

Bhoodan-Gramdan movement: An overview

Dr. Parag Cholkar

It has been over sixty years since the birth of the Bhoodan-Gramdan movement. Bhoodan and its offshoot, the Gramdan movement, were visible at the ground level as a movement for around 25 years and after its end, 37 years have gone by. Circumstances have changed. So what is the need to have an analysis of the movement now? Can we draw some lessons from this movement to face the challenges in the present?

Even when this movement was endeavouring to bring about new consciousness among the people, especially in the rural areas, the so-called intellectuals of those times did little except ignoring or ridiculing the movement and dismissing it in a few words born out of ignorance and lack of understanding. This movement, which presented a novel and unprecedented solution to a complex and formidable problem outside the framework of the state, and through it showed a way for the transformation in individual and social life, did not receive from them the attention it deserved; it was not adequately studied. Those intellectuals were either hoping for action from the state that claimed to be a welfare state; or were enamoured by the sterile violent activities backed by a verbose jargon. Perhaps this class had neither the will nor the capacity to understand the words having moorings in the tradition and the ground realities of this country.

But now the sterility of the violence of the extreme left is apparent to all; and so are the limitations of the state and its real character. In fact a question has arisen whether the so-called welfare state is really working for the welfare of the people, or serving the interests of national and international capital?

The problems of those times are still there and new problems too have arisen. The land problem that gave birth to Bhoodan movement still exists, albeit in a changed form. Perhaps it has become more serious. Farmers are fighting everywhere to save their lands from the assaults of the capital which have the backing of the state apparatus. The Gramdan movement fought against the process of the breaking of villages, which had started in the country in the colonial era. That process still continues; and despite the rhetoric of Panchayati raj the slavery of villages is increasing in alarming proportions. Violence and state action have clearly failed to find a way out of this impasse; in fact, they are aggravating the situation.

The only way that is left is that of non-violence. A number of mass movements are claiming to follow that path. But they, and the people too, need to have a deeper understanding of the meaning of non-violence, its strategy and the way of its working. And their power will grow in proportion to this understanding. An overview of the Bhoodan-Gramdan movement would be fruitful in this connection.

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When the country became independent, land problem was one of the most serious and complex problem facing it. Perhaps it was the worst legacy of British rule.

There is sufficient evidence that the concept of individual ownership of land that is prevalent at present was not there in India in the ancient times. The state was not the ultimate and sovereign owner of the land; it had only the right to a certain share in the produce of the land. In the middle ages, due to increasing demands of the state, the land revenue started increasing. During the period of British imperialism, it reached unbelievable levels. And it had to be paid in cash and even before the produce was sold in the market. As a result, the farmer got into the debt trap. As land became a saleable commodity, farmers began to lose hold over their land rapidly and it started getting concentrated in the hands of absentee landlords. Farmers became labourers. Coupled with the deliberate destruction of the domestic industry, this process resulted in great increase in the ranks of the labourers; accentuating in turn their exploitation. The loss of fertility of land and the low prices of the agricultural products aggravated the problem. Not only was the entire agriculture and the land system ruptured, the whole social, economical, political and cultural fabric of the society, which had developed throughout the ages was dealt a death-blow.

On August 15, 1947, the country became independent. But that was just the transfer of political power at the centre. As Gandhiji had written in his last testament, from the point of view of the seven lakh villages of the country, the social, moral and economic freedom of the country was yet to be attained.¹ In fact, in the true sense, political freedom too was to be attained; the villagers had lost this freedom in the colonial era.

Finding a lasting solution to the land problem was not only necessary to give succour to the farmer, it was also necessary to take a step towards the true and total freedom.

It had always been Gandhiji's effort to make the freedom movement, the movement of the farmers. Even before independence, land reforms like abolition of the zamindari system, protection of the tenants, cooperative farming and land ceiling were being discussed. Therefore, taking some steps in the interests of the farmer after independence was but natural. But vested interests were strong in the state structure; and there were some limitations of the democratic structure and the process too. So, revolutionary steps could not be expected from the state; especially when there was no pressure from the vigilant and organised public opinion. Those who were making policy decisions were influenced by the so-called 'modern' thinking. The country was dependent on imports for its food, therefore increase in production was bound to have priority; and the economists believed that redistribution of land would adversely affect food production. For this reason, land reforms were put on the back burner, legal battles continued for years, and the half-hearted and haphazard land reforms that took place proved ineffectual.

On the other hand, it was impossible to bring about land reforms through violence. Violence can never be the power of the people. Violence of a handful of people is bound to degenerate into terrorism even though it is done in the name of the masses. Violence of a small group can never succeed against the might of a modern state. And even if such

violence succeeds in capturing the state power, it will result in the rule of that group and not that of the people. The history of Communism teaches us this lesson. In Telengana (1951) the Communists could not distribute the land permanently nor are the Naxalites able to do it now.

But it was necessary to strike a blow at the huge disparity in the landownership in the country. This was necessary not merely for economic and social justice, but also to increase productivity. The farm labourer was toiling on the land, but he did not own it. He had a great hunger for land. If he could get land, it would not only provide him a permanent source of livelihood; increase in farm productivity too was bound to follow, besides mitigating his poverty and exploitation. Only then could the last man feel the advent of freedom.

The need for redistribution of land was thus obvious. But there was nothing for the landless in the various schemes of the government. The first Five Year Plan accepted that the farm labourers who did not have tenancy rights would hardly gain from the state-sponsored redistribution schemes² and mentioned Bhoodan in this connection. Economist D.R. Gadgil commenting on the plan said, "This can only be interpreted as meaning that the state itself considers it neither necessary nor possible to do anything for them."³ But there was urgent need to act on a priority basis in this direction.

In such a situation, Bhoodan stood up for the landless.

Bhoodan stressed the need for land redistribution and also questioned the ethical basis of private property in land. It not only did much in this direction, it also created an atmosphere wherein the government was forced to carry out land reforms, and its task was facilitated to an extent. This contribution was acknowledged by many, including the then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

But even as the Bhoodan movement was going on, those involved in it did have the realisation right from the outset that land redistribution in itself would not be sufficient; it would result in the fragmentation of land; and the key to the lasting solution of the land problem lies in the villagisation of land—that is, control of the village community over the land. Bhoodan, therefore, naturally blossomed into Gramdan and the latter became the main focus of the movement.

