

# Son of the Pagladiya

**Prithibhusan Deka**

**Gramya Vikash Mancha**

"I grew up in Barigaon village in Southeast Nalbari region. My district is drained by the ferocious Pagladiya river that rises in the hills of Bhutan and is prone to flash floods. I grew up during the turbulent period of first the Assam Students Union struggle and then the intense violence of the ULFA-led strife. I saw so many of my friends and even cousins losing their life in that period. The spirit of the liberation movement was as heady as the violence was grim. I had made up my mind to work in a constructive manner to make things better," said Prithibhusan Deka. In the amazingly green landscape of Assam's Nalbari district, the southern parts of which are dotted with numerous wetlands, he pointed out spots that had vivid memories attached to them. The memories of the past that lingered in his mind were of violent events that happened 15 or 20 years ago.

True to his early decision, Prithibhusan took up social work, founding Gramya Vikash Mancha (GVM) in 1999. I spent about three days visiting various offices of GVM and projects currently being implemented by GVM, time during which I had an interesting peep into the intellect of Prithibhusan Deka.

Prithibhusan and GVM began their work in the Barigog Banbhag and Barbhag blocks of Nalbari district. They later expanded their work to northern blocks such as Nikashi and Nagrijuli currently in Baksa district, besides some blocks in Kamrup district. In this area, GVM routinely carries out rescue and relief work in 120 flood-affected villages each year, being a major pillar of support to over 60,000 people. And most importantly, what remains in the background but has been a huge achievement is, during the heady days of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) insurgency, they successfully persuaded over 60 young men to abjure the path of violence and take to constructive work, thus effecting a change in the ethos of never-ending violence in the name of impractical goals.

## **The early years**

Prithibhusan was born to Bimola and Jagat Chandra Deka on 1 March, 1975 at Barigaon in Barigog Banbhag development block in Nalbari district. As the family had agricultural land, Prithibhusan grew up in the village. His father was a government employee in the revenue department. A pious man, Jagat Chandra contributed to several public causes and built temples at his own expense in Nalbari, Rangia and a few other places. He also helped many

needy people. "I am deeply influenced by my father's spirit of charity and goodwill towards fellow human beings," said Prithibhusan.

After completing high school at the government-run Bishnuram Medhi Higher Secondary School in Baridatara village, he joined Arya College in Guwahati. According to Dipok Saloi, his senior who now manages Puberun Jatiya Vidyalaya, Prithibhusan was a bright student and was expected to have a brilliant career. However, within six months Prithibhusan quit the reputed Arya College and joined science stream in Nalbari College. "My father was quite angry. But I was firm and told him that I wished to be closer home and all my friends. He told me to do as I pleased."

### **The young social worker**

Prithibhusan took to social activities quite early on as a student. He established an organisation named Pub Nalbari Art Science Society. Through this organisation Prithibhusan organised inter-school debates, quiz competitions for students, district level literary and art talent search programmes and the like, besides organising functions such as Gandhi Jayanthi celebration.

He was a regular participant in Nehru Yuva Kendra programmes at Nalbari and in 1995 received the award for the best young social worker. Around that time he started writing for *Asomiya Pratidin*, a popular Assamese daily as the local reporter and started contributing to other newspapers on different socio-political issues.

Dwarika Barua, the noted Gandhian leader from Assam was instrumental in making him take to social work. As a young man with ideals, Prithibhusan met many noted social workers including Rabindrababu of the Tamulpur Anchalik Gramdan Sangha (TAGS). The work of these people were in the Gandhian path of peace, brotherhood and moral values. They guided him along the same path. In 1997, he started taking interest in public affairs and became an activist for the Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti.

### **Persisting beyond personal setbacks**

Prithibhusan's mother suffered a stroke in 1997 and he had to spend a couple of months attending to her in Guwahati Medical College hospital. The same year he developed an intense problem in his eyes and had a surgery in Indore in Madhya Pradesh. The next year his mother suffered a second stroke. After one of her kidneys was removed, he had to attend to her in the hospital and again at home. Yet he graduated in physics with a good score.

In spite of the setbacks, with his friend Dr Putul Mahanta he established an organisation named Puberun Gosthi meaning Club of Eastern Sun. The organisation took a major lead in providing energetic footwork needed for rescue and relief work when the floods hit Barbhag area in '98. This was the first time Prithibhusan took a leadership role in flood rescue and relief work, which became the mainstay of GVM later.

