

## **Chapter 8 - Mother Chhattisgarh is Calling**

Subhadra took up residence in the house of a Gond adivasi in an interior village, Gotitola, in the Lohara Block of Durg district in the winter of 1989. She was part of a group of four young women who were to mobilise the villagers to get organised and fight for their rights. All these women used to live in separate villages and roam the jungles alone to visit the villages. It was difficult work walking through the dense jungles alone and then trying to convince people about the need to organise. During the training it had been explained to Subhadra through lectures and group work how people had to be made aware of their rights and then mobilised to launch mass actions to secure them. In reality, however, Subhadra found that the people already knew their rights but were apprehensive of the various problems that could arise due to the opposition of the oppressors in the event of a mass mobilisation to secure them. So they were extremely circumspect about launching anything that might involve confrontation with them and the state authorities and obviously did not have any faith in the ability of Subhadra to provide effective leadership. As we have seen this is the same problem of credibility that a much more seasoned activist like Khemraj had faced earlier. Thus even after spending four months the young women could not make any progress towards building up a mass movement.

Subhadra's village was about ten kilometers away from the town of Dalli, which was the nerve centre of the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM). The CMM had by then completed more than a decade of struggle and become a legend in the field of alternative social movements in India. Naturally Subhadra began attending the programmes of this organisation so as to learn something more about the techniques of mass organisation and also to gain inspiration from its success. The Morcha had had its beginnings in the fight against some more unholy acts done to set up the first modern temple of Chhattisgarh. It started as a trade union, Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh in 1977 in the struggles of adivasi contract workers at the captive iron-ore mines of the Bhilai Steel Plant at Dalli demanding better working conditions and wages. The plant management, instead of employing regular workers and paying them decent wages had adopted the abhorrent practice of hiring labourers through contractors at a cheap rate. A decade long struggle was waged from the mid nineteen seventies till the mid nineteen eighties during which many workers laid down their lives in police firing and attacks by goons of labour contractors while taking part in strikes. Finally the workers got their rights acknowledged by the Bhilai Steel Plant management.

The unique feature of this struggle was that it broke out of the narrow confines of standard trade unionism and encompassed the whole lives of its members. Campaigns were carried out against the two most debilitating problems that beset poor labourers in India - alcoholism and debt bondage to usurious moneylenders. Women were mobilised both to stop the brewing and selling of liquor and to form micro-credit groups so as to alleviate these problems. They also began addressing the problems of patriarchal oppression. A hospital was set up with contributions from the members that apart from providing treatment also developed a community health programme to increase health awareness. On the cultural front, research was conducted to unearth instances of people's struggles in the history of Chhattisgarh that had been glossed over by the mainstream historians. New literature in the form of songs and plays was created and disseminated through repertory troupes to project a positive alternate image of Chhattisgarh that could stand up to the modern urban culture being continually propagated through the mainstream media. The Morcha inspired by its leader Shankar Guha Niyogi began to fan out among

the nearby villages and also the ancillary industrial units in and around Bhilai from the late nineteen eighties.

The Morcha was formed in 1982 when the prevailing forms of development and governance were pinpointed as the root causes of all the ills of the people of Chhattisgarh. Not only did these bypass the livelihood interests of the majority but was also destructive of the environment. The industrial area in Bhilai was marked as the local source of most of this mal-development. Thus it was realised that any movement for thoroughgoing change in the Chhattisgarh region could not succeed without involving the labouring masses there. A four-pronged strategy was worked out. The thrust in the industrial regions would have to be to try and get labour and environmental laws implemented. In the villages the stress would have to be on reviving the traditional community spirit and the environment friendly agricultural activities that went with it. Simultaneously steps would have to be taken to get a better deal for farmers in the agricultural input and product markets where traders were invariably cheating them. The third front would have to be against the corrupt and repressive bureaucracy which had been inherited from the British and which was totally insensitive to the needs of the people. Finally an ideological and cultural onslaught would have to be launched against modern industrial and agricultural development by involving the intelligentsia. An alternative vision of a free Chhattisgarh would have to be formulated that was radically different from that of the urban Indian elite. This last was extremely important, as the ideology of modern development had so hegemonised the masses that it was hard to initiate mass action to challenge it.

Niyogi also realised that it was impossible for the Morcha to fight the state in such a comprehensive manner on its own and so went out of his way to forge a broader front with other mass organisations. At that point of time in 1989 there were a number of people's movements underway in Madhya Pradesh. The various mass organisations of the affected people of the Bhopal gas tragedy had forced the government to make its welfare activities more transparent and responsive to the needs of the people. Medha Patkar and her colleagues of the Narmada Bachao Andolan were carrying out a militant struggle against the building of large dams on the Narmada River. Rajaji had set in motion the process of mobilisation of adivasis and peasants all over the state to demand their basic rights, which was to later evolve into the mass organisation Ekta Parishad of which Subhadra was a part. Finally the Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath in Alirajpur and the Kisan Adivasi Sangathan in Hoshangabad had established themselves as forces to reckon with as adivasi mass organisations that had brought into focus the adivasis' right to a livelihood in accordance with their culturally and economically distinct lifestyles. The mood was very upbeat among all these organisations and together they did hold promise of better things to come at that point of time.

