

COMMUNITY HEALTH CELL

# Suppression of Valia Tribals

A CASE OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION

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## Preface

The data for this report were gathered during my 20-day stay in Valia *taluka* of Bharuch district, Gujarat, in February-March this year. I made a second visit to the same locality in the month of July for further verification of the data. At this time I was also able to incorporate in my report further incidents that had happened since my first visit. I wish to go on record here that I have no political axe to grind. My sole concern has been to bring to light the human rights violations against the Valia Tribals.

Though I have primarily dealt with Valia *taluka*, I have thought it necessary to include some incidents from the adjoining *talukas* of Mangrol and Mandvi in Surat district. These incidents show that the people there fare no better than the people of Valia. The conditions in Valia continue to remain virtually unchanged even today.

Many people have assisted me in this investigation. I wish to thank them all. Although their own safety requires that they remain anonymous, anyone who reads the following pages can hear their cries, feel their anguish. And if someone, somewhere, is also moved to do something about it, this work has achieved its purpose.

## A Tribal People's Struggle for Identity

An old tribal, so said the teller of tales, had two wives. One was old and the other young. The old wife would carefully pluck her husband's black hairs while he rested his head in her lap, as she wanted him to look as old as she was. But the young wife on her part would pluck out his grey hairs so that he might look as youthful as she herself was. Between them the two wives pretty well cleaned up their unfortunate husband's pate.

The story teller, an elderly Tribal, then drew the moral. The tribals of southern Gujarat were in the same predicament as that of the bigamous husband. The landlords, the politicians and the police between them have cleaned them up. The story teller had personally witnessed with mounting sorrow the cleaning up process of his fellow tribals. Yet the comparison between the bigamous husband and the tribals was too weak. The husband in the story lost only his plume. The tribals have lost their possessions, their honour and their hope.

### From the pages of history

The tribals who inhabit the Valia *taluka* of the Rajpipla subdivision of Bharuch district are semi-Hinduised Bhil tribes. They have lost much of their tribal identity during the last few centuries. Few of them can speak their ancestral language and they have adopted many Hindu customs and practices. Caste distinctions exist among those who live along the Narmada, some of whom have even assumed the sacred thread to assert their caste superiority. Yet they desperately

try to preserve their tribal identity, though they disown the name 'Bhil,' a word suggestive of primitiveness and waywardness often attributed to the tribals. The tribals of Valia belong to three different tribes: the Vasavas, the Gamits and the Chaudharis. The Vasavas are the most numerous but economically the most backward. The tribals of Valia are related to the Bhils who are scattered over a wide area of central and western India and have been in possession of the region for millennia.

Rajpipla, before it became a former princely state, was ruled by Rajput chieftains. Under the British, Rajpipla state, along with several other petty principalities became part of the Rewa Kantha Agency. According to the census of 1872, it had a population of 102,000 of whom 60% were tribals. On accession to the Indian Union after Independence, Rajpipla state became part of Bharuch district.

The Bhil tribes were once a force to reckon with. The Muslim rulers of Gujarat were frequently troubled by the Bhils. Forts were erected as a safeguard against these raids. But during the Mughal period they appear to have led a peaceful existence. At the break-up of the Mughal empire they became restless. The Marathas, try as they might, couldn't subjugate the Bhils. They then declared a war on them. When a large group of Bhils had gathered following an offer of pardon, hundreds of them, both men and women, were blown up with cannons, thrown off cliffs, or tortured; children dashed against rocks and women roasted on heated iron plates. This savagery forced the Bhils to take refuge on the inaccessible mountains (W.W. Hunter, *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. 1, 1885, p. 338).

But there was still fight left in them. The Gaekwad of Baroda came to grief in his effort to subdue the recalcitrant Bhils. An army of 10,000 men was ignominiously defeated and put to flight by the forest dwellers. The British too, initially tried to subdue them but had little success. Later they employed more conciliatory tactics, recruiting them into the police force. A corps of 600 Bhils was raised in the twenties of the 19th century (*Cambridge History of India*, Vol. VI, p. 71). The corps was pressed into service to subdue



the tribal leaders through surprise raids at their hideouts.

Hunter, (1885. p. 388) gives an illuminating description of the character of the Bhils:

The Bhils, roving and restless by disposition, and skilful hunters by necessity, long defied their oppressors. Superstitious in the extreme, and possessing little attachment of fixed spots, their hive-like habitations on the isolated knolls were abandoned without regret on the occurrence of any evil omen. Addicted to bouts of drinking, they burst forth in frenzied bands on the more settled country, and were a scourge to the lowlands.

The Bhils have their own peculiarities. A Bhil is capable of putting in a good day's labour when he has a mind to. But in cultivating his own land he tends to be slipshod. He is more likely to give over his own land to a share-cropper and then hire himself out as a daily wage labourer. He avoids assuming responsibility beyond a certain limit.

Valia *taluka* shot into the news early 1981. Following the agitation launched by the tribal farm workers, the area was declared a Mini Chambal. As we shall see in the next chapter, the agitation was crushed by the powerful landlords, who were able to bring pressure on the State government to deploy a platoon of the State Reserve Police in the *taluka*. This agitation was an expression of the tribals' growing self-awareness. They had known better times. Once they were the owners of most of the lands. The forest provided plenty of game to supplement their crop yields. The forests were their main source of sustenance. All this is now radically altered.

Today the outsiders have reduced the inhabitants to mere slaves working on the lands they once owned. According to 1981 census the total population of Valia *taluka* is 94,319. About 29 per cent of this population are outsiders and, what is a matter of concern, as much as 85 per cent of the land is in the possession of these non-tribal outsiders. This alienation has occurred through a combination of usury, fraud, cunning and capitalising on the weak points of the unsuspecting tribals.

A great deal of alienation of tribal lands has come about through disbursement of loans. The tribals were perpetually

in need of both cash and grain. The money-lenders were always prepared to oblige them with a loan. Even a maund of grain frequently led to the loss of land of the loan-seeker. The tribals' susceptibility to drink is cleverly used against them. There are numerous examples in which a Bhil is persuaded to part with his possessions in a drunken condition. One of them lost his ancestral possession for a drink of *mahua*. To the tribal it was like a bad dream. It was as if he had woken up one morning and discovered that someone had done a disappearing trick. The forests with their games and products were gone. He was no longer the owner of his home or his land. From the status of land-owner he had metamorphosed into an abject slave. Suddenly, he realised that it wasn't a dream at all but a stark reality. He had been outsmarted by the more resourceful and cleverer outsiders.

#### A testimony

Pithor is a large, exclusively tribal village in Valia *taluka*, 7 kms. from the *taluka* headquarters. This village has nearly 200 households. Most of the houses are miserable-looking thatched huts. One saving point about the village is that it is spread out over a large area. A few families can also boast of brick houses.

About sixty years ago outsiders started coming into the area. Half a century ago there were only a few families of non-tribals. This settlement has now grown into a huge village and stands in sharp contrast to the old tribal village of Pithor. The new village, Dehli, has far outstripped Pithor in number. It has, unlike Pithor, a prosperous look about it. Here live the Rajput, Brahmin and Patel landlords who have bought up great chunks of the land around Pithor and in nearby villages. The population of the village Dehli, is estimated to be more than 3,000.

Baba Kunj Bihari is a venerable, old priest with a flowing white beard, at the Ganga Nath Temple at Dehli. He first came to Dehli more than 50 years ago. At the time the temple was in ruins. He had it rebuilt single-handedly. Baba is one of the oldest persons living in the area and is a link with the past. Fortunately even in his eighties he is blessed with a clear

mind and a keen memory. He has been a witness to the transformation of the tribals from the carefree forest dwellers to the demoralised, oppressed labourers of today. With sorrow he narrated the sad tale.

When he first arrived at Dehli, the priest in charge of the temple had died and none had taken his place. So Baba Kunj Bihari took upon himself the care of the temple. He never thought of leaving the place. 'There were only a couple of Rajput families here when I first came,' he reminisces. 'Most of the land in this area was covered with forests. The tribals cultivated some land. But there was plenty of wild game to supplement their food. No one starved then.'

Baba Kunj Bihari has also watched the growth of Dehli village to the present size. With concern he witnessed also the growing impoverishment and enslavement of the tribals. His heart ached for the tribals. But his sympathies for the tribals irked the landlords at Dehli. They have boycotted his temple. The rich people of Dehli rarely visit the Ganga Nath Temple. He also alleges that the landlords have managed to take possession of most of the land belonging to the temple which was given to him by the former raja of Rajpipla on lease. The landlords in a raid at his residence one night also took away all his legal documents.

