

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WDF-14  
Gandhigram: Rural Campus

Gandhigram  
Madura District  
South India  
July 12, 1957

Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers,

Conversation overheard in the waiting room of a North Indian airport:

Middle-aged American woman (poking a finger toward a wall photograph of Mahatma Gandhi) : "All over I see a picture of that guy---who is it ?"

Husband: "Huh! That's Gandhi."

Wife: "Who the hell was he, anyway ?"

Husband: "Well, Jesus! Wasn't he the guy who didn't eat because he ---because he believed in something ?"

Gandhi is many things to many people, including Indians. At first he was simply M.K. Gandhi. Then he became Gandhiji (the "ji" is respectful) and Bapu ("Father") and the Mahatma ("the Great Soul"). For many of India's villagers, he was an incarnation of God.

It becomes clearer, nearly ten years after his death, that Gandhi was not simply a man who didn't eat occasionally, or even the man who helped the British to move out of India, and in general poked colonialism full of holes.

If he was an ouster of Britons, he was even more a reformer of Indians. His efforts, it seems to me, were chiefly bent toward making Indians worthy of self-rule, and what he had in mind and worked for in fact was a reformation of India's whole religious-social-economic structure. Gandhi certainly believed in political independence and he helped bring it about, but I get the idea that politics to him were somehow incidental.

Gandhi's teachings eventually took the form of a "Constructive Program" of wholesale reform, itemized to include intercommunal unity, removal of untouchability, general economic equality, khadi (hand-spun and -woven cloth) and other village industries, basic education, adult education and education in health and hygiene, provincial languages and a national language (rather than English), prohibition, special attention to the needs of women, peasants, labor, aborigines and lepers, and the improvement of cattle.

Gandhi's political heir, named by him, is of course Jawaharlal Nehru. Vastly different in temperament from Gandhi, Nehru today leads and represents what you might call the "nation-building" stream of Gandhi's followers, the Congress-Government-official group who have come to direct the nation's policies and programs. These, from the non-alignment policy in international affairs to the Community Development program at home,

draw their authority from Gandhi, and this leading group looks to him, at least with one eye, for approval.

Then again, in the past several years, some people have been looking increasingly to Vinoba Bhave, a slight, bespeckled Gandhian disciple, as the spiritual heir of the Master. For six years now Vinoba has been walking through the Indian countryside asking for gifts of land for the landless peasantry, and he has met with remarkable success. Working in his way---lecture and prayer---Vinoba seems to be the leader and representative of the lesser-known, non-political, non-official, "welfare-of-all" workers who also look to Gandhi as their source.

All this is by way of (lengthy) introduction to Gandhigram, "Gandhi Village," literally, a rural campus in Madura District in Madras State in South India. Gandhigram seems to be a meeting place of the "non-official" Gandhian attitude and the "official" Gandhian program. The Gandhian spirit seems to be around, and so does the Government, and I have spent several days here.

The director of Gandhigram, Dr. G. Ramachandran, was "called" by Gandhi as a "cheeky youth," he says, and for 20 years he lived with Gandhi and "accepted his invitations" to work. Now portly, bald and nearing 60, he presides over the "Village" and its 20-odd institutions and he has become, I think, a little more of a bureaucrat than he would like.

Sitting behind a desk piled with books and papers, Dr. Ramachandran beamed as he remembered: "When I came to Gandhiji to join him, he looked at me and smiled, 'Ah, Ramachandran, you are one of those high-caste fellows---just the one for my scavenger squad.' His way of helping us get rid of any misconceptions about certain kinds of work.

"You can't imagine those days!" he continued. "India was full of that man! Literally millions were out working under Gandhiji. For nothing. He had nothing to give us but his leadership and his love.

"Well," he said abruptly, "the tempo is less today. Today we are all safer and more cautious and less sacrificing. Today too much politics has come in. We have a lot of construction, but not so much constructive work. But the change was inevitable. And, we have come along, too."

He related how ten years ago a social-work agency, looking for a place to set up a training center, was persuaded to establish Gandhigram on a plot of 78 acres given by some villagers. Since then the Village has grown to 330 acres and a community of 1000 students, teachers and workers, and the name of Gandhigram, and its impact, have spread throughout South India.

About half the work at Gandhigram---the training side---is done for the Government by the Village establishment. "We tell Government," the director explains, "'We will train workers for you, our own way,' and they accept."

The "way," it strikes me, has something to do with a Gandhi-inspired

harmonious community life that comes from co-operation, equality, spirituality and quiet diligence. Although the campus is compartmentalized into the many schools, institutes and departments, there is common work and common worship for all, from school children to post-graduate students, and the faculties and staff too.

