

Chapter 5 - A Paradise Lost

When I arrived in Gendra there was still no formal organisation of the people and neither any hierarchy, just a loose gathering across villages with the activists as the leaders referred to as the 'Sangath'. The people through donations contributed some amount of money but this had not been systematised. They fed the activists when they visited their villages and stayed the night to conduct meetings. The activists were affiliated to the SWRC as a sub-centre of it and some meagre funds used to be provided by the latter. Nobody took any salary. The expenses of local travel and food were taken care of and for the non-advasis it was advised that they make their own arrangements for fare for going home and for their clothes by begging from somewhere! The adivasi activists, especially Khemla who had a family, were provided with a small stipend. The rule was that the activists should spend the maximum time touring the villages as this served the double purpose of reducing the expenses on food and also resulted in more training of the people through increased contact. It was decided that I should go and live with an adivasi family in Attha to get a hang of their culture and also pick up the language fast. I would work with the family on their farm during the day and in the evening conduct an adult education class for the members of the Sangath.

So I went to stay with Avalsingh in Attha. He was a landless peasant totally dependent on the piece of forestland that he had encroached upon. He had a wife Khetli and two small children. The evening I went there for the first time they were having a gruel prepared by boiling jowar or sorghum flour with the dried flowers of amari, a vegetable, which was called 'phulaan khaata'. The next day for lunch we had fermented corn soup, which was called "rabri" but had no resemblance whatsoever to the non-advasi sweet dish of the same name in Hindi. Both khata and rabri saved on the amount of grains to be cooked in comparison to chapatties, or hand baked bread, at the cost of nutrition. The adivasis had got used to eating this kind of food during the monsoon months when they are short of cereals and cash and have to borrow from the sahkars and make do till the kharif harvest comes in. For me of course this was too much coming as it did at the end of a day's labour weeding in the fields. This is what 'declassing' is all about I had consoled myself. Matters were made worse by the fact that Khetli would get up at four o'clock in the morning and start grinding the flour at the stone grinding wheel, which would let off a continuous monotonous wail right next to my ears and wake me up. Thereafter I had to stay awake smelling the stench of the dung and urine of the cattle and goats, which were also tethered for the night inside the hut. Last but not the least there were bedbugs in the charpai that was given to me to sleep in. My cup of sorrow was indeed full!

Life was hard for those at Gendra too. Because there was no electricity there was no flour-milling machine in Attha. So wheat had to be bought, cleaned and milled in Umralli and brought by bus to Palvi and from there on foot to Gendra. Fifteen kilos of flour slung across the back in a sack improvised from a bed sheet. Sometimes the flour supply ran out and then the only alternative was to grind maize or jowar flour on the adivasis' hand operated grinding wheel. There were some small shops in Attha and Gendra but they did not have good provisions, which too had to be brought on foot from the weekly market village at Chhaktala some thirteen kilometres away. The food had to be cooked on a wooden fire. Lighting a wooden stove is a pain at any time but it becomes an odyssey during the monsoons when the wood is wet. Later on when my mother once learnt that I could cook maize flour rotis on a wooden chulha and did so quite regularly, she said that for the first time she had found something to respect me for!

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The vegetable dish to go with these rotis had to be cooked in a round earthen pan called a tavla, which had a lacquered finish on the inside. Despite this it would absorb some of the oil that was used to cook the dish. Since water had to be brought up hill from a stream half a kilometer away in a round earthen vessel perched precariously on the top of the head it was a precious commodity. So we rarely washed this tavla with water after a meal. Instead we would wipe it spotlessly clean with the last of the rotis to relish the concentrated taste of the spices and make it ready for cooking again absorbed oil and all. The next time we put the tavla on the fire the heat would make it release the oil it had absorbed earlier and we would singe the cut pieces of onion in this before putting in more oil for frying the rest of the spices thus saving on the amount of oil used also. After all cooking oil too had to be lugged from Chhaktala. So unlike the well heeled given to rolling their tongues around vintage wine we in Gendra used to freak out on food prepared in vintage cooking oil!

