

Bhoodan and Gramdan

ARE THEY RELEVANT TODAY?

Vijay Mahajan

Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies (RGICS)

Rajiv Gandhi Foundation,

New Delhi



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Concept and Review

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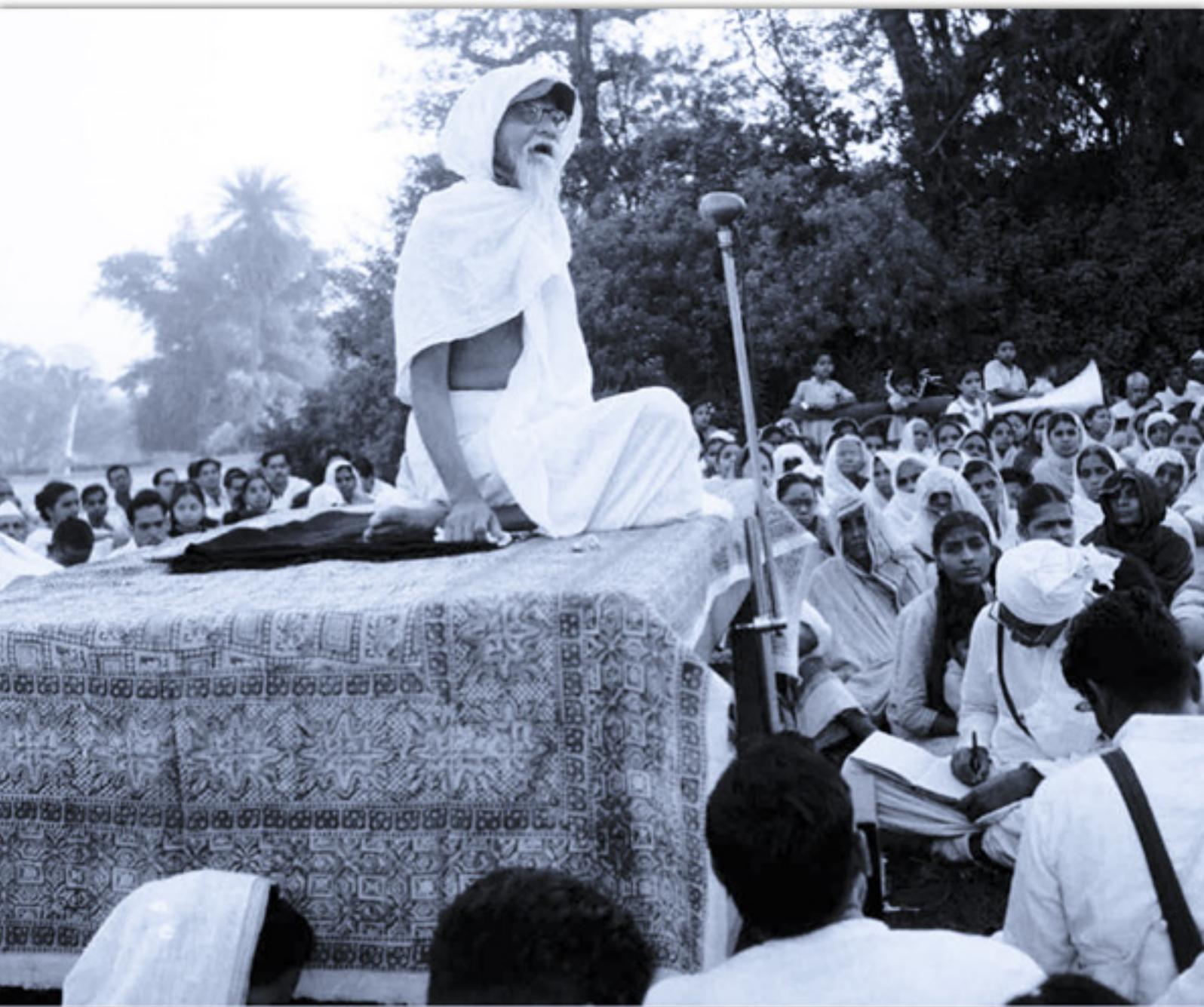
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Abstract

Nothing in this paper is original and since the author has no pretense at being an academic scholar, he has borrowed liberally from the writings of others, with due credit, of course. Only the description of ASSEFA's work and the landshare idea at the end can be credited to the author.

Mahatma Gandhi inspired many gifted young persons to join him and one of them was Vinoba Bhave, an ascetic, whom Gandhiji chose to be his first Satyagrahi, when he launched the Quit India Movement in 1942 against the British rule. In 1951, watching the growing violence linked to the issue of unequal land ownership in the countryside, particularly in the Telangana region, Vinoba made a visit to the area and had a dialogue with the landless and the landlords. In the village of Pochampalli, 40 kms from Hyderabad, based on a simple gesture by Ramachandra Reddy, the young son of a landlord, who offered to donate part of his land to the landless people in his village, Vinoba had an inspired vision. He decided that he would make it his mission to persuade landowners all across India to voluntarily give part of their land for redistribution to the landless.

This became the "Bhoodan Movement". Vinoba started a Padayatra and walked incessantly for nearly 14 years throughout the length and breadth of India and managed to collect 42 lakh acres of land under Bhoodan by 1966. Bhoodan Yagna Boards were established by the Government in each state to take care of the procedural work of accepting the land titles, taking possession and then re-distributing the land and confer titles to the landless Bhoodan allottees.

After the first few years, while continuing on his Bhoodan Padayatra, Vinoba expanded the concept from mere gift of a portion of land by some of the bigger landowning individuals to the concept of the entire village putting its land under a common trust, and everybody donating not just a small part of the land for the landless but also 1/40th of their income for the welfare of the poorest and for village development. This concept was called Gramdan.

In this paper, the author describes the philosophy, practice and performance of the Bhoodan and Gramdan movements, based on his actual personal experience of working with thousands of Bhoodan farmers during 1982-87 in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, and Gramdan in a few villages in Rajasthan, while working with a Gandhian NGO the Association for Sarva Seva Farms (ASSEFA), with whom he is associated even today.

The paper asserts that while the philosophy of Bhoodan and Gramdan – that of caring and sharing – embodied in the words Antyodaya and Sarvodaya, are even more relevant in today's world, the practice of the philosophy was not adequately perfected and as a result the performance in the long run has deteriorated. The paper ends with a proposal to standardize the value of each 10m x10 m (0.01 ha) parcel of land called "landbit", value it using ten criteria and then de-individualise ownership on it by issuing landshares which are tradable. But thereafter the principles of Bhoodan and Gramdan are adopted, so that capital, technology and market access can be attracted. We end on a hopeful note that the idea can be revived in a contemporized form to address the refractory problem of land reforms.

1 Land Reform in Independent India – Katl, Kanoon or Karuna¹?

The demand for land reforms, though distribution of land to the tillers, and doing away with multiple layers of intermediaries, particularly in those parts of the country where the Zamindari system was prevalent, was an important part of the thinking of the leaders of our freedom movement. Mahatma Gandhi said ‘Land and all property is his who will work it’. He argued that land should ultimately belong to the people. In fact, land, forest and water are the natural resources over which the people should have their control.

Gandhiji first major public action in India was the Indigo Labour Enquiry in Champaran, where the British landowners forced small tenant farmers to grow indigo to be sold at a throw away price to them. Gandhiji’s intervention put an end to this exploitative practice in just two years between 1917 and 1919. During the Non-cooperation movement in 1920, Gandhiji asked tenants and landlords to join and fight against the most powerful Zamindar - the British. In the Ryotwari regions (where British directly collected taxes), Gandhiji asked farmers to stop paying revenue but in Zamindari areas, Gandhi did not ask farmers to stop paying rent, perhaps because he did not want to antagonize those Zamindars / intermediaries). He explicitly instructed UP farmers....

“We want to turn Zamindars into friends. Therefore we many not withhold taxes from Government or rent from landlord.”

During the Civil Disobedience movement in 1930, Gandhiji issued a manifesto to the Uttar Pradesh farmers asking them to pay only 50 per cent of the legal rent.²

In 1920, the first farmers’ association Awadh Kisan Sabha was formed with support of Nehru and Ram Chandra. In 1923, NG Ranga formed the first ryot’s association in Guntur, Andhra Pradesh. In 1928, the Bihar Kisan Sabha formed by Swami Sahajanand Saraswati. In the same year, Akali leaders formed Punjab Riyasati Praja Mandal. In 1931, the Krushak Sangha was formed throughout Orissa. In 1935, the South Indian Federation of Peasants and Agricultural Laborers was formed with NG Ranga as Secretary. On 1st Sept 1936, the first All India Kisan Congress was held at Lucknow. They issued a manifesto with the following points:³

- Protect farmers for from economic exploitation,
- 50% reduction in land Revenue

¹ This phrase is taken from Shukla and Iyengar (2010) but it is not clear whether it was coined by them.

² <http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/land/gandhis-approach-to-land-problems-joshi-summary/31953>

³ <http://xaam.org/role-of-indian-congress-in-land-reforms> Reproduced verbatim

- security of tenure for tenants,
- reduction in interest rates charged by moneylenders
- abolition of begaar (forced labour)
- reasonable wages for labourers,
- promote cooperative farming
- transfer uncultivated government land, and Zamindari lands to poor and landless farmers.

