and Sheriff of Calcutta. He discharged all his duties faithfully with honour.<sup>44</sup>

It is interesting to note, that though he considered Homoeopathy to be the best mode of treatment, he was not blind to its limitations. We came to know of it from the pages of his diary where he was sceptical about the cure of cancer of Dwarakanath Mitra or Thakur Ramkrishna. He privately did painstaking research in Homoeopathic medicine and wrote many research papers.

On a review of his whole career, the exclusion of Homoeopathy from his Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science raises valid doubts about the status of Homoeopathy as science. In reply, the object of that Association may be referred to:

“The object of the Association is to enable the natives in India to cultivate science in all its departments with a view to its advancement by original research, and (as it will necessarily follow) with a view to its varied applications to the art and comforts of life.”<sup>45</sup>

It was clearly stated in it that the pursuit of pure science like Physics, Chemistry, Botany, Astronomy, Geology and Physiology was the agenda and the objective was to create and train scientists. Dr. Nilratan Sarkar was invited to lecture on Physiology but Allopathy and Homeopathy were not included in the agenda of the Association. Therefore both Allopathy and Homoeopathy find no place in research and deliberation of the IACS.<sup>46</sup> This was no aspersion on Homoeopathy. Towards the end of his life, he suffered repeatedly from asthma, malaria and kidney trouble. Even then his faith on Homoeopathy was unflinching. In the introduction to the second edition of his book, *On Supposed Uncertainty in Medical Science*, he wrote,

Persecution has already commenced, professional combination is strong against me, and likely to be stronger ..... but I can not deprive myself of the satisfaction that mine has been and shall be so raised against none. It was probable my bread will be affected, but I shall never forget the word of Jesus ..... we must not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of god.<sup>47</sup>

This may be regarded as his deathbed testament and will surely dispel all our doubts about his dedication to Homoeopathy.

To conclude one may quote Dr. Berigny's tribute to Dr. Sircar, the contemporary legendary Homoeopath,

It is time for the moon to set for the sun on the horizon.<sup>48</sup>

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