Chitta Ranjan Dev: The veteran Gandhian worker of Tripura

(A compilation by Ishani team)

Sri Chitta Ranjan Dev is one of the prominent social activists of Tripura. He started working with a crusader's zeal and determination to rendering voluntary social service right from his student days. While he was still a student, he started a library christened as Pragati Granthagar at Joynagar with books on the life of the illustrious sons and daughters of India. The library also had a good collection of story books. Since then he never looked back and carried forward social work with total dedication.

Sri Dev set up various organisations to serve the cause of the poor and downtrodden across the state. He also had the rare privilege of being blessed by Mahatma Gandhi in recognition of his service to the underprivileged section of the society.

Although Sri Dev established several organisations to mitigate the woes of the poor, prominent among them are Tripura Harijan Sevak Sangh, Tripura Adimjati Sevak Sangh and Tripura Prohibition Council. He is also the founder secretary of the Association for Social Health in India (Tripura branch).

Sri Dev was born at Agartala on February 8, 1931 to late Anukul Ch Dev and Smt Sailabala Devi. He married Smt Chitra Choudhury (Devi) B.A. B.Ed. He has three daughters — Smt Sutapa Miller, (B.Sc. B.Ed) who is a teacher), Sulata Kar, M.A. and Smt Nilanjana Dev Burman, B.A. who obtained masters degree in dance from Ravindra Bharati University and she is a teacher at present in the Ryan International School, Gurgaon.

Shri Dev’s grandfather, late Gagan Ch Dev, came to Agartala nearly 150 years ago from Mahisuddi village of Dacca district of the then Bengal Province to work in the Maharaja’s government. Shri Dev’s father was born at Agartala and got educated there and served in the Agartala Municipality as a clerk. He was also a good tutor.

Since the days of the Mahabharata, Hill Tripura was a princely state ruled by the Maharajas belonging to Tripuri community of the hills people. There was a Tipperah district of the then Bengal province adjacent to Hill Tripura. Tipperah, Sylhet, Noakhali and Chittagong districts of Bengal Province were under the Zamindari jurisdiction of the Maharajas of Tripura in the name of CHAKLAROSANABAD Estate. Till the time of Independence of the country, the people living in those districts paid revenue taxes to the Maharaja. Hence, they considered themselves as subjects of the Maharaja of Tripura.
Apart from social activities Sri Dev also organised a byayamgar (Indian style of gymnasium), various sports and games for boys and girls. He along with his fellow workers, organised a group of youths for serving the ailing people and arranged cremation of the bodies of the people who had none no means to perform last rites.

From the later part of 1945, i.e., after the end of the Second World War, when the freedom fighters were released from the jail, he under the guidance of freedom fighter Kshirode Ch. Sen and others, started literacy drive and worked for prohibition drive of intoxicating drinks in the Bhangi Colony at Agartala. In 1950, he set up an organisation in the name of Tripura Harijan Sevak Samity with the Bhangis (scavengers) of Agartala and formed a cooperative credit society in the name of Agartala Harijan Samabaya Samity to provide credit to the needy Bhangis on nominal interest rate to save them from the clutches of the big money lenders. In 1954, he started a Balwadi in Durgachumuhani (Agartala) Bhangi Colony with financial help of Bengal Harijan Sevak Sangh and a creche in the same colony for babies of the working mothers with cooperation of the municipality and financial help from All India Harijan Sevak Sangh in 1967.

He established one landless agri-labourers colony for 63 landless people at Jagatpur under Mohanpur Tahasil in the name of “Thakkar Bapa Nagar”. He also set up a landless cobblers’ colony by purchasing land with the help of the then DM and Collector at Pratapgarh for 62 families and started a pre-school education centre. He arranged rehabilitation of 23 Mali families at the Old-tranching ground land at Bhati-Abhayanagar in collaboration with the then municipal authorities, shifting them from Gandhi Ghat areas.

He had the proud privilege of meeting Mahatma Gandhi at Chaumuhani in Noakhali district on November 6, 1946 along with leaders of the Tripura Rajya Congress and had his blessings for working among the Bhangis.

As secretary of the Tripura Adimjati Sevak Sangh, he started many women and child welfare centres, medical aid (ayurvedic and homoeo charitable dispensaries), creches and Balwadis in the hill areas of Tripura West, South and North districts. Due to financial constraints, many such centres had to close after 10 or 12 years. At present he is running 22 creches and one short-stay home for the people of the hill areas.

As secretary of the Association for Social Health in India (Tripura branch), he is running one Counselling Centre for prevention of alcoholism and drug abuses and a Nariniketan at Agartala for the women and girls who are victims of family discord and in moral danger.

He is the senior life member of Bharatiya Adimjati Sevak Sangh, life member of Association for Social Health in India and Tripura Ravindra Parishad, Agartala.

He was the founder director of Tripura State Cooperative Land Development Bank Ltd, founder of Sarvodaya Samabaya Samity, Hrishidas Cooperative House Building Society, Charna Silpa Samabaya Samity, etc., to help in the social and economic development of the people.

From 1980 to 1983 he was the secretary of All India Harijan Sevak Sangh, Delhi, member, executive committee and the board of trustees, Gandhi Smarak Nidhi, New Delhi, member, executive committee of Himalaya Seva Sangh and Bharatiya Adimjati Sevak Sangh.

Received fellowship of All India Dalit Sahitya Academy in 1997, many awards from various organisations of New Delhi and Agartala. He had the proud privilege of working with Lokanayak Jaiprakash Narain in the hill and border area coordination committee. Met Pujya Vinoba Bhave many times and received rich blessings in writing for prohibition works in Tripura and other places.