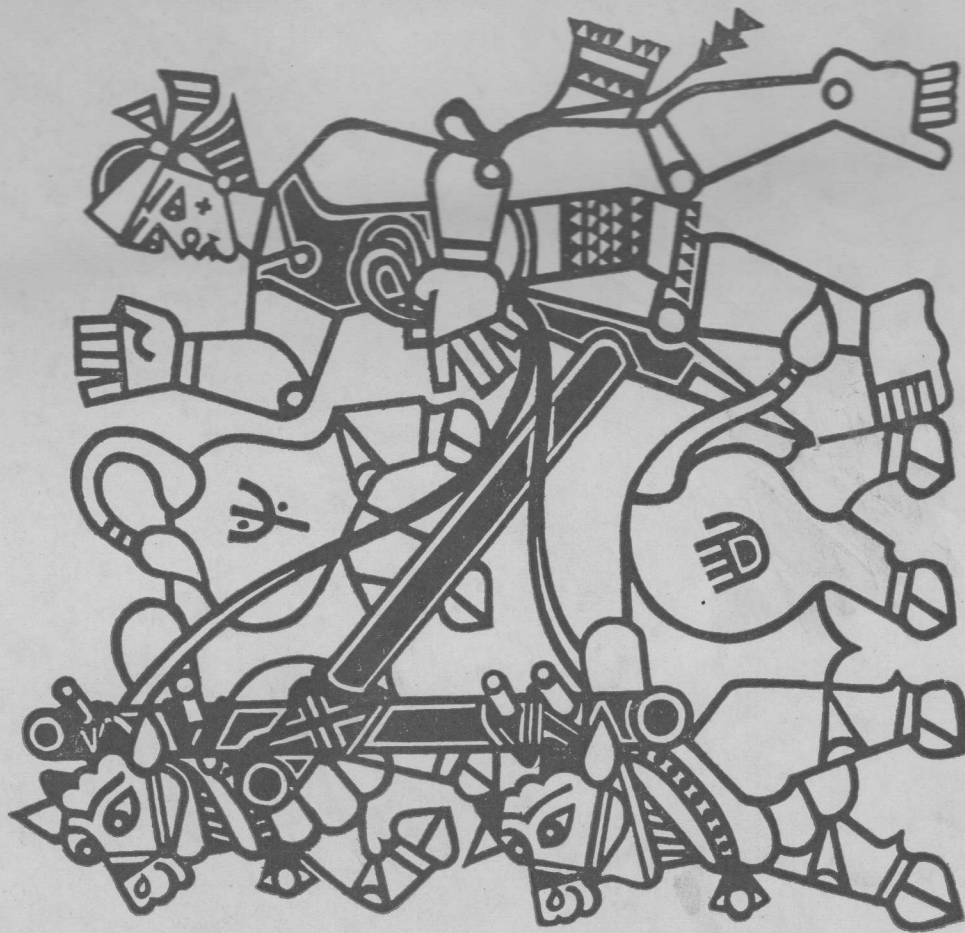




A Centre for Generating People's Power for Peaceful Progress

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Anand Niketan Ashram, Rangpur

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The man...

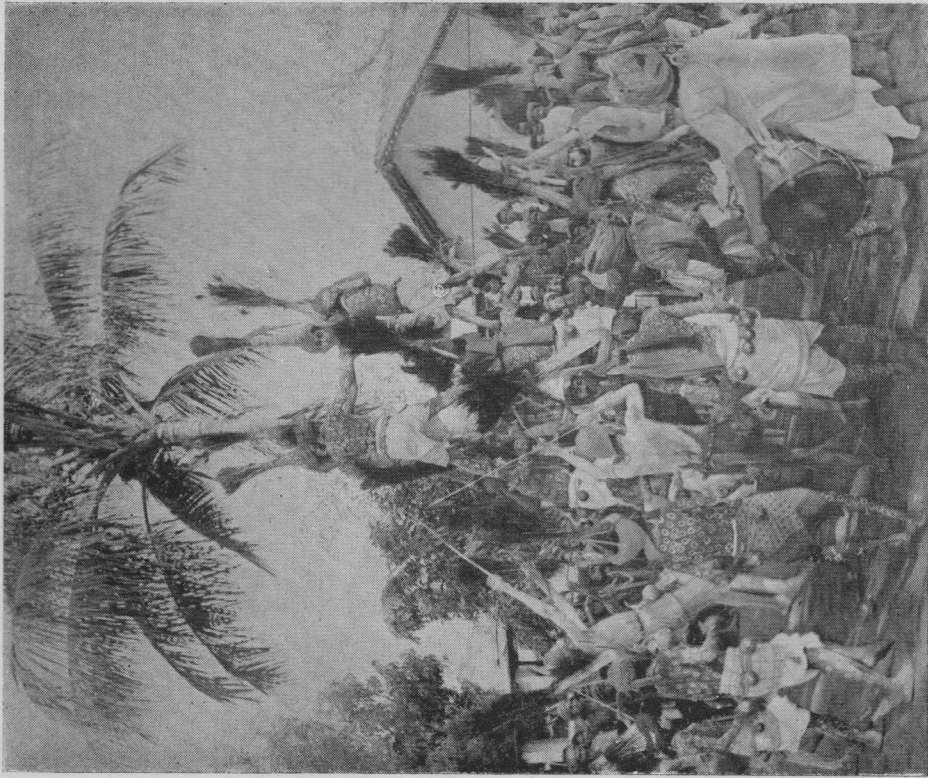
In 1949, a young man came back to Gujarat. He was born there, but had spent most of his youth in Rajasthan, where his father was the Diwan (Chief Minister) of a princely state. Young Harivallabh Parikh was educated to fill a similar post, but the stream of his life changed its direction when he came under the influence of the nationalist guests who visited his family : after matriculation, therefore, he did not go to England, but chose to complete his education with Gandhiji in Wardha Ashram. The great Quit India movement in 1942 sent him underground to fight for India's independence. This goal achieved through the common efforts of all, he decided it was time to put his ideas into practice.

