Scripting the Change

SELECTED WRITINGS OF ANURADHA GHANDY

About the Editors

Anand Teltumbde is a writer, political analyst and civil rights activist with Committe for Protection of Democractic Rights, Mumbai. He has authored more than 17 books, widely translated in Indian languages, and numerous articles on contemporary issues. Some of his recent books include: *Persistence of Castes* (Zed Books), *Khairlanji: A Strange and Bitter Crop* (Navayana) and *Anti-Imperialism and Annihilation of Castes* (Ramai).

Shoma Sen teaches English at Nagpur University and is active in the women's movement.

About Anuradha Ghandy Memorial Committee

The Anuradha Ghandy Memorial Committee was formed by friends of Anuradha who knew her and/or had worked with her as activists at some point of their lives. The sudden death of a dear friend and former comrade like Anu shocked many. Anuradha was an activist-thinker, one who constantly strove to link theory and practice, ideology and action. She wrote widely and studied the diverse strands of resistance and peoples movements intensely, while actively participating and even leading many of them. So, in addition to her contributions in developing and guiding grass root level movements, she also built up a significant body of theoretical literature. This has helped those in the forefront of revolutionary struggles to better understand the world around them. It was therefore decided to build a Knowledge Platform that will host thinkers and writers who have contributed to changing this world. So far, the committee has hosted three Anuradha Ghandy Memorial Lectures in Mumbai. The speakers were Samir Amin, Jan Myrdal, Baburam Bhattarai and Arundhati Roy. The very first memorial lecture by Samir Amin was published in a booklet form. This is the second publication by the committee.

Anuradha Ghandy Memorial Committee
C/o Suresh Rajeshwar, Adv., 10/14, Garden View, Amritvan Complex,
Goregaon (E), Mumbai 400 063
Email: agmcmumbai@gmail.com

Scripting the Change

Selected Writings of Anuradha Ghandy

With a foreword by
Arundhati Roy

Edited by
Anand Teltumbde
Shoma Sen

On behalf of
Anuradha Ghandy Memorial Committee

DAANISH BOOKS

Scripting the Change: Selected Writings of Anuradha Ghandy was first published in India in November 2011

First Reprint in February 2012

Daanish Books
C-502, Taj Apartments
Gazipur, Delhi-110 096
Ph.: 011-2223 0812, 2223 5819, 4306 7412

Jaishanti,
123, Kautilya Nagar
Patna-800 014
E-mail: daanishbooks@gmail.com
Website: www.daanishbooks.com

ISBN 978-93-81144-10-7 (Hb)
ISBN 978-93-81144-11-4 (Pb)

Cover design: Uttam

Published by Dhruva Narayan for Daanish Books
Printed at M.K. Offset, Delhi.

Contents

Preface

Anuradha Ghandy's writings, whether they be short reports on contemporary social and political issues, or research papers and booklets on theoretical and ideological debates, had the quality of sharpness, terseness and clearly defined political stands. They were not only well researched and placed in their historical context but also showed the depth of a writer having a philosophical outlook and ideological commitment. The dialectical relationship of theory and practice, where one enriches the other, seems to be the cornerstone of her work and life.

We present, in this volume, a compilation of the works of Anu, as she was fondly known among her friends and comrades. Besides her significant writings on the women's and caste struggles, we have also brought together other pieces that give a sense of the variety, breadth and sheer volume of her writing despite being involved in intense field activity. Some have been retrieved from crumbling, browned newsprint magazines with scrawled logos and cartoons, like *Adhikar Raksha, Kalam, Thingi*, etc. that were published and distributed by activist groups in the 1970s and 1980s. Others from prestigious and widely read journals like *EPW* and *Frontier*. Some are from booklets from the women's movement or the papers published by a cultural organization.

Others have been written by her under a pseudonym as they appeared in magazines that supported and propagated Maoist ideology.

But whatever the source may be, each piece is interesting, argumentative or constitutes some page from the history of struggle, which has perhaps not been recorded elsewhere.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of Anu has been in understanding the caste question from a Marxist point of view. Hers has been an honest and pungent analysis of the economic basis of caste and how it manifests itself in both the base and superstructure. She was one of the pioneers linking the caste system to the existing relations of production. With deep insights into Indian history, she showed how the Indian feudal system was basically caste-linked and the ideology of Indian feudalism was Brahminism. She further elucidated how the Dalit question and untouchability act as one of the major pillars of the caste system. Finally, as was her nature of being a theoretician-cum-activist, she brought out how destruction of the caste system is intrinsic to any anti-feudal struggle and the overall democratization of society.

The other issue that has aroused similar debate is the understanding of the gender question. A great deal of Anu's writings on trends in feminism, women and the trade union movement and women in the Naxalite movement, have helped throw light upon this issues. Anu pointed out that, by arguing for an autonomous women's movement, the socialist feminists were in fact weakening the broader movement against capitalism, imperialism, feudalism and patriarchy. By placing patriarchy as the main 'enemy' of women, the radical and cultural feminists were de-linking patriarchy from the systems of capitalism and feudalism which produced it. By equally emphasizing 'production' and 'reproduction' as the reasons for gender oppression, feminists were bringing 'reproduction' into the economic base and negating women's significant role in production. Most significantly, she points out that the strategy of bourgeois feminism is not to unite women with the working class and peasantry and fight the system, but rather to

form small women's groups advocating lifestyle changes within the system.

Anu tried to show through her work and writings that it is, in fact, by participating in the revolutionary movement that women try to throw off the shackles of patriarchy and hit at its roots. She was developing theoretical formulations on how 'Women need revolution and the revolution needs women!' And just like her counterparts in other countries, she too admitted that patriarchy existed within the revolutionary movement — the point was how to stay within it and combat it, not leave the movement and grumble about it. The simple piece in this volume on poetic aspirations of tribal women in Bastar is just such an example to show this.

The collection also includes some of her journalistic writings of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s written for various activist magazines. If all of her reports and articles of this period could be collected it would be a historical document of the time when the student movement, trade union movement and even the civil liberties movement were vibrant and powerful and so much a part of people's lives and culture.

Anu was both a seasoned activist and brilliant theoretician, and will surely be remembered as one of the leading women communists of India. She is no more today. Her writings, only some of which are presented in this volume, will not only serve as a permanent reminder of her work but also as the beacon for the coming generations of the activists striving for liberation of the toiling people of the country.

Foreword
"....But Anuradha was different"

Arundhati Roy

That is what everyone who knew Anuradha Ghandy says. That is what almost everyone whose life she touched thinks.

She died in a Mumbai hospital on the morning of 12 April 2008, of malaria. She had probably picked it up in the jungles of Jharkhand where she had been teaching study classes to a group of Adivasi women. In this great democracy of ours, Anuradha Ghandy was what is known as a 'Maoist terrorist,' liable to be arrested, or, more likely, shot in a fake 'encounter,' like hundreds of her colleagues have been. When this terrorist got high fever and went to a hospital to have her blood tested, she left a false name and a dud phone number with the doctor who was treating her. So he could not get through to her to tell her that the tests showed that she had the potentially fatal malaria falciparum. Anuradha's organs began to fail, one by one. By the time she was admitted to the hospital on 11 April, it was too late. And so, in this entirely unnecessary way, we lost her.

She was 54 years old when she died, and had spent more than 30 years of her life, most of them underground, as a committed revolutionary.

I never had the good fortune of meeting Anuradha Ghandy, but when I attended the memorial service after she died I could tell that she was, above all, a woman who was not just greatly admired, but one who had been deeply loved. I was a little puzzled at the constant references that people who knew her made to her 'sacrifices.' Presumably, by this, they meant that she had sacrificed the comfort and security of a middle-class life, for radical politics. To me, however, Anuradha Ghandy comes across as someone who happily traded in tedium and banality to follow her dream. She was no saint or missionary. She lived an exhilarating life that was hard, but fulfilling.

The young Anuradha, like so many others of her generation, was inspired by the Naxalite uprising in West Bengal. As a student in Elphinstone College, she was deeply affected by the famine that stalked rural Maharashtra in the 1970s. It was working with the victims of desperate hunger that set her thinking and pitch-forked her into her journey into militant politics. She began her working life as a lecturer in Wilson College in Mumbai, but by 1982 she shifted to Nagpur. Over the next few years, she worked in Nagpur, Chandrapur, Amravati, Jabalpur and Yavatmal, organizing the poorest of the poor — construction workers, coal-mine workers — and deepening her understanding of the Dalit movement. In the late 1990s, even though she had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, she went to Bastar and lived in the Dandakaranya forest with the People's Liberation Guerilla Army (PLGA) for three years. Here, she worked to strengthen and expand the extraordinary women's organization, perhaps the biggest feminist organization in the country — the Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sanghatan (KAMS) that has more than 90,000 members. The KAMS is probably one of India's best kept secrets. Anuradha always said that the most fulfilling years of her life were these years that she spent with the People's War (now CPI-Maoist) guerillas in Dandakaranya. When I visited the area almost two years after Anuradha's death, I shared her awe and excitement about the KAMS and had to re-think some of my own easy assumptions about women and armed struggle. In an

essay in this collection, writing under the pseudonym Avanti, Anuradha says:

> As we approach March 8, early in the dawn of this new century remarkable developments are taking place on the women's front in India. Deep in the forests and plains of central India, in the backward villages of Andhra Pradesh and up in the hills among the tribals in the state, in the forests and plains of Bihar and Jharkhand women are getting organized actively to break the shackles of feudal patriarchy and make the New Democratic Revolution. It is a women's liberation movement of peasant women in rural India, a part of the people's war being waged by the oppressed peasantry under revolutionary leadership. For the past few years thousands of women are gathering in hundreds of villages to celebrate 8 March. Women are gathering together to march through the streets of a small town like Narayanpur to oppose the Miss World beauty contest, they are marching with their children through the tehsil towns and market villages in backward Bastar to demand proper schooling for their children. They are blocking roads to protest against rape cases, and confronting the police to demand that the sale of liquor be banned. And hundreds of young women are becoming guerrilla fighters in the army of the oppressed, throwing off the shackles of their traditional life of drudgery. Dressed in fatigues, a red star on their olive green caps, a rifle on their shoulders, these young women brimming with the confidence that the fight against patriarchy is integrally linked to the fight against the ruling classes of this semi-feudal, semi-colonial India, are equipping themselves with the military knowledge to take on the third largest army of the exploiters. This is a social and political awakening among the poorest of the poor women in rural India. It is a scenario that has emerged far from the unseeing eyes of the bourgeois media, far from the flash and glitter of TV cameras. They are the signs of a transformation coming into the lives of the rural poor as they participate in the great struggle for revolution.
>
> But this revolutionary women's movement has not emerged overnight, and nor has it emerged spontaneously merely from propaganda. The women's movement has grown with the growth of armed struggle. Contrary to general opinion, the launching of armed struggle in the early 1980s by the communist revolutionary forces in various parts of the country, the militant struggle against

> feudal oppression gave the confidence to peasant women to participate in struggles in large numbers and then to stand up and fight for their rights. Women who constitute the most oppressed among the oppressed, poor peasant and landless peasant women, who have lacked not only an identity and voice but also a name, have become activists for the women's organizations in their villages and guerrilla fighters. Thus with the spread and growth of the armed struggle the women's mobilization and women's organization have also grown, leading to the emergence of this revolutionary women's movement, one of the strongest and most powerful women's movements in the country today. But it is unrecognized and ignored, a ploy of the ruling classes that will try to suppress any news and acknowledgement as long as it can.

Her obvious enthusiasm for the women's movement in Dandakaranya did not blind her to the problems that women comrades faced within the revolutionary movement. At the time of her death, that is what she was working on — how to purge the Maoist Party of the vestiges of continuing discrimination against women and the various shades of patriarchy that stubbornly persisted among those male comrades who called themselves revolutionary. In the time I spent with the PLGA in Bastar, many comrades remembered her with such touching affection. Comrade Janaki was the name they knew her by. They had a worn photograph of her, in fatigues and her huge trademark glasses, standing in the forest, beaming, with a rifle slung over her shoulder.

She's gone now — Anu, Avanti, Janaki. And she's left her comrades with a sense of loss they may never get over. She has left behind this sheaf of paper, these writings, notes and essays. And I have been given the task of introducing them to a wider audience.

It has been hard to work out *how* to read these writings. Clearly, they were not written with a view to be published as a collection. At first reading they could seem somewhat basic, often repetitive, a little didactic. But a second and third reading made me see them differently. I see them now as Anuradha's notes to herself. Their sketchy, uneven quality, the fact that some of her assertions explode off the page like hand-grenades, makes them

that much more personal. Reading through them you catch glimpses of the mind of someone who could have been a serious scholar or academic but was overtaken by her conscience and found it impossible to sit back and merely theorize about the terrible injustices she saw around her. These writings reveal a person who is doing all she can to link theory and practice, action and thought. Having decided to do something real and urgent for the country she lived in, and the people she lived amongst, in these writings, Anuradha tries to tell us (and herself) why she became a Marxist-Leninist and not a liberal activist, or a radical feminist, or an eco-feminist or an Ambedkarite. To do this, she takes us on a basic guided tour of a history of these movements, with quick thumb-nail analyses of various ideologies, ticking off their advantages and drawbacks like a teacher correcting an examination paper with a thick fluorescent marker. The insights and observations sometimes lapse into easy sloganeering, but often they are profound and occasionally they're epiphanic — and could only have come from someone who has a razor sharp political mind and knows her subject intimately, from observation and experience, not merely from history and sociology textbooks.

Perhaps Anuradha Ghandy's greatest contribution, in her writing, as well as the politics she practiced, is her work on gender and on Dalit issues. She is sharply critical of the orthodox Marxist interpretation of caste ('caste is class') as being somewhat intellectually lazy. She points out that her own party has made mistakes in the past in not being able to understand the caste issue properly. She critiques the Dalit movement for turning into an identity struggle, reformist not revolutionary, futile in its search for justice within an intrinsically unjust social system. She believes that without dismantling patriarchy and the caste-system, brick, by painful brick, there can be no New Democratic Revolution.

In her writings on caste and gender, Anuradha Ghandy shows us a mind and an attitude that is unafraid of nuance, unafraid of engaging with dogma, unafraid of telling it like it is — to her comrades as well as to the system that she fought against all her life. What a woman she was.

Remembering Anuradha Ghandy
Friend, Comrade, Moving Spirit...

I remain a song dedicated
to the revolution
This thirst will end
only with my life
— Cherabandaraju

On the morning of 12 April 2008, Anuradha Ghandy breathed her last. The revolutionary movement in India and the world and the oppressed masses in general lost a dynamic, dedicated and unwavering fighter and teacher at the relatively young age of 54.

Com. Anuradha had just returned after spending a week in Jharkhand taking classes for leading women activists from Jharkhand, mostly from tribal backgrounds, on the question of women's oppression. On 6 April, when the blood tests after she was struck by high fever did not show any signs of malaria, little did she or her comrades realize that the fever was caused by falciparum malaria and that it would prove fatal. Her frail and diminutive body which had withstood many a battle since a young age, had already been weakened by systemic sclerosis (an autoimmune disease that had affected her hands and had begun slowly eating into her heart and lungs). On 11 April morning, when

the diagnosis confirmed falciparum malaria, she was hospitalized immediately. By then it was already too late as her weakened organs began giving way. As always, she struggled valiantly. But the end came within 24 hours on 12 April morning. It seemed as though even in her death, Com. Anuradha stuck to her life-long motto of never wasting a minute.

THE EARLY YEARS

Anuradha Shanbag, fondly called Anu by everyone who knew her, was born on 28 March 1954, to a Gujarati mother and Kannadiga father — both her parents along with all her maternal uncle and aunts were members of the undivided Communist Party of India. Her parents themselves had got married in the CPI office in Mumbai in the 1940s. Thus Anu grew up in an atmosphere of rational and progressive thinking. Her late father Ganesh Shanbag was a well known lawyer in the Bombay High Court while her mother Kumud Shanbag at the age of 79 continues to work as a librarian and resource person for a Women's Resource Centre in Mumbai. Anuradha was the elder of their two children, her brother Sunil Shanbag is the noted theatre and film director. The desire to do something for the downtrodden was easily nurtured in an atmosphere of serious study, intellectual creativity and rational thinking right from her childhood. In this atmosphere she excelled academically in both school and college.

Ganesh Shanbag wrote in his memoir 'Kaveri to Ganga' that Anuradha their first born was dedicated by them to the revolution. Kumud Shanbag remembers the young Anuradha as a bundle of energy, very purposeful and yet ready to burst into anger at seeing any form of injustice to animals or the housemaid. For Sunil, Anu who was two-and-a half years older, was a close sibling who was responsible for giving him a world view. As he was in a boarding school, she would write him long letters explaining the importance of every event that was affecting the country.

A brilliant student, Com. Anuradha began as a committed cadre of the incipient revolutionary movement right from her

days at Elphinstone College, Bombay in the early 1970s. Those were the days when urban students were not oblivious to the bitter struggles of rural people — that too at a time when rural Maharashtra was facing one of the worst famines. The young Anuradha along with a group of students threw themselves into famine relief work. She was deeply affected by the horrors of famine that had ravaged the lives of the rural poor and at the same time inspired by their indomitable spirit of survival.

The early 1970s was also the time when the whole world was in the grip of militant struggles and revolutions. The anti-Vietnam war movement in the U.S., the daring students revolt in Paris, the heroic struggles that led to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) in China among others... In India, the spark of Naxalbari which lit the prairie fire of revolution in India inspired thousands of students to give up their careers and education to leave for the countryside to be with the masses in their daring dream to carve out a new world free from all forms of exploitation.

Com. Anuradha came in contact with the student organization, Progressive Youth Movement (PROYOM), which was inspired by the Naxalite movement. They started working in the slums which helped her come in close contact with the Dalit movement where she received her early exposure to the continuing reality of untouchability and caste oppression. It was at the same time that she began reading voraciously digging deeper into the warp and weft of Marxism as a touchstone to understand the basis of the oppressive and exploitative caste system and all the other ills of society.

She went on to do her M.A. and later M.Phil in Sociology. She began teaching as a lecturer, first at Wilson College (Chowpatty) and then at the Jhunjhunwalla College (Ghatkopar). Her fervour and diligence made her a very popular and effective lecturer and a favourite amongst her students. In November 1977 she married Kobad Ghandy, a fellow comrade.

The post-Emergency period saw Anuradha becoming one of the leading figures of the civil liberties movement in the country.

She was a founder member of the Committee for the Protection of Democratic Rights (CPDR) in Maharashtra. She played a prominent role alongside such leading figures such as V.M. Tarkunde, Govinda Mukhoty, Subba Rao, Sudesh Vaid, P.A. Sebastian and even ruling class elements as George Fernandes and Arun Shourie in organizing the landmark 1977 Civil Liberties Conference in Delhi. One of the prominent demands of this Conference was for the release of political prisoners.

THE COMMITTED REVOLUTIONARY

In response to the clarion call given by the nascent revolutionary movement in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra in the early 1980s, and urged by the need to spread the message of revolution in a backward region like Vidarbha, Com. Anuradha took the radical decision to leave Bombay and shift to Nagpur in 1982.

While teaching at Nagpur University, she actively participated in and played a leading role in the trade union and Dalit movements in the region. In trade union work, she began by organizing the *molkarins* (household labour) of Nagpur, and then in various other sectors. She was actively involved in organizing the 5,000 strong construction workers at the Khaparkheda thermal power plant near Nagpur and led a number of militant struggles, most notably a 3-month strike facing the collective might of construction companies as well as intense police repression. During the course of these struggles, Com. Anu went to jail on numerous occasions.

In 1993, Com. Anu shifted to Chandrapur to help organize the coal-mine and construction workers there. She fought against the fact that the unorganized sector workers had no basic trade union rights, and at the same time were totally ignored by traditional unions. She also developed links for joint activities with other progressive trade union leaders of the region, from Nagpur, Chandrapur, Amravati, Jabalpur, Yeotmal and other surrounding centres.

Com. Anu made path breaking contributions to organizing Dalits in Vidarbha. She shifted residence in Nagpur to Indora, a

predominantly Dalit locality and a stronghold of the city's Dalit leaders. Com. Anu's incisive knowledge of Ambedkar's and other sociological writings on the caste question seen in the light of Marxism drew large sections of the youth to the Naxalite movement. She grew to become the open face of the Maoists in the Dalit movement and one of the major public speakers at many Dalit functions in Vidarbha.

Com. Anuradha wrote profusely on the caste question in both English and Marathi, presenting a class viewpoint of the issue countering not only the numerous postmodernist trends on this count but the wrong Marxist interpretations of the Dalit and caste questions as well. An important essay written by Com. Anuradha in Marathi was published in *Satyashodhak Marxvadi* the journal edited by Sharad Patil from Dhule, explaining the Marxist standpoint on the Dalit question linking Dalit liberation with the task of the New Democratic Revolution (NDR) in the country. This essay is still referred to today as an example of the Marxist-Leninist viewpoint on caste.

The erstwhile CPI (ML) (PW) prepared its first caste policy paper which was the first for the revolutionary Marxist movement in India, based on the draft prepared by Com. Anuradha. This draft had categorically outlined that in India the democratization of society is inconceivable without smashing the elitist caste system and fighting all forms of caste oppression, most particularly, its crudest form — untouchability. Many of the views expressed by her then in the mid-1990s have become the core of the understanding of the present revolutionary movement.

THE CALL OF BASTAR

In the late 1990s, Com. Anuradha responded to the call of the revolutionary movement and went to Bastar. She spent three years living amongst the tribals of the region. She went out of her way to gather as many Ph.D. studies on the Gond tribals to provide source materials for the revolutionary cadre of Dandakaranya to deepen their understanding of the region. Later on she would say

with utmost conviction that these three years were among the most fulfilling in her life. She keenly studied the lives and struggles of the Gond tribals of Bastar, the painstaking ways in which the movement was built, particularly focusing on the lives of the women, their organizations, the KAMS (Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sanghathan) and the women in the guerilla detachments.

During the peak of the famine in 1997, Com. Anuradha was there in Bastar, which saw hundreds of people perish of starvation in other tribal areas. The revolutionary guerillas had resorted to seizing grain from the hoarders and distributing them among the starving masses, thus preventing a major calamity. During this period, intermittent attacks of malaria, the terrible dry heat of summer, coupled with the famine conditions took a toll on her health, and she lost about 10 kg. It was only her enormous commitment to the cause of the people, and tremendous will-power that kept her going. She never made a show of her own sufferings, always bearing pain, whether physical or mental, with dignity, without complaining or letting others know.

All this was happening amidst heavy state repression, at a time when the armed contingents of the mercenary paramilitary forces were tracking every inch of the Bastar forests, and when living life on the edge was the norm for the revolutionary. Com. Anuradha lived up to the challenge unflinchingly. She once even had a narrow escape after coming under the cross-fire of the police. She would point out to others that this was the hard reality of 21st century rural India — to be with the masses, to understand them and be like them is also to place yourself at risk of getting killed. Today, the forests, hills and valleys of India have become the hunting ground of the predators in the form of multinational corporations and India's large capitalists, with the greedy politician ready to grab any crumb thrown at him.

In Bastar, Com. Anuradha spent most of her time in the Byramgadh area, which has later come into the limelight for facing the brunt of the Salwa Judum attacks. She contracted malaria a number of times, but it was treated in time and with the good care of the local tribal people. Her tenacity to stay in such difficult

conditions and despite her age astounded and won the affection of the local tribals.

During this period she also spent much time in taking classes, on women's health issues, women's oppression and the New Democratic Revolution, on imparting general knowledge, on the rudiments of Marxism, etc. mainly for the growing leadership among the tribal women. She helped draft handbills and wrote numerous articles for the local revolutionary movement.

Towards the last part of her stay she was responsible for the West Bastar area covering what is known as the National Park region. This too is a region which is affected by the onslaught of the Salwa Judum.

REACHING THE PINNACLE

For the last 15 years till the end, Com. Anuradha had been working among the most downtrodden, braving state repression. She was deeply involved in developing a perspective on the role of a revolutionary women's movement and the need to organize the most oppressed women in realizing New Democratic Revolution free from all forms of oppression, exploitation and discrimination.

At the time of her death, Com. Anuradha was studying the problems facing the women comrades in the revolutionary movement. She was deeply involved in the enquiry of the varied forms/shades of patriarchy that women had to face every day, so as to devise a method to enable them to grow to greater leadership responsibilities.

A person of high principles, Com. Anuradha had the modesty to be a willing learner, always willing to acknowledge the positive in others, even with those with whom she differed, no matter what her differences. While being creative and not stereotyped in her thinking, she was always firm on the proletarian line and Marxist ideology.

Com. Anuradha was a founder-member of the CPI (Marxist Leninist) party in Maharashtra. At the time of her martyrdom, she had risen to become a member of the Central Committee of the

Communist Party of India (Maoist). At the 9th Congress – Unity Congress, she was the single woman comrade to be elected to its Central Committee.

The repressive state machinery, which allows so many criminals, communalist murderers, politicians and affluent people to continue with their harmful activities, banned the party for which she worked and made a dynamic leader like Com. Anuradha inaccessible to vast sections of society. Many great leaders of the Indian freedom struggle like Bhagat Singh, Subhash Chandra Bose and numerous others believed in the necessity of armed struggle because of which they had to live under the oppressive British Raj under changed identities in order to evade imprisonment or death at the hands of the state's repressive machinery. Today the situation is no different. While we uphold martyrs like Bhagat Singh as great leaders, modern day revolutionaries like Anuradha are portrayed as dangerous criminals and terrorists.

But the oppressed and exploited people, totally neglected by this same state, have great respect and love for revolutionaries like Anuradha. Wherever she worked, Com. Anuradha reached out and touched the lives of many, who will see her as a leading figure of the revolution and who became a martyr for its cause.

For the oppressed and exploited people of this country, Com. Anuradha will always remain immortal.

You are history. You are legend. You are
the heroic example of democracy's solidarity
and universality. We shall not forget you and
when the olive tree of peace
puts forth its leaves again –
come back!"

-La Pasionara

Section 1

Caste

Introduction

Anu contributed immensely through her writings to the evolution of the position as well as the strategy and tactics of her party on caste. In doing so she used her insights gained through working with people more than her academic training in sociology. The importance of these writings is immense.

The non-parliamentary Left that emerged after the Naxalbari struggle of 1967, inspired by the revolutionary developments in China, began the anti-feudal struggle in the rural areas and inevitably confronted the caste question. However, even in the Naxalbari struggle in 1967 and thereafter during the formation of the CPI (ML), caste never figured in the ideological discourse. As its base in Adivasis and Dalits began growing, it acquired an identity of a pro-Dalit and pro-tribal movement. Faced with growing caste atrocities since late 1960s and swelling numbers of Dalits in their cadre, it was impelled to consider the caste question more seriously than ever before. Some of the ML groups, particularly in U.P. and Bihar, where the caste atrocities had become more pronounced, took a clear pro-Dalit posture and made headway in resisting upper caste supremacy, in asserting the rights of the Dalits and, to a considerable extent, turning upside down the deeply entrenched cultural symbols of upper caste domination. However, the ideological position on the anti-caste movement still remained undefined.

Since the 1980s this began to change. Various groups started grappling with the caste question at the theoretical level and tried to formulate their caste-class programme. Anu's writings played an important part in the debates and discussions that ensued in her party.

The first essay, 'Caste Question in India,' marks the culmination of Anu's study on caste. This long essay was written in mid-1990s and because of its length remained unpublished. Here she takes a comprehensive review of the caste system, beginning from the theories of origin of castes through the significant developments in history and ending with a practical programme towards annihilation of caste. Anu at the beginning itself identifies the caste system as an ideology as well as a social system and transcends the stereotypical debate about the base and superstructure. Following Marx and Engels she identifies different stages in pre-British Indian society: (i) Tribal-Oligarchy, (ii) Ancient communal and state ownership which proceeded especially from the union of several tribes by agreement and/or conquest accompanied by the enslavement of the Shudra-helots, i.e., the 'Arthashastra Mode' and (iii) Feudal or estate property accompanied by the Jati-based system, i.e. feudalism of an Indian variety. While successfully navigating through the dark abysses of history she emerges into the contemporary period extending the unbroken thread of her argument to the programme of the party of the proletariat against caste system. It declares that class struggle against the caste system as an integral part of the struggle to accomplish New Democratic Revolution. She even tries to indicate what would remain of castes after such a democratic revolution is accomplished.

The second article in this collection, 'The Caste Question Returns,' was published in *Frontier* (16 January 1988). It was written in response to a piece by Gopal Guru 'Understanding Ambedkar — A Caste and Class Paradigm' (presumably published in *Frontier* and reproduced in the May 1988 issue of *Satyashodak Marxvadi*). Anu objectively points out the reactionary strands in both the movements, communist as well as Dalit, and also sees the new hopes in the form of Naxalite movement and

the Dalit Panthers movement sprouting out of them respectively. Criticizing the old communist economism that class struggle is only about economic struggle, she explicates that it 'includes the struggle in economic, political, social and ideological spheres' necessarily extending to the seizure of political power. She identifies the Congress Party (right from its olden days to its current version) as the main culprit for perpetuation of caste oppression and upholder of the caste system. Emphasizing the need to have a broader unity of all oppressed, she makes a profound point that the abolition of caste oppression can be accomplished only if the existing order is overthrown and the society is reorganized on a thoroughly democratic basis.

The next essay 'Movement against Caste in Maharashtra' was a paper she presented in the AILRC seminar (later published by AILRC). In this study, Anu highlighted how the social reform movement has been separate from, and in times even antagonistic to, the nationalist and the communist-led movements. In feudal times, this movement essentially expressed itself through religious idiom. She traces this movement from the 12th century Mahanubhava panth of Chakradharswami, a forerunner of the Bhakti movement, which preached remarkable egalitarianism insofar as it embraced low caste people and even granted women its *deeksha* (initiation). She traverses through the Bhakti movement, socio-economic conditions in Maratha period, Brahmin domination during the Peshawa rule and British colonial regime which catalyzed the non-Brahmin movement and then the Dalit movement and notes the sad developments in the non-Brahmin and Dalit movements after the death of Jyotiba Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar, respectively. Projecting the Bhakti movement as quintessentially the anti-caste movement, Anu argues against some Dalit intellectuals in Maharashtra, who criticized it as a reactionary movement as it preached Hindu religion and values in a popular form. Lastly, she makes a profound statement, uncommon in the leftist universe till then, that the anti-caste struggle is part of the class struggle in India and that the battle for transformation of social relations and ideology are part of the class struggle.

The last article she wrote was on the infamous caste atrocity at Khairlanji. Titled as 'Gruesome Massacre of Dalits: Dalit Fury Scorches Maharashtra,' it was published in the January 2007 issue of *People's March* under the pen-name Avanti. After describing the facts of the case, she observes that the Khairlanji carnage exemplified how casteism afflicted not only the Indian society, but also the major political parties and also the entire state machinery. At the same time she notes the enormous revolutionary potential of the Dalit masses. Their spontaneous uprising showed that they are prepared to cast off the yoke of their corrupt leaders and can accept new alternative. She proclaims that this new alternative lies with the Maoist party because only it is prepared to fight not only all the manifestations of casteism and its horrifying form in untouchability but also eradicate it from its roots by destroying the very basis from which it emerges — the semi-feudal base and the feudal culture.

The important thing to note in these writings is the evolutionary departure from the traditional position of the communist parties. Insofar as these writings in their essence are reflected in the position of Maoists, they indicate the importance of her contribution to the revolutionary project.

Caste Question in India

The caste system has been one of the specific problems of the Indian democratic revolution. It is linked to the specific nature of the evolution of Indian society and has been one of the most important means for the exploitation of the labouring masses. Sanctioned by the Brahminical Hindu religion, *Varnashrama Dharma* legitimized the oppression of the working people, and the enslavement and degradation of one section of the masses, reducing them to a near animal existence. For the ruling classes in India, from the ancient to the modern period, the caste system served both as an ideology as well as a social system that enabled them to repress and exploit the majority of toilers.

Invaders from other lands who came to rule over India, adjusted with this system, as it suited their class interests; religions like Islam and Christianity, which profess the equality of all men, adjusted with it, allowing its believers to be divided on the basis of caste, because they did not interfere with this system of exploitation. Today, caste ideology is still an important part of the reactionary ruling class ideological package, and it serves to divide the working masses, hampering the development of class

Extracts from an unpublished article written in the mid-1990s. As only a damaged Xerox typed copy was found, we are reproducing what was able to be extracted from it.

consciousness and a unified revolutionary struggle. At the same time, caste-based occupations and relations of production, caste-based inequalities and discrimination, the practice of untouchability and the belief in Brahminical superiority, are still as much a part of the socio-economic life of the country. Caste is being used in the corrupt electoral politics of the ruling classes. To root out the caste system we must first understand its origin and development and evaluate the successes and failures of the various struggles against the caste system and Brahminical ideology.

ORIGIN OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

The history of the caste system can be traced back to over 3,000 years. It is inextricably linked to the development of class society, emergence of the state, the development of the feudal mode of production and the continuous but often forcible assimilation of tribal groups, with their own customs and practices, into the exploitative agrarian economy. The origin and development of the system can be traced through the following periods:

1. *Vedic Period:* The period from 1500 BC, when Aryan pastoral tribes and non-agricultural tribal communities took to agriculture; the emergence of agriculture as the dominant production system; to the rise of the state around 500 BC.
2. *The Period from 500 BC to the 4th century AD:* The period of the expansion of agriculture based on *Shudra* labour; the growth of trade and its decline; the rise of small kingdoms; to the emergence of feudalism.
3. *The Period from the 4th century AD onwards:* When the development of feudalism took place, and Brahminical Hinduism and the *jati* system acquired their complex and rigid form.

For a country as vast as India, and a history so ancient, the above can only be broad periods which can be covered here, but there will be differences in every specific region. Yet the broad trends apply to the whole of India.

Indus Valley Civilization and Caste

Some Marxist historians have speculated that the roots of the caste system may be traced to the theocratic Indus Valley Civilization and in the tribal belief in magical power and pollution, common among Dravidian tribes. But there is no substantive proof to support this speculation nor is there any adequate explanation as to why such a complex system would exist in this earlier period. That the Harrappan city population was divided into these classes, with endogamous hierarchically placed groups, is not yet known. It is a fact that primitive tribes possess belief in the magical power of certain objects and in pollution, but from this one cannot conclude that in the earliest period whole sections within tribal communities were considered permanently polluting. Hence, we cannot conclude that some form of the caste system existed in the pre-Vedic period.

The study of this earlier period of history (3000 BC to 1500 BC) shows that even before the Aryan (Indo-European) tribes entered India, various communities and tribes with varying economic and social-cultural systems existed within the country. Some had developed agriculture, a division of labour, and even trade, and there were sharp class differences. They were in the copper age. Others ranged from shifting cultivation (*jhum*) to hunting, fishing and food gathering. Some were herders. Many of them had matrilineal social organizations. The pastoral Indo-European tribes with patrilineal social organization entered India in waves from around 1500 BC.

From Tribal to Class Society

Class society emerged from the clashes of the various pastoral Aryan tribes and the indigenous tribes and the development of agriculture with the widespread use of iron. It took the form, initially, of the four Varnas. Hence, we can say that the four Varnas were the form that class society took in the later Vedic and the Upanishad period.

As the Vedic Aryans entered from the Punjab area and spread towards the Gangetic plain from around 1500 BC, they were already divided into an aristocracy (*Rajanya*) and priests (Brahmins) and the ordinary clansmen (*vis*). In the incessant conflicts and wars that were associated with their spread eastwards, conflicts among the various pastoral Aryan tribes and with local tribes for cattle, water sources, land and then also for slaves, sections of tribes that were defeated began to be enslaved, known as *dasas-dasys*. The wars increased the importance of the chieftains. They relied on ritualism to enhance their prestige and consolidate it, and to appropriate the surplus through these rituals. Tributes of cattle and slaves were given by the ordinary vis to the *rajanyas*. Major and minor *yagnas* were increasingly performed by the *rajanyas*, in alliance with the Brahmins. The ruling elite and the priests lived off the gifts (*dand/bali*) given to them by the vis at these *yagnas*. At this stage, the tribal organizations based on clan and kin were still dominant. The emergence of the Brahmin and Kshatriya Varnas was a process of the breaking down of the kin-based relations among these ruling elites and the creation of a broader class — the Varna — which lived off the tributes and gifts from the vis and subjugated the tribes. The pastoral tribes had adopted agriculture; and from the local tribes, the chieftain clans and the priestly clans were being incorporated into the Kshatriya and Brahmin Varnas respectively.

The subjugated tribals, both Aryan and non-Aryan, gradually came to form the Shudra Varna. All of them were not slaves. While domestic slavery existed, it was basically the Vaishya peasants (from the vis the broader Vaishya Varna emerged) and the Shudras who reared the cattle and tilled the soil.

The widespread use of iron, not only for weapons but also for agricultural purposes, from around 800 BC, marked a qualitative change in the production system of the ancient tribal societies. Plough-based agriculture could generate considerable surplus on a regular basis. Dense forests could be cut down and land cleared for cultivation. Thus iron enabled the agrarian economy to become the prominent production system in this

ancient period. The spread of agriculture was achieved at the cost of the non-agricultural tribes. They were either subjugated or displaced from the forests and their traditional means of livelihood. The conquest of new territories and the possibility of regular settlements further enhanced the importance of chieftains. Tribal oligarchies emerged. Many of the chieftains turned into kings who needed grander yagnas to consolidate their rule not only over their own clans and tribes but also over the territories they commanded (the *janapada*). The Varnashrama Dharma was already being developed by the Brahmin priestly class. The rituals became more complex, elaborate and wealth consuming. These rituals were the means by which the surplus could be redistributed. The surplus appropriated in the form of gifts was shared by the ruling Kshatriyas and the Brahmin priests. Gifts were no longer voluntary. They were forced. The *Arya dharma* and Varna ideology legitimized the increasing power of the kings and priests and the absorption of the subjugated tribals into the lower Varnas. It became the ideological expression of the classes that had emerged from the womb of the various tribes. Those groups that did not accept the rituals and forced tributes were considered *anarya* or *mlechha*.

Development of agriculture, including paddy cultivation in the Gangetic plains, was accompanied by the increasing division of labour and the growth of trade. Private property in land emerged. Towns developed. Few classes came into existence — the Vaishya traders and the *gahapatis*, the landowners. The gahapatis did not themselves till the land but got slaves or shudras to till it. Tensions between the upper two Varnas and the lower Varnas, and between those who owned and those who laboured, emerged. This led to the emergence of the ancient state. The first states emerged in the Gangetic plains, in Bihar.

Rise of the State

The emergence of the Kosala and Magadha monarchies around the 6th century BC was the form in which the state developed in

ancient India. The ruling clans in the proto-states and these early states relied heavily on *yagnas* and rituals to buttress and legitimize their rule. The early states had the explicit function of upholding the Varna order and private property. Gifts were replaced by taxes. But the upper two Varnas, the Brahmins and Kshatriyas were not taxed. A standing army came into existence.

The Varnashrama ideology reflected and buttressed this class situation in the interests of the ruling Kshatriyas and Brahmins — 'the Brahmen and *Kshetriya* enclose the *vaishya* and *shudra,*' 'a *Visshya* a tributary to another to be oppressed at will... a *Shudra*... the servant of another, to be removed at will, to be slain at will.' In the context of the differences between the classes becoming sharp, the Varna divisions had become rigid. Social distance and endogamy came to be emphasized.

But the newly emerged classes, the lower two Varnas and the non-subjugated tribal communities did not accept this ideology and the Varna hierarchy with Brahminical superiority. The rise of the *Lokayata, Mahavir, Buddha* and other opposing sects and philosophical systems was a challenge to this Vedic yagna-based Brahminism and Varna-based hierarchy. These sects gained the support of traders and artisans organized into guilds and the semi-tribal kings and chieftains. Later, with the consolidation of the state formation with Mauryan rule (4th–3rd centuries BC), the reduction in the importance of yagnas and the consolidation of the agricultural economy, Brahminism itself underwent transformation. Reducing the importance of yagnas and borrowing certain principles from Buddhism, Brahminism tried to reassert its ideological role. Yet, it had to contend with Buddhism and Jainism for commercial and royal patronage and for social domination. This reflects the struggles put up by the various classes and peoples to the consolidation of the caste system based on Brahmin-Kshatriya superiority. Yet, Brahminism played a key role in the development and consolidation of the state in ancient India and the development and formalization of a class society in the form of the Varnas.

The Mauryan Empire

The Mauryan Empire, which rose in the Magadha region in the 3rd century BC, was the first major fully formed state in India (after the Indus Valley civilization). It was an 'ancient communal and state ownership' type of state with Shudra-based production. The origins of the Mauryas themselves are obscure, but the state was guided by the famous Brahmin Kautilya, also known as Chanakya. Chanakya's Arthashatra was the first and hence frank account of how to rule. It laid down the principles of statecraft without any ideological or religious cover-up. The Mauryan state was a centralized state which took the responsibility for the extension of agriculture and trade. This 'arthashastra' state settled groups of Shudras where lands could be cleared and brought under the plough. The *sita* lands were farmed directly by the state with the help of Shudra (serf) labour, under an autocratic regime, while *rashtra* lands were farmed by the free peasantry (Vaishya). These rashtra lands were taxed on various counts. The state took taxes from the Vaishyas and labour from the Shudras, providing them with the necessities of cultivation. While slavery also existed, slaves were used primarily by landowners for domestic work and by the state for processing the grain collected in the form of taxes and for the production of some commodities. The state also monopolized the mining of minerals. By this period, a class of dependent peasants and labourers (helots) — Shudra by Varna — had been consolidated. But the Vaishyas who carried out trade and settled in urban areas began to distinguish themselves from their peasant brethren. In latter centuries peasant cultivation became the hall mark of the Shudras. The ordinary, free peasantry was pushed down into the Shudra Varna, while the Vaishya Varna became the monopoly of the traders and merchants. At the same time the class of *Kshetraswamis*, those who got their lands cultivated by sharecroppers and dependent labourers, came to become the norm.

In the Mauryan period and up to the 3rd century AD trade was an important aspect of the economy. While trade along the *dakshinapatha* and to the North along the *uttarapatha* grew in the

Mauryan period, in later centuries trade with the Roman empire (1st and 2nd centuries AD) also became important. In the South, trade links with the South-East Asian societies, including China also existed. Thus, the class of artisans and merchants who were linked to the market were socially and economically important. Artisans and merchant guilds were powerful. Also, during this period artisan guilds were not strictly hereditary.

Endogamy and Rigid Marriage Norms

The restrictions on marriage, part of the tribal endogamous practices, were adopted by Brahminism, though their social purpose became different. In early Vedic period, tribal endogamy was not strictly followed in the assimilation of groups. But as class differences started to emerge and the need for a large number of labourers grew, the two upper Varnas enforced strict rules regarding the form of a marriage; a method of distancing themselves from the lower two Varnas, while at the same time sanctioning hypergamy. (Hypergamy is the marriage of a man of a higher Varna to a woman of a lower Varna.) Hypergamy allowed 'converted' Brahmins and Kshatriyas to seek partners from among their own tribesfolk, absorbed as Vaishyas or Shudras. It allowed political alliances with non-Kshatriya chieftains and kings. At the same time, marriage rules for the lower two Varnas were not restrictive — allowing for the rapid increase in the population of the labouring people. In a primitive economy, human labour is the main productive asset. Hence even marriage rules developed according to the interests of the ruling classes and gained ideological legitimacy through the rigid Varna divisions.

Spread of Buddhism and Jainism

The agrarian economy had no use for the expensive rituals based on the sacrifice of animals, including cattle wealth. The Vaishyas and Shudras, who paid taxes and laboured, discontented with their inferior social status, supported the new preachers like

Mahavir and Buddha and the sects established by them which opposed these yagnas and the superiority of the Brahmins who promoted them. These sects opposed the Varna hierarchy, and Buddha's *sanghas* were open to all members including the lowly *Chandalas*. But neither Buddha nor Mahavir preached against the new relations of production that had emerged, and a slave could not join the sangha without the permission of his master. Shudras from the sita lands were also not free to join the sanghas. However, both Buddhism and Jainism spread all over India gaining the support of the powerful artisan and merchant guilds. Although their philosophical content and material form changed over the centuries, they provided a tremendous challenge that lasted for over 1000 years. The early ascetics, the Buddhist and Jain monks, became part of wealthy monasteries which were supported by lavish gifts from merchant and artisan guilds and others. From around the 2nd century, as royal patronage increased, and they received land grants, these monasteries also became landowning institutions. Yet these religions retained their influence and Buddhism maintained its image as a religion that opposed the hierarchical Varna order and Brahminical superiority.

Brahminism in a New Form

With the decline of yagnas, a transformation in the social role of the Brahmins took place and with that Brahminism also underwent a transformation. Brahmins, encouraged and protected by kings, brought the borders of the kingdoms under agriculture, in the process 'aryanizing' the tribals in the region. From Ashoka's times, the free peasants and the Brahmns migrated in search of fresh lands to bring under agriculture. The ashrams set up by the Brahmins in the forests were the pioneer settlements that developed contacts with the tribes in the area, and brought them under the command of the plough and the Vedas. The local tribals were incorporated almost wholly as *jatis* of the Shudra Varna, and retained their tribal customs and became the labourers on the land, carrying out the various tasks necessary for agricultural operations.

The tribal elite were incorporated into the Brahmn Varna. The Brahmins changed the form of their religion. Sacrificial yagnas became symbolic. The principle of *ahimsa* was adopted from Buddhism. The older Vedic Codes, which were glorifications of pastoral life and wars, gave way to newer Gods, like the cult of Krishna, and also Shiva and later Vishnu. Tribal rituals were adopted, for instance, the *agani* rituals, performed only by Brahmins in south Indian temples, were non-Vedic in origin. Tribal worship of mother Goddesses was also incorporated into the Hindu religion. In fact, with the development of feudalism, the feminine names of certain tribes, e.g., Matangi, Chandali, Kaivarti, and their tribal totems, were also incorporated into the Hindu fold. Gods and Goddesses were incorporated into the Hindu pantheon as avatars of the main God, Vishnu. This was the ideological manifestation of the social process of the absorption of tribes and semi-tribes into the spreading agrarian economy at the lower levels of the social hierarchy. The significance of the Varnashrama Dharma in this process, the importance of the Brahmins in the unfolding agrarian economy and the generation of surplus, their role in the daily and seasonal rituals connected with cultivation increased their importance and social base. In the king's court they provided the genealogy that proved the Kshatriya/Brahmin status of the ruler's family; hence, Brahminism was supported by the rulers. Yet in the period up to the 6th century AD, at least, Brahminism and the caste system could not gain hegemony in India, due to various factors like the invasion of foreign groups like Kushans and Shakas which ruled over large territories, the strength of artisan and trade guilds, as also the influence of Buddhism and Jainism.

Extension to the South

Aryadharma spread to the South, along with iron, from the 6th century BC, along the trade routes through the Deccan. When the groups of Brahmins entered the South the Varna scheme had already become rigid in the North. In the South, a division of labour and a class differentiated society with a developed culture, within the structure

of tribal society, already existed. They coexisted with tribes based on different subsistence systems and social organizations. The society was semi-tribal, in transition from tribe to a full-fledged class society. Both exchange and conflict between the various groups with different subsistence systems prevailed. For the non-agricultural groups raids on the agricultural settlements were an important means of obtaining necessary resources. Trade across the sea was also developing. Brahmins, with their knowledge of iron and superior technology of cultivation, and the Varna scheme, obviously suited the peasant settlements and their chieftains. The Varnashrama Dharma helped to bring order to the society in which conflicts between the peasants and the labourers had emerged. In keeping with the change in the North, the peasant communities were incorporated into the Shudra Varnas. The chieftains closely linked to the peasantry, did not form a separate Varna. The local priestly clans became part of the Brahmin Varna. Buddhism and Jainism also spread in South India from the 3rd century BC and they attracted a following among different sections of the people; artisans and traders in the towns and semi-tribal groups. With flourishing Roman trade, the Buddhist and Jain centres received major donations from the artisan and trade guilds. The three religions contended for political influence and all three got support in greater and lesser degrees.

Brahminism itself expanded in the form of various sects, the most prominent being Shaivism and Vaishnavism. These devotional sects drew upon popular tradition and thus helped to transform a scriptural religion into more popular devotional cults which could strike roots among the peasantry and others. The philosophical content to this new Brahminism was given by Sankara in the later period (800 AD). This *Veerashaiva* preacher not only contested Jainism and Buddhism but also organizationally strengthened the religion by establishing the *maths* in different parts of the country.

State Formation in the South

The first major state formation in the Deccan took place with the establishment of the Satavahana power in the 2nd century AD. The

Satavahanas, also known as the Andhras, supported the Brahmins and the *chaturvarna* system. But they also financially supported the development of the cave monasteries in the Deccan and the Buddhist centre at Nagarjunakonda and Kanchi. In the deep South, the rise of the Pallava empire in 575 AD marks the first important state formation. This marked the domination of the agrarian economy over the other modes of production in the region. The Pallavan state introduced important changes in political and military organization, and also promoted Brahminism, by the setting up of Brahmin villages as centres of learning and promoting the use of Sanskrit. Pallava rule was based on the landowning peasant class and kings promoted the expansion of the agrarian order. The first Pallavan ruler is said to have distributed three lakh ploughs that could be pulled with bullocks. It is from this period that the clashes between the three religions became sharp and there are many historical accounts of the conversion of kings and the persecution of other religious groups. Mahenuravarman, the Pallavan ruler, converted from Jainism to Shaivism and is said to have killed 8,000 Jains. The first Pallava ruler was also a Jain who was converted to Shaivism. The early Hoysalas were also Jains.

Brahminism provided the legitimacy to the rulers of the *chakrvartin*, the ruler over a territory, which replaced the king as the ruler over his people. The Brahmins became the religious basis for the legitimacy of the state that emerged. The Varna scheme became the means to break the kinship structures and create broader class type identities. Hence Brahminism consolidated in South India with the support of the state. The close alliance between the Brahmins and the ruling groups can also be seen from the fact that in the Brahmin centres for imparting education, the *ghatikas*, both religious scriptures and the martial arts were taught. The art of administration was also imparted in these centres.

EMERGENCE AND CONSOLIDATION OF FEUDALISM

From around the 6th century AD, in the early medieval period, the caste system, based on jatis, began to consolidate in most parts

of India. It is clearly linked to the rise of feudalism all over India, when a class of intermediaries was created which expropriated the surplus in the form of revenue or share of the produce from the labouring masses. This was accompanied by the development of the self-sufficient village economy. The decline of trade and artisan guilds, primarily due to the collapse of the Roman empire after the 3rd century AD, the contraction of money circulation, the settling down of artisans in the villages, created the conditions for the rise of feudalism. Land grants began to be given to Brahmins, Buddhist monasteries and to army officials. Though this process began in the Satavahana rule in the 2nd century AD, and with the Guptas in 4th century AD, it became widespread from the 5th century onwards. From the 7th century onwards, appointing feudal intermediaries who collected revenue and took on administrative tasks became common. The distribution of land grants to Brahmins, in the period of rising feudalism, meant that from the beginning they constituted a part of the feudal class. This process essentially took place between the fifth and the seventh centuries, especially, in the parts that were colonized by the migrating peasant settlers — in Bengal, Orissa, Gujarat, and central and western Madhya Pradesh, in the Deccan. It began under the Pallava rule in the 6th century in the South, but reached its peak during the Chola rule from the ninth century onwards, in Tamil Nadu, parts of Karnataka and the Kerala regions.

In this period the proliferation of jatis also began. Jati, originally a term used for a tribe with its own distinct customs, coming into a Varna, gradually replaced the Varna since it became the main organization in which people were bound together. The original peasant settlers emerged as specific peasant jatis in particular regions. In the South the dominant peasant landowning jatis were considered as *satvik* Shudras, ranked only next to the Brahmins. A number of jatis and *upa*-jatis, each with an occupational specialization necessary for agriculture, or for social life in the village, also developed. The carpenter, blacksmith, potter, tanner, skinner of dead cattle were available in the bigger villages. As also the barber, the washerman and the priest. They provided

their skills to the peasant and other families including the families of the feudal intermediaries. In return they began to be given a share of the village produce. Initially the share was decided by *nattar*, the association of the dominant peasant community. In later times the shares became more formal, they were also given the right to till a part of the village lands. The *jajmani* system, the *balutedari* or *ayagari* system emerged within the new arrangement of the village structure. Money was not needed for daily exchange. This arrangement greatly aided the Brahmins and the other upper castes from the landowning, feudal intermediaries to raise their ritual status and social prestige, since the lower castes were available in full complement to do all the various types of physical and menial labour. The upper castes did not have to soil their hands. The jati system was suitable for the feudal mode of production and it would not be wrong to call this jati feudalism.

It is in this period that the number of Untouchable castes swelled greatly. From the 4th century BC itself, there are references to the Untouchables, in Patanjali, for example, who mentions two types of Shudras, the *Nirashrit* (excluded) and the *Ashrit*. But their numbers were restricted. Gradually newer tribal groups began to be included. But it is in the feudal period that their numbers went up greatly, the Chamars and Rajaks, for example, were reduced to the Untouchable status of an Untouchable. Tribal groups, subjugated by force after being dispossessed of their forests/lands, means of livelihood and freedom were relegated to an Untouchable status. Some artisan groups too were pushed down from the Shudra to the ati-Shudra ranks. They were in the main bonded agricultural labourers who were denied by religious injunctions any right to own wealth (gold, etc.) and land. Their only dharma was to labour for the entire village, especially, for the landowning class, but live outside the village at a distance, polluting even by their shadow. Maximum surplus could be extracted from the Untouchable labourers, forced into a low level of material existence and perpetual servitude.

Brahmins, both as individuals and as groups, were granted lands and a share of the revenue from the villages. They lived off

the surplus created by the villagers. The Brahmadeva villages in South India became the centres for Brahminical culture and learning. In these villages, Brahmins combined their control over the productive resources with administrative control over the life of the village and the surrounding region. Brahmins were allowed to keep the revenue of the villages, or the larger share (*Melavarm*) of the total produce, they got their own lands cultivated through tenants or sharecroppers. The Dharma allowed them the right to own land, they could supervise cultivation, but they could not cultivate it themselves. A section of the Brahmin castes were closely associated with the rulers. Apart from providing fictitious genealogies to prove the Kshatriya status of the ruling groups, they were the royal purohits and in many kingdoms they held administrative posts. These Brahmins, who helped to generate the surplus, gained the highest social prestige in the feudal era.

As landowners and revenue collectors, closely associated with the rule of the kingdom, the Brahmins held wide authority in the political, social and religious life. They were active members of the feudal ruling class, and its ideologues as well.

At the same time, in this period, the Kshatriya Varna consolidated itself in North-West India. This process did not take place in the South. The class of feudal intermediaries, as also big landowners with feudal armed retainers who lived off the land grants and share of revenue became a permanent feature of feudalism. In the North, the ruling or powerful clans of those invaders like Gujjars, Hunas and Arya Kshatriyas, and the intermediaries consolidated to form the Rajput caste. The clan-kin connections of these groups from the feudal strata were consolidated through marriage alliances to form the Rajput jatis. The word originates from *Rajrutra*, one who controlled a few villages in the early medieval period. In this period the village headman also came to be recognized as an important post. Normally, large landowners from the dominant peasant caste, they separated themselves from their cultivating peasant castemen, and consolidated their position through kin relationships and marriage relationships among themselves over a region. The Reddis in Andhra Pradesh (from *pedda rettis*) and the

Gaudas emerged as separate caste groups through this process in the medieval feudal period.

The process of the consolidation of the jati structure was completed in the main by the 10th century, before the raids of Mohammed of Ghazni. The feudal class upheld the *chaturvarna*. Even rulers who professed Buddhism were proud upholders of the *chaturvarna*. This scheme provided a ritual status to the various jatis. All castes connected with physical labour (peasants, artisans), or those that challenged Brahminical superiority or the notions of hierarchy (*kayasthas* or court writers, *vaids* or doctors), were classed as Shudra. But since this scheme was unable to explain the multiplicity of the various jatis, the *varnasamkara* theory was put forward. This theory explained the various jatis as being a result of the unsanctioned marriages between men and women of different Varnas. The Manusmriti (1st or 2nd century AD) proved to be a harbinger of the feudal order that emerged, providing it with a perfect ideological justification. This theory was nothing but the justification for the superiority of the exploiting classes and provided sanction for the lack of freedom and degradation of the majority.

It is often claimed that untouchability arose as a result of the ritually polluting nature of certain occupations and their low value. However, the nature of occupations cannot create a class of permanently polluting people. The ideology of ritual pollution and purity, on the contrary, provided the means of creating a class of semi-slaves for the agricultural and urban economy. As a ruling class that controlled the land and labour of the exploited classes, and in the condition of strong resistance and sharp class contradictions, Brahmins, as active members of this ruling class, developed the theory of pollution and purity. For this, they may well have borrowed from tribal terms, with the Brahmins themselves as the reference point to measure purity. The occupations became polluting. The ideology of Varna became the ideology of the whole society, which shows the importance of the caste system in the feudal mode of production.

The significance of Brahminical ideology in the generation of surplus, in the legitimization of rule and, above all, in the consolidation of an agrarian village economy based on intense exploitation, gave it hegemony over Buddhism and Jainism. Buddhist and Jain centres had become centres of opulence competing for royal grants. Though these religions too had changed to suit the feudal order, and they too accepted the jati system, yet their role in the economy declined. They remained as ideological centres counter to Brahminism, inspite of the fact that they were hounded and violently suppressed by various rulers, especially after the 7th century. With the invasion of the Turks at Sarnath and Nalanda, Buddhism could not recover in India from this destructive attack.

Turkish Invasion

The establishment of Turkish power in North India, through the slave dynasty in the 13th century, marked an important phase in the feudal mode of production. They centralized the administration and introduced a more systematic system of revenue collection. The composition of the ruling class underwent a change. Initially, it was the Turk slave families and their relatives that ruled, they were successively replaced by ex-slaves of Indian origin, Indianized Turks and foreign immigrants, to be replaced by even more foreigners. The most important changes related to the methods in which the rights to revenues collection (*iqta*) were assigned. Originally restricted only for life, on the decision of the king, by the end of the 15th century they were made hereditary. The Turks were urban-based and favoured Islam. Thus, Turkish rulers displaced the original feudatories and created new ones over a period of time.

The administrative changes introduced by the Turks, and adopted in the Deccan too, introduced changes in the powers of revenue collection and administration, affecting military service holders, administrators, village headmen and the priestly class, the officeholders came to be called *inamdars, watandars, iqtadars, deshmukhs-desais,* and later as *jagirdars,* during Mughal rule. Although some of the earlier intermediaries who had lost their

posts regained them during the later part of the Turk rule, yet in this period the composition of the feudal classes in North India was not stable. However, this did not affect the structure of the village economy. The Turks introduced new techniques in the science of war. They also gave a fillip to trade, commerce and artisan production in the urban areas. Hence, this period saw the development of the productive forces in Indian society.

Although the same instability in the feudal ruling class did not take place in South India, the emergence of the Vijaynagara Kingdom in the 14th century, a militarist rule, also brought changes in the ruling class. The Vijaynagara kings owed the success of their rise to power to the military techniques they had introduced, which they, in turn, had learnt from the conquering Muslims. They were allied with a class of warriors, called the *nayakas*. These nayakas emerged as powerful intermediaries over the older local chiefs. They were granted *amaram* tenures — the right to a major share of the produce in the land, in return for maintaining an agreed number of troops and animals, ever-ready to join the war along with the forces of the king. From the 14th century onwards these nayakas also became a part of the feudal class. Both the Vijaynagara kings and their feudatories patronized the temples and the Brahmins, and Brahminical Hinduism remained a very important part of the legitimizing ideology of the Vijaynagara kingdom till its decline in the 16th century.

Tribal Kingdoms

In the later feudal period various tribal kingdoms came up. This denotes both the differentiation emerging within the tribes and their Hinduization over the centuries. The Dome founded a kingdom in the foothills of the Himalayas in the 13th century, the Bhars came to power in Assam in the 13th century, and ruled upto the 18th century, the Nagbanshis and the Cheros ruled in Chottanagpur and Palamu in the 12th century, the Gonds founded kingdoms in central India between the 15th and the 18th centuries, the Mahadev Kolis founded a kingdom in south Gujarat in

the 17th century. As these tribes settled down to agricultural production, they were influenced by the technologically and culturally advanced Brahmins and peasants settled in the area through land grants; inequalities within the tribal societies grew. In the tribes in which a small clan made a push for power, kingdoms emerged. Although some of these early kingdoms opposed Brahminism in their initial phase, and some of them worshipped both Hindu and Buddhist Gods, all these tribal kingdoms were active supporters of Brahminical Hinduism. They invited Brahmins to settle in their kingdoms, attracting them with generous land grants. They also got genealogies prepared, to claim Kshatriya status. Within the tribal kingdoms too, the ruling elite adopted Varnashrama Dharma to legitimize their power before their own people and before neighbouring kingdoms. A lot of these tribal kingdoms later became intermediaries of more powerful rulers, such as the Mughals and the Marathas.

Resurgence of Trade and Commodity Production

The resurgence of trade and commodity production by artisan groups began around the 12th century in South India and a century later in the North. It led to the strengthening of the traders and artisan groups all over the country. The temples became centres for the growth of towns. Military encampments and administrative towns and ports developed as urban centres. The result of this was the assertion of the artisans and trading castes to break out of the constraints of Brahminical control. In South India, the rise of the left handed caste association, the *Idangai*, was the most powerful expression of the process. From the 12th century onwards, the artisan castes, especially those connected with urban trade, came together as the Idangai. Through this association they defended their rights against feudal agrarian domination and the oppression of traders. The right handed castes, the *Velangai*, tended to represent the agrarian related castes, and came from the low castes. As the putting out system developed for the production of certain commodities, the conflicts between the traders and the artisans dependent on them

increased. In North India members of the artisan castes converted to Islam, for instance, the weavers, the *julahas*, etc.

Protest — The Bhakti Movement

The growth of commodity production and the political and cultural changes created the material conditions within the feudal society for the rise of protest against the caste system.

The caste system, with its emphasis on Vedic learning and Brahminical superiority, faced its next major blow in the form of the Bhakti movement. Spanning a period from the 12th to the 17th century, the Bhakti movement was a popular opposition to the caste system. Most of the Bhakti saints were from the artisan castes, like blacksmiths, carpenters, weavers, although a few of the religious reformers were also Brahmins. A few, like Nandan (a *Nayanar*), Tiruppan (an *Aalvar*), Chokhamela and Sant Ravidas, were from the Untouchable caste. The movement also brought women saints into the limelight. The Bhakti movement had a moderate stream, represented by the likes of Ramanuja, Gyaneshwar and Chaitanya, which stressed on the oneness of all before God. The more radical stream, comprising of saints like Basavanna, Tukaram, Namdev, Kabir and Guru Nanak, criticized caste discrimination and Brahminical hypocrisy openly. Some of them initiated measures of social reform as well. Kabir and Guru Nanak went out of the fold of Hinduism. The movement, by emphasizing the personal relation of the individual with God, transcended the barriers of caste. It struck a major blow at the concept of Brahminical superiority based on the monopoly of the knowledge of the Vedas.

The Bhakti movement was a major assault on the ideological and material premises of feudalism. Preaching in the local languages, it gave an impetus to the regional languages, laying the basis for the growth of nationalism in the different regions. Even though towards the end of this movement, a conservative trend also came up in the form of Ramdas and Tulsidas, who upheld the *chaturvarna* and sought the re-establishment of Brahminical superiority and prestige, yet, in the main, the Bhakti movement

was a movement for religious and social reform. The movement, however, failed to break the caste system. The main reasons were that the movement did not attack the base of the caste system, the feudal mode of production and the land relations therein.

AGRARIAN ECONOMY AND RULING CLASSES IN THE 17TH AND 18TH CENTURIES

The Mughals who came to India in the 16th century from central Asia consolidated their rule by associating with the Rajput chiefs and other upper caste intermediaries and the ruling groups of kingdoms annexed in North India and in the Deccan. Thus, throughout the early period, though the Mughals monetized the collection of revenue to some extent, and also increased the exploitation of the peasantry, yet, they did not basically affect the social structure of the agrarian village economy as it had evolved over the previous centuries. It consisted of the intermediaries at the top of the rural structure, who were also, invariably, large landlords themselves. Often they held a post from the ruler, which gave administrative responsibilities and powers. There were also village chiefs and village level officials like accountants. These office holders and feudatories lived off the revenue collected from the peasants. They also controlled lands which they got tilled by either tenants or sharecroppers. In some areas, they used the bonded labourers from the tribal or Untouchable castes. Most of these feudal intermediaries were from the upper most castes; Brahmins, Rajputs and even if they originally came from the Shudra cultivating castes, they had elevated themselves to Kshatriya or to a high non-Brahmin status. In some areas they had even acquired Brahmin status. The control of temples had given the Brahmins wide control over the resources of the agrarian economy in the South. The appointment of Brahmins to high administrative and military posts during the Vijaynagara rule further concentrated power and resources under their control. In Western Maharashtra too, the Maratha rule concentrated economic and political power in the hands of the Brahmins.

The main cultivating castes were exploited for revenue and innumerable taxes. Yet their rights to the land had evolved over the centuries, even if they were under the feudatories. The *jajmani/balutedari* system institutionalized the system of exchange between the services of the various castes and the peasants and the landlords. On the one hand, it formalized the share of the various castes to the produce, but on the other, it increased the power and prestige of the feudatories and Brahmins, and formalized the system of *Begar* (forced free labour). Higher caste landowning sections could withdraw from all manual work, especially, work connected with agriculture. The other castes served as their *jajmans*. It included free labour for a number of artisans and service castes, who served various families at the same time, but the Untouchable castes, were in many areas attached to a particular family. While specific Untouchable castes, in specific regions, served as lower level functionaries (watchman, general servants marking boundaries, relaying messages, etc.) of the administration, and for this they received the right to cultivate a small portion of the village lands, the vast majority of them were agricultural labourers. They have been called as bonded servants, eristic slaves, and landless serfs. The religious prescriptions suited this structure perfectly — while it was a sin for the higher castes to touch the plough, Untouchables could own no land nor acquire any capital in the form of wealth. Other prescriptions, like style and type of clothing, names, carriage customs, etc., served to emphasize their degraded status and reinforce it. In many parts of the country, the names for the Untouchable field labourers highlights this situation. Bonded labourers in south Gujarat are called *halis* (those who handle the plough). In U.P., they are called *halwahas, holiyas,* and *sewaks*, in Punjab, *halis* and *sepis*. In Kerala, they were the *adimas*. Bondage was widespread during the time of the Mughals. According to estimates, more than 10 percent of the population comprised of agricultural labourers, most of them in various forms of bondage. At the beginning of the 19th century, in the southern provinces, this proportion was even higher. Almost all of them were

from the lowest castes of tribals. The British colonialists inherited this structure when they began their rule.

Pre-British Role of the State in Upholding Caste

Given the repeated attempts by the oppressed castes to reject the caste system, to oppose Brahminical tyranny, it must be emphasized that the pre-British feudal state not only upheld the philosophy and ideology of relations of caste but also actively intervened to maintain it. The feudal king had the authority to intervene in caste disputes, even those related to ritual superiority. Expulsion from the caste or readmission, decisions on rights of particular castes to ritual practices and modes of worship were decided by the political-secular authority. Muslim rulers too arbitrated in these disputes. The Vijaynagara Kings, the Sultans of the Deccan, and even the Mughals arbitrated in the disputes. For the state, this served the purpose of punishing subjects, and also gaining financially — they collected fees for arbitration. But more important is the fact that since the feudal rulers depended on the caste system they had to maintain it. The rulers had the right to extract free labour (begar) from the artisan and service castes, as also from the Untouchables, especially, for public works. The ideological use of the caste system was clear, it upheld and legitimized the dharma of the rulers to wield power.

The growth and consolidation of the caste system was, therefore, not a spontaneous process, but linked to the support and power of the state. The caste system was upheld with violence. Brahminism, in addition, sanctioned violence by the uppermost castes against the Untouchables. They had the right to kill the Untouchables who in any way transgressed the limits. The caste system was maintained not only through the ideology of the religion but also through the sword.

The Varna system, and the caste system, having been such an important aspect of the socio-economic and political life of ancient and feudal India, much of political and economic activity was organized on caste-kin basis. Hence, a large number of social

and economic conflicts were expressed in the form of conflicts between castes and religious sects — the conflicts between Buddhism, Jainism and the Brahminical sects, the conflict between the Shaivites and the Vaishanavas, the struggle between the right handed and the left handed castes, are examples of this. Since caste permeated the economic and political structures, it has taken this form to express the contradictions in the society. Tribals in India, too, have had a long glorious history of attempts to fight the feudal order served by Brahminical Hinduism. The struggles of the ancient Naga people, the Nishads and the Bhils, against those who ousted them from their ancient lands, their resistance to attempts at Aryanizaton — the forcible incorporation into the agrarian economy as semi-slaves — all are a part of this history. It is in this background that Brahminical Hinduism, in all its *Shastras, smritis*, and even in the epics, depicts the tribals who resisted in the most insulting and demeaning language. Eklavya, for instance, was the son of a tribal chieftain. Brahminism destroyed all the literature of the ideologies that opposed it, from Charvaka to Buddhism. The literature destroyed in India could only be found preserved in the monasteries in China and Tibet. This distinctive quality of Brahminical Hinduism has been hidden under the veneer of *ahimsa* and abstruse philosophy, and thousands of years of exploitation and parasitic existence could be justified under the clock of ritual superiority and contempt for manual work.

THE IMPACT OF BRITISH RULE

Colonial rule did not touch or tamper with the Brahminical Hindu order and the inequitable caste system. The East India Company, in fact, gave a fresh lease of life to the *chaturvarna* system by incorporating it into the legal system being used in India. By passing local customary and caste practices, they upheld the Dharmashastras, appointing Brahmin pundits to advise the British judges in interpreting the Shastras in disputes relating to family and marriage, property and inheritance, and religious

rights, including the status of specific castes. Hence the British legal system upheld the denial of entry into temples to the Untouchable castes in the name of protecting the 'established rights of other castes.' The British courts entertained caste claims regarding privileges and precedence of exclusiveness in respect to religious rituals as well. In the name of respecting the autonomy of castes, they upheld the disciplinary power of castes against violators of caste norms, even in inter-caste disputes. Thus, they upheld caste although in a much more restricted sphere than in the feudal period.

The early British rulers encouraged and financed the study of Sanskrit and the translation of Sanskrit texts into English. One section of the East Indian Company administration even attempted to make Sanskrit the medium of instruction in the universities in the system of education that they were setting up. It is another matter that the direct colonial racist interests were upheld when English was chosen as the medium of instruction.

Under pressure from the non-Brahmin movement and the reformers, the British were forced to enact resolutions and legislation granting access to public places, tanks, schools, wells, etc., (maintained out of public funds) to members of all castes and classes, but they did little to oversee their implementation.

Yet, at the same time, the British administrators, in their selfish interest of seeking support for colonial rule, implemented the policy of divide and rule, encouraged the conversion of the lower castes to Christianity by missionaries, and propagated the racist theory on the origin of caste, emphasizing the Indo-European origins of the Aryan race, and caste as a means of maintaining racial purity.

From 1901, through the Censuses, the caste backgrounds of the people were recorded, and castes were classified on the basis of 'social precedence as recognized by native opinion.' Through the censuses, the colonial rulers provided the various castes with a rallying point. The castes, which had started organizing themselves on a regional basis through caste conferences and caste newspapers, started mobilizing to record a higher status for

themselves. The colonial state came to be seen as the means of raising caste status. The process of Sanskritization was aided by the British government.

The economic changes introduced by the colonial rulers in the 19th century in order to consolidate their rule and intensify the exploitation of India had an impact on the relations of production in the rural areas and created new classes from among the various castes. The commoditization of land, its accessibility to members of all castes, the various revenue settlements — the Zamindari, *rayatwari*, etc., the introduction of railways, defence works, the colonial education system, the uniform criminal and civil law and the colonial bureaucracy affected the caste system and modified its role in society.

In the land settlements, the British ignored the inalienable rights of the actual cultivators, and in many areas made the intermediaries, the non-cultivating sections that only had a share in the produce traditionally, become the sole proprietors of the land. In the Zamindari settlement areas, the Shudra peasants became tenants at the mercy of the landlords, in other areas, a class of peasant proprietors arose, but, even in this, the larger peasants gained while the actual cultivators became tenants or sharecroppers. The Shudra peasantry was divided into an upper section of the rich; intensified exploitation coupled with famines and other crises, indebted peasants of all the cultivating castes who were pushed into the ranks of the landless. A section of artisans became landless labourers. A class of rural poor, landless or poor peasants, emerged from the ranks of most of the middle and lower castes in the 19th century.

A working class linked to industrial production also emerged from the ranks of the middle and the lower castes. A small section among the lower castes also found avenues for mobility with jobs as small contractors, traders and investors in land. With access to education, service in the army and the government bureaucracy, a class of petty-bourgeoisie also developed within the middle and the lower castes. But they found their avenues blocked by the monopoly of Brahmins over the government jobs.

The introduction of Western education helped the Brahmin castes to monopolize the colonial bureaucracy. With their tradition of learning, and their socially and economically powerful position, the Brahmins and others from the higher castes took Western education and soon came to occupy most of the posts in the administration and judiciary.

The development of new classes among the non-Brahmin castes led to the growth of a democratic consciousness among them. This was reflected in two processes. Among the upper sections of the non-Brahmins, for instance, the Kayasthas in the north and the Nairs in Kerala, reformers started organizing caste associations to press for changes in the practices of the caste system, giving up outmoded customs to adjust to the new opportunities available under colonial rule. Among the lower castes too, the petty-bourgeois sections mobilized caste associations to give up occupations that were considered as defiling or degrading, and start emulating the customs of the higher castes in an attempt to get a higher status. The conservative trend among the non-Brahmin movement was strong among these caste associations of the upper sections. The movements among the Patidars in Gujarat and the Rajputs, and the Marathas led by Shahu Maharaj in Western Maharashtra emphasized the process of Sanskritization and were conservative in their orientation. These attempts were led by the landlord and trading elite sections of these castes and helped them to gain access to positions of power and privilege in the state structure and in electoral politics.

At the same time, the masses of non-Brahmins were in contradiction with the feudal elite and moneylenders, the social props of the colonial rule, most of whom were from the uppermost castes, especially, Brahmins in many parts of western and south India. Members of these feudal upper castes also monopolized the state bureaucracy. These contradictions led to the emergence of a non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra and south India, especially, Tamil Nadu. The movement, objectively, had an anti-feudal and anti-imperialist content, but the leadership of the movement could

not comprehend the contradictions in this manner and therefore failed to articulate them in this manner.

The Non-Brahmin Movement

The non-Brahmin movement developed in the early part of the 20th century by mobilizing the Shudra middle castes, as well as, to some extent, amongst the Untouchable castes against Brahminical feudal domination and exploitation. They concentrated, primarily, on various aspects of caste oppression — superstition, caste-feudal privileges and rights, hereditary nature of posts, etc. The movement used the racial theory of the origin of caste to explain caste oppression, by interpreting Brahmins as Aryan invaders who conquered the Dravidian race. The conservative trend within the movement tended to restrict itself to opposing the monopoly of Brahmins in the field of education and government employment, in the legislatures and the struggle to get representation in the legislatures and control on District Boards. The Justice Party, Non-Brahmin Party, the Unionist Party (Punjab) marked this trend. The Triveni Sangh in Bihar also restricted itself to the three main middle castes, the Yadavs, the Kurmis, and the Koeris. This trend was not sympathetic to the oppression and needs of the lowest castes.

The radical sections of the non-Brahmin movement were more broad-based, more thorough in their anti-caste stand, rejecting the whole caste system with its hierarchy and oppression. They took up the questions of the peasantry and of the middle castes as well. The leadership of the non-Brahmin movement aroused the democratic consciousness of the oppressed masses and prepared the ground for their mobilization into the anti-imperialist movement. But the classes in the leadership, having gained their demands for representation and a share in the decision-making, gave up their anti-caste programme. These movements placed political power in the hands of the upper sections of the non-Brahmin castes, the smaller landlords and big tenants, when the land reforms were implemented by the Nehru government in the 1950s. Hence these

sections emerged in the post-1947 period as the main oppressors of the poor and landless peasants, most of whom are from the lowest castes. The Marathas in Maharashtra, Reddys and Kammas in Andhra Pradesh, the Vokkaligas and Lingayats in Karnataka, Patels (Patidars) in Gujarat and the Yadavs and the Jats in Bihar and Haryana, respectively. The class interests of the leadership of these movements prevented them from taking up a thorough anti-caste programme which should have included the land question from the viewpoint of the lowest castes, the poor and the landless, and thus they consolidated their own position but betrayed the interests of the middle and the poor peasants of their castes. The non-Brahmin movement was strongest in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, and threw up important leaders like Periyar and Jyotiba Phule.

Non-Brahmin Movement in Maharasthra

The movement began with the founding of the Satyashodak Samaj (SS) in Pune. The rise of the SS took place in the context of a rise of Brahminical Hindu revivalism in western India in the 1870s, with its base in Pune, which put the upper caste reformers on the defensive. After working as a social reformer for almost 20 years, Jyotiba Phule founded the SS in 1873 in Pune. The main task of the SS was to make the non-Brahmins conscious of their exploitation by the Brahmins. Phule himself belonged to the Mali (gardener) caste, a caste involved in the cultivation of vegetables, and their trade in the vicinity of Pune. His family was middle-class and he was educated in a mission school. The SS did not restrict its activities to any particular caste and worked among the various non-Brahmin (NB) castes in the rural areas of Thane, Pune and, later, in other districts in Bombay Province and Berar. They also worked among the workers in the textile mills of Bombay. The songs, booklets and plays written by Phule used a popular hard hitting style and language to expose the various ways in which the Brahmins duped the people, especially, the peasants. The SS interpreted the racial theory of the origin of

caste in the context of popular tradition — the Aryan invaders had enslaved the local peasantry, the rule of Baliraja, the peasant king was defeated — showing the links of the SS with the democratic sentiments of the peasantry. In Phule's time, the SS campaigned for social reform — they rejected their own feudal-style marriages and adopted the SS marriages which were based on principles of equality, mutual respect and loyalty between husband and wife. The SS reform campaign in Phule's time led to a strike by barbers who decided not to tonsure widows leading to tensions in the village. Phule ran a paper called *Din Bandhu* (Friend of the Oppressed). His main supporters were Telugu contractors and workers in the textile mills. The first reformist organization among the textile workers of Bombay, the Millhands Association, was formed in 1890 by N.M. Lokhande under Phule's guidance. This association represented the grievances of the mill workers till it was pushed aside by the militant trade unions that emerged among the workers in the aftermath of the First World War. Phule promoted modern agriculture among the peasantry and personally bought land to experiment and set an example before them. He was influenced by the democratic American writings of Tom Paine and the principles of liberty and equality. He wrongly believed that British rule had destroyed the rule of Brahmins and brought modern education to all castes, and hence, was a supporter of the colonial rule in the country.

The Non-Brahmin Movement after Phule: After Phule's death, the activists of the SS continued to work. The fact that units of the SS were formed in villages not only in the districts like Ahmednagar, Satara, Kolhapur but also in the Berar region in Amravati shows that the growing peasant consciousness was being mobilized through the SS in the beginning of the 20th century. Their propaganda struck a chord among the peasantry. Campaigns against social problems like drinking and against untouchability were taken up. The SS also took up the problems of the peasants, promoting co-operatives among them. The contradictions in the rural areas were expressed by the SS as a conflict between the Shetji/Bhatji and the Bahujan Samaj (moneylender/priest and the

masses). The SS functioned systematically, holding annual conferences after 1910, and bringing out a magazine. SS *tamashas* (the drama) toured the villages, singing songs and putting up performances to spread their message. The basic content of the activities was anti-feudal. The propaganda of an SS *tamasha* led to a spontaneous revolt of the peasants against Brahmin landlords in 1919 in Satara. The peasants were demanding a reduction in the rent. They broke idols and abused the gods and the wives of the Brahmins. This revolt was not supported by the landlord sections of the NBs in the rural areas. Nonetheless, SS activity continued and SS activists were involved in peasant agitations in other districts in the 1920s. The SS attacked the feudal authority in rural areas and aroused the democratic consciousness of the peasants. The SS campaigns led to the exodus of Brahmin landlords from the villages in western Maharashtra. It laid the ground for the militant anti-imperialist struggles led by the peasantry in the region in the 1940s, like the Patri-Sarkar movement in Satara, when a parallel authority was setup against the British.

The interests of the feudal and rich peasant sections of the NBs could not be satisfied within the SS, nor could they support the populist and militant propaganda. In 1915, the Non-Brahmin Party was formed in order to contest District Board elections and enter the legislature. This trend was closely allied with the colonial government and the textile mill owners in Bombay, and was strongly anti-Tilak and anti-Congress. The NB party was very active in Pune in the 1920s in a long drawn and bitter battle with the Congress extremists like Tilak and his supporters. Another conservative trend, associated with the NB party was the group led by Shahu Maharaj, the ruler of the Kolhapur principality. The Maharaj supported education for the lower castes, setting up hostels for them. But the main thrust of his activities was gaining Kshatriya status and forming a priesthood parallel to Brahmins. He was attracted to the Arya Samaj later.

While Phule, and the later SS activity, supported colonial rule, their main activity was arousing mass consciousness about social and cultural oppression. However, the NB Party was

collaborationist from the beginning and failed to express the mass sentiment aroused to direct anti-imperialist consciousness. Hence, a large section of the NB Party joined the Congress in the 1930s, while a much smaller group led by Javalkar joined the CPI. The dominant section of the NB movement consolidated the interests of the narrow sections of the non-Brahmins, the landlords, and developed a hegemonic Maratha consciousness within the Congress. They betrayed the interests of the other middle and lower castes and the anti-caste tasks. They suppressed the entire *Satyashodhak* tradition. This tradition was kept alive by middle peasant-based parties that emerged in the region in the 1940s, like the Peasants' and Workers Party and the Lal Nishan Party as well as the Dalit movement.

The SS movement was the main movement in the early part of this century in Maharashtra, through which the anti-feudal, anti-caste sentiments of the peasant masses of the middle castes were expressed. It dealt a blow to Brahminical hegemony and feudal relations in the countryside. But since the leadership of the movement restricted their attack to caste ideology and failed to put forward a programme to break the foundations of the caste system, in the concentration of land, the main means of production, they could only reform the caste system and feudalism and not break it. Hence they were unable to fulfill the interests of the lower castes.

The Non Brahmin Movement in Tamil Nadu

The concentration of religious and economic power in the hands of the Brahmin castes in the erstwhile Madras presidency, the concentration of Brahmins in the modern fields — education and bureaucracy in the province — the emergence of petty-bourgeois and nascent bourgeois classes among the lower classes, including an educated intelligentsia, led to the emergence of the NB movement in Tamil Nadu. While the first stirrings of the movement began by the mid-19th century itself, a movement against the domination of the higher castes started by the end of the century and gained organized expression by the 1920s.

The fact that the Brahmins, as the largest section of the intelligentsia, were the first to become active in the leadership of the Congress, and in the Home Rule League that was founded by Annie Besant and Capt. Olcott, added to the separation between the NB movement and the anti-imperialist movement from the its early days. It led to the view being put forward that unless caste differences were eliminated India's political development would not be possible.

The social reform movement in the form of the Madras Hindu Social Reform Association (1892) — which was active in promoting the education of women, reform of marriage, abolition of untouchability — involved a wide cross-section of the intelligentsia. The violent conflicts between the low caste toddy tapper Nadars, after they had risen economically through trade, and the feudal Marwaris, in the vicinity of Sivakasi in 1899, after the unsuccessful attempt of the town Nadars to enter a temple, reveals that with social differentiation the lower castes were astir for their democratic rights, against traditional inequalities and hierarchy. This movement led, on the one hand, to the formation of the Justice Party which primarily sought and obtained representation in the legislatures through communal electorates and used patronage for gaining posts in the bureaucracy. It was strongly pro-British. On the other hand, the much more mass-based and radical Self-Respect Movement, led by E.V. Ramaswami, EVR or 'Periyar,' did not restrict itself to promoting the interests of the NBs in the administration, but went further and launched an all round attack on the caste system and Brahminical Hinduism. While Periyar often used the platform of the Justice Party, yet his movement was mass-based and iconoclastic. The Justice Party was led by, and clearly represented the interests of, big landlords and merchants from among the upper castes among the non-Brahmins only. Periyar's movement was based on wider support of the rising working class, the middle class and the traders, especially, in the urban centres like Erode, Madurai, Coimbatore, Salem, Tiruchirapalli, Tuticorin and other towns. At its peak, the Self-Respect Movement took up the activities of propagating

against moneylenders' exploitation and the problems of the peasantry.

The Justice Party was formed in 1917 in response to the political reforms being proposed by the British government. It campaigned in India and in England for separate representation to the non-Brahmins in Madras Presidency. It won the elections in 1920 and formed the provincial ministry in Madras Presidency. In 1923, its base had eroded but it managed to continue in the government, but in 1926, it lost badly to the Swarajists. The Justice Party, in office, showed itself against the interests of the Untouchables and working class. Hence its base was easily eroded.

