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ALL INDIA KISAN SABHA

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**REVOLT
OF
THE WARLIS**

GODAVARI PARULEKAR

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ALL INDIA KISAN SABHA

FOREWORD

THE ALL INDIA KISAN SABHA, THE PREMIER ORGANISATION of the peasantry in our country, is celebrating its Golden Jubilee at Patna in Bihar, from April 25 to 27, 1986. Its foundation conference was held in Lucknow on April 11, 1936, which declared as its objective, "to secure complete freedom from economic exploitation of the peasantry and the achievement of full economic and political power for the peasants and workers and all other exploited classes".

Many struggles, big and small, were fought by the peasantry under the leadership of All India Kisan Sabha, and the organisation of the All India Kisan Sabha spread to all provinces of the country. The post-Second World War period saw some of the most glorious struggles of the peasantry—the Tebhaga struggle in Bengal, the glorious action in Punnapra-Vayalar, the Warli peasants in Maharashtra, the struggle of occupancy tenants in PEPSU, of the tribal peasantry of Tripura and, to crown them all, the heroic armed struggle of the Telangana peasantry.

The Central Kisan Council has decided to bring out pamphlets on all these struggles, so that the Kisan cadre, and the peasants in general, can know what role these struggles played in awakening the peasant masses and in building the Kisan Sabha. The task of writing these pamphlets has been entrusted to those who actually participated in these struggles and were part of the leadership.

This pamphlet is the first in the series, written by Godavari Parulekar, who herself was at the head of the struggle of the Warli peasantry. It gives an inspiring example of building an organisation and developing the struggle of those tribals who were kept backward and were the worst exploited. But once they rallied behind the Red Flag of the Kisan Sabha, they scored many victories and remained loyal to the Sabha in spite of all efforts by the ruling party to disrupt their unity.

I am sure this will help in understanding the necessity of organising the tribals, leading their struggle, and making them a strong part of the struggle for agrarian revolution.

New Delhi

Harkishan Singh Surjeet

REVOLT OF THE WARLIS

Godavari Parulekar

THE HEROIC AND HISTORICAL STRUGGLE FOR EMANCIPATION waged by the aboriginal tribes, popularly known as the Warlis, had attracted wide attention—of the Congress Government, then led by the late B.G. Kher, the press and the public.

In a communique issued on December 13, 1946, the Government had described it as the culmination of “the undesirable activities of those who advocated violence to bring about a political change, mainly the ushering in of a Communist State in India.” The Special Correspondent of *The Times of India*, in the course of his despatch of January 6, 1947, said :

“A detachment of the Maratha Light Infantry is standing at Kalyan and an advance guard of the Regiment moved into Dahanu, Thana district, on Sunday afternoon, starting immediately on a reconnaissance of the Thana district, where a state of undeclared war between the landlords and the aboriginal tenants has reached so serious a pitch that isolated farm units are being stormed, and landlords set foot on their estates only at dire peril to themselves.”

Michael Brown, the Bombay correspondent of the *Australian Daily Telegraph*, reported :

“A woman Communist is leading a revolt of the aboriginal Warlis in the thick jungles of Thana district of Bombay.”

What was the real and correct nature of the struggle ?

Revolt it was, in the sense that the Warlis were desperately and violently struggling to break the chains of the bondage which had held them in subjugation for over a century. It was a battle for emancipation, with a history of continuous struggle for two years. In 1945, for the first time, they consciously rose to end

their abominable conditions of serfdom. Since that time, their struggles went through various stages and vicissitudes. The courage and determination which they showed in the face of ruthless and brutal repression by the landlords, the imperialist rulers and the popular government, the sufferings they bore unflinchingly, and the sacrifices they made, have earned them a proud place in the glorious record of the struggle of the Indian peasantry for its emancipation.

What caused them to wage this relentless and desperate struggle? What inspired them to fight their exploiters so courageously? What were the hopes, aims and dreams that made these "timid" and "cowardly" Warlis such courageous, heroic and stubborn warriors? What inspired them to show such a unique capacity to suffer and sacrifice?

The popular ministry and a large section of the nationalist press naively and comfortably argued that the Warlis were uncivilised, illiterate and gullible, and that they had been incited by the Communists with their fiery speeches. This theory of the exploitation of mass struggle is stale and most discredited. The capitalists all over the world have trotted it out for explaining the struggles of the working class, since the birth itself of the working class. The imperialists repeated it in order to explain away the mass upsurge of the colonial people for winning their independence, and damn those who organised and led it.

What, however, was novel and disquieting, was the fact that the Ministry, representing the will of the people and itself condemned and maligned by the imperialists for organising and leading the movement for national liberation, should have ventured to adopt this same theory to explain the struggle of the Warlis for their emancipation.

Whence does this theory for explaining mass struggles arise? It emerges out of contempt for the masses, the prejudices against those who organise and lead them, and fear of the class struggle of the exploited.

