

Shri Sisir Sanyal

(Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Constructive Work-2001)

Date of Birth : 10th March, 1925
Educational Qualification : B.Sc., B.E. (Aeronautical), B.A.

Shri Sisir Sanyal joined the Indian Air Force as a Commissioned Officer but soon thereafter, inspired by Gandhiji's philosophy and writings he resigned. He joined the Bhoodan Movement when he was only 27 and finally, settled at Bankura in the year 1961 where he took charge of the Gandhi Vichar Parishad as a Tattwapracharak under Gandhi Smarak Nidhi.

The activities of the Gandhi Vichar Parishad extended to 100 villages in the Bankura Development Block. In each village, Community Assets were built as a result of the initiative of the villagers in scientific agriculture and development of skills. These assets were administered by Lok Samities organised in each village. As a result, villagers learnt the art of administration of the community assets which amounted to several lakhs of rupees. Thanks to these activities, migration from these villages stopped completely, the standard of living of people increased, rural employment was possible for every worker, community action was involved in the resolution of every crisis. In short, the rural community became an example of Gram Swaraj.

These activities which were Gandhian Constructive Work in its pure form became a target for the Naxalite Movement and Shri Sisir Sanyal's life was threatened on several occasions. Once, he was almost murdered at the doorstep of the library of the Gandhi Vichar Parishad. He not only survived but continued his missions vigorously and with even greater zeal to find that the murderers eventually became his followers.

Shri Sisir Sanyal undertook an experiment for integrated Rural Development in 50 villages perpetually affected by draught and consisted of barren land denuded of topsoil through erosion and periodical migration of labourers in search of employment. In these villages, irrigation (both ground water and river lift), reclamation of waste lands, pisciculture, animal husbandry and home industries were started. Local people were encouraged to consume local products in order to provide a ready market. All these assets were later on transferred to Lok Samities for administration.

Side by side a massive programme was undertaken for plantation and environmental upgradation in the draught ravaged regions of West Bengal and Bihar. A large number of NGOs were drawn for organising of these programmes which were started in 100 villages. This programme now encompasses 550 villages covering 7 districts in States - West Bengal & Bihar. The impact of Shri Sanyal's work has been extremely good. The development of the forest management movement by the villagers themselves, the empowerment of women through Panchayati Raj, economic self-sufficiency through common fund development, massive plantation and land reclamation resulting in reduced soil, nutrient loss and development of organic farming by reduction of the use of chemicals and pesticides and the formulation of healthy crop practices are some of the achievements.

To administer and operate these schemes, Shri Sanyal has developed a large number of key workers who operate in 550 villages and run the entire project of his massive activities on a continuing basis. These leaders have been drawn from the Gandhi Vichar Parishad and other NGOs, as a result of which a continuation of the basic impact of the activities initiated by Shri Sisir Sanyal has been possible.

Shri Sanyal's work has proved that Gandhiji's dream was not merely a flight of imagination - but can be transformed into a reality in the field. He has silenced the critics of the Gandhian philosophy who had pooh-poohed it as Utopian. His work with marginalised rural communities, in ensuring them a life of dignity, had proved without any doubt that Gandhiji's principle and strategy of rural reconstruction do work. Shri Sanyal's experience of facilitating a highly sustainable and replicable development model needs to be nationally recognised, so that his endeavours and successes do not get lost in oblivion - but rather stand out as a beacon for society to emulate in the future.

