

Consolidation amidst Conflict

As time went by, the continuation of the classes of the College in the Panbazar School became progressively difficult. So we decided to shift to the existing buildings in the plot allotted to us by the Government. It had also become strenuous for me to shoulder the twin duties of being Principal of two rapidly expanding institutions. As I had a car at my disposal, I used to visit the College first and then go to the School. But I realised that my presence was needed over extended periods of time in both the premises. I could not walk to and from each place on foot and rickshaws were still not used by ladies at that time. However, as social perceptions were rapidly changing, I remember enjoying rickshaw rides while commuting to College after I gave up my job in Panbazar Girls' High School.

The recollection of an unforeseen and extremely distressing incident that occurred on December 6, 1941, awakens a deep sense of depression in me even today. I have mentioned earlier that the President of the Managing Committee of the School was the Deputy Commissioner who was an Englishman and I was the Secretary. Early in December, he called a special meeting and a resolution was taken that those students who wanted to visit the War Fair going on in Judge's Field should be allowed to do so by the School authorities. Accordingly, announcements were made in the classes and the interested girls were asked to submit their names. The Fair was organised by the Government and some of the activities were also carried out in the neighbouring Cotton College campus. The girls

were eager to go because there were many games provided for students. To be honest, I had not paid much attention to what was going on in the Fair. Initially, we thought that if a few girls wanted to visit the grounds, they could be accompanied by the Matron. But as things turned out, almost about 250 girls took permission from their parents to go to the Fair from the School.

On December 5th, the school was given a half holiday to enable the girls to assemble before leaving for Judge's Field. The time of admittance for women was from 2.00 pm to 5.00 pm. All the teachers were asked to be present at the time the girls would leave. I, myself, reached the school on time. When I saw the crowd of girls, I became a little nervous. There was only one bus at our disposal. I requested a few of the teachers to escort the girls to the Fair but they were hesitant to shoulder the responsibility of controlling such a large number of girls. Finally, thinking that the ultimate onus rested on me, I decided to accompany the group and several teachers joined me. All of us walked to the venue. When we reached the field, a few young men came forward and tried to stop us from entering the Fair ground.

I noticed that one of them was Haridas Deka, my eldest brother-in-law's grandson. We ignored what they were shouting about and entered the premises. After we got in, someone from outside started pelting stones into the makeshift structure. We had taken Mon Bahadur, the *Chowkidar* of the school with us. I immediately sent him to get the school bus and started getting the girls back to school in batches. Three of the teachers and I stayed on in the Fair ground till all the girls were safely transported. We then walked back to the School together. I remember the boys making some comments as we walked past. But we could not make out what they were shouting about.

The next day was December 6. The foundation stone of Handique Girls' College was to be laid on that day by the Governor of Assam. The Deputy Commissioner, Mr Humphrey, had called Dr. Das and me to his bungalow at 9.00 am to discuss the

arrangements. When we reached his house at the appointed time, he told us, "The Principal of Cotton College has asked me to go over to see a demonstration in the Science class. It will only take a few minutes." Dr. Das and I wanted to come back home. But Mr Humphrey wanted Dr. Das to accompany him and said that they could discuss the matters regarding the laying of the foundation stone on the way. I was getting late for college but Dr. Das insisted that I spare some time and go with them.

We spent a very short time in Cotton College where students displayed and explained some scientific equipment to the men, all of which was beyond my comprehension. We then took our leave from Mr. Humphrey and drove out of the campus. Both of us saw a few boys marching towards our car with sticks in their hands and shouting slogans. One sentence rang out clearly, "Disgrace to the Headmistress." I realised that they were referring to the incident in the Fair that had taken place the previous day. It was again Dr. Das's grand nephew, Haridas Dekka who was leading the boys and shouting those words. Dr. Das naturally thought he had the right to chastise an errant, young family member. So he immediately climbed out of the car before I could stop him. I, too, was not overly perturbed because Haridas was a close relation. I remember clearly that there were two other boys with him.

The moment my husband got down from the car, several other boys appeared on the scene. Dr. Das went into the college campus with them. I proceeded to my college and sent the car back for him. After some time Dr. Das came to meet me in Handique College and apprised me of what had taken place.

