

RM - 30

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Dear Mr. Rogers:

On return here from Lucknow this week, I journeyed to the northern part of Azamgarh District for a visit to Gurukul, a Gandhi ashram. Swami Satyanand, who has been carrying out Gandhi's "constructive program" at Gurukul for several years, was selected by the Congress a few months back as President of the Azamgarh District Board. His new official duties allow him only brief stays at his ashram nowadays; I cut my own visit to a day because of his departure for a Board meeting. A day is too short a time to get into the real spirit of such an institution. But as the visit gave me a view of varied elements of the Gandhian program, I think it worth recording.

Swami Satyanand, in his late middle years, has the clean-shaven head, the loosely wrapped saffron dhoti and shawl of a religious monk. As a man of spiritual bent, he did not at once accept all of Gandhi's ideas when he first <sup>met</sup> him in 1920. Through the years he thought out and tested their meaning in his own experiences. He joined the political side of Gandhi's movement in the 1930 and 1932 civil disobedience and no-rent campaigns, by jail-going. In the mid-decade he began implementing Gandhi's social, economic and educational reforms here in his own ashram. As a constructive worker, he was held back by Gandhi from the political movements of the recent war period. His ashram suffered, however, from political forces: because Gurukul draws both staff and students from Madhuban, the nearby town where the public attacked and controlled government offices in August, 1942, the ashram was suspect. Early one September morning a police force appeared and burned it to the ground.

Charred rafters of the old building now support the roof of the new, over the heads of bright-eyed children in the basic school. As will be seen, independence and advent of Congress government have expanded the scope and status of Gurukul. It is still not among the two or three front-rank Gandhi ashrams of the United Provinces. But Congress workers from outside come to it for ideas and experience. Two such men inspected Gurukul with me. An aside on them will add to the picture of Congress constructive work in the United Provinces.

Shaligram Pathik I had met on earlier occasions. At 33, he has already done valuable work in his field, education. Mahatma Gandhi chose him several years ago as teacher in the first Model Basic School at Seva-gram. "I hadn't thought myself capable of the post", Pathik says - but he proved to be. During nine years of teaching in United Provinces villages and ashrams, he sought to relate school programs to needs of

the adult community. Besides evolving a new rapid method of teaching Hindi to adults, he enlarged his concept of the role of a teacher, whom he now says should be "cultural helmsman" - or "friend, guide and philosopher" - to the village. Come independence, he consolidated his experiences: founded a Peoples' Education Institute at Allahabad, designed, wrote and published alphabet charts and introductory readers for village adults, started the fortnightly "Gaon ki Baat" ("Village Talk"). Retaining his non-official position ("Why shut up a man of my enthusiasm in government files?"), he has nevertheless given much assistance to government in its developing educational program. Mobile adult education squads, operating in several districts, owe much to his ideas and organizing ability. Today, on behalf of the provincial government, he is organizing a training camp for 250 Harijan young men (already educated to the eighth grade) who are to return for social service work among their own people. His ideas for future work, outlined in some detail to me, show a creative and imaginative mind.

Swami Satyanand's third guest was Munni Dev, new President of the Moradabad District Board. Apparently chosen on a record of political, rather than constructive, work, Munni Dev in his new post is now called on to show nation-building initiative for a rural population of 1,400,000. He visited Gurukul to see the constructive program in action, to learn how it should be started in his own district.

Now to the ashram itself. Its neatness first struck my eye. Compact concrete washrooms stand near the open well. Pleasant ochre-colored mud buildings, well-ventilated, flank a garden and lawn on three sides. At the back, cattle stand on raised, clean platforms at their feed troughs.

The attitude of cleanliness, I found, reaches below the surface. In diet it leads to well-cooked, easily digestible food, including green leafy vegetables, rarely found on Indian trays. In ashram chores it permits real mixing of caste functions. Each ashramite takes his part in latrine cleanup. Former 'untouchables', Harijans from whom orthodox Hindus will not take food, do all the cooking. All recognizing the value of cleanliness, no one attaches a stigma to any social task.

