



GANDHI NIKETAN ASHRAM

Recipient of the Award in the Field of Constructive Work - 1980

Gandhi Niketan Ashram was founded in April 1940 at Kallupatti in Madurai District by G. V. Venkatachalapathy who was greatly inspired by Gandhiji. During the last forty years the institution has been carrying on constructive work on the pattern of the Constructive Programme initiated by Gandhiji: Village Uplift, Khadi and Village Industries, Basic Education, Harijan Welfare, Welfare of Women and Children, Prohibition and Naturopathy.

Upto the attainment of Independence in 1947 Gandhi Niketan functioned more as a centre of political activities side by side with constructive work. The Ashram spread the message of Satyagraha in the region and prepared the people to offer resistance to British rule and court imprisonment, besides encouraging them to spin on the Charkha and keep the village clean. Eminent leaders of Tamil Nadu used to hold political camps at this place. During the Quit India movement most of the inmates of the ashram were put in jail.

Just prior to Independence in 1946, O. P. Ramaswami Reddiar, Chief Minister of the then undivided Madras Presidency appointed Venkatachalapathy as Director of Rural Welfare to avail of his services as an administrator and organiser in a larger field. His colleagues at Gandhi Niketan then carried on the work he had initiated. However, it was only after the attainment of Independence in 1947 that Gandhi Niketan was able to take up the various items of constructive work in a more systematic manner and enlarge the scope of its activities.

Vaikuntal Mehta, the first Chairman of the Khadi and Village Industries Commission was keen that institutions like Gandhi Niketan should take up the Khadi and Village Industries programmes of the Commission. Accordingly, the Khadi Gramodyog Maha Vidyalaya, started here in 1956, trained more than 500 Extension officers (Industries) from all over India besides 300 Block Development Officers and 100 Revenue Divisional Officers. The Maha Vidyalaya, transformed into the Regional Planning Institute from 1965 for the four Southern States, imparted training to more than 200 Area Organisers in Gandhian techniques for rural development.

The Khadi Gramodyog Vidhyalaya, another institution aided by Khadi and Village Industries Commission has been training Khadi Karyakathas and Khadi Extension Officers as also the Village Industries Karyakarthis.

In 1965 the Tamil Nadu State Khadi and Village Industries Board handed over to the Ashram its Khadi activities in Kallupatti, Kalligudi and Sedapatti Blocks under the Integrated Development Programme. Ten Rural Textile Centres have been established in these three Blocks. About one thousand persons are engaged in spinning on traditional, Ambar and Textool Charkhas and their hanks are woven into cloth by eighty weavers to the tune of Rs. 8 lakhs a year.

Gandhi Niketan has also a number of other productive units within its precincts. It has taken up a wide variety and cottage industries like handmade paper, pottery, NEO soap, oil pressing, matches, bee-keeping and leather goods. A bakery to serve the requirements of the poor villagers has recently been started. The various units employ about 100 skilled and unskilled workers and fetch an annual income of about Rs. 12 Lakhs. The Ashram also provides training in flaying, tanning and manufacture of leather

goods to the sons of the local artisans and educated unemployed, some of whom after training are employed in its production centres.

In 1956 Dr. J. C. Kumarappa, the eminent Gandhian Economist chose Gandhi Niketan for his retired life. At his suggestion the institution was registered under the Societies Registration Act, to widen the scope of its activities. A Governing Body was formed with Dr. J. C. Kumarappa as its Chairman and R. Guruswamy as its Secretary. Although Dr. J. C. Kumarappa, relinquished his post after a short while in favour of K. Arunachalam who is at present the Chairman of All-India Gandhi Smarak Nidhi, he lived there for full four years shaping the working of the institution.

In 1963 the founder G. Venkatachalapathy who retired as Additional Development Commissioner of Tamil Nadu, returned to work in the Ashram and was elected as Chairman. He continued in office till his death in 1969. N. M. R. Subbaraman who had helped in starting and fostering the institution in its initial stages was elected in his place. K. Muniandi, Principal of the Regional Planning Institute became his Honorary Secretary in 1968.

In 1956, Dr. Rajendra Prasad visited Gandhi Niketan. Later in 1968 Acharya Vinoba Bhave visited the Ashram. Vinobaji's visit gave a spurt to Gramdan activities in the area. During 1969 the Ashram helped the State Sarvodaya Mandal in obtaining 8 Block dans in Madurai District through the services of trained young men. In addition a dozen functional Gram Sabhas in Kallupatti and neighbouring areas have contributed to the total Welfare of the people.

