

# ESTHER SUBHASHINI

## BIRTH



Mrs. Esther Subhashini was born on 17<sup>th</sup> January in the year 1949 in Hyderabad to Lucy and Sathya Johnson, a major in the Indian Army in the Military Engineer Services (MES). She is the second child in her family.

Theirs was a devout Christian family. Her father by virtue of his position moved from city to city in India. Wherever there was no church in their vicinity, Maj. Johnson would open his house for the Church Service for the neighborhood Christian community. A Methodist Pastor from the nearest town/ city would come and conduct the Worship service. This was how he showed his devotion to the Lord Jesus and raised his children in the knowledge of His word. Due to this kind of upbringing, she accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior at the age of sixteen and committed her life to serve the Lord.

Her father was a great lover of nature. He used to grow plants and saplings of various kinds and freely distribute them to his neighbors and friends. His love for plants, trees and gardens won him “**BEST HOME GARDENS**” award several times in his service in the Military. Even after his retirement, he would organize annual tree planting programs and promoted happy and healthy living. Subhashini as a child liked the green pastures in the yard of her house and assisted her father in maintaining the home gardens.

### EDUCATION :

Esther Subhashini studied in different military schools up to 12<sup>th</sup> standard, varying from South, Central and North East Indian states.

She moved back to Hyderabad after passing 12<sup>th</sup> grade. She pursued higher education and received a Master of Arts (History) from Osmania University, Hyderabad. Though she desired to make her career in 'International Relations,' her passion was to find out answers to the wars and violence in this society. She always had a heart for the poor, needy and suffering people. She envisioned the poor to become self-reliant and live with dignity and self-respect.

**FAMILY :**

She was married to Mr. Prem Kumar Wilfred in 1973, a teacher by profession. This couple is blessed with a daughter and a son named Supriya and Obed Sumit Kumar who both love the Lord.

**CHALLENGE :**

**Will you work hard to get an education that would help people for many generations?**

## ESTHER SUBHASHINI

### INSPIRATION



Esther's father used to subscribe to the magazine called "Guide Post". As she read, she was touched by the real life stories in those magazines on how people suffered, how the church helped, how God's Word comforted them and the miraculous ways that the Lord helped them. This led her to think more about doing something for the suffering people in her society. She constantly felt the burden to sow seeds of change by showing practically and from the word of God so that they could come out of their problems and build in them self-reliance and confidence.

Her foundational love for nature of course was through her father. She admired the greenery within the cantonment area. After her marriage in the year 1973, she moved to the city. It was here that she wondered how urban people have lost their touch with nature. When she became a member of the local church, she was inspired to motivate the youth to plant saplings in the open space around the church. The same saplings have now grown into huge trees offering shade, cool breeze, flowers, fruits and of course fresh oxygen.

However, she felt she should have some specific goals to achieve in her lifetime. She desired to be a Christian in the market place, to care and protect the planet Earth for it is God's creation entrusted into our hands (Gen 2:15), and to train and help the poor and needy through eco-friendly sustainable livelihoods.

#### **EARLY CAREER : Making the BEST of Every Moment :**

She began her career in 1974 as a college teacher, but also worked in different corporate schools. To teach the students the importance and value of reading she organized class libraries in the schools where she worked. The students got involved by donating magazines, storybooks, and helped to check them out to other students. The class libraries became interesting and popular.

She started Eco-Clubs for the students after school hours where environmental issues and concepts were discussed. She also used to invite parents with special talents and skills to volunteer their time and teach Environment Awareness, Eco-Clubs, Bonsai, Calligraphy, Music, Singing, and Games etc. to the interested students.

She would organize Environmental Plays for Annual Day and take the students for exposure visits to villages and nature walks and celebrate Environment Day, Conservation Day, and Children's Day etc.

She has been associated with MV Foundation from 1991. She worked for the eradication of Child Labor and to universalize Primary Education in Andhra Pradesh and through out India.

She also began to work with village children on creating awareness about the environment through the Non-Formal Centers. She took up a pilot project for the traumatized girls with the government aid in Thattiannaram village, Ranga Reddy district. She chose this village because it was on the bank of Musi River with high pollution and full of mosquitoes. She started with 15 girls from some of the nearby villages. Very soon the numbers grew and they were able to develop a user-friendly curriculum of three E's - Education, Environment and Empowerment.

The Environment Education program is for school children, youth & village communities. They took up village Environmental issues and mobilized people, organized public meetings, rallies, exhibitions and activities to address and understand the environmental issues and look for solutions. This activity was carried out in and through 60 Government schools.

She used to travel by bullock carts and tractors in the absence of buses to reach her home from the villages late at night. She used to take this opportunity to share about the love of God and environmental issues with the drivers and others during her visits to the villages.

