

Noted Gandhian and Freedom Fighter Pani Ram Das passed away

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Jayanta Kumar Das 1 December 2010 39096 views

Noted Gandhian and freedom fighter Pani Ram Das breathed his last at International Hospital Guwahati on November 30 at 4. 15 pm. He had been in the ICU since November 26. Several distinguished persons of the state namely- Samujjal Bhattacharjee, Advisor AASU; Presidents and Secretaries of various students organizations of Assam;SS Meenakshi Sundaram IAS, Deputy Commissioner, Tinsukia district; Thaneswar Malakar, Deputy Commissioner, Udalguri;Kumud Kalita, Deputy Commissioner, Darrang; Madan Deka, Deputy Secretary, Home, Assam, Brindaban Goswami, MLA; . PD Goswami, IGP(Retd), Assam Police;AGP leader Zoynath sarma etc etc offered floral tribute to the body of the departed freedom fighter at the hospital premises. On way back to Kalaigaon, AASU, Darrang and Darrang AGP and Darrang Congress also offered floral tribute to the departed leader.

Pani Ram Das was born on 7th April, 1917 at the village Kameipara (Jaljali) under Mangaldai police station. He was the second son of late Ratibar Saikia.

Das joined Patharighat M. E. School in 1929 and passed class VII in 1934. He was admitted to Mangaldai Government High School in the same year in class VIII. He was dedicated to the nation by his father in presence of 'Tyagabir Hem Barua' a nation famed social worker and great Freedom Fighter of Assam. His father wished that Das would be the servant of the people and accordingly his original title 'Saikia' was changed to 'Das' in 1929. He was a very brilliant student and had passed the Matriculation examination in Ist Division from Calcutta University in 1937. He was deeply attracted to India's freedom struggle by Mahatma Gandhi, so instead of joining a college for higher education, he decided to devote his prime youth for the service of Mother India. Once he was rusticated by the school authority for leading all students to boycott the coronation ceremony function of King George VI at Mangaldai in 1937.

In 1938, he joined the Indian National Freedom Struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi. He came in touch with the great leaders of Freedom Struggle of India and Assam. In 1941, he offered 'Satyagraha' at the direction of Gandhi, and was imprisoned for the first time. In December 1942, he along with Khitindra Das, Basab Kakati, Joy Chandra Das and Lakhi Ram Deka successfully set ablaze the British Revenue Circle Office at Mangaldai town, which stunned British administration Assam. In the year 1942, the Chief Secretary, Assam (Shillong) passed shoot at sight order on him and Das went underground since 25 September, 1942. He was the in-charge of Kakalbhanggi (Tangla) tribal welfare camp which was inaugurated by the then Prime Minister of Assam Gopi Nath Bordoloi. On 3rd February 1943, Das was arrested by the police when some award greedy locals spotted him to police. He was sent to Tezpur jail on 8th February 1943. Later he was sent to Jorhat jail in 1944 serving two years rigorous imprisonment. In the various jails of Assam, he came in personal contact with great leaders of Assam, Gopi Nath Bordoloi, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, Bishnu Ram Medhi, Fakruddin Ali Ahmed, Deba Kanta Barua, Debeswar Sarma, Siddhi Nath Sarma, Amiya Kumar Das, Mahendra Mohan Choudhury etc.

He was married to Kanak Lata Das, daughter of a social worker cum Freedom Fighter Bhakat Ram Saikia on 4th June 1949. Das has five sons and a daughter. In 1946 he organized the All Assam Exhibition on agricultural products at Jaljali near Mangaldai, which was inaugurated by the Prime Minister (then) of Assam Gopinath Bordoloi. Das was one of the most trusted aides of Gopi Nath Bordoloi. When India became independent in 1947, at the advice of Mahatma Gandhi he resigned from congress party to devote all his time for the welfare of the rural people of Assam. He even turned down an offer of Bimala Prasad Chaliha, then C. M. of Assam to join the Assam assembly as an MLA. He was offered accommodation and job at Guwahati by some great people like Debeswar Sarma and Gopinath Bordoloi, but he refused politely saying Mangaldai required his service more. The govt. of Assam had offered a plot of 80 bighas of land free as were allotted to other freedom fighters of the state, but Das distributed all the land to landless people of the villages.

In 1946 thousands of immigrant Muslims league volunteers started attacking local people of Monitari, Barbori, Rangamati areas shouting slogans in favour of Pakistan and Jinnah. Later they even marched to the Civil SDO's residence of Mangaldai creating panic and terror at Mangaldai. It was Pani Ram Das & Bhadra Kanta Sarma of Mangaldai who had organized terror stricken people to counter the attack. A volunteer camp was organized at Borbori on 25 th October, 1946. The camp was visited by Deb Kanta Barua(later AICC president)and Barin Ghosh of Calcutta. Das successfully solved the crisis avoiding Communal clashes.

In 1947 he along with great social worker cum doctor, Dr. Hara KanSaharia established Burhinagar, Dispensary, which was formally taken over by Assam govt. in 1951.

