

# THEY ALSO HAD DIABETES.....



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Indians are known to be genetically predisposed to develop Diabetes, and it comes as no wonder that till recently we were the leading nation of diabetes. Diabetes, if left untreated is a source of considerable morbidity. Today, in the second decade of the new millennium, we have so many treatment options in our armamentarium that it is unusual for a reasonably longstanding compliant patient of diabetes to have a premature demise or debility. But what was the situation, hundred years ago? Having Diabetes at that time, anywhere in the world, meant a sure death and a large number of diabetic patients, especially the Type 1 patients did not survive beyond just a few months. India was no exception to that rule. However, we had a few of our respected national idols who refused to be cowed down by Diabetes. This article is dedicated to their unputdownable spirit, notwithstanding the reality that true evidence based facts regarding these great heroes is few and far between.



The most famous of the lot was **SWAMI VIVEKANANDA**. A multifaceted genius, the face of India to the Western World in the nineteenth century, he was diabetic, probably from his late teens. There was probably a genetic component here. Several of his family members, notably his father Viswanath Dutta probably had Diabetes, and died of sudden cardiac death at a relatively young age from Myocardial infarction. However other risk factors associated with diabetes--- high calorie food and tobacco--- were present, presumably because the overall medical awareness of these risk factors was grossly lacking at that time. There was no definitive treatment of diabetes available in those days apart from gross dietary restriction. During his first tour of the Western World (1893-1897) he had an episode of Myocardial Infarction in 1896 when in London, in presence of his brother Mahendranath and John Pierce Fox presumably as a consequence of untreated diabetes. He reportedly told Fox that his heart was failing and added "My father died of this...it is there in my family". His diabetes worsened after his return to India, courtesy his hectic lifestyle. He alluded to his "diabetic attack" in a letter to Ms Mary Hale "Well it was in Southern India .....that an old hereditary disease made its appearance". He also suffered from asthma (? Cardiac) which worsened in the autumn of 1898, for which he was seen by a British Chest Specialist. Swamiji was advised complete bed rest. However, he did not have a very favourable opinion for any medical intervention & restriction of his activities for either diabetes or asthma. He observed, in a letter to his disciple, Ms Mary Hale "You need not be worried with me as the disease will take at least two or three years at worst to carry me off.... At

best it will remain a harmless companion!" His sarcasm of medical treatment is borne by his dejected comment "...the damned doctor does never say to hell with medicine; just walk a few miles". His thoughts regarding the pathogenesis of diabetes, as written in his famous book *Prachya O Paschatya* (The East and the West) was that "...lots of *Bengali Baboos* are developing diabetes because of their addiction to the food shops of Kolkata, and their lack of zeal to walk 10-20 miles every day as their forefathers have done in their villages; this is the result of being a *Calcuttan!* " How very true and prophetic observation! However, his fanaticism for vigorous exercise, though probably good for his diabetes (lifestyle management was the only available treatment for diabetes in those days) was definitely counterproductive for his heart. During his trek to the Amarnath caves in 1899 in presence of his disciples, including Sister Nivedita, he tried to perform some mystical exercises after bathing in ice cold water with a further worsening of his cardiac status (? Cardiomyopathy). Subsequently he felt that he was becoming increasingly infirm. In a letter to Swami Ramakrishnanada in 1900 he wrote "My health and spirit are totally exhausted.....I find it impossible to even hold conversations with people...I am almost dead and absolutely unwilling to meet anyone." He developed "dropsy" (edema). No doubt the symptoms were due to a decompensated congestive cardiac failure. In the words of his disciple M Rolland "...his feet swelled and certain parts of his body became keenly hypersensitive. He hardly slept at all" Could this be explained by a coexistent uremic encephalopathy? We do not know. He died at 9:10pm on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1902. Afterward, his disciples recorded that they had noticed "a little blood" in the Swami's nostrils, above his mouth and in his eyes. A probable cause of his *Mahasamadhi* was intracerebral haemorrhage—the final answer, again, we still do not know.

