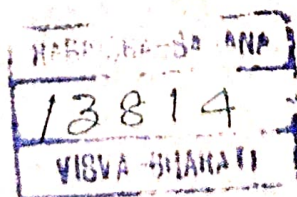
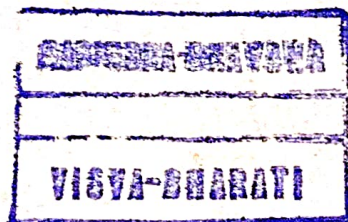
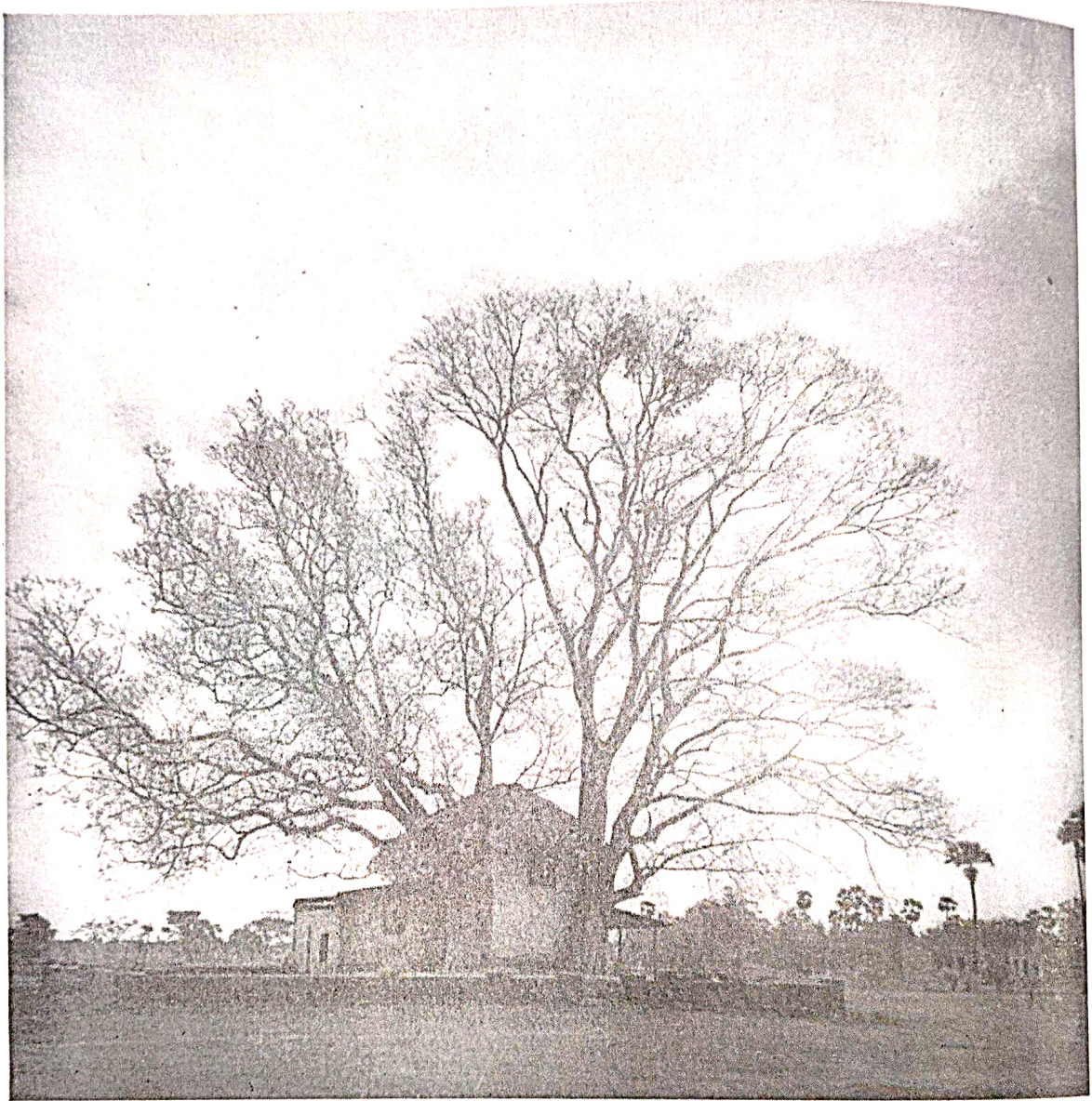


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LEONARD ELMHIRST

SRINIKETAN





Under the Pakur Tree at Sriniketan : A Favourite Spot of the Poet.

