

**Dr. Kotnis Ki Amar Kahaani**

<b>Feature</b>
<b>Regional Sidelines</b>

Manish Desai\*

***(The recent meeting the visiting Chinese Premier Li Keqiang had with the family members of Dr. Kotnis in Mumbai has rekindled the interest in the life of this selfless Doctor. A look into the journey of Dr. Dwarkanath Kotnis)***

No single Indian has been more revered by ordinary Chinese than a doctor who died more than 70 years ago. On the day when the Chinese pay respect to their ancestors, the grave of this doctor in North China Martyrs' Memorial Cemetery, Hebei Province is covered with flowers donated by the local Chinese. The man thus remembered with fondness and respect is Dr. Dwarkanath Kotnis, an Indian doctor, who rendered yeoman's service during China's hour of need in late 1930s.

 File:A statue of Dwarkanath Kotnis.jpg

Kotnis was one of the five Indian physicians dispatched to China to provide medical assistance during the second Sino-Japanese war in 1938. It was during the Japanese invasion of China in 1938 when Communist General Zhu De requested Jawaharlal Nehru to send Indian physicians for providing medical assistance to Chinese soldiers. [Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose](#), the President of the [Indian National Congress](#), made arrangements to send a team of volunteer doctors and an ambulance by collecting a fund of Rs 22,000. A medical team of five doctors, including Drs M. Atal, B.K. Basu, M. Cholkar, D. Mukherji and Kotnis was sent as a part of the Indian Medical Mission Team in 1938.

Dwarkanath Kotnis, born in a middle class Maharashtrian family from Solapur on October 10, 1910, had then graduated from the Seth G S Medical College, Mumbai and was preparing for post-graduation. He asked permission of his family to volunteer for service abroad. Dwarkanath's younger sister Manorama recalls that her brother wanted to travel around the world and practice medicine at different places. She said "'most members of the family knew little about China at that time. We only knew that people used to come and sell Chinese silk," While his father Shantaram encouraged young Dwarkanath to venture out, his mother was very sad because he was going that far and China was in a war situation.

Dr. Kotnis first arrived in China at the port of Hankou, Wuhan. The Indian medical team was then sent to Yan'an, the revolutionary base at the time in 1939, where they were warmly welcomed by Mao Zedong, Zhu De and other top leaders of the Communist Party, as they were the first medical team to come from another Asian country. In 1939, he joined the Eighth Route Army, led by Mao Zedong at the Jin-Cha-Ji border near the Wutai Mountain Area, providing medical service in mobile clinics.

His job as a battlefield doctor was stressful, where there was always an acute shortage of medicines. In one long-drawn out battle against Japanese troops in 1940, Kotnis performed operations for 72 hours non-stop, without any sleep. He treated more than 800 wounded soldiers during the battle. Dr

Kotnis was eventually appointed as the Director of the Dr Bethune International Peace Hospital named after the famous Canadian surgeon Norman Bethune.

Dr. Kotnis wrote letters to his family regularly. "He sounded very happy in the letters. People used to come to thank him for his help. He was telling the good part," says Manorama. Every place he went in China, he described it in detail in his letters home. The whole family found them to be great fun because what he described was so different from the life in India.

During his stay in Northern China, Dr. Kotnis met and courted Chinese girl Quo Qinglan, who was a nurse at the Bethune Hospital. Quo first met Kotnis at the inauguration of Dr Norman Bethune's tomb and was immediately attracted to the Indian doctor. Kotnis could speak Chinese and even knew how to write Chinese characters, which amazed Guo. In December 1941, Quo and Dr Kotnis were married. The birth of their son Yinhua -meaning India and China, brought a lot of joy to the couple.

But, the hardships of suppressed military life finally started to take its toll on him. Only three months after the birth of Yinhua, epilepsy struck Dr.Kotnis. It had struck once earlier, mildly, but this time it proved fatal for the young doctor. Quo was left alone with her baby son. Dr. Kotnis was buried in the Heroes Courtyard in Nanquan Village. At that time, Mao Zedong mourned his death by observing that "The army has lost a helping hand, the nation has lost a friend. Let us always bear in mind his internationalist spirit."

In the Northern Chinese province of Hebei, in Shijiazhuang city, a famous attraction is the Martyr's Memorial park. The north and south sides of the park are dedicated to the veterans of the Korean and the Japanese wars. The west side is dedicated to Dr. Norman Bethune, who fought for the Chinese, and the South side to Dr Kotnis. There is a great statue in his honour. A small museum there has a handbook of vocabulary that Kotnis wrote on his passage from India to China; some of the instruments that the surgeons used in their medical fight for life, and various photos of the doctors, some with the Communist Party of China's most influential figures, including Mao.

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Dr. Kotnis was immortalized in 1946 in the V Shantaram's movie 'Dr.Kotnis Ki Amar Kahaani.' His life was also a subject of a 1982 Chinese film 'Ke Di Hua Dai Fu' (Dr.D S Kotnis). China released two postal stamps on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of doctor's death in 1982 and then again on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1992. In 1993, India also released a stamp depicting his photograph and showing him conducting an operation, in the background.

Dr. Kotnis is such a towering and respected figure in China that whenever any Chinese Premier or President visits India he has made it a point to visit to Dr Kotnis' relatives. Top Chinese leaders including Zhou En Lai, Jiang Zemin, Li Peng, Zhu Rongji, Hu Jintao and now Li Keqiang have all met with Dr. Kotnis' extended family members in Mumbai.

Widow of Dr. Kotnis, Quo was an honoured guest at many high-level diplomatic functions between China and India and was visited by former President K R Narayanan during his visit to China in 2000 and the former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in 2003. . In November 2006, she accompanied Chinese President Hu Jintao on a state visit to India. She died on 28 June 2012, and is buried alongside Kotnis at the Martyrs' Memorial Park in Shijiazhuang.

"Now that it is more than seven decades since he died, we really appreciate how the government and the people of China are giving him so much respect after so many years," said Manorama Kotnis. Premier Keqiang during his recent visit to Mumbai said "Dr.Kotnis is a symbol of China-India friendship."

*(PIB Features.)*

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\* *Director, PIB Mumbai.*

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