

Vinoba Bhave as a Nation Builder

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Date of Submission: 10-07-2021

Date of Acceptance: 26-07-2021

Acharya Vinoba Bhave was a great non-violent activist, freedom fighter, social reformer and spiritual teacher. An avid follower of Mahatma Gandhi, Vinoba upheld his doctrines of non-violence and equality. He dedicated his life to serve the poor and the downtrodden, and stood up for their rights. Most of his adult life he led an ascetic style of existence centered on spiritual beliefs of right and wrong. He is best known for his 'Bhoodan Movement' (Gift of the Land). Vinoba once said, "All revolutions are spiritual at the source. All my activities have the sole purpose of achieving a union of hearts." Vinoba was the first recipient of the international Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership in 1958. He was also conferred with the Bharat Ratna (India's highest civilian awards) posthumously in 1983.

Born Vinayak Narahari Bhave, at Gagode in Kolaba district, Maharashtra on 11 September, 1895, he was the eldest son of Narahari Shambhu Rao and Rukmini Devi. He had four other siblings, three brothers and one sister. His mother Rukmini Devi was a very religious person and instilled in Vinoba a deep sense of spiritualism. As a student Vinoba was quite fond of mathematics. He also developed a spiritual conscience quite early having studied the Bhagavad Gita under the tutelage of his grandfather.

Although a good student, traditional education never really appealed to Vinoba. He considered renouncing social life and head out to the Himalayas. On other days, he considered joining the Indian independence struggle. He started travelling the length of the country, learning regional languages along with knowledge of scriptures and Sanskrit. He ended up in the holy city of Banaras, where he came across a piece on Mahatma Gandhi, specifically about a speech he gave at the Banaras Hindu University. The course of his life was altered after he read it. He burned his entire school and college certificate on his way to Mumbai in 1916, to appear for the intermediate examination. He started corresponding with Gandhi, who being impressed with the 20-year-old Vinoba invited him to Kochrab Ashram in Ahmedabad. Vinoba met Gandhi on June 7, 1916 and took resident at the Ashram. He dutifully participated in all the activities at the ashram, leading an austere and sparse life. He eventually dedicated his life towards various programs designed by Gandhi like the Khadi Andolan, teaching, etc. The name Vinoba (a traditional Marathi epithet signifying great respect) was conferred upon him by Mama Phadke, another member of the Ashram.

Vinoba was attracted towards the principles and ideologies of Mahatma Gandhi and he considered Gandhi his guru, from both political and spiritual point of view. He followed Gandhi's leadership without question. Over the years, the bond between Vinoba and Gandhi grew stronger and his involvement in constructive programs for the society kept increasing. In a letter to Vinoba, Gandhi wrote, "I do not know in what terms to praise you. Your love and your character fascinate me and so does your self-examination. I am not fit to measure your worth. I accept your own estimate and assume the position of a father to you". Vinoba spent a better part of his life in the ashrams set up by the leader carrying out the various programs designed by Gandhi. On April 8, 1921, Vinoba went to Wardha to take charge of a Gandhi-ashram there under the directives from Gandhi. During his stay at Wardha, Bhave also brought out a monthly in Marathi, named, 'Maharashtra Dharma'. The monthly comprised of his essays on the Upanishads. His political ideologies were directed towards principles of peaceful non-cooperation in order to attain freedom. He took part in all the political programs designed by Gandhi and even went to participating in the same. He believed in Gandhi's social beliefs like equality among Indians and various religions.

Under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, Vinoba also got involved in the Indian freedom struggle. He took part in programs of non-cooperation and especially the call for use of Swadeshi goods instead of foreign imports. He took up the spinning wheel churning out Khadi and urged others to do so, resulting in mass production of the fabric.

In 1932, accusing Vinoba Bhave of conspiring against the British rule, the government sent him to jail for six months to Dhulia. There, he explained the fellow prisoners the different subjects of 'Bhagwad Gita', in Marathi. All the lectures given by him on Gita in Dhulia jail were collected and later published as a book.

Till 1940, Vinoba Bhave was known only to the people around him. Mahatma Gandhi, on 5 October, 1940, introduced Bhave to the nation by issuing a statement. He was also chosen as the first Individual Satyagrahi (an Individual standing up for Truth instead of a collective action) by Gandhi himself.

Vinoba Bhave worked tirelessly towards eradicating social evils like inequality. Influenced by the examples set by Gandhi, he took up the cause of people that his guru lovingly referred to as Harijans. It was his aim to establish the kind of society that Gandhi had envisioned in an Independent India. He adopted the term Sarvodaya from Gandhi which simply means "Progress for All". The Sarvodaya movement under him implemented various programs during the 1950s, the chief among which is the Bhoodan Movement.

In 1951, Vinoba Bhave started his peace-trek on foot through the violence-torn region of Telangana. On April 18, 1951, the Harijans of the Pochampalli village requested him to provide them with around 80 acres of land to make a living. Vinoba asked the landlords of the village to come forward and save the Harijans. To everybody's surprise, a landlord got up and offered the required land. This incident added a new chapter in the history of sacrifices and non-violence. It was the beginning of the Bhoodan (Gift of the Land) movement. The movement continued for thirteen years and Vinoba toured the length and breadth of the country, a total distance of 58741 Km. He was successful in collecting around 4.4 million acres of land, of which around 1.3 million was distributed among poor landless farmers. The movement attracted admiration from all over the world and was commended for being the only experiment of his kind to incite voluntary social justice.

Vinoba Bhave was the first international figure to receive the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1958. He was awarded Bharat Ratna posthumously in 1983.

Vinoba Bhave received serious brickbats in 1975 for supporting the state of emergency imposed by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Bhave advocated that the emergency was required to teach people about discipline. According to many scholars and political thinkers, Vinoba Bhave was a mere imitator of Mahatma Gandhi. However, this criticism cannot undermine the great contribution of Vinoba Bhave to Indian society at large.

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Prof. B H More. "NOOSPHERE: Vinoba Bhave as a Nation Builder." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 26(07), 2021, pp. 19-20.