

Chapter 3 - Nature's Children Unarmed

I spent almost a decade in Jhabua living among the Bhils and they have been the best years of my life. It all began with my first meeting with the most colourful Bhil character I have known, my colleague and fast friend Khemla in his small hut in Badi Vaigalgaon village. Khemla is a born rebel. He is the only one of five brothers who attended school. Traditionally the Bhils mostly make their children tend to the cattle when they are small and once they reach adolescence they marry them off and harness them to the farm operations. Not surprisingly they have been highly reproductive as a result and combined with a continuous dispossession from their lands, water sources and forests by non-advasis and the colonial and post-colonial states, this had led to them being reduced to penury by the time Khemla grew to school going age in the early nineteen seventies. His father decided to send him to school seeing that there wasn't enough land to sustain all his sons.

The government had introduced a residential school system for adivasi children who cleared the primary level to counter the high dropout rate and so Khemla went to study in a hostel school in class six at the nearby weekly market village of Umrili. Unfortunately corruption, which has been and continues to be the bane of Indian governance, meant that the children in the hostels used to be dished out substandard food. Khemla protested against this and when the hostel supervisor beat him for this Khemla hit him back and was rusticated for his pains. So that was the end of schooling for Khemla. Naturally he got married once he was back home in accordance with custom. But that did not douse his latent fire. He had taken training under a "burwo", a traditional medicine man, and was capable of going into a trance to commune with the spirits. So he was highly respected by villagers far and near and was quite effective with his cures for sundry ailments. About this time the government decided to introduce a new scheme of barefoot doctors called the "Jan Swasthya Rakshak Yojana". Khemla, being educated and also a burwo, was easily selected for this, given some training and then appointed. This increased his prestige within the community, as he became a "sarkari" or government man.

What bothered Khemla the most was the tremendous repression and extortion that his people suffered at the hands of local government officials and the ubiquitous sahuakar or moneylender-trader. The most reprehensible was the behaviour of the police. The Bhils had a traditional community dispute resolution system in which the aggrieved parties and the whole panchayat, which could be as big as the people of ten to twelve villages in case of inter village disputes, would sit together and sort out matters. However, this was not favoured by the police obviously because it would reduce their earnings and so they systematically weaned the village patels or headmen off this system and instead encouraged people to report disputes to them. Thus over time an excellent community system was destroyed and the misrule of the police established. Once this was done custodial torture and the many other tools of harassment that the police have were brought into play to extort money from the illiterate adivasis.

Khemla began a singlehanded struggle against this malpractice. Every time the police would arbitrarily pick up some adivasi and the news reached him Khemla would go to the police station and get him released. He even went to the tehsil town Alirajpur and met the Subdivisional Police Officer on a few occasions and submitted written complaints to him. The news of his activism reached the local Member of the Madhya Pradesh Legislative Assembly (MLA) who was himself a patel and had been one of the first people to be lured by the non-advasis to break the traditional adivasi system. He called Khemla to Alirajpur

Recovering the Lost Tongue - A Manifesto of Anarcho-Environmentalism

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and told him to give up his foolhardy ways and join his political party instead. There was so much to be earned by cooperating with the police and other government staff and acting as their agent and informer the MLA said to Khemla. Khemla in his inimitable style ticked him off for being a traitor to his people and living off their blood and sweat and came away determined to continue his campaign.

No sooner did he get off from the bus at Umralli on his way home than he was arrested by the police there and taken to the police station. There he was stripped to his underwear and given the lambasting of his life by the assistant sub-inspector and told that he had better desist from his wayward ways. He was kept in the lockup for a night and released the next day. Instead of going home he took a bus back to Alirajpur and then from there to Jhabua. He went straight to the District Collector, the head of the district administration and gave him a written complaint and also a vivid oral description of what the police had done to him. The net result was that the ASI was transferred and an inquiry instituted against him. This concatenation of events added to the legend that Khemla was becoming and made him into a one-man army.

