

Mr. Danilo Dolci

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Promoting Gandhian Values outside India-1989

Often called "the Gandhi of Sicily", 65-year old Mr. Dolci is one of the most renowned social activists in the world. With a promising future in architecture ahead of him in Northern Italy, he chose to get involved, in his own words, in "work more essential than urban planning or building design for the rich", and proceeded to Trappeto, in Western Sicily, an extremely poor town of peasants and fishermen. It was also the heart of Mafia activity. Dolci was struck first by Sicily's poverty and decided to dedicate his life for its eradication. He worked with the peasants and fishermen, and, indeed, lived their situation: underpayment, seasonal unemployment, exploitation by Mafia and others like land owners, Government authorities, police and politicians. This experience taught Danilo what the people's suffering really meant.

Although a man of compassion, Dolci refused to set up institutions of charity. Rather, he would arouse the people to ask themselves questions about their condition. This was the method of grass-roots conscience-raising. He also provided leadership to the hapless community and adopted techniques of social action unheard of in Western tradition. He fasted, courted imprisonment, organised strikes, including "the strike in reverse"-which was a novel method in which the unemployed and the under-employed did public works without governmental permission to organise demonstration for jobs. Besides, he also resorted to sit-ins, protest marches, and underground radio broadcasts. An imaginative combination of critical reflection, practical experience and courageous action has been the hallmark of Dolci's work.

But the conflicts and struggles Dolci organised had a positive aim. He took up issues like construction of dams, organisation of people's cooperatives, and Government policy on starvation, rehabilitation of the unemployed, disease and illiteracy cause basic to people's day-to-day life. He fought the Mafia menace and its connections with bureaucrats and politicians, by leading from the front. It required rare courage to take on gangsters and representatives of the vested interests. Even Gandhiji would have admired Dolci's non-violence which was the non-violence of the brave.

A most interesting aspect of Dolci's endeavours has been the emphasis on integrating community development with education. Through his Center of Study and Initiative, Dolci has given a thrust to the educational system of Italy, while aiming at its revolutionary transformation based on indigenous philosophy of education.

By conferring on Mr. Danilo Dolci the Jamaal Bajaj International Award for Promoting Gandhian Values outside India, the Trustees of the Foundation feel happy in recognising his innovative radicalisation of non-violent social action and his developmental work from the grass-roots level.

