

# ACHARYA VINOBA BHAVE



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# An Illustrious Life

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## Birth and Childhood

Acharya Vinoba Bhave was born in a Brahmin family of Maharashtra on September 11, 1895 at the village of Gagode in the Pen Tehsil (sub-division) of Kolaba district of Bombay Presidency. His mother, Rukmini Devi, was a deeply pious, devout woman and father, Sri Narhar Shambhurao Bhave, a textile technologist, was very scrupulous, methodical and straightforward, of stern character and discipline. As his father was in service in the Baroda State, later merged in the State of Bombay, now Maharashtra. Vinoba passed a large part of his childhood with his grandfather, Sri Shambhurao Bhave, a very pure and devout soul, who commanded a great reputation and authority in the locality. As Vinoba said, it was the pious Shambhurao who was largely responsible in giving a religious trend to his life.

Of his parents' five children, Vinoba was the first-born. The younger, Sri Balkova ran the Nature-cure clinic, founded by Mahatma Gandhi, at Uruli Kanchan near Poona. The third, Sri Shivaji Bhave, who had developed himself as philologist and a deep scholar of saints' literature was an authority on Vinoba's writings. The fourth was a sister, Shantabai who after leading a married life for a few years, passed away at a young age. Dutta

was the youngest who breathed his last in his childhood. Like Vinoba, his two brothers, Balkova and Shivaji were also unmarried and had adopted a life of service and renunciation.

### **Early Education**

Vinoba had his early education at his home in nature's surroundings, at Gagode. He was a voracious reader. But he read nothing that he did not digest and enjoy. He was also quite fond of newspapers, among which he read out *Kesari*, the well — known mouth — piece of Lokmanya Tilak, to his mother regularly. It is the mother who has contributed the largest in his make-up. From her, he, Vinya, as she called him, developed his wonderful asceticism and taste for dedication and self-effacement. Whatever she did she dedicated it to God and always shared her household preparations with her neighbours, the duty of distribution being enjoined upon her beloved Vinya. An extremely religious and devoted woman, with the songs of saints on her lips, she lived a very godly and quiet ideal family life.

Until 1905, Vinoba's father lived in Baroda alone. Then he called his family and sent Vinoba to the Primary School where he completed two years' course. Then his father, temperamentally a teacher as he was, taught him English, Mathematics, etc. for three years. In 1910, Vinoba began regular school life as a student of the IV English Standard. In the beginning he fared very creditably in his class tests and examinations. But as his extra-curricular studies widened, his course work suffered, though he passed easily. Apart from the writings and utterances of Maharashtra's saints, he devoured nationalistic and political literature.

Besides literature, Vinoba was fond of Mathematics. It was the exactness of Mathematics which has become a part of his life. And he had remained a mathematician all his life, for he did nothing unless he satisfied himself by weighing its pros and cons fully and making close calculations about it. Which was why there was no wastage about him and he had dreamt no dream that was not realised. Passing his Matric in November, 1913, Vinoba joined the Intermediate. But he was not content with his life and ever since 1911 was thinking of leaving home for good and giving himself up to something higher. Two years of the class Intermediate were of intense inner agitation and suffering.

### Abandoning Formal Education

One day, early in 1916, he was sitting by his mother who was cooking food. He had some rolled papers in his hands. He lit fire to one at its end. It began to burn. Mother asked him what he was doing. He replied that he was reducing his school and college certificates to ashes. She suggested that they might prove useful if required in future. Out came the unequivocal answer, "No, now that I have decided to leave the college I will never require them. So why keep them with me?" It was a fateful decision.

On his way to Bombay in March 1916 to appear in the Intermediate examination, Vinoba detrained at Surat, took the train to Bhusaval and left for Banaras. To his close friends who asked him what was the inner urge that impelled him to this course of action, he replied, "Longing to attain Brahma, the Imperishable and All-Pervading". This desire to become part and parcel of the Eternal Self, i.e., to reduce himself to zero, was the single passion of Vinoba's life. He so wanted to eliminate himself that his any and every action might be reduced to non-action. Hence, his at once original and bold interpretation of the word (Vikrama) occurring in the Gita (Chapter IV, Verse 17) as 'specific action', contrary to the usual interpretation of 'wrong action', whereof he had found the illustrious formula: (action) (specific action) (inaction or non-action). His utter humility in claiming no authorship or entity for himself was remarkably shown in the few couplets which he had written by way of introduction to his Marathi rendering of Gandhiji's pious, charming, little book *Mangal Prabhat*. The first couplet of that introduction runs thus:

(Inspired by God, graced by Mahatmaji, I 'messenger like' but speak the language emanating from the saints.  
Nothing of Vinya is in this.)

And in the last, fifth, his feeling of reduction to zero reaches almost its climax:

(Vinya is like the non-being zero of Mathematics. The master or *guru* is one and unique whose esteem grows by the addition of zeros.)

This verse may be regarded to contain the key to Vinoba's life.

### **Literary Pursuit**

During the few years he was at Baroda, Vinoba gathered up more jewels of literature and making them as his own, he established an intimate contact with the immortal great whose company he continued to keep ever after. His memory being strong, sayings after sayings of Maharashtra saints were committed to his memory and he thus created for himself a spirituo-intellectual realm. His study helped him immensely later to translate the Sanskrit *Gita* into *Gita* in the form of parallel Marathi couplets. When he was requested one day to find time and translate the *Gita* into Hindi as well, he replied, "Well, I can't do that, for I have not read your Hindi saints except Tulsidas, that too only his *Ramayana* and *Vinaya Patrika*. As regards Marathi, I had mugged up all I could lay hands upon long long ago." From his early years Vinoba had been fond of walking. In Baroda, he, with his few friends, used to walk three to four hours and cover ten or twelve miles a day. Walking and reading could be said to be his main two occupations. In the Baroda State Library he was a familiar figure, with his *Kurta* hanging down the shoulder.

