

Smt. Gaura Devi

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Uplift and Welfare of Women and Children-1984

Smt. Gaura Devi was born in 1897 in Rawalpindi in the pre-partition Punjab. She studied up to middle standard as education of girls in those days was very rare. But she displayed her penchant for social activities even as a student by taking part in debates and public speaking, which brought her nearer to the subject of freedom movement. The speeches of Mahatma Gandhi after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre inspired the young Gaura Devi, who decided to plunge herself into the national struggle for independence. She responded to the call for Swadeshi given by Gandhiji by publicly burning her valuable clothes. This is where her public life began.

In 1937, Gaura Devi attended the famous Haripura Congress in which Gandhiji introduced the Constructive Programme especially in rural areas as part of the freedom struggle. Since then Gaura Devi concentrated all her energies on constructive work in rural areas. In the beginnings he started some centres in Sialkot District. She organized Katai Mandals, training in crafts (Spinning & Weaving) and social education for women. She was made representative of Sialkot district on the Kasturba Gandhi Trust.

In 1947, after the partition of the country, Gaura Devi shifted to Delhi and met Gandhiji for guidance. She was asked to work in Bal Niketan, a centre for training and rehabilitation of widows and destitute women displaced from Pakistan. One hundred women were trained there as Gram Sevikas. Besides, 250 children were educated on basic education pattern.

In August 1948, Gaura Devi shifted to Simla as her husband decided to settle there for medical practice.

Gaura Devi has contributed a great deal to the socio-economic transformation of Himachal Pradesh, especially its border areas, many of which had little or no communication with the rest of the State. There were no roads worth the name; they were inaccessible for most of the year due to heavy snowfall and difficult terrain. The first two trainees from Kinnaur Dist. Under Smt. Gaura Devi's tutelage had to sorrowfully confess that the people there were living like beasts even though they were basically good, honest, truthful and god-fearing. They would get intoxicated for weeks together. The sexual mores were somewhat primitive, resulting in venereal diseases; many communities practiced polyandry, causing much hardship to women folk.

In Simla she established a home for destitute children from remote hilly and border areas. She also started an Ashram known as Sarvodaya Bal Ashram which is still functioning and has a branch at Durgapur. Thousands of children from border areas have taken education here.

She started a training school for Desh Sevikas in 1953 at Durgapur, where she trained 5 batches of over 20 girls each coming not only from Himachal Pradesh but also from U.P., Kashmir, etc. They were employed in Rural Welfare Projects in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Himachal and Kashmir. One batch included 7 Muslim girls from Kashmir who were greatly impressed by the catholicity of Gaura Devi's outlook, as excerpts from Quran and from other scriptures were recited at her prayer meetings. A batch of 15 Tibetan girls was trained by her at Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's suggestion.

In 1959, the Durgapur training centre was converted into Sarvodaya Balika Ashram for girls from border areas. Although the curriculum of the Ashram is similar to Government and other public schools, Gandhian values receive paramount importance in it, apart from encouragement of local crafts and arts and folk dances and music. All the work from cooking down to the cleaning of latrines is done by the students themselves. A fruit orchard, a dairy farm and a Gobar gas plant help in the financial sustenance of the Ashram. There is also a Balwadi, a crèche for children where the

working women can leave their wards. Five dispensaries cum Gram Sevak Centres have also been set up, where the ill and disabled are treated. A team of Sarvodaya workers from Vinobaji's ashram accompanied by Shri Shivaji Bhave (Vinobaji's brother) and Kumari Nirmala Deshpande (Vinobaji's Secretary) paid rich tribute to Smt. Gaura Devi's work after going round the various centres.

Scores of Gram Sevikas trained by Gaura Devi and dispersed throughout Himachal Pradesh and thousands of children who have gone back home after education in her schools, spread her teachings of cleanliness, dignity of labour, temperance, elevated sexual more and the love of the country.

Adult education spread of Khadi and Go Seva have been the other fields in which Gaura Devi has worked with equal dedication. She conducts a condensed course of instruction for illiterate adult women and those who had to abandon their studies for family reasons. Her contribution to Go-Seva has resulted in Durgapur becoming a centre for cross breeding of local cows with Jersey bulls. Many farmers trek for scores of miles to Durgapur to have cross breed progeny.

The Kasturba Seva Kendra started by Gaura Devi imparts training in weaving and spinning cotton and wool. The Sevikas have been fully trained in various techniques of Khadi work and impart these to an increasing number of rural women folk.

