

BEYOND THE ZENANA: UNEARTHING THE HIDDEN ARCHIVE OF DR. MISS JAMINI SEN—PATRIARCHY, COLONIAL RACISM, AND HUMANITARIAN FEMINISM IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY BENGAL

Dr. Ritabrata Goswami

Associate Professor, Department of History

Kaliachak College, Malda

Email: ritabrataswami@gmail.com

Abstract:

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in colonial Bengal witnessed the gradual opening of professional avenues for educated middle-class women, among which the identity of the ‘lady doctor’ emerged as a highly complex amalgamation of empowerment and vulnerability. While traditional Bengali society hesitated to accept women as medical practitioners, British colonial authorities subjected them to systemic racial discrimination, and male colleagues often subjected them to professional harassment. Against this intricate backdrop, Dr. Miss Jamini Sen (1871–1932) emerged as a pioneering yet remarkably introverted figure. During her lifetime, Sen strictly guarded her personal diaries and memoirs, explicitly forbidding their posthumous publication in her will. It was only after her death that her elder sister, the poet Kamini Roy, defied this wish to preserve her legacy, publishing a serialized biography, "Daktar Kumini Jamini Sen," in the periodical *Bangalakshmi* in 1339 BS (1932 CE). Furthermore, a profound lecture delivered by Sen was published in *Suprabhat* in 1320 BS (1914 CE), and her historic academic achievements were covered by *The Modern Review* in 1912. Drawing heavily upon these contemporary periodicals and recent research by scholars like Pritha Kundu, Indranil Sanyal, and Sharmita Ray, this seminar paper provides a detailed feminist historiographical evaluation of Sen’s life. It examines her transition from a private individual to a public intellectual, her intellectual resistance against patriarchal and colonial hegemonic structures, and her enduring contribution to the intellectual legacy of women medics in colonial India.

Keywords: Dr. Miss Jamini Sen, Colonial Bengal, Women Doctors, Feminist Historiography, Hidden Archive, Soft Patriarchy, Lady Dufferin Fund, *Bangalakshmi*, *Suprabhat*, Kamini Roy.

Introduction: Feminist Historiography and the Journey from Privacy to Publication:

For decades, the historiography of the Bengal Renaissance was constructed almost exclusively around male reformers and their overt institutional achievements. When women were included in this grand narrative, the focus disproportionately fell on highly visible figures—such as Kadambini Ganguly—whose lives were inextricably linked to the public activities of their male counterparts. Writing the history of women physicians in colonial Bengal, therefore, presents a profound methodological challenge, primarily due to a severe lack of traditional archival material regarding women who operated outside the male reformist gaze. This is where the methodology of feminist historiography becomes indispensable (Scott, 1986, pp. 1053–1075).

Feminist historiography challenges the androcentric bias of conventional historical archives, arguing that traditional records systematically marginalize women lived experiences. It shifts the analytical focus from macro-level political events to micro-level personal struggles, seeking out "history from below." However, a unique epistemological crisis arises when the female historical subject *herself* actively resists archival preservation. Dr. Miss Jamini Sen belonged to this category. During her lifetime, she never shared her innermost pangs, professional grievances, or personal aspirations with anyone. So stringent was her desire for privacy that she explicitly stated in her will that her personal documents, diaries, and memoirs were never to be published (Kundu, 2024, p. 57). In feminist historiographical terms, Sen's deliberate silence creates an "archival void." Recovering her narrative requires looking beyond state archives and instead treating unconventional sources—personal diaries, private letters, and domestic periodicals—as legitimate historical texts. Recognizing the immense historical value of her sister's suppressed writings, Kamini Roy took it upon herself to rescue Jamini Sen from historical oblivion, essentially violating her privacy to serve the demands of historical justice. Roy meticulously translated Sen's English notes into Bengali and published a serialized biography, "Daktar Kumini Sen," in the *Bangalakshmi* periodical

between the months of Baishakh and Shravan in 1339 BS (1932) (Roy, 1932, pp. 505–510, 541–548, 631–636). Additionally, Sen's intellectual footprint is preserved in a lecture she delivered at a Mahila Parishad (Women's Council) meeting, published in *Suprabhat* in 1320 BS (1914 CE), and a Reuters telegram celebrating her historic academic fellowship, published in *The Modern Review* in 1912 (Sanyal, 2024, p. 3). These contemporary periodicals serve as the primary lenses through which this paper attempts to construct a feminist history of Jamini Sen's life. By applying feminist historiographical methods to these texts, we can analyze how Sen navigated and subtly subverted the dual hurdles of patriarchal dominance and colonial racism.

