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## VINOBA BHAVE: A MODEL AND TEACHER OF RENUNCIATION

For many, Vinoba Bhave will be remembered as an “adopted son” of Mahatma Gandhi. And, for the Indian peasants, he will be praised as a “god who came to distribute the land.”<sup>1</sup> Certainly, Vinobaji will be acknowledged in the annals of the Indian people, both as a favourite disciple of Gandhi, and as an organizer of the *Bhoodan* (land gift) Movement. However, in spite of these associations, he needs to be recognized as a *yogi* — a 20th. century saint — who followed the path of a *sannyāsin* from an early stage of his life. What needs to be emphasized is that above all, he is a *Sādhaka*, a seeker of truth, who wishes to complete his *Sādhana* (search), in the hope of achieving his liberation. Thus, his entire life—from the time when as a young man, he left his home for the holy city of Banaras, his association with Gandhi, struggle for India’s independence, involvement with *Sarvodaya* (welfare for all) Movement, and his experiments with “Sukshma”<sup>2</sup> (subtle spiritual power) in the early 1970s — is a testimony of a man’s relentless search for God. In this regard, he has paid tributes to the *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads*, *Bhagavad Gītā*, Buddha, Jesus, and Gandhi.

### Who is Vinoba Bhave ?

Vinayak Narhari Bhave was born on September 11, 1895 in the village of Gagode in Kolaba district, near Bombay. His father was a textile technologist and a man of stern character. His mother was a gentle, pious woman. Vinayak’s early childhood was spent with his grandfather, a man who lived according to the Hindu *Dharma*. It is reported that Vinayak decided to lead the life of a celibate monk at the age of ten, and to become a saint at seventeen.<sup>3</sup> He adhered to

1. Time Magazine 57, June 4, 1951, p. 36.

2. Shriman Narayan, *Vinoba : His Life and Work* (Bombay : Popular Prakashan, 1970), p. 335.

3. Mohanlal Bhatt, *Bhūdānā Yajñā Ke Praṇetā Vinobā* (Wardha : Rashtrabhāṣhā Prachār Samiti, 1972), pp. 1-13.

these decisions in the years to come. There are many details of his early life that are a source of inspiration for the young of India. The significant fact is that Vinayak was not an ordinary child. He was sensitive to his religious needs, a good student of mathematics and languages, proud of Indian culture and values, and somewhat of a poet, who burned his poems after having perfected them. While youngmen dream of success, and devise ways for happiness, Vinayak dreamed of retreating to the Himalayas in order to become a Yogi. His life came to a turning point when instead of going to Bombay (where he was to appear in his Inter College exams), Vinayak landed in Kashi (Banaras) to study Sanskrit. His decision to give up his formal studies and leave home was inevitably guided by his desire to know Brahman.<sup>4</sup>

While at Banaras, Vinayak read the reports of a speech of Gandhi, delivered on the occasion of the opening of the Banaras Hindu University. Gandhi, who had recently returned to India from South Africa, was in the process of organizing his movement to achieve independence from the British. In Gandhi, Vinayak found a kindred soul. Following some correspondence, Vinayak found himself at the doorstep of Gandhi's Ashram at Ahmedabad. What followed in the subsequent years was a romance between a guru and his disciple, which temporarily halted with the death of Gandhi in 1948 but continued spiritually. Later on, reflecting on his association with Gandhi, Vinoba (a name that Gandhi gave him) said, "Providence took me to Gandhiji and I found in him not only the peace of Himalayas, but also the burning fervour of revolution typical of Bengal. I said to myself that both of my desires had been fulfilled."<sup>5</sup> Soon Gandhi recognized the making of a saint in Vinoba, and appointed him the director of an ashram in Wardha. In the years to come, Vinoba became the spokesman for Gandhi's *Sarvodaya* (welfare for all) Movement while still continuing the studies of languages and world religions. A fact overlooked by many is that he became a scholar of Sanskrit, translating the *Upaniṣads Gitā*, and *Dhammapada*. Not only did he master Arabic in order to read the Quran in the original, but he even wrote a book, *The Essence of Koran*, a work well received by the Muslims during his visit to East Pakistan (Bangladesh). Since the launching of the *Bhoodan* Movement (1951), Vinoba has authored many books dealing with the issues of independence, democracy, revolution, religion, morality, *Bhoodan*, *Sarvodaya*, etc.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

5. Shriman Narayan, *Op. Cit.*, p. 36,

After the death of Gandhi, Vinoba started on a *pād-yātra* (travelling on foot) to meet the people of India. It brought him to Telangana, near Hyderabad, where the *Bhoodan* Movement was born in 1951, in the village of Panchampalli. Telangana had long been a trouble spot where under the communist uprising, several landlords had been murdered. In 1948, Prime Minister Nehru had dispatched a police force of 10,000 men to subdue the uprising. He had no real success in curbing the violence. Infested by an age-old custom of *Yetti*, farmers were forced by the police and revenue officers, together with the *deshmukhs* (landlords) to work in the fields without wages.<sup>6</sup> The communists organized the peasants to rebel against the system, which led to a blood bath. It was here that Vinoba held his prayer meetings and this resulted in his involvement with the farmers. *Bhoodan* was born when one landlord, Ramchandra Reddy, responded to the plea of Vinoba to settle the dispute among themselves. He donated 100 acres of his land to the farmers belonging to the untouchable caste. From this time on, Vinoba dedicated his life to the *Bhoodan* Movement, and set out to collect 40 million acres of land for the poor of India.

