

Chapter 27 - Cry, My Beloved Mehendikhera

A hot summer afternoon in the month of April 2001 saw Motiabhai the Bhilala adivasi Patel of Katukia village in Bagli Tehsil of Dewas district in Madhya Pradesh sitting among the ruins of his house under the burning sun and angrily asking the then Chairman of the National Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Commission, Shri Dilip Singh Bhuria, whether as a citizen of India he did not have the right to live with dignity under his own roof and could only live like the mice in their holes on his farm. Prior to this in a secretly planned "Operation Clean" the Government of Madhya Pradesh had carried out a sudden week long campaign of mass destruction and loot of the houses of adivasis who belonged to the Adivasi Morcha Sangathan without giving them any prior notice whatsoever. This had resulted in the death of four members of the sangathan in unwarranted police firing when they protested en-masse against this blatantly illegal operation in Mehendikhera village on 2nd April 2001 (IPT, 2001). Shri Bhuria was too dumbstruck by the scale of destruction to say anything other than some words in consolation.

Why is it that adivasis like Motia Patel are consistently denied full citizenship rights in India? Why is it that despite constitutional safeguards and other ameliorative legislation adivasis continue to face the iron hand of state repression whenever they demand their legally sanctioned rights in an organised manner? Why has the Panchayat Provisions (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 (PESA), which had initially been hailed as the long awaited panacea for all the ills of adivasi mal-development, also been unable to deliver the goods to the adivasis in the past decade in which it has been in force? Why indeed does the demand for adivasi self-rule remain a cry in the wilderness even after nearly six decades of independence and why is this demand suppressed brutally by the state whenever it is voiced in a concerted manner? The events of the three years in the Katkut-Udainagar region culminating in the tragic killings in Mehendikhera after Subhadra and I withdrew from the area, when the adivasis continued to mobilise on their own with only advisory support from me, provide the sad answers to these questions.

The main rallying point of the people was the fact that in Fifth Schedule Areas the amended Madhya Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act had made the adivasi Gram Sabhas the paramount executive power in their territorial domain. Due to some mischievous stratagems of the upper castes in the nineteen fifties, the Nimar portion of Dewas district adjoining the Narmada river which had an overwhelming majority adivasi population had not been declared as a separate tehsil but had been divided up into three parts and each part had been joined to the much more populous non-adivasi areas of the Malwa plateau to form three separate tehsils in all of which the adivasis were in a small minority. As a result these tehsils and the development blocks within them had not been declared as scheduled areas depriving the adivasis residing there of the political and developmental benefits that accrue from such a declaration. This became the major grouse of the people of the area. They began demanding that a separate new tehsil consisting of the adivasi majority areas in the Nimar plains be carved out and it be declared a scheduled area so that they could get the benefits that were being denied them. Massive demonstrations began to be held in support of this demand.

Given the ways of the state in India and the tremendous opposition from the non-adivasis to this demand there was little chance of its being met easily. So the people decided that they would go ahead anyway with establishing the paramountcy of the Gram Sabha in their villages. This immediately brought them into conflict with the Forest Department. The Forest Department has traditionally claimed that it was the sole controller of the reserved forests under the provisions of the Indian Forest Act. The forefathers of the adivasis in this

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area had migrated from Dhar and Khargone districts about sixty years ago. They were brought and settled there by the Jagirdar in Bagli so as to clear the forests and begin cultivation of the land. However, almost immediately thereafter, the coming of independence in 1947 put a stop to this process of bringing forest land under plough and following a settlement survey the people of the area were restricted to cultivating only some of the land that they had been able to clear and the rest was taken over by the Forest Department. So over the years as their population increased this land proved to be too little for providing a decent livelihood. Not only that the provisions of the Indian Forest Act 1927 prevented the adivasis from even collecting the wood and timber needed for basic functions like cooking, housing and farming and so put them at the mercy of the forest department staff.

Bondar Singh an adivasi from Hirapur village had gone as usual to the forest in 1990 to collect timber for fencing in his farm. When he was returning with the timber in a bullock cart he was accosted by a forest guard and his helper. The tacit understanding under the moral economy (Thompson, 1968) prevailing at that time between the adivasis and the local staff of the forest department in such circumstances is for the forest guard to take a bribe and look the other way. But this particular guard decided to seize Bondar's cart and asked his helper to take it along with the bullocks to the Range office in Udainagar. When Bondar protested the forest guard hit him with his lathi. This violation of the moral economy by the forest guard angered Bondar and he hit him with a piece of wood seriously wounding him. Bondar was later arrested by the police and sent to jail. He was released on bail after his brothers engaged a lawyer by borrowing money at an usurious interest rate from a sahuakar. Later still he was sentenced by the sessions court in Dewas to a jail term of three years. He once again had to borrow money from his sahuakar to appeal against this verdict in the High Court.

