

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Vinobaji: The Gentle Revolutionary

Beach Hotel
Kozhikode
Kerala, India
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers,

His name is Vinoba Bhave. He is 61 years old, 5'4" tall, and weighs 90 pounds. He has malaria and a duodenal ulcer. He should be in a hospital. Learned in philosophy and mathematics and, above all, Sanskrit, he could be in a university. A timid, retiring disciple of Gandhi in the non-political sphere, he has spent most of his life as a farmer, experimenting with his neighbors in close community living. He could still be there.

Instead, this frail, scholarly, mild man, is now in his seventh year of walking through India, asking those who have land to share it with those who have not. Surrounded by a band of devoted workers and greeted by respectful crowds, Vinoba tours from one village to another, lecturing, praying, asking. And they give. So far, more than five million acres of farmland have been contributed, by the rich, and by the poor giving to the poorer.



Vinoba in Kerala

The land is given for the landless through Vinoba, who accepts it in the name of a "revolution of love" aimed at establishing a "new era of freedom and happiness."

"God has created the land for the benefit of all in the same way he has created the air, the water and the light of the sun," says Vinoba in his soft voice. "I have asked all to regard Daridranarayana [God revealed in the poor] as a member of their families, and give him his share as a right, and not as a piece of charity, and people have given me with the same feelings."

"I know," Vinoba has said, "I have no right to give a program to the nation...If Gandhiji were alive today I would never have appeared before the public as I do today... Circumstances have compelled me to come out and be audacious enough to be an initiator of this great

sacrificial movement. But whether it is impertinence or humility I dedicate it to God and request all my sisters and brothers to cooperate."

His leadership has made "Vinobaji" the most revered man in India and, next to Nehru, the most renowned.

The story is simple. In the spring of 1951 Vinoba had walked 300 miles from his ashram in Madhya Pradesh to a meeting of Gandhian social workers in Hyderabad. There, in the Telengana area, Communists were carrying on a terrifying campaign of arson and murder in their self-appointed role as redistributors of the land. Into Telengana Vinoba walked, preaching non-violence.

In the village of Pochampalli, 40 landless families came to him to say why they supported the Communists. They needed 80 acres of land and the Communists were ready to give. What else could they do?

Meeting with the whole village, Vinoba placed the problem of the 40 families before them all. Is it possible, he asked, that someone would give land? A landowner suddenly stood up to offer 100 acres.

In hungry, land-crowded India they struggle for land and they hold it. They do not give it away.

That night, Vinoba relates, he wondered "whether the gift had any significance at all" or was "only a miracle." He concluded that "the Great Power that rules over all is after some new activity." He calculated the amount of land needed for all of India's 10,000,000 landless, land-working families and arrived at the figure of 50,000,000 acres, one-sixth of all the cultivable land in the country.

"So in the village that we reached the next morning with great confidence I begged for land as a son would of his father...'I am your child, you are my fathers. If you have four children already, take me to be your fifth child, and allot me one-fifth of your lands...'"

Within seven weeks he had collected 12,000 acres. The Bhoodan Yajna, the "Land-Gifts Sacrifice Mission," had begun.

Prime Minister Nehru promptly invited Vinoba to New Delhi to talk with the national Planning Commission, and offered to send a plane. Vinoba said he would come, "but in my own time, and as always." He walked the 795 miles in two months, gathering 17,000 more acres on the way.

In Delhi he lived in a bamboo hut near the spot where Gandhi's body was cremated. They came to see him: Nehru, President Rajendra Prasad, members of the Planning Commission. He told them that what he would do is "provide work and food first, and then draw up plans." He told them they had "forgotten" India's 500,000 villages, that they should forgo huge industries and dams in favor of small-scale rural workshops. After 11 days Vinoba, no friend of the city, left, walking, toward the villages.

Since then, he has walked through Uttar Pradesh, Bihar (where he collected more than 2,500,000 acres), down into Orissa (where 1500 entire communities were given as gramdan, "village-gift"), to Andhra and Madras and now, six years later, Kerala.

I joined the Vinoba party in a village schoolyard in Kerala. It was evening. The crowd who had come to the public prayer meeting was going home. I entered the compound. The rain dripped from the palm trees overhead. There was a kerosene lamp shining on the porch. "Baba ('Father') is inside. Let us have our supper."