All through the years, Vinoba Bhave has gained the respect of the young and old alike in India. He continues to be respected at home and abroad in spite of his later inactive years. No man receives so much veneration of the people unless he has done something of great importance for them. Like Gandhi, Vinoba has given his life to his people and to the world. Bertrand Russell characterized him as a "symbol of the role of conscience in human affairs."<sup>7</sup> Hallam Tennyson (son of poet Tennyson) called him, "The embodiment of India"<sup>8</sup> Vasant Nargolkar describes him as "a great devotee, a *Karmayogi*, a *Jnani*, a religious reformer, a social scientist, an educationist, a political theorist and lastly a revolutionary thinker and a teacher of mankind."<sup>9</sup> Mahadev Desai, the senior private secretary of Mahatma Gandhi, states, "Vinoba has something which others have not. His first rank characteristic is to resolve his decision into action the moment it is once made. His second characteristic is continuous growth. Besides Bapu (Gandhi), I found this quality in Vinoba alone."<sup>10</sup>

6. Time Magazine 57, June 4, 1951, p. 36.

7. Narayan, *Op. Cit.*, p. 340.

8. Narayan, *Loc. Cit.*, p. 340.

9. Vasant Nargolkar, *The Creed of Saint Vinoba* (Bombay: Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963), p. 36.

10. Daniel P. Hoffman, *India's Social Miracle* (California: Naturegraph Co., 1961), p. 45.

Dr. Lanza Del Vasto, an Italian poet, recognizes Vinoba as "Gandhi's spiritual successor who has made a dramatic contribution to the social and economic revolution in India."<sup>11</sup> In the words of Jammalal Bajaj (a long time benefactor of Gandhi and Vinoba), "I regard Vinoba as a great *Rishi* in line with the Indian tradition. We may not realize it today but history will reckon him as an eminent *Rishi* equal to any of the *Rishis* who sanctified the land in the past."<sup>12</sup> Bede Griffiths likes to compare him to St. Ambrose and St. Chrysostom, who like Vinoba believed that "land was originally a common gift of God, and only sin had introduced private property."<sup>13</sup> The Indian newspapers often called him, "the Saint Paul of Constructive Work."<sup>14</sup> And finally Gandhi, who showed no restraint in defending and praising Vinoba, is reported to have said, "I have seen many ascetics who have withdrawn from life and live in the mountains or in a monastery. On the other hand, I know many dedicated social workers. But I have never seen a person in whom both qualities combine in a such powerful way."<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the greatest joy comes to a disciple when his guru pays him a compliment. Thus, the following words of Gandhi must have meant a great deal to Vinoba : "Your love and faith fill my eyes with tears of joy. I may or may not deserve them, but they are sure to do you infinite good. You will be an instrument of great service."<sup>16</sup>

The secret of Vinoba's success lies in his life of renunciation. No matter what others see as the goal of his life, for him it was *Ātma-Vidyā* (knowledge of the Self), or the search for Brahman. Thus, whatever he has achieved in his life is the result of his austere life, which he led with determination and discipline. In this regard, he has consciously followed the life of a *sannyāsin*, modelled after the great Indian sages. However, Vinoba is a spiritual innovator, not a blind follower of an ancient tradition. His life is a living testimony of what Gandht termed as his "Experiments with Truth." There is a novelty in Vinoba's experiments with truth, which uniquely belongs to him. With this observation we turn to his model of renunciation.

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11. Shriman Narayan, *Vinoba : His Life and Work* (Bombay : Popular Prakashan, 1970), p. 340.
  12. *Ibid.*, p. 330.
  13. Bede Griffiths, "The People of India", 'Commonweal' 71, Oct. 23, 1959, p. 98.
  14. Time Magazine 57, June 4, 1951, p. 36.
  15. Daniel P. Hoffman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 44.
  16. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

### The Roots of Vinoba's Model of Renunciation

From his early childhood until he came to be recognized as a modern saint, the life of Vinoba Bhave reveals that he profusely drank from the reservoir of Indian spirituality. Needless to say that his studies of the *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads*, *Gītā*, and the *Brahma-Sūtra*, along with the Epics and the Buddhist writings, must have impressed the Indian ideal of 'renunciation' upon his mind. Where else would a ten year old boy find the ideal of *Brahmacharya* except in the four stages of life described by *Manu* and others? Surely his decision to become a celibate monk, and to search for emancipation has strong similarities with men like Śaṅkara and Gautama Buddha. For, very early in his life, Vinoba has been observed to follow the principles of renunciation and non-attachment. His biographers report that as a young student, Vinoba was fond of composing poems. However, even though he worked hard to refine them, he would burn them when completed to his satisfaction. Later on, while in Banaras, he would recite his poems to the Mother Ganges and then float them as his prayer-offerings to her. Another incident which exemplifies his spirit of detachment at a young age relates to the story of burning his school certificates. On being questioned by his mother about his behaviour, Vinoba simply replied that he had no use for them any more. Even later in his life, he is reported to have torn up a letter by Gandhi, written in his praise. His explanation for his behaviour was simply that he did not want to keep the letter lest it become a source of pride.

