

Gandhi, Vinoba and the Bhoodan Movement

By Jayaprakash Narayan

The Bhoodan movement is one which aims not only at establishing world peace but at creating the foundations of a peaceful life. Although everyone is interested in the problems of peace, very few stop to question what the sources of human conflict may be, and why it is that in human society there is strife of every kind including war.

Mahatma Gandhi was an exception in that he tried to go to the root of this problem, and he built up a philosophy of life which was based on what he called truth and non-violence.

In building up his philosophy he took help from wherever he could. It is well known how deeply indebted Gandhi was to Jesus, and how he always considered the Sermon on the Mount to be his greatest single inspiration. The philosophy of turning the other cheek was the foundation of his whole *satyagraha* movement, that developed first in South Africa and then in India. Among modern thinkers, he acknowledged Tolstoy, Ruskin and Thoreau to be his teachers. Whatever he tried to do, he did with an open mind; nothing was foreign to him just because it happened in a foreign country. He was what might be called a universal personality.

Now, Gandhi applied that philosophy to the Indian freedom movement. I also was one of his humble soldiers and like so many



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Indians of those days, I had to spend several years in prison. During those years, the nationalists in India—the freedom fighters—had to go through all kinds of suffering, of which I think imprisonment was perhaps the least noxious. But travellers to India today are surprised to find that there is no ill-will or bitterness anywhere for Britain or for the British people but, rather, a very warm welcome.

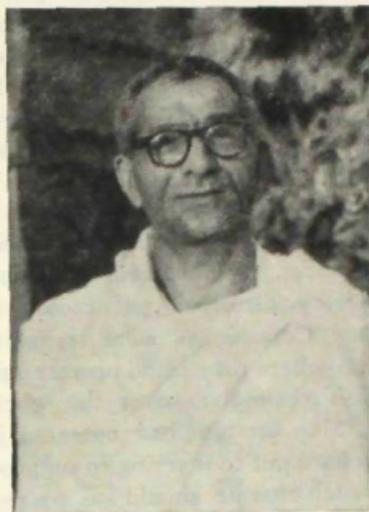


Dhirendra Mazumdar,
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He taught us during those days that even if we had to fight for our country's freedom we should harbour no ill-will, no hatred, no bitterness, for those against whom we were fighting. Rather, he said, we should have love in our hearts for the British. This was a difficult lesson to learn, and many of us didn't learn it so well. I think if we had, the British affair would probably have been settled much earlier—perhaps the Hindus and Moslems would not have quarrelled as they did, and perhaps the country would not have been divided. But that is an old story.

Gannhi did not live long after the independence of India. Only a few months later he was assassinated. It is difficult to say now what he would have done had he lived, and how he would have applied that same philosophy of love and truth to the problems of independent India. There is no doubt that he would not have retired from public activity : he would not have gone to the Himalayas, as many Indians do towards the end of their lives, to contemplate and to pursue whatever other spiritual interests he might have had. He always used to say that he wanted to live for a hundred and twenty-five years so that he might be able to help India to go forward, and help to create the India of his dreams.

But it is our great good fortune that there was one among his disciples who was not content merely to tread the beaten path, and



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disobedience. But he did not wish to let go unanswered the challenge which the British Government of that time had thrown to India, when on the one hand it said that it was fighting for freedom and democracy and on the other hand was persistently denying freedom and democracy to India herself—a contradiction. And, therefore, as a matter of protest, Gandhi had launched this Individual Satyagraha. That is, only those who in his view were qualified enough and equipped enough morally to offer satyagraha would be allowed to do so. He had drawn up a fairly long list, and on that list the first name was that of Vinoba Bhave. He had selected him as the first *satyagrahi* out of all his thousands of followers. The second name on that list was that of Jawaharlal Nehru, our Prime Minister.

