
Reasons For Hope

Part I

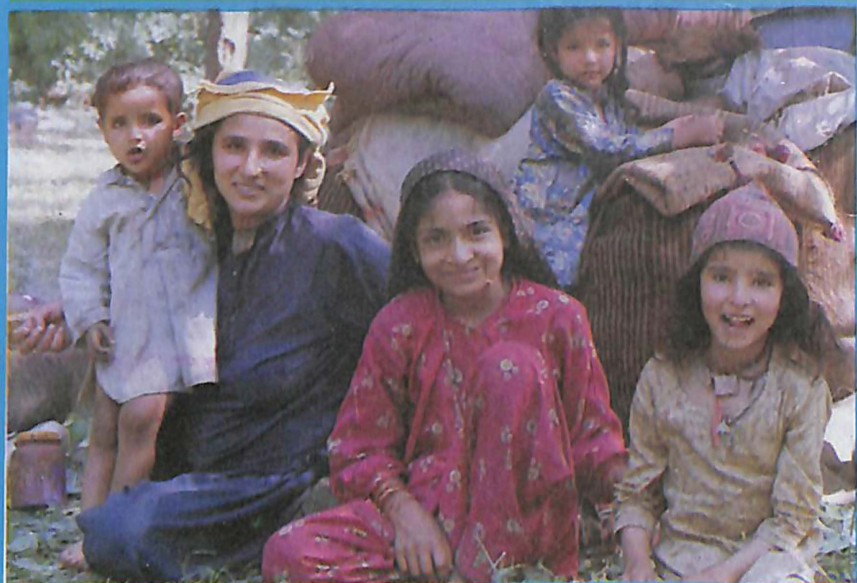
People's Movements And Voluntary Organisations In India

Bharat Dogra



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Introduction

A remarkable aspect of the nearly 200 years of British rule in India - one which has not attracted the attention it deserves - is that struggle and revolts by peasants and forest-dwellers continued almost throughout this period.

Peasants played an important role in the revolts at Gorakhpur (1778-81), Rangpur (Bengal, 1783), Subadia (Bengal, 1792), Mysore (1830-31), Barasat and Faridpur (Bengal 1838-47). Peasants, artisans and workers participated enthusiastically in the famous 1857 uprising in a large part of India.

Indigo farmers protested against forced and exploitative cultivation of cash crops in Bengal (1859-60) and Bihar (1866-68). Peasants rose against excessive rents (Assam 1893-94, Bengal 1873), against zamindar landlords (1872-76, Bengal), and exploiting moneylenders (Pune and Ahmednagar). In Rajasthan there were leading peasant movement in Bijolia, Mewar and Alwar against exploitation of peasants. Sahajanand Saraswati initiated national-level peasant unity efforts in 1936. Just around independence there was an important movement of share cropper peasants in Bengal.

Similarly there were several revolts by tribals and forest-dwellers such as Chuar rebellion (Bengal and Bihar 1766-72, 1795-1816), coastal Andhra (1805), Bhil rebellion (1818-31), Kol rebellion (Chota Nagpur, 1831-32), Rampa (Andhra, 1840, 1845, 1858, 1861-62 and 1879). At its peak in 1879 the Rampa revolt spread to nearly 5000 sq. miles area. The rebellion led by Birsa Munda in the villages around Ranchi became even more famous. Tribals rose against the trampling of their forest-rights in Bastar (1910) and South Andhra Pradesh (1913). During 1922-1924 Rampa tribals

had a major uprising under the leadership of Sitaram Raju. Just around independence there were major movements of tribals in Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh.

Side by side there were important social reform movements. The movements for equality of women were led by Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Sagar.

Social reformers like Jyotiba Phule, Narayan Guru, Justice Ranade, Baba Ambedkar and Gopal Hari Deshmukh fought caste rigidities and related social evils.

Some freedom fighters had a very deep commitment to social justice and economic equality. Apart from the leading communist party, this included some very popular leaders like Bhagat Singh who became a legend in his lifetime despite the fact that he was hanged by the British at the young age of 23.

With the advent of Mahatma Gandhi in the forefront of leadership around the year 1920, there was added emphasis on evolving a new development path, a different way of life.

The two most important challenges of our time are protecting environment and meeting the basic needs of all. The Gandhian response to both challenges is simple and similar - release resources from the grip of the very rich people so that the needs of the poor can be met.

The life-style of the richest people is attractive and so it soon becomes a model for others. Mahatma Gandhi said clearly that this is a model not worth emulating because it is destructive to nature. Instead he tried throughout his life to experiment with low-cost food, farming, education and medicare which could meet the needs of all people.

Mahatma Gandhi did not have access to the extensive data on ozone depletion, acid rain, biodiversity loss and climate change which is available to scientists and scholars

today. But his quest for deeper truth of life had taken him to a higher state of understanding from where he could anticipate some of the greatest threats being faced by humanity. His understanding of the ecological crisis was much ahead of his times and is still of great relevance today in solving some of humankind's most pressing problems.

Mahatma Gandhi challenged well-entrenched concepts of what is development, a task which must have been even more difficult then when some of the worst environmental aspects of this development phase had not become apparent.

In 1929 he repeated optimistically that the west will itself realise the futility of this path, but in any case India should never pursue this path. He wrote, "There is a growing body of enlightened opinion in the West which distrusts this civilisation which has insatiable material ambition at one end and consequent war at the other. But whether good or bad, why must India become industrial in the Western sense?"

While thinking of an alternative path of development, one thing Gandhi was very clear about was that it will not be based on exploitation. He wrote in 1929, "Surely exploitation means usurpation. And usurpation can never be reconciled with spiritualism."

Once he was asked whether he will like India to develop as much as Britain, Gandhi replied that Britain was such a small country but it required the plunder of half the planet to give it this development, so for a big country like India to develop in the same way will probably require the plunder of several planets. But he was certain that even if these planets were available, he would never would want his country to follow this path. He wrote in 1940, "I have no idea of exploiting other countries for the benefit of India. We are

suffering from the poisonous disease of exploitation ourselves, and I would not like my country to be guilty of any such thing."

While several people in India were eager to 'develop' as much as the British and later some others wanted to industrialise as rapidly as the Soviets, there were others who kept alive the concept of small and cottage-scale development to be based in largely self-reliant rural communities.

This viewpoint was most vigorously articulated by Mahatma Gandhi who popularised the spinning wheel or 'charkha' to symbolise this aspect of self-rule or 'swaraj'.

The spinning wheel in Indian conditions was the best example of appropriate technology, because, as Gandhi said in 1927: "It uses machinery for the service of the poorest in their own cottages." Further by taking essential industrial activity to village cottages "Khaddar (hand-spun, hard-woven cloth) is an attempt to revise and reverse the process and establish a better relationship between the cities and the villages."

In 1921 he wrote, "I have seen women beaming with joy to see the spinning wheel work, for they know that they can through that rustic instrument both feed and clothe themselves."

He said at a wider level, "What we seek to do is substitute false and non-human economics by true and human. Not killing competition but life giving co-operation is the law of the human being."

Cooperation of human beings is of crucial importance and this alone can reduce the dependence on oppressive machinery.

In 1945 Gandhi wrote : "When dependence becomes necessary in order to keep society in good order it is no

longer dependence, but becomes co-operation. There is sweetness in co-operation; there is no one weak or strong among those who co-operate. Each is equal to the other."

Gandhi was not at all overawed by the success of the economic super powers of his day. In 1926 he wrote : "So far it appears that the Western nations have divided all the know races outside Europe for exploitation and that there are no new worlds to discover. Among the exploited, India is the greatest victim. Japan is taking the share of the spoils no doubt. But if India and China refuse to be exploited, what will happen to the exploiters?"

Next year he made an even more forthright statement : " I do not believe that multiplication of wants and machinery contrived to supply them is taking the world a single step nearer its goal."

He made it clear that the he linked economics closely to moral and ethical principles. In 1924 he wrote : "That economics is untrue which ignores or disregards moral values. The extension of the law of non-violence in the domain of economics means nothing less than the introduction of moral values as a factor to be considered in regulating international commerce."

There views were reflected increasingly in Mahatma Gandhi's perception of the role of a consumer or a buyer. For Gandhi a buyer in need of a product should not enter the market merely to maximise his satisfaction. Instead he should be guided to a large extent by social responsibility. He unhesitatingly extorted people again and again to buy khadi and support it, ignoring questions such as coarseness or unevenness of the fabric.

Closely linked to this is the concept of 'Swadeshi'. Literally this means 'my country' but Gandhi used the word in a much broader sense. Explaining this concept he wrote in 1916 : "Swadeshi is that spirit in us which restricts us to

the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote. In the domain of economics I should use only things that are produced by my immediate neighbours and serve those industries by making them efficient and complete where they might be found wanting."

Interpreted in this way Swadeshi will take India to a stage where every village of India will almost be a self-supporting and self-contained unit, exchanging only such necessary commodities with other villages as are not locally producible.

Gandhi explained that the concept of Swadeshi did not involve any ill feeling towards foreigners or other related narrow feelings. He wrote in 1923 : "My definition of Swadeshi is well known. I must not serve my distant neighbour at the expense of the nearest. It is never vindictive or punitive. It is in no sense narrow, for I buy from every part of the world what is needed for my growth."

These ideas of Mahatma Gandhi attracted a large number of constructive workers, some with specialised skills in one or more areas. For example several persons started work in evolving low-cost, local resource based yet frequently more effective methods of medicare, education, farming and village industries. A special effort was made to promote hand-spinning, hand-carving and other non-machanised skills. Some others devoted themselves to 'anti-liquor work (nashabandi) and others to uplifting the castes and groups who suffered from social discrimination and injustice. Yet others devoted themselves to helping the even more deprived, almost ostracised groups such as leprosy patients.

The impact of these various aspect of the freedom movements can still be seen in the wide diversity of people's movements struggling for social justice, economic equality and environment protection, as well as taking up various constructive activities.

A few of these movements, struggles and voluntary efforts are described in the pages which follow. All of these movements and efforts are committed to peaceful methods of bringing social change. Several of them have been influenced by Gandhian thinking to a lesser or greater extent.

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CMSS - Trade Union With a Difference

It has been said time and again that trade unions should not have a narrow focus of just increasing the wages of workers or obtaining some other economic benefits. Instead they should be involved in the many - sided welfare of workers and this concern should be linked, to the extent possible, to the overall betterment of society. However very few trade unions have been able to actually live up to this ideal situation.

