



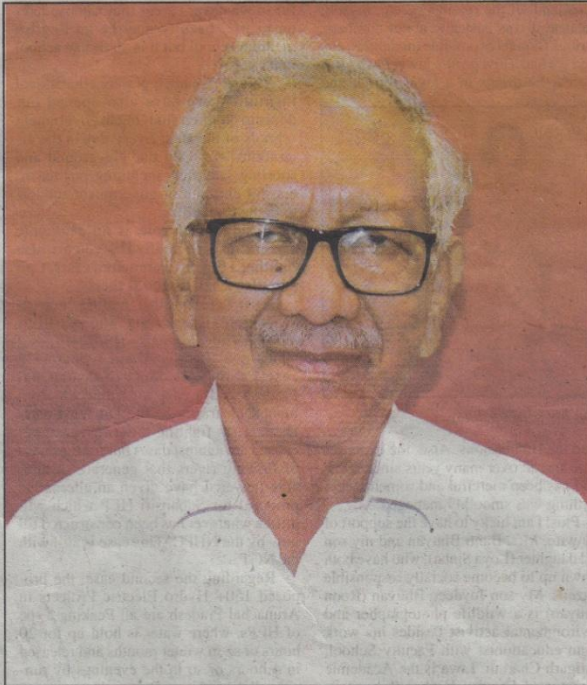
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A
Dream
Come True



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FILM
REVIEW:
'Village Rockstars'



Pradip Kumar Bhuyan

The entire State of Assam, as well as the rest of the country, has woken up to the massive National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise, and the same, which was undertaken more than 25 years after the Assam Agitation, is being welcomed by a huge section of people. While most of us are busy with filing our claims and objections to ensure that our names are published in the final NRC list, we would like to introduce our readers with Mr. Pradip Kumar Bhuyan and his wife Mrs. Banti Bhuyan, both highly socially conscious citizens, and the couple who had first filed the petition for a correct

voter's list in Assam, making the entire NRC exercise a real possibility.

An educationist who likes to call himself as an academic consultant, Mr. Pradip Kr. Bhuyan is a civil engineer who graduated from the prestigious IIT-Kharagpur and who played a pivotal role during the Assam Agitation. The co-founder of Faculty Higher Secondary School, the octogenarian and his wife Mrs. Banti Bhuyan, are both highly socially conscious citizens, who prefer to live a secluded life in the lap of nature and work for the overall development of Assam's environment, educational scenario and the society as a

Of Commitment to a Better Society

In conversation with educationists Mr. Pradip Kumar Bhuyan and his wife Mrs. Banti Bhuyan who set the ball rolling for NRC in Assam

whole. It is a matter of pride for all of us that he has been selected to be conferred with the prestigious Lachit Award during Lachit Divas on November 24 this year.

The *melange* team recently met Mr. Pradip Kr. Bhuyan at the Faculty Higher Secondary School located in North Guwahati, to know more about his life and his commitment to Assam's social progress and development. Following are excerpts from our lengthy conversation which covered various issues like Assam's educational environment, his role in the Assam Agitation and the NRC process and his

involvement with other environmental issues.

Q. At the very outset, thank you for taking out time from your busy schedule to talk with us.

Ans: Thank you. The pleasure is all mine. But to be honest, I consider my bio-data or how 83 years of my life has flown by as a matter of no consequence. If I have been able to do a little bit for our society, environment and nature in my own humble way, that is all that matters for me.

Q. There is a perception among certain people that you like to live the life of a



Pradip Kumar Bhuyan and his wife Banti Bhuyan interacting with students of Faculty H.S., North Guwahati

recluse. What do you have to say about that?

Ans: That is their perception but I would like to say that I am neither a recluse nor do I shy away from my social responsibilities. But yes, I don't like to waste my time gossiping or engaging in unnecessary activities which have no positive outcome. I like to concentrate my time and efforts in constructive activities and which have a definite outcome for the well-being of people and our Society in general.

Q. You have seen 83 years of life and you still look fresh as ever, ready to overcome new challenges with your positive outlook in life. How do you look back at your journey in life? Please tell us a bit about your childhood.

Ans: I am an optimist at heart. I was born in Dibrugarh in October, 1935. I did my schooling from AOC Boys High School in Digboi and matriculated from the same school in 1952. I studied science at Cotton College in Intermediate stream from 1952-1954 and finally graduated from IIT, Kharagapur in 1958.

After I completed my graduation in Civil Engineering from IIT, Kharagapur in 1958. I worked with the Assam PWD, AOC/OIL, Assam State Electricity Board and the Assam Govt. Construction Corporation up to 1973. You can say my life had been a rolling stone of sorts till then. But I was totally dedicated to whatever I was doing. After 1973 I was on my own. I was busy with various activities; while some turned out well, there were a few occasions where I burnt my fingers!

Q. As a highly socially conscious citizen, you have been an integral part of the Assam Agitation. How do you look back at the movement? Do you feel that the Assam Agitation was necessary, given the fact that it change the lives of an entire generation of people in Assam?

Ans: Yes, I was deeply involved with the Assam Agitation; not as the member of any political party but just because I love my motherland. I still feel that the Assam Agitation was necessary because it opened our minds to the huge demographic changes which were taking place in our land.

Q. The entire country has now woken up to the fact that Assam has undertaken the NRC exercise, which is one of the largest government-sponsored exercises in the country for an updated voter's list. Not many people know that you are the man who filed the first petition in this regard and made the entire NRC exercise a distinct reality. Can you please tell us about what made you decide to file the petition?

