

Lecturer: Will Travers

Land Rights and Nonviolence, Part 1 The Land-Gift Movement in India

“This workshop is all about Vinoba Bhave's land-gift movement in 1950s India and its roots in the economic vision of Gandhi. Communal land ownership that proved effective, inspirational, and is still active today.”

Handouts

- Gandhi, “Who is Vinoba Bhave?”, *Harijan*, October 20, 1940. (2 pages)
- Gandhi, “Equal Distribution Through Nonviolence”, *Harijan*, August 25, 1940. Reprinted in *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, pp. 388-391 (2 pages)
- “Gandhian economics is relevant”, *The Times of India*, October 2, 2005 (1 page)
- “Bhoodan & Gramdan”, *TIME Magazine*, December 29, 1958 (1 page)

Introduction

Hello everybody! Welcome to part 1 of the two-part workshop on *Land Rights and Nonviolence*. This particular workshop is on Vinoba Bhave's land-gift movement in India and its roots in the economic vision of Gandhi. Part 2, tomorrow, is going to be on nonviolent action and how it's been used in recent history to obtain a more equitable distribution of land, or win back land for people from whom it was unjustly taken.

Who is Vinoba Bhave?

In 1940, Mahatma Gandhi “introduced” someone named Vinoba Bhave, then unknown, to India and the rest of the world. This introduction was necessary because Gandhi had chosen Vinoba Bhave as the first individual *satyagrahi*, the second of whom was to be the future prime minister of India, (Jawaharlal) Nehru. An individual *satyagrahi*, of course, is someone who performs, or as Gandhi used to say, *offers*, individual *satyagraha*. What is *satyagraha*?

[*Satyagraha*](#) is basically the word Gandhi came up with (or actually someone else came up with it to win a contest he sponsored in his newspaper *Harijan*) to refer to nonviolent action. It's a composite of two other Hindi words, meaning all together something like “the determined pursuit of truth” or “the force of truth” or something.¹ It was conceived to be a positive term (i.e. literally, not a word that begins with the prefix “non”), and also one that connotes action (as opposed to the other term popular at the time to

¹ [Protest, Power, and Change](#), pp. 460-462

connote nonviolent action: “passive resistance”). It therefore comprises more than just protest and abstaining from violence, but actively working toward social justice, in whatever ways that might entail. Many separate “satyagrahas” were conceived by Gandhi as separate actions in the larger struggle for independence, most famously among these, the [Vaikom Satyagraha](#) in 1924/25, the [Bardoli Satyagraha](#) in 1928, and the [Salt Satyagraha](#) in 1930. These consisted of basically large numbers of people peacefully protesting and committing civil disobedience.

“Individual *satyagraha*”, on the other hand, was something that Gandhi came up with later on as a means by which one person could use nonviolent action, something usually considered a group activity, and still make a difference. It was conceived as a way for people to register their opposition to a subjugated India’s participation in World War II fighting for their colonial occupiers. Gandhi much preferred, however, that the Germans not come out victorious, and so strove to limit the amount of civil disobedience in resistance to war in India, which he thought might serve to humiliate the British at a time when they were already in a rough spot. He therefore allowed certain individuals, hand-picked by him, to offer individual satyagraha, and get arrested out of conscience for their opposition to war. (Source: Gandhi’s [Nonviolent Resistance](#))

So this is the first handout you all have today, something Gandhi wrote and published in his weekly newspaper [Harijan](#), which he appropriately called, “[Who is Vinoba Bhave?](#)”

“The text below was published in the ‘Harijan’ of October 20, 1940. It was written by Gandhiji to introduce to the public Sri Vinoba Bhave, whom he had chosen, as the best representative on non-violent civil resistance to war. Sri Vinoba was to start a campaign of individual civil disobedience, and in the first instance it was to be confined to him only.

“He is an undergraduate having left college after my return to India in 1916. He is a Sanskrit scholar. He joined the Ashram almost at its inception. He was among the first members. In order to better qualify himself he took one year’s leave to prosecute further studies in Sanskrit. And practically at the same hour at which he had left the Ashram a year before, he walked into it to without notice. I had forgotten that he was due to arrive that day. He has taken part in every menial activity of the Ashram from scavenging to cooking. Though he has a marvellous memory and is a student by nature, he has devoted the largest part of his time to spinning-in which he has specialised as very few have. He believes in universal spinning being the central activity which will remove the poverty in the villages and put life into their deadness.

