



MS. ASHOKA GUPTA

Recipient of the Award for Development and Welfare of Women and Children - 2007

Born: November 8, 1912

Educational qualification: Bachelor of Science in Pure Science, Calcutta University

Ashoka Gupta was drawn towards voluntary social work since her student days as a Girl Guide. She was attracted to study and work for the welfare of women and children in the rural areas of West Bengal. After her marriage with a member of the Indian Civil Service, she had to move in different districts of the State. She became a member of the All India Womens' Conference (AIWC) in Calcutta and, under its auspices, she was instrumental in setting up one of the Homes of Save the Children Committee at Bankura in 1943-44. During the communal riots in Noakhali in 1946, she volunteered to act as a leader of the volunteers on behalf of the AIWC, Chittagong Branch, and gave up, temporarily, a sheltered, secure home life to devote herself to bringing relief to the uprooted humanity.

She encouraged and comforted the panic-stricken multitude while trying to restore communal harmony under the inspiring guidance of Gandhiji. Her decision to stay with a child in the remote Harijan villages of Noakhali after the communal holocaust, to give succour to the affected people under the direction of Thakkar Bapa, is considered to be her life's most cherished experience.

Following the partition of the country in 1947, she shouldered the responsibility of coordinating the efforts of various voluntary organizations working in the State for the rehabilitation of the refugees. The West Bengal's "Emergency Relief Committee" which was set up as a voluntary body to tackle the national crisis and which was subsequently redesignated as Mahila Seva Samiti (of which she is now the Chairperson), continues to work in the field of women's rehabilitation even today. In 1955, the Union Ministry of Rehabilitation appointed her leader of a six member team to study the conditions of the West Punjab Homes and compare them with those set up in the East.

Ashoka Gupta served as Chairman of the West Bengal State Social Welfare Advisory Board, as Member of the Central Social Welfare Board and as State Chief Commissioner, Bharat Scouts and Guides. As a Member of the delegation from All India Women's Conference and Bharat Scouts and Guides and as a non-official delegate of the Government of India, she visited United Kingdom, United States of America, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Brazil, Japan Italy and the Federal Republic of West Germany to participate in an International Conference on Social Work and also to study the social, educational and youth programmes in these countries.

She has been Trustee of the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust since 1973. She takes keen interest in the development activities of the 10 Gram Seva Kendra run by the Trust in 10 districts of West Bengal. She has particularly served the cause of education, vocational training, rehabilitation of women and children and the eradication of illiteracy among women in rural areas through the leadership given by her to the workers of the Trust.

Ashoka Gupta has used the AIWC platform as a medium to start many development projects to serve the cause of the uplift and welfare of women and children. The AIWC Buniadi Bidyapith established in 1947 is one such Institution which bears testimony to her commitment to her mission. She remains the longest serving founder Office-bearer of the Bidyapith, serving as a President today with the same undiluted zeal. The Bidyapith has attained the status of a Government recognized and aided Higher

Secondary School. The mission is to include as many girls and boys in the pre-primary section into the area of literacy, education and vocational training. It gives attention to the nutrition requirements of the children of the entire school as well as street children with donations brought in from various sources. It also organizes regular health check-up camps.

She continues as the President of the SOS Children's Village, Calcutta, and mentors the aunts and the mothers and the administrative staff of the organization which aims at bonding several shelter less children under one roof under the care of a mother who is motivated to take care of the children as though they were her own in a totally family atmosphere. The Mahila Seva Samiti where she gave leadership and worked for the rehabilitation of displaced women and families in Post Partition Bengal in 1947, continues today under her leadership.

Ashoka Gupta has authored two books on her experiences, her life and times, entitled 'Noakhali Durjog Diney' and ' In the Path of Service' and 'In the Path of Service-Memories of a Changing Century'.

At the age of 93, she still leads from the front with compassion in her efforts to alleviate poverty, eradicate illiteracy and train and empower women so that they may live with the dignity they deserve.

Ashoka Gupta has received a number of Awards, viz. "Gandhi Seva Puraskar" awarded by the Gandhi Darshan Samity in October 1994 and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar Gold Plaque by Asiatic Society, Kolkata in 2003-04 for the spread of education.

