

Punjab

The Stagnation Faced by the BKU (Ekta) Brings to the Fore the Need to Build a Struggle-Movement of the Peasants

— by a correspondent

The Bharati Kisan Union (BKU), which came into existence about two decades ago, went through the process of splitting twice and now stands divided into two kinds of streams: One is the BKU (Lakhowal) and the BKU (Rajewal), which comprise one kind of stream, and the other is the BKU (Ekta), which represents the other kind of stream. Whatever subjective considerations and designs the leadership might have had, divergent class interests were the real basis of these splits. The leaderships of the two unions comprising the first stream are motivated by the interests of the feudal-landlord class and are protagonists of ruling-class parliamentary politics.

BKU (Ekta) is the outcome of a relentless and protracted inner-organisational struggle waged against the dominant leadership of BKU (Lakhowal) by a pro-peasant faction of activists. This struggle centred around the need: to denounce and make a rupture from reactionary parliamentary politics of the ruling classes; to oppose the leadership's attempt to turn the union into an instrument of communal Sikh politics, in particular the fanatic and terrorist politics of the Khalistanis; to oppose the penetration into the union of landlord usurers working as commission agents; to oppose the attempts of the leadership to marginalise the leading peasant activists whose politics differed from the politics of the leadership, in particular the revolutionary democratic peasant activists and

the consequent expulsion from the union of seven prominent peasant leaders; etc.

The outcome of this struggle was the BKU (Ekta), which denounces ruling class parliamentary politics; opposes every brand of communalism and communal politics; and provides space to the peasants with variant political views to participate and engage in its activities, so long as they comply with its basic class orientation. Thus BKU (Ekta) is a pro-peasant organisation.

Despite its pro-peasant characteristics and character, however, the BKU (Ekta) has stagnated after a period of time. This situation is the consequence of some inherent weaknesses and limitations of its leadership. While the urgency of tiding over the present stagnation is clear, there is sharpening inner-organisational contention about how to address this task.

What caused the stagnation?

In Punjab, BKU was launched on the basis of an action programme to oppose and correct the adverse terms of trade for agricultural products. From its inception, the union has been projecting the demand that prices of agricultural products should be brought in line with prices of industrial products. Thus, the struggle against the adverse terms of trade for agricultural products was not aimed at reducing the prices of industrial products that are used as inputs in the agricultural sector. The struggle, which left aside the issue of the rising costs of inputs, thus failed to direct its edge against the ruthless plunder by the imperialist-feudal combine which is indeed responsible for the continuously inflating costs of inputs.

Since the adverse terms of trade for agricultural products occupied the central place in the action programme of BKU (Ekta), it could also have carried out widespread anti-imperialist propaganda within this frame among the peasant masses. Instead it merely continuously reiterated the demand within a limited and narrow context for higher prices of agricultural output. As a result, propaganda activities of the union lost interest and appeal for the peasant masses.

Now, in the face of the sharpening economic-political crisis, the peasant masses are increasingly coming under a fresh and sweeping imperial-

ist assault in the garb of the new economic policy. Various economic, political and social issues related to the peasant masses are thus cropping up. New demands are pressing for attention and requiring solution. The rocketing price-rise and the sinking material condition of the peasants has pushed them into a debt-trap of terrible dimensions.

Despite their desperate attempts to pay back their debts by the sweat of their brow, the peasants are finding they cannot disentangle themselves from their debt-traps. Consequently, a new phenomenon, never before heard of in Punjab, of suicides by peasants, is emerging here. The problem of usurers' debts alongside debts to banks is manifesting itself as a pressing problem of unprecedented proportions.

At a time when the peasants of Punjab are being beaten down by increasing land rents, rising rates of interest charged by usurers, shooting prices of agricultural inputs, and the loot by traders in agricultural produce, a new calamity has befallen the peasantry — viz. the attack on their crops by insects and pests, creating an epidemic-like situation in the fields. This has pushed not only the poor and middle peasants, but also a section of the rich peasantry (in particular those in the cotton belt) to the brink of auctioning their lands. The lurking danger of the land slipping out of their hands is agitating the peasants acutely.

Consequently, the process of polarisation as between the feudal landlords and the peasant masses is gaining momentum. And the objective situation is becoming more favourable than even before for mobilising the ordinary land-holding peasantry against the socio-political oppression by the feudal landlords, as well as for building a struggling unity between the land-owning peasants and the agricultural labourers.

Along with these economic problems several socio-cultural problems are acquiring new dimensions for the peasantry. The new economic policy is slashing the budget share of the service departments. Consequently, education, medical treatment, transport, electricity, and water supply etc are becoming more scarce and even more expensive for the peasantry. In particular, the increases are unbearable for the poor and middle peasantry. Besides, the quality of these services is daily being eroded. Corruption and bribery are sinking to ever new depths. By dint of the new invasion in the cultural sphere by imperialism, the consumer culture is spreading widely in the countryside and inflating expenditures on mar-

riage-ceremonies, means of merriment, and forms of entertainment. Social ills such as dowry too are acquiring bigger dimensions. Various addictions are spreading among the peasantry and many kinds of moral degeneracy, conflicts, and quarrels are fast becoming the order of the day in the villages. At the same time, the peasantry, thus buffeted by the all-round crisis, is becoming more and more keen to understand the politics of what is happening to them.

