

Chapter 11 - Grand Old Men of the Anarcho-environmentalist Fringe

A trip to Anandwan is a pilgrimage, undertaken by madcaps like Jacob and myself, apostates from the false religion of modern development. The living God of Anandwan, Baba Amte, began to work there with his wife Sadhana Tai in the middle of the jungle in the early nineteen fifties to treat leprosy patients. This work later blossomed into a full-fledged rehabilitation programme for these patients and they built up a productive community in Anandwan out of its barren wastes through organic agriculture and village industry. Baba's motto is people do not have disabilities but only different abilities. This is the motto that led him later to set up two more centres in Somnath and Hemalkasa deep in the jungles of Chandrapur and Gadchiroli districts among the Gond adivasis. None have suffered more in modern India due to Nehru's perverse penchant for modern temple building than the quintessentially differently able adivasis. Baba Amte's work with the leprosy patients has brought him many national and international awards and the status of a saint but the work he took up for the adivasis at an age at which other lesser people would have been happy to call it a day after having got so much of recognition has not got him the same recognition. On the contrary the continuing injustice against them has in fact led him to return some of the awards that the Indian state had earlier conferred on him.

Tongue in cheek he talks of himself as being a spineless man. An injury to his spine had necessitated the removal of some vertebrae to be replaced by those of some animal. In his characteristic jocular style he jokes that the replacement bones must have been those of an ox because he felt stronger after they were put in. When in reality this operation had physically incapacitated him in such a manner that he could not sit anymore and had to either lie down on a bed or stand bolt upright. Later he had to have a pacemaker also inserted because his heart started malfunctioning. But despite all this he undertook two strenuous north south and east west Bharat Jodo or Knit India yatras accompanied by a host of youth in an effort to kindle a new movement of social renewal that could draw the youth of this country to work for the betterment of its hordes of underprivileged citizens. Perhaps this stubborn commitment not to rest till the last breath was breathed was what he had in mind when he referred to himself as an ox, which is even today the mainstay of Indian agriculture.

Baba Amte is a great nurturer of youth who are socially wayward in a positive sense. A great number of people who have in later life made significant contributions as activists in leftist, socialist and environmentalist movements not to speak of voluntary work of the garden variety have spent time working out their initial ideas and plans in the fields and jungles of Somnath and Hemalkasa. Till he became seriously ill a few years ago he used to be in constant touch with all these people and so was always very well informed about them and through them about other promising young activists who may not have been fortunate enough to be acquainted with him personally. This is something I learnt only much later. So when I met him for the first time in Harsud and introduced myself imagine my surprise when he gave a hearty laugh from his supine position and said, "you look so frail and innocent to be a murderer; the police must have made a mistake". I later learnt that he had come to know of my arrest on the charge of murder immediately and then phoned people to ensure that I got released on bail as soon as possible. That is the level of concern that this great man shows for activist youth who he feels are the torchbearers of a more humane society than the one we live in at present. He laid his hand on my shoulder in that first meeting and said, " from now on I shall call you my 'badmash dost' - mischievous friend". True to his word he always mentions me to others as being his badmash dost!

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A dam was planned to be built on the river Godavari in Andhra Pradesh in the early nineteen eighties, which would inundate most of the jungles and adivasi villages in Gadchiroli. Baba Amte gave a clarion call to the adivasis to rise up in protest and thousands of them gathered together on the banks of the river in response. The then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi heard of this and ordered the project to be shelved like she had done with the Silent Valley dam in Kerala earlier. But that did not make Baba rest on his oars. He decided to take up the issue of the large-scale wanton destruction of nature and the involuntary displacement of its children, the adivasis, by dams in general all over the country. By this time the movement against the Sardar Sarovar dam had begun to pick up momentum and it attracted his attention. So he called a meeting of environmentalists from all over the country in Anandwan to search for alternatives to big dam building in 1988. This was the first such meeting and it came up with comprehensive recommendations regarding a more people friendly water resource utilisation policy than the one that was being pursued by the government in the Narmada Valley. This was how he came to be associated with the struggle in the Narmada valley in particular and the more widespread struggle against destructive development in general.

