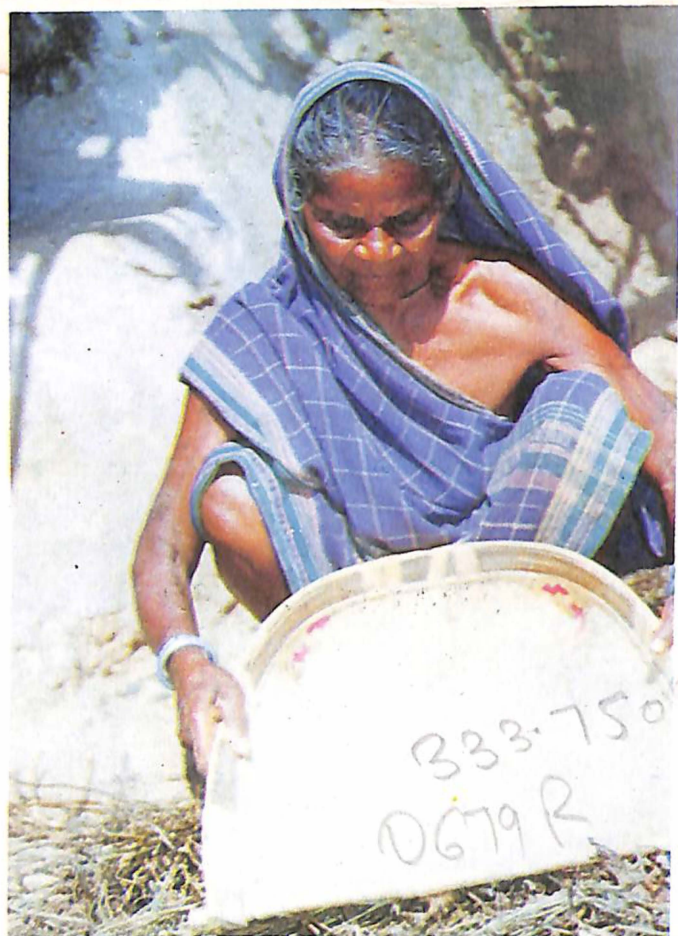

Land and Freedom Struggle Of Released Bonded Labourers To Obtain Land In Chattisgarh

Bharat Dogra



333.75098
D 679 R



Land And Freedom

Land reforms and in particular land distribution among landless and near landless peasants is one the most effective ways of reducing poverty. Despite the wide acceptability of this precept, the real progress of land reforms has been very slow. The Seventh Plan Document (1985) said, "Small and marginal farmers with holdings of land upto 2 hectares represent about 73 percent of the land holdings but are cultivating only about 23 percent of the cropped area." The situation has not improved since then.

However in some parts of the country movements of landless and small peasants have not only kept alive the issue of land reforms but in addition they have also created conditions in which the poorest sections of rural society have either obtained a significant quantity of land, or else they are likely to get this in the near future.

One such place is Mahsamund district of Madhya Pradesh where a voluntary organisation named Mukti Niketan (MN) has mobilised the weakest section effectively during the last five years or so for a peaceful but determined struggle for land and land rights.

The beginning of this struggle goes back to nearly 15 years when efforts were first made in this region (which was then a part of Raipur district) for the release and rehabilitation of bonded labourers. As Rajendra Sail, Director of MN says, "The rehabilitation of bonded labourers would have been incomplete without trying to obtain land for them. So we were led towards a 'Zameen Satayagraha' (peaceful struggle for land) as a logical development of first phase of the struggle."

Till about two decades back, this region (consisting of Saraipali, Basna, Pithora and Kasdol blocks) was characterised by the large-scale bonded labour.

Indian Institute of Advanced Study
Acc. No. _____
Date..... 14/03/20.....
8/9/14



Library IAS, Shimla

333.75098 D 679 R



140320

The farm labourer in general leads a hand to mouth existence, but among the farm labourers also the bonded labourer was paid much less than the free labourer. Thus while a free labourer or melha commonly got about 3.75 kgs of paddy, as his daily wage, a Kamia or a bonded labourer got only about half of this as his daily wage. This was partially, and only partially, made up by other payments including the gift of a small plot of land, but even in this the bonded labourer was frequently cheated. For example, the bonded labourer was given a rocky piece of land and after toiling on it for a long time he made it productive. But just then the 'master' would take back this piece of land, and give the labourer another piece of rocky land.

