

Where the Statesman met the Physician

Nilanjan Sengupta

Professor and Head

Department of Endocrinology

NRS Medical College Kolkata

Hony General Secretary

Endocrine Society of Bengal

Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy (July 1, 1882-July1,1962) is best known as a legendary physician and the second chief minister of West Bengal. But beyond that, he was a great patriot, a freedom fighter, an architect of modern West Bengal, and above all, a great humanist. His life was one of struggle and success, principle and fame. He never did deviate from what he thought was right or compromise with what he felt was unjust.

Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy was born in **Bankipore**, Panta in Bihar. He was the youngest of five children of his parents **Prakash Chandra Roy** and **Agharkamini Devi**. He lost his mother when he was only 14, and his father, an excise inspector, played the role of both parents.

Bidhan Chandra Roy completed his I.A. from Presidency College, Calcutta, and B.A. from Patna College.

After being graduated in mathematics, Bidhan sought admission in both Bengal Engineering College and Calcutta Medical College. Academically brilliant that he was, it was no surprise that Bidhan qualified in both, but as luck would have it, he opted for medicine since the call letter from Medical College reached him earlier! However, missing Bidhan Chandra Roy as an engineer, in hindsight, was no great a loss, because it was he who is credited with founding the industrial towns of **Durgapur** and **Kalyani** and developing the posh residential conglomerate of **salt lake** that now bears his name.

His early years as an undergraduate student at **Medical College, Calcutta**, were turbulent. To add to the pressure of studies and frequent indisposition owing to change in environment, there was serious economic hardship, not to mention the instances of discrimination at college, being a native student.

Bidhan Chandra Roy was urged by Col Peck, Professor of Midwifery, to give a false testimony in a road traffic accident case involving the professor. Young Bidhan, firm as he was, agreed to testify, but only the truth which would have been to a disadvantage to Col Peck. Not unsurprisingly, Bidhan was unsuccessful

in the ensuing MB examination where Col Peck was an examiner! Undeterred, he sat for the **LMF** examination in 1906 and cleared it where the same Col peck was again the examiner.

After graduation, Bidhan joined the Provincial Health Service, and also set up private practice to supplement the modest salary.

In 1909, Bidhan set sail for England against all odds and with only Rs 1200 in his kitty to pursue higher education. His application for enrollment at **St Bartholomew's Hospital, London** was initially turned down since he was an Asian. Gritty that he was, he submitted the same application many times making the authorities relent finally. In May 1911, he cleared both **MRCP** and **FRCS** successfully, in a period of just over 2 years—a rare feat by any standard; not only that, he **topped the MRCP examination**. Bidhan created such an impression amongst the authorities of St Bartholomew's Hospital that the Dean, who once stoically, though unsuccessfully, resisted his entry, promised him that he would consider application of candidates from India with a priority, which would have Dr Roy's recommendation!

When Bidhan Roy returned to India after his brief English sojourn, Bengal witnessed the announcement of Partition and the freedom fighter in him urged him to join anti partition agitation. However, judging that prudence is the better part of valor, Bidhan, at this juncture, rightly decided to concentrate on his professional career, suppressing his anti imperialistic ambitions. He joined as faculty in **Calcutta Medical College**, subsequently shifting to Campbell Medical School (now Nilratan Sircar Medical College) and Carmichael Medical College (now RG Kar Medical College).

Economic affluence and professional success failed to change the humanist in him. Throughout his professional life Bidhan Chandra Roy had served the poor and downtrodden with compassion. He used to attend to his patients in the morning every day. There was no deviation from this rule even during the 14y that he served the state as its chief minister. Even on July 1, 1962, his 81st birthday and the day that he breathed his last, he attended to his patients in the morning in his residence!

Several medical institutions of repute like **KS Roy TB Hospital, RG Kar Medical College, Chittaranjan Seva Sadan**, and **Chittaranjan Cancer Hospital** were built at the initiatives of Dr Roy.

There are many anecdotes about the legendary clinical acumen of Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy. His clinical prowess as an astute physician was known all over the country. **Motilal Nehru** and **Mahatma Gandhi** were amongst his patients.

Dr Bidhan Roy attended Gandhiji when he was undergoing fast during the Quit India Movement. Gandhiji refused to take medicines that were manufactured abroad. He asked Dr Roy, " Why should I take your treatment? Do you treat for hundred million of my countrymen for free?" Dr Roy replied," No Gandhiji, I could not treat all patients for free. But I came...not to treat Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, but to treat **him** who to me represents the four hundred million people of my country." Gandhiji relented.

People know Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy as the second chief minister of West Bengal. But prior to that he held many other prestigious posts. He was **mayor of Calcutta**. In 1941, he was appointed **Vice Chancellor of University of Calcutta**. He was awarded **Hony DLitt** by Calcutta University in 1944.

His entry into electoral politics was no less spectacular, being elected to Bengal Legislative Council defeating the Grand Old Man of Bengal, Surendranath Banerjea.

As a member of the outlawed Congress Working Committee during civil disobedience movement Dr Roy was arrested on Aug 26, 1930 and detained in Alipore Central Jail.

Post independence, Dr Roy wanted to devote full time to medicine. But at the advice of Gandhiji, he agreed to become the **chief minister of West Bengal** and assumed office on Jan 23, 1948, at a time when the state was torn by communal violence, shortage of food, unemployment, and a large influx of refugees from East Pakistan. Within a span of three years he was able to take the state to a new path of development. Aptly regarded as the architect of modern Bengal, Dr Roy was awarded **Bharat Ratna**, the highest civilian award of India, on Feb 4, 1961.

Despite being plagued by coronary artery disease in the last years of his life, this bachelor workaholic continued managing affairs of the state as well as treating patients at his residence every morning, which was his daily ritual that he enjoyed dearly—with equal finesse. There have been many physicians who have occupied important public offices but there have been very few who could carry on with his/her medical profession throughout along with his/her official duties—not neglecting the former at the cost of the latter.

In 1976, to honor this great physician cum statesman, the Medical Council of India instituted the **BC Roy Award** to honor eminent physicians among others. **July 1**, the birth (and death) anniversary of this great visionary is observed in India as **Doctor's Day**.

The world has seen (and will see) many physician-statesmen. But it is really hard to find a visionary, a freedom fighter, a humanist, a dedicated philanthropist, a successful educationist, an astute clinician and an administrator of the tallest order,—all rolled in one. Rising from a very humble background, it is quite amazing how Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy could discharge his duties both as a clinician and as chief minister of a state burdened with hoards of difficulties with equal finesse till the very last day of his life.