Baba and Sadhana Tai came to the Narmada valley in 1990 and set up a centre on a piece of barren land on the banks of the river in village Kasrawad in Barwani district which was at that time the nerve centre of the NBA. They stayed there for more than a decade upto 2001 after which their deteriorating health forced them to go back to Anandwan. It was a turbulent decade by any standards during which once their hut was surrounded by the swirling waters of the Narmada and yet they refused to evacuate. It is a testament to the will and spirit of these two modern greats that they risked so much for a cause despite their failing and aging bodies. Baba's stay in the valley was personally very beneficial to me. I had never had any illusions about the longevity of both the work we were doing in Alirajpur through the KMCS and the struggle against the dam through the NBA as standalone movements. However, I had felt, especially after the formation of the Jan Vikas Andolan in Bhopal, that the nation wide movement against destructive development would gradually gain in strength and so all the small isolated struggles that were taking place would combine to posit a viable challenge to the dominant paradigm. But from 1993 onwards this gradually became an unattainable mirage and I began feeling the urge to seek out some more challenging kind of work to do. I visited Kasrawad about this time just after Sankranti and while Sadhana Tai offered me the traditional sweet made out of sesame seeds and jaggery, Baba and I got talking about the happenings in the field. He must have sensed from my words the turmoil going on in my mind and my sense of boredom with the work I was doing because he suddenly admonished me in his inimitable style, "tum janmei ho badmashi karne ke liye aur jab tak jinda rahoge tumko badmashi karte hi rahena hoga - you have been born to do mischief and so as long as you are alive you have to go on doing mischief!" A simple inspiring exhortation to never say die as he himself hadn't.

In India there is a great tradition of apprenticeship of students to teachers called the "guru-shishya parampara" by the Hindus and "ustad-shagird rivayat" by the Muslims in which the skills of one generation are passed on to the next free of cost to the student so as to keep a particular art alive. I was lucky to have had many such gurus and Baba was not the only one I could look up to for inspiration and guidance in pursuing my mission in life. There were other unique personalities in western Madhya Pradesh at that time. One venerable personality who had dominated the political firmament of Western Madhya Pradesh for over half a century was Mama Baleshwar Dayal Dixit. He started his political career in his

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hometown of Etawah in Uttar Pradesh, at the young age of sixteen in 1923, by beating up his British schoolteacher who had spoken ill of Gandhi. He was rusticated and fearing the wrath of his father ran away to his maternal uncle's place in Khachrod near Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh. Once again he fell into trouble when inspired by Gandhi's satyagraha to get admission for dalits into the Guruvayur temple in Kerala, he had prasada distributed by dalits after a religious ceremony in a local temple. He had to leave again and was invited by the great freedom fighter Chandrashekhara Azad's mother to run a school in his hometown in Bhabra in Jhabua district. Later he became the principal of a school in nearby Thandla. The Bhil homeland in those days was carved up between a number of principalities of feudal lords who extracted *begar* from the Bhils. The adivasis were also being exploited by the *sahukars*. So from the beginning of the decade of the nineteen thirties he launched an unique struggle for freeing the Bhils from this exploitation which held sway over the region for over four decades upto the early nineteen seventies as mentioned earlier. He became so much of a nuisance for the princes and the British that he would spend most of his time in jail. However he found a novel way to circumvent this problem. He would carry out a mass action in the area of jurisdiction of one prince and then nip across the border to the area of jurisdiction of another prince to get some reprieve!