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After Gandhiji's assassination, the followers of Gandhiji were in a quandary over what to do next and they turned to Vinoba. Vinoba had come into limelight when he was selected as the first satyagrahi by Mahatma Gandhi in 1940 to start individual Satyagraha. Vinoba had spent years in the Gandhi ashrams pursuing his spiritual quest which included experiments in the realm of Gandhian constructive work. In March 1948, a conference of constructive workers was held at Sevagram, where Sarvodaya Samaj was formed. This conference heralded the rise of Vinoba as the leader of the Gandhian fraternity. When the conference of Sarvodaya Samaj was organised in April 1951 at Shivarampalli in the

Telengana region which was wrecked by Communist violence, he was engaged in the experiments of *rishi-sheti* (farming without the aid of bullocks and machines) and *kanchan-mukti* (freedom from the evils of money). Pursued by the organisers, he consented to attend the conference, but he set out on foot. He passed through many villages, talking to the people, understanding their tribulations. While returning on foot, he reached Pochampalli on April 18, 1951 and on that day the incident occurred that started the Bhoodan movement. When the dalits in the village demanded land, Vinoba casually asked those present whether they could do something in this regard. An individual named Ramchandra Reddy got up and announced that he would be willing to donate 100 acres of land.

The donation made by Ramchandra Reddy was to fulfil a wish of his late father. It was not a donation that had been given for the landless, acknowledging their right over land; nor had Vinoba asked for such a donation. This incident could very well be viewed as a peculiar incident in a particular circumstance. But the genius of Vinoba realised its implications. He realised that this could be a non-violent way through which land could be redistributed, and that too without creating any ill will among different sections of the society.

It was bound to appear impossible. Could the land hunger of millions of landless be satisfied in this manner? Can it be achieved without political power and organisational strength? But Vinoba, a man of God, took it as a signal from God and set out with faith.

A trust was formed to administer the 100 acres of land received in Pochampalli and it was decided that the dalit families would work on it collectively. While going from Pochampalli to Tangalpalli, the next destination, Vinoba was welcomed on the way by people and it was there that he asked for land for the landless for the first time. 25 acres were donated. At Tangalpalli, Vinoba received 90 acres of land. He then went on marching forward and kept on receiving more and more land.

It was indeed strange that people were coming forward to donate land to an individual who had neither any temporal power nor the backing of any organisation. Certainly it was the strength of his charisma, the power in his words that was working wonders. The unique movement caught attention of the entire country.

For Vinoba this work was a '*yajna*', an act of sacrifice wherein everyone ought to participate. That is why he would ask for land even from the small farmers. He did not beg for land, but asked for it as a right of the landless. For him '*dan*' meant equal distribution, the meaning he claimed to have derived from the scriptures. He believed that traditional words should not be abandoned; rather new meanings should be given to them. The villagers, acquainted with the traditional words, were understanding what Vinoba was saying.

For Vinoba the redistribution of land was not simply a work for temporary relief. He was striking at the very root of the concept of individual ownership of land. For him the redistribution of land was the first step in the direction of total transformation. There was

great potential in this seed. “This issue is an international issue and if we solve it in a peaceful manner, one can say that after Swaraj we have made a major discovery. If we are able to achieve what we have set out for, and I believe that we will be able to achieve it, then this will show a new path for emancipation to the whole world. The movement has the potential to usher in world-wide revolution.”⁴ It had been Vinoba’s quest to find ‘non-violent means for the mitigation of our problems on social and individual levels’.⁵ It was this quest that had yielded this novel means.

During the 58 days of Telengana march, Vinoba received 12,201 acres of land in 200 villages.⁶ The work of redistributing the land also started. For redistributing the land, the Hyderabad provincial government formulated rules and authorised the committee nominated by Vinoba for distribution of the donated land.

In June 1951, Vinoba returned to his ashram and got engaged in his experiment of *kanchan-mukti*. He did want the work of Bhoodan to continue in Telengana; perhaps he would have decided on the further course of action by evaluating the progress of the work there. But at that time the first Five Year Plan was being formulated. To have Vinoba’s views on it, Nehru sent R. K. Patil, a member of the Planning Commission to meet Vinoba. Vinoba’s views were highly critical. For him any plan that did not focus on food self-sufficiency, generation of employment and land redistribution was worthless. The rulers of the country who claimed to follow the Mahatma had to take the views of Gandhians into cognizance. Nehru invited Vinoba to Delhi to talk at length with the members of the Planning Commission.

Vinoba started for Delhi on the 12th September 1951, but on foot. This time it was but natural to try to broaden the Bhoodan movement. So Vinoba started speaking on Bhoodan, forcefully putting his point of view with cogent arguments and drawing upon varied parables. And he kept on getting land. Sceptics had said that Vinoba got land in Telengana because of the Communist menace there; elsewhere he would not get land. But they were proved wrong. Vinoba reached Delhi on the 13th November. Till then he had received donations of 19,436 acres of land.⁷ On his way, in Sagar (Madhya Pradesh) he presented the demand for 50 million acres of land before the country—one sixth of all the cultivable land in the country, which, according to him, was necessary to give land to all the landless in the country.

In his message to the Delhiites, sent in advance, Vinoba had said, “I have not come to beg (*bhiksha*), but to initiate you (to give *diksha*).”⁸ That was what he really meant to do—to initiate the people into a life of service, sacrifice and altruism.

Given the ‘modern’ thinking behind the Plan, significant change therein was clearly not possible. Nevertheless, Vinoba explained his views to the members of the Planning Commission. For him, it was more important to reach the people, the real masters in a democracy, and to build people’s power to force the government to take necessary measures. He, therefore, did not turn now towards his *ashram*. Rather, he immersed himself in the vast ocean of the people in the country. For the next 13 years, he kept on walking from village to village to reach those whom no one had ever reached before.

