

## **Chapter 4 - Nature's Children's Revival**

Khemraj came down to Alirajpur from Tilonia in 1982 searching for a canvas on which to paint his own dreams. He put up in a hotel and began asking educated adivasi people around about the conditions in which the villagers were residing. It soon became obvious to him that the prevailing state of affairs was a sorry one. One day he met a local journalist Pushpendra and began talking about the poor condition of the adivasis and the need to do something for them. Pushpendra himself had been a student union leader and taken part in a campaign against the highhandedness of the police on one occasion. He had heard of Khemla and told Khemraj that he should get in touch with him if he wanted to do anything concrete for the adivasis. Khemraj took a bus down to Umrli and then asked his way to Khemla's hut in Badi Vaigalgaon and so began an odyssey that is continuing to this day.

Khemraj told Khemla that there was a limit to what he could achieve with the kind of individual struggle he was waging. The adivasis had to be organised into a sangathan - a mass organisation, if any lasting and sustainable impact was to be made. This gelled with Khemla and he invited Khemraj to stay with him in his hut and help him build up a sangathan. Khemla and Khemraj began moving round the villages holding meetings trying to convince people that they should come together to fight for their rights. They met with resistance. The people were afraid of committing themselves, as they feared that there would be reprisals by the police. The village patels too were against them as they saw the formation of a sangathan as a threat to their power. There was also something else. The memories of the earlier repression unleashed by the administration to crush the Lal Topi Andolan still lingered in the minds of the people.

So for quite some time the duo made no headway whatsoever. Yet another renegade from mainstream society, Amit, joined them in early 1983. Amit had chucked up his studies as a student of the School of Planning and Architecture in Delhi to come to Tilonia to see if something more worthwhile could not be done with life. There he had met Khemraj who had gone there for one of his visits and been sufficiently impressed by what he had told him about the work in Jhabua to be enticed into joining him. So the now enhanced trio of activists began moving round the villages on a regular basis to find some issue around which the organisation process could begin.

Then it was announced that a big earthen dam would be built in Atthava village upstream of Badi Vaigalgaon on the big stream, which drained the watershed. The contract had been given to a non-adivasi sahuakar contractor in Alirajpur by the Government Irrigation Department. The activists decided to join the work as labourers. The contractor was paying the labourers a daily wage of Rs 3 only when the statutory minimum wage at that time in 1983 was Rs 7.50. The activists slowly began talking to the people about this hiatus and the need to do something about it. Their perseverance paid and one day all the labourers led by the trio struck work demanding payment of the minimum wage. This created a sensation as this was the first time that a strike had taken place in Jhabua. The Subdivisional Magistrate (SDM) at that time in Alirajpur was an Indian Administration Service (IAS) officer who was sympathetic to the problems of adivasis. He acted immediately and got the contractor to hike the wage rate to legal levels. The success of this action kicked off the sangathan process like nothing else could have done.

The news of the action spread far and wide and Gulab a resident of Badi Vaigalgaon who had gone away to live and farm in his wife's village in Attha in the nearby Mathwar

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Reserved Forest Range came to know of the deeds of the trio. He came to Khemla's hut one day and described in detail how the forest department staff were harassing the adivasis in the Mathwad Forest Range and beating them up and extorting cash and kind from them. He implored Khemla that he should come along with his two bajariya friends and provide help to them to counter the excesses of the forest department. So Khemraj and Amit set off with Gulab to his house in Attha for a preliminary survey of the state of affairs there while Khemla remained to continue with the organisational work in the Umralli region. They found the situation in the Mathwar Forest Range to be a classic case of adivasi deprivation amidst natural plenty that had become the order of the day all over India due to faulty development policies adopted after independence (Sharma, 2001).