The first time I met Mamaji in 1987 in his Bhil Ashram in Bamnia village in Jhabua district he related, amidst guffaws of laughter, an instance of the unorthodox ways in which he went about fighting the princes. Finding that agitations alone were not being effective enough in abolishing *begar* he sought a quaint new way to solve this problem. Mamaji found that there was a rule in the princely states that *kshatriyas* and *brahmins* could not be made to do *begar*. So Mamaji wrote to and got the sanction of the Shankaracharya of Puri to hold a massive religious congregation in Bamnia in which the Bhils performed "*shuddhi*" or purification in large numbers and wore the "*janeyu*" or sacred thread to become *kshatriyas*. This proved very effective as the hold of religion on the princes was very deep and they could not possibly defy the Shankaracharya and not recognise the Bhils after this as being *kshatriyas*. Vast numbers of Bhils were freed from serfdom and this raised the movement to a higher mass level altogether.

Immediately after independence Mamaji began a movement for the abolition of the feudal rights of the princes and their *jagirdars*. He found that the leadership of the Congress party in the Madhya Bharat region of which Jhabua was a part did not want to take any action in this direction. So he dashed off an angry letter to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru accusing him of reneging on the promises he had made earlier. He had to cool his heels for eight months in Tonk jail in Rajasthan as a result. He was released only after the then Governor General Rajagopalachari intervened on his behalf. Mamaji came into contact with the towering leaders of the Indian socialist movement like Rammanohar Lohia and Acharya Narendra Dev. Unlike these intellectual stalwarts, however, even after embracing socialism he remained rooted to the Bhil homeland and continued to give leadership to one of the most sustained and unique but little publicised of peasant movements that this country has witnessed - the Lal Topi Andolan. As mentioned earlier the Lal Topi Andolan finally perished and its marginalisation has a lot of lessons for those engaged in grass roots battles for the emancipation of the oppressed. Bowing to the wishes of the national leaders of the Socialist Party, Mamaji began to devote more time to electoral politics than in building up a formal, ideologically committed and cadre based structure for the Lal Topi Andolan that could sustain it over a long period. So with the waning of the influence of the Socialist Party at the national level and its many splits the local leaders in Jhabua soon became prey to the

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temptations proffered by the Congress Party and defected to it. The corrupt form of centralised electoral politics that is practised in India just does not allow the ethical political practice of grass roots organisations mobilising around livelihood issues of the poor to succeed at the hustings. We will see why a little later on.

Mamaji consistently refused to be drawn into national politics and only reluctantly accepted the presidentship of the All India Socialist Party in 1962 for a year after being pressurised by Lohia. Again after the nineteen-month incarceration during the emergency period between 1975 and 1977, Jayaprakash Narayan forced him into becoming a member of the Rajya Sabha in 1978. He used to term the proceedings in the Rajya Sabha a farce. He was particularly peeved that the right to work had not been made a fundamental right in the Constitution. He once related to me in hilarious detail how he had tried his level best during his six years in parliament to try and get this done and how members of his own party had not responded and had in the later stages begun avoiding meeting him altogether to escape from his persistent harangues. He found himself sitting alone in parliament, as by that time the Janata Party had split and his fellow MPs were all busy defecting from one party to another.

Yet inexplicably despite his commitment to grassroots organisation and his scepticism about the effectiveness of the legislatures and parliament in bringing about radical change, he used to throw himself with vigour into election campaigns for candidates, who he must have known were going to lose, even when he was well past the age of eighty. Just after his comic diatribe against the parliamentarians the 1989 elections for the Lok Sabha were announced and in the course of canvassing for the Janata Dal candidate he came down to Attha and began exhorting us to spare no effort whatsoever. I was tempted to remind him of his recent barbs against parliamentarians but at the sight of his intense, sweat streaked and venerable visage, suddenly the two famous lines from the Bhagvad Gita exhorting one to work diligently without hankering for any reward flashed across my mind and I took a deep breath and kept respectfully quiet.