SRINIKETAN

LEONARD ELMHIRST

Address delivered at the Anniversary Celebrations at Sriniketan on February 6, 1955.

MAY I start by saying what a privilege it is for me to be here with you on this day ? It is thirty-three years now since Gurudeva said good-bye to us at Santiniketan. Our party included a batch of ten of the Santiniketan boys and two members of staff who said that they wanted to become 'chasas'. With our great Aluda at the wheel of the Ford lorry we started that morning to set up our experiment at Surul, today called Sriniketan. It is three years now since it was my privilege to be with you for this Anniversary Day. It is difficult, of course, to celebrate fully when so many of our old fellow workers are no longer with us. But so many, I am happy to say, are still here. In the last three years we have lost Prem Chand Lal, who joined us early in our experiment, and one of those ten pioneer students, Subir Tagore.

I would like to say a word or two about the challenge that your country, India, seems to me to offer today to Sriniketan. Most of you will call to mind that old mantram Gurudeva used to use in his meditation. One of our philosophers of the West, Prof. Whitehead, has tried to express a similar sequence of ideas in the following words : "Culture is activity of thought and sensitiveness to beauty and to humane feeling. Culture is for action." Gurudeva taught us on identical lines and insisted that the village must have access to, and was entitled to enjoy and to create, a culture of such a kind. Such a group of ideas lay behind the programme of Sriniketan from the beginning. Sriniketan's function was to take action on a wide front. It was Gurudeva who said to me, when I first saw him, "I have an institution at Santiniketan that is mainly academic, but so many of the villages around it are in decay. Their culture is failing, their social life is deteriorating, their economic base is disintegrating. Can you and your students and staff find

out why this is happening ?” Some of you will remember how later on we summed up the problems as the three m’s — monkeys, malaria and mutual mistrust. Now you and I have travelled a long way since then, so I want to ask you what we are to look for from Sriniketan and Santiniketan in the future.

In the effort to bring about change rapidly, different peoples have tried, in the past thirty-three years, a variety of methods ; some have tried ‘revolution’, some civil and some imperialistic warfare, and some peaceful evolution. It is the demand for rapid change through forceful revolution that alarms some of us and that seems so attractive to others. It is the appeal to violence that so easily destroys a culture, destroys just those qualities that I have mentioned. Violence seems most often to break loose when the people at the top lose a good working touch with the people at the bottom in society. As the gap widens between the classes, the force for revolution grows, and if the gap widens too far revolution can break out with violent force. I am not saying that we should be frightened by the threat of violent revolution, but to win our freedom from such a fear we have to keep watch the whole time. We need to be conscious of and accustomed to measure the distance between the ‘Haves’ at the top and the ‘Have Nots’ at the bottom, so that they never lose working touch with one another. Are we able to make up this gap between ourselves and, say, the Santali ? In 1922, we set out to find out what was the condition of all the people at the bottom of the social scale in this area : Hāris, Doms, Muchis, Santalis and landless labourers generally, and to see not what could be done for them but what should be done with them and what they could do to help themselves. This was Gurudev’s programme, and I remember his argument on its behalf with the Soviet Ambassador in Peking in 1924, who countered with the need for the forceful compulsion of

the Russian peasant if he would not change from his old traditions.

We have in Devonshire an institution not unlike Santiniketan and Sriniketan put together. We invited the Ambassador of Russia down to show him our experiments. Before he left, he said to me, "How fortunate you are, Mr Elmhirst, to be able to work out the future for your country in peace, and to carry on quietly your researches into wise modes of rural change and development. For us in Russia, the revolution was very wasteful and expensive. We had to do so many things in a great hurry, and so often they had to be done all over again later on."

Gurudeva remarked in Peking that he could never believe in such a wholesale approach as the Russian Ambassador favoured, and that he preferred the gentler approach and the more scientific diagnosis on a small scale of the Sriniketan programme.

