

Twenty-Five Years of Bhoodan Movement in Orissa (1951-76) - A Review

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The *Bhoodan* Movement, initiated by *Acharya* Vinoba Bhave, a trusted follower of *Mahatma* Gandhi, was launched in the country in the early fifties of the last century. The movement was an attempt at land reform and it intended to solve the land problem in the country in a novel way by making land available to the most sub-merged and disadvantaged class of Indian society, the landless and the land poor and the equitable distribution of land by voluntary donations. The movement deriving its inspiration from Gandhian philosophy and techniques, created a sensation in Indian society for a few years by making mass appeal and giving rise to the hope of solving the age old land problem by producing miraculous results in the initial years of its launch. It was an intellectual movement based on the theory of trusteeship and it emphasized on the need of class co-operation in agrarian society.

The movement owed its origin during Vinoba's tour of the strife-torn region of Telengana in Hyderabad in April, 1951. He undertook the tour to spread the message of peace in the region as it witnessed violent clashes between the Communists and the landlords in the wake of an agrarian movement. On 18 April, 1951, a small but extraordinary incident occurred in his camp at Pochampalli village. On that day, Vinoba was offered 100 acres of land by Ram Chandra

Reddy after he appealed to the assembled villagers in his prayer meeting to do something for the *harijans* of the village. This incident came as a revelation to Vinoba and he became convinced that if one man on listening to his appeal could offer gifts of land, surely others could be induced in the same way. But it was only after receiving the second gift on 19 April, 1952 in the village Tanglapalli from Vyankat Reddy, he described the previous day's gift as '*bhoodan*' and realized that '*bhoodan*' could provide a solution to the problem of extreme inequality in the country. Thus, Vinoba and his followers undertook *pad-yatra* from village to village and persuaded the landowners to donate at least one-sixth of their land as '*bhoodan*' for distribution among the landless and the land poor. The encouraging response to Vinoba's land-gift mission in Telengana, in which he secured 12,000 acres land in '*bhoodan*' in 51 days emboldened Vinoba to continue the mission and finally prompted him to resolve on Gandhi's birthday in 1951 to collect fifty million acres of land for the landless from the whole country by 1957. This induced the *Sarvodaya* workers in various states to devote their energy on acquiring the target. Thus, an individual effort assumed the character of a movement and the '*bhoodan*' work, which was initially viewed by some as a mere charity work,

took the shape of a national reconstruction movement.

'*Bhoodan*' programme was started in Orissa on 7 January, 1952. On that day, Gopabandhu Choudhury and his wife Rama Devi along with several others started their historic *pad-yatra* from Bari-Ramachandrapur for collecting land for the landless. The *pad-yatra* though initially not intended for the purpose of '*bhoodan*', in the course of its progress collected land gifts. In the first meeting held at Bari-Ramachandrapur the first land-gift was made by Harapriya Devi of the village. The *pad-yatra* continued for 4 months and 22 days and it passed through 8 districts of Orissa covering a distance of 1100 miles, yielded a collection of 1626 acres of land from 233 donors. The second round of *pad-yatra* led by Gopabandhu Choudhury and Rama Devi commenced on the Gandhi Jayanti day in 1952 and it ended on 10 December, 1952. This *pad-yatra*, which covered only a distance of 427 miles yielded a collection of 463 acres of land, seven pair of bullocks and agricultural implements worth rupees 816. Though the movement started as a private movement, it received the support of the State Government. To facilitate the donation of land to the movement and to provide for the distribution of such lands, the Orissa Legislative Assembly passed the Orissa Bhoodan Yagna Bill, 1953 on 9 April, 1953. It received the assent of the President of India on 26 July, 1953 and became Orissa Act XVI of 1953. The Act provided for the establishment of a Bhoodan Yagna Samiti in the State of Orissa. The Samiti was authorized by the Act to receive donations or grants of land and to distribute the lands vested in it to landless persons.