While the Justice Party took a strong pro-British stand, anti-colonial intellectuals among the non-Brahmins, many of whom were active within the Congress, for instance, Kesava Pillai, EVR, Dr. Varadharajalu, formed the Madras Presidency Association in 1917 to press for full communal representation for the NBs.

E.V. Ramaswamy formed the Self-Respect Movement — *Suyamaraiyathai Iyakkam* — after he walked out of the Congress in 1925 for their unwillingness to support separate representation for the NBs. The conservative, pro-feudal, pro-Varna positions of the Congress leadership had led to tensions within the Congress between Brahmins and NBs. EVR's movement was concentrated in the Tamil areas of the Presidency. It was oriented towards the oppressed castes, including the Untouchables, and took active steps to involve women and the youth. They ran a magazine called *Kudi Arasu*. Militant attacks, with an atheistic approach, were launched by the Self-Respect Movement, not only on Brahmins, but also on the religion itself, on superstition, caste divisions and caste privileges. EVR wanted to arouse the self-respect and feeling of equality among the lower castes. They upheld the pride in Tamil language and opposed the use of Sanskrit. They propagated a ban on the use of Brahmin priests for marriages and popularized Self-Respect marriages; they opposed the use of the *Thali*, called for the abolition of caste names, and ridiculed the epics like The Ramayana. EVR's style was direct, propagandist and very popular. By struggling for the equality of all castes and

breaking the hold of religion, the movement paved the way for a materialist analysis.

In the 1930s the Self-Respect Movement, under the influence of Communists in Tamil Nadu, and the influence of Periyar's trip to the USSR, supported socialism. Communists like Singaravellu propagated materialist philosophy and socialism through the magazine. During that period, two trends were active within the Self-Respect Movement, one which preferred to restrict itself to social reform, and the other, which wanted to take up anti-capitalist propaganda and activity. The Self-Respect socialists began organizing on problems of the peasantry along with their regular conferences. Under the influence of the CPI leaders, the Self-Respect socialists (*samadharma* group) merged into the Congress Socialist Party in November 1936.

Periyar faced repression from the British government for his attack on the NB government, and for 'promoting Soviet Bolshevism.' Consequently, Periyar retracted. The Self-Respect movement could not sustain its social radicalism consistently and was unable to give expression to the sentiments of the masses demanding a full attack on feudal land relations. Periyar then entered the Justice Party and in 1942 formed the Dravida Iyakkam (DK). They supported the efforts of the British in the war. In 1947, during the transfer of power, Periyar called for August 15 to be observed as a 'day of mourning,' demanding freedom from the Brahmin Raj that had been inaugurated. Differences within his organization on this call, as well as on Periyar's organizational methods and morality, led to a split with C. Annadorai forming the DMK. During Congress rule under Rajagopalachari, the DK launched strong agitations against the decision to impose Hindi. The anti-Hindi agitations took place in 1948 and in 1952, and again in 1965, thus giving expression to the Tamil nationality sentiments against the domination of the all India comprador bourgeoisie. These agitations were violently suppressed. The DK also continued its anti-caste propaganda, breaking the images of Lord Ganesh, calling for a boycott of temples, burning thousands of copies of the Constitution in 1957 for maintaining the caste system.

The NB movement continued in the 1950s as a cultural expression of the oppressed castes and the Tamil nationality. Periyar supported the Congress when a Nadar, Kamaraj, became the Chief Minister. Later he supported the DMK government.

The DMK and the AAIDMK, the parties formed from within Tamil Nadu, represented the interests of the regional comprador sections with whom the Self-Respect Movement had compromised. It also compromised with Brahminism and with the policies of the all India comprador bourgeoisie. While initially, in the 1950s, they gave expression to the Tamil nationalist sentiments, and propagated against casteism, ever since they achieved power at the state level they consolidated the class interests of the landlord sections of the middle castes and the regional comprador bourgeoisie. Hence these parties have not been sympathetic to the demands of the lowest castes and have been equal to the Congress in the suppression of the militant and revolutionary agitations of the lowest sections of society. In order to further their class interests they have come to an agreement with the all India comprador bourgeoisie and sacrificed the interests of the Tamil nationality as well. Thus, a section has even supported the repression of the struggle of the Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Dalit Movement During The Colonial Period

Due to the betrayal of their interests by the non-Brahmin movement and the limitations of the upper caste reformers, the castes most oppressed by the caste system, the Dalits, developed their own movement, especially in South India, from the early part of the 20th century. The Dalits, calling themselves as *Panchamas*, changed their names to *Adi-Dravidas, Adi-Andhras, Adi-Karnatakas*, to show that they were the original inhabitants of their respective regions and started organizing separate conferences. The Chamars in Punjab broke away from the Arya Samaj and its '*shuddhi*' (purification) programme and its defence of the Vedas and began the *Adi-Dharma* movement. They invoked the name of Sant Ravidas, the Bhakti movement saint. Initially, these associations emphasized

education and Sanskritization. But soon there was a shift from the imitation of the upper castes to an assertion of social equality, the demand for political representation and an end to specific forms of caste oppression. A successful movement was led by the *Ezhava* community of traditional toddy tappers in Kerala, under the leadership of Shri Narayan Guru. He founded the Sri Narayana Guru Dharma Paripalana Yogam in 1902–03 with the help of the first Ezhava graduate Dr. Palpu. Initially, they tried to demand a higher status, and emphasized the need to take to education. They tried to enter the temples and the Vaikom Satyagraha in 1924 was the effort of the Ezhavas along with progressive sections of the people in Kerala. The strongest and longest lasting separate movement of the Dalits emerged under Dr. Ambedkar's leadership in Maharashtra. While Ambedkar broke with the upper caste reformers and the NB party, he took his inspiration from the SS movement and Jyotiba Phule.

Maharashtra

The Marathi speaking districts of Bombay Province and the Central Provinces and Berar were the first areas in India where a full-fledged independent movement of Dalits emerged in the 1920s. The movement was based on the majority Untouchable community in Maharashtra, the *Mahars*. Dr. Ambedkar emerged within this movement, and shaped it with the strength of his personality and activity.

The Dalit movement emerged in the background of changes wrought by the imperial policies of the British. The Mahars, general village menials, migrated to urban areas in much larger numbers than other Untouchable castes due to their lack of a fixed traditional occupation that tied them to the village economy. The economic insecurities of the landless, economic distress, combined with new economic opportunities in textile mills, ports, defence works and railways, the army and petty trade, led the Mahars to gain employment in these areas. The class differentiation within the community took place rapidly, and a small but

influential petty-bourgeois, and even usurious, capitalist class developed within the community. A sizeable section became part of the working class.

Social and educational reform activities among Mahars began at the turn of the century. But in the 1920s mass mobilization began in the community on the question of civic and social rights. This was preceded by a spate of magazines brought out by leaders like Ambedkar, Kisan Faguji Bansod and others. The dominant sections of the NB party were hostile to the demands of the Mahars. Within the working class, especially in the Bombay region too, in the textile mills, the homogenization of the working class could not take place, partly because of the caste prejudices among caste Hindu workers and the conscious efforts of the mill owners, including Indian capitalists, to keep the workers divided. The uneven development of the various communities forming part of the working class hampered a unified class consciousness from developing. This problem is evident in other states too, for instance, the struggle of the B & C Mills in Madras was hampered by the division between the caste Hindu and Adi-Dravid workers. Hence the Dalits, especially the Mahar workers in the Bombay working class, remained outside the active trade union struggles till the mid-30s, and they were under the influence of their community leaders. In Nagpur, where caste discrimination was not too sharp, and the Mahars constituted almost 25 percent of the mill-workers, their integration was greater. Hence the Dalit movement developed independently, led by the petty-bourgeoisie with the support of the poor peasant and working class masses of the community.

Ambedkar was a pioneer of the movement of scheduled castes for equality and against untouchability in the country. Ambedkar, the son of a Subhedar-major in the British Army, was the first graduate in his community. With financial help provided by the Maharaja of Baroda, he went for further studies to the United States of America, completed his doctorate and returned to India in 1916. He took up employment with the Baroda Maharaja but having faced caste discrimination he resigned and came to Bombay to teach in a college. He began participating in the reform

activities of the community and also started a paper. He countered upper caste reformers and wanted the Dalits to create their own leadership and develop their self respect. He went to England again to do his post doctoral work at the London School of Economics and came back in 1923 with a thesis and a law degree. He was the first Dalit to have gained a doctorate abroad.

In the second half of the 1920s Ambedkar was active in a series of struggles launched to assert the civic and religious equality of the Dalits. The Mahad Satyagraha, organized by Ambedkar with the support of younger and more militant sections of the NB party and other progressives, galvanized the Dalits in Maharashtra and proved important in creating mass awareness in the community. After a government resolution was passed opening public places to members of all castes, the Dalits attempted to use the public tank in Mahad, a town in Konkan. This was resisted by the upper caste sections controlling the Municipality. Subsequently, a massive conference was organized in Mahad in December 1927. Although the upper castes in the Municipality were able to obtain a stay order from the court preventing the Dalits from collectively using the tank, yet, the mobilization, the burning of the *Manusmriti* and the propaganda created a stir. In 1928 and 1930 two temple entry programs were taken up. The Nasik Satyagraha was a protracted struggle that lasted five years. Both were unsuccessful. Through these experiences, Ambedkar was disillusioned with attempts to reform the Hindu community and turned to seeking political rights and safeguards for Dalits as a means for achieving equality.

In the 1920s the NB movement responded to the constitutional reforms proposed by the colonial government by trying to get separate electorates for the non-Brahmins. Ambedkar was among the first Untouchable caste leaders to recognize the importance of political rights and political power, but, along with the dominant trend in the nationalist and NB movement, he envisaged this completely within the context of political institutions created by the imperialist government. Hence, from 1928, he demanded separate electorates for the Dalit castes. In 1928 he

appeared before the Simon Commission. In 1930 and 1931 he went to England to represent the Dalits in the Round Table Conferences (RTC), the forums created by the British imperialist government to plan constitutional reforms. The RTC marked a significant turn in the relation between Ambedkar and the Congress. While the Congress boycotted the RTC, Gandhi attended the second RTC and claimed to speak for the whole of India. While refusing Ambedkar's claims to speak for the Untouchables, he claimed that he alone represented the entire Hindu community, including the Untouchables. The British granted separate electorates to the Depressed Classes and Gandhi and the Congress strongly opposed this decision. The British played their devious game of divide and rule, of gaining the support of the Untouchable castes, and, at the same time, encouraging the contradiction between the Dalit movement and the Congress. Gandhi sat on his well publicized hunger strike against separate electorates in Yerawada jail in September 1932. The Poona Pact was a compromise between Ambedkar and Gandhi. Separate electorates were withdrawn and joint electorates, with reserved seats, were agreed upon. This entire conflict, while on the one hand, created a wide awareness about casteism in Indian society, also divided the Dalit masses, just awakening to a democratic political consciousness, between allegiance to the anti-imperialist movement and that to the Dalit movement.

The1930s were the period of mass movements of the peasants and the workers. Ambedkar was the first important Dalit leader to come out in support of Swaraj. He launched the Independent Labour Party (ILP) which fought the 1937 elections and won 14 seats in the Bombay Provincial Assembly. In this period, the Dalit movement in the province moved closer to the wider class struggle going on, as is evident from the joint workers' strikes and the anti-feudal struggles supported by the ILP. The pro-landlord, pro-capitalist orientation of the Congress was thoroughly exposed in the two years that the Congress ministry held power in the province from 1937; co-operation between the socialists, the communists and the ILP in this period continued.

Dalit Upsurge in Other States

It is in this phase that in other parts of the country, the militant sections of the lower castes in the NB movement joined the Communist movement. The Ezhava community in Kerala, after their experience in the Vaikom Satyagraha, became more militant and joined the newly formed Communist Party in the state in large numbers. The more militant sections of the Self-Respect Movement too had close connections with the Communists and under their guidance entered the Congress Socialist Party in 1936. In coastal Andhra the peasant organization led by N.G. Ranga had mobilized the cultivating castes within the peasant movement in the 1920s itself. This became increasingly more radical under the influence of communist activists. In the early 1930s Ranga had formed the Harijan Seva Dal and several social reformers were associated with it. Although separate Adi-Andhra Conferences were organized under the leadership of Kusum Dharmanna, B.S. Venkatrao and others, it was the communists who mobilized the masses of Dalits in organizations of agricultural labourers which took up the basic questions of the Dalit masses, their oppression under the *vetti* system and the distribution of wastelands. In the late 1930s one section of the Dalit leadership started becoming pro-Muslim under the Nizam's patronage, while another section drew close to the Congress through Gandhi's Harijan Sewak Sangh activity. In the widespread democratic awakening, the Dalit masses spontaneously participated in the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggles raging at that time.

Transfer of Power and War

With the declaration of World War II the political situation underwent changes. Ambedkar supported the allies unconditionally in the war. In 1941, he was invited to join the National Defence Council, and he became Labour Minister in the Viceroy's Cabinet in 1942. As Labour Minister, Ambedkar initiated the setting up of formal institutions for consultations between the management

and the labour representatives, and for the settlement of labour disputes. He introduced some legislation for improving the conditions of labour, but, in the main, his activity was centred on helping the war effort by ensuring increasing labour productivity. The dominant concern of the Dalit movement led by Ambedkar was to obtain representation for the Dalit castes (DC) at all levels of the administration. In this period he succeeded in getting 8.33 percent reservation for the DCs in government posts, and scholarships for technical education for the DCs abroad. During the later part of the war, and immediately after, it became clear that the actual and serious negotiation for the transfer of power had begun, and the comprador bourgeoisie had tightened its control over the Congress leadership, the British imperialists had been negotiating only with the Muslim League and the Congress. All other forces and political parties had been sidelined altogether. Ambedkar had dissolved the ILP in 1942 and formed the Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF) in order to be able to represent the Dalits in the constitutional set-up that was being negotiated.

Inspite of their efforts in 1946, the Dalits got no guarantees from the British imperialists. The Congress had succeeded in bringing a section of the Dalit leadership under its influence, due to which Ambedkar and the SCF faced a setback.

In the period between 1946 and 1950, in the context of the transfer of power, Ambedkar decided on a strategy of co-operating with the Congress in order to ensure safeguards for the Dalits in the new constitutional set-up. He was appointed as the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee by the Congress, and later as Law Minister in Nehru's cabinet. The Nehru government kept Ambedkar out of the opposition and utilized his skills to get a Constitution drafted that suited the interests of the new ruling classes. Though Ambedkar himself did not take the full credit for the Constitution and recognized the contradictions facing the Dalits, his experience in Nehru's cabinet was bitter. When Nehru, in league with reactionary, feudal forces within the Congress, went against his own promise of passing the Hindu Code Bill, Ambedkar resigned from the cabinet in protest in 1951.

Meanwhile, in this period, the Dalit movement in Maharashtra and other states remained confused and divided. While the Dalit masses participated in the various revolts of the peasants that developed all over the country, the petty-bourgeois sections all over the country, with little organizational connection with the masses, were divided between the SCF and support to various political forces of the bourgeois and feudal classes like Congress and the Muslim League. For instance, in Telengana, while the Dalit masses were active in the heroic people's struggle for power, the SCF had no organizational connection with the rural masses, while another section of the Dalit leadership, such as Shyam Sunder and Venkatrao, allied with the Nizam.

In Maharashtra the Dalit movement revived in the 1950s when Ambedkar and the SCF co-operated with the Socialists and the CPI in the demand for a unified Maharashtra state. In 1956 Ambedkar dissolved the SCF and formed the Republican Party of India (RPI). During this period the RPI, along with CPI, took up several rural struggles for the distribution of government lands to the landless.

At the same time, Ambedkar concentrated his attention on setting up colleges in Aurangabad and Bombay and in 1956 he implemented his long standing resolve to leave Hinduism and converted to Buddhism.

CHANGES IN THE POST-COLONIAL PERIOD

In the post-colonial period, caste configurations have undergone considerable changes. They are a result of the partial implementation of the Zamindari Abolition Acts in some states and the penetration of capitalist relations and the blows delivered by the people's struggles.

The most significant changes have been in the countryside. The close correspondence between caste and class no longer exists in most parts of the country. The old upper caste zamindars and other big feudal landlords have, to some extent, been weakened and feudal authority is, to a large extent, asserted by smaller landlords, the

former big tenants of the zamindars and the large peasant proprietors. While the position of the upper castes has weakened the most, the new landlords are from the middle castes. The middle castes are, today, significantly divided along class lines. The landlords and the rich peasants are a small group from the traditionally cultivating castes, and these castes are also found in large numbers among the middle and poor peasants and even among the landless. The lower sections of the middle castes, that is, the artisan castes, are primarily middle, poor or landless peasants and some are continuing their traditional occupations. Therefore, today, the main exploiting class in the rural areas consists of the earlier upper caste elements, i.e., the Brahmins, the Rajputs, the Bhumihars, together with the upper stratum of the middle castes, such as, the Patidars, the Marathas, the Jats, the Yadavs, the Vellars, the Lingayats, the Reddys, the Kammas, the Nairs, etc. The middle peasants, comprising about 25 percent of the rural households, largely, come from the major cultivating castes and from other lower castes, as well as a small section of the Dalits. This section has contradictions with upper sections of the rural elite, but due to the caste relations and low class consciousness in areas of low class struggle they are tailing behind the elite landlord sections of the other castes.

The poor and the landless, who consist of 60 percent of the rural households, have the greatest number of caste divisions, including a large number of small artisan and service jatis, and even Muslims. This class consists also of a large number of households from the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Of the rural agricultural labour families, 37 percent are Scheduled Castes and 10 percent are Scheduled Tribes, while the remaining half are drawn from the cultivating castes and other lower castes. Hence, caste divisions among the exploited are the greatest. The caste-class relationship in the present period is indeed complex.

With the growth of the state capitalist sector of industrial production and the government bureaucracy, caste discrimination has reproduced itself in this sector with some modifications. In the highest rungs of management in industrial enterprises and the bureaucracy, the upper castes are dominant. Dalits, on the other hand, are accommodated in Class IV positions as sweepers, peons and other menial jobs. In working class jobs, Dalits are mainly employed in the relatively, unskilled, low paid and insecure work, as contract labour and in the small scale industry.

In the state and central administration, due to the pressure of movements, a certain percentage of reserved posts, especially in the clerical category, as well as in the lower managerial category, are being filled, yet, the social distance between those from the SCs and those from other backgrounds remain. Although it is no longer manifest in the overt practice of untouchability, yet, it prevails in the form of discriminatory attitude and deep-seated prejudices. The most lucrative professions, too, remain a monopoly of the highest castes.

The linguistic reorganization of the states helped the small upper sections of the middle castes to gain power at the regional level, especially, in western and south India. But in the north Indian states, the upper castes remained in control of the state machinery and the government.

The economic crisis of the 1980s led to an intensification of contradictions in the country, including, an intensification of the contradiction of the regional comprador bourgeoisie and the landlord sections with the dominant power. With the growth of pro-capitalist landlord/rich peasant forces in several states, due to policies like the Green Revolution and the industrialization of specific regions, their demand for a share of the state's resources has grown. The all India comprador bourgeoisie, unwilling to share resources, attempted to further centralize the state. The political instability in the late 1960s and early 1970s led to the assertion of various landlord/pro-capitalist landlord sections that were denied a share in the political power in the north Indian states. The formation of the various non-Congress governments, like that of the BKD, led by Charan Singh in U.P., who represented the Jat landlord sections from western U.P., was one such attempt, but this assertion could not be consolidated.

The pro-capitalist-landlord sections and the trading elite among the middle castes reasserted themselves in co-operation

with the regional comprador bourgeoisie through the Janata Party in 1977. But this coalition of various classes could not last due to the pulls in different directions. In the 1980s the Congress (I) came back to power, representing the interests of the all India comprador bourgeoisie and centralized resources. The pro-capitalist landlord sections came together on an even wider basis in U.P. and Bihar, once again, in a coalition of classes, to form the Janata Dal, which came to power at Delhi in 1989. To stabilize their social base, and to get a share of the state's resources through control of the higher rungs of the administration, they demanded reservations in government jobs and higher professional education for the OBCs. The appointment of various commissions at the state level, and that of the Mandal Commission in 1977, was a part of this process. The implementation of the Mandal Commission report, dealing with posts in the central government services, was an attempt by the rural elite from the middle castes to guarantee their share in the state resources and stabilize their hold over their class brethren from the poorer classes.

Hence the intensification of the political and economic crisis of the present semi-feudal, semi-colonial system has intensified the contradictions in the realm of the caste system and this has manifested itself in: a) the pogroms against Dalits, especially, in rural areas, and b) the demand for reservations for the OBCs and violent agitations against the reservation policy.

Attacks on Dalits

The mass killings of Dalits began with the Kilvenmani massacre of Dalit agricultural labourers in Thanjavur district in 1968. It was a reprisal for their attempt to strike in support of their demand for higher wages. This was soon followed by similar massacres in various parts of the country, especially, from the late 1970s onwards, for instance, in Bihar (Belchi, Farasbigha, etc.), Marathawada in Maharashtra and Andhra (Chundur, Karamchedu, etc.). These killings, and the countless attacks in every state, are attempts by the landlord sections to crush the growing assertion of poor Dalits

against their caste-based exploitation and their caste-based position in the village. While the caste/class relation in the context of the labourers is clear and related — the poor are Dalits the aggressors in many of the cases have been exploiter members of the middle castes. They have taken place in areas where the class struggle is sharp but a united front of the exploited classes could not be forged, or in areas where the class struggle is less sharp and the Dalits have, in isolation, asserted their demand for equality. These brutal killings and attacks are a reflection of the intensified contradictions crying out for a revolutionary solution. They have also catalyzed the resurgence of the Dalit movement in the country.

Reservation Policy

The reservation policy, granting the reservation of a certain percentage of jobs in the administration and seats in educational institutions for professional courses for SCs and STs, began in the post-1947 period, although it was introduced for the Scheduled Castes in 1943. But this policy was implemented in a half hearted manner at the all India level till the mid-1960s. With the upper sections of the NB castes gaining power in the southern states, and the pressure of the strong NB movement, a large proportion of the seats in professional institutions and government jobs were reserved for various NB (OBC) castes as well. This policy was implemented for the OBCs in the northern states since 1980.

In a backward country like India, with uneven development and industrial and bank capital concentrated in the hands of a small elite coming from the trading upper castes or non-Hindu communities like the Parsis, where recruitment is based more often on kin-caste considerations, the government sector has become the primary means of employment for the less privileged sections. For the emerging educated youth among the Dalits and other lower castes, aspiring for petty-bourgeois status, this is the main source of white-collar employment. At the same time, the economic crisis engendered by the imperialist stranglehold over our economy has meant economic stagnation with limited and

distorted development. The government sector is unable to satisfy the demands of the educated unemployed whose numbers grow by leaps and bounds. The scramble for jobs has made reserved seats prized among the Dalits, and they arouse the hatred of the middle classes among the higher castes. The upper caste bureaucrats and ruling elite have attempted to scuttle the implementation of reservations in every way and deny the Dalits even what is their right under the law. Hence reservations have generated a great deal of the tension within the urban petty-bourgeoisie of the upper castes and the Dalits. What is basically a non-antagonistic contradiction among the people has taken an antagonistic form, leading to agitations, riots and attacks on Dalits as a whole.

There are severe limitations to the reservation policy from the perspective of Dalit liberation. The reservation policy has been used by the ruling classes to stabilize a petty-bourgeois class among the Dalits and also create a small, but influential, elite amongst them. This policy has fostered dependence on the state and created an illusion that the Dalit castes can gain equality within this exploitative system, something impossible without smashing this semi-feudal, semi-colonial economy, the foundation of the caste system. The class of government employees created by this policy is denied political rights and this has hampered the petty-bourgeoisie from participating in militant mass struggles and this class has sought to restrict their agitations within constitutionally recognized channels and through the politics of lobbying and patronage. Reservation is a reformist policy which provides relief but not liberation. Though these limitations of the reservation policy need to be exposed, yet, at the same time, we must understand that, for the SCs, reservations have provided white collar employment and has been the main avenue to enter the higher professions which are still the monopoly of the higher castes.

Anti-Reservation Agitation

Reservations for SCs and STs, as well as for the OBCs, have led to violent agitations against them. These agitations have been

backed by the main ruling class parties, the Congress and the BJP.

As long as the reservations for the SCs and the STs were implemented marginally, opposition to them did not take an agitational form. But in the mid-1970s, under the pressure of mass revolts of the Dalits and tribals, the ruling classes started implementing the reservation policy to some extent in most sectors. A violent agitation began in Gujarat in 1981, led, initially, by medical college students against reservations. Bitterly false but provocative arguments that reservations lead to inefficiency, etc., were put forward to get the support of the urban petty-bourgeoisie from the upper castes. The upper castes were reacting against a threat to their monopoly over the lucrative professions and the government bureaucracy. The agitation in Gujarat spread from the cities to the villages. The landed Patels used the anti-Dalit atmosphere created by the agitation to attack their Dalit labourers, who had begun to oppose their unchecked exploitation, and browbeat them into submission. The anti-reservation agitation in Gujarat was supported by the students and youth from the upper castes aspiring for professional education in other states as well. The ruling classes gave publicity to their agitations and an anti-Dalit atmosphere was generated all over the country.

By the 1980s the middle castes — the OBCs — too, began to demand reservations. In 1977, when the Janata Party state government in Bihar, under Chief Minister Karpoori Thakur, implemented reservations for the OBCs in the state administration and professional colleges, it led to a violent agitation by the 'forwards' — the upper castes — against the 'backwards,' the middle and lower castes. The agitators forced the state government to modify the policy and introduce reservations for the Economically Backwards as well (EBC).

The commission, under the Chairmanship of B P Mandal, appointed by the Janata Party government in 1977, was also under the pressure of the growing assertion of the landlord and rich peasant sections among the middle castes in north India. The Commission recommended reservations for the OBCs. The

Congress (I) government shelved this report. The all India comprador bourgeoisie led Congress government, with its reduced support from the agrarian elite in the northern belt, was interested, primarily, in the centralization of the state. In the 1990s the Janata Dal government implemented the Mandal Commission recommendations of reservations for the OBCs in the central government administrative machinery and in the institutions of higher education. From the 1980s, sections of the OBC had been pressing for the implementation of reservations, though it had not taken the form of a mass agitation.

The middle castes, whether of landlord or ordinary peasant backgrounds and artisan castes, have been even more backward than the educated sections among the Dalits. They are trapped in the semi-feudal agrarian economy of their traditional occupations and way of life. The emerging educated sections among them are the social base for the demand for reservations for the OBCs. But the OBCs are much more class divided than the Dalits. Upper sections of the OBC castes have tried hard to be included in the OBC lists in the different states.

In an attempt to check the BJP's efforts to dislodge it, the Janata Dal government announced the implementation of reservations for the OBCs. But this was widely opposed by the upper castes in the form of anti-reservation agitations. The extent of the upper castes' control over the government bureaucracy and prestigious professions can be seen from their violence and aggressiveness against the implementation of the Mandal Commission. The comprador bureaucrat bourgeoisie and its media gave wide publicity to this agitation which was restricted to elite institutions. The techniques they used, like self-immolation, to show their opposition also gave their agitation more publicity. The upper caste sections of the bureaucracy also supported this agitation. The agitating students were from the ABVP and NSUI, although both the Congress and the BJP opportunistically remained silent during the agitation.

While recognizing that implementation of reservation policy for OBCs, will, in spite of income limits, favour the landlord/elite

sections of the OBC castes, and, in that, only a few castes may gain; yet, the fact is that most of the OBCs are poor and landless peasants or those eking out a bare subsistence in their traditional occupation. Reservations will provide only a very small section among them a secure middle class existence, for the majority, the agrarian order has to be overturned in order to give security and a better life. But the middle castes have hardly been represented in the administration and they have a right to their share in this sector.

The extent of caste prejudice and caste feelings that are nurtured and bred among the so-called modern sections of the upper castes has been revealed by the vehemence of the anti-reservation agitations. There is a need to oppose the anti-reservation agitations for what they are — an attempt by the reactionary sections of the uppermost castes to maintain their monopoly over the state's resources and prestigious lucrative professions with their vicious elitist caste biases. It is nothing but an indirect attempt to perpetuate the caste system by keeping the Dalits and the lower sections of the OBCs as menials and labourers to be exploited at will.

Movements in the Present Period

Dalit Panther Revolt

The economic and political policies of the reactionary ruling classes have led to agitations among the Dalits and other sections of the lower castes from the 1970s. Although the leadership of the Dalit movement was co-opted and splintered in the 1960s, the plight of the masses of the lower castes, including the Dalits, worsened. The practice of untouchablity continued unabated in the rural areas, caste forms of extra economic exploitation like *Vet Begari,* Vetti, etc., persisted in many parts of the country. Caste discrimination and prejudices in urban areas also became sharp. This situation, coupled with the Brahminical Hindu culture's domination and lack of opportunities among the Dalit youth led to the revolts. Under the influence of the world wide upsurge among the students, the youth and the Blacks in the 1960s and the

Naxalbari movement, Dalit youth in Maharashta revolted under the banner of the Dalit Panthers. The movement began in the city of Bombay in 1973. It was initially a cultural movement, of poems and articles printed in the small magazines brought out in that period. Dalit students and youth from the slums, hostels and chawls condemned the Manusmriti, announced that the 15th of August was false independence and called for a boycott of elections. The movement did not last long, but it spread rapidly to other urban centres like Pune, Nagpur, and even to cities in Madhya Pradesh and other places like Karnataka, Gujarat, Chandigarh, Bhopal and Agra, where units of the Dalit Panthers were formed.

The Panthers revolted against caste oppression and also the RPI Dalit leaders who they felt had betrayed the Ambedkarite anti-caste/anti-untouchability movement. Their campaign to villages where caste oppression was reported indicates this. They also attacked the ideological bastion of the caste system by burning the *Manusmriti*. They also attacked the corrupt parliamentary system by calling for a boycott of the by-elections to the Lok Sabha in Worli at Bombay, and managed to get almost 85 percent of the SCs in the area to boycott the elections. This was the first time that the Dalit movement took an explicitly anti-state stand. They were able to mobilize thousands of people for their *morchas* and faced acute state repression. During one of their morchas, the Shiv Sena attacked with a volley of stones and when the Dalits resisted the police fired on the morcha in defence of the Shiv Sainiks. In this attack a young poet, Bhaskar Jadhav, was killed. Later, the Shiv Sena, acting as the storm-troopers of the upper-caste dominated state machinery, systematically attacked the Dalit Panthers. The Panthers militantly resisted these Shiv Sena attacks, which instigated riots in Dalit slums and chawls. The physical battles at Worli, between the Shiv Sainiks and the police on one side and the Dalits on the other, lasted for over three months. Hundreds of Panthers were thrown into jails. The Panthers confronted state repression, but having been a spontaneous revolt led by the petty-bourgeoisie, and lacking a unified strategy and tactics, they started

disintegrating by 1975. The Dalit Panther movement was a part of the democratic revolutionary class struggle in the region. It was as a result of this movement that the scheduled castes of the country began rejecting the derogatory word *Harijan* (with its Hindu connotations) and instead adopted the word 'Dalit.'

The leadership of the movement was won over by the Congress government by giving cultural awards and other enticements and gradually most of them fell prey to lumpenness, political bankruptcy and opportunism. In spite of this, the mass of the Dalit youth and students in various parts of the state have repeatedly become active and their militancy has burst forth on issues like the renaming of the Marathwada University, against the banning of Ambedkar's book *Riddles in Hinduism*, the agitation against the killing of 11 Dalits in police firing at Mumbai (Ramabai Nagar) and other local issues.

The Dalit Panther movement shook up Maharashtrian society and forced it to acknowledge the existence of caste discrimination and prejudice. It struck a major blow at the upper caste monopoly and superiority and to the politics of co-option. The cultural establishment was particularly affected; they were forced to give recognition to the literature of the oppressed masses, and Dalit literature expressing the agony of Dalits in this casteist system saw a new expression. Also, it was only after this outburst that reservations for Dalits began to be filled. Till then, besides a handful and in the post of sweepers, the reservations were only on paper. This movement also had an impact on Dalits in other parts of the country.

Karnataka

A similar movement emerged among the urban Dalits in Karnataka. The Dalit Sangharash Samiti began as a resistance against upper caste attacks in urban areas and soon spread to the rural areas to fight caste-based atrocities. It led to a popular opposition against casteism in Karnataka too. This movement revealed the hidden truth of untouchability and the persistence of

caste oppression and also resulted in the development of Dalit literature. But soon it too became sectarian and evolved as a pressure lobby that was used by the various ruling class parties.

Elite Dalit Politics

Due to this outburst of revolt the ruling classes have consciously sponsored an elite among the Dalits who have, consciously appealed to Dalit solidarity and a sectarian approach, while denying any unity with other exploited sections and parties representing them. They were maintained as powerbrokers whose main task was maintaining a class alliance with the ruling classes through the medium of the state. They have been playing the role of repeatedly building up the faith in the ruling class state among the Dalit masses. The Dalit leaders have promoted the ideology of Ambedkarism which suits the ruling classes. Instead of learning from the life and experiences of Ambedkar, and drawing lessons from his positive democratic aspects, they have highlighted and dogmatized all those aspects of Ambedkar's thoughts that will legitimize the existing state. They are upholding the Constitution as sacrosanct, defending liberal political philosophy the politics of bargaining and lobbying. Hence they are taking a sectarian approach to the unity of the Dalits with other sections of the exploited masses, or talking only of caste unity between the Dalits and the OBCs, without considering the class contradictions that make this unity practically impossible to sustain. They are unwilling to address any of the basic questions of the Dalit and the OBC masses. Thus the elite political leadership among the Dalits, in league with ruling class parties, is trying to keep the Dalit masses under their organizational and ideological influence, repeatedly preventing their militancy from being integrated into a revolutionary struggle, and channelizing it into parliamentary politics. They are preventing the building up of united struggles which alone can wage a successful fight against all forms of caste oppression, particularly, the dastardly system of untouchability and the overthrow of the caste system from its roots.

Dalit Movement in the Present Period

The intensification of contradictions in the past decade, the caste atrocities, the impact of the anti-feudal struggles under revolutionary leadership in Telengana and Bihar, have led to a widespread awakening among the Dalits and other lower castes in various parts of the country, especially, in the northern states like U.P., Haryana and MP which were relatively untouched by any social reform movement for the upliftment of the Dalits in the colonial period. This awakening was particularly among the petty-bourgeois sections of the Dalits. The BSP, the party formed on the base of Dalit bureaucrats and ruling class elements from amongst the Dalits, has become the main organization through which this democratic sentiment against caste discrimination, and for social and political power, is being expressed, and, hence, mass struggles under its leadership have also taken place locally, in the various states, in the face of repression from local vested interests and the police. But the BSP, with its anit-Brahmin rhetoric, its emphasis on caste alliance, the exclusion of class unity, the absence of a systematic socio-economic programme and its complete faith on electoral politics, which, in practice, has meant alliances with ruling class forces and parties, cannot satisfy the democratic aspirations and sentiments of the Dalits and other lower caste masses. Their alliance with the regional comprador and landlord-based parties has meant that they have betrayed the interests of the poor and the landless peasants. With its support to the pro-imperialist economic politics, which has led to privitization, unemployment and increased imperialist exploitation of the agrarian economy, the BSP cannot but betray the interests of even the petty-bourgeois sections amongst the Dalits. It is acting as the major tool amongst the Dalits for keeping them enslaved to feudal and imperialist exploitation, and diverting them from the path of revolution.

However, the intensifying crisis in India is bound to lead the Dalit masses and petty-bourgeoisie to more and more struggles. The constitutionalism being fostered by the elite and corrupt

leadership of the Dalits is dissipating their militancy into lumpenness on the one hand and political lobbying on the other. Thus, their interests cannot be satisfied.

Only by joining hands with the revolutionary struggle that is being waged against imperialism, its social prop feudalism and the comprador bourgeoisie, the three enemies of the Indian people, that are sustaining all the reactionary forces and all the reactionary social relations and ideology, can the caste system and Brahminical ideology be uprooted from the Indian soil. The parliamentary system has placed power in the hands of the feudal and comprador bourgeois classes, while it will seek to co-opt only a small section from the middle or lower castes. But for the masses of the oppressed castes and classes political power can be gained only through a revolutionary struggle to first overthrow the control of the handful of upper castes over the means of production. Without taking control of the means of production, the power of the oppressed cannot be built. Hence, while fighting against all forms of caste oppression and humiliation, it is this task that remains principal in our struggle to annihilate the caste systems.

CASTE, CLASS AND STAGES IN INDIAN HISTORY

In this section, we shall trace the interlinking between caste and class through history from the advent of class society. We have seen continuous changes in this, which we shall try and trace in this section.

Any overview of Indian History would show that, '*All hitherto history of India has been the history of caste and class struggle.*' The processes due to which classes, Varnas and *jatis* came into being, and their roles in the different stages of Indian history, are now more clear. It is also now proved beyond doubt that Indian society has been a changing society, and has gone through different stages in history prior to its present stage of a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society.

Based on the definition given by Marx and Engels in the *The German Ideology*, that '*The various stages of development in the division of labour are just so many different forms of ownerships, i.e. the existing stage in the division of labour determines also the relations of individuals to one another with reference to the material, instrument and product of labour,*' we can categorize the different stages in pre-British Indian society as (1) Tribal-Oligarchy, (2) Ancient communal and state ownership which proceeded, especially, from the union of several tribes by agreement and/or conquest, accompanied by the enslavement of the Shudra-helots, i.e., the 'Arthasashtra Mode' and (3) Feudal or estate property accompanied by the Jati-based system, i.e., feudalism of an Indian variety.

The Tribal period extends from the early Vedic period, wherein, the Aryan tribes came to the Punjab, at about 1500 BC. This continued to 500 BC, by when they had conquered, subjugated and assimilated the non-Aryan tribes and had overrun the Doab (Ganges plains). It was in this period that the decaying gentile society broke up due to the incessant intra-kin and inter-kin conflicts for cattle, land, water sources and, later, slaves, classes were born, and Varnas came into being. Settled agriculture developed due to the wooden and then the iron plough. Transplantation of rice was known. Iron use was widespread. The state was yet to come into being. Varnashrama Dharma, outlined in the Brahmin texts, brought order and was the ideology of the ruling Kshatriya/Rajanya and Brahmin classes who expropriated the surplus through the extraction of *Bali* (Tribute) or *Dan* (Gifts).

From 500 BC onwards, we see the emergence of the 'Arthasashtra State' which was based on the expropriation of surplus, in the main, from the Shudra who tilled the king's sita lands and also the tributes from the peasantry. The Arthasashtra mode of production based on tributes and expropriation of surplus from the Shudra-helots declined after Ashoka and disappeared in the main after the Gupta period (4th century AD) in the north and the Chola period (9th century AD) in the south.

From the 4th century AD onwards, we see a new intermediary class coming into existence, which not only kept a part of the surplus but also administered fiefdoms. Also, during this period, money economy and trade declined, local barter increased,

the guilds/*srenis* nearly disappeared, and the self sufficient village economy, with its Jajmani, Balutedari and Ayagar system, came into existence. The Jati system was born. Thus, the third stage of Indian History came to be — the Indian variant of feudalism — till the British came. The British continued the feudal and semi-feudal system with changes suited to their imperial designs.

The Changing Role of the Varnas

In each of the first three stages of Indian history, the role of the Varnas did not remain unchanged with regard to the ownership of the material and instruments of labour and the expropriation of the product of labour. The *Varna Vyavastha* too was not a constant which remained unaltered.

In the first stage we have traced the development of how, from the tribal chiefs or Rajanyas who were given *bali*, and also from the priestly class of Brahmins who were given *dan*, arose the tribal-oligarchy of the 7th century BC. It was this ruling alliance that kept control over the ordinary tribal-folk, Vis, and a small class of domestic slaves, the Shudras. The Vaishya was a tributary to another, to be oppressed at will, while the Shudra was *'a servant of another, to be removed at will, slain at will.'* The Varnashrama Dharma was a code of conduct propounded by the ruling classes to keep the ruled in check and in order.

But, in the next mode of production, we see a change. The Brahmins, in this period, keeping aside the rules of the Varnashrama Dharma, which restricted them to priestly functions, had now transgressed into the territory of the Kshatriyas, acting as advisors to the rulers, and taking up tasks in the administrative set-up. Also, they had become *gahapatis*, i.e., landowners, and *gahapati/settis*, i.e., merchants — traditionally, the preserve of the Vaishya caste. In the Arthasashtra mode of production, wherein, due to the development of agriculture, the importance of cattle and farm animals increased — the sacrificial *yagnas* declined — the Brahmin priests had to search for fresh avenues.

The Vaishya Varna also saw a break up into different classes. The upper crust in the urban areas became merchants of trade and their guilds controlled towns. The *Nagarsettis* became the main backers of Buddhism and Jainism and contended for a share in the power set up, together with the wealthy *gahapatis* of the rural areas, who had numerous Shudra domestic slaves and farm labourers.

The *Paura-janapada*, the ruling classes of the Arthasashtra state, consisted of the Kshatriyas, the Brahmins and the upper crust of the Vaishya Varna. The Vaishya Varna witnessed the formation of another class within it. A class which was skilled in certain crafts (like making chariots) later became part of the Karmarkar Shudra. Also, the Shudras performed farm-labour as hired helots in the Arthasashtra state, which was not witnessed in the Vedic times.

Thus, we can conclude that while in the tribal period Varnas were itself classes and had certain roles, this changed in the Arthasashtra mode of production, in which Varnas of the Arthasashtra society were not congruent to classes.

In the next stage, from the Gupta period onwards, we once again see changes in the role of the Varnas with the emergence of the *jatis* and the self-sufficient village economy.

The Brahmins, missionaries who helped settle villages for the state, had become the priests, astrologers and keepers of accounts in the self-sufficient village. The Brahmin missionaries brought with them the knowledge of the *Naksatras*, the use of the iron plough, rice transplantation, etc. They contributed to the production process and became a part of the *balutedari* system. At another level, the court Brahmins of the numerous rising feudatories — characteristic of this period — granted and sanctified Kshatriyahood to a section of the erstwhile Shudras or foreign conquerors; in return, receiving, of course, large grants of tax-free land. Thus, the Brahmin Varna took up priestly functions once again and also consolidated their position as landlords.

The Vaishya, as a Varna, had nearly disappeared from the scenario and were restricted to big urban centres only. This was so

because trading had declined and local barter had increased. The majority amongst them in the rural areas (i.e., the cultivators) became assimilated with the Shudras. The Shudra became synonymous with the class of peasantry. The Shudras were again divided into the *Satvik* Shudras, i.e., the cultivators and the *non-Satvik* shudras, the labourers. Also, an ati-Shudra caste of Untouchables were born. The Untouchables could not own land or wealth and were usually labourers.

The Kshatriyas became a bigger Varna in size with the numerous new foreign and local entrants to it.

It is in this stage that we see the *jatis* being born. Many *jatis* composed a Varna. Also, classes were composed of many jatis. The Kshatriya and Brahmin castes comprised the ruling class. The Varnashrama Dharma outlined the hierarchy and also who were the rulers and who could be exploited. Thus the jatis were fitted into the Varnashrama Dharma scheme by the ruling classes. Also, the new entrants were given befitting status by the theory of the newly invented *varnasamskara* theory.

Thus we see that though classes did not take exactly the form of the Varna after the tribal stage, i.e., during the Arthasashtra and the feudal stages, yet, the two higher Varnas comprised the ruling class of Indian feudalism during, and after, the Gupta period (4th century AD).

Muslim rule, from the 13th century AD onwards, did not bring about any fundamental changes, although certain things, like the Persian wheel or the *Araghata*, helped increase agricultural production. Also, the introduction of cement lime helped in storage of water, etc. Yet rural parts of the country stayed as they were in the matters of caste and class. Though Islam did not discriminate and did its own bit in loosening the bonds of caste, yet, the higher castes remained close to the seats of power from the local level to the centre. Muslim feudalism collaborated and colluded with Hindu feudalism. There were no fundamental changes in the realm of production relations, i.e., the base. Thus, though the composition of the ruling classes changed, the majority of the lower castes were the lower classes also.

The British Period and the Birth of New Classes

Before the British colonized India, during the Mughal rule, trade and urbanization had again gained ascendancy — a new mercantile class was born. This nascent national bourgeoisie was crushed by the colonial plunder in its infantile stage itself.

It was during the British period that the modern proletariat was born, as also the comprador bourgeoisie was born and brought up by the imperialists. Within the peasantry too, a slow and gradual differentiation was taking place. It was from this period onwards that caste and class coincided less and less.

For, from amongst the peasant and artisan castes of the Shudra status, came the factory worker. Also, the former ati-Shudra Untouchables, the Dalits, were recruited in large numbers in the army, railways, road construction and in unskilled jobs in the factories. The mines and the plantations also employed the Dalits and the *Adivasis*. All these together constituted the modern proletariat.

The merchants and moneylenders were from amongst the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Muslims, erstwhile Vaishyas, the trading communities and from the erstwhile Shudras also.

The comprador business houses came from amongst the *Banias*, i.e., trading caste and communities, like the Parsis, the Jains and from the Khattiya, i.e., the Kshatriya caste. A few were from the Brahmin and erstwhile Shudra castes. The bureaucracy was dominated by the Brahmins, the Kayasthas, the Anglo-Indians, the Parsis, the Muslim educated elite, etc.

The British also legally constituted classes notified as landlords (other than *Vatandars* or *Inamdars*), tenants and labourers. Although the *Zamindars*, the *Khotedars* and the *Talukdars* mostly came from the upper castes, the smaller landlords and rich peasants, notified as tenants, came from the erstwhile Shudra castes. The ati-Shudras, Adivasis, and the Nomadic Tribes constituted the bulk of the landless and agricultural labour force. Also, a large section of the impoverished Shudra peasants became labourers and landless.

Thus, within each caste, classes were created and the modern proletariat especially was a multi-caste class with the *Savarnas* and the Dalits both within its fold. The peasantry was composed of the Shudra and the ati-Shudra castes. The higher caste predominance over the means of production continued. These were also well entrenched in the bureaucracy.

Since the British did not bring about a change in a thoroughgoing manner, since they merely superimposed their colonial rule, keeping the material base as intact as possible, changing and transforming only what was necessary and suitable for their purpose, India became a semi-feudal society under colonial rule.

Post-1947: Caste and Class

Post-1947, India saw even more changes, especially, in rural India. Semi-feudal and semi-colonial India saw the rise of new caste-class configurations, due to the growth of some capitalist relations and blows delivered by the people's movements. In the rural areas, especially, the pre-dominance of the Brahmin and the Kshatriya castes has been reduced and their place has been taken up by the upper section of the erstwhile Shudra castes. The ruling elite in the countryside now composes not only of the Brahmin, Rajput, Vellala, Bhumihar castes, etc., but also of the Patidars, Patels, Marathas, Kunbis, Jats, Yadavas, Kurmis, Vokkaligas, Lingayats, Kamma, Reddys, etc.

The bulk of the middle peasants come from the erstwhile Shudra caste while the small, landless and poor peasants comprise the Shudra and ati-Shudra castes, Nomadic Tribes, Adivasis and religious minorities.

Thus, today, a close correspondence between class and caste does not exist. Today, it is not possible to establish multi-class unity along the lines of the non-Brahmin movements, against the feudal elite, as was possible earlier.

Today, unity along caste lines can only lead to class collaboration and making the toiling masses of the oppressed castes into tails of the exploiting sections of their own castes. Unity along class lines can provide the basis for the comprehensive struggle against the caste system, i.e., real unity forged by taking up the caste question as the question of the entire oppressed classes.

CASTE AND AGRARIAN REVOLUTION

During the colonial rule, we see, in the agrarian sector, broadly two trends within the movements of the peasantry. The one led by the All India Kisan Sabha and the other by the non-Brahmin organizations.

The Non-Brahmin Movements

The leadership of most of the non-Brahmin movements during the British period failed to understand the nexus between British rule and feudalism.

They failed to realize that feudalism was the social prop of British Imperialism and that the British were in alliance with decadent feudalism, propping it up, and also utilizing the putrid caste system, modifying it to their advantage.

Another important failing was that they did not correctly put forward how to break the control of the ruling classes on the forces of production and how to establish the real control of toilers over them and, thus, how the political power of the toiling masses is to be established. Therefore, while hitting out at upper caste domination in the bureaucracy, and caste and feudal authority, thus assaulting feudalism and making dents in it and the caste system, no revolutionary transformation could be effected.

The non-Brahmin movements took up struggles against money-lending and other caste/feudal related non-economic forms of oppression, against the hereditary nature of posts, the domination of upper castes in the educational and cultural sphere, etc. They also took up issues like taxation, rent, access to water, etc. Nearly every non-Brahmin movement had a strong nationality content.

Although, these movements, could build a united front by rallying the erstwhile Shudra and ati-Shudra castes, i.e., the

Bahujan Samaj, the leadership of these movements were by-and-large the rich and middle peasantry — who gained substantially in the social and economical sphere. The lower-level landlords came from the upper sections of the erstwhile Shudra castes, e.g., the Marathas/Kunbis. Utilizing these movements they gained ascendancy even in the political sphere and became co-opted into the ruling-class political structure at the Taluka, district and provincial levels.

It was the radical trends within these movements which joined the communist fold in many provinces. But the communist leadership failed to lead these mass-movements by drawing correct lessons from them. For example, a class analysis of the non-Brahmin movement was not done. The limitation of caste-based mobilization was not really understood. Most important, the significance of the anti-feudal struggle was not recognized, as also, the caste question, as an important question for the success of the New Democratic Revolution, was not understood at all.

The Dalit Movements

The Dalit movements separated themselves from the non-Brahmin movements (at times even ideologically), and took up militant mass struggles against feudal and caste bondage. Struggles for entry into temples and the use of common water tanks became widespread. In the realm of production relations, the struggles centred on the refusal to perform traditional caste duties, performing forced labour for the landlords and government officials. Another arena of struggle, representing the aspirations of growing Dalit petty-bourgeoisie, was related to the access to education and employment.

The Dalit movement, like the non-Brahmin movements, failed in understanding the link between British Imperialism and feudalism. They did not grasp the fact that the key to demolish the caste system lay in demolishing the semi-feudal, semi-colonial relations of production. The linking up of the struggle to control the means of production, and the seizure of power as a strategy to

demolish feudalism, was not understood. In fact, the Dalits were encouraged to leave the village arena and take up challenges in other avenues. The Dalit movements tried to build up a united front with the working class in the urban areas but there were few attempts in the rural areas, where caste oppression was strong. There was an objective reason for this — it was difficult for the Dalit movement to propose a unity with the non-Dalits, who had strong biases against them and practiced untouchability. Another reason due to which class unity could not be achieved was the sectarian outlook of the Dalit leadership, also seen in the urban areas later.

The All India Kisan Sabha Led Movements

The *kisan* movements, too, had taken up caste related issues varyingly in different provinces. In some areas they turned a blind eye to the issue, for instance, in Maharashtra, where, even after winning over the radical sections of the non-Brahmin movement, it did not draw upon its lessons. In some areas it did take up the issue to a limited extent, but in the name of not damaging the united front of different classes of peasants, still pandered to the upper-caste biases of the kisan leadership.

The *kisan* movements took up the issues of Zamindari abolishment, forced and hereditary labour, money-lending and various other non-economic, caste related forms of oppression, increase in wages, etc. They were also much linked to the national aspirations of each region.

The *kisan* movements, too, did actually build up the Bahujan unity in the rural areas, but they did not take up the caste question as a question to be solved, neither at the practical level nor at the theoretical and political plane (i.e., understanding its relative importance for the accomplishment of the New Democratic Revolution and drawing up a special programme for it).

Since the CPI leadership turned revisionist, it betrayed the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggles, although the rank-and-file often led heroic struggles. The middle and rich peasantry, from

the upper castes and a section of the middle castes, who were at the forefront of these movements, gained the most. Zamindari abolishment, for the revisionists in most areas, meant land distribution — it did not mean the seizure of power and the ownership of production in the hands of landless and poor peasants.

It was only during the Telengana movement and consciously from Naxalbari onwards that the connection between the land-to-the tillers slogan and the ownership of the means of production and seizure of political power was outlined. Only by displacing the landlords from power and the ownership of the chief means of production, i.e., land, and implementing the land to the tiller slogan, and placing power in the hands of the peasantry, led by the landless and poor peasantry and agricultural labourers, can feudalism be demolished and caste-linked feudal authority smashed.

Agrarian Revolution

Today, the genuine liberation of the oppressed castes lies in advancing the Agrarian Revolution along with the demands of land-to-the tiller and power to the people committees. This is to be achieved by uniting the most oppressed with the poorer sections of all other castes, and building up the new power structures with the landless and poor peasants in the leadership; thereby overthrowing the trio of feudalism, imperialism and comprador bureaucratic bourgeoisie, which serves as the basis for the continuation of caste oppression.

An oppressed caste-class unity, forged by means of facing repression together, the gaining of self-respect and self-confidence among the oppressed castes, through the armed might of the people and the growth of people's authority, during the course of the armed agrarian revolution, are pointers to the methods, with which to solve the caste questions, in the course of the struggle.

The mobilization of the oppressed castes into revolutionary class struggles in rural Telengana, rural Bihar-Jharkhand, formerly

a region of the most savage feudal forms of caste-class oppression, based on the demands of land-to-the-tiller and for the establishment of people's authority in place of caste-linked feudal authority, along with the other general demands of the peasantry, shows the path of solving the problem of caste.

With agrarian revolution as the central task it is also necessary to fight any and every form of caste oppression and discrimination, and, particularly, its most horrendous form in untouchability. Smashing the hierarchy of caste is a necessary aspect of the democratic re-organization of Indian society; and removing the upper-caste biases is a necessary requisite for strengthening class unity of the oppressed (coming from all the castes).

TOWARDS SOME TASKS FOR CASTE ANNIHILATION

The programme of the party of the proletariat against caste system, has as its perspective that the anti-caste struggle must aim to overthrow feudalism, imperialism, and the comprador bureaucrat capitalism, the classes which are upholding the caste system in India today. Hence,

1. The proletariat must direct the class struggle against the caste system as an integral part of the struggle to accomplish the New Democratic Revolution.
2. For this, mobilize all the exploited classes in the struggle against caste oppression, exploitation and discrimination.
3. Smash caste-linked feudal authority in the villages and place political power in the hands of the oppressed classes, led by the landless and poor peasants.
4. Struggle to implement land-to–the-tiller, keeping the interests of landless peasantry and poor peasantry at the forefront.
5. Wage an ideological struggle against Brahminical casteist ideology and all other forms of casteist thinking. Expose the casteist ideology in the scriptures like the Manusmriti, the Gita, and the Vedas, etc.

6. While upholding the right of the individual to pursue his or her faith, conduct a relentless ideological struggle against all forms of caste rituals and practices, like thread ceremony (moonj), etc.
7. Fight against propagation of vegetarianism, based on its link with 'purity,' and other forms of superstition regarding 'pollution.' Oppose Gohatya Bandi.
8. Fight social stigma against certain occupations and customs of lower castes, like beef eating or pork eating.
9. Fight against symbols of caste identity and degradation, and the language and culture having a caste slang.
10. Defend and actively support the struggle of the Dalit masses for self respect. Defend the right of the Dalits to enter temples and to convert.
11. Struggle for the civic and social rights of the Dalits and other lower castes, and oppose discrimination, e.g., use of common wells, hotels, toilets, and hostels, etc.
12. Struggle for equal participation of lower castes in social functions. Try to establish social intercourse between the people belonging to various castes participating in the class struggle. Encourage inter-dining among different castes.
13. Oppose housing schemes based on caste segregation.
14. Defend and encourage inter-caste marriages. Demand incentives for all inter-caste marriages. Children of inter-caste marriages should get facilities as accorded to either parent.
15. End use of caste names in official records.
16. Encourage trade unions to take initiative in the implementation of reservation policy. Fight for reservations in private sector. (Public limited companies).
17. Fight bureaucratic delays and corruption in loans and subsidies for Scheduled Castes and OBCs.
18. Demand special schemes to upgrade technology and the skills of lower castes and artisan groups.

19. Demand increase in scholarship amount and improved facilities in hostels for SCs and STs.
20. Expose the reactionary nature of caste associations, especially, upper caste associations.
21. Fight against and expose the casteist leadership within the oppressed castes, who prevent the class unity of the toiling masses. There is a false consciousness among the poor people belonging to the upper castes that they are socially equal with the rich people of their castes. We have to expose this myth and make them understand that their real comrades-in-arms are the oppressed people of other castes. We should never put caste before class.
22. Fight and expose the opportunistic and reformist trends within the leadership of the oppressed castes. Fight bourgeois democratic illusions among oppressed castes.
23. Struggle against caste prejudices and caste beliefs within the ranks of the proletariat and other sections of the toiling masses, and build up a struggling unity among the exploited classes.
24. The communists should be one among the oppressed people of all castes and be with them in words and deeds. At the same time we should expose the pseudo communists who are rank casteists in practice.
25. Educate and struggle against casteist beliefs of activists of mass organizations.
26. Form special platforms of democratic sections to fight caste discrimination and pogroms against lower castes.
27. Form anti-riot squads in defence of lower castes in areas of caste tensions.
28. Propagate materialist scientific ideology, promote atheism.
29. Struggle to create a democratic culture, based on equality of all irrespective of caste and gender.

CASTE AFTER NEW DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION

The CPI held the position that caste oppression shall automatically disappear after a revolution. Caste was only seen in the superstructure and it was interpreted that once the base changes, the problem of the superstructure would not be of much hindrance.

In fact, it is not only that after the seizure of power that castes shall remain in the realm of the superstructure, even before, we shall have to recognize it as a reality and struggle against it. Wherever it exists, even if remnants of the caste system continue, it has to be fought against.

The other fact is that the problems of superstructure cannot be postponed till after the seizure of power. Even during the revolution, while destroying it at its roots in the base itself, we shall have to struggle against caste-discrimination and prejudices, wherever they occur.

After the seizure of power by the four class united front, based on the worker-peasant alliance, led by the proletariat, caste-based exploitation, that is, caste system in the realm of production relations, shall be abolished. (Even before the countrywide seizure of power, if power is seized in an area then the above shall hold true). Caste institution-held big private property or temple held big private property shall be seized.

Caste discrimination shall be fought against. Untouchability shall not only be abolished, but punishment shall be meted out to anyone practicing it.

All caste-based inequalities shall be done away with. Reservations shall continue and incentives shall be given to lower castes to develop the required skills.

Not only in the rural areas, but also in the urban sector, lower castes shall be given the training and skills to enhance their knowledge. In the rural sector, caste-based occupations shall be abolished and alternate employment given by teaching new methods and techniques. Localized agro-based industries shall be promoted, handicraft industries shall be gradually mechanized.

Agriculture shall be developed and industrialized and industry shall be based on agriculture.

Reservation and preferences shall be continued in the educational sphere for the oppressed castes, particularly the Dalits.

Encouragement, protection and incentives shall be given to inter-caste, inter-community marriages.

At the ideological and cultural plane, the fight against Brahminical practices, *Pujapath*, superstition, rituals, religious and caste prejudices, contempt for labour, and any and every symbol of hierarchical superiority, etc., shall continue, while upholding one's right to practice one's faith.

The gap between mental and manual labour, urban and rural divide, sexual and caste discrimination shall be continuously fought against.

Learning from Mao's China, wherein the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution had taken place, we shall have to emulate and learn lessons continuously to create the new person, the socialist person. In the Indian context it means, specifically, eradicating all caste sentiments and ingrained thoughts of superiority through a continuous process of cultural revolutions.

The Caste Question Returns

With the growth of the Dalit movement and an increasing awareness amongst Dalits, the caste question, specifically in Maharashtra, has been pushed to the forefront of political debate amongst the Marxists. As part of this debate is the latest book released by Sharad Patil entitled, *Das-Shudra, Gulamgiri Part-II*. Earlier, Gopal Guru's article, 'Understanding Ambedkar — A Caste and Class Paradigm' (reproduced in the May issue of *Satyashodak Marxvad*) sought to analyze Ambedkar's views and various assessments of them. In this article, Gopal Guru has commented on another article, written some eight years ago, on Ambedkar, which appeared in the *Frontier*. That article has been misunderstood by Gopal Guru and has been quoted out of the context in which it was written. Of course, in the past eight years, our understanding on the issue has deepened and the debates and studies on the caste question, in the course of the last decade, have helped throw much light on the issue. In view of the issues raised by Gopal Guru, we wish to raise some more points on the caste question and the role of different individuals/ideologies in India's democratic revolution.

This article was originally published in the *Frontier*, 16 January 1988.

AMBEDKAR, MARX AND DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION

Marxism has been an issue of debate in the Dalit movement for a very long time. As early as 1956, Dr. Ambedkar gave a speech at Kathmandu comparing the ideas of Marxism and Buddhism. In 1958, when Dadasaheb Gaikwad and Dadasaheb Rupavate split the RPI, the major criticism of Rupavate was that Gaikwad was a communist. Again, in 1974, when Raja Dhale and Namdev Dhasal split the Dalit Panthers, the main accusation of Dhale was that Dhasal was a communist. And later, Raosaheb Kasbe, Sharad Patil and others have sought to link the views of Ambedkar and Marx. And, even now, in the course of the 'Riddles in Hinduism' controversy, it was decided at a meeting attended by all Dalit organizations, that the Dalit movement and the Left movement should come closer. So, the question of Marxism keeps surfacing again and again in the Dalit movement.

Today, many of the present-day leaders of the Dalit movement go on a tirade against communists but see no harm in associating with such caste-ridden parties as the Congress-I and the BJP. Why does this happen? For two reasons. Firstly, the traditional 'communists' (specifically, the CPI and CPM) have not understood the caste question in India and have often taken a reactionary stand on the Dalit question. Secondly, the established leadership of the present-day Dalit movement does not seek a total smashing of the caste system, but only certain concessions within the existing caste structure. It is primarily for these two reasons that the leadership of the present-day Dalit movement tends to take anti-communist positions.

Is it not a fact that the CPI and the CPM have turned a blind eye to Dalit oppression? Why do the likes of Dange, Ranadive, Namboodripad, etc., not hesitate to quote from the Hindu scriptures, but are afraid to take an open stand in support of Dalit rights (thinking that they may frighten off the Hindus)? Why do the establishment 'communists,' in their electoral games, run after the Hindu (majority) vote? Can such people really be called communists?

On the other hand, how could a supposed Dalit leader like Gavai get totally linked with the Congress-I and the government? How could a person like Khobragade have regular joint meetings with the Hindu chauvinist BJP? Or why did Dhasal and Ramdas Athavale lend support to that most casteist and reactionary outfit, the Congress-I? While doing all this can they really be said to represent Dalit interests?

Thus, it is not a question of whether the 'communist' leadership is bad and the Dalit leadership good; or vice versa. The history of the last three decades had shown that the bulk of the traditional leadership of both the 'communist' and the Dalit movements have been, basically, reactionary. But, in both these movements, there have been bright sparks of hope. The Naxalites broke from the traditional communists while the Dalit Panthers broke from the traditional RPI. Today, however, both of these have split into numerous factions. While the Naxalites are today at the crossroads on how to advance, they too did not develop a theoretical framework on how to deal with the caste question in India. Also, the original Dalit Panther movement has lost its character of revolt while losing itself in ruling class politics.

In Maharashtra, it was really the Dalit Panther movement that once again pushed the question of caste oppression to the forefront. In 1973–74, the movement broke out as a revolt against caste oppression and against the passive, compromising attitude of the RPI leadership. The revolt took the form of an upsurge, resulting in pitched battles with the Shiv Sena and the government; and also of a cultural upsurge against Hindu cultural norms and literature. It is this movement that also pushed to the forefront the debate on caste among certain Marxists in Maharashtra.

It is a fact that, in India, caste is an important aspect of the life of most people. Social relations, marriage customs, religious norms and even one's friends and associates are determined by caste. Voting patterns take place on caste lines, in job preferences, the caste factor counts and even in the sphere of cinema, bureaucracy and administration the caste factor is of key importance. Even today, people's identity is primarily through their caste.

Whether 'I' am a Kumbi, Teli, Mahar, Brahmin, etc., is what is of importance to society and not myself as a person (as an individual with all my individuality). 'I', as an independent being, is of little importance to society. And, as caste is all pervasive, those at the bottom of the caste ladder face the maximum discrimination, while those at the top gain the maximum privileges. While Rajiv Gandhi can speak eloquently against apartheid (racism) in South Africa, he says not a word against the inhumanity that exists within the caste system in India. While, in South Africa, blacks are treated as inferior, in India, Dalits are not only looked on as inferior but are also debarred from living in the locality of higher castes (especially in villages), from even drinking water in higher caste houses and from all forms of social and political rights. If racism is inhuman, casteism is not only inhuman but barbaric and medieval.

Therefore, an important aspect of the democratization of society is the total abolition of the caste system and, specifically, all forms of caste oppression. Today, India is a backward society where pre-capitalist and semi-feudal relations affect social relations of production and where feudal and backward thinking dominates our outlook. Caste is a major social prop for the continuation of this backward semi-feudal system.

Today, 40 years after independence, there is much talk of modernization, industrialization, growth, etc. But, in India, 'modernization' has not taken place with any significant democratization of society. Nor has capitalist growth taken place with much significant revolutionization of the relations of production. Capitalism in the West was a revolutionzing force, wherein, the bourgeois democratic revolution smashed all the old feudal relations and reorganized society on a new basis. In India, capitalist growth (initiated, nurtured and led by the imperialist powers) is of a distorted and warped character, and has only superimposed new factors on the old, existing relations of production — it does not seek to smash the old relations. So, along with the supercomputer, you also have the wooden plough; with modern telecommunications and television, you also have *Sati*; in spite of the

'modernization' of the cities, you also have the deep-rooted caste sentiments.

Democratization of society means, primarily, smashing these old feudal institutions — in economic relations, in the re-organization of political (state) power and in social relations between man and man. Basically, the essence of the democratic struggle must be to build a truly independent India along with a thorough revolutionization of all economic, political and social relations. This democratization of Indian society is the first step for the advance of the country. Thus, all those, who participate in this process and attack even some aspects of this imperialist/semi-feudal structure, are progressive. The dividing line between who is democratic and who is not cannot be posed as whether a person or movement is pro-communist or not (as even we have tended to do). Thus, for example, those forces that fight caste, fight, say, for the equality of women, fight against the oppression of nationalities, fight against the oppression of minorities, etc., are all part of the anti-feudal struggle and are, therefore, progressive, no matter what their ideology. Also, for example, those who are genuine patriots (i.e., who oppose all forms of superpower domination) are also part of the democratic stream, no matter what their ideology.

It is true that the communists must be the foremost fighters for democracy and democratic revolution — but they need not be, and are not, the only fighters for democratic change. The trouble with the traditional 'communists' is that they do not see the present stage of revolution as being basically anti-feudal and anti-imperialist but see it as being anti-capitalist. They measure the progressiveness of various individuals and ideologies not by their role in the democratic revolution but by their attitudes towards the CPI, the CPM and towards socialist thinking. So these so-called communists could find progressiveness in those arch reactionaries like Nehru, Gandhi and the Congress Party but not in the various non-Brahmin movements, nationality movements, women's movements and the movements of the oppressed minorities. Thus, although Gopal Guru and the other scholars may

compare the ideas of Ambedkar and Marx — the central question is how to assess these movements as part of the process for an overall revolutionary democratization of society.

To repeat, in India, the stage of revolution is democratic (and not socialist) and, although the communists should come forward as the most consistent fighters for democracy (which they have not), there will be many movements/individuals/ideologies that will be a part of the democratic stream, especially from the oppressed castes and the oppressed sex. Communists must seek to understand these movements, participate in them and link them to the overall democratic reorganization of society through the seizure of state power. Ambedkar, and the Dalit movement against caste oppression, attacked an important pillar of the semi-feudal structure — CASTE — and, therefore, became a part of the democratic stream.

FAILURES

The caste factor in Indian polity manifests itself in two ways — first, as the caste system, which acts to divide the oppressed masses in India, and second, as caste oppression, which is an inhuman and medieval form of outrage on a section of the Indian population — the Dalits.

In India, the traditional communists (CPI, CPM, etc.) have, generally, viewed class struggle as, primarily, an economic struggle. They have, most often, viewed the caste struggle as dividing the people. What they did not realize is that the people are already divided on caste lines and the basis of unity must be equality (and that higher caste prejudices must be fought in order to gain that equality). Also, class struggle is not merely an economic struggle, it is a struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor for control over the main means of production and the political life of society. It includes the struggle in economic, political, social and ideological spheres; and the key aspect of revolutionary class struggle is not economic struggle but political struggle — the struggle for the seizure of political power. In rural India, this

struggle for political power involves the smashing of the feudal and caste authority in the countryside; and, also, the setting up of new bodies (where the higher castes are not allowed to automatically dominate) through which people's power is exercised.

The reasons why the revisionist CPI and CPM have basically negated the caste question are three:-

1. First, they did not view the agrarian struggle as primarily anti-feudal and so, did not see the significance of attacking caste oppression as part of the anti-feudal struggle.
2. Second, because of their reformist politics, and their immersion in economic struggles and electoral battles, caste oppression was not merely negated but brushed aside, as the bulk of the organized workers are from the higher castes and the biggest vote banks are also from the higher castes, and,
3. Third, because of a mechanical linking between the base and the superstructure, they did not feel the need to fight casteist outlook and maintained that common economic struggles will automatically bring together all castes and remove the caste bias. Ideologically, they replaced dialectical materialism with mechanical materialism and assumed a one-to-one relationship between the base and the superstructure by further maintaining that, with the transformation into socialist society, all caste biases will automatically disappear. Influenced by the 'theory of productive forces,' whereby, they maintained that social relations of production will automatically change with a development of the productive forces.

These are the three major reasons why the CPI and the CPM were unable to understand not only the caste questioning in India, but many of the other problems of the Indian revolution. The CPI (ML) — the Naxalites — made a clear break with these establishment communist parties and were able to rectify the above weaknesses. But the CPI (ML), although it was able to pin-point semi-feudalism as the main target of the revolution and, thereby,

build a wide base amongst rural Dalits and tribals, too, dogmatically viewed the caste question. It mechanically linked it to merely one aspect — the land question — and was, thus, unable to grasp the specificity of the caste question.

ROOTS

The roots of the caste system lie deep in Indian society — they go back over 5,000 years. The beginnings of the caste system lie in the period of transition from a simple tribal economy to a surplus extracting agricultural economy; in the subjugation of tribes through wars; and in the assimilation of tribal customs and taboos by the growing village culture. The evolution of the caste system is closely related to the growth of an exploitative agricultural economy (from the primitive tribal economy) where a class of people who controlled land and state power, needed caste to keep the vast masses enslaved. Elaborate rituals and religious philosophy were important aids in this process. The caste system, gained its rigid, developed and hierarchical form by the age of the Guptas, i.e., 3rd-4th centuries AD.

In feudal India, land was the most important means of production. Those who owned/controlled the land and exploited the surplus, constituted the feudal exploiting classes, while those who tilled the land and did other occupations connected with cultivation belonged to the exploited class. While it was members of the higher castes who were the feudal exploiters and those of the lower castes that were the exploited, this categorization is general. Ownership or control was not caste-based in an absolute sense, as members of various higher castes, as well as Turks, Afghans, Moghuls, etc., constituted the surplus appropriating class. Also, members of the lowest castes tilled the soil. At the same time, the caste system provided a division of labour with reference to various services necessary for agriculture and village administration and also to sustain the political-economic system. Thus, we can say that the caste system was part of the economic base although it did not encompass all aspects of the relations of production.

Caste and class were not synonymous, but there is no doubt that the caste system and caste ideology played a significant role in the enslavement of the masses and their exploitation.

With the growth of trade and commerce in the earlier period of British colonialism, and with the growth of capitalist relations as a result of British policies in the late 19th century, the old feudal structure was disturbed. And with this came the rise of anti-feudal struggles and consciousness, as reflected in the non-Brahmin movements and the growth of a national consciousness. Slowly, with the growth in capital investment, the rise of a middle-class, etc., the existing feudal structure was transferred into a semi-feudal structure. The post-1947 strategy of the Indian ruling classes — land reforms, green revolution, etc. — has speeded up this process but the democratic transformation has been far from completed. The distorted and incomplete capitalist growth in the country has acted not only to prevent revolutionary change in the relations of production (as has happened with the bourgeois democratic revolutions in Europe) but has integrated a large part of the pre-capitalist relations. Capitalism in India, having grown as an off-shoot of worldwide imperialism, has not come as a revolutionizing force, but has grown with all the semi-feudal and pre-capitalist trappings. This is why, the old trading castes like the Banias, etc., are, today, the textile workers, while the old time Bhangis/scheduled castes are the sweepers in the municipality, etc. And hence, 'modernity' has not come with much democratization of society and of our social values and has been, rather, superimposed on the old feudal relations — thus creating a distorted society in which computers co-exist with the wooden plough; untouchability and animal sacrifice co-exist with television; dowry and wife-burning co-exist with video and modern films; etc.

Caste, though interwoven in the economic structure of society, is deeply embedded in human psyche. The uninterrupted history of caste over thousands of years have given it a resilience and autonomy of its own, which has its own impact holding back the process of change. To destroy the roots of caste, it is first

and foremost necessary to smash the backward semi-feudal socio-economic system. But that alone is not sufficient — we need to consistently attack caste ideology, oppose caste-based social relations and, above all, fight all forms of caste discrimination and oppression.

DALITS

The Scheduled Castes, which comprise about 16 percent of the population, face a crude form of oppression in untouchability. In the villages this casteism is cruder while in the urban centres it is more subtle and cunning. Modern thinking may have reduced the intensity of caste oppression (as compared to a century ago) but it has not made it any less pervasive.

First, let us take the question of caste oppression in the countryside. The scheduled castes are not merely denied economic and political rights but also basic civic rights. At the village level, the struggle must be led not only for economic demands and for land (together with all the oppressed class) but also for their basic civil and political rights. The struggle must be led for the Scheduled Castes to freely participate in the religious, social and political life of village. Even today, the Dalits live outside the main village, cannot draw water from the community well, have no rights to enter in the temples (in many places) and even face discrimination in the purchase and sale of land and also their labour power. So, to smash the oppression of the Scheduled Castes from its roots at the village level, it requires a struggle to undermine the existing caste and patriarchal authority of the village rich, and set up, in its place, the authority of the oppressed masses organized into village committees on a democratic basis. Therefore, the struggle against the local power elite, and against the control of the economic, social and political life of the village, is the key aspect of fighting all forms of oppression, including caste oppression.

In the cities and towns, caste oppression, especially on the Dalits, though less crude than in the villages, operates in many, more subtle, ways. It operates in the sphere of jobs, education,

housing and various aspects of social life. This has led to the struggle mostly taking the form of a fight for reservations and their implementation and also the fight for self-respect and dignity. This movement broke out as a revolt in the Dalit Panther movement in the mid-1970s. This assertion of one's identity had begun much earlier — the DK movement under Periyar's leadership in Tamil Nadu, the Satyashodak movement and the Ambedkarite movement in Maharashtra and the *Namantar* movement for self-respect and an equal identity. In the urban areas, discrimination against the Dalits takes many subtle forms — whether in the realm of housing or job preference, or in that of education, especially, higher education. Reservations have not solved the problems of discrimination that haunt the Dalit students, in medical and engineering colleges, for example. It is, in innumerable ways, in the minor aspects of social interaction that the Dalits face discrimination and oppression. And, as a reaction to these various forms of discrimination, the Dalit movement has grown with a distinct identity, for justice, social equality and dignity. Ambedkar has become a symbol of this movement.

What then should be the main focus of the revolutionary movement on the question of caste oppression? Should it be for reservations? Or should it be against the Hindu religion? Or should it be opposed to the Hindu communal organizations? Although the revolutionary movement has to defend the continuation of reservations, and also fight Hindu communal organizations, the main focus of attack must be the state-Congress-I combine which is the chief perpetrator of caste oppression and the upholder of the caste system. Without the overt, and covert, support of the government and the Congress-I the Hindu communal organizations would never have seen the type of growth that we witness today. There is a strong trend in the Dalit movement that considers the Congress, which has granted and continued reservations, as not as casteist as the RSS. But reservations are no charity granted by the government, they are a right wrested through struggle. The weakness of the Dalit movement, evident in Ambedkar's views also, was that it seeks change

within the existing constitutional framework. The caste system can be thoroughly attacked only by destroying the existing political system which sustains it. Yet, this too, is only a starting point, since caste ideology and thinking is deep-rooted in people's thought and will require a continuous ideological struggle to uproot it completely.

The Congress-I portrays itself as a saviour of the Dalits. But behind nearly every castiest outrage in different parts of the country we can find the hands of the Congress-I or the ruling party. The aggressive Maratha lobby that dominates the reins of power in rural Maharashtra or the Rajput and Brahmin lobbies of the North are all tied to the Congress-I. The Congress-I represents the most reactionary forces in the country. The RSS too has close links with it (Hedgewar was a Congressman and Deoras has supported Rajiv Gandhi). The Vishwa Hindu Parishad, too, has close links with the state structure and the Congress-I. Communal organizations are floated by the Congress-I. That the Shiv Sena was floated by Vasantrao Naik and is now sustained by the Vasantdada Patil lobby is an open fact. In the North, fascist Hindu organizations have acted as the direct storm-troopers of the government and the ruling party. The state-Congress-I combine is the most staunch upholder of the existing feudal culture in all its reactionary essence, and the RSS, VHP and Shiv Sena type communal fascist outfits get direct and indirect patronage of the Congress-I, either through influential individuals linked to the government or through funds channelized to these bodies discretely. It is a convenient division of labour — the RSS, the VHP, the Shiv Sena, etc., yell for 'Hindu Rashtra,' while the Congress-I looks more secular as it gives concessions to Hindu fanatics (cleaning the Ganga, broadcasting the Ramayana on TV, supporting the *Rashtriya Ekatmata Yagna*), and also to the fundamentalist demands of other religious, while stopping short of giving the full demand of Hindu Rashtra. Therefore, the Indian state and the Congress-I represent the most reactionary classes (the feudal, big bourgeois, anti-national pro-imperialist classes) in Indian society, and are the chief upholders of the caste system.

While fighting back the attacks of fascist Hindu communal bodies (through self-defence squads, etc.) the revolutionary movement has to win over the other oppressed sections among the Hindus and also target their attack against the Congress-I and the government. In this struggle, the need to unite the Dalits, the Bahujan Samaj, the minorities and the secular individuals and organizations, irrespective of their ideological differences, is important. The caste-based mobilization of the Dalit movement has prevented this unity and led the movement into a quagmire of sectarianism. Without this unity the Dalits can be (and are increasingly being) pitted against the Bahujan Samaj, which have become the mobilizing section of the rising Shiv Sena and such bodies. No doubt this unity is difficult to achieve but it is also essential.

Precisely in order to bring about this unity of all oppressed sections and classes the movement against caste oppression will have to shed its sectarian character and join the overall democratic movement in the country. Experience in Maharashtra itself has shown that mere anti caste movements, unlinked to other struggles that unite the exploited and oppressed, such as the 'one village one well' movement (of Baba Adhav), have not effectively undermined caste discrimination. Nor can the movement of one oppressed caste for equality hit at the caste system. The workers, the peasants, the oppressed nationalities and the oppressed minorities have as their enemies, basically, the same forces that are also the targets of the Dalit movement. The Dalits alone, constituting 16 percent of the population, cannot break the stranglehold of caste, let alone win the battle against caste oppression. The broader unity of the oppressed, cutting across caste lines, is a precondition for winning the fight against the caste system. Thus, the struggle against caste oppression has to be united with the struggle of all the oppressed classes for the overthrow of the existing order and the reorganization of society on a thoroughly democratic basis.

Movements against Caste in Maharashtra

The democratic transformation of Indian society is a multi-faceted movement encompassing not merely the economic and political aspects of Indian society but also its social and cultural aspects. While the anti-feudal peasant movement was the backbone of the democratic revolution in China, the cultural movements that emerged were also a significant aspect of the revolution. However, to grasp this aspect while evolving the strategy and tactics of the new democratic revolution means being able to grapple with the complex and often seemingly contradictory situations that are thrown up by history, and being able to tackle the various forces operating on these situations.

The social reform movement has been varied in its intensity and sweep in different parts of India. Maharashtra has had a strong tradition of social reform, especially on questions of women's status and oppression and against caste discrimination. But this social reform movement has been separate from, and in times even antagonistic to, the nationalist and the communist led

This paper was presented at the Seminar on 'Caste and Class in India' organized by All India League for Revolutionary Culture (AILRC) in Mumbai in 1988.

movements. Yet these movements, like the non-Brahmin movement, have had strong impact on the fabric of Maharashtra's social and political life.

The separation of and even antagonism of these movements to the Communist-led organizations has found its reflection in the question of the relative importance of caste struggle versus class struggle, a question that has been theoretically posed. In this debate, class struggle has been equalized with economic struggles, while caste struggle has been interpreted to mean the conflict in the social sphere. From a scientific Marxist position this counterposition itself is incorrect; it comes from a mechanical and essentially narrow interpretation of class struggle.

From the Marxist perspective, the fact that classes are not categories of people separated from each other by the income they earn, but they are groups of people related to the process of production and to the means of production in different ways, brings a complexity in conceptualization. Class includes the social and political in its dimension. And class struggle is not merely the struggle of the exploited and exploiters to better their economic conditions. It includes the struggle between the exploited and the exploiters for control over the main means of production in society and the political life of society. Thus includes the struggle in the social and political sphere. From the revolutionary perspective, the struggle against the caste system is part of the class struggle going on in India. The battle for the transformation of the social relations and ideology are part of the class struggle.

The roots of the caste system lie deep: they lie in the pre-British feudal agricultural economy. Though the history of the caste system extends much further into the past, to the phase of the transition from tribal societies to settled agriculture economies (when economic surplus began to be produced while the main means of production — land and cattle — came to be controlled by some clans/tribes), we see that the system acquired its rigid, fully developed hierarchical structure with the growth of feudalism. It is not within the scope of this paper to go into the details of

the history and growth of the caste system. We will trace the growth of the anti-caste movements in Maharashtra.

BHAKTI MOVEMENT

Marathi nationalism and the anti-Brahmin movement can be said to have originated in an inter-related way with the Bhakti movement in the Middle Ages. In the 12th Century, Chakradharswami was the forerunner of the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra. He established the Mahaanubhav sect which preached in Marathi. He attracted a large number of people from the oppressed castes, including the untouchables like Mahars into his fold. He set up an order that was egalitarian and even allowed women to take *deeksha*. The sect was much maligned during Chakradharswami's time. From the 14th Century onwards, a number of Bhakti saints emerged in various parts of the state. While a few of them, like Gyaneshwar were from the Brahmin caste, the majority were from poor artisan or peasant castes. They preached in Marathi and brought the worship of the peasant deities like Vithoba and Khandoba to the fore. Certain trends can be distinguished in the Bhakti movement. The trend represented by Gyaneshwar was moderate: he preached the Bhagwata Purana in Marathi, his songs reflected the suffering of the lower castes but in a controlled manner. The Varkari Panth, the main trend represented by Tukaram, Namdev, Chokhamela and others, were more forthright in their criticism of Brahminical exploitation and articulated the agony and pain of the lower castes with deep emotion. Their songs express the pain of discrimination and they sought equality for all before god. There is one more trend in the Bhakti movement represented by the last of the saints, Ramdas, in the 17th century, whose main inspiration came from the feeling that the conditions and status of the Brahmins had deteriorated. An astute organizer, his main efforts lay in trying to establish centres in order to reassert Brahminical superiority. He used the idea of Maharashtra Dharma as a rallying point for his activities. The Bhakti movement was not a homogeneous movement, yet its main trend, the

Varkari Panth, rallied the peasantry, the artisans and women, the bulk of whom were from the lower castes. The movement was an expression of the oppression and suffering of the people. By opposing the expensive, complicated rituals on which Brahmins thrived, they incurred the wrath of the established classes. The movement led to a growth of Marathi language and literature.

There is an opinion among Dalit intellectuals in Maharashtra like Arun Kamble and Yeshwant Manohar that the Bhakti movement is a reactionary movement since it preached Hindu religion and values in a popular form and thus consolidated the hold of Hinduism among the masses. This criticism does not consider the complexity of the process of change in any society. A movement's significance cannot be judged only from its impression of itself or its content in isolation from the society in which it has emerged. In a feudal society, in which economic and political relations are intertwined with and obscured by family, kin and other social relations, religion has been an important tool for mobilizing people. The condition of the people is often expressed through religion. The reformation in Europe, for example, was a movement with an intense religious sentiment, based on many reactionary values, but it attacked the hypocrisy of the Roman Catholic Church. It helped to break the monopoly of the Roman Catholic Church over the social and political life in Europe. Thus the Reformation represented those forces and, as a movement, aided the process which led to the growth of capitalism in feudal Europe. The Bhakti movement in Maharashtra was a religious reform movement; it emerged after feudalism had consolidated in the region. The growth of commodity production may have loosened the ties within the village thus enabling such a movement to emerge. But these economic developments were neither rapid nor widespread enough, thus the movement, unlike the Reformation is not linked to any major economic and political transformation. It remained a religious reform movement which articulated the discrimination of the lower castes and expressed their desire for equality.