Therefore, the first and foremost task before the BKU (Ekta) is to substitute its present action programme, which is inadequate for the sharpened objective contradictions, with a new and appropriate action programme that responds to the situation.

Indeed, the issue of the adverse terms of trade for agricultural products should be translated into demands directed against imperialist plunder. The exploitation of the peasants through usury and land rent should be specified in the form of demands such that the aspect of opposition to feudal exploitation and oppression becomes an integral part of the BKU (Ekta)'s action programme. The appropriateness of form and the extent of opposition should be determined keeping in view the strength of the union and the level of consciousness of the peasant masses. However, the task of opposition to every form of feudal high-handedness and oppression should get a prominent place in the action programme. In a nutshell, the edge of struggle activities, instead of being directed solely against the government, should be directed also against the forces operating as the tools of feudal exploitation, oppression and discrimination in the countryside.

The action programme of the union should by no means limit itself to mere economic demands. It should also include specific demands opposing privatisation, scarcities, price-rise, and the erosion of quality of services the Government should be responsible for giving, as well as those related to the social and cultural life of the peasantry.

The demands of the most exploited and oppressed section of the peasantry, viz the poor peasants, who have a comparatively large numerical strength, should be accorded special significance. This will expand and consolidate the mass base of the union.

Apart from the economic, social and cultural demands and tasks, more significant than this for the action programme are the specifically politi-

cal and democratic demands linked closely with the problems and demands of the peasantry. Thus, articulating the political consciousness of the peasantry should be an essential part of the BKU (Ekta) action programme.

It needs to be stressed that, after delineating the action programme, it is the conviction, perseverance and correct method of work which have a decisive significance in the implementation of the action programme. Otherwise it could remain as a paper programme.

Almost two decades ago, there was a forceful and spontaneous peasant upsurge in Punjab which became then the springboard for launching the statewide Bharati Kisan Union. During that upsurge, a strong political trend emerged among the peasants of forsaking dependence on ruling-class leaders, their parties, and their governments. Furthermore, ruling class leaders and parties became the targets of the peasants' ire and hatred. The boards flashing the warning "Political leaders are prohibited to enter this village!" could be seen at the bus stops and entry-points of numerous villages. At many places, the peasants had forcibly seized the dais of the ruling class parties.

Once the trend of seeking the solution to problems through struggle established its sway over the peasantry — as the alternative to the trend of dependence on ruling class parliamentary politics — for meeting their demands, actions such as gheraoing of government offices and officials and blocking of traffic by the peasant masses in their thousands became a regular phenomenon. In the heyday of this peasant struggle wonderful incidents occurred at some places. Among them were the confining of some government officer visiting a village in a room meant for storing wheat chaff, or the punishing of an official by ordering him to do some sweating hard work, etc.

With the gradual ebbing of this peasant movement and the degeneration of the leadership, this positive trend of seeking solutions to peasant problems on the basis of mass struggles also began to lose vigour. Finally, the dominant leadership of the union turned the union into an adjunct of ruling class parliamentary politics.

BKU (Ekta) has revived a glorious aspect of this peasant movement by waging a relentless struggle against the dominant leadership of BKU (Lakhowal) and rejecting the path of reliance on parliamentary politics

for the solution to the peasant problems. In the context of the movement of the land-owning peasantry of Punjab, this has been a very significant march of events. Nevertheless much more has to be done to establish this trend even among them. Active and effective rejection of parliamentary politics amounts to the forceful projection of the alternative to parliamentary politics and *the translation of that alternative into practice*. It means that a struggle-movement of the peasantry should be built and advanced by *implementing*, persistently and vigorously, the policy of reliance on mass struggles. Only by firmly grasping this orientation and sticking to it, can the partial gain of having rejected the path of sham parliamentary politics be turned into a conclusive gain.

The problem of building the peasants' struggle-movement and of transforming the union into a struggle-oriented organisation still remains the crucial issue for the rank and file of the union. This has exposed the serious limitations and weaknesses of the union leadership. Struggles have, of course, been waged under the leadership of the union. In some areas, many protracted and praiseworthy struggles have been waged around local demands. Militant forms of struggle have been practised, such as gheraoing of government offices and officials, blocking of traffic, and resisting of police repression at the mass level. But the pockets of such practices are mere islands in the total area covered by the expansion of the union.