Under the aegis of Puberun Gosthi, a school by the name Puberun Jatiya Vidyalaya, referred earlier, was established in 1999 in Baridatara village. The school receives no grants and has always been managed by contributions from the community and student fees.

### **Genesis of GVM**

“For me 1999 was in a sense a turning point. On the one hand, with so many of my friends and associates in the liberation movement, I was getting drawn into it. On the other hand I wanted to engage in constructive social work; like my father I believed in serving God by helping fellow human beings. And at 24, I had to live up to the expectations of my father and develop a respectable career,” he said.

“Putul and I organised a large eye camp in Bishnu Ram Medhi Higher Secondary School at Baridatara. Given the constructive nature of this cause, the district collector agreed to inaugurate the camp. All the physical support came from them. They could get the whole of the ophthalmology department of Guwahati Medical College here and we could get over 180 surgeries done in one day,” he recalled.

He cleared Management Aptitude Test (MAT) with a good score, enabling him to get admission in a reputed college of his choice, should he wished. But with his focus elsewhere, he established Gramya Vikash Mancha (GVM) the same year, with Dr Surendra Majumdar, a medical officer and a few other friends.

### **Studying to serve**

Prithibhusan got selected for a course in Electronic Design and Training Corporation (EDTC) in 2000. He joined only to please his father. However he quit after a while, as his heart was not in it. “I was keen to work for my people,” he said. But his budding association with the movement was not to last long.

On Teachers' Day he invited a teacher to give a talk in his school. The speaker was seen as a state collaborator and informer by those involved in the movement. They were sceptical about Prithibhusan's loyalty. There was retribution in the offing. He was saved from physical harm only at the behest of the villagers. But he was banned from the liberated zone

dominated by the insurgents. He had to go into hiding. He stayed in Guwahati. "My father's friend gave me refuge and I spent a year there teaching his children maths and physics."

During this period, he applied for and got admission in the Entrepreneurship Development Institute of India (EDII) in Ahmedabad. Prithibhusan wished to pursue EDII's course on NGO management. His father would have given him the fee of Rs 30,000 under normal circumstances; but by quitting the EDTC course, he had angered his father. However, he managed to persuade his father and went to Ahmedabad. He did very well in the interview and got fee waiver eventually. He did his thesis on microfinance, which came in handy later, while establishing Pragjoti Co-operative, a microfinance institution.

### **Reinforcing GVM's integrity**

There was a major flood in Barbhag area in 1997-98 as there always is. Substantial relief materials sent by the government were being diverted. As a reporter, Prithibhusan reported this in *Asomiya Pratidin*, creating a storm locally. In retaliation, those who diverted the relief materials made the police pick him up as an ULFA sympathiser. Due to local pressure, he was released after a day. Local pressure on the guilty also made them admit to the public that they had diverted the relief materials; eventually they made up for the loss.

Barbhag area was hit by floods again in 2004. GVM received financial support for flood relief from Action Aid. They had also collected a lot of relief materials from traders and farmers whose villages were not affected. Prithibhusan recalled his father calling some senior volunteers of GVM and stressing the importance of honesty and integrity in dealing with contributions made by others, in reference to the earlier issue. His father told him in their presence, "You have seen that at the end of each *satsanga* (religious discourse), someone is assigned the task of distributing *prasadam* (food offered to the deity and later distributed to devotees). The person does not partake of any *prasadam* till everyone has received. You must think of contributions made by other people for GVM in the same manner. It is as sacred as the *prasadam* meant for others. If ever I learn that you or any of your friends have misappropriated or diverted such contributions, I will turn you out of my house." Prithibhusan said that this statement made a deep impression in him. All his efforts to instil a sense of integrity among the volunteers stem from this statement.

### **Focus on disaster risk reduction**

By now GVM had started working in 40 villages of the district. Now Prithibhusan was a full-fledged social worker and there was no looking back. With the recurrent need for rescue and relief in this perennially flood-prone area and his initial foray, disaster relief became the major focus of his volunteers. From relief to working on disaster risk reduction (DRR) was a

natural step. Prithibhusan remembered with gratitude, the financial support from Action Aid as well as the frequent guidance and mentoring he received from the head of their Guwahati regional office.

