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Emergence of people's power in
Palghar and some reflections arising
out of it.

THE EMERGENCE OF PEOPLE'S POWER IN PALGHAR
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SOME REFLECTIONS ARISING OUT OF IT

Note

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and

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The Bhoomi Sena Movement

The Bhoomi Sena Movement in Palghar started in 1970 primarily as a struggle of tribals (Adivasis) to recover land alienated from the small peasants to the sawkars who were initially local money lenders. This is a widely observed phenomenon in small peasant agriculture of Asia, where in extreme cases after land alienation the peasant himself becomes bonded to the money lender and reaches a near slave status. This had happened in Palghar. The success of the struggle against land alienation and bonded labour resulted on the one hand in the growth of the Bhoomi Sena movement and on the other hand in the dwindling economic power of the money lenders as a class. In the emerging new situation the weakened money lenders are being gradually replaced by sections of the middle/rich peasant proprietors who are now beginning to enter the field of essential money lending activities of providing working capital and consumption loans to the poor peasants. While the rate of interest being charged by them is highly exploitative, the earlier system of land alienation through land mortgage has been eliminated. Thus, the character of the exploiting class itself has begun to change somewhat as a result of earlier struggles and this in turn has corresponded to changes in the nature of the Bhoomi Sena movement. One crucial link with the past situation remains however: both the earlier money lenders who are losing economic power and the newly emerging money lending rich peasant proprietor are non-Adivasis.

* A note prepared by Amit Bhaduri, G V S D'Silva, Niranjan Mehta, Anisur Rahman, Datta Savale and Ponna Wignaraja, August 1977.

Internally, the Bhoomi Sena movement which started more or less as a spontaneous reaction of the exploited and oppressed Adivasis on the social and economic plane, found an initial rallying point in the movement against land alienation and bonded labour¹. The success of the movement on these specific issues created, first, an awareness that it was within their power to change the exploitative socio-economic order with which they were in direct contact. The organization of the Bhoomi Sena as a political organ grew out of this self-awareness of the power they could collectively wield. Thus, spontaneity gave rise to organisation and the organisation now is seeking to channel spontaneity of the Adivasis towards struggle on more carefully deliberated specific issues. At the moment, the Bhoomi Sena is beginning to take up such specific issues as minimum wage and guaranteed employment schemes through extensive discussion among the Adivasis. The newly emerging feature is that these discussions are often actively initiated by the Bhoomi Sena to heighten awareness of these problems.

In the larger context, it needs emphasis that all the issues so far chosen by the Bhoomi Sena for struggle have one common characteristic: Their demands are all for rights granted them by the laws of the land. From this point of view, their need for struggle so far has arisen in the context of non-implementation of the existing laws. But it is also equally important to note that these legal demands represent some of their most immediately pressing problems. On the other hand, in cases where they have felt that implementation

1 Coincident with the official "20-Point" programme of the Indira Gandhi government at this juncture.

of law will not be feasible within the present socio-economic framework (e.g., the stringent laws about terms of private lending in Maharashtra), they have not taken up these legal issues even if they are pressing.

Although the Bhoomi Sena movement has been engaged in the struggle for realizing the legal rights of the Adivasis, its own origin in spontaneous rebellion against injustice and its organization into a political organ have themselves been outside the formal politico-administrative framework. In this sense, it is not the authorities who transferred power to the Bhoomi Sena to implement the law; rather, it is the collective power of the exploited Adivasis which got crystallized into the formation of the Bhoomi Sena as an organ of people's power. This newly born power acts more as a countervailing power aimed at ensuring the proper implementation of law rather than as an implementing body created from the top. Thus, people's power is primarily a countervailing power in this context, functioning within the legal framework.

A Dialogue with Bhoomi Sena

Introduction

We had a dialogue with the Bhoomi Sena cadres from August 20 evening until August 24 noon. During this period, we lived with them in their local office in village Damkhin in Palghar.

Among us were those who speak English, Hindi and Marathi; English and Hindi, and English only. One of us (Y) has been involved with the Bhoomi Sena movement for the last two years. Among the Bhoomi Sena cadres who were ten in number including its leader - eight Adivasis and two non-Adivasis -, at least six were present at any one time. Among the cadres were those who speak Marathi, Hindi and English; Marathi and Hindi; and Marathi only. The dialogue was carried on in all the three languages, with translations into English and/or Marathi, whenever necessary, by one or other of the participants. The presence of others with knowledge of both the languages in question was a check to any possible misinterpretation.

