

FOR JUSTICE ... FOR DIGNITY... FOR EQUALITY



Sarvahara Jan Andolan

**FOR JUSTICE...FOR DIGNITY...
FOR EQUALITY**

A Story of the Katkaris of Raigad

By
Ulka Mahajan

For Justice ... For Dignity ... For Equality
A Story of the Katkaris of Raigad

Written by :

Ulka Mahajan

Typeset and Design by :

Ronald & Robin Rebello

Marathi to English translation by :

Ms. Anjali Kanitkar

Donation Price : Rs. 25/-

Published by :

Sarvahara Jan Andolan

Karjekar's Chawl, Nijampur Road

Mangaon, Dist. Raigad

Maharashtra - 410 206

Printed at :

Chintanakshar Grafics

16, Hanuman Indl. Estate

G. D. Ambekar Marg

Wadala, Mumbai - 400 031

Tel. : 2411 49 32

The Beginning

The Sanghathan actually started functioning from August 1990. The name had been decided even earlier. We could not think of a term more suitable than 'Sarvahara' for the Katkaris of Raigad district. 'Sarvahara' – one who has lost everything..... or more appropriately, one from whom everything has been snatched away.

The Katkaris have always been known as a primitive tribe. Their traditional occupation of making 'kaat' (used in the 'paan' made from the betel leaf) from the khair trees, disappeared some decades ago with the depleting jungles. Occupations like farming, fishing, making coal, bricks etc. prevailed. Not having any special skills in farming, this community has always been alienated from the mainstream. Migration is a part of routine for them. Once the monsoon is over, non-availability of work locally, compels the Katkari families to gather their meagre belongings and shift residence in search of work. By the end of November, after their major festival - Devdiwali, which is after the harvest – the Katkari moves lock, stock and barrel to another place, another job. This other place is predetermined by the contractor who capitalizes on the lean post-transplantation period and gives him 'advance loans'. In Raigad, loans are advanced in the period when the Katkari has no work, no food and no spending money for food or for festivals – around August. The contractor then extracts his pound of flesh in the post-harvest season. A keen understanding of the life-cycle of the Katkari, of his needs, his situation, his psyche, has facilitated the contractor to perpetuate a vicious cycle of debt-bondage over the years.

The Katkari family thus, for six months every year, leaves its hamlet in order to 'survive'. Such a life leaves the children uneducated, growing up only with the wisdom that comes from surviving on the fringes of life. Schools and formal education are not part of their world. Daily meals constitute of bhakri (thick bread), rice, and if possible some watery dal (cereal), dried fish and rarely a feast of some small animal or jungle fowl caught in forests. Dry hay for a bed and the sky for a roof- these have been the essentials of a Katkari life. Until almost four decades ago, his expectations were limited to these bare essentials for his survival. There

was no question of aspiring for or even dreaming about anything more than this. Managing daily survival was the sole aim of this community for the last hundred years. At least records available from the British period describe the Katkaris in this manner. Earlier to these, there are no records available, about the community.

Psychology tells us that human beings have a hierarchy of needs. Only when the basic needs are satisfied, does a human being aspire to 'higher', more abstract needs. The Katkari community in their quest to satisfy their basic needs of survival became a community without roots. This perennial instability has left deep marks on the very psyche of the community. Faced consistently with treachery and exploitation, the Katkari finds it extremely difficult to put his trust in anyone. As a result, without a definite understanding of its own identity, it is a faceless, struggling community of stragglers, with no political clout. In every way it is a community which has lost its all, even its sense of 'self' – a Sarvahara community.

Official records state that Raigad district has a population comprising of 12 % Adivasis (Tribals). These records are, in all probability, erroneous; since most census exercises are conducted after the monsoon, the likelihood of the tribals having migrated for work cannot be overlooked. The numbers, therefore, are likely to be heavily underestimated. The official records, consequently, indicate a very small proportion of Katkaris – most of whom are landless.

Thus we started work in this area with the dream of organizing this community, building a 'Sanghathan' creating a political identity for them. We cannot boast of having had any ideology or thought clearer than this. The one thing we were sure about was that we would not be implementing any project with outside funding; we would not enter the arena in order to dole out services to the community. We wanted the Sanghathan to become an important part of the history of the community – a part of its capacity building. We thought that in spearheading the struggle for their rights, the Sanghathan would become an inspiration to the future generation of Katkaris, to assert and safeguard their rights, their identity. We also made a conscious decision not to register the Sanghathan as a trade union or in any other form. This was more as a result of wanting to stay true to ourselves, than because of any 'ism'. Being new to the field, being

on our own, we were not sure of our resilience, of our staying power. We were not sure for how long we would last. Registering the organisation would compel us to keep up appearances, to go on under any circumstances. We were not against perseverance, but we were against continuing a sham just for the sake of "the show must go on". We therefore decided that the day we felt we could not go on, we would stop - we would not deceive ourselves nor deceive others.

We noted down all our thoughts about the Sanghathan – its roles, its principles, its constitution, and its objectives. 'We' means my colleagues Sumitra Joshi and Sopan Sutar, and I. Sumitra was my classmate in the college from where we both graduated in the field of social work. Sopan was a 17-18 year old youth from one of the villages near Mangaon – educated upto 10th standard. We knew Sopan to be a very shy and honest person. We roped him in to help us. In those early days, all that he had to do was sit in the office and take down messages of the people who came.

Once we started working, the first hurdle was money. Both Sumitra and I had decided not to burden our families with our demands. I had worked for a year earlier and had some savings. Sumitra was getting some money from a scholarship she had won. Friends in Mumbai helped to some extent by collecting Rs. 100/- each. With these meager funds, we started paying Sopan Rs. 100/- per month and expenses for traveling. Both of us would manage in Rs. 500/- per month. Most of the time, we saved on food – often eating only one meal a day, eating at around 4.00 pm, so as to manage to subsist through the whole day. We were young and enthusiastic and had vowed that we would not get frustrated in the face of mundane difficulties.

When I look back and think about those days, I feel that all this was possible because of the sensitivity that had been fostered in us by our schools and by our parents. I think many different people have contributed to our growth – a teacher who taught history from the depths of her heart, a school principal who praised some small achievement of ours, parents who always supported us and taught us to put in sincere and genuine efforts in anything that we did, friends who came from poorer backgrounds and whose struggles touched us, stories written by Sane Guruji – stories told sensitively, which remained in our hearts and minds giving us gentle lessons in life, inspiring accounts about Baba Amte, Medha

Patkar and their struggles for peoples rights – all these have been the accumulated treasures that ignited our minds and strengthened us during our early difficult days.

The other strong support we had in those days was, the constant encouragement we got from Mr. Bhuskute, Mr. Prabhu, Ms. Anjali Kanitkar and Dr. Pradip Patkar. As advisors to the Sanghathan, they helped us to keep up our morale, strengthened our knowledge base and helped in many different ways - their doors were always open to us. Another home that always welcomed us was that of Girish and Amita Godbole. Though they were in that area for a short time, they were there for us very solidly when we needed support in the difficult early days.

When our funds started dwindling, we both took up research assignments for an organisation and worked in Chandrapur for a month. With the Rs. 2000/- each as remuneration, the next 5-6 months were taken care of. We had also been corresponding with and locating donor groups which had no connection with foreign funding. Samajik Kritadnyata Nidhi, Sruti, CRY, were some such groups. For some time we got a fellowship from Vidhayak Sansad.

Somehow, we went on. Lack of finance did not prove an insurmountable obstacle. As the difficulties arose, we somehow overcame them.

In these initial days of working we met a lot of people — activists, journalists, academicians, researchers; we read a lot of books including the District Gazette, the District Census; we met senior politicians from the districts; met teachers, lawyers, and other professionals. We met them to discuss what we wanted to do, to gauge whether they could be of help to us in our work. Sadly though, they all seemed inclined to wait and watch from a distance what we were doing. Many of them did not even want to lend us any reading material that they had.

Probably the atmosphere was such - there was nothing in the socio-political environment, then, to inspire any social movement or struggle for rights. These people, therefore, did not seem inspired to help. There was not enough reason why they should have implicitly trusted us. In fact, we had yet to prove our mettle to society at large.

However, we were not disappointed. Life, we knew came in mixed doses – of happiness and hopelessness. We both had the capacity and the

zest to experience life to its fullest – in all its dimensions. Whether it was struggling through the long, hot summer days or walking the long distances, soaked to the skin during the monsoon or whether it was enjoying a meal of peanuts and tea at the end of a hungry day - we managed to live all these experiences with zest and take them in our stride.

In the initial days, when we visited tribal hamlets, people did not even wait to talk to us. The women and children would mostly run away, some women would come with an intention to confront – many thought we were police women come to confiscate illicit liquor. The Katkaris were not used to people from other communities coming to visit them or to exchange pleasantries. Often, therefore, we were not even offered a glass of water in the tribal hamlets.

Through our readings, our earlier experiences of fieldwork in the area (while doing our social work post-graduation), and through the experiences we had of other local organisations in the area, we had learnt a few things. We resolved that we should identify issues of exploitation and build up the capacity of people to fight against exploitation and injustice.

We were intrigued by the issues identified by the people. They listed out the following – they wanted electricity, water, roads, balwadis (kindergarten schools), houses, roof-tiles, crematoriums, and small bridges. These issues were indicative of what people wanted from the government. This awareness about what role the government should be playing in their development, stemmed from the tutoring by non-advansi leaders. Development of the advansi hamlet meant the acquisition of the above-mentioned facilities from the government. Rarely did people mention that they had no land to cultivate or that they should be given titles to the cultivated forest land ('Dali' land).

They never mentioned low wages as an issue; nor did they ever mention that their lands were usurped by the upper castes or that they were beaten up or their women raped. Such issues never came up in the discussions we had with them. It was almost as if these issues were part of their daily routine, their life and hence did not deserve any special mention – they were not even considered as issues. It seems that in order to realize that one is being treated as 'secondary' or that one is not being accorded the respect due to any human existence, one has to first satisfy the basic needs of existence. Self-realization or self-actualization is a need

that arises thereafter. Our challenge was to raise the consciousness of the adivasis not only to realise the importance of their own existence but also to create a sense of class identity, in Marxist terms – an understanding of themselves as the ‘labour’ or ‘exploited’ class. Besides this, it was also essential to establish among the adivasis and among the larger community around them, an understanding of their struggle for a ‘humane’ existence and the aspirations that went with it. It was necessary therefore to enable the people to think independently.

Which then should be the first issue to address? The one problem which struck us and which we thought would help us directly connect to the many goals mentioned above, was the issue of low wages. Whenever we raised this issue in discussions held at the different ‘wadis’ (hamlets), the people participated, but somehow seemed reluctant to take any action about it.

