Indian Students at Edinburgh University

In the mid-nineteenth century there was an influx of privileged Indian students coming into the university as the British Empire recognised the need to train an elite of Indians to fulfil scientific, medical and administrative posts within the subcontinent. During the latter half of the nineteenth century many of these received their education at the University of Edinburgh. In the 1920s and 1930s the Indian student population was greater than at any other University within the UK. The most famous early Indian student in the late nineteenth century was Prafulla Chandra Ray, who was elected the Vice President of the Chemical Society at Edinburgh and later was became a famous chemist in India as well as founder of India’s first chemical company. Ray was also notable during his university career for writing an essay on the Indian Uprisings of 1857 for a University essay competition. The essay won the runner-up prize. One of the judges complained that it was critical of the British colonial administration. In 1883 Indian students at Edinburgh formed the Indian Association, which had the distinction of being the first South Asian student association in the UK. The association was first housed at 11 George Square, and later at 3 Potterrow. It campaigned on liberal issues such as the abolition of capital punishment and was one of the first Edinburgh University Societies to allow women into its membership. Some notable leading members of the Indian Association later had prolific careers. Dr Taravath Madhavan Nair, who trained in medicine at the University and was a leading member of the Indian Association, later formed the Justice Party in India, which was a South Indian low-caste political party. Dr Sarat Mullick, who was involved in the Student Representative Committee at the University and later President of the Indian Association, was to have a distinguish medical career, becoming Professor of Medicine and Clinical Medicine in the National Medical College of India and physician to King’s Hospital in Calcutta. He also was awarded a CBE for his work. In addition, to these notable figures, Kadambini Ganguly, the first Indian woman doctor, completed part of her medical training in Edinburgh.

The Indian Association held annual dinners where it invited dignitaries to attend and was also engaged in fund-relieving activities during the Bengal famine. The society further participated in debates within the student union with its members argued against the benefits British colonial rule in India. When the issue emerged during the period of 1927-34 of Edinburgh local restaurants and cafes initiating a colour bar against non-whites, with Indian students being particularly discriminated against, the society played a leading role in campaigning against this unfair discrimination. The Association was active in complaining and raising concerns with the Lord Provost. They also wrote a letter to Shapurji Saklatvala, the Asian Labour MP of Battersea, who then raised a question regarding this issue in the House of Commons to the Sir John Gilmour, the Secretary of Scotland, who claimed that the matter was outside his jurisdiction. Whilst there were numerous articles within *The Scotsman* criticising the colour bar, Edinburgh University’s student newspaper, *The Student*, was conspicuously quiet. During World War I, Indian students of Edinburgh University formed an Ambulance corps to assist in the relief of the sick and wounded. The Edinburgh Indian Voluntary Corps acted as surgeons, dressers and interpreters for Indian soldiers who were recovering in hospitals in Brighton, Milford Haven, Boulogne and Southampton. They attended only to Indians, due to racial prescriptions about Indians not being able to treat whites. There were also several Indian students at the University during the 1920s and 30s who complained of discrimination, in stark contrast with the late nineteenth century, where figures such as Prafulla Chandra Ray and Sarat Mullick gained recognition within the University for their contributions.

After World War 2 and India’s independence, Edinburgh University lost its position as the most likely university within the UK for Indian students to attend. However, there were still Indians who received their training here, and who became respected members within their own field. The famous psychiatrist Ravinder Kapur, who was appointed Professor of Health and Human Behaviour the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) in Bangalore in 1988 and later became the Deputy Director of NIAS in 1990, received his doctorate in psychology at the University of Edinburgh. Moreover, Edinburgh boasts Indian graduates who seem to represent different ends of the political spectrum. For instance, Prakash Karat, who attained his MSc by Research in Politics at the University of Edinburgh, is now the General Secretary of the Communist Party of India. In contrast, Armeane Choksi , who graduated with a degree in Chemical Engineering from the University, was recently the Vice President of the World Bank and now the Managing Partner of Hudson Fairfax Group, an India-specific investment and financial services firm focusing on high-growth sectors of the Indian economy.

