

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL FORMATION

AND

PEASANT RESISTANCE IN MAHARASHTRA

VOLUME II

Sulabha Brahme  
Ashok Upadhyaya

SHANKAR BRAHME SAMAJ VIDNYAN GRANTHALAYA, PUNE

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**Sulabha Brahme  
Ashok Upadhyaya**

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CHAPTER IV

Peasantization of Tribals and the Making of  
Organised Struggle in Thane

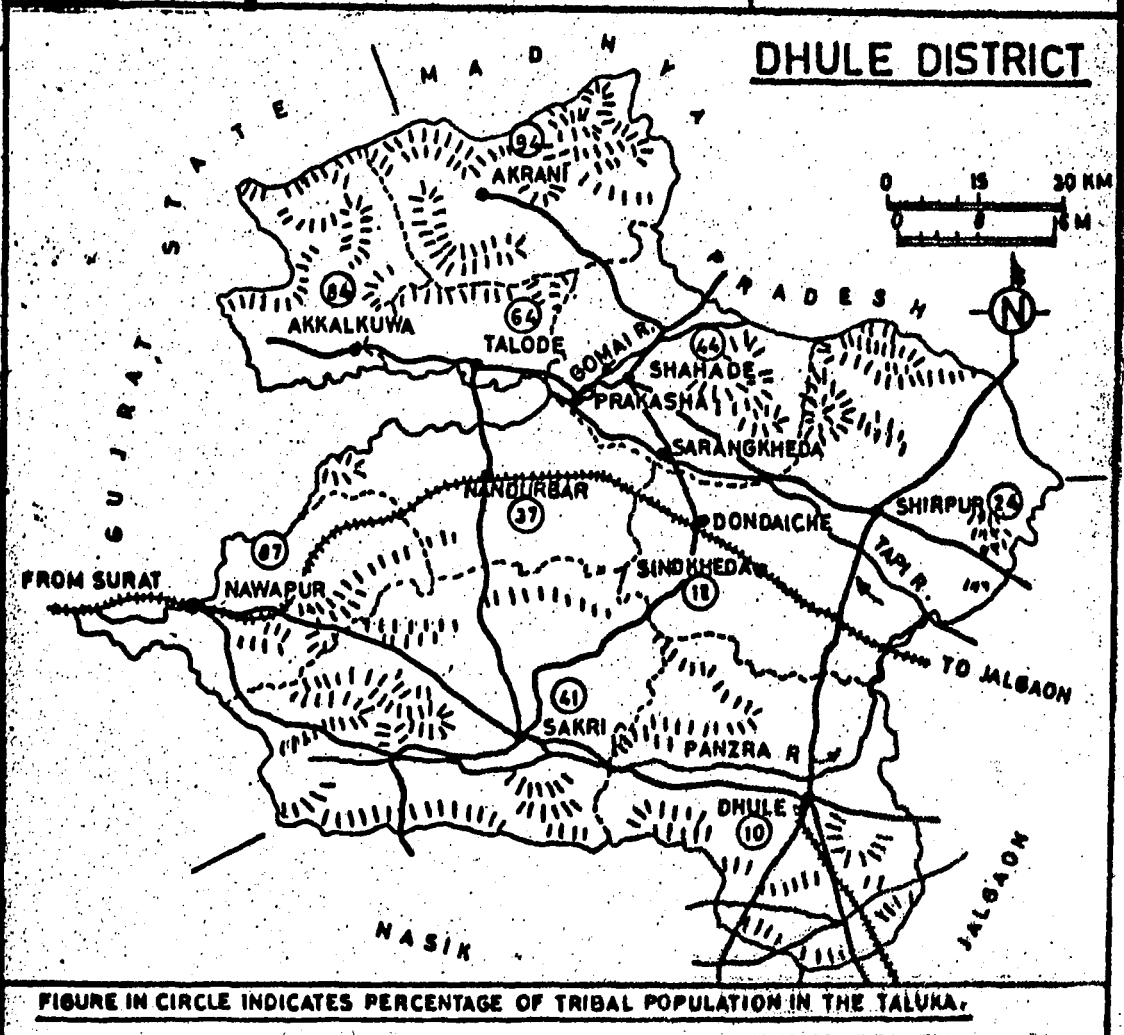
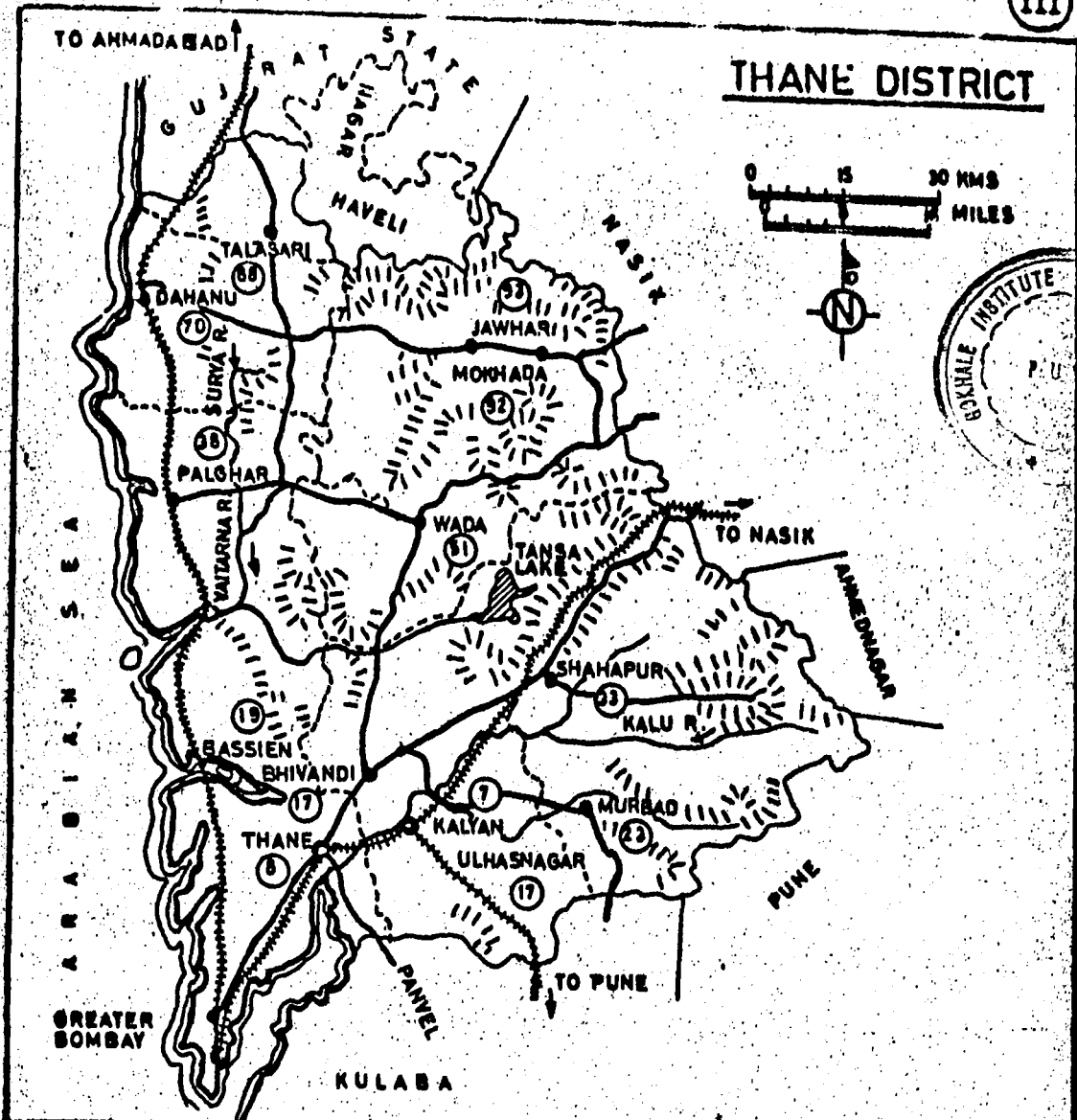


FIGURE IN CIRCLE INDICATES PERCENTAGE OF TRIBAL POPULATION IN THE TALUKA.

Section I

Economic Development in Thane District

The Setting:

Thane district forms a part of the north Konkan region which lies between the Sahyadris in the east and the Arabian Sea in the west. It has a coastline of about 110 kilometres. It is bounded by Surat district of the Gujarat state in the north, Kolaba district in the south and Greater Bombay district in the south-west. Towns of Thane, Bhiwandi, Kalyan, Ulhasnagar fall within the Bombay Metropolitan Region and some parts of the Thane district viz., some villages from Salsette and Kalyan talukas have been merged with the Bombay suburban district. Broad gauge lines of the central and western railways which connect Bombay with the rest of India pass through the Thane district. The Bombay-Ahmedabad national highway passes across Thane, Bhiwandi, Vada, Palghar and Dahanu talukas of the district. The coastal parts of the district along the Bombay-Delhi rail route and the Bombay-Ahmedabad national highway are developed and towns of Dahanu, Palghar and Bassein are located on route. Kalyan is a large exporting and importing centre for several talukas of the district. The major exports from the district, chiefly to the metropolis of Bombay are grass, firewood, timber, salt, fish, vegetables, fruit and rice.

In 1901, the population of the district was 665 thousand persons and it was 882 thousand persons in 1941. The population of the district increased considerably in the subsequent decades and in 1971 the population of the district was 2282 thousand persons. The major urban centres are the industrial centres of Thane (1.7 lakh population), Kalyan (1 lakh population), Ambarnath (1.7 lakh population), and Bhiwandi (80,000 population). The total urban population in 1971 was 827 thousand persons most of which is concentrated in the south-western corner of the

district adjoining the Bombay Metropolis. Apart from this industrialised pocket, the rest of the district is not significantly affected by the proximity of the industrial metropolis of Bombay.

The district\* can be broadly divided into three zones viz., the western, the central and the eastern zone. The western zone comprises the coastal talukas of Thane, Bassein, Palghar and Dahanu. Valuable garden crops of plantains, guava, mangoes, chikkus, coconuts, betel leaves flourish in the coastal strip. The coastal belt also sustains fishing industry and salt industry. Thus only the western part of the western zone i.e., the region between the coastline and the hill range running north-south is developed. The eastern part of the western zone, like the central zones which comprises the talukas of Jawhar, Vada, Bhiwandi and Kalyan has rice fields in the valleys of minor hill ranges and inferior cereals like nagli, vari, nachani on the uplands. The eastern zone comprises the talukas of Mokhada, Shahapur and Murbad. Major portion of this zone is covered by ranges of Sahyadri. There are dense forests in this zone.

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The territory now included in the Thane district was in 1817 a part of the North Konkan district with headquarters at Thane. In 1869 the sub-collectorate of Kolaba was separated from Thane. The then Thana district included Dahanu, Mahim, Vada, Bassein, Bhiwandi, Shahapur, Salsette, Kalyan, Murbad, Panvel, Karjat talukas. Karjat, Panvel were transferred to Kolaba district in 1880's. In 1920 Salsette taluka was divided into north and south, the southern part being merged with Bombay suburban district and the north Salsette was renamed as Thana in 1926.

The former state of Jawhar was merged in the Thane district and new Jawhar taluka was found in 1949. The northern part of the Shahapur taluka was separated to form Mokhada Mahal. In 1960 major portions of the Umbergaon taluka which earlier formed part of Dahanu sub-division were transferred to Gujarat state and the remaining part was included in Dahanu taluka and made into Talasari Mahal in 1961. In 1961 the district comprised 10 talukas and 2 Mahals. Subsequently the Mahals were upgraded to taluka status.

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Land use and cropping pattern:

The total geographical area of the district is 9337 square kilometres. About 40% of the total geographical area is under forests. The forests are tropical mixed deciduous. The commercially important trees are teak, Apta leaves, Mohwa flowers and fruit, palm leaves, Khair for catechu, bamboo and Palas for propagation of lac. The forests abound in species of wood used for charcoal industry. Fodder and thatching grass is also available in good quantities.

The topography of the district makes it necessary that varkas lands be left fallow for 4 to 5 years. The proportion of fallow land is therefore about 15 per cent. For the district the net sown area is only 30 per cent of the total geographical area, while it is about 60% in the State as a whole. Irrigation facility is not developed in the district; less than two percent of the gross cropped area is irrigated. The agricultural activity in the district is almost wholly dependent on the monsoon except for the irrigated orchards and sugarcane patches in the Bassein taluka.\* Kharif season is the main agricultural season and rice

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In 1969, Kalyan taluka was split into two to form the taluka of Ulhasnagar and Kalyan. Thus in 1971 the district comprised 13 talukas as follows: Thana (earlier known as North Salsette), Bassein, Palghar (earlier known as Mahim), Dahanu, Talasari, Jawhar, Mokhada, Vada, Bhiwandi, Shahapur, Murbad, Kalyan and Ulhasnagar. The various talukas are referred to, in the text, by the names as used at the particular time.

\* Bassein taluka of the district has the finest garden lands. As far back as 1695, the Italian traveller Gemelli Careri noted that for fourteen miles between Bassein and Agashi there were only delightful gardens planted with trees bearing palms, figs, mangoes and areas planted with sugarcane. The soil is rich alluvial. Water is so near the surface that wells are not required as a supply of it sufficient for irrigation throughout the year is obtained from small tanks or holes in the soil. (R.D.Choksey: Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan, 1960, Bombay, p. 101).

is the main crop grown in the valleys and ragi, nachani, vari, chawli, udid are grown on the uplands. About 34 percent of the land is under grass or fodder crops. The inferior land is mainly left for grass production which proves to be a valuable crop because of the proximity of Bombay.

Table 1: Land use and crop pattern in Thane district

Land use	Area in '00 hectares (1971-72)	Percentage Distribution	Area under major crops (1951-52) percentage distribution
Total Geographical Area	9337		
Forest Area	3737		
Net Sown Area	3030		
Gross Cropped Area	3090	100.0	100.0
Area under -			
Rice	1429	46.2	51.2
Ragi and Vari	371	8.5	13.3
Pulses	124	4.0	4.3
Fruit & Vegetables	46	1.5	1.2
Oilseeds	40	1.3	1.2
Grass	1054	34.1	27.7

Note: The gross cropped area in the district increased from about 273 thousand hectares in 1951-52 to 309 thousand hectares by 1971-72. The area under rice recorded only a small increase from 140628 hectares to 142875 hectares during this period. The additional cropped area is mainly put to cultivation of grass.

Source: (i) Socio Economic Review and District Statistical Abstract of Thane district (1972-73);  
(ii) District Census Handbook, Thana, census of India 1961.

If the crop pattern excluding grass is considered then nearly 70% of the cropped area is under rice, 20% under other cereals, 6% under pulses, 2% under oilseeds like niger seed, sesamum.\* About 2.2% of the gross cropped area is under fruit, betel leaves, vegetables - the most valuable and highly paying crops of the district.

The orchard and garden crop cultivation in the district is dominated by Samvedis, Christians, Parsis, and Iranis. The Agris and Sonkolis cultivate the coastal salt lands. The cultivators in the valley region are mainly Kunbis, Marathas, Agris and some of the tribals like Kolis, Thakurs. In the uplands Varlis, Thakurs, Kolis, are the main cultivating communities. The agricultural labourers are made up mainly of the tribal population particularly Varlis, Katkaris and Kolis. In 1971 about 70% of the male agricultural labourers were noted to be from the tribal communities. Among Katkaris nearly 85% of the total workers were returned as agricultural labourers in 1971.

The trade in the district has been in the hands of Gujarati and Marwari Vanis, Muslims, Bhatias, Parsis, Khojas, Memons, Brahmins. The urban moneylending business has been under the control of Vanis, Brahmins, Muslims, Bhatias, Parsis, Kayastha Prabhus. At the village level the Vanis and the Kunbis or other rich landowners control the trade and moneylending business. Some of the urban Vanis operate at the village level through their agents.

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\* In 1880 in the gross cropped area (excluding grass and fodder crops) rice occupied about 60% of the area, vari-nachani 16%, and pulses 9%. The gross cropped area (excluding grass) recorded an increase by about 10 per cent between 1880 and 1970.

Table 2 : Scheduled tribes population and workers in Thane district by livelihood class (1971)

Scheduled Tribe (rural areas)	Total Population	Percentage distribution of scheduled tribe population	Male population
Katkari	54215	9.6	27817
Kokna	32728	5.8	16063
Mahadev Koli	28042	5.0	14984
Malhar Koli	95729	17.0	47013
Thakur	75408	13.4	38346
Varli	254818	45.4	129287
Others	20681	3.8	10527
All scheduled tribes(rural)	561621*	100.0	284037
Total Rural	1454915	-	748572
Total Rural and Urban	2281664		1204855

Scheduled Tribe (rural areas)	Male workers	Male cultivators	Male agricultural labourers	Male workers in non-agricultural occupations
Katkari	17586	1897	14466	1223
Kokna	8462	6565	1476	421
Mahadev Koli	8216	4534	2441	1241
Malhar Koli	26469	11974	13175	1320
Thakur	24784	16088	7957	739
Vali	73868	40392	29443	4033
Others	6189	2049	2846	1294
All scheduled tribes(rural)	165574	83499	71804	10271
Total Rural	409586	187751	100382	55453
Total Rural and Urban	653318	191783	104192	357393

Scheduled tribe population living in urban areas numbered only 17917.

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Scheduled Tribes:

In 1971 the tribal population formed 38.6 per cent of the total rural population of the district and 25.3 per cent of the total population of the district. The tribals are localised mainly in the hilly and forest region of the district. In 1971 the proportion of tribals living in the urban places was only 0.03 per cent. The talukas of Talasari, Jawhar, Mokhada, are almost exclusively inhabited by the tribals; they are also found in considerable numbers in Vada, Dahanu and Palghar talukas.

The life of the tribals is a constant struggle for survival. Before two centuries or so it was a struggle for survival but with a difference. They were then not hampered in their activity by the outsiders. They had full access to the forest produce and the game. They also engaged partly in slash and burn cultivation.

The district is rich in many resources of commercial value viz., timber, bamboos, wood, grass, fish, rice; with the growth of commercialisation the control over the economic resources of the district passed on to the trading-money-lending class. It was easy to dislodge the timid, ignorant tribal from the means of survival viz., the forest and the agricultural lands and then to ensnare him into the debt cycle and servitude. The moneylenders, traders, forest contractors, grass traders reduced the tribal population to bondage and misery.

In 1940, B.G. Kher, a leader of the Adivasi Seva Mandal\* thus wrote about the state of tribals, "The fact

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\* Civil Servant Symington reported in 1939 on the prevalence of forced labour which was hardly distinguishable from slavery. Symington's report stimulated setting up of Adivasi Seva Mandal with B.G.Kher taking up the leadership supported by some of the social workers in Thane. The objective was to provide educational

that such a big mass of humanity should be rotting in a condition of life more debasing than that of slaves within 50 miles of Bombay and that our citizens should be in complacent ignorance about their hardship and tortures is certainly disgraceful."

**Table 3: Tribal Population in various talukas of Thana District (1971)**

Taluka	Area in sq. km.	Total rural population	Tribal population (Rural)	Percentage of tribal population in total rural population
Thana	305.4	114147	9134	8.0
Bassein	526.3	155404	29330	18.9
Palghar	1092.7	188970	72112	38.1
Dahanu	963.7	169996	118585	69.7
Talasari	248.1	53385	47142	88.3
Jawhar	804.7	89786	83613	93.1
Mokhada	627.3	54430	50411	92.6
Vada	736.3	75746	39076	51.5
Bhivandi	683.0	166448	28089	16.9
Shahapur	1645.4	135438	45456	33.5
Murbad	898.5	99585	23204	23.3
Kalyan	325.3	102736	7058	6.9
Ulhasnagar	343.2	48844	8411	17.2

Source: District Census Handbook, Thane, Census of India, 1971.

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and medical aid, help implementation of tenancy and other legislation, organise grain banks, Jangal Kamgar Sangh etc. Leading Congressmen were at the helm of the organisation and the funds were mobilised from merchants and other moneyed sections. The task of upliftment of the adivasis was viewed as a constructive aspect of the nationalist movement. At this time some of the young dedicated workers influenced by the ferment of nationalism and the call for helping the dalits given by Mahatma Gandhi also moved to tribal areas. The Christian Missions have also been active in the areas extending educational and health services.

'Back Pages'

One of the peculiarities of Thane district was that on the eve of British colonialism, it had run the gamut of various rulers from Hindu kings, Muslim rulers, Marathas and Portuguese, the latter two contemporaneously squeezing the peasantry through their multiple revenue systems.

If unevenness of land relations marked Bombay Presidency as a whole, this was all the more true of Thane district, where, as a result of the various rulers, differing land relations had emerged with their accompanying revenue/tax systems.

The coastal regions of the district, mostly flat marshy land, was rice lands which the early Hindu kings, without measuring them, divided into parcels or blocks. These were estimated to require a certain amount of seeds or to yield a certain amount of grain. The levy was then calculated at one-third and was known by several names - dhop, hundabundi, kasbandi, takbandi.<sup>2</sup>

The hilly and forest tracts, forming the major part of the Dahanu sub-division of the district, were inhabited by tribals who gained a scanty living by tilling forest glades and hunting. Practising shifting cultivation, the only contact with civilization was a plough and sickle cess, which continued as the principal form of assessment, till the entry of the British into the district.<sup>3</sup>

During Muslim rule, the Bahamani kings of Ahmednagar, who held sway over the district, maintained the levy of rice lands at one-third, till the 16th century, when revenue officers, for the first time undertook measurement of the land and reduced the government share to one-sixth, payable partly in grain and partly in money. The plough cess on the upland (hilly tracts) was continued.<sup>4</sup>

Elements of a stable revenue administration were introduced by prohibiting vexatious practices of collecting extra cess on any pretext, peasants were granted proprietary rights known as kularag. Revenue was collected by the kulkarni, (village accountant) and brought by subordinate agents to the Government treasury.<sup>5</sup>

With the advent of the Portuguese rule in the territory, changes occurred, especially in the revenue system of the rice lands. A class of European landholders called "Fazeindeiros" was established over and above the actual tillers, who were now required to pay rent to these landlords at the rate of 50 per cent to 60 percent of their produce. The Fazeindeiros themselves held the land on a quit rent at four per cent of the former rental.<sup>6</sup> The levy paid by the Portuguese Fazeindeiros was extremely low, principally to provide the incentive for reclamation of salt marsh lands.<sup>7</sup>

As for the results of the establishment of Portuguese landlords, accounts by the British officials regarding the position of the tenants, varied. One official, while admitting that the actual cultivator was no more than a tenant at will, however, felt that his position was definitely better off than before. Another suggested that they "were poor wretches worse than vassals". The Gazetteer, while noting these accounts however mendaciously added that the latter's pity seemed to have been aroused by "their (tenants) want of freedom rather than by their want of food and clothes."<sup>8</sup> But both officials were unanimous in their description of the landlords who were "... living in such splendour in fine country houses and... enriched beyond measure."<sup>9</sup>

Contemporaneously, the Marathas, who had ceded Salsette division to the Portuguese, continued the practice of revenue farming, which had begun towards the end of Mughal rule. Large tracts of land were auctioned off to Deshmukhs and Deshpandes,



as before, with the change that instead of giving them rent free izafat villages, they were paid a fixed percentage (6.69%) on their revenue collections.<sup>10</sup>

The Marathas simultaneously created a class of landlords called 'Panderpeshas', who for a time existed side by side with the Portuguese 'Fazeindeiros' in the rich coastal lands. Once the Portuguese had been driven off, most of the lands of the Fazeindeiros were then occupied by these Panderpeshas, who like their predecessors employed tenants at will and kept slaves. These Panderpeshas were usually of the higher castes i.e., Brahmins and Prabhus, who received lands on low rates of assessment, and also held high offices, often acting as agents for the commandants of the hill forts. They also kept slaves largely to till their land.<sup>11</sup>

As for the tribals who were still occupying the larger parts of the upland regions and growing nachni (a coarse grain) some of them had already become the slaves of the Panderpeshas but by and large they continued their own activity - with a difference. The Maratha system of revenue farming and increasing powers to the village headmen had led to exorbitant taxes and levies on the tribals. The tribals suffered much oppression at the hands of patils and talatis.<sup>12</sup>

The first signs of 'begar' (forced labour) had also appeared, largely as a result of the multiple levies imposed on the tribals due to revenue farming and the needs of the Panderpeshas. Its institutionalisation as a part of the production process, however, was to take place only subsequently, under the British rule.

Experiments in Empire

By 1818 the British had established their political sovereignty over Western India, and began the consolidation of their power by establishing a centralised state apparatus and a uniform land settlement.

In Thane district, they inherited two principal problems. On the one hand, a confusing variety of multiple land tax/revenue systems, and on the other a large section of the population, viz., the tribals who not only fell outside the pale of any regular tax/revenue system, but also indulged in frequent "dacoiting" and "gang robberies". "Gang robberies" were frequent as a result of both the increasing hill tillage levied on the tribal produce which in any case was meagre, and secondly, the practice of shifting cultivation, which allowed the tribals a great deal of mobility,

The first ten years of British rule were spent in evolving the method of survey operations itself, and little advance was made apart from the outright abolition of petty taxes.<sup>13</sup> By 1830 survey operations had begun, revenue farmers were replaced by village accountants, unequal assessments were reduced and equalised in order to encourage tillage.<sup>14</sup>

Side by side, the British began their policy of "settling" the tribals. As a part of the policy followed all over the Presidency, "gang robberies"\* were met with utmost severity. At the same time, the various taxes on hill cultivation were abolished and the rates of assessment on tribal lands were

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During the first 12 years of British rule, the hilly region both below and above the Sahyadris were infested with gangs of Bhils and Koli tribals. With their headquarters in the Deccan, they made forays into Thane, aroused the local tribals and caused "widespread alarm". Revolts in Satara district in 1828 were accompanied by simultaneous uprisings in Thane, all of which were put down by British troops.

considerably reduced.<sup>15</sup> The process of settlement was necessitated both from the point of view of the "law and order" problem and increasing the revenue that could accrue to the British if this sizeable section of the population (40 per cent of the total population of the district in 1872<sup>16</sup>) did settle down to the cultivation of virgin lands especially in the interior and hilly regions.

By 1852, Colonel Francis had begun survey operations for the imposition of a uniform land settlement.<sup>17</sup> There was a considerable debate as regards the utility of special tenures. By 1860 when survey operations were nearing an end, however, the Panderpesha tenure was greatly reduced, in terms of the privileges hitherto available and the rates were raised to bring them on par with the rates on the raiyatwari tenures.<sup>18</sup>

Some of the other hitherto existing special tenures, were maintained, but by and large the special tenures were done away with. By the time the first revenue settlement was completed (1862), a uniform land settlement had been imposed. Its principal feature was the recognition of proprietary rights on the land on payment of a revenue generally fixed for thirty years, in cash. The rights of alienation were recognised and cognisable in the courts of law. As a measure of the incentives for the tribals, special privileges were granted for the wilder regions. The tillage of forest lands was lowly charged in terms of a sickle cess, and under a special provision Kathkaris were allowed to till half bigha of land free of charge.<sup>19</sup>

"They Heard, and Came....."

The emergence of a centralised state apparatus that not only legalised the land settlement, but, reproduced the conditions necessary for the maintenance of "law and order" and the perpetuity of the land revenue system, attracted a large number of settlers into the district.

From the Ratnagiri and Deccan areas came the Brahmins as priests to the Lingayat traders and Kunbi peasants; they were to subsequently also provide the personnel for the growing colonial state apparatuses albeit at the lower levels of the hierarchy. The Gujarat or Marwar Brahmins were to serve as priests to the Gujarati and Marwari traders; whereas those from Northern and Central India ended up as messengers, labourers and servants.<sup>20</sup>

The most significant influx was however of the Marwari Vani, a trading community from Rajasthan, Lingayats from South Deccan and Bhatias from Kutch and Gujarat, as traders, moneylenders and shopkeepers.<sup>21</sup>

The significance lay in the fact that not only was the Marwari Vani community to play a dominant role in determining the emerging social formation, but was also the first trading community to enter into the 'wilder' areas of the district even as early as 1830. "Their first general movement into the district followed the very liberal and general reduction of rent that was introduced over the southern and western parts of the district between 1835 and 1838. The reductions left a large margin of profit to the landholder and the Marwari came, advanced money at from 100 to 200 per cent to the husbandmen and sold them up. In 1846, the Collector, Mr. Law noticed that of late the avaricious Marwari had begun to settle down even in the remotest villages."<sup>22</sup>

Alongside the Marwari, the Muslim and the Parsi communities were also to become dominant in terms of both landholding and trading. The difference however, was the latter two communities

were earlier settlers, having entered the district via the coast. The Muslims had settled as traders in timber and grass and the Parsis had entered the liquor business.<sup>23</sup> It was during the British rule that they were to venture into moneylending and thus appropriate lands. They too were to settle in and colonise the wilder regions of the district (viz., Dahanu, Umbergaon)<sup>24</sup> subsequent to the growing importance of Dahanu town as a major halt on the Bombay-Ahmedabad railway line. The Talheri Kunbi found almost entirely in the centre of the district along the basin of the Vaitarna existed as serfs in the days of the Marathas and Portuguese. Under the British rule, and the Raiyatwari settlement many of them became landholders and began to grow rice; a few in the coastal villages had coconut or mango orchards and grew vegetables.<sup>25</sup>

The tribals, constituting 40 per cent of the total population (in 1872) however remained a strong characteristic community of the district. They were (and are) to be found in a considerable number over most parts of the district, except for the richer coastal tracts. Of them, except for the Mahadev Kolis, who came from the Deccan, in the 14th century, all the others, Agris, Varlis, Thakurs, Kathkaris, Dublas, Vaitis, Konkans and Chodiahs were the earliest settlers in the district.<sup>26</sup>

As a result of both the severity with which "gang robberies" were crushed and the easy rates of assessment on varkas (upland) lands, many tribals settled down to regular cultivation, albeit with varying degrees of prosperity, as we shall subsequently see. By 1859-70 the Varlis and some Kathkaris, the two most downtrodden tribals had also begun to grow grass and coarse grain,<sup>27</sup> though the Kathkaris by and large retained their traditional occupation of felling trees and making Catechu.

Enquiries conducted in 1877 by the British authorities showed that the "Kathkaris... were still degraded but Varlis had settled down and some were even prosperous like ordinary husbandmen."<sup>28</sup>

.... and Conquered

On closer examination however, the "prosperity" of the tribals consequent on their taking to regular cultivation, even the process itself, was nothing more than the juridical expression of the real relationship that was inexorably emerging as the basis of the social formation in the district. In other words the process of settling the tribals was nothing but their transformation into tenants of the moneyed section viz., the moneylender-landlord combine.

On the one hand a large number of tribals who took advantage of the reduced rate of assessment to become independent raiyats, had to rely on the local moneylender both for seed capital and consumption loans; the right of alienation legalised the transfer of land to the moneylender, who in a short period of time acquired the status of a landlord. Thus, when grain was advanced for seed, interest equal to the quantity borrowed was generally charged, whereas for consumption loans (khavti) to the tribal, interest in kind, equal to one half the quantity borrowed was payable at the next harvest.<sup>29</sup> The cycle led to the transformation of the tribal into a tenant, since the lands were not fertile as the rice growing coastal lands, being largely uplands where pulses and coarse grain could be grown; thus the meagre produce from the land had to feed not only the tribal family but also pay the revenue and repay the loan. Land pledges by Varlis and other tribals were thus common.<sup>30</sup>

Land alienations were however not the only form through which tenancy was created. The larger land holding raoyats usually let out their lands to tribals, who cultivated it on the payment of a fixed rent. Many became tenants of Brahmin landholders.<sup>31</sup> Varlis, Thakurs become tenants under the "Ardheli" system. Thus "... a landholder allows a Varli to till the land, the owner paying the Government assessment, contributing one-half the seed required and one bullock for the plough, and at harvest time, receiving as rent one half the gross produce..."<sup>32</sup>

In effect, the transformation of the tribal from his place in a natural economy to a regularised colonial economy, from the practice of shifting cultivation purely for consumption purposes, where cash needs were negligible if not nil, and where obligations to an authority higher than the tribal elders (panchayat) was absent, to a regular mode of cultivation where proprietary rights were alienable and cognisable by law, where monetisation marked the whole process of circulation of commodities, where payment of revenue in cash was mandatory, represented a telescopic, almost supra historical leap for the tribal. The process itself undercut the possibility of the tribal turning into an independent peasant proprietor. The absence of any institutional infrastructural facilities like credit, markets, protection against alienation and lack of education rendered the tribal an easy prey to the exploitation by the moneylender and landlord. Dialectically, exploitation was possible only in the measure that the tribals were totally subsumed, turned into a tenant, totally dependent on the moneylender, thus recognising in fact, the

domination of the latter.\*

The process of land transfer and sub-infeudation was aided, by the commercialisation of agriculture that took place all over the Presidency. In Thane district, this implied an increase in the value of rice as a commercial crop outside Thane, and growing importance of grass as a cash crop. One of the principal advantages of "growing" grass is that it requires little attention or capital. Its importance stemmed largely from the growth of the dairy business consequent on the demand for milk in the growing towns both in the district and in Bombay.+

Thus the period 1863-1890 saw a rapid increase in the cultivable area under rice and grass. For instance, between the years 1860-90, about 1,500-1,600 acres of dry crop land were converted into rice lands, in the Mahim taluka of the district.<sup>33</sup> In the Shahapur taluka, 2,295 acres of varkas were converted into rice growing lands.<sup>34</sup> The introduction of the first railway line from Bombay city to Thane town in 1856 and its subsequent expansion also provided the impetus for further commercialisation of and increase in the value of both rice and grass.<sup>35</sup>

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It was precisely the character of the attempts at subsuming the tribal into a given form of exploitation that created its own mechanism of struggle. Tribal revolts in Thane, and more so in other tribal areas, were brutal and violently attacked the moneylender/landlord combine till as late as 1940.

The telescopic leap into a rent based social formation violently transgressed on the tribal consciousness that still visualised a golden age of freedom in the recent past, when they were the "kings of the jungle" (dongarache raja).

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The Island of Bombay came into possession of Great Britain in the year 1664 in the fulfilment of the treaty with Portugal. The population of the island was then put at 10,000 persons. In 1814-15 the population had grown to 2 lakhs, in 1872 it was 6.4 lakhs and in 1901 the population of Greater Bombay was 8.4 lakhs.



A Share of the Spoils for the Empire:

This commercialisation and increase in the area under cash crops provided a justification for the British authorities to increase the revenue by 1890s when 30 years had lapsed since the original settlement in 1863. As the Secretary of State put it in his report to the Governor of Bombay, in Mahim, Panvel and Kalyan, grass and hay constitute a "new and valuable agricultural asset which was hardly in existence at the time of the original settlement."<sup>36</sup> Debates ensued with the result that the increase in the rates and the limits of enhancement was fixed at 33 percent.<sup>37</sup>

To assess the value of the lands and the impact of the new rates, the authorities undertook enquiries into the question of landholdings and transfers. Their findings proved a damp squib to their enthusiasm for an increase in the rates. As the Commissioner for the Northern Division put it,

".... one regrettable feature of the economic condition of the taluka (Mahim)... is the increase in indebtedness and transfer of lands from the cultivating to the moneylending classes, especially so amongst the Varlis. Regarding these peoples, the District Deputy Collector, Mr. Patwardhan has reported that out of 654 occupancies registered in their names not less than 254 have been transferred in the revenue records to the names of the moneylending classes."<sup>38</sup> The character of the lands thus transferred, and of which the "Varlis and other primitive tribes indeed are principal owners" was dry crop lands or varkas lands, the assessment of which was very low.<sup>39</sup> As said earlier, the easy rates of assessment attracted the moneyed from outside with the result that "large areas belonging to the poor and illiterate members of the cultivating classes many of whom consist of Varlis and other primitive tribes, have been bought by the white robed classes at a price most remunera-

tive to the purchaser."<sup>40</sup>

In the case of Shahapur taluka the Collector of Thane Mr. Barrow pointed out in his letter to the Commissioner of the Northern Division, "I doubt that the people of the taluka are generally in a better position than they were 30 years ago, and such information as I have been able to acquire leads me to believe that Mr. Hudson's statement that 'the condition of the people on the whole is good and the lands have remained in the hands of the original occupants to a far greater extent than is the case in some of the other talukas of the district' is open to doubt." "Mr. Orr in his Forest Settlement Report of the taluka, reviewed by the Government in their resolution, came to similar conclusions and the Government in their resolution remarked as follows, 'A very large proportion of the land has passed to rack renting moneylenders and the cultivator gets less than one half of the produce.'<sup>41</sup> The extent of land transfers can be gauged from the table 4. The transfer of lands to the moneyed sections (usually moneylenders and landlords) was simultaneously accompanied by the process of tenancy and as said earlier most of these tenants happened to be tribals who were erstwhile owners of their lands.

In the Mahim taluka, the Assistant Settlement Officer Mr. Hudson noted "a considerable amount of land is held by well to do people who have their headquarters at places like Kalva, Mahim, Tarapur, and Manor and let their lands out on makta to Kolis and Varlis. This <sup>is</sup> especially noticeable in the north-east of the taluka."<sup>42</sup>

For the district as a whole it was noted in 1880 that there were some 9 Khatedars who held more than 1000 acres each, 32 Khatedars who had between 500 and 1000 acres each and 1014 Khatedars with more than 100 acres each. Many of the bigger landowners were non-agriculturists with headquarters in the towns and they rented out their lands. (Table 5)

Table 4: Land Transfers in 1899-1900 in Mahim, Shahapur, Murbad and Wada talukas.  
(Land in acres)

Taluka	Character of land	L a n d t r a n s f e r b y				
		Ordinary sale of land	Sale by Court	Simple mortgage	Mortgage with possession	Sub-leases of land
<u>Mahim</u>	K+V	485.4	110.8	663.3	314.9	547.4
	K	96.9	11.8	99.8	126.1	69.5
	V	144.3	-	37.7	95.7	142.5
	B	12.4	-	7.0	8.1	22.4
	B+K	-	-	5.2	15.9	8.9
	K+V+B	-	-	-	17.7	16.2
	Total	739.0	122.6	813.0	578.4	806.9
<u>Shahapur</u>	V	102.2	-	221.9	-	-
	R+V	1072.0	341.7	1352.1	1130.3	813.2
	R	19.3	-	10.0	20.1	5.2
	Total	1193.5	341.7	1584.0	1150.4	818.4
<u>Murbad</u>	Total	743.0	35.0	1184.0	931.0	-
<u>Vada</u>	Total	1468.5	91.8	2045.3	1532.5	-

Note: K = Kharif, V = Varkas, R = Rice, B = Bagait.

Source: Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government - New series, papers relating to the Revision Survey - Settlement of Mahim taluka (1900), Shahapur taluka (1899), Murbad taluka (1895), Vada taluka (1899).

Table 5: Distribution of Khatedars in Thane District  
(1878-79)

Size of landholding (acres)	No. of Khatedars
Upto 5	52678
5 - 10	13602
10 - 20	11982
20 - 50	9057
50 - 100	2335
100 - 200	722
200 - 500	292
500 - 1000	32
Above 1000	9
Total	90709
Average size of holding (acres)	11.5

Source: Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Thana District, 1882.

According to the 1891 census for Shahapur taluka including Mokhada petha (a largely tribal populated area), the division of the agricultural population was as shown in table 6.

The process of land alienation and increasing tenancy, and the high rentals on varkas lands did not however deter the British authorities from raising the rates of assessment.

As a matter of fact, the recognition of the process was seen, not as a problem to be solved in favour of the tribals and others who were losing land, but as the *raison d'etre* for raising the rates of assessment. As the commissioner for Shahapur put it, it was precisely the high rentals demanded by superior holders of their tenants at will that provided ample justification for the fact that "government are entitled to

share in the increased prosperity," and therefore "an enhancement of the present assessment is justified."\*43

Table 6: Livelihood Pattern of Agricultural Population in Shahapur taluka.

Number per 100 of general population				
1) Population having interest in land				
Land occupants not cultivating	Land occupants cultivating	Tenant sharers cultivating	Others	Total
0.48	36.07	23.33	0.17	60.05
2) Labourers				
Farm Servants	Field labourers & crop watchers			Total
2.30	14.01			16.31

Source: Papers relating to the Revision Survey Settlement of Shahapur taluka, 1899.

The Survey Commissioner and Director of Land Records and Agriculture in his recommendation to the Secretary and Government suggested that "... the main basis for the increase in rates is not the improvement in the life of the

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In 1899-1900 it was noted that in Mahim taluka the respective average rates of assessment per acre and the rate for which land was sublet were Rs. 1-0-9 and Rs. 3-5-4- for Kharif + varkas lands and 0-2-0 and Rs. 1-13-0 for varkas land. The rent was thus 3.18 times assessment rate for Kharif + varkas lands while it was 14.44 times in the case of varkas lands.

people only, but the more or less tentative imposition of original rates. If what the Acting Collector says is correct and people are rack rented by the village usurers and others, it would appear that the original rates were so low as to leave room for oppressive sub-leases. That means that the lessors are getting too much of the produce of the soil and that the Government should get more."<sup>44</sup> (emphasis ours)

Some opposition to the logic of this argument came from an official when he noted that [Mr Hudson] "... is dealing only with the coast and railway villages. Had he collected similar data for the eastern villages, he would have probably found a greater percentage of profit to the lessor, which by no means meant that the land was assessed much below its value but that the lessee (in any case the registered occupant) was compelled to pay an exorbitant rent to his sowcar irrespective of the assessment on the land."<sup>45</sup> (emphasis ours)

The occasional glimpses into the reality of the situation, were however not to stand in the way of the logic of colonialism, itself. The British colonial government viewed the whole problematic in terms of its own need to acquire and centralise around itself the growing surplus extracted from the peasant. The overriding attention was not on the plight of the tribals whose lands were being taken away, but the fact that it was the moneylender/landlord who was the principal beneficiary in the whole process. As the Superintendent, Konkan Revenue Survey wrote to his chief in Bombay "The low rating of the villages in the north-east part of the taluka at the original settlement was probably due to the country in that part being more malarious and land cultivated and owned about that time by the wilder tribes of Kolis and Varlis; but in view of the facts reported by the Collector and sent on to you with my letter..., the lands having passed into the hands of the wealthier classes, the reason for assessing these lands abnormally low at Rs.2-3 per acre does

not exist."<sup>46</sup> This then, principally, provided the justification for the increased rates of assessment, notwithstanding the belated observation that the "Governor in Council admits that the backward conditions and inaccessibility of many parts of the taluka, and of the whole of Mokhada Petha, necessitate the most scrupulous moderation of assessment."<sup>47</sup>

The King is Dead, Long Live the King...

The process of peasantisation of the tribal and the simultaneous subsumption into a tribute paying formation was accompanied by a process of depriving the tribal of the alternate means of livelihood i.e., forest produce.

Increasingly, the practice of carting forest produce for sale to the towns and village markets came into conflict with the needs of British colonialism. The demand for timber began to increase consequent on the introduction of British rule and increased with the growth of towns and railways.

Specifically the contradiction manifest itself in terms of the traditional right of the tribal to the forest produce (including the rights of non-tribal villages staying near forests to communal forest lands for grazing purposes) a right that had led to the popular notion that the Adivasis were "Dongarache Raja, Junglache Raja" (King of Jungle) and the newly acquired power of the British sanctified in the legal apparatuses of the State (and thus mystified?) to appropriate the wealth of the forest for distribution as they pleased.

On the face of it, the crisis was put in terms of conservancy vis-a-vis wasteful use. The principal reason for the institution of the Forest Commission in 1885 was to "secure the efficient management of forests believing that the conservancy of forest and the maintenance of the

Crown is beneficial to the interests of the people in providing a continuous supply of timber."<sup>48</sup>

In a sense, the Commission and its recommendations can be seen as a logical culmination of the struggle between the local bureaucracy to curb the rights of the tribals and the latter's reaction to them. As the Commission continued "... convinced that where friction has arisen in the management of forests especially in Thane, such friction is due to a misunderstanding, which can be removed."<sup>49</sup>

..... But Not Without a Fight

Historically, prior to the British rule, there were no "record of practice of former governments with respect to preservation of timber in the Konkan district." Some restrictions were imposed on cutting valuable timber. But "the inhabitants were allowed to obtain all the produce they required for domestic and agricultural purposes from public forests without let or hindrance."<sup>50</sup>

In the first few decades of British rule specifically till 1839, a tax on timber was levied and collected by the Land Customs Department.<sup>51</sup> In 1841, the first prohibitory order for cutting trees was issued by the Collector of Thane, consequent on his opinion that the forests were being exhausted due to irregular exploitation, and reckless cutting from "Government forests."<sup>52</sup> The prohibitory order was amended in 1845-6 when Mr. Law, the Collector of Thane demarcated and assigned to each village a timber reserve proportional to the size of the village.

The main source of revenue for the British at this time was collections under the jungle fee system. One of the harmful effects of this system was the indiscriminate felling of trees once the fee had been paid, by contractors from outside the



district, who often employed local labourers to fell trees. The influx of outsiders, as it were, irked the trading class such that in 1851, some merchants of Sanjan taluka (later named Dahanu), shipped about 300 Varlis to Bombay and gathered them on the steps of the Council Hall in order to "coerce the Government into a repeal of the jungle-fee scheme. Tensions built up to the extent that when a Forest Conservancy official toured Sanjan in 1852 in order to make a final settlement he was surrounded by some thousands of Varlis, "all of them in the same object and little disposed to stop short even of personal violence."<sup>53</sup>

In 1860-67 largely as a result of local pressure, the jungle-fee scheme was abolished, but "owing to growing scarcity of timber and extensive demand for wood of all descriptions for buildings and railways," strict conservancy was introduced, a measure to be enforced by the newly created local Forest Department, which also undertook the responsibility of felling trees. In 1863, a Committee of revenue and forest officers was appointed to inquire into the report on the rights of the tribals and others to the forest produce in Thana. The Committee came to the conclusion that there were no private rights that any section of the population enjoyed, but that certain privileges could be granted.<sup>54</sup> The exact character of privileges were not spelt out, thereby leaving them to the discretion of the local Forest and Revenue Officer.

Side by side the enforcement of conservation created its own dialectic. Traditional practices of felling trees by tribals and non-tribals were curbed; and as numerous petitions to the Government put it, large areas of old free pasture land were wrongly included in the forest limits.<sup>55</sup> Arbitrary action was taken by the local forest Department and Commissioner and the judiciary; on the

slightest pretext of breaking conservancy rules heavy fines were imposed.

In 1882 for instance, the annual Conference of Forest Commissioners in Thane decided that the ryots had no claim to forest produce or any rights therein, and when the tribals exercising their traditional right continued to claim forest produce, they were prosecuted under the Forest Act and criminally sentenced before any settlement had taken place.<sup>56</sup>

The participation of the judiciary was clear when the local District Magistrate of Thane Mr. Mullock directed the local subordinate Magistrates by a writte order, that, on conviction for a forest offence the accused not be furnished with copies of the findings, even if demanded. The grounds stated for such an order were that "there was no provision in the Act or in the High Court circular orders to the effect that such copies should be given to the accused."<sup>57</sup> The High Court intervened in its extraordinary jurisdiction, consequent on the petition by various associations formed for the purposes, and quashed all the proceedings of the lower courts as illegal. But this did not deter the local magistracy and forest officials who substituted in place of the Forest Act, executive and departmental action under the Land Revenue Code.<sup>58</sup>

Reaction to the high handedness of the British authorities reached its high point when in 1885, a small brochure known as the "Red Pamphlet", (owing to its blood red cover) was published in Bombay by an anonymous writer. It received wide popularity and was distributed all over the district, describing in forcible terms the straits to which "the cruel grasping and relentless forest policy of Mr. Shuttleworth, the Conservator of Forests, W.Circle, had reduced the Thane ryot."<sup>59</sup>

The pamphlet was well timed since it followed a memorial submitted by the Thane Forest Association in 1884 which highlighted the grievances of forest villages in Thane. The debates

caused by these two pamphlets and the various petitions submitted over the preceding years prompted the government to appoint the Forest Commission in 1885.

Recommendations of the Forest Commission:

The most significant recommendation of the Commission that was accepted and continued as the practice till 1947, was the establishment of Forest Coupes.

Under this system, forest of each taluka or mahal was divided into blocks varying in number and size. It was calculated that a forest attains full growth in 40 years; so each block was subdivided into 40 compartments or coupes, one of which was to be cut every year in rotation; so that by the time all had had their turn, the first was ready for another cutting. In this way, it was hoped that the block was never entirely denuded. The coupes were nearly equal, an area of about 50 acres on an average, while a block comprised about 2000 acres.

After the demarcation, each coupe was auctioned off to the highest bidder in the month of August. Cutting was allowed from the 1st of September till the 1st of May the following year, by which time the coupe was closed for ten years, and no one was allowed to cut except by permission.<sup>60</sup> Alongside, the Forest Commission also recommended that special privileges be granted to the tribals to collect gratis dead wood (headloads) of certain types specified in detail, only for home consumption. They were also to be allowed to cut grass and collect deadwood for sale, free of charge, in the Protected and unclosed portions of Reserved Forests and in closed portions also with the previous permission of the Divisional Forest Officer.

Also wood of common description, gratis, were granted for construction of or repairs to, their huts.<sup>61</sup>

The coupe system and its introduction marked the more or less complete control of the British over the forests and their produce. That the privileges granted to the tribals (also for non-tribals) were merely incidental and likely to be rendered meaningless with the growth of the coupe system was obvious from two implications.

That the privileges were incidental is clear from the sweeping observation by the Forest Commissioner that "thousands of families of cultivators and labourers of aboriginal descent have long since abandoned a nomadic life, and cannot now be distinguished except as regards their origin, from the ordinary settled population of the district. For instance a very large proportion of the Kokanis, Varlis, Ramoshis, Bhils, Vadars etc., are either cultivators or agricultural labourers and can no more be correctly called wild tribes than the Kunbis." It however recognised that some are still nomadic living principally by collecting forest produce for barter or sale..." the Katkaris are especially of this class."<sup>62</sup>

The above observation of the Commission was however to be proved wrong time and again, to the extent that although the tribal may have become peasantised, the jungle and his right over its produce was to remain a strong element in his consciousness, signifying both independence and a right.

The coupe system on the other hand was to prove not only the total control by the British over forest resources but as we shall see later, it was to impinge on the rights of the nomadic tribe recognised as such, by the Forest Commission. It was the coupe system, that was to lead to the total enslavement of the Katkaris by the unscrupulous contractors.

