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Interview: Manoj Kumar Das



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This week we speak to the Assam Association Delhi Secretary and NEDFi representative in Delhi, Manoj Das. A multi faced personality he speaks about life outside Assam, NEDFi and the Assam Association Delhi which is turning dreams into realities for the Assamese population of Delhi.

What was your background and how did you venture into your current line.

I did schooling from Bordoloni in Dhemaji district of Assam and PU(Sc) from cotton College in '79. Pursued Production Engineering from Morvi, Gujarat in 1983 and subsequently MBA from University Business School, Chandigarh, Panjab University. Thereafter I joined Hero Honda Motors Ltd. as Plant Engineer in 1985. I was selected by the Govt. of Assam for a two crore venture under 'Operation Udyog' scheme in 1986. I resigned and worked for three years to set up a Steel Forgings unit in Rani Industrial Area, near Guwahati. That turned out to be a misadventure. I got an experience in dealing with failure at quite a young age.

I had to come back again to the job market and quickly changed 3-4 jobs after that. These jobs were in industrial consultancy and Govt. sector. One as Management Officer in Assam Govt. gave me insight into Govt. style of functioning and another as Consultant to DST on a Science Tech Park at Shimla. In 1990 I got married and we had our first child in 1991. As my wife, a doctor, did not get enough career opportunity in Shimla, we came to Delhi and have been staying here since.

I used to work for a Industrial Consultancy firm and in between helped a businessman from Nagaland to set up a plant in Dharuhera as his Project Director. I also worked as Secretary to an MP from Assam for a brief period of one year, apart from being Project Director to Majuli Island Protection and Development Council. We also started one company in 1997 to design web sites with the blessings of Dr. Jayanta Madhab.

There was a long unstable patch in my career. It gave me good lessons in human behaviour though. I am the quintessential entrepreneur, who could not make it..:)

How long have you been outside Assam?

It's been almost 25 years now. I stayed in Morvi, Mumbai, Chandigarh, Gurgaon, Shimla and now in Delhi.

How did the move to NEDFI happen?

I helped Dr. Jayanta Madhab, then Chairman of NEDFI to organise a seminar of MPs in 1997. He found my management and networking abilities quite outstanding and hired me into the NEDFI's fold.

Any steps taken by NEDFi to benefit people of Northeast.

NEDFi is the public finance institution for the people of Northeast. Bank and industrial finance was difficult to get in NER. Realising this a dedicated financial institution, mandated to cater only to create assets in the NE was created by Dr. Manmohan Singh, then Finance Minister in 1995-96 budget.

NEDFi has been extending term loans and micro finance to Northeast India Residents for the past 12 years. It has established itself as the premier lending institution there, and has been consistently profit booking, despite the not so reputable credit habits of the people.

NEDFi is also the canalising agency for central government subsidies under industrial and investment policies. It has designed a few innovative schemes to serve the first generation entrepreneurs of the region.

How did you venture into the Assam Association?

I used to attend Assam Association's functions, when I used to stay in Gurgaon. I became Executive Member in 1993 and thereafter I have been in the Executive committee continuously. I was General Secretary for the first time in 1996 and have been General Secretary for three consecutive 2 years terms since 2001. I was treasurer for a term in 1999-2001.

How has the experience been?

It's very satisfying working for a cause. Delhi's hectic life leaves us with very little time and resources for social work. It has been a wonderful experience and I enjoyed every bit of it.

How did the Srimanta Sankaradeva sankaradeva-bhawan Bhawan come up?

Namghar is an essential ingredient of Assamese consciousness. Ever since a group of Assamese got together since independence in the National Capital, they have been dreaming to find a place for common social activities, where basic minimum festivities can be held. The current plot was bought from the DDA in 1991, while allocation was made in 1989. Mr. Aatur Rahman, Dr. Nagen Saikia, Dr. Amol Hazarika, Mr. S D Lahkar, Mr. Dinesh Goswami, Dr. Nilamani Sarmah are the elders who went extraordinary length to get the land allocated. Padmashree Jugal Kishore Chaudhury, the noted Assamese architect gave critical inputs during the concept development stage of the centre.

