

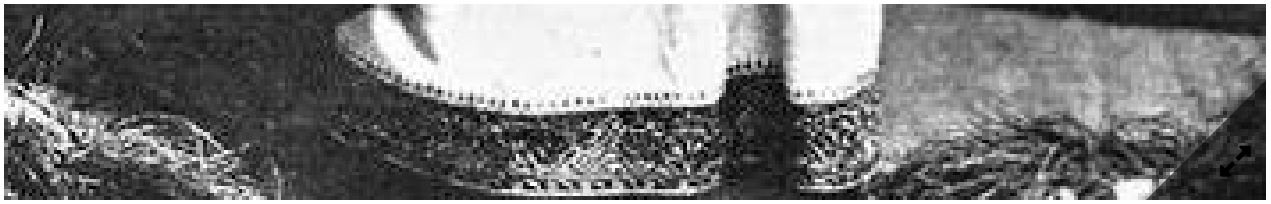
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Anandibai Joshee: The first woman doctor from India

Sathya Saran | Updated on March 27, 2020 | Published on March 27, 2020

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A new biography by Nandini Patwardhan brings to life the trailblazing story of Anandibai Joshee, who crossed the seas and bigger barriers to earn her doctor's degree in the US

Had Nandini Patwardhan been superstitious, she would perhaps have thought it was Anandibai Joshee's spirit that had prompted her to write the biography of Joshee — the first Indian woman doctor. Patwardhan had just finished reading mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan's biography *The Man Who Knew Infinity* and was struck by the parallels in his early life and hers, and their common experiences as first-generation Indians living overseas. That's when Joshee's name popped up in her mind — she remembered the details about Joshee's pathbreaking journey across the forbidden seas, a Brahmin woman leaving her husband behind to study medicine in an era when wives were largely unlettered and considered as good as chattel. Serendipitously, Patwardhan also came across an article in the US, where she lives, which mentioned that the intrepid doctor's ashes were buried there. Joshee died at 22 of tuberculosis.

Patwardhan immediately set about reading the two existing biographies on the Maharashtrian doctor, published in Marathi, and ploughed through records, letters and other information available on the Net, over the next seven years. The research resulted in the recently published biography, *Radical Spirits:*

India's First Woman Doctor and Her American Champion. It paints a portrait of the slightly-built, sari-clad woman who ventured into the unknown on a ship, buoyed by her zeal to learn medicine and bring succour to India's women. The friendship of a kindred soul-sister in the town where she embarked on her journey to becoming a medical practitioner remained her anchor through the arduous three years of her medical studies.

Patwardhan tells a story that is inspiring and capable of firing up many a young imagination. In an interview with *BLink*, Patwardhan discusses the writing of the biography.

This is a deeply researched book. How much of the information is from fresh sources?

About 15 per cent of the information is from an 1888 biography published in the US and another 15 per cent is from previously published Marathi biographies. The rest is new and is based on letters, periodicals and books. The book's Notes section has over 400 entries. I obtained copies of Joshee's letters from a descendant of Theodocia Carpenter, Anandi's mentor and "aunt". Almost all my other sources are online.

How did you choose which letters to quote from?

I chose the excerpts that moved the story forward. And, the ones that were the most illuminating in terms of the thoughts and emotions of the letter writers. The excerpts inject emotion and dialogue into what might otherwise have been dry history.

Do share your perception of Joshee from your perspective as a 21st-century woman.