Renunciation does not mean the practice of non-attachment to things alone. It means the cultivation of discipline in private and public life. Vinoba's life shows that he exercised great discipline in matters of hygiene as well as studies. He observed a strict self-culture, which yogis often describe as the practice of *Yama* and *Niyama*. Needless to say that these are two basic principles of yoga according to Patanjali. Even in prison, Vinoba did not hesitate to observe fasts, meditate, and study religious scriptures. Those who knew him in the Ashram report on his strict observance of the discipline set by the rules of the Ashram. In spite of being a patient of chronic malaria and peptic ulcers, he stored up enough stamina to outdo others in walking and spinning the *charkhā*. A strict vegetarian, he subsisted on the minimum intake of food. So far as his ulcers were concerned, he spoke of them as a blessing, for they enabled him to reduce the amount of his food.<sup>17</sup> From where did he get the energy to work, study, and walk? The answer is simple — from being a *sannyāsin*.

17. Bede Griffiths, *Op. Cit.*, p. 95.

In Indian spirituality, "renunciation" also means getting rid of all desires and egotism. Certainly the spirit of non-attachment can be cultivated only when a person is devoid of all egotistical feelings and ambitions. Theravada Buddhism goes so far as to equate *Nirvana* with a state of having no ego. In the system of yoga, *samādhi* cannot be experienced unless all egos and desires have been eliminated. In *Vedānta* the unity of Ātman and Brahman cannot be achieved while one continues to be preoccupied with the *jīva* (psycho-physical self). A life without egotism and selfish desires is a life of peace and happiness. When internal peace is achieved, external peace follows. It is no secret that Vinoba is a follower of *Ahimsā* (non-violence), and has dedicated his life to world peace.

Renunciation does not mean the neglect of one's responsibilities, but rather the sacrifice of all pride that might result in the course of the fulfilment of those responsibilities. In his writings, Vinoba draws on the Hindu Epics and the *Purāṇas* to prove his point. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, when *Rāma* took to the forest to complete his austerities, his stepbrother *Bharata* accepted the responsibilities of running the kingdom, but he did that in keeping with the spirit of renunciation. King *Janaka*, the father of *Sītā*, is exalted as a king who was untouched by the pleasures of his kingdom, but remained committed to his responsibilities as a ruler of his kingdom. *Rāma* himself never gave up his responsibilities as a husband toward his wife, and later to his kingdom.<sup>18</sup> What Vinoba Bhave reports about the ancient sages is beautifully exemplified in his own life. Right from the time of taking on the most mental jobs at the Ashram up to his *Bhoodan* marches, Vinoba never shook off his responsibilities. And, he always did these in the true spirit of renunciation, without showing any trace of pride. If it is true that a life of sacrifice is a life of freedom, Vinoba is a prime example of such a life in the 20th century. For he is a free spirit, who has been able to associate with the poor and the *Harijans* (untouchables) with equal ease as with the rich and the *Brahmins*. For both he showed love and compassion, the traits associated with the life of renunciation.

The *Bhagavad-Gītā* has been often described as a religious scripture where the idea of renunciation as "detached action" is presented. Therefore, it is appropriate that Vinoba Bhave gives us a definition of renunciation in his work, *Talks on the Gītā*. Here, he makes a distinc-

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18. Vinoba Bhave, *Democratic Values* (Kashi : Sarva Śeva Sangh Prakāṣhaṇ', 1962), p. 50.

tion between two ancient Sanskrit terms, *sannyāsa* and *tyāga*. Generally speaking, these two terms are often equated in Hinduism. However, Vinoba attempts to clarify their meanings in order to avoid certain misunderstandings. For him, in *sannyāsa*, "action should be renounced in its very form and nature. That is, the form of action is itself to be renounced. But in 'tyāga', sacrifice, what is renounced is not action, but the fruit of it."<sup>19</sup> This is the message of the *Gītā*, which is axiomized as "detached action". In this context, "renunciation of fruit is the test for performing any action. When this test is applied, interested actions show themselves up as unworthy. They are fit for *sannyāsa*, fit only to be renounced. What now remains is only pure *sāttvik* action. Such actions should be performed without egoism."<sup>20</sup> From this analysis it is evident that in keeping with the message of the *Gītā*, Vinoba does not denounce actions (*karma*), but their fruits only. A further distinction between *karma* (actions) and *kriya* (activity) is made by Vinoba to emphasize the importance of action. *Kriya* involves effort, which in turn involves attachment. *Karma* without *kriya* is pure and *sāttvik*. The control of *kriya* leads to the purity of *karma*, which cannot be avoided. For to do nothing is a form of action. In the final analysis, "when the mind and heart become absolutely pure, in the end, activity (*kriya*) tends towards zero and action (*karma*) towards Infinity."<sup>21</sup>

Through Vinoba's discussion of the *Gītā* and its message, it is evident that for him renunciation does not mean lack of action, but the action done in a spirit of detachment. Theologically, selfless action indicates the absence of egos and desires, which are responsible for reincarnation in Hinduism. Therefore, Vinoba goes to the extent of denying the desire for salvation itself. He writes, "We should be so absorbed in *Sādhana* (which is done with the spirit of detachment) that we forget all about *Moksha*, and then *Moksha* will come seeking us and stand in front of us. Let the *Sādhanika* be steeped in his *Sādhana*."<sup>22</sup> This is precisely what Vinoba has shown us through his life and work. He was been engaged in "fruitless" *karma* all his life. And all of his actions have been the outcome of his *Sādhana*, which has an ultimate significance for his emancipation. Consequently, "renunciation" for him is not a weapon to be used in order to achieve

19. Vinoba Bhave, *Talks on the Gētā* (Kashi : Akhil Bharat Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, 1958), p. 265.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

a temporary goal. It is, rather, a part and parcel of a larger concept of *Brahma-vidyā* — the knowledge of Brahman. In the process of this *Sādhana*, he has poured his love on all mankind by working for them. In this manner he has embodied the message of Buddha, Jesus, and Krishna. No wonder he has been acclaimed as ‘the Saint Paul of Constructive Work’.