We decided then to organise a meeting on this issue of low agricultural wages and decided on a time and place suitable to all. On that day, only 15 – 20 people appeared. The meeting was a major flop. We learnt a lesson, the hard way. Closely inquiring as to why people had not come for the workshop we realized that though the wage transaction was the apparent economic linkage between the employers and the labourer, there were innumerable socio-economic ties between them, which had endured over the years and over generations at times. Right from advancing financial and other help during the marriages held in the labourer’s family, to forwarding money in times of crisis, allowing thoroughfare of labourers through his fields, allowing them to fish in the ponds that were created in the fields during monsoon, facilitating the labourers to access some government schemes, to ensuring bail in the case of arrests by police – all these are the many reasons due to which the dependency of the adivasi labourer on his non-tribal landlord is perpetuated.

For the labourer, therefore, opposing the master and confronting him on any issue is like axing one’s own feet.

We learnt our very first lesson in the struggle against exploitation: the nearer and more concrete the enemy and closer his linkages to survival issues, the more difficult it is to confront him. We could not, as our very first battle, choose such an issue which would sever all support of the labourers and leave them with nothing; especially when they did not have

a new support system to replace the old nor the self-confidence to face the repercussions. There was also no reason to expect them to believe in us. We had not yet established our credibility in their eyes. "Who knows," they must have thought, "these city girls are here today and may disappear tomorrow. We will, however, have to stay here facing the ire of all those we confront today."

After this little setback, we arrived at some conclusion about the issue to be selected: an issue where the enemy would be distant and perhaps also nebulous, but which would call upon the people to participate and make the people feel it is "our issue". This would benefit their overall development and be within their capacity to resolve.

The issue that fitted all these criteria was the 'dali' land issue. It was close to their heart and the confrontation would be with the government, which was a relatively distant opposition and which would not resort to overt, anti-people actions overnight.

We now started collecting extensive data about the issue, along with many other similar organisations from the district. All these Sanghathans were affiliated to a federation called Shoshit Jana Andolan, which had decided to pursue this issue to its logical end. In collecting the required data we approached government offices, the Tribal Research Institute, read the District Gazette and met many people. Gradually the issue became clearer to us.

The Struggle for 'Dali' Land

The Katkaris have been cultivating this dali land in the forest right from the days of the British. During the British Raj, the tribals were given some tracts of sloping land on the periphery of the forests, for a dual purpose, namely, that the forests should be protected and the tribals' livelihood issue should be taken care of. The word 'dali' has been derived from the local dialect, which means cultivating the slopes. Generally, each hamlet was given a continuous tract of land for collective cultivation. The 'dali naik' was the leader who was given charge of keeping records of who cultivated this tract, how many families from that hamlet, what crop they grew, and he was also responsible for paying the collective rent to the government. All the records of their activities were maintained in the dali-book given to the dali-naik. The dali-book also contained the map of the land, and its description, the names of the families cultivating the land, the purpose and conditionalities of giving the land for cultivation. The dali-naik used to religiously pay the rent to the Forest Department, which to this day is owner of the land. Thus, the dali cultivators had no proprietary rights as the land could be and often was taken away from them at the whim of the government.

After Independence, there were tribal uprisings in various parts of the country on the issue of land rights. There was no such uprising in Raigad district since the Katkari were never organised. However, the Maharashtra government decided in 1970 to grant titles of the cultivable dali land to the adivasis. With some revision, the government then resolved on 26th July 1971 to transfer all dali land to the tribals. After 1971, with a lot of initial enthusiasm, the government started transferring this land from the forest department to the revenue. Then the implementation stopped. When questions started being raised in Raigad about dali land after 1989, the government had forgotten the issue because in the meantime the jurisdiction of this issue had been transferred to the Central government. We therefore had our work cut out – to get New Delhi to listen to voices from a Katkari wadi.

We went about doing this very methodically. First we collected the list of all the dali plots and the names of all the dali cultivators, from the

Forest Department. Then we started conducting meetings in the adivasi hamlets we already had come to know. After the meetings we used to ask those people to contact others and give them our office addresses. We expected that by snowballing, we would disseminate information and collect more people.

We identified the weekly markets in the region. In Mangaon tahsil, there are four major market places – Goregaon, Indapur, Tala and Nijampur. On the day of the weekly market functioned, we would wait at some central spot. People from neighbouring villages and wadis visited these markets. Whenever we saw tribals, we would approach them, ask them which wadi they hailed from, located on our lists whether they had any dali plots and after some discussion with them we used to hand over a note for the dali-holders from their villages, asking them to meet us on the next market day in a neighbouring temple or near a shed by the river, and then and there fix up a meeting with them.

These efforts bore fruit. On the day of the meeting, 40 – 50 people would come from different villages. Apparently, the dali land issue was crucial for them. In these meetings, we would give information about the Government Resolution of 1971 and the people would give us information about their cultivations. They used to invite us to visit their dali-plots and give us directions on how to reach their wadis. We then fixed up dates for our visits. Thus, in a month, we covered the entire tahsil. The market place became an ideal communication centre. It became increasingly easy to identify which shops the people visited and which shopkeeper would pass on our messages to the tribals about meetings and visits. This communication network made our task that much easier.

The first thing we would do in the wadi was to demarcate the boundaries of the dali plots. Each plot ranged between 40 acres to 200 acres. Sometimes, a day would not suffice to cover the entire area. We insisted that all the plot-holders should be with us during this exercise. Hence, at times, the entire wadi was with us – all of them being cultivators of the plot. During this collective exercise, we often came across instances where non-tribals from the village had encroached upon dali land. We would immediately issue a notice to the encroachers, on our Sanghathan letter-head, with the signatures of the dali cultivators as well as our signatures. This small action seemed to give the tribals tremendous strength. We then

organised a public meeting at Mangaon of all those who were presently cultivating the dali plots. After this meeting, we organised a morcha (a protest march) to the Range Forest Office demanding rightful ownership of the plots. About 250 people marched in this first morcha. The people's confidence and our enthusiasm increased. It seemed that this time around we had chosen the issue accurately.

Soon, thanks to the dali cultivators, our work spread from Mangaon tahsil into Roha tahsil. The morcha in both these tahsils became the 'talk of the town'. Everybody woke up to the fact that two young girls were working with the tribals and organizing them into a Sanghathan. In the initial two years, the dali plot issue became known from the tahsil level to the state level and later also at the Centre. A glance at the date-wise review of the planning and activities undertaken during these years, will give an idea of the scope of the work.

- July 12, 1990** - Morcha to the Range Forest Office
- August 15, 1990** - Morcha to all Tahsil offices in the district. Notice was given regarding intensifying our action programme in future.
- Sept. 6, 1990** - 30 kilometers walk from Pen to the District capital Alibaug, in heavy rains. All Sanghathans participated in strength.
- October 1990** - Dharna (sit-in) at the Range Office for dali-books
- February 1990** - Distribution of dali-books begin.
- August 1991** - Sanghathan starts a survey of dali land.
- August 11, 1991** - Morcha to tahsil office to oppose cutting of trees and bushes on dali land.
- Sept. 6, 1991** - As no response was forthcoming from the state, a mock funeral of the government was held in front of the District Collector's office.
- Sept. 9, 1991** - Dali cultivators give collective application for crop inspection.
- Nov. 16, 1991** - Morcha to Divisional Forest Office in Roha.
- Dec. 12, 1991** - Gherao of Collector at Alibaug. Extracted written assurance from Collector and Divisional Forest

Officer.

- December 1991** - Discussion on issue in winter session of State assembly.
- Dec. 30, 1991** - Convention of all dali –cultivators in Roha declaring their resolve to carry on the struggle.
- January 27, 1992** - Huge morcha to the office of the Konkan Commissioner of dali – cultivators from Raigad and cultivators of one-year tenure plots from Thane districts.
- March 1992** - Discussion with Minister of Forests, Government of India.

It will be heartening to note how the people gained from strength to strength at every step of this movement.

In the very first morcha on this issue, our demand was for the dali-book. This book, like a bank passbook has the record of the plots and the names of the cultivators. Some elderly tribals had told us that these dali-books had been taken away from them by the forest officials, way back in the 70s. Not a single dali book was found in any of the wadis and hence our demand.

This morcha reached right up to the door of the RFO in Mangaon. Until then, the Mangaon police had no experience of handling such a protest march. Therefore, they did not even attempt to stop the morcha until it traveled across a courtyard and reached the RFO's doorstep.

The RFO and his officials flatly refused that they had any dali-books. Some of the officials exhibited their ignorance when they asked what was meant by dali-land. "Why do you collect revenue from us then?" asked the tribals.

The officials then tried another ploy: 'How can you expect these Katkaris to take care of any records'? they said. "Their huts get drenched in the monsoon, or sometimes burn in forest fires. The dali-books must have got lost like that."

At this juncture, one old man stood up amidst the crowd and calmly took out an old dirty looking package tied at his waist. He opened the folds of the cloth package and took out what looked like a lot of aged pieces of

paper. These were receipts of the dali revenue paid right from 1932. "Sir", he said to the officer "if we can take care of these bits of paper for so many years, can we also not take care of the book? Are you saying that the book must have got burnt but these pieces of paper escaped that fate?" The officer was dumbstruck. The old man who spoke was a dali-naik from Vilhe village – Kamlu Mahadu Valekar. His courage in front of the 'big sahib', stirred the enthusiasm amongst all of us. The Sahib gave us a written assurance that he would find and give us the Dali books within a month.

We made conscious efforts that people should understand the strength gathered from the various stages of the dali movement and from other similar issues taken up later. It was important that they to retain these memories of the struggle and the victories won on the way. In fact, the role of Sanghathans like ours is to create these memories of struggles which will feed the fire and inspire not only those who participate but will also be carried forward to the next generation of the oppressed. We had learnt this from experiences of other organisations around us.

Especially in the case of communities that do not have struggle-oriented histories, no tradition of conquering conflicts, such memories have a special role – they inspire people to fight against injustice. The struggles have to be planned in such a way that at different stages along the way, people's confidence steadily grows. The first few stages, therefore, have to be those that bring in victories. Failures at initial stages will only result in such 'Sarvahara' communities further plunging into hopelessness. As Marx said, the 'Sarvahara' have nothing to lose but their chains of exploitation. However, the struggle should be planned keeping in mind that in our march towards victory and freedom from exploitation, our confidence in our collective strength should increase with each step.

The 30 km. walk from Pen to Alibaug, getting soaked to the skin in heavy rains, slogans echoing in the environs of Dharamatar and Karle, is so deeply etched in our memory that to this day it is cherished by all those who were there. Five Sanghathans from Raigad district came together for this rally. On the previous day, about 4000 people came from all over the district to Pen, the starting point of the rally. The District Superintendent of Police and the Deputy Superintendent were there, trying to manage the huge crowd, pleading to us with folded hands: "Please ensure that everything will be peaceful. We have a very small police force here.