The dialogue is presented in the sequence in which it unfolded. 'We' means any one of us, subscripted by (1), (2), (3) etc. when more than one of us spoke in immediate succession on any one issue. The subscripts denote the sequence of intervention for the specific discussion only, and do not correspond to respective specific persons for the entire course of the dialogue. B.S means any one of the Bhoomi Sena cadres including its leader, and is also subscripted by (1), (2), (3) etc. with the same meaning. When Y made some independent observation calling upon the experience of his two-year involvement in the movement, or gave his personal clarification to some observation by B.S, he is identified as Y.

A characteristic of Bhoomi Sena's participation in the dialogue was that, as a rule, the indigenous cadres (whose formal education was less than that of the non-Adivasi cadres) spoke the most and often summed up the consensus. The leader

(an Adivasi) spoke considerably less than the others, relaxed and content in seeing his cadres articulate the Bhoomi Sena point of view.

First session. some general observations

The dialogue was kicked off by one of us, who presented some observations on the Bhoomi Sena movement based on an eight-day visit in April 1977 when he attended a review session of the Bhoomi Sena cadres, and another eight-day visit early in August 1977 to a number of villages in the area during which he talked with individual peasants and attended Tarun Mandal (Youth Club) meetings in three villages. His observations were:

1. Bhoomi Sena is an indigenous movement of the Adivasis of Palghar, in which however some outsiders have also been involved from time to time.

2. There has been a qualitative difference in the involvement of outsiders in a second phase of the movement from that in a first phase: in the first phase outsiders came with external solutions to their problems; in the second phase outsiders are contributing only to conscientization and raising the reflective capability of the Bhoomi Sena cadres and the Adivasis and are not prescribing any solution to their problems. The disastrous consequences of the first phase outside intervention played a crucial part in the emergence of a new consciousness of the Adivasis and a correspondingly new role of outsiders in the movement.

3. The Bhoomi Sena organization has not been formed as a result of prior abstract deliberation. It has been formed

at the height of a spontaneous mobilization of the Adivasis in concrete struggle.

4. Likewise, the local organizations (Tarun Mandal) are also not being formed by abstract deliberation or by central decision. These are being formed either in spontaneous local struggles of the Adivasis against exploitation at the local level, or through stimulation in the camps which are held from time to time to review and disseminate experience of the continuing struggle and the role of local organizations in the struggle.

5. A review may be worthwhile of the comparative experience of the performance of local organizations that are born out of struggle and those that are born out of stimulation in the camps. It is possible that these two methods generate different types of leadership in terms of mobilizational and deliberative ability, and the quality and performance of a local organization may vary accordingly.

6. The local organizations have full autonomy in deliberating on local problems and in taking action. The centre comes when a local organization brings its problem to its attention for assistance or guidance. In this respect, the movement appears committed to the development of local initiative and capability and is opposed to the principle of "centralism".

7. The demands of the Bhoomi Sena movement are all for realisation of their legal rights. In this, there is implicit

acceptance of state power to bestow these rights. The movement seeks to implement state law regarding minimum wage; it does not assert the right to determine what the wage should be. It demands the implementation of the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS), and has not apparently questioned the state's ability to implement this scheme, or considered the fundamental question of dependency in an employer-employee relationship.

8. One is curious to know if the struggle of the Adivasis is conceived primarily as an economic struggle, or whether a deeper perception of man underlies the struggle. What, in other words, is their conception of development?

After these observations, the session adjourned, with the understanding that the Bhoomi Sena cadres would in subsequent sessions discuss any of the above issues, or other issues, as they would feel like, spontaneously.

Second Session: Role of Outsiders

The Bhoomi Sena cadres started by discussing the role of outsiders in their movement:

B.S (1) : We need outside help for analysis and understanding of our situation and experience, but not for telling us what we should do.

B.S (2) : Initially, we had genuinely thought that outsiders had our good at heart, and knew better. We did not ourselves think at all, and did not have any ideas of our own.

We : Then will you say that the experience of the first outsider's help, and its quick failure, was very good?

B.S (several together): Yes.

We : In what sense do you think now that outside help is useful?

B.S (1) : We have good experience ourselves. We "insiders" are outsiders to the Tarun Mandals, and they ask us to tell them what to do. But we have to tell them that it is they who must decide.

B.S (2) : An outsider who comes with readymade solutions and advice is worse than useless. He must first understand from us what our questions are, and help us articulate the questions better, and then help us find solutions. Outsiders also have to change. He alone is a friend who helps us to think about our problems on our own.