Forfeiture of Forest Rights:

In 1896, the Collector of Thane, Mr. R.E. Candy issued a notification in July withdrawing all forest privileges.<sup>63</sup> The reasons given, for the removal, were that the privileges were abused with the result that State forests were suffering losses. And as the Collector put it in the notification, in any case the coupe system was working well enough, for the tribals to get employment in.<sup>64</sup> It was further stated that any one breaking the prohibitory order would suffer punishment of jail for six months and fines upto Rs.500 or both.<sup>65</sup>

Reaction to the notification took place at three levels, with each interfacing with the other. At the local level, a Shetkari Sabha was formed, and a deputation of Varlis, Katkaris and other forest tribes numbering 2,000 persons marched upon the District Collector, demanding removal of the notification.<sup>66</sup> When the petition and the deputation were refused a hearing, there was considerable tension. A few days later Varlis and Katkaris went on riots in Dahanu and Bassein.<sup>67</sup> Matters reached a head when Mr. Candy issued yet another notification threatening to fire upon any assembly gathered for purposes of demonstration.<sup>68</sup>

Yet at another level, the liberal Poona Sarvojanik Sabha took up the issue in its Quarterly Journal. In its July-Oct 1896 issue it said, "No branch of administration is so tyrannical as the Forest Department. Not content with appropriating thousands of private holdings by including them in State forests the Department is continuously encroaching upon the rights of the people most of which are absolutely necessary for their subsistence or beneficial enjoyment of their property."<sup>69</sup>

While accepting the coupe system, its principal argument remained one of accommodation. It posed the question of justice, when it suggested that till the coupes

had not been completely marked and distributed, privileges should continue. As for the argument in the notification that the coupes provided employment for wild tribes, the Sarvajanik Sabha suggested that small as the number of existing coupes was, the number that such coup could employ was still smaller. This was so, since in actual practice, cutting operations began in September and were over by November and by December the material was stacked in the depots. Secondly, estimates showed that roughly 40-45 people were enough to work the coupes and even so, there was no guarantee that all were tribals, even though the Forest Commission had suggested that they should be given the monopoly in this kind of work.<sup>70</sup> Besides, as it pointed out, the collection of deadwood from the coupes by the tribals was dependent to a large degree on the whims and fancies of the contractors.<sup>71</sup> The result was that not only were the tribals deprived of all privileges, but were left dependent for their employment on the forest contractors.<sup>72</sup>

The attitude of the Government at Bombay was clear from the reaction of yet another section of the intelligentsia. In answer to a question raised by Mr. I.U.Yajnik in the Bombay Council on the issue of notification by the Collector, the Government curtly replied that although it was aware of newspaper reports on the matter, nothing had reached the ears of Government through the official channels.<sup>73</sup>

Although it would seem then that the Government was unwilling to discuss the question raised in the Council, thus denying any effectivity to the Commission, in fact, the agitations in Thane by the Varlis and the propaganda by the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha had alarmed it, enough to issue an order suspending Mr. Candy's notification, temporarily.

Item: "Hand in clasped hand and side pressed close to side

Silently stand some children of the poor

And shyly, hungry eyes half-turned aside,

Observe the cater through the open door."<sup>74</sup>

There are strong motives compelling the Government to rescind Mr. Candy's notification. For one, the agitation of the Varlis received an impetus by an accompanying agitation against the forced extraction of the land revenue in a famine stricken year. As Mr. Khare on behalf of Mr. B.G. Tilak said in the Council, forced extraction of land revenue on threat of confiscation of lands was a common feature in the Umbergaon Petha of Dahanu taluka. This as Mr. Khare pointed out, was contrary to the Famine Code which allowed a remission of the revenue in times of famine.<sup>75</sup> The agitation was nothing more than the distribution of a handbill outlining in the vernacular, the contents of the Famine Code and some Government resolutions dealing with relief works, tagai advances etc. Three persons from Umbergaon were arrested distributing these pamphlets,<sup>76</sup> their arrest being an indication of the alarm caused by the widespread popularity that the pamphlet received, among the raoyats. On examining the handbill, however, the local magistrate ordered their release.<sup>77</sup>

This year (1896) being a famine year, Sabha activists had toured various parts of Bombay Presidency to evaluate the magnitude of the famine and the effects on the peasant. As their activists from Dahanu and Umbergaon reported, although the taluka was not hit by famine conditions as such, nevertheless there was an extreme scarcity of drinking water. Besides the forest tribes had been most badly hit by the near famine conditions. As the activists reported, there were three principal crops in Dahanu taluka - Kharif, Varkas and Rabi. The latter two crops on which nearly 40,000 people live had failed that year; to add to their problems, Mr. Candy's notification had prohibited the carting and sale of dead wood. As the activists put it, near starvation conditions prevailed.<sup>78</sup>

Peasantisation of Tribals Continues:

Although the Government had agreed temporarily to allow the tribals the privileges earlier granted, the trend was clear. On the one hand, and increasingly so, the tribal would have to seek employment with the coupe if he was to have anything to do with forest produce. The implications and results of working for coupe contractors, we shall study somewhat later. On the other hand, the closure of forests, as it were, left the tribal with no other choice but to 'peasantise' himself; in effect this meant his transformation into a tenant. That this led to the alienation of his lands, was one of the principal reasons for the introduction of the impartible tenure for tribals in 1906. According to a Government resolution passed that year, plots of woodland were to be given to the tribals (and any other who wished it) on a non-alienable tenure. But the process of domination of the tribals, via a tribute paying formation had already entrenched itself, and any Government legislation at this stage hardly made any difference to its further intensification and perpetuation.

The situation caused sufficient alarm for J.D. Atkins, the Commissioner for the Northern Division, to say "Another matter worth noting is the large extent to which land has passed and is passing into the hands of non-agriculturist classes in the Thana district, and the small extent to which, except in the remote forest sub-divisions of Vada and Mokhada agriculturists are found to be in possession of land which is their own."<sup>79</sup> To emphasise the magnitude of the problem he appended a letter from Mr. Madgavkar the Acting Collector of Thane who wrote "The process of land passing into the hands of the non-agriculturists sowkar landlords - Parsis, Brahmins, Baniyas and Marwaris - from the actual cultivation of the soil continues."<sup>80</sup>

In 1913-14 it was noted that "In Surat and Thane, numerous instances came to notice in which a poor cultivator was put up by a sowkar to obtain land cheap..."<sup>81</sup>



Of the various districts in the Northern Division, the area held by non-agriculturists was the largest in Thane district by 1913-14. About 40 per cent of the land was held by the non-agriculturists in Thane district while the corresponding proportion in other districts like Surat, Broach was around 20 per cent.

#### War and After:

The last year of the First World War, 1917-18 was particularly bad. The mobilisation of agricultural produce for war needs had created not only a general scarcity, but a profitable situation for the traders and merchants, who capitalising on the situation compounded the scarcity, by hoarding and thus raising prices of essential commodities. "The prices of foodstuffs which were already considerably above normal rose still further slowly upto April, after which they went up by leaps and bounds. The importation of rice from Bombay (into a rice growing area!) under the Controller of Prices checked the rise in price of rice for a while only..." "The price of salt has doubled and attempts to bring it under control did not meet with success. The rates of grass have risen considerably..."<sup>82</sup> "The local aristocracy, the businessmen, the contractors and the salt, timber and grass merchants have made considerable profits. Cultivators have received better prices for their crops and where they own their own land have not done badly."<sup>83</sup>

The latter was a moot point. Who was the cultivator owning land and what proportion of the agricultural population did he constitute? Apart from this, it is possible that the "ownership" of land was seen purely as a legal phrase. Considering the fact that earlier reports had mentioned the widespread influence of usury capital, it is possible to conjecture that even the "legal" owners were in effect tenants, in as much as a large portion of their produce was syphoned off by the sowkar by way of debt redemption.

Table 7: Land Held by Agriculturists and Non-Agriculturists  
in Northern Division of Bombay Presidency (1913-14)

District	Area of land held by agri- culturists (acres)	Area of land held by non- agricultu- rists (acres)	Total area (acres)	Percentage of land held by non- agricultur- ists in the total area
Ahmedabad	517,578	213,791	731,369	29.2
Kaira	550,559	152,047	702,606	21.6
Panch Mahal	265,423	52,574	317,997	16.5
Broach	465,972	124,807	590,779	21.1
Surat	571,840	155,420	727,260	21.4
Thana	595,917	414,868	1,010,785	41.0

Source: Land Revenue Administration Report of the Bombay Presidency including Sind, for the year 1913-14.

The table 8 gives a vivid picture of the proportion of "owner" of land, by 1921. The increasing land concentration in favour of the landlords that the above table implies had its repercussion on the payment of revenue itself. As it so transpired, it was largely the landlords who constituted the principal defaulters in payment of revenue. Thus in 1922-23, out of 915 cases of penalty under Section 148 of Land Revenue Code in the whole Northern Division, Kaira and Thane were responsible for 119 and 483 cases respectively. "In Thane this measure had to be resorted to as a warning to absentee landlords to pay dues in time."<sup>84</sup> The situation took a turn for the worse by 1925-26 when out of 1,316 cases of penalty, Thane was responsible for 1,017, most of which were found to be necessary as a warning again to absentee landlords.<sup>85</sup> In 1931-36, the number of cases had increased to 1,576 out of which Thane was responsible for 930, out of which in 13 cases lands were forfeited.<sup>86</sup>

That the increasing number of defaulters of revenue in Thane were absentee landlords does not point to their inability to pay. As a matter of fact, the share appropriated by the landlords by way of rent from the tenants constituted the major portion of the peasant's produce.

In 1938\*, an official had this to say "... An average rent approximately works out between slightly over one third and slightly under one half of the produce of the land.. In any case I find that the rental are now too high and it is certain that

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Even as early as 1882, it was noted that "Under the contract system, a Varli agrees to rent a piece of land from the owner [usually one of the big landowners] and to pay a certain quantity of grain at harvest time. He has to probably borrow seed and grain to eat during the rains. He also hires ploughs and bullocks. All borrowed grain he has to repay at harvest time with at least 50% interest, so that between maintenance, rent and bullock hire, his share of crop is small. In the dry season there is very little demand for labour in Dahanu and Varlis are hard pressed for a living."

they do not leave the cultivator sufficient for his livelihood even for half the year... Rentals which do not leave enough for the maintenance of the tenants are extortionate."<sup>87</sup>

Quite apart from the fact that rack renting by its very term, keeps the total produce of the peasant at a deficit level, its significance lies in the fact that at a particular stage of development of society and under certain given historical conditions, it constitutes the principal and determining form of surplus appropriation by the dominant classes. In turn it defines, by its principality, the character of the classes involved in the relations of production, and their place in the production process itself.

If this is so, then the reproduction of this system represents the attempts by the landlord to subsume the tenants directly under his dominance. The rack renting, that was described earlier, can perhaps be viewed then, as one of the aspects of the subsumption process. But rack renting, though it may even appropriate three-fourths of the produce does not in itself suffice to subsume the tenants. In order to ensure the reproduction of the landlords' position, and taking into account his relative distance from the production process, he resorts also to extra-economic coercion to subsume the tenant and the direct producer. These extra economic forms of coercion take political and ideological form.

Veth Begar:

Forced labour (= veth begar) whereby the tribal was under compulsion to labour in the manner directed by the landlord assumed two forms. Varlis often had to borrow either grain or cash to live, and in the bargain they pledged their labour for a term, which often developed into lifelong servitude. As a result of life long servitude on account of marriage expenses borne by the landowner, the future generations were also often bonded, to serve the landowners.<sup>88</sup> For example, to raise a loan of Rs.40/- towards the marriage expenses, the Varli would pledge his labour for a minimum of 10-12 years at a wage rate of Rs.4/- per year. If the repayment was in cash, the interest would be compounded, which the landowner/sowkar often enforced in courts; the rules about excessive rates of interest were all too easily evaded. Under this system, the tribal [ called Lagnagadi = marriage slave ] remained bonded.<sup>89</sup>

By 1903-04 there was "... hardly a khatedar paying as much as Rs. 50/- assessment who has not five or six servants. They are of course mostly Kolis and Warlis. Very frequently they bind themselves for life...."<sup>90</sup>

Who were the landowners to whom the Varlis had bonded their labour? Some of the Parsi, Marwari, Bania and Brahmin money-lender-landlords had turned agriculturists. Many more, however, only supervise the agricultural operations which are carried out by the original owners who have now been reduced to the condition of permanent servants or a kind of serf.<sup>91</sup> (emphasis in original) "A large number of the tribe who once owned land have parted with them in favour of the Sahukar class, whose tenants they continue to be. If large majority of them are servants, often servants of some rich moneylender or Kunbis, to whom they have pledged their labour or have had their labour pledged by their fathers for 12-15 years in consideration of having marriage expenses paid."<sup>92</sup>

The above quotations give us an inkling that alongside tenancy the sowkar/landlords also undertook cultivation by a "feudally subjugated forced labour."<sup>93</sup> (Kautsky) Although rent remained the determining form of surplus appropriation, and the landlord-tenant relation the dominant one, yet side by side cultivation with the feudally subjected labour was not uncommon; especially so, where landlords undertook cultivation of rice, and maintained fruit gardens.

The 1921 Census Commissioner noted "At this census I decided to make an attempt to get at the figures of the agricultural labourers - for the most part called Halis who are not employed at their own convenience on wages, but are maintained, usually hereditarily as permanent estate servants by the larger landlords - furnished by these with homes and food, and not regarded as in a position to resign service and seek any other occupation."<sup>94</sup> The Census Commissioner on this question however came in for a rude shock when the returns showed only 2 "indentured labour"<sup>95</sup> for Thane district. The ridiculous census returns led the Commissioner to suggest that in Thane "... there are many of these serfs in the coastal region especially to the North; but it would seem that the landlords were sufficiently powerful and enterprising to secure that they should not be returned by designations which in the census office could be classified to this sub-group."<sup>96</sup> (emphasis ours)

Tenants were forced to work on landlords' fields as and when needed by the landlord. "At the critical period of agricultural season when the rain breaks the cultivators are forced to be present on the landlord's fields; work on their own rented fields is postponed and their crops suffer substantial damage."<sup>97</sup> All jungle tract tenants who cultivate lands are liable to be called upon to work for their landlords, "for as many days as are necessary for the

landlord's requirements."<sup>98</sup>

"If they refuse or procrastinate, they are liable to assault or beatings. These are of common occurrences and are usually carried out by the landlords' local agents. I was told, on creditable authority, of men being tied up to posts and whipped. There are also rumours of men in the past having been killed."<sup>99</sup>

Quite apart from the force and violence used on the tenants as a class, individualised and personal violence perpetuated by the landlords was not uncommon. For instance, it was a common feature, for Varlis to shave off their heads except for a tuft of hair which they grew rather long. Landlords often beat the tribal tenant or serf by holding him by this tuft of hair. In one case, "A certain landlord wished to alter the boundary between his land and a tenant's. His intention was to encroach on the tenant's land in order to extend his own. The peasant would not submit to this. So the landlord called him to his house, tied his long hair to his toe and whipped the doubled up Varli on the back. This form of torture always brought about a quick surrender... the poor peasant in this case also yielded. "That's better", said the landlord. The next time you decide to disagree with me, I'll take your life."<sup>100</sup>

Personalised violence for the purpose of maintaining the domination of a class works best, when it is inflicted on the women of the dominated class. "The Varli women were not spared from torture either..." "the landlords considered their tenants' wives and the wives of their debt slaves to be their own personal property. They firmly believed that they had the hereditary right to enjoy these women whenever it pleased them so."<sup>101</sup> So common were the violations of the women that "a special name was given to their progeny. They were called "watlas", a special caste."<sup>102</sup>

One unique instance of coercion was to utilise the importance of liquor in the tribal life. "All the toddy shopkeepers in the forest area earn their living by selling toddy to Varli and other

forest tribes... Taking advantage of their passion for toddy drinking, landlords even got to the extent of encouraging them to borrow money for drinking purposes. They naturally prefer their tenants to be always involved in heavy debts from which they cannot be redeemed in their (tenants') life time." "...landlords... take utmost advantage of the Varli's fondness for toddy by exacting labour from them by offering a gallon or two of toddy worth only 4 annas in exchange for labour which would have cost them a rupee."<sup>103</sup>

There were two agencies through which the landlords/ moneylenders ensure the reproduction of these forms of extra economic coercion. There were firstly, "the local government offices, and secondly, the privately employed foreman, Bhaiya and others.\* From among the Government officers, "the middle rung officers like the Mamlatdar, the circle inspectors, the Talathi, the police inspector and officers of the forest department, were always honoured guests in the houses and bungalows of the landlords..."<sup>104</sup>

In short, in Thane, there grew a social formation, which was an ensemble of various articulated levels; principally and determining instance was exploitation through ground rent. Side by side was the cultivation of rice and fruit gardens through a feudally subjugated forced labour. If subsumption of the tenant in a rent paying formation was a necessary condition for the reproduction of ground rent as a form of exploitation, the monopoly over land and credit were the sufficient conditions. The acquisition of monopoly of land implied its increasing concentration and in turn the reproduction of the whole formation at a more oppressive level.

A picture of the land distribution in 1936-37,<sup>105</sup> and concentration in the hands of the landlords can be had from the table 9.



Table 8: Distribution of Agricultural Population in Thane district by Livelihood Class (1921)

Livelihood Class	Total workers and dependents	W o r k e r s	
		Male	Female
Rent receiving landowners	13028	3905	1768
Cultivating owners	126663	42225	31420
Cultivating tenants	170729	58778	43629
Unclassified cultivators	106487	19816	17654
Farm servants and field labourers	153202	53818	50552
Of these indentured labour	3	2	-

Source: Census of India, 1921, Vol VIII, Bombay Presidency Part II.

Table 9: Land Holdings in Thane district by Size Class in 1936-37.

Size Class of Landholding (in acres)	Class A		Class B		Class C	
	No. of holders	Area held	No. of holders	Area held	No. of holders	Area held
Upto 5	51326	98439	834	1676	7253	14825
5-15	10686	94021	521	3464	2839	26098
15-25	3687	60230	216	3878	1164	23169
25-100	3302	113642	595	14992	1996	88275
100-500	370	32487	260	27243	751	162060
500+	5	4238	32	32329	101	97738
Total	69376	403057	2458	83582	14104	412165

Class A - Those who cultivate themselves.

Class B - Those who cultivate with hired labour.

Class C - Those who do not cultivate and receive rent in kind or cash.

Source: Land Revenue Administration Report of the Bombay Presidency 1936-37.

It will be noticed that as the landholding size increases the proportion of land held by the rent receivers increases. Thus in the size groups of 100 acres onwards, the class of rent receivers held more than 70 per cent of the land.

In the case of tribals even where the tribals did possess land, the size of holdings was small. K.J. Save, while studying the Varlis, rarely came across a Varli landlord, except for two. Of them, one was a drunkard, an old man of 60 years; he had leased out some land to fellow Varlis, a good deal however was mortgaged to the sowkar. And inspite of his being a landlord the women in his family worked as casual labourers at the neighbouring sowkar's lands.<sup>106</sup>

Of those who had lands, Save found that many were the woodlands or gurcharan plots given them by the Government, under the impartible tenure and woodland scheme introduced in 1901. But the scheme had not worked well\* with the Varlis and not many were enthusiastic for such plots. This was so, according to Save, because not only were the tribals ignorant as to the procedure involved in acquiring them, but more often than not, the landlords through their agents or the talathi of the villages would create difficulties in the way of these people acquiring these plots, for obvious reasons.

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In 1934 it was recorded that in Thane district as a whole only 58 acres and 12 gunthas were occupied under impartible tenure.<sup>89</sup>

Initial Response - A Primitive Consciousness:

It has often been suggested that the tribals remained mute, helpless before and in the culture of repression. Surprisingly even the veteran Kisan Sabha leader G. Parulekar suggests that "the whole community [the tribals] lived a dead life...[the] illiterate, helpless creatures... did not know that they had a right to live as human beings. Self-respect was unknown to them."<sup>107</sup> (emphasis ours).

It is difficult to conceive that any people, under any circumstance could allow themselves to live a dead life, helplessly and most of all lose self respect. Indeed one can believe that under any circumstance, man always resists the pressures on him only in order to retain a modicum of self respect. Sociologically, this implies that the conservation and reproduction of existing relations of production and exploitation by the dominant class is sanctioned by various instances and at various structural levels - (economic, political and ideological) - so dialectically will the exploited class through multiple instances oppose their total subsumption both at the material and ideological level. Both sides of the phenomena and the instances and levels represented therein are placed in the field of class struggle.

In this light, then, we begin the evaluation of tribal reaction to the culture of repression much earlier than the emergence of the peasant organisation in 1945. For us then, 1945 and the formation of the Kisan Sabha represents a critical transformation of an existing consciousness that was in essence antagonistic to the dominant classes.

To begin with, one of the most primitive form was to counter attack with the same if not greater physical violence, either individually or in gangs. But individual attacks on landlords, were by and large few. In one case, in the village of Kochai, Dahanu taluka, a particularly brutal landlord called Cochaiwalla, was murdered along with his leading henchmen by a few tribals.

The leading tribal was branded a criminal and sentenced to 7 years rigorous imprisonment.<sup>108</sup>

A more common form of rebellion was to flee. This was common amongst the Kathkaris who mostly worked in the forests as labourers for the unscrupulous forest coupe contractors. Quite a few Varlis who worked with the contractors fled to avoid any more oppression. But the penalty they paid if caught, and more often than not they were, was terrible and inhuman. Recalcitrant Kathkaris were caught and often burnt alive in the presence of family and friends as lessons for future recalcitrant and stubborn Kathkaris.<sup>109</sup>

#### Other Forms of Resistance:

"A Varli loathes steady work. From time immemorial they had to work very little and the result of this is that laziness has been the trait of the tribe. He does not take pains during the summer either to level his field or to construct proper bunds for the same. Many a Varli does not possess his own bullocks. The quality of the seed is not fine, the fields are not properly ploughed. All these factors combined to bring a meagre crop to him. He is satisfied with whatever little he gets which has made him most unambitious and checked his very progress."<sup>110</sup>

Looked at from a critical point of view, once the production relations between landlord-tenant are defined, the laziness of the tribal tenant or labourer may perhaps be seen as a deliberate weapon that is used to preserve, materially, one's labour power and ideologically, one's self respect. If the converse were true, and the tribal did work harder and become ambitious, the fruits would in any case go to the landlord, by way of increased rent share or other illegal exactions. As G. Parulekar pointed

out, "The landlords claimed shares in every single thing that grew on the peasants' land, be it pulses like arhar, urad and beans etc. If the peasant seemed unwilling to give shares of these, then the landlord demanded more paddy." "... If the peasants grew vegetables like gourds, cucumbers and pumpkins on their own lands, they had to give all these to the landlord."<sup>111</sup> Knowing this as a matter of the daily 'lived reality' the tribal would rather not grow anything, than have the produce of his labour appropriated by the landlords. Thus laziness, lack of ambition etc. In the whole ensemble of class struggle that ensued between the landlord and the tribal tenant/bonded labourer, the attempts at subsuming both the individual and his labour in the given social formation, are resisted and challenged by counter attempts by the exploited class to preserve and repose within itself, not the fruits of labour (in which case then the struggle acquires different connotations) but the labour itself. In a sense, then, laziness, lack of ambition, unintelligent minds, the lack of desire "...to improve their lot by having lands of their own,"<sup>112</sup> represent aspects and instances of the most elemental form of class struggle.

Its elemental character derives from the passive rejection (boycott) of the 'place' that the tribal occupies either as a tenant or a bonded labourer.

If the Kisan Sabha leaders could mobilise the Varlis so rapidly both in terms of time and space, the reasons are not to be found merely in the response to a tangible force (Kisan Sabha) visible to the Varlis, but the transformation of a consciousness hitherto existent amongst the Varlis - the most degraded of the cultivating tribals - that represented two things. On the one hand, it represented the conscious realisation that the dominant class could no longer appropriate the fruits/produce of its labour, and secondly, that the material weapon through which this consciousness could find reflection in actual practice was

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the Kisan Sabha. Passive rejection of their place as agents in the given relations of production, they had moved on to the terrain of active transformation of the same given relations of production. If hitherto they had merely preserved their 'self respect', now they were asserting it.

Section II

Kisan Sabha in Thane District

Autumn of Our Discontent:

Item: "In October 1945 an important problem, which suddenly preoccupied the attention of the Thane police, was the agrarian disputes between landlords and tenants of the Dahanu and Umbergaon talukas. The aboriginal Warlis, owing to Communist propaganda suddenly transformed their movement against the sowcars and later even against the police, into a violent one."<sup>113</sup>

-(Bombay Police)

Item: "The roots of Adivasis (Varlis) in Dahanu taluka should be an eye-opener to us. No doubt the police and the military will suppress the riots and peace will be restored. But that does not mean that the problem is solved. So long as the root cause of this disease is not removed, a superficial treatment of outward symptoms will not be of any avail... The spirit of the exploited and suppressed people has awakened. The point both in time and circumstances has arrived which demands their full deliverance. None will be able to stop that process."<sup>114</sup>

-(Narahari Parekh - A Gandhian)

Item: "At the outset, Comrade Dalvi picked up the red flag and made a short speech. After him, I spoke. I explained to the Warlis in simple words how the system of forced labour "Vethi and Begar" was illegal and tried to impress upon them that they must not work without remuneration. I described the various atrocities they had suffered at the hands of the landlords, and told them that the red flag would help them put a stop a to all exploitation and persecution."<sup>115</sup>

-(Godavari Parulekar)

Not that the Adivasis were really quiet and timid prior to the entry of the Communists and the Kisan Sabha in Thane. In 1944, the Adivasis had struck work for higher wages, without any conscious leadership guiding them; considering the fact that prices of essential commodities had shot up 400 per cent and their wages were as low as 2 annas per day, it was understandable that they struck work demanding 12 annas per day.<sup>116</sup>

Also understandable was their trust in Shri Save, a newly appointed Welfare Officer, who appalled at their wretched conditions had not only encouraged them to strike for 12 annas but had also promised to use his good offices to help them. He, however, soon withdrew from the scene.

The strike fizzled out; wages were not increased. The Home Minister, Mr. Morarji Desai, refused to believe that anyone could live on 2 annas a day, as was alleged, the striking tribals were doing. So no legislative action was taken; not that it would have made any difference, since the landlords had already taken recourse to their own tactics of violence to break the strike.

#### Adivasi Seva Mandal

Before the entry of the Kisan Sabha in Dahanu taluka an association called the Adivasi Seva Mandal was working in the area to ameliorate the conditions of the Adivasis. The association was organised by Shri B.G.Kher in 1940. The aim was to (i) create among the Adivasis, particularly the Kathkaris, interest in permanent habitation by securing for them land; (ii) remove hardship pertaining to conditions of their labour and unemployment; (iii) to wean them from drink, reform their habits and mode of life; (iv) Establish and conduct schools, hostels, adult literacy classes to achieve a general standard of cleanliness and neat and



moral living; (v) to found colonies and settlement with a view to work for their economic betterment and to that effect organise multi-purpose societies and other cooperative activity. The Adivasi Seva Mandal approached the rich for raising funds. The report of the Mandal for the year 1945-46 mentions that the President of Timber Merchants' Association from Dahanu, Tatas, Dahanukar etc., contributed to the fund.

The approach of the Mandal is best represented in a speech by Shri Kher, who was addressing a conference of the Adivasis at Maswan in December 1946.

"You have borne for years the burden of oppression. Have patience and give us time. The congress cannot simply because it is in power, eradicate social evils like untouchability and forced labour. Changes in economic and social spheres take place as a result of the realisation by those who were guilty... The landlords cannot be dispossessed of lands by killing them. A new order would be brought about only by converting the minds of the present owner." (emphasis added) -- Bombay Chronicle, 31-12-1946.

The achievement of the Adivasi Seva Mandal may be summed up with the help of a short passage from the Report of the Mandal, "It is a matter of discredit to the good sense of the propertied class that inspite of the general awakening among the Adivasis they should still continue their old methods unmindful of the consequences that follow. The records of our workers are daily filled with tales of oppression and sufferings inflicted on the Adivasis... The present state of things is creating a sense of frustration in the minds of the Mandal workers and a feeling of rebellious exasperation amongst the Adivasis."

Enter the Red Flag! :

The Kisan Sabha gave an expression to the simmering discontent among the Adivasis. The Maharashtra State Kisan Sabha held its first conference in January 1945 at Titwalla in Thane district. Godavari and Shamrao Parulekar the leading CPI activists toured the Thane district to mobilise the tribals for the conference. "They heard the slogan 'Down with forced labour' for the first time at this conference. Elated by the import of this slogan they returned to their homes taking with them the Red Flag, and determined to fight forced labour."<sup>117</sup> The landlords resorted to further oppression, and the Adivasis had to retreat, confused. So the Parulekars decided to hold another meeting at Talasari in Umbergaon taluka.

"Our first problem arose in the matter of pinning up the red flag which we wished to do before commencing the meeting. We had brought neither pins nor nails with us. One of the Varlis provided a quick answer to the problem, and one which appealed greatly to our urban minds." Suddenly some of the local landlord's henchmen appeared, accompanied by the Talathi, the village revenue officer, who was staying with the landlord at the time. "The Varlis made room for them but they came straight upto where we were sitting. The Bhaiyya (one of the henchmen) cracked his cane on the ground and sat down cross-legged... Immediately the Varlis became uneasy and anxious..." "They were frightened a little." "The whole atmosphere changed with their coming from relaxed enthusiasm to tension. It was imperative to send our visitors about their business if we wanted the Varlis to talk about their problems freely." So the Talathi and the henchmen were informed that they had no business to attend a private meeting, uninvited and the Bhaiyyas were admonished. "Don't you know that the days

for terrorising people with canes are now gone?" Puzzled, and in angry bewilderment, they hastily left. "Barely had they left, than the Varlis who had so far remained dumb, broke into an excited babble. Everybody started talking all at once... The meeting took on a new colour ... Adivasis eager to voice their sorrows began talking all at once, some standing up to do so, others half-rising and the rest speaking from where they sat... Whatever they said boiled down to unbearable rage against the landlords, the moneylenders, and their agents..."

"Before we left we told them that our aim was... to unite the Varlis, to organise [ them ] under one banner,..." "They seemed to have accepted us as their fellow beings..." "[ they ] had begun to trust us."

The Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party emphasized the fact that the law could be utilised by the Adivasis against the landlords "that it would be easy work for the Communist Party to put to stop to the landlords' atrocities using law as a weapon."<sup>118</sup> It was with this perspective that the Kisan Sabha undertook the first step in the struggle for the abolition of forced labour.

At one of the meetings, some tribals had suggested that the meagre attendance was largely due to the inability of many to come as they were forced to do 'begar' at the house of a landlord. A deputation of Varlis led by one of the activists proceeded to the landlord's house, asked the tribals not to work (on the carting of firewood to the village six miles away) under the begar system, and told the landlord that they would do so only if paid. When the landlord refused, the activist asked the tribals to unload the carts and proceed home, which they did. "While others secretly worried about the outcome of their action, they came to the school-house (where the meeting was being held) to see what would happen next. Some were vacillating, some were frightened. This was the first time they had refused to do the landlord's bidding. This was a new experience to them."<sup>119</sup>

The landlords did not retaliate, the Varlis were overjoyed, and the Kisan Sabha explained that forced labour was unlawful and they must not allow themselves to be exploited. "The incident proved valuable to us in winning the Varlis' confidence. They thought I had some specially powerful law in my hand with which I could hoist the landlords' tail. They would not understand that the law I wielded was the law of the country."

Quite obviously so. The tribal surely grasped the fundamental fact that as far he was concerned there was no difference between the landlord/moneylender/forest contractor and the law. For him, the dimensions of the law were personified in the 'landlord'; as a counter point to the landlords' law then, was the Kisan Sabha law. The personified view of the law impinged on the tribal consciousness daily, as the birthpangs of the struggle took place. Report of the Adivasi Seva Mandal (1945-46) refers to such occurrences. "A year ago some Varlis left their work and ran into the jungles to escape ill treatment. The forest contractor and his men followed them and fired upon them, killing five and injuring others." "A forest contractor beat two Varlis to death. The murderer is still a free man."<sup>120</sup> Again, during the strike (one of the first to be organised by the Kisan Sabha) for higher wages in October 1945, the police had resorted to firing killing two Adivasis and injuring others. When the landlords learnt that the Adivasis were now organising to refuse veth begar, they in turn countered by refusing to give 'khavti' loan. As a show of strength, the Kisan Sabha organised a mammoth conference in Zari village in Umbergaon a taluka where the principal issue was the abolition of veth begar. The majority of Adivasis' refusal to do veth begar paid off. The landlord's threat of not giving khavti proved empty in the face of the

adamant attitude of the tribals not to give in. After all, the landlord did need labour.

But if the struggle against the boycott of landlords' use of veth begar was organised under the leadership of the Kisan Sabha in Umbergaon taluka, during May 1945, it was not so in Dahanu taluka where the tribals on their own, hearing of the conference, "became impatient, and launched their own agitation without waiting for anybody to give them the call. They went from village to village waving red flags, and calling meetings which were attended by upto 2000 Varlis." Later the number grew to 8000-10,000. Referring to the meetings the Bombay Chronicle reported on 22nd Oct. 1945, "The Adivasis who were tame and docile till this day suddenly became class conscious and they began to collect in large numbers under the red flag. Mass meetings were held throughout these talukas. People marched miles and miles to attend these meetings. They carried sticks in their hands. Their enthusiasm appeared to be unprecedented."<sup>121</sup>

"Where are you, General? Please, please, please, restore order."

— Bertolt Brecht<sup>122</sup>

The reaction of the landlords to the increasing militancy was obviously reflected in their readiness to use violence. Thus during the month of October 1945, the landlords of Talwade village in Dahanu taluka lured thousands of Varlis into the village on the false pretext that "The Bai [name given by tribals to Godavari Parulekar] has called a public meeting at Talwade village at midnight; ruffians have been hired by the landlords to break up the meeting. The Red Flag orders all Adivasis to be present at the meetings with whatever weapons they can find..." The ruse worked, and on the other hand, the landlord informed the police that thousands of Adivasis had gathered together for an armed attack, incited by the Communists

and demanded police protection. The Police Sub-Inspector arrived on the scene and without making any independent inquiries into the truth of the matter, believing the landlords, and taking instructions from them climbed on top of the police van and opened fire on the crowd of Adivasis. "From the night of the 10th to the afternoon of the 11th the police van patrolled up and down the main Ahmedabad-Bombay road near Talwada showering bullets on innocent Adivasis. Five Adivasis fell victims to their bullets and hundreds along with their children were injured."<sup>123</sup>

The Government in an attempt to justify their action pleaded provocation, alleging that thousands of armed Adivasis had started throwing stones. As was reported by the police, "the aboriginal Varlis owing to Communist propaganda suddenly transformed their movement into a violent one. A number of cases of rioting and dacoity were reported, the movement finally culminating in a 24-hour battle between police and the Varlis. Fire had to be opened by the police as a result of which three persons were killed and about seven injured. Peace was thereafter restored and the situation gradually returned to normal."<sup>124</sup>

Or so the police thought consequent on the exterment order issued on the Parulekars and a few others on 15th October 1945.<sup>125</sup> But the class struggle in the area turned far more acute and intense. On the one hand, not only had the call for an independent enquiry into the police firings by the Bombay Chronicle gone unheeded but the landlords with the connivance of the police had increased the repression on the Adivasis in an attempt to finish the movement once and for all. Merciless beatings, molesting women, and mass arrests were common features. On the other hand, the Adivasis were not to be bowed down. Many fled the villages to the jungle to bide their time.

Others who stayed behind, carried on their strike against the landlords refusing to work, refusing to cut grass for them, such that "the landlords began to worry about the quality of grass deteriorating, it getting dry with the passing of time, and not fetching a good enough price... The Varlis refused to cut a single blade of grass until our externment orders were rescinded, and those who had been arrested were released."<sup>126</sup> Subsequently the externment orders had to be cancelled.

Struggle Against Forced Extractions:

"In Thane, the main factors responsible for the increase (in number of cognizable crimes) are stated to be (i) the depredations of the Bombay Pathan and Bhaiyya gangs (ii) the revolt of the Varlis of Dahanu, Umbergaon and Palghar talukas against their economic conditions." - Bombay Police.<sup>127</sup>

On 21st January 1946, the Kisan Sabha called another conference of Adivasis at Mahalaxmi village in Dahahu taluka. At this conference, it was decided to launch agitations against the payment of rent in kind, where the landlord claimed the produce of the tribal over and above the share agreed upon. Secondly, the system of demanding payment of "arrears" in rent, "arrears" which the landlords often managed to cook up against the illiterate Adivasis, was also denounced, and it was decided to refuse to pay old arrears.

"The peasants implemented these resolutions to the word. All false arrears vanished... the landlords... were forced to give in without protest." Strict vigils were maintained to enforce the new resolutions. If the Adivasis came across a landlord or agent carrying away any produce other than paddy as "rent" they would stop him, sometimes "over enthusiastic Adivasis even made miscreants bow down at the red flag and ask for forgiveness."<sup>128</sup>

The Kisan Sabha also launched two wage struggles. One was for the fixation of rates for grass cutting, at Rs.2.50 per 500 lbs. of grass in jungle area and Rs.3.00 on the coastal strip, and the other was the demand for Rs.1.25 per day for forest work.

The Congress Government took a belligerent stand against the Kisan Sabha. For instance in July 1946, the District Collector of Thane called a meeting for talks between representatives of grassland owners and Kisan Sabha to determine wages for grass cutting. However, when the Parulekars arrived they were told that the meeting had been postponed.<sup>129</sup>

To undercut the Kisan Sabha, the District Collector on his own announced the new rates for wages for both grass cutting and forest work. Where the Kisan Sabha had demanded Rs.2.50 and Rs.1.25 respectively, the D.C. announced the rates as Rs.1.50 and Re.1.00 per day respectively.

The Adivasis under the guidance of the Kisan Sabha rejected the wage rates and decided not to cut grass and fell trees... "within 48 hours of the call for a strike being given, the forests for miles around fell silent, work in the forests stopped."<sup>130</sup> Meetings called by the D.C. repeatedly were boycotted. The necessity of having the grass cut however forced some landlords to submit to the demands of the tribals, who on their own initiative ordered them to collect permits from the Kisan Sabha office, "authorising them to employ the Adivasis on the wage rate demanded by the Sabha."<sup>131</sup>

But the submission of individual landlords and forest contractors was only a tactical measure to buy time, as it were. While the strike on both fronts was progressing peacefully, the landlords, the police and the Congress Government were preparing to oust the Kisan Sabha.



At the local level, Adivasis were arrested on trumped up charges of housebreaking and theft. "Thousands of Adivasis indignant at the unjust arrest of their innocent brothers, set off for Dahanu with intentions of marching on the jail to get the arrested released." They were persuaded against this step by the Sabha activists, but not quite successfully. As the police reported "The agrarian trouble in the Dahanu and Umbergaon talukas took a turn for the worse during the month of October. Willing Varli workers and agents of landlords were intimidated, assaulted and beaten. The matters came to a climax when the Sub-Inspector of Police at Dahanu, who had arrested two Varlis in connection with a robbery case, was obstructed by 200 Varlis around with sticks and was forced to release the accused and to give up the Panchanama made by him regarding the search of their houses. The complainant and his brother who accompanied the police were beaten in the presence of the Sub-Inspector and forced to sign a document to the effect that they had no complaint to make regarding the robbery. The Sub-Inspector was also forced to sign the document. The situation was brought under control only after the arrest of as many as 55 Varlis concerned in the incident."<sup>132</sup>

If the relative balance of forces in the class struggle ensuing in Dahanu and subsequently parts of Palghar taluka shifted in favour of the Adivasis, it was due not only to their strong organisational unity in maintaining the strike against the grass landlords and timber merchants.\* But also due to the necessity the latter felt to have the timber cut; and the realisation of the tremendous loss that would ensue if the strike

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The Adivasis under the Kisan Sabha resorted to measures that suggested an offensive attack on the power of the landlords. For instance, following a prevailing tradition, the Adivasis imposed fines on offending landlords who tried devious means of breaking the strike. Many landlords complied.

continued. It was the economic necessity that made the Timber Merchants Association ancome to an agreement with the Kisan Sabha, acquiescing to the demands laid down by the Kisan Sabha. The activists subsequently set off for the jungles and villages to explain the agreement and call off the strike.

Item: "Each wanton judge new penal statutes draws,

Laws grind the poor, and rich even rule the law."

But the Government had other plans. To make matters clear and leave no room for doubt as to the Government's feelings and intentions about the struggle, a state of emergency was declared in the district on 14th November 1946, as the police stated, "as the trouble spread to the Palghar taluka. The trouble continued till the end of the year as the Varlis had taken to committing of universal offences, such as dacoities, robberies, thefts, rioting etc. They also continued to assault, intimidate and obstruct members of their community who were willing to resume work\* and had made sowkars and landlords targets of their violence."<sup>133</sup> Subsequently, about 200 Adivasis were arrested, many others detained and on 21st November 1946 externment orders were served on Kisan Sabha activists including the Parulekars.

The overtly political-repressive character of the Government's attitude can be comprehended if we consider it in the light of the situation in other parts of the

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This would obviously seem to be an exaggeration if not outright distortion, largely because the agreement between the timber merchants and Kisan Sabha had been signed earlier that year. Besides, as far as grass cutting was concerned, the Adivasis were willing to work for those landlords who were ready to meet the demands for higher wages and who received permits from the Kisan Sabha to employ labour.

Presidency and the country. For instance, it was in 1946 that the Royal Indian Naval Mutiny broke out. The Congress adopted a hands off policy towards the nationalist naval ratings, sacrificing them to the British. After all, it had to prove time and again, that its bread was buttered the right side. If an active participant in the Mutiny is to be believed, the Congress even participated actively in the sell out of the ratings.<sup>134</sup>

Quite apart from this, the policies of the C.P.I. at the national level at this time must have made the Congress slightly apprehensive. While there seemed to have been some differences at the top level of the C.P.I. leadership on tactics and strategy, the unanimity was quite apparent in the necessity for struggle of all the exploited classes.<sup>135</sup> The C.P.I. in Bombay for instance had organised and was leading intensely militant struggles of the textile workers that often acquired semi-political overtones and practices.

#### Class Struggle Intensifies :

The assertion of the political power of the Government, which resulted in the externment of the Parulekars from the district set forth a chain of reactions, creating its own dialectic as it were. On the one hand, the political power of the landlords and other sections of the local dominant classes acquired a legal sanction to crush the movement. On the other, the Adivasis, sufficiently conscious of the implication of the Emergency went on large scale voluntary strikes, both in jungles and grasslands "Despite the fact that no leaders or prominent workers were present to give them the call..."<sup>136</sup>

As far as the landlords and other dominant class were concerned, the form of assertion of their political power ranged from outright denials to physical violence with the active connivance of the police.

For example, the Timber Merchants' Association, subsequent to the declaration of the Emergency declared that it had never entered into any dealings with the Communists concerning increased wage payments, prompting the Free Press Journal to remark caustically "Now it only remains for us to state that Mr. Ponda was never chairman of the Timber Merchants' Association, there was no special officer present, nor were there any Varlis or Communists, that in fact the whole thing was nothing but a figment of the imagination."<sup>137</sup> Apart from this, false charges and cases were filed against the striking Adivasis. About 400 Varlis were thus harassed, so much so that a special Court was set up and magistrate appointed to deal solely with these cases. The Adivasis came to call it the Red Flag Court. Many were locked up and the District Collector issued directives to the criminal courts that clearly point to the distortion of the law and freedom of association, all meant to reduce the Adivasi's mobility.<sup>138</sup>

The Government also thought it fit to ignore the agreement.<sup>140</sup> Rejecting the agreement, signed in front of a Government official, the Home Minister said in an interview that he "was not aware of any understanding that may have been arrived at between the Timber Merchants' Association and the Kisan Sabha at the instance of the Prant Officer, who, wittingly or unwittingly, may have been a party to the agreement. He is now on leave and has been transferred. The Government could not bind itself to any and every act of the Prant Officer done on his initiative."<sup>141</sup>

Item: "It is an anti-human who kills human beings.

A brutalized machine that doesn't think."

-Hugo Blanco<sup>142</sup>

Physical repression and attacks by the landlords mounted with greater intensity. In the beginning of

1947, for instance, Musalpada (Varli hamlet) in Maki village in Dahanu taluka was razed to the ground, old men and children thrashed, moveable properties were snatched away by the landlords' goondas and an attachment of 50 policemen.<sup>143</sup> The policemen were supposedly maintaining law and order..." Due to the tense situation, road and mobile patrolling by Armed Police in motor vehicles was intensified and all available officers and men were detailed for special duty in the affected areas."<sup>144</sup> The increased police force spread their networks through 139 villages in each of which they established a check post. In addition to these, "the Police Superintendent put in a request for propaganda vans which were meant to undermine Communist propaganda and counter it effectively with Government propaganda."<sup>145</sup> Joint repressive actions were taken from now against the Adivasis. Thus in Kosbad village some Marwari landlords and police beat up several women because their men had fled to the jungle.

In Golwad village, several Adivasis were tortured and beaten by policemen, when they refused to divulge the names of party cadres. Shri Save, the Special Officer, who had done a study on the Varlis earlier, visited various villages, to try and pacify the tribals. When none attended his meetings, he is reported to have given all sorts of threats. When the Collector visited the village of Kasa, and none turned up to attend the meeting arranged for him, he gave the police orders to beat up the families of those men who were hiding in the jungles as a lesson. The police often harassed Adivasis during their searches for party activists, by demanding food, rations etc.<sup>146</sup>

On 7-1-47, upon hearing that considerable number of Adivasis were on their way to Nanivali in Palghar taluka, a police sub-inspector leading a division of men also proceeded to the same village. When the Adivasis refused to disperse, the police opened fire, killing five innocent Adivasis and injuring many

others.\* Subsequently false charges of rioting etc., were imposed on 12 hundred Adivasis, who received sentences ranging from 4 months to 7 years.<sup>147</sup> The Kisan Sabha request for an inquiry into the firing at Nanivali was turned down by the Chief Minister.<sup>148</sup>

Ballad of the Inarticulate :

The initial response of the Adivasis to the intensification of the class struggle by the landlords and police were to flee the villages and seek shelter of the jungles. Hundreds went underground and began to regroup their strength devising guerrilla tactics of beating the enemy. Alongside, the landlords of Waki village who had committed atrocities on the Adivasis began to face retribution, when a detachment of Adivasis marched on the huge orchards of the landlords and burnt them to the ground... A landlord who was known for molesting Adivasi women, was beaten up and the truck he was travelling in was hacked to pieces before him....<sup>149</sup>

The Adivasis were, however, in the process of learning that assertion of a right comes through their own strength. Organisationally, the Varlis learnt guerrilla tactics; there were no leaders to teach them. The reality of the situation and the tradition, (albeit now crushed) of quick mobility in jungle areas, taught the Adivasis. Armed attachments of 50-100 Varlis were formed under a leader who was to be obeyed at all costs; movements of the police, moneylenders and landlords were noted. The detachments included one man from each house in the village. When he left home

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\* The police reported the incident thus "A police party posted at Nanivali in Palghar taluka had to open fire in self-defense. There were cases of assault, arson and dacoities." (M.P.A.P.B., 1947, p. 57)

he carried his own ration of food to last him a few days after which he would return home and be replaced by another.

The police and landlords were indeed no match for the kings of the jungles, who participated in huge processions against the Emergency, arrests and the repression by the landlords during the day,\* and disappeared into the jungles at nightfall without leaving a trace behind. They erected barriers of boulders and logs of wood in the narrow gorges of the hills, and similar barricades were erected on other roads. The impact of the guerrilla tactics began to be felt by the ruling classes and the police. Forest contractors could not use the regular roads since there were huge holes every few feet; landlords found the crops in their fields suddenly cut during the night, especially those who had been either too oppressive or had appropriated large tracts of tribal lands; a detachment of five policemen, armed to the teeth were ambushed by thousands of Varlis in the thick jungles of Sukadamba gorge; some were beaten, all ran away leaving their weapons to the Adivasis. Hundreds of Adivasis once marched on a godown near Gholwad station, used for storing grass, because some Varlis were being held prisoners there. They freed the prisoners.<sup>150</sup>

In a word, the Adivasis "... were mad with rage. It was difficult to predict what they would do or would not do. It became increasingly difficult to restrain them and keep them peaceful and calm. The entire people had entered the battlefield."<sup>150</sup>

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For example, one morning, leaflets appeared on the trees at vantage points along the roads to Charoti village, and other thoroughfares used by the landlords, forest contractors and Government officials. The leaflet demanded 1) Rs.1.25 as wages for felling trees; 2) Fixed hiring charges for bullock carts; 3) The release of all arrested Adivasis; 4) The rescinding of the externment order. Alongside appeared another leaflet addressed to the police, which pointedly stressed his peasant stock and requested them not to shoot their own brothers. The effect felt was obvious, when seven policemen were suspended for neglect of duty. (Adivasis Revolt, p. 137).

The assertion of a positive consciousness against the ruling classes and the police, went side by side with a strong feeling of brotherhood within themselves. The unity of the poor Adivasis was realised not only in terms of a common enemy, but the feelings of oneness for each other; the two aspects of a new consciousness only mutually reinforced each other.

Thus those Adivasis whose lands were neglected either because they were in prison or in hiding must have been gladdened when they received letters saying "Greetings to Laxman Barkya and others of Kankole village from their families. We are all well. Vithal Barkya is to be told that we have done all his harvesting. His family is well. Your families are being looked after by the villagers..."

"... We have made arrangements for your harvesting. We have reaped everybody's paddy and stored it."<sup>151</sup>

The tilt in the balance of power in favour of the Adivasis was recognised by the Superintendent of Police when he said in an interview "The Varlis have divided themselves into small gangs. Their organisation stands on solid foundation. Its roots go very deep in the soil of the district. They have their own couriers who are in possession of all information."<sup>152</sup> It was the recognition of their helplessness in the face of the Varlis that necessitated the decision of the Government to send in the Army. A regiment of the Maratha Light Infantry was dispatched and camped at Kalyan. An advance guard of the regiment that entered Dahanu taluka however had to be withdrawn under public pressure.

The newspapers in Bombay City had learnt of the arrival of the Army into the district and severely criticised the step. Although most of them were anti-Communist, their attitude towards the struggling tribals remained



sympathetic. Respected, liberals like N.M. Joshi, Prof. Wadia and others also highlighted the plight of the Adivasis, and condemned the use of the Army against them. Even the Maharashtra Congress Committee consisting of intellectuals from Pune, set up an enquiry committee, whose executive committee later endorsed the demands of the Adivasis.

Under the pressure of the above and the newspapers, the Government was forced to withdraw not only the Army but also Mr. Gilbert, a police officer who had gained notoreity for crushing the revolt of the Satara peasants. In the month of May 1947, the Chief Minister Shri B.G. Kher announced the release of arrested Varlis, "and 200 policemen, who were posted in Dahanu, Umbergaon and Palghar talukas had to be withdrawn to deal with communal disturbances in Bombay City."<sup>153</sup> Although the police were withdrawn, the externment order against the leading activists, the Parulekars, was not withdrawn.

#### Birth of a Nation :

The latter quarter of 1947 and the beginning of 1948, were crucial years in India as a whole. For one, the country gained independence on 15th August 1947, in the midst of communal riots of the worst kind. Quite apart from this, the Telangana Armed Struggle had reached the climax of its movement, with the poor peasants having liberated a number of villages and areas in Khammam and Warangal districts.<sup>154</sup>

At a national level, the C.P.I. had altered its national programme consequent on the election of B.T. Ranadive as the new Secretary of the Party. The Party leadership under his guidance gave the call for an insurrection to be led by the proletariat and peasantry.<sup>155</sup> Cadres of the C.P.I. fanned out into areas inciting workers and peasants to seize the factories and fields. The fledgling Government under the circumstances, banned the party,

driving many of its cadres underground, but also arresting many more at the same time, and they sent in the army into Telangana to crush the movement, which by 1951 they successfully did.

The impact on the Adivasi movement in Thane was the arrest of the leading activists of the Kisan Sabha, Godavari Parulekar was underground but did make one trip to Dahanu and Umbergaon taluka on foot, which served as a 'morale-booster'. During this period, the movement abated from both sides, largely because of the communal disturbances which found their way even into the districts towns of Thane.

"In Thana, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi caused a great stir in the district and at a number of places hooligans committed unlawful acts of assaults etc. Every member of the RSS and of the Hindu Maha Sabha were the target of these attacks."<sup>156</sup> The movement was at a low ebb; the organisational structures of the Kisan Sabha had received a blow with the arrests of the leading activists, the banning of the Party at the national level, and the spread of the communal riots even to rural areas consequent on the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Attempts made at reviving the movement by the local activists, did not make much headway.<sup>157</sup>

Although the movement of the Varlis was to subsequently pick up its momentum, one can definitely say that 1948 marks a periodisation not only in terms of the events that forced the Kisan Sabha to retreat, but also in terms of the qualitative change in the character of the struggle that was to emerge subsequently. Although the Kisan Sabha was to struggle against tenancy, for the reduction of rent, and the abolition of bonded labour, the form and content of the struggles in which these issues were placed were to be changed; subsequently, even the issues were to alter, and therefore reduce the framework of

perspective to one of functioning within the existing production relations.

