

# Power of the People

## Political Mobilisation and Guaranteed Employment

*Various non-political outfits were involved in the introduction of Maharashtra's Employment Guarantee Scheme. Once introduced, these organisations understood the potentialities of EGS as a means to address various issues relating to the marginalised sections of society, including dalits, women, tribals and the landless, among others. This paper analyses how these groups engaged with the state in defining the scope and reach of EGS and how over time this definition of EGS was enlarged by these same groups to ensure the empowerment of the poor.*

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It is not the imagination of one individual but a long drawn out and continuous mobilisation and agitation by different groups and movements that made the passage of EGS possible. (Interview with Comrade D S Deshpande of Lal Nishan Party, December 7, 2003).

Compared to other state-led poverty alleviation programmes, there has been a greater degree of mobilisation around the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) in Maharashtra. Between the early 1970s and late 1980s, a number of organisations emerged mobilising rural workers in different parts of Maharashtra to get EGS enacted and implemented. Further, they used EGS as a platform to raise broader questions of discrimination affecting marginalised groups, issues of social reforms and poverty. In 1981, they came together forming an umbrella organisation – the Maharashtra Rajya Shetmajoor and Employment Guarantee Scheme Workers Samanvaya Samiti (henceforth Samanvaya Samiti) – to collectively advocate for changes in state policy relating to rural workers in the context of EGS.

Such a high degree of collective action warrants two related questions: First, what enabled activist organisations to collectively mobilise rural workers to advocate for changes in public policy? Second, what impact did the resultant programme – the EGS – have on sustaining activism? This paper delves deeper into these questions through a detailed examination of the role played by five activist groups in advocating for and later redefining the EGS. They are Maharashtra Rajya Shetmajoor Parishad, Yukrand, Shramik Sanghatana, Kashtakari Sanghatana, and Shramjeevi Sanghatana.<sup>1</sup> I assess their contribution in the enactment and implementation of EGS and the ways EGS itself enabled activist organisations to translate their concerns into action. Subsequently, I examine the reasons behind the decline in activism among these organisations since the late 1980s.

The role of these groups in mobilising for social change does not start or end with EGS. Those existing prior to EGS had worked on land reforms, rural poverty and employment. Groups that emerged post EGS ratification worked on other important questions such as bonded labour and mobilising unorganised workers. The history of their mobilisation related to EGS can be examined in two phases. In the first phase (up to 1978) activist groups mobilised so that the government adopted the principle of guaranteed employment and campaigned for the inclusion of certain worker friendly provisions within the EGS Act. In the

second phase (after 1978) activist groups focused on proper implementation of the EGS Act and to change some provisions in view of the changing conditions. While the Maharashtra Rajya Shetmajoor Parishad, Yukrand and the Shramik Sanghatana were more active in the first phase, the Kashtakari Sanghatana and the Shramjeevi Sanghatana were more active in the latter.

In light of the larger political context of the period, the late 1960s witnessed the emergence of a flurry of activism. Scholars reflecting on the emergence of these new political actors termed them – “Non Party Political Formations (NPPFs)” [Kothari 1989], “grassroots initiatives” or “new change agents” [Sheth 1984]. What was common among these conceptions was that these groups were born out of a deep scepticism towards electoral politics and a critique of the state's developmental agenda.

Kothari (1989), Sheth (1984) and Sethi (1984) identify some common characteristics that unite NPPFs. First, NPPFs reflect the resurgence of the “people” asserting their democratic rights, challenging the established order outside party political processes. Second, although these groups and movements were predominantly autonomous, they were also associated with radical and marginal political parties such as the Lal Nishan Party (LNP) and the Socialist Party. Third, their agitations were directed towards local problems, and though small, their impact on the prevailing discourse on poverty mitigation through public works was critical in reframing and enlarging the notion of public works. Fourth, the NPPFs perceived poverty not only in terms of economic inequalities but also as a consequence of the social-structural locations of the poor; therefore raised questions of material concern such as land relations and land reforms. Simultaneously they addressed questions regarding tribal and dalit identity because they recognised that economic exploitation alone did not explain poverty. Fifth, the groups in Maharashtra formed an umbrella organisation, a loose federation networked among the groups mobilising on EGS, called Samanvaya Samiti. Sixth, the leaders of the NPPFs belonged to the upper and middle castes and class and were mainly urban based. Seventh, over time, the leaders of some of these political groups institutionalised their work by altering these groups, from ‘sangathana’ (movement) into that of a ‘sanstha’ (NGO).

The five organisations examined in this paper fit this characterisation of NPPFs, to a large extent. In the context of

EGS, I detail the emergence of these movements and examine their link with political parties. I evaluate how EGS enabled them to mobilise rural workers in demanding the implementation of the EGS Act. I assess their strategies in using EGS to further broader agendas of worker, tribal and dalit rights, land reforms and poverty alleviation. I trace their involvement with the Samanvaya Samiti and its subsequent weakening and decline in organising around EGS in general since the late 1980s. My focus in tracing the history of the evolution of these organisations is to examine the spaces of intersection of organisations and government programmes to ascertain the extent to which government programmes enable or constrain organisational mobilisation.

