

## **Smt. Vasanti Roy**

### **Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Uplift and Welfare of Women and Children-1986**

Smt. Vasanti Roy (born in 1913) is the daughter of the well-known freedom fighter, late Shri Nibaran Chandra Dasgupta. She received education under the guidance of late Shri Jamnalal Bajaj at the Mahila Ashram, Wardha. She did a course in Physical Training at Kandivali (Bombay).

Soon after her formal education was over, Jamnalalji entrusted to her the work of house management in Mahila Ashram, which she did for 10 years from 1938. She took part in the 1942 Quit India Movement and courted imprisonment.

Jamn Lalji used to offer hostel accommodation to many youths from all over the country. Vasanti looked after their hospitality in a very efficient but quiet manner. She greatly benefited from the personal contact she had with Mahatma Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave and many other Sarvodaya leaders. This gave her proper and firm grounding in constructive activities, especially village service through self-reliance.

In 1944 she married Shri Subodh Kumar Roy, who started looking after the Fine Arts Section of Mahila Ashram. Himself an artist of deep sensitivity, Shri Roy inspired the making of sculpture, leather goods, fretwork and toys.

After the assassination of Gandhiji, the couple decided to dedicate themselves to all-round village uplift and went to Nimidh, a tiny village situated in a tribal area of Bihar. They set up an institution called 'Loksevayatan'. Some villagers, who knew Vasantibahen's father donated a small plot of land to them. They started cultivation there. Gradually the barren land acquired greenness through their application and hard work. They devoted considerable time to establish contacts with local population and soon won their goodwill and credibility.

The Roys and their co-workers took to khadi production and cultivation for attaining self-reliance in clothing and food. This involved a process of mutual exchange they persuaded the local farmers to teach them farming and the farmers were induced to learn Charkha spinning from the Loksevayatan workers. Initially there were 40 charkhas of the box type. Later, with the help of Khadi-Gramodyog Commission, Ambar Charkha units were also started. Today, Nimidh and Balrampur have 25 Ambar Charkhas. Weaving khadi cloth was also started. A Khadi Bhandar was opened at Nimidh and Balrampur for sale of khadi. The annual production of khadi is of the value of Rs 75,000 which can be easily raised by 25-30% if electricity supply is regular. The earnings of persons working in khadi production are adequate for their families' livelihood.

Smt. Roy has spearheaded the development of education in Nimidh and surrounding villages. A balwadi was started in 1952 with 8-10 children, which has now grown into a Shishu Kendra with more than 100 children. The curriculum taught here is framed with a view to making it useful for life. Villagers themselves have taken up the responsibility of running the Kendra. There is a Primary School and a Secondary School with suitable emphasis on sanitation and farming. The Roys believed in arousing people's own involvement and hidden strength in various activities. Great emphasis is placed on cultural activities for creating the right atmosphere in schools. The educational activities in Nimidh have created a spread effect in that people in many nearby villages have now opened schools in their areas.

Vasantibahen also started adult education centres, where condensed courses are made available especially to women, many of whom have gone for further training in nursing and teaching.

The Roys took keen interest in improving the health conditions of workers. Subodh Kumar was well versed in homeopathy. A Health Home was established by Smt, Roy in which she arranged for regular services of qualified doctors. There are hospitalization facilities also in the Home. Eye camps are regularly held. For prevention of diseases, efforts are made to educate people in proper diet. Vegetation is also resorted to for securing nutritious food.

Farmers were able to grow only one kharif crop previously. With the entry of the Roys followed by their experiments in that direction, the farmers are now able to grow many rabi crops, including wheat and groundnut.

A number of village industries have been set up under Smt. Roy's guidance. Chief among them are weaving, grain-pounding, oil mill, and bricks and tiles making, This has brought about improvement in housing.

In order to channelise youth energy and induce them to worthwhile undertakings, Vasantibahen's son Dipankar has set up an organization called People's Organisation for Rural Knowledge (PORK) which has 180 active members from 26 villages so far covered (out of 84). A football team has been built with not more than 2 players from one village and both of them belonging to different castes, which has led to a secular friendly relationship among them. One Adivasi boy represented India in international tournaments.

The PORK also proposes to start a Health Insurance Scheme, which will reduce the average annual expenditure of the village family by about Rs 400/-. There will be an Education and Training Programme for mothers in health matters.

Vasantibahen has no assets or inheritance of any kind. Whenever her friends give her some donation, she gives it to Loksevayatan. She only takes the pension given to freedom fighters which is her sole means of livelihood.

Bihar is an extremely difficult area to do social work. The socio-political atmosphere there is not much conducive and helpful. There is always the fear of natural calamities overtaking the region. But Smt. Roy faces all difficulties with courage and bravery. She earned highest compliments for her work from Vinobaji who said that Vasantibahen's ashram was a pillar of strength to the community. It provides support and solace to many.

