



## KAMAL KUMARI BAROOAH

### Redefining Womanhood

“The ingenuity with which Kamal Kumari Barooah surmounted innumerable hurdles, thrived and prospered would remain as a source of inspiration to the young generation of entrepreneurs.”

Kamal Kumari Barooah a pioneer woman entrepreneur in a male dominated society was the matriarch of the Khongiya Barooah family of Thengal, Assam. She was born to Mahendranath Mahanta and Swarnalata Mahanta on 14th April 1899, at Borlengi Satra, Nowgong. In 1917, she got married to Siva Prasad Barooah of Khongiya Barooah family. This family is one of the foremost indigenous tea planter families of Assam that embarked on the tea planting ventures during the days of British Raj. She was the mother of three sons and six daughters amongst whom, the most dynamic and outstanding is Hemendra Prasad Barooah, a well known entrepreneur today. After her husband's premature demise in 1938 she had to handle the huge Thengal household alone, along with running of their tea gardens and retaining the family properties for her children. Kamal Kumari, being educated only upto pre-matriculation level, out of the necessity to run their business had to self-educate herself, in English as well as in tea craft, and thus efficiently performed all those affairs. Her foray into the male world of

entrepreneurship was not a matter of personal choice, but when the circumstances demanded her role, she boldly came forward to assert her identity and achieved laudable success.

On 22nd December 1944 the partition of the family's assets had left Kamal Kumari and her children with Haroocharai, Kuhum and Mokrung Tea Estates. At this point, she was overburdened with various financial problems. Moreover, she had to face another crisis—there was none to run the three gardens. Undeterred by the adverse circumstances and determined to preserve the paternal properties for her children, she decided to run the gardens herself. Although she was ignorant about the commercial practices, she entered the unfamiliar world of commerce and not only retained the properties but was successful in carrying out modest improvements.

She was thoroughly conversant with every stage of sericulture and reared Muga and Endi Silk worms at Thengal itself and also developed the skill of spinning muga threads. While Kamal Kumari's artistic talents found expression in handloom, she was interested in creative writing too. She also compiled anthologies of Assamese prayers and wedding songs, *Gossainnam* and *Biyanam*. She along with prominent women of her times such as Narayani Handique and Ratnaprava Rajkhowa were involved in pioneering social activities through Jorhat Mahila Samiti.

By 1950, when her elder son, Hemendra Prasad took over the task of running the tea gardens, Kamal Kumari's role as the preserver of the family properties had come to an end. It was a great relief for her. When in 1950, her elder son Hemendra Prashad took over the charge of running the tea-gardens. Being relieved of this heavy responsibility she could now find out some time to devote herself to religious and social welfare activities. She breathed her last on 11th September 1978 in New York, USA and was finally cremated at the family grounds at Thengal.

Kamal Kumari Barooah, though shy and soft spoken, possessed an inner strength and individuality. This determination enabled her to survive in an intrinsically male dominated society and to leave a mark on the entire Assamese society. The ingenuity with which Kamal Kumari Barooah surmounted innumerable hurdles, thrived and prospered would remain as a source of inspiration to the young generation of entrepreneurs. Kamal Kumari Barooah, who could effectively handle mid-life crisis, redefined the very ethos of womanhood by embarking on the 'man's world' of entrepreneurship with a difference and thereby crossed the boundaries between the public and the private realms.

In her memory the Kamal Kumari National Awards were instituted in 1990 to promote excellence in the field of Science and Technology and cultural pursuits. □□