His ideal was to contribute to the making of a world of justice and equality among people, based on non-violence and love. His aim was to work with the most rejected and exploited sections of the society, to bring more humanity on earth.

The people...

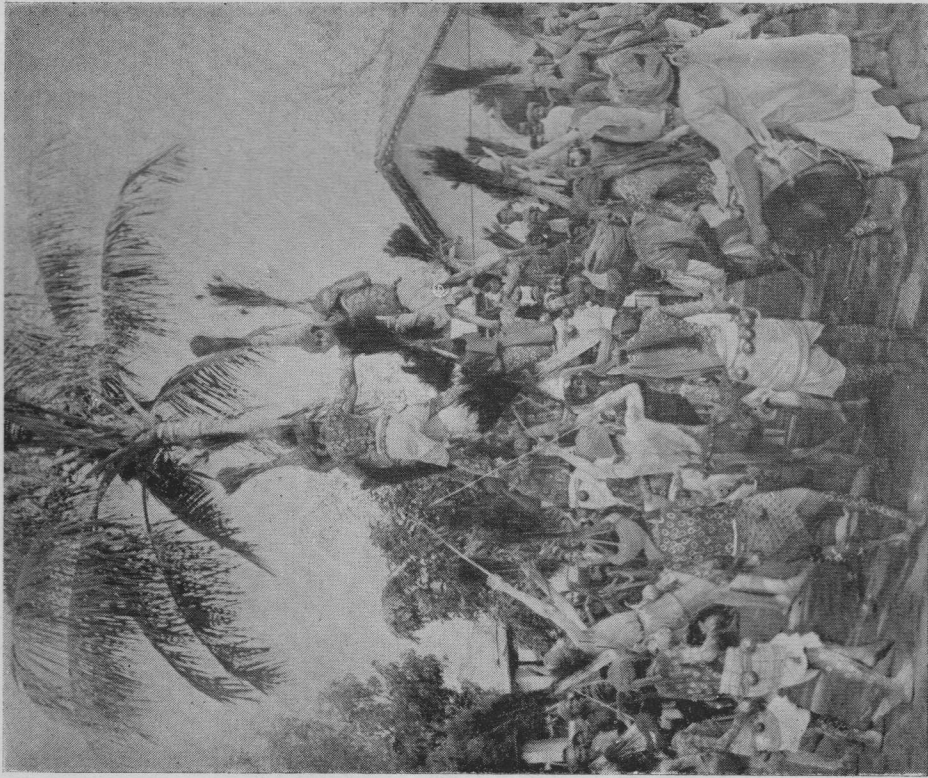
His tour of Gujarat brought him to the Fenai Pradesh region, in Chhota Udaipur Taluka of Baroda District. The hills were covered with thick forests and the whole area was criss-crossed by small streams. It was inhabited by the Adivasis, aboriginal tribes living in small scattered huts.

Extremely poor and wearing only some loin clothes, the Adivasis were living on nutritious roots, occasional game, and scarce results of their few agricultural efforts. They were masters in the use of bows and arrows, quick to react and no week passed without two or three murders, provoking other revenge murders, in an evil chain. Drinking and dancing,



spirited by animistic beliefs, were their main entertainment. Completely illiterate, they were the preys of witch doctors who took advantage of their superstitious beliefs. Moreover, due to their ignorance, they were exploited by money lenders, Police personnels, forest and revenue officials. News of the outside world hardly came to them and the victory of national independence brought no changes to their lives.





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Coming in contact with them, Harivallabh Parikh decided to settle there and become their brother, their 'Bhai', as everyone calls him now.

