

The Chandra Nursery Centenary (1910 - 2010) - a tribute



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It was the year 2001, when in Kathmandu to print my book on rural technology *Vikasko Goreto Grameen Proudhyogiki – Kam Dam Dher Gyanka Satheek Sujhauharu* at the Shakya Offset Press, an idea struck why not a CD-rom version too along with its deluxe, hardbound and paperback editions. I could soon find the technical support in *E-motion*, a PATA award-winner for its Nepal Tourism Board promo that year, while for the voice back up *Sagarmatha FM* had Sugam Pokhrel and Prabha Adhikari ready to help and record just in one go from the script prepared that morning. This CD-rom is now the first ever for a Nepali book the world over.

That fine morning it dawned upon me that the Chandra Nursery should get and be given the credit for making Sikkim what it is today because of the sheer foresight and farsightedness of one and the only one - the great and brightest jewel Chandrabir Newar (1837-1900). He along with his brother Laxmidas from Bhaktapur nee Bhatgaon in Nepal, had landed in Darjeeling in the year 1851 escaping the *Kot Parv* when the Ranas had conspired evil designs rather than pay the debt they owed to them. They had fortune smiling on them with grocery business started selling *gundruk* flourishing. They had to dispose of a sword, their only heirloom in possession, to invest and run the business at *Gundri Bazar*, the then hub of the town came to be later named after this item. They were invited by the power that be then to this tiny Himalayan Kingdom Sikkim nestled in the foothills of the mighty Mount Kanchenjunga. It was still a common practice here to sow paddy by digging a hole in the field with the help of a stick. He started human settlement clearing deep forests full of dangerous wild animals amidst strong and wild protest from a section of the society. This led in 1872 and again in 1878 to scuffle to be settled on the intervention of the British, since many amongst them were in their support too for the good works they had done bringing in the development and prosperity to the otherwise barren uninhabited forest land, only on the 14th April 1880 in the presence of the Deputy Commissioner Paul at Rhenock.

Chandrabir Newar a strict law-enforcer, who collected for the Durbar revenues accumulated unpaid over a decade, was also into philanthropy. He understood well the role that a temple played in binding together a society so as to build *Sri Sri Sri Dhaneshwar Mahadev Shivalaya Mandir* at the site, which the fable retold since ages say that he dreamt of some sage showing him the same spot, where from some stone idol was to be later found and installed. Stories of this temple being built by somebody else later on, circulated by a few, does not hold water and could only be the figment of their imagination as the biography (unpublished manuscript) by late Pandit Devi Prasad Sharma, father of *Kanchhabajey* Pandit Deoraj Sharma of Pachekhani, circa-1929 mention the truth.

It was during the same period that Chandrabir Newar thought the need to have a *Rhenock Newar Guthi* (association) for his fellow citizens which could play a significant role unifying them. Senior most of the *Guthi* was entrusted with the responsibility of managing the affairs of the *Mandir*. This *Guthi* exists even to this day there at Rhenock that still render help to the people in distress or when someone is dead for marriage rituals besides other matters of the society.

The adage “Like father like son” proved correct, his sons carried on the torch starting *Chandra Dramatic Club* named after him at Rhenock that saw this trend later spreading over to other parts of Sikkim and neighbouring Darjeeling as early as in 1930s. A practice started by Chandrabir Newar now that is a tradition taking out every year the procession on the *Gai Jatra* day in memory of the departed soul in past one year religiously even till this day could find Rhenock to be the only place outside Nepal to hold it the world over!

The British honored him for the exemplary brevity declaring him the chieftain of the society with the title of 'Pradhan'. They, in turn, shared this rare honour, with the rest of his kinsman giving credit of this accomplishment as that of their whole community instead, without whose support it would not have been possible for him to reach so far all alone. As a result, we now see most of the Newars in Sikkim and Darjeeling write this surname of Pradhan. Even the Shakya have adopted this surname. So much so, this adoption is now even beyond one's perception to find even others assuming the title - thus reducing the ethos and identity of the community itself.

