

The Story of Seed Potatoes*

(As narrated by Shri Sudhir Ghosh)

The anecdote carried here is a typical example of how Gandhiji treated a matter thoroughly. Nothing was small for him. This anecdote consists of an incident of a few poor farmers from the villages of Bengal who shared their difficulties with Gandhiji about getting good seed material for cultivating potatoes on their field. Gandhiji felt convinced of their need and the urgency involved and he put his ace emissary Sudhir Ghosh on the job of getting seed potatoes. The anecdote shows to what extent Shri Sudhir Ghosh had to go to procure the needed seed potatoes. At long last the potatoes were found and passed on to the needy farmers. Gandhiji saw to it that the mission was fulfilled in time. A good example for all of us to remember.

N. Th.

For Gandhiji, life consists of 'little' 'little' things, but each 'little' thing is significant. This story is another example of this. During his six-week tour of Bengal and Assam in December 1945, he held important discussions with the Governor. In the midst of this happened 'the drama of seed potatoes'? This incidence brings into focus again the Gandhi personality that he never considered anything concerning people trivial enough to be brushed aside.

There was some difficulty in finalizing a press statement to be released to the press on his interviews with the Governor.

But Gandhiji was unconcerned. He was not interested in talking politics either with anyone else. His only desire during the six weeks of his Bengal-Assam visit was to be in the midst of the people, the villagers, and to give them whatever comfort and succour his presence meant to them.

Large groups of the villagers used to come every day to see him at the Ashram at Sodepur, north of Calcutta, where he was staying. He used to spend hours listening to their problems of ploughing and plantation and seeds and irrigation and crop failures.

One bright December morning I was suddenly summoned to the little enclosure in the open where he used to get his daily oil massage lying on a wooden platform. He was lying completely naked in the sun on this wooden platform inside the little bamboo enclosure and Kanu Gandhi, his grand nephew, was giving him the oil massage. For him this was a good time for quiet thinking in his crowded day. As I walked in, he opened his eyes and said that he was very distressed that morning because a large group of potato growers from the Hoogly district had come to see him; they were in great trouble because the season for planting seed potatoes was almost over and they had found it impossible to get seed potatoes from the big dealers in the traditional potato market in Calcutta at Posta; if they could not get seed potatoes, somehow or other, within a few days, they would lose the year's potato crop and their families would starve.

'You have got to do something about it – and it has to be done today,' said Gandhiji with emphasis. He added, 'you say this Governor, Mr. Casey, is a good man. Well, I will know that he is a good man if he can find these seed potatoes for the villagers.'

As soon as he finished his massage and his bath he sat down to write a letter to the Governor about seed potatoes:

Khadi Pratisthan, Sodepur
8th December 1945

Dear friend,

I write this with the greatest hesitation. The more I see and hear, the greater is the grief over the happening in Bengal. Here is a sample demanding immediate attention.

Satish Babu brings me the story that potato growers cannot get seed potatoes and the planting season will be over in a week's time. Seed potatoes are there in the market under Government control. But the grower cannot get them.

There is evidently something radically wrong if the news brought by Satish Babu is true. I wonder if you can do anything. You were telling me about the clever Mr. Dey whose services you have enlisted for such matters. Can you make him over to me or some other officer who can attend to this immediate affair?

I am having this letter delivered at once. The question is small enough on the large Bengal canvas but is all in all to the poor growers whose livelihood is at stake.

Yours sincerely,

M.K.Gandhi.

H.E. The Governor of Bengal
Calcutta

With the letter in my hand I ran along to Government House and demanded an interview with his Excellency. In those days Governors were considered to be very big people. It was unheard of that a young man could just walk into the private secretary's office and say that he must see the great man immediately. It was not done. And J.D. Tyson, Secretary to the Governor, was a senior civil servant who did not approve of this sort of anarchy. "Are you sure you have something important to discuss with His Excellency? What do you want to say to him?" I said that I wanted to talk to the Government about seed potatoes. "Seed potatoes? Don't be silly," said the respectable Tyson. Thereupon, I produced the letter written by the Mahatma with his own hand and marked 'immediate'.

Tyson was squashed and went into the Governor's room next door and told him that I wanted to see him about seed potatoes. He came back in a second and said the Governor would be glad to see me. "Hullo, Sudhir, what is it that I hear about seed potatoes? Tell me all about it," remarked the Lord Sahib as I walked in. I handed to him Gandhiji's letter and explained to him how the poor potato growers of Hooghly had come to see him about their problem of seed potatoes. The Governor said he knew all about politics in Australia and in Britain but in his long political career he had never been called upon to find seed potatoes. "But I will do all I can," said His Excellency and rang for Mr. Tyson, Secretary to the Governor. "Tyson," said the Governor very solemnly, "for years and years you have been a district officer in Bengal. Surely you know all about seed potatoes? Well, for goodness sake, get busy then and find out where we can get seed potatoes. It has got to be done today. Mr. Gandhi is very upset about it."

Tyson scratched his head and suggested that perhaps the best thing to do was to send for the Agriculture Secretary, Subimal Dutt. Within a few minutes, Mr. Dutt (who later in life became Foreign Secretary and India's Ambassador in Moscow) arrived looking very anxious, for it was a serious thing to be sent for so suddenly by the Governor. It was settled in this conference on seed potatoes that Mr. Dutt and I were to proceed to the Posta Potato market in Nimtolla, North Calcutta, and Mr. Dutt was authorized, as Secretary to Government, to use the emergency powers of Government to seize whatever stock of seed potatoes existed there and have them distributed amongst the villagers at the legitimate price.

The scarcity of seed potatoes had been artificially created by the stockholders, who were profiteering at exorbitant prices, which the potato growers could not afford to pay. When the big holders of potato stocks saw the robin-red-breast chaprassis and policemen following no less a man than Secretary to the Government, they got frightened. The honorable Secretary Sahib stood on a packing box in the middle of the market and read out a flimsy piece of paper on which he had hurriedly written:

'I, Subimal Dutt, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, by exercise of the power vested in the Governor of Bengal under the Defence of India Rules do hereby seize all stocks of seed potatoes in this market. And I do hereby affix my seal of office to the notification.'

The Secretary had not remembered to take with him a seal of the Government. So he drew a circle on the piece of paper and described it as the seal of Government and signed his name below:

The flimsy piece of paper was promptly pasted on a wall of the market by the robin-red-breast chaprassis. For a moment I feared that the shopkeepers might not take any notice of the notification. But the effect was instantaneous. I thought it was more due to the chaprassis than to the Secretary who was rather a thin looking gentle sort of Bengali. The stockholders became very reasonable and meekly disgorged their hoarded stock of seed potatoes at the legitimate price. We stood there in the market for the whole day and watched with great pleasure the villagers taking away cartloads of seed potatoes.

Like boy scouts, after a day's good deed, we reported in the evening to the Governor and to the Mahatma that 250 maunds (about 5,000 kilos) of seed potatoes had been distributed to the growers that day.

The old man was overjoyed. He was proud of my exploit. For the next week or two every distinguished visitor who came to see the Mahatma, including the great Nehru had to hear first the story of the seed potatoes! (Sudhir-64)

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