While the free labourer was free to take advantage of new earning opportunities, the bonded labourer remained condemned to the low wage given by his master. In some cases when he was allowed to seek other employment, he had to surrender the economic gain thus made to the master.

The bondage which generally started with a debt of between Rs 200 and Rs 500 (it could be less or more) extended partially to other family members. For example, sometimes the master had the first right to the labour of the bonded labourer's wife. In other words she could work elsewhere only if the master's household did not need her services.

What is more, the debt bondage could also be passed to other family members and from generation to generation. Even a child or a teenager could become bonded. For Rs 200 per annum and daily food of rice and salt (Pasia) a peyjoli - or a child bonded labourer aged 6 to 9 - served the master's household from morning to night. And all bonded labourers had to be at the beck and call of the master always. "Even if we were eating our food or sleeping and the master sent for us, we had to leave immediately," the released bonded labourers recall again and again with resentment.

In 1976 the Government of India enacted the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act. This was to be followed up by the efforts of the administration to identify, release and rehabilitate bonded labourers in various parts of the country wherever this system of bondage exists. Raipur district obviously had a very high concentration of bonded labourers, and the existence of this system should have been quite evident to the officials as well as elected representatives. But in fact not a single bonded labourer was officially identified or released for the next seven years in Raipur district. Finally, in 1984-85 when officials started the process of release and rehabilitation of bonded labourers, it was at the intervention of the Supreme Court which had been approached by a voluntary organisation.

Following Supreme Court's directives for involvement of voluntary agencies or social work organisations in the rehabilitation of bonded labourers, six voluntary agencies were selected for this work.

While all these voluntary organisation made their contributions according to their understanding of this problem of bonded labour, one initiative which clearly emerged as a long-term true friend of bonded labourers is Mukti Niketan (MN), a programme for the satisfactory rehabilitation of released bonded labourers. It is largely as a result of MN's sustained efforts that released bonded labourers (RBLs) have been able to protect their new-found freedom.

When as many as four thousand bonded labourers were released in four blocks of this region in 1985-86, MN was created with the understanding that a long-term effort will be needed to provide a livelihood base for RBLs. MN carried out surveys to carefully identify various vocational skills in which RBLs will be able to obtain a livelihood in and around their villages. Then training in these skills was arranged for them or their family members in these skills at the Multipurpose Polytechnic at Mahsamund. Nearly 370 of them were trained

in various skills like carpentry, cycle repair, and the work of electricians. Cottage scale production of soap, detergents, agarbattis, baskets and other products of everyday use was started in remote villages providing employment to a significant number of RBLs and other weaker sections.

This is a drought-prone area. MN and its sister organisations have also been carrying out drought relief work on a significant scale to reduce the distress of people and in the context of RBLs to particularly ensure that the difficult days do not push them towards the acceptance of some new forms of bondage. During 1996 to 1998 MN organised drought relief work in three phases. For RBLs and other landless or near landless labourers food-for-work was provided wherein a family (generally a husband and wife team) received 32 kg of foodgrains and Rs 90 for a week of six days.

For expectant and lactating mothers and sick and old people, nutrition packets were provided. Special efforts were made to ensure that the cash payments and particularly the grain reached the workers in time. The entire work was decentralised and democratised as RBLs and other poor people in various villages elected Gramin Vikas Samities (GVS) or Village Development Committees. Both in the selection of the development work and in the distribution of foodgrains the GVS had the leading voice. Representation to women was always given in the GVS.

MN also made special efforts to keep people away from liquor. When contractors and other influential men tried to set up liquor shops even in remote villages, women activists in particular took up the challenge of removing the shops and breaking liquor bottles. Within the organisation of workers, they were motivated and encouraged to give up the consumption of liquor.

It was realised from the outset that RBLs should get organised to assert their rights and as far as possible, their

support base should be broadened by including other rural poor in this organisation. Then they formed a union called Chattisgarh Mazdoor Krishak Sangh (CMKS) which is affiliated to Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha, a leading organisation of the poor in the Chattisgarh region.