Another honour the British bestowed on Chandrabir Newar was that of 'Bahadur Shamsher' for the extraordinary valor and dedication they showed. He passed on this honor to his two sons thus naming Ratna Bahadur and Durga Shamsher.

Being given the rights in 1868 to extract ores excavating copper mines, they minted till 1891AD coins with inscriptions *Sri Sri Sri Sikkim Sarkar* and *Sri Sri Sri Sikkimpati Maharaj* as well that earned them and their family the title 'Taksari'. Dr. Parasmani Pradhan, eminent educationist of the period declared Taksari Chandrabir Newar a jewel (*vibhuti*) and mentioned of this Chandra Nursery - started by his two sons, Ratna Bahadur Pradhan and Durga Shamsher Pradhan - included in his textbooks and got approved by the Board of Education to be taught in the schools thus spreading the message far and wide for wide knowledge and benefit of the general public.

Keshab C Pradhan's memoir

In his memoir, *The Life and Times of a Plantsman in the Sikkim Himalayas*, Keshab C Pradhan mentions of *My Uncles' Chandra Nursery – Pioneers in the Plant Business* giving a beautiful account. “The two sons of Chandrabir from his fourth wife (Bhima Devi - writer), Ratna Bahadur and Durga Shamsher started the plant business in their vast lands extending to around 80 acres at Rhenock East Sikkim in 1910. It is till a mystery as to how the idea of trading in plants dawned on them.” Mentioning different versions for possibility of going in for a nursery for plants, “the Chandra Nursery got a boost as the elder brother Rai Saheb Ratna Bahadur in charge of Rhenock Estate and also a member of the State Council had an excellent rapport with

the Political Officers, several Governors and their guests from the UK visited Sikkim frequently. Their contact further boosted the interest in the plant business especially orchids which at that time, were highly priced among the British aristocracy.

“While the elder brother Ratna Bahadur specialized in orchids his younger brother Durga Shamsher learnt the art of growing and hybridizing garden plants like bougainvilleas, dahlias and gerberas (and chrysanthemums and roses too - writer). A large number of garden plants were named after the royal families of Sikkim and the Ranas of Nepal as they happened to be good customers. Some of them were also named after family members and workers in their establishment.

“They were not botanists by genes nor education. How they imbibed so rich a knowledge that would put any botanist to shame is still a mystery. Their only source of reference came from two momentous books. *The Rhododendrons of Sikkim Himalayas* by J.D. Hooker (1854) and *The Orchids of Sikkim* by King and Pantling (1898) besides their cousin and my father Rai Saheb Bhim Bahadur, Forest Manager.

“Ratna Bahadur had a place to stay at Gangtok, being a landlord-cum-councillor. The Chandra Nursery reached a peak in 1930s (With proceeds from one single supply they could build a two-storied bungalow to serve as the office complex of the Chandra Nursery in 1937 – my late father used to mention me - author). It was a household name all over the world, from Buckingham Palace and Balmoral Castle to the orchid house of Sanders and the Viceregal Lodge in Delhi. Their Visitor's Book became a Who's Who, from Governors to Maharajahs, eminent botanists like Sir George Taylor. The visit of Her Excellency the Marchioness of Linlithgow (wife of Viceroy of India) on December 12, 1940 was the high point of their establishment.

“Initially my uncles did not know the process of labelling, packing and forwarding. So they ordered orchids from nurseries in the UK and Australia and herbaceous plants from Duncan and Davies in New Zealand. The consignment took three months to reach them by sea. The moment parcels arrived, there was a good gathering of all concerned from the *malies* (gardeners) to the owner. They checked every detail and then emulated the process. It worked. Since cardboard boxes were not available, they devised woven bamboo baskets of the correct size and shape acceptable to the postal system. Rhenock Post Office was upgraded to handle metre-long parcels. (a Telegraph Office too was functional there at Rhenock in those days even - author). Then onwards there was no looking back. Ratna Bahadur had an able hand in his son-in-law Surjyaman Shresta (Suryaman Singh Joshi, whose work could still be seen around the Buddha statue near the Tashiling Secretariat in Gangtok - writer) – a pleasant personality and a gifted garden designer.