The Politics of the Family: 'Soft Patriarchy' and the Struggle for Medical Education:

Born on June 20, 1871, in the Basana village of the Barisal district, Jamini Sen was the second daughter of Chandicharan and Bamasundari Sen. Her family was deeply rooted in the Brahmo Samaj, an institution at the forefront of social reform. Chandicharan was a progressive man who vehemently supported female education; however, as researcher Pritha Kundu points out, his progressive mindset was bounded by a 'soft patriarchy.' (Kundu, 2024, p. 57) While he encouraged his daughters to study literature and become teachers, he considered the study of human anatomy and medicine highly disrespectful and unsuitable for women. Feminist historiography utilizes the concept of soft patriarchy to highlight a critical contradiction within the Bengal Renaissance: enlightenment was permitted only as long as it did not threaten the traditional gendered division of labour. Interestingly, Kamini Roy herself had desired to study medicine but ultimately submitted to her father's will. Jamini, however, possessed a different psychological constitution. Refusing to succumb quietly, she, alongside her elder sister, employed logical persuasion to convince their father. This resistance was not radical or aggressive; rather, it was a dignified, intellectual protest that eventually forced her father to concede without breaking familial bonds. (Kundu, 2024, pp. 57–58) In 1890, after passing her F.A. (First Arts) examination from Bethune College, Jamini Sen created history by enrolling in the Calcutta Medical College (CMC), where she was the only Bengali Hindu girl in her class.

The Male-Dominated Medical Sphere and the Crisis of Identity:

The environment at CMC in the 1890s was entirely male dominated, operating under a regime of co-education that viewed the presence of women with intense suspicion. In a society where interacting with unrelated men was a social taboo, a female medical student dissecting cadavers alongside male peers was viewed with moral panic. To maintain her respectability, Sen adopted a strategy of imposing isolation. As Kamini Roy noted in *Bangalakshmi*, "Her dignity was such that her male colleagues were hesitant of coming to her even to discuss necessary matters." (Roy, 2005, p. 64) This self-imposed distance forced male colleagues to view her with a mixture of awe and respect rather than condescension.

However, the harsh realities of the professional world shattered this insulated academic life. After passing her L.M.S. (Licentiate of Medicine and Surgery) in 1897, she attempted to start a private practice in Calcutta, only to be met with the unyielding wall of patriarchy. Historian Sharmita Ray notes that society was still not ready to accept female doctors as reliable professionals (Ray, 2021, pp. 59–60). Kadambini Ganguly, the first female medical graduate, had previously been forced to advertise her services in *The Bengalee* newspaper to attract patients (Ray, 2021, p. 61). Sen experienced the same marginalization, observing that lady doctors were rarely called directly; they were only summoned as a last resort upon the recommendation of a male family physician. Furthermore, there was gross discrimination regarding medical fees (Kundu, 2024, p. 58). For an independent-minded woman like Sen, relying on the charity of male doctors for patient referrals was an unbearable assault on her self-respect. Consequently, she left Calcutta in 1898 to join a hospital in Sholapur.

The Nepal Chapter: The Zenana as a Hidden Archive:

In 1899, upon the recommendation of the CMC Principal and Kadambini Ganguly, Sen moved to Kathmandu to serve as the personal physician to the Nepalese royal family and to head the Zenana Hospital. It is within the context of her decade-long stay in Nepal that Pritha Kundu introduces a fascinating theoretical framework: the "Hidden Archive." In the colonial gaze, the Indian *zenana* (women's quarters) was stereotyped as a space of darkness, disease, and scandal, particularly within royal households. Colonial administrators and missionaries often justified their presence in India by claiming they

needed to "rescue" women from the zenana (Kundu, 2024, p. 58). As the physician to the royal women, Sen had intimate access to this space. The royal ladies attempted to befriend her and often shared the secrets and scandals of the *antarmahal* (inner quarters). Yet, Sen refused to act as an informant. Her 'dignified silence' and strict speech control meant that she heard the secrets of one but never exposed them to another. Kundu argues that this silence was a form of hidden archival construction. Unlike the colonial archive, which seeks to document, categorize, and ultimately dominate, Sen's hidden archive derived its power from its impenetrability and refusal to disclose. She treated the zenana not as a site of colonial intervention, but as a sacred space of female trust, returning to Calcutta only after the death of the Queen Mother in 1909 (Roy, 2005, p. 64).

