

Shri Ramesh Bhaiya & Smt. Vimla Bahan
Recipient of the Award for Outstanding Contribution
in the field of Constructive Work - 2011

Ramesh Bhaiya Born: 20th April, 1956 / Vimla Bahan Born: 15th April, 1959

Shri Ramesh Bhaiya, a law graduate and an ardent follower of Acharya Vinoba Bhave, along with his wife Smt. Vimla Bahan, a Post Graduate, set on a Padyatra with a vision to uplift and empower the rural people. They found and chose a neglected and highly crime infested village Ban- ka- Tara (presently Bartara) for setting up Vinoba Seva Ashram in 1980. The Ashram began under a thatched structure on a piece of land used as crematorium. Gradually people got involved with the Ashram. The village women were engaged in illicit distillation of liquor and earn a small living from the money so earned. With an objective to first make the village alcohol-free, their efforts were channelized in that direction. Till date there are around 20 alcohol- free villages.

Shri Ramesh Bhaiya and Smt. Vimla Bahan took steps to meet and understand. After regular and constant interactions, understanding, and judgement of the life, needs and development prospects of the village women, they were introduced to sewing classes. It subsequently helped them generate income through tailoring. Gradually this brought an end to the illicit brewing and boosted people's confidence to move towards upliftment and development.

Smt. Vimla Bahan is working shoulder to shoulder with Shri Ramesh Bhaiya and looks after the administrative work. Their diligent and patient effort finally resulted in getting rid of the social evils and malpractices. Their vision is to establish a society where every individual gets an opportunity for integrated development based on self sustainable and rural based economy focusing mainly on women empowerment. The vision of the Ashram is "Andhkar ko na Dhikkaren, accha hai ek deep jalayein" (It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness). Today, the Vinoba Seva Ashram is spread over 11 acre land and carries out many diversified activities for the development of the most neglected areas. The quantum of work is quite large, qualitative and in line with Gandhian principles.

The couple strived for:-

*Imparting knowledge to the people.

- Bringing and developing attitudinal changes in the minds of the people.
- Directing and helping the people to be socially and economically independent.

In the initial 5 years (1980-1985) focus was on creating awareness and changing the mindset of the people. Followed by implementing small scale activities under various government schemes during the period from 1985-1990. During 1990-1995, the dairy program was initiated with the involvement of 30 women. Gradually, various vocational and enterprising activities like sericulture, carpet weaving, vermi compost and vegetable production programs were undertaken.

The Ashram has around 1100 karyakartas of which, 500 are involved full time with the various projects and the balance 600 are spread across the 32 districts of Uttar Pradesh.

Education

In 1984, Vinoba Sewa Ashram made arrangement to provide primary education at Bartara village in Bhawalkheda development block. This primary school has now become an Intermediate College. Both these educational institutions are being run with local contribution. Setting an example as to how effective educational programs can be made available to the children in resource deficient areas even without government support. In its initial days, the Ashram observed that only a few children attend schools because of poverty in the area. This resulted in designing a number of interventions for the community, mainly children and women; laying emphasis on Education, Healthcare, Income generation, Goseva and Sustainable Agriculture.

To educate the community, the karyakartas created awareness and spread the importance of education amongst women and children. Finally after continuing persuasion for over two years, in 1984 foundation was laid of the school with only 3 children. Today, the school has enrolled 1200 students catering to the inter college level with no Government grant. The Ashram has 100 Adult Literacy Centers and an Institute of Management and Health Science (Vinoba Vidhyapeeth) to cater to the professional education in addition to the 40 girl's primary centers catering to 1600 dropout girl children in Hardoi district.

Healthcare

In order to promote the attendance of women in awareness sessions about healthcare, the duo jointly with other associations initiated activities focusing on family welfare programs, healthcare, sexually transmitted diseases, nutritional aspects, training to traditional birth attendants etc. Most importantly, they addressed the concern of maternal and infant mortality rate by involving Gram Panchayats and educating the women Panchayat representatives.

The Radha Project in Shahjahanpur district imparted healthcare training to 13,830 members of 922 Village Health Committees and also prepared the village health improvement plan for the community. Amongst other projects are - Kastoori project in Bhawalkheda and Dadraul blocks to promote family welfare programmes, Devki project to impart training to 2,120 traditional birth attendants (TBAs) in all the villages of Shahjahanpur and 968 TBAs in all the villages of Pilibhit district, Rachna project for implementing improvement of malnutrition of pregnant mother and children in Pilibhit district and the Hanuman Pariyojana.

Self - Reliance

To practice Vinoba Bhave's philosophy of Swavalamban, Shri Ramesh Bhaiya and Smt Vimla Bahan have promoted khadi as a means of employment generation since 1984. 200 spindles from Akhil Bharat Krishi Goseva Sangh, Gopuri, Wardha were made available to the village women on subsidised rates for producing khadi cloth. Khadi is marketed through Khadi Bhandars and Khadi Mahotsav in Shahjahanpur and Pilibhit district.

Women empowerment

Number of steps has been taken towards making women and the community self reliant. Over 5850 women are occupied in sericulture and carpet weaving projects. 6000 self help groups have been formed. These are involved in making food and dairy products, embroidery, tailoring, agriculture and farming, etc. 25 women are involved in the goshala activity. Around 5000 are engaged in vegetable cultivation in Shahjahanpur, Lakhimpur and Pilibhit districts. Women in 14 districts of UP have been educated on their legal and land rights. The Ashram is voicing its opinion to title women as farmers as they are primarily and significantly involved in farming and agricultural related work. AAROH Campaign has been initiated for joint ownership (of husband and wife) in land records.

Goseva

Quite impressive work is being done towards rescuing and rehabilitating the cows which are transported to slaughter houses in very cramped and rough manner. Starting with 11 cows, it now has 250 rescued cows. The milk given by the injured cows is used to feed the calves. The gomutra is used in preparing herbal and ayurvedic medicines and organic pesticides. The cow dung is used to produce vermi compost.

As demonstration, the Ashram produces organic grains like wheat, rice, and some varieties of pulses to promote the culture of organic farming. This has resulted in the formation of a district level set up called the Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN-UP) in Uttar Pradesh.

Gram Swarajya

Following the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave, the Ashram has spread the message of Gram Swaraj in villages through community meetings, seminars, padyatras and

literature etc. A number of Sammelans have also been organized in collaboration with Akhil Bharat Rachnatmak Samaj. As a celebration of the golden jubilee of Bhoodan Movement, Shri Ramesh Bhaiya has conducted 35,000 kms of Padyatra in phases from Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh to Pochampally, Andhra Pradesh between 1996 - 2001.

Shri Ramesh Bhaiya and Smt. Vimla Bahan have strived to implement numerous developmental initiatives jointly with various national and international organizations.

Recognizing village as the basic unit for development, Vinoba Seva Ashram has made considerable progress for over 29 years towards the service to the mankind.

An effort has been made to create an environment in which each villager recognizes Ashram as its family and each Ashramite recognizes the villager a part of his family. Shri Ramesh Bhaiya and Smt Vimla Bahan in the village Bartara and the surrounding areas have built a new world of swadeshi and are striving to do more.

Awards and Honours

Shri Ramesh Bhaiya and Smt. Vimla Bahan have been recognised and honoured for their contribution through various awards some of which include the National Youth Award (1990, 2004 and 2005), the SHG Award from NABARD, Gandhi Puraskar, Janpad Ratan (2004), Swayam Siddha Award, Mahila Siromani Award, Matra Shakti Samman and Prakriti Rama Award.

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