Salvation came soon as my stay at Avalsingh's was a shortlived one. With the coming of the monsoons every year the tensions regarding the cultivation of the nevar lands always hot up because despite all the negotiations the forest department invariably takes the position that it cannot officially allow nevar to exist. Thus I had to set out on tour along with the other activists to handle the situation. In one highhanded operation the forest department staff had beaten up and arrested some twenty-five people from villages close to the Narmada river which had just joined the Sangath and taken them away to Bakhatgarh. Amit and I set out in search of them with some other villagers when we got news of this. On reaching Bakhatgarh we found that the arrested people had been taken away to Alirajpur and the forest guards left there abused us for our pains. We lodged a complaint with the police about the forest guards having abducted the adivasis and abused us. Then we set off for Alirajpur. We had to spend the night on the way in Chhaktala village as there were no more buses available at that time. Next morning when we arrived in Alirajpur we were arrested along with a few adivasis on the false charge of having allegedly raided and ransacked the Forest Department Dak Bungalow in Bakhatgarh. It appeared that the forest department staff had broken up the furniture and windowpanes in the Dak Bungalow and lodged a false complaint against us after we had left.

The news of our arrest spread and immediately the rest of the members of the Sangath along with Khemla and Khemraj took out a rally in Alirajpur and sat on a dharna. By this time in 1985, the IAS officer who had been the SDM in Alirajpur during the previous action in 1983 with regard to the non-payment of minimum wages in the construction of the Athhava dam had returned as the District Collector of Jhabua. He rushed down to Alirajpur and assured the agitating adivasis that he would institute a magisterial enquiry into the whole incident and if the case of vandalism at Bakhatgarh was found to be false it would be withdrawn and in the meantime the arrested people would be released on personal bonds. He also said that those who had been cultivating encroached forestland for some time now would not be dispossessed and a survey would be conducted to determine the reality regarding the extent of encroachment in the Mathwar Range.

With this incident my long saga of fighting the state, which is continuing to this day, began with a bang. Soon we were to take up other issues like that of the extortion of the sahuikars, the corruption of the rural development functionaries, the human rights violations of the police and of course the struggle against the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam being built on the river Narmada. And it was not only 'sangharsh' or struggle that we engaged in but also 'nirman' or constructive development as we experimented with joint forest management, watershed development, primary education in the Bhili language,

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primary health care through homoeopathy, formation of self help credit groups, running of cooperative societies and conservation of indigenous agricultural seeds and practices. Through a long and laborious process the Sangath was given a formal structure and registered as a trade union 'Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath' (KMCS), Farmers and Labourers Consciousness Union, in 1991. As the fame of the 'Attha Group', as we were known in activist circles, spread, so also did the number of non-activists working within it swell and at one time in 1993 we were as many as eight of us working in Alirajpur. The KMCS had made an impact with its work right up to the national level in just a decade upto 1993 (Rahul, 1994).

Till 1994, when I left Alirajpur for Indore, I had a great time, the best I have ever had. Primarily because I got to live very simply, close to nature and close to people who have very few material desires other than to fill their stomachs, make love and make merry. Not that they have no intellectual pursuits. They have a rich oral culture, a religion respectful of nature and a well worked out ecologically sustainable agricultural practice. Their worldview was not an accumulative one that would lead them on to using their surpluses for trade and development but one, which acknowledged the fact that "nature had only enough for fulfilling human's needs and not their greed" (Gandhi, 1959). They left a lot in the hands of their Gods and did not worry much about the future, even in times of stress like the frequent droughts. I had a considerable amount of the modernist hubris in me when I first came to Jhabua not to speak of the revolutionary zeal to change society for the better. I had thought that my job would be initially to teach the adivasis how to pick up the skills of negotiating the modern economic and political systems. Later on I would have to show them how these systems are inherently tilted against them and so needed to be drastically changed. The ultimate aim would be to convince the adivasis to build up the power of their grassroots mass organisations vis-a-vis the state. Very soon, however, the critical tendencies in me got a boost from the easygoing worldview of the adivasis and I lost my modernist impatience and became a much more casual person content to let events unfold at their own pace providing only an occasional push here and there.

