

A RED-GREEN MOVEMENT

**Shankar Guha Niyogi  
and Struggle of Chhattisgarh People**

Bharat Dogra



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## **Shankar Guha Niyogi and the Struggle at Chattisgarh**

### **1977-19997**

#### **A Movement is Born**

The Chattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh can be best described as a 'rich land inhabited by poor people'. The seven districts of Madhya Pradesh (Raipur, Durg, Rajnandgaon, Sarguja, Bilaspur, Raigarh and Bastar) which comprise this region are known for their rich deposits of minerals (iron-ore, coal, limestone, dolomite and several others), for their forests spread over a large area and for the capacity of indigenous resources and skill-based agriculture to give very high yields of paddy (as shown by the research of the eminent rice scientist Dr. R.H.Richaria). And yet, despite this enormous potential of development, most of the people continue to live here in conditions of poverty and denial of even basic needs.

To understand this paradox of 'rich land and poor people' we have to go back to colonial times, the famines witnessed during this period, the neglect of the people's needs and the brutal repression of people's movements, like those led by Vir Narayan Singh and Thakur Pyarelal, which protested against the policy of neglect and oppression. Unfortunately even after independence vested interests continued to dominate the economy and politics of Chattisgarh so that while there was a rush for exploiting the natural resources of the region, there was little concern for raising the ordinary people of Chattisgarh from the morass of poverty and neglect. The result was that while mines, industries and timber depots began to appear over vast area of Chattisgarh, thousands of Chattisgarhi people had to migrate to work in conditions of bondage and extreme hazards.

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It was in these conditions that a huge steel plant was set up at Bhilai in 1959. Although the Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP) was set up in the public sector with help from the Soviet Union, it belied all hopes of making a significant dent in the poverty and backwardness of local people. Most of the skilled, well paid workers employed here came from outside. The local people who got employment here were generally employed through contractors on exploitative terms. The largest number of the local workers were employed in the mines of Dalli Rajhara (containing huge deposits of iron ore) which functioned as captive mines of BSP. The workers here worked and lived in inhuman condition, exploited ruthlessly by powerful contractors and betrayed by selfish trade union leaders at least some of whom were in collusion with contractors.

This situation was being observed carefully by a youth who had recently come from Jalpaiguri region of West Bengal (He was born in Assam ) to live with his uncle in Durg district of Chattisgarh. Tall, lean and endowed with a deeply sensitive mind which just could not tolerate any injustice, this young man was torn between his duties towards his family (in which he was the eldest son) and his wider social commitments. It was the later which triumphed eventually and both as a student (he took a Bachelor of Science Degree in the middle of all his stormy work) and as a worker in BSP (where he formed a militant union called Blast Furnace Action Committee) he was in the thick of political activity on behalf of workers and weaker sections. In between he found time to bring out small radical journals. Above all he identified himself completely with the Chattisgarh people and learned the local language to perfection.

***The name of this youth was Shankar Guha Niyogi.***

All this work was bound to bring the police to his doors and soon enough young Shankar was in jail. This was to be only the first of his many jail visits which continued right till the last year of his life (1991). There was, however, a difference between some of the earlier jail terms and the later ones. In the earlier phase, when he was unknown outside the area of his work, he was frequently subjected to the most ruthless torture.

Recalling one such moving instance, Niyogi told this writer how when once his body was badly injured and his clothes were torn and he was in the lowest depths of demoralisation in a jail cell, his

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spirits were suddenly revived by a note sent by his father saying, "I believe the task to which you have devoted yourself is higher and nobler than the most devoted service you could have rendered to me and I send my blessings." (This is a rough translation of what Niyogi told from memory). The jail and police authorities who thought that they had succeeded in breaking Niyogi's spirits just could not believe their eyes when they found Niyogi - torn clothes, unattended wounds and all- brimming with confidence and shouting revolutionary slogans.

Niyogi was so repeatedly harassed by the police that instead of living in a town he took to roaming to distant parts of Chattisgarh. In the course of his travels he would work at times as a farm hand, at other times as a miner, a fish vendor or even a herdsman selling goats. This brought him in close touch with the reality of Chattisgarh. During this phase of wanderings Niyogi also organised villagers to resist a dam project that would have needlessly displaced a large number of people and successfully have it replaced by a number a smaller irrigation projects that really benefited the people. In addition Niyogi also mobilised miners, specially those at Dani Tola, to wrest some concessions from reluctant contractors. There was pleasant news of a different kind too as Niyogi was married to Asha, a miner girl who since then steadfastly stood by her husband through the most difficult times.

But good times are always much too short in areas of struggle. Emergency came in 1975 and Niyogi was again on the run from the police, from village to village, hamlet to hamlet. During such periods of evading arrest, there have been times when Niyogi, tired beyond the limits of tolerance and yet unable to risk staying in a hut, had to tie himself to tree branches while sleeping on them (for fear of falling off).

Niyogi evaded the police chase successfully for six months, but then realised sadly that wherever he went (or the police thought he went) the police harassed the simple village folk. So he eventually allowed the police to arrest him, emerging out of jail about 13 months later in early 1977.

During the emergency the problems of the miners of Dalli Rajhara had continued to swell and so had the discontent of miners- against the contractors as well as the pretensions of the

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union leaders. In fact the miners were thinking seriously along the lines of leaving the old union and forming a new one. Niyogi's release intensified the process and soon most of the workers had come together to form a new union 'Chattisgarh Mines Sharmik Sangh' (CMSS) with Niyogi as the Organising Secretary. The new union went from strength to strength, struggle to struggle winning one gain after another.

When the month of June dawned, the CMSS workers were on strike on the question of *fall-back wages, hut-repair allowance and bonus*. While the contractors and even trade unionists were pressing upon the administration to take action against them, on the night of June 2 a police force suddenly came to union office to arrest Niyogi. When workers resisted, the police opened fire. Next day around noon time the police fired again on workers. At least 11 workers were killed, while several others had to be hospitalised with bullet injuries. Niyogi was arrested.

Curfew was imposed, and with this came a reign of terror. Several workers had to run away from their huts to escape this terror. But the workers remained firm in their struggle and there were nationwide protests against the police firing. Ultimately, in about a fortnight's time an agreement was signed conceding the main demands of workers. After about seven weeks Niyogi was released, returning to the huts of Rajhara amidst tears of joy shed by miners who had throughout maintained the pressure for his release in very difficult conditions.