Although not all sections of the rural poor could become the members of this union due to various reasons and the support base continued to be mainly of RBLs, still this union has emerged as a significant protector of the rights of the rural poor in a region which only till 15 years ago was a den of bonded labour.

This organisation work has contributed to, and at the same time has also been helped by the education programme which first gave literacy skills to a large number of RBLs and then this was followed up by a campaign to set up rural community libraries in distant villages.

The cultural programme celebrates the new found freedom of the people to voice their feelings and aspirations strongly and without fear.

About ten years back when I first visited these villages and attended a meeting of just released bonded labourers, I recorded my feelings in these words:

This is a change that cannot be denied, at least the culture of silence has been broken. The bonded labourer who dared not raise a word of protest is today gathering at meetings held to discuss his problems and voice opposition to those responsible for them. They speak out their problems. They sing songs about them, and sing them loudly.

There is one former bonded labour, Bujung who always insists on sitting in the first row of all such meetings and once

actually generously invited the biggest landlord of the area to sit by his side.

Sonai Bai, who was released after bondage extending for nearly 40 years, became fully involved in the struggle of bonded labourers and was always prepared to walk long distances to attend any meeting or demonstration in this context. She even managed to reclaim the land which had been illegally grabbed by some landlords in the past.

Mayadhar was another released bonded labourer who fearlessly played an active role in strengthening the struggle. In 1993 he contested the state assembly elections against his former 'master'. The 'master' begged him to withdraw from the election but Mayadhar did not oblige him. Although Mayadhar could not win, he managed to ensure the defeat of his former 'master'.

A more typical story is that of Shiv Narain.

This youth of Singhanpur village, located in Basna block, had got so used to working as a bonded labourer, always at the beck and call of his 'master' that he hardly ever had the time or reason to visualise a different life for himself.

Then suddenly things began to change, and very rapidly at that. Shiv Narain and his brethren heard of some vague and distant but obviously powerful institution called the Supreme Court which had ordered their release. They saw social workers and officials coming time and again to their village. To their surprise, they found that the officials no longer confined themselves to the houses of well-to-do landowners, but also visited the hamlets of the poor. Then a meeting was held under a shady tree in which Shiv Narain and other bonded labourers were given papers of their release from bondage.

But this was not to be the end of Shiv Narain's surprises. He was fortunately included among those who were selected

for a special training course in technical skills organised under an educational and technical training programme. Here he learnt cycle repair work. Then as a part of his rehabilitation package, he was given four bicycles as well as tools for repair work.

Soon he was a cottage scale entrepreneur operating from a road near his village. He not only repaired bicycles but rented them, earning a reasonably adequate income for his modest needs.

Another bonded labourer Malik Ram of Sukhri village went a step further. He and his joint family combined agriculture, animal husbandry and trade work in such an admirable way that they soon left behind the memories of bonded labour, and they could even buy a television.

However such success stories need to be balanced by the experience of other bonded labourers in the more remote villages whose livelihood is still quite precarious. In the existing state of rural economy diversified new employment could become available to only a limited number of RBLs. Several others continue to depend mainly on farm labour work and forest labour work the opportunities of which are dwindling due to mechanisation of farm work, a feeling of revengefulness towards RBLs on the part of some (not all) landlords, depletion of natural forests and distorted forestry policies. As a result of this some of them have to enter into exploitative long-term arrangements with landlords, or else they have to migrate to faraway places in search of work.

It is in this context that the need for giving some land to RBLs has been emphasised by MN to provide a more secure basis for their livelihood. While land for RBLs and other landless peasants has always been emphasised by MN, at a formal level the Zameen Satyagraha (ZS) or peaceful struggle for land started in 1994.

Due to scarcity of land and lack of other livelihood opportunities several rural poor were cultivating disputed land even earlier, but as a result of ZS their ability to cultivate the land and harvest crops raised on it increased. Thus thousands of peasants belonging to the poorest section, including a significant number of RBLs, have been able to cultivate land and obtain its produce in recent years largely because of the support extended by MN and CMKS. In recent years they have organised several demonstrations and dharnas to press for their demand for land.