The All India Kisan Sabha leadership was concentrated in the hands of the upper caste Bhumihar and other rural elites. The Harijans and Adivasis and the Landless found no representation in its leadership. The Kisan Sabha wanted abolition of Zamindari but not abolition of Sharecropping (Bargadari). The Kisan Sabha supported the demand for a maximum limit of landownership of 25 acres per landholder in 1946.

The Congress officially introduced the notion of land ceiling soon after independence. In November 1947, the AICC appointed a committee, which drew up the economic programme of the Congress. The committee headed by Jawaharlal Nehru had recommended,

‘The maximum size of holdings should be fixed. The surplus land over such a maximum should be acquired and placed at the disposal of the village cooperatives.’

Similarly, the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee, chaired by J.C. Kumarappa, which submitted its report in July 1949, also recommended a ceiling on landholding which was to be three times the size of an economic holding. An economic holding was defined as that which would give a reasonable standard of living to the cultivator and provide full employment to a family of normal size and at least to a pair of bullocks. In the meanwhile, China was undergoing an armed revolution.

1.1 Katl – the Chinese Example and the Insurgency in Andhra Hills

By 1949, practically all arable land in China was under cultivation, and peasants constituted 85 per cent of the Chinese population. Mao Zedong was convinced that China’s peasants would be at the centre of the communist revolution that delivered them from feudalism. Under Mao’s direction the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) developed a program of agrarian reforms. These reforms, while revolutionary, were often implemented and enforced by coercive and violent means. The

Agrarian Reform Law (June 1950) was one of the communist republic's first major policies. Its overall aim was a more equitable distribution of land, an outcome achieved by seizing land from affluent landlords and redistributing it to landless peasants. Land reform would also be the first step in China's march toward industrialization.

By 1951 more than 10 million landlords had been identified and dealt with, and 40 per cent of the land was in the hands of 60 per cent of the population. At the beginning of 1953 the CCP declared China's agrarian revolution to be complete, though in reality more significant changes were yet to come. Statistics on violence against landlords vary significantly. It has been estimated that between one and a half million and two million former landlords died between 1947 and 1952.⁴

In the meanwhile, In India we witnessed the Telangana Rebellion known in Telugu as Tēlaṅgāṇā vēṭṭi cākiri udyamaṅ, "Telangana Bonded Labour Movement"; alternatively, Tēlaṅgāṇā raitāṅga sāyudha pōrāṭaṅ, "Telangana Peasants Armed Struggle" . It was a peasant rebellion against the feudal lords of the Telangana region and, later, the princely state of Hyderabad, between 1946 and 1951.

The revolt started in 1946 against the oppressive feudal lords and quickly spread to the Warangal and Bidar districts in around 4000 villages. Peasant farmers and labourers revolted against local feudal landlords (jagirdars and deshmukhs), who were ruling the villages known as samsthans. These samsthans were ruled mostly by Reddys and Velama known as doralu. They ruled over the communities in the village and managed the tax collections (revenues) and owned almost all the land in that area. The Nizam had little control over these regions except the capital, Hyderabad. Chakali Ilima, belonging to the Rajaka caste, had revolted against 'zamindar' Ramachandra Reddy, during the struggle when he tried to take her four acres of land. Her revolt inspired many to join the movement.

The agitation led by communists was successful in taking over 3000 villages from the feudal lords and 10,00,000 acres of agriculture land was distributed to landless peasants. Around 4000 peasants lost their lives in the struggle fighting feudal private armies. The initial modest aims were to do away with the illegal and excessive exploitation meted out by these feudal lords in the name of bonded labour. The most strident demand was for the writing off of all debts of the peasants that were manipulated

⁴ <http://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/agrarian-reform/>

by the feudal lords. It later became a fight against the Nizam.

With Hyderabad's administration failing after 1945, the Nizam succumbed to the pressure of the Muslim elite and started the Razzakar Movement. At the same time the Nizam was resisting the Indian government's efforts to bring the Hyderabad state into the Indian Union. The government of India sent the army in September 1948 to annex the Hyderabad state into Indian Union.

The Communist party had already instigated the peasants to use guerrilla tactics against the Razzakars and around 3000 villages had come under peasant rule. The landlords were either killed or driven out and the land was redistributed. These victorious villages established communes reminiscent of Soviet mirs to administer their region. These community governments were integrated regionally into a central organization. The rebellion was led by the Communist Party of India under the banner of Andhra Mahasabha. During the course of the rebellion, communist rebels had gained control over 3000 villages and had redistributed land among the poor (Banerjee, 1984). In 1948 the Communist Party of India in its Second Congress at Calcutta put forward the slogan of land to tiller.⁵

1.2 Kanoon - Land Ceilings Legislation

The lessons of these events were not lost to Indian political leaders and administrators. It resulted in attempts to usher land reforms through the legal route. In 1949 the high level Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee submitted its Report. M.L. Dantwala, a professional economist was the chief architect of the Report. This Report led the central and the state governments to go Kanoon (legislation) way to land reforms and agrarian development. The state had initiated land reforms in form of Land ceiling, *“The First Five Year Plan (1951–56) expressed itself ‘in favour of the principle that there should be an upper limit to the amount of land that an individual may hold’.*

Though the Plan broadly accepted the upper limit suggested by the Kumarappa Committee as ‘fair’, it was nevertheless stated that the exact upper limit was to be ‘fixed by each State, having regard to its own agrarian history and its present problems’. Moreover, it was stated, ‘The census of land holding and cultivation, which it is proposed to hold during 1953, will give the data relevant to this decision.’ Clearly, there

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telangana_Rebellion Reproduced verbatim

was no immediate programme of implementing ceilings and the First Plan anticipated that ‘two to three years would be necessary’ to even undertake the necessary survey and set up a machinery which would enforce ceiling legislation effectively.

Despite the early statements of intentions and recommendations, not much progress on the question of ceilings occurred in the initial years after independence. This was recognized by the Congress, and the AICC in its session in Agra in 1953 urged, ‘The State Governments should take immediate steps in regard to collection of requisite land data and the fixation of ceilings on land holdings, with a view to redistribute the land, as far as possible, among landless workers.’ This position was reiterated repeatedly by the CWC and the AICC over the next few years.

In 1957 the Standing Committee of National Development Council (NDC) adopted a decision to complete the imposition of ceilings in the few states where such legislation had been passed by the end of 1960 and decided that other states should pass such legislation by 1958–59 (The NDC was created in 1952. It was a forum where all the chief ministers of the states would assemble, under the chairmanship of Nehru, to discuss critical issues relating to development.)

In the meantime, opposition to ceilings was building up in large parts of the country, in the Press, in parliament, in the state legislatures and even within the Congress party. A threat to the right to private property was perceived by the rural landowners as well as urban interests. Matters came to a head at the Nagpur session of the Indian National Congress in January 1959. Despite opposition from prominent Congressmen at the AICC and the Subjects Committee meeting preceding the open session, the Nagpur Congress (January 1959) passed a resolution stating that

‘in order to remove uncertainty regarding land reforms and give stability to the farmer, ceilings should be fixed on existing and future holdings and legislation to this effect . . . should be completed in all States by the end of 1959’. Further, the land declared surplus, that is, above ceiling limits, was to ‘vest in the panchayats . . . and (be) managed through cooperatives consisting of landless labourers’.

A wave of criticism was to follow in the months after the Nagpur session. N.G. Ranga, secretary of the Congress parliamentary party who had already, in December 1958, sent to Nehru a letter signed by a hundred

Congress MPs, critiquing the idea of ceilings, resigned from the Congress in February 1959. The Nagpur Resolution contributed considerably towards the consolidation of the right-wing forces both in the rural and urban sectors of the country.

N.G. Ranga and C. Rajagopalachari, alarmed at the moves towards land ceilings and threats of compulsory cooperativization, now joined hands with Minoo Masani, an important leader of the Forum for Free Enterprise which campaigned against the threat of nationalization and the public sector swamping the private sector, to form the Swatantra party in June 1959, with Ranga as president. The campaigners and beneficiaries of zamindari abolition, the tenants who had now become landowners, also ranged themselves against the next step in land reform, an attempt at redistribution of land-ownership through imposition of land ceilings.

The opponents of the ceilings legislation were, however, to have their real victory at the state level, as it was the states which had to formulate and implement the legislation. The state legislatures, which met shortly after the Nagpur session, showed no haste in implementing the Nagpur Resolution. The ceilings issue thus dragged on and most states passed the enabling legislation only by the end of 1961, that is, nearly fourteen years after the idea was officially mooted.