By “spinning” Gandhi here is talking about the practice that he encouraged at all his ashrams of spinning [khadi](#), which is basically handspun and handwoven cloth. Spinning *khadi* for Gandhi served a number of purposes, political, economic, and social. The biggest advantage was economic independence, and visible resistance. Basically, the more cloth they were able to spin, the less they had to buy from the British, which at the time not only dealt an economic blow to British companies, but also served to visibly distinguish themselves from their opponents. If you’re familiar at all with Gandhi, and you’ve seen pictures, you probably know that he virtually never dressed in a shirt and tie. This wasn’t by accident. He actually studied in England in his younger days, and there are plenty of pictures of him where he looks just as western as you or I

in our manner of dress. Well, I guess he was slightly more formal than most of us now, but you get what I'm saying. Basically, he wanted to convey a sense of independence right on down to the very clothes he wore – basically, like a walking advertisement for the fact that they no longer needed nor wanted the British in their country. Marketing-wise, a very shrewd move, I'd say.

Another main purpose served by spinning *khadi* was to decentralize production from the large industrial centers to small villages, laying the groundwork for broad-based support around the country. By building up small sectors of society, free from immediate English influence, the ideas of resistance could be more effectively propagated. This was therefore a shrewd political move as well. Finally, the social benefits accrued from this activity included enabling the poor and unemployed to help themselves, thereby building up self-confidence, and contributing to the realization that each one of them could actually make a difference. Gandhi was also not a huge fan of industrialization, especially when it was seen through the eyes of an Indian whose country was being exploited economically by a colonial power. The spinning wheel, on the other hand, harkened back to more traditional, simple times, before British domination. While not an enemy of technology *per se*, Gandhi thought it was always important to keep the human side of things first and foremost in your mind, and only later worry about technological “advances” and making money. Finally, I'm sure the monotony of spinning and even the sound produced by the wheel was itself very conducive to a kind of working meditation, and compatible with the kind of spiritual atmosphere that Gandhi wanted to create at his ashrams.

Incidentally, the spinning wheel itself featured very prominently in the flag of the Indian National Congress during the independence struggle, and very nearly made it on to [India's national flag](#) in 1947, but was replaced with the [Ashoka Chakra](#) symbol instead. Nonetheless, according to Wikipedia, “The official flag specifications require that the flag be made only of ‘*khadi*,’ a special type of hand-spun cloth made popular by Mahatma Gandhi.”

Anyway, continuing on:

“Being a born teacher he has been of the utmost assistance to Ashadevi² in her development of the scheme of education through handicrafts. Sri Vinoba has produced a text-book taking spinning as the handicraft. It is original in conception. He has made scoffers realise that spinning is the handicraft *par excellence* which lends itself to being effectively used for basic education. He has revolutionised *takli* spinning and drawn out its hitherto unknown possibilities. For perfect spinning probably he has no rival in all India.

“He has abolished every trace of untouchability from his heart. He believes in communal unity with the same passion that I have. In order to know the best mind of Islam he gave one year to the study of the Quran in the original. He therefore learnt Arabic. He found this study necessary for cultivating a living contact with the Muslims living in his neighbourhood.

² A Bengali Christian woman, married to a Ceylonese guy named E.W. Aryanayakam, who came and stayed at his [Sevagram](#) ashram in order to work on developing what they called “[basic education](#)”.

“He has an army of disciples and workers who would rise to any sacrifice at his bidding. He is responsible for producing a young man who has dedicated himself to the service of lepers. Though an utter stranger to medicine this worker has by singular devotion mastered the method of treatment of lepers and is now running several clinics for their care. Hundreds owe their cure to his labours. He has now published a handbook in Marathi for the treatment of lepers. Vinoba was for years Director of the Mahila Ashram (an Ashram for women) in Wardha. His devotion to the cause of *Daridranarayan* (a God of the poor) took him first to a village near Wardha, and now he has gone still further and lives in Pavnar, five miles from Wardha, from where he has established contact with villages through the disciples he has trained.

“He believes in the necessity of the political independence of India. He is an accurate student of history. But he believes that real independence of the villagers is impossible without the constructive programme of which *khadi* (handspun, handwoven cloth) is the centre. He believes that the *charkha* (spinning wheel) is the most equitable outward symbol of non-violence which has become an integral part of his life. He has taken an active part in the previous *Satyagraha* (non-violent civil disobedience) campaigns. He has never been in the limelight on the political platform. With many co-workers he believes that silent constructive work with civil disobedience in the background is far more effective than the already heavily crowded political platform. And he thoroughly believes that non-violent resistance is impossible without a heart belief in and practice of constructive-work.”

