Assam’s contribution to the freedom struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi was second to none. The leadership and the people plunged into the movement whole-heartedly. The movement also was instrumental in bringing forth leaders of high stature and calibre. A galaxy of eminent personalities were at the helm of affairs of the freedom movement in Assam. The names that come to mind are Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Tarun Ram Phookan, Dr. Harikrishna Das, Gopinath Bordoloi, Dr. Bhupaneswar Baruah, Shrimati Amalprova Das, Shrimati Pushalata Das, Shri Omeo Kumar Das, Shri Bimala Prasad Chaliha, and quite a few others. Realizing the spirit and the leadership of the people of Assam, Mahatma Gandhi visited Assam four times in all. Such was his attachment to Assam.

Assam also was in the forefront in Gandhiji’s programme of propagation of khadi. This work meant promoting spinning and weaving in all corners of the State. The nonagenarian author of this article, Shri Kamakhya Prasad Das was a pioneer in the Khadi movement in Assam. He tells us in this article about most of the major developments which took place in Assam in the field of Khadi. An interesting major initiative of Assam about which very few are aware today was the construction of a huge pandal for the annual session of the Indian National Congress in 1926. The entire pandal was constructed out of khadi produced in the villages of Assam with great enthusiasm and excellent organizational skill. This initiative of Assam set the trend and thereafter during all the future annual sessions of Congress, the pandals were constructed out of khadi. Shri Das tells us the main details about this interesting story in his present article.

We would also like to draw attention to another special feature of Assam to which Shri Das has referred. This is very important. Unlike other parts of the country, Assam does not have a separate class of spinners and weavers. Every household produced its requirement of cloth within the four walls of the house. As food is cooked in the kitchen of every house, the cloth also used to be produced under the weaving shed or weaving corner of a house. This was a reality in all parts of Assam till the beginning of the nineteenth century. Even today, many houses in the villages have a loom each and the women of the house weave some cloth during their spare time. This good practice had started disappearing when the market was flooded with the
textiles produced in England. We learn some details in this article of the movement of boycotting foreign cloth.

To state briefly, no cloth was produced in Assam as a commodity for marketing. The future of khadi in the entire country lies in thinking seriously of this old practice and start a movement of producing khadi in every village for the consumption within the village. Gandhiji in his later days was most keen of starting such a campaign. We find a mention of such a campaign in this article. Shri Das refers to what Gandhiji prescribed soon after he was released from jail in the year 1944. This new definition of khadi was then described as *Nava Sanskaran* (New Version). The world today needs to apply its mind seriously to such a plan.

*N. Th.*

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Author

Khadi is a type of cloth that is derived from fibrous ingredients and is reeled and spun with hand. Hence cotton, eri, muga, pat, tassar, motka, etc., which are spun and weaved with hand are called khadi. The raw materials needed for the production of khadi is generally available locally. For the people of Assam, producing cloth with the locally available raw materials for daily use was a way of life even as late as the time when Gandhiji was in our midst.

In other parts of the country Gandhiji had to launch a movement to promote production of khadi, but in Assam cloth woven out of cotton, eri, muga and pat had been in use since a very long time. What needs to be understood here is that there was no commercial production of cloth in Assam. Cloth was not a commodity produced for marketing. Every household was fully self-reliant in respect of their needs for clothing. The system of spinning thread and producing cloth for self-sufficiency had always been prevalent in Assam.
Through a process of evolution, spinning and weaving of cloth has reached the present stage. The Assamese people had always been self-reliant, when it came to food and clothing. During the reign of the Ahom king Swargadeo Pratap Singha, a senior official namely Momai Tamuli Barbaruah, made it a rule for the men to make at least one basket each and for the women to spin at least one bobbin of yarn, before retiring for the night. It was customary for every Assamese family to possess a spinning wheel, a loom and a dheki (grinding apparatus). This was a part of the Assamese culture.

During times of war, there was a custom among Assamese women to give their menfolk who would participate in the war a piece of cloth known as ‘kobos kapur,’ loosely translated as armour cloth. The ‘kobos kapur’ was made by ginning, carding, spinning and weaving the cotton in a single night, and handed over to the menfolk early in the morning before seeing them off with a smile. The popular belief was that the ‘kobos kapur’ provided invincibility to its wearer and thus the victory of the menfolk was assured. All these show that Assam has always been self-sufficient in textiles. But due to maneuvering of the British rulers, the import of clothes produced in the British mills flooded the market and the custom of spinning and weaving clothes with hand gradually started fading away. Gandhiji revived this forgotten practice and re-established it in the Indian psyche.