From Delhi, Vinoba came to Uttar Pradesh. Ignoring the din of the first election, he continued his work. In April 1952, at the Sarvodaya Conference at Sewapuri, Sarva Seva Sangh, the all-India organisation of the Gandhians took over the task of Bhoodan movement. Uptil now only Vinoba was walking on foot, collecting donations of land; now the work of Bhoodan began in all the regions of the country. Apart from Gandhian constructive workers, workers of political parties also started taking part in the Bhoodan work. Upto the time of the Sewapuri conference, more than 1 lakh acres of land had been received as Bhoodan. At the conference it was resolved that 2.5 million acres be obtained within two years.⁹ In an appeal addressed to all the countrymen, Vinoba made three claims for Bhoodan: "Firstly, it is in tune with the Indian culture and ethos. Secondly, it has the potentiality to usher in social and economic revolution. And thirdly, it can help in establishing world peace."¹⁰

Such were the potentialities inherent in the Bhoodan work. On the 9th May 1952, the day of Buddha Jayanti, Vinoba gave Bhoodan a new dimension by calling it *Dharma Chakra Pravartan*—beginning of a spiritual revolution. That the foundation of Bhoodan was spiritual was a recurrent theme in Vinoba's discourses.

During his march in Uttar Pradesh, Vinoba received 295,054 acres of land.¹¹ The work of redistribution of this land also commenced. For the first time in the country the Bhoodan-Yajna Act was passed in Uttar Pradesh. Under it there was a provision for the establishment of a Bhoodan-Yajna Committee to redistribute the Bhoodan land. Its chairman and members were to be nominated by Vinoba.¹² Later, the same provision was made in the acts passed in other states. Enactment of laws that gave authority to an individual who did not hold any governmental post was indeed unique.

The biggest achievement in Uttar Pradesh was the Gramdan of Mangroth village. On the 24th May 1952, all the landholders of this village donated their entire land in the village, totalling 828 acres.¹³ Voluntary surrender of private property in land, sanctioned by the Constitution of the country, by all the landowners in a village was a phenomenon of unprecedented dimensions. There was no question of giving this land to outsiders; it was natural to redistribute it among those villagers working on the land. Herein lied the possibility of having communal control over the most important natural resource in the village. The potentialities of the movement were getting gradually unfolded.

After Uttar Pradesh, Vinoba entered Bihar on getting assurance by the workers there that they would ensure collection of 4 lakh acres of land there. Vinoba now thought of attempting the solution of the land problem in a particular state, and to him Bihar was the right state in this regard. He therefore appealed to the people of Bihar to give him one sixth of their entire arable land—that is 32 lakh acres. He said, "If we fail to solve this problem within a particular time frame then the pace of the age would overtake us; our programme will then be only a programme for relief; it will lose its revolutionary possibilities. Therefore, we must attempt to solve the problem somewhere. Bihar was a medium sized state where people are good-natured. Non-violence has the greatest chance to succeed in a region where Buddha had given his message."¹⁴

For this purpose, Vinoba tried his best in Bihar. The main political parties passed resolutions supporting Bhoodan and joined the movement. The government too extended full cooperation. Socialist leader and hero of the 'Quit India' movement in August 1942, Jayaprakash Narayan, disassociated himself from Socialism and party politics and joined the Bhoodan movement. He was searching for a practical method to bring in social revolution in the Gandhian philosophy; in Vinoba's movement he found the answer.¹⁵

In March 1953, at the Sarvodaya conference at Chandil, in his famous speech, Vinoba put forth the concept of people's power, the third power which is opposed to violence and is different from the coercive power of the state. He also explained the concepts of *vichar-shasan* (belief in the power of thought) and *kartrutva-vibhajan* (decentralisation of power), the main elements in the Sarvodaya methodology. This is Vinoba's original and radical contribution not only to the Gandhian philosophy but to the political science. He gave the clarion call for land revolution, fixed the target of collection of 50 million acres of land by 1957. Jayaprakash appealed to the youth to give up their studies and give one year for this work. Up to the Chandil conference the Bhoodan movement had received the Bhoodan of 1.15 million acres of land.¹⁶

Now the the Bhoodan movement had spread to almost all parts of the country; it had taken the shape of a countrywide movement. Workers of the movement were travelling throughout the country, mostly on foot; meetings and conventions were taking place in different parts of the country. The movement was receiving widespread support from all the quarters. People were looking at it with hope that it would solve their problems. In foreign countries also, there was increasing curiosity about this movement, and many foreigners were coming to the country to see and understand this movement. Many were taking part in the *padayatras*. They were giving their first hand accounts in various newspapers, journals, and on radio stations. Even ordinary workers were getting land. Often there were long queues of people at meetings for donating land! The atmosphere was surcharged with a new consciousness. Vinoba's march was like a mobile university, imparting knowledge to people in the remotest corners of the country and sowing the seeds of human values and revolutionary inspirations.

In April 1954, at the Sarvodaya conference at Bodhgaya, Jayaprakash announced dedication of life for the cause of the movement. Vinoba himself and seven hundred other workers too announced that they were going to dedicate their lives for the movement. By then the Bhoodan movement had received 28.15 lakh acres of land, and the resolve to collect 2.5 million acres of land in two years had been fulfilled. Around 56,000 acres of land had been distributed.¹⁷ The work of redistribution of land was lagging behind and therefore it was decided that special thrust would be given to it. However, this was a very difficult, complex and time-consuming task particularly because of the involvement of the revenue department – a department known for its incompetence and corruption.

In Bihar intensive work had created a favourable atmosphere. The sale and purchase of land had lessened, and so also the land-related litigation. Jayaprakash told Krishnavallabh

Sahay, Revenue Minister of Bihar, “No mass movement can do anything more than this. The atmosphere is favourable and now it is up to the government to take its advantage.”¹⁸ But the government failed to take advantage of this psychological moment. But was it right to expect that the status-quoist state would take radical measures?