In 1951 he requisitioned 150 Bighas of land at Kalaigaon which was about to be occupied by the immigrants from East Pakisthan and established Kalaigaon Sevashram, a rural social welfare N. G. O. which was inaugurated by the then C. M. of Assam, Bishnu Ram Medhi. Former C. M. of Assam Bimala Prasad Chaliha was the founder president of the Sevashram Trust. Other members of the Trust were Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, Bijay Chandra Bhagawati, Biswa Dev Sarma and Amal Prabha Das. Since then Das has been doing all the social welfare activities for the better living of of the people. His advisors requested him to keep the said land in his own name at least for the use ofhis children in future, but he stuck to his decision.

In 1960, during the language movement attacks on the language minoritiy communities in Assam had started in Kalaigaon areas, but Das arranged many peace rallies in and around Kalaigaon saving the lives and property of the people.

In 1960, famous Gandhian and leader of Bhoodan movement Acharya Binoba Bhave had visited Das and stayed at his house for a fortnight at Kalaigaon Sevashram. In 1962, during Chinese aggression, thousands of panicked stricken people had started fleeing Mangaldai, Kalaigaon etc. for safer places; but Das along with some other leaders convinced them to stay back at their respective homes. He took initiative to mobilize people for voluntary services for the construction of roads and bridges for the movement of the Indian Army. In 1965, when cholera had broken out at Kalaigaon areas, Das arranged a medical relief camp at Kalaigaon Madrasa School and saved lives of many poor people. In the same year he arranged an eye relief camp at Kalaigaon in association of Srimanta Sankar Mission.

In 1970, he organized Mangaldai District Educated Unemployed Youth's Association and convinced Assam government for the establishment of the Industrial Estate at Mangaldai. Lands and industrial loans were provided to the unemployed youths and an agriculture farm was established at Bhairabkunda for the youths.

He was the founder secretary of Kalaigaon High School, founder president of Kalaigaon Marketing Society and Kalaigaon College. In 1971 he organized All Assam 'Santi Sena Sanmilan' at Kalaigaon Sevashram for spreading the message of peace. In 1971 Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi honoured him with the 'Tamrapatra' for his service to the nation.

Das earned national focus in 2000 and 2001, when he had started his single handed fight to save the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi. He went to New Delhi and met dignitaries like Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, journalist Kuldip Nayar, Gandhian leader member of parliament late Nirmala Deshpande, Gandhi's grandson and writer Mr. Raj Mohan Gandhi, journalist Sanjay Hazarika etc. and finally he met the then Hon'ble President of India K. R. Narayan, who was much impressed at his personality and his mission was over with success saving the legacy of the Father of the Nation.

Pani Ram Das has always been interested for the conservation of traditional folk songs and dances of Assam. He was himself a good actor and had acted on many occasions at Kalaigaon and Mangaldai. He was a good poet too and had composed many poems. He was invited to recite poems at the Asom Xahitya Sabha session at Mangaldai in 1973. In 2005 he was felicitated by the Asom Sahitya Sabha session at Sipajhar. Das introduced famous folk song and dance 'Darangi Ojapali' and 'Deodhani' dance to the national level. He invited Academy award winner Oja Lalit ch. Nath and Radhika Devi to perform at the INC session at Pandu in 1946. Das took all initiative for the performance of these artists at the Assam Sangit Natak Academy session at Sibsagar in 1961 and at Asom Sahitya Sabha session , Shillong in 1953.

At the request of Abani Kr. Das, Station Director of All India Radio, Guwahati he arranged for the performance of these artists through AIR, Guwahati in 1953. He had been the member of the advisory board of AIR Guwahati from 1965 to 1968. Noted Assamese writer and director, Dr. Bhabandra Nath Saikia wrote an editorial on Das in his magazine 'Prantik' in 2001. He was the first reporter of 'The Assam Tribune' from Mangaldai.

The Hon'ble President of India Mr. APJ Abdul Kalam felicitated Das at the Ashok Hall, Rastrapati Bhaban, New Delhi on 9-8-06 for his contribution to the nation. He was also felicitated by the Vice Chancellor of IGNOU at New Delhi in August 2007 for his contribution to the freedom struggle of India.

At the age of 94 years, Das had been trying to establish a rural hospital, an indoor stadium and a cultural complex at his Kalaigaon Sevashram. He offered 50 Bighas of land free of cost to the Assam government for the said projects for the rural people of Assam, by his application, dated 16-07-06 addressed to Tarun Gogoi, CM , Assam. But he has not received any response from the government so far. Finding no way, Das had approached the Army for the establishment of a vocational training center at Kalaigaon Sevashram and it was inaugurated in January 2009.

Das had also (dated 1st February, 2008) written to Dr. Manmohan Singh, Hon'ble Prime Minister, India offering 10 acres of land free for the establishment of a bio-diversity conservation cum Children park at Kalaigaon Sevashram and Hon'ble PM has granted an amount of Rs. 5 lakhs as the first installment of the project. More over works has already been started under NREGA for the construction of the park with an amount of Rs. 25 lakhs.

At the age of 94 years, he looked young and was looking forward for the welfare of the people of the country.

Jayanta Kumar Das

Environmental journalist.

BY JAYANTA KUMAR DAS

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