

Shri Rabindra Nath Upadhyay

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Constructive Work-2003)

Born: 1923

Educated in Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi.

Popularly known as Rabinbhai, Shri Rabindranath Upadhyay is well-known for his commitment to the Khadi Gramodyog ideology and his role in the Sarvodaya movement. Born in a small village in Ballia District of Uttar Pradesh, he joined the freedom movement in his school days on the call of Netaji Subhash Bose and did not hesitate to use arms as a means of attaining India's Independence. However, Gandhiji's death in 1948 came as a turning point in his life when he decided to rededicate his life to the service of the Nation by non-violent means.

Rabinbhai spent his early Gandhian life in Bihar where he actively participated in Vinobaji's Bhoodan movement that was later to influence his Gramdan work in Assam. During this period, his association with stalwarts like Shri Jayaprakash Narayan, Shri Vinoba Bhave and Shri Dharendra Majumdar brought to the fore his dynamism and organisational capacities that have helped him in his active career spanning more than fifty years.

In the wake of the Chinese aggression, Rabinbhai moved to the Bhutan border in Assam as a Shanti Sainik. Slowly and steadily, he spread the Gramdan philosophy in the villages and introduced spinning and weaving to improve the lot of the poor residents of the area. The Tamulpur Anchalik Gramdan Sangha (TAGS), which he founded in 1962, now serves as a Khadi Gramodyog Training Center and has a very active campus where silk, khadi, honey, oil, etc. are produced for marketing. He also established a Peace Centre at Kumarikata (TAGS) in Tamulpur Development Block of Nalbari District.

Initially, he helped the poor villagers to get their lands freed from the hands of the mahajans by arranging loans for them from voluntary institutions. Later, in the 1960s, he helped in the establishment of a common granary in which the villagers deposited their grain according to their capacity and took them back during their times of need. Rabinbhai organised a number of balwadis in Assam and in Arunachal Pradesh, low cost sanitation for houses in a Gramdan Village, established biogas plants and arranged for the digging of wells for providing safe drinking water for the villages. Relief operations to famine affected agriculturists were also undertaken.

Under the auspices of the Khadi and Village Industries Commission, Rabinbhai started a training programme called the "New Weavers' Training Centre". Buildings, work sheds, hostels and equipment were provided at a reasonable rate to several weavers, spinners and other artisans. This Centre also supplied bee-boxes to the villagers and it started an oil press unit for crushing oil seeds for extracting the oil.

Leading a simple life, Rabinbhai enjoys robust health and he continues to innovate and generate new ideas. Under his guidance, the efficiency of the silk charkha has increased manifold, thus raising hopes of reviving the hand-spinning tradition of silk seen in many rural Indian households. Ever keen to launch actions to help people in times of malaria epidemics or during ethnic conflicts, Rabinbhai and his organisation have come to be known for their fearless struggle on behalf of the minority and marginalized communities, the famous Angarkata Satyagraha being a shining example.

A firm believer in the democratic process, Rabinbhai was jailed for opposing the Emergency and, despite an occasion when he was brutally attacked by militants for his refusal to bow to their demands, he has continued his constructive work tirelessly and with renewed vigour.

Even today, he is a crusader and harbinger of peace and non-violence. At the helm of various Khadi and Sarvodaya networks, Rabinbhai is the founder member of several Sarvodaya institutions. Along with his wife, Smt. Shakuntala Bahan, an active Shanti Sainik, Rabinbhai leads a humble existence at the TAGS, which he continues to lead with a deep commitment and profound insight.

Shri Rabindra Nath Upadhyay was the recipient of the Padmashri in March 2000.

