

BACK TO THE VILLAGE

(By: M. K. Gandhi, www.mkgandhi.org)

REAL INDIA

I HAVE believed and repeated times without number that India is to be found not in its few cities but in its 7,00,000 villages. We town-dwellers have believed that India is to be found in its towns and the villages were created to minister to our needs. We have hardly ever paused to inquire if those poor folk get sufficient to eat and clothe themselves with and whether they have a roof to shelter themselves from sun and rain.²³⁵

Hitherto the villagers gave their lives and died in thousand so that we might live. Now we might have to die so that they may live. The difference will be fundamental. The former have died unknowingly and involuntarily. Their enforced sacrifice has degraded us. If now we die knowingly, our sacrifice will ennoble us, and the whole nation. Let us not flinch from the necessary sacrifice, if we will live as an independent, self-respecting nation.²³⁶

VILLAGES AND CITIES

The cities are capable of taking care of themselves. It is the villages we have to turn to. We have to disabuse them of their prejudices, their superstitions, their narrow outlook, and we can do so in no other manner than that of staying amongst them and sharing their joys and sorrows and spreading education and intelligent information among them.²³⁷

I have found that the town-dweller has generally exploited the villager, in fact he has lived on the poor villager's subsistence. Many a British official has written about the condition of the people of India. No one has, to my knowledge, said that the Indian villager has enough to keep body and soul together. On the contrary, they have admitted that the bulk of the population live on the verge of starvation and ten per cent are semi-starved, and that millions have to rest content with a pinch of dirty salt and chillies and polished rice or parched grain.

You may be sure that, if any of us were to be asked to live on that diet, we should not expect to survive it longer than a month or should be afraid of losing our mental faculties. And yet our villagers go through that state from day to day.

THE PEASANTS

The moment you talk to them [the Indian peasants] and they begin to speak, you will find wisdom drops from their lips. Behind the crude exterior you will find a deep reservoir of spirituality. I call this culture-you will not find such a thing in the West. You try to engage an European peasant in conversation and you will find that he is uninterested in things spiritual.

In the case of the Indian villager, an age-old culture is hidden under an encrustment of crudeness. Take away the encrustation, remove his chronic poverty and his illiteracy and you will find the finest specimen of what a cultured, cultivated, free citizen should be.²³⁹

Over 75 per cent of the population are agriculturists.... But there cannot be much spirit of self-government about us if we take away or allow others to take away from them almost the whole of the result of their labour.²⁴⁰

It is only when the cities realize the duty of making an adequate return to the villages for the strength and sustenance which they derive from them, instead of selfishly exploiting them, that a healthy and moral relationship between the two will spring up. And if the city children are to play their part in this great and noble work of social reconstruction, the vocations through which they are to receive their education ought to be directly related to the requirements of the villages.²⁴¹

I regard the growth of cities as an evil thing, unfortunate for mankind and the world, unfortunate for England and certainly unfortunate for India. The British have exploited India through its cities. The latter have exploited the villages. The blood of the villages is the cement with which the edifice of the cities is built. I want the blood that is today inflating the arteries of the cities to run once again in the blood vessels of the villagers.²⁴²

.... I know that, if India is to be the leader in clean action based on clean thought, God will confound the wisdom of..... big men and will provide the villages with the power to express themselves as they should.²⁴³

India is made of villages, but our intelligentsia has neglected them... village life must not become a copy or appendage of city life. The cities have to adopt the pattern of village life and subsist for the villages.²⁴⁴

OUR DUTY

We must identify ourselves with the villagers who toil under the hot sun beating on their bent backs and see how we would like to drink water from the pool in which the villagers bathe, wash their clothes and pots, and in which their cattle drink and roll. Then and not till then shall we truly represent the masses and they will as surely as I am writing this, respond to every call.²⁴⁵

We have got to be ideal villagers, not the villagers with their queer ideas or absence of ideas about sanitation and giving no thought to how they eat and what they eat. Let us not, like most of them, cook anyhow, eat anyhow, live anyhow. Let us show them the ideal diet. Let us not go by mere likes and dislikes, but get at the root of these likes and dislikes.....

We have got to show them that they can grow their vegetables, without much expense, and keep good health. We have also to show that most of the vitamins are lost when they cook the leaves. We have to teach them how to economize time, health and money.... Lionel Curtis described our villages as dung-heaps. We have to turn them into model villages. Our village-folk do not get fresh air though they are surrounded by fresh air; they don't get fresh food though they are surrounded by the freshest foods. I am talking like a missionary in this matter of food, because my mission is to make villages a thing of beauty.²⁴⁶

The only way is to sit down in their midst and work away in steadfast faith, as their scavengers, their nurses, their servants, not as their patrons, and to forget all our prejudices and prepossessions. Let us for a moment forget even Swaraj, and certainly forget the 'have's' whose presence oppresses us at every step. They are there. There are many who are dealing with these big problems. Let us tackle humbler work of the village, which is necessary now and would be, even after we have reached our goal. Indeed, the village work when it becomes successful will itself bring us nearer the goal.²⁴⁷

VILLAGE MOVEMENT

The village movement is as much an education of the city people as of the villagers. Workers drawn from cities have to develop village mentality and learn the art of living after the manner of villagers. This does not mean that they have to starve like the villagers. But it does mean that there must be a radical change in the old style of life.²⁴⁸

In [my picture of independence], the unit is the village community. The superstructure of independence is not to be built at the village unit, so that the top weighs down on and crushes the forty crores of people who constitute the base....

A village unit as conceived by me is as strong as the strongest. My imaginary village consists of 1,000 souls. Such a unit can give a good account of itself if it is well organized on a basis of self-sufficiency.²⁴⁹

We stand today in danger of forgetting how to use our hands. To forget how to dig the earth and tend the soil is to forget ourselves. To think that your occupation of the Ministerial chair will be vindicated if you serve the cities only would be to forget that India really resides in her 7,00,000 village units. What would it profit a man if he gained the world but lost his soul into the bargain.²⁵⁰

Submitted by:

The Swaraj Foundation, Willowbrook, IL, (www.swaraj.org).