In Bihar, the movement received a total of 22.32 lakh acres, and what was particularly significant was that this land was donated through 286,420 donation deeds.¹⁹

From Bihar, Vinoba went to Odisha. And here he began talking of the land revolution—not just redistribution of land, but its villagisation; that is, establishment of communal control over land. Vinoba thought that Odisha, the poorest state in the country was the most favourable for such an attempt: “If the poor do not surrender their ownership rights first, then who else will? The ownership of the rich will go automatically; the poor will have to give it up voluntarily. It is India’s good fortune that a few rich also come forward to surrender their ownership. But one cannot rely too much on that. Hence we should gain as much sympathy of the rich as possible, but focus on seeing that the poor give up their ownership; that is the best way for the dissolution of ownership. For this Orissa was the right place.”²⁰

Surrender of the individual ownership of land is the foundation of Gramdan. Therefore, emphasis was put on Gramdan in Orissa. Especially tribal villages came forward to declare Gramdan in large numbers. Redistribution of land based on the size of the family took place in many of them. Voluntary surrender of individual ownership of land by all the landowners of the village and its complete redistribution was a phenomenon of revolutionary dimensions. There were instances of landowners relinquishing land over 100 acres and gladly accepting 5 acres, while landless persons with larger families got 10 acres or more. It was indeed unbelievable; but this did take place in scores of villages across the state. However, it is unfortunate that its implications were not realized and the country’s energies were not channelled towards this purpose.

The concept of Gramdan evolved gradually. It started with the abolition of individual ownership of land and its redistribution. The individual ownership of land stood dissolved. Who will then be the owner of the land? The entire village community should control the land; its survival depends on it and only it can utilize it properly in the interest of the whole community. When a basic resource like land comes under the control of the entire community, it can formulate and execute plans for its economic development and welfare on its basis. The poverty, hunger and unemployment in the village could then be effectively tackled. When the people in the village sit together and think about the welfare of the village, they can solve their problems, resolve fights within the village and can run the affairs of the village—that is, they can advance towards Gram-Swaraj (village self-rule). Gramdan can thus be the harbinger of Gram-Swaraj. Right since the inception of the Bhoodan movement, Vinoba had kept on stressing that land must not be the private property of anybody; it should be available to all like air and water; it too is a gift of the Lord to all: ‘The earth is the Lord’s; no one can have individual ownership over it’ (*Sabai bhoomi Gopal ki, nahin kisee ki maliki*). No one can own the land, but all should have equal right over it. A resource like land should not be an instrument of personal benefit

and nor should it serve to make the state more powerful. Only the local community should have control over it, as only it can protect and develop it. This would lead the villages towards Gram-Swaraj and the state would gradually wither away. All the revolutionaries had always desired the withering away of the state, all had believed that revolution would not be complete without it. However, the Socialists and the Communists actually worked for making the state stronger and stronger and the Anarchists could not find a proper way for its dissolution. Gramdan removes this deficiency in the theory and practice of revolution; and it therefore is still relevant— not only in India, but all over the world facing an unprecedented crisis where its very survival is at stake. Vinoba's genius blossomed further in exploring and explaining the potentialities in Gramdan.

Koraput district in Odisha recorded the highest number of Gramdans; and on its basis, an attempt was made to create a model of alternative development.²¹ That attempt failed, but valuable lessons could be learnt from it. Vinoba's standpoint in this respect was always clear; he always maintained that the task of the workers was to work for strengthening the spirit of brotherhood and unity among the villagers and to see that the Gramsabha (the assembly of all the adult villagers) evolves into an active unit where everybody has a stake and a role. Once it is realized, then it was up to the villagers themselves to work for their progress with their intellectual and physical resources.

From Odisha, Vinoba went to Andhra and from there to Tamil Nadu. Detractors had said that Gramdans took place in Odisha because the villages there were mainly tribal, where the people were simpletons and the land did not have much market value; it will not be possible in Tamil Nadu where the land was fertile and the farmers were educated. But this presumption was proved wrong and Gramdans took place in Tamil Nadu also in large numbers.

Now it had been proved beyond doubt that land could be got and distributed through Bhoodan all over India and that the villagers can give up individual ownership of land and take the pledge of Gramdan. Of course, there were obstacles; there were ups and downs in the movement. But all these were natural. The main thing was that the message of the movement had spread all over the country, and its practicability and applicability had been proved beyond doubt. From the very beginning, Vinoba wanted that this movement should be taken up by the people themselves; it should not remain a cadre-based movement; the people should consider and make it their own. If the people wanted Swaraj then it was for them to work for it; no group claiming to represent them—howsoever noble its ideals might be—bring it for them. Only a truly people's movement can be revolutionary. Over the years, Vinoba had been talking from time to time about *nidhimukti* (freedom from funds) and *tantramukti* (freedom from any formal structure). In November 1956, at Palni (Tamil Nadu) he succeeded in convincing his followers. Sarva Seva Sangh resolved for their adoption. It resolved to discontinue any aid from any centralised fund and to dissolve the Bhoodan committees working at that time. Gandhi Smarak Nidhi was funding the movement on its own accord, but now the Sangh decided that they would not take any funds from it. This was indeed a revolutionary decision. Normally, the organisations seek money and the donors decide whether to give that to

them or not. But here the donor was offering financial aid on its own accord, and the recipient decided to refuse it! All organisations want to strengthen themselves, but in the process they may get strengthened; not the people.

The decision was undoubtedly revolutionary, but it did not yield the desired results. The movement did not become the people's movement. The temporary arrangement made for conducting the movement did not serve the purpose. An organisation of Sarvodaya *mandals* had to be created to take it forward. While there were political workers in the Bhoodan committees, the members of the Sarvodaya *mandals* were non-political workers. The idea that the people should work on their own initiative was good, but there was no sufficient groundwork. The movement did need full-time workers, but how could they be expected to work without any honorarium, howsoever meagre it may be? The full-time workers had families to support. It was not that Vinoba was not concerned about it; he did make suggestions from time to time for the type of funding that was in tune with the philosophy of the movement. It was for this reason that he gave the programmes of *sootanjali* (donation of self-spun yarn hanks) and *sampattidan* (voluntary donation of one sixth of one's income every year), but none of these programmes worked. Later he gave the programme of *sarvodaya-patra* (families sympathetic to the cause should keep a vessel wherein the youngest child in the home would deposit a handful of grains, which would later be utilized partially for the subsistence of the workers) which sought to earn the people's consent for a revolutionary programme. But this programme too could not make much headway.