The first period from 1946-48, fired the initial volleys of peasant attack against serfdom. These years were crucial and important in as much as they created the scenario for the transformation; both in terms of the increase in the existing contradictions almost to boiling point, and the high social visibility that the struggle gave to the existing production relations. The sympathetic and sometimes supportive overtones of the intelligentsia from the urban areas for the plight of the exploited Adivasis and their struggle respectively, did benefit the movement in the direction towards the transformation of serfdom as a determining mode of exploitation.

'Stabilisation' of the Kisan Sabha :

In 1951, the police and the Government stated "the hold of the Communists over Varlis in Thane district, though abated, has not yet completely disappeared. The peasants' struggle against the landlord of the Parnala estate which proved a knotty problem at the hands of the Socialists as late as 1950 was solved amicably as a result of the sustained negotiations between the Inamdar and peasants, and the latter's consent to purchase the whole land by a Cooperative Society. As a result of this, the harvest season in Parnala passed off peacefully in 1951 and this long drawn struggle ended once for all."<sup>159</sup>

The second period began also with the first general election, to which the C.P.I. had agreed to participate. The shift in the national programme occurred largely consequent on the suppression of the Telengana armed struggle, and the submission of the leadership of the C.P.I. to the new political situation. The local C.P.I. unit in Bombay State and its mass organisations following party orders began to contest elections. G. Parulekar and another

activist canvassed for the 1952 elections to the legislative assembly. They were accompanied by police to Dahanu for the vote counting.

Item: "There was a lull in the Communist activities in the northern part of the Thane District and the party was disintegrated with the waning of its influence though not completely disappeared in the agricultural class of Varlis."  
- Bombay Police.<sup>159</sup>

The "lull" in the Communist activities increased in 1953, when the Kisan Sabha following the directive of the C.P.I. supported the Samyukta Maharashtra struggle in 1953. This is evidenced by the fact that the landlords of the area began to look at the movement in a different light than before, favourably, as G. Parulekar would have it. "As soon as I declared that thousands of Adivasis would attend the Thane district meeting called to organise the Samyukta Maharashtra Parishad, in 1953, the whole tone changed. A few days later at the talks in Shivgon, the landlords saying let bygones be bygones, requested us to forget the past, and showed their willingness to come to an understanding. This sentiment set the tone of the meeting during which an open-hearted discussion took place."<sup>160</sup>

The "lull" in the Communist activity, as the Police Report suggested, was largely viewed in terms of what the Kisan Sabha had represented earlier, in the period 1946-48. If the earlier period had represented direct attacks by the Adivasi poor against the dominant classes, the forms of class struggle was on transforming the existing relations by attacking the ruling landlord/moncylander combine directly on the terrain of exploitation itself, this was certainly not so in this stage of the movement.

As part of the overall policy of the C.P.I. at this juncture, the Kisan Sabha viewed the emergence of the bourgeois state with its laws and legislation and promise of land reforms as an extension of its own practice. Now the problematic lay in the contradiction between the existing relations and the laws and legislation passed by the new bourgeois State; and the Kisan Sabha was to be the catalyst in resolving this contradiction by its struggle to make the former conform to the latter. In other words, the Kisan Sabha, implicitly, viewed itself as the agency for the implementation of the laws passed by the new state.

The implications of this were bound to be felt in the focus and the forms of struggle, which would now be prescribed within the limits of the bourgeois framework itself. The focus of class struggle was still the transformation of production relations, but the struggle to do so was now via the intervention of the State with its tenancy laws and other legislative apparatuses. In a sense, then, the State was to acquire the determining role in the last instance, in transforming the existing relations of production.

Of the Exploiter and Exploited :

That the relations of production were still prominently rent based even in 1951 will be seen from Table 10.

Table 10: Livelihood Pattern of Agricultural Population in  
Konkan Districts (1951).  
No. per 10,000 of general population.

District	Owner Culti- vators	Tenant Culti- vators	Cultivating Labourers	Agricultural Rent Receivers
Thane	2,130	2,435	785	89
Kolaba	2,673	4,201	324	203
Ratnagiri	3,910	2,638	247	154
Kanera	1,583	3,500	885	314

Source: Census of India, 1951, Vol. IV, Bombay, Saurashtra, Kutch, Part I.

The number of tenant cultivators is large; they are more numerous than the owner cultivators. The percentage of the rural population in class IV i.e., rent receivers is small in the Konkan districts; this is "not because landlordism there was not a problem - the high percentage of tenants disproves that, - but because the landlords in question had large holdings."<sup>161</sup>

The table 11 shows that Thane had the highest degree of landlordism and land concentration; nearly 30% of the land was concentrated in large holdings, of over 100 acres owned by a small fraction of the rural population. On the other hand, nearly 75 per cent of the total landowners had landholdings below 5 acres each and they held only 16% of the total land. Another 15% reported landholdings of 5 to 15 acres.<sup>162</sup>

Table 11: Percentage of Occupied Lands Held in Large and Very Large Holdings and Percentage of Classes Returned as Belonging to Tenant Cultivators and Cultivating Labourers

District	Percentage of land held in the total land		Total (1+2)	Percentage of agricultural classes returned as belonging to	
	(1) Large Holdings 100-500 acres	(2) Very Large holdings more than 500 acres		Tenant cultivators	Cultivating labourers
Kolhapur	6.5	4.7	11.2	16.6	9.1
Sholapur	13.3	1.0	14.3	7.4	23.5
Belgaum	8.2	2.1	10.3	19.1	15.0
Bijapur	13.0	3.1	16.1	9.5	22.0
Dharwar	8.0	4.9	12.9	13.1	26.2
Thana	23.8	7.6	31.4	44.8	14.4
Kolaba	18.9	7.8	26.7	56.8	4.4
Ratnagiri	13.1	1.5	14.6	55.7	14.1

Source: Census of India, 1951, Vol.IV, Bombay, Sourashtra and Kutch, Part I.

Table 12: Distribution of Landholders by Size of Ownership Holding-in Thane District (1951).

Size of Landholding (acres)	Landowners (Percent)	Land Held (percent)
Upto 5 acres	74.19	15.80
5-15	14.58	15.49
15-25	5.05	11.21
25-100	5.07	26.04
100-500	1.03	23.82
500+	.08	7.64
Total	100.00	100.00

Source: Census of India, 1951, Vol.IV, Bombay, Saurashtra and Kutch, Part I.

Bombay Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act:

The initial steps taken by the new State in power to effect the transformation of at least the legal relations was the wide propaganda given to the Bombay Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act 1948. Revenue officers were asked to explain the workings of the Act during their visits to their districts.

One of the crucial features of the Act was the clause relating to a Protected Tenant; and the fact that such a tenant could claim ownership rights with the proof that he cultivated the lands for six years; but the accompanying clause that the submission of this proof rested with the landlord, more or less rendered the Protected Tenancy Clause meaningless. Besides, as for the landlord, he could eject tenants and retain the lands if he was going to use the lands for personal cultivation; quite apart from the fact that he could eject the tenant if the latter



had not paid the rent. Also in 1952, the Government had lowered the limit of maximum rent payable by tenants to their landlords to 1/6th of the crop share of both irrigated and unirrigated lands.<sup>163</sup> As a result of which the tasks of the Kisan Sabha in transforming the production relations with the help of this Act, became difficult. On the one hand, either on the grounds of personal cultivation or non-payment of rent, landlords could eject tenants by filing suits; on the other the possibility of the tenant acquiring protected status and then ownership of the land was rendered difficult because it was upto the landlord to prove that the tenant had cultivated the land for so many years. Thus the abolition of tenancy was more or less assured, in the case of the former than in the event of the latter, where ownership rights were in fact not assured.

The process was slow and protracted and as table 13 shows, in the initial stages, Thane district lagged behind considerably; the fact that it did so, only provides an insight into the deep entrenchment of the production relations, and the reluctance of the landlord/moneylender combine to transform the mode of exploitation. Thus on the one hand, as the table shows, the area brought under cultivation by landlords by 1953-54 in Thane district remained negligible compared to that in the other districts; similarly for area taken under management under provisions of the Tenancy Act.

Table 13: Working of the Bombay Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act (1948).

District	Area taken under management under provisions of B.T. & A.L. Act (acres)	(G)	No. of cases	Area under cultivation by Landlords (acres)	Area under Cultivation by Govt. (acres)
Thane	103	11	134	592	140
E.Khandesh	1382	39	1285	2240	510
W.Khandesh	-	-	127	1521	-
Nashik	-	-	-	29590	707
Nagar	455	14	256	2895	162
Poona	578	30	-	3108	-
N.Satara	145	2	143	1366	18
Kolhapur	25	28	3	2	22

Source: Land Revenue Administration Report of the Bombay Presidency for the year 1953-54.

The number of tenancy suits both by landlords and tenants give us an indication as to the manner in which the Tenancy Act was benefiting either class. Thus in 1953-54 the following was the picture:<sup>164</sup>

	No. of tenancy suits pending from previous year					
	<u>Instituted by tenants</u>			<u>Instituted by landlords</u>		
	Granted	Reject- ed	Not deci- ded	Granted	Reject- ed	Not deci- ded
Thane	174	86	50	766	635	95

Of those instituted in 1953-54 in Thane we have the following:-

	<u>By tenants</u>			<u>By landlords</u>		
	156	112	337	597	603	380

From the above, it would seem that the Act was working definitely in favour of the landlords. As it was reported, there was widespread dissatisfaction amongst the landlords with the present limits of the maximum rent, and the large number of cases decided in favour of landlords included a large number of applications by landlords in cases of voluntary relinquishment by the tenants.<sup>165</sup> It would only stretch the imagination far too thin if we were to believe that at the particular historical conjuncture of the class positions and struggle in Thane district, there could be any question of "voluntary relinquishment by tenants!" That this could hardly be the case is obvious from the fact that since "the release of Shri and Shrimati Parulekar from their detention they immediately returned to Thane district; renewed their old contacts, and promulgated the party views amongst the Adivasis with regard to payment of Khand (rent) and demand for wages as laid down by Government."<sup>166</sup>

One can visualise the whole question of the emerging land ownership in terms of the class struggle between the landlords and tenants, a struggle that took place on the terrain and via the transformation of the legal relations in this particular periodisation of the movement. Nevertheless, on examining the position closely, it becomes clear that the balance of power is definitely in favour of the landlords in this particular conjuncture. For instance, altogether the number of tenancy suits filed by the landlords far outweighs those by the tenants and if the number of tenancy suits granted is compared, we find that the landlords benefited more than the tenants.<sup>167</sup>

The principal reasons behind this were reported to be the non-payment of rent by tenants, and the possession of lands by landlords for personal cultivation; also many tenants had voluntarily surrendered (!) their lands.<sup>168</sup>

By 1955-56, the apparently "peaceful implementation" of the tenancy law and the more or less passive transformation of the legal relations became somewhat strained. The principal cause was the announcement by the Government of April 1957, as Tiller's Day all over the State as a result of which the landlords began to blatantly evict tenants, and tension grew especially in the Thane and Kolaba districts.<sup>169</sup>

'Intervention' by Kisan Sabha:

On the other hand, "Communists (in Thana) started agitation with a view to force the absentee landlords to lease their lands to Adivasi tenants. This agitation sponsored by the Adivasi Red Flag workers resulted in stray cases of assault, intimidation and arson in which a number of haystacks, belonging to local landlord from Unbergaon taluka were set on fire." - Bombay Police<sup>170</sup>

Around this time, the All India Kisan Sabha decided to have its 13th session at Dahanoo (Dahanu) from 17th-22nd May 1955. Incidentally, Nana Patil, the veteran Satara peasant leader, was the chairman of this session. The session was marked by a sense of urgency about the problem of poor peasants and tenants, and noted that the mass eviction of the poor peasants were "increasing the number of landless, strengthening the hands of the landlords to increase their stranglehold on the tillers of the soil, and finally frustrating even the concessions secured by the peasant movement in the direction of land reforms."<sup>171</sup>

The above quotation brings out a major implications of the weaknesses of the Tenancy Law which the landlords had utilised to evict tenants, thus creating a new problem as it were - landlessness. Of this, we shall say more later.

The last sentence gives us an inkling as to the political perspective of the Kisan Sabha, in this particular periodisation. According to the sentence above, the Kisan Sabha secured

"concessions" for the peasants, a term that denotes the acceptance of the given State power and political dominance of the contemporary ruling classes at all the levels. The significance being all the more clear when we compare it to the tone that G. Parulekar, in retrospect undoubtedly, writes about the first period of the movement 1946-48, where she notes with pride, the abolition of rack renting, forced labour by the militant Varlis.

To add to the problem, the C.P.I. and the Kisan Sabha in Bombay State, for instance, condemned the attitude of the State Reorganisation Committee,<sup>172</sup> and joined the rightist and socialist parties in demanding a Samyukta Maharashtra. While we are not undertaking an evaluation of the C.P.I policy towards regionalism, we can say that the struggle at this level did not seem to have any organic link to the peasant movement of the Adivasi poor. The Kisan Sabha (and more so the C.P.I.) failed to evolve a strategy which would outline the principality of contradictions to be resolved, in a situation where it was struggling at various levels. As a result of which, although the Varlis "fought heroically" both for the emergence of a linguistic Maharashtra State, and the liberation of Dadar Haveli from the Portuguese, they did not substantially gain in terms of their own problems. This was clear even till 1961, when the position of the Adivasi peasants was as follows.

Table 14: Scheduled Tribe Sample Households in Cultivation  
Classified by Interest in Land by Size of Land  
Cultivated in Rural Areas of Thane District (1961)

Size of landholding (in acres)	Interest in Land			Total
	A No. of households	B (scheduled tribe)	C	
Less than 1.0	235	521	11	767
1.0 - 2.4	1282	2574	170	4026
2.5 - 4.9	1260	1822	472	3554
5.0 - 7.4	565	616	299	1480
7.5 - 9.9	284	210	130	624
10.0 - 12.4	244	141	86	471
12.5 - 14.9	73	40	48	161
15.0 - 29.9	255	106	123	484
30.0 - 49.9	53	20	38	111
50.0 & above	16	3	19	38
Unspecified	45	-	7	45
<b>Total</b>	<b>4312</b>	<b>6053</b>	<b>1396</b>	<b>11761</b>

(Note - Based on 20 per cent sample)

Source: Census of India, 1961, Vol X, Maharashtra, Part V-A,  
 Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Maharashtra.

A = Owned or held from Government

B = Held from private persons/institutions for payment  
 in money, kind or share.

C = Partly from Government/party from private for  
 payment in money, kind or share.

From Table 14 it would appear that even in 1961 tenancy was still the dominant form of land relations. In the total population of the district the proportion of cultivators cultivating land wholly or partly rented was about 50 per cent, while the corresponding proportion among the Adivasis was as much as 63 per cent. A large number of tenants were found in the smaller size holdings i.e., from less than 1 acre to 5.0 to 7.5 acres.

Even if tenancy was still dominant, it was to diminish in the following decade. On the one hand, the Government had imposed a limit on the rent chargeable by the landlord, fixed at 1/6th of the share, or five times the revenue or not more than Rs.20/- per acre. Besides it was to be paid in cash, and no longer in kind.<sup>173</sup> This limit could have been bypassed and ignored, but for the fact that the Kisan Sabha was ever watchful on this score. Also, the Kisan Sabha's main focus in this period was on the implementation of the Tenancy Act for the benefit of the Adivasi tenants. Many did get lands, as G. Parulekar testifies, paying compensation to landlords in instalments.

For 1971 no separate data for the land owned by the tribal population are available. For the district as a whole, it was noted that 85 per cent of the landowners were owner-cultivators, about 7 per cent cultivated wholly rented land and 8 per cent cultivated partly rented and partly owned land. The land leased in formed about 8 per cent of the total cultivated land. The proportion of pure tenant cultivators thus decreased from about 32 per cent in 1961 to 7 per cent by 1971 in the total cultivating households. The tenancy operations persisting under various covers are, of course, not reflected in these official statistics.

The Maharashtra Agricultural Lands (Ceiling on Holdings) Act came in force from 26 January 1962. The ceiling area for Thane district was fixed at 66 acres in the case of dry crop land and at 126 acres in the case of varkas land. For irrigated lands the ceiling area was: 18 acres - perennial irrigation; 27 acres - two season irrigation; 48 acres - one season irrigation

The landowners with large landholdings by and large managed to retain the land held by entering into the Land records names of additional members from the family as khatedars. In effect, the extent of land held by the large landowners got considerably reduced as per official records. In 1971, as per official statistics the landowners with above 100 acres of land held about 5 per cent of the land.<sup>174</sup> The corresponding proportion was about 30 per cent in 1951.

The tenancy legislation and the other land legislation had twofold effects. On the one hand the extent of tenant cultivation got reduced partly because some of the erstwhile tenants could, through pressure of Kisan Sabha, get a title to the land by paying the stipulated amount. On the other hand, many of the tenant cultivators got evicted thus swelling the ranks of agricultural labourers. Among the scheduled tribes the number of male agricultural labourers increased from 42539 in 1961 to 71804 by 1971.

In effect, both the above forms were to transform the relations based on rent exaction as the principal mode of surplus to exploitation by wage labour. If the erstwhile landlords, in the process, changed their class character, this was not the case with the erstwhile tenants. Their transformation into independent owners of land was, to begin with, and remained so throughout, mainly a juridical or legal transformation, and not a real, effective one. In other words they were unable to effectively cultivate the lands acquired, independent of the dominant classes. Thus, utilisation of the land by the new "owners" was predicated only upon the degree of their subservience and subsumption to the



existing dominant classes. Quite obviously ownership of land was to remain a legal and juridical expression in the absence of any inputs that could really create a viable independent producer. Thus, the new landowner had perforce to rely on the ubiquitous usury capital to see him through not only for production needs but for consumption purposes also.

"Modernisation" by the Kisan Sabha:

Some of the significant features of this period apart from the transitional character of the forms of class struggle adopted by the Kisan Sabha on the terrain of the relations of production, were the attempts made by the Sabha in enlarging the world outlook of the Adivasi poor. As we have seen the earlier period (1946-48) witnessed the transformation of the Adivasi consciousness from one of a passive rejection (viz., 'laziness/ 'apathy') to a positive assertion of a collective will, expressed in class struggle, against the elements of the relations of production. The Adivasi poor, as a result, had realised the advantages of organised struggle against exploitation, the more tangible forms of oppression were now visible as issues to be tackled on a collective basis, and the Adivasi understood that the outcome of the struggle was predicated on the strength of this collective basis. The consciousness of the Adivasis had to be enlarged to encompass the struggle against the super-structural or cultural instances of oppression, instances that had their origin in tradition, but had acquired a place in the culture of repression exercised by the landlord.

We have already referred to the habit of Adivasi men shaving their heads, except for a tuft of hair at the back. Landlords often used to intimidate the Adivasi men

folk into submission by pulling the tuft of hair, causing immense pain and immediate obedience.

The Kisan Sabha undertook a campaign to have men grow their hair in full, or shave off the tuft. Initial reticence gave way to enthusiastic approval, when the Sabha activists began to recount details of landlords' oppression, and hold intensive study discussion in villages.

A more difficult 'instance' to overcome was the practice of women to wear heavy bangles and anklets of copper or some alloy weighing  $\frac{1}{2}$  kilo. The bangles and anklets did not have a clasp, and the only way to remove them was to break them. They created noise when the women walked. So it was easy for the landlord and his hirelings to know that the women labourers were around, even if they could not be seen. Adivasi women returning home from work were at times waylaid and molested by the landlords following the women aided by the sounds of clanging of their bangles. The heavy anklets constrained the women in their movements, and made it difficult to run away and escape.

In 1954, the Kisan Sabha after a series of discussions between the activists decided that women should be 'liberated' from their 'chains' as it were. When persuasion through discussions failed, the Kisan Sabha decided on a demonstration of liberation. Thus a function was organised at Talasari, much propaganda was undertaken, and in the midst of great fanfare and solemnity, the wives of the veteran activists were 'liberated'. Incidentally, one of these activists whose wife volunteered for this, was Lahanu Coam, presently a C.P.M. MP from Thane district.

The crowd watched with great trepidation as bangle after bangle, anklet after anklet, was broken. No calamity befell the fetter-less women, as the older folk had prophesied, and soon many of the women in Talasari followed suit. As of now, very few Adivasi women wear such bangles.

The Kisan Sabha also undertook a campaign to discourage adoption of the rigidity of the caste Hindu institution of marriage. Among the Varlis, young men and women had been free to live together and get married at some future date in the course of their relationship. With the penetration of the Hindu culture, the private land ownership rights, and the subordination of women accompanying the peasantisation of the Adivasi, premarital relationships came to be frowned upon. The Hindu value system of "promiscuity" was attached to premarital relations, and slowly but surely the relationships between men and women were becoming circumscribed within the limits of the rigid institution of marriage. But marriage involved rituals, and sanctification by the priest; this demanded considerable expenditure. The logical step was for the Adivasis to borrow from the sowkar to meet these expenses, leading to his indebtedness.

So the Kisan Sabha began a campaign of boycotting the marriage ritual at least till such time as the Adivasi concerned could bear the expenses on his own. The activists highlighted the Adivasi tradition of cohabitation without the ritual emphasizing that it had not led to indebtedness, defining 'promiscuity' in terms that were not applicable to the tribal tradition, and finally as the coup de grace, they dispensed with the rituals. When some activists began cohabitation without marriage altogether, the news spread like wildfire. Some months later, the news also spread, that they were the only Adivasis not indebted to the sowkar. The practice spread, though in a limited measure.

Similarly in the case of divorce, most Adivasi couples would approach the 'Bhagat' and Patil of the village, both of whom expected a feast and remuneration once their decision had been given. The Kisan Sabha termed these two agents as class enemies and encouraged

the couples to approach the activists in their villages or talukas to administer divorce cases.

Attempts by the Kisan Sabha at education took two forms. Firstly, they attempted to remove certain prejudices held by the Adivasis. One of them was the simple manner in which the Adivasi through years of perception, had come to distinguish the difference between themselves and the sowkar. The sowkars wore shirts, whereas the Adivasis were bare-chested, with only a langoti. As a result, initially even the Kisan Sabha Adivasi activists at the village level, most of whom began wearing shirts and shorts were boycotted as agents of the sowkar. In 1954, the Kisan Sabha helped a Congress social worker, sell shirts and shorts to the Adivasis, at the cost of a pair of langoti-blouse. Activists went around villages selling them at low prices, and by 1957 most Adivasis began to accept this apparel as a necessary and convenient one.

Side by side, the Kisan Sabha began attempts at formal education. In 1953, one R.G. Kulkarni, who had been elected as Secretary to the Education Board with the C.P.M.'s help, started a school for imparting education to Adivasi along innovative lines. But his efforts however came to a halt when Mr. Desai, the then Chief Minister declared that he should not work in cooperation with the Communists, and the school had to be shut down.

At the same time, a young middle class youth from Dahanu town approached the Kisan Sabha volunteering to help. So a study class with 15 students was begun in the Kisan Sabha office at Dahanu. Though this informal type of education did carry on for some months, it could not sustain itself, due to the imperatives of the class struggle. The attendance dropped and finally this too closed down. Some dividends however did appear, as quite a few Adivasis learned to read and write in this school.

The Kisan Sabha has to take many challenges from the established order, at the superstructural level. For instance, although the proportion of Adivasi youth going to the established schools is low, yet the ones that do enter school return to their homes and villages, with aspirations that are expressive of the hegemonic culture. Coupled with the growth of new forms of entertainment, namely, the cinema, in the towns of Talasari, Jawhar, Dahanu, the aspirations of seeking employment in white collar jobs is growing among the Adivasi youth.

This has had its impact on the Kisan Sabha in terms of both the number and quality of activists that can be mobilised. As a prominent activist noted with dismay, many young activists view their participation as temporary. After all, they do receive a stipend, mobility is ensured, and interaction with the institutions like the courts involve frequent visits to towns; some basic education in terms of learning to read and write is definitely acquired, all of which only make the activist restless for higher (sic!) goals in life. It was also reported that such young C.P.M. activists are offered jobs by the establishment. In effect the subsumption of the Adivasi youth into the folds of the hegemonic culture tells upon the efforts of the Kisan Sabha in organisation and politicisation of the Adivasi poor.

Exploiter and Exploited - Today :

The prevalence of indebtedness amongst the Adivasi poor was not a new phenomenon. It had existed earlier as an 'instance' via which rent as a principal form of exploitation had been perpetuated. Indebtedness often led the Adivasi to becoming a tenant and thus 'entering' as it were, the rent paying formation.

In the new conjuncture, where rent is no longer the principal mode of surplus appropriation, usury capital found new sustenance and bred on the tenant who was acquiring ownership rights.

While the modes of surplus appropriation in which usury capital operated and operates are different, the impact that it has continues to be the same. In as much as it pauperises the peasant by appropriating large portions of the produce (sometimes even the produce necessary to sustain the labour), it cannot allow the possibility of any capital accumulation; this is all the more so when we look at the question from the peasant's point of view, who does not view usury capital as a price of production to be paid out of the surplus value that he produces (a price of production similar to rent, wages etc.) but as the raison d'etre for his production as such.

In the new conjuncture, usury capital undercut the possibility of the emergence of an independent producer by either appropriating the land itself, thus rendering the Adivasi landless, or appropriating the produce through a system called Palemode (\* crop mortgage).

In the first case, the Adivasis swelled the ranks of the growing number of landless; a phenomenon that resulted from the provisions of the Tenancy Act that favoured the landlords by providing grounds for eviction. Some of them were even bonded in cases where the rich peasant sowkar felt it necessary to secure supply of labour for the busy season. In the second case, crop mortgage or palemode was to appropriate nearly half or sometimes two-thirds of the crop in repayment of a debt;

echoing then, the rent form of surplus appropriation, in its essential effects.

The Government did realise the problem. In 1957, the Central Advisory Board for Tribal Welfare made some recommendations to the State governments, which unfortunately were not carried out. It suggested that all debts of the tribal people which were more than 3 years old should be written off, the debts of less than 3 years duration should be scaled down after allowing interest at the minimum rate, but not exceeding 6 per cent.<sup>175</sup>

In 1964-65, a survey was conducted by the Commissioner for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes which covered three-fifth tribal families in 12 villages in Ashagad, Kassa, Talasari, Jawhar, and Mokhada tribal Development Blocks. It was found that professional moneylenders accounted for 48 per cent of total loans; cooperative societies 30 per cent, and Tagai and other Government loans only 17 per cent.<sup>176</sup>

Out of the 315 families covered, 145 i.e., 45 per cent of the total families surveyed, were indebted, with the percentage varying from 20 per cent of the total families in Ashagad village of Ashagad Block to 80 per cent of those in Khodala village in Mokhada Block.<sup>177</sup> 54 per cent of the total outstanding loans were for economic activities (all types), 30 per cent for normal domestic consumption plus 8 per cent for marriage, death expenses and other social functions etc. The rates of interest varied, but they were generally very high, depending upon the number of loans taken. It ranged from 25 per cent to 50 per cent.<sup>178</sup>

The survey also noted the Palemode system, as a characteristic feature of usury capital. As it noted, under this system, the needy tribals take seed on loans, at sowing time. Repayment, at harvest time, was often 2 to 3 times the original quantity taken; also, any grain

"borrowed" by the tribal in the lean periods for consumption, is repaid at harvest time at the same rate. Thus, the survey concluded, during the harvest season, practically the whole crop disappears in the godowns of moneylenders.<sup>179</sup> And finally, it also noted the existence of bonded labour in some villages, with the period of bondage ranging from 3 to 5 years, with no cash payment made at all during this period.<sup>180</sup>

The Government of Maharashtra by a resolution No.MIS-1065/37677Q dated 15-7-1965 instituted a scheme by which provision was made to extend a loan upto Rs.100 to Adivasi family with not less than 50 per cent in grain terms to be disbursed in two instalments first in June and second in August. The rate of interest was fixed at  $7\frac{1}{2}$  per cent. The Government sanctioned an amount of Rs.12 lakh which they put at the disposal of the Zilla Parishad Thane for this purpose.<sup>181</sup> By a further Government Resolution dated 9 September 1966 the loan limit per family was increased to Rs. 250.

A number of problems arose in the working of the Palemode eradication scheme. For example, it was experienced that the kind loan in some cases was given in terms of milo and not rice. As the Adivasis do not eat milo they could sell the milo for a song and in the process would be left with a heavy debt burden. The procedure for obtaining the loan from the Government is tedious and cumbersome. The loan has to be repaid in cash in October. The Adivasis often find it difficult to cope with all this and go in for the immediate and speedy loan from the moneylender. The limit of the loan is fixed at Rs.250. If he needs more than he has to turn to the landlord or moneylender for the loan and cases were reported where the Adivasi was denied loan and asked by the moneylender to go to the Government.

A Committee appointed by the Government of Maharashtra in 1976 under the chairmanship of Shri V.S. Page to examine the problems of illicit moneylending and bonded labour, stated



that 'The system of Palemode is in vogue in Thana district and its extent is significantly large, covering about 25 per cent of Adivasis population.'<sup>182</sup>

The Committee undertook investigation in the tribal areas of various districts of Maharashtra State and came to the conclusion that in spite of the sweeping and stringent legislatures against moneylending "illicit moneylending is rampant both in rural and urban areas...(and) its extent is comparatively very much larger in... Adivasi and backward areas."<sup>183</sup>

In Thane district, the Committee found that under the Palemode system "... moneylenders gave one quintal of paddy to an Adivasi during rainy season and recovered four quintals from him at the harvesting season." "Similarly 'dalals' of moneylenders gave advances ranging from Rs.50/- to Rs.200/- to Adivasis in the month of Shravan..." "... The price of grass handed over to moneylenders by the debtors was estimated to be 3 to 4 times the amount of advances." The Committee concluded that it was therefore evident that "... interest charged by moneylenders under the Palemode system both in respect of paddy as well as grass works out to nearly 300 per cent for a period of four months i.e., about 1200 per cent per annum."<sup>184</sup> As to the character of moneylenders, the Committee's findings more or less corroborate our own surveys at village level, when it reported that moneylending by unlicensed moneylenders was suspected to have increased.<sup>185</sup> The present moneylenders, the Committee points out, now insist on outright sale of properties, although there is an oral agreement that after repayment the property would be returned.<sup>186</sup> While the Committee has not specified the character of such property, it could be hypothesised that a substantial portion would be land itself.

As for labour service for debt repayment, the Kisan Sabha has not been very successful in combating this wage form as the Sabha has not been able to evolve any suitable measures that could meet the problem of crucial consumption needs of the poor peasants and agricultural labourers during the lean season. At this time they are driven to get Khavati loan and agree to work on landlords' field during the future busy season at wage rates below the ruling rates. The Kisan Sabha had been agitating against the corruption in Government initiated Palemode Eradication scheme and demanding to put curbs on the moneylending activity. The important measure to fight this problem could be (i) increase in the wage rate and (ii) demand for year round employment either through the Government instituted Employment Guarantee Scheme or other measures.

#### Struggle for Wage Rise:

The Kisan Sabha launched in mid 1975 an agitation demanding the implementation of minimum agricultural wages of Rs.3/- per day, stipulated by the Government and secured the stipulated wages in Vada, Dahanu and Talasari talukas. In the following period of about 18 months - the period of Emergency - it was not possible to give vent to problems of the labouring class. The discontent among the Adivasis found expression in the summer of 1977 when about 2500 labourers employed on the construction of canal for Surya Dam Project struck work demanding increase in the daily wage rate. The labourers on road and other construction works in Dahanu and Talasari taluka and metal work in Jawhar taluka agitated for increase in the daily wages. In all about 4000 labourers joined the strikes at various work sites under the banner of Lal Bawta and succeeded in securing wages of about Rs.4/- per day. This helped boost up the confidence of agricultural labourers also.

In April 1977 a meeting of the Janata, RPI (Khobragade and Kamble faction), CPM, and Peasants and Workers Party members was held at Khandala (Poona district). It was decided that a minimum daily wage of Rs.7/- be demanded in the perennially irrigated areas and Rs.5/- in other areas of Maharashtra State.

Anatomy of a Strike:

The Kisan Sabha undertook the task of implementing these resolutions in Thane district and held a meeting of the activists in the district office at Dahanu town in June 1977. At this meeting it was decided that the wage should be at least Rs.4.50 for both men and women and Rs.10/- if the labourer had brought his own bullocks. A list of the large landowners was made and each activist was assigned an area that covered 4-5 big landlords, where the activist would undertake the responsibility of organising the strike.

After the first spells of rain, is the transplanting period - one of the most crucial periods in the whole process of paddy cultivation. The job has to be done within a set duration of about three weeks. The Sabha decided to strike work precisely at this stage. A list of various types of rice grown, their cost of production, and gross value of the produce was made together with the crucial period for each variety. It was decided to differentiate between big and medium landowners, in terms of the wage demand. Medium landowners and those having less fertile soil were to be allowed to fix the wage at Rs.4/-

On 26th June the labourers struck work on JC's - one of the big landlords - fields. JC promptly approached the local Janata Party president BK complaining of Communists instigating the agricultural labourers. JC is a local Congress leader and a prominent personage of the Marwari

community. BK immediately wrote a letter to the district committee leader of the Kisan Sabha saying that the minimum wage should be fixed at Rs.3.50 and that the strike should be called off. In his reply the Kisan Sabha leader stated that the resolutions at Khandala for the wage of at least Rs.4.50 had been endorsed by both their respective parties and there could be no question of calling off the strike till the demand was acceded to.

To solve the mounting contradictions and impasse, meetings were held on the 2nd, 4th and 7th July between the local Kisan Sabha and Janata representatives. At the last meeting on 7th July, Kisan Sabha put forward a compromise wage of Rs.4/- to which the Janata representatives agreed. The Kisan Sabha leader then suggested that they bring out a statement to this effect, but problems began anew, principally because one prominent Janata representative SN disagreed with the wage rate, thus leading to differences within the Janata itself.

BK and SN are big landowners themselves in Bahanu taluka and Nagar Haveli respectively. They pay only Rs.3/- to their labourers. Their opposition is understandable, and the Kisan Sabha realised that it will have to not only struggle alone, but also against the local Janata faction.

For five days, from 6th to 12th July, a general strike was declared on the fields of the big landlords in Dahanu and Talasari. The CPM realising the immensity of the struggle where over 3,000 Adivasi agricultural labourers from 41 villages were involved, sent cadres from Thane city, who stayed on till the end. 4 activists from Bombay city also came and took part in the organisational tasks.

Landowners' Reaction:

Initially the landowners tried to break the strike by attempting to employ Katkari tribals, many of whom are unemployed except during the timber season. The Sabha anticipating this tactic, held meetings of both Varlis and Katkaris where the activists explained the need for the latter to support the striking Varlis. The Katkaris were organised to work on the field of the Varli poor peasants land and the Kisan Sabha undertook the responsibility of providing them with food - many Katkaris joined the agitation as couriers etc.

Realising the failure of this tactic, the landlords, under the guidance and initiative of a big landowner PC held a meeting together with the local Janata Party leaders and decided that no one would pay wages over Rs.4/- per day. And the agreements to do so should be with the labourers directly and not with the "Communists". A committee was formed with a practising lawyer, also a landowner, as its Ghairman, and PC as the Secretary. The Committee met with the Chief Minister, the Collector, complaining of Communist sabotage of production, simultaneously they attempted to import labour by the truckloads from outside.

In the meantime however, some landowners began to have misgivings of their recalcitrant position and contradictions began to develop within the landowners themselves. The tensions stemmed from the fact that valuable time was being lost in which the crop would suffer; and most important of all, some of the leading landlords who organised opposition to the strike were secretly paying the actual amount demanded, even prior to the strike. As a result of which most of the transplanting work was over on their fields.

Two trends emerged as a result of which one trend representing the most vocal "oppositionists" demanded a strong

refusal to bow to the demands, the other trend representing some smaller landowners, was for meeting the demands.

The latter group began subsequently to meet the Kisan Sabha activists secretly agreeing to the demands. They were then given a permit indicating approval by the Sabha to work on agreed wages, a practice that echoed the tactics followed in the early stages of the movement in '46-'48, and work began on their fields.

The issue of such permits angered the leaders of the landowners who accused the Sabha of forming a parallel Government and taking the law into their hands - again echoing the sentiments of the erstwhile landlords in the 1945-48 struggle. The Collector was called and a tripartite meeting was fixed for the 14th July when some 25 landowners attended. While there were differences on the amount of wages that they were willing to pay, the landowners unanimously held that the labourers were willing to work for less but for the Communists who were using force to make them go on strike. The landowners also held that they could not afford to pay the wages at the rates that the Sabha was demanding.

To these charges, the Sabha replied that it had compiled a list of landlords and their capacity to pay. The demands were framed to suit precisely this capacity and the charges of threat and force were in any case too facetious to refute.

The Collector, it was reported, nonplussed at the situation left the matter to be decided by the two parties. The landowners now seizing the initiative on the same day formed the Talasari Khedut Sangh, held a meeting under its banner and decided on a general lockout to force the labourers to return to work. It was decided to mobilise support for the lockout, for which purpose, the landowners and their hirelings set out on motor-cycles asking those landowners who had submitted to the demands earlier to declare lockout. The lockout was to last from 14th July till 18th. In the meantime attempts were made to recruit Katkari labourers from outside. The lockout was successful.

The Kisan Sabha reacted to this news by holding meetings with Vailis and Katkaris. The striking labourers declared their intention to go on with the strike even for a month if necessary than acquiesce to the show of force. Morchas and public meetings were organised supporting the strike action.

On the day that the lockout was to be lifted i.e., 19th July, 3,000 Adivasis in 41 villages working for 110 landowners went on strike. No landowner was spared, not even the ones who had earlier agreed to the demand and had later submitted to the pressure of the Khedut Sangh to declare lockout. By 25th July, 2,000 acres of land belonging to 120 landowners were lying unattended and the landowners finally gave in. 3,000 Adivasis won their demand for the wage rate of Rs.4.50. The loss of a few landowners who still refused to pay at Rs.4.50, amounted to about Rs. one lakh only because of their refusal to pay Rs. 1.50 more than what they were already paying.

On 26th July at the behest of some of the big landowners the Revenue Minister toured the district, where on the one hand he gently castigated the landowners for overlooking the changing reality, which demanded a more tolerant attitude on their part, on the other, he promised to give police protection to labourers who were willing to work, but were fearful of Communist reprisal!

#### After 30 Years of Struggle:

The Kisan Sabha entered the Dahanu-Talasari area in 1945 and launched the first organized struggle in the history of the struggles of Adivasis in Maharashtra, a struggle against yeth begar. It was a new experience and gave a new perspective to the struggling Adivasis. Kisan Sabha fought against lagnagadi and other forms of bonded labour, rack renting and eviction of tenants. Later they

launched a protracted struggle raising the demand of 'land to the tiller'. The Kisan Sabha activity spread from Dahanu, Talasari, Jawhar area to Vada, Mokhada, Shahapur. Their base continues to be among the Varlis - the major tribal community of the Thane district - though other tribes in the area are also getting incorporated in the movement.

In 1976 the Kisan Sabha was reported to be active in some 200 villages. Eleven full time activists and eight part time activists were working in the area. The Sabha has its main office in Dahanu and local offices are located at some of the major village centres. One of the centres where the Kisan Sabha is located was selected to study the activities of Kisan Sabha in the context of the local socio-economic matrix.

#### Aswan - A Study of a Kisan Sabha Village

##### The Setting:

Aswan village is located in the coastal part of Dahanu taluka, to the south-east of Dahanu town. It is situated on the major district road popularly known as 'Dahanu-Charoti Naka' which is connected to Bombay-Ahmedabad Highway. It is well connected by State Transport bus service to Dahanu town.

Aswan is a medium-sized village with a population of about 2100 in 1976. In the main village live Parsis, Muslims and Caste Hindus. They are traders, shopkeepers, service personnel and a few craftsmen. The Gram Panchayat office is situated in the main village, so also the shops, two flour mills and three saree dyeing units and one stationery-making unit. Two rice mills, one of which is owned by a substantial Parsi landlord of the village, are also located in the main village. There are eleven grocery shops and two cloth shops in the main village. Larger houses in the main village, the shops and the flour and rice mills



have electricity connection. The water supply of the village is drawn from wells.

There are a number of large landowners in the taluka who reside in Dahanu town and own land in a number of villages in the taluka. In Aswan it was noted that there were ten substantial absentee landowners, three of whom resided in Dahanu town, four in Bombay and three in a nearby bigger village of Soti.

In spite of the fact that the Adivasis are in the majority in Aswan, on first sight the village gives us no indication of this population breakup. As one gets off the State Transport bus, one is struck by the fact that most houses on or around the main road are brick built and that not many Adivasis are noticeable on the road or in the tea stall or the grocer's shop.

It is only on moving away from the main village, that houses all the non-Adivasis that one comes across the Adivasi 'Pada' where the large majority of Adivasis live in thatched huts. The Adivasis - mainly Varlis live in some nine padas scattered around the main village. Aswan is thus not one village, at least topographically. It is the political economy and the production relations reproduced therein that give the village a unity.

The main village has about 100 families - the non-Adivasi population of the village, while the Adivasi families, numbering 240 live in the padas.

Church is one of the prestigious institutions of the village. A fruit orchard of over ten acres, a church building set amidst the lush greenery, a boarding house and a school upto the 10th standard, are owned by the church. The church provides free medical service to the Adivasis in Aswan and its vicinity. It serves as a resting place to social workers and voluntary agency volunteers working among the Adivasis in the district.

The Kisan Sabha has its office in the village, a small cashew plantation and it runs a hostel housing 25 Adivasi-students. The Kisan Sabha has a mass following from the Adivasis of the village, the local leading activist is also an Adivasi. The non-Adivasis - the landlords, traders, reckon it as a force.

#### History of Land Relations:

Aswan village represents a classic case of the proposition earlier presented that the transformation of production relations was predicated upon the 'intervention' by the Kisan Sabha led struggle.

According to a prominent activist of the Kisan Sabha, it has been unable to organise the Adivasis in Aswan during the initial years of its activity in the district. Being part of the feudatory jagir of Jawhar State, it had escaped the intensity and passion of the struggles of the first period. Only when the State was merged with the Indian Union consequent to Independence, did the Kisan Sabha step up its activity.

In 1951, there were only six cultivating owners in the village, while there were as many as 100 tenant cultivators. There was no rent receiver in the village. But in the towns of Bordi, Chinchani and Dahanu there were about 300 agricultural rent receivers. These landowners held land scattered over a large number of villages in the taluka.

It was principally the Kisan Sabha and the struggles launched by the Adivasi tenants under its banner that was responsible for the transformation of the relations of production. The process however was slow and protracted, and as the District Committee leader of the Kisan Sabha pointed out, the struggles involved three stages, as it were, towards the final abolition of tenancy.

With the announcement of the Tenancy Act in 1948 the first stage of struggle by the Kisan Sabha led Adivasis was a purely defensive one as far as the tenants were concerned. Thus the Kisan Sabha demanded sufficient protection for the tenant from summary and unjust eviction. Activists would tour villages, holding meetings, explaining the provisions of the Act and arousing sufficient awareness in the tenants to protect themselves against illegal eviction. Cases of such eviction, wherever they went against the provisions of the Act in this regard, were quickly brought to the notice of the Tahsildar; and in the meanwhile, tenants were asked to refuse to move, with the village backing them.

In the second stage of the struggle, it was decided that the tenant must get a certain fixed share of the produce. In other words, illegal evictions, rack renting, and in-kind exactions were attempted to be curtailed. In the third stage, the Kisan Sabha activists, undertook the task of registering the tenants, and finally gave the call for claiming ownership of the land by 1957 i.e., Tiller's Day.

The 'effectivity' of the Kisan Sabha in terms of the benefits that accrued to the Adivasi tenants was discounted by the activists themselves, when they said that although the movement had picked up tempo in Aswan, it was not strong enough to prevent evictions of the tenants in the first stage of the movement, as the Sabha could, in many other villages. According to the district leader, this was largely due to the fact that Aswan was a part of the feudatory jagir which was integrated after Independence. As such, the machinery for the implementation of the Tenancy Act was slower to move in Aswan than in other Raiyatwari villages, where not only was a history of judicial administration a reality, but the fear of the Kisan Sabha sufficient to arouse it to action. Secondly, although there were absentee landlords of the type found in

other parts of Dahanu taluka namely Parsis, Muslims and Banias, the fact that the ex-jagirdar himself an Adivasi, was a big landowner, rendered the Adivasi tenants less amenable to organisation and struggle.

As a result of this peculiar characteristic in Aswan, the effectivity of the Kisan Sabha was reduced. Undoubtedly, the ex-Jagir's lands were subsequently seized, but not before his managers and munims had evicted a number of tenants. Which is why Aswan has a large number of landless labourers.

Crop Pattern and Land Ownership Today:

The geographical area of the village is about 1500 acres of which about 880 acres are culturable. In 1976 about 40% of the area or 360 acres were put to cultivation of rice and about 20 acres to nagali, wal etc. Fruit, flower and vegetables covered about 80 acres and the rest of the area was under grass.(Table 15)

Table 15: Crop Pattern in Aswan (1975)

Crop	Area (acres)	Percent
Paddy	362	41.1
Nagali	12	1.4
Pulses	10	1.1
Fruits, vegetables, flowers.	78	8.9
Grass	418	47.5
Total	880	100.0

In 1976 there were 118 landowning Adivasis in the village and as many as 122 landless families. Majority of the land-owning families had landholdings below 5 acres each. Only 26 had landholdings between 5 and 10 acres. (Table 16)

Table 16 : Distribution of Landowners in Aswan by Size of Landholding (1976)

Size of landholding (acres)	Non Adivasi landowners		Adivasi landowners	
	Number of households	Area Held (acres)	Number of households	Area Held (acres)
Below 2.5	9	12	45	62
2.5 to 5.0	7	22	46	150
5.1 to 10.0	16	110	26	176
10.1 to 20.0	16	176	1	12
Above 20.0	4	160	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>480</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>400</b>

The only Adivasi with more than 10 acres, happens to be the Sarpanch of the village. He owns about 12 acres of land. The land is put to cultivation of rice and pulses mainly for home consumption. Regular commodity production is not taken up. Most of the Adivasi landowners can be categorised as poor peasants. They do not have any irrigated land, any land under fruit or vegetable cultivation. They raise rice, and some pulses on the border of the field. The produce from their field lasts for 3 to 5 months and they have to seek work as labourers to eke out sustenance for the rest of the period.

The Adivasis cultivated in all about 350 acres of land, nearly half of which was under grass. The rest was put to paddy cultivation and some to nagali, wal etc. The lands are relatively inferior, where mainly the halave variety of paddy can be grown. Many Adivasis do not own plough and bullocks and have to hire in these services. Since they do not have the necessary farm equipment they often are unable to get the preparatory tillage done properly and on time. Because of the lack of working capital they are not in a position to use manure and fertilisers for rice cultivation. As a result the productivity was noted to be low. The reported per acre yield of paddy varied 3 between 3 to 5 quintals. The Adivasis had very few supplementary resources. Most of the families had few chickens, some had goats. Only a few Adivasis owned cattle.

Some of the Adivasi landowners lease out their land and work as agricultural labourers as they do not have any equipment and funds to cultivate the land. The rent for such lands was reported to be about Rs.100 per acre per annum.

The landless agricultural labourers in the village and the small peasants who work as labourers for part of the year can secure employment in the village in (i) chikku orchards where some workers are employed for year round work and employment for larger number is available during the harvesting season; (ii) rice planting and rice harvesting work; (iii) grass harvesting work. After the kharif harvesting season they have to look for work outside the village. They seek employment in (a) forest coupes (b) salt pans (c) construction work (d) distillation of liquor (d) coolie work in towns. It was reported that about 100 families emigrate for a period of five to six months seeking work in the coastal strip right from Dahanu to Borivili (near Bombay). In vernacular they describe this migration as 'jarayala jato' which literally means 'move for survival'. Only a few Adivasis in the village are occupied in non-agricultural work .eg. helper

in a tea stall or a shop.

The non-Adivasis stand apart, live apart from the Adivasi population of the village. Nearly half of them are occupied in non-agricultural occupations like work in factory, trade, transport, salaried service etc. Majority of the non-Adivasi cultivators could be categorised as middle peasants, with land holding between 5 to 20 acres; they grow rice using improved methods of cultivation and it was reported that a family of about 5 to 6 persons can get adequate income with 3 acres of land under paddy cultivation. There were eight landowners who could be classified as capitalist landlords, as per the categorization adopted by Kisan Sabha, and two feudal landlords. The C.L. have irrigation facilities and have developed fruit orchards mainly chikkus. Two owned tractors and other accessories. They have developed specialised cultivation for the market yet a part of the land is still put to cultivation of rice, pulses, vegetables for family consumption. They also have some stretches of grassland. About 30 acres are owned by the erstwhile ruler of Jawhar who still owns land in a number of villages in Jawhar taluka. He gives part of the land to Adivasi tenants and the rest is left as grassland. He stays in Bombay and arranges for rent collection and sale of grass through an agent. The biggest landowner who owns about 70 acres stays at Soti. He puts part of his land to paddy cultivation and the rest to grass growing. He is also a dealer in grass and controls the grass trade in the village.

There were in all 170 landowning families. Among these there were 10 substantial non-Adivasi landowners who controlled about 30 per cent of the village lands. These landowners had markedly higher per acre income because of fruit and other garden crops. It was estimated that in the total agricultural income of the village the share of the 10 rich landowners was about 60 per cent. About

30 per cent of the landowners (50 families) could be categorised as middle peasants and they owned about 40 per cent of the total land and their share in the net agricultural income was 30 per cent. The rest of the 110 families were poor peasants most of whom were Adivasis. They owned about 30 per cent of the land and could get only 10 per cent of the total agricultural income. It was however noted that some of the middle and many of the poor peasants were not able to retain the entire agricultural income accruing to them. Through trade and debt 30 to 50 per cent of their produce passed into the hands of the rich landowners or trader-cum-moneylenders.

The substantial landowners thus not only command much of the irrigated land, fruit and vegetable gardens, good rice lands but also control the major production of the village through trade and credit nexus.

#### Debt-Cycle:

One of the principal mechanisms by which the Adivasi poor peasant - a class which is substantial in Aswan - is subordinated emanates from their inability to make their landholding a viable proposition. Although the intervention of Kisan Sabha and enforcement of the Tenancy Act may have resulted in quite a sizeable proportion of Adivasis getting land, yet the lack of the necessary working funds has resulted in the ownership of land paving the way for the operation of usury capital as a mechanism of exploitation.

Take for example the case of Lahanu. Lahanu, a poor Varli peasant with wife and two children migrated in December to Dahanu and worked as a coolie. He could secure work for 90 to 100 days in a five month period and could earn (with both husband and wife working) about Rs. 700. He owns three acres of land in Aswan of which 2 acres are put to rice cultivation. On his return he did



not have any means to live through the season when the kharif crop is growing and he had to resort to borrowing i.e., get a khavati loan. He obtained the loan, 3 quintals of paddy and Rs. 100 in cash from a grocer in Soti. He has to return it in terms of paddy which worked to twice the amount of the original loan. In effect, out of the production of 10 quintals of paddy he was left with only 2 quintals of paddy. This could provide bare subsistence for a month or so. Thus soon after the harvest he has to move out again for 'survival'.