He travelled to Thailand for a training programme on DRR, besides studying the same in detail in Nepal and Bangladesh. These exposure trips helped him categorise their territory according to the likely risk and hence the level of assistance. Some of the permanent steps taken include building raised earthen or RCC platforms for people to take shelter during floods, installing raised hand pumps for drinking water, building raised toilets for use - particularly by women and relocating schools to avoid discontinuity in education of children.

### **Broadening GVM's scope**

Indo-German Service Society supported them in 2007, to work on the issue of human trafficking. From then on GVM has been rescuing several children every year from the clutches of traffickers. Trafficking was very rampant in the Nikashi, Musalpur and Nagrijuli blocks along the Bhutan border. Prithibhusan recalled GVM volunteers literally setting fire to a market place that had become the notorious hub of traffickers. They have rescued over 200 children from traffickers who have large-scale operations in Baksa district.

During this period GVM adapted and standardised a template for preparing a community action plan by involving the communities. This meant that they had to spend quality time with the communities, discussing and prioritising their issues and problems. These included aspects like the absence of a road, lack of clean drinking water, poor health facilities, discontinuity in schools during floods, large-scale dropout of children from schools, early marriage of girls, acute poverty because of floods and so on.

GVM had neither the domain expertise nor the bandwidth to address all these issues. Hence they made efforts to help communities access state programmes and worked with them to make the state provide solutions to their problems. They also helped in addressing these problems through external support and also through voluntary community support by means of labour and other forms of support. Strong insistence on high fidelity implementation and strong reliance on local contributions have led to GVM's paid-out costs being very less, especially compared to those working in the same domain.

In 2008 Prithibhusan received a fellowship from Rashtriya Gramin Vikas Nidhi, a non-profit organisation that supports voluntary institutions, and a small grant from the Tata Trusts. Under Tata Trusts' diversion-based irrigation (DBI) programme, a larger grant was given to GVM in 2009 for cleaning up a large *dong*, the traditional water management system that irrigated a number of villages.

On the successful restoration of the first dong, GVM received more grants for diversion-based irrigation. The team built on its contacts in Nagrijuli, Musalpur and Nikashi blocks which had many dongs coming down the hills of Bhutan. Thus they expanded their project coverage to 130 villages. GVM has restored 27 dongs which cumulatively irrigate about 35,000 *bigha* (5,000 ha) of land, benefitting about 30,000 farm households, besides improving the drinking water situation for people and animals.

In many villages where GVM conducted the community action plan exercise, Prithibhusan observed that large-scale dropout of children from school was recurrent. So when Tata Trusts approached him to participate in a programme on adolescent education he took it up enthusiastically. He learnt Doosra Dashak, an integrated method of education for adolescents developed by Foundation for Education and Development, and established a residential bridge course camp in their Barbari office campus. The team has brought 300 school dropouts back in the ambit of education. Through their learning centres, they have supported over 1500 students, majority of them being minority and scheduled caste children, in continuing their studies despite parental pressure for early marriage or migration for labour. By integrating technology, they have helped more than 5,000 children stay up-to-date in their education.

In 2012 Prithibhusan went on study leave to do MA in social work from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Guwahati, but continued with his work whenever possible. In 2013, his mother passed away. Just then a national donor was pressing GVM to submit a proposal for a project on livelihoods. Prithibhusan started preparing the proposal right after his mother's obsequies, even as many people visited to pay their respect and condolences. According to him, completing a task well was the real *pranaam* (obeisance) to his mother. On completing MA in 2014 with a silver medal, he rejoined GVM.

### **The family**

Jagat Chandra is aware of GVM and his son's work. He is satisfied with the motive with which his son is working. "I wanted him to have a good career, but never forced him to pursue any particular profession. I have always encouraged him to take up anything of his interest. Knowledge is what matters and not the education. Pandits who have earned names for themselves were not highly educated. Therefore what is required is the true spirit to help and love others; everything else is temporary," said Jagat Chandra.

As a child, Prithibhusan accompanied his father to the events where he preached about the ideology of Thakur Anukulchandra, a religious leader who founded Satsang, a social movement. "We didn't take any extra effort in bringing up our son," said Jagat Chandra. "His mother was very pious and kind, loving everyone equally and extending her hospitality to whoever visited our house." Jagat Chandra added that his wife Bimola Deka who passed away in 2013 was a great influence on their son.