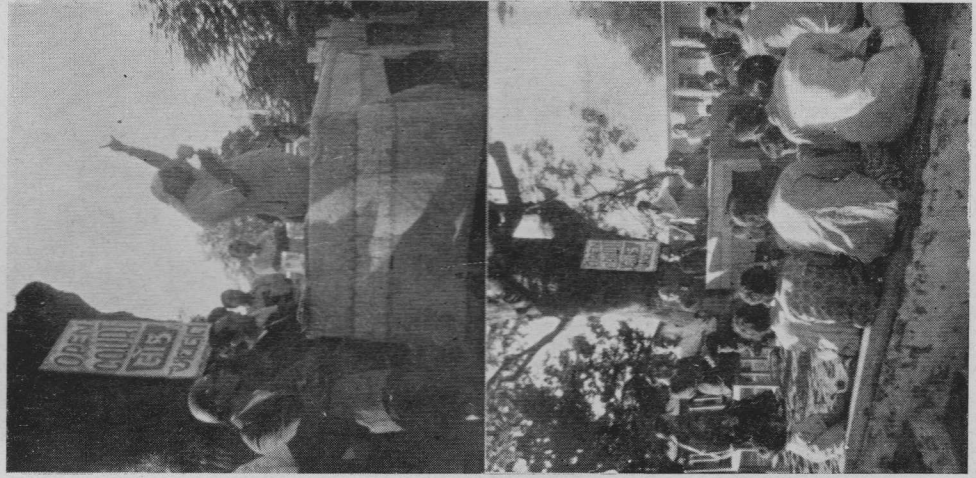
Through his work, he has gained the respect and confidence of all. Some have compared him with Dr. Tom Dooley or Albert Schweitzer : like these two selfless workers, he has settled in and adopted a culture different from his own. But Schweitzer used to say : 'the African brother is our little brother', and Bhai just says : 'we are brothers.' As someone asked him whether this was not a case of 'all brothers are equal but some are more equal than others', he replied : 'You are taller. If I want to make you equal, must I cut your head and feet off?' To him, brotherhood and equality are expressions of love rather than of qualifications or attributes.

The Ashram...

He established his working centre in a few huts on the bank of river Heren and called it Anand Niketan Ashram, the 'Abode of joy.' The activities immediately started in many directions and continue their regular development, covering now 1,000 villages in 5 Talukas of the Baroda District, one Taluka of the Broach District and one Taluka in Madhya Pradesh, including a population of 1 million tribal people.

'THE ACTIVITIES

Since the very beginning, people came to Bhai with their disputes, which often ended with fights and murders. He decided to play the 'go-between' : finding a tree at equal distance from the homes of both disputants, he would call them there and discuss the problem with all present until an amicable settlement could be reached. The Open Court, or Lok Adalat, was born.



The Lok Adalat...

It is now meeting at least once a month. Every day people come to the Ashram with stories of marital quarrels, land disputes, or with complaints about police officers asking for bribes, forest and revenue officers' harassment and money lenders' cheating...

After the complaint is registered in the office, a date is given to both parties, asking them to come with their relatives and friends to present their opinion on the matter. On that day, all gather for the meeting of the open Court under the shade of a big tree in the centre of the Ashram.

Turn by turn, the parties explain their position in the dispute. All present are invited to question, discuss, Bhai playing the roles of Chairman and arbitrator. Often a jury is designated to decide about penalties or compensations. When an amicable settlement has been reached and agreed on by the parties and the assembly, the compromise is recorded and gur (brown sugar) distributed to all, showing that sweetness has replaced bitterness in the people's relationship.



Up to now, 27,500 disputes have been settled in this way. No costly or lengthy procedures, no violent punishment, self accepted judgment... these are a few secrets of this unusual court. Divorce, corruption, land ownership, witchcraft, murder attempts, marriage counselling... there will never be a verdict of incompetence. Every case is discussed and through it



information and education of the villagers are also realized : old customs and superstitions are destroyed, a new social law based on justice is created.

The Lok Adalat is a unique institution whose originality has struck many lawyers. Dr. Upendra Baxi, Dean of the Faculty of Law in Delhi University has written—after a study in co-operation with Dr. M. L. Singhvi, Senior Advocate of the Supreme Court of India—a lengthy article on the subject in the Journal of Constitutional and Parliamentary Studies (1976), under the title : 'From takrar to karar : the Lok Adalat at Rangpur—A preliminary study' (i.e. from quarrel to compromise).

A more intensive study has also been made by Dr. Avad Prasad of the Kumarappa Gram Swaraj

Institute, under the direction of the Indian Council for Social Sciences and Research.

Legal Aid Project...

However, some problems have been taken to the Court, either because an official decision has to be taken and registered, or due to the initiatives of landlords or money lenders trying to abuse the villagers.

In these cases, the problems of costs, understanding of the procedures, lengthiness, remain.

To help the villagers, a new project has recently started, covering 500 villages : the Legal Support for the Rural Poor Project.

Two advocates and ten field workers are moving in the area, ready to listen to the problems, to make the case clear to the people, take it to the Court and help the Adivasis get justice. But what is more, they will work for the information and education of the poor, explaining what are their rights and how to obtain their respect.

This way, it will also help the Government in implementing its policies in favour of the rural poor : Land policies, Debt Relief Act, Farm Labourers Act, Bounded Labour Act, etc....

People's power...

It was also in the Lok Adalat that were planted the seeds of Lok Shakti, the people's power.

