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Youth Trained in Peace on 8-Month Railroad Yatra Text:

Sanjoy Ganguly, Calcutta

Like a lightening bolt of hope, the blue train travels to distant corners of India carrying the message of peace, harmony and justice, reminding Indians of the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi and Acharya Vinobha. Called the Sadbhavana Rail Yatra, this unique project on wheels is the masterwork of Shri S.N. Subba Rao, an eminent Gandhian, sexagenarian and livewire of the National Youth Project. He is known nationwide for his youth camps and innovative programs to reform criminals. It was at the NYP's Communal Harmony and National Integration Camp at Kanpur in March, 1993, that the Union Railway Minister, Mr. C.K. Jaffar Sharief, causually pledged that his ministry would provide assistance to anyone who would like to carry the message of sadbhavana ("harmony") through the countrywide network of the Indian railways. For the minister, he was thinking aloud. But to Subba Rao, a veteran social worker and youth motivator, this was just the right kind of approach to reach out to Indians, especially the youth. It was dramatic. It was free. And it was potentially able to impact India's scattered masses. Using his experience directing the Gandhi Darshan Train mobile exhibit run during the Gandhi Centenary year, Subba Rao quickly plotted a circular rail route that the Sadbhavana Rail Yatra could follow. The original plan was shelved when the railway ministry

pleaded paucity of funds. But Subba Rao persisted until the ministry agreed, and the Ministry of Human Resources Development provided additional funds. Individuals and voluntary organizations, both at home and abroad, came forward to help. The yatra was pledged on October 2, 1993, at New Delhi. On October 8, the Sadbhavana Yatra Special Train was flagged off at New Delhi station by the former President of India, Giani Zail Singh. Itinerary and Logistics During the 8-month expedition, the train will call at more than 100 railway stations on the broadgauge network of Indian Railways, carrying nearly 2,400 participants in its entire journey. Dr. Licy Bharucha, Public Relations Officer, spoke on the logistics: "The entire route has been divided into several legs. Across each leg, the train has 200 to 250 young men and women travelling on it. Every ten or twelve days, groups of 100 youth change over so that the maximum number of participants can be ensured. All the 2,400 participants will come together at the concluding camp at New Delhi during May 24-31, 1994. The train carries 200 bicycles and a jeep. On reaching a station, the participants bring out their bicycles and make processions through the streets, visit schools, colleges, slums, community meeting centers, even people's homes. Depending on the time and place, discussion and exchange of ideas take place and cultural programs are organized which convey the message of brotherhood of man, the need to live in peace and harmony and religious tolerance. The day is concluded with an all-religion prayer and an all-language program." I caught up with the yatra at new Jalpaiguri, as it headed East into West Bengal state. Subba Rao seemed to be all over the place at once. He was organizing, planning, participating and praying. Taking an example from the NYP camps that had been the harbingers of national reconstruction, Subba Rao-"Bhai-ji" to all-affirmed the message of the yatra, telling Hinduism Today, "The effort is to create a platform where youths of the country

can come together without any barriers of state, language, religion or political ideologies. The youths will establish that, with all existing differences, we can still be friendly to one another. We can still live together and be friendly to one another, bringing forth the true spirit behind 'unity in diversity!'" And one did not have to seek far for proof. One of the cultural programs includes presentation of Ramayana through the folk art called yaksha-gana. The group did not have a girl participant to play the part of Sita. So a North Indian girl played the role after mastering the Kannadiga dialogue. Talking about the route, Subba Rao regretted that, "There are many places that I would have liked to have gone that the train couldn't reach. Certain places were purposely chosen. Wardha was definitely on my mind, and Ayodhya also. We are visiting as many riot-affected places as we can-Aligarh, Kanpur, Varanasi. Our train is going in a circular route-the northernmost tip of the broad gauge is Jammu. We have been there. Easternmost is Guwahati and we are just about to visit there. We will be calling at the southernmost tip of India, at Kanyakumari, in late February. Owing to the shortage of time, we are not able to go to Dwarka and Porobander, the westernmost corner, but we are going as far as possible. From the route I had submitted, the railways dropped only two or three places for logistical reasons. There was actually no real planning behind the places chosen." The final route began in Delhi in October, then to Ambala, Amritsar and Dehradun (with stops in-between); in November to Kanpur, Allahabad and Muzaffarpur; in December to Patna, Bhagalpur, New Jalpaiguri and Shantinektan; in January to Cuttack, Puri, Vishakhapatnam and Madras; in February to Madurai, Cochin, Kanya Kumari and Kannur; in March to Bangalore, Sholapur and Bombay; in April to Nagpur, Ahmedabad, Gandhi Nagar and Bhopal; in May to Gwalior, Jaipur, Mathura and finally back to Delhi on May 24th, 1994. The Daily Schedule A typical day on the yatra begins at