Overall, the union thus far is operating as a propaganda-oriented organisation. The prevalent style and method of work is of propaganda and mobilisation to prepare the peasants for mass gatherings around some demands. After holding rallies and demonstrations, memoranda are handed over to the concerned officials, and thereafter the activities come to a stop; such actions are again and again repeated at the tehsil, district and state levels. Moreover, the prevalent method of propaganda and mobilisation to rouse the peasant masses is inadequate. Peasants are approached at the individual level, sending messages from one individual to another, and announcements are made on the village loudspeaker. Such a method of work is ineffective for solving the peasants' problems, spreading political class consciousness among the peasants, bringing new sections of the peasantry under the influence of the union, and expanding and consolidating the organisation of the union. In fact, this wrong method of

work is the most significant cause of the present stagnation. For giving a momentum to the stagnant union, the task of practising the mass line in carrying out propaganda and mobilisation, of building the peasants' own struggle-movement, and to this end transforming the union itself into a struggle-oriented organisation, is crucial. This task thus has a cardinal significance for building the alternative to parliamentary politics.

A seasoned and capable leadership and a consolidated union structure are needed to realise this task. However, BKU (Ekta) has come into existence along with certain inherent weaknesses. Because of the situation of split-after-split faced by the former BKU, the layers of leadership rallying around BKU (Ekta) were weak, and they still are so. Its organisational structure too is thus weak. It is important for the union to overcome this weakness.

This task of ridding the union of its weakness is inseparably bound up with the need to base practice in the orientation of relying on the mass struggles for the solution of the peasants' problems. Without struggles, neither can the present leaders and activists be developed nor can new batches of activists and leaders be prepared.

Emergence of the wrong thinking

An extremely wrong and damaging thinking is raising its head within the union in mistaken response to the problems and weaknesses haunting it. Contention is thus being sharpened among the different understandings. The wrong thinking is based on a wrong conception of the present stagnant situation faced by the union. According to this thinking there is an absence or lack of revolutionary political propaganda among the ranks of the union, whereas the peasants are yearning to know and assimilate revolutionary politics. There is an attempt by this thinking, therefore, to force revolutionary politics down the throats of the peasant activists and peasants on a large scale — on the assumption that this will lead to the spread of revolutionary consciousness among the peasants and hence put the union back on the track of progress.

Such a thinking thus manifests itself in various attempts by its protagonists such as the following: First, airing of revolutionary politics directly from the platform of the union by some of the leading activists who are the followers of such politics; secondly, inviting one of their own

political persons to meetings and functions even when he does not belong to the union; thirdly, catapulting, by hook or by crook, one of their own political persons to a position of leadership in the union; fourthly, dragging the union itself into 'united activity' with some organisation propagating revolutionary politics and ideology; etc.

Distortions projected by the wrong thinking

How do the peasants generally come to receive and accept revolutionary politics? On this question, the wrong thinking is proving to be extremely simplistic. Actually, the peasants' concern is always centred around their problems. They show keen interest to know the causes and solutions of their problems. Thus, they are interested in knowing and assimilating those elements of political conceptions, promises and phenomena which seem to them concretely and directly related to the causes and solutions of their problems. Advance propagation of general politics proves meaningless, undigestible and tedious for them. Thus their interest in and capacity increasingly to grasp the links between their own problems and the revolutionary politics as well as the integral inter-relationship among the various elements advances in tandem with the advance of their political consciousness.

It happens that often when the peasants seem to be agreeing to one's political argumentation they have not actually assimilated it. This they can do only by testing it on the touchstone of their own experience. Herein lies the particular significance of steering them through the experience of mass struggles linked with their experience of their daily life. Therefore, it is indispensable that the union build the struggle-movement not only for defending the peasants in the face of the daily ruling class attacks but also for inculcating political consciousness among them. However much political propaganda one may otherwise carry on, peasants cannot imbibe revolutionary consciousness unless they have been guided through the fire of mass struggles. Therefore they need to be guided to learn politics by integrating politics with the needs and problems of their mass struggles.

There is a sharp increase in the problems of the peasants as the all-round political crisis is deepening, in particular with the renewed/reinforced imperialist assault in the form of the government's new economic

policies. As a consequence, objective possibilities have brightened for carrying their movement forward. They have thus brightened also for seeding political consciousness among the peasants. However, this does not at all mean that the peasants' way of learning politics has undergone a change and that now the peasants can be imbued with revolutionary consciousness by directly propagating among them revolutionary politics with a higher content.

The advocates of the wrong thinking have given scant attention to these things. With good intentions, but for the wrong reasons, they are bent upon activating the peasants by injecting them with general revolutionary politics through direct propagation — and without any attempt at revealing the linkages of politics with peasant problems by guiding the peasants through the experience of struggles. They are adopting methods which on the contrary have very damaging consequences in store for the prospects of politicising and organising the peasants; and hence also for the prospects of the union.

For example, peasants belonging to BKU (Ekta) were taken to Hyderabad under the pretext of participating in a countrywide gathering of various peasants' organisations which was supposed to oppose WTO. There, the overwhelming presence of communist revolutionaries among the gathering and the dominance of their politics on the stage, was quite obvious. Given its history BKU (Ekta) as well as common peasants would at present have no direct relation with all of this. Similarly, efforts are on to bracket BKU (Ekta) with political platforms which are operating as propaganda centres of communist revolutionary politics and ideology.