When people are aware of their collective strength, nothing can resist them in their fight for justice and equal rights. Satyagrahas, demonstrations, marches and non-violent resistance led the Adivasis to many victories

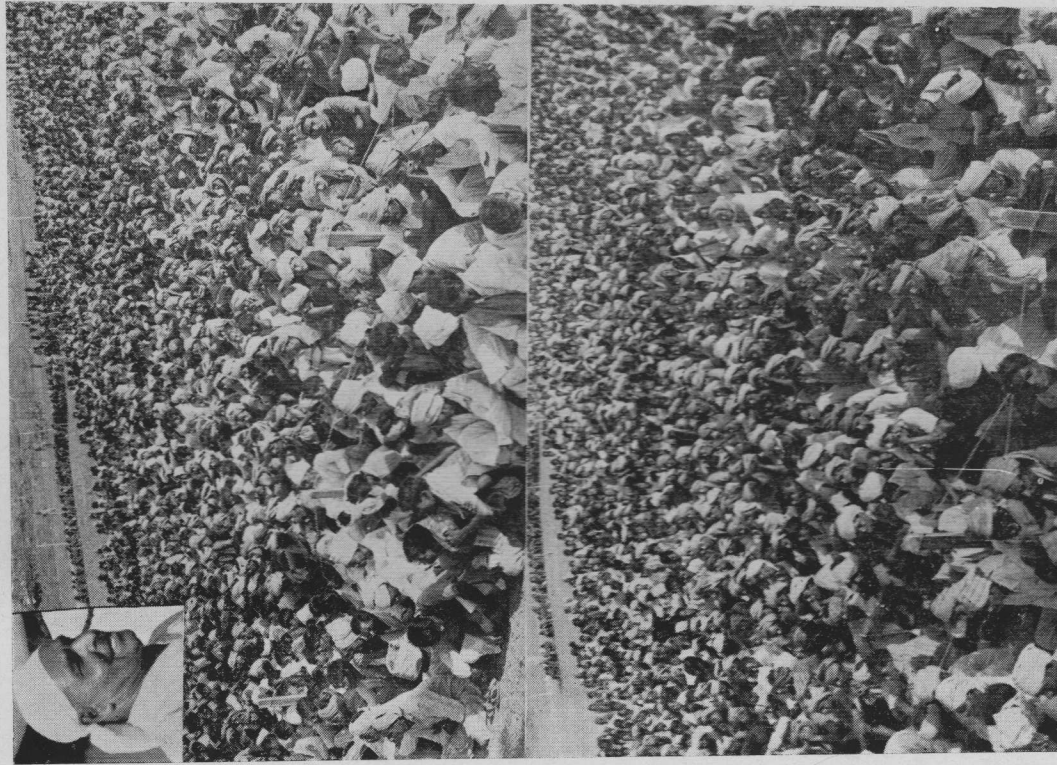
over their exploiters, giving them pride, dignity and enthusiasm for further creation.

Lok Sabha : People's parliament...

The villagers want to take their future in their own hands : This means also that they should be able to control their elected representatives closely, reminding them that they are responsible and answerable before them. This is a basis for more direct democracy.

At least twice a year in each constituency, voters meet their elected members from the village councils, talukas, districts and from the State Assembly and the Parliament. During these public meetings, the people receive a report of what has been done, ask questions and decide on guidelines for further steps. In this way, the villagers keep a control on the policies undertaken in their name and participate in the decisions concerning their future.

People's strength



Bhoodan, Gramdan and Gramswaraj...

In the same effort to present a common front in the fight for their interests, and with a spirit of justice, the Adivasis have actively participated in the Bhoodan and Gramdan movements.

For Bhai, co-operation and defence from exploitation are the essence of Gramdan. Concretely, it means release of some part of the land to the landless, more equitable redistribution between all, and collective ownership by the village community. There are now more than 350 Gramdani villages in the area, where a solid follow up work is being done. The Gram Sabhas (councils) of these villages are giving strong and active support to all Ashram activities for development.

One of the priorities remains to improve the way of living of the villagers, and two goals were set:

Raise the food production and

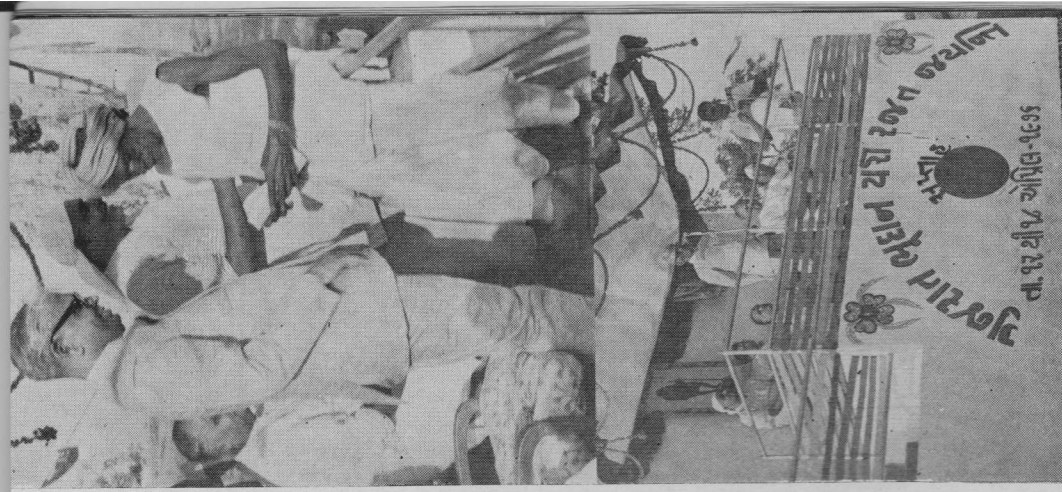
Control the population growth.

