

Sarvodaya in India

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‘Sarvodaya’ (or ‘the greatest good of all’ which is different from the Utilitarian formula) is an integrated philosophy and attitude of life through which its exponent Mahatma Gandhi, who took little time to arrive at it from the concept of ‘Antodaya’, wished to establish ‘Rama Rajya’ for all. Rama here stands for all the basic human qualities like Love, Truth, Honesty and Justice and also equi-distribution, i.e., an around development of both the human being and his world – physical, economic, social and intellectual, as Rabindranath Tagore has put it. This was to be done by bringing about a change in the socio-economic system based on exploration, inequality and oppression and that again, through his non-violent technique. Gandhi did not live long enough to activate this programme. In mid – ’47 we could shake off foreign domination, but could not gain Swaraj as Gandhiji meant and wanted it and for which, as Dr. Rajendra Prasad put it, he plumed for political activities, although he had given a clear-cut formula including a code of conduct for the pioneering workers.

Years earlier, Gandhiji, an extremely intelligent person with a strong common sense, could foresee the shape of things to come and said, “.....I know that if I survive the struggle for freedom, I might have to give non-violent battles to my own countrymen which may be as stubborn as that in which I am now engaged.....” He desired to organize a ‘dialogue’ for a number of days from 2nd February, 1948, at Wardha. In any case, after his sudden demise, it fell on the shoulders of his associates and followers, especially those in the constructive work field, to make an honest attempt on his behalf. On 13th March, 1948, they met at Sevagram (Wardha) and formed Sarvodaya Samaj or Brotherhood “.....to strive towards a society based on Truth and Non-violence, in which there will be no development of caste or creed, no opportunity for exploration and full scope for development, both for individual as well as groups.....” by raising the power of the people (Lok Shakti), and to achieve this, various constructive work programmes, as practiced by Gandhiji, were advocated. Vinobaji added some more programmes and called for ‘Sadhan Suddhi’ or purity of means. Later on, Sarva Seva Sangh was formed as a natural corollary.

The first Sarvodaya Conference was held on 9th March, 1949, at Rao (Indore) and the monthly, ‘arvodaya’ was started as the mouthpiece of the movement. A World Peace Conference was also held in December of the same year. But the real breakthrough came in 1951 at Pachampalli, Telengana, when Vinobaji, out in his quest for settling the then famous Telengana problem, received a voluntary gift of land on more appeal and the Bhoodan Movement was born opening up a new direction and with great possibilities. As J. P. has put it – “.....so far in history, redistribution of land has been brought about by the sword or the law. In India, developing Gandhiji’s ideas, Vinoba came forward to redistribute land by love.....” and the logic in it has been well elucidated in numerous books. It, of course, could not end with this, and a sustained effort and plea for self-help and development of village-industries, co-operatives, marketing and Nai Talim, etc., were taken up to establish village-swaraj or a grass-root

unit of Indian polity. This was given an impetus by starting the Gram Dan Movement in 1953. The movement received a new and further thrust with the joining of the indefatigable Jayprakash Narayan who, with his searching analytical mind and a Marxist background with a strong practical common sense, tried to put it on a more rational basis.

So, while the land gifts and attempts for the consolidation of the movement were going on, Vinobaji further expanded its scope by forming the Shanti Sena (Peace Brigade) in 1957 to, as Sri Narayan Desai has put it, “.....ease tensions and prevent outbreaks of violence and to break down the barriers which divide man.....” in a non-violent and peaceful manner. (During the communal riots in 1947 Gandhiji thought of such a programme. “Sometime ago I had suggested the idea of establishing a Shanti Sena (Peace Brigade), the members of which would deal with riots, especially with communal riots, and not hesitate to risk lives for it. The idea was that such an army would replace police and armed forces.”) The Sena could actually prevent some violent incidents in both the South and the North, and in conformity with the Sarvodaya movement, achieved a near miracle by effecting voluntary surrender of hardened criminals like the dreaded Chambal Valley dacoits on 19th May, 1960 thus showing the efficacy of love and gentle persuasion.

Meanwhile, when Vinobaji was undertaking ‘Padayatras’ to spread the message of Bhoodan, Gramdan and the concept of Gram Raj or Gram Swaraj, we find Jayprakash publishing a brochure – ‘Swaraj for the People’ which provided a critique for the present-day government system and appealed for a real participation of the people in the government to establish a decentralised system “.....so that the pyramid becomes a real pyramid.....narrow at the top and broad at the bottom,” to give the people “.....a sensation of Swaraj”. What he advocated was ‘Panchayat Raj’ or ‘Swaraj from below’ to create” self-governing, self-sufficient, agro-industrial, urbo-rural local communities”. The booklet should be carefully read and consulted because in it one may have some inkling into the genesis of the Bihar Movement.

