

VINOBAJI

The Spiritual Humanist

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It is a habit of our mind not to recognize very easily new things, new ideas, and creative men. We understand them better only if we try to think in terms of old things, old ideas, and old patterns. But this weakness of our mind has to be overcome if we want really to recognize and understand ~~marry~~ early enough new ideas and creative thinkers as soon as they appear. We cannot forget that, however dull and mechanical the habits of our mind might be, life itself is creative and flowing and new problems bring new prophets and fresh solutions. An attempt at right understanding, therefore, is necessary when a new star rises on the ~~hor~~ horizon.

There is no doubt that Gandhiji was a creative thinker. That is why many a time he was not understood properly. People, therefore, tried to understand him in old terms and in existing 'isms'. When no existing 'ism' fitted him, they called his 'ism' Gandhism. He hated this kind of characterization very strongly and he oftentimes protested, saying, I do not want to usher in or add a new 'ism' to the already existing wilderness of 'isms'. When he was sometimes called a Communist, he would say, Yes I am a Communist, but without their violence. Similarly, he would have said, if he had a chance, that he was a Socialist, but with a difference and with a spiritual approach.

On account of the slowness and sluggishness of the human mind to recognize, understand and appreciate new things except in terms of the old, even a creative thinker has to adjust himself to those amongst whom he works, and he has to explain his own new ideas in old terms. He has often to assure others that there is nothing new in his teachings. Though conscious that he is creative, he has to say that he is but preaching an old doctrine. Instinctively, the new thinker knows that his

new medicine could go down the gullet of the patient only if it is sugar-coated by old phraseology !

Gandhiji's insistence on the use of the word Ahimsa (non-violence) for his new and unique technique is typical of this kind of phenomenon. His Ahimsa was really something new, aggressive, comprehensive and not restricted for use only in the field of self-culture or individual salvation. Possibly 'love' writ large or with a capital 'L' would have been able to convey the full meaning better. When once this was suggested to him, he explained that the term 'love' had certain associations which he did not want. He said that he had been using the ancient, negative word Ahimsa for fifty years and that it had developed a connotation in his life which he did not want to shed. He did not want to try any new experiment with a new term and see how it went down.

Something like that is happening in the case of Vinobaji, both as regards the new ideas that he is putting forth, their application, and the creative thinking for which he stands today. There is no doubt that not only many of us but he himself often says that he has taken his inspiration from Gandhiji. But at the same time it is no less true that he is developing some of the ideas of Gandhiji in quite a unique way. It is this uniqueness that entitles him to the designation of a creative thinker.

Vinobaji today is known to the general public more by his Bhoodan movement than by anything else. Till he initiated this movement three or four years ago, he was looked upon as one of the most devoted disciples of Gandhiji, a true interpreter of his philosophy, and the most scholarly, the most chaste, and intensely sincere follower of his. According to Gandhiji himself, he was Satyagrahi No.1. It is after his taking up the Bhoodan movement that his creative power has come to the fore and become evident. The deep and spiritual

basis of his teaching is now revealing itself more and more. Bhoodan, Shramadan, Sampattidan are but the expressions in the economic field of some fundamental principles in which he has living faith.

It is very difficult to characterize Vinobaji by any particular word or expression or slogan. That would be an over-simplification. No doubt, expressions such as 'All land belongs to God' or 'Land ought to be as free as air and water for those who want to use it', do express some aspect of the principles he holds. But that is not all that he means. These slogans and expressions which are but faint reflections of his faith, only mean that the operation of that faith in the economic field, is today far more urgent than in other fields. But the principle that he holds is a comprehensive one, applicable to the whole of life and its activities and to the whole of humanity. It may be said to be total and integral in its sweep. He would well add Vidya-dan, Jnan-dan, Jeevan-dan, and even Atma-dan to complete the series of 'dans' that is implied.

While I know that it is not possible for me to name his teaching adequately or describe it precisely by a phrase here or there, I am attempting to explain him and his philosophy in words that may be familiar. In a sense, he may be said to be 'anti-individualist'. This is obviously a negative term. But this term is useful in a way. Man is by nature an individualist and thinks in terms always of his own personality, his own gain, his own security, his own prosperity, his own immortality, and his own salvation to the exclusion of others. This 'individuality' is, of course, sometimes identified with a community, a country, a religion, or an ideology. But the essential thing, namely, exclusion of 'others', is there all the same. It is by some effort and by education and for carrying him higher that he has to be taught to look beyond

himself and think in terms of those around him and of humanity in general. While 'ego-centrism' is born and is commonly too much with us, the higher urge ^{has} ~~is~~ to be altruistic and ultimately 'humanity-centric'. Vinobaji is tirelessly striving to wean humanity from individualistic trends and to turn its steps towards something higher and nobler, namely, humanism, universalism. That justifies the use of the term ~~is~~ 'anti-individualist' in connection with him.

One may also term him as a 'universalist' or a 'humanist' but in quite a new and comprehensive sense. This term would signify here that the individual is but an integral part of the society in which he lives and of humanity at large, and that his interests are vitally and indissolubly bound ^{up} with them. It is implied that no individual has any chance of evolving by himself or of achieving any ideal except progressively along with and through humanity as a whole and as an integral part of it. It means, therefore, that though an individual today is normally 'ego-centric', his progress and evolution lies in his becoming increasingly 'humanity-centric'. He must transcend his ego-consciousness and replace it by humanity-consciousness, if he ^{really} has ~~to~~ benefit himself and march on the road to progress.