Please co-operate with us.” For the poor, neglected adivasi, this was a new experience – The police pleading to them with folded hands! This incident and many other similar things that happened in that 30 km walk, added to the people’s enthusiasm and confidence. Shouting slogans like “the police are our servants, not our masters” right in front of the police; slogans like “Adivasis and labourers are human beings, not animals. They want their rights, not your charity” hearing these slogans echoed down the line in the march was an exhilarating experience for all of us. It very strongly brought home to us the fact that slogans are an extremely effective way of educating people from the most deprived and illiterate communities. It is a very simple medium to express thought, action and strength together. This is probably why slogans are so effectively used by most people’s organisations.

All through this struggle, we were conscious that this issue should be linked to a holistic perspective of development, keeping in mind the changing reality.

To clarify this point, let me give an example. When we said, “we have a right to dali land” we would always discuss about the trees, bushes, on this plot and emphasise their significance. We used to encourage people to plant a variety of trees on their dali plots, and involve children in planting papaya, drumsticks, neem, cashew, mangoes and similar trees which can help to meet their daily nutritional needs and also be useful for selling in the local markets. In each hamlet we would disseminate information to people as to how these fruits/vegetables can give their diet a much-needed boost, eg. How drumstick leaves can help pregnant women with its iron content and how the neem tree can be used for a variety of skin infections. All this information and meaning was packed in the slogans when people took collective pledges that “we will not give up our dali plots! We will not fall prey to any monetary temptations to give up our land.”

Behind these pledges was the understanding of the threats to these plots, the exploitation involved in the threats and the challenges of the future.

When we prepared the list of the dali cultivators, we insisted that the names of the spouses should also be listed. Both the man and his wife would be on the list. The demand was that the tittles should be given to them jointly. Another demand was that the sale of these plots should be

banned. A lot of thinking went into these and other such demands.

In each hamlet, we collectively discussed such issues like – who has the right to dali land? Who will be deemed as ‘heirs’ and what will be their rights? What rights will the women have? What is the woman’s status? What do we believe in? We also considered what would be the rights of the poor who were non-tribals, or from other castes. We came to the conclusion that our Sanghathan was not just of the Katkaris, but also of poor people, labourers from all communities.

We conducted conventions for Dali rights, at various levels, where we reinforced the decision to struggle for dali land. Simultaneously, a campaign was started across the district – that each wadi should send a joint letter to all political parties and to the MLAs from the district. During the next Assembly session, about 100 representatives from different Sanghathans met about 60 – 70 elected representatives in Mumbai, so that they should be apprised of the dali issue and raise it in the House. We also organised a sit-in by small children to draw attention to the issue.

The preparations for these meetings involved creating an understanding among the people about different political parties, their stand, the MLAs and their backgrounds. We also called the local MLA for a meeting and encouraged people to ask him questions about his views, his stand on the issue. All this led to enhancing the political understanding of the people.

These varied activities not only resulted in strengthening the Sanghathan – qualitatively, numerically and geographically, but it also gave a tremendous boost to the confidence of the people and to us. People, themselves, were now helping the organisation to spread. Committees were being formed in each wadi and it was made mandatory to have at least two women on each committee. As a result, more women started becoming visible in the Sanghathan’s work.

To date, three government surveys have been conducted to measure the dali lands. Of these, we rejected two because they were conducted without taking the dali cultivators into confidence. These surveys came up with the finding that only one-fourth of the total land was under cultivation – a result that was suitable to the government to transfer this meager land to the tribals. The Sanghathan, therefore, forced the government to conduct a third survey. This time, the District Forest Officer himself happened to be a tribal. He took the initiative and formed a team compri-

sing of forest officials, Sanghathan activists and regional heads. This survey was conducted in 6 months and completed by the beginning of 2000. Around that time, the Minister for Forests at the Centre also announced the decision that this land would be transferred to the tribals. All these efforts have led to the creation of an authentic, official record of dali-lands today. We will, probably, have to step up the heat again for implementation of land distribution according to the 1971 resolution, based on this record. We are also considering going to the court for speedy implementation.

Recently, in April 2001, representatives of all dali-Sanghathans in Raigad district undertook an indefinite fast for speedy and accurate implementation of the 1971 resolution. Our organisation played the lead role in this action. We decided to organise this action at Alibaug, the district capital and not at Mumbai. This decision stood us in good stead. Not only was it more convenient for the participating Sanghathans, but also MLAs and political leaders in the district across party lines, expressed their support to us. They all made independent efforts to contact the other MLAs in the House as the Assembly Session was on. With the active intervention of late Mr. Arun Mehta, then member of the Legislative Council, the Chief Minister gave us a hearing on the very first day of the fast. He reiterated his government's commitment to the 1971 resolution and gave the assurance that the trees and bushes on dali plots will not be cut down. This action created a suitable impression on the District Collector as well as the forest officials.

While battling for the rights to dali-land we were confronted by many other problems, too. These empowered the Sanghathan to take on wider issues. These issues were about growing industrialization, threats arising out of so-called 'development', issues arising from caste differences, issues of injustice to and atrocities on women, etc. Selecting the appropriate and pressing issue was always a challenge to the Sanghathan.

Confronting the established economic, social and political power structures for improving the living standards of people and in the process building up the collective strength of the people, constantly being realistic about the feasibility of the situation, were not easy tasks.

When we look back today with some amount of satisfaction, we realize what a thin line we were walking on. Earlier, even in the village

where we stayed, we found it difficult to explain what our work was to our neighbours and others. "Has the government employed you on some new scheme?" they would ask; or "which government department do you belong to?" Such questions used to irritate and upset us on two counts : that they could not understand what we were doing there; and that we could not explain in a way which they could understand. A fleeting thought would come to mind – maybe it would have been better if we were school-teachers or in some such profession whereby we could easily explain our work in terms acceptable to them. Nowadays, however, I find there is more acceptability and I strongly feel that this has come about due to the work done by Medha Patkar. Often now, when I describe my work to somebody, they react respectfully: "Oh! You mean your work is like that of Medha Patkar!"

Despite earlier frustrations, our determination to continue such work sustained because of our linkages to many groups and organisations outside our immediate environment. We had strong supporters and sounding boards in Shoshit Jana Andolan, Samajik Krutadnyata Nidhi, Shetmajoor Samanvay Samiti, where we could discuss our thoughts, present our analysis and sharpen our focus, reconfirming our faith that we were on the right track. That all this can happen when the general social atmosphere is not conducive to such work is especially heartening. Perhaps this is exclusive to Maharashtra, which is truly known as the land of the saints. The primary contribution of any people's organisation should be to sow the seeds of knowledge and thought and create a society based on the capacity to discern what is human and what is not. Examining our work against these criteria has always been a challenge for us.

Although we initiated our Sanghathan with the tribals, our goal always was to include landless labourers and marginal farmers from other communities, too. The problems that confronted these poor, were more or less the same irrespective of which community they belonged to. Besides, it was clear that challenging policy decisions could not be done on the strength of small numbers. The Katkari tribals in Raigad are a mere 12% of the total population and hence would not become a formidable force on their own. We were, therefore, always open to issues of other communities too. Issue of dalits then started coming to the Sanghathan.

The Palasgaon Challenge

We came in contact with Palasgaon during the dali-land struggle. The dalits staying in the Buddhawadi in Palasgaon also had dali-plots. When we reached this Buddhawadi and took a meeting with these 10 - 12 houses adjoining the village, we sensed their appreciation and admiration. The elders in the wadi felt moved at two young girls like us talking about their land issues. In this meeting we also reminded them of how Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had called upon people to agitate and organise for their rights. This created an immediate bond between the people and us.

A week after that meeting, about 7 – 8 people, young and old, from the wadi came to the office, looking extremely worried. They began narrating this incident to us: “It is becoming difficult for us to stay on in the village”, they said. “Just yesterday, the upper caste members in the village called a meeting in the Panchayat office. All villagers had been invited including the leader and respected villagers. Members of the Buddhawadi posed the question as to why they were not being treated well, why the Buddhists and the Harijans were excluded from village programmes and why they were being boycotted by the upper caste.” To this, a senior, respected villager had replied: “We do not include you in village programmes now because you do not behave as you used to earlier.” He then went on to describe what he termed was their earlier acceptable behaviour.

“We will give you water but ensure that your pots do not touch ours; you should not sit on the same mats as ours, but sit away from us; the ‘prasad’ that you get after pujas (religious functions) will be given to you such that we or our utensils do not touch you; the musical instruments which are of joint ownership in the village should not be used by you – you should get other instruments if you want them. Do not touch anything that belongs to us. We will invite you and include you in village programmes only if you abide by these conditions.”

On hearing this, the people from the Buddhawadi were shaken. One of the youths took courage and asked the headman (the Sarpanch) of the village what his opinion about this matter was. The Sarpanch said, “I will support the villages in their decision. Whatever they decide, I will go with

them.” At this the youth stood up and left the meeting. All the other Buddhawadi residents soon followed him. Only the villagers from the Harijanwadi and one person from the Buddhawadi who worked on the Sarpanch’s farm stayed back at the meeting.

The next morning, having spent a troubled night, people from the wadi arrived at the Sanghathan’s office. We were touched by the confidence they showed in us, but also a little anxious. Though the senior members of the group felt that the issue should not be stretched too much, they all felt it was unjust and did not want to give in to the situation meekly. We then decided to write to the Tahsildar. As Executive Magistrate, he would have to look at this situation of social boycott, which was an offence under the Prevention of Atrocities (Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe) Act, passed recently in 1989. We also decided to write to the local police station.

On receiving our letter, the police called all the villagers and the Buddhawadi to the police station. Some of the non-dalit villagers first went to the local MLA and others went to the Shiv Sena leaders in the area and brought their heavyweights along with them to the police station. Both of us were with the Buddhawadi members. True to their usual practice, the police kept the Buddhawadi members waiting for almost the entire day. The police always hold the poor at ransom, demanding either their time or their money. Registering one complaint means the loss of one whole day; at times, more. The inspector or the ‘sahib’ is never accessible to the poor. When he is not around, the junior officers do not even bother to lift a finger to help the poor. They, then, have to wait around for the sahib to come and glance their way – risking their day’s wages and other work. For us, too, this was our first brush with the police.

When the sahib came, he asked the villagers from both sides to come in. With them, their leaders went in. Sumitra and I also entered the office. By this time, the inspector probably already had a telephonic conversation with the MLA and other leaders. As soon as he saw us, the inspector said “Why are you here? Sit outside. I have called in only the villagers.”

Pointing to the leaders accompanying the villagers, we said: “Are these also villagers? Ask them to wait out along with us”. The inspector said that the leaders were local residents. “We have also been staying here for the last two years, and are locals,” we said. The inspector was

exasperated by our stand but when we refused to vacate our seats, he realised he had no other go but to ask the leaders also to sit outside. He then discussed the matter at length with all the villagers. The upper castes were not willing to accept that they had said anything at all. Finally, the inspector sent everybody off, cautioning to them to function together harmoniously as one village.

