

Gandhiana

Recalling my Glimpse of Gandhi

“Gandhi Raja”, Kamakhya Das and Khadi

Ankur Acharya

Kamakhya Prasad Das is one of the handful of surviving citizens of Assam who had the privilege of having seen Gandhiji personally. Blessed with good health, the nonagenarian Kamakhya Prasad Das, a freedom fighter, continues to remain active. He is normally present on all occasions and events related to Mahatma Gandhi at Guwahati. He was more fortunate as he also had an occasion or two to briefly interact with Gandhiji.

As we have mentioned in our comments section, Ishani looks forward to contact as many individuals in the northeast as possible who had seen Gandhi. Recollections of their experience of having seen or met Gandhi are bound to prove of interest as the majority of people today have only heard of Gandhi or have read about Gandhi. Shri Kamakhya Prasad Das was the first person who was approached by Ishani to record his memoirs briefly. We are very happy to present this account in our first issue of the resumed Ishani.

In case of Shri Kamakhya Prasad Das, he has continued to work throughout his life in the field of khadi. Khadi is one of the most important items in constructive programme that Mahatma has designed for the reconstruction of India.

The year was 1926. The young boy of 8 years was determined to have a darshan of Gandhi Raja or King Gandhi, for such was the conception of Gandhi in the young boy's mind as well as of the people of his village. The boy did have his darshan and he was disappointed, even unable to recognize Gandhi at first sight. Disappointed not due to any lack in the Mahatma's personality but because Gandhiji did not match his mental image of him. The boy in question was the now octogenarian Kamakhya Prasad Das.

Shri Kamakhya Prasad Das was born on April 8, 1918 in a village 3 miles away from Palasbari town of Assam. His mother as well as father's sister took active part in the freedom struggle from the year 1921 onwards. The general conception in the minds of the people of his village was that Gandhiji was a king, even an incarnation of God, who was going to drive away the English king from the country and then rule it himself dispelling the woes and miseries of the common people. So when Gandhiji visited Assam in 1926, young Kamakhya Prasad approached his uncle studying in Cotton College to take him to Gandhiji's camp at Pandu on the outskirts of Guwahati.



A huge crowd was waiting to have Gandhiji's darshan when Kamakhya Prasad and his uncle reached Pandu. Being a small boy, Kamakhya Prasad managed to wriggle his way to the front of the crowd. A car came and everybody started cheering, but Gandhiji was not there. The car carried Md. Ali and Shaukat Ali, who were good looking gentlemen. Then a second car came. Kamakhya Prasad got up on the

footboard of the car and saw Gandhiji and with him Thakkar Bapa seated on a *moorha* or low wooden stool. Kamakhya Prasad, however, could not recognize Gandhiji as his mental picture of Gandhiji was something entirely different from what Gandhiji was in reality. When his uncle enquired whether he saw Gandhiji, Kamakhya Prasad asked for a description of Gandhiji. Unwilling to believe what he heard, he had his uncle buy him a photo of Gandhiji and that finally convinced him, though to be honest, he was disappointed.

In 1930, when the Cunningham Circular was issued in Assam, many boys and girls left school in protest. Sri Kamakhya Prasad also left school and joined the Civil Disobedience Movement. He was also imprisoned in 1931 due to this and again in 1932 and 1934. In 1934 he joined the National or Jatiya School – Sivasagar Vidyapeeth. While he was a student at this school, Gandhiji came to Sivasagar in the month of April, 1934 on Harijan tour. It so happened that the school was established in the land of Bimala Chaliha's eldest brother. Gandhiji stayed at the house of the elder brother where four boys from the school were selected to attend on Gandhiji. Kamakhya Prasad got the opportunity to come in close contact with Gandhiji during this period as he got the scope to serve the Mahatma for several days. Gandhiji was in the habit of saying things with humour now and then. Sri Kamakhya Prasad Das sometimes used to sing 'Borgeet' or the compositions of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, the great Vaishnavite saints of Assam, before Gandhiji. Gandhiji used to appreciate his singing saying, "Very good" and prod him to sing again another day. Whenever he had time at his disposal, Gandhiji used to play sometimes with the two to three year-old daughter of Tara Prasad Chaliha, who was later to wed Bipin Pal Das.

In 1940, during the Raigarh session of the Indian National Congress in Bihar, Kamakhya Prasad heard Gandhiji's speech at that meeting. After the convention, he went with a friend to Gujarat to see Sabarmati Ashram at Ahmedabad. There he was keen to see the innovative oil-pressing machine manufactured by Jhaverbhai Patel after observing the different models available across the country at that time. From there Kamakhya Prasad went to Wardha in Maharashtra. In Sevagram at Wardha, he took part in the morning and evening prayers. During the evening walks of Bapu, he had some ordinary conversation with him. When Gandhiji learned that Kamakhya Prasad Das was a worker of the Assam branch of the Akhil Bharat Charkha Sangha, he asked him many questions about the progress of works related to Khadi in Assam. He also enquired about Eri and Muga production process. Kamakhya Prasad said that Eri, Muga production has been going on in Assam since long time back.

Kamakhya Prasad Das was in Sevagram for many days. As he was staying with Abha Gandhi's elder brother Dhiren, he got the scope of engaging in homely conversation with Gandhiji.