BACKGROUND

Thana is one of the districts in Maharashtra State. In many talukas such as Dahanu, Talasari, Jawhar, Wada, Mokhada,

Palghar, etc., the forests in the mountain ranges are inhabited by a large number of tribal communities called Adivasis. There were then neither roads nor communications, schools nor dispensaries in this area. It was a world where only unimaginable misery, poverty, destitution, degradation, disease, exploitation and death flourished.

The total population of the aboriginal tribes in the Thana district is about five lakhs, the majority of whom are Warli Adivasis.

THE BRITISH ERA : LOSS OF LAND

Approximately one hundred and twenty five years ago, i.e. till mid-19th century, the Warlis were the owners of all the land in the region. They lived in the midst of beautiful natural surroundings, a contented people, growing plenty of paddy and eating their fill. With the advent of British rule, outsiders—Hindus, Parsis and Muslims—infiltrated the region with the connivance of the British rulers. They were educated men, tradesmen and merchants. Taking advantage of the illiteracy, ignorance and docility of the Warlis, they began systematically to appropriate their lands. Gradually, most of the lands of the Adivasis passed into the hands of the newcomers, who established themselves as powerful landlords.

In order to expropriate the original rightful owners of the land, these newcomers committed many heinous crimes. It was but natural that the Adivasis were unwilling to part with their lands. Some of them are alleged to have been shot dead for their recalcitrance, while others were tied to trees and whipped, or tortured in other ways. In some cases deeds were made out which the Adivasis were cheated into signing with their thumb impressions. Thus the Adivasis lost all their land.

In order to maintain a hold over the Adivasi Warlis after taking away their land, the landlords offered to give back to them certain plots of very poor land on a share-cropping basis in return for half of the produce of the land. In fact, the landlords of course always claimed "bigger share" than what had been agreed upon. The 'gift' of poor land was made to yield further advantages. In repayment, the Adivasis were obliged to do

all the farm jobs on the landlords' rich land, for which nothing was paid. Thus, through this forced labour, the hitherto free Adivasi was reduced to the status of a serf.

This land-hungry peasant looked upon even the bit of poor soil given to him, as a part of his very being, the loss of which would affect him in the same way as if a lump of flesh had been torn out of his very body. He was willing to do anything in order to keep it.

The landlords thus exploited the peasants in two different ways : First, Adivasis tilled the land of the landlords without any remuneration, with the landlords keeping the entire produce for themselves. In addition, the landlord would demand a big share of the produce of the land given to the peasant.

Further, the landlords were very often the owners of extensive grass lands as well as the contractors who took the local forests in auction sales from the Government. The landlords made the same tenants cut grass on their grass lands, and the trees in their forests. Hence, they exploited the Adivasis in their capacity as landlords, as grass land owners and as forest contractors, in order to acquire a permanent supply of free labour for all the work that was involved on their estates.

In addition to all this the landlords used their unlimited power over the life and death of the aboriginal peasants to force them to render all services to the landlords free. They had to supply firewood from the jungles free ; carry milk to the residences of the landlords ten to fifteen miles away ; worked as domestic servants and, with tears in their eyes, had to clean even the latrines. The list of the services which they thus rendered to the landlords was inexhaustible, and its full enumeration is impossible here.

There existed, therefore, thousands of aboriginal debt slaves in the area, slaves in every respect except one, that they could not be bought and sold by their masters. The system of debt slavery which began with their loss of land, became a rule of their serfdom which survived till 1945, the time when the Warlis rose in revolt.

Then landlords used the aboriginal women as their mistresses and for entertaining their official and non-official guests.

In 1945 when I first saw the Adivasis at close quarters,

they were living in their limited world about eighty miles from Bombay. These half-naked Adivasis were eking out a starved existence in the jungles and valleys of Thana district. Knowledge of the outside world seemed irrelevant under their existing conditions. Held fast in the grip of exploitation and death, these people were leading a life of indescribable horror.

The whole administrative machinery in the area was used by landlords as a handmaid for maintaining this rule of tyranny, torture, oppression and exploitation. The courts were their mouth-piece, the police were their protectors to enable the landlords to commit heinous offences of murder, torture, rape, etc. With nothing to fear or hesitate over, some of these offences had become commonplace occurrences, but their perpetrators remained undetected. Instances of any landlord having to pay penalty under the common law for the offences he committed, were unknown in the area.

The administration of justice and law in cases where the aboriginal was the accused and landlord the complainant, however, presented a totally different picture. The courts were open and shameless champions of the landlords, having discarded even the appearance of impartiality. One of the richest landlords of the area was the Honorary First Class Magistrate in the Talasari taluka.

The poverty and wretchedness arising out of such conditions, necessarily defy any attempt to describe them adequately. To get a faithful and full picture they needed to be observed and studied first-hand.

By contrast was the grandeur, the pomp and the wealth in which the landlords of the area rolled, the fruit entirely of the forced labour of the aboriginal peasants. Some of the landlords had constructed private roads, bridges and pleasure tanks with the free labour of the Warlis. Most of the landlords built palatial pleasure resorts on their estates in their villages, popularly known as *awars*.