Things could have been otherwise however. The Constitution of India in its Fifth Schedule has provisions that for areas notified under it like the district of Jhabua the Governor may, on the advice of the Tribal Advisory Council (TAC) comprised by a selection of adivasi MLAs, have special laws enacted for these areas and also direct that laws enacted by the parliament or the state legislature for the state as a whole should not apply to them. But like the British before them who first introduced similar measures in the Government of India Act of 1935, the rulers of independent India too thought nothing of disregarding during implementation grand provisions made on paper. Indeed, the British when introducing the first Government of India Act in 1858, subsequent to the quelling of the first war of independence, had guaranteed to the people of India inter alia that due regard would be paid to the ancient rights, usages and customs of India while framing new laws and that these laws would be administered equally and impartially for the benefit of the people (Paranjape, 1998). Almost immediately, however, these principles were breached. The Indian Penal Code (IPC) was enacted in 1860 and the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) in 1861. These laws have been codified in such a manner as to provide the administration with a handy means of suppressing organised public dissent. A more harmful law from the point of view of the adivasis was the enactment of the Indian Forest Act (IFA) in 1864. Applying the principle of *res nullius*, which means that a particular property has no owner unless there is documentary evidence in support of ownership, the British refused to recognise the customary community rights of the adivasis over the forests in which they resided. The forests were turned over to the Forest Department created for this purpose and we have seen how devastating it has been from the point of view of the adivasis of Jhabua. Yet another law that disinherited the adivasis from their main resource of land was the Land Acquisition Act (LAA) enacted in 1894, which using the principle of eminent domain empowered the government to dispossess the private owner of a piece of land for some public purpose in exchange for a paltry monetary compensation. These laws with minor modifications continue to be in force at present.

The British after having had to contend with organised and spontaneous adivasi militancy of a much more troublesome kind than they faced from mainstream Indian society throughout their rule in India had introduced the provisions, that were later to be incorporated in the Fifth Schedule and the Sixth Schedule which is applicable to some areas in the North East, so as to isolate the adivasi areas and contain their militancy by providing some sops and so drive a wedge between them and mainstream Indian society (Savyasachi, 1999). Some well-meaning European anthropologists like V Elwin, C V F Haimendorf and W V Grigson egged on the British in this whereas the nationalist freedom fighters opposed this move supported mainly by the Indian anthropologist G S Ghuriye. The British did some work in this respect because of the spin off they gained in terms of isolating the adivasi

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areas from the movement for independence during the crucial World War II years when the pressure of the freedom movement was extremely high on them.

The presence of articulate adivasi leaders like Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Jaipal Singh resulted in the debates in the Constituent Assembly reverberating with eulogies for the inherently democratic and non-exploitative nature of adivasi communities and the expression of concern about enabling them to negotiate the process of integration into the modern economy to their advantage (GOI, 1954). Nevertheless there was strong opposition to the provisions of the Fifth and Sixth Schedules. The day was carried finally because these provisions received the backing of the first Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru and were incorporated in the Constitution. These could easily have been used to prevent the application of the inimical laws like IPC, CrPC, IFA and LAA in adivasi areas after independence. This would have facilitated the seclusion of the adivasis from the onslaught of modern development and allowed them to gradually pick up the skills of negotiating a modern economy and polity and be integrated on equal terms with mainstream society. But as will become clear by and by Nehru's fascination with modern industrial development resulted in these provisions being given the go by in actual practice. In Madhya Pradesh the TAC was not constituted or was there only on paper for a considerable period of time and the Governors never used their special powers to intervene on behalf of the adivasis leading to massive land alienation due to development projects, deforestation and debt bondage. This is because these provisions are not binding on the Governor and only state that he "may" utilise them. So if the government does not implement these provisions it cannot be held responsible and taken to court for redressal. To cut a long story short the adivasis of Mathwar were in dire straits because of a severe failure of affirmative governance in post independence India.

Mathwar had been a small princely state before independence. The Raja was still around and lived in style in his palace in Bakhatgarh, which also happened to be the Range Headquarters. When Khemraj and Amit went to meet him in the course of their preliminary travels through the area he boasted in a perfect public school accent and a grand Selkirkian style that he was the "monarch of all that he surveyed". In reality, however, it was the forest and police department staff that held the real power there. In leftist circles in India there is a considerable amount of heat generated around the characterisation of the Indian state, with the Maoists, as mentioned earlier, saying it is semi-feudal and semi-colonial in nature while others argue that it has evolved into being a capitalist one. However, as far as the Bhil adivasis of Mathwar were concerned in the early nineteen eighties, the state was both totally feudal and totally colonial! They had no conception at all about India being a sovereign democratic republic in which they not only had some basic inalienable rights but also special affirmative provisions and laws to enable them to overcome centuries of isolation and domination by non-adivasis. Very few people at that time voted in the state assembly and the parliamentary elections.