Srimanta Sankaradeva Bhawan was conceived as a cultural centre with auditorium, art gallery, canteen, conference hall, guest house, office, library, open air theatre etc. to make it a centre of excellence and hub of activities of the Assamese people living in Delhi.

While the land cost was borne by the Govt. of Assam, raising the huge construction cost was a stupendous task. We needed to build the credibility of the organisation first, also to clearly chalk out the utilisation plan. Mr. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, the former CM of Assam brought together the CEOs of oil companies operating in Assam. Substantial amount was received from these companies as donation towards this venture. Every possible sources were tapped. The project cost for the 10000 sqft complex was initially estimated at Rs. 1.5 crores, but with time overrun, it will finally reach to about Rs. 2 crores.

We organised three major events to collect funds. Two were held during my tenure. In one Ustad Zakir Hussain and the Bangash brothers performed; while in the other Dr. Bhupen Hazarika enthralled the audience at the Sirifort. We were fortunate to have Mr. B C Bora, former CMD of ONGC as our President during these very critical years. His personal reach enabled us to collect substantial fund and effect good project management.

Mr. Kuldip Nayyar gave Rs. 20 lakhs from MPLADS fund, Govt. of India gave Rs. 15 lakhs, Mr. Tarun Gogoi gave Rs. 10 lakhs from CM's fund, ABITA, GAIL, NEEPCO, NRL, BRPL gave Rs. 5 lakhs each and OIL, ONGC gave Rs. 10 lakhs each. At an individual level Mr. Rajeev Baruah of Hongkong gave Rs. 6 lakhs and Dr Jayanta Madhab gave Rs. 2.5 lakhs.

Srimanta Sankaradeva Bhawan is an excellent example of People-People-Partnership; and how a determined lot can achieve a lot despite the gruelling and tough existence that you experience in metro life, if you make up your mind to sacrifice a little for society.

Future plans for Assam Association.

Our term has already ended and the new team will be elected on 28th July. I really cannot dictate any terms for the new EC. Only spell out a few broad milestones. This year is the Diamond Jubilee year of the association and a befitting celebration should be on the cards.

New committee should endeavour to make Srimanta Sankaradeva Bhawan, the first address of Assamese in Delhi and make it a centre of excellence and a proud possession of the people of Assam.

It must also try to bring in the young and vibrant people to the fold. More interaction among the youth is essential, especially it should act as a forum for the youth, where they can mingle and exchange ideas. Future always lies with the youth, and we should catch them young.

Any plans for Assam? How do you feel people outside can work for Assam?

Assam is in a sad state of affairs. It had the potential to be the richest area in the world, but that opportunity has been wasted due to geopolitical fate of the state. Flood plains are a menace. We can reclaim more than 1.5 million hectares of land, if proper river training and dredging operation is done. Assam is suffering from what is called 'resource curse'. We have seen tumultuous changes during our own lifetime. My greatest fear is of losing our own identity, in our own land.

People in Assam look upto the ones who have come out of the state in search of own destiny also to help them.. They definitely have more exposure and better soft power and skills. These people should give back whatever they can to the state, especially so when it is going through such a bad patch. We can contribute at various levels. We can provide information on job availability and skill development for suitability to such jobs. We can do events and set up enterprises that help people of our home state, Assam Times being an example. The other example is that these days Assamese youths are coming for jobs like security agents. We can help them by providing low cost shelter for six or seven days, till they are absorbed. We can also pool the information on jobs available in our respective organisations and pass on that information to job seekers.

If a few students sitting at Calcutta more than 100 years back could germinate the seed to save the Assamese language, people sitting in the national capital and all across the globe can definitely sow the seeds of saving the state politically. *We need an obsession and a few obsessive people.*

Arindam Garg



[editor](#)

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