Mamaji was a simple man till the last day of his life. He had declined a freedom fighter's pension and privileges saying that it was absurd to accept monetary compensation for patriotic deeds. His Bhil Ashram in Bamnia was a small hut situated on a small plot of agricultural land that had been made by soil deposits resulting from blocking a gully with stones at a point where it took a wide turn. His meagre personal needs were met from the produce of this small farm. When he became seriously ill due to progressive organ failure two years prior to his death in 1998, George Fernandes, then a Minister of the Central Government and other erstwhile Socialist leaders pleaded with him to be taken to Delhi for treatment at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. But Mamaji refused saying that he would not avail of any facilities that a common Bhil adivasi could not get and finally passed away in his own hut in Bamnia. He will forever remain a beacon for all those who believe in fighting for lost causes.

I came to Indore for the first time in 1987 to attend a meeting of the Madhya Pradesh chapter of the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL). The PUCL is one of the offshoots of the first human rights organisation in this country set up by Jayaprakash Narayan in 1976 in the aftermath of the imposition of emergency in 1975 The People's Union of Civil Liberties and Democratic Rights. Later in 1980 this organisation split into the PUCL and the People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) and both are at the forefront of the human rights movement in this country. I met yet another great persona Om Prakash Raval in this PUCL meeting in Indore. When I was introduced to him and told that I was an engineer from IIT who had opted for grassroots political activism among the Bhil adivasis he clapped my back

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and said, "Well done my young man, the sight of you warms the cockles of my old heart." Like Mamaji, Ravalji too was an erstwhile Socialist. He had been elected a member of the Madhya Pradesh Vidhan Sabha in the elections following the emergency in 1978 and had been the Education Minister in the Janata Party government before the party split and the legislature was dissolved. Thereafter he had been extremely saddened by the repeated splits and opportunistic floor crossings by his comrades and had resigned from mainstream party politics to work with environmental and human rights movements. He had involved himself with the Bhopal Gas Andolan and then when the movement against the Narmada started he became its mainstay in Indore.

Ravalji had started his adult career as a teacher in a private school in Indore in the pre-independence days. In those days teachers were very badly paid and had abominable working conditions. So very soon he started a trade union of teachers and began agitating for their rights. The result was that he was sacked from his job. However, he continued with the agitation and finally not only was he reinstated but also the teachers began to get a much better deal. He continued with his crusades for the teachers even after independence. The chance came for a government job as a teacher but he spurned this so as to be free to pursue his political struggles, which had in the meantime broadened into addressing the problems of agricultural labourers and factory workers. He joined the Socialist party when it was formed in 1951 and became one of its most promising young activists in Madhya Pradesh. On one occasion he went to the town of Barnagar near Ujjain and along with the local activist of the party there went out with a hand cart and a battery powered public address system. He went round the town announcing that in the evening there would be a mass meeting of the Socialist party to be addressed by its young leader from Indore - Om Prakash Raval!

Naturally he went to jail many times the last time being during the emergency when he spent nineteen months in the special jail made for political detainees in Indore along with all the other opposition politicians of the Malwa region. After coming out he had a brief flirtation with power when he was not only elected as an MLA from Indore but also became the Minister for Education in the Janata Party Government in 1978. He told me once with a mischievous smile that he knew that his days as a minister were to be numbered so he wasted no time in pushing through a legislation giving various benefits and security to the teachers in private schools and colleges that were being run with government funds. He said that all his life he had fought for the limitation of the dictatorial powers of the managements of private schools but had failed to achieve much but as a minister he had made amends for that in a jiffy. The inevitable inner party bickerings began and within a year and a quarter he was out of the ministerial hot seat and in another three or four months back on the streets as a common man as the legislature was dissolved for fresh elections. That was when he decided to part ways with the Socialist party and begin seeking out a new mode of politics.