For Vinoba Bhave, Mahatma Gandhi provided a concrete life of renunciation. In the spirit of classical Hinduism, Vinoba surrendered himself to Gandhi completely, and accepted him as his *guru* in 1916. At Gandhi’s Ashram, Vinoba refined his model of renunciation and put it into practice. Later he confessed, “I have never been influenced by anyone the way I was by Bapu.”<sup>23</sup> He never ceased to praise his *guru*. He wrote, “whatever I am today I owe to Bapu. He turned an uncouth person like me into a servant of the people.”<sup>24</sup> If there was any one most important thing that Vinoba learned from Gandhi, it was this practice of “detached action”. Vinoba admits,<sup>25</sup> “it was Bapu who initiated me into the philosophy of *karma-yoga*. True, it is explained in the *Gīta*. But I saw its application only in Bapu’s life. It was here that the *karma-yoga* of the *Gīta* was most clearly illustrated.”<sup>25</sup> Needless to say that both Gandhi and Vinoba looked at the *karma-yoga* as the service of mankind. Thus, renunciation for them did not mean withdrawal from society, but an active participation in it. This attitude led Vinoba to confess that he considered “service” as a way of worship and the people to be served as his masters. And serving the masters brought solace to his heart.<sup>26</sup>

Vinoba’s *Sādhana* coincided with Gandhi’s *Sādhana*, as they came together while cutting vegetables in the Ashram kitchen, cleaning the latrines, attending the prayer meetings, and fighting for *Swarāj*. To a great extent, it was Gandhi who unobtrusively trained Vinoba in such precepts as *Ahimsā* (non-violence), *Satyagraha* (truth force), *Sarvodaya* (welfare of all), *Shanti-Sena* (peace force), *Swarāj* (self-rule), and *Ramraj* (kingdom of God). As a disciple, Vinoba took shelter under Gandhi’s wisdom, and devoted his energies to the realization of Truth. The relationship of Gandhi and Vinoba does not fit the stereotyped image of a relationship between a *guru* and his disciple, often presented

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23. Kanti Shah (ed.), *Vinoba on Gandhi* (Varanasi : Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan), 1973, p. 3.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 168.



in the classical Indian literature. Gandhi recognized the genius of the man Vinoba and treated him as an equal. He loved Vinoba as a father loves his son, but respected him more than any father would respect his son. Thus, in 1940, Gandhi wrote an article, "Who is Vnoba Bhave?", in the weekly magazine 'Harijan'. In this article Gandhi introduced Vinoba to India, and to the world. He praised him for his scholarship of Sanskrit and Arabic, his excellence in spinning the *charkhā*, his ability to attract "an army of disciples", his devotion to the cause of the poor, and for his practice of non-violence.<sup>27</sup> As a renunciate, Vinoba accepted Gandhi's remarks with humility, but considered them of no ultimate significance. Although his relationship with Gandhi was important to him, as a disciple he never felt worthy of the honour bestowed upon him. From 1916 (the year he came into contact with Gandhi) till 1948 (the year Gandhi was assassinated), Vinoba remained close to Gandhi. Their closeness was more spiritual than physical. For, sometimes, as much as two years elapsed before the two met. Vinoba remained active at the Ashram at Wardha, while Gandhi worked from his Ashram at Sabarmati. Nevertheless, when Vinoba visited Gandhi, their meeting was complete. Much can be said about the influence of Gandhi on Vinoba, but it is important for us here to examine Vinoba in his own right.

In spite of his close affinities with Hinduism on the one hand, and with Gandhi on the other, Vinoba can be seen as a man with his own spiritual taste. For, a close look at his life and work reveals that he was an innovator rather than a blind follower of tradition. This is particularly true when it comes to his understanding of the concept of renunciation. As Vasant Nargolkar explains it, renunciation in ancient Hinduism was related to the problem of *Karma-Samsāra*. If actions were responsible for rebirth, then renunciation of actions became specifically attractive as a means of escape from the vicious cycles of birth and rebirth.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps an appeal for *sannyāsa* (fourth stage life) was related to the problem of *Karma*. Moreover, the development of the "Caste System" further classified work, making the idea of the escape from work in the form of *sannyāsa* a desirable goal. The consequences were drastic. Not only did the spiritual significance of "renunciation" get lost, but society itself was victimized by pre-judice and discrimination in the name of religion. Both

