

## Tribal Resurgence in Ganjam

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July-August 1981 Voluntary Action 87 are not capable of anything except cutting and carrying firewood. We are illiterate, uneducated, ignorant tribals, who cannot do anything to improve our situation". These were the initial reactions of the tribals in our first meetings with them when they were first initiated into a process of analysing their own situation. These tribals, who belong to the Khond community, live in the Kerandimal range of hills in Ganjam district, Orissa. This low self-image was consistently reinforced by the oppressors to keep the tribals in perpetual dependency and slavery.

With the passage of time, the tribals, internalised the image that they were a pack of worthless beings, hardly human. They could be heaped with any indignity, humiliation and oppression. They never protested; they had come to accept these as part of life. If anything tangible had to happen to these people, first this low image of themselves had to change. But how? Indoctrination? Mere words and theories would have no meaning unless they stood the test of action. It had to be a process of reflection-action-reflection.

The Kerandimal group of Khond tribals live in the shadow of Berhampur. The first tribal village is only 12 kms away from the town. Yet very few towns people know even of the existence of these tribals. Literacy is less than three percent. Most of the villages cannot be approached by roads. A majority of the villages are situated on hilltops. They are interconnected only by steep, winding

tracks. The people have a long history as victims of exploitation. Through a process of usury, forceful occupation of property, mortgage and terrorisation by exploiters. These tribals have been gradually driven out of better lands and environments deep into the forests and to the tops of almost inaccessible hills.

## Health as entry point

Many apparent do-gooders had in the past approached them. Promised them loans, animals, houses, wells, etc. enjoyed their hospitality and decamped with the money collected in one form or another. For these and many other reasons, the tribals are suspicious of outsiders and any good intention that they might possess. Precisely for this reason, it was difficult for our group. Gram Vikas, to gain immediate acceptance and to establish our bona fides. Hence we chose health as an entry point to gain access to this tribal community.

Gram vikas initially started work in 11 tribal village. our group, consisting of a medical team and a few others began visiting the villages. We began to treat malaria, which is rampant in this area, and to attend to other basic health needs. It took nearly a year to establish some sort of rapport with the villagers. But once established, it was not difficult to start a dialogue with them. The tribals began to speak about their problems. A two-way process had begun for both sides. We began to analyse with them their present condition and the causes for their all round impoverishment



. Liquor and liquor merchants were identified as an issue on which all could unite. Originally, the tribals used to make their own liquor from fermented rice or mahua flowers. Gradually, a group of outsiders known locally as 'Shundies' penetrated into the area and began distilling a liquor with a greater 'kick,' by using lavish amounts of ammonium sulphate with molasses. In course of time, the tribals were weaned away from their rather mild drink and habituated to this poisonous brew. Every village had its own shundi, who distilled the liquor in the village with tribal labour. The shundi was Gram Vikas started work tribal villages. group, consisting initially in 11 Ourting of a medical team and a few others 88 Voluntary Action July-August 1981 all too willing to give any amount of liquor to anyone on credit, through which process he came in possession of most of the means of production of the villagers-land, fruit trees, village tanks, village common property and tribal labour. Quite often, the tribals were bonded to the shundi to distil liquor till they paid back the loans. It was the most naked and shameful exploitation.

A year later the number of villages in which we were working had increased to 30. By now, the tribals had come to identify the shundi as their arch exploiter. Friction between the two groups began to increase. A new turn of events precipitated matters. A tribal boy from Baniamari village was assaulted by the local shundi for the grave sin of asking for the wages due to him over a long period. Another young man in Purunapatna was mercilessly beaten up by the shundi there. This youth had objected to the sale of illicit liquor in the village. Both events happened within the span of a week.

### **Drive Against 'Shundies'**

When the two villages approached us regarding these incidents, we suggested that the issues be taken to the Karandimal Gana Sanghatan (KGS), a registered organisation that the tribals of the 30 villages had formed to work in collaboration with Gram Vikas. KGS called an extraordinary meeting of all 30 villages. It was decided to throw out the shundies from every tribal village within a week; prevent the shundies from distilling liquor anywhere in the tribal area; not to work for the shundies in distilling liquor and not to supply them firewood. It was decided to take a silent procession to the

office of the Sub-Divisional officer, Berhampur to highlight the exploitation that the tribals were facing and to demand the immediate intervention of the authorities to stop all illicit distillation in the area.