The provisions of the Indian Forest Act 1927 are such that adivasis residing in a reserved forest area can be dubbed thieves as soon as they are born. The moment they step out of their fields they become trespassers in the forest in which they have lived for generations. Thus for even minor requirements like wood for fuel or fodder for their livestock they are at the mercy of the forest guard. The forest department staff had used this Act to unleash a reign of terror over the people in the Mathwar Range. They had to regularly contribute chicken, eggs, ghee, cereals and pulses to the forest guards and also pay bribes when they needed timber for making or repairing houses. The major problem,

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however, was about cultivating “newar” or encroached forestland. This was clearly against the law but was allowed by the forest department staff in exchange for huge bribes. Thus people had been cultivating forestland for years together and there was no official record of this. Some of this land had been initially taken away from them at the time of the settlement survey in 1949. Some had been cultivated when the logging contractors had cleared the land of trees. Most of this cultivation dated back to the late seventies. Given the tremendous pressure on land the adivasis had no option but to cultivate this land and the forest department staff was taking advantage of this by allowing them to do so in a totally unofficial manner. But a point had been reached when the bribes and the beatings were becoming too much of a burden for the adivasis.

Like in the Umralli area the whole problem was complicated by the fact that the village patels had been coopted by the forest department staff into facilitating the process of extortion. They used the power that they derived from their nexus with the forest department to keep the rest of the villagers in thrall and earn a commission from the bribes that were paid to their masters. Such was the power of the forest staff that the villagers had to bow down and wish them “Ram Ram” whenever they passed by and failure to do so meant being beaten up. The adivasis were considered to be untouchables and so special utensils were kept at the patel’s house where food used to be cooked specially for the forest department staff when they came there while they sat in royal style on charpais, wooden cots with ropes intertwined in them, laid out with soft mattresses. All this meant that organising the villagers to demand their rights was to prove a difficult proposition. When Khemraj and Amit went round the villages they would be lucky to find one or two people who would be prepared even to talk to them. None of them, however, were prepared to participate in bigger meetings. Word spread round that there were two odd bajariyas who spoke the Bhili language going from village to village who would eat whatever the villagers themselves were eating and would even sit crosslegged with them on the ground. There were also rumours that these people were really evil spirits who were adept at removing the desi roof tiles of the adivasis huts and insinuating themselves into their houses at night to do all kinds of harm!

Attha being the village of Gulab there was some response from the villagers there. Some people from the nearby villages of Chhoti Gendra and Mankhara too showed some interest. The patel of Chhoti Gendra proved to be an exception to the general run of patels and after some initial hesitation decided that the two activists meant well and warding off pressure from the forest department invited Khemraj and Amit to stay in one of the rooms of the government primary school in his village in the other of which the teacher stayed. The children of course used to study sitting in the verandah. Even though the teacher had been there for some ten years he had not been able to get even one student past the primary board examinations at the class five level. He had already heard of the kind of work that the activists had done and so was apprehensive about them staying close to him and creating problems. However, the sheer desire for Hindi speaking urban company in this back of beyond prodded him to agree to Khemraj and Amit staying with him in the school.