For thirty-three years, you have been carrying on your work at Sriniketan, and I think it is worth while for us to remind ourselves of some of the basic aims we had at the outset. The research done by Dr Timbres was fundamental. He studied so thoroughly the life story of the malarial mosquito that he was able to lay down sound principles for preventive work. Since then the scientists have given us D.D.T. as a basis for a wholesale attack on malaria. Let us not forget that mosquitoes are still alive and they may one day prove resistant to D.D.T. and come back.

Dr Sudhir Sen, again, undertook the original research into the economic causes of agricultural poverty. Over thirty-three years at Sriniketan, you have developed wise methods of approach to many of the problems of the village people. Dr Dhiren Sen worked out here in Siksha-Satra the basic principles of a primary education to suit all, but especially for village children. I heard yesterday of one village whose leaders came to Dhirada and said, "We do not need to depend upon your

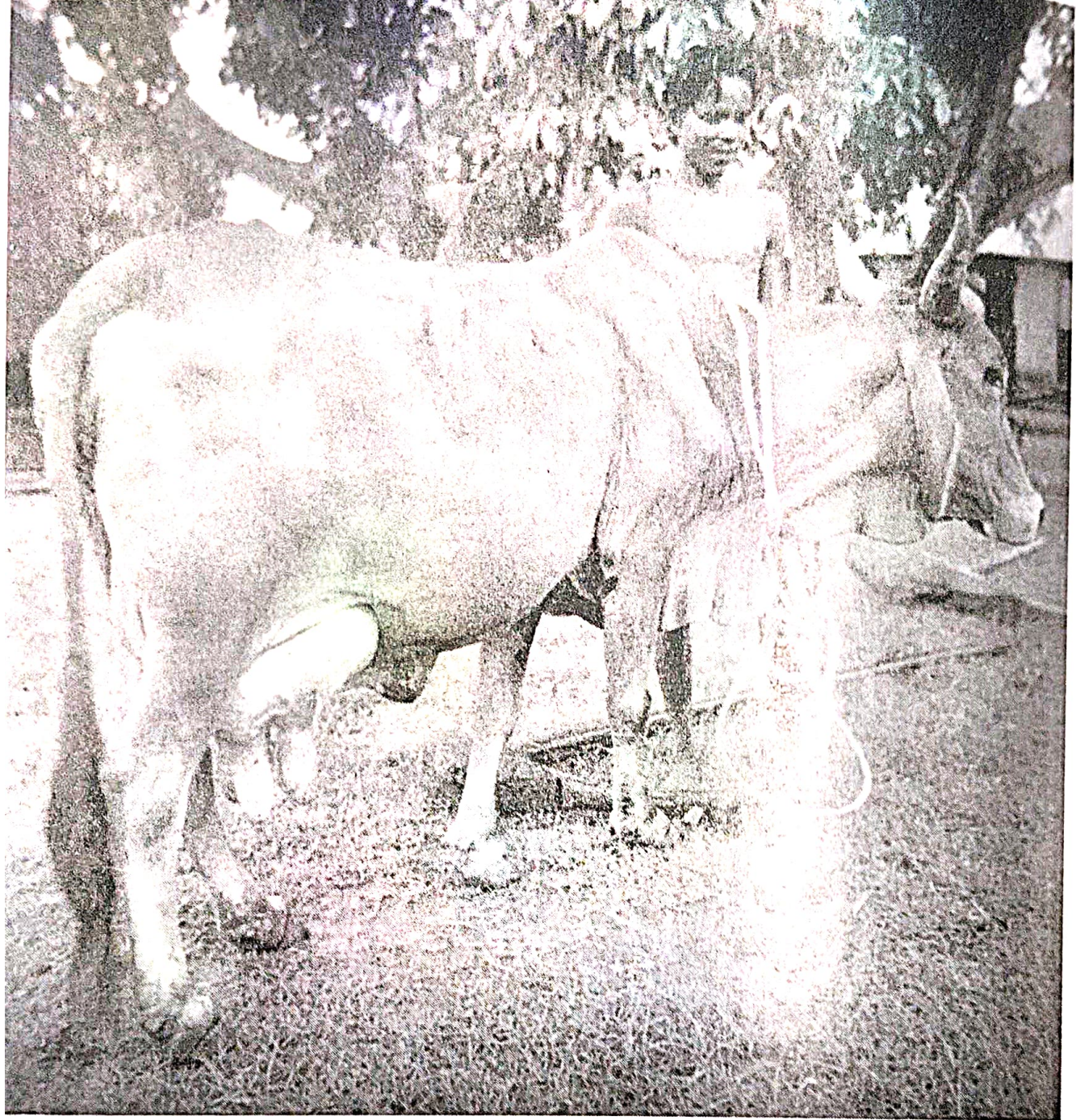
help any more. With the tools you have given us we can now pull ourselves out of trouble." In another local village the people have decided that they must have a school of their own. They have raised Rs. 16,000/- of their own with which to build their school. Such revolutions in outlook are only possible today because of the work done in the past by field men like Kali Mohan Ghose, by research workers like Dr Timbres and by artists like Nandalal Bose and poets like Rabindranath Tagore. It is by research, by activity of thought, by sensitivity to beauty and to humane feeling that the new day for the village will be won. In this work you have now decided to collaborate with the Government and the Community Project Administration. In some fields of Government activity there is still something of the old pattern of handing out gifts to the villager whilst he holds up his begging bowl to be filled. This was at times the method of the British, of your "Imperialist oppressors," of whom I was one. Those days are gone, but sometimes this patronising attitude remains. Government in a democracy must be with the people and by the people and not just for the people. At Sriniketan we have always believed that, given the right tools and organizations, the villagers can help themselves upward by development based on research and by a welfare programme based upon the study of human need in every village in India.