Stories like that of Bondar abounded in the area and so when they got the opportunity the people grabbed it and organised themselves to express their anger in a more legal way than the one in which Bondar had done. The people contested the monopoly of the Forest Department saying that the forests situated within their village boundary were to be managed and used by them. Seeing that the local forest officials were unable to withstand the mass strength of the Sangathan, the administration brought in forces from outside and teams of forest officials in vehicles began touring the area arresting unsuspecting people in the forest and beating them up before sending them to jail after falsely charging them of having contravened some section or other of the IFA.

Getting bolder the forest officials began raiding the villages themselves early in the morning to increase the chances of catching people unawares and arresting them. On 23rd September 1999 a team of forest officials raided the village of Katukya at 6 am in the morning and fired on and killed Roopsingh who was returning from answering nature's call. The forest officials had gone ostensibly to arrest one Balu for allegedly having cut timber from the forest (Banerjee, 2005). The murder of Roopsingh evoked an immediate protest response from the sangathan members as they amassed in thousands in front of the Police Station in Udainagar with his dead body demanding the immediate filing of a case of murder and the arrest of the guilty officials. Tension had been building up for quite some time among the people against the arbitrary and illegal manner in which the state was trying to suppress their legitimate aspirations. So there was a tremendous outpouring of anger. The administration had to yield to the demands under public pressure, a case of murder was registered against the forest officials and they were arrested and sent to jail. The Sangathan became very powerful at the local level after this victory and the de facto rule of the Gram Sabhas was established.

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However, since the forest officials had been acting at the behest of the administration, the police did not file the charge sheet in the case within the stipulated ninety days and so the accused were let out on bail and their suspensions revoked. Indeed the charge sheet has not yet been filed even after more than six years having elapsed and the case has not been sent to the courts for trial yet. According to the provisions of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Rules 1995, which supplement the provisions of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989, the state has to provide monetary compensation to the heirs of the deceased when an adivasi is murdered by a non-adivasi. So the Sangathan had pressed for this compensation to be paid to Roopsingh's widow Sagarbai. Despite all the formalities being completed the District Magistrate did not pay the compensation making the specious plea that since the forest guard who had fired on Roopsingh was an adivasi, the provisions of the Atrocities Act did not apply. The counter arguments by the Sangathan that all the members of the team, which included and was led by non-adivasis, had gone together and had illegally killed Roopsingh in contravention of all legal norms and so they were all together along with the state responsible for the crime were summarily brushed aside.

The Sangathan then went to the High Court in Indore against this arbitrary decision of the District Magistrate in September 2000. The petition was admitted and quickly came up for final disposal at the admission stage because the government prosecutor was not foolish enough to make the plea that the murderer not being an adivasi the provisions of the Act did not apply in this case. However, on the day of the final hearing the honourable judge gave the astounding excuse that since the rules for Madhya Pradesh were framed in Hindi he could not give a judgment as this latter had to be written in English. No amount of pleading that the rules in question had been published in the gazette of Madhya Pradesh in Hindi only could make the judge budge. In two hearings thereafter the judge gave the same excuse for not giving his final judgment on the matter and then he moved the case out from the fast track admission stage onto the motion hearing stage where it had to wait its turn behind the pile of cases already in line there. Then the administration came down on the Sangathan like a ton of bricks and severely crippled it during Operation Clean in 2001. Thereafter the main concentration of the Sangathan became the fighting of the numerous false cases that were registered against it at that time and the Roopsingh case took a backseat.

Nevertheless efforts were made from time to time to get things expedited but the government prosecutor would make some plea or other and get the case postponed. Things would have continued in this frustrating manner had not the Supreme Court sent strict orders to the High Court that during the summer vacation of 2005 a special bench should be constituted to dispose of the 1000 oldest cases that were still pending in the court. Roopsingh's case happened to be in this list and so it came up for hearing on 19.5.2005. This time the government prosecutor made the weird plea that since the District Magistrate had not passed any written order refusing to give the relief that was demanded there was no cause for action by the High Court. Surprisingly the learned judge despite protests from the petitioner's lawyer went along with this to some extent but had the grace to admit that the District Magistrate had no business not to give a written order even after so much time had elapsed. So he passed an order directing that the District Magistrate should give the relief to the petitioner in accordance with the rules and write a reasoned order based on the facts of the case within two months of a repeat application being made by the petitioner along with the certified copy of the High Court's order.

