

Chapter 7 - Gandhism as the last resort of the Hapless

Subhadra did not want to marry and spend the rest of her life only as a homemaker. Her elder sister had earlier given up studies after class nine saying she wanted to get married instead. This was at a time in the late nineteen seventies when high school educated dalit women in Bastar could get government jobs at the drop of a hat. She had been married off to an employee in the National Mineral Development Corporation mines in Bailadilla in South Bastar. It later turned out that this man was a drunkard who already had a wife and was a virulent wife beater. Subhadra's family did not do anything to help her sister and so she had continued in an oppressive relationship bearing children and digesting abuses and beatings. Subhadra was scared stiff of getting into a similar situation. She disliked being beaten up and this was what most women had to put up with from their husbands. She wanted to get a job and live independently. However, things had changed considerably over the past decade and it was not possible to get a government job without giving hefty bribes. Her father obviously did not have the money and lacked the necessary creditworthiness to take a loan for such a heavy amount without mortgaging the little land they had.

So Subhadra too like many others in her village began rolling bidis to earn money. The single harvest from the land was just enough to provide food. Money had to be earned to provide for other needs such as clothes and travel. Her elder brother was not employed regularly and even if he was he did not contribute any money to the household. So Subhadra had to earn money by making bidis. One day they had an altercation about bearing the household expenses equally and at the end of it her brother slapped Subhadra. This was too much for Subhadra. She packed a few clothes and left immediately for Kodogaon village some ten kilometres away where her cousins stayed without informing anyone at home. There she did not tell anyone why she had come and just began working in their fields and staying there and of course rolling bidis. After some time her father arrived there and pleaded with her to come back but she refused saying that she would not come back to the house until she had begun earning money independently.

In Kodogaon she learnt that one of her nieces, who was the same age as her, was working with a Gandhian NGO, Prayog, in Raipur district. It was not a government job but it was a small step towards independence. Then one day she met Suddhu Kunjam who was a Gond adivasi and resident of the nearby village of Kilepar. Suddhu was working with the sub-centre that Prayog had established in Bastar. He was touring the villages to find youth who would be ready to attend the training programmes that were being conducted by Prayog at its main centre in the village Tilda in Raipur district. Earlier Suddhu had taken Subhadra's niece to one such training after which she had been selected to work in the organisation. Even though she did not understand what the training was for, the fact that in the event of being selected she would get a job of two hundred rupees a month was enough reason for Subhadra to opt to go to Tilda.

Gandhi was made of different stuff from Nehru. He was of a spiritual bent of mind and his moral reference point was the Bhagvad Gita which he first read, when he was in England studying to be a lawyer, in the English translation "The Song Celestial" by Edwin Arnold (Arnold, 1900). The Gita, which is a part of the great epic Mahabharata, is a very short poem that in lyrically appealing verses exhorts human beings to battle on against material adversities regardless of rewards in the relentless quest for spiritual truth. However, for the initial formulation of his socio-economic and political programmes Gandhi took inspiration from the works of two westerners - "Unto This Last" by John

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Ruskin (Ruskin, 1985) and "The Kingdom of God is Within You" by Leo Tolstoy (Tolstoy, 1985). Ruskin was a critic of Victorian materialism and industrialism and relied on an evangelical interpretation of Christianity to press for a more humane social system, which would use the surpluses gained from modern development to pull up the people at the bottom of society and create a level playing field for them. As opposed to the classical economists like Ricardo and Malthus he refused to accept that resources were scarce and instead worked from the proposition that they were abundant but were being disproportionately and inappropriately used and advocated that if need be some of the new industrial and urban development should be jettisoned because it clashed with nature and human weal.