Weekly meetings began to be held in the three villages and a consensus evolved that the most urgent matter of recognition of the fact of cultivation of forestland would be raised with the higher-level authorities. It was decided that a delegation would go to meet the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) in Jhabua. Three people were chosen for this who would be accompanied by the activists. However, on the day the delegation was to set out all three backed out and the programme fell through. Time was running out. The monsoons of 1984

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were approaching and the forest guards had already sent out warnings that unless they were paid hefty bribes no one would be allowed to cultivate their nevar land. Lalia of Attha who had bled for three days from an internal haemorrhage the year before from the beatings that he had got and had to borrow money at an exorbitant interest to pay both the forest guard and the doctor's fees began crying in the meeting imploring the others to do something. There was clearly a sense of desperation, so eventually another delegation was put together and this one did manage to reach Jhabua and meet the DFO. The officer flatly refused to believe that there were so many encroachers on forestland as the records revealed that Mathwar Range had only two encroachers. He also refused to believe that his staff was behaving in an inhuman and wholly illegal manner with the adivasis. Then Khemraj told him that if he did not come to Attha and judge for himself the truth of their complaints then they would be forced to begin a demonstration and approach higher authorities.

This was a bluff as the people were not organised or brave enough to embark on an agitation at that stage. But the reputation gained from the strike of the labourers in the Atthava dam earlier had preceded Khemraj and so the DFO thought it more prudent to come to Mathwar and investigate matters rather than call his bluff. This proved to be the turning point. The adivasis who had gone for the parley with the DFO came back and related how they had sat on chairs face to face with the DFO and he had spoken very civilly with them and even offered them tea and biscuits. They said that the officers higher up were much better and it was only the staff in Mathwar who were beasts. Word spread round that the DFO was coming to Bakhatgarh the Range Headquarters for the express purpose of listening to the people's problems. Gulab went one step further and told the people that the names of all those cultivating nevar would be recorded on that day and so those that missed out on this meeting with the DFO would miss being registered for cultivation in future!

On the appointed day hundreds of people gathered at Bakhatgarh to press their claims regarding nevar and complain about the repressive and extortionate behaviour of the local forest department staff. Some of the patels who were against this kind of mobilisation had informed the MLA about the goings on and so he too arrived along with the DFO for the meeting. The MLA immediately began berating the people for having listened to the bajariya activists and not come to him with their problems. After all only he could solve them. The people retorted by asking him whether he had been sleeping all this while and whether it wasn't his responsibility to come and see if his electorate was doing alright or not. This initial altercation seemed to dismiss all hesitation and fear from the minds of the people and all the suffering and anger that had been dammed up all these years burst forth in a mass catharsis as person after person rose to castigate the forest department staff and relate the sordid history of dispossession and repression of the past few decades. The people were especially thrilled at the site of the forest guards whom they had thought to be the lords of the forest standing meekly with their hands folded behind their backs not being able to put a word in edgeways.

Eventually nothing concrete came out of the meeting. The DFO said that he could not allow encroachments to continue as it was against the law but he admitted that the malpractices of the forest guards would be stopped and no one would be beaten up in future or forced to pay a bribe. The people then put pressure on the MLA asking him to do something to legitimise their nevars as without them they could not possibly survive. The MLA hemmed, hawed, and gave a weak assurance that he would talk to the Minister of Forests about the problem. The success of the meeting lay in resoundingly breaking the culture of silence that had previously stifled the adivasis' powers of expression in the



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Mathwar area and thus kick starting the grassroots democratic process there. Since people from many more villages than the ones around Attha had come for the meeting they too saw the power of organisation and realised that Khemraj and Amit had not been talking through their hats. This proved to be the turning point and the two activists received many invitations for holding meetings in their villages from the people.

All was not hunky dory however. The forest department staff did not see these developments with a benevolent eye as was only to be expected. They began going round the villages threatening people with dire consequences if they attended the meetings or thought of cultivating their nevars in the coming monsoons. Nevertheless the people in the villages of Attha, Gendra, Mankhara and Mathwar did sow their newar lands with the onset of the monsoons forming teams so that the forest guards would not be able to intimidate them. Khemraj stayed on in Gendra while Amit went over to Mathwar to oversee the whole operation. Then one day news came in from the village of Gondwani that a team of forest officials had arrested some people there and brought them to the Range office in Attha. Khemraj and a few of the people from Attha went to the Range office to find out what charges had been framed against those arrested.

