



A study on bhoodan and gramdan movement in India

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Abstract

This study examines the Bhoodan and Gramdan movements in India. Three-quarters of the people who own at least half of the land must transfer ownership to the village, but they retain hereditary rights to the majority of their land and must surrender only five percent to the landless. With this significant concession to private property and inequality, the movement regained steam, particularly after 1965. Soon block-dans and district-dans, the majority of villages within a block or district pledging in gramdan, were announced. This phase of the movement reached its zenith in October 1969 with the declaration of Bihar, the first "gift" state. Therefore, the study focuses on Bhoodan and Gramdan in numerous Indian states.

Keywords: Bhoodan, gramdan, movement

Introduction

In 1951, Vinoba Bhave began travelling through village India in an effort to establish Gandhi's vision of a stateless society devoted to the welfare of all and founded on nonviolence, equality, and decentralisation, known as sarvodaya. Bhave, who believed that real economic and social change must begin with a change of heart and the voluntary renunciation of possessions, addressed the "land problem" by urging people to recognise that all land belongs to God and to demonstrate their love for their fellow man by making bhoodan (land gifts) for the landless. Hundreds of thousands of individuals donated more than four million acres of land within a few years. In the mid-1950s, bhoodan morphed into gramdan (village gifts), and Bhave began requesting that villages establish collective ownership and divide land according to need. In the early 1990s, when these goals proved too radical for more than a few thousand villages, Bhave introduced sulabh gramdan (simplified gramme-dan). Despite the faith and praise of some and the criticism and cynicism of others, there have been surprisingly few attempts to evaluate the movement's origins and impact.

Bhoodan and Gramdan in India

Aside from some original material on the development of the first Gramdan village, it is primarily an uncritical review of the movement's history and philosophy. Fragments of a Vision is an extremely unique travelogue based on Linton's 1967–1968 excursions to more than eighty Gramdan villages in eight states. Even though the tour was largely guided and the perceptions were necessarily superficial, Linton's account is intriguing due to the breadth of her observations and her sympathetic yet critical eye. The remaining three studies span distinct phases of the movement and report empirical field research findings. This book concentrates on the collection and distribution of bhoodan in the Maharashtra region of Vidarbha. Nanekar and Khandewale conduct interviews with benefactors and recipients of bhoodan in a random sample of twenty-five villages and compile a report. Charisma, Stability, and Change is based on research conducted in 1996 in "original"

Gramdan villages in Rajasthan. Oommen conducts interviews with the household leaders in four gramdan villages and three "control" villages in order to reconstruct the fate of various institutional innovations. This information is used to support a comprehensive, albeit unconvincing, accusation against Gramdan. Bhoodan and Gramdan in Orissa is the report of an "impartial" committee appointed by Jayaprakash Narayan to investigate allegations made by the Orissa government in 1969 that bhoodan workers obtained gramdans fraudulently, practised favouritism in land distribution, and had ties to the Naxal movement. Singh conducts interviews with bhoodan workers, officials, and a limited sample of Koraput district villagers. The analysis of these data is not always as explicit and creative as desired, but the material has the benefit of being current.

Since these studies delve into the intricate worlds of Bhoodan and Gramdan in various ways, they provide the foundation for some general observations. One of these is that the "official" statistics exaggerate the influence of the movement. In Vidarbha, which is generally regarded as a relatively successful bhoodan region, Nanekar and Khandewale discovered that 14% of the official figure for bhoodan represented errors in records, 24% had never been effectively transferred in bhoodan, and an additional 2% was under legal dispute or uncultivable. The number of gramdans claimed by the movement—currently greater than 600,000—is also deceptive, as these are merely pledges for gramdan that have not been implemented or registered under state law. Even promises are suspect. Linton cites instances, particularly in Tamil Nadu, where the required number of individuals have not signed the gramdan vow. This also occurs elsewhere. When Jayaprakash Narayan began intensive development work in the Musahari division of Bihar, he discovered that the Gramdan pledge had been fulfilled in almost no village.

Despite the possibility that the numbers are exaggerated, the number of people who have participated in bhoodan and gramdan is remarkable, and this raises the question of motivations. Vinoba Bhave's appeal to altruism has always been met with scepticism by some. These studies provide no

