ushal Konwar was a ‘Satyagrahi’ and Gandhian, a descendant of the Ahom dynasty. He pledged to remain a vegetarian and accepted the ShrimadBhagawad Gita as his only companion. Ever since the Salt Satyagraha led by Mahatma Gandhi in 1931, Konwar even stopped taking salt. On 10th October 1942, hidden in the thick fog of early morning, some people removed few sleepers from the railway line near Sarupathar in Golaghat district. A Military train passing by derailed and many British and American soldiers lost their lives. Accusing KushalKonwar of being the chief conspirator of the train sabotage, the British police arrested him. At dawn on 15th June 1943 at 4:30 am, KushalKonwar was hanged at Jorhat Jail.

Source: The Unsung Heroes: A Tribute, Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration

Assam had played a significant role in the Indian freedom struggle. Many sons of Assam did her proud by sacrificing life for the cause of the country. Among them all, Kushal Konwar stands out as a bright star of India’s historical freedom struggle for he happened to be the only martyr in the country who was hanged during the Quit India Movement of 1942.

Born to middle class parents at the village called Chowdang Chariali of Ghiladhari Mouza of Golaghat District (formerly falling under Sivasagar District) in 1905, Kushal Konwar was just like other youths of his times, leading a quiet family life. But from 1925 onwards, he came under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and this changed the course of his life. Since then, Kushal Konwar pledged to remain a vegetarian and accepted the Shrimad Bhagawad Gita as his only companion. Starting from the salt satyagraha led by Gandhiji in 1931, Konwar even stopped taking salt. He observed these pledges till the last moment of his life.

Kushal Konwar was quiet and truth loving as a child – the traits that he inherited from his parents, Sonaram Konwar, and Kanakeswari Konwar. The fifth child of his

parents, Kushal Konwar completed his primary school education in 1918 and took admission at the Bezbarua Middle English School at Golaghat. During that time, after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919, the spirit of the freedom movement spread nationwide. Subsequently at the Congress session held at Nagpur in 1920, it was resolved that “Purna Swaraj” was the main aim of the Congress. And in 1921, the freedom movement took a new turn. Non-cooperation movement started throughout the country and for the first time the students of the country joined the freedom movement in an organized manner under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi.

The ripples of this national upsurge were felt in Assam too. In accordance with Gandhiji’s directive, non-cooperation with the British began in all fields – social, political, economic and educational. Foreign goods were also boycotted. Students left schools and colleges to take part in the movement. Kushal Konwar too, left school in 1921 along with many other students. He was then 17 years of age and was in the eighth standard.

During that time, Kushal Konwar’s father who was trading in timber jointly with an Englishman named Mr Migor Wilson, suffered losses when the latter left for England. Having suffered losses, his economic condition deteriorated and to make good the loss, he abandoned his paternal property at Balijan and shifted base to Rengmai, where he took to agriculture and shop keeping. Kushal Konwar was at the prime of his youth then and he easily adopted the social life of Rengmai. He began to be associated with a number of social organizations at Rengmai and in due course established himself as a social worker. He also engaged himself in spreading the message of freedom among the people.

At Rengmai, he established a primary school with the help of the people, and worked there as a teacher on an honorary basis much to the annoyance of his father. His father did not approve of him working in the school because his economic condition came to such a pass that it became difficult for him to keep the home fires burning. Paying heed to the insistence of his father, he decided to join a tea garden. But being

independent minded he refused to work under the British. Luckily for him, an Assamese tea planter with nationalist leanings, named Bisheswar Sarma, opened a tea garden at Balijan. Hence in order to help his father run the house, Kushal Konwar joined Sarma's tea garden as a supervisor on June 17, 1927 and went on to become a clerk later. He worked in the garden till 1936, a total of nine years.

The family had retained some of their property at Balijan and Kushal Konwar stayed there and worked in the garden. While at home, he conferred with the Congress leaders about the organizational works of the Congress party. Though he was a handsome young man with a job, he was not interested in amassing wealth or establishing himself in the society. Instead he was imbibed with the spirit of sacrifice and surrendered himself totally to the cause of freedom of the country. This worried his father and he began to look for a bride for his son. Though initially he resisted the attempts of his father to tie him down in matrimony, he finally relented due to the persuasion of his elders. In 1929, he wedded Prabhabati, the daughter of Premananda Duwara, a respectable gentleman of Morongi Konwar village. In course of time, the couple became the proud parents of two sons.