From 1964 the movement progressed further and from Gramdan developed two more dimensions known as ‘Prakhanda Dan’ and ‘Zila Dan’ ultimately aiming to incorporate a state or a nation etc., to ensure the establishment of the blissful ‘Rama Rajya’ everywhere. Of course, up to this, it is just an expectation for a new order. But the problems of real workers and leadership were always there and in 1968 ‘Acharya Kul’ was established at Buddha Gaya to solve the problems to a certain extent. In 1973 came the Bihar Movement that triggered off a serious divergence of opinion ultimately among the Sarvodaya workers, although, as J. P. later confessed, the movement became channelised in a different sphere and consumed itself without much success. It, at the earlier stages, however, raised great hopes. Vinobaji called off the movement around this time, and entered into Sukkhsa-karmayoga (Action in Inaction) with the decision to engage himself in Iswar Chinta (Thinking of God).

My intentions here are not to provide a critique of the Movement, but to provide a narrative history, to the extent possible, due to lack of adequate literature and record. Prof. Sugata Dasgupta’s book ‘A great Society of Small Communities’ and Dr. Archana

Sinha's book 'The Social and Political Philosophy of Sarvodaya' or Dr. Viswanath Tandon's book 'The Social and Political Philosophy of Sarvodaya after Gandhi' and some other books provide an in-depth study from the different angles. The movement could secure through gifts, 16 lac acres of land apart from other materials. Still, it failed to sustain an abiding impression ultimately, as was expected by the leader of the movement due to certain definite drawbacks. If I am permitted to make an attempt here to analyze some of these in a most humble manner, we may perhaps learn from the mistakes and profit by these.

1. Later records reveal that the then Government did not take the movement seriously and did not extend necessary co-operation to it through legislation and otherwise. Even Vinobaji was disillusioned. Perhaps the Central Leadership only utilised it to counter a violent extremist movement.

In an interview with the present writer an eminent Sarvodaya leader, who alone motivated people to donate thousands of acres of land, opined that the Government introduced land-ceiling measures only when the Bhoodan-Gramdan movement gained momentum thinking that the importance of the Government was waning. Vinobaji took up the most vital and burning issue and attacked the body-politic where it was necessary. Instead of supplementing the new revolutionary approach except through marginal co-operation the Government chose to have its own land laws and followed the beaten track. The Telengana uprising adopted a violent course no doubt. But was the prevalent social situation non-violent.?

2. Vinobaji lacked the charisma of Gandhiji. He was not a political person per se. He did not build up any organization to back up his movement like Gandhiji and most of his followers mainly belonged to the frontal organizations earlier built up and nurtured by Gandhiji. A statistics of workers in 1965, when the movement was supposed to be at its peak, showed the number, even then, to be meager in proportion to the needs of the time and there was not much of new blood.

3. The landlords utilised this movement for their self-interest.

They found in the land-gift movement a convenient device to pass off some of the unproductive or disputed land.....and at the same time earn a lot of virtue.....A survey of the Vidarbha region (central India) revealed that approximately 99 per cent of the land were of poor quality. A sizeable number of landowners found this 'gentle approach' more convenient during the violent Telegram uprising.

4. There was a lack of proper leadership and there was less than adequate resemblance between the precepts and practices of the leaders. Ultimately the people became disillusioned.

The same Sarvodaya leader, earlier referred to, confessed to the present writer that the movement failed because there was not much following and the leadership itself,

in some cases, was far from exemplary. The leaders failed to generate much motivation and the movement did not really become a people's movement which was its aim.

However, one should not lose heart. "The latent implications of the movement are more important than its obvious impact.....potentialities of Gramdan for integration of the social structure, or for creation of fluidity in it, are thus greater.....If the directions of change that Gramdan points out could be logically pursued, "it would definitely deliver the Real Good ensuring a peaceful, harmonious and humanistic existence. It is up to us to ensure it". (A Great Society of Small Communities - Prof. Sugata Dasgupta) What Prof. Sugata Dasgupta observed fourteen years back is still true – "The Movement reaching a crucial stage thus stands at the crossroads today. Its future depends on the direction of growth it is ultimately able to chart out for itself".