
Mahila Shanti Sena

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M S S E - N E W S L E T T E R ✨ **M A Y 5 t h , 2 0 1 0**

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Dear Friends,

I am saddened to inform, if you have not heard already, that Ravindranath Upadhyay (affectionately known as Ravindrabhai), Director of Tamulpur Anchalik Gramdan Sangh (TAGS), Kumarikata, Assam (India), passed away on April 12, 2010 in Guwahati.

I visited Ravindrabhai in October 2009; he had organized a great Annual Mahila Shanti Sena function (I presented a brief report on my travel to North-East in the last MSS E-Newsletter). We are all shocked by his loss. He developed TAGS from nothing to a remarkably successful national institution that it is today. He had earned the respect and reputation of a national Gandhian leader. He was able to gather resources and provided training and leadership to young men and women dedicated to creating peace and social justice in the North East. He was also the body and the soul of the Mahila Shanti Sena (MSS) movement in the North East. We have lost a great leader and a great humanitarian and his absence is going to hurt our movement badly. We are keeping in touch with MSS members in India and look forward to working with who so ever is chosen to replace him.



We hope the seeds of peace that Ravindrabhai showed in the North-East will continue to grow and flourish.

For those of you who are not familiar with Ravindrabhai, I have reprinted below an article about him written by Natwar Thakkar, Director of Nagaland Gandhi Ashram (India).

Acharyaji's Health

We have another setback. Recently Acharyaji fell from Chair and broke his hip. In view of his age (98!) doctors have advised against operation. He is in Patna and is being looked after by family and friends. His mind is alert and he is still able to write little bit through dictating to his longtime associate Krishnakumar ji.

Ravindranath Upadhyay

*Architect of a model centre of voluntary social service in Assam**

Natwar Thakkar, Founder Secretary, Nagaland Gandhi Ashram, India

In statement of objectives of ISHANI, we have written that it will be our effort to write about bodies engaged in voluntary service in the Northeast and also about eminent voluntary social workers. Shri Ravindra Upadhyay is a well known name in the Gandhian fraternity. We have attempted to describe below the outstanding services rendered by him in different fields.

Shri Ravindra Upadhyay (popularly known as Ravindrabhai) is a well known figure in the Gandhian fraternity all over the country. His devoted efforts in a small village, Kumarikata, located on Assam-Bhutan border in the field of khadi and village industries, social welfare, social justice have earned him this appreciation. He is essentially a combination of a constructive worker and a crusader. The standards of performance established by him at his organization are on a very high order. His creation-“Tamulpur Anchalik Gramdan Sangha (TAGS)” is not only the best run constructive work organization in Assam i.e. North East India, but it is comparable to the best organizations anywhere else in the country. The phrase “Constructive work” was coined by Mahatma Gandhi to describe national reconstruction or developmental activities during the day of our struggle for freedom. This explanation has become necessary as it has gone out of use and younger generation may not be familiar with it.

The effort of Ravindrabhai has proved the validity of voluntary service of Gandhian orientation (constructive work) beyond doubt. The significance and true nature of Gandhian voluntary service needs to be emphasized in the present day context of the world and India. There are unique features of this approach. Unlike Christian and other religious bodies, constructive work does not aim at promoting any particular brand of religion or ideology. There are no dogmas attached. It is not geared merely to implement a project or a bunch of projects. Its primary concern is no doubt the socio-economic development of India's villages. But it is equally

committed to promote and strengthen ethical and spiritual dimensions of an individual and society. It aims at integrated development of every man as well as the society as a whole.

The instrument to attend to this moral aspect is the constructive worker himself/herself. A constructive worker has to continuously strive to cultivate and upgrade ethical and spiritual qualities in his or her person. This process consists of faith in prayer, voluntary poverty or self-restraint. The worker restricts one's want to minimum, cultivates simplicity, maintains detached attitude to pursuits of power. These essential features of Gandhian service stand apart from other forms of voluntary bodies. Judging from above norms, Ravindrabhai's life and work emerge with flying colors. True to his Gandhian creed, he has strictly shunned the pursuit of material gains, led a simple life, kept free from political entanglement and has totally devoted all his time and energies to serve his clientele – the poor of Assam's villages.

