

Kumari Jharna Dhara Chowdhury

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Promoting Gandhian Values outside India-1998

In the wake of the series of communal riots which broke out in Calcutta, Bihar and other places in October 1946 when the question of the transfer of the power from Britain to India was being proposed, Gandhiji set out on a unique peace mission to Noakhali to restore Hindu-Muslim harmony which had been very greatly affected by the happenings in India.

After the attainment of Independence and Gandhiji's return to India, the work started by Mahatma Gandhi continued, but after his demise only a few stayed behind. The foremost among them was Shri Charu Chaudhury who was 85 years old. He selected Jayag village, which was visited by the Mahatma on The 29th January 1947, and this became the headquarters of the Noakhali mission after Gandhiji's demise.

The mission passed through various vicissitudes including the murder of its inmates and looting of the property of several of them. Fortunately, Banga Bandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rehman after he took charge of Bangladesh came forward to provide the mission all possible assistance. He formulated an ordinance to give help and protection to the mission and this was passed after his death. As a result of the Ordinance, Bangladesh Government involved itself in fiscal and financial assistance to this mission and fund for its various projects undertaken in pursuance of the Gandhian philosophy of peace, non-violence and constructive work. By this time Shri Chowdhury was physically a broken man and it was a matter of great fortune that Kum. Jharna Dhara Chowdhury who had been his colleague took over the reins and commendably continued his work not only by her own selfless service but also with the active help and associating of a dozen of her loyal colleagues.

The Gandhi Ashram selected a cluster of 21 villages with a population of 48,000 and carried on effectively the following activities:

- Setting up thrift funds with over 1600 members mostly women, the total fund being 2.55 lakh Takas.
- Promoting small business, cottage industry and handicrafts, animal husbandry, poultry, housing and rural sanitation. 216 beneficiaries, majority of whom were women, have been provided with soft-loans for nearly 10 lakh Takas. Loans are given to groups of 8 to 10 persons without any security but the recoveries averaged well over 90%.
- Among other rural development programmes, the villagers in 14 tanks undertook an improved fishery project and most of the participants were women. Primary health programmes have covered 1140 families. 41 tube wells have been sunk and 167 damaged tube wells were repaired. 200 rural flush-latrines and an equal number of new low-cost latrines were constructed. 80 families have been trained in constructing fuel-efficient smokeless chulhas. A nursery under the afforestation programmes has been established and distributed 450 saplings.
- Education is a very important aspect of the activities of the mission. There is a primary school in the Ashram in which 25 poor boys and girls are given merit-scholarships. 20 centres of the Ashram have been instrumental in imparting non-formal education to 400 adults in 1993 alone. 1499 villagers of whom 1197 are women have been trained in the essential education required by them as also in other streams of the knowledge, pisciculture, health and hygiene, leadership and organization, women's rights and

development, development of skills, maternity and nursing. As part of its assistance to natural calamities, the Ashram and its workers has plunged themselves whole-heartedly in relief work during the 1993 tornado when thousand effected families rendered almost pauper were helped with domestic utensils and appliances.

Most of the workers are Muslims and most of Kum. Jharna Dhara Chowdhury's colleagues are Muslims. A large number of Muslim women have given up using burqa, which is no mean achievement in rural areas of Noakhali, which has been known for its orthodox Muslim lifestyle particularly among the womenfolk. This is tantamount to a mini-revolution. Similarly village womenfolk have now taken courage and are strongly protesting against the triple Talaq system that has put many hapless Muslim ladies in Bangladesh in distress particularly after years of toil by being thrown to the wolves at the sweet will of their estranged husbands.

Promotion of Gandhian values and harmony between nations, communities and individuals has been one of the main activities of the Gandhi Ashram under the leadership of Kum. Jharna Dhara Choowdhury. The Ashram has organized permanent photographic exhibition of Gandhiji's life and work. Being inspired by this work, a writer of Noakhali District has written a 400-page biography of Mahatma Gandhi in Bengal.

Kum. Jharna Dhara Chowdhury's work has been appreciated by the Government of India, which invited her and her right-hand colleague Kum. Estha Chakravarthy for a study-tour of about one month in India during July-August 1994. In an Islamic State like Bangladesh, in spite of several local difficulties and problems the Ashram carried on its activities with perseverance and effectiveness. To survive and expand in the milieu is a miracle in itself and to promote Gandhian philosophy, which for long was considered to be an anathema in Bangladesh, is a dual miracle. In the words of Shri Rajib Sen who is one of the sponsors of her nomination, "She is the mother of everyone else's problem, for everyone knows that whatever she does, only they stand to gain, not she. How much closer could anyone get to the Mahatma without ever meeting Gandhi"

