

In Pursuit of Education

Overjoyed that both our parents had put their seal of approval on our venture, my sister and I first applied to Bethune School in Calcutta for admission. But we were informed that there were no vacancies for that year. So we sent our applications to Giridhi Girls' School in Bihar and were accepted. The school was comparatively new and maybe because of that we were both admitted to the classes we had applied for, after preliminary interviews.

The problems, however, were not over with our admission. Our departure would leave our mother completely alone in the Dibrugarh house. She now put pressure on our brother to get married, perhaps because she did not want to deprive us of this opportunity to study. Finally, *Kokaideu* relented. In May, 1912, after our brother's marriage was solemnised, we prepared to leave for Giridhi. We were reassured that our new sister-in-law would be company for our mother. The next step was to decide upon the escort who would accompany us girls to Giridhi.

Travelling to Calcutta in those days entailed journeys by boat and train which took almost three days. And thence we had to continue to Giridhi by train. My mother brought up the topic while talking to my eldest brother-in-law and Dr. Chaliha. She told them, "We have decided to send the girls to Giridhi and they have been admitted. But my worry now is how to send them so far without a responsible escort". Both of them were happy for us but wanted to know about my father's stand on the matter. When my mother told them that we had proceeded with our father's full support,

they offered to take a week's leave and accompany us to Giridhi. They were highly impressed with my parents' bold decision to defy the existing social constraints. They even took on the onus of finding out whether any of their friends would send their daughters with us.

Gopal Dutta, father of Captain Suren Dutta, was a close associate of my brother-in-law. He was the Managing Director of Teemon tea estate. He decided to send his daughter Saraswati with us. She was only about ten years old at that time.

The time for our departure soon arrived. The news that we were going to study so far away from home spread like wildfire. My parents' decision had shocked conservative minds. Remarks like, "Is this the time to send their daughters to study?", "Have the parents lost their minds?" circulated all over Dibrugarh town. My parents, however, refused to surrender before societal pressure. Saraswati arrived from the garden and met us at Hojai railway station. The first phase of our long journey began, thanks to two extremely supportive and intrepid gentlemen.

After reaching Calcutta, we took a train to Giridhi the same evening. We were settled in a ladies' compartment and my brother-in-law introduced us to a young woman saying, "She is Miss Hironmoyee Sen. I know her from the days when I was working in Dhubri. She is travelling with us as she is going to join your new school as the Assistant Head Mistress. I have told her to look after you. So there is no need to worry." I suddenly recollected that I had met Miss Sen before. During my short stint in Bethune School, Hiron *didi* (Bengali term for elder sister) was my senior. My cousin Hemoprobha was in First year F. A. and Hiron *didi* was in second year. She too recognized me when I jogged her memory. After a night's journey, we reached Giridhi in the morning. It was Hiron *di* who took us to the hostel.

Hiron *di* had made all arrangements for my brother-in-law and Dr. Chaliha as well. We went to have lunch at the house of a member of the School's Governing Body as the hostel would function only from that evening. His name was Sashi *Babu* as far as

I can recall. We three girls from Assam were the first occupants of the school hostel. Our escorts returned to Calcutta by the evening train after safely settling us in the hostel. We felt completely bereft when they said goodbye. Saraswati started to cry and wanted to go back with them. The two men entrusted me with the responsibility of the younger girls and told me, "You have to be strong now because it was your dream to educate yourself. We brought you here because you desperately wanted to come. There is no need to be apprehensive. Be determined to reach your goal and everything else will fall into place." I was ashamed to show my weakness but I could not control my tears as their familiar faces disappeared.

Hiron-di was a source of great comfort during those first gut-wrenching days away from home. She understood our fears and loneliness. But she admired our courage in pursuing our dreams so far away from our comfort zone. She herself was from the Lower Assam town of Dhubri. Her family had converted to the Brahmo Samaj. Hence, she and her sister, Mrinmoyee were well educated but both sisters had opted to remain single.

Giridhi, in the 1920s, had a lot of open spaces. The school campus, with the classrooms on one side and several hostels on the other, was a sprawling area. The buildings had tiled roofs. Like Dibrugarh, Giridhi also had wells for water supply and the water was excellent. *Hiron-di* was kind enough to keep us in the same hostel where she had taken up residence. But it took us some time to settle down in a completely new environment.

The three of us were interviewed and tested again and I was allowed to attend Class VIII and my sister Class VII. Saraswati was admitted to the lowest class.

After our first year at Giridhi Girls School, all of us were promoted. I secured the second position in my class. Our headmaster's daughter, Indira came first.

Summers in Giridhi were terribly windy and the shutters had to be closed during the afternoons. Everyone had to remain indoors. During this season, classes were shifted to the mornings.

