

The Sarvodaya Movement in India in the 1950s

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Background: Gandhi and Sarvodaya

In the history of India in the twentieth century the figure of M. Gandhi occupies a central position. His ideas and activities gave the Indian movement for independence a method and a content that far transcend the local Indian context. His role in the struggle for independence of the Indian Congress Party and especially his choice of a strategy of nonviolent resistance form an important object of study and a continuing source of inspiration. For Gandhi himself, however, these were only a part, to be sure essential, of a spiritual movement for the creation of a new India. As early as 1934 Gandhi had withdrawn from the Congress Party out of discontent with its leadership, which regarded nonviolence as no more than a political instrument and not as a fundamental philosophy of life, in order to devote himself to a constructive program of uplift for the Indian rural population. This program of sharing resources, education, rural industry, in particular spinning, and improvement of the position of the untouchables stems from his philosophy of *Sarvodaya* ("uplift").

Independence

The Second World War again placed Gandhi in the center of the struggle against British colonial power, a struggle that led to Indian independence in 1947 and the separation of Pakistan, and to Gandhi's violent death in 1948. From 11 to 14 March 1948, a month and a half after Gandhi's assassination, his followers gathered in Sevagram in order to continue his work in the spirit of his philosophy of Sarvodaya. A loose federation of organizations was set up,

known as the Sarvodaya Samaj (Sarvodaya Brotherhood). In 1949 during the conference of Indore this loose federation was strengthened by the founding of the Akhil Bharat Sarva Seva Sangh (All India Association for the Service of All). In the Sarvodaya Movement after Gandhi's death, Vinoba Bhave (1895-1982) occupied the most important position. Not only was he Gandhi's most faithful follower, but also a charismatic leader in his own right with far-reaching influence. His achievements ranged from improving the organization of the Sarvodaya movement to his struggle for the legal prohibition of slaughtering cattle. His best known contribution, however, is the concept of *Bhoodan* ("gift of land") and the movement it generated.

Situation in rural India

The India of the immediate post-independence period was overwhelmingly agrarian. The situation in the countryside was characterized by deep poverty and in some regions was sharply polarized. Government plans for land reform lagged behind expectations. In the Telangana region civil war had broken out in 1950-1951, in which communists carried out armed seizures of land. In this area, in which conflicts between Hindu peasants and Moslim landowners also played a role, it has been estimated that 3,000 villages and one million acres of land were sovietized. It was during a journey on foot through Telangana in 1951 that Bhave hit upon the idea of Bhoodan. He was able to convince a landlord to adopt him as son and grant him land on behalf of a group of landless peasants. From that moment on Bhoodan became a central tenet of the Sarvodaya movement. Between 1951 and 1960

Bhave traveled 25,000 miles on foot, persuading 700,000 landowners to give up 8 million acres. The strategy of the Bhoodan movement was criticized, especially by socialist nationalists, for producing fragmented land patterns that stood in the way of modernization and rationalization. In accordance with the spirit of Gandhi's thinking, however, Bhave took the position that land reform had to proceed from an individual change of mentality and not be imposed from above by government measures or other external pressures. This did not prevent him from getting landowners to cooperate by pointing out the rising threat of the communists. Still, in order to allay the criticism by the socialists, Bhoodan was supplemented from 1952 on by the concept of *Gramdan*, which entailed granting land to whole villages to be worked collectively. In 1956 during the conference of Palni, Gramdan was made the central tenet. In 1964 India counted 6,807 Gramdan villages.

A third figure who should be mentioned in this context is Jaya Prakash Narayan (1902-1979). This Marxist adherent of the Congress Party and founder of the Praja Socialist Party went over to the Bhoodan movement in 1952, while retaining his interest in national politics. In 1959 he argued for a rehauling of the institutions of government in India and later was one of Indira Gandhi's most influential critics.

The microfiche collection

The material presented here on microfiche was brought to Amsterdam through the good offices of Narayan and of Julius Braunthal (1891-1972), who was secretary general of the Socialist International from 1951 to 1956. In

addition to his political function, the latter was also a member of the board of the IISH. During his official travels he was able to interest individuals and organizations in making documents available for historical research.

The majority of the 130 titles are in the Hindi language, the rest are in English. They cover a wide range of subjects, including traditional crafts, philosophy, Bhoodan, self-management, Sarvodaya, movement conferences, education, spiritual songs, Gandhi, agriculture,

economics, and so forth. Many of the works were written by Vinoba Bhave. They date from the 1950s and give a good picture of the concerns of the movement in that period.

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| Scope | 130 titles |
| Number of fiche | 200 |
| Film type | Positive silver halide |
| Internal finding aids | Eye-legible headers with title on each fiche |
| External finding aids | Printed guide |
| Order number | M450 |
| Producer | MMF Publications |