### Maharashtra Rajya Shetmajoor Parishad

The Maharashtra Rajya Shetmajoor Parishad (Parishad) was a rural trade union established by Lal Nishan Party (LNP) leaders such as Datta Deshmukh in 1971 in Shrirampur taluka in Ahmednagar and was affiliated to LNP to mobilise the rural poor against the drought. However, the Parishad and LNP retained a distance from each other for strategic reasons. The Parishad limited its activities to the mobilisation of rural workers and kept away from electoral politics which the LNP continued. And yet, in many ways the Parishad's rural base helped LNP to crystallise its long held vision to forge an integrated rural-urban workers union. For example, in January 1971 the Parishad organised demonstrations of around 25,000 rural workers in Bombay with the support of the urban workers around the slogan 'ala re ala shetkari ala' (here comes the farmer). The official journal of the Parishad called this the beginning of a new era in the working class movement in India (*Grameen Shramik*, February 1, 1972:9).<sup>2</sup> I assess the role of the Parishad at two junctures. The first pertains to the introduction of EGS and the second for the implementation of the provisions in the act.

In early 1970s the Parishad used a combination of strategies to press its demands including demonstrations, strikes, road blocks, gheraos, sit-ins, long marches and fasts as also petitions and delegations to government. The Parishad pressurised the government to extend drought relief work to rural areas. In an instance when the government failed to pay rural workers, the Parishad collected Rs 40 lakh from the industrial workers in Bombay and Pune. This idea that the urban population could provide support to rural poor later formed the Parishad's demand of imposing a tax on urban professionals to provide resources for the EGS.

In January 1972 the Parishad demanded – the expansion of the public distribution system (PDS) in drought prone areas, an inquiry committee to ensure minimum and timely wages in drought relief sites, controlling black marketing and inflation, taking action against officials who exploit the poor, controlling police authoritarianism and introduction of new employment opportunities. This pressure made the state Congress leadership incorporate the issue of employment guarantee in their 15-point programme. In April 1972 the state government initiated the EGS for the entire state as a drought relief scheme. In addition to the above scheme it also decided to initiate local employment schemes to be operated by each village panchayat with effect from the same date (*Economic Times*, May 2, 1972:3).

Once EGS was introduced the Parishad concentrated on the appropriate implementation of the existing provisions of the scheme. The main demands now included doubling of EGS wages, an eight-hour working day, a weekly holiday, location of

work sites within a five-mile radius and that work begins immediately when 50 or more people demanded work. The Parishad intended that the rights of the organised working class be extended to the rural poor. Their slogan was 'poore poore kaam, pot bhar dam, ya shivai mage hatoo naka' (adequate employment and wages, or we shall resist until these demands are met). Following this the Parishad organised many struggles. For instance:

In Shrirampur due to the absenteeism of authorities work could not commence. Consequently, in July 1972 the workers threatened and overwhelmed two junior engineers. Only after higher officials intervened, they freed the engineers. However they now held the tahsildar responsible and kept him as a hostage instead. They promised to release him only if work would commence immediately. The concerned authority promised five new EGS work sites. This intervention instantly attracted the attention of top district officials though the incident was peaceful in nature (*Grameen Shramik*, 1973, May, p 5).

However, the problem of under/unemployment did not diminish though the effects of the drought did subside. The Parishad attempted to make the EGS permanent with the slogan "the right to employment on demand" (Interview with D S Deshpande of LNP, August 13 and 28, 2003). Thus, the Parishad demanded that the state government create a permanent fund for this scheme. The Rs 5 crore pledged by V P Naik the chief minister in March 1973 was insufficient. By the end of 1973 there were about 1,54,000 relief work sites employing about 25 lakh workers. At this juncture Parishad proposed the introduction of a tax to be collected from professionals in urban centres.

Consequently, in December 1974, in a statement the government accepted the responsibility to provide full employment to those who seek it, as a fundamental objective of its fiscal and economic policy. The statement also incorporated all the demands of the Parishad including levying of a new professional tax and pegging EGS wages at par with agricultural wages.

During the emergency, the Parishad's activities waned. However, when EGS was enacted in 1978, the Parishad restarted mobilising to implement the provisions of the act. The demands included parity in wages for men and women and between agricultural and EGS workers, social security, pension, dearness allowance, crèches, access to potable water, shelter, maternity relief, and the issuance of identity cards. They also demanded abolishing the system of engaging contractors, providing permanent employment to muster clerks, and extension of EGS to forest work.

The Parishad continued its activities at two levels: (i) for proper implementation of the provisions, and (ii) caring for adverse economic conditions and the specific plight of the small farmers. For instance, it asked the government to write off the agricultural credit loans. To this end it organised rallies in Sholapur and Osmanabad in 1979. It raised issues such as the non-initiation of EGS works, of corruption in EGS works, of untimely payment, and of ensuring that ration shops recognise food coupons given under the scheme. Its membership increased from 10,000 in early 1970s to 60,000 in late 1970s (interview with D S Deshpande, August 13 and 28, 2003).