My younger sister, Surabala fell ill with whooping cough. I sent a telegram home after being instructed by the school authorities. My parents panicked and immediately sent our cousin Dr. Chaliha to check on her. He came for a day and she improved considerably after taking his medicines.

Next year, we took a transfer to Bethune School, Calcutta. In 1915, I passed my Matriculation Examination in the first division. My sister did the same the following year. The Government of Assam gave me a scholarship of Rs 20. When the Headmistress called me to her office to inform me, I was pleasantly surprised because I had never applied for the scholarship. It was the Government's acknowledgement of an Assamese girl's success outside the state. My sister too was awarded the same scholarship the subsequent year.

Our new School had a very strict code of conduct. Girls were not allowed to roam around in the front verandahs overlooking the street. There were four big school buses, drawn by horses. The school had stables at the back. These buses transported girls to and from the school daily. The residents of the hostels were taken for trips to the zoo and to the famous Botanical Gardens in these buses by the teachers. Occasionally, we were taken to New Market, Calcutta's famous shopping area. But during all these activities, strict discipline was enforced.

Our life in the hostel ran on a tight schedule. The evening meal was served at 4.00 pm, as I have earlier mentioned. We came back from school and finished our dinner straightaway. After that, we could walk on the lawns or even play badminton. Sometimes, the local girls joined us in the games when their cars were late in coming to pick them up. I had a class mate named Kusum Kumari Bose. She loved to walk around with me till her bus arrived. She has remained a dear friend to this day. Our free time ended at 6 pm when the study hour began. There was always a teacher present, supervising the girls during this time. I really enjoyed my years in Bethune hostel. The teachers were affectionate and treated us kindly

because we were far away from home. We, too, took care never to flout any rules.

Back home in Dibrugarh, my securing a first division in the Matriculation Examination in such a short span of time, became a popular topic of discussion. Many sceptics had expected us to come back halfway as failures. They had thought that my parents would then learn not to defy conventions and would suffer from the consequences of sending their daughters to study outside the state. It gratified me immensely that both of us lived upto our potential and made our parents proud of us.

My mother had told me that after we left, whenever she attended a wedding or any other social occasion, she had to fend off and parry countless questions about us. The ladies pestered her because they were curious as to why our parents took such a bold step for us and what would they do if we failed in our mission. In a close-knit society like Dibrugarh, we had suddenly become objects of much speculation.

My unexpected success in the Matriculation Examination cleared the lingering doubts in the minds of many parents, regarding the education of their daughters. A few months later, Gauriprobha and Sashiprobha, daughters of Shri Gunaviram Duara were sent to Giridhi. I was happy to see that the blocks in the traditional mindsets were gradually shifting. Gauriprobha passed her Matric Examination from there and graduated from Diocesan College in about 1923. Later she joined the Dibrugarh Girls' High School as the Vice Principal. My cousin Hemoprobha was the Principal at that time. This school was established as early as 1918. Gauriprobha later got married to the late Shri Bharat Chaliha and became the Principal of the school after Hemoprobha *Baideo* retired.

When I was still studying in Calcutta, Kanaklata, daughter of late Shri Gopalpuri Bhuyan, joined our school. Shri Bhuyan served as the Diwan of the Zamindar of Jalpaiguri while his family lived in Dibrugarh. The family was closely related to us as Shri Bhuyan's wife was my father's niece, his elder sister's daughter. Shri Bhuyan

had earlier worked with the Government of Assam before taking on the post in Jalpaiguri. The increasing number of girls opting for education was a definite indication that slowly and steadily, Assamese girls were emerging out of their closeted existence and morphing into distinctive identities. And this significant change had taken place within a short span of time.

After Kanaklata joined our school, Shri Bhuyan made it a point to include my sister and me in all her outings with him. He usually took us to visit Assamese families residing in Calcutta. The late Shri Ramakanta Borkakoti, who worked as a translator in Calcutta High Court, lived with his family in the city. We were often taken to visit them. His two daughters, Sudhalata and Sukhalata studied in Bethune School and were a year senior to me.

Another family we were taken to visit was that of Colonel Sibaram Bora. Mrs. Bora was a non-Assamese and could not speak the language well. They had two daughters named Dolly and Moni and a son named Suren, who was studying medicine. I remember there was a party in the house on the day we visited them. Several young medical students were present. The sound of music filled the house. Mrs. Bora played the piano while her daughters sang. Ananda Bordoloi, a medical student from Dibrugarh sang the Brahma Sangkirtan. Another student, Kiron Sen, sang a Bengali song. It was there I first met Jyotish Chandra Das, a young medical student from Assam. Moni insisted that we sing an Assamese song and introduced us to all the young men present. But we were diffident and did not participate. Shri Bhuyan covered up for our lack of social graces by singing an English song. I felt like a total misfit in that westernised gathering. We never visited the Boras again. However, I continued to meet Moni because I studied at the Diocesan College and she attended the Diocesan School.