He came into his own as a major supporter of the NBA. He would take part in its rallies visit the villages in the interior for grassroots meetings, garner support in Indore and write in the press. Later when, after the Harsud rally, the Jan Vikas Andolan was formed in Bhopal he became a member of its national executive. On one occasion we were returning from a meeting of the JVA in Bangalore by train. He was the oldest member in the group and in his mid-sixties then but he participated in our revelry as if he was the same age as us. We were singing Hindi film songs. Someone began singing the song - aa chal ke tujhe le jata hun main ek aisi gagan ke tale, jahan gam bhi na ho aansu bhi na ho bas pyar hi pyar pale - come let me take you down to that heaven where there are no sorrow and tears and only love prevails. He also joined in and then when the song was sung he said with a mischievous smile

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that true love and sorrow are inseparable so how can there be pyar without gam. This was as utopian as our own dreams and plans for a better India that we had just worked out in Bangalore he said! We lost him in 1993 to a sudden heart attack just at the time when we needed him most. A considerate and honest man like I have never seen before and his memory has served to keep me going in the face of severe odds.

The PUCL meeting in Indore in 1987 was also the occasion when I met Mahendrabhai Jain. He was a died in the wool Gandhian of the old school. He joined the Sarvodaya movement when Vinoba Bhave passed through the Malwa Nimar region as part of his Bhoodan Yatra. Vinoba told him that it was important to choose a mission in life and stick to it throughout no matter what may come. So he chose to start a press service devoted to publishing news and features related to Gandhian values - Sarvodaya Press Service in addition to his work as an activist of the Gandhi Peace Foundation. At that time there wasn't any press service exclusively devoted to the propagation of Gandhism and the mainstream press did not have much place for such stuff. Yet Mahendrabhai laboured on urging people to write and then pressing editors and journalists to carry the articles he sent out. He worked on a shoestring budget doing everything from editing to typing and then cyclostyling the press notes by himself. Eventually he succeeded in establishing the Sarvodaya Press Service as an internationally renowned supplier of quality articles and news on environment and alternative development issues. He achieved this solely on his own meagre salary as an activist of the GPF and the resources generated by the payments made for his press notes by newspapers and magazines, without accepting any external funds. Many years later when the international news agency for environmental issues PANOS decided to collaborate with him to publish its handouts in Hindi in India, a person came from that agency to meet Mahendrabhai to work out the modalities. Coming from a heavily funded agency working out of a modern office equipped with computers, scanners and printers, he was floored by the sight of Mahendrabhai sitting in a small twelve-foot by ten-foot room labouring over a typewriter and a cyclostyling machine surrounded with piles of books, magazines and papers.

Despite being an acolyte of Vinoba Bhave his conscience had not allowed him to support his stand on the emergency and he had begun sending out articles revealing the atrocities being perpetrated under the cover of draconian provisions. So he too was soon incarcerated along with Ravalji. This brought about a distinct change in him and after coming out of jail he was one of the prime movers behind the formation of the Madhya Pradesh chapter of the PUCL. He felt that the neglect of confrontational grassroots politics by the vast majority of Gandhians had been a major faux pas. Since his responsibilities with the press service prevented him from actively participating in grassroots movements he decided to help them as much as possible by providing support service. Thus it was that Mahendrabhai's residence became the clearinghouse for information about the various movements going on in the Malwa region. Especially benefited was the NBA, which had to rely heavily on instant communications of its actions or the repressive actions of the state to the outside world. In those days in the late nineteen eighties and early nineteen nineties the Internet was non-existent in our part of the world. So desperate phone calls would be made from some remote place in the interior and Mahendrabhai would take down impromptu notes. Based on these he would type out a press note and circulate it all over the world! The coordination of the movements of various people coming from outside to the valley would also be done through this efficient one-man exchange.

