

Shri T.S. Avinashilingam

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Constructive Work-1985

Born in Tiruppur, Madras State, in May 1903, Shri T.S. Avinashilingam graduated in Politics and Economics and also in Law. He came under the influence of the teachings of Shri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda at an early age, through meeting Swami Brahmananda and Swami Shivananda, direct disciples of Shri Ramakrishna. Late he met Mahatma Gandhi. Inspired by these illustrious men, Avinashilingam has lived a life of total dedication and service to humanity.

He spearheaded the freedom movement in Madras Province from 1930 till the attainment of freedom in 1947 and was imprisoned on four occasions during that period.

He was actively involved in politics for over 30 years. He was elected to the Central Legislative Assembly in 1934, to the Madras Legislative Assembly in 1946, to the Lok Sabha in 1952 and to the Rajya Sabha in 1957. He became the first Minister of Education of Madras State after independence and made far-reaching changes in the education system. He introduced basic education and revitalized moral and spiritual education in schools by incorporating the study of Thirukkural. He improved the status of teachers. The Madras Libraries Act was passed at his initiative, which ushered in the library movement in the State. Shri Avinashilingam has also served on several national policy making bodies in the fields of general, technical and agricultural education and community development.

However, his life-long contribution has been in the fields of basic education and integrated rural development, to which he has given his best in terms of ideas, strategy and programme of action, which he has also implemented with success. Leading a celibate life, Shri Avinashilingam has inspired a whole band of workers over three generations, who are serving the institutions he set up and the projects he initiated in these fields in Coimbatore City and District.

He is the founder of Shri Ramkrishna Mission Vidyalaya. He also established a number of other educational institutions under an educational trust named after him, the prominent among them being the Avinashilingam Home Science College and the Rural Centre at Vivekanandapuram.

Shri Ramkrishna Vidyalaya was started in 1930. The first student to be admitted to the school was a destitute Harijan boy, despite stiff resistance from the conservative elements in society. This shows the firm conviction and determination of Shri Avinashilingam. The Vidyalaya received the blessings of Mahatma Gandhi when he laid the foundation stone for its building in 1934. Later in the year, the institution was affiliated to the Ramkrishna Mission.

Adopting a broad-based educational philosophy and comprehensive outlook, the Vidyalaya has developed into a multi-faceted educational complex, having acquired today the status of being a leading centre of life-oriented education in India. In its 300-acre campus, it houses institutions imparting instruction at various levels, ranging from nursery to doctorate, including diplomas and degrees in professional courses.

Schools from Balvadi to higher secondary level and a Post-Graduate Arts and Science College constitute the set up for liberal education, of course, with a slant of basic education and community service orientation. The Teachers' College with audio-visual department and a Computer Centre, the Gandhi Teachers Training Institute for basic education, the Maruthi College of Physical Education, the Engineering Polytechnic, the Community Polytechnic for rural development engineering and the School of Agriculture form the infrastructure for professional courses, including special education for the visually handicapped. The industrial institute provides training in industrial vocations and jobs. The Vidyalaya also conducts non-formal courses and a variety of short courses for farmers. It has a Workshop for producing electric motors and pump sets.

Besides imparting education and training, the Vidyalaya also run a dispensary, well-equipped with medicines and even instruments for minor surgery, catering to the health needs of its students and staff members and also of people from surrounding villages. There is also a Mini Health Centre which gives clinical, maternity and child welfare services to 13 villages.

A separate Trust called Shri Avinashilingam Education Trust (A.E. Trust) was established to promote facilities for women's education. They include schools from nursery to higher secondary levels, Teachers' College for Women, Home Science College for Women and Institute of Child Health and Nutrition.

The Home Science College is the biggest of its kind in India, with over 2000 students, including those from foreign countries, and offering a large option of 18 undergraduate and 9 Post-Graduate courses up to Ph.D. degree. In addition, it serves as a training centre for social workers and functionaries of Central and State Government Departments of Social Welfare and Community Development. The College has been granted autonomous status by the University of Madras, Tamil Nadu State Government and the U.G.C. It has a well-developed research wing whose experiments in nutrition, health, environmental sanitation and low cost rural diet have proved very useful. The Extension Department of the College has organized the District branch of the Bharatiya Grameen Mahila Sangh and induced women to undertake productive activity through arrangement of bank loans. The College is also publishing a Research Journal in Nutrition and Diet, the only one of its type in India; it has foreign subscribers also.

The A.E. Trust also runs, on a 102-acre garden land, a Rural Centre at Vivekanandapuram, jointly with the Ramkrishna Mission Vidyalaya. Started in 1978, the Centre has taken up the work of integrated rural development in 15 villages. It has a Demonstration Dairy Farm, Goat Unit, Poultry Unit, Agricultural Farm, Tailoring Unit and a Biogas Plant. A Krishi Vigyan Kendra has also been started with the help of ICAR.

Following the dictum of Swami Vivekananda that a nation is advanced in proportion as education spreads among the masses, the Trust institutions and the units of the Vidyalaya engage themselves in rural development work like : adult education, social forestry, school enrolment drive, coaching weaker pupils and school dropouts, village sports, repairs to houses and temples, building bridges and class-rooms, film shows on health, nutrition and family planning, soil testing, training in electric motor and pump set maintenance, etc.

Shri Avinashilingam is also a noted scholar. He is the author of several books on basic education, religion, human development, and teachings of Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi. He has also lectured on these subjects in India and abroad during his extensive tours. He founded the Tamil Academy in 1946 and supervised the publication of a 10-volume Tamil encyclopedia and a Children's encyclopaedia. He also guided the publication of Tamil translation of the Complete Works of Mahatma Gandhi, as Chairman of the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi's Committee for this purpose.

Shri Avinashilingam was awarded the Padma Bhushan and the Nehru Literacy Award. An Honorary D.Sc. degree and various titles were also conferred on him by Universities in Tamil Nadu.