I know many of you are afraid that some essential qualities may be lost if the Government becomes too intimately associated with the affairs of Sriniketan and Santiniketan. Do not be too nervous. You can speak from the strength of your long experience, on the basis of your research, and from the intimate understanding you have of the village and its problems. In the field of research and of education, as well as of contact with the village, you should generally be well ahead of the more slow-moving machinery of administration. For administration is the

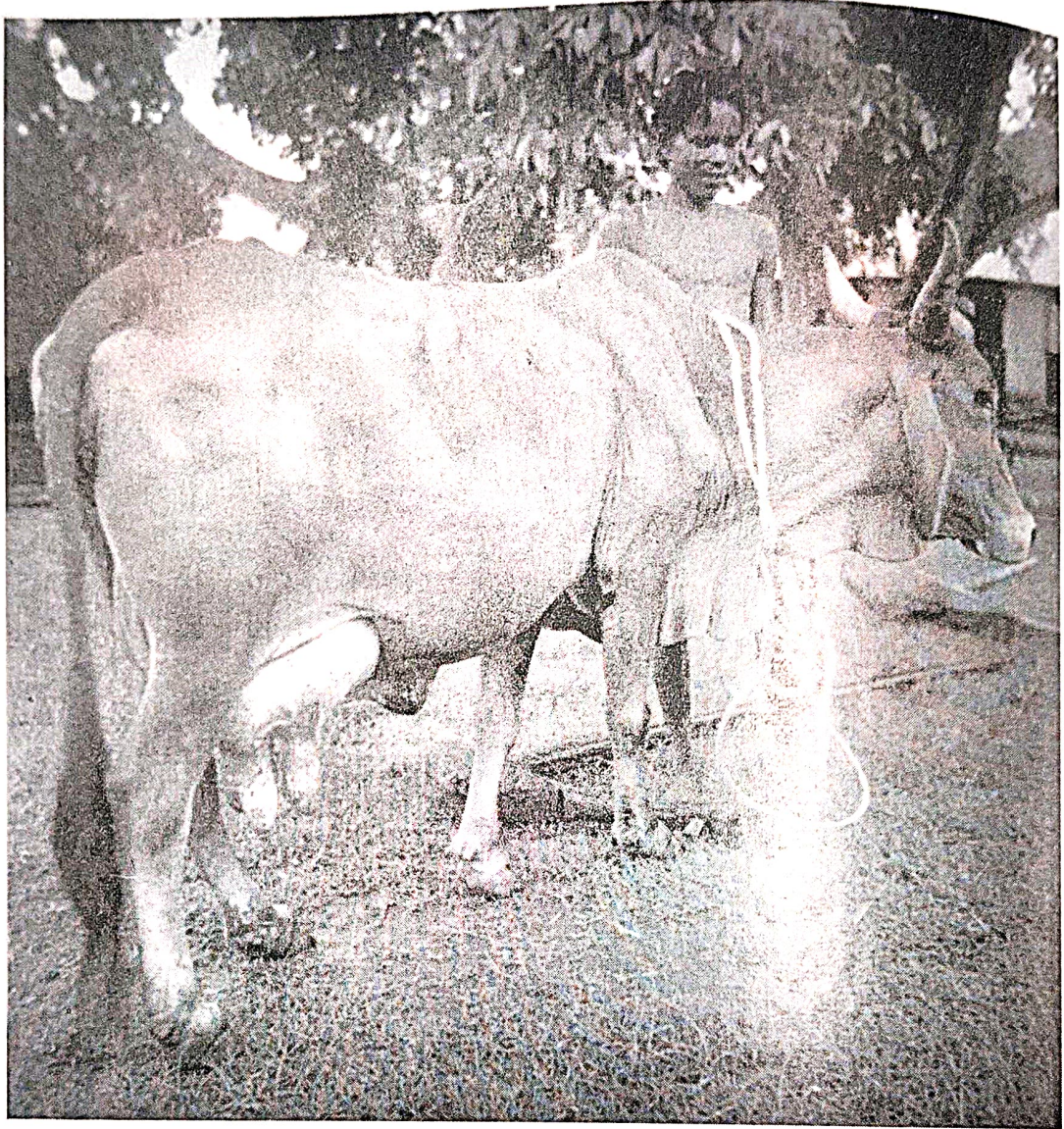


Leonard Elmhirst at Sriniketan

Left to Right : Leonard Elmhirst. Sj. Dhirananda Roy, Principal of Sriniketan. Dr. P. C. Bagchi, Vice-Chancellor of Visva-Bharati University.



Best Yelder in the Sriniketan Dairy.



Best Yelder in the Sriniketan Dairy.

job your elected Government is paid to do with your money. Your concern is that administration should be increasingly more sensitive, more humane, more imaginative and more intelligent. You neither want nor need to be caught up too deeply in the process and machinery of administration, but by pilot experiment, by research and by new varieties of education, you can help, and the villagers with you, to enlighten, to inform and to sharpen up all the administrative processes. This should be, in the Welfare State, one of the great services that university research, extension and adult education work can perform.

I am going to make one or two suggestions for your programme of research. In the field of Hygiene the Government can bring various pressures to bear upon the villagers, but may fail to win their full collaboration. This is where educational processes must, through research, always be being improved. In some of your villages the people have themselves defeated malaria. The need for a spleen index may therefore, be gone forever. You can go and see in villages today that the children there play and laugh just like the children of Santiniketan. This was not true thirty, even twenty, years ago. The victory has been achieved because you gave the villagers the tools and won their willing collaboration. There are still, of course, other scourges to be conquered, like leprosy and T. B. T. B., I hear, is on the increase. There is a very general tendency towards intestinal disease. I am told by doctors that 95 % of the Indian population suffers from intestinal