In the innermost corner of his heart, the Warli nursed the same intense hatred for these *awars* which the French people had for the *Bastille*, because it was in these *awars* that they were murdered, tortured, tied to posts and whipped till they bled, and where the chastity of their women was assaulted.

THE ADIVASI SEVA MANDAL

Before the Kisan Sabha stepped into the world of the aboriginal hill tribes in the Talasari and Dahamu talukas, an association called the Adivasi Seva Mandal had been working among them since 1940, for supposedly ameliorating their conditions, organised under the auspices of the Congress party by the late B.G. Kher, the Chief—then called Prime—Minister of Bombay Province. It was the misfortune of aboriginal hill tribes that their conditions did not come to the knowledge of B.G. Kher till nearly three years after he first became the Chief Minister.

But, in fact, the Mandal was a purely formal gesture, its aims and objects shallow and superficial, based on a poor and almost pitiable understanding of the problems of the aboriginal hill tribes which the promoters of the Mandal wanted to tackle.

The problem of the aboriginal hill tribes was essentially the problem of serfdom and its inherent evils. Its only solution could be the abolition of that serfdom. The aims and objects of the association, however, bore no shadow of a trace of either the real problem or its solution. What the aboriginal hill tribes urgently needed was their liberation and freedom, what the Mandal promised them was creation of interest in them in permanent habitation—colonies and settlement; multi-purpose societies; reformation of their habits and mode of daily life; reclamation from superstition by introducing the Ganapati Puja; medical aid, schools and hostels; literacy classes for adults and the raising of their social status by inculcating in them ideas of human dignity, morality and self-respect—all without the prior abolition of serfdom and slavery. The Adivasi Seva Mandal advocated abolition of the conditions of serfdom and slavery by appealing to the hearts of the landlords and converting them.

In short, the activities in which the Mandal was engaged during the six years of its existence were purely and solely "constructive", as some of the workers of the Mandal chose to describe them. Abolition of serfdom was considered destructive, and the Mandal was opposed to any 'destructive' work, even if it was the destruction of the evil.

Naturally this reformist and class collaborationist organisation failed to win the confidence of the aboriginal serfs and slaves. The plans of the Adivasi Seva Mandal to solve the problems of the Adivasis were as ambitious and ridiculous as trying to melt the Himalayan mountains by putting a match to them, or taming all the wild animals in the jungles into submission by playing a flute.

It is particularly necessary to note this when, today, several reformist and class collaborationist organisations are raising their heads, like poisonous mushrooms, in the backward Adivasi areas all over India, especially to beat down the influence of the Kisan Sabha and the Red Flag wherever it is raised.

STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION

The basic cause for the upsurge of the Warlis thus lay in their abominable conditions of wretchedness and their oppression by tyrant landlords. They had rotted in these conditions for a century, unnoticed and uncared for. In the innermost corner of their hearts they nursed an unextinguishable hatred for their conditions, but they dared not express it. Fear and helplessness kept it smouldering within. Nowhere on the horizon did they see any ray of hope for their liberation. They lived in a mood of bitter despair. Anxious to end their slavery, they did not know how to do it. They needed someone who would extend to them his helping hand, show the road to their freedom, guide them, take their side against their oppressors, stand by them and lead them in their fight to be free men and women.

This need was fulfilled by the Kisan Sabha, when it went to work amongst them. They rose to resist their oppressors as one man. This movement of liberation started in May 1945 when they first raised their banner of revolt against serfdom.

The Maharashtra Kisan Sabha had decided to hold the first Provincial Kisan Conference of Maharashtra at Titwala, in Thana district, on January 11, 1945. In pursuance of this decision the Kisan Sabha workers in Thana district planned to mobilise representatives of the peasants from all the talukas of the district. While campaigning for the conference, the Kisan Sabha workers for the first time came into contact with the aboriginal hill tribes of Talasari taluka in December 1944.

The late Comrade Parulekar addressed a meeting of about 300 Warlis at Dingari village in Talasari taluka, in the third week of December. The Warlis listened to him with rapt attention for over an hour. Comrade Parulekar's speech broke the ice between them; his approach of class struggle captivated their hearts. In turn, they narrated at great length and in great detail, how they were inhumanly tortured and tyrannised by the landlords. They told Parulekar that he had spoken what they felt deeply but could not express.

What appealed to them the most, was the reason which he gave for their poverty. They said :

"You have rightly said that we are poor because we are exploited. We feel the same, but all the rest who met us before blamed us for our poverty. The landlords tell us that we are poor because we drink toddy and are ignorant. The Adivasi Seva Mandal repeats what the landlords say. They are all blind to the reality. You alone have said what we believe to be true."

They promised to send representatives to attend the Maharashtra Conference at Titawala, but laid down one condition and demanded its acceptance from Comrade Parulekar. The condition was that one of the Kisan Sabha workers must stay in their midst to help them after the conference. They were afraid, and justifiably so, that the landlords would inflict the most brutal punishment when they came to know that they had attended the conference. They said :

"We are prepared to resist the landlords and sahuikars with the strength of our unity. We want the Kisan Sabha worker to help us to unite and to show us how to fight the landlords successfully. We are prepared to give our lives for securing our freedom."

