

She Lost a Daughter, Today She Shelters 800 Girls by Sanchari Pal

A cradle outside a home in Lucknow may look strange for passersby but for orphaned and abandoned girls, it ensures love, warmth and motherly care. For over 30 years, this cradle has seen many a baby girl being left in it only to be taken care of by another mother who made it her life's mission to help them.

Dr Sarojini Agarwal, now 80 years old, is 'Maa' to the scores of girls and young women who live at Manisha Mandir (as the destitute home is called), her home and the ashram in Lucknow where she raises her adopted daughters. Interestingly, the destitute home owes its origin to a tragedy, which had struck Sarojini over three decades ago.

Dr Sarojini Agarwal with her girls.

Photo Source

Her eight-year-old daughter Manisha died in a road accident in 1978. What made the catastrophe unbearably painful for Dr Agarwal was the fact that she was driving the two-wheeler on which little Manisha was riding pillion. Why my child? The question nagged her persistently till, as Agarwal says, the answer finally came to her.

"I was lamenting the loss of one when there were so many other Manishas, homeless and unloved, looking for a mother. Perhaps I could give them a loving home," she recalls.

But it would be many years before she worked on making her dream a reality. Born and raised in Jodhpur and holding a PhD in Hindi literature, Dr Agarwal was then a writer and had authored short stories and collections of poetry, novels, and had even penned an autobiography titled 'Baat Swayam Bolegi'. Other than her work, all her time was taken up by her family, which included her husband, ageing in-laws and three sons, one of them a twin of Manisha.

"The day my oldest son became an engineer, I shared my idea of a home for abandoned children with my husband," reveals Dr Agarwal, who adds that her husband, V C Agarwal is now 'Papa' to the girls at Manisha Mandir.

And so Manisha Mandir was set up in 1985 in three rooms in her own house with Dr Agarwal pouring into it all the money she had earned in royalty from her books. The first girl she adopted was a deaf and mute child whose mother, a divorcee, had died while giving birth. Shivi, as she named the little one, was soon followed by two sisters whose mother had also died in an accident. Other girls followed – some who were found abandoned, others given up as unwanted while some others were picked up from the streets by Agarwal. A few also found their way out of brothels.

Photo Source

Dr Agarwal also began hanging a crib, which she named 'sanjeevan palna' or cradle of life near the gate of her home, Here, people could leave abandoned newborns, instead of leaving them on the streets.

"We have even taken in two-day-old baby girls. It would then occur to me that you need not give birth to a child to be a mother. When I would take those babies in my arms, my desire for a daughter would be satiated. Initially, I had to face some problems in bringing up the girls but I did not lose heart and continued to do everything I could to help them," Dr Agarwal says, adding that it gave her the greatest pleasure to hear her girls call her 'maa'.

Over the years, Manisha Mandir has changed addresses a few times and is now housed in a sprawling, three-storey home in Lucknow's Gomti Nagar area.

Photo Source

It has a well-stocked library, a computer lab, craft workshops, recreation halls, dormitories, gardens with swings, basketball and badminton courts and a television room, among many other facilities that ensure a comfortable and safe environment for the children. They also learn to stitch, knit and are taught other vocational skills.

Dr Agarwal also ensures that the girls receive the best education possible. To meet the ever-growing expenses of the home, the Agarwals have built a large hall on the top floor of the building and lease it out for functions.

"Only good education can make the girls independent, which is so crucial for their self-confidence, We get them admitted to good and prestigious schools. Many of our girls have excelled in their studies and have secured good jobs," she says, adding that her family have always lent all possible help. "They were always ready to do whatever they can and without their cooperation, I would not have been able to fulfill my commitment toward these girls."

The abandoned and orphaned girls taken in by Manisha Mandir stay at the home till the age of 17-18 and are then encouraged to take up a job. Till date, close to 800 girls have stayed at the home and many of them have made their mark as bank managers, teachers

and principals, while others have married into good families. Many girls have also been rehabilitated through legal adoption.

Photo Source

A beaming bust of her deceased daughter, installed at the entrance, looks on in pride as girls who have settled in jobs elsewhere or have married keep visiting to find out how they can help.

Although she has received numerous awards for her work, including the National award for Children's Welfare, accolades mean little to Dr Agarwal, who continues to work tirelessly for the girl child. Recently, she set up the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, Beti Badhao Academy to facilitate higher education among girls from poor families through the Manisha Higher Education Scholarship. Meritorious girls are screened by a four-member committee for the scholarship, which is given for a period of three years to pursue bachelor's and master's degrees across the country.

Photo Source

However, with age catching up, the octogenarian says she finds it difficult to take in newborns any more. Dr Agarwal says that she has no idea how much longer she will be able to go on serving these girls, but will continue to do so for as long as she can.

"In every orphan and abandoned girl, I see my daughter Manisha. Maybe God took my daughter away from me as he wanted me to take care of these children. I thank him for giving me this opportunity to keep her memory alive in a meaningful way," says Dr Agarwal, summing up her life's journey.

Caregiver, companion, confidant and educator to hundreds of girls, Dr Sarojini Agarwal is much more than just a name. A true inspiration, she has proved that if you are dedicated, nothing can stop you from changing the lives of people around you. We salute this compassionate lady and hope that the country gives birth to many such strong daughters and mothers.

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