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THE HEYDAY'S OF GRAMDAN MOVEMENT IN INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ODISHA



Sarat Parida

Lecturer In History, Government Women's College, Sambalpur, Odisha

Abstract::-Gramdan(village-gift) an offshoot of Bhoodan programme which created great excitement and curiosity among the people in the country in mid-fifties of the last century was a voluntary non-official movement. The Bhoodan movement originally conceived and started by Acharya Vinoba Bhave passed through several stages. Beginning with an appeal for gifts of portions of land, it took the form of a movement asking for one-sixth share in holdings and then widened into Gramdan calling for complete surrender of property rights in land in favour of village community. The 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 this programme too like the earlier Bhoodan programme could not sustain its momentum in the long run and became a neglected activity towards the seventies, thus faded from the public concern. This paper intends to examine the progress of the movement in the country so as to assess its efficacy and potentiality in solving one of the basic problems afflicting Indian society, the land problem, through voluntary action involving the masses.

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

INTRODUCTION

Gramdan(village-gift) an offshoot of Bhoodan programme which created great excitement and curiosity among the people in the country in mid-fifties of the last century was a voluntary non-official movement. The Bhoodan movement originally conceived and started by Acharya Vinoba Bhave, a trusted follower of Mahatma Gandhi passed through several stages. The programme started with an appeal for gifts of portions of land. But as the programme gathered momentum Vinoba specifically pleaded for one-sixth share in holdings and subsequently the movement unfolded a new programme called Gramdan which in fact demanded complete surrender of property rights in land in favour of the village community. The renunciation of private property in land on a mass scale through Gramdan and the recognition that all land in a village belonged to the village community as a whole was the most significant development of the Bhoodan movement.

THE CONCEPT

The concept of Gramdan in real sense embodied the idea of Gram Raj as conceived by Mahatma Gandhi. It stemmed from the idea that the village community as a whole constitutes a big family. Hence, there would be no individual possession of land, labour and wealth. The entire land in a village would be 'common property' and to be held in trust by the village community. In it each would offer his all to the community and the community would take care of him. Common land ownership and cooperative decision making its main features would usher in village unity. Moreover it would form the basis for the establishment of a self-sufficient

village republic. Thus, Gramdan concept was not an offering for good of the community but a sound investment in good and cooperative living.²

ORIGIN & PROGRESS

The Gramdan idea took birth in 1952, in the midst of Vinoba's bhoodan campaign in Uttar Pradesh, when on 24 May, 1952 the entire population of the village Mangroth donated their lands to bhoodan. Vinoba returned the lands asking them to share the lands of the village equitably. This idea of community-sharing of land, in place of individual ownership inspired in Vinoba a campaign for Gramdan.³ But it was only during and after Vinoba's foot-march through Odisha in 1955 that the movement caught the attention of nation and became a forceful campaign. The second Gramdan in the country in fact the first in Odisha was obtained in Manpur⁴ in Cuttack district, on 30 January, 1953. But the movement received great stimulus in the tribal dominated district of Koraput. By the time Vinoba started his first pad-yatra(foot-march) in Odisha on 26 January, 1955, 26 Gramdans were made in the district of Koraput alone. During his tour Vinoba concentrated his campaign mainly in the two southern districts of the state i.e., Ganjam and Koraput and in these districts the Gramdan movement achieved spectacular success. This was evident from the fact that by the time Vinoba left Odisha on 1 October, 1955 Koraput contributed 605 Gramdan villages out of the total 812 made in the entire state.⁵ Vinoba also urged the people to work for Gramdan during his tour and in this connection in one of his prayer meetings at village Baripada in Ganjam district on 12 May, 1955, he told: there should be no

landlessness in our village is the first step. And that there should be no land ownership in our village is the last. None except God is the owner of land. We mortals can only be its children. And ours is to serve the mother-earth as we can. ⁶ Even after the departure of Vinoba from Odisha the movement continued to make strides in Odisha and by 15 December 1956, 1575 Gramdans were made in Odisha with Koraput district contributing 1226 alone. The district of Koraput was followed by Balasore with 185 Gramdans to its credit. The districts of Mayurbhanj and Ganjam followed Balasore in the list with their contributions being 62 and 54 respectively.⁷ The movement had also spread to ten out of the thirteen districts of the state, thus registering a phenomenal progress in the period following Vinoba's first tour in Odisha.

