

# Sriniketan Experiment in Rural Reconstruction

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THE country has begun to realise today that the present social order can bring no solution to the existing economic malady. Projects of Community Development claim to provide a new pattern of social living. These Community Development Projects, which have been started in 55 centres are further developments after the experiences gained in Etawah and Nilokheri. In connection with these recently propounded and well-publicised projects, the discerning among us will surely remember the contributions made by our eminent leaders in this line in the past. Sriniketan, the Rural Reconstruction centre of Viswabharati which embodies the ideals of village improvement as envisaged by the poet Rabindranath Tagore, the high priest of Indian renaissance, was started in 1922. Though thirty years have gone by, and perceptible results have been achieved, this centre has not received sufficient publicity. It appears to the present writer that a great deal of solid but unobtrusive constructive work accomplished at Sriniketan has been too often concealed from the general view by the artistic and literary fame achieved by the sister institution at Sriniketan. Its fate is somewhat similar to that which overtakes the good son of a famous father..

In a unique way Tagore combined his desire for the collective good of mankind with the fullest development of the qualities of the individual. An all-round regeneration of the people, so that the choked bed of village life may again be flooded with stream of happiness was his ideal of rural reconstruction. In this great task, the scholars, the musicians, the artists have to collaborate to offer their contributions. He believed in missionary zeal and self-sacrifice. But at the same time he was warned that the results of service should make people stand on their own legs. The best way of serving them is to help them to help themselves. In a word, the task of rural reconstruction is to rebuild the man.

For the poet, the problems of rural reconstruction not only required the removal of poverty but also bringing creative joy to the life of villagers. While Gandhiji was deeply moved by the poverty of the

rural mass, the poet was shocked at the sordidness of the life behind the mud walls. The dull and dreary life in villages was like a long-drawn agony to him. Hence it was his constant endeavour to give villagers joy through his songs and music.

With these ideas and philosophy of rural reconstruction in mind, Sriniketan was established in a village in Birbhum along with Viswabhaiati with the considerable assistance from Mr Leonard K. Elmhirst, the President of International Society of Agricultural Economists. The aims of the institute are to win the friendship of the villagers and to make a lively effort to assist them in solving their most pressing problems. The Institute takes the problems of the village and the field for study and discussion and investigation in an experimental farm for solution, and carries the knowledge and experience gained in the classroom and farm to the villagers to improve their condition of living. The institute also aims at developing their resources and credit and at teaching them better methods of growing crops and vegetables and keeping live-stock. It also encourages the villagers to learn and practise arts and crafts, and tries to bring home to them the benefits of associated life, mutual aid and common endeavour.

Starting with neighbouring villages, the Institute has conducted its activities in seventy-six villages. These villages are grouped under sixteen sub-centres and cover an area of 200 square miles. For the convenience of administration the area has been divided into two zones (1) Intensive area, (2) Extensive area. The first comprises 26 villages which are under the direct guidance and supervision of Sriniketan.

The activities of the institution may be broadly divided into nine spheres, viz: (1) Agriculture; (2) Industry; (3) Village-welfare; (4) Co-operation; (5) Health and Sanitation; (6) Education; (7) Scout organisation; (8) Economic Research; and (9) Soil erosion.

The activities of the institute are organised in full-fledged departments. These departments are adequately staffed but not always by people whose qualifications are upto the mark. It will take us too far out to go into the details. So a

rough idea of these departments may be given here. The Agricultural section consists of an experimental, farm, and branches for a dairy, fishery and poultry. An attempt is made to produce improved varieties of crop and raise quality of live-stock at the centre and to distribute them among the neighbouring villages. The industries department (Silpa-hhavan), imparts training in tannery, carpentry, pottery, book-binding, tailoring, embroidery, lacquer and batic works. "Phis set lion provides subsidiary occupation to the cultivators of the area by offering them indoor employment in the Institute during the agricultural slack season as also by supplying raw-materials and equipments in their homes. The responsibility for marketing is assumed by the department itself which also caters to the demand for fine artistic goods, for which Viswabhaiati is specially renowned. The Health section is in charge of the preventive and curative programme of health and sanitation in the surrounding villages. It has a well-equipped dispensary, and a clinical laboratory with a family and child welfare clinic. It has also started a leprosy section. Doctors and their assistants move from village to village to attend to those who are unable to come to the Centre.

The Education Department has been built up on the new ideals of education as visualised by Tagore who substituted creative joy for the boredom of the classroom for school children. The department also provides teachers' training for adults, who are trained in the modern methods of teaching. The system of basic education which receives a great deal of attention today originated in the Education Department of Sriniketan. The "Loka Siksha Parishad," a part of this section which has 270 centres all over India, provides an opportunity of higher education to the adults who are unable to attend regular classes. The rural circulating library, the night school for adults and fortnight training camp on rural, welfare for village workers also form an integral part, of the activities of the Centre.

