

Initiation into the Congress Mahila Sabha of Dibrugarh

Many distinguished citizens of Dibrugarh who were associated with the Congress party were imprisoned by the British in their futile attempt to stop the tide of the Nationalist Movement. At that time, I was working as the Secretary of the women's wing of the Dibrugarh Congress and was focused on spreading the message of the Mahatma. The day my brother Rajanikanta Baruah was arrested, there were no male members present in our house. Before leaving for prison, my brother had entrusted our cousin, Kanak Chandra Barooah, to look after the family. But a few days later, Kanak himself was arrested. His youngest brother, Jagneswar came to stay with us. He was younger than me and we called him Dhon at home. He was also a Congress worker.

Those were troubled days for us. I woke up one morning to find armed policemen surrounding the house. No one dared to step outside. The *Daroga*, the officer-in-charge, arrived at about 8 am and enquired about my father who was in Makum at the time. Dhon came in and told me that it would be wise for someone to talk to the officer. Otherwise, the police might initiate a search of the house, leading to untold harassment. I did not want that to happen. So I went out and told the officer that a search was not possible without the presence of my father, since he was the owner of the property, not my brother. The officer argued with me for a long time but I stood my ground. At last, he conceded defeat and left with his policemen. Later on, when my father returned, the

Daroga apprised him of the incident and told him, "Your daughter turned your saviour that day."

My father never joined the Congress. On the other hand, he had to hear a lot of criticism from his British employers because of my brother and my active involvement with the Non Cooperation Movement. He defended us by saying that, "My children are independent. If they have joined Gandhi's movement out of their own free will, who am I to stop them?" When his British superiors kept on heckling him, he retaliated by saying that he would rather not work for them if he had to suffer such covert attacks on his integrity. They later apologised and stopped him from resigning. He always remained neutral and never prevented us from working for the Congress. Our mother's sympathies and support, however, were for the nationalist movement. She never tried to hide this fact.

The Government tried its best to create problems for Gandhi's campaign. The entire country was in a turmoil. The prisons everywhere overflowed with inmates. By 1922, the whole of India was permeated with the spirit of Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement. I have mentioned before that a Government Girls' High School had been opened in Dibrugarh in 1918. But the enrolment in the higher classes was negligible. My cousin, Hemoprobha tried her best to persuade me to take up a teaching job. But the prospect of a regular job did not appeal to me at a time when the atmosphere was rife with nationalist sentiments.

In the meantime, my parents had become desperate for my marriage. I was not at all interested in personal matters at that moment of time. My focus was on how to serve my country. Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya had visited Dibrugarh around that time. He stayed in Shri Prasanna Barooah's house and a meeting was held there to felicitate him. As the only woman graduate present, I was asked to speak a few words on behalf of the assembled women. After the meeting was over, Malaviya beckoned me to come close and asked about my future plans. I candidly told him that I wanted to study further. He assured me, "I will get you a seat in Benares

Hindu University for your Masters Degree and also a job in a school with a pay of Rs. 150, so that you can support yourself."

This generous offer, however, did not meet with the approval of my family. In fact, my mother was totally against it. When Malaviyaji's telegram actually arrived with the information that a job has been found for me and I should leave for Benares immediately, I was faced with a difficult choice. I did want to study but I knew that my parents would never willingly allow me to take up the assignment. If I insisted, they would perhaps give in, but it would be under duress. My brother had just come out of jail. I somehow felt that even he would not want me to go. I was in a terrible predicament. I had to join within fifteen days of receiving the telegram. When I brought up the subject, my mother's reaction was vehement. She told me, "We cannot allow you to go far off to study or work. As it is, I am very unhappy about your attending meetings all over the place. Your father is also becoming increasingly worried. Your brother may support your activities, but we both are extremely disturbed. We are now determined to do our duty as parents. You have studied enough. Now we are thinking of getting you married." I started to weep out of sheer frustration and passionately voiced my feelings, "I am not getting married. I want to work for my country."