Situated at a distance of 100 km from Guwahati, the drive to villages of Kumarikata takes roughly 2.5 hours. It is surrounded by villages inhabited by Bodos, Santhals, Nepalese, Refugee settlers as well as the villages of non-tribal Assamese farmers. The nearest Bhutanese check post is just 3 kms away from Kumarikata. It falls within Nalbari district of Assam. Kumarikata's greater claim to fame is that it happens to be the headquarters of Tamulpur Anchalik Gramdan Sangha (TAGS) conceived, nurtured and shaped by Ravindrabhai.

Genesis:

Ravindrabhai was born in 1923 in Balia district of Uttar Pradesh. Right from his early age he like many others of his time, came under the spell of Gandhi and the unique struggle for India's freedom led by him. Even in his teens, Ravindrabhai was involved in underground activities. Having lost his father when he was just one year old, Ravindrabhai began life with serious handicap. He did try his hand with routine avenues of livelihood, but his interest in these could not sustain for long. His greater interest lay in nation's service. Mahatma Gandhi's assassination put a seal on his resolve to become a full time

constructive worker. His search for right training ground took him in 1951 to SHRAM BHARATI in Bihar which was in fact an extraordinary experiment conducted by a highly esteemed Gandhian activist and thinker, late Dhirendra Majumdar. SHRAM BHARATI functioned as a commune and struggled to become a model to develop decentralized structure of power and economy. Influence of Dhirendrabhai on the life and work of Ravindrabhai is prominent. It was at Shram Bharati that he matured and formulated his vision of rural reconstruction. These were his formative years.

Ravindrabhai continued at Shram Bharati till 1962; during this period of 10 years the country also witnessed a unique manifestation of Gandhian spirit and technique through Bhoodan and Gramdan movement originated by Acharaya Vinoba Bhave. Ravindrabhai was greatly impressed and attracted to Non-violent land reform or redistribution of land to poor. The progress of movement generated great enthusiasm and expectations everywhere, but in the meanwhile an unexpected development took place.

A new challenge and opportunity:

To the shock and surprise of our countrymen, India was invaded by China in 1962 through Arunachal Pradesh known as NEFA then. This terrible event catapulted Ravindrabhai from his Shram Bharati in Bihar to rural world in Assam. As destiny would have it, he continues to stay put there till date, an impressive 44 long years.

The decision to reach Assam came in a dramatic way. When Chinese attacked in the North East, the Gandhian fraternity's leading light and common volunteers all had assembled at VEDCHHI on the Western Wing of India for their annual conference of SARVDAYA SAMAJ. The news had an electrifying effect. One decision was immediately arrived at to dispatch volunteers as Shanti Sainiks (peace soldiers) to Assam. A batch of 10 was selected for Assam which was led by ravindrabhai. All reported to the Gandhian sentinel of Assam, Smti. Amalprova Das. Ravindrabhai, with one more companion, was directed to report to her for assignment of a suitable field of operation. He was asked to go the area in the vicinity of Kumarikata. The objective was to

inform and educate the population to build unarmed resistance against aggressors. Ravindrabhai's first task was to establish contacts with as many villages as possible and make himself available for service and consultation in day-to-day affairs of the villages. In the process, he learnt about the local conditions, lack of development and also about the possible areas in which he can intervene for the betterment of these localities.

Launching Tamulpur Anchalik Gramdan Sangha:

Although the Chinese aggression came to a halt and the Chinese forces withdrew from Indian Territory, Ravindrabhai realized the need of building a permanent Non-violent defense everywhere; more so in the villages of border areas. Vinobaji had described the India-China conflict as the conflict of ideologies. He also felt that happy, contented villages free from exploitation pursuing Non-violent social order was the best form of defense. His concept of Gramdan was aimed at collective ownership of land of every village and creating Non-violent social order. He emphasized that this will mean an effective defense measure. Ravindrabhai got confirmation on this belief through his field experience in Assam. He also felt that fulfillment of such a vision was a long-term process and the means to bring this almost was sustained constructive work. This realization led him to decide to stay permanently in Assam and he launched Tamulpur Anchalik Gramdan Sangha in late 1962 which were later registered as a legally constituted Society in 1966.

First job for the new 'Sangha' was to register the Gramdani villages according to the newly enacted Gramdan Act. A total of 10 villages stood the scrutiny of the law and were registered as Gramdan villages. Keeping Gramdani village in center the Sangha aimed to work for the wider section of the locality, including all Non-Gramdan villages of the Anchal also.