On the question of united activities

The followers of the wrong thinking are smuggling in their intent to directly propagate general revolutionary politics by pressing the union into united activities with organisations propagating communist revolutionary politics and ideology. No doubt united activity with other organisations is very much needed for BKU (Ekta). But what should be the criterion of united activities? That is, which organisations come within the ambit of united activities with BKU (Ekta) and which do not? BKU (Ekta) is an organisation without affiliation with any brand of politics. It encompasses persons of various political hues and is concerned with

peasants' problems. Keeping in mind the specific history of the union (mentioned earlier) and its present level of consciousness, it is all the more important that the union should not be misused as a platform to air one's own particular type of politics, irrespective of whether it is some kind of revolutionary politics or that of ruling class politics.

Thus, presently, there is no ground for BKU (Ekta) to have united activity with any political party or platform. It does not follow from this that the peasant organisation should never come in close contact or come under the leadership of a revolutionary political party. Certainly, it should and would do so, whenever, as a consequence of revolutionary political advance of membership of the peasant organisation in due course of time, the majority of its membership would be in an autonomous position to decide would be in a position to voluntarily decide whether their organisation should or should not be affiliated to the revolutionary political party. But for such a political advance of the peasant organisation, it is an extremely incorrect and damaging step on the part of the leadership to tie it in a knot with any revolutionary political party merely by dint of an organisational decision.

Mass organisations of different sections of the people are already weak in the face of sweeping attacks of the ruling classes. Hence, the dire necessity of united activities for these organisations. The same is true for BKU (Ekta). Therefore, it should strive for united activities with organisations of different sections of the people, in particular, with those of agricultural labourers and land-owning peasants.

The protagonists of the wrong thinking are manifesting a sectarian and pragmatic approach here also. They are attempting to bracket the peasant organisation with some political platform of their preference, under the pretext of united activity, to encash its influence among the peasants in favour of a particular politics. BKU (Ekta) has no ground for united activity with the said platform.

On the role of help from without for strengthening the union

What is the process of development of any organisation, union, or anything else? The answer to this question also exposes the ideological distortion of the wrong thinking. It is a proven and established Marxist premise that internal factors in a thing or phenomenon *provide the basis*

for its development, whereas external factors provide the conditions which *play an assisting role* in its development. It follows that external assistance is redundant until and unless the required internal basis of development of any organisation is prepared. But it does not mean that the peasants can acquire revolutionary consciousness merely through their own experience. Instead, the peasants must be imbued with revolutionary consciousness from without. Here, the significant question is, how the required internal basis should be prepared so as to develop the union further by complementing it with revolutionary consciousness from without.

The revolutionary groups or parties which aspire that the BKU (Ekta) should break its impasse should vigorously propagate revolutionary politics among the peasants from their own platforms, and should educate and inspire them for organisation and struggles. As the number of members, activists and leaders influenced by such education and propaganda increase, giving a boost to struggle activities, the situation would become increasingly favourable for preparing the internal basis for the development of the union. The leadership of the union can guide it to tide over the present stagnant situation by taking advantage of the favourable situation, provided it plays its role appropriately.

But the followers of the wrong thinking are not prepared to put themselves through such a complicated and difficult process. They are making desperate efforts instead to immediately push the union out of its stagnation by some shortcuts of imposing their particular brand of politics on the union.

Undemocratic conduct — a central feature of the wrong thinking

The incorrect political and ideological approach can also be seen in the blatantly undemocratic conduct of its protagonists. The organisational code of conduct of the union is not more than a matter of convenience for them. They feel free to take the liberty to trample on the code of conduct as per their convenience. Since they are convinced that their revolutionary politics is the one which can play the role of a torch-bearer for showing the path of liberation to the peasants, they are quite justified in turning the peasant organisation into a forum for propagating their

politics even by undemocratic and wrong organisational methods. This thrust is forcing them to adopt methods such as the formation of a fake city unit of the peasant organisation by recruiting some employees, shopkeepers and persons belonging to non-agricultural professions, in order to install a political person from outside the union to a leadership position — even instantaneously catapulting him to the district level team of the union; or, inviting a fellow political leader, not part of the union, to the meetings of its committees at different levels; or declaring that the union would participate in the Hyderabad gathering by agreement between a few of the top leaders, behind the back of the state body of the union, etc, etc.

In fact, the followers of this wrong thinking are unable to grasp that democratic composition and functioning of the peasant organisation havenot only organisational significance but ideological significance too. The peasants come under feudal coercion and discrimination all around in their daily life. They are made to believe in this society that might is right; that, here, everybody is on his own. It is only when they enter a peasant organisation having a democratic composition and functioning that they come to experience for the first time in their lives that everyone is equal before the code of conduct of the organisation; that there cannot be discrimination against anybody at the time of recruitment to membership or election to leadership of the union; that decisions are to be taken according to the interests and opinions of the majority; that nobody is entitled to use the influence and means of the union for his self-interest; and that rights and responsibilities are divided according to the rules and regulations of the union; and so on and so forth. Such a democratic atmosphere within the union and its functioning proves a school and training centre for the peasants. They feel the decisions of such a union to be as their own and they implement them whole-heartedly.

