

Kumari Radha Bhatt: A Daughter of the Himalayas

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Kumari Radha Bhatt, with whom this article deals, is one of the senior constructive workers of our country. She was born in an interior village of the Himalayas and hence the author of this article has termed her as the daughter of the Himalayas. An extraordinary woman by all accounts, what is most important, as the author points out, is the services rendered by her to the hilly region described as Uttarakhand. The people in this region suffered from superstition, illiteracy, poverty and the burden of certain undesirable traditions and customs. To quote the author again, Radha Bhatt was born in the midst of this community where women were looked down upon as inferior creation and were led to live almost a sub-human life. It is, extraordinary, indeed, that though Radha Bhatt was a girl who grew up under such adverse circumstances, she succeeded in educating herself and what is more is that she remained celibate. These practices were against the prevailing norms in the villages of Uttarakhand and evoked lot of opposition and obstacles. Radha Bhatt bravely faced all these adversities and finally succeeded in her pledge of leading the life of a celibate Gandhian constructive worker. This was in a way possible because of the strong current of Gandhian thought favouring women liberation flowing in our country at that period of time when Radha Bhatt was growing up. The author of this article, Shri Natwar Thakkar is himself a veteran Gandhian. This tribute from a senior Gandhian to a fellow pilgrim of the Gandhian Path explains the significance of Radha Bhatt's contribution to the society in general and to the villagers of the Himalayas in particular..

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Author

One unique feature of Mahatma Gandhi's struggle for India's freedom was his motivation to a large number of young men and women to work for implementation of constructive programme as drawn out by him while all political activities like offering of satyagraha, civil disobedience, non-cooperation, etc., were also taking place under his direction. He had seen to it that the efforts for national reconstruction through people's own initiative also continued. The individuals involved in constructive work were described as constructive workers. Radha Bahan Bhatt is one of the senior constructive workers of our country. She was born in an interior village of the Himalayas and hence she is a daughter of the Himalayas.

One important item of Mahatma Gandhi's constructive programme was, "women". If we read Gandhiji's prescription in his small book, "Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place," (page number: 16), we find that his thoughts on the subject were highly enlightening. He rightly claimed that, *"Though satyagraha has automatically brought India's women out from their darkness as nothing else could have in such an incredibly short space of time, Congressmen have not felt the call to see that women became equal partners in the fight for swaraj. They have not realized that woman must be the true helpmate of man in the mission of service. Woman has been suppressed under custom and law for which man was responsible and in the shaping of which she had no hand. In a plan of life based on non-violence woman has as much right to shape her own destiny as man has to shape his".** This shows how radical and far-sighted Gandhiji was on the subject of empowerment of women. However, the most important point in his observation above is to note that it was satyagraha as conducted by him that brought women in the forefront of national awakening and even in the forefront of freedom struggle. *The real empowerment of women began in our country with the satyagraha as conceived and led by the Mahatma himself.*

Those who are familiar with history of freedom struggle will recall the role played by women in every stage of the freedom struggle. But more than that the freedom struggle could bring about a galaxy of eminent women leaders in the forefront of our national struggle. The names, which immediately come to mind, are Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Nehru, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, Aruna Asaf Ali, Usha Mehta, Amalprava Das, Pushpalata Das and Chandraprava Saikiani of Assam and others.

Emergence of leadership of women at the national level set a trend and we find women leaders emerging in small and big towns all over India. Women workers came forward in every state from far and distant corners of the country. This was a great gift to the nation derived from the freedom struggle led by an outstanding leader.

In the field of constructive work programmes also, we find women workers and even leaders emerging in many places. Kumari Radha Bhatt, a daughter of the Himalayas was one of them. She began her career as a worker of Lakshmi Ashram, Kausani and has emerged today as one of the national level women constructive workers of Gandhian stream. This process got further strengthened with the formation of Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust (KGNMT). A major contribution of this trust is that a large band of grassroots-level women workers started working silently and the majority of them worked for their lifetime mainly for the well-being of women and children in the villages.