Vinoba is no longer a young man—he is over sixty years old. He is a man who, in the tradition of ancient India, would be considered to have renounced the world—a concept which I find the West does not understand. What does it mean, this renouncing the world? Vinoba has no home, no property, no family; he is what we would have called in the ancient days a *rishi*, a seer. He is a deeply religious person, a man of God, a person who considers whatever he does to be in the

who had genius enough to be able to apply his principles—the universal principles of truth and non-violence—to India's practical problems. This was Vinoba Bhave. Vinoba was already an important person during Gandhi's lifetime, although he was not so well known as Nehru and others who were working on the political field. One little incident gives us some deai of the esteem and regard in which Gandhi himself held Vinoba.

During the war in 1941 Gandhi had started a movement which he called individual Civil Disobedience. He did not think that there was occasion then, or at least justification, for a mass movement of civil

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pursuit of spiritual ends rather than of any social, economic, or political ends. He is also a very deeply learned individual, very erudite ; a great Sanskrit scholar. He knows all the major Indian languages. It is a great achievement. He wanted to study the Koran, so he learned Arabic ; he is a deep student of the Bible (not in Hebrew, of course, but in English) ; he knows French well enough to read, and is learning German. He is indeed a wide-awake person.

More than nine years ago, early in 1951, Bhoodan movement originated in rather dramatic circumstances. Vinoba was travelling on foot in an area that had become very disturbed on account of Communist guerrilla activities. The Communists were trying to establish a foothold for themselves from where they could operate and expand outwards and gradually establish themselves over the whole of India, much in the fashion in which Mao Tse-tung had operated in China. The Government of India was hard put to it trying to suppress this violent guerrilla warfare. Vinoba felt that he should go to this area to give the people the message of non-violence and love. It was a very courageous thing to do. The Government of India offered him armed protection, which he refused, and with his small band of workers, not more than half a dozen, he went from village to village on foot speaking wherever he went.

One day, after his evening talk in a fairly large village, an old "untouchable" from the back of the audience got up, placed his palms together and said that while they tilled the fields of rich landlords who had hundreds and thousands of acres of land, they themselves had not even a decimal of land. "Therefore, sir, we want land for ourselves," he prayed. Vinoba knew not what to reply. To gain time he asked the old man, "How much land do you want ?" Now that old *Harijan* was not speaking for himself alone, so he didn't reply immediately but had a little consultation with his companions. After two or three minutes he got up again and, again with palms touching said, "Sir, we want eighty acres of land". It was a very modest demand he made, but Vinoba had no land to give him. Without hoping for anything to happen, Vinoba turned to the people around him and said, "Have you, gentlemen, heard what, this old man has said ? "Is there any among you who is prepared to fulfil the demand that has just been made ?

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When he put this question he had no hope that anyone was going to answer. He just put that question because he felt there was nothing else for him to do. And lo and behold! Someone gets up from the ranks of the land-owners, puts his palms together, and says, "Sir, I have five hundred acres of land. We are six brothers; I am head of the family; on behalf of my brothers and myself, I am prepared to give a hundred acres for this landless people." Now Vinoba was dumbfounded; he was completely speechless. Here were these "untouchables" demanding eighty acres of land, and here was a landlord coming forward to give a hundred acres—twenty acres more than was wanted. That night Vinoba did not sleep. All night long his mind was working and from within a voice came again and again and said, "This is the answer. You have been roaming about these villages for so many days, trying to find an answer to the Communist violence. Here is the answer. From tomorrow, you will go on throughout the length and breadth of this country: you will walk from village to village asking for land, and giving the land that is given to you to the landless."

From the next day, Vinoba started on a trek that still continues, walking every day from eight to ten miles, may be twelve miles some days, and talking to the people. When he started, there were not more than half a dozen people with him; now there are thousands in practically all parts of India. In these several years, Vinoba and his co-workers have been able to collect more than four and a half million acres of land. As compared with the land that is needed for all the landless people, this is not very much, but if we remember what land means to the peasant, and how deeply attached he is to it, we will appreciate that it is nothing less than a miracle that four and a half million acres have been given away for the asking, without any kind of coercion being used. True, maybe half of this land is not worth cultivation and distribution (perhaps it may be put to some other use, such as pasture), yet this land too was at one time the personal property of some landlord, and he felt persuaded to surrender his ownership. The other half, I have no doubt, is fit for cultivation and much of it has already been distributed to the landless people. Ours is an agricultural country, and eight per cent of the people still live in the villages, so it can be imagined what this movement means for India. In India it is one of the biggest things that has happened since Independence—the biggest thing, I should call it.