One of these is the Chattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS), a trade union of iron-ore miners set up under the guidance of the legendary labour leader Shankar Guha Niyogi in 1977. Subsequently several other sister unions came up and all of them together came to be known as unions related to the Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM). The CMSS at its peak had a membership of about 10000 workers, but this number will increase almost three times if the other related unions scattered in cities and villages of Chattisgarh region are also counted.

Chattisgarh region has been described as a rich land inhabited by poor people as its mineral and forest resources have been plundered for enriching a few while the vast majority have continued to suffer from poverty and exploitation. In these conditions even the highly publicized advent of a giant public sector steel plant at Bhilai also did not benefit the poor - several of them were displaced while the few who managed to get jobs at the steel plant got these through the contractor system at the lowest level. Around the year 1975 a typical iron-ore miner team (generally husband and wife) jointly earned only Rs. 10 after toiling very hard from dawn to dusk.

This ruthless exploitation revolted the sensitive mind of a youth who had come here from Jalpaiguri, to stay with his

uncle and study further. He got deeply involved in the sufferings of local people and started going to remote villages to know more about their problems and establish a deeper relationship with them. He also organised miners and steel plant workers. The police chased him relentlessly and when he found out that innocent villagers were being harassed by the police to get information regarding his whereabouts, he made himself available for arrest in 1975-76. However before this he had done the ground work for establishing a new union of workers as miners were fed up with the existing unions which had badly failed to protect their interests.

Soon after the emergency was lifted, Niyogi returned to the workers to a hero's welcome and the CMSS was soon set up as a truly representative union of the miners of Dalli-Rejhara, the main mining area. Within four years the wage of the miners increased by about four times. The labour-contractors and other exploiters certainly tried their best to resist this. There was even a police firing in which 11 workers were killed, Niyogi was arrested once again. But finally the determination of the workers won and the authorities had to agree to significant economic gains for them.

In some mining areas hard-won economic gains have been lost in excessive consumption of liquor, but CMSS was careful from the onset to prevent this. Niyogi fasted for several days for the removal of liquor shop and created a moral environment in which purchase of liquor was considered as a betrayal of the cause of workers. This proved effective to an amazing extent, as the workers had great loyalty to the union and respect for Niyogi.

Women in particular played a very effective role in ensuring that the consumption of liquor was reduced. In the case of die-hard addicts, women members of their families cooperated with the union to discipline the offenders. CMSS

encouraged women members to come forward and accept several responsibilities. A conference of women workers was organised on the question of protection of jobs from mechanisation. Women workers also raised the question of maternity benefits with the wider support of CMSS. CMSS mobilised people against any case of gender related crimes which came to its notice. As a result the cases of rapes or molestation in the nearby areas came down significantly. Women played an important role in almost all struggles of CMSS and related organisations.

The workers with their own labour and donations built a hospital called Shaheed Hospital which was mainly meant for the treatment of poor villagers from nearby areas. Highly capable and dedicated doctors left the prospects of high paying jobs to come here and serve the poor. Local workers were trained to become supporting staff and they happily volunteered for this work. This hospital gradually grew to a two-storeyed 50-bed hospital with an operation theatre, a pathological lab and a labour room.

This hospital took care to use only those medicines which are listed in the W.H.O list of essential drugs. Efforts were made from the outset to avoid a hierarchical set up so that all had a full and equal involvement in the success of Shaheed Hospital. This hospital became the base for preventive measures and a lot of educational material in simple language was published. At the time of floods the prompt work done by the hospital resulted in the prevention of epidemics.

Even good doctors cannot do much when clean water is not easily available and when garbage is allowed to accumulate. When the authorities failed to meet the basic needs of workers, the CMSS organised a protest action which led to the provision of drinking water as well as garbage removal.

When communal violence erupted in 1984 and the Sikh community was being targeted, the CMSS spread its protective umbrella and ensured that no Sikh would be harmed. The result was that Sikhs from several surrounding areas also came here to take shelter and remained well protected.

CMSS was increasingly concerned about the welfare of nearby villagers. CMM was formed to take up the wider problems of this region. At Nandiya village CMM carried out a long struggle to protect the rights of sharecroppers. Elsewhere landless poor were able to obtain land which they cultivated collectively and shared the crop on the basis of equality. At the time of drought, CMM tried to expose the irregularities in the relief work so that the relief payment could actually reach the needy people. This movement worked for replacing large dam projects with smaller water projects which do not cause displacement and directly help the poor. CMM tried to protect indigenous varieties of various crops, particularly rice, and tried to propagate the benefits of organic farming based on that. Similarly the movement stood for protecting natural forests and opposed their replacement by plantations of commercial trees. A 'know your trees' campaign was started and many diverse species of trees were planted in a garden behind the CMSS union office. When fines of iron ore mines destroyed the fields of some farmers, efforts were made to obtain compensation for them. There were protests against pollution of rivers by big industries particularly liquor industry.

Even while all this welfare work was being continued, the union had to struggle hard to save the jobs of its own members. The management of the steel plant wanted to mechanise mines on a large scale. CMSS not only opposed this but in addition, in consultation with some engineers, prepared an alternative semi-mechanisation plan which could speed up the work without displacing workers. This struggle

went on for a long time and although the CMSS also had to accept compromises in the end, nevertheless it provided an inspiring example of a union which could also present alternative, employment saving technologies in detail.

All this while the union continued to expand to new areas. Apart from other neighbouring mines (not only in Madhya Pradesh but also in nearby areas of Maharashtra) the union took up occupational health related questions in B.N.C Mills. After an intense struggle several demands of workers were conceded. As this mill was also in a crisis for some time, the workers offered constructive cooperation to protect its future. A senior official after his transfer from this mill wrote to Niyogi. "As you are aware that B.N.C mills has bagged the best performance award for the year 1987-89 during my tenure which would not have been possible without your cooperation."

The most difficult phase of this movement started in the late eighties when it moved to the Bhilai-Raipur industrial belt. Here it came into direct conflict with big industrialists involved in several illegal activities (including a hawala racket) who ruthlessly exploited workers with no care for labour laws. They were alarmed when CMM affiliated unions started attracting their workers in large numbers. They unleashed a reign of terror against the CMM and removed nearly 5000 of their workers from their jobs. Finally Niyogi was killed in Bhilai on September 28, 1991.

The assassination of Niyogi was the worst blow that could have been inflicted on this movement, and yet it has tried bravely to live up to ideals of its beloved leader in the nine years since then. Although all the retrenched workers of Bhilai have not been taken back on work, several workers have started living in a community spirit in a new colony Shaheed Nagar where they can share each other's problems.

Towards the end of 1999 the movement won some significant legal victories, providing new hope.

The movement has continued to combine struggle with constructive work. At several national level mobilizations to protect the rights of weaker sections, this movement continues to play a significant role. A strong community effort of coming to each other's help (for example the miners of Dalli Rejhaa have been sending foodgrains for the unemployed Bhilai workers) has enabled the union to survive very difficult times.

Mukti Niketan - Hope For Bonded Labour

Even though so many rural development schemes are announced in the name of the poor, these often fail to reach the weakest sections. For nearly three decades after independence, the poorest of the poor consisting of the bonded labourers remain largely unaffected by development schemes. The reason clearly was that all the time they had to be at the beck and call of their 'masters'.

Mahasamund district of Madhya Pradesh had a large number of bonded labourers. However even after the enactment of legislation to abolish bonded labour in 1976 and the subsequent effort to identify bonded labourers, local officials continued to deny their existence. It was only after a lot of effort by social activists, who also approached the Supreme Court, that officials initiated steps for the release and rehabilitation of bonded labour.

Nearly 4000 bonded labourers were released here and the challenge now was to ensure their proper rehabilitation. Several social activists and NGOs have helped in this work. Mukti Niketan (MN) is one voluntary organisation which has devoted itself fully to this effort during the last two decades. In the process it has helped a large number of released bonded labourer (RBLs) to maintain their freedom in very adverse conditions. *In 1992 the International Labour Organisation specially recommended that work of*

Mukti Niketan should be used as a model for the rehabilitation of bonded labourers.

MN proceeded in a planned way to identify the skills which could provide livelihood to RBLs in or around their villages. With the help of Chattisgarh Multi-Purpose Polytechnic (CMPP) a technical cum social education centre, MN was able to arrange technical training in the skills of carpenters, tailors, electricians, welders etc. for RBLs. A survey was also carried out to identify those products of daily use which RBLs could make in their villages. After some training, several RBLs started making soap, baskets, incense sticks and some other products at a cottage scale.

But all this at best provided work to only a few RBLs and everyone realised that the real struggle was to obtain some farmland for RBLs. MN carried out detailed land surveys to find out how and where land could be obtained for RBLs. This actually made the work of the government easier as it could now implement its land distribution programme more easily and also help the poorest of the poor in the form of RBLs.

Although the government made several promises, there were long delays in providing legal papers of properly identified land to RBLs. Therefore several RBLs started occupying small pieces of land and worked hard to bring it under cultivation. They formed a union called Chattisgarh Mazdoor Krishak Sangh (CMKS) which helped them to struggle for land rights. A seed bank has been started to help RBL farmers to obtain seeds of indigenous varieties. Benefits of organic, chemical-free farming are emphasised.

It was also realised that raising literacy levels will be very useful in preparing RBLs and their families for protecting their new found gains. MN has started a literacy programme which gives special emphasis to girls. New literacy programs based on local conditions and context have been prepared. In addition several small libraries which emphasise books on social awakening have been started in some villages. Cultural groups have been formed which give special importance to socially relevant issues.

Just when RBLs were beginning to get a little prosperity in their homes for the first time, it was noticed that many new petty shops

were being opened even in remote villages for selling liquor. Many RBL families felt that this was also a tactic to weaken their organised efforts for improving their life. Women in particular came forward very bravely to drive away the liquor shops. They formed raiding squads which swooped suddenly on these liquor shops and smashed the illegally sold liquor bottles.

Adverse nature also tested the will and determination of RBLs. They had a prolonged drought spell and then another disaster in the form of untimely heavy rain which destroyed the almost ready for harvest crop. This led to such large scale loss of crops and employment that the danger of RBLs again getting bonded to outside labour contractors increased.

It was at this stage that MN decided to take up large-scale drought relief work with two aims. The first was to provide immediate relief to RBLs so that they could protect their freedom. This was achieved by making very prompt weekly payments for drought relief work - a part of it in cash and a bigger part in the form of food grains. In addition special nutrition packets were arranged for vulnerable families with special needs.

The second aim was to improve the land of RBLs and to provide it at least some irrigation so that productivity can increase and it gets some protection from drought . This objective was also achieved to a substantial extent as 28 irrigation tanks and 13 wells were constructed within a short period in a cost effective way. There are further plans to improve their benefits on the basis of 'pani panchayat' concept.

