

EXPLOITATION OF FORESTS THROUGH FOREST LABOUR CO-OPERATIVES IN MAHARASHTRA*

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I. HISTORICAL REVIEW OF THE FOREST LABOUR CO-OPERATIVE MOVEMENT

THE forests in India are being exploited mainly through use of the (aboriginal) Adivasi labour. The Adivasi communities dwell within and on the outskirts of forest areas and provide labour for the exploitation of forests. Till Independence the Adivasis were being exploited by the forest contractors by employing them on very meagre wages and advancing credits to them in the agricultural season at very high rates of interest against surety of their labour. As they had no other source of livelihood except cultivation of the inferior millets and pulses on uneven lands, they were compelled to work at the discretion of forest contractors on the wages and the terms of repayments of loans, they dictated, to make up for their livelihood in the post-harvest season. The forest labour co-operative movement came up as a result of this severe exploitation of the illiterate Adivasis by the forest contractors who also happened to be landowners and moneylenders.

The objective of the Forest Department was to derive the maximum revenue by bidding the coupes¹ for extraction to the contractors in open auctions. Though the method turned out to be favourable for the Department, it could be so only at the cost of the tribals dwelling in the forests for generations. The contractors dictated the wage terms to the Adivasis who had no source of employment other than working in the forests. In many cases their cultivable lands had also fallen into the hands of the contractors and the moneylenders and they had reached a point of mere slavery serving the interests of the forest contractors. To combat this menace, the local self-Government of Bombay appointed Mr. Symington as a special officer in 1937, to look into the plight of the Adivasis. He investigated their problems and submitted his wellknown report to the Government suggesting some ameliorative schemes. This report submitted to the

* This study was sponsored by the Planning Commission and was financed by a grant from it. The facts and opinions expressed in the study are entirely of the author.

¹ Area marked for felling (usually one in an annual series).