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27. Vasant Nargolkar, *The Creed of Saint Vinoba* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963), pp. 29-30.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Gandhi and Vinoba have tried to restore the dignity of labour. Theologically, Vinoba has attempted to show that *sannyāsa* is an *attitude of mind* rather than a physical separation from the world. Although, as a young man, he entertained the thought of retreating into Himayalayas, with Gandhi he came to understand the real meaning of work. He found peace through involvement in "disinterested work". As far as the caste system is concerned Vinoba dedicated his life to work among the Harijans.<sup>29</sup> More importantly, he tried to show that a society should not be stratified on the basis of *Varṇa Dharma* (caste). Rather, we must so cultivate our character that the qualities of all four castes exist within ourselves. Thus, we should have the poise and wisdom of a Brahmin, the strength and valour of a Kshatriya, the skill and efficiency of a Vaishya and the humility and service of a Shudra.<sup>29</sup>

At the basis of Vinoba's thinking is the affirmation that the world is real, and not something from which one should try to escape. Here we see his rejection of the traditional concept of *māyā*, particularly when it is used to denote 'illusion'. In the context of *māyā* the act of 'renunciation' necessarily implies a retreat from the world which is considered impermanent and ever-changing. The critics of Hinduism never fail to pinpoint this tendency which exists in traditional Hinduism, and has been often mistakenly attributed to the great Indian philosopher Śaṅkara. If Śaṅkara can be accepted as a Cypto-Buddhist, then the problem of *māyā* exists in Buddhism as well. The crucial problem which concerns the critics relates to the issue of ethics. If the world is unreal, then our moral behaviour and ethical conduct are of no ultimate significance.<sup>30</sup> Many modern Indian philosophers, including Dr. Radhakrishnan, have tried to answer this charge through their philosophical writings. Although Vinoba Bhave is not classified as a modern philosopher, I would not hesitate to call him a moral philosopher. For it is through his actions that he has proved the traditional Indian understanding of *māyā* (when used to denote the illusory nature of the world) to be wrong. He has definitely given the world its rightful place by taking it seriously. His life and work are living proofs of his beliefs. Needless to say that Vinoba's 'renunciation' suggests involvement.

As clarified earlier, for Vinoba, renunciation means 'detached action'. He once wrote "Renunciation could be likened to a currency

29. Kanti Shah (ed.), *Op. Cit.*, p. 128.

30. Albert Schweitzer and Hendrik Kraemer have raised this particular issue in their writings regarding Hinduism.

note, while the philosophy of action with detachment to a coin. The value of both is exactly the same.”<sup>31</sup> The uniqueness of Vinoba Bhave is that for him renunciation (or non-attachment) did not mean lack of excellence. When ‘detached action’ is translated as ‘distinterested work’, there is a danger of interpreting it as work done haphazardly. Consequently, renunciation could be viewed as the absence of skillfulness while undertaking a task. Moreover, it could mean a lack of proficiency in the name of renunciation. Such an interpretation would indicate a misrepresentation of the ideal of renunciation. Examples from the life of Bhave point to the fact that he believed in excellence. Whether it was a matter of composing poetry, spinning the *charkhā*, learning the languages, teaching the *Gītā*, or walking for the *Bhoodan* Movement, Vinoba tried to excel in the tasks undertaken by him. And he did these things in a spirit of detachment, and left a noble example for the others to follow. As for Vinoba, he followed Gandhi.

By Vinoba’s own admission, it is clear that he surrendered himself to Gandhi as his *Śiṣya* (disciple). However, his uniqueness is evidenced by the manner in which he followed Gandhi and what he thought of him. Gandhi was his *guru*, but Vinoba was not a blind follower. That Vinoba had a mind of his own is exemplified by the fact that he tested Gandhi. He once wrote, “I do not know whether Gandhiji ever put me to the test. But I did, without his knowing it, test him thoroughly; had he been found wanting I would not have stayed with him.”<sup>32</sup> His advice for those who sought Gandhi’s opinion at all times was simply that they should not become followers of Gandhi. Such an opinion coming from a man, who himself is sometimes called “the second Gandhi”, might sound strange. Nonetheless, it shows his spirit of renunciation when it comes to hero or *guru* worship. Thus, he spoke against the deification of Gandhi, and called for the practical application of his ideas.<sup>33</sup> The basis of Vinoba’s argument is that Gandhi was a seeker of truth, and involved in the pursuit of that goal. He wrote “Gandhiji thus was constantly developing. We should, following him, do our thinking afresh in the context of every fresh situation.”<sup>34</sup> It was almost providential, suggested Vinoba, that Gandhi was taken away from among us at a time when India needed him most. It is as if God wanted to teach us something —“that we should be more detached in our thought.”<sup>35</sup>

31. Vasant Nargolkar (trans.), *Random Reflections* (Varanasi : Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, 1971), p. 54.

32. Kanti Shah (ed.), *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

35. Shah, *Loc. Cit.*

Vinoba's belief that people should be freed from their attachment to Gandhi is illustrated by his own life and activities. Although he never reported to have disagreed with Gandhi on any serious issue, in his own evolution, he differed from him. A few examples will suffice to show the differences between them. Vinoba did not only follow Gandhian principles, but added new dimensions to them. In this respect *Bhoodan* and *Gramdan* (village gift) are his unique creations. As Vinoba himself explains it for Gandhi Salt *Satyagraha* was a symbol of *Swarāj* (self-rule). *Bhoodan* and *Gramdan* are more than symbols, they are "the foundation of village Swaraj."<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, Vinoba states, "while Bapu gave the central place to the *charkhā*, I give the central place to *Gramdan*."<sup>37</sup> He also views his *Gramdan* Movement as a positive *Satyagraha* as opposed to Gandhi's negative *Satyagraha*. By way of explanation, Vinoba points out that during Gandhi's time, circumstances (because of British rule and their opposition to the Independence Movement) demanded a negative kind of approach. However, in an independent India, there is a need for developing a new *Satyagraha*.<sup>38</sup> Thus, he views his Movement in a different light. These examples are cited not to emphasize that Vinoba is different from Gandhi, but to show that he is an innovator.