Paradoxical as it may seem the Bhils' worldview is a mix of both the opposing philosophies of stoicism and epicureanism. While in their merrymaking they are quintessential epicureans, in their work and in the fortitude with which they bear their travails they are first class stoics. Over and above this, given their propensity to live in small comparatively egalitarian, except in matters relating to their women, social units, closely knit together by customs of resource pooling in social and agricultural activities, they are also the original anarchists. In the sense that one common thread running through the many different schools of anarchist thought and action, that of the organisation of civil society in small units in opposition to the state and the centralised economic interests that determine its political direction (Horowitz, 1964), is also present in the traditional social organisation of the Bhils. So instead of I transforming the mindset of the adivasis of Alirajpur it was they who converted me to a form of anarchism, for which I have coined the term anarcho-environmentalism and fortified me with a kind of Stoicism that has enabled me to persist as an activist over such a long period of time in the face of heavy odds in my continuing fight against the state! However, what I cherish most from those years in Alirajpur is the tantalising flavour of the Bhils' unfettered Epicureanism.

There was a beautiful place in village Jalsindhi on the banks of the Narmada, which has now unfortunately been permanently submerged by the Sardar Sarovar dam reservoir. During winter when the rocks on the banks became exposed there was a patch where the

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rocks were dented in the shape of giant footprints called Dabaliya. Near to these there was a deep well like depression and next to it a tall slim rock. The adivasis said that this was the place where the Gods had had a great celebration. They had prepared 'ghat', a pounded maize preparation, by pounding the maize in the deep well like depression, which was the 'ukhal' or mortar, with the tall slim stone, which was the 'musal' or pestle. Then they had eaten and drunk mahua wine and danced and the dents in the rocks were their footprints. The Narmada used to become like a lake here because there was a deep depression in the riverbed also. So this place was frequently visited by the adivasis in winter and spring to fish in this big lake in their boats made from hollowed out trunks of trees and also to propitiate the Gods. I used to make it a point during my travels to spend a day there once every month swimming in the lake and catching grasshoppers and earthworms to use as bait for the fish and then laying out the fishing lines in the river during the day and cooking and eating the fish on wooden fires in the evening. The nights would be especially beautiful, as the adivasis would huddle around the bonfires to sing their lilting songs under the starlit sky to the accompaniment of the 'rantha' or horsehair violin and relate their myths and stories.

Once on my suggestion we had one of the monthly meetings of the central committee of the Sangath at this heavenly spot. After a great day of swimming and fishing and a lovely dinner we settled down to the serious business of the Sangath at night. The anti dam struggle was at its peak at the time and we were hotly discussing the strategy to be adopted for the future. Khemla, excitable as he always is, rose up in the middle of the meeting and stated that if the government could not provide for the poor adivasis then they would have no option but to blow up the dam. Before the rest of us could react to this bombastic announcement Khemla was greeted by a chorus of croaks which refused to abate. When we looked around for the source of this cacophony we found that a bevy of frogs had overturned the bamboo basket in which all the fishing lines had been kept ready for laying in the river in the morning and swallowed the grasshopper baits. These baits had naturally got stuck in their throats forcing them to essay resounding bugle calls in support of Khemla! The meeting had to be called off as all of us fell to laughing and the adivasis who find prolonged serious cogitations a pain at all times broke into their traditional song and dance around the bonfires. A paradise that has been lost forever.

The other reason for these years having been the best was that our group was a happy go lucky one. Very soon we realised that there was little chance of our succeeding in bringing about any substantive changes in state policies. What we could do at the most was increase the access of the adivasis to the state system and reduce the transaction costs somewhat. As one of our mentors once told us in the initial stages of the anti-dam struggle – “you are two and a half people and yet making so bold as to take on the Indian state and the World Bank at the same time”! Indeed without the support of well meaning bureaucrats in the early phases we would not have been able to put the Sangath together at all. For me initially this was a painful process being steeped as I was in the belief that a radical overthrow of a black anti-people state was absolutely essential. However, the realities of working with a set of people who were still in a pre-capitalist mode of economic and cultural production and the opportunities being offered for economic development and political organisation by the spaces provided by the liberal democratic and in some respects even socialistic and anarchistic Constitution of India, inevitably led me to reconcile myself to letting the idea of working within it influence my thought and action.

