

When Tribals Awake: The Kerandimals Movement

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Exploitation, even in its most oppressive form, is part of history both in India and elsewhere. In our own country, it has been legitimized more than elsewhere in the name of the caste hierarchy which considers those at the bottom of the social rung inferior beings. Though the tribals do not belong to the caste hierarchy as such, the dominating groups continue considering them inferior. The oppressed groups in their turn have interiorised this low self-image and find it difficult to organize themselves in order to demand their rights. The existence of internal collaborators of the oppressors in the group of the oppressed makes any movement much more difficult.

That is where the role of group from outside comes in awakening the tribals or other oppressed to the reality of their exploitation and denial of human rights. If not on its guard, such an outside group, while freeing them from their present oppressors easily makes them dependent on themselves. No community can grow unless animation comes from within. This paper will study the action of one such group that acted as facilitators of a movement. They used health as an entry point but were always clear that it was to be only a tool for education.

THE AREA AND THE PEOPLE

A mere 10 kms outside Berhampur in Southern Orissa and you are at the foothills of the Kerandimals. Not many of the townspeople are aware that this hilly region is the home of a few thousand Khond tribals. Long long ago, several small kingdoms flourished in these hills-the Chikiti, the Mahuri, the Khemandi Raj- to whom these tribals had served as their subject people. In course of time, the kingdoms disappeared due to various legislations enacted by the legislature pursuant to a State policy known as the socialistic pattern of society, but the tribals continue to live on in neglect and isolation, on the memories of their past glory.

The Khonds live in small scattered villages on the hill slopes unconnected by roads. They speak Kui which has no written script. Oriya is used for communicating with outsiders. It is also the medium of formal education.

These tribals depend largely on the forest for their livelihood and theirs is in fact a firewood economy. Most men and women go daily to the jungle to cut firewood which is then dried, cut to equal size, tied into neat bundles and carried down long and winding hill paths to be sold to the firewood *sahukars* who wait with their bullock carts at the foot of the hills. These merchants usually exchange it to the advantage of the *sahukar* at a low price for the wood and a high price for the poorest quality of rice etc.

Besides cutting firewood, the tribals spend the rainy season in their *bogodo* cultivation i.e. hillside shift cultivation of several indigenous grains and vegetables which on an average feed a family for two or three months. In their individual tracts they grow ragi and maize. In general, the tribals are poor agriculturists and there is a definite under-utilization of existing resources of land, water etc.

The forests yield an abundance of fruit. Many of these-Mango, Tamarind, Jack fruit etc.- have either been planted by the tribals or they have been enjoying their fruits from time immemorial.. Petty non-tribal traders invade the tribal villages seasonally to purchase the produce of these trees. Paradoxically, while these petty traders in forest produce depend on the tribals for their livelihood, in reality they have become the masters and the tribals, their easy victims.

Despite the existence of several government primary schools in the tribal villages, the level of literacy is as low as 3 %. This is because hardly any of the teachers attended the schools. Almost all the other government schemes and infrastructural institutions function in the same way as the schools of the Education Department. On the block map, this area has been outlined in red and noted as 'risky'. This is discreetly understood by all functionaries to mean that no government servant need risk entering the area.

Unlike the Khonds of Phulbani and Koraput districts who have a rich cultural heritage of song and dance, the Kerandimal Khonds are conspicuous by the absence of these culture forms. Generally speaking, the tribals of Kerandimal reveal a marked dilution of the intrinsic tribal character. This 'acculturation' may be because of the proximity to Berhampur, geographical isolation from the main body of Khonds, ethnic penetration etc. 'Collectivity' and 'co-operative effort' are low, though a limited form of common ownership does exist in most villages in the institution of the 'kotha' which may be in the shape of trees, land or money. The leadership of the village has, by and large, exercised full control over the 'kotha' with very little accountability to the rest of the village. A few of the tribal leaders are themselves the biggest enemies and exploiters of their people.

In years gone by, the tribals brewed their own mild liquor from 'Mahua'. Today the 'manufacture' of liquor is controlled by a small group of non-tribals called 'Sundis'. The tribals have become their 'wage labourers'. Ammonium Sulphate is used to prepare this illicit poisonous liquor which is then supplied to Berhampur and also sold among the tribals. Today alcoholism is a major problem among tribals-that being one of the reasons why they cannot break away from the stranglehold of their backwardness and powerlessness.

The role of the women in the tribal society is important. She is really the backbone of the family. It is she who brings home the day's food while the man often relaxes at home. Tribal women generally enjoy greater freedom of movement and expression than their non-tribal counterparts. But despite these concessions, they receive a poor bargain. They are often subject to the barbaric behavior of their alcoholic husbands who are still the heads of the families and the main decision-makers, though not necessarily the breadwinners.

Shaping and controlling the lives of the tribal people is a powerful force, Black magic. So steeped are they in their superstitious beliefs, that introducing them to a rational system of thinking is often impossible. The tribals of the Kerandimals are undoubtedly a fascinating combination of simplicity and complexity of strength and weakness, of selfishness and integrity.

Besides the tribals, we are also in contact with some of the non-tribal villages in the area. These villages which are all on the plains, tend to be large and heterogeneous. Many of them have a very large landless Harijan population.