The internal documents of the Parishad show that over time, work in the districts among rural poor declined due to improved economic situation and the shift of their attention to unionising the unorganised. There is only one record that this author could find regarding their involvement in EGS. This record indicates a change in tactics. For the first time the Parishad used the court

to pressurise the state. In 1984, the Parishad filed a writ petition in the high court to ask the government to pay unemployment allowance when it did not start the EGS works in Ahmednagar district. The court ruled in favour of the workers but the government did not implement this order till as late as 1999, indicating that EGS remained a low priority for the state.

The Parishad's work was highly significant in the mobilisation of the rural poor and in ensuring that these workers' entitlements matched those of the organised urban workers. In the early 1970s the Parishad broadened the agenda by demanding proper implementation of land reform and minimum wages as part of a larger movement of landless agricultural workers. However over time their involvement declined as it focused on the legal front.

Why did the Parishad, so successful in the 1970s, suddenly lose significance in late 1980s? B R Bauke, a founder member of Parishad, in an interview on December 7, 2002, stated that in areas where Parishad had its base, the number of EGS's works had declined affecting their mobilisation. Additionally the Parishad faced internal organisational problems. The LNP had split with one group supporting the Congress Party resulting in a split in the Parishad. One faction that supported B R Bauke did not support the Congress. As a result the Parishad's strength was reduced in Ahmednagar where Parishad was strong. The failure of the textile strike in 1983-84 was a deathblow to all communist trade unions in the state depleting LNP's monetary resources. The state was promoting NGOs in service delivery of development programmes. This tendency was part of a larger international trend of NGOisation, negatively affecting people's movements. Today all that is left of the Parishad is a few files in its Shreerampur office managed by its elderly leader B R Bauke who continues to adhere to the revolutionary ideology.

### Yuvak Kranti Dal

Yuvak Kranti Dal (Yukrand) was started in 1969 as a student's organisation in Pune.<sup>3</sup> Initially it focused its activities on issues faced by students in colleges and universities of Maharashtra. In the course of this mobilisation in Pune, Mumbai and Auranagabad, it came to understand the particular problems faced by the student body in general and particularly the deprived groups, especially the scheduled castes. The latter were in some throes of transformation as they started understanding their own oppression through the dawning realisation of a new identity, that of "dalit" (the oppressed). The leaders of Yukrand understood dalit oppression as cultural and ideological oppression, encapsulated in the emerging dalit literature movement and later by the Dalit Panther Movement [Omvedt 1994].

Yukrand leaders from the upper castes started rethinking their own social background and its impact on the organisation of politics. They argued that there was a need to "de-caste" themselves. Nalini Pandit, succinctly elaborates,<sup>4</sup>

Marx expected socialists to be declassed. Every middle class intellectual is made aware of his class bias from the time he joins the Communist Party. The socialists in the country realised that they needed to de-caste themselves before undertaking revolutionary activities.

This philosophy was extended even to interpersonal relationships including marriage. These changes gave many upper caste leaders of Yukrand a space within the dalit community not available till then to the outsiders (interview with S P Punalekar, March 7, 2003).

Yukrand activists formulated their vision and strategy by elaborating and collating the ideas of Marx, Gandhi, Phule and Ambedkar. Like other left parties it critiqued unequal landholding patterns in the villages and wanted comprehensive land reforms. Its leaders were initially drawn towards the contemporary socialist discourse of Ram Manohar Lohia but later questioned its efficacy through a Marxist and a dalit evaluation. Yukrand's critique was at two levels. First, it was against the mainstream socialist parties, which understood the nature of caste exploitation (unlike the communists) but did not integrate this into a political strategy for reconstruction of society. Second, the Republican Party of India, the party of the scheduled castes founded by B R Ambedkar, advocated an electoral strategy to change the power equation. This, Yukrand felt instrumentalised the goals of genuine revolution. It wished to extend participatory democracy to all organisational issues and matters at all levels. No wonder, its leaders advocated that all decision-making should be collective, after a thorough discussion and debate of the issues on board.

Yukrand became a part of the Dushkal Nivaran and Nirmoolan Samiti. In the initial period the demands of the Yukrand were similar to that of the Parishad. However, after 1972, when the state introduced the EGS programme, the nature of their work changed radically. Like the Parishad, Yukrand wanted to ensure that EGS metamorphose into a permanent employment programme. But their approach included some of the revolutionary ideas that they were developing regarding caste-based class exploitation and ways to reconstruct a casteless society.

The experiments of social reconstruction in two locations provides evidence of how Yukrand leaders translated their ideas into reality. In 1973 Kumar Saptarshi settled in Rashin village of Ahmednagar and initiated the first experiment and in 1979 Shantaram Pandhere undertook a similar effort in Vaijapur Taluka of Aurangabad. Other leaders also initiated such mobilisations in other regions. The Yukrand considered Rashin as the "laboratory" while Vaijapur was the "field".

Rashin was one of the most backward of villages, perennially under drought conditions. However sugarcane cultivation, which needed continuous access to water, dominated the region's crop pattern. As a result, landlords ensured that their land was irrigated leaving bereft the small and marginal peasants and the landless, mostly belonging to the dalit and other lower castes [Brahme and Upadhyaya 1979].