Now, when any union leader belonging to some of the revolutionary political formations blatantly violates the rules and regulations of the union in order to make it an instrument for the propagation and advance of his politics, then the undemocratic conduct of such leaders only reinforces the already prevalent belief among the peasants that discrimination over-rides everywhere and that everyone only grinds his own axe. Thus, as an ultimate consequence of their undemocratic conduct, namely,

their practice of imposing their politics on the union and violating its rules and regulations, the followers of the wrong thinking tend to cripple the very process of the development of democratic consciousness among peasants and instead they start the process of disintegration of the union.

Now the task of making a breakthrough in the stagnant situation of the union requires, on the one hand, radical changes in its action programme and its method of implementing it, and on the other hand, an irreconcilable struggle against the wrong thinking outlined above. Without fighting out this wrong thinking, the union cannot be expected to come out of the present stagnant situation; rather the danger of splits and disintegration could lurk over the union.

Nowrangpur, Orissa **Dispossessed Tribal and Dalit Peasants Struggle for Their Land at Chuinmatiguda**

— by a correspondent

Background of the Sangh

Nowrangpur Zilla Dalit Adibasi Chasi and Mulia Sangh was formed in January 1995, as a sister organisation of the Malkangiri Zilla Adibasi Sangh. The main cadres for this organisation were drawn from the struggle waged by the Nowrangpur Gana Sangharsha Samiti against Indravati Big Dam Project. This struggle was fought mainly by the people of submerged area of the Dam. It continued for about five years, from 1989 to 1994. Later it also took up the problem of the Dry Area people (people of the area rendered dry by the Project) and took them into its fold. Though the struggle showed some immediate results in the organisation of the people, and some of the demands were fulfilled by the government (such as raising the compensation amount, giving compensation to the landless in the form of "*banabasi bhatta*" of about Rs 40,000, and treating every 18-year-old as a separate family for calculation of compensation) the movement could not be sustained.

There were certain inherent limitations. The strength and the influence of the democratic-revolutionary political force there was very limited and the organisation was not basically a class-based organisation. Thus once the issue for which the organisation fought was to some extent solved, it lost its relevance. But the militancy with which this struggle was fought and the repression it faced brought forward some activists with a mass democratic consciousness. Their further development needed a democratic mass *organisation* with revolutionary tenor and with the

orientation for a protracted agrarian struggle.

In preparation for such an organisation, then, the nascent democratic-revolutionary forces there took initiative under political guidance to organise a convention of the fore-mentioned activists and advanced elements. After the convention, taking the Malkangiri Zilla Adibasi Sangh as the model, they formed the "Nowrangpur Zilla Dalit Adibasi Chasi O Mulia Sangh" (NZDACMS) and constituted the organising committee of this Sangh.

Within the very first year of its formation, the Sangh took up the issue of *jamin* and jungle, mainly in Tentuli Khunti block and extending activity upto Dabugan and Jharigan block.

About 500 acres of land belonging to a cluster of villages in Jharigan block had been taken away by the Soil Conservation department. The excuse was that the adivasis and dalits cultivating the land did not have any land records. The Sangh fought against this and occupied all the land through mass ploughing. Such resistance movements spread also to the nearby panchayats and blocks.

Within another year, the Sangh had recaptured about 2,000 acres of land from the forest and soil conservation departments. Apart from this, it also fought against the *sahukars* (moneylenders) who were taking away the land belonging to the adivasis, dalits and poor peasants. This they were doing in the name of leasing in land for raising a commercial maize crop and then displacing the claim of the original holders. As a result of this struggle, another 500 acres of land was restored to the original tenants.

Gradually the Sangh started to become popular. A part of its leadership also extended active help to the January 1996 struggle of the Malkangiri adivasis against the timber mafia. Then, in 1996, the district central office of the Sangh was built at Tarajodi village. This village was the centre of a cluster of villages where the struggle against the Soil Conservation officials had been fought. The Sangh members themselves built the office and it became the centre of all Sangh activities.

Tarajodi belongs to Fupugam panchayat of Jharigan block and this block is at a distance of about 75 km from the district headquarters, viz. Nowrangpur. It is adjacent to Raighar and Umerkote blocks bordering M.P.'s Bastar area. This vast area is populated mainly by Damas (dalits),

Kandhas, Gonds, Paraja, and Bhotudas (tribal sections). By 1997 the Sangh's activities had spread to three nearby blocks, viz. Dabugan, Umerkote and Raighar. It dealt mainly with the questions of the dalits and adivasis and with the demands of the poor peasants pertaining to the land they cultivate, and the community forest they live in. The Sangh raised the slogan that all land alienated or taken away from poor peasants must be recaptured by them.

People from nearby villages began to come to the Sangh's office with their various problems pertaining to land, jungle, wages and to their social and economic life. All the other political forces operating in this area, ranging from the Sarvodayees to the ruling class parties, became more and more irrelevant for even routine problems of the people. The Sangh leadership extended its influence mainly through struggles over many tiny and small and some big issues.