Secondly, MN has carried out detailed surveys to find out the reality of the land situation in these villages and to what extent it differs from the government records. Availability of detailed data and information on the land situation makes it easier for MN to secure justice for the landless or nearly landless people, particularly the RBLs.

Where RBLs have already been able to occupy some land and are cultivating it, MN during the drought relief programme undertaken by it has created new irrigation sources in the form of tanks and wells, or else it has deepened or repaired already existing irrigation sources. This will make it possible to irrigate the fields of several RBLs. However this can only be called a beginning, as the fields of most of the poor peasants are still unirrigated. MN has plans to extend the irrigation work further on the basis of the concept of 'Pani Panchayats', emphasising the fair and equal distribution of irrigation water.

MN has already undertaken land improvement work on the fields of RBLs so that their productivity can increase. This has been done on a large scale in the course of the drought relief work so that, in effect, a large number of RBLs and other poor peasants have been paid to improve their own fields.

Similarly RBLs and poor peasants have been encouraged to dig compost pits in their fields as a part of the drought

relief work. This will be particularly useful as MN advocates organic farming methods. In addition MN emphasises cultivation based on indigenous seeds. A seed bank has been established by MN to make available seeds of indigenous varieties to peasants. Although due to successive drought years this work has suffered during the last two years, it is expected to pick up after some time.

MN has also carried out a campaign for protecting the farmers' rights over seeds and for opposing TRIPS as well as other international efforts to curb the right of farmers by patent regimes or related arrangements.

Hence MN's efforts represent highly relevant efforts to create a community of small peasants who are committed to ecologically protective farming practices, who will grow food which will directly and definitely go to hungry people and grow it in such a way that the fertility of land will be protected.

Despite this some critics say that this effort is ecologically harmful as the occupation of forest land by poor peasants is involved. However this criticism is not valid as the poor people are not destroying any forests, they are cultivating only land which although legally it may belong to the forest department (or else the exact ownership may be under dispute) but it was by and large devoid of forest-cover. The people from weaker sections particularly tribals are keen to save natural forests. They are very upset that natural forests are been converted into industrial plantations at many places. This also harms their livelihood as they obtain so many types of useful minor forest produce from natural forests. What is more, the people from weaker sections are willing to grow tree crops also on the land occupied by them, if (particularly fruit trees) adequate help and encouragement is extended to them for this purpose.

A lot of forest land is actually occupied by the resourceful rich people, but somehow it is only the poor people who

frequently face criticism. It should not be forgotten that the poor have a genuine need for land, they need it to keep away hunger, while for big landlords this land-grab is only a part of their efforts to maintain their dominance over the resources of this area.

The aspirations of the poor to obtain some land of their own are highly justified from the point of view of the priority, widely accepted objectives of reducing hunger and poverty. Various governments have also made promises to regularise the occupation of land from time to time. The Congress government with Digvijay Singh as Chief Minister also promised to regularise occupations made before October 24, 1980.

In reality however the actions of some government officials can be quite different from the declared policies. The experience of many poor peasants in this region has been that when the government gives them paper titles to land they cannot occupy, cultivate or, in some cases, even locate this land. On the other hand, where they have occupied land and are cultivating it for several years, then generally the officials refuse to give the legal paper titles for this land. In addition the special legal provisions that have been enacted to protect the land of the tribal peasants are generally not used effectively for this purpose.

MN has been demanding action on all these fronts. At times the government has offered to consider these demands sympathetically. At one stage Chief Minister Mr Digvijay Singh himself made promises to speed up the work for giving land and/or the relevant papers to the poor peasants. But on other occasions some insensitive officials have unleashed severe repressions on RBLs and other landless peasants. In some villages the persons struggling for land have been attacked and beaten up badly.

For example in late October and early November 1995 eight poor peasant workers of Keramunda and Kudaribahra

villages were mercilessly thrashed by forest officials. When MN activists tried to come to the rescue of these workers, they too were beaten up very badly by these officials. Some of them were badly injured. Even the Director of MN Mr Rajendra Sail was being threatened when the timely arrival of a senior official resulted in some protection being provided to him. Several ordinary villagers were also chased and beaten up when they were going for a meeting. During this terror campaign which extended for nearly one week several senior activists of MN who had played an important role in the rehabilitation of bonded labourers suffered severe injuries.

