

# Repression in Dahanu: Where It Comes From



findings of an independent fact-finding committee constituted by

*Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana*

member A. I. F. O. F. D. R

Maharashtra, November 1983



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**Cover Photo :**

Girji Gondya Rautya, resident of Khinowli Khoripada, who was raped and beaten very severely by a CPI (M)-led mob in May, 1982. Even today she is emaciated and finds it difficult to walk.

**(Photograph by Sam Pareth)**

**N O T E**

The press release was issued jointly by all the members of the team. Due to constraints of time, however, the changes desired by PUCL Executive in the full report could not be incorporated; the material was in the press. This, then, is the report of the team excluding the two PUCL members.

The release of the full report was delayed due to (i) other pressing work of the members of the team, and (ii) the chronic financial stringency of Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana.

## INTRODUCTION

Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana is a Maharashtra-based democratic rights organisation. It stands committed to the right of the people to struggle for better living conditions, better terms of existence, and so organise against exploitation and oppression. Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana believes in the right of the people to seek out the political philosophy that will best suit their long-term interests.

It was in the course of our work that in 1979 we first came into contact with Kashtakari Sanghatana. Our first organised visit to Dhahanu area was prompted by the first major repression Kashtakari Sanghatana faced at the hands of police. The charges against them pertained to robbing, dacoity, and other, clearly trumped-up, charges. Our concern was, with our organised group presence, to morally support the Kashtakari Sanghatana who were depressed by such patently false criminal charges when their struggle had been legal and legitimate. Our purpose was to support them in the assertion that those arrested were their mass activists and leaders, and that the state action was grossly unjust hence must be shown as such. Our actions comprised physical presence in the area, leafletting, joint meetings, and legal assistance.

Ever since then, we kept in touch with Kashtakari Sanghatana's work and struggles. Our concern was with the justified nature of these struggles against various forms of exploitation and official indifference, and with the democratic aspect of the struggles themselves. We joined them in their joint programmes with Shramik Sanghatana (Dhule) and Bhoomi Sena (Palghar) held in Bombay.

Slowly, we began to hear and read in the newspapers about 'attacks' on the Kashtakari Sanghatana by the local CPI(M). There were reports too of the CPI(M)'s charges of the Kashtakari Sanghatana's links with the Church and with 'Naxalites'. We found not much substance in these from our

experience, but reserved judgement. As a democratic rights organisation, political intervention beyond a point was outside of our scope.

Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana took up several programmes regarding State action against Kashtakari Sanghatana, but until October 1983 had never taken up a programme regarding CPI(M)'s attacks on Kashtakari Sanghatana.

More recently, reports of 'clashes' and 'attacks' became more urgent in tone. When a report on Khoripada firing appeared in the daily press of Bombay two Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana members visited the area immediately to ascertain the truth of the matter. They were away three days and returned with enough information to warrant two courses of action.

First, action that would immediately focus attention on, and help curtail, such violent incidents. And secondly, a more thorough independent fact-finding mission to find out why violence existed between two organisations that claimed to be champions of people's interests and rights.

A morcha organised by Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana and attended by some 400 adivasis mobilised by Kashtakari Sanghatana, was an attempt at first-aid in the circumstances that we knew immediately existed in the area.

The independent fact-finding team constituted there after and to which several other organisations were invited was to look into the history of the adivasis and their struggles, and the reasons for the tension and repression in more recent times. Our purpose was to understand this history because there always is a link between struggle and consequent repression. Therefore it was important to understand the condition of the adivasis, the struggles these had engen-

dered in the past, and the repression these struggles had earned in history. Moreover, while repression comes from the State in the most organised form we know that as often it emanates from those who feel threatened by the struggles—be they landlords, employers, or locally powerful political parties. Yet, both CPI(M) and Kashtakari Sanghatana claim to be left and CPI(M) is not a party anywhere near power in Maharashtra. What then, was the genesis of this tension?

We were clear in any case, that the finding of the independent fact-finding team should address our future course of action in relation to the struggles and organisations in the area.

Constituting the team was a difficult operation because, while many were willing, few could coincide their time-tables. Moreover, at least one organisation felt that the violence was purely inter-organisational and not performed with state collusion, and therefore it was beyond their scope. (This

question is, one hopes, amply answered in the body of the report). The organisation failed to see the relevance of a historical look into the area.

At last the team left, and in what follows are its itinerary and finding. As Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana we wish to underscore the connection between the material condition of the people of the area, their struggles, and the violence they face. We assert, too, that whatever our individual political affiliations and stands, we can ill afford as democrats to disregard the repression—wherever it may emanate from, and keeping in mind the interests it serves—on the right of the people to organise to further their demands.

The frame and terms of the fact-finding team are briefly summarised in the press release.

LOKSHAHI HAKK SANGHATANA

## I

# The Real Face of Kashtakari Sanghatana

*The CPI (M) has accused the fact-finding team of being biased. To allow them to present their case first and at length, we reproduce, as an opening, Godavari Parulekar's article in a recent issue of People's Democracy, the CPI (M) organ.*

When, on October 15 last about 200 Adivasis, owing allegiance to the Church-backed Kashtakari Sanghatana (KS) of Thane District and including some women, marched to demonstrate before the CPI (M) office at Worli in central Bombay, little did they expect to face a massive counter-demonstration by CPI (M) supporters, which thoroughly outshone them in determination and discipline. Such was their discomfiture that the team of Press reporters and photographers whom they had brought

along with them, ever ready and obliging in giving them publicity and maligning the CPI (M) just did not have the heart to photograph them or to report the non-demonstration. Indeed what was expected to climax the week long slander campaign of vilification what with oft-repeated allegations (four times in five days) of rape, looting of innocent Adivasis, desecration of their hearths and homes, etc.—what was expected to be a bang, proved to be less than the proverbial whimper.

## Cover-Up of a Murder

But be it noted, the reality was something much more sinister. The demonstration was a camouflage to cover the diabolical murder of an Adivasi Red Flag supporter, Com. Gondya Soma Rinjad of Dhulshedpada village Dabhodi who was fired upon jointly by the KS activists and the police posted there to 'protect' the KS followers.

Worse still after being felled down by gunfire Rinjad was speared to death by a KS activist and yet no arrests have been made. Indeed when Rinjad's brother complained at the Kasa police station about the murder, the police not only would not record the complaint, they locked up the complainant himself and he continues to be there till today. On October 15, a written complaint was lodged alleging murder, and a copy sent to the Thana D.P. Again, no cognisance has been taken.

The murder has this setting. On October 8, seven Adivasi children with four adults, (out of the ten padas, nine belong to the Red flag in Kinhavali village) went to catch crabs, a common delicacy in the rainy season. No sooner were they sighted, than the policeman posted there blew his whistle and his two armed colleagues and about 30 KS armed followers fell on the crab hunters, and caught hold of the four adults. They were all armed with spears and country-made guns. Meanwhile, the children escaped and rushed to their padas to report to their elders.

Soon about 50 to 60 Adivasis approached the spot. The police party and the KS followers without giving any warning, opened fire on them, felling Gondya Soma Rinjad. The rest turned back at the suddenness of the attack. Seeing their chance the KS followers, speared Rinjad, stoned him to death and even dragged his body to their Pada, yelling hideous shouts of victory. And still the police looked on.

## Atrocities Manufactured

At the pada, the KS followers placed a country-made rifle near the dead body

and wantonly set fire to one of their own huts to 'prove' that they had been attacked and their huts had been set afire by the Red Flaggers. This has been a planned and developed technique of the KS of late. They pull down their own huts and then report it to an ever obliging Press, if only to prove CPI (M) atrocities. Interestingly enough, FIR Report mentions a loss of Rs 500, an intriguing development if the Press report of a mob of 1200 CPI (M) supporters creating havoc was to be believed.

True to type the Bombay press did report on the CPI (M) crowd being about 1200, attacking Khoripada, besieging the "helpless police party" whose "fire in self defence" felled Rinjad. And yet, State Government Secretary Shri Chowgule had to state that Rinjad was killed by a private bullet of the KS men and not by the police. This official news was however tucked away most reluctantly in a corner in some, but not all dailies, which had earlier lapped up the alleged gory assaults by the CPM. Interestingly, after this attack no one was ever hospitalised!

Earlier the Bombay press, with full support of the local Congress(I) MLA Mahadu Kadu, and Congress (I) Vice-President of Dahanu, one Narrotom Prajapat Kumbhar, himself a landlord and a grass merchant, gave wide coverage to the CPI (M) committing rape at Ganjad, while the Kisan Sabhas replies were just blacked out. Ignoring the disclaimers sent the number of rapes was augmented from one to two, and the Congress (I) and KS joined hands to take out a morcha denouncing the CPI (M) atrocities on Adivasis, as if the CPI (M), with its Adivasi MLA was a non-Adivasi body. As for the rapes, I was told by the DSP, Mr. Raman, at Jawhar that there had been no case of rape at Ganjad and that no case had been recorded.

Such has been the frequent use of this "atrocities" technique that recently in a village bordering on Thane District, a gang of unknown hoodlums shouted Red Flag slogans before felling some Adivasi huts. Unfortunately for them, they were caught.

Their claim that they were followers of Ravindra Patil a Janata Party leader, were totally and promptly rejected by Shri Vaidya, himself.

## Church's New Tactics

While the yellow Press laps up all such stories, and blacks out CPI (M) denials, the KS, as the "new Messiah through Emancipation", a self-styled alternate force, has been actively slandering the CPI (M) in Thane District. Christianity here had always remained confined to a few Adivasi hamlets only, even with Nagar Haveli, an erstwhile Portuguese possession, being close by.

These Adivasis had earlier been pro-British and are now pro-Congress. And yet the CPI (M) had never had any quarrel with the Church till the KS came on the scene. It was the Church's close links with the landlords that alienated them from the Adivasi mass. That was why the earlier efforts of Father Miranda of Talasari went awry till 1977-78.

A change of tactics was obviously called for and the gap was filled by Peter Demello (new name Pradeep Deshbhakta Prabhu), Nicholas Cardozo (new name Nickibhau) and sister Sylvia D' Souza (new name Sushila).

No more was propagation of Christianity the professed aim, nor conversion the main activity. Instead they claimed to work for 'conscientisation of the poor, by refurbishing the human element in them by making them fight for justice and against oppression and exploitation the new gospel in true Christian style. Peter and Nickibhau, two Tata Institute trained graduates, claimed to have been 'expelled' by the Church for the 'sacrilege', and professed to work for the New Church, as laid down by the 1975 Conference of the World Church Council held in Nairobi.

## 'Awakening' the Masses

The KS was advertised as a Left democratic set up which was non denominational, non-Party, non-political, only working for

the emancipation of the Adivasis, through such catchy slogans as Jana Jagaran (Mass awakening), Jana Shikshan (Mass education) and *Jana Karya* (Mass work) Ostensibly they even evinced 'interest' in Marxism, but just that far only and no further. Having nothing to do with Marxism and keen on maintaining their independent identity even if talking glibly about Marxism, it was clear that they had entered the scene only to oust the CPI(M), the real fighter for the Adivasis over 40 years.

To establish their bonafides and to catch a ready ear among the Adivasis, they began with praises of Godavari Parulekar, with her 40 years record of dedication, a conscious militant fighter. But soon the slander campaign gathered speed. The CPI(M) was pro-establishment, doing only electioneering, keen on cushy posts and not caring for the poor Adivasis, that the police helped the CPI(M) to oppress the Adivasis. They even charged the CPI(M) with corruption and renegacy.

The highlight of all this was the case of a landlord in Dhundalwadi, whose residence these Messiahs broke into in his absence. With molestation of his wife, loss of some property and the like taking place, the police had to file a criminal case, and the 'messiahs' made themselves scarce, if only to move freely in Bombay.

## 'Liberated' Padas

In their bid to appear more militant than the CPI(M) they came out with such slogans as "only the Adivasis should stay in the Adivasi area" They even talked of creating "something like Nagaland" in this region.

The Party leadership addressed a big meeting in the same village explaining how it was the democratic right of every Indian to stay where he wanted, and denounced this call as anti-Adivasi and disruptive. With this propaganda, too, cutting no ice, the KS leaders persisted in slanders and vilifications, with their 'militancy' being exhibited through other forms.

They now talked of 'liberated padas' while at the top maintaining affable relations



with the higher ups in the Government machinery like the Collector, DSP, Conservator of Forests etc. At the village level, they dubbed the gram sevak, forest guards, telatis, etc., as 'people's enemies' who were not to be allowed to enter the 'liberated padas'. The tactics were worked out in some hamlets only and ended with listing some 80 CPI (M) supporting Sarpanchas as enemies of the people. They were threatened with physical annihilation if they did not disown the CPI (M) and join the KS.

## Pretence Marxism

Space does not permit us to list all their misdeeds. Suffice it to say that the Kisan Sabha has filed at least a dozen cases of assaults, threats to life burning of huts, attacks on women and the like. But strangely, when the KS mobs attack in strength, sometimes in groups of 150, only seven or eight are charge sheeted. And yet this has been going on from October 1980 till the end of 1982. With the Press lending them its helping hand, blacking out even Press conferences of the Kisan Sabha President, Godavari Parulekar, the CPI (M) MLA, Lahanu Kom, among others.

To lay bare their pretence to Marxism, the then CP.M District Secretary, Khopkar in early 1980 (when the KS needed to parrot Marxist phraseology) called on them to answer five questions submitted in writing: (1) Whether the Church as part of the establishment, would work against the exploiters. (2) How the KS assessed U. S. imperialism, (3) the KS attitude to the world Communist movement, (4) the KS assessment of the CPI (M) as a revolutionary force on the national plane (5) whether the KS looks upon the Congress (I) as the principal antagonist of the Indian People's Democratic Revolution.

Sister Sushila who took receipt of the questions, said she would refer them to the other two members of the triumvirate and a prompt reply would be sent. That reply is yet to come, although four years have gone by.

## Church Financed and Inspired

Despite their vehement denial of having any links with the Church, the KS is known to have had an indisputable tie up over the years, with the Church in Bombay, Goa and Tamilnadu and some groups in Bihar. Their activists are known to have attended such institutions as Oxfam, Notibb, Tarde Homes, Peedit, Aware, Centre for Tribal Conscientisation, etc., all of whom are being master minded and financed from Great Britain, Holland and West Germany.

They often visit Church institutions in Goa, Bangalore and Kerala; the Gloria Church in Bombay and the Spiser Institute in Poona have been their favourite haunts, and the Churches in the Adivasi area in Thane District like Ashagadh and Talassari, are their stop overs.

It is no secret that their morchas and Kashtakari shibirs (which have special classes for the select few, late in the night) are very often fed by the Church. Indeed Nickibhau is known to have journeyed to the north-east for "special research and studies". No wonder they cannot find the time to reply to the five points of clarification.

As for their attitude towards the Congress (I) their recent collaboration is too well known. On October 2 last, they joined hands with the Congress (I) to take out a morcha at Kasa against alleged CPI (M) atrocities. The gang-up is too obvious to need any further stress.

## Directive of Fifth Assembly

The KS, an effort at diversion by the Church, owes its out look and methodology to the line laid down by the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, held at Nairobi in November, December 1975. It called for "the main focus of Ecumenical development work, through solidarity with the struggle of the poor and the oppressed, aimed at human liberation especially at the social, political and economic levels. However...the risks and dangers are inevitable;

ideological positions of the parties involved on the historical scene must not at any price be absolutised, thereby taking the place that only God has".

Hence the call to found bodies like the KS, Harijan Yuwak Sanghatana, Urban Poor Organisation, Zopadapatti Rahiwasi Sanghatana, and the like which are termed 'Liberation Proxies' by the Church. The KS will participate in Adivasi organisation, will parrot Marxism when needed, will adopt Communist technique of struggle and organisation, but will still retain and nurture its role as 'Liberation Proxies'.

## Oust the CPI (M)

It is for the fulfilment of this role that the KS must oust the CPI (M) from among the Adivasis, no matter the latter's countless struggles for the Adivasis over the last forty years, which have made the Adivasis a real fighter, not to mention their winning over 75,000 acres of land as their own. Since ousting the CPI (M) is also the objective of the Congress (I), of the landlords and the Savkars, of the Adivasi Seva Mandal and the others of this ilk, naturally enough, they all collude freely. If the Red Flag cannot be eliminated by democratic means, have free resort to slander, assault and even murders, not to speak of the chorus of calumny of the press. With funds never found wanting, they had hoped to win, but these hopes have been shattered, even after this new murder.

On October 13, five days after the murder, the Kisan Sabha observed its traditional "Martyrs Day" where Party leaders, Ahilya Rangnekar and Godavari Parulekar spoke. Seeing the massive processions of Adivasis marching, carrying countless Red Flags and denouncing, among others, the KS denouncing the Congress (I) policies, the KS just cannot expect a future here.

On October 20 a condolence meeting for Gondya Soma Rinjad was held very near Kinhavali, attended by over 1,500 Adivasis where 'KS Murdabad' was naturally the main slogan.

On October 23, P. K. Kunjachen, General Secretary of the All-India Agricultural Workers' Union, visited Kinhavali, and the spot where Comrade Rinjad was martyred. With almost no preparation over 500 Adivasis came to receive him shouting slogans in defence of the Red Flag and in condemnation of the KS. Kunjachen rightly raised once again the demand of the Kisan Sabha for a judicial enquiry into the death of Comrade Rinjad and the firing.

The Kashtakari Sanghatana which started its political life denouncing the CPI (M) for being pro-landlord and pro-establishment has now ended up by siding with the same landlords and the same establishment, when all its democratic trappings were torn asunder by the life and struggle of the Adivasis under the Red Flag. Foredoomed to failure is the only verdict history will return on the Sanghatana.





## II

# Press release issued soon after the return of the team from the area

### Findings of a fact finding team constituted by Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana to look into reports of clashes between CPI (M) and Kashtakari Sanghatana :

Why a fact finding team ?

Because of a four-year history of clashes between the CPI (M) and Kashtakari Sanghatana (an organisation of adivasis in Dahanu and Talasari Talukas of Thane District); because of reports that the police authorities have in the past consistently refused to extend protection to villages that apprehended attacks; because of a recent incident at Khinoli Khoripada which resulted in a police firing and the death of one adivasi; and because of reports of a serious threat to the right of the adivasis to organise, Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana felt it necessary to constitute a fact finding committee into these incidents. Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana has in the past taken stands on this issue, but it felt it was now necessary to go into the background in more detail. And, as charges and counter-charges were being traded, it felt it was important to constitute an independent team.