Roamed as Vinoba did in a world of his own, he was rather averse to organisational work and activities. On a Diwali day in 1914, his friend and companion, Sri Raghunath Sridhar Dhotre (renowned secretary of the Gandhi Seva Sangh and later secretary of the All-India Gandhi National Memorial Fund and Trust) took the initiative in founding the *Vidyarthi Mandal*, a sort of study circle. Vinoba promised every cooperation but refused to accept any executive post with the remarks, "Making me the organiser of some institution or programme is like appointing Tukaram to the post of a bank manager." Hence, Vinoba's characteristic aloofness from all groups, parties or organisations.

### **Serious Studies at Banaras**

The year 1916 marked the close of one chapter of Vinoba's life and the commencement of another. He had left college studies for all time. What to do next to meet the inner urge was the question. But he was sure of one thing—for a vision of the Divine everything had to be dedicated unto Him, as also for true national service. With this resolve to sacrifice all unto His feet, he came to Banaras.

He began studying Sanskrit. He also contacted political workers and terrorists but was soon disillusioned. For they did not reach his standard of dedication and renunciation. But he was very much attracted by a speech which was the talk of the town. It was Mahatma Gandhi's historic address before a princely audience in the newly founded Banaras Hindu University, in which he had asked the Princes of India to go and sell their jewels. Vinoba got a report of it from the newspapers. Immediately he wrote a letter about it, touching both religion and politics, to the Mahatma who gave a prompt reply. Vinoba sent a rejoinder and was again replied. His restless soul remaining unpacified, he penned down a third letter. Then Gandhiji wrote back to him that such riddles as raised by him could not be solved through correspondence alone and that he would advise him (Vinoba) to come to the Kocharab Ashram (then recently started by Gandhiji) for detailed talk. Immediately Vinoba left for Kocharab and thus his stay at Banaras was cut short to three months only.

### **Meeting the Mahatma**

On Wednesday, June 7, 1916, he met Mahatma Gandhi. Never was held a more epoch-making meeting. Their eyes discovered them and a relationship was established which no distance of time or space could efface. Vinoba was a full-fledged member of the Ashram. Vinoba had gone to the Ashram with an inner resolve to behave as (inert Bharat), again an expression of his ambition to become zero. He would quietly perform the duties given to him and maintain utter calm. But the evening prayer was followed by some study, discussions or questions and answers. There Vinoba happened to ask some questions, though very rarely. They, however, revealed the man that he was, completely above the average and of a different mould altogether. They of the Ashram soon began to admire and love him, and requested him to do some teaching work for their sake. He willingly took it up. Shortly after Babu came to know that he (Vinoba) had not informed about his movements to his parents. He wrote to Vinoba's father at Baroda a brief letter himself:

"Your son Vinoba is with me. Your son has acquired at so tender an age such high-spiritedness and asceticism as took of me years of patient labour to."

What a great tribute!

But somehow Vinoba's health in the Ashram declined. So Vinoba took one year's leave. Bapu agreed. Exactly a year after, down to the very minute, Vinoba produced himself back before the master. Bapu had almost forgotten it. But he was very much moved by so scrupulous execution of a promise. Recalling the event one day, he said to Vinoba, "It showed your loyalty to truth." Humbly Vinoba observed, "Rather, it was my loyalty to Mathematics." Bapu smiled, "Can Mathematics ever betray truth?"

Vinoba spent half of his leave days at Wai where in the *Prajna Pathshala* of the renowned Sanskrit scholar, Sri Narayan Shastri Marathe, he attended lectures on *Brahma-Sutra Bhashya* of Shankaracharya. Shankaracharya's *Gita Bhashya* is Vinoba's almost constant companion. Perhaps of all thinkers, none has influenced Vinoba so much as Shankaracharya. The other six months were spent in going round the countryside and propagating knowledge. What Vinoba actually did during these 12 months is, thanks to Mahadev Desai, on record. On February 10, 1918, he wrote a long letter to Bapu giving full details of his studies and activities. This letter was preserved by Mahadevbhai and forms a part of the latter's diary. During this period, Vinoba studied the *Upanishads*, the *Gita*, the *Manusmriti*, the *Patanjali Yoga Darshan* and read through the *Nyaya Sutra*, *Vaisheshik Sutra* and *Yagya Valka Smriti*.

Perhaps the most daring work of Vinoba at Wai was to conduct a corn-grinding class in which he and his friends ground wheat and other cereals into flour. They searched out men who carried their wheat to the mill. They grounded it themselves at the rate of two seers a paise. Many of them were High School students who never did such things. Yet the class continued for two months during which they all earned so much as fetched a good number of books for their common reading room.

Concluding his letter, Vinoba wrote:

"To the best of my ability, I have tried to observe our Ashram rules.

"What else may I say? Will He make me a fit instrument of His service? This one desire dominates my thought even in my dreams..."

“Vinoba earnestly presses for—he who regards himself as your son —entreats of you a reply in your own hand.”

