

“I Assisted in Preparing Lunch for Bapu”

Srimati Hema Kakoti, the Octogenarian Gandhian of Assam recalls
the Glimpses of Gandhi She was Privileged to Have

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It is truly amazing to see the manner in which Mahatma Gandhi influenced the lives of different persons in different parts of the country. This article is the story of octogenarian Gandhian social worker Hema Kakoti, who was one such person influenced by Gandhiji. The story has been created by Shri Ankur Acharya after a long interview with Hema baideu. The focus of this article is to record the reminiscences of the glimpses of the Mahatma she was fortunate enough to have. The first glimpse that she had was when she was just a small nine-year-old girl. Though young, some of the impressions she had then have remained firmly imprinted on her mind. The second glimpse was when she was a grown-up girl. There are very few persons left in Assam now who had seen or had a meeting with Mahatma or had interacted with him. Hema baideu is one of them and we are very happy to carry her impressions in this article.

Many distinguished personalities of Assam were closely associated with our freedom struggle. One of the historic Congress sessions of those days was also held in Assam in which Mahatma Gandhi participated. Similarly, a band of dedicated voluntary social workers were engaged in the programme that Mahatma Gandhi had prepared for reconstruction of India. All work and activities related to this programme were then described as ‘constructive work’. It is highly gratifying that in case of political activities related to the freedom struggle, a good number of sincere and committed selfless workers were also associated in the constructive work programme of Mahatma Gandhi.

This article makes a mention of a distinguished family of Dr Harikrishna Das, his wife Shrimati Hemaprova Das and his daughter Shrimati Amalprova Das. This family functioned as a pivot of constructive work in Assam. Late Hemaprova Das was the most active of this trio, but she expired at an early age. Her dreams were fulfilled later by her daughter Amalprova, who was universally addressed as Amalprova Baideu. The word baideu, meaning elder sister in Assamese language is now a familiar word for the Gandhian fraternity all over the country. She was no doubt a remarkable soul. For many years she was the motivating force behind the Assam State Branch of Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust. She was also instrumental in motivating a good number of Assamese men and women to engage themselves in the activities related to constructive work programme. One is also reminded here of the efficient and well-planned manner in which Bhoodan Yatra (march on foot undertaken for land-gift mission) of Acharya Vinoba Bhave in Assam was conducted under her leadership. The main character of our article, Hema Baideu was one of her life-long associates. This article carries some details.

The Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust (KGNMT) was the unofficial meeting point of all Gandhians of Assam in the past. It is heartening to note that it continues to remain so in the present times also. The two senior most workers of KGNMT, both in their eighties, are Shrimati Shakuntala Chaudhuri (Shakuntala baideu) and Shrimati Hema Kakoti (Hema baideu). Ishani has already carried an article on Shakuntala baideu in the past. It makes us very happy that we are also able to tell our readers about Hema baideu in our present issue. These celibate sisters in their eighties are the pride of Assam, nay the entire country. May all of us be blessed with the company of both these sisters till they complete their century!

It was the year 1934. The place: Charing village, of Sivasagar district in Assam. A little girl of 9 years was standing in a queue along with her schoolmates with bated breath. Bapu, the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi was going to come to their village. Gandhiji came, walked by the queue and gave a light tap on the heads of the little girls in the queue as he walked along. The little girl of our story doesn’t remember whether she too received a pat on her head from Gandhiji! But she did have his *Darshan* from close quarters, while her grandmother was removing her earrings to donate to Gandhiji’s collection for Harijan Welfare. Perhaps Gandhiji’s *Darshan* awakened in the little girl’s mind a desire to follow in his footsteps, unknown even to her. Years later this girl even assisted an elder in preparing lunch for Gandhiji and received praise and blessings from Bapu for her service. All members of her family were Congress supporters. This background perhaps accounts for how this little girl from Sivasagar grew to become a steadfast follower of Gandhiji in later years. The girl

under reference is Hemaprova Kakoti, known popularly as Hema Baideu, who at 83 is one of the two oldest inmates of Sarania Ashram, at Guwahati.

Hema Baideu had just passed her M.E. examination in 1940, when the legendary Jyotiprasad Agarwalla, accompanied by Dr Harikrishna Das with his wife Hemaprova Das and daughter Amalprova Das visited Charing village near Sivasagar town. Hema Baideu was greatly impressed by their presence. Her family members were already devout Congress followers. During the 1940 individual Satyagraha organized by Gandhiji, the grandmother of Hemaprova Baideu was arrested for taking active part in this satyagraha. About the same time, her elder brother Chikan Kakoti was falsely charged with murder as a result of which he had to go underground. All this meant that the family responsibility rested on Hema Baideu, who was the second eldest among the nine children in the family (1 son, 4 daughters by first wife of Hema Baideu's father, and 3 sons, 1 daughter by his second wife). A little later, at the instance and inspiration of Amalprova Baideu and the blessings and encouragement of her mother, who was 44 then, Hema Baideu resolved to follow the path shown by Gandhiji. The year was 1945. The place she came to was the now famous Sarania Ashram of Guwahati.