From Tamil Nadu, Vinoba went to Kerala. In Kerala he announced the setting up of *Shanti Sena* (Peace Brigade). The incidents of violence in the country were increasing, and for the success of the Gramdan movement it was necessary that there be goodwill and brotherhood in society. The Peace Brigade was supposed to consist of workers who would serve the society and work for the Sarvodaya movement during peacetime, and would be ready to lay down their lives to put out the flames of violence whenever they erupt. Some work was done in this direction and in some of the communal riots the Peace Brigade did creditable work.

From Kerala Vinoba came to Karnataka where he gave the programme of *sarvodaya-patra* and also gave the mantra, '*Jai Jagat*' (Victory to the world). In Yelwal, on September 21-22, 1957 there was an all-party meeting on Gramdan in which the President, Prime Minister and nearly all the top leaders of the country were present. The Gramdan movement was praised and everyone promised full support to it. It was recommended at the meeting that there should be closest possible co-operation between the government's Community Development Programme, which at that time was the main instrument through which the government worked for the rural development, and the Gramdan movement.²² For this purpose the objectives of the Community Development Programme were changed.²³ That the elected representatives in democratic India put their seal of approval on Gramdan was a major historical event.

From Karnataka, Vinoba went to Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab and from there he entered Kashmir. In Punjab he spoke against the entry of politics in the *gurdwaras*

and reminded the Sikhs that their *gurus* (the ten masters venerated and followed by the Sikhs) stood for unity, love and sharing. His journey to Kashmir was in his own words, 'a message of love'. In his eyes, all his work had essentially this aim: to unite the hearts of the people. In Kashmir, he went up to the Pir Panjal range which is at the height of 13500 feet. From Kashmir, he turned south and came to Madhya Pradesh where a large number of dreaded dacoits of the Chambal valley surrendered before him. This was another example of the power of non-violence. In Indore, he stayed for one month and tried to make it a '*Sarvodaya-nagar*' (a city following the ideals of *Sarvodaya*)—tried to find out how and which Sarvodaya programmes could be undertaken in the cities.

In July 1960, there were riots in Assam wherein linguistic minorities were targeted. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru requested Vinoba to go there. Vinoba already had plans to go to northeast in any case, and so from Madhya Pradesh he headed to Assam. Here he spread the message of peace and brotherhood and also worked for the Gramdan movement. He stayed in Assam for one and a half year and a large number of Gramdans took place. There was a major problem of infiltration (from the neighbouring East Pakistan) in Assam at that time—which is still present. Vinoba believed that Gramdan would be an ideal solution to tackle that problem, as no outsider can purchase land in a gramdan village without the consent of the *gramsabha*. Even now, fifty years later the gramdan villages in Assam are free from infiltration.

While returning from Assam, the best route was through East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and the Pakistani government gave permission to Vinoba to enter the country. In his 16 days there, he received 176 bighas of land in Bhoodan and it was distributed then and there.²⁴ This showed that Bhoodan-Gramdan could be replicated in other countries too.

By September 30, 1962, this is where the Bhoodan-Gramdan movement stood: A total of 530,344 donors had given 41, 62,623 acres of land; 11,20,485 acres of land had been distributed to 313,866 landless persons and the number of gramdani villages was 5079.²⁵ Bhoodan Acts had been passed in almost all the states, and Bhoodan committees had also been constituted under it. They were distributing the land, but the work was not progressing at the desired pace. Donation of land had almost come to a standstill. During Vinoba's tour Gramdans were being declared, but their number was not enough to have an impact on the society. In the gramdani villages and also in other areas, efforts were being made to progress in the direction of gram-swaraj, but that progress too was lagging behind expectations. *Nidhimukti* and *tantramukti* had resulted in reduction in the number of workers. Naturally, there were demands from the ranks of the movement for rethinking on its strategy. However, Vinoba was in favour of continuing the Bhoodan-Gramdan programmes which for him were still useful and necessary and scope still existed for them.

Gramdan involved the redistribution of entire cultivable land of the village. That it took place in quite a few villages was indeed a unique achievement. But it was very difficult for this thing to take place on a large scale. And no programme could be an instrument of change without being able to be implemented on a large scale. Moreover, it is certainly more practicable to proceed towards the dissolution of landownership in a phased

manner. Vinoba therefore put forward the scheme of 'Sulabh Gramdan', whose main features were as follows:

1. At least 75 per cent of the landowners should surrender ownership of their land to the village community—that is, *gramsabhas*, meaning the assembly of all the adult male and female population—and the land so donated would vest in it.
2. This land should at least be 51 per cent of the entire cultivable village land.
3. At least 75 per cent of the people of the village should accept Gramdan.
4. Five per cent of the land vested in the *gramsabha* would be given to the landless.
5. The remaining 95 per cent of the land would remain with the original owners and their descendents. However, it can be transferred within the village only, and that too with the permission of the *gramsabha*.
6. The villagers would give 2.5 per cent of their earnings or produce to the *gramsabha* with which the *gram-kosh* would be formed. This would be used for providing aid to the needy, for overall development of the village or for public works.

On fulfilment of these conditions the village would be deemed to be a gramdani village. All the adult men and women of the village would sit together in the *gramsabha* and discuss and decide about the village affairs, make plans and execute them. The decisions of the *gramsabha* would be taken by consensus—either by unanimity or with everyone's consent, and not by vote. Only such a decision-making process is in tune with freedom, and only it would be able to lead the people towards *gram-swaraj*. Division between majority and minority would break the unity of the village. The *gramsabha* should have all the powers that are necessary to discharge its duties.

With the advent of Sulabh Gramdan, the number of Gramdans in the country started increasing. To fit them in a legal framework, many states passed laws. Substantial powers have been given to the gramdani villages in terms of these Acts. After fulfilling the necessary requirements—which show the keenness of the villagers to advance towards *gram-swaraj* and demonstrates their fitness for it—any village can opt for Gramdan and get those powers. Even today, Gramdan Acts are the most potent instrument for village self-government.