We squatted cross-legged and ate the supper ladled out onto banana leaves. My young companion on the left was explaining, not complaining, when he whispered, "This is the kind of thin rice they give you in some poor-line."

At eight exactly, there was a clanging bell and all, a dozen, stepped into Vinoba's darkened room for prayers. They sat, facing him. He sat, only a silhouette: big eye-glasses, beaked nose, wispy beard on a slender jaw. Silence. Intense silence, with the overwhelming awareness that Vinoba was there.

Then a voice began chanting:

"Samjaya uvaca,
Tam tatha krpaya vistam
Asrupurna kulek sanam..."

The silhouette came to life, sing-songing and swaying joyously. The others, a chorus, joined in: Bhagawad Gita, "The Song of the Lord," Krishna giving the warrior Arjuna courage to fight: the promise of the immortality of the soul and the glory of action in a just cause.

They ended and took up Vinoba's own staccato hymn:

"Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya..."

"Non-violence, Truth, Honesty,
Chastity, Non-possession, Labor,
Temperance, Fearlessness, Religious Tolerance,
Independence in Material Needs,
Avoidance of Caste-Distinctions.

These eleven vows should be observed in humility."

They ended, praying slowly:

"Om, Shanti, Shanti, Shanti."

"God, Peace, Peace, Peace."

They withdrew, and Vinoba went to his cot.

The next day began, as usual, at 3 A.M., with the clanging bell that arouses the party, asleep on mats on the earthen floor. The lantern goes on, there is much hawking of throats and splashing of water. At 3:30 there is a brief chanting of prayers in Vinoba's room.

Usually the daily hike to the next village, 12 or 20 miles away, begins at 5, but Vinoba has recently had influenza, so the hike is only five or six miles, beginning at 7.

The bell again, and Vinoba steps out. A white shawl, a white loin cloth, sandals. A quick, stiff-legged, heel-lifting gait, the arms pendulating outward and behind. The party falls in, abreast and behind.

Down the sand-packed road, under the palm trees. In the hamlets, people line the road, their eyes following him in respectful silence. Someone, a schoolgirl, a headman, offers a garland, quickly, from the side. Vinoba accepts it without looking, without breaking stride. He passes it back.

They arrive at the appointed village and are guided by a welcoming committee to the schoolhouse. One of the young men invites the crowd to come to the prayer meeting at 5. Then there is breakfast, pancakes and spiced stewed vegetables. At 10:30 there are prayers in Vinoba's room. At 11 the local committee meets with Vinoba's secretary, who gives them a peptalk. Alone, Vinoba reads the papers and attends to his correspondence. The others wash their laundry by the well. At noon there is lunch, then rest, then silent spinning on a simple charka. At 3, Vinoba consults with workers, talks with visitors, including those who have come to offer land.

In the schoolyard, at 5, the prayer meeting begins. Vinoba sits on a platform in the midst of the crowd of 400. His face and shins stick out of his white wrappings. His voice, blown up by the microphone, still comes out soft and gentle. The pretty woman interpreter sounds scolding by comparison. Vinoba's skinny arm shoots out, a revolting wrist and flung fingers. The voice remains calm. The crowd listens closely. He ends with a silent prayer. The crowd lets him through and away. They become noisy slowly as they go.

Vinoba has been accompanied these years by two helpers: Damodar Das, his friendly-argumentative secretary, and a woman, Mahadevi Thai, nurse and prayer-leader. Others come for two or three years, men and women in their 20's who come to do what administrative work there is. In each State, a new group of interpreters and local committeemen come and join.

There is scarcely a proper Bhoodan organization. An association of old Gandhian "constructive workers" is loyal to Vinoba, whom they regard as eminent among them, and a Gandhian social service organization publishes periodicals and books of Vinoba's speeches. Behind this there is a far-flung corps of Bhoodan workers in advance of Vinoba's party, behind it and in areas where Vinoba may never set foot, making the Bhoodan appeal in Vinoba's name. To this group have come social workers, students, businessmen and politicians. The most renowned of them is Jaya Prakash Narayan, the leader of the Praja Socialist Party and second most popular political figure in India.

State governments have supported the Bhoodan movement by variously simplifying land-transfer procedure and granting loans to gramdan villages.

When Vinoba crossed the Kerala border the Communist Chief Minister and the all-India president of the Congress party were there to greet him. Vinoba can get his mail "c/o Chief Minister" in whatever State he is in.