## **Women Defeat The Bottle**

The new union went from strength to strength, not only obtaining new gains for the workers but also improving the life of the miners in others ways. Four years after the formation of the union, when this writer first visited Dalli Rajhara, this is how Izaz Ahmad Qureshi, an activist of CMSS, summed up the situation 'then and now' (i.e. before and after the formation of the CMSS),

"Five years ago a miner's family cooked only one meal every day - at night after returning from a hard day's work. The meal consisted of mostly rice-dal and vegetables were a rarity reserved only for festive occasions. The leftover of this rice preparation

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known as 'basi' - were consumed the next day to assuage the pangs of hunger. On this sparse diet a miner had to work nearly thirteen hours every day. Besides, in many families the children did not recognise their father since he left early in the morning when they were asleep and returned late in the evening when they had again dropped off to sleep."

After five years of relentless battle, Qureshi said: "Now the miners eat well whenever they are hungry. They have built themselves pucca huts with tiled roofs, instead of the mud thatch hovels that existed before. A miner's wage for most categories of labour has increased from Rs. 5 to Rs. 19."

A woman sitting on a cot inside one of the huts interjected: "Don't say that our standard of living has improved because of the wage rise only. If it was not for our campaign against liquor the men would still have squandered nearly all their earnings on alcohol".

Subsequent inquiries revealed this statement to be substantially true. The wage rise - which had taken place in various stages - as well as the better working conditions made available to the workers through the struggles waged by the CMSS meant that now they had more money in their pockets and also more leisure on their hands. So, in the evenings, most of them invariably walked towards the liquor contractor's shop to squander their hard-earned gains.

The contractors running these shops had to pay high auction bids for the licence, apart from the cost of obtaining the liquor. Most of them also maintained a small group of hired 'goondas' to run their shop and after meeting all these expenses they naturally ensured a fat profit for themselves.

Liquor was not only sold at a high price, but also spurious liquor with harmful substances was sold to the unsuspecting tribals. The result was that this took away a large part of their earnings and played havoc with their health. Despite these obvious ill-effects, the consumption of liquor did not decrease. The inordinately hard work for very long hours inevitably led the tribals to seek relief in alcohol.

Understandably, the habit persisted even when the working conditions improved. It was at this stage that the CMSS decided to launch a campaign against the consumption of liquor.

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Niyogi did not treat the anti-alcoholism as a relatively insignificant activity of the union. In the initial stage it became a major concern of leading CMSS activists. Through repeated assertions a climate was created in which the tribal members felt that the consumption of liquor was a betrayal of the union that fought for them. Once this feeling was generated, the task of weaning the tribals away from alcohol was not difficult since traditionally they attached a great deal of importance to honouring trust and loyalty.

It was realised that some constructive work had to be found to occupy their leisure hours or else the idle mind would inevitably be driven back to the liquor shops.

Hence various workers were assigned specific tasks such as keeping a watch on the workers who were more prone to the various vices. Others were asked to supervise the construction of schools and hospitals and the numerous other activities of the union. Bhajan and folk song evenings were also organised and attempts were made to enact skits and dramas on the day-to-day problems of the miners and the brave exploits of their folk heroes.

These activities, however, were a poor substitute for the hardened alcohol addicts. Such people were approached individually by the union's activists to compel them to respect and accept the union's programme. Concessions had to be made for those who were too old and found it exceedingly difficult to give up the habit.

These people were issued special cards which entitled them to consume a small quantity of liquor in the privacy of their homes.

The punishment given to offenders was quite unique. Initially an offender would be asked to pay a fine ranging from Rs.50 to Rs.100. However, behind his back, the money was returned to his wife. Soon this secret leaked out and the offenders became smug and careless. The union then reverted to imposing genuine fines.

Another interesting aspect of this experiment was that the addict's own family members were effectively used to rid him of this deadly habit. They were persuaded to report all violations of the union's regulations by the addict and continuously protest against

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the consumption of liquor by him. Helped by the changed climate in the labour colonies the wives and even grown-up children could now wage their own individual battles against an alcoholic husband or father.

The overall result of this sustained campaign against liquor has been that a large number of miners have given up drinking altogether while the few who continue to drink have significantly reduced their intake. It is difficult to cite precise statistics as no studies have been made of this unique experiment, but in her own simplistic way Sonaribai, a tribal woman said: "If previously we consumed one rupee's worth of liquor now we consume four annas worth.

Surely, a significant gain!

Similarly a campaign against gambling was also waged. This was the next major social evil which played havoc with the financial stability of the labourers' families. Employing similar tactics, many workers were weaned away from gambling dens.

Simultaneously the union made available facilities of education to the miner's children. While five years ago almost none of the children belonging to the families of contract labourers in manual mines went to school, now an overwhelming majority of them did so. And this was made possible by the initiative of the CMSS which also organised the construction of some school buildings.

In all this work there was enthusiastic participation of women. The workforce in manual mines of Rajhara had a large number of women. From the beginning of the struggle they had been actively involved in CMSS work. One of the victims of the police firing in June 1977 was a woman activist called Anusuiya Bai. She was very popular among the workers because of her folk songs which inspired them with courage. Women also played an important role in the mobilisation effort after the police firing. Kusum Bai, who became the Vice-President of CMSS played an important role. A women's wing of the movement called Mahila Mukti Morcha (MMM) was organised soon. The women were very active also in the campaign against job-displacing mechanisation policy specially as this would have affected them most adversely. A convention of women activists on the question of mechanisation was held in Hirri

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mines. The women also successfully raised the question of maternity benefits with the wider support of CMSS.

From time to time several instances of molestation of women were being reported from this region. The movement gave a lot of importance to checking this. In the case of an attempted rape involving some security personnel, large-scale opposition was organised so that the guilty could be punished. Once it became known that any such crimes would be resisted widely instead of being hushed up, the incidence of such crimes decreased drastically.

Later when the movement of Chattisgarh workers spread to Rajnandgaon and Bhilai, high participation of women was maintained. At lots of places women made great sacrifices, faced attacks by police and antisocial elements bravely and did not hesitate to go to jail. However, one observer has commented that women's participation peaks during crisis periods of intense struggle and becomes somewhat less in ordinary times. Even if this limitation is accepted, on the whole the red-green flag movement of Chattisgarh offers an inspiring example of the active participation of women in the process of significant socio-economic change.

## **Our Village, Our Forest**

In the course of his long journeys in the villages of Chattisgarh, liyogi had clearly seen how closely the problems of the peasants, miners and other workers of this area are linked. In the same family one son worked on the land, the other son went to work in a mine industry to augment the family income and perhaps more than that to provide some security to the family during the all too frequent droughts in the region. The struggle of the miners and the workers living in the town should therefore be linked to the struggles of the peasants in the surrounding villages in this predominantly rural area for broad mobilisation to become a reality.