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The movement arose by the surrender of part of a person's land, in course of time many developments took place, of which the most important is which we call Gramdan. Suppose a landlord has one hundred acres of land and he is persuaded to give ten acres to some landless families in his village. that would be what we call Bhoodan, the earliest phase, by which name the movement is still known. But then as the idea spread and the people understood it, and a new kind of moral climate was created in the rural areas, partial sharing developed into total sharing, and we now have something like five thousand villages in which land has ceased to be individual property and has become communal—the property of the whole community.

In China, in Russia, and in other Communist countries, we know what happened in the wake of collectivisation. In Russia alone twenty million people were liquidated in one way or another. Now, in five thousand Indian villages, much more has happened than forcible collectivisation brought about. If the farmers in all these Communist countries were given the option to choose between collectivisation and their own individual farming, I don't think there is much doubt that the vast majority would choose the latter. All this process of forcible collectivisation has produced very little change in their minds and hearts, and we have instances of it in Yugoslavia, Poland and Hungary.

By propagating this philosophy of Love and Truth (because it is the truth, whatever the economists or others may say) and persuading people that they should live together as one family, it has been possible to convert thousands of people and bring about a non-violent agrarian revolution of the completest kind in these 5,000 villages of India. This philosophy asserts that whatever we have is a trust and should be held and used as such, whether it be land or other kind of property or whether it be skill, knowledge or experience. It is a trust that we hold for our fellow human beings and for our community. It is not meant for our personal enjoyment alone: we have a share in it, but only a share.

Mahatma Gandhi was never tired of emphasizing that although it is necessary to improve society and to change the social, economic, and political institutions of society, these changes will not mean very much unless men, too, change and improve, mere external improvement will not take us very far.

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As a young man I was a Marxist and I believed that if the environment was changed the individual would change, because the individual was a product of his environment. Therefore I thought that once capitalism and feudalism were abolished, and the private profit motive eliminated from life, everything would be all right.

In Russia there was this tremendous revolution. Capitalism and feudalism were destroyed from the roots, and the private profit motive was destroyed. But what happened? Did the good society emerge? Did the good man emerge? Nothing. All the ideals of Communism—or at least what I consider to be the ideals of Communism—seem to me to have been buried fathoms deep under the Russian soil. The very people who made the revolution became, after the success of the revolution, thirsty for one another's blood: and blood flowed on the streets of Moscow and other cities like water.

And I saw what was happening in the democratic countries that were trying to create a socialist society. I found the ideals of socialism were becoming fainter and fainter, dimmer and dimmer. Nationalization at one time used to be such an exciting and promising slogan. But today we find bureaucracy! We find that the relationships between the producers, the consumers, the management, and other sectors of society have become frozen. There is no *socialism* left in the life of the people.

In India today we are faced with the problems of socialism, democracy, the co-operative movement, industrialization. We are concerned with these problems because we are at the crossroads. Which way do we go? Do we follow the West? Do we industrialize in the same manner? Do we accept the same ideals of life for ourselves? I personally shudder to think that we would go the same way, follow the same path. And now we are in the midst of this cold war and one doesn't know what will happen. Millions and millions of people throughout the world are living in fear.

Mahatma Gandhi had insisted that while there has to be a social revolution the starting point of that revolution must be man himself. It is only through a human revolution that we can have a social revolution that is meaningful. And therefore he always said that he was a double revolutionary and that his revolution was a double revolution

—internal as well as external —human as well as social. Without the internal revolution, the external was meaningless.

The Bhoodan-Gramdan movement is an example of this double revolution. In these 5,000 villages there has been an external change. Land has ceased to be individual property and has become common property. The village community in an assembly decides what is to be done with this land—whether it should be farmed collectively as a single unit, or whether it should be re-allocated on some just basis among the members of the community who are prepared to farm the land. The whole decision as to what should be done is in the hands of this small village community. This is an economic revolution of the most fundamental nature.