The principle of co-operation is the keynote of the institute. A central co-operative bank and, affiliated with it, small multi-purpose co-

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operative societies have been organised in the Centre and the surrounding villages. Sriniketan has started a full-fledged Economic Research Department, which carries out field surveys and other studies, relating to the economic condition of the area and publishes the results of such studies from time to time. This department has been organised under the initiative of Indian Council of Agricultural Research Institute. Soil erosion is a particularly acute problem in this part of Bengal. Soil research and conservation work has been conducted with an appreciable result in 200 acres of land near Sriniketan. The object of this soil survey scheme is to work out comparatively easier and less expensive methods of plantation and cropping in order to put a stop to soil erosion.

The Village Welfare Department is the nucleus on which all other welfare activities are centred. This department, from its long experience, claims to have discovered the technique of gaining the confidence of the rural folk through the younger generation, who can more easily be weaned from superstitious ways and customs. Scouting activities -scouts are called 'Bratibalaks'-form an essential part in the programme of rural reconstruction. These bands of young bratibalaks are the catalytic agents of welfare work in their respective villages. The important festivals such as, 'Magna Utsaba', 'Briksha Ropan', 'Varsha Mangal', 'Basanta Utsab', 'Navanna', 'Hala Karshana' are observed to welcome and greet every new season of the year. A village fair is held with an exhibition in February. These festivals and dramatic performances inculcate the artistic and co-operative spirit among the villagers. Tagore wanted to revitalise and reorient the traditional festivals of rural Bengal, which have got rich socio-economic significance. The festivals and exhibition also offer market for the goods produced by the villagers. Musicians, artists, villagers, dancers, Santals and all assemble in the festival and they share one another's feelings. The institution thus attempts to foster the spirit of brotherhood and disinterested service between man and man in the promotion of his welfare and happiness. Without such a spirit, an endeavour to solve the problems of village life will lead us nowhere.

The institute has been a pioneering organisation to carry out an experiment in all-round regenera-

tion of Bengal villages, which has become the crying need of the country. It has a new outlook of social justice and is inspired by a sense of community. Untouchability and other social evils have been eradicated to a certain extent in these villages. People have become more used to a freer mode of behaviour and conduct. The mobilisation of self-help and co-operative effort among the villagers has found expression through the creation of co-operative granary society by the village women. It is stated that the village panchayats settle about 78 per cent of the local disputes with the help of Sriniketan authorities. Co-operative village health societies enable the remote villages to get all medical facilities at a cheaper rate. These societies are organised on the principle of health insurance. It is gratifying to note that, according to the report of the health committee, the number of casualties due to malaria has come down from 95 per cent to 5 per cent in the extension areas. It is claimed by the authorities that the Industry Department provides about 25 per cent of these villagers, both men and women, with employment. Appreciable work has been done among Santals who are actual tillers of that area. The authorities have acquired land and distributed it for cultivation to the Santals.

The traditional measure of success and failure has little value in an experiment of this type. We will have to appreciate the spirit behind it. The possibilities opened up by Sriniketan are far more important than its actual achievements. Neither should we lose sight of the practical difficulties which are deep rooted in the life of the institution. The institution in following the imaginative ideals of the goat poet, has neglected the practical aspect to a great extent. The marked ten-

dency towards gradual urbanisation and centralisation of the Institute indicates the danger which, if unchecked, will prove fatal to the successful working of the whole project. It is necessary that the members of the stall should acquire a clearer understanding of modern principles of social science and not continue to depend for all time on the stock in trade of Tagoria writings and sayings. The work among women, who are the main pillars upon which a healthy society rests, is still in primary stage. The institute has not been able to bring forth any satisfactory solution to the problems relating to agriculture. Propaganda and publicity which form a very important part of any experiment of this nature have not received adequate emphasis.

The financial position of the institute is in such a deplorable state that it may collapse at any time. The activities are constantly threatened by the acute shortage of funds. Of course, Sriniketan is still thinking in terms of self-sufficiency. But it is remarkable that inspite of so many years' experience the project is yet very far from the goal of self-sufficiency which must be the ultimate test of success. The activities of the various departments should be organised and remodelled in such a way that the minimum expenditure can entail the highest benefit to the rural mass.

In conclusion, Sriniketan, inspite of its great handicap due to lack of proper qualified personnel, adequate finance and other difficulties, it has to be admitted, has been 'a pioneering venture in rural reconstruction work. It may be hoped that the defects and deficiencies of this venture will be examined with care to provide us with invaluable lessons for rural reconstruction on which we are now embarking through the Community Projects.

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