Hence soon after the formation of CMSS efforts were initiated taking up the wider problems of the region, specially those concerning the peasantry. This evolved into the formation of a sister organisation called 'Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha' (CMM-Chattisgarh

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Liberation Front). A young activist from the rural area Janak Lal Tahkur played a leading role in strengthening the peasant front.

CMM took up the cause of the weaker sections in rural areas in several contexts. At Nandiya village there was a prolonged struggle to protect the interests of sharecroppers against a powerful landowner who claimed to be the leader of a religious sect. Elsewhere, there were efforts to organise evicted persons to enable them to cultivate new lands as a collective. This has been an interesting experiment in collective farming which has belied the fears expressed initially that people will not be able to work together.

Some parts of Chattisgarh had a high incidence of bonded labour. Due to the efforts of some dedicated social activists and organisations helped by the Supreme Court of India (and occasionally by a few sympathetic officials), over 5,000 workers have been released from bondage and efforts to rehabilitate them have been made. In this effort a new initiative was taken specially by a civil liberties activist Rajendra Sail to form a trade union of bonded labourers so that the battle for their satisfactory rehabilitation as per the accepted policy of the Government has a better chance of success. Sail, who had also played a helpful role for the red-green flag movement in various ways (personally and as a secretary of the People's Union for Civil Liberties), made efforts to integrate the new union Chattisgarh Gramin Shramik Sangh (CGSS) to the wider movement of CMM and this contributed to the strength of both initiatives. The released bonded labourers soon became enthusiastic participants in various mass meetings and demonstrations of CMM and this also contributed greatly to increasing their confidence to assert their rights.

It has been said frequently that the peasantry in villages should be organised along with workers in towns so that they can both come to each other's help in times of crisis. This has been realised at a practical level in the red-green flag movement's struggles where sacks of rice are sent from villages to support workers on strike. The industrial workers in town came to the help of their brothers and sisters in villages whenever such help is needed. A hospital built in Dalli Rajhara by miners is used mainly by villagers. Shankar Guha Niyogi had said that this hospital was a gift of the organised workers to their unorganised brothers.

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Droughts frequently accentuate the hardships of poor people in these villages. During such times the relief works organised by the Government are called upon to play an important role. CMM has time and again carried out campaigns against the various irregularities observed in these relief works so that the workers are not deprived of at least this source of subsistence. In addition CMM has also been concerned with long term issues which can help to reduce drought-related distress.

The green-red flag has campaigned against those dam projects which displace a large number of people. The movement has demanded that such projects be replaced by small projects to tap the flowing water to confer direct irrigation benefit to nearby farmers. The success of this effort can be seen at some places where displacement has been avoided to a large extent, but irrigation benefits have increased. The movement has linked these local concerns with support for similar efforts in the case of Narmada, Tehri and Bodhghat projects.

At another level the movement has worked for protection of natural forests and against the efforts to replace these forests with commercially-oriented monoculture plantation. In some cases it has intervened to check forest thefts. The red-green flag movement has stood for protecting the forestry rights of local villagers, specially tribals. Niyogi argued that only a policy which protects these interests will succeed in the long-term to protect forests.

The workers raised a beautiful garden of trees of a wide variety of species behind the office of the union. A 'know your trees' educational effort was launched so that these workers become well informed about the important role of trees, their various species and forests. These efforts encouraged several workers to plant trees around their homes.

The movement's awareness of ecological concerns was also evident in other contexts. The movement raised its voice against the pollution of rivers by distilleries. When fines of ore mines destroyed the fields of some villagers, the union not only took up the issue of obtaining compensation for farmers, but in addition also carried out protective work to prevent the damage in future. Even the problem of noise pollution caused by proliferation of

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loudspeakers in the town of Dalli Rajhara was taken up and reduced to some extent.

For workers the issue of health hazard at work site is an environmental problem closest to them. This has been a very important issue in the struggle of the red-green flag movement at Rajnandgaon and Bhilai. In both movements the health hazards have been reduced at least to some extent as a result of the importance accorded to this issue by the CMM -related unions compared to the glaring neglect of this aspect by some other unions which had earlier been powerful in these factories.

## **Protecting Jobs From Machines**

The mines of Dalli Rajhara have been functioning as the captive mines of Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP). The Rajhara mines have functioned as highly mechanised mines since 1978, almost from the time that BSP started functioning. However the Dalli mines continued to be operated manually for several years, using the system of employing a large number of workers (men as well as women, who often worked in pairs) through contractors. In 1977 when the CMSS was formed, however, there was already some talk of mechanising this unit also. CMSS was very concerned about this issue, as the union feared that mechanisation would rob many of their members of their jobs.

In 1978 sudden and large-scale efforts at mechanisation were made in Bailadilla iron ore mines of Bastar district. This displaced thousands of workers from their jobs. When the workers protested, the police fired on them. Their huts were burnt and women were molested.

These tragic events made it amply clear, if such clarification was needed, that mechanisation can become the most crucial issue in the days to come. CMSS therefore evolved a policy of semi-mechanisation which met some of the stated requirements of management without causing any retrenchment of workers. The management was persuaded to accept this policy mainly because of the organisational strength of CMSS, but it went on voicing grievances against this policy.

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Later speaking about this policy at a seminar organised by the People's Union for Democratic Rights on Mechanisation Policy for Mines in Delhi in the year 1984 Niyogi said, "The agreement of 20.4.79 marks a milestone on the road to an alternative mechanisation policy. The plan for Dalli mechanised mines was altered to one for semi-mechanisation, where the raising of ore is done manually and its processing undertaken by a mechanised process. But this was accepted only as an experiment. It has been a historically useful and successful experiment, but has yet to be accepted as such. It could have cleared the ground for fresh thinking about the fundamental processes of mining in the present national context. The reasons behind the failure to take this opportunity for rethinking have to be analysed and exposed before the public. In the Dalli semi-mechanised mines the workers have been so successful in raising ore that the mechanised processing facility is unable to deal with even 30 per cent of the production. The production power of the workers has forced the machines to accept defeat".

Niyogi then went on to expose the vested interests who are behind pushing mechanisation policies which do not match the needs of developing countries.

Although the BSP management initially accepted the semi-mechanisation policy, time and again it would start raising new objection. Was this only due to the persistent bias for mechanisation, or were other factors also at work? The mining contractors and liquor contractors who had been harmed by the CMSS successes had powerful political contacts which they wanted to use to harm the CMSS. Powerful politicians were themselves alarmed at the growing influence of the CMSS-CMM combine. It is quite likely that these forces ganged up together to exert pressure for mechanisation so that CMSS strength could be broken. This view is supported by the fact that numerous other obstacles were raised for CMSS such as dissolving cooperatives of workers, holding back their wages, instigating attacks on them by outsiders and so on.