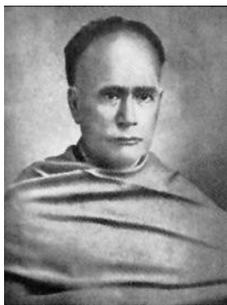


Another of the doyens of modern India **RABINDRANATH TAGORE** was also a diabetic. Diabetes was a chance finding when the poet was struck down with erysipelas, a form of systemic cellulitis, in 1937. The poet remained in a comatose state for quite a few days and was near death. He pulled off a remarkable recovery thanks to the combined effort of the best medical brains of Bengal. However this event completely sapped all his energies and all his compositions at this time were premonitions of impending death. His last message on his last birthday, May 9<sup>th</sup> 1941, was "I'm lost in the middle of my birthday. I want my friends, their touch, with the earth's last love. I will take life's final offering, I will take the human's last blessing. Today my sack is empty. I have given completely whatever I had to give. In return if I receive anything—some love, some forgiveness—then I will take it with me when I step on the boat that crosses to the festival of the wordless end!" He was also suffering from Prostatic hyperplasia and had several episodes of urosepsis. Tagore relied on alternative medicines like homeopathy & ayurveda more than allopathic treatment. Two schools of Medicine – one led by the senior professional Sir Nilratan Sirkar & the other lead by the young & dynamic Dr B C Roy- had completely divergent views regarding the management of the poet's Prostatic hyperplasia. The former was in favour of a conservative approach while the latter preferred a surgical intervention. Finally Dr B C Roy was able to prevail upon the poet and his relatives. Tagore was taken from his favourite Santiniketan by a special saloon of the Eastern Railways (which can be seen to this date at Bolpur Railway station). He travelled from Bolpur to Howrah and subsequently to his ancestral house in Jorasanko for the surgery. Prof L M Banerjee, the renowned Professor of Surgery of Medical College, Calcutta did a suprapubic cystostomy on 31<sup>st</sup> July, 1941 under local

anaesthesia. Incidentally the surgery took place in exactly the same room where Tagore was born in 1861. Despite the fact that the room was extensively sanitized with Lysol & carbolic acid and all possible aseptic measures were taken care of, his diabetes was probably not well controlled preoperatively. The only available treatment of Diabetes at that time was soluble animal insulins which had to be imported from Britain, and there was not a regular supply of them. The only available antimicrobials available were sulpha drugs. Penicillin had just been invented and was not available in India, because the British Government sent the bulk of the penicillin to the War front in Europe. It therefore was not surprising that the poet went on to develop a fatal urosepsis, which ultimately led to his death on 7<sup>th</sup> August, 1941. Incidentally the poet dictated his last poem "*Tomar srishtir path rekhechho akirna kari*" on 30<sup>th</sup> July, 1941. Did uncontrolled Diabetes cut down his vitality and end his creativity? We will never know the final answer.



**BANKIM CHANDRA CHATTOPADHYAY**, the great author of the nineteenth century, who gave us the hymn "*Vande Mataram*", also had Diabetes. He spent around 33 years as a Deputy Collector of the erstwhile British Government (1858-1891). His hectic and irregular lifestyle added to the miseries of diabetes. No detailed data is available as to when he developed Diabetes, but circumstantial evidence suggests that he avoided sweets for a large part of his professional life. It is obvious that the end organ damage from uncontrolled hyperglycemia cut short his life and he died of "cardiac problems"(? Myocardial infarction) only two years after his retirement on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1894 at the age of 56 years. Was Diabetes a cause for his premature retirement & death? There is no doubt about the latter..... about the former, we are not very sure.



**PANDIT ISHWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR**. Erudite scholar, educationist, social reformer & philanthropist, was one of the key figures of the Bengal Renaissance in the nineteenth century. A lone crusader on multiple issues he developed diabetes in the final decade of his life. He had, by then become so frustrated with the selfishness of his near and dear ones that he had taken a self recluse in Karmatar in Santhal Parganas of present day Jharkhand. Healthy lifestyle amongst the local tribals had for some time kept Diabetes under control. He was aware of the disease, as manifested from his letters, but did not give too much importance to the disease. When it started decompensating, he was initially put under the treatment of the then famous Homeopathic physician Salazar. There was an initial response followed by subsequent metabolic decompensation leading to his death on the night of 29<sup>th</sup> July, 1891. The whole nation, including the men of letters like Rabindranath Tagore & Satyendranath Dutta mourned the passing away of this "Man amongst dwarfs "

To summarize, all these stalwarts had a vital period of their life cut short by Diabetes. Apart from Rabindranath none of the others were alive after the discovery of insulin. But they did not let Diabetes dictate terms on their activities of daily living except in the final days. Who knows how the world for Indians might have changed only if even insulin was available during the lifetime of these great national heroes? We can only speculate. We sincerely hope that the lesser mortals with diabetes get an inspiration in their fight against Diabetes from the story of these heroes.