Unlike in other parts of India, where weaving was done only by a certain class of the society, Assamese women irrespective of class or creed were adept at weaving. Weaving has been an indispensable part of the Assamese culture. In fact it was difficult for a girl to find a suitable groom, if she did not know the art of weaving. In other States, weaving is done by particular castes called ‘tanti’ or ‘julaha’. Weaving is a profession of these castes, not their culture. Whereas for the Assamese women, it was an indispensable part of culture. In the midst of their household works, the Assamese women used to make time for spinning. The custom of the women of a neighbourhood, sitting together, for a fixed time everyday and spinning collectively is called ‘hedari’. Young girls of a neighborhood used to gather together around sunset for two to three hours and spin. The daughters-in-law would gather together in a particular house in the wee hours, before undertaking any other household work and undertake spinning. This custom was called ‘Sorairingia hedari’. Similarly the elderly women used to spin in the evening. Almost all the female members of the family used to spin yarn with hand and weave cloth on their looms. Hence there was no dearth of clothes. The main purpose behind this spinning and weaving was to be self-sufficient in respect of the requirement of textiles in a family.

A historical record of sorts was made at the Pandu 41st session of the Indian National Congress held under the presidency of Dr. Srinivas Aiyengar in 1926, when the main pandal for the meeting was entirely made with locally available khadi cloth. All the cloth that was required to make the pandal
was supplied jointly by Krishna Nath Sarmah of Jorhat, Chandramohan Biswas of Dharamtul, Haladhar Bhuyan of Nagaon and Purna Chandra Baishnab of Topakusi. The cotton required for producing the cloth was procured from Mikir Hills (presently Karbi Anglong), and more than 10,000 yards of local khadi was produced by the villagers themselves to construct the pandal. The Pandu session was the first occasion when a pandal of a Congress session was constructed with khadi. For the purpose, the All India Spinners Association (A.I.S.A.) at the behest of Babu Rajendra Prasad had given a loan of Rs 6,000. Assam thus created a unique record as there was no precedent prior to this of the construction of the pandal of Congress session with khadi.

In 1934, Nagaon was affected by a devastating flood. Especially, the losses suffered by the western part of Nagaon (presently Morigaon district) were immense. The flood waters of Kopili had destroyed homes of thousands of people and livestock were lost. In addition to the local individuals and organizations, various voluntary organizations like the Ananda Margis distributed food items and clothing to the affected people. Social workers of Mumbai, Shrimati Amrit Kaur (not Rajkumari Amrit Kaur) along with her husband Sardar Jamiatsingh had collected clothes from businessmen in Mumbai and distributed among the flood-affected people. A group of volunteers led by Mahendra Hazariaka, an Assamese Ashramite from Abhay Ashram in Comilla, a place in East Bengal (presently Bangladesh) came to Assam to take part in the relief operations. When the situation improved, the teams from outside went away. The Abhay Ashram at Comilla was an organization that worked in the North-east for the popularization of khadi under the aegis of Akhil Bharatiya Charkha Sangh (All India Spinners Association). The Akhil Bharatiya Charkha Sangha was chaired by Mahatma Gandhi. The north-eastern branch of the Sangha was formed by including the states of Assam, Bangladesh (undivided Bengal) and Orissa. The person in charge of this branch was Annada Prasad Choudhury, who was the Finance Minister in the Prafulla Chandra Ghosh Ministry of West Bengal in independent India.

A centre was established at Raha in Nagaon as a branch of the Akhil Bharatiya Charkha Sangha to help the poor through khadi work. The late Annada Prasad Choudhury assigned the responsibility of the organization to Mahendra Nath Hazariaka, myself and his co-worker at Abhay Ashram Jnanendra Mohan Pal. Besides Raha, the sub-centres were opened at Barapujia, Charaibahi, and Borongabari, Marigaon where spinning was done on a contractual basis. Local artisans who had expertise in khadi were given the responsibility to run these centres. Mahendra Hazariaka had even given me the responsibility to produce khadi at the Roha centre. The contractual spinners at first undertook ginning and carding before spinning the yarn and weaving the cloth and depositing it at the centres. The drawback of the whole process was that the measurement of clothes and the quality could
not be controlled. Moreover, the process was time consuming also. To
improve the quality of the clothes, cotton of long staple imported from
outside the State, improved spinning wheel, wooden ‘pinjon,’ (carding
loom), etc., were provided to the artisans. In order to streamline the
process, the artisans were divided into two sections - ones who did the
spinning and the others who did the weaving, and they were paid wages in
cash. Because of the streamlining of this process, it became possible to
control quality, size and varieties as per demand of the market, to pay
wages to the spinners and weavers regularly. Workers were also given
training on advanced techniques of spinning and weaving. It has been
mentioned earlier that clothes that are produced by spinning and weaving
locally available raw materials, is called khadi. Hence, Assam’s Eri, Muga
and Pat also fall in the category of khadi. Therefore, centres were opened
at Rampur, Barama, Tamulpur, Khatikusi and Sualkuchi in Kamrup District
and in Upper Assam’s Nakatoni, Bokota of Sivasagar District, for the
development of khadi related activities. Being satisfied with the progress of
work at these centres, the Akhil Bharatiya Charkha Sangh declared Assam as
an independent branch and appointed late Bimala Prasad Chaliha as the
secretary of the Assam branch. With late Chaliha at the helm of affairs in
Upper Assam, and Mahendra Hazarika in lower Assam, khadi revolution in
Assam bloomed slowly but steadily. In Upper Assam, along with late Chaliha,
late Krishna Nath Sarmah, the devoted Gandhian, freedom fighter and
experienced social worker of Jorhat, also established centres and produced
khadi. In this way, khadi work in Assam began in an organized commercial
way and has reached the present stage.