The tribal elders, who have memories of the times gone by, insist that the licensing of the manufacture of toddy has been another serious cause of the ruin of the tribals. According to them, some traders first persuaded the former raja to grant them a license for the production and sale of toddy in the tribal belt. Till then the tribals had enjoyed freedom to brew it. They have been accustomed to use it for centuries. The licensing and restriction put on its manufacture, began to eat into their earning and gradually led to exploitation and enslavement.



## A Valley of Terror

It is against the backdrop of the continuing impoverishment of the tribals that the agitation launched by them in Valia *taluka* in 1981 should be viewed. It had not come as a bolt from the blue. Many young leaders had contributed to it. They had succeeded in awakening a response in the illiterate and harassed tribals.

### Tribals elect *sarpanches*

Towards the end of the last decade there were clear signs of a new consciousness emerging among the tribals of Valia regarding their rights and the forces that had contributed to their impoverishment. In a remarkable departure from tradition, the tribals began to elect their own fellow tribals as *sarpanches* in those *gram panchayats* where they held a numerical advantage over non-tribals. Chotalia and Luna were two such villages that returned tribal *sarpanches*. Manharbhai Nursing was elected *sarpanch* in Chotalia in 1979 on a Janata Party ticket. The village has about 160 tribal households. In the village itself there are no non-tribals. A few families of landlords have their residences not far from the village.

Soon after his election, Manharbhai was implicated in several cases of theft, looting and dacoity. 'Whenever a crime was committed in the locality, I was held invariably responsible for it,' says Manharbhai. His house was attacked and destroyed by a mob. Manharbhai is convinced that the mob was hired by the landlords. The police harassment became so frequent and intolerable that he thought it best to leave the

village. Today he lives with his wife's relations in another part of the district, from where he continues to function as *sarpanch*.

### Ordeal at Luna

Luna is a village of 100 households of which 50 belong to the tribals. Of the 50 non-tribal households nearly 40 are Rajputs. Brahmins and others make up for the rest. In the same *panchayat* election which returned Manharbhai as *sarpanch* in Chotalia, Chandubhai Virambhai was elected *sarpanch* in Luna. At first, the people, including the Rajputs, were pleased with the performance of the new *sarpanch*. He was instrumental in installing street lights and a water supply system. But confrontation soon began when a Rajput of the village, Harisingh Mangrola, started constructing a compound wall which encroached upon the public road. The *sarpanch* objected to the construction. Mangrola ignored his objection and continued the construction. The *sarpanch* then secured a court injunction against Mangrola. The emboldened *sarpanch* now went a step further and lodged a complaint that Mangrola had an unaccounted wealth of rupees one lakh. The Rajput at this stage reportedly hired a gang of goondas and had the *sarpanch* beaten up. Chandubhai lodged a complaint at the local police outpost. But the police took no notice of it.

It appears that a certain Sanatbhai, a Brahman with some political ambition, lent his support to the beleaguered *sarpanch*. Sanatbhai was also threatened, harassed and even beaten up. He appealed to the D.S.P. of Bharuch for police protection. The D.S.P. dispatched two police constables but there was no let up in the harassment. Hari Singh Mangrola now filed a new suit in the court charging Chandubhai with inciting the people. He also moved a non-confidence motion in the *panchayat* committee against the *sarpanch*. The motion was defeated. At this time the Dy. S.P. (Mr. Parmar) of Rajpipla arrived at Luna, presumably under pressure from the Rajput landlords. He summoned the *sarpanch* to the outpost and threatened him brandishing his pistol at him.

Chandubhai had registered two more cases, one in the matter of the assault on him and another on the snatching

away of some cash he was carrying while returning from Karsal village. The cash was intended for payment of wages for labourers. The money was snatched away by the musclemen of the landlords, who waylaid Chandubhai. The Jamadar of Luna severely beat up Chandubhai's brother Bihalbhai, for taking the matter to a press reporter. One day a mob consisting mostly of Rajputs dragged Chandubhai out of his house and beat him up severely in the street. The Mangrola family took a leading part in the proceeding. Dilawarkhan the arch-musclemen of Luna led those who wielded the lathis on Chandubhai.

For Chandubhai, existence in Luna had become a nightmare. He understood now that his very life was in danger. The police, the guardians of the law, were of no help. The place where Chandubhai was brutally beaten was within two minutes' walk from the police outpost. So he decided to slip off from the village, leaving his mother in the care of his elder brother. He found a refuge in a village in Surat district. But he was not to be left in peace. The musclemen of the Rajputs were trying to trace his whereabouts. In summer of 1984, the hoodlums discovered his hideout. But fortunately for Chandubhai, when the hoodlums arrived, he was absent. Instead, they found Chandubhai's nephew, whom they beat up brutally. Thus, the first tribal *sarpanch* of Luna had to pay a heavy price. After four years of exile, he is still being hounded out by his implacable tormentors. The democratic experiment in Luna too seems to have come to a stop. Luna now has a Rajput *sarpanch*, a relative of Mangrola.

Whatever other factors might have contributed to the flight of the elected representatives of the tribal people from their villages, it will be impossible to deny that the representatives found it difficult to function in the face of the determined opposition from the landlords and the harassment by their musclemen. The police, if they did not actually cooperate with the forces of oppression, were silent spectators. As long as the tribals were content to play a submissive, non-questioning role in the life of the village, they were left in peace. But once they became politically conscious, and claimed their rights, they aroused the virulent opposition of those hitherto

accustomed to lord it over other less privileged groups.

These privileged groups acted true to a pattern followed by the Whites in South Africa. As long as the Blacks were content to play a subservient role in the affairs of the country, there was little conflict between the White minority and Black majority. But when the mood of the Blacks changed and they demanded to be treated as equals with the Whites, repression was unleashed on them. The minority regime went a step further and legitimised apartheid through legislation. The Whites had no difficulty whatever in employing Blacks as domestic servants, in permitting them to handle their food and looking after their children and even in treating them as members of the family. It was a different matter when the Blacks began to ask for a share in the decision-making process or wanted to occupy positions as equals with the Whites. The ire of the Whites was directed at the educated Blacks and not to those in humbler stations. To the Whites, the Blacks aspiring to share power was insufferable cheek. In many ways, the apartheid of South Africa is being reenacted in Valia.

### Oppression unleashed

In the beginning of 1981 there was an unusual spurt in the number of offences registered against the tribals by the Valia police. These offences related to house-breaking, looting, and theft of standing crops. Complaints of house-breaking were registered, for example, in FIR Nos. 1/81, 14/81, 54/81. Between January and April of that year the police registered 20 cases relating to theft (*Aas Paus*, a Gujarati magazine published from Bharuch, September 27, 1981).

The tribal farm workers had by now begun to demand better wages. It is not difficult to detect a design behind the spurt of complaints by landlords. It was their first reaction to the changing mood of the farm workers. The harvest season was approaching. At this time the average daily wage was as low as Rs. 3.00. In support of their demand, the workers launched a strike in April. It was organised by the Marxist leader, Mahiman Desai. The 10-day strike was called off after an agreement was reached between the farm workers and the landlords according to which the landlords agreed to pay



Rs. 5.50 as daily wages. The workers gained little from the strike as the farmers never implemented the terms of the agreement. But the strike was to have far-reaching repercussions.

Following the strike, the farmers seemed to take alarm over the new mood of the farm workers. At this time several complaints were lodged by the farmers with the local police alleging thefts of standing crops by the tribals. These allegations were, according to the tribals, a cover for the demands of the farmers to the State government for the deployment of the State Reserve Police (SRP). The Rajput farmers, it must be remembered, are the mainstay of the party in power in Gujarat. Naturally, they were able to bring considerable pressure on the State government to deploy the SRP. However, the SRP was ordered into Valia against the clear instructions of the Inspector General of Police, Gujarat, and against the advice of the district officials of Bharuch. A unit of the SRP arrived in Valia in early May 1981. They were stationed in such villages as Bhamaria, Luna and Delhi to patrol the villages closeby.

With the coming of the SRP, the Valia police embarked on a round of raids, indiscriminate arrests, and terrorism. The villages like Pithor, Mokhadi and Patharia were picked out for special maltreatment and brutality. The reason? Some young leaders were emerging in these tribal villages who were believed to have been responsible for the wide participation of the tribals in the April strike. Manga Supad of Pithor village was one of them. He was subjected to various types of ill-treatment by the police. His ancient-looking, frail grandmother, Tegli Behn, recalls vividly the savage beating, the police gave Manga when they were taking him away from his home in Pithor. Eye witnesses have mentioned another savage beating Manga received at the bus stand at Valia, the taluka headquarters. Manga was one of the young leaders who played a prominent role in April strike.