The condition was accepted.

TITWALA CONFERENCE

Fifteen Warli representatives from Talasari taluka attended the conference. The mobilisation of about 7000 peasants from different districts of Maharashtra had an electrifying effect on the Warlis. It inspired and transformed them. One of them,

Maya Dhangaenda of Zari village, who had never spoken more than a few words all his life, volunteered to speak on the resolution on abolition of forced labour. He trembled while he spoke, but he spoke with determination. His pent-up feelings had found an outlet and they rushed out in a torrent. He held the conference spell-bound by his pathetic narration. He declared in conclusion that the Warlis would end serfdom and resist their oppression.

The Warlis who returned from the conference were not the same as those who attended it. The conference had changed them beyond recognition. They no longer trembled in the presence of their oppressors, but started defying them. They had returned convinced that abolition of forced labour was an easy job, and started efforts in right earnest for achieving that end without waiting for the Kisan Sabha workers to arrive in Talasari to help them.

They had carried with them a few Red Flags which had decorated the pandal of the conference, and they felt that the flags would serve them as their guide, friend and philosopher. They discarded their routine mode of life and went as missionaries from village to village, holding group meetings of the Warli peasants to preach the message of the conference. The message stirred the whole mass of Warli peasants and the whole jungle tract of Talasari vibrated with its echo.

The Warli Conference which subsequently met at Zari village on May 23, 1945, under the auspices of the Kisan Sabha, was a significant landmark in the history of their liberation movement, the liberation of the Warli serfs. Dalvi and Godavari Parulekar carried on an intensive campaign in the jungle tract for more than a month before the conference. Their identification with the Warlis was so complete that the Warlis regarded them as one of them.

Whilst the campaign aroused the entire mass of Warlis, it also awakened their oppressors. They started bitterly opposing and resorted to social persecution of the Kisan Sabha workers. This attitude of hostility, which increased in intensity with the increasing volume of the enthusiasm of the Warlis, confirmed the belief of the Warlis as nothing else did, that at last they had their real friends who could take up their side and

help them to break their chains of bondage. The landlords, unwittingly, had helped the Red Flag to win the loyalty of the Warlis.

While campaigning for the conference the Kisan Sabha workers helped the Warlis to resist the demand of the landlords for forced labour, and to put a stop to it. It vividly helped them to realise how feeble were their oppressors, who had appeared to them omnipotent, in the face of their united strength. The stray victories which were easily won in this first round of campaign and struggle, roused the spirit of resistance in all strata of the Warli population and instilled confidence in them that they could easily defeat their enemy. A new awakening and consciousness were being born. The enthusiasm of the Warlis knew no bounds.

Five thousand Warlis attended the conference. They listened to the proceedings very attentively and devoured whatever little they could understand. Among the five thousand, five hundred were women. Since that conference, till today, the Warli women have participated and suffered in all struggles along with the men.

The conference took momentous decisions. It adopted the immediate programme of abolishing serf-tenure and forced labour, and formulated the five main simple slogans, urging the Warlis to resist their oppressors :

- (1) Do not cultivate land of the landlord unless he pays in cash the daily wage of one rupee, twelve annas ;
- (2) Do not render any free service to the landlord ;
- (3) Resist the landlord if he assaults you ;
- (4) Meet the landlord in groups and not alone ;
- (5) You must all unite.

The programme and the slogans inspired the Warlis to cast away their age-long attitude of apathy, passivity and cowardice. They instinctively realised that the Kisan Sabha had understood their problem and knew its solution.

The resistance of the Warlis to the landlords against forced labour commenced on a mass scale the moment the conference concluded. They returned home shouting all the way that forced labour (*vethi*) had been buried in the conference. The slogans, the message of the conference reached every nook and

corner of the jungle tracts within 24 hours of its conclusion. The Warlis forged cent per cent unity. The timid were persuaded; the few recalcitrants were threatened with social boycott.

Their resistance swept the jungle tracts so quickly, and gathered strength so rapidly, that within three weeks forced labour became an event of the dead past. The system, was so rotten to the core, and the unity which the Warlis had forged was of such irresistible strength, that the system collapsed. The Warlis did not have to exert much for ending it. Assaults and tortures of Warlis which had been quite routine and common occurrences in their life, stopped immediately and automatically. Their strength instilled such a dread amongst the landlords that they dared not raise a finger against the Warlis. The landlords were convinced that the erstwhile tame and timid Warli would not hesitate to defend himself and resist, if they persisted in their inhuman practices.

ABOLITION OF SERFDOM

It was in the month of June 1945 when the rainy season had set in, that the aboriginal Warli proceeded to abolish serf-tenure. The victory which had been easily won in the first encounters against forced labour had made him fearless and audacious. He launched a full blast offensive against the strongest citadel of the enemy which crumbled as quickly as forced labour had collapsed. He bluntly refused to cultivate the land of the landlords free, and demanded the rates of wages decided by the Kisan Sabha. His offensive gathered the strength of a whirlwind in the whole jungle of Talasari taluka and the landlord was swept away. He found himself utterly at the mercy of his serf and retreated without even attempting to offer resistance. Serf-tenure was abolished. Abolition of serfdom was a glorious victory. It regained the Warli his freedom which he had lost a century ago.