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When Roopsingh's widow Sagarbai met the District Magistrate and gave him this new application along with the High Court's order, the first comment that he made after reading it was that in his opinion this was not a fit case as the forest guard who had fired and killed Roopsingh was an adivasi! This was a different person from the District Magistrate who had initially given this same idiotic excuse some six years back but such is the consistency of the training in stonewalling given to the bureaucracy in this country that they invariably come out with the same checkmating answers regardless of the person. One must remember that these officers are all members of the hallowed Indian Administrative Service the so-called "Steel Frame of the Indian Executive". Sagarbai with the help of the Sangathan once again went to the High Court against the written order this time of the District Magistrate denying her the compensation. The inexorable Sisyphean curse was in action yet again! However as has been mentioned earlier Sagarbai finally did get justice with the help of the High Court.

Meanwhile, the Sangathan, prior to the tragic climax of Operation Clean had began using its strength to expedite matters in various cases where the bureaucracy was hell bent on preventing justice being given to the adivasis. One example was the recovery of adivasi lands that had been alienated by non-adivasi moneylenders. The attempts on the part of the Sangathan to institute proceedings for the return of such illegally usurped adivasi land under the provisions of section 170(b) of the Madhya Pradesh Land Revenue Code 1959 had met with bureaucratic intransigence. In one such notable case Dhansingh Ramsingh of Udainagar village and his brothers had lodged a complaint with the SDM in Bagli against Gopal Maheshwari for the return of the land that the latter had forced them to formally sell to him for a pittance as payment for a loan that their father had taken. They won the case in Bagli but the moneylender went in appeal to the Collector in Dewas. There too the case went in favour of the adivasis. The sahuakar then appealed to the Commissioner in Ujjain. The Commissioner struck down the Collector's decision arguing a moot technical point that the Bhilala tribe had not been declared a scheduled tribe in 1961 at the time of the purchase. The case has since been pending in the court of the Revenue Commissioner in Gwalior. The Sangathan used force to recover the land from the moneylender and give it to its rightful owner for sometime before the crackdown by the state.

Then in 2000 after the Roopsingh murder we all sat down for a two-day workshop in Mehendikhera village to think of a way to build up a comprehensive ideological challenge to the developmental discourse being peddled by the state. We felt that just the slogan of "hamara gaon mein hamara raj" was not enough and that we must have some evocative symbol or focal point around which a more widespread mobilisation of the adivasis of the whole western Madhya Pradesh region could take place. Deepsingh of Bisali, who is a widely respected burwa, then said that we should take up a programme for mass celebration of the martyrdom day of Tantia Bhil at his Gatha or memorial at Patalpani near Indore. Traditionally adivasis construct stone bas relief memorials to their heroic ancestors and then celebrate their memory in communitarian festivals similar to indals. Deepsingh ruefully said that no one celebrated the martyrdom of Tantia at his Gatha anymore. He said the great Tantia had fought to his death for precisely the same things that we were demanding and we could do no better than invoke his memory to give us strength in our current struggles. Everyone at once agreed and said that Tantia was revered by the Bhils over the whole of the western Madhya Pradesh region and so a massive mobilisation for the establishment of true adivasi self rule could be built up in future taking heart from his legendary exploits.

A programme was finalised whose main action was to be a three daylong mass march from the Narmada River to the memorial site in Patalpani. Apart from the members of the

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Sangathan people from all over the western Madhya Pradesh region and the neighbouring states too were invited. Posters and pamphlets were published and a small booklet on the history of Tantia's struggles was brought out and these were distributed and sold in a big way to publicise the impending programme to be held in January 2001. On the appointed day thousands of adivasis congregated at Patalpani and there were nightlong meetings and celebrations. A traditional Gatha worship was done by Deepsingh burwa at the memorial of Tantia where goats were sacrificed and this was followed by the traditional feast next morning. This celebration was widely covered in the media and its news spread far and wide. Just after this I was traveling to Bhopal by bus and I had an adivasi who was migrating there for seasonal work on the seat beside me. In the course of the conversation that we struck up he mentioned to me that he had heard that the great Tantia Mama had come alive once again and so the adivasis, his bhanjas or nephews, could hope for a better deal in future! Such is the belief among common Bhil adivasis in the magical powers of the great Tantia.