The relation between outsiders and Bhoomi Sena should be similar to that between Bhoomi Sena and Tarun Mandal. The principle should be minimum intervention. The Bhoomi Sena cadres do not offer any solutions to Tarun Mandal: when Tarun Mandal faces some genuine problem, Bhoomi Sena tells them only how problems of this type have been solved in other villages. Then Tarun Mandal decides.

Y : After failure of "outsider's" method a camp was held in 1975 to discuss the experience. The majority of those present were outsiders, but the purpose was to get the perception of the local workers. Two years later today the camps are dominated much more by insiders.

We : How did this happen?

B.S : In the first camp, we had not come out of dependence. We had no political understanding. We wanted to link the political issues with our problems and needed the help of outsiders in this respect. When we learnt the linking, we can now do this analysis on our own. We now go to the Tarun Mandals and tell them the method by which we learnt, and ask them to learn the method of learning how to link economic problems with politics.

When we go to Tarun Mandal, they talk to us freely and we encourage them to assert. We formulate issues for the struggle on the basis of their assertion. When however they meet real outsiders they still tend to listen more and assert less.

Self-reliance

We : Is this fierce self-reliance a matter of having no other concrete option, or a value also? A conscious ethical choice between alternatives that exist, or compulsion?

- B.S : Self-reliance is an ideal for us, but it is also linked with our practical situation, without this our struggle will not develop.
- We : Refusing to repay bank loans is also a kind of self-reliance. Have you considered this option? After all, it is your money that the Sawkar (money-lender) puts in the bank.
- B.S : It is better to rely on our own accumulation. If a loan is taken at all, it should be returned, or else corruption may come in the mind.
- We : Why not "snatch" bank money?
- B.S (1) : If we get money through concrete struggle then everyone becomes more responsible about its use. If money is just snatched away, then such money is misused - individuals snatch it also ~~from~~^{for} themselves.
- B.S (2) : To snatch it and avoid misuse you have to be strongly organized.
- B.S (3) : By suggesting soft options, you are diverting them away from the hardship of the struggle which will be long and hard.
- We : Your opponents also understand this, and offer soft options. Do you succeed in convincing people that this should be rejected?

B.S : When individuals ask for something, we ask them to demand collectively. Then we know the demand cannot be met and so the people will remain struggle-minded. This is the way to combat the tendency of individuals to fall into the trap of soft options.

We (1) : The more such movement succeeds, the greater is the possibility that government will come with massive investment in some area of Palghar.

We (2) : If government accepts demands gradually, then what happens to the struggle? This also becomes a soft option.

We (3) : The method of "outsider" may be tried again, this time more efficiently. For example, an Adivasi Development Plan genuinely to be implemented in Palghar.

B.S : Local vested interests will not permit this.

We (1) : The movement must all the time keep growing at a critical minimum rate in order not to slip back.

We (2) : This means the demand of the movement must always be sufficiently greater than what can be met.

Y : Not only the struggle, but rearranging the society for self-government will also develop a new culture and experience which they will not be ready to give up. This gives them a new identity which develops its own momentum.

We : In other words, the struggle should not merely be negative - it must have a positive content as well.

B.S : Take a concrete example. Out of 206 acres of excess land of Nagzhari (village) to be distributed, only 4 acres were earmarked for the landless peasants in Nagzhari. The rest were not cultivable land. Twenty-eight persons applied. How to distribute 4 acres among 28 persons? The officials wanted to draw lottery. But Tarun Mandal decided that irrespective of lottery the land would be cultivated jointly by all the 28 peasants who would be paid wages, and the surplus would go to the Tarun Mandal. That is, for all practical purposes the Tarun Mandal would own the 4 acres. This is how they are countering efforts to corrupt individuals.

Attempt is also being made to corrupt individuals by tempting them with the hope that they may get an extra acre of land each if they join the lottery. But Tarun Mandal said "no, if there is more excess land let us take stock of that and bring that too under joint cultivation. There should be no individual deals".

Third Session: Organization

We : Would you describe the structure of your organization? What are the interrelationships and the rules of business?

B.S. : We have a President, but he participates in decision-making as an equal. Any villager can come and participate as equal in our decision-making. We thus have an open decision-making process. Bhoomi Sena itself goes to villages to consult villagers on major issues. Sometimes it convenes meetings of villagers.

There are no representatives as such in Bhoomi Sena from the villages. Its members are all full-time workers.