Lahanu's case speaks of the circumstances of the majority of Varli peasants in Aswan, for that matter in the Thane district. The small peasants have to depend on the grocers or traders-cum-moneylender for khavati and crop loan and in the process lose half or more of their produce to the trader. In addition they sustain losses in the sale transaction of grass or paddy because the traders (i) beat down the prices at the time of purchase (ii) use false weights and (iii) manipulate accounts.

The amount borrowed as khavati loan is seldom enough to obtain the basic necessary foodgrains for the period of three-four months i.e., till the crop is harvested. Consequently the Adivasis had to go without food even for two-three days at a time. In such circumstances they hold that they eat the leaves of a plant that they know from experience, helps kill appetite.

There is a cooperative credit society at Aswan which covers five other villages. The records show that many of the Adivasi landholders are members of the society. Of the 118 Adivasi landholders in Aswan, 77 were borrowers of which 18 have had their loan facilities cancelled due to insolvency. On investigation of the records and a cross check with the activists and Adivasis of Aswan, it was noticed that the loans are sanctioned in the largest proportion to those with

land holdings of 10 acres and above. The total distribution of loan for the year 1975-76 for all the villages was about Rs. 61,000 of which 40 per cent was distributed in Aswan village. Of the Rs.25,000 distributed in Aswan over 70 per cent amount accrued to the non-Adivasi middle and rich landowners. As the Secretary of the Society, who incidentally is also the Police Patil of the village remarked, the security offered by the non-Adivasis is greater than that offered by the Adivasi poor peasants, and so the bulk of the loans flowed to the former.

The Government has introduced palemode eradication scheme in 1964-65. The scheme has hardly helped the Adivasis in Aswan. It was reported that in 1975 only four peasants of whom three were reportedly non-Adivasis received the loan under the scheme and the total amount distributed was Rs. 500/- only. The activists pointed out that the administrative procedure is cumbersome and full of loopholes as a result the Adivasis stay away from the scheme and continue to depend on the trader-moneylender.

All that the Kisan Sabha has been able to do is to organise demonstrations in Aswan against 'sowkari'. But the necessity of consumption loan in the absence of any alternative means for sustenance, keeps 'sowkari' intact. Thus through the operation of usury capital in the form of palemode system part of the necessary produce is appropriated from the Adivasi by the dominant class.

Advance of consumption loan during the lean season is also used as a means for ensuring the supply of labour at low wages by the rich landowners. Repayment is made in terms of labour days where considerable opportunities exist for extracting labour days more than proportionate to the loan advanced since the poor Adivasi peasant tends to lose count of the days. Take for instance the case of Hari. Hari was expected to repay the loan taken in 15 days of labour time but in fact he worked for 20 days. It was reported to be a common practice among the wadiwalas (orchard owners) to advance loans to agricultural labourers who pledge

their labour time for the harvesting work at the rates which are below the peak season wage rate by 20 to 40 per cent. The low level of wages is then explained as a part of the agreement with the Adivasis in consideration of the interest on the loan.

In Aswan, another system viz., labour contract system is prevalent under which the landlord and a group of labourers enter into a contract wherein a certain rate of payment is fixed to complete the work in a specified area. The Adivasis, it was reported work for 10 to 12 hours and at times even complete the work in over a larger area. The effective wage rate did not exceed Rs. 3/- per day for more than 8 hours work.

As for the labour service for debt repayment is concerned, Kisan Sabha has not been successful in combating this wage form since they are not able to provide any alternative to meet the consumption needs during the lean season. The Adivasis continue to pledge their labour and in effect suffer a cut in the wages or pay usurious interest rate in terms of grain and lose a substantial part of their produce.

Many Adivasis in Aswan are members of the Jungle Kamgar Cooperative Society, which gives them employment by way of felling trees, loading and unloading trucks etc. Usually they were paid Rs. 3 to Rs.4 per day, but of late the piece rate system has been introduced. It was reported that the prevailing piece rate for the total work done at the end of the day is far too little to ensure a wage of even Rs.3/-

It was also reported that there is corruption in the Society and Adivasis are often cheated in measuring the total load and in the distribution of the dividends at the end of the financial year. The corruption and the attendant embezzlement is even more glaring since the Government provides a subsidy of 50 per cent to the Society, while handing out the contract for felling trees. As the effective control of the Society rests mainly with non-Adivasis, they are able

to reap the benefits of the subsidy and the Adivasis are left high and dry.

The Gram Panchayat is also dominated by the rich landowners. Even though the Sarpanch of Aswan is an Adivasi and four out of the nine members of the gram panchayat are Adivasis the Sarpanch is rendered a mere rubber stamp. Since the employment opportunities for the large proportion of Adivasi poor peasants and agricultural labourers are few, the Sarpanch has tried various means, including active help from the local Kisan Sabha to have the grants for work on the Employment Guarantee Scheme increased. But he has not succeeded and on examining the accounts of the Panchayat, it was found that the grants for E.G.S. constitute a very insignificant amount. For instance, the total income of the Gram Panchayat of Aswan was about Rs. 1700 in 1975-76, earned from various sources like house tax and other local taxes. Income through Government grants was Rs. 1500 of which the grant for E.G.S. work allocation was Rs. 372/- only.

#### Kisan Sabha in Aswan:

Kisan Sabha launched in 1976 a wage struggle in Dahanu, Talasari and Jawhar talukas. A massive strike of the agricultural labourers was organised demanding an increase in the daily wage from Rs. 2.50 to Rs. 4.50. The Kisan Sabha effectively mobilised the workers who struck work for about a week. The strike was successful and the landowners in Aswan had to accept daily wage rate for Rs. 4 to Rs. 4.50 and made the agreement accordingly. It was reported that the agreement was not adhered to by some of the big landowners, however it was not possible to fight for these individual cases. The activists reported that during the strike the Adivasis had already lost some wages and it was not possible to mobilise them again on the issue of individual cases in specific villages. In 1976, it was reported that the earnings of

agricultural labourers during the season in which he gets work for about 100 days, increased from about Rs. 300 to Rs. 450 so that the wages of man and wife could provide at least the basic sustenance to the family.

Another problem which the Kisan Sabha is trying to tackle is liquor addiction. It was reported that with the Marwari finance, liquor distillation activity is flourishing near the village. It is an effective weapon used by the dominant classes to divide the Adivasis and win over some of them. Part of the earnings of the Adivasis get used up for liquor consumption thus increasing the deficit further. The Kisan Sabha has been able to put some check on excesses through social pressure. The practice is to arrange a meeting of the Adivasis in a pada and then 'try' the case of a drunkard or a person beating his wife etc. We attended a meeting during our visit when Madhu was criticised for beating his mother. A number of members voiced their feeling in the meeting. It was reported such an action was effective as a deterrent because in a small community an individual cannot really overlook the social pressure.

The Kisan Sabha has been effective in controlling the physical violence which the landlords, forest contractors or forest guards etc., used to inflict on the Adivasis. The social oppression and some of the malpractices perpetuated by taking advantage of the ignorance of the Adivasis have been curbed. The Adivasi finds in Kisan Sabha a kind of a protector for meeting the oppression and onslaught of the dominant classes.

The system of lagnagadi and ghargadi has been effectively combated. Under this system a boy of 7 to 8 years is employed by the landlord as a domestic servant. When the boy is about 18 years old the landlord arranges for his marriage. The boy and his wife are both required to work as bonded labourers for repaying the amount that the landlord had spent for the marriage. The labourer is required to serve for 10 years or so

under bondage. He is made to work from early morning till late at night. The Kisan Sabha organised for the liberation of the lagnagadis and provided them with necessary protection after they escaped from the landowner's house. It was reported at the time of the study in 1976 that in Aswan there was no lagnagadi.

The Kisan Sabha had taken up yet another issue, the issue of casteism. Among the Adivasis the Katkaris are sort of outcastes and the Varlis will not even accept drinking water from Katkaris or Mahars. The activists of the Kisan Sabha faced considerable opposition when they would visit a Katkari house and eat with them. The activists persisted with their anti-caste practices. Over a time there was some relaxation of caste barriers and intermixing of the various communities increased.

The Kisan Sabha helps the Adivasis in legal matters. They launched a vigorous struggle for 'land to the tiller' and have been able to stall illegal eviction of the tenants in a number of cases. The Kisan Sabha also fought the Makta system under which the Adivasis used to lease out their land to non-Adivasi land owners on a small rent. They mobilised the Adivasis to harvest the crop on the leased out lands and put some check on the system. Yet some of the Adivasis still lease out the land for lack of the necessary inputs to cultivate the land. It was reported that some of the Adivasis leave their plots under grass rather than borrow a loan to cultivate paddy and pay heavy interest charges.

The Kisan Sabha also has to be vigilant about police cases. The Adivasis are often implicated on false charges by the landlords particularly if some agitation for wage struggle, land claim is on. The Kisan Sabha has to provide the necessary protection and legal aid to the Adivasis. The activists of the Kisan Sabha reported that they have to spend quite some time and energy in attending to these legal matters at taluka and district places.

The problem of lack of work after December and forced out migration for 'survival' is serious. The Kisan Sabha has launched

agitations demanding work under the Employment Guarantee Scheme. However it was reported that the procedure and conditions under which the work has to be started are complicated and the Government officials manage to dodge the issue.

Considering the fact that the Adivasis have lost, over time, all their means of subsistence and were reduced to bondage the achievement of the Kisan Sabha in liberating the Adivasis from veth begar or bondage is viewed by the Adivasis as spectacular. Discussions with the Adivasi members of the Kisan Sabha in Aswan and other villages in the area revealed how this achievement is much valued by the Adivasis. The members also mention the struggles launched to regain the lands lost to the landlords or the claim to Government lands. It was reported that the acquisition of land through sustained struggles helped generate confidence among the Adivasis. They have moved from the status of bondage and total servitude to land ownership where they now have at least a modicum of control over the conditions of life. They have not been able to move beyond this. They almost lose the effective control over the land because of the debt trap and again enter into part bondage through labour pledge.

The reasons for the limitations of the movement are found partly in the conditions obtained within the area. It was reported that the hands of the Kisan Sabha are already full because of the day to day legal, police and other individual matters and the various immediate struggles and the implementation of the demands. The activists in the area are mainly Adivasis who have their limitations of education and experience. The members are all Adivasis and almost all uneducated, and poor. They need continuous support of the Kisan Sabha to withstand pressure, to fight the oppression or exploitation perpetrated by landlords, traders, money-lenders, contractors or Government officials.

The major limitation in the advance of the work of the Kisan Sabha was stated to be the dearth of activists and also the funds to support the activists. It was therefore stated that even though there is potential for expansion of the movement, this is constrained due to the limited number of activists. The activists are fully occupied in day to day work and the struggles and cannot give adequate attention to the tasks on other fronts viz., educational, cultural, political. The Kisan Sabha activists meet regularly to discuss party programme, review and report on the conditions and the activities in the area, discuss plans of work etc. For the members of the Kisan Sabha annual conferences are usually held and study classes are conducted at different places. Apart from this, it has not been possible to involve the members in any regular programme that would develop basis for collective activity or promote educational and cultural enhancement and in the process raise the capacities of the Adivasi members to shoulder new responsibilities at the local level and cope up with the problems that they have to face in the 'modern' world.



Section III

Bhoomi Sena - Adivasi Organisation in  
Palghar Taluka

The Prelude:

Disillusionment with the United Front Governments ruling in several states after the defeat of the Congress in the 1967 elections and dissatisfaction with the continuation of the status quo made people wary and a number of struggles erupted at the turn of the 'sixties. The left parties - Communists and Socialists - started the 'Land grab' movement. In Palghar taluka of Thane district, the Praja Socialist Party led the 'land grab' movement. On 9th August 1970, they offered Satyagraha agitating against the Anjuman Trust in Mahim. The Trust owned some 2000 acres of land in that area.

It was reported that the lands held by the Anjuman Trust were given by the British Government prior to 1930. Most of the trustees are Iranis, and a manager is appointed for the administration of the Trust. The Chairman lives in Iran and comes once a year to India to collect the incomes from the land. Most of the lands are under grass cultivation; a major part of the large holdings are reportedly good paddy lands, but paddy production is negligible. About 150 P.S.P. workers participated in the satyagraha; all of them were arrested on charges of trespassing the Trust lands and sentenced to 15 days imprisonment, in the district jail of Thane. A number of Adivasis and their leader were among the satyagrahis.

Represented within the jail were two trends; the conservative being shared by most P.S.P. workers was that the satyagraha had proved its point in that they had achieved the purpose of highlighting the issue of land concentration. The other position was that the struggle had just begun, and struggle against the

land concentration in the hands of the Sowkars and big landowners, has to be continued. The point at issue was to recover the lands lost by the Adivasis and better their conditions of existence. This view was shared by the Adivasi leader - Adil, and a few of his colleagues. Debates ensued but the non-Adivasi satyagrahis did not support Adil and his colleagues. The Adivasi satyagrahis realised that they have to fight their battle themselves and for this they have to provide an organisational shape to any conception of struggle undertaken by the Adivasis and not by representative workers alone.

#### The Initial Stirrings:

On release from jail, Adil and his friends returned to Sondha, and using his own village as the starting point they began to undertake detailed surveys of the land relations in the nearby villages. Discussions were held with Adivasis, who readily accepted Adil, and the first perceptions of the dimension of the problem began to acquire shape in the minds of Adil and his colleagues. The process was dialectical however, borne of the mechanisms of the dialogue between Adil and the Adivasis; and if the latter and his friends had acquired a semblance of a unity of the reality around, so did the Adivasis to whom they spoke and with whom, in village after village, they shared their 'experience in truth'.

It was under such circumstances, and at this stage of their cognition that Adil thought of forming an organisation that would deal with the problems they had learnt of. The name 'Bhoomi Sena' (Land Army) was given to this organisation which was born in 1970, and acquired a membership of eight hundred.

Consciousness determines the class struggle, and the levels of the perceptions implicit in the consciousness of

the oppressed presuppose the dimension and levels of the struggle. Adil and the Bhoomi Sena had seen the reality, grasped it in its essential features, and accordingly planned their forms of struggle.

Thus it was clear that the Sowkar or landlord did not need the law to usurp land or produce. The mechanism of exploitation was predicated upon direct physical coercion. Accordingly, the first phase of the struggle by the Adivasis led by the Bhoomi Sena had the directness of mass strength, the freshness of spontaneity and as we shall see, the limitations of its perception of the reality.

A rich sowkar from Sava village was the first victim of the new consciousness. 600 Adivasis from various villages, many of them armed with sickles heard Adil's speech, explaining the aims of the Bhoomi Sena and then marched on to the fields, cut the standing crop, as an assertion of the collective will.

The sowkar was taken aback, there was no resistance, the crop was taken away, and distributed by the Bhoomi Sena to the landless victims of the sowkar's usurious operations.

Such crop seizures took place at first sporadically and then more frequently, often under the guidance of the Bhoomi Sena, more often than not spontaneously. Reaction from the dominant class, the sowkars and landlords was quick to come. Adil was taken to the police station, but the crop seizures continued such that in a year's time more than 50 sowkar/landlords from more than 10 villages were targets of the crop seizures. The issue reached such dimensions as to drive the local S.D.O. at the sub-divisional headquarters to make the trip to Manor to deal with the question of fraudulent cases of landownership, which the Bhoomi Sena had pointed out earlier.

What about the crops seized? The Bhoomi Sena began grain banks where the grain acquired from the crop seizures after being collectively threshed, was stored. It is, however, important to

note that the grain banks of this phase were not 'informed' by the consciousness of the third phase of the movement.

As a matter of fact the limitations of the struggle and the attendant consciousness influenced the functioning of the grain bank. In other words, the process of perception of the reality involved the Adivasis only to the extent that they saw the benefits that could accrue to each one of them individually, were they to participate in the struggle. In itself this consciousness is to be expected as the dialectical opposite of the collective will in which the former is manifested always amongst the peasantry. By itself, and unaccompanied by the ideology of the collective will and aspiration, it is dangerous and leads to fissiparous tendencies within the movement.

The grain banks, were started with an idea that just conceived of the need for storage space for the grain. Given the limitations of the Adivasis' consciousness and the lack of any collective ideology 'informing' the grain banks it is not surprising that corruption stepped in. Some workers in charge of the grain banks were arbitrary in their distribution of the grain and many Adivasis did not have enough seeds to sow the following year's crop with, nor the gumption to ask the sowkar who would have refused anyway.

#### Aid From Above - The Debt Trap:

The S.D.O. had cleared some 800 pending cases and the Adivasi cultivators got back their land. Now arose the problems how to cultivate the land. The grain bank could not come to their aid. Subsequently a few Adivasis leased out their lands and some were driven to approach the sowkar for seed and plough service. The Bhoomi Sena, at this confused state, succumbed to a set of ready solutions viz., application

of modern technology with the help of a bank loan. In a meeting organised by the Sarvodaya leaders a social worker from Bombay offered to help; the measure suggested was increase in the production through modern inputs. Bhoomi Sena leaders agreed. Starting from Adil's village, SW and the members of the voluntary organisation he had formed for helping Adivasis, carried out a quick survey and soon discussed its development plans with the local branch of a Nationalised Bank. On the basis of SW's goodwill and reputation, the bank agreed to provide loans to twenty Adivasi families in Sondha for the agricultural season 1972-73. The twenty families set to work under the guidance of SW. The yield that year reached upto 12 quintals per acre as the land, in many cases was fallow the previous year, and expenditure for improved seed, fertilizer was incurred. When the rice was threshed SW wanted to make contribution to levy despite the fact that the levy price was much lower than the market price and small landowners were exempt from the levy on crop. In the process the Adivasis were hardly left with any surplus to repay the bank loan.

Next year, SW organised and registered an association called the Shetkari Mandal for mediating the loans between the bank and the Adivasis. Adil was made its President, SW remained its Honorary Advisor and the Bhoomi Sena activists were roped in into the propagation of the development programme. In 1973-74 120 families were included in the programme. Problems soon began to pile up, as SW became in effect its sole guiding force. Policies, in relation to the bank loans, which were to be handed out by the Mandal, were arbitrarily framed. For instance, each Adivasi was to deposit the loan he received from the bank with the Mandal. He was given an amount less than the amount originally advanced by the bank. The remainder was given out, at SW's discretion, to peasants who had not originally borrowed from the bank and were thus not liable to the bank's claims of

repayment. Complicated procedures for withdrawal and repayment were introduced and coupled with the above policy of the Mandal . giving loans to non-bank borrowers, many Adivasi peasants found themselves heavily indebted.

Coupled with this, SW's scheme of entering the grass trade ended in a total failure when the grass traders boycotted the Mandal. Grass piled up and was later transported to Bombay but could not be sold. Most of the grass given to the Mandal by the Adivasi poor peasants thus rotted away in Bombay, adding to their financial burdens.

In 1974-75, the third and what was to be the final year of the programme, the scheme was extended to 600 families. More wells were dug taking the total number to 19; out of which 15 wells failed and the work on the remaining could not be completed. Loans mounted up and the bank became anxious. Adil and the Bhoomi Sena had participated in all this with increasing misgivings. When the Bank set out to look into the matter, things began to happen. On enquiring into the Mandal's books, the Bank was thoroughly confused as to the borrowers and actual recipients. An audit enquiry was instituted in the Mandal's dealings and they revealed a sorry tale of uneconomic projects and arbitrary distribution of loans.

Only then did Adil own up his mistake in supporting SW's programme when in a public speech he admitted his share of the responsibility. By a unanimous vote the programme was laid to rest, and in June 1976 SW left the area.

The Bhoomi Sena Today:

The total failure of the scheme of self sufficiency via increased production through aid from external resources, the partial success of the struggles of the Adivasis in the earlier Bhoomi Sena phase through mass mobilisation, finally convinced Adil of the necessity of a programme of class struggle, implemented on an organised basis.

Fortuitously enough, the arrival of SP, an erstwhile Socialist Party worker, and an innovative educationist helped the Bhoomi Sena achieve a certain conceptual basis; a factor that had been missing earlier. What is more, SP has been able to impart a certain creativity and freshness to the process of politicisation, again, a conspicuous absence in the earlier phase of the Bhoomi Sena's activities.

The Bhoomi Sena has now been able to grasp the essential reality of the situation that to function as an effective organisation of the poor and landless Adivasis, it has to identify the exploitation of the Adivasis in terms of a 'culture of repression' and its basis in the monopoly ownership of land and appropriation of surplus from the poor. As a result, it attempts to create a counter 'culture of revolt' as we shall see, by organising the Adivasis to struggle against the landlords at various levels, and to simultaneously try to build alternate forms of livelihood both based on the collective support of the poor peasants and landless as counterposed to the landlords and their interests.

Since the 'culture of repression' represents a total system of exploitation and oppression, that operates and perpetuates the class inequality through various 'instances' as it were, it is possible to organise the poor against any one of the instances initially, preferably the one with a greater 'organisability'; the sustainability and effectivity of the organisation would however depend on its ability to recognise the totality of the

system of exploitation and move in the direction of its destruction.

Bhoomi Sena with its new perspective of class struggle took up an issue that immediately affected a large number of Adivasis, i.e., minimum wages and employment.

"Bhoomi Sena"

To

Tahsildar, Palghar.

Sub: Regarding payment of minimum wages to Agricultural labourers.

Sir,

The wages received by Agriculture labourers in Palghar Taluka particularly in Manor Tribal block are less than what they should receive according to the Maharashtra minimum wages Act of 1974. We have so far submitted to you various applications from Borsheti, Nagzeri, Pochade, Valgaon, Masvan, Lalthan, Chahade, and Tandulwadi stating that the Agriculture labourers in these villages are not receiving the minimum wages. We have also submitted to you about 1100 applications of landless labourers with full information, where we have brought to your notice that the labourers are not receiving more than 1 measure of paddy. In our letter No. 813 dated 4-1-1977 we have stated that Laxman Kanu Mor and 10 others from Velgaon have in their application dated 9-2-1976 complained of receiving only Re.1/- wages and also Shri Santya Devji Mere and 17 others have in their application dated 15-11-1976 stated that Shri Mohamad Yusuf Haji Amin Rais is not paying minimum wages. It is learnt that even today the same landlord is paying only  $\frac{1}{2}$  kg. of milo. The Government has not made any efforts so far to implement the minimum wages Act of the Government of Maharashtra in force since 24-3-1974. It is regretted to note that even after the lapse of three years such negligence on the part of the Government in implementing the laws.

The General wage rate in the area is 1 measure of paddy and if paid in cash only 75 paise to Rupee one is paid. In these difficult days when the prices of essential commodities and grains are raising day by day and taking into consideration the number of days employment is available in a year are very few these labourers have to go hungry or make do with a glass of gruel is a sad thing. Even after requesting the Government for a long time the EGS works were started only in the month of May and discontinued due to the rains within a month.

Is it not possible to include the implementation of the minimum wages Act as one of the important works to be done by the Tahsildar? The submitted applications were just dumped in the file and no action was taken. Where do you expect these labourers to go?



Now it is time for the cultivating season. Once again after three years of the enactment of the law the sawkars will force the labourers to work for the same old rates and Government will remain satisfied that it has passed a good law. The Government through the Gram Sevaks, Talathis and circle Inspectors must take strict measures to implement the laws. The Gram Sevaks due to "Dadagiri" of the Sawkars are not able to convey the rules of the Laws to the Labourers, nor can they hold Sawkars responsible for not paying the proper wages.

Bhoomi Sena is organising the labourers to fight for their rights and demands immediate implementation of the minimum wages Act of 1974. We hope to receive your co-operation in this matter.

Yours faithfully,

Sd/-  
President,  
Bhoomi Sena.

cc: 1) The Collector, Thana  
2) Mrs Mrinal Gore, M.P.  
3) The Labour Officer, Thana.

Tactics of Bhoomi Sena:

As described earlier, through the mechanics of moneylending and enforced contracts, a large number of Adivasis had been rendered landless and thus forced to sustain themselves through labour. Although the Minimum Wage Act had prescribed the minimum wage at Rs. 3.50, few Adivasis were paid anything more than Rs.2/- or its equivalent in kind i.e., 2 Paili paddy. Off season, the wages amounted to not more than Re.1/- or 1 Paili paddy. The Bhoomi Sena adopted, and still does so, a two-fold approach to the problem. On the one hand after inquiry into the numbers not getting minimum wage and the defaulting landlords and rich peasants, sent a petition to the local tehsildar requesting him to look into the matter. Simultaneously they undertook mobilisation of the poor initially around the peak season, when the landlord would really feel the pinch of a strike.

In Vahada village, for instance, after undertaking these preliminary steps a strike was called, when no answer or legal action was forthcoming from the tehsildar. The local landlords, however, refused to comply with the demands, expecting to break the strike. The Bhoomi Sena, however, strengthened the struggle,

by suggesting an alternative means of income to the Adivasis. As a result, all the Adivasis refused to work and took to jungle cutting and carrying the wood about 18 kilometres to a town for sale. The whole operation involved a round trip for nearly 36 kilometres to earn Rs. 4 to 5, and when the landlords found this to be the case, they complained to the Forest Officer and Havildar, who ordered the Adivasis to stop cutting any more trees. The Bhoomi Sena not to be outdone, organised a demonstration of the Adivasis of the village, 600 strong, and explained that according to the law one was allowed to cut headload of wood, so actually it was the Forest Officer and Havildar who were acting against the law and not the Adivasis. Cutting operations resumed. The Forest Officer and landlords were also informed of the decision of the Adivasis to resume cutting trees, and at the same time, a petition was sent to the Secretary of the Gram Panchayat, explaining the whole issue. The Secretary called a meeting of the landlords and Bhoomi Sena who demanded that the landlords should pay the minimum wage. The landlords complied, partly due to the pressure from below, and partly due to the necessity to get the work done, but only for a few days. No sooner had the dust settled than they reverted to the old wage of Rs. 2/-. The Bhoomi Sena again called for a strike, and jungle cutting, and carried demonstrations every day to the landlord's houses, till they finally complied.

#### On Bonded Labour and Class Struggle:

As described below, one of the 'instances' through which the 'culture of repression' is maintained is the system of bondedness which reduces the Adivasis to the position of slaves.

The Bhoomi Sena recognising the system for its inhumanity again adopted a twofold approach to the question of the emancipation of bonded labour. Utilising the provisions of

the Bonded Labour Abolition Act 1975, the cadres collected data relating to bonded labourers and filed cases in court as per the Act for 'emancipation'.

Bhoomi-Sena

13th June, 1977

To

The Tahsildar, Palghar.

Sub: Regarding freedom of Bonded Labourers.

Sir,

In a number of villages in Palghar Taluka there exists a system of bonded labour known as Lagnagadi-Ghargadi (Bondage due to marriage-bondage as house servants). In this system the labourers work for a nominal wage for the Sawkar in consideration of marriages. The Adivasis in this area are working as bonded labourers for a number of years.

Under this system these labourers instead of receiving one measure of paddy per day as wages, as is practised in this area, receive 20 measures of paddy a month (calculating 1 measure a day per month it comes to 30 measures, but 10 measures a month are deducted as repayment of the loan). In some cases 3 to 4 mounds of paddy given as 'Vahi' (advances) is also deducted as repayment. It is worth noting that the mound measures 28 payali, but the 'Vahi' paid to these labourers measures only 20 payali. The payali is a standard measure in the area and is also a very tricky measure. It is made of either wood or metal and every one has his own shape and size. In this area the Government recognised measure of quintal is not in practice and the Government is also aware of it.

Under the system, after the marriage both the husband and wife have to work for the Sawkar. The wife also receives the same wage rate. If asked for in cash only 75 paise to Re. 1/- are paid.

Most of the labourers do not know the amount of loan they have taken. In some cases he is only aware of the loan received in kind. No one bothers about the rate of interest, and the Sawkar asks him to work for a number of years without any accounts being kept. When a few dare to ask the Sawkar the time period of bondage on increased time period is the answer.

If the labourer is sick for a day or has to attend a ceremony at home and does not attend to the work, he is abused or beaten up the next day. Sometimes when the Sawkar has no work for the labourer he is not paid any wages and does not allow the labourer to go elsewhere. If the labourer works on the EGS the wages are collected by the Sawkar.

After Independence the bonded labour system was abolished according to rule 23(1) of the Constitution. When Government

realised that nothing was done the 4th point of the 20 point programme declared by the Prime Minister on 1st July 1975 . abolished the bonded labour system. The Government proclaimed an ordinance to that effect on 24th October 1975, and after that the ordinance was made into an Act. The Act is now known as Bonded Labour Abolition Act No. 19 of 1976.

According to the debt relief Act of the Government of Maharashtra for small farmers and rural artisans, it is clearly stated that any system which forces the labourer to work for the Sawkar in consideration of loans taken is abolished and the labourers are free.

Bonded labourers are to work for wages far below the minimum wages fixed by the Government of Maharashtra even after three years of the date of enforcement.

Bhoomi Sena has submitted 167 applications since 30-8-1976 to 2-5-1977 from villages Nagzeri, Mahagaon, Kirst, Borsheti, Barhanpur, Ambada, Kev, Ambhan, Durves, Pochada, Tamsar, Govade, Dhuktan, Khanloli, Maswan, Chahada, Vishranpur, Lalthan, Tandulwadi, Sakhare, Nawaze, Dahisar, and Kuda. In most of these cases husband and wife both are working for the Sawkar. We are aware of the fact that the above number is far less than the actual number of bonded labourers. At present in bondage, these labourers are undergoing ruthless oppression by landlords and also because of inadequate employment in the area. Even after a time lapse of 4 months after submitting the application no action was taken. Once again labourers will be forced to work for the same old rates under similar conditions this season. What is the action taken regarding the applications submitted to you?

Enquiries should be conducted of all these applications and offenders should be punished according to the bonded labour abolition Act.

All Sawkars and bonded labourers should be informed in writing about the abolition of the bonded labour system and loans. All gram sevaks and Talathis should be instructed to implement the above law. We also along with Ex-MLA Mr. Navnitrai Shah met you in April 1977 at your residence. We were told that the cases of bonded labourers were sent to the Labour Office, Thana. Later when our workers visited your office, it was learnt that your office will deal with it. What is the truth? Is the problem going to be solved?

While it is found that the Government is not willing to implement the laws passed by it and applications and requests made by the public for the implementation are not taken care of by its own laws, the Government is forcing the public to look for other means to solve the problem. Please note that you are forcing us to seek other means for the solution of the question of bonded labourers.

Yours faithfully,

sd/-

President,  
Bhoomi Sena.

The Bhoomi Sena also suggested to the Tasildar that he go on a tour of the villages where bonded labour exists and hold talks with the sowkars and labourers and free them; that the problem did not merely stop at their emancipation but at finding them employment subsequent to their emancipation, and that the sowkar should be made to employ the same labour but at wages prescribed by the Minimum Wages Act.

The Bhoomi Sena did not stop at this legal remedy. As the Sena activists are at pains to point out, in their discussions with the Adivasis, it is only struggle and organisation that can achieve their emancipation. So alongside, they organised demonstrations/meetings in villages where bonded labourers existed, and asked them to walk out as free men, in some cases even forced the landlord to agree to releasing the lagnagadis.

For instance, Wada village had 7 bonded labourers. The local Tarun Mandal with the help of the Bhoomi Sena prepared a list of their histories and organised a meeting, where all the Adivasi, poor peasants and landless attended and many spoke of the atrocities committed by the landlords. The Tehsildar was also invited, and presented with the list of bonded labourers; under the new Act they were now free men. One of these was BDM who was bonded to the local sowkar for the past 14 years. For his marriage, 6 years ago, when he had come of age, he had borrowed Rs.500 in cash and kind; the sowkar however insisted that he had borrowed Rs. 900. He was getting a wage of only 20 paili paddy per month i.e., Rs. 20, and his wife 15 paili or Rs. 15. With the emancipation of bonded labour arose the problem of finding work for them. The landlord/sowkar was made to agree to employ BDM and the others as free wage labourers at Rs.3/- in season. The freed labourers now work only in the fields.

We Want Work!:

Majority of the Adivasis are poor peasants or landless labourers. They have to rely for a major share of their total earnings on outside employment. The problem acquires a sharper dimension in off season months, at which time unemployment is very high.

A survey conducted by the Bhoomi Sena revealed that out of thousand families interviewed the period of employment was as follows:

		<u>Employment Period</u>				
		1-2	2-3	4-5	6-8	8-10
		months	months	months	months	months
<u>No. of families</u>		184	426	266	96	28

As this is a single crop area, employment is available only in the kharif season i.e. between June and November. Even in this period August and September are slack months (after the transplanting and before harvesting). After this period, unemployment is acute and the rural poor migrate to urban centres like Palghar, Boisar, Dahanu or to the outskirts of Greater Bombay in search of employment. They are employed in salt pans, construction, road works, forest timber depots and coupes where work is not permanent and wages vary from Rs. 3 to Rs.5. A few manage to find some kind of temporary employment near the village, but this is only marginal.

The Employment Guarantee Scheme promises to provide employment to groups of not less than 50 people within 5 kms of the place of their residence within 10 days of their application to the local authorities.

The Bhoomi Sena knowing fully well that the administrative machinery moves much too slowly, began submitting applications for 16 villages for work under the EGS, since August 1976.

They were sent well in advance of the lean season. However, nothing was done to implement the scheme and by 20th January 1977, the Bhoomi Sena sent another letter to the President of the taluka Co-ordination Committee, reminding him of the applications sent earlier, and also that not only should the scheme be implemented forthwith but that the Minimum Wage of Rs. 3.50 should be strictly adhered to. A meeting was arranged with the Tehsildar only on 24th March 1977, but no positive action followed till the first week of April by which time many Adivasis had migrated elsewhere.

The Bhoomi Sena organised a delegation from 30 villages to the Tehsildar on the 15th of April 1977; the Tehsildar was informed that if the EGS works did not begin in these villages immediately, i.e., within the next 10 days, a morcha would be organised to his office and would leave only when the works get started. The Tehsildar acquiesced, and by 25th a list of 24 works was announced. But, as the Sena pointed out, most of these were near the non-Adivasi villages. Considering that most of the rural poor were Adivasis, it was necessary that works should be started to benefit these sections. With a constant pressure from the Bhoomi Sena, some 40 works were finally opened up by the 4th of May.

All the works were closed by the 12th of June as soon as the monsoon started. A total of about 30 days work was provided for the Adivasis in the Manor tribal block at an average of 1100 people per day. But as the Bhoomi Sena cadres pointed out to us, it is negligible when compared to the number of landless and agricultural labourers and poor peasants in the area who face near-starvation situation during this season for want of employment.

Besides, as the cadres pointed out, even on the ongoing works there were a number of problems. For example,

1. No implements were provided at the work site. Those who had no implements had to hire them from big landlords or else they had to go without work.

2. Irregular payment was a common feature at all the work sites. The minimum wage of Rs. 3.50 was not always paid reportedly because of embezzlement.
3. Since payments were not made in time, many Adivasis were driven to leave the EGS work and move to other places in the hope of getting employment and immediate wages at the end of the day, however low they might be.
4. As a result of which the relief works benefited the middle peasants and non-Adivasis more than the Adivasi poor.

Confrontation With 'Culture of Repression':

While organising the poor peasants and landless on issues like minimum wages and against instances of exploitation like bondedness, the Bhoomi Sena is also watchful of instances of oppression that instil fear in individual poor peasants like threats, beatings by the landlord, and police harassment which hitherto have always cowed the Adivasi poor peasants into submissiveness. It was reported that when an Adivasi goes to the police station to lodge a complaint, he is first harassed for lodging a complaint against a sowkar (who in most cases is the offender); after which the complaint is filed away and no action taken at all. On the other hand, a complaint by a sowkar of indiscipline by Adivasis or whatever is cooked up, is dealt with immediately. The police visit the village in a matter of hours and bring the offender to the police station handcuffed and harass him until he confesses his "crime".

The Bhoomi Sena attempts to transform all such instances of fear into instances of revolt and struggle by the poor. For instance, during the struggle by the Adivasi poor and landless of Dongari village for minimum wages, a police havildar accosted a landless labourer, and rudely asked him if his father had fixed the wages, and that he should be



thankful for whatever he gets and not demand any more. The Bhoomi Sena at once registered a complaint of police harassment with the police station at Manor demanding an inquiry and apology.

Neither the inquiry nor apology was forthcoming although batches of Adivasis and cadres visited the police station at Manor. On the fifth occasion, when the Bhoomi Sena cadre was waiting at the police station for a reply, a sowkar, well known in the area for his usurious operations, entered with his domestic servant, alleging that the servant wanted to leave without paying his dues. The servant, however, replied that the sowkar would neither pay him wages, nor let him go. Upon hearing this, the police constable beat up the servant. The Bhoomi Sena cadre who was present, intervened, only to be beaten up by another havildar. The cadre left, and in a matter of an hour a morcha and demonstration was organised to the police station denouncing police harassment and demanding an apology. A copy of a petition sent to the Chief Minister was also given to the PSI, who reportedly acquiesced, an apology was rendered to all, and an inquiry of police harassment is under progress.

Molestation of women by goondas of the landlords was common at village fairs and carnivals. So just before the annual 'mela' at Manor, at which most young Adivasi girls and boys bedecked in all their finery attended, the Bhoomi Sena instructed all its cadres and local Tarun Mandal members to beat up any havildar or goonda caught so much as whistling at a girl. The next day at the meeting called by the local Tarun Mandal all the cadres reported that things had gone quite smoothly.

As a result of such tactics, the Bhoomi Sena is able to prove to the Adivasi poor that the system of oppression functions at multiple levels and therefore demands multiple forms of struggles; it is the collective might and organised struggle of the poor that alone can bring them justice; and that to do this it is necessary to build up a strong organisation in every village

to serve the interests of the rural poor exclusively.

The Tarun Mandal - Nucleus of Struggle:

It is perhaps with the view to strengthening the collective interests of the poor at the village level, and not make the Bhoomi Sena into a monolithic organisation that Tarun Mandals (youth clubs) have been formed, wherever the Bhoomi Sena has gained popularity. The Tarun Mandal is not seen merely as a local unit to implement the orders of the central organisation i.e., Bhoomi Sena. Its need emerges more from the imperatives of the struggles against the totality of the 'culture of repression', which cannot be fought by a monolith organisation based in one area. Apart from providing the organising capacity for the struggles of the poor at the village level, the Tarun Mandal, as we shall also see, begins to emerge as counter power, based on the interests of the poor peasants and landless as contrary to the interests of the landlords.

The Bhoomi Sena encourages the Tarun Mandals to function and take decisions independently for local struggles. It however helps and guides them, where coordination with other villages is necessary, and on legal matters. Obviously, it also provides the ideological perspective to the Tarun Mandals.

Katore - A Case Study of a Bhoomi Sena Village:

Katore is a small village with a total population of 450 in 1975 situated 3 kilometres off the Palghar-Manor highway, and 13 kilometres away from the taluka place.

A predominantly Adivasi village, Katore remains, like many other villages in India, even after thirty years of 'progress' and 'prosperity' a tragic reminder of the laws of uneven development. Progress, at least in terms of the provision

of tangible assets seems to have passed it by. Time stands still in Katore, and the young Adivasis light the same wicker lamps, walk the same 'Kuccha' roads that their forefathers did.

It has few civic amenities, there is no electrification and for a good three months of the year, during the monsoon rains which are quite heavy in Thane, the village is completely cut off from the rest of the world. This is because its only link with the rest of the district is a mud track road connecting it to the Palghar-Manor highway. In monsoons, it is virtually unusable.

As a result of this, most Adivasi families have to stock provisions for the monsoons by purchase in Manor, a major town of the talukas situated 6 kilometres away. Very few families can afford to buy provisions anyway, and since in any case the monsoons are too heavy to look for any work, most Adivasis spend their time in an age old condition - semi-starvation.

The total land area of the village is 762 acres of which 240 acres are held by the various landholders, the rest being Government lands. Of the latter, the division is as follows:

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Description	Area (in acres)
Crematorium	3.0
Tank	1.5
Gaothan	8.0
Reserve Forest Land	214.7
Woodland Protected Forest	294.8

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Katore is a monocrop - a paddy village. Only some gram and wal are sown in the rabi season.

Land Relations:

The present distribution of land amongst the various classes is given in Table 17.

Table 17: Distribution of Landowners in Katore by Size of Landholding (1976)

Size of landholding (acres)	Number of Landowners		Total
	Adivasi	Non-Adivasi	
Upto 1.0	6	-	6
1.1 - 2.5	6	2	8
2.6-5.0	12	8	20
5.1 - 10.0	-	10	10
10.1 - 15.0	-	2	2
15.1 - 20.0	-	1	1
20.1 & above	-	2	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>49</b>

The above figures are derived from the Talathi's records, and as such although they give us an idea of the pattern of inequality of land ownership, they do not provide a more precise picture of the extent of land holdings by the upper sections.

While the activists of the Bhoomi Sena were unable to provide us with the extent of land holdings, they were however, after much discussion in a position to give us a pattern of the classes existent in Katore.

	Number of Households
Rich Peasant	4
Middle Peasant	10
Poor Peasant	15
Agricultural Labour (with land)	20
Landless Labourers	29
<b>Total</b>	<b>78</b>

There are no landlords of the earlier type, and most of the poor peasants downward are Adivasis. Of the 29 landless labourers, 23 are Adivasis and the rest Kunbis. Community-wise, the rich peasants, with a sprinkling of poor peasants are Kunbis. There are some Kunbis who are landless i.e., six households, and most of them go to work on the Kunbi rich peasants' fields.

#### History of Land Relations:

Around the time of Independence, the land relations in Katore, and the attendant production relations were the landlord-tenant type, with ground rent forming the basis of the production relations.

In 1951, there were 38 households in the village. Of these 20 were tenant cultivators and six cultivating labourers. In the class of cultivators there were only four households. There was no landlord or rent receiver staying in the village. The landlord lived in Manor town. The landlord, a Muslim, was also a money-lender; he reportedly frittered away his money on high living till a Marwari moneylender was able to buy off the lands for a song. The transformation of the production relations in Katore was predicated upon the dissolution of the relations of tenancy. With the passing of the Tenancy Act, the Kunbi tenants of the

landlord applied for ownership status. Many received it to become the middle peasants of today. Some of the Kunbi owner-cultivators became rich peasants, largely because they were in a position to utilise the aid forthcoming from the State in terms of cooperative credit and other inputs.

The Adivasis suffered principally because there was no viable peasant organisation to represent their interests. The Kisan Sabha's influence in Palghar was peripheral. If the production relations did change, in Katore consequent to the Tenancy Act, it was largely due to the initiative of the landlord himself. As we were told, the Marwari moneylender found it more lucrative to practise moneylending and continue with appropriation of the crop through palemode rather than face the legal tangles of the Tenancy Act.

So some Adivasis got land only to lose possession over its produce to the moneylender and the newly emerging Kunbi rich peasant class. It was only with the emergence of the Bhoomi Sena that some Adivasis have been able to acquire their lands lost time and again through indebtedness, ignorance and the 'culture of repression'.

#### Dynamics of Exploitation:

The Kunbi appeared as the dominant fraction in the ruling classes in Katore consequent to the Tenancy Act. An indication of this can be had from the case of one Kunbi rich peasant, who is more of a capitalist landlord, as the Kisan Sabha categorises such elements. Owning more than 60 acres in Katore itself, this capitalist landlord has distributed the landholding amongst his sons to avoid the Ceiling Act. He himself does not work or supervise, but has appointed a Munim to supervise agricultural labourers. As of September 1976, when we made our last visit to the village, this Kunbi had 22 saldars, in his employment, of

which four were lagnagadis i.e., bonded marriage slaves.

With the help of the Bhoomi Sena, the Katore Tarun Mandal organised a struggle for the emancipation of these marriage slaves and saldari whose conditions are not too different from those of the lagnagadis. Most of them were freed from the usurious clutches of the Kunbi, and only three saldars remain on a contractual basis, of their own accord. The conditions of work have improved, due to the vigilance of the Tarun Mandal.

Credit:

One of the principal instances through which exploitation of the Adivasis is maintained, is the inability of the Adivasi landowner to "effectively" cultivate his lands. In Katore, the story is not different from that in other villages. The Adivasis suffer from a serious lack of funds for securing inputs like seeds, fertilisers, and in the lean season, for consumption. As a result, the poor peasant Adivasi has to rely on the local sowkar and in Katore the Kunbi rich landowners for credit.

In itself, the credit nexus does not explain exploitation. But it does when we understand the inextricable link between credit, indebtedness of the Adivasi landowner, and the loss of land. Thus indebtedness is the dialectical side of the increasing landlessness of Adivasis, and this notwithstanding the fact that the Maharashtra Restoration of Lands to Scheduled Tribes Act, 1974, is operative in this area. As a result of his moneylending business, the Kunbi capitalist landlord described above has been able to acquire another 10 acres of land from 3 Adivasis who became indebted to him.

Besides, many Adivasis being unable to cultivate the lands due to the reasons described above, prefer to lease it out on the 'makta' system to the rich peasants. Rather than face the trial and tribulations of indebtedness, the Adivasis prefer to

lease out the lands on a pitiably low sum and work as agricultural labourers. Thus the same Kunbi capitalist landlord has leased in another 6 acres from two Adivasi poor peasants. They are given in all 320 pailies of paddy per annum as 'rent' which is worth Rs.320/-. They are now working as agricultural labourers on the lands that they had to lease out.

The local sowkar is also an influential element in terms of the credit he advances, and like the Kunbi rich peasants, also appropriates the lands in case of non repayment of the loan. Although the operation of usury capital by both the Kunbi rich peasants and the sowkar result in the pauperisation of the Adivasi and loss of lands, there is a difference between the two. For one the Kunbi rich peasant is not a licensed money-lender, nor is moneylending supposedly his principal occupation. But he has taken to it largely because it helps him to acquire more lands at below the market price. Besides more significantly, it assures him a domination over the Adivasis, both in terms of the produce prior to his having appropriated the land itself, and the labour of the Adivasi and his family. In a sense, domination becomes more total.

The mechanisms of exploitation that are reflected in the credit cycle and loss of land is an indication of the failure of institutionalized credit to fill in the gap between 'ownership' of land and its effective use. Thus as far as the Adivasi is concerned, the cooperative credit societies are figments of imagination, usually expressed in the speeches of the occasionally visiting officials or ministers.

The multipurpose cooperative society is supposed to distribute seeds, fertilizers with a subsidy of 50% to the Adivasis. But the irony of the situation is that the Adivasis are not able to pay even the subsidised price. For the Kunbi rich peasants this is too good an opportunity to let by. It was reported that much of the subsidised inputs



have flowed to the Kunbi rich peasants who manoeuvre the Adivasis into registering for the subsidised inputs.

In Katore, no Adivasi has been able to acquire cooperative credit, or a bank loan, although there is a branch of a Nationalised Bank at Manor. As a matter of fact, the Bank has advanced loans to Kunbi rich peasants, presumably for agricultural purposes. The Kunbi beneficiaries, two of whom are the Sarpanch and the Police Patil of the village, are reportedly using the money for sowkari purposes.

Again the State Bank of India in Palghar has advanced credit to 7-8 peasants in Katore and neighbouring villages, none of whom are Adivasis, but all rich peasants. The bank officials however complain that none has repaid the loan, and when asked why the Bank did not advance loans to Adivasis, the officials replied that if the Kunbis could not repay, then the Adivasis certainly cannot.

#### Agricultural Labourers and the Wage Form:

As a result of the operation of credit cycle and loss of land, and the inability of the Adivasi landowners in general to effectively cultivate their holdings, agricultural labour has a high premium, and the wage form or relation constitutes one of the principal mechanisms of exploitation.

As indicated earlier, of the total of 78 households dependent on agriculture, 50 households constitute the section of agricultural labourers, and therefore, subject to the wage exploitation, in some degree or other. Of the 50 households, 29 are without lands, and constitute the lowest sections of the Adivasi households.

The wage form however derives its own manifestations from the set of problems facing the Adivasis in Katore. Insecurity of landholding, relative isolation of the village from the rest of the taluka for a part of the year, has created imperfections in the wage relations which range from bondedness to pure daily wage

contracts. In the absence of any alternative sources of livelihood and the presence of a culture of repression the *saldari* system, which on the face of it appears an annual contract of employment, in effect borders on bondedness. The *Bhoomi Sena* therefore makes no distinction between *saldari* and bonded labourers since this distinction is academic, and in its struggles forces the big landowner to accept all on a daily wage rate.

As in other villages, there are two periods when work is available at a wage rate of about Rs.2/- per day. The first period is May-June-July when agricultural labourers are required for bund repairing, sowing, ploughing, and transplantation and the other is in October-November for harvesting, threshing and grass cutting. Since *Katore* has a one crop economy (paddy) many *Adivasis* are forced to migrate outside to work. Thus in the off-season months (excepting for the monsoon period) i.e., December to May they migrate to *Vasi Taluka* on the Bombay-Ahmedabad Road, for jungle work of felling trees, bunding work and road repairing. They are usually underpaid in these temporary work sites; wage rates as low as Re.1/- or 1 *paili* paddy for men and women were reported in some cases.

#### Production:

In the last 10 years, only four wells have been dug in the village. There are no other sources of irrigation. A percolation tank was built in 1971, but as far as irrigation is concerned the tank has not helped. The crop yield as far as the *Adivasis* are concerned is low. On the other hand, over the last few years, the non-*Adivasi* cultivators have been in a position to increase the area under paddy and use of fertilisers, improved seeds which are supplied through the cooperative society in *Palghar*. Also, the *Gram Panchayat* of

the village has recently acquired some insecticide sprayers and agricultural implements. Beneficiaries of these new inputs have been the Kunbi rich peasants, whose crop yields have increased. Thus whereas before the use of these inputs, the crop yield varied between 5 to 7 quintals per acre, now it is reported to be between 9 and 12 quintals per acre.

According to the Talathis, in the preceding season (1975) only 200 quintals of paddy were marketed out of the total 1600 quintals produced in the village. But the Bhoomi Sena contends that the exports amounted to nearly 1000 quintals; this included large portions appropriated through sowkari from the poor peasants. Most of the surplus is sold to the big traders in Virar, who usually send their agents to the villages to buy from the rich peasants. The Adivasi poor peasant forced to sell his produce to get some ready cash always realises a low value due to the fraudulent practices of the traders' agents.

When asked whether the Adivasis had enough grain to see them through the year, the Talathi said that there was enough grain to go round. He deduced this conclusion from the fact that no Adivasi purchases grain on ration cards from the fair price shop!

#### The Politics of Opposition:

Tarun Mandal was established in Katore in 1976. Landless Katkaris and Thakur poor peasants are the members. A committee of seven members one of whom is a Sena cadre shoulders the executive responsibilities.

Till the creation of the Tarun Mandal and the arrival of the Bhoomi Sena, politics was a concentrated expression of the domination by the Kunbi rich peasants and sowkars. Even today, the Gram Panchayat, which is shared with another village nearby, is dominated by Kunbis with no Adivasi representation.

The Tarun Mandal in Katore backed by the Bhooni Sena has been able to recognise the contradictions in Katore and struggle against the forms of exploitation as they reproduce themselves in everyday life.

As explained earlier, one of the principal instances through which the Adivasi loses his land, often becomes bonded, is because of his subsumption in the debt cycle. The high rates of interest, the element of force or threat used to extract not only the produce of the land, but evict the Adivasi from the land itself, create contradictions that have been tackled by the Tarun Mandal in quite a unique fashion.

It is not enough merely to denounce sowkari, or even struggle against the sowkar's methods of usurious operations till some alternative is provided. The sowkar does play a vital and necessary role in the political economy of the village. To struggle against the sowkar therefore implies not merely to remove the agent of usury capital, but remove the necessity faced by the poor peasant in seeking such capital. In other words, the poor peasant must be liberated from his subsumption not to the sowkar alone, but the production relations of which he is till now a constituent part.

