Satish Chandra Das Gupta: A Saga of Service And Sacrifice

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He is “one of the truest of men”, in the words of Gandhi, a man with little worldly wants. He is a karmayogin who staked his life for the good of the poor and the down-trodden and in whom the spirit of disinterested dedication and selfless sadhana ever burns. He has set a rare example of how to combine science with the ideals of truth and service. That is Satish Chandra Das Gupta, the oldest living associate of the Mahatma, better known as the Gandhi of Bengal. With the weight of his hundred years he was sitting on his cot in his humble hut in a remote obscure village in the interior of Bankura district, two hundred and fifty kilometres away from Calcutta.

My first question related to the Krishi Research Farm that Shri Das Gupta had set up fourteen years ago, a farm that has successfully tackled a problem that baffled the ingenuity of leading soil scientists for long.

To Gandhi’s clarion call, hundreds of educated people in India like doctors, scientists, social workers often sacrificed everything they could call their own and went to the rural areas, to serve the ignorant, illiterate people. For them, it was a duty to motherland, a mission in life to serve the suffering humanity. They worked tirelessly and selflessly for the amelioration of the rural masses. Doctors spread among the masses the importance of cleanliness and sanitation, scientists showed the way for application of science and technology and social workers spread literacy among the rural illiterates. That was long before independence dawned on our country. But what is the position now? Often doctors and scientists shun to serve in the rural parts. Even those educated “sons of the soil” refuse to return to their own villages to work among the masses. Still there are a few who cherish the value of Gandhian ideals and carry out the rural reconstruction programmes with the same enthusiasm and zeal which they showed at the time of baptism to social service. A shining example is the centenarian, Shri Satish Chandra Das Gupta, the first 1977 Jamanalal Bajaj Award Winner, “for pioneering research done on the application of science and technology for rural development” and who has been described by our President Shri N. Sanjiva Reddy as “one of the greatest scientific innovators and humanists of our land.” Our Senior Correspondent Shri S. K. Ray, who recently interviewed this Gandhian humanist at his ashram at Gogra in Bankura district reports.

He has shown how to grow crops on red sandy laterite soil, ever condemned as irreclaimable wasteland. There was a perceptible glow of a sense of achievement on his face as the architect of this wonder feat recalled his tireless efforts to convert these eternally fallow lands into lush green paddy fields that they are today.

It all began in the middle of the sixties when a severe drought hit Bankura and other districts in West Bengal leading to famine conditions. Shri Das Gupta at the age of 86 was then deeply involved in carrying forward the Gandhian constructive work from his Sodepur Ashram. He was stirred by the miseries of the poor tribal people who inhabited these barren lands and who were the victims of recurring drought. He was equally dismayed at the inaction of the Government in allowing vast tracts of laterite soil to remain fallow year after year. Shri Das Gupta accepted the challenge and resolved to dispel the verdict of the geologists that because of the absence of sub-soil water the laterite soil could never be productive.

In a steady voice belying his age Shri Das Gupta began to narrate his experiments that he had assiduously conducted for seven years from 1965 to 1972 with his simple tools of tin cans and bamboo tubes. He was confronted with the twin problems of the total incapacity of leterite soils, commonly used for road surfacing, to hold water and the absence of an assured water supply for irrigation. The author of many inventions in his early days was in his elements again. He chose the SanthaI tribal village of Gogra, being the worst affected area, for reclamation. The task of tapping underground water presented formidable problems, the soil structure being what it was. There was laterite soil, comprising about ninety per cent of red sand particles and big and small gravels and only about ten per cent of clay, up to a depth of ten to twelve feet. Digging through this layer he came across patches of hard lava rock. Planting dynamite sticks he blasted his way through for another five feet. Then came a layer of rotten white stone which he pierced through with pick axe. It was a thrilling
Barren Land Turned Lush Green

With the transformation of the surface soil and with an assured supply of irrigation water the fallow land turned fertile. The experiment of the crusader was at last crowned with complete success. That this experiment is capable of being carried beyond the limits of the demonstration farms has been admitted by eminent scientists. The top soil of such converted plots has been tested by soil scientists and found to have acquired water retention properties of a lasting nature. In the course of his convocation address at the Bidhan Chandra Krishi Viswa Vidyalaya in March, 1976 Dr. M. S. Swaminathan, the then Director General of ICAR observed: “The potential for converting large tracts of perennially fallow land occurring in Bankura, Purulia and Birbhum has been demonstrated by Shri Satish Chandra Das Gupta. Shri Das Gupta has shown how the water retention capacity of surface soil can be improved and how ground water resources can be tapped.”

