

## Shri Natwar Thakkar

### Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Constructive Work-1987

Natwarbhai was born in 1932 in a Gujarati family at Dahanu on the West coast about 120 km north of Bombay. He passed Matriculation in 1951, but discontinued further education and joined late Acharya Kakasaheb Kalelkar in that year to get groomed as a Gandhian constructive worker. He spent four years in all with Kakasaheb in the course of which he was sent for one year to Sevagram to get formal training. He went round all parts of the country in the company of Kakasaheb who was then functioning as the Chairman of the Backward Classes Commission., These tours served Thakkar as his informal, wider education in the conditions of underprivileged sections of our country.

Seeing his passion for national service and spirit of adventure, late Acharya Kakasaheb Kalelkar motivated him to undertake the difficult mission of working for emotional integration of the Nagas with the rest of the country. At the young age of 23, Thakkar went to Nagaland (then Naga Hills) in early 1955 and established the Nagaland Gandhi Ashram under the auspices of the Bharatiya Adimjati Sevak Sangh, at Chuchuyimlang, a village on a hilltop inhabited by the Ao Nagas.

Till then, all social work in Nagaland was done by the Baptist Christian Missions. The Ashram was, therefore, the first social service institution which had a secular inspiration.

The atmosphere in that totally unfamiliar region was charged with high tension. The secessionist movement was at its peak. The extremists suspected Thakkar to be a Government agent planted to report and work against them. Similar was the feeling harboured by the Missionaries, who feared that Thakkar had a secret design of spreading Hinduism. The challenge which Natwarbhai faced was thus, real and tough.

But he weathered the storm, surviving even direct attempts on his life, and gradually took firm roots in the Nagaland soil. He won the confidence of the Nagas by virtue of his sincerity, devotion and hard work. To them he would always say :”I am Gandhiji's man. I know only his teachings of truth, love and compassion.” He learnt the colloquial language of the people and imbibed their customs with a view to assimilating their culture. He married a Naga girl, Lentina, who herself was the first ever Naga person to be trained as a Gandhian worker at Sarania Ashram, Gauhati. All this helped Natwarbhai to get accepted by the Nagas as one of them. He also had the blessings and support of the Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, and other national leaders, who knew the crucial national importance of Natwarbhai's work.

While the invisible work of generating climate of goodwill and brotherhood through personal contacts, talks, discussions and mixing with the people continued, Shri Thakkar also gave concrete expression of his spirit of service by undertaking various socio-economic development programmes. He sent batches of young Naga men and women to Wardha to learn Hindi. He also started Vocational Training Centre for school drop-outs to teach the trades of carpentry and tailoring, ran Balwadis (pre-primary schools) in neighbouring villages, ran a small medical aid centre, organized vocational training for orthopaedically handicapped, organized highly successful medical relief camps on 3 different occasions where eminent specialists rendered treatment to Naga villagers numbering more than 2000 on each occasion, developed a small library, started the tradition of observing national days, experimented with running a small dairy, etc.

Another pioneering work of Shri Thakkar through his Gandhi Ashram has been the experimenting and demonstrating Khadi and Village Industries Programmes such as Bee-keeping, Gur making, Oil ghanis, Bio-gas plant, mechanized carpentry workshop, Khadi sales centres. The Ashram's most significant achievement in this field has been the popularization of the art of modern bee-keeping throughout the State.

All these programmes were undertaken on a modest scale with limited resources of manpower and funds. But they were pioneering jobs and path-finding exercises. Many of these were started for the first time in Nagaland by a non-Governmental voluntary agency. Their worth cannot be gauged through statistics alone.

And yet statistics are also quite impressive : 7 balwadis catering for 200 children, introduction of bee-keeping in 108 villages, 8 Khadi Bhandars in 5 districts selling khadi worth more than a lakh of rupees every year: a Go-shala producing and selling up to 4000 litres of milk in a year. Regular use of milk is a comparatively new phenomenon in many parts of Nagaland.

Thakkar also experimented with the introduction of non-traditional agricultural crops like sugarcane and mustard seeds in the nearby villages.

Yet another area of Thakkar's contribution is his efforts to modernize Chuchuyimlang and surroundings by motivating the Government authorities and the local community to establish essential amenities of present-day world. The one time unknown, sleepy, mountainous village of Chuchuyimlang now has a small telephone exchange, full-fledged post office, small government hospital, piped water supply, branch of the State Bank and a Govt. High School.

All this work has brought to Natwarbhai the esteem of the people and recognition in the form of award or honours. In 1964, he received the Governor's Commendation Certificate. In 1986, the First National award for National Integration and Communal Harmony was conferred on him by the Bihar Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya, Patna.

Most of our Gandhian institutions are established in familiar surroundings and a majority of them have operated in predominantly Hindu localities. Thakkar is working in a tribal society which is predominantly Christian and which still possesses remnants and value system of a bygone era. The toughest challenge to any sensitive individual in such circumstances is to make psychological adjustments. It is bound to be a painful experience. There are not many comparable examples in our country. Thakkar's has been a unique mission.

