

Day

THE CHALLENGE OF VILLAGE RECONSTRUCTION

Our speaker yesterday said he started out as a messenger boy and became the Chairman of a bank. My experience is just the opposite: I started out as a Professor and became a messenger boy for an unusual kind of people. I would like to speak for the 235 million people of the 511 million people in India who live in villages. That is 511 million people out of the nation's total population of 657 million. India is the largest village country in the world. Let's begin by that. With more than 1 million villages if we include the various hamlets we could say that there are 2 million villages in India. When I spoke to the Prime Minister of Canada he said, "Don't talk to me in such big numbers. I cannot deal with that figure. There is no Ministry in Canada that can deal with the problem of 180 million unemployed people; it is too big for us."

These 235 million people are mostly landless, are below the poverty line and can spend less than 1 rupee per day. There are homeless, half the time jobless, and all the time voiceless. I needed a few shocks to get out of this professorial assumption. An earthquake, a famine and an unforgettable cyclone. Also I needed a word from someone, like Gandhi who, when I asked him, "What can I do? I am only able to teach economics. What shall I do in India?", said, "Don't worry. If you have two things you are welcome and necessary: Courage and vision." Gandhi was a man with his ears to the ground and he knew common man well. I have been reflecting a long time on why he said just these things. The day after the cyclone I went to one of the devastated villages and saw an old man sitting in dejection. I tried to start conversation and said, "Come on, let's get up and we'll build the village again." He refused to talk to me. I insisted little by little. He finally said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I am not going." This was the first shock to that man: to meet somebody who wasn't going. Then I said, "Let's work." I got another rejoinder: "You don't know what you are talking about." This was maybe the shock I needed, to start to listen. The man was accustomed to people coming and going, patting him on the back, giving some good advice and passing by with relief. These people did not know what they were saying. We are now working in about 6,000 villages on the east coast of India. We always start with one simple question: what in your village have you ever done together? Not what have you asked for together or applied for together, just done together. And we start a long process of consciensization around that basic reflection on their part. It is the most remarkable experience to sit with village people who have forgotten that working together is possible. They have survived without knowing this particular way of living; they have been divided.

India, as you know, is in many ways a unique country. I don't know of any other country in which the Prime Minister, when he or she talks is understood by only 20% of the population. I don't know of any other country which has 15 official languages. I don't know of any other country that has something as sad and continuing as the caste system that has penetrated the furthest, remotest corners of the mental makeup of many people, even today. It is a country divided, at least in feeling, if not in boundaries. And this is the first big shock that I encountered in the field of development. In the economic field I think of development as a quantitative, progressive chart. More, clearly, is not necessarily better. The first obstacle to village development in India is the fact that all that is done and not done, said

and not said, lies under a blanket of fear. I am sure, in the United States, we have forgotten what fear is. People are conscious, all the time, of that fear: of no work, of each season, or the landlord, of the government, of the neighbor who is not in any sense a neighbor unless he belongs to the same caste. And so the first step for human development is to remove the blanket of fear and give people a little bit of confidence. That confidence we can only build on God, but how does God appear to man? Ghandi said unless He appears in the form of bread, He shall not be understood or recognized. But bread does not come to village people except through work.

The first step is to provide, to assist, to engage the entire village community, unity being the target. We have to concentrate the unity not in meetings and resolutions and big songs which the village has long forgotten to sing, but by developing again the skills required to find work. One of the most dramatic experiences I had was to discover that these villages that had produced in the past every form of art from architectural skills to weaving and stone carving but that today people have practically all lost their skills, except one: that of handling an iron crowbar or a small spade. In our survey of more than 30,000 villages we found only 11 saws! The skills have to be revitalized in order to find work. It is not enough to engage them all in the same skill as we have in the past such as in public works, digging roads or making wells. These things are exhaustable. New skills have to be provided. For that we have developed what we call basic productivity training centers.

The second step is to make the people again proud of their rural environment. So much in the world is still determined by birth. You belong to a nation, a faith, a caste because you are born into it. The great liberation of people is that birth has not always been the sole, primary and final determinant of man's choice, neither of nation nor faith, nor work nor social government. To lift man out of this opporssion of the birth limitation is a tremendous human development task. How do we achieve this? By turning necessity into a virtue; by burning an element of birth into an element of choice; by giving a sense of pride to the man born in the village so that he no more longs for the town but is proud of his village.

That requires building totally new villages. It means, in the words of the French Presidential candidate, that we have to invent the village of the year 2000. This is in the Gandian sense of the word, "village reconstruction." Actually in Sanskrit, this means "a village renewal organization." This task is not done by projects to put wealth here or there, or by making roads this way or that way. It is an environmental choice. It is a way of living in which a man is, at the same time, consumer and producer and exchanger. This is the village way of life. The villager makes his pots and uses them and sells them. He grows his rice and eats it and sells. He makes his nets and catches fish and sells. He is an integrated human being because all these relations have become part of his way of life. What was the birth of the town, except the market? What was the segregation of consumption except the middle-man's dominance?

The last step to human development in India is creating the organizational structures to give back to the village the power to control its own environ-

ment. An average village in India may have 2,000 to 3,000 acres of property. Of these acres they will occupy maybe 5-6 acres for residence, but the control of the other remaining 1000, 900, or 2000 acres is not in the hand of the people. It is controlled by some other structure. And so the task is to give back to the village, not only the political but the resource control and so, the community pride. This is the task of human development. This requires enormous courage. The word Gandhi used for courage is close to the word for "truth". Human development will require an undefeatable adherence to truth. It will bring to people something more than what we can give by ourselves: a faith.