Tarun Mandals and the struggle

You raised the question of formation of Tarun Mandal. In one village Tarun Mandal was formed without struggle, after a camp. In the village itself there was no immediate issue that agitated the peasants - Sawkar was not living in the village, and was not visible. The number of landless labourers was small. So Tarun Mandal collapsed. There must be struggle to keep the organisation alive. The village however is solidly behind Bhoomi Sena, and there is cent per cent mobilization when Bhoomi Sena initiates mobilization on particular issues. But organization did not last.

We : Is struggle against men absolutely necessary? There can be struggle for economic and social progress without necessarily struggling against other men. Can this not sustain organization?

B.S (1) : Some social issues they have, and they have got together and solved them. The caste system is there -

four or five castes. In this respect much progress has taken place. Last two years, local workers kept on working to break caste barrier and promote organization on class basis. Inter-dining, taking water, tea, participating in social activities together - these are now taking place. But no inter-marriage yet. Yet with all this, Tarun Mandal organization is not being formed.

Y : One reason may be that in this village (Nanewali) the paras (clusters) are scattered.

B.S : The peasants fear that organization will alienate Sawkar too much and they will not get Khauti (consumption loan). They are still too dependent.

We : But why then in other villages Tarun Mandal is being formed?

B.S : Nagzhari, where organization is most advanced, has a long history of struggle. Even this year they had trouble:

The poor peasants did not have enough working capital. Sawkars agreed to pay landless labourers 3/- a day, but against 10 1/2 hours of work a day. So Tarun Mandal sent the landless labourers to other places where they can get more - both wage and food. But the situation remains desperate as many poor peasants were not provided for. Tarun Mandal went to a charitable mission for loan. A letter has been sent by one of cadres to us about the desperate situation: in three or four days, some

arrangement must be made for Khauti, otherwise the organization may collapse.

The Sawkars struck here by refusing Khauti after the question of distribution of excess land was solved by the Tarun Mandal who took ownership of land and arranged for joint cultivation by the landless labourers.

The mission finally came to its assistance, and the situation was saved. But it was really touch and go in this, the most advanced village.

The letter to Bhoomi Sena expresses the deep agony and dilemma - the organization has created such desperate situation, and if it cannot be tackled the organization cannot survive.

Small farmers must join the landless labourers to strengthen organization, but small farmers are afraid to antagonize Sawkars because they are so very dependent on Khauti. They all have sympathy for Bhoomi Sena, but they also have fear.

B.S (2) : In Tandulwadi village, Sawkars threatened to stop all loans, but Tarun Mandal was prepared for this and was able to make alternative provisions. But in Nagzhari, Sawkar promised loans during the election, and Tarun Mandal was fooled. Later, neighbouring Sawkars persuaded this Sawkar to back out. Tarun Mandal was not prepared with any alternative, so this crisis.

Realization has come now that movement cannot survive unless the small farmers' problem of Khauti can be tackled by the organization. So grain contribution after harvest is being mobilized. From this, loans will be given at 25% rate of interest, thus gradually building up a growing fund.

- We : What if the borrower does not repay and goes back to Sawkar next time?
- B.S : If he is in real distress he will repay, and Tarun Mandal will consider giving him fresh loan. If he defaults deliberately, he will not fare better with Sawkar whose interest rate is 250% and on top of this he has to be given daru (liquor). Besides, there is also informal social sanction. Generally, no one feels recovery is a problem.
- We : Will not the Sawkars strike in one go as a last resort, by denying all kinds of help. There are so many types of dependency - bullock, seed, khauti, etc. They will keep their land fallow.
- Y : Against this mutual aid is the answer. Small peasants have their own bullocks and ploughs which can rotate.
- We : This will perhaps be the next phase of struggle, and for this mutual aid should start developing.
- B.S : In Naniwali village mutual aid is being attempted.

We : Suppose next year Sawkars decide to keep all land fallow. Then how will the landless labourers survive?

B.S (1) : Our labourers will walk 25-30 miles and get work at 4/- a day. But Sawkar cannot take his land out of the village! We already have this collective consciousness and solidarity.

Also, out of 25 Sawkars, 5 or 6 only can survive one season without cultivating their land. Others have no such staying power. Furthermore, Sawkars can suffer less than we can. We can go hungry - the Sawkar cannot. Small Sawkars, middle peasants and small peasants have the bulk of land; the bigger Sawkars do not command so much land as to put landless labourers into great difficulty by stopping work.

B.S (2) : The bigger Sawkar will have to go for second crop to maintain his standard of living after giving minimum wage. This will increase employment possibilities all the more.