Members of team; itinerary

(1) A fact finding team constituted by Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana left for Dahanu on October 29, and returned on November 2. The chairman of the team was Ratnakar Matkari, the Marathi playwright. Members of the team were Pushpa Mehta and Shri Rahate (UTUC); P. R. Shah and Jean Kalgutkar (PUCL); Rajani Desai, Madhav Kulkarni, Sushil Mahadeshwar, Vinod Shetty (Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana); Chaman Prabhakar, Sam Pareth and Amol Samant, and Girish Srinivasan who was secretary of the team. The team divided into sections and visited Dahanu, Kasa, Khinoli (Khoripada), Chalni (Belpada), Shisne (Patilpada, Dongarpada) Haladpada (Patilpada), Kainad (Bundanpada, Naikpada), Saiwan, Ambesari (Khadkipada and Baripada), and Ganjad (Dasrapada). They also met people from Gangangaon and Jamshet. They interviewed villagers; active members of the Kashtakari Sanghatana, CPI (M) and the Congress (I); and police Officers in the area.

Frame of reference

(2) The frame and terms of reference can be briefly summarised as follows :

- (a) The Khoripada firing incident of October 8, 1983.
- (b) Earlier incidents of violence between organisations working in the Dahanu and Talasari talukas;

- (c) The activities of different organisations working in the area, in relation to the social, economic and historical background, and the problems arising out of these ;
- (d) The role of State forces in relation to Kashtakari Sanghatana and the adivasis.

Khoripada firing:  
unanswered  
questions

(3) The Khoripada incident, where a clash between supporters of CPI (M) and of Kashtakari Sanghatana resulted in a police firing, deserves further inquiry in several respects.

First, it seems unlikely that the victim of the firing was actually killed by the firing itself. If the versions the residents gave are correct, he would have to have run some fifty yards from the place at which he was hit to the spot at which he fell. So the police story that he was hit by a bullet in his head is doubtful. The police would not supply to the team the postmortem report of Gondya Soma Rinjhad. (The team applied for a copy but has not received any reply to date.) It seemed possible to the team that he was hit in some other part of the body and was killed thereafter. Who precisely was responsible for the death the team was unable to determine, though CPI (M) has accused a Kashtakari Sanghatana follower of having speared him to death.

CPI (M) elements  
did attack

Secondly, it seems clear from the accounts of Khoripada residents that a mob led by CPI (M) elements actually did attack Khinoli Khoripada on October 8, throwing stones, attacking two huts and burning one. The residents say it was composed of three sections and numbered 1,000. This had been preceded on October 4, by what the inhabitants say was four hundred strong stone-throwing attack. (The various CPI (M) versions of the October 8 'incident' are highly implausible. The stream at which the incident began is clearly part of Khoripada and miles away from any other pada. The CPI (M) men who supposedly came to fish for crab in that stream came from areas where crab is said to be plentiful than here some of the participants came far, from over 10 kilometres away; and apparently crab fishing is done at night, not at 9 00 a.m. Moreover, CPI (M)'s accounts in the party organ and in their cyclostyled handout contradict each other on several important particulars; and statements by CPI (M) leaders further contradict these.)

From the numbers involved and the three-pronged manner of approach, it seems that the whole attack had been carefully planned.

As for the use of guns, the CPI (M)'s repeated claim that it was the Kashtakari Sanghatana followers who killed Gondya Rinjhad by firing is absurd. Why should the police claim credit for a firing they did not carry out?

Moreover, the team felt that the one wound it was shown by a Kashtakari Sanghatana follower might well have been from a splinter of buckshot or an air-gun pellet; there were no serious bullet injuries. Thus it was impossible to verify the residents' report that the mob came bearing real guns.

At any rate, the fear a mob of this size could inspire in a hamlet with less than 50 grown men should not be underestimated. It was not a clash: it was an attack.

An earlier attack;  
a victim

The team also met Girji Gondya Rautya, who had been severely beaten and raped by a similar mob in May 1982. She has testified before the district judge appointed by the Supreme Court to look into some incidents (on the basis of the writ petition filed by Pradeep Prabhu, Kashtakari Sanghatana activists). Hers was one of the two houses damaged in the October 8 attack. It seems possible that the singling out of her house for attack this time was intended as a warning against her testifying in any future criminal case. (The team also recorded elsewhere how CPI(M) elements had in the past pressured witnesses in a rape case to turn hostile.)

Three-year history  
of attacks

(4) The team recorded instances of large-scale attacks over the last three years, at hamlets in Sukhadamba, Chalni, Shisne, Kainad, Ganjad, Saiwan, Gangangaon and Haladpada

Several CPI (M) members specifically named as being in the attacking mobs. The team interviewed two CPI (M) cadres who proudly acknowledged their personal involvement in, and the CPI (M)'s orchestration of, the attacks. They also met a former CPI (M) member who described the methods used by the CPI (M) to round up an attacking mob. High-ranking members of the local unit were involved.

The phrase 'confrontation' does not properly describe these incidents. First they always took place at villages owing allegiance to Kashtakari Sanghatana, not on neutral territory. Many of the inhabitants were beaten; some of the women were raped; houses were badly damaged; goats and chicken were stolen. On several occasions, the residents fled to the jungle,

where they stayed in the nights for three to six months before they felt it safe to return. On other occasions attacks took place as Kashtakari Sanghatana members assembled for large public meetings; and attacks on individual activists were numerous.

Why attacks :  
Kashtakari  
Sanghatana's  
threat to CPI (M),

Over and over in the areas the team visited, it was found that the CPI (M), though approached by villagers for help, has not taken up basic issues facing the adivasis e.g. protection of crops from destruction by forest officials (these crops are 'encroachments' on government land), extortion and abuse by forest officials, indebtedness to moneylenders, land alienation, and so on. According to these people the CPI (M)'s only programme in these areas seems to be re-election. (According to the CPI (M), its public meetings are highly popular; however, many people from all the villages visited by the team had been rounded up forcibly for these CPI (M) public meetings. Similarly, among those present in the attacking mobs, it appears that about half were coerced into coming : it was from such coerced persons that the attacked villagers received advance notice of the attacks.

It may have been difficult for the CPI (M) to work otherwise, as several of its cadre had local vested interests; according to the KS villagers,

many were labour contractors grass traders, toddy sellers, and so on, who had been intrinsically antagonistic to the Sanghatana activities. The team found instances where the CPI (M) had even acted to break strikes organised by the Kashtakari Sanghatana. In one such operation, top leaders of the CPI (M) (Lahanu Kom, Kisan Surti) were involved.

But in several areas, there were neither many local vested interests (the government in these areas is the main landowner) nor had Kashtakari Sanghatana entered CPI (M) hamlets. Here, it was felt the attacks were brought on by the political threat CPI (M) sensed in the Sanghatana's rapid growth between 1978 and 1981. While the Sanghatana's strength is still limited to areas of Dahanu and Talasari, it poses a real threat to the CPI (M)'s image as a struggle-oriented party. For CPI (M) this region is crucial. From it they gain their only MLA in Maharashtra. Padas in Sukhadamba, Khinoli, Chalni and so on were among the strongest Kashtakari Sanghatana supporters. If they succumbed, others elsewhere would follow. Hence the attacks on them cannot be explained simply as attacks, on individual areas of militancy, by local vested interests. In such areas, the attacks were really attempts to break an organisation.

'Church funds'  
charge flimsy

(6) The team found little basis for the claims that Kashtakari Sanghatana was heavily funded by the Church or foreign agencies. If there were really substantial funding, the team would have witnessed greater resources; but it saw no jeeps, no cars, not even cycles. We met activists who are unable to maintain their own families. The organisation seems to operate on meagre finances.

As for the charges that the Sanghatana was (i) operating only in Christian hamlets and (ii) converting people to Christianity, these were entirely absurd. Almost all the hamlets the team visited were largely or solely Warli Hindu, and the people that had been Christian said they had moved away from the Church since the Sanghatana came. Even those who claim that Kashtakari Sanghatana is interested in conversion admit that there is no preaching of Christianity by the Sanghatana; these people only believe that conversion would take place at some point in the future. On the whole, the CPI (M)'s attack on Kashtakari Sanghatana as being Christian missionaries smacks of dangerous exploitation of communal sentiments.

Role of the State:  
past inaction;  
new leverage

Though the role of the State in this repression was active during 1979 to 1980, it has over the past three years been passive. Time and again, it has refused protection, refused to register complaints, and refused to prosecute the guilty in these attacks. The entire campaign has been carried out with police complicity. The Khoripada incident is the first example of protection being extended in more than name. Most of the padas the team visited had been granted police protection since the filing of Pradeep Prabhu's writ petition, but this conferred no greater sense of security on the villagers, who remembered past occasions on which the police protection installed refused to take action. Further, it is important to note that in those villages which have been forced to ask for police protection, the State forces may now possess a dangerous new leverage over the activities of Kashtakari Sanghatana, or any other adivasi struggle in these areas.

Team's efforts to  
obtain CPI (M)  
side of the story

(8) The team made extensive efforts to meet CPI (M) members to obtain their version of these incidents. We did manage to interview three CPI (M) activists, one a very senior member, and we collected the CPI (M) public statements on the issue. However, the local unit told us that no one there had the authority to give us any assistance; a CPI (M) activist in one hamlet chased us out, calling us missionaries; and the CPI (M) Maharashtra took two weeks to respond to our request. The response of the state leadership of CPI (M) was that certain individual members of the team, whom they deemed 'progressive', would be escorted to CPI (M) padas but that the team as a whole would not be received, and even these 'progressive' members would be greeted only as individuals. However, as these 'progressives' did not want to go to the area as individuals but only as part of the team, the proposed visit fell through. (In a conversation, Ahilya Rangnekar of CPI (M) has said that any persons accompanying the progressives would also be received, but then the position changed some days later.)

In all, the team's findings were released two weeks late because of its attempts to ascertain the CPI (M) position in full.

The reason CPI (M) gave for its position was that it felt that the team had already made up its mind, and it was not worth showing this team the area. The team was aware that Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana, which had constituted the team, had joined adivasis who came to Bombay in a morcha to the CPI (M) office to protest against the Kisan Sabha's atrocities on them. But the fact finding team was constituted as an independent body, containing other organisations and independent persons, and its scope was much broader than the Khoripada incident. The team felt moreover, that there was anyway no legitimate reason for such secrecy.

(9) In brief :

- ★ The Khoripada firing requires further enquiry, and we call upon the State to release documents regarding the death of the person killed in this incident.
- ★ CPI (M)'s concerted long term campaign of physical attacks on Kashtakari Sanghatana in the area is of an order that could not simply be the work of lower level cadres.
- ★ We feel these attacks on Kashtakari Sanghatana constitute an attack on the civil liberties and democratic rights of the adivasis in this region.

(The full report substantiating these conclusions was released subsequently.)





### III

## Background of the Region : Pre - 1947

### *Region : Physical and Topographical Position*

A large section of the 7 per cent of the total tribal population in Maharashtra is concentrated in Thane district. Thane is the northernmost district of the Konkan strip bordering the state of Gujarat in the north and the islands of Bombay to the south. The territory now included in Thane district was, in 1817, a part of the north Konkan district with headquarters at Thane. The major talukas of the present day Thane are a) Dahanu b) Talasari c) Palghar d) Mokhada and e) Jawahar.

### **Marshland and Forest**

The Bombay-Baroda railway line cuts across the length of the district dividing area into two distinct regions; the narrow coastal belt known as 'bandarpatti' and the forested hilly tracts to the east known as 'junglepatti'. Unlike the bandarpatti, which is a long strip of sultry marshes separated by shallow creeks and occasional raised land of rice and gardens the junglepatti is almost unbroken forest. The extreme north is well watered and the soil is conducive to superior quality rice cultivation. In the south, the valley around the river Vaitharna, which flows westwards across the breadth of the district, is well wooded and fertile. The rest of the areas to the east are marked by ranges of hills that rise as we proceed to the interior. The climate for more than half the year is moist with heavy rainfall, and has been described in British records as being unhealthy and malarial for most of the year.

### *Composition of the Population*

The tribes : the original inhabitants: The population of Thane, especially north Thane is predominantly tribal. The 1872 census mentioned 40 per cent of the population as 'early population'. The later census reports clarified the 'early population' as Warlis,

Kathkaris and Thakurs, and described them as "unsettled, wandering and degraded people living in the midst of forests, and making a paltry existence by the cultivation of patches of forest tracts, sale of forest produce etc.". The Warlis, the largest of the forest tribes, were found concentrated in the northern portion (Dahanu Talasari, Jawahar and Mokhada talukas) where they constituted more than 80 per cent of the population. The 1938 Symington Report on the aboriginal and hill tribes in the province of Bombay mentions the presence of other sections such as Korkan, Duhian, Dhodran, Koli-Mahadev, Dhorkolis and Mahars.

Entry of non-tribal population : The non-tribal population is composed of Brahmins, Marwaris, Kunderis, Vanis, Parsees, Muslims and Christians. Unlike the Warlis, the early settlers, the communities entered Thane at points of history with official encouragement. Thus when the Portuguese left Thane in 1740, the Marathas encouraged the Brahmins and Prabhus, known as 'Panderpeshas', to settle in and colonise vast tracts of land left behind by the Portuguese estate owners. And with the advent of British rule in 1818, the 'Panderpeshas' were joined by the Parsees and Muslims, the latter having already settled in small numbers during Bahamani rule before the Portuguese. All these communities (i.e., the Brahmins, Vanis, Marwaris, Parsees, Muslims etc.) were basically landlords, traders, orchard owners and moneylenders. Petty trade and moneylending seem to have been the primary or predominant activity of the Vanis, Marwaris and Brahmins, whereas the Parsees and Muslims took interest in orchard-farming and large-scale grain and timber trade. However, all these communities had developed vast landed interests and combined other activities with it. The Bhaiyas of U.P. and Bihar, initially acted as private goondas of the Parsees, Marwaris and Brahmin landlords; even now there are many Bhaiyas employed for this

purpose. But many others have today become the latest addition to the class of landlords, traders and moneylenders.

### *Relation of Tribals to Land and Forest*

The living and working conditions of the Warlis and other tribes of Thane was no different from the ones faced by other tribals and economically exploited sections of the people in other parts of India. British records and other non-official sources clearly support this conclusion.

The 1938 Symington Report describes the conditions under which the jungle tribes people work and live as "wretched in the extreme and constitute a blot on the administration."

All the backward class tenants without exception have to take advances, since their own share of the produce is exhausted in about March. In Dahanu and Umbergaon they nearly all go to their landlords for these advances. In Shahpur many go to the shopkeepers. The usual date until which their grains last is Shimga (Holi) which falls in March. During the later months of the rains, when the credit of many of them runs out, and for weeks together they have to live on semi-poisonous roots. If their rice lasts till March, they think they have had a normally fair deal; if it lasts a shorter time, which is very often, they think they are unfortunate; if it lasts till the rains they think they are comparatively well off.

Regarding wages and working conditions, the Symington Report has the following to say :

As I have stated, they cannot feed themselves on their share of the produce longer than until March. Thereafter they must rely on their earnings by casual labour, i.e., four annas a day on such days as they are free to work for themselves and on 'khariti' (consumption loans) advances taken in kind from their landlord. The sowcar pays a maximum of one anna per diem to a tenant working on 'veth' (forced labour). Agricultural labourers

usually get 2 annas plus 2 chapathis or 3 to 4 annas per diem. Work, however is obtainable only during the busy season and cannot be had steadily.

(We intend to quote the Symington Report at some length to give a concrete sense of the oppression, and so as to make it possible at a later stage of the report to make certain connections to the present day exploitation and oppression of the people.)

Even the government forest department and forest contractors, who used to offer forest felling and carting and charcoal-burning jobs to the adivasis, used to pay a very meagre amount.

In these occupations they work under forest contractors during the 7 months of the working season (i.e., the dry season). Rates of pay for felling are either 4 annas per diem, or a fixed amount for 100 trees according to the size. Carting is paid for at a rate per gaj (a rough cubic measure) fixed according to the lead and state of the road eg Rs 1-8-0 from forest near Kasa to Savta bandar and Rs 5 or more from Mokhada forests.

Symington found these "wages terribly low considering the arduous nature of the work". Similarly, charcoal burning, according to Symington,

...was practically a preserve of the Katharis who are slaves of the sowcars. They work in groups of a score or so helping each other to build their wood kilns in working coupes out of the non-timber wood. Each man sells the charcoal which is produced from his sowcar. The rate of payment is often alleged to be 8 annas per bag, but 6 annas or less are more usually paid. In Mokhada and Shahpur the rate is one rupee for 3 bags. I have heard of some sowcars who pay even less than 5 annas. The Kathkari, however, is not paid in cash for his charcoal. In fact, it is my belief that he is not paid in full at all, and that whatever nominal rate of payment may be, the result is the same.

About the forest department, Symington states that,

Such work as road making and thinning operations are paid for at rates amounting to 3 or 4 annas a day. But regeneration operations, which are charged to another account head, are very badly paid for. This works out to one anna or less per diem. Sometimes they get nothing.

## Rack-Renting

Subsistence wages and lack of employment opportunities apart, rack-renting of the *adivasis* was another critical factor responsible for their object poverty and serfdom. Since the majority of the *adivasis* were reduced to the status of tenants payment of rent (and *veth* or forced labour) was a necessary condition for them to retain their position as tenants. Regarding rack-renting Symington noted :

It is not easy to obtain accurate data regarding the rentals paid because the landlords are not disposed to part with accurate information and the tenants have no knowledge of any measure of area. Land is not rented at so much per acre. Instead, the cultivator only knows that he takes on so many local *khandis*, i.e., he cultivates the rent of which amounts to the number of *Khandis* of rice. A detailed examination of two landlords' estates was made in Talasari which confirmed the impression which I received after exhaustive enquiries from the landlords and tenants of many villages that the average rent is from  $3\frac{3}{4}$  to  $1\frac{1}{4}$  *khandis* per acre, and I find that rentals are now far too high and it is certain that they do not leave the cultivator sufficient for his livelihood even for half the year.

## Veth or Forced Labour

Extracting forced labour or *veth* from the tenants was a normal practice among the landlords. To quote Symington :

This "terrible system" entails conditions of life hardly distinguishable from slavery on the bulk of the aboriginal population.

Symington describes *veth* in the following terms :

Tenants of land in the vast jungle tracts of the district are entirely dependent on their landlords not only for land to cultivate without which they would starve, but also for their maintenance during not less than five months in the year. Their very homes are as a rule scattered on their landlords' fields and they may at any time be ordered to remove their huts. From the break of the rains until rice harvests *kharti* (consumption loans taken from the landlords) advances are their only source of maintenance. If they offend their landlords the result is eviction and starvation. They live in constant dread of their landlords and have no alternative but to comply with all his customary demands. The landlords use their power to exact forced labour. All jungle-tract tenants who cultivate by '*khandi*' (i.e. those who pay fixed rent in kind and not a crop share) are liable to be called upon to work for their landlords. If they refuse or procrastinate they are liable to assaults or beatings. These are common occurrences, and are usually carried out by the landlords' local agent. I was told on credible authority of men being tied up to posts and whipped. Such occurrences I can vouch for. There are also rumours of men in the past having been killed. Tenants are required to do this agricultural work for their landlords as well as for themselves. Their opportunities of earning money as forest labourers or otherwise are thus seriously curtailed throughout the year. *Veth* is demanded for as many days as are necessary for the landlord's requirements. Many *Warlis* I found had to work for a fortnight per month. If the forest landlord is also a forest contractor, he will use his tenants' labour by *veth* for working his coupes. In addition they may be used for domestic work, polishing and loading timber at depots etc. The maximum remunera-



tion for forced labour that I could discover is one anna per diem. More often rice is given, barely sufficient for one meal. Landlords will not scruple to use their power in fulfilment of other purposes; for instance, the use of their tenants' womenfolk for the gratification of their lust.