### Well-known Indians who studied at Edinburgh University

**Aghornath Chattopadhyay (1851-1915)** was born in 1851 in Brahmamnagar village of Dhaka, in Bangladesh. His father, Ram Charan was a Sanskrit scholar. Aghornath excelled as a student and was awarded the Gilchrist scholarship to go to England. He won the Baxter Prize in Physics and the Hope Prize in Chemistry in the University of Edinburgh. He was the first Indian to obtain a degree of D.Sc. from a foreign university. He knew several languages like Sanskrit, Greek, Hebrew, French, German and Russian. In 1877, the Prime Minister of Hyderabad, Salar Jung 1, who was visiting Europe, invited Aghornath to Hyderabad to promote the spread of education through the English medium. Arriving in Hyderabad in 1878, Dr Chattopadhyay started a school that taught subjects in the English medium. In 1881 he established the Hyderabad College which later came to be known as the Nizam College. Aghornath was its first principal. Aghornath and his wife Varada Devi were social reformers who campaigned for female education and were instrumental in setting up the first school for girls in Nampally. They championed the cause of emancipation of women and were against child marriage and in favour of widows’ remarriage. It was largely because of his efforts that the Special Marriage Act of Hyderabad was enacted. He also believed that the elementary education of the child should be carried out through the medium of indigenous languages. He therefore set up a society for teaching various subjects in Urdu. His school conducted examinations, which were open to all Indians. He was also in favour of inter-communal marriages. When Bengal was divided into two in 1905, Dr Chattopadhyay was heavily involved in the resulting protests against the partitioning of the Indian state. When the Indian National Congress was established in 1885 Chattopdhyay and his friend, Mulla Abdul Qayyum joined it and strengthened the movement and its objectives. His daughter Sarojini Naidu later became President of the Indian National Congress and of Utter Pradesh.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Prafulla Chandra Ray (1861-1944)** was born on August 2, 1861 in the village Raruli-Katipara in Khulna district, in Bengal. His father Harish Chandra Ray was a land proprietor. When Ray was aged 9 his family migrated to Calcutta and there he studied in Hare School and Albert School, respectively. During his studies at Calcutta University he developed his interest in science after reading the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. However, since Calcutta University held no science classes at the time, he attended lectures in Physics and Chemistry at Presidency College. Here he was specially attracted by the chemistry courses of Professor Alexander Pedler, who awakened his interest in natural science. While taking the science course for the B.A degree he was awarded in 1882 one of the two Gilchrist Prize Scholarships after an all-India competitive examination. Without completing the course for his degree, Ray proceeded to the UK where he studied at the University of Edinburgh. He was a pupil of the Chemistry Professor Alexander Crum Brown. While being a student of the University he was elected Vice-President of Edinburgh University Chemical Society in 1888. He obtained from Edinburgh a B.Sc. degree in 1886, and the D.Sc. degree in 1887 as well as being awarded the Hope Prize. Ray returned to India in 1889 and joined Presidency College, Calcutta as Assistant Professor of Chemistry. Ray invested his own money into forming Bengal Chemical and Pharmaceutical Works in 1893 which was India’s first indigenous chemical company. He also continued his academic interests in chemistry by publishing a paper on the preparation of a new stable chemical compound: Mercurous Nitrate in 1896. This work made way for many investigative papers on nitrites and hyponitrites of different metals, and on nitrites of ammonia and organic amines. In addition to being a pioneering chemist, he also took a keen interest in the history of science within the subcontinent publishing in 1902 and 1908 his two volumes of *A History of Hindu Chemistry from the Earliest Times to the Sixteenth Century*. The work was result of many years of research through ancient Sanskrit manuscripts. Prafulla Chandra Ray retired from the Presidency College in 1916 and joined the Calcutta University College of Science (now known as Rajabazar Science College) as its first Palit Professor of Chemistry, a chair named after Tarak Nath Palit. He started a new Indian School of Chemistry in 1924. He published the first volume of his autobiography *Life and Experience of a Bengali Chemist* in 1932 and dedicated it to the youth of India. The second volume of this work was issued in 1935.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Sarat Kumar Mullick (1871-1924)** was educated at Calcutta University at St Mary’s Hospital and Edinburgh University. He graduated as an MB and CM in 1887 and as MD in 1905. His thesis was a study of Beri-Beri. During his time at Edinburgh University he was a leading figure in the Indian Association, occupying the posts of under-secretary, secretary and President of that body. He also was an active member in the Student Representative Committee. During his undergraduate medical career, he had the distinction of gaining the Senior prize in Medicine. He also wrote articles for *the Student* in favour of the election of a liberal rector. His contribution to the University was so noted that he gained honourable mention in *The Student* upon leaving Edinburgh University. Mullick subsequently took a leading role in medical politics and was an ardent advocate of military service for Bengalis. During the first world war he raised the Bengali Ambulance Corps, which served successfully in Mesopatamia. Mullick had a considerable role in inducing the government to enrol a Bengali battalion for combatant service. Sarat Mullick was a professor of Medicine and Clinical Medicine in the National Medical College of India and physician to King’s Hospital in Calcutta. He received a CBE after the war in recognition for his work. He was president of the Indian Territorial Force Committee, Sarat Mullick died of pneumonia in 1925 in Calcutta.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Kadambini Ganguly (1862-1923)** was born at Bhagalpur in Bihar in 1862. Her father, Braja Kishore Basu, was headmaster of Bhagalpur School and a social reformer. He and Abhay Charan Mallick started the movement for women's emancipation at Bhagalpur, establishing the women's organisation Bhagalpur Mahila Samiti in 1863, the first in India. Kadambini started her education at Bang Mahila Vidyala and while at Bethune School in 1878 became the first woman to pass the University of Calcutta entrance examination. She and Chandramuki Basu became the first graduate from Bethune College, and in the process became the first female graduates in the country. Ganguly studied medicine at the Calcutta Medical College. In 1886, she was awarded a GBMC (Graduate of Bengal Medical College) degree, which gave her the right to practice. Kadambini overcame some opposition from the teaching staff and and orthodox sections of society. She went to the UK and obtained a diploma of Licentiate of Royal College Physicians LRCP from Edinburgh which was a popular initial qualification in Medicine for overseas students. She also obtained an LRCS from Glasgow and a GFPS from Dublin. After working for a short period in Lady Dufferin Hospital, she started her own private practice. In 1883 she married the Brahmo reformer and leader of women's emancipation Dwarkanath Ganguly. They were actively involved in social movements to improve work conditions of female coal miners in eastern India. She was one of the six women delegates to the fifth session of the Indian National Congress in 1889, and even organised the Women's Conference in Calcutta in 1906 in the aftermath of the partition of Bengal. In 1908, she had also presided over a Calcutta meeting for expressing sympathy with Satyagraha being practiced by Indian laborers in Transvaal, South Africa. She formed an association to collect money with the help of fundraisers to assist the workers. In 1914 she presided over the meeting of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, which was held in Calcutta to honour Mohandas Gandhi during his Calcutta visit. She died in 1923.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Taravath Madhavan Nair** **(1868 - 1919)** was born near Tirur in 1868. His father was a District Munsiff in the Judicial service at Tirur. Nair went to school at Government High School, Palghat. He graduated from Presidency College, Madras, and joined Madras Medical College. He later moved to the UK where he obtained his MD in 1896, with Sanskrit as the compulsory classical subject. He researched ENT diseases at Paris. Prior to his return to India, Nair spent some time in London where he served as Secretary and later Vice-President of London Indian Society, led by Dadabhai Naoroji. He also served as a member of the British Medical Association, the Royal Asiatic Society, the National Liberal Club and the Royal Society before returning to India in 1897. In India he involved himself in the Indian National Congress sessions in 1898 and 1899. He strongly condemned the status of Indian officers in the medical services and campaigned for their equal treatment. In 1908, Nair was appointed member of the Labour Commission by the Government of India. He submitted a report condemning the conditions of factory workers and recommended the reduction of their working hours. He personally submitted his condemnation and recommendations to the Secretary of State for India in London. In 1912, Dr Nair was elected to the Madras Legislative Council. When the First World War broke out, Dr Nair served as a surgeon in the hospital ship, SS Madras and was commissioned as a Lieutenant. At the end of the War, he was awarded the Kaiser-i-Hind medal and the War Service medal. In 1916 after losing the elections to the Imperial Legislature of India, Dr Nair blamed caste-based prejudices in the Indian National Congress for his loss. In 1917, Dr Nair left the INC. In October 1917, he launched the South Indian Liberal Federation, also known as the Justice Party, in collaboration with Sir Pitti Theagoroya Chetty. The Justice Party launched the newspaper *Justice* in 1917 to voice the aspirations of non-Brahmins. Dr Nair was Chief Editor until his death in 1919. He used *Justice* to attack his opponents in the Indian National Movement and within the Home Rule Movement. In 1918-19, despite warnings not to travel abroad because his health was deteriorating, he led a mission to England to speak in support of communal representations before a Joint Parliamentary Committee. However, he was prohibited from speaking to the public on the orders of Montagu, the Secretary of State for India. Dr Nair died in 1919 at the age of fifty-one.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Meherbanoo Ardeshir Dadabhai Naoroji (1881-1974)** graduated in 1906 as the first Indian woman to gain an MB ChB degree at Edinburgh. She was the daughter of Dadbhai Naoroji’s son Ardeshir; with his cousin Manekbai, also a doctor, Meherbanoo looked after her grandfather in his final illness. For most of her career she worked in the Princely State of Kutch, present-day Gujarat, heading the women’s hospital there and serving as personal physician to the royal family till her death.