For information on the founder of this movement, I relied heavily on three books, the first being Thomas Weber’s [Gandhi as Disciple and Mentor](#), which talks about Vinoba on pp. 151-156, and also has a chapter on E.F. Schumacher, who will be mentioned briefly later. The second book, written by [Glyn Richards](#) in 1996, is his [Source-Book of Modern Hinduism](#), which contains a very concise biography of Vinoba Bhave. Third, a book by Mark Shepherd called [Gandhi Today: A Report on Mahatma Gandhi’s Successors](#) has also been extremely helpful, focusing more on Vinoba Bhave’s *Sarvodaya* movement. All these books are partially available online at Google Books, which if you haven’t checked out yet, is like the best thing ever. I’m totally addicted to it. Anyway, I’ve also of course consulted Vinoba Bhave’s [Wikipedia page](#), as well as the information on [mkgandhi.org](#), a veritable goldmine of information on all things Gandhi-related.

Vinoba Bhave was born in 1895 in the state of Maharashtra, in western India. Studying classical Sanskrit as a teenager, he eventually became introduced to the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi and by age 21, in 1916, had joined Gandhi’s [Sabarmati Ashram](#) just outside of Ahmedabad (Gujarat). Five years later he had become so respected by Gandhi that he was asked to go start a new ashram in Wardha, back in his home state of Maharashtra.

He was arrested in 1923 and again in 1932 in different civil disobedience (*satyagraha*) campaigns, and in 1940, as we already read, Gandhi asked him to become the first *satyagrahi* to offer himself up in the *Individual Satyagraha* campaign, which we talked about earlier. All in all, he was arrested 6 different times, and served 5 and a half years in jail, 3 of them from 1942 to 1945, where he wrote a master political work outlining

his vision of how a nonviolent state would work. In this booklet, titled *Swaraj Sastra*, he proclaimed that “man’s happiness lies in giving, but the idea of the right of ownership acts as an obstacle.” He said that “villages should be self-sufficient and that collective responsibility is a better incentive to encourage skill, honesty, enthusiasm, and a sense of responsibility than the mere payment of wages.” Echoing some forms of classical anarchist thought, he proclaimed that “in a non-violent political order there will be no police but only a band of public-spirited workers.” (Weber, p. 153)

Although many of these ideas can be seen as interesting in their own right, the one which was to have a good deal of influence over the direction his life would take was that on ownership. Weber writes that Vinoba first came up with his ideas about ownership by combining elements of Marxism with classical Gandhian thought; that is, that the differences between the haves and the have-nots needed to be lessened, but that this could in no way be brought about by violence, or even by non-violent coercion. It had to be a willing gesture on the part of the “haves”, to give part of what it is they have to those who have nothing. In addition, and as we can see by the manner in which Gandhi himself wrote about Vinoba, he believed wholeheartedly in the constructive program, as Gandhi had envisioned it. For, as he was taught by his mother, “He who gives is a god: but he who withholds is a devil.”

After Gandhi’s death in 1948, people looked to him for leadership. He realized that “although independence for India had been achieved, Gandhi’s mission was still incomplete” because not everyone had “achieved self sufficiency and were neither economically free from exploitation nor politically free.” Forging stronger friendships with 2 of Gandhi’s other most well-known disciples, J.P. Narayan and Nehru, he attended with them the 3rd annual *Sarvodaya* conference in Hyderabad, in south central India (capital of Andhra Pradesh). According to mkgandhi.org, “Vinoba decided to walk [the] three hundred miles to Hyderabad,” from his ashram in Wardha.

“On April 11th, 1951, the final day of conference, Vinoba announced that on his walk home to Pavanar he & a few companions would tour” the region of Telangana to spread Gandhi’s message of peace and nonviolence. Telangana had just prior “been the scene of a violent communist rebellion which was still smouldering in April 1951.” The area was undergoing in essence a violent rebellion over land rights, involving armed communist groups seizing land from wealthy land-owners, and these land-owners in turn violently trying get it back. The villages were basically caught in between. For Vinoba Bhave, in some sense, “the future of India was essentially a contest between the fundamental creeds of Gandhi & Marx.”

“Once in Telangana, Vinoba quickly showed his sensitivity to the... situation. On April 17th, at his second stop, Vinoba learned first hand that village people were afraid of the police as well as the Communists & that the village was torn along class lines.”

On April 18th, Vinoba entered the Nalgonda district of Andhra Pradesh, “the centre of Communist activity. The organizers had arranged Vinoba’s stay at Pochampalli, a large village with about 700 families, of whom two-thirds were landless.” The people there “gave Vinoba a warm welcome,” especially when he went to go visit the dalit (untouchable) community, who, “by early afternoon... began to gather around Vinoba” at the cottage where he was staying. He asked them what they needed in order for their situation to improve, and the villagers said that “80 acres of land, 40 wet, 40 dry for 40

families...” would be enough. “Then Vinoba asked, ‘If it is not possible to get land from the government, is there not something villagers themselves could do?’ To everyone’s surprise, Ram Chandra Reddy, the local landlord, got up & said in a rather excited voice: ‘I will give you 100 acres for these people.’ At his evening prayer meeting, Ram Chandra Reddy got up & repeated his promise to offer 100 acres of land...” To Vinoba’s astonishment, the villagers repeated that they only needed 80, and would not accept one acre more. “This incident, neither planned nor imagined, was the very genesis of the Bhoodan movement & ... made Vinoba think that therein lay the potentiality of solving the land problem of India,” voluntary land-gifts, building cooperation and respect between the rich and poor.