Kumari Radha Bhatt

As we take a look around, the size of the fraternity of women leaders and workers of the Gandhian stream is growing smaller. Yet we do have amongst us some eminent workers

in many parts of the country. Most of them have grown old. But there are also a few who are still very active and energetic. One important name undoubtedly is the name of Radha Bahen Bhatt. I am very happy to learn that her associates and fellow workers have decided to observe her 75th birthday this year and also to bring out a commemorative volume. Such observances are important because they provide opportunity to the society at large to express gratitude to its servants who have worked selflessly with total dedication. Additionally, such an occasion enables the associates to take a stock of the good work done by the leader and acquaint the wide world with the valuable services rendered by her. All such material in its turn is a rich treasure for the future citizens of the country. It is a source of rich knowledge and inspiration for them. I am, therefore, tempted at the very outset to congratulate the organizers of this event.

As I glance through the details of the life led by Radha Bahenji, one thing that strikes me as most important is the services rendered by her to the hilly region described as Uttarakhand. The people in this region suffered from superstition, illiteracy, poverty and the burden of certain undesirable traditions and customs. Radha Bahen was born in the midst of this community where women were looked down upon as inferior creation and were led to live almost a sub-human life. It is, indeed, an extraordinary example that Radha Bahen decided from a very early age to get educated even though she was a girl. She also decided to remain unmarried. Both these resolves were against the prevailing norms in the villages of Uttarakhand. Her resolve, therefore, created a lot of opposition and obstacles. Radha Bahen bravely faced all these adversities and finally succeeded in her pledge of leading the life of a celibate. Her second major initiative was to seek entry in the Lakshmi Ashram, Kausani. Here at this ashram, she had the rare good fortune of getting an extraordinary teacher and guide in Sarala Bahen, an Englishwoman whose original name was Katherine Mary Haileman. She was greatly attracted to Gandhiji and his teachings and had made India her home. She was given the name Sarala Bahen and she had settled down to work in the villages of the Himalayas.

Sarala Bahen in her turn groomed Radha Bhatt to become a dedicated constructive worker. Radha Bahen has publicly acknowledged Sarala Bahen's role in her life and has expressed her gratitude to Sarala Behen for being an invaluable guide to her. While at Laxmi Ashram, Radha Bahen was able to train, educate and empower a large number of young girls from villages of the hills of Uttarakhand. A number of these girls in later lives turned out to be good citizens and some of them even rose to be dedicated social workers. Radha Bahen devoted her full attention to work for the entire Uttarakhand and neighbourhood and she undertook a large number of welfare and development activities for the villages for more than 30 years. Her association with and her social work for Uttarakhand and neighbourhood continues. After all that is the main mission of her life. Her services to the villages of that area were of multifarious nature and these are invaluable.

While working in the hills of Uttarakhand, Radha Bahen came across a few opportunities to visit countries abroad for participation in conferences and similar events as well as for training.

It was inevitable for the country to take a notice of Radha Bahen's dedicated services to her people. She got invited to work on a wider canvas and shoulder responsibility in national level organizations. The presidentship of Himalaya Seva Sangha was one of the first major responsibilities that came her way. Other responsibilities too followed one after the other. In course of time, she was appointed as the Trustee of the prestigious Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust (KGNMT) and later as its secretary, with the headquarters at Indore in Madhya Pradesh. It was in course of this responsibility that she went personally to a number of KGNMT centers spread over the entire country. She handled this responsibility for seven long years and emerged as a national level Gandhian leader. More recently she has been chosen to be the president of Gandhi Peace Foundation, another important and respected national level body with its headquarters at Delhi.

In today's India, Radha Bahen is one of the top-level women activists of the Gandhian stream. She is known and respected all over the country and I am sure there will be occasions and programmes where her association will be continuously sought. All the work Radha Bahen could do in different spheres at different levels including the national level is highly admirable and important. But in my opinion, her services to her own people of the hilly region are most important.

As an Indian citizen and as a Gandhian worker, I feel proud that the Gandhian stream has an outstanding dedicated worker from the Himalayan region in the person of Radha Bhatt. May God bless her with sound health and energy to continue serving the country till she completes a century and even beyond!

*Quoted from the booklet "Constructive Programmes, Its meaning and Place" by M.K.Gandhi. 2005 reprint. First published in 1941, revised and enlarged edition in 1945.

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