



# An Inspiration and an Icon Celebrating Prema Gopalan

Founder - Swayam Shikshan Prayog  
1956 - 2022

“ Ordinary women can trigger extraordinary changes. My vision is to create an ecosystem that empowers women at the grassroots. Enabling them to move from margin to mainstream, transforming not only their lives but their community, their villages and society - for the better. ”

- Prema Gopalan



Women leaders at the Unnati Fellowship Award, 2018 for Women Changemakers

# Prema: the quintessential Sakhi

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A firm believer in the power of women to shift boundaries and mindsets, Prema established *Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP)* in 1998.

Little did she know, she was setting in motion a movement that would spread across seven states of India. A movement that is inspiring 300,000 rural women to step out of their homes, shrug off archaic notions of self and carve new identities as entrepreneurs, farmers and community leaders.

‘*Sakhis*’ as she lovingly called these women, are impacting every facet of their society today. With a strong vision of a developed community, they are battling issues of agriculture, water, health, nutrition and civic leadership, to create thriving models of development.

Prema’s intrinsic belief in women's leadership garnered worldwide interest and acknowledgement. In a glittering career spanning three decades, she received several national and international awards. Most recently she was the recipient of the 2021 Women Transforming India Award, *NITI Aayog’s flagship* initiative.

A quintessential *Sakhi*, Prema was a devoted daughter, a loving wife and a fun and lively sister. With friends across the globe, Prema was always ready for new adventures. An artist and a foodie, she was curious about people and cultures. She loved narrating her experiences, especially the irreverent stories - her eyes twinkling with mischief and her laugh filling the room.

Prema leaves behind an immense legacy. She also leaves behind 3,00,000 women who embody her work, her values and her spirit. They are her enduring legacy. Ever the generous soul, Prema has left us hope!

# Awards and recognition

2022



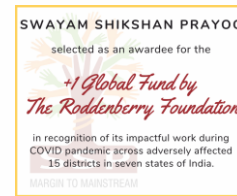
Women Transforming India Award (WTI), NITI Aayog's flagship initiative which endeavours to honour women entrepreneurs who bring transformational change in India.

2021



Parkhe Foundation's "Adarsha Mata Puraskar" for the indomitable courage in adverse situations and to have raised women in her community to become successful leaders.

2021



Roddenberry Foundation's +1 Global Fund in recognition of the impactful work during COVID pandemic across adversely affected communities.

2019



Schwab Foundation's Award of Outstanding Social Entrepreneur of the Year 2019 from Prof. Klaus Schwab, the Founder and Executive Chairman of the WEF.



2018



Devi Awards instituted by the New Indian Express from Hon'ble Chief Minister of Maharashtra.

2018



Schwab Foundation's "Social Entrepreneur of the Year India" award.

2017



UNDP's "Equator Prize" for pioneering the women-led climate resilient agro-ecological farming model and entrepreneurship in India.

2016



UNFCCC's "Momentum for Change Lighthouse" Award in the 'Women for Results' category.

**Ashoka Globalizer** (Fellow since 2003), a Synergos Senior Fellow (since 2013) and Womanity Foundation's Women Change Makers (WCM) India Fellow (since 2017).

# Prema – A life in pictures



Prema with her beloved family



Prema with her husband, Mr. Britto



Her inspiring and supportive parents



SSP's 20 years celebrations



Always leading from the front



Grassroot women leaders in Maharashtra



With SSP team at Pune office



Sakhis for lifetime



Friends from Haiti



Filter coffee and unending chats



Prema with her colleagues



With her friends Yashodhara, Suneeta and Manisha

## And the tributes poured in...

Prema demonstrated a two-way pathway between disaster and development informed by a climate lens, seeing the way that climate change impacts women in particular.

*- Sheela Patel, Founder and Director of the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC)*

Through the Community Resilience Fund, Prema and her friends from the Huairou Commission showed that small grants and loans given to grassroots women can trigger economic empowerment of women.

*- Prof. Vinod Menon, Founder Member, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), GoI; Governing Board Member, Swayam Shikshan Prayog*

Through Prema's poised and eloquent voice, one could clearly see a world where poor women who are not usually considered farmers were not only farmers but were seen as agriculture decision-makers, planners and experts in local adaptation.