Tools and equipments: The Assamese people had been using traditional
cane and wooden spinning wheels. But now many advanced spinning wheels
like Madhubani Charakha, Kisan Charakha, Box Charakha (Yervada Chakra)
and Ambar Charakha have been discovered. Similarly in the case of
weaving, fly shuttle loom, automatic winding loom and such other types of
advanced looms are being used. The use of these advanced equipments has
enabled the weavers to increase productivity and thereby their income.
Late Bimala Prasad Chaliha was an all out, devoted Gandhian. Mahatma
Gandhi had established a Research Centre at Maganwadi in Wardha for the
development and diversification of khadi works. Therein he had done
various research works on the charkha and other tools and equipments and
had also discovered different types of charkha, etc. Late Chaliha too used
his intellect and invented a spinning wheel to spin cotton yarn. Chaliha had
shown his spinning wheel to Gandhiji, when the latter visited Assam in
1934. After observing the spinning wheel, Gandhiji did not utter any
comment. He simply advised Chalihaji to proceed to Madhubani in Bihar to
undergo training in khadi. He asked Baba Raghav Das, who had accompanied
him, to make the necessary arrangements. Chaliha after returning to Assam
from his training at Madhubani established a residential khadi training
centre at Sivasagar Vidyapith, with a few students. I was the first student of this centre.

Gandhiji’s politics and his entry into the world of khadi: Gandhiji returned to India in 1915, after successfully conducting the Satyagraha movement in South Africa. On the advice of Gopal Krishna Gokhale of Maharashtra who was described by him as his political guru, he undertook a journey of the entire country to get a first-hand understanding of the living conditions of the people. India is mainly a country of villages, with 85 per cent of the population living in villages engaged in agriculture.

Gandhiji entered active politics only in 1920. In the Congress session held in the month of May of the same year, he spelt out his programme of non-cooperation movement. Finally at the special session of the Congress held on the 4th September under the presidency of Punjab Kesari Lala Lajpat Rai at Calcutta, after a long discussion, Gandhiji’s historic non-cooperation resolution was accepted by a huge margin of votes (1886-88). With the acceptance of this resolution, the leadership of the Congress practically rested on Gandhiji’s shoulders. Among the many items of the non-cooperation movement, boycott of foreign goods was the topmost. Gandhiji through the Congress, appealed to the people to boycott foreign goods and use locally produced goods. The topmost item of the non-cooperation movement of 1920-21, was not cooperating with the Government in all its activities and also the boycott of foreign goods. As a part of this programme, I am reminded here that even in Assam a huge heap of foreign clothes was burnt in the presence of Gandhiji in the courtyard of Deshbhakta Tarun Ram Phookan at Guwahati. Congress workers went from village to village to appeal to the people to boycott foreign goods and to spread the message of Gandhiji’s non-cooperation. In this movement, more than 30,000 Congress workers were jailed. In 1925, under the chairmanship of Gandhiji, the Akhil Bharat Charkha Sangh was constituted for the popularization of khadi. Shankar Lal Banker was its secretary. Gandhiji declared that the main weapon of the Indian freedom struggle was the charkha, i.e., khadi and compared the charkha with the sun. Just as all the planets move around with the sun at the center, similarly, if all the village industries develop around the charkha, the economic condition of the villages will improve. According to Gandhiji, khadi is not merely a piece of cloth. It is a school of thought. Even in the Constitution of the Congress party, the wearing of khadi and spinning cotton was compulsory for its active members. The tricolour of the Congress party was made with khadi and the charkha, the symbol of the village economy, was placed at the center of the white portion. Parallel to the freedom movement, Gandhiji planned to distribute 20 lakh spinning wheels in the whole of the country and asked the Congress workers to carry forward the plan. Accordingly, the Congress workers established centres in Ashram style in many parts and worked for the development of khadi. In every region, regional centres of the Charkha
Sangh were established to impart training to the spinners and weavers on the use of advanced tools and equipments. During those times, the khadi workers were also the ones who spread the message of Gandhi’s philosophy and the message of Indian freedom struggle, as they were in direct contact with the people.