We : What are the various possibilities of the Sawkars retaliating?

B.S (1) : Sawkar lives in the village, and knows the weakness of each individual and group, and will try to exploit these.

B.S (2) : They will use (1) daru (2) caste; and (3) bribe selectively to create division.

B.S (3) : Where the productivity of land is high, Sawkar will prefer to pay higher wages - even than he will have considerable surplus left.

Public Institutions

We : How about the police?

B.S : Police beating has stopped. Police are now afraid of the organization. (Sawkars are also getting afraid).

Bribery in Adivasi hospital has also stopped. The bank's attitude has also changed - they have now posted a branch manager and a field assistant approved by Bhoomi Sena whose cooperation they now want.

Fourth Session: Class Analysis

B.S : The problem of uniting landless labourers and small peasants is receiving serious attention by us. We have four agricultural classes: (1) totally landless; (2) very small farmer - part self employed, part outside employment; (3) self-sufficient middle farmer, employing outside labour only occasionally; (4) rich farmer. In all, about 35% are landless labourers, 35%-40% small farmers, and 10-15% middle. Then there are the shopkeepers-traders who are of non-Adivasi and non-Maharashtra origin trading in paddy, grass etc.

Among the landless labourers, 90% are Adivasis. The Kunbis, a non-Adivasi caste, form about 5-8% of the total population, but 50% of the middle farmers.

The Kunbis and Sawkars employ regular wage-labour. But those among the Adivasis who have more land share their income more like extended family with hired labour. Thus they are not rich, and there is no dynamics for them to move up.

We : Doesn't the demand for minimum wage go against the middle farmer who needs to hire casual labour?

B.S : Middle farmer is normally neutral with respect to this demand. During natural calamities when he has to work outside his land, he will benefit. During off-season also he works, and so the demand for EGS helps him. Actually, he can take greater advantage of it than landless labourers as under EGS wage is paid once every week only, and he has the greater staying power.

The Adivasi middle farmer does not engage in money lending but the non-Adivasi middle farmer does. The non-Adivasi middle farmer will thus lose from EGS because demand for Khauti will decline.

We : The demand for minimum wage and employment both affect the same classes in the same direction, so that class separation on this basis is in order and it appears the two movements can be launched simultaneously.

B.S : This is true. The pressure of the organization on the EGS is yielding concrete results. When it fails to do so, then also the struggle advances by exposing the

government's hollow promise. And if employment results, then the demand is increased. Minimum wage and employment are not ends, but instruments of struggle, and at the same time to increase incomes in order to give staying power for the struggle.

We : Are you pressing for daily payment of wage under EGS?

B.S : Demand for daily payment of wage in kind has been added to the demand for implementation of EGS in order to benefit the landless labourer.

Struggle in Nagzhari

At this point the leader of Tarun Mandal in Nagzhari who is also a cadre of Bhoomi Sena, arrives from Nagzhari, and reports on the struggle in his village and the latest situation.

B.S : Khauti is not a demand of the landless labourers - they will not get it in any case. To the small farmer, Sawkar often gives Khauti for 4 instead of the 5 months of the cultivation season, at a rate of interest of 200 per cent plus, so that the last month before harvest he has to come again, and this time the rate of interest is made even higher. For the landless labourer, there is the Visoli system, i.e., advance given just at the beginning of the crop season for 15 days, in return for which the labourer has to work on the master's land and get food only during work - just like bonded labour.

Nagzhari village has 25 landless labourers, 25 small farmers, 8-10 middle farmers and 8 rich farmers. The

small farmers joined the landless labourers in the struggle for minimum wage, and Sawkars in retaliation stopped giving Khauti to the small farmers. Tarun Mandal and Bhoomi Sena discussed the problem but found no solution. They went to Father Miranda of the Adivasi Shetkari Mandal (Farmers' Association) Mission. Father said from his book that seven years back Nagzhari villagers had borrowed half a bag of rice from the mission and never repaid, so that they could not be given further loan. The farmers went back to a Bhoomi Sena cadre who asked them to go to Father again. They did, but Father would not help.

For 8-10 days the farmers were without food. They ate roots in the forest. The landless labourers went back to work on Sawkar's land even though they did not get minimum wage. Finally a Bhoomi cadre persuaded Father Miranda to give some advance: one bag of rice initially, then after a week one bag of wheat. Having gotten loan the small farmers now planted paddy. Even through this hard struggle the small farmers are better off because they got loan at much lower rate of interest (25%) than what Sawkar would charge. The small farmers came then to Tarun Mandal meeting, and it was decided that they would return loan to Father after harvest, and next year Tarun Mandal would give them advance for Khauti.