The book gets its name from a parable in the Bible in which daily labourers are put to work throughout the day as and when there is an opportunity for them. At the end of the day all are paid the same wage. When some of the workers who have worked from the beginning protest, it is argued that the last of the workers was prepared to work the whole day and it was not his fault that he got an opportunity only at the end and so he too deserved the same wage. This is uncannily close to Marx's definition of Communism but the crucial difference lies in the fact that while Marx was a materialist and a proponent of a violent overthrow of the capitalist system, Ruskin was a spiritualist and so pitched for winning over the hearts of the unbelievers rather than burning them on the stake. As regards the devastation of nature, Marx had the same views as Ruskin but unlike the latter the former was an out and out votary of modern industrial development and so he downplayed this aspect expressing the hope that once communism was established the relationship between man and nature would stabilise (Benton, 1989). Tolstoy in his book written after his conversion to Christianity deplores the violence that is rampant in society because of the greed of human beings and makes a moving impassioned plea, with an eloquence that only such a great writer could have displayed, that the way out of the sea of troubles in which human beings found themselves was to become completely non-violent.

Gandhi gave up his legal practice in South Africa where he was then leading the struggle of the Indians after reading these books and set up the Phoenix Ashram to evolve a new way of life. The word "Sarvodaya" or the rise of all was coined for the name of the Gujarati translation of Ruskin's book. After this in 1909 Gandhi went to England and had debates with various people on social organisation, economic development and political methods. The main points of contention at that time were regarding rural versus urban industrial development and non-violent as opposed to violent means of political action. The outcome was a book written in the form of a dialogue between a sceptic and the author on the voyage back to South Africa in which he set out for the first time his thoughts on development, society and politics - "Hind Swaraj" (Gandhi, 1959). Hailed as the "Sarvodaya Manifesto" this work first of all critiques modern industrialism for the prominence it has given to greed, making human beings slaves of machines. Then it inveighs against the resultant change in the education imparted which has turned students away from sustainable occupations and instead trained them for professions based on greed. At the socio-political level this has resulted in a centralised system of governance to facilitate the exploitation of human beings and nature. This system is democratic and participative only on paper while in reality being controlled by the powerful classes.

Then the book goes on to propose an economic alternative based mainly on rural industries, especially the charkha or spinning wheel and handlooms to produce khadi or hand spun and woven cloth that will gainfully employ labour and a minimum of modern

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industries and a socio-political alternative based on totally participative and largely self sufficient and autonomous village republics or panchayats. A political programme based on non-violence is proposed for achieving this. It is argued that a truly just society has to be non-violent in nature and to achieve it the means to be employed must also be non-violent. Civil disobedience and passive resistance relying on spiritual power instead of arms are suggested as the modes of action and given the name "Satyagraha". The aim of the satyagrahi or passive resister should be to bear repression passively so as to impress on the oppressor the immorality of his deeds and so win his heart over. An important part of the satyagrahi's programme would be to resist unjust laws through civil disobedience or non-cooperation.

The day before he was assassinated on January 30th 1948 Gandhi had drafted a resolution for discussion in the forthcoming meeting of the All India Congress Committee, which has come to be known as his last will and testament (Dhadda, 1997). In this he had put forward the radical idea that since independence had been achieved the Congress party had served its purpose and it should be disbanded and instead all the members should devote themselves for the rejuvenation of rural India where the life of the masses was weighed down by the burden of oppressive forces that were internal to Indian society. Gandhi had been bothered by this internal oppression even during the freedom struggle and so had set up many ashrams throughout India to carry out rural empowerment and reconstruction work. The adoption of a nationwide Sarvodayi programme of action after independence would have meant micro planning from the village or even hamlet upwards with the macro planning of the country as a whole to be done so as to be able to provide resources at the central level for the fulfilment of the village level micro plans. Something that Gandhi called an Oceanic Circle to counter the image of a pyramid that top down planning conveys. In the ocean the water moves out in waves from an epicentre, which is the most powerful and so also the village republic was projected as being the most powerful in Gandhian social dynamics.