GRAM VIKAS AND ITS ENTRY POINT

As long back as 1969-70, a group of young students of Madras University became involved in an analysis of the existing educational system as the principal means, whereby the social malice afflicting the country was perpetuated. The group was not naïve to the reality that the golden age of student life could very well be spent in romanticising about the poor and calling for the overthrow of the existing social order because these same heralds of change and revolution could, after completing their studies, retrace their steps, make peace with their conscience and find, each for himself, a comfortable niche in the establishment. Several members of the core group decided to opt out of the usual niche-seeking race and to commit themselves in ways that were as yet not fully known, to the challenge of social transformation. Young Students Movement for Development (YSMD) was registered as a society in Madras at this point, as a result of concretisation of these lofty ideals and thoughts.

A group of YSMD activists went to Orissa in 1971, in response to a plea for relief volunteers, following the cyclone and tidal wave that devastated its coastal area. When relief operation came to an end, a few of these young people remained behind and began an agriculture-based development programme. For several reasons and constraints, the group had to leave the area a few years later after handing over what remained of the programme to local hands.

Gram Vikas has its origins in this group of YSMD, which moved to Ganjam District of Orissa in 1977. The experience and process of the years from 1971 to 1977 have left their mark on their thinking and composition. As the group became more localised, the need for a more relevant organisation was felt and *Gram Vikas* was registered in Orissa in January 1979 to facilitate local participation and solidarity. It is a mixed group made up of Oriyas and non-Oriyas and secular in character, having, among its members, persons of various religious denominations, most of them Hindus but also a few Christians and others. They do not have any political, party or official religious affiliation.

In the summer of 1977 Gram-Vikas first became aware of these tribals who lived in the Kerandimals. As first perceived by us, their main problems seemed to be of 'identity', 'acculturation', 'integration', 'exploitation', and 'lack of organization'. Today, after a period of three years, when we think that our initial perceptions have only been confirmed and strengthened, we began to ask ourselves if there was not something, which had forgotten their existence. A decision was taken to find out more about these people who lived in obscurity.

Our initial contact was with 11 villages at the foot of the hills. A simple socio-economic survey was made more with the purpose of establishing a friendly rapport with them for the efficient collection of cold statistical data. On these visits we carried with us a medical kit for treating minor ailments. The immediate relief that we brought to many, especially those suffering from malaria (and there were many) was the main reason for our quick acceptance among the tribals. However, it took quite some time for us to gain their full confidence.

What struck us early in our contact among the tribals was the complete absence of a functioning health service to meet even their basic curative needs. Malaria and tuberculosis appeared to be rampant and accounted for the loss of many lives when in the case of the former just 4 tablets of Chloroquin could have brought great relief. So we decided to begin an awareness building process using 'health' as an entry point until other avenues of need and involvement which

were as yet unknown or controversial, could be more carefully explored. After several discussions with the people, we initiated a low-key, simple health programme to meet what we observed, and what the tribals also voiced, as their foremost need.

The Technical aspects of our health programme included simple curative services, mother and child health services, chronic disease control and environmental sanitation. Its non-technical aspects centred round community participation and control of the whole programme. With this end in view, we concentrated on village health workers training, formation of village communities and a health insurance scheme. Every one of the 11 villages as a whole participated in the scheme. We visited all the villages daily.

From the outset we were clear that our ultimate goal was not mere achievement of 'health' which we knew would be very difficult because of the tremendous problems in the field of 'health concerns'. But we knew that these problems could not be separated from the other aspects of the total rural hopelessness complex. So, keeping in mind that 'health' was directly related to the economic and social base of the tribals, we constantly used our involvement through 'health' to build up awareness in the community on other aspects of their lives.

The basic condition for working in a village was the formation of a 'village committee' that would function as the leadership group. This was done to reinforce the vital aspect of community participation and control and also with the long-sighted intention of developing a grass roots organization among the tribals. Ultimately. What we had in mind was the unionisation of all the tribals living across the Kerandimals.

PEOPLE BEGIN TO ACT

Even in the early days, these committee were never really pure 'health committee' and gradually their scope expanded to include almost all aspects of life. The entire village meets once a month with some of the volunteers of *Gram Vikas*. Besides the village level meeting, all committee members come together every month to determine the needs of each village and to work out a plan of action with the resources available within and without the community. In village Nunighore, for example, all the children were having scabies. The reason was ascribed to lack of water sources for bathing. A well was needed. Where were they to get money from for that? So an application was written by the committee to the BDO asking him to provide a drinking water well in the village.

We see instances like these as the first faltering steps the people take on a road that is new and unknown. It is the beginning of their effort to acquire their rights that have been denied to them. Perhaps the people had so far viewed the *sarkar* (government) as the benevolent *sahukarr* who bestowed a few favours on them such as an occasional sanctioning of a well. They had, also in the past, put in many applications for the 'favour'. But now they began to see themselves as human beings and realised that their humanity gave them a natural right to clean drinking water and that such a right did not have to be bestowed on them by a benefactor. Consequently, this new application, though following the same old format as the previous ones, was of a totally different nature. This time they were acting as human beings and demanding it as a right from those who had deprived them of what belonged to them.

By this time we knew almost every man and woman in the villages by name. As the rapport between the people and the group grew, the people began to voice spontaneously their problems and constraints in other spheres of their lives. More important, the tribals began to identify us as their friends, as persons who stood for certain principles of integrity and service.

Thus, within about 8 months, what had begun as a health programme, grew into an integrated development programme, with the people taking the initiative in specific issues with the support and encouragement provided by the group.

