

Smt. Indirabai Halbe

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Uplift and Welfare of Women and Children-1989

It is often our experience that names of individuals or institutions are not congruous with their true nature or character. Not so with Matru Mandir-the temple of the mother-of Deorukh in the Ratnagiri District of Maharashtra. Everything that goes on in this institution started by Smt. Indirabai Halbe in 1954 is informed by deep love and sympathetic understanding, which only a mother can show.

Fate was unkind to young Indira. A short married life punctuated by the early death of two children and ended by the sudden loss of her husband when she was 25, left young Indirabai with her only hope-the eldest daughter. When she was also taken away, there remained nothing to hope for. But Indirabai braved this gloomy phase in her life to be later inspired by Sane Guruji's lecture on the Bhagwad Gita to realise that 'life is real, life is earnest'. She was determined to look at life positively and to spend it in the service of mankind.

Equipping herself with training in nursing, Indirabai started a maternity centre in a modest way. Her aim was to cater to the needs of the poor and the underprivileged irrespective of social and religious distinction. Deorukh and the surrounding area was no paradise; indeed, it was the converse of it with no roads and none of the facilities of a civil society. There was also resistance from the high caste sections who, intolerant of her catholicity, were bent upon ostracizing her. But Indirabai showed fierce determination and rare courage to withstand such obstacles and finally overcame them. Matru Mandir's is thus a saga of victory over the scorching sun, the blinding rains and the hostile neighbourhood.

Today the maternity centre has blossomed into a big hospital complex in and around Deorukh. It has also brought under its umbrella a number of institutions set up for the welfare of women and children such as orphanages (Gokul Niketan), free hostels, a sports and cultural centre for children, the agricultural section, the cooperative society for cottage industries for women and the like. In the process Indirabai's own vision was also developed. Realising that welfare activities started out of compassion are not enough, she introduced a number of income generating programmes for grown up boys and girls and women, with provision of industrial training facilities.

Her entire success is primarily due to the strength of her character and the force of her will. She works without any fanfare or publicity. Though a stickler for discipline, Indirabai is never fussy about it and believes in achieving results through example and sympathy-the hallmark of a humble and humane leader. Her simplicity, self-denial and transparent sincerity and devotion to her cause evoke a responsive chord in the minds of everyone who get to know her. No wonder the Matru Mandir has a large circle of friends ready to help the institution at any time.

By conferring the Award for outstanding contribution in the field of uplift and welfare of women and children on Smt. Indirabai Halbe, the Trustees of the Foundation feel privileged to honour a person who is a shining example of Indian womanhood in all its facets.