The most significant movement against the caste system came in the 19th and 20th Centuries. The Maratha period and

the impact of British rule provided the foundation for this movement.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN MARATHA PERIOD

In the feudal period, rural Maharashtra was bound in a network or relations centred around the cultivation of land. The bulk of the peasants within the village were permanent lease-holders while temporary lease-holders were called *Upara*. Besides, members of various castes performed specific functions for the village — traditionally evolved, but recognized by the feudal state. They were village servants and were paid by the village in the form of a stipulated share of the annual produce of the village *baluta*. The washerman, barber, blacksmith, carpenter, the Mang who supplied ropes and thongs, the Mahar who guarded and cleaned the village, the village priests — Joshi and Gurav, were balutedars. Some of them, like the Mahar were also given rent-free land for cultivation — *watan*. At the village level, it was the task of the *Patil* and *Kulkarni* to maintain law and order and to collect revenue and maintain accounts; they were supervised from above by the *Deshmukh* and *Deshpande*. They negotiated with the government about the amount of revenue to be paid. They were given *watans* in lieu of their appointments besides being privileged to receive the free services of village servants and artisans. For example, the Patil got free grain, a pair of shoes, cloth and the free service of the Mahar for a fixed number of days in the years. The Jagirdars and other feudatories stood above these intermediary revenue collectors. In most areas patil, kulkarni, deshmukh and deshpande were members of the higher castes. Thus the production relations in the agrarian economy were founded on peasant cultivators and feudatory revenue collectors, but included a network of caste-based *balutedari* relations between the village cultivators and the service rendering castes, which bonded these artisans to the agrarian economy. Besides, members of lower castes were also tied individually to cultivator families and the feudatories.

After the death of Shivaji in the beginning of the 18th Century, as the power of the Peshwas in Pune grew, caste discrimination also increased. While Brahmins were given rent-free lands, revenue demands on the peasantry went up. Brahmins came to dominate the economic and political life in Western Maharashtra, especially in the areas under the direct control of the Peshwas. Laws and regulations favoured Brahmins and enhanced discrimination against the lower castes, especially the untouchable castes. Caste oppression intensified and the discontent of the lower castes and the peasantry also increased.

By the end of the 18th century Maratha power had expanded from Pune to Orissa, and it had spread into Malwa and Gujarat. Maratha kingdoms included Gwalior, Indore and Baroda, principalities like Dewas were also under Maratha rule. The symbolic centre of this power was the King in Pune, but in reality the reins were controlled by the Peshwa, the Prime Minister. Internal rivalries and degenerate life-style led to the downfall of the Maratha Empire. The British utilized the divisions to destroy the Maratha power by 1830, and Maharashtra was among the last of the areas to come under British rule.

During British colonial rule, due to the capitalist relations that penetrated the feudal rural economy, the unity between agriculture and hand industry was shattered. The Zaminidari and Rayatwari system of land tenure introduced by them created a class of rapacious landlords and moneylender traders who intensified the exploitation and misery of the peasantry in the 19th Century. Large-scale import of factory made goods drove the village and urban artisans to ruin. Meanwhile new opportunities for economic progress also emerged with the growth of trade, contracts and through systematic recruitment into the British Army. Members of the non-Brahmin castes were able to take advantage of these opportunities. The colonial education system also created the opportunity for members of lower castes to take modern education. Sections of the non-Brahmin communities all over the country gained from these changes. The untouchable Mahars in Maharashtra also gained from these changes. They

gave up their traditional occupations and improved their economic conditions.

NON-BRAHMIN MOVEMENT

When the Maratha power was destroyed by the British, the most disappointed were the Pune Brahmins who had commanded supreme, unchecked authority in this capital under the patronage of the Peshwas. Yet, under the rule of the British, it was the Brahmins who, due to the tradition of learning, were able to adopt British education and take up government jobs. At the same time, a section of the Brahmins, who had been feudal intermediaries earlier, now became landlords under the British land tenure system. In the rural areas, a section of the moneylenders and traders too were Brahmins. Thus they commanded power not only under the old kingdom, but also remained socially and economically powerful under the British. Their domination in education and government jobs and their exploitative role in the rural areas created an anti-Brahmin sentiment, which was articulated and expressed by that section of the non-Brahmins who had come forward due to trade, contracts and educational opportunities.

This sentiment was initially given direction by Jyotiba Phule. Born in 1827 in a middle caste Mali family, and educated in a mission school, Phule was very much influenced by the ideas of Tom Paine, the famous US democrat and by the Negro movement. Phule became actively involved with Brahmin social reformers in Pune, like Ranade, in running a school for girls. He faced the wrath of his father and of the community to educate his wife Savitribai and to make her teach in a school for untouchables and women.

In 1873 Phule started the Satyashodhak Samaj (SSS) with the support of non-Brahmin contractors and intelligentsia. The main task of SSS was to make non-Brahmins aware of their exploitation by Brahmins. They brought out a newspaper called *Din Bandhu*. Phule wrote songs and books elaborating on these themes. He concentrated on exposing the ways in which Brahmins cunningly

utilized the illiteracy, superstitious faith and gullibility of peasants to cheat them. Phule's main ideology was that Brahmins were Aryan invaders who had divided and enslaved the native population (*Ishara* and *Shetkaranyancha Asud*). In his writing he pitted the Bahujan Samaj against the exploitative *Shetji-Bhatji*.

Phule campaigned against the traditional marriage ceremonies which needed Brahmin priests and proposed an alternate Satyashodhak marriage. Influenced by Christianity he believed in some form of egalitarian religion though he emphasized the need for rational thinking. Whether it was a question of caste, or the oppression of women, or even the plight of the peasantry, Phule represented the foremost democratic thinking of his time. He stood far ahead of contemporary social reformers in Maharashtra since he appealed to the masses and since the issues he campaigned for and the activities he undertook were not restricted to any particular caste. His associates worked among the textile workers in Bombay too.

Yet, Phule laid emphasis on the religious exploitation of the masses, the Bahujan Samaj, by cunning Brahmins and thus underplayed the role of the colonial government and the landlordism created by it, in the exploitation of the peasant masses. He believed that the British were misled by cunning Brahmin officials and clerks. He urged the British to undertake improvement in agriculture by introducing modern techniques and he demanded the introduction of mass education. Confronted by a colonial government on the one hand and a growing nationalist movement on the other (dominated by Brahmins who were hostile to the SSS activities), the SSS opted for collaboration with the British. Phule failed to realize that after the 1857 revolt the British had compromised with feudalism, not merely in the economic sphere but in the social sphere as well, and hence they were not allies in the fight against conservative practices and institutions. The Indian National Congress, which had emerged during the same period, was not a revolutionary, anti-imperialist force either. At this stage it represented the newly emergent bourgeoisie, the petit-bourgeoisie and industry. Phule was a thinker imbued with revolutionary democratic ideas in a feudal milieu. He was foremost among the social

reformers in his activities. He laid the foundation for the widespread SSS movement that emerged two decades after his death in 1890. But Phule was ignored and his work remained unacknowledged in established political and social literature. The resurgence of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra in the 1970s brought Phule into the limelight of Maharashtra's social history.

NON-BRAHMIN MOVEMENT AFTER PHULE

After 1900 the Satyashodhak Samaj started spreading and units were set up in villages as far east as Berar. From 1910 activity revived, and though the SSS remained explicitly loyal to the British, it conducted vigorous propaganda through *tamasha* performances in villages, and through books and magazines. They campaigned against exploitation by Brahmins and against untouchability. They took up social problems like drinking. As a result, the popularity of the SSS among the rural masses grew. In 1919 the tour of a SSS *tamasha* led to a spontaneous peasant uprising in Satara district. The peasantry rose up against Brahmins and Marwari moneylenders-cum-landlords and demanded a reduction in rent. Superficially, the revolt appeared like an anti-Brahmin uprising but it had a strong anti-landlord content. The peasants, including the landless, boycotted Brahmins for ceremonies, broke idols and publicly abused and humiliated gods and Brahmin women. This revolt represented the more militant trend within the non-Brahmin movement.

There was also an important trend within the non-Brahmin movement to gain Kshatriya status for the Maratha-Kunbi castes. They had no sympathy for the untouchables and were against the peasant revolt that emerged in Satara. Led by landlords, lawyers and other professionals, this conservative trend got organizational expression through the Non-Brahmin Party. They were explicitly loyal to the British and contested and won district board elections. But after 1925, as the anti-imperialist movement all over the country became broad-based and the peasantry was mobilized, the Non-Brahmin Party leadership's loyal stand could no longer satisfy

the peasantry in Western Maharashtra and large sections of the Non-Brahmin Party joined the Congress. A small section under Jawalkar's leadership joined the CPI. The Scheduled Castes were already getting organized independently under Ambedkar's leadership. Hence the Non-Brahmin Party was virtually liquidated.

The significance of the non-Brahmin movement lay in two main aspects. The first was its anti-feudal content and the fact that the mass of the peasantry, not only of the Kunbi-Maratha caste but also the lower castes, was mobilized. The spontaneous revolt of the peasants in a few districts is evidence of this. But these revolts did not become comprehensive struggles against the semi-feudal agrarian relations, an important reason for this being the conservative leadership of the Non-Brahmin Party, which came from the landed and trading classes.

The second significant aspect of the movement was its connection with the growth of nationalist consciousness, including Marathi nationalism. Jyotiba Phule, in his propaganda, had pursued the theme of Aryan-Brahmin usurpation of the native peasant rule (Baliraja). Pride in one's land and culture, self-pride of the peasantry were awakened by him. The areas in which there was widespread non-Brahmin propaganda became the districts in which militant anti-British movements emerged (Prati Sarkar movement). In the same areas the Samyukta Maharashtra movement also got wide support. The Kunbi-Maratha leadership of the non-Brahmin movement which joined the Congress have narrowed this Marathi consciousness into a Maratha caste consciousness. The manner in which peasant-based national consciousness was distorted into a caste-Hindu consciousness is reflected in the way in which Shivaji, the peasant ruler of Jyotiba Phule's propaganda, has been usurped by the Shiv Sena to become a Maratha Hindu symbol. Thus the two trends in the non-Brahmin movement reflected the different class interests in rural Maharashtra, especially in the districts of western Maharashtra.

The CPI in Maharashtra unfortunately, did not understand the significance and the dynamics of the non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra. The CPI viewed the movement as an essentially

anti-Brahmin movement. Dange, for example, wrote in *The Socialist* in November 1925: 'The fight of the non-Brahmin classes to raise themselves to the status of Brahmins began when the Hindu society divided itself into various castes or classes.' In Bombay the CPI built its base among the textile workers in confrontation with the earlier reformist non-Brahmin leadership. This strong trade union consciousness was probably the reason why the CPI failed to see the significance of the anti-feudal content of the movement in rural Maharashtra. Hence it was not the CPI but the Congress which gained a foothold among the peasant masses. In 1950, when Nana Patil, the hero of the Prati Sarkar movement entered the CPI, it was too late. The CPI soon entered the parliamentary process and the anti-feudal tasks of the Indian revolution had been relegated to the background.

DALIT MOVEMENT

In Maharashtra the conservative character of the non-Brahmin leadership was one of the reasons why the Dalits broke away from the non-Brahmin movement and started organizing themselves separately. This is in marked contrast to Tamil Nadu, where the DK movement emerged under Periyar's leadership; the Dalits in Maharashtra, especially the Mahar caste, organized themselves independently. Ambedkar himself considered his movement as a successor to Phule's non-Brahmin movement.

There are various reasons — social, economic and political — because of which the Mahars in Maharashtra could organize themselves. Mahars (including the Buddhists comprise almost 70 percent of the Scheduled Caste population in Maharshtra). They were traditionally general village servants, one of the '*baara balutedars*' of the village. They received a piece of land, '*watan*,' as part of the payment for their services to the village. Their duties included helping the village Patil in his work, maintaining village boundaries, serving officials who visited the village and carrying away the dead cattle in the village. Since only a few Mahar families held these responsibilities, the rest lived off agriculture, as labourers or small

cultivators. In Vidarbha, especially in Bhandara, Chandrapur and Nagpur districts, caste rules were not as rigid as under the Peshwas in the Pune areas. In this area Mahars were also weavers.

The 19th century marked a turning point for the Mahars since, as a result of the new administrative and revenue structure introduced by the British, many of their traditional duties were cancelled. But the British continued the *watan* thus retaining their bondage to the village as servants. Many of them started seeking alternative avenues for employment in the towns. Lacking a traditional profession meant that they were forced to diversify the occupations they took up. They were recruited in large numbers in the army. Since schooling was compulsory for soldiers and their families, the Mahars too acquired education. Many became workers in the textile mills in Bombay and elsewhere. They also became bidi-workers.

The Mahars were in search of work. The introduction of railways and cotton trade opened up opportunities for trade and contracts. British land policy meant that they could even buy land. Thus a small number of Mahars took advantage of these opportunities by becoming traders in cotton and oranges and by taking up contracts for wood, tendu leaves, etc. A few of them even became *malguzars*. By the beginning of the 20th Century a small petit-bourgeois section had been created among the Mahars and it was this section that came into the forefront and mobilized the community in the struggle against discrimination and with the demand for equality.

When recruitment of Mahars in the army was stopped in 1892, some Mahar ex-soldiers took the help of Ranade to petition the government to lift the ban. A number of social reformers, like Kisan Phaguji Bansod and Kalicharan Nandagawli in Nagpur emerged within the community, urging the poor among them to give up drinking, to educate their children, to demand temple entry, etc. It was Ambedkar who was able to consolidate these processes and give leadership to the community.

Ambedkar's father was a Subedar-Major in the army. After retirement, he moved with his family to Bombay so that Bhimrao,

his youngest but most intelligent son, could pursue education in a relatively freer environment. With the economic help of various social reformers, Ambedkar passed his matric and then B.A. from Elphinstone College. He obtained a scholarship from the Maharaja of Baroda and went to the USA and Europe for further studies. Ambedkar was the first Indian from an untouchable caste to get a Ph.D. from abroad.

He came back in 1916 to serve in the Maharaja of Baroda's administration. But the humiliating discrimination he had to face made him return to Bombay, where he started teaching in Sydenham College. Distrustful of upper caste reformers, Ambedkar tried to unite the Depressed Classes (DCs) under their own leadership. He began a paper called *Mook Nayak*. As soon as he had accumulated money, he went back to England to study law. While abroad, Ambedkar was very strongly influenced by the philosophy and work of liberal thinkers like J.S. Mill, Edmund Burke and Booker T. Washington. He became a believer in democratic values and the parliamentary system.

Returning to India in 1923, Ambedkar practiced law and taught at the Government Law College, Bombay. He plunged into politics of the DCs. Though he tried to unite the various untouchable castes in Maharashtra, he was successful in organizing the Mahars. He soon became recognized as the spokesman of the untouchables all over India. Ambedkar tried first to gain status for untouchables in religious matters. He participated in two unsuccessful temple entry movements at Nasik, but finally gave up the idea. He decided to concentrate on gaining political rights through reservations and separate electorates then led the Mahad tank *satyagraha**. Gradually he also became firm in his decision to reject Hinduism. The logic provided by Hindu classical texts for discrimination against women and lower castes, the sanctification of inequality as a principle by Hinduism were incisively analyzed

* It was rather because of the disillusionment with the attempts to reform Hindu society through the civil rights movement like Mahad *satyagraha*, he turned his focus towards political rights.

by him. His search for a new religion led him to Buddhism which was based on egalitarian principles.

Ambedkar formed various political organizations. In 1937 he formed the Independent Labour Party and contested the Provincial elections. In 1942, he formed the Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF) and finally, just before his death he proposed the Republican Party of India.

Ambedkar represented the Scheduled Castes in the Round Table Conference. He was selected as Labour Minister in the Viceroy's War Cabinet in 1942; in 1945 was elected to the Constituent Assembly and became Chairman of the constitution drafting committee. He was law minister in Nehru's Cabinet till 1951, but his differences with the Congress over the acceptance of the Hindu Code Bill drafted by him (this comprehensive bill sought to give Hindu women inheritance rights, guarantee monogamy and divorce rights) led to his resignation.

Following the tradition of the earlier non-Brahmin movement, Ambedkar did not participate in the nationalist movement. Though Ambedkar was aware of the exploitation of the British and the Depressed Classes realized that they needed *Swaraj* to develop, the movement he felt that it could not take on two enemies (i.e. the upper castes and the British) at the same time. So they targeted their attack on the caste system. Throughout his political career Ambedkar was a firm opponent of Gandhi and he exposed the hypocrisy of the Congress leadership on the issue of eradicating untouchability.

Ambedkar played a very important role in mobilizing the lowest castes in Maharashtra to struggle against caste oppression and to demand equality. He gave the people, suppressed for centuries, a self identity in which they developed a pride in being from the Mahar community, and he gave them the self-confidence that, given equal opportunities, they were no less than members of the higher castes. The almost total conversion of the entire Mahar community to Buddhism in 1956 served to encourage this sense of identity and pride. The public rejection of Hinduism, which sanctifies inequality and caste discrimination, and public

conversion to a religion based on egalitarian principles, is another symbol of the desire for equality. It includes also a rejection of the old feudal ideology of Brahminical ritualism.

Ambedkar also recognized the importance of the land question in the economic status of the Scheduled Castes. Hence he gave a call to them to give up their *watan*, which was one form of bondage in the village. His campaign against the *Khoti* System (a form of landlordism in the Konkan) and his proposal to the Constituent Assembly that land be nationalized show that he realized the land problem of the Dalit peasants and labourers. The Republican Party of India in early 1960 (along with the CPI) led a movement to occupy government lands and thus gained support even in rural areas.

Ambedkar broke with the trend of social reformers and posed the question of political rights and political power for the Dalits. But Ambedkar was deeply imbued with liberal political thinking and hoped that the framework of Parliamentary democracy would give equality to the Dalits. Thus he gave importance to the constitutional process. Ambedkar had faith that given sizeable representation in the legislature and bureaucracy, the Dalits could defend and assert themselves as a minority.

There has always been a controversy on an evaluation of Ambedkar among the Communists. Issues like his attitude to Communists, his attitude to violence or his role in the trade union movement have been presented to judge Ambedkar. But what is of significance in such an evaluation, from a Marxist point of view, is his objective role in the process of the democratic transformation of society.

The democratic transformation of India required a revolutionary struggle against the backwardness and semi-feudal agrarian relations in rural India, as well as its main prop, i.e. British imperialism. The caste system had been part of the pre-capitalist feudal economy; caste ideology was part of the traditional feudal culture and ideology. Therefore, to smash the caste system and actively fight caste-based oppression were an integral part of the democratic transformation of our society. Ambedkar and the Dalit movement

led by him were an important part of this democratic current against caste-feudalism. By asserting the identity of the Dalits, by demanding equality, by attacking the feudal ideology of Hinduism, Ambedkar fought for democracy in social life. But Ambedkar did not connect the caste system with wider agrarian relations in a comprehensive manner. He did not conceptualize the role played by the British in perpetuating and defending this backward exploitative agrarian economy. Hence his movement remained one part of the anti-feudal current (Maharashtra did not develop comprehensive anti-feudal struggles under the communist leadership either). And this led Ambedkar to place hope in constitutional means for gaining political equality. Ambedkar was a leading liberal reformer of his time. He is a source of inspiration for the Dalits not only in Maharashtra, but in other states as well. For Dalits, who have acquired education but face caste discrimination, who demand equality but are denied it in various ways, subtle and crude, he is a symbol of their identity and desire to gain equality.

THE DALIT MOVEMENT AFTER AMBEDKAR

The Dalit movement sustained after Ambedkar and is a force to reckon with in the politics of Maharashtra state. Ambedkar died within a few months of his conversion to Buddhism, but for the next few years, mass conversion of Mahars continued throughout the state. In 1957 the Scheduled Castes Federation was dissolved and the Republican Party of India, as conceived by Ambedkar, was formed. In 1969, under the leadership of Dadasaheb Gaikwad, *satyagraha* for land was taken up. A movement to occupy government lands also emerged. The RPI participated along with the CPI and the Socialists in the Samyukta Maharashtra movement, but this opposition unity lasted only till 1962. Differences among the RPI leadership surfaced and gradually splits started taking place. In 1967, the main leaders of the RPI had made electoral arrangements with the state Congress leadership in the Zilla Parishad elections. The Congress, the sworn enemy of Ambedkar, had become an electoral ally.

Discontent with the existing political and economic situation among the youth of the newly converted Dalits burst forth in 1973, in Bombay, in the form of the Dalit Panther movement. The general political and economic crisis in the country, the revolutionary upsurge of students and youth around the world, the frustration of the newly educated Dalit youth who found their desire for equality smothered, confronted by discrimination and unemployment, led to the emergence of the Dalit Panther movement. The movement challenged not only the Congress rule but also the corruption ridden RPI leadership.

On 15 August 1973, Raja Dhale wrote an article in *Sadhana* exposing the hoax of Indian independence. Dhale abused the Indian flag since it had given the Scheduled Castes neither equality nor freedom from oppression. The issue of *Sadhana* was banned by the Maharashtra government. This was the spark that gave birth to the Dalit Panthers. A literature of protest burst forth, attacking all forms of discrimination, mocking at those 'immersed in plastering withering leaves,' expressing the anguish of the 'injuries ploughed into their backs,' calling upon 'countless suns aflame with blood... to advance setting afire town after town.' Namdev Dhasal, Yeshwant Manohar, Daya Pawar, Keshav Meshram and many others achieved overnight fame. The literature of revolt vowed to take revenge for the centuries of oppression: it sprang up on noticeboards, in slums, in small magazines and posters. Taking inspiration from the Black Panthers, this movement gave itself a name, Dalit Panthers. Meetings were held, the Bhagwad Gita burnt; campaigns to break the practice of untouchability in various forms were organized. In a short span of six months, militant organizational units sprang up in innumerable slums of Bombay and Pune. The state, taken aback by the spontaneous growth and the intensity of this movement, launched attacks on the Dalit Panthers, not directly, but through the Shiv Sena. Minor reasons were utilized in order to arrest activists of the Dalit Panthers, and to beat them up, in order to prevent them from spreading.

On 5 January 1974, in a mammoth rally in Worli, Bombay, the Panthers called for the boycott of the forthcoming Lok Sabha

by-elections in the area the two candidates for the elections being Roza Deshpande (CPI) and B.C. Kamble (RPI). They supported the strike of the textile workers going on then. Hearing the call for boycott, the Shiv Sena attacked the meeting: confusion followed and the police lathi-charged the meeting. In protest, the Dalit Panthers organized a big morcha on 10 January, which was again disturbed by the Shiv Sena. In the police firing, one young poet, Bhagwat Jadhav, was killed*. After this, riots broke out between the Panthers and the Shiv Sena in Worli, in the heartland of the textile workers' chawls. For over two months the fighting raged between the two groups. The state intervened with a two-pronged strategy of beating down the cadres and winning over the leadership. While the riots raged, *Golpitha*, Namdev Dhasal's book of poems, much abused by the establishment literary circles, was awarded a prize by the state government.

The movement got splintered with differences arising among the leadership. The debate crystallized over the programme of the Dalit Panthers. For Dhale, the word Dalit meant the neo-Buddhist and he wanted their separate identity to be asserted; for Dhasal, the term Dalit had a wider meaning, emphasis being on the unity of all the oppressed and exploited. The various leaders were drawn close to different parties; the CPI, the RPI and the Congress. Essentially an urban-based movement, it had spread as far as Nagpur and Bhopal, drawing into its fold militant educated Buddhist youth in large numbers.

The Dalit movement saw resurgence in 1978, over the *Namantar* issue, the struggle to rename Marathwada University after Ambedkar. This time the movement was centred around Aurangabad and Nagpur. The Dalit Liberation Army (DLA) formed by Jogendra Kavade in Nagpur led a long march to Aurangabad in the face of repression. This mobilization came in the wake of the riots in Marathwada. A unanimous resolution was passed by the Maharashtra Assembly, in June 1978, to rename the

* Actually, he was killed with a stone dropped from the terrace of one of the chawls by the Shiv Sena attackers.

University. But within a few days of the resolution, riots broke out in several districts around Aurangabad, and members of the Dalit community, especially Buddhists became the targets of brutal attacks by the landed rich. They had obviously planned the riots to 'teach a lesson' to the newly emerging equality conscious Dalits. In response to these riots, activists from all over Maharashtra marched to Aurangabad to gherao the University to demand the implementation of the resolution. The University has not yet been renamed. But this demand became a rallying point for Dalits and a symbol of their struggle for equality.

The main political thrust of the Dalit movement was the struggle for equality and to assert their identity. But after a militant phase, the Dalit movement has seen the resurgence of conservative trends which assert the separateness of Dalits and oppose any unity with progressive, non-Dalit forces, which make electoral agreements with the Congress, which blindly uphold the Constitution and which lay emphasis on the propagation of Buddhism.

Ambedkar's thoughts have been very influential within the Dalit movement in Maharashtra and are becoming increasingly influential in U.P., AP and other states. The DS4, the Bahujan Samaj Party and almost all Dalit organizations profess Ambedkarism. The implementation of reservations in higher education institutions and in the various government jobs, the result of the widespread movements of the lower castes and tribals in the early 1970s, has led to the emergence of a newly educated section among Dalit youth. These youth are thirsting for equal status but find their aspirations and desires thwarted by the dominant semi-feudal culture and economy. Even in government service, in spite of reservations, they find discrimination being practiced. The Rajiv government's policy is openly anti-minority and anti-Dalit. Thus thwarted, these youth have turned to Ambedkarism; it has become the symbol of their demand for equality in social life, though within the present structure.

Ambedkarism, as propagated by these organizations, primarily poses the question of gaining political power through reservations (a share in administration) and through elections. They

emphasize the constitutional struggle and believe that Dalits can gain equality and power by capturing the existing bureaucracy and Parliament.

The domination of the higher castes in the higher echelons of the bureaucracy and Parliament is visible. Caste-kin connections are utilized to perpetuate their domination. They provide the social base for openly Hindu chauvinist organizations like the RSS and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. But this is not the only reason for higher caste domination over India's social and political life, as these organizations believe. They fail to grasp the class nature of the Indian state and government; the millions of ties by which the bureaucracy, government and judiciary are tied to the preservation of the existing exploitative socio-economic structure. The ruling classes operate through the state, to retain the existing semi-feudal structure, to continue and enhance the loot of our country by the imperialists. This approach has emphasized the neutrality of the Indian state, thus preventing the growth of a consciousness that, without smashing the semi-feudal structure with its protector, the Indian state, the foundation of the caste system cannot be destroyed. Dalits and other oppressed castes can gain real power and equality only after the existing state is destroyed. The comprador bourgeoisie and the imperialists are utilizing the semi-feudal structure, including the caste system and upper caste domination through their control over the state, in order to sustain their exploitation of the people, a large number of whom are from the lower castes and tribals.

The task before the revolutionary democratic movement is immense. Unless the revolutionary democratic movement in India takes on the fight against caste discrimination and caste oppression as part of the anti-feudal struggle, unless the mobilization against caste oppression becomes part of the wider class struggle against the state, real democracy will not be established. The upper caste bias and the casteist bias of the Indian state needs to be exposed if the revolutionary democratic movement has to rally the Dalit movement in the front to smash the Indian state and the caste system.

When Maharashtra Burned for Four Days

On the night of 10 July 1997 'unknown' people placed a 'garland' of *chappals* around a statue of Ambedkar at Rambai Ambedkar Colony, Ghatkopar, East Mumbai. This affront to Dalit self-respect, and the unprovoked police firing that followed, ignited a veritable inferno that engulfed not only entire Maharashtra, but singed many other parts of the country. Outbursts were particularly strong in neighbouring Gujarat and Karnataka. In the flames of Dalit fury, not only were the fascist Shiv Sena and their partners burnt, but all those who sought to play with their sentiments, including, not only the Congress opposition, but also their own corrupt leadership. The boot licking, servile politics of the Dalit self-seeking leadership got a slap in the face and was shown that self-respect can only be achieved, not by begging for crumbs, but, by fighting for one's rights.

The events of 11 July, that ignited the conflagration, were only the last straw of pent up anger and frustration which had been simmering for the last couple of years.

First published in the *Voice of the Vanguard*, July-October, 1997.

THE POLICE FIRING

On the morning of 11 July, the garland of chappals was first noticed at 6.45 a.m. By 7.50 a.m. Inspector Kadam had given orders to fire. This swift action was in direct contrast to the inaction of the police two days earlier, when Shiv Sena leader, Mohan Ravle, and his gang of storm troopers, held a rail *roko*, obstructing the travel of lakhs of commuters during peak hours.

Although the nearby Pantnagar police station was informed, no senior official bothered to come and immediately register a complaint. On the contrary, the few police personnel present sought to remove the chappals with a stick, without even recording a *panchanama*.

The police's callousness infuriated the crowd, which began gathering on the adjoining Eastern Express highway, with a view to stop traffic. With this, the police immediately arrived, together with a van of the Special Reserve Police (SRP), and began clearing the highway and removing the chappals off the statue. The people retaliated. But even before the condition deteriorated, a second SRP van arrived and began indiscriminate firing. Without any prior warning, without first using tear gas shells, without initially firing into the air, without using rubber bullets or water canons, the police started firing — they fired above the waist, they fired to kill. Within 15 minutes, 10 people lay dead and 38 were injured, 15 of them seriously. This police action was not just to clear the roads, as most of those hit were in the bye-lanes of the slums. The bulk of the bodies were found around a small playground. Of those killed was a boy of 14, most of those hit were bystanders, some received shots inside their houses and even some women received bullet injuries. It was clearly a vicious, brutal attack, nowhere commensurate with the needs of clearing a *rasta roko*.

The news of the massacre and the desecration of the statue spread like wild-fire. Rasta rokos and stone-throwing erupted all over the city. Some railway lines were closed down. In Ramabainagar itself, instead of being cowed down by the firing, the retaliation became more intense and a police *chowki* was burnt down. By evening the entire Bombay was aflame. Sensing the people's anger, the RPI gave the call for a Bombay bandh on 12 July and a Maharashtra bandh on 14 July. This call was supported by all the opposition parties, while the Shiv Sena-BJP government was too terrified to oppose it.

THE BANDH

Early morning, on 12 July, all the buses, trains, etc., were made to ply as normal. But, as the day progressed, over 100 buses were stoned, cars were smashed, railway lines blockaded and rasta rokos dotted all the major roads and highways. By the afternoon it was like a peoples' curfew — all roads were closed, trains came to a halt, police chowkies were attacked and clusters of over a thousand people were moving around attacking railway stations, Shiv Sena outposts and government property. One such gathering even marched to Bal Thackeray's house, which was defended by Sena hoodlums together with a force of the SRP and the Rapid Action Force. In all Dalit dominated slums and colonies, not only the youth, but elderly women and young girls could be seen aggressively moving around, disrupting traffic.

Even though the Maharashtra bandh had been called for the 14th, violence flared up in nearly all the major towns of Maharashtra, bringing life to a grinding halt in 35 towns of the state. In Pune, a crowd of 5,000 smashed shops and buses and resorted to rasta rokos. In Vidarbha, till late evening, pitched battles were being fought between the Dalits and the police. Particularly violent were the actions in Nagpur, Amravati and Akola. In Marathwada, violence erupted in Nanded, Purna and Ichalkaranji, while all major towns observed bandhs. In Kolhapur, too, clashes occurred, and in Sholapur, Dalit youth, shouting slogans *'Joshi-Munde do gunde'* (Joshi and Munde are a pair of goondas), warned Manohar Joshi not to participate in the Pandharpur *Jatra*, scheduled for 16 July.

The government resorted to a massive show of strength by calling into action 75 companies of the SRP and also units of the Rapid Action Force. Curfew had been clamped in parts of Nagpur

and Purna and by the evening, 1,136 people were arrested and five more killed. One of the injured at Ramabainagar died, one was killed in police firing at Kurla (Mumbai) and two at Nagpur, while one local Dalit leader was killed by Shiv Sainiks at Kolhapur.

Yet, on 13 July, the violence and bandh activity continued unabated. In Nagpur Division (five districts) spontaneous bandhs were observed in 53 places for the second consecutive day. In Nagpur city, five police posts were attacked and two burnt down. In Bombay, major parts of the city remained closed — rasta rokos and rail rokos continued to paralyze both central and western railways.

Again, on 14 July, the Maharashtra bandh was a near total success. Bombay, although officially exempted from the bandh, continued to witness sporadic violence, with the Central and Harbour lines closed and large parts of the city immobilized. Thane district, particularly, saw large-scale violence, with the Chief Minister's Kohinoor Hotel becoming the target of Dalit fury. By the end of the fourth day the toll had gone up to 16, with one more being killed at Wardha; and mass scale arrests had resulted in 9,941 people being jailed.

THE FUNERAL

On Sunday, 13 July, roughly one lakh people attended the funeral of the 11 Dalits killed at Ramabai colony. Several platoons of the Rapid Action Force and the SRP were deployed along the funeral route. What was significant about this funeral was that no political leaders were to be seen, having already face the wrath of the masses. Even the Dalit leaders, who, as usual, tried to make their presence felt, were physically chased away. Particularly to face the wrath of the masses were the two chief Congress agents — Ramdas Athavle and R.S. Gavai. Athavle was greeted by a shower of chappals, and while trying to flee, was caught and thoroughly thrashed. He was finally rescued by the police. R.S. Gavai was also roughed up, but, pleading ill health, escaped. A tragic fate awaited the other Dalit leaders as well. Prakash Ambedkar,

together with a number of big-wigs of the Dalit movement, bolted himself inside the house of a doctor, while the masses shouted anti-leadership slogans outside. This continued for hours, and even though a police jeep was called for, and waited outside the doctor's house, the 'leaders' were too afraid to come out. It was only after the funeral procession had begun, that these 'leaders' quietly slunk out through a back door into a waiting car. Beside Prakash Ambedkar, those who crept out, included, Namdev Dhasal, Avinash Mahtekar, Arjun Dangle, Bhai Sanghare and Chandrakant Handore.

CAUSE OF THE OUTBURST

The Hindu chauvinist Sena-BJP government has been particularly casteist and communalist in its attitude. After coming to power it disbanded the Minorities Commission and withdrew all cases under the *SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act*. Then, the state government sought to segregate these sections by prescribing a different dress code (blue uniform) for the Dalit pupils, whereas white shirts and khaki shorts were prescribed for non-Dalit school children (this was withdrawn after protests). In January, this year, they sought to ban Ambedkar's photos in the courts, bypassing a ruling that only Gandhi's and Shivaji's photos will be allowed. Again, this faced strong protests. Then again no real action is ever taken on the numerous attacks on Dalits or the vandalization of Ambedkar's statues. The culprits eventually always get off scot free, which encourages them to further action. For example, in January this year, the killing of Dalit youth sparked riots in Aurangabad, while, in March, the desecration of Ambedkar's statue in Ahmednagar district led to clashes, but nowhere have the culprits been brought to book. Finally, since the government came to power, there has been a conscious slowing down of the filling up of reserved posts in the SC categories and also the huge backlog is being systematically ignored.

This, of course, is over and above the general bias against the SCs by the government and the state in spite of the growing

attacks on scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Crimes against Dalits and Adivasis in the country increased by as much as 89 percent in the 1992–94 period. Yet, in Maharashtra, of the 2,500 criminal cases filed by the SCs and STs every year only 2.6 percent result in conviction. Added to this, the elitist 'New Economic Policies' have enhanced unemployment, the ban on public sector employment and privatization have reduced the reservation policy to a joke, and the continuous attacks on slum dwellers, at the behest of the builders' lobby, have increased the all-round insecurity in the lives of Dalits. Added to all this is the growing Hindu chauvinism and, therefore, casteism, by the very state machinery itself. This trend was set by the very 'founding fathers' of this country. The Constituent Assembly refused to include any clause for the safeguard of the SCs in the Constitution (one of the reasons for Ambedkar's resignation from the ministry). While Gandhi had this to say about the caste system — 'Varnashram is inherent in human nature, and Hinduism has simply reduced it to a science.' Moreover, politically, there is no visible force consistently fighting social oppression that can give confidence to the more educated Dalit masses in Maharashtra. This has resulted in an all-round frustration where the Dalits feel economically, socially and politically cornered. The hope that the Dalits in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar have in the powerful revolutionary forces, with which they have aligned, is yet to inspire the Dalits of Maharashtra.

Even on this occasion the Sena-BJP combine has acted in a most biased and casteist manner. By announcing Rs. 1 lakh compensation (by the evening raised to Rs. 2 lakh) for those killed, and Rs. 25,000 for the injured, the government sought to buy their way out for the butchery while, at the same time, totally supporting the police firing. They actively propagated the cock and bull story dished out by the police that the firing was necessary as the people were supposedly about to set fire to two LPG tankers. The government is, in fact, doing its best to shield Inspector Kadam who ordered the firing, the same Manohar Kadam who has twice been charged in the past with violations under the SC and ST Atrocities Act.

Today, to fight on all these fronts, the Dalits need to organize themselves into a far more powerful revolutionary force rather than act through regular spontaneous outbursts, which are easily quelled by the organized might of the state.

ROLE OF THE OPPOSITION PARTIES

The Congress party, which is shedding crocodile tears over the Dalit killings, is being led by one Chhagan Bhujbal (earlier in the Shiv Sena) who had led the attacks during the agitation on the 'Riddles in Hinduism' issue in 1988. At that time, this man was at the forefront demanding a ban on Ambedkar's book, *Riddles in Hinduism*. Not only that, Vasantrao Naik, the first CM of Maharashtra, was instrumental in the formation of the Shiv Sena, and successive Chief Ministers, from Vasantdada Patil to Sharad Pawar, have actively encouraged the Shiv Sena. Also, the bureaucracy, the police and the big business in Maharashtra, particularly, Bombay, have been instrumental in its growth — all under Congress patronage.

The Janata Dal saw Ram Vilas Paswan fly in and out of Bombay, making a few pious statements, but, actually, sharpening his swords, not to fight casteism, but to settle scores with his political adversary, Laloo Prasad Yadav. All he could think of was some stunt about the renaming of the Dadar station, which is, in fact, just copying the Shiv Sena's methods of gaining popularity. Their 'social justice' slogan remained in the air, while the only concrete steps taken, have been to implement Manmohan Singh's economic policies with even greater vigour than by its original proponents. The CPI Home Minister cut an even more pathetic figure. After making a special trip to Bombay, besides making contradictory statements in the Parliament, he has shown unnecessary faith in Thackeray's assurances that such things will not be repeated. The CPM, as usual, has issued some 'strong' statements and forgotten about the issue. Neither of these revisionist parties has ever considered fighting caste oppression as important to its policy. Finally, we have the so called

Dalit party, the BSP, which has been the only party (except for the Hindu chauvinists) that has not even condemned the police firing. On the contrary, Mayawati threw the blame on the Dalits, and their lack of unity, for all that happened in Bombay. With such 'friends' to stab in the back, the Dalit movement does not really require any enemies.

And with the various Dalit factions in Maharashtra running at the tail of one or the other major political formations, they have effectively reduced the Dalit organizations to a state of paralysis. In all the major Dalit movements in Maharashtra, since the Dalit Panther movement in 1973-74, these 'leaders' have had little or no role to play. The militant Dalit Panther movement, the long drawn out Namantar Movement (which saw fierce outbreaks in 1978, and again in 1994, for changing the name of Marathwada University to Ambedkar University), then again, the Maharashtra wide protests against the banning of Ambedkar's book *Riddles in Hinduism* and now, in the present outburst, the Dalit leaders have never had any role to play. They never gave the protests an organized form, they never planned any resistance to the attacks of the fascists and/or police, they never mobilized their people or led them to fight, (except for the Dalit Mukti Sena in the initial phase of the Namantar movement), and, in fact, left them to the spontaneity of the movement, thereby, becoming easy targets of the Shiv Sena and the police. Even on this occasion, during the bandh, while the masses fought, the leaders roamed in cars with RPI flags flying, under police protection. And that is why, on each occasion, even though the Dalit masses have fought heroically, the battles have been one-sided — the deaths, the injuries, and the arrests, have all been of the Dalits, while the Shiv-Sena and police go scot-free. Of course, the fascists have the backing of the state, but that only calls for more organization, more systematic planning and the utilization of forms of struggle combined with the mass confrontations. Besides, it is a losing battle to continue the fight with stones and sticks against the armed gangs of the Shiv Sena and police.

DALIT MOVEMENT IN MAHARASHTRA AT THE CROSS-ROADS

The Dalit movement in Maharashtra has become an important vote bank in state politics, and the various parliamentary formations seek only to utilize it for their electoral games. The Dalit leaders are no different, during the struggles they are conspicuous by their absence, during elections they appear on centre-stage and that too, as political pimps of some other party, selling votes for large packets of notes. Sometimes it is for the Janata Dal, at other times for the Congress, and now even for the openly casteist BJP. It is the upper-class Dalit elite who are primarily responsible for leading the Dalit masses into this suicidal anti-Dalit electoral politics. And, in this, the BSP has proved to be the best manipulator and the most dangerously poisonous snake within the Dalit movement. It is the chief Trojan horse of the ruling classes, placed within the Dalit movement to divert their militancy into electoral channels.

But, in Maharashtra, despite the co-option of the leadership, militant struggles have again and again broken out and now the Dalit movement is at the cross roads. Besides, the New Economic Policies are leading to a polarization within the Dalit community. On the one hand are the elites, well placed in the top echelons of the state, bureaucracy and the establishment, and on the other hand are the masses of Dalits, mostly educated, but unable to find decent employment. With even the limited reservations drying up, the new generation of Dalits face a bleak future. And with the growth of the Hindu chauvinist forces their own security is getting even more fragile. They are being cornered from all sides. This polarization is reflected politically, with the established leadership, representing the upper and middle strata of Dalits, seeking compromise and adjustment with the ruling cliques, while the masses are left betrayed and leaderless. It is this sense of betrayal that burst out in anger during the funeral.

But the agony of the Dalits cannot find answers within the framework of establishment politics. The movement is only going round and round in circles, whether the unity of self-seeking

leaders, or a V.P. Singh or Ram Vilas Paswan, or a Kanshi Ram, or an Arun Gawli, or any of those hundreds of self professed Dalit leaders who bask in the glory of ruling class pay-offs, it makes little difference. None really attacks caste oppression at its roots, none stands for the smashing of the caste system, as all are merely interested in the electoral game, in the Dalit vote bank and in filling their coffers.

But if the Dalit movement is to break out of these shackles and advance, if it is to hit telling blows at the Shiv Sena type Hindu fascists, if it is to confront the police more effectively, and, most important, if it is to achieve real self-respect and a decent life — it must come out of the confines of the politics of servility, the decadence of parliamentary semantics and the importance of social reformism. The time has come to stop receiving blows, but, rather, to give them. The fascists are sharpening their swords and so is the state. Hardly has the sound of the bullets died down, when the Shiv Sena has begun rallying 'Hindu Dalits' (taking out a *jatra* from Kalaram Mandir, Nasik) with an aim of pitting them against the neo-Buddhists, who are the main force in the present Dalit movement. It is a new strategy to use Dalits to kill other Dalits.

Each round of the battle needs to be followed by systematic organization and preparations for the next round. Ambedkar, in his time, was a social reformer whose activity, to some extent, contributed to the weakening of the caste system in Maharashtra. But his constitutionalism, his faith in achieving change within the framework of the system, and his reformism, restricted the movement from developing further. No doubt, Ambedkar gave Dalits that self-respect which had been destroyed and mutilated by centuries of untouchability. But mere self-respect is not sufficient to fight that gigantic system on which casteism breeds and gains sustenance. If the Dalit movement is to advance, it must reject the limitations of Ambedkarism, reject the trammels of constitutionalism, non-violence, sectarian politics and electoral stultification, and must weld itself into a revolutionary force in order to achieve a new bright future.

Already, in actual practice, each round of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra has gone farther beyond the confines of Ambedkarism. The Dalit Panthers proclaimed Indian Independence as fake, observed 15 August as Black Day, boycotted the by-elections and openly called upon Dalits to retaliate caste oppression with violence. The Namantar movement spoke of a 'Dalit Liberation Army,' a 'Long March' and a violent struggle for achieving its aims. Further, in the 'Riddles' agitation, as well as in the present upsurge, totally extra-constitutional methods and violent forms were adopted. However, after each spontaneous outburst, the movement has returned to being reigned by the ruling classes and their agents within the Dalit movement.

Nonetheless, the present upsurge in the Dalit movement is not confined to Maharashtra alone. In Karnataka, over the last few months, there has been a spurt in the number of clashes, with feudal elements of the upper castes (Lingayats and Gowdas) taking an offensive against the Dalits, very often utilizing the backward caste elements in the clashes. But, significantly, in all these areas, the Dalits have been fighting back. The most militant outbreaks have, in fact, taken place in Tamil Nadu. Here, feudal upper-caste elements have ganged up with the DMK government and the police to launch massive attacks on the Dalits. Over the last year, a number of Dalits have been killed and hundreds are languishing in jail. Here too, the Dalits have been continuously betrayed by the establishment parties, including the DMK and the AIADMK, and have now taken the initiative in their own hands. During the 6 August rally, organized by the Devendakula Vellalar Federation (DVF), and supported by the Vanniyars' organization, the PMK, the police took into preventive custody one lakh Dalits, many of whom were local level activists, disrupted rail traffic from the south, and detained 2,000 vehicles proceeding for the rally. Even the High Court, while granting permission, introduced such stringent conditions on the rally that the so-called 'freedom of assembly' was made to look ridiculous. At the rally, where the police thrice outnumbered the procession, the leaders warned of a

liberation struggle if the government does not set free, by 14 August, all the Dalits arrested over the past few months, under the National Security Act and the Goonda Act.

Thus, while the Dalit masses have been fighting for their rights, the upper class Dalit leadership and their parties have stayed aloof. The polarization within the community is deepening, the gap between the haves and the have-nots amongst them is widening and the contradiction between the masses of Dalits and their leadership is sharpening. The Dalits are beginning to realize who their real friends are and who are their enemies. The time has come to throw off the shackles that tie them to this decadent system, to break free from the self seeking 'leaders' and march forward with a revolutionary confidence, to build a new social order, free from exploitation, oppression and the inhuman caste system.

Dalit Fury Scorches Maharashtra
Gruesome Massacre of Dalits

Marx's famous phrase, 'people make history,' was witnessed this past one month in Maharashtra, when the Dalits rose as one to protest against the gruesome killings of four Dalits in Khairlanji village. It is a fact that it is the people who develop the tactics and that the revolutionaries must learn from them. The manner in which the protests in Maharashtra spread, the determination and fury of the masses, as the movement built itself up over the period, the focus in the targets of their attacks, were not planned, but they point to how the people have devised their own methods to express their protests. While Surekha Bhotmange, her teenaged daughter Priyanka, and sons Roshan and Sudhir were killed on 29 September, the protests began in the first week of November, as the realization came that the entire case was being suppressed by the police and political authorities to protect the perpetrators of the crime. As the casteist nature of the police and the government revealed itself over the days, the masses pressed their protests forward, sparing none, not their opportunist, compromising leaders, nor the corrupt

This article, under the pseudonym Avanti, was published in the January 2007 issue of the *People's March*.

Dalit officials who were also party to the cover-up. It was as if the protests rose from the depths of their beings, their frustrations at the casteist oppression that they continue to face in daily life, and the lack of economic opportunities in a 'globalizing India,' in spite of their struggle to educate themselves and their children. Young school educated youth and women were at the forefront of the protests. Neither the large forces of the police nor the Rapid Action Force could stop them. They faced arrest only to be back on the streets the next day. The Maharashtra government was simply unable to stop these protests, although it tried strong repression and disinformation. The appeals of the established Dalit leaders and the Buddhist clergy to use peaceful means fell on deaf ears. Although comprising only 10 percent of the population of the state, the Dalit masses proved their strength and capacity to paralyze the entire economic life of the state.

The Maharashtra government has unleashed its repression on the masses. Hundreds have been arrested, the police have resorted to firings and lathi-charges at innumerable places, combing operations have been conducted in various *bastis* in the different cities in the state, hundreds of youth have been detained. They have even imposed sedition cases on some of them, as if protesting against casteist violence is equal to an attempt to overthrow the state. Indeed the Brahminical Indian state really is fearful of the militancy of the Dalit masses. They have prevented all *morchas* planned by the people if there is even a whiff of militancy. The Long March from Nagpur to Khairlanji was, thus, forcibly stopped.

But it was to prevent the march to the Vidhan Sabha in Nagpur on 4 December that the state government pulled out all the forces in its arsenal. Nagpur was converted into a police camp with ten thousand special police, including the Rapid Action Force, deployed all over the city to ensure that the march would not take place. All the Dalit leaders were detained. Trucks from villages were turned back and people were not allowed to leave their villages. The Dalit masses in the bastis in Nagpur were imprisoned in their homes. Repeatedly, the government has been

saying that all the demands of the masses have been met and that now there should be no agitation. The government's crass undemocratic approach is exposed before all. So the government now decides when the people should agitate and when they should not. They decide whether the demands of the masses have been met or not.

Nonetheless, the assertion of the masses was so strong that even Sonia Gandhi had to cut short her trip and the Maharashtra CM had to rush back from Singapore to do damage control.

THE INCIDENT

Four members of the Bhotmange family — mother Surekha, daughter Priyanka (19), son Sudhir (17), working in a town nearby, and son Roshan (18), visually challenged — a Mahar Buddhist family residing in the village Khairlanji, were murdered in full view of the entire village on 29 September 2006. The two women were dragged out of their house by some women from the peasant OBC families of the village and taken to the centre of the village near the Panchayat office. On the way they were beaten and their clothes torn in the process. Once there, they were tied to a bullock cart, stripped and beaten, and their private parts injured with blunt weapons. The two sons rushed to their defence but they too were caught and thrashed and plummeted around like footballs. The women were molested and gang-raped and the boys asked to rape their mother and sister in full view of the village. When they refused their private parts were crushed. In this gruesome drama that was enacted for almost two hours all the four died on the spot. Their mutilated bodies were then thrown into a canal more than two kilometres away from the village. The father, Bhaiyyalal Bhotmange, who was in the fields when this attack began, came back to the village and witnessed the entire horrifying event by hiding himself. He crawled away to the neighbouring village to inform his people about this incident. Two other Dalit families in the village also realized what was happening but hid themselves in their houses out of fear.

WHAT CAUSED THIS GRUESOME MASS KILLING?

The incident is a reflection of the horrifying conditions in rural Maharashtra, where semi-feudal relations still prevail, and caste prejudices, lack of development, concentration of land and land hunger have led to severe contradictions that simmer under the surface and burst out in this and other ways occasionally. It is a reflection of what the Dalits face when they assert themselves through acquiring education and a burning desire for equality. The Bhotmange family had migrated to this village in 1988 because they got about five acres of land to cultivate. They struggled on the land and dreamt of educating their children. Sudhir managed to become a graduate, Priyanka was studying in the 12th standard, Roshan was blind but he was also studying. Priyanka had been a merit student in the 10th standard, was an NCC cadet and a student of political science and sociology. Surekha Bhotmange was the driving force in the family.

They had gotten into a conflict with neighbour Shivshankar Atilkar and his family, over access through their land to his land. He wanted to drive his tractor through their land, which they refused. This had led to a dispute and police complaints in 2002. Through the mediation of Siddharth Gajbhiye, a relative of Surekha and police *patil* of the nearby village Dhusala, the Bhotmanges had agreed to allow 15 feet of land for a road. Gajbhiye, also a Dalit, was a better off farmer who also sometimes employed women from the OBC castes to work in his fields. The other peasant families, most of them from the OBC Kalar, Powar and Kunbi castes, could not stomach the struggle of these two Dalit families to come up economically, and their confidence and self assertion. Caste prejudices were manifest openly in many other ways in the village. Bhaiyyalal Bhotmange has said that they faced caste oppression all through their stay in this village. Priyanka was the only girl in the village to study beyond school level. In a village of about 800, with 125 families, there were only three Dalit families.

On 3 September Siddharth was beaten up by some villagers in Khairlanji over a dispute concerning agricultural wage payment. He was openly abused in his caste name. When he went to lodge a complaint in the Andhalgaon police station he was chased away. He admitted himself into a hospital in Kamptee town where the doctors insisted he register a police complaint. A case was registered days later and Surekha gave evidence in this, naming several villagers. However, the accused were released on bail immediately on 29 September. As soon as they were released they took their tractors, etc., and headed straight for Siddharth Gajbhiye's house. Not finding him at home they returned to their village. A meeting was held in the village square and the crowd, then, proceeded to the Bhotmange house, to punish them for standing witness. Thus, Surekha and her children became the targets of the attack.

All attempts to bring the police initially came to naught. In spite of having been informed they deliberately delayed coming. Only when the first body was found on 1 October did the police started moving. Even then they claimed that the bodies were unrecognized. Various lower level policemen and police officials have now been suspended. Even the doctors who conducted the postmortem were suspended after the pressure of the agitation built up. Among those suspended (including the Assistant Police Prosecutor, Leela Gajbhiye) some are Dalits themselves. Money played a big role in slowing down the police investigations and weakening the charges. But now investigations have brought the whole matter into the open. As revealed in the report filed by the government institute Yashada, there was a conspiracy from the beginning to suppress the facts, wipe out the evidence and downplay the crime. The local BJP MLA, as well as the IG Police, Pankaj Gupta (special IG, in charge of anti-Naxalite operations), are both involved in this conspiracy. All of them, with a blatantly casteist approach, tried to spread disinformation and fudge the evidence. The Maharashtra government and Home Minister R.R. Patil (NCP) also tried hard to protect the real culprits and hide this conspiracy. The *Sarpanch* and the *Up-Sarpanch* of the village, who were personally present through the entire attack, were arrested only at the end of November.

They spread the rumour that Surekha had an extra-marital affair with Gajbhiye and that the village women objected to this and thus attacked them. That this rumour is still being kept alive, in spite of all the facts having come to light, is evident from a 27 November article in the *Hindustan Times*, written by correspondent Sarita Kaushik. It has also been said that the Bhotmanges sold liquor and that this was objected to by the villagers. Thus, in true patriarchal fashion, there was an attempt to justify the murders by maligning the character of a bold and unbending woman like Surekha. Nonetheless, in the beginning of November the incident became an issue and protests began. As the protests picked up momentum, all the disinformation and the conspiracies came to be exposed one by one. Only through the determined struggle of the Dalit masses could part of the truth behind the incident and the killings be unearthed. The main culprits, the instigators and manipulators, the BJP and NCP politicians are, however, still at large.

THE PROTESTS

The first major protest, a 1000 strong *morcha* in Bhandara, on the first of November 2006, was organized by the Dalit women's front, the Samrudha Baudha Mahila Sangathana. Many democratic forces, including women from other sections, also participated in this protest. Then, on 6 November, the protests spread to Nagpur, where the Dalit Buddhists constitute a sizeable section of the poor and even the middle class. Spontaneously, the youth and the women came out into the streets, attacking police stations, police vehicles, burning tyres, and the house of Congress MLA Nitin Raut. Various symbols of the government and the police were targeted. The protests began in the Indora area and then spread to all the other areas where Dalit Buddhists are concentrated. For several days Nagpur was aflame. The police started picking up activists indiscriminately. The youth went around holding corner meetings, staging plays, putting up posters and distributing handbills. The mood among the masses was to reject the established

Dalit leadership and press their protests forward. There was no organized force behind this protest but the masses revealed their creativity, fearlessness and capacity to struggle. Thus, the call for the Long March to Khairlanji, starting on 12 November, was given. The people rallied around this call, even as the state's repressive administration swung into action to prevent the march. Women, in large numbers, courted arrest when they were not allowed to hold the march.

All efforts by the people to reach Khairlanji have been forcibly thwarted by the police. The village itself is under siege. Three police barricades have been put up to pass in order to reach the village.

As news of these protests spread the agitation picked up in other towns and cities. The entire month of November saw Maharashtra reverberating with the sound of protest. On 8 November the *morcha* to the *Mantralaya* gave a rude shock to the Chief Minister and the Home Minister, sending their precious security into a frenzy. As the Chief Minister was addressing a Cabinet meeting, a group of about 50 women, belonging to various Dalit women's organizations, including Urmila Pawar (a Dalit woman intellectual), managed to sneak into the Mantralaya and stormed into the office of the Chief Minister shouting slogans. *Bandhs* were observed in various towns and big villages in Bhandara and Gondia districts. Pandharakwada and Yavatmal were also rocked by protests. Over 15,000 people participated in a protest march in Chandrapur on 13 November. The protest then spread to Amravati. On 14 November, a spontaneously planned morcha turned into a mammoth march of 20,000 as the Dalits responded to the call in large numbers. It was the first major protest in the town and became a means to release their pent up anger. The police resorted to lathi-charge and firing and one Dalit youth, Dinesh Wankhede, was martyred by the police bullets, while several others were seriously injured. The people targeted police vehicles and some private cars to register their anger and several policemen were injured in this agitation. The police firing and the death of one youth in

Amravati sparked off further protests and led to an intensification of the agitation in other districts.

The people have been demanding the resignation of the Home Minister and the Chief Minister. The Home Minister had the gall to state in a police function in Pune that the agitation was being conducted in a 'Hitlerite fashion.' As reports of this speech spread, the Home Minister also became a target of the people's protest. Curfews were clamped in Sholapur, Aurangabad and Pune to stop the agitations. But even the lathi-charges and firing (in the air) could not subdue the people.

After the firing in Amravati, the capital city, Mumbai, came under a wave of protests. It started with a huge protest morcha in Chembur and spread to the outlying suburbs like Ambarnath, Ulhasnagar, Karjat, Kalyan, Bhiwandi, Badlapur and Navi Mumbai. These towns have witnessed repeated protest demonstrations and there has been at least one bandh call being given in one suburb or the other every day for over a fortnight now. In every locality and suburb in major cities like Pune, Mumbai and Navi Mumbai local organizations have got together and protested in whatever form they could. Those with less strength organized *dharnas* while others organized morchas and still others bandhs. It was a good lesson in how sprawling metropolises can be made to feel the impact of the people's voice. Protests engulfed cities like Nanded, Parbhani and other towns in the interior of the state.

Sensing the mood of the people, and their leadership slipping away, the ever squabbling Dalit leaders of the various factions of the Republican Party of India came together to salvage their leadership. *Mahamorchas* were organized in Kolhapur, Satara and Sangli. The leaders began to make plans for a morcha to the Vidhan Sabha on 4 December, the first day of the assembly.

This year being the fiftieth anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, big functions have been organized in Dalit localities. Ambedkar's rejection of Hinduism and his conversion to Buddhism led to a wave to conversions in the state and all the Buddhists in the state are Dalits. The deep sentiment and the faith that the people have in this symbolic rejection of the

caste-based Hindu religion makes them mark this event widely. The Buddhist clergy and the leadership of Buddhist organizations (some funded from Japan and Thailand), too, have been active this year to commemorate the occasion. This leadership tried their very best but could not make the masses stay within the bounds of the law and restrict their protests to peaceful marches and dharnas. In some areas this Buddhist clergy itself came under repression, such as in Nanded, where they were brutally lathi-charged.

The efforts of the police top brass to malign the movement by claiming that it is a result of naxalite conspiracy and, thus, justify their repression came to naught. They attempted, to frighten the people into silence in this manner. But the masses gave them a fitting retort. From 8 November itself, after violent protests began in Nagpur, the Home Minister and the IG Pankaj Gupta had begun this misinformation campaign.

The 30 November incident of the desecration of the Ambedkar statue in Kanpur again proved to be a spark that led to a fresh round of protests. The suburbs of Pune exploded. Pimpri, Chinchwad, Dapodi and Khadki erupted as the fury of the masses knew no bounds. All vehicular traffic came to a halt, and so did train traffic. The nerve centre of the industry and IT — the Pune-Mumbai belt was also affected. Mumbai and Thane came to a halt. More than 200 buses of the public transport were damaged and the prestigious Deccan Queen train from Pune to Mumbai was halted near Ulhasnagar and set on fire. The protesters, though, took the trouble to empty the entire train and escort the engine driver to safety before setting fire to the train. Stone pelting and *rasta/rail rokos* were reported from every nook and corner of the city. Police firing also took place in Bandra. Curfew was imposed in parts of Nanded, Osmanabad and Pune. In Aurangabad clashes took place between the Dalit crowd and the police, resulting in the police firing in the air (a sub-inspector was injured). In Nasik 100 buses were damaged and one Dalit was killed by casteist upper-caste mobs for stone-pelting. In Pune the Dalit fury was intense and here too 100 buses were damaged. The struggle was anti-state

and every symbol of the state has come under attack, whether public transport, or police vehicles. Intense agitations also took place in most towns of Maharashtra including far-away Sholapur, Osmanabad and Latur. The agitation, thus, also spread to districts that had been relatively silent.

RESPONSE OF THE PARTIES

The BJP/Shiv Sena and Congress combine, together with the entire state machinery, was entirely against the Dalits and outright casteist in their approach. The state was so corrupted with its casteist bias that even though many of the policemen and doctors involved in the case were themselves Dalits they sided with the powerful and acted at their behest. Ironically, many of those against whom action (suspension) has now been taken are Dalits themselves. All the other ruling class parties only lent lip-support to the Dalits. The Dalit leaders have long been discredited amongst the Dalits and the agitations were totally spontaneous with no leaders to be seen. In fact, the rulers were wailing that there were no leaders around to pacify the situation. In a bid to rebuild their credibility on the eve of the Nagpur Assembly some of them were arrested.

In fact, it was only the Maoists who lent full and open support to the Dalits and called a Vidarbha bandh on this and the farmers' suicides issue on 8 December. The press reported that the bandh was particularly successful in Nagpur and Yavatmal districts, as also in Gadchiroli, Chandrapur and Bhandara.

In a press release on 10 November itself, the Maharashtra State Committee of the CPI (Maoist) issued a statement saying:

> The CPI (Maoist) Maharashtra State Committee strongly condemns the casteist attack on and massacre of the members of the Bhotmange family in Khairlanji village of Bhandara district on September 29, 2006. We also condemn the stand of the state government which has done its best to shield the perpetrators of this massacre for the past one month and is instead launching a campaign of repression against the Dalit masses who have protested strongly against this massacre and the inaction of the government.

The Khairlanji carnage throws up the extent of casteism that still exists amongst all the major political parties and also the entire state machinery. This too in a state that boasts of a powerful Dalit movement against caste oppression and untouchability. But the fierceness of the Dalit response is also an indication of the enormous revolutionary potential of the Dalit masses. They are not willing to take targeted attacks meekly and are prepared to fight back. At least in Maharashtra they have long since thrown off the yoke of their corrupt leaders and are searching for an alternative. This alternative lies with the Maoists who alone are able to fight not only all the manifestations of casteism and its horrifying form in untouchability but also eradicate it from its roots by destroying the very basis from which it emerges — the semi-feudal base and the feudal culture. It is they who are at the forefront fighting both class and caste exploitation and oppression and it is only a matter of time before the Dalits realize where their true emancipation lies.

Mahars as Landholders

This is a late response to the points raised by Gopal Guru in his review *'One Dimensional View of the Dalit Movement'* (14 January). I saw the review only recently. My comments pertain to the points raised by Guru and not to the book by Jayshree Gokhale under review.

I agree with many of the points made by Guru with reference to the Mahar elite, its formation and its role. But he has made one assertion which I think is exaggerated. Guru states that in the Nagpur region landholdings of the Mahars are larger than those of the upper castes. From our experience in Vidarbha, I do not think this is correct. It is a fact that Mahars in the Nagpur region, as compared to Mahars in other parts of the state, own more land. It is also a fact that the Mahar elite possesses substantial landholdings in the region and in particular villages Mahar families own more land than the upper castes. But, on the whole, the Kunbis and the Telis are the main landholding castes (and, in specific areas, the Pawars, Malis, Kirads, etc.). They are the dominant agricultural castes in rural Vidarbha, including the Nagpur region. Also, even the old landed Brahmin families have tried to retain important portions of their lands in the region.

Extracted from Letters to the Editor, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30(29): 1814 (22 July 1995).

Another point that is significant in the context of Vidarbha is the relation of the Dalit elite to the revolutionary movement that has developed among the tribals, especially, the Gonds, in the past one decade. While the poorer, militant Dalits are drawn towards the revolutionary movement, the Dalit political elite is extremely active in preventing any collaboration with the tribal movement. Further, many senior government and police officers who are Mahars are posted in this region. As an influential section of the Mahar elite, they are also involved in driving a wedge between the struggling tribals and the urban Dalit masses, but this may often be out of a need to preserve their jobs, although not in all cases. Thus, the unity of the toiling masses and the growth of a wide democratic consciousness have definitely suffered as a result.

Section 2

Women

Introduction

A large number of Anuradha Ghandy's writings were devoted to the women's movement — both theoretical analyses of the different streams and approaches, as well as in-depth reports and assessments of the revolutionary women's movement with which she was directly associated.

In this section, we present some of the articles written by her on women's struggles and women's' liberation. No doubt, a few of them deal with topics like feminist trends, rape laws or women and Hindutva, which have been extensively written about by other women researchers and activists. However, Anu presents these issues from a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist viewpoint, and from the perspective of an activist directly involved in organizing women, rather than merely from an academic standpoint.

In addition to presenting the radical perspective on these themes, Anu also authored a detailed paper on 'Trends in Feminism' which was published as a booklet by the People's March publications. This paper was exceedingly useful to numerous activists and students who neither have the access nor the time to go through the huge number of books on this theme. But it was not merely an academic exercise, for it also presented a clear revolutionary standpoint for the women's movement in India, one that has proved to be an invaluable guide to those in the world of social change and activism.

The other articles on history of the women's struggle have highlighted the revolutionary women's struggle in India. Briefly tracing the history of women's participation in armed struggle during the anti-colonial movement, through the Telengana, Naxalbari and Srikakulam struggles, the articles paint a vivid picture of the organizations that are involved in mobilizing women, especially tribal women, in the rural areas and forests of Dandakaranya and some of the movements they have led. Other writings in this section too provide detailed and intimate insights into different facets of these movements, providing an invaluable picture of what is actually happening behind the indirect news blackout from these areas as a result of brutal state repression.

In all her writings, Anu addresses the important question of the relation between the women's movement and the movement for a revolutionary transformation of society. She emphasizes the importance of breaking the shackles of both feudalism and imperialism that bind down women and society as well.

In some of the other writings in this section, Anu also addresses the criticism made by many academics and NGOs that the Naxalite movement is a patriarchal one. She points out how the very act of joining the revolutionary women's movement is one of defying patriarchy, of rejecting the traditional role of daughter, mother, wife, that society has carved out for women, and that this is the very movement that can really smash patriarchy. In these articles she has also emphasized that the growth of the guerilla movement itself has acted as a fillip for the women's movement. It is here that the innumerable talents of multi-faceted women have flowered, from writing songs, nursing the struggling community to commanding military formations. By resisting the domestic pressures and facing the brutal torture and repression of the state machinery, women have displayed their strength. She also describes how the tribal women have tried to challenge the internal patriarchy of their communities and though they have faced resistance from the elders, the party has supported this anti-patriarchal struggle to the full.

Many of these writings draw on the experiences of the revolutionary women's movement in Andhra Pradesh and the forest stretch called Dandakaranya, areas with which Anu was most directly in contact with. They constitute not just theory, or empirical reports, but represent the evolution of a clear-cut perspective on the women's movement through study and practical experiences. It was a perspective that had eluded the revolutionary communist movement in India for many decades, and one that Anu, perhaps the senior-most Maoist woman leader at the time of her death, had played an important role in developing.

Later, Anu spent long periods with the Nari Mukti Sangh in Jharkhand and Bihar, which had been working with a similar revolutionary perspective for many years. In fact it was with these tribal women that Anu spent her last days before the fatal malaria attack that took her life and deprived us of any further insights into the women's movement that she would have gleaned from her experiences there.

Philosophical Trends in the Feminist Movement

Internationally, one of the most remarkable developments in the capitalist era has been that of the emergence and growth of the women's movement. For the first time in human history women came out collectively to demand their rights, their place under the sun. The emancipation of women from centuries of oppression became an urgent and immediate question. The movement threw up theoretical analyses and solutions to women's oppression were put forth. The women's movement has challenged the present patriarchal, exploitative society, both through its activities and through its theories.

It is not that women were earlier unaware of their oppression. In fact, they articulated this oppression in various ways — through folk songs, pithy idioms and poems, paintings and other forms of art to which they had access. They raved against the injustice that they had to suffer. They interpreted and re-interpreted the myths and the epics to express their viewpoint. The various versions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, for example, still in circulation among rural women through songs in various parts of India, are a vivid testimony to this. The feudal period saw the emergence

First published as a booklet brought out by *People's March* in 2006.

of some remarkable women who sought out ways, through the means available at the time, and became symbols of resistance to the patriarchal set-up. Meerabai, the saint, is only one example among many such who left a lasting impact on society. This is true for all the societies in the world. This was a counter-culture, reflecting the consciousness of the oppressed. However, it was limited by circumstances and unable to find a way out, a path to end the oppression. In most cases, the solution was sought in religion, or a personal God.

The development of capitalism brought about a tremendous change in social conditions and thought. The concept of democracy meant that people became important. Liberalism, as a social and political philosophy, led the charge in its early phase. Women from the progressive social classes came forward as a collective. Thus, for the first time in history, a women's movement emerged that demanded from society their rights and emancipation. This movement has, like all other social movements, had its flows and ebbs. The impact of capitalism, however constricted and distorted in colonies like India, did inspire progressive men and women. A women's movement in India emerged in the first part of the 20th century. It was a part of this international ferment and yet rooted in the contradictions of Indian society. The theories that emerged in capitalist countries found their way to India and were applied to Indian conditions. The same is true in an even more acute way in the context of the contemporary women's movement that arose in the late 1960s in the West.

The contemporary women's movement has posed many more challenges before society because the limits of capitalism in its imperialist phase are now nakedly clear. It had taken much struggle to gain formal legitimacy for the demand for equality. And even after that, equality still remained unrealized not just in the backward countries, but even in advanced capitalist countries like the USA and France. The women's movement now looked for the roots of oppression in the very system of society itself. They analyzed the system of patriarchy and sought its origins in history. They grappled with the social sciences and showed up the male

bias inherent in them. They exposed how a patriarchal way of thinking colored all analyses regarding women's role in history and in contemporary society. Women have a history; women are in history they said (Gerda Lerner). From a study of history they retrieved the contributions that women had made to the development of human society, to major movements and struggles. They also exposed the gender-based division of labour under capitalism that relegated an overwhelming majority of women to the least skilled, lowest paid categories. They exposed the way in which the ruling classes, especially the capitalist class, had economically gained from patriarchy. They exposed the patriarchal bias of the state, its laws and regulations. The feminists analyzed the symbols and traditions of a given society and showed how they perpetuated the patriarchal system. The feminists gave importance to the oral tradition and thus were able to bring to the surface the voice of the women that had been suppressed throughout history. The movement forced men and women to look critically at their own attitudes and thoughts, their actions and words regarding women. The movement challenged the various patriarchal, anti-women attitudes that tainted even progressive and revolutionary movements and affected women's participation in them. Notwithstanding the theoretical confusions and weaknesses, the feminist movement has contributed significantly to our understanding of the women's question in the present day world. The worldwide movement for democracy and socialism has been enriched by the women's movement.

One of the important characteristics of the contemporary women's movement has been the effort made by the feminists to theorize on the condition of women. They have entered into the field of philosophy in order to give a philosophical foundation to their analysis and approach. Women sought philosophies of liberation and grappled with various philosophical trends which they felt could give a vision to their struggle. Various philosophical trends like Existentialism, Marxism, Anarchism, and Liberalism were all studied and adopted by active women in the movement in the U.S. and then in England. Thus, the feminists are an eclectic

group who include a diverse range of approaches, perspectives and frameworks depending on the philosophical trend they adopt. Yet they share a commitment to give voice to women's experiences and to end their subordination. Given the hegemony of the West, these trends have had a strong influence on the women's movement within India too. Hence, a serious study of the women's movement must include an understanding of the various theoretical trends in the movement.

Feminist philosophers have been influenced by philosophers as diverse as Locke, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Derrida, Nietzsche and Freud. Yet most of them have concluded that traditional philosophy is male-biased, its major concepts and theories, its own self-understanding reveals 'a distinctively masculine way of approaching the world' (Alison Jagger). Hence, they have made efforts to transform traditional philosophy.

Keeping this background in mind we have undertaken to present some of the main philosophical trends among feminists. One point to take note of is that these various trends are not fixed and separate. Some feminists have opposed these categories. Some have changed their approach over time; some can be seen to have a mix of two or more trends. Yet, to develop an understanding, these broad trends can be useful. But before discussing the theories, we will begin with a very brief account of the development of the women's movement in the West, especially the U.S. This is necessary in order to understand the theoretical developments among feminists.

OVERVIEW OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN THE WEST

The women's movement in the West is divided into two phases. The first phase arose in the mid-19th century and lasted until the 1920s, while the second phase began in the 1960s. The first phase is known for the suffragette movement or the movement of women for their political rights, i.e., the right to vote. The women's movement arose in the context of the growth of capitalism and the spread of a democratic ideology. It arose in the context of other

social movements that emerged at the time. In the U.S., the movements to free the black slaves and to organize the ever increasing ranks of the proletariat were an important part of the socio-political ferment of the 19th century. In the 1830s and 1840s the abolitionists (those campaigning for the abolition of slavery) included some educated women who braved social opposition to campaign to free the blacks from slavery. Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan Anthony, Angeline Grimke were among the women active in the anti-slavery movement, who later also became active in the struggle for women's political rights. But the opposition within the anti-slavery organizations to women representing them and to women in leadership forced them to think about their own status in society and their own rights. In the U.S., women in various states, started getting together to demand their right to common education with men and for married women's rights to property and divorce. The Seneca Falls Convention, organized by Stanton, Anthony and others in 1848, proved to be a landmark in the history of the first phase of the women's movement in the U.S. They adopted a Declaration of Sentiments modelled on the Declaration of Independence, in which they demanded equal rights in marriage, property, wages and the vote. For 20 years after this convention, state-level conventions were held, and propaganda campaigns through lecture tours, pamphlets, signature petitions were conducted. In 1868, an amendment was brought to the Constitution (the 14th amendment) granting the right to vote to blacks but not to women. Stanton, Anthony and others campaigned against this amendment but were unsuccessful in preventing it. A split between the women and the abolitionists took place.

Meanwhile, the working class movement also grew, although the established trade union leadership was not interested in organizing women workers. Only the IWW supported the efforts to organize women workers who worked long hours for extremely low wages. Thousands of women worked in the garment industry. The Anarchists, Socialists and the Marxists, some of whom were women, worked among the workers and organized them. Among them were Emma Goldman, Ella Reevs Bloor, Mother Jones and

Sojourner Truth. In the 1880s, militant struggles and repression became the order of the day. Most of the suffragette leaders showed no interest in the exploitation of the workers and did not support their movement. Towards the end of the century and beginning of the 20th century, the working class women's movement developed rapidly. The high point of this was the strike of almost 40,000 women garment workers in 1909. The socialist women were very active in Europe and leading communists like Eleanor Marx, Clara Zetkin, Alexandra Kollantai, and Vera Zasulich were in the forefront of the struggle to organize working women. Thousands of working women were organized and women's papers and magazines were published. It was at the Second International Conference of Working Women in Copenhagen that Clara Zetkin, the German communist and famous leader of the international women's movement, inspired by the struggle of American women workers, moved the resolution to commemorate 8 March as 'Women's Day' at the international level.

By the end of the century, the women's situation had undergone much change in the U.S. Although they still did not have the right to vote, in the fields of education, property rights and employment they had made many gains. Hence, the demand for the vote gained respectability. The movement took a more conservative turn, separating the question of gaining the right to vote from all other social and political issues. Their main tactics were petitioning and lobbying with senators, etc. However, it became active in 1914 with the entry of Alice Paul who introduced the militant tactics of the British suffragettes, like picketing, hunger strikes, sit-ins, etc. Due to their active campaign and militant tactics the women won the right to vote in America in 1920.

The women's struggle in Britain started later than the American movement but it took a more militant turn in the beginning of the 20th century with Emmeline Pankhurst, her daughters and their supporters adopting militant tactics to draw attention to their demand, facing arrest several times to press their demand. They had formed the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903 when they got disillusioned with the style of work of the older

organizations. The WSPU spearheaded the agitation for suffrage. But they compromised with the British government when the First World War broke out in 1914. Both in the U.S. and in England the leaders of the movement were white and middle class and restricted their demand to the middle class women. It was the socialists and communist women who rejected the demand for vote limited to those with property and broadened it to include voting rights for all women, including working class women. They organized separate mass mobilizations in support of the demand for the women's right to vote. The women's movement did not continue during the period of the Depression, the rise of fascism and the world war. In the post Second World War period America saw a boom in its economy and the growth of the middle class. During the war years, women had taken up all sorts of jobs to run the economy but once the war was over they were encouraged to give up their jobs and become good housewives and mothers.

This balloon of prosperity and contentment lasted until the 1960s. Social unrest with the black civil rights movement gained ground and later the anti-war movement (against the Vietnam War) emerged. It was a period of great turmoil. The Cultural Revolution that began in China too had its impact. Political activity among university students increased and it is in this atmosphere of social and political turmoil that the women's movement once again emerged, this time initially from among the university students and faculty. Women realized that they faced discrimination in employment, in wages and, overall, in the way they were treated in society. The consumerist ideology also came under attack. Although Simone de Beauvoir had written *The Second Sex* in 1949 itself, its full impact was felt only now. Betty Friedan had written *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. The book became extremely popular. She initiated the National Organization of Women in 1966 to fight against the discrimination women faced and to struggle for the Equal Rights Amendment. But the autonomous women's movement (radical feminist movement) emerged from within the student movement that had leftist leanings. Black students in the Student Non-Violent Coordination Council (SNCC) (which

campaigned for civil rights for blacks) threw out the white men and women students at the Chicago Convention in 1968, on the grounds that only blacks would struggle for black liberation. Similarly, the idea that women's liberation is women's struggle gained ground.

In this context, women members of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) demanded that women's liberation be a part of the national council in their June 1968 convention. But they were hissed and voted down. Many of these women walked out and formed the WRAP (Women's Radical Action Project) in Chicago. Women within the New University Conference (NUC — a national level body of university students, staff and faculty who wanted a socialist America) formed a Women's Caucus. Marlene Dixon and Naomi Wisstein from Chicago were leading members in this. Shulamith Firestone and Pamela Allen began similar activity in New York and formed the New York Radical Women (NYRW). All of them rejected the liberal view that changes in the law and an equal rights amendment would solve women's oppression and believed that the entire structure of society has to be transformed. Hence they called themselves radical. They came to hold the opinion that mixed groups and parties (men and women) like the socialist party, SDS, New Left would not be able to take the struggle for women's liberation forward and a women's movement, autonomous from all parties, was needed. The NYRW's first public action was the protest against the Miss America beauty contest which brought the fledgling women's movement into national prominence. A year later, the NYWR divided into the Redstockings and the WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell). The Redstockings issued their manifesto in 1969 and in this their position of radical feminism was clearly presented for the first time.

> ... [W]e identify the agents of our oppression as men. Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination. All other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are extensions of male supremacy: men dominate women, a few men dominate the rest...

'Sisterhood is Powerful' and 'The Personal is Political' became their slogans which gained wide popularity.

Meanwhile, the SDS issued its position paper on Women's Liberation in December 1968. This was debated by women from various points of view. Kathy McAfee and Myrna Wood wrote *Bread and Roses* to signify that the struggle cannot be solely against the economic exploitation of capitalism ('Bread') but must also be against the psychological and social oppression that women faced ('Roses'). These debates that were carried out in the various journals produced by the women's groups that emerged in this period were taken seriously and influenced the course and trends within the women's movement, not only in U.S. but in other countries as well. The groups mainly took the form of small circles for consciousness raising and non-hierarchal structure. In this way, the socialist feminist and the radical feminist trends within the women's movement emerged. They raised questions and brought many aspects of women's oppression out into the open. *It must be noted that all of these were following either the Trotskyite or Cuban socialism.*

During the later 1960s and early 1970s, in the U.S. and in Western Europe, 'different groups had different visions of revolution. There were feminist, black, anarchist, Marxist-Leninist and other versions of revolutionary politics, but the belief that revolution of one sort or another was round the corner cut across these divisions' (Barbara Epstein). The socialist (Marxist) and radical feminists shared a vision about revolution. During this first period the feminists were grappling with Marxist theory and key concepts like production, reproduction, class consciousness and labour. Both, the socialist feminists and the radical feminists, were trying to alter Marxist theory to incorporate a feminist understanding of the women's position. But, after 1975, there was a shift. Systemic analysis (of capitalism and of the entire social structure) was replaced or recast as cultural feminism.

Cultural feminism begins with the assumption that men and women are basically different. It focusses on cultural features of patriarchal oppression and primarily aims for reforms in this area. Unlike the radical and the socialist feminisms, it adamantly rejects

any critique of capitalism and emphasizes upon patriarchy as the root of women's oppression and veers towards separatism. In the late 1970s and 1980s, lesbian feminism emerged as one current within the feminist movement. At the same time, 'women of color' (Black women, third world women in the advanced capitalist countries) raised criticism about the ongoing feminist movement and began to articulate their versions of feminism. Organizations among working class women for equal treatment at the workplace, child care, etc., also started growing. That the feminist movement had been restricted to white, middle class, educated women in advanced capitalist countries, and was focusing on issues primarily of their concern, had become obvious. This gave rise to global or multicultural feminism. In the third world countries women's groups also became active, but all the issues were not necessarily 'purely' women's issues. Violence against women has been a major issue, especially rape, but alongside there have been issues that emerged from exploitation due to colonialism and neo-colonialism, poverty and exploitation by landlords, peasant issues, displacement, apartheid and many other such problems that were important in their own countries. In the early 1990s postmodernism became influential among feminists.

In the 1980s, right-wing conservative backlash against feminism grew, focusing its opposition to the feminist struggle for abortion rights. They also attacked feminism for destroying the family, emphasizing the importance of women's role in the family. Yet, the feminist perspective spread wide as countless activist groups and social and cultural projects at the grassroots grew and continued to be active. Women's studies too spread widely. Health care and environment issues have been the focus of attention of many of these groups. Many leading feminists were absorbed in academic jobs. At the same time, many of the major organizations and caucuses have become large institutions which run with their own staff and are like any established bureaucratic institution. Activism declined. In the 1990s, the feminist movement has come to be known more from the activities of these organizations and the writings of feminists in the academic realm. 'Feminism has

become more an idea than a movement, and one that lacks the visionary quality it once had,' wrote Barbara Epstein in the Monthly Review (May 2001). In the 1990s, the increasing gap between the economic condition of the working class and oppressed minorities and the middle classes, the continuing gender inequality, increasing violence against women, the onslaught of globalization and its impact on people, especially women in the third world, has led to a renewed interest in Marxism. At the same time the participation of women, especially young women, in a range of political movements, as is evident in the anti-globalization and anti-war movements, has shown that women are politically active.

With this brief overview of the development of the women's movement in the West we will now analyze the propositions of the main theoretical trends within the feminist movement.

LIBERAL FEMINISM

Liberal feminist thought has enjoyed a long history in the 18th and 19th centuries, with thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97), Harriet Taylor Mill (1807–58), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) arguing for the rights of women on the basis of the liberal philosophical understanding. The movement for equal rights to women, especially the struggle for the right to vote, was primarily based on liberal thought. Earlier liberal political philosophers, like John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau, who had argued for the rule of reason and the equality of all, did not include women in their understanding of those deserving of equality, particularly political equality. They failed to apply their liberal theory to the position of women in society.

The values of liberalism, including the core belief in the importance and autonomy of the individual, developed in the 17th century. It emerged with the development of capitalism in Europe in opposition to feudal patriarchal values based on inequality. It was the philosophy of the rising bourgeoisie. The feudal values were based on the belief of the inherent superiority of the elite — especially, the monarchs; the rest were subjects, subordinates.

In opposition to these feudal values, liberal philosophy advanced a belief in the natural equality and freedom of human beings. It advocated a social and political structure that would recognize the equality of all individuals and provide them with an equality of opportunity. This philosophy was rigorously rational and secular as well as the most powerful and progressive formulation of the Enlightenment period. It was marked by intense individualism. Yet the famous 18th century liberal philosophers like Rousseau and Locke did not apply the same principles to the patriarchal family and the position of women within it. This was the 'residual patriarchal bias of liberalism that applied only to men in the market' (Zillah Eisenstein).

Mary Wollstonecraft belonged to that radical section of the intellectual aristocracy in England which supported the French and American Revolutions. She wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1791 in response to Edmund Burke's conservative interpretation of the significance of the French Revolution. In the booklet she argued against the feudal patriarchal notions about women's natural dependence on men, that women were created to please men, and that they cannot be independent. Her book was highly influential even in America at that time. Wollstonecraft wrote before the rise of the women's movement and her arguments were based on logic and rationality. Underlying Wollstonecraft's analysis were the basic principles of the Enlightenment: the belief in the human capacity to reason and in the concepts of freedom and equality that preceded and accompanied the American and French revolutions. She recognized reason as the only authority and argued that unless women were encouraged to develop their rational potential and to rely on their own judgment, the progress of all humanity would be retarded. She argued primarily in favour of women getting the same education as men, so that they could also be imbibed with the qualities of rational thinking and as well as be provided with the opportunities for earning and leading an independent life. She strongly criticized Rousseau's ideas on women's education. According to her, Rousseau's arguments that women's education should be different

from that of men had contributed to make women more artificial and weak characters. Rousseau's logic was that women should be educated in a manner so as to impress upon them that obedience is the highest virtue. However, her arguments reflect the class limitations of her thinking. While she wrote that women from the 'common classes' displayed more virtue because they worked and were to some extent independent, she also believed that 'the most respectable women [were, in fact,] the most oppressed.'