In December 1963, Sarvodaya conference at Raipur adopted the three-point programme of Sulabh Gramdan, village-oriented khadi and Shanti-Sena, and it was decided to intensify the *Gram-swaraj* movement throughout the country on the basis of that programme.

From Raipur, Vinoba moved towards Wardha. But in June 1964, ill-health forced him to stay at Pavnar Ashram. His health was no longer permitting *padayatras*. For 13 years of his life he had walked without break, disregarding hot or cold weather or rains; crossing forests, mountains and rivers that lay in the way. During his Bhoodan-Gramdan *padayatra*, Vinoba must have walked at least 80,000 kilometers.²⁶

But Vinoba could not stay for long at Pavnar. The situation in the country was deteriorating at an alarming pace. To make the movement widespread and effective it was

necessary to focus on a particular area and concentrate all the energies there. In May 1965, he threw a challenge to the workers of Bihar that if they are prepared to bring 10,000 villages under Gramdan in six months, he was ready to come to Bihar. He gave the word—*toofan* (typhoon). The workers of Bihar accepted this challenge.

For Vinoba it was his last fight—the last and the best. By 14 years of tireless efforts he had built a unique movement; showed a new way. The movement had certainly received some support from different quarters, but it had not yet been able to mobilise the kind of support that could make it an instrument for fundamental change in the country. In the fast-deteriorating situation in the country the people were losing patience and unrest and violence were increasing. Vinoba's call to the workers was: "Time is fast running out. You must prove the efficacy of *gram-swaraj* through Gramdan within five to six years, otherwise this ideology would go into cold storage. It may be good, but it would be of no use if it stays in cold storage. This ideology has the power to save the country and also the world."²⁷

For this reason, Vinoba concentrated all his energies in Bihar. He himself came to Bihar in September 1965. This time *padayatra* was not possible; so he travelled by car. Efforts were launched from every quarter to bring the entire state into the ambit of Gramdan. The government too extended a helping hand. Workers reached out to people even in the remotest areas, convincing them about the necessity of Gramdan. Even the administrative blocks, tehsils and districts started accepting Gramdan—that is, majority of villages therein resolved to accept Gramdan. In the course of time, Bihar became the aim of the movement. The idea was that if a new structure could be developed based on Gramdan, then it would have an economic and political impact on the society in the state. Vinoba's urgency was becoming more and more vocal: "If we do not work quickly then it would not matter whether we do it or not. If we do it in 10 to 20 years, it would be meaningless. Then the circumstances would be beyond any control and the entire work would become futile. The forces of violence would assert themselves. That is why I am stressing on quick action. If the village unites only then will it be strong and the people will be free from exploitation. The government would never be able to free them from exploitation. It is for the villagers to do it. For this, Gramdan is the only non-violent programme. If we do not take this up the downtrodden would revolt. Their continuous exploitation is beyond endurance."²⁸

The *Toofan* movement sought to get the signatures (or thumb impressions) of at least 75 per cent of the landowners on the declaration forms saying that they were in favour of Gramdan of the village. In a way, it was a massive signature campaign under which the idea of Gramdan was being spread from village to village and their consent for it was being taken in the form of signatures or thumb impressions. The workers of the movement went from village to village, knocked on doors and went to the fields to convince the people. The work went on in the midst of political instability, valueless politics and natural calamities like floods and droughts. There was an unprecedented churning in rural Bihar. Signing the declaration forms for Gramdan was a vote in its favour, on the foundation of which an alternative system would have taken shape.

By October 1969, when the Sarvodaya conference took place at Rajgir, 60065 villages in Bihar had come under Gramdan –almost the entire state had ‘voted’ in favour of Gramdan. The movement had reached its peak. The *Toofan* movement had brought a new zest everywhere in the country and Gramdan was getting widespread support there. In the country, the number of gramdani villages had risen to 137,208.²⁹

But when work is done at great speed, keeping targets, and help of anyone who is willing is taken, it is but natural that there will be deficiencies and impurities. Yet it was not an insignificant fact that lakhs of people in thousands of villages had come to know about Gramdan and they had given their consent for it. This was no mean achievement. To detractors who said that getting consent or declaration forms for Gramdan was just paperwork, Vinoba used to reply that even the vote is a piece of paper; yet it can topple governments. Moreover, a vote in itself is inactive, but the consent forms signed for Gramdan showed willingness of the person to do something.

Now the task was to make as many of those villages gramdani villages in the true sense—to work for making the *gramsabhas* there strong, active and the vehicle of transformation. The era of propagation of ideology had passed to a certain extent. Now the work demanded a new vision, new approach and new methods. This is what Vinoba wanted and the situation demanded that the strategy of the movement should have been revised accordingly. Whatever had been done earlier was just groundwork; the real work of *gram-swaraj* was to begin now.

Unfortunately this could not be done. There were attempts to get the legal stipulations fulfilled, particularly in Saharsa and Musahari in Bihar. But they could not make much headway due to red-tapism in the government bureaucracy and several other factors. Efforts did take place; and that is why there are 3932 villages that are registered gramdani villages under different state Bhoodan-Gramdan Acts.³⁰ In these villages at least the individual ownership of land has been abolished, and that too voluntarily.

Nevertheless, what had been aimed at could not be achieved. The movement lost its momentum and gradually dissipated when confronted with the reality of rural India and in the end it became confined to the pages of history. The movement ended, but Bhoodan-Gramdan is still alive. The distribution of Bhoodan land is still going on and so far around 25 lakh acres of land have been distributed to the landless poor in the country. There still exist 3932 gramdani villages and efforts are on to make some of them active. Villages like Seed in Rajasthan and Keliweli in Maharashtra have demonstrated the potentialities inherent in Gramdan. Villagers of Maharashtra’s Lekha-Mendha village—the first village to get forest rights in the country—have unanimously resolved to opt for Gramdan.

