

## **Uncharted sojourn of life**

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When this memory piece was written, I was almost completing five years' term as the Vice-Chancellor of Bodoland University, Kokrajhar, Assam. Prior to it, I was serving as Officiating Director at the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai, from where I superannuated in March 2019. My professional career is full of adventure and misadventure, risking not just the professional career but also the livelihood of my family. When I look back, I

have no clue to how I succeeded in my professional career as I was not in a position to have career aspiration and expectation under the dire financial circumstances.

I had my early schooling from Nachou Primary School in the present Bishnupur district. Nachou is the village where my parents lived when I was born, and then they migrated to Imphal where my father worked as labourer, had worked as Chowkidar during the construction of Imphal College and mother as vendor. I attended many primary schools in Tiddim Road, Chingmeirong localities, including Mahatma Gandhi School, Nagamapal, depending on the place where my father would work. As such I did not have the opportunity of regular formal primary schooling. I remember having stood first in some annual examinations at the primary level. At last my father got a peon's post in the then Tombisana High School and had the first luxury of staying in the school quarter after spending early childhood in *khola* of contractors and small rented houses in different locations.

I studied from class III to X in Tombisana High School but was marred by prolonged treatment of injured right leg and had to spend largely in hospital. I attended classes sporadically as and when there was relief from the treatment, mostly self-studied in hospital bed and my father used to take me on his back for examinations till class VI. I got cured after treatment in Jorhat Mission Hospital and started attending classes regularly from class VII. I also remembered securing second or third positions in some annual examinations while in high school. I lost my father in 1972, a year before I appeared for matriculation examination. I got high second class in class X examination which helped me to get admission in D.M. College of Science and I gradually picked up the tempo of education. My mother as a vendor struggled hard to support for payment of my college fee and buying books. I used to go to my elder brother's friends for borrowing old books with them and borrowed books from classmates. I got moral boost after I passed B.Sc. in 1977 with distinction. It had ignited the dream of higher study but family financial distress was still at the back of mind. I spent a year taking tuition and saving money for pursuing higher study. In the meantime, my elder brother got a job in Indian Navy, which brightened my dream of higher education.

My dream of pursuing higher study was realized when I was nominated by the Government of Manipur for pursuing M.Sc. at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) and awarded state merit scholarship for 1978-80. My mother and elder brother financed for my PG study. I considered getting admission for M.Sc. in AMU as God's blessing as all text and reference books were

abundantly available for students in the central and departmental libraries. I did my preparation of notes after the classes and readings only in the libraries as it opened from 7 am to 10 pm at that time and closed only three days in a year. For the first time in my academic career I got star marks in 21 out of 24 papers of M.Sc. and got first class first position in the 1978-80 batch. I was told by the faculties of Department of Statistics, AMU that I was the first in the department till that time to have such achievement. I had to forego fellowship offered by the department and return home to look for job.

I got my first job as Assistant Director in the Directorate of Statistics and Economics selected by Manipur Public Service Commission in March 1982. I gradually developed interest in teaching and research when I encountered applications of my learning in Statistics in planning and developments while working in this department. I left the regular job and joined as Lecturer in Statistics on ad-hoc at Imphal College in 1983. In those days, a lecturer had to take 4 or 5 classes of 45 minutes a day, including pre-university and undergraduate courses. I could enjoy my days in the college but felt inferior and envy of senior faculties in the college with Ph.D. In 1985 during the summer vacation of the college, I went to find university and suitable guide for Ph.D, including Banaras Hindu University and Tirupati University, and finally I landed in getting admission in pre-Ph.D. programme (Certificate in Population Studies (CPS)) at the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai with a Government of India fellowship of Rs.350/- pm at that time as the institute had no provision of taking direct to Ph.D. I had neither taken leave from the college nor informed my mother and wife, but did not return home. Later I sent an inland letter to my wife which reached home after a month. I secured star marks in many subjects in the Pre-Ph.D. (CPS) and secured first class first position and got admitted in Ph.D. with ICSSR (Indian Council of Social Science Research) fellowship of Rs. 800/- pm in 1986. When I returned home after one year, my daughter did not recognize me and she refused to come to me. My wife was not happy with my decision as the financial condition was very bad with two children and there was leakage in our thatched house but my mother supported and encouraged me saying that she would look after my family. When I called on the then Principal of Imphal College to submit retrospective resignation he suggested me to join, giving an application to convert my one-year absence from duty to leave without salary. But I was determined to complete Ph.D. and return to Mumbai after submitting resignation letter. During my Ph.D. I hardly wrote letters to my family and my younger brother wrote letters blaming me for putting our mother under hardship to support my family. I

submitted a draft of Ph.D. thesis for corrections to my supervisor Prof. K. B. Pathak in December 1988 and came back home.