One incident will amply describe the tremendous powers of inspiration that the memory of Tantia has for common adivasis. The adivasis in Potla village in Dewas district were held in thrall by the only sahuakar in the village who used to rule their lives in all respects. Some of them heard of the plans for holding the martyrdom celebrations of Tantia Bhil and came and told the rest of the villagers about it and distributed the pamphlets and booklets on Tantia's brave deeds to the educated adivasi youth. The result was that the villagers decided to participate in the yatra to Tantia's memorial. For this they needed to hire a truck to carry their possessions and they contacted their sahuakar who initially agreed to give them his truck on hire. But on the day of their setting out the sahuakar declined to give them the truck and also threatened not to give them any loans for the forthcoming cropping season. This incensed the villagers so much that they decided to socially boycott the sahuakar and his family and made alternative arrangements to participate in the yatra. There was no need for activists to go and organise the people as it just took a few pamphlets and a general milieu of cultural revival to bring about the end to generations of servitude. This village unit of the Sangathan became so militant within the space of just two months that it was specially targeted for elimination during Operation Clean later with even women being implicated in false cases and jailed. This incident sparked off a new movement against the sahuakars with the people refusing to pay them any interest on the loans they had taken from them in view of the difficult drought situation.

The response of the state was typical in that it labelled this new phase of mobilisation as a ploy to introduce Naxalism in the western Madhya Pradesh region (Singh, 2000). Immediately after this, things began to come to a head. Since 1999 there had been deficient rainfall in the whole western Madhya Pradesh region. Whereas some tehsils of Barwani and Jhabua districts had been officially declared drought hit others had not been so fortunate as the harvest there had not been less than the statutory level of 37% of the normal harvest required for declaring a district or tehsil as being drought hit. Even after being declared drought hit paltry amounts of between Rupees three and four crores each had been sanctioned for these two districts for relief works over and above the minimal amounts that are normally available through various Central Government schemes. The rest of the region had not even got these crumbs. The adivasi mass organisations had launched a massive campaign for putting pressure on the government to carry out sufficient relief works. Plans for soil and water conservation works were prepared by the people and sanctioned by the Gram Sabhas and forwarded to the administration for action. Subsequently rallies, dharnas and even blocking of roads was undertaken. The Adivasi Mukti Sangathan organised a month long

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dharna in January 2000 in Barwani and later in Bhopal pressing for relief works to be started but could get extra sanction of only Rupees one crore for the district. Even the allocations of cheap food grains for distribution to the poor families through the public distribution system were not increased.

This failure on the part of the government to provide adequate relief work resulted in more number of adivasis having to migrate for work to far off places than was normally the case as with the man who had travelled with me to Bhopal on the bus. The problem was that the whole western Indian region had been groaning under drought conditions for the past three years or so. So even the places that normally offered work to the adivasis like the towns and cities of Gujarat and Indore and the intensively cultivated agricultural areas of the Malwa plateau and Gujarat had less work to offer. This combination of less available work and a higher number of migrant workers depressed wages to well below subsistence levels all over the region. The net result was that the sahukars were having a field day. The adivasis were forced to go to these sahukars in the absence of any other support system and bear the burden of usurious interest rates that had shot up to levels of 10% per month and more. In Alirajpur tehsil of Jhabua district when the adivasis did not have even the money for the bus fare to migrate they went to the sahukar and borrowed the money from him. When they returned after a fortnight or a month they paid back double the money borrowed. The government announced support prices for soybean, maize and wheat each year and ordered the cooperative societies to purchase the produce of the farmers. However, the finances of the cooperative societies being in a bad shape these had adopted the policy of adjusting the payments due to the farmers for the crops bought from them against their loan dues. Consequently the farmers who were in need of hard cash did not go to these societies and sold their produce to the sahukars at the much lower prevailing market prices. Retiring the high cost debt of the sahukars was more of a priority than repaying the cheaper loans taken from the cooperative societies when it came to a trade off.

The adivasi mass organisations reviewing the situation found that the only way in which things could be improved was for the government to take action under the various laws at its disposal against the sahukars. Since this was unlikely given the political power of the sahukars plans were finalised for launching a mass action programme pressing for punitive action against them. This campaign was to piggy-back on the other ongoing campaigns for access to and control over the main natural resources of forests and water that were already underway. Given the persistent drought conditions the pressure on these resources had increased and so had the confrontation with the agencies of the state regarding their proper utilisation. In the Udainagar area the Gram Sabhas stopped the logging of timber by the Forest Department saying that if the government could not find resources to provide them with relief works to tide them over their livelihood crisis then it had no right to take resources out of the area to finance its other activities.

