What is Sarvodaya?


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We have carried in this issue of Ishani the inaugural speech delivered at the 40th Sarvodaya Sammelan held in the month of May at Ahmednagar in Maharashtra. The word Sarvodaya is not in currency during present days as it was during several years back, more particularly when Bhoodan (Land Gift Mission) campaign had reached a high peak. But the principles of Sarvodaya, which have emerged from the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, are bound to acquire greater relevance during the days to come.

We have given extracts from the write-up of Dr. Bharatan Kumarappa written by way of Editor’s Note to the book Sarvodaya by M. K. Gandhi to acquaint the readers with the origin and meaning of Sarvodaya and Sarvodaya Samaj.

Dr. Bharatan Kumarappa has rendered invaluable service to mankind by compiling Gandhiji’s writings and utterances on different subjects with utmost care and these have been published by Navajivan Publications house. Dr. Kumarappa has also written enlightening notes and forewords to compilations which are a great help in understanding Gandhiji’s writings.

— Editor

Sarvodaya, as the welfare of all, represents the ideal social order according to Gandhiji. Its basis is all-embracing love. So it has room in it for all without exception — prince and peasant, Hindu and Muslim, touchable and untouchable, white and black, saint and sinner. No individual or group is to be suppressed, exploited or liquidated. All are to be equally members of this social order, all sharing in the produce of their labour, the strong protecting the weak and functioning as trustees for the weak, and each promoting the welfare of all.

As one of the essential qualities of love is self-giving, or emptying oneself or dying for the loved one, self-control and self-suffering form one of the prime requisites for realizing Sarvodaya. India with her centuries of renunciation and austere self-control provides thus the best soil for it. In marked contrast is the Western craze for comfort, for multiplication of wants and self-indulgence. Gandhiji set himself in strong opposition to this trend in Western civilization precisely because he knew that it could not lead to Sarvodaya or social justice, but only to greed, conflict, and suppression of the weak by the strong, whether under Capitalism or under Communism.

A philosophy such as this, of all-embracing, self-suffering love, presupposes deep spiritual foundations. It implies a living faith in the One that pervades all. It requires also great self-discipline and training, and development of soul-force. In this its essentially spiritual basis; it is the very antithesis of Communism which is avowedly materialistic, although in regard to its goal Sarvodaya is similar to Communism.

Its basis being spiritual, the means for achieving Sarvodaya is also spiritual. Communism holds out the hope that the ideal social order can be realized only when the exploiter is done away with by physical force. For this it builds on class hatred and resorts to periodical purges and war. To Gandhiji, on the other hand, such a method seemed entirely futile, for hatred and violence were bound sooner or later to recoil on their perpetrator, and to produce more hatred and violence in their wake*. The way to end oppression, accordingly he believed, was to appeal to the conscience and reason of the oppressor by self-suffering and nobility of character, and to convert him and make him a
willing ally of the new social order. The technique he evolved for this purpose, the
technique of Satyagraha or clinging to Truth and Non-violence at the cost of untold
suffering to oneself and even death, was one of his distinctive contributions, and very
central to his teaching.

Gandhiji did not believe in drawing up a futile Utopia. The goal did not interest him
more than as a pole star by which to steer his course through the storms which life
presented. Not for him the distant scene. He did not therefore trouble to give us a
detailed blue-print of the ideal social order. His concern was much rather with the means
i.e., with shaping the present in the light of the goal. He was certain that if we could work
out our ideal in terms of the immediate present, the end was bound to follow.
Accordingly he dealt from the Sarvodaya point of view with various problems as they
confronted him from day to day, such as those of Industrialism, Capital and Labour,
Landlord and Peasant.

Such an essentially realistic and practical approach on the part of Gandhiji has had an
amazingly wholesome effect, for since his death his followers have concerned themselves
with going forward in the application of his great principles of Truth and Non-violence to
the immediate problems confronting the nation. Of all such problems, the greatest, of
course, is the economic one of freeing our people from poverty and want. Gandhiji
himself sought to tackle it by trying to revive village industries, a symbol of which was
hand-spinning, which occupied the first place in his economic programme. Not that he
did not realize the importance of agriculture, but that he felt that with a foreign
government at the helm nothing much could be done to improve the lot of the
agriculturist, weighed down as he was by tenancy laws and a wooden system of land
revenue and village administration. But with the advent of independence, Gandhiji’s
followers have rightly taken up the problem of land, which is the most crucial for the
agriculturist who forms the backbone of our nation........

This was the problem which Acharya Vinoba Bhave, a close associate and disciple of
Gandhiji since 1916, set out to tackle in April 1951 in a violence-ridden, Communist area
of India. His solution was in accordance with the teachings of Gandhiji. He appealed to
the best in the landlord and obtained free gifts of land. Thus was born his great Bhoomdan
or Land Gifts Mission, which has startled the world by its remarkable success. Already
almost 2 million acres of land has been secured for the landless through this means, and
it is hoped to attain the goal of 50 million acres for 50 million of India’s landless
labourers by 1957, so that by that year there will be no landless labour in India. Here is
bloodless revolution unprecedented in the history of the world, whereby a step is taken
in the direction of Sarvodaya or the ideal social order, by converting the exploiter and
making his services still available to society, instead of doing away with him and
depriving ourselves of his ability for organization and management........

Sarvodaya may well be regarded as India’s distinctive contribution to social philosophy.
Its roots go back to almost 3000 years when Buddha and Mahavir went about preaching
love or non-violence, and to those ancient seers who through the centuries taught and
practised austerity and self-control, and sought to inculcate them in the individual
through social institutions such as the joint-family, caste and village organisation. In the
family, caste and village community life the individual learnt to curb his own desires for
the sake of his group, to share his produce with others, to co-operate with them, to feel
loyalty to the group and to accept its discipline. He enjoyed economic security as his
work and minimum requirements were assured to him by the group. There was a feeling
of kinship and equality between him and other members of his group as in a family. It
was village communism without Communism’s violence. It was from these sources that
Gandhiji drew his inspiration for Sarvodaya or the ideal social order, although
immediately it was from a reading of Ruskin’s Unto This Last. Gandhiji was convinced that if individual and social life were not thus based on love and high moral and spiritual principles, no amount of preaching, establishing world organizations for peace, and resisting war will avail, for peace is the end-result of our daily living. Consequently he was at great pains to show, even as our ancestors had done in the past, how the individual and society were to be transformed if we were to progress towards the ideal social order.

The question that faces humanity today is how we may attain peace and freedom for all. Can we obtain them if we pursued the way of self-indulgence and aggressive industrialism with its greed for the world’s resources and markets, and if we built up mammoth organizations backed by military might to control others for our own ends, or should we rather go to Gandhian way of simplicity and economically self-sufficient small community-organization, wherein the individual will live for all through service and self-sacrifice? The two lead in entirely opposite directions. Of this there is no mistaking. One moves inevitably towards hatred, war and destruction, the other is calculated to lead to love, peace and the welfare of all alike. The destiny of man depends on his choice between the two ways. It is high time that both we in India and others start to reflect seriously over the issues involved*........

*Italics by the Editor of Ishani

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