### **Bhave's Application of His Renunciatory Model**

The greatness of Vinoba Bhave resides in the fact that he practised what he preached. Thus it is his method of application of his renunciatory model that demands our attention. Behind this model is his firm belief that with renunciation come strength and power.<sup>39</sup> These could be understood as the internal forces, generated by the experience of the truth of renunciation. They mould a person's character and imbue him with courage and confidence. In his writings Vinoba often uses the lotus flower as a symbol of beauty and strength to illustrate the power of renunciation. Like a lotus that has its roots in the mud but transcends its ugliness, a renunciate, through an austere life, conquers his desires and reflects beauty and strength of a different kind. Of course, for Bhave, this strength is acquired through involvement and by renouncing the fruits of the actions. Consequently, he rates

36. Kanti Shah (ed.), *Vinoba on Gandhi* (Varanasi : Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, 1972), p. 143.

37. Shah, *Loc. Cit.*

38. Vinoba Bhave, *Democratic Values* (Kashi : Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, 1962), p. 154.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

“ detached action ” higher than meditation. He writes, “ the renunciation of the fruit of action has been declared to belong to a higher order than meditation. For, there could be a subtle selfishness even in meditation.”<sup>40</sup> The application of Vinoba’s model of renunciation necessarily implies the practicality of actions. Therefore he believes that “ renunciation which sets out to oppose the Philosophy of Action is not true to itself. It is not genuine renunciation; it is only a variety of action. That which easily digests action or accommodates it within itself constitutes genuine renunciation.”<sup>41</sup>

For Vinoba, today, the source of strength and power is to be found in social service. Thus, he equates renunciation with active involvement in finding solutions for our social problems. To put it in the context of India, “ strength is to be found in bridging the gulf between high and low, between master and servant ; in arousing the strength of oppressed womanhood, in raising up the despised Harijans and serving the scheduled castes. There are natural opportunities for renunciation in this founding of a new social order..”<sup>42</sup> Thus, *renunciation as a force for social change* became the goal of Vinoba’s life. Immediately after the dawn of the independence in India, he found his views being challenged by those who presented other alternatives to deal with the problem of social change. In a speech, Bhavé evaluated the situation. He explained that there are two dominant views concerning the future of India. Both views are concerned with *Satya Yuga* or the golden age. Those who hold that *Satya Yuga* really existed in the past are *Purāṇavādīs* (believers in an ancient golden age). And, those who believe that *Satya Yuga* will be established in the future are the *Communists*. He characterized both groups as *Satya Yugavādīs* (believers in golden age-ism). One looks to the past and the other to the future. Vinoba proposed the need for *Satya Yugakāri* (one who realizes the golden age in practice in the present).<sup>43</sup> It should be noted that he makes a sharp distinction between a *Vādi* and a *Kāri*. Needless to say that Vinoba did not want his model of renunciation to be preached but practised here and now.

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40. Vasant Nargolkar (trans.), *Random Reflections* (Varanasi : Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, 1971), p. 54.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

42. Vinoba Bhavé, *Democratic Values* (Kashi : Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, 1962), p. 52.

43. William Theodore DeBary’s (ed.), *Sources of Indian Tradition* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1958), Vol. II, pp. 374–375.

If there is one concept which adequately describes Vinoba Bhave's methodology for social action, it is the concept of *Sarvodaya*. However, *Sarvodaya* is more than a concept. It is a way of life based on a moral philosophy, which is derived from the ancient Indian spirituality. Under Gandhi it became more universal, and was extended to mean a perennial wisdom, which existed at the heart of every religion. After Gandhi's death, Vinoba became a champion of *Sarvodaya*, and carried it forward as a Movement for independent India. Although the term *Sarvodaya* is translated as "welfare of all", it is an ideology which Vinoba applied to personal, social, political, religious, national, and international spheres of life. *Sarvodaya* can be described as the embodiment of Bhave's model of renunciation. It is a medium through which he put his ideas into practice. Primarily, it is a spiritual philosophy which seeks *parivartan* (transformation) in all aspects of life for the pursuit of the knowledge of God. Through the uplift of all, it tries to establish *Rāmraj* (kingdom of God) on earth.

Vinoba Bhave speaks of *Sarvodaya* as a new *mantra*.<sup>44</sup> As a moral philosophy it includes the Gandhian principles of *Satyagraha* (truth force) and *Ahimsā* (non-violence) as its most important ingredients. Consequently, it is religious philosophy. Politically, "*Sarvodaya* does not mean good government or majority rule, it means freedom from government, it means decentralization of power."<sup>45</sup> For Vinoba, "the best kind of government is one where it is possible to doubt whether any government exists at all."<sup>46</sup> He calls *Sarvodaya* a "third force" opposed to the other two forces, which he describes as *Himsā* (violence) and *Danda-Shakti* (legislative power of punishment). As a third force, *Sarvodaya* is "abolition of power through service". It is *Lok-nīti* (politics of people) as opposed to *Raj-nīti* (politics of power).<sup>47</sup> It is founded on "service through understanding in a spirit of love."<sup>48</sup> Its goal is not the greatest good of the greatest number, but the greatest good of all people. As Kaka Kalelkar points out, for Vinoba, even if a single person is unhappy, then the happiness of all the others is useless.<sup>49</sup> Socially, the aim of *Sarvodaya* is to initiate