The movement slowed down after Gandhiji’s arrest. Until the next stage of the movement, during the interim period, the Congress volunteers got a chance to extend their field of activity. In 1930, the second phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement began. During Gandhiji’s Dandi March to disobey the salt law, many khadi workers were imprisoned along with the Congress volunteers. Hence, khadi work got a setback and many centres were temporarily closed down.

In 1942, during the Quit India Movement, the whole country was burning. In the wee hours of 9th August, Gandhiji, Maulana Azad, Jawaharlal Nehru and other leaders were arrested and taken to unknown destinations. The Congress was declared as an unlawful body and though the Charkha Sangh was not declared unlawful, its offices were closed down along with the offices of the Congress party. Many godowns of the khadi centres were destroyed and plundered. People everywhere felt insecure because of the arrests and atrocities committed on the people. New jails were constructed to accommodate the large number of prisoners.

In 1944, Gandhiji was again released from confinement in the Aga Khan Palace due to ill health. After coming out of the prison, when he learnt of the closure of the khadi centres, he was greatly pained. He decided that the functioning of khadi activities will have to be changed. The small amount of production that was taking place was dependent on the urban areas. He thought that the khadi activity should not be dependent on any organization. Rather it should be conducted by the weavers themselves. Those places which produce khadi should also be the places which utilize khadi to maximum extent and only the surplus should be exported to other places. Gandhiji also coined a slogan: Do spin, think and understand the significance of spinning. One who spins should wear, and the one who wears should spin. In many places it was seen that clothes were available in the market which were much cheaper than the khadi. Hence, the weavers themselves wore those cheaper clothes and sold the khadi that they produced. According to Gandhiji, the weavers should themselves use the khadi produced by them and sell only the surplus.

Gandhiji also referred to living wages. He proposed the increase of wages from 3 Annas to 8 Annas per day (Rupees, Annas and Pice were the coins under use during the British regime. Sixteen Annas made one Rupee). This he thought was necessary because after working hard the whole day, the spinners should be able to manage to get their meals at least. Here Gandhiji
also changed the definition of khadi. According to the new definition, the cloth that is produced after spinning and weaving with hand, and also that which yields prescribed wages (the rate prescribed by the Charkha Sangh) will be known as khadi. This is what is known as Gandhiji’s new version of khadi. This new plan of Gandhiji was quite comprehensive. For smooth functioning and progress of the activities of the Charkha Sangha, under the advice of Gandhiji, a joint committee was formed consisting of Charkha Sangha, Gramudyog Sangh, Hindustani Talim Sangh, Go Seva Sangh and the Harijan Sevak Sangh. It was decided that the committee would sit from time to time to discuss future course of action.

After India attained her independence, the Central and State governments took interest in implementing the khadi and village industries plan to deal with the unemployment.

In 1953, the leadership of Independent India formed the Akhil Bharatiya Khadi Gramodyog Board for development of khadi and village industries. Later on, in 1957, to make the Board more powerful with more facilities, the Board was converted into the Commission. Immediately after its formation, the Commission undertook development work for khadi and some specific village industries. State boards were also constituted for the purpose.

In Assam too, the khadi and village industries ordinance was passed in the State Assembly in 1953 and the Assam Khadi and Village Industries Board was constituted. The Board was formed then under the chairmanship of Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, with different leaders and freedom fighters as members. The Director of Industries, Govt. of Assam was given the charge of the secretary of the Board. To begin with, the Board brought all the centres working under the Charkha Sangha, under its fold. Later on according to convenience and the need, the Board opened production and selling units in different parts of the State for the extension of khadi and village industries activities.

With the devotion and selfless service of the members of the board, the activities of the Khadi and Village Industries Board progressed very well. The members of the Board in their respective areas through the execution of the plans and programmes of the Khadi and Village Industries Board, enabled the poor villagers to earn decent income. The Board members also strictly monitored the quality of the produced items. Due to these efforts, the quality of the traditional Eri and Muga and cotton clothes increased many times. Once upon a time, the clothes produced in Assam had great demand and name outside. Since I was once associated with the production of khadi clothes, I have earned knowledge and experience of the different fields. Hence, one can safely say that with concerted effort, the production
of khadi under the auspices of Assam State Khadi and Village Industries Board can be revived substantially.

* Translated into English by Ms Jolly Saikia Gogoi from the original in Assamese