This decision of the Sangathan brought it into direct conflict with the deep-rooted resource extractive character not only of the Indian state but also of global capital. The state through the forest department has continually tried to increase the extraction from forests and the first major new initiative in the post independence era was the setting up of the MP Forest Development Corporation in 1975 to encourage industrial forestry, which would yield high returns in a short time, both in terms of timber output and revenue. But whereas bamboo was supplied to industry by the Corporation at 54 paise per 4 meters of bamboo the rate for the villagers was Rs 2. (Sundar *et al*, 2001). After this at the behest of the World Bank a social forestry programme was then implemented between 1981 and 1985 but this too was

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unsuccessful in meeting people's needs for fuel wood and fodder because of the lack of sincerity on the part of the forest department.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of forest policy in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh since the colonial period has been the *nistar* system, giving all bona fide village residents the right to take forest produce for non-commercial household use. The *nistar* facility was continued after independence, albeit, with some changes. The gap between demand and supply, however led to several abuses of the system and the forest officials using their arbitrary powers encouraged the sale of *nistari* materials in the open market (cited in Sundar *et al* op cit). Thus *Nistar* became an area of strong contestation (Sundar *et al*, op cit), with villagers seeing changes in the policy and the increase in rates as encroachments on their customary rights and forest officers blaming the villagers' alleged overuse of *nistar* as the cause of the deforestation which had actually resulted from the state's extractive policies and their own corrupt practices. This was in fact a worldwide phenomenon with forests being decimated to provide for the needs of industrial development both in the developing countries themselves and also in the developed countries, which are comparatively poorly endowed in natural resources leading to an environmental crisis from the nineteen seventies onwards that has become increasingly intractable over time.

The reaction of the hardliners among the developed nations to this new environmental crisis was to blame it on the population explosion in the third world countries and suggest that the poor in these countries living at subsistence levels degraded the environment as they did not have sufficient monetary incomes and this degradation further increased their poverty thus creating a vicious circle and so strict laws must be enforced to sequester environmental niches (Hardin, 1968). This thinking was reflected in India in the enactment of the Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972, which totally dispossesses the forestdwellers who are mostly adivasis from the rights to the forests in which they have lived for centuries by the formation of national parks and sanctuaries. As we have seen, the adivasis in western Madhya Pradesh have in fact faced such a mindset right from the time of independence.

To address these problems a scheme was started in pursuance of the World Bank agenda of diffusing conflict arising from such resource extraction with financial help from the World Food Programme to provide employment to poor adivasis residing in forest areas ostensibly to improve their livelihood options and reduce the conflicts between them and the forest department. The first formal resolution on joint forest management (JFM) was passed in 1991 and was later revised in 1995 and again in 2000. A number of amendments have been issued, indicative of the attention paid to the programme by state level policymakers as a handy modus operandi for legitimising the continuing extraction of forest resources by the state. JFM activities in Harda division set the wheel of JFM in motion and it was followed in many more forest areas of the state. Eco-development programmes were also taken up. This involved supporting village development – agriculture, cattle, veterinary inputs, schools, health, water and roads to elicit more effective community involvement.

However, the real spurt in JFM came after the 1995 resolution and the launching of the Madhya Pradesh Forestry Project, funded by the World Bank. The Madhya Pradesh Forestry Project was launched as part of a pattern of such projects initiated all over the country by the World Bank to throw a few crumbs to the poor adivasis and fool them into saving the forests as ecological niches and carbon sinks to compensate for the tremendous destruction of forests and emissions of greenhouse gases being caused by the industrial development. The project, worth US\$ 67.3 million, was conceived as a part of the 10-year strategic investment plan of the World Bank and Government of India, in the forestry sector

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in Madhya Pradesh. The 4-year long Phase I was launched on 29th September, 1995 and closed on 31 December, 1999. Under this scheme Van Suraksha Samitis or forest protection committees were to be set up and given some minimal funds or just the promise of funds without any actual disbursements. The control of these funds, however, remained with the forest department. In areas where there were active adivasi mass organisations as in Dewas the forest department used these funds to try and buy out people and form Van Suraksha Samitis to counter the influence of these organisations and stifle their demands for more control over their habitats.

The adivasi mass organisations began a vociferous campaign against the way in which the project had been implemented and began agitating against the World Bank demanding that it terminate the project and not fund its second phase. This was when the Mehendikhera massacre took place and gave point to the complaints of the mass organisations. The tremendous international hue and cry following the incident forced the World Bank to invite a number of people from the adivasi mass organisations to participate in a Joint Review Mission with representatives of the World Bank and of the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department (MPFD) to examine cases of the violation of human rights of indigenous people and of the World Bank's Operational Directives in this regard. The joint mission gave a very critical report underlining human rights violations, lack of sustainability and equity and displacement of people and concluded that there was an urgent need for staying the Madhya Pradesh Forestry Project. This led to the cancellation of the second phase of the project by the World Bank in the later part of 2001.