44. Vinoba Bhave, *Democratic Values* (Kashi : Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, 1962), p. 49.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

47. Shriman Narayan, *Vinoba : His Life and Work* (Bombay : Popular Prakashan, 1970), p. 334.

48. Vinoba Bhave, *Democratic Values* (Kashi : Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, 1962), p. 203.

49. Kaka Kalelkar, *Vinoba Aur Sarvodaya Kranti* (Varanasi : Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, 1970), p. 118.

reform and reconstruction through modified education (*Nai Talim*), economic development, cottage industry, and the uplift of the Harijans. All such activities are to be guided by a spirit of egalitarianism which Vinoba describes as *Sāmya-yoga* (yoga of equality). Thus, a *Sāmya-yogi* seeks the welfare of all, and desires good for every human being when he desires good for himself. He seeks a universal order and challenges all forms of organizational hierarchy. Theologically, *Sāmya-yoga* is based on the Vedantic axiom that *Ātman = Brahman*. Therefore, *Sarvodaya* is not merely a social ideology but also a spiritual philosophy. The mission of *Sarvodaya* can be summarized as *Sāmoohik Sādhana* or collective search for peace and harmony which involves the whole world. It carries with it a spirit of universalism, which emphasizes *Loka nīti* (universal morality) searches for *Loka shakti* (infinite moral energy), and attempts to harness *Jan-shakti* (inner power).<sup>50</sup> In order to achieve its goal it follows naturalistic, humanistic, and altruistic ethics.

Although *Sarvodaya* remains a philosophy, its implementation begins with the *Bhoodan* (land gift) Movement and is then carried to other activities. In order to achieve a *Sāmya-yogi* society, Vinoba had been a follower of *Sarvodaya* for a long time, before he arrived in Telangana in 1951, where *Bhoodan* Movement was born. However, once it gained momentum, it became the primary vehicle for practising *Sarvodaya*. It was an outgrowth of *Sarvodaya*, but it further helped Vinoba to crystallize his ideas on *Sarvodaya*. It should be noted that the spirit of renunciation continued to play an important role in the formulation of *Bhoodan*. For, in response to a question regarding the basis of *Bhoodan*, Vinoba identifies three major concepts — *Yajña* (sacrifice), *Dāna* (giving) and *Tapas* (renunciation). He admits that these are derived from the *Bhagavad Gītā*.<sup>51</sup> Theologically Vinoba believes that air, water and land belong to God, and no one should have a vested interest in them.<sup>52</sup> Thus, through his movement he sought to bring about an equal distribution of land among the rich and the poor. Furthermore, he saw this Movement as a medium for reaching a society based on religious order. He wrote, "I believe that this *Bhoodan* work of mine is a mission of *dharma-chakra*

50. V. Narayan Karan Reddy, *Sarvodaya Ideology and Acharya Vinoba Bhave* (Hyderabad : The Andhra Pradesh Sarvodaya Mandal, 1963), p. 21.

51. Kaka Kalelkar, *Op. Cit.*, p. 39.

52. Daniel P. Hoffman, *India's Social Miracle* (California : Naturegraph Co., 1961), p. 45.

*pravartana* — the establishment of a righteous order.”<sup>53</sup> In order to achieve this goal more concepts were added to the Movement.

An important aspect of Vinoba’s philosophy is the concept of *Dān*. Although popularly translated as “gift” or “charity”, Vinoba makes it a religious concept. In this context, *Dān* is not merely charity, but an act of spiritual exercise that has larger implications for effecting changes in one’s life. Furthermore, *Dān* is viewed as an “equitable distribution,” not merely as ‘giving’. It was this understanding that led to the development of *Gramdan* (village gift) as an important aspect of *Bhoodan* Movement. *Gramdan* was seen as a movement of fundamental importance to bring peace and harmony, since it focussed its attention on the village — the smallest unit of habitation in India. *Gramdan* emphasised that the entire land was to be owned by the village, and distributed among the farmers. Later on such concepts as *Zilā-dān* (district gift) and *Prākhand-dān* (block gift) were added to the *Bhoodan* Movement.<sup>54</sup> Their primary objective was *Nirmān* (development) of the country. To make this programme successful, such ideas as *Sampati-dān* (giving of wealth), *Shram-dān* (giving of labour), *Buddhi-dān* (giving of knowledge), and *Gupta-dān* (secret giving) were also incorporated into the Movement. The final aim of these gifts was *Jivan-dān* (giving of oneself). Through these processes, Vinoba envisaged *Gramrāj* (rule of the village), and eventually the establishment of *Rāmrāj* or the kingdom of God on earth.