support for those who completely reject the possibility of altruism, but they do indicate that self-interest is a significant motivator for many B'hoodans and Gramdans. On the one hand, Nanekar and Khandewale found that nearly forty percent of Vidarbha Bhoodan donors cited ideological convictions or charismatic influences as the reason for their donations, while thirty percent cited moral or social pressure as the reason. On the other hand, nearly all donated land was of poor quality, and more than half came from donors who acknowledged giving unprofitable land, anticipating future gains, or fearing losing their land due to land ceiling legislation. Evidence on Gramdan is comparable. Oommen finds only a few reports that gramdan employees used deception to collect pledges, but he considers the fact that villages frequently participated in gramdan in the hope of acquiring land from neighbouring villages to be the most important aspect. In Orissa, Singh finds no evidence to support the government's accusations against b'hoodan workers, despite the fact that many villagers have a limited comprehension of the gramdan programme and many of those who donated land participated in gramdan in order to obtain land. According to Linton, many individuals sign the Gramdan Pledge in hopes of receiving outside assistance. In addition to redistributing land to the landless, Bhoodan and Gramdan seek to eliminate the notion of private land ownership. While there has been some redistribution of land, studies indicate that this has had little impact on land attitudes. Although bhoodan in Vidarbha has not even begun to solve the problem of the landless, Nanekar and Khandewale demonstrate that it has moved in the right direction: the majority of land has been distributed to landless labourers, the majority of recipients now have permanent title to their land, and more than 80 percent of the distributed land is under regular cultivation. In the gramdan villages of Rajasthan, however, Oommen concludes that redistribution has "completely failed." Where redistribution has been attempted, land typically returns to its original proprietors, and land conflicts persist. In Orissa, Singh notes the failure of redistribution in a number of villages in the plains, but he finds a somewhat improved situation in the tribal district of Koraput. Some (but not a majority) of the landowners donated land, and this was typically more than the 5% now mandated by Gramdan. This land was primarily redistributed to landless individuals and those with minor holdings. However, the village had retained very little land for common cultivation, and the concept of collective land ownership had not taken hold. Rarely is gifted land registered in the beneficiary's name, and if the recipient does not use it, it reverts to the donor. Individuals pay the land tax, not villages, and those who received bhoodan land pay their land tax through the donor. In India's most renowned and dense Gramdan region, Singh concludes that land-based individualism is as strong as ever. Where land redistribution does occur, these studies indicate that it is rarely accompanied by aid and rarely serves as a catalyst for further changes in the agricultural economy. In Vidarbha, Nanekar and Khandewale report that the majority of bhoodan recipients received no financial assistance other than from traditional moneylenders and that there was not a single instance of a cooperative effort to cultivate bhoodan lands. Linton provides examples of successes and failures in village industries, cooperative stores, and village initiatives

for Gramdan villages, but success is frequently contingent on external funding. She only discovers sporadic examples of communal and cooperative farming. Oommen's conclusions are more negative. Gramdan has had no effect on the agricultural practises of villages that have declared it, and attempts to establish village industries and cooperative stores have either failed or been utilised by dominant groups. Singh discovers that a few villages in Koraput have established and utilised village funds effectively, but there have been few other innovations.

Lastly, since the economic changes brought about by bhoodan and gramdan are limited, it is not remarkable that these studies find little evidence of the broader changes in attitudes that were anticipated to follow gift-giving. Sixty percent of those interviewed by Nanekar and Khandewale in Vidarbha believed that bhoodan had improved relations between owners and non-owners, and less than twenty percent believed that bhoodan had helped eliminate caste and class conflict and fostered a sense of community living. The author asserts that stratification and economic inequality are functional necessities for Indian industrialization and urbanisation. The purpose of his work is to contribute to sociology by demonstrating that charisma can be a system-maintaining force. Certainly, Oommen finds sufficient evidence to paint a very bleak picture of Gramdan's achievements in Rajasthan, but the crucial issue is whether sufficient evidence exists to conclude that the contribution is essentially negative. The answer seems to be negative. One cannot help but be struck by the manner in which Oommen consistently presents and interprets evidence in a manner detrimental to grammar. In one argument, he refers to two ostensibly committed constructive employees as "frustrated politicians" due to their prior involvement in congressional politics. Later, without any evidence, these and other workers (vague references to "a large number" and "many") are referred to as "representatives of vested-interest forces." Oommen also contends as follows: for a movement to be successful, its support must come from relatively homogeneous groups; gramdan appeals to those with diverse backgrounds and interests; therefore, gramdan's "goal-attainment" is hindered. Oommen forgets that Gramdan is intended to appeal to all audiences, in addition to failing to offer any support for the argument's vaguely worded initial premise. Given that Oommen makes a number of valid criticisms, it is regrettable that he appears to have allowed his desire to make a point and his antipathy towards the Sarvodaya ideology to compromise his scholarly objectivity.

Regardless of the "final" verdict regarding Bhoodan and Gramdan, there is little doubt that the movement is in a dire state. Bhave has retired to his ashram near Wardha; the three-year campaign to make Saharsa district in Bihar a model of Gramme Swaraj has recently concluded without the desired results; and Jayaprakash Narayan is redirecting the energies of many sarvodaya workers into anti-government movements in Bihar and elsewhere. Nonetheless, Gramdan development experiments are proceeding in a number of locations." These initiatives frequently rely precariously on outside funding and the leadership of a single individual, but they are signs of vitality. Whether or not they will revitalise the movement remains to be seen.

Conclusion

In Rajasthan, Gommen discovers little distinction between gramdan and other village values. In her travels, Linton encounters instances in which Gramdan has given a sense of unity and initiative to backward villages, but she also encounters instances in which an observer can only be "crushed by disappointment." After demonstrating that the bhoo'dan-gramdan movement falls far short of its lofty aims, the majority of authors conclude their studies in a straightforward manner. They acknowledge the movement's noble intentions and efforts, sometimes pointing out that government efforts at land reform and community development have also been largely unsuccessful. In addition, they offer a few recommendations for increasing the movement's efficacy: minor programme modifications, closer coordination with the government, intellectual support, better-trained employees, and increased publicity.

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