While I was still in Bethune School, two more Assamese girls joined the school. One was Sashiprobha, daughter of Ghanashyam Baruah of Golaghat. The other was Hemangini, daughter of Duryodhan Baruah of Jorhat.

My health suffered a setback after my Matriculation Examination. A recurring fever weakened me and my poor eyesight troubled me greatly. Everyone advised me not to appear for my Intermediate Examination. But I balked at losing a year and sat for the examination. The outcome was disappointing. Next year, I went to study in the Diocesan College and cleared my I. A. Examination securing a first division. I was once again given a scholarship of Rs. 20 by the Government of Assam. My sister, however, decided not to appear in the I. A. Examination.

When we started attending classes in Diocesan College, there were no hostel seats available. The Principal of the College was Sister Mary Victoria. We heard that she belonged to a noble family of England. She did have an impressive appearance and looked like an aristocrat even in her nun's habit. My brother Rajanikanta had come to Calcutta for our admission and though Sister fully appreciated his predicament, she expressed her regrets for not being able to accommodate us in the College hostel. She then advised *Kokaideu* to get our college admissions done and assured him that if he could arrange for us to stay elsewhere for a few weeks, she would give us top priority and bring us to the College hostel as soon as a vacancy occurred. *Kokaideu* was concerned about our safety and asked her if she knew of any good hostel. She then took the initiative to find us seats in a Mission hostel where a few other girls from the college were also staying. The distance from this hostel to the college was considerable. So our brother asked her to fix up some kind of transport for our daily commuting. Sister agreed to do that and it was decided that the charges would be added to our college fees. Sister Mary Victoria henceforth monitored our activities with vigilance, perhaps because she felt responsible for us. Everytime I met her in the college, she would wish me with a smile on her face. She realised that I was shy and always encouraged me to respond to her greeting and speak in English.

The Mission hostel we stayed in was managed by three nuns- Sister Mabel, Sister Irene and Sister Agnes. They were affectionate

and we liked the hostel and the food. Sister Irene would often call me to her room and talk to me at length about the history of the Christian faith, the greatness of Christ, and about the Holy Mother. I would listen to her silently and often wonder why she singled me out for these lectures when there were so many other girls. And, that too, when I was from a different religion. Sister Irene grew so fond of me that sometimes, even when I was playing badminton, she would come to the playground to summon me to her room.

I was never happy to be disturbed in the middle of a game with friends. But I could not voice my displeasure. Very soon, my friends started to tease me by saying that Sister perhaps wanted to convert me. One day, she called me away from the playground and started her usual spiel on the merits of Christianity, about how pure the Christian religion was and how Jesus sacrificed his life for humanity. She then told me that Hinduism was full of scandals and sinners. "Look what Krishna did with the *gopis*. How can one accept such a person as God?" Listening to her diatribe that day, I clearly understood her intentions. She must have thought of me as a very gullible and easy target for conversion. I decided to be forthright and replied, - "Sister, I am not qualified to discuss religion with you. I don't have to justify the actions of Lord Krishna to you, nor do I want to talk about Christianity. I am just a student residing in your hostel. So I do not want you to embarrass me by discussing serious matters like religion with me." I left the room immediately after uttering those words. Sister Irene assiduously avoided me after that day. For the remaining part of my stay in the hostel, I was left alone.

I don't think Sister Irene told the other Sisters about this incident because they showed no change in their attitude towards me. Sister Mabel, in fact, told me one day that she would be very happy if I took up a teaching post in Borisal Mission School after my graduation. I replied that it was still too early to make a decision about my future plans. Very soon, we moved to the College hostel, as Sister Mary Victoria managed to get two seats for us.

The food in the College hostel became a major problem for us after we shifted. Meat was the staple diet and my sister and I did not eat meat. So we had to make do with rice and *dal*. Our breakfast was a slice of bread and a cup of tea. Semolina was served as a porridge with milk and sugar but we found the cereal infested with weevils. We saw other girls eating without any fuss. But my sister and I could not bring ourselves to eat that porridge. Lunch was served at 2.00 pm and included rice, *dal*, fish or a vegetable curry. Tea and bread was served at 4.00 pm. Dinner was at 8.00 pm. A non-vegetarian soup was followed by meat curry, rice and *dal*. Sometimes cutlets were served as a variation. We often remained hungry at night because the fixed menu provided nothing for us to eat.

Sister Mary Victoria noticed that my sister and I were both losing weight. She asked a senior student to supervise our meals. The hostel dining hall had tables for four with a senior student sitting in each table. The Sister and other teachers sat apart at a high table at the end of the hall. We knew that Sister kept a strict eye on all the students. The senior in our table informed the Sister that we did not eat meat. Sister talked to us and tried to change our minds. She insisted that not eating meat would affect our health and we would suffer in the end. We did make an attempt on her insistence but failed. Sister called us again and asked for an explanation. When we told her that the very smell of meat was repugnant to us, she relented. But we knew that she was extremely annoyed with us.