Improve agricultural techniques...

To raise the food production, it was highly necessary to change the agricultural conditions.

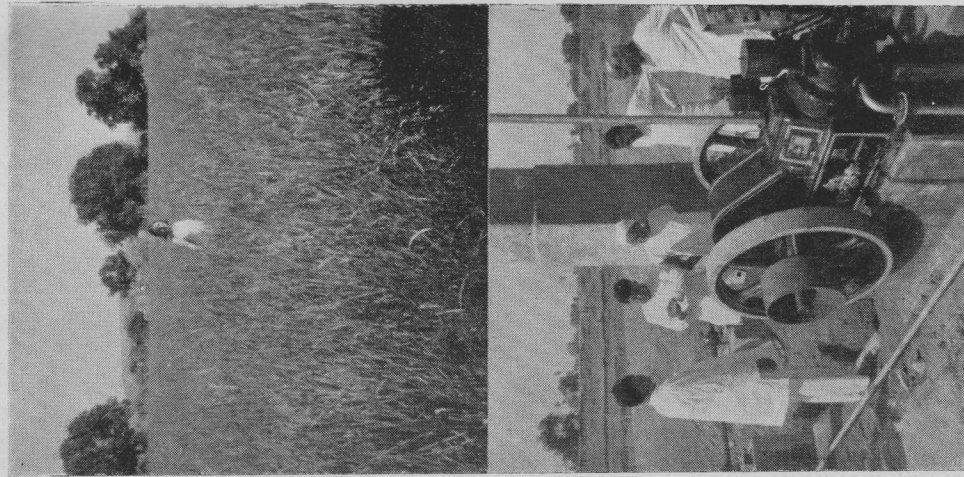
The Adivasis used to simply throw the seeds in the fields and wait for the results. New techniques had to be taught : the ways to plant the seeds, to get new hybrid varieties, to spread fertilizers and insecticides... For all this, the Ashram set a practical example in its own fields, the good results being enough to motivate the villagers to learn to do the same.

The Governor of Gujarat is distributing land to the landless Adivasis at the occasion of the Bhoodan Silver Jubilee



Irrigation...

But the weather conditions were still masters of the game : however hard they worked, the Adivasis could still see all their efforts and hopes destroyed if monsoon failed to come or if rains were too heavy. The introduction of irrigation systems and water pumps gave justice to the work done.



Slowly irrigation projects are being completed in different areas, either with the help of foreign agencies (Community Aid Abroad and Freedom from Hunger Campaign from Australia; OXFAM from England; EZE and Bread for the World in Germany; CIMADE from France...), or Indian charitable trusts, or through loans from the banks. Villagers are contributing with funds and with their labour work, digging the wells or the trenches where the cement pipes will be laid.

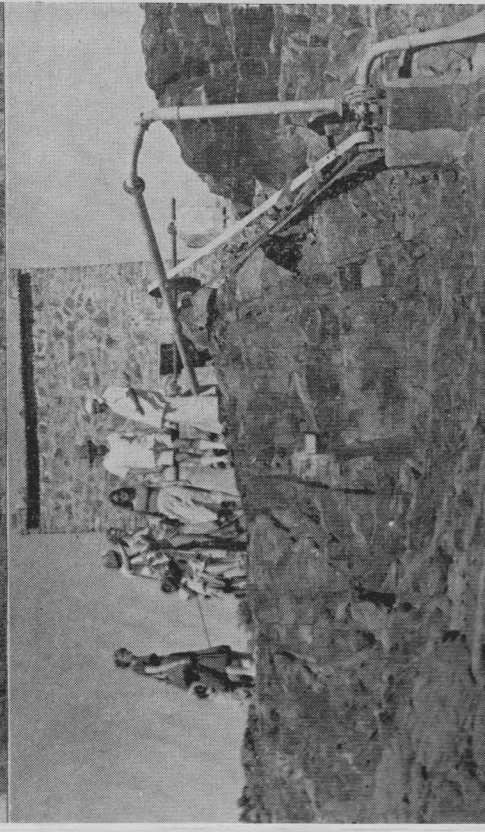
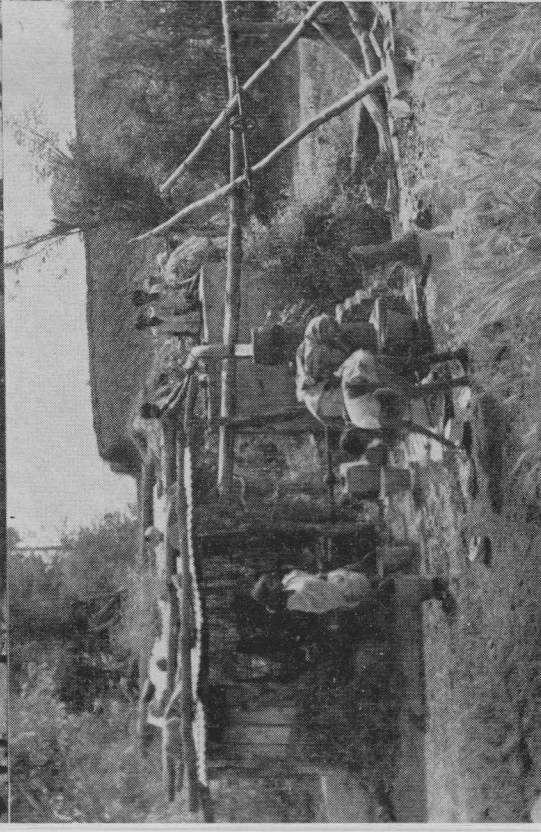


