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The heyday's of the bhoodan movement in Odisha: A reminiscence

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Abstract

The bhoodan movement originally conceived by Acharya Vinoba Bhave, was launched in the country in the early fifties of the last century. It intended to solve the land problem in the country in a novel way by making land available through voluntary donations for distribution to the landless and the land poor. The movement created sensation in the country quite for some years by making mass appeal and giving rise to the hope of solving the age-old land problem by producing miraculous results in certain parts of the country at least in the initial years of its launch. Again gramdan, an offshoot of bhoodan programme gave a new spurt to the waning bhoodan movement in the sixties and showed promising signs of success in certain pockets of the country especially in the district of Koraput of Odisha. However, the movement could not sustain its momentum in the long run and became a neglected activity towards the seventies, thus faded from the public concern. This article intends to examine the origin of the bhoodan programme and its progress during its heyday in the state of Odisha.

Keywords: Bhoodan, Gramdan, Pad-yatra, Vinoba, Koraput, Odisha

Introduction

The Bhoodan Movement, an attempt at land reform¹originally conceived by Acharya Vinoba Bhave, a trusted follower of Mahatma Gandhi was launched in the country in the early fifties of the last century. The movement which made mass appeal and was a living force in parts of the country in mid-fifties intended to solve the land problem in the country in a unique way by making land available to the landless and land poor and the equitable distribution of land by voluntary donations. The movement deriving its inspiration from Gandhian philosophy and techniques created the hope of providing solution to the land problem in the country by peaceful means.

Origin of the Movement

The genesis of the movement is traced to Vinoba's tour of the strife-torn region of Telangana of the old princely State of Hyderabad in April 1951. He undertook the tour to spread the message of peace in the region as it witnessed violent clashes between the communists and the landlords in the wake of an agrarian movement. On 18April 1951, an extraordinary incident occurred in his camp in Pochampalli village. On that day, Vinoba was offered 100 acres of land by Ram Chandra Reddy after he appealed to the assembled villagers to do something for the *harijans* of the village. This incident came as a revelation to Vinobe and he became convinced that if one man on listening to his appeal could offer gifts of land, surely others could be convinced in the same way. But it was only after receiving the second gift on 19 April, 1951 in the village Tangalapalli from Vyankat Reddy, he described the previous day's gift as 'bhoodan' in the evening prayer meeting² and realized that 'bhoodan' could provide a general solution to the problem of extreme inequality in the country. The land-gifts made on 18-19 April, 1951 inspired in Vinoba a concept for a crusade, a campaign of *bhoomidan-yagna*, the worship of God through sacrifice of land³ and he launched the movement. He and his followers moved from village to village and persuaded the landowners to donate at least one-sixth of their lands as bhoodan or land-gift for distribution among the landless and the land poor. The encouraging response to the land-gift mission of Vinoba in Telengana, in which he secured 1200 acres of land⁴ during his fifty-one days' tour inspired in Vinoba a missionary zeal to continue the work and finally prompted him to resolve on Gandhi's birthday in 1951 to collect fifty million acres of land for the landless from the whole country by 1957.

Bhoodan Campaign in Odisha

Vinoba's call for a nationwide effort to achieve the target soon found reflection in the activities of the Sarvodaya workers in Odisha. Gopabandhu Choudhury and his wife Ramadevi, the most

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distinguished and leading constructive workers in Odisha accompanied by several others started their historic *pad-yatra* for collecting land for the landless from Bari-Ramachandrapur on 7 January, 1952. This *pad-yatra* though initially not intended for the purpose of bhoodan⁵ in the course of its progress collected land-gifts. In the first meeting held at Bari-Ramachandrapur, the first land-gift was made by Harapriya Devi. It was the first land-gift in Odisha and therefore, 7 January 1952 was considered as the birth day of 'bhoodan' in Odisha.⁶ Along with Harapriya Devi, two other persons also made their donations of land to *bhoodan-yagna* in that meeting. They were Rambha Devi, the wife of a rich merchant of Gujrat and Surendranath Pati, a resident of village Bilibila. Manmohan Choudhury and Gopabandhu Choudhury, who spearheaded the movement in Odisha also made donations of land on the first day of the *pad-yatra*. The *pad-yatra* continued for 4 months and 22 days and it passed through the districts of Puri, Ganjam, Koraput, Kalahandi, Bolangir, Sambalpur, Dhenkanal and Cuttack⁷ covering a distance of 1100 miles. It greatly helped in the spread of the movement in Odisha. In the course of the 'pad-yatra' a conference was held at Tainsi in Angul district from 1-7 February 1952. The conference was attended by the then Chief Minister of Odisha, Nabakrushna Choudhury and his wife Malati Devi on the concluding day. It resolved to continue the *bhoodan-yagna* movement of Vinoba in Odisha and defined *bhoodan-yagna* as the principal work of the sarvodaya workers. This 'pad-yatra' yielded a collection of 1626 acres of land from 233 donors.⁸ The second round of 'pad-yatra' led by Gopabandhu Choudhury and Rama Devi commenced on the Gandhi Jayanti day in 1952 and it ended on 10 December 1952. This *pad-yatra* which passed through the sub-divisions of Bhadrak, Balasore and the districts of Mayurbhanja and Keonjhar covering a distance of 427 miles, yielded a collection of 463 acres of land besides seven pair of bullocks and agricultural implements worth about 816 rupees.