A repository of inexhaustible energy, the centenarian was keen to answer my questions. He said that there were in all twenty-two acres of land with his farm. Fifteen acres of laterite soil had already been turned into paddy field and the remaining seven acres of virgin land was yet to be reclaimed. His successful experiment sent a wave of unremitting enthusiasm among the simple santhals living in and around Gogra who acclaimed the technique as a miracle that would help deliver their age-old fallow land from what they had thought to be the curse of eternal barrenness. This heartening perseverence, a method that precisely suited these hard-working people. For, though involving hard labour the method entailed little investment. The gradually widening landscape of blooming fields at Gogra where nothing had grown for ages is slowly but unmistakably giving shape to the dreams of the Patriarch that Shri Das Gupta is to the local people.

Gandhian Constructive Work

The highly rewarding work at Gogra seems to be the consummation of Shri Das Gupta’s long record of innovative constructive work that began as far back as in the twenties when this chemical engineer by education and training was irresistibly drawn to Gandhiji’s ideals of truth, non-violence and service. He renounced his remunerative job at Bengal Chemical Works to join the mainstream of the national movement. That was the watershed in his life—a total break with a life of plenty and security and initiation into a life of selfless service to the motherland and to the common man.

The living archive of an eventful era was in a reflective mood and that was the right moment for me to allude to those historic days when independent India was in the making. He delved into his memories with obvious delight. Those were the days when the entire nation was in a ferment. Several times he courted imprisonment. But the interest of this devout disciple of Gandhiji lay more in the field of constructive work on Gandhian lines—rural reconstruction through promotion of Khadi and Cottage Industries and removal of untouchability, casteism and communalism. The gifted scientist fruitfully exploited his genius in response to Gandhiji’s call to apply science for the uplift of the poor. The Khadi Pratisthan devoted itself to the task of revitalizing the cottage industries. With its branches in Calcutta and elsewhere the Pratisthan spearheaded the programme of constructive work for more than two decades and served as a centre of research for rural development and training of workers.

Gandhiji’s constructive programme has great relevance even today. The free India of Gandhiji’s dreams envisaged not only political freedom, but also social and economic justice for all.

Shri Das Gupta was also the Director of Wardha’s Research Institute for Village Industries for a time. He evolved a host of newer and cheaper processes and products suitable for production on a cottage scale—improved mustard seed crusher of village type, cheaper gobar gas plant replacing the brick lining of the walls of the plants well with bamboo matting, soap from non-edible oil, hand-made paper from bamboo pulp, matches from bamboo sticks, to name only a few. He also developed new techniques of improving khadi products. A new life was infused in the khadi and village industries.

With this prolific inventor it was a constant endeavour to diversify the products of the khadi pratisthan and with him it was a passion to tread newer pastures.
In those days the Britisher were the masters in trade and industry in our country zealously guarding the secrets of their products. But Shri Das Gupta would not let them keep their manufacturing processes a secret. He told me of one such episode. The Buckingham Mills of Kanpur used to be the sole supplier of huge quantities of chrome khaki to the Karachi Municipality for making uniforms. Shri Das Gupta wanted to get the order for his khadi Pratisthan. Gandhiji came forward to help him and asked Monilal Kothari to approach Janshedi the Chairman of the Karachi municipality. Janshedi agreed. Shri Das Gupta set himself to finding out the secret of the chrome khaki. The secret was unravelled. Bichrome chemical was the principal ingredient. He produced the chemical and the Khadi Pratisthan began to supply chrome khaki to the Karachi municipality.

"Today, when the affluent world is becoming aware of the menace of dehumanised technology, while the poorer countries continue to look to science to deliver them from the bondage of poverty, he has shown how science can be made to serve human fabrics to make them more attractive to the buyers. Bengal Chemical Works earned huge profits. But soon there was a mishap. A worker engaged in the manufacture of this substance died of acid burns. The death, though resulting from the worker’s own negligence, left Shri Das Gupta bitterly repentant. It was he who had started the manufacture of a product which had hardly any economic value, but cost a life. Remorseful Satish Chandra decided to quit Bengal Chemical Works and cast his lot with the brave warriors of the freedom struggle. The episode only revealed him in his true colours—a humanist first and a humanist last.