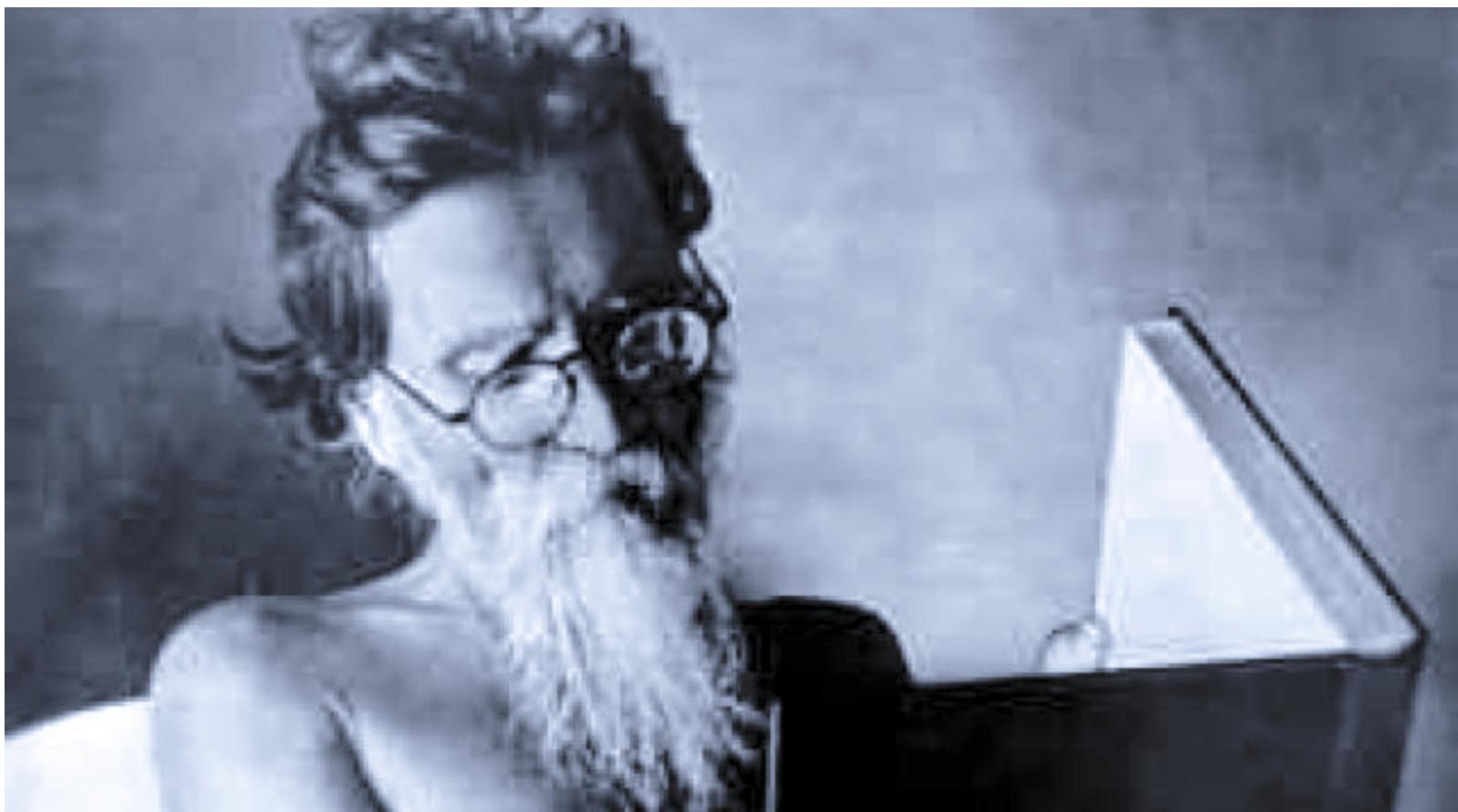
Land ceiling legislations were initiated in many parts of the country in the late 50's and early 60's. Jammu and Kashmir was the first state in the country to pass this Act. It was followed by West Bengal and Himachal Pradesh States. Maharashtra State passed this Act in 1961. The progress of ceiling legislation till 1972 was slow. It was found that only about 23 lakh acres of land was declared surplus. Of this, only about 13 lakh acres were redistributed. In Bihar, Karnataka, Orissa and Rajasthan, no land was declared surplus. It was mainly due to partitioning of land or Benami transfers.

In an attempt to stem this trend, the Central government got the 34th Amendment to the Constitution passed in Parliament in August 1974, getting most of the revised ceiling laws included in the Ninth Schedule of the constitution so that they could not be challenged in the courts. While the renewed effort of the 1970s did lead to some progress in surplus land being redistributed, the overall results were still far from satisfactory.

Nevertheless, by March 1985, 72 lakh acres was declared surplus out of which 43 lakh acres was distributed to about 33 lakh beneficiaries.

Moreover, more than half, 54.6 per cent of the beneficiaries, were members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes who received about 43.6 per cent of the area distributed. The objective set out in the 1947 economic programme of the Congress, of distributing surplus lands to village cooperatives or of even using such lands to start new cooperatives, however, was not achieved. Out of the land declared surplus but not distributed, nearly 16 lakh acres was under litigation. There was wide regional variation in the implementation of ceiling laws, with states like West Bengal under the Left Front implementing the law seriously, while others let it be lost in the morass of indifferent implementation.

By the middle of 1992, the area declared surplus was 73 lakh acres and the area distributed was about 50 lakh acres and the beneficiaries numbered about 47 lakh. The increase in the number of beneficiaries particularly between 1985 and 1992 was far greater than the increase in area distributed, 14 lakh beneficiaries and just 1 lakh acres respectively. This suggests that the new beneficiaries would have received only tiny plots or homestead lands. Thus, by the end, ceiling land were being used to give house sites to the landless, rather than cultivable land.”⁶



⁶ <https://erenow.com/exams/indiasinceindependence/33.html> Reproduced verbatim

2 Karuna – The Third Alternative to Katl and Kanoon

2.1 History of the Bhoodan Movement

This history is well known. Instead of attempting to rewrite it, I reproduce below one of the many versions which are on the net, and which most tallied with how I would have narrated it:

“Bhoodan was an attempt at land reform, at bringing about institutional changes in agriculture, like land redistribution through a movement and not simply through government legislation. Eminent Gandhian constructive worker Acharya Vinoba Bhave drew upon Gandhian techniques and ideas such as constructive work and trusteeship to launch this movement in the early 1950s. Unfortunately, its revolutionary potential has generally been missed.

Vinoba Bhave organized an all-India federation of constructive workers, the Sarvodaya Samaj, which was to take up the task of a non-violent social transformation in the country. He and his followers were to do padayatra (walk on foot from village to village) to persuade the larger 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 target was to get as donation 50 million acres, which was one-sixth of the 300 million acres of cultivable land in India. The idea was that each average family of five should give up to one-sixth of their land accepting the poor landless man as a member of the family.

The movement, though independent of the government, had the support of the Congress, with the AICC urging Congressmen to participate in it actively. Eminent former Congressman and a prominent leader of the Praja Socialist Party, Jayaprakash Narayan withdrew from active politics to join the Bhoodan movement in 1953.

Vinoba received the first donation of land on 18 April 1951 in the village of Pochampalli in the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh, where the reverberations of the Communist Party-led armed peasant revolt were still being felt. In less than three months he had covered about 200 villages in this region and received 12,200 acres as donation.

The movement then spread to the North, particularly Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. In the initial years the movement achieved a considerable degree of success, receiving over 45 lakh acres of land as donation by March 1956. After this the movement lost momentum and very little new land was received as donations.

Also, a substantial part of the land donated was unfit for cultivation or under litigation. Perhaps this was one reason why out of the nearly 45 lakh acres of Bhoodan land available only about 654,000 acres was actually distributed among 200,000 families by the end of 1957. By early 1961, about 872,000 acres of land had been distributed.

Meanwhile, towards the end of 1955, the movement took a new form, that of Gramdan or 'donation of village'. Again taking off from the Gandhian notion that all land belonged to 'Gopal' or God, in Gramdan villages the movement declared that all land was owned collectively or equally, as it did not belong to any one individual. The movement started in Orissa and was most successful there.

By the end of 1960 there were more than 4,500 Gramdan villages out of which 1,946 were in Orissa, 603 in Maharashtra, 543 in Kerala, 483 in Andhra Pradesh and about 250 in Madras. It has been argued that this movement was successful mainly in villages where class differentiation had not yet emerged and there was little if any disparity in ownership of land or other property, such as those inhabited by certain tribal communities. Vinoba is said to have picked such villages for this movement.

By the 1960s the Bhoodan/Gramdan movement had lost its elan despite its considerable initial promise. Its creative potential essentially remained unutilized. The programme, however, appeared to drag on indefinitely, essentially forgotten but for rude reminders such as the Bihar government decision of June 1999 to dissolve the State Bhoodan Committee for its inability to distribute even half the Bhoodan land available over the past thirty-eight years!

There were, however, some very significant aspects of the Bhoodan movement that need to be noted. First, the very fact that it was one of the very few attempts after independence to bring about land reform through a movement and not through government legislation from the top is in itself very significant. Second, the potential of the movement was enormous, based as it was on the idea of trusteeship or that all land belonged to God.

If the landlords failed to behave as trustees or as 'equal' sharers of property, then a satyagraha, in the Gandhian mould, could be launched against them. This, for example, was precisely what the Tamil Nadu Sarvodaya leaders proposed to do in 1961: 'Start satyagraha against landlords who refused to cooperate in Gramdan villages and went back on their promises to donate land.'