### *Roots and Offshoots of Indebtedness*

The landlord's power to extract *veth* or forced labour from his tenants stemmed from the fact that the tenant was compelled to take 'kharti' (consumption loans) advances, sometimes at 50 per cent interest over a period of six months, or marriage loans at milar, or higher rate of interest. Symington notes :

The sowcar in the partially excluded areas in Thane district differs from the sowcar in Khandesh in that he usually combines this business as a profitable sideline, with his main occupation of landlord or formal contractor.

Symington found that "about half the people in these areas are indebted for cash advances".

His report cites the following cases of indebtedness of the people in that area.

(a) An old man borrowed Rs. 100 from his landlord for his son's marriage three years ago. Interest, one anna per rupee *per month* (this is a very common rate in this district). He has repaid Rs. 100 and does not know the balance due.

(b) A Dhodia boy this year borrowed Rs. 140 from his landlord for his marriage. Interest, one anna per rupee per month. The loan is to be worked off by carting work every fair season. On these terms he will still be carting for his landlord at the time of his death and will then owe about Rs. 1,500.

The system of pledging future services for cash advances (sometimes called the 'hali' system) is particularly prevalent in this district, and is productive of much

exploitation and degradation. Once a man has borrowed from a sowcar, whether it be his landlord or another person, he is not likely to get out of his clutches during his lifetime. Even then it usually happens that the debts of deceased persons are, as in Khandesh, forcibly saddled on their heirs by taking fresh promissory notes and families become virtually hereditary slaves? If a debtor is slow or recalcitrant in making payment or rendering services he is threatened assaulted or beaten by the sowcars' agents who are often Pathans or Bhaiyas.

### *The Base : Land Relations*

The detailed descriptions of the living and working conditions of the adivasis, their indebtedness to landlords/money lenders extraction of *veth* or forced labour given above was an outcome of the basic changes taking place in the land relations in Thane. From being owners of land and 'kings of the forest' the adivasis were slowly transformed into tenants and serfs of the Marwaris, Brahmins, Parsee landlords and money-lenders. The adivasis were steadily dispossessed of their land, restricted from using the forest and forest produce for their needs and were forced to stay in abject poverty and destitution, utterly dependent on the landlords and the British colonial government, for food and employment.

The process of land alienation in Thane district dates back to the Portuguese rule between 1535 to 1740, and subsequently intensified during the Maratha rule between 1740 to 1818 and British colonial rule between 1818 to 1947.

During the early stages of history, and till the establishment of Muslim Bahamani rule in Thane, the land relation among the adivasis was distinctly communal in character. At this stage agriculture was relatively undeveloped.

The adivasis were still primarily in the stage of 'shift and burn' cultivation of forest lands and had not yet reached the stage of settled cultivation. The most strenuous task of clearing the forest undergrowth and burn-

ing the soil to fertilise it for cultivation was organised collectively. Such primitive cultivation of semi-cleared forest patches on the hill slopes was in large part devoted to inferior crops like 'nagli' and 'cvari' and was possible only when land was available in plenty.

However, in course of time, certain basic changes started occurring. The Bahamani kings of Ahmednagar, who held sway over the district before the coming of the Portuguese, for the first time introduced a revenue system and granted proprietary rights to peasants known as 'kularag'. A levy on rice lands and a plough cess on the upland (hilly tracts) was imposed.

## Changes with Colonial Rule

With the coming of the Portuguese rule in 1535, changes occurred, especially in the system of revenue of rice lands in coastal or bandarpatti area, where the rule was more strong. A class of European land holders, known as 'Fageindeiros' was set up over and above the actual tillers, who were now to pay rent to these landlords at the rate of 50 per cent to 60 per cent of their produce. Large numbers of Europeans, mostly ex-soldiers, priests, merchants and vagabonds settled on the land granted in some coastal villages. British records state that the actual tillers were no more than tenants, 'who were poor wretches worse than vassals'. In contrast, the landlords were described as 'living in such splendour in country houses enriched beyond imagination'.

The departure of the Portuguese in 1740 resulted in large-scale migration of the Europeans who left behind their landed estates. In their place came the 'Panderpeshas' i.e. the Brahmins and Prabhus, a distinct class of landlords created by the Maratha rulers. The Panderpeshas occupied the European landed estates and also bought land auctioned off by the Maratha kings. The Panderpeshas in turn, helped the Maratha rulers to run the state machinery and collect taxes. British records mention the Panderpeshas as very rich and powerful and as employers of slaves. The first sign of *veth begar* (forced labour) was to appear during this period.

By 1818, the British had established their political sovereignty over Western India and began the consolidation of their power by establishing a centralised State apparatus and introducing far-reaching measures such as the 'ryotwari' system of land rights and revenue, control over forest and forest produce for commercial purposes etc. Unlike the zamindari system introduced in the North, which placed new middlemen (zamindars) with revenue collection authority on behalf of the State, the ryotwari system in theory placed on such middleman between the cultivators and the State, so that the ryots would have become tenants of the State. The land holdings were small and leased directly by the State, and the system was supposed to relieve the tenants of the more intense forms of exploitation by powerful middlemen. But the history of the ryotwari operation, as one can see in Dahanu, is the history of the emergence of, and oppression by, new powerful intermediaries in the normal social course of the times.

Thus the process which resulted in dispossessing the adivasis of their land and their rights over forest produce, and which began in the late 16th century, started acquiring a legal and organised form. In all this, the British colonial legislation especially the introduction of proprietary rights under the ryotwari system, recognition of the rights of alienation, the imposition of revenue on the basis of distances from market and means of communication, the starting of the forest department in 1818, the enactment of the Indian Forests Acts, 1873 and 1928, and finally the encouraging of the grain and timber trade played a very crucial role. For, this legislation not only gave legal sanction to the process in many ways; it also intensified the process of land alienation. Apart from this specific legislation, the overall British colonial rule created conditions of poverty, want, unemployment etc., among the adivasis, which compelled them to part with their land to others.

Consequently, the adivasis were reduced to tenants, and large tracts of land both in coastal and forest areas went into the hands of alien (i.e. non-adivasi) landlords, traders

and moneylenders such as the Marwaris, Parsees, Brahmins, Muslims etc.

The Symington Report on Aboriginal and Hill Tribes records that, in Dahanu, Umbergaon and Shahapur talukas, the majority of the people are tenants. It further states that:

Eighty years ago they are reported to have been the owners of the soil but the land has long since passed out of their ownership into the hands of the sowcars who are now their landlords.

To substantiate his contention Symington refers to some sentences written by Miory in 1895, when submitting the proposals which were finally embodied in the Taluka Woodland code :

Now as to the necessity of helping the poorer classes, Warlis, Thakurs, Kolis, etc and the means of doing it at a profit. The necessity of some policy or other arises from the notorious fact that by various means, the least iniquitous of which is cajolery Brahmins Parsees, Prabhus and Marwaris are getting hold of all the land in Dahanu and rack-renting the resident cultivators so that the objects of the Bombay Revenue Survey system are utterly defeated and the tenure is much more like the zamindari tenure of Madras than the much-vaunted tenure of Bombay.

Nearly 40 years later, in 1938, Symington commented that,

nothing has been done to stay the process of land passing out of the old inhabitants or to save them from oppression even as tenants.

The process of land alienation against the interests of the adivasis continued unabated into the 20th century. Symington estimates that, in 1938 in Dahanu, out of the total cultivated land measuring 68,113 acres, the Warlis held only 6.8 per cent of the land, and in Umbergaon out of 86,270 acres only 2.2 per cent of the land. Land in lieu of kharti advances, outright of the adivasis, and legal manipulation have been

some of the forms used by the sowcars and landlords to dispossess the adivasis of their land. Morarji Desai speaking in the state Assembly in 1939 said :

But in bad times, during scarcity and famine, the lands of the adivasis passed from their hands into the hands of the sowcars and moneylenders for trifling amounts. There are occasions in which land was parted, some acres of it, for 5 pounds of grain, in some cases at the rate of 5 rupees per acre, or a rupee per acre, or even eight annas per acre.

## British Colonial Policy on Forests

While on the one hand the adivasis were slowly being dispossessed of their lands, and were being reduced to tenants by the shrewd landlords cum moneylenders cum traders, the British colonial government was steadily encroaching on the traditional rights of the adivasis on forest and forest produce. The development of Bombay city, near Thane district, the opening of new railway lines, shipbuilding and most important of all, the growing revenue needs of the colonial government compelled the British to look at forests as a source of profit and commerce. Consequently the British started making systematic efforts to take over forests and enacted various measures and legislations to that effect.

Before the advent of British rule in India, there was only customary regulation of people's rights over the forest and forest produce. The adivasis in fact relied heavily on the forest for their livelihood. Shift and burn cultivation, and the sale of wood and forest produce in the market and also for self-consumption, were normal practices. However, when the British realised the commercial value of forests, they tried to regulate and curtail the rights of the adivasis over them.

The first onslaught on the north Thane forests began in 1852, and was to meet the needs of the railway line. Dadabhoy Byramji, a Parsee, is estimated to have

employed 25,000 carts annually to supply wooden sleepers for the railways. Subsequently the British divided the forests into a number of compartments which were broken into smaller segments called 'coupes' to be auctioned on annual leases to contractors, who were mostly Parsees and Muslims. To force the adivasis to work for the 'coupes' leased out to private contractors, the British government banned the practice of shift and burn cultivation and also restricted the dependence of tribals living on the sale of forest produce like firewood.

The ban was imposed in 1895, but had to be withdrawn when faced with riots in 1896. However, the British government worked at a separate scheme known as 'the woodland scheme' to recruit adivasi labour, by giving them forest plots on the condition that they would work for the 'coupes'. Holding the subsistence plot as a threat, most Warlis were forced to work on the coupes. The landlord in the junglepatti could involve himself in a lucrative sideline in timber extraction, without in any way harming his interests as a landlord. In fact he reinforced his domination over his serfs. The pattern became very common. Symington in his report noted that almost all the forest contractors in Dahanu, Umbergaon etc, were also the local landlords.

Together with measures mentioned above, the British government enacted the Indian Forest Acts of 1878 and 1927. Both these Acts contained various provisions, such as classification of the forest into (1) reserved forests, (2) protected forests and (3) village forests, giving absolute powers to the government to define the limits and uses of forests, restrictions on 'shift and burn' cultivation, sale of forest wood and produce, etc.

In effect, the adivasis were denied their traditional rights over the forests and forest produce. And the government was made the sole determining authority as to the limits and existence of their rights.

Besides, the 1878 Indian Forest Act and the subsequent 1927 Indian Forest Act imposed stiff penalties ranging from fines to

imprisonment on adivasis found violating any of the provisions of the Act. The forest department and the forest officials working under it were empowered to deal with such, and also to regulate the use of forests according to the Act.

The objective of the British Government in enacting the Forest Act, raising revenue from the sale of timber and other produce, paid rich dividends to imperial interests. Thus the Thane forest revenue rose from a meagre Rs. 64 000 in 1870 to over Rs 4 lakh by 1905. And by 1940 the three northern talukas of Dahanu, Umbergaon and Mahim were the major suppliers of teak, firewood and fodder grass to metropolitan Bombay. By 1945, timber and grass industries in North Thane were employing on an average of 45 000 people between the months of October and June.

Apart from the British government, whose revenue went up with the commercial exploitation of the forests, the only other class to benefit from British forest policy was the class of landlords, contractors, and timber traders, who had the necessary capital to buy coupes on lease, and also the economic and physical power to employ adivasis in the coupes for felling and carting work.

To cite one instance, the fortunes of Mohammed Amin Raiy in Manor, one of the biggest contractors and landlords in the area were built on the timber business. He rose from the position of a customs clerk under the Portuguese to a position that, in 1939, he was able to buy from Vikajee Mahajee both the 'khot' villages of Velgaon and Panali.

With the demand for fodder growing in Bombay, to meet its own growing dairy needs, a small trade had already developed around the railway line in the last 19th century, it was found that all the villages within the reach of the railways were exporting grass in varying quantities, an estimated 4,000 wagons of grass annually to Bombay.

Since the growing of grass, unlike rice, needs little attention and capital, most of the



landlords started growing grass instead of rice, which was a necessity for the people. Added to this advantage was also the fact of the growing profitability of the grass trade. Thus the area under grass increased, from about 10,000 in 1898 producing about 20 lakh tons of grass to 150-200 lakh tons by 1922. The railway had to construct extra loading tracks in all the stations between Saphala and Umbergaon to cope with the immense increase in the grass (and timber) trade.

The result of such enormous growth in the grass trade was that large 'varkas' (grass lands) passed into the hands of the grass merchants or big landlords who did not care for the agricultural needs of the village and converted all the varkas land for export. This fact becomes clear when it is noted that the major type of land transferred to the sowcar was not rice lands but varkas lands.

### *Two Essential Features of Exploitation*

It is possible to isolate two essential types of exploitation of the adivasis in this area over the course of three centuries.

First, the initial alienation of adivasis' land by outsiders and their status as rack-rented tenants there after led to their indebtedness to landlords. This, in turn, gave birth to the various forms of particularly crude oppression bonded and forced labour, various free services, sexual oppression, and so on. It is worth tracing the continuing indebtedness of adivasis today and linking it to this history.

The second major aspect was the appropriation of all forest lands by the State. The adivasis, who had depended on the forests for food, medicines, building materials etc, now became illegal encroachers on State property. Meanwhile, State ownership acted as a conduit for other private interests to loot the forests. This second aspect was entirely ignored by the Warli revolt, and is also worth tracing to the present.

### **Adivasi Struggles against Sowcars and British Rule**

During the course of three centuries, the adivasis were transformed from 'kings of

the jungle' to slaves of the landlords, sowcars and the British colonial government. Deprived of their lands and forests, the adivasis became aliens in their own territory. Brutal slavery and subjugation to the landlords, moneylenders, traders and the government became the necessary conditions to survive and eke out a living.

In striking contrast, the vested interests, the non-adivasis who had entered adivas land to exploit their labour and resources increased their power and wealth. Landlords, such as Vikajee Maharjee, Kochaiwalla, Pimparkar, Homi Dariywalla, etc, represented the power of the class of landlords and traders who had come to acquire total power over the lives of the adivasis. These landlords and traders formed their own organisation—the Thane Katedars Association and the Thane Timber Merchants Association. This class lived a life of luxury and wealth amidst the immiserated and destitute adivasis.

Graphic descriptions of such striking contrast between the lives of the landlords, sowcars and adivasis is found in British records as well as in such books as 'Adivasi Revolt' by Godavari Parulekar. Periodic attempts to protest against their exploitation and oppression by the adivasis were suppressed by the vested interests and their equally exploitative and oppressive regimes. However, a few struggles of the adivasis were successful, though shortlived.

In 1896, the adivasis, initially at the instance of some local landlords, rose in revolt against the ban on 'shift and burn' cultivation and restriction on the use of forest produce, such as firewood, imposed by the British colonial government. The British had to withdraw the ban, but not before the revolt spread to Mahim, Dahanu and other talukas. After forming a Shetkari Sabha at the local level, a deputation of Warlis, Kathkaris and other forest tribes numbering 2000 persons marched to Dahanu, demanding the removal of the notification regarding forest rights of the adivasis. When the petition and the deputation were refused a hearing, there was considerable tension. A few days later, the Warlis and Kathkaris went on a riot in Dahanu and Bassein.

Matters reached a head when the collector issued a threat to fire upon any assembly gathered for the "purposes of demonstration". As the Warlis continued their struggle even in the face of threat held out by the collector, the British government had no alternative but to withdraw the notification and accept the traditional rights of the adivasis over forest produce. Thus the first major struggle of the adivasis ended in success.

Much later in 1944, an abortive attempt was made by about 30,000 Warlis in Umbergaon taluka to wage a struggle by a strike when harvesting season began in support of the demand for an increase in the daily rate of wages. It was for the first time in the course of a century (earlier protest being individualised and in most cases passive) that the Warlis had dared to protest against exploitation and the wretched conditions of life by refusing to slave for the landlords and timber merchants for daily wages. (The 1896 struggle was against the colonial government's forest policy.)

The strike was a spontaneous outburst. But the source of inspiration for the strike was the propaganda of Mr. Save, the government appointed assistant Backward Class Officer for the Warlis. Subsequently, Mr. Save was chastised and transferred from the area, and the strike fizzled out without realising the demand. Nevertheless the 1944 strike enabled the warlis to realise the potential power of unity and organisation, and to that extent their earlier fear and helplessness decreased.

## The Warli Revolt

In a way, the 1944 strike of the Warlis can be taken as the turning point in the history of the adivasis because by effectively striking work for nearly a month it attracted the attention of various sections, and especially the Communist-led Kisan Sabha. The Kisan Sabha entered Thane district in 1945 to organise the adivasis after having been drawn by the strike of 1944. Shyamrao Parulekar and Godavari Parulekar established their first contacts among the Warlis after the first Maharashtra Kisan Sabha was held at Titwala in Thane

district. As part of the propaganda campaign, Shyamrao Parulekar had conducted a public meeting in Dongari village in Umbergaon Taluka.

The Warli revolt of 1945-47, under the Kisan Sabha leadership was initially a spontaneous revolt. As Godavari Parulekar mentions in her book "Adivasi Revolt", for the adivasis of Thane,

A point was reached, however, when they could no longer endure the abuses they were daily subjected to. Death seemed but a minor price to pay for escaping this torture. That is when the Warli girded up his loins to fight. He fought with great determination and deathdefying courage against the inhuman persecution practised by the landlords with the full connivance of the government. The struggle lasted for two years. In 1947 the Warlis emerged victorious, thus gaining for themselves a place of honour in the history of heroic peasant struggles in India. Their unique struggle had another important effect. It caused public attention to be focussed on their problems.

It was in the context of such an objective situation that the Kisan Sabha and Godavari Parulekar had started their work among the Warlis. Though the forms of work of the Kisan Sabha were limited to conducting public meetings, village meetings and legal cases this in itself set in motion the adivasis who, once having been inspired, extended their struggle and intensified their militancy on their own. Referring to the January 1946 conference called by the Kisan Sabha in Mahalaxmi village in Dahanu taluka, against high rack-renting, Godavari Parulekar says:

Peasants from Jawahar and Palghar talukas who had come to the meeting at Mahalaxmi also joined the united organisation of the Adivasis and won for themselves all the demands that had been won by the peasants in Umbergaon and Dahanu. It was the Adivasis themselves who had carried the agitation from Umbergaon into Dahanu and thence into

Phalghar. We merely lent them our support

Godavari also cites another major spontaneous struggle undertaken by the adivasis for the abolition of the institution of debt slaves, which was widely prevalent for centuries.

