

## Remembrance of an Unremembered: Dr. Sakharam Arjun (1839-1885) - The Physician, Leprosy Researcher, Botanist and a Social Reformer of Colonial India

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In the last one and half century the research about cause and management of leprosy has witnessed a sea change. The emergence of new drugs has made medical community to think about elimination of the once dreaded disease. This happened in the course of many long years and with the contribution of many well known and unknown warriors. Dr Sakharam Arjun, a great physician and botanist with a profound knowledge on medical use of the indigenous bazaar medicines did research on the effect of *Chaulmoogra* oil, *Gurjon* oil, *Bauchi* oil etc. on leprosy. His findings were noted by the *Leprosy Commission in India during 1890-91* and were quoted the same in their report. He played active role in making people aware about public health and wrote in number of books in Marathi. He had played an active role in supporting the education of his step daughter Dr Rukhmabai. A legal suit filed by Dr Rukhmabai regarding the child marriage and age of consent led to a land mark amendment in the law about the age of consent and abolished the age old practice of child marriage. This whole battle was possible because of the dynamic support of Dr Sakharam. Sadly we have forgotten this great physician and Social reformist. This article is a brief remembrance of this presently unremembered great man.

**Key words :** Sakharam Arjun, Leprosy, History of Leprosy, *Chaulmoogra* Oil, Leprosy Commission of India

### Introduction

*"Men make history and not the other way around. In periods where there is no leadership, society stands still. Progress occurs when courageous, skilful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better."* Harry S Truman (1884-1972).

Nothing can be more apt to the words of Truman than the life and works of Dr. Sakharam Arjun (1839-1885), a great physician, famous botanist

and a renowned social reformer. History always chronicles the very famous events and victors who changed the course of events on the earth, but at times we fail to remember the deeds of many great men whose contributions altered the path of human civilisation.

The last one and half century had witnessed many a landmark discovery and advancements in the history of leprosy. A number of new findings regarding the aetiology and management had

emerged. If we go through the pages of history of leprosy in India, names of many stalwarts such as Henry Vandyke Carter (1831-1897), Ernest Muir (1880-1974) and Sir Leonard Rogers (1868-1962) are well mentioned (Desikan and Pandya 2016), but very little has been written on this Indian leprosy researcher Dr Sakharam Arjun. His opinion was quoted in the report of famous Leprosy Commission in India, 1890-91. This present piece of writing is a brief overview of life and works of Dr. Sakharam Arjun whose activity was not confined to leprosy research only but also famous in the field of botany, medicinal use of plants and more importantly in social reforms.

#### **Dr Sakharam Arjun - Childhood and Academic Career :**

Dr Sakharam Arjun (Fig. 1) was born in the year 1839 and lived his childhood at Girgaum, Maharashtra. In the initial years of his life he was taught at home and afterwards he joined Elphinstone College in Bombay in the year 1850 and in 1858 he joined Grant Medical College to study medicine. His tutor was Narayan Daji, the younger brother of renowned Bhau Daji Lad. Sakharam was a stipendiary student at Grant Medical College and used to top in all the examinations. He obtained his Licentiate in Medicine (L.M) in the year 1861. He was appointed as Professor in Botany in Grant Medical College and also taught Surgery. He joined as an Assistant Surgeon at JJ Hospital in 1866 and was given the responsibility of leprosy patients in 1873. Dr Sakharam was the first Indian to occupy the post of Assistant Surgeon at JJ Hospital (Leprosy history.org, 2019). He was awarded the title of 'Surgeon of the Viceroy (Save 2012). Dr Arjun was married to a widow named Jayantibai and brought up his step daughter Rukhmabai (the daughter of Jayantibai from previous marriage) so successfully both in education and culture that she became an icon of a social revolutionary



**Fig. 1 : Dr.Sakharam Arjun (1839-1885) :  
Portrait from the Archives of Acworth Leprosy  
Hospital, Mumbai.**

(Source:<http://www.theacworthleprosymuseum.org/SAKHARAMARJUN2R.gif>)

about women's rights. Dr Rukhmabai was one of the first practising lady doctors in India (Ferry 2019).