Though agriculture as practised by the tribals is in a primitive stage, it is still an important function. We took our time to study and collect facts on the entire agricultural system of the tribals. As specific agriculture-related activities, we organized several workshops for men and women in collaboration with AFPRO and the Block in 1978 and early 1979. Besides the opportunity to come together, share ideas etc., these were important occasions for the people to meet and voice their problems to various officers and functionaries of the district – BDO, AEO, VLW, SFDA Director, Banks, Co-op., Institutions etc.

Historically, credit and government subsidies have always been appropriated by the rich and the powerful. We found this to be the case in our area as well.. Except for a few who had taken loans from an almost defunct, corrupt co-op. Society, the majority of the people had no access to fair credit.

Most tribals did not own a pair of bullocks and were unable to buy one since they could not get loans. One of the reasons for under utilization of existing land and water resources was the lack of viable credit facilities for agricultural development. We recognised economic development as a support and as a foundation for democracy itself. We further recognised the need for adequate agricultural credit inputs as a stimulus for increased agricultural activity. So we decided to act as catalytic agents in bringing credit facilities to the marginalised sections of society.

The United Commercial Bank, Berhampur, came forward to finance the tribals at 4 % interest under the DRI scheme, with a 50 % subsidy on loans from the SFDA. Almost all families in the villages where we operate have by now received loans for various agricultural development and related purposes.

At about this time, we tried to introduce the concept of Young Farmers' Clubs in the villages. 8-10 such clubs were formed but the idea never really took root and these clubs have more or less fizzled out. Today, while analysing the causes of the failure of our efforts in this direction, we see more clearly why we failed to get our 'Young Farmers' Clubs' going. Besides being our idea, we ourselves were apparently not fully clear on why we wanted to start them, what would be the activities of these groups, what kind of initial support these would require, who among us would give this support etc. Lacking this basic clarity of purpose and definition of its objective, wanting to be a leadership group or a mere farmers' group or of integrating the two, we generally failed to sustain even the few groups that did get formed.

The tribal philosophy is to live from day to day and there is seldom a question of surplus money to meet unexpected expenditure, viz, illness, death, or even anticipated expenditure like marriage, social feasts, festivals etc. The tribals, therefore, contact the moneylenders for loans to meet these consumptional needs. Interest usually ranges between 66% and 150%. Since these loans contribute nothing to production, it becomes impossible to provide for their repayment and the tribal is further entrapped in an ever-widening circle of exploitation. A small savings scheme was started

around February 1978 as a possible solution to the problem of indebtedness in collaboration with the Punjab National Bank.

It was linked to the availability of institutional loans for consumptional needs, the idea being that common savings would be used to finance later needs. Though the whole concept was completely new to the tribals, the small savings scheme has caught on in every family and today there are nearly Rs. 60,000.00 in the savings accounts. However, from the beginning it was clear to us that a bank account was not an end in itself but only a means to help the people free themselves from the money lenders and get from the commercial institutions loans that are their right.

THE EMERGENCE OF PEOPLE'S POWER

Something has already been written about the exploitative system whereby a non-tribal group called the Sundis manufacture illicit liquor in the depth of the jungle using tribal labourers. Working for the Sundis is apparently a good job -Rs. 4 per day plus a free meal and liquor. But this seemingly rosy job carries with it several hidden risks and evils, which are not immediately perceived by the tribals. Illness, addiction to the alcohol, police cases, mounting debts to the Sundis gradually sap every drop of the man's mental, physical and economic strength.

Despite our awareness of the problems of alcoholism and Sundi exploitation, we reasoned that time was not ripe for any direct action. But around December 1978 we were more or less forced into confrontation with the Sundis.

On December 11th 1978, a tribal of village Banyamari was assaulted by the Sundis because he had dared to ask his Sundi *sahukar* for the wages that were long due to him. The day following this incident, the Sundis further beat up his mother and wife and took away his goats. This incident was reported to us by the people of Banyamari who asked for our support in order that they would take action against the Sundis. At first we were very sceptical about interfering in what we felt was a temporary skirmish between the Sundis and the tribals. Moreover, almost all the people of this village were employed by the Sundis and were entirely in their grip. It could be bad strategy to start action so soon.

In any case, we went to the village that night and to our great surprise found every adult member of the village gathered for the meeting and not one was drunk. It is difficult to recapture on paper the fire and spirit of that meeting which continued late into the night.

For the first time, the people began to unravel the intricacies of their exploitation by the Sundis. The mystifying veil of tribal exploitation through liquor was demystified. A unanimous decision was taken to drive all the Sundis out of the village. Besides this, no member of the villages was to be allowed to harbour materials or equipment of the Sundis in their homes nor would the Sundis be allowed to distil alcohol anywhere within the boundaries of tribal land or to sell it in the village. Wisely, a decision against police action was taken, the tribals knowing better than us the futility of such recourse.

The young men of the village further reasoned that merely throwing out the Sundis from their village would not check the entire system of Sundi exploitation of tribals. They decided that time had come for a well organised total liberation of all the tribals from alcoholism and exploitation.

They took it upon themselves to spread the news of the Banyamari incident to all the other villages and risk for the support and co-operation of every tribal, for what had happened in Banyamari could well happen elsewhere.

One week later, an area meeting was called. All the villages except one adopted the resolution of village Banyamari. This village was also finally made to toe the line by a group of young, newly awakened tribal men of that village.

All during this time, we in YSMD had to take some hard decisions. In the period preceding the Banyamari incident, we had concentrated only on awakening the tribals in the evils of excessive alcohol and the exploitative relation of production that existed between Tribals and Sundis. Now, for the first time, we were on a course of open confrontation with the Sundis, without fully knowing the strength of the tribals to stand by their resolution and decision. But during the initial period of the boycott we were continually amazed and humbled by the strength and leadership of some young and old leaders who were the rallying force behind the tribal struggle for liberation.