The "Polite Challenge": Navigating Colonial Racism and the European Journey:

Upon returning to Calcutta, Sen realized that to truly serve her country's women; she needed to update her medical knowledge. The unpublished diary excerpts published in *Bangalshmi* reveal her internal conflict: she was a patriot and an introvert, terrified at the thought of living among strangers in Europe. Yet, her sense of duty overcame her fear. She applied for a scholarship from the Lady Dufferin Fund, fully aware of the systemic racial bias inherent in the institution. She wrote, "The Dufferin Fund generally did not grant applications from Indians, in most cases, British or Phiringhee applicants used to get this scholarship. I thought I should apply for it. If it is granted, then it would be decided that I should go." (Roy, 2005, p. 64) This application was, in essence, a "polite challenge" to the colonial establishment. She weaponized her own merit. On March 8, 1911, she departed for Europe. As detailed by Indranil Sanyal, Sen obtained her LM degree from Dublin and, in 1919, passed the fellowship examination at the University of Glasgow to become the first female Fellow of the Royal Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons (FRFSP). This was an unprecedented achievement for an Indian woman, especially since the institution had long resisted admitting women (Sanyal, 2024, p. 8). *The Modern Review* in July 1912 proudly reported via a Reuter's telegram: "We are glad to learn... that Dr. Miss Jamini Sen... has become a Fellow of the Royal Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of that University. She is the first lady to obtain this distinction." (Sanyal, 2024, p. 8) Sen subsequently went to Berlin for further training, proving that an

Indian woman could not only equal but surpass her European counterparts in academic excellence.

Constructive Nationalism: Medicine as an Indirect Anti-Colonial Tool:

It is crucial to contextualize Sen's life within the turbulent political landscape of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengal, a period rife with anti-British activities and the rise of the nationalist movement. While historical records do not indicate that Dr. Sen participated directly in political agitations, revolutionary activities, or the *Swadeshi* movement, her role in the anti-colonial struggle was nonetheless significant, albeit indirect. There is a profound difference between struggling to establish oneself in personal life and establishing oneself to contribute to the nation. Sen's life exemplifies the latter through "constructive nationalism."

In an era when the British Raj justified its rule through the "civilizing mission"—citing Indian backwardness and the need to rescue Indian women—Sen's professional triumphs served as a direct rebuttal to colonial propaganda. By securing the FRFSP in Glasgow and excelling in Dublin, she demonstrated the intellectual parity of Indian women, undermining the very racial hierarchies the colonial apparatus relied upon. Furthermore, her refusal to accept subservience within the Women's Medical Service (WMS) was a form of passive resistance. By enduring harsh transfers and racism yet continuing to serve the Indian populace with dedication, she upheld the dignity of the native medical profession.

Her approach to nationalism was rooted in service to the people—a philosophy later championed by Gandhi. She contributed to the nation not through slogans, but by healing the bodies of the future citizens of India. Her establishment of Vishramkutir, where she raised destitute children, was an act of nation-building, ensuring the survival and education of the marginalized. Thus, while she was absent from political rallies, her battlefield was the hospital ward, and her weapon was medical excellence, making her an unsung soldier in the broader anti-colonial struggle.