Naturally the Madhya Pradesh government was extremely angry at the adivasi mass organisations for their opposition to the continuation of the World Bank Forestry Project. The situation became very tense in the areas of influence of the mass organisations by December 2000. A delegation of adivasi members from various organisations went to meet the deputy chief minister Jamuna Devi on 2nd December to invite her to participate in the martyrdom celebrations of Tania and try and cool down matters. However, the minister categorically told them that they should give up their agitational methods and distance themselves from the non-adivasi activists who she alleged were Naxalites out to destabilise the state. She advised them to disband their separate organisations and join the Congress party instead like she herself had done a few decades earlier!

The government at that time used to carry out a mass contact programme each year in the month of January called the Jan Sampark Abhiyan ostensibly to take note of the problems being faced by the people. Led by the Chief Minister all the ministers, secretaries and other government staff used to go to the villages in a weeklong programme to record the grievances of the people. Apart from a few symbolic actions this charade did not result in any widespread improvement in the quality of governance in the state and in the end it became just a publicity stunt. In the cabinet meeting held in January 2001 to review the Jan Sampark Abhiyan the spreading influence of the Adivasi Morcha Sangathan was commented on and a decision was taken to crackdown on its members.

Matters were not helped by the fact that the Naxalites had in the meanwhile in December 1999 murdered an adivasi minister of the Madhya Pradesh Government, Likhiram Kavre, in Balaghat after dragging him away from his house in his ancestral village where he had been sleeping. They left posters behind saying that this had been done in revenge for the extra judicial killing, subsequent to their arrest in an undercover operation, of three of their senior leaders in Andhra Pradesh by the police there. This shook up the government and the bureaucracy in Madhya Pradesh no end (The Hindu, 2000). They began to see a red under

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every bed and began shrilly chorusing the false propaganda that the Adivasi Morcha Sangathan was also a front organisation of the Naxalites and was secretly plotting to wage a war against the state.

Consequently a high level meeting chaired by the Chief Secretary was held on February 17th 2001 in Bhopal to work out the modalities of conducting what was ominously named "Operation Clean". It was admitted in this meeting that the lack of development and the corruption in government services had led to rising disaffection among the adivasis in the Udainagar area, which were snowballing into organised protests of massive proportions. However, it was categorically stated that the might of the state apparatus and its rule over the people of the area could not be allowed to weaken in the face of such protests even if they were spurred by valid grievances and so force should be applied to crush the organisations and recourse should be taken of such laws as the National Security Act and externment proceedings instituted if required to put a stop to the activities of the activists of these organisations. Full support was pledged by the government to the district administration with police forces from outside to carry out the operation to its logical conclusion - that of wiping out the Adivasi Morcha Sangathan and making the region "clean" for the state's dirty governance once again !(IPT, op cit).

The MLAs of the region held public meetings in various places along with the collectors, superintendents of police and other officers. Open threats were given in these meetings that unless the adivasi sangathans disbanded themselves and joined the World Bank sponsored Van Suraksha Samitis, punitive action would be taken against their members. I had all along played a supportive role during this period providing advice and legal support to the adivasis. I came to know from my sources that a severe crackdown was being planned and so in a secret meeting sat down with the members of the central committee of the Sangathan to discuss this imminent attack. I told them of my previous experience of such situations, especially the Anjanbara incidents of a decade earlier and warned them that the power of the state was such that it could move in massive forces to crush the Sangathan.

Nevertheless the people said that there was no option but to put up resistance as the administration and the government had clearly said that they wanted the organisation to be disbanded and this is what would be repeated if the Sangathan now wanted to parley with the government. What would remain of their honour, so soon after having held the martyrdom celebrations of the great Tantia, the people asked, if they meekly disbanded the organisation because of the fear of repression. Deepsingh got up and said melodramatically "I will utter a mantra in Tantia Mama's name and just slap my buttocks and that will make the police run away" to a roar of approval from all those present! My suggestion that a delegation should be sent to talk with the government was overruled and the stage was set for a confrontation between the primitive animism of the poor unarmed adivasis and the modern animism of the heavily armed state in yet another unequal battle like the many that had been fought earlier by adivasis not only in India but also all over the world and I a non-animist was left a helpless bystander.