Subhadra and I will ever remain indebted to him for allowing us to drop anchor in the ashram at Machla at a time when we were penniless and I was seriously ill. We spent nearly a

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decade in the serene, natural and tree clad environs of Machla and were frequently in touch with Mahendrabhai during this time. Every time we met he would relate some joke or other cleverly playing on the words he used. Once he chuckled and said "tum aur ham jaise *a-sarkari* kshetra ke log isliye sarkar ki aankh ki kirkiri bane hue hai kyunki ham unse jyada *asar-kari* hain! - people like you and me in the non-governmental sector are detested by the government because we are more effective". A play on the words *a-sarkari* and *asar-kari*, which have the same pronunciation but different meanings. Like Mamaji and Ravalji he was a self-effacing man and so people took the enormous contribution that he was making to our movements for granted. Unfortunately he became afflicted with a form of cancer and passed away in 2003. Only then did we all realise what a great pillar of support he had been while alive. When I was in jail after the Mehendikhera confrontation in 2001 he went to meet the Divisional Commissioner in Ujjain and tell her that I had been wrongly labelled as a Naxalite out to overthrow the state. The Commissioner complained that I conducted my meetings at night and that is what had led the administration to believe that I was up to no good. Mahendrabhai told her that in rural India meetings had necessarily to be held at night as the people were all away during the day earning their living. "Aap log raat aur din ka antar nahin samajhte hain isliye aap aur hamare beech raat aur din ka antar hai - you do not understand the difference between day and night and so there is a day and night difference between us!"

Yet another Gandhian who has played a stellar support role for the movements in this region is Ramchandra Bhargava. Bhargavaji is positioned in an enviable place as the Coordinator of the Gandhi Bhavan in Bhopal. The Bhavan is so centrally located that it is always rented by various organisations for holding seminars and conventions. Nevertheless this venue located at a prime location has always been available to the grassroots movements free of cost for the holding of their meetings and conventions. So much so that there have been occasions when commercial bookings by outside people have been cancelled to accommodate some last minute convention to be held by the movements. On many occasions rallies to block traffic in the high security area of Bhopal just next door from the Gandhi Bhavan have been planned and begun there and yet Bhargavaji has not flinched under pressure and always welcomed people like us with open arms.

Bhargavaji came into his own during the Bharatiya Janata Party government under the Chief Ministership of Sunderlal Patwa from 1990 to 1992. The BJP government took it into its head to crush the burgeoning social movements in the state and so there were continuous protest rallies or meetings in Bhopal. These were all organised and planned at the Gandhi Bhavan. Despite pressure from the government not only did Bhargavaji not relent but was able to convince the Chief Minister to at least agree to meeting and talking to the activists of the social movements instead of unleashing repressive action unilaterally.

When Subhadra and I decided to get married we chose Bhopal as the place to tie the nuptials. The Indian Marriages Act stipulates that at least one of the two people applying for registration of marriage under it in a certain court must be a resident of the area of jurisdiction of the court. Moreover we had to provide proofs of our ages, which we did not have as we had both misplaced our school leaving certificates. So we approached Bhargavaji to help us out. He immediately got up and embraced us saying that he and his wife Rukmini devi had no children and so it would be a great pleasure for them to stand in as Subhadra's parents. Things moved like clockwork after that, all the affidavits and certificates were in place in no time and we were happily married after the mandatory one-month interval. We were penniless in those days so all the expenses of the marriage too, minimal though they

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were, were borne by Bhargavji, the surrogate father of the bride, in the traditional Hindu style!

We were holding a meeting of people from all the submergence villages in Alirajpur in the village of Anjanbara on the banks of the Narmada in the searing heat of a summer afternoon in 1986. Suddenly we saw a towering old man, dressed in a dhoti and kurta, huffing and puffing his way to our meeting spot, barely able to walk, supported by two men. This was Dr Brahmadev Sharma who was at the time the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes of the Government of India, a constitutionally mandated post for the protection of the rights of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, which has since been replaced by the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. He had heard that this meeting was to be held and had made his way to it walking up hill and down dale for the last five kilometers where there were no motorable roads. Sharmaji is a legend and has done much to ensure that activists like me retain some relevance in a milieu that is becoming increasingly hostile to the mass mobilisation of adivasis for the control of their habitats. After obtaining a Phd in mathematics he joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1956 and soon made a name for himself for his strict actions as the District Magistrate against the government functionaries and traders who were exploiting the adivasis of Bastar. His tenure in government service up to 1981, when he resigned due to differences with the government over the way in which the welfare of adivasis should be ensured, was a single-minded pursuit of justice for the children of nature.