As you visit the dormitories and classrooms and workshops and gardens, and see the people at work, the word "family" creeps in on you to describe the relationship here, and it seems to be not only a family with a remarkable harmony of interests, but one with few quarrels and few loafers.

The life at Gandhigram is one of simple wants in food, clothing and shelter, personal and community cleanliness, manual labor for its social "and moral" value, and devotion.

The daily schedule resembles that of the ashrams where Gandhi carried on his work: the early rising and congregational prayer, sanitation work, vegetarian breakfast (all meals are vegetarian), a morning of classes, lunch, silent spinning of cotton yarn, field work for men and women (in the gardens, or road-making, et cetera), late-afternoon games or other recreation, the evening meal, community prayer, group discussions or self-government meetings or personal studies, and lights out.

The Gandhian goal of village self-sufficiency is worked at in Gandhigram, with considerable results. Half of the ₹ 200,000 (\$42,000) it takes to run the Village in a year comes from the Government in a payment for services rendered. The other half comes from income from Gandhigram's own production---vegetables and cloth, for the most part ---and from public donations.

The Villagers generally buy their saris, dhotis, sandals, soap and paper from the co-operative store that sells these made-in-Gandhigram products of the Village Industries department.

The Gandhian insistence on inter-religious tolerance is accepted in Gandhigram. Although most of the Villagers are Hindu, the Scripture-reading at worship includes the Koran, the New Testament, the Teachings of Lord Buddha and, say, the Sayings of Sri Ramkrishna. Caste is banned in theory and minimized in practice.

The "service" motif is strong too: There is a Children's Home with 150 foundlings and orphans from throughout the district, and a Sevikasram, a home and school for 60 widows, deserted wives and destitute women who are given elementary education and then trained to become midwives, nursing assistants, Community Development workers and hand-loomers.

Gandhigram runs a maternity home in the nearest village, a mile away. In a distant district there is a "missionary" outpost: a branch Sevikasram. And batches of Gandhigram students are frequently camping out in nearby villages to dig compost pits, repair roads, instruct mothers in child-care and provide educational entertainment.

If these activities reflect a whole-hearted plunge into the work of the Gandhian "Constructive Program," and I think they do, the institutions at Gandhigram work toward the same end. Some of the main ones are:

---The Basic Training School, a co-educational school which provides a two-year course to high school graduates to prepare them as teachers in Basic Schools in rural areas. The students concentrate on agriculture and "cotton-craft." There are 80 students, and 408 applied for the 40 seats available for the first-year class last time.

---The Basic School, with more than 400 boys and girls engaged in the "New Education." The idea is to center education around the "basic" fact of Indian rural life---work with one's hands, in the earth---and the aim is to produce not only a "balanced person, at home in his environment," but a new cooperative social order as well. Students in the eight grades devote a good part of their school time learning (by doing) how to farm and make cloth.

---The Post-Basic School, of grades nine, ten and eleven. Last year the students produced 45 per cent of their food and clothing needs.

---The Extension Training Center, for young men who undergo an 18-month course and become all-around Village Level Workers in the Community Development program. The 70 men, most of them high school graduates, take intensive training in agriculture, animal husbandry, public health, engineering, village industries and education, and go out to become the operating-level go-between the Government and the villagers.

---The Social Education Organizers' Training Center, one of ten in India which train college graduates and experienced Village Level Workers to live in the countryside organizing village participation in the Community Development program and summoning up village leadership in an effort to develop a broad base of democratic citizenship. There are 80 students at present in the six-month course.

---The Rural Institute, one of ten in India, founded as an experiment to bring good higher education to rural youth. With a similar approach to that of Basic Education, the Institute intends to produce "self-reliant and progressive young men and women with a general education and special techniques to enable them to make a vital contribution in building a fuller, richer, happier life in the rural areas." There are 90 students now, good ones, most of them enrolled in the three-year, degree-level course. Their compulsory subjects are languages (Tamil, the regional language, Hindi, the adopted national language, and English), the "Story of Civilization," and "An Introduction to Rural Problems." Their electives include Public Administration, Village Industries, Co-operatives, Fine Arts and Home Science. Eventually, the plan is to make the Institute a degree-granting rural university.

"When we first among the Gandhian institutions began to co-operate with the Community Development projects," Dr. Ramachandran was saying, "we took a bit of criticism from our fellow-workers in the earlier Constructive Program. But we have come through fairly unscathed.

"All we are doing is working to reconstruct the material, cultural and moral life of our villages on the lines indicated by Gandhiji. Did I say 'all'? That's enough for several life-times."