During the strike, two villages, Chotalia and Patharia, had been raided and men beaten up. On account of these raids and police savagery, the men of the village fled from their homes. The way was now clear for the police. They brandished

their rifles at the older women of the village, threatening them. According to these women, the constables took the younger women inside the houses and raped them. During the raid on Pithor village in the first week of September, the police also allegedly raped the women. The men-folk had fled their homes. Dalki, the younger wife of Manga Supad was allegedly raped. A rape attempt is said to have been made also on Narmada, Manga's sister-in-law.

On September 14, 15 women with various complaints of molestation, rape and thefts against the police were being taken in a matador to Dediapara to enable them to file cases in the Judicial Magistrate's court. Three men escorting them on a motorcycle were arrested on the charge of violation of prohibition. The women were thus prevented from proceeding to the court. Seven of them were later produced before the DIG, K. V. Joseph, who was then at Valia to inquire into the complaints of police excesses (*Pratap*, a Gujarati daily published from Bharuch, September 15, 1981).

A woman by name Gajra of Chotalia village has filed an FIR (No. 118/81) against the officer heading the Valia P.S. A.M. Rathor. According to Gajra, PSI Rathor, during a raid at the village, entered her house, threatened her with his pistol and then raped her. At a public meeting held at Bhamaria on September 26, 1981, in which two former Chief Ministers of Gujarat, Babubhai Jasbhai Patel and Chimanbhai Patel were present, Gajra is reported to have stood up before the crowd and narrated her tale. According to a newspaper report, her account moved Babubhai Patel to tears. (*Gujarat Samachar*, September 27, 1981). But Mr. Patel is not known to have given any further expression to his sympathy.

Manga Supad's sister, Yamuna, married with two children, has the following tale to tell. The incident occurred in September 1981 after the police were posted in Pithor. One night, at about 11 p.m., when she was alone with her two children in her house, two constables arrived at her house and asked her to dress up and accompany them to the police outpost in the village. She changed into a fresh sari and followed the constables. At the outpost she found the head constable in a drunken state. He ordered Yamuna to come

into the room and to close the door behind her. She was now thoroughly frightened. She had a fair idea of the man's intention. In a spurt of courage, she angrily told the men that, if they dared come again to her house, she would kill them. Then she fled

### **Assault and rape**

One night, in September 1981, three constables turned up at the house of Dhanji Dani at Valia. They found Soni, Dani's daughter-in-law alone at home. The menfolk hadn't yet returned from their work. One of the constables entered the house, and pinned her down. The victim has identified her assailant as constable Mustaq. Constable Mustaq's name has figured in several other incidents of atrocities committed against the tribals. While the assault was taking place, Dinesh Dani, the younger brother of Soni's husband, returned from work. Hearing cries for help, Dinesh rushed to the house. The two other constables, standing outside, severely beat him up. They then took him to the police station, where he was charged with violation of the prohibition law and with obstructing the constables from carrying out their duties.

When I interviewed Soni, she maintained that she went to the police station to surrender the sari she had been wearing at the time of the assault and to lodge a complaint. She was detained at the police station several hours for questioning. A complaint was lodged with the DSP Bharuch, regarding the assault on Soni, as it was thought that the local police might not take action as they themselves were involved in the crime. A case was later instituted in the matter. A medical examination reportedly showed no evidence of rape. The policeman concerned was later acquitted of the charge. Dinesh Dani was also acquitted of the charge against him.

### **An exposure**

When the SRP were deployed in Valia, there was an outcry, especially in the Gujarati press. It was at this time that Bhanubhai Advairiu, a noted social worker visited Valia to ascertain for himself the truth of the allegations of large scale looting of crop by the tribals of Valia. Valia had by now

become a 'Mini Chambal.' His findings were published in a series of articles in *Jansatta*, a Gujarati daily. Advairiu has given the lie to the Mini Chambal scare that the landlords had spread with the assistance of the Valia police. Advairiu draws attention to the repression the Valia police freely indulged in and the naked violation of human rights that followed. Analysing the causes of the plight of the tribals Advairiu also notes that the ceiling laws were being violated with impunity by the landlords. Some landlords possess 500 acres, while the ceiling is 40 acres. He calls this a mixture of law and lawlessness, legality and illegality and 'mixed economy' (*Jansatta*, October 20, 1981).

When the Valia police adopted measures against the farm workers, the latter protested loudly and demanded an impartial enquiry. The matter was brought up by some legislators during the assembly session. As a result of this, the Inspector General of Police, Gujarat, was asked by the government to look into the complaints of repression by the police. But before the IGP could submit his report, the State Home Minister Prabodh Raval stated at a press conference that the situation in the tribal area did not warrant a judicial enquiry and that the law should take its course. Hearing this, many tribals set out for Dediapara to register cases, since, at this time, there was no court at Valia. On the way they were arrested. It was abundantly clear that the administration, the police and the landlords were all in collusion to suppress the awakening among the tribals and to keep them 'in their place.'

An armed attack, alleged to have been made on PSI F.S. Mahida of Valia P.S., was much publicised outside as proof of criminality and lawlessness among the tribals. According to the police, on June 26, 1981 PSI F.S. Mahida was proceeding towards Desad on a motorcycle with two pillion riders. Mahida is reported to have been attacked by a gang of tribals, who, it is claimed, fled only when Mahida fired into the air. 'Firing into the air' may be a euphemism for missing the air. That the officer should fire into the air to scare away a gang of blood thirsty men making a vicious attack on him sounds rather queer. One cannot help wondering why our police officers are such wretched shots. Or is it that they do not



know how to tell a lie. The tribals living near the spot where the assault is supposed to have taken place, have a different version of the incident. According to them the officer concerned had a quarrel with a Rajput of the area and that it was this Rajput who had dispatched his goondas to attack the officer.

The Gujarati dailies *Jansatta* and *Gujarat Samachar* have carried frequent reports of atrocities on the Valia tribals. But the *Loksatta*, a Gujarati daily from Baroda, has preferred to carry only the police versions in its reports. Navin Chauhan, *Loksatta's* correspondent, has made much of the attack on PSI Mahida, to show that the tribals have taken the law into their hands. The tribals, however, assert that they have observed Chauhan moving around in police vehicles. It is only to be expected that he would swallow the police version hook, line and sinker.

### Police indicted

Hari Vallabh Parekh is a highly respected social worker of Congress (I) persuasion attached to the Anand Niketen Ashram, Rangpur in Gujarat. When Valia was declared a Mini Chambal, he visited the area on a fact-finding mission. Beginning on September 5, 1981, Parekh toured the villages of Valia and acquainted himself with the situation. Later he issued a statement which was carried by the *Gujarat Samachar* on September 27, of same year. Parekh has referred to the harassment of Chhotubhai Vasava and his brother in Maljipura village. The Valia police had raided the farm and the house belonging to the brothers and had confiscated a pump set, claiming that it was stolen property. Though the police were shown a receipt for the purchase of the pump set, that did not deter them from carrying it away, from where it was being used for the irrigation on the farm. Parekh adds that the people of the village looked up to Chhotubhai and he saw no sign of the dacoit which the police had painted of the social worker.

Parekh also visited Pithor, a village which the Valia police had dubbed as a den of dacoits. He remarks that the house of Manga Supad, which he had visited, wasn't the type one

would expect an arch dacoit to live in. It was a shabby thatched hut, devoid of furniture. The people in this village, he noted, lived in dire poverty. He discounts the stories of looting and dacoities in which the people of Pithor were believed to indulge in. He dismisses these stories as pure fabrications. Parekh adds that the Chambal scare is an insult to the many social workers engaged in the selfless services to the people. He demanded the withdrawal of the SRP from Valia taluka.

Following persistent complaints of police excesses in Valia, the State government appointed a one-man enquiry commission consisting of DIG K.V. Joseph. He submitted his report in the first week of October, 1981. However, the State government has not yet made the Report public. The commission is believed to have passed severe strictures on the Valia police and in particular on PSI A.M. Rathor of Valia P.S., Head Constable Vansia, and Head Constable Badhaji of Luna. The tenor of the Joseph Report may be gathered from the fact that soon after the Report was submitted, the SRP unit was withdrawn from the area and was replaced by a few mounted policemen.

## Laws Made for Repression

According to the agreement reached between the farmers and the workers in 1981, the daily agricultural wage was fixed at Rs. 5.50. The agreement has remained unimplemented. Instead of this mutually accepted wage rate, even today, after three years, the average agricultural wage is rupees four per day. In some villages it is only three rupees.

### Minimum Wage Act

Acute unemployment in the tribal area forces the workers to accept low wages. The local administration has been very vociferous in its claim that statutory wages are being paid to the workers. Such claims of course do not alter the actual wage situation. Only in rare cases do workers receive rupees five per day, and that too only in the peak employment season.

