



DR. RANI ABHAY BANG

Recipient of the Award for Development and Welfare of Women and Children - 2006

Born: September 17, 1951

Educational qualification: Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery (M.B.B.S.), Nagpur University, 1972, Doctor of Medicine (M.D.) (Gynaecology), Gold Medallist Master of Public Health (M.P.H.), Johns Hopkins University, United States of America (USA), 1984.

Dr. Rani Abhay Bang and her husband, Dr. Abhay Bang, make a wonderful and inseparable couple, who have dedicated themselves completely to the social and educational uplift of the lowest of the lowly, namely, the tribal people of Gadchiroli district in Maharashtra, their "Karmabhumi", by providing effective medical and public health services to them. On her return to India from USA, Rani Bang and her husband set up a grassroots health organization SEARCH (Society for Education, Action & Research in Community Health) in 1986. This institution, after surveying the health conditions among the people in the villages of Gadchiroli, came up with the startling discovery that 92 per cent of women in these villages had gynaecological disorders, a good part being sexually transmitted disease (STD) related. Another study in the same 58 villages revealed that pneumonia was a major child killer.

Rani and her husband began working out solutions with the villagers' involvement in 1993, when they set up Shodh-gram, 17 kms from Gadchiroli on a 13 acre plot. It is modeled on a typical Gond tribal village, with a tribal-friendly hospital complete with a small temple for a tribal deity. The hutlike wards, the outpatient department, the canteen, all have the tribal touch. The ambience was created to make the tribals feel at home. The campus has a training center, a research center, an alcohol de-addiction center, a pharmacy, quarters for the staff and a house for the Bangs, a prayer-cum-meeting hall, a kitchen-cum-dining hall and quarters for visitors.

Every evening, before dinner, the people of Shodh-gram gather for a prayer meeting. Strains of Gandhiji's Birla Temple gatherings, Rani and Abhay give the lead with a rendering of "Itani shakti hame dena data" to be picked up by the others. The entire movement initiated by this couple is a fulfillment of the concept of Mahatma Gandhi's ideal of evolutionary revolution. Gandhiji's influence is writ on every aspect of Shodh-gram.

The entire basis of research in Shodh-gram is participatory in character and the objective is to search for healthcare to the rural and tribal population in India. A large number of rural Dai (midwife) in 60 villages have become barefoot doctors to help and treat thousands of uncared-for rural women.

Rani influenced them with her humane qualities, her very transparent heart and her effusive warmth. The locals responded eagerly to the overtures from the doctors-turned-social healers and this unity of purpose was soon seen in the epoch-making campaign against alcoholism. The couple soon formed a Darumukti Sanghatna, organised an ISO-village conference attended by 3,000 delegates, mostly women, who turned into enforcers of the "People's prohibition". Rani and her husband won the gratitude of thousands of women and children who were liberated from the physical and mental abuse of the alcoholics.

Rani and Abhay have conducted pioneering research in high prevalence of gynaecological problems in rural women, sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS control, child mortality, acute respiratory infections in children, new born health care for rural areas, tribal health, alcohol and alcoholism and

adolescent sexual health. The work done by SEARCH has reduced the infant mortality rate in this tribal area from 12 to 30 per cent per 1000. The new approach by SEARCH has been accepted world-wide as an effective way to reduce child mortality.

SEARCH has provided a light in an area where doctors are scarce and it has become a beacon of hope and help for thousands of people belonging the most vulnerable sections of the people.

SEARCH has received the MacArthur Foundation International Award for creative and social work. It was earlier honoured by the Government of Maharashtra in 2003 with "Maharashtra Bhushan" for its work among the tribals. In 1996, it was given the "Seshadri Gold Medal" for outstanding contribution to the field of community medicine in India. In 2005, the TIME magazine honoured the couple and included them in its list of 18 "Global Health Heroes".

In their larger mission, Rani and Abhay Bang are striving to model themselves on Albert Einstein's ideal: "A human being is part of a whole, called by us the "Universe", a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness".

"This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening out circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and whole of nature in its beauty".