1989 in fact is a watershed year in the history of the environmental mass movements in India because on September 28<sup>th</sup> the first ever national rally and mass meeting against destructive development was held in the small town of Harsud in Madhya Pradesh which was attended by thousands of people and ended with the resolve to launch a broadbased nationwide mass movement for people centred development and governance. The next day an even bigger mobilisation was witnessed in Raipur under the aegis of the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha for the establishment of a dream Chhattisgarh state, which would secure the interests of its poor citizens. The struggles conducted by the CMM had served to strengthen their basic understanding that just the creation of a separate state of Chhattisgarh without a radical change in the form of development and governance was not

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going to bring about an improvement in the lives of most of the people. Given the prevalence of a mass consumerist culture popularised by television that had enamoured both urban middle and lower classes the environmentalist challenge perforce had to be mounted in rural areas. The peasants and not the industrial workers would have to be the vanguard of the environmentalist mass movements.

The Morcha had consequently intensified its participation in the politics of the village panchayats so as to strike at centralisation from below. These panchayats have lost their traditional character and have become a microcosm of the larger political arena that is beset by corruption and act as nurseries for the breeding of cadres for the mainstream political parties. The Morcha had begun a process of reversing this trend by reinvigorating the traditional consensus based panchayat as a preliminary stage in its battle against the present over-centralised system. Kautilya, the famous political analyst and statesman of ancient India, had advised Chandragupta, the first great all Indian emperor who set up the Maurya dynasty, who was despondent after having been defeated in battle by the powerful king Nanda early on in his career, that it was foolish to plunge one's hand into the centre of a bowl of hot rice and that he should instead pick the cooler grains on the side first (Sharmasastri, 1924). The Morcha had reaped rich dividends as a consequence of this sage strategy as its adivasi leader Janaklal Thakur had been able to win the Dondi-Lohara assembly seat of the Madhya Pradesh Legislature in 1985. The CMM was unique in that it combined "sangharsh" - economic and political struggles with "nirman" - developmental and cultural renewal activities, functioning democratically under a collective leadership which had a clear political vision of an alternative social set up and the means to achieve it (Sadgopal & Namra, 1993). Phaguram, a peasant leader of the Morcha and a folk singer who has created many revolutionary new songs, which have become extremely popular, reflected this bouyant mood of the time in his song -

"Chhattisgarh dai ke have ga gohaar

Sabho jan milke shoshan la tarbo"

"Mother Chhattisgarh is calling all her children,

Join together and overthrow the exploitative burden."

Subhadra drew a lot of inspiration from the CMM's struggles but her own attempt at setting up an organisation did not get anywhere. Moreover a new problem cropped up. Subhadra suggested to the man who was the supervisor of their group of women workers that they should be allowed to stay and work together in pairs as it was very difficult to work alone given the dense jungles in the area and the great distances which had to be covered either by foot or by bicycle. There was always the feeling of insecurity that follows young single women like a shadow in this highly patriarchal society of ours. Every now and then there would be the sad news that some woman activist of Prayog had been raped. If the people in the villages had listened to what she was saying at least there would have been some satisfaction. But in all the months of travelling from village to village she had not been able to convince anyone to attend meetings to decide on some course of action. When she came back in the evening there was no one she could share her frustrations with. The man not only vetoed this proposal but also warned Subhadra that she would not get her pay unless she covered a certain amount of villages every month.

She had to work very hard in order to fulfil this order and fell ill as a consequence from the physical effort and the mental tension. This is the perennial problem for activists working among people trying to mobilise them to fight for their rights. The people treat

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these activists and their organisations as "bin pende ka lota" meaning a round vessel without a stand at the bottom to keep it straight in the event of a push from oppressors or the state. So used have people got to the system of patronage practised by mainstream political parties that they have lost faith in themselves and their own ability to fight. To expect them to follow the lead of a young twenty something girl in fighting the state and the local vested interests was a little too much. Subhadra thought that if things continued like this she would not survive let alone be in a position to earn any money and do any social work. So she gave up her job and went back to Jepra in the spring of 1990.