The Women's Medical Service (WMS) and the Myth of Universal Sisterhood:

Returning from Europe, Sen joined the Women's Medical Service for India (WMS) in 1914. Her tenure here is a textbook example of structural displacement. The WMS, originally conceptualized to empower women, became an instrument of colonial racism

under British administration. As detailed in *Bangalakshmi* and corroborated by Sharmita Ray, Sen was repeatedly transferred to hostile environments to cover for the misconduct of British lady doctors. (Kundu, 2024, pp. 59–60; Ray, 2021, p. 71) When three British female doctors were transferred from Agra to Shimla in the summer as a punishment, Sen was sent to Agra in scorching heat to do the work of three doctors. Six months later, when the "problem" with the British doctors was resolved, they were sent back to Agra, and Sen was unceremoniously transferred to Shimla in the bitter winter. Upon arriving in Shimla, she found no living quarters and was forced to clean out locked, unused hospital rooms just to survive (Kundu, 2024, pp. 59–60). Later, when Lady Chelmsford arrived to inaugurate a new female ward in Shimla that Sen had painstakingly developed, she blatantly stated that an Indian lady doctor was not competent enough to head a hospital. Consequently, Sen was transferred to Shikarpur in Sindh to face extreme heat (Sanyal, 2024, p. 10). These incidents completely dismantle the Western feminist myth of "Universal Sisterhood." Sen's life proves that in a colonial setup, racial solidarity among women was a façade; white British women actively participated in the subjugation of native women to protect their own racial privileges. Inter sectionalist—the overlapping vectors of gender and race—is key to understanding Sen's marginalization within the WMS.

The Public Intellectual: Humanitarian Feminism in *Suprabhat*:

While *Bangalakshmi* reveals Sen's professional struggles, the lecture published in *Suprabhat* in 1320 BS (1914) exposes her profound philosophical mind. Speaking at a Mahila Parishad gathering, she critiqued the apathy of Bengali women, urging them to break out of their "cocoon of happiness and peace" to engage in humanitarian work (Sen, 1914). She used the example of the 'Free Masons' to illustrate how shared ethical standards could bridge the racial divide between Indians and Europeans. The most captivating part of her lecture was an anecdote from her time in a Berlin women's hostel (*Damen Hospiz*). She recounted how an American woman, upon seeing a specific badge on an unknown young man on a tram, confidently approached him. The badge signified membership in an elite college society dedicated to high ideals. The American woman knew that no badge-holder would violate those ideals, allowing her to trust a complete stranger (Roy, 2005, p. 114). Using this anecdote, Sen urged Bengali women to model

their Parishad on King Arthur's Round Table, quoting Lord Tennyson: "A glorious company, the flower of women / To serve as model for a mighty world... To speak no slander, no, nor listen to it, / To honour her own words as if her God's." (Roy, 2005, p. 114) Her feminism was not aggressive or merely rights-based; it was a deeply humanitarian and moral framework that sought to empower women by elevating their ethical and spiritual stature.

Reconfiguring Motherhood: Spirituality and *Vishramkutir*:

While in Berlin, Sen suffered a catastrophic personal loss: the sudden death of her adopted daughter. As an unmarried woman, this child was her sole anchor. The trauma led her to question divine justice. However, as recorded in *Bangalakshmi*, during her sea voyage back to India, the ebb and flow of the ocean brought her solace. She recorded a dream where a Divine Presence consoled her: "Listen, my child, no good work goes futile... dedicate your tenderness and sympathy to the noblest cause... try to bring happiness to other children, so that she, though 'dead' for this world, will remain in your heart as an inspiration." (Roy, 1932, pp. 509–510) This spiritual epiphany led Sen to merge the concepts of 'home' and 'hospital.' Unable to bear biological motherhood, she constructed an alternative maternal space. She established *Vishramkutir* in Puri, a home where she adopted and raised destitute children whose mothers had died in her hospitals, bearing all their educational expenses (Kundu, 2024, p. 59). This was a radical reconfiguration of maternal identity, transforming personal grief into a collective social service.

Final Years and Conclusion:

Sen's refusal to be subservient eventually led to her resignation from the WMS in 1920 following a dispute with authorities over familial duties. She traveled to Europe a second time, earning a Diploma in Public Health from Cambridge and a certificate from the London School of Tropical Medicine. Returning in 1924, she took charge of the Baldeodas Maternity Home in Calcutta. According to Indranil Sanyal, she transformed this institution into an ideal maternity home, personally training nurses and authoring a vital manual titled *Prasuti-tatva* (Thesis on Maternity-care) (Sanyal, 2024, p. 10). She continued working until her body completely broke down under the weight of stress. Even while on leave in Puri, she was forced to take charge of a local hospital. She was

finally brought back to Calcutta in December 1931, breathing her last on January 22, 1932 (Deb, 1994).