Experience had taught these people that solitary attempts at escape were doomed to failure. The scheme for liberating marriage servants was conceived and executed in its entirety by the adivasis themselves. Kisan Sabha cannot claim any credit for it. They looked upon the whole agitation of Red Flag as the liberation movement of which freeing of marriage servants became an important part. They called meetings attended by thousands of people. A decision to liberate marriage servants was taken. The entire lot of people present at the meetings was divided into four sections. These four sections took out processions in four different directions, visiting all the landlords' homes. For three days these processions walked through the villages, freeing hundreds of marriage servants.

## Major issues by Kisan Sabha

The major issues taken by the Kisan Sabha, and on which the adivasis had conducted their struggles, were :

(1) Resistance against forced labour, immediately followed by a campaign to end the system of bonded labour. The adivasis stood firmly united on this demand and refused to give in to coercion. After incidents of violence by the landlords' private goondas failed to yield results, the landlords and sowcars turned helpless. Moreover, support by the State proved inadequate. Within two months, bonded labour was abolished.

(2) Demand for increase in wages for grass cutting. The adivasis went on strike during the critical harvesting season. The State backed the sowcars against the adivasis by opening fire at two places in which

five adivasis were killed, externing the Parulekars from the district for brief period, and effecting mass arrests of the adivasis. Not with-standing the state repression, the adivasis stood their ground and continued to keep away from work. Since the strike was affecting the milk supply in Bombay and there was a danger of the grass crop being lost if not cut at the proper time, the traders got desperate and yielded on the issue of wages.

(3) Demand to charge rents according to agreed amounts and refusal to pay fictitious arrears. The adivasis, as mentioned earlier, put up a militant and organised fight on this and forced the sowcars to relent.

## State's Response to Adivasi Revolt

The State's response to the adivasi revolt was on expected lines. Initially, the Congress-led provincial government under the British regime appeared indifferent ; but as the struggle grew and engulfed larger areas and as adivasis plunged into the movement with all their anger and determination, the State panicked and even as the private armies of the landlords, sowcars and traders were attempting to suppress the struggle with their own might, the adivasis bore the brunt of the wave of State repression. The State succeeded in keeping away the leadership, especially the Parulekars, by simply externing them from the area. But the adivasis were fired upon, killed, imprisoned in large numbers, implicated in false cases. Finally, the government declared the area 'disturbed' and sent in the Maratha Light Infantry. This, raised a hail of protest from different sections of the people in Bombay and government had to withdraw the army. Meanwhile, adivasis began to wage an underground struggle, showing full preparedness to meet the situation of repression.

However, some changes in the political situation, viz, transfer of power, and corresponding changes in the thinking and tactics of the Communist Party and the Kisan Sabha in Maharashtra put a brake on the further developments of such a process. The Commu-

nist Party of India at the end of State's response to adivasi revolt nationally saw the State in a new light: not as composed of, and defending, the class interests that had to be opposed, but rather as one which could be amended, improved and carried forward. And so its emphasis was less on agitation and opposition and more on implementation of what it saw as essentially progressive legislation.

## Achievements of Warli Revolt

The main achievements of the Warli Revolt appear to be:

(a) that

"In the sacred fire of the agitation that raged from 1945, the adivasis made offe-

rings of such evils as serfdom, marriage-servants, vethbegar, grass and forest work at four annas—two annas a day, formidable arrears in rents, and many other forms of exploitation."

(b) The revolt enabled at least some, if not all of the adivasis to realise the strength and power that comes from unity and organised action. It also exposed to the adivasis the nature of the State and its close links with the sowcars, landlords, traders. The revolt brought out the adivasis, high degree of organisational capacity. Godavari Parulekar's description of the underground network carried out by the adivasis, without any guidance from her or any other Kisan Sabha activists, is a striking example of this.

## IV

# The Post-1947 Period

The difference in their (adivasis') condition has not been so great that they no longer need to eat roots and leaves. They still do that and remain half starved for four months of the year, sometimes they are literally forced to fast for want of food. The main problem that plagues them is land. Unless this is solved, their condition can never improve appreciably.... But the total area of land in the possession of adivasis is so little, that it is impossible for them to feed themselves and their families on the produce of this land. If the amelioration of the adivasis is desired then one of the main things to do is to take away the land that is in the possession of the landlords, and distribute it free to the adivasis.

(Godavari Parulekar in the last chapter of "Adivasi Revolt", describing the continuing problems of adivasis today)

Such an understanding of the adivasis' needs, however, cannot be found among the demands formulated by the leadership of the Warli revolt. Further still, this need was interpreted in such a way by the Communist Party in Dahanu in the post-1947 phase, that it has had definite consequences on its position in the area to day.

In fact, the post-1947 picture and the emergent relationships are more complicated, though perhaps there has been little fundamental change. In 1948, during the Warli revolt, the government announced the regularisation of tenure of all the adivasis' lands, with rent to be paid at fixed rates to the landlord. By 1957, the Tenancy Act ('land to the tiller') came into being: tenure was made permanent, with a small compensation to be paid to the landlord. Determined attempts by the landlords to defraud adivasis



out of the land did bear some fruit. The CPI (M), in these circumstances, saw its role as being to participate heavily in ensuring the Act's implementation. One researcher notes :

Specifically, the struggle in this period, centering around the effective implementation of the Tenancy Act, involved three stages. With the announcement of the Tenancy Act in 1948, - the first stage a purely defensive one as far as the tenants concerned-involved the demand for sufficient protection for the tenant from summary and unjust eviction. Activists would visit villages, educating tenants about their rights and reporting cases of illegal eviction to the tahsildar; at the same time they would organise tenants not to vacate their fields. In the second stage, it was decided that the tenant must get a certain fixed share of the produce, thus preventing any system of rack-renting. In the third stage, activists undertook the task of registering the tenants and finally gave the call for claiming ownership of the land by April 1, 1957, ie, Tiller's Day.

The impact of the Sabha's actions was not very encouraging. The Act was working most definitely in favour of the landlords as against tenants as the Table shows.

Number of Tenancy Cases Instituted in 1953-54 in Thana (Source : Land Revenue Administration Report for Bombay Presidency, 1953-54.)

	Instituted by Tenants	Instituted by Landlords
Granted	156	597
Rejected	112	603
Not decided	337	380

The sense of urgency was noticeable in the thirteenth session of the All-India Kisan Sabha held at Dahanu in May 1956 which noted that the mass eviction of the poor peasants was 'increasing the number of landless, strengthening the hands of the landlords to increase their strangle-

hold on the tillers of the soil, and finally frustrating even the concessions secured by the peasant movement in the direction of land reform'.

(Ashok Upadhyaya, 'Peasant Organisations in Thane District', EPW, January 30, 1982)

Nevertheless, in most CPI (M) areas, there was some implementation of the Act, and some portion of the land generally the poorer land fell into the adivasis' hands; this, in turn, won the party the loyalty of many. One independent observer the team met estimated that by the late 1950s around 40-50 per cent of the adivasis owned some plot of land. It was during this period that the Kisan Sabha was strongest in the region.

## Continuing Indebtedness

But this large adivasi peasantry was desperately poor, constantly threatened with reverting to being agricultural labourers. Their land was unproductive - the extension of fertiliser, seeds, pesticides, irrigation, and credit from the State was almost non-existent. Those who owned a bit of land were able to live off it for only a few months of the year. For the rest, they starved and sold their labour, but they also had to take out loans, leasing their land in return. Meanwhile, most of them also cultivated crops on encroachments on forest lands. Though direct physical oppression and bonded labour were by and large abolished, and the direct exploitative bonds between the landlords and many adivasis seemed on the surface to have been snapped, the way was left open for new ties. Essentially, these were a continuation of old ones. Between 1961 and 1971, the number of male agricultural labourers among the scheduled tribes in Thane rose from 42,539 to 71,004. These labourers also took out loans from the landlords : In the process of indebtedness on usurious terms, if the agricultural labourers had a plot of land it reverted to the landlord.

The actions of the Kisan Sabha ensured that a large number of tribals did get ownership of land, but the point is that this ownership has, by and large, remain-

ned a *Juridical* ownership. Tribals have been unable effectively to cultivate their land and to emerge as independent peasant proprietors, because of the absence of any input/capital and their inaccessibility to the market. In the circumstances, most of them have been forced to work as agricultural labourers and seek the aid of moneylenders—the sowcars for whom the need has not diminished. Thus indebtedness is rampant. But, unlike in the pre-Tenancy Act period, land alienation does not follow as a method of debt-redemption. The mode of claiming debt charges is now principally through the system of *palemode* crop mortgage. (Upadhyaya, *op cit*)

The importance of this distinction made between the Tenancy Act period and the present-day condition is not clear. *In either case, it indicates loss of control over the land.* After all, the *palemode* system continues from year to year. Indeed, the illegality of alienating the land is being circumvented by appropriating the crop.

## CPI (M)'s Approach

In this situation, the CPI (M) saw its role as ensuring the fuller implementation of various government schemes for the uplift of adivasis, and the taking up of the adivasis' grievances to the appropriate authorities. This also necessitated the maintenance of their electoral position and their connections with various centres of authority. As one CPI(M) activist explained to the team, for developmental measures it is necessary to have a member in the Vidhan Sabha. In turn, the CPI (M)-dominated panchayati samiti in Talasari and the strong CPI(M) contingent in the panchayati samiti in Dahanu channelled developmental measures as a form of patronage. Agitational methods were constricted by the fact that implementation of various schemes had to be performed through various officers of the State. All in all, the use of CPI(M)'s intermediary services has served to blunt the antagonism of people towards the State.

## Failure of State Schemes

The history of the various State schemes for the uplift of the adivasis, from 1947 to the present day, has been miserable.

The Maharashtra Tribal Economic Condition (Improvement) Act, prohibiting moneylending and banning private trade in certain commodities grown by scheduled tribes, has had little effect. Indebtedness in the area is widespread and quite acute, and the government procurement of adivasi produce (performed through corrupt adivasi co-operative societies, managed by the Congress-I) does not exist in even grass, where it is most needed.

The team ran into samples of the government's ambitious rural housing project. Fraudulently constructed and tiny, the houses were unusable and empty. (Tall grass was growing in them.)

The *Palemode* Eradication Scheme, instituted in 1972 to substitute local moneylenders with the State as a source of credit and thereby to halt the extensive mortgaging of land, did not give fresh loans to defaulters. But, as very few could afford not to default, its coverage dropped sharply over the years.

There was also a very high demand for Employment Guarantee Scheme work, but it was not being met. A study made by the Kashtakari Sanghatana suggested that, at the height of its coverage, 4,500 were employed in an area with a demand for 32,000 to 61,000 jobs. Instead, there is large-scale seasonal migration by the adivasis to work in areas, from Thane to suburban Bombay, in low-paying jobs such as truck-loading.

## The Grass Trade

Perhaps the most telling comment on the state of the adivasis in Dahanu and Talasari is the extent of the grass trade, which Kashtakari Sanghatana has valued at Rs 500 lakhs for the three talukas (Palghar, Dahanu, and Talasari) where it is concentrated. The trade is largest in Palghar; but it is also very important in Dahanu-Talasari.

The Kashtakari Sanghatana note on the subject is reproduced below, as it is revealing of a number of aspects of the exploitation involved. The history given of the Monopoly Purchase Scheme in grass also gives an idea of the strength of the interests involved.

## The Grass Issue : A Kashtakari Sanghatana Note.

The grass issue centres round the purchase and marketing of naturally-growing grass in the area. This grass is sold in the wholesale grass market at Goregaon. Two types of grass are marketed at different times :

- (1) Green grass : During the months of September - October grass is bought from the adivasis who cut it in the jungles and other wasteland and carry it in headloads to the roadside. The purchase price is 4 paise per kg. A great deal of cheating is done while weighing the green grass. The sale price at Goregaon, on the same day ranges between 15 and 20 paise a kg. On several occasions, the adivasis who cut the grass in the evenings transport it to the roadside in the early morning, and have to return home emptyhanded because extra grass is purchased at an earlier point. Average earnings range between Rs 4.00 to Rs 5.00 for 13 hours' work (cutting, transport waiting for sale).

On the other hand, the average earning of the grass merchants per truck ranges between Rs 400 to 600 per day.

The economics of the purchase/sale are :

(1) Purchase of green grass (10 tons)	400.00
(2) Transport charges	400.00
(3) Sundry charges	200.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>1000.00</b>
<b>Sale</b>	<b>1500.00</b>

- (2) Dry grass : During the months of November-January grass is bought from the adivasis who cut grass from bunds and other open spaces on their land. Grass is either purchased from them as outright sale or against consumption loans.

**Outright sale :** pre-Diwali purchase price is higher normally at the rate of Rs 120-130 per 55 kg ; Post-Diwali, the price of grass drops and ranges between Rs 80 and Rs 110 per 55 kg. The rate at which grass is purchased is totally arbitrary and depends on the will of the grass merchant. There is usually cheating in the weighing of the grass since the adivasi is totally oblivious of the process of weighing, grading and pricing.

Economics of grass sale for the adivasi :  
Labour for cutting, tying, (500 kg)

	40.00
Transport	30.00
	70.00
Purchase price of grass	90.00

**Against consumption loans :** Grass is purchased at approximately Rs 10-15 per 500 kg against consumption loans. The value of the grass purchased is, approximately Rs 120-130.

Economics of the purchase are as follows:

Price of grass (against loan)	10.00
Labour for cutting and transport	70.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>80.00</b>
Purchase price of the said grass	130.00

The grass is sold by the grass merchants between October to August of the next year, depending on their storage facilities and holding capacity. The economics of the process is :

Purchase price of grass (average)	100 00
Baling storage & transport	40 00
Total	140.00
Wholesale price (average)	275 00

The exploitation of the adivasi in the grass trade takes place at different points:

- 1) through consumption loans: 25 per cent of actual value of grass cut
- 2) weighing of grass: approximately 15 to 20 per cent of value
- 3) grading of grass: approximately 10 to 20 per cent of value
- 4) pricing of grass: approximately 20 to 30 per cent of value

Hence we note that the exploitation of grass means:

- 1) 75 per cent of the actual value of grass in consumption loans.
- 2) 60 per cent actual value of grass in outright sale.

**Monopoly purchase scheme:** To put an end to this exploitation, the Maharashtra government initiated the monopoly purchase of grass through the Adivasi Development Corporation. The history of the monopoly purchase scheme is as follows:

In 1979, the monopoly purchase was begun in Palghar taluka.

In 1980 Monopoly purchase was to be introduced in the Dahanu and Talasari talukas. The purchase scheme was withdrawn, under pressure from the grass merchants, one week before the purchase of grass was to begin. The reason given was that the infrastructure for purchase of grass (*viz* scales and baling machines were not available) since they would have to be hired from the grass merchants themselves.

In 1981, the monopoly purchase scheme withdrawn from Palghar taluka as well, under pressure from the traders. (The traders are reported to have collected Rs 3 lakh to finance the project for with-drawal of monopoly purchase.)

**Economics of grass trade:** The grass trade is of a very high order running into a total of approximately Rs. 50 million Rupees. The purchase is financed by bank loans from nationalised banks. The grass market at Goregaon is controlled by grass merchants who made the monopoly purchase scheme face difficulties in marketing of grass. The approximate profit margin ranges between 50 per cent to 80 per cent, depending on storage facilities and holding capacity of the grass merchants.

The fact finding team too found, as it moved about, that the growing of grass is widespread. On one occasion it arrived at the time when wages were being paid out for grass-cutting; the whole hamlet seemed to have been engaged in this work, and the grass merchant seemed to wield considerable influence over them.

Several points emerge from the Kashtakari Sanghatana note: (i) The grass trade is extensive and cruelly exploitative. (ii) Its most profitable form is repayments in grass for consumption loans. (iii) The growth of the grass trade over the last 40 years has only reinforced oppressive feudal relationships between the adivasis and those from whom they take out loans. (iv) The failure of the State to provide the necessary farming inputs and credit has assisted this process of re-inforcement. (v) The history of the Monopoly Procurement Scheme demonstrates the control these forces possess over State action concerning the region.

## Forest Plots : Different Approaches

The adivasis, meanwhile, cultivate 'forest plots'. These are in official terms, 'encroachments' on forest lands. In the western parts of Dahanu-Talasari, the major



rity of the families grow crops on these plots. These were periodically destroyed by forest officials, who also extracted money in various ways from the adivasis for allowing them to gather their basic needs from the forests. The situation prevailing in Dahanu-Talasari at the time of the formation of Kashtakari Sanghatana was indeed one in which the forest plots – the only land that perhaps a majority of the population was cultivating – was entirely insecure.

It was over the forest issue that the Kashtakari Sanghatana made its first real impact. CPI (M) had largely ignored the issue. Adivasis told the team that they had repeatedly approached the CPI (M) for help in protecting their forest plots. The CPI (M) told them it would take up the issue. Later, the CPI (M) people would return, pointing out that, as the forest official was acting on government orders there was nothing they could do about it. There was no campaign for the regularisation of these plots.

What struck the team in its investigations is that the two outstanding features of economic exploitation prevailing in the pre-1947 phase – viz, the land alienation through the vicious circle of abject poverty–usury and the legal appropriation of the forests by the State of which the adivasi had been the historical lord both lived on in the post-1947 phase. Especially so because of the CPI(M)'s political inability to cope with land alienation and its legalistic stand on the forest question. (in fact, as is described in the Conclusions, the role of CPI (M) on the question of indebtedness was to maintain, in a modified form, the pre-1947 relationships.)

## Formation of Kashtakari Sanghatana

Between 1976 and 1978 a series of study camps were organised with young adivasi men and women by some of those earlier working in the Catholic mission in the area. These included a Jesuit priest, Peter D'Mello, who later changed his name to Pradeep Prabhu. Nicholas Cardozo and Sylvia D Souza, who joined later, became Nickybhau and Susheila, respectively. They had become

convinced that the present activities of the Catholic Church in Dahanu-Talasari were not adequate to deal with people's problems. They found the Church colluding with the vested interests there, preaching acceptance of exploitation and suffering on occasions when people needed to resist. For instance, when the Government Dairy Scheme at Dapcheri was started, dispossessing them of their land, a large number of tribals (many of them Christian), the Church told them not to resist eviction.

...two activists of the Sanghatana, Nickybhau Cardozo and Pradeep Prabhu (previously known as Peter D'Mello who chose an Indian name deliberately) were Jesuits, who broke off all relations with the mission establishment to become part of the Sanghatana. The Jesuit organisation of which they were members has formally expelled Nickybhau but have not taken an official position as yet in regard to Pradeep. The expulsion has been motivated by their direct and open opposition to conversion and the alignment of the church with the rich, the powerful and vested interest. Its position being that religion has only resulted in the division of the poor and that religion serves the ideology of the status quo, rationalises the present unjust system, and displaces the attention of the poor into the aspiration of a next life and in that perpetuates the present unjust state of affairs.

