

Gopalrao V. Deshmukh

1883 - 1963

Mumbai Legacy Project
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The first Mayor of Bombay in Independent India, Dr. Gopalrao V. Deshmukh, was a social reformer, educationist, and an ardent supporter of women's rights. An expert physician, he provided medical care to eminent personalities such as Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Muhammed Ali Jinnah. He also initiated several developments in Bombay's medical infrastructure and services.

Dr. Deshmukh lived at 39 Pedder Road in a house he acquired on the auspicious Mahashivratri day in 1929 from Dr. Homi Bhabha (Barnagarwala 2017). At that time, the road honoured the former Municipal Commissioner of Bombay, W.G. Pedder. The road was renamed to "Dr. Gopalrao Deshmukh Uddyanpul" in 1966. It was his residence that once graced this locality. Picture his two-storey white bungalow with an entrance that led to an expansive foyer. It is the present Kalpataru building, where his palatial plot 39 stood until 1969.

Born in 1883 in an agricultural family in Vidarbha, he moved to Bombay for higher education. He pursued MD-FRCS in London and went to Birmingham to learn from the renowned pancreatic specialist Jordan Lloyd. Later, Dr. Deshmukh returned to India equipped with newfound knowledge to change the medical scene in the city. In Bombay's King Edward Memorial Hospital, widely known as KEM Hospital, his collaboration with Seth Gordhandas Sunderdas led to the establishment of the Gordhandas Sunderdas Medical College (GSMC) in 1926 (Marfatia 2018). KEM Hospital and GSMC, referred to as twin institutes, have contributed to medical support for almost a century.



Dr. Deshmukh was instrumental in installing Bombay's first electric crematorium at Chandanwadi. Under his presidency, at the 5th All India Medical Conference in Calcutta in 1928, the resolution to establish the All India Medical Association was unanimously embraced (Indian Medical Association 2014). Deshmukh emerged from the role of a physician and progressively advanced towards assuming the mantle of a contemporary reformer.



While treating the stalwarts of national politics of that time, Dr. G.V. Deshmukh became a supporter of freedom fighters, especially Lokmanya Tilak. The walls of his residence preserved the stories of secret meetings, with patriots seeking refuge in the hidden hideouts beneath his two-storey bungalow. In 1920, the untimely demise of Lokmanya Tilak led to a gathering of around 2 lakh people on the streets from Crawford Market to Dhobi Talao. N.C. Kelkar was eager to transport Tilak's body to Poona for cremation. However, Dr. Deshmukh emphasised the importance of seeking a community consensus among the vast crowd, which resulted in the conducting of the cremation on the shores of Girgaon Chowpatty (Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav 2021).

Dr. Deshmukh generously donated to the Lokmanya Tilak Hospital (Sion Hospital). The maternity ward of the Sion Hospital honours Dr. Deshmukh's wife, Annapurna Deshmukh. Dr. G.V. Deshmukh won the University Constituency in the Bombay Legislative Council during the era of Dyarchy. He became the voice of the university's teaching staff. He was elected to the Indian Central Legislative Assembly in Bombay City (General) in 1934 and 1945 (Reed 1947, 75). He aligned himself with Congress' ideology and supported a unified front against British bureaucracy. He backed Bombay University graduates and their right to cast their votes post-graduation (Marfatia 2018). He demanded a drastic overhaul of a flawed system.

Dr. G.V. Deshmukh also initiated progressive feminist laws. In 1937, he introduced the Hindu Women's Rights to Property Bill, also known as the Deshmukh Act, and the Hindu Women's Right to Divorce Bill in 1938 (Agnes 2011, 22). The Deshmukh Act aimed to provide widowed daughters-in-law legal rights equal to their sons in accessing their husband's share in joint family property. It is important to note that this law didn't grant them complete and transferable ownership rights (Som 1994, 170). The bill's objective to restore married women's rights under Stridhan suffered a subversion. The government allowed the passage of this Act in 1935, but it excluded the more progressive reforms proposed by Dr. Deshmukh in his original bill (Levy 1968-69, 306).

Dr. G.V. Deshmukh remains a source of inspiration to all those who are committed to a cause. In 1963, Dr. Deshmukh found eternal peace, and the city bid farewell to a person who devoted his life to the selfless service of others.



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