Thus the Bhoodan movement was born, and the world took notice. In just two years it was the cover story for TIME magazine, [May 11, 1953](#). “[A Man on Foot](#)”

What is the Land-Gift movement?

Three definitions

From Gene Sharp’s [Gandhi as a Political Strategist](#):

- [Bhoodan](#): Land-gift; a movement for redistribution of the ownership of land begun after Gandhi’s death by Vinoba Bhave to be achieved solely by persuading owners to give a portion of their holdings to the landless.
- [Gramdan](#): Village-gift; a development from the *Bhoodan* movement, in which all owners of land in a village were asked to transfer ownership voluntarily to the whole village.

The other important concept under which these two operated:

- [Sarvodaya](#): The uplift of all; a concept promoted by Gandhi and later developed into a movement to achieve social justice and social progress among the least fortunate members of society.

From the Wikipedia article on [Gandhian economics](#): “Gandhian activists such as [Vinoba Bhave](#) and [Jayaprakash Narayan](#) were involved in the [Sarvodaya](#) movement, which sought to promote self-sufficiency amidst India's rural population by encouraging [land redistribution](#), socio-economic reforms and promoting [cottage industries](#). The movement sought to combat the problems of class conflict, unemployment and poverty while attempting to preserve the lifestyle and values of rural Indians, which were eroding with industrialisation and modernisation.”

It was Gandhi who first coined the term “Sarvodaya” in 1908 when he needed to come up with a catchy title for his Gujarati translation of John Ruskin’s classic work on political economy, *Unto This Last*, originally written in 1860. The term, like many words that come from Sanskrit, is made up of two smaller roots, in this case *sarva* (all) and *udaya* (uplift). Together it can be taken as "the uplift of all", which was how Gandhi chose to summarize the ideas contained in Ruskin’s essay.

These ideas, according to Gandhi in his [autobiography](#), were basically threefold. The first was that the good of the individual is contained in the good of all. The second was that a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's in as much as all have the same

right of earning their livelihood from their work. The third idea, which Gandhi said had never occurred to him before reading it, was that a life of labour (of which he gives the examples of the life of the tiller of the soil and that of the handicraftsman) is the life worth living.

It's particularly this last idea that Gandhi worked hard to instil in those who came to live at his ashrams, and also this last idea that helped compel him to encourage people to spin *khadi*. It's fitting then that the *Sarvodaya* movement that popped up in the years after Gandhi was assassinated was established precisely by those Gandhians who had years of experience living in his ashrams, spinning their own clothes, and working day in and day out doing all kinds of jobs, from the most privileged right down to the most menial. All *Sarvodaya* workers were therefore necessarily instilled with the Gandhian ideals of individual freedom, the dignity of labor, an equitable distribution of wealth, and complete communal self-sufficiency.

Read from the 2005 article: [Gandhian economics is relevant](#)

It's been called the largest peaceful redistribution of wealth in human experience.³ Let's watch a [short video](#) I found on the ol' You Tube that talks a little bit about Vinoba's contributions. (Not relevant after 1:12)

So basically, after conceiving this idea, he began to walk from village to village, talking with the people there, and asking for land-gifts. Admittedly, many of the gifts he received at first in that area "were inspired by fear of the Communists and hopes of buying off the poor—as the Communists were quick to proclaim. But not all the motives of the rich landowners were economic. Many of the rich hoped to gain 'spiritual merit' through their gifts; or at least to uphold their prestige. After all, if poor farmers were willing to give sizeable portions of their land to Vinoba [which they would do from time to time, although Vinoba would rarely accept it], could the rich be seen to do less? And perhaps a few of the rich were even truly touched by Vinoba's message."

"In any case, as Vinoba's tour gained momentum, even the announced approach of the 'god who gives away land' [as the New York Times referred to him] was enough to prepare the landlords to part with some of their acreage. Soon Vinoba was collecting hundreds of acres a day." Looting with love, was what people said. "What's more, wherever Vinoba moved, he began to dispel the climate of tension and fear that had plagued the region. In places where people had been afraid to assemble, thousands gathered to hear him—including the Communists. At the end of seven weeks, Vinoba had collected over 12,000 acres. After he left, Sarvodaya workers continuing to collect land in his name received another 100,000 acres."