One day when I met Dr. Irom Tomba Singh of Department of Mathematics, Manipur University in the market. He informed me that the Manipur university was opening the Department of Statistics and the recruitment might be going on. I immediately took mini bus to Manipur University and approached Dr. B. M. Singh, the then Head of Department for information of available positions in the department. He told me that he had been asked to appoint two Research Associates to start the department and all were recruited. I then approached Prof. H. N. K. Sarma, the then Dean of Science, who took me to Prof. K. J. Mahale, the then Vice-Chancellor, Manipur University. He offered me Research Associate position after a short interview and said that only two regular posts of Assistant Professors would be advertised and I had to compete with them. Thus I got an opportunity to join and start my academic career in the Department of Statistics, Manipur University under the headship of Dr. B. M. Singh. I got selected as Assistant Professor when it was advertised in 1992. Thereafter I took three months' study leave and went back to Mumbai to complete Ph.D. I became Associate Professor in 1997. All three regular faculties of the department at that time, were largely spent on course development and teaching. No substantial research could not be done during my service in Manipur University, except for a few publications in national level journals and a project funded by Department of Science & Technology, Manipur. I had successfully guided three Ph.D. during my period in Manipur University. I had some differences with matter related to administration and I decided to shift my workplace.

Yet another phase of life started when I joined in 2002 as Associate Professor at my alma mater the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai. I got opportunity of working in competitive academic environment and got taste of engaging in teaching, research and internally financed projects. I got a Hewlett Packard summer fellowship to participate in a workshop at the East West Centre, Honolulu, Hawaii where I was mentored by Professor Andrew Mason, University of Hawaii and Professor Ronald Lee, University of California, Berkeley. The workshop was about introducing age into the national accounts and assessing the interplay of public and private monetary support system from the perspective of individuals and it was referred to as National Transfer Accounts (NTA). After the workshop I was inducted in a project on studying Intergenerational Public and Private Support System in Asia with Professor Naohiro Ogawa based

at Nihon University Population Research Institute (NUPRI) and funded by UNFPA, Bangkok. For this project I had attended workshops and seminars to present papers based on the project in Tokyo three times during 2006-08. Thereafter I became a member of a Global Research Network on National Transfer Accounts and continuously got projects funded by Bill-Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), MacArthur Foundation, UNFPA, Bangkok and International Development research Centre (IDRC), Canada. I also had opportunities to collaborate with the University of Cape Town, South Africa and University of Berkeley, San Diego. I also got fellowships from different funding agencies to attend summer workshops at the East West Centre, Honolulu, Hawaii four times in 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2010. I visited USA, Japan, South Korea, Brazil, South Africa, Senegal, Vietnam, France, Spain, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Cambodia for attending and presenting papers in NTA international conferences, and all were financially supported by East West Centre, Honolulu. On the basis of my work on NTA, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) offered to write a commissioned paper on demographic dividend in India and it was included in Asian Development Outlook 2011. I was once invited by a prominent politician at his official residence at Delhi to give insights of demographic dividend for India.

The nature of work, responsibility and engagement at IIPS, Mumbai got reoriented when I got Professor in direct recruitment in April 2006. I was assigned major academic and administrative responsibilities in the capacity of Coordinator for Master Courses for management of students and faculties for adherence to workloads & academic calendar, Research Coordinator to look after the internally funded research projects, member secretaries of board of studies, member secretary of academic council and remained HoD of Department of Mathematical Demography & Statistics. IIPS used to undertake many projects funded by Ministry of Health & Family Welfare (MoHFW), UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank, BMGF, IMF etc. and I was among the principal investigators of some of those projects. I had to travel length and breadth of the country for training, supervision and monitoring of projects like District Level Households & Facility Survey, Global Adults Tobacco Survey and National Family Health Survey. I had travelled to more than 500 villages and had stayed in many remote villages in all states in the northeast. On the basis of my expertise in designing, training and implementation of national level large scale demographic and health surveys I was appointed as Consultant to Myanmar by UNICEF to provide assistance to Myanmar Government for conducting Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey third round (MICS-III). I had to visit frequently and stayed in Yangon and Nay Pyi Taw, the new capital of Myanmar during

2008-09. My time in IIPS, Mumbai was academically most productive period. I guided dissertations of fifteen Ph.D. students, fourteen M.Phil. students and twenty-six post-graduate students including two Vietnam and one Kazakhstan students while working at IIPS, Mumbai. About eighty research papers were published and of it about sixty-seven were indexed by Scopus, PubMed and Thompson-Reuter. My publications were jointly with students. I was also in the team of collaborative research with Dr. Soumya Swaminathan, the then Director of ICMR & Director General of Medical Research, Dr. Lalit Dandona, Public Health Foundation of India and others resulting to publications in Lancet. ***I authored two reference books on statistics and method of survey.***

I was appointed as Officiating Director of International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai in March 2017. It had given the opportunity to be member of various committees of Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation (MoSPI), Registrar General of India (RGI), Niti Aayog, National Institute for Health & Family Welfare (NIHFW) and Gandhigram Rural Institute, Madurai and was associated with academic bodies of Tata Institute of Social Science and Department of Statistics of KJ Somaiya Institute of Management. Signing of MoU for the institute with University of Berkeley, San Diego for gender studies, with UNICEF for education of migrant workers and with ICMR for mapping of malaria incidence and getting approval of new academic building from BMC, Mumbai and clearing pending scale promotion of staffs were among the notable works during my period of directorship.

