

Shri L. N. Gopaldaswami

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Constructive Work-1994

Born on 12th November, 1902, Shri Gopaldaswami is a veteran Gandhian, a very distinguished freedom fighter and a selfless constructive worker particularly in the field of removal of untouchability, Harijan welfare, khadi, prohibition, temple entry and village industries. A lawyer by profession, he plunged at the age of 30 into the freedom movement as a result of which he was debarred from practice as a lawyer. He never went back to that profession and completely devoted himself to Gandhiji's constructive programme.

He came into contact with Gandhiji in 1921 and in 1927 he toured along with him for khadi collection in Trichy District.

At the request of Rajaji and with the blessings of Mahatmaji, Gopaldaswami took up fulltime Harijan work in 1934 under the auspices of the Harijan Sevak Sangh. From humble beginnings, the work of the Harijan Sevak Sangh progressed rapidly and in 1969 there were 30 hostels both for boys and girls with 2585 students. Nearly 200 schools in the remote villages run by the Sangh were merged with the common schools. All these activities were in the rural areas. He also developed a large number of rural centres for village industries like poultry, bee keeping, agriculture, weaving and mat making, tanning and production of leather goods.

Taking advantage of the State of Travancore having thrown open all the Temples to the Harijans in 1937, a similar movement was started by the Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh of which Shri Gopaldaswami was the Secretary. The Sangh campaigned for temple entry for Harijans into the Meenakshi Temple at Madurai and organised a Conference for this purpose which was presided over by Smt. Rameswari Nehru and inaugurated by Shri Rajaji. Shri A. Vaidyanathan Iyer, the President of the Harijan Sevak Sangh and Shri Gopaldaswami along with a batch of Harijans and on~Nadar entered the Meenakshi Temple at Madurai on 8.7.1939. Gandhiji as soon as he heard of it wrote in the Harijan calling it a 'miracle'. At Shri Gopaldaswami's persistent request, Gandhiji came down to Madurai in 1946 and worshipped at the Meenakshi Temple and also visited Palani and worshipped at the Hill Temple.

Just at this time Shri Gopaldaswami got into the Madras Legislative Assembly after being elected from a rural constituency in Trichy. He was made Secretary of a Committee appointed by the Madras Government to report on Harijan work and formulate programmes for their welfare. He toured the entire province of the then Madras State which included the present Andhra and Kerala States and submitted a report which has been hailed as a basis for all Harijan Welfare work all over the country.

Gandhiji during his first Harijan tour had founded the Kodambakkam Industrial School in 1933 in a suburb of Madras to give practical shape to his idea of learning craft during education. To start with, the institution had only 40-50 boys from the Harijan community who would otherwise have been on the streets. So far over 3000 boys have been trained and every one of them has been employed on some remunerative basis.

In 1946, the foundation stone of the present Thakkar Bappa Vidyalaya was laid by Gandhiji. Shri Gopaldaswami was appointed -as the Managing Trustee which post he has occupied uninterruptedly since 1953. The Thakkar Bappa Vidyalaya is one of the most outstanding monuments of Harijan work in the entire country.

Even in his 80s and 90s Shri Gopaldaswami continues to engage himself fully in constructive work, to keep up the memories and fulfil the desires of his masters viz. Mahatma Gandhi and Thakkar Bappa who enjoined upon him not to leave Harijan work for any reason whatsoever. Most of his preceptors and co-workers have left this world but Gopaldaswami continues to serve the institution in the true spirit of Nishkamya Karma.

His is indeed a very rare example of a real Karmayogi. Prompted by the sole desire of contributing his mite to the restoration and upliftment of the most disadvantaged sections of the community and transforming them into dignified human beings managing their own lives and engaged in gainful occupations.

Shri Gopaldaswami is a person of infinite moral courage and of the highest rectitude from which he has never deviated throughout his life. In the Gandhian tradition, he is humility personified and has been "hiding his head" under the bushell, because of his incurable modesty and almost religious avoidance of the limelight.