Thus CMSS was constantly kept under one tension or the other. In the summer of 1981 this writer reported on the situation in Dalli Rajhara in the Economic and Political Weekly (EPW, May 23),

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"Nearly 8000 workers of these mines have been without work for nearly three months and without wages for nearly seven months. The extreme distress caused to these poor miners can be imagined. Many of the workers and their families have been forced to subsist on rice bran and wild fruit and leaves.

It may be recalled that since November 1980 there has been a dispute over payments by BSP to the workers' cooperatives and consequently wages of the workers have not been paid. When the CMSS leaders, Shankar Guha Niyogi and Sahdev Sahu, went to meet the district collector to discuss the question of these long overdue payments, they along with five cooperative presidents were arrested on February 12. Their arrest led to a spontaneous strike by the workers and ruthless suppression by the administration. Then the cooperatives were also superseded. Niyogi and his colleagues were released on March 21, but the workers were not reemployed. The management has now taken the stand that it is difficult to absorb most of the workers in the mines because of the proposed mechanisation of the mines.

However, earlier a formula of semi-mechanisation had been evolved by the CMSS leaders in consultation with some young engineers of BSP. This formula had been accepted after some modification by the BSP. The salient feature of this formula was that it avoided retrenchment of workers while meeting the quality requirements emphasised by the management. The use of costly shovels and dumpers was avoided, cost of production remained the same and diesel consumption was actually reduced. This was a unique scheme evolved with the mutual consultation of engineers, workers and management.

Despite clearly affirming its commitment to introducing this technology as per its discussions with the workers on August 11, 1980 at which senior labour and steel sector authorities were also present, the BSP management later started talking in terms of mechanisation involving retrenchment of labour."

Eight years later, while reporting in the same journal (June 10, 1989) about several incidents of attacks on CMSS members, this writer reported, "All these incidents have taken place against the backdrop of the attempt of the management to mechanise mining, contracts worth crores of rupees being given for this, and the efforts

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of the CMSS to protect the jobs of the workers, The management's argument is that to meet the needs of expansion and efficiency, mechanisation is important. On the other hand, the CMSS, which in the past has prepared semi-mechanisation plans which combine man and machine in a rational mix keeping in view the resource endowment of the country, feels that the existing technology with a few modifications can meet the requirements of efficiency and expansion. Quoting facts and figures from official documents- for example the monthly reports on various captive mines in the country-CMSS asserts that Dalli Rajhara mines have been able to satisfy the specified norms of quality and average cost per ton with the existing technology for several years.

The management has assured the workers that there will be no retrenchment following mechanisation. The CMSS sources, however, point out that even if this were true, over the years there will be a gradual loss of employment opportunities as the posts that fall vacant will not be filled. Further, even the 'no retrenchment' promise of the management is doubted.

CMSS sources point out that efforts to retrench the workers were made from time to time even when the bargaining position of the union was strong in the absence of mechanisation, now, with the onset of mechanisation, the bargaining position of the union would be considerably weakened and it may be only a matter of time before an effort is launched to get rid of more and more workers, again on the basis of argument about reducing costs, increasing efficiency, etc."

These two reports on the situation in 1981 and 1989 reveal how the issue of mechanisation was raised time and again for a long period to pose a threat to the growing strength of the CMSS. Ultimately the CMSS has been able by and large to protect the jobs of its members, but the efforts to protect the interests of next generation of workers and ensure a wider, longer-term acceptance of technologies which avoid labour displacement in the mining sector did not succeed to the extent the CMSS had once hoped.

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## Workers Build Their Own Hospital

At a time when the health system is getting increasingly alienated from the weaker sections and when the system has become more responsive to the call of profit than the real needs of society, the Shaheed Hospital at Dalli -Rajhara stands as a symbol of all that is needed to make the health system people-oriented in the true sense of the word. Here 'people's participation', 'demystifying medical science' and 'rational drug use' are not only just concepts to be proclaimed from books and posters, these are practised every day in the hospital and much beyond its small campus in the bustees and villages where the health workers linked to the Shaheed Hospital are active.

A doctor who had been with the Shaheed Hospital for several years says, "In a wide stretch of backward villages, Shaheed Hospital stands as the only institution providing scientific and rational therapy at nominal cost. Here no banned or bannable drugs are used, no tonics, no cough syrups, no combination drugs, only the drugs which are listed in the WHO list of essential drugs are in use. Effective home remedies are also advocated."

Commenting on another aspect of the functioning of the Shaheed Hospital he adds, "The class division in our society is reflected in almost all the health institutions. But in contrast Shaheed Hospital has no hierarchical setup, there is no superintendent or administrator. All the doctors, staff and health workers meet once in a week to sort out administrative problems or to take policy decisions. In case of major policy decisions the matter is referred to the worker's union which takes decisions in consultation with the hospital committee."

Yes, a special aspect of the Shaheed Hospital is that it is very much a part of a wider trade union cum social reform movement which enables it to secure the participation of people in its health programme on a much wider scale and in a much more involved way than would have been the case if the hospital had functioned in isolation. In fact the hospital has been built by the workers themselves (members of CMSS) and some of the trained health staff whom we see efficiently providing several support services are those who have toiled earlier in the day in an iron ore mine.

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Along with its other social concerns the CMSS always attached a lot of importance to a health movement among workers. This is clear from the fact that in 1978 when the union formed several departments for various types of work, then itself a separate health department was formed. The idea of building the workers' own hospital had excited the workers for a long time, but it began to take practical shape only in 1981 when three capable and dedicated doctors came up there to work among miners and villagers. These doctors- Dr. Ashish Kundu, Dr. Binayak Sen and Dr. Pavitra Guha initially had to be content with a corner of the union garage which was transformed into a makeshift dispensary. However simultaneously workers started building a hospital.

Using their own savings and labour the workers succeeded in building a 15-bed hospital which was inaugurated on June 3, 1983 (this was the day six years ago when 11 workers of the area became shaheeds or martyrs in police firing aimed at crushing the union ) by the oldest miner of Dalli Rajhara mines and the oldest peasant of nearby villages.