Khemla is a resourceful guy. He regularly took advantage of the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) schemes. He had been given ten goats and two thousand rupees for tending to them as a loan once. He said that money was not needed for tending goats, which had to be grazed in the forest. So he had immediately sold two of the goats for three hundred apiece and along with the two thousand rupees cash had made up the two thousand five hundred rupees that he had to pay back as there was a fifty percent subsidy and deposited it in the bank thus becoming debt free. The remaining goats have ever since provided some supplementary income. Since he promptly paid back his loan he became eligible for another grant. This time he had landed another rupees six thousand for the construction of a hut under the Indira Awaas Yojana and built his own home. This scheme at that time was so structured that the grants could be given only to a group of people who were setting up a new colony together. So Khemla had roped in six other people from his village, done the entire running around, got a barren hillock sanctioned for the purpose and got the money released for all of them together. He had then got another loan sanctioned under the IRDP for starting a provisions shop and his wife was running it when I met them for the first time. Once again he had paid back the seed money immediately and so cleared the loan and had no payback problems to worry about.

Khemla was to take me to Gendra village where Khemraj stayed, so I got down from the bus at Umralli on a hot summer afternoon in 1985 in the midst of barren hills like red dragons all round. I had been told to ask for directions at a pan kiosk. The owner of the kiosk raised a clenched fist in salute and greeted me "zindabad" - long live, when I introduced myself to him. He called a young boy and told him to take me to Khemla's hut. I crossed the Angkhar River, which was a dry sandy bed, walked along a dirt track behind my young guide in between hedgerows of cactus boundaries of fields and finally reached the bottom of the hillock on which stood Khemla's hut. My young guide shouted out to him and we climbed up the last few rocks to the hut. A dark short man with muscular limbs and a round face emerged and raised his fist in greeting saying as was customary – zindabad. I responded similarly a thrill going through me. I had found my romantic revolutionary niche at last! Inside was Thavli, Khemla's wife who was slim and tall, taller than Khemla and sharp featured and as I was to learn later sharp tongued too! He had three daughters at the time one of them a toddler. All of them were living together in a dark windowless hut, whose walls were only shoulder high.

After spending a night in novel surroundings listening to Khemla's second daughter singing a lullaby while she swung her younger sister to sleep in an improvised cradle made from a rope and a bedsheet we set off the next morning for Gendra. The road from Umralli to Bakhatgarh was metalled but not macadamised and was a dusty brown in colour. The joke was that the road upto Mathwar ahead even of Bakhatgarh was black in colour only on paper as the money had in fact been used to colour the lives of the government staff, contractors and the political leaders instead. So Khemla and I bumped along in a ramshackle bus and after some time got off at a village called Palvi. From there it was nine kilometers of walking up hill and down dale to Gendra. We were greeted by occasional shouts of zindabad as we wended our way to and finally reached Gendra and the picturesque country tiled primary school, one small room of which was to be my home. Khemraj came out, hugged me and said he was really happy that I had come. At last he could boast, he said, that there was a man in the organisation who had actually read Marx in the original! He introduced me to Shankar an adivasi boy who had just passed his higher secondary examinations. Shankar had heard of the exploits of the activists and come to Gendra to meet them. He had liked what they said and what they were doing and decided to join them. Amit the other non-advasi activist in the group had gone home to Delhi for a change of air.

We immediately set off for a swim and fish in a big tank in nearby Kosaria village some three kilometers away. Khemla dived into the water and by some magic of his own caught as many as six fish with his bare hands. We came back, cooked the fish over a slow wooden fire, and had them with rotis made of maize flour, something that I had never had before. There was no electricity so we had a flickering lantern light dinner – all so romantic. Then Khemraj turned on a transistor and tuned it so that the BBC Hindi Service broadcast came on the air. The teacher of the school who stayed in the other room also came along to hear, he had not participated in the meal as he was a vegetarian. Khemraj related how the radio too was initially considered to be an unnecessary luxury by them. But when the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had been assassinated by her own Sikh bodyguards in 1984 he had not come to know of it till almost a week later. After that he had decided that there should be at least a radio around to cut off the isolation.