The majority of the members of the Congress party under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru did not pay any heed to this proposal and went on to build further on the centralised state apparatus bequeathed by the British. As we have seen he chose the path of centralised industrial development to cater to the needs of the urban elite with the rural populace being crucified in the process instead of the bottom up rural reconstruction advocated by Gandhi. So it was only those who had already been engaged in rural reconstruction work in the many ashrams set up by Gandhi that continued to work on Gandhian principles under the leadership of Vinoba Bhave. At his suggestion a central body to coordinate the activities of all the Gandhian institutions was formed in 1949 and named "Sarva Seva Sangh". Nehru in an effort to get some legitimacy for his developmental efforts from the Gandhians sent a member of the Planning Commission in 1951 with a draft of the First Five Year National Development Plan to Vinoba Bhave for his comments. After going through the draft Vinoba opined that in a poor and populous country like India any plan should have as its priority the utilisation of its vast and cheap human resources which would lead to both the eradication of poverty and high savings and capital formation and he did not see any of this in the draft before him. Vinoba is reported to have said, " I have found only one useful thing in this bulky document. It is the pin holding it together. So I am taking out that useful thing and consigning the rest to the waste paper basket!" (Dhadda op cit, pp 6).

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One such rural reconstruction organisation was the Gandhi Ashram in Morena district in Northern Madhya Pradesh, which had been set up by S.N. Subbarao. Subbaraoji had launched a national youth project under which he toured the whole country holding camps to enthuse the youth to take part in rural reconstruction work. The man behind Prayog, P. V. Rajagopal, popularly known as Rajaji, hailed from an upper middle class family in Kerala and had once attended such a youth camp when he was in his teens. He had been so impressed that he had decided to devote his life to social work and joined Subbaraoji's Ashram in Morena. After some time he had set up the NGO Prayog in Tilda in Chhattisgarh which was then eastern Madhya Pradesh. Initially Prayog was involved in the standard Gandhian rural development work producing khadi cloth and other handicrafts with grants and marketing support from the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC), which was a support organisation within the government set up by Nehru to aid the Gandhian organisations in expiation for his sin of renouncing Gandhi's philosophy of development.

Things changed one fateful day in the mid nineteen eighties when during a visit to a village Rajaji found that the kamiyas or landless labourers who worked on the fields of the aghariyas or large landlords were in fact bonded to them for generations together because of some small debt that their forefathers might have taken. Investigations revealed that there were thousands of kamiyas in Raipur district while the local administration denied that they were bonded labourers. Rajaji got in touch with the district administration and also approached the appropriate authorities at the state level but the administration was loathe to even recognise the problem let alone take any action to free these bonded labourers. He then got other NGOs too to conduct surveys in their areas and on the basis of this filed a petition in the Supreme Court. This did the trick as the Supreme Court after hearing all the parties took the Raipur district administration to task for having neglected its basic duties and directed not only that the labourers be freed but that they be also rehabilitated in new occupations (Kumar, 1988). Such was the impact of this action that many more such cases came to light and a veritable movement of freeing bonded labourers in agriculture and in stone quarries began. This experience made a profound impact on Rajaji and drove home to him the need for political mobilisation to free the poor from oppression. Rural development work alone would not do he realised without mobilisation of the masses against exploitative economic and social relations. This required the services of numerous village level animators who had to be trained in the Gandhian theory and programme of social and political action for the amelioration of exploitation and poverty. This was the genesis of the training programmes being conducted by Prayog. There was also another side to the training. Bonded labourers once freed had to be rehabilitated and their families and children taken care of. So a Grameen Vikas Pratishthan or Village Development Institute was set up to provide training in alternative income generating skills and the village animators were also imparted training in running anganwadis or child care centres.