The struggle at Chuinmatiguda

In June 1996, four poor peasants came to the Sangh office from Satighatguda. This village belongs to Chacha panchayat adjacent to Fupugam panchayat. They alleged that a landlord of Dabrimunda village had taken away about 50 acres of land belonging to 15 poor peasants (adivasis and Gouds) through fraudulent means and had kept it under his possession.

This landlord, Bhagaban Goud, was a sarpanch of Chacha panchayat in the sixties. He had managed to take away all this land using his political clout and had been claiming that all this land is his as it has been recorded in his name. The poor peasants who came to the Sangh office provided a certain record which proves that all this land was in the forest category and that Matia Kandha alias Mati Kandha was charged vide case no. 204/54/55 u/s section 55 of Madras Forest Act and Jeypore Forest Rule and fined Rs 27 and 13 annas for occupying and cultivating forest land. (This area was under Madras Province until 1936, then brought under Orissa Province as its sixth district, but kept under the Orissa Governor until 1956.) Similarly, in another case no. 120/54/55, he was fined Rs 100. Thus the land (about eight acres) belongs to the said peasant. Some time back, the landlord took away this land. He also took away, through illegal mortgage, another 40 acres of land belonging to poor peasants

staying at Chacha, Chuinmatiguda, and Goi Chatara villages. All this land is in Chuinmatiguda village. Out of these peasants, Sukhchand Bhatra, Baidyanath Mujhi, Sana Goud, Duryodhan Gouda, Gayo Gouda, Daman Bhatra and Durusai Bhatra have faced similar forest cases and have been punished with fines. Of course, as happens in these parts they have lost the case records.

After receiving this allegation from the poor peasants, the Sangh sent a team led by its two vice-presidents to Satighat Guda for a detailed investigation. After preliminary investigation, the team found that Bhagaban Gouda, the ex-sarpanch of Chacha gram panchayat is a very influential person having about 200 acres of land in four villages — Chacha, Chuinmatiguda, Gabaguda and Thatbeda. Apart from this, he had land in his native village, Gaita Para, in his home district, Kalahandi. His brother, Jaya Shankar Gouda, happens to be an old Sarvodaya worker. (In Nowrangpur district, Sarvodaya workers enjoy considerable political power since this is a “Zilla Daan” region where the Sarvodaya Committee had a large area of land at its disposal in the '50s and '60s. By using both these sources of political power (as ex-sarpanch and as a Sarvodayee), he actually occupied 49 acres of land belonging to the 15 peasants without paying even a single paisa. Both the revenue and forest officials along with police officials helped him in this illegal transaction.

In 1984, Bhagaban Goud claimed that he had *pattas* for this land and compelled the peasants to vacate possession. For three consecutive years, the peasants did not vacate. Bhagat applied goonda forces to occupy the land. Both the parties cultivated the land. But the revenue department applied 144 and 145 Cr.P.C. to the land in favour of the landlord. The original tenants were arrested. Bhagaban cut the crop with the help of the police. The cases continued in Umerkote Tehsil Court for years, and then went to the Sub-Collector's court at Nowrangpur. There was an order for “*serjamin*” (spot) enquiry by the Sub-Collector. The Revenue Inspector and the *amina* who came for the enquiry earmarked 16 peasants, called all of them, and demanded Rs 100 from each. Only one peasant, Jal Gouda, was able to pay them on the spot, and got a *patta* for his two acres of land. The other 15 peasants could give the officials only Rs 200 in all and promised to give the rest within a short time. But as they could not arrange that money they lost the land.

These poor adivasis and a few poor non-adivasi peasants ran from pillar to post in the administration and judiciary to get justice, and sold off whatever movable property they had to pay advocate fees. Finally, helplessly, they remained silent. When the Sangh was formed as a struggle representative of the peasants' interests in the locality, the peasants regained their lost hope and came to the Sangh so that justice is achieved.

Thus, after their approach and the aforesaid investigations, people of Chacha, Satighat Guda, Chuimatiguda, Gadgada, Gabaguda and some nearby villages were organised under the Sangh banner. And village level committees were formed.

Details of Dispossessed Peasants and Their Land at Chuimatiguda

1. Late Mati Kandha alias Matia Kandha (his son: Kusum Saanta and his sons: Banabas Saanta, Musei Saanta and Pitabas Saanta) — 8 acres.
 2. Late Sukhchand Bhatra (his son Sobha Bhatra) — 10 acres.
 3. Sana Gouda, son of Dama Gouda — 4 acres.
 4. Duryodhan Gouda, son of Budan — 2 acres.
 5. Gaya Gouda, Dipchand Gouda, Ratan Gouda (brothers) — 12 acres.
 6. Damna Bhatra, son of Padlabh — 2 acres.
 7. Durusai Bhatra, son on Jaya Singh — 2 acres.
 8. Ratha Saanta — 3 acres.
 9. Kuru Saanta — 2 acres.
 10. Patsumam Majhi, son of Baidyanath Majhi — 4 acres.
- Total land — 49 acres.

