

Vinoba Niketan

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Uplift and Welfare of Women and Children-1997

“A rare atmosphere of meditation, a place congenial for retreats” soliloquized an eminent Carmelite Father on the eve of an All India Inter-religious Camp at Vinobaniketan. Amidst nature's panoply of evergreen hills, forests, springs and streamlets. Vinobaniketan stands distinct from the scattered Tribal hutments and village houses around.

Vinobaniketan Ashram is a women's institution serving humanity on Gandhi-Vinoba lines for the past 43 years. With the objectives of World Peace and Universal Brotherhood, Vinobaniketan was registered under Charitable Societies Act XII in 1956.

If Mahatma Gandhi spiritualised politics, Acharya Vinoba Bhave spiritualised service to humanity. Symbolic of this was the laying of the foundation stone of Vinobaniketan by the Late Swami Tapasyananda of Shri Ramkrishna Mission, Thiruvananthapuram. The hut was built through Shramdan (voluntary manual labour) in Kerala State on a donated site of 23 cents and opened by a harijan girl. To this was added 50 cents of mortgaged land through Bhoodan and on lease from the State Government, 10 acres of land in 1956 and 3 acres in 1976.

Saint Vinoba blesses Vinobaniketan Ashram by his stay in the Ashram hut in 1957 during his historic “Padayatras”. When the Bhoodan-Gramdan Movement gained momentum in the country, Vinobaniketan inspired the entire State with its spiritual vision, and several young men and women voluntarily came forward to serve the nation. For a few years the Ashram remained a spiritual powerhouse sending out trained workers to different parts of India directly guided by Late Dharendra Mazumdar, Vallabhaswami and Krishnadas Gandhi.

Vinobaniketan had the privilege to offer the first gramdan in Kerala that surrendered the individual ownership of land to society from Vinobaniketan area to India's first President Late Dr Rajendra Prasad at Kanyakumari. During Vinoba's yatra in Kerala, Vinoba Niketan organized the first cluster of gramdan villages and sponsored a Farmer's Co-operative Society and Gramdan Co-operative Society and entrusted them to the local people to encourage them in economic self-sufficiency. True to the spirit and letter of Vinoba's slogan of “Jai Jagat”, Vinobaniketan was declared open as an international women's institution in 1975.

Vinobaniketan has now completed its 43rd year of social service. Situated in the declared Tribal belt of Chooliamal a reserve forests in Nedumangad Taluka, 32 kms from Trivandrum City, true to Vinoba's principle of 'Lokniti' Vinobaniketan stands above party politics. Correlating all services to “Jai Jag at” 25 Vishwasevika centres were opened in the 4 Panchayats around Vinobaniketan by Shri Radhakrishna Bajaj, Late Manohar Divan and Shivaji Bhave who led the Silver Jubilee celebrations of Vinobaniketan in 1979 as Vinoba's emissaries. The centres are pioneering the Gramaswaraj works in the area. The Sevikas are all trained social workers, from Vinoba Niketan.

Vinobaniketan's activities comprise all Gandhian constructive programmers with special focus in the upliftment of the weaker sections of the society through social, economic, educational, cultural and inter-religious activities like 'Vishwamandir' for deserted new-born baby-creches in the interior villages, Nursery Schools, Upper primary schools, Literacy lasses, Extensive khadi work, weaving workshop for Tribal women, agricultural experiments, mini-irrigation, dairying and gohar-gas plant. Tribal girls hostel with facilities for coaching and training in vocational and cultural activities, Kanyagurukulam for poor girls and also girls from broken families of drunkards, day care for the old, self-employment scheme for 2500 poor village women, Gramswaraj camps, conferences and seminars, training to Gramsevikas, Rural

organizers, Animators and social workers, Ayurveda clinic and Herbal garden, encouraging Rural mothers towards homestead cultivation of medicinal plants and preparation of medicines for home use, Rural allopathic dispensary now expanded to a full-fledged Public Health Centre, mobile medical unit, nature cure and Yoga classes, clean environment programme of low cost latrines, low cost houses, awareness camps on health, hygiene and clean drinking water, Sarvodaya Patra or Home Banks promoting family income generating programme, campaigns for World Peace, Alcohol prohibition and protection of cows, etc.

The whole area is now known as 'Vinoba'. The post office is 'Vinobaniketan'. When people ask for tickets they say 'Vinoba'.

The work influences the younger generations and children who grow up to the awareness of changing social order. The spirit and light that guided Vinobaniketan for 40 long years would certainly continue to be the guiding force on the path.

Vinobaniketan has initiated a 5-years intensive rural development activities as a part of Vinoba Birth Centenary Celebrations inaugurated in 1994 by Shri R.K. Narayanan, the then Vice-President of India. A series of camps, conferences, seminars, padyatras, cultural activities and publications were the main features of the celebrations. A vehicle-cum-padyatra from Kanyakumari to Thalappadi and another one Vinobaniketan to Gagode, Vinoba's birth village propagating the ideals of gramswaraj could inspire the masses a lot.

With the dedication of “Vinoba Smruti Mandiram” to the nation by Dr Susheela Nayar, the Birth Centenary Programmes open a new horizon of universal services.

“Vinoba Smruti Mandiram” is on Vinobaniketan campus at the very site where Vinoba laid the foundation stone for Gramvidyalaya/Rural Institute in 1957, during his historic Bhoodan Yatra in Kerala. A Museum and Library are organized with universal outlook and a Rural Institute on Gandhi-Vinoba system of education based on vocational and cultural activities form the main components of “Vinoba Smruti”. This seat of universal moral renaissance, as a centre for study, research and dedicated services to generations to come is Vinobaniketan's befitting tribute to the Great Saint Vinoba.