"Operation Clean" started in the village of Kadoriya on the morning of the 28th of March 2001 as hundreds of armed policemen and forest officials accompanied by hired adivasis and led by the District Collector, Superintendent of Police and Divisional Forest Officer descended on the unsuspecting people there. So that no one should know of this beforehand the state forces had got together in Dewas early before daybreak and then made the four hour journey to Kadoriya village and taken the people there by surprise just when they were letting their cattle out for grazing. Even though the people were taken by surprise

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they put up a stiff resistance to this illegal raid but were overwhelmed by the might and numbers of the state forces. A series of houses were demolished and the timber taken away by the raiding team and their belongings looted. The grain and water was poisoned with pesticides. Thereafter this team went to other villages, which were strongholds of the Sangathan, including the newly enrolled Potla village where the women put up a stiff resistance, systematically destroying houses, pillaging, looting and poisoning the grain and water, including the village of Katukiya on April 1st, All Fools Day, where Roopsingh had been killed two years before.

That night the marauding team came back to Udainagar and camped on the banks of the Luhar River readying itself to cross it and attack the core area of the Sangathan the next day. The members of the Sangathan had begun a peaceful sit in on the road leading from Udainagar to Katkut stopping all traffic demanding that the administration stop its illegal campaign from the 30th of March. The administration of course had not paid any attention bent as it was on wiping out the organisation altogether. It was clear that a confrontation would take place as soon as the government forces crossed over the next day. I desperately wanted to go down to be with the adivasis but could not do so because my seven month old son was down with an attack of dysentery and there was no one to take care of Subhadra and him in Machla in my absence. The long drought had resulted in the well in the ashram drying up to such an extent that I had to get up even before it was dawn to draw the little water that accumulated overnight with a rope and bucket before it was pumped up for the girl students staying in the hostel there. Anyway I had not thought that the administration would go to the extent of killing adivasis in cold blood.

Mehendikhera village is situated picturesquely on the banks of the Luhar River on the other side from Udainagar. The river, like many others descending the escarpment of the Vindhyas from the Malwa plateau and flowing to the Narmada goes dry in summer but there are some deep pools in it near the village, which brim with water throughout summer and are full of fish. The children and youth enjoy themselves swimming and catching fish in the summer months. This was one of the reasons for this village being a favourite meeting place of the Sangathan. But on April 2nd 2001 the village was devoid of any people, who had all left to join the roadblock further down the road. So at ten am in the morning when a long cavalcade of cars, jeeps and vans made its way into the village they found no one there. The cavalcade instead of going down the road towards the hundreds of people amassed a kilometre or two further down and engaging in a dialogue with them cavalierly swerved into the village and immediately set about with power driven saws and axes cutting down the timber poles on which the houses had been constructed. While the poles were being cut these marauders went about catching the chicken and looting the grains and other possessions that were there in these houses. The District Collector, Superintendent of Police and Divisional Forest Officer all looked on as this grossly illegal looting went on.

The people waiting down the road were angered by this callous attitude of the officials and rushed to the village to prevent this outrage only to be met by a hail of bullets as they came within range. Nevertheless they tried to press on towards the marauders only to face more bullets, which killed four of their comrades. Seeing the futility of pressing on against an inhuman dispensation they withdrew with three of the bodies of the dead while one was taken away by the marauders. They brought the dead to Indore in a tractor trolley for post mortem and to tell the world about the depths which the administration in this country had plumbed to stamp out the rising tide of protest against its unjust functioning. I went along to the hospital with the people who were too deeply shocked and scared to be able to do

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anything to ensure that the post mortem did take place. I will never forget the crying wizened old face of Jermabhai a senior leader of the Sangathan whose son Balram had been killed as he said to me "What kind of a government is this that always wants to take away what little we adivasis have. Now they have taken away my son."

I was picked up by the police from the hospital and shunted into jail and the whole area near Udainagar was overrun with armed police. Tens of false cases were slapped on the main workers of the Sangathan and they had to go underground. That effectively put an end to the protests of the Sangathan. There was a lot of flak for the government as human rights organisations and the press reported the atrocities committed by the administration resulting in a lot of public censure. Other mass organisations in Madhya Pradesh too rallied round to try and provide support. But the sheer level of repression was so much that it scared most of the rank and file of the Sangathan in the absence of their leaders and it buckled under. In earlier such crackdowns I had always managed to avoid arrest and organised the counter protests but this time I was absolutely alone and the adivasis were in no shape to even talk to the administration and so I had to come forward which resulted in my immediate arrest and that put paid to any chances of organising mass protests against the illegal and murderous operation carried out by the state. Subhadra herself was under threat of arrest and for the sake of the safety of our seriously ill infant son she had to go underground instead of taking on the Herculean responsibility of tackling the state on her own at such a crucial juncture and that drove the final nail into the coffin of an inspiring and innovative burst of anarchist adivasi mass mobilisation that capped two decades of militant struggles in the western Madhya Pradesh region that had been initially kicked off with the strike of the labourers in Atthava village in Alirajpur tehsil way back in 1983.