During the initial period of the boycott, various meeting took place to strengthen the tribals in understanding the process that was taking place, of their strength in unity and determination to end what was being newly understood by several tribals as an exploitative system. It was a busy period. Alternative work had to be found for those who had been working for the Sundis. The Orissa Forest Corporation, which was cutting down trees in the area, was contacted for giving employment to the tribals.

The Corporation was only too willing to absorb the tribals in their felling operation because they needed people to work for them. The more work that got done, probably the greater the profits to the Cooperation or rather to the immediate employers of the tribals. The supervisors of the OFC were probably more interested in their immediate profit than in the battle of the Sundis against the tribals. Today, perhaps, given an opportunity, the Sundis, OFC, Forest Dept., the functionaries of various other government departments such as Health, the Block, Education and money lenders would more consciously unify their forces against our group, the tribals.

Underneath the apparent calm prevailing was a smoldering tension, especially in village Purunapatna - the hornet's nest as it were. The Sundi of this village who was also running a commodities shop refused to stop selling liquor. One evening, some young men of the village seized his liquor and deposited it with the local *sarpanch* in writing and promised not to sell liquor again in the village. They daringly beat up one of the young men before the stunned village.

Following this incident in village Purunapatna, another big meeting was held at which nearly 200 people were present. It was decided at this meeting to give Gopi Sahu 24 hours to make a public apology and should he refuse to apologise, the people proposed to go on a mass protest at Berhampur to make known to the authorities the violence perpetrated against the tribals and to ask for protection and redress. Gopi Sahu refused to apologise.

On 8th February 1979, the tribal leader called on every tribal family of the area to be represented in a procession that the Adivasis of the area would take in silent protest to Berhampur. On the 9th morning, near about 600 people collected at Narasinghpur from where they marched, two by two, to Berhampur covering a distance of 15 km.. They presented a memorandum to the Revenue Divisional Officer and to the Sub-divisional Officer (S.D.O.). In the memorandum they alleged that Gopi Sahu and his brother Paramananda Sahu virtually kept the tribals under perennial bondage. They reminded the officials that the road linking the tribal lands with Berhampur and

other cities was in such a state of disrepair that not even jeeps could pass through it. Wild elephants were causing depredation in the area. But all their representation had been useless.

The S.D.O. at first refused to appear before the people to hear their complaints. So the people decided to sit in the courtyard. Then she the (SDO) promised an official enquiry into the harassment of tribals and legal action against those Sundis involved in illicit distillation of liquor.

The walk back to the village was hard and exhausting. Most reached their villages around midnight. But the tribals were triumphant. For the first time they saw proof of their hidden strength through collective action. Never before had the town of Berhampur witnessed such a well organised mass of protesting people and tribals at that! Many local newspapers carried news of the unusual procession of tribal men and women whose proximity to Berhampur was hitherto unknown to most. The All India Radio also carried a broadcast of the events.

The official action that followed is another story. What was significant was the emergence of people's power among the tribals - the emergence of a new consciousness-precisely what the tribals were supposed to lack. For those of us who had been already there but confusedly aware of, before the march to Berhampur, this was a triumphant moment.

MOVEMENT TO REDEEM MORTGAGED TRIBAL PROPERTY

Land and trees are the instruments of production and gainful economic activity among the tribals. An outsider who can take over the ownership of these means of production can slowly take total control over the life of the tribals, using the commonest method of exploitation. As in many other parts of India, prevalent also in this region was an outrageous system of mortgage, whereby the ownership of the best tribal property has been slowly but steadily passing out of tribal hands.

Around the summer of 1978, faced with this glaring injustice of usurious exploitation, the team decided to take this up as an issue of education and liberation through collective action by the tribals. Not one of the tribals knew of the existence of the moratorium on rural indebtedness. This ignorance speaks for itself of the effectiveness of so many government policies and the state of their implementation. This one was a highly publicised policy to free rural people from indebtedness and human bondage. A campaign to mass educate and conscientize the people of the existing and flourishing system of usury was begun sometime around September, October 1978.

This was the core issue of every meeting – big, small, personal, casual-with the people. And gradually they began to understand the dynamics of the social and economic order that exists on the exploitation of man by man, that people's response was weak:- “What can we do to free ourselves? We are after all only tribals.” This was a genuine challenge. They had come to think of themselves as ‘only tribals’. They had internalised the low self-image that had been imposed on them by their exploiters and had come to consider themselves as a group that cannot do much.

