



SUDHA VARGHESE

Recipient of the Award for Development and Welfare of Women and Children - 2023

Born: September 5, 1944

Sudha Varghese, a champion of Gandhian philosophy and social transformation, stands as a living embodiment of the Gandhian principles of service, empowerment, and self-reliance. Born into a privileged family, she chose to follow her heart, leaving behind a life of comfort to serve the marginalized and dispossessed. Sudha Varghese's journey of over six decades has been a profound testament to the transformative power of Gandhian ideals in shaping lives and communities.

The Beginning: Varghese's odyssey began in the 1960s when she encountered a magazine report highlighting the dire conditions faced by the impoverished in Bihar. Motivated by a deep-seated empathy, she answered the call to serve, arriving in Munger district with an unwavering resolve to uplift the downtrodden. Her presence in Bihar wasn't just a contribution to development; it was a commitment to live Gandhiji's philosophy of being the change one wishes to see.

Guided by the notion that true service requires immersion in the lives of those being served, Sudha Varghese spent two decades engaged in hands-on humanitarian work. From teaching underprivileged Dalit children to working in Naxal-affected villages, she embraced the challenges that society presented, echoing the belief that service should address the immediate and long-term needs of the community.

Uplifting the Musahar Community: In 1986, after 21 years of dedicated service, she discovered her true calling: uplifting the Musahar community from their depths of miseries. Sudha Varghese settled in a Musahar slum in Jamsaut village. This decision to forsake comfort and embrace simplicity mirrored her commitment to social justice through self-sacrifice.

The core of Ms. Varghese's work, for self-reliance, revolved around education and empowerment. She recognized the potential for change within the Musahar community, especially among adolescent girls, whom she believed could catalyze transformation. Her innovative approach to education, with emphasis on nurturing self-sufficiency, included Prerna schools and alternative education centers, offering not only literacy but also the tools for empowerment and self-expression.

Varghese spearheaded initiatives that transcended traditional roles. Through skill training and agricultural programs, she steered Musahar women towards self-reliance, echoing promotion of self-sufficiency in every sphere of life. Her efforts paved the way for women to transcend their traditional roles, from being landless laborers to proud landowners and pioneers in unconventional fields.

Sudha Varghese's relentless commitment not only uplifted a marginalized community but also exemplified the enduring relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's a noble philosophy, in the modern society. She envisions a community not dominated by caste where people experience acceptance, oneness, and respect regardless of sex, religion or language, where education is considered of high value, along with equality for women and girls with dignity and freedom in life. And together in community promote child rights and take them through education that will change their lives assuring them a life with dignity, self-confidence, ownership of land and all their fundamental rights.

Her Mission

- Continue to be in contact with the deprived section of the society and orient them to become aware of their dignity as human beings enjoying equal rights - Economical, Social, Cultural, and Political.
- Help the girls to intensify their fight against violence and any kind of discrimination against woman.
- Continue to promote leadership qualities among woman to encourage potential leaders to bargain for decision making positions.
- To uphold education as the basis for change and development and to make it possible for children, women especially for girls.
- To create awareness about health, and to become familiar with herbal and home remedies, promoting reproductive health especially among Dalits and economically weaker sections of society.

The Work: Sudha Varghese has made significant and multifaceted contributions across various domains, and primarily focused on empowering marginalized communities. It has reached to around 650 Villages across 4 Districts of Bihar.

Education and Empowerment: Her NGO, Nari Gunjan, has provided bridge courses to over forty thousand children, ensuring access to education for the marginalized communities. They have also established Prerna Schools specifically catering to Musahar girls, thus addressing a critical gender disparity in education.

Legal Advocacy and Empowerment: Sudha Varghese has exhibited immense courage by organizing Musahar women to protest rape and sexual harassment through Gandhian methods. Their pursuit of justice has extended to personal education in law, allowing them to represent hundreds of victims of caste-based atrocities, and sexual violence.

Economic Empowerment: Through skill training initiatives, her efforts have enabled around five thousand women to initiate self-employment activities in agriculture and related fields. By imparting these skills, they have contributed to enhancing economic independence and livelihood opportunities among marginalized women.

Child Welfare and Protection: Varghese's involvement in operating a child Helpline has resulted in the rescue of numerous children from various dire situations, including child marriages, human trafficking, child labour, and torture. This intervention has played a crucial role in safeguarding the rights and well-being of children.

Gender Equality and Breaking Norms: Her initiatives, such as supporting the creation of the "Sargam Band" all-women music band in Bihar and facilitating the entry of the first women-driven auto-rickshaw driver in the region, has challenged traditional gender norms and paved the way for women's empowerment.

Youth Empowerment through Sports: By engaging Musahar youth in sports activities, the individual has redirected their energy away from negative influences like gambling, liquor production, and violence. The training provided, including collaboration with the Indian Army, has opened avenues for these young individuals to seek employment and contribute positively to society.

Advocacy and Representation: Sudha Varghese has consistently raised her voice against injustice and atrocities targeting women, children, and socially marginalized groups. Her participation in government

and non-government committees at the district, state, and national levels amplifies these issues on a larger platform, leading to policy changes and greater awareness.

The Message: We are at a point of time surrounded by challenges, risks, opportunities and possibilities. We are surrounded by economic crisis social confrontation and violence on human rights, political instability. We have to be firm on our constitutional values of justice of liberty equality and fraternity. We have the right to live with dignity as women, girls and this will not be compromised in any way.

Even in her seventies, Sudha Varghese has an exuberance, a spirit to do more for women, for children and the deprived. It is a passion that has stayed with her for over six decades.

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