disorders. Here is another battleground, and I wonder whether we pay enough attention to the need to win the women-folk and train them as our chief allies in the battle for health. I still see that the privilege of Education is enjoyed mainly by men folk. But how are you to reach the women in the villages unless you take the girls from the villages for special training as health workers and send them back to the villages ?

It is the Santal girls in the Santal villages who need to learn

what they can do to protect themselves, and it is their own Santal women folk who, after training, will go back and win this battle for health most cheaply and efficiently for their own people. We must in each culture discover the needs of the women, the preferences of the women, the ancient customs and habits of the women. It is no use dictating to them and trying to eradicate all at once traditions prevalent for 5,000 years that still dominate their minds and feelings and their unconscious. Without intimate sympathy and understanding your educational process will be both too costly and too slow.

The whole subject of family planning needs to be faced and discussed with the adult women in the villages. I was given a pamphlet on the rhythm method of birth control. It would, I suspect, need a professor of mathematics to work out the application recommended. We must select young women from the village, train them for two years as health workers and send them back again to the village. There are five and a half lakhs of villages in India, and it will be 200 years before we have qualified doctors for all these villages at the present rate of training. But Sriniketan developed in the health co-operative a remarkable organization. It looked on the problem of village health with a sympathetic approach and tried to face the economic barriers to progress in this field. Without humane feeling and sensitivity to humane feeling you cannot reach the most important person in the village home, the mother. I had a chance to watch the women at work in some villages in Central India. How they ever find time or leisure for thinking and recreation, I do not know. They work from morning to evening in the fields and then return to cook. Their every hour and every minute is occupied with manual labour. Unless we reach out to make contact with the mother in the home and to understand all her needs and preferences our work will only be half done.

