

Sudha Varghese

Recipient

Development and Welfare of Women and Children Award 2023

Today is a very special and privileged occasion to speak about the work I have done with the women and children of the Musahar community, particularly the adolescent girls. It indeed was a challenge to come across a community deprived of all the parameters of growth, progress and development. They were landless, illiterate, untouchables. They found themselves living in shanty huts on the roadside mainly. We started working with this community called Musahar in the year 1987, as they were the most needy and deprived.

First, we targeted children who could be in school. We started an education program for the adolescent girls who are usually married off when 11 or 12. These girls were so interested in education and they went ahead. We concentrated on the women and oriented them for educating their children and also to learn the habit of saving. We helped them to open their accounts in the banks. Through women's groups we identified the violence and atrocities meted out on Dalit women. Gradually women learned to resist the violence and raised their voice demanding justice for themselves and their sisters and daughters.

So far, they were following the maxim of 'earn today and eat today' but now they began to understand the need and value of a sustainable livelihood. We have taught some women the skill of drumming and this has become their livelihood, and they earn good money during the wedding season and the festival season. Besides, they are also invited to perform at various places and occasions, like Government functions, banks, Schools, etc.

The biggest livelihood engagement our women have taken upon themselves is agriculture. It's almost like a blatant contradiction – women belonging to a totally landless community, taking land on lease and cultivating it very successfully. This program was started with just 10 women in community farming, in 2016 and today we have 3553 women in this program. The women say that their children are not crying any more with hunger. Many women sent their children to private school for better education and the women pose a question – if we don't educate our children, what is our future? Today these women are not landless, some of them have bought their own land and they are members of National Farmers' Forum.

My journey with this most marginalized community has impacted my life as a person, as a woman activist who is an integral part of the community in all its struggle – caste struggle, sexual harassment, rape and all kinds of discrimination and exclusion. Being an Advocate, I was able to take up their cases and help them to get justice. My community women did not know rape is a crime, so I had to explain this to them and took them to the police Station to file the first rape case of an adolescent girl. In return I was threatened with dire consequences. Over the 21 years I lived with this community, I have lived a thousand deaths and lived a thousand lives. Being with my people, my life has become very meaningful, and I can say YES to any circumstances that may come in the future.

I have a word for the youth, our country has 60% youth population, it's the youth who will lead the country in the future. It's our responsibility to accept and live out our Constitution and to be kind and tolerant and sensitive to all citizens, especially the less privileged - the women and children.