

Kum. Arunaben Shankarprasad Desai

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Uplift and Welfare of Women and Children-2005

Born: 13th May, 1923

Immediately after her graduation, Kum. Arunaben started social work in 1946. At that time, the problem of immoral traffic in women had gained notoriety in Saurashtra. A large number of girls had no shelter of any kind and had to undergo untold miseries which often forced them to commit suicide. The problem of untouchability had also reached grave proportions in that region. Arunaben studied the situation carefully and decided to take action with rare courage and resolve. She started the Vikas Vidyalaya in 1946 in a place called Wadhwan with 40 inmates in the first year. This institution has grown beyond expectations and now has a number of branches in different parts of Gujarat. The number of beneficiaries has almost reached 80,000. The objective of the Vidyalaya is to achieve the welfare of women and children living in the worst social and economic conditions. The Vikas Vidyalaya has started a primary school, 2 Girls' High Schools, a Polytechnic, a college for handicrafts, Teachers' Training colleges for B.Ed., vocational training programmes which focus on tailoring and embroidery, printing, knitting, and a training centre for women for using Amber and Bardoli charkhas. Arunaben has also started a Founding Home which provides shelter, healthcare, and education, rehabilitation through job or marriage and adoption for girls. As a part of preventive and rescue work, cases of family discord, quarrels, etc., are registered and visits to the homes of the girls are organized. Counseling has been done in over 2600 cases so far with a view to finding practical solutions to the problems of these girls. Over 800 girls have benefited till now by the starting of a Cosmopolitan Hostel. A Social Welfare Centre with 12 sub-centres has been started as a self-contained unit in which a balwadi is functioning, and craft training and adult education classes have been organized for rural women.

For many years, the Vikas Vidyalaya was the only place for shelter and care of children. A few years later, Arunaben started the Zalawad District Probation and After Care Association which prepared the background for enacting social legislation called the Saurashtra Children Act in 1956. The Vikas Vidyalaya has been declared as a "Fit Person Institution" for the safe custody of children under the provisions of this Act by the Government of Gujarat. The Vidyalaya also propagates family planning and welfare in all its branches and sub-centres.

Arunaben has also paid special attention to the welfare of the physically handicapped through a blind school, a deaf school, a home for mentally retarded children, a home for crippled children, a mental hospital, an Orthopaedic Centre and a mental hygiene centre. Through a rural industrial development programme for women covering 34 villages, over 2000 women have been employed mainly on khadi spinning and weaving, most of them belonging to the Scheduled Castes. Through persistent efforts, Arunaben has also persuaded the Khadi Commission of India to sanction a Puni Plant in 1991 and blow room card machinery has been installed which can produce 250 to 300 kg. puni per day.

In 1981, when a natural calamity in the form of a dam burst took place in Morvi, dislocating large sections of the community and rendering them homeless, Arunaben took up rehabilitation work in right earnest and set up many projects for the welfare of women and children. The Bal Kalyan Kutir looking after 60 children, a production-cum-training printing press, a readymade garment factory and a handicraft class with 5 crafts have been started.

During her long career, Arunaben has received a number of prestigious awards starting with a State Govt. Award in the field of child welfare in 1981, the Mahila Suraksha Award in 1989, and the Shri Rajiv Gandhi Human Services Award in 2002 for her service to society and to the development of women and children, in particular.