Saptarshi started collecting information regarding the nature of oppression in the village, both historically and in contemporary terms. Land reforms had hardly made an impact in this region. This oppression was bolstered by a historically conditioned jajmani relationship of patron-client to the Maratha landlords. This hierarchical relationship created a dependency, which made the dalits accept their oppression, both material and cultural. In 1973, Saptarshi mobilised the dalits and gaining their confidence by becoming "one among them". He and the other activists dwelled and shared food with the dalits. This kind of participatory involvement elicited immense support from the villagers.

We lived with the dalits and the EGS (formed) the sites of mobilisation. The activists ensured that the meetings were interactive. Once the villagers were aware of important issues, the next step was to defy the village officials – predominantly upper caste people. Our land grab movements enraged the upper caste landlords in 1974 in Rashin who attempted a murderous attack on me (interview with Kumar Saptarshi, February 12, 2003).



Like the Parishad, Yukrand demanded that the rural poor have access to structural material needs. They also demanded an end to all cultural and ideological oppression. Yukrand wanted the state to implement a broad-based strategy, such as giving land to the tiller, the distribution of common property resources and grazing land seized under Land Ceiling Act to landless and the dalits, provide minimum wages, waive loans, expand drought relief programmes and freeing dalits from all bondage by abolishing zamindari (especially in Marathwada region).

Success of this experiment led to more work sites becoming centres of further mobilisation. Yukrand leaders were now able to understand that EGS had the potential of not only organising the dalits but also of weakening the stronghold of the maratha patrons. By providing an alternative employment, EGS freed the dalits from patron-client dependency. However, they recognised that this dependence was structural and so needed a long-term solution as the dalits were subjected to social and other forms of oppression. Thus they wanted the dalits organised to demand for their own entitlements.

More specifically, like the Parishad, it wanted EGS to be a permanent employment programme always available on demand to the rural poor. They also attempted to enlarge the conception of productive work and integrate it into the notion of participative democracy such that the kind and type of public works under EGS was to be decided by the rural poor. They wanted to reclaim and develop wasteland, through watershed development, so that once developed, this could be distributed among the dalits.

This revolutionary experiment received a temporary setback during Emergency. After Emergency the organisation came under crisis in 1978. Saptarshi joined mainstream politics and became a member of the Janata Party. This divided the organisation into those who supported the move to mainstream politics and those who did not. The latter decided that they would continue EGS mobilisation in their own respective regions and would be autonomous in organising these activities. They now argued that their philosophy was encapsulated in the slogan, 'Sangharash ani rachanatmak Karya', that is, struggle and creative work.

A much-truncated Yukrand now started new experiments in different regions after the enactment of EGS. Shantaram Pandhere and his wife Mangala Khirswara mobilised the rural poor in Vaijapur in Aurangabad, Ajit Sardar in Khed (Pune), and Ranga Rachure in Udgir, Latur district. Below I discuss the work in Vaijapur as an example. Vaijapur comprised 72 villages and was considered among the most backward of talukas, though hardly 70 kilometres away from the industrial town of Aurangabad. Plagued by perennial drought unemployment, the region was steeped in poverty with a large dalit community.

In 1979, Pandhere organised the dalits to demand that the Nandur Madheshwar canal irrigation work be brought under EGS and trained the dalits to execute this work themselves, thus making long-term employment opportunities available for them. However, the landlords from the maratha community resisted this demand. The activists however began working without his consent on his land and the landlord could not physically resist this collective action. Other landlords agreed but only if the work was executed by private contractors, often members of their kin groups. At this juncture, the rural poor demanded that the work of the canal could only progress if it was under EGS. The pressure made the government succumb to their demand. This victory gave the rural poor a possibility of learning new

administrative skills and the need to fight for their rights. Pandhere recollects that,

'In a village, the talati made sexual advances towards a dalit woman. When she approached us, hundreds of EGS workers marched to the village office. The women forced the talati out of his office, undressed him and garlanded him with chappals. He was then made to walk around the town while the women booed at him. This shows the confidence the women gained through the work of Yukrand.'

In early 1980s, in many villages, Yukrand formed lok samitis (committees of villagers). These samities were organised around the slogans of people's education, people's movement and Satyagraha. All decision-making was by the rural poor while Yukrand leaders would be mere facilitators. Henceforth, lok samitis decided on the demands regarding the nature and kind of EGS works, the selection of work sites and to ensuring minimum and timely wages. They mobilised the villages against corruption and insensitivity of officials and demanded crèche facilities. In addition, Samiti started raising structural issues such as access to gaonthan and grazing land, which the landlords had encroached on. Some samities initiated a land grab movement and demanded that the government register the grazing and forest land in the names of landless.

The organisation suffered a further ideological division in 1982 on the issue of affiliating with the Marxist Leninist movement in the state. One group supporting the latter strategy remained headquartered at Pune and the other in Aurangabad. These ideological and organisational tensions and divisions affected local level mobilisation. In 1994 the organisation was formally dissolved.