Thus it is necessary during the process of class struggle to provide alternative institutions to the sowkar, such that these institutions represent the movement from necessity to freedom. In other words therefore, the alternate institution must express the free and collective will of the poor peasants to create and reproduce their own institutions.

The Tarun Mandal has begun this process of self-sufficiency by attempting to reduce the necessity of the Adivasi's dependence on the sowkar. Consumption needs, some extraordinary expenses all of which are met usually by the sowkar are now partly being met by an alternative institution begun at the initiative of the Tarun Mandal.

Thus, through popular consent a grain bank has been started with every member of the Tarun Mandal contributing 1 paili paddy or Re.1/- per month. Contributions from non-members are also accepted. This grain bank then advances loans as it were, and accepts repayment after harvest.

For child delivery expenses, it advances Rs.10/- and 10 paili paddy.

expiry expenses:	Rs.25/- + 10 paili paddy (not recovered)
illness:	Rs.15/- (recovered after wages received)
marriage:	Upto Rs.160/- + 80 paili rice, (recovered according to ability to pay).

One of the instances by which the sowkar ensured the reproduction of his relation with the poor peasant was the constant threat of cutting off the supply of loans at the most crucial period of cultivation. While the grain banks helped the peasants in their lean periods, its limitations are obvious, due to its as yet meagre financial base to even substitute the sowkar's capital for production needs of the poor peasants. In such cases, then, the Tarun Mandal comes to the aid of the poor peasant who incurs the wrath of the sowkar, and consequently finds it difficult to cultivate his small plot. By mobilising opinion in the village, groups of labourers would be organised to aid the poor peasants in their work either free or for wages which were paid after the harvest. For instance, the sowkar of Katore decided to boycott the Adivasis and not advance any loans to them. The Bhoomi Sena in reply called a meeting of the Tarun Mandal which includes all the Adivasi members, and asked the Mandal to do whatever it could to help the needy Adivasis. So the Tarun Mandal distributed grain from the grain bank and also carried on intensive propaganda amongst the neighbouring villages to help their Adivasi brethren

in Katore. Response was quite heartening as one activist said, and that in season 13 Adivasi families were supported without any dependence on the sowkar.

At the same time, while boycotting the sowkar through struggle, the Tarun Mandal noticed that most of the Adivasis had become indebted because of their marriage expenses for which the Adivasis borrowed from the sowkar at exorbitant rates of interest. Thus it began educating the Adivasis about the necessity of lowering the expenses and the futility of certain items of expenditure, it simultaneously began to advance loans to Adivasis at minimal or no interest from its grain bank. Thus it reduced the marriage expenses from a total of Rs. 450-500 to Rs. 100-120. At the same time as expenditure in certain rituals and items were drastically cut, after heated discussions with the village Adivasis, the practice of calling a priest (Bhagat) to conduct the marriage rites was dispensed with. Now a Tarun Mandal member who usually knows the rites, conducts them.

As a result of the propagation of the concept of institutions of self sufficiency, the Tarun Mandal has slowly been able to erode the power of the sowkar to exploit the Adivasi poor.

The Tarun Mandal of Katore has also undertaken the task of liberating bonded labourers, and in the process of its struggle, actively aided by the Bhoomi Sena it has successfully managed to emancipate quite a few of them.

Typical of these are the following three labourers who were bonded to the biggest landowner of the village.

1. K. Ganpat is 30 years old and has been bonded to the above landlord for the past 13 years. Prior to that he worked as an agricultural landless labourer; when he decided to get married, the only way was to bond himself to the landlord who agreed to defray the expenses of the marriage. Ganpat now got only 1 paili rice (= Re.1/-) per day, and out of the total earnings

of the month, the landlord kept 10 paili as repayment of the loan. Ganpat and his wife stayed on the landlord's fields, he was not allowed to go anywhere else for work, and had piled up a debt of Rs. 500. Ganpat has often thought of running away, but was intimidated by threats of beating. The pervasive atmosphere of threat was indicated when Ganpat was refused to relieve himself while repairing the roof top of the landowner's house.

2. V. Konba has been bonded for the past two years when for his marriage he borrowed 300 paili of paddy and Rs. 150/-. Since then he got 1 paili rice and when he asked the landowner as to the amount to be repaid, the landlord replied "work 8 years more or repay Rs.900 just now." The heavy work load told on his health, and for want of medicinal expenses, he sold his wife's mangalsutra to the landowner for Rs. 10/-. The ill health is caused principally by lack of food; not surprising, since the landowner, raises the bottom of the measure while measuring out the daily wage of rice.

3. D. Kasinath aged 35 years has been bonded for 13 years first as a ghargadi, when he worked as a goat herder. Marriage brought him a wife and bondedness as a lagnagadi, 7 years ago, all for 300 pailis of rice and Rs.200/-. One day, the cattle, which Kasinath was tending, entered the neighbouring landowner's fields. A fight ensued between the lagnagadi of the neighbouring landowner and Kasinath, in which Kasinath injured the other Adivasi lagnagadi. A case was lodged against Kasinath, but quietly shelved largely due to the landlord's influence. Kasinath was informed that his debts had doubled because of the expenses involved in releasing him.

The Tarun Mandal had been successful in fostering a unity amongst the sections of the rural poor against usury capital and its relations of debt bondage. The Tarun Mandal adopted the course of direct action to free them; they organised the rural poor, marched in a show of force to the sowkar cum landowner's

residence and fields, and liberated the bonded labour. The recourse to legal action and the administrative machinery to draw the Government's attention to the existence of bonded labour was undertaken by the Bhooni Sena in contemporaneous actions.

Simultaneously, the Tarun Mandal also liquidated the debts of a number of poor peasants and recovered their items mortgaged to the sowkar - all through struggle at the village level.

For instance, J. Maluja a poor peasant had borrowed Rs.25/- and mortgaged several items which according to the sowkar were worth Rs.105/-, while Maluja insisted they were worth Rs.230/- The Tarun Mandal organised a demonstration in front of the sowkar's house, accepted the sowkar's evaluation and did not budge till the sowkar had repaid Rs.80/- after deducting the principal.

B. Dathya for a loan of Rs.30/- from the same sowkar had mortgaged copper pots worth Rs.300/- The sowkar insisted they were worth only Rs.135/-. The Tarun Mandal had him return Rs. 130/-. Prior to this organised struggle, the sowkar was not willing to listen to any pleas, insisting that he had sold off all the items. The agricultural labour section of the rural poor constitutes a sizeable proportion in the village. Since the wage form is predominant the Tarun Mandal keeps a watchful eye on the payment of wages. Considering that the wages were far too below the prescribed minimum the Tarun Mandal on its own initiative, but with the legal help of the Bhooni Sena, organised the agricultural labourers for an increase in wages. The initial strike led to a success in terms of wage increase upto Rs. 3.50 or its equivalent in kind. The battle is still continuing, with the Tarun Mandal watchful of the tactics employed by the dominant classes. In every season time the Tarun Mandal sends its members along with the Bhooni Sena cadres to inspect the payment of wages. If the wages fall short



of the minimum of Rs.3.50, a lightning strike is organised.

As a matter of fact, the Tarun Mandal began its activities in the village on the issue of minimum wages. Once the rural poor had witnessed its strength and effectivity, they began to identify their interests with those of the Tarun Mandal, which was subsequently able to exert greater intervention at various levels.

The Tarun Mandal has not forgotten that the principal media by which the other forms of exploitation are rendered possible is the ease with which the Adivasis are evicted from their lands. Thus the reacquisition of lands appropriated by the landlords acquires importance. After a heated discussion with the Adivasis on this question, where vacillations and doubts were put to rest, undue enthusiasm channelised and modified, a plan was evolved to deal with the question of land.

Parvatibai, an old Adivasi woman had been evicted from  $1\frac{1}{2}$  acres of fertile land the past three years, because she had not paid her due instalment of the crop to the sowkar. The Tarun Mandal waited till harvest time, and the Adivasis, organised under the youthful leaders of the Tarun Mandal marched into the fields and cut the crop from the old lady's lands. The Tarun Mandal handed over the seized crop to Parvatibai, and the sowkar subsequently had to return the  $1\frac{1}{2}$  acres to her.

#### Coordination by Bhoomi Sena:

The perceptual cognition of the Tarun Mandals at the village level is further elaborated and expanded, into some sort of theoretical framework by the Bhoomi Sena. Thus in its group discussions with the various Tarun Mandals or the poor peasants and landless at large, the Bhoomi Sena attempts to explain their poverty, and the system of oppression principally due to the monopoly ownership of land by the landlords and his consequent ability to appropriate the surplus generated by both the poor

peasants and landless. Thus, it emphasises the importance of the struggle of the Adivasis both to acquire land and break the monopoly of the landlords in terms of land ownership. As a result, the Adivasis under the guidance of the local Tarun Mandals and Bhoomi Sena have conducted struggles for land. Again, both legal i.e., constitutionalist and mass struggle oriented tactics are simultaneously utilised.

For instance, the Agricultural Lands Ceiling Act prescribes 54 acres of dry crop land and 18 acres of perennially irrigated land as the ceiling for land ownership. The Bhoomi Sena located surplus lands to the extent of 192 acres with a major landlord AHR. A struggle was launched, the Act was applied to AHR's lands and the outcome was that 65 families of landless Adivasis received 2-2½ acres each.

ROM, another landlord had 200 acres of surplus lands in 3-4 villages, which the Government had recognised and acquired under the Land Ceiling Act. The Bhoomi Sena had been agitating for the distribution of these lands, but ROM however managed to have the lands distributed amongst his kith and kin. The Bhoomi Sena learning of this, led an agitation against this distribution, had it declared null and void and a new distribution of the land is under way.

The Bhoomi Sena however has no illusions about the efficacy of the law and of the officials who implement them. As one of the cadres admitted, the officials often join hands with the landlords to point out the loopholes in the law, and then if it is brought to the notice of the Government, the case often takes years to solve the problem. Where lands do accrue to Adivasis under the Act, they are, more often than not, unproductive lands or at a considerable distance from their villages. As a result of which the Bhoomi Sena placed great emphasis on the strength of the organised struggles to solve the problem of Adivasi land alienations and recovery.

Thus it takes recourse to direct class struggle and action based on the mass participation of the Adivasi poor.

For instance, D. Charan, a landlord of Jakhup village had seized Adivasi lands inspite of the law that prohibits such transfer. After all, his growth as a big landowner was possible only via these means of alienating Adivasi lands.

Originally from U.P., his father had migrated during the British rule in the early part of this century and had become an itinerant grocer moving from village to village. With a particularly glib tongue and sharp business mind that foresaw later development, he moved into the Adivasi villages in the hinterland, and slowly began lending some amounts of money to the increasingly pauperised Adivasis or advancing commodities on credit. From movable property like pots and pans as security, Charan's father demanded land as security and started on the road to becoming a landowner. He acquired land in different villages and leased them out to the same Adivasis living off the rents from the tenants. This position continued till as late as 1974 (although in a hidden fashion after 1947), when the Bhoomi Sena launched a massive agitation and succeeded in making the tenants acquire ownership status. But this did not stop Charan from acquiring further lands through illegal transfer via usury capital or mere force, considering the fact that, as indicated earlier, ownership was merely a legal expression of what was in effect becoming the pauperisation of the Adivasi.

Matters have changed slightly (at least in terms of the trend) since the arrival of the Bhoomi Sena on the scene. This is illustrated in the struggle by the Adivasis under Bhoomi Sena in the case of one such illegal transfer. The Bhoomi Sena as usual sent in a petition to the Mamlatdar. No action was taken. So one night just before harvest, the Adivasis of Jakhup under the guidance of the local Tarun Mandal and Bhoomi Sena, moved en masse into the fields and cut the crops. Anticipating trouble,

children were asked to build up piles of stones, and no sooner had the Adivasis moved half way through their seizure than a couple of goondas appeared. Met with a volley of stones, they retreated to Charan, who filed in a complaint, with the local police and arrived on the scene with more goondas in trucks and motorcycles sent as aid from other landlords. A volley of stones met the first truck, a few physical clashes took place, in which both sides received injury. In the meantime, a Sena cadre had notified the police who arrived on the spot and broke up the confrontation. Criminal charges have been levelled at Bhoomi Sena cadres and some Adivasis for assault and battery, but the Mamlatdar ordered Charan to return 60 acres of land he had illegally seized. The Bhoomi Sena at the same time carried out an intensive survey of such illegal land transfers and collected a total list of 13 sowkars who had indulged in this practice. This was handed over to the Assistant Collector of Thane district.

Pressure from local MLAs and widespread struggles conducted by the Bhoomi Sena led the State Government to pass an internal order, by which a special court was set up in the area and each individual case decided and solved within three minutes! But pressure from the local landlords was so strong that the proceedings were stopped after 3 days of efficient working.

#### Politicisation - Education as a Material Weapon:

An activist of the Bhoomi Sena once asked a couple of Adivasi poor peasants whether they knew what Kakshmi and Saraswati each symbolised. The Adivasis replied that Lakshmi symbolised a cow, buffalo, land etc; and Saraswati, a pen, paper, book etc. So they were asked which of the two they would prefer to have first Saraswati, replied the Adivasis in a chorus. When asked as to why they would not like Lakshmi

first, they replied that if they had Saraswati, then the sowkar and zamindar would not be able to cheat them at all!

The Bhoomi Sena takes the moral of the story very seriously. It has quite clearly realised that collective action in an organised fashion is not enough; the cultural level of the Adivasi poor must be raised to levels where each can conceptualise their problems at an ideological level. It is this level of cognition in class terms that would enable each Adivasi in an organised manner to also conceive the direction towards the destruction of the 'culture of repression' perpetuated on them.

The basic method of politicisation of the Adivasis is the 'shibir' (training camp) which are held in various villages from time to time, both for new recruits to the organisation, and for summarisation of past struggles. The creativity of the Bhoomi Sena activists lies in the unity of form and content of their politicisation process. In terms of the latter, abstract theories of class analysis are dispensed with, and efforts are made to raise their cultural level through cognition of their own reality. As to the form, lectures are dispensed with in favour of intensive group discussions and 'dialogues' where each member is made to participate.

The participation of the leaders and cadres of Bhoomi Sena is restricted to guiding the discussions, summarising the experiences related by each group and giving information, where necessary. Attempts are made to restrict their 'lectures' to as little time as possible.

Thus, the first session of the first day of the shibir, is devoted to group discussions, on individual problems, village problems, injustices heaped on them by the sowkar, landlord etc.

After the group discussions, a general body meeting is held, where the Sena cadres summarise and help conceptualise the problems discussed.

For instance, one Adivasi reported that the sowkar had grabbed his lands of 4 acres because he had not repaid a loan of Rs.2,000. For the past 12 years he has been landless and the sowkar tills his land.

A discussion follows, in which the Sena cadre also participates and economics of exploitation that emerges is:-

Minimum yield from 1 acre = 5 quintals; 4 acres = 20 quintals.

Market price of paddy per quintal = Rs.125; 125 x 20 = Rs.2,500.

Sowkar tills lands for 12 years. Excluding the cost of cultivation, the profit made by the sowkar on lands mortgaged for loan of Rs.2,000 amounted to Rs.15,000.

**Item:** Bhoomi Sena and participants discuss cost of cultivation

per acre.	Expense involved
1 pair of bullock - rent charge	165 kg.
1 plough - rent charge	35 kg.
Seed 35 kg. - borrowed at 100% interest	70 kg.
Consumption loan of 60 kg. - borrowed at 50% interest	240 kg.
	<hr style="width: 10%; margin: 0 auto;"/>
	510 kg.
Total production per acres =	600 kg.
Rent charge and payment to sowkar =	510 kg.
Balance =	90 kg.

**Item:** Lagnagadis, discussion on their exploitation.

1 lagnagadi worked 14 years and received 1 paili paddy per day = Re 1/- i.e., 2 paili less than official minimum wage, therefore for a period of 14 years the landlord has robbed the lagnagadi of 10,220 pailis of paddy or its equivalent.

Item: The poor peasant whose land-4½ acres were seized by the sowkar filed a petition to the Mamlatdar, to the effect that it was an illegal seizure, and the lands should be returned. Nothing was done.

An Adivasi landless labourer who received land under the Tenancy Act asked the Tehsildar for a loan of Rs.900/- for its improvement and cultivation, a loan which he was entitled to, as the Government had already sanctioned a certain amount for distribution. The Tehsildar shooed him away, saying that the funds were exhausted. A week later, the Sarpanch of the village got the same amount for his relative who was a big landlord of the village.

The conclusion drawn from the discussion was that the sowkars, landlords were exploiting the Adivasi poor, this the sole reason for their backwardness and poverty. The Government officials were no better, and were collaborating with the exploiting classes in perpetuating injustices on the poor.

During the process of reflection and observation which the rural poor do for the first time, the solution to the problem of exploitation that is done by the dominant classes, begins to dawn on the Adivasis. And with the conceptualisation of the experience when the irresistibility of classes is pointed out through the demystification of political economy, they realise the need for an organisation of their own, and that only through struggle against the dominant classes can the poor have a better life.

The process of politicisation, however, does not end here. Once the necessity of organisation is keenly felt by all through the process of cognition at higher levels, discussions veer towards the actual issues that can be taken up by the organisation. While discussing the issues, the process of reflection, observation and conceptualisation is carried all through and solutions arrived at through the summarisation of all the ideas emanating in and through the discussion.

Item: A Sena cadre gives a history of Minimum Wage Act, and an account of some of its legal nuances. The first point on which heated discussions follow is the manner in which minimum wages have been fixed. All the participants are clear in their opinion that it was not the poor who were consulted as to what the minimum wages should be, but the sowkar and the landlord, and Government officials like the Tehsildar. So the wages have been fixed at Rs.3/- but it is the experience of the poor that a family of 5 alone needs at least Rs.12/-. The fact that the wage has been fixed at Rs.3/- is clear enough indication that the landlords alone were consulted, since it denotes the minimum capacity they are willing to pay on their own.

And why has it been so fixed? In order to maintain the dependence of the poor on the landlords, by giving a bare subsistence level wage. Since the Adivasi poor is made dependent on the landlord, he cannot protest individually, for a higher wage. Therefore the only form of protest and struggle possible is in an organised and collective fashion through an organisation which demands higher wages and an eight hour working day.

But how to measure light hours? A discussion follows, suggestions are mooted, like setting up a clock in the village, politely rejected since the work is outside the village; working according to S.T. bus timings; also rejected since very often buses are late, and finally a solution is arrived at when somebody suggests why don't we buy watches and another reminds him that the sowkar or landlord usually has one. At this point the Sena cadre intervenes and suggests that the organisation should demand a register and card system, like, as he explains, there are in factories. But for this and in order not to be cheated, Adivasis need to know to write and read. Therefore night schools must be started immediately to educate the Adivasi poor.



Item: An Adivasi asks as to why the organisation cannot take up the responsibility of carrying out the Employment Guarantee Scheme instead of the Tehsildar. In the discussion, his idea is rejected on the reasoning that the responsibility would entail the organisation's involvement in Government machinery and red tape, and there is no guarantee that the required funds would be allotted and in time to guarantee work to all. The fact that the Tehsildar makes a lot of money in this scheme is enough proof that there is a lot of money, and the only way for the Adivasis and their organisation is to stay independent of the Government machinery and struggle for implementation of the scheme.

So what is to be done? It is known that not all get work, for a sufficient length of time, although there is sufficient money, and that is because the landlord does not want to be deprived of the cheap labour. So the wages on the scheme are also very low.

Therefore, (as the solution emerges) the organisers and cadres must go around all the villages in their area and make a comprehensive list of the maximum number of Adivasis who need jobs for a maximum period of time. This list should then be given to the Tehsildar, for immediate action, and his office is to be gheraoed by the representatives till he gives a written guarantee that work will begin in the next few days. For everyone knows that the rains may start and labour will be required on the fields prior to it. If after the pressure is applied, he cannot prove to us that no work is possible immediately, then all the Adivasi poor must be organised in a demonstration of at least 10,000 to demand a written guarantee of work after the monsoons for the maximum number of people.

The discussions in these shibirs do not always follow a consistent logic, but often tend to meander and get lost in minor details. The Sena cadres do not discourage this, knowing fully well, that this is the first time that the poor are giving expression to their pent up feelings. Normally some participant

attempts to veer the discussion back to the original point at stake.

As a result of the dialogues and discussions, class antagonisms and the need for the poor to unite under their own organisation for struggle is quite evident. The level of the Adivasi consciousness at the end of the debate can be gauged by the remarks of an old Adivasi lagnagadi who with great profundity observed that life is a game of cards, and inspite of the fact that the landlords and sowkars having the queen, king and jack, they can be beaten if the poor had the Ika (Ace) = Unity!

Having arrived at this stage, one of the Sena cadres usually summarises all the discussions and categorically states that the need for unity arises from the need to fight the three forces - landlord, sowkar and Government and the need to build a new society of the poor. This is possible principally through the application of class struggle against the three forces. Alongside it is necessary to fight in the Gram Panchayat elections. Although there is one x reserved seat for Adivasi representative in the Gram Panchayat, his role is futile and even reactionary. So, the Gram Panchayat must have total Adivasi representation. To ensure that this Gram Panchayat does not become corrupt, local Tarun Mandals must direct it in the right direction. The Tarun Mandals in each village will decide on the list of candidates for election, and subsequently control and direct the Gram Panchayat in the interests of the poor and landless. A protracted expansion of both the forms of struggle is considered necessary for the onward march of the movement.

Bhoomi Sena - Organisational Set-up:

The Bhoomi Sena whose head office is in Manor in the quarters once owned by the SW was formed out of the PSP and Socialist Party, in as much as the principal ideologue and mass leader were both a one time members of the above two parties. As of now, none of the leaders nor cadres have any links with any political party, either of a state or national level. But the organisation does cooperate at an action and issue level with other local peasant organisations.

It operates principally in the Palghar Taluka of Thane district and also includes in its operation the area between Wada and Jawahar, Manor. The principal activist, Adil, who in a sense, is the mass leader of the Sena is an Adivasi himself, studied upto 11th standard, from Sondha village in Palghar, and was more or less the founder of the Sena. The principal ideologue, as it were, of the Sena, was SP who as said earlier was a Socialist Party member, a teacher who had applied innovative non-formal methods of adult education. The Sena methods of politicisation, can more or less be ascribed to SP's methods. Of the five full time cadres of the central organisation of Bhoomi Sena, 2 are from outside, one of them being a University graduate. The others are from the area itself, and do not take any stipend, supporting themselves from the income of the little land they have. The two cadres from outside get a stipend of Rs.100 per month.

Membership: The Bhoomi Sena does not have party type membership, therefore it would be difficult to gauge the exact number of members of the organisation. It does not have a written constitution as such, and no subscription fee. All donations are voluntary, and although financial help flows in from sympathisers in urban areas, the Adivasis themselves, voluntarily contribute grain as and when they can.

Structure: There is no organisational structure representative of a monolithic party, nor a hierarchy. However, the leadership

of Adil is readily accepted.

The basic unit of the Bhoomi Sena is the Tarun Mandal formed in each village. The Bhoomi Sena operates through the Tarun Mandals, and the link between the two lies more in the guidance, both theoretical and legal that the Sena renders. The Tarun Mandals are allowed to operate on their initiative to the extent they can i.e., at their village level. Coordination between Tarun Mandals is undertaken by the Sena. A physical link is maintained, in as much as a Sena activist normally sits as an ordinary member on the Committee of the Tarun Mandal. His role is of an advisory character, except in the case of an impasse, where his decision is accepted by all. The Tarun Mandal activists are not all full time cadres but in some cases they are. The Tarun Mandal has a subscription fee of Re.1/- and voluntary contributions of grain and paddy, some of which is given to the Bhoomi Sena. The Bhoomi Sena cadres meet every Saturday in Manor for a weekly summarisation of their experiences and plan for the week ahead. This meeting is also utilised for the increasing politicisation of the cadres themselves.

The democratic centralism practiced by the Bhoomi Sena towards the Tarun Mandal is an indication that the Tarun Mandal is not merely an implementing unit of the Sena's perspective. Over and above this, its independence implies the emergence of the Tarun Mandal as an alternative institution of political power of the poor and landless as counterposed to the power of the rural rich, in the village. It represents the most advanced consciousness of the poor and landless at the village level.

Chapter IV

Abbreviations

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CHAPTER V

Formation of Kulak Power and Bhil  
Resistance in Dhule

Section I

Agrarian Structure in Dhule District

in Pre-1947 Period

The Khandesh Region:

Dhule and Jalgaon districts make up the Khandesh region of Maharashtra. Khandesh is bounded on the west by Gujarat and in the east by the Vidarbha part of Maharashtra. In the south it is bound by the Nashik district and the Marathwada part of Maharashtra. In the northern part it is bound by Madhya Pradesh. The Tapi Basin that we are concentrating upon lies in the north-west of Dhule district comprising talukas of Shahade, Talode and Nandurbar.

The Tapi river flows east-west across the district cutting the district into two almost equal halves. It forms a basin from the beginning of the Shahade taluka which broadens into a strip of extremely fertile plains of about 15 to 20 miles in width at its broadest. In the north of the Shahade and Talode talukas, the plains end with a steep rise of the Satpuda mountains which form ridge after ridge of rising mountains. Most of the parts of Akkalkuwa taluka which bounds the Talode taluka on the west is taken up by the Satpudas with a relatively narrow strip of the north-west basin included in its southern region. The Nandurbar taluka lies to the south of the Tapi, Here the plains end with a slow rise and increasingly rocky soil to end into the Sahyadri and Galna hills in the south-west. The Nawapur taluka which bounds Nandurbar taluka to the west lies entirely in this slow rise part with a sparse forest covering a large part.

The Bombay-Agra Road passes through the eastern part of the district through Dhule and Shirpur and lies along one of the old trade routes of India. The Bombay-Delhi railway route passes through the Jalgaon district. The Surat-Bhusaval Railway line follows the south bank of the Tapi throughout the region. The village Prakashe which lies at the confluence of the Tapi and the Gomai in Shahade taluka was the important nodal link in earlier

days. From Prakashe through Shahade we have a route which passes north through the Khetiye pass into the Madhya Pradesh plains. We have also now a metalled road passing through Akkalkuwa-Talode-Shahade-Shirpur following the north bank of the Tapi on the Surat-Barhanpur highway.

Thus Khandesh lies in the westernmost parts of the whole cotton tract of Maharashtra. It also forms a natural boundary, for it is the beginning of the mountainous parts of Madhya Pradesh once we leave Khandesh behind on the Bombay-Agra Road. It is the first plains we meet as we cross the Sahyadris and the Satpudas. It lies just south of the great belt of mountains and forests that girdles India, and leads directly into the rich cotton tracts of north-east Maharashtra. The strip of land between the Akkalkuwa and Talode talukas and the Tapi in the north, and between the Nawapur and Nandurbar talukas and the Tapi in the south now form part of the Gujarat region, the history of which fact is connected with the building of a huge dam on the Tapi at Ukai in Gujarat and the consequent displacement of hundreds of Adivasis.

#### Khandesh in Pre-British Period:

By the period of the later Moghals, Khandesh had become an important and covetable part of the Moghal empire. European travellers of the late 16th century describe Khandesh as a rich and well peopled country yielding great abundance of grain, cotton, wool and sugar with big markets for dry fruits. It was during the first viceroyalty of Aurangzeb in Shahjahan's time that we find the first systematic, recorded and centralised land revenue assessment being applied to Khandesh along the lines of Todar Mal's land revenue settlement. This assessment known as the 'Tankha' and reorganised on a more lenient basis during Aurangzeb's second viceroyalty was to serve as the nominal standard and the

basic departure point right upto British times.

Of Khandesh the west and north-west formed a very important part. As compared to the 32 divisions of Khandesh excluding the Nandurbar district yielding an yearly revenue of £ 76,000 the seven divisions of Nandurbar district (including what today forms the Shahade and Talode talukas) yielded an yearly revenue of £ 1,25,000 or over one and a half times as much as the other districts of Khandesh.<sup>1</sup> The husbandmen mentioned by the European travellers were the Kunbis, the Bhils and the Gond Adivasi tribes as the main class of cultivators.<sup>2</sup> Especially the Muslim records show that the area north of the Tapi and what comprises the Shahade-Talode region today was exclusively peopled and tilled by the Adivasi tribal population settled on land.<sup>3</sup> Thus by the time of the late Moghals the Tapi Basin plains north of the Tapi in what forms the Dhule district today<sup>4</sup> can be seen to be peopled and tilled by the Adivasi population and ruled by the Moghals through Rajput, Muslim as well as Maratha feudatories alongside the Adivasi chieftains.

It is necessary to clearly separate the Adivasi 'husbandmen' and their non-Adivasi counterpart. It does not seem to be the case that the prosperity or revenue of the north-west basin was arising from the advance in the production on Adivasi cultivated land. The crucial position of Khandesh on trade-routes and the production of non-Adivasi cultivators on the fertile plains appear to be at the root of this prosperity. It seems that the Adivasis and their entire life formed a relatively autonomous enclave in the region. It was the fertility and production of the lands and the trade in Khandesh which made it important that peace with the Adivasis be secured. The Adivasis were so to say tolerated on the land and they retained their own rites and practices in regard to land. The Bhil adivasis form the largest part of the population of the north-west basin. They are believed to be a group of tribes occupying the whole area of the

Satpudas and its northern parts who have been compressed and pressed southwards<sup>5</sup> so that they occupy the large forest belt starting from the Thane district in the west to the western parts of the Vindhya mountains. The Adivasis of the basin thus form simultaneously the fringe of this vast tribal area and a part of the larger Moghal empire.

A trade route through Prakashe towards Khetiye-Badwani existed but it had remained entirely undeveloped until the late 13th century. It is precisely during this period that trade routes criss-crossing the south and the north-east of the whole of Khandesh region were growing and developing. It is only after the annexation of the Yadav kingdom to the Delhi Sultanate and the setting up of the capital of the Sultanate at Devgiri now converted to Daulatabad in the early 14th century that we find the area becoming important enough to warrant a separate fiefdom and a separate centre for administration. This administrative seat, which was later to be of importance also during Moghal times, was situated at Sultanpur right in the centre of the now Shahade taluka. It was this which formed the vice-regal seat of the Moghals and which was administered twice by the young Aurangzeb during Shahjahan's rule.

With the integration of the region into the larger Moghal Empire, its stability and peace assured the development of trade on an extensive scale. The road just south of the Tapi and following it became an important artery of this trade. Moghal rule brought most of it under a unified rule and ensured its development. Nandurbar gathering into itself most of the export trade bound for Surat from the Madhya Pradesh as well as the deeper Central Provinces became a town of importance. Tavernier and Bernier travelling through the area around the mid-seventeenth century find flourishing trade, especially of cotton fabrics, muslins of

all kinds being exported to Persia, Turkey, Moscow, Poland, Arabia, Cairo and other places.<sup>6</sup> The strategic importance of Khandesh was the link forming the confluence of the north-south trade along the Agra Road and the trade along the east-west through Nandurbar. As a matter of fact, the Khandesh had acquired such importance that only a close relative of the Emperor could be granted viceroyalty over it, and moreover, this viceroy had to exercise this viceroyalty on the spot, from the viceregal seat of Sultanpur.

The feudatories who held power in Khandesh, and especially in the northwest basin had a very varied caste basis. This fact which was to prove important later was due to the very position of Khandesh. Khandesh, is in a sense, a frontier between the socio-economic region now roughly forming the Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. It also formed the confluence of major trade routes crossing India. This position and the constantly shifting empires which took control of Khandesh have left it the legacy of a feudal class of Muslim, Maratha, Rajput along with a few Adivasi chieftains. Because this feudal class was so divided along caste lines it could not assert its class dominance to the same degree that it could in many other areas.

#### Pillage of Khandesh:

This very strategic position of Khandesh which made it an important nodal link in the trade of the country later turned into a calamity for Khandesh. This position made it bear the full brunt of the Moghal-Maratha wars and the later wars during the decline and dissolution of Maratha rule. In the year following his coronation Shivaji led an expedition through Baglan and Khandesh and the short period of calm was over for Khandesh. In 1667 Nemaji Shinde sacked and pillaged the Peths of Nandurbar in collusion with the governor Hosain Ali. In the same period, Amritrao Kadambande occupied Kukurmunda, a strategic fort between



the Malwa and Khandesh, levied high taxes on all trade to and fro, and ravaged the whole country between Surat and Burhanpur along the trade route. In 1703 Nemaji Shinde with a force of about 28,000 troops plundered Nandurbar, Sultanpur and a number of places in the Burhanpur-Berar area all in a matter of three weeks!

These raids of Moghal territory by the Marathas in the early period were characteristic of the method of warfare that they had evolved in their home provinces. These mobile and surprise raids undermined the slow-moving massive Imperial armies of the Moghals. In fighting the Moghals in the Sahyadris with forces drawn from the local peasantry this method constituted a pillar of their strength. But outside their homeland they appeared as much a scourge of the local peasantry as a scourge of the Moghal feudatories. Their exactions from the feudatories of the Moghals and the imposition of chauth added only to the burden of the peasantry, their campaigns left the country ravaged and by destroying the local administration and trade contributed to the disorganisation of the economy, with nothing else to replace it in the earlier year. It needed but a few years of below average rainfall to bring on a famine in such conditions. And come it surely did. From the year 1702 to 1704 Khandesh was visited by famine.

With the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 the Moghal power already crumbling began to give way and the conflict intensified. The main battles between the Peshwa Bajirao I and the Nizam-ul-Mulk were also fought out across this area. Rights were ceded and reimposed in rapid succession. By this time the Marathas had also taken to employing massive armies and the conflict passed north through Khandesh by the mid-century. During this period the Maratha land-tenure was in force. Apart from the Tankha settlement which formed

the departure point, chauth and sardeshmukhi were added. There were also a host of other levies and cesses on all kinds of activity too numerous to be described. What can however be seen is that by these impositions the Maratha rule added much to the burden of the local peasantry caught between the warring powers.<sup>7</sup>

The Marathas became an Imperial power at the same time that the competition between the foreign powers fighting for control in India had come to its sharpest. This never allowed the Marathas to consolidate an Empire. This was because of the growth of sub-infeudation, the tendency of feudatories to claim sovereign power in their territories and the wrangling over hereditary powers. Since the foreign powers were always around to offer aid and importantly arms and soldiers, the dissident feudatories always began with a strength they acquired on this background. The presence of foreign powers and the competition among them acted as the corrosive acid which ate into the Imperial structures of the Marathas with devastating effects.

In the years following the death of Narayanrao Peshwa the campaign of Poona ministers against Raghobadada traversed Khandesh. But though small, there was in this campaign a new and ominous sign of things to come. Raghobadada succeeded in inciting the Kolis of Khandesh and Gulzar Khan, the feudatory of Sultanpur and Ranala, to rebel against the official Poona Regime. That Gulzar Khan could dare to take up arms against the official centre shows how deep the process of sub-infeudation had bitten while the Kolis of Khandesh bring into relief the extent to which Maratha rule had disaffected the local tribal populations.

The last Peshwa of the declining Maratha empire Bajirao II acquired his Peshwepad in 1796 amidst a welter of rival claimants, supporters and opponents. If anything, he was unable even to stem

let alone reverse the tide of infeudation which was fast snowballing into a host of local wars. Local feuds merged into this mainstream and helped by intrigues of foreign powers the Maratha empire broke up into two large loosely defined warring camps whose lines and constituents constantly changed. Punitive expeditions, pillage and looting of rival territory became the order of the day.

One such feud which was to be of importance to the Khandesh was the feud between, the Shindes of Gwalior and the Holkars of Indore. The history of the feud and its complex relation with the struggle for the Peshwepad is too complex to relate, nor is it the object of our investigation. Suffice that Yeshwantrao and Tukoji Holkar rebelled against the Poona regime in the course of this feud and took to the Khandesh hills. From here they reverted to the oldest forms of Maratha warfare against the Maratha Empire. Unlike Raghoba, who was able to incite only the tribe of Kolis to revolt, Yeshwantrao was able to draft into his army a number of Bhil chieftains. It is ironic that Yeshwantrao Holkar should come to play the same role against the Maratha empire that the Marathas in their early period played against the Moghals.

Came the inevitable famine in the wake of this disorder. The severity of this famine of 1802-1803 compares only with the terrible Durgadevi famine of 1639 which is said to have left only a few thousand Adivasis alive. The Peshwa government abolished import duties on grain and remitted revenue but these halfhearted measures were of no avail. How half-hearted they were and in what faith they were taken is demonstrated by the "reorganisation" of the land revenue system in the following year - 1804. Earlier the post of mamlatdar, or the revenue collector for an area, used to be conferred either to a salaried person or to a feudatory holder. In 1804 this post was put up to auction

for a period of one year. The post was then to be reauctioned each year. The ruthlessness of the highest bidders and their armed detachments of those who had "farmed in" (sic!) the post for a year can be too easily imagined. This in the wake of the 1802-3 famine!

Flight of Peasantry:

The effects of this on the local peasantry were disastrous. The famine and the "farming out" were the last straw to the camel's back. The constant warfare had already made life and tillage precarious. The famine and the burden of farmed out posts proved too much. There started a process of emigration of the labouring peasantry. The non-tribal castes connected through kinship and other relations with the peasantry in other areas emigrated in a large number. Much of these were already immigrants from other areas and took themselves off to their 'homelands'. But the problem was very different for the population north of the Tapi and the other regions bordering the hills. There most of the population was a tribal population and they had no homeland to flee to. It was their homeland that was being ravaged. Their only refuge lay in the hills. Since they were hardly in a position to stop the Maratha warring factions from traversing their territory they were forced to leave their lands and take to the hills. There they resumed their former way of life and organised themselves into armed groups and carried out a warfare exactly along the lines of the early Maratha period. They struck the invading enemy wherever possible and plundered him.

The Maratha feudatories, who inspite of their infighting considered the area their collective domain looked upon the tribal population and its revolt as pure banditry and plundering

just as much as the Moghals had looked upon the Marathas. Incensed and irritated by this resistance of tribals they resolved to read them a chapter in terror. In 1808 Balaji Laxman at Kopergaon tempted from the hills a large body of Chandor Bhils, then proceeded to surround and massacre them. Instead of being cowed down the Bhil revolt became fiercer and the Marathas retaliated with the most cruel massacres at Chalisgaon, Dharangaon, Antur and a number of places.

Such unsettled conditions naturally see the growth of brigandage and pure marauders as well. Most of the big feudal landowners had not quit the area out of fear but had proceeded to draft into service private Karnataka and Arab mercenaries. Many of these soon overgrew their control and took to brigandage. Meanwhile Yeshwantrao Holkar who had been kept captive at Poona escaped and, in the words of the Gazetteer, "carried sword and fire through Khandesh."<sup>8</sup> He was actively helped by the chieftain Jugar Naik of Chikhli to attack and devastate the Maratha stronghold at Sultanpur. The warlike Pendharis and the Muslim Tadvī Bhils carried an expedition across the east-west and entered Khandesh in 1816 from the east and retraced their route in 1817.

The only ones to have consistently and progressively benefitted from this warfare were the British. Apart from the campaigns actually fought by the British, the Maratha infighting also took its toll. In their feuds they had also got used to and later were forced to take British help - at a price! Territory after territory passed insiduously into British hands until in 1818 with the decisive defeat of the Peshwa at Asṭe the Maratha empire became part of British territory. Thus the British in 1818 acquired rights over a Khandesh standing in ruins. The whole social fabric had been torn asunder. The labouring population had fled. The Adivasi peasantry had withdrawn

to the hills and the province was full of marauding groups of plunderers. The British on their entry were astounded at the sight that met their eyes. The anarchy, chaos and desolation that met their eyes could not have been an uncommon sight to their eyes. It always announced their imperial control. It was only its scale which astounded them and led Elphinstone to remark that in their anarchy the conditions of Khandesh were almost unexampled "even in Asia."<sup>9</sup>

#### Return of 'Order':

Having acquired rights over this now desolate and hilly country up in arms, the first task that the British colonizers faced in setting up their political and civil apparatus was the problem of crushing the resistance of the local tribes and the armed gangs of plunderers occupying it. In a few years they had taken care of the bandit gangs of Arabs and others. But crushing the resistance of the local tribal population which was fighting for its homeland was quite another matter. Right upto 1825, by continuous and ferocious campaigns they tried to wipe out this resistance purely and solely by armed force. Each deceptive and temporary spell of peace acted as a carrot to the British effort only to burst into a sudden attack at some other place. In 1825 the British, at the instance of Elphinstone, then Governor of Bombay, put into effect a policy which was to be much more <sup>ui</sup>fraternal. One edge of this dual policy consisted in an active effort to repopulate the area and to assure the Adivasi population that they were not interested in pursuing them at gunpoint if they were to settle on land and pay the British Caesar his due in the form of revenue and as law-abiding citizens. The second edge of it was to draft into service a part of the tribal population itself in the work of suppression. To this end three Bheel Agencies were formed and Agents were

posted at each to take care of the measures-benevolent. A Bheel Corps was formed albeit "with extreme difficulty" under British command. This policy yielded substantial results, though very slowly. By 1828 the Collector of Khandesh could report that "for the first time in 20 years the district has enjoyed six months rest."<sup>10</sup>

Sporadic outburst still continued and not only on the part of the tribal population. Nor did they lack ferocity as witnessed by the 1845 confrontation between the Chikhli tribal chieftain and the British. In step with the 1857 uprising of the disaffected feudatories and regal heads all over India, which was effective in many places also because it rode a tide of peasant upsurge, the Khandesh Bhils rose under Kajarsingh Naik. The suppression of this revolt, just like the suppression of the 1857 uprising was to mark the end of a decisive period. After its role in the suppression of this revolt the Bheel Corps did not have to be called for active service and was finally disbanded.

Especially in Khandesh, this consolidation of political power was of prime importance to the British, because in this case it represented not the suppression of this or that feudatory chief but the suppression of an entire people up in arms. Thus along with the general description of the area as overgrown with forests, roads cut up, the country empty of people, we find it recorded that revenue - that roughest of things - was collected with great difficulty and with the help of the military force in the early years!<sup>11</sup> But it was not only the British, they were following an example already become practice in later "farming in" period under Bajirao II when Shibandi troops specially were requisitioned for this purpose by the "revenue collector" tenants.<sup>12</sup>

One of the reasons for the partial nature of the success of British attempts at revenue settlements in 1821 and 1828 is also clearly due to their basis in the late Maratha standards. With much fanfare it was declared that revenue farming was to be abolished but previous assessments were to form the norm, wherever they were not clearly (sic!) unjust or oppressive. Through this the British effected only a formal abolition of revenue farming while retaining all its ill effects. Nor was a clause assuring no new burden of taxation adhered to. After all the Company could measure justice and oppression only in the measure it knew. According to class of land, dry crop rates in Nandurbar were raised by 25 to 60%. Not only did tillage fall drastically in Nandurbar but tillage of higher classes of land fell more drastically!!<sup>13</sup> Only in 1839-40 with a 30% reduction of rates did tillage in Khandesh begin to improve.

In spite of this right upto the 'fifties the tillage still remained very low. Up until 1852 there was no systematic survey of the land or its classification and no established machinery of land records. The British administration therefore was threatened with the fate of remaining purely formal and nominal while the information and access to cultivators remained the sole preserve of the feudatories of the Marathas. A systematic survey carried out by Captain Wingate in 1852 brings out the lack of tillage very well. His report estimates that only 14% of the estimated arable land was under tillage. About 25% of the villages stood completely deserted.

However the estimated tillage of 14% was an average for the whole of Khandesh. The actual figures varied from 5% to 35% for the various sub-divisions. More significantly in the north-west basin it was considerably lower than that for the rest of the province. For the areas in the north-west Tapi basin, the tillage figures varied from 7 to 9%. This indicates that most of the settlement on land that took place in this period



(upto the 'fifties) generally took place in the plains in the rest of Khandesh. To quote, "the lands north of Taptee, once very populous and yielding a large revenue, were an almost uninhabited forest." <sup>14</sup>

But this "forest" was not a forest in the real sense of the word. It was an extremely fertile land now overgrown with bushes and trees. It had only to be cleared with some labour to become again with a few years of cultivation as rich in produce as before. Thus while the rest of the Khandesh plains by the end of the 'fifties were reaching some degree of cultivation the north-west plains still had the character of an open country awaiting settlement and with an abundance of fertile land. This open country was now being slowly occupied by the Adivasi tribal population. The Gazetteer of the East India Company, in the relief it felt at having established their law and order in the province, waxes lyrical over this phenomenon "the Bheels, from outcasts have become members of civil society, daily rising in respectability and becoming useful and obedient subjects of the state." <sup>15</sup> Though the lyricism is at a heavy discount, there can be no doubt about the slow settlement of the Adivasi population on the lands they had been forced to vacate by the combined terror of Maratha feudatories and the various armed gangs of bandits.

With the abolition of Company rule in 1858 the process of colonization reached yet another mark. The 'fifties also saw the growth of demand for cotton and gave rise to the cotton boom which reached its first peak in 1862-65. In 1860, the 1852 assessments were lowered. The Administrative machinery was overhauled and reconstituted along tighter lines. Laws were enacted and sub-divisional civil courts were established. Railways began to be built and the main Bombay-Chalisgaon line was completed in the 'sixties. British power spread into the very pores of Indian society

to effectuate and consolidate the process of colonization. More than anything, the cotton boom of the 'sixties was to prove much more of an engine in the progress of cultivation in the area than all the previous British attempts to attract people to the land. Where offers of rent-free land and money for bullocks and implements had failed to attract anyone to Khandesh, its rich soils now called forth an immigration which outstripped the trickling streams before the 'fifties. In the words of a visitor to the Talode taluka in 1864, ten years after his first visit,

"... I was hardly prepared for the change that has taken place. Miles of high jungle, I might almost say forest, has been cleared off, and places which gave cover to wild animals such as nilgai and sambar, were now clothed with luxuriant crops of wheat and gram."<sup>16</sup>

Even setting the usual discount rate on the lyricism it shows clearly the rapid growth in tillage. In fact tillage shot up from a bare 7% to 9% in 1852 to 72% in Nandurbar, 60% for Shahade and 78% for Talode taluke in 1878.<sup>17</sup> Before the end of the century, "the whole of the area (Talode taluka) is now, in effect, under good cultivation and the absence of wild animals is conspicuous. Pasture land has given way to cultivation, more than half of which is producing exportable crops..."<sup>18</sup>

#### Gujar immigration:

It is in this period that we find the specific mention of the Gujar population in the area. The specific nature of the immigrant Gujar population has its role to play in the shaping of the land relations of the north-west Tapi basin. It would therefore be necessary to be clear on the nature of this immigrant population. The British Gazetteers and reports talk of them at various points as Guzars, Guzar Kunbis, Guzar Vanis as well as a branch of the Leva (Reve) Patils. In discussing their caste

origin the British tend to assimilate them to the Reve Patils. There is a distinct continuity between them as well as a distinction. There are all indications to show that both communities have migrated from the same or very similar areas of Gujarat. Both communities are Kunbis by caste and therefore their traditional occupation is that of cultivation. However the Reve Patils' chronicles put their own migration centuries back around the 14th century. In manners of speech, habit and customs this is borne out by their acculturation to the Khandesh regions. They occupy the eastern and north-eastern parts of Khandesh. In contrast however the Gujar community of the north-western provinces shows a relatively small degree of acculturation to the region and especially the records of the British and Muslims show that their mass arrival is much more recent. It is this wave of migration that we find flooding the north-west basin during and after the 1860s.

At the same time they must not be assimilated to the Marwaris, or Vanis of Gujarat inspite of their moneylending and usurious practices. The Marwaris and the Vanis have traditionally been mainly a moneylending and trading caste even though they have not been "averse" to owning land. As we shall attempt to show below, unless both these distinctions are kept in mind their specific impact on the land relations in area can hardly be understood. A kulak rich peasant when and where he can is not at all averse to practising usury and employing it as a means of gain. However since on the surface all that appears to the eyes is a combination of moneylending trading and land ownership there is all the more reason to keep this distinction in mind. What differs is the nature of the impact it would have on the land relations in the area and will therefore have to await our discussion of these. This is especially important

if we can take into account the fact that the British viewpoint was used to a clear separation of banking, commercial, industrial capital as well as a landowner class. So the British alternatively catch on to some one of these aspects to describe the complex phenomena that they face, assimilating them now to moneylenders, now to capitalists, now to cultivators and so on.

Their immigration into the area is quite different from the slow pace of settlement of the Adivasi population. The Adivasi tribal population forming the settled fringe of the tribal economy would be expected to look upon land more as a means of livelihood than as a source of gain. On the other hand the Gujar Kunbi population coming from a cultivating caste of the peasantry with a fully developed sense of property would naturally be expected to look upon land not only as a means of livelihood but also over and above that as property and a means of gain. It is to be expected therefore that whereas the Adivasis came to settle on land acquiring land sufficient for their livelihood, immigrant population would be expected to fence in the largest possible chunks of the most fertile land available. But in the open settler's country that the north-west basin had been reduced to, this would have meant much more than what a family could have tilled. This created the problem, which we find being taken note of by the Gazetteers, "the shortage of labour."

It is symptomatic that before the 'fifties the only problem noted by the Gazetteer is the problem of increasing tillage - as if that was not a "shortage of labour"! It is only after the occupation of large chunks of land by the immigrant Gujar population that a shortage of labour arose. It is on this background that the British descriptions have to be taken. Supported by British law and Adivasi ignorance and lack of a sense of property the Gujar population solved this problem by reducing the Adivasi population to near slavery through a combination of cunning, usury and pure fraud.<sup>19</sup> The condition of the tribal

population is best described by the quotations from the Gazetteers.

Growth of Bondage:

"The condition of the Bhil cultivator in the north-west of Khandesh is special. There the landholders are mostly Gujar capitalists, not peasant proprietors, and the Bhils were formerly contented to serve them for clothes and food, liquor now and then, and a small sum of money whenever their children are married. Of late the demand for Bhil labour has increased and wages have greatly risen. On the other hand, the settlement of their disputes with their employers has been transferred from the magistrate to the civil courts, and the Gujar, by the ignorance and carelessness of the Bhil, has him at his mercy. The Gujar agrees with the Bhil that the Bhil is to till the Gujar's land and that they are to share the produce. An advance is made to the Bhil to buy bullocks, and a bond is drawn up with a premium of twenty-five percent. The Bhil grows the crop and is fed by the Gujar. At the end of the year the Gujar takes the crop and puts off the Bhil on the ground that he has to pay for the bullocks. Next year the Bhil again gets clothes and food and is told that he has something to pay. He asks for a new settlement of his accounts, and as a preliminary is sent for a new stamped paper. With a few soft words, some money to buy a robe for his wife, and a little liquor, a new bond is made, the meaning of which the Bhil does not understand, and he goes back to his work hoping for better luck next year. After struggling on for a year or two he determines to leave. Then he finds that his partner, or master, has his acceptance for £ 20 (Rs.200) or more, that the bullock he has toiled for is not his, and that he and all he has are at his master's mercy. A decree is passed, and the Bhil's goods are seized

and sold. Then his master offers him a chance of return and he serves for some time more. Again he grows tired of his position and refuses to work. The master has still some outstanding debts, and the threat of the civil court again brings the Bhil to order. Thus things go on from year to year. It is not uncommon for a Bhil, under pretense of the transfer of his debt, to be handed over from one creditor to another. A Bhil with a decree against him is worth more than one whose debts are smaller. His mother's name is entered in the bond, and as a Bhil will suffer anything rather than disgrace his mother, the threat to send her to Dhulia Jail is at any time enough to make the Bhil do whatever his master wishes."<sup>20</sup>

This graphic description of the specific mode of exploitation of the Bhil sharecropper brings out his situation very clearly. First we have as a historical background the situation before the shortage of labour when the Bhils were contented to serve simply for yearly wages in kind. With the coming of the "shortage" however we have what on surface purports to be a relationship of tenancy. But behind this facade lurks a relationship of total servitude, of slavery. What the Kulak gets from it is not a part of the produce or a share. He provides for the subsistence of the Bhil labourer, the implements, the livestock and the seed and appropriates the whole of the produce. In addition we have the labourer handed over from one to another under the pretext of transfer of the debt. The promise of sharing the crop is only a ruse, a tactic, a carrot to lure the labourer in a situation where labour is scarce and wages are high. It is neither a relationship of wage-labour, though wage-labour is the context in which it develops, nor is it a semi-feudal relationship. It is a relationship of pure slavery at worst and semi-slavery at best. It is an attempt to secure (sic!) labour on the part of a rapacious kulak class when faced with a shortage of labour.