**CHALLENGE :**

**Do the needs and the sufferings of the people around you inspire you to become a leader of change?**

# ESTHER SUBHASHINI

## ACTIVITIES - 1



*Women involved in Dry Land Farming.*

Esther saw that there was a lack of educated people in matters of land usage and sustainability. This caused problems in livelihood of the rural communities, such as: starvation, poor health, no source of income, and migration in search of work. She took a lead role in initiating a wide range of programs such as ‘Empowering Women and Rural Communities’ and ‘Collective Action and Environment Protection’. Esther went to the villages to bring awareness, to teach and counsel the villagers on topics such as: Environmental Education, Tree Farming, Watershed, Forestry, Health, Fallow Land Development, Food and Fodder Security, Biomass Availability, Energy Security, Sustainable Livelihoods and

Collective Action have been undertaken in 106 villages of six mandals/taluks in Ranga Reddy District of Andhra Pradesh.

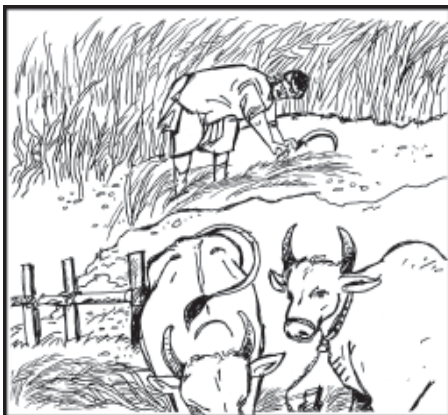
These programs help the women and children to become dynamic groups in the villages and solve many of their own issues of natural resource management.

### **A. FOOD & FODDER SECURITY :**

People in the villages, particularly the marginalized and women did not know the possibility of successful dry land agriculture. So they were forced to migrate in search of survival options to the urban labor market. In addition, the land that they owned in the village remained fallow for want of resources either in kind or money to convert them into productive assets. So, to protect their food security the women farmers were motivated towards the cultivation of



*Food Security in villages decreased migrations to urban areas.*



*Fodder Security improved Livestock assets.*

fallow lands and there by growing of food crops. She made them adapt successful methods and the use of organic manures in their farming which yielded good crops.

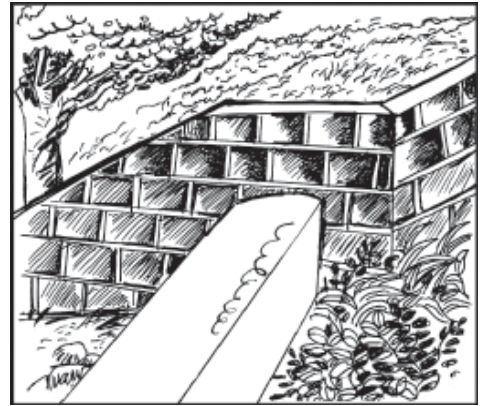
As a result, many stopped migrating to the urban areas. The products were even sold right in the villages for the urban marketing.

Many people in those villages are oriented on the benefits of self sufficiency and biomass availability. This has led to significant increase in livestock assets and greater milk yield. Many families now have taken to fodder cultivation to improve their livestock assets thereby improving their livelihoods as well. Kitchen gardens were encouraged for self-sufficiency and nutrition.

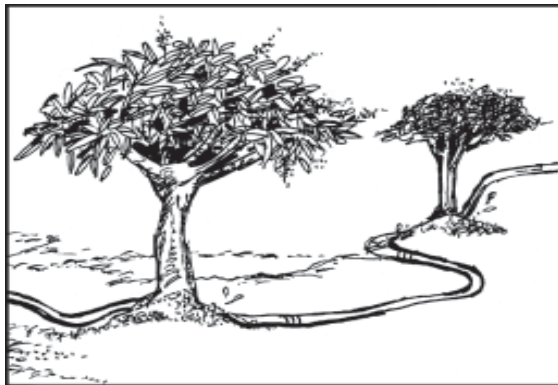
## **B. WATERSHED :**

Under Esther's leadership, the watershed program was implemented in villages with high water scarcity. It raised awareness on conserving, storing, maintaining and utilizing water and also helped build confidence among the villages. She promoted building soak pits around bore wells and to utilize the household water to grow vegetables, fruits and saplings.

For the watershed development, she made the villages to develop village drainage maps and water harvesting structures like Fields Bunds, Contour Bunding, Check Dams, sunken ponds etc. Water bodies were conserved and maintained through de-silting, and strengthening the embankment by planting trees. Drip irrigation and recharging water bodies were also promoted.



*Building bunds improved water storage for crops & drinking.*



*More cultivation with less water through Drip Irrigation.*

As a result of the above developments, significant changes in the living conditions of the women and families have been found. Ground water levels have risen considerably in most parts of the villages where watershed programs were introduced. Greater extents of dry lands have been brought under food crop cultivation. The people found labor and food right in the villages and so the incidence of migration has fallen. Many of the women in the villages had direct access to Rythu Bazaars (*Farmers' Markets*) without middle men. There has been improvement in soil fertility, and moisture levels. Availability of pasture lands and the numbers of

livestock assets have increased. Green cover has also increased. Dried up lakes and ponds have been regenerated in the villages and forests. Communities in a number of villages have taken up the responsibility of managing village pond, rain water structure and lakes.

