

## The Dream that Came True

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Everyone - from the most humble to the most high and mighty - has a dream of his own. And in most cases, this dream relates to the inner desire for raising one's station in life, be it in material condition, intellectual attainment, social standing or just climbing the rungs of power.

There are however, a few - a very few - whose dream consists of devoting their lives for the wellbeing of their fellow-men among whom may be the sick, the oppressed, the illiterate, the backward. This may involve leaving the security of their home and hearth undertaking difficult journeys, living among alien people sometimes in the most adverse circumstances and voluntarily moving from civilization to where the most backward and the needy are. Such a one, for instance, was father Damien and Albert Schweitzer; Dr. Ida Scudder and Dr. Kotnis. And such a one was Miss Margaret Barr, affectionately called 'Kong Barr' by the Khasis among whom she lived and worked for nearly four decades.

The dream that brought Miss Barr to India and especially to the remote parts of the Khasi hills according to her started taking shape in her late twenties, although as she says in her autobiography "it is always difficult to tie down a dream to any one moment .. it owes its rise to more than one incident in the career of the dreamer and to their subsequent development and merging." She traces the dream back to the time when at one of the annual meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Christian Churches she for the first time heard from Rev. Griffith J. Sparham of "an indigenous little Unitarian movement in the Khasi hills,....and of the courage, vision and simple faith of the man who had founded it". "From that moment", she says, "her fate was sealed". But actually, looking back, we can see that her faith was as good as sealed when she revolted against the Methodist religion of her parents. She had always been a restless spirit with a questioning mind. And soon she found that

there was much in the teaching of the Church which she could not understand. This is how, for instance, she describes her mental conflict: "The Doctrine of Atonement I found especially baffling. How could the loving Father - God taught by Jesus require the horrible cruelty of the Cross before he could forgive sinful men? Surely this was a denial of his own teaching in the Parable of the Prodigal son. And how was it possible for Jesus to be the 'only begotten son' when he himself had taught that all men were sons of God; and when history showed so many great men and good sould even before the time of Jesus?"

Such questions and doubts had led Annie Besant to theosophy; Margaret found her answer in Unitarianism. When she attended a Unitarian service at Cambridge in which the Minister spoke of religions other than Christianity with genuine respect, she found this to be completely different from anything she had heard at Missionary meetings during her Methodist days and felt like ..... "Some watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into his ken". Accordingly in 1921 at the age of twenty two she became a Unitarian.

This change in her own personal life together with the knowledge of the Unitarian movement founded in the Khasi hills by Hajom Kissor Singh decided her course of life. But the big question was how to come to India? It was at that time that Rev. Magnus C. Ratter had returned to England after spending some time among the Unitarians of the Khasi hills and reported that something should be done for them, although in view of his indifferent health he was reluctant to go there himself. When Miss Barr came to know of this she immediately wrote to the Unitarian committee; 'here am I send me'. The committee, however replied that they could not take the responsibility of sending a woman alone to such a lonely post'. As this was no inspiration to Miss Barr to search for a husband, she had to look to some other means of coming to India.

And then the opportunity came. On Rev. Ratter's recommendation, Margaret received an invitation from the Gokhale Memorial Girl's school in Calcutta to come and join as resident housemother and a teacher in English and Mathematics. Here at last was an opening and Margaret was the last person to miss it. And so she sailed for India in 1933.

The first person she wanted to meet in India was Mahatma Gandhi. Margaret's elder sister Mary, was already here working with Gandhiji and with her help Margaret reached Wardha and could meet him. She recalls the meeting thus:

Then just before I rose to go I said, 'what do you really want your English friends to do, Bapu?'

Like a flash came the reply, admonitory finger raised, face alight with the famous mischievous toothless smile, 'keep out of jail now. Don't go getting mixed up in politics, find some constructive work to do.'

'And constructive work I suppose means village work,' said I.

'Of course,' he replied, 'what else is worth doing in comparison with serving those who need you most?'

This advice of Gandhiji, Miss Barr maintained to the end, was one of the voices that made the stuff her dream was made of. The other voice was that of Hajom Kissor Singh.

