

Bharat Ratna Nanaji Deshmukh: A Pioneer of Environment and Education

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Abstract: *Nanaji Deshmukh developed a rural development model rooted in self-reliance, community participation, environmental conservation, and the responsible use of local resources. His philosophy of Gramodaya linked the progress of villages with the wider development of the nation. Through projects in Gonda, Chitrakoot, and other regions, he promoted organic farming, water conservation, renewable energy, rural industries, traditional healthcare, education, and locally suited agricultural practices. His approach challenged development models that relied heavily on centralized planning and offered a practical alternative based on local needs and public participation. Many of his initiatives reflected principles later associated with sustainable development, including economic security, social inclusion, ecological balance, and efficient resource use. The Chitrakoot model demonstrated how education, healthcare, agriculture, livelihood generation, and environmental protection could work together within a rural setting. Nanaji Deshmukh's work presents Gramodaya as an Indian approach to sustainable rural development in which village self-reliance and environmental responsibility form the foundation of broader national progress.*

Keywords: Nanaji Deshmukh, Gramodaya, Rural Development, Environmental Conservation, Self-Reliance

Rashtrarishi Bharat Ratna Nanaji Deshmukh is included among those distinguished individuals of pre- and post-independence India who never made position or specific ambitions their life's goal; rather, their objective was the all-round development of the nation, for which they chose the path of rural development. This novel path of rural development earned him the title of 'Rashtrarishi'. The concept of Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015 was something Nanaji Deshmukh had attempted to implement much earlier through community development. Following independence, rural development was identified as a primary goal in India, as it was believed to be the engine for accelerating the country's economic growth. In this regard, two viewpoints emerged. The strategy adopted through the government was influenced by Western countries; while it accelerated development, its distribution was highly unequal and caused significant environmental harm. The second viewpoint focused on formulating a development strategy suited to Indian conditions. Nanaji Deshmukh's contribution to environmental conservation and rural development was based on his vision of 'Gramodaya' (upliftment of villages) and self-reliance. He considered environmental protection an essential component of rural self-reliance, linking development intrinsically with environmental preservation.

Chandikadas Amritrao Deshmukh, popularly known as Nanaji Deshmukh (11 October 1916 – 27 February 2010), was an Indian social activist who worked in the fields of education, health, and rural self-reliance. He was honored with the Padma Vibhushan in 1999 and posthumously awarded India's highest civilian honor, the Bharat Ratna, by the Government of India in 2019.[1] He was a leader of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and a Member of Parliament in the Rajya Sabha. Born on 11 October 1916 in Kadoli, a small town in Hingoli district, into a Marathi-speaking Deshastha Brahmin family, he possessed a strong desire for education despite financial hardships. To fund his education, he worked as a vegetable vendor. Inspired by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, he attended high school in Sikar, where the Rao of Sikar awarded him a scholarship. He later studied at Birla College (now

BITS Pilani) and joined the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) the same year. Nanaji always placed immense emphasis on education. When RSS leader M. S. Golwalkar asked him to take charge as the General Secretary of Bharatiya Jana Sangh in Uttar Pradesh, Deshmukh served as a full-time activist (pracharak), proving instrumental in building the organization at the grass-roots level.

His contribution to the field of education is considered peerless. In 1950, he established India's first Saraswati Shishu Mandir in Gorakhpur, which today has grown into a network of over 30,000 branches engaged in imparting education.[2] He founded the Deendayal Research Institute (DRI) and published the monthly magazine 'Rashtradharm', the weekly 'Panchjanya', and the 'Swadesh' newspaper from Lucknow. In 1991, he established the country's first rural university, Mahatma Gandhi Chitrakoot Gramoday Vishwavidyalaya, serving as its Chancellor for three and a half years. In 1978, he launched the Gramodaya Project for the reconstruction of rural society in the Gonda region. He revitalized numerous villages across Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh through public participation. In 2002, he launched the Self-Reliance Campaign for the holistic development of 500 villages around Chitrakoot through community involvement. Following his death in 2010, he donated his body for medical research.

Nanaji Deshmukh strived to lead the future of the Indian nation toward comprehensive development by advocating sustainable development, eco-friendly agriculture, and rural self-reliance. To realize this vision, he chose Chitrakoot—a sacred land associated with Lord Rama's exile during the Treta Yuga. In this region, he focused on organic farming, water conservation, and solar energy, demonstrating that a prosperous society can be built by balancing development and environmental protection.[3] His core philosophy was 'Gramodaya to Rashtrodaya' (Upliftment of Villages to Upliftment of the Nation). He believed that Indian rural society was the true medium for the nation's progress and presented an alternative to the Western development model that was not merely theoretical, but practically implemented.

Nanaji's environmental contributions included promoting sustainable agriculture, rural development, and eco-friendly traditional practices, including initiatives like the Krishi Sanjeevani Scheme to foster climate-resilient agriculture. Through Gramodaya, he emphasized living in harmony with nature to maintain a balance between progress and environmental conservation.

In the absence of a foundational framework for development, the Government of India was blindly implementing various projects designed by Western institutions without understanding their drawbacks. At that time, a top-down approach was used as a standard for policy formulation, whereas a bottom-up development process was found to be far more suited to Indian conditions, though it had not yet gained conceptual traction. This proposed model ensured community participation in policy-making and allowed modifications based on local feedback.