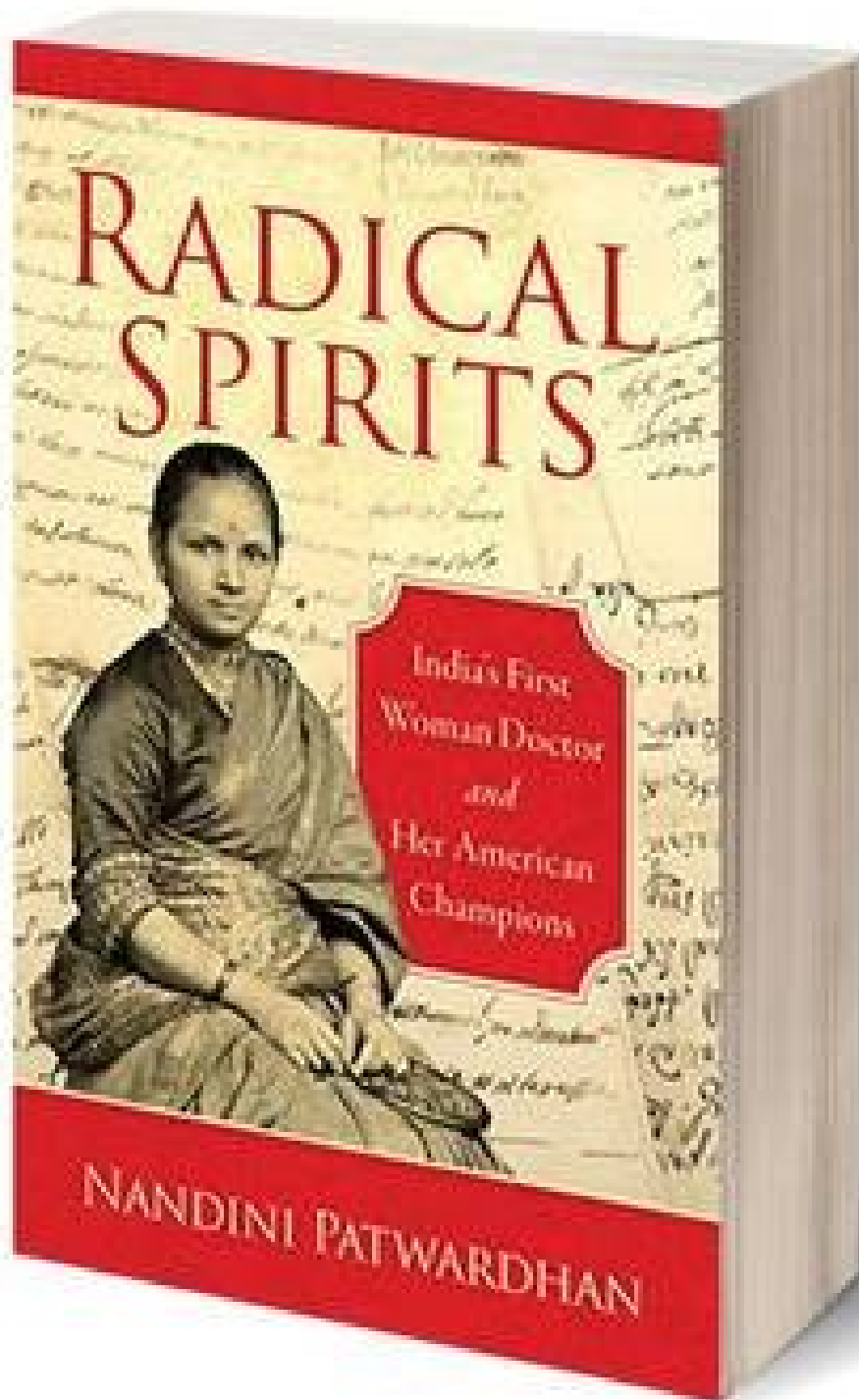
In a society in which women had no legal standing and were completely subordinate to men, Joshee imagined a world in which women could be emotionally, as well as financially independent. In a society that dismissed women's suffering, she sought to make medical care available to them. She resisted her husband's unfair criticism of her by reminding him of his previous abusive behaviour.

Joshee took a stand against casteism by supporting her cousin Pandita Ramabai, who had been ostracised for marrying a non-Brahmin. Conservative Hindus threatened to shun Joshee for committing the "sins" of crossing the oceans, living among non-Brahmins, and pursuing an education. She did those anyway. In summary, Joshee was a fearless activist. If she were in today's world, she would be like Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg. She would be using social media, marching, and running for office or leading an advocacy organisation.