On 15 April, 1934, Mahatma Gandhi had paid a visit to Golaghat during a tenday sojourn to Assam. During those days it appeared as if all roads led to Golaghat because people came here from far and wide to have a look at the great leader. The responsibility of serving Gandhi during those days fell on young Congress workers like Kushal Konwar, Bhadra Phukan, Tilak Bora and others. Kushal Konwar was overwhelmed with sacred feelings on seeing Gandhi and he touched the Mahatma's feet and sought his blessings. This meeting made an everlasting impact on the young Kushal Konwar and proved to be a turning point in his life.

Another incident a year later, too made a great impact in his life. While Kushal Konwar was working in Balijan tea estate, some 60/70 cows from the neighbouring

Jamuguri tea estate, owned by an Englishman, had destroyed tea plants of Balijan tea estate. Enraged at this Konwar tied up all the cows and told the labourers who came to get them, that they will be released only when the Manager himself comes to seek their release. When the Manager of the Jamuguri tea estate, Mr Wilson came, he entered into an argument with Konwar and in excitement, was about to hit Konwar with a stick. Enraged at this, Kushal Konwar took off one of his shoes and charged at Mr Wilson. Seeing Kushal Konwar's courage and temper, Mr Wilson was forced to retreat. Later Kushal Konwar sent the cows to Golaghat cow shelter and the Jamuguri tea estate had to spend a lot of money to get the cows released.

After this incident and also after coming into close contact with Gandhiji, the urge for freedom began to possess Kushal Konwar and finally on 30th June 1936, he resigned from his service in the tea gardens to actively follow the path shown by Gandhiji. When Kushal Konwar was about 31 years of age, he was already reciting the Gita and Bhagawat regularly and had given up non-vegetarian food and salt. Having given up his job, he began to involve himself even more actively in the activities related to the freedom movement and he went about spreading the message of freedom in the villages. One of the agendas of the freedom movement was the formation of region and mouza-wise rayat forums. At Sarupathar, Kushal Konwar established one rayat forum. He won the hearts of the people with his mental vigour, his capacity to toil tirelessly and his organizational capacity. After the success of the Sarupathar rayat forum, Konwar's popularity grew in Congress circles, and he came to be recognized as a prominent leader of the Golaghat district Congress committee.
In the meantime, after his father's death, Kushal Konwar along with his wife and three children, shifted base to Sukia Pathar. The Sarupathar Congress office became Konwar's second home and the responsibility of running the home was left entirely to his wife, Prabhabati.

In 1942, the activities of the freedom movement reached a climax and the Congress session held at Bombay adopted the “Quit India” resolution. Along with the rest of the country, in Assam too, there were widespread protests against the British rule. But the British regime came down heavily on the non-violent protestors and many attained martyrdom. Among them mention may be made of Kanaklata, Mukunda Kakoty, Bhogeswari Phukanani, Thogi Sut, Nidhanu Rajbongshi, Ratan Kachari and others.
The sacrifice of these martyrs earned Assam a place of pride in the history of India’s freedom movement.
Though the movement against the British was conducted in a non-violent manner, yet the atrocities meted out by the authorities forced some in the Congress to organize a suicide squad. This squad indulged in subversive activities like derailing trains, burning bridges, attacking army outpost and snapping communication channels. Being an ardent follower of Gandhiji, Kushal Konwar did not approve of the activities of the “Suicide Squad” and kept his distance from them. But unfortunately, an act of sabotage by the volunteers of the squad proved to be a great disaster for Kushal Konwar.

On the 10th October, 1942, at 1:52 in the night, a train carrying British soldiers got derailed at about one kilometer away from the Sarupathar Railway station. According to witnesses, about one thousand soldiers were killed in the accident. It was a handiwork of the “Suicide Squad”. Fish-plates were removed from the track and hence the derailment. Immediately after the accident, police and Army personnel cordoned off the Sarupathar area and indulged in indiscriminate atrocities and arrests. Numerous freedom fighters were implicated in the accident and jailed. During that time Kushal Konwar was advised by many to go underground, but Konwar refused. Since Konwar was a prominent leader of the Golaghat District Congress Committee, he too was falsely implicated and arrested along with 43 others. On the 5th November 1942, on the ground of being under trial, Kushal Konwar and others were sent to jail on the orders of the Golaghat

Magistrate. In Jorhat Jail, Kushal Konwar spent altogether 221 days. The first 121 days as an undertrial prisoner and the next 100 days in solitary confinement as a prisoner awarded with death sentence.