The Kisan Sabha decided to extend its base to the adjacent Dahanu taluka in 1946, after it had consolidated and organised the work in Talasari taluka. The Warlis did not wait for the Kisan Sabha to take the initiative in launching the movement in Dahanu taluka. They launched it themselves in September 1945.

A few Warlis of Dahanu taluka from villages adjoining Talasari taluka had attended the Talasari Conference out of curiosity. It had inspired them but they lacked the intensity which could impel them to march along with the Warlis of Talasari taluka, in common battle against their bondage. They did not share the confidence of the Warlis in Talasari taluka. They had doubts as to the certainty of their success. They had, therefore, decided to wait and watch the progress and the result of the battle waged by Talasari Warlis.

When the news of the victorious march of the Talasari Warlis crossed their borders, their hesitation ceased and they became impatient. Without waiting for the Kisan Sabha they moved. They launched their offensive against their oppressors, unaided, with the Red Flag which they had carried from the Talasari Conference as their only guide. They felt they could achieve their liberation under its inspiration.

By the middle of September they launched their movement by daily holding mass meetings. The reports from Talasari which had percolated throughout the area had so roused the Warlis that the meetings attracted large crowds. The audience varied between two to three thousand. In the initial stages they did not feel the need for inviting anyone to address the meetings. They addressed their own meetings. Those who had attended the Zari Conference used to be the speakers. Their speeches were short. They simply repeated the slogans formulated at the Zari Conference and the audience used to be satisfied. But as the movement gathered momentum the attendance swelled. It varied between eight to ten thousand. Mere slogans no longer satisfied the audience, but the organisers did not know what else to speak. It was then that they realised they needed a Kisan Sabha worker for addressing meetings.

They sent their frantic invitations which used to be in the form of commands: "A meeting is to be held on...date. The meeting orders you, come and address." No Kisan Sabha worker was able to attend their meetings, as their commands never reached in time.

The movement, however, did not pause or falter, but marched ahead and took historical strides. By the time the Kisan Sabha workers arrived there, in the first week of October, they found to

their surprise, that the whole area was in the grip of a gigantic upheaval. The Special Correspondent of the *Bombay Chronicle*, in the issue of October 22, 1945, described it thus :

“The Adivasis who were tame and docile till this day suddenly became class conscious and they began to collect in large numbers under the Red Flag... Mass meetings were held throughout two talukas. People marched miles and miles to attend meetings. They carried sticks in their hands. Their enthusiasm appeared to be unprecedented.”

LIBERATION OF DEBT SLAVES

The Warlis of Dahanu went ahead of the Warlis of Talasari. They not only abolished forced labour and serf-tenure, but also liberated debt slaves.

I went to several villages taking village meetings, explaining the Red Flag, the Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party, altogether covering about forty villages within a distance of 14 miles from Dahanu. I explained the importance of November 7, 1917, and assured them of my return from Bombay after discussing the problem of the liberation of debt slaves with Parulekar and other senior members of the Party. Then we would launch the liberation of debt slaves from November 7, 1945.

The problem of debt slavery was very acute in Dahanu taluka, more than the Kisan Sabha and its workers were aware. The Warlis as mentioned earlier had started the liberation movement before the Kisan Sabha workers arrived. They had understood the movement of the Red Flag as the movement of liberation, and they considered the liberation of debt slaves as an integral part of the movement.

At mass meetings in two villages, Akharmal and Narpad, attended by about six thousand Warlis, they took the decision to liberate the debt slaves. The plan chalked out by them was simple, effective and characteristic of their boundless enthusiasm. Those who could not be away from their homes for urgent reasons returned with the permission of the meeting. The rest divided themselves into four batches. The batches marched in procession to different parts of Dahanu taluka with Red Flags. As they marched they stopped at the gates of the landlord's

buildings and called out the debt slaves. The slaves came out, the landlord dared not stop them. The procession declared, in the name of the Red Flag, that they were free men and women from that moment and asked them to join the procession.

The slaves walked out of their prisons with bag and baggage and accompanied by their wives. The procession then proceeded further, to the next landlord's estate. Thus they marched for three days and returned home after liberating about a thousand debt slaves. Debt slavery received a death blow.

The movement for the liberation of debt slavery had another important aspect. While it restored to the slave his freedom, equally important, it rescued his wife from the lust of the landlord.

II

CHARACTER AND ACHIEVEMENT OF THE MOVEMENT AND THE ROLE OF THE KISHAN SABHA

The first phase of the movement which had started with the Zari Conference, ended with the liberation of debt slaves in the talukas. It was a revolutionary upsurge of the Warlis. The rapidity with which the movement swept over the entire area, the tempo which it gathered as it spread, the unique unity which it forged among the Warlis, the quick transformations which it achieved, the courage which it instilled and the initiative which it developed among them, were all characteristic of a revolutionary upsurge.