Hajom Kissor Singh (born on 15 June 1865 at Cherrapunji) was by any and all accounts a phenomena. Starting his studies in a Methodist mission school, at fifteen he converted to the calvinistic faith. But like so many others he found it difficult to accept everything that he was told about Christianity and soon his questioning and doubts led him in search of a more satisfying faith. Deep meditation led him independently to develop the main tenents of what form Unitarianism and when through a Brahmo friend he came to learn of Rev. Charles Dall in Calcutta, he eagerly corresponded with him somewhat surprised to know that there were like minded people nearly all over the world and who called themselves

Unitarians. Then in face of the great hostility of his acquaintances in the orthodox faith who called him an 'enemy of the Lord', Hajom Kissor Singh founded the Unitarian Church in the Khasi hills in 1887 with two men and one woman as members. ...Entirely a non-proselytizing faith, the church has nevertheless steadily gained strength till now when it has 27 Churches and nearly five thousand members. Hajom Kissor Singh himself died in 1923 but his work was carried on by his son Ekiman Singh, and above all, Miss Margaret Barr.

It was previously the knowledge of Hajom Kissor Singh's 'little indigenous movement' that had inspired Miss Barr to look towards India and so even while attending to her duties in the Gokhale Memorial School in Calcutta, her eyes remained turned to the east, and she availed of the first school vacation to pay a visit to the Khasi hills "where a white woman had scarcely been seen before and a white Unitarian woman was a nine-days wonder." Finally her Calcutta contract came to an end in November 1935, and after a short holiday in South India, "I tiiil my way bag and baggege in April 1936 to my new sphere of activity in the Khasi Hills".

Here she soon realized that the key to giving a better life to the people of this area lay in education, and education in this region had so far been monopolized by the missionaries who laid emphasis on narrow sectarian and Christian education. Fortunately soon after her arrival she met a kindred spirit in the Director of Education (the last Englishmen to hold the post). She found that he too was interested in liberating Khasi education from the stranglehold of the Missions.

And so early in 1938 her educational experiment began. A school for young children was opened in the Laban Church and a training class for young woman teachers started.

Inspired by the Basic Education concept of Gandhiji, she thus set out the aims of her school:

- i) To produce intelligent and alert villagers with a healthy respect for honest toil and a desire to improve their lot.
- ii) Develop responsible democratic citizenship. -
- iii) Imbue a sense of stewardship- a sacred trust to be used for all and especially for those less fortunate than themselves.
- iv) Create in everyone a regard for the faith of others, refusing for his own faith exclusive claims, yet loyal to his own beliefs; and finding in inter-religious fellowship a unity of spirit.

Although naturally there was strong opposition to her scheme from orthodox elements, but as Rev. Sparham says in his book *Khasi Calls*: "very rapidly word went round that here was a school different from all the rest and methods of teaching that had never even been dreamed of in the Khasi Hills", Even the Inspector of schools, himself a Khasi, visited the school less than six months after it had started reported that he "could never have believed it possible for Khasi school children to be so alert and so happy."

By 1941, the school had a modest building of its own with the assistance granted by the American Unitarians. She called it the Sunderland Memorial School in memory of Dr. J.T. Sunderland - a true friend of India and a life-long companion of Hajom Kissor Singh.

Encouraged by the response of the local people, Miss Barr started another school in 1940 at Malki. And soon yet another school came up to which Lady Reid the wife of the Governor of Assam agreed to lend her name. It remained the Lady Reid Non - Sectarian school when it was taken over by Government in 1949. At about this time this was also taken up with the possibility of "a completely non-proselytising and non-sectarian school", helped by Chandra Nath Roy. How important Miss Barr's contribution was in this field can be gauged by a report Mr G.D.Walker the commissioner of Assam field in 1942 after having visited her school:

"The people of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills are rent with factions, under the old-fashioned sectarian missionaries. Miss Barr's influence is all for unity, and among her friends and supports are several of the leading young intelligentsia not only or even principally among the 'unconverted' but also among those brought up in the narrow Christian missions... And it is from the young people that the spirit of unity and breadth of outlook and sympathy, so boldly needed here, will spread".

So long, Miss Barr's activities had been centred in Shillong and mostly confined to education. Now she felt that it was time for her to move villageward. As she wrote in 1938: "I'm beginning to doubt the wisdom of this idea of bringing village children and young people into Shillong. I am inclined to think that what I must aim is a village centre". An opportunity came when in 1949 Government took over her Lady Reid school and made it the first - Basic Training Centre for the Hills as Miss Barr had desired. She remained the Principal of this school till a suitable substitute was found.

