

GOPALDEB ATA'S THAN AT BHAWANIPUR

(Will it be Lost in Oblivion?)

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December 16th 2012 It was about the time the sun positions itself low in the western sky to call it a day. My eyes swayed between my wrist watch and the western sky. I was accompanied by my other half, Sailaja, in my small car that kept on speeding along the familiar kind of gravel-laid rural road. I was speeding because I had to reach my destination before it grew dark. She kept a control over my speed on such a road with frequent warnings to slow down. I was late owing to some other preoccupation. My heartbeat grew louder. Oh God! If there had been something that could stop the flow of time... At last, the man in the paddy field reaping his crop pointed to a distant structure and said “Look, that compound having a house. *That* is what you are looking for!”

Yes, esteemed readers, that was my destination! A long-standing structure, **GOPĀL ĀTĀ'S THĀN**, at Old Bhawānipur, some three kilometers westward from the main *chowk* of Bhawanipur on NH-37 of Barpeta District. What feelings did stir our emotions the moment we arrived at the main gate of the compound! We just can't express it in words.

It's a beautifully placed area amid paddy fields with a soothing, divine serenity that can free your mind and soul from all anxieties. **Gopāl Ātā** founded this *thān* at Bhawānipur centuries ago. [Mahāpurush Sri Sri Mādhabdeb](#) stayed here for six months. Gopal Ata had a great contribution towards [the construction of the Rangawan Griha or the Rangial Griha or the present Nāmghar/Kirtanghar \(Prayer House\) of Barpeta](#). It is said that Mahapurush Madhabdeb had disclosed before one of his blue-eyed disciples Gopal or Gopal Tāti (different from Gopal Ata) alias Mathuradas that the place for daily prayer had not been somewhat big enough in size to accommodate large gathering of people and expressed his desire of renovating it to his envisaged prayer-house **Harimandir**, the Temple of God. He engaged all his disciples in this project which he

himself supervised. Thus when beams of timber measuring about 18 feet in length were required for the construction, Mahapurush Madhabdeb urged Gopal Ata of Bhawanipur to make those available and transport them to Barpeta. Gopal, obeying his Guru's command, alone rowed his boat loaded full with timbers and beams down the river Palla to Barpeta. Rivers were the only preferable means for transport in those days.

On the way to the *thān*, we came across a village inhabited by the Bodo community also besides the Assamese. But interestingly we discovered that the populace in the close vicinity of the *thān* belonged to a community other than Assamese, who ordinarily spoke local Bengali dialect.



When we got down from our car we were greeted with a structure that had been built by one 'LAKHIMI BORA OF ZOO ROAD GUWAHATI, HOTEL AMBARISH'. Thanks to this good person. The main prayer house, the *Nāmghar*, was well-illuminated by the golden rays of the afternoon sun. With a deep breath we stepped forward in total silence.

The main door was locked. Some children were playing in the front ground under the big trees. They grew curious and stopped their activities. I took a few steps around while my wife talked to the children. They informed us that the *Ātoi* had left for his native place and the key of the *Nāmghar*'s main door was with Shibu. I inquired if Shibu was available. Some of them said Shibu had gone home or somewhere else and wouldn't return. But one little girl disapproved and said that he was available at home. So I asked the eldest one of the group to send for Shibu. By then two ladies arrived there who then started interacting with us. In reply to our queries they told us that prayer was performed daily both in the morning and evening under the supervision of the *Ātoi* who

was not available then. The *Ātoi*, according to the village women we talked to, is from Nagaon. They did not know the exact name of his native village. As no male member was available to ask more about the *thān*, we maintained short conversation with the ladies. I wanted to know if they were aware of the management of the day-to-day expenditure and they said (pointing to the nearby paddy fields) it was done mainly from earnings from the lands that belonged to the *thān* and donations and contributions in the form of *pranāmi* (offering) by visitors to the *thān* from time to time.

“থানখন চলিবৰ বাবে টকা-পইচাৰ ব্যৱস্থা কেনেকৈ হয় জানেনেকি?”