Gendra is a lovely little village perched on a series of hillocks. The Bhil adivasis here build their houses on their farms. Thus all the hillocks have houses on their crests with the farms surrounding the houses. There are small gullies in between these hillocks, which flow down into the main stream Kara, which flows through the village. Just outside this narrow stretch of private farmland hillocks rise the larger hills, which are separated by the demarcation line of the forest department from the farms. Here there are a lot of trees and unlike Umralli one gets the feeling of being in a forest. The kutchra road from Attha goes through Gendra to Mathwar and the school building is beautifully situated on the edge of a cliff on the side of this road. Khemla left the next morning and Khemraj, Shankar and I went down to the stream below to take a bath. I was itching for a bath not having had one the previous day. Khemraj said that he bathed once a week. I made a face at this and said that I was used to bathing everyday. Khemraj smiled and said that soon I would sing a different tune. He had the last laugh of course as the unavailability of water and the need to climb up and down hillocks to reach a water source soon forced me to become if not a weekly at least a twice a week bather.

Before launching into the main course of our modern day struggles against the marginalisation of the Bhils we must first have an entree to imbibe of the true flavour of Bhil militancy with which this tale is liberally laced. This requires a brief perusal of their

intriguing history, which finds little mention in standard history books. The Bhil, Bhilala, Barela, Mankar, Naik and Patelia tribes together constitute the indigenous people known generally by the name of Bhils. They are the third most populous adivasi group in India after the Gonds and the Santhals and inhabit a large area spread over the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. They find mention in the ancient Hindu texts of the third century AD and were originally concentrated in a small area in Sindh, Southern Rajasthan and Northwestern Madhya Pradesh (Russel & Hiralal, 1916). Traditionally the Bhils lived by practising shifting cultivation, hunting and gathering in dense forests. A combination of the reduction of the fertility of their farms and epidemics would cause them to move every few years to new locations.

Living at subsistence levels and being heavily dependent on physical labour they had no alternative to being integrated into tightly knit communities by customs of labour pooling in most aspects of their material and cultural life. The egalitarianism of the Bhils was further ensured by customs that decreed that surpluses accumulated beyond a certain limit be spent on communal merrymaking and feasting. This also did away with the possibility of these surpluses being used to develop agricultural and artisanal production and engage in trade and further accumulation and so protected the environment from over exploitation (Rahul, 1997). This aversion to trade also meant that they eschewed the abstractions of literacy and numeracy and remained firmly down to earth and developed a rich oral animistic culture with nature at its centre.

Their habitats being vital to their existence the Bhils jealously guarded them from encroachment by others. There is historical evidence of the Bhils having defied the might of the Gupta emperors on the strength of their superb archery skills and retained their independence (Kosambi, 1956). The introduction of firearms into the subcontinent by the Muslims invading from the west, however, led to this independence being circumscribed. Initially the Rajputs who had been in ascendance over the northern and central parts of India took the help of the Bhils in their fight against the Muslim invaders. There is the famous example of the Rajput king of Mewar Rana Pratap having been helped by the Bhils in his struggles. But later as the Muslims consolidated their rule over the region the Rajputs had to move into the Bhils' territories. Thus started the exodus of the Bhils, which over the centuries has led to their dispersal to the areas that they now occupy. This process is described in interesting stories that are part of their folklore. Even though the Rajputs ruled over them, apart from having to do begaar or free labour and pay some nominal taxes, the Bhils largely remained free to pursue their nature-friendly subsistence lifestyles. So much so that they frequently used to waylay trade caravans on the route from the north of India to the west, not so much for looting but more to prevent what they considered to be trespass into their territory (Varma, 1978).

The rise of the Marathas from the mid seventeenth century onwards for the first time led to serious inroads into the Bhils' homelands in the Western Madhya Pradesh region. In order to develop trade and settled agriculture so as to boost their revenue they carried out sustained campaigns against the Bhils who refused to agree to this incursion into their lifestyles. Peasants and traders from Gujarat and Maharashtra were encouraged to settle in the Bhil regions and forests were cleared to bring land under the plough. Thousands of Bhils were massacred when they rose in revolt against this policy (Manohar, 2001). Thus a process was started through which the adivasis were systematically dispossessed of the fertile lands of the Malwa plateau and the Nimar plains flanking the Narmada river and pushed into the hills of the Vindhya and Satpura ranges.