Ans: Like I said, the Assam Agitation had left a deep impression in my mind. For the first time in the late 1970s and 80s, I realized that the future of the greater Assamese society was at stake. Then sometime in 2009, a young man came to meet me and my wife. His name was Abhijeet Sharma and he was the founder of the Assam Public Works. He was very frustrated because of the prevailing situation of the State concerning the unabated Bangladeshi migration and consequent changes in the demographic pattern of the state. He asked me if we could move the Supreme Court for some kind of redressal to our problem.

I, like everyone else, was also worried and frustrated that even after signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, i.e. even after 24 years, nothing was happening and the prospect of a Bangladeshi national becoming the Chief Minister of the State, as was predicted by former Governor General S.K. Sinha, had become a distinct possibility. I readily agreed to move the Supreme Court on the issue.

As the 2011 Assembly Elections were due at that time, I told Abhijeet that a correct voter's list after regularization of the pre-1971 Bangladeshis and identification of the post 1971 Bangladeshis as foreigners, must be our first priority. I asked Abhijeet to get a copy of statistical report on General Election 2006 and a few other documents.

Q. Filing a PIL in the Supreme Court is no mean task and you prepared the entire petition in a very comprehensive manner. The high quality of the petition and the fact that you do not have any background in law left many astounded. How challenging was the entire process?

Ans: Fighting a case in the Supreme Court is a stupendous challenge for first timers. The first challenge was to get the petition accepted as many of the PILs



A family photograph taken on his 83rd birthday.

which are filed are usually rejected. I prepared the petition, based basically on statistical data, and a modality for regularization of the pre 24th March, 1971 Bangladeshis, and identification of the post 24th March, 1971 Bangladeshis as foreigners, so as to ensure the preparation of a correct voters' list for the 2011 State Assembly Elections. The Petition was filed in May 2009 in the Hon'ble Supreme Court. After the elections of 2011 was completed, we filed another Affidavit in February 2012, giving sole emphasis on updating the NRC.

When the Chief Justice, after glancing through the petition, ordered to issue notices, we all heaved a sigh of deep relief and gratitude to the Almighty. Our lawyer did not once have to open his mouth! After the Hon'ble Supreme Court took over the monitoring of the preparation of a correct NRC from 2013, basically then our Petition of 2009 and efforts have reached a logical conclusion. Looking back, I guess the fact that we provided a lot of statistical data in our petition played a pivotal role in the PIL being accepted by the Supreme Court.

Of course, there were many hurdles on the way as we waded through the complex web of pursuing the case. Abhijeet stood steadfast throughout the entire pro-

cess and we need to appreciate his courage and total dedication towards the cause.

Now the work is going on under the direction of the Hon'ble Supreme Court through Pratik Hajela as the State NRC Coordinator alongwith his team. He is undertaking a massive operation and various "subversive operations by vested foreigners and groups" is only to be expected. The honourable court is aware of these situations and is giving directions accordingly. Let us all be vigilant and help in the preparation of a nearly correct NRC. The exercise of NRC will be fruitful only when the voter's list will be corrected based on it.

Q. Fighting a case in the Supreme Court is a costly affair. Did you face any financial problems while filing the petition?

Ans: Many kind of figures are floating around regarding the expenses in fighting the case. It is true that fighting a case in the Supreme Court is a costly affair. But in our case, I drafted the petitions, and all the rejoinders, etc. myself, because it was basically about numbers, various formats of possible modalities, etc. And we had a low profile lawyer, who just placed the things in a legal format and

land at that time was around INR 4000 - 5000 per *bigha* at that time, which for us seemed like a king's ransom at that point of time! Also to develop the infrastructure and basic amenities of the school was a herculean task for us. But we always kept our vision of a school with open fields and spaces in the lap of nature and today, we are proud to say we are a school with more than 1700 students. The journey, however, still continues. Even after 35 years when we first decided to start the school, a few facilities are yet to be completed. But by God's grace, we are nearly there!

We take a lot of pride in the fact that we have been able to establish a school which ensures holistic development of children in the lap of Mother Nature. Our emphasis is not on rote learning but on the overall development of children. We lay a lot of emphasis on the holistic development of our students so that they can emerge as socially-conscious and responsible individuals who are successful in whatever career they choose later on in life. Faculty may be an English medium school but it is an Indian school in its 'core'.

Though we are a private educational institution, we have also opened our doors to children studying in government schools of the area. Every day in the afternoons, we open our playground and sporting facilities, including our teachers, for children of government schools to come and utilize.

Q. Besides your role as an academic consultant for Faculty HS, you are also fighting a few environmental cases. Can you please tell us about them?

Ans: Yes, I am also fighting three environmental cases viz. the petitions against the Subansiri Hydro Project which was filed by Abhijeet Sharma, a case against all dams of Arunachal Pradesh and a case regarding environmental clearance of the Dibang Lower Dam. I am fighting these cases not because I am against dams but for the cause of flowing rivers that generate sustainable power. I have given an alternative proposal for Subansiri HEP which will utilize whatever has been constructed till now by the NHPC. This case is still with the NGT.

Regarding the second case, the proposed 150+ Hydro Electric Projects in Arunachal Pradesh are all Peaking Type of HEPs, where water is hold up for 20 hours or so in winter months and released in 4 hours or so in the evenings by running all the turbines. During the monsoon, they are forced to open the gates of the dam suddenly, causing catastrophic floods. This is happening all the time in Ranganadi HEP of NEEPCO, which is a peaking type of HEP. The entire River Brahmaputra is in grave threat because of these peaking types of dams, if and when these are commissioned after 10-15 years.

Further, I have, along with Kashmiri Kakati and Joydeep Bhuyan, also filed a case in July, 2018 in the NGT regarding various aspects of elephant-killing in railway tracks, by electrocutions, man-animal conflict, etc. I am also working in the field with others in the foothills of the Karbi hills to improving the elephant habitat through massive plantation of *Bhimkols*, *Owtenga* plants, etc. and other mitigating measures.