Harriet Taylor, also part of the bourgeois intellectual circles of London, and wife of the well known Utilitarian philosopher James Stuart Mill, wrote *On the Enfranchisement of Women* in 1851 in support of the women's movement just as it emerged in the U.S. Giving stark liberal arguments against the opponents of women's rights and in favour of women having the same rights as men, she wrote, 'We deny the right of any portion of the species to decide for another portion, or any individual for another individual, what is and what is not their 'proper sphere.' The proper sphere for all human beings is the largest and highest which they are able to attain to....' Noting the significance of the fact that society had not extended equal rights to women, she wrote, 'The world is very young, and has but just begun to cast off injustice. It is only now getting rid of Negro slavery ...Can we wonder it has not yet done as much for women? '

In fact, the liberal basis of the women's movement, as it emerged in the mid 19th century in the U.S., is clear in the Seneca Falls Declaration (1848). The declaration at this first national convention began thus:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and pursuit of happiness...

In the next phase of the women's movement in the late 1960s, among the leading proponents of liberal ideas were Betty Friedan, Bella Abzzug and Pat Schroeder. Friedan founded the National Organization of Women (NOW) in 1966. The liberal feminists

emerged from among those who were working in women's rights groups, government agencies, commissions, etc. Their initial concern was to get those laws amended which denied equality to women in the sphere of education, employment, etc. They also campaigned against social conventions that limited women's opportunities on the basis of gender. But as these legal and educational barriers began to fall it became clear that the liberal strategy of changing the laws within the existing system was not enough to get women justice and freedom. They shifted their emphasis to struggling for the equality of conditions rather than merely equality of opportunity. This led to the demand that the state play a more active role in creating the conditions in which women could actually realize opportunities. The demands for child care, welfare, health care, unemployment wage, special schemes for the single mother, etc., have been taken up by the liberal feminists. The struggle for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) has also been led by this section among the feminists. Their work has been through national level organizations and thus they have been noticed by the media as well. Liberal feminists like Zillah Eisenstein argue that liberalism has potential as a liberating ideology because working women can, through their life experiences, see the contradiction between liberal democracy as an ideology and capitalist patriarchy which denies them the equality promised by that ideology. But liberalism was not the influential trend within the movement in this phase.

Critique

Liberalism, as a philosophy, emerged from the womb of the western feudal society with the struggle of the bourgeoisie to come to power. Hence, it included an attack on the feudal values of divinely ordained truth and hierarchy (social inequality). It stood for reason and equal rights for all individuals. But this philosophy was based on extreme individualism rather than collective effort. Hence, it promoted the approach that if formal, legal equality was given to all, then it was for the individuals to take advantage of

the opportunities available and become successful in life. The question of class differences and their effect on the opportunities available to people was not taken into consideration. Initially, liberalism played a progressive role in breaking the feudal social and political institutions. But in the 19th century, after the growth of the working class and its movements, the limitations of liberal thinking came to the fore. For the bourgeoisie that had come to power did not extend the rights it professed to the poor and other oppressed sections (like women, or blacks in the U.S.). They had to struggle for their rights.

The women's movement and the Black movement in that phase were able to demand their rights utilizing the arguments of the liberals. Women from the bourgeois classes were at the forefront of this movement and they did not extend the question of rights to the working classes, including working class women. Working class ideologies had emerged — various trends of socialism found support among the active sections of the working class. They began to question the very bourgeois socio-economic and political system and the limitations of liberal ideology with its emphasis on formal equality and individual freedom. In this phase liberalism lost its progressive role and we see that the main women's organizations fighting for suffrage, both in the U.S. and in England, had a very narrow aim and became pro-imperialist and anti-working class. In the present phase, liberal feminists have had to go beyond the narrow confines of formal equality to campaign for positive collective rights like welfare measures for single mothers, prisoners, etc., and demand a welfare state.

Liberalism has the following weaknesses:

1. It focuses on individual rights rather than collective rights.
2. It is ahistorical. It does not have a comprehensive understanding of women's role in history nor any analysis for the subordination of women.
3. It tends to be mechanical in its support for formal equality without a concrete understanding of the condition

of different sections/classes of women and their specific problems. Hence, it was able to express the demands of the middle classes (white women from middle classes in the U.S. and upper class, upper caste women in India) but not those of women from various oppressed ethnic groups, castes and the working, labouring classes.

4. It is restricted to changes in the law, educational and employment opportunities, welfare measures, etc., and does not question the economic and political structures of the society which give rise to patriarchal discrimination. Hence, it is reformist in its orientation, both in theory and in practice.
5. It believes that the state is neutral and can be made to intervene in favour of women when, in fact, the bourgeois state in the capitalist countries and the semi-colonial and semi-feudal Indian state are patriarchal and will not support women's struggle for emancipation. The state is defending the interests of the ruling classes who benefit from the subordination and devalued status of women.
6. Since it focuses on changes in the law and state schemes for women, it has emphasized lobbying and petitioning as the means to achieve their demands. The liberal trend most often has restricted its activity to meetings and conventions and mobilizing petitions calling for changes. It has rarely mobilized the strength of the mass of women and is, in fact, afraid of the militant mobilization of poor women in large numbers.

RADICAL FEMINISM

Within bourgeois feminism, in the first phase of the women's movement in the 19th and early 20th centuries, liberalism was the dominant ideology. In the contemporary phase of the women's movement, however, radical feminism has had a strong impact and in many ways, although diffused, several ideas and

positions can be traced to the radical feminist argument. In contrast to the pragmatic approach taken by liberal feminism, radical feminism aimed to reshape society and restructure its institutions, which they saw as inherently patriarchal. Providing the core theory for modern feminism, radicals argued that women's subservient role in society was too closely woven into the social fabric to be unraveled without a revolutionary revamping of society itself. They strove to supplant hierarchical and traditional power relationships, which they saw as reflecting a male bias, with non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian approaches to politics and organization.

In the second phase of feminism, in the U.S., the radical feminists emerged from the social movements of the 1960s — the civil rights movement, the new left movement and the anti-Vietnam war/peace movement. They were dissatisfied with the roles given to women in these movements and the way that the new left tackled the women's question in its writings, theoretical and popular. At the same time, none of them wanted to preserve the existing system. Hence, in its initial phase, the writings were a debate with Marxism, an attempt to modify or rewrite Marxism. Later on, as the radical feminist movement became strong, Marxism was cast aside and the entire emphasis shifted to an analysis of the sex/gender system and patriarchy delinked from the exploitative capitalist system.

In this contemporary phase of feminism, attention was focused on the origins of women's oppression and many theoretical books were written trying to analyze the forms of women's oppression and tracing the roots of this oppression. Yet one thing that needs to be kept in mind is that in all their writing they kept only their own society in mind. Hence, all their criticism, description and analysis deal with advanced capitalist societies, especially, the U.S. In 1970, Kate Millett published the book *Sexual Politics* in which she challenged the formal notion of politics and presented a broader view of power relationships, including the relationship between men and women in society. Kate Millett saw the relationships between men and women as

those of power; the domination of men over women was a form of power in society. Hence, she titled her book 'Sexual Politics.' Here she made the claim that 'the personal was political,' which became a popular slogan of the feminist movement. By 'the personal is political' what she meant was that the discontent individual women feel in their lives is not due to individual failings but due to the social system, which has kept women in subordination and oppresses her in so many ways. Her personal feelings are therefore political. In fact, she reversed the historical materialist understanding by asserting that the male-female relationship is a framework for all power relationships in society. This 'social caste' (dominant men and subordinated women) supersedes all other forms of inequality, whether racial, political or economic. This is the primary human situation. The other systems of oppression will continue because they get both logical and emotional legitimacy from oppression in this primary situation. Patriarchy, according to her, was male control over the private and public world.

According to her, to eliminate patriarchy, men and women must eliminate gender, i.e., sexual status, role and temperament, as they have been constructed under patriarchy. Patriarchal ideology exaggerates the biological differences between men and women in order to subordinate women. Millett advocated a new society, which would not be based on the sex/gender system and in which men and women would be equal. At the same time, she argued that we must proceed slowly, eliminating undesirable traits like obedience (among women) and arrogance (among men). Kate Millett's book was very influential for a long time and is still considered to be a classic for modern radical feminist thinking.

Another early influential writer was Shulamith Firestone, who argued in her book *Dialectics of Sex* (1970) that the origins of women's subordination and man's domination lay in the reproductive roles of men and women. In this book she rewrites Marx and Engels. Engels had written of historical materialism as: 'that view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and great moving power of all historical events in the economic development of society, in the changes of the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggles of these classes against one another.' Firestone rewrote this as follows:

> Historical materialism is that view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all historical events in the dialectic of sex: the division of society into two distinctly biological classes for procreative reproduction, and the struggles of these classes with one another; in the changes in the mode of marriage, reproduction and child-care created by these struggles; in the connected development of other physically differentiated classes (castes); and in the first division of labour based on sex which developed into the (economic-cultural) class system.

Firestone focused on reproduction instead of production as the moving force of history. Further, instead of identifying social causes for the women's condition, she stressed upon biological reasons and made it the moving force in history.

The biological fact that women bear children is the material basis for women's submission in society and it needs a biological and social revolution to effect human liberation. She too was of the opinion that the sex/gender difference needs to be eliminated and human beings must be androgynous. But she went further than Kate Millett in the solution she advocated to end women's oppression. She was of the opinion that unless women give up their reproductive role and no longer bear children and the basis of the existing family is changed it is not possible to completely liberate women. Hence, according to her, unless natural reproduction was replaced by artificial reproduction and the traditional biological family replaced by the 'intentional' family, biological divisions between the sexes would not be eliminated. Biological family is the family in which members are genetically connected (parents and children) while the intentional family, according to her, means a family chosen by friendship or convenience. She believed that if this change occurred, the various personality complexes that develop in

present society would no longer exist. Others wrote about how, historically, the first social conflict was between men and women. Man, the hunter, was prone to violence and he subjugated women through rape (Susan Brownmiller).

These writings set the tone for the women's movement, the more radical section of it, which was not satisfied with the efforts of liberal feminists to change laws and campaign on such issues. They gave the push to delve into women's traditional, hitherto, taken for granted, reproductive role, into gender/sex differences and to question the very structure of society as being patriarchal, hierarchal and oppressive. They called for a total transformation of society. Hence, radical feminists perceive themselves as revolutionary rather than reformist. Their fundamental point is that sex/gender system is the cause of women's oppression.

They considered the man-woman relationship in isolation from the rest of the social system, as a fundamental contradiction. As a result, their entire orientation and direction of their analysis and action deals primarily with this contradiction, taking them towards separatism. Since they focus on the reproductive role of women; they make sexual relations and family relations the central targets of their attack to transform society.

SEX-GENDER SYSTEM AND PATRIARCHY

The central point in the radical feminist understanding is the sex/gender system. According to a popular definition given by Gayle Rubin, the sex/gender system is a 'set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity.' This means that patriarchal society uses certain facts about male and female physiology (sex) as the basis for constructing a set of masculine and feminine identities and behaviour (gender) that serve to empower men and disempower women, that is, how a man should be and how a woman should be. This, according to them, is the ideological basis of women's subordination. Society is somehow convinced that these culturally determined behaviour traits are 'natural.' Therefore, they hold that 'normal' behaviour

depends on one's ability to display the gender identities and behaviour that society links with one's biological sex.

Initially, the radical feminists, for example, the Boston group or the Radical New York group, upheld Kate Millet's and Firestone's views and focused on the ways in which the concept of femininity and the reproductive and sexual roles and responsibilities (child rearing, etc.) serve to limit women's development as full persons. As a solution, they advocated androgyny, so that rigid sex defined roles would no longer remain. But later, in the late 1970s, one section of radical feminists rejected the goal of androgyny as they believed that it meant that women would learn some of the worst features of masculinity. Instead, they proposed that women affirm their 'femininity' and try to be more like women, i.e., emphasize women's virtues such as interdependence, community, connection, sharing, emotion, body, trust, absence of hierarchy, nature, immanence, process, joy, peace and life.

From here onwards, their entire focus became separatist, believing that women should relate only to women and should, in fact, build a women's culture and institutions. With this, their understanding about sexuality also changed and they started arguing that women should become lesbians. Thus, they supported monogamous lesbian relations as the best option for women. Politically, they became pacifist. Violence and aggression are masculine traits that should be rejected as they upheld that women are naturally peace loving and life-giving. By building alternative institutions they believed that they were bringing revolutionary change. They began building women's clubs, making women's films and other forms of a separate women's culture. In their understanding, the revolutionary transformation of society would take place gradually. This stream is called the *cultural feminist* trend because they are completely concentrating on the culture of society. They are not relating culture to the political-economic structure of society. But this became the main trend of radical feminism and is intertwined with eco-feminism and also post-modernism. Among the well known cultural feminists are Marilyn French and Mary Daly.

SEXUALITY: HETEROSEXUALITY AND LESBIANISM

Since man-woman relations are the fundamental contradiction for radical feminists they have paid a great deal of attention to the sexual relations between them. Sexuality is the arena where most of the discussions and debates of radical feminism have got concentrated. The stand of the Christian churches in the West, regarding various issues including sex and abortion, has been extremely conservative. This is more so in countries like the U.S., France and Italy. Christian morality has defended sex only after marriage and opposed abortion. The radical feminist theorists confronted these questions head on. At the same time they also exposed how, in a patriarchal society, within sexual relations (even after marriage), women often feel a sense of being dominated. It is in this background that the questions of sexual repression, compulsory heterosexuality and homosexuality or sexual choice became issues of discussion and debate.

The radical feminists believe that in a patriarchal society, even in sexual relations and practices, male domination prevails. This has been termed as repression by the earlier radical feminist trend and as an ideology of sexual objectification by the cultural feminists. According to them, sex is viewed as bad, dangerous and negative by the society and the only sex permitted to women and considered acceptable is marital, heterosexual practice. (Heterosexuality means sexual relations between people of different sexes, i.e., between men and women.) There is pressure from the patriarchal society to be heterosexual and sexual minorities, (i.e., lesbians, transvestites, trans-sexuals, etc.) are considered as intolerable. Sexual pleasure, a powerful natural force, is controlled by the patriarchal society by separating the so-called good, normal, healthy sexual practice from the bad, unhealthy, illegitimate sexual practice.

But the two streams have very different understandings of sexuality, which also affects the demands that they make and the solutions they offer. According to the radical feminist trend, sexual repression is one of the cruelest and most irrational ways for the

forces of civilization to control human behaviour. Permissiveness is in the best interests of women and men. On the contrary, the cultural feminists consider heterosexual sexual relations as characterized by an ideology of objectification in which men are masters/subjects and women are slaves/objects. 'Heterosexualism has certain similarities to colonialism particularly in its maintenance through force when paternalism is rejected and in the portrayal of domination as natural and in the de-skilling of women' (Sarah Lucia Hoagland). This is a form of male sexual violence against women. Hence, feminists should oppose any sexual practice that normalizes male sexual violence. According to them, women should reclaim control over their sexuality by developing a concern with their own sexual priorities which differ from the priorities of men. Women want intimacy and care rather than the performance. Hence, they advocated that women should reject heterosexual relations with men and become lesbians.

On the other hand, radicals like Gayle Rubin believed that women must seek their pleasure and not make rules. For the cultural feminists, heterosexuality is about male domination and female subordination and so it sets the stage for pornography, prostitution, sexual harassment and woman-battering. Hence, they advocated that women should give up heterosexual relations and go into lesbian relations in which there is emotional involvement. Cultural feminists emphasized the need to develop the essential 'femaleness' of women. Lesbianism was pushed strongly within the women's movement in the West in the early 1980s but it receded a few years later.

The solution offered by the cultural feminists to end the subordination of women is breaking up the sexual relationship between men and women, with women forming a separate class themselves. The first trend is advocating free sexual relations delinked from any emotional involvement, whether with men or with women. In fact, the solutions which they are promoting make an intimate human relationship into a commodity type of impersonal relationship. From here, it is one step to support pornography and prostitution. While cultural feminists strongly

opposed pornography, the radicals did not agree that pornography had any adverse impact on the way men viewed women. Instead, they believed that pornography could be used to overcome sexual repression. Even on questions of reproductive technology, the two sides differed. While the radicals supported repro-tech, the cultural feminists were opposed to it. The latter were of the opinion that women should not give up motherhood since this is the only power they have. They have been active in the ethical debates raised by repro-tech, such as those regarding the rights of the surrogate or biological mother.

Critique

From the account given above it is clear that the radical feminists have 'stood Marxism on its head,' so to speak. Although we will deal with Firestone's arguments in the section on socialist feminists some points need to be mentioned. In their understanding of the material conditions they have taken the physical fact of reproduction and women's biological role as the central point for their analysis and concluded that this is the main reason for women's oppression. Marx had written that production and reproduction of life are the two prior conditions for human existence. Reproduction means both the reproduction of the person on a day to day basis and the reproduction of the human species. But, in fact, reproduction of the species is something humans share with the animal kingdom. That could not be the basis for women's oppression. For, in all the thousands of years that people lived in the first stages of human existence, women were not subordinated to men. In fact, her reproductive role was celebrated and given importance because the survival of the species and the group depended on reproduction. The importance given to fertility and the fertility rituals surviving in most tribal societies are testimony to this fact.

Marxism understands that some material conditions had to arise due to which the position of women changed and they were subordinated. The significant change in material conditions came

with the generation of considerable surplus production. How this surplus would be distributed is the point at which classes arose, the surplus being appropriated by a small (section of people) in the community. A woman's role in reproduction, the cause of her earlier elevated status, now became a means of her enslavement. Which clan/extended family the children she bore belonged to became important and it is then that we find the emergence of the patriarchal family in which the woman was subordinated and her main role in society became that of begetting children for the family. Radical feminists have treated historical development and historical facts lightly and imposed their own understanding of the man-woman contradiction as the original and principal contradiction that has determined the course of actual history.

From this central point, the radical feminist analysis abandons history altogether, ignoring the political-economic structure and concentrating only on the social and cultural aspects of the advanced capitalist society and projecting the situation there as the universal human condition. This is another major weakness in their analysis and approach.

Since they have taken the man-woman relationship (sex/gender relationship) as the central contradiction in society, all their analysis proceeds from it and men become the main enemies of women. Since they do not have any concrete strategy to overthrow this society they shift their entire analysis to a critique of the various superstructural aspects — the culture, language, concepts and ethics — without concerning themselves with the fact of capitalism and the role it plays in sustaining this sex/gender relationship. Hence they ignore the need to include the overthrow of capitalism in their strategy for women's liberation. While making extremely strong criticisms of patriarchal structure the solutions they offer are, in fact, reformist. They are focused on changing the roles and traits and the attitudes and the moral values and, thereby, creating an alternative culture. Practically, it implies that people can, to some extent, give up certain values, for instance, men can give up their aggressive traits by recognizing them as patriarchal, while women can try to

be bolder and less dependent, but when the entire structure of society is patriarchal how far can these changes be brought about without an overthrow of the entire capitalist system is a question that they do not address at all. So it ends up turning into small groups trying to change their lifestyle, their interpersonal relations; a focus on the interpersonal rather than the entire system. Although they began by analyzing the entire system and wanting to change it, their line of analysis has taken them in reformist channels. Women's liberation is not possible in this manner. The fault lies with the basic analysis itself.

The cultural feminists have gone one step further by emphasizing the essential differences between males and females and claiming that female traits and values (not feminine) are desirable. This argument gives the biological basis of male-female differences more importance than social upbringing. This is, in fact, a counter-productive argument because conservative forces in society have always used such arguments (called 'biological determinism') to justify domination over a section of the people. The slaves were slaves because they had those traits and they needed to be ruled because they could not look after themselves. Women are women and men are men and they are basically different, thus social roles for women and men are also different. This is the argument given by reactionary conservative forces which are opposed to women's liberation.

Hence, the basic argument they are putting forward has dangerous implications and can and will rebound on the struggle of women for change. Masculinity and femininity are constructs of a patriarchal society and we have to struggle to change these rigid constructs. But this struggle is linked to the overthrow of the entire exploitative society. In a society where patriarchal domination ceases to exist, how men and women will be, what kind of traits they will adopt is impossible for us to say. The traits that human beings will then adopt will be in consonance with the type of society that will exist, since there can be no human personality outside some social framework. Seeking this femaleness is like chasing a mirage that amounts to self-deception. By making

heterosexuality as the core point in their criticism of the present system, they encouraged lesbian separatism and thus took the women's movement to a dead end. Apart from forming small communities of lesbians and building an alternative culture they could not and have not been able to take one step forward to liberate the mass of women from the exploitation and oppression they suffer. It is impractical and unnatural to think that women can have a completely separate existence from men. The cultural feminists have completely given up the goal of building a better human society. This strategy is not appealing to the large mass of women. Objectively it became a diversion from building a broad movement for women's liberation.

The radical trend, by supporting pornography and giving the abstract argument of free choice, has taken a reactionary turn providing justification and support to the sex tourism industry promoted by the imperialists which is subjecting lakhs of women from oppressed ethnic communities and from the Third World countries to sexual exploitation and untold suffering. While criticizing hypocritical and repressive sexual mores of the reactionary bourgeoisie and the Church, the radical trend has promoted an alternative which only further alienates human beings from each other and debases the most intimate of human relations. Separating sex from love and intimacy, human relations become mechanical and inhuman. Further, their arguments are in absolute isolation from the actual circumstances of women's lives and their bitter experiences.

Maria Mies (1986) has made a critique of this whole trend which sums up the weakness of the approach:

> The belief in education, cultural action, or even cultural revolution, as agents of change is a typical belief of the urban middle class. With regard to the women's question it is based on the assumption that women's oppression has nothing to do with basic material production relations... This assumption is found more among Western, particularly American, feminists who usually do not talk of capitalism. For many western feminists women's oppression is rooted in the culture of patriarchal civilization.

For them, therefore, feminism is largely a cultural movement, a new ideology, or a new consciousness.

This cultural feminism dominated Western feminism and influenced feminist thinking in third world countries as well. It unites well with the postmodernist trend and has deflected the entire orientation of the women's movement from being a struggle to change the material conditions of the life of women to an analysis of 'representations' and symbols. They have opposed the idea of women becoming a militant force because they emphasize the non-violent nature of the female. They are disregarding the role women have played in wars against tyranny throughout history. Women will and ought to continue to play an active part in just wars meant to end oppression and exploitation. Thus they will be active participants in the struggle for change.

Summing up we can see that the radical feminist trend has taken the women's movement to a dead end by advocating separatism for women. The main weaknesses in their theory and approach are:

1. Taking a philosophically idealist position by giving central importance to personality traits and cultural values rather than material conditions. Ignoring the material situation in the world completely and focusing only on cultural aspects.
2. Making the contradiction between men and women as the principal contradiction, thereby, justifying separatism.
3. Making a natural fact of reproduction as the reason for women's subordination and rejecting socio-economic reasons for the social condition of oppression, thereby, strengthening the conservative argument that men and women are naturally different.
4. Making women's and men's natures immutable.
5. Ignoring the class differences among women and the needs and problems of poor women.

6. By propagating women's nature as non-violent they are discouraging women from becoming fighters in the struggle for their own liberation and that of society.
7. In spite of claiming to be radical, having completely reformist solutions which cannot take women's liberation forward.

ANARCHA-FEMINISM

The feminist movement has been influenced by anarchism and the anarchists have considered the radical feminists closest to their ideas. Hence, the body of work called anarcha-feminism can be considered as being very much a part of the radical feminist movement. Anarchists consider all forms of government (state) as authoritarian and private property as tyrannical. They envisage the creation of a society which would have no government, no hierarchy and no private property.

While the anarchist ideas of Bakunin, Kropotkin and other classical anarchists have been an influence, the famous American anarchist Emma Goldman has particularly been influential in the feminist movement. Emma Goldman, a Lithuanian by birth, migrated to the U.S. in 1885 and as a worker in various garment factories came into contact with anarchist and socialist ideas. She became an active agitator, speaker and campaigner for anarchist ideas. In the contemporary feminist movement the anarchists circulated Emma Goldman's writings and her ideas have been influential. Anarcha-feminists agree that there is no one version of anarchism, but within the anarchist tradition they share a common understanding on: (1) the criticism of existing societies, focusing on relations of power and domination, (2) the vision of an alternate, egalitarian, non-authoritarian society, along with claims about how it could be organized, and (3) the strategy for moving from one to the other.

They envisaged a society in which human freedom would be ensured, but believe that human freedom and community go together; however, the communities must be structured in such a way

that makes freedom possible. They believe that there should be no hierarchies or authority. Their vision is different from the Marxist and liberal tradition but is closest to what the radical feminists are struggling for, the practice they are engaged in. For the anarchists believe that means must be consistent with the aims, the process by which revolution is being brought about, the structures, must reflect the new society and relations that have to be created. Hence, the process and the form of organization are extremely important.

According to the anarchists, dominance and subordination depend on hierarchical social structures which are enforced by the state and through economic coercion (that is, through control over property, etc). Their critique of society is not based on classes and exploitation, or on the class nature of the state, etc., but is, rather, focused on hierarchy and domination. The state defends and supports these hierarchical structures and decisions at the central level are imposed on those subordinate in the hierarchy. Thus, for them, *hierarchical social structures* lie at the roots of domination and subordination in society. This leads to ideological domination as well, because the view that is promoted and propagated about the structure and its processes is the official view, the view of those who dominate.

The Anarchists are critical of Marxists because according to them revolutionaries are creating hierarchical organizations (the party) through which they want to bring about the change. According to them, once a hierarchy is created it is impossible for people at the top to relinquish their power. Hence, they believe that the *process* by which the change is sought to be brought about is equally important. 'Within a hierarchical organization we cannot learn to act in non-authoritarian ways.' Anarchists give emphasis to 'propaganda by deed,' by which they mean exemplary actions, which by positive example encourage others to also join. The anarcha-feminists give examples of groups that have created various community-based activities, like running a radio station or a food co-operative in the U.S., in which non-authoritarian ways of running the organization have been developed. They have given central emphasis to small groups

without hierarchy and domination. But the functioning of such groups in practice, the hidden tyrannical leadership (Joreen) that gets created, has led to many criticisms. The problems encountered included hidden leadership, having 'leaders' imposed by the media, over-representation of middle class women with lots of time in their hands, lack of task groups which women could join and hostility towards women who showed initiative or leadership.

When the communists raise the question that the centralized state, controlled by the imperialists, needs to be overthrown they admit that their efforts are small in nature and there is a need of coordinating and linking up with others. But they are not willing to consider the need for a centralized revolutionary organization to overthrow the state. Basically, according to their theory, the capitalist state is not to be overthrown, but, rather, has to be outgrown. ('[A]gainst the pathological state structure, perhaps the best word is to outgrow rather than overthrow,' from an anarcha-feminist manifesto — Siren 1971.)

From their analysis it is clear that they differ strongly from the revolutionary perspective. They do not believe in the overthrow of the bourgeois/imperialist state as the central question and prefer to spend their energy in forming small groups involved in co-operative activities. In the era of monopoly capitalism it is an illusion to think that such activities can expand and grow and gradually engulf the entire society. They will only be tolerated in a society with excess surplus, like the U.S., as an oddity, an exotic plant. Such groups tend to get co-opted by the system in this way. Radical feminists have found these ideas suitable for their views and have been very much influenced by anarchist ideas of organization or there has been a convergence of anarchist views of organization and the radical feminist views on the same.

Another aspect of anarcha-feminist ideas is their concern for ecology and we find that eco-feminism has also grown out of anarcha-feminist views. As it is, anarchists in the Western countries are active on the environmental question.

ECO-FEMINISM

Eco-feminism also has close links with cultural feminism, although the eco-feminists prefer to distinguish themselves from the latter. The approach that cultural feminists like Mary Daly have taken in their writings comes close to the eco-feminist understanding. Ynestra King, Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies are among the well-known eco-feminists.

Cultural feminists have celebrated women's identification with nature in art, poetry, music and communes. They identify women and nature against (male) culture. So, for example, they are active anti-militarists. They blame men for war and point out that masculine pre-occupation is with death defying deeds.

Eco-feminists recognize that socialist feminists have emphasized the economic and class aspects of women's oppression but criticize them for ignoring the question of the domination of nature.

Eco-feminists hold that feminism and ecology are the revolt of nature against human domination. They demand that we rethink the relationship between humanity and the rest of nature, including our natural, embodied selves. In eco-feminism, nature is the central category of analysis — the interrelated domination of nature — psyche and sexuality, human oppression and non-human, and the crucial historical position of women in these. This is the starting point for eco-feminism according to Ynestra King. And, in practice, it has been seen, according to her, that women have been at the forefront of struggles to protect nature — the example of the Chipko Movement, in which village women clung onto trees to prevent the contractors from felling them in Tehri-Garhwal, proves this point.

There are many streams within eco-feminism: the spiritual eco-feminists, who consider their spiritualism this worldly and believe in active intervention to stop the destructive practices. They believe that the nature-culture dichotomy must be dissolved and our oneness with nature brought out. Unless we all live more simply, some of us won't be able to live at all. According to them, there is room for men too in this save the earth movement. There

is one stream among eco-feminists who are against the emphasis on nature-women connection. Women must, according to them, minimize their socially constructed and ideologically reinforced special connection with nature. The present division of the world into male and female (culture and nature), with men for culture building and women for nature (child rearing and child bearing) must be eliminated and oneness emphasized. Men must bring culture into nature and women should, in turn, take nature into culture. This view has been called social constructionist eco-feminism. Thinkers like Warren believe that it is wrong to link women to nature, because both men and women are equally natural and cultural. Mies and Shiva combined insights from socialist feminism (the role of capitalist patriarchy) with insights from global feminists who believe that women have more to do with nature in their daily work around the world, as well as from postmodernism which criticizes capitalism's tendency to homogenize the culture around the world. They believed that women around the world had enough similarity to struggle against capitalist patriarchies and the destruction it spawns. Taking examples of struggles by women against ecological destruction by industrial or military interests, to preserve the basis of life, they conclude that women will be in the forefront of the struggle to preserve the ecology. They advocate a subsistence perspective in which people must not produce more than that needed to satisfy human needs, and use nature only as much as needed, not to make money but to satisfy community needs. Also, men and women should cultivate traditional feminine virtues (caring, compassion, nurturance) and engage in subsistence production, for only such a society can '*afford to live in peace with nature, and uphold peace between nations, generations, and men and women.*' Eco-feminists believe that women are non-violent by nature. Some of them are considered as transformative eco-feminists.

Nonetheless, the theoretical basis for Vandana Shiva's argument in favour of subsistence agriculture is actually reactionary. She makes a trenchant criticism of the green revolution and its impact as a whole, but from the perspective that it is a form of

'western patriarchal violence' against women and nature. She counter poses patriarchal western, rational/science with non-western wisdom. One can agree with her view that the imperialists used the developments in agro-science to force the peasantry to increase their production (to avoid a Red revolution) and to become tied to the MNC sponsored market for agricultural inputs like seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, etc. But Shiva is rejecting agro-science altogether and uncritically defending traditional practices. She claims that traditional Indian culture, with its dialectical unity of *Purusha* and *Prakriti*, was superior to the Western philosophical dualism of man and nature, man and culture, etc. Hence, she claims, that in this civilization where production was for subsistence, to satisfy the vital basic needs of people, women had a close connection with nature. The Green Revolution broke this link between women and nature. In actual fact, what Shiva is glorifying is the petty pre-capitalist peasant economy with its feudal structures and extreme inequalities. In this economy, women toiled for long hours in backbreaking labour with no recognition of their work. She does not take into account the condition of Dalit and other lower caste women who toiled in the fields and houses of the feudal landlords of that time, abused, sexually exploited and unpaid most of the time.

Further, the subsistence life was not based on enough for all, in fact, women were deprived of even the basic necessities in this glorified pre-capitalist period and had no claim over the means of production; they were not independent either. This lack of independence is interpreted by her and Mies as the Third World women's rejection of self-determination and autonomy for they valued their connection with the community. However, what women value as support structures when they do not have any alternative before them is being mistakenly projected as conscious rejection of self-determination by Shiva. In effect, they are upholding the patriarchal pre-capitalist subsistence economy in the name of eco-feminism and also that of opposing western science and technology. A false dichotomy has been created between science and tradition. This is the form of culturalism or postmodernism that is

involved in defending the traditional patriarchal cultures of third world societies and opposing development of the basic masses in the name of attacking the development paradigm of capitalism. We are opposed to the destructive and indiscriminate push given by profit hungry imperialist agri-businesses to agro-technology (including genetically modified seeds, etc.) but we are not against the application of science and agro-technology to improving the agricultural production. Under the present class relations even science is the handmaiden of the imperialists but under a new democratic/socialist rule this will not be so. It is important to retain what is positive in our tradition, but to unthinkingly glorify it all is anti-people.

Eco-feminists idealize the relationship of women with nature and also lack a class perspective. Women from the upper classes, whether in advanced capitalist countries or in the backward countries like India, hardly show any sensitivity to nature, so absorbed are they in the global, consumerist culture encouraged by imperialism. They do not think that imperialism is a worldwide system of exploitation. They have shown no willingness to change their privileges and basic lifestyles in order to reduce the destruction of the environment. For peasant women, the destruction of the ecology has led to untold hardships in carrying out the daily chores such as the procurement of fuel, water, fodder for cattle, etc. Displacement due to take over of their forests and lands for big projects also affects them badly. Hence, these aspects can and have become rallying points for mobilizing them in struggles. But from this we cannot conclude that women, as against men, have a 'natural' tendency to preserve nature. The struggle against monopoly capitalism, that is relentlessly destroying nature, is a political struggle, a people's issue, in which the toiling people as a whole, men and women, must participate. And although the eco-feminists quote the Chipko struggle, in fact, there are so many other struggles in our country in which both men and women have agitated on what can be considered as ecological issues and their rights. The Narmada agitation, the agitations of villagers in Orissa against major mining projects, and against uranium

mining and nuclear missile projects or the struggle of tribals in Bastar and Jharkhand against the destruction of forests and major steel projects are examples of this.

SOCIALIST FEMINISM

Socialist or Marxist women who were active in the new left, anti-Vietnam war student movement of the 1960s joined the women's liberation movement as it spontaneously emerged. Influenced by the feminist arguments raised within the movement they raised questions about their own role within the broad democratic movement, and the analysis on the women's question being put forward by the New Left (essentially, a Trotskyite, revisionist leftist trend critical of the Soviet Union and China) of which they were a part. Although they were critical of the socialists and communists for ignoring the women's question, unlike the radical feminist trend, they did not break with the socialist movement but concentrated their efforts on combining Marxism with radical feminist ideas. There is a wide spectrum amongst them as well. At one end of it are a section called Marxist feminists, who differentiate themselves from socialist feminists because they adhere more closely to Marx, Engels, and Lenin's writings and have concentrated their analysis on women's exploitation within the capitalist political economy. At the other end of the spectrum are those who have focused on how gender identity is created through child rearing practices. They have focused on the psychological processes and are influenced by Freud. They are also called psycho-analytic feminists. The term feminist is used by all of them. Some feminists who are involved in serious study and political activity from the Marxist perspective also call themselves Marxist feminists to denote both their difference from socialist feminists and their seriousness about the woman's question.

Marxist feminists like Mariarosa Dalla Costa and others from a feminist group in Italy did a theoretical analysis of housework under capitalism. Dalla Costa argued in detail that through domestic work women are reproducing the worker, a commodity.

Hence, according to them, it is wrong to consider that only use values are created through domestic work. Domestic work also produces exchange values — the labour power. When the demand for wages for housework arose Dalla Costa supported it as a tactical move to make society realize the value of housework. Although most did not agree with their conclusion that housework creates surplus value, and supported the demand for wages for housework, yet their analysis created a great deal of discussion in feminist and Marxist circles around the world and led to a heightened awareness of how housework serves capital. Most socialist feminists were critical of the demand but it was debated at length.

Initially, the question of housework (early 1970s) was an important part of their discussion but by the 1980s it became clear that a large proportion of women were working outside the house or for some part of their lives they worked outside the house. By the early 1980s, 45 percent of the total workforce in the U.S. was female. Then their focus of study became the situation of women in the labour force in their countries. Socialist feminists have analyzed how women in the U.S. have been discriminated against in jobs and wages. The gender segregation in jobs, (concentration of women in certain types of jobs which are low wage), too, has been documented in detail by them. These studies have been useful to expose the patriarchal nature of capitalism. But for the purpose of this article, only the theoretical position regarding women's oppression and capitalism that they take will be considered by us. We will present the position put forward by Heidi Hartmann in a much circulated and debated article, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union' to understand the basic *socialist feminist* position.

According to Heidi Hartmann, Marxism and feminism are two sets of systems of analysis which have been married but the marriage is an unhappy one because only Marxism, with its analytic power to analyze capital is dominating. But, according to her, while Marxism provides an analysis of historical development and of capital it has not considered the relations of men and women.

She says that these relations are also determined by a system — which is patriarchy — which the feminists have analyzed. Both historical materialist analysis of Marxism and patriarchy as a historical and social structure are necessary to understand the development of western capitalist society and the position of women within it, to understand how relations between men have been created and how patriarchy has shaped the course of capitalism.

She is critical of Marxism on the women's question. Marxism has dealt with the question only in relation to the economic system. Women are viewed as workers, and Engels believed that the sexual division of labour would be destroyed if women came into production, and all aspects of women's life are studied only in relation to how it perpetuates the capitalist system. Even the study on housework dealt with the relation of women to capital but not to men. Although Marxists are aware of the sufferings of women they have focused on private property and capital as the source of women's oppression. But according to her, early Marxists failed to take into account the difference in men's and women's experience of capitalism and considered patriarchy to be a left over from the earlier period. Capital and private property do not oppress women as women; hence their abolition will not end women's oppression.

Engels and other Marxists do not analyze the labour of women in the family properly. Who benefits from her labour in the house, she asks, and argues that not only the capitalists, but the men as well benefit. A materialist approach ought not to have ignored this crucial point. It follows that men have a material interest in perpetuating women's subordination. Further, her analysis has held that although Marxism helps us to understand the capitalist production structure, its occupational structure and dominant ideology, its concepts like those of a reserve army, wage labourer, class are *gender-blind* because there is no analysis as to who will fill these empty places, that is, who will be the wage labourer, who will constitute the reserve army, etc. For capitalism, anyone, irrespective of gender, race, nationality can occupy these positions. This is where the 'woman question suffers.'

Some feminists have analyzed women's work using Marxist methodology but by adapting it. Juliet Mitchell, for example, has analyzed women's work in the market, their work of reproduction, sexuality and child-rearing. According to her, the work in the market place is production, the rest is ideological. For Mitchell, patriarchy operates in the realm of reproduction, sexuality and child-rearing. She did a psychoanalytical study of how gender-based personalities are formed for men and women. According to Mitchell, 'we are dealing with two autonomous areas: the economic mode of capitalism and the ideological mode of patriarchy...' Hartmann disagrees with Mitchell because the latter views patriarchy as solely ideological and does not give it a material base.

According to her, the material base of patriarchy is the control of men over the labour power of women. They control it by denying access to women over society's productive resources (denying her a job with a living wage) and restricting her sexuality. This control, according to her, operates not only within the family but also outside, at the work place. At home she serves the husband and at work she serves the boss. Here it is important to note that Hartmann makes no distinction between men of the ruling classes and other men.

Hartmann concluded that there is no pure patriarchy and no pure capitalism. Production and reproduction are combined in a whole society in the way it is organized and hence we have what she calls *patriarchal capitalism*. According to her, there is a strong partnership between patriarchy and capitalism. Marxism, she feels, could not gauge the strength and flexibility of patriarchy and overestimated the strength of capital. Patriarchy has adapted itself to suit capitalism and capital is flexible when it encounters earlier modes of production and it has adapted them to suit its needs for accumulation of capital. Women's role in the labour market and their work at home are determined by the sexual division of labour and capitalism has utilized them to treat women as secondary workers and to divide the working class.

Some other socialist feminists do not agree with Hartmann's position that there are two autonomous systems operating, first, capitalism in the realm of production, and second, patriarchy in the realm of reproduction and ideology. They call this the dual systems theory. Iris Young, for example, believes that Hartmann's dual system makes patriarchy some kind of a universal phenomenon which has existed before capitalism and in every known society. This makes it ahistorical and prone to cultural and racial bias. Iris Young and some other socialist feminists argue that there is only one system, that is, *capitalist patriarchy*. According to Young, the concept that can help to analyze this clearly is not class, because it is gender-blind, but division of labour. She argues that the gender-based division of labour is central and fundamental to the structure of the relations of production.

Among the recently more influential socialist feminists are Maria Mies (she also has developed into an eco-feminist) who also focuses on the division of labour: 'The hierarchical division of labour between men and women and its dynamics form an integral part of dominant production relations, i.e., class relations of a particular epoch and society and of the broader national and international divisions of labour.'

According to her, a materialist explanation requires us to analyze the nature of women's and men's interaction with nature and through it to build up their human or social nature. She is critical of Engels for not considering this aspect. Femaleness and maleness are defined in each historical epoch differently. Thus, in earlier, what she calls, 'matristic' societies, women were significant for they were productive — they were active producers of life. Under capitalist conditions, this has changed and they are housewives, empty of all creative and productive qualities. Women as producers of children and milk, as gatherers and agriculturists had a relation with nature which was different from that of men. Men related to nature through tools. Male supremacy came not from superior economic contribution but from the fact that they invented destructive tools through which they controlled women, nature and other men. Further, she adds that it was the pastoral

economy in which patriarchal relations were established. Men learnt the role of the male in impregnation. Their monopoly over arms and this knowledge of the male role in reproduction led to changes in the division of labour. Women were no longer important as gatherers of food or as producers, but their role was to breed children. Thus, she concludes that,

> [W]e can attribute the asymmetric division of labour between men and women to this predatory mode of production, or rather appropriation, which is based on male monopoly over means of coercion, i.e., arms and direct violence by means of which permanent relations of exploitation and dominance between the sexes was created and maintained.

In upholding this, the family, state and religion have played an important part. Although Mies says that we should reject biological determinism, she herself veers towards it.

Several of their proposals for social change, like those of radical feminists, are directed towards the transformation of man-woman relations and the responsibility of rearing children. The central concern of socialist feminists, according to her, is reproductive freedom. This means that women should have control over whether and when to have children. Reproductive freedom includes the right to safe birth control measures, the right to safe abortion, day care centres, a decent wage that can help look after children, medical care and housing. It also includes the freedom of sexual choice, that is, the right to have children outside the socio-cultural norm (that children can only be brought up in a family of a woman with a man). Women outside such arrangements should also be allowed to have and bring up children. And child rearing in the long run must be transformed from a woman's task to that of men and women. Women should not suffer due to childlessness or due to compulsory motherhood.

But they recognize that in order to guarantee all of the above, the wage structure of society must change, women's role must change, compulsory heterosexuality must end, the care of children must become a collective enterprise and all this is not

possible within the capitalist system. The capitalist mode of production must be transformed, but not alone, both (mode of procreation) must be transformed together.

Among later writers, an important contribution has come from Gerda Lerner. In her book, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, she goes into a detailed explanation of the origins of patriarchy. She argues that it is a historical process that is not one moment in history, due, not to one cause, but a process that proceeded over 2500 years from about 3100 BC to 600 BC. She states that Engels, in his pioneering work, made major contributions to our understanding of women's position in society and history. He defined the major theoretical questions for the next hundred years. He made propositions regarding the historicity of women's subordination but was unable to substantiate his propositions. From her study of ancient societies and states she concludes that *it was the appropriation of women's sexual and reproductive capacity by men that lies at the foundation of private property, it preceded private property.* The first states (Mesopotamia and Egypt) were organized in the form of a patriarchy. Ancient law codes institutionalized women's sexual subordination (men's control over the family) and slavery and they were enforced with the power of the state. This was done through force, economic dependency of women and class privileges to women of the upper classes. Through her study of Mesopotamia and other ancient states she traces how ideas, symbols and metaphors were developed through which patriarchal sex/gender relations were incorporated into Western civilization. Men learnt how to dominate other societies by dominating their own women. But women continued to play an important role as priestesses, healers, etc., as seen in goddess worship. And it was only later that women's devaluation in religion also took place.

Socialist feminists use terms like mechanical Marxists, traditional Marxists and economistic Marxists for those who uphold the Marxist theory concentrating on the study and analysis of the capitalist economy and politics and differentiate themselves from them. They are criticizing all Marxists for not considering the fight against women's oppression as the *central* aspect of the struggle against

capitalism. According to them, the work of organizing women (feminist organizing projects) should be considered as socialist political work and socialist political activity must have a feminist side to it.

SOCIALIST-FEMINIST STRATEGY FOR WOMEN'S LIBERATION

After tracing the history of the relationship between the left movement and the feminist movement in the U.S., a history where they have walked separately, Hartmann strongly feels that the struggle against capitalism cannot be successful unless feminist issues are also taken up. She puts forward a strategy in which she says that the struggle for socialism must be an alliance with groups with different interests (e.g., women's interests are different from general working class interests) and, secondly, she says that women must not trust men to liberate them after revolution. They must have their own separate organizations and their own power base. Young too supports the formation of autonomous women's groups but thinks that there are no issues concerning women that do not involve an attack on capitalism as well.

As far as her strategy is concerned, there is no need for a vanguard party to make revolution successful and women's groups must be independent of the socialist organization. Jagger puts this clearly when she writes that,

> [T]he goal of socialist feminism is to overthrow the whole social order of what some call capitalist patriarchy in which women suffer alienation in every aspect of their lives. The socialist feminist strategy is to support some "mixed" socialist organisations. But also form independent women's groups and ultimately an independent women's movement committed with equal dedication to the destruction of capitalism and the destruction of male dominance. The women's movement will join in coalitions with other revolutionary movements, but it will not give up its organizational independence.

They have taken up agitations and propaganda on issues that are anti-capitalist and against male domination. Since they identify the mode of reproduction (procreation, etc.) as the base for the

oppression of women, they have included it in the Marxist concept of the base of society. So they believe that many of the issues being taken up like the struggle against rape, sexual harassment, and for free abortion, are both anti-capitalist and a challenge to male domination. They have supported the efforts for developing a women's culture which encourages the collective spirit. They also support the efforts to build alternative institutions, like health care facilities and encourage community living or some form of a midway arrangement. In this they are close to radical feminists. But unlike radical feminists whose aim is that these facilities should enable women to move away from patriarchal, white culture into their own haven, socialist feminists do not believe such a retreat is possible within the framework of capitalism. In short, socialist feminists see it as a means of organizing and helping women, while radical feminists see it as a goal of completely separating from men.

Socialist feminists, like radical feminists, believe that efforts to change the family structure, which is what they call the cornerstone of women's oppression, must start now. Thus, they have been encouraging community living, or some sort of mid way arrangements where people try to overcome the gender division in work sharing, looking after children, and lesbians and heterosexual people can live together. Although they are aware that this is only partial, and success cannot be achieved within a capitalist society, they believe it is important to make the effort. Radical feminists assert that such arrangements are 'living in revolution.' That means this act is revolution itself. Socialist feminists are aware that transformation will not come slowly, that there will be periods of upheaval, but these are preparations. This is their priority.

Both radical feminists and socialist feminists have come under strong attack from black women for essentially ignoring their situation and concentrating all their analysis on the situation of white, middle class women and theorizing from it. For example, Joseph points out the condition of black slave women who were never considered 'feminine.' In the fields and plantations, in labour and in punishment, they were treated equal to men. The black

family could never stabilize under conditions of slavery and black men were hardly in a condition to dominate their women, slaves that they were. Also, later on, black women have had to work for their living and many of them have been domestic servants in rich white houses. The harassment they faced there, the long hours of work make their experience very different from that of white women. Hence, they are not in agreement with the concept of family being the source of oppression (for blacks, it was, instead, a source of resistance to racism), on dependence of women on men (black women can hardly be dependent on black men given the high rates of unemployment among them) and the reproduction role of women (they reproduced white labour and children through their domestic employment in white houses). Racism is an all pervasive situation for them and this brings them in alliance with black men rather than with white women. Further, white women themselves have been involved in perpetuating racism, about which feminists should introspect, she argues. Initially, black women hardly participated in the feminist movement, although in the 1980s slowly a black feminist movement has developed which is trying to combine the struggle against male domination with the struggle against racism and capitalism.

These and similar criticisms from women of other third world countries has given rise to a trend within feminism called global feminism. In this context, postmodernism has also gained a following among feminists.

Critique

Basically if we see the main theoretical writings of socialist feminists we can see that they are trying to combine Marxist theory with radical feminist theory and their emphasis is on proving that women's oppression is the central and moving force in the struggle within society. The theoretical writings have come predominantly from Europe and the U.S. and are focused on the situation in advanced capitalist society. All their analysis is related to capitalism in those countries. Even their understanding

of Marxism is limited to the study of dialectics of a capitalist economy. There is a tendency to universalize the experience and structure of advanced capitalist countries to the whole world. For example, in South Asia and China, which have had a long feudal period, we see that women's oppression in that period was much more severe.

The Maoist perspective on the women's question in India also identifies patriarchy as an institution that has been the cause of women's oppression throughout class society. But it does not identify it as a separate system with its own laws of motion. The understanding is that patriarchy takes different content and forms in different societies depending on their level of development and the specific history and condition of that particular society; that it has been and is being used by the ruling classes to serve their interests. Hence, there is no separate enemy for patriarchy. The same ruling classes, whether imperialists, capitalists, or feudal, and the state that they control, are the enemies of women because they uphold and perpetuate the patriarchal family, gender discrimination and the patriarchal ideology within that society. They get the support of ordinary men undoubtedly who imbibe the patriarchal ideas, which are the ideas of the ruling classes and oppress women. But the position of ordinary men and those of the ruling classes cannot be compared.

Socialist feminists, by emphasizing reproduction, are underplaying the importance of the role of women in social production. The crucial question is that without women having control over the means of production and over the means of producing necessities and wealth how can their subordination ever be ended? *This is not only an economic question, but also a question of power, a political question.* Although this can be considered in the context of the gender-based division of labour, in practice, the emphasis is on relations within the heterosexual family and on the ideology of patriarchy. On the other hand, the Marxist perspective stresses on women's role in social production and that their withdrawal from playing a significant role in social production has been the basis for their subordination in class society. So we are concerned with

how the division of labour, relations to the means of production and labour itself in a particular society are organized to understand how the ruling classes exploited women and forced their subordination. Patriarchal norms and rules helped to intensify the exploitation of women and reduce the value of their labour.

Supporting the argument given by Firestone, socialist feminists are stressing on women's role in reproduction to build their entire argument. They follow Engels in that:

> According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is of a twofold character; on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organisation under which the people of a particular epoch live is determined by both kinds of production. (*Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*)

On the basis of this quotation they make the point that in their analysis and study they only concentrated on production, while ignoring reproduction altogether. Engels' quote gives the basic framework of a social formation. Historical materialism, our study of history, makes it clear that any one aspect cannot be isolated or even understood without taking the other into account. The fact is that throughout history women have played an important role in social production and to ignore this and assert that women's role in the sphere of reproduction is the central aspect and it should be the main focus is, in fact, accepting the argument of the patriarchal ruling classes that women's social role in reproduction is more important than anything else.

The socialist feminists also distort and render meaningless the concept of base and superstructure in their analysis. Firestone says that (and so do socialist feminists like Hartmann) reproduction is a part of the base. It follows from this that all social relations connected with it must be considered as part of the base — the family, other man-woman relations, etc. If all the economic as

well as reproductive relations are part of the base, then the concept of base becomes so broad that it loses its meaning altogether and cannot be an analytic tool as it is meant to be.

Gender-based division of labour has been a useful tool to analyze the patriarchal bias in the economic structure of particular societies. But the socialist feminists, who are putting forward the concept of gender division of labour as being more useful than private property, are confusing the point, historically and analytically. The first division of labour was between men and women. And it was due to natural or biological causes — the role of women in bearing children. But this did not mean inequality between them — the domination of one sex over another. Women's share in the survival of the group was very important – the food gathering they did, the discovery they made of growing and tending plants, the domestication of animals was essential for the survival and advance of the group. At the same time, further division of labour took place which was not sex based. The invention of new tools, knowledge of domesticating animals, of pottery, of metal work, of agriculture, all these and more, contributed towards a more complex division of labour. All this has to be seen in the context of the overall society and its structure — the development of clan and kinship structures, of interaction and clashes with other groups and of control over the means of production that were being developed. With the generation of surplus, with wars and the subjugation of other groups who could then be made to labour, the process of the withdrawal of women from social production appears to have begun. Thus, the concentration of the means of production and the surplus in the hands of clan/tribe heads began which became manifest as male domination. Whether this control of the means of production remained communal in form, or it developed in the form of private property, whether by then class formation had taken place fully or not, was different for different societies. We have to study the particular facts of specific societies. Based on the information available in his time, Engels traced the process in Western Europe in ancient times; similarly, it is for us to trace this process in our own respective societies.

The full-fledged institutionalization of patriarchy could only come later, that is, the defence of or the ideological justification for the withdrawal of women from social production and their role being limited to reproduction in monogamous relationships, could only come after the full development of class society and the emergence of the state.

Hence, the mere fact of the gender division of labour does not explain the inequality. To assert that gender-based division of labour is the basis of women's oppression rather than class, still begs the question. If we do not find some social and material reasons for the inequality, then we are forced into accepting the argument that men have an innate drive for power and domination. Such an argument is self-defeating because it means that there is no point in struggling for equality. It can never be realized. The task of bearing children, by itself, cannot be the reason for this inequality, for as we have said earlier it was a role that was lauded and welcomed in primitive society. Other material reasons had to arise that was the cause, which the radical and socialist feminists are not probing.

In the realm of ideology, socialist feminists have done detailed analyses exposing the patriarchal culture in their society, for instance, the myth of motherhood. But the one-sided emphasis by some of them on ideological and psychological factors makes them lose sight of the wider socio-economic structure on which this ideology and psychology is based.

On the questions of organization, the socialist feminists are trailing the radical feminists and anarcha-feminists. They have clearly placed their strategy, but this is not a strategy for socialist revolution. It is a completely reformist strategy because it does not address the question of how socialism can be brought about. If, as they believe, socialist/communist parties should not do it, then the women's groups should bring forth a strategy of how they will overthrow the rule of the monopoly bourgeoisie. They are restricting their practical activities to organizing small groups, building alternative communities, of general propaganda and mobilizing around specific demands. This is a form of

economistic practice. These activities in themselves are useful to organize people at the basic level but they are not enough to overthrow capitalism and to take the process of women's liberation ahead. This is a major organizing work in confrontation with the state — its intelligence and armed power. Socialist feminists have left this question aside, in a sense left it to the very revisionist and revolutionary parties that they criticize. Hence, their entire orientation is reformist, to undertake limited organizing and propaganda within the present system. A large number of the theoreticians of the radical feminist and socialist feminist trend have been absorbed in high paying, middle class jobs, especially in the universities and colleges and this is reflected in the elitism that has crept into their writing and the distance from mass movement. It is also reflected in the realm of theory. One Marxist feminist states, 'By the 1980s however, many socialist and Marxist feminists working in or near universities and colleges not only had been thoroughly integrated into the professional middle class but had also abandoned historical materialism's class analysis...'

POSTMODERNISM AND FEMINISM

The criticism of feminists from non-white women led a section of feminists to move in the direction of multiculturalism and postmodernism.

Taking off from the existentialist writer Simone de Beauvoir that the woman is the 'other,' postmodernist feminists are glorifying the position of the Other because it is supposed to give insights into the dominant culture of which she is not a part. Women can therefore be critical of the norms, values and practices imposed on everyone by the dominant culture. They believe that studies should be oriented from the values of those who are being studied, the subalterns, who have been dominated. Postmodernism has been popular among academics. They believe that no fixed category exists, in this case, woman. The self is fragmented by various identities — by sex, class, caste, ethnic community and race. These

various identities have a value in themselves. Thus, this becomes one form of *cultural relativism*. Hence, for example, in reality, no such category of 'women' exists. Woman can be one of the identities of the self, but there are others too. There will be a Dalit woman, a Dalit woman prostitute, an upper caste woman, and such like. Since each identity has a value in itself, no significance is given to values towards which all can strive. Looked at in this way there is no scope to find common ground for collective political activity. The concept of woman helped to bring women together and act collectively. But this kind of identity politics divides more than it unites. The unity is on the narrowest basis. Postmodernists celebrate *difference* and *identity* and they criticize Marxism for focusing on one 'totality' — class — and for being 'essentialist.'

Further, postmodernism does not believe that language (western languages at least) reflects reality. They believe that identities are 'constructed' through 'discourse.' Thus, in their understanding, language constructs reality. Therefore, many of them have focused on 'deconstruction' of language. In effect, this leaves a person with nothing — there is no material reality about which we can be certain. This is a form of extreme subjectivism. Postmodernist feminists have focused on psychology and language. Postmodernism, in agreement with the famous French philosopher Foucault, is against what they call 'relations of power.' But this concept of power is diffused and not clearly defined. Who wields the power? According to Foucault, it is only at the local level, so resistance to power can only be local. Is this not the basis of NGO functioning which unites people against some local corrupt power and makes adjustments with the power above, the central and state governments. After all, postmodernism is sceptical of any ideology or 'large projects' or 'grand narratives' like humanism, enlightenment and Marxism and see the reality as fragmented 'little narratives.' In effect, postmodernism is extremely divisive because it promotes fragmentation between people and gives relative importance to identities without any theoretical framework to understand the historical reasons for identity formation and to link the various

identities. So we can have a gathering of NGOs like World Social Forum, where everyone celebrates their identity — women, prostitutes, gays, lesbians, tribals, Dalits, etc., but there is no theory bringing them under an overall understanding, a common strategy. Each group will resist its own oppressors, as it perceives them. With such an argument, logically, there can be no organization; at best, it can be spontaneous organization at the local level and temporary coalitions.

To advocate organization according to their understanding means to reproduce power — hierarchy, oppression. Essentially, they leave the individual to resist for himself or herself, and are against consistent organized resistance and armed resistance. Carole Stabile (1997), a Marxist feminist has put it well when she says,

> Anti-organisational bias is part and parcel of the postmodernist package. To organize any but the most provisional and spontaneous coalitions is, for postmodernist social theorists and feminists alike, to reproduce oppression, hierarchies, and forms of intractable dominance. The fact that capitalism is extremely organized makes little difference, because one resists against a multivalent diffuse form of power. Nor, as Joreen pointed out over two decades ago, does it seem to matter that structurelessness produces its own forms of tyranny. Thus, in place of any organized politics, postmodernist social theory offers us variations on pluralism, individualism, individualized agency, and ultimately individualized solutions that have never — and will never — be capable of resolving structural problems.

It is not surprising that capitalism, imperialism, etc., do not mean anything more than one more form of power. While postmodernism in its developed form may not to be found in a semi-feudal, semi-colonial society like India, yet many bourgeois feminists have been influenced by it. Their vehement criticism of revolutionary and revisionist organizations on grounds of bureaucracy and hierarchy and the total disregard of class issues in the women's movement also reflect the influence of postmodernism in recent times.

SUMMING UP

We have presented in brief, the main theoretical trends in the feminist movements as they have developed in the West in the contemporary period. While the debate with Marxism, and within Marxism itself, dominated the 1970s, in the 1980s cultural feminism with its separatist agenda and focus on the cultural aspects of women's oppression came to the fore. Issues of sexual choice and the reproductive role of women came to dominate the debate and discussions in feminist circles. Many socialist feminists too have given significance to these questions although not in the extreme form that cultural feminists have. The transformation of the heterosexual family became the main call of the bourgeois feminist movement and the more active sections among them tried to bring it into practice as well. Although many of them may have envisaged a change in the entire social system in this way; in fact, it became a reformist approach which they have tried to theorize. Postmodernism made its influence felt in the 1990s. Yet, in the late 1990s, Marxism was again becoming an important theory within feminist analysis.

This critical overview of the way in which the feminist movement (particularly, the radical feminist and socialist feminist trends) theoretically analyzed women's oppression, the solutions they have offered and the strategies they evolved to take the movement forward, shows us that flaws in their theory have led to advocating solutions which have taken the movement into a dead end. In spite of the tremendous interest generated by the movement and the wide support from women who were seeking to understand their own dissatisfactions and problems, the movement could not develop into a consistent broad-based movement including not only the middle classes but also women from the working class and ethnically oppressed sections. The main weaknesses in their theory and strategies were:

1. Seeking roots of women's oppression in their reproductive role. Since women's role in reproduction is determined by biology, it is something that cannot be changed.

Instead of determining the material, social causes for the origin of women's oppression they instead focused on a biologically given factor thereby falling into the trap of biological determinism.

2. In relation with her biological role, focusing on the patriarchal nuclear family as the basic structure in society in which her oppression is rooted. Thus, their emphasis was on opposing the heterosexual family as the main basis of women's oppression. As a result, the wider socio-economic structure in which the family exists and which shapes the family was ignored.
3. Making the contradiction between men and women as the main contradiction. Concentrating their attention on changing the sex/gender system — the gender roles that men and women are trained to play. This meant concentrating on the cultural, psychological aspects of social life while ignoring the wider political and economic forces that give rise to and defend patriarchal culture.
4. Emphasizing the psychological/personality differences between men and women as biological and advocating separatism for women. Overemphasis on sexual liberation for women: separate groups, separate live-in arrangements and lesbianism. Essentially, this meant that this section of the women's movement confined itself to small groups and could not appeal to or mobilize the mass of women.
5. Falling into the trap of imperialism and its promotion of pornography, sex-tourism, etc., by emphasizing the need for liberating women from sexual repression. Or, in the name of equal opportunities, supporting women's recruitment into the U.S. Army before the Iraq War (2003).
6. Organizational emphasis on opposition to hierarchy and domination and focus on small consciousness-raising groups and alternative activity, which is self-determined. Opposing the mobilization and organizing of large mass of oppressed women.
7. Ignoring or being biased against the contributions made by the socialist movements and socialist revolutions in Russia, China, etc., in bringing about a change in the condition of large sections of women.

How incorrect theoretical analysis and wrong strategies can affect a movement can be clearly seen in the case of the feminist movement. Not understanding women's oppression as linked to the wider exploitative socio-economic and political structure, to imperialism, they have sought solutions within the imperialist system itself. These solutions have at best benefited a section of middle class women but left the vast mass of oppressed and exploited women far from liberation. The struggle for women's liberation cannot be successful in isolation from the struggle to overthrow the imperialist system itself.

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDIA IN THE LIGHT OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL TRENDS

Liberalism in the First Phase

In the colonial period, from the 19th century itself, liberal ideas came to influence sections of the intelligentsia in different parts of India, particularly, in Western India and in the South, which led to the emergence of the social reform movement. Naturally, the plight of women became one of the important issues around which they took up education and propaganda. But the specificity of the social conditions of India, in which the caste system has been an important institution of oppression and exploitation made the social reform movement also differentiated. Since most of them were drawn from the upper castes they took up issues primarily affecting women within the upper castes, like *sati, purdah,* child marriage and widow re-marriage. During the British period, initially, it was male social reformers like Gopal Krishna

Gokhale, M.G. Ranade, Agarkar, Veerashivalingu, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Ram Mohan Roy and Keshab Chandra Sen, who were inspired by liberal philosophy in their campaign to improve the conditions of women. They advocated education for women. However, they did not advocate equal rights in all spheres but sought to ameliorate the more cruel customs like permanent widowhood.

At the same time, among the middle castes and the Untouchables too there was an awakening which led to the rise of intellectuals from amongst them. The approach taken by Jyotiba Phule was much more democratic because he took up the question of caste oppression and linked the women's question to the caste system. They demanded equal rights for all castes and for women. Women social reformers of this earlier period like Tarabai Shinde, Pandita Ramabai, Savitribai Phule, Ramabai Ranade and Muthulaxmi Reddy also took a more democratic stand challenging women's subordination within religion and within the family. They strove to spread education among women, help women in distress, and take up employment. Yet their activity remained basically within the framework of social reform.

In the Indian context, since the battle against feudal customs and values took place under a colonial regime, with the partial support of the same colonial power which supported feudal classes, it could not take on a thoroughgoing democratic approach. Further, the main bourgeois and petty-bourgeois forces leading the reform movement themselves were not in favour of breaking the feudal structure from its roots. We find that liberal ideology was adopted in its narrowest sense. In the post-1947 period, India has still not seen a total democratic transformation, due to which women are still not accepted as independent beings with equal rights. Anomalies in the laws deny women equal rights; oppressive feudal customs like purdah and sati still continue, and it is possible only for women from upper and middle classes to be active on issues of discrimination against women and for women's rights with a liberal outlook.

When the masses were mobilized into the anti-British movement after the First World War, women too started getting mobilized for their demands. Thus, the women's movement emerged from within the anti-British movement. The upper sections of this movement were inspired by liberal ideas. Leading women like Mridula Sarabhai, organizations like the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and the Anjuman Khawateen-E-Islam, were gatherings of women from the upper and middle classes and they campaigned and petitioned for women's rights to property, for rights within marriage, and for the right to vote, etc. They did not question the social structure or link the question of women's secondary status to the wider social structure. Their emphasis was on gaining rights for women through the law. In the present period, the philosophy of liberalism governs the functioning of established women's organizations and forums like the National Commission of Women, the Gandhian women's organizations like SEWA and of those their leaders like Ila Bhatt.

The Second, Contemporary Phase

Women from the toiling classes like workers and peasants, and students also came to be mobilized in large numbers under the influence of socialist and Marxist ideology. They actively participated in struggles against landlord oppression and the British. Women's organizations, with membership in lakhs, were set up in many parts of the country, especially, in Bengal, Punjab and Andhra Pradesh. In the first phase of the women's movement in India in the first part of the 20th century both liberal and Marxist trends were influential among women.

In the second phase, from the 1970s onwards, the situation became more complex and influences much more varied. The mobilization of the masses of women took place on issues that emerged from the contradictions that racked Indian society — unemployment, price rise, corruption and continued severe exploitation of the rural poor peasants and landless, tribal and non-tribal, by landlords. Women were mobilized under the leadership of

the Naxalites, socialists and the revisionist parties like the CPI and CPM. The main leadership of the independent urban women's groups that emerged in the mid-1970s came from among educated women who had been active in various Left (revisionist, revolutionary and independent) groups or parties. They were influenced by the women's movement in the West and the debates that cropped up there. The issue of violence on women — rape, dowry deaths, sati, eve teasing, sexist portrayal of women in the media and domestic violence — all came to be focused upon by the urban women's movement. These groups, the individual members and their activities, initially got support from the mass media and, hence, their impact was widespread.

The urban women's movement emerged spontaneously, independent of any political party. Under the impact of the western women's movement the groups also stressed the importance of being autonomous from political parties. The predominant influence on the autonomous women's movement was that of socialist feminism. The activities and thinking of these groups and individuals has also undergone much change over the past 25 years. They have responded differently to the responses to the various campaigns undertaken by them. The growth of the right wing parties and organizations, particularly, the BJP, VHP and the Bajrang Dal has affected the urban women's movement. The mobilization of large numbers of women by these groups in support of the sati, in the campaign to demolish the Babri Masjid, and even in support of the pogroms against Muslims in Gujarat made the women's movement realize that merely sisterhood cannot unite all women. The nature of activities undertaken by the urban groups changed towards the end of the 1980s with less focus on propaganda among and mobilization of the mass of women, and more emphasis on documentation, influencing the media, lobbying for changes in laws, etc., helping women in distress. The impact of socialist feminism is much wider than these groups because it has diffused among women and men in the academic community, and among broader sections of women intellectuals.

The impact of socialist feminism can be clearly seen in the manner in which issues are taken up. The focus of these groups has been on patriarchy, particularly, violence within the family, and they are suspicious of all organized politics, including revolutionary parties. But they have consistently opposed right wing politics and exposed its anti-women character through their writings and research. They have also played an important role in bringing out the brutality of these parties and the state in riots and pogroms and their impact on women, whether the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi in 1984 or the Gujarat killings in 2002. But they have not played as significant a role in supporting the many mass movements that have emerged in the past two decades in the rural areas in which women have played an active role and have also suffered severe state repression. The pacifism that was promoted by cultural feminists is influential among feminists (including non-Gandhians) and hence we find a large section of them opposed to militant forms of struggle and against the armed struggle of the oppressed.

Gail Omvedt has been an important writer in India who has theorized on the women's question within the broad framework of socialist feminism. Unlike most other feminists, Gail Omvedt has always given importance to mass movements and especially the rural women's movement (*We will Smash this Prison*) and her writings have been given importance by those who are striving for revolution. In her widely read booklet, *Violence against Women, New Movements and New Theories*, written in 1990 and reprinted in 2000 also, she has focused on three new theories — the analysis and program given by Shetkari Sangathana led by Sharad Joshi, the analysis by Sharad Patil and Vandana Shiva's analysis and support for the Chipko movement. She considers them as organic intellectuals who have made significant contribution to the women's cause in India. Sharad Joshi initiated massive mobilization of peasant women from 1987 to 1990 under the banner of the Shetkari Mahila Agadhi (Peasant Women's Front) in Maharashtra and pushed for women's active participation in local elections to panchayats and zilla parishads. Sharad Patil, formerly a CPM district

leader, did a detailed study based on ancient texts into the origins of caste in India — *Dasa Shudra Slavery*, and within that traced the emergence of women's oppression. He believed that Marxism alone cannot adequately analyze Indian history and the specificity of caste requires us to also adopt the theoretical approach developed by Phule and Ambedkar. (He has recently repudiated this theoretical fusion.) Vandana Shiva's eco-feminist views have also been analyzed by her. Having presented their basic points and their strengths and weaknesses, she points out that all of them give significance to the role of violence in subjugating women as against the 'traditional Marxist' explanation which deals only with economic causes like the production of surplus and the rise of private property.

Gail Omvedt then goes on to giving her own analysis about the origins of women's oppression. Omvedt believes that Engels' analysis oversimplified the origins of the oppression of women as emerging with the development of class society with private property and the state. According to her, we 'reject the simplifications of the traditional Marxist tendency to see violence as only an epiphenomenona... and have to throw out the interpretation of "class" and "class struggle" in terms of private property and the centrality of a factory-based largely male proletariat...' She also rejects the simplification of radical feminism that male domination was associated with hunting as the earliest form of exploitation and violence.

According to her, historically, although settled agricultural societies appeared from about 10000–8000 BC and there was production of surplus, yet, for a long period there was no evidence of violence, class exploitation or patriarchal domination. She follows Gerda Lerner's study that patriarchal domination is visible with the rise of the first states (3000 BC). But she says that there is no evidence that private property or ownership of land preceded the formation of these states, there is no separate land owning or slave owning class whose power is based on the ownership of property. She believes that these earliest states were close to the Asiatic mode of production and there was a 'state

class' which extracted surplus from the peasantry which was still not differentiated into classes. Classes emerged later, and Engels' analysis fits the states that appeared almost 2000 years later in Greece, Rome and Magadha (Bihar). From this she concludes that the 'overall historical and archaeological evidence backs up the stress on the autonomous role of force and violence found in Shetkari Sangathana's theory and other recent theories.' In that ancient period the organized and legitimated violence of the state was central to the development of looting, economic exploitation and patriarchy. Then she goes on to add that it is also important in the Indian context to incorporate the role of caste in the development of state domination, exploitation and patriarchy. Further, in current capitalism and imperialism, and their link to ecological destruction, there is a need to include the concerns of eco-feminists.

Finally, Omvedt adds that the dialectics of sex, the insights of radical feminists too need to be incorporated in a holistic analysis. Thus, according to her, the question of women's oppression is related to basic conditions that include, the 'control of property and means of production, control over political power and the means of violence, control over their own bodies and the means of reproduction,' and all these have appeared on the agenda of the women's movement at present. The traditional left and urban feminists are not tackling any of these questions properly and each of them is being taken up by different movements. She believes that old theories, ideas and conventional methods are being challenged. Also, according to her, *the liberation struggle is not simply one of mobilizing an army to capture state power and establish the socialist society, but of changing individuals as much as transforming the collective movements against exploitation themselves.* This is being done, not by the old left or the urban feminists but by movements that are emerging from the depths of the exploitative and destructive social order, the movements of the peasants, Dalits and Adivasis.

Omvedt's perspective, while bringing out some important points on what the women's movement needs to take up, is, in fact, reformist rather than transformative. While she stresses the

importance of mass movements and especially of the rural movements in the Indian context, she makes no distinction between reform and revolution. In fact, revolution is not on her agenda at all. While her analysis on the origins of patriarchy deals with the role of the state in the ancient period, she does not deal with the state in the contemporary situation at all. Although she raises the question of the role of the state in the present incidence of violence on women she does not tackle the point at all. While the caste-class equations in rural India remain as they are, and with the extreme competitiveness within ruling class politics, how effective can women be in using these institutions to reduce violence against them? What have been the experiences of the past decade and a half in the experiment of women participating in Zilla Parishads and Panchayats? The question of political power is certainly crucial but women's liberation cannot be taken forward by women gaining seats in the institutions of power in the present exploitative, corrupt set-up. Omvedt's unwillingness to consider the concrete and difficult but necessary task of revolution, the overthrow of this state, rather, her rejection of this task, makes her whole analysis no different from that of liberal reformers. She also ignores the widespread movement of the Maoists in India and the part being played by women, particularly Adivasi women in it.

Omvedt has used the term traditional left to refer to all those who claim to uphold the Marxist analysis, particularly the communist parties. This is problematic because by using such an unscientific and sweeping term, Omvedt places into one basket Marxists of various hues, the Trotskyites, Maoists, CPM type revisionists, etc. After Engels' pioneering work, revolutionary Marxists around the world have taken many steps to tackle women's oppression in the course of revolutionary movements and also after the revolution. In this context, the efforts made in China during the revolutionary movement and after, the formulations made by Mao, the theorizing during the cultural revolution and the practice initiated in that period, all that has to be taken into account before rejecting the 'simplifications of Marxism.' The mechanical

interpretation and backwardness of some Indian Marxists on this question cannot be used to reject Marxism itself. This kind of selective use of history does not aid the women's cause. The fact of the matter is that Omvedt emphasizes the role of violence in the subjugation of women, but she is unable to answer the question that arises from it — violence for what? If she replies for reproductive control, the question still arises, reproductive control for what purpose? Engels' formulation was extremely complex — he tried to search for the material causes for women's oppression within history and for this he interwove the economic (surplus, classes), the social (kinship, family) and the political factors (the rise of the state) together. The state is the instrument of violence, and it is necessary for subjugation.

Periyar's views and Ambedkarism have also influenced the understanding of the women's question in India. A large number of women from the Dalit castes have been mobilized by organizations that profess Ambedkarism, and it has gained adherents among a section of academics as well in the past decade. Ambedkar was deeply influenced by liberal philosophy and hence he actively strove to gain equality for the Dalits and women in India. The burning of the Manusmriti, the framing of the Hindu Code Bill (which was to give Hindu women rights in marriage, property, adoption, etc.) were the means by which he tried to highlight the plight of women in India. In the specific context of caste oppression in India, of which Dalits and women are the main sufferers, Ambedkar studied the source of caste oppression and its origins. In his works, *Who were the Shudras?*, he concluded that Hindu religion as developed by the Brahmins is responsible for the degraded condition of women and therefore campaigned to expose the essentially iniquitous nature of the religion. Periyar too exposed the Brahminical traditions that denied women equal status. Although this has meant that the focus of attack is on the traditional culture and the material conditions tend to be given less importance, yet, the link between caste and women's oppression was first clearly articulated by the non-Brahmin movement in India.

While the influence of Gandhism was marginal when the women's movement re-emerged in the 1970s in India, but later, in the 1990s, it has gained strong proponents in various well known women thinkers like Madhu Kishwar and Vandana Shiva. There are considerable differences among them but both stress on the importance of the non-violent method and are glorifying the pre-colonial traditions and the village community life. While Shiva has upheld the *prakriti* principle which showed women as an active force in relation to nature, Madhu Kishwar has been supporting the Indian tradition and seeking elements within it which are empowering of women. She tends to defend tradition in all its aspects. Hence, she has been critical of women's organizations that have attacked anti-women traditions like sati. According to her, we need to make a distinction between the forced immolation of widows, which is a criminal act, and the sati tradition which was a celebration of women's power and spiritual superiority. Kishwar has emphasized that through the principle of self-sacrifice and loyalty too women gained considerable support and clout within the family and community. She interprets the popularity of Sita as an ideal woman and wife too from the same perspective. The feudal ruling classes developed this patriarchal culture to ensure the continued subjugation of women. By internalizing these values women have sought to gain the approval of society — meaning, the dominant sections of the village or community. Behaviour based on this kind of internalization of patriarchal values could only have led to an illusion of power for women, which made their real enslavement invisible. Kishwar's uncritical advocacy of the tradition fits into the postmodernist approach of hailing the local and emphasizing the question of identity. It goes against the basic interests of the mass of women who are oppressed by the feudal traditions that are still dominating and denied even their right to life by these very traditions and attitudes. By advocating non-violence as an absolute principle, they are denying women the right to choose the form of struggle that will take the struggle for liberation forward. Both Madhu Kishwar and Gail Omvedt are direct supporters of globalization. Flying in the face of facts, both are of the view that the WTO regime will give opportunities to the peasantry, women, Dalits, etc.

NGOs that are working among slum and rural women are also organizing women within the country. But a major section of them is involved in directly running the government sponsored projects like self-help groups, micro-credit and community organizing. Most of these activities have been carried out with the help of either funds from the government or from foreign donors, like Church organizations, foundations, etc. They are not part of the women's movement but have taken the language and culture (songs, etc.) of the women's movement while implementing the policies of the central and state governments among women. In this way, they are trying to pre-empt the growth of an independent women's movement, and prevent women from joining the revolutionary struggle. A small section amongst them is also using the language of radical feminism to organize prostitutes and campaign for the legalization of prostitution in India. In this way, they are directly serving the interests of imperialists to develop a sex industry and sex tourism.

The revolutionary women's movement, under the theoretical guidance of Marxism, as it has been developed through experience by Lenin and Mao, has been successful in organizing women of the most oppressed castes and communities, the rural poor peasants and landless labourers. The movement has taken heed of the issues raised by the international women's movement and considers the fight against patriarchy an integral part of the new democratic revolution. By studying the above trends critically, taking the positive points and integrating them with its theory and practice, can it realize its goal of liberating the vast masses of Indian women while successfully completing the revolution?

The Revolutionary Women's Movement in India

As we approach 8 March, early in the dawn of this new century, remarkable developments are taking place on the women's front in India. Deep in the forests and plains of central India, in the backward villages of Andhra Pradesh and up in the hills among the tribals of the state, in the forests and plains of Bihar and Jharkhand, women are getting organized actively to break the shackles of feudal patriarchy and to make the new democratic revolution. It is a liberation movement of the peasant women in rural India, a part of the people's war being waged by the oppressed peasantry under revolutionary leadership. For the past few years thousands of women are gathering in hundreds of villages to celebrate 8 March. Women are gathering together to march through the streets of a small town like Narayanpur to oppose the Miss World beauty contest, they are marching with their children through the *tehsil* towns and market villages in backward Bastar to demand proper schooling for their children. They are blocking roads to protest against rape cases, and confronting the police to demand that the sale of liquor be banned. And hundreds of young women are becoming guerrilla

This article was first published under the pen-name of 'Avanti' in the *People's March* issue of March 2002.

fighters in the army of the oppressed, throwing off the shackles of their traditional life of drudgery. Dressed in fatigues, a red star on their olive green caps and a rifle on their shoulders, these young women are brimming with the confidence that the fight against patriarchy is integrally linked to the fight against the ruling classes of this semi-feudal, semi-colonial India and are equipping themselves with the military knowledge to take on the third largest army of the exploiters. This is a social and political awakening among the poorest of the poor, the women in rural India. It is a scenario that has emerged far from the unseeing eyes of the bourgeois media, far from the flash and glitter of TV cameras. They are the signs of a transformation coming into the lives of the rural poor as they participate in the great struggle for revolution.

But this revolutionary women's movement has not emerged overnight, nor has it emerged spontaneously merely from propaganda. The women's movement has grown alongside the growth of armed struggle. Contrary to general opinion, the launching of armed struggle in the early 1980s by the communist revolutionary forces in various parts of the country, the militant struggle against feudal oppression, gave the confidence to peasant women to participate in struggles in large numbers and then to stand up and fight for their rights. Women who constitute the most oppressed among the oppressed, poor peasant and landless peasant women who have lacked not only an identity and voice but also a name, have become activists for the women's organizations in their villages and guerrilla fighters. Thus, with the spread and growth of the armed struggle, the women's mobilization and their organization have also grown, leading to the emergence of this revolutionary women's movement, one of the strongest and most powerful in the country today. Yet it is unrecognized and ignored, a ploy of the ruling classes that will try to suppress any news and acknowledgement as long as it can.

BACKGROUND

The vast majority of women live in villages weighed down by feudal oppression that takes many forms: intense economic

exploitation, crude and brutal social oppression, a culture that not only denies them independence but also denigrates them in all possible manners. Hence, women from the oppressed classes have a stake in the destruction of the feudal rural order and have come forward to do so.

In the anti-feudal peasant struggles in the past century women have played a very militant and active role. In the Tebhaga struggle in the 1940s, the participation of women was very high and *Nari Bahinis* were formed for self-defence to counter state repression. In the Telengana peasant uprising from 1947 to 1951, too, women participated in large numbers and peasant and tribal women became guerrilla squad members. There are many accounts of the bravery and tenacity displayed by these women in the face of encirclement by the Indian Army; in the face of torture and sure death. Thus, when the Naxalbari uprising took place in 1967 in North Bengal under the leadership of Charu Majumdar, it is not surprising that poor peasant women and girls participated with full enthusiasm. In the Srikakulam struggle, the participation of women was remarkable. Women became commanders of the armed squads and struck terror in the hearts of the moneylenders and landlords in the area. The armed struggle, in fact, began after an attack by the *goondas* of a landlord when the women were on their way to participate in a peasant conference. The names of the women martyred in this struggle, women who preferred to be felled by the bullets of the armed police rather than surrender, still shine bright — Nirmala, Ankamma and Saraswati. Thus, these women defied their families and society to take on roles which directly challenged their traditionally acceptable identities in society. They displayed tremendous heroism and determination to make the anti-feudal struggle a success. But the revolutionary movement at this time did not take up the conscious task of building women's organizations and taking up the struggle against manifestations of patriarchy. In the face of severe repression these movements were suppressed.

When communist revolutionaries regrouped themselves and began building up the anti-feudal peasant struggles in the late

1970s, there was a resurgence of the participation of women in the struggles. In the plains of central Bihar and in the fields and villages of Telengana (AP) the peasant movement grew like a storm. Among the first issues that the movement confronted were the feudal privileges of the landlords over the wives and daughters of the labourers working in their fields, especially of the Dalit castes. Subject to the worst form of abuses and vulgarities by the landlords' men, broken by starvation and poverty, these poor women were easy prey for the landlords and their henchmen. Many of the violent struggles in Bihar and Telengana, in the first part of the peasant movement in the 1970s and 1980s, were to end this abuse and molestation being carried on in the name of 'tradition.' These struggles provided the background for the growth of the women's movement.

In this article we are restricting our report to the movement in Andhra Pradesh and Dandakaranya.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE RURAL MOVEMENT IN ANDHRA PRADESH

The Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh remained a bastion of feudal exploitation, and many forms of patriarchal oppression related to it, until the early 1980s, when the anti-feudal struggles hit them hard and decisively. The landlord's 'sexual rights' over the wives of his labourers is only one of them. Also, under *vetti*, both the male and female labourers were expected to provide free services to the landlord and his family. The service castes too were forced to provide free labour. Child marriage was widely prevalent. So were religious practices like the *jogini* or *basavi*. A local variant of the *devadasi* cult, young girls from the lower castes were married to the gods and a girl so married could not marry any man. In effect, she was forced into prostitution.

When the anti-feudal struggles broke out in Karimnagar and Adilabad districts of Telengana in 1977, one important form of struggle was the social boycott of landlords. The labourers refused to go and work in their houses and fields. The success of the social boycott was made possible because of the active participation of

women too. Vetti came to an end in many districts of Telengana only because of these struggles. The active struggle of women also helped the formation of the Ryotu Coolie Sangham (RCS), a peasant organization. They also became members of the peasant organization. As the struggle developed, many incidents challenging the rights of the landlords in social and cultural aspects of their lives came up. After this struggle broke out the first RCS organizer to be murdered by the goons of the landlord was Laxmirajam. He was murdered because the women in his village decided to celebrate the *Batkamma* festival in their own locality rather than in the *gadi* (courtyard) of the landlord' house, as had been the tradition.