Reading the said letter, Bapu remarked that the disciple had surpassed the master and that Vinoba was a veritable Bhim (giant or Hercules). In his reply Bapu wrote:

“I don't know what epithet to use in respect of you. Your love and character overwhelm me. I am not competent to judge you. You have tried yourself and I accept your judgement as mine. I accept the position of father you have asked me to. You come very near fulfilling my expectations of you. I hold that a truthful father produces a more truthful son than himself. A true son is he who carries forward the father's work. If the father be truthful, resolute and kind, the son inherits these qualities in a more pronounced degree. I see you have done so. I feel they have come to you through no efforts of mine. I, therefore, accept the position of father you have offered me as a gift of love. And I shall try to deserve it. If I prove a Hirnakashyap, you must prove a Prahlad.

“You are right. You have scrupulously kept the Ashram observances even out of it.... May God give you long life. May He make of you an instrument of service to Hind! That is my prayer”

A prayer, so noble and genuine, could not possibly remain unfulfilled.

On returning to the Sabarmati Ashram, Vinoba participated in the usual activities of the Ashram. But his special work was teaching in the Rashtriya Shala (National School). He was also called to give lectures in the Gujarat Vidyapeeth, then recently started.

### **Mother's Death**

Another important event in Vinoba's life, occurring about this time (1918) was the death of his dear and revered mother. Baroda

was ravaged by a terrible influenza epidemic. At Bapu's bidding Vinoba went there to be at his mother's service. Reaching home he found both the parents as also the youngest brother, Dutta, ill. The last was to go first and three days later the mother also passed away, while the father slowly recovered. Vinoba expressed a desire that the funeral hymns should not be chanted by the professional priest. His father pleaded helplessness. So Vinoba did not participate in the funeral ceremony and spent the day in reciting the *Gita* and the *Upanishads* at home.

### **Ashram at Wardha**

On January 14, 1921, a branch of the Satyagraha Ashram (Sabarmati) was started at Wardha, at Seth Jamnalal Bajaj's persuasion, under the supervision of Sri Ramniklal Modi. But on account of ill-health, Sri Modi could not stay there long. So Bapu asked Vinoba to take up its charge. Vinoba readily consented and on 6th April 1921, he left Sabarmati for Wardha. His old Baroda friend, Sri Raghunath Dhotre accompanied him as also five students of the *Shala*. Of these five, mention must be made of two— Sri Krishnadas Gandhi (former Secretary of the All-India Spinners' Association) and Sri Vallabhji Bhagwanji Patel, popularly known as Vallabhswami, now joint secretary of the All-India Sarv Seva Sangh. Sri Vallabhswami, an ardent disciple of Vinoba, is among the most respected and loved constructive workers of the younger generation. Reaching Wardha on April 8, 1921, Vinoba came to the Satyagraha Ashram, located in what is now known as Maganvadi. After some three months, the Ashram was shifted to Bajajwadi where it continued till the end of 1923. Early in 1924, the Ashram was shifted to the new and permanent spot, now called *Mahila Ashram*.

### **'Maharashtra Dharma' on Scene**

In 1923, Vinoba brought about a Marathi monthly, *Maharashtra Dharma*, which was unique in that every word of its 48 pages, containing serious first-class matter, came from Vinoba's pen. But only four issues appeared as Vinoba went away to jail on account of the Nagpur Flag Satyagraha movement. Later it came out as a weekly and continued for about three years.

### **Philosophical Pursuit**

Vinoba's activities from 1921 to 1947 might be regarded as researches both of a soul-physicist in the laboratory of his self and that of a cottage-chemist in that of his Ashram-village. The former took him to cosmic spiritual heights, while the latter found expression in the enrichment of the various items of Gandhiji's constructive programme, specially Khadi, village industries, *Nai Talim* and *Safai* (sanitation and hygiene). On 25th December 1932, he shifted to Nalwadi, a village about two miles from Wardha town, where he resolved to support himself by spinning work alone and he span for hours on end, going deep into the various aspects of Khadi craft. Illness overtook him and he was advised to go to the hills for rest. He told Bapu that he had chosen his own hill station—a desolated hillock-like piece of land by the side of Paunar river, some five miles from the Wardha town, where Seth Jamnalal had built for himself a country-house. Vinoba gave it the meaningful name of *Paramdham Ashram* which has remained his headquarters ever since.

### **Silent Campaign for the Mahatma**

Again it was from Wardha that Vinoba took his silent part in political campaigns of Gandhiji. He was among the moving spirits of the Nagpur Flag Satyagraha of 1923, his other companions being Seth Jamnalal, Mahatma Bhagwandin, Sri Ganpatrao Tikekar and Sri Nilkanthrao Deshmukh. In connection with a memorable speech which he delivered at Nagpur on 17th June, 1923, Vinoba, together with Sri Dhotre, was arrested and sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment. It was his first experience of jail life. On an interview day, when some friends came to see him they enquired how things in the jail were. With his characteristic frankness, Vinoba replied, "Well, you must have seen a circus. There, men guide and control animals. A jail is exactly the reverse; here animals guide and control men!" The jail authorities, present on the occasion, simply blushed at the great truth. From Nagpur jail, Vinoba and Sri Dhotre were transferred to Akola Jail. They were released on 20th September 1923. Immediately on reaching the Ashram at Bajajwadi, in the early hours of the morning, Vinoba rejoined his work as usual, as if nothing extraordinary had happened.

### **In Jail after Arrest**

An important event of Akola Jail needs special mention. Before Vinoba reached Akola jail, political prisoners refused to work, particularly those who were sentenced to simple imprisonment. Vinoba appealed to their good sense and explained to them that food without work was sin. He prevailed upon all of them to regard it as God's rare blessing that they had an opportunity of learning the art of useful physical labour which they should whole-heartedly acquire. The entire lot of political prisoners was moved and "began working. The jail authorities called it a Vinoba-made magic.