Recent struggle

Towards the end of June 1996, efforts were made for an amicable settlement of the issue. For that purpose a meeting was called in which people of the 15 to 20 surrounding villages participated. Bat Bhagaban Gouda, his brothers and sons did not attend this meeting. At that meeting the Sangh decided to occupy eight acres of land originally belonging to the peasant Banabasi Saanta, who could produce the forest case documents of his grandfather, Mati Kandha. Accordingly, the peasant's land was ploughed collectively by the Sangh and paddy was sown. When the sprouts came out, the landlord Bhagaban Gouda's sons re-ploughed the land, destroying the sprouts. The rightful peasant and his father, Kusuma, along with his brother pitabasa and Mubei lodged a complaint about this at Jharigan police station. But the Officer in Charge (OIC) of the police station did not accept the F.I.R.

On November 12, 1996, when the paddy crop was not yet ripe, the landlord and his son started cutting the green crop. When the peasant and his brothers tried to stop them, they attacked the peasant's family with a range of weapons such as sickle, *tangia* (axe), and *suli danga*, etc. In this attack by the landlord, the peasants Kusuna Saanta, Banabasi and Pitabasa were seriously injured and taken to Jharigan hospital. Two of them could not be treated there and were shifted to Nowrangpur hospital. Pitabasa's hand was broken and head injured. Banabasi's head got a *tangia* injury and his condition was declared very serious. Jharigan police recorded their statement, but nobody was arrested. Finally, a case of simple injury was filed against the landlord's party.

After Banabasi and his family members were attacked by the landlord and were hospitalised, people from about 50 villages were mobilised by the Sangh. They cut the crop and harvested it. A part of the thus-harvested crop was given to the concerned peasant's family, while the rest was distributed among the people. The police appeared at this juncture, seized two bags of paddy at Palia Kandhaguda village, and deposited the same with Hari Saanta.

The same process got repeated in 1997. Both the parties sowed paddy on the same eight acre plot. This time, without taking any further chances, on November 2, the Sangh mobilised about 200 people to cut the crop. But as soon as all of them reached Chuinmatiguda, the landlord Bhagaban

Gouda and his family members along with some goondas attacked the peasants with guns and *tangias*. The suddenness of the attack took the Sangh members by surprise and they were compelled to retreat. In this incident seven peasants from Khirpabar, Chacharaguda and Chuinmatiguda got injured. They did not report the attack to the police station as they already had learnt from their past experience that the police would not take any action. After four days of this incident, Sangh people made a larger mobilisation and went to the land where the landlord and his men were harvesting the paddy. There was attack and counter-attack from both sides, but this time, since the Sangh people were well organised with *lathis*, *tangias*, *batali*, and stones, they could give a fitting reply to the *sahukar*'s guns. Two from the *sahukar*'s side were wounded and the rest fled away. The Sangh people took away the harvest and distributed it on the same day.

Severe police repression

Three days after this incident, at about midnight, police from Jharipada police station came to Chuinmatiguda and Satighat Guda and started full-scale attack on each and every household. They arrested 25 persons, molested the women, and ruthlessly beat Mubei Saanta of Satighat Guda and Dhanmati of Chuinmatiguda. Finally, all the arrested were taken to Jharigan police station at about 3 a.m. and kept in custody for some 60 hours. Not only were they thus illegally interned at the police station, but only one meal a day was served to them, and they were even restricted from responding to calls of nature.

Militant protest

Eleven days later, when part of the main leadership of the Sangh was underground, on 20th November, a protest rally was organised in front of the Jharigan police station against police excesses and illegal detention. More than 500 people, including 200 women, assembled at about 10 a.m. first at Sarush Bhata, a village two kms from Jharigan. A meeting was held till 12.30 noon, discussing the strategy to be adopted while dealing with the police.

After reaching the police station, people argued with the police: "Why did you arrest our people at the dead of night?" "Why did you destroy

and loot our property?" "Why did you molest and beat our women?" "Why did you detain our people for more than 60 hours?" "Why did you not give proper food to the arrested people?" The OIC, Jharigan, did not have any reply to all these questions. He indeed panicked, because all these questions were hurled at him mainly by the women, who were in the forefront. Very tactfully he called the vice-president, Ananda Garada, and explained that he had done all that on instruction from the Umerkote Circle Inspector, who would be the proper person to reply. He had already wired to him and he would be coming to discuss with the leadership.

Repression intensified

Within two hours of the gherao of the police station, the C.I. of Umerkote reached the spot with three vehicles full of armed police. The adivasis and dalit peasants were squatting peacefully. No sooner did the C.I. reach the police station than the OIC identified the Sangh leaders, and the C.I. ordered their arrest.

When the police tried to arrest the vice-president, Ananda Garada, people protested vehemently. "How dare you go back on your words!" and "We won't allow our leaders to be interned!" were the slogans they shouted. One hand of Anand Garada was held by the police and the other by the women participants who dragged him to their side. This confrontation continued for half an hour. Then suddenly there was a lathi-charge and blank firing. People, both men and women, were beaten severely and driven away. Fifteen activists were arrested from the police station itself and immediately sent to Umerkote police station. Another vehicle went to Soroush Bhata and seized all the bicycles (35 in all), kept in a cycle shop and near a *bardha* (pond). Even a Rajdoot motor cycle was seized and taken away to the police station.