All these achievements taken together are significant and provide a new hope to the nearly 4000 RBL families of this district. However generations of bonded labourers were deprived of all resources and opportunities to such an extent that nearly 15 years of this rehabilitation effort is still too short to ensure permanent success. There effort will have to be continued and the government will have to extend more active support before we can be sure that the freedom of RBLs has become permanent and new, secure livelihood has been ensured to them.

MKSS - Labour Struggle Linked to Information Right

Some struggles of weaker sections appear to be very small struggles at first glance, but they have the potential for much wider social change of great significance. If this potential can be tapped properly at the right time and linkages established with wider issues, then results can be achieved which are far greater than the issues involved in the immediate struggle.

A clear example of this is a struggle for minimum wages which took place in Rajsamand district of Central Rajasthan in 1989-91. At that time some sceptics asked why so much struggle is taking place for obtaining a few extra rupees for a few workers. But it was this small struggle which soon attracted nationwide attention and that too for very good reasons- it proved to be a path-breaking effort in the struggle to obtain people's democratic right for information.

Ajit Bhattacharjee, Director for Press Institute of India, says, "I regard this as one of the most relevant and important struggles of recent times. Workers and peasants initiated a struggle which is of such great importance for democracy and for which journalists should have played a leading role."

This entire effort had a very small beginning in Dev Dungri village of Rajsamand district (the nearest town is Bhim on the Ajmer-Udaipur highway). When Aruna Roy, an IAS officer, decided to leave her high profile job and settle here to work among the rural poor she had good company in Nikhil Dey, an idealistic youth who had just returned from the USA, and Shankar, a communication genius with a special skill in puppets. This small group lived an austere life and worked without any institutional funding, obtaining just an occasional research or writing project to ensure survival. Their dedication and openness soon attracted a large number of villagers and their organisation was named Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS).

One of the first challenges the MKSS faced related to the non-payment of legally fixed minimum wages at the various relief work sites. In the precarious rural economy of Rajasthan, these relief workers are supposed to play an important role in protecting the rural poor from the worst forms of deprivation, particularly in serious drought years. However apathy and corruption had badly eroded this role of relief work, as was evident in the open and large scale flaunting of legal minimum wage laws. Only a few years back another leading social activist Sanjit Roy had fought a prolonged case in the Supreme Court in which the highest court had confirmed that legal minimum wages should be paid at relief work also. MKSS learned soon on the basis of reports reaching from nearby work sites that despite this workers were still not getting the legal minimum wage.

In 1990 the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) launched a movement against violation of minimum wage laws in rural employment works in the Bhim region culminating in a hunger strike-cum-dharna. Despite the administration's heavy handed methods, the movement succeeded in drawing attention to the issue of non-payment of minimum wage at rural employment works. This led to a two-day discussion on the question of minimum wages in government sponsored rural employment programmes which was organised at the Institute of Development Studies in Jaipur. Senior officials, academicians and social workers who participated in this discussion resolved that minimum wages should be paid in all government sponsored employment work including famine relief works, and that too, within a week of completion of the muster-roll.

This meeting gave strength to the struggle of the MKSS and its activists were hopeful that the revised minimum wage of Rs. 22 would be paid henceforth. However, when work on Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY) started at 13 places in Barar panchayat, it was seen that payment at much below the minimum wage rate was the general norm, and in fact no worker was being paid the legal minimum wage of Rs. 22. Several workers made requests for proper measurements to be taken and when this was not done, they refused to accept the lower than minimum wage. However, several

workers were ultimately forced to accept lower wage due to their precarious economic condition and the immediate need for cash. The final confrontation was confined to 12 workers who steadfastly refused to accept anything less than the legal minimum.

Officials were quite willing to make an off-the record extra payment to the 12 workers who had refused to accept the low wage, and thereby to reduce the matter to one concerning only a dozen persons. For the MKSS, however, it was of crucial importance to get this extra payment on official record, so that this decision would prove helpful for similar struggles. It was in making the payment on record that the officials faltered, appearing to agree sometimes and then backing out. Finally the MKSS had to resort to another dharna-cum-fast unto death in Bhim in the first week of May.

By now the decision-making appears to have passed from the hands of the local officials to state level officials. Once again the state government adopted an arrogant and indifferent attitude. In a particularly glaring act of ruthlessness and insensitivity, the government sent a large number of policemen to forcibly lift the five hunger strikers and carry them to a hospital a long distance away. While the reason given was that their lives had to be saved in reality some of them were denied even water for a long time.

Finally what appears to have changed the heartlessness of Rajasthan government was the firm stand taken by the department of rural development in Delhi. The state government was not only asked to pay minimum wages, but was further told that its grants for JRY would be held up if it failed to do so.

What is more important, of course, is the precedent that was established in this matter. This immediate fallout could be seen in surrounding areas where workers employed at several employment works started getting the legal minimum wage.

This prolonged struggle against corruption led further to the idea of several jan sunwais or public hearings against corruption. These public hearings also provided a good example of how the participation of various sections including officials, mediapersons,

social workers, elected representatives and other prominent citizens was obtained to expose the shocking levels of corruption in rural development works.

This entire difficult and prolonged process convinced the MKSS that one of the most effective methods of fighting village-level corruption is to provide people the right to obtain copies of official records (such as muster rolls, bills and vouchers) relating to rural development and anti-poverty programmes implemented in their areas. This soon became a central point in the demands being raised by MKSS.

MKSS now embarked on a series of dharnas (sit-ins) in various districts of Rajasthan to take the message of the right to information to more and more people. Despite having a very low resource base, MKSS was able to organise dharnas and meetings in almost all administrative divisions of Rajasthan. People and organisations from very different backgrounds joined these efforts - once the meaning and implications of this campaign became clear to them.

Finally the Rajasthan government agreed to provide a limited right to information which enabled citizens to examine all records relating to panchayat development work and also to obtain photocopies and certified copies of these records. This means that if any one prepares fake records then local villagers can expose this corruption by asking to see the relevant records. This is why corrupt forces are opposing this right to information. MKSS activists are continuing their good work by using the new right in several interesting ways to expose several cases of corruption and also to test the practical aspects of exercising this right at the grass roots level.

At another level MKSS activists have interacted with lawyers, journalists, academicians and others to carry out a nationwide campaign for enacting right to information legislation at the national level. The work of MKSS at the grassroots level has been a big source of strength and inspiration for this national campaign. So what appeared to be a small struggle of workers has certainly created very relevant and positive impact at the national level.

Saving Forests And Seeds In Henvaighati

A significant and inspiring aspect of the voluntary effort in India has been that some small-scale efforts have achieved big results without any outside funding or financial support. The sustained effort of a few dedicated persons, their honesty and integrity which wins the trust of villagers, the ability to reach neglected sections particularly women - these have been important aspects of such a success story in Henvaighati region of Tehri Garhwal district. Henva river can be seen on Rishikesh-Tehri road in Garhwal Himalaya and its villages/small markets visible from road include Jajal, Khari and Nagni.

At the core of this effort are a handful of Gandhian activists. Particular mention may be made of Dhum Singh Negi, Kunwar Prasun and Vijay Jardhari as these three have been involved in all the major movements, including the anti-liquor movement in the early seventies, the hug the trees movement (Chipko movement) in the late seventies and early eighties and the save the seeds movement (beej bajao andolan) in the nineties.

This core group was formed in the early seventies when Dhum Singh Negi became the head teacher in a school. He motivated his students to carry out several constructive activities and as the social life of these villages was being increasingly threatened by the activities of liquor contractors and smugglers, he was increasingly drawn into the anti-liquor effort. He got support from several students and youths like Prasun and Jardhari. Although the smugglers threatened the youths in the earlier phase, later as the unity of villagers grew they had to beat a hasty retreat.

This unity of villagers was even more needed in the late seventies when several forests of this area were being auctioned. These Gandhian activists protested against the

auctioning of forests but when some forests were still sold, they got ready to protect the trees standing in remote forests. The most determined struggle took place in Advani forest. Here the contractor had initially managed to win over some influential villagers to side with him. But the situation changed with the arrival of a Chipko activist and a five day fast by Negi. Women and children of these villages got deeply involved in the movement. There was a lot of enthusiasm and people waited for the contractor to do his worst. He did this by calling a big police force to support the felling of trees. But villagers - including women and children - were not at all scared by this. Whenever the contractor ordered a labourer to cut a tree, villagers rushed to hug this tree. After trying in vain to cut some trees, the police and the contractor had to go back.

In the other forests of Hernalghati such as Salet and Khuret the activists and villagers again succeeded in preventing felling of trees in adverse conditions. Some of the activists then went to other parts of Garhwal to participate in Chipko movement there. All this resulted in saving thousands of trees from being axed.

Once the threats of commercial fellings had subsided, these activists encouraged villagers to plan voluntary restriction on grazing at some places so as to allow depleting forests to regenerate. Many forests near villages like Jardhar, Kuri and Piplet could regenerate in this way. Wild life started returning to these forests. At the time of forest fires villagers cooperated to extinguish the fires and prevented them from causing heavy damage, although some damage could not be avoided.

When mining contractors tried to initiate mining at a very sensitive point where dynamite blasting would have destroyed some of the most fertile fields, these social activists again got together to oppose this. The mining work

was given up due to this intervention, although it can start again. These activists also went to another site of very destructive mining near Nahin Kala village to help the villagers there to stop this.

In the early nineties some of these activists were alarmed when university/government scientists asked villagers to give up traditional mixed farming system (barahnaja or twelve grains system) to replace it with soyabean monoculture. These scientists also asked villagers to grow green revolution varieties of rice using heavy doses of chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

The Gandhian activists of Henvlghati challenged this official viewpoint and proved on several fields that if a proper comparison is made (including not just grain but also fodder, examining the cooking and nutrition quality of grain and counting all the ecological costs) then the traditional seeds and organic practices are much better. This viewpoint was taken to more and more villagers by activists who went on long foot-marches for this purpose. The usefulness of the barahnaja mixed farming system was also widely discussed. Several villagers reacted very positively and decided not to give up their time-honoured seed varieties and practices for the lure of some short-term cash gains.

The need for preserving more and more traditional varieties and growing them on fields was also emphasised. Women in particular responded well to this. Infact in the villages most of the farming work is done by women and they support traditional seeds. By approaching more and more villagers, collecting the seeds and making available the varieties needed by them, preservation of seeds is being done at the field-level. Nearly 200 varieties of rice, 150 varieties of rajama and several varieties of other crops are being saved in this way.