Jepra could not provide solace to Subhadra. Things had changed drastically in the year since she had left. Her father did not farm his land anymore as he was too old to work in the fields and her brother was not interested in doing so. So the land had been given out on rent to one of their kin. There was thus nothing to do in Jepra. Her brother was desperately trying to land some job or other, had failed to do so and was very despondent. He was also very ill and lacked the money to get himself treated. Her father pleaded with Subhadra that she should go out in search of employment once again as there was no future in the village. He felt helpless that he could not do anything to help her but expressed the belief that she had it in her to make it good in the outside world and should not lose heart so quickly in the face of initial difficulties.

Subhadra set off once again after a month or so for Tilda to meet Rajaji and see if she could start working again in some other area. Rajaji was effusive in his welcome and scolded her for having gone back to her home without even meeting him. He told her that the organisational work was to be begun anew in the western Madhya Pradesh region and if she liked Subhadra could go and start the work there. She would have a free hand he said and there would not be any problems arising from somebody else bossing over her. This was a very good offer and she immediately accepted it despite having some inner misgivings about having to go to an unknown area and shoulder the immense responsibility of setting up the organisation there.

So in the hot dry summer of 1990 Subhadra too hit the oft trodden migrant's trail out of Chhattisgarh and took the Chhattisgarh Express train to head for Bhopal. There she met for the first time one of the stalwart Gandhian workers of Madhya Pradesh Ramchandra Bhargava. Little did she know then that one day he and his wife Rukmani would act as her surrogate parents for the purpose of her court marriage with me. Bhargavji was in charge of the Gandhi Bhavan in Bhopal and also some other NGOs. Though he or his organisations do not take part in any agitational activities he always keeps his doors open for activists and organisations that do. That is why the Gandhi Bhavan in Bhopal has been the venue for many important national and state level meetings of the environmentalists. Since it is located very close to the legislative assembly, the Chief Minister's residence and the Governor's residence it is a convenient assembly point for launching agitations in Bhopal. When Rajaji had expressed a desire to expand his organisational work to the western Madhya Pradesh region to Bhargavji, he had enthusiastically agreed to help. He consulted Mahendrabhai and organised a meeting of Gandhians working in the region in the Ashram of the Sarvodaya Shikshan Samiti in Machla.

There for the first time Subhadra met two other Gandhian stalwarts Mahendra Jain known popularly as Mahendrabhai who was the president of the the NGO that ran the ashram at Machla and Kashinath Trivedi. Mahehdrabhai had joined the Gandhian Sarvodaya movement when in his teens and decided to devote his life to people oriented

journalism. He had set up the Sarvodaya Press Service and through it he disseminated articles dealing with poor people's concerns to hundreds of magazines and newspapers. He was jailed for eighteen months during the emergency declared by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975 to stifle Jayaprakash Narayan's Sampurna Kranti Andolan. His office cum residence in Indore had become a hub for the various mass movements afoot in the region. Kashinathji was a veteran Gandhian who had fought valiantly during the freedom struggle and been to jail many times. He had devoted his time after independence to developing an alternative education system for the rural poor and especially the adivasis. He had set up an ashram in village Tavlai in Dhar district where a residential school for adivasi children was being run.

It was decided in the meeting that work would be started in the Dahi Block of Dhar district, which had remained relatively untouched by both the Gandhians and also the new breed of NGOs and social movements. This block was ideally situated because in the adjacent blocks of Sondwa in Jhabua district and Kukshi in Dhar district the Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath and the Narmada Bachao Andolan were very active and would be able to provide Subhadra good support. She went to the ashram in Tavlai. There were children in the school from Dahi block and it was felt that they would be the right people to introduce Subhadra to the area and the people. So Subhadra accompanied by a few teenaged adivasi students then went to the villages of Dahi block. Everything had been so hectic and exciting over the past few days that she had not had the time earlier to notice the change in the natural ambience. But walking in the blistering heat of summer through the countryside she was suddenly confronted by the drastic difference. The Nimar region had become heavily denuded over the years and there were barren hills all around which increased the heat. This was in stark contrast to Chhattisgarh, which because of its tanks and irrigation canals and still extant forests remained green even in summer. The other change was in the food. Subhadra had been used to eating rice all her life. But here she had to eat thick maize rotis. The maize was of a hybrid variety and white in colour as against the yellow indigenous maize that was available in Chhattisgarh and also tasted bland.

One thing put her off very much. The approach road to the villages was invariably flanked by human excreta and stank like anything. Instead of going to the fields the people would defecate on the sides of the roads. On top of this she learned that the Bhilala adivasis do not wash themselves with water after defecation and instead use stones to wipe their anuses clean. She learnt that the Bhilalas traditionally believed that washing their anuses was equivalent to washing their fortunes, however inconsequential they may be, away with the stools! The Bhilalas also bathed on an average once a week given the great shortage of water. So both defecating and bathing were challenging activities for her. She had to spend some time searching around for a can in which to take water for washing before she could go to relieve herself. Similarly, bathing became an elaborate ritual, as water had to be fetched from a handpump or a dugwell, which might be as much as a kilometre away. Chhattisgarhis always take a bath before having their lunch by taking a dip in the nearest pond. She learnt the hard way like I had done earlier that living and working among the Bhils meant renouncing the transient pleasure of regular bathing.