When Dr. Das went in to inform the Principal of Cotton College about the misconduct of his students, they became rowdy and started throwing shoes at everyone present. As Dr. Das was coming out, he was pushed into a roadside ditch by the unruly students. The Deputy Commissioner and the teachers intervened and my husband was rescued from further ignominy. Shocked and

bewildered by the turn of events, we both came home. It was about 10:30 in the morning.

I was getting ready to go to school when the *Chowkidar* came to tell me that a group of boys had entered the school premises and had forced the girls to come out to the street. There was chaos everywhere. A procession was on the road heading towards our house and the Deputy Commissioner and many local residents were following it.

Dr. Das and I were completely stunned by the turn of events. We had no idea what sparked off such a strong public reaction or who was instigating it. At 3.00 pm Mr. Humphrey came to our house to inform Dr. Das of what had transpired. We were told that the police had to resort to a *lathi* charge in Kulidipur. Mr. Humphrey advised Dr. Das to file an FIR in the police station against the boys who had manhandled him and had thrown stones at him. But, my husband, circumspect as always, told the Deputy Commissioner that he would think over the matter. We could make out that Mr. Humphrey was not very pleased with this decision.

The matter did not end there. A telegram was sent from an anonymous source to the State Ministers and higher authorities with an exaggerated version of our misdeeds. The matter was raised in the State Assembly. Public meetings were held denouncing us and we were held responsible for all the disturbances that occurred on that day, including the *lathi* charge. For the first time in our lives, we both realised how manipulative minds could destroy reputations by misinterpreting the truth. I had always been pro active about taking immediate steps to stem the rot and told my husband, "We should give a clarification in the newspapers since so much canard is being spread against us." He consulted a few of his trusted friends and all of them dissuaded him, saying that no newspaper would come forward to publish the truth. Public opinion against us escalated and extended to the rest of Assam. In Gauhati, certain sections of people became so aggressively hostile in campaigning against us that friends even began to fear for our lives and some of them advised us to leave Gauhati for sometime.

My well wishers requested me to abstain from attending my duties in the School and the College. But I was determined not to do so because I thought that if I shirked my responsibilities at this critical moment of time, I would appear to be guilty. I stoically went on doing my job and also tried to give an authentic account of the happenings to the people I came into contact with. By now, I got to know that the entire incident was orchestrated by a certain Congress bigwig who used my public position as a tool to malign Dr. Das and destroy his promising political career. Haridas and the boys were mere pawns in a game played by shrewder and seasoned people.

Even though we weathered the crisis and our names were cleared, I always had the feeling that my sensitive husband never fully recovered from this malicious character assassination. I could only draw comfort by thinking that such a setback was fated to happen. There were no other rational explanations as to why we had to suffer as we did. I knew that there would always be lingering doubts about our role in the *lathi* charge on students that took place on December 6, 1941. I told my husband that we had to accept this unpleasant episode that had ruptured our lives as God's will. The history of mankind was crammed with examples of innocent people having to pay a heavy price for misdeeds they had never perpetrated.

We slowly recaptured the rhythm of our daily life. The Second World War had by now made its ominous impact on India and military presence in Assam became a reality. The army began to occupy the school and college buildings in Gauhati. We had no choice but to vacate both the premises for their use. I was under tremendous pressure as to how we could continue with the classes. We owned a house next to our residence which had been lying empty for sometime. The school was shifted there and two smaller houses were used as hostels for the girls.

The College was temporarily shifted to St. Mary's Convent but soon even that premise was taken over by the army. So we had

to move once again. I saw no way out and at one time thought of closing down the College permanently. But better sense again prevailed. This College was the fulfilment of a long nurtured dream. I could not give up without exhausting my last resources. I informed Mrs. Hemoprobha Das about our problem. Propitiously, she had a house which had been vacated by the tenants very recently. She instantly agreed to let the College take it on a nominal rent. The house was too small to accommodate all the classes properly. With Hemoprobha Baideu's permission, we made a few temporary rooms for the administrative staff. We now at least had a premise to operate from. With the new turn of events, my duties multiplied. I was the Principal of Handique Girls' College and the Headmistress and Secretary of Panbazar Girls' High School. I was also in charge of two school hostels. My working hours stretched endlessly.