To give a fillip to the movement in Orissa, Vinoba campaigned in the State. Actually Vinoba's '*bhoodan*' campaign was started in

Orissa on 26 January, 1955, when he set foot at Deola, a frontier village in Balasore district. In the first meeting held at Lakshmananath in Balasore district, Vinoba was apprised of the progress of the movement in Orissa. It was reported in that meeting that the total '*bhoodan*' collections in Orissa was one lakh and twenty-two thousand acres. But that was much less than the targeted 5 lakh acres of land set for '*bhoodan*' collections in Orissa by Vinoba by the end of 1957. However, by the time he started his *pad-yatra* in Orissa a definite shift was perceived in the movement as it took a new form that of *Gramdan* or donation of village, which soon overshadowed the '*bhoodan*' programme. Though the programme of land gift was still there, it became almost a neglected activity in the subsequent years and little land was received as donations.

Gramdan an offshoot of *Bhoodan* programme was actually started in the year 1952, when on 24 May, 1952 the entire population of the village Mangroth in Uttar Pradesh donated their land in *bhoodan*. But it was only during and after Vinoba's foot-march through Orissa that the movement assumed mass proportion and became a forceful campaign. Though the first *Gramdan* in Orissa was obtained in Manpur in Cuttack district on 30 January, 1953, in the district of Koraput the movement received great stimulus. By the time Vinoba left Orissa on 1 October, 1955 Koraput contributed 606 *Gramdan* villages alone out of the total 812 made in the entire province. The movement got impetus in 1956, when Nabakrushna Choudhury resigning from Chief Ministership joined the movement. As a result, by the end of 1960, 1946 villages were gifted in *Gramdan* in the State out of the total 4500 *Gramdans* made in the entire country. The movement received a fresh lease of life during Vinoba's second *pad-yatra* in the state, which

started on 13 August, 1963 and continued till 12 December, 1963. This *pad-yatra* which passed through 8 districts of western Orissa gave popularity to the movement in the region, where the movement yielded no spectacular results till that time. Even in the years following Vinoba's second visit to the State the movement made considerable progress in Orissa. This is evident from the fact that out of the total 11, 065 *Gramdans* made in the entire country by November, 1965, Orissa made a handsome contribution of 2807 *Gramdans* and thus occupied the second place in the country in that respect. To facilitate donations of land to the Bhoodan and Gramdan Movement in the State and to provide for the distribution of such lands, the Government of Orissa passed the Orissa Bhoodan and Gramdan Act in 1970. But despite legislative measures the movement lost its momentum after the Fourth Five Year Plan (1969-74) period when the ceiling surplus provisions came in to force. On 18 April, 1976 the *Bhoodan* Movement completed 25 years of its launch in the country and though by March 1976, the Silver Jubilee Year of the movement, 10,611 villages were gifted in *Gramdan* in Orissa, yet the movement had failed to actualize the dream of Vinoba, who hoped to see the whole of India reconstituted in to Gramdan villages by the birth centenary of Mahatma Gandhi.

Thus, the *Bhoodan-Gramdan* Movement as a whole had failed to garner enough land for the landless in the State by the Silver Jubilee Year of the movement. All it could obtain in Orissa by the end of December 1975, was a total of 12, 75,428 acres out of which only 6, 79, 565 acres of land was distributed among 74, 687 families in the State. Nevertheless, Orissa occupied the fourth place in the country so far as the progress of the *Bhoodan-Gramdan*

Movement in individual state was concerned by the Silver Jubilee Year of the movement. Ironically most of the villages gifted in the movement were located in the so-called tribal areas of the State, the areas which were in least need of land reforms. Also, a substantial part of the land donated in the movement was found either unsuitable for cultivation or under disputed possession. However, the movement should not be judged in terms of its material achievement but from the fact that it represented one of the major attempts after independence to provide a peaceful solution of the basic problem of Indian Society, the land problem, through voluntary action involving the masses.

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