We, too, feared the police initially, but we gradually learnt that if you have truth and the law on your side and if you stand your ground with confidence and courage, the official before you has to listen to you. This was our first experience as I stated earlier. Actually, we had invited this same police inspector to one of our village training programmes where he had spoken about the legal rights of citizens and how it was important to uphold the law at all costs. We realised now that these same 'upright' officials do a complete turnabout when there is political pressure.

That day, the villagers went back. The upper castes, however, were seething. They did not like it one bit that they had been forced to the police station because of the dalits. They decided to teach the Buddha Wadi a lesson. Those were summer days. There was a water shortage in the Bouddhawadi. Though there were taps in the village, the dalits found it difficult to fill water there – every attempt ended in squabbles and fights over their pots touching the upper caste pots. The other well that existed was taboo to the dalits. They were not allowed to draw water from it on their own. They could take it only if one of the upper castes drew it for them and poured it from a height into their pots.

Other problems also increased. Paths leading to the cemetery, to the dalit farm from the land of the upper castes were fenced off. They could no longer use these paths. The youth were threatened and terrorized. The atmosphere in the village grew tense day by day. We lodged complaints regarding restrictions on filling water, the cutting off, of the village paths and the beating up of the youth. However, the Tahsildar as well as the police did not take any cognisance. The MLA's goons visited our house to threaten us. Such stands would make it difficult for us to continue staying in Mangaon, they said. Our Sanghathan was still in its nascent stage. We realised we could be easily isolated. We then sent messages to all the nearby Bouddhawadis, met the office-bearers of the Bouddha Panchayat of the Tahsil; met the local leaders of the Republican party; met people

who had received "Friends of Dalits" awards, met freedom fighters who had, along with the struggle for Independence, also fought for abolition of injustice and inequality in the country. But, unfortunately, for all of them, this was a minor issue. The dalits and upper castes had been filling water at different wells for centuries; this was the scene in every village, they said. Why create an issue out of something that was traditionally accepted? Learn to solve things a little collaboratively, they advised us.

Mangaon is only about 30 kms away from Mahad where Dr. Ambedkar had led dalits to drink water from the Chowdar Lake. This Satyagraha had been held in 1927. Today, 64 years after that historic Satyagraha and 54 years after Independence, the situation is no different. The officials were not concerned; the "Friends of Dalits" who made sure that they were seen paying homage to Dr. Ambedkar's memory on every Buddha Jayanti, were not bothered that the ideals he stood for were being trampled right in front of them. The only person who came to the village during this period was Shri Dadasaheb Limaye, former President of the Zilla Parishad. He met the villagers from both the sides, advised them to bury their differences and told us that such issues are not solved by law alone.

Due to the increasing tension in the village and the threats to the youth, the elders in the wadi started hesitating a bit about taking the issue further. "Let things be", they said. "Why challenge the sharks when you are only small fish swimming in the same pond?" The youth were, however, determined. One young man, particularly, who was in the forefront staunchly during this struggle was Chandrakant Gaikwad. He is now a full-time activist and President of the Sanghathan.

We had to strengthen everybody's resolve to stay together undaunted. We made an appeal to their sense of pride in Dr. Ambedkar's movement and declared that those who wanted to back out of the struggle and were scared of their security should remove Dr. Ambedkar's photograph from their homes and forego the right to worship him. The youth agreed. Since the local police station was not responding, we appealed to the District Superintendent of Police. He replied that these were not offences under the Protection of Civil Rights Act and hence there was no need for any action on their part. Thus, despite it being 1.5 years since the Atrocities Act became a law, the law implementers themselves were not aware of the provisions of the new law.

We next met the Director General of Police (Protection of Civil Rights Cell), in Mumbai. We explained the entire issue to him and demanded that the case be registered under the Atrocities Act, 1989. Mr. Vivek Pandit of the Shramajivi Sanghathana helped us in this matter. We organised a sit in at the Mangaon Police Station. The officials of the Special Cell for Protection of Civil Rights, located at Thane, came to Mangaon and registered the offence – a full 3 months after the offence had taken place. This was the first case registered under this Act in Raigad district.

During this struggle, we had organised a Satyagraha in the village, for water. All the dalits – including the women and children went together in a procession to all the wells in the village and drew water from each well. All had decided that even if it meant dying for their rights, they would do it that day. Throughout the day, they received threats – ‘the upper castes are going to beat you up, they have collected stones, and sticks to disrupt your procession’. But the dalits did not waver. The procession continued in the presence of police and with slogans resounding in the air.

We were not able to draw water from only one well in the village that day. This one well is in the village situated between the tribal hamlet and the village. This well has water for all the 12 months in the year and does not dry up during summer. The adivasis used this well. They had been instigated by the others in the village and told that their well was going to be defiled by the dalits. On the day of the Satyagraha the adivasis were waiting at the well with sticks and stones to prevent the dalits. Until then, the Sanghathan had not had much contact with that particular adivasi wadi. We tried to reason with them, but to no avail. We realized then that the upper castes were trying to engineer a conflict between the adivasi and the dalits so that they could gain from it. The Atrocities Act also would not be effective in this case if adivasis prevented dalits from touching the well. We, therefore, decided that day, that retreat from that particular well was the most sensible course of action – resolving to come back later to work with that adivasi wadi.

After appropriate offences were registered, the main persons in the village were arrested and produced in the Session’s court for bail. The hearing was held after 6 months. Throughout this period, the case made waves all across the district – it was the topic of discussion everywhere. The offenders were later acquitted because their Defense and the judge

found some technical weakness in the case. But the entire process – including paying the court fees – resulted in an expenditure of more than Rs. 80,000/- for the upper caste villagers. This, we thought, was like a fine they had to pay for their actions.

After this, the upper caste people in the village learnt a lesson. The tension prevailing in the village slowly got diffused. The anti-dalit feeling dissipated. The fences set up on village roads were broken by the government officials. The villagers gradually began accepting Chandrakant Gaikwad's leadership. He became an active member of the Sanghathan and started studying legal matters and advising people in their disputes. Today, all – dalits and non-dalits - villagers seek Chandrakant's guidance in land disputes, the youth are more open in their interaction; the water is no longer an issue in the village; the neighbouring adivasi wadi is now part of the Sanghathan and today laugh at their own ignorance when reminded of their role in the Satyagraha. They, too, have now accepted Chandrakant's leadership.

After this incident, similar issues of water were handled in other Buddhawadis of Mangaon and Roha. As a result, the dalits also started coming to the Sanghathan.

The Sanghathan has not only drawn people to it but has become a part of the lives of the tribals, dalits and marginal farmers in the area. The significant reason for this is the strong and unequivocal stand the Sanghathan takes regarding the issues of the tribals and the dalits. Before the Sanghathan came into being, the experience of the tribals was that if there was any injustice, they had to keep quiet and bear the cross. If somebody did dare to complain about this injustice, a couple of 'respected/important' men in the village would 'mediate' to quieten things, to affect a compromise. The Sanghathan changed this time worn practice and attitude.

There are different perspectives regarding adivasi-dalits complaining and registering offences against the upper caste injustice. Some think that such actions only create conflicts in an otherwise peaceful, mutually dependent, harmonious interaction in the village. Others point out that the law is not a remedy for all situations. "Society does not function according to law", they say. There are citizens as well as government and police officials who subscribe to these views. Only, the officials keep changing their perspective according to the situation.

When people from the oppressed classes, come forward to struggle for their rights, when they build confidence among themselves to confront their oppressor, they break many shackles which are constraining them. In the simple act of demanding what is their right, what is justly due to them, they embark on a process from dehumanisation to becoming human. Once on this journey, they become capable of deciding the direction of their own development. Of course, all this does not happen naturally. Events have to be created, opportunities seized. Once the momentum is set, there is no looking back for those who have nearly found their freedom in this way.

I think this is an important journey. It is undoubtedly a difficult one for the activist as well as the oppressed people. It is a journey fraught with many temptations of "short cuts" to success; it is fraught with many risks and threats to life since it implies confrontation with the established power structure. These risks have to be taken, people have to be supported, made resilient.

Many activists working on poverty issues forget that poverty is a result of exploitation. Merely taking up socio-economic programmes will not build the resilience for fighting against exploitation. When an entire societal system is based on exploitation, one has first to build up a struggle against the exploitative system by fighting against exploitation at the grass root level. For such grass root confrontations, one must select issues and programmes which have the potential to strike out at such exploitation. Only when all those who take up such issues unite, will any meaningful confrontation take place at the systemic level. Otherwise, the number of those who work for the poor will steadily increase with the increasing number of the poor themselves.

Here, the tribals got a sense of freedom and self-respect because we took up issues which entailed fighting against the injustice perpetuated on them. Injustice among labourers, usurping of land, economic injustice, atrocities on women, corruption and other injustices faced at the hands of the government officials, indifference shown by elected representatives – all were different focal points for our struggle. In this struggle we were helped by various legislations – various Land Reform Acts, Acts for Minimum Wage and Equal Remuneration and especially the Prevention of Atrocities Act. The Sanghathan not only has the credit for having

registered the first offence under this last Act in the district, but in several other cases afterwards also, has insisted on and ensured proper implementation of the Act. This Act has given a lot of strength to the Tribals. Beating up a tribal and abusing him/her which was a daily routine earlier, does not happen so easily today. Earlier, if a tribal labourer remained absent from work due to illness, he/she would be dragged from his house, beaten up and forced to work on the master's farm. Today, nobody will dare to do this. If he does, the tribal will go and register an offence under the Atrocities Act. He has learnt that from the Sanghathan. There are many other cases where landlords have voluntarily given up usurped land on receiving a simple note from the Sanghathan. They would rather do this than get into legal wrangles with the Sanghathan.

The story of Yashwantkhar

One of the incidents that need a special mention is the incident of Yashwantkhar. This was a village in Roha Tahsil, comprising largely of farmers from the other backward classes (OBCs). The OBC community was economically well off and arrogant about their status – they were known to others in the neighbouring villages for their “couldn’t care less” attitude of arrogance and domination. Just outside the village was the Yashwantkhar Katkari wadi. Farmers subjugated the entire wadi. No Katkari was allowed to work anywhere else except with the farmers in that village. The wages were dismally low and physical abuse was common. The Katkaris faced a perennial water problem but the Gram Panchayat did not take any cognizance of their plight.