This self-image had to be changed if they had to become agents of change and not merely passive sufferers of events imposed on them by others. They took time and finally the People's Council decided to take this up as an issue somewhere near December 1978 and accordingly plans were made. Right from the initial stages, the tribals insisted that justice and fairness should weigh in their approach to this issue. This is because of the inherent tribal quality to honor all debts and obligations. The movement was to take the following shape:

1. Conduct a survey to find out the amount of indebtedness in each village.
2. Preparation of the people and leaders to face the *sahukars*
3. People's Court" where the tribals themselves would be just and impartial i.e. if the *sahukar* had taken more than that is due through interest and use of land trees, he would be paid nothing. But where he had taken less than the capital amount borrowed, he would be compensated as per the rate of interest at which tribals were receiving loans from banks.
4. Utilisation of collective strength of the people to physically protect the property of tribals in cases where the *sahukars* refused to acknowledge the judgement.
5. In those cases wherein the Sahukars had to be compensated monetarily, a loan would be made to the individual tribal, if he himself could not pay this amount.
6. Every tribal whose case was arbitrated by the Court would have to give in writing to the village Committee that henceforth he would strive not to remortgage his property and if in times of dire need for money this could not be avoided, the committee would first be consulted. This clause had been added because of an attempt to strengthen the village 'kotho' or common property, whereby it is hoped that non-productive credit needs can be met within the village at fairer terms.
7. Those tribals who received monetary assistance to compensate their *sahukars* would declare in writing that the village had control over the land until such time as the loan was repaid. Repayment of the loan would be made by giving half the value of every crop received from the property that had been released, until such time as the loan was repaid.
8. No tribal whose land had been released, would be allowed to keep his land fallow, If in season he could not cultivate any part of his land, the committee would have the right to lease his land out for that season to the landless families of the village on a share cropping basis.

With this as the matrix of the strategy for releasing mortgaged land and trees, the movement took off. At every stage the *sahukars* worked out a new strategy to foil the the movement. They tried their best to tempt key leaders and witnesses with bribes, other inducements and with persuasive arguments aimed at touching the intrinsic tribal loyalty. Several of them threatened the tribals with dire consequences if they persisted in their pursuit for liberty from bondage. Knowing that a few of us in the group were Christians, they circulated a rumour that we were in fact Christian missionaries in the garb of social workers and that the ulterior motive of YSMD was mass conversion of the tribals and appropriation of their property at the most appropriate time. These rumours were meant to produce confusion in the minds of the tribals who trusted us as their friends.

The money lenders could not succeed because the relations of power had changed. Our years together had produced a broadbased organisational structure and alliance between *Gram Vikas* and the people on the one hand and the people among themselves on the other. A new People's organization had grown with its 'cadre' of 'workers' at every level, among women and men of every village. Of the greatest importance was the existence of some strong and determined leaders whose presence was crucial in resisting the exploiters and preventing them from penetrating the collectivity and breaking it up.

Besides, we discussed the issues openly with the people without any hesitation. The issue of conversion came up for discussion in many places. When it was raised at one of the meetings in village Singabadi, we made our stand very clear to all those present there. We started that we were not in the area to coerce people into adopting alien religions, but we insisted that as educated, enlightened people we did not subscribe to the caste feelings and divisions among them. We accepted only two castes or groups of people: the rich and the poor. But we also told them that we were in a vulnerable position as there was such an effort in the past at “conversion” which was part of history and could not be denied. But we insisted that we had “Time” as our only ally - ‘Time’ would prove our intentions.

Briefly, the confidence which the people had acquired in their own ‘collectivity’ and the open dialogue, which we had maintained with them, had changed the relations of power in the area. The people were closer to *Gram Vikas* than to the *sahukars* and our alliance proved stronger than the threats of the money lenders who were forced to capitulate. Those *sahukars* who refused to accept the arbitration of the people had actually approached their lawyers who seemed to have counseled them against such a step and told them that their case was hopeless and could even boomerang on the complainants. This forced them to come to terms with the People’s courts. They attempted not to bring their written documents, to exaggerate loan claims and under-estimate the amounts of interest enjoyed by them in the form of cash or use of land and trees. But these were harshly dealt with.

Initially, cases pertaining to mango, jack fruits and tamarind trees were taken up because of their approaching fruit-bearing season. After they were declared released with or without compensation, the most important period was in physically protecting them from the vengeful and angry *sahukars*. And this, the people have done thoroughly. With the exception of a few cases, no *sahukar* has enjoyed the fruits of tropical trees on the area since then.

Following the release of trees came the release of land. This in fact is still going on. Today nearly 60 villages have been covered by this movement. We are in the process of compiling and analysing the individual cases of release and hope to prepare a documentation of the same. Those have been one concrete issue and struggle with the greatest learning value for us and the people. It has given the tribals tremendous confidence in themselves.

One more interesting aspect has been the discovery of the same form of indebtedness to a limited extent among the tribals themselves i.e. some tribals lending money to others and keeping them under their control. As a strategy, we decided to initially ignore the existence of the same system within the tribals themselves, because we did not want to risk upsetting the broader aims of the movement. We reasoned that the second step should be directed against the internal contradictions. And true enough this is what happened. Spontaneously, people began to question the money lenders within their own committees and to exercise the same forms of judgement as was done in the case of external exploitation.

This has not met with total success. But exploitation within the community has to be tackled and internal collaboration with the exploiter abolished, if a community of the exploited has to grow. Internal collaboration with the exploiter is seen much more clearly in the marketing sector where they get easily exploited because of their lack of bargaining power for a better price and the links of the traders with some tribals. The bulk of tribal produce: tamarind, mangoes, jack fruits, vegetables, maize, firewood, eating leaves, tooth sticks etc, is now purchased through middlemen whose margin of profit is probably greater than that of the tribals. These middlemen, because of their long

acquaintance with the tribals, have an indirect hold over other aspects of the tribal life as well. Any attempt to get a better price is settled by the middlemen with the help of tribals with whom they keep in contract.

We have often discussed whether an alternative system of marketing could be worked out to stop the existing exploitation by the petty traders. But this has never materialised because of the scattered nature of the villages, the lack of entrepreneurial skills among the tribals, the strong personal ties of exploitation. We have always rejected the ideas of introducing a government tribal marketing society in the area, because objective studies reveal that such societies, by their own internal dynamics, become bigger exploiters of the people than the existing petty traders.

