

Smt. Vidhya Das

Recipient of the Award for Development and Welfare of Women and Children – 2013

Born: May 22, 1959

Smt. Vidhya Das, through Agragamayee, has been working, since over 25 years, in the areas of policy advocacy, socio-economic and human rights of the tribal people, natural resource management, formal and non-formal education, awareness generation and skill development involving tribal people's participation and mobilisation. She is fighting for the rights and empowerment of some of the most downtrodden, tribal communities residing in the backward areas of Kalahandi, Bolangir, Koraput, Rayagada districts of Odisha. Agragamee is known for its unequivocal stand for the rights and justice of the tribal, dalit and other underprivileged and exploited communities.

One of the most successful efforts of Smt. Vidhya Das has been her mobilization of tribal women to demand rights over minor forest produce. Through her close involvement she has been able to mobilize and inspire tribal women to undertake a sustained and systematic struggle on this issue, which eventually led to a policy change at the State level, ensuring that the rights for minor forest produce were handed to the Panchayats in all the tribal areas of the State. This resulted in the historic broom revolution which transformed the lives of the tribes.

The understanding and vision of Smt. Das on the socio-economic factors of exploitation and the need for freedom from the economic dependence led to the formation of Ama Sangathan, the most successful tribal women's organization in Odisha. It is a federation of tribal women's organizations which has been able to enter into the State and National market for agricultural and minor forest produce from the tribal regions. It provides employment to more than 100 tribal women. The women have learnt the technology for value addition and food processing and are supplying pulses for the mid-day meal program of the government in Kashipur block. Ama Sangathan's entry into the market has enabled them to eliminate exploitation and keep a check on monopoly of the petty traders. The model for collective enterprise with tribal women's collectives are being taken up by different government organisations as also voluntary organisations.

Smt. Vidhya Das's persistent and painstaking efforts have encouraged around 5000 tribal women of 200 villages, across 5 districts to organize groups to address issues of discrimination, exploitation, corruption and violation of basic human rights. Her efforts to create awareness on the governmental programs and services available to the people have led to women demanding accountability of the schemes.

Anti-alcohol movement in 12 Panchayats in Rayagada and Kalahandi districts has led to the closing of the liquor breweries in these areas.

Smt. Das's efforts for leadership development amongst the tribal women has resulted in the members of Ama Sangathan representing tribal women in State and District level Advisory Bodies, including the Joint Forest Management Committee, Tribal Advisory Counsel. Tribal women have also successfully contested elections at local level occupying positions such as Block Chairperson, Sarpanch and Samiti Member.

She has mobilised tribal women in 60 villages to protect, rejuvenate and revitalise the commons. More than 5000 acres of upland commons have been reclaimed by women's groups in 120 villages which now provide income and firewood support for the women of these villages.

Smt. Das has helped tribal farmers adopt natural farming methods for cultivation. This has helped reduce soil erosion by eighty per cent and has significantly improved soil fertility.

In the field of tribal education, not only has Smt. Das been able to mobilize women to ensure that girls get an opportunity to go to the school, but she has also made systematic and sustained effort to mobilise resources for educating the tribal children in 210 villages in the tribal regions of Odisha. The models of language and methodology of teaching mathematics developed by her are being

followed in different primary schools via various voluntary organizations in the State. 5000 tribal girls and boys now have access to primary education and higher education due to the efforts in implementing non-formal education by Smt. Vidhya Das and her organization. 600 tribal girls from villages with zero literacy have been able to have qualitative primary education from the Agramee Schools.

Smt. Das is recognised for her numerous books and publications. She has extensively written on tribal socio-economic issues in local and national newspapers, and social science journals to draw national and international attention to the injustices against tribal people. Some of the books published are Human Rights, Inhuman Wrongs; Chronicle of a Struggle; Stories from Beyond, Food Security reports from Tribal Orissa.

Smt. Vidhya Das is Advisor to the Supreme Court Commission on Right to Food. Since her appointment, in 2006, she has brought several irregularities on the issue of right to food to the notice of the Commission. Smt. Das in 2000 was specially recognised with the YWCA Role of Honour for her unstinting work.

A strong line of leadership within the village community has been created. The villages are made self reliant with the application of capacity building, sustainable and low cost technologies, market linkages.

For over twenty five years Smt. Vidhya Das has directed her energy and efforts so as to enable the tribal and rural women and folks to attain better life and livelihood with dignity.

Contact details

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