

Shri Dwarko Sundarani

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Constructive Work-1991

Dwarkoji was born in 1922 in Larkana District in Sind Province, now in Pakistan. He had started his College education in Science when he decided to leave his house in disagreement with his father over the question of accepting dowry for his marriage. He joined the National School as teacher and soon became its Head Master. He used to tour the whole country during vacations. In a visit to Sevagram, he joined the Khadi Vidyalaya and learnt spinning and weaving. In Vinobaji, he met his mentor.

He returned to India after partition and went to Sevagram Ashram, determined to follow its discipline and hard work. The next few years he spent in undertaking various activities in the Ashram which made its life more self-sufficient. He learnt carpentry. He became the manager of the Param Dham Ashram as Vinobaji was impressed by Dwarkoji's managerial competence. He got the welfare projects in and around the Ashram completed in a short time; they were lying dormant for many years.

He also took part in the Kanchan Mukti experiment of Vinobaji, which envisaged living without monetary transactions.

He joined Vinobaji's padayatra for Bhoodan. During the campaign in Bihar, Vinobaji asked Dwarkoji to stay back and experiment with his ideas in Bodh Gaya. Vinobaji set up the Samanvay Ashram there in April 1954 in the presence of Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Dr Radhakrishnan and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. He summoned Dwarkoji to go there to manage its affairs because the initial arrangements made by Vinobaji were not working satisfactorily owing to internal squabbles. Dwarkoji was given Rs 120/- per month for running the Ashram. He cultivated the Ashram's wasteland donated by Shanker Math with his own labour. The land today yields the highest in the region. Since October 1954, Dwarkoji has been the main motivating force, innovator and administrator of the Ashram's activities, which were greatly diversified by him.

The Ashram has been working for the Musahars, one of the most depressed Harijan castes and the Bhogtas, a scheduled tribe. The Ashram has distributed 5000 acres of land amongst these people. 13 new villages were rehabilitated on Bhoodan land.

It is for the betterment of the conditions of these people that the Ashram launched its various socio-economic developmental programmes and achieved results in a short time, much to the astonishment of visitors, social workers, foreign observers, and officials both Indian and of international agencies. Indeed, the Ashram Project has been prescribed as a Case Study in Community Work by a British organisation, with programmed syllabus and teachers' workbook.

The Ashram's activities are spread in 16 villages situated in 3 blocks of Gaya district. It has 3 major centres : Samanvay Ashram at Bodh Gaya, Samanvay Vidyapith at Bagha and Samanvay Vikas Vidyalaya at Lodhwai, the first one being the headquarters.

The Ashram's activities are not merely a programme for social and economic change of Musahar community. They intend to bring new values of life by integrating educational, spiritual and developmental work. They also aim at training committed social workers from among the Musahar children for dedicated work in villages.

The activities include education; agriculture, dairy farming; mechanical workshop; medical services; village reconstruction; land development; cultural activities; placement for jobs in Ashram's activities; provision of nutritious food for 2000 children daily; Programme for social change through campaigns against dowry; prohibition; untouchability; bonded labour; child marriage; Relief services. The biggest eye camp in India was held here in 1990, in which over 9700 operations were carried out.

An experiment in education was started with 100 children on 70 acres of land. Agriculture, Dairy, Mechanics, Sewing, Teachers' training is taught correlated with three 'R's. This is a basic education experiment without Govt. aid. Govt. examination or Govt. syllabus. In 1988, with Central Govt. help, 4000 children in 150 centres in 83 villages were given non-formal education. The District Resource Centre was started for training and research in education for Gaya District.

When Bihar suffered a severe famine in 1967, Dwarkoji worked hard to provide relief. He did not believe in running free kitchens, as was done by many others. Instead, he devised a scheme called 'Food for Work' under which 540 wells and 12 water reservoirs were conducted. This work earned him a special honour at the hands of the Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi.

Another outstanding contribution of Dwarkoji is the conduct of worker's courts functioning under Gram Sabhas disputes among villagers are solved by these courts under Dwarkoji's leadership.

The role of Dwarkoji is all pervading. He takes personal part in many field activities, apart from conceiving ideas, and planning and organizing various projects. The metamorphosis which Dwarkoji brought about in the life of the Musahars earned him the highest of praise from Jayaprakash Narayan, who said "Dreams rarely come true, but here is a dream that has come true."