(from a Kashtakari Sanghatana note.)

Pradeep Prabhu was expelled from the order in 1982. Susheila D'Souza was never a nun, as has sometimes been claimed, but was working with the nuns in Ashagad on the mission's projects there. When these activists began working as Kashtakari Sanghatana, they severed all ties with the Catholic mission there and worked independently.

These study camps culminated in the 1978 formation of the Kashtakari Sanghatana, an organisation committed to fighting the exploitation of the adivasis by collective action. It defined itself as a non-party Left organisation. It placed an emphasis on raising awareness stage by stage as people took collective action, realising at each stage



their own strength and their objectives. Once formed, the Sanghatana spread rapidly. Perhaps the period of rapidest growth was between 1978 and 1980.

## Issues Taken Up by Sanghatana

The Kashtakari Sanghatana, over the five years since it was formed, has been taking up a variety of issues that immediately affect the adivasis of the area. Taking up the two broad modes of exploitation mentioned earlier (the land alienation through usury and the appropriation of the forests by the State) both of which have been sustained with the pushing of liquor, or toddy, the creation of communal divisions among the adivasis and daily repression, the Sanghatana pitted itself directly against the related interests. It has repeatedly carried out programmes against moneylending, on occasions taking processions to the moneylender's house and forcing him to return payments or to cancel debts. It has carried out repeated campaigns to stop the sale of 'kala gool' (black jaggery, which is only good for making liquor; many shopkeepers refuse to sell kerosene unless the adivasis buy the kala gool as well!). On this, however, the Sanghatana has had very limited success. (The CPI(M), on the other hand, believes the campaign is altogether wrong-headed, and that excessive drinking can only be controlled with social change. It feels there is no 'pushing' of alcohol in the area.)

Most importantly, the Sanghatana took up the issue of the regularisation of 'encroachments' on forest lands. By 1979, they formed a major contingent of the Maharashtra Joint Action Committee of organisations fighting for the regularisation of these forest plots. Other organisations included Bhoomi Sena of Palghar and Shramik Sanghatana of Dhule. The CPI(M) joined them in pressing for the demand of regularisation of all the encroachments of between 1960 and 1978. However the CPI(M), which was a partner in the Progressive Democratic Front government of Sharad Pawar, agreed to a privately negotiated deal with government. By this deal encroachments of only between 1972 and 1978 were regularised. It then with-

drew from the agitation. The other organisations felt the stand to be illogical. It excluded the majority of the encroached land, and regularised newer encroachments while leaving older ones illegal.

On the forests issue, Kashtakari Sanghatana has been taking up a consistent campaign, including demonstrations in Dahanu and in Bombay, publicity, and legal action in the Supreme Court. Pradeep Prabhu, Sanghatana activist, wrote a letter regarding the destruction of these encroachments, which letter was later converted into a Supreme Court writ petition. On this pending a judgement, the judges have stayed in August 1983 all destruction of crops on these encroachments. The single campaign which adivasis in the area mentioned to the team as the most significant of the Sanghatana's was over the forest plots issue. It seems to account for a great deal of the Sanghatana's popularity.

## Early Police Repression

During the early phase of the Kashtakari Sanghatana, repression came directly from the police. Between 1978 and 1980, the

police used a variety of means to harass, intimidate or outright attack the Sanghatana members. The following is a small selection of examples of common tactics:

- ★ Attacks on demonstrators: eg, 24-8-79, lathi-charge and arrest of Satyagrahis agitating over forest lands issue in Talasari.
- ★ Attacks on those who made complaints against Range Forest Officers, police etc: eg, 9-4-79 beating of villagers who complained of molestation by RFO Bhandar; 3-12-79 arrest and torture of Jumna Masmar in connection with a complaint made against the forester of the Madgaon beat.
- ★ Refusal to investigate charges of assault registered by the people: eg, inaction over the 28-4-79 molestation of Mahi Dandekar, Haladpada.

★ Arrest of activists on trumped-up charges: eg. 1-4-79 arrest of three Sanghatana activists on dacoity charges.

★ Refusal to protect demonstrators against goonda attacks : eg. the 28-1-79 CPI(M) -led violent counter-morcha at a money-lender's house in Amboli. The police stood aside and watched the attack on the Sanghatana demonstrators. This last strategy is significant because it evidently proved most convenient, and pointed to the future approach of the police in dealing with such situations.

## 1980 Assembly Elections and Aftermath

It is interesting to note that, in the 1980 elections, the Kashtakari Sanghatana decided to mobilise support for the CPI(M), despite

the hostile incidents that had already taken place. The Sanghatana felt that first, the CPI(M), whatever its faults, was a Left organisation, and secondly, the attacks might be the work of lower-level cadre without the sanction of the party as a whole. Uptil the 1980 elections, Kashtakari Sanghatana had not publicised the CPI(M)'s attacks on them.

CPI (M)'s margin of victory in Talasari was 6,000 votes. The Sanghatana claimed it had mobilised 7,000 votes ; the CPI (M) claimed the figure was only 2,000. If the Sanghatana's claim was genuine, it would certainly have increased the insecurity of the CPI (M) *vis-a-vis* the Sanghatana. At any rate, after the elections, the attacks started in full force. The following is a list made by the Sanghatana of the major attacks by the CPI (M) on villages with affiliations to the Sanghatana.

### *List by Kashtakari Sanghatana of Major Incidents of Organised Violence by CPI(M) Elements Acting on Behalf of Local Vested Interests.*

No	Date	Place	Type of Violence
1	28- 1-79	Amboli	Attack on Morcha
2	15- 8-80	Saiwan	Attack on men/women activists
3	18-10-80	Shisne	Dacoity & assault
4	18-10-80	Gangangaon	Dacoity & assault
5	4-10-81	Ambesari	Dacoity & assault
6	15-11-81	Dhamangaon	Dacoity & assault
7	6- 2-82	Kainad	Assault on tenants (5 incidents)
8	13- 2-82	Savroli	Dacoity & assault
9	28- 2-82	Dhundelwadi	Assault on women
10	28- 2-82	Talasari	Assault
11	25- 2-82	Savroli	Assault
12	20- 4-82	Haladpada	Assault
13	1- 5-82	Saiwan	Assault
14	1- 5-82	Savroli	Assault
15	1- 5-82	Savroli	Dacoity & assault
16	2- 5-82	Savroli	Dacoity & assault
17	8- 5-82	Savroli	Dacoity
18	10- 5-82	Sukhadamba	Dacoity, assault, gang rape & destruction of houses
19	19- 5-82	Khinoli	Dacoity, assault & rape
20	19- 5-82	Sukhadamba	Dacoity
21	23- 5-82	Talasari	Dacoity
22	24- 5-82	Haladpada	Dacoity & assault
23	24- 6-82	Haladpada	Dacoity

No	Date	Place	Type of Violence
24	27- 6-82	Haladpada	Dacoity
25	21- 9-82	Chalni	Dacoity & assault
26	5-10-82	Khinoli	Dacoity
27	13-10-82	Chamarshet	Dacoity
28	13-11-82	Thilonda	Dacoity
29	13- 3-83	Khinoli	Arson
30	24- 6-83	Sukhadamba	Assault
31	30- 6-83	Sukhadama	Assault
32	17- 9-83	Ganjad	Dacoity
33	18- 9-83	Sukhadamba	Destruction of houses
34	20- 9-83	Kainad	Dacoity, destruction & assault
35	8-10-83	Khinoli	Arson

### References

The following sources were relied upon heavily for chapters III and IV.

1. *Adivasi revolt* - Godavari Parulekar's autobiographical account of the Warli uprising.
2. *Report on the Aboriginal and Hill Tribes of the Partially Excluded Areas in the province of Bombay* (1938) by Symington, I.C.S.?
3. *The Warlis in Struggle (Thane, Maharashtra)*, part of an unpublished paper by Rajen Sing, was an important source.

4. *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, vol. XIII, part II.

5. "Peasant Organisations in Thane", Ashok Upadhyay, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30-1-82.

6. BUILD Documentation Centre's collection of papers regarding forests were also very useful.

We also gained much from conversations with academicians who had studied the area.

## V

# The Attacks : Three Instances in Detail; A List of Attacks Recorded by the Team

The majority of the members of the fact-finding team arrived in Dahanu on the morning of October 29. A second lot arrived a day later. The last members to return returned to Bombay on November 2, at night. The team split into groups to be able to cover different areas as the total area to be covered was large. The team thus spent five days in the area, but covered more ground than it might have done had it moved all together.

As the total number of incidents recorded by the team was very large, and as it is through

the details that a fuller understanding of these incidents emerges, it is best to give a few instances at length.

### Khinoli Khoripada

As the incident of police firing at Khinoli Khoripada was, as it were, what triggered off the constitution of a fact-finding team, it is worth describing first of all that incident and its background.

Khoripada is one of the 10 or so padas of Khinoli village, Dahanu taluka. It is surroun-

ded by hills on each side (hence its name: a 'khor' is a valley). Khoripada is thus quite cut off—it being several kilometres to the next pada. Khoripada's 40 huts house about 180 people, about 45 of whom are grown men. In the southern side of Khoripada runs a stream.

Khoripada had been a Congress-I hamlet in the past, there were only a few CPI (M) supporters in the village at any time.

## The Birth of a CPI (M) Activist

At one point one resident, Janu Laxya Rautya, combined several different key roles. He was a catechist, and did whatever work the missionaries told him to do in the area. In addition, he owned a small shop in the village and gave out loans to other villagers. He was also a labour sub-contractor. He hired the Khoripada villagers to gather and cart away wood felled in an illegal jungle contract. The villagers claim he cheated them out of over two thousand rupees in wages, and the resident's insistence on receiving these wages led to tension. He also extracted labour from the other residents in building his house.

Kaluram Dhangda, a Kashtakari Sanghatana activist, met Janu Rautya in 1977 when he attended a joint Janata Party-CPI(M) rally, and again in 1978 when he attended one of KS's early 'shibirs'. The Sanghatana entered the village through Janu Rautya: he became their representative there. Once they held a public meeting at which people came forward with their grievances against him. Janu was also present. He promised to pay the full amount he owed and to stop his various other offensive behaviour. But it did not stop, and he did not repay. The rest of the village, including his brother, was united against him, and though no campaign had yet been carried on against him, Janu by 1980 felt the isolation and the risk to be too great: he left for a neighbouring pada. Since then, Janu Rautya is said to have joined the CPI (M) as a full-fledged activist. He gave a speech at a CPI(M) public meeting of October 13, 1983. Dharma Mhada, a leading activist of CPI (M) in Dahanu told the team that Janu Rautya was certainly a

member (and yes, he was still a catechist). Janu was also seen in two of the latter attacks on Khoripada, [and villagers believe he is instrumental in rounding up people for attacks.

The Congress party's activities in Khoripada seem never to have been particularly important. The villagers remember only that they come for votes at elections and leave them alone for the rest of the time. The villagers said the Congress never physically coerced them into anything, although on two occasions they stole part of the villagers' crops. The villagers had all, however, attended CPI (M) meetings, whether members or not. One CPM person would be told to make everyone turn out for the meetings. A former CPI (M) member, Padya Nathya Kuvra, described how he used to round up members and how, if told by such CPI (M) activist as Mangalya Bhogade or Dharma Mhada, he would beat people.

## Forests Issue

Perhaps the most immediate problem in this area is protection of 'encroachments'. Only two households have farms, the rest cultivate 'forest-plots', i.e. they encroach on government-owned land. The Forest Officer in the past used to destroy these encroachments, making the residents utterly destitute. Where the forest had been before, it had been denuded, but adivasis could not grow crops even on that deforested area. When approached on the issue of encroachments, CPI (M) used to say it had taken up the issue with the concerned government officer.

Shortly thereafter, however, they would return with the response that nothing could be done, as they had confirmed that it was indeed an official order, not the mistake of some lower-level official. The cultivation of forest plots speaks of several central features of the inhabitants' lives, not only in Dahanu but in all of Maharashtra. (i) The alienation of their normally cropped land. (ii) The lack of farm inputs and credit which would increase the productivity of land already under cultivation. (iii) The appropriation by the State and denudation by contractors of the forests, which used to supply



several basic needs of food, medicine and shelter of the adivasis.

Kashtakari Sanghatana's first programme in the area was of crop protection; and on this they have had some success. After a series of mobilisations and legal actions, government action against encroachment is today only a fine (amounting in a sense, to a rent) which the adivasis are more able to afford than the earlier destruction of crops. The residents also used to face various forms of harassment and extortion by the forest officer. For instance, he would not allow them to gather wood for building their houses without paying him a bribe. The Sanghatana organised them on this issue and filed cases against the forest officer. Today, in their village, the forest officer has stopped extracting bribes.

## The Sanghatana and the Church

Khoripada, contrary to CPI (M) accounts, is not a Christian hamlet. About 10 to 12 of the households are Christian and there was at one point a mission school in the hamlet; but the other 30-40 families are Warli Hindus. Those who had been Christians, moreover, said that since Kashtakari Sanghatana started to work there, they had moved away from the Church. The Sanghatana tells us to struggle, but the Church tells us to maintain the peace and not create conflict."

## The Attacks

The other padas in Khinoli are CPI (M) supporters, though Kashtakari Sanghatana had some followers in two or three of these padas (eg. Nirgudpada). The Khoripada residents were often warned that they should join 'lal bavta', but it was not until May 1982 that the first attack occurred. Some hundreds of men shouting pro-CPI (M) slogans attacked on the morning of May 19. (Rautya was one of them.) Khoripada residents fled to the jungle while houses were looted and smashed, goats and chicken were stolen, and those residents who could not run away fast enough were beaten.

Girji Gondya Rautya was in her house with her husband when they came to the

village. As she ran out to collect the goats, she and her husband got separated. She remembers ten or fifteen men chasing her at first, but as she ran away up the slope of the hill there were more. She doesn't know how many. She was caught, then beaten badly, then raped. She became unconscious after being raped a third time. She was left unconscious until late in the day, when the villagers returned. The police also came to make enquiries but insisted that they should take her to the hospital alone. The villagers refused. They took her to the hospital themselves the next day. The day after the offence the case was registered, but no one has been arrested, though specific names were named. Meanwhile Girji Rautya lay in a semi-conscious state in hospital for five days; even now she is emaciated and can barely walk. (The villagers say that after she had become unconscious the attackers had also pushed an axe-handle into her vagina.)

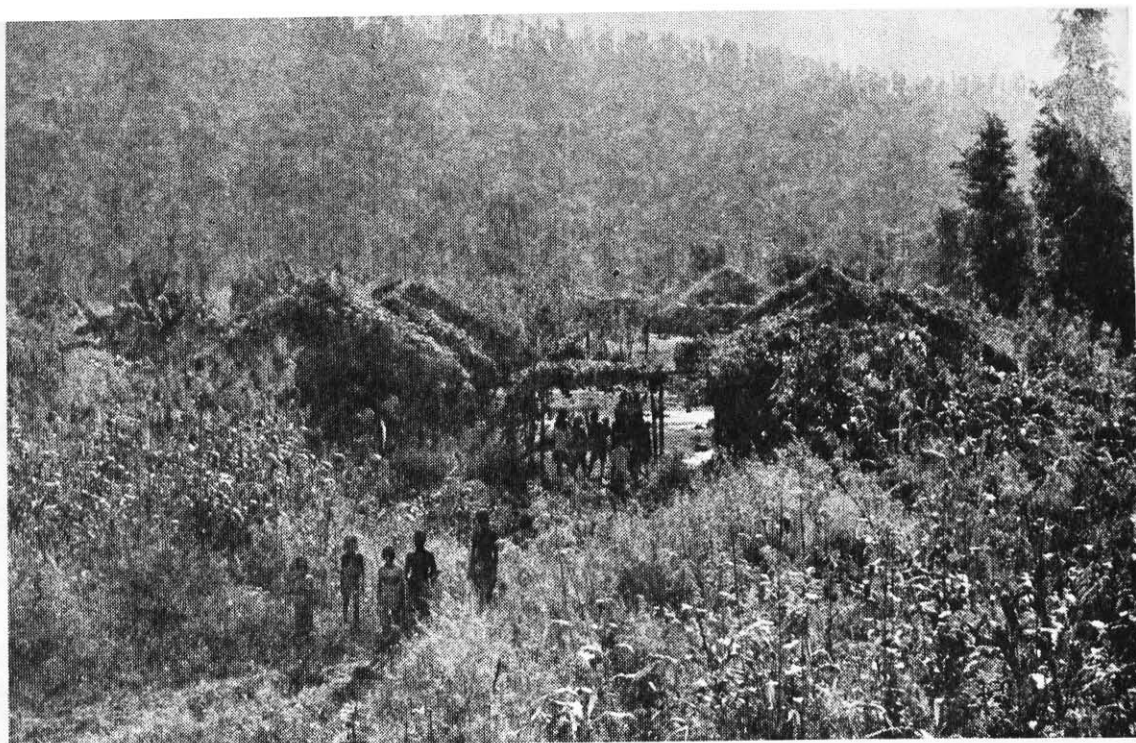
Since May 1982, there have been many smaller attacks, 'warnings', carried out by ten to fifty people. In these attacks the villagers would be told to leave the Sanghatana and join Lal Bavta, and then goats and chicken would be stolen.

Since the filing of a writ petition in the Supreme Court by Pradeep Prabhu, a Kashtakari Sanghatana activist, the police have agreed to post three constables at Khoripada for protection. Yet, at the time of fresh attacks, this police protection has not been of much use. For instance, on October 1983, a mob of residents numbering 400 came to Khoripada and threw stones. They stood further up the slope, so the Khoripada residents could not hit back with stones. The police showed their rifles, but did nothing. However, it might have been because of the police presence that residents did not flee this time, despite the fact that many were hit by the stones. (The team met Babji Dasma Rautye, who still had scars on his scalp and midriff from this attack.) After a few hours, though, the attackers left.