Among the other major issues taken up by the revolutionary peasant movement has been the issue of wages. Although, initially, the question of equal pay for equal work was not taken up, the struggle for an increase in the pitiably low wages was fought bitterly. The movement led to an increase in the wages for all kinds of agricultural labour, although the rates for men and women remained different, women getting less than men. The peasant struggle developed in the midst of intensive propaganda about the new democratic revolution to end feudal and imperialist exploitation.

Among the first women's organizations to be formed was that by the CPI (ML) (CP Reddy group) in Telengana under the banner of the Progressive Organization of Women (POW). Towards the end of the 1970s units of the POW were formed in villages in Karimnagar district and conferences were also organized. Later, as the work of organizing the women who rolled *beedis* (leaf cigarettes) began, they too got organized into the POW, apart from being organized in the unions which were also formed. Thus, the demands of women, especially peasant women, began to be articulated.

Women in the Telengana region and in the Eastern region of AP were also active in the land struggles undertaken by the CPI (ML) (PW). By the early 1980s itself women of the poor peasant and landless classes were clashing with the landlords and

police over the lands occupied by them. Tribal women had started displaying their militancy. In April 1980, when the police suddenly banned the tribal peasant conference at Indervalli in Adilabad district and started driving away the people who had gathered in the market, it was a tribal woman who pulled a bow against a policeman and hit him with her arrow. Gradually village level organizations of women began to emerge and they became widespread from the late 1980s. These women's groups also became targets of police repression and found it difficult to function.

VIPLAVA MAHILA SANGHAM

In areas where the revolutionary movement was strong, women took up the struggle in their localities. This became a major agitation in the beginning of the 1990s, encompassing a variety of women's organizations. Thus, the village level women's organizations formed in the various districts, as the peasant struggle developed, coalesced into the Viplava Mahila Sangham (VMS) around 1995. (In North Telangana they were initially called MVS.) This underground women's organization is the culmination of the many efforts and experiments to build the women's movement in rural Andhra Pradesh in the face of state repression. As the peasant struggle expanded from North to South Telengana, from Guntur to Rayalseema districts, so has the mobilization of women. Born and steeled within the revolutionary struggle for a new democratic society, of which the principal slogan is land to the tiller, the land struggles have and still occupy an important part in the mobilization of women. For example, in December 1997 the peasant association Ryotu Coolie Sangham (RCS), in Ainool village (Mehboobnagar district) decided to occupy 200 acres of land controlled by Ramachandra Reddy and two other landlords. Of the 300 people who took part in this campaign 100 were women. In Shalkarpeta village in the same district, the VMS supported the call of the RCS to take over 100 acres out of 200 acres belonging to a landlord. The VMS campaigned among women to prepare them to participate in the struggle. Finally, in June 1999, when a public meeting was held, over 100 women

participated. They took part in the rally and planted the red flags that they held on the land which they occupied. Similarly, in 1998, in Kovunoor village in Cuddapah district, a land struggle committee was formed to regain control of 120 acres of land illegally occupied by a landlord. The lands belonged to the SC society and village community. *It is a decision of the RCS and the VMS that when lands are taken over and distributed, women should also be given titles to the lands independently and this is being implemented wherever the revolutionary movement is able to give titles to the land.*

Wage struggles occupy another important activity for the women's movement. A campaign for equal wages for agricultural work has been taken up. In Tandra village (Mehboobnagar district), the VMS campaigned among women labourers for days to make them realize the need for and the importance of struggle. Finally, when the RCS and the VMS together gave a strike call for higher wages, it was a success. They beat the drum and began the strike. Two days later, the landlord and rich peasants came before the labourers and negotiated in public to decide on the increase in rates. Inspired by the example of Tandra, women in the surrounding villages also took up similar struggles even though in all of them no VMS units existed. The initiative of women workers too has increased with the growth of the women's organization. In June 1998, in Pallikonda village of Nizamabad district, women beedi workers faced unemployment because the owners decided to remove their local agents and thus stop local production. 300 women went to the Bhimgal Mandal centre and sat on a dharna before the beedi company office. The local agents were re-appointed and production resumed.

An account of the issues taken up by the VMS in various areas will give an idea of the variety of issues being addressed by the women's organization in AP: In Achampet area, Vakeshram village, when the husband of a woman called Autamma died her brothers refused to give her any share in the land. The VMS organized a *panchayat* and made the brother give her a 5 acre plot of land. In Warangal village of Medak district, 70 women organized a rally to protest against the rape of a Dalit woman by a landlord's

son. They thus exposed the incident. In Dubbakka village, one man Venkatagowd had promised to marry Balamma, but then deserted her and subsequently she committed suicide. The women took out a rally demanding that he be held responsible for her death. The rally was lathi-charged by the police. In another interesting case in Erpedu mandal village Cinnanuru, a village head attacked and chased away a family. In the process the 8 year-old daughter of the attacked family got lost. She was found by one Ramaswamy, who made her a bonded labourer in his house. When the VMS got wind of this they mobilized the local villagers and rescued the girl. They insisted that he pay for the months that she had worked for him. He was made to pay Rs. 12,000 to the girl for her labour. VMS units in several areas have been instrumental in organizing small symposiums on issues like dowry to educate people against it. They have also organized processions to spread awareness about dowry killings.

Besides this, VMS units have been active in mobilizing women for agitations against drought, and for facilities like roads and electricity. Especially in the summer of 1998, faced with a severe drought, women were in the forefront of the agitations for water and relief. They also led the exposure of Chandrababu Naidu's *Janmabhoomi* reform program. Hundreds of women demonstrating in Regonda mandal town shouted, 'We want water not liquor!' They have staged *rasta rokos* and *dharnas*, held meetings and processions. They have stood up in many instances against police atrocities. They have stopped police from arresting mass organization activists and peasant leaders from their villages. In Tanda village of Warangal district, for example, one day in January 1998, the police came to arrest one Mahendra Reddy on the suspicion of his being involved with the revolutionary movement. They caught him and started beating him on the way itself. About 500 men and women surrounded the police carrying sticks, broomsticks and stones. The police loaded their rifles and threatened to attack the villagers. Undeterred the women went forward and started attacking the police with whatever they had in their hands. They even tried to snatch their rifles. The shocked police ran away leaving Mahendra

Reddy behind. Twenty special batch police came back another day but were again confronted and chased away. Similarly, in Gurajala mandal 50 women stopped a police bus taking away the Sangham leader and forced the police to release him. In Durgi Mandal, Naramalapadu village twice the police arrested RCS leaders and on both the instances, under the leadership of the VMS, women staged rasta rokos and got them released. Such examples can be multiplied by the hundreds all over the state. Women themselves have faced repression for leading the struggles. They have been beaten up by the landlords' men, they have faced harassment, threats, beatings and arrests by the police. But through all of this, the women, under the influence of revolutionary politics, are forming their own organizations and fighting for the right to equality and freedom from oppression. For them the struggle for a new democratic revolution and the struggle against patriarchy are integrally linked. Hence, their feelings and dedication for the revolutionary movement. This came out most sharply in a major confrontation that developed with the police in Manala village of Nizamabad district over the martyr's column. In September 1997, 1800 men and women of Manala and neighbouring villages laboured for 18 days to build a 45 feet high column in the memory of revolutionary women martyrs. Thousands attended the inauguration of the memorial column. Hence, in June 1998, when the police came and tried to force the women and men of Manala to break the memorial, they faced stiff resistance. When the police realized that the villagers were willing to face death but would not allow the column to be broken, they were forced to retreat. Although they tried to harass the Manala women in other ways, they did not succeed.

IMPACT OF REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS ON GOND WOMEN

The impact of the revolutionary movement on tribal society, both in Dandakaranya and also in the Eastern Ghats (Vishakapatnam, Srikakulam, Vijayanagaram districts), has been even deeper. The majority of tribals in the districts of Gadhchiroli and Gondia in Maharashtra, in the Bastar division of Chattisgarh, in Balaghat in

Madhya Pradesh and in Malakangiri of Orissa belong to subtribes of the Gonds — *Madia, Muria, Pardhan, Dorla* or *Raj Gond*, although other tribes like the *Raut* and the *Halbi* also inhabit these forests. Although there are particularities in the customs, their society is patriarchal. The women play an important part in production, they labour hard and long in the fields and at home, yet, traditionally, they have no rights to the land. They do not have any social rights either. Their participation in the actual rituals is prohibited by custom; their role in community decision-making and arbitrations is also marginal. In many ways, through customs and beliefs, small and big, their subordination is reinforced. Thus, for example, although women may plough the land and even cut the harvest, they may not thresh the grain, so much so that they should not even step on the threshing floor when it is underway. Girls are not allowed to enter the main grain store of the family. During menstruation they must stay outside the village and not be seen, especially by a priest. The family has the right to decide the marriage of a girl and boy. If a girl disagrees with their decision, then she is forced to go to the house of her in-laws. In case of resistance, it is common to beat her inhumanly, tie her to a pole and carry her off, like an animal's carcass being carried after a hunt. In some areas, boys would kidnap a girl, who one of them liked, and then force her to marry him. Polygamy is common, a woman's labour being prized. Although their society does not prohibit pre-marital sex, and in some parts it is acceptable within certain institutional arrangements like the *Ghotul*, yet promiscuity is neither a practice nor is it acceptable. A girl who becomes pregnant before marriage is looked down upon. In some areas like Gadhchiroli the custom of giving up wearing the blouse once a girl is married was strictly enforced among the Madias. But it is not uncommon in other parts too for women to give up wearing the blouse once they have a child or two. Better publicized is the oppression that these women have been facing at the hands of 'outsiders' — the contractors, traders, settlers, policemen and other government employees who come into the forest, into the tribal villages and take advantage of the simplicity and innocence of

these girls to sexually exploit them and then abandon them. For them the tribal ways amount to promiscuity, which gives them the license to treat them as prostitutes.

As the squads of the People's War entered the Dandakaranya forest from 1980 onwards, they confronted these patriarchal customs and practices. As they won the trust of the people and started struggles for rights over the forest and for raising the rates for *tendu* leaf picking in the hot summer months they gained the trust and confidence of women too. Since women are at the forefront of picking tendu leaves they came into the struggle too in large numbers. They actively participated in the strikes when the contractors and the government were intransigent about their demands. Women participate in many kinds of labour in the forest. They go for bamboo-cutting for the paper mills, they work in the forest department nurseries, in road building and other such work. In all these areas of work, struggles broke out to improve the wage rates and the conditions of work and women were very active in all of these. Young girls came forward to campaign in villages, to put up posters propagating the issues and demands. Women with babes in arms walked for days to attend meetings and conferences. There were many instances when outsiders, exploiting tribal girls or molesting them, were brought by the squads before the people, forced to apologize and either leave the area or reform their behaviour. As a result the incidences of sexual exploitation in the areas of struggle went down a great deal. And when the police repression began to crush the revolutionary forces and their struggles, women learnt to face the police and help to keep the movement and the organization alive. From all these experiences the Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sangathana (KAMS) was born. While the initial units were formed in Gadhchiroli district, they gradually spread to all parts of the district and also to the neighbouring districts. Since 1995 the KAMS has spread by leaps and bounds in Bastar-Dantewada district, some parts of Bastar district and Kanker district, Gondia, Rajnandgaon and Balaghat. It later spread to Malkangiri district and here too the organization has grown rapidly.

The first District Conference of the KAMS was held in Gadhchiroli in 1991, but the Maharashtra government launched its repression campaign a few months later and all the KAMS district committee members were forced to leave their homes and operate from the forests, or become full time organizers functioning underground.

The KAMS took as its task to propagate against tribal customs which are oppressive for women. They struck a chord among young women and gained their active support and units began to be set up in village after village. But due to the repression the units found it difficult to function openly. For the police merely being a member of KAMS is a crime. In the charge sheet of a middle aged woman, arrested from Gondia district, it was alleged that she is the president of the village KAMS unit! Thus, from 1993 onwards, KAMS has grown in the midst of severe repression. Units have been set up in the Abujhmadh hills, in the areas around Kondagaon and Keskal, in the hills of Byramgadh and the plains of the Avapalli, Indravati and Pamed national parks, up to the banks of the Shabari river. Today, there are more than 500 villages with units of the KAMS, the membership varying from 5 to 20 in each village. In areas where there are more units, range committees have been formed which oversee 25 to 40 villages. Since 1997 range level conferences of the KAMS have been held in several areas and the Range Committees elected.

ISSUES AND STRUGGLES

The KAMS has actively propagated against the more oppressive customs that are resented by the women and helped women and girls who have put up resistance. For example, due to the active campaign against forced marriages one now rarely finds a case of physical force being used to pressurize a girl to marry against her wishes. If a girl brings such a case before the village unit of the KAMS or the peasant organization, the KAMS members and/or the squad talk to the family to convince them to desist from forcing their will on the girl. In fact, there are many cases in which

girls have left their families and become guerrillas in the PGA to avoid a marriage they are not interested in. Women perceive the revolutionary party as their own because they see it as a force which is helping them to become aware of their oppression and fight it. They come to the squads with their problems and expect help. Girls from the Kondagaon area approached the party to end the Ghotul system because they felt oppressed that they were forced to go and dance in the Ghotul every night even if they were not interested. The KAMS in the area took up a campaign to stop compulsory dancing. Meetings and rallies on this issue were organized. In many villages the Ghotuls were shut down or, at least, were no longer a compulsory activity for unmarried women. But taking advantage of the increased repression of the police, when it is not easy to function both for the party and the mass organization, the elders of the clan and community again forced the Ghotul activity to be restarted. In Gadhchiroli there was strong resistance from the clan elders to the campaign for wearing the blouse after marriage and it has taken some years to wear down their resistance so that now the practice is no longer widespread as before. Initially, it could be enforced only in the families of those active in the peasant organization.

For the past four to five years, the KAMS has been regularly organizing 8 March programmes around specific themes. While sometimes big programmes gathering women from many villages have been held, in some areas smaller meetings of women of five to ten villages have been organized in every range. Women squad members have presented skits in these meetings and sung songs. An 8 March meeting organized in the Indravati National Park area in 1999 was busted by the special armed police when a report of the meeting somehow leaked to them. Almost 1000 people, half of whom were women, had gathered for the meeting in the forest. A pamphlet had been brought out for the occasion. The people had to return very disappointed because the meeting could not be held. The KAMS has also organized on issues of all India significance like the 400 to 500 strong rally taken out by women in Narayanpur, to protest against the Miss World contest in Bangalore in 1997.

KAMS has also actively participated in the anti-famine marches, in election boycott campaigns, in development activity in the villages undertaken by the village itself. Representatives of the KAMS also sit in the revolutionary people's committees wherever they are formed. People's courts have been conducted in cases like those of wife beating, re-marriage by men while abandoning the first wife, etc. In one particular instance the local KAMS brought forward the case of a girl made pregnant by one boy. The KAMS unit ferreted out the identity of the boy. He was forced to part with some land and cattle for the girl and her forthcoming child.

As a result of the women's organization and campaigns, women's political and social consciousness has developed. They are actively supporting the armed struggle and the people's guerrillas. Every year they gather in large numbers before the martyrs' column in their village to pay homage to the revolutionaries who have died fighting to make the new democratic revolution a success. They take tremendous risk to help the guerrillas during police encirclement. When the police arrested some men from Bellum Nendra village the women followed the police and the men all the way to the police station over 5 kilometres away and did not budge because they refused to release the men. The police arrested these women too and sent them off to jail, more than 150 kilometres away. Yet, women are participating in large numbers in political rallies and meetings. Young girls, often defying their parents, join the People's Guerrilla Army in large numbers and their numbers have gone up remarkably in the past five years. Today, almost 40 percent of the fighters in the PGA in Dandakaranya, are women fighters. Women who have been housewives, too, have left their children with relatives, and joined their guerrilla husbands to serve the poor.

ADIVASI VIPLAVA MAHILA SANGHAM

Up in the mountains of East Godavari and Vishakapatnam districts of Andhra Pradesh, an overwhelming majority of the people are tribal but they belong to the Kondlu, Gadaba, Kondareddy,

Bhagata and other related tribes. The hard life in the hills makes the woman's labour even more arduous and tedious. Even fetching water entails climbing and descending with pots over long distances. Patriarchal traditions make her socially dependent and politically powerless. Added to this is the exploitation of the people from the plains who have come into the hills and started plantations. Closer to the plains, like in Malakangiri district (Orissa), women are facing newer forms of exploitation. Settlers are marrying tribal women to gain access to tribal lands. The woman loses her place in the tribal community only to be used and abandoned by the avaricious husband. Women were in the forefront of the tendu leaves struggle which began in this area from 1983 onwards. They negotiated with contractors before the entire village. When a contractor refused to negotiate with a Sanyasamma she told him, 'Give me the keys to your jeep, I will drive it, while you carry this one sack of tendu leaves and show me.' Women have participated in struggles to occupy the excess land of landlords. Through protracted struggles they have emerged as mass leaders.

While, from 1985 itself, women's organizations began to be formed in villages, they got area and district level character only in 1989, when the Krantikari Adivasi Viplava Mahila Sangham came to be formed. In 1995 the name was changed to Adivasi Viplava Mahila Sangham. In the beginning of the 1990s on of the major struggles undertaken by the AVMS has been on the anti-liquor issue. Apart from this the organization has undertaken campaigns, organized meetings, rallies and people's courts on many issues. For example, in 1996, a dowry death case in Ramavaram became an issue in which hundreds of women were mobilized and they demonstrated to teach the killer husband a lesson. In March 2000, a campaign against polygamy was taken up in the Koyyur Mandal. People's courts have been conducted on many cases of polygamy and forced marriages. Justice has also been meted out to those men who have sexually exploited women and then abandoned them. In big meetings in which neighbouring villagers are mobilized, the men have been forced to marry the women and give them a share in their property. Since 1988, in bamboo cutting and other related

work, the struggle for equal pay for equal work has been taken up and won. Thus, a tremendous change is coming about in the region because of the awakening among women and the growing organization among them. Since 1997, 8 March is being celebrated all over, even in the remote villages. In March 2000, hundreds of meetings were held in all parts of these districts and women have come to look forward to this, 'their' day, the day to talk and plan to struggle for their rights. Women have been travelling to cities far from their region, like Vishakapatnam and Guntur, to participate in state level programs. By 1998, there were 200 units of the AVMS with 6700 members. Today, however, the organization is functioning in the face of severe repression and many units are destroyed in the raids and arrest campaigns launched at regular intervals by the armed police.

Thus, the revolutionary women's movement is growing in the midst of struggle. It is growing in Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal as well. As women are getting mobilized and organized in larger and larger numbers, a section of them is also moving forward to join the armed struggle as fighters. They are willing to brave the hardships of guerrilla life with its constant movement and constant alertness, take on tasks and duties equal to men, with the aim of changing this exploitative society, for there is no other way to get out of the existing system, however long and arduous the path may be. The movement is creating a new woman, bold and brave, who is willing to sacrifice her life for the social cause — the names of the women who have sacrificed thus loom high in the sky. There was Rathakka (Nirmala), the housewife from AP, who died at the sentry post while defending her comrades, Emeshwari (Kamala), the Oraon educated girl from Jagdalpur, who died at her post during a raid on a police station, young Raje who died of a snake bite, Swaroopa who died giving a heroic fight in an encounter. This list can go on. But they are fighting so that women can be unshackled and attain equality, so that the poor can get justice and India can become a truly independent country, free from imperialist exploitation.

8 March and the Women's Movement in India

On 1 November 2000, seven women were shot dead in the deep forests of Karimnagar, Andhra Pradesh. These women, local activists of the Viplava Mahila Sangham (Revolutionary Women's Organization), were attending a women's conference. Four out of the seven were under 16.

These women were just a few of the thousands of women inspired by the revolutionary politics of the CPI (ML) [People's War]. Although the revolutionary movement has seen over 150 women martyrs in the last two decades (half of which have been in North Telangana alone), thousands more have taken up the tasks of their fallen comrades. Not only are the women's organizations growing in strength, but, increasingly, women are also seen playing a leading role in the squads, the PGA (People's Guerilla Army), the Party, front organizations, cultural troupes and in all other spheres of revolutionary political life.

It is only within the revolutionary movement that their individuality has been allowed to flower, coming out of the constraints of the daughter/wife/mother syndrome. It is only here that they have gained self-respect and see themselves as part and parcel of

This article was first published in the *People's March*, March 2001.

the creation of a just, new social order; rather than as appendages to their male counterparts.

It is with this new found confidence that revolutionary women throughout the country will once again celebrate 8 March 2001, the International Women's Day (IWD), as a day of struggle — a struggle against patriarchal oppression and economic exploitation — for the emancipation of women as a part of the new democratic transformation taking place in the flaming fields of India. They will once again pledge their solidarity with oppressed women throughout the globe and march forward together, in the struggle against imperialism, as part of the numerous proletarian and democratic streams that comprise the World Socialist Revolution.

The International Women's Day and the women's movement in India, both, have a long history of struggle and sacrifice. With Naxalbari, and the growth of the revolutionary movement, the women's movement and active participation also took a qualitatively new turn.

8 MARCH IN INDIA

8 March was celebrated in India for the first time in 1943. It was organized in Bombay by the 'Friends of the Soviet Union.' The event was ignored by the national media and got coverage in only one Left newspaper. Later, 1950 onwards, 8 March was regularly celebrated by the National Federation of Indian Women.

On 8 March 1970, in Pune, Maharashtra, over 750 women employees of the municipality came out in a procession, carrying red flags and shouting slogans : *'Long Live May Day,' 'Long Live the Heroic Fighters of Vietnam,' 'Long Live Proletarian Women.'*

In 1975, 8 March was jointly celebrated by all left parties. However, it was only with the 1980 International Women's Day, that there developed a widespread trend for the celebration of IWD all over the country. It was on that day that women in numerous cities of the country came out onto the streets demanding another hearing in the Mathura rape case. They attacked sex

discrimination and demonstrated against the actions of the police and the government in this case.

SHORT HISTORY OF WOMEN'S ROLE

In the 19th century, a number of social reformers sought to raise the status of women and oppose the discrimination and evil practices towards them. Notable amongst them was Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922), who put emphasis on educating women, and set up a shelter for women 'discarded' by their husbands. In Maharashtra, Jyotiba Phule (1827–1890), besides fighting Brahminism, involved his wife, Savitribai Phule, in setting up schools for women's education. They also opened an ashram for the children of widows.

In the 20th century, women became active participants in the anti-British struggle. Here we recount some who played a more revolutionary role. At the start of the 20th century, Madame Cama was associated with those fighting an armed struggle against the British and was also a participant in one of the conferences of the Second International during the first decade of the 20th century.

In 1928, a women's organization called the *Women's Student Organization* was formed in Calcutta. This organization trained women to become revolutionary fighters. They organized study circles and taught women the use of the *lathi* and the sword, and also to ride cycles and drive cars. Their members kept bombs and illegal literature for the safe custody of the 'terrorists' and also acted as couriers. In December 1931, two young women named Shanti Ghosh and Suniti Choudhary, under some pretext, took an appointment with the British Collector, Stevens. At close range, they shot him dead. Both served lengthy sentences at Kala Pani in the Andaman Islands. On 6 February 1932, a college student, Beena Das, who attended the convocation at the Calcutta University for her degree, suddenly pulled out a revolver and shot at the Chancellor and the British Governor. Although the shots missed, Beena served nine years in jail.

A number of women were active in the Indian Liberation Army, organized by Master Surya Sen in the Chittagong Hills. To

gather arms they organized raids on the British armoury, police barracks and telegraph offices. The name of Preetilata Wadaddar still resounds amongst the hill tracts of Chittagong. In September 1932, she led a group of women in a midnight raid on an officer's club in the hills. In the bomb attack, one was killed and several injured. Preeti was herself seriously injured and captured by the enemy. To avoid being caught alive she swallowed a cyanide pill. Together with Preeti, another comrade, Kalpana, was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment. Preeti's sacrifice inspired thousands of women to join the anti-British struggle.

There were a number of women in the Hindustan Republican Army of Bhagat Singh and Chandrashekhar Azad. 17-year old Roopvati Jain was in charge of the secret bomb manufacturing unit at Delhi. Then there was the young Durga Devi, who once saved Bhagat Singh by posing as his wife, and also shot and killed a British police officer in Bombay.

In Subhash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army there was an entire women's regiment. Under Captain Laxmi Sehegal, this was called the Rani Jhansi regiment.

Women also participated in a big way in the Tebhaga (1946) and Telangana (1948–51) peasant movements. In both these mass upsurges, not only did a number of women actively participate in the struggle against the landlords and police, they also stood up against patriarchal oppression. They often fought the police using traditional weapons and chilli powder. The women in the Tebhaga struggle even supported the Hindu Code Bill (which gave greater equality to Hindu women within the family) and demanded a right to the share in the property.

In the Telangana struggle, although only a few women were allowed to join the squads, (the leadership opposed it, saying women need protection) many women played an active and leading role in the struggle. Over 100 women were brutally raped and murdered in the course of this struggle. For example, there was the case of Lachamma who was stripped naked and tortured, after being hung from a tree, in order to obtain the whereabouts of communist party activists. She bore the tortures and was

martyred, but did not disclose a word to the enemy. Then there was the case of Rambayamma who led 150 prisoners on a hunger strike within the jail. For this she was ruthlessly beaten, as a result of which she died.

WOMEN, IN THE WAKE OF NAXALBARI

Naxalbari aroused the youth from all over the country. It awakened a new hope, specifically, amongst the students. Many girls from various colleges plunged into the revolutionary movement inspired by the Naxalbari uprising and the politics of the CPI (ML). However, the left line of that period restricted this growth.

Yet, around the same time, it was in the Srikakulam armed struggle that thousands of women participated. In October 1967, a mass procession involving women, wearing red saris and carrying red flags, who were going for a public meeting, were fiercely attacked by a landlord's hoodlums. The men and women retaliated using stones, lathis, chilli powder, sickles, etc. But the cowardly landlord fired on the crowd, killing two. The women of Srikakulam were active in the squads and in various roles assisting the squads. They were active in smashing the liquor mafia; they were in the forefront, beating-back the police. They were inspired by the heroic martyr Panchadi Nirmala, who, after her husband's martyrdom in May 1969, took over his responsibility of leading the squads. To do so, she left her small child with her relatives. Nirmala herself, along with Ankamma, Saraswati and the legendry poet, Panigrahi, was caught in December 1969, brutally tortured, and killed in a fake encounter. During the three years of the Srikakulam movement, 17 women were martyred, 1,000 jailed and roughly 3,000 had criminal cases against them.

Fighting both, the existing left deviation, and the right line that emerged after Com. Charu Mazumdar's martyrdom, the mass organizations were rebuilt in Andhra Pradesh by the State Committee. But it was only after 1980, when the radical student and youth movement swept the state (1980–85), and the party took the step towards building guerrilla zones, that large numbers of

women began entering the movement. Yet, it was only when the movement began to acquire deep roots in the rural areas that mass scale women's organizations began to be built. By the late 1980s a large number of women also began entering the squads.

In Dandakaranya there developed the Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sangathan — KAMS (Revolutionary Tribal Women's Organization), and in Telengana there was the Mahila Vimukti Sangam, which later changed its name to Viplava Mahila Sangam — VMS (Revolutionary Women's Organization). With at least one woman member in each squad, in the initial stages, these women's organizations were built by the squads. But, as the numbers of women grew, women organizers (as teams) went around the villages building the women's organizations and taking up women's issues. Many such women had to face the wrath of the police. A number of them were caught, tortured and killed in fake encounters. For example, in just the first nine months of 1998, twenty-three women were martyred in these regions. Yet, the women's movement grew. By the end 1980s, a large number of women began entering the squads.

The KAMS and the VMS fought alongside the peasants' organizations for their economic and political demands. They also battled against patriarchy and male domination. Issues of wife-beating, harassment, dowry, alcoholism/*gutka*, polygamy and the abandonment of wives, etc., have been actively taken up. In addition, they propagated widely against superstition, black magic, etc. They have also been active in resisting the police. Often, when the police come to arrest the youth it is the women who en masse surround them and beat them back. The KAMS and VMS mobilized the women to join the women's organizations, setting up committees in the village areas and the divisional levels. Regular conferences have been held, where the organizations have been further strengthened. However, in areas of severe repression this process has been temporarily retarded. By the 1990s, each were bringing out their separate women's magazines — *Porumahila* (Struggling Women) in Dandakaranya and *Mahila Vimukti* (Women's Liberation) in Telengana.

With these struggles, not only has there been a betterment in the economic condition of the masses, including the women, but the fight against patriarchy has led to a greater democratization of relations within the village and the family. With the smashing of feudal authority, and the establishment of the democratic authority of the village committees — the Gram Rajya Committees — the democratization of the relations between people has received a further impetus. This has been further consolidated in those areas where the embryonic form of the new democratic economy has been initiated through co-operation, mutual aid teams, *shramdan*, etc. Women are playing an active role in establishing the New Power in the guerrilla and preparatory zones, with a perspective of creating base areas. Today, in the People's Guerrilla Army (PGA), one-third of the members are women.

Besides the revolutionary forces, many democratic women's organizations and movements are sprouting all over the country. The present policies of the ruling classes and the government, have hit women particularly cruelly. Economic deprivation and religious fanaticism are its twin weapons. This is drawing in more and more women into conflict with the rulers and resulting in the growth of a democratic and revolutionary awakening amongst them. This will add a new flavour to International Women's Day 2001.

However, the day will also be 'celebrated' by pseudo-feminists and outright counter-revolutionaries as well. They seek to dampen the fighting spirit of the IWD. There is no doubt that the democratic and revolutionary women's movements will assert themselves over these pretenders. The glorious spirit of 8 March grows amongst the women of India with each passing year. On this 8 March 2001 let us resolve to fight patriarchy and male domination even more firmly; to fight the consumerism and decadent imperialist culture of the West; and work for the creation of a new democratic society and socialism, wherein alone can man-woman relations be built on the basis of genuine equality, trust and mutual respect.

International Women's Day
Past and Present

8 March 2001 is the 91st anniversary of the International Women's Day (IWD), which was first declared in 1910. In that year, Clara Zetkin, inspired by the working class women's movement in America, proposed to the Second International Conference of the Socialist Working Women that an annual celebration of women's day be held. The Socialist International meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark, established a Women's Day, international in character, to honour the movement for women's rights and to assist in achieving universal suffrage for women. The proposal was greeted with unanimous approval by the conference of over 100 women from 17 countries. No fixed date was selected for the observance.

As a result of this decision, the first International Women's Day was held on 19 March 1911 in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland, where more than one million women and men attended rallies. In addition to the right to vote, they demanded the right to work, to vocational training and an end to discrimination on the job. The date was chosen by German women as 19 March, because, on that date in 1848, the Prussian king, faced with

---

This article was first published in the *People's March*, in March 2001.

an armed uprising, had promised many reforms, including an unfulfilled one of votes for women.

In 1913, the date for the IWD was changed to 8 March. This was to commemorate two important events which occurred on that day. On 8 March 1857, women garment and textile workers in New York City had staged, for the first time, a protest against inhuman working conditions, the 12-hour work day and low wages. The marchers were attacked and dispersed by the police. Two years later, again in March, these women formed their first union. Again on 8 March 1908, 15,000 women marched through New York City demanding shorter working hours, better pay, voting rights and an end to child labour. They adopted the slogan *'Bread and Roses'*; with bread symbolizing economic security and roses, a better quality of life. In May of that year, the Socialist Party of America designated the last Sunday in February for the observance of the National Women's Day.

The first National Women's Day was observed across the USA on 28 February 1909. Soon, women in Europe began celebrating Women's Day on the last Sunday of February. It was in this background that Clara Zetkin put forward the proposal for an International Women's Day at the 1910 Conference of the Women's Socialist International. Within a week of the first celebrations in 1911, on 25 March 1911, over 140 working girls were killed in the tragic Triangle Fire in the USA. This event had a far-reaching effect on labour legislation in the USA and gave the IWD a further impetus.

On the eve of World War I, Russian women observed their first International Women's Day in 1913. Elsewhere in Europe, on or around 8 March of the following year, women held rallies either to protest against the war or to express solidarity with oppressed women. The most famous International Working Women's Day was the 8 March 1917 (24 February in the Russian-style calendar) strike for *'bread and peace'* led by the Russian women of St. Petersburg. Both Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai took part in this event. The IWD strike merged with the riots that had spread throughout the city between 8-12

March. The February Revolution, as it came to be known, forced the Czar to abdicate.

In the Soviet Union, 8 March was declared a national holiday and accompanied by a celebration of *'the heroic woman worker.'* Since then, 8 March has grown in significance, and its celebrations throughout the world have marked a growing awareness of women's rights. The great advances achieved in women's rights in the Soviet Union, after the socialist revolution, were an inspiration to women throughout the world. The Chinese revolution in 1949 showed how, even in one of the most backward countries of the world, seeped in feudal values and patriarchal thinking, women can be aroused for change. The gigantic strides made by women in socialist China were a living example for women throughout the Third World. Particularly, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and its consistent attack on feudal Confucian thinking, acted as a great source for the further emancipation of women in China. Comrade Chiang Ching was its living symbol.

The 1960s and early 1970s, which saw a strong democratic upsurge in the capitalist countries and powerful national liberation movements in the Third World, also witnessed a rejuvenation of the women's liberation movement. The movement had such an enormous impact throughout the world that the imperialists sought to destroy it through co-option and diversion into acceptable channels. This resulted in large, corporate or state-funded NGOs vehemently attacking socialism, and putting forward a bourgeois form of feminism. The process of co-option culminated in the United Nations officially recognizing 8 March as the International Women's Day in 1977. Since then, the most bourgeois and reactionary organizations have also come to 'celebrate' 8 March, depriving it of its revolutionary content and great history of struggle, through which it originated. This process was further catalysed with the reversal of socialism, first in the Soviet Union, and, later, in China. The first casualty of these reversals was the denial of some of the rights achieved by women under socialism.

Yet, the International Women's Day continues to live on amongst the oppressed women of the world. The temporary setback of the communist movement and socialism, and the re-assertion of capitalism/imperialism, has hit women hard. Globalization, and the crass consumerism associated with it, have witnessed the mass commodification of women, on a scale unheard of before. The cosmetic industry, tourism and bourgeois media have degraded the woman's body as never before, without any respect for their individuality. This, coupled with mass poverty, has led to entire populations turning to prostitution as witnessed in East Europe, East Asia, Nepal, etc. Coupled with this, the rise of religious fundamentalism and various sects throughout the world is pushing another section of women back to a status of the Dark Ages. Squeezed between these two extremes, women, today, more than ever before, feel the need for assertion, for self-respect and equality with their male counterparts. 8 March has, therefore, an even greater significance today.

The revisionists and bourgeois liberals seek to dampen the women's spirit of freedom, displaying mock 'concern,' acting as condescending saviors, confining women to their home. They compromise with patriarchal values, feudal traditions and fear women's emancipation and assertion. They, of course, also 'celebrate' women's day, as a routine, issuing out the regular hypocritical statements.

It is the revolutionary forces throughout the world, and, more particularly, the Maoists, who have brought back a living vibrancy to the IWD, making it, once again, a day symbolizing the struggle of women for freedom, self-respect, equality and emancipation from all patriarchal values and exploitative practices. It is this revolutionary spirit that kindles a new hope in the future for the oppressed women of India, and the world.

Fascism, Fundamentalism and Patriarchy

Exactly one year after the carnage in Gujarat began, the country is still reeling under the horror of the events. Narendra Modi's expected victory in the Assembly elections has further strengthened the position of the Hindutva fascist forces not only in Gujarat but also in the country as a whole. Reviewing the strategy of Hindutva forces, the lessons from Gujarat become even more relevant now.

The agenda of the Hindu fascist forces is political. Their strategy is that of the maximum political mobilization of the Hindu masses and their aim is the establishment of a Hindu *Rashtra*. It will be noticed that the present phase of Hindu fascist upsurge can trace its growth along with the neo-liberal economic policies of the early 1980s. Similarly, the aggressive policies of economic reform and globalization of the 1990s were accompanied by those of an belligerent Hindutva. The reasons for this are not far to seek: the policies of economic reform have led to the extreme impoverization of, not only a large section of the masses, but also of sizable sections of the middle classes; thus, there was an urgent need for

This article was first published, under the name of Avanti, in *People's March*, March 2003.

the ruling classes to divert the peoples' attention from their mass destitution through the whipping up a frenzy against the Muslims and other minorities. Besides, mass anger against the ruling classes' blatant capitulation to the imperialists, particularly, the United states, is sought to be diverted through these intrigues, supported by calls for cultural nationalism and a Hindu Rashtra.

The extreme and continued polarization of Hindu society in Gujarat along religious lines; the brazen confidence with which the attacking, looting and killing were carried out and the active participation of a section of the women from the upper castes, shows that the Hindu fascist forces have been successful in taking their agenda forward in Gujarat. They have penetrated, and succeeded in converting, a section of the Hindu masses to their ideology and imbued them with the goal of Hindu Rashtra. What horror this portends for the oppressed sections — the lower castes, women, especially, women of minority communities and the poor — does not need mention.

GROWING FUNDAMENTALISM WORLDWIDE — WHAT IT MEANS FOR WOMEN

The rise of the Hindu fascist forces is a part of the world-wide rise of fundamentalism and fascism. Imperialism, faced with its worst ever crisis since the inter-war years, is encouraging and promoting fundamentalist forces and fascist organizations and propaganda. As Lenin once said, 'Imperialism strives for reaction everywhere.'

Further, as John S. Hawley has argued, 'fundamentalist perspectives on gender cast a uniquely revealing light on the nature of fundamentalism as a whole.' As it is, all religions are patriarchal in the moral codes they sanction and the social arrangements they uphold. And one of the central points of fundamentalist propaganda is a conservative ideology of gender — all fundamentalist forces, be they of the Christian denomination in the U.S., or Hindu, or the New Religions in Japan or the Islamic forces, proclaim the specific agenda of restoring the centrality of the family

and the home in the life of the women and patriarchal control over their sexuality. Hence, ideologues of the New Right, even in the U.S., are claiming that there is a moral crisis in American society and that this is because of the fact that women are working outside the home. Although they have mobilized actively around opposition to abortion rights for women, they begin by arguing that welfare state expenditures have raised taxes and added to inflation, pulling married women into the labour force and thereby destroying the fabric of the patriarchal family and, hence, the moral order of society. According to Jerry Falwell of the Moral Majority, 'children (in the U.S.) should have the right to the love of a mother and a father who understand their different roles and fulfil their different responsibilities... to live in an economic system that makes it possible for husbands to support their wives as full time mothers in the home and enable the families to survive on one income instead of two.'

While giving specious moral arguments, these fascists in the U.S. are aggressively presenting the so-called pro-life campaign. This campaign, which began with reactions to court judgments, has now gone beyond that and has included attacks on abortion clinics and killings of activists and doctors who helped women get abortions done. At the same time, these very so-called pro-life forces are among the active campaigners for the continuation of the death penalty, larger military spending and an aggressive international policy by the U.S. government. Hence, they are among the most conservative and reactionary sections of the American society. They have white supremacist views, indulge in openly racist activity and are fascist in their nature of organizing and propaganda.

The same is to be found in the conservative New Religions that have sprung up in Japan, especially, in the post-war period. A study in the early 1990s says that,

> In the post-war period many New Religions have adopted an agenda of social issues on which re-establishing a patriarchal ideology of the family heads the list. The pre-war family system that they seek to reinstate institutionalizes male dominance and the

authority of elders and keeps women's status low by restricting their sphere of choice in matters of marriage, reproduction and divorce. The older family form is imbued with religious significance in such a way that to be a good wife and mother is not only proper, it is essential to women's salvation.

Both in the U.S. and in Japan these movements have arisen in the context of a rapid change in women's roles and a transformation in the family structures. Women have been going out in large numbers working outside the home and earning an independent income.

Islamic fundamentalism is a more complex phenomenon. Initially, in the post-Second World War period, it was propped up and sustained by U.S. imperialism in the face of democratic and socialist movements of the people, like in the Arab countries. But with the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union and especially China, and the betrayal of the democratic national liberation movements by their compromising leadership, anti-imperialism has been expressed in traditional and often religious ways. Islam has also become an ideological force adopted by movements against the U.S. imperialists like in Iran, or become the expression of resistance as in Palestine today (due to the betrayal of the older, more secular and 'left' leadership). In the countries of the former Soviet Union too, Islamic fundamentalism has become the means through which nationalist opposition to Russian domination and exploitation is being expressed. In countries like Afghanistan, where there was no anti-feudal democratic mass movement or modernization, and where the increase in freedom to women was initiated from above during the Soviet occupation and could gain no support from the rural masses, Islamic fundamentalism maintained its social base. Hence, the warlords who came to power in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1992, were as reactionary as the Taliban that swept to power several years later. Thus, the RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan), which opposed the restrictions on women's rights, was as critical of the warlords as of the Taliban. Today, the same warlords are back in power under U.S. protection. But, whether

they are reactionary regimes like the Saudi monarchy or the mass movement-based organizations, they have been making control over the women's dress code, their movements and manner of participation in public life, an important part of their campaign. And this is what has gained the maximum publicity in the bourgeois and imperialist media, given the campaign being launched by American imperialism against Islam.

Taking into account the complex role of fundamentalism in the world today, the political role it plays will determine the manner in which we struggle against it. Religious fundamentalism, of all types, promotes patriarchy and other backward values, and must, therefore, be generally countered by all democratic and revolutionary forces. Yet, today, fundamentalism has a dual role. First, the fundamentalism of the Christians in the U.S., of the Hindutva brigade in India, etc., is part of the growing fascist policies of the state and the ruling classes, and has to be seen and attacked in that context. It is the strategy of mobilizing the majority community, to distract them from the class issues, against the minorities. On the other hand, Muslim fundamentalism today is growing in reaction to the U.S.'s aggressive war-mongering and in reaction to the Hindu fascist offensive in this country, and, so, plays a different political role vis-a-vis the state. Thus, with respect to the former, it is necessary to attack it thoroughly on all fronts; regarding the latter, there is a need to see its anti-U.S./anti-Hindutva role, while at the same time exposing its retrograde patriarchal and feudal thinking.

THE INDIAN CONTEXT

In the Indian context it is clear that at present the foremost enemy of women is the Hindutva forces. Hindutva breeds on the festering stagnant pool of feudal values that continue to thrive in this backward semi-feudal, semi-colonial system. The casteist, patriarchal and other feudal values already prevalent in this system, act as dry hay for the Hindu fascist fire; and the upper caste elite form natural allies for these venomous political vampires. Besides, due

to the general backward thinking and a weak democratic movement, other castes and classes also tend to fall prey to the aggressive and wide scale propaganda of the Hindutva forces.

During Roop Kunwar's *sati*/immolation in 1987, which some commentators consider as a dress rehearsal for the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the Hindutva forces publicly revealed their patriarchal biases and attitudes. The event, which took place in a well-off village, Deorala, about 50 kms from Jaipur in Rajasthan, snowballed into an all-India issue with the various organizations of the Hindutva brigade coming out stridently in support of the practice of sati. While the progressive women's groups organized a *morcha* in opposition to the *sati* and demanded the arrest of the culprits, supporters, mostly Rajputs, led by the Hindutva brigade, took out a militant morcha of almost 30,000 in the state capital. The BJP leader Vijayaraje Scindia openly came out in support of *sati* as 'our cultural heritage,' and argued that it is a fundamental right of any Hindu widow if she so desires. In their argument, if a widow voluntarily decides to immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre then there is no reason to oppose it. The woman is seen only in relation to her husband, her independent existence does not count. By attaining *sat* (inner truth) a woman decides to immolate herself with her husband and, thus, acquires a power that will protect her husband in his journey beyond. Thus, the *sati*, the one who acquires this power, is the model of devotion to her husband, the true *pativrata*, whose bond with her husband cannot be broken even with death as she carries on to protect him after death. Conservative trading families from Rajasthan have funded and built innumerable *sati* temples in Rajasthan and elsewhere promoting this backward patriarchal ideology. Although their support for *sati* is no longer as crude, they still glorify religious customs which uphold the same ideology and role for women.

The Hindutva forces have picked up the demand for a Uniform Civil Code and, thereby, communalized yet another issue of women's rights. These very forces had opposed the reforms in the Hindu customary law pertaining to women's rights in property

and marriage in the 1950s. But, in the 1990s, they began demanding the introduction of the Uniform Civil Code so that Muslims could no longer be governed by their personal laws. Their demand has nothing to do with the rights of women, whether Hindu or Muslim, it is only one more stick to beat the Muslim community with.

Their anti-human, patriarchal attitude came forth in Gujarat, in its crudest and most violent forms, with the gang-rapes and sexual assaults on women in various districts and the vulgar, sometimes false, propaganda of raped women distributed widely in various places. Various fact-finding teams have recorded the testimonies of women who were either victims of rapes or witnesses to the rapes of friends and relatives. This must be understood in the context of the full significance of how this fascist mentality looks at women. When backward ideology sanctions and advocates the total subordination of women to men, then women become the symbols and carriers of social honour of the community, often even the embodiments of the sovereignty of the state. Women, for them, are the representatives of the community and the transmitters and repositories of the culture of the community and its values, they are the means through which the community is reproduced and continued.

The Hindutva forces are using women to pursue their political ends, both when they are mobilizing them and when they are sexually attacking minority women. It is important to remember that these forces, whether they be of the Sangh Parivar — the RSS, the Bajrang Dal, the BJP — or whether they are within other political formations like the Congress, share the same reactionary attitude towards women.

Even in most individual cases, rape is an affirmation that the woman is an object of pleasure and an assertion of the power of a man over her. But when rapes take place in the political context, as in Gujarat, as part of collective attacks, the act is organized aggression; it becomes a spectacular ritual, a ritual of victory — the defilement of the autonomous symbol of the honour of the enemy community. This has been stated earlier but needs

to be emphasized, especially when we see that the vulgar propaganda leaflets issued by the Sangh Parivar were explicitly sexual. There is nothing sexual about gang rapes, or rapes of individual women in riots and such attacks, whether by the communal or by the state forces. These rapes are political acts, meant to humiliate the '*enemy*' — dishonouring the woman is the dishonour of the community, a challenge and insult to the men of the community who could do nothing to '*protect the honour of the women, i.e., the community.*' In this entire play of power, the woman, her rights as a human being, do not count at all. Gujarat has once again proved that the Hindu fascist forces will stop at nothing to achieve their total domination over the religious minorities, especially over the Muslims.

Justifications for these rapes are to be found in the writings of the ideologues of Hindutva, in fact, in the most sophisticated among them, in Savarkar's writings themselves. Savarkar, in his interpretation of history, portrayed the Muslim as lustful and sensuous, while the Hindu as comparatively impotent. The Muslim, driven by religious duty, abducted, raped and forcibly converted millions of Hindu women, while Hindu men had a '*perverted sense of chivalry*' that prevented them from doing anything to the enemy's womenfolk. He called it a law of nature (obeyed even by the animal world) that in a war, the men of the conquered tribe are killed while the women are distributed by the victors amongst themselves. Savarkar wrote this in 1963 in his Marathi treatise, *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History*, translated into English in 1971. After the 1965 war with Pakistan, he repeated this idea even more strongly when he criticized Shivaji and Chinnaji Appa for not doing to Muslim women what the Muslim men had done to Hindu women — only a tit-for-tat policy would teach them, he asserted. From 1938 itself, in fact, Savarkar repeatedly addressed the theme of the violation of Hindu women at the hands of Muslims and the need to give up non-violence. Thus, there is no doubt that the fascist outlook, historically, as well as morally, justifies rape and the killing of foetuses and new born babies — a moral justification to conduct ethnic cleansing!

As the Hindu fascists promote the worst forms of Brahmanical orthodoxy, their patriarchal approach, although it has taken the most degrading form against the minorities (particularly, the Muslims and Christians), is also manifest against womenfolk in general (for instance, through the promotion of dowry, *sati*, etc., and the confining of the woman to the house, as a chattel for housework and production of children). Besides, the aggressive Hindutva offensive against Muslims has retarded the movement amongst Muslim women for reforms in their personal law, as the entire community is being pushed back into the arms of their religious leaders. The defence of their right to their faith has now become the main issue before them. The increase in the use of the *burkha* is an example of such retrogression.

THE STATE'S PATRIARCHAL COMMUNAL OUTLOOK

If the fascist forces in India have revealed their patriarchal outlook in crude and violent forms, the Indian state, too, shares the same communal and patriarchal approach. All its pretensions to being secular and democratic stand exposed when we examine the way in which it works. For, as a *Times of India* editorial was forced to point out in the context of the forcible deportation of Bangladeshis going on at present, if they are Hindus they are considered refugees, while if they are Muslims they are considered infiltrators. But this is not all. The Indian state revealed its communal patriarchal bias during the formation of India itself — in 1947, in the manner in which the issue of women, abducted during the turmoil and riots during the Partition, was handled. Within eight years, from 1947 onwards, 30,000 women were 'recovered' from both countries. The total number of Muslim women 'recovered' from India was 20,728. The rescue of the abducted women was seen as a question of national honour and a moral obligation. The women were victims; they were the symbols of the community honour. Muslim women were to be restored to the 'Muslim nation' and Hindu women to the 'Hindu nation.' After forced abduction there was forced return. Hence, even the ordinance that

was enacted in India was concerned only with Muslim women residing in other houses and not with all women. The government even passed another law that the women brought back from Pakistan should leave their children behind (considering they were fathered by a Muslim), those who were pregnant were made to undergo abortions. In fact, in the entire process, the wishes of the women were never considered and they were denied all legal rights to decide whether they wanted to leave the family they were living with and whether they wanted to return or not. The policy of the state was clear — the women were to be returned whether they wished to or not. The Indian state had, thus, revealed its Hindu bias at the time of the Partition itself. And women were the victims of this policy.

The judiciary, too, has, during the 1980s been very much influenced by the Hindutva ideology. Since senior judges come from the same classes that are the supporters of the Hindu fascist forces it is not surprising that their bias is showing. The judgment by Justice Y.V. Chandrachud of the Supreme Court in the Shahbano case is an example of this. The judgment waxed eloquent about Muslims and Muslim personal law and the privilege enjoyed by Muslim men. It talked about the divided loyalties of the Muslims and the need to immediately introduce a Uniform Civil Code, while having very little to say on the rights of women. It was, essentially, the anti-Muslim nature of the judgment that inflamed the anger of the community, leading to the mobilization by conservative Muslim leaders against the rights of Muslim women to maintenance after divorce.

WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS OF THE HINDUTVA FORCES

The RSS started the *Rashtrasevika Samiti* in 1936 itself, as an adjunct of the RSS which admitted only male members. It was patterned like the RSS, with small locality-based *shakhas* (branches) and a *pramukh sanchalika* which is a non-elective post. Office-bearers are selected by senior members. These shakhas were centres for intense ideological training for the women without having

to leave their locality and their caste/class environment. They were taught the RSS version of Indian history, about culture and tradition and were given physical training. But the Rashtrasevika Samiti was restricted in its caste and class base. It was only after the progressive women's movement emerged in the late 1970s that the pro-Hindu parties set up women's organizations. The BJP set up its *Mahila Morcha* in 1980, the *Mahila Agadhi* was established by the Shiv Sena in 1985, while the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) set up the *Durga Vahini* later. All of them were geared towards mobilizing the mass of women for the cause of Hindutva.

The shakhas of the Rashtrasevikas are concentrated in the states where the RSS has been traditionally strong — Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. It has been restricted to the same caste/class circles that the RSS has had its base in — the Brahmin and trading communities. The women are encouraged to build up contacts in their neighbourhoods, become counselors, encourage the celebration of Hindu festivals promoted by the Samiti and informally spread the ideas received in the shakhas. This is their main aim — spreading their ideas after building up friendship and trust. In this way the Samiti has spread its ideology amongst the conservative middle classes. It has also been associated with children's education — *Shishu Vihars, Saraswati Vidyalayas*. The ideology of the Rashtrasevika Samiti emphasizes the pivotal role of the woman in the family, her role in transmitting the '*samskaras*' to the other family members, especially children. They emphasize the virtue of deference to the elders and the family, and disapprove of acting in opposition to the family's wishes. A large number of women BJP Members of Parliament have been members of the Samiti. They believe in a strong Hindu woman and hence the focus on physical training. They propagate that women bear children to serve the motherland. The attitude is that women are being trained for combat in the war against the Muslim enemy. They have successfully combined her traditional role in the family with her 'patriotic' duty, blended *Desh bhakti* with *Ram bhakti*. Service to the nation and the liberation of the *Ramjanmabhoomi* are one and the same for the women indoctrinated by them.

The *Rath Yatra* in 1990 can be considered as a turning point as far as public mobilization of women by the Hindutva forces is concerned. Women came to be mobilized on a wide scale for the Ramjanmabhoomi campaign. Since then women's active participation in riots — in looting and in attacks on the minority community — has become noticeable. They were active in the riots in Mumbai and Surat immediately after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. The BJP, the Shiv Sena and the VHP have attracted a much wider mass base than the Samiti. They have spread in specific areas and localities by organizing the celebration of traditional Hindu customs and festivals like the *haldi kumkum, villuku pooja* and *ganapati*, by helping them take up locality-based issues, encouraging schemes for income generation for women and, above all, by encouraging women to come out actively for political causes that their organization supports. This could be the arrest of a leader, *Maha-arthi* or the temple campaign. Through this participation women have gained a sense of importance and a feeling of participation in public life hitherto denied to them. Although these organizations have taken up issues like dowry death and rape and resolved some family dispute or the other, this is done basically on the strength of the party. They do not advocate gender justice and are opposed to any moves that disturb the patriarchal structure of the family and the political party. Ideological indoctrination, whether through TV serials like Ramayana or through *shibirs* (training camps), upholds patriarchal, authoritarian values, especially with reference to the family. They have been indoctrinated to believe that the progressive women's movement in India is an implant from the West which has no relevance in India. According to them, 'Women in India ever had a pride of place within the household and the society. This only has to be re-established and re-affirmed.' Yet, the various leaders of the Hindutva parties do not speak with one voice. While some, like Vijayaraje Scindia, have taken an openly conservative position, and some VHP leaders like Bamdev and *sants* like Swami Muktanand Saraswati have demanded that the right to polygamy be restored to Hindu men ('why should only Muslim men have

this privilege?!'); other leaders take a more moderate stance. For example, they uphold women's right to employment (only then can they be strong). The position they take also depends upon the political situation and the needs of the hour. Basically, they portray women as *Matrishakti* — motherhood being pivotal in their characterization of women and their power. Women are mothers and wives and they must be honoured and protected. For them the Hindu woman today is not a victim but a power that has to be channelized for the service of the community. Essentially, they are indoctrinating women to hate Muslims as enemies and to uphold patriarchal values (they believe that there are natural and essential differences between women and men). They ignore gender injustices that exist in Hindu laws and customs, but exaggerate the injustice that Muslim women are subject to (note their excessive concern about restrictions like the *burkha* on Muslim women and the deliberate ignoring of the *ghoonghat*) and justify the rapes and molestations of women from Muslim and other minority communities. As a whole, they are being indoctrinated to accept a fascist agenda which will be extremely harmful to the rights of women. Women's autonomy and independence will be crushed and they will have to serve the state and the community as was done during the Nazi rule in Germany. The women's struggle for equality has been glossed over by them and will be crushed ruthlessly if the Hindutva forces succeed in their fascist aims.

WOMEN ARISE, FIGHT HINDU FASCISM!

For revolutionary and democratic forces, for the progressive women's movement, the tasks are clearly laid out: To fight the rise of the Hindutva fascist forces in India it is not sufficient to fight it only in the political realm, but to fight it on all fronts. The impact of these forces on women and their strategy for women has also to be countered. It is necessary to expose the notion that their mobilization of women means the real 'empowerment' of women. We have to bring to light that inspite of their rhetoric of the strong woman and *Shakti*, inspite of their projection of aggressive

women leaders like Uma Bharati and Sadhavis like Rhitambara, their basic conception of women's role is patriarchal. We have to expose that their very activation of women is based on distorted and totally false history and a systematic whipping up of hatred for a besieged minority community. The para-military training being given to women by the Durga Vahinis and Sevika Samitis is not for self-protection or for the liberation of the masses from oppression and exploitation but to attack the Muslim and other communities. We need also to expose the fact that they have the support of the rightist forces in the U.S. and elsewhere, since they share not only common economic interests, but also a common vision of society and women's place in society. And we need to expose that these forces have gained support because Indian society has not been through a democratic revolution which would have swept away the feudal relations and culture, not only as far as the economic aspects are concerned but also in social life. Hence, this struggle encompasses the economic, political and social spheres and it must include propaganda, education among the mass of women and cannot be restricted only to middle class women. Thus, in the present context, an important aspect in the struggle against patriarchy is the mobilization of the vast masses of women, not merely against fundamentalism in general, but, more particularly, against the Hindutva fascist forces.

REFERENCES

Hawley, John Stratton (ed.). 1993. *Fundamentalism and Gender*. OUP.

Kishwar, Madhu. 1998. *Religion at the Service of Nationalism and Other Essays*. OUP.

Menon, Ritu and Kamla Bhasin.1993. 'Recovery, Rupture, Resistance — Indian State and Abduction of Women during Partition,' *Economic and Political Weekly*; April 24.

Sarkar, Tanika and Urvashi Butalia (eds.). 1995. *Women and the Hindu Right*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Changes in Rape Law: How far will they Help?

'There's nothing new about women being raped. It's been happening for years.' — Defense Minister, George Fernandes, during the Gujarat debate in Parliament.

While this callous dismissal of the most heinous crime against women is outrageous, it is also representative of the general attitude towards rape — of society, of the state, of the powers that be. Throughout the ages, from the era of slavery, through feudalism, capitalism, down to the present era of imperialism, there has been an unwritten support of the belief that women can and should be 'taken by force.' From the inception of class society and patriarchy, rape has not only been a weapon to 'show women their place,' but has also been used to teach an entire community a lesson, as an instrument of political mobilization, to instigate a community into armed conflict, as repression against social movements, as an act of aggression on the enemy in war. What an irony, that while women have had little or no say in the decision making processes of change, it is *they* who should be at the receiving end... have their bodies brutalized,

This article, written under the pseudonym of Sujata, was first published in *People's March*, 2003.

their minds shattered. Due to the pressure of the growing women's movement, changes have been made in the rape laws, rape crisis centres set up, and there have been some attitudinal changes in the media in imperialist countries. Yet, the number of rapes taking place in those countries (more get reported) continue to be high, showing that rape is an integral part of the system of patriarchy and class exploitation.

Recently, rape laws have again come in for revision. The Law Commission has placed its recommendations, some of which have come into force. The recent case of a college student of the Maulana Azad Medical College in Delhi being raped in broad daylight in the heart of the city, sent shock waves throughout the country. Once again, the Home Minister, L.K. Advani, playing to the gallery, began clamouring for the death penalty for rapists while George Fernandes swung to the other extreme of his previous statement declaring that rapists should be shot. The women's movement, however, has reacted sharply to this arguing that awarding the death sentence can hardly be the solution. We have seen that the higher the punishment to be awarded, the fewer the cases of conviction that take place. Where the conviction rate is so low, this will surely not help. Some are apprehensive that more women will be murdered after rape since the penalty for both may be death. Besides, the linking of the act of rape with that of murder, as the BJP is doing, further reinforces the feudal views that a woman raped is as good as dead and has nothing to live for.

Instead of the death penalty, it is procedural and attitudinal changes that are called for. Yet, it is most ironic that, in India, we had been following a rape law drafted by the British in 1860, and even after the transfer of power had not changed it, while the British themselves had modernized their own rape laws. It was only after the Mathura rape case and the growth of the women's movement in India that the rape laws were changed for the first time in 1983. A minimum punishment of 5 years was fixed and, in cases of custodial rape, the onus of proving his innocence was put on the accused. Now, the Law Commission, in 2002, has made

various recommendations for changes: the sections pertaining to cross-examination have been amended so that the victim's character is not taken into consideration and the necessity of previous good character does not become a factor going against the victim. However, to understand the laws and proposed changes it is necessary to examine the politics of rape and the manifestations of patriarchy through it. Besides, in spite of the law and the supposed concern for women's safety by the state, the National Crime Research Bureau's figures indicate that the incidence of rape has increased from 15,330 in 1997 to 16,496 in 2000. Yet, according to Veena Goswami, legal advisor to the Delhi Commission of Women, only 20 percent of rape cases are reported. About 30 percent of the victims get pressurized into withdrawing the complaint. Some rape cases take 10 to 15 years in court and only about 4 percent of rape victims get justice.

RAPE, THROUGH THE AGES

Let us examine how rape was used as a weapon of subjugation in ancient Indian and medieval feudal society. The booklet published by PUCL & DR, called *Rape, Society and State*, breaks the myth, much propagated by today's Hindutva forces, that women in ancient India enjoyed high status. The fact remains that at no stage of her life did a woman enjoy independence — man was her master and exercised his right either to make his wife cohabit with whomsoever he chose, to get a son, as the impotent Pandu did with his two wives, or gamble her away as *Dharamraj* Yudhishthir did to Draupadi or to throw her out of his kingdom as the 'great' lord Rama did to Sita. Even in the Rig Veda, the concept of a woman's usefulness centres on her sexuality. After creating man, the 'great' *Prajapati 'lord of all creatures,'* created woman:

> Come, let me provide him with a firm basis! So he created woman. When he had created her he revered her from below. Therefore one should revere woman below — He stretched out for himself the stone that projects. With that he impregnated her. (*Brhadaranyak Upanishad, Brahmana IV, ii*)

That rape was not merely permitted but encouraged is clear from the verse that follows. Should a woman not yield despite flattery and bribes the man is advised that: *'he should hit her with a stick or with his hand and overcome her, saying, "with power, with glory I take away your glory".'* Thus, she becomes inglorious. No stigma was attached to the rapist. Thus, the great preceptor of the gods, *Brhaspati*, suffered no punishment for raping a married woman — the punishment fell on her child who was born blind.

The same importance given to honour and the defilement of a woman's purity, as an instrument of demeaning the name of a family, is seen in European feudalism. In fact, the word 'rape' itself comes from the French verb 'raper': to steal. While sexual assault is a big act of aggression on a woman's body and mind, the word does not connote this violent attack on her rights regarding her sexuality, but, rather, gives importance to her honour being stolen from her. And, here too, it is not *her* honour that society is concerned about but that of her man, her family. In early law, the punishment for rape was higher if the victim was married and less if she was single! Linking up history with the present situation in India today, one could only conclude: how well are the forces of Hindutva reviving our 'glorious' past! How sincerely have they emulated the gods in words and deeds in the carnage against Muslims in Gujarat! The law, even to this day, is framed in such a way that instead of the accused, it is the rape victim who has to indirectly, prove her innocence. It is the only criminal law where the crime rubs off on the victim. The victim is twice victimized.

To understand the demands for changes in the rape laws we must first understand how rape is used as an instrument of aggression and repression. Firstly, as Engels has pointed out in *Family, Private Property and the State*, the oppression of women was institutionalized after the growth of private property and class society. The institution of family was one of the chief institutions to spread and maintain patriarchy. As Engels points out, in order to pass on the property of the husband to his lawful heirs, various restrictions were placed on women's sexuality. The *purdah, burqua* or veil, the various social norms restricting the freedom and independence of women, are related to this. Reducing women to bondage and slavery helped appropriate their labour but also helped preserve patriarchy. Thus, in 'genteel' society or the landed classes, a woman was the exclusive property of her family and for her to be looked upon by other men was a dishonour to the family. In the days of 'chivalry,' it was the duty of the men of the clan or community to protect the honour of their women and an affront on their women folk was a call to arms, from private duels to family feuds and wars. Honour was so important that women would commit suicide or *sati* to save it; fathers would kill their daughters to preserve it. Many of these feudal norms are prevalent in today's semi-feudal semi-colonial societies and their hangover lingers on in the advanced capitalist societies.

With the advent of class society and patriarchy, the state that arose defended this inequality and exploitation. We all know how, in the days of early law formulation, the punishment for the murder of a member of the propertied class was higher than if a plebian was murdered. That is, the background of the victim of murder was taken into consideration. While, even today, the same attitude prevails in society in an unwritten manner, it is almost a written or regular aspect of the rape law — questions are asked about the background of the victim. While it should not legally or otherwise matter whether the raped woman is a prostitute or a 'woman of good virtue,' attempts are made to malign the character of the woman to show that there was consent on her part to the sexual act. As patriarchy developed in society, various social norms were developed to condone the crimes of men against women, in fact, to transfer the blame onto the women themselves. For instance, wife beating was and is still justified in society. Any woman questioning any wrong act of her husband or his family is dealt with violence, physical or verbal. The code of Manu, in ancient India, warns the man against the seductive and immoral nature of a woman, putting the blame on her for the man's sexual escapades, so much so that even today the wife blames the 'mistress' for her husband's extra-marital affairs. In the same vein,

sexual aggression on women is approached with the attitude, '*She asked for it.*' A woman must have dressed in a particular way, chosen to travel alone, to go out to work or do something that provoked the man to rape her. It is this attitude that prevails in society that needs to be changed before we can expect any significant changes in law and justice. It is precisely this attitude that dominates the state, the judiciary, the armed forces and the police machinery and the media. In other words, changes in the law will be purely cosmetic ones unless there is a revolutionary change in society and people's thinking, else rape will continue to be used as a weapon of repression and subjugation.

RAPE AS SUBJUGATION

Rape is the kind of violence that has manifold effects on a victim and can damage her psyche so badly that it may lead to suicide. After suffering the physical brutality of the act, often committed in a sadistic way, the woman has to go through the emotional trauma. This trauma is magnified due to social attitudes that discourage women to speak out and fight against rape, that point fingers at her as if she is the criminal rather than a victim. Traditional culture depicts the raped woman as one doomed for life, having no other option than prostitution or suicide. In fact, the same report, referred to above, says that a survey conducted by the Indian Housewives' Federation (in the 1970s) shows that 80 percent of the women entered into the institution of prostitution, at the first instance, as rape victims. An unmarried victim may never even get married. The stigma attached is so strong that not only do women hesitate to come forward and report cases and fight for justice through the courts, they themselves feel that they are defiled, spoilt, 'fallen.' Fortunately, some of these attitudes in women are seen to be changing as more and more women are speaking out. This was observed when fact-finding teams visited Gujarat and the innumerable rape victims from a traditional Muslim background took the courage to describe in detail their experiences and wanted to fight for justice.

Behind the innumerable cases of rape, which are considered to be instances of uncontrolled lust on the part of the rapist, lies a psyche that women are to be seen as sex objects, their reason for existence is to satisfy the sexual desires of men and to give birth to children. Identifying women only in their sexual and reproductive roles is the kind of social conditioning both men and women grow up with. This is useful for the ruling classes, as the value of women's contribution to the workforce through the reproductive function remains under-rated. Treating them as sex objects helps in keeping one half of the population subjugated. A large number of rapes occur within the family or extended family, by neighbours, with children, with dependent girls and widows, within insecure and exploitative work relations. They also, largely, occur due to efforts by males at asserting, establishing, and reaffirming their power in the gender struggle. Degenerate social and cultural trends, due to the prevalence of feudal culture and the growth of imperialist penetration, have been increasing sexual violence against women. Due to the commodification of women in the media, in the beauty, fashion, entertainment and tourism industries, women and girls are becoming more and more vulnerable to sexual violence.

Rape is used as an instrument of maintaining class, caste, racial and ethnic distinctions and hierarchy. While this has been going on from the time of slave society, we can see that even in the era of modern slavery in America, black women were easily raped, due to the notions of racist supremacy and also to keep the entire community in bondage. In India, in parts of Bihar and Telengana, the landlord maintained the right to be the first to sleep with the newly-wed bride of the lower castes and landless peasants. In Maharashtra and other places, the *Devadasi* system leads to young girls being offered to the priests of the temples as prostitutes due to blind faith and poverty. Other girls from lower castes have traditionally been singers and dancers who work as prostitutes in rural areas. Thus, the women folk of the rural poor and the Dalits are considered common property. Raping them is condoned by society and the state turns a blind eye. In areas of

development projects, tribal girls are lured and raped by the non-tribal contractors who come there to work. In areas of work, poor women labourers, single women, destitute women, domestic workers, sometimes even health workers in rural areas, are raped with the knowledge that the class background of the rapist will save him from punishment, while that of the victim will deprive her from justice.

Rape is used as a method of the assertion of political power over a community, caste, or the poor in general. The police, the bureaucrats and the feudal lords in backward areas, rape womenfolk with impunity. Upper-caste elites use rape to humiliate an increasingly assertive Dalit community or to suppress the growing assertion of women. Custodial rape is widely prevalent, with the police humiliating those under arrest. In areas of class conflict, the army, para-military and police forces routinely rape and humiliate the womenfolk of those fighting for justice. This was to be seen during the Vietnam War, in Bosnia and in Africa, among other places. In India, it is to be seen in Kashmir, the North East, and in the Telangana and Naxalite movements. Even in non-violent movements, like the one against the Narmada dam, women have been raped.

Today, with the onslaught of Hindutva forces against the minorities, hundreds of minority women have been raped and killed with the backing of the state, in Gujarat. Even before this, during communal riots, women have been raped to teach a lesson to a community,or to instigate another community to fight. Thus, nuns were raped in Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh to teach Christian missionaries a lesson; while Dalit women are raped to warn the community against asking for self-respect.

RAPE AND THE LAW

Moving on to the existing laws against rape, let us first confront the biggest irony: Who is it that fights for the rape victim against the accused? None other than the state, one of the greatest perpetrators of violence against women, whose aim is to maintain the

status quo of patriarchy. Although it gives the semblance of a welfare state, one that owns the responsibility of meting out justice to the wronged woman, as such, she has no real voice in fighting out her case. The rape victim is only a mere witness in her own case. Her fate depends on the mercy of the police, who did the *panchanama*, the public prosecutor, a government servant, the judge, another representative of the state, whose minds are filled with class, caste and patriarchal biases and pockets filled with unaccounted money.

We can next examine the various loopholes in the law, which account for the low conviction rate in rape cases. Firstly, what constitutes the crime of rape according to the law? According to Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code, rape is committed when a man has sexual intercourse with a woman *against her will or without her consent.* Given the patriarchal biases of the judiciary and other wings of the state apparatus, which invariably brands a victim as 'loose,' 'provocatively dressed,' etc., this clause acts as a convenient loophole to let off the culprit.

The normal punishment for rape is a minimum 7 to 10 years imprisonment and the maximum is life imprisonment and a fine. The court has the power to impose a sentence for less than the minimum. To do this, it must explain the special reasons for giving lighter punishment in its judgment. Needless to say, the courts jump at any opportunity to do so! Either the rapist is condoned for being too old or too young, fearing that his future life may be spoilt, or because he is the sole breadwinner and his family has to be considered, and so on. The law provides for stricter punishment, i.e., rigorous imprisonment for 10 years or life, plus a fine, under the various circumstances of custodial rape, charge of the rape of a pregnant woman, a girl under 12 and gang rape. Even in these special cases, the court has the right to award lighter punishment while giving adequate reasons. Section 354 of the IPC deals with outraging the modesty of a woman, which is a cognizable, bailable offence with punishment up to two years.

The plea of the defence is based around proving that the intercourse was not against her will. The victim's word, that she did

not give consent, is not considered valid (except in the case of custodial and child rape). While an act like rape can have no eyewitnesses, the victim has to prove that she had raised an alarm and put up a tremendous struggle. The attitude of the judges, as reflected in the judgments, are material for black humour, for, sometimes, a judge considers the lack of injuries on the body as willingness, while in another case, the detailed description of resistance written out by a victim was considered too detailed to be true.

Thus, ten years after the changes that had taken place in 1983, began another campaign for changes in the rape law. In the last five years, the numerous workshops held by women's groups, legal aid centres and women lawyers have led to some proposals for changes. These proposals have been given to the Law Commission (LCI) who have, in turn, given their recommendations to the authorities. These recommendations were the outcome of a legal battle waged since 1994 by an NGO named Sakshi in New Delhi, in dealing with the sexual abuse of an eight-year-old minor at the hands of her father, a government employee. In the course of the case, the Supreme Court urged the LCI to look into the existing rape laws and give recommendations for changes that incorporate the interests of both women and children. Along with Sakshi, the IFSHA (Interventions for Support, Healing & Awareness), the All India Democratic Women's Association and the National Commission for Women (all organizations that seek reform within the existing power structures) were consulted and these organizations gave their suggestions.

Changes recommended by the Law Commission in the Indian Penal Code, 1860, Section 375:

1. The first significant change recommended by the Law Commission is that the word rape itself be replaced by 'sexual assault.' This has been made into one category, clubbing it with outraging modesty. Previously, the vague definition and interpretation of the term had become an excuse for appealing for lighter punishment. For instance, in one case, where one Major Singh had molested a seven-month-old baby girl, each member of the panel of judges had a different understanding. One 'learned' judge asked how an infant girl could have any modesty at all that could be outraged. While to another judge, modesty lay in the eyes of the beholder and his intention in outraging it.
2. Secondly, instead of restricting rape to sexual intercourse, now, other sexual acts, including penetration of objects like sticks, etc., (often used in police torture or in communal riots), would be considered as sexual assault. This is also keeping in mind child rape where penis-vagina penetration may not have taken place. A new section on Unlawful Sexual Contact is recommended for insertion (376E) while Section 377 (same sex intercourse as an unnatural offence) is recommended to be deleted. Some procedural changes have been recommended, such as, that the FIR should be recorded by a female police officer, government servant or in the presence of a female social worker, changes regarding medical examination of the victim and the manner of recording confessions and statements.

It is clear that the above changes still leave ample scope for the major loopholes — that a woman has to prove that she did not give consent and also give corroborative proof of this. The Law Commission has not accepted that 'consent' be replaced with 'unequivocal voluntary agreement.' Marital rape still is not recognized. In addition, a campaign has begun protesting against another drawback of the LCI recommendations — that the law is now being made gender neutral. Bearing in mind child sexual abuse, which includes the abuse of boys, the law is proposed to be gender neutral. The law proposes to club women, children and homosexuals, each of whom are oppressed in different ways, into the same category. In the name of broadening the scope of sexual abuse, this recommendation only complicates matters. This opens the scope for men to charge women with sexual assault. Indian

society has such a strong patriarchal bias, and the level of politics is so degenerate, that it is not a far-fetched thought that such a provision will be misused. More seriously, the point is that each of these categories has their specificities and need special provisions to deal with them. Child sexual abuse is a serious social problem in India, and there is a need for a separate law to deal with it. Homosexual assault and abuse is an issue in which recommendations have been made without consulting those concerned or discussing the problems that are being faced by them. Most important, in India, where physical and sexual assault of women is so rampant, and a major part of it socially and politically legitimized, what is the purpose of changing provisions on rape to make them gender neutral? Such an approach is divorced from the Indian social and political reality. Many women's groups have also opposed this recommendation.

Regarding punishment for sexual assault, the LCI recommends enhancement of the minimum punishment to seven years. With regard to sexual assault by a police officer, by a public servant, i.e., custodial rape, and in the case of sexual assault of a pregnant woman, a minor or a gang sexual assault, the minimum punishment is suggested to be ten years. Section 376A recommends that if a man, who is separated from his wife, commits sexual assault on her, the minimum punishment will be two years. Sections 376B to D, pertaining to sexual assault by public servants, superintendents of jails and remand homes, hospital staff or management member with any woman in their custody/institution/hospital, recommend the minimum punishment to be not less than five years. A new section 376E is suggested to be added about unlawful sexual contact (colloquially called eve-teasing or molestation) and simple imprisonment recommended as punishment.

Changes recommended in The Indian Evidence Act 1872: Section 114A:

> It is recommended that if sexual assault by the accused is proved and the question of consent is being contended, then, if the victim states that she did not consent, the court shall presume that she did not consent. Sections 53 and 146, regarding the past character of the victim, have been amended.

How do the laws in India compare with the rape laws in other countries? In the Philippines, where there has been a strong women's movement, some positive changes in the rape laws have been made. The new laws recognize that rape is not a crime against chastity but, rather, a crime against persons and is a question of human rights. It broadens the definition of rape to include sexual assault and puts this into two categories, one graver than the other. It implicitly recognizes marital rape as a crime. In America, where there had been a strong women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s, there have also been changes in rape laws. In 1984, a New York court held marital rape exemption to be unconstitutional. Several other countries, including Russia, Sweden, Denmark and Australia, allow the prosecution of husbands for raping their wives. Yet, we find that in both America and the Philippines there is a high rate of sexual violence against women, thus confirming our understanding that unless there is a revolutionary change in the class relations and the eradication of patriarchy, sexual assault against women will go on unabated. In the Indian context too, we can see the law failing to give justice, not because of the lack of evidence, so much as lack of will. For example, 70 percent of the rapes are usually of minors, where the question of proving that the act was with consent does not arise and the accused can easily be held guilty. Yet why do these crimes go unpunished? In the Gujarat genocide, last March, a number of eyewitnesses to rapes exist — something that is usually impossible to find. But will these people be convicted?

CONCLUSION

It remains to be seen how many of these recommendations are accepted and in what manner. To hope for greater justice for women from the present government is futile. All the ruling class parties are deeply steeped in patriarchal values and their elitist

class/caste basis ensures that they legitimize rape as part of the overall subjugation of society. While giving populist, rhetorical speeches, and calls for the death penalty, etc., the major parties have condoned all, and even well publicized, cases of sexual assault and rape, in places like Gujarat, Delhi (anti-Sikh pogrom), Kashmir, North-East, etc. Cosmetic changes in the law are unlikely to help the rape victim. Besides, the patriarchal biases within the judiciary, police, and other sections of the establishment will further retard the process of gaining justice.

Rather than merely depending on the legal process all democrats must mobilize the masses to take direct action against the rapists and molesters at the local level. They must be humiliated and publicly condemned and made to compensate and apologize to the victim. The victim, on the other hand, needs to be socially and sensitively assisted to get over the trauma, and her self-confidence restored. While agitating for changes in the rape laws, social actions, like ostracizing rapists, blackening their faces, the beating up of the rapist publicly, etc., could be effective, militant actions.

Yet, in the long run, there is a need to understand rape as a weapon of subjugation, and its link to patriarchy and class exploitation. The movement must, in the final analysis, mobilize women to fight for a change in the basic structure of society that will eradicate patriarchy, and with it, rape, from the roots.

Cultural Expression of the Adivasi Women in the Revolutionary Movement

Sadhana, a male comrade, wrote the popular novel *Rago* which deals with the social oppression of an Adivasi Gond girl, her resistance to that oppression and her integration into the life of an armed revolutionary. He wrote it on the basis of his experiences while working in Dandakaranya, at a time when the tribal women's movement was still in an embryonic stage.

Almost a decade later, the Adivasi girls of Dandakaranya are themselves composing songs in Gondi to express their oppression and anguish and their path to liberation. From the hills in Balaghat and Abujhmadh, to the banks of the Godavari and Pranhita rivers, the forests are resounding with songs not only about revolution in general but also about women's conditions and their aspirations. This cultural outpouring of young women squad members, joining together to compose songs, is spreading. Young girls can always be found in villages jostling each other while standing to give chorus when these songs are being sung.

This essay, written under the pen name of 'Sushila', was first published in the *People's March*, 2002.

An old but popular song that has been adapted in the various dialects of Gondi, as it has spread from area to area, is the *Kamalakka* song. This song has played an important role in spreading awareness among village women. Written as a dialogue between a village woman — Kamala — and a peasant organization leader — Sangham Pandu, it begins —

Madvimir, Madkamir Kamalakka
What have you to say, speak Kamalakka
How much can I tell,Sangham Pandu
What can I tell, Sangham Pandu

Then Kamala laments about the marriage forced upon her by her elders and parents and goes on to vividly describe the slave-like labour she performs at the house of her in-laws and her utter neglect. She describes her work —

I labour all day, but then my in-laws
Call me a lazy daughter-in-law!

To collect the leaves, to bring the firewood it is the daughter-in-law,
To fetch the water, to cook the food, it is the daughter-in-law,
To make the toggu, to cook the gruel, it is the daughter-in-law,
To clear the stumps, to gather and sweep it is the daughter-in-law.
I get up in the darkness, Sangham Pandu
And pound and pound the grain
Till the sweat flows Sangham Pandu

I slave in the house, I slave in the forest,
Cutting the paddy, cutting the Kohla I do well.
Yet, girl you may not thresh they say,
I looked after the house, bring stuff from the hills,
But I can't go near the grain store.
I breed the hens, I breed the pigs,
But he eats without asking his wife and children.
Near the Panch, near the ritual if we go,
What do women understand, they say.
What sin have we committed Sangham Pandu?
I cannot go anywhere, Sangham Pandu.
He takes the cows and bulls and sells them off
He drinks and spends the money, my man.

He never brings anything, not even clothes
As if he doesn't know he has a wife and children.

This song, very popular among women, young and old, poignantly brings out the unending, unrecognized toil and taboos that is the fate of tribal peasant women.The patriarchal family, the subordinate position of women in the family and their lack of rights is a theme repeated in many of the songs on women. Like in this song written by the squad women in North Bastar two years ago:

The red flower, sister, is flowering
Let us follow the path of the red flower and struggle.....

In the village, the elders, sister
The elders threaten and suppress us sister
In the house it's mother and father.
Without listening to mother and father we cannot go anywhere
They marry us off sister.....

You bring up the sons and daughters
You do all the work in the house
But the man has the right to the house
The children too are the father's right
Sister, the sons and daughters get the father's name,
Sister, the house too is in the man's name
Wherever sister, we are seen as outsiders
Wherever we look everything is in the man's name.....

In the flag song too, the lack of rights over the crop, land and the house is emphasized:

You give birth to girls and boys, but your name is nowhere sister,
The store is full of paddy, but girls cannot get it, sister.
At a tender age, they are married, sister,
If she says she won't go, they beat her sister....
We look after the crop, we look after the harvest, but we have no rights, sister.
Even though woman looks after the cattle and goats,
Even if she looks after the hens and pigs, the girl has no share.
The land and sky are equal, women and men are equal!

The social oppression faced by girls due to some of the traditional customs and superstitious beliefs are also repeated in many songs. Like the forced marriages practiced quite commonly and the practice of forcing women to remove the blouse once they get married, in parts like Gadhchiroli:

At a tender age they marry us off sister,
If she says she won't go, they beat her, sister.
They bring grown-up wives for small boys sister
Without asking me they married me, my parents,
They took the liquor and fixed up the elders.

The Madia custom is different,
The men don't have the custom
The custom of removing the blouse
At marriage they remove the blouse
They put haldi and take off the blouse
They make me the daughter-in-law of the madkamirs.

The feelings of a young girl forced into marriage have been poetically expressed in a song which goes like this:

In the darkness of no moon
In the light of full moon
In the deep forest I am alone,
I put my foot forward, I take a step backward
Wherever I step it is dark, brother.

Their only daughter, this bright beauty,
This beautiful face they have ruined, brother
They have forcibly married me off, brother.

The imagery in the song expresses the depths of despair that young girls feel due to the outmoded customs and practices. In the end, when she realizes that women must organize themselves and struggle to end these conditions, she says:

Yes, brother yes, I have heard your view
I will no longer stay in this darkness
I will go forward towards a red dawn

The songs emerging from the revolutionary women's movement are clear about the way forward, towards equality. They

reflect what progressive young tribal women view as the only concrete way to achieve their goal of emancipation from social exploitation and oppressive tribal traditions — the path of building a women's organization and joining the armed struggle or supporting it to establish a new democratic order. Thus, the flag song ends by saying:

The land and sky are equal, women and men are equal
If our troubles have to go
Join the struggle, sister
Let us build a Red army and win power
Let us build our liberated areas in the world.

The red flower song ends in this way:

Sister in the forests of Dandakaranya
Let us take the struggle for new democratic revolution forward
All the people must unite sister
We have to build our raj (power)
Hold the red flag in your hand sister
Let us also join the war sister

At the same time, songs on other issues concerning women have also been written, sung and become popular. This one song deals with the atrocities of the police on women and the people's resistance to them. Taking the background of the rape of the nuns in Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh it strings together a series of incidents. It goes like this:

In the rule of this police, in the rule of this government
There is no security for sisters
There is fear in the village, there is fear in the forest.....

The tehsildar with the eyes of a cheetah, the ruler of Narayanpur
Reached Vedmakot, and summoned a meeting
Like a cat he slipped and tried to molest Kamaladidi
The people enraged went to Narayanpur,
They took out a procession, did a chakka jam

Women of the Christian faith, who nursed children
The goons of Jhabua district, with the lotus symbol
This Congress government is false, they entered within

In Conversation with Comrade Janaki

Poru Mahila: *Com. Janaki, would you please first explain to us the nature of the oppression faced by urban women?*

Janaki: Although all women in India are under feudal, capitalist, imperialist and patriarchal oppression, it is present in different forms in different areas, i.e., the urban and the rural areas. The working class and the middle class women in urban areas are faced with some specific problems.