“Those were the glorious years, and it was this single establishment, rather an institution, that was responsible for spreading the name of Sikkim far and wide across the globe. So much so that when my cousin, Mohan Pratap, former Chief Secretary and son of Ratna Bahadur during his administrative training in Oxford UK in 1960 lined up along with students from other Commonwealth countries to greet the Queen Mother, he was lost for words about describing his

country of origin assuming Her Majesty wouldn't know where Sikkim was. Her Majesty excitedly replied “Oh you are from Sikkim – the land of rhododendrons?” Even today the curators at the premier botanical gardens in UK and the continent mention with pride that the primulas and rhododendrons growing in their gardens mostly come through the Chandra Nursery in Sikkim in the Himalayas. It was a mecca of plants and they imported plants of all types, which they thought had commercial prospects.”

Pradhan mentions of his group tour to Hanover attending the International Rhododendron Conference in May 1992, when he visited Elizabeth Hobbie's Rhododendron Park spread over 300 acres where most of the plants were from seeds of Himalayan Rhododendrons supplied by the Chandra Nursery and also of such random encounters occurred at various places around the world.

Acknowledging its role as the mentor, he further writes, “Most of the eligible male members of the family who worked in various sections of the garden at the Chandra Nursery, from orchids to bulbous plants, seeds and fruit plants eventually turned out to be accomplished nurserymen and set up a base in the neighbouring town of Kalimpong in West Bengal. Gardeners from Nepal and Bhutan were trained for the royal courts. Even the veteran Nepali Congress politician, Ganeshman Singh worked (incognito, I hear) in the garden for some years. This fact became known to my uncles only after he left the garden.

Ganeshman Singh in Sikkim

As regards the veteran leader Ganeshman Singh working in the Chandra Nursery, let us hear straight from the horse's mouth as told in *Ma Krishnabhadur Typist Bane* (I became Krishna Bahadur Typist) from his biography *Mero kathaka panaharu* (Pages from my story) translated for the benefit of the readers:

“Jaishankerlal's in-laws were in Sikkim. He would write a letter to his father-in-law and I was to go and stay there – so, I went to Sikkim. I reached satisfied that I would be in an area and amongst Nepali-speaking populace. The address to which I was directed that was the Kothi or residence of Rai Saheb! He was the Rai Saheb of Rhenock estate in Sikkim. Actually, a Rai Saheb is equivalent to a big landowner with immense landed property, but the post had a different stature/status during the British regime. His personality was awesome and he was elegant and refined as well. I once asked him why he had Shamsher for his name (he might have asked this to his brother Durga Shamsher - writer), he narrated me an anecdote from his father's memoir.

“According to this, his ancestors had reached Sikkim from Dhulikhel (Bhatgaon to be correct - author). They had to travel to and fro Nepal frequently. It was during one such journey that he was much harassed by the people at the border while Shamshers were treated with respect. On his return home he thought it better to name himself too a Shamsher.” (Late Durga Shamsher's third son, Bidhan Chandra Prakash Pradhan, has a different version to share and narrates that Shamsher Bahadur was an honour bestowed on the family by the British for their exemplary bravery and

feat in repulsing the aggressive forces as also mentioned in the beginning above -writer)

“There was a Nursery belonging to Rai Saheb. This was regarded as the best or second in Asia in those days. Its name was the Chandra Nursery. I joined there as a Typist. Being his son-in-law’s friend, he used to respect and treat me well. Other members of the family were also cordial and I was taken as one amongst them. Whatever be the treatment from the family, I had given my introduction as the Typist only. Thus my name even was changed while in Sikkim. This name was given to me by Jai Shanker Lal Shresta. While writing to his father-in-law he just wrote, 'Krishna Bahadur Pradhan from Birgunj.'

“Thus I went to become Typist Krishna Bahadur Pradhan of Chandra Nursery.”