This attempt is reflected in another form of relationship between the labouring population and the direct appropriation of its surplus labour. This form, already substantial by the 1880's, was to form the crucial relationship between them in later years. This was what has been identified by the 1880 Gazetteer as labour-mortgage.

"About two to three per cent of the labouring population in the east and about ten per cent in the west raise money by mortgaging their labour. These men are generally small landholders, who by some folly or mishap have fallen hopelessly in debt. Men who mortgage their labour are known as yearlies, saaldars, because their term of service lasts for one or more years. Labour is generally mortgaged, either to clear off old debts or to raise a sum of money to meet marriage and other expenses. Sometimes a man mortgages his own and his children's labour. The men who take labour in mortgage are generally rich landowners, desh mukhs, patils and others who employ the mortgagees in fieldwork and sometimes as messengers or duns, mahasulis. The labour-mortgage bond, called an year deed, saalkhat is on stamped paper. Sometimes the mortgagor is advanced the whole and sometimes only half of the sum agreed upon. The common plan is that the mortgagee working solely for his (the landowner's) benefit is supplied with food at the mortgagee's cost. Under this form of agreement a labourer takes from three to four years to work off a debt of Rs.100. Occasionally the saaldar lives by himself and is bound to do only a certain amount of work for his master. Under this agreement the labourer supports himself and in two years can work off a debt of Rs.100. They are willing workers and generally do their share of the agreement freely and without punishment. Sometimes they run away, and formerly, though now they refuse to do so, the magistrates used to enforce the bond."<sup>21</sup>

The saaldari system, or the engagement of labourers by the year is found in a number of places. A real or fraudulent debt as a medium to bring about and secure this labour for an year or a number of years in advance is also a phenomenon found elsewhere. What is remarkable is its prevalence on as large a scale as ten percent of the labouring population. It is this system which became prevalent when the "shortage of labour" arose.

This does not mean that the relationship of tenancy that developed between the moneylender-landowner and the small cultivator through usury did not develop in the area. Quite the contrary. The Adivasi population that had begun to settle on land were mainly small holders. Their smallness of holdings was sure to drive them into the clutches of the moneylending kulaks, and a process of transfer of land into the hands of the non-Adivasi kulaks was indeed taking place.<sup>22</sup> Since most of these transfers took place directly under the protection of and with the active intervention of the legal system that the British imposed it would be interesting to discuss what the judicial record for the period shows.

In 1859 separate judicial civil courts were established for each sub-division and the former system whereby the District Collector as Magistrate vested in himself all right to settle civil disputes was abandoned. By Act 13 of 1859 Breach of a Contract of Service was made a criminal offence and Act 8 of 1859 made a provision for the imprisonment and the attachment and/or sale of the property of a debtor. It is these British Acts that provided the kulaks with the weapon of terror that they needed against the Adivasis. But it may be noted here that due to the latter Act it was not necessary for the kulaks in the area to take land in mortgage, but any debt or pledge that the small holder could not execute could be used as an instrument to acquire land through attachment and/or sale. This has created a very spurious appearance in the juridical statistics.



The statistics for the year 1870 show that in the whole of Bombay Presidency an average 7.3% of civil suits "related to land". The highest percentage is found in Kanara or the northern part of the now Karnataka at 20.5% and Khandesh is the lowest in the scale with only 0.7% "relating to land."<sup>23</sup> This would seem to indicate that the process of land transfer in the Taluka was one of the slowest. However if we compare the figure for the arrests of debtors and attachments and/or sales of "immovable property" we get a figure of 6% and 13% respectively!

The trend for these figures also graphically brings out the point. The arrest of debtors was a measure which was useful to the kulaks in intimidating the labouring population. As such, the kulaks were not interested in the arrest of debtors. In keeping with this, the highest percentage of suits in which the arrest of debtors was secured by the suitors stands at 6% in the tension ridden year of 1870. It then shows a secular decrease to 1.4% in 1878. The actual arrest of debtors lost its potency to the extent that the possibility of actual arrests was demonstrated by the early arrests and played its part in becoming an instrument of terror and intimidation in the hands of the kulaks.

The second category of suits "relating to land" as identified by the Deccan Riots Commission is a category in which land was directly involved as the object of contention. The high proportion of such suits in Kanara or, immediately following it, in Ratnagiri districts is rather an indication of a substantial section of middle peasantry or poor peasantry conscious of its property rights as well as resultant disputes among these sections. An interesting highlight on this is the number of suits decided ex-parte. Thus we find that in most of the districts in which the proportion of suits "relating to land" is low the proportion of ex-parte

decisions is much higher than the average. Thus Khandesh figures with a proportion of 72.4% of suits decided ex-parte whereas the same figures for Kanara are 46.6%.<sup>24</sup> There is evidence that the ex-parte figures were even much higher for the northwest basin.<sup>25</sup> But more importantly it is the third category of attachment and/or sale of immovable property which is more significant. While "suits relating to land" show a fluctuating trend rising from 0.7% in 1870 to 1.4% in 1878, the figures for attachment show a secular increase from 10% to about 30% from 1870 to 1878.<sup>26</sup> What can very clearly be said from this, leaving apart the fact that the figures for the northwest basin would be expected to be higher than the district average, is an acceleration in the process of transfer of land from the Adivasi small cultivator to the hands of the kulaks through usury.

Usury in case of the kulak was not, however, the object of accumulating money through the debt but rather the means of effectively securing labour on his land. Thus his transactions were mainly with the labouring population and not in those areas where trading and moneylending as such would be gainful. As graphically brought out by one British official, in case of the kulak,

"The debt of the Bhil saaldar does not go on increasing year after year. When the Guzar has got a bond up to two or three hundred rupees he is satisfied (sic!), his chief object being to secure the services of the man, which is done by holding out the threat of imprisonment for breach of contract under Act 8 of 1859, and for debt through civil courts."<sup>27</sup>

The attitude of the British to this enslavement of the labouring population was not an unmixed indignation. We find it also mentioned as an "encouraging point" that the Bhils (presumably landless) taking up 'service' under Gujars.<sup>28</sup> But the dominant theme in the 1870's is that

"We state as a positive fact that the Bhil Awtyas of these

three talukas are the slaves of their Guzar masters, forced to labour, bought, sold, and transferred from one to another like so many cattle."<sup>29</sup>

By itself, it was not at all the conditions of the labouring population that troubled the British so much. It was a double fear. On the one hand they feared an emigration of the labouring population by a situation where British laws were used so that it "does not let them go where they can earn fair wages." The second spectre that haunted them was that of a Santhal type of rebellion.<sup>30</sup> This was especially true of the year 1870.

"In 1870 the pressure of Guzar moneylenders in the western district aroused much ill-feeling, and only by the personal influence of Major Probyn, the Commandant of the Bhil Corps, was a general rising prevented."<sup>31</sup> Two years ago the Bhils in Baglan, "growing discontented committed gang robberies, in many cases attacking the moneylender's houses."<sup>32</sup>

It is this spectre and the Deccan Riots of 1875, that led the British to enact the Deccan agriculturists Debt Relief Act of 1879. This did not check the process of enslavement of the Adivasis or an alienation of land from them. What began to become common instead of land mortgages, were now sale deeds to be torn up at the repayment of the loan. Moreover a reduction in interest could always be met by a spurious inflation of the principal. Until 1907 the court did not even have the power to go behind the bond and determine the real nature of the transaction.

#### Closure of Forests:

The British also took measures to relieve the area of the problem of the "shortage of labour" which lay at the roots of the specific intensity and sharpness of the relationship between the kulaks and labouring population

of the area. So long as the intensity of the relationship did not create the constant threat of an emigration of the labouring population and a Santhal type of rebellion, the British were not averse to the "encouraging point" about the Bhils increasingly "taking up service" under the kulaks.

unwittingly

This decisive act of the British which reacted back upon the situation was the closing of the forests. By the provisions of chapters IV and II of the Forest Act (VII of 1878) 1612 square miles of Khandesh were declared to be reserve forests and 714 square miles were declared protected forests.<sup>33</sup> The demarcation of these was completed by 1879. Note may be taken here of the fact that in the language spoken by the departments, delimitation refers to the drawing up of a boundary on paper whereas demarcation refers to actual determination of these frontiers on the land itself. In Shahade subdivision 73 thousand acres of land were enclosed. The need for such a measure was being felt from the 1860's when the Railways began to be constructed. A further spurt in this was provided by the work of the Surat-Bhusaval line crossing Khandesh east-west just south of the Tapi and the Dhule-Chalisgaon line both completed in 1899-1900. The area formerly used to import timber, especially for the famous carts of Talode. Now more and more of the timber cut down was used within the area. The seeds of this process which assumed large proportions with the starting of the Surat-Bhusaval line can be glimpsed from the figures for the movement of timber. In 1873 the movement of timber by rail inwards to the district was 536 tons and the outward movement was a meagre 10 tons. By 1878 the inward movement had fallen to 240 tons while the outward movement had leapt to 112 tons.<sup>34</sup>

The effect of this development on the tribal population can be easily seen. It amounted to an effective dispossession of their tribal property. The forests as their tribal property was the basis of their existence. The enclosure of the forests now

meant that they were to occupy the forests only on sufferance. Generally they were only left with the right to pathways and waterways. Their right to game and forest produce was severely restricted and this restriction grew to the degree that the British need for forest produce and timber and the effectivity of their forest administration grew. No doubt as the forests were cleared they were granted plots in the clearings but in lieu they had to perform back-breaking 'veth' or forced labour gratis for the Forest Department. There was an attempt to give restricted rights to woodcutting which were to be given to specified members. A register was maintained of all those who gained their livelihood by woodcutting. Each of these was issued a wooden "ticket" with a number - hence the name of the system. During the first year the system worked well. In the second year there was such a rush and pressure on the system that within the year tickets had to be drastically reduced.<sup>35</sup> After this brief attempt the Department gave up these efforts and concentrated mainly on enforcing strict forest supervision i.e., a stricter and more effective dispossession of the tribal population. The later period saw an extensive thinning out of the forests. So much so that by 1930 the department could distribute a huge section of cleared fallows to a number of "plotkaris."

What can be deduced from this is a process of a much bigger migration of the Adivasis back to the plains of the Tapi. As they came in and settled into the area, they occupied the remaining empty land in the fertile plains as well as the surrounding areas slowly shading off into barren, hilly, koradvahu land. The character of an open settlers country that the taluka had slowly disappeared. Tillage reached its limit and the immigrants coming after this point found themselves forced to take up either tenancy or saaldari or some form of employment with the

kulaks. The dispossession of the tribal population by the British thus wiped off the shortage of labour. That this process of immigration had not at least by 1898 given rise to the reserve army of labour can be seen by the figures for that year. That year the proportion of share-croppers and tenants for Shahade taluka is given at 2.8% and the percentage of labourers (farm servants and field labourers) is given at 12.6%.<sup>36</sup> However, this process moved very fast so that by 1917 the corresponding figures were given as 35.2% and 39.7% respectively.<sup>37</sup> With it also disappeared the spectre of the Santhal rebellion.

With this development we should also expect the growth of usurious practices concentrating land in the hands of the kulaks. Disturbed by the Santhal rebellion and the evidence of peasant unrest in the Deccan Riots the British tried by legislation to stem the tide of concentration by a new enactment, Act 6 of 1901. This act amended section 73 of the Bombay Land Revenue Code (Act 5 of 1879) which explicitly recognised the right to sell, mortgage, bequeath or otherwise to transfer land without limit. By the amendment the Government of the day was empowered to make certain lands non-transferable i.e., not transferable without the prior and special sanction of the collector. Adivasi land in the northwest basin was brought under this Navi-Shart, literally - new tenure. This was quite an ineffective measure. All it involved was tighter credit for the smallholder and some additional trouble to the kulak and moneylender. Moreover the collectors gave their sanction to transfers quite freely. How little an impact it had is seen from a 1938 report which shows that the entire tribal population of Shahade taluka held only 5.3% of the land.<sup>38</sup>

Kulaks and Adivasis:

Some mention must be made here of the various feudatory chiefs in the area. There were in the area at various places a number of feudatories who held feudal titles to huge tracts of land in the pre British period. This class had a mixed caste basis and counted among itself Brahmins, Maratha Rawals, Muslim Bohras, Rajputs as well as some Adivasi chieftains. After the enforcement of British Land Administration the erst-while feudatories were able to retain their land interests in the form of revenue rights and land ownership. For the most part their land was leased out to small-holding Adivasis and, more importantly, to the emergent kulak class. Even if we have so far singled out the Gujar caste, as typically representative, the kulak class that was emerging in the area was made up of also the Rajputs, Dakhani Marathas, Gosavis and Kunbis belonging to the higher castes. The contradiction that appeared between the Gujar kulaks and the smallholding and landless Adivasi population in the area appeared generally between all these sections of kulaks and the smallholders, landless Adivasis. It was softened to an extent dependent on their caste specific characteristics but came out in its sharpest form in the relations between the Gujar kulaks and the smallholding and landless Adivasi sections. In all these cases it will still be found that the main form in which labour was secured was mainly the saaldari system and/or the spurious tenancy graphically described above.

The Adivasis formed about 77% of the total population in Talode taluka and 53% of the total population in Nandurbar taluka in 1875.\* Only in Shahade taluka the

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In 1875 the total population of Talode, Nandurbar and Shahade talukas was 30 thousand, 46 thousand and 41 thousand respectively.

adivasis constituted about 30% of the total population. The population classed by the British as Kunbis which included the Gujars was 4.2%, 13.5%, and 24% respectively in Talode, Nandurbar and Shahade talukas.<sup>39</sup>

In both the former cases along with the plains we also have a substantial population returned from the Satpudas in Talode and the offshoots of the Sahyadris in southwest Nandurbar. It is Shahade which brings out the characteristics of the plain areas very well. Here we have a Kunbi population of 24% along with nearly 16% of other cultivating castes (like the Rajputs, Dakhanis, Malis etc) i.e., a total of 40% of the population with only 30% Adivasis. The proportion of the Brahmins and Vanis together was about four percent in these talukas.

#### Commercialisation of Agriculture:

The crop pattern for 1878 for the three talukas and a comparison with the figures for Khandesh as a whole are instructive. The proportions of area in percent under jowar and Bajra were 25.4 and 30.2 for Khandesh as a whole. For Nandurbar, Talode and Shahade they were 10.2 and 27.6, 18.2 and 23.4, and 17.0 and 22.3 respectively, consistently lower than the Khandesh figures. By contrast the figure for wheat for Khandesh as a whole was 6.7%, whereas for the three talukas it was 20.4%, 25.4%, 30.5% respectively. Also for gram the Khandesh figure was 1.7%, while for the three talukas it was 6.3%, 7.2%, and 6.2% respectively. The only exception would seem to be cotton; the Khandesh average being as much as 25.4%, and the Nandurbar and Shahade talukas showing only 8.3%, and 8.9% respectively. The area under cotton was negligible in Talode taluka.<sup>40</sup>

The proportions of cotton appear relatively low in the crop-area of the taluka as a whole as cotton cultivation was concentrated mainly on the kulak lands in the plains. The



Adivasi poor peasantry had not taken to cotton cultivation in the same way as its traditional Hindu counterpart in the rest of Khandesh. If we take into account that the Adivasi poor peasantry in the area would be much more likely to have a higher proportion of the coarse millets and pulses, then what we can very clearly see is the extent of commercialisation of kulak production. Wheat, cotton and gram formed the main crops of the kulak and accounted together for 35, 33 and 46% of the total (including both the plains and the hilly regions) cropped area in Nandurbar, Talode, and Shahade respectively.

From then till now wheat is exported by the kulaks to Bombay and the southern parts of Maharashtra. The traders were generally from the big wholesale markets of Nandurbar and Dhule. The trading structure was very rigidly centralised and based itself mainly on the cotton trade. It was the cotton trade which brought about and maintained this centralisation. With the metalling of Satmala passes and the regularisation of traffic through these in the wake of British takeover of most of Maharashtra, the Bombay trade received a big boost. Very soon the cotton boom set in and the small trader was completely subordinated to the centralised chain of commercial capital emanating from the offices of British cotton agents in Bombay.

Through these international magnates the chain passed downward. The big marketing centres of Dhule and Nandurbar were entirely subordinated to the vagaries of the world market. It is this chain which brought that pledging of crops six months before through advances of money - the notorious 'jalap' which became an institution. It is through jalap that even the poor peasant was then made to produce cotton for the Lancashire Mills, it secured for the trader an assured supply of cotton. Thus the high proportion of cotton in the area. Trading in agricultural produce led in the colonial period to moneylending as an essential component in order to secure produce. The kulak in northwest

basin was definitely subordinated to this trading-moneylending chain both through the cotton as also the wheat trade to Bombay. His main centres for marketing were Nandurbar and Dhule. He dealt through the Shahade and Talode based local trading vanis and sahookars. The trading and moneylending activity at the taluka level was mainly in the hands of Marwari and Gujarat vanis as well as the few richest of Gujars. Their chief occupation was trading and money-lending though a lot of them did acquire land in the process.

The development of commodity production led the kulaks to borrow on increasing scale to meet the expanding cash needs. The need to repay these debts sharpened the drive to secure land and labour and gave rise to a series of spurious and real debt and share-cropping transactions between the kulaks and the labouring population in the area. Both these factors would combine to make the Khandesh an area with a very high level of per capita debt. This is borne out by the figures for 1929-30. The estimated debt per Khandesh family at 685 Rs. was the highest in the Presidency and was more than twice the presidency average of 324 Rs.<sup>41</sup> Under it lurked two kinds of debts - the debts of the kulak which were so to say truly integrated into the cycle of usurious money capital as such and the debt of the labouring population in which the cycle was subordinate to the chief aim of securing labour and land. The concentration of land and the expansion and extension of commodity production proceeded inexorably on the basis of the relations formed in the early British period.

We have then the main class of direct exploiters in the area as this class of kulaks which had concentrated virtually all the fertile in the plains in their hands and were linked to the former feudatory holders by tenancy relationships and to the trader moneylenders through their credit and marketing

needs. The class of middle peasantry was virtually non-existent in the fertile plains and was confined to the surrounding fringe of the plains. The labouring population was mainly that of small holders and, increasingly, landless labourers. The smallholders were heavily in debt to the kulaks and the relationship of the kulaks to the direct producers on their lands was mainly that of labour-mortgage.

#### The Specificity of Shahade Region:

So far our analysis has only brought forward the different elements in the situation. What it must also be able to do is to give a historical analysis of the specificity of the relations in this region. This is especially important if we anticipate at this point the rapid growth of mechanization in the 1960s which the kulaks put through. What we shall point out below is the different historical elements that go to form the specificity of the Shahade region.

The first important element that stands out is the strategic position of Khandesh, the consequent crescendo of chaos and its impact on the Shahade region. Thus the warring feudatories and the foreign powers between them drove the Adivasi peasantry, which was in the process of consolidation, off its lands. Thus the Shahade region came to acquire the character of an open "settlers country". But this was not a settlers' country that needed years of backbreaking labour to clear off the forests and which had to be newly brought under cultivation. It was land which had already been brought under the cultivation-however crude - by the Adivasis. It was now overgrown with shrubwood. This character of an open settlers' country is also based on the extensive depopulation of the region. This depopulation stands out even in contrast with the rest of Khandesh, which in the plains was mainly a partial emigration of the labouring peasantry, as the tillage figures show.

This had its impact also in terms of the power of the traditional feudatories. As it was, already the caste basis of the feudal class was never homogeneous in the Shahade region. Added to this now we had extensive tracts of fertile, open, settlers' country which could be brought under cultivation with comparatively little initial labour. This weakened the hold of the feudatories as well. This did not happen in the rest of Khandesh to that extent. A powerful Kulak-led but broad based non-Brahmin and Satyashodhak movement in parts of Sakri and Dhule talukas indicates much more the strength of the feudal holders in that area rather than independent kulak strength as compared to the Shahade region.

It is also this character of an open settlers' country which allowed the kulaks in the Shahade region not only land but a substantial amount of land which allowed quite a large proportion of the population becoming a rich-peasant kulak. Thus from the beginning, the Shahade kulaks formed a much more substantial part of the population as compared to other areas of Maharashtra, had substantially large holdings and thus had substantial independent strength with much less reliance on poorer sections of the peasantry. This contrast of its independent strength is also important to bring out the effect of the moneylenders-traders on other areas where the differentiation of the peasantry was not sharp. In these other areas the development of a rich peasant kulak was repressed economically, socially as well as politically. In those areas where the differentiation was significant but not substantial enough to acquire an independent strength, the kulak was forced in its own interests to start, or participate in a movement which had much more the character of a broad peasant movement.

The character of open settlers' country is important. But an equally important element is also the nature of immigrant population, which is related to the earlier element.

but still distinct from it. This was the character of the Gujars as originating from a peasant-pastoral tradition with well developed sense of private property. There is a certain romantic conception of the peasantry which ignores the contradictory nature of the peasantry. Then a peasant who succeeds in becoming richer than average will be as likely to use the forms of usury, trading and other forms of bondage of the labourer in his drive for gain with as much harshness as the usurer, trader that he might have hated earlier. After a certain period of 'growth' (sic!) it is/<sup>difficult</sup> looking 'purely' at the economic character of his transactions, to distinguish him from the usurer/trader or feudatory holders being subordinated to capital. There is, however, even at this level, an essential difference, that his drive is to accumulate land and labour and that he acts in order to effectuate the ownership of these into a possession ( i.e., direct possession of the labour process as against a control of the production process) He is thus at the same-time creating the dispossession of the direct producers. The effect is also important from the point of view of the class struggle. In the case of the usurer-trader or the feudatory, on the basis of a peasant consciousness a struggle leads the subordinated peasantry to consolidate and strengthen its 'peasant' character. A struggle against the kulak who is taking over the possession of the labour process as well, tends to consolidate and strengthen the character of the subordinated peasantry as agricultural labourer rather than as peasant. The struggle against the kulak, needs more and more the crossing the bounds of peasant consciousness. Thus inspite of the constantly recurrent complaint showered on the panicking Bhil agent it is significant that there was no spontaneous peasant revolt of the Adivasis against the kulaks. This is the contrast to the Santhal rebellion or the Deccan Riots. It is also why 'labour-mortgage' becomes the main problem of the area. This is also why we cannot subsume the kulak, the usurer-trader, or the feudatories under a

single title 'semi-feudal' landlord or submerge the distinctions between them when talking about 'the subordination to capital.'

This is also related to the importance of caste in precapitalist India. At the 'pure' economic 'instance', an instance drained of all the dregs of 'ideology and politics' it would be hard to identify a distinction between the kulaks, the usurer-trader and the feudatory holder as they are subordinated to capital. It begins to seem as if all of them are but single stages of an ongoing process, forming a uniform class, at least at the 'economic' level. Caste has a definite role to play in this, not simply because it has a 'relative autonomy' vis-a-vis class relations but because caste is a necessary form of the social relations of production in precapitalist India, just as much as the commodity, that pure 'economic' thing is the form that they take in capitalism. It is thus quite important to note that caste has acted as a very material category in the history of the Khandesh region precisely because of its being the form of the social relations of production in precapitalist India. Thus the relation of labour-mortgage was first formed and became dominant in the relations between the Gujars and the Adivasis but later became generalised among the cultivating castes and the Adivasis generally. The emergence and generalisation of these relations also was mediated through caste relations. Thus the linear viewpoint which sees caste as an ideological factor external to the relation between classes must first be discarded in order to be able to see the complex relationship that caste as a material relationship exerted on the formation of classes in both precapitalist and later India.

This does not at all mean that caste was not an ideological relationship as well. In fact again what strikes the eye is the cultural, ideological legitimation

of violence, and 'extra economic' coercion of the subordinated labouring population. From the standpoint of capitalism, this seems 'abnormal', because capitalism declares itself to be a realm of freedom! What distinguishes the repression inbuilt into a culture is not whether repression and violence is directed against the labouring population but the form in which it is done. And here we have to ideological, cultural effect of this process in the Shahade region. What comes from it is the legitimation of violence and 'extra-economic' coercion of Adivasis for economic gain. It is not a legitimation of violence and extra economic coercion per se but in connection with the Adivasis. It may be questioned how tribal groups like Adivasis living outside the margins of Hindu society could be experiencing caste forms of oppression. What has to be taken note of is the process of formation of castes. Thus the Adivasis are formed into a caste in the process and their subordination and its legitimation has a distinct continuity with the dalit castes of India. Caste is a reality because not only did the kulak or the feudatory have power over the labour of the dalits but the village peasant castes as a whole had a real right over it. It is on this solid relation of production that the specific violence towards the dalits is based. It is thus a culture rooted in the role that caste played in India. It is not therefore at all surprising that the first signs of spontaneous resistance of the labouring population expressed itself as an Adivasi movement in the 1920s.

Lastly, it should not be forgotten that the foundation of this subordination of the labouring Adivasis in the Shahade region was based on the very brutal and material fact of imperialist domination. This was at the root of the internecine warfare of the crumbling Maratha empire, and the consequent crescendo of chaos that gave the area the character of a settlers' country. It was at the root of the wave of famines which drove the Gujars to this area. It was at the root of the

legal enactments and their enforcements which made possible the frauds, the usury, the spurious contracts and the violent subordination of the Adivasis. It was at the roots of the enclosure of forests which dispossessed the Adivasis and threw them out into the plains to be bonded to the rapacious kulaks and which was the basis on which their violent subordination was made permanent and became a cultural fact. Nothing brings out the crucial nature of British imperialist power like the contrast with the nearby Akkalkuwa taluka. The southern strip of the taluka is as fertile as the Shahade region, yet in the pre-independence period we find the area tilled by small holding Adivasis almost exclusively, and instead of the cultivating castes it is mainly the usurers/traders castes which hold the Adivasis in subordination. One may very well ask why? The reason is that British control did not extend to this part of Akkalkuwa during the influx of the cultivating castes - especially the Gujars. It is as late as 1921 that effective British control could be established. By that time, however, the forest enclosure was nearly fifty years old, and progressive deforestation had added to it. The land had already been occupied by Adivasis. It was then under British protection that the usurer/trader made his entry and until very recently he was not after effective possession of land and labour. In fertility, in its character as open country, this area had as much to offer as the Shahade region, except British control! The kulak thus was made a hard fact by the fact of British colonial rule.



Section II

The Kulak is Set Free

The period after 1947 represents a period in which the class of kulaks came to control the entire local power structure and used it effectively to carry through their 'green revolution'. The period upto the 'sixties is a period during which it consolidated its class dominance, both economic and political. The period after the sixties represents the 'revolution' proper, the rapid emergence and spread of mechanized agriculture.

Tenurial Reforms:

The important phenomenon which took place immediately after independence was the enactment of the Bombay Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act, 1948 and its subsequent amendment in 1956. An assessment of the impact of this act on the agrarian situation needs to take into account the differentiation within the peasantry itself. The very well documented literature which brings out the ineffectivity of the provisions of this law and their implementation generally sees this ineffectivity only in terms of the degree of ineffectivity.<sup>42</sup> It must be pointed out that this ineffectivity itself is a phenomenon that relates mainly to the tenancy that obtains between large landowners and the poorer peasantry. The provisions for rights to resumption, for eviction with prior notice and the number of loopholes in the law were effective in the circumvention of the law with regard to the poorer sections of the peasantry. By presupposing a heavy financial burden, prolonged legal procedures and at least a minimal degree of organisation for any tenant to effectively fight against the provisions of this law it placed an effective barrier to the efforts of the poorer peasantry to acquire ownership over the land that they tilled. At the same time it is equally

true that so far as the rich peasantry was concerned it had acquired the financial and political base and the necessary staying power to stand up to the landowners. Thus the effect of the Tenancy laws was to selectively set free the rich peasant class. The significance of these laws is not that they were ineffective in doing away with the dominance of the landlords over the peasantry but that they were selective in their operation. They presupposed and developed the differentiation of the peasantry; thus the simultaneous effect of freeing the rich peasantry and perpetuating tenancy relationships with the small peasantry.

In Shahade region it served to clarify and consolidate the class dominance of the kulaks. The big landowners with a feudal title to large stretches of land had, in this region, mainly the kulaks as the tenants on their land. Tenancy relationships with the small peasantry (which includes the Adivasi and other depressed castes) was at best subordinate. Farming in the land of the big landowners and moneylending creditors could hardly have said to be cutting into the subsistence of the kulaks in the area. However for this very reason the Tenancy Laws proved for this rich peasantry a significant increase in its profitability rather than a simple expansion of a subsistence fund. Also the more the area held by the big moneylender and landowners shrank the more they took to the emulation of kulak methods. This reinforced the movement of the reduction of the landowners to the level of the rich peasantry and an already substantial and growing dominance of the saldari system on their lands in preference to tenancy. This presupposed again the dispossession of the small peasantry from whatever land that these landowners continued to keep in their hands by circumventing the provisions of the Tenancy Law. Thus in its impact the Act simultaneously set free the rich peasantry, consolidated its economic dominance by substantial increase in its profita-

bility, created a pressure on the landowners to take to wage-exploitation and also created another spurt and channel of dispossession of the Adivasi and Dalit small peasantry.

This process, starting from an already high degree of concentration of land in the hands of the kulaks, has entirely changed the laws of tenancy relationships in the area. Just as these laws made the rich peasants and the former landowners reluctant and ill-disposed towards tenancy in preference to saldari, at the same time it disposed the increasingly impoverished peasantry to leasing out its lands! Hard put to find the means (bullocks, seed) of tilling a shrinking area, it preferred to lease out its lands. In the first instance this land was generally farmed out to their kith and kin within the smaller peasantry but to rich peasants also in cases where the land was such that due to its proximity or fertility etc., it was especially attractive to the rich peasants. This last form in which the rich peasant large holder became a tenant to the impoverished smallholder was of quite some significance to the rich peasantry in order to consolidate its position through this reverse tenancy. A significant portion of land was thus transferred through this reverse tenancy to the rich peasant who acquired tenant rights on the land. This land, not large in terms of area, but significant in terms of its location and quality made the rich peasant interested in reverse tenancy. With the acquiring of the ownership over this land this trend of reverse tenancy served its historical purpose so that today the main and dominant form of the tenancy relationships is the extensive agreements of sharecropping among the smaller peasantry while both the cases relating to a small peasant tenant of a large holder and its reverse are marginal. Even these sharecropping agreements are substantial only in the fringe areas surrounding the plains where we find a substantial section of middle and poor peasants family land.

Other Land Legislation:

The Bombay Prevention of Fragmentation and Consolidation of Holdings Act, 1947 stands out in contrast with all the efforts to protect the small holder. Under this Act the kulaks in Shahade could truly consolidate their holdings, and convert their holdings into unified tracts of fertile land. They acquired through this not only fragments intervening between their lands but also contiguous land. Many of these transactions did not perhaps dispossess the small peasant completely but invariably ousted him from fertile holdings and transferred him to remote, fringe lands of low productivity. These exchanges, which were not infrequently accompanied by fraudulent exchanges, invariably left the small peasant the loser in the transaction. It may be remembered that the 'New Tenure' of 1901 enacted by the British had provided at least a modicum of protection for the Adivasi smallholder by making his land inalienable without the prior authority of the District Authority. In 1948 even this modicum of protection was abolished; so also was protection abolished from the Bhil and Naik Inami Lands. The removal of these nominal constraints on the transfer of land was symptomatic of the series of legislation carried out by the Indian State. It was clearly a weapon in the hands of the kulaks to establish their class dominance vis-a-vis the other sections of the peasantry and the former landowning classes.

The land ceiling legislation brings out this case quite clearly. Functioning within the constraints of Gandhian ideology, the ruling class was at the same time committed to preserving a peasant economy. This entailed the curbing of any extensive concentration of land. This is symbolized by the ceiling legislation. The ceiling legislation far surpasses other land legislation in its ineffectiveness. So far as the other pieces of land legislation were concerned,

it found direct support among the landholding population; they were supported by the kulaks and was used by them in establishing and consolidating their dominance. But so far as the land ceilings legislation is concerned it has met organised and unified opposition from both the kulaks as well as landowners with a feudal origin. It is the total ineffectivity of the land ceiling legislation and the selective ineffectivity of the other land legislation in both its qualitative and quantitative aspects which brings out the nature and consequences of the state power established after independence.

The land ceiling legislation and the need to circumvent the Act, have created a mass of spurious data which however is quite orderly in its spuriousness. The order in that spuriousness is a large gap between the actual operational holding and the spurious legal holdings for the largeholders. However even the data available on this basis which apart from being incorrectly reported has been as badly collected and equally miserably processed, cannot but reflect the trends and distinctions between regions. In table 1 we provide the data available for the five talukas of Shahade, Talode, Nandurbar, Navapur and Akkalkuwa. A comparison between them bears out our points about the distinctive character of the Tapi Basin.

Table 1: Distribution of Cultivated Holdings by Size of  
in Different Talukas of Dhule District (1961)

Size of Cultivated Holding (acres)	Percentage Distribution of Cultivated Holdings				
	Akkal- kuwa	Talode	Shahade	Nandurbar	Navapur
0.1 - 4.9	15.0	26.5	18.8	16.1	10.3
5.0 - 14.9	68.8	43.6	39.0	42.7	50.5
15.0-29.9	13.7	23.2	27.1	27.3	30.6
30.0 and above	2.5	6.7	15.1	13.9	8.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: District Census Handbook, Dhule district, 1961.

Credit, Fertilizers, Cooperatives and Communications:

One of the prerequisites for the development of capitalist agriculture is the infrastructural and institutional base needed for it. The activities of the state in the post-independence period were clearly related to developing these prerequisites. Of these, the development of the facilities for marketing and communication and transport network, which have generally been neglected are equally important. In the British period the only major motorable roads in the taluka were the Burkanpur-Shahade-Akkalkuwa-Ankleshwar Road and the Dhule-Dondaiche-Shahade-Khetia road. Even of these, the latter had to pass over the Tapi on a submersible bridge and the region was cut off from the rest of Maharashtra during the monsoon period. In 1957 the non-submersible Sarangkhedha bridge over the Tapi was completed and the taluka was open to vehicular traffic throughout the year. Not quite though. The River Gomai, a tributary of the Tapi and normally a trickle of water, cut the taluka in half during the monsoon. The non-submersible bridge over the

Gonai near Shahade was completed in 1966. Throughout the period there was extensive conversion of cart roads to motorable through kucha roads. By 1964 the nationalised MSRTC was plying its services on 20 routes covering a total of 1500 miles per day in and just around the taluka. In 1964, 23 new routes were added to this. At present almost all of the plain villages in the taluka can be reached by motorable roads and more importantly, they are now connected directly to the southern Dhulia district and Maharashtra beyond by a road link open throughout the year.<sup>43</sup>

Hand in hand with this went the rationalisation of the marketing structure. In the British period there was no regulated market in the region. The bulk of trading had to be done at Dondaicha and Nandurbar which were in direct road and rail contact with other parts of Maharashtra and Gujarat. The trade of the taluka was mainly in the hands of a small number of adatyas who were agents of larger traders in these centres. The only regulated market during the British period was restricted to cotton and its management was left to the tardy initiative of an already overburdened Mamlatdari office. In 1949 a market yard was acquired and a market committee was set up. But the local development only took place after the opening of the Sarangkhedha Bridge. A cooperative marketing society was set up and starting with cotton slowly extended its activities to all marketable produce. This was accompanied by the setting up of two submarket yards and a seasonal temporary yard and warehousing facilities extended by the warehousing corporation at Shahade.

All these activities, fully backed and promoted by the State, were crucial in the development of capitalism in agriculture in Shahade. So far as the poor peasant and his produce are concerned both these developments made little difference to him. His produce was never sufficient enough for him to have taken advantage of the increased means of communication and the lowering of transport costs in order to

achieve profitability. On the other hand he lacked sufficient staying power to take advantage of the rationalisation of the marketing structure and as earlier was still dominated by the specific cycle of agricultural production and distress sales. It is for the rich peasant kulaks that this development proved crucial since it significantly brought down their transport costs and through the cooperative marketing society they could now assure themselves of the marketing structure and facilities that they needed. By lowering their circulation cost and time it increased their level of profitability.

The entire post-independence period is a period during which the kulaks with the active and full backing of the state carried through a continuous development. The next aspect of this is the cooperative movement, and the rationalisation of the credit structure. In terms of instituting cooperative farming the movement has been a virtual non-starter. However its effect on the credit system has been extremely significant. It has had an ironic double edged impact on the presupposed differentiation of the peasantry. Not only have the stream of benefits flowing from cooperative credit largely bypassed the poorer sections of the peasantry but have even created new debt-bondages for him. His needs are parcellised, subsistence loans with hardly any security to offer. He is thus still driven for his requirements to the moneylender or the rich kulak. The new forms emerge out of the cooperative loans. The Vividh Karyakari Sahakari Society is a village based affair and is expressly created for the small time needs of cultivators. It is also under compulsion to help the small peasant. This creates a curious situation. The small peasant is even found to borrow some money. Unable to repay the loan, he is advanced a sum of money to repay it and immediately renew it, which the society is authorised to do. Thus on paper the loan is cancelled out each year and is released



each year. This keeps up the appearance of the VKS 'helping' the small peasant and the VKS funds become available to the rich peasant! The only difference is that the poor peasant now pays an annual interest on his loan in perpetuity in order that the VKS may retain its democratic image and found *raison-de-etre*. Thus through a permanent loan and annual interest the poor peasant makes credit available to the kulak for his incidental and small time needs!!

No wonder then that the development of cooperative credit is seen as so much of a boon by the rich peasant. As far back as 1951 the All India Rural Credit Survey indicated that most of the largeholders meet nearly 40-50 per cent of their credit requirements from Government or Banking channels. (Table 2) Cooperative credit and its extensive development has helped the kulak to break free from the need to borrow from private money-lenders and big landlord-sahookars. This does not mean that he no longer takes loans from them, but only that he does so at his convenience. The tremendous expansion of cooperative credit between 57-58 and 71-72 is brought out by the tables (Tables 3-5). The agricultural credit societies have more than doubled their membership during this period. During the same period however the total amount of capital with the societies has increased five-fold. Similarly for the Dhule DCC Bank while the number of societies has nearly doubled the capital with the bank has increased a phenomenal eight and half times as much as its original. For the Land Development bank also the increase in capital outstrips the increase in membership. It may be noted that the Land Development Bank was created with the express purpose of catering to the long term credit needs of the 'cultivators' and was to be instrumental in supplying sizeable amount of credit for the mechanical equipment bought by the Shahade kulaks in the 1970's.<sup>44</sup>

Table 2: Distribution of Outstanding Debt According to Class of Cultivators and Credit Agency in Dhule District.

Credit Agency	Class of Cultivators				All
	Big	Large	Medium	Small	
	Percentage Distribution of Outstanding Loan				
Government	8.8	13.3	18.4	13.2	14.8
Cooperative and Commercial Banks	41.2	32.8	14.0	16.0	26.3
Relatives	19.9	21.1	18.4	18.9	20.2
Landlords	4.3	5.0	4.8	0.9	4.6
Agricultural Moneylenders	4.1	4.7	8.5	13.2	6.4
Professional Moneylenders	17.9	18.6	32.5	34.0	23.6
Traders and Commission Agents etc.	3.8	4.5	3.4	3.8	4.1
All Agencies	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: The total cultivators covered in the survey were classified into decile groups considering the size of landholding. The class of Big cultivators refers to the top 10 per cent cultivators; Large cultivators include the top three deciles, Medium cultivators the middle four deciles and small cultivators - the bottom three deciles.

Source: All India Rural Credit Survey, (1951) District Monograph, West-Khandesh.

**Table 3: Land Development Bank in Dhule District**

	1957-58	1971-72
Borrowing members	14.36	25,257
Share capital (Rs. lakhs)	1.67	65.24
Reserve (Rs. lakhs)	2.78	8.24
Loans Outstanding (Rs.lakhs)	24.48	288.21

**Table 4: Agricultural Credit Societies in Dhule District**

	1957-58	1971-72
No. of Agricultural credit societies	672	765
Membership (thousands)	48.60	110.75
Share capital (Rs. lakhs)	39.36	209.07
Reserves (lakhs)	27.79	70.84
Working Capital (Rs. Lakhs)	129.99	664.93

During 1971-72 the societies advanced Rs.425 lakhs and recovered Rs.378 from borrowers.

**Table 5: District Central Cooperative Bank in Dhule District**

	1957-58	1971-72
No. of member societies	777	1598
Share capital (Rs. lakhs)	10.64	98.02
Reserves (Rs. lakhs)	-	33.68
Working capital (Rs. lakhs)	118.78	884.67

During 1971/72 the Bank advanced 680.98 lakhs as short term and Rs. 154.63 lakhs as medium term loans.

Source: Socio-Economic Review and Statistical Abstract for Dhule District.

Like the credit 'cust<sup>hion</sup>' it provided, the cooperative movement also allowed the rich peasants to centralize their resources and take advantage of the larger scales of operation that were thus possible. The middle and poor peasant, if at all he could participate in this, could never be the backbone of the movement and his participation was always dominated by the rich peasant. By 1964 and 1965 there were 12 fertilizer distributing cooperative societies. With the exception of Dhule this is the largest figure for a taluka in the district. Dairy and animal husbandry were the other agricultural operations to be subordinated to the cooperative movement. In Dhule, Shahade, Shirpur talukas 61 Feeder societies collecting and supplying milk to the central cooperative dairies had been established by 1964. Besides this, local milk producers unions were also set up and handled an equivalent amount of milk. Khandsari societies were set up leading to a development of sugarcane area later to lead into the Cooperative Sugar Factory established in 1972.<sup>45</sup>

#### The Consolidation of Economic Dominance into Political Dominance:

The most important development regarding the political structure in the area was the constitution of the Maharashtra State and the setting up of the Zilla Parishads. Before the creation of the Maharashtra State the 'local self-government' bodies were bodies subordinate to the centralized bureaucracy of the Bombay State. Local elected representatives had at best consultative voice and the effective control rested in the hands of the bureaucracy. Nor did these bodies have any well defined function or control over funds. With the institution of the Zilla Parishads (literally District Councils) they acquired well defined autonomous functions

as well as control over substantial funds. Part of the funds were fixed at a ratio of the Gram Panchayat collections and the rest were provided by the State bodies. Except state highways and national highways, maintenance and development of all other roads came under its purview. Primary, and later, secondary education outside the Municipal areas came under its control. More important was the concentration into its hands of virtually all areas of agricultural development. Except for all major irrigation works, all minor irrigation works and land conservation works like bunding etc., were transferred to the Zilla Parishads. All specific development activity came under its head and it derived a regular machinery to carry it out under the Block development schemes with 'gramsevaks' in nearly every village. These were to include, with the general advance of mechanization, such things as the distribution of fertilizers, setting up of seed farms and later on even the distribution of scarce fuel resources with the advent of the 'energy crisis'. Notorious for their nepotism and manouvering, the notoriety generally refers to cases of individuals. What is necessary to be pointed out is that this nepotism was the result of the competition of various contending groups exclusively among the kulaks. This was only to be expected from the nature of the functions reserved for the ZPs. But whichever group of kulaks came to dominate the ZPs, it was mainly the kulaks as a class who benefited from their activity. The development of the ZPs put in the hands of the kulaks a weapon to selectively channelize development to their area and their lands. Where previously the PWD and the local boards dominated by the nominated officials of the bureaucracy generally dissipated their meagre funds in feeble and general efforts at development, the new bodies constantly expanded their area of control and their funds and selectively, ruthlessly and in open disregard for public opinion channelized development to their own interests. It is the ruthless struggle for control

of these bodies and the flaunting of all norms of behaviour once control has been acquired, which has earned them their notoriety.

The constitution of the ZPs was the expression of the dominance of the kulaks in the area. It also reacted back on the situation to increase their strength manifold. The 'green revolution' of the late 'sixties and the early 'seventies did not include the Shahade area in the list of its designated districts. But it did mark a change in the relationship of the kulak - "progressive farmer" in bureaucratese - and the State. The state now intervened directly as the agent of the largeholder and no efforts were spared to concentrate all developmental activity centred on the needs of "the progressive farmer." This is very sharply brought out by the figures.

Between '61 and '71, the percent gross irrigated area in Dhule district rose from 5 per cent to 11.7 per cent compared to a rise from 3.6 per cent to 5.0 percent in the earlier decade. For the Shahade taluka the figures are more striking; between '61 and '71 the percent gross irrigated area rose from 8.1 per cent to 20.6 per cent compared to a rise from 6.8 to 8.1 per cent in the previous decade (Tables 6 and 7). This irrigation is used for crops like wheat, sugarcane, spices and condiments etc. Today almost all the wheat grown in the Shahade plains is grown on irrigated land. The rise in economic strength is shown by the fact that the share of total cereals fell from 59.6 per cent in 1951 secularly to 42.6 per cent in 1971. Even of this 10.3 per cent in 1971 was under irrigated wheat. The increase in cash crops is absorbed by pulses and oilseeds the area under these crops rising from 10.3 per cent and 8.6 per cent to 19.5 per cent and 19 per cent respectively. The percent area under more intensively cropped condiments, spices, fruits vegetables, sugarcane etc increased from a total 2.4 per cent in '51 to 5.4 percent in '71.

**Table 6: Selected Information about Agriculture in  
Dhule District**

	1951	1961	1971
Population in '000	1060	1351	1662
Gross cropped area* (000 hectares)	753	759	724
Percentage of gross irrigated area to gross cropped area*	3.6	5.0	11.7
In gross cropped area percentage area under*			
Wheat	5.4	4.5	6.6
Total cereals	63.0	54.7	53.7
Total pulses	11.8	13.2	15.9
Cotton	11.0	10.1	9.9
Oil seeds	12.1	19.1	17.0
Condiments & spices	0.8	1.8	1.5
Fruits & Vegetables	0.3	0.3	0.7
Intensity of cropping*	108	113	109
No. of oil engines with pumps	844	3826	11157
No. of electric pumps	13	81	6651
No. of tractors	50	40	294

\* Averaged over 1952-53 - 1953-54, 1960-61 - 1961-62,  
1970-71 - 1971-72.

Source: District Census Handbooks, Socio-Economic Review  
& Statistical Abstracts for Dhule district.

Table 7: The Progress of Agriculture in Shahade Taluka

	1951	1961	1971
Population in '000	134.5	155.5	183.7
Gross cropped area* (000 hectares)	85.2	93.4	84.3
Percentage of gross irrigated area in gross cropped area*	6.8	8.1	20.6
Wheat	11.2	9.1	10.3
Total cereals	59.6	51.2	42.6
Total pulses	10.3	16.4	19.5
Cotton	18.4	9.2	12.4
Total oil seeds	8.6	17.8	19.0
Condiments & spices	1.8	3.5	2.8
Fruits & Vegetables	0.5	0.6	1.5
Sugarcane	0.1	0.8	1.1
Intensity of cropping*	110	115	113
No. of oil engines with pumps	283	1008	2228
No. of electric pumps	1	50	801
No. of tractors	8	13	109**

\* Averaged over 1952-53-1953-54, 1960-61-1961-62, 1970-71-1971-72.

\*\* The number of tractors in Shahade taluka was 136 according to the Livestock Census, 1966.

Source : District Census Handbooks, Socio-Economic Review & Statistical Abstracts for Dhule District.

This was in step with the increasing mechanization of agricultural production as well. The number of oil engines in Dhule district shot up from 844 to 11157 between 1951 and 1971, and electric pumps from 13 to 6,651 for the same period. What is however most remarkable is the rise in the number of tractors. They rose from 50 to 294 in the same period. There is some evidence indicating some degree of understatement in the official figures. Today it is estimated that more than 400 tractors ply in the taluka and we are also witnessing now the other agricultural machinery; wheat harvesters are beginning to be employed. This rapid coming to affluence is also indicated by the setting up of the Tapi-Satpuda



Sahakari Sugar Factory in 1972 which had around 1200 hectares of sugarcane in its command area in Shahade taluka. So also the increase in motorcycles, the setting up of a modern college among others indicate the increasing affluence of the kulaks. They have undisputed control of the district and taluka bodies. The kulak has come to power.

By the same token, however, the condition of the agricultural labourers in the area forms a stark contrast to this. The percentage of cultivators in the Shahade taluka has gone down from 45.3 percent in 1951 to 33.9 per cent in 1971 while that of agricultural labourers has risen from 36.6 per cent to 48.4 per cent in the same period. The proportion of agricultural labourers in Shahade is highest for any taluka in the district. Needless to say most of the labourers are Adivasis. A recent survey (1974) reports<sup>45</sup> that in the ten villages in the taluka only a little above 25 per cent of the agricultural labourers lived above subsistence level (at 425 Rs/annum!) 47 percent of the families reported current loans outstanding. A very large part of them, about 70 per cent was loans below Rs.200/- and mainly for current consumption. This is to be but expected since only a little above 25 per cent lived above the subsistence level. The proportion of literates in the general population was about 43 per cent for males and 20 per cent for females, while for the agricultural labourers it was about 18 per cent for males and two per cent for females in the surveyed villages.<sup>46</sup>

There has been however one significant change in the area. And that relates to the rationalization of the 'saldari' contract. The saldari system grew out of the British laws and kulak interest in which a debt was forced on the Adivasi, whether through charm or fraud is irrelevant here, and the threat of imprisonment was kept hanging on the Adivasi to perpetuate his saldari contract. The force and violence in this relation which appeared so nakedly in the early period, 'disappears' later into the specific caste

attitudes between the Adivasis and the kulaks. The threat of imprisonment is no longer necessary the economic servility imposed on the Adivasis by the loss of their communal property drives him to accept social servitude. This is intensified by the army of reserve labour i.e. the unemployment and under employment among the Adivasi labourers. Thus we see that even in 1974 the male labourers get work on an average only for 150 days per year, the female labourers for 116 days per year only. The proportion of female labourers who get work for less than six months is around 80 per cent and for the male labourers it is 68 per cent.

A study of 21 villages from Shahade taluka carried out in 1976 included 596 saldars. Of these 462 saldars were working for less than five years with the same kulak. Only 38 saldars were serving the same kulak for more than 15 years (Table 9). At the same time of the 440 saldars who worked for more than an year 314 were in debt to the kulak. What this shows is that indebtedness has surely not decreased but has definitely changed its function. While earlier the debt was functioning to bond a saldar to a kulak individually, today it serves mainly to deepen wage exploitation and to create a bondage to the kulak class as a whole. It is this change also which is part of the situation that makes possible a movement of the labourers against the kulaks. But this change has not taken place on its own, it is the spin off of the resistance of the Adivasis population to their various oppressors. So that if the kulak has come to power, so also has the labourers' movement come up to challenge this power.

**Table 8: Distribution of Male Workers by Occupation in Shahade Taluka**

Year	Total Population	Total male earners.	Percentage distribution of male earners		
			Culti-vators	Agril. Labourers	Others
1951	1,34,552	37,200*	45.3*	36.6*	18.1*
1961	1,55,472	44,071**	41.6	40.8	17.6
1971	1,83,682	48,649	33.9	48.4	17.7

\* Estimated

\*\* The figures of earners for 1961 are adjusted to concepts as adopted in 1971 census.