**Prakash Karat (1948- )** was born in Rangoon, Burma, in 1948. His father worked with the British Railways. Prakash Karat lost his father while still in school and moved to Madras with his mother Radha and sister Kamala. The sister died in her teens and the mother took up a job as a Life Insurance Corporation of India agent. Karat was an undergraduate student of Economics at the Madras Christian College, where he won the prize for the best all round achievement and was a resident of St. Thomas's Hall. He graduated with a gold medal and won a scholarship to study at Edinburgh University, for a Masters’ degree in politics. In 1970 he received an MSc degree from Edinburgh University for the thesis "Language and politics in modern India". At Edinburgh he met Professor Victor Kiernan, the Marxist intellectual and academic. His political activism began with anti-apartheid protests at the University, for which he was suspended. The suspension was later reversed based on his good behaviour.Karat returned to India in 1970 and joined the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi. Karat was one of the founders of the Students Federation of India (SFI), the CPM’s student wing, in JNU. He was involved with student politics and was elected the third president of the Student's Union. He also became the second President of the Students Federation of India, 1974 to 1979. He worked underground for one and a half years during the Emergency in India in 1975-76. He was arrested twice and spent 8 days in prison. Prakash Karat married Brinda Karat, then a party colleague, in 1975. Brinda has also risen through party ranks and both are active members of CPI(M). Karat worked as an aide to the previous party leader A.K. Gopalan, the legendary communist leader from Kerala. Prakash Karat was elected to the Central Committee of the CPI (M) in 1985 and became a member of the ‘Politburo’ in 1992. He took over as the youngest-ever General Secretary of the Communist Party of India in 2005, effectively the most influential position in the party structure. [[6]](#footnote-6)