Valia forms an arid region. It is served only by lift irrigation and the land is not very fertile. Naturally, there is surplus labour nearly throughout the year. In October 1982, the Gujarat government fixed the minimum agricultural daily wage at Rs. 9.00. It did so at a time when it could not enforce the daily wage of even Rs.5.00. It needs hardly be said that the 1982 minimum wage regulation has never been implemented. It is hard to believe that the government was serious about implementing it. My own inquiries have revealed that in villages like Pithor, Chotalia, Sodgam, Patharia, Karsad, Madia and Desad the farm worker receives an average of only Rs. 4.00 per day.

When a labour officer of the area was queried on the wage situation, he confessed his inability to do anything in the

matter. Even if he filed a suit in court against a landlord for non-payment of statutory wages, the landlord would succeed in obtaining an affidavit from the illiterate labourers to the effect that they were receiving statutory wages. The farmers themselves have admitted they do not pay the statutory minimum wage rates. They maintain, not without some justification, that they are unable to pay the statutory wages, as farming becomes unprofitable at these rates.

The government has not been able to ensure even half of the fixed rates of wages. No one takes 1982 wage regulation seriously. The government is unlikely to antagonise the Rajput landlords, its political supporters, by enforcing the minimum wages. Expediency often determines the policies of the government. It is even more scandalous that on the government-aided development projects such as digging of irrigation canals, workers are not paid the minimum wages. Since the wages are low, able-bodied youth seek employment in the industrial towns, such as Ankleshwar and Surat. Here they receive much higher wages in the diamond cutting factories and other establishments. But the tribal youth are repelled by the unhealthy and cramped living conditions prevailing in these places.

Acute unemployment invariably leads to cheap domestic labour. In the tribal belt, one comes across a type of domestic labour which has its own peculiar features. Tribal women and girls are employed as domestic hands in the homes of the non-tribals. Their work generally consists in washing clothes and utensils, tending cattle, and other menial jobs. They receive, along with two meals a day, an annual pay of Rs. 60.00 or Rs. 5.00 a month. They also receive a set of clothes once during the year. This mode of employment appears to be widespread in the *taluka*. When there are serious anomalies regarding the payment of wages in the better organised farm sector, it isn't surprising that domestic labour is exploited.

### **Prohibition or legalised extortion?**

I have noted above that the degradation of the tribal population is said to have begun with the licensing of the production and sale of liquor. In former times, the tribals



used to brew their liquor from the flower of the *mahua* tree. With the disappearance of forests, it is impossible to obtain the *mahua* flowers. Now they use jaggery as substitute. A low-quality jaggery is used for the purpose. With the introduction of licensing in the days of Rajput Chieftains, illicit liquor made its appearance. Having been long accustomed to the consumption of home-brewed liquor, the tribals were liable to incur penalties for illicit brewing. That was bad enough. Then came the prohibition law of May 1961. Now the tribal faced heavier penalties. With his pronounced weakness for the brew, the tribal frequently lost his landed property mortgaged for loans or even in exchange for liquor. He was lured into business transactions while under the influence of liquor with grave consequences for him. The prohibition law brought an additional disadvantage. Now the tribal fell easy victim to the whims of the law enforcement authorities. He was easily snared in the prohibition net. It became a convenient instrument of harassment and extortion.

There is no denying that illicit brewing is fairly widespread. The raw materials are easy to obtain. It requires no great skill to brew country liquor. The police extort varying sums of money from those nabbed in the prohibition net. The sum would depend on the victim's ability to pay or his economic condition as judged by the police. Needless to say, the police confiscate the liquor. People say that the police usually consume the liquor soon after it comes into their possession. Such prompt consumption of course relieves them of the burden of carrying it. It is not difficult to understand why the Valia police display rare zeal in enforcing the prohibition law. No one can charge them with neglect of duty here.

It is not only the drinkers who are caught by the police. The police easily brandish this charge of drunkenness at will. The prohibition law is a good example of how any legislation in the hands of unscrupulous men becomes a means of harassment and extortion. Budhiabhai Vajibhai Vasava claims that he was beaten by the police at the Chodgam bus stand on the charge of drunkenness. This happened on February 19, 1984. Later Budhiabhai attended a meeting at Vittalgam and there he complained of police harassment. He says that the police

saw him at the meeting. On February 21 the police came to his village and began to belabor him and then took him to Luna outpost and later to Valia P.S. There he was beaten again in the lock-up. His son-in-law and his father went to the Valia P.S. and had him released from lock-up on payment of Rs. 30.00 to the police for *nasta-pani*. On the same day Budhia-bhai was examined medically and no trace of liquor was found on him.

In the last week of February 1984 the police had a field day in Mokhadi village, 13 kms. from Valia. On February 22, three constables led by Jamadar Vanmadi of Mirapur outpost arrived at the village around noon and led away Chandiben, wife of Resiabhai, after confiscating two bottles of country liquor. Later another villager Thakharbhai had her released after paying the Jamadar Rs. 50.00. The police consumed the incriminating material, but were considerate enough to return the empty bottles. There are witnesses to the policemen drinking the forbidden brew. On February 23, a police party of about ten constables led by Jamadar Vanmadi came upon a tribal named Virembhai carrying some liquor and catching hold of him beat him, and took him to Ghatta village to the house of Saradhbhai Mania, a fairly well-to-do tribal. Saradhbhai, besides furnishing a bond, gave the police an egg-laying hen and Rs. 100.00 in cash. Only then did the constables release Virembhai. The constables had the hen cooked there and had a chicken dinner. They washed down the dinner with the liquor they had seized from Virembhai. There are two witnesses of the constables' feasting in the village. Again on February 23 in the same village, a tribal, Naginabhai Jethiabhai, was apprehended because he was reportedly found in possession of a bottle of country liquor. He was also taken to Ghatta village. In this case the police succeeded in extracting Rs. 50 00 from Saradhbhai. He merely acts as a go-between for the transaction. The conclusion seems to be inescapable that prohibition has become a means for the police to extract money and liquor from the tribals. Law has become a handy means of extortion.

Viewed in this light, the prohibition law, as it operates in Valia is a colossal fraud on the tribals who must bear the

brunt of the waywardness of the constables. They pin the charge of violation of the prohibition law on anyone they want to harass. The guardians of the law show an appalling want of respect for the law itself. It is worthwhile to note here that the Rajputs, though heavy drinkers, are rarely ever apprehended. The rare instances where they are nabbed are almost certain to be motivated by political vendetta. Another aspect of the problem is that the police do not seem to be concerned about the manufacture of liquor which could be discouraged with a ban on the sale of the type of jaggery and the chemicals used in its production. But are the authorities seriously interested in stopping the production of liquor? Can the Valia police, most of whom are Rajputs, do without the liquor?

### Seemrakhas

Village watchmen are locally known as *seemrakhas*. They are usually hired to guard standing crops. In reality they do a lot more than crop-watching. The *seemrakhas* in many Valia villages act as the musclemen of their employers. The Rajputs seem to prefer outsiders as *seemrakhas*. Generally they employ Pathan Muslims. Some of them have gained wide notoriety. From the record of these *seemrakhas*, one is led to conclude that they have been hired to keep an eye on the tribals and to cow them down through the use of naked forces. The tribals themselves are quite capable of doing the job of *seemrakhas*. Manga Supad of Pithor organised a team of *seemrakhas* in 1980-81, who hired themselves creditably. The Dehli farmers however didn't renew their contract when it expired after the rabi crop. Manga had by now gained some influence with the tribals. He was one of the emerging young leaders. The landlords didn't quite relish this development, and grew wary of him.

The *seemrakhas* of Luna village have terrorised not only the tribals of Luna but also of the neighbouring villages. They have done so with the connivance of the local police, and also with the full backing of the landlords. Their leader is Dila-warkhan Rahimkha Pathan, a Sindhi Muslim. They seem to derive diabolic pleasure in cruelty. The tribals of Luna and

the neighbouring villages have suffered much at their hands during the past five years. The *seemrakhas* keep a close watch on the tribals. Visitors to the tribal quarter of the village are also kept under surveillance. The democratic rights of tribals are held in abeyance.