Source: District Census Handbooks for 1951, 1961, 1971..

**Table 9: Conditions of Saldars from Shahade Taluka (1976)**

(a) Duration of Employment		(b) Amount of Loan Taken from the kulak	
No. of years of employment with the same kulak	No. of saldars	Loan Amount (Rs.)	No. of saldars*
Upto 2	201	Nil	126
3-5	261	Upto 100	70
6-10	70	101-300	146
11-15	26	301-500	75
Above 15	38	Above 500	23
Total	596	Total	440

\* Does not include 156 saldars who have joined the service of the particular kulak in the current-year.

Source: Field Investigations carried out in 1976 in Shahade taluka.

Section III

Genesis of Peasant Movement

The annexation of Khandesh in 1818 brought the British East India Company face to face with a people in armed rebellion. Active measures were taken to put a stop to the eruption of the Bhils. Captain Briggs hunted out several of their leaders. Troops were posted along the passes of the hills to check their movements and to cut off their supplies. These military measures together with a policy of forbearance adopted by Elphinstone, providing liberal provision for pensions and allowances for Bhil watchmen on the resumption of the police duties which were formerly discharged by them, were calculated to render the country free of this "species of invasion".

In 1819, the Bhils broke out in a general insurrection on all sides; the leaders holding out the different outposts of the hill area and sending out marauding parties to ravage the plains. Several detachments were employed against the rebels. Some of the outposts which provided access to their mountain strongholds were captured, but fresh leaders appeared to defend these key positions, and the jungle war continued. Proclamations of amnesty were unheeded, not one of the tribes prepared to take advantage of the offer. Expeditions were sent against many leaders but the whole district was in utter chaos and even the village police aided the plunderers. Cil Naik was apprehended and hanged.

In 1821, there was no decrease in gang robbery. Military operations continued without success. In 1822, a fresh incursion of the Bhils under the famous leader Hiria threw the country into a state of complete lawlessness. Then for two years, fierce retribution followed, the Bhils were caught and killed and many of them were also subjected to severe punishment. But though many were caught and killed fresh leaders were never wanting,

their scattered followers again drew together, and quiet and order were as far off as ever. In 1825, the situation further deteriorated. Sivran, a blacksmith, produced forged papers from the Rajah of Satara. He enticed the Baglan Bhils to rise up in an insurrection.

As force had failed, Mr. Elphinstone, the Governor of Bombay, determined to try gentler measures. In 1825, orders were given that fresh efforts should be made to encourage the wild tribes to settle as husbandmen and to enlist and form a Bhil Corps. With these objects Khandesh was divided into three Bhil agencies, which were apportioned to as many officers, who were expected to reside within the limits of their respective districts.

The duties of the agents were heavy and varied. Gangs still in revolt had to be reduced and order kept, offenders punished and pensions paid and the people led to settle to steady work. As far as possible registers of the different tribes were kept, the chiefs were won by rewards and pensions, their hereditary claims to guard the passes were carefully respected and the tillage was fostered by grants of land, seed and cattle. The Bhil Corps was very hard to start. Their shyness, restlessness and suspicions hindered the Bhils from enlisting.

In 1826, a gang plundered Burgaon. The Sindvaghata was shut by Dhursing and Soobhania returned from transportation. Sultanpur was plundered. Detachments were sent against Deccand and thirty of his followers were killed in Sultanpur but repulsed the party of regulars sent against him. He was seized by Rania Naik and was sent to Dhulia where he died in the jail.

Meanwhile the Bhils continued to settle in the plains, the south colonies prospered and many of the wild Bhils in the east of Janner took to agriculture. The Bhil tribes were now reclaimed. The Collector in 1828 reported that, for the first time in twenty years, the district had enjoyed repose for six months. The Bhil corps was employed throughout the district, in pursuing marauders and in escorting prisoners and treasurers.

The order of the Revenue Commissioner in 1849 that the landholders should provide stone boundary marks for their lands, met with a strong opposition. In 1852, the cultivators of Savda, Raver and Copda in Khandesh made strong demonstrations, when a revenue survey party led by Davidson was about to begin their work there. The demonstrator pleaded that neither stone nor labourers could be found to put the boundary marks. On intimation from Davidson, other civil and military officers arrived to help him, but on ascertaining the strength of the demonstration, it was decided to stop the survey operations for the time being.

After a few days Davidson again moved in Savda village. This became the occasion for a tremendous upheaval. Savda peasantry began to assemble in hundreds, "in less than an hour a mob surrounded the tents, and seized the tent ropes, shouting 'Din' 'Din' and 'No Survey'." So violent did they become that the European officers fled away in panic, the Mamlatdar and the Mahalkari who tried to pacify the mob were assaulted. The Government was practically boycotted by the people. The people of Erandol refused to lend their carts for public and military services, Mamlatdar's messengers were intercepted, and a Subheddar-Major was kept confined at Erandol. Major Morris with 300 men of the 11th and 16th regiments of Native Infantry and two companies of Bhil Corps fell upon the insurgents at Erandol. The occupation of the place was effected after the gates of the town were broken through and precautionary measures were taken by

keeping in custody the landed gentry, the Desmukhs, Deshpandes and Patils. Though Erandol was recovered, Savda and Faizpur remained strong centres of disaffection. There the rebels had set up a government of their own in supersession of the existing one. The Panchayat conducted the local administration, collected the revenues and punished the offenders. On 15th December, 1852 the Bhil Corps surprised the rebels by surrounding the town. The gates were guarded by the men of the line. The ring leaders were seized simultaneously, a force moved to Savda, where the persons who had made themselves most conspicuous were apprehended, and later on a proclamation was issued commanding the cultivators to return to their homes. As resistance was impossible, the peasants submitted. Two days after, the Collector held a Darbar at Savda in which he explained the object of the survey in relation to agricultural conditions which was generally understood.<sup>47</sup>

This incident, however, showed how little was needed to bring the government into disrepute and danger. The deep-seated discontent of the masses lay dormant, ready to gush out in an upheaval at the slightest provocation. Resistance to survey was obviously a resistance to the imposition of the revenue system and more particularly to assessment. The survey riot was only an indication of the dread of the peasantry at the burden of assessment which would follow as a sequel to survey and measurement of land.

The 1857 Revolt:

The 1857 revolt was a very complex phenomenon. What however stands out quite clearly is the interlacing of two movements. While in most places it was led clearly by revivalist feudal elements, at the same time the rapidity with which it spread was definitely linked to an as yet inarticulate, chaotic revolt of the poorer peasantry, and the oppressed Adivasis.

In the Khandesh, the northern revolt was a signal for a mass revolt of the Adivasis called the Khandesh Bheel rebellion by the British. It was led by Khaja Naik (or Kajeesingh Naik) along with Bheema Naik and Mehvasia Naik. From 1831 to 1851, for twenty years Khaja Naik cooperated with the British and was in charge of the security of 40 miles of mountainous roads winding through the Sendhwa pass on the Bombay-Agra Road. In 1851, he was sentenced to 10 years of confinement for the death of a suspect at his hands in a robbery committed on the road in his charge. In 1856 he was set free and the records indicate that he was set free expressly in order to ensure the security of the Bombay-Agra Road. Much to their amazement, the British found that on "some abuse" from an European officer he led his men in armed revolt which soon spread to all parts of Khandesh.<sup>48</sup> The desperation and panic with which the British reacted is apparent from the correspondence about the Khandesh Bheel rebellion.

In trying to suppress this Adivasi rebellion the British proved to be as, if not more, ferocious as their predecessors - the Marathas. The Gazetteers which speak in horrified tones of the massacres carried out by the Marathas at Dharangaon and Antur, include also extracts of letters which say in proper form that, "... sixty-two men were taken prisoners out of which fifty-seven have been shot by sentence of a Drum Beat Court Martial."... "...72 male prisoners were also taken... of these 55 were tried last evening by Drum Beat-Court Martial and shot and the rest similarly disposed of today(sic!)."



Regarding capture of Bheel women as hostages -

"It is well known that Bheel women are just as troublesome and mischievous as the men, and their seizure and imprisonment have had the best possible effect... .

"I am strongly impressed with the conviction, that they should be retained as hostages and not released, till Bhagojee and other Naiques are captured... .

"The women have all been compromised by their own acts - Their detention is perfectly legitimate... .

"I deprecate therefore the release of any at present..."<sup>49</sup>  
By contrast, about Khaja, the Adivasi leader of the revolt, it is <sup>remarked,</sup> is/

"As far as I can ascertain, he has not been guilty of any acts of wanton cruelty..." And about the Adivasis,

"... a great and generous Government should remember that they are dealing with wild and ignorant race, who have not embraced their hands in the blood of our countrywomen and little ones; that the Bheels are men who are naturally of a generous and humane nature..."<sup>50</sup>

What can be more contrasting than a people's rebellion and its ruthless suppression? It is not then so surprising that the British do not even care to record in the Gazetteers the actual incident which sparked off the revolt - "some insult"!

The Khandesh Bheel rebellion continued even after the northern revolts were crushed. The source of its continuance is very clear from the excerpts above, it was mainly the ferocious and violent suppression of the Adivasis. Finally, after a lot of exchange of correspondence and debate the Britishers on the spot who were constantly advising an unconditional pardon for the Naiks as the only way of suppressing the rebellion won out. This had immediate effect and the rebellion was finally suppressed. A strange suppression indeed, which meant an unconditional and unilateral pardon to the Naiks. But the characteristic

lucidity of the underlying analysis comes out below,

"Taking into consideration the difficult and unhealthy country in which the Naiks had their headquarters which render military operations against them almost impracticable for the next ten months and knowing what amount of misery these men, rendered desperate by the loss of their families could inflict on the population residing in the borders of Khandesh before they could be killed or apprehended, if they were allowed to remain united, I was convinced no sacrifice could scarcely be too great if their dispersion could be accomplished and I had little doubt of breaking up the confederacy if Kajeesingh who was the head of it could be induced to submit."<sup>51</sup>

In mid-1858 Khaja Naik dismissed his followers and supporters and presented himself to the District Magistrate at Dhule. By that time the northern revolt had also been effectively crushed by the British and Khaja Naik and his followers, facing isolation gave up their hopes of leading a general Adivasi revolt against the British for the time being. Thus ended the people's rebellion of the Adivasis against the British. It took the cue of the 1857 revolt of the feudal chiefs when it began and isolated by the suppression of the 1857 revolt was forced to give in to the British. But 1857 was to prove a much bigger landmark in Indian history. It was also the end of the period of a purely revivalist feudal leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle. It marked also the end of the rule of the British East India Company and the beginning of the Crown rule.

Taming the Bhils!

Crown rule announced itself by the setting up of Civil Courts and the enactment of various legal provisions for the defense of property ownership and also of proprietary rights regarding employment. These included the earlier quoted enactments legalizing arrest of debtors and of those committing a breach of service contract. With it started a new process of subjugation of the Adivasi population to the emerging kulak class, the leading portion of it being the Gujar occupants of the vacant and fertile land. The Adivasi population was growing increasingly restive and complaints bombarded Major Probyn, the Bheel Agent. We find in this entire period a curious contradiction. In the Civil Courts almost **none** of the Adivasis appeared to represent their case either personally or through counsel. At the same time the Bheel Agent was flooded with complaints regarding the very same matters which were being decided ex-parte in the courts!

Right unto the enclosure of forests this constant tension remains, even at boiling point but as far as present information goes, never exploding into a general revolt against the rapacious kulaks. It is this existence of unrest and at the same time its co-option which brings out in relief the nature of the British colonial state. The Courts, which had the enforcing machinery behind them, were based on strictly formalised codes based on property. The Bheel Agents however, who possessed only the power to recommend after 1858, had however a tradition of dealing with the Adivasis on a much more informal basis without being hemmed in by formalised coded procedures based on property. It was the Bhil Agency which was again responsible for the putting through of the policy of unconditional pardons granted to the Naiks after the Khandesh Bheel Rebellion. So far as the Adivasis were concerned, from within their culture, it would be natural for them to have

thought of the Bheel Agent and the Agency (as an enemy no doubt) as the proper representative of the 'British tribes' rather than the civil court machinery set up by the British which was largely alien to their tradition. By contrast it was equally natural for the rapacious property-conscious emerging kulaks to avail themselves of the Civil Courts. What is significant about the set-up is its character of a well-oiled machinery which while it brought about the subjugation of the Adivasis, at the same time functioned to limit and contain the growing resistance and unrest among the Adivasis. Moreover it was shaped by the specifically British tradition of politics which had emerged through an entire process in which the subordinated classes resistance was limited and contained by similar co-option.

But in the last analysis had this machinery been the only medium through which Adivasi resistance could be limited, given sufficient time, it was bound to spill over. What decisively clinched the issue was the forest regulations and deforestation beginning from 1878. This created a reserve army of semi and unemployed poor or landless peasants who through the compulsion of economic necessity now 'chose' to enter saldari and bondage labour. Thus it blunted the edge of growing Adivasi resistance and created a period of lull in the Adivasis movement. This lull lasted upto the '30s. Folklore indicates that in the very early 20th century there was resistance of the Adivasis to their effective dispossession of the forests by the British but it is a matter for deeper and sustained research.

This period of lull upto the 'thirties is also the period of the growth of the anti-caste Satyashodhak movement and its later transformation into the Non-Brahmin movement in the rest of Maharashtra. This movement, even if it did not consolidate an organisational structure in the areas of its strength, did succeed in making an ideological impact which was later to carry over into the Congress itself. It reflected the efforts of the rich

peasantry to build a social bloc against the "shetji-bhatji" sahookars and zamindars in the rural areas embracing the peasant sections as a whole under its leadership. This it was compelled to do because by itself, in isolation from other sections of the peasantry its social base was not large enough. This movement was quite strong in the southern parts of Dhule district especially in Sakri taluka (the Pimpalmer sub-division of old). By contrast we find the movement not taking any roots in the Shahade region. In a sense, the early economic strength and the large economic and social base and caste unity that the kulaks had from the beginning was itself responsible for the weakness of a broad peasant movement growing up in the area. The position of a large number of Adivasis as agricultural labourers and saldars also created a situation in which the peasant movement as it grew up through the medium of a struggle against caste oppression could not unite the kulaks and the Adivasi peasantry into a social bloc under kulak leadership. The Adivasis' situation was much like that of the dalit castes, to which they were in effect reduced to. Their movement was destined to grow outside the kulak dominated peasant movements, and subsequently, outside the national movement of the Congress which increasingly was dominated by the kulaks. Thus while in other areas the need to acquire a social base on the basis of caste forced the rich peasantry to start and dominate a broad peasant movement the Adivasis could not in this region be brought under the leadership of the kulaks in a general peasant movement.

It is after this lull during the late 'thirties that the national movement under the Congress leadership begins to take some roots in the Shahade region. Thus it is only after the emerging kulaks in the rest of Maharashtra had emerged as the main leading force in the social support of the national movement that we find the Shahade kulaks becoming

alive to it. One of the results of this has always been the relatively younger leadership, aggressively aware of their class interests vis-a-vis the agricultural labourers, and acutely dissatisfied with the kulaks in the rest of Maharashtra who in their concern for the broader peasant base seem to the Shahade kulaks to be renegades on specifically kulak issues. It was only in the 1960s with the national intensification of the issue of kulaks versus agricultural labourers that they could begin to make an impact at the state level.

For the Adivasi population the coming of the British meant an uprooting from the traditional mode of life they led and a resettling under the joint subjugation of the British and the kulaks. It also meant (with the process of deforestation adding to it) a change from a mode of life in which a largely shifting agriculture was but one of the occupations alongside fishing, hunting, and food gathering to a mode of life which was based on fixed agriculture. This marked out the Adivasi population even from the subjugated dalit castes. It is on this background that the first Adivasi movement in this period, the movement of Gulya Maharaj begins.

#### Aarti Movement:

The Gulya movement or the 'Aarti' movement as it came to be known was a movement which so far as its surface reveals was essentially a movement of social reform among the Adivasis. It preached ~~non~~-vegetarianism, bhakti (devotion) and aarti, sincerity in family relations, and a rejection of theft habits. It centred around Gulya Maharaj an Adivasi who was born in Ranjanpur. But a little below the surface we find the contradictions latent in trying to give expression to the specific needs faced by even social reform of the Adivasis. Nowhere does this come out more clearly than in the life and character

of the man who was the centre of this movement - Gulya Maharaj.

Gulya was born of an illiterate labourer's family in Ranjanpur (Morwad) and was to remain illiterate throughout his life. For eight years after his marriage with Dagubai Baya he moved from village to village doing odd jobs like well digging, watchman, dhorkya etc. After another four years at Moramba he came back and settled down at Ranjanpur and worked as a saldar on the fields of a number of kulaks. He had to watch the death of seven out of eight children that Dagubai gave birth to. What his life brings out is that he had himself borne the full brunt of social oppression that weighed down on the subjugated Adivasis of the region.

What stands out even more is the quietly rebellious nature underlying his actions. This is all the more characteristic by the crucial change in his life, his adoption of 'bhakti'. He came to know of 'bhakti' from the preachings of Santoji Maharaj, a high caste Gujarati from Kukurmunda, until then he had been spending his time in 'upaasana' like the pooja of Maruti and Surya namaskar. The power of 'bhakti' - personal devotion - made him go to Santoji and ask permission to accompany Santoji to Pandharpur. Santoji refused and there followed a dispute. The outcome is unclear but what is clear is that Gulya Maharaj went to Pandharpur thrice on pilgrimage. Later, Gulu himself started the reform movement and there is no trace of Santoji's special connection with the movement.

It is this rebelliousness which is at the root of the radical proclamation of human equality which formed the core of his movement. All men and women were supposed to be equal since in all resided God. Men who were committed to the movement were expected to greet each other with the folding of hands, saying 'Aap ki jay' (roughly, May your auspicious self be victorious) irrespective of caste or sex. It restored to the downtrodden Adivasis their sense of

identity and dignity as human beings on equal footing with all others. This went hand in hand with the rejection of idol-worship. In effect the 'Aarti movement' was a collective invocation to God without the intermediating idols, icons and priesthood.

However this proclamation of universality does not do away with its character as an Adivasi movement. If it was a demand for equality, it was specifically an adivasi demand for equality. The minimum rituals and the content remained specifically tied to the situation of the Adivasis. That it was called into being by the passing need of a virtual revolution in the Adivasis' life is shown by a number of things. For one, its tirade against liquor, non-vegetarianism, and theft-habits is relevant especially to the Adivasis now entering into a property-based agriculture-centered life from the forest-centred communal labour based existence that they led earlier. The Aarti movement and its central ritual also grew out of the need to consolidate the patriarchal family. The central ritual of the movement was the Aarti performed by the women. It started first on a personal scale when Gulu had the Aarti first performed in his house. It involved kneeling before Gulu on part of Dagubai, his wife. Dagubai, herself a labourer, resisted this and refused, but later acquiesced. The Aarti, six months before Gulu's death became a weekly collective ritual performed at Ranjanpur. It is said that the British had to start a special weekly train on the Surat-Bhusaval line called the 'Aarti train' to accommodate the crowd. People of nearly all castes and dominantly Bhil Adivasis attended this weekly ritual, though in personal life only the Adivasis adopted it as a way of life. Here also the situation is very contradictory. While Gulu Maharaj's influence spread all over the plains where the Adivasi labourers' population dominated, it rooted itself as a way of personal life mainly in the fringe areas of the poor and middle peasant economy bordering the ranges. Nor should this be strange, given the puritanically patriarchal stress on the proper upbringing of the family which was very likely to be loosened in the plains where most of the Adivasi



women were also predominantly agricultural labourers.

In the period when Gulya had started his Aarti personally but had not yet made it a mass gathering, the famous Congress Convention was scheduled at Faijpur in the adjoining Jalgaon district. Gulya asked Laxman, a Congressman from Nalgawhan to take him to the session. Laxman, refused. And with characteristic rebelliousness Gulu travelled on foot to Faijpur and attended the session.

Gulya died of general illness (unrecognised) on 29-7-'38. He died only six months after the Aarti movement became a mass movement attracting lakhs of people. At his death Gulya named Ramdas, his brother, as his successor. Ramdas Maharaj was more political and militant than Gulu, as also events forced him to be. Even after Gulya Maharaj's death the Aarti movement kept rising and reached peak attendances of lakhs in the '40s.

#### Aap Mool Dharma Movement!

It is during the year 1940 that the results of such a big movement began to show. The movement is said to have affected agricultural production in Talode taluka. The kulaks began to complain about the neglect of work by the agricultural labourers - mainly Adivasi. They are said to have come up with a private ruling that fixed a fifty-rupee penalty and head-shaving as a punishment for any Adivasi who neglected agricultural work and attended the Aarti. This sparked off a continuing conflict between the Adivasis and the kulaks. Because of the dominance of Bhils among the Adivasis and the Gujars among the kulaks as also the necessity of caste relations imposed by the form of social relations, it took the form of a Bhil-Gujar conflict. Ramdas Maharaj's militant attitude towards liquor also alienated a section of the Adivasis from him.

It was at this time in 1940 that the British became cautious of such large gatherings and the road to Ranjanpur was built. Nationalist Congress leaders like Shankarrao Deo also visited the Aarti. Gandhi is said to have mentioned the Aartiwalas. A Government official began to be present at the Aarti. At the same time this 'attention' made the Adivasis conscious of themselves as a section and there began a strong sense of brotherhood between the followers of Ramdas Maharaj, who identified themselves and came to be identified by the loose term - 'Samaj' (which literally translated means society but can also be social group, caste, religious group etc.)

In this atmosphere in 1940 a small event set in train the movement for which Ramdas Maharaj was to become famous later. Some women of the 'samaj' were walking to visit Ramdas Maharaj who was then staying at Chichale. Katyare, a forest guard riding a horse knocked down one of the women. She fell unconscious, seriously hurt and bleeding. The guard, Katyare, rode away unheeding. Ramdas Maharaj and a lot of men and women of the samaj went to Katyare's village and confronted him. Katyare instead of coming clean, threatened them with arrest for obstructing a Government official in his duties. Ramdas Maharaj filed a complaint with the police. The police remained inactive. Meanwhile Girijabai, the injured woman died in hospital. Still the police did not move. The samaj was infuriated. A few Adivasi women went to Katyare's house, dragged him out and beat him up. Katyare lodged a complaint.

The Collector of Dhule, called both Katyare and Ramdas Maharaj when he was camping in a Shahade village. He persuaded Ramdas Maharaj to withdraw his complaint and assured him that Katyare would also do the same. Ramdas Maharaj withdrew the case against Katyare. A few days later a letter arrived from the Collector saying that the sub-divisional officer had refused to withdraw the case filed by Katyare. Eighteen women

and six men from the samaj were arrested. This was a clear case of treason so far as the samaj was concerned. The story spread with the wind. The 24 Adivasis had to go to Vyara (a town now in Gujarat State) to attend court sessions. A few thousand Adivasis from all over the area used to accompany them.

The British posted an increasing number of policemen around the Courts. On 23 April 1941 the case was scheduled to come up in the Navapur Court. The court's yard was filled with police and the Parsee Acting Collector was patrolling in a jeep. There were some hot words exchanged and Ganpatsingh threw a stone at the Collector, who was hit. By then the Samaj was boiling with rage and prevented the police from arresting anyone. Later the Inspector arrested Ganpatsingh and Gajanan Dave (a Non-Adivasi supporter from Ranjanpur). On the 6th of June they were sentenced to one and half and three and half years respectively. Two men were sentenced for one year's imprisonment from the original 24 accused, four women were sentenced but later set free.

The Rana of Pratappur, a feudal chieftain opposed to the samaj and hand in glove with the police, called Ramdas Maharaj to his house where they threatened him with dire consequences. In November 1941 the Aarti was banned and meetings were proscribed through section 144. A permanent armed police camp was posted at Ranjanpur. A rumour was spread that anyone who attended the Aarti ceremony would be sentenced to an year's imprisonment, and that an order had been passed permitting the armed police to shoot at sight anyone approaching the 'samadhi' of Gulya Maharaj.

On the 4th of May 1942 Ramdas Maharaj was externed from Khandesh. Hundreds of Adivasis - men, women and children - accompanied him into the nearby Holkar State (the part now in Madhya Pradesh). The National Congress had already been wooing Ramdas Maharaj. But he had refused to

join. The kulaks of Nandurbar were also active in fomenting opinion against Ramdas Maharaj in the Congress. They made a special point about his loose morals. But now Ramdas Maharaj had come into active confrontation with the British over the issue of people's oppression. The Congress renewed its attempts to woo Ramdas Maharaj over to their side. A Congress leader from Dhule, Shankar Vinayak Thakar met Ramdas Maharaj at Sattabai and requested Ramdas Maharaj to come to Dhule before the externment period was over and to join the anti-imperialist struggle of the Congress. A letter to this effect was sent again to renew the request.

After this request, Ramdas Maharaj, re-entered Khandesh by way of the Satpudas before the period of externment was over and in open defiance of the British. The entry of Ramdas Maharaj along with his followers began to mobilise the Adivasis in the Satpudas as well. But the end was disastrous. On 2nd March 1943 the British, acting on information received from the kulaks, surprised and surrounded Ramdas Maharaj's army in a deep valley of the Satpudas at Ambapani-Rawalpani in Akrani taluka. The British surrounded the camp in the night and with daylight rained bullets on the camp taking care to avoid Ramdas Maharaj. All the injured died on the way to hospital. Ramdas Maharaj was caught and tried at Dhule. The trial lasted six months. 40 people were kept in detention in Dhule for a period of one year.

Harassment continued even after he was set free. In 1945 the police camp was recalled <sup>from Ranjanpur</sup> but the Aarti was still proscribed, and four armed police still guarded the samadhi of Gulya Maharaj. Only in 1946 was the Aarti allowed again. Thirty-four Adivasi families from various villages who had accompanied Ramdas Maharaj into exile lost their lands. Their lands were acquired by the Forest Department. To this day they remain without any title to their lands. Nor have they received any recognition, nor any help as freedom fighters.

This, however, is not the end of the story of Ramdas Maharaj's movement. The Aarti which started again in 1946 had lost its original power. The tradition of 'maharajs' coming up had become a part of the general tradition of the people and a cultural fact. The unique attraction of Ramdas Maharaj dwindled. The attendance to the Aartis came down from 'hundreds of thousands' to a few hundreds and at most a few thousand. So it continued to this day.

But meanwhile Ramdas Maharaj had begun to become more political. In 1945 he joined hands with Kesarsingh from Vyara in Gujarat, another Adivasi leader who had grown up under Gulya's influence. They came together on an anti-British platform and with the active propagation of the Adivasis as original proprietors. They continued their alliance even after 1947. In 1954 in an incident the police resorted to firing on the Adivasis. Kesarsingh and Ramdas Maharaj were both picked up and sentenced to an year's imprisonment after a long period in jail as undertrials. This term they served in Belgaum jail -- soon after their return Ramdas Maharaj was again active when he led a movement against the Ukai Dam which led thousands of Adivasis being deprived of their traditional lands. He joined hands with the Communists and led a morcha on the Secretariat at Bombay. In 1960 he died of a stroke of paralysis. The movement remains today as a way of life amongst his followers who are strict teetotallers, strongly conscious of their own position as Adivasis and living a simple and frugal life. The three days on which they gather collectively at Ranjanpur are the two days on which Gulya Maharaj and Ramdas Maharaj earned peace respectively and of Shivratri, which forms the foundation day of the "Aap Mool Dharma."

On the balance sheet the 'Aap Mool Dharma' movement appears puny enough. All it has left is a few thousand

Adivasis 'chauvinists' scattered all over the fringe of the poor peasant economy practising Aap Mool Dharma as a way of life. As a movement it has died out. But it has much more far reaching effects in its subterranean aspects than in its 'super'-terranean ones.

To start with the Gulya Maharaj's original movement for social reform is unique in two respects vis., whom it is addressed to, and whose interests it is trying to articulate and express. In the very first place it fulfils a cultural need of the masses. Its adoption of the Bhakti cult position is significant in this. The Bhakti cult movement in Maharashtra is the substratum of the unity of the Maharashtrians as a people, the Sant literature a part of its common tradition. It arose in its days as a reaction to the utterly rigid Brahminical orthodoxy and contains the seeds of a rebellious opposition. It was specifically addressed to and attracted the people oppressed by the Brahminical orthodoxy. There is no doubt that it served the larger purposes of integrating the oppressed people into a system of oppression but this it did by creating a tradition of the oppressed by trying to give an independent expression of their cultural needs. It could do so only at the cost of including the seeds of a rebellious opposition which, even if it did not necessitate opposition, can accommodate and allow opposition to the dominant class. Thus even if it formed the mainstream of the way of life of the masses - since they cannot simply conform but must struggle as much as they must conform - it always formed a fringe of the Brahminical orthodoxy and its main and dominant expression as the ideology of a ruling class. In fact this is a contradiction latent in the very formation of a people's culture in an oppressive system. Trying to give expression to the independent expression of the subaltern class inscribes even a 'conformist ideology' with its stamp. The contradiction is faced by trying to pose without counterposing. There is no

posing that is not also a counterposing. Gulya Maharaj's movement has a similar dynamic. To what extent it was addressed to the Adivasis and tried to give a specific and independent expression<sup>is shown</sup> by a 'trivial' thing which is remembered by anyone who had been to Gulya's preachings. All of them remember and take care to say that one of the component parts of his preachings was to carry water when they went for defecation! This would have been irrelevant if not embarrassing to most of his non-Adivasi listeners. But for the Adivasis it symbolised a change in a mode of life. From a forest-based life it meant also a change to a fixed agriculture-based life. As a matter of fact the contradictions of an independent expression of the subaltern class or bloc of classes are precisely that the distinctions it proposes also impels the masses to counterpose themselves to the oppressors. It has a fertilising function. It, so to say, is the ground on which resistance takes place, since to resist one must first find oneself.

It is this that the Aap Mool Dharma movement did in the first place. It set into motion<sup>a tradition</sup> of singing Maharaj's bhajans. Almost every locality now has one. The bhajan and kathaas of these gatherings are nowhere near the kathaas of the puranas. It has later become corrupted by the 'pure' Bhakti cult of the sant-movement but retains a trend within the mainstream that is closer to Aap Mool Dharma than others.

It was the logic of this contradiction and the militancy with which Ramdas Maharaj led the movement which brought it into inevitable conflict with the kulaks and the British. In this it acquired a political consciousness of the Adivasis as the original owners of the area who had been duped and robbed of their property. This was the bond that brought Ramdas Maharaj and Kesarsingh together. Kesarsingh's movement was much more radical regarding this and for a few years they even carried out a no-tax movement. They wrote

to the U.N. complaining that their sovereign rights were being trampled upon. They opposed the changeover to the decimal system of currency as a fraud. There is much that is naive in this movement. But there is at the same time a refreshing totally rebellious attitude on which it is based. Kesarsingh's movement died out faster than even Ramdas Maharaj's after his death. But the fertilising influence remained. Its generalisation however had serious limits due to its specifically Adivasi, and even within it, Bhil character.

#### Dhoorkhede Struggle:

It was during the last days of Ramdas Maharaj that there was a movement which drew the Adivasis into its fold. This was also the background for the movement against the construction of the Ukai Project. This was the land-satyagraha led by the R.P.I. These satyagrahas by the R.P.I. were probably the largest all-Maharashtra mass movements over the demand of land for the landless, especially the now fallow forest land. In this area the movement was led by Dadasaheb Soundankar. He was a militant RPI leader from Malegaon in Nasik district and had organised a movement in the forest tracts of Nasik and Dhule districts. This was the first time when the mass of Adivasi, Dalit and other landless labourers and poor peasantry did mobilise themselves together. This was again to mark the widening of the purely Adivasi movement against oppression towards a wider movement of the oppressed peoples ie, the oppressed classes.

Soundankar used to live with the Adivasis in the Bhilati or the Adivasi settlement in the village. He had three full time Adivasi activists. In the Shahade region the main thrust of the movement was the demand for fallow forest land in Shahade and Talode talukas. This movement starting in 1952 has left a legacy of a number of militant songs as also the ringing slogan



that land like sunlight and water is a gift of the Gods and everyone has an equal right to it. After a number of militant satyagrahas the Government had finally to concede to the demand. Dadasaheb Soundankar, himself a dalit, by his example of living with the Adivasis, could draw the Adivasis out of their purely sectarian consciousness into the wider consciousness.\* His whirlwind-like activity and militant speeches reached the whole of the taluka in a very short time. But his movement had an equally abrupt and unfortunate end.

As part of the movement was also the demand for the return of the land that the kulaks had in their occupation by coercing the Adivasis into an agreement to give it to the kulak. The kulaks would not return these lands. During the harvesting season in 1955 Soundankar gave a call for harvesting the crops from these fields. Accordingly, in Dhoorkhede, a village of Shahade taluka, a large number of Adivasis entered the field of Dhashrath Shambhu and began picking cotton. At this, mounted on horses, Dhashrath Shambhu, Onkar Vallabh, Ratansingh and others attacked the Adivasi labourers. It was reported that in the wanton firing by the kulaks some ten Adivasis were killed. The kulaks were later tried and sentenced to a term of upto ten years. The Adivasis rioted in retaliation the very next day; but whatever resistance there could have been was finally pre-empted by the sudden withdrawal by Soundankar. He joined the Congress in 1957 and since then moved farther and farther away from mass movements and deeper and deeper into the mazes of the corridors of power which always eluded him. An old man, he now lives a quiet non political existence at Malegaon. In spite of that one must acknowledge the great impact he made and the

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This and the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement was the background on which Ramdas Maharaj participated in the movement against the Ukai Project.

possibilities that he opened up of a genuine mass movement of the Adivasis, dālit and other oppressed sections in the area. This is the ground, fertilized by over a century of struggle which forms the background to the emergence of Ambarsingh Maharaj and later of the Shramik Sanghatana.

New Leadership - Ambarsingh Suratwanti: Ambarsingh Suratwanti was born in 1940 - a time when the Aarti movement was at its peak. Vanya, his father was a landless labourer working the fields of the rich kulaks as a saldar. Vanya was much influenced by the Aarti movement even if he did not adopt the Aap Mool Dharma as a way of life. His village, Padalde was but a couple of kilometres away from the Satpuda ranges and in the midst of the area swept by the movement of Dadasaheb Sowndankar.

Vanya was proud of being an Adivasi and had resolved to educate his son. Ambarsingh struggled through school and completed his education upto matriculation inspite of the tremendous pressure and derision on the part of the local kulaks. It was common for these kulaks to deride his persistent efforts and Vanya was constantly taunted by them for trying to make Ambarsingh into a 'babu'. Ambarsingh had to withstand the jeering offers to become a cattle-tender to the kulaks instead of going to school. This childhood struggle built in Ambarsingh the same quiet rebelliousness that characterised Gilya Maharaj, which so often seemed to the kulaks to border on obstinacy.

In 1962 on the completion of his education, Bhau Mundada, an upper caste Sarvodaya worker and the head of the Satpuda Sarvodaya Mandal drafted him into the service of the Sarvodaya Mandal. In the Mandal he worked at all kinds of odd jobs in a situation when it was hard to get people to work at a pittance of a wage in that social service organisation. He worked now as a secretary, now as a jeep driver, now as teacher in the school run by the Mandal for Adivasis. He soon became the most important man in the

Mandal after Bhau Mandada. But very soon the narrow and futile routine of the eminently collaborationist social service organisation that the Sarvodaya Mandal's activities represented left him entirely unsatisfied.

A people's revolt was simmering in the air for lack of organised expression, and it was this that communicated itself to Ambarsingh and rendered his life and work at the Sarvodaya Mandal narrow and futile. In the course of the Mandal's work he had to travel throughout the northern parts of the district. This brought him face to face with the people and their problems. His Adivasi background and the nature of Sarvodaya work, coupled with the rebellious sensitivity he had acquired in his childhood led people to open out and come out with all the suffering and the glaring need for the alleviation of their distress.

At the same time his work with the Sarvodaya had brought him into contact on the one hand with political literature and modern ideas, and his extensive dealings with the invariably non-Adivasi officials had brought him face to face with the tardy initiatives of bureaucracy and also helped him to acquire a strong self-confident expression of the possibility of Adivasi 'uplift'.

While it is due to these factors that Ambarsingh moulded himself into the potentiality of a personality capable of leading and at the same time expressing the will of the Adivasi poor, it is the amorphous pressure of a people's revolt seeking expression, simmering in the air that alone could actualise this potentiality. The resistance of the Adivasi and other rural poor in the area had reached a high tide with Dadasaheb Soundankar. With his withdrawal the organised, manifest character of their resistance died out. Not however, this resistance itself. That too is the character of a 'setback' which a people's movement receives. Even when the setback has taken a few steps back manifestly, simultaneously a residue has already been formed, thoughts liberated, traditions set which are no longer of a 'setback' in the same sense.

By the sixties the conditions of the Adivasi poor had deteriorated considerably, and this in face of the green and white revolutions that the kulaks in the area were undergoing. Cheated and exploited at every step, forced off their paltry lands they were barred access to the Government machinery for their grievances and anyway where they had had access it had shown itself thoroughly indifferent to their plight. Low wages and indebtedness could not keep off starvation from many homes even if all family members worked. A large number had to collect fuel-wood from the hills and walk 15 to 20 miles to sell it and supplement the lack of employment. And yet large tracts of land lay barren officially classed as forest land and falling under its regulation but laid follow by marauding contractors in league with the officials. The fire-line, supposed to be a tract of fallow running through the forest protecting one part of it from a fire in the other part, ran far outside the forest at the foot of the hills! And yet, this land was refused to the Adivasi landless.

Even a growing spirit of resistance was met with terror by the kulaks and as usual the burden told most heavily on the Adivasi womenfolk. Poor, ignorant, and powerless as they were, the Adivasis were fast approaching a point where one stands up and says, "Enough!". Sporadic individual clashes increased and these individuals were often implicated in false charges by the pliant police force and jailed. The harassment itself was now, after the Aarti movement, after Soundankar's movement, and increasing affront.

It is these conditions that Ambarsingh was brought to face and insistent demands were made by his kinfolk to satisfy their real needs. The needs of the Adivasi poor in this situation could not be fulfilled by the conceptions that the Sarvodaya reformists worked with. No wonder then that Ambarsingh soon began to outgrow them. In 1968 Ambarsingh quit the offices of the Sarvodaya and became a 'maharaj'. He received spiritual tutelage from his guru

at Sindkheda and set out to tour the Adivasi areas, talking and preaching self respect and upliftment to them, expressing their sorrows and sufferings of this world in the bhakti tradition and its bhajans, but increasingly taking the path of advocating resistance against the intolerable suffering forced on them. Gradually he established contacts throughout the area and soon the rebellious core of the Adivasi poor gravitated towards him.

One day his parents reported that the kulaks had beaten a number of Adivasis, because an Adivasi boy had stolen a few cow dung cakes from a kulak's house. Many of the Adivasis had fled the village in fear of their lives. Another day four girls from his village informed him of the dangers they faced from the rich who often bound them to a tree and beat them.

The Sarvodaya world view could not explain the pattern in this incidents and Ambarsingh felt that he would have to evolve measures to protect the Adivasi poor from such harassment. Accordingly, he wrote a letter to the Deputy Superintendent of Police demanding protection for his people. The DSP wrote to the Sub-Inspector of Police and asked that a meeting be arranged in Shahade. Ambarsingh who was invited to the meeting insisted that the DSP should conduct the inquiries by visiting his village. After several negotiations, Ambarsingh went to the office of the Superintendent of Police. The SP produced a letter signed by the Adivasis that nothing had happened in their village.

Ambarsingh did not give up. He tried to contact the Government officials in the district. He met with the Adivasi MP (Congress) and asked him to visit the villages and ameliorate the lives of the Adivasi poor. He offered to pay the bus fare for the MP, who however wanted to go in a jeep. When Ambarsingh reminded the MP of his economic condition, the MP refused to come. Disgusted, Ambarsingh returned to the office of the SP and a heated argument took place. Finally, with great difficulty a meeting was arranged in the village, where the Adivasis were

constantly being harassed. Eight Gujars were found guilty and provisionally expelled from the village. Subsequently in the court case at Shahade they were released.

Reality teaches, and Ambarsingh was learning well. The Adivasis spoke of their grievances, Ambarsingh listened, and the outcome was a decision to construct an "office" on the Government land in Shahade. This "office" was to be a centre for the collection of the Adivasis grievances and pressurising the legal machinery to look into each incident of oppression as were brought to their notice. The centre established in 1969 was called Adivasi Bhil Seva Mandal. But no sooner had the Adivasis begun to construct the office "building" that the Gujar kulaks razed some forty Adivasi huts in Suratwanti's village. For a year, Ambarsingh persevered, he struggled with the legal apparatus and pleaded with the politicians to look into the affairs of the Adivasis, but to no avail.

The Spark: 1970-71 was a bad year for Maharashtra. The countryside was visited by a drought, and quite obviously, the rural poor were the worst affected. Faced with starvation, the Adivasis from Patilwadi - a village 15 kilometres from Shahade, approached Jagannath Patil (son of Vishram Hari Patil, the biggest landowner of Patilwadi owning more than 500 acres of land) for some grain stored up in his godowns. Jagannath Patil agreed and hundreds of Adivasis lined up to receive the grain. After receiving the grain the Adivasis set off for their home, while the Patil called the police informing that the Adivasis had looted his granaries. The police confronted Adivasis at Mhasavad (3 kilometres from Patilwadi) where a number of Gujars carrying guns drove on tractors. The Gujars insisted that the police should open fire but the sub-inspector refused. The Gujars themselves opened fire on the Bhils. In the meantime Bhils from the neighbourhood had joined with bows, arrows and lathis and they put up some resistance. In the firing

one Bhil was shot dead and a number of others were severely injured. The doctor at Shahade certified that the death of the Bhil was caused by arrows. The Bhils demanded post mortem of the buried body and on examination two bullets were found in his body. A few Gujars and more than hundred Bhils were arrested. The Gujars were released on bail while the Bhils languished in jail for long.<sup>52</sup>

The Patilwadi incident marked a turning point in the movement of the Bhils. On this backdrop, on 30 January 1972 the Bhu-Mukti conference was convened jointly by the Satpuda Sarvodaya Mandal, the Landless Agricultural Labourers and Poor Peasants Union led by the Lal Nishan Party and Ambarsingh's Adivasi Bhil Seva Mandal. It was attended by over 5000 Adivasis.

Attending the rally were also some young leftists from Bombay and other areas of Maharashtra who had been considerably impressed by the conditions in Shahade and efforts made by Suratwanti, to volunteer to work with him as full time activists. Some of them had worked in Baba Ante's 'Shranik Karyakarta Vidyapeeth' in Chandrapur and some had Sarvodaya leanings or experience.

The rally held on 30th January 1972 received wide publicity in the regional press and some English language periodicals. Called the Bhu-Mukti - Land Liberation Conference, its importance increased with the publicity it received and the gathering together of diverse political tendencies. The rally was to mark the turning point both in the form and content of the resistance of the Adivasis to kulak oppression, based on a concrete program of action.

The deliberations at the rally, listened to by some five thousand Adivasis covered the following points for action:-

- 1) Wherever the Adivasis are still the legal owners of land as per Government records, if the lands are cultivated by force by landlords/moneylenders, these lands should be immediately taken over and cultivated by the Adivasis.
- 2) Lands leased out for a limited tenure by the Adivasis

should be promptly taken back after the expiry of such tenure;

3) The Government has assured to provide employment to all seeking work. It was decided that in order to push through the demand the Adivasis should enlist their names at the offices and organised efforts be made to secure work.

The Conference also called upon the Government to implement the following demands:-

1) All the villages be brought under the New Tenure, which considers Adivasi lands as inalienable and impartible with effect from 15th August 1947;

2) Loans given to Adivasis by Government financial institutions be written off;

3) Minimum wage for agricultural labour be announced and implemented.<sup>53</sup>

At this point the Gram Swarajya Samiti was formed. The Sarvodaya leaders, Ambarsingh and the local activists and those from outside who had volunteered to join agreed that the Gram Swarajya Samiti will adhere to (i) independence of any political party; (ii) The decision making will rest only with the activists (iii) Not to resort to violence but for self-defence.<sup>54</sup>

Bhu-Mukti: It was said earlier that the Land Liberation Rally was to provide the turning point both in the form and content of Adivasi resistance to kulak oppression. The first manifestation was in the transformation of resistance to struggle. Whereas earlier the Adivasis had attempted to defend themselves with the aid of the legal machinery, now they began to organise, on a class basis, with the initiative of struggle emanating from their mass strength. This latter aspect marks the second point of departure. Earlier it was the charismatic personality of Ambarsingh, which symbolised for the Adivasis their capacity to resist now it was their united action.

The first task of the Gram Swarajya Samiti was to undertake a survey of the Adivasi lands which had been illegally appropri-



ted by the kulaks or moneylenders.

The survey covered 92 villages, and the Gram Swarajya Samiti began its first task of organising the Adivasis for recovering their lands. By May 1972, only five months after the rally, the G.S. Samiti had recovered 1872 acres of land. As the G.S. Samiti reported, the recovery was "at times through amicable and understanding negotiations and partly through organised struggles, morchas etc."<sup>55</sup>

But this was only the tip of the iceberg. The Adivasis had been historically subjected to the exploitation of the kulaks or moneylenders both of whom appropriated the Adivasi lands through coercion, fraud, bribing the Government officials or plain physical assaults. This was apparent even after the Tenancy Act, 1948, when the provisions of the Act itself were used to bypass the provision of the Land Revenue Code, which prohibited the purchase of Adivasi lands by non Adivasis. One of the simplest means of fraud was for the kulak or moneylender, to whom the Adivasi land holder was indebted, to "lease in" (sic) the Adivasi lands on a tenancy basis, against the loans they had extended. The "landlord" Adivasi then worked as a saldar on the "tenant" kulak's lands. It was then simply a matter of applying as "tenant" under the Act for permanency of tenure. The Tribunal would fix the prices, and ironically, 1-4-1957 which was euphorically called "Tiller's Day" saw the transfer of Adivasi land into the hands of the kulaks and moneylenders, all within the purview of the Law!<sup>56</sup> Force was another common method by which the poor peasants either mortgaged their lands or sold them at throwaway prices, to the kulaks or moneylenders. Often this mortgage or sale would not appear on paper, since considerable amount of the land was held on the Impartible Tenure. So in most cases the kulak's possession of land was in any case illegal. The process of land transfers and the consequent proletarianisation of the Adivasis continued unabated during the subsequent years.

The extent of land alienation prompted the Maharashtra Sarvodaya Mandal to appoint a Committee to look into the matter. It observed that in 57 villages in Shahade taluka that they visited, there were a large number of cases of alienation of Adivasi lands. These cases together involved an estimated area of about 10,000 acres.<sup>57</sup>

The Shramik Sanghatana: In June 1972 Shramik Sanghatana (Toilers Organisation) was formed. Gram Swarajya Samiti was only a samiti (committee) of activists; it was necessary to have a mass organisation for the mobilisation and participation of the peasant masses on their own demands. The felt need for such an organisation was concretised in the foundation of Shramik Sanghatana. Subsequently they waged struggles on the issues like demand for forest and waste lands, claim to get back possession of their lands illegally occupied by the kulaks, conditions of work of the saldars and wages of agricultural labour.

The Shramik Sanghatana realised the immensity of the fraud perpetuated on the Adivasis. They observed quite clearly that such land appropriation constituted one of the principal mechanisms by which the Adivasi poor was exploited. An indication, perhaps, of this was inadvertantly provided by the Government's reluctance to publish the findings of the special Tehsildar Committee constituted to enquire into this problem. Set up in 1973, consequent meeting between the activists of the Sanghatana and the Minister in April of that year, the Committee proved completely ineffective in either providing a degree of social visibility to the problem or prompting the Government to take action.

In the light of the ineffectivity or unwillingness of the Government to act, the Shramik Sanghatana took up the initiative. Activists of the Sanghatana organised meetings in various villages of Shahade and Talode talukas, where the necessity for organised struggle by the Adivasi poor themselves was highlighted, as the principal weapons with which to recover their lost lands. In a

meeting organised at Valade (Talode taluka) on 10 February 1974 it was decided to resort to satyagraha to regain their lands. The Adivasis launched satyagraha in several villages in Talode taluka and marched to take possession of their lands along with the standing crops.<sup>58</sup> The Satyagrahis did not resist arrest and 'law and order' was not disturbed in any of the villages. Over 250 satyagrahis were arrested and charge-sheeted for theft and mobbing. As a protest against the arrests, a morcha was held before the Tehsildar's office. The Legislative Assembly discussed the event and the Government reiterated its assurance of restoring the lands to their rightful owners by an appropriate amendment in the existing law.

Wage Question: The other important issue that engaged the Sanghatana was the wage question. While the Shramik Sanghatana realised the importance of the struggle for recovery of lands, it could not ignore the immediate question of the conditions of employment of an increasingly large number of the rural poor.

That the proletarianisation of the rural poor was proceeding at a very rapid pace was an indication of the growth of capitalism. Conversely, the last two decades point to a continuous increase in the number of agricultural labourers in Shahade taluka. Thus during the decades 1951-71, the proportion of male earners reporting cultivation as their major occupation declined from 45.3 per cent to 33.9 per cent while the proportion of agricultural labourers increased from 36.6 per cent to 48.4 per cent. In comparison with the other talukas of Dhule district, Shahade taluka shows higher percentage of agricultural labour. It was reported to us in our survey that the big landowners own over 50 hectares of land along the banks of the two rivers, Gomati and Tapi, where the soils are very rich. Some of the bigger kulaks were reported to be holding over 100 hectares of land each, the lands being distributed over a few villages.

Under such conditions of a highly skewed land distribution

the Shramik Sanghatana faced the problem of agricultural labourers on two counts. For one, the large number of the rural poor which constituted the agricultural labour acted as a depressant on the wages, and determined the conditions of work. In terms of the former problem, the Shramik Sanghatana activists found that not only were the wages far below the minimum necessary to sustain a family, but the conditions of work itself were very oppressive. The system of *saldari* (annual contractual labour) was widespread, and the extent of such employment varied between the villages, depending upon the number of bigger landowners in the village and the extent of irrigated area.

A survey on agricultural labour conducted in 1973-74 noted that in some prosperous villages (located in the fertile region), the *saldars* formed about 20-25 per cent of the total agricultural workers. While the corresponding proportion was about 10-15 per cent in other villages from the less fertile areas. In the hilly or forest regions there were only a few *saldars*.<sup>59</sup> Traditionally, the *saldar* used to be provided with meals, certain perquisites like clothing, footwear, shelter plus some cash. With the growth of capitalism, the mode of payment had undergone a change to cash payment with only a part paid in grain. Prior to the organised struggles of the *Adivasis*, the yearly payment was only Rs. 300-800 per annum. Every week 3-5 kgs. of *dadar* (a *jowar* variety) was advanced and the equivalent amount was deducted from the annual emoluments. The annual contract was made in April-May, on *Akshyatritya* (3rd day of *Vaishakh* month) i.e., the beginning of the *kharif* season. The contracts of employment were mostly oral, and left large room for fraud, as the majority of the *saldars* were *Adivasis*. The hours of work varied anything from 12-16 hours with a few rest intervals. Besides the agricultural work, the *saldars* had to attend multifarious duties like cleaning the stables, providing water to the cattle and household work.<sup>60</sup> There was no relief from work, no weekly holiday or leave and the *saldars* had

to be at the beck and call of the landowner for 24 hours.

The system was, and is, acceptable to the landowner principally, because the availability of saldar labour assures him of extended labour power. The saldar's labour power and the hours of work could be extended without any investments on the part of the employer. Although mechanisation (at least in terms of tractor usage) was prevalent amongst the bigger kulaks, the use of extended labour power assured him increasing returns in terms of absolute surplus value. From the point of view of the agricultural labour, saldari was necessary, only in as much as it assured him employment all the year round.