A word about the Sarania Ashram is due here. It is situated in Guwahati and has the quiet atmosphere of a hermitage. The Assam Provincial Kasturba Gram Sevika Vidyalaya and Assam Provincial Office of the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust are situated here. It is popularly known as 'Sarania Ashram'. The Sarania Ashram was started on a plot of land measuring 32 bighas donated by Dr Harikrishna Das, the noted freedom fighter and father of Amalprova Das. The story behind this beginning is as follows.

Dr Harikrishna Das was greatly attracted towards Gandhiji's constructive work programme. His wife Hemaprova Das was already an active constructive worker herself and she was working for the advancement of women's education. She established the Dibrugarh Girl's High School and decided as far back as 1939 to engage herself in constructive work on Gandhian lines. She went with her daughter Amalprova to Maganwadi in Wardha in 1939 and received three months training in oil pressing, bee-keeping, paper-making, etc.

After returning to Assam, they started all these three cottage industries in Sarania. Srimati Hemaprova Das and her husband Dr Harikrishna Das were eager to start a permanent constructive work-centre there. So they picked up some widows and started a weaving centre along with the cottage industries. She wanted to make the institution self-reliant. Her idea

was to take up Endi, Muga and Silk production to become self reliant. The 1942 Quit India Movement, however, intervened leading to a halt.

In the year 1944, on the 22nd of February, Rashtra Mata Kasturba Gandhi died under detention in Poona's Aga Khan Palace. Reflecting on this loss, the senior leaders like Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and Thakkar Bapa conceived a plan to commemorate the life of Kasturba and launched a nationwide drive to collect donations. Hemaprova Das also took active part in the work of collecting funds for the Trust. But before she could fulfil the dream she had conceived earlier, she died in January 1945. It was her daughter Amalprova Das who along with Gopinath Bordoloi took upon themselves to carry forward her unfulfilled dreams.

Gandhiji entrusted the Kasturba Trust's work in Assam to Amalprova Baideu. The HQ of the Trust in Assam, at Sarania in Guwahati had the great honour of having been inaugurated by Gandhiji himself in January 1946. A little after the inauguration of the Assam Branch of the Trust, Amalprova Baideu went to Sevagram to seek guidance from Gandhiji. Gandhiji was impressed by the spirit of Amalprova Baideu. Hema Baideu remembers Gandhiji remarking to someone about her that, "The girl is clever in her work".

The main quarter at Sarania was constructed as early as 1928. Though financial assistance was offered from time to time to enlarge that house, Hema Baideu and her colleagues have politely declined these offers as Amalprova Baideu, their mentor and their source of inspiration had instructed them, "don't construct a big quarter. You will function better staying in a small house."

To return back to our main story, Hema Baideu was asked by Amalprova Baideu whether she would like to complete her matriculation. Hema Baideu replied that she had no urge as such and if Amal Baideu would guide her, she would be satisfied. Amalprova Baideu, herself a meritorious Post-Graduate in Chemistry, promised to teach her all that she knew and she kept her word. During the period 1945-48, Amalprova Baideu taught her daily for some time. She also taught her to translate Gandhiji's writings from English to Assamese.

Hema Baideu's grandmother expired in the year 1955 aged 93 years, while her father died in 1978 aged 85 years. She herself is maintaining good health now at 83 years and her memory is quite good. On the 21st January, 2003, she was awarded the Diwaliben Award 2002 at Bombay, which she accepted on behalf of the Assam Branch of the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust (KGNMT). Her reason for accepting the award was that it carried with it a sum of 3 lakh rupees which would be invaluable in furthering the work of the Assam Branch of the KGNMT.

When asked about her recollection of Gandhiji's visit to Sarania Ashram for three days (Arrived in the evening of the 9th January and left on the 12th) in 1946, Baideu reminisced, "Gandhiji woke up at 3.30 a.m. At 4 a.m., there was prayer. Then he took goat's milk and fruits. At 5.30 a.m., he went for a walk nearby. At 12 noon, he ate boiled vegetable like *paleng*, along with Khajur (dates) using a wooden spoon. Later in the afternoon he used to spin on Charkha sitting under a Neem tree*. He had trained himself to spin with both hands because if one hand felt tired he used to switch over to the other hand."

Gandhiji had his bath with tepid water. He did not use soap but used earth to smear on the body and clean it. There was problem regarding quality of water as it became muddy on boiling due to high iron content in it. After undertaking different other trials, water was ultimately brought from some other place. At 4.30 p.m., prayer meeting used to be held at Jubilee Park in Pan-bazaar where the water treatment plant stands at present.