There were some including a section of Socialists influenced by Gandhian thought and practice (many of them were in the PSP in the early 1950s) who wanted to realize the revolutionary potential of the notion of trusteeship and of constructive work through the technique of satyagraha by launching mass civil disobedience against injustice.

The Sarvodaya Samaj, however, on the whole failed to make this transition: to build an active large-scale mass movement that would generate irresistible pressure for social transformation in large parts of the country."⁷

The table below indicates that out of total donated land 48.6 per cent has not yet been distributed among the landless and small farmers. This was in 2009, fully 50 years after the Bhoodan movement peaked. Thankfully, the situation is not bad everywhere and in Odisha, only 9.2% land was still undistributed. The details of district-wise distribution in Odisha are given in the table on the following page.

Table 1: Status of Bhoodan Land Received and Distributed (as on 31 March, 2009)

State	Land Donated in Acres	Land Distributed in Acres	Land Yet to be Distributed as % of total recd
Andhra Pradesh	252119	116134	53.9%
Assam	877	877	0.0%
Bihar	648593	251430	61.2%
Delhi	300	180	40.0%
Gujarat	103530	50984	50.8%
Haryana	2070	2043	1.3%
Himachal Pradesh	5240	2531	51.7%

⁷ <https://erenow.com/exams/indiasinceindependence/33.html> Reproduced verbatim

Jammu-Kashmir	211	5	97.6%
Jharkhand	1469280	488735	66.7%
Gujarat	103530	50984	50.8%
Karnataka	15864	5017	68.4%
Kerala	26293	5774	78.0%
Madhya Pradesh	410151	237629	42.1%
Maharashtra	158160	113230	28.4%
Orissa	638706	579984	9.2%
Punjab	5168	1026	80.1%
Rajasthan	546965	142699	73.9%
Tamil Nadu	27677	22837	17.5%
Uttar Pradesh	436362	418958	4.0%
West Bengal	16000	9000	43.8%
All India Total	48,67,096	25,00,057	48.6%

Source: Cholkar, Parag. Sabai Bhoomee Gopalkee” Shukla, Nimisha and Sudarshan Iyengar, “Governing of Commons: The Bhoodan Way” Gujarat Vidyapeeth. 2010. The all India total has been corrected and the last column computed by the author.

District-wise Bhoodan Land Position

Sl No	Name of the district	Land donated (in acres)	Land distributed (in acres)	Land available for distribution (in acres)
1	SUNDARGARH	3,204.23	2,303.20	901.03
2	ANGUL	7,353.84	7,151.37	201.97
3	DHENKANAL	37,716.38	37,607.05	109.33
4	KEONJHAR	13,787.15	13,607.05	179.90
5	BOLANGIR	7,116.05	6,850.70	255.70
6	SONEPUR	52.93	28.43	24.50
7	PHULBANI	31,076.58	31,076.58	-
8	SAMBALPUR	1,454.62	663.92	790.70
9	BARGARH	26,287.95	18,992.02	7,365.93
10	JHARSUGUDA	267.11	199.86	67.25

11	RAYAGADA	93,567.87	82,281.02	11,286.95
12	NAWARANGAPUR	1,05,551.37	1,05,551.37	–
13	KORAPUT	1,79,811.01	1,65,146.99	14,664.02
14	MALKANGIRI	26,876.50	26,876.50	–
15	KALAHANDI	5,990.87	1,125.29	4,865.58
16	NUAPADA	7,943.92	6,438.55	1,505.37
17	GANJAM	8.00	8.00	–
18	GAJAPATI	30,419.26	30,235.30	183.96
19	PURI	8,717.24	8,486.40	230.84
20	KHURDA	566.42	566.42	–
21	NAYAGARH	3,634.13	3,634.13	–
22	CUTTACK	4,146.88	2,913.27	2,233.41
23	JAGATSINGHPUR	6,496.29	3,085.75	3,410.54
24	JAJPUR	5,922.48	2,005.21	3,917.27
25	KENDRAPARA	1,281.16	525.27	755.89
26	BHADRAKA	6,111.55	3,806.44	2,305.11
27	BALASORE	16,142.82	14,016.25	2,126.57
28	MAYURBHANJA	8,071.20	7,415.86	655.34
29	BOUDH	–	–	–
30	DEOGARH	–	–	–
	TOTAL	6,38,706.50	5,79,996.29	58,710.29

Source: ORISSA BHOODAN YAGNA SAMITI, BHUBANESWAR, as on 31/03/2006.

Source: http://www.undp.org/content/dam/india/docs/land_rights_ownership_in_orissa.pdf

2.2 Scholarly Criticisms of Bhoodan

Vinoba travelled all over India covering over 80,000 km. on foot until 1969. His initial experience in Telangana had boosted his enthusiasm and he set a very high target of 50 million acres by 1957 that was one sixth of the total cultivable area in 1951. Tandon (1984) has divided the first phase of Bhoodan (1951-57) into four distinct phases by intensity of the Movement. Palliative (removal of local grievances) phase, Calling Attention (creating a wider understanding of the movement and calling attention of the nation) phase, fortification of Faith (building confidence among the workers about the possibility of the giant mission) phase and Extensive land Gift phase that happened in Bihar. Between 1951 and 1957 the Bhoodan movement was at its peak and reminded the political movements led by Gandhi. It is important to understand the legal follow up of Bhoodan. According to Iyengar,

State governments developed legal arrangements for accepting the gift and for redistribution. Procedures were laid down for transfer of land by a person owning a transferable interest in land to the Bhoodan Board. A declaration had to be made to the Revenue officer by any person desiring to transfer the land. It was examined and when found legal and without any problem relating to title, the gift was registered under Indian Registration Act of 1908. For objections a suit in a Civil Court was admissible. The distribution of gifted land to landless families was done by the Mandal or Tehsil Committees. The landless also included small holders owning up to 2 acres of irrigated and 5 acres of unirrigated land. Those who received land were known as Bhoodan-lessees.

Land distribution took place as soon as the declaration was made by the donor. Grantee was given a kachha patta and only after the gift was verified and approved as legal, a pucca patta was given to the lessee. It entered the record of rights of village revenue record. The leasehold right was heritable. Subletting was not permitted. A lessee had to hold the land for ten years without violating any condition to gain the status equivalent to that of the donor. There could have been minor inter-state variations in the processes of legalising the donations and the legal procedures followed for redistribution, but in every state Kanoon did follow Karuna.

Shuka and Iyengar (2010) examined the theory of Bhoodan to see if it would simultaneously solve the problem of equity in land use in agriculture and also achieve ecological sustainability in common property framework. According to them

The [Bhoodan] land distributed to landless had inheritance rights but did not give right to alienate. Bhoodan is a case of collective ownership and private use. The process of receiving land as a gift, its distribution to landless and plans for production and management would be analysed. Unlike the traditional community based naturally evolved systems of commons management for private and public economic benefits, Bhoodan is a system that is introduced to a community with basic principle and value of non-violence. It is expected that the communities will experiment and naturalise it.

This appears to be a tall order and it is not surprising that the spirit of Bhoodan failed to take root, except in a few pockets where dedicated NGOs like the Association for Sarva Seva Farms (ASSEFA) worked

assiduously to help the allottees level the land, dig wells, and start cultivation. Capital was arranged from foreign donors and banks.

2.3 Practical Improvements in Bhoodan - Association for Sarva Seva Farms

ASSEFA was established in 1978, seminal effort that led to its establishment began in 1969, the year of Gandhi's birth centenary, in Sevalur village of Ramand district in southern Tamil Nadu. In this village lay barren a plot of 44 acres land gifted to 22 landless families under the Bhoodan movement. The recipients of the Bhoodan land had not been able to cultivate the land, as it required levelling, bunding and soil improvement. Besides, there was no source of irrigation; the Bhoodan families did not have work bullocks for ploughing the land, or money for crop inputs.

Inspired by Sarvodaya leaders such as Jagannathan and Rev. Keithan, a young Sarvodaya worker, Loganathan went to Sevalur and persuaded the villagers to join hands, contribute their labour for land reclamation and well digging. Prof. Giovanni Ermiglia, a retired professor of philosophy from Italy, who was impressed by Gandhian thought and had come to work with the Sarvodaya movement in India, organised funds for purchasing work bullocks, farm implements, irrigation pump sets and crop inputs. In a year, the barren land had been converted into a productive farm with lush green crops, operated collectively by the Bhoodan families. This was given the name 'Sarva Seva Farm' (Sarva Seva literally means service to all). For about a decade, Loganathan continued to work under the aegis of the Tamil Nadu Sarvodaya Mandal, expanding the number of such farms from 1 to 10, covering nearly 800 acres of Bhoodan land and enabling nearly 400 erstwhile landless families generate a stable livelihood.

Until the first Sarva Seva Farm was developed at Sevalur in 1970, there was little headway to enable poor landless families generate livelihoods from Bhoodan land, though some two million acres of it had been distributed. The Sarva Seva Farms effort attracted the attention of other senior Sarvodaya leaders who had participated in the movement as they felt that similar farms could be started in other states as well to realise the goal of the Bhoodan movement. ASSEFA was thus established in the end of 1978 as an all India organisation to spread the concept of

Sarva Seva Farms to other States outside Tamil Nadu.