### **Shramik Sanghatana and Tribal Mobilisation**

Magowa, a student Marxist group was formed in 1967 at Pune.<sup>5</sup> Magowa means "to look back and to go forward". It attracted the youth sympathetic to Marxist ideology but critical of existing communist parties. As Sulabha Brahme, a noted social scientist in an interview on January 16, 2003 stated,

By the 1970s, the communist parties had become oriented to parliamentary politics, though immediately after independence they were quite radical. The limitations of parliamentary politics led many youth to become radical and search for alternatives.

Sudhir Bedekar, an activist, also confirms this analysis. He argues that in their discussions they attempted to address contemporary problems of peasants and landless and assess the nature of Indian capitalism and make a critique of the existing political alternatives. They were especially concerned with the lack of success of all-India movements, such as Kisan Sabha and also the Naxalite movements. He said that joining the parties could mean some compromise and stagnation. Though the Magowa group drew inspiration from the Naxalite movement, they questioned their annihilation strategy. They felt that there has to be a mass movement against the landlords who exploit the tribals. This group saw their major enemies as the landlords, the Congress Party and the state machinery.

The Magowa group tried to understand the specific conditions of tribals in Maharashtra. They found that tribal exploitation history dated before colonialism. During colonialism existing exploitative processes were further enhanced through policies denying the tribals access to forests, and thus to their traditional cultural and religious sites. Additionally, during this period, the tribals were burdened with agricultural tax and agricultural commercialisation leading to alienation of their land. Gradually,

the tribals became landless agricultural labour and tenant cultivators from a position of being small landholding cultivators. In effect, this transformed the tribal economy, culture, and religion. This process of commercialisation and land alienation intensified in the post-independent period [Brahme and Upadaya 1979; Gare 2000].<sup>6</sup>

The members of Magowa started their work in Dhule and Thane. These districts had seen major mobilisations since the 1930s. One such movement was organised by Godavari Parulekar of the Kisan Sabha affiliated to the Communist Party. After independence, groups affiliated to the Gandhian movement established their presence in these two districts in addition to Praja Socialist Party and Bhoomi Sena which had a base in Thane in early 1970s.

Amber Singh Suratwanti, a local tribal leader earlier associated with the Sarvodaya Mandal had organised the tribals in Dhule. Disillusioned by the Sarvodaya philosophy he had formed an organisation – the Gram Swarajya Samiti, which initiated the Bhoo-Mukti Andolan. The Magowa activists joined Amber Singh's movement in January 1972. This movement started with a conference, which took place after a violent incident against the tribals. It focused on the exploitation by the landlords from the gujar and maratha community in Dhule district and worked for long-term struggle. It decided that the activists would be independent from political parties, responsible for the decisions of the movement and that the movement would not resort to violence except for self-defence. In June 1972, the activists from Magowa set up the Shramik Sanghatana (SS) which worked with the Gram Swarajya Samiti. This mobilisation was done in context of the drought relief work initiated through the EGS.

SS embarked on its mobilisation when the drought was at its height so its primary concern was securing employment for the tribals. The activists lived at these work sites and gradually "conscientised" the tribals regarding the exploitation they faced and ways to resist the landlords. These landlords employed the tribals cheaply in the agricultural season. Under the leadership of the SS the tribals boycotted the landlords. Through gheraos, roadblocks, picketing of government offices, long marches by the tribals, the SS kept up the pressure. SS also took the government officials and police to task for harassing the tribals. The exploitative shopkeepers were publicly punished by trials. These tactics in several ways empowered the tribals.

The SS revolutionary agenda included the return of tribal land illegally cultivated by the landlords and/or moneylenders. SS had conducted a survey of the tribal land illegally usurped by the landlords. As a result of their struggle by May 1972 they had recovered 1,872 acres of land partly through negotiations and organised struggles. They demanded that land leased out for a limited tenure by the tribals need to be promptly taken back after the expiry of such tenures, that cultivation in the forest land be declared legal and the government start programmes to provide employment.

Like in other parts of Maharashtra, the landlords in Dhule district were mainly the marathas. The SS emulated the Kisan Sabha model of land capture movement. Over 4,000 acres of land were recaptured in the period 1972-74. The SS demands in 1973 included registration of land in the names of the tribals cultivating forest land, returning the fines collected from them, cancelling their debts, distributing land among the tribals, withdrawing all the judicial and police cases against them, and starting EGS works immediately on demand.

The sanghatana, a membership-based trade union had between 15,000 and 20,000 members at the height of its influence. Funds came from the members, but it also had contributing well-wishers in large cities. Like Yukrand, SS attempted to democratise decision-making. Consequently, in 1979 there were eight tribal activists among the 14 full-time activists.

The SS created Lok Samitis, tarun mandals and mahila mandals. In an interview Manohar Deenanath a member of the SS, said that the tarun mandal activists would supervise the EGS sites, the measurement of work done, the payment of wages, the amount and quality of foodgrains, and ensure access to drinking water, shelter, as well as question corruption by officials. Their militancy made them visible and respected even by the local administrations. During the Emergency, however, the SS activities declined. After the lifting of Emergency the sanghatana did not revive, though they did initiate mobilisation for better implementation of the EGS. They raised issues of measurement of work, timely payment of wages and dues pending from the earlier years, which the contractors had not paid [Sathe 1990].