Against this backdrop, Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya formulated the philosophy of Integral Humanism ('Ekatma Manavvad'), introducing concepts such as 'Yuganukoolan' (adaptation to the era) and 'Deshanukoolan' (adaptation to the nation). 'Yuganukoolan' involved re-examining Indian knowledge systems and indigenous practices to present a contemporary approach aligned with current needs. 'Deshanukoolan' referred to tailoring foreign ideas and concepts to fit the Indian context and environment before implementation.[4]

After retiring from active politics to offer a better alternative for rural development through community action, Nanaji launched the Gonda Gramodaya Project in 1978 under the Deendayal Research Institute (founded in 1969). Later, similar projects were launched in Beed, Nagpur, and Chitrakoot.

The primary objective of the Gonda Project was to prioritize public initiative and participation in rural development. For rural development and environmental conservation, instead of deep borewells with iron pipes promoted by the government at the time, he introduced the use of eco-friendly and locally accessible bamboo pipes. At a time when water conservation, affordable clean energy, and sustainability were not yet on the global agenda, the successful replacement of iron pipes with bamboo demonstrated his commitment to sustainable production and consumption.[5] This innovative and cost-effective irrigation technique proved vital for environmental protection. Guided by the goal of 'water for every field', Nanaji integrated both traditional and modern water management techniques, scaling them up broadly. Through initiatives like the Krishi Sanjeevani Scheme, he promoted drought-resistant and climate-resilient agricultural strategies to combat climate change.

Long before the United Nations established the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals— anchored in economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection— Nanaji Deshmukh had laid the groundwork for these concepts in India. His fundamental aim was to link economic development directly with environmental conservation.

Following the implementation of the Chitrakoot Project, this backward region transformed within a few years into a hub featuring a university, an Ayurvedic hospital, an Ayurvedic pharmacy, Krishi Vigyan Kendras (Agricultural Science Centers), educational institutions and residential complexes for tribal students, skill training institutes, a Gurukul, and research centers for preserving indigenous cow breeds. These efforts toward indigenous cow conservation, organizing cattle fairs, and establishing agricultural research centers continue to contribute significantly to sustainable development goals. Rainwater harvesting was integrated into the Chitrakoot Project, implementing water conservation techniques across numerous rural areas, leading to noticeable groundwater recharge. To make over 500 villages in Chitrakoot self-reliant, he utilized local resources and public participation, reducing reliance on external aid. He promoted small businesses and rural cottage industries to strengthen the rural economy while ensuring the judicious use of natural resources,[6] thereby fostering economic growth alongside environmental stability.

Countering the trend toward heavy chemical fertilizer usage influenced by Western models, Nanaji advocated organic farming and encouraged natural agricultural practices. He promoted traditional farming methods and organic fertilizers to maintain soil fertility and ecological balance, aiming to mitigate the harmful impacts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Efforts were made to convert cow dung and agricultural waste into energy and organic manure, ensuring proper waste management. He encouraged farmers to adopt modern techniques, high-quality seeds, crop diversification, and sustainable farming methods to conserve soil and water resources.[7]

In healthcare, he prioritized traditional Indian systems over Western medicine. Collaborating with local tribal communities, he initiated projects like 'Dadi Maa Ka Batwa' (Grandmother's Medicine Pouch) to preserve medicinal plants and herbs. Through the Deendayal Research Institute, Nanaji presented the Gramodaya model, which integrated environmental protection with health and education, making tree plantation and soil conservation an integral part of the rural lifestyle. He conceptualized 'Arogyadham', a healthcare framework promoting natural and traditional wellness practices.[8]

Nanaji expanded the Deendayal Research Institute across various regions of India, bringing rural development and environmental protection to the masses. Notable innovative experiments include the Vanvasi Youth Industrial Training Center and Hostel at Birasa village in Singhbhum (Jharkhand), Bal Jagat in Nagpur, Bal Sanskar Kendra in Aurangabad, Saunders Gurukul in Beed, and the Vanprastha Campaign in Ahmedabad.

Nanaji Deshmukh's simplicity, humility, and dedication to rural development are illustrated by a famous event: In one of the most underdeveloped villages of Gonda district in Uttar Pradesh, he invited the then President of India, Dr. Neelam Sanjiva Reddy, to inaugurate the Gramodaya Scheme. During a community feast, five representative underprivileged farming families from every block in Gonda district were invited. The President of India sat on the floor alongside these

poor farmers to share a meal in a single row. The meal served consisted of arhar dal, local 'Mowad' rice (famous in the region), and various local vegetable dishes. In 31 years of independent India, this was the first time a President stepped out of the grandeur of Rashtrapati Bhavan to visit a neglected village, sitting on the ground to eat from a banana leaf and a earthen bowl.[9] This event stands as exemplary proof of Nanaji's love for rural development and his harmonious relationship with nature.

Former President of India, the late Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, visited Nanaji's pioneering initiatives in the rural areas of Chitrakoot in 2005. Observing the transformation, he remarked: 'I see the Chitrakoot Project as an outstanding model for the development of rural India. It is capable of creating a society where families stay united, traditional Indian knowledge and modern education coexist vibrantly, social tensions are eliminated, women are empowered, sanitation is prioritized, environmental concerns are addressed, and income is equitably distributed. All this aligns perfectly with my philosophy that a developing India's goal is not merely economic progress, but paramount preservation of art, literature, humanity, purity of thought, and our 5,000-year-old rich cultural heritage.'[10]

Nanaji emphasized the prudent use of local resources for the upliftment of the underprivileged and the last person in line. The Deendayal Research Institute continues to work relentlessly to advance his vision and goals. His work in environmental conservation and rural entrepreneurship is regarded today as a major contribution and guiding light for national development. He firmly believed that until our villages become environmentally sustainable and economically self-reliant, India's progress remains incomplete.

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