

Kameshwar Das: The Lotus in the Muddy Pond

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Over a hundred years back, in the year 1901, a little boy took admission into a primary school located at Hagurigaon (Harihar Gaon) near Pathsala district in Assam. It would be wrong to say he took admission. Rather, a noble teacher of that school admitted him into the same.

The son of Banahu and Ratipriya of Pathsala's neighbouring village Bamakhata, Kamo used to graze other people's cattle in the fields and earned a minimal bonus in return. The primary school seemed to pull Kamo towards it like a magnet. But, no doubt, he was too low on funds to even dream of going to school. Thus, he had to silently kill his desire and get on with his life.

Kamo would let loose the cows in the field and, taking a stick in his hand, stand outside the classroom and listened attentively to the teacher giving lessons to the class. One day, while the teacher was teaching his class, he asked a question. Nobody could give the correct answer. There was pin drop silence in the classroom. And suddenly, out of nowhere, to everybody's surprise, breaking the silence; Kamo who had been sitting outside the room, came up with the correct answer. The head master, Santaram Chaudhury felt pity for the poor, support less boy and went on to persuade the mother of the fatherless child to let him study. The poor mother was crestfallen. She would lose her only source of income. Every other day, the family would have to go without food. Santaram Chaudhury wasn't going to give up either. He kept persuading, till Kamo's mother finally agreed. He was admitted to the school. As per the deal with the mother, Mr. Chaudhury agreed to keep roving regularly the money that Kamo would have earned as wages working as a cowherd.

Kamo's named was changed to Kameshwar Das. His father Banahu was renamed as Baneshwar Das. Date of birth? Comparing his age with students older and younger to him, Kameshwar's birth date was fixed to be on 1st March, 1893.

The headmaster, amazed at the boy's brilliance, gave him a double promotion in class and eventually in 1903, along with a scholarship, Kamo passed out of Primary school. Santaram Chaudhury again admitted him to another school and not only paid his fees, but also let him stay at his place. Once again, in 1905, Kameshwar passed his M.E examination with full scholarship. With the blessings of his respected mentors Santaram Chaudhury, Paramananda Datta Chaudhury and Chandrapandit of Bamkhata, in the year 1906, Kameshwar took admission in Barpeta High School. The Maujadar of Bijani, Pushparam Chaudhury offered some financial help. And finally in 1911, Kameshwar passed his matriculation exams from Calcutta University with more than 80% marks in several subjects. In 1913, he passed out from Cotton College with 1st Division marks (16th position) in the ISC examination and in 1915, graduated from Dhaka with honours in Mathematics, securing the first class first position. Kameshwar was the first ever Assamese student to secure the first class first position in M.Sc in Mathematics. Here, it should also be mentioned that in his matriculation exam as well, Kameshwar had secured the 2nd position in the state; Banikanta Kakati had stood first.

Kameshwar Das was a student member of the Calcutta Mathematical Society. He was the most loved student of the University Vice Chancellor, prominent mathematician Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay. After the M.Sc results were out V.C Mukhopadhyay had written to the Govt. of Assam to grant Kameshwar a scholarship for a year, to which the Govt. of Assam agreed. Kameshwar started to do research work under the supervision of Hardings Professor Dr. C.E Cullis in the University. He had also published a research paper during this period. However his research work remained incomplete because the scholarship stopped coming. He was also selected as a Mathematics lecturer in Calcutta University. However, the appointment letter arrived late, and due to the delay, Mohit Ghosh who got the second position, was given appointment. He even got offers from Mahishur College and Rangoon College, but could not join due to domestic inconvenience. After passing his Law examinations, he practiced as a lawyer in Barpeta. He participated in the country's freedom struggle, served his term in prison as well. He played a major role in establishing Madhav Choudhury College in Barpeta. He also became a member of Assam Legislative Assembly. He graced the post of the Chairman of the Assam Public Service Commission (or did the post grace him?). He was in fact, the first Assamese chairperson of the APSC.

He had not forgotten Santaram Chaudhury even after reaching such heights. Be it at home, or in the market place of Pathsala, he would always greet his mentor and touch his feet. He had immense respect for his mentor. Without Godfrey Harold Hardy, the world of mathematics might have never seen Srinivasa Ramanujan. Without Santaram Chaudhury, Kameshwar Chaudhury would have remained Kamo throughout his life.

Here's something that I heard from the former H.oD of the Department of Linguistics, Gauhati University, Late. Dr. Rohini Kumar Mahanta. Nobel Prize winning physicist Dr. Chandrashekhar Venkata Raman had come to be a part of the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of Cotton College. On arrival, the first thing he inquired about was the news of Kameshwar Das. The organizers were in a fix. Because, they had not invited Kameshwar Das. They tracked him down and invited him. They were told that Kameshwar Das had provided a lot of help to Dr. Raman in his research work. His name was also mentioned in the acknowledgment page of the bibliography of Dr. Raman's research work. This is a matter of great honour, indeed.

Bajali College of Pathsala was something very close to Kameshwar Das' heart. For the establishment of this college, he had even begged around for money with a bag in his hand, seeking donations from people here and there. Bajali College celebrated the birth centenary of Kameshwar Das in 1997. A book in his name was published as well.

Kameshwar Das could not complete his research work under the supervision of Dr. C.E Cullis. This is completely true that Kameshwar Das who possessed such amazing mathematical knowledge did not actually stick to the subject throughout his life. He stopped getting involved in the learning, teaching and practicing of mathematics. Neither do we know of any book on mathematics written by him. Without doubt, had he been more serious in moulding a career in mathematics, he would have been one of the best in the country. However he could not ignore the call of the society. Madhav Chaudhury College of Barpeta and Bajali College of Pathsala: are these two institutions as good as his "thesis"?

[This article was first published in the book "Nirupam Gonit" by Dr. Dilip Kumar Sharma of Cotton College, Assam under the title "Bukar Podum". This English translation was done by Ms. Tinam Borah (Dept of Mass Comm. and Jour., Tezpur University). We thank both Dr. Sharma and

Ms. Borah for their valuable contributions. It has been our attempt at GonitSora to bring forth the lost heroes of Assamese mathematics.]

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