A very remarkable aspect is that some activists have worked in a very sustained way for nearly 25 years, without any funding even though their families face economic hardships. Kunwar Prasun became a Gandhian activist when he was still a student. For nearly three decades he has continued being a Gandhian activist, enduring great risks, economic crisis and health problems. He is one of those Chipko activists who was actually in the thick of Chipko action. Yet there has been no desire to seek any fame, any award or gain. His family continues to lead the life of a small peasant family.

Dhum Singh Negi has emerged as a father figure for the younger activists. A number of young activists are eager to join the movement. Raghu Bhai Jardhari in particular is working to prepare young activists who can carry out the unfinished tasks in the near future.

‘Appiko’ Movement To Save Forests

There are some parts in the world - although these are getting increasingly rarer - where the existence of forests near villages remains the major factor in providing people a high quality of life. Several such clusters of villages can still be seen in Uttar Kannada district of Karnataka. It is true that in recent decades the forests of this district have come under a tremendous strain due to a number of factors (including commercial exploitation for industrial-urban use and indiscriminate mining) but the destructive impact of deforestation seen elsewhere has also motivated people to get organised for the protection of remaining forests.

Thanks to this people's movement for saving forests which started in 1983, today we can visit several forests which would have vanished but for the timely action to save trees. It is a blessing to be able to stand in the middle of this greenery and to think that all this was protected by the

people. This movement for the protection of forests here is called Appiko (hug the trees). The name reminds one of the Chipko movement of Uttarakhand Himalayan region (Chipko has the same meaning) which to some extent served as the source of inspiration for Appiko.

Just a walk in a village like Gubbigadde (people from where had been enthusiastic participants in the Appiko movement) can give a fair idea of the importance of forests in the life of people. I took only a 15 minute walk and found that there are so many types of vegetable and medicinal plants just growing wild whose uses are very well recognised by the people and they describe in detail their virtues. I was initially full of questions but soon information on the use of various plants came in such torrents that I soon grew tired of taking notes. When I entered a house, I was informed how different types of wood had been used for the upper, middle and lower portions of the door. When I expressed admiration of a small basket, my village friends hastened to show me the many different types of baskets, all made from the material obtained from the nearby forests, which were available with a single household.

Then there were the numerous types of implements, for domestic use as well as for agricultural fields - ranging from the humble broom to the sturdy plough. Above all the forest provides the even more basic daily needs of fuel, fodder and water. The forest's gift of leaf manure has a special significance. This district is famous for its mixed gardens of arecanut, banana, black pepper, coconuts and cardamom which have been able to flourish largely because of the green manure and overall conducive environment provided by natural forests.

Due to these manifold contributions of forests it is not difficult to understand the pain which the people of Gubbigadde (sparrow field) and other villages felt when the forests near their villages were auctioned to meet the needs

of plywood industry or for other industrial- urban requirements. These villages also have a tradition of opposing anti-people forestry practices going back to the days of British rule. The people were anxious for some action to protect trees and they listened with rapt attention when a dedicated son of this region who had travelled to the remote Himalayan forests told them inspiring real life stories of how the people of several Himalayas villages, specially women, hugged the trees to prevent them from being axed. This youth, Pandurang Hegde by name, had obtained a gold medal in postgraduate social work course from Delhi but his academic achievements were for him only a starting point for involvement in people's environmental struggles first in the Himalayan region and then in his home-district of Uttar Kannada (and neighbouring areas).

Around the same time Sundarlal Bahuguna, the venerable leader of Chipko movement from Himalaya region, also visited Karnataka. As the people here were full of questions about deforestation and how to check this , a local youth club invited him for a public meeting in Gubbigadde village. The presence of this veteran of several difficult struggles and the inspiring stories he told about the nonviolent struggles to save forests inspired the people further to initiate action for protection of forests near their own villages. People of Salkani village had already written protest letters to forest officials. Now the people were waiting for some direct action.

This opportunity came soon enough in September 1983 when the Forest Department started felling trees in the Kalase Forest. Even though this forest was located far away from village settlements, as soon as the news reached Salkani and Gubbigadde villages, efforts were started to mobilise people for reaching the tree-felling site.

On the morning of 8th September about 160 people started their march towards Gubbigadde forest. Braving rain

and ignoring leaches that clung to their feet, crossing a river on a hanging rope bridge, the people rushed toward Kalase with the determination to prevent any further axing of trees. When they reached the forest, some of them rushed towards a tree which was being felled and embraced it. The axemen were stupefied. How could they axe a tree which had been embraced by human beings?

Surprisingly the forest workers were not all that opposed to the basic concerns of the people and agreed to stop work till senior officials came. On 22nd September the District Forest Officer came here with scientists and influential people. At first he said that the tree felling was scientific and should continue, but this reasoning broke down at the felling site when a scientist accompanying the official himself said that the allegations of excessive damage were correct. He said that the people should be complemented for having brought this to the notice of the authorities.

Husri village was the next major site of confrontation. In 1969 a natural forest of 900 acres had been clear felled here to raise a eucalyptus plantation. This had played havoc with the forest-dependent life of villagers, but fortunately one part of forest was still left for them. In 1983 the Forest Department sent axemen to fell nine trees here. The people decided to resist this. About 200 of them marched to the forest and embraced the trees. A tense situation was prevented from worsening when the official present was persuaded to take the viewpoint of villagers to senior officials and the Minister for Forests.

By December 1983 the Appiko movement had spread to eight different parts of Uttar Kannada district. Finally in the last week of December the much awaited visit of the Forest Minister to Kalase and other affected areas came. People turned out in large numbers to present their view point to him. The Minister gave specific orders to stop the felling of several marked trees and said that in future only dead and dry trees will be cut from here.

In April 1984 some Appiko activists decided to go on a long foot march to take their message to a wider area. This march started from Sirsi town on 10th of April 1984 and after covering about 650 kms. the marchers returned to Sirsi on 29th April 1984. Such foot-marches enabled the movement's message to spread to a wider area and also helped the activists to get a firmer grasp of the realities.

Within three years the movement had also spread to the districts of Shimoga and South Kanara districts. In some villages resources were mobilised initially by daily collection of handfuls of grains. The traditional theatre of Karnataka 'Yakshagana' was adopted to spread the movement's message.

But the 'appiko' movement was not concerned only with confrontations. Following the ban on green fellings after 1987 the movement gave more attention to the regeneration of degraded land. There are several successful examples where greenery is returning fast.

Struggle of Ganga River Fisher Folk

The Ganga Mukti Andolan (Liberate the Ganga River Movement) has initiated a pacifist movement to aid the livelihood of several hundred thousand fisherfolk living by the banks of the Ganga, as it flows through Bihar. This has now entered a new phase, which is aimed at helping boatmen.

It has been observed that marine fisherfolk are relatively easier to mobilise. The river fisherfolk are very widely scattered and despite their innumerable problems, it is very difficult to organise them, particularly so in a state like Bihar with its poor communications facilities and a very wide, intricate network of rivers.

The Ganga alone flows across a 500 kilometer stretch in Bihar, receiving several tributaries from other parts of Bihar and also from Nepal.

The first phase of the movement was confined mainly to the area in and around the Bhagalpur district. In this stretch fishing rights of the Ganga river had been arbitrarily given away to certain rich families (called the zamindars of the fisheries sector) who in turn sub-leased smaller stretches to contractors who exploited the fisherflok by compelling payment of taxes and extortion sums.

Several Gandhian social activists took the lead in mobilising fisherfolk against this injustice. They also encouraged the fisherfolk to become aware of the weaknesses within their community, and to try to overcome this. This process also took the movement closer to the women of this community and several of them started taking an enthusiastic part in the movement.

Contractors and their goons attacked fisherfolk or activists working with them on several occasions, but the movement maintained its pacifist character even in the face of grave provocation. Some big and colourful boat processions were organised, defying the threats of the contractors and raising the morale of the fisherfolk. Finally the obvious injustice of this situation was accepted and old zamindari rights over this stretch of the Ganga river were removed.

However, this was only a small victory, keeping in view that the situation changed in only one relatively small stretch of the main river, while arbitrary taxes and illegal extortions continued in a wide network of the main river, its tributaries and sub-tributaries. The second phase took the movement forward by raising the demand for ending extortions and taxes on other parts of the river network.

At first it appeared that the social activists had bitten more than they could chew. Their new demand threatened contractors and officials/politicians in league with them over a much wider area. Hence the repression unleashed by

them was much more than before. Moreover some of these vested interests were operating in the guise of cooperatives, so that there were also legal problems in resisting them.

Recalling those days a leading activist of the GMA, Anil Prakash says, "We had reached a nearly hopeless stage when in the wake of threatening calls issued to social activists and no signs of an early victory, even some of the determined social activists had started leaving the movement. We did not know what move to make next."

Fortunately at this stage the situation was retrieved at least partially by the timely intervention of some senior enlightened officials who tried to convince the Chief Minister that this was a good opportunity to help several hundred thousand fisherfolk. The Chief Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav was quick to appreciate the political advantages inherent in the situation. He went one step ahead of the demand being raised for stopping taxes on the Ganga river and actually cancelled taxes on the other rivers of the state as well. He told the activists, "In any case you are going to come back after a gap of a few months to recoup your strength, so let me give you the advance benefit for all rivers."

However, the order was easier to issue on paper than to implement. The reason was that there were several legal complications regarding the rights over smaller, remote river systems and even the GMA did not have the relevant information from all areas. Several surveys needed to be done to get the detailed information. As a result some areas still remained untouched by the widely pervasive orders of the Chief Minister, but still quite an extensive area received the benefits of the new order.

However, soon the movement realised that despite the newly won gains of the fisherfolk, their livelihood was threatened by the pollution in the river as well as the hindrance of dams and barrages which inhibited the free migration of fish.

According to a study by Professor K S Bilgrami and J.S. Datta Munshi of Bhagalpur University, in the stretch from Barauni to Farakka, "The maximum pollution of the river takes place near Mokamah bridge where the effluents from the Bata Shoe Factory, the McDowell distillery, the oil refinery, the thermal power station and the fertiliser factory are discharged into the river. Fish have been found to die in large numbers within hours of the discharge from some of these offending units."

According to V G Jhingran former director of the Central Inland Fisheries Research Institute, "The river valley development programme adversely affects both the migratory and the non-migratory species of fishes. Dams, weirs and barrages act as physical barriers to migration tending to prevent access of the fish to their usual breeding, rearing and feeding grounds. The denial of migration may result in a permanent and irrevocable reduction of fish stocks, ranging from lowering the levels of abundance to complete extermination."

So the movement now started taking up these issues of pollution and river-valley projects, which in turn took them to still wider issues of floods and flood protection works involving not just fisherfolk but also other people living around the rivers. Realising that these issues had acquired much wider dimensions the movement organised meetings at which people from other parts of the country as well as from Nepal and Bangladesh were also invited, leading to a very useful exchange of views.