“Thus I, a person who had never touched a typewriter with his fingers, had to remain stay in Sikkim for a few days. There was no problem but in stead, I being a son-in-law's friend, was given treatment befitting a son-in-law. However, I could not be happy there. I had to spend a sort of disciplined life, without any opportunity to share political thoughts and no one to discuss the situation and to contact the people from Nepal, I started feeling uncomfortable with my Sikkim sojourn. So, I decided to leave Sikkim though it was an appropriate and the right place from the point of view of security.

“Thus my name now became Krishna Bahadur Pradhan. I was known by that name until I was in India. Once in 1950 Jawahar Lal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, also advised me to keep that name in stead of Ganeshman.” (Courtesy: Mathwar Singh in *Punrjagaran Saptahik* Volume 1 No. 32 dated 2046 Kartik 08 Tuesday Kathmandu, Nepal)

My father once told me of the episode. Ganeshman Singh, calling in hushed tone from behind in a busy market place in Calcutta, to find him in rags and tatters dressed like a porter seen in the hills. My mother tells me that none in the family knew even though her cousin sister Pratima married to Tulsilal on a holiday from Calcutta knew and recognized him but his identity was not disclosed until Krishna Bahadur Typist nay Ganeshman Singh left the place. He used to spend his nights in the outskirts of the Chandra Nursery in a room of the Bhima Devi Memorial School started by the Rai Saheb Ratna Bahadur Pradhan in memory of his deceased mother. My mother was a student there along with her sisters before going to St. Joseph's Convent in Kalimpong, where late Shankha Gurung, wife of the former chief minister Bhim Bahadur Gurung, was among her friends.

I had the rare opportunity of meeting this great man Ganeshman Singh once about a decade back in a social gathering where he too was present to mourn the death of a relative of mine, Shyamraj Rajbhandari in Kathmandu. About to leave and nothing more than just introduction as Jai Shanker Lal Shresta's son from Sikkim.

I understand that Mathwar Singh is working on a memorial in honor of this Supreme Leader Ganeshman Singh(1915-1997), who was the first Asian to receive the United Nations Human Rights Award and to bag United States Peace Run Prize in 1990. He is the only person ever in the History of Nepal to refuse to become the Prime Minister when requested by the monarch and supported by the people and is known as the Father of Democracy in Nepal.

Recollecting the days past, my father often used to narrate me about him accompanying his father-in-law in botanical excursions to high altitudes of Sikkim in Kupup-Sherathang near Sikkim-Tibet border and how sharp was his uncle-in-law Durga Shamsher's memory that though bedridden and lacking the sense of sight in his late eighties, he could direct his men about orchid plants or fruits/seeds on trees around the area found in the season. It was during one of these trips to Gnathang that Rai Saheb Ratna Bahadur Pradhan - a naturalist - found and identified a new variety of cobra lily that was later named by a Kew botanist C.E.C. Fischer as *Arisaema pradhanii* in his honor. I remember of writing an article on this alpine plant for the magazine *Yeti* that I edited and brought out from Yeti Exchange the pen friendship club we started at Birgunj, Nepal in 1964. My cousin Ramesh Kumar Pradhan, the first agriculture graduate and a Naini alumni from Sikkim and a pioneer in tissue culture of orchids, had contributed one on the endangered *Paphiopedilum fairrieanum*, Lost Lady's Slipper found here in Sikkim. The proof in color painting of the *Arisaema pradhanii* the family possessed, was later found to have disappeared from the living room of the Woodland Nursery to adorn the wall somewhere else as it was taken by a family photographer friend never to be returned. Some might have made a fortune out of this discovery as well, who knows!