Support to the Movement

The movement though independent of the government had the support of the Congress party in the state. The Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee in its meeting held on 24 December 1952 not only decided to extend support to the movement but also the Chief Minister Nabakrushna Choudhury, the Revenue Minister Radhanath Rath, and the Development Minister Dinabandhu Sahoo had given their pledges in the meeting to donate lands to the movement. Some prominent political leaders of Odisha such as Nishamani Khuntia of Praja Socialist Party, the Maharaja of Kalahandi Pratap Keshari Deo of Ganatantra Parishad, and Sadasiva Tripathy, the Congress leader from Koraput supported the movement.⁹ The movement also received the support of the State Government. The Government of Odisha in order to facilitate the donation of lands to the movement and to provide for the distribution of such lands introduced the Orissa Bhoodan Yagna Bill, 1953 in the Odisha Legislative Assembly on 9 March 1953. The bill was finally passed by the Assembly on 9 April 1953 and after receiving the assent of the President of India on 26 July 1953, became Orissa Act XVI of 1953. The Act provided for the establishment of a Bhoodan Yagna Samiti in the State of Odisha.¹⁰ The Samiti was authorized by the Act to receive donations or grants of land and to distribute the lands vested in it to landless persons. The Bhoodan Yagna Samiti constituted under the Act in its first meeting held at Puri under the presidency of Gopabandhu Choudhury on 11 November

1954 discussed matters relating to the ensuing visit of Vinoba Bhave to Odisha and other issues relating to bhoodan work.¹¹ To give a fillip to the movement in Odisha, Vinoba campaigned in the State. Actually Vinoba's bhoodan campaign started in Odisha on 26 January 1955, when he set foot at Deola, a frontier village in Balasore district. In the first meeting held at Lakshmananath in Balasore district, Vinoba was apprised of the progress of the movement in Odisha. It was reported in that meeting that the total bhoodan collections in Odisha was one lakh and twenty-two thousand acres, which was obtained from forty thousand donors.¹² The *pad-yatra* of Vinoba continued in Odisha for more than 8 months and it ended on 30 September 1955. It was during this tour that Vinoba stayed for full 4 months in the district of Koraput. Further, it was during his stay in Koraput, the Gramdan or donation of village, an offshoot of bhoodan movement began to gather popularity in the district. Moreover, during this tour of Vinoba, his new programme of *sampattidan* (wealth-gift) acquired popular acceptability especially in Kujendri. On 23 September 1955, the agricultural labourers of Kujendri gave their pledge to contribute one day's income from their monthly income to Vinoba's *sampattidan-yagna*. During his seven days' stay at Kujendri from 21-28 September 1955, Vinoba had received 150 pledges concerning donations to *sampattidan-yagna*.¹³ Vinoba left Odisha on 29 September 1955. The movement despite showing promising signs of success in the initial years lost momentum in the mid-fifties for the movement took a new form that of Gramdan or 'donation of village' and Gramdan unfolded new possibilities for social reconstruction. Though the program of land-gifts was still there, it became almost a neglected activity in the subsequent years and little land was received as donations. The Gramdan programme gave a fresh lease of life to the waning Bhoodan campaign and received wide response in certain pockets of the country, especially in the district of Koraput. But like the earlier Bhoodan programme it too lost momentum in the long run and became a neglected activity towards the seventies.

Conclusion

However, the movement had failed in its primary objective of collecting the targeted 5 lakh acres of land set by Vinoba for bhoodan collections in Odisha by the end of 1957. Even by the end of June 1965, the movement had failed to obtain the targeted land as the total land collections under bhoodan in Odisha were 1, 68,378.14 acres, which was received from 84,183 donors.¹⁴ So far as the distribution of the donated land under the programme in Odisha was concerned, the record was very unimpressive as only 94,973.51 acres of land was distributed to 38,337 landless families by the end of June 1965. Moreover, the distribution of donated lands started very late in some district. It started on 6 June, 1955 in the district of Puri¹⁵ and it began as late as on 6 October, 1959 in the district of Sambalpur. Further, a substantial part of the land donated in the movement was found either unsuitable for cultivation or under disputed possession. Moreover, the rich and the landed responded to the movement and donated land not being motivated by ideological considerations but for the reason that by parting with small tracts of land they could legitimize their control over the balance¹⁶ and slip away from the ceiling limits. Though the movement had failed to generate enough land for the landless in the state, it represented one of the major attempts after independence to bring about land reform through a movement involving the masses.

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