

## Shri Satish Chandra Das Gupta

### Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Application of Science and Technology for Rural Development-1978

Shri Satish Chandra Das Gupta was born on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1880 at Kurigram, in Rangpur district (now in Bangladesh). At 99 he is perhaps the oldest living associate of Mahatma Gandhi, still active in the field of constructive work. As early as 1933, Gandhiji in a letter to Miss Agatha Harrison had referred to Satish Babu as 'a valued and well-known co-worker. His non-violence is deep-rooted...and is one of the truest men it has been my good fortune to meet.'

After early education in his hometown, Satish babu completed the M.A. course in Chemistry at the Presidency College, Calcutta in 1906. He was having his practical classes in the laboratory of Acharya P.C. Ray.

Acharya Ray had observed the earnestness with which he was working in the laboratory and offered him the post of Factory Superintendent in Bengal Chemical Works, which he had founded.

Satish Babu worked there for eighteen years. He was responsible for many inventions and innovations leading to the prosperity of this pioneering Indian concern. He applied his mind and ingenuity to manufacture several products from indigenous raw materials, most of which were being imported. Strychnine alkaloids, caffeine from waste tea leaves, carbon black, printing inks, mag-sulph, ferro-alum and batch-oil were among the products he made. He also manufactured laboratory instruments, tube-well equipment and fire extinguishers for sale in replacement of imports. The fire extinguishers supplied to Mesopotamia during World War I earned a profit of Rs 4 lakhs for the company out of which Rs 2 lakhs was given to Satish babu as his share in accordance with the practice introduced by Acharya Ray for sharing the profits accruing from inventions made by the staff members. Satish babu believed in the dignity of labour (much before he came in touch with Gandhiji) and became an accomplished machine-man, tinsmith, blacksmith, carpenter and printer.

At the Cocanada Congress in 1921 he met Gandhiji for the first time and wished to surrender himself completely to Gandhiji, but Gandhiji refused to draw him away from Acharya P.C. Ray as he (Satish Babu) was engaged in important national work in the Bengal Chemical Works. However, it was not long before Satish babu decided to give up his post to become Gandhiji's disciple. In 1923, he handed over his savings of Rs 2 lakhs to Gandhiji, but Gandhiji advised him to utilize it for Khadi and Cottage Industries. He founded the Khadi Pratishhna Trust at Sodepur in the outskirts of Calcutta, which became the centre of Gandhian constructive activities. Members of his family including his wife Hemprabha Devi completely identified themselves with his work. Gandhiji used to stay here during his visits to Calcutta, treating it as his own home. Through his experiments in the Ashram and his writing in the *Harijan*, Satish Babu trained a large army of scientifically skilled constructive workers for the task of rural uplift. An improved and cheaper gobar gas plant without bricks was one of his ingenious inventions.

Satish Babu was inevitable drawn into the freedom struggle and was imprisoned during the Salt Satyagraha and Quit India movements. He endeared himself to the other prison inmates as well as the jail authorities with his amiable nature and passion for constructive work even in jail, where he improved the working of the dairy and carpentry work

His monumental work, *Cow in India*, in two volumes was written while he was in jail. Later, at Gandhiji's insistence, he wrote *Home & Village Doctor* for which he spent nearly two years in studying medicine and allied subjects and actually converted his house into a residential hospital. There has been a touch of perfection in whatever work he has undertaken. Apart from several

original books on scientific subjects in English, Satish Babu has translated the *Bhagvad-gita*, *Ramcharit Manas* and Gandhiji's *Autobiography* into Bengali.

During Gandhiji's pilgrimage to Noakhali, Satish Babu acted as an advance guard to pave the way and prepare the ground by literally clearing the paths as Gandhiji walked barefoot.

After India attained independence he was offered the post of Consul at Dacca (East Bengal), but he declined the offer because he was promise-bound to Gandhiji not to take up politics but to do only constructive work. Again, when the Government decided to give him a *Tamra Patra* and pension for suffering imprisonment during the Freedom Movement, he refused to accept them on the ground that 'the imprisonment was no suffering for him, on the contrary his detention periods in jail gave him ecstatic joy and an opportunity for serving the nation.'

Satish Babu was a member of the first All India Khadi and Village Industries Board and was mainly responsible in persuading the then Finance Minister Shri C.D. Deshmukh to give an annual subsidy of Rs 3 crores for Khadi. Late, he resigned from the Board on the issue of introduction of the 'Ambar Charkha', on account of his string conviction that it was not a charkha of Gandhiji's conception.

In 1966, at the age of 86, responding to Gandhiji's 'call from heaven' he embarked on a scheme of land reclamation to convert the perennially fallow lands in Bankura and surrounding districts into fertile lands which would help in relieving the poor peasant from hunger and want.

With hardly any experience in the field of agriculture, he set up the Krishi Research Farm in the distant village of Gogra, about 40 km from Bankura, in an area predominantly inhabited by Santhals, for carrying on his research and experiments on a problem which seemed to have defied the ingenuity of soil scientists. The basic problem of the area is incapacity of the surface soil to hold water. Therefore, much of the rainwater used to be lost due to run-off. Single-handed and fighting against financial odds Satish Babu has demonstrated on his experimental farms how ground water resources can be tapped and stored in specially designed tanks and the water retention capacity of the surface soil can be treated for converting fallow land into fertile land with the help of human labour and the application of natural manures like cow dung. The importance of the scientific techniques he has evolved and the feasibility of adopting them on a wider scale has received recognition from eminent Agricultural Scientists. Satish Babu has thus proved that multiple crops worth crores of rupees can be grown on fallow laterite soil, which could provide work and sustenance for millions of poor peasants and landless labourers.