This wider interaction has also brought the movement to a fourth phase which is more concerned with boatmen than with the fisherfolk. People plying boats, and indirectly, other villagers who use these boats, also have to pay several taxes and extortion sums. This phase of the movement has also met with an encouraging response from the people and it is likely that a large number of other such settlements will

get a chance to improve their livelihood prospects in the near future.

Strengthening Village Community in India

A crucial aspect of the thinking on alternatives to the existing distorted path of development relates to the rescue, revival and strengthening of village communities for the protection of environment, for evolving sustainable ways of meeting our needs and protecting all forms of life. This task is of particular significance in India where nearly one sixth of the world's population lives, and where over 70 per cent of the total population still lives in villages.

It is encouraging to know therefore that despite the many sided onslaughts on the village community in the two centuries of the British rule and even in the post independence period, many efforts are being made to protect the village community in India. While these efforts have taken many diverse forms which is only to be expected in such a vast country like India, one movement which has made the revival of village community the central point of all its efforts is the 'our village, our rule' movement. The most important leader of this movement is Dr. B. D. Sharma. He had a distinguished career in the government the highlight of which was the reports he prepared to draw attention to the problems of tribal communities in India. He served as the Vice-Chancellor of North East Hill University and then as the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes. During the last decade he has worked as a social activist devoted to strengthening the village community and particularly the tribal community. He is also the chairperson of a networking of people's organisations called Bharat Jan Andolan.

Mahatma Gandhi said, "My idea of Village Swaraj (self-rule) is that it is complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. Thus

every village's first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation and playground for adults and children. Then if there is more land available, it will grow useful money crops, thus excluding ganja, tobacco, opium and the like. The village will maintain a village theatre, school and public hall. It will have its own waterworks ensuring clean supply. This can be done through controlled wells and tanks. Education will be compulsory up to the final basic course. As far as possible every activity will be conducted on co-operative basis. The government of the village will be conducted by the Panchayat of five persons, annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female possessing minimum prescribed qualifications."

Taking this viewpoint further Dr. B. D. Sharma argues that the real basis of democracy should be the entire village community, consisting of all village units. The village for this purpose is to be defined not as a revenue village as mentioned in the government records but as a living reality of people spontaneously thinking of themselves as one unit, of people working and living together.

Dr. Sharma recognises the problems that exist within several villages due to the sharp inequalities and exploitative practices within the communities. These should be resisted and socio-economic equality established. Therefore in the initial phase he concentrates mainly on those village communities where already a great deal of equity within the community exists. For this the ideal choice may be the many tribal communities which to a considerable extent have equity within the community. There is an additional reason for prioritising tribal communities. They are the ones who

have suffered the most due to the neglect of their traditions and the forced imposition of an alien system on them.

India's New Legislation for Tribal Areas

On 24 December, 1996 the Parliament finally passed the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act 1996. This Act, which applies only to Scheduled Areas (having a significant tribal population) firmly establishes the Gram Sabha as the most basic unit of the Panchayat Raj set-up. For example Section 4(d) of this Act says, "Every Gram Sabha shall be competent to safeguard and preserve the traditions and customs of the people, their cultural identity, community resources and the customary mode of dispute resolution."

Section 4(e) (i) says every Gram Sabha shall approve the plans, programmes and projects for social and economic development before such plans, programmes and projects are taken up for implementation by the panchayat at the village level. Section 4(f) says that "Every Panchayat at the village level shall be required to obtain from the Gram Sabha a certification of utilisations of funds by that Panchayat for the plans, programmes and projects referred to in clause (e).

Other clauses give the Gram Sabha important rights before any village land can be acquired for various projects or before any village land can be auctioned for its minor mineral. Similarly the Gram Sabha has been given significant power regarding ownership of minor forest produce, preventing alienation of land and restricting the sale of liquor.

The tribals also have inherent strengths which should receive a creative outlet. The most remarkable reality concerning the tribal people, Dr. B. D. Sharma asserts, is

"the vibrant community behind the veil of outward silence which has provided the only protection to people, albeit not complete, in a strange hostile world."

To demand separate laws for tribal areas, Bharat Jan Andolan (BJA) (Indian People's Movement), a movement of weaker sections with special concern for tribal rights, formed a National Front for Tribal Autonomy (NFTA). NFTA campaigned relentlessly for new laws, including a prolonged fast by thirty leading activists in Delhi.

On December 24, 1996 the President of India finally put his signature on this new legislation on extension of panchayat laws to scheduled areas.

Referring to these changes as historical and epoch-making Dr. B. D. Sharma said that he had waited for this for a long time.

One of the most important features of the new legislation, according to Dr. Sharma, is the empowerment of the entire tribal community as distinguished from the village councils which consist of only a few elected members. The word 'village' will be defined in a functional way as per the prevailing position of managing local affairs in scheduled area. This village community will be given substantial power on matters affecting its present and future well-being including :

1. Significant rights of ownership over minor forest produce
 2. Better rights over water management
 3. Right to prevent land-alienation among tribals
 4. Right over functioning of local markets
 5. Right to oversee the government's development expenditure in the area.
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The Gandhian View

The Gandhian perspective on Panchayati Raj has all along stressed that the entire village community should be strengthened, but instead most of the power got concentrated in a few individuals under the Panchayat Raj system created by the government. Senior Gandhian leader Jai Prakash Narain warned that "if the people were to have no other part in the management of village affairs than to cast their votes at Panchayat elections, even village democracy will fail to be satisfying, adequate and sound. If under Panchayati Raj too the village Panchayat were not to draw their strength, authority and sustenance from the village community they would remain as before instruments through which the state government and its officers would control and manipulate the village population." He further said, in order to give a true base to our democracy... It is necessary to go lower down than Panchayat to the people themselves and to constitute the entire adult membership of the village community into a statutory collective body, the Gram Sabha. The panchayat should function as an executive of the Sabha."

Another leading Gandhian, Sidhraj Dhadha said, "Any talk of democratic decentralisation, or of the participation and involvement of the people in the democratic process has no meaning when the opportunity for them to do so at the only level where they can effectively function is denied to them... The village or the primary face-to-face community... must be the base, and the Gram Sabha an integral part of Panchayati Raj. Without this base not only democratic decentralisation would have no meaning but democracy itself would remain fragile."

Clearly an attempt has been made to empower the tribal community in those areas where they have suffered the worst exploitation in the past.

It has also been provided that the village community and the village council will be consulted regarding the decision to acquire any land for development projects or for any mining activity.

Some provisions of the new legislation are open to more liberal interpretation, in which case the rights of tribals will increase further, particularly in relation to forests. As Dr. Sharma says, "If someone is given rights to eggs, then this person automatically gets rights to look after the health and well being of the hen. So if the tribal gets rights to minor-forest produce, then he automatically gets rights to look after the well-being of forests."

A limitation of the new legislation is that it is applicable only to those areas which are legally regarded as scheduled area. A significant number of tribals living outside the scheduled areas are not covered by this legislation.

Despite these limitations, there is no doubt that the changes initiated by the new legislation are quite significant. These can empower millions of tribals to protect their livelihood and way of life from such threats as land-alienation, displacement and environmental ruin.

All over the world there is a new interest in the tribal way of life and how it can prove very educative for evolving a more harmonious and sustainable development path. This legislation increases the possibilities of tribals maintaining their distinct way of life and therefore will be welcomed by all those persons and organisations who are keen to learn from the tribal way of life.

Unfortunately, however, the process of adaptation of laws for the scheduled areas in various states has been slow and tardy, and it is much behind the target. Madhya Pradesh is an exception to some extent as it has initiated significant follow up action in scheduled areas. Infact this state has given significant powers to the gram sabha not just in the scheduled areas but in the entire state. Orissa has followed Madhya Pradesh in this respect to some extent. On May 13, 1998 the state Ministers of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj at their conference in Delhi resolved that the "Gram Sabha or its variants like Palli Sabha/Gram Sansad

shall be viewed as central to the success of Panchayat Raj and should be empowered and strengthened." As a follow up a task force has been appointed with 'Empowerment of Gram Sabha' as its main term of reference.

Dr. B. D. Sharma on the Village Community

Dr. B. D. Sharma emphasises the tradition of 'village republics' which existed in India since ancient times and deeply regrets its decay during the years of colonial rule. He writes, "The non-recognition of the village community on the one hand rendered it functionless and powerless in the eyes of law. But by the same token all spontaneous activities of the community which are intrinsic to a living system were deemed to be extra-legal, nay illegal or violative of the law of the land liable for punishment. In fact even a flutter in the field could be branded as rebellion because all activities of a people, by their very nature, are bound to be collective and based on mutual consultation and deliberation. Any organism devoid of such spontaneity, nay chastised for any signs of life, is bound to languish, decay and perish."

This happened during colonial rule. What saddens him even more is the continuing neglect of the village community even after independence. Using strong language he writes, "The very foundation of the village republic, which had been badly shaken during the British rule, was sought to be totally destroyed by the new rulers after independence."

This may appear to be an exaggerated statement considering that elected village councils or panchayats were created all over India. But according to Dr. Sharma, these top-heavy panchayats did not empower the village community; only a few influential individuals within it. He says, "The focus in this frame shifted from fraternity to individual. The panchayats, like all other institutions, became areas of personal advancement and aggrandisement. The spirit of community got battered as panchayats degenerated into subordinate formations and cheaper versions of state agencies."

Pradip Prabhu, a senior activist of the tribal self-rule movement says that although the supporting legislation by various states to be enacted by various states have either been delayed or else these are quite weak, people's own initiative has led to the encouraging progress of the concept of self-rule. He estimates that at the national level, this concept of tribal communities obtaining the leading voice in the important issues concerning the welfare of their village has already spread to nearly 12,000 villages. He feels that where the state governments are adopting delaying tactics in enacting supporting legislation, the central law which has already been enacted should be applied as there is adequate legal basis for this.

SEWA - Serving Self-Employed Women

The poverty of those who are self-employed frequently remains hidden in their cramped homes and narrow lanes. While the self-employed poor generally suffer from neglect, within this group also it is the women who suffer the most neglect. It is assumed that they work only to provide some additional income to family, ignoring the reality that in most cases their income is crucial for families struggling in poverty.

It is in this context that the work done by the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Gujarat has rightly attracted a lot of appreciation. In recent years its work and membership have been growing rapidly. SEWA grew from 41,867 members in 1992 to 2,09,250 in 1998. However it must be clarified here that SEWA has a rather broad definition of self-employed women workers including not just hawkers, vendors, home-based workers and artisans but also farm workers, construction workers and domestic workers. According to SEWA's estimates, of the female labour force in India, 94% are in the unorganised sector.

