



PUSPALATA DAS

Upholding the Cause of the Nation

“The impact of this movement transformed this young teen-aged girl from a common student into a spirited leader of the youths, capable of such responsibilities which entail true leadership.”

Veteran freedom fighter, writer, orator, social activist, member of the parliament, a true Gandhian, Padmabhusan, and above all a woman with remarkable qualities of head and heart, Pushpalata Das was born as the second child of Rameswar Saikia and Swarnalata Saikia at the Lakhimpur township of Assam, on March 27, 1915. Hers is a great legacy, full of infinite variety and richness. She is one among those few Assamese women who have set the stamp of their extraordinary personalities on an epoch.

A study of this great woman's eventful life proves the appropriateness of the popular adage, 'morning shows the day'. Childhood being the 'fair seed-time', a number of influences operated to mould her character and mental attitude. Family was the first formative force and Pushpalata was greatly influenced by her resourceful mother, Swarnalata Saikia. Her father held a transferable Govt. job and had to tour from one place to another. It was on her mother's inspiration and persuasiveness, that the child Pushpalata, affectionately called 'Makon' by her parents, developed her interest in reading ancient

myths and legends, the stories of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, lives of great men, in singing and dancing, in spinning yarns at the Charkha and wearing Khadi clothes. It was her mother again, who instilled into her mind the noble sentiment of patriotism, and at that time the whole environment, charged with the intense political ferment of India's struggle for freedom, inculcated a deep sensitivity and perception in Pushpalata's mind from her very childhood. Those were the trying times, and the soul of an oppressed nation under British imperialism was fired by the call of Mahatma Gandhi. It was amazing that a six year old child was so quick to spark into enthusiasm often bursting into endless queries to know about this historic struggle.

Pushpalata passed Matriculation from the Panbazar Govt. Girls's High School and during her tenure as a student in this school, she was more drawn to organisational activities than to her studies, the period being one of political turmoils when the whole nation enthused with a rare patriotic fervour was on the march. The impact of this movement transformed this young teen-aged girl from a common student into a spirited leader of the youths, capable of such responsibilities which entail true leadership. The flame of rebellion burning within her, she bravely defied the directives of the school authorities not to join any revolutionary programme and was ready to risk the wrath of the Government to become a fighter for the cause of the nation.

The consecutive deaths of her father and mother in 1930 and in 1934 respectively, created a void in Pushpalata's life. Even after this irreparable loss, never at any moment, did she remain indifferent to her duties and obligations towards the country. She passed B.A. in 1936 from Benaras Hindu University, and M.A. in Political Science in 1938 from the Andhra University. In the university, she came to be intimately associated with Durgabai Desmukh, a woman with iron will, and a powerful, magnetic personality. Durgabai became a formidable force in shaping and forming Pushpalata's future course of life, and it was she who actually drew her to active politics. Pushpalata's thesis, 'Federalism' based on her post-graduate research was a widely acclaimed one, its examiner being no other than Harold Laski, the then Professor of London School of Economics and Political Science.

The marriage of Pushpalata Das on February 24, 1942 with the veteran freedom-fighter, Gandhi, Social Worker and Education Minister of Assam, Omeo Kumar Das was a marriage of two noble ideologies, a union of two devotees dedicated wholeheartedly to the service of society and the nation at large. Their conjugal life was marked by sheer austerity, sans any wordly comfort and luxury. Together they cherished and upheld those precious values which go a long way in making life sacrosanct and in preserving society from disruptive forces. For their unflinching commitment to the nation, their unalloyed patriotism, their altruism and exemplary spirit of service to humanity, both were honored with Padmabhusan. Omeo Kumar Das in 1963 and Pushpalata Das in 1999.

Some of the noted luminaries, who played their iconic roles in the life and society of Assam were the inspirational role-models for Pushpalata. Prominent among them were Chandraprova Saikiani, Lokhabandhu Dr. Bhubaneswar Barooah and Jyotiprasad Agarwala. Lokabandhu Dr. Bhubaneswar Barooah was her idol whom she revered with an awe-inspiring devotion, and from whom she received affectionate guidance in carrying out her life's mission. The love and affection she received from the Lokabandhu and his wife Induprova Barooah filled, to a great extent, the void in Pushpalata's life in the absence of her lost parents.