When the Katkaris of Yashwantkhar heard about the Sanghathan, they felt that this was their only hope to end their sorry plight. They designated two youth – Suresh and Navshya from their wadi, to go to the Sanghathan with their appeal for help. One day, when the Sanghathan was conducting a training camp at Shenvai village – 6 km away, both Suresh and Navshya reached there. All the main activists of the Sanghathan were present at the camp. They, along with the villagers attending the camp, listened to the many incidents of injustice and suffering narrated by the two youth. By the time these youth went back to their own village in the evening, the Yashwantkhar farmers had already got wind of the fact that the s had approached the Sanghathan. That same night, they plotted among themselves to further terrorise the tribals and nip their little rebellion in the bud. Claiming that some goats from the village had been stolen, they circled the tribal wadi, dragged the men out of their huts and took them to the Gram Panchayat office where the entire village mercilessly beat up the tribal men. In this commotion, some of the tribals managed to steal away into the darkness and stumbled to the nearby Shenvai village where we were. It was around midnight when the first two reached Shenvai. After that, throughout the night, others kept coming with more stories of the atrocities happening at Yashwantkhar. By the time we reached the nearest police station, which was 14-15 km away and came back with the police force to the village, dawn was breaking.

Some Katkaris – Suresh and Navshya among them - had borne the brunt of the beatings throughout the night. The police Sub-Inspector on realising what had transpired asked the police *patil* to round up all the villagers and produce them before him. When the villagers did not come forward, the police went around the village and arrested 28 men. An offence was registered against them under the Prevention of Atrocities Act. Under this Act, the offender is granted bail only in the Sessions Court at the District level and not at the lower tahsil court. At the time of their arrest, the session's court was closed for Diwali holidays. As a result, the 28 men arrested had to spend 8 days in custody before being produced in court.

On the same day as the arrests, we took out a rally of all the tribals who were attending the camp at Shenwai, through the 6 km route to Yashwantkhar, shouting slogans and expressing solidarity with the tribals of Yashwantkhar, denouncing the behaviour of the farmers. Here too, we kept hearing rumours that the wives of the arrested men and other youth in the village were lying in wait for us with sticks, stones and chilli powder (to be flung into our eyes) to attack us. The tribals were not deterred. "It is now or never," they said and we went ahead. The rally ended in a meeting right in the village square at Yashwantkhar. Nobody dared to attack us.

Consequently, the tribals at Yashwantkhar got a tremendous boost to their confidence. Other non-tribals in the neighbouring villages felt happy that the arrogant farmers of Yashwantkhar had been taught a lesson. Some of them became our supporters. The Sanghathan spread rapidly in the area. It also succeeded in raising the wages of the Yashwantkhar labourers. For almost a year these labourers refused to work for the Yashwantkhar farmers and took their labour elsewhere to nearby villages. Other non-tribals began supporting the Sanghathan.

Thus the suffering ended, wages were raised and most importantly, self-respect regained. The atmosphere in the wadi changed dramatically.

The Taming of an Industrial Giant

‘Sukeli’ – the name of this Katkarwadi indicates a certain delicateness that belies the strength and courage exhibited by its residents. This wadi lies very much on the National Highway, a stone’s throw from Nagothane – an industrial centre in Raigad district. There are about 46 families in this wadi. Tenancy rights had given them strips of land to cultivate. The records of these lands clearly indicated that these lands would not be open for any transactions without the prior permission of the governments. This was the protection given to tribals so that their land should not be appropriated from them. However, the tribals were not aware of this.

Around 1987 – 1988, the Maharashtra Seamless Company, bought hundreds of acres of land from non-tribals in the Sukeli grampanchayat. They did not buy any tribal land, but they took possession of the tribal land. Tribals watched in consternation as their cultivable land disappeared under the landfill operations carried out by the company’s bulldozers and other contraptions. How could they oppose such a powerful industry, they wondered?

Two big industries – Jindal Drilling Industries and Mahalaxmi Seamless, both connected to Maharashtra Seamless – were soon constructed on this land. A strong cement wall was built around the area. The adivasis’ homestead land – their village, their homes, were inside the compound, fenced off from their earlier access routes. As their houses stood on government land, their forcible eviction would have created a furor. The company knew this. They would have to approach the matter subtly. They started implementing their game plan through the active mediation of the local revenue officials. Not only was the government’s revenue department a witness to the atrocities that followed, but was also an active partner in perpetrating the crime.

Efforts were made to motivate the adivasis to vacate the land of their own accord. This would save the company the long-drawn out procedure of acquiring the land legally. The company built 36 homes of pucca (cement) walls and asbestos roofs in a rocky area. They expected the tribals

to move into these homes. The tribals flatly refused for these reasons:

- * Firstly, there was a 30 feet deep trench just adjacent to these homes. They were scared that their children might wander over and fall into the trench.
- * Secondly, these houses were very small. A village house, even if it belongs to a landless labourer, has a little porch in the front as well as at the back of it where, at times, goats and cattle are tied. It often has a little backyard where the villager can do some kitchen gardening especially during the monsoon. These things, which are very important to the tribal, were not considered at all when building these so-called homes for them.
- * The third reason was that the rocky area would not have space for any more huts to be built. As a tribal family grows - as the sons get married - they usually extend the structure to house the new family unit, or build a new house. This would not have been possible in this place.

The villagers, therefore, all refused to shift to these new homes. By this time, however, the 4 families that depended solely on agriculture were left without a livelihood. The others were anyway landless.

The adivasis ran from pillar to post seeking justice; they approached the Gram Panchayat and the local leaders who all made a cursory attempt to help them. Nobody made any systematic attempts to understand the issue or the legalities involved. Of course, from their point of view, there was no "merit" in pursuing the matter. The company "silenced" these leaders, in its own way. Besides, the company had a ready answer for anybody who questioned them: "We have sent a proposal to the government to transfer the land rights. Once the permission comes through, we will give you the appropriate price for the land. If you are in a hurry, you are free to approach the government."

The company was definitely not in a hurry as they already had possession of the land. They knew that they would never get permission through the official procedure. The revenue department was also not in a hurry. The officials stood to gain more, as long as the case remained pending. The political leaders were also satisfied with such "suitable" an-

swers. The adivasis were the only ones who stood to lose in this situation.

In 1997, the tribals came to know about the Sanghathan and they approached us. We had also heard about the issue. Often, while traveling along the highway, we had seen this tribal wadi standing forlorn amidst the huge industrial structure, cordoned off by the compound wall. We had also heard that leaders of different political parties were 'interested' in the issue. We, therefore, sent messages to the wadi through one other member and waited for them to approach us. Once they did, we told them to collect all the relevant documents regarding the land and organised a meeting at their wadi.

We had to apprise the people about the risks involved in taking up the issue and made it clear to them that they should be prepared for all eventualities – even physical harm. We had to give them time to bolster up their courage. We made sure that during this period our activists went to the wadi frequently; we organised visits of other well wishers also, to the wadi to give the people a sense of being supported. In the meantime, we corresponded with the officials concerned – the Tahsildar, the Sub-Divisional Officer, the District Collector, the Superintendent of Police, and the company management – but to no avail. We discussed the issue with the Tahsildar and the SDO in person. However, nothing moved.

Finally, on March 25, 1998 when the State Assembly was in session, the Sanghathan declared a satyagraha. We declared that the tribal owner will go and take possession of his land – wherever it was situated – and the Sanghathan will participate in this programme. We sent written intimation of this arrangement to all concerned.

This brought results. The SDO came to the wadi and threatened the people. "Do not create a law and order problem," he said. "If you create an issue about this and think such tactics will help you, you will not get any money for your land." What could be more ironical than that the rightful owners of the land should be threatened thus and the usurpers should be shielded? And that too, threaten tribals whose land rights are protected by law? But the tribals were not cowed down by this threat since the Sanghathan was supporting them.

There was a small pond in this wadi that met the tribals' need for drinking water. The company started pumping dirty water into this pond,

hoping that this would compel the tribals to leave the area. But the people stayed on and after many complaints, made the company provide them clean tap water. The 46 families then got water for one hour in the day. They were also facing difficulty in meeting other natural needs. As the company had leveled the surrounding area, there were no shrubs or bushes that could shield them – especially the women – when they went out in the open for their toilet.

But, all these problems were not even acknowledged by the revenue department. Instead, they were further threatening the tribals.

This was the background on which we declared the satyagraha. As the compound wall surrounded the wadi from all sides, we planned beforehand what we would do if the company clamped down the gates on the D-day. The Sanghathan's core activists reached the wadi a good two days before the satyagraha. On the evening before the D-day, the revenue officials, the senior police inspector, the company officials – all descended on the wadi to 'prepare' the tribals. All spoke in one voice: "Call off the satyagraha", they said. The company was not willing to give up anything. "We will see when we get the government permission" was their line. The Sanghathan, on its part, stood its ground, too.

After the meeting in the wadi, the vehicles of all the officials turned towards the industry. It was obvious, therefore, what would happen the next day.

The next morning, the satyagraha began. Women and children all participated. People from neighbouring villages and nearby tahsils also came to express their solidarity. The Tahsildar responded in tune with the hospitality he had received from the company the previous day. He pointed to some piece of land as belonging to Rama Dehu Katkari. But Rama knew exactly where his land lay. He took us to the right spot. We had a meeting there. Where once Ramu's farm stood, there was now some construction belonging to the company. We demanded that it be removed. We took possession of the land but it was no longer fit for cultivation. We then demanded that an offence be registered against the company for having violated the land revenue code and alienating the tribals from their land.

The meeting lasted for 3 hours, in the scorching heat of the afternoon sun. The Tahsildar, the Police Inspector, were present throughout. As the

meeting ended, the Inspector called us and said that he was registering the offence. We were surprised at this sudden *volte face*. At our surprise, he clarified that he himself was a tribal and as he had listened to the speeches in our meeting, he remembered his own village situation. He remembered how his own ancestors had been cheated similarly and his conscience was pricked. He registered the offence. The Sanghathan got its first victory. The issue was also discussed in both houses of the State Assembly.

The company appealed to the High Court against the offense registered. On behalf of the Sanghathan, Advocate Mr. Nitin Pradhan, Adv. Ms. Shubhada Khot and Public Prosecutor Mr. Rajiv Patil were appearing for the case. Ramu Dehu Katkari was the main respondent in the case. Each time he had to be taken from his village to the Mumbai High Court, we had to arrange for many things. The general atmosphere of the big city and of the court overwhelmed him. Moreover, the company started playing other tactics. Realising that Ramu's economic condition was bleak and he was indebted to others, the company tracked down who his creditors were. These creditors were instigated to pressurize Ramu for recovery of their loans. Thus, pushed to a corner, the company then tempted Ramu with an offer of Rs.10,000/-, with which he could repay all his loans. In return, the company got an affidavit made from him that he had no complaint against the company and he was withdrawing his case. Ramu did not know what was written on the papers that he signed.

The Sanghathan got to know about this only after this affidavit was produced in the court. Again we worked with Ramu, to build up his courage. Then, the real situation was presented to the Court. The Court took the stand that Ramu should get justice and he should be properly rehabilitated. The Court gave the company six months to achieve this rehabilitation. Meanwhile, because this issue had been discussed in the Legislature through a "calling attention motion", the revenue department was under pressure not to manipulate facts further.