The British came to power in the western and central Indian region after having subordinated the squabbling Marathas in the early nineteenth century and carried forward their policies with regard to the Bhils with even more gusto. Having decimated their own forests to fuel industrial development and international trade, the British began to exploit the forests of India from the early nineteenth century onwards (Gadgil & Guha, 1992). This exploitation increased with the laying of rail lines, which began in Western India in the 1850s. The extraction of timber reached altogether new levels requiring deep inroads into the densely forested adivasi territory and as elsewhere in India the domain of the Bhils too was encroached upon (Nath, 1960). The British also decided to fund this development and the accompanying administrative costs through enhanced land revenue collection and the commercialisation of agriculture. For this purpose throughout India they embarked on a policy of displacing the shifting agriculture practising adivasis and replacing them with more settled agricultural castes and substantially hiking the levels of land revenue charged. In the western Madhya Pradesh region the British followed the policy of the Marathas and brought in Kanbi Patidar and Jat farmers from Gujarat and Rajasthan respectively and settled them on the Bhil lands in the plains so as to both increase the earnings from land revenue and commercial agriculture and also to tame the militant Bhils. While some of the Bhils withdrew into the hills most others were converted into serfs or bonded labourers of these non-adivasi farmers (Luard, 1908).

The British introduced a new land settlement regime under which the earlier loose system of revenue calculation by the village heads was dispensed with and a centralised system was put in place with greatly enhanced levies on the farmers and the appointment of Malguzars or revenue collecting agents with free rein to collect as much commission as they could for themselves over and above the settlement. Taxes in the Central and Western Indian region increased to the level of about 65% of the production of the farmer from around 25% prevailing previously (Mishra, 1956). The British thus dismantled the older feudal system that, especially in adivasi areas, had allowed the village councils a fair level of independence and put in place a new one, also feudal, but with functionaries loyal to them that was considerably more exploitative. Even though these policies were implemented in the areas where the British ruled directly, they had a demonstration effect and the princely states too began acting in a similar manner goaded on by the British Residents stationed there for guidance and monitoring.

All this created a serious disruption in the traditional livelihoods of the adivasis of the western Indian region (Hardiman, 1987). The rail line connected the adivasi regions with the rest of the world through Mumbai. Grain and minor forest produce began to be exported. The British appointed the trader bania castes as agents for collecting excise revenue on a commission basis. This led to the increasing infiltration of these traders into interior areas using dishonest practices to defraud the adivasis of their produce. Thus the surpluses that the adivasis used to have to tide them over the occasional years of bad monsoons were available no more and famines became the order of the day. The insistence of the British on the payment of taxes regardless of the failure of the harvest resulted in indebtedness of the adivasis to these trader-moneylender sahumkars following as the night the day (Aurora, 1972). Displacement from their lands and the decimation of their forests only added to their misery. The foundations of adivasi indebtedness and the rule of the sahumkars over them, which continues to this day, were thus laid by the British.

The Bhils have quaint stories about the way they have been dispossessed. Once a bajariya, a non adivasi who lives in a bazar or market, came to their land and asked the king

for some land on which to do his business. He said that he wanted only so much land as could be covered by the hide of a buffalo which he had with him. The unsuspecting king readily granted him this wish. The bajariya promptly cut this hide into very thin strings of leather and tied them together to make a very long rope. He then used this rope to circumscribe the whole of the kingdom and so usurped all the Bhils' lands. There is also the story that the Bhil king, Motia, was called to a banquet by some thakurs or Rajput princes who had come to visit his kingdom. The legend was that Motia could not be killed as long as he had his pugree or headdress on. So the thakurs dined and wine the king very well and also gave him a sleeping potion. When he fell asleep they took off his pugree and cut off his head. There was also the legend that even if Motia's head was cut off it would find its body and get joined once again. So the thakurs cut his head, buried it immediately, took the body away across the River Narmada and threw it across the Satpura hill range. To this day the place where Motia's head supposedly lies is known as Mathwar or the place of the head and the place where the body was buried is known as Dhargaon or village of the body.