Once it so happened that some members of Gandhiji's entourage like Prabhavati ji (wife of Jayaprakash Narayan) and Abha Gandhi (Wife of Kanu Gandhi) went to Shillong. Hence Amalprova Baideu's elder sister, Tilottama Roychowdhary assisted by Hema Baideu was entrusted with the task of warming up the already prepared lunch and serving it to Bapu. After he had his lunch, Gandhiji inquired as to who had arranged and served the meal. On getting to know, he called the persons concerned, i.e., Tilottama Baideu and Hema Baideu

and praised them in Hindi saying, "It was very good, it was very good." Hearing the praise, Hema Baideu and others bowed offering Pranam to him and he in turn blessed them.

When asked about her impressions regarding Gandhiji, Hema Baideu remarked, "How does one describe such an extraordinary personality! I, however, might say that he looked glowing red and fair in complexion. The eyes were especially appealing and captivating. Mere sight of him led to overflow of devotion from one's heart."

Baideu particularly recalled two incidents related to this visit of Gandhiji. The first concerns Ramakrishna Bajaj, Jammalal Bajaj's son. Once it so happened that the afternoon meal was not ready in time. The men kept on enquiring, "Sisters, is the meal ready?" Baideu sought to go to some other part of the Ashram hiding from their gaze, but Ramakrishna Bajaj spotted her and asked loudly in Hindi, "Sister, is the meal ready?" Not knowing Hindi, Baideu gestured with her hands to indicate that it was not ready, even as she disappeared from view. Years later, Ramakrishna Bajaj would remind her, "Do you remember how I teased you?" The second incident concerns Pyarelal ji, secretary to Gandhiji. Pyarelal ji used only a certain kind of lamp while writing. Exactly similar lamp was used by Amalprova Baideu. Once, it so happened that somebody had placed Pyarelal ji's lamp on the verandah. Seeing it, Hema Baideu thought it to be Amalprova Baideu's lamp and hence took it and placed it at a safe place somewhere. Soon there was an uproar in the camp. Pyarelal ji was missing his lamp and was upset. Ultimately, Amalprova Baideu asked Hema Baideu in the course of inquiries whether she had taken that kind of lamp from the verandah. Matters soon got sorted out and Hema Baideu was told by Amalprova Baideu to apologize to Pyarelal ji in Hindi while returning his lamp to him. When Hema Baideu handed over the lamp to Pyarelal ji, he was so overjoyed that he most probably didn't hear the rehearsed speech of apology uttered by Hema Baideu in a hurry. He patted Baideu on her shoulder and peace returned to the camp!

When Baideu was asked what had inspired her most in Gandhiji's teachings, she replied, "The *Ekadasa vrata* or the eleven vows. If we observe the 11 vows evolved by Gandhiji, we will find fulfilment. The 11 vows are –

- Ahimsa (non-violence),
- Satya (Truthfulness),
- Asteya (non-stealing),
- Brahmacharya (continence and keeping the mind on God),
- Asangraha (non-possession),
- Sarira Shrama (physical labour),
- Aswad (control of the palate),
- Sarvatra Bhaya Varjana (fearlessness),
- Sarva-Dharma-Samanatva (equal respect for all religions),
- Swadeshi (using products produced in one's own neighborhood),
- Sparsha-Bhavana (eschewing untouchability).

I myself have been able to observe only a few." Here Hema Baideu recalled that when Amalprova Baideu was offered the Padmashree Award during the time of Jawaharlal Nehru, she graciously declined to accept the same in a letter to Jawaharlal Nehru, wherein she stated that her ego may be inflated on receiving such an honor and it may stand in the way of the path of service that she had adopted. Jawaharlal Nehru was so impressed that he described her as the epitome of humility.

It may be mentioned here that the main emphasis at Sarania Ashram is on fearlessness, self-reliance and good health. The 11 vows enunciated by Gandhiji are in fact the guiding principles emphasized for every one to follow; the trainer, the trainees and the field worker.

When asked about the distinguished visitors who had visited the Ashram and who were legion, she recalled some names. She mentioned Vinoba ji, Jayaprakash Narayan, Acharya

Kripalini, Aruna Asaf Ali, Gopabandhu Choudhury, Nabakrushna Choudhuri, Rajendra Prasad, Kakasaheb Kalelkar, Sushila Nair, Ravindra Verma, Thakkar Bapa, and others.

Finally, Baideu said on her own that looking at the violence-filled atmosphere of today, she feels that Gandhiji's way is the only way to peace. This conviction perhaps explains what sustains her or makes her tick, after all these decades as a lifelong, unmarried Gandhian soldier.

* This Neem tree stands intact till today. The Sarania sisters have placed a seat below the tree to mark the spot.

(This article is based on an interview with Srijuta Hemaprova Kakoti that was initially conducted in 2006, at Sarania Ashram, Guwahati. It was, however, shown to her during the past month and edited wherever necessary as suggested by her.)