I mention these items - cooking and toilet - because they have caused censure of Swami Satyanand in the surrounding countryside. Hindu social attitudes go right down into basic daily activities. On contrasting the practices and attitudes in Gurukul with those of my village surroundings I have been able to realize that Gandhi's teachings imply revolutionary change in personal and community living habits. I begin to see also the potential carry-over from such social reforms, implicit in Gandhi's work for Harijans, into vast economic and political change.

Gurukul's original core was the basic school and spinning. We spent only a few minutes in the school, sufficient to feel and express admiration at the fifth grade student who has written original, if short, essays on "Life in the Vedic Age", "The Hindu Religion", "August 15th". Spinning, gardening, songs and games, and prayers are features of the regular daily program.

Among elements of economic development at Gurukul, khadi (cloth from homespun yarn) receives greatest emphasis, as it does in the overall Gandhi economic program to date. Veteran ashram khadi masters are now giving training in cotton processing and spinning to some sixty men. These trainees are all sponsored by government, at one level or another. Some 25 were sent to Gurukul by the Azamgarh District Board: they are teachers in primary schools, being trained to instruct fifth grade students in spinning with tacli and charkha. (This is an element of basic education being introduced in primary schools). Another 25 were deputed by the provincial Cottage Industries Department, in its expanding program of crafts training, for a full course qualifying them as khadi masters. The remaining 10 are to work for the Azamgarh District Board, in a scheme worked out by Swami Satyanand for making a sub-area of the district self-sufficient in cloth. Each of the ten is to set up a training center in the sub-area, to give spinning instruction to housewives.

My most interesting hours at Gurukul were at a meeting where Swami Satyanand, Pathik and Munni Dev spoke to these sixty trainees. All grown men, they filled the assembly hall, seated on the floor, each twirling the tacli, a palm-length metal rod, and drawing out rough thread from a clean splinter of carded cotton. They were not a highly qualified group. Most had passed the eighth grade; some of the teachers had had two further years, of normal school. Many of them had held their present jobs before Indian independence; the new government had been able to do little to better their low incomes; they therefore show little enthusiasm for Congress government and program. Pathik and Munni Dev, as a consequence, spent some time in explaining government's inability to increase the pay of its employees, and in emphasizing teachers' responsibility in producing better citizens for the young nation. The question period was more productive, some trainees showing certain independence of thought. One asked, "Why the emphasis on hand spinning instead of on training for machine industry?" In reply, Pathik gave three reasons, here summarized:

- We must start with what we have. To industrialize will require years of saving and import of machinery. Meanwhile we should improve our present utilization of resources. Hand spinning is a skill through which every household can add to our production of goods.
- Spinning and similar handwork as part of the school course will better equip our children for life. Both mind and body receive instruction, and the child gets working acquaintance with some of the livelihood needs of his environment.
- If outside forces involve India in another war of mass air attacks - "if Russia or America attack us" - decentralized industries would do much to preserve her.

Of the younger generation of Congressmen, and enthused over the possibilities of expansion of folk art through radio, wire recorders, even television, Pathik did not include among his reasons the "multiplication of wants" charge which Gandhi brought against the mass production and mass advertising systems of the west.

I did not have time to talk individually with the trainees. Perhaps later, in follow-up study of Swami Satyanand's area self-sufficiency efforts, I will be able to visit some of the District Board's trainees in their village centers. On their response to training will depend, in part, the future of hand-spinning in this province.

In addition to the cotton processing training, the provincial Cottage Industries Department is sponsoring courses at Gurukul in iron work, carpentry, and dyeing and printing of cloth. About 30 boys, mostly Harijans, are enrolled. In contrast to attempts at integration elsewhere in the ashram's program, these boys' courses do not include the three R's, though there will hardly ever be a better opportunity for them to get these fundamentals.