The situation deteriorated even further after independence as the independent Indian state built its edifice upon the colonial structure of governance that it had inherited from the British. The various Princely States of the region were parcelled out arbitrarily between the four states of Western India according to the whims and fancies of their rulers thus dividing the Bhil homeland. From 1949 onwards a process of land settlement was started with the aim of stopping shifting cultivation. With the formation of the state of Madhya Pradesh in 1956, The Indian Forest Act 1927 was extended to the adivasi areas of the former princely states and was strictly enforced totally stopping shifting cultivation. The forests began to be worked for fuel and timber for the continuing development of industrial and urban centres in Western India. Timber contractors in collusion with corrupt Forest Department staff began indiscriminately decimating the forests. This put the adivasis in a difficult position. They could not shift to newer locations any more as the fertility of the soils decreased and simultaneously the supplementary income and nourishment from minor forest produce also went down.

The aim of government social and economic development policies for the uplift of adivasis in Madhya Pradesh has been to integrate them into the modern market economy and culture and has downgraded the Bhils' own subsistence lifestyle. Thus the syllabi and teaching methods of the education system are totally alien to their culture and so for a long time very few Bhils did get educated. Those that did, mostly treated their own culture as something primitive and sub-human in accordance with the prevailing modernist assumptions and distanced themselves from it and their own community, with the exception of a few firebrands like Khemla. This resulted in the vast majority of Bhils remaining unequipped to participate effectively in the modern economy into which state policies were relentlessly pushing them (Rahul & Subhadra, 2001). This lack of a modern education has meant that the awareness of their rights and enabling laws has been low among the adivasis. So they have not only been unable to avail themselves of even the minimal services that have been provided to them but have also failed to protest against the unjust development policies of the state and suffered the pre-capitalist and illegal exploitation of the sahuks.

The Bhils have thus over the past two centuries been consistently deprived of their forest habitats, which are so important for their pre-modern subsistence livelihoods. Simultaneously they have been forcefully inducted against their wish into the modern market economy, which is dominated locally by sahuks and about the workings of which they have little clue. The whole region has become a chronically drought-prone area and the

people have no option other than migrating either seasonally or permanently in search of employment as casual unskilled labourers and living in perpetual debt bondage. Indeed this labour circulation and the consequent proletarianisation of the Bhils to serve as grist to the mill of capitalist development in industry and agriculture around the metropolitan centres in Western India is only the obverse side of the coin of modern development that has laid waste the subsistence economy of the adivasis (Bremar, 1985).

Nothing is more evocative of this dehumanisation of the Bhils than the meaning that the illiterate among them give to the term adivasi. They pronounce it as “adhavasi” and think of themselves as inferior and so half the human beings in comparison to the more well-heeled and educated “puravasi”. The latter refer to them with the pejorative term “mama”. So widespread is the phenomenon of migration among the Bhils of Jhabua and Ratlam districts that even during the busy monsoon kharif season there is always a rush of people travelling either way by the Vadodara-Kota passenger train that runs on the Delhi-Mumbai trunk rail route passing through these districts. Consequently this train has come to be called “mama gari”- the train of the mamas, by all and sundry!

But all this has not happened without a cheep from the adivasis. The Marathas and the British had come up against stiff resistance from the Bhils both spontaneous and organised in nature throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The British embarked on a policy of pacification after the initial wars in the early part of the nineteenth century so as to tame the militancy of the Bhils with a carrot and stick policy. They set up a Bhil Corp for military operations with adivasi soldiers. Apart from this a separate Bhil force was set up to provide security to the arterial Agra-Mumbai road passing through the Sendhwa region on which the Bhils regularly raided the trade convoys (WNG, 1970). However, taking advantage of the uncertainty created by the first war of independence of 1857, the Bhils, who were never very happy with the usurpation of their lands by the British, rose once again in revolt in what has come to be known as The Great Bhil Rebellion of 1857-60. Khajya Naik had been in the service of the British for twenty years from 1831 to 1851 and was engaged in guarding the Palasner ghat in the Satpura hills on the Agra-Mumbai road. He was sentenced and sent to prison in 1851 for having murdered a bandit after having taken him into custody. But taking his previous service into consideration he was released in 1855. This incarceration angered Khajya and immediately after his release he began plotting against the British. He found eager accomplices among the Bhils in the hills who had been nursing ill will against the British for having displaced them from their lands in the Nimar valley.