"The Telengana march became the launching point for a nationwide campaign that Vinoba hoped would eliminate the greatest single cause of India's poverty: land monopoly. He hoped as well that it might be the lever needed to start a 'nonviolent revolution'—a complete transformation of Indian society by peaceful means.

³ <http://memestreamblog.wordpress.com/2008/05/02/nirmala-desphande-and-the-death-of-gandhianism/>

“The root of oppression, he reasoned, is greed. If people could be led to overcome their possessiveness, a climate would be created in which social division and exploitation could be eliminated. As he later put it, ‘We do not aim at doing mere acts of kindness, but at creating a Kingdom of Kindness.’

“Soon Vinoba and his colleagues were collecting 1,000 acres a day, then 2,000, then 3,000. Several hundred small teams of *Sarvodaya* workers and volunteers began trekking from village to village, all over India, collecting land in Vinoba’s name. Vinoba himself—despite advanced age and poor health—marched continually, touring one state after another.

“The pattern of Vinoba’s day was daily the same. Vinoba and his company would rise by 3:00 a.m. and hold a prayer meeting for themselves. Then they would walk ten or twelve miles to the next village, Vinoba leading at a pace that left the others struggling breathlessly behind. With him were always a few close assistants, a bevy of young, idealistic volunteers—teenagers and young adults, male and some female, mostly from towns or cities—plus maybe some regular *Sarvodaya* workers, a landlord, a politician, or an interested Westerner.

“At the host village they would be greeted by a brass band, a makeshift archway, garlands, formal welcomes by village leaders, and shouts of ‘*Saint Vinoba, Saint Vinoba!*’

“After breakfast, the Bhoodan workers would fan out through the village, meeting the villagers, distributing literature, and taking pledges. Vinoba himself would be settled apart, meeting with visitors, reading newspapers, answering letters.

“In late afternoon, there would be a prayer meeting, attended by hundreds or thousands of villagers from the area. After a period of reciting and chanting, Vinoba would speak to the crowd in his quiet, high-pitched voice. His talk would be completely improvised, full of rich images drawn from Hindu scripture or everyday life, exhorting the villagers to lives of love, kinship, sharing. At the close of the meeting, more pledges would be taken.

All in all, Vinoba walked 36,500 miles, more than the circumference of the earth. He set out to collect 50 million acres of land as gifts, and in the end collected a total of 4.4 million acres, some of which admittedly turned out to be useless. Out of it, though, “1.3 million acres were distributed among landless farm workers”, which already was “far more than had been managed by the land reform programs of India’s government. About half a million families benefited.”

Meanwhile, Vinoba began to shift his efforts to a higher gear. “After 1954, Vinoba began asking for ‘donations’ not so much of land but of whole villages. He named this new program Gramdan—‘village-gift.’”

“Gramdan was a far more radical program than Bhoodan. In a Gramdan village, all land was to be legally owned by the village as a whole, but parceled out for the use of individual families, according to need. Because the families could not themselves sell, rent, or mortgage the land, they could not be pressured off it

during hard times—as normally happens when land reform programs bestow land title on poor individuals.

“Village affairs were to be managed by a village council made up of all adult members of the village, making decisions by consensus—meaning the council could not adopt any decision until everyone accepted it. This was meant to ensure cooperation and make it much harder for one person or group to benefit at the expense of others.”

What Vinoba wanted to achieve here was “a move away from the current forms of government, ‘the rule by one’ and the ‘rule by more than one’ to a form where ‘all the people may combine and equally share in the responsibility of carrying their own administration’ – in other words, ‘rule by all’. The way to achieve this was to arouse people’s power and create a system of self-sufficient village republics free from the coercive power of the state.” (Weber, pp. 154-5)

So “while Bhoodan had been meant to prepare people for a nonviolent revolution, Vinoba saw Gramdan as the revolution itself. Like Gandhi, Vinoba believed that the divisiveness of Indian society was a root cause of its degradation and stagnation. Before the villagers could begin to improve their lot, they needed to learn to work together. Gramdan, he felt, with its common land ownership and cooperative decision-making, could bring about the needed unity. And once this was achieved, the ‘people’s power’ it would release would make anything possible.”⁴

Read from [Bhoodan & Gramdan](#)

Three More Gandhians in India

1. Radhakrishna Menon

Mark Shepard tells about his 1978 trip to India in search of the true spirit of Gramdan. He eventually made it down to the southern state of Kerala, where the Navodaya Danagram, or New Dawn Gift-Village, is located. The village’s founder, [Radhakrishna Menon](#), welcomed Shepard with open arms, and led him on a tour through the village. From barren, uninhabited, hilly land owned by wealthy people who didn’t see much value in them, Radhakrishna and the untouchable families with whom he worked built a thriving village community complete with a nursery school, a stonecutter’s cooperative near a small quarry that the land contained. They planted coconut and banana trees, cashew and tapioca, dug wells for drinking water, and built roads to connect the village to the main road, two miles away.