Fundamental to any village programme is an understanding of simple economics. How you are to offer the economic tools that he needs to the cultivator? Instead of the three m's, here are five f's, each of which represents a major problem for the village: fuel, fodder, fertilizer, forest and firewood. If the housewife does not burn cowdung she must have an alternative fuel. Cowdung is such a convenient form of fuel. The cow drops much of it at the door of the kitchen. But the cow needs ample supplies of fodder. The *chagal* destroys your fodder supply unless you tie him up or fence him out. You will not have enough fodder to feed the cows without proper control of grazing and the fertilization of grassland. Unless you can keep the goats and cattle out of the forest, you will lose your timber and firewood supply altogether. The five f's represent key economic problems which call for urgent treatment over most of India today by a series of "combined operations."

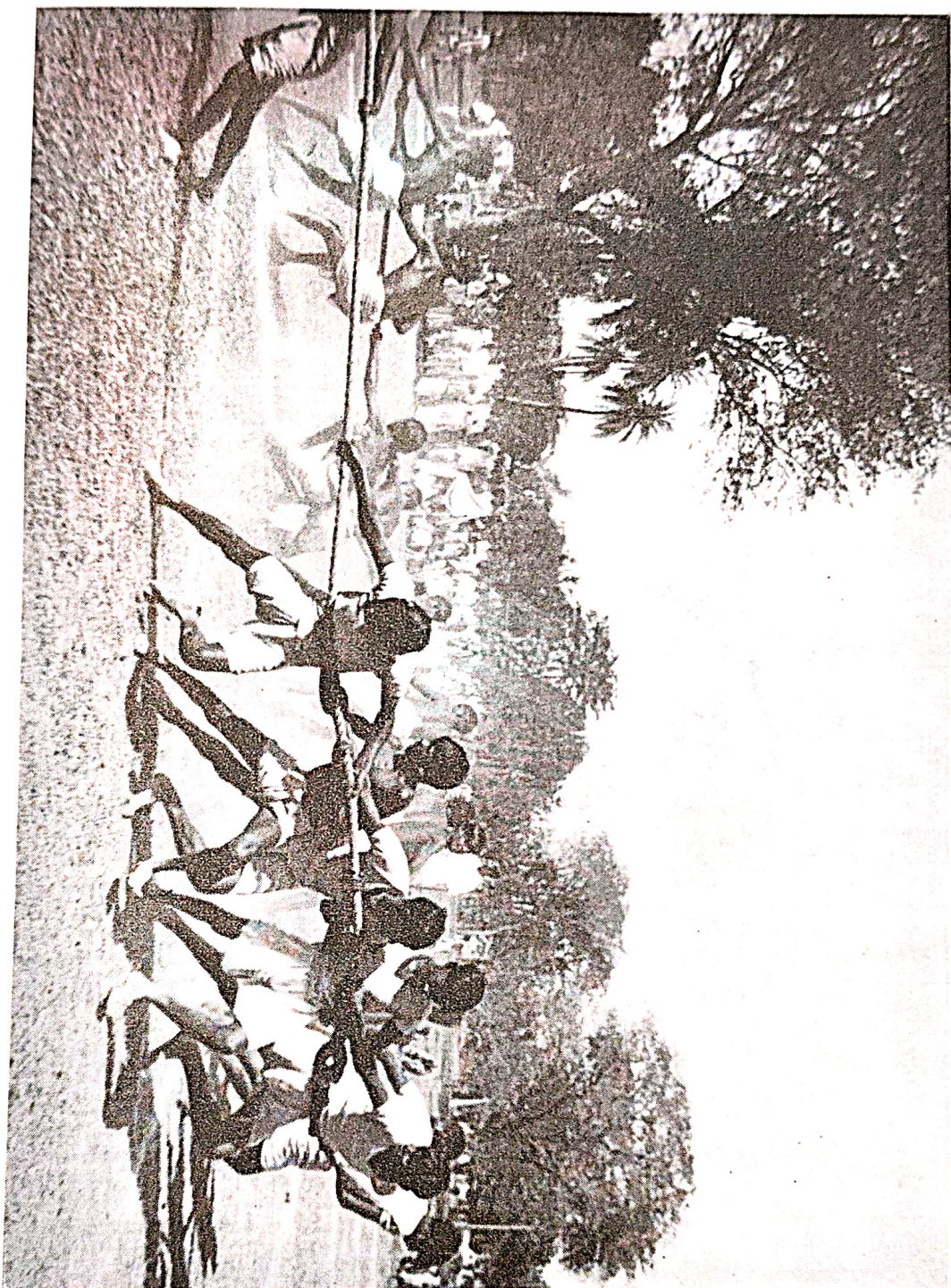
The Government has hitherto approached these problems under Ministries, but until the Community Projects Administration was set up it never worked out the co-ordinated approach needed. In Sriniketan you have developed over the years your field worker who can go to the villages and discuss with the cultivators their needs. You can then put all the five f's together and carry the information to the villagers and demonstrate with their help solutions to the economic problem.