He had also had by then a taste of joy that he could derive from serving the distressed people. The occasion was the severe floods in North Bengal. He was sent by Acharya Prafulla Chandra as President of the Bengal Relief Committee to the flood-affected areas to organise relief work. So though he was in his work that Subhash Chandra Bose when sent later by Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das to assist him wrote back saying that his presence was redundant. When freedom was about to dawn on India, Noakhali in the then East Pakistan was ablaze with communal riots. Gandhiji decided to go on a pilgrimage to Noakhali. Shri Das Gupta was the advance guard of the Mahatma. He did the spade work for Gandhiji’s historic march through those riot-stricken areas.

Honours declined
The life of Shri Satish Chandra Das Gupta is a saga of service and sacrifice. After Independence he was offered the post of Dy. High Commissioner at Dacca but, true to his lofty ideals, he did not accept the offer. He, however, agreed to become a member of the Khadi Board set up by the Government of free India because that would offer him a greater opportunity to carry on his constructive work. But when the Government decided to introduce the Ambar Charkha in preference to the manual charkha he resigned in protest, for he would not compromise on Gandhian principles. His idealism was again vindicated when he declined the Tamaprapatra and a pension as a freedom fighter. When I asked him the reason for it he raised his voice and
firmly said: "suffering in jail gave me ecstatic by and an opportunity to serve the nation. How can I accept money in lieu of such suffering?"

Shri Das Gupta is a linguist and a versatile writer too. He produced a precise Bengali translation of Gandhi's autobiography written in Gujarati. He translated the original Ramcharit Manas and the Bhagavadgita into Bengali. His Bengali book -Rabindranath O Gandhi- is a valuable addition to literature on Gandhi and Tagore. A number of authoritative books written by him were the products of a scientific mind enriched with practical experience. His Cow in India in two volumes was recommended for veterinary students. At the instance of Mahatma Gandhi he made extensive studies to write the treatise, Home and Village Doctor to enable the poor villagers to treat their ailments themselves at a low cost. There is an interesting story associated with this book. After going through the book a person wrote to the author addressing him as Doctor. Shri Das Gupta did not inform the man that he was not a Doctor. Gandhi rebuked him for concealing the truth. He had borne that sting in his mind for many years till he was actually conferred the degree of Doctor of Science Honoris Causa earlier this year by a Viswa Vidyalaya.

This honorary degree was awarded by the Bidhan Chandra Krishi Viswa Vidyalaya to honour this “devoted propounder of the Gandhian philosophy and a great social organiser” for his memorable contribution to the economic improvement of the rural people through the development of the cottage industries and the khadi movement and for his development of a novel and very cheap technique of reclaiming red laterite fallow wastelands at Bankura with indigenous material. And, in the fitness of things, this true disciple of Gandhiji was also selected as the first recipient of the Jamanalal Bajaj Award instituted in 1977 to give recognition to the services of those who will truly translate the Gandhian ideal of improving the lot of the poor. The citation of this award of one lakh rupees presented to Shri Das Gupta by the President, Shri N. Sajiva Reddy, on November 4, 1978 rightly said: “By choosing Shri Satish Chandra Das Gupta for the Jamanalal Bajaj Award for pioneering research done on the application of science and technology for rural development the Jamanalal Bajaj Foundation is proud to honour one of the great scientific innovators and humanists of our land, in whom, at 99, the light still shines bright”.

Lukewarm Response

But the irony is that the bountiful eulogies for all his service and sacrifice notwithstanding, this grand old man now spending his days at Gogra is an unhappy man. And rightly so it is a pity that the person who donated his life and resources to the nation has been begging for assistance without any worthwhile response to promote a magnificent cause. His work at Gogra has been mainly financed by the sale proceeds of the crops of his farm and donations from his friends.

All through his life this relentless karmayogin has zealously carried forward his noble mission of serving the poor which he undertook in his youth. Even at this ripe age he is seized of a number of projects, one of them being the setting up in villages of 'Pinjrapoles' with a string of cottage industries associated with them. There is hardly any sign of an ebb in his fervour as yet and that is what is expected of a giant like Satish Chandra Das Gupta.