#### **Dr Sakharam's Contribution to Medical Science :**

The Medical and Physical Society of Bombay was formed in 1835 with the objective of encouraging the cultivation of medical science and its collateral branches. Indians were excluded from becoming members but Dr Arjun Sakharam and other Indian doctors attended the meetings of 1880s. Dr Sakharam read a paper on "The practice of medicine in Bombay" describing different kind of indigenous practitioners (Anonymous 1883).

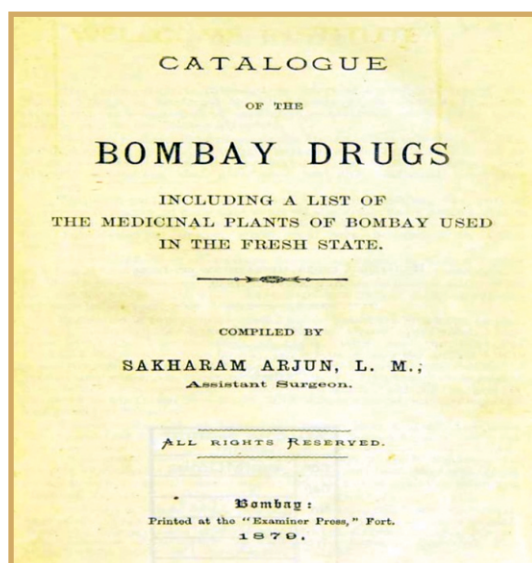
Dr Sakharam published a booklet from Grant Medical College in Marathi discounting practices like bathing in the sea after vaccination (Ramanna 2002). He noted the various ill effects of *suran* (*Arum campanulatum* Roxb) and abortifacient effect of *chitrak* (*Plumbago rosea*) (Kiritkar 1895).

During this period ladies trained in traditional way about delivering child and tackling pregnancy related problems were in charge of performing obstetric works. To educate these ladies who were part and parcel of the contemporary medical system of that period, a programme of certificate course on Midwifery in Marathi was started at Grant Medical College. Dr Sakharam took classes in Midwifery from 1871 to 1878 as an honorary service (Anonymous 1885-86).

He felt the need of public health awareness and realised that medical facts should reach the

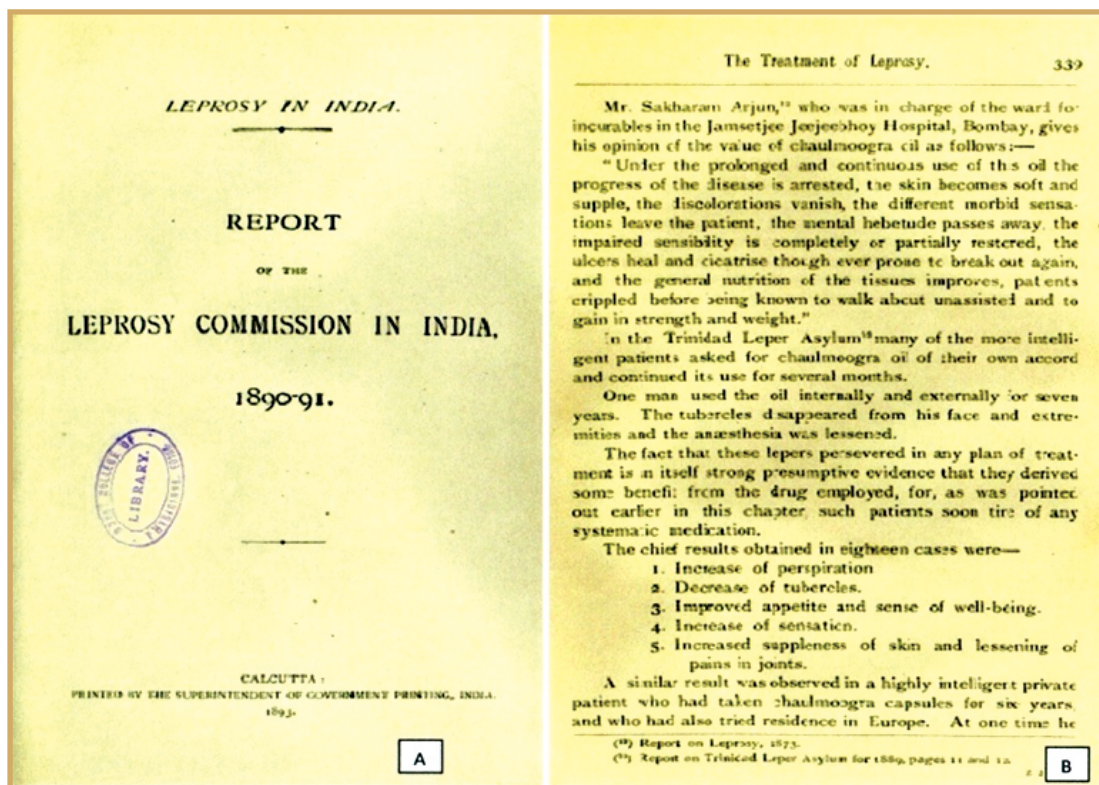
commoner too. Hence he wrote a number of compendia in Marathi language comprehensible to common people like *Vaidyatatva* (1869), *Garbhavidyava Prasutikaran* (1873), *Vivahavidnan* (1877), *Devichya Rogache Swarup ani tyacha Shamanache Prtibandhak Upaya*, *Gruhinikantha Bhushan* etc. He wrote on the *Physiology of Marriage* in *The Theosophist* in 1880 (Arjun 1880).