By the year 1980, ASSEFA had established 51 Sarva Seva Farms, covering over 3000 acres of land and benefiting about 2000 Bhoodan allottees, through its irrigation and land development projects. Of these, eight Sarva Seva Farms were in the Gaya district of Bihar, five in the Wardha district of Maharashtra and one in Kota district of Rajasthan. Thus the main work continued to be in Tamil Nadu.

ASSEFA was soon to encounter problems of organizational expansion. Just as the Tamil Nadu project had evolved under the leadership of a senior Sarvodaya leader, Jagannathan, so were projects in other states taken up under the leadership of senior local Sarvodaya workers, most of whom did not have any formal training. They generally had many years of experience of working with rural communities, mostly on social issues such as promoting khadi (hand spinning), and arousing consciousness against drinking and cow slaughter, and so on. This was characteristic of the Sarvodaya fraternity – individual Sarvodaya workers carried out various social activities with minimal guidance and support (including limited funds) by a formal or informal apex body created around a social issue, such as for the education of Harijans.

Realizing that the administrative and reporting work of the organisation would increase due to the expansion of project locations far away from Tamil Nadu, Loganathan began to look for individuals with professional background to strengthen the internal management of the organisation. The first such person recruited by ASSEFA in 1979 was T K Matthew, who had a degree in agriculture and over twenty years' experience of working with development agencies. Matthew joined as the Executive Coordinator, based in Delhi, and was given the charge of monitoring the projects in Bihar, Rajasthan and Maharashtra, as well as reporting and liaison with donors, most of whom passed through Delhi.

Because of his responsibilities related to donor liaison and reporting, as well as other administrative work, however Matthew could visit each project only about once in a quarter for a few days at a time and the projects continued to be run by local senior Sarvodaya leaders acting as honorary Project Directors.

By early 1981, it was becoming clear that the Sarva Seva Farms projects in Bihar, Maharashtra and Rajasthan were not taking off. This was due

to a variety of reasons; many perceived that the social conditions in these states were not as supportive as in Tamil Nadu. Also, the local senior Sarvodaya leaders who had invited ASEEFA to work in their areas were not necessarily experienced in land based livelihood projects involving intensive capital and technical inputs. They had much greater expectation from ASSEFA in terms of project management support. As ASSEFA was not able to provide guidance it began to be viewed merely as a funding channel for projects in states other than Tamil Nadu.

To overcome this difficulty, ASSEFA created a Technical and Management Services cell and the author, Vijay Mahajan, joined ASSEFA as its first head in 1982. He began working in Bihar. The author plunged into action - simultaneously diagnosing ASSEFA's needs. He made his first visit to Gaya, one of the districts in Bihar, about 120 kms south of the Bihar State capital, Patna, along with Loganathan and Matthew in August, 1982. The local Project Director was Diwakar ji, 58, a Sarvodaya leader who was the Secretary of the Bhoodan Board, and was respected by the community.

In Gaya, ASSEFA made a beginning with eight villages comprising of over 300 Bhoodan allottees, owning over 500 acres of cultivable land. The project villages were scattered and land ownership in the region was highly skewed, as a result of which a majority of the population consisted of small and marginal farmers and the landless. Irrigation was poorly developed in the region, though there was fair potential from ground water, small stream and rainwater harvesting. In the absence of irrigation, agriculture consisted of two uncertain rain-fed crops a year. Infrastructure and public services were very poor, especially in the project villages. There was virtually no supply of power and the link roads were not even metalled, so one had to wade through mud four months a year.

Eventually, the programs by which ASSEFA intervened in the agricultural sector in Gaya included

- Land Reclamation, which involved various wasteland development techniques, to bring more land under agricultural operation.
- Water Harvesting, through watershed, check dams, ponds and provision of open and bore wells, lift irrigation, for irrigation support.
- Agricultural inputs, provision of suitable crops inputs, farm implements, etc. for effective land utilisation and help in marketing

Most of these activities were done with grant support, as it required high investment. Moreover, most of the activities under land reclamation, watershed, check dams, ponds, open wells, etc. were for common benefits and hence loans could not be raised for those. In a period of three years, not only was the Gaya Project successfully completed, but similar projects were begun in two more districts in Bihar – Munger (now Jamui) and Deoghar (now in Jharkhand).

Later the work was spread to other states – Wardha and Yavatmal districts in Maharashtra, Guna district in Madhya Pradesh and Kota (now Baran), and Banswara districts of Rajasthan. ASSEFA continues to work with rural poor communities in all these areas, directly as ASSEFA in Tamil Nadu and through affiliated NGOs in other states.



3 Gramdan –The Next Phase of Bhoodan

Once again, this history is well known. Instead of attempting to rewrite it, I reproduce below one of the many versions which are on the net, and which most tallied with how I would have narrated it:

“The Bhoodan movement 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 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.

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

3.1 Gramdan in Odisha

Excerpted below is a wonderful narration of how the Gramdan movement unfolded in Odisha.

“The second Gramdan in the country in fact the first in Odisha was obtained in Manpur 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. 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 said: “There should be no landlessness in our village is the first step. And that there should be no land owner-ship in our village is the last. None except God is the owner of land. We mortals can only be its 6 children. And ours is to serve the mother-earth as we can.

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 7 respectively. 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 movement and also Vinoba’s mission in solving national and social problems through nonviolent 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 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 9 Gramdans made in the entire country.

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 Narayan 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.

...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. 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 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 Prakhand dan (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 Prakhand dan.

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.

By October 2, 1969 Vinoba had received 60,060 villages in the program in Bihar. 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. 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.

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 concept 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 168,058 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. 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. 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.”

3.2 Gramdan – Evolution of the Concept

As far as Gramdan, i.e. gift of village is concerned; the first Gramdan was made in Hamirpur district in Uttar Pradesh. Village Mangroth was as whole was donated to Vinoba by all the landowners in 1952. The second and third villages donated almost all land and that happened in Manipur and Akili in Orissa in 1955 respectively. There were three stages under Gramdan. In first stage, village would agree to donate all its land. In the second stage, after the gift papers are received by Sarvodaya Mandal, the village would be declared as Gramdan village. In the final stage, the village would be registered as a Gramdani village in government records.

In September 1957, the Managing Committee of the Sarva Seva Sangh decided that if more than 80 per cent landowners agreed to donate and if that constituted more than 50 per cent of the land in the village, the village would be declared as Gramdani village. People of such village would have no right to sell or mortgage the land, a condition with which the big landowners were not happy. Hence the norm was relaxed; the owner could retain ninety per cent (18 parts out of 20). Since the Gramsabha was the custodian of all the land, he could not sell or mortgage the land, but had right to bequeath and transfer to his kith and kin.

This understanding led to evolving of Sulabh Gramdan concept. To provide it legislature support, a model Gramdan Bill was prepared by prominent Sarvodaya worker and the member of Planning Commission, Dr. Ram Krishna Patil. It was expected that the states would enact Gramdan law. A number of states like Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu formulated such laws. The important features of the Gramdan are as follows.

- One, for each Gramdani village, every adult is a member of Gramsabha. Article 12 provides it legal and constitutional status. Till it is dismantled, it remains an autonomous authority that deals with land issues. (Chandra, 1995)
- Second, consensus is mandatory to elect office bearers of the Gramsabha.
- Third, there is a constraint to sell the land. There is a well defined procedure for selling of land, especially safe-guarding distress sale.

- The seller has to approach first to the needy within the village followed by residents of adjoining village and lastly outside the boarder villages.
- Fourth, total land is concerned as common property and all residents as stake-holders. They take decisions for entire land, at the same time they take independent decisions also for their private land.
 - Fifth, a Village Community Fund (Gramkosh) was developed wherein all producers had to contribute one fortieth of the produce after deducting land revenue. Non-land earners had to contribute one thirtieth of the income earned. The Fund was to be used for taking care of destitute, supporting education activity and renovating and establishing village industries.
 - Sixth, the transaction cost in the voluntary transfer of land is reduced to minimum. In the legislation route, the State not only had to compensate the landlords, but also incur huge administrative expenditure in first acquiring land and then distributing it.
 - Seventh, by adopting Gandhi's ideas to the solution of the basic economic problem of land collection and equitable redistribution among the landless, the Movement kept Gandhi's ideas of socioeconomic reconstruction alive at a period when the tendency of the educated elite was to overlook, if not to reject Gandhi's ideas as irrelevant.

4 Scholarly Criticisms and Practical Examples of Gramdan

Some of the criticisms aired by scholars of these movements are as follows. •

“The movement was unevenly spread across the states. Bihar alone donated half of all land donated in the country. Bihar, MP, UP and Rajasthan together contributed to more than 85 per cent of the total land donated. • The record of land distribution was very poor. Bihar and Rajasthan performed particularly worse. The workers perhaps could not convince the donors about the sincerity of the task of redistribution. • The programme became target oriented and extensive. Vinoba might not have thought through and accordingly could not follow a well-designed plan and shifted to Gramdan from Bhoodan. Significant number of Bhoodan-Gramdan workers failed him by their lack of total commitment, honesty and integrity and fell for number game. The workers lacked commitment and in many places it became a tool to cater to the interest of the near and dear ones in laying their hands on land property. •

Mainstream intellectuals ignored the entire experiment as inconsequential and the communist activists did not agree on the approach and hence were critical. Government agencies were also negligent and inefficient in following up on the legal and administrative steps that were necessary to firm up the redistribution of donated land parcels.