Tea and coffee plantations were taken up for household use and the garden is still providing the family with tea of unique flavour and taste. Some of the exotic trees, like camphor, eucalyptus, traveller's plant, *Nepenthes khasiana*, Ashok, magnolia, etc. besides wild fruit trees like *rudraksh*, *lapsi*, *triphala* (*harra-barra-jaiphal*), *kapur*, *tejpatta*, *litchi*, *safeda* or *chikoo*, star fruit, guava, jack fruit, pine apple, *amla*, *haluwaved*, etc. could still be seen in the Woodland Nursery which once used to be the Chandra Nursery. Besides introducing many seasonal flowers, citrus fruits were too here and later exported while oranges were sent to Calcutta. Grown in abundance fruits like oranges, guava, pine apples, etc. were converted into jam and jellies while juice was also bottled. Fond of good things in life, they used to get their tinned provisions imported and from Rajniklal of Calcutta regularly. They had Aladdin brand kerosene lamps and room heaters from London for incandescent light as electricity was a far distant thing then. Pomp and grandeur came naturally. No wonder if four goats were consumed in a gathering that lasted for ten days for settling the family partition - quoting his late father late Kamal Prasad Pradhan, Sailesh Chandra Pradhan of Sumbhuk mentioned me once. All the varieties of sweets made in home had to be laid on the table and served to the visitors that made Rai Saheb Ratna Bahadur happy and contented. The guests had then remarked rather in a jovial way whether the Chandra Nursery had started manufacturing sugar even!

Rai Saheb Ratna Bahadur Pradhan was fond of collecting coins and stamps. We as children used to see plenty of them nicely and neatly packed in bundles for each type and kind. Today we are dazed to know all these lost out of sheer ignorance and negligence too. Even the fate of the stamp albums brought out to sun one summer day I chanced upon to see during my childhood is not known. Might have gone to some unscrupulous hands perhaps!

A florist of repute with membership in various national and international organizations and close to nature by now, late Durga Shamsher turned an avid follower of naturopathy and brought out a

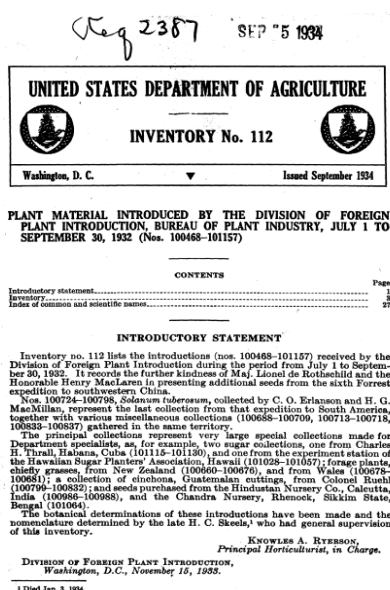
booklet in his last days for the common benefit. We too have benefited of such practice still followed by his octogenarian widow Jamunamaya from the therapy of virgin soil and water exposed to sunlight. He manufactured pencil, hand-made papers and colours from the wild flowers/seeds. He was a keen photographer and developed photographs himself.

My maternal grand uncle Durga Shamsher had blessed and gifted me with some Sikkim coins made earlier in bits and later minted by his father Taksari Chandrabir Newar in 1883, out of which only one is left with me now. Some coins along with a few stamps from my collection were passed on and shared with young Ganesh Kumar Pradhan, a cousin and my student in Rhenock Government school in 1960s. Imbided thus, he has developed through personal initiative his collection, converting his sons too into this hobby, to start a museum in the name of his deceased parents, *Ram Gauri Sangrahalaya* at Rhenock. Half a century hence, they have been spreading the message of philately and numismatics from this hamlet besides display of whatever available archival collection of whatever if of interest, like currency notes, historical documents, manuscripts, books, driftwood and antiques there. Recently he wanted me to find out about the recent US Postage Stamp on the Hindu theme.

Dr. Bal Gopal Shrestha has made a passing reference of the Chandra Nursery while narrating the business acumen of the family in his 2004-study on the Newars of Sikkim that also appeared in the *Newah Vijnana* Journal of Newar Studies issue Number 6 / 2007-08.

Surfing the net

Curiosity to know more led me surfing the archive in the internet making me grateful with many on the Chandra Nursery besides the Pradhan's CobraLily reproduced for the benefit of our readers below.



101064. CINCHONA CALISAYA
Wedd Eubiaceae.

From British India. Seeds purchased from the Chandra Nursery, Rhenock, Sikkim State, Bengal. Received August 29, 1932.

A tropical shrub with opposite, oblong or oblonganceolate, shining green leaves, and terminal panicles of small white and pink flowers. It is one of the sources of quinine and is native to Bolivia.