Who is the book written for? Is your target reader mainly Western?

In this era of globalisation, literature is global too. Books by Nigerian-American writer Chimamanda Adichie have been translated into several languages. So have books by Arundhati Roy and the biographies of Indian mathematician S Ramanujan and Pakistani activist Malala Yousufzai. The success of the movie *Dangal* in China and elsewhere affirms the appeal of *Radical Spirits* beyond the India-West axis. Just like *Dangal*, because *Radical Spirits* offers a classic "hero's journey" narrative, I expect it to engage readers everywhere.

But, I have special hopes for India. A couple of years ago, I visited a girls' hostel in a very small town several hours outside Pune. The director explained that the 30-odd students, ranging in age from 8-18, were from subsistence-level farming families. Some had come from such remote areas that they had never before experienced electricity. At her request, I told them the story of Anandi Joshee. The girls listened with rapt attention. After the talk was over, a few ran over and flopped down on the floor next to me. One girl declared: "*Mi doctor honar!* (I intend to become a doctor!)!". Her words were echoed by a few others. It was clear that they had related deeply to the story. Indeed, it had given them the audacity to dream big and the courage to unselfconsciously proclaim that dream to the world.



Radical Spirits: India's First Woman Doctor and Her American Champion; Nandini Patwardhan; Story Artisan Press; Non-fiction; ₹449

So, my hope is that *Radical Spirits* will be translated into several Indian languages, and that children's editions will also be published. In this way, readers of all ages will encounter a fresh take on Indian history and will also find inspiration, like the girls in the hostel did.

Is there an element of fictional reconstruction? As in your description of when she is leaving for Philadelphia?

Yes, that is one of only a couple of instances where I did this. Even so, I remained true to the spirit of the letters. These descriptions were a way to expand on the letters.

How different is your book from the earlier biographies on Joshee in Marathi?

Radical Spirits has a lot of new information. For example, it tells how Joshee's ashes reached Theodicia Carpenter. It describes her complex relationship with the dean of the college. Some other highlights: [Joshee's husband] Gopal's travels in the Far East and in the western US, Joshee's speech rationalising child marriage and Americans' reactions to that, and the extraordinary bond between Theodicia and Joshee. Unlike the American biographer, I am from India and, so, am intimately familiar with the Indian ethos. Unlike the Marathi biographers, I have spent almost all my adult life in the US. So, I possess insider as well as outsider perspectives to fully describe the cultures of both countries. The 1888 biography is outdated and does not tell the full story. The Marathi biographies are inaccessible to readers who don't read

Marathi. *Radical Spirits* overcomes both these limitations. Finally, unlike those books, *Radical Spirits* has an extensive Notes section, which makes it a great resource for further study.

Your book is an invaluable chronicle of a trailblazer, yet it had to be self-published. How do you explain this?

I think publishers did not see this because, as Aditya Mani Jha recently wrote in *The Hindu Business Line*, “...the primary criteria for selection of manuscripts is ‘What will be easiest for me to sell?’ and not ‘Is this worth reading?’...” In other words, trend-chasing and aversion to profit-risk obscured the vision of acquisition editors.

Confident of the profit potential and the compelling nature of the story, I decided not to let publishers’ rejections stop me. I have invested several thousand dollars for travel, professional editing and cover design, and marketing.

Is there an unconscious bias against the husband in your mind and writing? Or is his portrayal fair and justified?

I believe the portrayal of Gopal is fair and balanced. It is based on how he reveals himself through letters, newspaper interviews and speeches. He bet big with his earnest idealism. Finding himself in uncharted territory, he was ill-equipped to handle success. So, while he is far from sympathetic, I see him as a person worth reflecting upon.

Sathya Saran is a journalist and editor based in Mumbai

Published on March 27, 2020



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