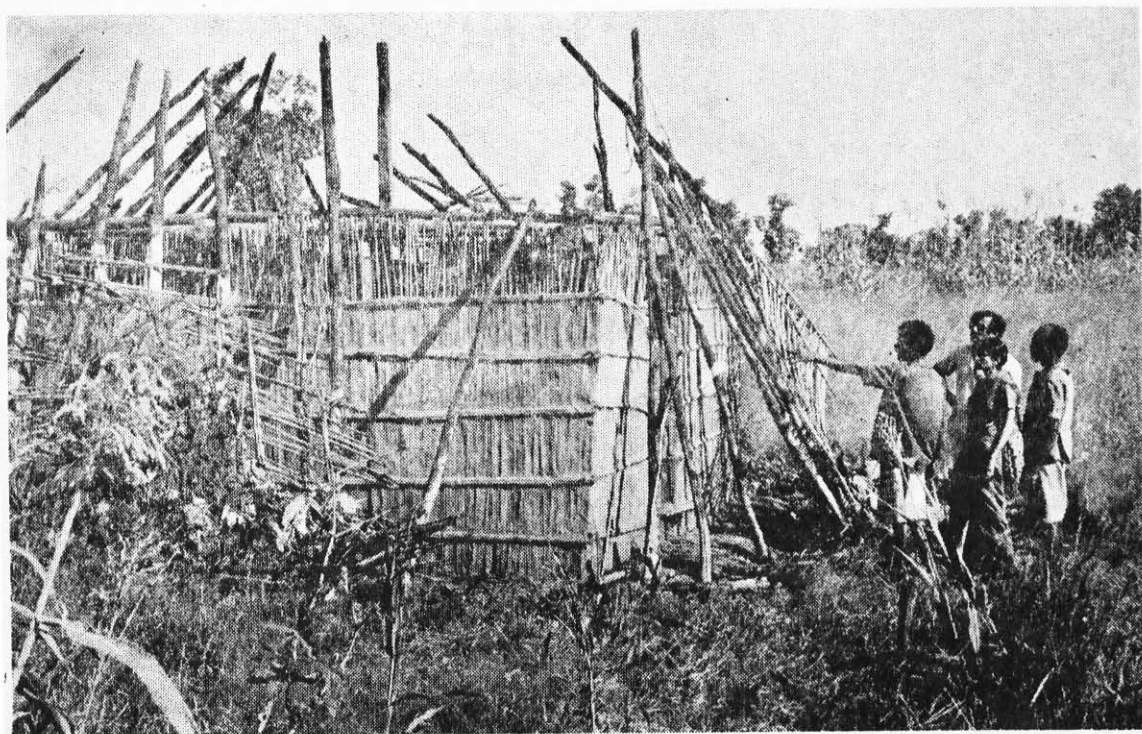
## October 8th 1983

There are several versions of the events of Khoripada on October 8. Since the eye-





**Khinoli Khoripada : isolated, surrounded by mountains and tall grass**



**Khinoli Khoripada : The burnt hut**

**(Photos : Sam Pareth)**

witness accounts of one side conflict with those of the other one can only hypothesize what really happened, using the internal consistency and plausibility of the different accounts as a guide.

The team obtained several different accounts from the CPI (M). The first came from an interview with P. Rangnekar; the second from a news paper report in the *Daily*; the third from an issue of *Jivan Marg*, a CPI (M) organ; the fourth from a cyclostyled message given out by the CPI (M) office in Dahanu; the fifth from an interview with Dharma Mhada, CPI (M) activist; and the last from an article in *People's Democracy* by Godavari Parulekar.

### CPI (M) Accounts

The (CPI (M) accounts contradict each other on several particulars, but broadly speaking they might be knit together as follows. Somewhere between four and six followers of CPI(M) from Khinoli Sabarpada (accompanied, according to one account, by seven children) came at about 9 am on October 8 to the stream running by Khoripada reportedly to fish for crabs. They were sighted by a havaladar who called out to other two stationed there and to Kashtakari Sanghatana followers. About 30 people gathered and began to beat the four to six adults. The seven children ran off to the adjoining padas and returned with about 50 to 60 people to demand the release of those who were being held. According to one CPI(M) account, the police and the Kashtakari Sanghatana immediately opened fire on them: according to another the four to six people were released before they opened fire. CPI(M) accounts insist that Kashtakari Sanghatana followers had country-made guns and each earlier CPI(M) account insisted that Comrade Soma Rinjhad, a CPI (M) activist died from a Kashtakari Sanghatana bullet. However, the police themselves in their interviews (and in the text of a wireless message) claim that their bullet killed Rinjhad. It seems unlikely that they would claim credit for the killing if they could avoid doing so. A later statement of Godavari Parulekar claims that Rinjhad was fired upon *jointly* by the Kashtakari Sanghatana activists and

and the police. Then according to this account, the wounded Rinjhad was spared by a Kashtakari Sanghatana follower and later stored by the rest of the villagers.

### Villagers' Accounts

According to the Khoripada villagers, themselves, what happened was as follows: At about 9 am on October 8, one of the havalgars was bathing in the stream. Devji Laxya Rautye saw four CPI(M) men across the stream. The villagers told the team that there was no question of these men crab fishing as crabs cannot be got in the day time but at night. Moreover, they pointed out that, in the places the CPI (M) men came from, crab was plentiful. Rinjhad, the man who died, was from Dhabadi Dulshatpada, four kilometres away. (According to the CPI(M) this was because he was visiting some friends at Sabarpada or Khomarpada). The Khoripada residents say there were no children with the CPI(M) men. The men were not captured by the police. As the policeman approached them, and shouted questions at them, one of them called out to others who began to appear (the monsoon had not quite ended and the grass was very tall). There were three large groups of people coming (the villagers say there were 250, 250, and 500, from three directions). The villagers say many were carrying country-made revolvers and guns. The three groups began to throw stones at first. The residents threw stones back. The attacker also fired guns. (One Padhya Nathya Kuvra says he was hit by a bullet ricocheting off his sick). Then the mob attacked houses on the north-western side, burning one. As the mob did so, the Khoripada residents were calling upon the police to fire. Finally, the police fired, and the vilagers say the bullet hit Gondya Soma Rinjhad in the head, whereupon the mob started to run away.

One of the two huts that had been attacked was that of Girji Gondya Rautya. She had testified about the assault on her earlier this year before the District Judge appointed by the Supreme Court to go into a series of such incidents (on the basis of the earlier mentioned writ petition filed by Pradeep Prabhu). The villagers felt that her hut had

been attacked as a warning that she should not testify in any future criminal case arising out of the writ petition.

## Police Version

The police repeat much of the Khoripada residents' version: The following text of a wireless message tallied closely with the version provided to the team by Inspector Thadvi of Kasa Police Station. 23.00 hrs, 10-10-83.

"VIOLENT MOB OF AROUND 1000 BELONGING TO CPI (M) FROM DEVSHI DHABADI, SUKHADAMBA PATILPADA ETC., ARMED WITH STICKS, KNIVES, SLINGSHOTS AND COUNTRY MADE GUNS STARTED SHOUTING 'ADIVASIS OF KHORIPADA BELONGING TO KASHTAKARI SANGHATANA SHOULD JOIN CPI (M). THEY WILL BE FINISHED IF THEY DON'T.' POLICE WARNED THEM TO GO AWAY BUT THEY DID NOT DISPERSE AND STARTED PELTING STONES AT THE VILLAGERS AND POLICE. STOP POLICE OPENED FIRE IN THE AIR. MOB DIVERTED INTO THREE GROUPS AND SURROUNDED THE VILLAGERS AND THE POLICEMEN. MEANWHILE THE HOUSE OF RAGHYA DHANJI LADKYA WAS SET ON FIRE AND THE HOUSE OF GONDYA RATTAN RAUTYA WAS DAMAGED. A SHOT WAS FIRED FROM THE MOB ON THE POLICEMEN. THE POLICEMEN FIRED IN SELF-DEFENCE AND TO PROTECT THE LIFE AND PROPERTY OF THE VILLAGERS. AS A RESULT OF THE STONE THROWING OF CPM PEOPLE, 7 ADIVASIS AND 2-3 POLICEMEN WERE INJURED. PADHYA NATHYA KUNVRA WAS INJURED DUE TO FIRING BY CPM MOB. POLICE FIRED 11 ROUNDS OF 410 MUSKET. ONE GONDYA SOMA RINJHAD OF 32 YEARS AGE OF DHABADI DHULSHETPADA (CPM) DIED ON THE SPOT IN POLICE FIRING. 1 CRACKER AND 1 COUNTRY-MADE GUN WERE FOUND NEAR THE BODY. THE MOB TRIED TO TAKE AWAY THE DEAD BODY. THEY DISPERSED WHEN POLICE FIRED 1 ROUND. ONLY 1 DEAD AND NO INJURED DUE TO POLICE

FIRING. ALL INJURED DUE TO STONE PELTING WERE ADMITTED IN JAWAHAR HOSPITAL. PADHYA NATHYA KUNVRA HAS BEEN ADMITTED TO CIVIL HOSPITAL DISPENSARY AT JAWAHAR. POST MORTEM WAS DONE ON DEAD BODY OF GONDYA SOMA RINJHAD AT JAWAHAR AND OFFENCE REGISTERED AT JAWAHAR POLICE STATION. DCP WAS IN ATTENDANCE.

WIRELESS FROM D S P O L TO THANE CONTROL ROOM 23.00 HOURS FROM D S P O L THANE RURAL CAMP AT JAWAHAR.

(This message was obtained by a journalist investigating before the team left for Dahanu.)

## Conclusions

The team's hypotheses as to what really happened can be summarised as follows:

## Unanswered Questions

The Khoripada incident, where a clash between supporters of CPI(M) and of Kashtakari Sanghatana resulted in a police firing, deserves further inquiry in several respects.

First, it seems unlikely that the victim of the firing was actually killed by the firing itself. If the version the residents gave is correct, he would have to run some fifty yards from the place at which he was hit to the spot at which he fell; thus the police story that he was hit by a bullet in his head is doubtful. The police would not supply to the team the postmortem report of Gondya Soma Rinjhad. (The team has applied for a copy. What led the team to be suspicious of the police account of Gondya Rinjhad's death was the behaviour of Inspector Thadvi. Initially, he was cordial and expansive as the team asked general questions about the Kashtakari Sanghatana. When asked about the specifics of Gondya Rinjhad, he became curt; when asked about the details of the post-mortem, and for a copy of the Post-mortem, he closed the conversation abruptly.



The team has not received a copy of the post-mortem report to date) It seemed possible to the team that he was hit in some other part of the body and was killed thereafter. Who precisely was responsible for the death the team was unable to determine, though CPI (M) has accused a Kashtakari Sanghatana follower of having speared him to death.

## **CPI (M) Elements did Attack**

Secondly, it seems clear from the accounts of Khoripada residents that a mob led by CPI (M) elements actually did attack Khinowli Khoripada on October 8, throwing stones and attacking two huts, burning one. The residents say it was composed of three sections and numbered 1000. This has been preceded on October 4 by what the inhabitants say was 400 strong stone-throwing attack. (The various CPI (M) versions of the October 8 incident are highly implausible. The stream at which the incident began is clearly part of Khoripada and miles away from any other pada. The CPI (M) men who supposedly came to fish crab came from places where crab is said to be more plentiful than here—some of the participants came from over 10 kilometres away; and apparently crab fishing is done at night, not at 9.00 am. Moreover, CPI (M) accounts in the party organ and in their cyclostyled handout, contradict each other on several important particulars and CPI (M) leaders' statements further contradict these.)

From the numbers involved and three-pronged manner of approach, it seems that the whole attack had been carefully planned. As for the use of guns, the CPI (M)'s repeated claim that it was the Kashtakari Sanghatana followers who killed Gondya Rinjhad by firing is absurd. Why should the police claim credit for a firing they did not carry out? Secondly, the team felt that the one wound it was shown by Kashtakari Sanghatana follower might well have been from a splinter of buckshot or an air-gun pellet; there were no serious bullet injuries. Thus it was impossible to verify the residents' report that the mob came bearing real guns. But at any rate, the fear a mob of this size could inspire in a hamlet with less than 50 grown

men should not be underestimated. It was not a clash: it was an attack.

## **An Earlier Attack; a Victim**

The team also met Girji Gondya Rautya, who had been severely beaten and raped by a similar mob in May 1982. She has testified before the district judge appointed by the Supreme Court to look into some incidents (on the basis of the writ petition filed by Pradeep Prabhu, a Kashtakari Sanghatana activist). Here was one of the two houses damaged in the October 8 attack. It seems possible that the singling out of her house was intended as a warning against her testifying in any future criminal case. (The team also recorded elsewhere how CPI (M) elements had in the past pressed witnesses in a rape case to turn hostile).

## **How the Police Gain**

The team would like to emphasise the following points: the attack was only the most recent incident in a long campaign; the campaign has been carried out with the police's deliberate refusal to act, and occasionally their open collusion with CPI (M). However, the police's new position in the attacked villages, and their fresh leverage, pose a danger to the Kashtakari Sanghatana's earlier work. It is interesting to note that this situation has been the end-product of the CPI (M) campaign.

A second example, from an area further to the west complements the first:

### ***Kainad :***

Kainad has 10 hamlets (padas). Three hamlets, viz, Naikpada, Bundkedpada and Mallawkarpada are the hamlets that have faced continuous harassment.

### ***Naikpada***

Naikpada has around 60-70 houses.

(a) Land relations : Almost all households cultivate land as tenants of a landlord named Jhaiwalla. They have paid him rent for the past 10 years. The rent is being

paid in cash. Before this, they tried to pay rent in the form of paddy or labour. Presently the rent is paid at the rate of Rs 61 for a specified unit of land. They have been cultivating these lands as tenants for generations. Only one crop of paddy is cultivated in a year. For most of the tillers the yield lasts for about four months. For the rest of the year, most of the people have to migrate to Bombay and other areas to find jobs in brick kilns, salt pans and on construction sites. A few may find jobs in near by farms. These people have not benefited from the Tenancy Act. Therefore, securing ownership of the land, they feel, is for them one of the main demands.

(b) Forests: More than half of the households in the hamlets are cultivating plots on forest lands. Some of them have been holding these plots since their fore fathers. They have to pay heavy fines for cultivating these plots; and even after doing this continuously for some years their crops had been destroyed. Legalising these plots has been another main demand for them, because even the 1979 settlement has not provided for legalising these lands. The 1979 settlement, accepted by the CPI (M), legalised forest land that was encroached only between 1972 and 1978 and left illegal the land that had been held by the adivasis for generations.

## How the Adivasis Survive

Apart from cultivation, they get wood from the forest which they use as fuel, for building huts, and for burning the fields before ploughing. They also depend on old roots found in the jungle as food during the lean months before the monsoons. When the adivasis would go into the forests for this, they would face a lot of harassment from the forest officials. Apart from demanding chicken, liquor, and money they would also make the adivasis pay fines.

Tenancy rights over the land, and legalisation of forest plots, are necessary demands for the adivasis not even for the betterment of their condition, but just for their bare survival. This is because of the extreme backwardness of the agriculture, combined

with the nondevelopment of that region (hence no job opportunities). This leaves the adivasis only this means of survival.

## CPI(M)'s Achievements

From what the people said it emerged that apart from waging a struggle and getting bonded labour (*veth*) abolished (pre-1947), the CPI (M) had not done anything in real terms to solve their immediate problems. Rather, the picture of CPI (M) in their minds was that of an established parliamentary party which promised that everything would be done once they came into power, asking people to put their seal on the hammer and sickle during election time. It was a party that threatened and bullied and forced them to come for meetings and programmes. Refusal to go for a meeting would be answered with blows and even maiming of their livestock.

The CPI (M), the people said had never taken up any programme to help stop the day-to-day harassment extortion and molestation of their women by the forest officials and guards. In regard to the forest plots, the CPI (M) had taken part nominally in an agitation in 1979. The adivasis of Naikpada had participated in the CPI (M) organised morcha. After this, the CPI (M) was party to the 1979 settlement by which hardly any of them gained land. Even after this, the CPI (M) justified the 1979 settlement and asked the adivasis not to demand ownership of their forest plots since the land belonged to the government.

## Antecedents of the Attack

The CPI (M) role in this area is most strongly seen in its relation to the struggle of the adivasis against the local landlord, Jhaiwalla. When the people were ready to put up a struggle, the CPI (M) did not take up this issue, but on the contrary, obstructed them. In this situation, the adivasis, who had heard of the Kashtakari Sanghatana as an organisation which helps the people to get back their lands, went to the Sanghatana for help.



## Adivasis Evicted

The government had started constructing a canal in the area under which it was to take over land that was being cultivated by about 200 tenant adivasis. The landlord, Jhaiwalla, was to get compensation from the government and the adivasis were left both land-less and without any compensation. The affected adivasis went to Shankar Chavan (CPI (M)-Ex-MLA) who refused help; saying that since the government was to take over the land, there was no point fighting with the landlord and that now it was impossible to get the land back. Therefore, the Kainad Naikpada adivasis, who had heard of the Kashtakari Sanghatana, went to a Sanghatana meeting at Kasa to see if they could get any help there. Kashtakari Sanghatana, in this meeting, promised to take this issue to the courts. After this, Sanghatana activists came to Naikpada and help meetings with the people. When the CPI (M) got to know of it, it started intimidating the people.

In the meantime, the project was dropped by the government. The tenants held on to their lands and continued to pay rent to Jhaiwalla. But because of what had happened, Jhaiwalla increased his harassment of them in various ways. Those in the employ of the landlord who were instruments in this harassment and intimidation of the people, were also known and active members of the CPM, chief among these being Rasma Janya Gawti.

This conflict culminated in a confrontation in February 1982, when the adivasis had gone to cut grass on land that they said was theirs. Jhaiwalla came here armed and with the thugs that he employed, and fired in the air, and thus frightened the adivasis away. The adivasis had then filed a police complaint.

Sensing the defiant mood of the adivasis, the sarpanch of the village, Babu Radke Katela, came to the house of Shankar Shirad Meda, an active tenant activist, and threatened him. Immediately thereafter, on February 6, 1982, Shankar Meda's house was attacked by CPM persons. The walls

of the house were broken, the house was looted and chicken stolen.

The CPI (M) wanted the people to break links with the Kashtakari Sanghatana. This increased the tension between Naikpada residents (who by now had become staunch followers of Kashtakari Sanghatana) and the CPI (M).

## The Attack

On September 20, 1983, CPI (M) organised 700 to 800 people from distant villages to attack Naikpada. At about 8 in the morning, they marched into the village from three directions. Noticing the attackers, the residents of Naikpada ran into the jungles. One of the residents, Babu Gujad, was caught in the jungle and brought to the village and badly beaten up before his wife. They left him only after his wife pleaded that he was old and sick and if beaten any more would surely die.

## Breaking an Organisation

Two descriptions of attacks on activists of Kashtakari Sanghatana give a sense of how the terror was aimed at breaking the organisation. Both attacks occurred as people were assembling for public meetings—one on minimum wages, the other on molestation of women.

1) Kaluram Dhangda, Kashtakari Sanghatana activist: "On May 1, 1982, on worker's day, we had planned a meeting on Osarvira Baripada on minimum wages. Different sections were coming from different places; in all about 1000 were due. I was in the group from Sukhadamba and Chalni. There were 8 women and 72 men in the group, walking in a line. Just before Saiwan there is a small river at which we sat and ate our rotis before moving on. As we did four Congress-I men—Kisan Gowli, Govind Mahala, Baban Powar, Raghu Borsha—tried to stop us, asking where we were going, but we moved on. Later four more men who were drunk tried to stop us. Two of them had sticks, but still we moved on. At Saiwan itself, at the bus stop, 20 more with sticks stopped us. There were argu-

ments back and forth as we kept moving forward. Then Kisan Gowli beat me on the head, and about 10 others also stepped forward, beating me. I became unconscious."