By this time some landless labourers who had gone outside the village in search for work returned, and Tarun Mandal led negotiation on their behalf with village

headmen for work on Sawkar's land. Negotiation failed as Sawkars demanded more than 8 hours work if 3/- wage was to be given. The labourers went out again and got employment for 25 days. The sawkars were now without workers. One of them brought two labourers from outside; the others were in trouble. After 25 days the labourers of the village returned, and Sawkars offered them work on their terms.

We : Through such hard struggle has the spirit of Bhoomi Sena been strengthened or weakened in Nagzhari?

B.S : The spirit is stronger today. The small farmers have resolved to contribute their whole surplus harvest to Tarun Mandal fund and themselves work outside for subsistence.

Women

We : What is the role of women in the movement?

B.S : They are participating in the movement, in mobilizations organized by the Bhoomi Sena and in local mobilizations. But there is no separate organization of women. This needs a catalyst.

Fifth Session: Conceptualization

This was a session only of the English speaking participants in the dialogue, for some quick conceptual reflections.

The points made were:

1. Future society grows out of the present and therefore its seeds must be sown in the present. In Bhoomi Sena some positive values are emerging, and even if the movement is crushed these values may continue to live. From this point of view Bhoomi Sena shows one way of generating these values.
2. Self-reliance has emerged as a value from experience in the struggle (material base). Having emerged, it has taken on an autonomous character (superstructure), and is giving the movement more sustaining power. This, in turn, influences the course of development of the material base.
3. Bhoomi Sena also demonstrates the role of spontaneity in developing self-awareness.
4. Dialectical development of spontaneity and order is observable in Bhoomi Sena movement. First spontaneous mobilization, then synthesis into an order (organization). Then split again: some spontaneity and some order, spontaneity being encouraged in struggles for new issues. Thus a higher stage is reached. A subsequent synthesis of spontaneous actions will take the movement to an even higher stage, and there will be a split again as new contradictions emerge and spontaneous initiatives to resolve them is allowed.

(At this stage the leader of Bhoomi Sena joins the session, and the above is communicated to him. He says that Bhoomi Sena is consciously committed to the development of

spontaneous initiatives to seek solutions of new contradictions and to draw lessons therefrom and develop organization on that basis. He cites the example of new contradiction as the refusal of Sawkar to give Khauti. To this problem no solution was known, so spontaneity was encouraged, for synthesis later.)

5. Is this dialectical role of spontaneity in developing a movement contrary to the concept of "democratic centralism", which assumes that solution is available to the centre or can be found by deliberations without some spontaneous experience?
6. Circumstances may however be such that there is no time for spontaneous experiences.

Sixth Session

The conceptualization of the previous session was presented to the full body of participants.

- 8.S (1) : This raises the question of how Tarun Mandal may be expanded. There may not be time for spontaneous growth in every new village, but at least people must feel that it is not being imposed.
- 8.S (2) : In Durgesh village, land distribution was the issue, but people did not feel the need for Tarun Mandal. We told them that in other villages Tarun Mandal had been formed and had tackled the issue. The Durgesh people tackled the issue by mobilization but did not form Tarun Mandal.

Bhoomi Sena's mistake

B.S (3) : We have ourselves made mistakes. In Nihal village, there are more small farmers than landless labourers. This makes organization for minimum wage difficult, since if small farmers join the landless labourers for minimum wage, they will not get Khauti. Even then we tried to organize the people around the demand for minimum wage, but it was unsuccessful. The mistake was Bhoomi Sena's; the people were rational alright. Our mistake was in the method of carrying issue of one village to another, without enquiring what the issue in each village is.

We : When you say the small farmers fear the Sawkars, what kind of fear is this?

B.S : The fear is not physical, but the absence of alternatives to sustain life.

Primacy of man

We : Why was bonded labour selected as a first issue?

B.S : It was a question of human dignity. The reason was not economic only.

We : Why is now minimum wage rather than Khauti being given priority? Is there something similar in the reason for this also?

B.S : Yes. Landless labour is very much like bonded labour, being dependent for day-to-day living.

Summing up
by the

Leader : We saw and hear of people's sufferings, and thought we therefore knew what they were. Then we go to them and talk about the movement. People listen; only a few talk, others do not. We thought the few that talked represented everybody. That was a mistake. Others did not talk not because they thought they were being represented, but because they thought we were their well wishers, so how could they contradict us? But what we talked or did, did not excite them always. So organization did not gather intensity.