On March 6, 1984, I visited Luna along with a small fact-finding team, driving into the village in a jeep. We interviewed several persons, both tribals and non-tribals. We were about to close our interview with a Rajput shop-keeper, when Dilawarkhan, the notorious musclem of Luna, walked in and called the shop-keeper into the living quarters. As we had no more business on hand, we took leave of the shop-keeper. As we walked towards the jeep parked under a tree in the main street of the village, a group of young men converged on the spot and surrounded the jeep. The young men who were obviously not a friendly-looking lot, wanted to know why we were asking all those questions and what data we were after. On instruction from us, the driver switched on the motor. But now Dilawarkhan stood directly in front of the vehicle, with one foot on the bumper. Repeated blowing of the horn failed to persuade him to move away. We asked the driver to shut off the motor and we emerged from the vehicle. We then declared our intention to appeal to the police outpost nearby. Only then were we allowed to proceed. We then drove direct to the Valia Police Station to lodge a complaint there. But the business of lodging an FIR turned out to be far more vexatious than we had imagined. It was clear that the officer taking down our complaint was trying to thwart us. He moreover seemed to have his own idea of what should be put in. The result of all this was that the FIR had to be drafted three times. The whole operation lasted two hours. We could not but ask ourselves: what chance did an illiterate tribal have at the police station in lodging an FIR?

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## A Tale of Two Villages

The incidents narrated below go to prove that the Valia police and the Forest Department are hand in glove with the *seemrakhas* and the local landlords and actively cooperate with them in the inhuman treatment of the tribals. There seem to be a tragic reversal of roles of the guardians of the law.

### **Harshani: Tribals treated as less than humans**

Harshani is a village in Mangrol *taluka* in Surat district. It lies just across the border of Bharuch district, only two kms. from Luna. Harshani is an exclusively tribal village. The people of this village have repeatedly been victims of barbarity of the *seemrakhas* of Luna led by the notorious goonda, Dilawarkhan. On July 13, 1983, Mohansingh Vansia, PSI of the Valia P.S., drove into Harshani along with a large force of SRP numbering about 50 men. Also present in the group were Dilawarkhan, his brother Abdul and a number of Rajputs from Luna including Jitendra Mangrola. The policemen, together with the Pathans, began rounding up all the adult male tribals of the village. But some of the men of the village, realising what was up, fled from their homes. However, eight men were caught. They were, Kilia Ramla Vasava, Dolat Dahya Vasava, Ramesh Nana, Subhash Karsan, Sardar Karsan, Prabhat Ravia Vasava, Viram Vallabh and Ghemal Viram. The captured men, roped together, were taken to Dhansoli. From there they were driven to Luna in a police vehicle. At the Luna police outpost, while the PSI was looking on, Dilawar poked Kilia Ramla with a stick causing a deep wound. Later the eight tribals were brought to Valia

police station. Here the torture began.

All the eight men were now ordered to lie face down on the ground. Four constables stood on Kilia Ramla, two on his legs, and two on his arms. PSI Vansia repeatedly beat Ramla on the sole of his foot with a lathi, causing him intense pain. The same treatment was administered to the other seven men in turn. Sardar Karsan, Prabhat Ravia and Kilia Ramla were beaten with greater ferocity. And what crime had the men committed to merit the arrest and torture? Khuman-singh Mahansingh Mangrola, a Rajput farmer of Luna, had lodged a complaint (FIR No. 110/83 dated July 12, 1983) implicating 13 tribals in a theft of papayas from his field. Besides the eight men apprehended and tortured on July 14, another tribal, Suroli Chidia Vasava, was arrested on July 15. Four of the 13 accused, namely, Nagin Jesing Vasava, Babu Jesing Vasava, Fatia Ravia Vasava, and Fikha Haria Vasava, could not be arrested.

From the manner in which the police went about rounding up the men in Harshani, it does strike one as strange that they, through sheer coincidence, succeeded in capturing the accused in the theft. It is conceivable that the police entered the names of the accused in the FIR after their capture on July 15. The police may have arrested all those who for some reason had earned the displeasure of the landlords. The presence of 12 witnesses, including Dilawarkhan, appears contrived and thus strengthens the suspicion. The case relating to the alleged theft was heard in the Valia court. Advocate Sursing Mateida appeared for the accused. The court declared all the accused innocent.

A few days before the raid by the Valia police on Harshani and the arrest of eight tribals, another incident took place which bears witness to the utter helplessness of the tribals in the face of brutality freely indulged in by the *seemrakhas* of Luna. Some cattle belonging to the tribals of Harshani were grazing on the fallow land belonging to a landlord, Ratilal Modi, and lying within the confines of the village. The cattle belonged to Dalusing Udesingbhai, Raimalbhai, Savantu Bijia, and Amarsing Virsing. Some adults and children were keeping a watch over the animals. Towards evening, Dilawarkhan

along with some members of his gang and a few Rajputs appeared on the scene and began to drive the animals towards Luna. Those who were keeping watch over the cattle were terrified and fled. They reported to the owners what had happened.

A few of the owners were very reluctant to go to Luna to claim their property, knowing full well the character of Dilawarkhan and his friends. Ishwarbhai Soniabhai of the village had some relatives in Luna. He was now requested to go to Luna along with Dalubhai. Accordingly the two men set out for Luna, arriving there around 8.00 p.m. They also had taken along with them a stick as they would be returning at night and would have to bring back the animals. On arrival at Luna, the two men went directly to the residence of the President of the *panchayat*, Bhupendra Mangrola. As Mangrola was at his evening meal, Amarsing and Dalubhai sat down on a bench near the door leading into the house. They kept their stick leaning against the wall. As they waited, Dilawarkhan happened to come by and noticed the two men. He picked up their stick and beat them with it. Then the ruffian Dilawarkhan asked for a glass of water from within the house. Water was handed to him in a steel cup; he drank a portion of the water and threw the steel cup at Ishwarbhai, hitting him on the head.

Now Mangrola, the panchayat president, emerged from the house and began discussing the matter of the cattle. He demanded Rs. 300.00 as fine. As the two men from Harshani didn't have that amount with them, they declared their inability to pay it. At this they were asked to pay Rs. 250.00. But between them they had only Rs. 240.00. Mangrola then told them to give the money to Dilawarkhan. When he discovered the amount was only Rs. 240.00 he demanded Rs. 10.00 more. Therefore the two tribals set off to borrow the money from Ishwarbhai's relative in Luna who kept a shop there. When they reached the shop, Ishwarbhai left Dalubhai outside and went into the shop to talk to his relative, Supadbhai. At this moment Dilawarkhan leading a mob of Rajput youths reached the spot. They dragged Dalubhai into the street and began to shower lathi blows on him. Dalubhai received several

blows from Dilawar on his thighs and arms. When Dalubhai tried to ward off the blows from Dilawar by catching hold of his lathi, Dilawar wrenched the lathi so violently from his hand that his forearm slipped off its socket at the elbow.

After this orgy of violence seemed to satisfy the mob, the two tribals were permitted to take the cattle away. But the men refused to lead the cattle out of the village unless one of the villagers accompanied them up to the boundary of Luna, lest they should be accused of stealing cattle and beaten up again. Hence Jitla, brother of Bhupendra Mangrola, brought them to the boundary of Luna. On their return to Harshani, the two tribals met the *panchayat* president of Harshani and informed him of all that had happened and of the heavy fine extracted from them, for which no receipt had been issued. The *panchayat* president who is a staunch supporter of the Rajputs of Luna, strongly advised them against filing any complaint with the police about the affair.

At this time Dilawarkhan appears to have formed a habit of driving away cattle belonging to the tribals at his pleasure. This had become an easy way of extracting sums of money, which must appear quite large to the poor tribals. Secondly, Dilawar was thus able to lure the men of Harshani into Luna where they could expect little mercy at the hands of the criminal elements. Most of those lured into Luna were also beaten up. It is impossible to believe that all this went on without the knowledge of the police at the outpost.

Gambhirbhai of Harshani works as an Extension Officer and is quite well off. One day seven buffaloes belonging to him were driven away to Luna, while they were grazing within the area of the village. The cowherds reported the matter to the owner. Shashikant, Gambhirbhai's son, along with the cowherd, drove into Luna on a motorcycle, with the purpose of recovering the buffaloes. They met Abdul, Dilawar's brother, who demanded Rs. 100.00 as fine. As Shashikant was known to be a man of means, he was not beaten up. Yet, finally he had to pay the fine in full.

Natwarbhai Jesingbhai, 21, an employee of the Maroli Sugar Mill, came home for a short visit in December 1983. On reaching home, he learned that two cows belonging to



his father were missing. Natwarbhai made a diligent search for the animals in the neighbouring villages. On failing to find them, he set off for Luna and located them there. He went to the house of the *panchayat* president Bhupendra Mangrola. At this moment Dilawar made his appearance and took Natwarbhai to another Rajput in the village. A yelling crowd of Rajput youths now collected and followed on the heels of Dilawar and Natwarbhai. The latter, sensing grave danger, took off. The mob led by Dilawar chased the young man and finally caught up with him at Panoli village and overpowered him. Natwarbhai was now led back to Luna in a triumphal march. All along the way, he was continually beaten. Dilawar now demanded Rs. 70.00. Natwarbhai paid the fine. He was then permitted to leave. He was informed by Dilawar that the cows had been sent back to his village. On reaching Harshani, he discovered that the animals had come direct to the village, as soon as they were released from captivity.