*- Karen Wong Pérez, Senior Researcher, IIED's Climate Change Research*

Prema is a cornerstone of everything we have dreamt of and achieved together for 30+ years. Personally, she is one of my dearest friends. We must and will celebrate her life & what she has meant to us individually and collectively.

*- Sandy Schilen, Executive Director of the Huairou Commission*

She was a star that shone bright and spread her light to every dark corner. The best way to honour her spirit is to continue to excel in the quest she has started with you all.

*- Zarine Commissariat, Head-CSR, Shapoorji Pallonji Group*



Prema worked effortlessly with all the stakeholders - communities, NGOs, governments, and international agencies, and produced a significant body of work related to gender and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). As she emerged as an influential voice in this area, the DRR practitioners looked up to her for her guidance and leadership. In her death, we have lost a strong pillar of practice related to gender and DRR. The most fitting tribute to her would be to work together for bringing a significant policy and program breakthrough in this area.

*- Shri Krishna Vatsa, Member, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), GoI*

Prema always chose tough areas on which to turn a gender lens, and she overturned conventional norms and ways of thinking. I so admired her for the way she did all this quietly and effectively, and always putting forward the organization. She was always the empowering leader and nurturing gardener, deeply caring for her crop.

*- Bharati Sadasivam, Regional Gender Advisor at United Nations Development Programme*

Prema was such a shining star who will be remembered for the impact and legacy that she leaves behind. She will be greatly missed by our community.

*- Goy Phumtim, Strategic Operations and Engagement Lead, Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship | World Economic Forum*

Prema has always been our mentor and leader. She has changed the lives of hundreds of women and their families for the better. Together we celebrate her life. May her work become her legacy.

*- Violet Shivutse, Founder of Shibuye Community Health Workers, Kenya and Chairperson of Huairou Commission's Governing Council*

# Quotes from *sakhis*

“My self-education and experiment started from the self-help group inspired by Prematai. Under her guidance I became a leader from a simple homemaker.”

-Varsha Pawar,  
Osmanabad

“Prema Tai is the mother who gave us the word to come out of our problems and work for others.”

-Mina Waghmare, Latur

“I am proud to be a member of Swayam Shikshan Prayog.”

-Revati Kangule,  
Nanded

“Prematai has empowered grassroot women and made them strong enough to face any adversity life throws.”

-Godavari Dange, Grassroot Leader  
from Osmanabad, Maharashtra

“If women decide, they can move mountains, that's because of Prema.”

-Vijaymala Shendge  
Wagholi Osmanabad

## SSP at a glance

Prema Gopalan, as Founder and Executive Director of Swayam Shikshan Prayog, developed an inclusive, participatory, and women-led approach to disaster management. Prema worked in 1200 villages after the devastating 1993 Latur Earthquake for rehabilitation and reconstruction. While retreating from the relief work, she was persuaded by the women to stay back and continue the exemplary work, and so SSP was born in 1998. Thereafter, she has made a longstanding contribution to global networks in building pro-poor community resilience to disasters and climate change.

In time, Prema and SSP mobilized women into self-help groups and developed a replicable model for disaster management that eventually created models for building community resilience. Over the next three decades, SSP expanded its 'disaster to development' initiatives in the most disaster-prone districts of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Bihar, and Kerala.

With a vision to empower grassroots women to move from "Margin to Mainstream", Prema and SSP developed a model of livelihood diversification. It reduces risks and vulnerabilities while increasing the capacities of small and marginal farmers. The climate-resilient organic farming model of SSP promotes the multi-cropping of indigenous,

climate-appropriate food crops. This ensures household food and income security with good nutrition while conserving water and natural resources.

Prema was convinced that women were pivotal to regenerating rural economies. Through our entrepreneurship development program, SSP has supported thousands of women to start businesses and grow by creating farmer producer groups.

SSP's recent flagship initiative, "Women's Initiative to Learn and Lead" (WILL), focuses on women's agency and leadership, enabling them to participate in governance, address critical issues at home and in the community, and empower other women.





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