

## SOCIETY / ACTIVISM

**From saree weaver to leader**

27-year-old Nandlal Master was born into a saree weaver's family. Today, he is a leader in the Mehdiganj area of Varanasi District, and runs classes for children who would otherwise be stranded. He has also led a local movement on water that has become a problem for Coca Cola as well as for Pepsi Cola and the local administration, writes Sandeep Pandey.

Inspired by Gandhian ideology and based on Jayaprakash Narayan's concept, the young U.P. based Nandlal Master has put together a cohesive local organization comprising of youth from saree weavers' families in about ten years time. Nandlal laid the foundation of his organization in 1994 when he returned to his village after aborting college studies, and started evening classes for his two little cousins – one, a son of his uncle and another from his neighbour's family. Most of the children in this area, situated about 20 km from Varanasi city, have to weave sarees on handlooms installed in every household. They do not go to regular school.

Nandlal was also born into a saree weaver's family in a village called Usrapatti. His father used to lend money for the same business. The family was originally financially well off. But his father died when he was a child. The task of raising him and his six siblings suddenly fell on his mother. From a money lender she soon slipped to being a labourer. Nandlal's elder sister was already married. When his mother could not manage their family affairs, she sent Nandlal to stay with his sister in Murgaha-Benipur village for continuing his studies. He completed schooling from Uday Pratap College and then joined the BSc programme.

But the deteriorating financial condition of his family forced him to drop out and return to his village. Two elder brothers had separated from the family after getting married. Nandlal upon coming back first decided to learn the skill of saree weaving on the handloom available at his home. At that time his two younger brothers were working on looms at other people's places. Along with taking up saree weaving work Nandlal also started evening classes for children who were not going to school. Gradually the number of children grew. He had to start centres in other villages.

Inspired by Nandlal's example, educated youth in other villages also started similar education centres for children engaged in saree weaving. Slowly Nandlal built up a team of volunteers. They used to look upto Nandlal for leadership and guidance. Nandlal was a born leader and this opportunity provided him a chance to hone his leadership abilities. But two incidents followed that shook him up.

Nandlal had started a practice of taking out all the children once in a year for an outing. In 1996 when the children were on a trip to Mirzapur, the bus carrying them met with an accident. One child died and 36 of them were injured, some of them very seriously.

Nandlal is soft-spoken and kind hearted, but very independent and with strong character. He is as strong in taking stands as he is soft in his demeanour.

This was a big jolt for Nandlal. He had to face such a big tragedy at the beginning of his journey. Nandlal initially blamed himself for the tragedy; but he gathered courage and started raising resources for the treatment of the injured children. He was able to raise Rs 36,000 mostly from heads of some village Panchayats. This brought back some of his self-confidence.

The children in Nandlal's classes were child labourers. A number of organizations were engaged in the abolition of child labour and plenty of foreign funds were also available for this. Some NGOs and funding agencies tried to bring Nandlal into their fold by offering him money in return for giving them some credit for his work. The NGOs wanted to show that they were running education centres for the children. Nandlal decided to preserve his autonomy and continued to work independently.

Because he did not get lured by the enticement, he emerged as a person of strong character and the confidence of local people and youth in his leadership deepened. However, he was fooled at a subsequent event.

An organisation from Varanasi proposed to organize a cultural programme for the children engaged in saree weaving work. Nandlal did not find anything wrong with it. The NGO organised the programme and invited some government officials. The very next day there was a raid by the government inspectors and a number of children working on handlooms in his area were caught. At this juncture, some money lenders and others who were not happy with Nandlal's growing popularity got a chance to denounce him. He was thought to be part of the plan to get the raid conducted and blamed for it, because he may have wanted to remove the children from work and put them in school full time.

Because of these two events Nandlal thought that his role as a social activist was over. He was feeling guilty that he had brought grief to the community because of his deeds. However, miraculously, it was the parents of the children injured in the bus accident who came to him and requested him to restart the education classes. It was probably because of Nandlal's integrity and commitment that people had faith in him. So Nandlal got a chance to rebuild his social work. Learning from the good and bad experiences of life he was now a more mature human being. Slowly he gained of the confidence of the entire area.

Nandlal doesn't think that the working children should be completely taken out of the work because the skills they learn are useful in helping them earn their livelihood. Still, he does run a few day schools as well. He has been able to attract some children to more regular education programmes away from the saree making business.

