



KALPANA BEZBORUAH

Helping the Disabled

“Kalpana had the urge to start an institute for children with learning disabilities such as mental retardation, hearing problems, dyslexia, autism and so on. However, it took her quite a few years before she was able to start Sahayika.”

Kalpana Bezboruah (née Sharma) was born in Tezpur on September 3, 1934 to the late Kumud Chandra Sharma and the late Haribala Devi. Her father, a brilliant student, gave up his studies in Cotton College to join India's freedom movement. He started teaching in the Tezpur Academy and eventually became the headmaster of the school. After Independence, he joined government service as a development officer. Kalpana, the second of six siblings, did well in her studies and won a scholarship in the middle school examination. She did the later part of her schooling at the Besant Theosophical School at Banaras and continued her college and university studies at Banaras Hindu University. She ranked fourth and second at the I.A. and B.A. examinations with the highest marks in Hindi at both the examinations. She also received the University gold medal for music at her B.A. examination. Her gurus for instrumental music (sitar) were Shrimati Indumati Purohit and Pandit Lalmani Misra. She completed her M.A. examination in Psychology in the year 1956 and taught

as lecturer in Darrang College, Tezpur after a brief stint as a research scholar at Gauhati University.

In February 1958, she married Dhirendra Nath Bezboruah who she had met at Banaras Hindu University and who was then a lecturer in English at J. B. College, Jorhat, but who started teaching in Cotton College by about the middle of the year. Her moves to Jorhat and Guwahati after marriage meant giving up her teaching career since Psychology as a subject had not been introduced in the colleges of Assam at that time. In a sense, she had been well ahead of her times in her choice of subject for her M.A.

In June 1959, the couple had their first child, Gayatri. Maitreyi, the second, was born on Gandhi Jayanti day in 1962 – weeks before Tezpur, where she was born, was being evacuated in the face of the Chinese invasion of India. The youngest was Bhaskar, born in December 1967. When Bhaskar was six months old, he had a severe attack of measles after which he lost his hearing. The fact that his father had been trained in Phonetics helped in the very early detection of this hearing loss. The couple took Bhaskar to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences and then to Dr Subramaniam, one of the leading ENT specialists of the world who was at Chennai. Dr Subramaniam confirmed the findings of the ENT specialist of Guwahati and of AIIMS and advised speech therapy for the boy. He said that if the hearing loss had been due to problems of the outer ear or the middle ear, he would have been happy to perform surgery as a remedial measure, but since it was inner ear deafness, surgery was ruled out (at that time). He recommended the All India Institute of Speech and Hearing in Mysore. The couple was shattered at the verdict of Dr Subramaniam because at that time his was virtually the final word. Bhaskar's parents went straight to Mysore where they visited the All India Institute of Speech and Hearing and were full of admiration for the excellent work the institute was doing. They decided that they would move to Mysore the very next year for Bhaskar's auditory training and speech therapy. This was in the year 1970.

The same year, Bhaskar's father resigned his job with the Board of Secondary Education, Assam as Education Officer for English and took on the resident directorship of *Natun Asamiya*, an Assamese daily owned by the family. He told his family that he could work only till about the end of 1971, since the family would have to move to Mysore in 1971. This act of burning the boats was a sort of preparation for the move away from Assam for some time for Bhaskar's treatment and therapy. By May 1971, Kalpana's family moved to Mysore. Dhiren had made the preparations for the education of the girls by writing to a few schools in advance and securing admission for them in CFTRI School run very competently by Mrs Parpia, The American wife of Dr Parpia who was the Director of the Central Food Technological Research Institute (CFTRI). The girls started attending school from the Dasaprakasa Hotel where the family was staying while their parents moved about during their school hours looking for a decent house where they could all stay until

Dhiren could wind up his affairs in Guwahati and return with whatever little furniture and clothes had to be transported to Mysore. At the same time he was also looking for job opportunities. Through the kind help of R.K.Narayan and the late Professor C.D.Narasimhaiah, Dhiren was able to find out that there was an ad hoc vacancy for a lecturer in English at the Regional College of Education, one of the four colleges of the NCERT in the country. He met the Principal, had this information confirmed, and wrote out an application for the job. Having found a suitable first floor flat for the family in a good locality within walking distance of the school, it was time for Dhiren to return to Guwahati in the month of July 1971. He had hardly spent a month in Guwahati when he received a telegram from the Regional College of Education on August 12 informing him that he had been appointed lecturer with four advance increments and that he was to join immediately. He rushed to Mysore and joined his new job within a few days even though he knew that the job was only up to April 1972.