SEWA aims to help these women by following a strategy of "struggle and development - struggle against the many constraints and limitations imposed on them by society and the economy, and development activities to strengthen their bargaining power and offer them new alternatives." In all these efforts SEWA swears by peaceful, non-violent methods,.

Any self-employed woman worker can become a member of SEWA by paying a membership fee of Rs. 5 per year. Every three years SEWA members elect their representatives to a new Trade Council made up of worker-leaders. These 393 members then elect the Executive Committee of SEWA (25 members).

According to an official publication of this organisation, "SEWA believes that the basis of development and progress is organisation. Self employed women must organise themselves into sustainable organisations so that they can collectively promote their own development." Further this document says, "The SEWA movement is enhanced by its being a confluence of three movements - the labour movement, the cooperative movement and the women's movement."

Examples of the wide range of groups organised by SEWA include artisan cooperatives, craft producers groups, salt-producers cooperatives, dairy cooperatives, trading and vending cooperatives, seed-collection groups, savings and credit organisations, social security organisations etc.

Statistics available with SEWA reveal impressive achievements in increasing the income, providing additional employment opportunities and increasing the bargaining position of SEWA workers. Distress migration has been reduced as a result of SEWA's intervention in villages of Banaskantha and elsewhere.

In Ahmedabad where textile workers had been laid off on a large scale, the work of SEWA provided considerable relief

to these families. SEWA's intervention helped to increase the wages of exploited bidi workers and initiated a process for making available provident fund to some of them with the help of SEWA. Vendors have been able to win significant legal rights and to protect their livelihood and get protection from constant harassment. SEWA has even initiated efforts to establish direct links between vegetable growers in villages and vendors in cities, bypassing middlemen.

Cloth headloaders have obtained a wage rise as well as some social security benefits. To help waste-paper collectors, SEWA helped to get favourable orders from the government for free waste-paper collection from its offices. Paper pickers in turn have participated in the campaign to keep Ahmedabad clean, some are now called "Arogya Bhaginis" or Health Promoters, and wear special aprons and badges provided to them, providing dignity to their work.

SEWA's constant campaigning for home-based workers helped to bring significant recognition for this category of workers, particular from the ILO in 1996. Its campaign for vendors' rights played an important role is the formation of the National Alliance of Street Vendors in 1998, and earlier the International Alliance of Street Vendors in 1995 at Bellagio, Italy.

Other campaigns by SEWA include the campaign for clean drinking water in villages, clean Ahmedabad campaign, food-security campaign, minimum wages campaign, a campaign for the rights of forest workers and a campaign for child care as a basic service.

SEWA Bank has over 87,000 poor women as depositors. It has attained equal status with nationalised banks. This bank is owned by self-employed women as shareholders, and policies are made by their own elected Board of Women Workers. In Ahmedabad SEWA Bank even has a Mobile Bank. Over 1,000 savings and credit groups have been promoted and supported by SEWA Bank. A Housing Finance Trust has also been started to make available housing finance and technical services to self-employed women.

SEWA has also initiated a lot of work to provide several useful schemes to self-employed women including health securities, child care and legal help . SEWA has taken up the work of education, research, public work and communication. Video SEWA has produced several inspiring documentaries on development and social reform issues.

SEWA also believes in training its members to become efficient managers so that they can become more self-reliant and efficient in organising their economic enterprises. However, as many basic rights are still to be won by self-employed workers, particular women workers, priority still must be given to grass roots organisations rather than to managerial roles.

SWRC - The Barefoot College

Bhagvatnandan was a priest in Harmara village with inclination for socially relevant work. When he heard of a voluntary organisation (Social Work and Research Centre) being started in the neighbouring village of Tilonia (Salora block of Ajmer district, Rajasthan) he gladly gave up his traditional work to become a school teacher with SWRC.

Once in Tilonia, he became increasingly curious and enthusiastic about the various new technologies being tried out here. Although he was asked just to help in keeping some equipment on solar energy clean and in good shape, he couldn't resist asking a lot of questions about it and before he fully realised what was happening, he found himself shifting from teaching to the emerging solar energy section of SWRC.

His progress here was so rapid that he was soon playing a leadership role in this section. This section soon succeeded in lighting up the entire new campus of SWRC spread over nearly 60,000 square feet. In addition solar energy was used here to pump water from a deep well and

run several computers as well as a small telephone exchange. As this work expanded rapidly several other youths from neighbouring villages with inclination for this work were selected and trained by Bhagvatnandan.

Laali used to be just an ordinary housewife in Chota Narena village of Salora block when she heard about the opportunity for getting training as a handpump mistry (repair-person). The SWRC had installed several handpumps in this and neighbouring villages and now under a new scheme this voluntary organisation was planning to make these villages self-reliant in the repair and maintenance of hand pumps. For this purpose they were about to start training some selected local villagers in the repair of handpumps and special care had been taken to include some women in this training. It was hoped that once trained a handpump mistry will be able to take care of about 30 handpumps within a distance of about 5 km. or so.

“At first I was very hesitant-will I be able to do this new work? But the training at Tilonia gave me a lot of confidence and equipped with the tool-box, when I started going to hand-pump sites I felt very good. Of course there were some problems occasionally, but on the whole people said that hand-pumps were much better maintained after I took over this responsibility.” This was readily confirmed by other villagers.

Similar performance by several handpump mistries trained by Tilonia proved so effective that the state government decided to replicate this model in the entire state, and the experiment is also being tried out in some other states.

Bhanwar Singh, a youth of Tilonia village doesn't have much of a training in architecture, in fact he can just about manage to read and write a few words. But when he

was given the opportunity of supervising the construction of the entire new campus of SWRC, he carried out this work so effectively that visitors marvelled at the low cost as well as the good quality of construction. What is more, the entire work was carried out very speedily without any hassles due to the good relations Bhanwar maintained with all construction workers.

“When the building was ready and the cost estimate became known, a big contractor simply carried me away and pleaded that I should not give such a low estimate of the building costs as then he will have difficulty in getting his own higher estimates for similar buildings accepted by the government,” Bhanwar says with a laugh.

When he said clearly that he cannot inflate the actual costs, the contractor alleged that lower quality construction materials had been used. Bhanwar invited him to make any checks he wanted in the new building.

These are only few examples of how young men and women selected from villages around Tilonia have achieved very significant results leading to heavy budget savings in several areas of work requiring technical skills. This experience is a strong affirmation of the faith of SWRC that villagers with their close understanding of local problems and local conditions as well as a long experience of trying out various practical solutions are much better equipped to shoulder several responsibilities compared to outsiders who may have higher qualifications but lack the local understanding and practical experience.

As Bunker Roy, Director of SWRC says, “Tilonia now calls itself the Barefoot College. The Barefoot College has proved on the ground by setting an example that paper qualified, urban trained experts and professionals can easily be replaced by para-professionals from the village who have never been to college or technical training of any kind. They have learnt their skills on the job itself and upgraded their

knowledge through sheer practical experience which includes trial and error.”

This experience has been further confirmed by the experience SWRC had when it expanded its solar energy work to remote hilly villages in Ladakh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, lighting up villages and adult literacy centres even at heights of 14,000 feet which had no hope of receiving conventional electricity for several years. In the course of this work, SWRC established contacts with several local youths who soon proved themselves capable of maintaining the solar electricity system in their villages.

Abdul Karim, a youth from Ladakh says, “I was earlier employed in carrying supplies to army units on donkeys. When the SWRC people came with their plans for solar electricity, I became interested in this and asked them endless questions. They didn’t get fed up and went on giving more information. What is more, I immediately got an offer to work with them.”

Bhagvatnandan, who had gone to Ladakh to actually look for local talent to install and maintain solar energy system adds, “What attracted me about Karim was his persistent questioning about solar energy even though this had no relationship to his work or employment at that time. He was mainly carrying loads on donkeys but his interest clearly was not in donkeys, it was in electronic circuits. We recognised his potential and offered him a job.”

Abdul Karim grabbed the opportunity, and soon came to Tilonia for training. Once here, his progress was very rapid, soon he became a significant link between the units which went from Tilonia and the villages in Ladakh where solar energy system was being installed. Over 900 families of Ladakh have received solar electricity from these efforts so far. In addition nearly 300 adult literacy centres in 8 different states have been provided solar lighting systems. Youths

from all of these states have come to Tilonia to receive training in maintaining these systems.

In addition a fabrication workshop at Tilonia designs, fabricates and installs geodesic domes. The geodesic dome is an eco-friendly, low cost contribution to rural housing which makes it possible to avoid the use of wood, instead using triangles of welded iron angles built into a dome. These domes have been introduced on an experimental basis in several states and village youths from there have also been trained in this work.

Solar lanterns are regularly fabricated and produced at SWRC. These have found particularly useful in night schools.

When computers are installed in a remote village, these generally remain a source of mystification for local villagers. Not at Tilonia where local villagers including women are regularly exposed to computers and trained in their use. In fact the work of cataloguing nearly 25,000 colour slides and library books on computers has been mainly done by local rural women.

This approach of encouraging and utilising local hidden talents and human resources is encouraged in all programmes of SWRC - whether it is education, health or water supply systems. In education the concept of relying mainly on teachers, within the village who are more responsible to the village community has already achieved good results and it is being replicated on a wider level in the state under the 'Shikshakarmi' project. In the piped water supply schemes more and more control is being handed over to the village committees. In health very cost effective results have been achieved by giving training to traditional dais or midwives, as well as to other village youth as primary health workers.

"This rich experience clearly reveals the high potential of the hidden talent that exists in our villages, which languishes

for lack of outlets, and flowers so well when even a few opportunities become available," says Teja Ram, a social activist at SWRC.

Van Gujar Community - Protecting The Rights Of Nomads

The Van Gujars are a colourful community of nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoral people who live in the west Himalayan hills and the plains immediately below these hills. In the winter they live in the forests of the plains with their buffaloes and in the summer most of them migrate to high altitude hills. Travellers and pilgrims to Garhwal, Kumaon and Himachal Pradesh often encounter these nomads without knowing that much of the milk supply for their use is provided by them.

These closely knit people, simple in their habits, are in the thick of a controversy because existing wildlife laws state that human settlements and economic activities cannot be allowed in forest areas that are declared as national parks. This means that a large number of the Van Gujars (particularly those based in and around Dehradun district) have to give up their present settlement as well as the livelihood and pattern of life they have held for several generations. Alternative sites, offered at a place called Pathri, were developed without any participative interaction with the community, to find out how many of them favour a permanent resettlement site, and what should be the minimum area and other requirements of this site for them to earn an adequate livelihood.