### **Satyagraha at Vaikom**

In 1924, Bapu sent Vinoba to Vaikom (Travancore) to guide and supervise the Harijan temple-entry Satyagraha, Sri Vallabhswami accompanied Vinoba in this pilgrimage.

### **Gram Seva**

Sometime after, Vinoba prepared a plan to spread a net of *Gram Seva* (village service) work near about Wardha, covering all the 300 villages of the Wardha taluka. Several of his students and co-workers took to this work and different villages were allotted to them. Vinoba maintained his contact with these villages right upto the beginning of 1948. It was during this time that Vinoba practised the arts of a farmer, spinner, weaver and scavenger. And, of course, he is a born teacher. He adorns whatever he touches. He has remained throughout a student in the highest sense of the term.

### **Jailed Again**

In 1932, on Gandhiji's return from the Round Table Conference, Vinoba happened to be at Jalgaon (Khandesh). He was pained to see terror gripping the general people. He decided to address a public meeting. He did it wherein he made a plea for fearlessness and self-help and assured that the British rule would not, and could not, stay long.

This took him to jail where he was tried and convicted for six months. He passed his sentence at Dhulia Jail.

Again, on return from jail Vinoba took to his *Gram Seva* work. Vinoba's ambition to destroy his ego and turn into a zero is also manifest by what he said casually in Dhulia Jail. To quote him:

"People delight nowadays in talking in terms of the *Ramayana*. British Raj is said to stand for Havana, Mahatmaji for Rama, Vallabhbhai for Hanumana, Jawaharlal for Angada and so on. I say to myself; what role is there for me in this *Ramayana*? Looking about, Ahalya turning into stone suggests herself. I shall be blest, thrice blest if I were to become that stone."

Never was humility more excelled. Never was ambition more ambitionless!

Towards the close of 1932 Vinoba wrote a letter to Gandhiji, giving the details of his village work and craving his guidance. Addressing him as *Krita-yugi Vinoba*, Gandhiji in the course of his reply observed:

"If something must be said, it is enough to say that the fiery ordeal you are going through would build a bridge between heaven and earth. If there is anything to communicate, I shall write."

Later, when he was to settle down at Nalwadi, Vinoba in a letter to the Master, wrote:

"Wardha Ashram will complete the twelfth year of its existence soon. A Yoga has done its full cycle. Experiences have been good. Egotism has disappeared. The conviction, that God alone is, has grown. But for your behest I would not have lived here so long. With me nothing counts in this world except your blessings. I may say that it has been my constant endeavour during these twelve years to observe the vows. Yet I have found many failings in myself. God has blest me more than my devotion has deserved."

He concluded:

"I know your blessings are ever there to cover me. Still I write this letter, seeking them. You take this

insignificant worker of yours under your protection. Secure for him from God the fitness that would make of him a worthy sacrifice in your great cause. If you have any directions to give for the future, please give."

Hardly would have been a master ever paid obeisance to thus by his disciple. Laying bare his heart, Bapu, addressing him as *Chiranjiva Vinoba* (as a father addresses his son), wrote:

"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."

What a rare master and a rare disciple!

### **Great Satyagrihi**

About 1937, Vinoba shifted, as observed earlier, from Nalwadi to Paunar. It was during his stay at Paunar in 1940 that Vinoba came into limelight and his name appeared for the first time on the front page of newspapers all over the country as India's first Satyagrahi of the Great War II. He was so chosen by Mahatma Gandhi as a devout symbol of opposition to all wars in general. After Vinoba offered Satyagraha he was arrested and sentenced to simple imprisonment of three months. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was chosen as the second Satyagrahi. He was, however, arrested before offering Satyagraha and was convicted for four years rigorous imprisonment. The Individual Satyagraha movement thereafter gathered momentum. On completing his term Vinoba again offered Satyagraha and was sentenced to six months' imprisonment. So also a third time, when Vinoba secured one year's imprisonment.

### **August Movement**

In the historic August movement of 1942, Vinoba was detained without trial on August 9, 1942, and released on 9th July 1945. He passed a portion of this detention period at Vellore Central Jail in Madras Presidency. It was there that he learnt from fellow-prisoners of Andhra, Karnatak, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the four great languages of the South. From Vellore he was transferred to

Seoni Central Jail (M. P.). After fifteen months' stay there, he was released. On the train journey from Seoni to Wardha via Nagpur, he was infinitely grieved to find aged parsons—both men and women—easing themselves in day light along the railway track. So on returning to Paunar he quietly rejoined his village work, and took up the programme of the scavenger of the village Sargaon. Daily he walked down three to four miles from Paunar to Sargaon and continued his work regularly in heat or cold, sun or rain. Nothing could interrupt him except the sudden death of Bapu when he felt called upon to undertake higher and more serious responsibilities.

### **Shanti Yatra**

From April 1948 onwards, he travelled round the country by train to have a first-hand idea of the situation in the country, particularly about the refugee problem. He has called this tour *Shanti Yatra* (Peace Pilgrimage). Besides, he took active interest in the resettlement of displaced Meos and refugees near about Delhi. That too, however, did not soothe his deeper yearnings. He returned to Paunar. Again an illness came to his rescue and after severe hard thinking he resolved upon a new venture of physical labour and self-sufficiency at his Ashram in which he himself worked in the field for eight to ten hours a day. He called it *Kanchana Mukti* (literally, freedom from gold) programme wherein he sought to get rid of the slavery of money in our life and to investigate the potentialities, social, economic, intellectual and moral, of productive physical labour intelligently performed. That experiment was carried on successfully by a band of selfless workers for three years until April 1953 when he called them away for the more pressing *Bhoodan Yojna* work in Bihar.