The journey of Ravindrabhai and the TAGS that began in 1962 continues non-stop. The TAGS has an impressive complex today at its headquarters in Kumarikata bustling with activities and people. There are a series of modest buildings to house the trainees, workers and activities. TAGS have made its mark in the region as well as in the country as a

whole. There are some centers at different locations in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. A long process of trial and error, struggle against odds, constant interaction with clientele and supporters have finally led to many concrete achievements. Ravindrabhai, of course, has blueprints of many more dreams yet to be fulfilled. There have also been some regrets. This long and interesting story is covered in another document enclosed herewith entitled as "The Evolution of Tamulpur Anchalik Gramdan Sangha-a comprehensive Historical Account". Some features, however, need to be highlighted and interpreted here in the context of the special environment of North East India.

Constructive work in the North East:

When we take the entire North Eastern region into account, Assam's involvement with our freedom struggle was maximum. Gandhiji himself visited Assam thrice; the last visit being in 1946 just 2 years before his death. One of the important acts he performed during this last visit was to inaugurate the Gramsevika Vidyalaya under the auspices of Assam branch of Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust (KGNMT) under the leadership of late Amalprova Das popularly known as Baideo (elder sister). KGNMT's main emphasis was on mother and child welfare through its Gram Seva Kendras. These Kendras dealt with Khadi in a symbolic manner by undertaking spinning and weaving for self-sufficiency of the Gram Sevika. Later on, inspired and encouraged by Baideo, 3 to 4 new Khadi institutions came into being. But the main bulk of Khadi production and sales was handled by ASSAM STATE KVI BOARD which was essentially a Government-run organization. But the credit of organizing Khadi work of major proportions rightly belongs to TAGS under Ravindrabhai's stewardship. There is no other organization which has surpassed this performance in the field of Khadi as well as village industries both in production and in sales. This is a major achievement particularly so when viewed in the North Eastern context.

North East India continues to be a major source of anxiety for the nations. Promotion of emotional integration is the urgent need. One of the sure remedies to bring this about is for selfless volunteers from other parts of the country to make North East

India their home and render service to the common people in a spirit of humility. It is a tough goal to achieve as acceptance of any non-local person or entity by the local community is a slow process. But once the acceptance takes place such a presence itself is a positive force for emotional integration. Through his 35 year long penance Ravindrabhai is a shining example of such a force.

Ravindrabhai has also proved his managerial skills through efficient management of productive as well as non-productive programmes. The handling of accounts in a clear and time-bound manner is the envy of many organizations. These aspects show what a voluntary effort can also achieve. Ravindrabhai today can easily be described as one of the excellent managers of the Gandhian fraternity.

TAGS is a model that has been followed by constructive organizations of recent origin in Assam in most of its details. Thus the replication of this at a few places in Assam is very much evident. This in itself is a valuable service rendered. Ravindrabhai has also provided a good number of trained workers to other organizations. Many of them were trained at the Khadi Gramodyog Vidyalaya managed by TAGS and others were those who have gained experience at TAGS through their involvement with the activities conducted at TAGS. Constructive work organizations thereby received the much-needed trained manpower for their work.

Yet another substantial input to the North East region at the hands of Ravindrabhai took place during his tenure as a member of the KVIC from 1977 to 1980. There were struggling institutions which needed closer guidance and substantial support. Ravindrabhai was instrumental in creating a good number of new institutions and placing them on the direct list of KVIC.

Ravindrabhai the crusader:

Though essentially a constructive worker, another aspect of Ravindrabhai's personality is that of a crusader, a crusader for peace and against injustice. This characteristic inevitably leads to confrontation with negative forces at some time or other. Life is always at stake during such situations. Ravindrabhai

also faced such serious eventualities.

The terrible exodus and tragic events in the wake of India's partition brought a large number of refugees to the doorsteps of Assam also. A large contingent of 15000 to 16000 from erstwhile East Pakistan had settled in Kumarikata. But many years later the State Government issued orders of eviction on them. They experienced a shock and they did not know where to go. When Chinese aggression took place the rumors circulated that if and when the Chinese capture Assam, they would certainly regularize their settlement. Being a nationalist and a Shanti Sainik, Ravindrabhai felt restless and took up their cause with the state machinery. But he met with stubborn resistance. Finally, he decided to lead a peaceful Satyagraha. It was a confrontation against the state and the tension built up to a high degree. But for the suffering settlers it came as a great reassurance that there is at least some one in the country to empathize with them and even fight for them.