Our stay in the Diocesan Hostel became intolerable because of problems regarding food. There were days when nothing else but meat curry was served and we had to starve. We were counting the days when our college education would end and we would be able to leave the hostel. Girls who were not meat eaters could not last for long in this hostel. Many other girls compromised by starting to eat meat. But my sister and I could not do so and we suffered terribly. When we went home during vacations, we could not digest home-cooked food for a few days because our bodies had become accustomed to near - starvation.

Our life in the College hostel brightened to a certain extent towards the end because of a few social events that we attended. One such occasion was the marriage of my classmate Aruna, the elder daughter of late Shri Lakshminath Bezbaruah. She lived with her uncle Justice Choudhury and attended our college. Mrs Choudhury and Mrs. Bezbaruah were sisters. I was never very close to Aruna and her Assamese affinities were not strong. We always conversed in Bengali as I did with the rest of my classmates. She also preferred to dress like a Bengali.

We passed our B. A. Examination in 1920. That same year, Aruna got married to Mr. S. B. Mukherjee. We heard that Mr. Mukerjee was the Director of the State of Baroda. I had by then taken admission in the B. Ed. course of the College and attended Aruna's wedding with friends. The ceremony was held in Jorasanko, the ancestral home of the Tagores. Shri Bezbaruah had given a special invitation to all the Assamese students studying in Calcutta. I remember, we had carried a gift for her but had forgotten to write our names on it.

The wedding pandal had separate seating for men and women. My friend Nalini Rudra, who is now Mrs. Mukherjee living in Shillong, asked me if I knew any of the Assamese boys present there. When I replied in the negative she pointed out to Dr. Jyotish Das and told me, "He is an Assamese. He has completed his MBBS and is now a house surgeon. Go and ask him for a pencil so that we can write our names and attach the card to our gift." When I refused outright, she kept on insisting, "He is an Assamese. If I ask him for a pencil, he might refuse. But he will not say no to you. Sweetie, please get me a pencil. I will go with you." I said 'No' once again and left her side. Later, I got to know that Nalini got a pencil from Dr. Das, wrote our names on the card and returned the pencil to him. She then sought me out and gave me a proper dressing down, "Why do you behave like this? Why are you so inhibited? The gentleman gave me a pencil as soon as I asked." I

remained silent because I knew my diffidence always prevented me from interacting easily with people.

Aruna's wedding was celebrated on a lavish scale. The guests were fed on the terrace and we lost count of the number of dishes served with *luchis*. All the gravies were served in individual earthen bowls. We heard people talking that there were about fifty varieties of curries served.

The bride and the groom were seated on one side of the huge terrace and certain rituals were being performed. Aruna's friends went to get introduced to the groom and chatted with him. I watched from a distance as usual. Gauriprobha Duara (later Mrs Bharat Chaliha) was still a student of our college then. She went forward to talk to Mr Mukherjee. I heard him telling her, "I am taking away the finest flower of Assam."

Many other varied activities filled our free time in College. The rules and regulations of Diocesan College hostel were not as stringent as in Bethune Hostel. Four or five girls could go out together to do their shopping. But everyone had to return by 6.00 pm.

When we were in the hostel, we were occasionally taken to the Brahmo Samaj meditation centre. The deep spirituality behind the *Shastri's* speeches never failed to impress us. We all woke up at 4.00 am uncomplainingly on the days *Shastri Moshai*, as we addressed him, delivered his sermons. On certain special days like festivals, he would end the meditation hour with a rousing speech. The hall was always packed with people who came to listen to him, and all age groups responded to him instinctively.

We also made trips to Nabobidhan Samaj and to the Cathedral Church from the hostel. In the Church, however, we found it difficult to kneel, sit or stand in the restricted space between the pews. I noticed that when men entered the church, they had to take off their hats or caps, and women had to cover their heads. Even little girls had a piece of cloth pinned to their hair. One of my Christian friends explained the interesting dichotomy in the situation to me very convincingly, "When women cover their heads in the

house of God, it shows their humility. When men enter bareheaded, it reflects their lack of pride."

The Christian priests' sermons were always dignified and meaningful. I became very fond of attending Church services. In retrospect, I like to think that the diversity in my experiences during my stay in Calcutta helped me immensely in formulating newer and maturer perspectives about life and living.

By the time I was on the verge of completing my college education, the number of Assamese students in Calcutta had increased considerably and we got to know that a club had been started for the Assamese diaspora. But my sister and I never attended a single meeting because we knew that our parents would not approve of our doing so. And we could not think of defying their wishes in such matters.