The village that she choose was Kherang, about 25 Kms. from Shillong. By this time she had adopted a Khasi girl as her daughter, and in 1951 both mother and daughter moved to Kherang where Ekiman Singh had got a house ready for her. The work in the village was much more diversified and seeing the utmost necessity of bringing health care to the village, Miss Barr herself took a course in midwifery. Soon under her care the Kherang landscape changed. The sleepy village got a rural centre, where farmers were given basic training in poultry and other fields, a health and maternity centre and a school. *Dr. Lotta Hitschmanova* of Canada of the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada who paid a short visit to Kherang gave a report which highlights the difficulties involved in Miss Barr's work as well as her achievement. She started from Shillong, she says, on her 16 mile path. The first six miles had been made into road that accommodated wheels; hence she could ride in a

bus. In the remaining ten miles of climbing over uncertain and ever-changing footholds she found the first part she "thoroughly enjoyed; the landscape continually changing and the tiny villages with low huts mostly made of thatch, with hordes of children gasping at the sight of us. But as we climbed over those rough stone roads.

Oh. I shall never forget the last three miles. They were an ordeal... I grew silent and desperate.. after those last bends of inhospitable soil with the wind and the sun beating down on us. It is no child's play to reach Kherang, but how much worth my effort. I have watched children's communities all around the world but in many respects Kherang is the most remarkable of them all... The children belong to four different religions and take turns in conducting the services each week; the hymns they sing each morning and night and the prayers they use are taken from all great religions of the world, in perfect Gandhian tradition... Life at Kherang is a happy experience and you hear constant singing and laughter and giggles; these are the first completely happy children I had ever met in an Indian institution. Margaret Barr... has opened these children's eyes to see the wonders of the world... Not unfittingly has this great teacher been called the 'feminine Schweitzer', and you the complete disregard for any physical comfort to know you are in the presence of a singularly unique personality"

Bruce Findlow, an Australian was so fascinated by Kherang that he spent nearly a year there and authored the book Kherang. Seeing Kong Barr there, he rightly says that it was difficult to believe that she was the person described in the year Book of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches as :- "Ed. Girton Coll., Cambridge, 1920-23; Homerton Coll., Cambridge, 1924-25, Manchester Coll., Oxford, 1926-27; B.A. (Cantab., 1923); M.A. (1927); Lay Charge Rutherfordham, 1927-28, Minister 1928-33; Khasi Hills, Assam 1936 -".

Miss Barr had roamed the world over, been in the company of the highest and the mightiest but as she says about her dream and Kharang and its people: "It is here at Kharang in the midst of all

this wild loveliness that it has flowered and fruited. So it is here that I, who hold it, belong".

And that is where she lived and worked till death claimed her on 11 August 1973.

Today the Kharang Rural centre may not have retained its old glory and the educational institutions founded by her may have languished; this often happens when a pioneer leaves the scene. Yet, her words of wisdom on education will live. Today when problems posed not only by the Aligarhs, Faizabads and Muzaffarnagars but by Iran and Iraq, the PLO and Israel burn all around us, we would do well to listen to the feeble and yet the voice of wisdom from the back of beyond which tells us:

"I am convinced that the major reason why the world is cursed with so many narrow-minded and prejudiced people in the matter of religion is sectarian education in childhood... I believe and know that there is another alternative; namely the teaching of Comparative Religion... let me hasten to add that by comparative Religion I do not mean (as is all too often meant) to take one's own religion as a standard with which to measure and compare all the rest, treating them, at best, with a sort of tolerant patronage, and at worst measuring what is best in one's own with what is inferior in others, and so, of course, strengthening prejudices already strong. By Comparative Religion I mean genuine interest in and unbiased study of all the world's great religious traditions. And this can and should be started at a very tender age, by saturating the child's mind with story material, not from one, but from all; till Christians are as familiar with the story of Buddha carrying the little lamb in his arms as they are with Jesus blessing the children; till Muslims know as much about Arjuna's conversations with God as they do about Mohammed's; and until all of them have sensed something of the reality of the experience which led Lao Tse to the assurance that his Immortal Mother Above was bending over him in his last moments and Christ to surrender unhesitatingly to the father into whose hands he committed his spirit."