In that decade up to the early nineteen nineties we mostly tasted success in our actions given the fact that we were working among a people who had been severely

deprived of the knowledge and fruits of the most basic economic and social rights and we had just begun challenging the deeper injustices of state policy. One action that I will always remember as one of the best I have ever instituted was a classical leftist "land to the tiller" operation. The former prince of the state of Mathwar who had initially boasted to us that he was the monarch of all he surveyed did in fact have that kind of an aura among his tenant adivasi farmers. These poor landless adivasis were scared stiff of him and not only tilled his lands for just one tenth of the share of the produce but even did beggar at his palace in Bakhatgarh. I continuously held meetings with them trying to convince them that times had changed and they and not the Raja could easily become the masters of all they surveyed. Perseverance paid and one fine day I got all of them together, took them to Alirajpur, and filed for landownership rights under the relevant provisions of the Madhya Pradesh Land Revenue Code. With the help of a pro-active dalit IAS officer who was the Subdivisional Magistrate in Alirajpur at that time we had the Raja of Bakhatgarh eating dust instead of the fruits of the toil of his tenants in no time whatsoever.

Moreover, in the same way as all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy so also does all ideology and no fun make activists into dogmatic dodos! Anyway living so closely among the adivasis we could not but imbibe their great love for fun and revelry. I used to say fondly that we were like Mac and his gang in the Nobel laureate author John Steinbeck's classic short novel Cannery Row (Steinbeck, 1986) with the only difference that we were not members of the lumpen proletariat like them but committed social activists. I remember once a researcher who was documenting the various kinds of social work organisations at work in India came down to our office in Alirajpur and we got down to arguing with her about the possibilities of lasting social transformation to a more egalitarian and sustainable developmental paradigm. During the course of the debate one of us said that we were nothing more than well meaning 'dalals' who acted as middle-men between the state and the adivasis and did not charge them a fee or extort money from them like the other dalals and so should relinquish all our romantic ideas about paradigmatic societal change. When the researcher indignantly asked this chap why he was wasting his time in Alirajpur if he had such a poor opinion of himself he promptly shot back –"because I have nothing better to do"!

Life is full of problems and good things never last, especially for those fighting for the poor. Khemraj was married and his activist wife Anita was pregnant at the time I met them for the first time in Tilonia. Anita had temporarily taken on work at the women's section in SWRC as it was not possible for her to stay in Gendra given her condition. But after her son had begun toddling she came down to Alirajpur in 1986. We had built a bigger house, which was to serve as the office-cum- residence for us in Attha by that time. But it was still not big enough to give Khemraj and Anita the privacy they needed. There was also the problem of expenses. The kind of funds we had were just not enough to allow Khemraj and Anita to bring up a family in even a simple middle class way. So after some time it became more and more difficult for Khemraj and Anita to continue in Attha. Anita applied for and got a job in Rajasthan as the coordinator of a Government Nehru Yuva Kendra and Khemraj left with her to take care of the child in 1987. Khemraj was a sad man when he left but he had to bow to the realities of life in the same way as later Amit and I have had to. Amit met and married Jayashree who came to the valley as part of the massive mobilisation of youth from Maharashtra by the Narmada Bachao Andolan in support of the anti-dam struggle in 1989. They too faced the same kind of problems that Khemraj and Anita had faced and had to alternate between Alirajpur and Delhi for quite some time. They would

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spend months in Delhi earning money and then come to Alirajpur and work there for some time. Then in 1995 they too had children and had to pull out of Alirajpur altogether. Some of the other activists pulled out for similar reasons and some others because they wanted to pursue other better paying options given the kind of dead end that mass organisational activism was leading to at that time.