As Gandhiji called forth the patriotic zeal of the people of India, and millions flocked to his banner in a non-violent struggle for freedom, the women of Assam too rose to this historic occasion. Among such women, one was Pushpalata whose participation in the movement was rock-solid, and she clung to the single-minded pursuit of her goal. During the Quit India movement of 1942, when hundreds and thousands of men and women pledged their lives, and in Assam a young girl like Kanaklata became a martyr, it was Pushpalata, who, with her indomitable courage and fortitude, carried on her campaign-organising women volunteer corps and mass-pickets, holding meetings to sensitize the people specially in the rural areas of Assam in the face of all Govt. repression and police action. Following the nonviolent ideals of Mahatma Gandhi, she undertook fast, became a Satyagrahi, courted arrest and was sent to jail. Pushpalata excelled in the rare art of elocution, and her fiery speeches were a clarion call to the teeming masses to fight for a noble cause. By her words she touched the inmost chords of the women, and psychologically prepared them for the titanic encounter. Hundreds of women, leaving their hearths and homes came out to the streets, shouting slogans and defying death.

India was proclaimed free on August 15, 1947 and this happy and joyful event devoutly cherished by the Indians, coincided with a moment of fulfilment in the family of Pushpalata when she gave birth to her only daughter, Nandini, in the same year. Pushpalata was the first Assamese woman to be a member of the parliament in an independent India. She remained in that capacity from 1951 to 1961, and representing the Indian Govt. she travelled many foreign countries. Her parliamentary speeches, replete with rhetorical flourishes created quite a splash in the floor of the House.

Pushpalata never kept herself isolated from the centre of contemporary issues and problems. Her sensibility was such that it always addressed any social or political issue, any disconcerting fact in the public life. A pall of gloom fell on Pushpalata when her husband, her friend, philosopher and guide, Omeo Kumar Das breathed his last in 1975. The trauma was unbearable but private grief had to be overcome and pushed aside, for the sake of larger social responsibilities, and she went ahead with her social and organisational activities without respite—writing thought-provoking articles, attending meetings and seminars, delivering speeches with same vigour and ardour, standing by the poor and the needy, vehemently reacting to any kind of social injustice, cooking delectable dishes, inviting guests and relatives

to her cozy cottage "Ashroy" on various occasions, and attending to them with an aura of warm hospitality. She also shouldered heavy responsibilities as chairperson of Assam Branch of Bhoodan Gramdan Board, the Advisory Board of Kasturba Trust, and as a member of several institutions and organisations, such as National Planning Commission, the Advisory Committee of Guwahati Doordarshan, Dibrugarh University Court and so on.

One of the most commendable qualities of Pushpalata Das was her involvement with books. She was well-read in Sankardev and Madhabdev, and other renowned past and contemporary writers of Assam, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Aristophanes, Aristotle, Plato and Machiavelli, to name only a few. Her pregnant learning and profound experiences of life evolved in her a progressive outlook which enabled her to rise above all prejudices, all pettiness and narrowness, conservatism and orthodoxy. She never had that high-browism, born of hollow pride and boastful vanity and she had that humility in her nature which endeared her to all. Though a strong votary of women's liberation and rights, she herself possessed that feminine grace and sweetness of disposition, and the figure of this great woman clad in traditional *Muga Mekhela* and *Riha*, *Khadi Chador* and *blouse*, sometimes emotional, sometimes even sentimental, but always firm and resolute will remain in people's memory as an archetype of ideal womandood.

Pushpalata Das has to her credit more than two hundred articles written in Assamese and English and published in different newspapers and magazines. Her oeuvre includes writings on contemporary social issues-mostly the issues related to women. 'Stree Shakti', 'Assamese Woman-Her Status in Society', 'Woman and Environment', 'Women and Reservation', 'Obstacles to Women's Education'- are some valuable treasures which have enriched Assamese literature.

The inexorable journey of this great woman, came to an end when she relinquished this mortal life on November 9, 2003. Till her last breath, by virtue of her innate strength and unshakeable faith in God, she carried on her life's mission untiringly and unwaveringly.□□