

INTRODUCTION

Writing a biography is a delicate—not a reckless—process, where the end result, if done properly, is simply the truth revealed.

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I invite you to read the story of Anandi Joshee, the first woman from India who became a doctor, and of the many Americans who made it their mission to help her succeed. It is the story of a daughter of India who became a niece of America. It is a remarkable chapter in the story of the universal human search for progress—a story that continues to unfold even today.

My recollection of Anandi Joshee was triggered over a decade ago when I read a biography of Indian mathematician S. Ramanujan (*The Man Who Knew Infinity* by Robert Kanigel). Having majored in mathematics in India, I had heard of Ramanujan. I enjoyed the biography because it told a story that was richer and more layered than the one I had known. I savored the spot-on descriptions of Ramanujan's humble and ascetic lifestyle. It was fascinating to learn of the complex relationship between Ramanujan and his English mentor. Just as important, it felt wonderful to realize that, despite the relative scarcity of preserved artifacts in India, it is possible for a skilled researcher to shed new light on long-forgotten Indian lives.

As I reached the end of the book, the name “Anandi-bai Joshee” popped into my head. I had not thought of her in nearly four decades. Having heard of her when I was growing up in India, I had a child's un-

derstanding of her story:

The first Indian woman who became a doctor was Anandi Joshee. She had to go abroad to study. While she was there, her husband wrote her angry letters. When she became ill, she could not use Western medicines because they might contain meat and alcohol. She died soon after returning to India.

Reminiscing, Anandi's story seemed like one of Aesop's fables or an event from Hindu mythology—stories that offered a pat moral. Except, was there a moral to this story? If yes, what was it? I was too young then to be curious about the specifics.

A few months after reading Ramanujan's biography, in a stroke of serendipity, I came across a story about Anandi online. It jumped out at me because it mentioned that her ashes were buried in a cemetery in upstate New York, in a plot belonging to the family of a woman named Theodocia Carpenter.

I was electrified by what this could mean. The late nineteenth century time frame meant that the two women had bonded in an era when racial and religious attitudes were more rigid than they are today. How did the two women find each other? What made them so committed to each other? I was fascinated.

My grandmother, who was educated in India only through the fourth grade, was married at fourteen. Being familiar with her simple life that revolved around the home, I could well imagine the internal leaps and external hurdles that Anandi would have had to master—almost fifty years before my grandmother's time—in her quest to become a doctor. How did Anandi learn English? How did she cope with the cold weather? Was she ostracized because she looked, dressed, and ate differently, and because she practiced a strange religion? Why did her husband write her angry letters? When she became ill, why did she eschew the fruits of the very training that she had worked so hard to acquire? My mind buzzed with questions. Inspired by

the Ramanujan biography, I could not let them go. I had to find out more.

As I researched Anandi's story, I realized that there are many points of confluence, as well as divergence, between her life and mine. For example, she came to the United States in 1883 and I came in 1983. Like her, I was the first Indian acquaintance of many Americans. As with her, they were surprised by my command of the English language. Like her, I sometimes felt alone and lonely; like her, I came to know many Americans who knitted me into their networks of care. The most amazing similarity between her life and mine is the fact that we both found our spiritual home among Unitarians (Unitarian-Universalists for me).

As for the contrasts: whereas Anandi was married at the age of nine to a man chosen by her father, I got married in my twenties and chose the man I would marry. Anandi had to be tutored at home because there were no schools for girls. In contrast, I came of age in an India in which the question of whether girls should be educated had been long settled—my mother was a college graduate and my family prioritized my education and encouraged me to pursue a professional career. Whereas Anandi's choices—crossing the seas, traveling without her husband, and pursuing an education despite being female—were considered sinful by her family and community, my travel to America was seen as the next logical step in the career of a high achiever.

When it comes to our American lives: unlike Anandi, I came to an America in which I did not feel judged by the color of my skin. Fearing the disapproval of Americans and Indians, she had to put a great deal of thought into her choice of attire; I freely chose to switch to Western clothes. Unlike her, I was never pressured to convert to Christianity; unlike her, I gave myself permission to eat meat. While she suffered from the bitter cold and from not knowing how to keep the fireplace lit, I lived in homes with central heat. While it took Anandi almost two months to reach America by ship, for me it is now a non-stop fifteen-hour flight. It took weeks for letters from

India to reach her. In contrast, I can today send text messages and make phone calls in real time.

Against this background, it is no surprise that my study of Anandi's life was powered by equal parts empathy and wonder. Learning her story in its fullness helped me better understand my own story—as an Indian, as an American, as an Indian in America, and as a woman.

Just as important, telling her story has allowed me to illuminate forgotten but important aspects of American history—America as a destination for women's higher education, Spiritualism as a faith tradition that supported a scientific outlook as well as women's leadership, Americans' openness to world cultures and religions, and most important, our history of welcoming and supporting a stranger.

I offer this book to you, dear reader, in the hope that you will feel as enriched, energized, and inspired as I was, by spending time with Dr. Anandi Joshee and her American champions.