"Start with what we have." Priority would indicate improvement of agriculture as Task A, in rural India. But Gurukul has come late to agriculture, as have others in the Gandhi group of economic builders in this province. It has only 14 acres of land, given by a local landowner, and scattered widely among various plots. As manager of the farm, a skilled khadi worker has been assigned, as no one trained in agriculture was available. At least he is systematic and alert. Pathik readily noted this and said to Swami Satyanand, "You should teach him English, so that he can begin reading agricultural bulletins."

Cotton for the khadi? It is not grown here now. But a new cotton plant, I was told, has been grown widely in the province, and is fully expected to fill the raw material need. Into this I must inquire elsewhere.

And so on.... My observations of the economic program do not yield a forceful business prospectus. But I saw sixty men and thirty boys getting long hours of disciplined and intensive training. "In scattered corners like this", said Pathik to the trainees, "our people are being equipped for useful work." Whether the corners are yet sufficient to instill real momentum into the home and cottage industries program remains to be seen.

#### The Meaning of Gurukul

In judging the likely importance of such an institution in the future India I am inclined to forego a strictly economic analysis. A new way of life is on experiment here. Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. J.C.Kumarappa have written of the economy of exchange as predominantly immoral. Their own economic program seeks to minimize untruth and coercion in man's production and utilization of goods.

Dr. Kumarappa has expressed regret that the present Congress governments are not aiming whole-heartedly for the social and economic order outlined by Gandhi. Announcement of government sanction of a large new textile mill in Kanpur coincided with my visit to the hand-spinning workshop at Gurukul. The contrast highlighted for me the fact that the constructive program now receives only a small fraction of governments' attention and support. Yet it has important elements which I believe are contributing to the nation's future:

- Its veteran workers are selfless and steadfast in pursuit of their ideals. They are a living standard against which the moral shortcomings of political opportunists and government officials stand out in sharp focus. They are thus a force in building the public conscience.
- Grappling with social problems at the individual and family level, these men remind society of its goal: the welfare of people. From direct working contact with men and communities, they have valuable experience on which governments and public bodies are forced to draw for realistic advice and aid.
- They aim at comprehensiveness, consistent adherence to the challenging philosophy of life offered by Gandhi. Gandhi, Nehru has written, became amid all his manifold activities "the perfect artist, for he had learnt the art of living". I found both efficiency and artistry at Gurukul, and efforts to increase both without sacrificing the one to the other. Neither was of the highest order: the disciples are not the master. But a balance was there, alive at its own level. I believe such balance, attained at working institutions like Gurukul, is of influence in society at large.

That the combined strength of such factors carries public weight, when personified in active men, was shown dramatically last July, in a political contest. In a by-election for a provincial legislative seat, the Socialist Party, but lately seceded from the Congress, nominated the universally popular Vice-Chancellor of Lucknow University. This made the contest a major test for the Congress. To find a man as truly respected as the Socialist candidate, the Congress had to turn to one of the province's leading constructive workers, Baba Raghava Das. Raghava Das agreed to enter the political field only after long hours of persuasion. His acceptance saved the Congress from a defeat which the party badly wanted to avoid. The incident gave constructive workers new assurance that they could still exercise significant influence within the Congress.

Baba Raghava Das, Swami Satyanand, and Shaligram Pathik are three of some eighteen leading United Provinces constructive workers who some months ago formed a new Lok Sevak Sangh (Servants of the People Society), under the presidency of Acharya J.B. Kripalani, who resigned a year ago from the presidency of the Indian National Congress. All these men are still within the Congress. By consolidating and expanding the constructive program, through the Lok Sevak Sangh, they hope to achieve results that will be examples to the Congress and the country.

I would liken these men and their program to a fuse, glowing with Gandhi's light. The light is far from predominant in India today, but is burning in the fuse and will be hard to extinguish. From these men now come ideals; their efforts may yield working forms for the future polity.

Yours sincerely,