Following a five-year stint after this as the Vice Chancellor of the North Eastern Hill University in Shillong in the State of Meghalaya he had assumed the post of Commissioner Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in 1986 and at once done away with all protocol to hit the dusty trails in his insatiable quest for justice for the adivasis. His activist outlook resulted in his producing scathing critiques of government policy regarding the adivasis in his statutory reports to the President of India (CSCST, 1990). Dissatisfied with the disregard shown by the government and the parliament to the sordid facts revealed and recommendations made in these reports Sharmaji filed a petition in the Supreme Court to demand action from the government and got it to acknowledge that all was not well with its tribal development policies and programmes. After retiring from his post in 1991 he went back to the villages of Bastar from where he had begun his crusade for the adivasis to start a grassroots movement of the people there for village self rule. This is the phase in which he came up with the famous anarchist slogan - "Hamara gaon mein hamara raj" - our rule in our village which has now become common currency in adivasi areas. It was at this time that there was the proposal for setting up a steel plant in the villages in which he was working and so he launched a movement against this. The result was that he was stripped by goons of the company proposing to set up the steel plant and paraded in the streets of Jagdalpur creating a furore all over the country.

My association with Sharmaji, which began with that meeting in Anjanbara continued well after that and throughout his term as Commissioner he continually helped the KMCS and the NBA in their mass actions by mediating with the administration to adopt a more positive approach. Afterwards as a free individual bereft of state privileges he was the prime mover behind the formation of the Bharat Jan Andolan, a forum of mass movements fighting for a just and sustainable form of development and governance. He has not only led this forum from the front but also written copiously on the problems of rural and especially adivasi development and their solution. He too like our other mentors realised the great value of young activists like myself fighting for the rights of the poor and downtrodden and was

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equally aware of the problems that we faced. So he set in place a fairly efficient system for the mobilisation of resources from society at large to help out young activists in their work and struggles called "Sahayog" or assistance.

After the passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992 making Panchayati Raj or village self rule mandatory as the third tier of democratic politics in the country he busied himself with ensuring that the Act for the setting up of a special panchayati system to accord with adivasi specificities in the scheduled adivasi areas as provided for in the Constitutional Amendment was also enacted. As a member of the Parliamentary Committee set up to draft the bill for this purpose under the Chairmanship of the then MP from Jhabua Shri Dilip Singh Bhuria he was instrumental in bringing out a set of radical recommendations for the establishment of true democratic control by adivasis of their lives and habitats (GOI, 1995). Later it was through his persistent efforts as the Chairman of the Bharat Jan Andolan that finally the Panchayat Provisions Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) was passed in 1996. Even though in its final form the provisions have been diluted as compared to the recommendations of the Bhuria Committee, nevertheless this Act is a very powerful instrument for assertion of adivasi supremacy in Scheduled Areas. Unlike the equally commendable provisions of the Fifth Schedule whose implementation is left to the discretion of the State Governments this Act gives the adivasis themselves powers to act and secure their rights and entitlements. As we shall see later in the case of the Mehendikhera confrontation, mobilisation by adivasis around the implementation of this Act can only be crushed by the state through the adoption of wholly illegal repressive measures. He came to meet me after the incident when I was in jail on the usual false charges trumped up by the police and commended me on having so purposefully fleshed out on the ground what he had conceived on paper. When I asked him about whether Subhadra and our small seven month old child were safe because there was a possibility of her being arrested too he said - "Fikr mat karo, kuch dinon ki hi to baat hai, ham tumhare saath hai - don't worry, its just a matter of a few days, we are with you."

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