The movement from Bhoodan to Gramdan was a big strategic mistake. Land owners in villages were willing to consider parting with some land parcel that they really held in excess, but parting with entire holding and then accepting small part as private and rest as common was not acceptable to most. Out of respect to the revered leader villages agreed to gift the land on paper and then backed out. Transferred to landless families, the ability to cultivate and at least produce same amount of output per unit of land would depend on the ability to control and invest inputs. In reality the landless did not have access and control over inputs other than family labour.

According to Parikh (1953), a noted Gandhian economist, two types of problems existed in the case of Bhoodan. First, with distribution of land from large land owners to small land owners simultaneously with the campaign of ‘grow more food’ by the government created contradictory situation. The second problem was related to the access of land receivers in terms of adequate agricultural inputs of which implements and credit availability were crucial for viable

utilisation of Bhoodan land. Apart from the above criticisms, the limitations especially of Gramdan can be summarised as:

- Inadequate legislative support.
- Revenue/administrative village and not natural/cultural village.
- Lethargic efforts on part of the government
- Avoiding conflicting situations by the volunteers/Psyche of volunteers
- Ignorance of urbanites regarding the movement
- Ignored by Media

Gramdan, was a voluntary approach by the land owners to relinquish the right of land in favour of the village community. It was a scientifically developed procedure where decisions were taken by the Gramsabha as a whole of which each adult resident was a member. Yet, the initial enthusiasm behind Gramdan could not sustain for long. Since the village as a community owns the village land, in classical sense it becomes a common property. Why could Gramdan not achieve remarkable success?⁸

4.1 Case Studies of Gramdan⁹

4.1.1 Mangroth Experience

It was the first Gramdani village of the country. After donating the land by the owners, problems rose regarding the management and utilisation of all the land. Since this was the first experience, Vinoba sent his two deputies, Baba Raghavdas and Ramgopal Gupta, to Mangroth. During the Gramsabha, community land ownership right was recognised, but issue of management remained. The opponents took up the opportunity to raise doubts about the success of the experiment. Once again, external input from Sarvodaya volunteers led to meetings for four days and the people decided for community agriculture. At the same time, for some unexplained reason, there was an attempt to take back the land donations. But the women of the village stopped them doing so.

Finally, following was decided after discussion in Gramsabha. Land would be considered as common property and anyone, who wishes so, could participate in community farming. It was also decided that those who owned up to 15 bigha (one acre=1.75 bigha), should keep the land with themselves. Each landless should be given minimum 7-8 bigha initially and should be increased to 15

⁸ Shukla, Nimisha and Sudarshan Iyengar, "Governing of Commons: The Bhoodan Way" Gujarat Vidyapeeth. 2010. Excerpts reproduced verbatim.

⁹ Cholkar, Parag. Sabai Bhoomee Gopalkee" Shukla, Nimisha and Sudarshan Iyengar, "Governing of Commons: The Bhoodan Way" Gujarat Vidyapeeth. 2010. Reproduced verbatim.

bighas gradually, so everyone should have minimum of 15 bighas each. It was also decided that revenue would be paid by village as a whole.

Since Gramsabha was not legally recognised, an organisation named Sarvodaya Mandal was formed in which every adult man and woman was member. Vinoba who was given the sole ownership of land transferred the right to the Mandal to manage the land. The procedure for registration took four years because of bureaucratic bottlenecks. Finally, 24 April, 1957 was the date when the Mandal was registered. Common land revenue was an important decision as it frees villagers from the corrupt administration and strengthens community spirit among people. Revenue officials issued warrant for auction of seized land against 20-25 villagers and almost attacked the village with help of police. The leaders had gone out of the village. The villagers paid land revenue in this uncertain circumstance. The leader informed the district collector regarding the whole incident. The matter reached the then Chief Minister Govind Vallabh Pant and his intervention led to an order that issued land in the name of the Mandal and common land revenue.

It was necessary to increase agricultural production and productivity. Irrigation was made possible with community efforts, land erosion was prevented, waste land was made cultivable and production of compost fertiliser was started. The production of anaj, tilhan and dal increased from 858 mans in 1954 to 3173 mans in 1957. This led not only to food self-sufficiency, but to surplus, too. The village tried for cloth self-sufficiency, but because of inadequate system of weaving it could not be achieved. Still, Khadi production did start. A community shop was started. Proper attention was given to forest protection. Progress was not only economic, it was also moral. The tiff between the encroachers and villagers was sorted out by non-violent manner. Village accepted policy of prohibition of liquor. Attention was given to spreading education.

4.1.2 Manfar (Gaya district, Bihar)

The village became Gramdani village in 1953 with 33 tribal families. The poor, exploited tribal were attracted to Gramdan to free themselves from the exploitation of landlords. In 1954, the land was equally redistributed with 22 acres for community farming and

3 acres for Sarvodaya Mandal. The land was divided into four types on the basis of fertility and care was taken to distribute each type of land to every family. There was no dispute among the people, but the government was levying the land revenue on the basis of old land ownership, when the change was conveyed to it! The efforts were translated into success in the span of 14 years.

The village that was able to grow food for only four months achieved sufficiency for the whole year as a result of investment in irrigation. New ponds and dams were constructed, land was resurfaced. The availability of milk and vegetables also increased. The alcohol consumption declined. Village hygiene was given priority. Primary school was started. Efforts for adult literacy were initiated. The disputes were resolved within the village. Marriage and death ceremonies became the affairs of the whole community and every family shared the expenses. Sarvodaya Sahyog Samiti was given the debt management. One of the major achievements was the sense of freedom among the exploited group.

4.1.3 Mohzari (Balaghat district, Madhya Pradesh)

The village became Gramdani village in 1964 with 3000 population. The leader, Mr. Mahipalsinh Naktaude was a person with intense intellectual understanding, exposed to and experienced from outer world. The village had many admirable traditions before Gramdan. Food storage, public distribution system, Khadi work and unanimous decision making were some of such traditions. After Gramdan, there was moral development of the village. Regular prayers were held in the village. There was no practise of untouchability, village disputes were resolved within village and prohibition of sale of alcohol were some of the positive outcomes of Gramdan. Committees like Khadi Samiti, Cooperative Society, Oilproducing society and Youth Circle etc were active in the community.

4.1.4 Koraput district (Orissa)

Vinoba received a large number of villages in Koraput district during his padyatra. Sarva Seva Sangh along with local Utkal Navjeevan Mandal decided to build a demonstrative development work. They invited the scholar Mr. Annasaheb Sahastrabuddhe, a veteran

Sarvodaya worker and noted expert in agriculture and Khadi fields, and initiated work from November 1955. It was found that only around 22 per cent land was cultivated out of total 64 lakh acres. About 70 per cent land was forest land. More the 83 per cent population was tribal with lack of interest in agriculture and suffering from malnutrition. The region was poor and backward with abundant natural resources. There was almost nonexistent education and industry. Bonded labour was rampant.

In 1956, a basic framework for development work was made, however it kept changing as and when required. For these villages, debt was a serious concern. As land became community owned, neither private money lenders nor state were willing to provide credit to this poor tribal population. The formation of Cooperative Societies was decided, but was not supported by the state. Since forest land and tribal interest in forest were significant, Forest Cooperative Committees were formed and efforts were initiated to establish forest based industries. Similarly, with abundant mineral wealth, mineral based industry was also considered. As a result of erroneous technique only 10 to 15 per cent iron was converted into steel. With adoption of better technique, the per cent increased up to 80-90. Redistribution and reforms of land were given priorities.

Till June 1957, land was redistributed in 756 villages. Out of redistributed 112058 acres, 83.5 per cent land was given for private farming. The remaining land was kept for community farming, income from which was to be utilised for development work. 15686 acres of land was found not suitable for agriculture. Bullocks and agricultural tools were also given to families besides programmes for micro-irrigation and soil conservation. Other voluntary organisations also joined hands in this process.

The development paradigm that was envisaged could not become reality. Along with volunteers' weaknesses, the government policy also changed drastically. Bureaucracy was against the Sarvodaya philosophy. The psyche of donors also changed. The situation became so critical that Sarva Seva Sangh decided to withdraw and development work dwindled. Koraput experience was short lived and unsuccessful. However, it could cultivate sense of self-confidence and self-esteem among the tribals.

4.1.5 Sid (Udaipur district, Rajasthan)

Sid became Gramdani village in 1980. The village population is homogeneous. There was no landless in the village. The land ownership ranges between 5 to 40 Bighas. Each family privately cultivates only five per cent of land and deposits its income in the Fund. Gramsabha has land papers for all village land and pays land revenue. Gramsabha head is not elected but selected and representative from each group is given opportunity. There is absence of liquor sale within village. Gramsabha also acts as court. Gomati River has become perennial as a result of water harvesting works. Village protects and conserves its 899 acre forest. A number of rules and their strict implementation have made the forest dense once again. The ownership of natural resources like land, water and forest by the community and their management are exemplary. However, it should be sadly noted that the change in laws in Rajasthan has withdrawn the Gramsabha rights. Time is difficult, but the fight still goes on.