Then others saw CPI(M) men gathering on the road. Soon there were around 300 of them. They started throwing stones at the Sanghatana members. The Sanghatana members retreated to the river, then fought back with stones. The (CPI(M) and Congress men were fighting side by side, in all about 500 strong.

The Sanghatana members told the team that they had earlier carried out a campaign against a Saiwan constable Daithanker who had extracted over Rs. 32,000 from the people for "surveying their land". After the campaign Daithanker was transferred. The Sanghatana members believe that Daithanker had paid the Congress-I and the CPI(M) leaders to carry out the attack.

From 8 am to 5.30 pm, a battle continued between the Congress I CPM group and the Kashtakari Sanghatana group at various points, as they moved from Saiwan to different padas in Chalni.

Kaluram claimed that 11 Sanghatana members were wounded by stones; one had a spear mark on his head; three were badly beaten with sticks; one was pushed right into river and broke his leg. Later Inspector Thadvi came with 10 other policemen to make enquiries. He told the Kashtakari Sanghatana members that they deserved to be finished off. No arrests were made in connection with the days incidents.

2) Nicky Cardozo former Sanghatana activist:

On August 15, 1980, we were going to take up the issue of molestation of women. There was to be a public meeting at Saiwan to be addressed by Chhaya Datar. We had also invited Ahila Rangnekar, but she did not come. The immediate issue was that a gramsevak in Chalni had raped the women. One of them was willing to testify. The others had been bullied (by CPI(M), members, we found

out) into not testifying. Only the one who had given birth five days before being raped was willing to testify.

Susheila, Ganpat, and I were going to the meeting. We found after we crossed the river near Saiwan that about 100 to 150 CPM members including Jai-ram Pagi and Trimbak Ferrari, CPI (M) activists, were shouting slogans against the Kashtakari Sanghatana. They came with sticks. They began beating us. They never hit on the head, they did not want to kill. They mainly beat us on the back and legs. They asked us 'This is Godavari Raj. How do you come here?'. Sushila was screaming, 'Help, Help.' Police were nearby they could see the spot. Earlier, they had watched the CPI (M) force leave, bearing sticks. But once Sushila and I got to the river where the water wasn't deep, we were safe.

Later, when we came to the meeting, we had ourselves medically examined. There were marks on our bodies, welts on Sushila's back. The medical documents show it. Chhaya Datar also examined us at the time. Then we went to the police to make a complaint, where the police told us that there was already a case filed against us."

The Chalni gramsevak was strongly supported by the (CPI(M). They put pressure on witnesses they filed counter-cases against the Sanghatana and Godavari publicly stated that no rape had occurred. The Chalni assistant sarpanch was a CPI(M) cardholder and the CPI(M) supported the union headed by the gramsevak himself.

(See Godavari Parulekar's interview, Appendix-I for remarks about the gramsevak and the attack on Nicky and Sushila.)

## List of Major Attacks Noted by the Team

1) Khinouli : Khoripada-	19- 5-82
2)	4-10-83
3)	8-10-83
4) Sukhadamba : Janoonpada-	10- 5-82
5) Shirsonpada-	19- 5-82
6) Patilpada -	18- 9-83
7) Saiwan-	15- 8-80
8)	1- 5-82
9) Chalni : Belpada-	21- 9-82

10) Thilonda-	13-11-82
11) Shisne : Patilpada-	18-10-80
12) Haladpada : Patilpada-	24- 4-82
13)	24- 5-82
14)	24- 6-82
15)	27- 6-82
16) Kainad : Naikpada-	6- 2-82

**Note :** This was one of a scenes of attacks carried out on the same day at different places as Kashtakari Sanghatana supporters gathered for a minimum wages meeeting-Talasari.

## VI CONCLUSIONS

### CPI (M), Congress, Police and Kashtakari Sanghatana

It was felt that a full report should not only record the attacks, but attempt to explain the roots of the attacks and the purpose they served. Since the violence came neither from the State nor directly from the landlords, such an explanation was all the more necessary. Through interviews with various people concerned, the team arrived at some assessment of the relationship between the various sections in this situation- including the CPI (M), the Congress-I, the police, and the Kashtakari Sanghatana. Broadly speaking the team found that the first three had frictions with each other, but a working arrangement existed: there would be no sustained conflict, and disagreements would be negotiated amicably. But all three had an utterly hostile relationship with the Kashtakari Sanghatana.

### CPI (M)'s Hostility : Different Levels

The CPI (M)'s hostility to the Sanghatana operates on several different levels: nationally, it is expressed as an ideological hostility; locally, it is expressed as territorial as well as communal, and is bound up with

a certain social position and role. The ideological position can be gathered from statements made by those such as Mrs. Parulekar, Lahenu Kom (MLA), Krishna Khopkar (Thane District Secretary), and P. Rangnekar.

### CPI (M)'s Ideological Stance

Mrs. Parulekar claimed, in a 1980 interview, that the Kashtakari Sanghatana was (i) linked to the world Council of Churches, (ii) funded by organisations that have links with the C.I.A., (iii) composed of extremists, disrupters, and antinationals who want to divide the Left from within, and so on. (See Appendix I). The CPI (M) Central Committee Report on political developments (June 1981) expanded on this theme :

"(The challenge from the religious Left)... Today the discontent has spread far and wide, and the adivasis are vulnerable to the separatist appeal. The situation is being fully exploited by some foreign Church missions which have firm roots among the adivasis in some areas and work in collusion with imperialist powers... A report submitted by the Thane District Secretary of our party, Comrade Khopkar, who is a member of the party's Maharashtra state committee, gives the following

account of such Church agents in the tribal Warli area of the district :

Now the Church missionaries call themselves Kashtakari Sanghatana (Toiler's Organisation) and declare it as a progressive Left democratic organisation and simultaneously a non-party organisation. In their study camp, their advice to the adivasis is as follows: (i) The adivasis are a different people. The other people are exploiters. If we went to be liberated completely we must throw out all non-adivasis from the area and we must have a republic of our own. Actually some of our people have established their own rule in Nagaland, Mizoram, etc. (ii) In the Soviet Union and China, workers are exploited and ill-treated and real democracy exists in the U.S.A. only. (iii) Christ alone can bring justice.

In the Warli areas, these agents of certain Church missions have organised assaults and attacks on our comrades. They indulge in slanderous propaganda and incite murders and clashes between adivasis and non-adivasis.

Lahanu Kom, in an interview (*Times of India*, October 14, 1983), repeated the Nagaland charge, and named four activists of Kashtakari Sanghatana who, he said, had gone to Nagaland for training in guerilla warfare and handling of guns.

## **CPI (M)'s Local Hostility : Communal**

Locally, the charge that the Kashtakari Sanghatana activists were missionaries was commonly made by the CPI(M). For instance, when the team visited Shisne Dongarpada, a CPI (M) hamlet, we were made to leave by a CPI (M) activist named Bhiku Katela, who called us 'padres'. Those who had attended CPI (M) public meetings said this was the central accusation against the Sanghatana. Several observers who had met CPI (M) workers of the area said that the strength and nature of their emotions about the Sanghatana were such that the attacks were the only logical outcome. The phrase used was "destroy the Kashtakari Sanghatana" the

phrase used by a lower-level CPI (M) worker (Sakharam Sapate) the team met outside the CPI (M) office in Dahanu, as he described the CPI (M) attack on the Kashtakari Sanghatana's mobilisation for a minimum-wages conference.

Another aspect of CPI (M)'s hostility towards the Sanghatana was territorial. The consistent question raised by the CPI (M) members and even by unaffiliated left sympathisers who might have been critical of the CPI (M)'s behaviour in the area was why the Kashtakari Sanghatana chose to constitute itself in an area where CPI (M) was working. Mr. P. Rangnekar asked members of the team: "It is true we have not achieved everything in Dahanu we would have liked. It is true that we have not created any great miracles. But we are doing some work organising adivasis. Why don't Kashtakari people work elsewhere?"

This attitude of the CPI (M) is understandable seen in the light of the historical importance (ergo the propaganda value) of the Warli revolt for the Maharashtra unit. But this notion of Dahanu-Talasari as being CPI (M)'s own territory did not affect its relations with the Congress-I and the R.S.S. (both active in the area) in the same devastating way as with the Sanghatana. Perhaps this is related to the latter's being a Left organisation an organisation which would put to the test the CPI (M)'s own claims of being struggle-oriented. Indeed, the rapid growth of the Sanghatana between 1978 and 1980 culminating in its considerable impact on the 1980 elections, may have been seen as a major invasion. It was perhaps the very threat to its reputation as a struggle-oriented Left organisation that led CPI (M) to react so strongly.

There seemed as the team set out, several possibilities. (i) CPI (M) might have become the party of the major landowning and trading interests in the area which were threatened by the Kashtakari Sanghatana. (ii) CPI (M) might have seen the Sanghatana as an electoral rival in its most important rural base. (iii) CPI (M) might have perceived the Sanghatana as agents of



Church or foreign subversion. (iv) Various local disputes and traditional rivalries might have got attributed to this rivalry.

None of these statements offered a complete picture. For the most part, it would be simply incorrect to say that CPI(M) had become the party of the landowners, traders and other vested interests: to that class the Congress had even better access. Nevertheless, there are numerous instances of CPI (M)'s defence of vested interests in a direct, collusive fashion.

### Direct Collusion

One example cited above was the conflict between the adivasis of Kainad Nalpada and the landlord Jhaiwalla. Another also cited was the counter morcha by CPI(M) at the Amboli moneylender's house. A similar instance the team recorded occurred at Haladpada.

The residents of Haladpada Patilpada, a Kashtakari Sanghatana stronghold used to work in a quarry at Haladpada. The men used to be paid Rs 6 a day, and the women were paid even less. Kashtakari Sanghatana organised a strike in which the demand was for Rs 12 a day. Lahanu Kom, Kisan Surti, and Barkya Korada came to the area. They told the people to call off the strike. The people refused. After four days, the strike was clearly successful: the owner was offering Rs. 8.50, but the workers refused, demanding Rs. 10.00, with both men and women receiving the same rate. The owner finally agreed to the new rate and put this undertaking down in writing. But the next day the Sanghatana members found when they turned up for work that 10 to 15 CPI (M) activists were guarding the gate, with 70 to 80 labourers working the quarry. The CPI (M) men told the Haladpada Patilpada residents: 'You're with the Sanghatana now, let them get you work'. Kashtakari Sanghatana activists cite many such instances, but the team did not have an opportunity to verify all of them.

## CPI (M)'s Relationship with Major Interests: Respect, Responsibility

In many areas, though, CPI (M)'s role was not that of the agent of the landlord, but of the responsible negotiating partner. The frictions of such a relationship inevitably led to hostilities on occasion. But these were limited and repairable, as the issue was generally wages for agricultural labour. One independent observer described the relationship between CPI (M) and the landlords as being unfriendly, while that between the Sanghatana and these interests was qualitatively more hostile.

Godavari Parulekar in 1980: "But also we are respected because, as they say, 'Godavari Raj, your people never killed a single landlord, never looted shops, never stole land. You did not believe in extremist tactics!'. One instance of such extremism she cited then was the gherao by Kashtakari Sanghatana of a Gangangaon moneylender, which she claimed involved housebreaking, dacoity, and molestation of women. Another was their campaign against the Chalni gram-sevak's attempted rape of a woman. On this Mrs Parulekar said that in fact, the gramsevak used to visit this woman and two others. They would always provide him with drink. But this time the woman had refused and he tried to beat her; but Mrs Parulekar explained, adivasi social custom being what it is the women would have not any hesitation in beating him back. "People are always giving out exaggerated stories about rape." (see Appendix I). Mrs Parulekar claims that the Kashtakari Sanghatana dubbed the gram sevak, forest guards, talatis and so on, as people's enemies and that they extended this list to 80 CPI(M)-supporting sarpanches, threatening them with physical annihilation if they did not join the Sanghatana.

### Loans and the CPI (M)

This attitude of the CPI(M) towards the major interests of respect, negotiation, and "responsible behaviour" has a certain correlation with the social position of CPI(M)



activists. What tended to happen, according to various independent sources, was this: During several months of the year, adivasis needed loans desperately, and at this point a CPI(M) activist, slightly better off and with a few acres of land and some status would obtain a large loan from the landlord. (The break up of the adivasi population in these talukas might be roughly as follows: 40 per cent agricultural labourers; 30 per cent poor peasants, with 2 to 3 acres, working their own land; 20 per cent middle peasants who can manage to see themselves through the 12 months with the produce of their land, employing a little labour; 10 per cent rich peasants, employing some labour, some irrigation, and doing some selling.) This loan would then be distributed among the rest of the residents of the pada in exchange for a later delivery of grass with which the activist would pay back the landlord, keeping a certain commission.

It is important to note that the grass trade is the scene of large-scale cheating of adivasis, through misweighing and underpaying. Moreover, a large percentage of adivasis were forced to give over a large percentage of their lands to grass-growing in order to repay the loans; In effect, the pre-1947 patterns were partially restored, using the CPI(M)'s social position as intermediary.

## A CPI (M) Activist in a CPI (M) Village

A sense of how CPI(M) operates locally was offered by a trip to Shisne Dongarpada. Members of the team arrived in the pada the day before Diwali. All the people in the village were moving in one direction—towards the house of Bhiku Katela, the local CPI(M) activist, to collect their wages for grass-cutting. Katela did not want to speak to the team, but he did talk briefly. Yes he did hire people to cut grass. What did we want with him? A large crowd, assembled in the porch of his house, was waiting for wages in fact, the entire pada seemed to have come there and three large stacks of notes guarded by two young men,

one wearing a red handkerchief, were the centre of attention. When pressed with some questions, Katela told us flatly: "Go get permission from Lahānu Kom or Dharma Mhada. Get out now." It was clearly an order repeated with some menace. As we were leaving, he stopped us "Why don't you return to where you came from and rejoin the rest of the padres?" he asked. The incident was brief, but several points emerged such as to whom the villagers were answerable; which leaders he in turn answered; and the communal nature of the propaganda carried out against the Sanghatana.

## CPI (M) as Intermediary

The CPI(M) thus operated as an intermediary between landlord-moneylenders and the poorer 70-80 per cent of the adivasis. In many places, 'active collusion with landlords' might thus be an inaccurate characterisation of CPI(M) activists' role. This suggests that they were the army of the landlords against peasant struggles, which is rather different from occupying a certain middle position in a structure of exploitation, perhaps paralysed by it, perhaps moved to a certain sort of action.

This middle position also parallels their position *vis à vis* the State: again an intermediary role, as the majority in the Talasari panchayati samiti and a sizeable minority in the Dahānu panchayati samiti. These large numbers of CPI (M)-supporting sarpanches exert a strong influence over the distribution of the various governmental schemes, and this allows for patronage on a wide scale, without much to differentiate it from the Congress's operations in the same area. These sarpanches are also related to a third facet of CPI (M)'s activities in the area: their electoral preoccupations. The panchayati patronage is reflected in their ability to turn out people for public meetings—what villagers affiliated to 'Kashtakari Sanghatana' claim are major coercive operations, carried out by important people in each village at the behest of the CPI (M).

Since CPI (M) sees its role in the area as being to place less emphasis on struggles,

to supervise the implementation of developmental schemes, and to preserve its electoral position. It is not surprising that it pits itself against a body founded on people's demands, agitations and struggles. This fact explains CPI (M)'s defence in general, and in specific situations of forest officials, gramsevak, talatis all those with whom it must maintain good relations in order to carry out its political programme.

## The Congress and the CPI (M)

But simply antagonism does not explain the attacks: the Congress I is also antagonistic to the Sanghatana. M.G. Kadu, Congress-I MLA from Dahanu, explained to the team in a long interview why he felt the Kashtakari Sanghatana was only a destructive force, and could not help the adivasis. (i) They are starting agitations, but peace is necessary for the implementation of developmental schemes; (ii) Kashtakari Sanghatana is anti-national, and wants to create a Nagaland; (iii) its members are Christians. In future they might try to convert people to Christianity, though they have not done so yet. The Congress-I is hostile to both CPI(M) and the Kashtakarīs but they are happy to maintain some distance from the conflict, which suits their own interests linked closely with landlords, the officialdom, and the adivasi co-operative societies.

The violence of CPI (M)'s reaction must stem, then, from (i) the fact that the Sanghatana was eroding their most important base in rural Maharashtra and (ii) the fear that a struggle-oriented Left organisation in the same area might expose the nature of their work.

## The Police and Kashtakari Sanghatana

The police in the area have deliberately maintained the same distance that Congress-I maintains from the conflict. Their hostility to the Kashtakari Sanghatana is evident. When the team met Sub-Inspector Thadvi at Kasa police station, he made several charges against the Sanghatana: (i) They had concocted cases against the gramsevak,

forest officers, and so on; (ii) they had attacked and committed decoities against moneylenders, molesting the wife of one of them; (iii) they were missionaries who were initially working in Christian villages, then spread their work with the long-term goal of conversion (although at present they did not convert). In sum, Thadvi stated a position identical to the Congress-I MLA's, identical sometimes even in the phrasing used to describe the Sanghatana.

Part of Thadvi's hostility might have been due to the fact that he is named in Pradeep Prabhu's writ petition as one of the police officers who refused to take the necessary action to protect villages affiliated to the Sanghatana. But even that initial refusal must have had a hostility behind it. (See the section in 'The Post-1947 Phase' about early police repression of the Sanghatana.) The petition provides a long list of such instances of police inaction, one which the team found correlated to their own findings.

For instance, at Sukhadamba, the villagers had found out days before the attack of May 1982 that such an attack was imminent, and they asked the police station well in advance for protection. It was denied; the attack came, and large-scale destruction took place.

The police reacted strongly to the Sanghatana's campaign against corrupt and exploitative government officials. Repeated Sanghatana exposures of forest officers, talatis, gramsevak, and policemen (eg, a corrupt head constable Daithankar who was stationed at Saiwan, and who helped to organise an attack on the Talasari-bound minimum-wages procession) led to a situation where naturally the police were determined not to protect the Sanghatana against the attacks.

However, since the filing of the writ petition, the Kashtakari Sanghatana members have found a considerable improvement in the situation. Most of the villages that have asked for protection have received it recently. However, this presence is double-edged: it potentially restricts the scope of Sanghatana action, and gives the State forces a danger-

ous new leverage; in a sense, the State's past inaction has strengthened its present position.

## The Church and the Sanghatana

Nor does the Church have a hostile relationship with the CPI (M). There was never any violence towards priests or employees of the mission in the past, nor is there at present. We don't have any quarrel with the normal missionary activities" (Godavari Parulekar, 1987). "There is a Father Miranda who used to distribute copies of my book to adivasis. He would say 'Look what she has done for you people!' So you see, I am respected, we are respected even by the Church."