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The distribution of land received under Bhoodan proved to be a great challenge before the movement. It could not keep pace with the donations. The work of distribution was complex and time-consuming and it could not proceed without the co-operation of the

government's revenue administration, which had been notorious for its inefficiency and corruption. Without the government's seal of approval, no distribution of land could have legal sanctity and permanence. Had there been political and administrative will, process could have been devised to complete the work easily and quickly. However, this did not happen. This work also demanded technical knowledge and skill, which the workers in the Bhoodan-Gramdan movement generally lacked; nor was there any arrangement for their training for this purpose.

The distribution of Bhoodan land started almost since the time of inception of the movement. State governments have to be complimented for taking necessary legal and administrative measures. The detailed rules for land-distribution were formulated by Vinoba himself. He saw to it that the entire process of land-distribution remains transparent. The rules stipulated that this be done in the well-publicised village meetings in the presence of government officials, that all the details of land available for distribution be obtained beforehand, that it be done with consensus and land be given to the most needy and with the consent of the landless present. It was also stipulated that at least one third of the land distributed should be given to those from the scheduled castes. The land so given was to be cultivated by the recipients and not to be sold.

It was necessary that this work be done with caution and not in haste. Moreover, it was the strategy of the movement to first concentrate on obtaining the donation of land and there was also the paucity of workers. All this naturally led to a gap between receipts and distribution and the movement could not escape its repercussions.

There was no question of leaving the work of distribution of land in the hands of the government, as the donors were giving land to Vinoba and not to the government. There were differences of opinion within the movement regarding the role of the donor in the distribution of the land. In 1956, Vinoba was against giving the donors the right to decide who the recipient would be, but he changed his stand in 1963.³¹ But it did involve risk as the experience of the Bigha-Kattha campaign in Bihar showed. Naturally, the distribution work remained worker-centric. But these workers were human beings after all; they were not free from human limitations and failings. That was why complaints about corruption were voiced from time to time. And though the incidence of corruption was decidedly meagre, it did affect the image of the movement. Actually, this work of distribution was that of the village communities, and they should have done it. This is what Vinoba always wanted. But the *gramsabhas* were not strong. Gramdan movement too failed in empowering them.

The work of distribution needed money, and that should have been provided by the society and the government; the movement could not be expected to bear this burden. The government did constitute the Bhoodan Committees, but they always lacked money and other resources. Even today, the Committees who are alive are grappling with this problem.

Even then, overall the work of distribution of land has been reasonably satisfactory. Independent studies have confirmed this. For example, in Vidharba, a study on Bhoodan

was done by leftist intellectuals Dr. K. R. Nanekar and Dr. S. V. Khandewale. They found that “by and large all the guidelines and laws were followed while distributing the land.”³²

When the landless were getting land through voluntary efforts, the welfare state should have come forward to ensure that the landless were settled properly. But the state did not fulfil this obligation. The landless who got land were poor; they did not have any resources. Some efforts were made by the Bhoodan movement to provide resources but it could only be limited. Neither did the government give resources, nor did it make arrangement of loans on easy terms. Forget giving special treatment, the farmers who got land under Bhoodan were given step-motherly treatment. In a state like Bihar, mutation of thousands of acres of land is still pending even after so many years. The problem of forcible eviction is serious and the state is not fulfilling its duty of restoring possession of land to evicted Bhoodan farmers.

Despite all the problems, till date around 25 lakh acres of land has been distributed among the landless and this is a creditable achievement. Moreover, most of this land has been received by those belonging to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward castes, since they were the most needy. The Chairman of the first Backward Classes Commission, Kakasaheb Kalelkar had said that the Bhoodan movement gave land to those castes who had all along been deprived of it.³³

And it too is noteworthy that despite all the powers and resources at their command the states, through the land ceiling acts have been able to distribute only 49.65 acres of land, just double of what has been distributed through Bhoodan (24.44 lakh acres).³⁴

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The Bhoodan movement took forward Gandhi’s epochal work—of which political independence was only the first step. Vinoba proved to be not only the spiritual successor of Gandhi, as is often said, but he also proved to be his political successor. Bhoodan-Gramdan movement always kept itself aloof from party politics, but it was essentially a political movement in the true sense of the term. Vinoba took forward, through his ideas and work, Gandhi’s work in terms of his political aim (a state-free society), political means (satyagraha) as well as political programme (constructive programme).

Vinoba took a material problem in his hands, but the movement was fundamentally spiritual. The Bhoodan movement showed that man could rise above narrow self-interest and greed. Critics at first did not believe that anyone could donate land, and when it started happening they said that the special conditions in Telengana were responsible for it and this could not be replicated elsewhere. When it took place in other states, they said that this was due to the abolition of zamindari system. But they forgot that when the zamindars were donating land as Bhoodan they were forsaking the compensation that was legally due to them. Moreover, not only big zamindars, large number of small landholders were also donating land. Then the critics thought that those giving land must be doing so to get name and fame, and that they were giving disputed and poor quality

land. And they took this conjecture as a settled fact! This was far from the truth. One can cite in this respect the study done by Babulal Gandhi in Western Maharashtra, where he found that those who gave disputed land or gave land to gain applause were only 13 to 14 per cent of the total number of donors—the percentage of land so donated was obviously even lesser.³⁵ There can be no doubt that most of those who donated land did so because they were motivated by a higher call and whatever pressure there was, it was moral pressure, which cannot not be faulted. And this land was distributed in such a way that the recipients' self-respect was not hurt.

That some of the land was of poor quality was only natural. But land unfit for cultivation can surely be used for several other purposes, and it was actually so used to some extent. On the other hand, one can safely surmise that the governments must have got the most possible inferior land under the ceiling acts. Yet the so-called intellectuals, without carrying out any independent comparative study about the lands received under Bhoodan and the ceiling acts, did not hesitate in making sweeping statements proclaiming that inferior lands were received under Bhoodan! In fact, no land can be said to be bad. The land that is not cultivable can be made so through irrigation etc. Kanti Shah rightly says, “ --- but no one received motivation from the fact that when so much land has been received in a manner unprecedented in the history of the world, let all efforts be put in to make every inch of it cultivable. In Israel the people did the extraordinary work of turning patches of desert into oases. Had our governments, our loquacious intellectuals and the leaders in different fields a little more imagination they would have launched a country-wide movement along with Bhoodan for this purpose. But --- they were interested only in declaring at the slightest opportunity that Vinoba had failed!”³⁶

If Vinoba came to know that the land was bad, he used to refuse to accept it. And the very fact that around 25 lakh acres of the land have been distributed means that at least this much land was cultivable; as only such land has been distributed. This is not a small figure.