Khajya joined forces with Bheema and Mevashya Naik and provided help to Tatya Tope in 1857. The British mobilised their forces including the Bhil Corps to not only defeat the rebellious Bhils in battle at Rajpur and later Dhaba Baodi in Barwani district but also used the services of informers to capture Khajya and Bheema. Khajya was pardoned in 1858 and thereafter acted as an informer for the British in their efforts to quell the uprising, which was still going on. But in 1860 Khajya once again revolted claiming that the British had not compensated him enough for his services. Immediately the uprising gained momentum and under Khajya's leadership the Bhils once again began waylaying the caravans on the Agra-Mumbai road in the Satpura Hills. Finally the British summoned up forces from other areas in addition to the Bhil Corps and there was a fierce battle at Ambapani near the Agra-Mumbai road. Even though the British came out victors in this battle Khajya and Bheema Naik managed to escape. Traitors in their forces who were in the pay of the British later

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killed them both. The British used a combination of force and treachery to subdue this rebellion with great difficulty.

Another such revolt is that of the great Tantia Bhil (Bhand, 2001). Tantia was born in the present day Khandwa district in 1842. This region was at that time under the direct rule of the East India Company and was later made part of the Central Provinces after the reorganisation consequent to the war of 1857. Like elsewhere the British had introduced the zamindari system for collection of land revenue in this region too. Tantia's father was a small tenant farmer of a landlord and he passed away in 1860 leaving Tantia to fend for himself. In the decade of the eighteen sixties there was continuous monsoon failure for three years. The British refused to forego the collection of land revenue putting the tenant farmers in a difficult position. Most farmers had to take loans from sahuks to pay their rent to the landlords. Tantia refused to do so and instead beat up the landlord and his men when they insisted that he pay the rent. This being a serious act of indiscipline from the point of view of the British given the simmering discontent among the adivasis arising from famine conditions, the police immediately arrested Tantia and he was later sentenced to a year of imprisonment. After being released from jail he was harassed continuously by the landlords, sahuks and the police through false criminal cases.

Finally fed up with this endless harassment he beat up the landlords once again and fled to the jungles. There he slowly built up a team of armed men and began looting the landlords and attacking the police stations from 1872 onwards. He and his men were caught on many occasions but they managed to escape from jail. For as much as a decade and a half Tantia and his men defied the might of the British and their vassal landlords and sahuks and came close to establishing a parallel government. He became famous for his Robin Hood style of functioning of looting the rich landlords and distributing most of the loot among the poor. Bhil women would regard him as their saviour and brother and would tell their children of the exploits of their Tantia "Mama" or uncle. However, he was once again apprehended in 1888 through subterfuge and sentenced to death by hanging after a summary trial in Jabalpur.

Shortly after this in 1881 the Bhils of Alirajpur in Jhabua district revolted under the leadership of Chhitu Kirar (Luard Op. Cit). The year had been bad for the farmers and famine was rampant. The patwaris or revenue officials had extorted what little had been produced in the form of taxes. The sahuks in the haat villages and towns, however, had large stocks of hoarded cereals. Chhitu Kirar rounded up a force of men and attacked some of the haat villages. The grain stores of the sahuks were looted and the food distributed among the people. Subsequently Chhitu aligned with a discontented military officer and his band of men of the ruling princely family in Alirajpur and threatened the seat of power itself. The British acted swiftly and brought in armed forces and cavalry to put down the rebellion. In the battle fought in Sorwa village Chhitu and his men killed the British commander and routed his forces. This forced the British to send in more detachments and in the subsequent battle at Ali his forces were defeated and Chhitu had to flee to Gujarat. He was later apprehended with the help of informers and killed. Such was the prowess of Chhitu that even today he is considered a legendary figure and the people say that there were as many people in Chhitu's force as flowers in a field of flowering gram plants.

This antipathy of the colonial state towards the desperate plight of the adivasis resulting from its policies and its heavy-handed and treacherous character with regard to protests on their part unfortunately remained unchanged even after independence as demonstrated by the fate of the Lal Topi Andolan (Rahul, 1999). Inspired by the legendary

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freedom fighter Baleshwar Dayal Dikshit the adivasis of Banswara district in Rajasthan and Ratlam and Jhabua districts in Madhya Pradesh began organising against the feudal extortion of the princes and the sahuks from the 1930s onwards. Despite ups and downs and some severe repression this movement was very successful in freeing the Bhils from the bondage of the feudal lords and sahuks in the areas of its influence. He quit the Indian National Congress after independence along with Jayaprakash Narayan and others to form the Socialist party in 1950.