You sent a member of your staff to Japan some time ago to examine the machines with which the rural Japanese reduce the need for manual labour and still preserve their own rural culture. I am always in favour of machinery if it proves to be the right machine, in trained hands and in the right place at the appropriate moment. In our day, we once had at Sriniketan a new tractor from America to work with. But within a month it was broken and there was no spare part service available. You must always remember that machines need trained people to

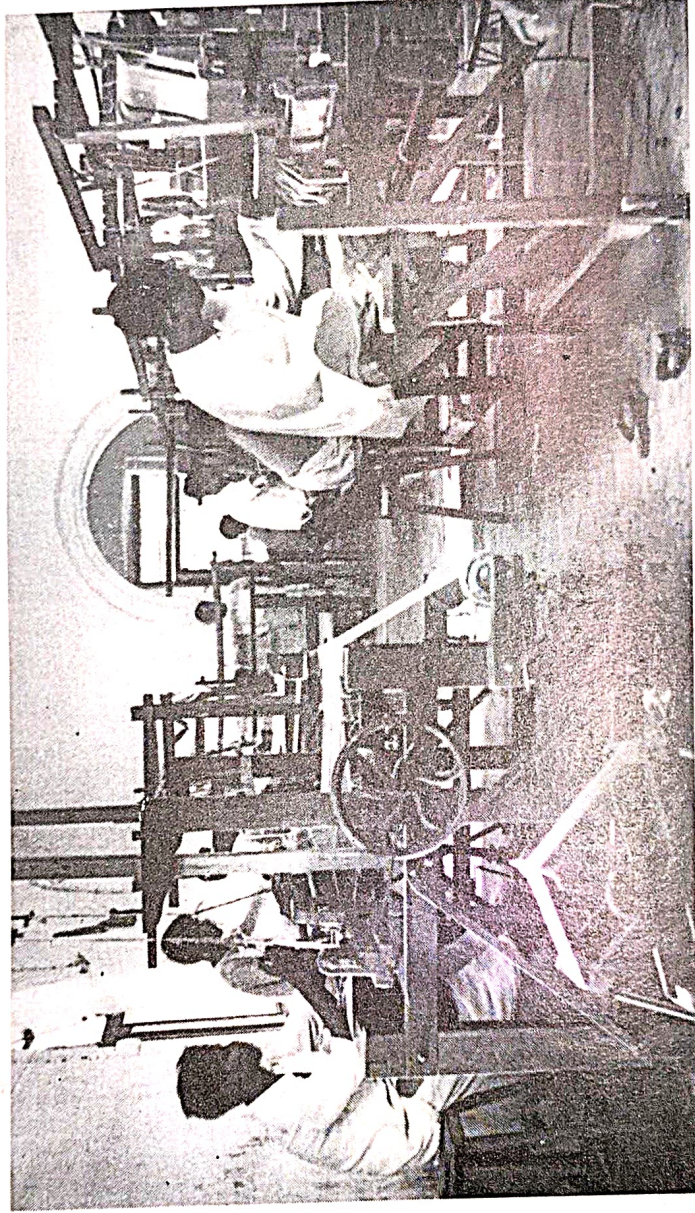
handle them and a good service station if you are to get the best results out of them. At Bolpur a Technical Training School is now being set up. You will need more machines and more competent men to handle them if you are to rescue yourselves and the villages from meaningless toil and sheer animal drudgery.

With the coming of the machine, the problem of marketing will be accentuated. Collaboration with the Government will be needed, but to collaborate fully and intelligently you will need to carry out continuous research.

