

Handique Girls' College : A Dream Realised

The concept of a college for women in the premises of Panbazar School to start with, now began to engross my waking hours. I applied for permission to the School Managing Committee to allow me to start morning classes for college students.

Two or three meetings of the School Managing Committee were, however, held without placing my application in the agenda. Dr. Das was also a member of the Committee and I appealed to him for help. I tried to convince him that, given the permission for starting classes for college education, I would begin by opening one class in a year so that the school's work would not be hampered in any way. I desperately wanted his support in the next meeting. He was very reluctant at first and said, "Why do you always want to take on such difficult targets? As it is, the school takes up so much of your time and energy. Why do you want to add to your burden?" I simply told him that I needed his help to get the permission first. Whether my cherished dream could be realised or not would come later.

I submitted my application once again in the next meeting. This time, fortunately, Dr. Das spoke up on my behalf. The President of the Committee was the Deputy Commissioner of Gauhati and an Englishman. He told me, "Mrs. Das, it is too premature to open a girls' college now." But seeing my firmness of purpose, he gave in and allowed me to open a morning shift for college girls in the school premises.

Admissions for new classes in Cotton College were usually over by the end of June. I announced that classes in our college

would start from July 16, 1939. The resolution was passed in a general meeting of the *Mahila Sabha*. The name decided upon was Gauhati Girls' College. The meeting was chaired by the late Hemoprabha Das. Two girls, who had passed out from Panbazar Girls' High School, were immediately admitted. They were Nani Baruah and Basanti Lahiri, the first students of the College. Gradually, the number of students increased to five. The initial lack of response caused me grave concern but I plodded on, hoping that given time, matters would improve. A few names deserve to be mentioned here for offering me unstinting support during these difficult times. They were Shri Kanak Chandra Das, Shri Ramesh Changkakoti, Shri Rajani Sharma, Shri Bishweshwar Sharma and Shri Nalini Dasgupta. With their cooperation, the first year classes were started and a constructive step was taken to promote higher education for women in Assam.

By the end of the year, the number of students dwindled from five to two. The second year began with a slight increase and we had eight girls taking admission. There was a time when we even had to go hunting for prospective students. Mrs. Hemoprabha Das was a great help to me in this matter. She and I often went over to visit guardians whose daughters had passed their Matriculation Examination and tried to persuade them to allow the girls to join the college.

Dr. Das helped me to apply for a grant of land and buildings for the college to the then Education Minister, Shri Rohini Choudhury. He was gracious enough to arrange for the present premises of the college to be transferred to us from the Cotton College authorities. The Government not only provided us with the land with the existing buildings but also gave us a financial grant.

In the meantime, we had applied for affiliation to Calcutta University during the second year of the College's existence. Satish Ghosh, the Inspector of Calcutta University, came over for an inspection. The classes were still held in Panbazar School in the mornings at the time. Dr. Das, as a member of the College Governing Body and I were present when the Inspector visited the

classes. We had briefed him about the sanction and allotment of land and buildings. He raised no objections on that score but told us that it was mandatory to have a sum of Rs. 10,000 in the college fund for the affiliation to be awarded. The students could then appear for their examination under Calcutta University that very year. Without the money, the affiliation would not come through.

Mr. Ghosh's words came as a complete shock to both of us. Dr. Das was fatalistic about the matter. I knew that he wanted me to accept the bitter truth that there was no possibility for the affiliation in that academic year. However, I was made of sterner stuff and did not let the Inspector see my distress. I asked him for just ten days time to raise the money because I knew very well that a longer grace period would never be granted.

Mr. Ghosh was highly impressed with the scholastic progress of the College. He did not complain much about the lack of infrastructure including a proper library, as he was made aware of our acute financial crunch. He gracefully granted my request for a few days' time to raise the required sum of money.

After the Inspector left, my husband turned to me in utter exasperation, "Why do you always take on more than you can handle? How can you even think of raising Rs. 10,000 in ten days?" I tried to pacify him by saying, "I spoke impulsively because I did not want him to write off the matter of affiliation. I was buying time. If we could not raise the money, it would be a foregone conclusion that the college would not be affiliated. But now we have at least ten days to work something out."

That day, I prayed to God as never before to show me a way out of this crisis. Then, suddenly, as an answer to my prayers, a long forgotten snatch of conversation flashed through my mind. A few years ago, the wife of Raibahadur Radhakanta Handique, noted tea planter and philanthropist of Jorhat, had visited us. I had a serious talk with her about educating Assamese women and had confided in her about my dream project of starting a women's College in Gauhati. I had also told her that if and when my plans

would take on a concrete form, I would approach her for help. She had encouraged me to pursue my aspirations and had assured me of all possible help when the time came.

I rushed to my husband and excitedly told him, "I have found a way out of our difficult situation. But I need you to help me out." I then related to him the gist of my conversation with Mrs. Handique. Dr. Das reflected over the matter and soon was caught up in my optimism. It was my good fortune that he was always eager to achieve whatever was feasible. He took me to meet Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan, President of our Governing Body. Both Dr. Bhuyan and his wife gave me a patient hearing. I insisted that Dr. Bhuyan and Dr. Das should visit Mr. Handique and acquaint him about his late wife's wishes. I would send with them a letter describing what had transpired between his wife and me when we had met.