Thereafter the movement took on a pronounced leftist character with demands for land to the tiller, the abrogation of all debts to the sahuks and strict regulation of their activities by the administration and access to forests. The members of this movement used to wear red caps to distinguish themselves and so it came to be called the Lal Topi Andolan. So pervasive was its influence that its candidates won the elections for the Lok Sabha and the Vidhan Sabha throughout the decades of the 1950s and 1960s. Locally the corruption of the administration and the activities of the sahuks and feudal lords were curbed considerably. Unfortunately elsewhere in Madhya Pradesh and India the Socialist party failed miserably and so the radical demands being made by the movement could not be pursued at higher levels. This soon made those adivasi leaders of the movement elected as Members of Parliament (MP) and MLAs fall prey to the sops offered by the local non-adivasi leaders of the Congress party.

So by the early nineteen seventies these leaders began to quit the movement and join the Congress party along with a major section of their followers. This was made possible by the fact that there was a substantial increase in central government development funds flowing into adivasi areas about this time, the temptation of the use of which was used as a bribe to woo these leaders and their followers. Once the unity of the movement was broken severe repression was unleashed on those activists who refused to be bought and remained loyal to their ideals. The imposition of a plethora of false cases and severe beatings by the police after arrest made sure that these activists and their followers soon gave up their crusading work and the movement was crushed totally.

Khemla's father Chena had been an enthusiastic member of this movement and told me once about the number of times he had been to jail and received beatings from the police. He said that the police began dominating the region only after the Lal Topi Andolan was smashed. He remembered with a wistful smile how in his childhood and early youth the whole region was very peaceful and every one had land to till and food to eat and the only problem was the beggar or free labour that they had to put in on the king's fields. It was only after independence that with the beginning of the wholesale felling of trees by the contractors that serious problems had started. Later things had become worse and the people had begun fighting among themselves, looting and murdering each other. The police had encouraged the spread of this internecine fighting so as to reap benefits from it with the help of the dalals. He had a colourful term for these dalals, taplo chato or dish lickers. Whenever a policeman or forest guard came to a village he would lodge himself at the dalal's house and ask him to prepare a meal of chicken and rotis. The dalal would go out into the village and extort a chicken from some poor adivasi and then cook it and serve it in a taplo or dish to his guests. At the end of their meal the government staff would give the leftovers in the dish to the dalal and then he would finish them off and lick the dish in the end. That is how they came to be called dish lickers!

Pushpendra, our journalist friend in Alirajpur, told me of a unique modus operandi adopted by the police for dealing with the most serious offence of murder. Whenever a

murder took place the police would not prepare a First Information Report (FIR) and instead just record that a dead body had been found in the Roz Namcha or daily record of the police station and some space would be left for future filling. The post mortem report also would not be finalised by the doctor. Time would be given to the opposing parties to reach an agreement brokered by a dalal. If an agreement was reached and the appropriate amounts of money changed hands between the parties and the police then the latter would register the case as a suicide in the Roz Namcha instead of as a murder and the post mortem report also would be suitably prepared. The papers would then be submitted to the SDM for disposing of the case as per the provisions of the Criminal Procedure Code. Obviously all the concerned officials would have to be bribed to get such an elaborate charade through in a hush hush manner. Later on we learnt to our cost that the police regularly tamper with the Roz Namcha, which is supposed to be a check on the legality of the police's actions. Only if the aggrieved party did not agree to this would a proper FIR of murder be filed and the case proceeded with. Even then the conviction rate would be low because the murderer's kin would bribe the police to do a poor investigation and file a weak charge sheet. The accused would come out of jail and then someone from the aggrieved party would murder him one day and the vendetta would continue indefinitely, the police looking on in glee. Little wonder then that the once brave children of nature, the Bhils, had been totally cowed down and the dense forests of the region totally devastated through excessive logging by the state and its minions by the time Khemraj reached Alirajpur and met up with Khemla.

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