

NRI's campaign to uplift widows bears fruit

Illiterate and without a job to fend for herself and her four children, a broken Ravinder Kaur was entirely dependent on her relatives for survival when she became a widow at 35. Today, an optimistic Kaur seems more confident and secure about her and her children's future.

Her plans now include opening a beauty parlour for a better lifestyle and education for her children.

This once reticent 40-year-old woman gives credit to the London-based Loomba Trust Entrepreneurship Programmes, which had tied up with noted beautician and aromatherapist Blossom Kochhar Hair and Beauty Institute, to train poor widows so that they could become self-reliant.

'I am a dropout (from school) and was not confident enough to talk to anyone. We had totally lost hope of a better future,' Kaur told IANS after she completed her training and received a diploma from the British High Commissioner Richard Stagg here Monday at the envoy's residence.

The mother of three daughters and a son, Kaur is among the nine widows who took training in beauty treatment sponsored by the Trust. 'During the training, I was not only taught about beauty treatment but also about interacting with clients. I am shy by nature. But now I am more confident,' said Kaur.

Feeling proud of her achievement, she said her world shattered when her husband, a small-time property dealer, died five years ago.

'I was all alone. With very little education, I couldn't even get a job. I was worried about the financial help my relatives were giving. How long could they have done it. But now I am more hopeful,' she said. Her new-found training gave her enough confidence to shake hand with the British Commissioner when she received her diploma at his residence here.

'I am no longer shy,' she added.

She got to know about the Loomba Trust initiative when her daughter, a class X student, started getting a scholarship of Rs. 500 from the trust that supports children of poor widows.

The Britain-based social entrepreneur Raj Loomba set up the Pushpa Wati Loomba Trust in 1997 in remembrance of his mother who became a widow at a very young age. The Trust also supports thousands of widows and their children in other countries in South Asia and Africa.

Loomba is the founder and executive chairman of the Rinku Group PLC, the fashion and clothing company in Britain. The Trust now wants the UN to recognise June 23 as International Widows Day in order to globally highlight the plight of widows and their children.

Just like Kaur, Uma Cherian, 39, worked as a maid to earn money to continue the education of her two children after her husband died. She was quite nervous when she first started the training, but now she was not even hesitant to tell the British High Commissioner that she hails from Kerala.

Talking about Loomba, Stagg said in recognition of his charitable work for the widows and their

children, he received the highest British civilian honour 'The Commander of the Order of the British Empire' 10 days ago.

'His focus is on trying to help widows and their children. His aim is that the children of widows do not suffer after they lose their fathers,' he added.

There are over 100 million widows across the world. Of this, roughly 35 million live in India.

Lalit Mansingh, former ambassador to the US and former foreign secretary, also a trustee, said former British prime minister Tony Blair's wife Cherie Booth Blair will celebrate the occasion with a gala event at the Trafalgar Square Monday.

'Raj Loomba is a role models for British Indians as he has paid back to the country of his origin.'

The Trust was also supporting 3,600 children of poor widows and 500 children who have been victim to the tsunami in India and carrying on similar work in countries such as South Africa, Kenya, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Nepal and Ghana.

Kul Bhushan, who is the consultant with the Trust, said there has been drastic change in women who took training. 'They were hesitant and unsure. But now they are looking forward to work. There are some who want to set up their own beauty parlours and we will help them financially,' he added.

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