It is significant that in the months preceding these attacks the ZS had been going from strength to strength. On April 2 a large number of people had courted arrest to press for their land demands. On April 17 people courted arrest in even larger numbers. On April 24 the Chief Minister met the movement's representatives and gave them significant assurances. As a follow-up of this, activists met senior officials on April 26. The officials accepted several demands of the movement in principle and the district collector asked the MN activists to make available lists of the people who needed help to get the legal titles of land on April 27. The Director of MN made available a detailed list to the collector. On May 5 administrative orders were issued for action based on these lists.

Thus it appears that vested interests were badly hurt by this progress made by ZS and they launched this attack to injure some of the main activists and hinder its further progress.

In July 1996 forest officials tried to evict several poor peasants from the land being cultivated by them for several years, and when they refused to vacate this land, they were carried to Pithora town and beaten badly by the officials. In July 1997 several poor peasants of Bijrapali village were

badly beaten up by local influential persons and their standing crop was destroyed.

These examples indicate the growing intolerance of officials as well as local powerful persons towards the aspiration of the poor peasants. In organised efforts to break their movement, many activists and ordinary peasants have been beaten up and imprisoned from time to time.

Despite all these problems, Zameen Satyagraha has continued to remain a symbol of hope for several thousand poor peasants and released bonded labourers of this region. Accepting the demands of ZS will clearly reduce poverty and hunger in this region and provide livelihood base to released bonded labourers. MN has already done very useful work to implement several innovative development initiatives. If the administration adopts a helpful attitude and provides land to the poor, this will enable MN to concentrate its energy on constructive work for completing the task of the satisfactory rehabilitation of bonded labourers. This region has the potential of emerging as an inspiring example of helping the poorest of the poor to acquire a resource base of their own and carry out several creative experiments in self-help. To make this possible, the government should immediately initiate action to give land with legal right to RBLs and other poor peasants. In villages like Laripur and Indrapur where large scale inequalities exist the ceiling legislation should also be implemented effectively to obtain more land for the landless-poor.

Anti-Liquor Movement In Chattisgarh

Mukti Niketan (MN), the leading voluntary organisation in the release and rehabilitation effort, successfully combined this with an anti-liquor movement. As the released bonded labourers were highly motivated for starting a new life, they were also more responsive to receiving the message against liquor. As MN had been clearly working at several levels to rescue them from exploitation and create new livelihood opportunities, its moral authority to speak against alcohol abuse was accepted by the RBLs in large numbers and they agreed to give up the consumption of liquor.

Rajam Tanti, a grassroot social activist of MN who has been involved in several struggles against liquor, says, "Both aspects of the effort were equally important - the fact that people were receptive to the message against liquor and the fact that a sustained effort was continued to keep away the liquor sellers from villages."

As a result several hundred habitual drinkers have been able to give up the consumption of liquor in this region. Earlier de-addiction of liquor addicts as a result of a social movement had taken place on an even larger scale among the iron ore miners of Dalli Rajhara. Infact the trade union of iron-ore miners and released bonded labourers both are closely related to each other.

The iron-ore miners under the leadership of a legendary trade unionist and social reformer Shankar Guha Niyogi had won significant economic gains around 1977-78. Initially this appeared to cause an increase in liquor consumption but Niyogi soon mobilised the trade union to check this disturbing trend. He sat on a protest fast against the sale and consumption of liquor which had a high moral impact on workers.

Niyogi did not treat the anti-alcoholism as a relatively insignificant activity of the union. In the initial stage it became a major concern of leading CMSS activists. Through repeated assertions a climate was created in which the tribal members felt that the consumption of liquor was a betrayal of the union that fought for them. Once this feeling was generated, the task of weaning the tribals away from alcohol was not difficult since traditionally they attached a great deal of importance to honouring trust and loyalty.

It was realised that some constructive work had to be found to occupy their leisure hours or else the idle mind would inevitably be driven back to the liquor shop. Hence various workers were assigned specific tasks such as keeping a watch on the workers who were more prone to the various vices. Others were asked to supervise the construction of schools and a hospital and the numerous other activities of the union.