On February 8, 1979, over 600 tribal men and women walked to the office of the Sub-Divisional Officer, some trekking more than 30 kms to reach Berhampur. The SDO refused to come out of this office to meet the tribals. (After all he is a public servant; hence he could afford to be callous to the agony of the public.) A sit-in was decided upon as the people were determined not to leave the premises unless the SDO came out, accepted their memorandum and gave them a patient hearing. The Additional District Magistrate, who was in the office of the SDO, saved the situation by coming out and accepting the memorandum. She promised a public inquiry and stringent punishment to the guilty.

The tribals had begun walking to Berhampur in the early hours of the morning and it was dusk when they started out on the return journey. They had no food all day. Through tired, their faces were aglow. They began to realise that they were human beings with rights and that they wielded power in their silence. The struggle was on- a struggle forming the foundation of an education that they could not have got in any university.

### **Pattern of Action Decided**

After this experience, the people began to intensify their struggle against the shundies. They realised that a mere silent procession or a memorandum to the Government would not help them and that they had to find ways and means to overcome their exploitation, to begin with, from the shundies. The people were certain that mere exhortations would serve no purpose. It had to be a head-on confrontation; the people had to prove to the shundies that they were powerful and united as one against them. This was crucial, for if the people backed out when they had to confront the shundies face to face, they would be moving several steps backward. The tribal leaders and office-bearers of the KGS and some of us from Gram Vikas held a series of meetings in every one of the 30 villages. All the villages agreed to cooperate and decided on the following pattern of action:

- (a) Each village would call a meeting with every adult present to which the shundi of the village would be summoned.
- (b) Each shundi would be asked to settle his accounts. He would be asked to pay outstanding wages which would be adjusted against any money owed to him.
- (c) Each shundi would be asked to leave the village within 72 hours of the meeting and he would not be allowed to leave behind any raw materials or utensils in the village. He would be forbidden ever to sell liquor within the village limits or distil liquor anywhere in the tribal area.
- (d) The shundi would be further warned that if he failed to comply he would be physically thrown out of the village, his utensils and raw materials appropriated, and 'distillery' destroyed.
- (e) If the shundies proved more than a match for any village or group of villages, all the 30 villages, would converge on that village or those villages and see that they were evicted.
- (f) Violence would be scrupulously avoided. Whatever the provocation, it was decided not to physically assault anyone and, if attacked, only to defend themselves.

### **Shundies flex their Muscles**

The shundies heard of the meetings and began to flex their muscles. They engaged goondas. They threatened the tribal leaders, office-bearers of the KGS and the people of different villages with dire consequences if they went ahead with their plans. When

threats failed, they tried bribery and other inducements. The shundies and their henchmen began to spread wild rumours that we were Christian missionaries in the garb of social workers whose only intention was to convert the tribals. They warned us that if we continued 'to instigate' the tribals against them, they would not hesitate physically to remove us from the scene. Through afraid, we pointed out that any violence from their side would only be to their disadvantage and the elimination of a few people could not crush the movement. False cases were started against some of the tribal leaders and GramVikas.

### **Tribals Win**

The shundies were called to meetings convened in each village. In quite a few villages, the shundies first refused to attend. They were given a further chance and informed that if they failed to attend the second time the village would in no way be responsible for any money due to them and that their distillation utensils and vessels would be appropriated to pay for the wages due to villagers. Every village followed the steps chalked out by the KGS. Seeing how united the tribals were, the shundies withdrew from the area. A few resisted but retreated when a few villages jointly went to destroy 'distilleries' deep in the jungles. Very soon all the 30 villages were rid of the shundies. The tribals had won the first round. They had tasted power in a common struggle. But the struggle had to go on, as liberation is a continuing process.