5:30am as everyone gathers for morning prayers and discourses. Around 8:00am, the bicycle procession is ready to move out, voicing their slogans such as Deshmata ki Kamna/Sadbhavana, Sadbhavana ("Mother India desires good feelings among all people"); Party-Jhagrey Chchoro, Chchoro/Bharata Joro, Bharat Joro, ("Stop political fighting, unite India, unite India"). Bhaiji can be seen pleading to go on a bicycle but participants push him firmly into the jeep, for unknown to most, Subba Rao is more frail now and in need of frequently denied rest. The rallyists meet the people of the town or village, talk to the riot-affected victims-if possible to the rioters themselves-the administration and, of course, to anyone who approaches them. No rallyist ever tires of speaking to an enthusiastic listener. They even visit people in their homes. Local organizers or schools and colleges mostly arrange for the two meals a day. In the evening, both participants and local organizers host cultural meets. It is the daily calls on bicycles that have provided the poignant moments of the yatra. With a few notable exceptions, the yatra has been enthusiastically received to date. In Begusarai, in Bihar, the District Magistrate and Superintendent of Police were so bowled over by the youth's spirit that they took a active part in the rally itself, riding bicycles, shouting slogans, dancing with the participants, and the town followed suit. At Ludhiana, Punjab, each of the gathered school students took two participants home for lunch. Recalled Ms. Manorama, one of the older participants, "A family relationship grew among the participants and the hosts within an hour or so. Something which is otherwise unthinkable during periods of unrest." Sometimes the rallyists were able to experience the communal tolerance they were advocating. At Patna, the cultural program had to be cancelled. The Muslim community from a mosque near the railway station promptly arranged for a cultural evening on behalf of the rallyists. At Amritsar, Punjab-holy city

of the Sikhs and scene of much violence in recent years-the train reached late, around 1:30am. Ignoring the bitter weather, young and old, Hindu and Sikh, had gathered to welcome the yatra.The yatra visited the Lakshminaryan Temple at Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh. The temple, a prominent place of worship in the city, was built by a Muslim. The architect's son Atikur Rahman lives and is one of the foremost supporters of the temple. Visiting Riot-Afflicted Areas Tension-ridden places mostly gave a positive reception. In the words of Kamarul Hasan from Bhagalpur, "For the first time we got a chance to show that we are ready to heal the wounds opened by some divisive forces among us. The Sadbhavana Yatra has placed their trust in us, and we are eager to prove that we also believe in the message of peace and harmony." In early 1990, over a thousand Muslims and Hindus died in and near the North India town of Bhagalpur. The riots were sparked by Hindu Ramshila processions carrying sanctified bricks destined for the new Lord Rama temple in Ayodhya. At Aligarh, the District Magistrate himself was surprised at the courage and tenacity of the rallyists visiting sites "which no one had dared visit after the riots." Sometimes the response has been lukewarm or indifferent. Recalled Ms. Manorama, "At Kanpur, we had reports from the rallyists that the Hindus avoided us, but the Muslims welcomed us with open arms. We have not been able to bridge the gap, but we keep on trying." The rally has had its trying moments too. At Ayodhya, both Hindus and Muslims refused to break their acrimonious silence. Instead it was the minority Sikh population who happily greeted the team of youth. There have been moments of humor too. At Darjeeling, West Bengal, the rallyists found plenty of supporters, but only one on a bicycle. The local hills people are hardly accustomed to riding bicycles, they prefer to walk. The lone local peddle-pushing participant had enough cuts and bruises to show how hard he had tried to master the task of bike-riding

within a week, and all because he felt compelled to join the rallyists on their mission. So in consideration of his well-being a compromise was made, and everyone travelled together on a bus. Toward Communal Harmony So onward travels the Sadbhavana train. Their journey has just begun. "The good feeling between man and man is lacking all over the world," feels Subba Rao. "This is not only in India. So I like to tell to everyone, 'Do everything that makes you strong physically, mentally, spiritually. Avoid everything that makes you weak.' In a camp, we all learn to live, eat and act together. There is no difference, no ill-feeling. Yet everyone is able to maintain their own identity. It is this spirit that we want to convey to the people of the country." Sections of the India national press charge that since the yatra is funded to a large extent by government departments, it is really a political intrigue of the ruling Congress Party. Countered Subba Rao,"Isn't the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and the entire judiciary paid by the government? They function independently. So do we. Just because the government is funding a cause, the cause does not become subservient to it. We are all tax-paying citizens. So it is our money that is ultimately funding the project." Ms. Manorama spoke of a different type of mix-up. At Uttar Pradesh, the bicycle-riding rallyists were mistaken as campaigning for Mulayam Singh Yadav and his party since their election symbol was a bicycle. Then an announcement was made that this was a non-political gathering and the slogans were explained. Looking Toward India's Future In the last couple of years the Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid issue has reared its ugly head to engulf India in a bitter genocide. Politicians and anti-social elements made the most of the opportunity. Poor people suffered. Tales of hatred and misery fill the media. The whole world gets the impression that India will fall apart, sooner or later. Yet the country survives. The self-appointed guardians of the state take pride that it survives

because they have-at last-made the people see the light of reason and enlightenment. I think the truth lies elsewhere, among the class of common men and women, who have nurtured within themselves the germ of solidarity, of tolerance, of the ability to rough out the odds in togetherness. Subbha Rao's youth went directly to those people. Traveling on the blue train of the Sadbhavana Yatra are the decision-makers of tomorrow. These boys and girls have pledged to usher India into and through a constructive phase of nation-building, bettering the lot of the country and of themselves. The youths feel that their life has more meaning now, and they are able to see their fellowmen in a more positive light. They broke through barriers of religion, language and belief to become part of a one family. They put into practice the famous saying from the scriptures, vasudhaiva kutumbakam, "The world is my family." Address: S.N. Subba Rao, 2221 D.D. Upadhyayaya Marg, New Delhi, India. In the USA, tax-deductible donations can be sent to International Service Society/Sadbhavana Yatra, 2601 Cochise Lane, Okemos, MI, 48864.