Due to a request from the Sanghathan, the District Collector called the company management for a meeting with the Sukeli residents in his office and in the presence of the Sanghathan activists. Here, it was decided that the company would totally relocate the entire village in a place suitable to the residents and each resident would be given Rs.30, 000/- for

building his home. It was also decided that the four families whose lands had been appropriated by the company, should receive compensation for the eleven years that these lands had been used and that each family should receive as much alternative cultivable land along with a house, which the company would build.

Accordingly, the residents selected an alternate spot to relocate their village. But the company was not willing to give the money. They would give the money only after the government gave permission for transferring the land, they said. Despite the Collector suggesting that at least 50% of the amount should be given to the people, the company did nothing for as long as three months after the meeting.

The Sanghathan again started organising for a dharna in front of the company gates. By then, there had been extensive coverage for this issue, in various regional dailies and the company was under a lot of pressure from different directions. They appealed to the Sanghathan to withdraw the dharna, but we went ahead with it, as the company had not taken any step towards implementing the decision taken earlier.

This time, the revenue and police departments were on the side of the tribals. On an appeal by the Sanghathan, the Deputy S. P. registered another offence against the company. There were three other people whose land had also been usurped by the company. All the three also registered their complaints. The Tahsildar immediately conducted a 'panchnama' and sent a 'show-cause' notice to the company as to why their construction should not be demolished.

This time, the offence was registered on the general manager of the company. In order to avoid arrest and get bail, he filed a writ in the High Court. This time, the Court ordered the company to first deposit the entire amount required to rehabilitate all the tribals, with the High Court Registrar. Only then, would there be any hearing, it held. Accordingly, the powerful Jindal group of industries had to comply. They deposited the money and gave possession of the agricultural land back to the tribals. The issue of alternate homestead is still being tackled but the four families, who had lost their land and consequently their livelihood, are back on their feet.

The Sanghathan could confront a powerful industry and gain this

victory only because of systematic and planned use of the existing laws and democratic processes.

Many people helped us in this struggle : Mr. Bhuskute, the Sanghathan's advisor, Advocates Nitin Pradhan, Shubhada Khot and Rajiv Patil, Adv. Datta Patil (former leader of the Opposition), Members of the Legislature Mr. Vyankappa Patki, Mr. Arun Mehta, Mr. Madhukar Pichad – all have contributed to our success in bringing justice to the residents of Sukeli wadi.

The 'Khot' is conquered

This is the story of the Kelad Thakurwadi – a hamlet comprising of the Thakur tribe. Nearby was the home belonging to the Khot – the landlord. Actually he stayed in Roha but visited this home quite frequently. The people were tremendously in awe of him.

The entire Thakurwadi toiled like bonded labourers for the Khot. Women and children alike had to slog on his farms. The wages were extremely meager; absence from work was punished with beatings. In the last two decades, at least two deaths resulting from internal bleeding from such abuse, were spoken of in hushed tones, but there was no registered complaint – no record, no official mention of it anywhere. Nobody raised his voice. The Thakurwadi was situated in the hilly interiors – who would have the time to go to the distant Tahsil to record a complaint?

All the tribal families had been cultivating the landlord's farms for generations. Each family gives the Khot a share of about 12 quintals of paddy every year in return for allowing them to cultivate the land. Should the harvest be poor one year, and the crop less, they still had to give him the 12 quintals. Any shortfall was carried over for the next year. Thus, they were always indebted to the Khot. None of them were allowed to go elsewhere for work. They had to work for the Khot irrespective of the wages he paid, even if they were close to starvation. Despite cultivating the land for years on end, their tenancy rights had not been registered, because the Khot was a powerful man. He had friends in high places. Ministers and even the chief minister of the state would dine at the Khot's home, when they came to Roha; MLAs and other influential people were daily visitors to his home; a few donations to known charities had given him a philanthropic image; the Tahsildar himself could not go to the Kelad wadi without prior intimation to the Khot. One can only imagine, therefore, the stranglehold that the Khot had on the Thakurwadi.

The stories about the Sanghathan reached this hamlet. Some youngsters from the Thakurwadi came for one of the village training camps being held in a nearby tribal wadi. They attended the camp for the whole day and came to the conclusion that they had come to the right place. By

the evening, they resolved that they will stand united against the Khot for their rights; if necessary face his terror tactics, but will remain firm in the face of all odds and do whatever the Sanghathan asks them to do.

The Sanghathan – as a preliminary step – asked them to get the 7/12 extracts of the land they were cultivating, to inspect the record of rights. Simultaneously, the Sanghathan gathered as many details about the Khot, as possible. His was a large family – 6 brothers, their children (about 18-20) – some lawyers, some traders etc. They had a timber depot in Roha, where malpractices abounded, it was said. They owned many shops in Roha. Their total land holding was above 100 acres – having circumvented the Land Ceiling Act, the Khot and his family had become economically, politically and socially powerful.

On collecting the documentary evidence, the Sanghathan saw that some years ago, probably due to some conscientious Tahsildar, 6 tribals of Kelad wadi had been registered as tenants of that land. At least 6 tribals from the group could rightfully stake their claim to the land. Immediately, applications in the name of these 6 were submitted to the Tahsildar. One other important decision was made – the Sanghathan advised everybody to stop giving the crop share to the Khot, but to retain possession of their land. Should the Khot take any action, they were to immediately notify the Sanghathan.

Accordingly, that year nobody from the Thakurwadi gave the Khot his share of paddy. For the first time, their granaries at home were full. They were very happy. This one action itself boosted their confidence to fight for their claims. The Khot, on the other hand, was wary. He had heard about the Sanghathan – that its support to the tribals meant that he could not resort to his age-old threats and physical terror tactics to subdue the people. He had to plan shrewdly and cautiously.

The next year – during the paddy season, the Khot started cultivating under police protection supported by an order of the District SP. The Sanghathan wrote to the District Police Superintendent pointing out that the tribals had been cultivating the land for years and hence being the rightful tenants, they were the ones who needed police protection and not the other way round. In reply the SP showed us a court order indicating that this protection was as a result of an order of the Sessions court.

When we started examining the reasons for the court order, we discovered that it was in keeping with a decision given in favour of the Khot, 11 years ago in a Session's court case. The adivasis had totally forgotten about this case and hence had omitted to mention it to us. Further probing gave us this information: it appeared that the Khot had appealed to the court that the tribals should vacate all his land. Knowing that the then Tahsildar and the magistrate were both sympathetic towards the tribals, the Khot had ensured that the case would be decided in his favour by giving false promises to the tribals and by bribing the lawyer representing the tribals. He had secured the signatures of the adivasis on blank papers, telling them that the land would soon be transferred to their names. In actual fact, what was then written on the papers was that the adivasis were relinquishing all their rights to the land as they were no longer interested in cultivating it as tenants. These fabricated papers presented to the court, resulted in an order stating that all the land was in the possession of the Khot and belonged to him alone. The adivasis had no claim to the land. This happened 11 years ago. Thereafter, as the adivasis, too, had not insisted on transferring the land to their names, as had been promised, the Khot kept the papers safely with him and continued to rent out the land on tenancy to the tribals. This was definitely more beneficial to him than to bear the burden of cultivating the entire land on his own. Meanwhile, the tribals forgot all about the case.

Now after 11 years, by raking up the issue, the Sanghathan had inadvertently made a big blunder. The jurisdiction of the Session's court, in such cases lasts for 12 years. By unknowingly forcing the issue, a year in advance, we had helped the Khot to implement the order.

We were in a quandary as to what was to be done. We knew that if the Khot brought labourers from outside and started cultivating, the tribals would leave possession of the land in sheer fear. We also knew that maintaining possession of the land with us was important – at any cost. When the people reached the place that day, there were policemen everywhere. All the young men from the Khot's family were present. The Khot himself arrived on the scene with a van full of labourers. The tribal women of Kelad wadi stood their ground firmly in their various plots. "We will not allow you to transplant paddy in our plots," they told the Khot. One of the young men from the Khot's party ran towards the women – punching and

swearing at them. A general commotion ensued. The police intervened and the work of transplantation that day was stopped. The people immediately informed the Sanghathan of the incident. As the state legislature was in session, we immediately contacted a few MLAs and also spoke to the DSP. The Khot could not continue with his plans that day.

The Sanghathan demanded that an offence be registered against the Khot under the Prevention of Atrocities (SC & ST) Act of 1989 – for assaulting the tribal women and attempting to evict tribals from the land they were tilling. Of course we knew that this demand would not be met easily. We therefore launched a campaign – organised protest rallies in the district and Tahsil places, a dharna at the police station, demanding that the Khot should be arrested. The question was also raised in the Legislative Assembly of the state. All this meant adverse publicity for the Khot. The area was now seeing his other face – this one not so philanthropic. Everywhere he and his family went, they seemed to be dogged by this issue.

Simultaneously we also raised the issue of the 2 deaths that had taken place in the last two decades and insisted that a proper inquiry be held. We maintained a close observation on the malpractices in his timber depot and started sending in written complaints regarding the same. We asked that the Ceiling Act be made applicable to the Khot's vast land-holdings.

We had nothing to lose in this campaign only to gain. The atrocities committed hitherto against the tribals actually paved the way to our success. Through these collective efforts of the Sanghathan, the offence was registered. Though the Khot could prevent his arrest (due to influential friends), the registering of the offence was the first step towards victory for us.

Meanwhile, the Sanghathan had approached some individuals who had been part of the compromise 11 years ago. Even they had been bypassed by the Khot in his manipulation to prepare the false documents. One of these individuals was a former leader of the Opposition in the state legislature. He was also a renowned lawyer with a tremendous presence in the region. We were successful in enlisting his support on behalf of the tribals in this case. After this, the picture changed dramatically. He motivated some respected local leaders to mediate with the Khot and

managed to pursue him to take a decision in favour of the tribals – taking into consideration their right to the land and the cause of justice. The Khot agreed to gift 55 acres of land to the tribals and kept his word within six months thereafter.

The Sanghathan's systematic, organised, planned campaign succeeded in cornering the powerful Khot and finally right won over sheer might.

Politics and the Sanghathan

The first few years when the Sanghathan was being established, were the years during which communist regimes around the world were collapsing. The ideas of Revolution through the organisation of the proletariat and ushering of a new era based on Communistic principles, were receiving a major setback. Therefore, propagating any 'ism' as the only way to equality and development, did not appeal to us. However, we did feel strongly, even then, that we needed a deeper and clearer understanding of Marxism to test out our own experiences and thoughts in this field.

Initially, I remember that Sumitra and I would struggle hard to read 'Das Kapital' and often got exhausted at the end of the exercise. Gradually, we realised from our discussion with other Marxist activists that you need some organised study circles and threadbare discussion to develop a more scientific and meaningful understanding of Marx.