Since then, despite the existence of several problems and even crisis situations (including the arrest of Dr. Shaibal Jana, doctor of Shaheed Hospital) the hospital has continued to grow-adding new facilities and improving the existing ones-all this by using the internal resources of the workers and peasants movement of which the hospital is a part. At present this is a two-storeyed, 50-bed hospital with an operation theatre, a pathological laboratory and a labour room. Its patients come mostly from the rural areas of Durg, Rajnandgaon, Bastar and Raipur districts. Nearly 150 to 350 patients are treated every day in the OPD. Despite the increase in the number of beds, on an average 15 to 20 beds have to be added to cope with the rush of patients.

Ready availability of highly motivated and hard-working volunteers from the union enables the hospital to spread health messages using posters, exhibitions, slide shows and village/street level meetings. In addition the hospital has a programme of bringing out informative, easy -to-understand booklets on important health issues under which eleven titles have already been published.

But health messages cannot be of use by themselves in a situation of failure on the part of authorities to provide basic

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facilities . For a long time the authorities failed to make any arrangement for removing garbage from workers' settlement. Then one day union activists along with some other local citizens cleaned the entire place themselves and loaded the garbage in a few trucks. Then they transported the entire load to the place where the officers lived and threatened that every day the garbage would be dumped right here unless arrangement to keep the workers' settlement clean is made soon.

Similarly the union had to exert pressure to get tubewells to provide clean drinking water to settlements of workers and also to nearby villages.

When the workers in Dalli Rajhara or in any other nearby place have been in the middle of a serious struggle, the Shaheed Hospital has helped the workers- some of them may have to remain without wages for a long period - and their dependents with free medicare.

However Shaheed Hospital also has its share of problems. Recently when the hospital started an additional health centre at Kusumakatta, it had to be closed for some time due to the lack of medical personnel. Even though dedicated doctors from Calcutta and elsewhere come from time to time to Shaheed Hospital specially to help cope with crisis time situation, availability of more doctors on a permanent basis.

## **The Movement Makes New Friends**

The impact of the miners' new trade union movement of a different orientation soon started being felt by various sections of the people of Dalli Rajhara and nearby areas. Shopkeepers (excluding the liquor contractor, of course) started saying that with the increase in the purchasing power of thousands of workers, their business prospects had improved as never before. The manager of a local bank said that his branch had won a state-level award for best performance in saving deposits, thanks to the increased income of the workers and also their ability to use it wisely instead of blowing it all on liquor and gambling. A school principal wrote a letter to Niyogi explaining how the local school had done very well in the district in examination results and why he felt a part of the credit should go to Niyogi and CMSS.

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Local people were full of admiration for the relief and rescue effort put in by CMSS and Shaheed Hospital at the time of highly destructive floods. Social activists from several parts of the country came to spend a few days and went back inspired by the many-sided work of the green-red flag movement. Their effort was already being discussed at several conventions of national and international experts on development issues, while several writers and experts who themselves visited the places where CMSS-CMM had worked paid glowing tributes to the organisations and their work.

More important than all this attention from all over the world, for the union, however, were requests they had started receiving from workers in various part of Chattisgarh (and beyond) to start working there. The CMSS had been established at the mines of Hirri, Dani Tola and a few other places and now it was time to move on to some industrial units.

The workers of Bengal Nagpur Cotton Mills in Rajnandgaon town had been increasingly restive due to increasing work load, health hazards and low basic pay, but they had been kept in the dark by trade union leaders who promised a lot, but delivered little. Finally in 1984 they deserted the old union in large numbers to form a new union 'Rajnandgaon Kapda Mazdoor Sangh' (RKMS) which was linked to the CMSS-CMM movement. The management, the police and the rival trade union tried their best to break the new union. They were brutally lathi-charged leading to such conditions that workers had to go on strike. Niyogi who came to live in workers' colony was arrested along with a large number of other workers, including women. On September 11, a procession of workers was attacked by antisocial elements leading to the death of one worker. Soon after the police fired on workers assembling to protest against the earlier act of violence. Two workers and a child were killed in this firing. After a long drawn out struggle, an agreement was reached with the management in 1990.

In Chandrapur and Gadchiroli districts of Maharashtra (bordering Chattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh) several migrant workers of Chattisgarh go to work in the iron ore mines leased to contractors. The miners here are very badly exploited and almost all welfare legislation pertaining to them is flouted. These workers also approached CMSS and with some help from it the workers of Maharashtra mines started organising themselves. Dr. Shaibal Jana

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of Shaheed Hospital who had gone from Dalli Rajhara to these mine was arrested, after having been badly harrassed by antisocial elements. The workers went on strike and there were protests at several places against the arrest of Dr. Jana. Workers raised issues like safety, minimum wages and implementation of welfare laws relating to mines. The contractors and antisocial elements initially unleashed terror against workers in the course of which tiles were removed from the roofs of some houses in the rainy season. Finally Dr. Jana was released and an agreement was reached after tripartite negotiations.

In the context of growing threat of communal violence in the country, the response of CMSS when faced with a situation of communal tension has also been appreciated widely.

As chance would have it, the union's fight against liquor addiction brought it into confrontation with a very rich liquor contractor who happened to be a Sikh. Due to his wealth and proximity to the then ruling party he presented himself as the leader of the local Sikhs. He tried to use this position to mobilise the entire community against the CMSS. In this shameful effort he was helped by the fact that several Sikhs who were in transport work had suffered during the agitations by the workers for improving their working and living conditions. The CMSS was keen to correct this misrepresentation and sent their men to meet Sikh leaders in Amritsar and Delhi. Consequently a representative was sent to this region who after examining all matters gave a report favourable to the CMSS.

Thus a communal clash being engineered by a selfish man for his self interest ( saving his liquor trade) was averted before matters could come to a crisis point. It is against this background that the events of November 1984 should be seen. Like other parts of Madhya Pradesh , the various towns around Dalli Rajhara also witnessed violence against the Sikh community. What would happen in Dalli Rajhara, a town where there had already been some tension? This was a critical question.

To make matters worse a powerful minister who at that time was regarded as the most powerful ruling party politician of this region, came here and camped in Balod, a nearby town. According to a prominent leader of CMSS , this minister sent him a message

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to the effect that though they had been rivals in the past they should now join hands in the task of teaching the Sikhs a lesson. The minister undoubtedly thought that in view of their previous clash with influential Sikhs the CMSS leaders would make use of this opportunity to take their revenge. And the union had thousands of workers at its command.

But such dirty thoughts had not even entered the mind of the CMSS leaders, instead their minds were working in an entirely different direction. They had sensed the danger to their Sikh brothers and they were now busy thinking how to provide complete protection to them.

The union leaders made it clear to those who were trying to provoke violence that any such effort would be resisted by the union with all the resources and manpower at its command.

