

## **Leading from the Front : Panbazar Girls' High School**

By now, I wanted to change direction from the social work carried out by the *Mahila Samiti*, and return to the area of interest closest to my heart- the spread of women's education.

Looking back upon the intricacies of my life's trajectory, I can now see a certain progressive pattern in all the major turning points in my life and career. It is almost as if when God willed that certain particular tasks had to be performed by me, my interests also became passionately focused on those very issues. I had never consciously planned or prepared for any career oriented move in my life. My compulsion from early adulthood had always been to serve my country in the best way possible. Whenever the urge to do something meaningful for the nation took root in me, it became a magnificent obsession. I would not be deterred by any impediments from reaching my goal. I also firmly believe that the mental and physical resilience I could evince during the many stressful situations that came my way, must definitely have been providential.

My involvement with Panbazar Girls' High School had continued from the time I came to Gauhati as a new bride. At this particular time I was the Secretary of the School's Governing Body. I now wanted to concentrate all my energies and efforts for the betterment of the school.

Fundraising became a priority in our agenda and we collected enough money to add to the school buildings. We arranged for a school bus to increase the enrolment of students and to facilitate girl students coming in from a distance. The proprietor of

Himmatsinghka Company, Shri Ram Babu, helped us substantially by allowing us to pay for the bus in instalments.

In all these years, I don't remember any lady graduate teacher settling down as a permanent Headmistress of the school. A few qualified Bengali ladies did come and join, but their tenure was shortlived. Till then, I was the only woman graduate in Assam. When the School Committee had earlier offered me the post, I had refused because of certain personal obligations.

When Shri Hem Chandra Sen had taken over as Headmaster of Panbazar Girls' School for three years, I had continued as the Secretary. Together, we initiated quite a few changes in the school. Home Science was introduced as a subject during this time and the girls were also taught weaving, spinning, embroidery and music. Because of the convenience provided by transport, girls from distant places now joined the school. The number of students was steadily on the rise and older girls, whose guardians did not approve of their walking to school, no longer dropped out when they reached higher classes. They started using the bus services. As a result, the number of students in higher classes increased noticeably for the first time.

When Shri Sen retired, the School Committee once again requested me to take charge as Headmistress. By this time, even my youngest son was ready to go to school. I had more time in my hands to devote towards the progress of the school.

I knew very well that, as the Headmistress, I would be more effective in initiating changes and development in the school. When I discussed the matter with my husband, he raised no objections this time as our children were growing up. So when Shri Sen retired, I took charge as the Principal and Secretary of Panbazar Girls' High School.

My husband continued to be my guiding spirit, helping me in matters like fundraising and securing government grants for the school.

In time, the Panbazar School established its reputation as a premier institution and students came to study here from all over

Assam, as hostel facilities were available. The number of graduate teachers were also slowly growing. The first Assamese graduate we recruited was Miss Indira Senapati, who later became Mrs. Indira Miri, a well-known educationist.

As more and more girls began to clear their Matriculation Examination every year, their college education became a matter requiring immediate attention.

Girls from prosperous families usually went to Calcutta or Benares for further studies. In Gauhati, Cotton College had limited seats for girls and a few of them were reserved for girls from outside Gauhati. These girls stayed in the hostel built in the premises of Panbazar School. The Superintendent of the school hostel was in charge of the college hostel also. After a few years, the Louis Memorial Girls' Hostel for Cotton College was opened in the American Mission campus on the initiative of the missionaries. Later, the same mission started the White Memorial Women's Hostel in the Chatribari Hospital campus. It was a two storied building and the girls from Louis Memorial were shifted there. The riverside mission hostel was then converted into a boys' hostel for Cotton College.

For a long time, there were no hostels for girls in the Cotton College campus. I do not remember the year clearly, but the College authorities finally opened a girls hostel in a rented house in Uzanbazar belonging to Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan. Mrs. Kamala Roy became the first superintendent.

The hostel built for Cotton College girls in the premises of Panbazar School had become vacant as more and more new hostels came up. In the meantime, the number of students in the school had also multiplied. The rooms in the hostel building came to be utilised for the school students.

After seeing Panbazar Girls' High School well entrenched in the path of progress, another aspect of women's education began to occupy my interest. I realised that many Assamese girls who passed their Matriculation Examination did not get a chance

to study further. And not all parents were willing to send their daughters to a co-educational college. I knew of two particular students who had passed out from my school, who were denied the opportunity of higher education because seats for girls were very limited in Cotton College. I felt that there must be many more similarly disappointed students, who had been deprived of their right to study.