Firstly, if we look at the problems within the family, even in urban areas women are oppressed by the feudal culture. Although the oppression of this nature may be less severe, yet the majority of young girls and women are not given the right to take important decisions regarding their lives by the family. Unmarried girls are under pressure to marry men from the same caste and religion according to the decisions of the family. If a girl decides to marry a man of her choice from another caste or religion she is subjected to severe opposition from the family. Even when a woman wants to work outside the house she has to take the permission of her father, brother or husband. Within many traditional communities

---

Adapted from an interview with Anuradha Ghandy from the March 2001 issue of *Poru Mahila*, the organ of Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sanghatan, Dandakaranya. Translated by Nallamma. All emphasis as in the original.

women are not allowed to take up jobs. Thus, it becomes inevitable for women to fight even for their economic independence. In addition, since capitalist values have spread widely, man-woman relations have also become commercialized. Dowry and other items which have to be given to the grooms' family before and after the marriage have become a big problem for the parents. Added to that, it has become common to all communities to harass women for dowry, both physically and mentally. When the worth of a woman's life can be measured in money and gold, then murdering her for its sake is not far behind. This terrible situation can be found in many households in the urban areas now-a-days. *India is possibly the only country in the world where, especially over the last 25–30 years, the new crime of burning brides for dowry has come into vogue.*

One thing we have to observe is that a section of women belonging to the working class and the middle classes do not get an opportunity to go out and take up jobs. All of their time is spent in house work and working for the family. As a result, they depend on others for their living. Socially they depend on their husbands. That is why they are unable to do anything independently. There are too many restrictions on them to venture out or step outside the threshold. The women who also take care of their children's education, tuitions, etc., have to work almost like a machine. Their entire life revolves round the husband and the children.

The condition of the working class in urban areas is pitiable. The main reason for this is the severity of the problem of homelessness, which forces the poor to set up house illegally in open places. Many of them build huts on the sides of the roads, railway tracks and sewers (even on top of the sewers). In narrow lanes and on the sides of the roads hundreds of families are currently living by building shanties. There is not even an inch of space to build a bathroom or a place which can be called a verandah. As the towns expand, slums keep proliferating on the sides of the roads, on rocky places and on the small hills inside the town. They do not have toilets or water facilities. Overcrowded spaces, polluted environments, and a lack of basic amenities — women

do their work while facing all these problems. Fights over water are a common sight here. In *bastis* like these *goondaism* and harassment is another problem they face. But, above all, the biggest problem is that of the demolition of the *bastis* by the municipal and government authorities on the allegation that they are illegal. Usually it comes upon the women to oppose these demolitions, because when the officers come in the daytime with the police and bulldozers it is usually the women and children who are at home. The capitalist system does not recognize that to have a household is a basic right.

Women in urban areas have many opportunities to step out of the house and work in factories, offices, schools, hospitals and shops. However, in many of the jobs, either they are not paid equally with men or the salary is so low that it is not even enough to run a household with. Many working class women work in the construction industry under the contractors. Many others work as domestic helps. All these jobs fall under the unorganized sector. These do not have any job guarantee, or a guaranteed salary. On top of that, they have to face harassment, often sexual, from the contractors and the men under whom they work. This harassment takes place in many forms, and even educated middle class women are subjected to it. Women are harassed with such pressurizing tactics as threatening to oust them, not giving them work, transferring them, writing bad remarks in their records, etc. Very few women are able to share such things with others.

Now-a-days, in big cities, electronics industries of the imperialists have come up on a large scale. Girls are employed in many of them. But the problems of longer working hours, less salaries and ban on organizing are present in these industries. Thus, they have to fight even for the basic right of forming unions.

In the past some industries like those of *beedi* rolling and *agarbatti* making were thriving in households. Today, many new companies are also giving most of the work to do at home. Poor housewives often take up these jobs thinking they can earn a bit while working from home. However, there is lot of exploitation in this work. Even if they work all day long with the help of family

members it is difficult for them to earn Rs. 20. The labour power of poor women is paid very less. They are being exploited a lot is what I want to say.

Lastly, another point is that the influence of imperialist culture is very great on the urban women. Urban people are not only influenced by consumerism but are also victims of it, giving more importance to fashion and beauty products rather than human values. As a result of this imperialist culture, there is an environment of insecurity due to the atrocities and sexual assaults in the urban areas.

In urban life, the women suffer from many problems, but there are very few organizations that fight against them at present.

Po.Ma: *Tell us about the various trends in the women's movement.*

Janaki: Around the 1980s there was a spontaneous outburst of the women's movement in many parts of the country, especially in the cities. This movement was an indication of the increasing democratic and anti-patriarchal consciousness among women. After the Naxalbari movement had dealt a severe blow to the semi-feudal, semi-colonial system in India, there was an outburst of working class and students' movements. There was the Emergency and the social, economic and political crises of the ruling classes — the women's movements arose out of this background. Internationally also there was the influence of other student and women's movements. Mostly the student, middle class and professional women participated actively in these movements. Out of these spontaneous democratic movements many small and big women's organizations also took birth. But in the past 20 years there have been many changes in the women's movements, their political character, and in these organizations. Later, the women's liberation movement, dependent on the urban middle class women, split into various political and ideological streams. In the nationality movements, as in the North-East, especially in the Kashmiri struggle for self determination, the active participation of women has increased considerably. Women are playing a prominent role in exposing the inhuman atrocities of the police and the army. Under

the leadership of the party, the revolutionary women's movement has developed well in the rural areas, especially in Dandakaranya and North Telengana. Even the BJP and the RSS have recognized the strength of women and are paying attention to spreading decadent social values and vicious politics among them.

Many of the women who had spontaneously participated in the movements against dowry deaths, *sati* and harassment, which drew the attention of the nation towards such problems, had later withdrawn from them. Nonetheless, many among them have gained a name for themselves as researchers and ideologues on women's issues, both in India and abroad. Others have founded voluntary organizations (NGOs). They are receiving funds from international agencies for women's studies programmes and for the emancipation of women. But they have a feminist viewpoint and ideology. This means that they have become propagandists for feminism, and believe that since patriarchy is the main problem of women, they have to fight only against patriarchy. But patriarchy has its roots in class society. In all societies it is perpetuated by the exploiting classes, i.e., feudalism, capitalism and imperialism. Thus, fighting patriarchy should mean fighting against these exploiting classes. But the feminists do not seem to recognize this! They believe that the women's conditions in this society can be changed by politically lobbying with the governments and by propaganda alone. In reality, this feminist stream today is representing the class outlook and the class interests of the bourgeois and upper middle class women in the country.

The women's organizations of revisionist parties like the CPI, CPM and CPI (ML) (Liberation) are working actively in some cities. They run movements on social and political issues of women. Along with issues of women's oppression they even take up processions and do *dharnas* on problems like those of price rise, etc. They are different from the feminist stream because they do not give importance only to struggles against patriarchy. However, they are also completely reformist organizations. Because of their revisionist politics they are not linking women's liberation with revolution and are working with the belief that by changing

governments they will be able to improve the condition of women within this existing social framework itself. For instance, in the recent past, they have concentrated all their activities on gaining the right of 33 percent reservation for women in parliament. In fact, the common people have lost confidence in the corrupt parliamentary system long back. It has also been proven that whoever gets elected to the parliament will always serve the exploiting ruling classes and not work for the rights of women or those of the poor people.

There are some organizations in the urban areas which are working actively, basing themselves on Marxist analysis, seeing the roots for the exploitation and oppression of women in the class society and recognizing the link between women's liberation and social revolution. For a decade they have been working amongst the working class, students and employees among women. They are working especially well in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. They not only take up issues of women's oppression but also campaign on political issues. They create awareness among women of the need for fundamental changes in society.

It is an alarming phenomenon for the democratic and revolutionary women's movements that the *Hindutva* forces are also working amongst women. They are reinstating age old feudal values in the name of opposing western culture. In the name of Hindu traditions and *Bharat Mata* they are suppressing the growing consciousness for women's liberation. Not only that, they are also carrying out a vicious propaganda against religious minorities among them. They are even giving military training to the women in the name of *Nari Shakti*.

In brief, the women's movement is divided into various ideological streams all over the country. We have to study them and build up a strong women's movement by fighting against the wrong ideological trends in them.

Po.Ma: *How much do people know about the revolutionary women's movement? What is its impact?*

Janaki: The Adivasi women's movement which has been emerging in the Dandakaranya over the last decade has a great

significance in the history of the contemporary women's movement in India. Apart from the great political mobilization of women in nationality movements, it is the Adivasi peasant women who are playing an active role socially and politically in India. They are organized on a wide scale in a large number of villages and are opposing the age old patriarchal traditions inside the Adivasi society. They are participating in the armed struggle against the exploiting government and its army and in political campaigns. This is a big victory for the Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sanghatan.

But it is very sad that very little information is available outside about the extent of the KAMS and about its activities. The CPI (ML) (People's War) members and sympathizers in other states know little about it. The party put in some efforts for this. The paper written and sent by you for the AILRC seminar in Patna (it was published in Telugu and Hindi), the book on women martyrs and some novels and short stories have been useful in propagating it. *But information about this revolutionary women's movement is not going out regularly. Even your magazine* Poru Mahila *is seen outside very rarely. Widespread propaganda about KAMS and its activities is much needed. Through that we can give a fitting reply to the government's negative propaganda about the approach of revolutionary parties towards the women's question.*

Po.Ma: *Tell us about your experience in Dandakaranya (DK).*

Janaki: Before coming to DK I had read articles and reports about the women's movement here. But I did not have an assessment that it was so widespread. That is why I was very happy to see the size of this movement. I must tell you something. In the lessons taught about tribal societies in the colleges they say that the *Gondi* society is very liberal. But after observing the *Muria, Madia and Dorla* people from close quarters I understood how patriarchal the tribal society was too. I understood how important it is to study the problem of women's oppression deeply. Although the participation of Adivasi peasant women in the production process is very huge, patriarchy had curbed their rights.

While writing about the women's movement during the war for a new democratic society in China, Jack Belden, the American writer and journalist, had written, 'The Chinese Communist Party has got the key to the victory of the revolution. They have won over the most oppressed section of the Chinese society.' When I saw the women's movement in DK it was these words of Belden which came to my mind. *In fact, next to the Chinese Revolution it is the revolutionary movement in DK that has proven that where there is a people's war, where there is armed struggle against the feudal, comprador, imperialist system for the victory of a New Democratic Revolution, the working class women participate actively on a large scale for the emancipation of the whole society as well as for their own emancipation. People's War has shattered the hesitations of the women. It doubled their strength. It showed the path for the liberation of women.* There is a link between the semi-feudal, semi-colonial society and women's oppression. *The Marxist principle, that we can carry forward the fight against patriarchy only along with class struggle, has been proven here to be correct.*

Wherever the party is working systematically, we can see that the participation of women is greater in all political activities and movements. In 1998, due to the severe famine conditions in South Bastar, many women had migrated to Andhra Pradesh for daily wage work. There were KAMS' range committee members too among them. But when we asked them to come for the 8 March meetings, in one place, 700, while in another 450, had attended. Before that, in rallies against famine conditions, thousands of women had participated. When I was there, women got recruited into the People's Guerrilla Army on a large scale. In some places the recruitment of young women was more than that of young men. *The thing which influenced me the most was that the wives of married comrades who were already in the squads are also getting recruited. Many of them have even given away their little children to relatives and are becoming guerrilla warriors in the ongoing great People's War for changing this society. And I have seen many women comrades who stood steadfast with the People's War without looking back even though within a few months their husbands had died in police encounter or in some other accident.* By breaking away from the traditional, dreary, narrow confines of the family they prefer this new life even though it is full of dangers. In that manner, their life and their existence are becoming meaningful. I have seen many comrades receiving training and taking up new responsibilities.

Building up KAMS' units in every village, election of committees, election of Range Committees in range conferences, sending the unit members to villages for propaganda campaigns, participation in *bandhs* and other protest activities, providing them military training — all these are victories of the movement. *But what I have observed in my experience is that since the Area Committee members are engaged, without respite, in various kinds of responsibilities, and due to a typical work style, KAMS work is being neglected.* We have to think of new methods to involve the elderly women in the villages. Women and children are facing a number of health problems. By increasing their understanding in these matters and by paying special attention to their welfare we can increase their zest. We have to increase their participation in the village level meetings. Many people call the KAMS an organization of young women. Widening the narrow knowledge of society among the members is another challenge in front of us.

Likewise there is a need to give special social and political training to women members in the squads and platoons. We have to plan to give them continuous education in scientific knowledge regarding health problems. Although there are discussions on these topics, due to a scarcity of time and due to getting immersed in various kinds of work, they get postponed. We can get rid of sense of inferiority by giving them scientific knowledge and imbibing wide social awareness among them.

Po.Ma: *What is your message to the women working in squads and in KAMS in DK?*

Janaki: *Our Adivasi women comrades in DK are building a new history today. Although it is the most backward area of the country, it has the first place in the ongoing women's movement in the country.* They are answering the guns of the police in a fitting manner by fighting

equally with the men comrades in the armed struggle to free this country from the vicious grip of imperialism, feudalism and comprador bourgeois clutches. In the villages they are standing up for their rights by facing the threats and pressures of village elders. They are weakening patriarchy in Gondi Adivasi culture.

Although they are opposing such big enemies and forces, the shyness and sense of subordination, whose remnants are still present, are also obstructing their development. Inferiority complex comes out of these. Its roots are very deep. What I want to tell my KAMS colleagues is that they should increase their self confidence. They have to fight against the enemy inside them. In the coming days KAMS will be facing many big challenges. State repression is already there. Apart from that, the government will try to keep the Adivasi society and culture in backwardness with the help of village elders and through Adivasi leaders. It will become necessary for the KAMS to face them politically. *Likewise, the KAMS should keep itself ready to put forward its understanding regarding true liberation of women by intervention in the women's movement which is going on in the form of various streams in the country. To face all these challenges our women comrades should attain political and ideological maturity and have self confidence.*

Working Class Women: Making the Invisible Visible

All over the world the participation of women in working class struggles has gone up. Since the percentage of women workers is going up, they are becoming an increasingly important component of the working class. International capitalism has intensified its use of patriarchy to exploit women not only in their own countries but in third world countries too. As working class struggles get intensified the role of working women in these struggles will also become important. The women proletariat must play its historical role to liberate themselves from the chains of imperialism and bureaucrat capitalism and gender-based exploitation as well.

But in India, since the vast majority of toiling women are in the rural areas, it is the contribution of peasant and tribal women that has been and will be most significant in the struggle to bring an end to feudal, capitalist exploitation and patriarchal oppression. Yet there are very large numbers of women who live by their toil, outside the sphere of agriculture. By their sheer number they

This paper was written by women activists, based upon the research of Anuradha Ghandy and presented by Stree Chetana, Nagpur, at the All India Seminar on Working Class Women at Hyderabad in March 1997.

constitute a force which is yet to be organized and released. The length and depth of feudal tradition in India has kept the masses of poor women in chains of bondage and without self worth. They toil and they labour but are hardly recognized. The composition of working women in India varies from that of other countries, including other Asian countries. Women constitute 40 to 50 percent of the labour force in countries like Germany and Norway. They constitute a little more than a quarter in India. While industry employs hardly 7.5 percent of India's working women, even in countries like Korea, Malaysia and Singapore women were almost half the work force in manufacture. In Indonesia 12 percent and in Philippines 17 percent of women's labour force were in industry. And in India most of the non-agricultural women's labour force is in the informal sector.

The invisibility of women's work, its under-valuation and perception that it is a 'secondary' line of operation is sharply evident in the industrial sector. Indeed, it is a matter of serious concern for all of us who are concerned with women's liberation and revolution, that the working class women and their contribution to the working class movement is so neglected. The resurgence of the women's movement in the late 1970s, and the consequent growth in women's studies, helped to focus studies on the 'invisible' women due to the existing ruling class policies. But their contribution to struggles is still mostly hidden in the yellowed, brittle pages of political journals and magazines, while their experiences lie scattered in the *jhuggies* and *bastis* of workers around the country. The task of making their contribution to the trade union movement and to the broader working class movement 'visible' has only now begun. This paper is an attempt to understand why this is so.

This paper first deals with the colonial period, tracing the entry of women into the modern working class and their struggles. In the next section it deals with the broad changing trends in women's employment, especially post-1947, considering the reasons for these changes. The paper also covers the impact of protective legislation, the role of trade unions and the struggles

women have undertaken. Finally, we have taken up various issues that have come up in the context of the working class movement, which the women's movement should also consider.

WOMEN IN THE WORKING CLASS: HISTORY AND TRENDS

The Colonial Period

Destruction of Handicraft Industry

In 1834–35 Marx wrote, 'The misery hardly finds parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India.'

An important proportion of the cotton weavers and spinners of yarn in pre-colonial India were women and they too were victims of the colonial policy that destroyed the widespread handicraft industry in the country. This destruction of the handicraft industry severely affected women's role in production. In the pre-capitalist economy, the family was the unit of production both in agricultural and in artisan households and women contributed considerably to the productive activity in artisan households too, though their role and responsibility varied in the different regions. In many areas they marketed what their families produced too.

'The decline in women's employment was a part of the general process of loss of industrial employment' that affected the entire Indian Population, during the 19th and early 20th century. The once flourishing cottage industries in India suffered a severe setback 'due to the rapacious exploitation by the East India Company, the tariff barriers introduced to protect British factory manufactured goods and the competition from imported and mill made yarn.' The decline of textiles, metal products, and services by potters and blacksmiths affected women's industrial employment adversely.

The burden of the population shifted towards agriculture and the proportion of women dependent on agriculture for their subsistence increased (Table 1). The increased burden on agriculture meant underemployment and impoverishment. Women migrated

Table 1: Trends in Distribution of Women Workers (in lakh)

Year	Agriculture	Industry	Service	Total	% of total female pop.	% of total labour force
1901	67.01%				31.70%	
1911	308.9 (73.9%)	61.37 (14.7%)	47.67 (11.4%)	418.00	33.73%	34.44%
1921	302.79 (75.5%)	54.09 (13.5%)	44.07 (11.0%)	400.95	32.67%	34.02%
1931	271.77 (72.3%)	51.47 (13.7%)	52.76 (14.0%)	376.00	27.63%	37.17%
1951	310.62 (76.8%)	45.54 (11.2%)	49.23 (12.1%)	405.39	23.30%	28.98%
1961	250.60 (80.1%)	33.07 (10.5%)	29.31 (9.4%)	594.02	27.96%	31.53%
1971	250.60 (80.1%)	33.07 (10.5%)	29.31 (9.4%)	312.98		

with men where they found work opportunities. They migrated as indentured labour to other British colonies in Africa and Pacific islands. Modern industry started emerging in the second half of the 19th century itself. But the slow pace of industrialization meant that the absolute number and proportion of the female population that got employment in these industries was too small to arrest the decline in the participation of women in non-agricultural occupations.

Growth of Modern Industry

In the first phase of the growth of modern industry, many women (and children) were employed in the manual and semi-manual operations in textile mills, jute mills and in mines. They were also employed in large numbers in tea and later coffee plantations started by British and Indian capitalists. Thus women joined the ranks of the modern proletariat from the second half of the 19th century. In the colonial period women constituted an important portion of the working class. In the 1920s for example, women

constituted 20 percent of the total workers in the textile industry. They were also employed in large numbers in the cotton pressing and ginning industries. In Greater Bombay alone, out of a total factory employment of 2.10 lakh in 1927, approximately 40,000 were women. A large number of women were also employed in mines. In 1901 itself, 30,488 women were working in mines. In 1921, 38 percent of the mine workers were women. In 1951, 1.09 lakh women were employed in mines and they comprised about one-fifth of the total work force in mines.

Women worked as loaders in the coal mines, and as cleaners and sorters in manganese mines. Though the largest number of women were employed in coal mines, their proportion in manganese and iron ore mines (43.9 percent and 38.2 percent) was higher. Similarly women constituted a large proportion of the workers in tea and coffee plantations, both in Assam and South India. They constituted over 45 percent of the plantation labour, and several lakh women were employed in these plantations.

Besides, in urban areas, women began to be employed in municipalities as scavengers and sweepers, and in the railways. Thus, though the total proportion of female employment in industry was low, yet, women constituted an important and militant section of the modern working class in the colonial period.

Post-1947 Period

Rapid Decline in Women's Work Participation

In this period employment in the organized sector expanded and diversified as new industries started coming up. But in this period, the proportion of women's employment started falling and there was a decline in women's total employment till 1971. It is in the decade of the 1980s that women's participation in non-household industry and in the service sector has increased (Table 2).

One of the most important reasons for this decline in women's employment in industry is the rapid decline in the handicraft industry after 1947. The expansion of the agro-processing factories

Table 2: Trend in Female Employment in Decade 1981–91 (Census)

	1981	1991
Total main workers	44.8 million (100%)	62.9 million (100%)
1. Cultivators	14.8 mn (33%)	21.5 mn (34.22%)
2. Agricultural labourers	20.8 mn (46%)	28.3 mn (44.9%)
3. Livestock, fisheries hunting, forestry, plantations	0.82 mn (1.83%)	1.01 mn (1.60%)
4. Mining & quarrying	0.16 mn (0.35%)	0.21 mn (0.33%)
5. Manufacturing, processing		
a) Household industry	2.05 mn (4.57%)	2.22 mn (3.53%)
b) Other than household	1.61 mn (3.6%)	2.44 mn (3.88%)
6. Construction	0.39 mn (0.87%)	0.42 mn (0.66%)
7. Trade & Commerce	0.92 mn (2.04%)	1.42 mn (2.26%)
8. Transport, Storage, Communications	0.16 mn (0.3%)	0.20 mn (0.32%)
9. Other Services	3.11 mn (6.94%)	5.19 mn (8.26%)

* Million = 10 lakh

affected women in the traditional industries like oil pressing, rice pounding, tanning and leather products and tobacco processing. Since the largest proportion of women in the non-agricultural occupations were in the domestic, cottage industry, the decline in this industry affected women's employment. The growth of organized markets and big intermediaries affected women who marketed products of household industry. Hence women's employment in the service sector also declined.

The second reason for the decline in women's employment was the retrenchment of large number of women workers from the modern industrial sector. Though it is in the British period itself that the process of reducing women in the factories and mines

began, it became more rapid after 1950. Women began to the retrenched due to the following reasons:

Mechanization, Automation and Rationalization: This has affected women workers most of all. Women's lack of education, the lack of opportunities to learn new technical skills, means that they were the first to be thrown out when manual or semi-manual operations were automized, e.g. the introduction of high speed spinning and winding machines led to women being retrenched. Even in modern industries like pharmaceuticals, new superfast filling, sealing and labeling machines meant that recruitment of women was curtailed. The same process has been repeated in the jute industry, in the coir and tobacco processing industries too. As a result, the total number of women employed in factories declined in the 1960s.

Protective Legislation: Though the trade union movement demanded and got laws passed that protected women, yet it did nothing to stop the retrenchment of women due to these very laws. The various protective legislations were used by employers to stop the recruitment of women initially and then directly retrench them e.g. with the ban on night shift employment for women, women began to be replaced by men in the textile industry. The ban on employing women in underground work in mines, the 1954 Award equalizing the wages of women and men workers, the restrictions on how much load a woman can carry, all affected women in the mines. In the jute industry too, the restrictions on load affected women's employment. To circumvent the other facilities etc, employers stopped recruiting women or restricted the number of women to be employed. In the case of the bidi industry they shifted operations from the factory/workshop to the home. The bidi rolling industry is probably one of the first industries in which the shift from the organized to the unorganized, domestic sector took place.

The fact is that capitalists have spent very little on the benefits and facilities that have to be provided to women. They have ignored or circumvented these laws and yet they have retrenched women and curtailed their recruitment in the name of these laws.

The failure of the trade union movement to prevent the retrenchment of women due to the above two reasons is, in the fact, the most important cause for the decline of women in modern industry and the marginalization of women from the industrial sector in the post-1947 period. Thus from being an important component of the proletariat in the colonial period, women became a marginal force in the modern manufacturing industries. They remained concentrated in the traditional and declining industries. In the cities, domestic service became an important source of employment for women (Table 3).

Table 3: Labour Force in India — 1973

	Organized		Unorganized		Total	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Male	154.16	12.73	158.74	1258.97	312.90	1271.70
Female	15.30	6.05	56.40	700.25	71.70	706.30
Total	169.46	18.78	215.14	1959.22	384.60	1978.00

Based on Five Year Plan : 1978–83.

The Present Situation

Impact of Globalization and SAP

Women's employment has been affected by the world wide imperialist offensive since late 1970s and the pro-imperialist Structural Adjustment Policies (SAP) introduced by the Indian government. On the one hand, there has been further retrenchment from industries, and on the other hand, there has been expansion of export-oriented production, especially, in the unorganized sector that is employing large numbers of women.

Hence there has been a growth in the proportion of women employed in the non-household manufacturing sector in the 1980s (see Table 2).

In the first period, after the comprador bourgeoisie came to power in India, while the organized sector expanded, women were marginalized, but in the present period the organized

manufacturing sector itself is under attack. The closure of thousands of factories, both in the public and private sectors in the decade of the 1980s has thrown lakhs of workers, including women workers, out of jobs. In many cases they have lost their life long savings and dues. Thousands of workers have been either forcibly retrenched or have been forced to give up their jobs through ploys like the VRS (Voluntary Retirement Scheme). Women have been targeted for this too: the Hindustan Lever case is a typical example of how this policy is being pursued by aggressive MNCs. Women's employment in the Sewree plant in Mumbai has been curtailed over the years. As part of their restructuring operations in the early 1980s they targeted women. During the year long lock-out, they approached and forced women to accept the VRS and finally when the plant reopened only seven women workers remained in the plant; 150 women had accepted VRS.

The policy of liberalization means that more and more jobs even in big factories and offices are being given out on contract and sub-contract basis. Women are being employed in the lowest levels in these contract jobs, as temporary, casual workers. The growth of the export-oriented industries like garment and electronics and the setting up of export promotion zones has led to the employment of larger and larger number of women, especially school educated girls in these factories. They are forced to work for low wages; there is an informal ban on unionization in these zones. Many of these industries are sub-contractors for the imperialist companies, a part of their international division of labour. Globalization, the international division of labour introduced by the imperialists, means that these industries and contracts are completely dependent on the imperialists for their market and subject to their rapacity and exploitation. The burden of this exploitation is being borne by these workers.

Globalization has also meant the decentralization of production; production being shifted out of large factories into workshops and homes. With computer-based technology they have

combined a highly centralized group of highly skilled workers with a large number of de-skilled, dispersed labour processes which require little capital investment. Thus these nodules of parts of the production process itself are being contracted out to small units where the same product is manufactured under very different conditions of work. It is in these sweated workshops that large numbers of women are being employed in larger cities. The imperialists have also introduced the putting out system once again, highly divided parts of the production process are being given out to women to produce at home. Women, with the help of their children, work for long hours for a mere pittance. The wage is not even a subsistence wage enough for mere survival. Thousands of women in the vast slums of Mumbai for example are involved in sewing garments from their home, in manufacturing parts of jewellery, locks, clips, bindis, paper boxes, agarbathis etc. They work with no tools or with the simplest. They now constitute the new unorganized sector, home-based workers being created by the SAP, women, who do not even realize that they are workers.

Women, especially third world women are being considered as particularly suitable for this task. They constitute a cheap, docile labour force, which is willing to work long hours for extremely depressed wages. Since their work is considered as supplementary, and since they combine it with domestic responsibilities, it fits into the feudal patriarchal family norms. The imperialists are using the feudal patriarchal norms to extract labour with super profits from the third world women, especially in the home-based sector.

The main criteria for locating production in a particular place is the availability of cheap labour, so that the production can be shifted the moment cheaper labour is available elsewhere. The fact is that this kind of production, whether in workshops or at home, has a minimal amount of machinery, so closing or the shifting production is extremely simple and entails no cost whatsoever. Thus women are being given work, with no certainty of continuity of job security.

Growth of Services Sector

At the same time, women's employment in the service sector, in teaching jobs, as nurses and para-medical workers in the rural health schemes; in the ICDS project, as clerks in banking, insurance and government administration and telecommunications has also grown in the past two decades. By 1984-85, 12.9 percent of working women were employed in the organized sector, of which the services sector itself accounted for 9.26 percent. This is a well unionized sector. This sector too has been affected by the liberalization and privatization policies of the government, the reduction in government spending on education and health, by computerization etc. To protect their jobs and improve their service conditions, workers in this sector have taken up struggles, in which these women have also actively participated. The number of educated unemployed women is growing by leaps and bounds.

Thus in this past two decades, the number and proportion of women in manufacturing has gone up, though they are concentrated in the unorganized sector. At the same time the number of educated women finding employment in the service sector has become substantial, and they are concentrated in certain industries and occupations in the services sector. Women's role in the working class movement has once again become important.

Gender-based Discrimination

Yet, women in both the organized and unorganized sector are subject to exploitation on a gender basis as well.

1. *Women are concentrated in the unorganized sector:* The largest proportion of women are bidi workers, handloom weavers, fish processing workers, vendors, mathadi (headload carriers) workers, domestic servants. Wages are low; hours of work unregulated and they have no job security or benefits. They have no chances of promotion; work experience does not bring them better wages.

2. *Feminization of certain occupations:* Women are concentrated in certain low skill, low wage occupations. Their work is under-valued and wage rates are lower, e.g. coir industry, bidi industry domestic service, hand embroidery, nursing, primary school teaching are examples of female dominated occupations.

3. *Bias against women:* Women are not allowed to handle sophisticated machinery and instruments because it is assumed that they cannot learn the necessary skills and technical knowledge. They are concentrated in industries with less capital investment (See Table 3).

   This is being reinforced by the policy of the government and social attitudes, since girls are not as educated as compared to boys, and also technical institutes offer very few courses for girls and women. Most of the courses offered are those like steno typing, data operating, cookery, beautician courses, which are considered suitable for women.

4. *Wage discrimination:* In spite of legislations like Equal Remuneration Act, women get lower wages than men in many industries and jobs. Women earn less than men even in the same job. Often unions too sign agreements that accept lower rates for women. Various indirect methods are also used to keep their wages lower like keeping them piece-rated, casual or temporary, lowering the categorization of their work.

5. *Sexual Harassment:* Women employees and workers have to face sexual harassment from supervisors and seniors.

6. *Discrimination:* Pregnancy and motherhood, the social functions of women have become levers in the hands of the comprador-feudal government and private capitalists to harass and discriminate against women. While the concept of paternity leave has been accepted in developed countries, in India women are still struggling to assert

their right to motherhood. Pregnant women are not employed; they are retrenched during pregnancy.

The government has also tried to link maternity benefits to marital status. This came to light in 1986 when a telephone operator from Bhuj was denied maternity leave because she was not married on the records of the department. Protests all over the country and a legal battle finally succeeded in forcing the government to withdraw its stand. The government reacted in typical feudal fashion that the provision is meant to protect the health of the mother and child. It was also an attempt to force women to change their surnames after marriage.

The Fourth Pay Commission has also restricted the right by proposing that maternity benefits should be claimed only up to two births. Even the ESI Act has been amended so that this right is denied to a large number of contract and casual workers.

7. *Health hazards:* Many of the occupations in which women are employed are hazardous to health. Lack of information and lack of alternative employment forces women to continue in these occupations.

8. *Lack of facilities like separate toilets, restrooms:* This problem exists both in the organized and in the unorganized sector. Utter neglect of the special needs of women, lack of trained staff to handle children in crèches, these problems are lowest on the priority of trade unions and hence neglected.

STRUGGLES OF WOMEN WORKERS

The British Period

The first part of the 20th century was marked by the awakening of the proletariat, especially in the period after the First World War. The severe exploitation of the workers during the war years, due to which the capitalist amassed massive profits,

coupled with the growth of an anti-imperialist consciousness, led to a wave of workers' struggles. Trade unions began to be formed in this period. Women workers, who formed a significant section of the young proletariat, played an active part in these struggles. They constituted a militant section of the working class in the colonial period, in the textile, jute, plantations and mining industries.

In the textile industry too, women were active from the very inception. They faced severe, inhuman exploitation: long working hours without any limits, without adequate breaks; poor working conditions, wages almost half that of men and no provision for maternity benefits, etc. Due to this, women textile workers were active from the social reform period in the end of the 19th century. In Mumbai, when a social reformer, N.M. Lokhande, began the Millhands Association in 1890, women workers also joined the association, attending and even addressing meetings of the association. The campaign of the textile workers of Bombay had its impact in getting the Factory Commission appointed in September 1890. Following the recommendations of the Factory Commission, the working hours of women were restricted to 11 hours and night work was prohibited for women.

Later when the trade union movement emerged among textile workers, women workers were also active and militant fighters. In the famous long strike in 1928 women were in the forefront of the picketing at mill gates. Women workers and wives of men workers played an active role in the Sholapur uprising in May 1930. Textile workers had gone on strike to protest against the arrest of Gandhi during the Civil Disobedience Movement. In retaliation against police firing on the striking workers, the workers burnt down police stations and the district court complex. The striking workers, joined by the general public, took control of the town. The British took seven days to regain control of the town. They declared martial law and unleashed a very brutal campaign of repression. Working class women displayed exemplary courage in this uprising. Through their struggles, women textile workers in Bombay were able to prevent their retrenchment in the 1930s.

The international socialist women's movement and the Third International led by Lenin raised several demands to protect women workers and to provide for their special needs. Ban on night work, ban on work in industries of processes hazardous to health, maternity leave, crèches, separate toilet facilities, community kitchens, regular breaks for feeding babies were demands raised by the international socialist movement, and implemented by the Bolsheviks after the Russian Revolution in the USSR. These became the demands of the international working class. Though the all India trade union movement too raised these demands, during the colonial period, only the ban on night work and underground work was legally enforced by the colonial British government. That too partially, for during the Second World War, due to the needs of increasing production of coal, women were encouraged and made to work in the underground mines. It is only in the period after 1947 that the trade union movement succeeded in getting legislation enacted for equal wages, maternity benefits and crèche facilities.

The trade union movement emerged in the 1920s in the context of the anti-British movement. The mass of workers and peasants also began to participate in the movement. Hence many of the petty-bourgeois and bourgeois leaders and participants of the nationalist struggles kept links with workers' movement and some of the Marxist leaders became organizers and supporters of the trade union movement. It is in this context that Annie Besant was elected one of the three Vice-Presidents of the AITUC at its founding conference in 1919.

Many educated, middle class women worked tirelessly among the workers as organizers and came to be recognized as leaders of the workers. In the Bombay Province, Maniben Kara, a supporter of M.N. Roy, led the struggles of textile workers. A fiery orator, she was imprisoned for her speeches. Elected as the President of the AITUC in 1935, she remained active among workers all her life. Ushatai Dange, the wife of the CPI leader S.A. Dange, was active among women textile workers from the 1928 strike itself. She led the eight-month long struggle of the mill workers, against

retrenchment. The high point of their struggle was the night long encirclement of the mill office by over seven hundred women workers. Usha Dange was also one of the organizers of the 1934 strike and remained associated with the workers' movement all her life. Parvati Bhore, a barber by caste was a fiery speaker and participated in many struggles of textile workers. She was elected Joint Secretary of the Girni Kamgar Union. Meenakshi Sane, a member of the CPI, was sent to Sholapur by the party in 1934 to work among the workers who had earned a name through their militancy. She built up a movement among textile and bidi workers with women played a leading role. Shanta Bhalerao, a full timer of the AITUC was elected Vice-President of the AITUC. Noteworthy about these women was the fact that most of them remained active trade unionists all their life.

In February 1946, (during the militant general strikes in support of the Royal Indian Navy cadet uprising) almost five hundred workers in Bombay were killed in police firings. Among these martyrs was one women communist leader, Kamal Dande.

In Bengal too several women, especially nationalist leaders, became leaders of the trade union movement. Among them was Santosh Kumari Devi who led the jute workers from 1922–27 in the Gouripur-Naihati region of the 24 Parganas, Prabhabati Dasgupta, who led the struggle of the scavengers of Calcutta Municipal Corporation in 1928, and then the general strike of jute workers in 1929. Dr. Maitreyi Bose, a Congress woman, worked among dock and port workers. She joined the INTUC and was a prominent leader of the INTUC, a rare thing considering that the INTUC has no tradition at all of promoting women into leadership. Communist women of various trends too were active among workers. Sudha Roy, a communist school teacher, worked among dock workers in 1930s. Women workers in jute mills, in the plantations too, made a name for themselves as militant organizers. Dukhmati was active among the jute workers of the Baranagar area and led many militant agitations. She was a representative of the workers in AITUC and elected Vice President of the Jute Workers Union. Sukumari Chaudhari was an active worker of

Bengal Lamps; Maili Chetri, a tea garden worker, led and organized the Denguajhaar tea garden in a long-drawn struggle in the repressive period of the late 1940s. She went underground though she was pregnant and led the striking workers from jungles. Succumbing to the extreme physical hardship, she died in 1949. There are many such unsung heroines of the working class movement. There are few examples given to stress the point that women as workers and as politically active members of the anti-imperialist movement and the communist movement played an active role in the working class movement. But this history is hidden in the various specific struggles and these could not be comprehensively documented for this paper. The average book on trade union history does not display any gender sensitivity and does not delve into this aspect of the working class movement. To an extent this is also a reflection of the weakness of the trade union movement itself, which drew women into struggle, raised their demands, but did not conceptualize the significance of the women's participation in modern industry, the problem of the double burden and thereby devise strategies to counter the anti-woman manoeuvres of the capitalist class.

The Post-1947 Struggles Involving Women Workers

This period too is marked initially by the major struggles in industries where women constitute a substantial number. Organizations of bidi workers were active during the British period itself, but their struggles picked up momentum in the 1950s and 1960s especially in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala and later in Andhra Pradesh. Coir workers in Kerala also led some militant struggles in the 1950s. They have also struggled against attempts to mechanize their work. In the 1970s and 1980s casual and contract workers in the public sector, steel and heavy engineering plants and mines around the country started getting organized and participated in militant struggles to get maximum wages, for regularization, implementation of provisions like PF, gratuity, bonus etc. Women contract and casual workers have been very much

part of these struggles. It was due to the agitations of bidi workers that the Bidi and Cigar (Conditions of Employment) Act of 1966 was enacted. This Act provides for paid weekly holiday, annual leave, and maternity benefits to all the workers including home-based workers.

Many of these struggles have been subject to severe police repression but both women workers and the wives of striking workers have braved brutal repression to continue the struggle. The wives of railway workers braved repression to sit on the rail tracks to prevent the para-military from running trains during the famous all India railway strike in May 1974. The workers in the iron ore mines of Dalli Rajhara began their attempts to form a separate union by facing police firing in 1977. The women textile workers and women family members of the striking workers participated in the rasta roko and jail bharo during the longest textile strike in Mumbai in 1982. One woman was martyred in this jail bharo. Women workers from SEEPZ in Bombay faced detention in jail when they militantly gheraoed a minister in his bungalow. Such accounts are innumerable and go to show that women workers are still as militant and willing to face the most brutal repression in order to fight their exploitation and get justice.

Since the late 1970s organizations of workers and employees in the various service sector industries has also started growing. School and college teachers, nurses, government employees etc have been involved in struggle. The militancy of women school teachers during the state wide strike in Tamilnadu made news all over the county. It is women in this sector who have struggled, individually and collectively against discriminatory practices and sexual harassment. The struggle of airhostess against being permanently grounded on attaining the age of 30 yrs or on becoming pregnant, the struggle of nursing students in Raipur and other cities against the virginity tests are examples of these struggles. Women employees in the anganwadis under the ICDS scheme have got unionized and have put up state wide and even an all India agitation to get regularized and get a regular salary instead of the miserable wages they were being given.

In the unorganized sector too women have slowly started organizing themselves. The widespread organization of the tendu leaf pickers in the forests of central India under the leadership of the DAKMS and KAMS in the past decade and a half has succeeded in substantially increasing the wages of the workers. Women and men bamboo workers (*burad*) in Bhandara district have also faced police repression to demand regular supply of bamboo at low rates from the forest department. Among the reformist attempts to organize women in the self employed sector the most famous is SEWA started by Ila Bhatt in Ahmedabad. Starting as a union of head load workers it has grown into an institution providing credit, medical training, etc. Yet the vast masses of women in the unorganized sector are yet to be organized.

While women have been militant and consistent during struggle, their participation in regular trade union activities and in taking leadership in trade unions is low (see Table 4). Some union women have functioned as unit leaders, or have become members of local committees, but few are found in responsible positions at the higher level. The neglect of the special problems of women by trade unions remains the single most important reason for this.

The tradition of women trade unionists still continues in Maharashtra even up to the present period. Most of them have been middle class women working among the unorganized sections of the workers. The oldest among them at present is Sunder

Table 4: Women in Trade Unions

Year	Total membership in TUs (in lakh)	Proportion of women
1971	54.7	7.1
1976	65.1	6.4
1981	54.0	7.1
1982	30.0	5.9
1983	54.2	7.5
1984	51.1	8.6

Source: Labour Bureau Women Labour in India

Navalkar. A labour lawyer, she was arrested in the early 1970s for her association with the ML movement and sentenced for three years. She has worked among construction workers all her life.

ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS AND COMMUNIST MOVEMENT: AN ANALYSIS

The trade union movement in India has to take the prime responsibility for the dismal condition of women workers in the industrial sector, for their marginalization and their concentration in the low paid, insecure informal sector, their low participation in trade union activities and meetings.

While the trade union movement is splintered on the basis of alignment to the various ruling class parties, the communist movement has had a major impact on the trade union movement. The CPI worked hard to build up militant struggles of workers and formed unions of workers in all major industries at that time. The working class also played an active role in the anti imperialist struggle, but the weakness in the political line of the party at that time prevented the proletariat from taking the leadership of the anti imperialist movement. The weakness of the political and organizational line of the CPI had its bearing on the questions of women's oppression too.

In spite of leading women workers in bitter struggle and even building up leadership among women, the CPI did not pay serious attention to the question of women's participation in modern industrial production. It did not conceptualize the gender bias that operated in industry, the ways in which the imperialists and the local candidates use a patriarchal system to keep women's labour value depressed and hence they did not devise steps to counter these strategies of the capitalists and the British rulers. Organizationally too, no specific steps were taken to create organizational forms through which women workers could be given special attention. During the course of the Russian revolution the Bolsheviks used many organizational forms, like sub-committees, bureau etc for organizing women workers. Though in the late

1920s Dange, the leader of the CPI and the textile movement in Bombay, mooted the idea of separate cells for women workers within the unions, but there is no evidence of concrete steps taken to form such groups on a systematic basis. Fifty years later, in 1987, A.B. Bardhan, the General Secretary of AITUC and presently Secretary of the CPI wrote, 'There is only a sprinkling of women delegates in trade union conferences at various levels. Even where women workers are in overwhelming numbers, as for example, in bidi or coir industry, it is men who represent them as delegates at conferences. Executive committees and office bearers of TU rarely have women among them.' It is an admission of the fact that they failed to involve women workers.

In spite of the many weaknesses in political and organizational line, in the British period, much work was done among women workers. But the major change came in the political line of the party after 1950. The CPI upheld the so-called Independence of India, hailed the rule of the comprador-feudal classes and the rule of the anti-imperialist national bourgeoisie under the leadership of Nehru and then began a process of co-operation with the ruling classes. It gave up armed struggle and the path to liberate the Indian masses and placed their entire political work within the framework of the parliamentary system. The trade union movement was also affected by this line, e.g., CPI-led unions have defended the public sector as a form of socialistic enterprise, overlooking the fact that this is a form of comprador bureaucrat capital. They have ignored the growth of the contract system in these industries, overlooked actualization, etc. and done next to nothing to make the permanent employees take up the cause of the unorganized sections in these plants. They took no steps to prevent the massive retrenchment of women from the industries where they had a base like coal mines and textiles. Having compromised with the comprador-feudal ruling classes and even defended their repressive policies (1975–77), the CPI-led unions are not in the forefront of the fight against the new offensive of the imperialists and globalization.

The women's front of the CPI, formed in 1954, the NFIW has been primarily based among the middle class women, though it

has a mass membership, and its focus has been taking up the general issues of women and children and women's rights.

In the late 1940s, the CPI-led women organized some conferences of working women (Shramik Mahila Parishad), but this was not followed up. The next systematic attempt to bring working women on a platform and highlight their problems was taken by CITU in 1979. They organized a convention of working women in Madras that year. This was followed up by the formation of the All India Coordination Committee of Working Women (AICCWW) at the centre with some state units. The AICCWW has organized three conventions, the first in 1981, the second in Delhi in 1984 and the third convention was organized at Calcutta in 1991. The main aim of the AICCWW was to promote the recruitment of women in unions, take up their problems and promote women in the higher committees of the union. Vimala Ranadive, the General Secretary of the AICCWW presenting her report to CITU in 1987, said that, 'the trade union movement has to fight its feudal tendencies as part of the working class struggle... women in thousands participated in strikes, faced jails and repression, went through all the privations with men employees. Unfortunately the working class and their unions did not pay attention to their specific problems nor fight for their demands like retrenchment, provision of crèches.' Reviewing the progress made in the seven years, she reported that, 'after initial gains in the beginning after 1979, a stagnation period began during the last 3–4 years and committees formed became non-functioning or inactive.'

The main tasks undertaken by the AICCWW was to popularize a charter of demands for working women and mobilize women for a political call at all India level.

From the reports, the Tamil Nadu unit put the maximum effort to organize various conventions of working women and draw them into their unions. The West Bengal unit concentrated on promoting women's leadership, a necessity in order to consolidate the base of the ruling CPM government. In Maharashtra, in spite of a higher participation rate of women in industry and the

services sector, this coordination of working women, even as a joint front effort was not successful after the first convention.

But the revisionist line of the CITU in keeping with its affiliation to the CPM is developing a narrow, economistic consciousness among working women. Since they are not willing to lead an uncompromising struggle with the pro-imperialist central government (and in the states ruled by them they are themselves inviting the imperialists), the CPM led CITU cannot fight the policies that have brought so many miseries to the Indian woman and draw her into leadership to fulfil her historical task, along with the male contingent of proletariat, to liberate the Indian masses from the shackles of imperialism and feudalism. In West Bengal, they have curtailed unions from vigorously fighting the imperialist offensive and rapacious policies of private jute mill owners.

On the other hand, the spark of Naxalbari has inspired many women to break down the rigid barriers of class and gender and work with a revolutionary perspective among workers. Girl students joined factories as workers to organize them. Later as the Marxist-Leninist (ML) movement has grown, women professional revolutionaries took up jobs, as part of a plan to organize women workers and bring them into struggle. Comrades Swarnalatha and Swaroopa who were martyred, fulfilled this task as part of the many activities they under took in the course of their revolutionary work. The ML movement has also taken up the demand for equal wages for women and men workers and succeeded in getting it implemented in the struggle areas in Vidarbha, Bastar and Telangana. Women workers working with the Public Works Department, for the forest department and other government departments have particularly gained from these struggles. The various trends of the ML movement have also generated several women trade union organizers and leaders, especially in Maharashtra; women who have worked, not only with women workers but also with coal mine workers, construction workers, press workers and general factory workers. The main struggles of bidi workers and their organizations have been built up by

revolutionary forces in Andhra Pradesh. But on the whole, these efforts have as yet, only touched a small part of the working class, especially women workers. The task of organizing women workers and employees from the revolutionary perspective, of making women full participants in the working class struggle and the struggle to emancipate women, has only begun. This is not merely a question of gaining formal positions of authority in the trade union movement, but giving the trade union movement an orientation, so that traditional barriers and attitudes that are keeping women away from active participation are fought and at the same time the calls to radically restructure family responsibilities so that the double burden on women is eased, become the calls of the entire working class movement.

A DEBATE: PROTECTION VS FORMAL EQUALITY

Meanwhile, in the light of the worldwide changes that have taken place, various discussions have emerged about what is the best way forward for working women to achieve parity and equality.

In the beginning of this century, the socialist women's movement pressed for certain demands to protect the health and interest of working women and children: ban on night shift for women, ban on work that is hazardous, restrictions on carrying loads, provision of crèches and maternity leave, and wage parity. The world over these demands were legally accepted, though its implementation is very limited. But these protective provisions are now being considered as obstacles to the wider employment of women. Employers have raised the bogie that they cannot bear the burden of these provisions and they should be scrapped. Some women activists are veering to this position indirectly. They point out that women in the unorganized sector carry extremely heavy loads, do not get any facilities or maternity benefits, etc. The government is hypocritical regarding giving protection to women. They argue that instead of banning only women's work in hazardous industries it should be banned for all workers. Similarly for night work.

The same question has come up before the international working class movement. In Japan for example, it was argued around the Equal Opportunity law. The decade of the 1970s and 1980s has witnessed rapid entry of women into the workforce and now they constitute over 35 percent of the workforce. Increasingly they are being absorbed as temporary, home-based and part-time workers, and paid much lower wages.

In response to the demand of the women for more economic opportunities in 1970s, Japanese capitalism said that women workers were 'over protected' due to regulations. Women's protection is obstructive: lack of skills, physical handicaps like menstruation, delivery and child care as well as legal regulations like limit to overtime work, night work restrictions was preventing women from being absorbed into workforce. Hence the Japanese capitalist class argued that protective measures reinforce discrimination against women in the workforce. They recommended that there should be legal equality from hiring to dismissal stage, protection for maternity should be reinforced, but all other protective regulations should be eliminated. The World Bank is giving similar arguments too.

On this basis the Equal Opportunity Law was passed in Japan in 1985 amidst a debate of protection vs equality. This debate has become a world wide discussion. However, protection cannot be considered as discrimination. Women's groups are also demanding that what women need is not equal opportunity law, but equality as a result, i.e., the creation of positive conditions so that women can actually exercise their right to work. Women need substantial equality, not merely formal equality. The equal opportunity law has made the conditions for Japanese women workers even harder, because if they choose to compete on equal terms, they are thrown into the most severe competition with men, overtime is forced, and they have no special provisions to handle or overcome their specific problems. Women who do not choose equal opportunity are forced to accept discrimination in job chances and lower wages. Imperialism is bound to bring the Japanese experience to India in different forms so the women's

movement must be prepared to confront the insidious way in which, in the name of equality, discrimination against women is sought to be justified.

In several occupations like nursing, telecommunications, and the press, night shift is accepted for women employees. Gradually the trade union movement has demanded and obtained facilities like rest rooms and transport for the employees involved in night work. The Norwegian women's movement and revolutionary working class movement is demanding six hour working day so that women can participate equally and men can share domestic responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

If women have to gain equality in the economic sphere, women's role in the manufacturing sector needs to rise substantially. At the same time, strategic demands which will go towards altering the traditional division of labour in the family - i.e. the burden of child care and domestic work, need also to be immediately placed as demands of the entire working class movement.

The tasks before the working class women's movement in co-operation with the women's movement are formidable but urgent:

1. The imperialist offensive and policy of globalization should be exposed and opposed. This is particularly necessary in the informal sector. Women must realize the cause of their poverty i.e. the under valuation of their labour. At the same time they must learn to value their own labour and consider it for what it actually is — a substantial portion of the family income — not supplementary or secondary. Without this, the task of organizing working women, especially in the unorganized sector, cannot be successfully undertaken.
2. Women in the workshop-based, home-based industries need to be organized to demand that all labour laws and

facilities, like ESI, provident fund, maternity benefits etc., are extended to them and they are recognized as workers. This is a task before urban-based women's organizations too, to lend a hand in organizing these women.

3. Put pressure on the organized industry unions to support and help the casual, temporary, contract, sub-contract workers connected with their concern or industry to get organized and defend their rights. In fact, in order to protect their conditions in organized industries it has become essential to organize these sections, and to struggle against attempts of managements to contract out work of all kind, whether it is cleaning and maintenance, or the running of canteens, or parts of the production itself.
4. In organized industries and offices too, the need to take up the specific demands of women and there is an urgent need for women to become active on their specific issues which include provision of toilets and restrooms, promotional opportunities, training and skill upgrading opportunities, transport, medical facilities, extended maternity leave facilities, etc. Women themselves need to become active on these issues and cannot wait for male trade union leaders to become sensitive to and take up their issues.
5. Cases of sexual harassment at work also must be exposed and fought.
6. The demand for crèche facilities needs to be reformulated. Crèche facilities should be available in all establishments, irrespective of whether women are employed or not. This will encourage fathers to also take responsibilities of children.
7. Men should be provided paternity leave.
9. The demand for community kitchens/subsidized canteens, adequate toilet facilities in industrial belts and estates also need to be raised.

10. Hostels for working women, a long standing demand of the women's movement, has to be vigorously put forward. Only then women can leave the confines of the family and go forward to seek employment and a career.
11. Oppose all proposals for part-time/flexi-time work since experience has shown that it is a means to deprive women of full income and job security. It does not, as the European experience shows, help to organize housework better either. Women find they have to work harder, and find that the flexible timings make it difficult to organize crèches, shopping, banking, etc.

Women Bidi Workers and the Co-operative Movement

A Study of the Struggle in the Bhandara District Bidi Workers' Co-operative

This article is a case study of a bidi workers' co-operative in Bhandara district, Maharashtra, and describes the struggle of the women workers to gain control over it. It has been argued that the state policy of development from above has pitfalls. Co-operativization and development can only go together if the masses are involved at an equal footing with the so called local elites.

The very fact that a National Commission on self-employed women, and women workers in the informal sector, was appointed by the central government in 1987 proves that the problem of poor women workers in the unorganized sector has become serious. In spite of a professed policy of poverty eradication, the fact is that poor women have not gained access to developmental resources. Instead the growth of modern industry has either pushed out women from many jobs in the organized sector or prevented

This article, jointly written with Geeta Thachil, was first published in *Guru Nanak Journal of Sociology*, 13(1), April 1992.

their absorption into that sector. They have been left to fend for themselves in the informal, poorly paid sector. These women are at a disadvantage when confronted with the complex modern laws and administration. This disadvantage is evident even when they are involved in the process of co-operativization, a pronounced state policy to fight capitalist exploitation. Whether, in reality, the process of co-operativization, in its existing form, can fulfill this aim, merits investigation.

The present article is a case study of a bidi workers' co-operative in Bhandara district. It is an account of the struggle of the women workers to gain control of this co-operative and the response of the state to their attempts. In this case study, we seek to highlight no unique features of the attempt; instead, we seek to show that it is representative of the nature of the state sponsored co-operative movement in India and its relation to the strategy of development adopted by the state in India.

The first section deals briefly with the background of Bhandara district; the second section covers the condition of bidi workers in the district. The third section deals with the struggle of bidi workers in the district. The next section gives details of the district level co-operative of bidi workers that was set up. The fifth section is an account of the struggle of the women workers to control the society and the sixth section analyses the response of the bureaucracy and the government to the struggle. The conclusion relates this struggle to wider economic processes.

CONDITIONS IN THE BIDI INDUSTRY

The exploitative conditions of work and the general plight of the bidi workers have been documented as far back as 1929 by the Royal Commission of Labour. Many recent studies have also highlighted these facts (Bhatty 1981; Eswar Prasad and Anuradha 1985). The salient features are mentioned below:

1. *Shift in production process:* When the bidi industry began around 1910 the workers congregated in the *sadars* (workshops) for production. But sometime in between 1931 and 1951, the mode of production shifted to the contract based home production. The main reason for this shift was the application of the Factories Act of 1923 to the bidi establishments with 20 or more workers, after 1930. This resultant atomization has led to flagrant violation of labour laws and exploitation of workers. It seems at that stage the workers too did not oppose this shift in the production process as they were unaware of its consequences. They were attracted by the convenience of working from their own houses in their villages.

2. *Marginalization of bidi workers:* With the contractor, home based system of production the bidi production reached remote villages of the district. As a result, the number of bidi workers, particularly women, increased. But the contract system helped to keep the wages low, even depress them further. As a result, bidi making can no longer be a source of livelihood and has been relegated to a secondary position. The practice of parallel or business bidi production by unknown and unregistered establishments has also brought down the wages. A study conducted by the National Labour Institute in 1985 showed that the workers were paid between Rs. 3.50 to Rs. 4.00 for 1,000 bidis instead of the then prevailing minimum wage rate of Rs. 9. At present, in Bhandara town also, the prevailing rate in business is Rs. 6.00 for 1,000 bidis as against the minimum wage rate of Rs. 12.

3. *Increase in the proportion of female workers:* Since 1961 there has been an increase in the proportion of female workers, the main reason for which could be the extremely low wages paid, as a result of which male wage earners are seeking other better paid forms of labour. Also, the general inflation has forced women to supplement the family earnings and the home based nature of the bidi

production is convenient for women, even if the wage rate is low.

4. *Forms of exploitation:* The exploitation of bidi workers has been well documented. There are many ways in which the women are exploited by contractors and industrialists: a) They are paid low wages on a piece-rate basis, b) They are supplied with less tobacco and leaves than required for making 1,000 bidis. To make up the shortfall in order to avoid a wage cut, the women have to buy the tobacco or leaves from the contractor at the price set by him, c) The contractor wets the tobacco before distributing it in order to increase its weight, and supplies defective leaves so that the women are forced to buy fresh leaves, d) As high as 20 percent of the bidis rolled in a day are cast aside as rejected and sold subsequently under another brand name. Lack of proper procedure for rejecting the bidis has led to this form of exploitation, e) Bidi rolling, being a seasonal job, the work pattern is very irregular. Due to the informal nature of production, and the lack of proper records, most of the workers depend upon the contractor to give them work and are, therefore, unable to protest against his arbitrary style of functioning, f) None of the labour legislations, applicable to the workers, whether it be the provisions of Bidi and Cigar Workers Act, which binds the contractors to maintain proper registers, give the workers an identity card and wages book, nor the Maternity Benefit Act, the Provident Fund Act and the Bonus Act are implemented for the home based workers. Constant inhalation of tobacco dust leads to bronchial problems including T.B. The companies take no responsibility to maintain the health of their workers. Many of the older women workers felt that after years of bidi rolling their bodies, accustomed to this sort of work, are incapable of any other forms of physical labour.

This rampant exploitation has led to the bidi workers getting organized. The setting up of co-operative societies was seen as an answer to their existing problems.

THE MOBILIZATION AND ORGANIZATION OF THE BIDI WORKERS IN BHANDARA

The formation of the district level co-operative of bidi workers in Bhandara in 1981 was preceded by the struggle of the workers over the closures of several centres by big bidi manufacturers and over the issue of raising the minimum wage rate.

The bidi workers of Bhandara have had a long history of struggle. This is because of a concentration of bidi workers in the district and the fact that most of them belonged to one caste. Although no documented account of the struggle of the bidi workers in the area is available, the narrations of older workers point out that even in the early 1950s there had been militant struggles of bidi workers with a high participation of women workers, especially, around Gondia. Though a section of them had been organized by a communist group that called itself Bolshevik Party, most of the workers in the area were organized by the followers of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. The most dynamic and successful of them was Advocate Dadasaheb Kumbhare. The enactment of special legislation for bidi workers, namely, the Bidi and Cigar Workers Act, 1966, and the extension of other protective benefits, like maternity benefits, provident fund and bonus for bidi workers, were primarily due to the agitations led by, and the efforts of, Advocate Kumbhare.

The agitation of the bidi workers has had a political and social impact in Vidarbha. This has been possible due to the significance of the bidi industry to the economic life of Bhandara district, coupled with the large proportion of Scheduled Caste workers in the industry, especially, *Mahar*/Buddhist, and the strong and articulate political organization among them.

But each time certain provisions have been made applicable to bidi workers, the bidi manufacturers have responded by

trying to set the gains to naught. When the Factories Act was made applicable to the dingy, unventilated, over-crowded sheds, they dismantled the sadar system and introduced the contractor mediated home based system of production (Royal Commissioner of Labour, 1931, Evidence in India). The minimum wage rate is rarely applicable due to the prevalence of the dispersed, irregular contractor system. When the Maternity Benefit Act was extended to cover the women bidi workers, the bidi kings struck off the names of the women from the rolls and introduced the names of their male family members. Thus, women became the *benami* (unnamed) producers for their brothers, husbands or sons. When the Provident Fund (PF) was made compulsory, they deducted it from the workers' wages but did not deposit the money with the PF Commissioner; nor did they contribute their own share. Thus, the workers' deducted wages were appropriated as capital for their businesses. Now, only 10 years later, after a Vidarbha-wide agitation, have the workers been gradually getting their PF back. When these manoeuvres were not successful enough, the manufacturers shifted to other states where labour was less organized and, therefore, more easily exploited.

Each time that many centres of these bidi manufacturers closed down, rendering thousands unemployed, agitations have been launched. One of the important and spontaneous responses to closures has been to set up workers' co-operatives. Hence, several co-operatives of bidi workers were started in the late 1950s, and again in the early 1970s. But none of these co-operatives have been successful; most of them wound up after some years. The only exception in the whole of Vidarbha has been the one started by Advocate Kumbhare in 1960 in Kamptee (Nagpur District). The Kamptee based Majdoor Bidi Sahakari Sanstha Pvt. Ltd., which began without any government financial aid, is still running profitably with 361 women workers.

In 1980, when one more wave of closures of bidi production centres of big manufacturers, like C.J. Patel & Co. and Mohanlal Hargobindas, occurred, whereby thousands of workers were

thrown out of jobs, the Bhandara Zilla Bidi Kamgar Sahakari Sanstha was set up.

FORMATION OF THE SOCIETY AND ITS COLLAPSE

In 1980 manufacturing firms in Bhandara and Nagpur districts closed their centres and fled to other states like Bihar, M.P. and A.P. where the minimum wage rates were much lower. As a result of this, a total of 11,842 bidi workers in Bhandara district became unemployed almost overnight. A Taluka-wise breakdown of these workers who lost their jobs in 1980 is given below.

Table 1: Taluka-wise Breakdown of Workers who Lost their Jobs in 1980

Taluka	No. of Workers
Bhandara	1,639
Mohadi	1,700
Tiroda	835
Gondia	350
Pauni	1,650
Sakoli	1,790
Tumsar	1,125
Total	**11,842**

Source: Progress Report of the Bhandara Zilla Bidi Kamgar Sahakari Sanstha, 1985.

Spontaneously, these workers decided to start local level co-operative societies to generate employment. At that time, Haribhau Naik, the State Minister for Labour in Chief Minister Antulay's cabinet, an INTUC leader of Vidarbha, intervened to provide government finance. It was decided that instead of several smaller societies, a district level co-operative would be set up, one in Nagpur and the other in Bhandara. A total of 4,850 unemployed bidi workers became members of this society by buying shares of Rs. 11 each. A taluka-wise distribution of these members is given in Table 2. To the amount of Rs. 55,000, collected as share capital from the workers, the government granted Rs. 23.6 lakh as share

capital. Some additional funds were granted towards the cost of advertisements and for purchase of vehicles, etc. The society started production in September 1981 with its headquarters in a rented building in Bhandara town.

The society started off on an extremely sound financial footing with a capital stock of more than Rs. 25 lakh. Thus, the Bhandara Zilla Bidi Kamgar Sahakari Sanstha was born. The bidis rolled by the society were sold under the brand name of Zhopdi Bidi.

Table 2: Centre-wise Distribution of Workers and Period of Production

Taluka	No. of Members	Centre	No. of Workers	Month	
				Opening	Closing
Bhandara	512	Bhandara	110	Nov. 81	Oct. 84
Mohadi	576	–	–	–	
Tiroda	441	Paraswada	64	Nov. 81	Apr. 84
Gondia	977	–	–	–	–
Pauni	725	Adyal	193	Sept. 81	Apr 84
–	33	Konda	78	Mar 82	Apr 84
Sakoli	861	Lakhni	84	Nov.82	July 86
–	4850	–	529		

Five centres were started in quick succession, generating employment for 529 workers. Most of the 84 workers in Lakhni were women and all except two belonged to the Scheduled Caste. This centre functioned for three and a half years. Lakhni being a big village, with a population of almost 9,000, there were several rice and oil mills and agricultural work in the surrounding area. But the bidi workers, having rolled bidis for decades found it difficult to find alternate employment.

The management of the society was entrusted to a managing committee fully nominated by the state government. The committee was to function under the supervision of the District Deputy Registrar of Co-operatives. The Assistant Commissioner of Labour, based in Gondia, was the President of the Society and the Assistant Registrar (Co-op) was the Vice-President. A Grade I officer of the Co-operative Department was on deputation as a

Managing Director of the society. Apart from these high ranking bureaucrats in the committee, there were seven representatives of the members of the society, who were also nominated. All of them, without exception, were private contractors of bidi manufacturers. Not one of the ordinary workers and not a single woman was nominated to the managing committee although a majority of the members were women. The expectation of the state government, that the contractors who had so far exploited the workers would suddenly transform and fight the monopoly of the bidi kings, to whom their interests were tied, was nothing short of utopian.

According to the co-operative officials, the reasons for the failure of this co-operative venture were several. According to them, the co-operative was started at too short a notice, because of which no proper ground work could be done. Also, according to them, the cost of production was too high, because they paid wages according to the Minimum Wages Act, while private manufacturers did not. Also, private firms evaded payment of Excise Duty while the society did not. Thus, their cost of production exceeded the prevailing market price. Hence, they concluded that bidis could not be manufactured on a co-operative basis profitably, while labelling the whole attempt a failure.

The failure of the co-operative venture lay, not only in the reasons given above, but, in the very structure of the co-operative that was set up. The managing committee, consisting of bureaucrats and contractors, could hardly be expected to have any interest, or spare the time necessary, to make such a venture successful in the face of competition from the bidi kings. Not merely was there indifference, but also open corruption — allegations regarding which have been made by employees and women workers and which were never denied. The society became a private fief of the officer of the Co-operative Department in deputation. It is little wonder then that the cost of producing 1000 bidis was shown to work out to Rs. 35, when the market price for selling did not exceed Rs. 25 per thousand. No efforts were made to cut down the production cost.

That there was no planning before the society was launched, and no proper marketing facilities developed, which led to stock piling within two years of the society's birth, is true. By 1984, there were 1.75 crore of bidis left unsold in the society's godowns. With special permission from the government, they were finally sold at one-third of the cost of production. Ironically, the managing committee was chosen from the co-operative department, precisely because of their expertise in handling such problems. Their total lack of interest in the success of the society is reflected in the indiscriminate opening of centres. Centres were opened to appease political and other leaders, rather than help the society grow slowly and soundly. Marketing has been the main problem; the employees built up a market for the Zhopdi bidi but the committee managing the society made no systematic efforts to help the society to become viable. As a result, the financial crises deepened by late 1984. Out of a total of over Rs. 25 lakh share capital, with which the society had started, the society was left with hardly Rs. 5 lakh.

It is significant to note that during this entire period the ordinary members had no say whatsoever in the running of the society. It was only when the news about the mismanagement and imminent closure of production became known that the employees and the members of the society stirred themselves into action. They knew that the only way the society could survive and be rehabilitated was to get rid of the corrupt bureaucrats in the management and wrest control of the society themselves. Thus, the confrontation between the co-operative department and the bureaucrats on one hand, and the women workers and the employees on the other, began.

THE WOMEN AND THEIR STRUGGLES: THE SOCIETY BELONGS TO US, THE LOAN WAS GIVEN TO US!

These women from poor families, with little or no formal education, and whose lives had revolved around their homes, were trying to face up to the might of the bureaucracy. With hardly any

experience of struggle, they were at a disadvantage. Barsanbai, an elderly woman from Lakhni, widowed soon after her marriage, was one of the few exceptions. She had earlier participated in an unsuccessful attempt to start a co-operative of bidi workers. With her 30 years of experience in various bidi workers' agitations, she was, undoubtedly, the leader of the Lakhni workers, whom she mobilized very effectively.

Malanbai from Bhandara, a widow of about 45 years, was yet another leader who had participated in an earlier struggle. She is well known for the ten-day hunger strike she had sat on, in 1980, when her company had closed down. It was with great pride that she said, 'I broke my fast only when the Collector himself assured me that he would look into the matter.' Needless to say, she had a hand in the initial stirrings among the women which began in October 1984.

As news about the rapid erosion of the capital stock of the society came into the open, the women started getting restless. Already the women were contributing 50 bidis a day free to help the society tide over its losses. The women's anger knew no bounds when the misuse of the society's finance became more and more blatant. For the first time, a group of 30 women workers of Bhandara mustered enough courage to question the managing committee. Chitra, an orthopedically handicapped young woman, the only matriculate among them, was their spokesperson. She drafted a letter demanding an explanation for the alleged losses and the expenditure incurred. The letter also questioned the need to retain certain employees in service. This letter, signed by 30 women and handed over to the managing committee at the Annual General Body Meeting, held in October 1984, was the first jolt that the committee received. The vice-president, finding himself on a sticky wicket, adjourned the meeting. These women, who, for all those years, had only been workers, and had been kept that way by the managing committee, had now begun to assert themselves as members of the co-operative society.

When no information was forthcoming, the employees of the society mooted the idea of forming a union of the bidi workers

and the paid staff of the society. A well known local labour lawyer, long associated with the struggle of the bidi workers, was made president. The inherent inequalities of our traditional social structure, which views women as incapable and inefficient of handling any position of power, were reflected in the appointment of the union's office bearers. Not a single woman was made the office bearer of the union. Yet, it was these very same women, who later participated actively in the demonstrations, marches, *gheraos* (picketing) and hunger strike and even went to jail for a brief period.

Initially, the union submitted a detailed memorandum to senior officials of the co-operative department and the State Minister for Co-operation. Facts about the callous mismanagement of the society, the nepotism and corruption among the co-operative department officials running the society, were submitted. The union pleaded for an enquiry and intervention to help the society get reorganized. These charges were detailed out for the Chief Minister as well. The union even submitted various suggestions on how to cut losses and improve sales. In spite of the question being raised in the DPDC meeting, and a special meeting being called by the District Collector of the workers' representatives and the managing committee, nothing came of the suggestions and proposals, except that a special audit of the accounts was ordered.

The women workers of Bhandara and Lakhni centres got activated when their centres closed in July 1986. From then onwards, they were in the forefront of the struggle to save the society from closure and to demand control over the society. One of the main demands of the workers was that the existing managing committee should be dissolved, as its term had ended, and elections should be held, so that the worker members of the society could choose their own representatives. The other important demand of the women was for government help to rehabilitate this society.

With these two main demands, for six months, the women continuously agitated, sometimes demonstrating outside the office of the Assistant Labour Commissioner and the President of

the society; sometimes shouting slogans in front of the cars of the visiting ministers, in order to attract their attention; and even gheraoing the officials of the Co-operative Department. For all the women this was a tremendous experience. They completely overcame their fears and hesitations; for instance, mild-mannered Ahilyabai, from a protected lower middle class background, soon learnt to argue vehemently with the management.

A morcha to the Vidhan Sabha, several delegations and meetings with ministers and officials, yielded nothing more than well sounding but vague assurances. Finally, when all the assurances given by the divisional and district-level Co-operative Department officials and the managing committee were exposed as being totally false and misleading, the women decided to sit on a relay hunger fast-cum-*dharna* (sit-in).

It was due to the lack of knowledge of the formal rules, and the complicated procedures of the co-operative laws, that the women could be fooled for so long, but the bureaucracy, ultimately, exposed itself. Yet, through this process, the women learnt about the complex structure of the bureaucracy and its devious ways. They learnt to identify the various ministers, such that Anubai's high school going children would gasp with surprise at their mother's newly acquired ability to casually identity the ministers who were touring the town.

At the end of January 1987 a relay hunger fast-cum-dharna was launched in front of the District Deputy Registrar's (Co-ops) office. The *pandal* (tent) for the dharna was made colourful with posters exposing the deeds of the corrupt officials. A handbill explaining their deeds was distributed all over the town. Many local people came forward to give support and even funds for the agitation. Every day the women gathered at the gate and demonstrated while four of them sat on the 24-hour fast. Several times workers from Paraswada and Lakhni too joined the hunger strike. A militant demonstration led to 30 of them being arrested and sent to jail for two days. Even the bravest among them were terrified when they heard that they would have to go jail. Women who had been married for over 20 years dissolved into tears at the

thought of what their husbands were likely to do when they were released. Nursing mothers had to get their relatives to bring their infants to the jail to be kept with them. Yet their fear of the life behind the huge stonewalls disappeared and, later, they could recount with pride about their incarceration. In fact, when plans for reopening of the society appeared to be finalized, they insisted that those who had been to jail should be the first to be given work. Contrary to the women's fears, all of them were welcomed back to their homes. This was because at this time there was support from the localities in which the women were concentrated since the struggle was viewed as a just struggle against the usurper bureaucrats. The dharna continued through the arrest and after their release.

All this made an impact as the local MLA intervened through the district *palak* (guardian) minister. A high level meeting with senior state level officials of the co-operative department, in the presence of the Minister and MLAs, was held in Bombay in the *Mantralaya*. A concrete sounding decision about transferring the management of the society to a committee of local MLAs and representatives of the members chosen by the union was agreed upon. A proposal for the rehabilitation of the society was to be submitted to the government on behalf of the worker members by the union.

The 25-day long dharna was finally lifted after these decisions with the hope that the society would restart production within a couple of months.

The agitation ended after six months of continuous effort but the reopening of the society was stuck in the tangle of the bureaucratic maze and the whims of the ministers. When several months passed without any sign of the society reopening, the union managed to organize a delegation of 15 MLAs to approach the concerned Co-operative Minister to approve the proposal. He passed the proposal for rehabilitation, approved the new committee and agreed that the government would stand guarantee for bank loan. The papers went to the Chief Minister for signature and several months later, when a delegation of the union met the CM, it was

informed that he disapproved of such a scheme of rehabilitation with such limited funds. He wanted a bigger, more comprehensive scheme, applicable, not merely to this society, but to others as well. To peruse this further a delegation of Ministers, MLAs and a few others, went on a trip to Kerala to study the success story of bidi co-operatives there. Several more proposals were sent to the CM. But then the Chief Munster and his entire cabinet had to resign and a new CM was appointed. With that, any plan for the revival of the society was shelved!

Work in the society had been prized among bidi workers. They worked together in the sadar and were free from the petty harassment and exploitative tactics of the contractors. They desperately wanted the society to restart. While waiting for the society to reopen, the women were forced to go back to rolling bidis for private companies. They had to bear the brunt of the taunts of the contractors who hesitated to give work to these 'Zhopdi bidi women.' Some of the younger ones, like Ambar, took to work on construction sites where the rate is better than for the bidis; old Deolabai went picking guavas in nearby orchards; Kisnabai and Tulsabai went for work as agricultural labourers in the season. As the months passed, and more and more of the private companies closed down production, the women became desperate to earn from all sorts of odd sources. While just a few managed to get permanent jobs (in the place of their dead husbands), for most, life has been depressing. Kamalabai got out of the drudgery of bidi rolling. She was married off to an old railway worker who died within two months of her marriage. He left her well provided. She lives with his college going son, off her late husband's pension. All the women felt that she was lucky. Jenabai, separated from her husband many years ago, had lived with her married sister's family, earning her sustenance through bidi work. With Zhopdi bidi closing down, she rolled bidis for private companies. But when even that stopped, and she found it impossible to fend for herself with the rate of Rs. 5-6 that business bidi rolling fetched her, she was forced to leave Bhandara and go back to her parents in some remote village. Anubai's husband, a class IV employee in

the ZP died. Now she and her almost blind mother-in-law sit all day long rolling bidis in a mechanically desperate fashion to supplement the meagre pension. Kisnabai's eye sight has deteriorated. She complained that she did not get work on construction sites because they said she was too old. So she now works in fields, when she can get work, and rolls business bidis in the night for a contractor who lives in another village. Chitra who cannot do any other work but roll bidis, looks bleakly at her future. The house she and her old mother built on encroached land had collapsed in the rains and they were back to a small rented room looking for contractors who would supply them with enough work to sustain themselves. None of them can use the government dispensary for bidi workers since their cards have been cancelled. These women, dispersed and tied to the exploitative grind of daily work, are no longer in a position to present their case afresh to the new CM and his ministers. The proposal lies on the shelves of the secretariat, while the hopes of the women recede with each passing month, nay, year.

CONCLUSIONS

From the experience of the co-operative bidi workers in the backward district of Maharashtra, several important conclusions can be drawn.

State policy, with regard to the growth of co-operatives among the unorganized, piece-rated bidi workers, had a dual character. On the one hand, the state encourages the growth of co-operatives and has even given financial aid to such societies. But on the other hand, it leaves the societies exposed to unrestrained market forces, as they are expected to compete with well organized private enterprises and succeed.

More important, the approach of the state has been the formation of co-operatives from above, through state intervention and the regulation of these co-operatives by the administration. Instead of emphasizing the need to mobilize from below, of involving the poor in the process of formation and management,

the state becomes the main agent, thereby marginalizing the people from this process. This bureaucratic stranglehold also kills the co-operative spirit due to anti co-operative laws that are a result of this approach. Authority is concentrated with bureaucrats and ministers. (Shram Shakti: 123)

This approach is not an isolated phenomenon, but is a part of the overall strategy of development adopted by the state in India. Emphasis has been placed on development through capital intensive industrialization. But this type of industrialization, which is based on sophisticated technology, has meant heavy capital investments and dependence on import of technology, which only a handful with extensive contacts and access to capital can participate in. The modernization theory, that has found favour, advocates dependence on the more industrialized countries, rather than encouragement to, and the generation of, resources, human, technical and capital, from within the country itself. It is a development from above, without the mobilization of the people.

This strategy of development has meant the growth of islands of concentrated industrialization, the displacement of less skilled labour, of which women are an important part, on a large scale, and an inability of the modern industrial economy to absorb the lakhs who need work. Thus, these lakhs remain marginalized from the mainstream of economic development and are left to fend for themselves in an insecure, poorly paid unorganized sector or forced to lead a semi-proletarian existence as self-employed.

The development policies of the various Five Year Plans have emphasized the need for schemes for the upliftment of women and the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. But, in fact, scant attention has been paid to the problem of how the lakhs, who, in fact, come from these three sections, and are forced to continue in the informal sector, will be assured secure sources of livelihood. Women have been given importance in state policy primarily in their reproductive role. Therefore, focus has been on family planning and child care and marginal attention has been paid to socio-economic programmes.

While the state has enacted labour laws to guarantee a minimum wage, and other protective measures like maternity benefits, etc., the machinery set up to ensure their implementation is toothless and ineffective. Violation of these laws is rampant not merely in the private sector but also in the state sector. The largest employers of workers on a contract and piece-rated basis are the government departments and the public sector. Workers in the informal sector, contract and piece-rate, are a source of high profits. The system has a vested interest in keeping this mass of women and men working in this condition, while women workers are the most vulnerable section.

All organized attempts to get these laws implemented have been dealt with ruthlessly by the very state that has enacted them. Therefore, policies for development of workers in the informal sector notwithstanding, women workers in the unorganized sector are a neglected force, exposed to the bondage and exploitation of contractors, money lenders and the market forces. The existing policy, ironically, expects that within the framework of this strategy of development, in the midst of capitalist forces and in spite of the grip of contractors, co-operatives of unorganized women workers will thrive through bureaucratic initiative and intervention.

Section 3

Miscellaneous

Introduction

Much attention has been devoted to Anu's voluminous writings on the issues of caste and gender, which dominated a good bit of the latter part of her political life. But, Anu also studied, interacted with, wrote about and analyzed other important sections and aspects of society — the working class and its movements, human rights and environmental issues, and other myriad facets of social and political life in India.

The collection in this section is by no means a comprehensive compilation of these writings — Anu was indeed a prolific writer, churning out short agitational pamphlets or calls to action as often as she wrote incisive reports on current political happenings, and almost as often as she presented in-depth, studied, analytical articles on issues of broader political importance some of them in association with other academics, researchers or journalists. She also wrote for a very broad spectrum of publications — activist based writings for student magazines like *Lalkar* or *Kalam*, youth and working class bulletins like *Thingi* or *Kamgar*, cultural magazines like *Aamukh*, general political journals like *Jahirnama* and *Jan Sangram*, the journal of the Committee for Democratic Rights, *Adhikar Raksha*, as well as established academic and political publications like *Frontier* and *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, to name a few. It would, in fact, take many volumes to bring together everything that she wrote over the years in a single place.

Actually the composition of this section has partly been determined by what was available, and partly by an attempt to capture glimpses of the entire span of the many decades of her life as a political activist.

The presentation does not attempt to follow a historical timeline, nor to strictly cover all the themes and issues that she may have touched upon; it's more akin to a glimpse through a little window that provides a hint of the many treasures contained within.

By itself, each article is an interesting read, providing an insight into issues, documenting and drawing lessons from the course of a struggle, or commenting on wider social and political trends. Many of them not only capture glimpses of history, but are presented from the view-point of an activist working to understand reality so as to change it. Some like the early reports on the tribal movements in Gadchiroli and the repression on a conference at Kamalapur are significant for their value as documentation; others like the analyses of the Empress Mills workers' struggle and the Inchampalli-Bhopalpatnam seminar use particular examples to draw broader lessons; a few reports on the workers' movements at the beginning of the last decade help capture the challenges that the working class had to deal with during the dawn of the era of globalization, while still others like the pieces on Cotton Prices and Practical Socialism can still be related to current happenings today.

The earliest pieces written in the 1970s are from *Lalkar*, the bulletin of Proyom, the first students organization with Marxist-Leninist leanings that Anu was associated with, while pieces written later are from *People's March*, a registered magazine that reflects the trajectory of the naxalite movement. In a certain sense they capture Anu's personal journey as an activist and depict her passion to write, to record and analyze the social movements she was so much a part of. They are as much a part of her gift to posterity as the articles in the first two sections of this book.

A Pyrrhic Victory
Government Take-Over of Empress Mills

More than a year after the state government's take-over of the Empress Mills, one of Vidarbha's oldest and largest industrial units, its future is still uncertain. The problems that led to the take-over are still smouldering, particularly with the retrenchment of over 4,000 workers. The crisis in the textile industry has affected units in all parts of the country, but Maharashtra and Gujarat are among the worst affected. Almost 127 mills around the country have closed down. More than one lakh textile workers in Maharashtra alone have been rendered unemployed due to retrenchment or closure. While large cities like Bombay and Ahmedabad are badly affected, smaller places like Nagpur have been the worst hit. In small towns and cities, where the textile unit has been a major source of employment, closure has meant a noticeable decline in the economy of the area.

Millowners have squarely put the responsibility of the decline and crisis in the textile industry on the unprofitable nature of the industry, the rapid proliferation of powerlooms, and the government's taxation policy. They claim that a vicious circle has been

This article, co-authored with Ajit Kumar, was first published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23(6): 238-41, 6 Feb. 1988.

created with low profitability preventing reinvestment on modernization, resulting in the problem of obsolescent technology, further compounding the problem of high costs and low profits. On the other side, a closer look at this industry, India's oldest, reveals a situation in which rapacious millowners reaped super profits from the mills and used this capital for speculation and diversification into other industries. These mills, drained of their profits were left to run as best as they could. Having reached a state of stagnation, the downward slide began. Then they were abandoned or were taken over by the government. In either case the millowners escaped with the minimum of liabilities. The big industrial houses began their entry into modern production with textiles and were able to build up their empires. The story of the Tatas is no different, and their saga started with the setting up of the Empress Mills in Nagpur.

EMPRESS MILLS AND THE TATAS

Over a century ago, on 1 January 1877, Queen Victoria of Great Britain was proclaimed Empress of India and on the same day, Jamshedji Tata's first company, named Empress Mills as a token of devotion to the British queen, was started. The company was floated with a nominal capital of Rs. 15 lakh. This capital was raised from the profits earned from trade in opium and raw cotton for export and from contracts with the commissariat of the British Army when it attacked Iran in 1857 and Ethiopia in 1868. The location of the mill in Nagpur came by default since the site in 'Jubbalpore' came to be occupied by a fakir's shrine who refused to vacate the spot. Nagpur was selected because it was the centre of a handloom industry, was accessible to raw materials, markets coal, water, etc., and also the terminus of the main railway line. Ten acres of marshy land was purchased from the Raja of Nagpur. Empress Mills started on a bitter note since the inferior machinery purchased by Tata, coupled with a fire, resulted in the mill's shares falling in the market. The situation was redeemed with the purchase of new machinery, and in 1881, after a period of

four years, a dividend of 16 percent was paid. The mills saw tremendous expansion till 1922 and four mills were added to the original Mill No. 1, as also a cotton waste plant. A unit which had started with 10 acres had in its possession, in 1927, 186 acres of land. It had a spindelage of 1,00,352 and 2,220 looms, apart from 480 spindles and 32 looms in the waste plant.

The mills' integration with the cotton growing areas was very strong and it had ginning and pressing factories throughout the old Central Provinces and Berar. It had its own agents for purchasing cotton in the Central Provinces, Berar, the Nizam's territory, Punjab, Surat, Dharwar and Coimbatore. The chief selling agents were the firm of Jamnalal Podar and Co., a Marwari firm whose business connection with the Tatas dated back to the time of Jamshedji's father. The mills had 35 selling agents spread throughout India, including one at Rangoon, most of them managed by the firm of Jamnalal Poddar, whose efforts made the Empress trademark, '*Nagchap*,' a household phrase. The Tatas also came to own about 7,000 acres of land in various districts of Vidarbha which were farmed till the 1960s. They lost all but 53 acres of land at Wardha, under the Land Ceiling Act. The Tatas were not merely industrialists, but they were also major landowners and investors in real estate in the region.

The Tatas undertook considerable welfare activities in the city and, particularly in the areas where their workers lived. Several amenities were provided and a large number of economic incentives were instituted to tie down the workers to the mills. A substantial amount of money was spent on educational institutions, particularly, those run by the Depressed Classes Mission Society. The development of Indora and Pachpaoli can be traced directly to the mills' housing schemes. This was done for ensuring a permanent labour force. An overwhelming number of workers were locals drawn from surrounding villages, and a significant proportion of them were Mahars. The Tatas' perspective on these welfare activities can be seen from their Director's Report for 1887, which stated that, 'the creation of the said fund (this was with reference to the pension fund) is in the interest of the shareholders as

securing faithful, continuous and therefore efficient service on the part of each workpeople.'