During my recent tour in India, I visited some of the institutions which are peculiarly devoted to carrying into practice the message and programme of Gandhiji. I was sad to find that some of Gandhiji's phrases were being pulled out of their context and used as a cover for not thinking problems through to a sensible conclusion. "Gandhi told us" they said, "that the village must be self sufficient. We are aiming at self-sufficiency." Self-sufficiency is a relative term. It can sometimes be achieved, but at such a high price or cost in other desirable goods that it is no longer worth the candle. His words were being turned into magic incantations. "Gandhiji didn't believe in machines," they said. What is the charka, then, but a machine for making possible the spinning of cotton? It was the exploitation or degradation of human beings by machinery that offended Gandhiji. I asked in one place: "Are you self-sufficient?" He said, "Oh, yes! We are." I enquired further, "Are you self-sufficient in fuel?" He replied, "Oh, yes. Our fuel used to come from that jungle forest over there. But the jungle has all been cleared. Our local fuel supply has therefore been exhausted and we buy from a forest further away." "So you are not self-sufficient in fuel?" "No!" "And are you rehabilitating and replacing the forest you have cut down?" "No!" "Are you stopping the erosion that is taking place as a result of your destruction of the forest?" "No!"



Sriniketan Anniversary : Sports of the Villagers.



Weaving at Silpa-Sadana : Sriniketan Crafts Department.

SRINIKETAN

Gandhiji's mind was not like that. He nearly always had a fresh solution for a fresh problem. He never meant phrases that had a specific meaning in a specific context to be used like magic words that in a different situation would bring no useful remedy to any one.

By repeating such magic phrases we can save ourselves neither from hard labour nor from hard thinking. We must not, I think, out of respect for their memory, try to use either Gandhiji's or Gurudeva's sayings for such a purpose. It is not honourable. It is not fair to either. We shall thereby destroy our cultural heritage and not rebuild it.

There is much talk today about the study of sociology. Sociology is that study whereby through orderly thought and a delicacy of approach to the man in the field and woman in the home, we may achieve some clearer understanding of why and how people behave the way they do. If you approach simple village people in a rude or a brutal way you can so frighten them that for generations they will never talk to any outside enquirer with any freedom. It was from Sriniketan that Kali Mohan Ghose established the right principle of approach. It was through his receptiveness to humane feeling, his gentleness and sensitivity of approach that he won the love and respect of the villagers of this region of all creeds and castes. I shall never forget Kalibabu's delicacy of touch when approaching simple, uneducated or primitive people. In those early days it was the exception for the sons of *Bhadralog* parents to be able to meet and discuss with Santalis on level terms or on terms of mutual respect. Kalibabu could do it.

Since his day, from Santiniketan and Sriniketan educated women have gone out into the villages to meet and work with the village women. Until you meet and know the women intimately, how are you to change their attitudes to education, to give them a new command over their environment, or to

arouse their interest in family planning so that the number of children to whom they give birth is the number they feel they can tend and support and send out happily into the world?

Dhirada and Masoji pioneered the Brati Balak movement through the adaptation of Baden Powell's Boy Scout method and principles to suit the needs and preferences of the Birbhum boy and girl. It was Dhirada who first persuaded a village to let their children join a troop. We hoped that such children would one day be the leaders of village organizations and that through this general training they would teach the villages the method of self-help. All this work was part of a gentle but practical approach to the minds of the villagers.

The atmosphere in those days was one of hard work, morning, afternoon and evening. No amount of political propaganda or talk will save you from hard work if solutions to rural problems are to be found. I still remember two men who were never idle. One was Kasahara, our Japanese friend, a supreme worker and an artist. He taught gardening and carpentry. The other was Santosh Mitra. Our Abanda—Abanindranath Tagore—said to me about him, "You are spoiling a good artist." I said, "He wants to work on the land with his hands and to be a farmer, and neither you nor I can stop him." He used to work from morning to night. Men such as these set an example to us all of how to work for rural India. I say again that by activity of thought, by receptivity to beauty and to humane feeling and by hard work you may build again your culture on solid foundations. You will need to collaborate with your Government not only in Bengal but throughout India. Such a culture can only be built up and inspired from Visva-Bharati if you think and feel and work hard enough from year to year. Let us always remember that nothing worth anything can be achieved without hard work.

Thank you very much.