As has been said above, Vinoba translated *Gita* from the original in Sanskrit into Marathi in 1930-31 and gave it the name of *Gitai* (Gita mother), which has been sold in several lakhs. His devotion to *Gita* was matchless and utterly beyond description. As he says, he always remains immersed in the ocean of *Gita* and while in contact with the world outside he floats on its warm bosom. *Gita* is verily his mother. Says he in his *Gitai*:

“*Gita* is my mother and I am her innocent child. While I stumble or weep she lifts me up in her arms”.

Thus, Vinoba's life was a living commentary on the great classic. His Marathi discourses on *Gita, Gita Pravachan*, given to fellow prisoners in the Dhulia Jail in 1932, formed a wonderfully original and popular exposition of the *Gita* doctrine vis-a-vis our daily life.

It has been translated and published in Hindi, Gujarati, Oriya, Sindhi, Kannada, Telegu, Tamil, Malayalam, Urdu and Bengali. Perhaps no other book in modern India commands a greater sale than Vinoba's *Gita Pravachan*. Besides he had written, *Isthit-Pragya-Darshan*, dwelling on the well known 18 verses of the second chapter of *Gita*.

### **Nai Talim**

In fact, if Gandhiji was the preceptor of *Nai Talim* (or New Education), Vinoba was its father. He was a member of the Zakir Hussain Basic Education Committee formed at Mahatma Gandhi's instance in 1937. He had been guiding the progress of *Nai Talim* from one stage to another.

### **Role in Freedom Struggle**

Vinobaji was associated with Mahatma Gandhi in the independence movement. In 1932 he was sent to jail by the British colonial government because of his fight against British rule. There he gave a series of talks on *Gita*, in his native language Marathi, to his fellow prisoners.

These highly inspiring talks were later published as the book: "Talks on the Gita", and it was translated to many languages both in India and elsewhere. Vinoba felt that the source of these talks was something above and he believed that its influence would endure even if his other works were forgotten. In 1940 he was chosen by Gandhi to be the first Individual Satyagrahi (an Individual standing up for Truth instead of a collective action) against the British rule. It was said that Gandhi envied and respected Bhave's celibacy, a vow he made in his adolescence, in fitting with his belief in the Brahmacharya principle. Bhave also participated in the Quit India Movement.

### **Religious and Social Service**

Vinoba's religious outlook was very broad and it synthesised the truths of many religions. This can be seen in one of his hymns "Om Tat" which contains symbols of many religions.

Vinoba observed the life of the average Indian living in a village and tried to find solutions for the problems he faced with a firm spiritual foundation. This formed the core of his Sarvodaya (Awakening of all potentials) movement. Another example of this is the *Bhoodan* (land gift) movement started at Bhoodhan Pochampally. He walked all across India asking people with land to consider him as one of their sons and so give him a one seventh of their land which he then distributed to landless poor. Non-violence and compassion being a hallmark of his philosophy, he also campaigned against the slaughtering of cows.

### **Bhoodan's Miracle**

In India the *Bhoodan* movement by abolishing the instinct of private property paved the way for collective farming in the voluntarily donated lands. On 13 November 1951, Vinoba reached Delhi to meet the members of the Planning Commission and the Prime Minister who was its Chairman. The meeting went on for three successive days. There were two vital points of difference between Vinoba and the Planning Commission, the one relating to self-sufficiency in food and the other to full employment. He objected to the imports of food. Vinoba observed.

"The main question is attainment of self-sufficiency in food, I was sure that the promise would be kept. Meanwhile the Food Minister made some statements on food. He repeated the pledge, but added so many conditions and exceptions that hardly anything was left of it. The conditions and exceptions made the matter serious I, therefore, commented on the subject. A reply was given, but I was not satisfied. I wrote again I had by now begun to wonder whether experts had abandoned the principle that food imports should be stopped. I wondered whether commercial

considerations had been brought in to decide that it was not necessary to have complete self-sufficiency in food even though the country mainly agricultural.”

Though, Vinoba did not point out the methods by which the country could be made self-sufficient, he made it clear that the goal of the Five-Year Plan should be to stop food imports.

The other point of difference was on full employment. To quote Vinoba:

“Secondly I wanted a policy of full employment for all. The Planning Commission have agreed it is their duty, but they say they cannot, under present circumstances, undertake it. In my opinion there can be no national planning without it. It is only when they accept this responsibility, that they can develop the villages and make them self-sufficient.”

He could not convince the members of the Planning Commission on these two issues and they parted company, the reason being. ‘There is a difference between their approach and mine, though they have also the interest of the country at heart’.

Self-sufficiency in food can only be attained through mechanised collective farming, the introduction of which depends upon an agrarian revolution through the *Bhoodan* movement.

### **Towards Sarvodaya**

Gandhiji consumed himself for the sake of the long cherished dream of *Swaraj* and sowed the seed of another, *Sarvodaya*, i.e., the greatest good of one and all and not only of the greatest number. He showed how the mightiest political power could be made to quit by a people bent upon self-sacrifice and non-cooperation. In other words, he displayed the efficacy and potentialities of soul force as against coercive or violent force to usher in equality between one man and another.

From realisation of *Swaraj* to the quest for *Sarvodaya* was a natural step which has found its full expression in Vinoba. We have seen how this quest took Vinoba to Telangana where he struck upon and launched the *Bhoodan Yagna* programme that had

been accepted all over the country as the base to build the new order which Vinoba called *Samya Yoga*, basing its philosophy on the four verses of the *Gita* (Chap. VI, *Shlokas* 29-32), he pointed out that the three requisites for *Samya Yogi* society were:

- No power should be dominant in the society; there should only be a discipline of good thought.
- All faculties of the individual to be dedicated to the society which must provide the individual with opportunity to growth and development.
- The moral, social and economic value of all sorts of callings performed honestly according to one's strength should be the same.