The Ishavasyopanishad has, in a way, given expression to this same principle, though it is in different words and though in place of humanity or the universe, the word used is Isha, meaning the Lord. The Upanishad runs as follows :- "All this that moves and lives and has its being is but the abode of the Lord or the Universal Spirit." What follows is a corollary or a logical consequence of this principle. An individual is entitled to live and enjoy his own life but not for its own sake or for his own selfish ends but in a spirit of renunciation and dedication to the Lord. This implies that the following constant consciousness has to be kept alive in the depth of one's being: that one is living and having his being in this

universe as an integral part of the whole, and one's own life has but to be lived in the spirit of giving everything away and by consecrating it to the Universal Spirit (Tena Tyaktena Bhunjeethaah). There is a further injunction in the Upanishad which says that one should not cover^t what belongs to others, which obviously means that one has a right only to what one can earn and one can use and can enjoy immediately and not more. All accumulation and indefinite possession of wealth is included here as strictly as 'theft'. Whatever is in excess

* Gandhiji once said that if any one gave him rupees 25,000, he would consider himself a 'thief' if he used anything more than was required for his elementary needs.

the teaching of the Upanishad.

It may be said that this, in a sense, is the basic faith of Vinobaji, born of spiritual experience, from which his teachings sprout and branch off. It is spiritual universalism in essence. It is an attempt to apply to life and to all its ramifications, economic, social and other, the inner realization of the Oneness of the Spirit, transcendent and immanent. His life may be said to be a running commentary on these few words of wisdom of the Ishavasyopanishad.

In fact, the eleven Vritas or observances, subscribed to by Vinobaji, are all derived from the above basic principles.

Though Vinobaji just at present is concentrating on Bhoodan, Shramadan and Sampattidan, which are applicable mainly to the economic field and material possessions, the operation of the principles in which he believes is not restricted to the economic or the material field alone.

The principle is a universal one and applies to every possession

*if he uses
thing more than
was required for
his elementary
needs.*

and to every kind of accomplishment which one can and may have attained. Since everything belongs to the Lord and has to be rendered unto the Lord in the spirit of renunciation and consecration, there is no scope for either exploitation in the process of accumulating, collecting or increasing one's material, intellectual, moral or spiritual wealth, ^{or for} ~~not in~~ possessing the same. While, thus, non-exploitation is to be observed in the process of accumulation and possession of any kind of wealth, the principle of renunciation, consecration and giving without any expectation to those who are needy and proper recipients is to be observed in the process of distribution of all kinds of wealth.

At the same time, there is an emphasis on producing more and more and on increasing one's capacity through incessant work. Work here does not restrict itself to merely physical labour. It is true that Vinobaji today emphasises physical labour and its dignity and also lays emphasis on production of material wealth, but that is only because ^{there is immediate need for it and} in certain sections of Indian society, physical labour and production of material wealth is looked upon as an inferior occupation. This has resulted in a kind of intellectual hierarchy which seems to suffer from ~~a~~ ~~kind of~~ superiority complex and has been the cause of the divorce of intellect from productive physical labour. Vinobaji's incessant work would include not only physical labour but also Tapasya, that is, constant thinking, contemplation, and all that has to be done in the way of persistent endeavour to arrive at prescribed results. Contemplation would also, thus, be included in 'action' which is necessary. While seen in this perspective, increasing production of every form of wealth and its distribution in the spirit of renunciation is a duty, but its exclusive enjoyment by oneself and its possession for one's own exclusive use is a social sin. The earning of any kind of wealth by the exploitation of the work and labour of others, who are in a less fortunate position, is equally a sin.

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Vinobaji's world would thus consist of men and women who would be constantly trying to transcend ego-consciousness and realize the presence of the Universal Spirit in everyone and all around. They would be busy all the time in attaining higher qualifications and in increasing all kinds of wealth, material, intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and spiritual, by incessant endeavour. But at the same time, this attainment and accumulation as well as possession of wealth would not be in the spirit of selfishness. It will be in the spirit of renunciation and ~~renunciation~~ consecration and of giving away all the wealth available to those who need it for their own proper development. Thus, in this world of Vinobaji the more one develops his powers and the more one accumulates wealth of any kind, the greater is the obligation to distribute it to all, so that all might feel and vividly experience that they are living in God's own house as brothers, sharing equally what they produce in cooperation, not only in the way of material goods but of all kinds of wealth, which means 'anything that has value'. It is possible to live in this world in this spirit only if there is a realization that the Universal Spirit pervades every atom and every being that exists, and that there is identity of interest between individuals and the whole of humanity of which they are integral parts. This kind of world can obviously come into existence neither by violence nor by coercion nor by law nor by exploitation. It can only come through love which spells the inner experience of the very spirit of identity. Such love and humanism rooted in spiritual experience alone can save the world in today's crisis. Mr. Thomas E. Murray, Atomic Energy Commissioner, has recently said, "If men will not clothe science with true humanism, they will end by making machines their god. Our crisis today comes from man's greed and will to power the time is ripening for a marriage of religion and science."

Who else but people like Vinobaji, who have spiritual experience and also a highly scientific attitude towards life, can act as high priests for such a marriage ?