Men versus women

B.S : In one village demand was made by Tarun Mandal for an wage of 5/- for men and 4/- for women, when actually women possibly work harder. What could Bhoomi Sena do in such a case? Bhoomi Sena will not tell people what they should do, but want to understand why people do this, why this difference? Were women present in the meeting? By asking such questions, Bhoomi Sena tries to generate a self-reflective and self-corrective process.

Tarun Mandal versus Bhoomi Sena

We : What if Tarun Mandal feels Bhoomi Sena is making a mistake?

B.S : (consensus after they talked between themselves): Bhoomi Sena can make mistakes, and should correct them. There should be a mechanism by which Tarun Mandal can raise such questions. Bhoomi Sena has not yet done it, but should do it.

We : Consider the following different models:
(1) Tarun Mandal a branch of Bhoomi Sena; (2) Bhoomi Sena a federation of Tarun Mandals; (3) the two are organizationally independent of each other. Which one do you prefer?

B.S (1) : Bhoomi Sena should be a federation, but at the moment Tarun Mandal looks like branch of Bhoomi Sena.

B.S (Leader) : It should be a federation, but we have not thought of this as yet.

B.S (3) : The two should remain independent. Then if external attack comes on Bhoomi Sena, Tarun Mandal can continue struggle independently.

We : Shall we say at present the relation is based on commitment and trust. This is working alright. Only a mechanism for Tarun Mandal and Bhoomi Sena to meet may be added. Other formal relations should be allowed to evolve as need is felt.

B.S : (consensus) : Some mechanism should be created for Tarun Mandal and Bhoomi Sena to meet from time to time. But as an objective Bhoomi Sena should be a federation.

Constraints to Growth

We : What is the most serious constraint to the growth of the movement? Lack of cadre, or finance?

B.S (Leader) : Bhoomi Sena has come to a stage when people are accepting

it as the instrument for their liberation. They all join mobilizations. There is the question of selecting and training cadres for Tarun Mandal. People want to join, but local leaders have to be carefully selected.

The financial constraint is now becoming a major one. As Bhoomi Sana spreads, communication, contact, etc. become increasingly more expensive.

B.S (2) : Personal ups and downs of full-time cadres, this is also a constraint. Eight (number of workers) is not always eight, and it has to grow as organization grows.

: Movement has to grow to survive, but as it grows the democratic qualities will be more difficult to retain in their purity. Also, the larger the movement the greater will be the chance of repression from above, and to face this some centralism may be necessary.

B.S (1) : Movement should not expand faster than the rate at which quality can be maintained. If quality is lost, then it will not be the fault of those who will repress from above: we ourselves by developing too fast shall be responsible for destroying quality, and once quality is lost the fundamental is lost.

B.S (2) : Taking care about recruitment of full-time cadres - this itself will restrict the pace of growth. One new recruit was admonished in a cadre meeting and he resented, saying that he should have been admonished by the leader privately. He had to leave.

We : Leaders emerge out of struggle. The nature of leadership depends on the nature of struggle and the issues. Subsequent struggles and issues may be different.

B.S : This relation is recognized. A person does not qualify to be a cadre just because he has led one struggle successfully. He must be able to do sustained organizational work.

Bhoomi Sena versus other organizations

B.S : In the neighbouring Taluk, a political party has been working for many years. But their method is wrong, and people are disillusioned. What should Bhoomi Sena do there? Bhoomi Sena should not come into unproductive conflict with the party. In the broader context, they are our friends. So Bhoomi Sena will work in that area, try to solve problems in one locality. This may have some effect on cadres of that party. If they change, all the better, for theirs is a large organization and if this organization improves in method of work people of a larger area will be benefitted. It is not necessary to plant Bhoomi Sena flag in all areas, nor can Bhoomi Sena handle a much bigger area. What is important is that our method is applied elsewhere also. In some areas where that party is working, their cadres actually acknowledge that the Bhoomi Sena method is better. They have become friends of Bhoomi Sena. But they cannot really change: most of them are too old to change. And their leaders tell Bhoomi Sena cadres: "you are doing good work, but without party you cannot survive; so you should join our party".

[We (ques-: It seems as an organization also Bhoomi Sena does not
tion to have an ego and is not interested in replacing other
Y) organizations working in the area. This rejection of
ego at all levels - how does such consciousness emerge?
From what type of material conditions?