Going into its details at one of his post-prayer speeches in Bihar, Vinoba remarked:

*"Samya Yoga* holds that therein dwells in every man the same spirit. It, therefore, makes no distinction between man and man. It even goes further and recognises no ultimate difference in spirit of man and other animals."

Dealing with its revolutionary aspect, he said:

"People have, upto the present, regarded themselves as owners of wealth they might have. This has produced clash of interests between different groups. I want to replace this idea of the private ownership of wealth in the interest of the society. Acceptance of the trusteeship ideal will transform our entire thinking, our regard to wealth and the relationship between the individual and the society. All that we have is for the service of the society, and not for serving our narrow selfish ends. Indeed, if we would but think of it deeply, real self-interest lies in sacrificing it at the feet of the society. This moral upliftment of the people which *Samya Yoga* brings about, is its distinctive feature."

Referring to the economic sphere, he pointed out:

*"According to Samya Yoga, every man who works for the society to the best of his ability, has a right to*

livelihood. All work which is an act of service to society must carry equal value. The prevailing practice is just the reverse of it. Intellectual work is regarded as superior to physical labour and paid more than the latter. This distinction between intellectual and physical labour is entirely baseless. Everyone must get full opportunity for development.

“The implementation of this view in the economic sphere will help the building up of self-sufficiency in the villages. They will produce all their primary needs, such as, food and cloth, milk and *ghee*, locally. God has made every one of us self-sufficient; that is the beauty of His plan. Every one has intelligence and capacity for work. We want the same kind of decentralisation in the economic sphere. Unless there is economic equality, domination and slavery and consequent distinction of high and low are bound to continue.”

In the political sphere:

“*Samya Yoga* will produce equally revolutionary changes in the political sphere too. We want an order of society which will be free not only from exploitation but also from every governmental authority. The power of Government will be decentralised and distributed among the villages. Every village will be a state in itself; the centre will have only nominal authority over them. In this way, gradually, we will reach a stage when authority in every form will have become unnecessary and will, therefore fade away, giving rise to a perfectly free society.”

And socially:

“In the social sphere also there will be no caste or any other variety of invidious distinctions. He who has the qualification of a *Brahmana* may be entrusted with work suited to his capacity but that will not give him a superior status. In the same way sweepers,

scavengers, and cobblers also cannot be regarded as inferior to others, because they render to society a service which is not less valuable than that of the *Brahmana*."

To fulfil the said 'ultimate aim', Vinoba had confined himself to Bihar as a test case until its land problem was solved. Going deeper still, he had concentrated on one district of Bihar, Gaya. From obtaining a few thousand acres of land in a small village in the Gaya district of Bihar to the establishment of *Samya Yoga* in the whole of the country, amidst the heat of circumstances as they subsisted, seems to be a very long and irksome journey, rather a dream. What was captivating, however, was not so much the final fruit as the determined effort to secure it. It was given to man to go but one step which was his destination in itself. One should regard it also as the last (for who had seen the whole except Him?) and proceed towards it with a zeal and resolve all one's own. Thus, shining like a lamp in windless space, it burns with a fire radiating light far and near. This single lamp, in course of time, lights another and more and more till a bright light encompasses the whole and darkness disappears. So went on Vinoba with an unflinching faith and indomitable courage.

Throughout his arduous march, Vinoba had been the unwearied, enviable *Satyagrahi*. His penetration into the interior and explaining to the people the real *Dharma* and urging them to do their duty, his insistence on truth and resistance to evil, all this is *Satyagraha*. Unlike the *Satyagraha* campaigns launched by Gandhiji there was not much excitement in the present case. One might call the latter as 'acute' form of *Satyagraha*, while the former as 'gentle'. Obviously the suffering involved in 'gentle satyagraha' is no less severe than in the 'acute' one, rather it might be more. But Vinoba did not anticipate either and carries on his work with no cares on his head, having placed them on the broad shoulders of God. In this connection it is worthwhile to recall what he once said:

"People ask me about *Satyagraha*. I have only got to say this much that if I can do anything it is only as a *Satyagrahi*. I believe even toady (May, 1952) I am

offering *Satyagraha*. To insist on truth, to create atmosphere for it, to undergo maximum suffering to enter another man's heart—all this is a form of *Satyagraha*. But if, inspite of this, acute *Satyagraha* would become a necessity, God will surely make you and me offer the same. He is there in the heart of all. As He is inspiring me, He will also inspire you."

The total *Bhoodan* donations exceeded 32 lakhs. It was not a big amount to look at but viewed in the perspective in which it had been obtained, it was a proof positive of the influence this gentle form of *Satyagraha* has produced in the atmosphere of our country. When the entire world was torn with strife and dissensions and our own country was marked with rivalries of caste, creed, untouchability, provincialism, languages, political parties, the high and the low, the rich and the poor, a successful execution of a pledge to collect 25 lakh acres within two years was no mean achievement. Presently when 'All India' outlook was at a discount, this was perhaps the only large scale and solid programme which has an 'All India' out-look and contributes to the integrated solidarity of the nation. Its message had already reached millions of people. It showed readiness, partly if not wholly, of the people to view its implications with sympathy and concern.