The forest officials told Khemraj to come into the office for discussion. No sooner had the unsuspecting Khemraj entered the office than the door was closed behind him and the forest officials began laying about Khemraj with lathis. He was given a thorough beating and cigarette burns and told to stop his “netagiri”, a pejorative term for people who try to organise protests against the establishment. The treatment he had received was an appetiser he was told and if he did not leave the area then he would be bumped off. They then called the adivasis waiting outside who had fearfully heard the screams of Khemraj being tortured inside and told them to take him away. Immediately word was sent to Amit and Khemla. Amit came in by the evening and it was decided that early in the morning the injured Khemraj would be taken to Alirajpur to lodge a complaint with the police there and also inform all the people outside as it was felt that Bakhatgarh was not a safe place to go to.

The next morning as the team of people set out from Gendra with the injured Khemraj being carried in an improvised stretcher the forest officials blocked the road at Attha saying that they would not let the team proceed any further. While an altercation was going on Khemla arrived from Umralli with a posse of his own men armed with bows and arrows. He pushed the forest officials off the road and escorted the team on its way to Alirajpur. Thereafter things moved fast. A police complaint was registered against the offending forest officials and news of their attack on Khemraj hit the headlines. The SWRC support network within and without the government became active. After almost a decade, since the demise of the Lal Topi Andolan, a rally was taken out by the adivasis in Alirajpur. The forest officials were suspended and the government ordered an enquiry to be conducted by the Conservator of Forests, Indore into the problems of the adivasis of the Mathwar Range.

This incident and its fallout provided a crucial boost to the organisation process in two important ways. It extended the liberal democratic space and the operation of the rights framework guaranteed in the Indian Constitution to the Mathwar region, which had previously been kept outside its pale, thus putting an effective check on the arbitrariness of the forest and police officials. More importantly it established in the minds of the adivasis that the activists were trustworthy and powerful people who could take on the might of the forest and police officials in the fight for their rights.

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Consequently after some initial hesitation the adivasis of Alirajpur once again began organising to fight for their rights as soon as they felt that the leadership being provided by the activists was of a credible and effective kind. The late sixties and the early seventies of the last century had seen the emergence of adivasi mass movements in Western India among the Bhils protesting against their alienation from their resource base and their marginalisation in the modern economy. The Bhoomi Sena in Thane district of Maharashtra and the Shramik Sangathana in the Dhule district of the same state are notable in this respect (Singh, 1983). The base of the latter was just across the river Narmada from the Mathwar Range. So Khemraj, Amit and Khemla along with some other adivasis decided to ford the river and climb the hills and go and meet the leaders of the Sangathana in Shahada where they had their office.

When they reached Shahada they were lucky to meet the great adivasi leader and poet Vaharu Sonawane. He received them with warmth and then greeted them with a raised clenched fist saying "Zindabad". No more "Ram Ram" he said to them since it was the greeting of the bajariyas and exploiters. The clenched fist was to symbolise the organised power of the adivasis as opposed to the hand folded in namaskar in which the fingers remained separate. The greeting was to convey to all and sundry that the adivasis were going to fight for a decent life as opposed to the moribund existence they were leading previously. He related to the visitors the great struggles they had fought against the landed non-adivasis who had not only seized their lands but also made them work as bonded labourers on them. In his inimitable way he danced and sang an inspiring song for them –

Nakedar ave kukri mange re (The forest guard comes asking for a chicken)

Vaghan vachhra aamu adivasi ra (We adivasis are the children of the tiger)

Hain juni apta ra, hain juni apta ra (Do not bend to the guard's demands anymore)

The visit proved an exhilarating one for all of them and they came back with renewed vigour to pursue the fight for justice in Alirajpur. The first thing they did on their return was to call a mass meeting and announce that from that day onwards they would greet each other "Zindabad". Many years later I asked Vaharu why they had chosen just zindabad instead of the more popular "inquilab zindabad" - long live the revolution, which is used by the communists. Vaharu replied that both the Bhoomi Sena and the Shramik Sangathana had begun as reactions to the mode of working of the CPI led peasant fronts, which did not respect the uniqueness of adivasi lifestyle and culture. So there was a suspicion in their minds regarding the relevance of Marxist theory and practice to their own situation and especially the concept of an armed revolution. As a result the contentious inquilab was dropped from the greeting.

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