#### **Devgiri: shocking stories of atrocity**

Devgiri in Mandvi *taluka* of Surat district is a tribal village of 60 households. The experiences of the inhabitants of this village have belied the pretentious name it bears. The inhuman treatment they received from the staff of the Forest Department has few precedents. The incident narrated below occurred in July 1982. But it was closely linked to another episode that took place two days earlier.

One night a stranger turned up at Devgiri village. He was bare up to his waist. He had taken off his banian and wrapped it around his neck. The man was obviously drunk. He entered the huts of the tribals uninvited, and would not state his business. In this fashion he went in and out of several huts, nor would he reply to questions. The villagers grew suspicious of him, thinking him to be a thief. Now some of the villagers gathered and stopped him. As he did not give any coherent answer, they cuffed him a few times. They also deprived him of the weapon (*dharia*) he was carrying. The few cuffs the man received seemed to bring him to himself. He now told the villagers that his name was Budhiabhai

Chaudhary and that he was employed as a beat-guard at Gangapur by the Forest Department with his residence at Gangapur settlement near Amli dam site. On hearing this, the villagers stopped the rough treatment and returned his weapon to him. They put him in a tractor-trolley working at the dam site which happened to be going in that direction.

Next morning Budhiabhai reported the incident, or his version of it, to Mr. Malek, the Ranger at Mandvi. Budhiabhai also must have filed a complaint with the Mandvi police soon after, for the police took action on the matter by evening of the same day. The police reached the nearby Bhunda village and sent word to Devgiri that all the people of Devgiri should report to Bhunda immediately. As soon as the message reached Devgiri, those who were present in the village at the time proceeded to Bhunda. First to arrive at Bhunda were Chandu Hira Vasava and Dhanji Supadia. Impatient at the delay in the arrival of people from Devgiri, the police took the two tribals into custody and left for Mandvi, leaving a message behind that the remaining people should report to the Mandvi police station on the following day. The two arrested men were sent to Mandvi jail. Next morning the Ranger Mr. Malek was seen at Devgiri on motorcycle, presumably studying the terrain in view of the operation that evening. It is logical to conclude that he masterminded the operation.

Seeing that two of their fellow villagers had been sent to jail, the elders of the village trecked to Mandvi that day to see about their release. In the evening of the same day, a motorcycle carrying two foresters, namely, Chatur Ramji Vasava and a certain Solanki, and six bicycles arrived at Devgiri. In the party were four constables armed with guns and nine other persons of the Forest Department staff at Tarapur. Immediately on their arrival, they set about the business on hand. The visitors first rounded up all the male adult tribals they could find in the village, and brought them to the shade of a *mahua* tree, showering blows on them while doing so. By the time seven men were apprehended, the others suspected something foul and fled the village into the surrounding forest and hills. The seven captured men were the following: Nava

Chamadia Vasava, Vimala Chamadia Vasava, Singa Kalia Vasava, Satalia Hubda Vasava, Kataria Nathia Vasava, Nava Hulial Vasava and Babu Kotana Vasava.

Now the torture of the men began. Forester Chatur Ramji Vasava was in charge of the operation torture. He ordered the seven to dance round the *mahua* tree. From his mouth he produced sounds imitative of drum beats to accompany the dance step. Those who failed to dance to his complete satisfaction were beaten on the legs, thighs, and backs by the constables. After this grotesque dance show, the men were asked to lie face down on the ground, holding up their feet. The forest staff and the constables, wearing heavy boots, tramped on the backs of the men on the ground. While they did this they struck at the feet of the victims with lathis. Then Forester Vasava had Satalia Hublia tied to a bicycle. One of the constables mounted the bicycle and pedalled as fast as he could, thus compelling Satalia to run behind. The other six men were also made to run but they were not tied to the bicycle. The forest staff and the constables pursued the running men and beat them whenever they slowed down or failed to keep pace with the bicycle.

After the men were made to run for more than a kilometre, they were ordered to stop. Here a new phase of the torment began. The men were told to pluck leaves of the *khakar* tree and make cups out of them. When the leaf cups were ready, the hapless tribals were ordered to urinate into the cups and pass the cups to their fellows. Whoever showed the slightest reluctance was severely beaten with lathis. All the seven were compelled to drink the contents of the cup. The barbarous ritual over, all except Nava Chamadia were permitted to go home. Nava was taken to Mandvi forest office where Mr. J.L. Zala, an official of the department questioned him whether he had been beaten up. On Nava's admission that he had been thoroughly beaten up, Zala asked Vasava and a constable to take Chamadia to Tarapur. Here the tribal was put on a truck going in the direction of Devgiri. He reached his village around 11.00 p.m. Chandu Hira Vasava and Dhanji Supadia, who had been sent to jail, were released on bail. The case registered against them is

being heard in Mandvi court. Advocate Balwant Singh Bojwalia is appearing for the two tribals. He collected Rs. 400.00 from the villagers for securing the bail. The villagers had also stood surety for the two men. The amount was collected through subscriptions. Each of the 60 families contributed Rs. 10.00. What was left over after paying the lawyer was spent on travel.

When the tribal leaders of the district came to hear of the outrageous treatment meted out to the men of Devgiri, they were shocked and dismayed. A protest meeting was held at Devgiri. The meeting was addressed by such leaders as Amarsing Chaudhary, a former chairman of the Tribal Development Corporation, Chandubhai Deshmukh, former Minister for Tribal Welfare and Forests, Chimanbhai Patel, a former chief minister of Gujarat, Arvind Desai of Halpati Seva Sangh and others. It is unlikely that anything more will come of it.

It may also be noted here that the whole population of Devgiri has been uprooted by the Amli Dam project. The dam construction has been completed but the villagers have been submerged in the catchment area. The people of Devgiri and other villagers have traditionally made a precarious living by cultivating these lands. They have lost not only their land but also their houses. They have been given a pitiful amount as compensation. The villagers of Gangapur and Bhunda are also faced with the same situation. All these tribals who were born and made a living in these areas are now thrown out unceremoniously. And no one seems to care!



## Two Fallen Leaders

Any tribal who shows signs of leadership, or dares to question the authority of the landlords, the police or the politicians is victimised, often exterminated. In this chapter we shall look at this process of elimination of tribal leadership and the suppression of the tribal voice through the experiences of two fallen leaders.

### Narsing Anop

The memory of Narsing Anop remains vivid and luminous among the tribals of Valia. His name is an inspiration not only for those who have known him personally but also those who have only heard about him. People still speak with fondness and pride of his courage, his oratory and his dedication to the cause of the harassed tribals. The liberation of his people from their bondage was the mission he had accepted and the cause to which he had dedicated himself. But he was cut down cruelly in the pursuance of that mission. The *Satyagraha* he organised in the forest at Peterkui in Mandvi taluka of Surat district in April 1981 claimed his life. While leading a large group of tribals on this occasion, he was shot by forest guards and he died of the gunshot wound in Surat hospital after a few days.

Narsing first came to public attention while serving as a *gramsevak* in the late sixties. He had begun to take a keen interest in the sad plight of the tribals. He had noticed with sorrow how they were being harassed, exploited and dispossessed of their land. For some time, Narsing served as *gramsevak* in the Rajpura *panchayat*. From here he was transferred to Sabaria. But before he could

take up his new post, he was once again transferred to Panoli gram panchayat. Narsing refused to accept the second transfer. Thereupon he was suspended. He challenged the suspension in court and eventually won the case. He was now reinstated in his post.

Narsing suffered much harassment at the hands of the police. He was one of the accused in a murder case and was jailed for six months. In the lock-up he was severely beaten up. Later he was acquitted of the charge. Once Narsing tried to intervene on behalf of a close associate of his, who had been arrested on the charge of violation of prohibition. There was an exchange of words and then of blows. The police fired without injuring anyone. Later Narsing claimed that the police themselves were drunk at the time of firing. It does not tax one's credulity to accept Narsing's charge about the police, as the police there have never been known to be teetotallers and country liquor is available in large quantities in spite of the prohibition law. After the episode Narsing remained in hiding for three months.