Nearly 500 projects are now functioning in the area, providing water for 65,000 acres of land.

Irrigation is not only an insurance to get food all year around, but very soon it helps to raise the living standards of the Adivasis : old debts are paid back, houses are reconstructed with bricks and good roofs, additional clothes and kitchen utensils are brought in, and new cattle are purchased.

Youth involvement...

Every year more than 1,500 students and teachers from all over Gujarat or outside come in the summer to give a helpful hand to the villagers. They live with them, learn from them, and become aware of the problems of rural India. It even gives to some a strong motivation to become social workers.



Control the population growth and improve the health conditions...

Family planning :

To confirm this economical betterment, the growth of the families has to be controlled. Much convincing on this point has been done throughout the Lok Adalat sessions or in other meetings, and every year the Ashram is



organizing sterilization camps where most parents with already two or three children voluntarily turn up. Constant efforts of information for family planning are also made in the villages.

Swasthaya Sevikas...

To help improving the health conditions, a new project has been recently started with the Swasthaya Sevikas programme, covering 100 villages.

A team of young girls are receiving a medical training in the Ashram on basic diagnosis and treatments. In pairs, they are visiting the villages, talking especially

with the women, showing them more nutritious dishes to cook, teaching some rules of hygiene, calling the nearby doctor when they spot a person whose sickness could be rapidly contagious... Ultimately, they will also organize women's activities and train one woman leader in each village.

Co-operatives...

Another step was also to find an alternative to the money lending system. For a long time, whenever an Adivasi was in need of money, he would go to the money lender who currently requested to be repaid with 200 to 300% of interest. Before the crop was in his field, the villager knew it was already out of his hands.

Due to the pressure of the Open Court, money lenders had to stop their practices of false receipts (taking advantage of the illiteracy of the Adivasis, they made them sign for amounts with no relation to the oral agreement), and they were forced to lower their interest rate down to 25%.

But an alternative was needed and organized as soon as 1950, by creating a net of co-operatives. They are giving loans with a rate of 12% interest. Moreover, since Gram Sabha is not yet a legal entity in the State of Gujarat, the ownership of the land in Gramdani villages is held by the Gram Swarajya Co-operative Societies. Each farmer gives 2.5% of his yearly income to the Gram Swarajya Fund, and it is managed for the benefit of the entire community : to pay off old debts, to recover land from the sahukars, to undertake some irrigation projects, or to offer credit for productive uses.

The co-operative stores are offering seeds, fertilizers, and first necessities at low prices and are useful intermediaries to sell the crops.



There are now 75 co-operatives in the whole area. They also serve as links between the villagers and the National Banks which are giving full trust to the villagers since, under the guidance of the Ashram, all their loans receive very good recovery.

Train leaders for tomorrow : Life Education School...

To consolidate this work, villages need qualified workers and dedicated leaders.

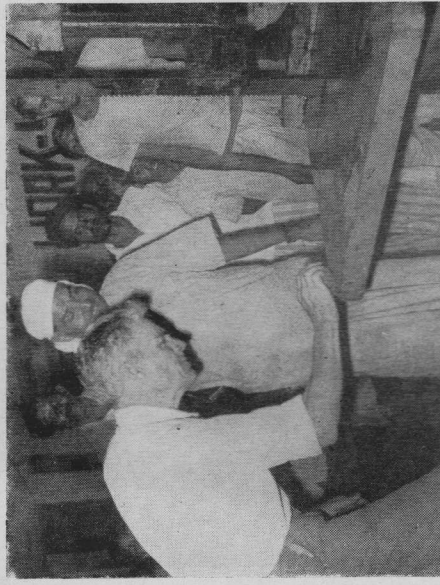
As soon as he came in the area, Bhai started adult literacy classes. More was needed for the new generation : a school was started, with few students in the beginning. In 1962 it took its present shape : nowadays it counts as many as 60 students and 400 have already been trained there.

Jeevan Shala—Life Education School—is a central part of the Ashram. The students live and study there, sharing all the activities and learning from them : being present in the Open Court meetings, they can reflect on their customs and rules; helping with the agricultural tasks, they get trained in the use of hybrid varieties of seeds, fertilizers, insecticides... They also have their own tasks : clean the school, the Ashram and the latrines, feed the Gobar gas plant, sweep the dairy, cook for themselves and wash their clothes and dishes regularly.