When raising funds for the children injured in the 1996 bus accident he had met Niti bhai in Varanasi city. Niti bhai introduced Nandlal to Gandhian ideology. Niti bhai also made it possible for Nandlal to visit Gandhiji's Sewagram Ashram in Wardha. It was after coming here that Nandlal was deeply influenced by Gandhian philosophy. Meditating in Bapu Kutli, participating in the all-religion prayer meeting, and talking to various people and learning about incidents from Gandhiji's life, a new light began to emerge from within him. This laid the ideological basis for his future work. He understood how his work locally was part of the larger social transformation process. He was enthused by his Wardha visit.

Upon returning Nandlal decided to spend some time with Niti bhai who had formed an organization called Lok Chetna Samiti in a different area of the Varanasi district, Chirai Gaon. Nandlal did this for two reasons. First he wanted to learn the art of organization building and secondly he wanted to satiate his ideological hunger in the company of Niti bhai which had been ignited during his Wardha visit. Nandlal still maintains live contact with Niti bhai and his organization today.

Nandlal emerged so strong from his association with Niti bhai that he decided to wind up his registered organization Nav Jyoti Swawlamban Sewa Sanstha and put its papers in a box. He decided to remain free of bureaucratic shackles and wanted to build a people's organization. With inspiration from Niti bhai, Nandlal founded Lok Samiti in his area in 1999. He decided not to work in the prevalent NGO mode accepting money from funding agencies. For a 22 year old coming from a simple lower middle class rural family, a decision reflecting such ideological maturity was a rare achievement. He got a chance to participate in a workshop on a recent development in philosophical thought called *Sah Astitwawad* (concept based on co-existence). More popularly, it is known as *Jeevan Vidya*, propounded by A Nagraj of Amarkantak. This helped further Nandlal's ideological development.

It became very clear to Nandlal that an individual does whatever he/she does for his/her own satisfaction rather than for somebody else. This ended the possibility of any arrogance growing within him for the service to the society that he was doing. The sense of independence that developed within Nandlal was because of the days spent at his sister's place as a young boy. He considers this period as one of bondage. There was financial security but no freedom to express his views. He always desired to free himself from this constraint and live according to his ideas. This strong urge to not compromise on his freedom has prevented Nandlal to either apply for any job anywhere or for funding to support his work. This is Nandlal – a soft spoken and kind hearted, but very independent and a personality with strong character. He is as strong in taking stands as he is soft in his demeanour. Incidentally, though Nandlal had to originally drop out of pursuing his B Sc degree, he later returned to college to get BA and MA degrees.

In addition to creating Lok Samiti, Nandlal also developed a cultural team called Kala Manch to raise awareness on social issues through street theatre and beautiful songs. In 2001 he became the State Convener from U.P. of the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), which gave him an opportunity to build contact with other people's movements going on throughout the country. Using a mature ideology and personal relationships to build his organization, Nandlal developed a concrete mass base. People in his organisation have complete confidence in him.

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In 2003 when the NAPM decided to organise a nation wide protest against Coca Cola and Pepsi Cola as part of their campaigning against the new economic policy, Nandlal decided to lead a protest at the gate of the Coca Cola bottling plant in Mehdiganj, situated in his area. This plant, drawing lakhs of litres of water every day, had distributed the sludge coming out of the plant as 'manure' to the farmers in the neighbourhood only to destroy their crops and fields. The farmers were up in arms against the Coca Cola bottling plant. The company was also encroaching upon a piece of land belonging to the local Gram Sabha (village assembly) on which it had illegally built a portion of the plant. Also, in 1999 when the company bought the plant from Thums Up they cheated the government on revenue to the tune of Rs 1,75,00,000. (The District Court order that recorded this also imposed an equal amount in fines on Coke. The company paid Rs 1,45,00,000 and then obtained a stay from the U.P. High Court.) No local person has been able to get regular employment in the plant till date. It has become quite clear that Coca Cola is working against the interest of the local people.

When after repeated complaints, the administration did not take any action on the company, 500 local people led by Nandlal assembled on 10 September 2003 at the gate of the plant and demanded its closure. The police using lathis and private security guards of Coca Cola using iron rods beat up the protestors. 14 people were injured and 70 people put in jail for two days. Since then a number of action programmes have been taken against the twin soft drink giants, and slowly, Nandlal's local movement at Mehdiganj is getting integrated into the international movement. The local movement has become a problem for the US multinational giant as well as the local administration.

Sandeep Pandey  
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*Dr Sandeep Pandey is one of the founders of the NGO Asha for Education and winner of the 2002 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Emergent Leadership. His chronicling is based on several conversations with Nandlal Master; he has also been working with the latter since 1999 on a number of development and social issues. Pandey heads the Asha Ashram, a centre based in village Lalpur of Hardoi District, U.P. The centre is run by the Asha Trust and intervenes for the empowerment of marginalized communities.*

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