

Gandhigram: Significant Experiment

Convocation address at Gandhigram Rural Institute on 5th May 1985

It gives me great pleasure to address you today on the occasion of the Annual Convocation of the Gandhigram Rural Institute, a unique educational centre dedicated to the continuance of Mahatma Gandhi's "experiments with truth". Long before, I became the Chancellor of your University; I have been one of you. I participated in the endeavour to turn the Institute into a Deemed University along with my esteemed friends, Dr. Soundaram and Dr. G Ramachandran. Dr. Soundaram, affectionately called Amma by all of us, was a creative genius. As a doctor, social worker, political leader, Legislator, Minister in the Government of India and Chancellor of the Gandhigram University. Soundaram has left an indelible impression on the sands of time. Inspired by leaders like Gandhiji, Dr. Soundaram believed that rural prosperity is the very foundation of India's freedom and independence. I have taken over the Chancellorship of the Gandhigram Rural Institute (Deemed University) only with a view to continue the great service which Soundaram Amma had rendered to the cause of rural welfare. From now onwards I shall strive in partnership with you to turn Gandhi's dreams into a reality. Your institute is a microcosm of the Gandhian Universe of tomorrow. Your faculty and alumni are engaged in one of the most significant experiments of our time to raise a cadre of those pledged to bringing about a quiet, peaceful, silent, sweeping, social revolution in India.

As I was on my way to Gandhigram, I reflected upon the priceless legacy you have inherited from those who evolved and developed the concept of a rural university. Mahatma Gandhi often said that the soul of India resides in the villages. Logically, it is here that the social revolution he worked for should commence so that it should gradually change the composite image of our people and of the country. He advocated ruralization of higher education which then was, and continues to be, the exclusive preserve of metropolitan and selected urban areas. Dr. S Radhakrishnan, one of our most eminent educationists, prepared the blue-print for a rural university in 1949 on lines conceived by Gandhiji. The principal objective they had in mind was to reverse the flow of rural youth for knowledge and learning into the cities, to which employment seekers as well flocked in free India. They were convinced, higher education had to be brought to the doorsteps of villagers.

Most of us will agree that the right setting for the universities, the temples of learning as they are, should be rural, far from the madding crowd of the city. Our gurus and sages also founded centres of learning in serene, sylvan surroundings.

The blue print for the university was translated into a programme of action and given a practical shape when ten Rural Institutes of higher education were organised by the Government of India. The Gandhigram Institute was one of them. This was to be the first phase of a countrywide programme for imparting an all-round balanced education to the people in the villages where the real India lives. The idea for a rural educational centre also enthused Dr. TS Soundaram in 1947 who founded a school for basic education from the nursery to secondary level at Gandhigram.

The imprint of these three leading personalities of contemporary India, the crusaders for service to rural youth, is sharply etched on the Gandhigram canvas of education. Though they are no more with us, their example is and should continue to be a perennial source of enthusiasm and inspiration to us. Gandhiji had merged his identity with the peasantry and workers. Dr.

Radhakrishnan was the embodiment of an ideal teacher. Dr. Soundaram created this wonderful organisation with children's home school, girls training institutions and family health centre a unique complex in the whole of India. It is a testimony to the success of "your experiments" in education that in 1976 the Institute was recognize as a University.

Before me are about 250 youth who are receiving diplomas and degrees after having imbibed the Gandhian Philosophy of work-ethic and assisted in giving a practical shape on a micro scale to some of Gandhiji's ideas. On you now depends how the nucleus nurtured in Gandhigram should be multiplied in other parts of the country, taking into account the local conditions, traditions and customs. You are among the 8,000 pioneers who have been trained and educated at the Gandhigram Institute since its inception about 30 years ago. Among you today is also my esteemed friend Professor K Arunachalam, a dedicated Gandhian, who has been awarded the Honorary degree of Doctor of Letters for his contribution to Gandhian studies. Together with your predecessors you must now embark on the second phase of the programme for bringing higher education to the villages. I congratulate you most heartily on the completion of your studies. But I should also like to say that you are about to enter the laboratory of humanity strewn with impediments. You must remain steadfast to Gandhiji's ideals. Indeed, in a way your work has just begun the struggle to implement the social reform programme Gandhiji initiated.

As Gandhigram is a symbol of significant experiment in rural higher education, I propose to analyze the components of the educational system in your institute, high lighting those which can be adapted elsewhere. The "Courses of study" or rather practical "experimentations" at the institute include rural education, development, integration of academic study, productive work, and community life and village extension. It offers a package containing the art of learning for knowledge, work opportunities for acquiring skills, community life for social responsibility besides action-based research and extension for rural development. Special emphasis is placed on extension service and field Special rural health, and evolution of new approaches to work, problem of population a part of the Gandhigram heritage. Its record is outstanding, in a block, I understand, the birth rate fell from 35 per 1000 to 21 per 1000 the target fixed for the entire country under "Health for All by 2000 AD". For this signal achievement Dr. Soundaram will always be remembered with admiration and gratitude.