As had been said earlier, since *Bhoodan Yagna* was not mere a transference of land from one man to another, but a symbol of the shedding of ownership of land and property and a provision of the supply of means of production to the producer, it got a profound import and vital relevance. It presupposed a new human outlook and approach to all problems. It would not be out of place to mention a special experience in this connection. At a well-populated village in Darbhanga district of Bihar, when, a volunteer, together with a friend, approached a well-to-do *Zamindar* for donation, he willingly offered. But after the *Dan patra* was signed and they were to take leave of him, he beckoned them to stop and feelingly said, "One prayer!"

"What please," said they in amazement.

"Kindly pray for death for me".

They were stunned looking towards his son he repeated, "Kindly pray for death for me. You people may make him (the son) turn plough or cut grass, but let mine eyes be closed; I cannot see it."

"We follow what you say," with a pause they replied, "but rest assured your son would do more physical work than you and would also lead a life happier than yours. There was no happiness without work. May we beg you to take to a simple work? Begin spinning on the *charkha*."

"That's right. But how should I bear it all?"

"You should be glad at this development. We shall all work together, rest together and play together, and be happy," said they. He nodded his head in assent and smiled.

This gave an insight into the feelings of the land-owning class. Old times were changed. Old order was crumbling. A new one had to take its place—but if it was to be done on a weak and false foundation more harm could be done to people during the next one or two decades than had been done during the last two or three centuries.

The lines of the new order must be the same as were in keeping with our genius and were native to our soil. Needless to state that 'plans' or 'projects' depending on foreign capital and experts or internal combines shared by foreign interests would result in throwing us all from the frying pan into the fire. India had to be built from below. But how? Here is reproduced what a seventy-eight years old *kisan* in Darbhanga district narrated. When one asked him what, according to him, could actually help at the present juncture, with a beaming face he replied, "*Bhoodan* is the way to *Sachcha Swaraj* (or true freedom) and I want to assure you that I would refuse to die until *Sachcha Swaraj* is established!" Who would not bow down in gratitude at so bright a faith?

This was the voice of our India, real India and *Bhoodan* was the way to build her truly. What was wanting was the number of workers to carry the *Sarvodaya* message, the robust youths who could act as missionaries in this work. It was a programme to create a new economic order, a new political order and a new social order and bring in *Sarvodaya*. Our fathers and grand fathers,

born in the beginning of this century or earlier did the stupendous task of freeing India from the British yoke. Let us be grateful to them for it and now see to what we could do.

The famished masses at home and the war-fear-ravaged millions abroad looked to us with hope and faith. It was ours to be the crusaders of a new order, a new India and a new world. The *Bhoodan* movement has established that it could show us the way in the deepest gloom we were involved in. Land-distribution was only a minor part of it. Virtually it aimed at re-discovering the dormant quality of man and make the same a social force with wide wings. *Bhoodan* was a march in the further evolution of the human kind. It was just paving the way for the quicker and greater development and prosperity of the society.

It was an endeavour to direct man's course from the rails of distrust, aggression and bloodshed to those of trust, self-suffering and love. *Bhoodan* was to set up a new world, to create a new man. It had a message for every country, for every citizen of the world. Upon India's youth it enjoined a duty we could not forego. Should we realise it before it was too late!

Vinoba gave the call:

"I appeal to you all to help me. This is revolutionary work I am doing. I want to revolutionise thought, revolutionise the means. The youth has in him the urge for new creation, so say the sages. There is a new world to create, a new mission to do, that I have opened up for you."

### **Surrender to God**

Vinoba's whole life was an utter surrender to God whom he saw in the smallest particle as also in the poorest and most down-trodden in the land. Sri Mahadev Desai wrote about him:

"Vinoba has something which others have not. His first rank characteristic is to resolve his decision into action the moment the former is once made. His second characteristic is continuous growth. Besides Bapu, I found this quality in Vinoba alone."

Like the steady and incessant current of gushing stream Vinoba was always vigorous, fresh and new. Right thought was his constant companion. The development of the two—the thought and man with it—went together and one helped the other in ascending to higher and still higher altitudes. A born Satyagrahi as he was, Vinoba's Paunar experiment of *Kanchan-mukti* was a robust, thought silent, physical manifestation of the disciplined expression of his ever-growing personality eager to empty itself of all desires and non-desires, to impart Satyagrahi aroma to the new freedom-air of the country and to make Swarajya a living reality with the teeming millions. He proceeded to materialise his dream with the twin weapons of love and bodily labour. It was, as it were, during his self-sought quest of a medium for its complete fulfilment that the concept of *Bhoodan Yagna* flashed across his mind.

### **The Living Legend**

Immediately after independence, in a morbid state of affairs, there seemed to be in our country but one man who, unmoved by the dazzling expanse of money or machine, untouched by the excitement and passion for pleasure or speed, undisturbed by the dark rage and fear of power or pomp, was devoted to his duty with a spirit content in itself, with an intelligence stable and settled, and with an ardour deep and sublime. For more than three decades past, he had been humbly consuming himself at the altar of the nation's real liberty. When the British departed from the Indian political stage he was, as ever before, carrying on at Paunar in Wardha district his silent constructive activities which included clearing latrines and lanes of a village. Soon after departed Gandhiji under whose spiritual shadow he had grown all these years. A voice from within exhorted him to enlarge the physical domain of the field of his work and render it vast and sweeping in consonance with its far-spreading social, mental and moral empire. Accordingly, Vinoba, as he was known, came out of his voluntary seclusion. Within six years he had developed into India's most popular character, almost a legend.

### **Gandhiji's True Disciple**

On 7 June 1916 he had met Mahatma Gandhi and this opened a new chapter in his life. Vinoba became a member of the *Ashram*.