The age of retirement in IIPS Mumbai is 62 years. My retirement was due in March 2019. Sometime in the second half of 2018, I started applying for professor and vice-chancellor posts. Out of it I got call letter to appear for the interaction session in November 2018 for selection of Vice-Chancellor of Bodoland University, Kokrajhar, Assam. A kind of unplanned spontaneous thought came in my mind and at the end of the interaction session said “Please do not underestimate my strength on the basis of my physical appearance”. I got an unexpected call from Raj Bhavan, Assam and conveyed my selection for the post in December 31, 2018.

I turned to administration after joining as the Vice-Chancellor, Bodoland University on February 25, 2019, taking extra ordinary leave from IIPS Mumbai. The university was established in 2009 by an Act of the Legislative Assembly of Assam and I was the third Vice-Chancellor. I found a lots of opportunities and challenges. Opportunities because back in 2019 it was not in the proper

shape of a university and challenges because no adequate funding provisions from the state and local governments. At that time the university did not have 12B concurrence from the UGC mainly due to the vacancies of faculty and statutory officer positions and lack of basic infrastructure. Only a few projects sponsored by ICMR, DST and BTC were housed in the university. There was only one Professor in the Department of English and no Professors in the other 16 academic departments while all posts of statutory officers manned by deputy registrars as in charge. Only 25 private and non-provincialized degree colleges, 4 DIET & one Government Teachers Training College, one private and one-provincialized B.Ed. colleges were affiliated to the university. The total enrollment in the aforesaid affiliated colleges were less than 3000 and 50 students each in the aforesaid affiliated B.Ed. colleges.

I set my aim for obtaining 12B recognition from the UGC as the first goal, followed by working for first cycle of NAAC accreditation. With this in mind as many as 6 faculties were given promotion to Professor and 29 Assistant Professors were given stage promotion under CAS and some more faculties and some statutory officers including Controller of Examinations and Finance Officer were soon appointed in October 2019. This had enabled Bodoland University to be concurred 12B status from the UGC. The first ever convocation of the university after its establishment was held in March 2020, followed by the second convocation in April 2022. I faced a tough time in managing not only in managing academic sessions but also in caring for the overall safety of students and employees of the university during COVID19 pandemic.

After obtaining 12B concurrence from the UGC, twenty-two provincialized and one government colleges were to be transferred back from Gauhati University to Bodoland University. As a result, the number of enrollment in undergraduate courses in the affiliated colleges had to be increased to 18000 in 2023 from a mere 3000 in 2019. The University now has modest strength of faculties with 110 faculties of which 12 are Professors and 13 are Associate Professors, including faculties with Post Doc from Oxford University and Universities in USA. Despite advertisements twice for 30 faculty posts of professor and associate professor levels, could not be filled up due to the dearth of applicants. My constant endeavor has been to build a vibrant academic and research environment in the university by recruiting faculties with good credentials and motivate faculties for publications in quality indexed peer review academic journals. Faculties publication in peer reviewed academic journals indexed by Web of Science, Thompson Reuters, Scopus and UGC

CARE list has increased more than tenfold as compared to 2019. Many funding agencies including NEC, BTC, DBT, DST-SERB, UNICEF, ICMR, ASTEC and ICSSR are now being undertaken by the faculties of the University. Fund for presentation of papers in international seminars/conferences was earmarked and fund for development of departmental library were provided to the academic departments from time to time. More fund was allocated for subscription of journals and procurement of books and RFID system was installed in the Central Library. Many pending infrastructure developments projects could be completed, which include new Arts Building, 6 units Officer Quarter, 12 units of Teaching Faculty Quarter, Animal House, Plant Tissue Culture Lab, Botanical Garden and University Guest House.

Two lessons I have learnt as the Vice-Chancellor of a state university in the sixth schedule area under the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) of Assam. First, it is much more challenging than thought of, to make good employable students of tribal and under-privileged students who were deprived of quality education at their foundation level. On top of teaching, frequent mentoring, counselling and one-to-one regular interactions on personal, social and economic distresses, are the key to sustain good education among the tribal population. Secondly, moral supports of the state government at all levels and respects for the autonomy of the university, are the important points, for conducive campus environment and healthy growth of the university. But it is hard to come by, and often not so much importance is given to it. At the same time, giving up and letting to happen without fencing with courage, shall lead to self-defeat of the role of the Vice-Chancellor.

At length I would like to caution all budding academicians and educationists, not to take an uncharted journey, as the academic, social and geo-political scenarios now are different from my time.