The mill which was inaugurated in 1877 had earned profits to the extent of Rs. 9.22 crore, 'which is nearly 61.47 times the original ordinary share capital,' upto 30 June 1926, as the Silver Jubilee Report of the mills points out. The extent of profits they made can be gauged from the fact that during the Second World War the company paid a tax of Rs. 1 crore on the excess profits they earned on one single year. The mills were an extremely profitable unit and laid the foundations of the Tata empire. To what extent, and in what manner, the mills played this role, is difficult to pinpoint, but during the teething stage of TISCO, and in other difficult periods, the mills' funds were used to pay the salaries of the TISCO employees. By the end of the Second World War the company had a cash reserve of Rs. 2 crore, apart from other reserves. All these reserves were wiped out by the 1950s. The decline of the mills had begun.

RECORD OF MISMANAGEMENT

During the 1950s the company took a loan for demolishing the ramshackle buildings of Mills No. 1 and 2. Apart from costing Rs. 55 lakh, the production had to be stopped and the workers laid off. This led to strikes and lay-offs and lay-off compensation had to be paid to the workers. In 1970, the management conceived of the idea of diversifying in the form of a small paper mill. This unit came on stream only by 1975 by which time the investment had jumped from Rs. 50 lakh to Rs. 1.65 crore. The machinery which was procured developed cracks leading to an additional expenditure of Rs. 40 lakh. Over the years, the management has purchased machinery and then left it unused. An investment of Rs. 46 lakh was made in diesel generators in 1975, when the state of Maharashtra had a power crisis. This was used only for six months. The same was the case with 700 motors purchased by the mills. In 1978, machinery worth Rs. 5 crore was bought for the purpose of modernization and not used. While the company's sales have been declining with production being steady, the Rashtriya Mill

Mazdoor Sangh (RMMS) have alleged that the top management has become top heavy with a high turn-over rate. Seeing that the ship was sinking, many among the senior personnel obviously deserted the Empress Mills.

In the notice for the closure of the mills, the Tatas emphasized the increase in prices of raw materials as the basic reason for their inability to run the mills. They cited the case of cotton prices which increased from Rs. 6,200 per candy in 1982 to Rs. 7,400 in 1984. They have also emphasized the increase in prices of chemicals, dyes, coal, electricity, water charges and the inflated wage bill, which they said was 35 percent of the total cost of production. The other reasons stated were recession in the market, growing consumer resistance, competition from powerlooms and handlooms, obsolete machinery, high loom-labour ratio and the declining demand for cotton textiles.

The arguments given by the management for the sickness of Empress Mills have little to do with the objective problems of the industry and more to do with the deliberate neglect and mismanagement of the mills. These arguments are full of half-truths and misleading statements in order to cover up the management's role in the mills' sickness. Increase in prices is a common phenomenon and the basic function of a management is to take this into account while planning its strategy. The public relations exercise on the inherent efficiency of the private sector rings false in the face of the role of the Tata management in running Empress Mills. The inflated wage bill cited by the management is misleading since the wage bill has varied from 21 percent of the total cost of production in 1962 to 22 percent in 1982. The sharp increase in the wage bill as a proportion of the total cost of production in 1984 is more due to the lowering of the total output than due to any other factor. The management took this figure to show a general increase of the wage bill relative to the total production. The obsolescence of the machinery is nothing but the deliberate neglect by the management, since, until 1977, no investment was made in modernization except for the purchase of some automatic looms. After 1977, some piecemeal and haphazard modernization was introduced.

There has been a deliberate and systematic effort to gradually bring down the production by the non-utilization of installed capacity and the refusal to employ any work-force as per the agreed complement. A part of the Russian order was met by buying cloth from the market rather than increasing production in the mills in 1985. The order made through Tata Exports Ltd. led to a loss since the company supplied cloth at a losing rate. The deal seems to have benefited Tata Exports more than Empress Mills. The RMMS has alleged that there has been systematic and deliberate indifference both in the purchasing of raw materials, particularly, cotton and the selling of the mills' products. The Empress Mills was made to buy Nelco computers for which it did not have much use. Since 1962–3, the company has been making virtually no profits. Dividends were paid in 1973 and 1974 and have been nominal, ranging from 5 to 6 percent. The profits have also been marginal, ranging from 1 to 2 percent of the turn-over. The cost of raw materials has been comparatively high, ranging from 50 to 60 percent of the turn-over and indicates a probable inflated bill in order to siphon off funds. Similarly, the commission charges for sales promotion show an increase from 0.8 percent of the turn-over in 1962, to 2.3 percent in 1982. This is another established method for siphoning off funds from the mills. Since 1962, the company has been virtually functioning off borrowings. The borrowings, as a percentage of the total capital, have been surprisingly high, ranging from 75 percent to 85 percent and have risen continuously from Rs. 490 lakh in 1962 to Rs. 978 lakh in 1982. In its closure notice, the company gave the profit and loss account to show the losses that had been accumulating. But a comparison with the original balance sheet shows that these profit and loss figures for the year 1982 and 1983 were wrong, for instance, while the original balance-sheet for 1983 shows a profit of Rs. 34.37 lakh, the profit and loss account submitted within the closure notice showed a loss of Rs. 498 lakh for that year. In the 1980s, the company's position had worsened and in August 1985 cotton was being procured on a monthly basis. In 1985, during Diwali, 2,000 workers were being paid without any

production. Mill No. 3 was closed in 1984. In February 1985, some changes in the local management were made in order to check the deterioration, and a loan was also being negotiated. On 8 February 1986, Barwat, the personnel manager, announced at a press conference that the mills had suffered a loss of Rs. 4 crore in 1985 and was expected to lose Rs. 9 crore in 1986. Production had come down to less than 10 percent. Not only had the mills been piling up losses but the interest rates, which had by then piled up to Rs. 37 lakh per month, had been mounting too. The press conference was called in order to announce the submission of a notice for closure to the state government. They were demanding permission for closing the mills from 5 May 1986.

TATA'S SOLUTION AND THE TAKE-OVER

An effort to tackle the problems of the Empress Mills was initiated in 1977 when Ratan Tata took over the chairmanship. A soft loan was obtained from the IDBI for machinery worth Rs. 5 crore. In actual terms this represents what has been spent in the past 50 years on modernization and resulted in piecemeal reforms when more drastic changes were required. Some moves were made to merge it with the other textile mills owned by the Tatas and to rationalize the product-mix of the companies involved, but this was not seriously pursued by Bombay House, the headquarters of the Tatas. Ratan Tata worked out a rehabilitation scheme in which the workers seeking voluntary resignation would be paid Rs. 5,000, apart from other dues. This scheme was accepted in principle by 1,000 workers but the State Bank of India refused to sanction the Rs. 50 lakh needed on the ground that it was not the bank's function to finance labour retrenchment.

After this the IDBI was approached for help which proposed a rehabilitation package of Rs. 8.60 crore, out of which Rs. 2.5 crore would come from the Tatas. They also imposed certain other conditions like the voluntary separation scheme and the foregoing of industry-wise wage increases by the workers. The scheme also expected the government to grant relief from sales and purchases

taxes and an exemption from electricity dues. All schemes involved roughly 40 to 50 percent retrenchment of the workforce.

It is doubtful whether this or any other rehabilitation scheme was pursued seriously by the Tata management. The management's much vaunted exercise of the IDBI rehabilitation scheme was a mere ploy to cover up their plans to abandon the mills. This is also obvious from the fact that the RMMS union alleged in its reply to the closure notice of the Tatas that the management never seriously discussed with the union the rationalization measures to be undertaken. This is to be seen in the context of the union's own admission of closely co-operating with the management in the various rationalization agreements signed by them over the years. As a corollary, the union has stated that this co-operation has cost them dearly, leading to a reduction in the workforce from 22,000 to 7,120.

The credibility of the management's efforts at rehabilitating the mills is even lower because in the previous years they had not raised the finance to implement the schemes that they had already signed. Due to a paucity of funds they continued to employ 60 workers who had reached superannuation. 40 workers who had been identified as surplus in a previous rationalization agreement had not been discharged since the management did not have the funds to pay them their dues. The gratuity, provident fund and family pension of many retired employees had not been paid. The Tatas let the Empress Mills drift and when the crisis reached its peak they quietly withdrew from a situation of their own making. The Empress Mills Ordinance, in its statement of objectives, says that the state government had made efforts to persuade the Tatas to resume operations by availing of the concessions granted by the IDBI but it did not resile from its attitude.

On 7 February 1986, the Empress Mills submitted an application seeking the state government's permission for closing the mills from 5 May 1986. The government rejected the application and the Tata management sought voluntary liquidation. Taking advantage of the workers' spontaneous agitation at the mill level which began in April 1986, the Tata management suspended

production from the end of April and declared a lock-out from 3 May 1986. Circumventing the denial of permission for closure, the Tata management managed to close the gates of the Empress Mills from 3 May 1986. The Bombay High Court appointed a provisional liquidator on 14 May 1986 while the state government, under pressure from the workers' unions and from politicians, had to reluctantly agree to 'explore the possibilities of taking over the mills.'

The final solution to the Empress Mills issue came, after a period of five months, in the form of an ordinance for taking over the mills. Under section 3 (11), the ordinance vests the mills with the Maharashtra State Textile Corporation Ltd. Although the textile industry is governed by the BIR Act the ordinance has been enacted under the Industrial Disputes Act. Apparently this has been done since there is no provision for take-over under the BIR Act. But, as a result of this, the employees are at a disadvantage, since the definition of an employee is different in the two Acts and hence the number of those eligible for retrenchment compensation under the Industrial Disputes Act will be less than those under the BIR Act. The ordinance makes no mention of the number of workers to be employed but explicitly gives the power to the new management to reorganize and rationalize the mills with or without modernization. This, coupled with a decision to adhere to the norms laid down by the Bombay Industries Textile Research Association (BITRA), sealed the fate of 40 to 50 percent of the workforce.

The ordinance set an amount of Rs. 6.10 crore to be paid as compensation to the management. But this amount was to be paid only after settling the liabilities of the mills. The ordinance also set out a priority list of creditors. The first priority was to be given to the workers dues. The Tatas had valued their assets at Rs. 6.45 crore while a government appointed committee comprising of members from the MSTC, IDBI and other banks submitted a valuation of Rs. 1.22 crore. But the state finance minister, Sushil Kumar Shinde, while submitting these facts on the floor of the state Assembly in Nagpur (25 November 1986), blandly asserted that the government's decision to set aside Rs. 6.10 crore was close to the Tatas' own valuation rather than that of its own committee.

Irrespective of this figure, the immediate actual liabilities in terms of dues, back wages to workers and employees worked out to almost Rs. 10 crore.

ROLE OF THE RMMS

In the same speech the minister also praised the Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh (RMMS) for conducting the agitation in 'a peaceful way,' holding it up as an ideal to be emulated by other unions, which has apparently contributed to this solution! The passivity of the Empress Mills workers in the face of such a grave crisis under RMMS leadership is in marked contrast to their own earlier history. The second recorded strike in India's labour history was in the Empress Mills in 1877. The leadership of the workers was in the hands of social reformers like Kisan Faguji Bansod and Dhundiraji Thengdi. The workers were unionized for the first time in 1927 by advocate Ruikar, a Congress Socialist. Ruikar had opposed the formation of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) in 1947 and had joined the EIMS in 1948. Ambedkar's Independent Labour Party also formed a union among the Empress workers in 1946. This merged with the INTUC in 1954. The CPI-affiliated Girni Kamgar Union (GKU) never gained effective strength although they were powerful in the mills of western Vidarbha. Gradually, the INTUC became the main union in Nagpur's textile mills. Various important politicians of the region, like Vasant Sathe, Narendra Tidke and Bhagwantrao Gaikwad, began their career among the Empress Mills workers.

Not only was the RMMS the sole recognized union for the industry in the region but it also had strength in marked contrast to the situation in Bombay's mills. The RMMS leadership was well aware of the crisis in Empress Mills even before the closure notice came. The leadership, based in Bombay, had witnessed the closure of 13 mills in Bombay. In Empress Mills itself, earlier agreements had been breached and the working of the mills had been reduced drastically. The union's only response was to petition the government and demand an inquiry into mismanagement. They

made no efforts to launch an agitation. Hence, when the closure notice came, the RMMS had no real grounds to be surprised. They chose to respond primarily at the legal level. They filed a detailed reply pointing out the discrepancies and deviousness of the Tatas in their notice. The RMMS did not mobilize the workers nor did they present the grim situation before them. They constantly said that they were expecting 'their' government, both at the central and at the state level, to intervene and find a solution. Threats of agitation, if any, were shadow-boxing as Haribhau Naik and others lobbied with the state government to take-over the mills. Local Congress (I) politicians were in a state of panic, they saw that an abrupt closure of the mills would mean a decline in the future of not only the RMMS but also the Congress (I) itself. Except for a *morcha* and a jail *bharo* programme the RMMS did not have any mass mobilization of the Empress Mill workers nor did they enter into any joint front with other unions. They came together with other unions only on 1 October 1986, one day before the ordinance was issued by the state government.

The Nagpur Union of Journalists tried to form a joint front of all the unions to agitate against the closure. Unions affiliated to the opposition parties came together and launched an agitation undertaking morchas, *dharnas* and jail bharo. By April 1985, when the workers realized the imminence of the closure they spontaneously began agitations at the mill level. Rebel Congress (I) leaders also entered into the fray to win over the workers, while the RMMS continued to assure the workers that a solution was in the offing. The workers continued to support the RMMS because they hoped that its association with the ruling party would protect their interests.

When the mill closed on 3 May 1986, no solution was yet in sight. The RMMS moved the labour court demanding relief but obtained none. The RMMS time and again and in writing had agreed to accept the BITRA norms for reorganization and rationalization. The leadership was obviously involved in finalizing the provisions of the ordinance. They had no objection to the workers' contributing funds for the mills to run, and proposed a wage

cut of 7 percent to 10 percent for this purpose. The state government accepted the figure of 10 percent. Hence, after the government had issued the ordinance, the RMMS had no real reason to challenge its provisions in the High Court. Expectedly, they lost the case, once again transferring the responsibility for the massive retrenchment that was coming on to the Court. This is a repetition of the ploy they had employed during the closure of the mills. The high court upheld the validity of the ordinance, including the provisions regarding the new management's power to rationalize and reorganize, without consulting the union. The mills re-opened with a massively reduced workforce, employed under harsher conditions and with a wage cut. The disenchantment of the workers with the RMMS began, evident from the fact that for the first time the workers attacked an RMMS *pandal* when Mill No. 5 did not reopen in September 1987.

PRESENT SITUATION

Even though the ordinance was issued on 2 October, on Gandhi Jayanti, by Shankarrao Chavan, in the presence of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at Nagpur, Empress Mills was formally opened on 23 November 1986, after a gap of seven months. But the situation is far from satisfactory for the workers. According to the BITRA report, out of a licensed capacity of 1,10,500 spindles and 2,140 looms, only 67,732 spindles and 754 looms (including automatic looms) in three shifts and 823 looms in two shifts should be worked. They recommended a staff of 3,578, inclusive of administrative staff, for this working capacity. The report suggested that the workable looms and spindles from Mill No. 5 be shifted to Mills No. 1 and 3, in effect closing down Mill No 5.

The functioning of the mills for the last year has been most depressing. The mill has not been able to achieve 30 percent of its production capacity and the stock of finished goods has increased from 1,308 bales at the time of the take-over to 3,034 bales at the end of October 1987. The mills have been producing 13 lakh metres of cloth in a month when the rated production capacity is 95,000

metres per day. The average monthly loss has been ranging from Rs. 5 lakh to Rs. 20 lakh. The case for take-over was that once the work-force is reduced and the desired man-machine ratio fixed as per the BITRA norms the mill would become a viable unit.

On the floor of the Legislative Council (21 November 1987, Nagpur assembly session) the Minister of State for Industries stated that the Empress Mill had a labour strength of 5,569 workers before the take-over; 2,797 workers had been re-employed while the remaining 491 would be re-employed in stages; 320 workers had retired before the take-over and 1,682 workers had sought voluntary retirement; 279 workers were surplus and would be paid their dues. The State Labour Minister also announced that Rs. 4.42 crore had been paid to the employees who had sought retirement while the dues of others have yet to be paid. The Chief Minister had stated at the time of issuing the ordinance that the mill would take three years to function normally. The RMMS had posed the Empress Mill issue in the form of a state take-over as the only solution and claimed to organize a 'peaceful agitation' to pressurize the government to acquire the mill. Subsequently, when the ordinance was announced, the RMMS claimed it as their victory and a general vindication of their stand. But, in retrospect, one could see that some form of take-over (possibly at the worst possible terms for the workers) was inevitable, irrespective of the RMMS 'agitation,' in the context of Vidarbha's backwardness, the effect of the mill's closure on Nagpur's economy and the Congress (I) political fortunes in the city. The ordinance, in that sense, was the lowest common denominator for achieving this dual purpose of formally running the mills at the least possible cost and investment to the state.

The AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress) and other union leaders thought that the closure notice was only a threat, that the Tatas wanted to go in for massive retrenchment and for large-scale modernization. Many unionists believed that the Tatas, for sentimental reasons at least, would not abandon their 'mother company.' The RMMS had seen the writing on the wall and they chose to stay passive. A tough public posture, coupled with

passivity, was the tactic they employed in order to survive. The functioning of the RMMS over these years, their 'reasonableness,' and their 'close co-operation' with the management was harmful, not only to the interest of the workers but also for the mills. An active, militant workforce keeps the management on its toes, keeps productivity rising. Paradoxical though it may seem, the co-operativeness of the RMMS with the management allowed the management to wallow in the complacency of its past record, of having to run the mill for so many years without any modernization or upgrading of production techniques!

Consequently, it is not the Tatas or the Congress(I) who have lost. The Tatas have already made crores of rupees and now have got rid of a liability. On looking back, it is evident that the Tatas had decided to let the Empress Mill die and the exercise of getting an IDBI loan was a mere decoy to mislead the workers. The Congress(I) and their unions have managed to survive so far. It is the workers who have lost everything. Thousands of workers are unemployed and have no hope of getting their jobs back. The numbers of rickshaw pullers, vegetable sellers, and other petty vendors, have noticeably increased in the working areas of the city. They have taken their dues and returned to agricultural operations in the village or started small businesses adding to the over-saturated informal urbane economy.

In spite of the Chief Minister's assurance, it appears very unlikely that the Empress Mill will ever function normally again. Local opinion in Nagpur is very pessimistic about the mill's future. It is being said that the central government has sanctioned a loan of Rs. 25 crore but it is not reflected in the mill's workings. The collapse of the mill is a major step in the economic decline of Nagpur. The whole course of events shows the impunity with which India's leading industrialists can circumvent labour laws designed to protect labour and abandon an industry they have sucked dry. They have been able to get away with little or no liability primarily due to the connivance of the state government and its protege trade union.

Empress Mills: What Misstatements?

Naval Tata has given a lengthy rejoinder to our article on the Empress Mills (19 March, *EPW*). The rejoinder, surprisingly enough, while eloquently championing the cause of the employers' rights, does not throw any fresh light on the issues and problem of the Empress Mills.

In the process of criticizing our article, Naval Tata has digressed to the question of the 'sacrosanct' right of the employers to close down their sick units. But the demand for the free exercise of this right should be seen in the context of the Indian industrialists using institutional finance belonging to the country (to which workers, as citizens, also contribute). This finance has been used by these industrialists to build up their industrial houses, rake in profits, thus, *de facto*, making this public finance their own private property. What should we call this but corporate highway robbery?

As late as 1978, the Tata management of the Empress Mills took a loan of Rs. 5 crore from the IDBI. The machinery they bought with this finance was largely unutilized, as our article pointed out. Having misused such large sums of public money,

Adapted from an article written in collaboration with Ajit Kumar and published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23(20): 1036, 14 May 1988.

does the management have no social responsibility? Today India's big business houses have to their credit more than Rs. 4,000 crore of unpaid loans. And yet, they demand the unfettered right to closure!

To alleviate the sufferings of the retrenched workers Naval Tata has suggested a national rehabilitation fund, partially funded by the workers themselves. This approach evades the basic cause of retrenchment and unemployment, a point to which we will return later. Additionally, it is important to note that to theoretically propound such a scheme is one thing but its actual implementation is an altogether different matter. Even in the case of the Empress Mills, the Tata management flouted the rules guaranteeing workers their statutory dues of provident funds. It was only in December 1986, after a case was registered at the Ganeshpeth police station under sections 406 and 34 of the IPC, against the board of directors, including Naval Tata himself, on the basis of a complaint registered by the office of the regional commissioner of provident fund, that the management deposited the required sum. When such is the situation with the Tatas, a hallowed industrial house in India, one does not require much imagination to perceive the fate of the all-India scheme mooted by Naval Tata.

Tata accuses us, primarily, on three counts. Firstly, that we have not taken the question of economic viability into account. Secondly, that we have made misstatements, and, thirdly, that ignoring the crisis in the whole textile industry, we have singled out the Tatas for this ignominy. It appears that he has not read our report carefully. We do not claim that any capitalist can run an industrial unit which is not viable. The economics of the cotton textile industry may not be as favourable as it once was. But it is our strong contention that the Empress Mills became unviable due to sheer and deliberate neglect by the Tata management and the siphoning-off of funds leading to the tardy updating of technology and process. Hence, the central point is not the 'historical inevitability of the sickness of old units,' but the role of specific economic and political forces in the decline of the viability of the concerned unit.

Naval Tata states that we have made misstatements. According to him, our first alleged misstatement is the mentioning of the Empress Mills' workforce as being 22,000 at one point of time. But in his own very next statement Tata cites the same figure to prove the tyranny of the militant trade unionist, Ruikar, in the Empress Mills. Sorab Batliwalla acquiesced to a work complement of 22,000. Then how does our figure become a misstatement? Our point that Ratan Tata's claims of negotiating an IDBI loan were only a decoy to fool the workers is considered to be another misstatement by Naval Tata. But this is the conviction of a large number of workers. In the final year of the crisis, the Tata management never made their plans publicly clear. Hence, workers remained in the dark about the type and extent of modernization, the extent of retrenchment and related issues and the probability of obtaining the IDBI loan. This state of confusion suited both the management and the RMMS. Even if we assume that Ratan Tata made serious efforts in the final throes of the crisis, this does not condone the several decades of neglect and mismanagement.

Tata's third point is that we have ignored the overall crisis in the textile industry. If he had read our report carefully he would have noticed that in our introductory paragraphs we have mentioned the crisis in the cotton textile industry. The point that we could not cover is that of the growth and changes in the textile industry and its relation to the present crisis in the industry. The first important reason for the sickness and closure of cotton mills around the country was the draining out of profits by the managements. The second important reason was the entry of polyester in the textile world. The liberal import of man-made fibres, the encouragement given to this by the central government (even in the latest budget) policy, has led to the phenomenal growth of Reliance and similar companies. This shows that not all sections of the textile industry are facing the crisis. A certain pattern of growth has been decided, in which priority has been given to man-made fibres and capital-intensive technology, and this has, consequently, benefited a section of the mill-owners. All serious studies of India's economy have pointed out the suicidal nature of

this pattern of growth, in which small islands of high technology will survive and thrive, surrounded by an ocean of backward, stagnant, industry and agriculture. India's leading industrialists have supported and gained from this pattern of growth, at the cost of lakhs of workers who have suffered unemployment and increasing disparities. And this growth has been financed, partially, at least, from the funds siphoned-off from the older units. However, this is a subject for a lengthy study, which our report of the Empress Mills could not cover.

Naval Tata refuses to take responsibility for providing employment to the lakhs being born every year. According to him, the solution lies in agriculture, agro-economics, small-scale industries and self-employment. But elementary laws of economics tell us that small-scale production with low technology cannot survive in the face of competition from large-scale, high technology industries. Therefore, while the Tatas continue to expand and reap their crores by moving from one profitable sector to another, abandoning the older, less profitable ones, in his scheme of things it is the workers who must adjust to the problems of low wages, retrenchment and unemployment. This policy of economic growth is not the creation of the government alone. Naval Tata, now, cannot shrug off the industrialists' share of the responsibility for this pattern of growth, from their position in the 'commanding heights of our economy.' With regard to Patel's comments, it is not our central thesis that the absence of militant trade unionism is fundamentally responsible for the economic unviability of the mills. Any such impression was unwitting. We do agree that for a meaningful understanding it is necessary to place the Empress Mills in the context of the changes taking place in the Indian economy and, particularly, the role of foreign capital in nurturing the man-made fibre industry. This rejoinder will hopefully clarify his point. Regarding the other points in his letter, we feel that they were not within the scope of our article.

Inchampalli-Bhopalapatnam Revisited

The National Highway 7 leads out of Nagpur towards Chandrapur, a journey which a bus covers in about three and a half hours. The road is rather straight and the land on either side is undulating, with large patches of fallow land. Considering the fact that one is in the countryside, for vast stretches one sees no signs of settled habitations and particularly noteworthy is the absence of grazing cattle. Chandrapur, a city where once upon a time the Gond Rajas used to reign, is now bustling with contractors of various types.

From Chandrapur to Ballarshah, an hour's journey, there is a sea-change in the scenery, with considerable construction activity along the highway. One can see drab grey concrete structures all over the place. The road is crowded with trucks going up and down and the belt is the hub of industrial activity in the area. Larsen and Toubro have set up their cement factory at Awarpur, Manikgarh Cement (a Birla concern) has come up at Gadhchandur and there is already an old ACC cement factory in the area. The pride of the place is still the Ballarpur Paper Mills (a Thapar concern), which, after depleting the forests in its vicinity, has crossed Allapalli for bamboo, and is also importing from Madhya Pradesh.

This article, jointly written with Ajit Kumar, was first published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 (22): 953-55 (31 May 1986).

After hearing so much about the forests of Chandrapur and Gadchiroli one wonders where they are, for even after leaving Ballarshah there are no forests to be seen till Ashti, an hour's journey away. From Ashti, the bus climbs and one is in the highlands, in the midst of the long sought forest. Magnificent teak trees can be seen but it would be wrong to call it a forest in the real sense of the term since large parts are actually replanted forests with a commercial purpose. In the course of the journey from Ballarshah to Nagepalli, which takes about three hours, we counted sixteen trucks, heavily loaded with timber going out of the forest and this was a Sunday. In fact, the trucks are the only traffic one sees on these roads, apart from the ubiquitous official jeeps.

The Wainganga river rnarks the end of Chandrapur district and the beginning of Gadchiroli district, created only in 1982. A short while after crossing the river the bus is stopped and some of us (it is easy to distinguish the locals from the outsiders) are questioned by an Inspector (armed) accompanied by a posse of *havildars*. The Naxalite 'menace' in the district has brought out the police on a war footing. The seminar being organized by the Committee for the Protection of Democratic Rights (CPDR) — an organization known for its exposure of police repression against the forest dwellers in the district and its legal aid to those arrested and harassed, including local organizers, was reason enough to bring the armed force out on the road.

The seminar — one has misgivings in using such a pure 'academic' term — was held on 23–24 March, under the auspices of the CPDR-Chandrapur, Gadchiroli. The seminar was organized in the context of the proposed plan to build the Inchampalli and Bhopalapatnam dams on the rivers Godavari and Indravati, respectively. This project has created a controversy and there have been attempts to mobilize local and outside opinion against the project, including the well-publicized *morcha* organized by Baba Amte and others at Gadchiroli on 9 April 1984 (for details about the project see *EPW*, 1 June 1985). The gathering was less of a seminar and more of a convention where local people and outsiders gathered in Nagepalli village. By the very fact of its locale, the

intention of the seminar was not to generate sophisticated discussions, otherwise a rigidly structured one could have been held in an urban centre, where the number of participants from outside and the number of experts would probably have been more and the press would have given a wider coverage. The point was, instead, more, to have: (a) a mutual exchange and sharing session with the local people and their perceptions regarding the dam, (b) to serve as a rallying point for all those opposed to the dam, and (c) to make the seminar the take-off point for the rallying.

The seminar began in the forenoon of 23 March with a formal inauguration. The gathering was small but unusual. Participants ranged from village level activists of the area to environmentalists from major cities. Civil liberties activists, political workers, journalists, lecturers and lawyers were among those who travelled to Nagepalli to attend the seminar.

The seminar itself was loosely structured. In fact, while three major themes had been demarcated — *Major Dams and Development, Dams and the Environment, Dams and the People*, once the discussion began the themes got merged and the discussion naturally flowed from one topic to another, with minor diversions attacking the police mobilization, obviously meant for the police who were stationed all around the compound wall. This form gave the participants a chance to set the trend and helped the local participants, unused to such a gathering and programme, to also take an active part. A number of papers were circulated and discussed. The paper from the CPDR-Chandrapur, Gadchiroli, elaborated on the entire issue of dams and their impact on the people and the environment, specifically, in the context of the Inchampalli and Bhopalapatnam dams. Besides this, Achyut Yagnik presented a paper on the 'Narmada Valley Project and Development,' while the Adivasi Kisan Shetmajur Sangathana (AKSS), the local militant organization of the villagers, presented a paper on the impact of the dam on the local people who will be displaced and also elaborated their idea of development. Medha Patkar (Ahmedabad) sent a paper on the oustees in Maharashtra, from the Sardar Sarovar dam, while Sharad Kulkarni (Pune) sent a paper on

'Tribals and Dams.' Ms. Bhugaonkar (Amravati) sent a paper on 'Dams and Alternatives,' and Shantaram Potdukhe (Congress(I)-MP) and Satyavana (Independent MLA) also sent papers explaining the negative impact of the Inchampalli and Bhopalapatnam dams. Apart from these papers, a note was circulated on the *Maharashtra Resettlement of Displaced Persons Act*, and fact-sheets giving basic information on the two dams were also distributed among the participants.

The nature of the participants also determined the language used at the seminar. The mixed group compelled the discussions to become a dialogue in several languages at the same time. To communicate with the villagers a mixture of Gondi and Telugu had to be used, apart from the discussion which was carried out in Hindi, Marathi and English. This only reflects the complex situation that is created when mobilizing such a diverse set of people. The problem becomes more complex in this particular case because the villagers in South Gadchiroli do not even speak a dialect of Marathi, instead, they speak Telugu. The tribals speak Gondi or Madia and Telugu.

COST OF BIG DAMS

The first paper, titled 'Dams — Are We Damned?', with its focus on the 'economic and ecologic analysis of water-use,' was presented by Vijay Paranjpe. In this paper, Paranjpe presented a cost-benefit analysis of big dams, wherein, he proved that: (a) the official cost-benefit calculations are inadequate and faulty, (b) cost-wise big dams are far more expensive than estimated, and (c) the ecological damage caused by big dams is permanent. In the 20th century, the size of the dams being constructed in India and other parts of the world has grown larger and larger, giving up the principle of least interference in the hydrological cycles of major rivers. Moreover, no serious attempts have been made by the government in India in recent times to do a realistic and objective techno-economic analysis of these dams. By 1985, the government had incurred an expenditure of Rs. 19,331 crore

for thousands of irrigation projects. The impact of these projects has not been commensurate with this expenditure. Construction costs of big dams have escalated and delays have added to this problem. As a result, the cost of providing water for irrigation per hectare for major and medium dams works out to Rs. 7,224 and Rs. 1,757 respectively. In spite of the cost-efficiency of small dams the government's allocation of finance has been biased in the favour of big dams.

Experience has shown that in the last 35 years the under-utilization of irrigation potential created by big dams is higher when compared to that of small dams and ground water. Similarly, although hydel energy is a renewable resource, free from all known forms of pollution, the cost of generating hydel power has gone up from seven paise per unit in the 1960s to more than 30 paise per unit today. In the case of single-purpose dams, where only electricity is generated, the cost would be even higher.

The environmental costs which are not taken into account include, the problem of water-logging, salination, floods, the depletion of forest resources and soil erosion. The impounding of large bodies of water has had effects on the geological structure of the earth, as in the case of Koyna dam and the Kariba Dam (Zimbabwe). Siltation is another major problem and a survey of 11 reservoirs in North India showed that the actual incidence of sedimentation is two to five times the rates assumed in feasibility reports. Within 30 years, the Yaukuo reservoir in Japan experienced a loss of 85 percent of its storage capacity, while the Nizamsagar in Hyderabad has lost 70 percent of its storage capacity already.

Submergence, the construction of approach roads and the rehabilitation of displaced persons, have all led to large-scale deforestation and the shrinking of wild life habitat. Official estimates have always underestimated the cost of compensation to be given to the displaced and, in most cases, the compensation has been too low. Hence, Paranjpe argued the case against big dams and for the small dams, since, in the case of the latter, the magnitude of problems are on a much smaller scale. After Paranjpe's paper, in the first session of the seminar, the debate on the nature and

concept of the current state-sponsored development began, specifically, in the context of the proposed Inchampalli and Bhopalapatnam dam projects.

A strong and articulate section among the middle-class in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra (of which Gadchirolii s a part) are actively in favour of the dam project. This trend was clearly and forcefully presented at the seminar. The main arguments in favour of such projects revolved around the opportunity presented by them for the development of the local people and the region.

Firstly, it was argued by Girish Khobragade (RPI-K) that this project is a golden opportunity for the local people, who have hitherto been neglected and live in extremely backward conditions, who are shackled by primitive technology and culture, to break out of this bondage and join the mainstream of development. The popularly used argument, to oppose the dam, that the tribal culture is likely to be destroyed, came under severe attack, since it amounts to wanting the tribals to stay in their 'loin-cloth' permanently. It was argued that all cultures have to change with the times, and that the tribals from Gadchiroli need not lose their ethnic identity through migration. The tribals and other villagers in the region will gain considerably from the project — water for their fields, better agricultural practices, jobs, education — in short, they will progress. For 'the forest dwellers even evacuation from their traditional habitat is worth the development that awaits them.' An oft-repeated argument was that the fact that the opposition to the project has so far been articulated by already established sections in this region shows their intention to keep the tribals as primitive exotica. This argument is also given by several educated influential tribals from Nagpur and other cities.

Secondly, it was argued quite forcefully, by Datta Pandhre, a local journalist and Congress-S worker, that the project will lead to the development of the region. In the context of the long-standing grievance of the people of Vidarbha that the region has been neglected, this argument cannot be taken lightly. Given the fact that recently there has been a major debate about the setting up of development boards and the demand to fulfil the backlog on

investment, any move to oppose the project is seen as an attempt to perpetuate the backwardness of the region. The project would lead to the development of the backward districts of Gadchiroli and Bastar, besides providing much-needed irrigation facilities in Andhra Pradesh. The development is seen, primarily, in terms of irrigation facilities, jobs for the local people and electricity. It was argued that with the pressure of population, traditional methods of irrigation no longer suffice. Technical arguments about how the reservoir will help to raise the ground water level were also given in support of the project. Thus, the argument in favour of the project sprang from mainly these two reasons and was inextricably connected with the conventional understanding of development.

FATE OF THE DISPLACED

In contrast, other speakers pointed out how the above arguments are based on assumptions not supported by reality. The fate of those displaced is miserable. Promises of rehabilitation, however inadequate, are also not kept by the governments. For example, people displaced by the Koyna dam in 1961 have still not been rehabilitated. Sharad Kulkarni pointed out in his paper that the merely mechanical rehabilitation measures have led to many social and cultural problems for the tribals displaced in Western Maharashtra. Similar examples of the impoverished conditions of the people displaced, especially, the poorer among them, were also quoted from the Srisailam project in Andhra Pradesh, the Narmada Valley project, etc. The CPDR paper pointed out that rehabilitation is viewed, primarily, as the payment of compensation for lands and property lost. The rights of the people, their needs or their development are never considered when planning such projects.

Taking this argument further, several speakers raised questions on whether these dams lead to the kind of development envisaged in the proposals put forward in official statements. It was emphasized that even if the damages caused to the environment and to the dislocated people are kept aside, the actual benefits from the projects tend to fall far short of the official claims. Further,

it was argued that the benefits go to the larger cities, while the people living in the vicinity of the project tend to get nothing. The electricity generated from these big projects goes into the national grid, while the water irrigates fields far away from the dam site. The villagers near the Pawana dam, for instance, are facing an acute shortage of drinking water.

In the course of the discussion it was also pointed out that the decisions regarding the location of such dams are often political, a result of the lobbying from groups in a particular area. (The Inchampalli and Bhopalapatnam dam project is a decision emerging from the water dispute and the bargaining between Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Maharashtra.) This, then, has to be justified by the technical/administrative personnel, and, hence, the neglect of the environmental consequences, faulty planning, problems of rehabilitation, etc.

Since the conventional view that such projects mean development of the people is strongly inculcated in various strata of the population, opposition to such projects becomes difficult. Yet, the people's perceptions of the process of development is changing with their experiences, as pointed out by C.V. Subba Rao. In every state and region, there have been agitations for the sanctioning of such projects. Politicians vie with each other to get the project sanctioned in their district/state. State nationalism was mobilized in varying degrees to get the Duliajan Oil Refinery and the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant sanctioned, accompanied by the inevitable *gheraos*, agitations and police firings with the resultant loss of life. Now, in Duliajan, the fight is between the locals and the outsiders (skilled persons from other states were employed to run the refinery) for jobs in the refinery. In Vizag it is between the steel plant authorities and the evicted people, with a repetition of police firing, again resulting in the loss of life. These big projects, by their very nature, make existing cleavages sharper, while, whatever developmental benefits are generated, are siphoned off by those sections that are in a position to do so. These crucial issues get blurred and the fight is on extraneous issues which have little bearing on the problem at hand.

ANTI-PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

The argument that the existing state-sponsored development programme is anti-people, was most clearly put forward in the Adivasi Kisan Shetmajur Sangathana's (AKSS) paper titled '*The Path to Real Development — Agrarian Revolution.*' In this paper it was argued that in a class-based society, founded on inequalities that emerge due to exploitative relations, it is futile to expect that the development policies of the state (whichever government may be in power) will benefit the vast masses of the people. The past 38 years have seen a development policy with slogans from '*Garibi Hatao*' to 'Modernization,' but the people, essentially, have not progressed. For the tribals and other villagers in this district, development has meant alienation from their environment as well as increasing restrictions on their rights. The 'nationalized' forests have been handed over to the contractors and the Thapars for commercial exploitation. While the dam will mean the displacement of thousands from the district, the benefits of electricity and irrigation will flow to a handful of big farmers and industrialists. Without a redistribution of land among the poor peasants and labourers, and without taking industry out of the control of the big industrialists and the imperialists, the benefits of such projects cannot reach the people. Hence, an agrarian revolution is a prerequisite for the development of the people, for the elimination of poverty and for the growth of production in India. The AKSS called upon the forest dwellers to oppose the two dams which will ruin their already precarious lives even further.

Paranjpe has persuasively argued the case against big dams and in favour of small dams. The cost efficiency of small dams and their advantages in terms of health hazards, water management and the impact on the soil are undeniable. Paranjpe also argues that, 'the farmer will not be obliged to the bureaucratic, and often corrupt, system of canal water distribution, as observed in the case of large and medium dams,' and also, 'power from micro-hydel plants would be utilized for local requirements in terms of light fuel, mechanical irrigation, small-scale and cottage industry,

etc.' Implicit in this second argument is the assumption that the benefits of the smaller projects will naturally flow to the poor. Also, it is argued that the smaller projects are more amenable to local control. But, given the eco-political structure of India from the village upwards, the villages are not homogeneous communities, which, if given control over these resources which are generated, will distribute them equitably. The inequalities in the social structure mean that local control will eventually imply the control of local landlords, *kulaks* or industrialists. The existing state cannot, or is not, going to hand over control over the utilization of these resources to the poor peasants or the workers. In any case, without a transformation in the land relations, irrigation facilities have little meaning for the impoverished peasantry.

LARGE VS SMALL

The debate between the large and the small is essentially portrayed as a debate between centralized large-scale technologies and decentralized village-level industries with appropriate technology. It has also been seen as a struggle of the powerful few to rapidly exploit the natural resources and the people's efforts to protect these for their survival.

This concern for the 'small' traces its theoretical paradigm to Schumacher's 'Small is Beautiful' thesis and to Gandhi's concern for the development of autonomous small communities without taking recourse to the large-scale technology and large-scale exploitation of natural resources. This is a model of society in which appropriate technology is used, wherein, ecological damage is minimized and decision-making is decentralized.

While it is true that the concern for the 'small' in technology has arisen from the horrifying situation that the monopoly industries around the world have created with their monopoly over scientific research and technology, as also the impact of the sophisticated technology which they have forced into the more backward third world countries under the guise of 'modernization,' what must be remembered is that the world is already tied

up into a network dominated by imperialism and it is impossible to reverse the course of history and take society back into the past. The struggle against imperialism cannot be primarily a struggle against its technology, but has to be a struggle against the political and economic system of imperialism itself.

Also, as Ben Crow of the Radical Science Journal, while commenting on the Centre for Science and Environment's report on the '*State of India's Environment*,' has remarked,

> Advocacy of the small stems, in part, from ... a general concern that small-scale producers, who face dissolution (or, at least partially, from their means of production) throughout much of the third world, should have their interest represented. But concern for the fate of the small-scale producer needs to be distinguished from an uncritical support of small-scale, 'traditional' technologies (and relations of production) as a way forward. It is by no means certain that the maintenance of 'traditional' relations with nature and with wider society will best serve their interest.

This one-sided emphasis on low technology, if adopted uncritically, could lead to a technologically static situation in the country, leading to underdevelopment. Revolutionary China, under Mao, adopted the policy of 'walking on two legs,' the one being small, labour-intensive technology, for consumer items for example, and the other, high technology for basic industry. The basic concern behind this policy was the technological and economic development of China in the process of satisfying the basic needs of the masses utilizing their large labour power and their existing technological knowledge and expertise.

The question of the type of development is connected to the wider political question of who controls society — which includes, not only the natural resources but also the means of production — and, hence, the question of policies and who benefits from them. The question of the utilization of natural resources is determined by these policies. The debate on the ecological degradation does not perceive the environmental question as one strand in the wider political question of the structure of power and control in our society, or if it does, it makes it the central question. Hence, ecology

tends to become an issue in itself. But, surely, the question is not merely of control over natural resources, but also of the control of the state structure, the bureaucracy, the armed forces, and the economy — which includes nature, technology and labour. It is only when the masses gain control over this entire mechanism of society that they can utilize their power to choose the technology and the development projects that will lead to a more equitable and democratic development. This is a wider political question and a broader political movement has to subsume the other issues whether they be those of technology or of wages.

The seminar concluded with a public meeting for which people had come from places as far away as Bhamragadh, walking through the forests for fear of the police. Police intimidation — denial of permission to hold the meeting till the last day, threats to villagers, forcing people who were coming to go back — could not prevent the meeting from being held on the grounds behind the Panchayat office, the venue of the seminar. A small meeting was also held for all the participants to work out a consensus on the issue of the Inchampalli and Bhopalapatnam projects and a future course of action. At this meeting it was agreed by all the participants that on the basis of existing information it can be stated that these two dams are likely to have serious ecological consequences and also disrupt the lives of the local people who would be displaced. Given the understanding that the existing developmental policy of the government is anti-people, the benefits of the projects are not going to reach the majority.

To confirm and verify these conclusions a technical team headed by Vijay Paranjpe has been set up to investigate the impact of the two dams in detail, and present alternatives to the government, if necessary. At the same time, local organizations — Project Virodhi Sangharsh Samiti, Jungle Bachao, Manav Bachao, and Jan Jagriti Samiti have decided to begin a campaign to make the villagers aware of the impact of the project.

Season: Tendupatta; Pimp: The State

Gadchiroli: The forest appears quiet, as if the Adivasis there are leading an inactive life of ease. But, as summer sets on, the seemingly quiet lives of the Adivasis develop into unrest, as pressure mounts on them for their labour; pressures exerted on them by the bureaucracy, filling their lives with fear, hope and questions on how to cope. Thus begins the *Tendupatta* (*bidi* leaf) season, with which also starts the conflict between the Adivasi-farmer-workers' organizations and the state governments. A fresh wave of tussle commences between the two and the picture of who is who, starts becoming clear.

Even before the season commences, the state government announces, a month in advance, its decision to deal toughly with the Naxalite-led tribal organizations. In the areas of South Chandrapur, Bhamragarh and Allapalli, the state collects the tendupatta with the collaboration of the Special Reserve Police (SRP). The policy of tendu leaf collection through the forest contractors was changed in an attempt to strike a blow at the social and economic base of the Naxal movement.

This article first appeared in the Marathi magazine *Thingi* (The Spark), April-May 1985. *Thingi* was published by Naujawan Bharat Sabha from Bombay in the 1980s and voiced the opinions of the growing youth and workers' movement in the city.

It may be borne in mind here, that tendu leaves are used for rolling bidis (a cheaper substitute for cigarettes). It is a very profitable product. Tendu trees are abundant in central India. These trees sprout new, pale green leaves in April, during the spring season. They are culled and stockpiled at the nearby collection centres. After drying, they are sold to city based bidi manufacturers on a weight basis. The workers who pick these leaves are paid according to bundles. The season is short, lasting for a month at the most. This is an additional income for the villagers, whose earnings are otherwise very meager. But, at the same time, this phenomenon is an opportunity for the state forest departments and forest contractors to exploit the tribals and loot lakhs of rupees, thus, intensifying the strife between the state and the contractors, on the one side, and the Adivasi labour on the other.

Until 1969 the Maharashtra Forest Department used to auction these forests and place them in the hands of the forest contractors for a certain amount. The state would then not have any say in the price that these contractors paid and the number of leaves that they demanded per bundle. It would conveniently turn a blind eye as the contractors amassed a fortune by paying a paltry sum to the workers.

It was in 1969 that the state began to market the tendu leaves itself, under the pretext that the contractors exploited the forest dwellers, showing, apparently, that the state wanted to be kind and considerate to the Adivasis. Soon, however, the real purpose of the state behind this move was revealed. The state's revenue in this account had increased manifold, although there was no increase in the wage rate. The forest department reaped a rich harvest. The agency, too, only changed in name: the forest contractors now became the 'agents' of the state. These agents started auctioning various forest areas and the nexus of commission to the forest department per bundle of leaves was set up. The more the bundles, the more the income of the forest department, and thus, of the government. The government, always in search of ways and means of converting and mortgaging its resources to international money lenders and swindlers, while spending

lavishly on its bureaucracy, found yet another forest resource to do this with!

The following chart gives a clear picture of this as well as of the increase in the revenue.

Year	Income (in Rs. crore)	Expenditure (in Rs. crore)
1970	1.70	0.81
1971	4.06	1.90
1975	3.80	1.81
1979	7.47	2.62
1980	5.47	2.37
1982	9.02	2.72
1983	13.96	2.98

Notes: Estimate of profit for 1984 is about Rs. 20 crore.
Expenditure is on labour and conveyance.

Last year, afraid that under the increasing influence of the Adivasi Kisan Shetkari Mazdoor Sangharsh Samiti, the labourers may not collect the leaves, the government changed its policy again and allowed the contractors to deal directly with the leaf collection and also dole out paltry sums at their own mercy.

At present, in spite of 18 batallions of the SRP in three talukas of Gadchiroli district, the tendu workers strike has not been affected.

Until 1979–80, the wage rate was extremely low — about Rs. 3 to 4 per 100 bundles. In 1981, after the growth of the movement, the rate became Rs. 4, in 1982, Rs. 5, and in 1983, it was made Rs. 6.40. In 1984, the rates were increased to Rs. 6.80 per hundred bundles. But when the contractors would experience labour scarcity, they would offer rates higher than those of the government. This alone explains the double faced stance of the government which merely increased its revenue by taking upon itself the task of marketing the tendu leaves.

It must be noted here that as a result of the sincerity of tribal labour, influenced by the organization that evolved, there grew a

political will in the Adivasi farm workers. It began in Sironcha and spread to Chodampalli in the North and Bhamragadh in the East and up to the Abujhari Hills, as the tribal workers compelled the contractors to pay wages higher than the government. Until 1984, the government rate was a paltry Rs. 6.70 but the workers were now bargaining and settling for no less than Rs. 15 to Rs. 17. Even at this rate, the contractors have greatly profited. The Adivasi Kisan Sangharsh Samiti has calculated and prepared a balance sheet:

A	
Item	**Amount (in Rupees)**
Honorarium' to be paid to the government by the contractors	1,75,000
To workers @ Rs. 17 per 100 bundles	10,20,000
Expenses for conveyance and supervisors	9,00,000
(Total Production: 60,000 bundles)	20,95,000
B	
Weight of 100 bundles	7kgs.
Market price of 1 Kg Tendu leaves	6.70
Income of the Contractor: 60,000 x 7 x Rs. 6.70	28,14,000
Contractor's profit	Rs.8,19,000

In this way, left to themselves, the contractors profited, for example, Rs. 17 lakh in only one area.

But this year, the state has announced a rate of Rs. 10 in the three areas of South Chanda, Bhamragarh and Allapalli. The forest department purposely lowered the rate as there is now no middleman agency involved. The government is, thus, forcing the Adivasis to accept a lower rate whereas they were earlier getting Rs. 15 to Rs. 17 per 100 bundles. The government, harping on profits, is not satisfied with this rate too. As a forest officer, Bahadur, said to a civil liberties team, 'Although the workers have obtained a higher collection rate through their struggles, we will not be in a position to pay the same.'

But this is only a half truth! The ulterior motive of the state is to crush the movement, started under the Naxalite leadership, among the Adivasi farm labour in the area. The reduction in wage rate is a part of this plan! The government (both centre and state) is highly worried about the growing influence of the CPI (ML) (People's War Group) among the tribal population. The governments of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa are coordinating in a planned manner to wipe out the Naxalite movement in these areas. The state cannot withstand the growth of a revolutionary ideology amongst the people. With an attitude like that of middlemen or *dalals*, and with profit as the motive, the state is willing to keep these sections backward and ignorant in order to facilitate their exploitation like bonded labourers.

Thus, in order to break the hold of the *Sanghams* (organization), and to evict the Naxalites from the area and wipe out their cadres, the state is employing various methods, like the reduction in labour rates, bringing in thousands of SRP personnel and, thereby, taking the reins of the tendu-patta collection into its own hands. While 18 battalions of the SRP have been deployed in just 3 talukas of this region to keep a vigil, the workers collect the leaves at gunpoint! The Collector had even publicly declared that in order to encourage the tribals to not collect the leaves (as the rates are low), the Naxal leaders would have to visit the villages and would, thus, land in the authorities' net. The government has also claimed that it may lose a crore to wipe out the movement, but it prefers to bear with this loss. *Thus, it is evident that the government will spend Rs. 3 lakh per day on the SRP but is not ready to raise the wages of the poor Adivasi people.*

The state will never tolerate the spread of a political spark. A student, who was arrested during the Kamlapur Conference, was told by a police inspector, 'You may take out rallies, etc., in the city. In the forest this just won't be tolerated!' In other words, mere trade union activities like those of the tribal workers are not being allowed to take place.

The police personnel, with their highly sophisticated weapons, are frequently seen in the villages, in search of the leaders of

the Sangharsh Samiti. They murdered Comrade Peddi Shankar by spraying bullets on him in 1980. In March 1985, they did the same to Dharma (Ganpati) in Madhya Pradesh. What were their crimes? They were simply activists who moved among the Adivasis to explain to them how their innocence as well as ignorance of their rights were being taken advantage of to exploit them. They had created an awareness among the Adivasis, organizing and uniting them to stand and fight against oppression. They had impressed upon them that the liberation of the poor would only be possible through the path of a people's war and an agrarian revolution. They themselves hailed from poor families and had taught the poor to fight for a new society where man would not exploit man and where the poor and toiling people themselves would be the rulers.

Along with such activists the ordinary villagers, too, are not spared from the brunt of repression. Apart from this, the government, having tempted a few villagers with some scraps, has weaned them away from their own comrades, made them informers and, in this way, tried to weaken the struggle.

What an irony it is that the very same tribal people who were the traditional occupants and users of forest land, to whom the forests belong, are now being turned into mere labourers by the government, forcing them to collect the forest produce at the point of a gun! But the people are not silent. They are certainly organizing to protest and struggle against this injustice. There will surely be a fresh round of struggle this tendu-leaf season as the Adivasi Kisan Shetmajdoor Sangathan has given the call:

Adivasi dada, jaaga ho aata,
Wel aali, haatat ghe wila koita!

(Adivasi brother, it is time to rise,
The time is ripe, grab the sickle!)

Can Revolution be Prevented by Blocking the Roads to Kamalapur?

Kamalapur, a small village of 1,500 people in Gadchiroli forests is now known not only all over Maharashtra, but also across the country. This village has become a symbol of the forest dwellers' movement, organized under the leadership of the Marxist Leninist movement. The first conference of the Adivasi Raithu Coolie Sangathan was scheduled to take place in Kamalapur and thus the movement in the forest areas became open. The government of Maharashtra was shocked at realizing the fact that the Adivasis in remote areas were becoming conscious and taking the path of struggle.

News of the conference spread not only to Aheri, Etapalli and Sironcha talukas but also to the surrounding talukas and districts. Adivasi peasants from Rajura taluka also wanted to attend the conference. About 1,500 Adivasis from Bastar came to participate in the conference.

Students and intellectuals, from various towns in Vidarbha, decided to stay in Kamalapur on 25–26 February, the conference

This article, a re-translation from Telugu, was first published in the monthly magazine *Srjana*, April 1984. The original English version, was not available.

days. Several days ahead of it, people in the three talukas left their own work and began making efforts to hold the conference. Donations of quintals of rice, vegetables, and hundreds of rupees were collected. Many cartloads of wood were brought for the construction of the dais and a hall that could accommodate thousands of people for two days. Adivasis, united in the course of struggles in their villages, themselves monitored all these arrangements. This was the first conference of its kind in this forest region.

In Chandrapur, too, there was a lot of enthusiasm regarding the conference. A Reception Committee, consisting of 45–50 members, including non-Congress opposition politicians, social activists, advocates and journalists from Chandrapur and Allapalli, was formed on 2 February. Some members of the committee voluntarily offered their vehicles, houses and time too for the sake of the arrangements for the conference. Some members of the committee worked round the clock to make the conference a success. In fact, it could be said that this has been the first major movement in Maharashtra, after the Warli peasant struggle in the 1940s in Thane district in the west coast of Maharashtra.

BACKGROUND

Kamalapur is a village in the Gadchiroli district on the far eastern side of Maharashtra. Gadchiroli has borders with Bastar of Madhya Pradesh in the East, and Adilabad and Karimnagar districts in Andhra Pradesh on the West and South respectively. The district has 73 percent of thick forests. This forest belt, that spreads from central India to Bengal, has plenty of forest wealth including teak, bamboo, *mahua*, *tendu* leaves and resin. The district is very thinly populated and half of them are Adivasis. Among the Adivasis, Raj Gonds, Pradhan Gonds and Maria Gonds are predominant. Until 1751, when the Bhosles of Nagpur defeated the Gond king, this region was a part of the Chanda Gondwana kingdom. Since the British rule, most of this forest region remained under the *zamindars* and *malguzars*. The forest

is very rich but the people are very poor. With the area under the landlords, the people did not have access to and were alienated in their own forest.

From 1951, the government started acquiring forests from the landlords and categorized them into protected and reserved forests. Later, the government started a systematic exploitation of the forests in a big way for commercial purposes. The slogan of the nationalization of forests to protect the forest wealth and to prevent the indiscriminate felling of trees was only a façade to acquire forests and use them for commercial purposes. According to the estimates of the Maharashtra Forest Department, in 1981–82 alone, the wealth exploited from these forests was Rs. 13 crore. In 1982, in Chanda circle alone the government earned Rs. 11 crore from the sale of tendu leaves. These estimates do not include the legal and illegal profits of the forest officials and the contractors. These figures pertain to the supply of bamboo on subsidized rates to the paper industry of the Birlas and the Thapars in Sirpur and Ballarshah alone.

The forest laws and policies that the government enacted after acquiring the forests have been obstacles to the forest dwellers. These children of the forest have been living here since the time of their ancestors and have an emotional bonding with the forest. Now they have become encroachers in the eyes of the government and the administration. Thus, the 'kings of the forest' have become slaves, while the traders, contractors, and the forest guards have become the rulers of the forest. These rulers think that the Adivasis are merely cheap and readily available labour.

The area is suffering from several issues like land alienation and indebtedness. Most of the forest dwellers are dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. Among the working population, 51 percent are agriculturists and 34 percent agricultural labourers. Among the Adivasis, 91 percent depend on agriculture. In the remote Bhamragarh area, Maria Gonds still practice shifting cultivation, called *ponda* in this area. Several Adivasis lead a miserable life, depending on five acres, or less, of

uncultivable land, relying on one rainy season in a year. This district has four major rivers around it and one small river flows across. But agriculture is minimal. After the monsoon crops, several people start collecting and selling minor forest produce or work in the forest development department. They are continuously cheated because of their alienation and innonence and are forced to offer bribes to obtain work in construction activity. Police and forest guards harass them when they bring wood to build their huts or brew mahua liquor or even when they conserve their culture. *Mamools* and bribes have become common in their lives. They are quite often herded to work for government and forest department officials without any wage. Traders cheat them in various ways. In one word, the 'civilized' do not have the habit of treating the Adivasis as fellow civilized or even as human beings.

BEGINNING OF THE MOVEMENT

The movement that began three years ago for land, higher wages, and self respect, has, suddenly, shaken the forests. The people who did not have any relation with any political party or trade union have now become conscious. (The last major revolt in the area, a Gond rebellion, was led by the local zamindar Babu Rao Raj Gond, in 1857, against the British.) Despite the camps of the Special Reserve Police and attacks by the police, this movement, beginning in small waves, has now spread as far as Asarelli, at the southern tip of this district.

Even before it took the shape of an organization, and even before any demands were voiced, the movement had its first martyr. Peddi Shankar was killed on 2 November 1980 in Moinbinpet, a village on the banks of the Pranahita, in the first 'encounter' by Maharashtra police. With this murder, the police thought that the Naxalites would be afraid to enter Maharashtra and their relations with the people would be curtailed. However, repression only led to resistance, as Peddi Shankar's death inspired the forest dwellers to organize themselves.

Land Struggle

This movement began around the land question, which is the major concern of the forest dwellers in this area. After the acquisition of the forests by the government, the people lost all opportunities to develop their own agricultural lands. Besides, the government has confiscated the lands of some Adivasis on the pretext that they lay within the forest area. The old custom of felling trees to cultivate land has now become illegal. But the economic backwardness, less land being available for agriculture and land being the only source of livelihood, have meant that the peasants' demand for land has been growing. Some peasants started clearing the forest and cultivating land either legally or illegally. However, they would not get land rights even after years of cultivation. They were in constant fear and used to pay bribes to revenue and forest officials for regularizing the land rights. The peoples' struggle began with a popular collective action in October 1981 when the villagers of Karjelli cultivated a few acres of forest land. In March 1982, 106 landless labourers of Asarelli began cultivating 13–14 acres of forest land. All of them were arrested and their land was taken back. On the whole, there are thousands of Adivasi and non-Adivasi peasants, landless and those with less land but no legal right. With these mass struggles the land issue has come on to the forefront of the agenda.

Tendu Leaf Struggles

With the onset of the struggle, a police camp was set up in Asarelli. However, this camp could not prevent the demand for higher wages for picking tendu leaves in that summer. Landless people in this area engage themselves in the picking of tendu leaves for one month during the summer as a means of earning their livelihood. The tendu leaf picking having been nationalized, the forest department auctions the collection rights to agents who have to pay the royalty fixed for 1000 bundles of 75 leaves each. The state government fixes the wage rate for picking the leaves. The

contractors and agents appoint *kalledars* in the villages to collect the leaf bundles picked by people.

There are many ways to cheat and exploit the villagers in this activity. First of all, the wage rate fixed by the government for picking the leaf is very low. Three years ago it was Rs. 4 per 100 bundles and last year it was revised to become Rs. 6.40. Secondly, contractors demand some bundles as *pasturi* — free of charge. The villagers, thus, had to give at least 5 bundles for every 100 without any wage. During the summer of 1982, the villagers of Asarelli demanded higher wages. The contractors accepted and the rate was fixed in the range of Rs. 8 to Rs. 9. This rate, achieved by the struggle, was almost double the amount of that decided by the government. The news spread like wildfire. During the next season, a demand for Rs. 14 for 100 bundles was proposed in the whole of Aheri and Sironcha talukas. Wherever the contractors did not accept this demand, the villagers stopped work. In Kamalapur, the contractors were intimidated when the people struck work for eight days. Those contractors that did not accept the demand lost heavily. In the villages around Asarelli, the rate was Rs. 12.50. Going further north, the rate was Rs. 9 to Rs. 10. Even the pasturi bundles have come down to 1 or 2 per 100. This victory inspired the people, who were, until then, diffident, like a wave! With this tendu leaf struggle in the summer of 1983, the movement became 'open.'

Other Demands

Even as the people started making other demands, the wage rates of the forest development corporation were raised. With the struggles, agricultural wage rates have gone up. The wage rate for cutting bamboo for the Ballarpur Paper Mills has been increased. The unpaid labour, under the coercion of the police and the officials, has been reduced. Most importantly, the people's self confidence and courage has grown so much that it has become difficult to insult their customs and culture. A Naib Tahsildar was openly beaten up by the people in Etapalli market

for raping a tribal girl. The movement has gradually spread from the southern part of Asarelli to Aheri, Bhamragarh and Etapalli forests. Despite several police camps, regular police attacks and combing operations, the fact that not even a single activist has been arrested shows that the struggle has spread widely with mass support.

This movement has, naturally, created fear among the landlords and contractors, who have started bringing pressure upon the government to suppress the Naxalites. An Adivasi minister in the state cabinet threatened that he would come to the district and root out the Naxalites within 15 days. An empty threat, since he has not dared to go to the district until now. The politicians are alarmed and anxious that they are losing their bastions of votes.

On the walls in Chandrapur one finds an old slogan, *'Adivasiyon Nagpur chalo'* (Adivasis rally to Nagpur), that was written some 15 years ago. Now, overshadowing that slogan, one can find other bigger slogans 'Chalo Kamalapur.' This is a sign of the rising consciousness that is driving the Adivasis away from the bourgeois politics towards a revolutionary politics. It was Raja Vishweshwar Rao who took the Adivasis to Nagpur with the demand for a separate Vidarbha. Later, the Adivasi Congress-I MLA, Baburao Madavi, took the Adivasis to Nagpur in 1981 with a demand to change regulations in the scheduled areas. Now, realizing that they have not done anything for the Adivasis, and as the latter, themselves, are getting organized, the bourgeois politicians are feeling threatened.

POLICE REPRESSION

About 62 State Reserve Police camps have been set up in many villages in the three talukas. Village *sarpanches* are being detained and tortured. They are being accused of giving shelter to dangerous criminals. En masse arrests of villagers have become very common. There are combing operations being carried out everywhere. Police surveillance in the area has increased with the announcement of the Kamalapur conference.

People's Committees

In spite of such heavy repression, the movement advanced in leaps and bounds. Last year, the people's committees were organized in the villages to settle various problems. In Terd village, the committee unearthed hoarded ration sugar. In a village near Sironcha, the people demonstrated demanding the appointment of a teacher in the local school. These committees have started acting as the first step towards the exercise of people's power.

Repression on the Conference

The organization of the conference was an expression of the heights that the movement had reached to. Local level struggles had led to the formation of local committees. The conference inspired an enthusiasm among the people, that was beyond expectations. It had been initially estimated that 8 to 10 thousand people would participate in the conference. But if the police had not obstructed several people from attending the conference, at least 20 thousand would have come to Kamalapur. The conference, thus, became a challenge to the local oppressors and created fear in the government.

The state government, by using the police, applied a two-pronged strategy. First, it threatened that the conference would be banned. Rumour had it that if the people assembled for the meeting, it would become another Indravelli. Posters of the conference, pasted by the villagers, were removed. The whole atmosphere was filled with terror. A month before the conference, all the males in Kamalapur were arrested and sent to the Chandrapur jail.

The necessary permission to use loud speakers was neither given nor rejected. The police spread the story that hundreds of Naxalites from across the border were coming to attend the meeting. But nothing happened for several days. The meeting dais was constructed in Kamalapur on a large scale. In spite of all the threats, the people came forward to work.

Abruptly, and unannounced, from 21 February onwards, the arrests began. First, the revolutionary poet Gaddar, and

10 members of the Jana Natya Mandali, were arrested in Aheri. Ganji Rama Rao (President, AP Raithu Coolie Sangham), Raghavaulu (Secretary, Girijana Raithu Cooli Sangham), Datta Pandre (a volunteer in the Reception Committee), Shekhar (Secretary, Reception Committee), were arrested the next day. Four members of the Avhaan Natya Manch were arrested after a performance in Ballarshah, on their way to Kamalapur. Eknath Salve, President of the Reception Committee, was arrested on 23 February and moved from one police station to the next for one week. Prohibitory orders were imposed around Kamalapur.

All the rice collected for the conference was seized. The half built stage was razed to the ground. A truck carrying an electric generator was confiscated. A number of books being brought for sales at the conference by the Peace Book Centre were taken away and those bringing the books were arrested. Krishna Reddy, an advocate and Reception Committee member, who was accompanying the books was also arrested. On the evening of 24 February, Varavara Rao and some others were arrested at the Sironcha bus stand. They were handcuffed and taken to court. When they were released on the 27th, the police tried to arrest them again, however, the magistrate did not allow it.

The entire area between Chandrapur and Sironcha was turned into a police camp. Armed policemen were posted at every bus stop. Each and every bus was searched and all those going to Kamalapur were asked to get down and thrown into police vans. On the 25th and part of the 26th, buses between Allapalli and Sironcha were not allowed to ply. Even when buses were allowed, they were instructed not to stop at Repanpalli, the only access point to the meeting place. Thus, the police successfully stopped all the people entering the conference place. During those days it was only the police vans and motor bikes that were visible in Allapalli and Sironcha. Two Special Reserve Police squads were posted to scuttle the conference. Even police from the neighbouring districts were deployed. Special police from neighbouring states were brought to keep a watch on the visitors and to interrogate the arrested.

To supervise the entire operation, the DIG himself camped at Kamalapur along with his armed squad. There was no relief from the repression even after the conference dates. All those arrested earlier were arrested again as a precautionary measure. Eknath Salve, Ganji Rama Rao, Gaddar, the JNM members, Raghavulu, Datta Pandre, Sekhar, Krishna Reddy, and others, were arrested again. They were charged with the ridiculous allegation of stealing and selling timber in Kamalapur. Gajanan Kalakshupavar, a youth of Asarelli, was arrested again and kept in police custody. Krishna Reddy was threatened that he would be killed in an encounter since he was accused in a murder case and absconding. He was taken into the forest in a jeep at midnight and threatened. About 100 Adivasis were also arrested on their way to Kamalapur. On the whole, about 300 people were arrested twice.

PEOPLE'S RESPONSE

Although there was such a heavy onslaught, thousands of people, including the Adivasis, tried to reach Kamalapur. Some of them were arrested while attempting to reach the conference venue. Students and youth activists from Bombay, Amravati, Nagpur and Adilabad were arrested en route. RSU students from Telangana, demonstrating in Chandrapur against police atrocities, were arrested. Forest dwellers from all corners of the district and from Bastar tried to come to Kamalapur in processions inside the forest and attempted to hold the conference.

About 5000 tribals from Madhya Pradesh (now Chhatisgarh) borders wanted to come to Kamalapur on foot. After realizing that the police were obstructing the way, they hid themselves in the forest and held a meeting there itself. They decided to start their journey the next morning. They brought a Sanjay Vichar Manch leader to the forest and, keeping him in front, they formed a mile-long procession and reached Kamalapur by the 26th afternoon. The police were totally unnerved! They told the shocked police officer.

> Take us wherever you want. Delhi police station, Nagpur police station, Aheri station. We will walk. We already walked for three days. We will walk for another week. We came for justice. We came for our rights. We came for land rights. When we came to your office two years ago, you promised us land rights in two months. Now we are not going to trust you. We will not leave this place.

After a lot of negotiations, half of them left. But the remaining half refused to budge and stayed back in the village, even as a team of documentary makers arrived there. Even though there was a lot of repression, and the meeting was banned, several tribals, waited to see what would happen. Only after a police lathicharge were they dispersed.

But this was only one of the many processions. Similar smaller and bigger rallies from various places in three talukas had arrived. A number of similar meetings were also held by the people within the forest. Students and activists arrested in Allapalli addressed the people who had gathered around, from the police van itself. The conference could not be held, but the inspiration of the conference was much more than expected and strengthened the idea of resisting repression.

Many of those arrested were sent to Chandrapur and Nagpur jails. More than 100 students, volunteers and Adivasis, detained in jails, held their own two-day conference, in the jail itself. For the first time, the Nagpur jail reverberated with revolutionary slogans and songs. The jail meeting passed resolutions on various regional, national and international issues, for instance, condemning the repression on Adivasis and peasants in Gadchiroli and Oraon, and demanding the removal of police camps from Telangana and Gadchiroli.

On the outside, too, there were several protest rallies. A hundred people took out a rally condemning the arrests and prohibiting the 25 February conference. Naujawan Bharat Sabha and Vidyarthi Pragati Sanghatan held a rally with 200 people in Bombay against the repression. Although the conference could not be held, the people were charged up with anger against the police actions.

The police conspiracy to suppress the conference could not succeed, nor could their attempt to isolate the Adivasis and the activists. The efforts of the Adivasis to organize themselves received wider sympathy and support. The police tried to terrorize the Adivasis into leaving the Sangathan, but the attempt failed. On the contrary, the Adivasis were emboldened and said, 'come what may, we will hold our conference.' In the meanwhile, the tendu leaf picking season starts next month and the forest dwellers are gearing up for a second round of struggle.

A revolutionary dawn is aglow in Maharashtra and, naturally, the light is spreading from the East.

Gagging People's Culture

The Nagpur District Collector clamped prohibitory orders on Gaddar, Vara Vara Rao and 25 others of the Jana Natya Mandali (JNM) preventing them from entry into Nagpur district. After a very successful tour of Bombay, Gaddar was to do a tour of Vidarbha under the invitation of the Aavhaan Natya Manch (ANM). To forestall this tour the Nagpur collector issued the ban order.

In Maharashtra, a state which prides itself for being progressive and liberal, the state government has launched crude and brutal attacks to suppress the revolutionary people's culture. The state government and, especially, the Chief Minister Sharad Pawar have always paid special attention to keeping the cultural establishment in the state on their side. But now, with the crackdown on the tour of the Jana Natya Mandali, this liberal mask has been ripped aside.

The ban order was accompanied by a torrent of protests from cultural activists, leading literary figures, professors, press-reporters and trade unionists of Nagpur. In a signature campaign signed by two local MLAs (RPI and Janata Dal), 35 prominent citizens and over 30 organizations, the citizens of Nagpur vehemently attacked

This article was first published in *Frontier* in 1991. Also appeared in EPW, 30 March 1991.

this encroachment on the civil rights of cultural activists and demanded that the District Collector immediately revoke the order. In Bombay a petition to revoke this order was signed by a 100 leading cultural activists and intellectuals. In Amravati and Chandrapur too, the protest movement grew.

With this, the tempo demanding that Gaddar's programme be held in Nagpur grew. Sanjay Jeevane of the Dalit Rang Bhoomi began to perform on the streets, dressed in Gaddar style, singing *'Gaon hamara, Gali hamari...'* and proclaiming that if Gaddar was not allowed into this district he would propagate the same songs. At the end of the second such protest programme eight members of the Dalit Rang Bhoomi were arrested for violating prohibitory orders. (Nagpur is one city where a ban order on the assembly of five or more persons is in force all the year round). Throughout the night they were harassed and intensively interrogated before being released the next morning.

Meanwhile ANM's police application for holding Gaddar's programme was rejected. Another application for merely holding Aavhaan's programme was also rejected. A third application giving details of the programme to be performed by Aavhaan was also rejected. The police also got the booking of the hall in which the programme was to be held, cancelled. Simultaneously, the Gaddar programme planned for Chandrapur came under heavy repression. Naujawan Bharat Sabha (NBS) activists involved in postering were arrested, and their wall writing erased. The police refused to grant permission for the programme by using stalling tactics. Finally, a few days before the scheduled programme, the police clamped Sec. 144 banning the entry of Gaddar and JNM into Chandrapur district.

As the date approached (13 February) police pickets were posted at the bus stand, railway station and all approach roads to Nagpur to prevent Gaddar and his team's entry into Nagpur. Meanwhile, the Sec. 144 order was jointly challenged in the High Court by Gaddar, ANM and trade unions like IFTU, AMKU and UTUC (LS). The hearing of the case on 11 February went on for the whole day. The judge finally passed an order on 13 February

itself, merely a few hours before the programme was to start. The Bombay High Court (Nagpur Bench) quashed the ban order prohibiting JNM's entry into the Nagpur district.

The path was cleared for the holding of the programme. But when the members of the NBS went to prepare the hall for the programme, they found that the hall had been taken over by the police. The Punjabrao Deshmukh Hall, located in the Dhanwate National College (DNC), was locked by the police and all three entrance gates to the college were also locked. A big posse of policemen, in uniform, and in plainclothes, was swarming all around the college. The police menacingly threatened the NBS from distributing handbills and attempting to hold any meeting. Soon the crowds swelled to 2000. It was then that the Nagpur unit of the ANM, led by Surendra Gadling, began to perform their songs and skit. ANM's lead singer from Bombay, Sambhaji Bhagat, also presented a number of songs and condemned the action of the Nagpur authorities. After an hour of ANM's programme, Gaddar dramatically appeared amidst the public, alighting from an auto-rickshaw.

He was barely allowed to take a couple of steps before the police pounced on him and spontaneously started their brutal lathi-charge. Lecturers, press reporters, women and even children were not spared. Roughly, a hundred people were injured, 10 of them seriously; and 15 people arrested, eight of whom were women. False cases were placed on those arrested and Gaddar and Srinivas were served with fresh orders prohibiting their entry into Nagpur town. While the others were released on personal bond the next morning, Gaddar and Srinivas were sent back to Andhra Pradesh in a private car.

The days following the lathi-charge, spontaneous protests occurred in many places in Nagpur. A number of colleges closed down and the students of DNC College took out a procession that ended with the arrest of a student leader. The district bar association organized a successful one-day boycott of the criminal, civil, labour and industrial courts in protest against the lathi-charge, in which a young lawyer's hand was fractured by police batons.

In Chandrapur, 104 persons were arrested while demonstrating against the ban order on Gaddar and the lathi-charge in Nagpur. In Bombay a demonstration took place at Churchgate station. Every unit of most of the parties in Nagpur, like the IFTU, UTUC (LS), RPI and Janata Dal, CPI, CPM, Dalit Mukit Sena and over 20 other organizations issued statements against the ban order on Gaddar and the lathi-charge. A joint *dharna* cum meeting was organized at the Akashwani Chowk demanding the suspension of the Police Commissioner, the revoking of the ban order imposed on other districts, and the withdrawal of the false cases, etc.

Vidarbha and, particularly, Nagpur, witnessed a veritable movement against the autocratic action of the Maharashtra government and police; against the crackdown on the ANM and the JNM and the suppression of people's cultural activity. Only during the movement for Samyukta Maharashtra, in the 1950s, and, later, during the Dalit Panther movement in the early 1970s, did the state take somewhat similar steps against the culture of protest and the people's artists.

Realizing the power of the cultural activists in influencing the minds of the people, the Maharashtra government and, particularly, its Chief Minister, spend crores in trying to make them pliable to the views of the rulers. Thus, the recently held *Marathi Sahitya Sammelan* in Ratnagiri and the *Marathi Natya Sammelan* in Satara, seeped in servility to the ruling classes and the government, were unable to make a single progressive statement. Here, government policy guides the cultural activists; the Zonal Cultural Centres seek to win over smaller district level cultural activists. In December, as a birthday gift, Sharad Pawar distributed Rs. 3 crore (Rs. 1 lakh each) to a hundred cultural activists of Maharashtra who have been nationally acclaimed. Only one person, Durga Bhagwat, dared to refuse this offer, while all the rest meekly fell in tune. Soon after this event, the committee writing the history of the social reform movements for the state gazette was arbitrarily disbanded by the CM because it made a few critical remarks regarding Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur. Independent thinking and the people's cultural creativity are feared by the government, which is, therefore, pressurizing artists, singers and cultural performers to bow to its tune.

The ban order on the JNM in various districts of Vidarbha, and the brutal lathi-charge at Nagpur, have thrown the gauntlet to all cultural activists in Maharashtra. Where do they stand? Do they wish patronage, fame and money from the blood stained hands of the government or do they desire the patronage of the masses of the people of Maharashtra? Do they wish to follow in the footsteps of the hundreds of artists who sell their wares for a few crumbs, or in those of the great people's cultural workers like Amar Sheikh, Annabhau Sathe and others? They must choose which side they stand on!

People's Struggles in Bastar

Bastar, to the outside world, is one of the remote, mysterious 'interiors' of India where the most backward Adivasis live. Although epidemics of gastroenteritis and malaria kill hundreds each year, health officers' posts lie vacant as nobody is willing to work in these areas. Forest laws have deprived the Adivasis of their traditional rights over the land and forest produce, while the rich mineral resources have been greedily exploited by the profit-hungry capitalists and agencies like the World Bank.

The Bailadila iron ore project, where high-quality ore is provided to Japan at extremely low rates, is a good example. Tribals have been displaced from their lands; have failed to find alternative employment in the highly mechanized mines; tribal women have been forced into prostitution by outsiders like officials and contractors; and, even drinking water supply to neighbouring villages has been dangerously polluted. Between 1956–81, a total of 1.25 lakh hectares (one-third of the total forest area) have been transferred to various such projects.

The exploitation of the natural resources of Bastar in this manner has already created impoverishment, continued backwardness and environmental degradation. And now, with the IMF-dictated

---

Adapted from 'Letters to the Editor', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28(41): 2170, 9 October, 1993.

New Economic Policies, the rape of this region and its people will increase in leaps and bounds. Already, NRIs like S.M. Dyechem have begun work for building a massive Rs. 3,000 crore steel plant. The highly mechanized plant will also produce cement and electricity. A number of other projects are already on the anvil to exploit the rich natural resources like iron ore, limestone, dolomite, bauxite, manganese, tin, precious metals, etc. Under the liberalized New Mineral Policy most of these will be given to foreign companies or joint ventures.

In fact, 'liberalization' has actually provided a licence to multinational corporations and their Indian collaborators (big business, NRIs, government, etc.) to blatantly loot the wealth of our country. It is causing massive unemployment, large-scale displacement of indigenous populations and unprecedented environmental degradation. As the experience of the tribals of Bastar indicates, such imperialist-backed development is tremendously harmful to the people of the country.

While the Congress-I and the BJP (which are both vying for the mantle of 'true nationalists') are open supporters of such a 'development' strategy, the real patriots are the struggling people. In Bastar, different movements against government plans have been launched which aim to protect the land, the livelihood of the people, and the environment. Predictably, they have faced attacks, both from the established political parties and the state. B.D. Sharma of the Bharat Jan Andolan was attacked and paraded naked by the BJP *goondas*, while the police have killed a number of tribal youth activists in fake encounters. The people of Bastar, however, have a long tradition of struggle, and from the days of the Maharaja of Bastar, Pravir Singh Deo (who was shot dead by the Delhi government in 1966) to the present upsurge, have valiantly resisted all attempts to crush their movements.

To focus on the devastation being wreaked on the people and the environment of Bastar, and the growing resistance to this onslaught, the All India People's Resistance Forum (AIPRF) is organizing a seminar at Nagpur on 6–7 November. The AIPRF is committed to building people's resistance to the imperialist

control and loot of our country and against all forms of backward economic, social and cultural relations which enslave the people. The keynote address at the seminar will be presented by B.D. Sharma, Bharat Jan Andolan (and ex-commissioner SC/ST). Other papers will be presented by experts from different parts of the country on forest policy, industrial development, cultural intrusions, etc., and their impact on tribals, especially, in Bastar. Themes like development and environment, the economics of dams, etc., will also be debated.

The Bitter Lessons of Khaparkheda

Not only were the rank and file stiffs the 'dispossessed and downtrodden,' they were also voteless non-citizens with residences no more permanent than a boxcar or a bunkhouse, and no property bulkier than their bedroll.

Kenneth Allsop
Hard Travellin'

The plight of the construction workers employed on the sites of major projects is among the most insecure and the most exploited in the country. Working under petty contractors they have neither the security of service nor the guarantee of continuous work. While the construction and engineering companies at these sites are making huge profits and boardroom battles are being fought by the rising stars in the Indian comprador firmament, the NRIs, to buy over these companies, the construction workers are putting up militant fights to improve their wages and working conditions. Most of these struggles are in the form of outbursts and desperate attempts in which the workers do not fear to destroy the machinery or attack the police. On most occasions, after such a battle, the site becomes an abandoned scarred battlefield, the workers

This article was first published in the *Adhikar Raksha*, July-September, 1989, when Anuradha was working as a trade unionist organizing contract workers.

having fled to other sites. This wave of struggles has reached the construction sites in Vidarbha, Maharashtra, as well.

Vidarbha, the eastern part of Maharashtra, is dotted with coalfields and, as of now, two thermal plants are under construction at projects that are controlled by the Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB). (Although it has been announced that the next phase of these projects will go to private companies, most probably, Reliance and the Birlas.) About a year ago, the construction workers at the Durgapur site near Chandrapur started organizing themselves under the banner of the Akhil Maharashtra Kamgar Union (AMKU). Six months later the Union had spread to the Khaperkheda site.

THE COMPANY DOES NOT RECOGNIZE ITS OWN WORKERS

The Khaparkheda site, about 25 kilometres from Nagpur, is situated in the Saoner coal-belt. Three years ago, construction work began for the first phase of a four-unit thermal plant.

During the first phase of this Rs. 417 crore project of two 210 megawatt units, the MSEB contracted out the work to Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd. (BHEL) on a turn-key basis. As in every other site, here too, other companies were given sub-contracts for various parts of the construction, both engineering and civil. These companies, in turn, employ smaller companies or sub-contractors. Further, these sub-contractors either employ workers directly or through a 'petty' contractor.

This 'petty' is a slippery creature. When the government labour officer arrives, the 'petty' turns into a supervisor; for the workers he is their employer, moneylender, relative and terror. As for the contractor company and for the principal employer, the worker is not theirs; they do not recognize the worker.

The construction sites in India operate under primitive conditions. The workers are employed on a short-term basis. Rates of payment are fixed arbitrarily and the hiring and firing of workers is summarily done. The worker is 'casual' and the company has no responsibility towards him.

The workers in the mechanical section, the welders, fitters, electricians, riggers, etc., are a tough lot. They move from site to site, exploited and hounded, but with a strong sense of pride and self-respect. On the contrary, the workers of the civil section, mostly unskilled, working with cement and bricks, are either local or semi-bonded, brought by the petty contractors from Orissa, Chattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, etc. Over 3,000 such workers are employed at the site at Khaparkheda. Accidents are treated in a casual fashion and not recorded by the companies. The workers are treated in private clinics and there is no question of legally prescribed compensation for the permanently injured. If a worker dies, his family is brought from the village, some money paid to them and the dead body hurriedly disposed of.

FORMATION OF THE UNION AND AGITATION

In August 1988, when the AMKU entered the site at Khaparkheda, the situation was more than ripe for the struggle. By the beginning of September, workers of more than 10 companies had joined the AMKU. As soon as the workers realized that the minimum wage rates prescribed for the construction industry were much higher than what they were receiving, they surged forward to press their managements to implement the statutory rates immediately. The managements of the bigger companies, like Buckauwolff India Ltd., Bharat Steels and Tubes Ltd., were forced to pay the minimum wages according to the Zone III notification. These companies, which had been flouting the law by paying overtime at the single rate, were forced to pay the statutory double rate for overtime work. As a result of this, a wave of enthusiasm spread through the site.

The AMKU committee meetings became mini-public meetings as the number of workers taking the initiative continued to increase. It became a movement of these suppressed workers. Stories of struggles at other sites, such as the agitation at Damanjhodi at Shakti Nagar, Faakka, Ramagundem, etc., were circulated with exaggerated, often fictionalized, versions of the

struggle, the repression and the gains obtained. But this helped to boost the morale of the workers even further, although it also highly raised their expectations.

Those workers who faced retrenchment, after the contract with their petty contractor was over, refused to accept it. Tension started building up with the management trying hard to get rid of these workers. The workers, on their part, insisted that they should be retained at the site. They refused to recognize the unlicensed petty contractor. In spite of the fact that the petty had no license, and that the workers facing retrenchment were senior to the workers employed by other sub-contractors of the company, the office of the Deputy Commissioner of Labour recognized the sub-contract between the company and the sub-contactor. This sub-contract was more important to the Dy. Commissioner than the rights of the workers and the rules under the labour laws of the land.

By the middle of September, the Dy. Commissioner of Labour declared that the site at Khaparkheda came under Zone I for the minimum wage rates for the construction industry (as a result of a careful check of the notification as demanded by the AMKU). This meant a raise of about Rs. 4 per day in the statutory wage rate. A fresh wave of enthusiasm spread through the site, with the workers now demanding the immediate implementation of Zone I rates.

