

NAMASKAAR

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Namaskar to Modern Day Rishis – Dr. Kavita and Dr. Ashish Satav

For those who wish to climb the mountain of spiritual awareness, the path is selfless work!

Bhagavad Gita 6.3

India has a rich ancient heritage of thousands of years where Rishi-Munis lived with their families deep in the forests and jungles and worked for the welfare of the people. Recently I had the fortune of meeting and listening to Dr. Kavita and Dr. Ashish Satav, modern-day Rishis, and understood the true purpose of life, courtesy 'Caring Friends' and Shri Pradeep Shah.

Dr. Ashish Satav, MD, influenced by his 'nana', a close associate of Vinoba Bhave, has been leading a simple life right from his impressionable years. Inspired by the Sarvodaya philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and encouraged by Baba Amte and Dr. Abhay Bang, Dr. Satav decided to serve the tribals of Melghat, instead of pursuing a lucrative medical practice in the comfort and security of a metropolis. Dr. Kavita's background and outlook are also Gandhian. With hardly any resources, they set up the MAHAN (Meditation, AIDS, Health, Addiction and Nutrition) Trust in 1997 and started a small hospital in a small hut at Melghat, a hilly forest area in the Satpuda mountain ranges in Amravati District.

Melghat is known by two words, "Malnutrition" and "Project Tiger" and is an underdeveloped area of about 320 villages spread over 4,000 sq. km. It is 150km away from the district headquarters and the uneven road crosses through a dense forest and sharp ghats. Even today a large number of these villages have very poor or no infrastructure like transportation, electricity & communication and the area lacks basic amenities. Most of the tribals (>75%) are below poverty line and illiterate (>50%) and live in hamlets (>90%), with very high maternal and infant mortality rates.

MAHAN hospital started from a small hut with very limited facilities. The patients were brought in bullock carts as there was no ambulance. Initially, the locals were very suspicious and reluctant for modern medical treatment and relied on traditional faith healers and quacks. Over last 15 years, Dr. Ashish and Dr. Kavita have

braved many challenges such as superstitions, limited infrastructure, political interference and lack of funds. Both Dr. Ashish and Dr. Kavita have gone beyond the conventional notions of service – for instance, Dr. Kavita narrated how she became a "Milk Mother" to a newly born adivasi child when their only son was just a few months old. This is being true to the concept of service before self.

This journey has enabled Satavs to demystify a lot of medical myths as well. They have proved how even without sophisticated medical facilities a lot can be achieved and even serious ailments can be treated. Within four years of MAHAN's intervention, the infant mortality rate has reduced by more than 50%. MAHAN identifies local villagers, mostly women, and trains them in basic health care segments. It has built a team of close to 40 trained village health workers. MAHAN now serves more than 75,000 persons in Melghat region.

The opposition to their work, especially from local politicians and government officials, has been tackled with the Gandhian thought of 'truth can be troubled but cannot be defeated'. Dr. Satav has also fought the bureaucratic system through numerous applications under the RTI Act and PILs and has been instrumental in ensuring improvement in benefits of the Government's welfare spending reaching the need.

The hospital based in a hut, shifted to a larger structure in July 2007 and presently has an ambulance, two operation theaters, an OPD, a spectacle shop and staff quarters. Now, Dr. Satav has a vision to carry out various research projects and develop models that can be replicated nationally.

Work done by Dr. Kavita and Dr. Ashish Satav is nothing short of a Yagna, often translated as "sacrifice" or "worship". A heartfelt Namaskar to this modern day Rishi Couple!

Errata

In our October 2012 issue, In 'Namaskaar' featuring 'Remembering Mahatma Gandhi', two paragraphs at the end of the feature were inadvertently omitted. These paragraphs are reproduced on page 19. The error is regretted - Editor.