The block was populated mostly by Bhilala adivasis. Only some of the villages like the market village of Dahi from which the block got its name had a substantial number of non-adivasis. The preliminary survey revealed to Subhadra a much higher level of illiteracy and lack of awareness than in Chhattisgarh but also a greater willingness to listen



to what she had to say about battling corruption through organised mass actions. She toured the whole block and secured the acquiescence of twenty households, which were to host the field workers who would come later. She was very happy because at last she seemed to be making some headway. There is the story of an activist having gone to a village to address a meeting only to find that there were just two people there. Undaunted the activist launched into his speech and in the end thanked the two listeners for having attended the meeting and listened to him so eagerly. The two people said that they had perforce to be present there because the carpet on which the activist had stood and given his speech belonged to them and they could not go away with it until he had finished! Great happiness warms the heart of an activist, therefore, when people assemble in good numbers in meetings to listen to what is being said. So despite the alien climate, culture and food, Subhadra spent a very satisfying fortnight in Dahi and went back to Tilda after having arranged everything for the start of organisational work.

A training and selection camp had been organised in Tilda for the recruitment of activists to work in the various new areas in which mass organisations were to be set up including Dahi. Subhadra was now senior enough to be one of the trainers and selectors. Twenty people were selected and they came along with Subhadra to Dahi and took up their residence in the villages that had been pinpointed earlier. Soon these young people were able to garner support among the local adivasis and people began to approach local authorities making various demands. Like in the neighbouring Sondwa block here too there was a nexus between the traditional village patels, mainstream political party functionaries and the bureaucracy, that ensured that corruption reigned supreme. Since people had already heard of the exploits of the KMCS and NBA in challenging this oppressive nexus in nearby areas they associated these new activists in their areas with these organisations and began responding to their exhortations. They were not "bin pende ke lote" anymore. Complaints were filed against officials who had taken bribes from the adivasis. Rajaji on hearing of the positive response decided to hold one of his training camps for the local people.

This was an honour for Subhadra. Nowhere else had a local training camp been held so soon after the launching of operations because normally the people would be late in responding to the overtures of the new activists. A training camp takes a lot of organising. But in this case there was an added problem that had to be taken care of. One of the basic tenets of Gandhian social work is that of inculcating cleanliness, especially the awareness of sanitation, among the people. This arose from the fact that in traditional Hindu society the responsibility for cleaning the latrines was that of a particular caste which was branded as untouchable. Gandhi in an attempt to free these castes called them Harijans or the children of God and made it compulsory for his followers to clean latrines in villages. In this way Gandhi hoped that he would be able to bring moral pressure on the upper castes to either clean the latrines themselves or install hygienic water washed latrines and waste disposal systems like septic tanks. So there would be periodic campaigns in which Sarvodayis would go around cleaning latrines for a week instead of the traditional untouchable castes.

Thus the existence of a clean and hygienic village ambience was the acid test of successful Gandhian mobilisation. And the first thing Rajaji would notice on coming to the village where the camp was to be organised would be the excreta and its stench on the side of the road and he would conclude that the activists had failed in one of their basic responsibilities. Since the people of the village were hardly bothered about this and were

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unlikely to participate in a cleaning drive so soon after their induction into Gandhism, the burden of cleaning the road fell on the activists. So Subhadra and her team set about with shovels and baskets and towels tied round their faces cleaning all the excreta on the morning the camp was to begin after the village people had duly relieved themselves. When Rajaji arrived the village was spic and span and every one was smiling from ear to ear and breathing stench free air.

The camp went off successfully with attendance not only by local people but also by people and activists from the neighbouring districts associated with the NBA and the KMCS. A whole new enthusiastic cadre of adivasi youth was inspired to work for their community. However, before work could be begun in earnest in Dahi Block a much more crucial battle was about to begin in the struggle to save the Narmada which had to be supported first. The construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam had reached the bed level with the foundation work having been completed. So it was imperative for the NBA to force the stoppage of the work at this stage permanently before construction began on the superstructure of the dam. A massive long march from Barwani in Nimar in Madhya Pradesh to the dam site at Kevadia in Gujarat ending in an indefinite sit in there was planned with the intention of forcing the government to scrap the dam altogether. This required massive mobilisation of people and the NBA requested Rajaji to spare his Dahi team of activists for a month to help in this mobilisation. So it was that Subhadra and her co-workers went off to Nimar to mobilise people for the "Sangharsh Yatra" or struggle march of the NBA.

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