The punishment given to offenders was quite unique. Initially an offender would be asked to pay a fine ranging from Rs 50 to Rs100. However, behind his back, the money was returned to his wife. Soon this secret leaked out and the offenders became smug and careless. The union then reverted to imposing genuine fines.

Another interesting aspect of this experiment was that the addict's own family members were effectively used to rid him of his deadly habit. They were persuaded to report all violations of the union's regulation by the addict and continuously protest against the consumption of liquor by him. Helped by the changed climate in the labour colonies the wives and even grown-up children could now wage their own individual battles against an alcoholic husband or father.

The overall result of this sustained campaign against liquor has been that a large number of miners have given up drinking altogether while the few who continue to drink have

significantly reduced their intake. It is difficult to cite precise statistics as no studies have been made of this unique experiment, but in her own simplistic way Sonaribai, a tribal woman said, "If previously we consumed one rupee's worth of liquor now we consume four annas worth."

Rajendra Sail, Director of Mukti Niketan who saw the movement at Dalli Rajhara and later helped to replicate it in parts of Mahasamund district says, "The anti-liquor movement had been a very important part of our struggle. The poor and oppressed people have understood how liquor is used to keep them in a state of helplessness. As this awareness has grown, so have their feelings against liquor."

Photographs on the cover show various scenes of the struggles of released bonded labourers and Sonai Bai

Published By : Bharat Dogra,
C-27, Raksha Kunj, Paschim Vihar, New Delhi-110063
Tel.: 5575303

Composed At : Sharma Computers,
4/5 Moti Nagar, New Delhi-110015 Tel.: 5165967

Printed By : Kulshreshtha Printers,
11 Tyagi Vihar, Nangloi, Delhi Tel.: 5472648.

Latest Book By Bharat Dogra

Another Path Exists-Outlining An Alternative Society

Pages 240, Price Rs. 180.

This book says first of all that the problems of the World have reached such proportions as to create not only mass distress but also a crisis of survival.

Therefore the issue before us is not one of running faster on the existing path of development but that of changing over to a different path of development.

An alternative path of development is then outlined in detail in the greater part of this book. There are separate chapters on economy, environment, food and agriculture, world government, wild life, village communities and inter-relationships of various aspects of social change.

Also By The Same Author:

1. Creating A Happier World - Clear, Specific Suggestions for Change

A-4 Size 44 Pages, Rs 60/- \$5 outside India.

2. Encyclopedia of Development Environment and Welfare

Pages 312 Size 10 x 7.5 inches. Price Rs 300/- in India, \$20 outside India.

The only encyclopedia of its kind which combines information and analysis at the Indian level and the World level. Durable hard bound cover with jacket.

Please write for a complete catalogue of all books, journals and press clippings service in English and Hindi.

Special offer for all the 33 books and booklets by the same author in English -Rs. 1500 only.

All orders to be sent in the name of

**'Social Change Papers' to Madhu Dogra,
C-27, Raksha Kunj, Paschim Vihar New Delhi-110063.**

Institution	Institute of Agricultural Studies
Acc. No.	11032
Date	8/9/14

Highly Relevant Media and Book Efforts

by Madhu and Bharat Dogra

C-27, Raksha Kunj, Paschim Vihar, New Delhi-110063

Tel. No. 5575303

1. **Mother Earth NFS-India** - Journal for a happier world - now in a new attractive format.
Four issues in a year - Annual subscription Rs.250-
your subscription cheque should be in the name of
NFS-India
2. **Community Libraries** - A carefully selected set of
100 Hindi books and booklets available for only
Rs.1000/-. A great way to start a small library in a
village or a slum.
3. **Press - Clipping Service** on 45 subjects -
development, environment, social welfare and other
highly relevant issues - available in Hindi and / or
English.
4. **Encyclopedia of Environment, Development
and Welfare** - Price Rs. 300 only + 64 other books
and booklets by Bharat Dogra in English and
Hindi.
5. **Supply of articles** particularly for small newspapers

We will be happy to send you details and
catalogues of all these efforts.



Library IAS, Shimla

333.75098 D 679 R



140320