Another major brush with the police occurred following the confiscation by the police of some toddy kept for the traditional ritual the tribals perform when a woman enters her labour. The police had taken the toddy away. Narsing, accompanied by a group of tribals, met the policemen at the Kadwali bus stand and an altercation followed. By this time the policemen were reported to have been drunk. The police then left the scene but soon returned with guns. At this the tribals fled. We meet Narsing in action again during the strike by the farm workers in April 1981. The strike was a complete success in Narsing's home village, Patharia. Later, when the SRP was deployed to Valia, and some SRP men stationed at Patharia itself, this village was further subjected to ruthless repression.

*Peterkui Satyagraha.* In his meetings with the tribals, Narsing repeatedly told them that the land as well as the forests were theirs and that the outsiders had disinherited them of their ancestral possessions. The use of the forest was their birth-right, he told them, and they didn't need anyone's permission to use it. To highlight this point, Narsing decided

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to organise a *Satyagraha* towards the end of April 1981 at the forest at Peterkui. He publicly announced the coming event. Groups of tribals came with bullock carts. The protesters reached Sabaria village on the evening of April 28. They halted there for the night. The next morning they set off again and entered the forest at about 8.00 a.m. Their plan was to fell trees and cart them away to use them for house building. The protesters were grouped village-wise. Manga Supad was leading a team from Pithor. Narsing told the assembled men that if anyone attempted to question their action, they were not to argue or resort to violence. They were to go about their business coolly. Now the protesters dispersed to different parts of the forest, and started their work. The action was not done clandestinely. It had been well advertised in the neighbouring villages.

When they had worked two hours at felling trees, a jeep and a tractor-trailer loaded with forest guards and policemen drove up to the place. Four of the constables were armed with rifles and others with lathis. When they attempted to stop the tribals from their work, a scuffle followed. At this time a few blows were exchanged. Narsing, who was at the moment working some distance away, rushed to the spot and managed to pacify the tribals and brought the situation under control. Narsing was asked to stop the whole operation under way. He told the forest guards and the constables that the tribals have a right to the forest and that he had documents to prove it. At this moment, according to eye-witnesses, he moved off a few paces to the shade of a tree where he had kept his file. Narsing was accustomed to carry this file with him. A shot or two were fired. Narsing was seen falling to the ground. He was hit on his thigh, a little above the knee. There had been no warning before the firing. After the shots, the forest guards and the policemen climbed into their vehicles and drove away. Vajanbhai, a youth of 21 years from Rajpura village, who acted as Narsing's body-guard was also injured in the firing. No help whatever was offered by the forest guards to take the injured man to seek medical help. Peterkui is far away from any village, not to speak of a hospital.

The tribals tied up his wound as best as they could to stop the bleeding and put him on a bullock-cart. Then began the long and agonisingly slow ride to a hospital. They were now headed for the primary health centre at Zankhvav. It was nearly 7.00 p.m. when Narsing was brought to Zankhvav. He was now unconscious. At the health centre in Zankhvav the doctor in attendance gave the wounded man first aid. He told Narsing's friends that he could not do anything more for the patient as the centre was ill-equipped. He advised them to take the patient to Surat. Here again there was an unexplained further delay in moving the patient to Surat. It was nearly four hours later, after much precious time had been lost, that a private vehicle was pressed into service. The police didn't offer their jeep for the purpose. Narsing was admitted to the Government Hospital in Surat. Dissatisfied with the quality of medical attention there, the tribals moved the patient to a private hospital in Surat. There he died on May 9.

His death was a shock for the tribals. He was the embodiment of their unity and their leadership. Fate had intervened to deprive them of that leadership. It need not be mentioned that in the case that followed about the firing at Peterkui leading to Narsing's death, the police were acquitted of all blame.

*A Tribal Guru.* Some years before his death, Narsing had met Kesarising Kunwar, known as 'Dada' to the tribals of southern Gujarat. Kesarising lives with his brother on a farm near Vyara in Surat district. He is the founder of *Satipati Sangh*, also known as A.C. (Ante-Christ) Panth. Narsing was greatly influenced in his thinking by the 'Dada' who has scores of followers among the tribals of southern Gujarat, as well as in Maharashtra.

I travelled to Vyara to see for myself the man who has succeeded in motivating many illiterate tribals and continues to influence their attitudes. Kesarising is in his mid-eighties and of medium height with an anemic look about him. Born a Gamit, he acquired a high school education. He has a smattering of English, which like most Indians, he likes to show off. Besides Gujarati, he speaks Marathi and Hindi.

According to Kesarising, the tribals are the only genuine



inhabitants of India. All others are encroachers and usurpers. He also maintains that the tribals are proto-Aryans. Kesarising keeps framed documents containing copies of letters purported to have been received from the office of the United Nations and the British government. These 'documents,' which he willingly shows the visitors, are supposed to prove the recognition by these bodies of the sovereignty of the tribals. These 'documents' are composed in bad English, and I could make little sense out of them. This suggests that they are in all likelihood Kesarising's own creations intended to impress the illiterate tribals.

Kesarising propounds several theories some of which sound a bit quaint. For example, he recognises only the one-rupee currency notes as legal tender. He dismisses all other notes of higher denominations as fake. He is convinced that the tribals are under no obligations to pay taxes. He brushes aside all direct questions about his plan of action, his vision for the tribals and his strategy. He objected to notes being taken at the interview.

Yet there is method in his 'madness.' Even in all his illogicalities, in his mixture of sense and nonsense, Kesarising's basic message comes through, namely, that the tribals have been defrauded of their land. And he knows fully well that the message will easily be grasped by the illiterate tribals. Kesarising had strongly disapproved of the action of Narsing in leading the *Satyagraha* at Peterkui. He described the action as foolhardy. Kesarising advocates a policy of non-confrontation. Narsing is gone but his guru still continues to shape the thinking of many tribals in southern Gujarat.

### **Manga Supad**

On November 12, 1983, newspapers carried the news of the brutal murder of the young tribal leader, Manga Supad, at his home village, Pithor. The murder put an end to another tribal story. He had just begun to emerge as a leader among the tribals. Before he stepped on to the stage of tribal leadership, he had led a loose and aimless life, given to bouts of heavy drinking. Then a gradual change came over him. His life seemed to assume a purpose. Narsing Anop and Baba

Kunj Bihari of Dehli were largely responsible for the change that came over Manga. Manga spent much time in Narsing's company and attended meetings addressed by him. He admired Narsing's eloquence and courage.

Baba Kunj Bihari used to talk to him of the days gone by and the deteriorating conditions in the tribal area. Manga became a frequent visitor at the Ganganath Temple. The Baba, who had broken his thigh in a fall and was bed-ridden, could expect no assistance from the Rajputs, Patels or Brahmins of Dehli on account of his sympathy for the tribals. He was looked after by the tribals of Pithor. During his long stay in Dehli he had watched with much sorrow and concern the growing impoverishment of the tribals. He had witnessed the influx of the outsiders and the havoc that resulted from it. All this had a great influence on Manga.

First, Manga gave up drinking. He had no education worth mentioning. But he was an intelligent man. He could become a leader to help his fellow tribals. He could unite them against exploitation—he was only in his late twenties. Manga played a prominent role in the farm workers' strike of April 1981. The strike clearly demonstrated that the tribals could not be taken for granted. They had reached a level of awareness where they could unite for a common purpose. Though the terms of agreement between the landlords and the farm workers remained unimplemented, the strike had forged a united front of the workers.

In 1980-81 Manga Supad had given ample proof of his organising ability by putting together a band of *seemrakhas* and bagged the contract from the farmers of Delhi for that year. But the Dehli farmers were becoming suspicious of his growing influence and his motives. Manga had boldly demanded that wages should be raised from the prevailing rate of Rs. 3.00 per day. The contract was not renewed.

In the wake of the strike, a period of repression followed. Scores of men were jailed. Manga was one of them. When he was in jail, the police destroyed the hut in which he was living with his aged grandmother. On another raid, a constable raped his wife, Dalki. Even after Manga was released from jail, the police continued to harass him and charge him with

responsibility for various crimes, including dacoity.

In pinning blame on him for any crime in the vicinity of Pithor and even distant villages of Valia, the police were acting true to form. In the eyes of the police, a man once an offender, is always an offender. It is convenient for them to assume that he never reforms. An old offender makes a very good whipping boy for them. It relieves them of the duty of looking for the real perpetrator of an offence. However, to the tribals, Manga was a constant source of inspiration and strength. They used to bring their troubles to him for counsel and assistance. He regularly visited the villages and talked to the people. He exhorted them to give up drinking habits, which according to him was the cause of their degradation. In 1982 some tribal workers of Valia complained to Manga of the denial of fair wages and harassment by the landlords. He intervened on their behalf, and asked the landlords to desist from harassment. The landlords, according to the tribals, had Manga arrested on the charges of dacoity. He was also severely beaten up at the Valia bus stand. The last meeting Manga addressed was held at Valia on October 23, 1983. He stressed the need for unity among the tribals, and on the importance of education in order to improve their conditions and to withstand all kinds of exploitation.

