

Kamalabai Hospet

Joint Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Uplift and Welfare of Women and Children-1980

Born in 1896, Kamalabai Hospet was the youngest of eight children. She lost her father early. At the age of thirteen she was married, but two years later she lost her husband. Undaunted by the calamity and in order to make herself self-reliant, she enrolled as a trainee in the Dufferin Hospital, Nagpur and qualified herself as a nurse and midwife. In the normal course she should have continued to earn a living as a nurse-midwife in a hospital, which was virtually the only opening for the like of her in those days. But an incident that had occurred during her training had left a deep scar on her soul and led to a new direction in her life. An English matron had chastised her for giving a bed pan to a Hindu woman patient. She decided to start a private maternity home, along with her life-long friend and colleague Smt. Venutai Nene, where every mother would be treated as a goddess and provided with the amenities and comforts which she needed.

Thus the Sitabuldi Maternity Home came into being on 8th May 1921 with only five beds to begin with. Today it has grown into a full-fledged hospital for women and children with 150 beds, offering all modern facilities such as operation theatre, X-Ray equipment and pathological laboratory. In 1922 the maternity home had conducted 37 deliveries. Now every year the hospital conducts about 3700 deliveries, over one-third being either free or partially free for the poor.

Private profit was not Smt. Kamalabai's motive. She wanted to serve the people. In 1927 she established a branch of the maternity home in the densely populated Mahal area of Nagpur which has now grown into a maternity hospital with 80 beds with the requisite facilities.

The years between 1921 and 1947 were the most trying period for Smt. Kamalabai, when she had to campaign from door to door for public support. The general ethos then was very orthodox. Women feared to go to hospitals for deliveries and widows dared not move out to find a vocation. Yet during this period, she was able to establish 11 branches in the rural and urban areas of the then C.P. and Berar Province where thousands of deliveries were conducted and many widows were employed as nurses and midwives. As a result of the re-organisation of States these branches are now spread in the states of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Between 1948 and 1970 she added 9 more branches.

Smt. Kamalabai's dynamic personality, drive and acute sense of moral values brought her appreciation from national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Kasturba, Dr Rajendra Prasad and Jamnalal Bajaj.

The Constitutions of the Sitabuldi Nursing Home was changed in 1954 and the Matru Seva Sangh, with broader social objectives, was established to widen the scope of its activities and services. The golden jubilee of the Sangh was inaugurated by Smt. Indira Gandhi in October 1972.

In 1961 the Matru Seva Sangh diversified into other fields of activity. A day school, Nandanwan, was started for mentally retarded children of the age group of 6 to 22 years. The school provides pre-primary and primary education, as well as occupational therapy and the children are also given vocational training in a sheltered workshop.

In the same year she established a school for social work for women known as the Matru Seva Sangh Institute of Social Work with a certificate course in social work. In the following year it was affiliated to the Nagpur University.

In 1970-71 a three year degree course and later in 1978 a post-graduate course in social work was started. Over the years, the school has created a large numbers of women workers with proper training in social work, who have got absorbed in various institutions carrying on social service.

Panchavati Ashram established at Dighori in 1961 is a home for the aged where they are provided with all the amenities of life. Persons irrespective of their religion, caste or sex, above the age of sixty are admitted to this Home which observes a regular and disciplined routine.

Smt. Kamalabai had started a Nursing School for widows and discarded women in order to make them self-reliant. These women are suitably employed in the various institutions when they come out of the school.

Smt. Kamalabai leads the simple and austere life of a 'Sanyasin'. She has no possessions of her own. The various branches of the Matru Seva Sangh contribute an annual 'Matru-Dan' for her personal expenses.

The maternal love of Smt. Kamalabai Hospet has manifested itself in her rehabilitating and providing shelter for innumerable backward, forsaken and ailing women and retarded children during the last 60 years. She has literally become 'Mataji' to them all.

In 1973 Smt. Kamalabai suffered a fracture of her thigh bone for which she was operated upon, but within six months she resumed her activities with her usual zeal and dedication.

Now 84 years old, Smt. Kamalabai Hospte has created a large band of inspired workers. Many of her colleagues have become life-members of Matru Seva Sangh and many more participate in the activities of the Sangh and work in its branches with a spirit of dedication and sacrifice. The zeal and unsparing efforts of Smt. Kamalabai have transformed the Matru Seva Sangh into a movement for the social betterment of women particularly the poor, the backward and the neglected.