As all the courses offered have an extension component; both student and teachers go to the villages and experiment with the ideas they study in classrooms. The courses are also need-based and the graduates are expected to play a useful role in voluntary organizations or private industry to serve the people. It is claimed, and rightly so, that Gandhigram has developed a successful model in rural extension a quadrangular model where village planning committee, government development departments and financial institutions work together. This has accelerated the process of development and enabled villagers to move towards basic national goals, namely, full employment, control of population, eradication of illiteracy and abolition of poverty. Some of Gandhigram service villages are nearing 100 percent employment, zero population growth rates 100 per cent literacy and zero poverty.

I also commend the system of research conducted in the Institute, as it is oriented to the practical needs and problems of the people in the surrounding region. The various studies made relate to practical issues in agricultural economics and other areas of rural development. At a micro-level planning, "resource atlases" are prepared for the villages, blocks and districts, scientifically and systematically assessing the natural resources in a particular area and evolving guidelines for development.

A practical production programme, under which goods valued at Rs. 6 lakhs are produced every year by students and supporting staff with the emphasis on entrepreneurship and self-employment, is welcome. Equally interesting is the Gurukula system which enable a group of students to work closely with teacher who acts as a “friend, philosopher and guide” to them. He also helps them to choose a vocation and smoothens the transition from the “world of learning” to “the world of work”.

Gandhigram Institute stands for a casteless and classless society in accordance with the Gandhian ideals of equality. The basic emphasis is on moral and social values without which no nation can really progress. Through sarvodaya prayers and other cultural and spiritual programmes, Gandhigram instills higher values in the students. Its course for national integration and unity is noteworthy. It is a mini India.

I am particularly happy to note that the Institute has organised Shanti Sena course for training in non-violence. Such a course in peace in peace science, including problems of disarmament and world peace is timely.

All this has attracted notice outside and I am glad to find that students from Asia and Africa are studying in Gandhigram, giving it an international character.

This endeavour to concretize the Gandhian concerns in the Institute’s campus is laudable. But It has become also necessary to underline some facts of his programme in our machine age.

For Gandhiji dignity of labour was an integral part of his worldly religion. Educational ennobles the mind. It must also attach due value to manual work. Gandhi said “whatever may be true of other countries, in India at any rate where more than 70 per cent of the population is agricultural and another 10 per cent industrial. It is a crime to make education merely literary and to unfit boys and girls for manual work in after-life. Our children must from their infancy be taught the dignity of labour.

The lesson on the dignity of labour should never be forgotten. It is a golden frame for mental attitudes and intellectual pursuits. Throughout the length and breadth of India so much has to be done, some of it by machines and with the help of scientific and technological aids but much more with human hands, which no machine can over surpass. A balanced development of mind and body in harmony with soul or sprit is the key to enrichment of human personality. This is also the key to good education, which must in the ultimate analysis help to rise to a higher level of consciousness. To quote Gandhiji again:

“Unless the development of the mind and body goes hand in hand with a corresponding awakening of the soul the former alone would prove to be a poor lopsided affair By spiritual training I mean education of the heart. A proper and all-round development of the mind, therefore can take place only when it proceeds *pari passu* with the education of the physical and spiritual faculties of the child”

Our greatest challenge today is to work for national integrity, social morality and humanism. These are our fundamental needs. As you, alumni of this Institute, go out to the various parts of the country to engage yourselves in the work assigned to you. You must learn to live as a part of a family. Gandhiji once described how he lived as a “father” among those he worked for: “ I had always given the first place to the culture of the heart or the building of character, and as I felt confident that moral training could be given to all alike 'no matter how different their ages and their upbringing. I decided t live amongst them all the twenty-four hours of the day as their father. I regard character building as the proper foundation for their education and, if the foundation was firmly laid, I was sure that the children could learn all the other things themselves or with the assistance of friends”.

I have often wondered whether it is not possible to spread these “ experiments with truth” to other parts of the country and even outside. Nothing is impossible if we set about the task with a sound programme. The three-language formula, namely, regional national or Hindi and link or English languages should be the sheet anchor of our educational policy. The selection of students and teachers for Gandhian Institutes should be judicious so that they may turn out committed young people devoted to social evolution. I recently visited the North Eastern region of our country. It is breathtakingly beautiful. Even in these remote regions, Gandhigram was known, and I was approached whether any of the trained graduates of your institute could be encouraged to go to such States as Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. In many other areas as well the Gandhian cadre is needed urgently.

A Nobel Prize winner and a physicist recently ridiculed that nuclear devices, which he described as “annihilators” with the object of “homicide” are characterized as “arms”. This is a perversion of truth as arms, conventional arms, are lethal only in limited areas, while nuclear devices spell wholesale destruction of man. The institute should also expand and strengthen linkages with institutions working in the areas of peace and development in the world. If we bring together all those who are working in accordance with the Gandhian ideals-and there are now thousands all over the world. We shall have reinforced the growing movement for world peace.

asathoma sat gamaya
tamasoma jyotir gamaya
mrityoma amritam gamaya

Roughly translated:

untruth to truth
darkness to light
death to immortality.