It is interesting to note that Nicky Cardozo, a former Sanghatana activist, worked in the region as a priest between 1965 and 1975 on and off. "I was distributing U. S. Food Aid, holding educational programmes, and so on, but never once did this cause any trouble with CPI(M) activists. On the contrary, it was in their villages that I was most active and they used to help me. It was only after I began to work in Kashtakari Sanghatana that they became hostile."

Dharma Mhada, an important CPI (M) activist explained that Janu Rautya, dharma-pracharak (catechist) in Khoripada, left the village because he refused to work as a Kashtakari Sanghatana person, and wished instead to continue his missionary work. Now, Mhada explained, he is a Lal Bawta activist, and he is continuing his work happily as a dharma pracharak.

In July 1982, two priests attached to the Talasari mission were attacked, reportedly by CPI (M) activists. The Kashtakari Sanghatana claimed that this was as a result of a mistaken impression that these priests were Sanghatana activists. The CPI (M) denied having anything to do with the attacks which, they claimed, were by dacoits. "Probably," said Lahanu Kom in an interview with *the Daily* "the dacoits must have mistaken the two priests for Kashtakaris before attacking them." Later there were reportedly high-level negotiations bet-

ween the Church and the CPI (M), at the end of which the CPI (M) is said to have privately apologised in return for the Church's withdrawal of the charges.

## Local Pride

The CPI (M) at a state and national level may be embarrassed by the publicity their activity in Dahanu has been given, but the team was surprised how little this shyness extended to the local level: on the contrary there was pride at their achievements in this regard. When the team met Sakharam Sapate, CPI (M) activist from Dahangira, outside the CPI (M) office in Dahanu, he proudly recounted how he helped at two points to beat Kashtakari Sanghatana members on their way to a meeting on minimum wages in Talasari. What about the women, had he beaten them too? Oh, yes, the women too.

Dharma Mhada, one of main CPI (M) activists in Dahanu: "when we came to know that Kashtakari Sanghatana were on their way to a minimum wages meeting in Talasari, and that they wanted to take out a morcha against Raja Ozura at Wadaoli on the minimum wages issue, we stopped them on the way and beat them up."

Godavari Parulekar, in a signed interview, 25-9-1980: "...Nicky and Susheila were holding their meeting near ours just as a provocation. While they were crossing a nearby stream our workers beat them up. But they couldn't beat them properly since Nicholas fell into the water and this Sylvia fell on top of him and you can't beat somebody up properly if he is half underwater."

## CPI (M) Leadership's Responsibility

Several facts lead one to the conclusion that the CPI(M)'s top leadership at the state and even national level bear responsibility for the campaign in Dahanu-Talasari:

(i) The systematic, large-scale nature of the attacks, indicating some level of organisation behind them;

(ii) The fact that all of CPI(M)'s statements support the local unit totally, and that repeated visits by its top leaders to the area not to mention meetings between Kashtakari Sanghatana activists and the national CPI(M) leadership (members of the Sanghatana were meeting CPI (M) leaders such as E.M.S. Namboodripad between 1980 and 1982. The team saw a file of correspondence with CPI (M) has not even moderated the force of the attacks;

(iii) The fact that the campaign has been going on for more than three years;

(iv) The total unco-operativeness of the CPI (M) state leadership, with the fact-finding team, or indeed with journalists visit-

ting the area (see point 8 of the Press Release).

Normally, when vested interests are threatened, they retaliate through the police or their own hired goons. In Dahanu-Talasari, a combination of a certain social role, local imperatives of retaining territory, and party imperatives of retaining a historic base, have propelled forward a campaign; another set of interests has allowed the campaign to continue. The complexity of the mechanism involved here has made this repression of a people's struggle a fact more difficult for many to digest. But the campaign of terror and the communal propaganda on adivasis struggling against their centuries-old exploitation surely constitute an attack on their very right to organise and struggle.

## VII

# Appendix I: Interview of Godavari Parulekar by Kannan Srinivasan, 25-9-1980

Reports have appeared in the press that Godavari Parulekar, President of the Maharashtra Kisan Sabha, has charged that the Kashtakari Sanghatana of Thane district, is "anti-government officials" and receives "foreign and church funds".

When I telephoned Mrs Parulekar, she very kindly agreed to see me despite her illness.

I went to meet Mrs Parulekar at her house on Sunday the 21st September. She spoke of her first meeting with some activists of the Kashtakari Sanghatana. "Two Fathers came to see me. They would not speak except in English. Will you join us? they asked. No, I said, we shouldn't join you. Why should we? We are a powerful party, and I have been working in Thane for more than

thirty years. Then they said can we join you? No, you can't I said, till we know more about you. Who are you? What is your mother tongue? English they said, So that is why you can't speak Marathi or Hindi? What nationality are you? They wouldn't tell me. Where are you from? Bombay—they said. They would not even tell me their names, these two priests. Now they call themselves Nickybhau and Pradeep Prabhu, but they are deceiving everybody, their names are Nicholas Cordozo and Peter Demello. "So was that it? You said no, you can't join, and they left?"

No, they were full of complaints against one of our active workers, Damodar Mali of the Kisan Sabha. So I asked Damodar: "Who are these people?". He told me "these people want to create a Nagaland, to expel



all outsiders, all non-advasis. We should watch out for them." It is true, later I had to throw Damodar out of the Party for corruption-but I think he was right about these people.

I asked - 'How have they co-operated with the church and missionary organisations?'

They have nothing to do with the local churches, but they are linked with the World Council of Churches, explained Mrs Parulekar. She showed me a booklet of the (WCC) World Council of Churches. "Wherever they stay in Bombay, they stay at Bvculla Church or at Andheri church; when in Pune, at the College of Society of Jesus; similarly in Delhi; always in a church.

Church funding is so obvious. All their 12 adivasi workers are paid Rs 300 a month. Who pays for that, tell me?

'Their women were in Surjana taluka, Nasik district, impersonating adivasi women, even the way they tied their saris. Why? One of our workers heard them talking that night in English. He said why do you tell me lies? and turned them out.'

Whom do you think they are funded by? I asked.

'For one by the Jesuit Education Institute, 4 Raj Nira Marg, Delhi 3; there is a man there called Tom Kunukkal who is in charge of this. They also fund other organisations.

Mrs Parulekar removed from a folder a typewritten report, about 20 pages of foolscap. This is confidential intelligence report", she said.

She spoke on the question of funding, referring constantly to the report. "A Dutch organisation called NOBIP, with links to the Central Intelligence Agency funds the Centre for Education and Documentation in Bombay. My information is that the Centre recently shifted their offices to Battery Street. For this, NOBIP paid Rs 3.2 lakhs.

The financing is arranged by Pradeep Guha, an advertising executive in Bennet Coleman. The Kashtakari Sanghatana, along with the Delit Yuva Aghadi, Shramik Sanghatana, Bhoomi Sena, Yuva Kranli Dal, Janajagharan, Samay Samata Samiti among others receives foreign funds in this fashion. Now look at this letter.'

Mrs Parulekar showed the photocopy of a letter, addressed to "Pradeep", signed "Nicky" and dated 3rd July 1980, written from Shishna on the Kashtakari Sanghatana letterhead. It spoke about the case of a woman having been molested and was critical of the police handling of the case. I did not notice anything remarkable or incriminating in the letter. Mrs Parulekar drew my attention to the last sentence which said something like - "if you can find any sympathetic to our side, perhaps we can bring them down by jeep."

"Does it not cost a lot of money to bring reporters down by jeep", said Mrs Parulekar "where do they get the funds from?"

'My impression, Mrs Parulekar' I said, "is that the Kashtakari Sanghatana want a dialogue with you. This they have claimed". "They are disrupters and anti-national. They want to create a Nagaland. How could we ever have a dialogue with them? We could have a dialogue with a left party but these people are only priests masquerading part of the left".

'What is all this nonsense about CPM being indebted to Kashtakari Sanghatana for the election victory of Comrade Lahanu Comb?' said Mrs Parulekar. "They approached us and made an offer of co-operation. I was wary, but I said let them go ahead, if they want to support us. They wanted to appear as part of the bonafide left. They said they would print a handbill supporting us--I said we shall pay you so that we are indebted to you for nothing. But they put on it their sign--a hand holding a pair of balances--the beam and the central pillar together from the Christian cross their secret sign".



"How much did their support help you?" I asked. "If at all it helped it was very slight. They have influence only in Shishna, Ganganagaon, Domangaon, Ambesari and Nagsari; and only in certain padas of these villages. Out of 151 polling booths in the constituency, Kashtakari have no influence at all in the electorate represented by 75 polling booths; and for 45 more they have only very little influence. Perhaps they represent 2,000 votes; Lahanu won by a margin of 6,000. What does the Kashtakari boast of? Their slight influence is among the Christian adivasis, who usually have been against the Red flag—recently Sukad Amba Pada switched to supporting them who were formerly Congress(I).

Mrs Parulekar said that the Kashtakari Sanghatana is trying to stir up feeling against government servants and gives false reports. For instance, they had claimed that a gram sevak had attempted to rape a woman in Chalni village. In fact, according to her investigation, the gram sevak used to visit this woman and two others. They would always provide him with drink. But this time she refused, and he tried to beat her; but Mrs Parulekar explained, adivasi social custom being what it is, the women would have had no hesitation in beating him back. "People are always giving out exaggerated stories about rape." Even on the conditions of life of the adivasis, Mrs Parulekar explained there is much exaggeration. "Now the adivasis when they return home can at least put some gowar in the pot for bhaji and eat it with their bhakri. Now they can feed themselves; before this, before the Red flag came to them, they would go hungry for days together. We shall win nothing except through struggle, we must constantly agitate for wages—but when the agreement is made, we should keep our side of bargain. Those who exaggerate the condition of the adivasis do so to manipulate those stories for their own purpose."

The Kashtakari Sanghatana have made the point, I said, that while they along with other organisations have been fighting for the regularisation of encroachments which have been made for 1960 to 1978, the

CPM has pushed for the regularisation only from 1972 to 1978. Why?

Mrs Parulekar replied :

"We should not make demands which are so extreme that they may absurd. I am especially concerned about forest lands; the former forest minister has already committed the government to returning 46,000 acres of forest land. If they are committed, how can we ask them again? I am going to see Mr Antulay and remind him about forest lands. I am concerned about this".

Mrs Parulekar also spoke about one of the Kashtakari Sanghatana workers. This woman who calls herself Suseila—her real name is Sylvia D'Souza—she has gone further than the others, she has done things which are really indecent. These people went to a village where there were money-lenders, bhaiyyas. Sylvia Peter and others broke into the house when the bhaiyyas were out and broke up everything, stole all the money and valuables. Then Suseila stripped the wife of one of the bhaiyyas naked, ripped away her mangalsutra and made her bow in homage to Peter and herself.

"They came to me for help. I scolded the bhaiyyas: you have come to me this time and I will help you. Why do you keep dues from the Adivasis, why do you not pay them immediately. I will not help you in future if you do so. I help you only since with the Kashtakari Sanghatana have done is just dacoity and goondaism.

"when I held a meeting, at Dhundal wadi there was a short hand reporter from the CID and an inspector from Dahanu with a dozen policemen who hoard what I said. He investigated the whole business. The police agreed with my findings. They have done a good job."

They have made much of having been beaten up by Kisan Sabha workers. This took place (at Saiwan) because this woman who called herself Suseila when she came upon some of our workers she threw down her

watch and said - 'you have attacked me and ripped off my watch' one of our men said 'if you don't pick that up yourself, we shall really beat you. I don't care if you are a man or a woman'.

Later in the day, Nicky and Suseila were holding their meeting near ours just simply as a provocation. While they were crossing a nearby stream our workers beat them up. But they couldn't beat them properly since Nicholas fell into the water and this Sylvia fell on top of him and you can't beat somebody up properly if he is half underwater. They went to a doctor, but there were only a few scratches, not enough to report... They also mention another 'assault' (8th March 1980 the returning from International Women's Day at Talasari). In reality they had taken adivasis to the meeting, deceiving them as to its real purpose. When the people found out, they beat up the Kashtakari Sanghatana people... In fact it is they who always use violence. They threatened one of our workers, Janya Janathya - you give us your reports for the CPM. If you don't, we shall burn down your house.

I asked Mrs Parulekar, how she would define the central problem facing the people of the region. Would it be the landlords and the moneylenders, the rural elite in alliance with the government?

"No, much has been exaggerated. In fact, the police and the local administration have been very responsible about many things. I am personally respected. In part, it is because people say - here is somebody from our class who works among these poor adivasis and doing something for them. Now this of course is just bourgeois sentimentality. But also we are respected because, as they say "Godavari Bai, your people never killed a

single landlord, never looted shops, never stole land. You did not believe in extremist tactics". Now these people (ie., Kashtakaris) - as a senior administrator said to me engage in anti-national activities.

"They have even deceived people in other movements. Once they said to the Bhoomi Sena We shall hold a joint morchha and neither of us shall bring out banners, our symbols anything. So the Bhomi Sena come without these things - but these people had fooled them, because the Kashtakari Sanghatana turned up with their flags and every thing and won a propaganda victory".

"Mrs Parulekar", I asked, "You say that Thane district is threatened by a foreign funded missionary organisation. But have you always felt so strongly about church activities here?"

"No" she replied. "We don't have any quarrel with the normal, missionary organisations".

"There is a Father Miranda who used to distribute copies of my book to the adivasis. He would say, "look what she has done for you people!" So you see, I am respected, we are respected even by the church.

"But these new missioneries, the Kashtakari Sanghatana, they want to divide the progressive and democratic left from within they want to create another Nagaland. Let the police investigate their funding. I request Mr Antulay to be vigilant about these anti-national and disruptive elements and help to avoid the things that have happened in Assam, Tripura, and Mizoram.



# Appendix - II

## Public Statement on the Khinoli Khoripada firing incident by Com. L. B. Dhangar (Secretary-CPI(M)., Thane District) Dahanu 11-10-83.

Public statement on the Khinoli Khoripada firing incident by Comrade L. B. Dhangar (Secretary-CPI (M)., Thane District )

Dahanu, 11.10.1983.

Wrong and contradictory reports are being spread about the incident of Saturday, 8-10-83, at Khinoli Khoripada district, Thane, and the police have joined hands with the Kashtakari Sanghatana to open about against CPI(M) supporters in the area.

As secretary of the CPI(M), Thane district, I, along with my associates Com. Krishna Khopkar, Com. Kisan Surti Com. Dharma Mhada and Com. Parshuram Chavan, went on 11-10-83, to the place where the incident occurred and spoke to the villagers of Khinoli in order to get to know the true facts of the case. Based on this we give below the official statement of the party about this incident.

The Khinoli Khoripada firing incident has occurred due to the collusion between christian Kashtakari Sanghatana people and the police party stationed there for their protection. From the time they were posted there, a friendly and affectionate relationship between the police and the Kashtakari Sanghatana had developed. Because of this friendship the police would intimidate CPI (M) members.

In this situation at about 8.30 p.m. on 8.10.83, 11 children and four youths from Kinowli Khomar pada had gone to a stream running between Khomarpada and Khoripada

to look for crabs. A policeman was bathing in the stream. Upon seeing the 11 people from Khomarpada the policeman immediately came up to the bank and blew a whistle and also called out to the Kashtakari Sanghatana people to come. On hearing this 2-3 policemen and 30-32 Kashtakari Sanghatana people came running and caught 4 youths out of the eleven while the 7 children ran away.

The children who had run away went to Khinoli Patilpada, Khinoli Marpada and Khinoli Sambarpada shouting "The police and the Kashtakari Sanghatana people have caught our people at the stream and are beating them". On hearing this 30-35 people from all the three padas set out for the stream. Also with them was Gondya Soma Rinjhad, who had come to Kinowli from Dabhadhi village as a guest. Seeing these people the police released the 4 youths and drew them away and stood with their guns drawn. When the people came within range of the guns, without any warning, the police fired. Under their protection, the Kashtakari Sanghatana people also opened fire with the illegal guns that they possessed. Gondya Soma Rinjhad who was in front, was hit by the bullets and he fell down. The others ran back. Gondya Rinjhad was trying to get up when Raghya Devya, a Kashtakari Sanghatana activist from Khinli came running with a spear and he thrust the spear into Gondya Rinjhad's head and also threw two big stones onto Gondya's body. Behind him came running Devji Nathya Kuvash, Devji Laxha Bhavar, and Dattu Janya Bhavar of Kinowli Khoripada and from Sukhadamba Devja Baber, Gondya

Pagi and 8-10 other Kashtakari Sanghatana activists. They beat him with sticks and killed him and dragged him by his feet towards Khoripada. All through, the police protected them. After this some of the Kashtakari Sanghatana activists from Khinoli Khoripada themselves thrust spears into the wall of one of the outer houses of the pada, broke its tiles and set fire to it.

This statement has been given to us by Khinoli Khoripada people who had themselves seen this happen. Not only this but when Gondya Rinjhad's brother, Kavji Soma Rinjhad with Santya Raju Batra Shaukar Guna Ginphat Radhya Dhakya Rinjhad and Sonya Dhavji Pilena went to the Kasa police station to record a complaint, they were arrested for rioting.

In this way, the police party which had developed friendly relations with Kashtakari Sanghatana people of Khoripada, attacked without reason the people of Khomarpada and fired on them; and the Kashtakari Sanghatana people from Khoripada murdered the injured Gondya Rinjhad. To hide all this, the Kashtakari Sanghatana people themselves set fire to their own house so as to create an impression of a riot. In

fact the CPM supporters did not create any riot.

In this way the police party, stationed there to protect the Kashtakari Sanghatana's Khoripada, have become their tools. and on the strength of this the Kashtakari Sanghatana is intimidating and bullying people. So much so that even when the crop has been ready for harvesting on lands near khinowli belonging to non christian villages have not been able to go to harvest it for the past month. As soon as they go to their fields the Kashtakari christians of Khoripada, in connivance with the police, chase them away.

Therefore, on behalf of the CPM (Thane district), we demand

- 1) The arrest of the Kashtakari Sanghatana people who killed Gondya Soma Rinjhad under that charge.
- 2) judicial inquiry into the unjustified firing by the Khoripada police party.
3. Police protection to the non-Christian people of khinowli for harvesting.



Kashtakari Sanghatana is an organisation of adivasis in Dahanu and Talasari taluks of Thane district, Maharashtra, fighting against exploitation by landlords, money-lenders, and the state. Since 1980 the local CPI (M) has been conducting a systematic campaign of terror and physical attacks to repress this organisation. An independent fact-finding team including members of three organisations investigated the attacks and the reasons for them. This report examines the history of the area, the modes of exploitation prevalent, struggles against exploitation, and the consequent repression unleashed.

**Lok Shahi Hakk Sanghatana,  
Maharashtra  
member,  
All India Federation of Organisations  
For Democratic Rights**