The dirty men got the message. They were well aware of the grit and determination of the union and knew that its leaders meant what they said.

At a meeting of the workers it was clearly explained to them - to the extent that such explanation was needed - that the CMSS was firmly opposed to all forms of communalism and whatever may have been their misunderstanding with some vested interests, such as liquor contractors (who incidentally happened to be Sikhs) the union's anti-communalism policy demanded that the entire Sikh community would be protected in this hour of need.

In the event not a single Sikh family in Dalli Rajhara suffered any damage and the CMSS did not have to make any great efforts to ensure this. Just spreading the word that the union was opposed to communal violence and would oppose and fight any such efforts was enough to ensure that peace was maintained despite the initial mischievous designs of powerful politicians.

Finally, in view of the fact that so many attempts have been made to misrepresent Niyogi as an irresponsible trade union leader who instigated industrial unrest without reason, it is instructive to note what a very senior official of B. N.C. Mills wrote after his transfer/promotion to another post in the National Textiles Corporation. In a letter dated July 10, 1990 and addressed to Niyogi he wrote, "I am grateful to you for all the cooperation you

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have extended during my tenure at B. N. C Mills. As you are aware that B. N. C mills has bagged best performance award for the year 1988-89 during my tenure which would not have (been) possible without your cooperation. I am also personally thankful for helping me from time to time on different critical issues of the Mills (and) its smooth functioning.

## **The Challenge at Bhilai**

Shankar Guha Niyogi fought and led innumerable struggles of workers and peasants during the last three decades in Chattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh. It was, however, only during the last about one and a half years that Niyogi, and the movement led by him, came into direct, sharp and sustained conflict with the wealthiest and most powerful industrialists of the area whose industrial empire, although heavily concentrated in and around Bhilai, extends from Raipur to Rajnandgaon. Although almost all of the earlier struggles had brought tremendous hardships, this was destined to be the struggle demanding the most sacrifice. There were several reasons for this, and it was probably keeping these in view that farsighted Niyogi had deliberately kept this stage of the struggle to a later phase, first consolidating the base elsewhere. In discussions with colleagues, Niyogi would frequently worry about the special features of this phase of the struggle as distinct from one of the earlier ones and the special problems this entailed.

Most of the earlier struggles were in the interior parts of Chattisgarh, but Bhilai is one of the leading centres of industry in the huge state of Madhya Pradesh. It is in fact an industrial centre of national importance. At the centre of the industrialisation process is a huge steel plant in the public sector (Bhilai Steel Plant or BSP) and clustered around it are a wide range of ancillary and other industries together employing over one hundred thousand workers, over one third of them in the ancillaries/industries other than BSP. The working conditions in most of the ancillaries/industries other than BSP are characterised by shocking violation of labour laws, low wages, severe health hazards, denial of essential facilities and lack of any security of employment. The accident rate in several units is very high but attempts are made to hush up the accidents.

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The ancillaries, specially the bigger units among them, flourished in collusion with corrupt officials of the BSP. While the public sector steel plant was swindled in several ways, the illegal activities swelled the coffers of corrupt officials and much more than that the profit of the private sector industrialists. Several rags to riches stories have been enacted in and around Bhilai, the foremost being that of the Shah family of Simplex group of industries. The other industry which grew at the highest rate in this highly industrialised region was the liquor industry and the Kedia family which managed to monopolise the bulk of it is also a rags to riches case. The enormous, mostly illegal profits which some of these industries have reaped in recent years, are out of all proportion to the returns that can be obtained by legal means. The sudden influx of wealth has also brought arrogance and an attitude that everything can be done by fair means or foul using the power of money.

At the other extreme there are a large number of unemployed youths who are vulnerable to being used for various types of illegal and criminal work by those who can pay the cash for this. Bhilai is known to be one of the most crime-prone areas in Madhya Pradesh and the newly-rich, arrogant persons of the city are known to have several shady relationships with the criminals directly or through a network of middlemen. In this situation it was only to be expected that faced with an emerging struggle of the workers, the industrialists would use criminals against this struggle.

Drawing attention to this phenomenon, Shankar Guha Niyogi had said at his last public meeting (held at Fauji Nagar on August 28), "Suppose that I've two sons, when one of my sons goes to work in a factory they deprive him of all his rights and subject him to inhuman exploitation, when he stands up firmly to oppose this exploitation, forms a union, shouts revolutionary slogans and asserts his rights, then they put a knife in the hands of my second son who is unemployed and order him 'Go, attack your brother with this knife'. In this way the enemies of humanity, these greedy industrialists (of this area) exploit both my sons."

One extremely tragic fact that needs to be added is that in this twofold exploitation of the weaker sections, the industrialists of Bhilai and nearby areas have generally not faced any hinderance

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from the administration and the police. Instead the police has generally been found quite willing to extend its help and support to the industrialists.

It was in this situation that the Niyogi led movement (comprising organisations like Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha-CMM and Chattisgarh Mines Sharamik Sangh-CMSS) came to Bhilai and new unions started being formed in several industrial units (other than BSP) which soon got the support of the majority of workers.

The experience of nearly one and a half years upto September 1991 had been that

1) The industrialists have ruthlessly unleashed antisocial elements for violent attacks against struggling workers injuring a large number of them. In addition several leaders of workers have also been attacked and seriously injured. Two workers are widely believed to have been killed in such attacks. Some women workers have been molested in these attacks. All this happened while CMM-linked unions remained peaceful in the face of grave provocation.

2) The administration and the police have by and large turned blind eye to these attacks. It has been made quite clear to the antisocial elements that the police will not take any action against them if they attack the supporters of the newly formed, CMM-linked unions.

3) The police force has also been guilty of repeated attacks on workers and their leaders, beating them mercilessly, implicating them in false cases and arresting them from time to time. The role of the police and the administration has been entirely one sided, anti-industrialist and anti worker. Almost all the leaders have been arrested or beaten without any provocation from their side.

4) In particular the industrialists and the police have been after most prominent leader of workers, Shankar Guha Niyogi. First he was arrested for two months, then after his release sustained efforts were made to extern him from all those five districts where workers' movement is strong. However, due to judicial intervention, both efforts to keep him longer in jail and then extern him failed.



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Further, despite the success of the industrialists in using the antisocial forces as well as the police against the workers, the emerging movement of the workers displayed the capacity to survive in the midst of great odds. Although a large number of the workers had been injured and arrested and a much larger number were without jobs (as some of the leading industrialists refused to employ the known supporters of the new unions) workers refused to desert the red-green flag of the CMM-linked unions.