The above problems connected with marketing and indebtedness among the tribals raise a very important issue of internal collaboration with the exploiters. No colonialism is possible without internal collaborators. So also, no exploitation is possible for a long time unless the economic, organizational, cultural and other power of the oppressed is broken and collaborators from among the oppressed are found. Apart from the fact that the existence of informers of the dominators in the group of the dominated renders the task of their organization extremely difficult; the oppressed themselves become oppressors-and this is the worst form of oppression.

Today this is our greatest problem. Existing among the tribals is a small band of men who have been their traditional leaders: the ward members, the dealers for sugar and kerosene, the 'friends' of the local petty politicians, who are now becoming petty government contractors concerned only with achieving economic benefits for themselves. These tribal sarpanches are as good as, if not better than the non-tribal sarpanches, in their exploitative practices. This problem will soon have to be tackled and brought more directly into the open at every forum of the people.

A STRATEGY FOR UNITING THE POOR

Around mid-1979 we realised that our involvement was largely with tribal communities and that this was being 'used' against us by external vested interests such as money lenders, land owners, Sundis, traders etc., who had an axe to grind with us due to our direct participation in tribal emancipation from years of exploitative usury and official neglect. They bring up the issue of 'conversion' again and again but do not succeed with the people who do not trust any more.

Another more dangerous trend was to play upon the existing tribal fear of the 'Bauris' and 'Dandasis' who are the scheduled castes of the Harijans Group. They are mostly landless labourers and are no better than that of the tribals. But while the tribals are fairly timid, peace-loving people, the Harijans are fierier and impulsively violent by temperament. Their loyalties are shifting in nature. So the vested interests began inciting them to steal tribal produce, destroy tribal crops and even to assault tribals.

In its analysis, *Gram Vikas* recognised that in order to unify the poor in a common struggle against injustice, discrimination, exploitation and poverty, time was ripe for making wider contracts than those existing with some of the non-tribal villages within the area with a large Harijan population. Rather than initiating contacts with the scheduled caste group alone, we decided upon the strategy of establishing links with the entire village community. The argument in favour of this approach was that the initial relationship of *Gram Vikas* may invite immediate counter-pressure from them. Greater strength was required to resist these counter attacks. Moreover, there were likely

to be non-scheduled caste groups also caught in the same throes of poverty and who might be interested in becoming partners in a process of self-liberation.

So *Gram Vikas* initiated contacts in several non-tribal villages. Recently, meetings have been held in village. Medinipur, Sahala, Judugi and Singabadi. In January 1979, the tribals registered a local organisation called *Kerandimal Gana Sanghatan* to give legal force and strength to the people's movement which was taking shape in the area. The organisation is still in the process of becoming a well-knit, cohesive body, truly representative of the aspiration and hopes of the people. To date, nearly 60 villagers are in active participation with this organisation.

All along these years, the committee members were aware that they were working mostly in the less inaccessible villages. Exploitation was much greater in the more interior areas where entire villages had sometimes succumbed to the usurious influence of the money lenders and Sundis. Besides, *Kerandimal Gana Sanghatan* and *Gram Vikas* continue to be approached by tribals from these villages with requests to extend our support to them in fighting their *sahukars*.

So we realised that to be effective, we had to cover a much bigger area. We felt that any attempt at eradicating existing social evils cannot be confined to a small oasis; that such attempts must necessarily take the shape of a people's movement over a definite geographical area. Otherwise, it is impossible to attack the very roots of a well-knit system of oppression.

So, towards the end of 1978, we had to make a difficult decision to extend our involvement to interior tribal villages. Despite the inaccessibility of the area and our own limited strength, we extended our work to another 30 villages in the hills. Today we are directly involved in about 70 villages and have indirect influence on another 30-a long way from our initial contact with 11 villages in 1977.

EDUCATION FOR UNITY AND ORGANIZATION

All the recent happenings-direct struggle against Sundi exploitation, attempt to reduce alcoholism, struggle against money lenders and various meetings that had been held, have been the richest education that the people could have. Yet we were convinced that unless action led to reflection and became a conscious, deliberate and continuing process, no amount of action and struggle would be truly liberating. So, in order to ensure this continuity of reflection-action-reflection, adult education was formally introduced into the programme around October 1978.

We opted to use young men from outside the region to play the vital role of 'social animators'. They would be full-time workers with the dual function of adult education and social animation. Originally, we planned to have one animator per village and to develop our own teaching materials and syllabus based on the Paulo Freire method of creative dialogue and alphabetization.

However, we are now realising that there are several shortcomings in our original programme, because education of this type cannot be tightly time-tabled and programmed. Education of this type requires facilitators who are themselves 'conscious' and aware. In fact, our biggest shortcoming was the recruitment of 'animators', all of whom were outsiders and most of them had come more for the 'job' and the 'salary' than that of any deep commitment to bring about a qualitative transformation of society. So, how was the animator to get involved in a process of sensitising education when he himself was a prisoner of the same society and bound by its social,

cultural, religious and economic frills? The first programme of education had to start with the animators and it is still continuing.