Doing this, they learn to become responsible, independent and self sufficient.

During 5 years, they receive also general education (hindi, gujarati, english, mathematics, sciences...). For two years afterwards, they get acquainted with different skills : maintenance and repair in mechanics, management of a co-operative, driving, work in the office and keeping of the accounts, learning carpentry, tailoring, better farming... Then they are able to choose their

speciality, and during two more years they work on it full time, learning all the techniques involved.



Doctor Nill Australia, inaugurating the workshop

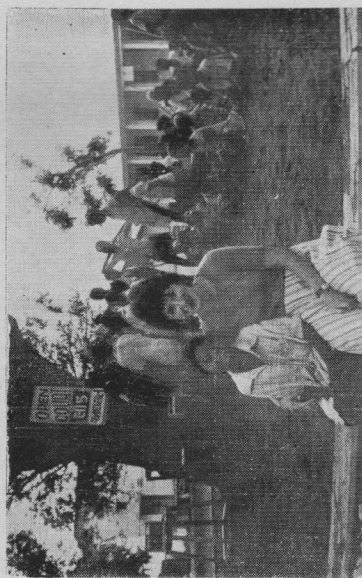
No certificate is given to anyone since the aim is to build up village workers only, and no unemployment is facing the Jeevan Shala students : due to these educational efforts of the Ashram, villagers have now well trained leaders in which people are confident, who help efficiently for the development work, and in the fight against injustices and exploitation.

Due to its originality and good results, Jeevan Shala was chosen among many schools in India to figure as an example in a study undertaken by the UNESCO Institute of Education in Hamburg, Germany. The purpose of the study was to show how a school can relate its teachings to the real life of its students, and contribute constructively to the community it serves.

The school is financially supported entirely by the Ashram, which has made its firm policy to refuse any help from the Government, to avoid such outside influence in its decision making process.

Sponsor programme...

A few students are sponsored by friends of the Ashram—mostly foreigners—who are interested to contribute to



its activities. They are able to correspond with 'their' child, and receive each year a progress report and a letter about his or her interests and development.

THE GARLANDS OF SUCCESS

To settle the disputes, put an end to corruption and exploitation, develop community work and management, bring water and better crops into the fields, train qualified workers... these are the many contributions of Bhai and the Ashram workers to the comprehensive development of the villages under its influence. The garlands of success also go to the Adivasis who are meeting this challenge with much enthusiasm.

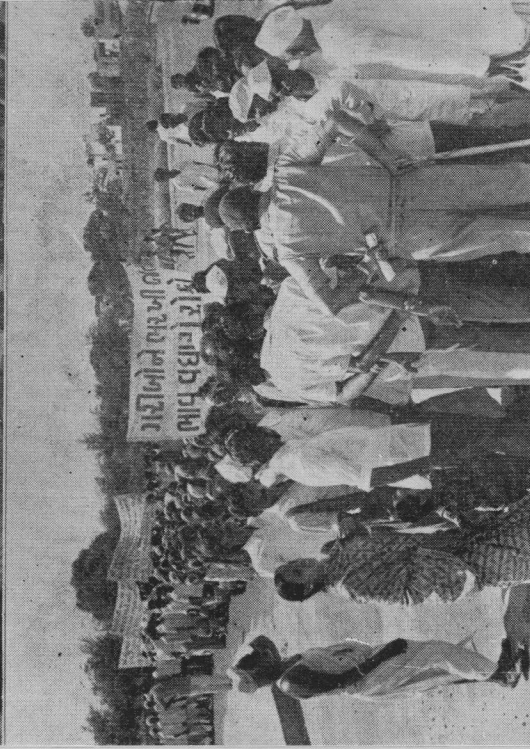
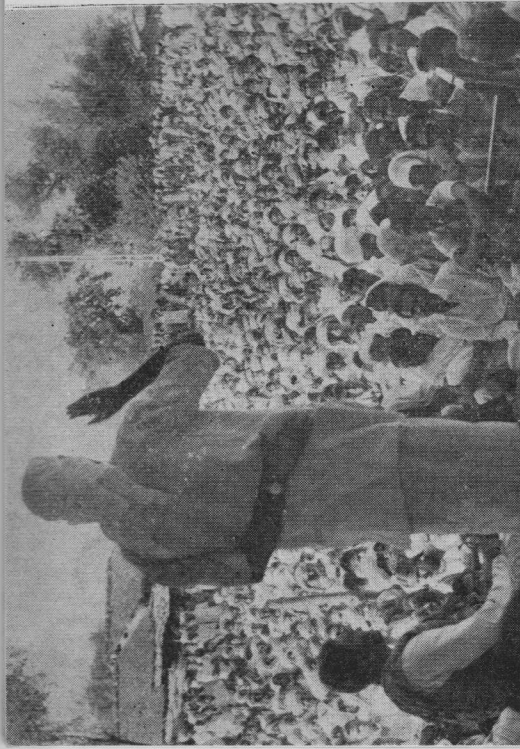
AN OCEANIC CIRCLE

But the influence of the Ashram goes far beyond these 1,000 villages : it is spreading all over Gujarat, overflowing on the national scene, and up to many parts of the world!