On learning of this Satyagraha Shri Jayaprakash Narayan admired Ravindrabhai's initiative and he, too, intervened. Many developments later the settlers were left undisturbed. This Satyagraha succeeded and settlers heaved a sigh of relief. Though not widely published, this was a Satyagraha of true Gandhian genre. It was a non-violent resistance for a just cause. The move was naturally not fully appreciated by indigenous population. But justice and human considerations were in favor of the settlers. Even at the risk of earning the temporary wrath in locality Ravindrabhai persisted and helped the refugee settlers. As it was a non-violent fight, it did not leave any scars on the minds and hearts of people on all sides. Jayaprakashji was so impressed with the conduct and outcome of this Satyagraha that he directed the Gandhian Institute of Studies to undertake a full-fledged study. It was faithfully carried out, and it consists of an impressive document of 200 pages.

Another event was literally an ordeal by fire. Bodo militants were active everywhere. The mood of secessionism was on the rise. Entities like Ravindrabhai who stood for harmony and emotional integration, were unpalatable for secessionist pursuits. While on a visit to a sub-center of TAGS in a village, Ravindrabhai was attacked at night and mercilessly beaten. Providence alone saved him from

disaster. But he was immobilized with bruise and fracture, and he had to be hospitalized. Once the body regained normalcy, Ravindrabhai was back to his post, and by God's grace, continued to be on duty with all zeal and alertness at his command.

TAGS and natural & man-made calamities:

Although socio-economic development should always be preferred to mere charity, the most urgent need in the face of natural and man-made calamities is the immediate relief in the form of treatment, medicines, clothes and similar other necessities. One definite means to convince the brethren in far-flung and fringe area about the genuine concern of the rest of the country is to reach relief in the face of calamities. And as luck would have it, Assam's hands have always been full with natural calamities like incessant floods of frequent epidemics of malaria or man-made calamities like riots, some of them ghastly. Emotional integration can only become a possibility if timely help is reached from all concerned in the face of such situations. TAGS has regularly kept itself awake to this reality and has faithfully acted as a conduit for such a help.

Conclusion:

Ravindrabhai at the ripe age of 82 years continues to remain active. His pace and output of work even today will put younger persons to envy. He is, of course, supported by a band of workers; the foremost amongst them is self-effacing, mild mannered Shakuntala Devi, his wife. Ravindrabhai's burning zeal and his wife's steadfast support are his two major sources of sustenance. Eminent National figures like Shri Jayaprakash Narayan, Shri U N Dhebar, Shri Bimala Prasad Chaliha, Shri Mahendra Mohan Chaudhury, Shri G Ramachandran, Shri Sombhai and others always encourage Ravindrabhai and held very high opinion of Ravindrabhai's devotion and ability.

It is a matter of great satisfaction that the nation as a whole has taken due note of Ravindrabhai's devoted services by conferring on him the national award of Padmashri in the year 2000, Jammulal Bajaj Award in 2003 and Friends of North-east Award 2004. These

awards in reality are the expression of gratitude by the society. Every society everywhere must not fail to express gratitude to its genuine and sincere selfless servants.

In the final analysis, one discerns that the fountainhead of Ravindrabhai strength lies in his faith in and adherence to the age-old Indian heritage of spiritual values, which Gandhi applied to socio-political sphere: The search for truth, the spirit of sacrifice, selfless service, minimizing material wants through self-restraint, firm faith in omnipresence of Divine in every individual, validity of truth and non-violence to build just and harmonious society. Without talking loudly about these values, Ravindrabhai continuously strived to cultivate them in his life with sincere effort. India is fortunate to have such worthy persons like Ravindrabhai and his creation TAGS will always be remembered as a symbol of integration, decentralized economic development, human kindness and force against injustice, exploitation and disharmony.

**Note: Adopted from ISHANI, Vol. 2. No. 1 (2008), a magazine published from Guwahati, with permission of the Editor, Shri Natwar Thakkar.*



Acharya Ramamurti (left) and Ravindra Upadhyay at Mahila Shanti Sena Conference at Sarnath (Varanasi) in 2007.