However, ideological and personal differences among the activists could not sustain the organisation. Its decline relates to individual members affiliation to political parties though the group had decided to avoid being part of mainstream parties. Some joined CPI(M) others the joined LNP. Others wanted to be part of NGOs. By 1982 most of the leaders had left the organisation. The only symbol of its existence that remained in Dhule district was a building [Sathe 1990].

### Kashtakari Sanghatana

Kashtakari Sanghatana (KS) was instituted in 1979 by members of the catholic church from Mumbai. Pradeep Prabhu, Nikki Cordosso and Susheela Desouza the founders of KS had earlier worked with the Christian mission in Talassari taluka in Thane. Deeply influenced by liberation theology they addressed the problems faced by the tribals. They critiqued the passivity of the church regarding structural exploitation and violence perpetrated against the tribals. This forced them to leave the religious congregation and work on their own. As a result KS was established in Dahanu taluka in Thane and their activities focused in Dahanu, Jawahar and Mokhada talukas.

KS was in many ways a different organisation than the ones described above. Though it believed in mobilisation, it was not a movement like the Parishad. It was run as an NGO with salaried activists. It did not have a global vision for a revolution. Other than tribals, its mobilisation included workers in unorganised sectors like construction, salt pans and brick kilns. They used the print media for eliciting support from the middle class. EGS was not the only means of mobilisation, though it was critical in its initial stages.

The KS found that 95.53 per cent and 96.59 per cent of the tribal population in Jawahar and Shahpur lived below the poverty line. Thus the immediate need was access to land and/or other employment. While a large number of tribals had become landless agricultural labour, some had become domestic servants. The police and the authorities were not being responsive and were colluding with the landlords in fabricating false cases despite incidences of ill treatment and sexual harassment.

KS believed in five concepts: educating people, conscientising people, people's work, people's organisation and people's might. KS organised youth camps, and youth festivals in the villages

to popularise these. Initially EGS work sites became the site for mobilising the tribals. In Amboli village, Dahanu taluka, KS started its first mobilisation activity. In an interview, on March 11, 2003, Shiraz Bulsara states,

A trader abused an elderly tribal woman when she asked for balance money from a shopkeeper after buying the provisions. The shopkeeper instead of paying her dues abused her and beat her up. The KS organised a morcha compelling the shopkeeper not only pay back the balance but also publicly apologise to the woman. This morcha included EGS workers in the same village. This was a moment of awakening to them that they brought a man with great political clout to his knees. This won for the KS the support of the tribals.

KS organised many tribal demonstrations in Dahanu against the oppression of landlords. When the leaders were arrested, tribals struck work, carried out protest marches and even gheraoed the government officials. To counter it, the landlords would boycott the tribals or get workers from other areas. In these circumstances, the EGS proved fruitful as an alternate employment. When in 1982, a drought like situation occurred in Thane, KS demanded EGS works, and the government sanctioned 13 sites providing work to about 6,000 tribals. In 1982 there were 40 EGS works in Dahanu, and 200 in Jawahar taluka when KS demanded EGS for dam-affected people.

The KS found that the EGS sites concealed economic interests of rich traders and landlords. For example, wells or roads being built near the field of landlords, giving them access to water, transport and markets. KS now argued that the government initiate schemes to create public works that truly assisted the poor

such as social forestry, soil conservation, and small dams, because most of the EGS works appeared to be related to activities such as road building. KS wanted that EGS be implemented the entire year to reduce the control of landlords on the tribals. Thus, during the Jabran Jot campaign against land alienation, the EGS works proved extremely significant in continuing the struggle and achieving some result.

KS is a membership focused organisation. In 2000, almost 10,000 families paid an annual subscription of Rs. 50 from 300 villages in the three talukas. Though committed to the development of tribal leadership, not many tribals have become activists in KS. Funds from the middle classes and well-wishers declined by the late 1980s, making organisations like KS move to seeking international projects. In early 1980s, KS increasingly came into conflict with the CPI(M) who felt that KS was encroaching on its domain (there is a long history of Kisan Sabha mobilisation in this area) diminishing the influence and mobilisation of KS around EGS. The establishment of other NGOs affected the KS's influence. Consequently, since late 1980s KS has started mobilising tribals in the unorganised sector.

### Shramjeevi Sanghatana

Like KS, Shramjeevi Sanghatana (SJS) is an advocacy group, that believes in training bonded labour about its rights. Vivek Pandit and Vidyulata Pandit, members of the Janata Party, formally established it in October 1982 as a trade union. Initially they had organised an NGO called Vidhayak Sansad in 1979,



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functioning in the urban slums of Dahisar near Mumbai. While organising camps for the youth, they learnt about bondedness among the tribals. They filed a Public Interest Litigation and were able to "liberate" some bonded workers, in 1982. SJS was formed for this liberated bonded labour to enable them find a means to survive despite the opposition from their erstwhile patrons. Presently SJS has a membership of 1,00,000.