Apart from the question of sensitising the animators, another problem we are concerned with is 'programming' - organising into a time-table and compiling into a syllabus the volatile, dynamic and delicate aspects of human life. Thus, for example, while we go prepared for a discussion on money lending and its consequences, the immediate problem in a village might be the changing nature of man-woman relationship or the challenge of the younger generation to the old. Hence while we may be stuck with our 'target-oriented' approach to the money lending problem the people may have no interest in it. This convinced us further, that despite the failure of the Young Farmers Club, we should make a renewed attempt to prepare leaders from among the tribal youth. No community can grow unless animation comes from within. And to have a future, it has to be through its youth.

Around February 1979, the first attempt of organising the young men of the villages was made. However, it is only since September 1979 that something concrete has got off the ground. We now have a regular group of 60 young men who meet thrice a month for a day and who are gradually being initiated into an awareness of the situation in which tribals and other backward groups live in relation to the social, economic and political realities of the Indian situation. Many of these young men show great promise in carrying on the awareness creation process that has begun and a lot of our energy at this stage is being directed towards supporting this group.

The regular contact through an average of three meetings a month and work together that we now have with this group of 60 has grown out of a much greater analysis of non-tribal education that we did in our earlier programmes, especially the Young Farmers' Club. Now we realise that 'literacy' is not an immediate priority, the role which the 'animators' were to play can very well be played by the tribals themselves and more effectively and realistically too.

We do not see this 'group of 60' becoming the 'animators' that we have today. We see them as the very beginning of some type of a 'cadre' or 'core group' belonging to the future of the tribals of all mankind.

Unlike the 'Young Farmers' Clubs' where there was a basic confusion regarding 'purpose', at present we think that we are clearer on the 'why' and 'how'. This gives us greater hope in the success of the enterprise.

We had realised, equally well, right from the start, that the education of the tribals can never be complete unless the women are organised. From the very beginning of the programme, we trained women to act as 'health educators' in their communities. We began with a batch of 8. We now have 20 women of the first batch and 40 more in two subsequent batches of animators. Each of them maintains a regular contact with the entire female population of the area.

Initially, our health workers, chosen of from each village, worked only towards giving simple curative treatment and preventive health education. Gradually, however, we changed the pattern of training so as to equip them with broader leadership and organisational skills, for we were clear in our minds that health care and education could only be a tool for more important things.

Since August 1979, we have been holding monthly women's camps where all the women of a geographical unit come together. We have 8 such zonal groups. Usually, at these meetings local issues are raised to stimulate the awareness-building process and news happenings across the

Kerandimals are shared and discussed. These meetings give women the opportunity to realise their rights and responsibilities. We still have a long way to go with them but we know that our work can never be complete until more awareness and leadership emerges out of this group.

FACTORS TO BE CHANGED

As the educational process progressed, we realised that we should abandon some factors to which we had till then attached some importance, the dairy project being the first. When we first came to Narasinghpur, we had begun a small dairy farm with the intention of promoting animal husbandry as a subsidiary occupation among the tribal and non-tribal marginal farmers. We tried in village Narasinghpur itself by giving 10 families a cross-bred jersey cow each on loan basis. Despite allowing them the use of a common cow shed, arranging for veterinary care, purchase of feed, sale of milk etc. this scheme was more or less a failure.

We were soon forced to realise that we should no longer waste our time and resources on implementing a scheme which could hold no real hope for the category of people we wanted to reach. We felt that we ourselves were more concerned about the animals, the repayment of the loan, the sale of milk etc. than about the people, their acceptance of a new way of keeping cows. We perhaps over-managed the scheme for the people, with the result that they never really got sufficiently involved and soon most of them opted to sell the cows.

Besides, at that stage we had a busy schedule of organising a predominantly development orientation camp and continuation of the scheme could not have been possible as it would have confined us to taking care of that scheme. The time is such that even now we operate within the framework largely dependent on funding agencies. But we realise that people have to come first; that we cannot be prisoners of a target-oriented approach, especially physical targets. We have to live in the tension between people's education and the economic aspect. On the one hand, many experiences of the past have clearly indicated that 'economics' alone will not solve the problems of the 'people'; on the other hand the groups still believe that unless a man has certain basic natural conditions as part of his environment, he cannot give of his best. This basic tension is that what perhaps gives a certain balance of approach favouring the material, social and political dimensions of our work. At the same time, it might also be an impediment for adopting a more radical fundamental approach.

Being in a situation narrated above, we had to give up our plan to start an agricultural cooperative. Many of the people we worked with had received agricultural wasteland from the government without receiving the necessary financial assistance for its development. We wondered if these farmers could not be organised to forming co-operative groups for developing it. Accordingly, after several discussions with the people, we more or less cajoled them into accepting a scheme for co-op. Land development. This scheme never really took off the ground because of the strong individualistic mentality and private interest of the people.

Further, as already mentioned above, we had to give up our attempts for creating alternative system of marketing because of the close ties many tribals had with the merchants.

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT TODAY

It is hardly three years since we got involved in the Kerandimals and it is perhaps too early for an objective evaluation of the process that has been set in motion among the people in the area. However, we are able to pinpoint the reactions of the various groups and some specific options we had made, which today we see as positive or negative points in our approach.

There is certainly a marked change among the tribals at their level of awareness of the exploitation they were undergoing and their rights. With this increase in awareness, there has also grown an increase in the power of united action through a series of struggles against the Sundis, moneylenders, school teachers, local health functionaries etc. The local power structure and functionaries of vested interest groups (like the Block, Health, Education & Tourist Developments) have begun to feel the backlash of tribal awakening. The tribals have now gained access to fair credit minus the bureaucratic red tape and corruption—a blow to the Agricultural Extension officer (AEO) and the village level worker to whom credit disbursement was a source of extorting bribes. Many villages are demanding from the BDO more efficient and honest implementation of block development schemes. A spate of written complaints have been sent to the Education and Health Departments against absentee teachers, auxiliary nurse midwives, malaria workers etc. The Forest Department functionaries – the kings of the jungle – are now being challenged against the corrupt practices committed blatantly. The moneylenders have been put in their place. Their so called legal documents have been proved to be worthless pieces of paper.