However, I have found that no reading is ever a waste. It enhances one's ability to conceptualise, to create a framework for any action one undertakes. Most of us activists have not come from a background of any 'ism' and hence have at times been considered 'untouchable' by some die-hard Marxists from the social movement scene. But, the writings and work done by Phule, Ambedkar, Gandhi, Agarkar, have always provided inspiration and direction to our work. Their work and an understanding, albeit superficial, of Marx's theories have been the backdrop against which we have tried to look at our own work and our own aim, when we take up any issue. This kind of political understanding has given rise to what we may call the Sanghathan's role or stand on most issues.

The Sanghathan's Guiding Principles

The Sarvahara Jana Andolan will work towards liberating the oppressed sections of society from exploitation and injustice. It will strive to achieve this through organizing these sections and giving them the power of knowledge, strength and confidence. The Sanghathan will strive towards a society based on equality and justice and make efforts to spread this thinking among people.

The Sanghathan considers that each individual has aspirations and dreams and it will strive to facilitate the individual to realise his/her aspirations in a human, non-violent manner.

Every individual connected with the Sanghathan will strive to be free from all kinds of corruption – social, political and economic; and will also strive to rid society of such corruption.

The Sanghathan will endeavour to root out exploitation from every walk of life. It believes that human existence is beautiful and priceless. It will endeavour to enrich the beauty and happiness in each person's life.

The Sanghathan will not be the property or monopoly of any individual, group or any ism. It will instead, be a symbol of the power of collective strength and decision-making among people.

The members of the Sanghathan will link themselves to and stand in solidarity with similar other efforts the world over, in order to bring happiness in the lives of the most deprived people, through value-based struggles for equality and justice.

The Sanghathan acknowledges that the struggle against exploitation of the deprived sections is inevitably a political struggle. The Sanghathan, therefore is also political in nature. However, this does not mean that the Sanghathan will indulge in political games in order to acquire power positions or that it will form linkages with political parties, merely in order to elect certain candidates. On the contrary, the Sanghathan believes that from representative democracy it will initiate a process of acquisition of knowledge and collective power, which will lead to a democracy truly based on collective community representation. The Sanghathan will

endeavor to spread this political thinking through various issues and activities it undertakes.

True empowerment of people can only come through access to knowledge, resources, decision-making and control over one's life. These are other dimensions of power. All these factors are today concentrated in the hands of the elected representatives and the bureaucracy. The Sanghathan will strive to loosen this monopoly over these resources and ensure that people have access to them.

Along with the control of these dimensions of power, the Sanghathan firmly believes in justice, equality, independence, amity, secularism, and the importance of every individual's right to happiness. The Sanghathan hopes to encourage a new worldview based on these values and strengthen it by a scientific temperament.

The Sanghathan believes in democracy. We accept parliamentary democracy because it promotes representation of people. However, such representation should be under the control of communities and collectives of people and not of a class or vested interests. Such truly representative democracy presupposes that people are alert, educated, informed and analytical. It especially requires an analytical perspective developed among the poorest sections, if the present perverted form of so-called representative democracy is to be challenged.

What the Sanghathan aims for is a democracy that decentralizes decision making to include even the smallest unit of society – the individual - in each collective. Such a democracy needs to have a transparent decision-making process, openness in all matters except that of the country's defense, the right to information in all matters, and the right to recall elected representatives and hold them responsible to the electorate. The foundation of such a representative democracy will be based on the village collective (gram sabha). Other local bodies will have control over their natural environment and resources; physical labour will be given equal importance and an equal share in the production process, as is intellectual capital; and women and men will have equal rights in all life situations.

Power will not be vested in specific posts, status or chair but will be vested in the people who control the functioning of that post, status or chair. Thus, power will lie more in the hands of the Gramsabha – in the

hands of the cluster of homes in wadis, padas and even the moving 'tandas' of the nomadic tribes. In the cities, these rights and power will be vested at the ward level in citizen's groups.

In the present situation, the Sanghathan contests elections at the Gram Panchayat level because we look at this as being closest to a decentralized power structure in our political arrangement. It is undoubtedly possible to further decentralize power even at this level. The Sanghathan's policy about contesting elections at other levels will be decided in future on the basis of analysis of the political situation at those times. However, the basic beliefs and values held by the Sanghathan today will not change. Our political stands today are steps in a political process that we hope will bring in the kind of democracy we have described earlier.

Role in Electoral Politics

Since the inception of the Sanghathan we had two Vidhan Sabha (State Legislature) elections, in 1995 and then in 99-2000. In this period we also had two elections of the local self-government bodies – the Zilla Parishad, Panchayat Samiti and the Gram Panchayat, where our members contested as candidates. However, lack of finances and the identity of the Sanghathan as a pro-tribal organisation in an area where 80% of the electorate is non-tribal, resulted in our candidates losing to others. We could not adequately convey to the people that the Sanghathan was a pro-poor organisation rather than pro any caste or religion. We also could not reach out to the entire Zilla Parishad or Panchayat Samiti electorate because of physical constraints having no vehicle, not even a two-wheeler to go from village to village.

During the 94-95 Assembly elections, for the first time the political parties took cognizance of our existence and contacted us. Except the Congress, all other parties sought to gain the Sanghathan's support. At a meeting of all the main Sanghathan activists, we decided to support the candidate of the Peasant and Workers Party considering the party's manifesto and its ideology. Besides, the contesting candidate had no known history of corruption. On the basis of these minimum criteria and realising that there was no better alternative, we supported the PWP. Unfortunately, this candidate did not win.

For the 99-2000 Assembly elections, we went through a more studied process of decision-making. We first organised a 3-day training camp for all the main activists, the zonal leaders of the organisation. In these 3 days we held threadbare discussions on all the major political parties, their ideologies manifested by their written and unwritten programmes and action, their nature, their candidates. Shoshit Jana Andolan – a federation of all such Sanghathans in Maharashtra also went through a similar exercise at that time and published a people's manifesto for the elections. We circulated their manifesto to all the contesting candidates in our area and invited them to a public meeting on a common dais to

face the people from their constituency.

On the designated day, about 1000 members of the Sanghathan – men and women came for the meeting and sat through the deliberations that started at 10.00 in the morning and ended at 5.00 pm. All five candidates contesting the Assembly elections were present at the meeting. They expressed their views on the Manifesto we had circulated and gave assurances about various issues highlighted in it.

They were asked to take a pledge not to buy votes by luring people with money or alcohol. Similarly, the people attending the gathering took a pledge that they would not be swayed by any temptation offered by any party and would not sell their votes.

The fact that all the contestants attended the meeting and gave serious consideration to the people's demands was in itself recognition of the growing strength of the Sanghathan. At the end of this meeting all zonal and committee leaders of the Sanghathan were asked to conduct meetings in villages, in wadis and padas and disseminate information about what had transpired in the meeting. It was decided that we would again meet after 8 days, to collate the opinions received from people in the various villages and come to a final decision about whom to support.

People's participation in this entire process was vibrant and spontaneous. It was encouraging to see and understand the significance that elections play in the lives of the villagers. We felt that the urban middle class who is getting increasingly alienated from the election process could learn a thing or two in responsible citizenship from the enthusiasm shown by the largely uneducated rural population.

A week later, when the meeting started, the party workers knowing that the Sanghathan would declare its decision that day, were doing the rounds of the office. The Shivsena brought a big group of women from Mumbai – this was their style to appeal to the women leaders in the Sanghathan. But the Sanghathan women asked them a series of questions that left the urban Shiv Sena women speechless. They soon left the meeting and went away. After listening to the opinions coming from all wadis, three alternatives were kept for discussion:

- the elections should be boycotted.

-
- the Sanghathan should let the people vote for any candidate as per their choice.
 - the Sanghathan should decide which candidate to support and tell its members accordingly.

The people discarded the first alternative immediately and the second was defeated by 98% voting against it. So the third alternative was acceptable. Even accepting this, there were two possibilities in deciding the candidate:

- the Sanghathan should decide on who should be definitely defeated and leave the other decision to the people.
- the Sanghathan should decide whom to vote for.

The people chose the second alternative. Now the difficult task of making the decision had come: of the 5 candidates, 2 were contesting independently and were known to be not very capable. Of the remaining three – Shivsena, Indian Congress and Nationalist Congress – the people were firm on not voting for the Shivsena. Of the other two, the Congress candidate was new and not much known to the people. The real contest was between the Shivsena and the Nationalist Congress candidates. Had our votes gone to the Congress, they would have only reduced the Nationalist Congress Candidate's chances and succeeded in the Sena candidate being elected. We, therefore, had no alternative, but to ensure that all our votes should go *en block* to the Nationalist Congress candidate.

However, this candidate was the incumbent MLA who had earlier helped those offenders/landlords against whom the Sanghathan had filed cases. Why then, should we support him? A lot of discussion ensued and the people suggested a way out. We should get the candidate to sign a written assurance, they said, that henceforth, he would not help his own people if caught in such cases, without listening to the Sanghathan's side of the story. We will support him only if he accepts this, they said.

When this discussion was going on, we were getting telephone calls from both the Congress and the National Congress party workers awaiting our decision. We sent a message to the National Congress asking the candidate to contact our office. He was canvassing in the neighbouring Tahsil and contacted the Sanghathan within an hour of our sending the message. Within two days, he signed a paper listing out eight different

conditions on which we could support him.

This was a major victory for the Sanghathan. Within a day we sent messages to all villages declaring our support to this candidate. He won the elections, and later also became Minister of State in the ruling coalition government.

One of the written assurances he had signed was that immediately after his election he would organise a meeting to understand the issues of the tribals in Raigad district. We sent him many letters to remind him of this promise, but to no avail. Finally, we decided to take a morcha (a protest rally) to his home to demand a public explanation as to why he was reneging on his election promise. A lot of pressure was put on the Sanghathan through various forces, that this morcha should not happen. But we went ahead. This morcha made news and resulted in a lot of adverse publicity for the MLA. His representatives met the delegation. Within a week, a meeting was arranged with officials from both Tahsils remaining present. Several issues were discussed at this meeting. To this day, the Sanghathan receives letters regarding the status of follow up about the issues raised at the meeting.

This process of making the elected representative accountable to the people and to his promises was a valuable lesson in democracy, learnt by all the people. That this was the only attempt of this kind in the District, was a feather in the cap of the Sanghathan.

The Funds

In the early days of the Sanghathan, we could survive on funds collected from friends and well-wishers, from some part time jobs done once in a while. After about 2 years of working like this, the Samajik Krutadnyata Nidhi started giving an honorarium of Rs. 500/- per month for one activist. Around this time, another Delhi-based organisation Sruti started giving the two of us a small monthly fellowship. Gradually, as our interaction with Sruti grew, we confidently tried to discuss with several connected people about funding concerns of struggle-oriented organisations. Later, Sruti changed its funding policy and decided to give group fellowships to such organisations rather than supporting one or two individuals only. In fact, they decided to fund only people's organisations. Since then, to date, the Sanghathan is supported by the group fellowship given by Sruti and by subscriptions from members. The people from their own contributions manage all the programmes and training camps.