Muslims by faith, they have a predominantly vegetarian diet of roti, lassi and other milk products. Residing in remote forest areas, they are well informed about the flora and fauna there, including several medicinal plants. The indigenous breed of buffaloes maintained by them for several generation are particularly suited to their way of life.

But can a satisfactory resettlement plan ensure that suitable land will be available in this region? As the experience of resettling evictees from the Tehri dam site has shown, it has been very difficult to find land for all of them even after trees were cleared in large tracts.

What is a plausible solution is a change in the law, allowing these communities to remain in the national park areas since it can be said with confidence that groups like the Van Gujars will assist wildlife protection activities. A Dehradun-based voluntary organisation, the Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra (RLEK), is endeavouring to involve the Van Gujars in the protection of forest and wild life. The RLEK chairperson, Avdhash Kaushal, says with confidence, "We are quite sure that wildlife will prosper if the Van Gujars are allowed to manage a part of the park on an experimental basis. If we are not successful, then the management can be taken back from us, but we are quite sure that this will not be necessary."

With adequate support from the government, the Van Gujars can be very useful in taking effective action against poachers. As residents of the forests, they are in a good position to challenge poaching activities.

In addition, if some minimum training support is provided, then the Van Gujars can prove invaluable in flora and fauna information generation, particularly medicinal plants. Some ayurvedic healers of the region already acknowledge their debt to the Van Gujars.

Ground work of preparing barefoot zoologists and botanists among the Van Gujars has already begun. A recent 'Community Forest Management in Protected Areas (CFMPA) plan for involving Van Gujars in forest protection describes the several skills and admirable world-view of Van Gujars in detail. On the knowledge of Van Gujars about forests it says, "To walk through the forest with a Van Gujar

guide is a lesson in bio-diversity; every species of tree is known, its quality as fodder, the timing of its leaf-fall, medicinal properties and so on. Every sound has meaning, every bird known and its habits noted, every fallen branch or tree noted."

The skills of the Van Gujars in buffalo breeding are evident from the special breeds they have which are particularly suited to the nomadic life. As this document says, "Van Gujar buffalo are not the rather dopey animals one sees commonly in Indian villages but a livelier and altogether more robust breed with the endurance to cover great distances on very little food and the strength to scramble over rocks in high mountain pastures... Injured animals are carefully tended and unproductive animals are neither killed nor sold."

As for their special needs of migration, "It is said these buffaloes themselves initiate the migration, becoming restless for the hills as the April heat increases and then again becoming anxious to descend as the mountain air cools in late September. They know the regular stops along the route, and where water is to be found."

Clearly communities which have such well-established skills and assets for a nomadic or semi-nomadic way of life deserve a better understanding of their ways instead of alien development plans being imposed on them.

Recently RLEK implemented a literacy programme among the Van Gujars. Highly motivated teachers stayed with Van Gujars in forests. Some of them even migrated with them to high altitude mountains when the migration season came. Some teachers were also selected from the Himalayan villages. Hence literacy work could continue despite the migration to remote hills.

Mr. Avdhash Kaushal, says, "Education programmes for nomadic people around the world set forth that settlement is

a precondition to their being made literate. We at RLEK, however, do not agree with this and believe that any programme for them must necessarily include their traditional ways and traditional wisdom. It is only the tired and the weary that settle down and the fact that this community has not done so over thousands of years goes a long way to prove the sustainability of their ways.'

Literacy work among nomads can be very difficult, and it is quite possible that some members of community can be left behind despite the best efforts to take literacy to the entire community living in a particular region. Despite this problem RLEK pioneered an approach of literacy which can be very useful among nomads and other such literacy efforts among nomads can benefit from the lessons learnt in the course of their work. Recently RLEK was given a prestigious UNICEF award for their literacy project.

This effort presents an admirable effort to understand and help a misunderstood and neglected community.

Frances Moore Lappe and Joseph Collins write in their widely acclaimed book, 'Food First' : "While the migrations of nomadic pastoral people might look random to outsiders, they are, in reality, patterned to take advantage of variations in rainfall and vegetation... The nomadic tactics make use of resources that others would not even consider resources."

K. S. Fraudenberger, a social scientist who has worked extensively in Africa, particularly Senegal, says, "Pastoralists like FulBe play a critical role in the sustainable management of fragmented ecosystems. Both Third World government and aid agencies need to recognise this. The key is to work with local people to develop policies to protect grazing lands and nomadic rights where pastoralism is both more sustainable and more environmentally appropriate than farming."

Disha - Bringing Hope To The Oppressed

In the early eighties a young man named Keshavanad Tiwari was struggling to choose between two options - a promising career as a politician and uncertain prospects of starting a voluntary organisation in a new area. He had already been elected twice to the Dehradun Cantonment Board and most of his friends felt that it would be foolish to give up this career to start a voluntary organisation. Yet something within beckoned him to take up new challenges and he left the comfortable life in Dehradun for the strenuous life of Sultanpur Chilkana, a village of Saharanpur district where he set up a voluntary organisation called Disha.

Nearly 17 years later he says with a smile that he doesn't regret the choice he made at that time, as the hardships he faced in his new life were more than compensated by the affection of people and the satisfaction of relevant work he got in his new life.

"In the earlier days when our own food and shelter were not assured and the risks became too great", says Jahnvi, who married K. N. Tiwari soon after he came here, "Sometimes I wondered how I am going to survive here. But once I came to grip with the challenging tasks I was determined to stay on. And today I am glad to have been a part of relevant social change that really helps people in their distress and suffering."

The earliest struggles were shared by K. N. Tiwari, Jahnvi and Manorama, another colleague from Dehradun. After working with dedication for some time Manorama left for another place, but local colleagues continued to join as work expanded, with the biggest expansion taking place around 1989. Today Disha has nearly 40 full time members supported by a large number of part-time workers and

volunteers spread over almost 60 villages of two blocks of Saharanpur district - Sarsawa and Sadhaura Qadim.

Initially Disha's health and education programmes helped it to establish wider contacts with local people. A dispensary started by Disha met the medicine needs of several villagers in and around Sultanpur Chilkana for some years. In its public health programme Disha stressed preventive aspects, alternate therapies and timely diagnosis and treatment of TB. It also participated in efforts to reclaim some waterlogged areas.

Disha participated in the adult literacy campaign and also set up schools for children. Its literacy efforts found the maximum success with those adolescent girls, particularly from the Muslim community, who had missed going to school in their childhood but were keen to become literate before their marriage. Some of them were prevented from going to literacy classes by conservative male members of society, yet so keen was their desire to learn that they found one pretext or the other to come to the literacy class.

This constructive work helped to create bonds with the local community which were to prove helpful for struggles involving conflict with the entrenched vested interests. Such conflicts appeared quite soon when Disha tried to help artisans who made ban rope from bhabhar, a grass which grows wild in the forests of this area. The contractors who had been fleecing the artisans at various levels didn't at all like the idea of a voluntary agency threatening their profits, and set fire to a huge pile of bhabhar which Tiwari had procured for the artisans after a lot of difficulty. Despite this early setback, Disha continued its efforts and collaborated with another voluntary organisation of this area, Vikalp to set up an organisation of Baan workers called Ghar Area Workers Front (Ghar Shretra Mazdoor Morcha or GSMM). As a result of its sustained efforts, today it is much easier for baan workers to obtain their raw material regularly at a

concessional rate, so that an important source of livelihood for this region has been saved to a significant extent.

Disha gave special attention to mobilising women for social change, particularly from weaker sections. Several Mahila Jagriti Kendras or Women's Awakening Centres were set up. A labour camp was organised to inform workers about their legal rights in which nearly 200 women workers participated, almost the same number as male workers. As women workers become more aware of their rights, they realised how they were being forced to work at wages significantly lower than the minimum wage rate. Women at Sultanpur village decided to go on a strike till the big landowners agreed to a significant rise in their wage rate. This movement supported by Disha continued for nearly 4 months. Finally the women workers scored a big success as their wage rate could rise from Rs 8 to around Rs 20. The benefits spread to a wide area.

In 1989 Disha agreed to implement the Government's Mahila Samakhya Programme for the awakening of women in 60 villages of the two blocks in which it worked. Disha's activists didn't like some of the rigidities of this programme but nevertheless while it continued it enabled Disha's work to extend to a wider area. After this programme was withdrawn Disha took up a major programme of self-help groups in most of these villages, initially only with women but later also with men.

Under this programme 10 to 20 villagers are encouraged to form a self-help group in which each member contributes a monthly saving, generally as little as Rs 10 a month. As the bank balance of the group builds up, the members can meet their credit needs from this fund. The interest they pay goes not to any moneylender but to increasing their own fund. This saves them from being fleeced by private moneylenders in their hour of need. Nearly 100 such self help groups have already been formed at the initiative of Disha.

Although the work of Disha brought significant gains to weaker sections, the opening up of liquor vends in villages and the subsequent increase in liquor consumption threatened to snatch away some of these gains from them, apart from leading to the ruin of health, domestic violence and other problems. Women were the worst sufferers of this increasing spread of the liquor menace in villages. In Pather village, where Disha had been working for a long time, the people decided to launch a movement for the removal of the liquor vend from this village. This movement supported by Disha continued for nearly 3 months. Several activists of Disha were badly injured in the police repression unleashed against this movement. However finally the movement won and the liquor vend was removed from this village.

This success inspired similar movements in some other villages, and liquor vends were removed in some other villages as well.

In the middle of all these movements and programmes, Disha has created a community of closely knit dedicated activists which is its biggest strength. Overcoming social barriers such as Hindu-Muslim, high caste-dalit, these activists help to spread the same attitudes and relationships to the wider community in which they work.

In recent years Disha has also ventured beyond the confines of the two blocks of Saharanpur district which have been the main area of its work. It has taken up a project of earthquake-resistant housing technology and watershed development in Uttarkashi district, and another project for helping Ringaal artisans (who make baskets and related products from a thin bamboo) in Tehri Garhwal district. In addition, as one of the partners of a state-level project, Disha is entering into partnerships with some other groups, particularly those based in Western Uttar Pradesh. However as it enters into new areas, Disha will have to increase its more specialised capacities to cope with the new work in

new environs, for example the technology and watershed project in Uttarkashi.

Disha's activists have a firm grasp of the reality of the Saharanpur villages where they work, but as the process of social change has many complexities, a greater awareness of the wider processes of social change in other parts of the country and world can contribute to widening their horizons.

