



MR. BHAWANI SHANKER KUSUM

Recipient of the Award in the Field of Constructive Work - 2019

Born: June 4, 1947

Efforts of Bhawani Shanker Kusum in different fields of social service, particularly in rural Rajasthan has changed the lives of thousands of people afflicted with leprosy, physically handicapped and the poor rural and women of backward castes and tribes. His work is multi-faceted and Bhawani Shanker Kusum is a staunch Gandhian in his thoughts and actions.

He encouraged the youth to join '*Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini*' for propagating peaceful change in the society and rural development when he joined Loknayak Jayprakash Narayan's *Sampoorna Kranti Aandolan* in 1975. During his participation in the 'Sarvodaya Movement' Bhawani Shanker Kusum mobilized the youth to fight against corruption, work for social change and encouraged students to participate in *Sarvodaya* Examinations. He played a key role in organizing State level people's movement through peace rallies and demonstration in 1978 to support a dedicated Gandhian Gokul Bhai Bhatt's demand for total prohibition of liquor in Rajasthan. *Bhoodan* land development for the *Sahariya* tribe, *Padyatra* for *Gram Swaraj*, night classes for non-formal education, people's rights, youth camps to stop liquor and smoking habits, awareness of healthcare and hygiene, cleanliness drive in houses and community, resolving community disputes, propagating Gandhian values, etc. have been some of Bhawani Shanker Kusum's Gandhian work in the initial years.

What prompted him to launch a sprawling network of social activities? He has been gripped by the infection of social work for more than three decades. Bhawani Shanker Kusum set up Gram Bharati Samiti (GBS) in 1984 to carry out rural and constructive development work following the principles of Mahatma Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan. GBS's work being that of empowering the women, their rights and economical self-sustenance, conserving natural resources, wastelands development, serving the leprosy infected people and providing basic education to the tribal children, has helped touch lives of the people in 266 villages in Jaipur.

Service to the lepers: Bhawani Shanker Kusum was encouraged to carry out meaningful rehabilitation work of the leprosy patients during one of his meetings with Baba Amte in 1987. He took over a Government run leprosy home. Motivating them to give up begging, he helped them through vocational skill training and provided them with shelter, food and medical care to stay a healthy, productive and dignified life. Many now manage their own homes, live independently and have given their children good education. Over 3,000 leprosy patients have so far been rehabilitated.

Development initiatives for women: As women volunteers joined him, Bhawani Shanker Kusum increasingly began to see the problems of rural women from close quarters. He thus organised poor rural women of backward castes in Self Help Groups (SHG), for small savings and livelihood activities, helped them combat domestic and worksite violence and made them economically self-sustained. Over 650 SHGs in 78 villages have been formed involving over 7,000 women. Of which, 560 are running their household small scale units. The Women's Training Centre of GBS is set up to vocationally train women in various vocations i.e. weaving durries and carpets, making plates of tree leaves, dairy development, making bangles and shoes, etc. In 2007, Gram Bharati Apni Bachat Ghar

Mahila Sahakari Samiti (Gram Bharati Mahila Bank) set up its own cooperative bank for rural women. Savings and micro credit facilities have kindled a spirit of entrepreneurship in the women. The bank which is exclusively for rural women has over 900 members.

Nature conservation: Concerned about the problems of desertification and water conservation, led to Bhawani Shanker Kusum's 'Gandhivan wasteland development project' in village Todaladi of district Jaipur wherein 25 hectares of wasteland in the Aravalli hill range is transformed to a forestland. Under his guidance, local youth volunteers were involved who carried out work related to harvesting rain water, checking soil erosion, protecting disappearing and endangered plant species of medicinal value and sapling plantation. More than 80,000 trees of fast growing species planted under the wasteland development project solved the problem of fuel and fodder of 15,000 women of 6 villages. For this purpose lepers residing at the foothills of Gandhivan were also involved in plantation activity. Some of the major outcomes of this initiative are: increased awareness among 50,000 villagers on the importance of trees, trained youth on environmental issues, revival of 30 traditional water structures, raised underground water level in 22 wells, solved drinking water problems of 1,000 households, stabilized 45 sand dunes, cattle rearing increased to 30%, employment of 500 community people, especially the women and the youth, attracted hundreds of species of birds and wild animals and balanced the complete eco system. Gandhivan is a model project on wasteland development, which gained wide recognition and many accolades.

Potable water: The revival of old and dried village wells initiated by Bhawani Shanker Kusum, eliminated the drudgery of over 5,000 women who had to walk miles away from their home to fetch water for their daily use.

Mobile health care: In order to reduce the risk of infection from HIV/AIDS, Bhawani Shanker Kusum planned to help carry out various educational activities through small group discussions, puppet shows, video films, peer training, health camps, etc. GBS's outreach medical unit focuses on reaching health care to rural women for general ailments and sexually transmitted diseases. More than ten thousand women and their children have benefited so far.

Literacy program: Non-formal education and general knowledge on the topics related to environment, cleanliness, health care, adopting small family norms etc. is provided by GBS to the SHG women entrepreneurs and dropout girls through evening classes.

Heritage conservation: Under the initiation and guidance of Bhawani Shanker Kusum, GBS has undertaken repair and restoration of Rajasthan's traditional and heritage structures - *bavadi* (step wells) through community participation. GBS has restored six ancient step wells in Jamwaramgarh block of Jaipur which are also now sustainable water sources.

Other activities and associations: These include awareness programmes and skill development activities for adolescent girls, and youth camps on national integrity, peace, nonviolence and environment. Bhawani Shanker Kusum and GBS have trained over 1,600 youths.

Bhawani Shanker Kusum has widely travelled across India and abroad, presented papers, shared his experiences and participated in the conferences and workshops related to women's empowerment, combatting desertification, developing wasteland, prevention of HIV/AIDS etc. As part of GBS's extension and capacity building activities, it has provided training to over 170 NGO representatives in 14 states of India.

He, as the Coordinator is presently implementing a project 'Women's empowerment by promoting their handicrafts in India, China and Nepal'. Bhawani Shanker Kusum was elected as Civil Society

Organizations (CSO) representative for Asia in the United Nation's Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) in 2016. He is the Focal Point for participation of CSO in the COP 14 (Conference of the Parties) organized by the Ministry of Forests, Environment and Climate Change, Government of India which was held in September, this year.

Awards & Recognitions:

1996: Van Vistarak Puraskar

2000: Ford Conservation and Environment Award

2000: Indira Priyadarshini Vrikshamitra Puraskar

2006: Jalmitra Puraskar

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