

A Female Voice at the Congress Session in Gaya

It was decided that I would travel with my brother and his associates. He made up his mind to take his ten year old son Bapdhan, (Ramesh Chandra Barooah) with us.

The Gauhati representatives included Dr. Das, along with stalwarts like Shri Tarun Ram Phookan. Shri C. R. Das had recently been elected as the Congress President. Shri Phookan and his family stayed in the President's camp because of his close personal friendship with C. R. Das. We reached Gaya, which is in Bihar, at about 10 am. The camps for men and women were far apart. *Kokaiden* dropped me off at the women's camp and went to settle down with Bapdhan. I found out that the facilities for bathing etc were most inconvenient. There was no privacy at all. I waited from 10 am to 3 pm, hoping that the crowd would lessen and I would be able to have a bath. My cousin, Jagneswar Barooah, came to check on me and when he saw my plight, he told me, "You will not be able to stay here." He went and informed my brother and Shri Lakheswar Baruah about my situation.

Lakheswar Baruah went to Tarun Ram Phookan and told him about the problems I was facing. I did not know Shri Phookan personally but his wife was our neighbour Parasuram Khound's daughter and we had played together as children. I was somewhat of a novelty in the Assamese society of our times—a woman graduate who had joined Gandhiji's movement instead of settling for domestic life. So, most people in the Congress Party had heard of me. Shri Phookan consulted his family and arranged a room for

me in their tent. I shifted my quarters at about 3:30 pm. Smti Phookan welcomed me warmly and I met their eldest daughter, Prativa. After I moved to the President's camp, my brother brought my nephew to stay with me. The living conditions in the men's camp were not congenial for the little boy.

The President's entourage camped in a big school building. Tents were put up in the compound for his friends. The Phookan family occupied one of these tents. The food was served for all in the school building.

In the camp, I met a lot of ladies whom I had met earlier during my stay in Calcutta. Some of them were with me in college. President C.R. Das's wife and daughter-in-law personally supervised our meals. The meetings were held at a venue some distance away from the camp. We could avail of the transport provided for the President's family as we lived in the same camp. We were also given front seats in the meetings. I clearly remember listening to the stirring speeches of Shri Rajagopalachari with rapt attention.

Dr. Das must have probably talked about me to Shri Phookan whom he regarded as a mentor and good friend. He shared a warm relationship with the Phookan family as well. One day, while we were in Gaya, Shri Phookan talked to me privately. He said, "I want to ask you something very personal if you grant me permission. And I have full faith that you will give me an honest reply." Without waiting for my response, he continued, "I know that you and the doctor know each other. He has just returned from England. How do you feel about him? If your family does not raise any objections, we would like both of you to get married here in Gaya. The doctor's old father may never agree to this marriage because most people from Kamrup consider people from Upper Assam to be Ahoms. The doctor has told me that his family will strongly oppose this match."

Shri Phookan's frank attitude embarrassed me but I was very clear about my reservations regarding the matter. I wondered how one could think of getting married while coming to attend a

Congress session and how could someone with Shri Phookan's experience and sagacity even broach such an issue before me. I maintained a diplomatic silence although I knew that he was displeased with me for being non-committal. He later asked the same question to my brother. My brother's answer was predictable. The marriage will not be held in Gaya. If anything worked out at all, it had to be from Dibrugarh.

Dr. Das personally met my brother with a proposal of marriage. He wanted the ceremony to be held as soon as possible as there was a possibility of his going back to England. My brother filled me in with all the details on our journey back to Dibrugarh. He had formed a very high opinion of Dr. Das. He now wanted to know my mind and was apprehensive that I might stick to my earlier decision of remaining single.

I now began to take the matter of marriage seriously. It seemed to me that there was no escape. If I had to get married, Dr. Das seemed to me to be my best option. I admired him as a person. The courtesies he maintained throughout our correspondence, his refined ways of getting to know me, had touched my heart. He had no support from his own family and perhaps this was why he had solicited Shri Phookan's help to talk to me.

After we returned from Gaya, my parents were informed of the developments by my brother. They were already interested in this match. Now *Kokaideu* joined forces with them. At one time my brother had wanted me to work for the country. He had even told my mother once that he would be happy if she did not insist on my getting married although he would never interfere with our parents' decisions. Surprisingly, after meeting Dr. Das, he actively advocated my getting married to him.

A few days later, Dr. Das's father wrote to my father, sending a formal proposal. I got to know later that it was only with Shri Phookan's persuasion that the old man relented. When Shri Phookan told him that we belonged to the distinguished Ishwar Prasad Baruah's family from North Gauhati, he verified it and finally gave his consent

to an early wedding. Dr. Das decided to have the marriage solemnised in Dibrugarh, with his friends helping him. He had to make all the arrangements himself, and he inevitably turned to Shri Phookan for guidance. Shri Phookan and Shri Kamakhya Ram Barooah came over to Dibrugarh to oversee all the preparations. Marriages between families from Upper and Lower Assam were rare in those days. The language itself, with the differences in articulation, acted as a major deterrent.

At the time I got married, Assamese bridal wear comprised of heavy *xingkhap riha* and *mekhela-sador* (the three piece Assamese traditional dress) woven with golden *zari*. Gandhiji's Non-Cooperation Movement had fostered a sense of austerity in me. I, therefore opted to wear a *Muga riha* and *mekhela* and a *sador* made of *paat*, patterned with *muga* thread instead of the traditional *zari*. My unusual attire created quite a stir among the ladies because, as usual, I refused to conform to convention.