Meanwhile, Kalpana had the arduous task of being both father and mother to the three children in an unfamiliar place with an unfamiliar language. She had to cook all the meals, leave the girls at school and then take Bhaskar to the Speech and Hearing Institute for his therapy every day. To add to the problems, Gayatri, who was in Class VII, had to appear for the VII Standard district-level public examination where she would have to take examinations in Hindi and Kannada – languages she had not had a chance to learn. Gayatri knew that her mother could take care of Hindi, but what about Kannada? Naturally, she had to have a tutor for Kannada. But even with these two handicaps, when the results were announced Gayatri stood second in the district largely due to the moral support and encouragement that she received from her mother every day.

Before Dhiren's ad hoc job came to an end in April 1972, the vacant teaching posts in the four Regional Colleges of the NCERT and the NCERT were advertised, and Dhiren applied for the post of Reader. The interviews for all the posts were held at the Regional College of Education at Bhubaneswar. He was not only selected but also posted to Mysore and was asked to take over as head of the English Department on joining.

Meanwhile, Bhaskar had also been admitted to the CFTRI School and he studied there together with his sisters until it was time for all of them to shift to the Demonstration School of the Regional College of Education run by the NCERT.

The family spent the years from 1971 to 1980 in Mysore though Dhiren came away on transfer to Guwahati as Field Adviser of the NCERT in October 1979 and Gayatri returned a couple of years earlier to join the Gauhati Medical College as a student. Bhaskar benefited immensely from the speech therapy and auditory training that he received in Mysore. For a few years, Kalpana too was able to work in the Central Institute of Indian Languages. As a musician, she found a very congenial atmosphere in Mysore with a very receptive and knowledgeable audience for classical music. She gave sitar recitals at several

concerts in both Mysore and Bangalore. She also staged Rabindranath Tagore's ballets *Chandalika* and *Chitrangada* in the Bangla original to raise funds for a nursery school at the university where she and her husband were both on the governing board. Chandalika had several repeat performances on public demand. On return to Guwahati from Mysore in May 1980, when both Maitreryi and Bhaskar had finished their school examinations, Kalpana had the urge to start an institute for children with learning disabilities such as mental retardation, hearing problems, dyslexia, autism and so on. However, it took her quite a few years before she was able to start Sahayika from a temporary makeshift arrangement at the first floor of the Mahila Samity's office next to the T. C. Higher Secondary and Multipurpose School in the year 1986. This arrangement, where Sahayika was cramped for space, went on for a couple of years until Assam Carbon Products Limited agreed to sponsor Sahayika part of the way by providing the monthly rent for the present premises on the Government Press Road at Bamunimaidam and the salary of just one assistant. This arrangement that was started in 1988 has gone till today. Much later, sometime in 2001, Shri Kuldip Nayar, who was then a nominated member of the Rajya Sabha, voluntarily offered a million rupees from his MP's LAD fund for the new building of Sahayika to house its rehabilitation centre for the disabled. The building was constructed on a plot of land donated by the Government of Assam at Lankeswar beyond Jalukbari and completed in early 2003. The rehabilitation centre started functioning around June 2003.

In the years that followed, the rehabilitation centre of Sahayika began to work on skills like weaving, tailoring and silk-screen printing, with plans to start mechanized carpentry in due course. Unfortunately, fate had other plans in store. In May 2007, Kalpana Bezboruah had a massive cerebral stroke that left her paralysed on the right side and affected her language. Since then she has fought with her ailment and the resulting disabilities with fortitude and courage making use of physiotherapy every day. However, the struggle has been a long one and she has a long way to go. □□