Within a short span of four months it won a number of victories. The movement sharpened the virgin intellect of the Warlis. It brought to the surface persons from their ranks who could take the initiative and lead the movement.

The role played by the Kisan Sabha in this upsurge was also no less important than the role played by the Warlis themselves. The Kisan Sabha had aroused the Warlis, made them conscious and showed them the path that led to their freedom. It tried to lead them, but the Warlis on their own initiative advanced at such a pace that the Sabha could not overtake them.

Then the liberation movement entered its second phase, when the Warlis went on strike in the first week of October 1945.

The season for cutting grass had approached on the vast areas of grass lands owned by landlords, for which there was a good market in Bombay, where it was sent as fodder. The Kisan Sabha demanded Rs. 2.50 for cutting five hundred lbs. of grass. The landlords refused to concede the demand as they were used to getting the cutting done free by forced labour. The Warlis on their part refused to cut the grass unless the wages demanded by the Kisan Sabha were paid. Thus they went on strike. The strike in both the talukas was complete and landlords could not get a single Warli to cut grass.

EFFORTS TO CRUSH THE STRIKE

The landlords tried to frighten the Warlis by launching false complaints against them in the criminal courts. They starved them by refusing to advance *Khavati* (paddy) to survive in the rainy season. This they did in the initial stage of the strike to disrupt the solidarity of the Warlis, trying in vain to regain the ground which had been swept from under their feet. But their measures had not the desired effect. The Warlis would not retreat; on the contrary, their measures made the Warlis fight more doggedly with redoubled determination and energy.

The strike really stunned the landlords. Helpless, they requested the Government to render them assistance to suppress the movement. They vilified and misrepresented the activities of the Kisan Sabha, harped on the prejudices against Communists, and falsely accused Kisan Sabha workers of inciting the Warlis to violence. They requested the District Magistrate to ban the meetings.

Then they struck on a method to utilise the situation created by the strike, and manoeuvred to provoke the maximum government repression. They designed a plan whereby there would be ruthless repression, firing and killing of a few Warlis, so that the movement would be drowned in blood. And they succeeded in hatching a most treacherous and wicked plot—leading to firing, murders and mass arrests, torture and inhuman repression.

The landlords had correctly judged the intensity of the loyalty of the Warlis to the Red Flag, and they based their plot on this basic fact. On October 10, at about 8 in the morning, through their hirelings, the news was spread at several places within the 2500 sq. miles area that Godavari was coming to Talwada, a village in the Umbergaon taluka, for holding a meeting, and the Red Flag wanted every Warli to attend the meeting, armed with whatever weapons they could get, such as lathis, sickles, axes, etc. The landlords planned to bring goondas to break up the meeting, and provoke a violent clash.

The news, of course, was totally false. Godavari was laying ill at Kalyan.

The naive and innocent Warlis believed the false call in the name of the Red Flag. Luring the Warlis for the meeting at Talwada was one part of the plot of the landlords. Its counterpart was to inform the Government that a violent and armed mob of Warlis had collected at Talwada for killing the landlords, and the lives of the landlords were in danger. The treacherous plot worked successfully.

Armed police arrived at Talwada at about midnight on the 10th, and opened fire on the peaceful gathering of the Warlis from the roof of the moving police van. The gathering did not disperse though one of them was killed and a few wounded in the firing. The police opened fire three times, indiscriminately and in all directions, from the moving van till 3 p.m. of the 11th, i.e., during an interval of fifteen hours, on the same gathering at the same spot. Five Warlis were killed and a large number wounded, among them a boy of 12 years. Still the gathering refused to disperse.

The episode was an inspiring exhibition of the wreckless defiance of death by the Warli, his loyalty to the Red Flag, and the birth of rare courage in him. For fifteen hours he had defied the bullets showered on him. Firing failed to influence him to move from the place, and it is difficult to guess how long he would have continued to remain there, if the Kisan Sabha workers had not arrived there and dispersed the gathering.

For fifteen hours they had protected the Red Flag which they trusted, by shielding it with their bodies. They thought

that the police were aiming to shoot the Red Flag and they felt it their sacred duty to protect it at the cost of their lives.

Firing did not, and could not, have succeeded in dispersing the meeting. Word from the Red Flag was necessary for this. The gathering believed that the meeting was called by the Red Flag. They felt their loyalty to the Red Flag required them not to disperse till they were asked to disperse, by the Red Flag.

They had waited for the Kisan Sabha worker to arrive for addressing the meeting till early the next morning. As none came they sent a messenger to the office at a distance of about twelve miles from the meeting place. Kamalakar Ranadive happened to be in the office and hurried to Talwada where he reached at 3 p.m. While he was addressing the gathering, advising the Warlis to disperse, the police van which was moving continually on the Bombay-Ahmedabad road, opened fire killing another Warli and wounding several others.

The gathering dispersed with the realisation of the landlords' treachery dawning on them. They returned home full of bitterness against the landlords and the Government who, together, had killed five innocent Warlis and wounded several others.

