



Ms. Vidhya Das
Recipient

Development and Welfare of Women and Children Award 2013

Honourable President, Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, Honourable Governor, Mr. Shankaranarayan, Honourable Chief Minister Mr. Prithviraj Chavan, and dear friends, I feel honoured and deeply humbled to accept the prestigious Jamnalal Bajaj Award from the President of this great country, whose history has been shaped by some of the most magnificent women and men. It is specially humbling to think of women like Kasturba and Janaki Devi, who have taught us that service to humanity is much holier than service to God! This award is recognition of the collective effort of all who are part of my organisation, Agramee, and the community of deprived tribal's and harijans who have helped our efforts take the form of a movement for rights and justice. I must here, take the opportunity of making special mention of my husband, who has suffered and supported my passions, and eccentricities, ensuring that Agramee is much more than a partnership.

This award recognises the efforts of my women companions who have provided outstanding and sustained leadership to their community to address injustice and exploitation. In 1993, the then Chief Minister of Odisha, recognised the immense moral power of these very same women and appointed eight of them as his Advisors. These illiterate women, not only dialogued with government secretaries, and District Collectors to guide policy and implementation in the state, but also took up a determined struggle for rights to non-timber forest produce. With the humble broom as their - symbol, they fought for their right to buy, process and sell the broom grass which grew in abundance on their hills. It took 7 years of petitions, braving scornful officials, having their stock of brooms seized, litigations, and tremendous persistence. It was one of the greatest moments for all of us, when in 2000; the Odisha Government handed over ownership to the Panchayats in tribal regions, thus engendering one of the most progressive NTFP policies in the country.

The next and the much bigger challenge, I and my colleagues faced was to help the tribal women's collectives capitalise on this herculean achievement by facilitating value addition and marketing of their forest and agricultural produce. Shifting gears from a struggle for rights into real-time business was not easy. In this, the Government and public sector provided support and slowly we were able to meet the markets' stringent demands, of quality and quantity, something that was quite different from our paradigm of small is beautiful! Now I can say, we have the largest tribal women's collective in Odisha, benefitting more than 1000 tribal producers by ensuring a better price for their produce, while also providing employment to more than 100 workers for of high demand goods including brooms, pulses, and millets. With the humble broom, made from hill grass as our symbol, I believe together, we have been able to show the best practices for entrepreneurship.

In looking at the situation of tribal communities friends, I have been struck by their inherent knowledge, and practical wisdom and the realisation of the huge advantages of and utmost need for literacy and numeracy. Towards this end, we have established schools, "The Mukta Gyana Kutirs" for

underprivileged girls, which has been able to prove its point, that nothing can hold back this community of people, if they had but basic education.

These primary schools have helped girls pass matriculation in just 7 years, and brought an immense support from the community, along with a demand for including boys, and increasing the classes' upto middle school. A demand we are ill able to meet because of inevitable fund crunches. Can we in this country think of ensuring a generation of literates in the next 5 years?

This award is recognition of our collective efforts to make the various pro-people laws and provisions in the tribal regions a reality. Could we counter the reality of the countless migrations, the reality of the underpaying labour contractors and help people avail of the benefits of the Rural Employment Guarantee Act? The answers to these questions were not easy, and became more and more difficult as we sought to take the NREGA provisions ahead. Yet, the amazing perseverance of my tribal friends in different tribal districts helped thousands of wage earners increase their income and earnings from the Act, and even more importantly develop land and infrastructure like ponds and income generating plantations, for long term income and food security. We had some run away successes too. In one Panchayat, one farm pond beneficiary took up courage and spoke out about the irregularities. The positive response of the administration encouraged all beneficiaries to demand redressal. They received a total of Rs.37 Lakhs of wage payment in arrears, after waiting for more than a year. In Phulbani 35, farm ponds providing irrigation and pisci culture opportunities, and 40 acres of lush mango plantations bear testimony to the synergy that can develop when Civil Society Organisations and Government join forces.

This award is the recognition of the efforts of tribal women towards participatory democracy through the seminal Panchayats Extension to the Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) ensuring that the interests of the poorest and most vulnerable are represented in development planning. They have also used the provisions of the PESA to much positive effect, and checked liquor licensing and alcoholism by mobilising the Gram Sabhas for unanimous resolutions to the effect.

With Agramee's help and support, tribal women have reclaimed their degraded commons with fuel wood and income generating plantations, and initiated a new effort towards sustainable cultivation, helping tribal farmers move away from the extensive practise of shifting and slash and burn cultivation towards a more eco-friendly practise that helps improve production, while also ensuring the preservation of the local millets and pulses.

Our efforts have also helped thousands of tribal farmers and entire villages view their degraded land and slope in a new light, and inspired them to use the opportunity provided by the Forest Rights Act. They have found support and strength from the Government in this, which has helped some of the village communities to develop these lands, as also encouraged them by ensuring Indira Awas housing for those whose claims have been recognised.

Collective effort, and improved production has also helped break the strangle hold of the moneylender in the villages. Village communities have found a new strength in their togetherness, and begun to build up community grain and seed banks. With contributions from their marginal surplus pooled together, combined with a little thrift during the festive seasons, these people have been able to keep off the moneylenders, and take significant steps toward self-reliance.

And yet friends, a sense of niggling discomfort affects me, a discomfort born of the fact that poverty and hunger are still a constant companion to millions of people in this country, and that our efforts are but a

drop in the ocean of deprivation that affects tribal's, and other underprivileged sections. Our progressive laws and policies are yet to reach the majority of these people, who struggle in the unorganised sector, and lead a hand to mouth existence. Our policy makers are worried about growth rate of the economy, but not of the stunted growth of that affects almost half our children.

We are proud, in this country of an ancient and rich tradition and culture, but we care nought about the much more ancient and immense culture and knowledge systems of the tribal peoples, who have preserved and nurtured our precious forests, mountains, river basins and natural habitats. These communities along with their knowledge systems and their habitats are under serious threat as the nation embraces neo-liberal policies which seek to expand mining and industrial activities. Peasants and tribal's are the inevitable victims of such trends. Tribal communities have a long history of struggle against oppression and tyranny. Their wars against colonial oppression are legendary, their role in the freedom struggles recorded in the annals of history. The convictions and resilience of these communities have sustained beyond wars and invasions. We as a nation must develop as one, taking the tribal's and other deprived and vulnerable groups along. We must affirm to one and all that this country and its great people are not destined to poverty and misery that oppression and injustice can be dispelled to usher in a bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood that together we can realise the dreams of our founding fathers, the dream of Swaraj for each, and Swaraj for all.