Y : From the realization that without surrendering ego
exploitation cannot be ended.

We (to Y): Let us take the question one stage backward. How does
such total commitment to end exploitation emerge?

Y : This should be asked to the cadres individually. Each
will tell his own story. Generally, the Adivasis have
been isolated from the egotist culture.]

Social and economic areas

We : How about moving to other areas like education, health,
women, etc.?

B.S (1) : Yes, Tarun Mandal should, when they are not busy with
specific issues for struggle, try activities in other
areas if people want them. But Bhoomi Sena has to be
engaged with political issues. The Farmers' Association
can occupy themselves with the others, with organizational
link with Bhoomi Sena.

B.S (2) : At present, Bhoomi Sena does political work, Shetkari
Mandal (Central association of farmers) economic work,

but Tarun Mandal is loaded with both economic and political work. At the village level also there should be division of work, otherwise one or the other function will suffer. For example, at the Tarun Mandal level when they are engaged with mobilization for a procession or some other activity, the task of negotiation for bank loan suffers.

B.S (3) : women may be given special tasks like health.

B.S (4) : However, for selecting cadres for non-political activities political consciousness and technical ability both should be verified.

B.S (5) : Work on education is not possible because half of the year the poor leave the village. They do not also perceive education as an issue yet. The beating up of Adivasi children by non-Adivasi children in the schools is an issue, and they resent it. But they have not yet thought of taking any positive action on this issue - they just do not send their children to school.

Farewell

We : We have learnt much from talking to you these four days. We are afraid we have not given much. We shall remember your hospitality, and hope you shall regard us as your friends.

B.S : It has been useful for us to discuss our problems with you. This has helped us clarify our own minds and has generated new issues about which we had not thought before. As regards your desire that we regard you as

our friends, (with a smile) we shall give due consideration to this request.

We (laughingly) : In other words, you only acknowledge receipt of our application for friendship?

B.S (laughingly) : Yes, that is the case !

Reflections on People's Power Arising Out Of Bhoomi Sena

1. People's power is created as a countervailing power through spontaneous mass action.
2. Spontaneity leads through a heightening of awareness into organization. Power is institutionalised.
3. In this process of institutionalization, the power of the institution and the power of the people have remained coincident; people's power has not been transformed into the power of the leaders/institution over the people. Why?
 - a. The awareness of Bhoomi Sena of the possibility of such a transformation and its conscious efforts to counteract it, by
 - i. Caeres continually moving among the people and integrating with them.
 - ii. encouragement of spontaneous action.
 - iii. style of leadership
 - iv. non-formal organizational structure (e.g.,

relationship between Bhoomi Sena and Tarun Mandal).

v. discussions in open forum - non-cadres have the same rights of participation and decision making as the cadres, whenever they are present at a discussion.

vi. a climate encouraging critical reflection.

b. The relative smallness of the area of operation, i.e., the space element is still favourable.

c. Time too is still not a constraint because of the specific relationships of power in the milieu in which it is growing.

Some Further Reflections

The specific Bhoomi-Sena movement raises several more general issues regarding the nature and scope of people's power.

In this specific context people's power is in the process getting organized in institutional forms to act as a check on the exercise of formal power, as is reflected in its law-implementing nature. This needs to be contrasted for analytical purposes with a situation where people's power largely or fully coincides with formal power e.g., in an immediate post-revolutionary situation. Thus people's power need not necessarily be countervailing power always; it may also have at least the transitory character of the ruling power. On the other hand, countervailing power is not always people's power.

The coincidence of formal power with people's power has been transitory in history. Since essentially it is countervailing in character to formal power, it would be generally more fruitful to think of people's power as countervailing. But people's power in this form can exist either as a heightened mass consciousness ready to be momentarily mobilized and act spontaneously or alternatively, it can be institutionalized. In general, people's power unless institutionalized, cannot act as a sufficient check to gross misuse of formal power. When institutionalized, however, new dialectics tend to be generated separating formal power from countervailing power again.

Countervailing power, institutionalized or otherwise, can grow with the formal power proportionately as an internal process (as in Chinese communes). But it can also grow or suddenly erupt in direct contradiction to established formal power.

Processes which have been characterized by the countervailing power growing as an integral part of formal power does seem to have a distinct negative element: the motive force of trying to capture the institutions created for the exercise of formal power is usually absent in these cases. Typically, countervailing power growing in contradiction to established power often has the characteristic of either capturing, remaking or destroying institutions of formal power - to start afresh again.