



## **DR. TULASI MUNDA**

### **Recipient of the Award for Development and Welfare of Women and Children - 2024**

Born: July 15, 1947

Being the Founder and Secretary of Adivasi Vikash Samity (AVS), she worked dedicatedly since 1964.

**The Beginning:** Tulasi Munda, lovingly known as Tulasi Apa was born to a tribal family in a remote village Kainsi in Keonjhar Sadar Block of Keonjhar District in Odisha. She is the 6th child of the family. Her father, Charan Munda, was village chowkidar as well as worshiper of traditional village goddess. Tulasi Munda was about 12 years old when she went to live with her sister in Serenda, 65 kms away from her home. Later, she established herself among the poor tribal of Joda-Barbil mining belt, where they were leading most distress life due to lack of education, serious health issues and poor economic condition. For more than five decades, Tulasi Munda has mingled with them dedicatedly and today a clear and visible growth is noticeable in the field of education, social change, health & sanitation and communication among dignified citizenship. She earned Rs. 2 a week by cutting stones, sieving iron from the waste. Whenever possible, she taught herself the alphabets (without getting formally educated). It was difficult, but she plodded on. In 1961, her passion for learning catapulted her into the orbit of Gandhian women like Malati Chaudhury, Rama Devi and Nirmala Deshpande, who were committed to social work, especially educating women. She joined them and participated in their village forays and struggles in different parts of the country. Tulasi Munda met Acharya Vinobha Bhave and was inspired by his vision and commitment to donate land (Bhoodan) and improve the lives of poor villagers. She participated in All India Rally for Bhoodan Movement which widened her experience country wide.

**Educational Development:** As to her contribution for educational development of the tribal children, Tulasi Munda has started AVS Vidya Mandir at Serenda, in 1964 and later promoted to residential school for non-school going children from different mining localities. Now, it has grown up to a full-fledged high school with more than 776 students, of whom around 600 are boarders. Similarly, another school at Kainsi has a strength of 300 students. In addition to that there were 20 satellite schools which has provided education to more than 1,000 students in remote areas. The children of mining workers, daily wage earners and nomads were brought under the folds of education by her unstinted effort. Besides, there are balwadi and community education centres in different villages, where people of different age groups get education. Also, with the help of different institutions, Tulasi Munda has ensured skill and higher education of hundreds of tribal youths.

**Lifetime Work:** In 1964, she came to Serenda. She had no opportunity to attend formal education. Tulasi Munda started her struggle of sustenance at the age of 15 and ultimately became the inspired torch bearer for tribal development in Odisha and beyond. Her mission in life was clear. A victim of illiteracy, Tulasi Munda would dedicate her life to eradicating this scourge. She resolved: "As long as I have breath in my body, I will fight illiteracy." She would devote herself to teaching and educating children, especially girls. Illiteracy, she believed was the worst form of enslavement. It was the root cause of the evils she saw all around her – poverty, unemployment, drunkenness, superstition, fear etc. Education was the tool to free people's minds from the darkness of ignorance. But executing her mission proved to be tougher than she anticipated. Villagers found the concept of educating girls preposterous. And boys had to work in the fields and mines to earn money, not waste their time learning alphabets and numbers and alien languages like English and Hindi. But Tulasi Munda was undeterred, despite not having either the students or the venue. She persuaded Serenda's local Pradhan to lend her the use of his veranda

(porch) for a few hours. As children could not be spared during the day, Tulasi Munda started evening classes. Before she knew it, she had 30 children. They were just taught the basic alphabets and numbers and a smattering of English words. She taught in the evenings and attended to Bhave's *bhoodan* work, during the day.

It is a tribute to her indomitable will and indefatigable energy that over the next 40 years, Tulasi Munda helped establish 17 schools and succeeded in educating more than 20,000 boys and girls. Currently, she has over 1000 students, almost half of whom are girls, and her residential school provides education all the way up to class X.

A lot had happened due to her dedicated work following the vision of Gandhian principle of Gram Swaraj. Tulasi Munda echoed it in all forums, whenever got an opportunity. She worked on formulating Gram Sabha and organising community for sustainable life. During the process, she was able to get participation of administration, politicians and local elites to converge development schemes and grants to work simultaneously for village development.

As the next step, she built institutions in the villages inviting participation of youths, women and children. Mahila Mandals in each of the villages having Gram Sabha were formed to make the women self-dependent. Similarly, Youth Clubs were formed in many villages.

Coming to settling village level disputes, tussle between mines/industry owners & the labourers, she has concentrated in bloodless settlement giving opportunity for survival of both and extending benefits to the poor. Tulasi Munda's services were recognized in many fronts.

Transforming 20,000 young lives is no mean achievement, especially for someone who was born poor and went through life without any facilities or patronage. Problems and challenges are mounting in every sphere of human existence. Today, Tulasi Munda feels the nation must launch a new freedom struggle to liberate her downtrodden sections of society from the yoke of poverty, disparity and injustice. Her selfless work shows her lifelong devotion to furthering Gandhian values.

As to her contribution in the growth and development of the poor and downtrodden, her services were recognized at various fields. She has been member in several philanthropic bodies of the State and beyond. Tulasi Munda has excellent motivation and mitigation skills for which she has been approached by the Government, mining companies and community leaders to mediate in major crisis. She had escorted TATA Group to pacify the labour unrest in England after their acquisition of Corus Steel Plant. Tulasi Munda's meaningful participation in resolving the issues of Kalinganagar tribal unrest was a milestone in the history of industrialisation in Odisha.

She has been working tirelessly for more than six decades on her crusade to uplift the life and livelihoods of the tribal and downtrodden. For her work, Tulasi Munda has received a fair amount of donations to run her schools. Despite the recognition and the accolades, she feels much more needs to be done and desires to be reborn and again undertake the same work of education and *Gram Swaraj*.

### **Highlights:**

Tulasi Munda doesn't judge her life with words like success and failure. She sees it more in terms of work that needs to be done, work that has been done, work that remains yet undone.

Pioneering in forming 400 Gram Sabhas in four districts of Odisha and in engaging village community for their self-development, Tulasi Munda has the only ambition to make the Gram Sabha omnipotent - the real parliament for village development.

Dedication, grassroots approach, and unwavering commitment to the Gandhian principles make Tulasi Munda a true inspiration. She is a firm believer that the rights of women, children or Adivasis can be tackled better if people have a higher level of education.

**Awards & Recognitions:**

2023: Times Power Women for Lifetime Achievements

2011: Kalinga Ratna Samman, Cuttack

2004: Red & White Bravery Award (Gold Medal)

2006: Doctor of Law, North Orissa University, Odisha

2001: Padma Shri, Government of India

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