



MS. KANTABAHAN SHAH & MS. HARVILASBAHAN SHAH

Joint Recipient of the Award for Development and Welfare of Women and Children - 1993

Born: October 8, 1930 & June 19, 1931

Both of them gave up their posts as teachers and dedicated themselves to Sarvodaya work under the inspiration of Vinobaji. In the beginning, they joined the Bhoodan movement. Since then, they have engaged themselves in various constructive activities for bringing about total revolution.

Basically, Gujarat has been their area of work. But their participation in the Bhoodan and Gramdan movements took them to all parts of India. In 1960, when Vinobaji undertook padayatra in the dacoits-infested Chambal Valley, Kanta Shah and Harvilas Shah also took part in it. They were in the forefront when it came to contacting the dacoits, persuading them to surrender their arms or meeting their family members. It was these two who applied the tilak on the forehead of the dacoits when they surrendered and also tied raakhi to them. Since then, they have been regarded as sisters by the dacoits.

At the time of the conflict between Assam and Bengal, Vinobaji sent both of them to Assam. Both took part in the peace work. Similarly, they participated in the Gramdan work in Bihar. For a brief period, in the meanwhile, they selected an extremely backward village in Kheda district in Gujarat for village development work. However, Vinobaji advised them to undertake educative work for arousing the people for reform and development. Accordingly, they travelled throughout Gujarat and propagated the message of Gram Swaraj. When the Gram Swaraj movement started losing momentum, Vinobaji advised them to go to a place which had no facilities of any kind and serve the people living in utter poverty and misery. That is how Kanta and Harvilas came to Pindval village in the tribal area of Dharmapur in Valsad District.

Even today, many parts of this region have kachcha roads, suffer from inadequate communications and lack basic facilities. Their work is today spread over about 100 Adivasi villages having a population of about 50,000. They have kept contacts with about 6,000 families. As part of their work, both have devoted themselves to awakening the women of the region. Their objective is basic, social transformation and all their activities are for fulfillment of this objective.

All their efforts are directed towards social reconstruction by means of Bhoodan, Gramdan, Khadi Gramodyog, village development, prohibition, providing health services and awakening the womenfolk.

A food bank was operated which gave interest-free loans to people. Over the years they provided food-grains at the subsidised rate of Rs. 1 per kg. This year, about 7 lakh kilos were supplied. People were encouraged to undertake horticulture for growing mangoes, lime, guava and cashewnuts. This supplemented their food stock. Wells were constructed in village after village to provide clean drinking water. 60-65% subsidy is given to Adivasis to enable them to put tiles in their kachcha huts. Till to-day, tiles worth Rs. 1.2 crores have been distributed to about 10,000 families.

Efforts were made to take medical services to the people living in the hilly tracts. Every year about 30-40 thousand patients take the benefit of free medical services. Special efforts are made to eradicate tuberculosis, scabies and leprosy. Balwadi have been set up and adult education classes are conducted. Management of primary schools was undertaken for some years. Thousands of trees were planted through specially organised campaigns.

Khadi work was been started on a large scale in this region. To-day 1,000 Ambar Charkhas are in operation providing self-employment to many families. So far about 40 weavers have established themselves as self-employed persons. Prohibition, de-addiction, improvement in agriculture, awakening among womenfolk, public relations etc. have resulted not only in the development of the Adivasi but also a kind of resurgence in them. One can regard this programme as Antyodaya. Besides making food, clothing, housing, health and education available to the Adivasi, both of them are trying to bring jobs to people's homes.

A special feature of their work is that except for medical services, no other work is done free of cost. People are persuaded to contribute their share at least by way of shramdan. As a result, the Adivasis are increasingly becoming self-reliant. The farmers have become enlightened and motivated to put an end to injustice, exploitation and corruption. Superstition is also on the decline.

The same people, who once went to fraudulent faith healers, are now coming forward to take medicines. Interest in education and learning is also on the rise. There is a tendency to educate the children. The youth is being weaned away from the habit of drinking. Ambar Charkhas and cottage employments have given employment to more then 1000 families. As a result, the people do not have to wander for off-season jobs. They stay in their own environment and are better off to the extent of daily earnings of Rs. 10 to 15, or sometimes Rs. 20 to 25. Naturally, their diet has also improved. To keep the khadi work going, marketing needs to be arranged for the sale of Rs. 40-45 lakhs worth material. This is being arranged even though an outlet like Khadi Bhandar is not there. As a result of these activities, the attention of the outside world has been drawn to this once neglected and poor Adivasi area.

Kantabahan has been the President of Gujarat Sarvodaya Mandai, Assistant Secretary of Sarva Seva Sangh, Secretary of Gram Swaraj Fund (Gujarat), Secretary of Jayaprakash Amrit Kosh (Gujarat), Treasurer of Vishwa Mahila Sammelan, Assistant Secretary of All India Peace Corps and President of Sarvodaya Parivar Trust, Pindval. Harvilasbahan has also been the President of Gujarat Sarvodaya Manch, Regional Secretary of Sarva Seva Sangh, in-charge of the work relating to Street Shakti Jagruti and Vice-President of Kasturba Rashtriya Smarak Trust. Both are joint authors of books and articles.

Because of their close mutual cooperation and dedication to all these constructive activities, Vinobaji had called them "Bhaginidvayee Harishchandra" (Sister-duo Harishchandra).