উত্তৰ- প্ৰধানকৈ, কাষৰৰ খেতি পথাৰলৈ আঙুলিয়াই, খেতিৰ পৰা হোৱা আয়েৰে খৰচৰ জোৰা মৰা হয়। তাৰোপৰি সময়ে সময়ে দৰ্শনাৰ্থীসকলে দিয়া দান-দক্ষিণা (প্ৰণামী ইত্যাদি)ৰ পৰাও হোৱা আয়েৰে ব্যৱস্থা হয়”।

But in recent times there had been developments of weighty concern. Like unknown people coming with the intention of buying the crop-growing lands that belonged to the *thān*

(“মাজে মাজে কিছুমান মানুহ ক’ৰবাৰ পৰা আহে [আঙুলিয়াই দি] সেই মাটিবোৰ কিনিবলৈ”)

“What do you do then?” I asked.

“We have been resisting till now. We will not allow [anybody] to sell or buy these lands; for these are the only income source for the *thān* to accomplish its activities”.

(“আমি সদায় বাধা দি আছো। এই মাটিখিনি বিক্ৰী হ’লে নামঘৰটো কেনেকৈ চলিব”)

“Do you take part in the daily prayers?” I asked. “Yes! We do and we love to do it!”

“Do people from other places also visit this *thān*?” my wife wanted to know.



“Yes. In the month of Bohag, the first month of the Assamese calendar, which begins on 14th or 15th of April of each Gregorian, the number is very big and the atmosphere becomes festive. But it decreases remarkably thereafter”, they replied.

“How do you feel then?” I asked again.

“We feel lonely”, the other lady said (আমাৰ বেয়া লাগে)

‘Shibu has come!’

By then someone among the children shouted, “Shibu has come!”

Our attention got distracted from the conversation and eyes roved around.

A little figure appeared at the east-end entrance of the compound. A little *gāmosā* clad boy with another *gāmosā* round his neck approached us. We were astounded to see him but the very next moment our hearts filled with joy and smiles of happiness rolled over.

“Are you Shibu?”

The boy nodded.

“Do you have the key to the locked door of the *Nāmghar*?”

“Yes”

Together we entered the *Nāmghar* to have a look and take a few snaps. I had already taken some snaps of the compound including the residence where Sri Sri Madhabdeb and Gopal Ata stayed.

“What do you do here?” I asked the boy.

He answered, “I clean the *Nāmghar* daily and light the lamps every morning and evening in front of the *Āsana*, the altar.”

“Who has trained you up?” my question.

“*Ātoi* has taught me all these” he replied.

“Do you enjoy doing it and what is your feeling towards *Ātoi*?” again I asked.

Shibu said, “I love to do it. We all here love *Ātoi* and *Ātoi* too loves us very much.”

Inside the *Nāmghar* I took a brief interview of Shibu – **Sri Shibu Arya**, a student of sixth standard. It seemed most of the residents were of *Arya* title. When I started recording, Shibu, politely and very attentively, gave a short interview. I could visualize a reliable caretaker or a *Ātoi* of the future. After the interview, I offered a hundred-rupee note to purchase oil for the lamps. Then I told him that we wanted to offer prayer

bowing down before the altar, the *Guru Āsana*. Shibu then, in the traditional manner of the *thāns*, allowed us to do that and stood near us till the end. I felt as if it was not Shibu but someone else showering Blessings on us.



The sun was ready to conclude its journey on its chariot in the western horizon. We walked out of the *Nāmghar*. No sooner did we reach the main gate of the compound than we heard the sound of drum. We looked back. Shibu had started beating the drum, the *Dobā*, with his little hand and we bowed for the last time to God. I could visualize a blurred picture – a man rowing down to Barpeta with two big beams in his boat. The sun, already half-dipped below the horizon, seemed to stop for a little bit of time, perhaps to bid us adieu. We started our journey back to Dhaligaon with a heavy heart full of mixed feelings.

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