



RAHA NABA KUMAR

Recipients of the International Award for Promoting Gandhian Values Outside India - 2023

Born: April 14, 1963

After completing his education, Raha Naba Kumar started his professional career in 1985 at Noakhali. During that time, he had the opportunity to meet many Gandhians including Charu Chowdhury, Reddy Pally Satyanarayan ji, Viswa Ranjan Sen and also the late Padmashri Jharna Dhara Chowdhury, then Secretary of the Gandhi Ashram Trust (GAT) who came with Mahatma Gandhi to Noakhali. Especially inspired by her work, Raha Naba Kumar started following her path and learning about Mahatma Gandhi. So much so that he found himself identifying as a Gandhian. Initially, Raha Naba Kumar faced numerous struggles when he joined Gandhi Ashram in Noakhali, Bangladesh in 1989. There were financial constraints, negative treatment from people around, dealing with continuous life threats from the illegal occupiers of the GAT properties, and encountering various speculations. Despite all this, Raha Naba Kumar accepted the challenge of revitalizing the Ashram as a trustworthy organisation in society. Through constant efforts for more than three decades, he has been able to change the situation.

Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's teachings, Raha Naba Kumar has chosen a path of nonviolence, truth, and self-discipline. In a world often marked by turmoil and discord, he strives to emulate Mahatma Gandhi's values of compassion, empathy, and social justice in all his deeds.

Work and Achievements

Raha Naba Kumar during 1985-1989 worked in a bi-lateral project of the Government of Bangladesh and the Netherlands called the 'Land Reclaim Project'. The objective was to help landless and marginalized floating people in the remote coastal area of Noakhali, Bangladesh. Through enduring hardships and threats to his life from the illegal land grabbers, with his continuous efforts, his team was able to provide 3000 acres of Khash land (the abundant land owned by the Government) to 1000 landless people.

Highlights of his achievements:

- Established 76 non-formal primary schools for basic education of the poor and dropout children, which has benefited approximately 22,800 students.
- Initiated the process of reviving a school (*inaugurated by Mahatma Gandhi on January 30, 1947 in Jayag, Noakhali which had stopped functioning during the Pakistan period*) to a well-established school known as the Gandhi Memorial Institute, from Class 1 to Class 10.
- In the 90s, due to lack of pure drinking water, lack of awareness of hygiene and sanitation and its infrastructure, people of the greater Noakhali district used to defecate in the open. Thus, resulting in significant health and financial vulnerability.
- With the support of the Government of Bangladesh, donor agencies, local non-government organisations (NGOs) and local communities, GAT installed approximately 18,000 deep hand tube

wells and 4,70,000 low-cost toilets and constructed 36 public toilets. This role model initiative in Bangladesh, benefited approximately 7 million people leading to better living conditions.

- Under the leadership of Raha Naba Kumar, GAT upholds activities related to human rights, good governance, and justice for all. People first approach GAT before taking any legal action. To date, GAT has helped resolve about 28,000 cases related to domestic violence, community litigations, communal instability, and other violences that destroy the peace and harmony in the society.
- The establishment of the 'Gandhi Memorial Museum' at the present campus of GAT is one of Raha Naba Kumar's great achievements. It is the first and only recognized Gandhi Museum in Bangladesh. Thousands of people from Bangladesh and abroad visit to learn about Mahatma Gandhi and his life.
- Raha Naba Kumar has provided livelihood opportunities to the poor and vulnerable women and the young students, by setting up a handloom and handicraft center to train in various activities including bamboo, cane, tailoring, loom management etc. GAT showroom markets the products to domestic and foreign tourists and caters to the orders received from Dhaka and across Bangladesh.
- In the 90s, to address the issues of water logging, salinity, poor vegetation and aquaculture and significant imports of food, Raha Naba Kumar focused on the development of agriculture in this area immediately after joining GAT. Through extensive research, GAT was able to identify suitable varieties that could be produced more efficiently with the help of local technical knowledge. It was instrumental in setting up 9000 households' gardens for poor families and in creating 300 village nurseries to support those gardens. At present, 70 per cent of the vegetables and fish are produced locally.
- Organized many interactive popular theatre and video shows, cultural events to raise awareness of Gandhiji among the community people.
- Through dedication and persistent endeavours of Raha Naba Kumar, 50 out of 64 districts commemorate Mahatma Gandhi's anniversaries, every year, in Bangladesh.
- His support to and association with the other Gandhian organisations in Bangladesh and abroad, respectively is helping propagate Mahatma Gandhi's ideologies and work effectively.
- Organizing seminars, conferences, meetings have helped build friendly relationships between Bangladesh and India, over a period.

Youth empowerment: Raha Naba Kumar's contribution has attracted more than 2000 volunteers, working in different parts of Bangladesh. They are playing a vital role to restore peace and communal harmony in their community (in October, 2021, they protected communal violence in Ramgonj of Lakshmipur District). While many are also engaged in GAT's rural development programs, peace campaigns and human rights programmes. He helped train youths in vocations covering computers, handicrafts, driving, mechanical engineering, midwife training, nursing, fish culture, bio-intensive agriculture, etc. Most of them are engaged in their profession. In many cases, GAT has provided the initial capital to those who were interested in starting his/her own business.

Khadi: GAT has established two handloom centers. These are run by women and presently 65 women are engaged in these units. Cotton to yarn to finished products are produced here, wherein natural dyes are used on yarn. It claims that in Bangladesh, only GAT produces pure Khadi. They organize exhibitions to promote Khadi in Bangladesh.

Rejection of violence and embracing peace and brotherhood: Raha Naba Kumar has conducted numerous activities to build peace and brotherhood in the community. He initiated nationwide peace campaign programmes to promote Mahatma Gandhi's ideology in Bangladesh, covering more than 1000 schools, colleges, and universities. Apart from these, a nationwide mobile museum exhibition on Mahatma Gandhi was also done over the years. In addition, there are regular meetings with different stakeholders, training on peace, conflict resolution and transformation, formation of "Peace Committee " in every union, etc. Raha Naba Kumar is further enhancing peace building activities to create an impact on a larger scale.

All these activities helped to prove the credibility of GAT among the communities and to spread Gandhian philosophy in Bangladesh. It is laudable that Raha Naba Kumar continues to work in Noakhali, in Bangladesh to revive Mahatma Gandhi's thoughts and to apply the constructive work programme for the benefit of the people.

Contact details:

Raha Naba Kumar
Director & CEO, Gandhi Ashram Trust
Post Office Jayag, Upazilla, Sonaimuri
District Noakhali-3827, Bangladesh
M: +880-1711408226
E: gandhiashram.bd@gmail.com
W: www.gandhiashramtrust.org