People come to see Vinoba. A prominent politician had come half-way across India to see him: "I asked Vinobaji what he wants me to do." Scholars, artists, students, journalists, businessmen come to listen.

What do all these people---what does India see in this man? That part of the story is not so simple. But I think that first of all in Vinoba they see a saint. Not another holy-man but a holy man, a true sannyasi in the age-old tradition, one who has left himself enough to come close to God, a wanderer who having attained spiritual freedom ministers spiritually to others.

Vinoba strikes some familiar chords. He recalls the golden age of the deep past, the age of the Vedas, when "all had the right to the soil." He recalls the old tradition whereby the land belonged to the village and the panchayat, the council of five elders, distributed it according to the number in each family.

He speaks of ahimsa, love as expressed in non-violence, of dana, charity, yajna, sacrifice, tapas, austerity, asangraha, non-possession. These things the people know, and they listen to the voice that preaches them. Vinoba's authority comes from practicing what he preaches. He is a practical sannyasi, one performing an amazing service. There are still many in India who cannot say "No" to such a saint.

The frail figure, the simple dress, the gentle voice, the words themselves, they say, remind people of Gandhi. The one connecting word, above all others, is Sarvodaya, "welfare of all," the word Gandhi coined to describe an ideal society based on economic, social and political equality, bodily labor and non-possession.

After Independence, Gandhi reminded the Congress that it had yet "to win economic, social and moral freedom," suggested the party turn itself into a Lok Sevak Sangh, a "Servant of the People Society." Those who followed after Gandhi politically moved into the parliament houses and secretariats the British left behind. Gandhi's Sarvodaya followers kept up the work in the ashrams and village centers. Now Vinoba has come forth, carrying Gandhi's Sarvodaya into new territory.

Since he began the Bhoodan movement, Vinoba's thoughts have ranged as far as his feet. Bhoodan, beginning as an attempted solution to the problem of landless labor, has been augmented to include sampattidan, wealth-gift (a pledge of one's annual income to buy tools, animals and seeds for those who receive Bhoodan lands), shramadan, labor-gift, buddhidan, intelligence-gift (propaganda or administrative work), jiwandan, the life-gift to the movement, and gramdan, village-gift.

It is this last, gramdan, which has taken Vinoba far past the original dimensions of Bhoodan to the area of political and economic decentralization called Gramraj, village rule.

From the beginning of the Bhoodan movement, the plan has been to distribute the donated land on the spot, dividing it among the needy families, who would then farm it individually. The minimum allotment is one acre of wet land or five acres of dry land. Those receiving land must have no other means of livelihood. They must not sell, mortgage or rent it, or leave it fallow. The Harijans, the erstwhile Untouchables, are given preference.

Later, however, when whole villages were given and stood ready for redistribution---a couple hundred acres for a couple hundred

people---Vinoba's basic tenet, sharing, was extended to the working of the land as well. Some gramdan villages have accepted Vinoba's teaching, others have not. But Vinoba insists on the principle.

The same argument he uses to ask for lands for the landless he uses to dissuade them from holding the newly given lands individually; "The owner, the master, of all property, is God, and we are only his servants. God has bestowed upon us lands and many other kinds of wealth and he has given them for the good of all. If we claim proprietary right over them to the exclusion of all others, it means that we are usurping the place of God. So we should shed our proprietorship and become servants. Everyone should get and has a right to whatever is required to satisfy one's hunger..."

"In a society where some own land and others are landless, there can be no peace. People might bring legal documents to substantiate their claim of proprietorship. These serve no useful purpose. They tear our hearts and keep us divided...If all land is socially owned, the present-day discontent would disappear and an era of love and cooperation will take its place."

Vinoba seeks cooperation in farming and what others would call joint ownership "for its moral and economic benefits," and because it would enable India, he says, to achieve true self-rule.

"Instead of the rule of London we now have the rule of Delhi. But we want to replace it by the rule of the villages." His ideal is Gandhi's idea of a nation of "village republics," each growing its own food and cotton for its cloth, educating its youth, governing itself on the basis of non-violence, living in happy cooperation.

Vinoba distinguishes between government and self-government. "Swa-rajya is a Vedic term. It is defined thus: Swarajya is the government of each by each, such that it seems to each his own rule; or it is government of all; or the Kingdom of God, Ramrajya."