Subhadra went through this three month training and after that she along with twenty other young women were sent off to work in the villages of Saraipali Tehsil on the border with Orissa to work as village animators and also as anganwadi workers. When they were boarding the bus in Raipur they paid the coolies to climb up and put their iron trunks on the roof of the bus. But when they reached Saraipali they found that it was not much more than a village and there were no coolies there. The women were all wearing saris and so were ashamed to climb up and so there was a stalemate with the bus conductor

shouting at them to hurry up. Then Subhadra decided to throw all shame to the winds and tying the pallu of her sari firmly round her waste climbed up onto the roof of the bus and began handing down the trunks to the other women who climbed up half way. This was an enjoyable spectacle for the men at the bus stand in Saraipali and they all gathered round and geeked at them and passed comments. They were even more surprised when the women then put the trunks on their heads and began walking towards the village that had been chosen for them to stay in for a day or two before fanning out to their respective appointed villages. They sang songs as they went. There was a tradition in Chhattisgarh of travelling entertainers or damchaghas who would go from village to village displaying there acrobatic, dancing and singing skills and be welcomed very heartily by the villagers as they were sought after entertainers in rural areas before the advent of television, which put paid to their art. All the children along the route followed the young women shouting and singing along with them, thinking that they were damchaghas!

When they reached the village the headman showed them their halting place for the night, which was a hall adjacent to a temple of the Goddess Kali. Instead of a full meal the villagers gave them popped rice and fried groundnuts to eat. That is what they had to make do with and sleep for the night. In the middle of the night Subhadra woke up as there was a lot of commotion. One of the women had been possessed by the spirit of Goddess Kali and was swaying her head and singing songs in a trance. The other women were pouring water on her and making her smell cowdung smoke to abate her trance. This continued till dawn when finally the woman came out of her trance and fell asleep. Next day Subhadra went off again with her trunk on her head to the village of Bagaijor where she was to stay.

Her job was to run an anganwadi centre there for the small children, playing with them and also preparing a light breakfast and feeding them. She also had to hold meetings in the villages nearby with the adivasis and find out cases of bonded labour so as to be able to free them. The first task she did with aplomb. The adivasis were so poor that they used to send their children to the anganwadis for the breakfast that they would get. The games and songs too were attractive to the children so they would come in large numbers. But in the matter of identifying bonded labourers she hit a roadblock. There were bonded labourers but this area was far removed from the area where Rajaji had initially started his movement. The people had not heard of the victories won by Rajaji. They were sceptical of what Subhadra told them and did not want to risk losing what little employment they had by rebelling against the landlords. The landlords too came to know of Subhadra's campaign and though they did not threaten her because the Tehsildar in Saraipali had sanctioned her stay in the village, they did their level best to discourage their labourers from meeting and talking to her.

In the afternoons Subhadra had to go out to the nearby villages to hold meetings and read out news of various actions taken by Prayog from the monthly magazine published for the purpose called "Gaon Mitaan". The usual practice was to get the children together and make them play games and sing and dance. When a curious crowd of elders gathered to see what was going on, Subhadra would take out her copy of Gaon Mitaan and start reading out from it and engaging the listeners in conversation. She became so popular with the children that whenever she entered a village the children would gather around her shouting "Mitaan awat he, Mitaan awat he" - Mitaan is coming, Mitaan is coming. While the children would stay with her and play the elders would drift away when she tried to talk to them on the issues written about in the magazine. This was not surprising given that this area had not witnessed any political movement or NGO work previously. In those

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days in the late nineteen eighties there were no panchayats or elected village bodies too and so in the absence of grassroots democracy the village elders held sway. These elders were both sceptical and suspicious of this bevy of young women who had suddenly descended on them with unfavourable winds of change.

Subhadra and her comrades were working on a salary of just two hundred rupees a month at that time. She used to eat a heavy breakfast with the children and only eat again in the evening after coming back from her tour of the villages to save on both time and money. If possible she would eat her dinner also in some villager's house! All the other young women too followed a similar routine. Once every week they would all gather in the central village where they had first spent a night to collect all the rations which were distributed from there after being brought from Saraipali. On one occasion when they had so gathered they woke up in the morning to find that a dog had eaten some amount of the jaggery that had been bought the day before. Jaggery was an essential ingredient of tea and they had no money left to buy some more. So the women argued that since the jaggery was to be used in tea any germs that may be there in it from the dog would be killed when they boiled the jaggery properly in the tea. Since there was no alternative, as they did not have any money to buy new jaggery to replace the dog-defiled jaggery, the women decided to use it to make tea. On hearing this one of the landlords commented disdainfully, "kutta ka prasad khake tuman ka samaj seva karbe" - what social work will you do after eating the leftovers of a dog!