Prithibhusan married Karabi, daughter of Vaskar Talukdar, a retired principal of a government higher secondary school from Mangaldoi, in 2009. Karabi works as a primary school teacher. She believes that her desire to move to Guwahati, so that her six-year-old son would get better opportunities, will materialise. While she is interested in the work of GVM, she has had no direct exposure to their work as yet. Since Prithibhusan has an irregular and demanding work schedule, she takes care of the household responsibilities, with occasional help from friends.

### **GVM the institution**

Prithibhusan has taken care that at least formally he does not perpetually remain the CEO of GVM. He quit his president's post when he went to TISS. Presently he does not hold a post in GVM. "But the general body decided to create a special post of director and appointed me in that role," he said.

According to Prithibhusan, the chief feature that distinguishes GVM from other organisations is that it is essentially a volunteer-driven organisation. "It was established as a youth club during a very difficult period of our society. From the very beginning we decided to ensure community participation and transparency in our activities. We kept away from militant groups as well as administration, to avoid drawingflak."

GVM built its own identity and image and has been a ray of hope as against many social organisations that are disorganised and do not enjoy people's trust."We call ourselves volunteers. We have laid down rules by which, a volunteer cannot be a paid staff for more than a defined term. Initially GVM was formed when 11 of us came together and worked together just like an informal club. As we expanded our work to new villages we asked the communities to nominate one young person who could coordinate the work in their village. Such a person then naturally joined us as a volunteer. Thus the number of volunteers has risen to about 80 now," informed Prithibhusan.

From among the volunteers who form the general body, an executive committee (EC) is formed. A sub-committee of the EC reviews the work of each project team and each regional team every month. Everyone is accountable to the general body. There are also senior volunteers like Dr Surendra Majumdar who are assigned special responsibilities. He has the responsibility of ensuring that everyone upholds the GVM culture.

According to Prithibhusan the role of Surendra is essential. "We now handle about Rs 50 million every year. We need to procure many items. We need specialists for projects such as integrating technology in education. Huge grants and specialised works mean that we need to have formal systems. We have created many formal protocols. But the more formal you become, more are the chances of the spirit of volunteerism drying up. To keep it alive, we need someone who will be a vanguard of GVM culture," explained Prithibhusan.

On being asked whether he sees the team as being capable of running the show without his intervention, he said, "They are certainly very good, better than me in fact, in implementing the programmes. My colleagues are excellent in mobilising communities, in organising logistics and in managing GVM's day-to-day affairs. However, my presence is required in dealing with senior government officers as well as donors. Also there are times when they need someone to urge them to keep their focus on the work."

### **Future plans**

On the personal front, Prithibhusan's food security is ensured as the family has about 30 *bigha* (about 4.5 ha) of land. His wife is employed as a teacher. Of late, he has been taking up consultancy assignments in other organisations for necessary income to manage the needs of his household.

"But like my father, I just cannot say no. There are a few students who have come to me for support and I extend financial help," he revealed. He sheepishly admitted to frictions at home when he is unable to meet the legitimate expectations of his family.

Prithibhusan is aware that he has a long way ahead of him. On the one hand he knows he has to educate his five-year-old son into a respectable professional, which means he has to earn. On the other hand, he knows that he must grow in stature as a professional and as a social worker. Having become a noted social worker early in life, he does not want to be seen as outdated. He plans to register for his PhD. He would like to get into academics and teach in a reputed institution. He would also like to write about his experiences, about the state of the society and about social issues. He does have the background of being a reporter; now with his formal education as well as his rich and diverse experience, there is much that he has to offer.

## About Prithibhusan Deka

- During the heights of insurgency, Prithibhusan Deka successfully persuaded more than 60 youth to quit the path of violence and join the mainstream
- Carries out rescue and relief work in 120 flood-affected villages every year, through Gramya Vikash Mancha he founded, helping more than 60,000 people
- Initiated disaster risk reduction measures such as raised platforms to serve as shelter, raised hand pumps for drinking water, raised toilets, etc. in areas prone to frequent floods
- Restored dongs or traditional water management systems in 130 villages, helping 30,000 farm households irrigate their lands, besides ensuring supply of safe drinking water
- Has standardised a template for community participation in solving their problems with government or institutional support

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