Last but not the least, even when surrounded by so many problems the new workers' movement was already taking up issues like pollution, loot of the public sector by the corrupt official-private industrialist gang-up, the wider loot of the resources of a poverty stricken and drought prone region by the industrialists, and other such broad issues beyond the confines of narrow trade union activity, which threatened the long term plans of the industrialists. The previous record of the CMM-linked unions in other parts of Chattisgarh testified not only to their dedication to the workers rights but also to wider concerns which would endanger the industrialists' longer term plans to reap higher profits in various ways.

Keeping this in view several industrialists appeared to have reached a common understanding to keep away the new union at all costs, and this is why despite their known ability to meet the highly reasonable and legal demands of the workers, they preferred to spend a higher amount on various illegal payoffs for crushing the new union and meeting the other costs of prolonged labour unrest.

An important question to be raised in this context is the level at which political support was extended for all this. Unhindered attacks on workers by antisocial elements and police for a long time, the unleashing of what have been described as the private armies of some industrialists against the new unions, the arrest and subsequent efforts at externment of a leader of the stature of Niyogi—all this could not have been done without political support at the highest level in the state government. Right through the period of repression the state of Madhya Pradesh had been ruled by a BJP (Bhartiya Janta Party) Government with Sunder Lal Patwa as the Chief Minister. This government, it may be noted here, had invited criticism for its several initiatives against the weaker sections, apart from what has happened in Chattisgarh.

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Shocked at the totally insensitive attitude of the state government to their problems, Niyogi and other representatives of the CMM-linked unions went to Delhi to meet the President and apprise him of the manifold injustices done to their movement. They met the President and held a press conference the next day where they announced a new , stronger phase of the movement from October 2.

This then was the situation in the last week of September. Some highly resourceful industrialists of Bhilai and nearby areas, drunk with the power of newly acquired money and the arrogance and ruthlessness which it brings and who were used to hiring criminals for various purposes in the past were determined to crush the new CMM-linked trade unions, whatever the cost. They had the full backing of the state government in these efforts, but were becoming increasingly desperate as during the last one and a half years their efforts to crush the new unions, or to have Niyogi jailed or externed had failed. This desperation increased further when a new stronger phase of the movement was announced. Before the new phase of the movement could be started, Niyogi was killed on September 27/28.

## **Chattisgarh After Niyogi - Continuing The Struggle**

The murder of Shankar Guha Niyogi in a conspiracy hatched by some leading industrialists, created a very difficult situation for the Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM).

The murder took place at a time when the industrial workers of Bhilai organized under CMM and its affiliated organizations were already facing retrenchments and violent attacks from an industrialist-criminal combine which was determined to oust CMM from this industrial belt. The CMM had to face these onslaughts while also making many sided efforts to ensure that those responsible for killing Niyogi received exemplary punishment.

The industrialists involved in this conspiracy spent a lot of money to create confusion and misguide the process of law. The most deplorable effort made by them was to spread as much disinformation as possible aimed at implicating Niyogi's own dear

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colleagues and friends in his murder. Fortunately, their efforts didn't succeed and a historical judgement delivered in 1997 sentenced two leading industrialists and three of their accomplices to life imprisonment. The person who actually fired bullets at Niyogi was sentenced to death. The constant efforts of CMM and some leading lawyers of the democratic movement who assisted them played an important role in foiling the efforts of the criminals to spread disinformation.

The CMM also made constant efforts to protect the livelihood of retrenched workers. In the protracted legal process, the organizations and unions related to it earned some important victories, but the immense money power of industrialists was used time and again to deny justice to the workers. By taking stay orders and other such devices, they continued to make efforts to deny justice to workers.

Even in the middle of all these problems, the CMM tried its best to continue its constructive work in several areas. The anti-liquor movement made rapid strides in Raipur district where women protested at several liquor shops and smashed up liquor bottles at some illegal shops. Chattisgarh Mahila Jagriti Sangathan carried out a mass signature campaign to remove liquor shops from villages and bastis.

Chattisgarh is widely known for the wide diversity of rice varieties available here - a famous rice scientist Dr R. H. Richaria had identified thousands of such varieties and cultivars. The CMM has launched an effort to protect this diversity, and to experiment with Dr. Richaria's methods of improving rice productivity without using agri-chemicals, particularly pesticides.

## **Bhilai Police Firing**

It is extremely important for the health of a democracy that various sections of people, specially the weak and oppressed sections, have at least some hope that the worst forms of injustice can be removed through peaceful means. This hope was dealt a cruel and harsh blow on July 1, 1991 when the police fired on workers and supporters of Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM) in Bhilai town of Madhya Pradesh. At a time when the working class

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was passing through a crisis period in several contexts, the 2-year long struggle of the CMM workers was being watched anxiously by people committed to the peaceful and democratic methods of social change. The CMM movement had a 15 year long history of combining peaceful struggles against exploitation with social reforms and constructive work. But in the present case, the limits of their patience had really been tested as the Sunderlal Patwa government in Madhya Pradesh had adopted an entirely hostile and unresponsive attitude towards them, allowing private armies and goons of industrialists to repeatedly attack workers and their leaders. People committed to peaceful and democratic change became increasingly anxious as the pro-industrialist and anti-worker attitude of the government gradually took the situation to a point where a big confrontation became inevitable.

The police fired indiscriminately on workers squatting on railway lines. 16 persons were killed and over 100 were injured (this includes those who were not involved in the agitation but were only passing by). This bloodshed could easily have been avoided if the legal and highly justified demands of the workers had been met. In brief, the workers all along had only been asking the government to implement its own laws.

The fact that workers' demands were justified is evident from the fact that senior officials, labor leaders belonging to those trade unions which have not been friendly to CMM and even some local leaders of BJP, which was the ruling party in the state government, have clearly said that working conditions in the industrial units where the workers have been struggling are highly exploitative.

For example in February 1991, the then labor commissioner Mr. Surendra Nath had told a local newspaper - "Amrit Sandesh," that the main cause of industrial unrest in Bhilai is the prevalence of the contractor system. Mohan Bhaiya, an important local leader of the BJP said in September 1990 that even workers employed for 10 years by one of the leading industrial units, Simplex, have not been regularized and the work is got done through the contractor system.

The workers have been denied any regularization. They are not even given identity cards, not to mention appointment letters. Under the prevailing system, they can be denied all facilities and

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they cannot even prove that they have been employees of a particular industrialist. That is why they have been demanding regularization as per the government laws. The rate of accidents is very high and medicare is minimum. So the workers have been demanding safer working conditions. The cost of living is very high in this area where giant public sector Bhilai steel plant is located. So the workers have been demanding better wage and overtime as per existing law.