After Nehru's emissary went back and told him of Vinoba's comment regarding the draft plan Nehru sent a telegram to Vinoba asking him to come and meet the full Planning Commission and tell them his views. Vinoba replied that he would come but he would travel to Delhi on foot. He said that his views were not important but those of the rural poor were and so on his way to Delhi he would talk to them and get their opinion on what kind of development path should be adopted. The meeting with the Planning Commission did not result in any constructive outcomes as can well be imagined but the walk to Delhi opened up a new programme for Vinoba. Thereafter he walked non-stop for thirteen years upto 1964. Early on in the course of this walk he was confronted with the acute problem of concentration of agricultural land in the hands of a few which was the main obstacle to rural development. Land reform legislation had been enacted but was not being implemented on the ground because of the power of the landed classes in the rural milieu. He felt that unless the landless masses were given title to land all talk of rural reconstruction would remain just that. He began mulling over a non-violent means to solve this intractable problem.

On 18th April 1951 he entered Pochampalli village in Nalgonda district of Andhra Pradesh which had been one of the nerve centres of the Communist Party of India led Telengana uprising against landlords which had just been quelled by severe police action. The dalits in the village came to him and said that they required only two acres of land per family, one dry and one irrigated to break out of their poverty. Vinoba then held a meeting with the upper castes in the village and asked them what the solution could be to this demand of the dalits. One of the landlords who was sitting with Vinoba at this time suddenly got up and said that he would donate a hundred acres of his own land for this purpose without any prompting. Thus began a veritable movement of land donation by landlords as Vinoba cited this example and began appealing to the hearts of the landed gentry asking them to donate land for distribution among the landless. This was the

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genesis of the Bhoodan or land donation movement which thereafter became the mainstay of Vinoba's long march.

The immediate post-independence period saw many stalwarts of the freedom movement opt out of mainstream politics to pursue Gandhi's vision of the establishment of Gram Swaraj or village self rule. The most notable among these was Jayaprakash Narayan who had started off by being a communist and then a socialist before finally converting to Gandhism to become a committed Sarvodayi in 1954 and devoting himself to Vinoba's Bhoodan movement. There was thus a great vibrancy in the work of the Sarva Seva Sangh and it attracted many young men and women to its fold to work as village animators. Many years later Subhadra and I met up with one such worker who was then the caretaker of the ashram in Machla where we had taken refuge after leaving Alirajpur. Radheshyam Bohre, then in his late fifties, spoke with a sparkle in his eyes about the first decade and a half of work he had put in as a village animator of the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi. The high point in his working life was when he accompanied Vinoba Bhave on his Bhoodan Yatra in the Malwa region in the nineteen sixties to get the landed gentry to donate their ceiling surplus lands for the purpose of redistribution to the landless.

The Bhoodan movement and the larger Gandhian programme, exemplary as they were, could not realise even a small bit of their potential as they were gradually pushed more and more to the periphery of the centralised parliamentary system which stressed on the concentration of resources on modern industrial development. So the leaders and workers in the Gandhian organisations too began losing their effectiveness after some time. The slide began immediately after the Bhoodan Yatra was completed. According to Bohre most of the lands that were announced as donated were never really redistributed and the owners retained control over them. The various sarvodayi organisations began losing their urge for grassroots mobilisation and instead concentrated on producing and selling handicrafts and khadi with the subsidies and grants provided by the KVIC. Field workers like himself were not only looked down upon but also discouraged from going out into the field. He said that many times in the late nineteen fifties and early nineteen sixties he had been offered government jobs as a teacher and patwari or land record official but had refused because he felt that he had a mission to accomplish. But after the euphoria of the Bhoodan Yatra subsided he found that grassroots mobilisation work was at a discount. The leaders of the Sarvodaya movement in Madhya Pradesh not only did not show any interest in bringing in fresh blood in the form of committed youth but on the contrary directed their own children into the mainstream job market to earn a good living.