"Paradoxically enough," Vinoba told the villagers in Kerala, "after the attainment of Independence the people have become more dependent. They think that everything will be done by the Government. This is a very wrong notion. Nothing could be more dangerous. The Government is like a bucket and the people are like a well. The bucket can take only a small quantity of water from the well...But nowadays a wrong idea that the bucket holds more water than the well has gained way.

"The Government is formed by the servants whom you yourself choose. Nowadays in the name of the Welfare State the servants formulate the plans. But the plans should be drawn by the masters and the servants are only there to carry them out. The people of every village should use their brains and draw out plans for their respective villages. Suppose someone fall ill in your village, will you send a telegram to the Minister for Health? Plans for rural health should be drawn in the village itself. Then the Government would be asked to help in its execution."

What is Vinoba preaching? Communism? Anarchy? Democracy?

Communism? With Gandhi, Vinoba could say he is "for communism minus the violence." When someone pointed out there was "only that difference between Gandhi and Marx," Vinoba replied, "This is like saying that there is only this little difference between two men, that one breathes and the other does not. But you know that for the first we must cook a meal and for the second we must light a funeral pyre."

In those Telengana days, Vinoba said: "Stopping communism is not our concern. Ours is a positive ideology, it is not an expedient for certain temporary ends. There is no disputing the fact that there is acute poverty in India, and we need to eradicate it. Now if this can be achieved by fair means, there is no reason why anyone should still think of employing foul means. A thirsty man, if he can get good, clean water, will not touch dirty water..."

Again: "The land belongs to no one, except God, who leaves the enjoyment of it to all. I repeat, it belongs to no one, and least of all to the State."

Anarchy? Vinoba would convert the present Rule into Village Rule, and then Village Rule into God Rule, or No-Rule ("the nomenclature to be decided by each according to his choice"). He would have government of selves, but no State. There would be administration in the village, but "the whole village will think and decide things with one mind."

Vinoba does not oppose the present Government as such or for its policies and practices. He thanks the Government for its help to Bhoodan. He is for legislation, provided universal agreement comes first.

But the only governmental authority that Vinoba believes in is the jana-shakti, the non-violent power of the people.

Democracy? "The Governments of Europe and America," he has written, "masquerade as 'government of all,' but are based on violence." Majority rule "means that there is simply the counting of heads. This does not mean that there is more of reason and sagacity on the majority side... The entire emphasis of thinking in this scheme is laid on bringing pressure on the society instead of rendering service to it. The whole approach is based on rights instead of duties... {Even in India} it has already slipped away from our minds that the whole society is but one family."

On the other hand, he talks to the crowd: "Who is the police constable that all fear? Nothing but the servant of a servant of a servant of a servant of a servant! The people---you---are the masters, the Parliament are your servants, the Home Minister is Parliament's servant, the Inspector-General of Police is..."

Who knows how many people who hear him follow him down the simple-tricky paths of thought? But you always come back to the fact that people give to him.

In Madras State I visited two gramdan villages, villages where Vinoba had stopped a half-year ago. In the first, 51 families which owned the village's 343 acres gave up their holdings to share all with the 28 other families which, owning nothing, had to work for them.

Why did they do this? The village leader replied, "All want to work together and live together the same. All should work and all should eat without difference."

The next village. "We wanted nobody in this village to be without land." Why didn't you think of it before? "Nobody came and gave this idea to us." What difference has it made? "Before, the people were talking lies. There used to be some theft here and there."

Then too, a gramdan village of potters in Kerala: "We expect the Government to do something for us. We have nothing now." Certainly there have been many who gave to gain praise or escape ill-feeling or relieve some debt---"those who give without grasping the idea behind it," Vinoba says.

But I think also of the converts.

There is criticism of Vinoba and his mission. Shockingly, less than one-fifth of the lands donated to Bhoodan have been distributed to the landless. The reason: there is no efficient organization to do the job. Vinoba has not wanted to become "organization-bound," and he indicates that "the economic side" is not his responsibility.

Some point out that Vinoba is adding no new acreage to India's farmlands, that indeed he is further adding to the problem of fragmented holdings. He repeats, he wants only to "furnish all with a place on the soil." "I am more concerned with the fragmentation of hearts than holdings."

I could add some criticism myself. Vinoba's economics date back to---

but who wants to argue with a saint?