Since agricultural work is largely seasonal majority of the agricultural labourers are employed as casual daily wage labourers. Over 70 per cent of the total male agricultural labour and all the female agricultural labour were employed at a daily wage, that did not measure up to the minimum. Prior to the Shramik Sanghatana's work, the wages were around Rs.2/- for men and Re 1/- to 1.50 for women. In poorer tracts the daily wages were even below Re.1/-.

The minimum wages for agricultural labourers were fixed for certain predominantly Adivasi talukas of Thane district in 1953 by the then Government of Bombay. Thus the wage rate for ploughing, grass cutting and transplanting was Re1/- per day, and for other light agricultural work 0.75 paise per day. The rates also applied to the Scheduled Areas of Jalgaon, Nashik and Dhule, with the saldari wage fixed at Rs.30/- per month but they were non-statutory in these Areas. Except for this (and Parbhani, Amravati, and Yavatmal, where minimum wages were fixed in 1954), no attempt was made to statutorily fix minimum wages till 1971.

In 1971 the State Government appointed a Study Committee on Employment Conditions of Agricultural Labour, known as the Page Committee, after its chairman V.S. Page. This Committee recommended that the minimum wage should be fixed at Rs.3/- for both men and women, for rural areas falling outside the drought-prone zone

and Rs.2.50 for the drought prone areas. For saldar, the Committee recommended Rs.1200 per annum as the minimum wage, with 24 paid holidays.<sup>61</sup> The Government of Maharashtra accepted these recommendations and announced its decision to implement these from March 24, 1974.

Even prior to the Committee's recommendations being made public, the Gram Swarajya Samiti had begun its work of mobilizing the Adivasis for both increased wages and better conditions of work. In a series of meetings held in various villages all over the taluka the activists outlined the main charter of demands, and called upon the Adivasis to organise and struggle for them. At the Gram Swarajya Samiti's rally on 1st May 1972 the following demands were put forth:

1. The minimum sal (Annual Payment) for the saldar be fixed at Rs.1,000/.
2. Paid leave for 30 days besides a weekly holiday, for the saldar.
3. The work of the saldar be confined to agricultural operations only;
4. Proper accounts be maintained about the money and grain advanced to the saldar from time to time.
5. For the casual agricultural labourers, the minimum daily wage be fixed at Rs.4/- for male workers and Rs.3/- for female workers; and
6. The saldars and casual labourers be treated as human beings.<sup>62</sup>

Account proforma were printed to keep record of the payments to saldars and these were distributed through the young local activists. Saldars and casual labourers organised themselves and put forward their demands to the landlords through their Committees in a large number of villages including Kurangi, Raykhed, Taradi, Burkhada, Kalmadi, Sonvad etc. Women were represented in almost all the local committees. In many places, the wages were fixed through negotiations, ably handled by the local committees

themselves. Strikes were declared at a number of other places and were continued in the face of oppression by the landlord. The oppression took different forms including closing the sale of food-grains or denying drinking water, involving the labour leaders in fraudulent litigation etc. In most cases the labourers gained in wages and the saldars gained to the tune of Rs.100/- in their annual payment.

The contracts were normally implemented for the first two months. But after the busy season the landlords used their bargaining power to force the labourers work at lower wages. However, the landlords were compelled to pay the difference in places like Kharwad, Kothli, Tarhawad where the local youth and the labour committees were strong and vigilant. Their example was emulated in some neighbouring villages as well.

When the local youth realised that food grains were exported from the village when no grain was available for the local population, they launched a campaign against such exports and prevented the grain loaded trucks from leaving the village until an equal quantity was sold in the village.

In 1973 April, before the new contracts were to be made, public meetings and committee meetings were organised and new contracts with higher annual payment were made. This was perhaps the first year when contracts were put down in writing, a copy of which was deposited with the police station in the village. Wages ranging from Rs.2/- to Rs.2.50 for male casual workers and Rs.1.50 for female workers were agreed upon.<sup>63</sup> Another noteworthy feature this year was that outside labourers showed their support to the strikers and did not accept work in place of the strikers as they used to do before.

A rise in wages followed by a rise in foodgrain prices would have negated the wage rise. The Shramik Sanghatana also waged a struggle against rising food prices in an organised fashion and succeeded in forcing the landlord to sell foodgrains at prices

agreed upon through negotiations.

Scarcity Relief Works: The drought of 1972-73 affected large sections of the rural population but the worst hit were the agricultural labourers and the small farmers. The Sanghatana led struggles demanding opening of relief works and secured work for a large number of workers. They also fought against a variety of unfair practices in allotment of jobs, work measurements, payment of wages etc.

Since the Adivasis are on the fringe of the society and are isolated in many ways, their movements face the danger of remaining confined to small pockets, unless care is taken to relate these movements to non-Adivasi sections. The Adivasis can relate meaningfully to other oppressed sections like the dalits and the agricultural labourers and poor peasants in their own areas with whom they come in daily contact. The work of the Sanghatana in connection with the relief works helped bring the Adivasi and the non-Adivasi toilers together. During the 1972 drought period, the workers and their local leaders started taking initiative and of their own organised morchas in many places demanding work and were also able to handle most of the day-to-day problems on the work site.

The Forest Lands: A struggle aiming at the abolition of the begari system and acquisition of open cultivable lands under the control of the Forest Department was launched by the Sanghatana. In some areas of Shahade, the Forest Department practised 'begari' under which the workers were forced to work gratis. In April 1972 a meeting was organised in Nandia and the begari labourers determined to refuse vethbegar work. The Adivasis were also harassed by the forest guards and others demanding gratis their chicks or homebrewn liquor. They would also demand a fee for permitting the Adivasi to carry head-loads of fuel wood from the forest area and threaten arrest if the fee was not paid. The Adivasis used to be so scared that they would hide into the jungle area on learning of the approach of a forest guard. The Sanghatana raised protests



against such illegal exactions and gradually the Adivasis gained confidence and learnt to resist the illegal demands.

In April 1972 a move to bring under cultivation the forest waste lands was organised in about a dozen villages involving 500 landless families. This was deemed as encroachment by the Forest Department. A movement like the civil disobedience movement was started. The landless occupied the waste lands and started cultivation, but did not resist arrest. Such Satyagraha was first offered at Nandia in July 1972 and spread to Ambapur, Bhute, Lakkadkot. On 2nd October 1972 a large-scale satyagraha was launched under the leadership of Ambarsingh and 200 satyagrahis were arrested and sentenced to imprisonment for one or two weeks.<sup>64</sup> The authorities expected that this will scare the timid Adivasis. However such experience of confronting the police and the forest guards emboldened the Adivasis and gave them new confidence. Under the pressure of the satyagraha movement, the Government agreed to distribute the waste lands in some of the villages.

In June 1973, about 140 acres were distributed to 28 landless families in Talawadi. However, a landlord - Dalya (from Pawara community) obstructed the land distribution operation and later succeeded in clamping a stay order. On 5th October the landless labourers and some activists who had assembled at the allotted site to discuss the issues involved were attacked by Dalya and his accomplices armed with axes, dharia. A case was lodged against Dalya and his accomplices.<sup>65</sup>

The struggle for occupation of forest waste lands and the confrontation with the police, the forest guards and the landlords who were trying to preempt the distribution continued in many villages from the forest belt. It was particularly strong in Sakri taluka where the struggle was carried out by the CPI(M)-led Kisan Sabha\* and the Adivasis had to face severe repression.

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\* The details of which are given in a subsequent section.

Culture of Repression:

The violent reaction of the ruling class in the areas to the movement only serves to underscore the fundamentality of the struggles. It is however important to realise that the violence of the kulaks towards the movement was not borne as a result of the need to defend themselves.

The violence was part of a directed and historically determined culture of repression, which served its purpose of continuing the subsumption of the Adivasis under the domination of the kulaks through the mediation of repressive institutions and apparatus. The control of the production process, and later with the growth of capitalism, of the labour process was not in itself adequate to ensure the perpetuation of the relations of production. The latter was assured through the centralisation of political power, and manifest via the mediation of political institutions.

With the growth of capitalist wage relations in the area, there was a separation of the two kinds of apparatuses. The ideological subsumption of the Adivasi is now perpetuated through the control by the kulaks of institutions that are seemingly independent of them viz., the Zilla Parishad, the Gram Panchayat, the cooperative societies. But if these serve an ideological purpose (apart from providing funds for their own development), the repressive apparatuses were and are still partially created by the kulaks themselves.

Crop Protection Societies: During the 'sixties Crop Protection Societies known among the Adivasis as Denga i.e. a lathi, societies were formed by the big landowners covering 4 to 5 villages each. These were used by the landlords to harass the workers. For instance, if a goat strayed into the landlord's field a heavy fine would be levied on the labourer. The crop guards also harassed the labourers; besides beating them, they collected from them fines upto Rs,100/- for petty and very often false charge. The terrorism was of such order that even the small owner-cultivators

had to take permission from the Denga societies before they could harvest their own crops. When the Shramik Sanghatana put up a resistance the vested interests tried to refuse work to the members of the Sanghatana and tried to put the activists to exile under threat. Such local level oppression was effectively fought back by the Shramik Sanghatana. The kulaks therefore considered it necessary to organise a more centralised and powerful machinery. The 'Khedut Samaj' of Bardoli (in Gujarat) and the Gujar kulaks in Tapi valley of Dhule district prepared in 1973 an elaborate plan to terrorise the labourers. A scheme to set up a para military force\* under the plea of crop protection was formulated. The scheme involved appointment of cavalry as crop guards. The scheme was to cover some 350 villages. The estimated capital expenditure was as follows:

	Rs. (in 000)
1 Jeep	30
12 motorcycles	84
100 horses	200
120 rifles	108
	<hr/>
	422

The estimated annual expenditure of the tune of about Rs.16 lakhs was to be collected from the cultivators.<sup>66</sup> The Scheme attracted public discussion at many levels. The public opinion became very strong and the issue was discussed both at the State Assembly and even in the Lok Sabha. In the face of such strong public opposition, the local vested interests were forced to abandon the scheme.

Offensive at Prakashe: Ambarsingh died prematurely in February 1974. Since then, the kulaks stepped up pressure in a variety of ways in the hope of breaking the Shramik Sanghatana. On 17 April 1974, a conference of the agricultural labourers was organised by the Shramik Sanghatana at Prakashe and was attended by over 15000 agricultural labourers and political leaders, social workers

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\* This came to be known as Purushottan Sena, Purushottan, being the first name of Shri P.K. Patil the leading kulak of the Shahade region.

from different parts of the State. This was the period when wage agreements were being concluded. The successful mobilisation of the Adivasis at the Prakashe conference led the kulaks to counter-act in an organised manner simultaneously in a number of villages. On April 28, 1974 the landowners organised a 'Shetkari Parishad' at Shahade and at this Parishad it was decided not to carry on wage negotiations with the Shramik Sanghatana. On the next day the kulaks attacked the agricultural labourers in Prakashe.<sup>67</sup> Following this incident the atmosphere in Shahade, Talode and Nandurbar turned tense. The kulaks started harassing the workers by denying work or closing grain shops to them. It was the organised and sustained efforts of the Shramik Sanghatana members and activists that made it possible to effectively meet the kulak offensive.

Subsequently the kulaks sent a delegation to the Chief Minister, demanding the banning of the Shramik Sanghatana. The Chief Minister stationed para military forces in the Shahade and Talode talukas.

Outside Support: The movement has received support from the big cities like Pune and Bombay, and Dhule, the district town. In Bombay, the local Marathi newspaper - Maratha - and Economic and Political Weekly offered its columns to publish reports on incidents of repression or articles sympathetic to the movement. Both in Bombay and Pune, democratic organisations for the protection of democratic rights, bodies meant for the dissemination of news relating to repression and exploitation, highlighted in a series of meetings the plight of the Adivasi poor. Activists were invited to speak on their experience thus offering a high degree of social visibility both to the extent of kulak-police repression and the magnitude of the peasant movement.

Women Hold Up Half The Sky:

A significant feature of the struggle, especially the agricultural labourers' struggles, was the clearly visible participation of the Adivasi women, not only in terms of joining the morchas

or demonstrations but joining the local committees and partaking in some measure of the decision making process.

The participation of the women is ensured because of their being part of the agricultural labour force. While this is the immediate reason, there are other superstructural factors that point to the potential militancy of the Adivasi women. These superstructural aspects are a part of the cultural ethos of the tribal community, that have survived notwithstanding their partial assimilation into Hindu culture and society. A cultural ethos that manifests in a somewhat different attitude to women continues to survive, albeit in a modified form.

An indication of this is clear from the customs prevailing in the Adivasi society. They are characterised by a greater freedom granted to women, especially before marriage. Intermixing between boys and girls before marriage is regarded as natural among the Bhils. Usually marriages are settled through talks between the elders on both sides. The groom has to pay a bride price. Marriages are not generally contracted at a very early age. A form of marriage by abduction or elopement receives social sanction, as long as the groom is prepared to pay the bride price.

Although women's freedom is restricted after they are married, they are allowed to divorce and remarry. Again, no social disgrace is attached to women who remarry. The only condition is that the new husband must pay a sum to the former husband to compensate him for the bride price he has paid. A divorced woman will take her young children with her to her new husband's home.

It seems clear that this freedom in the sexual life of the women at least stems from the fact that historically, the Adivasi had no property which he was concerned to hand over to his descendants. As Engels said, it was the onset of private property that brought about the world-wide defeat of the female sex. A people who do not have a developed institution of private property have no need to put such safeguards on woman's sexual freedoms, that

are considered essential in patriarchal societies. The result is that the relations between men and women in this community are relatively more uninhibited, and free from some of the unhealthy taboos that prevail in the Hindu society.

At the same time, the Adivasi women have to face assaults or even rape by the kulaks and upper castes in the village. Besides, the process of assimilation of Hindu culture, by the Adivasis, as a result of exploitation and oppression by the upper caste kulaks, has led to the strengthening of men's attitude of domination. This attitude is partially also determined by the enforcement of the 'culture of repression' which unable to fight, led the Adivasi poor to internalise conflict, and expend his violence on the nearest and the weakest - his wife.

Struggle Against Liquor Addiction: The system of domination was also perpetrated by the dependence of the Adivasi on liquor. Not that the Adivasis did not drink earlier. As a matter of fact, even women joined in partaking of liquor on some festive or special occasions. But commercialisation and the absorption of the Adivasi in the emerging social formation led to an increasing intake of liquor; a practice that was actively encouraged by the traders who stood to profit from it.

In this transitional situation where elements of both equality and domination exist, the women provide a great potential for politicisation. Not surprisingly, in the anti-alcoholism drive taken up by the Shramik Sanghatana after it had established itself in the area it was the women who took the initiative and brought social pressure to bear against a habit which was against their interests. The women marched collectively to destroy the country liquor distilleries and literally broke the earthen liquor kegs and bottles wherever they were found. None who-so-ever, not even the Sarpanch of the village or the Patil could escape. The mobilisation of women on this issue was easy as drunkenness also gives rise to the problem of wife beating. The movement was

sustained in a number of villages, where the Sanghatana had a substantial following and it also helped organisation of women's cells.

Offender is Punished: Participation of women in the movement and development of their consciousness is reflected in a number of struggles that they have launched in the recent period. To illustrate, last year, a tribal woman labourer was beaten up by a landlord in the village square of Bhaler village of Nandurbar taluka. The attacked woman visited a number of nearby villages along with the Sanghatana activists and mobilised support. On 16 September 1978, about 200 women labourers gathered in Bhaler and asked the Sarpanch and police patil of the village to take action against the culprit. As no action was forthcoming from the authorities, the women marched to the culprit's house, and demanded apology. As a punishment he was mounted on a donkey, paraded through the village and made to beg apology in public. 68

The Shramik Sanghatana is making efforts to give attention to the problems of oppression of women in the society and in the family and the women's units at the village level are debating the various issues of oppression. The women had been traditionally excluded from public affairs, they had no place in the panch samitis. They did not have access to education, and were not consulted in social matters. During the last seven years the women have gained to a certain extent through the Shramik Sanghatana led struggles and movements. For example, they are included in the wage negotiating committees. They have participated in various morchas, struggles and had even been arrested and jailed. They have gained a new confidence and consciousness and a small number of women cadre has also developed. The Tarun Mandal is also debating the various issues and some of the members have gradually come to accept that the women's question demands special attention.

Tarun Mandal: The depth and sweep of the movement was itself indicative of the potential for its development into a movement of wider significance. Thus there was militancy and an element of

spontaneity amongst the Adivasis first realising the possibility of organised self expression. Local committees were formed and women took an active part in the mass struggles at the social and economic level. Attempts were made to set up night schools in villages, as institutions to impart not only literary but more so, political consciousness both the young (boys and girls) and adults. Tarun Mandals that had been organised in the flush of the reformed consciousness of the Adivasis, were the units that carried out the propaganda and helped mobilise the poor for these night schools. The Tarun Mandals serve as organs of democratic functioning at the village level. They have often taken initiative in leading wage struggles at the village level.

Camps or 'shibirs', were held for the youth including women who had actively participated in the struggles. A village was chosen as the site of the camp, grain was collected from the villagers sympathetic to the organisation. Usually the programme lasted for two to three days. These were memorable occasions for the Adivasis participating and they would often recall what is taught in the camps for months afterwards. Songs would be sung at the beginning and end of every session; the tunes were often "borrowed" from Hindi film songs; but no matter, since the effect captured and summed up the consciousness of the Adivasis.

One of the activists would then present a lecture for an hour or so, after which it was the usual practice to break up into smaller groups in which the new ideas were discussed under the guidance of cadres and sometimes sympathetic volunteers who had been invited to the area for the purpose of the shibir. The subjects at these camps have included class structure of society, the relation of each class to the production process and the antagonistic contradiction between the interests of the exploiters and the exploited. This lecture was often repeated and most of the Adivasis, who have attended these camps, and actively worked for the Sanghatana remember and understand it.



Similarly, camps are held exclusively for the women where similar subjects get discussed. Recently, experiments are being made in which elementary scientific knowledge about everyday phenomena (monsoons, earthquakes, eclipses) and the human body, child birth etc, is being imparted in opposition to superstitious belief.

Thus, the period 1972-1975 was marked not only by crucial struggles that could have determined the trend of the movement towards greater politicisation, but also marked attempts by the Shramik Sanghatana to experiment with forms of mass education - the shibirs, and of organisation - the Tarun Mandal.

The dialectics of the two aspects of the movement, reinforced the consciousness of the Adivasis and the expression of this was manifest in the widespread popularity of the Sanghatana and willingness of the Adivasis to struggle against the exploiters on all fronts.

But class struggle is not only the expression of the exploited to destroy the existing system, but also the attempts by the exploiters to conserve and perpetuate the existing system. To illustrate, had the declaration of the Emergency only symbolised the curtailment of the right of organisation and struggle, the Sanghatana could have coped with it. After all, the repression expressed in these curbs would have only implied a legal sanction to the existing 'culture of repression', the reinforced consciousness of the Adivasis could have tackled the problem. But the problematic that the Sanghatana faced was the fact that accompanying the act of repression was the twenty point programme which included some measures to ameliorate the conditions of existence of exploitation in the rural areas. With the curtailment of democratic rights, came the simultaneous propaganda undertaken on a massive scale to convince the rural poor of the bonafide of the Government via the twenty point programme.

The Sanghatana had to evolve a strategy to be followed under conditions where not only was its movement restricted, but the

slogans of the 20 point programme reflected some of the problems of the rural poor. The Sanghatana decided to attempt at the implementation of some of the aspects of the twenty point programme. A campaign of liquidation of debts was carried out during this period. Two activists managed to organise land occupation campaigns in the remote Akkalkuwa taluka. These attempts were however matched by the Government's propaganda machinery and the simultaneous arrests of activists involved in the land occupation campaigns.

Post 1977 Period: In January 1977 elections to Lok Sabha were announced. The Shramik Sanghatana so far had considered their role only as a mass organisation and had not actively participated in electoral politics. However in the particular conjuncture when the need to defeat the emergency regime was urgently felt the Sanghatana decided to take a positive stand against emergency. At the same time the class nature of the Janata Party was also exposed. In the Legislative Assembly elections the Sanghatana fielded two Adivasi candidates - a youth and a woman. The mobilization efforts of the Sanghatana were inadequate due to lack of experience, appropriate machinery etc. and the candidates could secure only a part of the Adivasi vote and little non-Adivasi vote. Subsequently in the Gram Panchayat elections, Adivasi candidates contested the elections in a few villages and were mostly successful.

Shramik Sanghatana - An Overview:

It was noted above that the Sanghatana had a major achievement to its credit in terms of its organising the Adivasis for land in the first few years of its inception. As a result of the Sanghatana-led militant struggles, forcible crop harvesting, gheraoes, dharnas for the land illegally appropriated by the kulaks and moneylenders over 4,000 acres of land accrued to the Adivasis in just over a period of 3 years. (1971-74) But the inability of the Adivasis to acquire the inputs that are necessary rendered the gains ineffective. Part of the lands reverted to the kulaks; many leased it out to the richer peasants and worked as agricultural

labour. One is not sure of the number of Adivasis who really benefitted but considering the position of the Adivasis in the production process and labour process, it would be indeed surprising if many did get any inputs sufficient to ensure the viability of the lands they had won through their struggle.

While it had been usual to cast the onus of providing the inputs on the Government and subsequently denouncing them for not providing the inputs to the poor, it can be suggested that perhaps the Sanghatana itself could have undertaken the task of providing the inputs through its own institutions created, again for expressing the will of the rural poor. Thus seed banks, credit banks, kisan bazaars, could have been experimented with as an exercise in the growth of the alternative hegemony of the rural poor. Controlled and directed by the Tarun Mandals which in turn could have been the expression of political power of the rural poor, these institutions could have served as indications of the attempts of the rural poor to destroy the hegemony of the exploiting class; even while these institutions could not have possibly from the start satisfied the economic needs of the Adivasi small peasants. But the beginnings on a humble scale would have represented the real struggle, a struggle between two classes to establish their own hegemony.

Similarly, the Sanghatana has not been able to deal with the problem of indebtedness of the Adivasi small peasant in the Akkal-kuwa region. Initially, the moneylenders, most of whom have subsumed the Adivasi in the debt cycle, and appropriated the lands in many cases, were hesitant and wary, when the Sanghatana led massive demonstrations of debt liquidation and release of lands. Subsequently however, early successes of the Sanghatana in getting back the lands was met by a clever tactic on the part of the moneylenders who acquiescing the legal ownership of the land to the Adivasi, demanded a share in the crop product in the proportion that he had contributed the major capital towards production!

In effect, this left the Adivasi with little or no produce and therefore within the debt cycle. Had the Sanghatana attempted to create grain banks controlled by Tarun Mandals, as the Bhumi Sena has done in Palghar district, Thane, the Adivasis could have slowly emerged out of the debt cycle. And given the fact that the moneylenders are considered "outsiders" by most Adivasis, who still retain elements of kinship and class structures it might not have been too difficult to create the grain banks as a representative of the hegemony of the Adivasi poor. While the grain bank could not and is not capable of replacing the moneylender, the conception and living example of self-sufficiency based on institutions emerging in the process of class struggle would itself impart a new dimension to the consciousness of the rural poor.

The principal problem with which the Sanghatana has been occupied with throughout the period is the wage question. Other issues like malpractices of the Government officials, the corruption prevailing amongst the village or block level officials or police etc. are demonstrated against. But these do not substantially alter the scope of the movement, which could be said to function within the existing production relations. The wage question, and the struggles to secure just wages constitute the raison detre of the movement. It might be said that the Sanghatana represents the agency for strengthening the bargaining power of the Adivasi agricultural labour, and through struggle attempting to appropriate a greater share of the produce in terms of increased wages.

The struggles are protracted and in itself, the wage question and the conditions of payment still constitute a widespread problem. The protracted character of the struggle is also born out of the attitude of the kulaks most of whom are interested in the appropriation of absolute surplus value, and try to keep wages very low. The struggles that ensue involve a great deal of militancy on the part of the Adivasis, and often lead to clashes between the Sanghatana activists and kulaks.

One of the measures adopted by the kulaks is to pay lesser wages during the lean period, even though the Minimum Wage Act does not differentiate between seasons for payment of wages.

Immediately after the Post Emergency Elections the Sanghatana activists visited the villages, drawing up lists of those agricultural labourers who had been underpaid; the difference was calculated for each labourer by the Tarun Mandals who took the lead in such matters. These lists were then submitted to the Block Development Officer. At the same time the Sanghatana began to mobilise the labourers for the impending and inevitable demonstrations.

In some villages, the kulaks readily agreed to the Sanghatana's demands for negotiation, and the difference was paid. On the other hand in some villages, e.g. Kharamkheda the biggest kulak refused to negotiate even though the B.D.O. entreated him to pay the difference to avoid the confrontation. Agricultural labourers from the village, drawing on the support of labourers from neighbouring villages assembled and gheraoed the kulak and Tehsildar, till they received their dues. In one village dues to the extent of Rs.9,000 were received and distributed accordingly.

In another village, 6 miles from Shahade, the confrontation reached higher levels of tension, when the kulaks not only refused to pay the difference in dues but their sons attacked the activists injuring one. While the Adivasis staged a morcha to the Tehsildar's office and subsequently offered dharna, the kulaks retaliated by closing the village shops, flour mills, (all of which they controlled) and implicated the activists and some Adivasis on false charges of disrupting agricultural production preventing labourers from working. The Sanghatana realising the obstinacy of the kulaks led a morcha to the Tehsildar's office demanding work for the agricultural labourers on the Employment Guarantee Scheme.<sup>69</sup>

In Mod village the 70 odd saldars went on strike. The peculiarity of the saldars in Mod is that many of them are non-Adivasis,

but belong to Sundar Jati. Their demand was that (i) the annual contract should be renewed not in April-May, when work is slack, and consequently bargaining power of labour is weak, but in March when work is heavy, what with the pre-sowing operations etc. and (ii) the rate of dadar should be fixed at Rs. 2 per payali. From March 20th to 18th June the saldars went on strike, with local leadership guiding them. Ordinary agricultural labourers, cattle tenders, women engaged in domestic work, most of the Adivasi agricultural labourers supported the strike, demonstrating the fact of unity between the Adivasis and non-Adivasis,<sup>70</sup> despite attempts by the kulaks to divide them. The strike ended when with the onset of monsoons the kulaks had to negotiate.

Alongside the struggle for higher wages or payment of back wages etc., the Sanghatana also keeps an eye on the corruption of Government officials; some of whom were found to practice fraud and misappropriate the funds meant as wages for the Adivasi labourers.

For instance the Building and Construction department had employed a number of Adivasi labourers on the work of the Dara-Dhadgaon road. The wages were fixed at Rs.5.25 but the Adivasis were paid only Rs.3/-. The difference was reportedly shared by the contractors and the B & C engineers, supervisors etc. The Shramik Sanghatana organised in May 1978 a morcha of about 250 workers to the B & C office, demanding the difference in wages and the suspension of the concerned Deputy Engineer. While the Sanghatana kept up the pressure, the contractors wrote to the Chief Minister demanding a ban on the Sanghatana. The reason given was that the Sanghatana was obstructing work that provided employment to the Adivasis. Finally, the pressure built up by the Sanghatana warranted an investigation into the charges of corruption, which is still pending. In the meantime the labourers received Rs.20,000 from the contractor. The Deputy Engineer was transferred.<sup>7</sup>

To sum up, the Shramik Sanghatana finds itself functioning

within the existing production relations, and has acquired the characteristics of a trade union with a strong base amongst the Adivasi agricultural labourers. The Sanghatana also addresses itself to the malfunctioning of Government officials, and the misuse of power and funds. In this the Sanghatana has been successful in putting the fear of the organised people, in cases where the embezzlement of funds or other forms of corruption have been detrimental to the interests of the Adivasi labourers.

Shramik Sanghatana - Organisational Set-up:

The main areas in which the Sanghatana is deeply based is on the plains i.e. the Shahade, Talode and Nandurbar talukas and recently in central part of Akkalkuwa taluka. This is because it is in the plains that the contradictions between the kulaks and the landless labourers is sharpest as contrasted in the other fringe areas. The main office of the Sanghatana is located at Shahade town.

The 'membership' of the Sanghatana means an active participation in the struggles and programmes of the Sanghatana. On a subscription basis the membership is rather erratic but the underlying base of the Sanghatana on the basis of participation is quite large. At its least this base would comprise of a stable base of around 5000 members with anything from 5 to 15 thousand around this core. The only conditions for membership is that the persons belongs to landless or poor peasantry. A few middle peasants are also members. The potential of around 15 to 20 thousand is not being realised mainly because the Sanghatana activists are fully involved in day-to-day struggles and programmes and find little time to carry out a subscription drive in the form of a systematic campaign. Another factor is that the membership and identification of the Sanghatana is discouraged for those habituated to drink, gambling or for those who are only passively and reluctantly involved in the struggle. Even if this has resulted in the Sanghatana not actualising its potential on a subscription basis it has been immensely useful in checking such habits. The Sanghatana has to depend to a significant

extent on financial aid collected in small sums from sympathisers in cities like Bombay, Poona.

The leadership of the Sanghatana has been mainly from the youth. The average age of the activists would fall somewhere around 25 years. Of the locally drawn full time activists most are literate though there are even illiterates in leading positions. Those who are literate have qualifications ranging from a few years of high school to matriculation. They mainly belong to the poor peasant and landless labourer's families. Their weight in the activities of the Sanghatana has grown over the years. The leadership drawn to the struggle from the other areas has had a predominantly urban middle class background. Most of them are graduates while some have spent a few years at college. Most of them have had some contact with radical ideas and either during their stay but mostly even before their decisions to work in the area have been committed to working among the rural poor. In the initial stages these activists provided the main weight in the decision making procedures. As the local activists drawn from the oppressed classes have begun to understand the nature of the struggle, its needs and its significance, and also as those from outside who could not adapt to the hard conditions of the struggle withdrew the situation changed and the local activists have begun to articulate themselves and participate fully in the discussions and decisions.

Recruitment of a full time activist is a long drawn process. Those who take the leadership in the struggles carried out at the local level form the potential pool from which these are drawn. Later on through participation in study camps and Sanghatana work larger and limited responsibilities are shouldered. After passing these tests satisfactorily he is given the responsibilities of a part timer. Further study and involvement in large struggles then makes him eligible for becoming a full time activist. The responsibilities of an activist depend therefore on the stage at which he is in the process of development, his natural aptitudes and



abilities, the nature and amount of work faced by the Sanghatana. However, it is a necessary condition that he should be working on some mass front to become an activist. Anyone divorced from mass work is not eligible for becoming an activist, and participating in the decisions.

Currently there are 8 Adivasi activists among the total 14 full time activists. Study camps are organised in order to allow the leadership to express and form itself through a process of study and discussion. Responsibilities of pamphlet writing, putting down views on various issues for discussion and conducting study circles helps this process along and also awakens the initiatives latent in the activists. The more advanced cadre often help the advanced ones but all attempts are made to see that it (this help) does not impose itself but rather is genuine help. Study camps and shibirs are also organised at the level of Tarun Mandal and women's Mandal levels which are wholly conducted by the activists. This keeps going a process of education among the pool of political activists and the advanced sections of the masses as well and forms an intermediate link in the development of the Sanghatana. However the Sanghatana has always stressed that it is the struggle which teaches the masses much more and grounds their knowledge with an ongoing purpose.

The formulation of the policy of the Sanghatana is based on a discussion of how any issue or policy would serve the interests of the landless and the poor peasants and what it would achieve towards integrating it with the broader movement of these sections for their emancipation. The specific programmes at any juncture are dependent on both the general situation of the movement of the basic classes and the problems thrown up by the objective situation. Nevertheless there are three main planks regarding the economic struggle that have been the mainstay of the movement at the local level. The first is the agitation for restoration of alienated land to the landless and poor peasantry. The second is

agitation for distribution of the so-called forest land actually comprising of fallow. The third has been the struggle of the casual and yearly labourers over their wages and conditions of labour.

The programmes taken up at the non-economic level include a cultural and educational movement. The cultural movement is expressed through the Tarun Mandals and women's Mandals. They fight jointly against the various habits rooted in an imposed culture including drinking, beating up of women, gambling and the like. The Mandals are formed of those who are free from such habits and are ready to actively struggle against them. These Tarun Mandals also take up Dangri-shalas or Night-schools. Besides this there is a constant attempt through the method of work towards breaking down caste barriers and building a class unity not broken by caste lines (e.g. alternating meeting places between the different sections of the village and collectively drinking tea, breaking up labourgangs formed along caste lines to reconstitute them along multi-caste basis etc.)

The Sanghatana has always worked towards a working unity of organised struggles representing the independent interests of the oppressed classes and castes. They have thus participated in the Adivasi Parishad organised in 1974. They were part of the All-Maharashtra Sangharsh Samiti at the District and the State level through out 1974 and 1975. They were also part of the Duskal Nivaran Samiti formed in 1972 in the wake of the scarcity of 1972. They have participated in all calls of these bodies and have made efforts to utilise these to integrate with the larger movements of the oppressed sections.

After a few initial attempts the Sanghatana has come to a conclusion not to concentrate its efforts on programmes involving economic benefits to individuals like obtaining loans, farming cooperatives and managing them etc. where the main activity is the management or supervision or intermediary of economic activity.

Its relations with the Government has thus mainly been that of a pressure group outside it rather than integrated with in and implementing its programmes. Also it has no connections with any political party.

The activists are not distributed on the basis of "functions" but rather they are distributed area-wise with activists being responsible for the conduct of mass work as a whole in their respective areas. Generally the activists come together in a meeting every fortnight. The meetings generally take the form of a reporting, discussion on work done, future plan and actual decisions. Decision-making is not centralised into the hands of a few activists but all full time activists participate. At the local level the activist takes decisions in consultation with the leading and active members of the Sanghatana involved in the specific struggles. In the activists meeting the emphasis is on arriving at a complete consensus through detailed discussion.

Local struggles are now managed by the local leadership of the village. Only rarely does it need the guidance and on the spot presence of an activist. His contact and consultation are called for but not his presence. However there is one big limitation on the development of the local activists at the moment and that is the problem of education. Their lack of any formal literacy or education is a handicap that has been quite severe. The Sanghatana has tried non-formal methods to do away with this problem but has achieved isolated successes. It is not possible for the Sanghatana activists to put in an intensive effort due to the heavy pressure of the work demanded by the agitation over their day-to-day economic demands.

Adivasi Activists: We give below a resume of an interview with one of the cadres in which he spoke about his joining the organisation. He is the only full time activist who is illiterate. It is not a case-study of a typical activist. However, it reflects on the potential of getting activists from among the Adivasis.

GS was born in the village of Fatehpur in Shahade taluka. His father was a poor peasant who earned most of his income by distilling liquor and selling it in Shahade. GS never went to school. As a boy he grazed goats for a wage of 50 paise per goat per month. When he grew older he too began to distil liquor and sell it. In order to do this he had to make deals with the police, who extracted Rs.500 to 600 a month. He was the leader of a gang of 10 or 12 boys. They had to fight to protect their trade, and would also beat up any rich Gujars whom they found abusing Bhil women when drunk. He was arrested several times, beaten and tortured by the police. Once he was hung upside down and beaten on the soles of his feet. He lived with a Bhil woman and would regularly beat her.

Ambarsingh approached him at one time and asked him to give up his trade. He replied that he had no other means of support. This was true, and moreover his profits allowed him to live in a reasonable comfort, eat meat occasionally.

When the Sanghatana began to hold morchas in the nearby villages, he would go and listen to the speeches. It struck him that the speakers often denounced the police. This interested him because the police were also his enemies. One day he met the leader of the Sanghatana, and called him to his home. The following conversation took place. GS asked, 'How much do you get paid for doing this work?' K said 'Nothing!'. 'Then why do you go around like this?' wondered GS. K replied, 'We have to fight the Gujars. And for that, we have to give up drinking.'

Some time later there was a meeting. K sent him a message asking him to bring people from his village to the meeting. When he went, K asked him to speak on police corruption and the liquor trade. He spoke, and called on the people to give up drinking. The police take bribes and still betray us. In future we will sell liquor without giving bribes to the police.

The next day the police accosted him and asked him to beware

of the Sanghatana. They said, your trade is profitable, why give it up.

He said, I think they are good people (the Sanghatana)

They told him that he would lose his trade.

And he said, O.K., he would lose it.

After this he broke up his bootlegging apparatus. He would visit the Sanghatana office from time to time. He did not give up drinking himself. Once he visited the office when he was drunk. One of the leaders slapped him in the face. By this time, G.S. had alienated the other bootleggers in his village. He had no regular income and had to face harassment.

On the 3rd of April 1975, he went to Bombay for a morcha organised by various working class organisations. The show of strength and unity impressed him. He made the decision to work with the Sanghatana. He gave up drinking. In the beginning K would hold sessions of political education with him. At first he did not understand much, but persevered out of regard for K.

Very soon after this, the Emergency was declared. In this period he had to work on his own. He fought for the liquidation of debts in his village and nearby. During this period he ran a small shop. There was a pressure on him to close the shop. He moved the shop to his father-in-law's village in Virpur, but this did not help. He sold all his capital, and he and his family were reduced to poverty. His father-in-law offered him money on condition that he leaves the Sanghatana. He refused. He was attacked by a local moneylender, but managed to escape. After the Emergency he became a full time activist of the Sanghatana. He does not drink, and also treats his wife better.

#### Peasant Organisation in Sakri and Nawapur talukas:

There is in Dhule district, besides the Shramik Sanghatana, a unit working, until recently, as part of the CPI(M)'s All India Kisan Sabha, in the talukas of Sakri and Nawapur at the south-eastern end of the district, bordering on the Gujarat state.

Information about this unit was obtained from SP, who has been its leader since its foundation in 1968 and had been organising struggles in this region from the 1950s. SP dissociated himself from the party since August 1978.

During 1956, work began on the building of the Ukai dam on the Tapi river. This involved displacement of nearly 10,000 families from Nandurbar, Nawapur, Akkalkuwa, Talode and Shahade talukas. SP was at that time a resident farmer in a village in Dhule taluka. In 1957 he began to organise poor peasants, mainly Adivasis, from Nawapur taluka, who had been displaced because of the construction of Ukai dam. The peasants marched in a demonstration against Morarji Desai, the then Chief Minister of the Bombay State, at the opening ceremony of the dam. After this, SP then moved to organising the Adivasis in the area. He was already himself a member of the (then undivided) CPI, and the struggle for the displaced peasants became part of the Samyukta Maharashtra movement, as the water from the dam was intended to irrigate lands in Gujarat. Thus SP worked in cooperation with persons from several parties. The original aim was to found a Kisan Sabha and take up the problems of the poor peasants, of whom the poorest and the most militant were the Adivasis.

SP in fact repeatedly emphasised during the interview that he sees the continuing struggle of the Adivasis in these talukas as part of a history of mass upheavals. For example, the non-Brahmin movement had spread to these parts and some anti-sawkar, anti-landlord struggles had taken place here in 1919, though Shahade and the northern talukas were not similarly affected. The leftist parties mobilised peoples participation in the Samyukta Maharashtra movement in many parts of the Khandesh. And during the period of his activity in this area, Amar Sheikh's communist cultural troupe had set up branches in Adivasi villages in Sakri and Nawapur. Moreover, his organisational work was started before the 1960s when sugarcane cultivation became widespread in some parts

of the Dhule district, and brought a wave of prosperity to the rich landowners, giving rise to a capitalistic polarisation among the peasantry.

Sakri and Nawapur are relatively undeveloped talukas in the Dhule district. Although there is a sugar factory in the Sakri taluka, it is smaller than the one at Shahade, and the surrounding land has not been as extensively turned over to the cultivation of sugarcane. A sizeable middle peasantry still exists, and even the Adivasis own small plots of land, though they have to supplement their income by working as labourers. Many of the Adivasis are tenant cultivators, and the biggest landowner in this area is the Government. A large number of poor peasants migrate across the border into Gujarat for work, largely on cash crops such as bananas, cotton and groundnut. Thus we find that the unit in Sakri-Nawapur has not taken up many wage struggles, or struggles of the peasants in their capacity of hired labourers. Most of the struggles, from the Ukai dam protest in 1957, have been fights for the right to land.

In 1970, the unit began a campaign to occupy the open forest lands. Thousands of Adivasis forcibly occupied jungle lands and began to cultivate the lands. This was one of the high points of the peasant organisation in Sakri-Nawapur. According to the District Collector, organised encroachment had taken place on 10,000 acres of land in Sakri and Nawapur talukas.<sup>72</sup> This means that over 2000 families were dependent for their subsistence on the forest lands. It indicates that the campaign had indeed spread far and achieved the mobilisation of the poor peasant to a considerable extent. The forest land occupation movement continued from 1970 till June 1974, when S&P troops moved in; a period of severe police repression followed, but the organisation resisted it bravely.

In summer 1974, the Government declared that the forest land has to be preserved for the planting of teak trees, and started a

brutal and systematic eviction campaign against the 'encroachers on the forest land'. The Kisan Sabha, which had organised the Adivasis in this region, bore the major brunt of the Government's attack. In June 1974, 400 Jawans of the SRP were camped in Visarwadi (Nawapur taluka). The forest officers, accompanied by truckloads of SRP, asked the people to leave their huts, which were systematically razed to the ground. The Adivasis were loaded onto the trucks and let down at points far away from their original villages.

In protest against the Government repression and against the repression unleashed by the landlords, a morcha of 6000 workers was organised by the Kisan Sabha and Shramik Sanghatana to the collectorate on June 24, 1974. The following demands were made: i) withdrawal of the SRP (ii) punishment of perpetrators of atrocity; (iii) withdrawal of politically motivated cases (iv) regularisation of forest waste lands brought under cultivation by the landless Adivasis and non-Adivasis. The Collector however declared in a Press conference that the Government was determined to put down the encroachment. Nagli seedling plots of the Adivasis were uprooted and waves of attack were launched in villages of Vanjarkundi, Chinchpada, Vaki, Bodhra. The villagers had to take refuge into the forests and had to face severe hardships as it was rainy season.

Against this background, Maharashtra State Sangharsha Samiti representing CPI(M), CPI, SP, PWP and Lal Nishan Party toured the repression-torn areas in July and simultaneously satyagraha was offered by the Adivasis in protest. Public opinion was mobilised and the demands pressed. But instead of reconsidering its policies the Government intensified the repression using the SRP.

The Home Minister, Sharad Pawar, announced on the floor of the Legislative Assembly on 2-8-1974 that the Government had decided to raise two new units of SRP to post in Dhule, Nashik, Jalgaon districts and got a supplementary demand of Rs.7.87 lakhs passed.<sup>73</sup>



Before and during the time of the SRP occupation, the Sakri-Nawapur unit received publicity in other parts of Maharashtra. The local administration spoke of it as an outbreak of 'Naxalite' activity. Later on, democratic organisations in the cities like Poona, Bombay took up the issue of the repressive measures.

There was a state-wide famine during 1972-73. Although this area was not very severely affected by the famine, this was an occasion to mobilise the other sections of the peasantry in support of the Adivasis' struggle against the Government and for their right to land. During this period many middle peasants (mainly of Maratha, Mali and Rajput communities) took active part in the demonstrations and struggles.

In April 1975 the unit joined in the march on the Legislative Assembly organised in Bombay by several parties of the left (in which the Shramik Sanghatana also participated). During the Emergency, the struggle continued, and some anti-Emergency slogans were incorporated in the demands of the Adivasis. In 1976 the SRP troops were withdrawn. With the declaration of elections the unit took up the CPI(M) line of alliance with the Janata and campaigned for them in the Loksabha elections.

Structure of the Organisation: The Dhule Zilla Kisan Sabha was officially formed in December 1968. Its organisational structure conforms to the rules of the CPI(M)'s Kisan Sabha units. The main office is in the taluka town of Sakri, and the area of work is the talukas of Sakri, Nawapur and Dhule. The unit has three full-time Adivasi activists, who each receives monthly emolument of Rs.100. There are branches in 37 villages. The organisation started work in 1968 with a membership of 500, but the number rose to a peak of 8,000 during the SRP occupation, and at present (mid-1978) stands at 4,000. About 60 per cent of the members are Adivasis, and poor peasants of other castes form the rest. The proportion of Dalits is small, corresponding to a relatively small population of Dalits in the villages of this area.

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In all about 200 members of the unit were full party members, 42 of these being women. The participation of these women in organisational work has always been enthusiastic. The main decision-making body is the District Committee, which meets once a month. Each year a shibir is held for all the active members. During the monthly meetings of the District Committee theoretical discussions are held, usually on the party programme, and basic principles of Marxist philosophy and historical materialism. Since the integration of the unit SP has been the secretary of the District Committee. With his resignation from the party the entire unit has withdrawn from the party.

Crazy People's Crazy Talk

Someone farts  
And they scatter to the winds  
Or else  
Shit out their guts;  
Such rustic fools these  
Are now heard saying  
"Has really all-that-much happened?  
We have yet to win  
Heaps of territory right upto the limit;  
From the lathi-charge  
We have become wise, and will become wiser still;  
Straws in the winds of statecraft  
We have now come to understand;  
While fighting to touch the Mandav  
In spite of  
Your firing guns and all  
We will definitely touch the Mandav."

(Note: "touch the Mandav": literally it refers to a tribal marriage ritual in which the bridegroom must touch a wooden pillar while the kinsfolk of the bride prevent him. Only if this succeeds can the marriage proceed further).

- Free rendering of a poem composed in Bhilori (the dialect in the Shahade region) by a local Adivasi activist. The poem was published in the local fortnightly of the Shramik Sanghatana - 'Inquilab' on 15th September 1979 after a lathi-charge on a protest-demonstration at Shahade on 14th September as part of the call for state-wide demonstrations by the left-dominated Anti-Price-rise "Shramik Janata Parishad" - (Toiling People's Conference).

Chapter V

Abbreviations

1. GBP-XII - Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency Vol.XII, Khandesh, Bombay, 1880.
2. EICG-I - A Gazetteer of the territories under the Government of the East India Company, Vol.I, Thornton,Edward, London, 1854.
3. DRC-Appendix B - Report of the Deccan Riots Commission Appendix B; Action of the law and the civil courts on the agricultural debtor, 1876.
4. WR - Captain Wingate's Report on Survey and Assessment for Khandesh, Bombay, 1852.
5. GMSD - Gazetteer of India, Maharashtra State, Dhulia District (Revised Edition), Bombay, 1974.
6. ECAL - Brahme, Sulabha, Upadhyaya, Ashok, Study of Economic Conditions of Agricultural Labour in Dhulia District, Maharashtra, Shankar Brahme Samaj Vidnyana Granthalaya, Poona, 1975 (typed report).
7. WBTA - Dandekar, V.M., Khudanpur, G.J., Working of the Bombay Tenancy Act, 1948; Report of Investigation, Gokhale Institute of Politics & Economics, Poona, 1957.
8. RSS-ST - Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government, Papers Relating to the Revision Survey Settlement of the Shahade Taluka of the Khandesh Collectorate, Bombay, 1899.
9. EPW - Economic and Political Weekly, Bombay.

References:

1. GBP-XII, p.248.
2. Ibid., p.248, EICG-I, pp.258-259.
3. EICG-I, pp.258-259.
4. GBP-XII, p.82.
5. Ibid., pp.80-83.
6. Ibid.; p.214; p.250.
7. Ibid., pp.268-272.
8. Ibid., p.259.
9. GMSD, p.140.
10. Ibid, p.154.
11. GBP-XII, p.272.
12. Ibid., p.271.
13. Ibid., p.381.
14. GBP, p.273.
15. EICG-I, p.262.

16. RSS-ST, p.11.
17. GBP-XII, pp.330, 409, 417.
18. RSS-ST, p.11.
19. DRC-Appendix B, pp.164-184.  
GBP-XII, pp.197-200.  
see especially DRC Appendix B, pp.334-336 e.g. 'I have no hesitation in saying that false accounts and false bonds are the rule, and not the exception in the dealings of the Gujar sowkar with the unfortunate and ignorant Bheels.' -Extract from Report to Government No.255 dated 17-1-1871, from Mr. A.Rogers, Revenue Commissioner, N.D.,
20. GBP-XII, pp.197-198.
21. Ibid., p.199.
22. Ibid., pp.196-197.
23. DRC-Appendix B, pp.96-97; GBP-XII, p.308.
24. DRC-Appendix B, pp.96-97.
25. "We beg to appeal statements showing the number of suits filed by Guzars and moneylenders against Bheels in the court of the Sub-Judge at Nandurbar during the years 1867, 1868, and 1869, and how they were disposed of. It will be seen from this statement that of the 635 suits that came to inquiry during those years, 612 were decided in favour of plaintiffs, and only 23 in favour of Bheels, and that Bheels appeared to contest the claims brought against them in 29 cases only. In 594 suits judgement went default against Bheels. We rely on these figures in support of our statement that the ordinary civil courts are not suitable tribunals for the decision of such claims..." - Letter dated 9-9-1870 from Captain O. Probyn, Western Bheel Agent & C.Pritchard Esq. First Collector to L.B. Ashburner Esq. Collector and Magistrate. From DRC, Appendix B, p.102.
26. GBP-XII, p.308.
27. DRC-Appendix B, p.170.
28. EICG-I.
29. DRC-Appendix B, p.172, Extract from a letter dated 31-8-1870 from Captain O. Probyn, Western Bheel Agent and Mr. C. Pritchard, First Collector.
30. DRC-Appendix B, pp.164-167, 172-173.
31. Ibid., p.310.
32. Ibid.
33. GBP-XII, p.17.
34. Ibid., p.216.
35. Ibid, p.21.
36. ECAL, p.35.

37. ECAL, p.35.
38. Quoted from the Symington Report in a typed note on Land Alienation among the Adivasis by S.D. Kulkarni (1975) the figure of 5.3% is obviously very low, but what it does bring out is the fact of the Adivasis that by the 20% held substantially low proportion of the land in the plains.
39. GBP-VII, pp.379-386, 409-413, 417-421.
40. Ibid.
41. ECAL, p.38.
42. e.g. WBTA
43. GMSD, pp.572-599.
44. Ibid, p.494.
45. Ibid., p.492-504.
46. ECAL, pp.53, 68-84, 148.
47. GMSD, pp.150-158.
48. GMSD, p.171.
49. Extracts from the Correspondence between various British authorities GMSD, pp.164, 165, 168-169.
50. GMSD, pp.171, 166-167.
51. Ibid., p.169-170.
52. The Bhil Movement in Dhulia, EPW Annual No. Feb, 1972.
53. Shahada Chalwal, Gram Swarajya Samiti, Shahade, Bombay, 1974.
54. Aamchi Bhoomika, Shramik Sanghatana, Shahade, 1977, p.5.
55. Shahada Chalwal, p.10
56. Kulkarni, S.D., Alienation of Adivasi Lands, A New Act, Gramayan, Poona, 1974.
57. Ibid., p.3.
58. Shahada Chalwal, pp.11,12.
59. ECAL, p.106.
60. Ibid., p.107.
61. Report of the Study Committee on Employment Conditions of Agricultural Labour in Maharashtra State (with reference to Minimum Wages) Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1973, pp.111-112.
62. Shahada Chalwal, pp.17-18.
63. Ibid., pp.19-20.
64. Ibid., pp.23-24.

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65. Shahada Chalwal, pp.25-26.
66. Ibid., pp.27-28.
67. Ibid., pp.21-22.
68. A Report from Shahade, (Cyclostyled), Poona, 1978, pp.4-5.
69. Ibid., p.3.
70. Ibid., pp.8-12.
71. Government's War on Adivasis, EPW, October 26, 1974,  
pp.1808-1809.
72. Ibid., p.1810.