### **Strategy to Redeem Property**

By their struggles and a process of reflection – action-reflection the tribals started to become more and more aware of the forces that subjugated them. In analysing their situation, they began to realise that they were living in sub-human conditions and faced dehumanising poverty because of a process of perpetual exploitation of the most inhuman nature. They realised that they were poor because they did not possess the means of production and that even the few means of sustenance they possessed were snatched away from them by moneylenders or sahuikars. The tribals decided to free themselves from the clutches of the sahuikars and got back all their tribal property mortgaged to moneylenders or usurped by them. Now these sahuikars are powerful

and rich and wield considerable Political clout. They include some Sarpanches who had appropriated considerable tribal property by unfair means. Hence the task contemplated was not easy to achieve. But the tribals believed that given iron determination to struggle for justice and a wellplanned strategy all obstacles would be overcome. Together with the leaders of the KGS, we began to put all our efforts into this task. The following strategy was planned for the redemption of tribal property:

- a) A detailed survey was conducted in all villages to find out the extent of indebtedness.

- b) A series of village meetings were conducted to create awareness on the issue and to acquaint the people with the new laws concerning rural indebtedness and bonded labour.
- c) All the villages would form a solidarity front to protect as a whole any property that the moneylender sought forcibly to retain.
- d) A tribal court was constituted, with the elders of the tribal villages and office – bearers of KGS, whose decision with regard to all tribal indebtedness would be final and binding.

### Moneylending Terms

In this area, the terms of moneylending are very usurious. The tribals contracted debts for marriage and death ceremonies and, during prolonged illnesses. An acre of good land would be mortgaged for as little as Rs.50 whereas the market value of the land would be Rs.5000. The terms were that the land or trees would be returned when the borrowed money was returned with interest. Till this was done, the sahuakar could enjoy the land or trees or other property so mortgaged. Mango, tamarind and Jackfruit are the trees usually mortgaged. When money was advanced without any mortgage, the interest rate would be anything between 120 to 240 percent! Though the law does not require the tribals pay anything to the sahuakars, the intrinsic honesty and loyalty of the tribals made them decide that they would pay back the capital plus 12 percent interest. However, the returns that the sahuakars got from the mortgaged tribal land or trees would also be calculated. If the sahuakar got more than 12 percent after deducting all his expenses, the excess amount would be calculated as repayment towards the initial loan amount. In cases, where there was no mortgage but only moneylending at very high interest, all the previously paid interest in excess of 12 percent would be calculated as repayment towards the capital. This in effect meant that, except for very recently contracted loans and mortgages, the tribals would not have to pay anything to the sahuakars. By adherence to this principle, the action of the tribals, would not only be just but also appear to be just.

### Notices served on Sahukars

One fine day the tribal court on behalf of all the tribals declared through notices served on the

sahukars by indebted tribals that all tribal property mortgaged or otherwise appropriated by them would vest with the tribals from that date onwards. If the sahuakars had any counter claims, they were directed to appear on a given date before the tribal court at a fixed place to put forward their claims. The sahuakars were told that the decision of the tribal court would be final and binding. At first the sahuakars pooh-pooched the whole idea. "Till a few days ago we could tie you to the nearest tree and beat you up, why, even kill you and nobody raised a finger nor even murmured a protest. And today are you asking us to appear before your court? You ungrateful wretches, are you trying to stab us in the back because we came to your aid when you were in need? We would rather be reduced to penury than appear before your court. This is the work of those scoundrels from Narasinghpur (meaning Gram Vikas). They are Naxalites. We will fix them." This was the type of reaction that prevailed.