The Gramdan programme which was underway in the country under non-official initiative came to receive nationwide attention and support in the Gramdan Conference held at Yelwal in Mysore State on 21-22 September, 1957. The conference was attended by several prominent figures of independent India viz, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Jayaprakash Narayan, E. M. S. Namboodiripad and U. N. Dhebar. Some also attended the conference as the representatives of the government and it included among others Pandit Govind Ballabha Pant, Gulzarilal Nanda, Moraji Desai and the then Chief Ministers of the states of Bombay, Madras, Mysore and Odisha. The Participants in the conference greatly appreciated the objectives underlying the movement⁸ and also Vinoba's mission in solving national and social problems through non-violent and co-operative method.

The Gramdan movement got impetus in Odisha in 1956, when Nabakrushna Choudhury resigning from chiefministership joined the movement and devoted his time to organize Gramdan especially in the district of Koraput. But ironically the movement which received momentum in the state with the joining of Nabakrushna Choudhury got a jolt in 1958, when Gopabandhu Choudhury one of the pioneers of the movement in Odisha passed away on 29 April, 1958. But the brief spell of inactivity in the movement which was caused due to the demise of Gopabandhu Choudhury, only lived for a short period. It was soon energized by Acharya Harihar Das another dedicated worker, who undertook an extensive pad-yatra starting from Balasore on 15 August, 1958. The pad-yatra which covered a distance of 3000 miles in all the 13 districts of Odisha and finally culminated on 31 June, 1960, was indeed a great effort to rejuvenate the movement, which had apparently lost its earlier appeal. However by the end of 1960, 1946 villages were gifted to Gramdan work in Odisha out of the total 4500 Gramdans made in the entire country⁹.

THE CONCEPT OF SULABH GRAMDAN

By the end of 1950s, when the pace of Gramdan had slackened to a considerable extent and the appeal for gifts of land had lost its earlier charm, Vinoba realized the need of simplifying the Gramdan concept in order to make it more acceptable to the people. Hence in place of one-sixth part of the cultivable land of the holders which he demanded in the beginning, he asked the landholders to contribute one-twentieth of their cultivable land, thus scaling down the limit

stipulated earlier. Jayaprakash Narayan¹⁰ who had dedicated his life to Bhoodan work by declaring himself a Jeevandani; was reportedly not happy with this modification but nevertheless, accepted the decision. However, its success was encouraging and it led to the birth of the new Gramdan idea, later styled as Sulabh Gramdan.

Under the modified principles a village was declared as Gramdan village if it represented the following features.¹¹

- (i) The individual ownership of land was surrendered to the village community.
- (ii) All the landholders donated at least one-twentieth of their land to the 'Gram Sabha' for distribution among the landless of the village.
- (iii) The remaining nineteen-twentieth part of land of each donor however, remained under him with the hereditary right of cultivation.
- (iv) The Village Council or Gram Sabha was constituted with all the adults of the village, both male and female as its members.
- (v) A 'Gramanidhi' (village fund) was formed consisting of one-fortieth part of the annual agricultural production and one-thirtieth of other income for providing loan to the people of the village and giving relief to the disabled persons.

VINOBA'S SECOND PAD-YATRA IN ODISHA

Vinoba began his second pad-yatra in Odisha on 13 August, 1963 from Sirsa in Mayurbhanj district. It continued for long 4 months and finally ended on 12 December, 1963. His tour gave a fresh lease of life to the waning movement in Odisha. As a result, during his 4 months' of pad-yatra in Odisha, 807 villages were gifted to Gramdan.¹² During this tour the people came to accept the modified concept of Gramdan popularly known as Sulabh Gramdan as the correct step towards Gram Swarajya. The Zilla Parishads of the 8 districts, visited by Vinoba also passed resolution extending support to the Sulabh Gramdan movement. Following Vinoba's departure from Odisha, Rama Devi toured the district of Koraput from 20 February-1 March, 1964 and attended as many as six Gramdan Conferences in the district.¹³ Vinoba's tour as well as the tour of Rama Devi in Koraput brought a great change in the attitude of the people of the state and created a very favorable atmosphere for the spread of the movement in the state. This is evident from the fact that out of the total 11,065 Gramdans made in the entire country by November, 1965 Odisha made a handsome contribution of 2807 Gramdans and thus occupied the second place in the country¹⁴ in that respect. However, out of the total 2807 villages gifted to the movement in the state by November, 1965 lands were distributed only in 1279 villages among the landless families. In total 1,30,000 acres of land were received in the movement from 1279 villages but only 14,700 acres of land were distributed among 6325 landless families in 962 villages of the state. Thus, the movement was able to distribute only 11 per cent of lands donated to the movement in the state by November, 1965.¹⁵

The Gramdan programme also received recognition in the official programme of several state governments and for bringing the donations under the purview of law several state governments' enacted legislations. The Bihar Gramdan

Act 1965, the Assam Gramdan Act, 1961 and the Rajasthan Gramdan Act 1961 were enacted in the states of Bihar, Assam and Rajasthan respectively providing legal support to the movement in these states. To give fillip to the movement in the state the Odisha Gramdan Bill, 1965 was introduced in the Odisha Legislative Assembly on 21 September 1965 but it could not be pursued owing to the dissolution of the Assembly.