The number of students was naturally depleted during the War years. Both the institutions functioned primarily with local students. The improvised hostels were therefore able to accommodate the limited group of boarders and also some of the teachers.

My next venture was to devote myself to the upgrading and to the overall development of the College. For that, I had to apply to the Government to make Handique Girls' College a government college. Shri Sadullah headed the Assam Ministry at that time. Assam had only two colleges worthy of mention, Cotton College and the fast growing Handique Girls' College. Both were based in Gauhati. The Government approved of our demand as we were the only girls' college in the state. In 1945, Handique Girls' College was declared a government college and another milestone was achieved.

Two years later, after Independence, Shri Gopinath Bordoloi became the Chief Minister of Assam. One of the earliest decisions taken by the new ministry was to revoke the order making Handique Girls' College a government college. I tried my best to convince various ministers that this was wrong. The Government would not be saving a huge amount of money by taking this step. All of them

were aware of the struggle that had gone into the establishment of this college and the opposition we had to overcome. But no minister spoke up for a Government Girls' College. On the other hand, adverse comments were made in the Congress Party meetings that it was unnecessary to spend money on a Girls' College with a small enrolment. In desperation, I wrote to Pandit Nehru, Shri Rajagopalachari and Dr. Rajendra Prasad about the matter, requesting their urgent intervention. I explained the sequence of events and stated how the new Congress Ministry was trying to undo the good done two years ago by the earlier ministry. I appealed for their help for the College to sustain its present status.

The reply came promptly from Pandit Nehru. He wrote to me saying that he had asked the Chief Minister for a clarification regarding the matter as it was an issue pertaining to the State Government and the Centre had no say in it. Chief Minister Bordoloi informed Panditji that if Handique Girls' College continued as a government college, its rapid growth would be hampered. Moreover, the College would find it difficult to introduce new subjects. Hence the overall progress would slow down. The State Government had therefore decided to rescind the government college status and in its place would award the College an annual developmental grant.

After receiving the Prime Minister's letter, I knew that I had lost the battle. It was futile to hope that Handique Girls' College would continue as a government college. True enough, the Government followed its decision and declared Handique Girls' College as a government aided college.

The turn of events hurt me beyond measure. The only reason why such an arbitrary decision was taken was perhaps to undermine the action of the earlier government. Such regressive mindsets did not cohere with Gandhiji's liberal views on women's education. I was at a loss thinking how Congress leaders, motivated by the ideals of Gandhiji, could indulge in acts that put a spanner in the path of true progress. Who started the College or who made it a government

college were insignificant issues. How could the stalwarts of a new India be stymied by such narrow perceptions? The Congress leaders made it abundantly clear with their actions that it was their monopoly to do good for the people. After a lot of reflection, when I realised that the progress of Handique Girls' College had been obstructed, ironically, by the inheritors of the Mahatma's legacy, I felt deeply saddened and isolated. My only recourse was to pray for strength and resilience to tide over this crushing disillusionment. Once again, I reposed faith in the will of God and went back to my duties.

By this time the War had ended and the School and College premises had been vacated. We moved back to our own campuses. Panbazar Girls High School had blossomed into a quality institution with a good student strength and an adequate number of qualified teachers. Classes were conducted in two mediums- Assamese and Bengali. The infrastructure of the School had also improved considerably with time. I, however, began to feel the burden of my dual responsibility weigh heavily on my shoulders. So, in 1947, I handed over the charge of Headmistress to my junior, Shrimati Pragya Choudhury, and took my leave from Panbazar Girls' High School.

I wanted to concentrate all my energies in improving and upgrading Handique Girls' College. I began with the construction of the College buildings and looked for new ideas that would expedite progress. Dr. Das and I also started planning for a trip abroad. I was keen to acquire a first hand knowledge of the standards of women's education in the first world countries. Dr. Das was performing complicated operations regularly and wanted to update himself about the new methods of surgery used in London hospitals.