While in the beginning the mechanical workers were in the forefront of the struggle, by the end of September, the civil unskilled men and women had also joined the struggle. The workers of the public sector Engineering Projects India Ltd. (EPIL) struck work spontaneously, demanding the implementation of minimum wages. When the project manager was *gheraoed* on 26 September he promised to pay the minimum rates but later closed the site office and refused to return. The struggle took a new turn. The petty contractor of EPIL refused to give work to the workers unless they agreed to work at the old rates of Rs. 10 to Rs. 12. The workers resisted this bullying. When the manager did not open the site office, over 1,000 workers took out a *morcha* to the

MSEB and BHEL offices outside the site. They blocked the office entrance for more than two hours. After the intervention of various authorities like the District Collector, the Dy. Commissioner of Labour, the EPIL was forced to open its site office and start making payments at the minimum wage rates.

While the payments at the rate of minimum wages to the mechanical workers may have cut into the super profits of the companies, the payment to the civil workers also cut into the profits of the company and its hierarchy of petty contractors. Hence, their reaction to this victory was swift. On the fourth day of the payment, a riot was engineered within the site by an INTUC (Indian National Trade Union Congress)-supported petty contractor. This brought the entire process of normalization to a close.

Even as the workers of the other companies were demanding and agitating for the implementation of the Zone I rates, the MSEB, the BHEL and the company officials sank their differences and started their confabulations. The AMKU was trapped into negotiations and the state began its multi-pronged attack. The INTUC was activated with the open blessings of the local Congress (I) MLA. Legal cases were filed against the AMKU and the state prepared its machinery of repression to be deployed at the site.

The police attempted to arrest three active, leading workers of the AMKU on 24 October 1988. As news leaked out that they were to be whisked away to the *tahsil* headquarters, almost 1,000 workers gathered outside the police station within half an hour. The police were forced to release the workers. A victory procession with the released workers on their shoulders wound its way into the site. It was the peak of the workers' show of strength. The procession moved backwards and forwards inside the site and the town's main street. The entire site was closed as over 3,000 workers participated in the procession.

The next day evening, the Special Reserve Police (SRP) was moved in and the houses of active workers were raided that night. The morning after, the workers that reported at the site for work were provoked and trapped into a planned and brutal lathicharge. The police themselves broke the glass of their jeep to add

meat to their story of violence by the workers. In the lathi-charge and firing, almost 100 workers were injured and about 10 policemen, including the DSP sustained minor injuries. Over 200 workers were arrested. Union activists who went to arrange the legal aid were also arrested. A house to house hunt for some of the active workers who had escaped arrest began. Khaparkheda was turned into a garrison town.

But the real attack was to come later. Taking advantage of the SRP, posted in front of every company's site office, the workers who had been active were turned away. Militant men and women workers were denied work. In cases where several workers of the same sub-contractor were active, the contract itself was terminated. None of the niceties of the law, regarding termination, needed to be followed. While some of the more professional managements gave one month's notice pay to their terminated workers, a public sector company like the EPIL even refused to give the month's wages that were due. In this way, almost 400 workers lost their jobs. This was the fate of the unprotected contract worker, who is only a casual employed by the petty!

On 2 November 1988, a week after the lathi-charge, almost 1,000 workers participated in a morcha organized by several unions to protest against the repression. A *dharna* and a chain hunger strike were launched and they continued for three weeks to press the issue of the termination of the workers and the presence of the SRP at the site.

A public meeting and a morcha to the Assembly, when the session was on in Nagpur, were also organized. But the workers, unprotected by any law, were not taken back. Meanwhile, civil construction companies like the EPIL once again lowered their wage rates. The entire state, from the Congress (I) leadership to the state machinery, to senior officers of the BHEL and the MSEB, had come together to crush the organization of these contract workers.

Nonetheless, the struggle has left its mark. (Basically, it was a spontaneous movement of the workers against the contract system and the local Congress that backed the contractors.) While, only a part of the gains in wages could be retained, the awareness

about minimum wages was spread throughout the entire area. The Congress (I) and the INTUC were exposed for their open support of managements. The AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress) were exposed when they opened an office after the lathi-charge and deployed a petty contractor to wean away workers and opposed the demand for the implementation of minimum wages for civil workers as being impractical.

This struggle and its collapse, the repression and the reaction, have shown that negotiations, gradualism and the niceties of strategy have no place in the fight against these engineering/construction companies. Violence simmers below the surface; there is an atmosphere of ruthlessness. This erupts into fights with the contractors. This atmosphere created by the companies against the workers makes them fight desperate battles.

The migrant worker was the creation of early capitalism in Russia and the USA. But in India, under the supervision of the imperialists, the Rajiv Gandhi government has launched its privatization drive. The expansion of the contract system is only one of its aspects. As the World Bank finances projects around the country to take India into the modern era (the 21st century?), the number of contract workers is growing. Their attempts to organize themselves and their struggles gain significance in the context of this policy of the government.

Working Class Anger Erupts

Maharashtra witnessed a successful bandh on 25 April 2001. It was a joint action of the working class against the anti-labour policies of both the centre and state governments.

The response was unprecedented. Not only was Mumbai paralyzed, but all major towns and cities of Maharashtra came to a standstill. The anger of the working class against the government's economic policies forced even the fascist Shiv Sena to support the bandh. It witnessed an unprecedented alliance of groups as diverse as teachers and hawkers and all the political parties except the Congress, the NCP and the BJP. As one newspaper reported on the day after the bandh, 'the scale and spontaneity of the response showed the extent to which people are unhappy and angry with the centre's economic policies.' *Rasta rokos* and rail rokos took place in many parts of Mumbai; only 50 percent of the local trains were running and the BEST bus service ground to a halt. Of the fleet of 3,200 buses only 10 attempted to ply — these too were pelted with stones and eight had their tyres deflated. Most outstation buses came to a halt and many flights were

This article, written under the pen name of Sujata, first appeared in the magazine *People's March* in May 2001.

cancelled. Demonstrations also took place in many parts of the city and also in other towns.

THE MAHARASHTRA BANDH

The bandh itself was the culmination of a series of protest actions that began in September last year, when the Trade Union Joint Action Committee (TUJAC), a loose coalition of trade unions affiliated to the revisionists, some erstwhile socialist parties and others that have been in existence for more than 30 years, held demonstrations against the centre's globalization policies. Later, in the month of October 2000, during a militant struggle of the municipal workers to protect their right to a bonus, an indefinite strike affected the water supply to the city resulting in a sharp polarization of the middle class and ruling class opinion against the working class. In fact, although the workers called off their strike after the Municipal Corporation passed a resolution acceding to their demands, the administration, backed by some vocal upper middle class citizens' organizations, got a stay on the disbursal of the payment from the High Court, which passed vicious remarks against the working class and their trade unions. Although the issue did not snowball further, the blatant bias of the courts heightened the simmering discontent amongst the workers against the system.

Further mobilizations on related issues (the continued protests against the new economic policies, the struggle against the contract system, the continuing battle of the mill workers to save their jobs and for proper compensation after closures, the agitation by the state government employees against a proposed Voluntary Retirement Scheme, etc.) strengthened the foundations of a broad joint front of independent left and progressive trade unions under the banner of the Trade Union Solidarity Committee, which has been active in the city for nearly 15 years. It led to the establishment of new fronts like the Thekedari Padhati Virodhi Kamgar Manch (Worker's Platform against Contract System), and also brought about some rejuvenation in

the functioning of the revisionist-led TUJAC. The pressure on the leadership of TUJAC, which was otherwise passive and against any direct mass actions, to announce some sustained agitations, was growing.

Thus, when, in early January, the state government declared its intention to change some of the labour laws (notably, to amend the law on closures and the Contract Labour Act), a broad platform like the TUJAC became the co-ordination center for a series of protest actions, and other worker's fronts like the TUSC and the TPVKM also joined hands with them. On 15 February, for the first time since the historic textile strike of nearly two decades ago, a massive workers' rally was organized at the Shivaji Park, the largest ground in the city. Subsequently, the TUJAC organized a *'Chalo Assembly'* protest on 15 March, at which the call for a bandh on 25 April was publicly made. Similar protest actions were being organized in many other cities and towns across the state.

Meanwhile, the budget proposals made by Yashwant Sinha further deepened the anger of the workers and even turned large sections of the lower middle classes against the economic policies. The Tehelka expose and the stock market scam successfully smashed whatever little credibility the NDA had left. As the flood of imported goods that entered the markets after the lifting of the second batch of Quantitative Restrictions (QRs), triggered off some resentment in a wide section of traders and consumers, the overall mood of anger against the ruling class got sharper.

In this situation, the ongoing battle of the workers became symbolic of the popular discontent and was reflected in the spontaneous support to the bandh call on 25 April. Although the Shiv Sena was involved and the bourgeois media projected it as being the major factor behind the success of the bandh, the truth is that, for once, there was none of the tension and threatened violence that normally accompanies a bandh called by the Sena, especially, when the issue does not enjoy popular support. The success was, thus, a clear indication of the mood of the vast majority of the population.

Soon after the state government announced its proposals to amend the labour laws, the Sena, which is the largest opposition party in the state, declared its decision to protest against the move and started a campaign against it. The Sena leadership was clearly hoping to opportunistically capitalize on the mood of the workers, by declaring its opposition to the government's decision, a step it hoped would bear fruit in future elections. The polls to the Municipal Corporation of Mumbai are due next year, and workers constitute an important section of the electorate, and with coalitions at both the centre and the state, the possibility of a snap poll at other levels can also never be ruled out.

The move appeared to have boomeranged when the NDA government, of which the Sena is a part, announced similar anti working class measures as part of its budget for 2001–02. Having already launched its campaign, the Sena could hardly pull out at this stage without being badly exposed and so went ahead with its own huge rally on 21 March.

At this stage pressure from below began to act on the leadership of both the TUJAC and the Sena. Factory level leaderships in all unions, and the sentiment among the ordinary workers, pushed leaderships on both sides, perhaps somewhat against their will, to build a loose coalition of sorts, with some give and take on both sides. Thus, while the parliamentary left was forced to accept that this was a battle they would fight alongside the Sena, the Hindutva party was forced into extending its support to the bandh already called by the TUJAC. The only change in the previously announced 13 point charter of demands was that the TUJAC agreed to modify its demand of *'Enron Hatao'* to *'Reconsider Enron'* from the common platform, while continuing to raise the slogan under its own independent banner.

Thus emerged the rather unique alliance between two opposite sides of the parliamentary political spectrum, with a number of independent political forces participating as well. Following the bandh this loose coalition has jointly participated in a number of discussions with the government and has announced its intention to organize similar protests in other states as well.

OUTBURST IN BANGALORE

On 24 July there was a fierce outburst of working class anger in the sprawling Peenya Industrial Estate. This was sparked off by a simple rumour that the Provident Fund (PF) Office had decided that the workers who left service would not get their dues until they attained the age of 45. Although this was denied by the office, the violence continued unabated for the entire day, indicating the extent of the pent-up anger within the workers.

From the morning itself over 10,000 factory workers began gathering in front of the office of the Assistant Commissioner of PF. Soon the agitating workers blocked the main Bangalore-Pune highway and all peripheral roads, bringing traffic to a standstill. The crowd then stoned the PF office and ransacked it. As the violence escalated the police resorted to lathi-charges, bursting of tear-gas shells and even firing in the air. Pitched battles were fought, with the workers retaliating. Over 30 vehicles were set on fire, including 10 KSRTC buses, two trucks, a police jeep and a truck carrying 4 new vans. Over 100 vehicles were damaged, and 20 police personnel were injured, including an inspector and the Assistant Commissioner of Police. Section 144 was clamped in the area and over 100 workers were arrested. The agitation which began in the morning continued till late afternoon, with the workers launching another attack on the police at 3 pm. Finally, the situation could only be 'brought under control' by 4 pm.

UNPRECEDENTED ATTACKS ON THE WORKING-CLASS

Since the last decade of economic reforms, there have been unprecedented attacks on the working class. Never before, in post-1947 India, have the attacks been so ruthless and all encompassing. Retrenchments, lay-offs, wage-freeze, contractualization of labour, cuts in workers' social welfare, reduction of PF interest and now even changes in the labour laws, have all pushed labour to the wall. Lakhs have been thrown out of jobs, and many more are in the firing line. The private sector companies are sacking

workers by the thousands, the PSUs are rationalizing, and now even state and central government employees are being sacked. The Finance Minister has announced that the ministry plans to reduce its staff by as much as 10 percent in three years' time. According to a *Business World* survey of 72 of India's top companies, 'job creation almost ground to a halt in the past five years, even though output, sales and profits grew.' In the same period, the total manpower strength of these companies recorded a mere 0.43 percent growth, while sales leaped by a massive 55 percent. In a city like Mumbai employment in the manufacturing sector declined, from 7.3 lakh in 1981–82 to a mere 5.6 lakh in 1993–94.

In addition, workers' real wages have been consistently falling. In the private corporate sector, wages, as a percentage of the net sales, declined from 6 percent in 1991–92 to 5.2 percent in 1997–98. The government's own yearbook of 1997 shows a sharp fall of wages in the manufacturing sector. If the index was 100 in 1983, it dropped to 70 by 1990 and to 46 by 1995, indicating that these workers earn less than half of what they did in 1983.

Also workers' welfare measures are being systematically cut. As it is India has one of the lowest social security expenditures in the world. It was a mere 1.8 percent of the GDP compared to China's 3.6 percent and Iran's 6.1 percent. But, even what exists, is being further cut. PF will now get a much lower rate of interest, and health expenditure will have to be paid for. Workers' ESIS hospitals (health insurance) are languishing, where employers have not paid as much as Rs.110 crore of their share. Public hospitals are now introducing user charges. So, for example, the Maharashtra government has recently increased all rates in government hospitals by over 100 percent. Registration fees have increased from Rs. 2 to Rs. 5, while surgery charges have increased three-fold.

Notwithstanding the slowdown in the economy and the drop in sales growth, the increasing exploitation of labour resulted in big profits to the biggest industrial houses and huge salary hikes to the chiefs of these outfits. So, for example, in the first quarter of this financial year, aggregate profits of the top 10 companies shot up by 56 percent (Rs.9,914 crore) over the same period last year. These same

companies, while squeezing the workers, saw their chiefs take huge salary hikes. Dhirubhai Ambani of Reliance got his salary hiked, two years back, by 346 percent, and again last year by 74 percent, giving him an annual income in the year 2000–01 of Rs. 9 crore (i.e., Rs. 2.5 lakh per day). The other two Ambanis also took big hikes in salary, taking payments of over Rs. 7 crore each in that year.

Now, after launching such ruthless attacks on the working class, both centre and state governments are introducing changes in the labour laws that seek to thoroughly bind the workers hand and foot. As it is, throughout the 1990s, the workers were on the defensive in the face of persistent attacks by the managements. This is indicated by the number of lockouts far exceeding the strikes. The ratio of man-days lost as a result of strikes, to man-days lost as a result of lockouts was 74 percent in 1998. This fell to 25 percent in 2000.

Yet, the central government has set up a 13-member Task Force which has recommended a string of comprehensive changes in the existing labour laws, to curb workers' activities even further. One major change is in the Contract Labour Act, which will allow employers the free use of contract labour and remove all existing restrictions. It will also introduce labour flexibility allowing the managements the freedom to hire and fire. It will also introduce curbs on strikes, wherein they must be preceded by a 'strike ballot.' A strike would only take place if a majority of workers vote in favour of it. Bills drafted along the lines of this Task Force are planned to be introduced in the monsoon session of the Parliament.

REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE, THE ONLY ANSWER

In the closed Mafatlal Mills of Mumbai five workers have committed suicide and two have died of heart attacks. The workers of the closed Khatau Mills of Mumbai, in their affidavit in the High Court, have appended a list of 59 starvation deaths. In Mumbai, of the 2.5 lakh textile workers, only 50,000 remain in their jobs. Even these are not likely to last. Those who could, have returned to their villages to eke out an existence; while the rest live in

conditions of semi-starvation selling vegetables or hawking goods/food on the streets.

Such is the plight of a large number of retrenched workers throughout the country. With the revisionist and bourgeois unions collaborating with managements and keeping workers' struggles within government-accepted bounds, their struggles have been continuously betrayed. Legitimate compromises in union struggles (in order to gain strength through each battle) are understandable, total capitulation is not. Continuous defeats lead to enormous demoralization and frustration amongst the working class and employees. Not only the textile strike, but even the recent militant battles of the government employees (electricity, postal, state government staff, etc.) and of the BALCO workers/employees, have all resulted in defeats due to faulty leadership. The revisionists, in spite of having a sizable following in all these sectors, failed to unite them in a common battle, allowing them to be crushed piecemeal. Besides, with the revisionist/bourgeois union leaders having immersed the workers and employees in decades of economism and legalism, their hitting capacity has been temporarily stunted. And now, faced with an all-out offensive by the employers and the government, they are, at present, ill equipped to effectively fight back.

Today, due to an intense pressure from below, the pro-establishment unions have been forced to take up some struggles, lest the parties that are backing them lose their vote-banks. But, compared to the extent of the attacks on them, these struggles have been very limited. Some have acted as mere 'safety valves' to preempt further Bangalore-type outbursts.

It is only through revolutionary leadership and forms of struggle that the present offensive can be systematically fought back. This has been proved by the historic struggles of the coal mine workers of North Telengana under the SIKASA (Singareni Karmika Samakhya) banner. No doubt, the growing unity of the workers, as reflected in the Maharashtra bandh, is a positive step forward. This will have to be channeled in a revolutionary direction to be effective.

Workers' Upsurge against Changes in Labour Laws

The contradiction between labour and capital, a fundamental contradiction in the contemporary imperialist world order, has grown sharper by the day and given rise to innumerable international workers' struggles in the new millenium. The unjust and oppressive policies of globalization, imposed by the world's rich countries, their multinational corporations and financial institutions like the World Bank and the IMF, have made the poorer countries debt-ridden and economically bankrupt. This has been facilitated by the politically bankrupt governments that are ruling the latter countries and the comprador capitalists who have acted like the proverbial stooges before the neo-imperialist forces of globalization. India is like a golden goose for these forces, which, its political leaders are only too willing to sacrifice, in order that they may please their imperialist masters.

On 16 April this year, various public sector units, banks, insurance companies and collieries across the country were paralyzed when lakhs of workers struck work to oppose the NDA

This article, written under the pen-name Kalpana, was published in *People's March* in June 2002.

government's attempt to change the labour laws and introduce privatization and anti-labour polices. The ruling classes and the media acknowledged it as the largest countrywide strike, while the trade union activists billed it as one of the biggest industrial actions in India's trade union movement. An estimated 10 million public sector workers struck work, bringing to a complete halt the country's entire banking operations and severely disrupting rail and air traffic. Loading and unloading operations also ground to a halt in most major ports as over 25,000 port workers joined in the strike. Even the reactionary unions, like the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), were forced to join in the strike, while, in Mumbai, the Bharatiya Kamgar Sena (BKS, affiliated to the Shiv Sena), too, had to give token support.

The industry associations, such as the FICCI, ASSOCHAM, CII and others, could only watch in disbelief the strength and purpose behind a united working class. A decade ago, these very associations, as well as their faithful media representatives, had dismissed the unions, and the trade union movement itself, as 'increasingly irrelevant.' They openly expressed their 'concern' that the strike could not have come at a more inopportune time since the government's ability to deliver on key reforms was being brought to question.

Simultaneously with the imposition of the economic liberalization regime in 1991 by the Narasimharao-Manmohan Singh combine came the campaign for 'reforms' in labour laws. Globalization policies were introduced following the diktats of the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO. Since then, the consistent propaganda of the industrialist lobby, mouthed faithfully by the political leaders in power, has been that the policies of liberalization and privatization would bring about economic growth, and that for the full realization of this growth, there is a need to 'free' labour laws as well. Their principal demands were for the introduction of an 'exit policy' to allow an unconditional right to the industrialists to 'hire and fire,' for allowing the use of contract labour in all establishments and all jobs and for restrictions on the right to unionize.

The last decade saw persistent attacks on the workers, through means such as the rampant and forceful use of the VRS (Voluntary Retirement Schemes) schemes in both the private and the public sectors, retrenchments, closures and lockouts. There was a virtual ban on new recruitment in public sector enterprises such as the railways. Despite the falling number of workers in the organized sector, the Indian working class, through united and forceful state-level *bandhs* and actions, ensured that the centre could not effect the labour law changes. For the first time, major attempts were made by the organized sector workers throughout the country to join hands with the contract workers while organizing these actions.

At the end of a decade, successive governments showed their bankruptcy by placing the country's wealth and resources at the disposal of the MNCs and Indian capitalists. After an initial spurt in economic growth till 1994–95, due to the pumping in of foreign investor funds, there has been a continuous decline, with economic growth comparable to the pre-liberalization days. Of all the sectors, the worst affected has been the industrial sector which has registered a severe decline at the end of the decade, due to the virtual smashing of the manufacturing and small scale sectors. Unemployment has reached an all-time high. The proponents of globalization have the gall to claim that labour law reforms will result in employment generation!

True to the comprador nature of the Indian bourgeois and ruling classes, instead of reversing its disastrous policies, the government announced the launching of second generation economic reforms in 2001. The highlight of the 2001–02 Annual Budget was the Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha's declaration that labour laws would be amended. The three industrial laws targeted were 1) the Industrial Disputes Act, 2) the Contract Labour Act and 3) The Factories Act. The government could not muster sufficient muscle to bulldoze these amendments through. Chinks in the ruling BJP's armour were exposed when the saffron unions such as the BMS and the BKS were forced to join the state-level and country-wide protests against the proposed amendments.

PAST ATTEMPTS

It was during the post-1947 period that the new welfare legislations were introduced by the Congress government. They were a result of intense workers' struggles and of the participation of workers in the anti-colonial struggles. These included the *Factories Act 1948*, the *Minimum Wages Act 1948*, the *Employees State Insurance Act 1948*, the *Dock Workers Act 1949*, the *Plantation Labour Act 1951*, the *Provident Fund Act 1952* and the *Mines Act 1952*. Over a period of time it became clear to the workers that none of these welfare laws were ever implemented. For decades there has been a consistent campaign to subvert the labour laws, which proves that this was not a post-globalization phenomenon.

Also, there occurred an ebb in the workers' struggles after the high tide witnessed during the anti-colonial struggles. This was largely due to the betrayal by the communist party leadership that entered into electoral politics soon after 1950. This led them to give up militant struggles while the workers were utilized merely as vote banks for parliamentary gains. Thus, an already divided working class was left without a leadership committed to their class interests. This period also saw the formation of trade unions by the reactionary ruling class parties and the growth of trade union bureaucracies, which ensured that workers became their captive members, rather than active and thinking members. This was a primary reason for the gradual erosion of the workers' rights. A culmination of this erosion was witnessed during the Emergency, when trade union activity was banned and many leaders thrown in jail. It was during this period, in 1976, that the *Contract Labour Act* was enacted, which legitimized the use of contract labour.

Even during the brief Janata regime from 1977, there were major onslaughts on working class rights. On 30 August 1978, the then union Labour Minister, Ravindra Verma (who heads the Second Labour Commission constituted by the Vajpayee government in 1998), introduced the *Industrial Relations Bill 1978*. Through this bill, many important amendments were introduced in three

laws — namely, the *Industrial Disputes Act 1947*, the *Trade Union Act 1926* and the *Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act 1946*. Services were divided into two categories, essential and non-essential, and restrictions were sought to be imposed on the right to strike in the essential services. It was during this time that the other infamous bill, the *Hospital and Educational Institutions Bill 1978* was introduced. Termed as 'black bills,' neither could be enacted as the Lok Sabha was dissolved.

When Indira Gandhi returned to power in 1980, she was requested by the Employers' Federation to bring back the Emergency type conditions on the working class. Thus, in 1982, came the next onslaught on the workers' rights. In February, the *Industrial Dispute (Amendment) Bill 1982* was introduced in the Lok Sabha. Two months later, in April 1982, the *Trade Union Amendment Bill 1982* was introduced in the Rajya Sabha. Similarly, the notorious *Maintenance of Essential Services Bill* 1982 (ESMA), which sought to declare 12 services as 'essential,' and the *Payment of Wages (Amendment) Bill 1982* were also introduced. These anti-labour legislations were fiercely opposed under the banner of the National Campaign Committee and on 8 July 1982, a massive demonstration was organized in front of the Parliament, as a result of which, the government had to retreat and the two bills could not be enacted.

In 1988, the Congress (I) government again introduced the two bills, named as the *Trade Union (Amendment) Bill 1988* and the *Industrial Disputes (Amendment) Bill 1988*. They were based on the pro-industrialist recommendations of the Sarat Mehta Committee. Extensive mass movements were organized throughout the country against these two bills, culminating in a huge demonstration on 27 July 1988 before the Parliament. Once again, the government was forced to beat a retreat.

AFTER ECONOMIC REFORMS

In 1994, the then labour minister, P.A. Sangma, introduced the *Trade Union Amendment Bill 1994* in the Rajya Sabha. This bill, for

the first time, sought to make the membership of at least 10 percent of the workers in an industry as mandatory for the registration of trade unions. The bill, however, could not be enacted.

After the BJP government came to power, it constituted the Second Labour Commission, in 1998, to make recommendations for the amendment of labour laws within one year. Ravindra Verma, the Janata Party MP responsible for the *Industrial Relations Bill 1978*, was chosen to head it. Due to stiff challenges put up by workers, the Commission has not been able to make any headway and the government has been forced to repeatedly extend its tenure till date. The government had also constituted a 12-member task force on employment under the planning commission member M.M. Ahluwalia. The interim report of this task force also recommended changes in Indian labour laws to deal with rising unemployment.

Meanwhile, the government has gone ahead with various drastic measures such as allowing the entry of foreign direct investment into core sectors like telecom and insurance (despite prolonged and stiff opposition from the employees), the disinvestment of public sector enterprises, starting with Modern Foods and Balco. Apart from this, there has been the transformation of four SEPZs (Special Export Processing Zones) into free trade zones which are exempt from all labour laws, the setting up of the Rakesh Mohan Committee which has made detailed recommendations for the dismantling and the privatization of the Indian Railways, the dismantling of the State Electricity Boards (SEBs) and so on. Yet, this was not enough for the profit-thirsty MNCs. Having tasted blood, they were now thirsting for more.

On 5 February this year, the union cabinet announced a number of policy changes that would affect the Indian economy and industrial relations. They were: 1) the privatization of VSNL, IBPL, and four hotels owned by the ITDC; 2) a proposed massive downsizing of central government staff by announcing a VRS scheme for surplus staff; 3) further liberalization of the foodgrain trade and the dilution of price control in the case of a number of commodities like sugar and pharmaceuticals; and 4) a sharp hike

in excise duties. Four days later, the railways minister, Nitish Kumar, was prompt to follow suit by announcing that he would implement the Rakesh Mohan Committee recommendations and privatize operations in loss making railway lines.

At the end of February the government announced that an amendment bill to the *Industrial Disputes Act* would be presented in this year's budget session. It was scheduled to be presented on 16 April when the national trade unions proposed an all-India strike. In preparation for this the trade union joint front in Maharashtra called for a Long March on 15 March. Almost 40,000 workers from Mumbai marched for over three hours to reach the city center. This, in spite of the tension of the Ayodhya issue the following day. Slogans against communalism dominated the march. The government was however unable to table the amendments because of the contradictions within the ruling party alliance on the one hand and the government's complete loss of face and credibility over the murderous pogroms in Gujarat. In spite of this, the public sector workers and employees went ahead with the strike. In some states like West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh a state wide bandh was also simultaneously called. It is significant that during the bandh, the railway workers too unitedly struck work. It is after almost three decades that the railway workers have undertaken such widespread strike action.

INDUSTRIALISTS' 'CHARTER OF DEMANDS'

The latest amendment being sought is that Chapter VB of the Act will not cover establishments with less than 1,000 workers. The Chapter stipulates that in establishments employing 100 or more workers, government permission would be necessary prior to lay-offs, lock-outs and closures. This amendment will effectively remove more than 90 percent of industrial establishments from the purview of this law as there are hardly 1,000-odd establishments left that employ 1,000 or more workers. This will ensure that the exit policy, which is freely in practice for over 90 percent of the working class in this country, which is unorganized, will

become applicable to 90 percent of the organized workforce as well. It needs to be remembered that a major beneficiary of the amendment will be the government itself as an estimated 80 percent of the government-run public sector units are bound by Section VB of the ID Act provisions. To remove the section will give the government a free hand to implement its disinvestment plans for the PSUs.

Meanwhile, the downsizing of the central government staff is being threatened as part of implementation of the Expenditure Reforms Committee headed by Geetha Krishnan, former Finance Secretary. The Committee has recommended the abolition of nearly 50,000 jobs in nearly 17 ministries and departments of the central government. The employees targeted have been those found in the 'surplus pool' declared in the ongoing reorganization or closure of government departments. The employees are to be offered a VRS package and those who are declared surplus would be given a one-year period to accept the scheme or else they would be retrenched.

The amendments proposed in the other labour laws, which are very much a part of the 'charter of demands' of industrialists to the government, are, among others: 1) that the *Contract Labour Act* should be amended so that the clause for the abolition of the contract system be removed and that the contract system be allowed in all but the core sectors; 2) that the *Trade Union Act* should be amended so that the right to form unions is restricted and outside leadership not allowed; 3) the abolition of the *Sick Industries Company Act (SICA)* and of the Bureau of Industrial and Financial Restructuring (BIFR), among others.

Today, with a lumpen vigilante force having been readied by the fascist Sangh Parivar, as seen in Gujarat, to attack all those opposed to its agenda of Hindutva and the Ramjanmabhoomi, and with draconian laws like the POTA in place, the stage is being set to take the battle into the industrial arena as well. The unions of the Hindutva parties like the BMS and the BKS are, today, opposing the labour law changes in order to win over the majority of the workers to their ranks. This was exposed at the recent Shiv Sena

party meet where Uddav Thakerey announced that the Sena would implement the temple issue *and* oppose the labour law changes. The BMS, too, has put up a similar façade by calling Yashwant Sinha a stooge of the MNCs.

The INTUC was the only union which, true to its traditional role, opposed the 16 April strike. Some Congress leaders are making noises to oppose the amendments, but this opposition is also suspect, as it is a Congress ruled state like Maharashtra that has announced that if the centre does not amend the labour laws its government would. As for the left and other unions, their bureaucratic methods of functioning, the attachment to parliamentary politics and the exigencies of rule in states like West Bengal will ensure that the road ahead will lead to the path of compromise. Already they have shown their reluctance to take the struggle ahead. In spite of the success of the militant all-India three day coal workers' strike, on 1 December, they have failed to give a call for the intensification of the struggle. The resounding success, in some states, of the public sector strike and the bandh on 16 April, has also proved that while the workers are prepared for longer struggles, the established revisionist and reactionary leadership is not. For the past one year, in spite of repeated proposals, they have not agreed to give a call for even a single day all-India bandh.

The only road ahead for the working class is that of uncompromising militant struggles. It is clear that the workers are growing in militancy and self-confidence and only this can ensure that the workers do not face defeat. The challenge before the revolutionaries is to give this rising force a militant and revolutionary direction.

Meanwhile, there are reports of numerous militant workers' struggles the world over — from capitalist countries to a repressive anti-worker regime like China. On 23 March, a million workers marched to Rome and Italy witnessed a nationwide strike — there, too, the issue was to oppose the change in labour laws being contemplated by the Italian government. This strike too was on the same day as the one in India — 16 April. It is estimated that

10 million working people participated in this strike! In China, too, the workers resorted to spontaneous strikes to demand the release of their union leaders who had been imprisoned by the dictatorial regime in that country.

Thus, it is not just in India, but in different parts of the world, particularly, in the rich countries of Europe and the U.S., that the workers' movements are gaining momentum. And it is Karl Marx's clarion call at the end of the 19th century, 'Workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains,' that is indeed showing the way for the ushering in of a new dawn for the working masses everywhere, when the reign of the MNCs and the imperialist countries will be brought to an end, and the working masses will be the architects of their liberation and of a new world order.

Prices Make the Poor Poorer

Today, our very existence as students has been threatened by the tremendous rise in the price of everything from pencils to food. The government, however, seems oblivious to the hardships its policies are causing for the ordinary people.

To educate ourselves, we have to pay the fees, buy books, travel to and fro, stay in hostels and get a regular supply of food. Yet we do not have any source of income. And how much does the government provide cheaply, if not free, to its students? It pays the fees only for those students whose parents' income is less than Rs.100 a month. Since 1948, this level has not been raised, even though the value of the rupee has fallen by 63 percent! Hostel and canteen charges are so exorbitant that they are no longer within the reach of ordinary students. Nothing need be said about the cost of paper and books — we all know how bad the situation is. And now, even the transport charges — local train and BEST (Bombay Electricity and State Transport) fares — have been increased.

Why are prices rising so fast? How can the rise be stopped? Some answers supplied by our economic pundits:

From the students' magazine *Lalkar*, the bulletin of Proyom (Progressive Youth Movement), August 1974.

- The population is too large! (Do they not know that the density of population in England is three times that of India?)
- Droughts and floods have struck the economy! (Are they not aware that there was a record crop production in 1973–74?)
- The workers demand too many wage increases! (Are they not aware that the number of people existing below the poverty level has risen from 38 percent in 1961 to 54 percent in 1971? This means that there are more than 230 million people who are earning less or are out of jobs.)
- Corruption and bad planning! (But these are the symptoms, not the causes, of the disease.)

What, then, are the real reasons for this price rise?

- Because of unemployment, a large section of our population is not able to take part in any productive work. Most of the rural population work only four months in the year, not due to any unwillingness to work but because they do not have any land of their own to work on. The landlords choose not to increase production because it would help to lower prices and, in turn, reduce the profits. What can one expect when only 1 percent of the rural population owns 60 percent of the land?
- Enormous profit is still taken out of the country by foreign companies. It is estimated that a minimum of Rs. 800 crore is sent abroad every year.
- The surplus created by production is not reinvested, but is used unproductively or simply hoarded.
- Crores of black money comes into circulation every year, and this money is spent on luxury consumption, which contributes to lop-sided industrial development.
- Increased defence expenditure — Rs. 1,915 crore a year — also helps to keep the prices high.

If India had an independent economy — i.e. one without all the 4,000 collaboration agreements that tie our industry to America, Russia and Britain — and if more land belonged to the peasants who actually till the soil, then production and employment would rise and the prices would drop. (Ask your economics teacher if this is not the case. If he does not agree, tell him to write to us.)

Meanwhile, if we, the students, are to protect ourselves against rising prices and effectively exercise our right to education, we must unite and fight on our own behalf. The State Transport, in most towns and cities in India, gives concessions to the students in public transport. Then why should the BEST discriminate against the students in Bombay? We too must be allowed to travel to our schools and colleges for half-fare!

Public transport is meant to benefit the large majority of the people who cannot afford their own private means of transport. Therefore, the government should be spending much more on maintaining a cheap and efficient public transport. The excuse of paucity of funds will not do because the government policies are so lopsided. The government spends 50 percent of the central budget on defence, yet, our defence forces seem to be brought out more against the students and the poor, rather than to guard our borders. The government wants extra revenue, yet, it does not touch the crores of black money or the profits of foreign companies. Instead, it asks the poor and middle classes, who regularly travel by buses, to pay more. Does this make public transport an undertaking for the people?

PROYOM (Progressive Youth Movement) is, thus, organizing the students of Bombay to fight for a 50 percent bus concession. We also demand that the government withdraw the 5 p. surcharge. We call on all students to join the struggle for our basic democratic rights and fight exploitation.

Rape and Murder — 'Law and Order' of the Day

The revelations of the Emergency excesses brought the realization to many of us that people have no powers to deal with the arbitrary and illegal actions of the police. This is all the more disturbing, since such actions on the part of the police, are not aberrations, but are, rather, part of their normal routine, even without emergency powers. Recently, there have been grim exposures of police misbehaviour during the Emergency, through the Shah Commission and Justice Iyer of the Kerala High Court.

One shocking and frank example is the report of the Muktadar Commission, dealing with the rape of Rameeza Bee and the death of her husband at the hands of the Hyderabad police in March 1978. A year after the Emergency was revoked, the report of the Muktadar Commission, appointed after protest riots broke out in several cities and towns of Andhra Pradesh, has been tabled before the state Legislature. As can be expected, the report has been given little publicity. Yet, it is an important one, and should open the eyes of any sensitive person to how our police acts (with the support of the government) against the ordinary people.

This article was first published in the *Adhikar Raksha*, January, 1979.

Soon after the riots broke out, the police, the Home Minister and the Chief Minister publicly claimed that the riots were instigated by political parties and were communal. Further, they said that Rameeza Bee was a prostitute and her husband, a pimp. They presented a postmortem certificate of her husband's body, to show that he had died of 'coronary thrombosis precipitated by emotional upset and injuries,' and a medical certificate of Rameeza Bee showing little evidence of rape.

Justice Muktadar has unravelled the truth and torn the official version to shreds. He has proved that Rameeza Bee, newly arrived in Hyderabad, had been picked up from a rickshaw, in which she was waiting for her husband to join her, by the Nallakunta station police on the night of 29 March, and raped by them. Next morning, on hearing her experience, her husband Ahmed Hussein had abused the police, for which he was beaten mercilessly. Soon after reaching home that afternoon, he had died. Neighbours and passersby, angered on hearing the whole incident, had helped her to take the body to the police station to demand justice. The lack of response had infuriated the crowd and a riot had broken out.

The Commission has charged three constables with rape and exonerated one. It further stated that 'it is proved beyond doubt that the deceased died as a consequence of injuries caused by Surinder Singh, sub inspector and Syed Mahmood Ali ... as such they would be considered to have committed an offence punishable under Sec. 302 (murder) read with Sec 34 of the Indian Penal Code.'

What is of interest is not only that the commission has charged the police with rape and murder, but, also, how it has exposed the attempts of the police to distort the facts and tamper with evidence in order to prove their version of the incidents. They tried to dig out Rameeza Bee's antecedents in the village to prove that she was a prostitute. They even brought prostitutes before the Commission to testify that they knew her husband to be a pimp. But all that this manoeuvring revealed was the close alliance between the police and the pimps and prostitutes of Hyderabad,

which prompted the Commission to remark that 'this would show as to what all takes place in these police stations in our city.'

There were attempts to mislead the Commission in other ways. The evidence given by three police officers, as witnesses for the constable, got the following comment, '...their testimony would show that they, with a view to accommodate their subordinates, and mislead the Commission, have glaringly made untrue statements after taking oath... If this is the condition of the three police officers, then it would be very difficult for the judiciary to rely on the testimony of the police officers!'

Filthier is the light thrown on the involvement of the government and the senior doctors in covering up for the police. The Commissioner of Police wrote to the Chief Secretary of the state government on 30 March, 'discreet inquiries regarding any possible motivation by political parties behind the violence revealed that nobody instigated Rameeza Bee to take the dead body to the police station.' In spite of this, the Home Minister and the Chief Minister publicly announced that the riots were politically instigated.

The Home Minister, Mr. Hashim, accompanied by the DIG of Police, visited the house of Dr. Khandilkar, Professor of Forensic Medicine, on the night of 30 March. Immediately after the visit, the doctor left for the hospital where he was to perform the postmortem on Rameeza Bee's husband and to examine Rameeza Bee. Dr. Khandilkar was surrounded by the police officers when dictating the postmortem.

The preliminary postmortem notes and the final certificate tell different stories. Serious injuries to the kidney caused by the police beating were glossed over in the certificate. Dr. Khandilkar's assistant, Dr. Nagraj, testified before the Commission that these injuries would normally result in death. Even the notes written by Dr. Lima, of Dr. Khandilkar's dictation, while he was examining Rameeza Bee, were tampered with, to weaken the medical evidence of rape. So incriminating were these facts, that the Commission wrote that Dr. Khandilkar had stooped to the lowest depths at the zenith of his career, by making interpolations

in the original reports in order to minimize the seriousness of the injuries.

Such is the functioning of the police in India. From the Chief Minister downwards, and even senior doctors throughout the administration hierarchy, from the DIG Police to the junior most constables, most people in senior official positions are part of the game. Instead of exposing the police they helped them to cover up their tracks in order to fool the people. It was unfortunate for them that Rameeza Bee had the courage to demand justice and get mass support. It was also unfortunate for them that Justice Muktadar was honest. It is to negate the effect of these unfortunate factors that the report is being tendered useless by preventing publicity.

It is in the light of this exposure of the functioning of the police and the complete backing that they get from the governments that we must analyze the pleas made by the Chief Ministers at their recent conference. They pleaded for a complete stop to all criticism of the police. According to them, criticism demoralizes them and has prevented them from effectively curbing the growing lawlessness. But, a few questions — Against whom have the police not acted? Who are the really lawless in this land? And who is responsible for the total demoralization which exists in them already?

A Time to Remember

The only characteristic of the 1980 elections is the lack of choices before us. Going by their long record in power, we should not expect anything from the new government, which will be made up of the same old faces, merely masquerading under new names. A critical appraisal of each major party and individual will tell us what we can expect from them.

What makes such an appraisal a little less formidable than it would otherwise have been, is the fact, that all the leading lights have been around in power for so long even though they may have moved from party to party or even formed new parties. Thus, the Lok Dal's or the Janata (S)' newness does not indicate a change in Charan Singh's policies. He continues to draw his support from the big farmers and landlords of the North, the Jats, Kurmis, Bhumihars and other intermediate castes. His 'rural bias' is oriented towards their interests alone, and their prosperity is dependent on the poverty of those who form the bulk of rural India, the small peasants and landless labourers, be they Harijans, Adivasis or those belonging to any other caste/religion.

Charan Singh often declares with anger that, because he is a simple farmer, the urban press and the big politicians are

This article, written jointly with Jyoti Punwani, was first published in the *Adhikar Raksha*, January, 1982.

contemptuous of him. In a way he is right. He has not, in all his years of power, risen above his class. Like his class, his attitudes are feudal — casteist, reactionary and anti-women. He, of course, calls this Gandhism! His new-found secularism does not follow from the anti-Muslim and anti-Harijan stands he has always taken. When his fellow Jats were massacring Harijans in Pantnagar, in Bihar, in Punjab and in Haryana, he remained silent. When communal riots exploded in Aligarh and Jamshedpur, he took no stand. But his anti-urbanism has been expressed very often and very clearly in his statements on organized urban labour and in his defence of the police massacre, in 1977, of innocent workers of the Swadeshi Mills, Kanpur, who were only demanding that their wage arrears be paid.

Charan Singh's anti-urbanism, like his 'rural bias,' is partial. Just as his sympathies lie only with the rich farmers, his hatred is directed only towards the organized working-class, who, according to him, are sucking away at the meagre resources, which could be used for rural labour, by demanding wage increases. Many ex-Socialists share this view. It would have been nice if the facts conformed to their opinion, because then we could boast that even without socialism/communism, the working-class has become a privileged section in our society. Unfortunately for them (and for the working-class), various surveys have shown that the real wages of the mass of urban workers have decreased progressively over the years, compared to the prices of essentials and to company profits. Charan Singh, in his budget last year, helped increase prices further, so that today, cooking gas, which only upper middle-class families can possess, is cheaper and more easily available than kerosene, which the rest of the people use. However, if he was really bothered about the agricultural workers' share of the national resources, the obvious things for him to have done would have been to tax the fabulous wealth of the landlords, to reduce defence and bureaucratic expenditure and to recover the gross tax arrears which every big industrial house owes the government.

As for Charan Singh's concern for civil rights, it was during his Home Ministership that many states promulgated the

mini-MISA, and the Janata Party tried, unsuccessfully, to make preventive detention (PD) a part of the normal laws. Those politicians that opposed Charan Singh's latest PD Ordinance have no more democratic a record. When they were all united under the Janata Party, not one of them opposed (at least, publicly) the attempt by Morarji Desai to make PD a part of our Criminal Procedure Code. They are equally guilty of all the authoritarian acts which the Janata Party committed in its two years' rule.

The Janata Party's economic policy's main thrust was in favour of the private sector and the multinationals, all its talk of Gandhian Socialism notwithstanding. Capital intensive industries were offered incentives; even under the much-publicized policy for the small and tiny sectors, units using heavy machinery, rather than labour, were given concessions. Foreign aid was also increased by the Janata Party. Dominated, as it was then, and comprised, as it is now, by the right-wing parties like the Jan Sangh and the Congress (O), these policies were not surprising, nor was the lack of concern for civil rights, except when they themselves were affected, as under the Emergency.

The Janata Party is making a lot of capital out of Jagjivan Ram being a Harijan. Harijan feelings are being whipped up and he is being portrayed as a leader of the oppressed Scheduled Castes. But Jagjivan Ram was first brought into the Congress hierarchy to prevent Ambedkar from becoming the Dalit minister needed in the 1946 Cabinet. He, therefore, started his political career by opposing the recognized leader of the Dalits, Dr. Ambedkar. He has never, in all his long years in power, done a single thing to help the Dalits become self-sufficient. In fact, it is in his state, Bihar, that every landlord has his own army which is used to murder those Dalits that are peacefully demanding their due. Jagjivan Ram had also favoured the dismissal of the striking Bombay University employees in 1978. And one must not forget that he was a major accomplice in the implementation of the Emergency, during which he was part of the senior-most bodies — the Congress Parliamentary Board and the Congress Working Committee.

The Emergency is now being nostalgically remembered by a disturbingly large number of people. But even if some trains ran on time then, and some government officials did not take bribes, it was out of fear, not self-discipline. Knowledge of this mass fear enabled Indira Gandhi to do what she wanted, with the economy, and with our rights. Can we forget that the Emergency made it possible for her to freeze our wages under the CDS, to make the giving of bonus (a deferred wage) optional, and then to ban all forms of protest against these measures. This directly benefited the large industrialists, who also gained the license to intensify arbitrary measures against the workers. The Emergency made it possible for the World Bank to push its inhuman policy of population control in India, even at the cost of Indian lives. And if the Emergency put an end (if at all) to corruption, it was only among those so low in the administrative ladder, that for them corruption meant earning an extra Rs. 50–100 a month. The Shah Commission reports have exposed that corruption continued to flourish at the highest levels. And it was also this 'high society' which benefited from the Emergency, as is evident from the enthusiastic support it received from the Tatas and the Birlas.

The Emergency, however, was only the culmination of a long process of increasing state repression on democratic protests. The policies followed by the Congress under Indira Gandhi had resulted in increasing unemployment, increasing impoverishment of small farmers and landless labourers, and increasing control of our market by the multinationals and foreign powers. In such a situation, protest was inevitable; and when the young, committed, educated men and women, who later came to be known as Naxalites, entered spontaneous agitations and started leading them, Indira Gandhi was quick to suppress them. The massacre of hundreds of young dissenters and the torture and imprisonment of thousands was done under direct orders of Mrs. Gandhi's government. For them, however, the Emergency had always existed. And the Opposition leaders then had not said a word in protest.

A legacy of the Emergency is Sanjay Gandhi, who can, even when his family is out of power, terrorize ordinary people and

judges, with his gang of hoodlums, and openly spit at the law and get away with it. These tactics are very reminiscent of those used by Hitler's Black Shirts. So are the slogans of 'stability and socialism.'

The CPM is one party which does not underestimate the fiendish capabilities of Indira and Sanjay Gandhi. But its own record has been very disappointing, especially because, as a left party, it had raised many expectations. Not only has it welcomed the multinationals on the economic front, but it has also not undone the deeds of the Indira era, even when it had the ability to do so. Kamalnath, the staunch Sanjay supporter, has prospered in the past two years in Bengal; senior police officers, responsible for the brutal tortures and murders, have not been touched. The CPM has also violated the democratic rights of the people over and over again, the most notorious episodes being when the Marich-jhaapi refugees from Dandakaranya, who had cleared the forest and built homes, were forced with police help to leave their homes after food supplies to them were cut off by the CPM-led government, and the firing on the dock workers in which six people were killed.

Can we forget these shameless deeds of all the major parties? Can we expect them to change when they draw their financial support from the landlords who, today, in Punjab, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, and elsewhere, are massacring peasants; from the multinationals and foreign powers, whose only aim is to exploit the Indian market and suck out resources; from private industrialists, under whose behest the police recently shot down innocent children in Faridabad; and from the communalists, who exchange the lives of ordinary people for political deals?

Brahmin Sub-Inspector Tramples Dalit Flag

The Dalit Mukti Sena had organized a *morcha* on 29 March, to protest against the government's inaction in renaming the Marathwada University, despite such a resolution having been passed in both houses of the state government.

The morcha demonstrated that the Dalits are determined on this issue despite the scars from previous caste-riots. Thousands of Dalits, from various villages, had come for this morcha, which was to start from Azad Maidan, the usual starting point for all morchas in Bombay and end at the Vidhan Sabha.

The participants had started gathering in the maidan in a disciplined manner from 1 p.m. onwards. There was a tight police and SRP *bandobast*. On his arrival, Prof. Jogendra Kawade, leader of the Dalit Mukti Sena, who had been leading the morcha from Ghatkopar-Chembur was asked to hand over the flag by Sub-Inspector (SI) Joshi of the Azad Maidan police station. When Prof. Kawade refused, Joshi snatched the flag from him and trampled it underfoot. This enraged one of the members who hit Joshi on the head with a stick. At this, Joshi hurled caste-abuses at the

---

This article was first published in the *Adhikar Raksha*, April-June 1982.

members, and the police and the Special Reserve Police began to lathi-charge the participants.

One hundred fifty-eight persons were beaten so badly that doctors at St. George's Hospital were nervous about admitting them. Women were beaten till their clothes hung in rags from their bodies. It was later discovered by the Dalit Mukti Sena that SI Joshi is a member of the RSS backed Patit Pavan organization.

The government has promised a judicial inquiry, but the Sena has declared that it does not want one. The courts have done nothing whenever the Dalits have been murdered by the upper castes, they say. It is the people who will punish those responsible for what happened.

Small Magazines
A Significant Expression of the People's Culture

Although hardly one-fourth of our people can read fluently (whatever the census figures may show as the literacy rate), the written word is considered as an important medium of communication and of the propagation of ideas. For, those who can read still constitute a very large number in absolute terms. In addition, they are significant as a vocal section of the society.

The importance given to the written medium is evident from the vast number of publications brought out by the people involved in, or sympathetic to, the process of change all over the country. In numbers, these are almost as many as what the establishment and the government, with their resources and network, bring out. It is also evident from the policies of the government regarding the price of paper, the distribution of publications, censorship and the distribution of advertisements.

All over the country, in every town and city, and even in some big villages, publications are being brought out locally. Registered

---

This article was first published in the *Adhikar Raksha*, July-September, 1982.

and unregistered, with the circulation varying from a couple of hundred to many thousands, dealing with all types of topics and issues, with perspectives varying from the most reactionary to the most revolutionary, these publications are in almost every Indian language. Some of them have lasted for years, some have folded up within a year, yet, new ones keep cropping up, hopeful of a better survival rate. Some of these publications have even built up a reputation and had a lasting impact.

Distanced from the publications which enjoy a circulation throughout the country, people's expression usually finds an outlet in these papers. They are the forum in which local problems can be emphasized, local creative writing can be first printed, and ideological and theoretical issues grappled with. It is widely assumed that this small press, as a part of the people's movement, has stood up against the dictatorial policies of the state fearlessly.

But this assumption needs to be qualified. It is not enough, merely, to categorize in terms of scale. Many of these small publications are run by local bigwigs for profit or with other considerations, like currying favour with those in power. However small their circulation may be, they cannot be considered as part of the self-expression of the people, as part of the real creative culture of the people. Local vested interests regularly finance such publications, either as purely business propositions or to 'expose' rivals. Big politicians help such publications indirectly to downgrade their own rivals and, thus, secure their own political base in the region. These are as much a part of what Sarveshvar Dayal Saxena has called the 'Parallel Culture,' as the glossies run by the big business houses.

But what is a significant expression of the people's culture are the hundreds of small and medium publications, brought out either by individuals or by groups. They reflect the outpouring of the people's culture and pose a challenge to the established feudal and bourgeois culture and politics. They have played an important role in helping movements, in creating new literary trends. It is well-known to every original writer and political worker how

difficult it is to get their writing published, or their views honestly represented in the established publications which seek to uphold the viewpoint and literature of the established interests and the government.

Therefore, it was in small journals, brought out by writers, that the Hindi literary establishment, represented by Kamleshwar and Dharmvir Bharti, was challenged, and new literary trends established, including the now-emerging revolutionary trend. Dalit literature, which revolted against the literature of the establishment in Marathi in the early 1970s, or the revolutionary writing that emerged in Andhra Pradesh in the late 1960s, too, found no place in the larger widely circulated magazines brought out by the established business interests.

Similarly, political views and acts, which challenge the existing socio-economic structure, or even, just the undemocratic nature of the state's policies and actions, either find no mention in the national press or are presented in a most distorted manner as the handiwork of a few isolated, unbalanced anti-socials. The point of view of the workers is rarely presented, since most of the established papers are run by the industrialists. Thus, the literature of revolt, the acts and views of committed political activists, through which they have gained knowledge of their situation, a direction to their turmoil and a desire for a better life, find a voice in these small magazines.

The lack of finance, of a distribution network and escalating costs are always put forward as constraints that prevent this anti-establishment press from expanding and growing. But, in one sense, these very weaknesses are also its strength. These publications have no definite, secure, source of finance. They depend, occasionally, on erratic advertisements, and, largely, on donations and subscriptions from friends of the publisher, as well as members, if the latter is an organization. Contributors do not get paid to write. But not being dependent on any one big source for finance, they do not have to remain in the good books of any businessman, advertiser or, even, any government. The strength of the writing, the nature of the content, depends on the views of those

who bring out these publications and on their courage in facing repression and harassment.

During the Emergency, many of these journals closed down, or came out clandestinely, rather than submit to state censorship. Numerous publishers have sunk in their life's savings into their publications to enable them to carry on rather than depend on the government or any big industry, and, thus, compromise on the content. In the democratic struggle in India today, when the state, the ruling party and big business are the biggest oppressors of the people, and exercise a monopoly over the media, this independence in functioning of the committed press has been important.

Such magazines can never sell through the regular distribution network. But this, too, has been their strength. Their sale is through subscriptions and through the personal effort of those involved. This means that their sale depends only on the dedication of concerned individuals, their ability and determination to convince more and more readers, and on the consistent support of the subscribers, who have to put up with often irregular issues as well as the total lack of attractive sales gimmicks.

This committed press today faces many dilemmas. As costs of production — paper, printing, ink and binding — go up, more and more funds are needed to sustain these publications. The government continues to do everything within its power to throttle it. The increases in the costs of paper and postal rates has hits this press most of all. Also, the readers are being increasingly corrupted by the establishment press, with its focus on gossip, whether about film stars or politicians. Also, in this sphere, the technical quality of printing has improved so much in the last few years that it becomes impossible to compete on a shoe-string budget.

Therefore, committed magazines are faced with a major problem of attracting, and attempting to reach out to, the ordinary, apolitical, readers. For magazines which discuss theoretical issues alone, this problem does not exist, because they have a captive readership. The challenge this committed press faces is that of spreading the people's culture, of trying to get readers to see

through the glossy, expensive and sophisticated press, to look for content that expresses the urges and activity of the people against dead traditions and against exploitation.

This committed press has had the best minds in the country writing and contributing to it. It has survived and grown out of the dedication and sacrifice of idealists who were committed to change society. The efforts of *Zhot, Himmat. Frontier, Srians Kalpana, Pahal, Artarth, Aamukh, Satyakati,* and countless others are lessons in the failure and success of this press.

As the monopoly control of the big businesses and the government on the print media increases, and as the government succeeds in increasing the costs of printing, the challenges before those who wish to help the people's culture grow becomes more difficult. More and more journalists are willingly conforming to the dictates of the state, and not merely for fear of repression or out of economic compulsion. In these conditions, the need for support from people who will contribute, write, subscribe and distribute, is growing. If this press has to survive and expand, if the present undemocratic order is to be challenged, those who have been merely talking so far, have to actively support and prove it.

Deaths in Police Custody in Nagpur

In the month of August, two deaths were reported from the same police station in Nagpur. These deaths rocked the area and there were big demonstrations outside the police station after the local people heard about it. The Committee for the Protection of Democratic Rights, Nagpur appointed a team to investigate the deaths. The team consisting of Subroto Sen, Ms Chandra, Anuradha Ghandy, R.N. Naise and Prakash Meghe visited the area in the last week of August, and a report of the team was released to the press on 27 August. A summary of the findings of the team follows.

On 4 August, at about 6 p.m., the police of Sakkardara police station admitted Harish Waghmare to the medical hospital where he was pronounced dead. He had been arrested by the police just that afternoon at about 1.30 p.m. Waghmare was well-known in the Siraspeth locality where he lived. He worked as a supervisor in the Housing Co-operative Society.

Shocked by the news of his death, a huge crowd collected outside the Sakkardara police station that night. The Police Commissioner was forced to transfer the policemen involved in the arrest of Waghmare. Due to pressure by the local social workers, a panel of doctors was appointed to conduct the postmortem

---

This article was first published in the *Adhikar Raksha*, in December 1983.

the next morning. The postmortem revealed the cause, or the probable cause of death, as: 'shock caused due to laceration of spleen caused due to injury to back.' The police, however, are trying to get out of the responsibility for his death. The events leading to his arrest become significant because of this.

On the afternoon of 4 August, Waghmare met Kamble who runs a small *kirana* (grocery) shop near his house, and both went out for a while. They returned an hour later after a drink. An argument broke out between the two of them just outside Waghmare's house over a few rupees. Kamble's little son intervened in the argument and a small scuffle ensued between him and Waghmare. The boy ran away and informed the police, who promptly arrived on the scene. In full view of the family members and neighbours, they dragged Waghmare away, beating him all the time. They then threw him into a waiting rickshaw.

Two hours later, a friend, Shri Nayak, who runs a video shop at the Sakkardara *chowk*, went to get Waghmare released on bail, which was denied. At this time Waghmare was complaining of pain. An hour later, the police came to Shri Nayak's shop saying that someone should come and get him out on bail. At the police station, Nayak saw that Waghmare's condition was very bad. He refused to take him and instead asked the police to take him to the hospital. By six that evening, Waghmare was dead.

Four days after the death, on 8 August, the police arrested Kamble and his 12-year-old son, Rahul, on the charge of murdering Waghmare. In spite of protests, the police have, so far, taken no action against those policemen involved in the case, except for transferring them, while Kamble now languishes in jail with a murder charge on his head.

The second death, in the same police station, occurred on 9 August. This time the police claim that Manohar Thakre hanged himself to death in the room which is used as a lock-up in Sakkardara police station. But an investigation of the circumstances makes the police theory very dubious.

Twenty six-year-old Thakre, an unemployed married youth, left home as usual after lunch at about 11 a.m. He is said to have got

into a quarrel with a shopkeeper, and on the complaint of the shopkeeper (whose shop is just opposite the police station), he was arrested by the police at 1.30 p.m. At 6 p.m., the police called Dr. Rathi, who has a clinic nearby, to examine Thakre. The doctor was shown the boy lying on the ground, with one end of the rope around his neck, tied to the bars of the window. He was pronounced dead.

At about 7.30 p.m., Thakre's father was taken to the police station and told about the death of his son. Since a crowd had started gathering outside, the police allowed the rest of the family, and some local social worker, to see the body in the room, in the dim light of the evening.

No one is convinced by the version that Thakre hanged himself. The police station has no lock-up. A small room in this small police station serves as one. The room has an ordinary door and an ordinary window, about four feet from the floor. The prisoners are tied to the bars of this window with a rope that binds their arms as well.

The rope with which Thakre is supposed to have hanged himself was tied to one of the middle bars of the window. How could a full grown man, of medium height, hang himself from the bars of a window hardly four to four-and-a-half feet from the floor? According to those who saw the body, even the facial contortions common in a death due to hanging were not present. His face was sad in death. According to the doctor, except for a slight elongation of the neck and a slight bulge in the eyes, there was no bleeding, nor was Thakre's mouth open.

The CPDR team has demanded that:-

i. The policemen involved in the death of Waghmare be immediately suspended and charged with murder.
ii. False charges framed against Kamble and his son, Rahul, be withdrawn.
iii. Instead of the CID inquiry under progress, an independent judicial inquiry be conducted into Manohar Thakre's death.
iv. All the charges against those arrested from the crowd on the night of 9 August be immediately withdrawn.

Cotton Flower ... the Best Flower! ... ?

It is a tale from the age of Akbar and Birbal. The king held a competition to test the wisdom of his people. Akbar asked, 'Which flower is the best?' While some replied that it was the lotus, others answered that it was the rose. Birbal, however, replied that, 'The best flower is the flower of cotton, because it gives us cloth.' Thus, the importance of cotton has been known to man for a long time. But what is the value of this cotton flower today? What is the condition of the farmers who give life to it?

On 3 February, the Shetkari Sangathan (a farmers' organization), under the leadership of Sharad Joshi, staged a *Rasta Roko* ('road block') movement to support the farmers' demand for increased rates of agricultural produce. But such a peaceful protest, too, could not be tolerated by the government and about two thousand workers were arrested in the entire state of Maharashtra. During the elections to the Legislative Assembly, and to the Parliament as well, the farmers' union staged a *Gaon Bandh* movement against the Congress (I) and those candidates who did not support the union's programme.

This article appeared under the pen name Gayatri More in the April-June, 1985 issue of *Kalam*, the Marathi magazine published by Vidyarthi Pragati Sanghatana.

Farmers in various parts of the country have been actively struggling around this issue because, on the one hand, the costs of modern agricultural implements (seeds, water, fertilizers, machines, etc.) are continuously rising, while the market rates of agricultural products are largely stagnant. The wheat, sugarcane, tobacco and cotton farmers have discovered newer and tougher ways of struggling through various movements. They have bravely faced the oppressive measures taken by the police. The farmers of Nipani, North Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu, have even lost their lives in police firing.

Cotton producers of Maharashtra, and, especially, of Vidarbha, have a long history of struggle, as compared to those from other parts of the country. At present, too, these farmers are actively involved. The plantations of cotton, its producers, its movements and history give us the real picture of how our agricultural economy has got trapped in the web of the international economic system. The Maharashtrian farmer has been tangled in this web for the last hundred years and eight monopolist industrial groups, who have control over the cotton mills in the state and centre, are still exploiting them.

Cotton is the oldest cash crop grown in India. However, not even 4 percent of the cotton fields are irrigated. The objectives of the Five Year Plans have never been accomplished. Yet, if, fortunately, some year, there is good production of cotton, the government hastens to export the deseeded cotton, saying that there is no boost in the local market. Indian cloth mills and handloom industries require cotton of small and short thread. However, after 1965, the government has encouraged and provided aid to the production of only long threaded cotton. On one hand, the government has been chalking out schemes to boost the local market, while on the other, it has been distributing permits for a huge import of polyester thread. These contradictory aspects of the cotton economy seem to be puzzling, but a study of the history of cotton in Maharashtra may help explain this contradiction.

MAHARASHTRA : THE COTTON PRODUCING STATE

Maharashtra state is at the leader in terms of land usage for the production of cotton (25 lakh hectares). More than 12 lakh farmers produce cotton and 20 percent of the population of Maharashtra is dependent on cotton for their living. The state also has the highest number of cloth mills. Powerloom industries are flourishing and there are an a very large number of handloom weavers across the state. In a nutshell, Maharashtra has a large number of people who are directly or indirectly dependent on cotton. Moreover, 50 percent of the cotton production in the state is from Vidarbha, and, yet, the economy of Vidarbha is backward. We can explain this backwardness, to some extent, by studying the cotton policy.

In the 18th century, the cotton from Vidarbha reached remote Bengal, from which the world famous *Mul-mul* was made. However, the modern history of Maharashtra starts from the industrial revolution in Britain in 1870, and with the origin of cloth mills in Britain. Then onwards, the type of cotton, its rates and its quantity came to be decided by the demands of Britain and the mills of other countries.

MAHARASHTRA: A SUPPLIER FOR THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

India continued to provide cotton to the cloth industries of, first, Britain and, later, also of Germany and Japan. The big businessmen gave advance payments to the cotton producers and traders; huge roads and bridges were constructed in order to export cotton from Mumbai. The first railway was constructed in 1850, so that the transportation of cotton upto Mumbai could be facilitated. During the American Civil War, the supply of cotton to Europe was curtailed. At that time, the production of cotton was increased and so was its rate. When this war came to an end, the rates of cotton again plummeted and the farmers of the Deccan went on strike. But, fortunately, the demand from Japan and Germany for the cotton of Vidharbha increased. However, these countries required short threaded cotton and, therefore, after great efforts, the

farmers of Vidarbha stopped producing the conventional '*Hinganghat*' long threaded cotton, and returned to producing short threaded cotton. The irony is that while such a large quantity of cotton was being exported, the handloom weavers in the country were suffering due to the scarcity of cotton. After 1932, whenever the international capitalist economy went into a crisis and production came down, the cotton producers suffered a lot. From then onwards the cotton economy began declining and the British did nothing for the producers of short threaded cotton.

During the Second World War, and with changes in the international demand, the farmers of Vidarbha had to turn towards producing the medium and long threaded cotton once again. In 1964-5, the government encouraged the production of the long threaded cotton, e.g., *Varalaxmi*. This type of cotton has less demand in the local market than in the international market. At the same time, in order to improve the productivity, very expensive insecticides, fertilizers, seeds, etc., were brought in. The farmers were given loans to buy these. The rates of these materials are continuously rising, while the rates of cotton are stagnating.

Due to various factors such as the growing indebtedness of the farmers, imported seeds, increasing cost of fertilizers, lack of demand for their crops, earning an income even lesser than expenditure, the situation has become explosive. Because of the government's policy of solving socio-economic issues by applying foreign methods mechanically, and due to all of the above mentioned factors, the cotton farmers are out on the streets, agitating.

THE DEMAND FOR A FAIR PRICE

The first big rally of cotton farmers took place on 24 November, 1969, at the Nagpur session of the Legislative Assembly, to focus attention on the low market price of cotton. Ostensibly with the intention of guaranteeing a stable price for cotton, and to free the farmers from the exploitation of traders, the Maharashtra government started the Ekadhikar Kharidi Yojana (Monopoly Purchase) in 1971. However, even after the implementation of this scheme,

discontent among farmers and their movements continued to increase. Although the farmers had got rid of the private traders, they were still in the firm grip of the monopolist bureaucratic traders. Through the Council of Maharashtra Cotton Producers, the farmers have been continuously raising their voices in protest against the low rates announced by the government. In January 1973, over one lakh farmers staged agitations at various places to press their demand of Rs. 500 per quintal, but the government was ready to give only Rs. 250 per quintal. Then, in the very next season (1973–74), the Maharashtra government simply disbanded the Yojana because it did not want to increase the procurement price of cotton. The following year the rates of cotton started plummeting, but because of the lack of economic back up, the Ekadhikar Yojana could not be so effective.

It has often been observed that the prices of cotton under this scheme are even less than the rates in the open market from traders. As a result, discontent has always been simmering, and in 1980, the farmers of Vidarbha came out onto the streets demanding a guarantee of Rs. 700 per quintal. They successfully organized a *Chakka Jaam* (Road Block, stopping vehicles) on 20 November. Seeing the volatile situation, all the opposition parties supported the farmers. People participated in this agitation in large numbers and, at least in this part of the state, all transport came to a standstill. Students of the agricultural university and other colleges came forward to support the farmers. An incident of *lathi-charge* took place in the students' hostel. Under the pressure of this movement the Government had to increase the rates by Rs. 100.

However, in the next season, the mill owners and the central government put pressure on the state government to decrease the rate of cotton. The Council put forth the demand of Rs. 966 per quintal on 26 November, 1981. They called for a 'farmers' curfew.' The farmers of Amravati were at the forefront of this movement and the call of not selling any produce for 10 days was largely successful. As a symbolic measure of protest by lawbreaking, another movement named *Jungle Todo* was also staged successfully. But, while this movement was going on, the mill workers' strike had

begun and the rates of cotton came down. Every season, the mill owners' lobby protests against export, saying that cotton procurement is at a loss, to keep the rates of cotton low.

The attitude of the government has all along been helping in keeping the rates low. In a state like Maharashtra, where so-called progressive farmers like Vasantdada Patil, Shankarrao Chavan, Sharad Pawar, etc., have been the Chief Ministers, the cotton producers' fate still depends upon the weather. The per hectare productivity of cotton in Maharashtra is the lowest and the low rates of cotton are beneficial for mill owners and imperialist traders. This is a system where the government, which is supposed to be responsible for the farmers' welfare, works only for the benefit of international imperialism and local big capitalists.

With polyester yarn gaining in importance, the Indian government is freely distributing permits for its import. Many mill owners have stopped the production of cotton cloth and, instead, have started producing the expensive but profitable polyester. Facing this stiff competition has been another major factor as to why the rates of cotton have greatly plummeted. The mill owners are fulfilling the demands of only the city and rich markets. The market for polyester, though limited, is profitable. The poorer sections in rural areas can only afford cotton, but from the market point of view, cotton textile has no value. Forty percent of our village people use only about two metres cloth a year. However, even after a huge production of cotton in India, even though 70 percent of the Indian population uses cotton cloth, in spite of the climate in India being more suitable for using cotton than

Table 1: How much does the Government Spend on the Import of Polyester Yarn?

Year	Tonnes	Price (in crore rupees)
1975–76	5,300	6.11
1976–77	26,000	30.34
1977–78	1.80 lakh	192.00
1978–79	1.70 lakh	198.00

polyester, the government, being the agent of the imperialists and the big capitalists, is profusely importing polyester solely to benefit the imperialist, petro-chemical monopolist industries. Instead of eliminating the oppression and problems of the Indian people, the government is helping in their exploitation and loot through its policy. By encouraging the multinational companies like Union Carbide and Cynamyde to sell their expensive, high technology based products, like insecticides, the government has helped them to extort profits from not only urban, but rural people also. The farmers have no option but to buy these insecticides so that they can earn at least a minimum amount from cotton production, but to fulfill their daily needs, to pay debts, to perform marriage ceremonies, the resources are decreasing day by day.

Small and big farmers of cotton have been struggling for the last 15 years for the fair price of cotton. Similar struggles have been waged by the farmers producing wheat in Punjab, by those growing onions and sugarcane in western Maharashtra and by tobacco farmers in Nipani, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu continuously. They have accepted the leadership of Sharad Joshi, Sharad Pawar, Narayanswami Naidu, Akali Dal, etc., all of whom have attempted to limit their demands only to that increased prices for farm produce. These leaders have tried to give it the form of the exploitation of '*Bharat*' (rural India) by 'India' (urban India). However, they have neither understood, nor made the farmers understand, that in the present socio-economic system, it is impossible for the farmers to get the right value.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Fifty percent of our population (mainly rural) is living below the poverty line (BPL) and another 20 percent, that are on the border of the BPL, cannot even purchase items of daily necessities. Due to the poor purchasing power of the people, the markets are low and therefore the demand for those goods is limited. Trapped in the evil cycle of feudal relations and indebtedness, the common people are being exploited and becoming landless. Because of poverty

and the caste system their lives are insecure. Even the clothes they wear are usually given to them by others. They live in darkness, literally, since they are not even capable of buying oil to light their lamps. Hence, the cruel irony, that people do not even have clothes to wear but cotton is being exported because of the lack of demand. Fifty percent of the population survives on *aambil* (jowari gruel) for 6 months in a year and we are exporting 10 lakh tonnes of wheat!

It is evident that unless the socio-economic conditions of the people of our country improve, we cannot get the right answers to the question of fair price for the farmers' produce. While struggling for a fair price, they also have to get organized for an agricultural revolution — a revolution that will radically change the land relations in the country and give land to those who till it. Until and unless the 50 percent landless farmers of our population get land and relief from other forms of economic dependency, their conditions cannot be improved. Fertilizers may have helped to increase production in some areas but it has only given rise to other problems. It is not backward technology but the social relationships that are responsible for poverty and backwardness. Until and unless our government does not get rid of feudalism, capitalism and imperialism, the backwardness of our economy is not resolved and land is not distributed among poor people, technological development is of no use. Therefore, these problems of cotton producers are intrinsically related to the larger question of land relations and agrarian revolution.

Practical Socialism
Not Socialism but Pure Fascism

The word socialism has become a cliché in Indian politics. Any Tom, Dick or Harry uses the word. Any political party, irrespective of whether it is a reactionary party or progressive, must include this word in its manifesto, interpreting it to its own convenience. Hence, we have the Nehruvian Socialism of the Congress (I) and the Gandhian Socialism referred to by the BJP; and now Thackeray and Bhai Sangare have also jumped onto this bandwagon with their own special brand — Practical Socialism! The articles recently published by the editor of *Navakal*, Nilkantha Khadilkar, based on his short visit to Soviet Russia, propound this new theory. A mere fortnight's stay and paltry information were enough for Thackeray, Sangare and Khadilkar to develop these theories.

Although this series of articles by Khadilkar is informative, readable and has a way of riveting the attention of the reader to its contents, yet, it is quite superficial. On closer reading we can easily perceive the skin deep knowledge of the writer about the USSR marching towards its goals in the last 30 years and about Marxism

This article, written under the pen name of Gayatri More, was first published in the Marathi magazine *Kalam*, Nov-Dec, 1984.

or Socialism itself! The articles are, moreover, a reflection of the ignorance and poor knowledge of many of our journalists on political theory and international politics.

Khadilkar candidly accepts that prior to his visit to Russia in 1983, his views about that country were based upon popular misconceptions. Thackeray and Sangare are even more superficial in their study, for them, these articles suffice to develop a theory of Practical Socialism. One does not know whether to applaud or to moan when Khadilkar announces that his is one of the first such articles to be written on the Soviet Union! In contrast, Mr. Banerji, Chief of the Geological Survey of India, remarked, after his two month visit to China, that his stay was far too short to observe the variety and development in Chinese life, and that was, in fact, his second visit!

Khadilkar, on the basis of his 15-day sojourn, appreciates Russia for its practical application of socialism and the rejection of dogmatic Marxism. He is happy that they have rejected the non-practical, idealistic theorization of Marxism. Moreover, Khadilkar is mighty pleased that Russia has crushed the 'nuisance' of Christianity and Islam! Side by side, he has the audacity to say how Socialism and Hinduism can co-exist! What a formidable task it would be to explain to Khadilkar the journey through which Socialism in Russia has traversed, turning it from a socialist state into a social imperialist dictatorship, and at the same time, to make the reader aware of the reactionary motives behind Khadilkar's writings!

Saying that the writings of Marx are only fit for a library, and that they reflect the dreaminess of a poet, Khadilkar praises Lenin and Mao for developing practical socialism. Little does he realize that he is torpedoing the theoretical developments of Lenin and Mao on Marxism by saying this!

He seems oblivious to the history that, in 1917, Lenin had to struggle against the outdated and dogmatic tendencies in Marxism only to further the cause of the proletarian revolution, to execute the ideology of Marxism itself. In 1917, in the Introduction to his famous work, *The State and Revolution*, Lenin wrote about how the

present undesirable and misguided tendencies in the socialist movement were quite acceptable to the capitalists. Whose side was Lenin on then, the revolutionary Marxists, or Practical Socialism?

Indian democracy is a sham, and, although, India needs socialism, it needs a genuine democratic society first, where democracy would be real for the toiling people and the oppressed sections. To establish such a society is the responsibility of the revolutionary communists. To bring about such a society there is need for a revolution, a class war, since the ruling classes will not yield their power peacefully, and Marxism has to be the ideological tool for this. How can India develop unless the parasitic ruling class, which has fattened on the exploitation of the working people, is overthrown by waging a continuous battle against it? Those who like to conveniently ignore the aspect of class struggle and its consequence, violence, while talking about socialism, are only playing with words. They have not understood the essence of revolutionary socialism.

Words like 'practical' and 'feasible' are not new to the international socialist movement. Whenever the socialist movement advances in a country, its organizers are cautioned to be 'practical' and not too militant. These observers should note that the ruling classes are highly organized and powerful. It is impossible to uproot them, to finish them off politically, without a class struggle and armed conflict. This 'moderate' stream of thought has always been flowing along the revolutionary struggles. For instance, in the trade union movement it says, 'Be practical! Aim only for that much for which the workers are prepared!', in the student movement: 'Students have no interest in politics, talk only of their demands!' In short, being 'practical' always means lagging behind the consciousness of the people and not exerting to take it forward towards the resolution of class conflict; to prefer the easier path of participating in the elections and, thus, betraying the revolution.

In Russia itself, the professing of practical socialism by Kruschev, Brezhnev, and now Chernenkov (or Andropov), amounts to a betrayal of the revolution brought about by Lenin

and Stalin and of the sacrifices made by thousands of Russians earlier. In October 1917, the Russian working class toppled the capitalists and laid the foundations of a new society based on socialism. The workers came to power by making great sacrifices. They defeated European aggression. They, thus, created an industrially strong and capable Russia. To the exploited people of the world, Russia became a pathfinder and a beacon light. It was only through a deep study of Marxist theory, and its correct application, that the workers came to power in Russia.

But in 1952, after the demise of Stalin, the leadership adopted shortcuts in order to face various economic and political issues and, thereby, promoted the growth of capitalistic tendencies. Due to their own self interests, they let the power in the economic and political fields slip into the hands of the bureaucracy and the technocrats. As a result, a new class of exploiters emerged. Thus, by 1965, the first socialist state became a capitalist regime. Now it has become an imperialist power. A more realistic assessment has been done by clear sighted visitors, unlike Khadilkar, who have noticed how the higher level officers and managers possess a number of cars personally — Brezhnev himself owns nine cars, including a Rolls Royce! They own private rest houses at holiday resorts and a lot of property which they have amassed through corrupt means and by abusing their official positions. Hence, now in Russia, there exists a huge gap between the rich and the poor, which is bound to increase day by day. The average Russian worker has to stand in long queues for bread, while the ministers roll in wealth. Prostitution is on the increase and alcoholism is becoming a big problem.

Khadilkar was also impressed by a few other things he saw during his visit: a beautiful cemetery in Leningrad for the soldiers, incentives for the highly intelligent students, special positions being given to scientists and musicians, etc. But this is nothing new and can be seen in most European capitalist countries. Khadilkar has also been impressed by the facilities for entertainment and health for workers, but these have been provided since about forty years ago, when Russia was a socialist country. The present exploitative ruling class is simply continuing with them because withdrawing these facilities would lead to vehement protests from the people. But what Khadilkar liked most about the present day Russia, and which he wants to be implemented in India, are discipline and dictatorship! It is here that Khadilkar appears in his true colours! However, it must be noted that the dictatorship imposed in Russia today is that of the new capitalist class and not the dictatorship previously imposed by the working class on the capitalist class.

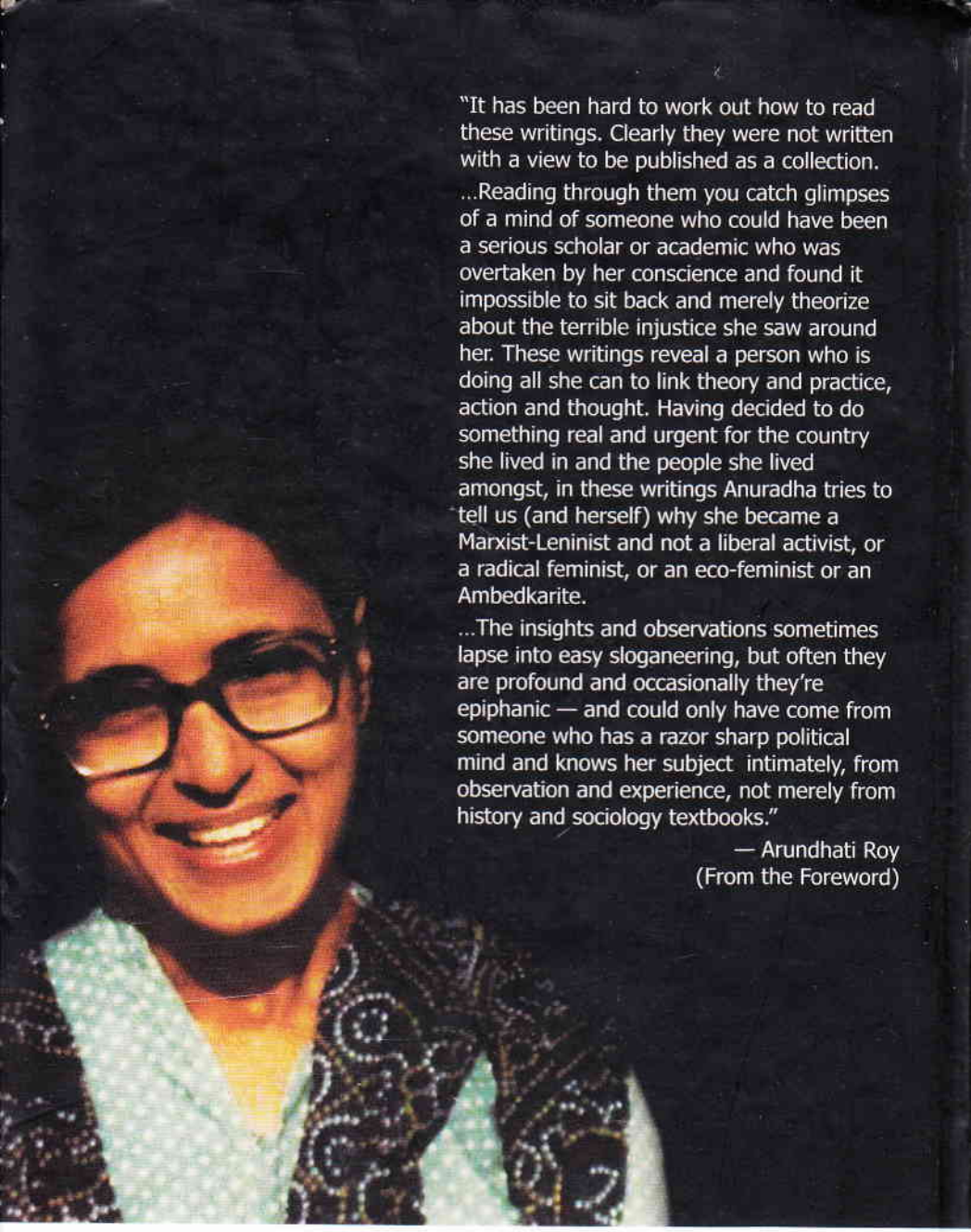
The present 'discipline' is a dictatorship forced upon the common people to prevent them from speaking their minds and revolting against the new form of exploitation. To support this kind of a discipline is similar to the view held during the Emergency, in 1975-77, by a section of the middle and upper classes, that since trains ran on time and roughnecks were to be seen less on the streets, thus dictatorship was good! The reality, however, was that strikes were banned, prices were rising and wages were frozen. The assets of the Tatas and Birlas were on an upward curve, the workers were getting poorer and the situation was totally being neglected. It was then that the 'practical communists' in the CPI were full of praise for the Emergency and now Khadilkar is following suit.

Khadilkar feels a great sense of relief that in Russia, since religion is a private affair, there is a curbing of Islam. This, he feels, is beneficial for India because, otherwise, through Uzbekistan and other parts of Asia, Islamic forces, the 'descendants of Tamburlaine and Babur,' would swoop upon the soft and culturally rich Hindu people of India and swallow them! Little does he realize that the Indo-Soviet friendship treaty has placed India in the Russian noose forever! Khadilkar, who believes that Islam is more cruel than Hinduism and Christianity, should really ask the Dalits if they find the caste-based, discriminatory Hinduism any more tolerant!

It is clear that those who talk of 'practical socialism' make a pretence of liberalism and their sympathy for the working class. In reality they are creating a social base for the Hindutva

chauvinistic philosophy in the country. This is reminiscent of the manner in which Hitler tried to break the socialist mass base and create his fascist dictatorship under the guise of 'nationalistic socialism' and an anti-Jew campaign. In a similar vein, Khadilkar and others are trying to establish a '*Bharatiya* brand of dictatorship' under the guise of practical socialism. If some sections of the CPI-CPM, the followers of Dange, feel that there is some substance in what Khadilkar is saying, it only indicates the low level that they have descended to. Khadilkar is talking of nothing but Hindutva chauvinistic dictatorship behind the veil of 'Practical Socialism.'

Index



"It has been hard to work out how to read these writings. Clearly they were not written with a view to be published as a collection.

...Reading through them you catch glimpses of a mind of someone who could have been a serious scholar or academic who was overtaken by her conscience and found it impossible to sit back and merely theorize about the terrible injustice she saw around her. These writings reveal a person who is doing all she can to link theory and practice, action and thought. Having decided to do something real and urgent for the country she lived in and the people she lived amongst, in these writings Anuradha tries to tell us (and herself) why she became a Marxist-Leninist and not a liberal activist, or a radical feminist, or an eco-feminist or an Ambedkarite.

...The insights and observations sometimes lapse into easy sloganeering, but often they are profound and occasionally they're epiphanic — and could only have come from someone who has a razor sharp political mind and knows her subject intimately, from observation and experience, not merely from history and sociology textbooks."

— Arundhati Roy
(From the Foreword)

DAANISH BOOKS
www.daanishbooks.com

ISBN 978-93-81144-10-7
9 789381 144107