The above are representative cases of Gramdan. The situation may not be drastically different in other villages. What can be starkly observed for the most important reason for failure of Gramdan movement is lack of government commitment. Apathy of bureaucracy, to some extent hostile opposition to the movement, has been a serious cause of concern. The seventh principle-Right to devise own rules to be respected by external authorities-although accepted on paper, has been violated. The violation of one rule would discourage the members of a community and they follow the suit. As a consequence, Gramsabha could not function effectively.

4.2 Status of Gramdan villages in Rajasthan

A discussion was held by the author's colleague Shri Dilip Kumar Gupta held in Jan 2018 with Shri Rambabu Sharma, Sachiv, Bhodan/Gramdan Board and Mohanlal Tabiyar of Ghanevabada, Zila chairman of Gramdan villages. The author gratefully acknowledges Mr Gupta's contribution to this section.

The number of gramdan villages has reduced to 198 from 236 in Rajasthan. Most of the gramdan villages are concentrated in Tribal

districts- Dungarpur, Banswara, Chittorgarh and Sirohi. Banswara has 39 while Dungarpur has 41 gramdan villages. There is hardly any Gramdan village declared after 73rd amendment in the constitution of Panchayati raj, in 1994. In fact the number has been reduced to 198 from 236. In Banswara, gramdan sangh is no longer in existence (dysfunctional) for the last 7-8 years there is a adhoc committee in its behalf which facilitate the president election every three years. Rajasthan Gramdan Board, Chairman is appointed by Govt. (Board has 3 members only). As per Govt Circular in 2007-08, Board was advised that chairman of gramdan be elected under secret ballot (earlier it was elected through consensus with gramsabha member raising their hand).

Observing and experiencing the complexity of conducting election with secret ballot (logistic and fund constraints -no separate fund provision) Board suggested that District collector be authorised to conduct the election and Govt finally issued a notification in 2016 where District Collector was given the responsibility of conducting the election of Gramdan chairman. Dungarpur is the only district where all the legal process is followed in the election of Gramdan chairman. Otherwise Banswara has adhoc committee which facilitates the election Gramdan village; as per gramdan Act 1960, Tehsildar would receive and examine the application from the Gramsabha and based on the merit he would declare the village as gramdan village, but a modification in the process of declaring gramdan village was brought in the Act, known as Gramdan act 1971, which says application will be examined by tehsildar But, announcement of gramdan will be done after due procedures by District Collector.

All the power with regards to development work including revenue related matter was vested with Gramsabha of the Gramdan village as per section 43 of the Act, but scope of work and power delegation was reduced to land revenue only as a effect of 73rd amendment in constitution. Accordingly to him, status of gramdan village is deteriorating with gramdan kisan losing interest year after year, there is no control on Gramdan President, President is elected through adhoc committee. Even many of the powers with Gramdan villages have been taken away after the Constitutional amendment in Panchayati Raj

Now panchayats are empowered for carrying out development works even in the gramdan villages. Only the revenue matters are now with

once all powerful Gramsabha of Gramdan village. The Gramdani kisan are mostly small and marginal farmers. With the increase in land price, particularly near urban area, Gramdani kisan is tempted to sell off their land. Knowing it is against the law they compromise with chairman and find a way out.

Shri Mohanlal Tabiyar has been Zila Adhaksht, Gramdani village for the last 6 years. He said the Gramsabha elects Executive committee (Karypalika), it has 9-11 members who are elected from pada/different part of the Gramdan village. Executive committee elects Gramdan adhaksht from among their members. After withdrawal of section 43 of the Gramdan act, Gramdan scope of work has been reduced to only Land revenue related work such as, keeping of land records with the support of Patwari (this person is provided by Gram dan Board to organise meeting) mutation, collection of Lagan etc;

Gramsabha also collects 5 kg of crop in a year for Gram nidhi. The status of Gramdan villages in Rajasthan can also be observed from the following article

Bhoodan movement under Threat- Hindu January 31, 2008

Rajasthan Govt. move to provide ownership rights to individual landholders in "Gramdan" villages

JAIPUR: The good old "Gramdan" villages, visualised as communes of joint ownership by the legendary Bhoodan movement leader Acharya Vinoba Bhave, are under threat in Rajasthan today with the State Government deciding to provide ownership rights to individual landholders.

There are 210 Gramdaan villages spread over a dozen districts across the State and with increasing pressure on land in the wake of growing urbanization it is feared that the land in these villages, now mostly with small and marginal farmers belonging to Adivasis and Dalits, would change hands pretty soon.

The Rajasthan Gramdan Act forbids individual ownership of land in the Gramdan villages, which has been proving a deterrent to transfer of land so far. The landholders are free to cultivate the farmlands under them but they cannot sell the land to any other person.

Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan campaign years ago had a huge impact in Rajasthan where landowners donated over 42 lakh acres of land to the movement as common property till March 1964. "The surest way to reach Gandhiji's ideal gram raj is gramdan," wrote the late Sarvodaya leader Siddhraj Dhadha in his book, "Gramdan", exactly 50 years ago.

"As long as the Act remains in force, the ownership right of land cannot be given to individuals. Any such move would lead to playing into the hands of land sharks," says Sawai Singh, president of Rajasthan Samagra Seva Sangh. "Other than the power to transfer the land, the cultivators have all kinds of rights over their holdings. The Government move is only to facilitate the sale of land," he alleges.

At a recent meeting of the Rajasthan Cabinet, held in Ajmer, it was decided to provide ownership rights to landholders in Gramdan villages.

"There is a provision in the Act which says that only the gram sabha can decide on transfer of the land. As long as the Act is in force, khatedari (title) right to anyone would be only at the cost of violation of law," observes Rameshwar Vidhyarthi, president of the Bhoodan-Gramdan cell of Samagra Seva Sangh.

As such, many of the powers vested with the Gramdan villages, spread over in the districts of Jaipur, Sikar, Banswara, Dungarpur, Chittorgarh, Sirohi, Jaisalmer and Bhilwara, have been taken away after the Constitutional amendment pertaining to Panchayati Raj in the past. Now the panchayats are empowered to be the nodal agencies for carrying out development works even in the Gramdan villages. Only the revenue matters are now with the once all powerful gram sabhas, which have elected chairpersons as heads.

"The maximum number of Gramdan villages in Rajasthan are in the tribal districts of Banswara and Dungarpur and any such move would only deprive the tribals of their land," notes Awadh Prasad, director of the Jaipur-based Kumarappa Institute of Gram Swaraj.

"The pressure on land is increasing all over the State and

inhabitants in villages situated near to the urban centres are tempted to sell off land,” he noted. The Gramdan villages near Jaipur are under severe pressure, Dr. Prasad adds.

The Gramdan villages are in limbo with development activities changing hands. “Gram sabhas have become almost like wards under any panchayat. Earlier the gram sabha chairperson was empowered to issue death and birth certificates and the ration cards. Now these powers have been transferred to the panchayats,” says Jayaprakash Arya of Naharwali Dhani, one of the Gramdan villages in Chaksu tehsil of Jaipur district.

Chaksu tehsil alone has 12 Gramdan villages. “Earlier the gram sabha chairperson used to have powers to vote in the election of the panchayat samiti pradhan. Now that right too has been taken away,” Dr. Arya notes.

Not to speak of powers of the elected chairpersons, the Bhoodan-Gramdan Board, which is empowered to conduct elections in the Gramdan villages, stands defunct in the State after the State Government failing to constitute it after coming to power.



5 Status of Land Ownership Distribution Today

As can be seen from the Statements 3.1 and 3.2 reproduced above from the Report of the National Sample Survey 70th round (January-December 2013) on Land and Livestock Holdings, in 2013, the total land ownership by households was 92 million ha in 2012-13. Of this, the top 7.18 percent of the households owned 47.71 percent of land in rural areas. In contrast, the landless 7.42 percent owned next to nothing – just 0.01 percent. The 85.42 marginal and small farmers in between own over half of the land 53.29 percent. Thus the distribution of land, the most important productive asset in rural India and the very basis of the most important livelihood – agriculture, continued to be skewed despite all types of attempts to make the distribution more equitable, from the violent leftist peasant movements (kati), the legislative and administrative attempts at imposing land ceilings (kanoon) and even Vinoba Bhave's Karuna based Bhoodan and Gramdan movements.

We need not despair though for, as we can see from the table above, perhaps because the cumulative effect of all these, or other reasons, in just one decade, the land owned by the top layer has fallen from 57.00 percent to 47.71 percent. Beyond the triad of kati, kanoon and karuna, there seems to be some karishma, perhaps the hidden hand of market forces. We will return to this topic in the end.



6 Conclusion – Naiveté or a New Vision

Given its dismal track record, the Bhoodan-Gramdan movement can be accused of naiveté. There are at least three levels where the movement was naïve, in the sense of being based on assumptions which are rarely true in practice.

