

An Exemplary Individual

An interview with Artist/Social Worker/Environmentalist/Educationalist AMLA RUIA reveals that she is a woman with many facets, and, above all, a deep spiritual dimension that imparts an integrity of purpose to her life

BY WILLIAM M. CARDOZO

Artist/Social Worker/ Environmentalist/Educationalist, Amla Ruia (nee Tayal), hails from Allahabad. She grew up with simple living, high thinking, and a spiritual atmosphere in the house. Blessed with a very creative and artistic mind, her predisposition was always toward fine arts including painting, singing, dancing, and poetry.

As a young girl she had heard of the J.J. School of Art in Mumbai. "Painting was my passion," she recalls. At the age of 16, her marriage was arranged with Ashok Ruia (the owners of Phoenix Mills (originally into textiles but now a complete entertainment set up). So marriage brought her to Mumbai... and to the J.J. School of Art - in a way!

Professor Dhopeswarkar (retired Dean of Painting of the J.J. School of Art) began coming over to train her. Her dream had come true! Then with a collection of 25 paintings, incorporating landscapes and child portraits, she had a solo show at The Taj Art Gallery, where each and every painting was sold! Then she got involved with her three children - Sharmila, Kavita, and Atul. "Now my children have grown up, married and are well-settled in life. So the remaining and rising passion of my life is spirituality," she reveals.

This began some years ago. "I was with Dada Bhagwan Laxmi's Movement, and the longing of my soul was to attain Nirvana. We were more



Awesome Twosome: Ashok & Amla Ruia

into 'Satsang' and uncovering the mystery of the 'Shastras' written by 'Rishi Munis'. So also, I have exposed myself to Buddhism and was deeply touched by the depth of understanding of the Buddhist writers," Mrs. Ruia explains.

"Then I began to feel that in order to practice what I had received from my Guru I needed to extend myself in the social sphere. It was fortunate that I met Shri Rajendra Singhji (Megasaysay Awardee), an icon in water and he showed me how I could start water harvesting in my husband's native place, Ramgadh Shekavati, in Rajasthan. Here, along with Ramgadh Vikas Trust, we have

made 120 drinking water 'kundhs' in the community. So we are now able to harvest 48 lakh litres of pure distilled drinking water. This has been accomplished in the desert where salt and fluoride are very high in the available water!" she explains.

[PROFILE]

During 2003 Amla Ruia got an opportunity to be involved with the water problems of Maharashtra. She helped organize the Maharashtra Jal Chetna Yatra for Rajendra Singhji. "I was so moved by the plight of the farmers of Marathwada that



rural areas of Rajasthan, where I am personally involved.

"Further, we are into Women Empowerment programmes. I hope to eradicate alcoholism, addictions, and social evils like dowry and child marriages from these villages," she adds.

At the moment, she has just completed the development of a herbal garden called Shantiv (in between Hanging Garden and Hyderabad Estate). This one-of-its-kind Municipal garden Half the plot was no more than a garbage dump. It now boasts an open-air amphitheatre to seat 1,500 people, a large sized stage for cultural programmes, and a waterfall. The herbal garden has an acupuncture walk, a hydrotherapy walk, a glass bridge with a little brook flowing under it, and hundreds of tropical trees and herbal plants. "We are holding nature trails for school children in which a lot of information is imparted to them about water harvesting, soil conservation, ayurvedic plants, insects and birds," smiles Amla Ruia.

She continues, "I am basically a grass-root worker. I don't like to be in big conference halls or rooms. Interestingly, to me, simple village folks give me immense satisfaction. There's a lot to be learnt from their warmth, simplicity and tolerance."

I decided to give an Aakar Award called Aakar Jal Puraskar of Rs. one lakh to the village that does the best water harvesting in Maharashtra."

Amla Ruia's other area of interest is primary education. "I am associated with a NGO called Ram Mangal, practicing the most innovative methodology to teach tribal children. The outcome of this is that the first generation of tribal children is now at par with the most prestigious urban school children in most subjects! I was so taken up by this methodology that I wanted to spread it in all rural schools across India. So I thought the best way would be to open model schools in many states of India, practicing these methods. And, toward this end, we have opened a model school in the

As a parting shot, she states "Today, education is very essential - even more especially for our women. Our family has been into education for a 100 years. Our grandmother, Subrata Bai Ruia, was a pioneer of women's education in Ramgadh. Our Secondary & Higher Secondary Girls' School in Ramgadh has been declared, 'The Best Institution' in the area," she beams with pride.

With the support of her husband, and the rest of her family, Amla Ruia has achieved her potential with grit and gentle grace. Surely a lady we can commend as an inspiration to all other women!