

Dr. Sushila Nayar

1914–2001

Dr. Sushila Nayar, a veteran Gandhian and a leprologist in her own right, passed away on 3 January 2001 at the ripe age of 87 years.

Dr. Sushilaben was born on 26 December 1914 in a village in Gujarat District of Punjab, India. She passed her M.B.B.S. and M.D. from Lady Hardings Medical College of Punjab University and completed her M.P.H. and Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University in the U.S.A. She worked for some time as Registrar and Assistant Professor in Lady Hardings Medical College and Chief Medical Officer, Faridabad. Many years later, she functioned as Professor of Community Medicine in the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences at Sevagram (founded by her in 1969). She was a member of many prestigious medical institutions: President, All Indian Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi (1964–66); President, Indian Council of Medical Research, New Delhi; Chairman, Indian Red Cross Society (1964–67) and National Society for Prevention of Blindness (1964–1981); President, Indian Society for Rehabilitation of the Handicapped (for over 10 years), etc.

Besides being a medical person, Dr. Sushilaben was intensely active in many other fields of social interest, women's problems, handicapped persons and held many positions in national institutions engaged in these different fields. She was Chairman of the Kasturba National Memorial Trust, All India Prohibition Council, Kasturba Health Society, Indian Council for Child Welfare, etc.

Shri Pyarelal, her elder brother, was Secretary to Mahatma Gandhi until his passing away; hence Dr. Sushila was in close contact with Mahatma Gandhi since her young age until Mahatmaji's passing away. She got involved in the Freedom Movement and went

to jail. She was in detention with Mahatmaji and Kasturba in Agakhan palace, Pune from 1942–44 and joined the Quit India Movement. She participated in Gandhiji's program for Peace and Communal Harmony in Noakhali and Punjab. After Gandhiji's Nirvan, she came in close contact with Acharya Vinoba Bhave and participated in his Bhoodan movement by joining his padyatra from Kanyakumari to Kashmir (1956–57).

Dr. Nayar has written number of books, some of which have received acclaim "Bapu ki Karavas Kahani" (received Presidential Award in 1952), "Hamari Ba" (1948), "Kasturba, wife of Mahatma Gandhi" (1960). Her elder brother, Shri Pyarelalji, had taken upon himself to write volumes on Mahatmaji, but could complete only three. On his passing away, Dr. Nayar completed the remaining five volumes (IV, V, VI, VII and VIII).

Dr. Nayar received a number of awards, prominent among which are: "Desikottam" by Vishwa Bharati University, Shantiniketan in 1995; Amol Prabha Das Award by the government of Assam in 1996; Ba and Bapu Award by Ba-Bapu Samiti, Pune, in 1997; and Public Health Person of the Millennium Award in 2000.

Dr. Nayar was elected as a member of the Delhi State Assembly (1950–56), became Health Minister of Delhi State (1952–55) and was Speaker of the Delhi Legislative Assembly (1955–56). She was elected as a Member of Parliament from 1957–71 and 1977–79 and became Union Minister of Health, Town Planning and Family Planning from 1962 to 1967.

In the '40s, Dr. Nayar was staying at Sevagram Ashram of Gandhiji and was running a clinic in the Varandah of the Kuti for treating patients from surrounding villages and founded a small Kasturba Hospital at Sevagram which after 20 years metamor-

phosed into the present Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Science (1969). She was soon joined by a young medical person, Dr. R. V. Wardekar, who is considered the Father of the Leprosy Control World in India. During her daily contact with patients, Dr. Nayar noticed a large number of leprosy patients (because Wardha District in those days had the highest prevalence of leprosy in the erstwhile Bombay Province). Her deep sympathy for leprosy patients was aroused and leprosy continued to be a subject very dear to her all her life.

In 1946, someone from Sindh (part of the Bombay Presidency) sent a newspaper cutting which mentioned that a bill for compulsory sterilization of leprosy patients was introduced in the Sindh Assembly. Mahatmaji was disturbed after reading it and asked for the expert opinion of Dr. Nayar on this "unjust and unfair" step. She gave her opinion that there is no medical ground for compulsory sterilization of leprosy patients because leprosy is neither congenital nor hereditary. Mahatmaji accepted her word but wanted her to consult some more prominent medical men in the country and give him a joint statement. Dr. Nayar contacted Dr. B. C. Roy (of Calcutta), Dr. M. D. D. Guilder (of Bombay), Dr. C. G. Pandit (of New Delhi) and a few others, and they gave their well-considered opinion that such a measure was unacceptable. Mahatmaji then wrote to Prof. Malkani, Chief Whip of the Congress Legislative Party, Sindh Assembly, to make sure that all congress MLAs voted against the bill. The bill was thrown out.

After Mahatmaji's passing away, a huge fund was collected from all over the country to carry on work in areas in which he was interested. Leprosy work, being a part of the Constructive Program chalked out by Mahatmaji, was selected as one area. The National Gandhi Memorial Trust appointed a Leprosy Advisory Committee with Dr. Nayar as its Secretary and many eminent medical persons and leprosy workers as members with the objective of advising the Trust as to what work should be done to perpetuate the memory of the Mahatma. Dr. R. V. Wardekar was a member, and he and Dr. Nayar toured extensively to see the working of prominent leprosy institutions in the country, mostly run by Christian mis-

sionaries. The Advisory Committee gave the opinion that the traditional method of running leprosy asylums and colonies, even if multiplied a hundredfold, would not control leprosy and, hence, suitable field experiments should be conducted to find out a pattern of community work which could bring us closer to control of the disease. The committee also advised that a separate institution by the name Gandhi Memorial Leprosy Foundation be established which should not restrict its activities to any geographical area but should look at the problem from a national angle and suggest ways and means to tackle different facets of the problem.

The Gandhi Memorial Leprosy Foundation (GMLF) was established in 1951 and conducted experiments in the control of leprosy by chemotherapy in most endemic parts of 10 endemic states of India. The findings of these experiments were endorsed by the Tokyo Congress (1958) and the government of India introduced a National Leprosy Program on the lines recommended by the GMLF. Dr. Nayar continued to have association with the GMLF although she was engaged in a wider field.

During her ministerial period in central government, there were negotiations with JALMA (a Japanese Leprosy Agency) for starting their hospital near the Taj Mahal in Agra. This was accepted by the government of India which gave rise to a tremendous uproar against establishing an "ugly" institution so close to the Taj Mahal, but Dr. Nayar successfully faced the storm and JALMA was established near the Taj Mahal in Agra.

Dr. Nayar founded the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences (MGIMS) during the Gandhi Centenary Year (1969) at Sevagram, and took precautions to see that patients of leprosy are not shunned but are admitted to any ward of the hospital, depending on their other ailments and medical needs. MGIMS is the first hospital in India to end segregation of leprosy to any one or two medical disciplines. She developed MGIMS as a remarkable medical college where every student is attached to a few families in a village and takes close care of all family members' health.

Dr. Nayar, in this way, has made a signal contribution to the leprosy cause and will

be remembered for her initiative in bringing leprosy work out into the community from the four walls of leprosy colonies and in integrating leprosy in medical teaching in the real sense.

The NLO pays its respectful obeisance to this great soul.

—Dr. S. P. Tare