**Ravinder Lal Kapur (1938-2006)** was born in 1938 at Lahore to Mohan Lal Kapur and Vidyavati. After completing his MBBS from the Medical College at Amritsar in 1960, he took up psychiatric studies, completing his DPM in 1965 at NIMHANS. He went to Edinburgh in 1966 for advanced training with Morris Carstairs on a Commonwealth Fellowship in the Department of Psychiatry. He completed his PhD from Edinburgh, specializing in statistics and psychiatric research methods. He returned to India in 1970 and launched a major epidemiological research project in Manipal (jointly with Edinburgh University). The results were published in the well-known book that he co-authored with Carstairs in 1976 entitled *The Great Universe of* *Kota.* Ravi stayed in Manipal until 1975, organizing the Department of Psychiatry at Kasturba Medical College, where he served as Professor and Head of Department. In 1975, he joined NIMHANS as Professor of Community Psychiatry and Head of the Department of Psychiatry. He reorganized the department and research, giving equal importance to biological and psychosocial factors. In 1983, Ravi Kapur decided to leave NIMHANS. When the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) started in Bangalore in 1988, he was appointed Professor of Health and Human Behaviour, and later became the Deputy Director of NIAS in 1990. He continued as Emeritus Professor in NIAS until his death. From 1985 to 2000 he made several psychosocial studies and published articles on a wide range of topics. These included: creativity among Indian scientists, the mentality of terrorists in Punjab and Kashmir; the psychological roots of violence; and the alienation of youth in present-day India. Under an ICMR project he embarked on a psychological and social study of Sanyasis (holy men) living in the Himalayas which took him to remote areas like Rishikesh, Gangotri, Badrinath, etc. Kapur was a Fellow of many prestigious professional organizations like the Indian Psychiatric Society, National Academy of Medical Sciences, Royal College of Psychiatrists, etc. He was a Fellow of the Indian Academy of Sciences, Bangalore from 1977. He was a Visiting Professor at IISc in 1983 and a visiting professor at the Harvard University. In 1986, he had the distinction of being appointed to be an Advisor to the World Health Organization (WHO), and went to Alexandria, Egypt as a WHO consultant to conduct a mental health programme in Somalia.[[7]](#footnote-7)

***Ashok Malhotra, Edinburgh, 2010, edited Roger Jeffery, 2018***

1. *Narendra Luther Archives* <http://narendralutherarchives.blogspot.com/1998_09_01_archive.html> [accessed July 23 2010] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Prafulla Chandra Ray, *Life and Experiences of a Bengal Chemist* (Calcutta & London, 1932) & *University of Edinburgh Alumni & Staff Records* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *The Student*, *23 October 1897 vol. xii-no. 2*, p36 & Article in *The Student* by Sarat Mullick 29 October 1896 vol. xi-no.. 1901 p. 2*, The Student* *October 5 vol. 2 no 2172* pp. 1013-1014, *The Student 28 October 1897 vol. xii no. 2* p. 36 & James Barr ‘Dr Sarat K. Mullick and Indian Medical Reform’ in *The British Medical Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 3340 (Jan. 3, 1925) p. 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Malavika Karlekar, ‘Ganguly , Kadambini (c.1862–1923)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, May 2006 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/58727, accessed 14 July 2010] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T._M._Nair> [accessed July 23 2010] [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prakash_Karat> [accessed 23 July 2010] [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Current Science*, 93, 2, 25 July 2007 <http://www.ias.ac.in/currsci/jul252007/256.pdf> [accessed 23 July 2010] [↑](#footnote-ref-7)