The Government came out with its routine set of lies in justification of the firing. The Kisan Sabha challenged the lying propaganda of the Government and demanded a public enquiry into the whole incident. Even the Adivasi Seva Mandal which had taken an antagonistic attitude towards the Kisan Sabha, could not help demanding an independent and open enquiry into the firing. The imperialist bureaucracy turned down the demand, afraid that the enquiry would bring to light its own atrocious misdeeds as well as the heinous plot of the landlords. A departmental enquiry however was instituted. *Chitra*, the Marathi daily, disclosed the confidential conclusion of the enquiry : "The firing was unjustifiable and unnecessary."

REIGN OF TERROR

As the Government realised the significance of the Warli peasant movement, their earlier attitude of non-intervention in the initial stages suddenly changed. From non-intervention it

turned to ruthless repression. The firing had signalled the turning point and, under the guise of restoring law and order, a reign of police terror was let loose against the Warlis.

On October 13, meetings, processions and assemblies of more than five persons were banned for a period of two months, under the Defence of India Rules.

On October 14, the landlords requested the District Magistrate to extern all the Communist workers from the area, and accordingly, the District Superintendent of Police externed S. V. Parulekar, Godavari Parulekar, Sunil Janah, the photographer of *People's War*, the Communist Party weekly, and V. M. Bhave of the paper *Lok Yudh*, on the grounds that their presence in the area was prejudicial to public safety, industry, machinery and buildings in the area of Dahanu and Umbergaon talukas.

The police ran a regular intensive campaign for arresting those Warlis who, in the opinion of the landlords, were undesirable. Within a week the number of such arrests mounted to one hundred, and ultimately a total of one thousand Warlis were arrested. After the firing, people from nearby villages left their hamlets and hid themselves in the jungles. For ten to twelve days they had to go without food. People were afraid to disclose their injuries and gave their own version, afraid that the police would arrest anyone who came forward. Their fear was not groundless. A woman reported that her husband was arrested by a landlord because he was a witness to the mischief played by the landlords during the trouble.

Police repression in Dahanu knew no bounds, some of their methods as crude and brutal as those employed by the Nazis. Several Warlis were mercilessly hammered. Warli women were threatened with rape. Kerosene was poured on the buttocks of one Nannhu Gharat and a match lighted to burn the Warli. He fainted and fell down. The police constables carried him out of the *awar*.

The object of the repression was to terrorise the Warlis into submission and put down their rising movement, to drown it in blood.

The statements of B. G. Kher, President of the Adivasi Sewa Mandal, published in the *Bombay Chronicle* of October

19, 20 and 26, did not contain a single word of unequivocal condemnation of the firing and reign of terror let loose on the Warlis. As anti-imperialist fighters it was the sacred duty of Kher and his Congress colleagues to have condemned the firing and brutal repression. Their statements were a grossest betrayal of the Warlis' interests. The whole incident was so ghastly and revolting that it would have invoked the righteous indignation from even an impartial observer.

However, the statements of the Adivasi Seva Mandal not only did not condemn the imperialist firing and repression, they instead condemned the movement of the Warlis as having resulted in violence in some places. Imperialism was trying to justify its reign of terror under the same excuse. By echoing the cry of imperialism they strengthened its hands, indirectly justified the repression, and extended to imperialism its protection.

The Warli serfs had conducted their movement with exemplary self-restraint, self-control and composure. Their worst enemy, the landlord, had not dared to even falsely accuse them of any act of violence till the October 10 incident. History records very few such peaceful transformations.

The Adivasi Seva Mandal and the landlords, on the other hand, characterised the movement as violent. To characterise and condemn the movement of nearly one and a half lakh of the Warli population as violent, because of the solitary instance of an alleged attack on three landlords, is a typical instance of the distorted and perverse judgement of those who are frightened by any movement of the people for a better life.

MOVEMENT FORGES AHEAD

Firing and repression had failed in its object of crushing the Warlis and, undaunted they marched ahead, emerging stronger, more united and with a better understanding as to who were their friends and who were their enemies. In spite of the firing and repression the strike succeeded and the Warlis secured the rate they had demanded. Some landlords had even to pay three rupees or more to get their work done in time.

Thus the joy of the landlords over the success of their plot

was very short-lived. They soon realised to their disappointment, that the Warlis were holding their ground firmly. This disillusionment demoralised them.

On January 21, 1946, a second conference of the Warlis of the two talukas was held, attended by about 15000 Warlis, at a village called Mahalaxmi. Many walked a distance of about 30 miles to attend the conference, conscious of the strength born out of these victories. Resistance to the repression of the Government and landlords was widely in evidence. The conference considered the problem of the current year's rent and took the following decisions:

1. The Warlis would give only one year's rent and refuse to give any accumulated arrears. (The landlords used to show any amount of arrears taking advantage of the ignorance of the Warlis.)

2. Only the quantity of paddy they had contracted to give, would be given. They would refuse to give all other illegal exactions.