SJS differs from the other NPPFs. SS and in its early stages KS, were ideologically guided movements that raised structural issues. SJS and the KS later were mobilising tribal migrants in the fringes of urban areas, who had left tribal districts, and were now working in salt pans, brick kilns and quarries as bonded labour. Thus their demands were not concerned with access to land. This changed focus was also related to their philosophy of making the workers "free" to work as labour in an unorganised setting. Thus their strategy was to demand from the state the constitutional right towards workers/labour.

They thus concentrated towards building public opinion through the media and conducted professional classes for training social workers and labour. SJS's initial struggles were related to establishing the proof that there existed bonded labour before it liberated them. Only after years of their struggle and litigation did the government accept the existence of the bonded labour in the state.

While the earlier mentioned NPPFs focused on political consciousness for revolution through EGS and theorised on the exploitation of tribals, and were also not averse to using violence to realise their goals, for the SJS, the goal was creating awareness regarding rights *already* granted to labour through peaceful protests and by creating public opinion. Employment under EGS was a substitute arrangement, until they attained these rights. Unlike the earlier NPPFs, SJS also participated in panchayat elections and in later years, also aligned itself to mainstream parties and to international NGOs.<sup>7</sup> (The SJS believes that this political space helps them obtain additional EGS work sites).

The SJS shared some common features with other NPPFs since EGS was a means to achieve its goals. However, the SJS is an issue-based organisation and used the EGS in transforming the existing patron/employer-client (bonded labour) relations into contractual ones. The liberated poor are trained to believe in their freedom, dignity, self-esteem, self-reliance and gender equality for which they have to attain rights; civil, socio-cultural and economic. Vivek Pandit in an interview on February 22, narrates the story of Anita Dhangda:

I wish you could meet Anita Dhangda, the first bonded woman to be elected as a representative in a district government. Born into a bonded family, her father died young. In 1989 Anita approached our union to help free her family. We registered a formal complaint against the landlord. He stopped all work and food for Anita and her family. We mobilised the surrounding villages, who confronted the landlord, and we succeeded. Anita and 22 of her family members gained their freedom. Like other NPPFs, SJS, organises processions, gheraos and roadblocks. While SJS has helped more than 6,000 bonded labour to gain their freedom, others have been freed voluntarily by their patrons as a result of this struggle.

### Samanvaya Samiti

In the post Emergency period, the people's movements recognised the need to unite to fight the state's divide and rule policy. In 1981, the Parishad and Shetkari Shetmajoor Panchayat provided the leadership in the formation of the Samanvaya Samiti

— a federation of trade unions coordinating all activities in rural Maharashtra.

However, by the early 1990s, the samiti found that its members had little interest in its activities. The general decline of mobilisation of the rural poor by its constituents affected the samiti. Additionally, a loose federation of trade unions created difficulties in ensuring participation. Though all units of the samiti were trade unions, some were also part of NGOs creating tensions among the members. Also, the samiti, not a registered organisation, used the office of the Hind Mazdoor Sangha affiliated to the socialists in the Janata Dal. Some constituents did not want an affiliation to a mainstream party. Additionally there was confusion as to whether the task of the samiti was only related to EGS activities or to mobilise all agricultural workers. Some groups were only mobilising the rural poor for EGS while others had a larger agenda. The Parishad and the Panchayat wanted the issue of minimum wages to be the critical demand. This demand was connected to the strategy to build a revolutionary movement, a position not accepted by other constituents leading to ambiguity of the samiti's role.

Despite these grave differences, the Samiti did agitate and initiate new campaigns across the state and raise issues regarding EGS in the assembly. In 1982, the samiti demanded parity of EGS wages to agricultural wages. To this end it organised, a one-day strike by 75,000 EGS workers and also a state wide agitation was initiated on October 22 1982 in which one-lakh workers participated. It resulted in the scaling-up of the minimum wages. In November 1983, the samiti organised 138 public meetings, 109 meetings of leaders/representatives, 24 public representations and seven public demonstrations. This activity helped them incorporate maternity benefits into EGS Act.

The samiti's agenda in its early years was dominated by a philosophy of trade unionism — an agenda of the two promoters. The samiti was concerned about issues of proper measurement of the work, timely wage payments, bonus and other gratuities, crèche and drinking water. The samiti also demanded that EGS works be included in the category of construction works, which are paid at higher rates, as most EGS works, such as pajhar-talao, nala-bunding, making wells, road construction officially declared to be construction activities.<sup>8</sup> In 1984, the samiti demanded that migrant workers be given travel allowance, ensure that part payment be made in kind with good quality food.

Till 1987 the samiti was able to organise sit down strikes, 'jail bhara', form unions of muster clerks assistants and arrange a joint conference of EGS and agricultural workers. As a result, it could reduce delays in the execution of EGS works and ensure that backlog in payment of higher wages was paid and unemployment allowance speeded up, and provident fund introduced for casual labourers. When in 1987, the government proposed an amendment of the EGS Act, the Samiti was able to organise protests.

After 1988, the samiti's activities decreased. As Prakash Shinde of the Shetkari Shetmajoor Panchayat acknowledges in an interview on August 12, 2003,

In 1988 the wages were made equivalent to agricultural wages. Thus we were left with no issue to fight. Also the organisations had lost the battle to stop the change in the Act which introduced private contractors in executing EGS works. This defeat affected all of us.