Kamakhya Prasad was jailed once again in 1942 at Tezpur Jail, the largest jail in Assam, which was known as a 'B' class jail. There the political prisoners were separated from the criminal ones. Asked about his experience there, Kamakhya Prasad remarked that it was much better than his previous experience in jail. However, there was one irritant. They were served meals in a copper vessel. This vessel if not dried quickly after washing caught rust very soon. This was a form of punishment. The criminal prisoners often helped them in this regard by washing their vessels or anointing them with mustard oil. The prisoners were given potato, different types of vegetables, dal (pulses), rice, all given in fixed quantity from the godown. The prisoners collected their rations from the godown or storehouse themselves and hence could not be cheated. Since they did not consume the amount of rice allotted to them, they stored it and thus the political prisoners of Tezpur Jail were able to donate 1950 kg of rice to those afflicted in the 1943 Bengal famine. At first the political prisoners were unwilling to don the jail kit or dress. But Kamakhya Prasad initiated it and others followed suit. His reasoning was that his own clothes would get worn out and then who would give him new clothes? So better to utilize the jail kit. Due to voicing their grievances, conditions in jail gradually improved. Kamakhya Prasad was in jail till 1945. When asked if they maintained contact with the outside world during this period, Kamakhya Prasad replied that the Warden was favourably inclined towards political prisoners and helped and sympathized with them. Thus contact with others could be established.

When asked about the condition of Assam during the World War II, he said there were lots of foreign soldiers mainly from Canada and the United States so the economy got a boost with small notes being in excess. This was stated briefly and beautifully by a visitor to the jail who stated that the leaves from the trees become converted to currency notes on touching the ground! Thus the common people earned some money.

When Kamakhya Prasad was released from jail he was curious to learn about the military camps. A military contractor took him to a military SDO who took him around the camps. Kamakhya Prasad observed a note of despair and a lack of enthusiasm towards their duty among the camp soldiers. As observed by him during 1939-42, the common people suffered a lot due to the war, for Assam had become a war zone. Guwahati had to be evacuated. There was beating and looting in several places like Nagaon. Though there were no atrocities on women as such, free movement was barred due to the soldiers' movement and some teasing and bantering of girls by the soldiers did take place.

In 1946, at Sarania Ashram, in Guwahati, Kamakhya Prasad stayed in the camp there during Gandhiji's brief stay of some days. He took part in Gandhiji's morning walks and in his Jubilee Park meetings at the place where the water works at Panbazar, at Guwahati is now located.

When asked about the influence Gandhiji had on his life, Kamakhya Prasad said the influence had been on little things in life, which, however, were important. Exercising economy in daily life was a favourite dictum of Gandhiji. He did not throw away the twig used in brushing but collected them for use as fuel. Gandhiji laid stress on life's conduct. Gandhiji never bought handkerchiefs. He made them from old torn shirts. By the way, Kamakhya Prasad said that from the time the Assamese wore clothes, they used Khadi (Eri, Muga included in Khadi). We should also wear khadi only. Fine khadi can be used. "Those who wear (khadi) should spin, those who spin should wear khadi." Kamakhya Prasad Das said that Gandhiji influenced us for improvement in our life. He further said that Gandhiji's ideals do fall in place with today's times. Today, the mental tendency of earning wealth without toil is the cause of our ruin. Gandhiji was of the opinion that gap between producers and consumers must be lessened.

When asked about the eminent personalities other than Gandhiji that he had met, he mentioned the names of Bimala Chaliha, Mohendra Hazarika and BK Bhandari among others. Bimala Chaliha of course became the Chief Minister of Assam. Mohendra Hazarika had great contribution towards the khadi movement in Assam being himself based in Nagaon. BK Bhandari, who was from the South, worked a lot for Harijan welfare establishing the Harijan Sangha at Barama near Nalbari. Here tribals like the Boros were greatly benefited. BK Bhandari did not shy from any work. At the Ashram, he, for example, learnt about potato cultivation from the cultivators and then he himself undertook potato cultivation. His son Mohan Bhandari was to become the CEO of Oil India in Assam. By the way, Kamakhya Prasad Das has great regard for Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda whose ideals, according to him, has helped many a youth choose their path.

At 89 plus, Kamakhya Prasad is keeping well with his looks and gait hardly betraying his age. It was a nice experience to be with him for nearly two hours of the interview.

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(Based on an interview with Sri Kamakhya Prasad Das at his home in Guwahati)
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Work and its Secrets

One of the greatest lessons I have learnt in my life is to pay as much attention to the means of work as to its end. He was a great man from whom I learnt it, and his own life was a practical demonstration of this great principle. I have been always learning great lessons from that one principle, and it appears to me that all the secret of life is there; to pay as much attention to means as to the end. Our great defect in life is that we are so much drawn to the ideal, the goal is so much more enchanting so much more alluring, so

much bigger in our mental horizon, that we lose sight of the details altogether. But whenever failure comes, if we analyze it critically, in ninety nine per cent of cases we shall find that it was because we did not pay attention to the means. Proper attention to the finishing, strengthening of the means is what we need. With the means all right, the end must come. We forget that it is the cause that produces the effect; the effect cannot come by itself; and unless the causes are exact, proper, and powerful, the effect will not be produced. Once the ideal is chosen and the means determined, we may almost let go of the ideal, because we are sure it will be there, there is no more difficulty about the effect. The effect is bound to come. If we take care of the cause, the effect will take care of itself. The realization of the ideal is the effect. The means are the cause: attention to the means, therefore, is the great secret of life. We also read this in the *Gita* and learn that we have to work, constantly work with all our power; to put our whole mind in the work. Whatever it be, that we are doing. At the same time, we must not be attached. That is to say, we must not be drawn away from the work by anything else; still, we must be able to quit the work whenever we like. — Swami Vivekananda.

Excerpted from *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*