**Dr Sakharam Arjun: a Medical Botanist Per Excellence** : Arjun was interested in Botany since his student days. After receiving his L.M. degree he joined Grant Medical College to impart teaching on botany and was made assistant to Professor William Guyer Hunter. In the year 1879 he wrote the famous *Catalogue of the Bombay drugs* (Fig. 2), which according to the author was intended to serve as a native drugs to be found in the bazaars of Bombay. The book contains details on the scientific name, botanical information, names of the plant in local language and its medicinal importance (Arjun 1879). Being a skilled botanist he identified many medicinal plants available in Bombay bazaar (Basu 1893). He mentioned about various indigenous bazaar remedies in diseases like dysentery, tuberculosis, tapeworm infection etc. (Kiritkar and Basu 1918). The importance of various plants like *Azadirachta Indica*, *Anacardum occidentale*, *Psoralea corylifolia*, *Clematis triloba*, *Hydrocotyle asiatica* in many skin diseases including leprosy have been mentioned in his book (Arjun 1879). His expertise in Indian medicinal plants and interest in botany led him to become one of the two Indian founding members of the Bombay Natural History Society which was established in 15<sup>th</sup> September, 1883. He proposed the plan of setting up Victoria garden. The famous botanists like Jaykrishna Indraj, Kanhoba Ranchhodas Kiritkar were taught botany under the mentorship of Dr. Arjun. (Shah 2014, Shyamal 2017). Dr. Sakharam



**Fig 2: Title page of Catalogue of the Bombay drugs**

(Source: <https://archive.org/stream/b20415540#page/n4/mode/1up>, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=64264651>).



**Fig 3 : (A) Title page of Report of the Leprosy Commission in India 1890-91, (B) Sakharam Arjun's opinion as quoted in the Report of the Leprosy Commission in India 1890-91**

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discovered a plant named *Dressinafurgussaina* (Dhumatkar 2004).

#### **Dr Sakharam's Contribution in Leprosy Research:**

As already mentioned Dr Sakharam was in charge of the leprosy patients at JJ Hospital and this gave him an opportunity to try various remedies on the leprosy patients under the super vision of the Chief Physician Henry Cooke. He studied the effect of oil of *Chaulmoogra*, *Kowti*, *Bauchi*, *Gurjon* and Cashew nut oils during 1870-1875. He published his view in the Report on leprosy in 1873. According to him only chaulmoogra oil was found helpful.