Once in jail I was initially disconsolate that events had played themselves out in such a way that I could not give of my best at a time when I was most required to do so. Recalling the immense enthusiasm with which the people had greeted Deepsingh's suggestion just a few months ago in the meeting at Mehendikhera that we celebrate Tantia's martyrdom day and the tremendous groundswell of enthusiasm that celebration had created in the whole region and comparing it with the desolation that was bound to follow after the crushing blow delivered by the state at the same Mehendikhera, I could not help remembering the tragic circumstances of Alan Paton's heart rending novel on the grim reality of racist oppression in South Africa - "Cry, the Beloved Country" (Paton, 2003). There may not be de jure racism in India as there was in South Africa during the apartheid era but for the really poor adivasis who have not had any advantage of the meagre affirmative provisions and enabling laws and policies that are in place and have instead been forced to bear the huge environmental, economic and social costs of modern industrial development, the sad ground reality is that of a de facto racist rule. What else can be said of a political dispensation in which even at the highest levels of decision-making there is no understanding or sympathy for the desperate circumstances in which the Bhil adivasis are eking out their lives and their legitimate protests against their marginalisation are considered as a serious threat that needs to be snuffed out through such a cynical "Operation Clean".

The administration was shameless in its efforts to cover up its lawlessness. It first tried to pass off the illegality of its actions by claiming that the adivasis had planned to wage a war against the state inspired by Naxalites and had laid out mines to blow up the government force. When these accusations were proved to be patently false it said that the adivasis had been destroying the jungles and so the operation had to be carried out when in reality it was the adivasis who had blocked the logging of trees by the forest department.

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Despite various independent commissions of inquiry indicting the administration for having committed unwarranted atrocities no official judicial enquiry was instituted to investigate the incident. Instead an administrative inquiry by a senior IAS officer was conducted in a totally partisan manner absolving the district administration of all blame saying that since it had been given the order to "clean" the area of the Sangathan it had no choice but to adopt such draconian measures! It even said that the operation could have been carried out better if the adivasis had not been allowed to organise in protest (Bose, 2002)!

An organisation of adivasis, working within the legal limits set by the laws of the land, is first declared to be waging a war against the state without any legal procedure being followed to factually establish such a serious charge and then it is obliterated through a sudden secret armed operation without being given a chance to refute the charges being brought against it. And the highest decision makers in the state sanctioned these illegal actions. The preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of which the Indian Government is a signatory says "... it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law "(Morsink, 2000). The politicians of all hues, the civil service bureaucrats, the police and the local level judiciary all combined to facilitate a gross violation of the rule of law in Mehendikhera. No wonder then that adivasis in independent India have been and continue to be in perpetual rebellion against various mining, dam and industrialisation projects that have been and are continuing to be implemented at a breakneck speed all over the country regardless of the brute force they have faced in the many Mehendikheras that have taken place.

Just after this Bondar was finally given a lighter sentence of a fine of five thousand rupees by the High Court instead of the three-year jail sentence given earlier by the sessions court in Dewas. He did not have the money to pay the fine and so he had to go to a sahuakar, who once again charged him a very high interest rate, as the countervailing force of the sangathan was there no more. He had to send his son off to work as a servant in the fields of an upper caste landlord in the Malwa region to pay off the sahuakar and avoid piling up a huge debt. So things have come back to square one after a brief adivasi interregnum in Udainagar.

Mehendikhera means a field of Mehendi plants from which an organic colouring is extracted for decorating the palms of women on auspicious and happy occasions. There are a lot of big mango trees in one of its fields which made this village the favourite spot for holding many a meeting and workshop when the Sangathan was building up. The women in fact formalised their attempts at colouring their own drab lives by constituting the first adivasi women's mass organisation, Kansari Nu Vadavno, under these trees. Well it has now become a blood coloured graveyard in which my anarchist dreams have finally been laid to rest under the worldwide web of greed and rapacity that fuels modern industrial development. The Bhil adivasis have a proverb that says that one should never catch a tiger by its tail because then it will turn around and eat you up with its mouth. In retrospect our attempt to wag the tiger of the modern Indian state by organising its adivasi tail was equally foolhardy and so we ended up being devoured by the state!

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