It is for such demands that the CMM- related unions had been fighting. But the industrialists retrenched workers in large numbers whenever they came to know that these workers had joined the CMM. When the workers protested peacefully, the private armies of industrialists and hired goons were used to attack them again and again. About 15 such major attacks during the last two years have been listed by a citizens committee of eminent persons. In the most shocking of these attacks, the most prominent leader of workers, Shankar Guha Niyogi was killed on September 28, 1991. There could be no bigger confirmation of the essentially peaceful nature of the movement that even in this moment of their greatest loss and sorrow, the workers remained peaceful and disciplined, while assembling in huge numbers to pay homage to their departed leader. Those who have witnessed the funeral say that they will always remember the event as much for the intensity of the feelings as the great sense of discipline and restraint.

But the government continued to remain hostile and unsympathetic. When the workers threatened some mass action or protest the government merely made a pretence of some activity but later backed out. The workers' leaders were prepared to agree to much lesser demands than they had initially asked for, but at least the livelihood of the workers had to be protected. It was only when the government had disappointed them time and again with its unsympathetic attitude towards their highly justified demands, after enduring several attacks in which their most loved leader and some other colleagues had been lost, that the workers finally decided on July 1 to sit on the railway tracks to pressurize the government to accept their demands. Even at this stage the government could have saved the situation by accepting the highly justified demands. But the Patwa government had already shown by its past actions that it had little concern for the life of workers.

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So instead of trying to save the situation the police was ordered to fire on the workers leading to large scale bloodshed which was entirely avoidable.

## **Helping Bonded laborers in Mahasamund**

What happens when the government remains unmoved while a few landlords, gangsters and petty officials in league with them are allowed to destroy a fine example of uplifting the poorest people ? Such callousness is today clearly visible in Mahasamund tehsil of Raipur district. Social activists who were engaged in the release and rehabilitation of bonded laborers were being attacked and threatened while senior politicians and officials adopted a careless attitude as if they were not particularly concerned about protecting this regions's record as a model of helping the rural poor.

Among various parts of the country where concentrated work on the release and rehabilitation of bonded laborers was done, Mahasamund tehsil has often been cited as a success story. The traditional system of bondage called kamiya which has been continuing in these villages for a very long time, was actually abolished and thousands of bonded laborers got a real chance to lead a new life. What made the Mahasamund experience worth emulating was the balanced way in which legal action and grass root work were combined to obtain justice for the poorest of the poor

Rajendra Sail, a senior activist of the People's Union for Civil Liberties who played a leading role in the release and rehabilitation of bonded laborers says, "During those days we had to rush repeatedly from the Supreme Court to the remotest villages of Mahasamund, and back again. But in the ultimate analysis we could win the legal battle in the highest court of the country only because of the careful, painstaking work being done in the villages by several social activists and organizations."

Another special aspect of the Mahasamund experience was the careful organized way in which rehabilitation work was done, involving several NGOs and a project called Mukti Niketan. In some other places a good beginning has been marred by unimaginative ideas of rehabilitation. In Mahasamund, however,

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regular surveys were conducted to find out which kind of skills could earn a livelihood for released laborers and then an attempt was made to provide similar type of vocational training. For example, if a village lacked a bicycle repair shop, then this opportunity was seized to provide bicycle repairing skills.

At places where such good beginnings have been made to help weaker sections, it is very much in the government's own interest to build further on this foundation so that at least some models of genuine poverty alleviation can be seen - some work which will inspire others and which can be replicated at other places while allowing for local changes. After all, even though officials had in the beginning played a hesitant role in the release of bonded laborers, at a later stage, after the orders of the Supreme Court most of the funds and the effort came from the government. The government should take pride in such work and, with the help of dedicated social activists working in such areas, take further steps to strengthen the earlier initiatives.

Such an opportunity appeared recently in Mahasamund when some social activists tried to link up the earlier work for bonded laborers with a broader struggle for land reforms, in particular distribution of land among the poor. It is a basic reality of rural India that till the rural poor, particularly the landless, do not have at least some minimum resource base, poverty alleviation measures such as vocational training and petty shops can at best provide only temporary and precarious relief for some time. Specially in areas where sharp inequalities in land distribution exist and big landlords are illegally cultivating land that can be distributed among the landless according to the already accepted practice of the government, there is a clear case for according the highest priority to the distribution of land among poor families having precarious existence.

Till some time the Madhya Pradesh government appeared to have taken an enlightened view of the aspirations of the landless poor in Mahasammund. The Chief Minister personally assured the representatives of the weaker sections that justice will be done to them and senior district officials at a high level meeting held in April 1996 were also sympathetic. However a series of incidents shattered the faith of the weaker sections in the official machinery.

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During these days police stood as a silent spectator while some social activists were beaten up badly and others were harassed and threatened.

On 27 th October 1995, two petty forest officials arbitrarily beat up, dragged and arrested eight released bonded laborers of Keramunda village in Basna Police Station area. When a social activist Kashyap affiliated to Mukti Niketan's release and rehabilitation work went to one of these forest officials he was also attacked by several persons who were accompanying the official. Kashyap and another social worker Makhan Lal Sinha were beaten with shoes, lathis and gun-butts. The attackers were drunk and quite wild in their attack, they were oblivious of the cries of the social workers. Even while beating them they were drinking. After sometime Kashyap became unconscious. Yogendra Singh, a village leader who went to rescue the two social workers, was also beaten up. To add insult to injury, the attackers later accused the badly beaten up persons of having attacked them.

On November 1, 1995, the CMM had convened a solidarity meet at Keramunda village to voice the people's protest against this atrocity. This meeting was disrupted by the same interests who were behind beating up the social activists on October 27. Several participants including a women's cultural team were terrorized and Rajendra Sail was being threatened when timely arrival of the SDM prevented the situation from taking an uglier turn.

These incidents reflect the growing tensions between the interests of the rural poor on the one hand and a collusion of some rich persons, politicians and corrupt officials on the other hand. While the poor people, including released bonded laborers, understandably have aspirations to get rights on forest land which they have been cultivating for several years, there are other interests who want to make quick profits from the forest wealth and use forest land mainly to benefit the already better-off sections. These interests regard the emerging strength of the rural poor as a threat to their stranglehold on forests and therefore they are trying to create terror among the people to keep them away from such efforts at getting organized. This situation calls for a wider support for the rural poor so that the 'forest mafia' can be prevented from curbing their aspirations for a better life.



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