Manga's end came suddenly and is still shrouded in mystery. On November 11, around 8.00 a.m. a heavily armed group of tribals, reportedly dragged Manga out of his hut in Pithor and took him to the outskirts of the village and hacked him to death. Some of his own relations are reported to have been in the murder gang. The police arrived at the scene of the crime about 11.00 a.m. though they had been notified soon after the murder. After the postmortem, his body was brought back and buried at the burial ground at Delhi. A week after the crime, 14 murder suspects were arrested in Desad village. The case is still going on but much pressure is reportedly being brought on the eye witnesses to disclaim any knowledge of the crime. The cause of Manga's murder is not very clear. Was it tribal jealousy, political rivalry or another plot by the landlords. Whoever were behind Manga's murder, in his death another budding tribal leader was exterminated.

## Divided and Enslaved

Politicians have brought deep divisions among the tribals and have further weakened their strength, which is daily being sapped through conflict with the landlords. Dividing the people through threats, bribery and political handouts has led to a slow but ruthless enslavement of the tribals by the landlords and political bosses.

### Horse trading

One of the undesirable consequences of the political rivalry that has been introduced into the tribal society of Valia is the horse trading that is in full swing there now. For political ends, corruption is thus legitimised and protected. A typical example of this can be seen in the political patronage offered to the Secretary of the Milk Cooperative Society at Bhamadia village. The Secretary reportedly defalcated a large amount of money from the Society's funds. Till this time, only one party had following in this village. To cover up his misdeed, the Secretary approached the boss of the ruling party, who readily extended his support to the corrupt man. The party boss had been waiting for just such an opportunity to establish a base in Bhamadia village. A war was declared on those who refused to countenance the defalcation. On September 17, 1983 an armed mob attacked the local Janata Party man, Chandubhai Maganbhai's residence, and damaged his property. In another raid on January 22, 1984 vandals destroyed his crop.

The political intrigues have caused deep fissures in the tribal community of Bhamadia with the people ranged on two



sides, one side supporting a corrupt tribal, and the other siding with the Janata Party. One's capacity to indulge in corrupt practices depends on which side of the fence one is. It is not surprising that the tribals have adopted the course of buying patronage for their sheer survival. Others have been offered monetary rewards to shift their political allegiance. Even a person of the calibre of Manga Supad was offered Rs. 5000 for crossing over to the ruling party in Gujarat from the C.P.I. Money and favours and other allurements are dangled before the tribals to win adherents for political parties.

### **The triangle**

The landlords, the politicians and the police constitute a triangle in Valia. The tribals, who are caught in between, are made to pay a heavy price for everything.

The Patels, though a minority among the landlords, are an important segment of the population. The Patels have no love for the Rajputs. But they readily join hands with them against the tribals on such matters as wages. The Patels maintain that in the enforcement of minimum wages, they are being harassed, while the Rajput landlords go scot free. This they attribute to the Rajput hegemony. 'The Rajputs have simply taken over the country, moans a Patel Landlord of Dajipura. While the Patels intensely resent the power of the Rajputs, they also insist that the government is pampering the tribals. They have little sympathy for the aspirations and demands of the tribals. Today the Valia landlords are staunch supporters of the Congress (I). So were they of the Janata Party during the short tenure of the Babubhai Jasbhai Patel Ministry from 1977-79.

Obviously the landlords have found that playing up to the party in power has several advantages and they were determined to reap them. It is not unreasonable to assume that they would again transfer their allegiance if another party comes to power in the State. Class interests have taken on protective political colouration. Colours may vary, but the design behind the colouration does not. Even if a new party comes to power, nothing will change the situation in Valia. The landlords are determined to safeguard their interests at

all costs. Their strong-arm measures are merely an expression of their determination. Scores of applications from the landlords for gun licences now pending before the authorities speak for themselves. The tribals are always on the receiving end, often made to pay a price for their very existence in Valia. The tribals themselves have time and again pointed out how their fellow tribals in the police force surpass the non-tribals in brutality and callousness. It is the price they have to pay for their jobs. Other petty tribal officials too dare not show bias in favour of the tribals for fear of earning the displeasure of their bosses.

Ruling party politics in Bhamadia freely use intimidation and vandalism against the tribals. Chandubhai Maganbhai, the tribal leader of the village, continues to be subjected to attacks by mobs. On June 8, 1984 a mob of an estimated 150 people, consisting mostly of people from outside the village, attacked his residence. Several Rajputs from Luna were in the mob. More noticeably, Dilawarkhan, the notorious goonda of Luna, was one of the attackers. Ambu Mahida, vice-president of Valia *taluka panchayat*, appeared to be directing the operation. Following the attack, Chandubhai lodged a complaint with the Valia police. The police however deleted the name of Ambu Mahida from the list of names of the attackers.

A posse of six SRP men has been posted at the residence of Chandubhai after the latest mob attack. Another young tribal leader, Manilal, the newly elected president of Bhamadia *gram panchayat* in Valia *taluku*, has been given an indication of things to come. On July 6, 1984, Chanda Devji, the new recruit to the ruling party from Bhamadia village, went to the residence of Manilal and poured out threats on him. Manilal has also lodged a complaint with the Valia police.

The tribal leadership is thus hemmed in on three sides—by the police, controlled by the political bosses, by the powerful landlords who employ hired goondas and who have the assistance of the police, and by the politicians who dangle blandishments before the tribals to establish their bases. The beleaguered leaders are fighting for survival. Many of the young leaders I talked to suspect that there is a conspiracy

afoot to exterminate the emerging tribal leadership. For evidence, they point to the violent deaths of such leaders as Mohan Narsing, Narsing Anop, and Manga Supad.

### **Extermination continues**

One of the latest acts of violence was the fatal attack on Amarsing Kotesing Vasava, chairman of the Tribal Development Corporation, Gujarat, who was also holding the rank of a minister. On March 3, 1984, a little after midnight, Amarsing was woken up at his home in Koyli Mandvi in Valia taluka by a group of men who said they had important business and had brought a letter from a close friend of Amarsing. While talking to the men he was stabbed. When he caught the assailant by the hair, another struck out at his leg with an axe. He then ran into the house. He was fired at. (*Loksatta*, May 10, 1984). He died in the government hospital at Bharuch on March 3. In his dying confession, he reportedly told the executive magistrate Bharuch that the attack on him was politically motivated.

The suspicion of involvement of politicians is strengthened by the long inaction of the police following murder of Amarsing. A meeting attended by nearly 8,000 people was held at Mowza on April 8 to protest against the failure of the police to arrest the culprits. A delegation of tribal leaders met Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on April 24, and submitted a memorandum. The Prime Minister is understood to have passed an order for the arrest of the culprits within 48 hours. Only on the sixty-fourth day after the murder were some murder suspects taken into custody. (*Loksatta*, May 13, 1984) Amarsing belonged to the ruling party. Many young tribals seem to feel now that belonging to the ruling party is no guarantee against extermination.

## Conclusion: A Cry for Justice

In the preceding pages I have tried to give a general, by no means exhaustive, picture of the situation in Valia and neighbouring *talukas*. If these pages say anything, it is that there have been massive human rights violations in these areas.

It takes a lot of nerves to tell the tribals of Valia that they live in a democratic country, or that they have certain basic rights. Their experience provides little evidence for this. Law in the hands of the police has become a cover for law-breaking. Humanity in the hands of unscrupulous landlords and politicians have become a piece of clay they can mould as they wish. The situation that prevails in this tribal area is a repudiation of the Constitutional provisions for special protection for the Scheduled Tribes. Those guilty of letting loose repression on them or abetting it stand indicted by the Constitution.

It can hardly be denied that repression has caused incalculable damage to the dignity of the people of Valia. It is hard to believe that the incidents narrated here actually took place and are still taking place in this land of non-violence and religious tolerance. But in spite of these brutal incidents, the spirit of the people lives. One day that spirit will rise up and demand for an answer from all of us.

To restore its credibility in the eyes of the tribals, the Gujarat government must first make public the Joseph Commission Report of October, 1981. Only by doing this can it refute the charge of giving protection to guilty officers.



Releasing the Report will also be a test of its sincerity and goodwill towards the harassed tribals.

There is more than sufficient ground for calling for a high-level and impartial enquiry into these incidents. The democratic principles we glory in, demand such an inquiry. The blood of so many innocent tribals killed in Valia, clamour for it. The wounded human spirit of the tribals left behind, cry for it.

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