## **CHALLENGE :**

**Plant some vegetables, guava and papaya seeds in your yard and water it to grow.**

## ESTHER SUBHASHINI

### ACTIVITIES - 2

Let us see few more of her activities which greatly helped the sub-urbans and the rural communities :



*Children involved in Tree Plantation.*

#### A. FORESTRY :

It was observed that the forest cover even in Reserve Forests were also minimal. There were frequent soil erosion and extensive tree falling and sand mining. She promoted the construction of field bunds, gully controls, deep ploughing across the slope, and tank silt application in order to stop soil erosion and tree felling and prevent sand mining.

In open lands and in village forests sand mining and tree felling was extensive. Her efforts strengthened forest community groups to campaign against sand mining and tree felling. Communities were motivated to adopt new techniques to protect the forest land and utilize forest produce.

She was instrumental in establishing 25 Vana Samrakashna Samithi (VSS) groups in her project area. The VSS has played an active role in managing forest resources. Members of the 25 VSS meet every month at the village level to plan for conservation of forest resources and utilization of forest produce. They have been linked to the Forest Department and trained in gap plantation, water harvesting, construction of check dams, social forestry, bio-fuel plantation, pruning and soil and moisture conservation. They were also provided with market linkages for sale of forest produce.



*More trees give more rains.*

The campaigns and construction to protect the forest cover have resulted in profit from the forest produce, no incidences of soil erosion, new growth, and a protected area for wildlife to graze.



*Trees/Forest Protection Groups formed.*

#### B. ENVIRONMENT :

In this program, awareness was given for the school and the youth. Environmental campaigns were held in villages. The students showed greater awareness of environmental issues and they put pressure on the local Gram Panchayaths (village governing bodies) for protection of the saplings, keeping the village clean and free from all pollution. They observed Annual Environmental Days. Dramas or skits were played and songs were sung on Environmental issues. Later in the year the women, children, and youth became involved in extensive tree planting in the villages. Every year groups will

celebrate the Environmental Day from June to October by holding public meetings and the whole village participates by planting fruit trees, bio-fuel saplings along the roads, inside schools, community centers, graveyards and backyards.



*Cow/Buffalo dung used to produce Bio-gas.*

**C. ENERGY SECURITY :**

She has also focused on training women’s groups in innovative livelihoods based on renewable energy technologies such as biogas, solar driers, lanterns etc. As a result, children use solar lanterns for study in the evening. Women use it for night meetings. They use biogas as cooking fuel.

**D. HEALTH :**

She created awareness on the health of rural women. Trainings on health-care and first aid were provided for the rural community. Effective functioning of the rural public health institutions are

monitored by rural community members.

Most of the water available in the project areas had high fluoride content until ten years ago, but it has reduced over the last five years due to the activities of the communities. Improvement in the quality of drinking water has led to reduced incidence of waterborne diseases such as diarrhea, fluorosis, dental problems and bone disorders. Also, women from the rural community take up active and speedy measures during epidemics.



*Rural Groups monitoring Health Services and clean water supply.*

**AWARDS :**

In the year 2000-2001 she received an Award of Best Citizen ‘**MOTHER THERESA SEVA PURASKAR**’.

In the year 2008 **she received another Award** in the category of “Community - led Action for Management of Water Resources, Land-use and Forestry”. This Award was given for having highlighted to tackle challenges posed by climate change of direct relevance to India. She received the Award on Earth Day i.e. 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2008 in New Delhi.

**PROBLEMS :**

The road to success so far had not been so easy for her. It was very rough and difficult with stiff opposition, criticism, insult and humiliation from all people including her family. Her husband and in-laws were bitterly opposed to her leaving the job and work among the poor in villages. They used to openly criticize, insult and humiliate her among her friends and relatives saying that she is irresponsible towards her family and negligent about the social security of her children.

After realizing that she is totally into it and not going to change, her in-laws and her husband slowly began to at least leave her alone. But her children understood her and had been very supportive. Of late even her husband has understood the importance of this work.

Even in the villages where she started her projects, the villagers would suspect her motives saying that she is doing all these to convert the poor villagers to Christianity, but after seeing the fruit and reaping the results of her selfless and dedicated hard work, the villagers are also supporting her and fully cooperating with her in all her efforts.

At the bottom of Esther's heart, her future goals are: To motivate everyone to protect their environment as good and faithful stewards, to see them enjoy good health and become agents of change and to show Christ's love to these communities and help them to understand His love.

Esther is truly a child of God. She knows God made heaven and earth to make His kingdom beautiful. She learned, taught and toiled to protect, care, and preserve to make the earth a safe and sound place to live in.

**CHALLENGE :**

**Go and tell two to five of your friends about the importance of saving the environment.**