In the jail as an undertrial prisoner, Konwar came into contact with a number of prominent leaders of Assam, like Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Bimala Prasad Chaliha and others and he was popular with all of them. His knowledge about the Gita, the Bhagawat and the Kirtan Ghosha, his moral outlook and his progressive ideas impressed everyone.

The trial of the Sarupathar rail accident began from 11 February, 1943. The trial did not take place under any ordinary court established under the British colonialists. At that time, in order to curb the revolution of 1942, the Governor General used to issue an ordinance whenever he felt like. So by a similar ordinance (Ordinance III of 1942 and Section 109 of IPC), giving special powers to the District Commissioner, the trial took place. No Indian judge was appointed for the trial. The Deputy Commissioner of Sivasagar District, Mr Campbel Andrew Humphrey was entrusted to conduct the trial.

The British Regime conspired with all the means at its disposal to implicate Kushal Konwar in the accident. Many were tempted, persuaded, threatened and even tortured to appear as witness against Kushal Konwar. It was a trial only in name.

On 6 March, 1943, Saturday, the hearing of the trial began at the Jorhat jail.

Among the 17 prisoners, Indreswar Phukan and Nagen Chutiya were given ten years rigorous imprisonment, Dhaneswar Gogoi was given three years imprisonment and declared that he could also be released on bail. But Kushal Konwar, Dharmakanta Deka, Ghanashyam Saikia and Kanakeswar Konwar were ordered to be hanged. And the rest were released due to lack of evidence.

Later, on 26 April, 1943 the Governor of Assam revoked the death sentence of Kanakeswar Konwar, Dharma Deka and Ghanashyam Saikia and awarded them with ten years rigorous imprisonment. But Kushal Konwar’s death sentence remained.

In order to save Konwar's life, many prominent leaders, lawyers and citizens of Assam gave a petition with their signatures to the Governor General Lord Linlithgow. But the petition was rejected. So Konwar spent his days in jail waiting patiently for the last day. But his spirits were not subdued. He took recourse to holy books and discussions and presented a picture of total calm.

Three days before his death, when Konwar's wife, brother and his three sons came to see him in jail, he consoled his wife, who was crying uncontrollably, by saying that he considered himself lucky, for God has given him the opportunity to sacrifice his life for the country. A day before the hanging, his meeting with some prominent leaders was a historic moment. Leaders like Gopinath Bordoloi, Tayabullah, Amiyo Kumar Das, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed had gone to console him in jail, but they themselves came away consoled. About this Gopinath Bordoloi had written in his diary on 14 June, 1943.

On the dawn of 15 June, 1943, at 3.30 a.m. some representatives of the British colonial regime came to Kushal Konwar's cell while he was still asleep. They were Deputy Commissioner Humphrey, one Magistrate, jailor, assistant jailor, civil surgeon, a hangman and a dozen armed constables. When the jailor called out his name, he woke up with a start. When the jailor informed that his time had come, he got up, freshened himself, said a prayer, recited the Gita and got up to follow the jailor. With calm steps, he got to the stage where he was to be hanged, and greeted the people gathered there. He asked for forgiveness from the people if they thought he had committed any crime. Then he said that he is praying to God to give freedom to the country and he shouted, "Inquilab Jindabad." As the hangman prepared for the final moment, Konwar was heard singing – "Par Kora Raghunath Sansara Sagar…"

After the Magistrate signaled with a white handkerchief, a thud sound was heard and with that ended the life of a thirty-eight-year-old freedom fighter and a Vaishnava. He was victorious in death and the British regime was defeated for it was a defeat of their Goddess of Justice. It was 4.30 a.m. and rain started pouring as if nature too was

showering flowers as rain upon the mortal remains of Kushal Konwar. He became immortal.

Kushal Konwar was by birth an ordinary citizen. But he died a glorious death, having sacrificed his life at the prime of his youth for the cause of his country. His patriotism, truthfulness, morality and mental strength were unique. The present generation can take a leaf out of his life and emulate his patriotism and spirit of self sacrifice