After the death of father Damien de Veuster in April, 1889 in Molokai, a committee was formed in England to pay homage to the legendry leprosy worker. This committee in its first meeting in 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1889 was assigned the task of taking stock of the situation of leprosy in India and accordingly the members left London on 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 1890 and reached Bombay on 17<sup>th</sup> November, 1890. They met the Indian representatives and collected detailed information about the various aspects of leprosy in India (Choksy 1893). Dr Sakharam Arjun was in charge of patients at the ward for incurable diseases at Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy Hospital, Bombay. He was

working on the efficacy of *Chaulmoogra* oil in leprosy. Sakharam's remark in this context is noteworthy. He opined : *Under the prolonged and continuous use of this oil the progress of the disease is arrested and the skin becomes soft and supple, the discolorations vanish, the different morbid sensations leave the patient, the mental hebetude passes away, impaired sensibility is completely or partially restored, the ulcers heal and cicatrise though ever prone to break out again, and the general nutrition of the tissues improves, patients crippled before being known to walk about unassisted and to gain in strength and weight.*

The Leprosy Commission in India took note of Dr Arjun Sakharam's work and quoted his remark in its report (Fig. 3A,B) (Anonymous 1890-91). Dr Sakharam also mentioned the efficacy of *Clematis triloba*, *Azadirachta indica*, *Anacardium occidentale* etc. in leprosy (Arjun 1879).

#### **Dr Sakharam as a Social Reformist :**

It is a fact that Dr. Sakharam was a distinguished doctor whose profound knowledge in botany brought him in the fore front of the contemporary erudite personalities, but he was remembered more for his role in the social reforms about public health education, child marriage, female education, women's right etc. His active role and support led to victory for Rukhmabai, his step daughter in the Dadaji Bhikaji vs. Rukhmabai legal suit filed for the restitution of conjugal right in 1884. The verdict of this famous case led to the reformation of the law about the child marriage and age of consent and this made him immortal in the social and legal history of India. The case stirred all strata of the society both in India and England and various illustrious personalities like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Alan Octovian Hume, Max Müller, the Viceroy of the country and even Queen Victoria were involved in debate regarding the issue. The case was settled in 1887. Dr

Sakharam did not live to see the judgment as he died on 16<sup>th</sup> April, 1885. This verdict amended the Indian Penal Code and Code of Criminal Procedure, 1882 and was a precursor of the Age of Consent Act X of 1891 which was introduced on 19<sup>th</sup> March, 1891 which abolished the age old practice of child marriage thereafter. This act became a national issue and even radicalized the national movement at Bengal (Burton 1999). Though Dr Rukhmabai was married at the age of 11 according to the prevailing tradition, Dr Sakharam encouraged his step daughter to carry on her studies even after marriage. In the year 1889 Dr Rukhmabai went abroad to study medicine and attained MD degree from Brussels in 1894 and later joined London School of Medicine for Women. She is one of the first practicing lady doctors from India (Ramanna 2008). The rise of Dr Rukhmabai, a victim of child marriage to an emblem of women's right movement and women's education. The changes in the legislature and social history by her protest about the injustice against women became possible only because of her upbringing in an advanced and liberal environment under the direct guidance and active support of the great visionary Dr. Sakharam Arjun.

#### **Epilogue**

Once famous philosopher and polymath Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) wrote: *The work an unknown good man has done is like a vein of water flowing hidden underground, secretly making the ground green.* Dr Sakharam Arjun's contributions to the medical world, particularly in the field of leprosy research and his role as a social reformer have gone into oblivion. Today hardly any of the students of medicine is aware about his research work done at a time when there was no effective remedy for leprosy. His profound knowledge in medical botany and traditional Indian system of medicine led him to try indigenous medicine for

leprosy. Even being trained in Western system of medicine, his endeavour to work on home-grown medicine is exceptional and noteworthy. His work should inspire us to explore our own treasure trove to fight against the menace of various difficult to treat diseases. Dr. Sakharam's active role in creating awareness about public health makes him a torch bearer whom we should follow. He fought in opposition to social injustice against women at a period when the society was immersed in the dark of prejudice against female education and even not ready to recognise their basic right as human being. Sadly his contributions are forgotten today and Dr Sakharam Arjun has become 'unknown' to us, but truly his life and work made the ground green for the generations to come.

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