

Sushri Radha Bhatt

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Uplift and Welfare of Women and Children-1991

Born 16-10-1934. Studied up to XI Standard.

Sushri Radha Bhatt entered Lakshmi Ashram when she was just 16 years old. Since then she has been serving the women and children and the rural areas of Uttarakhand.

She carried out an experiment in propagating social service based on Gandhian ideals and techniques in the Bougad village of Pithoragarh district during 1961-1963. The experiment involved large-scale participation of people. She set up small organizations (Mandals) for the teenagers, a 'one hour school' for the girls, and personality development activities for children of all ages. She motivated the women to work for the preservation of their forests, and set up the Berinag Gram Swarajya Mandal for carrying out social and economic programmes of development. The Mandal is active even today and has contributed largely to the growth of Khadi and village industries and to environmental protection.

She has toured Denmark and other Scandinavian countries for training in advanced methods of school instruction. After her return she was entrusted in 1967 with the main responsibility of conducting the affairs of the Ashram. For the next 3-4 years she organized the women in a movement against the drinking habit in Almora and the surrounding three districts. The movement was highly successful and brought about the closure of the liquor shops in the region.

She has visited Denmark, Sweden, the United States and Canada to lecture on Environment, Gandhian through and Constructive Work and to participate in international women's conference.

Sushri Bhatt has made dedicated efforts for the progress of Lakshmi Ashram. In 1972, she started a Vocational Training School for women. More than 200 young women have been trained so far in spinning, weaving and knitting, out of whom some 125 are now self-employed.

In 1978, she extended the Ashram activities to Dhauladevi block of Almora district. Bal Mandirs and a tree planting programme have taken firm roots there. Some 45 Balwadi workers are running 25 Balwadis for 700 children.

The year 1977 saw the beginning of a new dimension to the Ashram's activities. Sushri Bhatt launched a campaign against blasting and excavation in soapstone quarries, with a view to protecting the environment and saving the common village grazing lands and forests from destruction. The movement made over 300 acres of land available to the villages of Khirakot. This aroused the rural folk in the neighbourhood of quarries in Pithoragarh and Almora districts against deforestation. Many quarries in the Saryu catchment area were closed down and more than 1.60 lakh trees have been planted. This movement has generated considerable confidence, especially among the women folk, and imparted in them a sense of obligation towards society. Thus, many of them took part in the Chipko movement.

The Ashram organized camps and conferences for creating awareness among the villagers on the issue of tree-felling. This has led to several local peoples' committees being set up to fight against the evil.

Impact of Ashram's Work :

i. Over 1,500 children (75%) in Districts of Almora, Pithoragarh, Pauri Garhwal and Tehri Garhwal have benefited from the Balwadis during the last five years.

The holding of Bal Melas has provided a golden opportunity to the children of the most neglected hill areas. They have also opened new vistas in the lives of young hill women, who have now acquired skills in organizing.

ii. There is an increased awareness among the rural women whereby they now seek solutions to their problems of getting fodder, fuel, water, etc organize themselves for struggles to obtain them, and cooperate with each other to protect the right of the community to its own land.

iii. Many women have been trained in various skills with a view to rehabilitating them, thus ending their exploitation.

iv. The vision of the villagers has broadened. Newly awakened, they now dream of wider horizons.

Radhabahan has written many articles and a few books, which have also been published in Danish, Swedish and German languages.

Sushri Bhatt has been associated with many Gandhian institutions, being the Chairperson of the Himalaya Sewa Sangh, New Delhi, and member of the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi, Kasturba Mahila Utthan Mandal of Kausani, etc. She is also a member of the Center for Science and Environment, New Delhi, of Central Himalayan Environment Association, Nainital, and of Parvatiya Paryavaran Sanrakshan Samiti, Pithoragarh Dist.