The above actions against age-old institution of exploitation and injustice have certainly disturbed the existing relations of power and invited the wrath of local vested interests on the people and on us. The working relationship we had with the local Primary Health Centre and the Health Department has gradually eroded. Supply of free government drugs for treatment of malaria was stopped in one of our working villages without any plausible explanation. One of our village animators was assaulted by a forest guard and soon after a complaint was lodged by the said forest guard with the connivance of his superior officer, at the police station alleging that our staff was stealing forest produce, while actually the reverse was the case.

The most interesting reaction has been that of spreading a rumour among the local population that we are a Christian group and have been there with the covert purpose of converting innocent tribals to Christianity. Another rumour that is circulating is that we have appropriated large amounts of money meant as subsidy on loans given to the tribals.

Besides these external vested interest groups, there is another group within the people we work with – a group of corrupt, reactionary leaders- who would have liked the old laws to continue. These people, however, have not come out as yet in the open, and we assess that they cannot do any real harm. They will have to be gradually re-educated.

Besides, we notice many positive and negative points in our approach. On the positive side are (1) our strategy to adopt a 'safe entry point' (health), gradually working towards a wider awareness building process; (2) gaining the full confidence of the people, building up some sort of a progressive leadership organisation before becoming involved in certain specific issues and the collective struggle for the redress of their grievances; (3) the early emphasis on training of women as 'health educators and animators', men as leaders of grass root democracy, youth as the final hope for a deeper transformation of existing structures; (4) the co-ordination of all local leadership – women, committee members etc. - on a regional level; (5) decentralised pattern of our own

organisation; we have as many volunteers as possible living in the villages where the people are; helping people to see not only their rights but also responsibilities as individuals and groups; (6) involving the people's organization, 'the K.G. S' as much as possible in the decision-making process and facilitating educational and organisational processes to develop from the start, rather than being mere managers in development.

On the negative side, we are faced with the eternal question 'which came first- the chicken or the egg?' Today, we analyse that many of the issues that were pin-pointed for stimulation of the awareness building process, perhaps followed too fast into programmes of action and struggle, the result being that 'true consciousness' had not really developed among the people. Take for example, the struggle against the liquor manufactures culminating in the march to Berhampur. How many of the people who participated in this really understood the exploitative relation of the Sundis, the dynamics of a government that thrives on the exploitation of man by man? We are not sure. And yet at the same time, we analyse that the initiation of action against the Sundis, money lenders etc. was needed as a practical experience to sharpen the growth of a new consciousness among the qualitative change in our values, ideas, beliefs and hopes and for the time being must be content with the staggered development of our people from powerlessness etc. to a new unionisation and awareness.

Another such 'necessary evil' as it were, is our decision to use outsiders as 'agents of change'. Today we see more sharply that our original expectation of the 'animator' may never be realised because of the contradictions implicit in such a person, who is an outsider, motivated by the 'salary' etc. and whose avowed interest is not the 'people'. The animators can only play a limited role. The real animators will be the young people who are now glimpsing new perspectives of thought and action about the future of their society.

CONCLUSION

We can see from the above that we have been partially successful on our work and have set a process in motion. We were successful with the initial group because of the choice of the entry points and our work could spread to a bigger area because of the proper choice of issues. With replicability in mind, we shall study the elements that led to this success and the role played by ourselves i.e. outsiders.

Our point of entry into the tribal society of the Kerandimals 3 years ago was 'health' in a very modest, subdued manner. We were not highly target and programme-oriented at all. Today we feel that we succeeded with the entry point because it was (1) board-based; (2) it brought us into close contact with all sections of the village community; (3) it was non-aggressive and ; (4) it kept pace with the people's acceptance of us as strangers.

The reason why our involvement spread so rapidly i.e. to 100 villages in a span of 2 years is mainly because of certain definite issues that we got into (1) release of mortgaged property; (2) implementation of institutional credit schemes for tribals; (3) support to individuals and groups of tribals in various cases of naked exploitation and injustice. In these issues, we took a clear stand whereby we apparently gained the confidence of the tribals. Consequently, we were effective though we are outsiders.

In our particular case we are ‘outsiders’ in more than one sense. Firstly, we are not ourselves tribals. Secondly, some of us (5 in a group of 30) are not even Oriyas and this places us in an even more vulnerable, undesirable position. We continuously face so many obstacles-new culture, language, local politics...that one often wonders if one should not be working in one’s home state. We cannot be the leaders of the movement - these leaders must be from among the people. The most we can do is to be ‘midwives’ who assist in the birth of these men and women who begin to find their identity and demand their legitimate place in society.

We do not think that our people have reached the stage when we could be called a ‘people’s movement’. And not having reached that stage we cannot really discuss out of praxis what elements of support a people’s movement would require.

However, even at this rudimentary stage we realised that we are still more ‘powerless’ than ‘powerful’. We do not have the support of a group outside the area, within the state. We need wider linkages, but with whom-a political party, tribal movements elsewhere, a support group of like minded friends and supporters ? We do not know. But all that we know is that movement for social change cannot survive in isolation.