The rot that had set in was deep and things came to a head when Jayaprakash Narayan launched his Sampurna Kranti Andolan in Bihar in 1974 to challenge the Congress party head on in a vintage mass Gandhian mobilisation against the state. There was a split down the middle within the Sarvodaya movement with some people supporting Narayan while most others headed by Vinoba against him. Vinoba at that time had assumed a "maun vrat" and had stopped speaking. He communicated only if very necessary by writing. Indira Gandhi appealed to him to prevail upon Jayaprakash Narayan to withdraw his agitation. Vinoba tried but Jayaprakash was adamant saying that things had gone too far and no compromise other than the dissolution of the Bihar legislative assembly was acceptable and so the whole Sarvodaya movement split. The leaders of the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi in Madhya Pradesh too decided to go against Jayaprakash Narayan.

Strict orders were given to Bohre not to take part in any mobilisation in support of the Bihar movement. Disillusioned with all this Bohre resigned from the Gandhi Smarak

Nidhi to go back to his ancestral land in Khategaon and live the life of an ordinary farmer in 1975 even before the internal emergency was declared. He said he could have returned to his area of work and gone to jail but felt that it was useless, as society had drifted far from the Gandhian dream and Narayan's final attempt to improve things would not succeed. Only later after the lifting of emergency, Mahendrabhai had requested him to come to Machla to look after the ashram, which was without any caretaker. Machla was where he had received his first training as a Gandhian worker and so he felt some nostalgia for it and came back to bide his time there in 1978. But he found that things had changed drastically in the intervening two decades. When he had first come there as a teenager in the early nineteen fifties the place was thriving with activity. The Ashram was not only a khadi and village industries training centre but also the spearhead of a farmer's cooperative movement in which landless dalit farmers had been given the right to till ceiling surplus land through the formation of a commune. There were many bright young men from all over India who used to reside and work there. Gramodyog Vidyalaya, as the ashram was known, was to be a beacon for ushering in Gram Swaraj.

Within a few years the bright young people all left, some going abroad, and the cooperative movement too fell flat and the land was instead distributed among the farmers to be tilled by them on their own. The Vidyalaya found it difficult to get students as well as trainers and so after some time its training programmes were abandoned. By the early nineteen seventies all work had stopped and its empty buildings were mute witnesses to the marginalisation of Gandhian thought and practice in independent India. Bohre said that he felt like the caretaker of a graveyard but yet had agreed to become one because it reminded him of the early years of promise when things had seemed so rosy. He lamented that while in his own youth Gandhian work was greatly sought after and many youth would give up lucrative career prospects to join the Sarvodaya movement now only those who had no other employment option chose to follow Gandhi's path like Subhadra had done. "Majboori ka naam Gandhi hai", he said, Gandhism is the last resort of the hapless.

This is why the revival of the Sarvodaya movement in Madhya Pradesh brought about by Rajaji, through his NGO Prayog, was acclaimed by many senior Gandhians across the country as a harking back to the halcyon days of old. The hundreds of young animators that he had trained including a whole host of women like Subhadra were fanning out all over rural Madhya Pradesh creating a new movement for rural reconstruction and empowerment. These youth had no idea of doing social work of any kind and it was only during the training programme that they learnt about this. The consequences were sometimes comical as we have seen and sometimes tragic as there was little security for the young women when they stayed alone in the villages trusting their hosts. In a few cases some young women were raped. Nevertheless, these young people did make some impact in the initial years as the lethargic administration had to sit up and take notice of the issues being raised by them.

Subhadra's sojourn in Saraipali was short lived and she had to leave soon. The Central Social Welfare Board of the Government of India, which had been funding the team of women of which Subhadra was a part, stopped doing so after one year and so they had to pack up their trunks, put them on their heads and once again wend their way back to Tilda. There most of the others were told to go back home but Subhadra and some others were told that they were to proceed to Durg district where work was being started anew in a different area.

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