Organisation for the rural poor...

In the area, the *Fenai Pradesh Gram Swaraj Organisation* links all the activities following a Gandhian and Sarvodayan line.

Moreover, all the Ashram activities are connected with those of the 6.5 millions tribals of the State of Gujarat, through the *Gujarat Vanvasi Seva Samaj*.



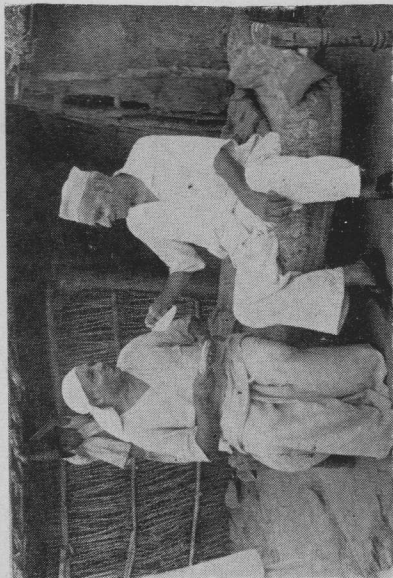
On the Gujarat level, the Ashram has also undertaken the great task of helping all the marginal farmers, landless labourers and village artisans to unite in one defence organisation : the *Gujarat Khedut Khet Majoor Parishad*. There are two and a half millions of land holders in Gujarat : among them, two millions are



marginal farmers having less than five acres. One million eight hundred thousand villagers are also landless, and one million are village artisans.

Through this organisation, they will receive help to get timely loans, seeds, fertilizers, minimum wages and contacts with appropriate funding agencies. It is providing them training to get a new leadership : its aim is to become the organisation of the poor, for the poor, which is badly needed for the development of the villages.

The Gujarat Khedut Khet Majoor Parishad, non politically oriented, has attracted the attention of many social



Bhai receiving Indulal Yagnik, at the Ashram,
a prominent Gandhian labour leader

workers in other states of India, and the experience is rapidly being multiplied all over the country.

Keeping an open door...

Due to all these achievements, the Ashram has been a place of high interest to many Indian and foreign visitors. J. P. Narayan, Vinoba Bhave, Indira Gandhi, Morarji Desai, Lanza del Vasto... as well as civil rights leaders, social workers, students, teachers, agricultural experts... all have enjoyed the hospitality of Bhai, his workers and of the villagers.

SERVAS ..

There have been more than 900 foreign visitors in the past years. It is true that the Ashram keeps its doors



wide open to allow its friends to be close witnesses of the life of rural Indians.

It is part of a national and international organisation, SERVAS, which offers home hospitality to travellers for a few days. It aims to establish understanding and peace among people all over the world by providing opportunities for deeper and more personal contacts between men of different cultures and backgrounds.

Harivallabh Parikh is the co-ordinator in India and the international Vice Chairman.

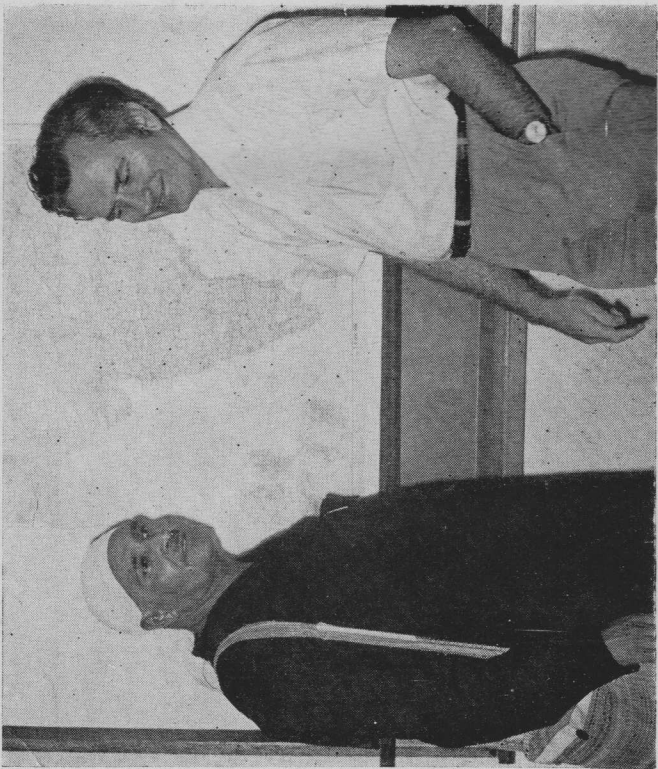


Anand Niketan Ashram... the abode of joy : Bhai is a man who keeps his promises!

His work has generated among the Adivasis the will to take their future in their own hands and to work for further development with strength and unity. His dearest hope is that through their own efforts, the oceanic circle he has started will be continuously increasing.



The Chief Minister of Gujarat was compelled to listen to 15,000 Adivasis representatives after a long march.



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