Shankar also had got married in 1989 and had children. The non-activists could pull out of Alirajpur if they wished but this escape route was not available to the activists. So we had to sit together and work out some formula for them. It was decided that the activists would take a stipend big enough to be able to look after the needs of their families and the non-activists like myself would continue to work without pay as before. If not in society at large, within our group at least, we were able to implement the communist ideal of “from each according to his capacity and to each according to his needs”! This meant an increase in the money required to run the show in Alirajpur. Since SWRC was not prepared to foot the whole bill we had to begin looking round for other sources of funds. At this crucial juncture in 1990 Baba Amte added his considerable moral weight to the Narmada Bachao Andolan by coming and setting up residence in the submergence zone in the valley near Barwani. He is a very perceptive person and having known activists for a long time knew that their main problem is always that of the lack of funds. So he sent word one day that I should go and meet him. When I went to his hut by the riverside in Kasrawad village he told me that he wanted to help us from time to time with some funds if we were amenable to this proposition. This was an offer that I could hardly refuse.

Then SWRC threw a spanner in the works in 1993 by cutting off our funding altogether. This made the situation desperate, we had to look around for other sources and somehow we made ends meet for sometime through ad hoc measures. This is when the agency Society for Rural Urban and Tribal Initiative (SRUTI) came to our rescue. SRUTI had been already providing a fellowship to Khemla since 1987 but now they made a proposal to us to fund the organisation as a whole so as to provide it with some stability. SRUTI in fact has played a stellar role by funding many of the activists mass organisations in the Western Madhya Pradesh region and so ensuring that a widespread and sustained challenge in defence of activists rights could be mounted against the oppressive policies of the state and international funding agencies in the region, which has had a national and international impact.

Finally, much as I would have loved to continue my idyllic existence there, I too had to leave Alirajpur in 1994. I got married in 1993 to my colleague Subhadra Khaperde who was an activist working with the mass organisation Ekta Parishad in the neighbouring Dhar district. Subhadra insisted that I break with traditional patriarchal custom and leave my place of work to join her instead of vice versa. But her colleagues did not like the idea of my joining them and objected to our staying in their area of work. So we had to move to Indore instead in 1994 to work out our future life and work plans. Things were complicated by the fact that I had become a chronic sufferer of malaria which continually relapsed every two months or so. Doctors in Indore told me that Jhabua was a malaria endemic area and I had been deeply infected by the parasite. The only solution they said was that I take a complete anti-malarial treatment and abstain from fieldwork for at least a year or so.

There was something else too. The Activists Ekta Parishad (AEP), which is an organisation of activists spanning the four Western Indian states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra was formed about this time. The main thrust of the AEP

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was that the adivasis had had enough of being led by non-advansi activists in their struggles. In the poetic words of Vaharu Sonowane, who was the co-convener of this new movement -

We did not sit on the stage
We were not called to do so
We were shown our place on the ground
We were told to sit there
But they sat on the stage
And talked about our sorrows
Our sorrows remained ours
They never became theirs.

The AEP has subsequently prepared a full-fledged manifesto, which is the first conscious and methodical expression of the inherent anarchism of the Bhils. In it has been detailed the kind of society the AEP desires and the means for bringing it about (AEP, 1998). Shankar became an active member of this organisation in 1992. He and some other adivasi activists began to feel that it was time that they directed the affairs of the Sangathan in Alirajpur and this would be possible only if we non-advansi activists removed our overbearing presence from there. Fair enough we said and bowed out gracefully.

This change of scene led later to a new and more challenging phase of activism for Subhadra and myself further up the Narmada valley in Dewas and Khargone districts to the east of Indore. I became a background man and the people and Subhadra played the lead roles. Grassroots mobilisation by the adivasis and especially women reached such a high level that the state had to discard all pretence of being a liberal democratic one and crack down with illegal force as it always does in such circumstances. This culminated in a heroic but tragic climax of vintage anarchist rebellion in the classical Bhil tradition in the picturesquely named village of Mehendikhera in 2001.

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