An objection was that Bhoodan would result in fragmentation of land, which was already much fragmented; and small plots were not economically viable. Vinoba did recognise this; and therefore from the very beginning he used to harp on the theme that the land of the village should belong to the village. But he believed that Bhoodan was necessary as a first step towards the abolition of landownership, for providing immediate relief to the landless and bringing unity and goodwill in the society. Ultimately, the land had to belong to the entire village and that is why Gramdan became the ultimate goal and main programme of the movement.

There was also the criticism of taking donations from the poor. But this, in fact, was the special characteristic of Bhoodan. It wanted to create an environment of giving and not taking in society. Vinoba believed that if the poor gave land, then that would bring a moral pressure on the rich: “When lakhs of poor donate, the battle would be won without any fighting.”³⁷

Therefore, Vinoba did not think that time then was opportune for any kind of aggressive satyagraha. He had to face the criticism that he gave up Gandhiji's aggressive satyagraha. Vinoba used to point out that Bhoodan was also a kind of satyagraha; and that the strategy of the movement demanded that first the ideology be sufficiently spread. "Sarvodaya says that if a principle is accepted by a majority and is still being disregarded, then it is a fit case for satyagraha; but if a principle is accepted by us but not by the majority, then it is a matter for education and not for satyagraha. The principle that there should be no individual ownership of land is not accepted by the majority. Only we believe in it, and therefore it is a matter of education, and not of satyagraha."³⁸ For this reason, Vinoba gave emphasis on spreading the message of the movement. When the majority accepts a principle, then satyagraha can be done to bring round the intransigent few. Satyagraha can also be undertaken when the majority, even though accepting a principle, are not following it because of weakness. Under such circumstances Vinoba did give permission for satyagraha; in fact, he took lead in 1960 for satyagraha against vulgar posters and in 1976 for satyagraha against cow-slaughter.

Vinoba's critics, however, continued to criticise him, often without knowing the real situation or even after receiving cogent replies. Hallam Tennyson makes this correct observation, "Vinoba used to present his point of view repeatedly in different ways. But his critics never paid any attention to them – they simply carried on their opposition – sometime complaining, sometimes spreading rumours – just for the sake of opposition. It was very difficult for those who thought that they were well versed in the way the world to accept that a simple thing like Bhoodan can work." (39)

It was due to this approach of the intellectual community that Bhoodan-Gramdan was not adequately studied. The terminology of the movement was another problem for them. Pandit Nehru had rightly said, "There is no doubt that Acharya Vinoba's movement is a somewhat strange way of solving this important and complex problem. This is a way which the learned economists cannot explain; perhaps cannot understand as well."⁴⁰ That is why Acharya Kriplani had said, "Gandhiji's non-violent non-cooperation and decentralised industrialisation had to be explained to the educated person in the modern Western terminology; the Bhoodan movement also has to be explained to them in that manner."⁴¹ Undoubtedly, the movement did not succeed in doing it adequately; and therefore the urban media by and large ignored it.

In the first phase of the Bhoodan movement, there was some support from the political workers. They participated in the work of the Bhoodan committees, which clearly served their political interests. But after the dissolution of the Bhoodan committees in 1957, they naturally lost interest in that work. Their vested interests were obviously opposed to the declared aims of the movement. Vinoba always exhorted the people to shun the party politics. Political workers co-operated in the Gramdan phase also, as mass contact involved therein was likely to give political benefit. But when it came to implementing the next phase of Gramdan, their co-operation could not be hoped for. The government also extended co-operation in the early phase as the movement was giving land to the landless and so easing pressure on the government. But Gramdan was Gram-Swaraj—where the villagers would be masters of their own village. Opposition of the government

to this 'state within the state' was but natural. Moreover, the government machinery, built during the colonial period, has a particular nature, which has not changed much even after independence.

The movement had the benefit of Vinoba's extra-ordinary charismatic leadership. But that too had its limitations. It was Vinoba who gave vision to the movement and decided about its strategy and programmes. So when Vinoba withdrew, the movement collapsed. The movement was essentially an ideological one, and therefore it was necessary that the workers should have understood its ideology thoroughly. For this reason, Vinoba always used to stress on study, but its inadequacy always remained a matter of concern. Nor were there adequate training facilities. Therefore, there was always ideological confusion among the workers and even in the second and third leadership tiers of the movement. Jayaprakash Nayaran once admitted candidly: "Even we ourselves do not fully understand this new method, so others too naturally do not understand it."⁴² Most of the workers who came from the political background could not perhaps completely change their old mindset. However, it has to be conceded that the workers of the movement worked impartially. They rose above pettiness and worked selflessly and honestly. This movement only gave hardship to the workers, there was no incentive or promise of power or money or position. Even then, the dedicated workers worked for years, facing ridicule, opposition, privations. This undoubtedly is one of the greatest achievements of the movement.

The movement could not fulfil its announced objectives. This was only natural. Its aim was so high that it was bound to fail. But what it achieved in concrete terms and also intangibly has to be taken into account by any authentic history. The main achievement of this movement is that it put forward an alternative. It presented a new process for change; and it gave several ideas and programmes in this connection. The ascension of ideas during the course of this movement is simply astonishing. This ascension is a valuable treasure of the entire humankind. The seed it sowed can never be lost. And it should not be lost, as therein lies not only the survival but also the progress and evolution of the human race.

(The writer has written the history of Bhoodan-Gramdan movement in three volumes, titled 'Sabai Bhoomi Gopal Ki', which has been published by Gujarat Vidyapeeth, Ahmedabad)

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Dr. Parag Cholkar

P-2, Laxmi Nagar, Nagpur – 440022)

Phone: 0712-2295574; Mobile: 09822565574

e-mail: samyayog@rediffmail.com