All measures adopted by Vinoba to bring about the *Rāmrāj*, point in the direction of his model of renunciation. Whether *Bhoodan*, *Gramdan*, or *Jivandan*, they all require *yajña* or sacrifice to make his dream come true, Vinoba Bhave looks at *Sarvodaya* as a collective *Sādhana*, which requires every individual to emulate the renunciatory model. His Movement is a testimony to the fact that the ancient spirituality of India can be revived, and given new dimensions. However, this form of ‘renunciation’ requires hard work, individually and collectively, as Vinoba has demonstrated through his life and work. In the years to come, scholars will debate whether Vinoba’s Movement was a social movement or political movement. Only the more discerning eyes will recognize it as a religious movement. For, behind the popularization of the *Bhoodan* Movement, there is the religious *Sādhana* of Vinoba Bhave, who is a renunciate *par excellence* in the

53. Vinoba Bhave, *Democratic Values* (Kashi: Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, 1962), p. 136.

54. Hoffman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 32.



twentieth century. The strength and vitality which filled the Movement came from his life as a *sannyāsin*.

### Concluding Remarks

Since Vinoba Bhave belongs to the twentieth century, one wonders if he represents a change in the traditional Hindu consciousness. In a sense, this question can be asked of all modern Hindu thinkers who have been affected by modernity. This question demands some reflection on the problem of continuity and change in the Hindu religion. There is no doubt that Vinoba is steeped in the traditional Hindu spirituality, but he also brings changes to it. However, his innovations are by no means so different as to constitute a radical departure from Hinduism. There are those who believe that Hinduism went through a transformation when it encountered Western influences in India in the 18th and 19th centuries. Consequently, many Hindu thinkers attempted to reform Hinduism to suit modern times. Thus, *Renascent Hinduism* was born. However, one of the characteristics of this Movement was to revitalize the Hindu spirituality in the light of its ancient wisdom. A return to the Vedas and Upaniṣads was emphasized in order to make India's ancient religion meaningful for the present. Vinoba Bhave can be viewed as a child of *Renascent Hinduism* insofar as Tagore, Aurobindo, and Gandhi are also children of the same Movement. While these three were educated in the West, Vinoba defied the wishes of his father to be educated abroad. In spite of the former being influenced by the West, none of these thinkers departed radically from Hinduism. Furthermore, it is not so much the fact that they borrowed from the West (particularly Christianity) which is important ; rather it is the fact that this encounter made them aware of the need to apply Hindu religiosity in those areas of Indian life that had been neglected. In this regard, Vinoba represents the continuity of the ancient Indian religious tradition in modern times. As for his attempt to bring about a change in Hinduism, he is motivated by his own spiritual growth. The application of spiritual ideas to politics, service to humanity, emphasis on social change, involvement in world affairs, and the importance of the present time are all born out of Vinoba's own vision of the betterment of India and the world. If these are seen as his innovations, they are changes brought about from within the Hindu tradition rather than from extraneous source.

Almost thirty years have passed since Vinoba Bhave launched his *Bhoodan* Movement and came in light in world affairs. During these years, his Movement has not escaped being challenged by those who

have doubted the measure of its success. He never came close to achieving the goal of collecting fifty million acres of land for the poor of India, which he had vowed to do. There have been numerous organizational difficulties like the unpreparedness of the *Bhoodan* workers, lack of commitment, bureaucracy, legal squabbles, non-co-operation of the landlords, etc. More recently, there have been reports of some landlords regaining control of the land which they had once donated. Furthermore, many close associates of Vinoba are dead or have grown quite old. Vinoba himself has remained inactive for quite a while as time has taken its toll on his physical strength. Under these conditions two questions are being raised : First, to what extent has Vinoba been successful? Second, what after Vinoba ?

In response to the first question, let me suggest that those who raise the question of measuring the success of Vinoba, tend to do so by evaluating the success of *Bhoodan* in terms of the amount of land collected and redistributed. It seems to me that it is wrong to put the emphasis on *Bhoodan* Movement. It must not be forgotten that Vinoba viewed *Bhoodan* as a part of a larger movement — *Sarvodaya*. And, the answer to the question of the measure of success resides within the ideology of *Sarvodaya*. In the light of the renunciation of the fruits of the action, the questions of success or failure become devoid of any meaning. Vinoba himself learned this from *Bhagavad Gītā* but it was Gandhi who exemplified its truth for him. He mentions an occasion when Vinoba expressed his doubts to Gandhi on certain actions, which according to him were to produce no significant results. Gandhi responded, “ Vinoba, it is not for us to worry about the result. All that we have to consider is whether it is right.” As far as *Bhoodan* is concerned, Vinoba deemed it right, and proceeded to work in the spirit of detachment. Once someone asked him if his Movement would succeed. He answered, “ fire merely burns. It does not care whether any one puts a pot on it, fills it with water and puts rice in it to make a meal. To burn is the limit of its duty.” If we must ask whether Vinoba’s Movement was a success, then we must also ask whether Gandhi’s Movement was a success. Not only that, we must also ask if the *Gītā* was a success in teaching the doctrine of *Nishkāma karma*.

In answer to the query — what after Vinoba ? — we can anticipate how Vinoba will answer. After Gandhi’s assassination, a similar question was put to him—what after Gandhi ? On numerous occasions he tried to silence this manner of questioning. For him, attachment to the person of Gandhi defeated the philosophy of non-attachment. Thus he criticized those who were given to hero-worship and

deification of Gandhi. He once wrote, "today, for me Gandhiji is no longer a person, he is an idea." Here lies the answer to the question — what after Vinoba ? He is an *Idea* which will survive long after the person Vinoba is gone. And in the years to come, the extent to which this *Idea* is made into an actuality will depend on the commitment of those who believe in its truth.