Mahatma Gandhi even at the first meeting was very much impressed by his inner impulse and character.

Vinoba took a leading part in the *Ashram* and became a true disciple of *Bapu*. In a memorable letter Mahatma Gandhi wrote of him in the following words:

"I don't know what epithet to use in respect of you. Your love and character overwhelm me I am not competent to judge you. You have tried yourself and I accept your judgement as mine. I accept the position of father you have asked me to. You come very near fulfilling my expectations of you I hold that a truthful father produces a more truthful son than himself. A true son is he who carries forward the father's work. If the father be truthful, resolute and kind the son inherits these qualities in a more pronounced degree, I see you have done so I feel they have come to you through no efforts of mine I, therefore, accept the position of father you have offered me as a gift of love. And I shall try to deserve it. If I prove a *Hirnakashyap*, you must prove a *Prahalad*.

"You are right You have scrupulously kept the *Ashram* observances even out of it. May God give you long life. May He make of you an instrument of service to Hind! That is my prayer."

Later years of Vinoba were passed at Sabarmati *Ashram* where he came in close touch with Congress workers like Seth Jamnalal Bajaj and others. He took a leading part in the various activities of the *Ashram*. His hobbies were hand-spinning, organising village industries, *Nai Talim* and *Safai* (New Education and Hygiene).

In 1924 Mahatma Gandhi had sent him to Vikom in Travancore State to guide and supervise the *Harijan* temple-entry *Satyagraha*. From that time onwards Vinoba has taken a keen interest in the uplift of Harijans and he is now easily regarded as one of their best friends. Vinoba was imprisoned twice, which Hallam Tennyson called 'a poor ration' for a close associate of Gandhi. As mentioned earlier, Vinoba was a linguist of eminence. He

knew several languages. Marathi was his mother language, so also are Gujarati and Hindi. He knew Urdu, Bengali, Oriya, Punjabi and all the four South Indian languages. He had been a born Satyagrahi and was a living example of Mahatma Gandhi, after his death. He propagated Mahatma's mission with the greatest zeal and there was no other person living in India, who had more imbibed his qualities, habits and aspirations to change the face of Mother India.

### Heightening Mahatma's Mission

In fact, he had enlarged the scope of the mission of Mahatma Gandhi by starting the *Bhoodan* movement which was unparalleled in the history of the world.

### A Living Saint

Vinoba was a living saint and no single personality could attract the Indian masses more than him. In habits he was a true representative of the teeming millions. Above all in the words of Shri Mahadeo Desai:

"Vinoba has something which others have not his first rank characteristic is to resolve his decision into action the moment the former is once made his second characteristic is continuous growth. Besides Bapu, I found this quality in Vinoba alone."

The success of the *Bhoodan* movement arose precisely because it had been given through saint Vinoba, the colour of *Yajna* to the masses.

### Accomplished Editor

Though, publicity, averse to Vinoba was an accomplished editor. Mention has already been made of his *Maharashtra Dharma*. In 1949 he started from Wardha a Hindi monthly, *Sarvodaya*, now recognised all over the country as an authorised exponent of the Sarvodaya ideology. Another monthly intimately connected with Vinoba is the Marathi *Sevak*, edited by his secretary, Sri Damodardas Mundada. *Sevak* is printed in Vinoba's Ashram at

Paunar and appears in *Loknagari* characters, comprising of Vinoba's own improvements in the *Devnagari* script and making it more scientific, popular and up-to-date.

### **Eminent Linguist**

Vinoba was also a linguist of eminence. Marathi language was his mother-tongue, so almost also Gujarati and Hindi. He had acquired a workable knowledge of Urdu, Bengali, Oriya, and Punjabi. He knew all the four south Indian languages—Tamil, Telegu, Kannada and Malayalam. English, of course, he knew very well and French was his second language at the college. His profound command over Sanskrit which he acquired after leaving the college, was next only to that over Marathi. The wisdom of our classics was almost at his fingers' ends.

That he was always young like a student was clear by the fact that he learnt Arabic at the age of 48 and studied by himself the Holy Quran, which he went through no less than seven times and which he could recite remarkably well. The only purpose of his learning all these languages was to become familiar with the traits of and establish brotherly relations with millions of his countrymen so that he might render easily and effectively his service of love towards them by becoming one of their own.

### **Scholar and Litterateur**

Vinoba Bhave was a scholar, thinker, writer who produced numerous books, translator who made Sanskrit texts accessible to the common man, orator, linguist who had an excellent command of several languages (Marathi, Hindi, Urdu, English, Sanskrit, Kannada), and a social reformer. He wrote brief introductions to, and criticisms of, several religious and philosophical works like the Bhagavad Gita, works of Adi Shankaracharya, the Bible and Holy Quran.

His criticism of Dnyaneshwar's poetry as also the output by other Marathi saints is quite brilliant and a testimony to the breadth of his intellect. A university named after him, Vinoba Bhave University, is still there in the state of Jharkhand spreading knowledge even after his death.

### **Awards and Honours**

In 1958 Vinoba was the first recipient of the international Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership. He was awarded the Bharat Ratna, posthumously in 1983.

### **Later Years and Demise**

Vinoba spent the later part of his life at his ashram in Paunar, Maharashtra. He controversially backed the Indian Emergency imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, calling it *Anushasana Parva (Time for Discipline)*.

He fell ill in November 1982 and decided to end his life. He died on November 15, 1982 after refusing food and medicine for a few days. Some people identified this as *sallekhana*, the Jain religious ritual of voluntary death by fasting.