

Smt. Amalprava Das

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Constructive Work-1981

Smt. Amalprava Das was born in Dibrugarh on November 12, 1911 in an affluent family. Her father Dr Harekrishna Das was an eminent surgeon and her mother Smt. Hemaprava Das, a dedicated teacher, was the Headmistress of the Dibrugarh Govt. Girls' High School. Deeply influenced by the Non-cooperation Movement of 1921, Dr Das retired early from service in 1927 to join the freedom movement. Amalprava imbibed, even as a child, the spirit of patriotism and social service from her parents. Their exemplary life given to simple living and public service was responsible in moulding the thoughts and character of their daughter.

Smt. Amalprava Das took her M.Sc. in Applied Chemistry in 1934 and established a clinical laboratory in Gauhati. But her mind had been set on service to the poor. Greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and her own mother's example she had taken to wearing khadi and spinning as early as 1926. When Gandhiji visited Assam in 1934 he stayed in Dr Das' house in Gauhati. Smt. Amalprava was deeply impressed by what she saw of him from close quarters. Learning Hindi from a private tutor, she soon mastered the language. Besides adopting Khadi she vowed not to use any foreign or luxury goods and abjured the use of jewellery in any form.

She made up her mind to devote her life in doing constructive work according to the Gandhian Constructive Programme. So, in 1939, she went with her mother to Maganwadi in Wardha to take training in village industries like oil pressing, paper making and bee-keeping. On their return they set up a small Ashram at Sarania, a hillock in the midst of Gauhati, where they started oil pressing and bee-keeping besides other activities. During the 'Quit India' movement in 1942, she and her father were imprisoned and the work of the Ashram suffered and ultimately stopped. After her release from prison, she was given the responsibility as the Secretary of the Committee for the collection of funds for the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust. The Trust had been constituted in 1944, with Gandhiji as Chairman. In 1945, Gandhiji selected her as the 'Pratinidhi' of the Assam Branch of the Trust.

In 1946, when Gandhiji came to Assam he inaugurated the Kasturba Gram Sevika Vidyalaya under the auspices of the Assam Branch of the Trust on Sarania hillock at the same place where Amalprava and her family had started an Ashram earlier. Dr Das offered the land and building for the use of the Vidyalaya and also provided the requisite funds for additional buildings. Thus the work of the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust in Assam started with Gandhiji's blessings. "Amalprava will guide you", said Gandhiji to the girl trainees assembled on the occasion, "and you will have to take the light and spread it among the masses in thousands of villages." To this day the light has been spreading, brightening the corners of many a humble cottage in Assam. About one thousand village girls have been trained as Gramsevikas since the Vidyalaya was started. Most of these Gramsevikas work in 21 Gramseva centres established by the Kasturba Trust in far off outlying areas of the North-Eastern Region: 15 in Assam, 4 in Meghalaya and one each in Arunachal and Nagaland. By their selfless work in the field of Pre-Basic Education, Adult Education, Village Sanitation, Maternity and Child Welfare and Village Industries, these Sevikas have spread the Mahatma's message of self-reliance in hundreds of villages in Assam.

One of the important services rendered by the Sevikas is their work of integration among the different communities in their areas. They also serve as 'Shanti Sainiks' whenever the need arises. The Sevikas have also helped in introducing the energy saving 'Magan Chulha' on a wide scale and propagating the gobar-gas plants in the remote villages. Population of the Japanese method of rice cultivation in these areas owes a great deal to the efforts of these messengers of progress.

This institution is the Kasturba Trust is popularly called 'Sarania Ashram'. It has now blossomed into one of the nation's major institutions founded on Gandhian philosophy.

Smt Amalprava is a staunch believer in the philosophy of Basic Education. In 1945 she went to Sevagram to undergo training in Basic Education under E. W. Aryanayakam and his wife Asha Devi. For some time she worked as Honorary Advisor for Basic Education to the Government of Assam. It was due to her efforts that a number of centre for training of teachers for Basic Schools were established in Assam which helped in spreading Basic Education throughout Assam.

Smt Amalprava's deep concern for mitigating human suffering, particularly of women and children, is evidenced in various spheres of service. The earthquake in August 1950 caused wide-spread devastation in North Lakhimpur where the swollen Suvansiri River washed away many villages. Assisted by a handful of co-workers of the Kasturba Trust she reached the affected area by foot and by country boat and rendered invaluable service to orphaned children and widowed women at different camps. The women were looked after until they were completely rehabilitated. The Child Welfare Centre which she then started became in 1962 the now famous 'Maitri Ashram' which was opened by Vinobaji. The Ashram is working for 'Maitri' and training workers who have decided to dedicate their life for this mission.

She worked as the Sanchalika of the Assam Branch of the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi for a few years from 1952. In 1954 she was appointed by the Central Social Welfare Board as the Chairman of the Social Welfare Advisory Board, Assam Branch.

When Vinobaji came to Assam in 1961-62 on his Bhoodan-Gramdan padayatra, Smt. Amalprava accompanied him for 18 months with a band of her co-workers both men and women. During the padyatra about two thousand villages were offered to Vinobaji as 'Gramdan'. One of the most important constructive activities now taken up by them is building up these villages according to the ideology of Gandhiji and Vinobaji. Among her other constructive activities was her active association with the Nagaland Peace Mission in 1964-65. In 1975 she presided over the bhoodan Silver Jubilee Sammelan held at Paunar (Wardha) and helped in organizing the anti-cow-slaughter movement in Calcutta in 1978-79. In 1979-80 she was made the Chairman of the Reception Committee of the Viswa Mahila Sammelan at Paunar in the presence of Vinobaji.

Smt. Amalprava Das was inevitably drawn into the freedom struggle under Gandhiji's leadership. She was arrested in 1941 for offering Satyagraha, and again incarcerated in 1943 for over a year. In 1955 she was offered the award of 'Padma Vibhushan' but she politely declined it on the ground that it might create a feeling of vanity in her.

Wedded to a life of unremitting service to the needy and the suffering, Smt. Amalprava has remained single. The innumerable children on whom she has bestowed her care and affection, the band of dedicated and selfless workers whom she has trained to serve the people and her co-workers make up her family. Her patience, compassion and selfless service have made her the 'Baidew' elder sister to thousands of people all over Assam, and especially the poor and the downtrodden.