Again, on 21st November, the police party came to Ranichatar village in the middle of the night and arrested 14 activists, including two women workers. Warrants were issued against almost all the executive body members.

Thus white terror was let loose in the area. It was propagated that anybody belonging to the Sangh would be arrested. The political significance of the Sangh can be seen in the fact that political leaders from all

ruling class parties moved from village to village asking people to give undertakings that they did not have any connection with the Sangh. Even a small section of the Sangh leadership connected with the Sarvodaya organisation spread the rumour that the Sangh people had killed two persons, that Gorkha police had been deployed in all important Sangh villages, that the area had been declared a "disturbed area", that no leaflet should be distributed or rallies held of the Sangh. On the other hand, some advocates took advantage of the panic thus created and collected huge amounts of money from the families of the arrested. Organised attempts were made by the administration and the landlord section to destroy the fighting strength of the Sangh and unity of the people. Bail was not granted by the courts for about 45 days. Another rumour was also floated that all land occupied under Sangh leadership would be re-occupied by different agencies of the government for plantation. All the "*bandha dharus*" (land mortgagees) would do their business again.

Continuing struggle

But the main leadership of the Sangh did not buckle down. As soon as they came out of prison, they sat again and decided to continue the struggle. A leaflet that was published by both Malkangiri Zilla Adivasi Sangh and the Nowrangpur Zilla Adivasi Dalit Chasi O Mulia Sangh in December 1997, but was held back by a compromising section, was distributed. The Sangh's policy about "*chidini*" and other forms of usury (like *basta lagani*, etc) was declared through another leaflet. Furthermore, struggle was waged for about 150 acres of land in Dandasara village of Hirapur gram panchayat (Raigarh block) against land mortgagees and the same was restored to the peasants. Some contractors were gheraoed in Fupugan panchayat for not paying minimum wages. Re-organisation was taken up at the village level. Cycle marches undertaken from village to village to keep high the people's morale were also successful. In fact, the struggling masses are biding their time with the morale intact.

When this correspondent reached Tarajodi village, where the central office of the Sangh is located, all sorts of rumours were in the air. However, when he asked the first person he met, "Is this Tarajodi?", the answer was a cryptic "Yes". When he asked, "I think the Sangh's head

office is here?" the reply was, "Yes, it is here" He further asked for any Adibasi Sangh member. At this the villager jumped up to reply, "Of course. All the people of this village, beginning from a child to old men and women — everybody here is a Sangh member!" This was the response of an ordinary member of the Sangh when the enemy rumour was that Gorkha police had sealed and were guarding the Sangh office.

On its part now, the Nowrangpur Zilla Adibasi Dalit Chais O Mulia Sangh (NZADCMS) is preparing to sustain and deepen the struggle by putting forward the following demands:

1. The poor peasants of Chuinmatiguda, Satighat Guda and Chacha must be forthwith given back ownership of their land.
2. All the excess land belonging to Bhagaban Gouda should be seized and distributed among landless peasants of the gram panchayat in accordance with the democratic decision of the people.
3. All the false cases foisted on the Sangh activists should be withdrawn forthwith.
4. Immediate action should be taken against the police excesses.
5. The dalits' and tribals' rights over the land and forest should be recognised and should be respected as their basic rights.
6. All the land illegitimately transferred to non-tribals should be given back to the original tenants. In the case of all land under poor peasants' possession, whether the "anabadi" or the "dunger" category, legal "pattas" recognising peasants' right over them should be issued forthwith.
7. All the cycles seized during the Jharigan rally should be returned to the owners, in running condition, merely on description by the owners.

Such is the brief account of the ongoing experience of just one strug-

gle over one plot of land illegally occupied by the landlord forces. Through this, and many such past and current experiences, the peasant masses of this region are fast realising that under the present political-social set-up, the adivasis and dalits cannot get justice in the courts, from the administration, or through parliamentary political forces. They are also realising that the Sarvodayees, the reformists, and the voluntary agency forces are sure to restrain or ditch the people and their struggles at every critical or opportune moment.

The same experiences are also making the people realise the dire need to develop their own defence network to repulse the attack from their tormentors. They are learning that it is only their (people's) combined strength and struggle under a truly democratic mass organisation with a democratic revolutionary perspective that can win them their rights over their means of production and subsistence — ie the land and the forest.

Only when imbued with the protracted armed agrarian revolutionary perspective, can such a democratic revolutionary mass organisation properly channel people's urges, enthusiasm and struggle energies to building their own defence network. It is incumbent upon the nascent proletarian-revolutionary and democratic-revolutionary forces there to sharpen their ideological, political, practical orientation so as to be able to assiduously the people in building and strengthening such a democratic-revolutionary mass organisation. In this course, the organisation is bound to emerge as a force to reckon with against all anti-people forces in this tribal and Dalit peasant belt.

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