### Moneylenders Flabbergasted

When a few sahuakars tried to harvest tamarind from trees mortgaged to them, they were effectively resisted by the people. The moneylenders were flabbergasted by the unity and solidarity of the tribals – a phenomenon that they were seeing for the first time. Many sahuakars approached lawyers with their registered mortgage deeds and notes. They were in for a big disappointment as the lawyers informed them that under the new laws they had no grounds at all for approaching the civil courts. Finding their way blocked, the sahuakars swallowed their pride and approached the tribal court. They insisted on settlement of all claims in accordance with the original agreements. Later they stepped down and asked the tribal court to direct the tribals to pay at least the original borrowed amount without taking into account the amounts already returned. The court stuck to the guidelines it had laid down for itself and all claims were settled in the light of these. In this process, 75 percent of the sahuakars got nothing at all. The members of the court, other tribals leaders and Gram Vikas had to face all kinds of pressures and threats. Many false cases were started against innocent tribals. Wherever some money had to be paid to the sahuakars Gram Vikas gave a loan to the concerned tribals from a revolving fund.

In one isolated tribal pocket a small tribal population

surrounded by non-tribal villages of the sahu-kars- the sahu-kars refused to vacate the tribal lands or to release their mortgaged trees. The sahu-kars began to terrorise the tribals and to assault them. The people of these villages therefore decided to go en mask to the Tehsildar to represent their case.

To reach Digapahandi, the tehsil headquarters, the tribals had to walk over 25 kms. Some 200 people began this walk early in the morning and reached Digapahandi before noon. They faced ridicule and jeering as they passed through the villages of the sahu-kars enroute. On reaching Digapahandi, they found to their utter dismay that the day had been declared a holiday since the ex-president, V.V.Giri, had passed away. The Tehsildar who was in his residence, refused to meet the deputationists. So they walked over to the compound of the Tehsildar's house and decided to stay there till the office opened the next day. All the decisions were taken in a loud enough voice for the Tehsildar to hear. At this point he sent a message that he would meet two representatives of the people in his residence. The people were not satisfied with this and argued that they had walked over 25 kms to meet the Tehsildar and hence he either meet all of them or none. When he found the tribals adamant he came out of his house. The tribals are very courteous and immediately won his sympathy for he expected a very unruly crowd. He received the memorandum and promised to help.

The Tehsildar sent court notices to be leading sahu-kars. On their appearance, he directed them to vacate the tribal lands in their possession immediately. They were also fined Rs. 500 each, payable to tribals whose lands they had possessed illegally. The tribals thus not only got their lands back but also Rs.500 each which could be utilised towards the purchase of bullocks. After this incident the sahu-kars of the area were quick to beat a hasty retreat.

### **Task Completed**

The task of releasing tribals from indebtedness has already been completed in 91 villages. These villages all tribal property has been released and no moneylenders are operating at present. There are also no bonded – labourers in these villages. The tribal court has to date released 378 acres of land, 793 fruit trees and two mortgages

against gold. Another 28 cases have been settled where no mortgage was involved, but only high interest. 290 families have so far benefited from these measures.

With the disappearance of the sahu-kars, the credit vacuum created was filled in by the United Commercial Bank, Mohuda. The bank gave the tribals credit, the utilisation of which was monitored by Gram Vikas and the KGS, Credit was extended at four per cent interest to the tribals and the bank has now come forward to give consumption loans as well. Over the past three years, there has been 100 percent recovery of loans from these people !

### **The struggle is on**

The struggle is on. The people are struggling against their own kith and kin who had come to accept the ways of the exploiters. They are struggling against certain of their own ills like addiction to alcohol, improvidence, superstitious practices, etc. The struggle continues against illiteracy, lack of awareness, disunity and passivity. The tribals are struggling against an unjust system that keeps them in perpetual slavery and dependence. People have started questioning nonfunctioning officials and resisting corrupt functionaries. The struggle for a better and more meaningful tomorrow has started in Kerandimal. It has spread. To achieve true development, there is no end to struggle in one form or other.

As members of Gram Vikas we have grown a great deal. Our sensitivity has been sharpened. Our desire to struggle with the people has deepened. We also have a struggle against the tendency to dominate; struggle to

see that we do not occupy the stage but are on the side lines only, helping them with a little prompting now and again. We struggle constantly with our own internal contradictions and inconsistencies. We have to struggle to ensure that the movement may be truly a people's movement and that we remain only as facilitators. The struggle goes on.

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