There is no party in India today, neither the ruling Congress party, nor the Socialist party, nor the Communist party nor any other party, that has the courage to say that if it were in power it would communize land and abolish individual ownership of land. The Communists would certainly like to do so, and perhaps many Socialists also, but it is impossible for them even to speak about it now. If you take all the election manifestoes and all the programs of these parties, and put them all together, it doesn't total up to very much: a few land reforms, redistribution of land, fixation of ceilings, uneconomic holdings of land to be made rent-free, and a few things of that nature, which are certainly not Communist or Socialist programs. They are desirable land reforms, that is all; but a bourgeois government a liberal Capitalist government may well carry through those reforms.

One must appreciate what a tremendous revolution it means, at least in these 5,000 villages, for the land-owners voluntarily to say, "Our lands belong to the village community, to everyone". Nor is the conception of community restricted to the village alone. The idea is that whatever is on this earth belongs jointly to the human family. *I have a share in what you have, and you have a share in what I have. It is this philosophy which Vinoba is preaching.*

The whole world today is concerned with the question of peace and war. The Bhoodan movement goes to the very roots of this question. If human civilisation, if our economic and political institutions, were based on foundations such as I have described, there would be no cause for struggle, for any kind of strife.

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The immediate program that Vinoba has placed before us is the program of Santi Sena. Vinoba has been saying for the last few years that India should unilaterally adopt a policy of disarmament. We should not wait till others have given up wrong to give up ourselves what we consider to be wrong. If violence is wrong, let us eschew it, irrespective of whether others have done so or not. Now this is a very bold thing to say, but Vinoba knows that by merely saying so it will not be done.

It is a very difficult lesson because all around different lessons are being taught. Vinoba says that before we presume to ask the Government of India to start on this policy of disarmament, we should demonstrate that at least for our internal security it is possible to do without the militia.

In spite of Gandhi, in spite of Buddha and Mahavira and the whole tradition of *ahimsa* in our country, in spite of our vegetarianism, the situation is such that if there is any kind of dispute in India that gets out of hand, on the linguistic or other question, violence breaks out. There is violence on the streets of Bombay, or Calcutta, or may be somewhere else. And then what happens? The militia is called to suppress this "disorder". And the disorder is suppressed. Stones are answered with bullets, and order is established, and we say there is peace. Vinoba says, "*This is not peace; this is an illusion of peace, peace that has been established by the force of violence. Therefore, let us create in India those forces which will be responsible for internal security*" so that we can say to all our Chief Ministers in the States (who are responsible for internal security), 'We don't need your militia. Let your police control the traffic on the streets and perform such other services for the people, but we don't need you for enforcing law and order.'

It is for this purpose that he is trying to create the Santi Sena. He has given a call for 75,000 volunteers, that is, one soldier of peace for every area with a population of 5,000. Each such soldier will be trained to engage himself in whole-time service of that community.

The man who goes to the people with a message of peace should have some moral authority, and this moral authority can come only by selfless service and by no other way. You may be a great scientist, a great politician, or a great something, but that does not give

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you the right to go to the people and ask them to listen to you. You have that right only when you have been in their service.

Every such volunteer will live in simplicity, and not ask for more than the satisfaction of his primary needs ; but those needs will have to be fulfilled by the community. He will have to visit every home in that little locality and establish personal acquaintance. He will find out what the difficulties of these people are and help them in any way he can.

The responsibility of peace is not a partisan responsibility, so the soldier of peace must be non-partisan and cannot belong to any political party. He should not believe in caste differences or "untouchability", but should believe in the equality of all religions. These and similar qualifications the volunteer should have. These conditions are doubtless rather difficult to fulfil. If these conditions had not been enforced, thousands of volunteers might have joined, instead of the few hundred, and may be by now Vinoba would have got these 75,000 people. But they would have been completely undependable people and no commander of any army could have depended on such a force.

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