The first level of naiveté was the assumption about the human beings' willingness to share. Because the young boy Ramchandra Reddy in Pochampally decided to give away 100 acres of his father's land to the landless or the villagers of Magroth decided to give up all their lands to a collective to establish the first Gramdan, does not mean that a majority of Indians wanted to do them same. But out of respect for Vinoba's saintliness, and the wave of giving, apart from a nudge from the government about to impose ceilings on land ownership and the extremists wanting to dispossess landlords, many more landlords decided to give part of their land in Bhoodan, irrespective of whether its title was clearly with them or not or if it was cultivable or not.

The author has seen good land given as Bhoodan in the Gaya district of Bihar, but immediately contested by a bevy of relatives and erstwhile tenants. In another case, the author has seen really bad, rocky, undulating land given away in Bhoodan in the Kota district of Rajasthan. In the latter years of the Bhoodan movement, it became a matter of prestige that if Vinoba was passing through a district or state, he would be given a lot of Bhoodan land. The author has seen over a lakh acres of land "forest" in the Guna district in Madhya Pradesh, which was donated by the then Madhya Bharat provincial government. Even 25 years later, that land title was disputed among the Revenue Department, the Forest Department and the MP Bhoodan Board.

The second level of naiveté was the assumption about the human beings willingness to develop themselves by working hard and working together. A lot of Bhoodan land allottees could have made something of the land gift that they got had they been willing to come together in small groups of just five or six, who had contiguous plots, so that they could share wells, pumps, pipelines, plough bullocks and boundary walls. The author found during his work with Bhoodan allottees in Bihar in 1982-84, an extreme reluctance to share any resource. Eventually the author did prevail on them but it was often at the threat of withdrawing the resource like a pumpset. The difficulty of getting poor farmers to share resources was so large that the concept of Gramdan, where a whole village community with many starting inequalities,

would share their resources seemed really utopian. Yet, the author has seen “living Gramdan” in villages like Sundrao and Bada Ghaneva in the Anandpuri block of Banswara district of Rajasthan. But these were tribal communities with much higher level of starting equality and a tradition of sharing.

The third level of naiveté is the assumption that everything happens merely by change of heart and volunteer people, with no working systems or organisational structures have to be set up. In fact, this was the biggest reason for the failure of Bhoodan. Land was collected, but the donations were not carefully scrutinised for title or utility, nor were systematically handed over to anyone who felt responsible to give those away to deserving landless people. Instead, the Bhoodan Patras were just handed over to indifferent, or worse, Revenue officials and Vinoba and his retinue moved on. It was much later that Bhoodan Boards were constituted under law and but never given adequate capacity or resources to do justice to their work.

Yet in this era of Uber, where under-utilised automobiles are shared though for a price, Air b’n’b, where under-utilised residences are shared, again for a price, though often well below the perceived value of either the owner or the user, and Wikipedia, where knowledge about a myriad topics is shared completely for free, it seems that Bhoodan and Gramdan were ideas ahead of their time and that we may yet live to see some resurrection of these badly needed ideas in our time.

One such radical idea is to use the power of technology and the market to attract capital to Indian agriculture, but to do this in a way those who own land today or live by working on it do not get left out of the increase in prosperity that will result. For this, the first step would have to be recognise titles in an absolute and not presumptive manner. This process is called Torrens titling,

Torrens title is a system of land registration, in which a register of land holdings maintained by the state guarantees an indefeasible title to those included in the register. Land ownership is transferred through registration of title instead of using deeds. Its main purpose is to simplify land transactions and to certify to the ownership of an absolute title to realty. It has become pervasive around the countries strongly influenced by Britain, especially those in the Commonwealth of Nations. It is named after Sir Robert Richard Torrens, GCMG (1814 – 31 August 1884), who was the third Premier of South Australia.¹⁰

After due consultation and legislation, we introduce the concept that the government shall guarantee the location and the title of the land, by entering

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torrens_title

it into a National Landbit Registry, an electronic database downloadable on any mobile phone. But there will be one proviso – for benefiting from all this unlocked value, the owner has to donate 1/10th of his land to the village community and it can in turn decide to give it to the landless or keep it in a pool. This is where the idea of Bhoodan gets resurrected.

The idea is not as idealistic as it sounds. All over the country, as it is people pay between 6 to 15% of the land value to merely register a sale deed, which only confers on them a presumptive title (that is since a search for the past 30 years of records shows no one else claiming title on that land, so it is presumed to be that of the seller). As against this, giving up 10% of land for a government guaranteed Torrens title seems to be quite a reasonable thing to ask. Imagine, if indeed this were to happen, it would release 10 percent of 92 million hectares owned by households in 2012-13 or 9.2 million ha or 234 lakh acres of land for redistribution, which is over three times the 73 lakh acres collected under the land ceiling legislation, and nearly five times the 48 lakh acres collected under Bhoodan.

Another example of this type of exchange is seen commonly in urban road-widening projects. Here, landowners are offered more floor-area-ratio (number of square mtrs they can build on each square mtr of land) in return for shifting back from the roadside, leading to land becoming available for road widening. People not only cooperate, but spend money breaking old structures and building taller new edifices.

The next step would be to standardise the value of all land as objectively as possible, without engaging in a market transaction. This means converting all land into standardised parcels called landbits, as small as 10m x10 m, which is 1/100th of a hectare (0.01 ha) or about 1/40th of an acre. The location of each landbit will first be determined absolutely using GPS, giving each landbit centroid an unique GPS Lat-Long ID. Its boundaries, rectangular or any other polygon, will then be recorded on GPS. Then each landbit will be further rated on the following parameters:

1. Gradient (For every 3% gradient, deduct 1 point from 10, so that non-slopy land is rated 10, while anything 30% or above is rated 0)
2. Topographic advantage (If at the bottom of a slope, 10 points, 0 if at the ridge)
3. Soil depth (10 pts for 30 cm or more of top soil, deduct 1 pt for every 3 cm less than 30 cm)
4. Soil Type (10 pt for high humus, alluvial, 0 pt for rocky lateritic or sodic soil)

5. Insolation (10 pts for highest possible sunshine at that location...)
6. Groundwater /Mineral (10 pts if it is on top of an acquifer or mineral deposit...)
7. Heritage/Scenic value (10 pts if within line of sight of heritage /scenic view)
8. Locational advantage (10 pts if next to a national highway, 7 for state highway, 5 for major district road, 3 for other PWD road, etc...)
9. Existing usage (10 pts if current use is mutable and less if there are constraints)
10. Existing title (10 pts if the existing title is clear)

Based on the scores on each of the above ten points, there will be an overall score for each landbit, which will become aligned with the market price over a period of time, with some adjustments being done for ratings. So it is the market price which will be used to adjust the weightages of the different criteria in the rating system.

Once the value of each landbit is standardized, the value of any plot say as small as 0.04 ha can be measured by summing of the value of each landbit in that small plot - in this case 400 landbits will have to be added up. Once the landbit value is determined of any plot of land, it is ready for the next step, which is de-individualising land ownership, without taking away existing land ownership from individuals. This means the owner of the above 0.04 ha plot will be given landshare certificates, whose value and title is guaranteed by the collective (a cooperative or a company of all the proximate landowners) through the underlying landbits. While title guarantee by a private entity will not have as much authority as an absolute Torrens title by the government, going by the fact that most land title/boundary disputes happen with neighbours or local people, we think a Torrens kind of title by a collective comprising of neighbours or local people will be adequate for over 95 percent of the cases. In the long run, the government can offer an additional layer of title guarantee but by starting with collective honoured Torrens like titles, we can start the process of de-risking land title issues.

Once landbits have been standardised, they can then be exchanged with each other and landshares can be bought and sold in the landshares market. They can be pooled together to establish a “Mutual Fund” of landshares, which can then become the equity in a development project, which capital markets will be more ready to finance given the underlying certainty of title and tradability.

At this stage, we reintroduce the concept of Gramdan. So all landshares in a village will, though individually owned, be held in trust with the Gramsabha. While existing owners will have the right to enjoyment and inheritance, there will be a limitation on the sale of landshares to only those who are approved by the Gramsabha. This does not prevent companies and wealthier people from purchasing the landshares as long as they can convince the Gramsabha that the whole thing will lead to an improvement of the quality of life of everyone in the village.

Through this process, much needed capital and along with it technical, processing and marketing expertise will come to the villages, ushering in a new era of rural growth and prosperity. Land use will automatically get rationalised as small and marginal farmers will no longer feel compelled to cultivate slopy parcels with poor soil cover, since they will be earning incomes from their landshares as the same slopy parcel with poor soil cover on the ridge could have a great scenic view and thus fetch a high value from someone who wants to convert it into a tourist resort. The owners of that land, who could hardly make a living doing agriculture there, would earn a lot more as landshare holders of the tourist resort, in addition to possible employment there.

The above sounds like a strange mix of Gandhi and Vinoba on the one hand and GPS and Torrens on the other, coupled with some high technology infrastructure for land titling and, of course, the political and administrative will to carry this through. Whether the specific ideas suggested above are valid or not, the approach certainly is. The challenge before us in the 21st century is to re-invent Gandhi and Vinoba in a contemporary manner and build in their ideas to address one of our most refractory problems – land reforms.

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