WHO IS VINOBA BHAVE?

[M. K. GANDHI]

The text below was published in the ‘Harijan’ of October 20, 1940. It was written by Gandhiji to introduce to the public Sri Vinova 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. Being a born teacher he has been of the utmost assistance to Ashadevi 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.

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.