Issues like definition of public works and programme for sustainable growth for generating long-term employment hardly came up for discussion. The government had introduced new

programmes such as Jawahar Rojgar Yojana and Employment Assurance Scheme, which paid higher wages than EGS. Also localised problems were not addressed by the samiti, which made organisations lose interest.

## Conclusion

In the 1970s, in Maharashtra, NPPFs emerged around the issue of mobilising of the rural poor to provide them guaranteed employment. In the course of this mobilisation the NPPFs defined the nature of exploitation faced by the dalits, tribals, landless and small peasants. Leaders who had socialist and communist ideologies led these NPPFs. Through their struggles these NPPFs were able to convert a drought relief programme into a permanent on demand employment programme and ensure that the workers obtained entitlements similar to urban industrial workers. These NPPFs also raised issues regarding reorganisation of agriculture in Maharashtra, through land reform/land ceiling acts and distribution of wasteland, and the way EGS could be used to create sustainable public works. Also they interrogated the conception of democracy in practice and initiated organisational changes to ensure local participation and non-hierarchical practices.

The Emergency affected the mobilisation of the NPPFs, which revived after the Act was passed in 1978. But the Emergency had inaugurated a new political situation, that of alignment of mainstream political parties against the Congress Party. This affected the NPPFs, which became divided on whether to join these parties. Both Shramik Sangathan and Yukrand were victims of this phenomenon.

I have argued that the formation of Samanvaya Samiti was the next important landmark in the growth of NPPFs. This samiti was promoted and controlled by the Parishad and the panchayat. They were able to ensure that minimum rights of urban industrial organised labour be granted to the EGS workers. This limited aim once achieved the samiti lost its momentum. The divisions of the parent groups also affected the samiti.

In the early 1980s new groups emerged which drew upon the earlier radicalism but were being defined by the new situation in Maharashtra. First, the state was becoming increasingly urban. Second, the state was providing target-oriented alternate programmes for the poor. This has divided the rural poor into those who are below poverty line and those who are not. Thus organisations found little interest among the poor for EGS. Third, from 1987 onwards, the government was encouraging organisations to be converted into NGOs to help deliver development programmes – a move parallel with trends at the international arena. Major donors and governments encouraged the formation of NGOs. The buzzwords of this new agenda were service delivery, empowerment for human rights, and advocacy. This pressure led many organisations into NGOs while retaining a faith in them as people's organisations. Also, organisations have become sucked into the concerns of becoming professional groups rather than be leaders of political movements. New groups formed in the early 1980s have attracted professional social workers rather than committed activists. This is the case of KS and SJS.

Thirty years of EGS has not helped eradicate the drought. Every summer and sometimes in the monsoon the state government declares parts of talukas and districts as drought affected. The people's movement had rethought of ways to ensure that this did not happen. As mentioned above, Yukrand had visualised a new programme of public works for wasteland development while

Shramik Mukti Dal had visualised a plan for constructing small and medium dams to ensure continuous access to water for the small and marginal farmers. Can these experiments be made part of the Act? Can local communities decide what kind of public works they wish to have and why? Can such programmes be part of local democratic experiments? Paradoxically, interest in these concepts has now increased. And yet the experiments in Maharashtra are not taken to heart as the newly formed National Rural Employment Guarantee Act suggests. It is time that there is mobilisation across the country so that this concept is now introduced across India incorporating the visions with which the rural poor fought for its implementation. **[FW]**

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## Notes

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- 1 A review of the organisations in the Samanvaya Samiti revealed a list of 45 organisations, although Acharya (1990) suggests that it had 109 member organisations. A preliminary study of these 45 revealed that many were either splinter or branch of some key primary organisations. Out of the various NPPFs, five were selected which were the most active in using EGS to mobilise workers covering the two time periods.
- 2 Gramin Shramik is the official journal of Lal Nishan Party.
- 3 The prominent youth leaders of Yukrand were Kumar Saptarshi, Ajit Sardar, Shantaram Pandhere, Subhash Lomte, Ranga Rachure, Hussain Dalwai, Madhu Mohite, Nalini Pandit, Ratnakar Mahajan among others.
- 4 Letter to members of Yukrand, undated, files of year 1982-83 Yukrand Files (Sardar Archives)
- 5 The prominent members of the organisation were Kumar Shiralkar, Ananth Phadke, Manohar Deenanath, Ashok Manohar, Vikram Kanhere, Bharat Patankar, and Chaya Datar among others.
- 6 The majority of the tribal population concentrated in Dhule, Thane, Raigad and Chandrapur districts. In 1971, Thane had 67.28 per cent of tribal population while Dhule had 40 per cent. More than 90 per cent lived below poverty line.
- 7 Vivek Pandit shifted from Janata Party to the Congress and recently fought elections on Shiv Sena ticket.
- 8 Many of the EGS construction works had higher wages than agricultural works. However these EGS works received wages of the lowest agricultural zone. SS raised this issue and demanded that these works be paid according to the nature of the work.

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