Radhakrishna was a budding communist in the mid-1940s when he decided to see what was going on at Gandhi’s Sevagram ashram. He ended up spending two years there, and eventually went into education, following and building upon Gandhi’s model of cooperative and participatory education. When Vinoba came to the city near Calcutta where Radhakrishna had been [living and teaching](#) with his wife, they received a gift of 30 acres from one wealthy landowner, and 20 more from various other people in the

⁴ Extensive quotes from: http://www.markshep.com/nonviolence/GT_Vinoba.html

community. With these 50 acres they started with, 19 Dalit families were able to come and establish residence. To officially turn the village into a Gramdan village, these families turned over the deeds of their newfound land to a village council, made up of all the men and women of a village. This was how Navodaya Danagram was founded.

The community was built entirely through the volunteer efforts of Radhakrishna and the other villagers, and supported only later through a combination of foreign charities and matching government funds. They cooperated in virtually every facet of life, which Shepard describes as allowing them to benefit from “resources for development, pooling of talents and strengths, protection from injustice and caring neighbors.” When he visited the village, Shepard said it had grown to 100 acres with 50 families, or 350 total people. They were about to start to make enough money with their cash crops that they would no longer need exterior financial assistance. There were youth groups, women’s groups, a library, etc. Little by little, neighboring families who were taking part in many of the village’s activities become convinced that joining the village was the best way to go, and so they, too, gave their deeds over to the village council. Other neighboring land, as it became available, was often bought with the pool of money created by the sale of crops and by families giving one percent of what they make. (Shepard, pp. 91-103)

2. Nirmala Deshpande

[Nirmala Deshpande](#) served as Vinoba Bhave’s secretary and participated heavily in his Bhoodan movement. In addition to writing a biography of Bhave, she founded the Gandhi Global Peace Centre at Gandhi Ashram, Kingsway Camp in Delhi, and became a “nominated member” of Indian Parliament (meaning that out of 250 total members of Parliament, she was one of 12 people chosen by the president of India for their expertise in certain matters). She passed away about six months ago at the age of 79, and the following comes from articles written shortly thereafter:

“Her tryst with destiny began in 1952 when she joined the Bhoodan Movement and stayed at Acharya Vinoba Bhave's Paunar Ashram at Wardha near Nagpur. She undertook 40,000 kilometers of padyatras along with Bhave to carry the message of Gram Swarajya from state to state.

We still cool? Was that too many weird words at once? “[Padyatras](#)” I think are basically rallies held in different villages to gain people’s support for various issues.

“During the historic march, they collected thousands of acres of land donated by those who believed in Gandhiji's ideals and distributed it among poor and landless people.”⁵

3. Prem Bhai and the Agrindus Institute

The Agrindus Institute, located in Uttar Pradesh, is another Indian phenomenon in communal land ownership. The area is home to 400 villages of *adivasis*, a tribal people whose roots in India go back more than 4000 years. Traditionally subsisting on food from the forests where they lived, the encroachment of industry eventually forced them

⁵ <http://www.expressindia.com/latest-news/Veteran-Gandhian-Nirmala-Deshpande-is-no-more/304110/>

to take up farming, which itself began to prove hardly enough. It was during a severe famine in 1967 when Gandhian Prem Bhai decided to establish the Agrindus Institute.

When Prem Bhai first showed up, the area was rocky, hilly, eroded, and covered with brush. He hired local *adivasis* to clear the land, and shape it for planting cotton, rice, wheat, vegetables, banana trees, which grew rapidly thanks to the digging of reservoirs in strategic locations, making up for the irregularities of the monsoon season. In doing the work, the local villagers learned all about the farming techniques that were being employed, and were soon able to benefit from their efforts yielding 5-10 times more per acre than conventional farmers.

The digging of reservoirs is important because the way the Indian government has traditionally dealt with problems of irrigation has been to build dam, inevitably flooding villages.

One of the workers eventually left to go spend a year in another nearby village, learning about their problems, and trying to come up with ways to solve them using the farming techniques that the Institute had taught him. He eventually came up with a model to improve the lives of the inhabitants of 5 villages within a 2-hour drive from where he was.

The Institute, at the same time as working closely with 5 different villages, also implemented a plan to work with 100 villages, doing the same thing. They opened outposts for every 15-20 villages, and lending money for a flat 5% interest rate, in order to be able to pay staff salaries. ... The 100 village model was soon stepped up to 400 villages.... and after that I kind of lost count. (Shepard, pp. 104-122)

What's the deal with it today?

