

## Beyond the White Coat: The Legacy of Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy

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### INTRODUCTION

Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy, a great physician, statesman and visionary, remains an enduring figure of inspiration for generations of Indians (Fig. 1). As one of the rare personalities to have excelled equally in medicine and politics, his legacy reflects a harmonious confluence of two seemingly disparate worlds.<sup>1</sup> Serving as the second Chief Minister of West Bengal, his contributions to healthcare, education, and infrastructure development left an indelible mark on India's sociopolitical and medical landscape.

### EARLY LIFE AND MEDICAL PROWESS

Born on July 1, 1882, in Bankipore, Patna, Dr Roy exhibited academic brilliance from an early age.<sup>2</sup> His journey in medicine began at Calcutta Medical College, where he opted for a career in healing over engineering. A pivotal moment came when his application to study at St Bartholomew's Hospital, London, was initially rejected because he was Indian. Undeterred, he pursued his goal with persistence and eventually gained admission, completing both the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons (FRCS) and the Membership of the Royal College of Physicians (MRCP) within a record 2 years and 3 months.<sup>3</sup> This extraordinary feat not only marked him as a trailblazer but also foreshadowed his future role as a pioneer in India's medical and political arenas.

Returning to India in 1911, Dr Roy's medical career flourished as he established himself as one of the most distinguished physicians and surgeons of his era. He served as a professor at Calcutta Medical College, where his emphasis on medical education laid the groundwork for future generations of doctors. His enduring interest in public welfare later drew him into the realm of

politics, where he saw an opportunity to scale his impact from individuals to entire communities. His compassion for patients, combined with his academic rigor, became hallmarks of his approach to medicine and governance alike.

### THE UNLIKELY BRIDGE BETWEEN MEDICINE AND POLITICS

Dr Roy's foray into politics was driven by his profound belief in the symbiosis of health and national development. He maintained that "Swaraj (self-rule) would remain a mere dream unless the citizens were healthy and strong in mind and body." This conviction motivated him to join the Indian National Congress and contest the 1925 elections. His initial service as an elected member of the Calcutta Corporation saw him rise to the position of mayor in 1933, where he spearheaded reforms in public health, sanitation, and municipal governance.<sup>2</sup>

His tenure as the second Chief Minister of West Bengal (1948–1962) was transformative. Taking office just after India's independence, he was tasked with stabilizing a state struggling with refugee influxes and economic instability. Under his leadership, West Bengal witnessed industrial expansion, including the establishment of the Durgapur Steel Plant and the Kalyani engineering hub, developments that played a pivotal role in the state's postindependence industrialization.<sup>1</sup>

But perhaps his most lasting contribution was his visionary approach to urban planning. The development of Salt Lake City (Bidhannagar), now one of Kolkata's most prominent residential and commercial hubs, exemplifies his foresight. His influence extended to education as well, with the establishment of educational institutions like the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kharagpur, India's first IIT. These initiatives reflected his deep understanding of the role of education and urban development in fostering long-term societal progress.

### HEALTHCARE REFORMER AND VISIONARY

Dr Roy's role in healthcare reform is unparalleled. As a physician-turned-politician, he placed health at the heart of governance. During his tenure as Chief Minister, the number of health centers in West Bengal grew from 70 to 271. He championed the establishment of 96 maternity centers, 92 leprosy clinics, 16 malaria control units, and one of India's first polio clinics.<sup>3</sup> His deep



Fig. 1: A commemorative sketch of Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy, portraying his composed demeanor as both a physician and a statesman. Artist: Dr Sugata Dasgupta

concern for women's and children's health led to the creation of institutions like the Chittaranjan Seva Sadan for women and children, as well as the Chittaranjan Cancer Hospital, which became one of the country's leading cancer treatment centers.

Dr Roy's administrative acumen extended to the medical profession itself. He played a seminal role in the establishment of the Medical Council of India (MCI) and the Indian Medical Association (IMA).<sup>1</sup> As the first president of the MCI, he laid the foundation for medical ethics, professional standards and the regulation of medical education in India, a legacy that still endures. His tenure also saw improvements in mental healthcare, with the establishment of dedicated mental health facilities and infectious disease hospitals. Through his vision, healthcare in India was no longer viewed in isolation but as an integrated part of nation-building.

## THE ETHOS OF LEADERSHIP

What set Dr Roy apart from his contemporaries was his ethos of selfless service. His leadership was not confined to policy or administration but was characterized by a personal commitment to public welfare.<sup>4</sup> Known to attend to patients in the morning before addressing affairs of state, he epitomized the concept of "service before self." His convocation address at Lucknow University in 1956 captures the essence of his philosophy: "My young friends, you are soldiers in the struggle for freedom from want, fear, ignorance, frustration, and helplessness. Through dedicated efforts for the country, carried out in a spirit of selfless service, may you proceed with hope and courage."

His dedication was not only symbolic but also deeply practical. During his tenure as Chief Minister, he displayed political dexterity in managing communal tensions, ensuring the resettlement of refugees after the partition, and promoting policies to improve the lives of marginalized communities. His approach to governance was inclusive, balancing the demands of rapid industrialization with the needs of the underprivileged.<sup>5</sup>

## RECOGNITION AND LEGACY

Dr Roy's contributions to India's medical, educational, and political landscape did not go unrecognized. In 1961, he was awarded the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honor, for his unparalleled service to the nation. In a symbolic gesture, India's National Doctor's

Day is celebrated every year on July 1, his birth and death anniversary, to honor his contributions to the medical profession.<sup>6</sup>

The impact of Dr Roy's legacy extends far beyond his lifetime. As a physician, he redefined medical education, emphasizing the role of ethics and empathy. As a political leader, he proved that governance need not be divorced from compassion. Today, Salt Lake City, Chittaranjan Cancer Hospital, IMA, MCI, and IIT Kharagpur stand as living monuments to his vision. His life serves as a blueprint for future generations, demonstrating how dedicated leadership can drive tangible social progress.

## CONCLUSION

Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy's life is a testament to the power of a singular vision that bridges two distinct domains, medicine and politics, for the betterment of society. His work continues to inspire doctors, policymakers, and leaders alike. At a time when the world seeks role models who embody service, resilience, and vision, Dr Roy's story remains profoundly relevant. As India's "doctor-statesman," he exemplified how one person's dedication can shape the destiny of a nation. His life reminds us that the most profound impact lies not in individual success but in collective progress, a lesson that resonates deeply in our world today.

## CONTRIBUTORSHIP STATEMENT

All the authors prepared the manuscript with adequate planning and execution. All the authors contributed to review of literature, critical revision of content, and final approval of manuscript. All authors are in agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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