Vinoba's third tour to Odisha was scheduled to start on 21 December, 1965 from Mayurbhanj and it was programmed to continue till 16 January, 1966. But the tour of Vinoba was postponed at the last moment due to his illness. However, to give encouragement to the workers of the movement in the state, Jayaprakash Narayan visited Odisha in the first week of February, 1966.¹⁶ His visit gave impetus to the workers of the movement in the state to work with refreshing zeal and determination. Gramdans obtained in the third phase called the Toophan Gramdans, which were collected amidst of stormy campaigns, started in 1965 and during this phase 1304 Gramdans had been obtained in the state as on 23 February, 1966. This Toophan Gramdan movement had made notable progress in 90 blocks out of the total 310 blocks in the state.¹⁷ But as the Sulabh Gramdan movement which was specially conducted in Bihar from 1965 under the personal guidance of Vinoba soon broadened into Prakhanda (a group of villages or a block given in Gramdan), efforts were made in Odisha especially in some of the blocks in the districts of Koraput, Kalahandi, Bolangir, Sambalpur and Dhenkanal to obtain them in Prakhanda. The Gramdan movement of Acharya Vinoba Bhave had finally reached the phase of Zilladan after 40 blocks of the district of Darbhanga in Bihar were donated to the movement. Thus, Darbhanga in Bihar was the first district in the entire country which was donated to Gramdan. The Bhoodan workers of the state too tried to emulate the example of Darbhanga in Odisha and with that objective they worked tirelessly. Finally, on 17 April, 1968, in a meeting held at Jeypore in which the Bhoodan worker of Koraput, Brundaban Jena and the veteran Sarvodaya leader Sankar Rao Deo were present, it was declared that Koraput, the largest district in Odisha, was donated under the programme, Zilladan.¹⁸ By October 2, 1969 Vinoba had received 60,060 villages in the programme in Bihar.¹⁹ However the movement in spite of making discernible headway in Bihar and Odisha had failed to actualize the dream of Vinoba, who wanted to see the whole of India reconstituted into Gramdan villages by the birth centenary day of Mahatma Gandhi falling on 2 October, 1969.²⁰

The Gramdan Movement got official recognition in the state in 1970 when the State Legislature passed the Orissa Bhoodan and Gramdan Act, 1970. The Act provided that if 51 per cent of the people of a village donated their lands and the donated lands would amount to 51 per cent of the total lands of the village then that village would be declared as a Gramdan village.²¹ One-twentieth part of the total land of the village would be distributed among the landless persons and the rest part would remain with the actual donors with the right of cultivation. They would cultivate the land but could not transfer the land. The Act came into effect from 25 December, 1972.

CONCLUSION

Gramdan programme which had the potential of ushering in an egalitarian society on agrarian lines though received wide response in certain pockets of the country could not sustain its momentum in the long run particularly after the Fourth Five Year Plan period (1969-74) when the ceiling surplus provisions of the land reform laws came into force. Furthermore, after the programme received the support of the state governments in several states, the petty politicians having influence at village level tried to gain mileage from this by associating themselves with the work. Consequently this resulted in the dilution of the concept²² and also accounted for the decline of the movement. Nevertheless by the end of March 1976, 10,611 villages had been gifted to Gramdan in Odisha out of the total 50,000 villages in the entire State. However one thing was noticed that though 1,68,058 Gramdans were made in the entire country by 21 July 1971, yet most of the villages gifted to the movement were located in the so-called tribal areas, where the tradition of village ownership of land partly existed and the people had little attachment for land for cultivation purpose. Data available relating to the distribution of land under the programme in Odisha and other states shows that a large chunk of land received in movement however remained undistributed owing to litigation, poor quality of the soil and other reasons. In fact in many villages most of the villagers had signed the Gramdan pledges without understanding its basic implication and the pledges were merely paper commitments.²³ In this connection Gunnar Myrdal observed: Gramdan's accomplishments do not appear to have gone far beyond paper transactions or to have substantially modified social behavior or agricultural practice.²⁴ Nevertheless, the Gramdan gifts implied that there were considerable number of people who readily relinquished their absolute right of ownership over their lands in favour of the village, a measure had it been adopted zealously by all and continued with gusto for a few more years could have made a great impact in the country.

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