Bhoodan (A sampling of current events from a couple different Indian states):

Some numbers from the state of Orissa: out of a total area of 639,000 acres of Bhoodan land received by way of donation, 580,000 of it has been distributed among 153,000 landless persons and 59,000 acres of Bhoodan land, as of 2006, was still yet to be distributed.⁶ Under the direction of His Excellency the Governor of Orissa, a High Level Committee was constituted in October, 2006 to look into the further distribution of this Bhoodan land in that state.

In the state of Bihar, official government action has been less swift when it comes to distributing donated land. The Bihar Bhoodan Yagna Committee says that "out of the 2,118,000 acres of land that was received under the Bhoodan Movement in the State close to 1,000,000 acres were unfit for distribution. Out of the remaining 1,120,000 acres the committee had distributed 723,000 acres of land. This leaves about 390,000 acres of land with the Committee, which has not been distributed to the landless persons only because the state government failed to give the technical approval required under the State Bhoodan Act." What's more is that "there are nearly 400,000 acres of land

⁶ <http://orissa.gov.in/revenue/bhoodan/bhoodan.html>

available with the Bhoodan Yagna Committee that have not been distributed for the sole reason that the State has not given its approval yet.”⁷

Like I mentioned earlier, after 1957 interest in the Bhoodan movement began to wane, and Vinoba Bhave had the wherewithal to ratchet up the movement from Bhoodan to Gramdan. Between 1958 and 1974, Gramdan was pretty popular, with over 100,000 Gramdan villages in India. The idea was being promoted heavily, not just through the efforts of Vinoba, but also through the efforts of Jayaprakesh Narayan. The government, however, began to relax the restrictions on what could be considered a Gramdan village, and the movement eventually crumbled. Nonetheless, significant pockets of Gramdan villages remained, which “form the base of India’s Gandhian movement. In these locales, the Gandhians are helping some of India’s poorest by organizing Gandhian-style community development and nonviolent action campaigns against injustice.”⁸

Links:

http://www.maharashtra.gov.in/english/gazetteer/BHANDARA/agri_bhoodan.html

<http://www.hinduonnet.com/2008/01/31/stories/2008013153490400.htm>

<http://www.hindu.com/2004/07/01/stories/2004070104710500.htm>

<http://pmindia.nic.in/speech/content.asp?id=546>

Something else the two worked on was Gandhi’s idea of a [Shanti Sena](#), or peace army. The first members joined in 1957, and in 10 years membership had exceeded 15,000 people. This organization lost and gained members over the years, at times completely disintegrating, and today there exist a number of smaller organizations in India that have tried to fill its shoes, the most prominent of which is [the Mahila Shanti Sena](#), started in 2001. An excellent book, although it’s a little hard to come by, is called [Gandhi’s Peace Army: The Shanti Sena and Unarmed Peacekeeping](#). The idea as a whole has been seen to bear fruit in the form of groups you may have heard of such as [Peace Brigades International](#) and the [Nonviolent Peaceforce](#).

“Vinoba Bhave died on 15 November 1982. Once in a message to the Sarvodaya conference, Jawaharlal Nehru had said: ‘in the troubled but dynamic scene that was India, the frail figure of Vinobaji stood like a rock of strength, modest and gentle, yet with something of the vision of the future in his eyes... He represented, as no one else did, the spirit and tradition of Gandhi and of India.’”⁹

Anyway, while the Bhoodan movement itself may no longer be in its heyday, its influence upon other land rights movements in India is undeniable. Today we have [Ekta Parishad](#), the [Narmada Bachao Andolan](#), and the [Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha](#) as well as activists like [Medha Patkar](#), [Arundhati Roy](#), and [C.K. Janu](#). All are fighting for land rights, all going down the same path that has been trodden since the early 1950s, and all owe a debt of gratitude to Vinoba Bhave for lighting the way.

⁷ <http://www.indiatogether.org/2004/jan/vup-bhoodan.htm>

⁸ http://www.markshep.com/nonviolence/GT_Vinoba.html

⁹ <http://www.mkgandhi.org/associates/Vinoba.htm>

The other three:

I couldn't actually get much information on how that first village is doing. I do know that Radhakrishna Menon [passed away](#) back in October of last year at the age of 83, and that four years earlier he had been elected president of the [Thiruvananthapuram Senior Citizens' Association](#), Thiruvananthapuram being the capital city of Kerala state. I suppose he lived there in his final years, although he apparently died in the city of Kozhikode.

[Nirmala Deshpande](#), like I said, recently passed away as well. She was much more well-known than Mr. Menon, and having begun her journey through Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan movement, did much over the years to promote his vision, always trying to remain faithful in spirit to the Gandhian ideal.¹⁰

The Agrindus Institute, on the other hand, is still up and running, receiving funding from [international charities](#), government programs, and local donors.

