

The Autumnal Years

In 1950, after several months of absence from our native shores, we returned home. Our three sons were now all studying in England. Our younger daughter, who had taken admission in the University of Leeds to study Political Science, decided to come back with us when she saw her father's extreme reluctance to leave her behind.

Back home, we were once again drawn into our hectic work schedules. The State elections were scheduled to place that same year and both Dr. Das and I (as a woman representative), applied for permission to contest for the State Assembly seats. But the State Congress Committee rejected our applications. They were then forwarded to the Central Election Office as per rules. At that time, representatives of the regional Asom Pradeshik Mahila Samiti had gone to Delhi to protest against the limited number of candidatures allotted to women. The Central Office re-examined the applications of the women candidates and selected me. I got to know the good news that I had been chosen to contest from Gauhati from the newspapers. Later, I received a letter from Shri Sriprakashji, the erstwhile Governor of Assam, wishing me all success in the coming elections. I had the privilege of interacting with him on several matters during his tenure as Governor of Assam.

My co-contestants from Gauhati were political stalwarts like Shri Hem Baruah, Shri Gauri Shankar Bhattacharya, Shri Jagadish Medhi, all from different political parties. I was the Congress candidate, pitted against these seasoned veterans. I lost to Shri Bhattacharya by a margin of about 120 votes.

After my short engagement with politics, I turned my attention back to education, my lifelong concern. The residents of Bharalumukh had for long felt the necessity of a high school for girls in their immediate vicinity. I decided to help them by convening a public meeting. Everyone gathered there took a unanimous decision to start a Girls' High School. Shri Kalicharan Das, the Headmaster of Sonaram High School, helped us in this venture in every possible way. The late Kamakhya Ram Barooah made a donation of Rs. 15,000. So, we decided to name the school after his father, Shri Kaliram Barooah.

The classes were started in the Bharalumukh M. E. School. Shri Balen Phukan, Secretary of the the M.E. School was made the Secretary of the High School as well. Mosfia Ahmed, a teacher of Panbazar High School, opted to join the new school and was appointed as Vice Principal. Aimana Khatoon, a Master's Degree holder, was appointed as the first Headmistress. But she left after a few months. Ms Khatoon was my neighbour and I had to drop her in the School by car at 10.00 am every morning. After she resigned, we appointed the late Holiram Deka's eldest daughter Bina Deka as the Headmistress. Holiram Deka had made substantial contributions to the School in its nascent stage, specially with the fundraising. The Government sanctioned a grant and Kaliram Barooah High School began to take shape, providing opportunities of education to many girls in that locality. These girls had to commute to Panbazar High School either by bus or on foot. The establishment of the new school put an end to these difficulties.

The T. C. Girls' School in Uzanbazar was also established around the same time as Kaliram Barooah Girls' High School. Pramila Choudhury, Dr. Das's younger sister, had donated an amount of Rs. 16,000 to open a school in her husband's name. The Chief Minister of Assam, Shri Gopinath Bordoloi took an active interest in its progress and T. C. Girls' School became the only government girls' high school in Kamrup.

1952 was a terrible year for my family at a personal level. Our eldest daughter passed away at childbirth. In spite of all our

efforts, she succumbed to death. My husband and I did not know how to deal with this devastating bereavement. As parents, we were bereft and shattered. We lost the will to continue with our work and it took us a long time to come to terms with our grief over this irreparable loss.

As time went by, duty called and I picked up the threads of normal life again. I had written three school text books earlier. Now I put my mind to writing Sahitya Path, Part IV and Part V. All these books continued as text books in schools for quite a few years. But, later, they were removed from the syllabus of school text books.

Handique Girls' College had by now become an established and recognised institution. The infrastructure had improved considerably. The enrolment had gone up to about 600 students. Most of the important Arts departments had been started, with Honours in all the subjects. The number of teachers had also increased. My abiding ambition now was to open the Science stream in the College. When the UGC extended grants to colleges, I got a chance to initiate the process of opening the Science stream. The Director of Public Instruction of Assam, Shri Suresh Chandra Rajkhowa extended all possible and timely help to the College. We began with Home Science classes. Gradually, the other Science subjects were introduced in Pre-University as well as in the Three Years Degree Course.

I felt that the College had now achieved a completeness which was missing before. To see this institution garner credibility and success as a first rate centre of education in Assam was the culmination of all my dreams and aspirations. That so much would one day be attained was at one time far beyond my imagination. My constant goal in all my life's endeavours was to change the condition of the women of Assam. That dream alone had fuelled the birth of this College. Since its inception to the present times, Handique Girls' College has had to contend with overwhelming odds. The trials and tribulations that the College has weathered triumphantly, fills me with a sense of quiet satisfaction.

Today, I feel infinitely sad when I think of all the women who lived before my time, who remained unseen, unheard, and deprived of the light of education. Their lives were spent subserviently, pandering to the needs of men. So many of them perished without ever getting a chance to voice their choices.

For the liberated women of present times who are empowered by education, the stories of their earlier counterparts and the struggles they went through, may seem implausible and far fetched. The modern woman is no longer vulnerable and helpless. Nor can she be easily fooled. Her contribution to the making of a modern India is as significant as that of any man's. I have always believed that this innate core of strength in a woman can achieve its optimum potential and power only when it is honed by education. It is India's women who can shape India's future and guide our nation along a path of progress, truth and self- realisation. It is our women who are the true nation builders because they mould and nurture our young. I am happy to say that the present day India reposes a lot of faith in its women. As for myself, I can assert with both pride and humility that I have been singularly blessed to be a part of this great process of transition that has completely transformed gender equations. It has been a wonderful privilege to have been able to witness and contribute to the revolutionary changes that have propelled our women from being docile care givers to becoming dynamic and creative participants in the forging of a new world.