The Sanghathan has stood by its stand of not raising more money than its minimum requirements. Since the expenditure is curtailed to the bare minimum, the issue of major funding does not arise.

The Activists

In these last years, some activists were asked to leave because of misbehaviour or corruption. When such things happened despite a constant attempt to create a strong value base through training programmes and other actions, we all felt bad. The loss of close associates is depressing. However, we were able to overcome these losses. Earlier, we had not declared publicly that these activists were no longer with the Sanghathan. But their continued misbehaviour forced us to publicly disown them.

We feel that the Sanghathan failed to create in them a sense of what is right and wrong. They were more influenced by prevailing societal systems than by us.

It has always been a challenge to make people think of issues beyond their own immediate problems. There is a practice among rural folk to listen to good thoughts, to stories of lives of saints in the folklore tradition.

We have tried to make use of this for some programmes. We also continue to moot different discussions with people when we meet them once a week on the day designated for that tahsil. We also try to disseminate these values through our work and actions, but all these efforts need to be planned more seriously.

Village Training Programmes

While conducting training camps for village committees, one day we had a very intriguing experience. We were in Shenvai wadi for a training camp – expecting about 40 – 45 people to come. Slowly, people from neighbouring villages started coming in and the number swelled to above 200. This became almost like a public meeting. Food and other facilities were tremendously inadequate but the people sat patiently till late evening listening intently to all discussions.

Ever since this incident, we started conducting village training camps. At first, the Sanghathan contributed for and paid 50 per cent of the expenses, the rest being managed by the people themselves. Later, however, the people started taking responsibility for all the expenditure incurred. The camps would deal with an understanding of exploitation and on deciding the line of action so as not to suffer any exploitation. This action would be immediately implemented. Some of these camps resulted in the release of some bonded labourers; at others we successfully regained usurped land, raised the wage level in the area, ensured proper functioning of the fair price shops, etc. Most of our training camps ended with a rally (*morcha*) and all the camps were organised around some issue. They took on the semblance of a festival for the people and they participated with great enthusiasm. On the day of the camp, people stayed at home to clean and decorate the village. Alcohol was taboo on that day. The prestige of the wadi where a camp was held, suddenly grew in the region. Hence, many wadis started demanding village camps.

The Sanghathan then started laying down conditions for conducting village camps – no camps until there was 100% membership from the village; no camps until women also participated, we said. This resulted in a steady increase in women's participation. Further, non-tribals from neighbouring villages also started attending the camps.

In these camps, we dealt with various subjects like: understanding exploitative systems, retaining land rights; police and our rights; building

people's organisations; significance of satyagraha; the political system; superstitions; basic health related issues; the role of the Sanghathan; strategic planning; various sects in society and their growing influence; adivasi culture and threats faced by them; social reformers and their contributions to society. People participate in discussions on all these subjects that affect their lives.

Through all this, the Sanghathan tries to disseminate information, enhance analytical capacity and inculcate values in people. The training camps for the main activists also aim at the same. The only difference is that in the village camps we rely heavily on the use of programme media like role-plays, posters, simulation games, taking into consideration the attention span of people who live by the sweat of their brow.

The village camps then, gave the Sanghathan speed and direction. They have been crucial to the growth of the Sanghathan because they have facilitated among activists and the people, the ability for reflection and action.

Major issues taken up in the Decade

- Struggle for right to Dali Land.
- Registration of the first case under the Prevention of Atrocities Act in Raigad District. Subsequent efforts at just and proper implementation of the Act in various cases.
- Regained the land belonging to Tribals and other Farmers, usurped from them by other forces – in Shenvai, Vave, Keladh, Khadki, Pahun, Recholi, Wakhandha, Medha, Raviraj, Gangavali, Sukeli, Mandavshet, Kharbachhi wada, Yerad.
- Organisation of Brick Kiln workers
- Struggle for bringing about change in the Public Distribution System, Police, and for rights of Ration-card Holders.
- Collective efforts to regain lands under Tenancy Rights.
- Efforts towards redistribution of land acquired under the Ceiling Act.
- Struggles for various Land Issues
- Organising for land lost to growing Industrialisation.
- Efforts for Tribal Self-rule Legislation.
- Organising for issue of private Forest Land.
- Issue of Census of Tribals in Raigad District
- Issue of Raigad District Development Plan.
- Building a strong Women's Organisation
- Health camps.
- Campaigning for Education
- Consistent efforts at raising policy issues in the State Legislature.
- Campaign of Women against Liquor.
- Working on issues of right to homestead land, house rent and right to land on which the house stands to establish rights of Tribals.
- Training of Gram Panchayat members.
- Organising against corruption
- Organising for Minimum Wages of Agricultural Labourers
- Campaign for release of Bonded Labour
- Struggle against Exploitation of Migrant Workers.
- Voter's Awareness Campaign.
- Struggle against Worldwide Exploitation in the name of Globalisation.

Looking Back

The first few years of the Sanghathan were very difficult years. No doubt we had a lot of enthusiasm and dreams about how we would organise the people. The chasm between the dreams and reality, however, was so deep, that frustration was always lurking around the corner. There were many instances when we felt like running away from the situation, from the place, but were held back by the many different local issues. It was a very closed-in kind of feeling.

Many friends and well-wishers helped us overcome this hopelessness and the people in the area, through their love, their support, also taught us a lesson in patience.

The stagnation that had afflicted the Sanghathan in Mangaon tahsil, due to extreme poverty and deprivation of the people, the high rate of alcoholism among both men and women, disappeared when the Sanghathan reached Roha tahsil. Here, the women came forward to take leadership and helped the Sanghathan to move from issue to issue, growing stronger simultaneously. If the adivasis are in the deprivation stage in Mangaon, they may be considered to be at exploitation level in Roha. We realised that an organisation like ours can take roots among the exploited rather than among the extremely deprived. Even today, the Sanghathan in Mangaon tahsil is weak due to various geographic, social and economic reasons.

Today, the Sanghathan has spread to 6 tahsils. This growth in the last 11 years has been due to the participation, enthusiasm and love of our people. It is no longer limited to only adivasis. About 30-35% of the members now are non-tribals. The Sanghathan still does not take any foreign funds nor does it look for programme based institutional funding. It functions mainly on membership fees and people's participation during programmes. Apart from 11 full time activists, there are zonal leaders and tahsil committees – all comprising about 50 – 60 activists who are at the helm of affairs in the Sanghathan.

I am the only 'outsider' today since Sumitra had to leave due to her personal constraints. All others are locals. All activists have participated

with great enthusiasm and fervor in all the local struggles. We have had confrontations with many powerful individuals and other vested interests – with ministers, with corporate groups like Jindal, Suman Motels, Kuber Motels, Agrindustries, with powerful landlords and ‘khots’ in the region, and so on. These confrontations have resulted in victories for the Sanghathan due to the attempts we made at trying to understand the dynamics of the vested interests involved at the local level and strategizing carefully about the action to be taken.

We utilized strategies to work with the state legislature to a large extent. Trying to gauge the strength of elected representatives, identifying the weak links and utilizing this knowledge to raise issues of the deprived section in the legislature, understanding the functioning of the legislative machinery – all formed part of our strategies. My experience of working with Samarthan — an advocacy organization — helped us a lot in understanding that a system is not monolithic, but is made of many different individuals whose multiple interests inform the working of the system. It is a lesson we learnt repeatedly. It was this that has helped in the strategic planning of many struggles.

The Sanghathan has developed a large friend circle and network of well-wishers among the communication media. At the local level, some Sanghathan activists themselves are reporters working with district newspapers. It, therefore, facilitates our access to the media when we need to highlight any of our issues. We also have maintained the discipline not to misuse this publicity.

At times, we have had to confront local bureaucrats on issues. We have always remembered to keep our strategies and ire focused on the issue and on the system – not trained our guns on any individual. The Sanghathan maintains the discipline that even the most inefficient or undeserving official will still be treated with basic respect.

Whilst battling on various local issues, we also built linkages and participated in similar other struggles – from struggles of all agricultural labourers in Maharashtra, the struggle of people displaced due to the Narmada dam, the struggles of dalits and adivasis, to the war against Enron and other battles against exploitation clothed in the garb of globalisation. We regarded the issues of the oppressed as our issues and today, the Sanghathan is closely linked with and is a member of federa-

tions like the Shoshit Jana Andolan, National Alliance for People's Movements, Coordination Committee for EGS and Agricultural Labourers, and the Rationing Kruti Samiti.

We have been constantly trying to strengthen ourselves through consistently taking stands and fighting exploitation at local levels, confronting exploitative systems manifested in the form of varied vested interests, and in doing so are trying to empower the s, the dalits by building their confidence and self-respect. The battle is constant and is gradually getting more difficult. The solutions to most of our issues are lying increasingly outside the local reach. Before gaining thorough expertise at local level, we are being overwhelmed by global dimensions of our issues. How do we retain our balance? How do we address these issues? How do we fight and at what levels and with whom? – These have all become difficult questions to answer. We are still searching as to what will be the weapons and the strategies for these ensuing larger battles.

I cannot say confidently that we are clear about the kind of socio-economic order we want established – we are more clear about what we don't want happening. There is still a fair amount of vagueness about what should be our political stand, who should we consider as 'friend' or 'foe'. We know we never intended our struggle to be relegated to one small patch of change in an isolated corner. But we need to build clarity about what should be our future direction.

Nevertheless, we are not disappointed. The struggle for change is continuing. In many villages, non-tribals have accepted tribal leadership – even the leadership of tribal women. In some small corner, in some small way we are succeeding in inverting the power pyramid.

A largely rootless, marginalized group like the Katkaris is creating its own history – of struggle against the might of a corrupt exploitative system. In future, the Sanghathan may or may not retain its present form – may even cease to exist. But the faith and confidence that the Katkaris can come out of their chains of bondage and stand up strongly to the challenges of life will remain. This alone, we are sure, will be the impetus to their future development.

Core Activists of the Sanghathan

Chandrakant Gaikwad

Sopan Sutar

Kamlakar Ovhal

Nathuram Waghmare

Mahadev Koli

Shanta Jadhav

Chandadevi Tiwari

Bhima Jadhav

Sangita Waghmare

Gopal Waghmare

Vasant Waghmare

Kisan Jadhav

Ganesh Waghmare

Ulka Mahajan

Advisory Committee

R. V. Bhuskute

D. G. Prabhu

Dr. Pradeep Patkar

Anjali Kanitkar

Contact Telephone Nos. :

Mangaon : 02140 - 263263

Panvel : 022 - 2745 8901