And one more makes four:

Finally, there is also an organization in Sri Lanka called [the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement](#) who continues Gandhi's work through efforts of its founder, [A.T. Ariyaratne](#).

From its website:

“Sarvodaya is a Sri Lankan organization developed around a set of coherent philosophical tenets drawn from Buddhism and Gandhian thought. It has been operational for almost 50 years. Today Sarvodaya is Sri Lanka's largest and most broadly embedded people's organization, with a network covering 15,000 villages, 345 divisional units, 34 district offices, 10 specialist Development Education Institutes; over 100,000 youth mobilized for peace building under Shantisena; the country's largest micro-credit organization with a cumulative loan portfolio of over LKR one billion (Sarvodaya Economic Enterprise Development Services, or SEEDS); a major welfare service organization serving over 1000 orphaned and destitute children, underage mothers, and elders (Sarvodaya Suwa Seta); and 4,335 pre-schools serving over 98,000 children; among others.

“It has been described as an international role model by international bodies. Its founder and charismatic leader, Dr A.T. Ariyaratne, whose visionary contributions have been recognized in multiple countries, continues to provide ideational leadership to the organization while its day- to-day operations are in the hands of a new generation that is receptive to modern forms of management that are compatible with the overall vision of this volunteer-based peoples' organization.”

¹⁰ <http://memestreamblog.wordpress.com/2008/05/02/nirmala-desphande-and-the-death-of-gandhianism/>

The [Wikipedia page](#) also says it was the largest indigenous organization working in reconstruction from the tsunami caused by the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake. If you're interested, you can also check out their local affiliate, [Sarvodaya USA](#).

In short, while there may no longer be a penniless Vinoba Bhave figure walking from village to village in search of land gifts, his influence can be felt all over India, especially wherever land rights are today in jeopardy, and unequal land distribution is still making sure that certain segments of society stay marginalized and landless.

How can this influence us where we live? What can we do?

One way I found that these ideas have cropped up in the US is through what's called a [community land trust](#) – “a [property trust](#) which aims to benefit the surrounding community by ensuring the long-term availability of affordable housing.” The first one was created in Albany, GA in 1967 as “a way to achieve secure access to land for African American farmers.”

This first CLT was founded by Slater King, a cousin of Martin Luther King, and by Robert Swann, who also started an organization called the [E. F. Schumacher Society](#). [E. F. Schumacher](#) was a German economist who found himself extremely attracted to Gandhian economic ideas. One of his crowning achievements was a book he wrote in 1973 called [Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered](#). Anyway, from the website of this organization, Robert Swann:

“...was inspired by [Ralph Borsodi](#) and by Borsodi's work with [J. P. Narayan](#) and [Vinoba Bhave](#), both disciples of [Gandhi](#). Vinoba walked from village to village in rural [India](#) in the 1950s and 1960s, gathering people together and asking those with more land than they needed to give a portion of it to their poorer sisters and brothers. The initiative was known as the [Bhoodan](#) or Land gift movement, and many of India's leaders participated in these walks.

“Some of the new landowners, however, became discouraged. Without tools to work the land and seeds to plant it, without an affordable [credit system](#) available to purchase these necessary things, the land was useless to them. They soon sold their deeds back to the large landowners and left for the cities. Seeing this, Vinoba altered the Boodan system to a [Gramdan](#) or Village gift system. All donated land was subsequently held by the village itself. The village would then lease the land to those capable of working it. The lease expired if the land was unused. The Gramdan movement inspired a series of regional village land trusts that anticipated Community Land Trusts in the United States.”

If anyone's interested, the guy who came up with the idea wrote a book in 1972 called [The Community Land Trust: A Guide to a New System of Land Tenure in America](#), which is available online for free.

A modern example is the [Cold Pond Community Land Trust](#) in Acworth, NH, started in 2000 by some folks, and now has, according to the website, “over 800 people spread out over nearly 40, very beautiful square miles.” I actually know a lady who lives there, because she sits on the board of the nonprofit I was working for in Boston, the Albert

Einstein Institution. If anyone would like her email address to ask questions, I'm sure she'd be happy to answer them. As you might imagine, she's very nice.

Also, as you might imagine, there are many others that exist, as well – according to Wikipedia, 190. The National Community Land Trust Network, online at www.cltnetwork.org, has a full list of them. There are 6, for instance in Michigan, one right here in Ann Arbor called the Homeplace Community Land Trust, out there off Jackson Rd.

Links

<http://www.mkgandhi.org/vinoba/bhoodan.htm>

http://www.markshep.com/nonviolence/GT_Vinoba.html

[Gandhi Today](#) (at Hatcher Grad Library: HM 278 .S461 1987)

[Gandhi as Disciple and Mentor](#) (at Hatcher Grad Library: DS 481 .G3 W46 2004)