As a result of the concerted efforts of the Ashram workers about 100 families of Pranmalai Kailars of Periakattalai village have turned over a new leaf as a community since 1976. In the past this community had been depending mainly on thieving for their livelihood and has been declared as a denotified tribe by the British. By repeated appeals the Ashramites were able to persuade these people to give up their age-old habit by offering them alternative sources of income through agriculture with the aid of the Meiyer Trust. People of the neighbouring villages who were the victims of their deprivations now feel safe and warmly testify to the great transformation that has taken place. Another village called Chattirapatti which was faction-ridden stands united today due to the efforts of the Ashram workers.

In 1946 the Ashram had started a Basic School. In spite of initial difficulties it flowered into a Post-Basic School obtaining 104% self-sufficiency in food in 1954. Some students after coming out of school have become self-employed agriculturists or workers in the various Khadi and Village Industries units of the Ashram. Many of them preferred to serve as teachers in the Basic Schools or as Gram Sevaks. At present this Post-Basic School is functioning as a Higher Secondary School with dairying, dress making, nursing and electrical motor winding as vocations. On its rolls there are 1200 students and 45 teachers at present. By their performance the students have proved that planned manual work which they put in does not hamper their academic excellence. The Primary School of the Ashram has 900 students and 25 teachers on its rolls with facilities for free mid-day meals for 500 children.

The workers of the Ashram including school teachers and staff of the Training Centres contribute one day's salary to the Common Good Fund of the Ashram. They voluntarily do community cleaning every Friday within the Ashram premises for an hour.

The Ashram has established a College of Gandhian Thought affiliated to Madurai Kamraj University. The Secretary of the Ashram K. Muniandi is the Principal of the College. Almost all the teachers of Gandhi Niketan have obtained a Diploma in Gandhian Thought through this College. Several Government servants and educated rural youth also attend these courses. Special 42-day courses with the aid of All-India Gandhi Smarak Nodhi, New Delhi, are conducted for graduates and post-graduates for initiating them into Gandhain techniques for the establishment of peace and harmony among the

intelligentsia and the illiterate. Gandhian Niketan also arranges padayatras for the propagation of the Gandhian way of life.

Gandhi Niketan has organised Gram sabhas in the neighbouring villages, which conduct monthly meetings to discuss their day to day problems with a view to solving them. Existing wells are deepened and new community wells are sunk and pumpsets installed through these Sabhas. Most of the local feuds and disputes are settled amicably. The Ashram uses its good offices in times of tension between villages or between Harijans and caste Hindus. Periodical seminars, conferences and camps organised by the Ashram for the Gram Sabha leaders, teacher and College students have had their stay in maintaining tranquillity in the area.

For ten years the Ashram assisted Dr. G. Venkatasamy and his team of doctors from the then Government Erskine Hospital, Madurai in conducting Free Cataract Operation Camps at the premises of the Ashram. All the Ashramites including the school children offered their free services for nursing the operated patients. They also served as volunteers in Eye Camps held by this team of doctors in other parts of the State. Now the Ashram is helping Aravind Eye Hospital, Madurai in this humanitarian service.

The National Adult Education Programme of the Central Government was successfully launched in Kallupatti Block by the Ashram and in Kalligidi Block by the Tamil Nadu Basic Education Society functioning at Kallupatti with K. Muniandi as its Secretary. Thousands of adults between 15 and 35 years of age in 120 centres have been enabled to learn to read, write and count besides enhancing their general awareness, knowledge and skills. Fifty per cent of these are rural women from all communities including backward and scheduled castes. The Ashram has also succeeded in establishing amicable relations between the Harijans and other communities in the area, leading to better employment opportunities for the Harijans.

When Prohibition was relaxed in Tamil Nadu, the Ashram trained volunteers for a non-violent struggle against the State policy. A pada yatra squad headed by the Ashram Secretary visited neighbouring villages exhorting the people to abstain from drinking with a written undertaking to that effect.

In short, Gandhi Niketan Ashram has not only established a model centre of constructive activities at Kallupatti for the benefit of the local population, but has carried the message of Gandhiji to the adjoining area through a large number of Gram Sevaks, Gram Sevikas and others whom it has trained and inspired to devote themselves to the service of the weaker sections of society. Decentralisation of all activities of the Ashram at all levels in a special feature of the institution conducted in the best Gandhian traditions.