Through the lens of feminist historiography, the documents published in *Bangalakshmi*, *Suprabhat*, and *The Modern Review* prove that Jamini Sen was far more than a medical practitioner; she was an intellectual warrior. Her resistance against patriarchy was never loud or chaotic; it was intellectual and symbolic. She dismantled colonial racism not through political protests, but by quietly building hospital wards, increasing patient statistics from 213 to 478 in Shikarpur (Indian Medical Gazette, 1882), and earning academic accolades that forced the colonizers to acknowledge her superiority. Dr. Miss Jamini Sen carved out a unique space for the intellectual legacy of women in colonial Bengal (Forbes, 1994, p. 125). To forget the silent battles fought by warriors like her is to leave the history of the Bengal Renaissance fundamentally incomplete.

References:

- Deb, C. (1994). *Mahila Daktar: Bhin Graher Basinda*. Ananda Publishers.
- Forbes, G. (1994). *Women in modern India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Indian Medical Gazette. (1882, July). On native ladies and medical work.
- Kundu, P. (2024). 'Doctor Miss Jamini Sen': A journey from privacy to publication and critical appraisal. *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, 11(1), 57.
- Kundu, P. (2024). A comparative analysis of Kamini Roy's submission versus Jamini Sen's rational persuasion. *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, 11(1), 57–58.
- Kundu, P. (2024). Antoinette Burton's concept of 'Contesting the Zenana' as theoretical baseline. *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, 11(1), 58.
- Kundu, P. (2024). Sen's silence in the Nepalese royal court as counter-narrative to colonial gaze. *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, 11(1), 58.
- Kundu, P. (2024). The concept of 'soft patriarchy' in enlightened Brahmo society. *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, 11(1), 57.
- Kundu, P. (2024). Transfer policies and discrimination in women's medical service. *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, 11(1), 59–60.
- Ray, S. (2021). Kadambini Ganguly's advertisement in *The Bengalee* newspaper in 1888. *Social Scientist*, 49, 61.

- Ray, S. (2021). Women doctors' masterful manoeuvrings: Colonial Bengal, late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Social Scientist*, 49, 59–60.
- Roy, K. (1932). Doktor Kumari Jamini Sen. *Bangalakshmi*, Baishakh-Shravan 1339 BS, 505–510, 541–548, 631–636.
- Roy, K. (2005). Kamini Rayer Agranthita Gadyasangraha (Collected prose of Kamini Roy). Dey's Publishing.
- Roy, K. (2005). The Berlin 'Damen Hospiz' incident. Kamini Rayer Agranthita Gadyasangraha, 114.
- Roy, K. (2005). Translation of Jamini Sen's diary entry by Kamini Roy. Kamini Rayer Agranthita Gadyasangraha, 64.
- Roy, K. (2005). Translation of Lord Tennyson's poetry used by Sen. Kamini Rayer Agranthita Gadyasangraha, 114.
- Roy, K. (1932). The spiritual and social context of establishing Vishramkutir in Puri. *Bangalakshmi*, 1339, 509–510.
- Sanyal, I. (2024). DR. (MISS) JAMINI SEN (1871–1932): A pioneer woman doctor of colonial India and the first female fellow of the royal faculty of physicians and surgeons, Glasgow. *Science and Culture*, 90, 3.
- Sanyal, I. (2024). Details regarding the Royal Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons, Glasgow's historical reluctance to admit women, and Sen's triumph. *Science and Culture*, 90, 8.
- Sanyal, I. (2024). Information regarding her assuming charges of the Baldeodas Maternity Home and authoring Prasuti-tatva. *Science and Culture*, 90, 10.
- Sanyal, I. (2024). Lady Chelmsford's derogatory remark regarding Sen's competence. *Science and Culture*, 90, 10.
- Sanyal, I. (2024). Quote from Reuters Telegram published in *The Modern Review*, July 1912. *Science and Culture*, 90, 8.
- Scott, J. W. (1986). Gender: A useful category of historical analysis. *The American Historical Review*, 91(5), 1053–1075.
- Sen, J. (1914). Lecture at the Women's Council. *Suprabhat*, 1320 BS.