I was clinging to a nebulous hope that Mr. Handique would honour his deceased wife's commitment. She had passed away some time ago. Mrs Bhuyan agreed with me and urged the men to go to Jorhat. Unfortunately for us, the next day was Bohag Bihu, the Assamese new year celebration. The festivities usually lasted for a week and we were sorely pressed for time. Dr. Das, however, decided that he would go on the Bihu day itself and asked Mrs Bhuyan if she would allow her husband to be absent from home on that auspicious day. I was certain that Mrs. Bhuyan would object. But, surprisingly, she enthusiastically agreed to the suggestion. I was overwhelmed by her magnanimity and consideration.

On the morning of the Bihu day, Dr. Das and Dr. Bhuyan travelled to Jorhat, taking with them my letter addressed to Mr. Handique. He was in his Tirual tea estate bungalow at that time. Dr. Das and Dr. Bhuyan met him on that very evening and gave him my letter and all the information regarding the College. Mr. Handique was thoughtful for a long time after reading my letter. He then told the visitors that he would definitely contribute for the cause but would confirm the amount the next day. The two men spent the

night in Jorhat and went back to the garden at the appointed time the next day.

Mr. Handique told them, "I am very happy to know that Mrs. Das has taken up the challenge of starting a girls' college. Such work deserves encouragement. I am giving you a cheque of Rs. 10,000 needed for the affiliation right now. I would like to contribute more. I will directly correspond with Mrs. Das about the matter." He then extended his well known hospitality to the two men before they left for Gauhati.

This act of generosity from Mr. Radhakanta Handique enabled the College to be affiliated to Calcutta University that same year.

Mr. Handique then started corresponding with me formally as the Principal of the College, stating the specific areas where he wanted his money to be spent. He began by donating an amount of Rs. 10,000 for opening the Department of Botany. Next came four scholarships for deserving students, two for merit and two for Ahom students. This was followed by a sum of Rs. 58,000 for the College buildings. It was at this point that a unanimous decision was taken to rename the college as Handique Girls' College, in the honour of its chief patron. But, unfortunately for us, Mr. Handique passed away the year the construction of the College building was started. He had sent us the money in various instalments and because of a faulty signature given while he was bed-ridden, we could not encash a final cheque of Rs. 8000, a princely sum in those days.

After Mr. Handique expired, the two scholarships for Ahom girls were terminated by his Trust Committee. The two merit scholarships of Rs. 600 each were continued for a few years. They were named after Narayani Handique, his late wife. After a time, these were also stopped and the tradition of the Handique scholarships in the College he had helped to establish, came to an abrupt end.

The College was gradually taking roots and unfurling its lush foliage in different directions. I have to mention here the names of

some of the remarkable teachers who came forward to work with me in this new and uncertain enterprise even when the remuneration they were paid was a pittance. Shri Uma Kanta Sharma, Shri Sarat Chandra Goswami, Shri Banamali Sharma, Shri Satya Ranjan Sen, Shri Shiba Ghosh, Shri Bishnu Ghosh, Shri Gyan Nath Sharma, are few amongst many who contributed unconditionally to the cause of women's education in Assam.

There were also others who supported us whenever the need arose. Shri Hem Baruah was then the Principal of B. Baruah College. But he came to Handique College to teach English. Shri Sarat Kumar Dutta (the present Chief Justice of Assam) came to take classes in Economics. Such enlightened patronage added to the standing of the College. Handique Girls' College soon morphed into a full fledged undergraduate institution with the active help and goodwill of a whole host of people. I took charge as honorary Principal while continuing my duties as Principal and Secretary of Panbazar Girls' High School.

The establishment of a girls' college naturally provoked a great deal of controversy. Some people were of the opinion that there was no need for an independent college for girls. Newspapers added fuel to the matter by publishing sensational headlines like, "Handique College is a white elephant." The attack gained momentum and even the students were drawn in. Some of them started a muted campaign about their reluctance to study in a college managed by a graduate Principal.

My sole intention in assuming the Principal's post was to spearhead the movement of establishing the College. There were very few guardians willing to send their daughters for higher education and I had to use a great deal of persuasiveness to gather a handful of girls to initiate the process of providing college education for girls. I had no vested interests in this enterprise nor did I ever seek any personal mileage out of the project.

My husband was greatly affected by this adverse criticism of me coming from the student community. He advised me to obtain

my Master's Degree as soon as possible. I was not very keen in the beginning because of my heavy workload. I really did not know how I would make time for studies. But Dr. Das was insistent. On one of his visits to Calcutta, he found out the details of the Indian Vernacular Examination and even got an application form for me from the University office. I started preparing to appear for the exams privately during the school and college vacations.

I wrote to Ambika Bora, a friend based in Calcutta, asking about text and reference books and notes on Assamese, which was my subject. He advised me to approach Durgabati Saikia who had cleared her Master's examination in Indian Vernacular that same year. When I wrote to her, she immediately sent me her notes and a few books. The material she provided helped me immensely. I was granted the permission to appear under Calcutta University. For two months, I studied diligently with the notes and books I had acquired. My earlier acquaintance with the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and the *Kirtana* now came into great use. I prepared for the Bengali paper on my own and scored very well. The Pali-Prakrit (Sanskrit) paper was a challenge because I had no help for it. So I was convinced that I would not fare well in that paper.

I had to go to Calcutta for the examination. As usual, my husband smoothened my way, making all the arrangements. He went ahead and rented a house for a month and took all our children there to be with us. I appeared for my M. A. Examination in 1941 and passed with a second class.

After acquiring my Master's Degree, I felt vindicated. Now no one could raise any questions about my educational qualifications.