INDIAN- ORUHIDS AND CALADIUMS.
12 sorts Grand Dendrobiums 38/; 12 sorts Showy Orchids, 28/; 6 sorts Cypripediums. 24/; 6 sorts Cymbidiums, 24/; 24 different named Caladiums, 24/; hundred mixed, 30/; 40 Achimenes, in 20 named vars., 13/; 12 Eremurus Himalaicus. 30/; 12 Frittlarla Imperialis, 24/. Post Free. Cash.-New Catalogues of Orchids, Caladiums., Seeds, Free. CHANDRA NURSERY, Post Rhenock, Sikkim 31, Indian."

One among them is - Introduction Statement signed by Knowles A. Ryerson, Principal Horticulturist, in Charge dated November 15, 1933 of *United States Department of Agriculture Inventory No. 112* Washington D.C. Issued in September 1934 about the Plant Material introduced by the Division of Foreign Plant Production, Bureau of Plant Industry, July 1 to September 30, 1932 among others seeds as the item no. 101064 purchased from the Chandra Nursery, Rhenock, Sikkim State, Bengal.(see below)

Another showed an advertisement in *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane, Qld. : 1933-1954), Saturday 18 November 1933, page 19 National Library where figure 31 after Sikkim is used - CHANDRA NURSERY, Post Rhenock, Sikkim 31, Indian."

Where we stand

In a family gathering on April 18, 2010, Keshab C Pradhan raised the issue suggesting the need to commemorate and celebrate 100 years of the Chandra Nursery organizing some festival of sort. Later, Sailesh Chandra Pradhan had to suggest for this, the great day when the pact was signed by Taksari Chandrabir Newar in 1880. On his request, I prepared and provided him an article on Rai Saheb Ratna Bahadur Pradhan as the pioneer in capacity building in Sikkim for the annual *Champ Gurans*.

To sum up, I propose that some devoted scholar should come forward and take up further detailed study for some serious research on the Chandra Nursery that would fetch him/her a PhD as the reward. Keshab C Pradhan lamented thus:

“It was unfortunate that the nursery went downhill, after the demise of the elder brother in the mid-1940s. The younger brother took over the business but he was not into orchids. The business was divided between two families as the Chandra Nursery and the Woodland Nursery.

“The Chandra Nursery of yesteryears is in a deplorable condition. All the Pradhan offspring took up government jobs. The vast garden is overrun with jungles of weeds, uncared for and almost abandoned. No tangible and concerted effort for the revival could be made as the brothers migrated from Sikkim to India, then to Nepal and Australia. This made any combined strategy for revival even more difficult. But I still hope some miracle takes place and someone from the family chain comes up to revive it, digging out the old historical records and carrying forward the good work. It is a historical heritage garden. A pride to the State and country as a whole and too precious to let it go astray.”

To conclude in tribute, may I share that not even two generations past down the line, people have forgotten the jewel in our own home turf. Are we so mean and ungrateful even to acknowledge and give due credit for their unparalleled and rare contribution to the Sikkimese society? We still benefit with meals out of the crop from the field inherited. Sometimes I feel guilty somewhere deep in my heart - could it be why our community is not in itself but through an awkward phase that could make the departed soul difficult even in the heaven!

Finally, befitting the centenary as our profound tribute, Rachna help me put both The Chandra Nursery and the Woodland Nursery in the world map courtesy Google Earth.



Pradhan's Cobra Lily *Arisaema pradhanii*
source: www.Phoenixperennial.com



Taksari Chandrabir Newar(1837-1900)



Rai Saheb Ratna Bahadur Pradhan (1886 - 1946)



Ganeshman Singh (1915-1997)



Jai Shanker Lal Shrestha(1917- 2003)

Currently visiting their daughter Rachna in Exton Pennsylvania, Rajiva Shanker Shrestha was invited to attend as the Special Guest and speak on the Newars of Sikkim during the 9th Convention of the Newah Organization of America on May 30, 2010 in Potomac Maryland USA when his latest *Newar: Haami Yastai Chhaun* was released.

*Also published in **Talk Sikkim** August 2010*