In its journey during the last one and a half decades, Disha has faced many crises including many threats and real attacks. Some of its activists have been seriously injured, and some, including its chief functionary, have faced the threat of being attacked and killed. It is a mark of their courage and determination that this has not deterred them from any of their main activities, concerns and beliefs and they have emerged from some of their most serious crises, such as at the time of police beatings in Pather agitation, with even greater determination than before.

ABSS- Fighting Terror, Protecting Dignity

The biggest challenge for a voluntary organisation in conditions of rural India is to select a very difficult area for its work, and then to work with the most oppressed sections in this area. This is the challenge which Akhil Bhartiya Samaj Seva Sansthaan (ABSSS - All India Social Service Organisation) accepted when it decided to work in Mau and Manikpur blocks of Chitrakut district (Uttar Pradesh). This region (known as Patha) had been in news mainly for the repression of its feudal landlords and terror of dacoit gangs, apart from acute water scarcity, drought distress and prevalence of high levels of hunger and malnutrition particularly among the kol tribals.

Soon the ABSSS realised that at each stage it will have to confront the feudal landlords, or the dadus as they are known here. When it is a question of challenging land grab

and bonded labour, then of course the dadus are confronted directly. But even if there was a struggle for better rates for minor forest produce, or for misutilisation of irrigation funds, then even here the dadus were involved because the forest contracts and irrigation contracts were generally obtained by them or others related to them. In other words, all resources were being cornered by a small number of influential people while kols were deprived at all levels. So during struggles to obtain the rights of kols they had to confront the dadus at several levels.

What probably the ABSSS did not realise in the first phase was that the dadus will also use dacoit gangs to terrorise the ABSSS activists. They did not realise that even when ABSSS activists worked to implement the government's own priority programees like land reforms and bonded labour rehabilitation, the dadus will be able to collude with police officials to implicate them in false cases.

However as these threats gradually manifested themselves over the years and its director Gopal Bhai's life was also threatened, the ABSSS neither stepped down its commitments to the poor nor its resolve to confront the symbols of terror and repression. It was above all its determination to continue its chosen work in increasingly hostile conditions which increased the confidence of the long-oppressed kol tribals (and other communities) and they started coming forward to assert their rights.

The more visible achievements of ABSSS in the course of this involvement of nearly two decades (more intensive work for nearly 14 years) are the following :

1. Playing crucial role in the distribution of nearly 6,000 to 10,000 acres of land to nearly 2,000 to 3,000 families of the landless or nearly landless families, mainly kol tribals.

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2. Playing a crucial role in the release and rehabilitation of rural bonded labourers.
 3. Construction/repair of 27 tanks and 39 wells, construction of 7 check dams and 2 earthen dams, irrigation of about 1,000 acres of land, water-conservation and bunding work in 2,000 acres of land, regulation of 28 chauhras or natural sources of water to provide drinking water.
 4. Provide primary level education in innovative creative ways to a large number of children, numbering about 2,100 at present.
 5. Increasing the income of tribals from minor forests collection, protecting their forest rights and planting several thousand trees.
 6. Providing timely legal aid to the poor.
 7. A health program emphasising local herbs based medicines and alternative therapies.
 8. Effective and sensitive organisation of drought relief work and flood relief work.

While these achievements - particularly those relating to land distribution - are very significant in themselves, the real achievement of ABSSS goes much beyond that in becoming a true partner for a highly distressed community, a partner which shares all sufferings and joys of the community and the community in turn shares its joys and suffering with this partner. There were difficult times for ABSSS when some of its friends advised it not to get so involved in so many confrontations. They advised the less hazardous path of concentrating on building check dams and running schools. But ABSSS felt that it had a moral obligation to take up and pursue all cases of distress and deprivation which the poor

suffered at the hands of feudal landlords. At times this also involved direct confrontation with police authorities - as for example in cases when police officials were involved in several human rights violations. However ABSSS did not shirk from these confrontations just to ensure its smooth functioning. When it took up cases involving the oppression of very poor and weak people at the hands of the some of the most powerful people of this region, it obviously could not succeed in getting justice in all the cases. But ABSSS tried its best and the victims knew that it was trying its best. This is what drew them to ABSSS and a relationship of trust was established.

This message that ABSSS can be trusted is now spreading beyond the area of where it has concentrated most of its work. Other oppressed communities of neighbouring areas are getting involved with ABSSS. For example the badly neglected community of Snake charmers in Shankargarh block. ABSSS is also drawing attention to the tragic plight of quarry workers there, including child workers. Its excellent organisation of flood relief work on the bank of Ken river in Banda district has won ABSSS permanent friends in that area who retain close links several years after floods. In Majhgawan block of Satna district there is a growing struggle for the rights of forest workers. Work is also beginning in Rewa, Lalitpur Hamirpur districts and other areas.

Within the main area of work, new organisation of Kol youths like Patha Kol Adhikar Manch and Patha Kol Vikas Samiti are taking up more and more responsibilities. Rajan Kol has emerged as a source of inspiration of Kol youth. Earlier he could not remain sitting on the cot when high caste men of his village passed by. Today he is the elected pradhan (head person) of the same Sarhat panchayat area. He has implemented several development schemes and refused to pay the customary bribes for obtaining funds. He

even refused to pay any money to dacoit gangs even though they kidnapped him and threatened him.

Buti Kol also of Sarhat panchayat was an illiterate girl who toiled hard to earn five rupees in a day. She made use of the adult literacy classes organised by ABSSS to acquire literacy and then she became active in mobilising her community. Finally she contested district level elections and was elected member of district panchayat with a heavy majority.

Like Rajan and Buti, several other youths of the Kol community are emerging to take up positions of responsibilities. In schools more kol children are learning the first lesson of what they need to do to bring justice to their community and protect its rights. A lot of hardship continues to trouble the kols and other people of Patha, there are still glaring violations of human rights from time to time, but at the same time in many hamlets and huts things are changing. What in more there is a growing desire and determination to change things, to obtain justice.

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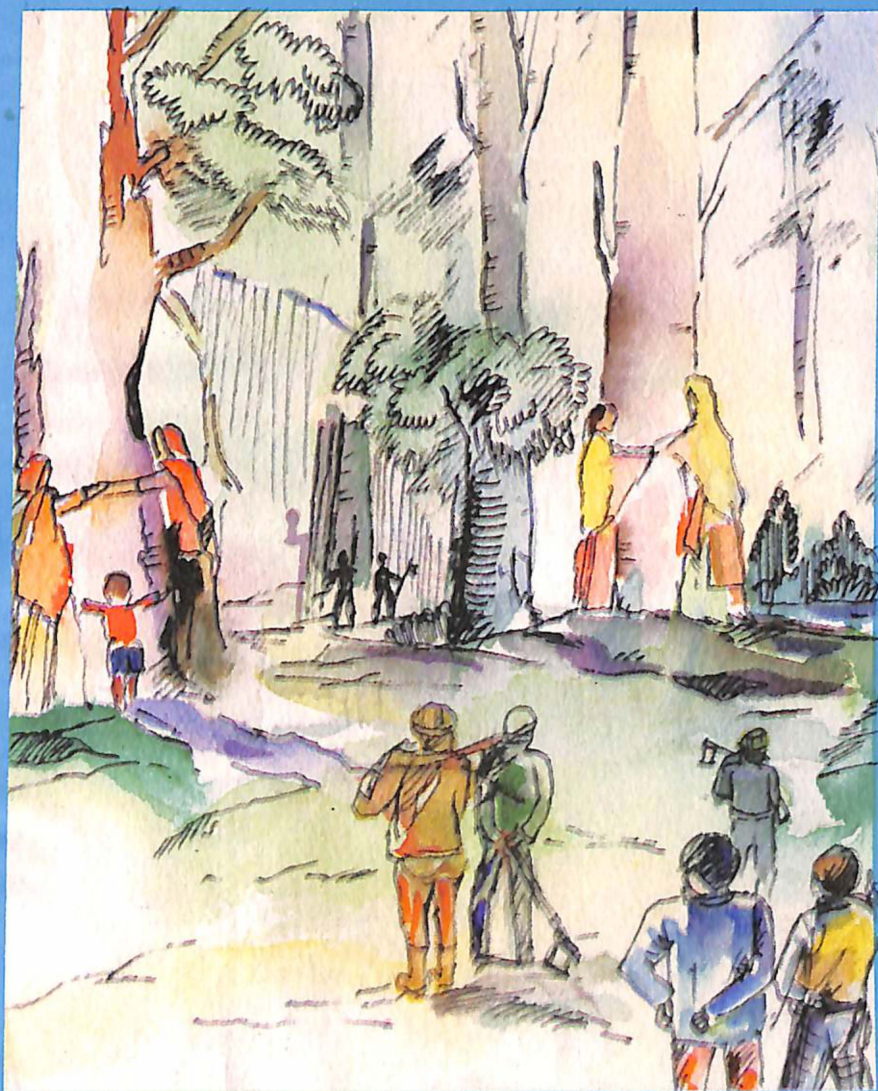
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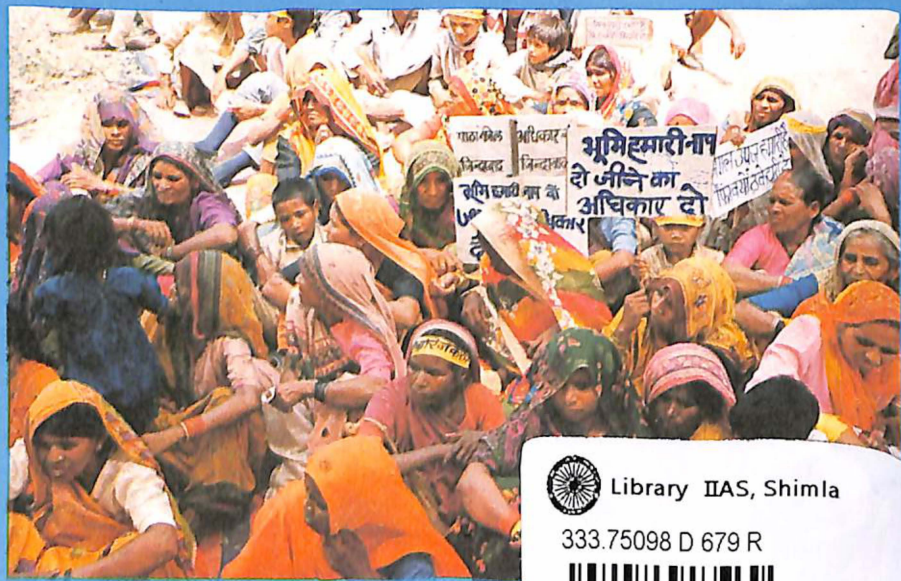
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