My mother heard me out and then calmly told me about a proposal for me that she was considering. Dr. Jyotish Chandra Das was a young doctor from Gauhati. His father was Shri Sonaram Rajmedhi, a famous lawyer who founded the Sonaram High School that exists till today. My mother had scrupulously collected all information about the prospective groom and his family. She now told me, "Before he left for England for higher studies, Dr. Das had visited us. You were in Calcutta at that time. Dr. Harikrishna Das brought him over and he even touched my feet, seeking my blessings. I was very impressed with his manners and I have asked Harikrishna to mediate on our behalf." Dr. Harikrishna Das was my cousin Hemoprobha's husband. He called my mother *Maiden*, a

shortened version of *Mamiden* as my mother was Hemoprobha's maternal uncle's wife.

I was stunned to hear what was developing without my knowledge. When I was in college in Calcutta, a girl named Swarna Bose studied in the same college. Swarna later became Mrs. Priya Ranjan Dasgupta. Dr. Das used to visit her at times. I knew that Swarna called him Jyotish *Kaka* (Bengali term for uncle). Swarna was very fond of him and she often told me that she would be very happy if I married him. I paid no attention to her and even reprimanded her one day for persisting with the matter, "Why do you harp on this subject? I have no intentions of getting married and that too, to him. I have heard Dr. Das criticise the Assamese dress often." I knew he was actually more at home in Calcutta and with the Bengali way of life, as he had done even his schooling there. His long stay in this city had made him a part of the Bengali society and culture. I personally felt that he was more Bengali than Assamese.

Swarna must have communicated what I had said to Dr. Das. I was appearing for my B.T. Examination when she told me that he was leaving for England. Just after my examination was over, I received a letter from Dr. Das which he wrote while travelling to England by sea. In a few lines, he wished me luck for the examination and also voiced his protest about my assumptions regarding his attitude towards Assam and the Assamese.

When I came home, I told my mother about the letter. She chastised me severely. My father instructed me to write to him explaining the reason behind my comments. After deliberating for quite sometime, I wrote to him apologising for my uncalled for remarks.

From that time onwards, a desultory correspondence had sprung up between us. He wrote occasionally about life in England, the education system and the natural beauty of the country. I wrote to him about the Non-Cooperation Movement and the state of our country under British rule. This exchange of letters allowed me

to get to know the person he was, to a certain extent. He had not yet joined the Congress but I felt that his sympathies were directed towards the party. But I had no inkling of any other communications he might have had with my family.

My mother was deeply affected by my stubborn stand regarding marriage. She repeatedly told me that both she and my father would not be able to die in peace if their daughters were not well settled for life. My sister Surabala had also completed her studies but, unlike me, she was not inclined towards social or political work. I gradually realised the import of my mother's words. So I sent a telegram to Malaviyaji thanking him for his concern. I expressed my inability to take up his offer and cited my mother's ill health as an excuse.

Dr. Das had returned to India in 1923 and had joined the Congress immediately. The Gaya Congress Session was held in that same year. The representatives from Dibrugarh included my brother Rajanikanta Baruah and several others. At that particular time Shri Nabin Chandra Bordoloi visited Dibrugarh for some work. He knew me from before as an active participant of the Non-Cooperation Movement. He was the son-in-law of the illustrious Malbhog Ram Barooah, Prasanna Barooah's father. All the leading Congressmen stayed at their sprawling house when they visited Dibrugarh. I had grown very close to the Barooah family in the course of my work. Shri Bordoloi came to our house to meet me and asked my brother to take me to Gaya as a woman representative. *Kokaiden* enthusiastically agreed. He was, however, unsure about my parents' reaction. Shri Bordoloi talked to my mother and was able to convince her that I should be allowed to go because to serve one's country at this decisive moment of its destiny should be regarded as a matter of great pride and privilege.