The decisions of the conference marked a new step forward in the development of the movement, and the Warlis advanced this firm step in obedience to the decisions. No arrears of rent were paid and the landlords, finding no means of resistance, meekly submitted.

The conference furnished further evidence of the loyalty of the Warlis to the Red Flag. The Kisan Sabha workers had appealed to them to contribute one rupee per family for building up their movement. Those to whom the call had reached brought one rupee with them. There were others to whom the call had not reached.

The esteem in which they held the Red Flag, their appreciation of what it had done for them, their confidence in its leadership, were reflected in the enthusiasm, eagerness and devotion with which they paid their contributions. They stood in queues till the time of the conference, to pay their contribution. The rest paid the amount after the conference in the office, the next day. At the conference, the total collection was about Rs. 6000.

CHANGE IN POLITICAL SITUATION

The struggle of the Warlis which had brought them on to the

political stage of the State, secured recognition of the problem of the aboriginal tribes ignored up till then, as one of the important items in national reconstruction. The struggle became an epoch-making event in the history of their emancipation, and was continued in 1946.

The political situation in the State had radically changed. The hated regime had ended, under Section 93 of the Government of India Act, and a popular ministry had come to power. B. G. Kher, founder of the Adivasi Seva Mandal, became its Prime Minister and Morarji Desai, ex-Deputy Collector, who had imbibed the habits and bureaucratic spirit of his position, became the Home Minister. The enlightened and in some measure independent District Magistrate of Thana was transferred. The one who stepped into his place had sympathy for landlords and prejudice against the Adivasis. He had to his 'credit' the suppression of the Bardoli struggle, and personified the worst type in the bureaucracy. After the Congress came to power he changed overnight, from one who was a crawling bureaucratic henchman of imperialism, to the most zealous tool of the vested interests in the Congress.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE WARLI

The Warli aboriginal was also changing. The experience of the bitter struggle through which he had had to go had rapidly transformed him. He became a new being. Earlier he had been an infant in understanding and consciousness. Now straight from infancy he stepped into maturity, overtaking the peasant who had been far ahead of him, by compressing many intervening steps.

He developed a thirst for knowledge. The landlords' campaign of slander against the Kisan Sabha workers kindled in him a desire to know all about Soviet Russia. The landlords had been circulating false information that Godavari Parulekar received large sums of money from Soviet Russia which she was misappropriating. They had never heard of Soviet Russia and were eager to know who this philanthropic person was.

When Godavari next visited the area, they told her what the landlords had been telling them, and requested her to tell them everything about Soviet Russia. They were in wild raptures.

when they heard from her that Soviet Russia was the only country in the world where the workers and peasants had established their raj, abolished all exploitation and built up an invincible Red Army of workers and peasants to protect their country. In the quiet of the night her talks on Soviet Russia in reply to ceaseless questions would drag on till late at night. They showed little interest in knowing from her that the stories the landlords had been circulating about her were baseless lies.

When they met the landlords later, the more intelligent among them would not care to dispute the landlords' allegation, but argued :

"It is but natural that the workers and peasants of Russia, who own all wealth and were, therefore, rich, should send financial aid to their brethren who are poor and cannot fight this oppression." They would conclude : "You, however, have concealed one material fact from us. There is a Red Army in Soviet Russia", and, to frighten the landlords, would proceed to say : "Do you know that it will render us all assistance, if need be, in our fight against you ?"

To their utter dismay, the landlords realised that their campaign of slander had recoiled on them. The Warli held Soviet Russia in great esteem and admiration.

When the Kisan Sabha planned to organise a procession of 20,000 Warlis to Bombay for demanding a reduction in the rent, they said : "We will all go to Bombay, but tell us how far is Soviet Russia from Bombay ? We would very much like to visit it when we go to Bombay." They were disappointed when they learnt that they could not go to Soviet Russia.

The struggle had not only made the Warli conscious of his rights in the economic domain, but it had made him understand and value civic and political rights. At the time of the Bombay Legislative Assembly elections in 1946, hundreds of them marched to the polling booths. In those days there was no adult franchise, and the Warlis were indignant to see that while all their exploiters were voters, all of the Warlis were not.

THE STRUGGLE OF 1946

Thus, both the change in the political situation and the

awakening of the Warlis constitute the necessary key to understanding the course of development of the historic struggle of the Warlis.

The dispute that arose in 1946 was in its origin a pure and simple economic dispute. It had arisen as we saw, with the 1946 season for grass-cutting and felling trees in forests. It was a dispute between the Warlis and the landlords, and Warlis and timber merchants, regarding rates for grass-cutting and felling trees, respectively. The Kisan Sabha had demanded a minimum rate of Rs. 2.50 for cutting 500 lbs. of grass as was secured in the previous year, and a daily rate of Rs. 1.25 for forest work. The demands of the Kisan Sabha were quite modest and reasonable.

A number of landlords had readily conceded the demand and grass cutting had started. Some of them had engaged Warlis at an even higher rate of Rs. 3 per 500 lbs. of grass. The dispute was confined in fact only to the small section of landlords who were the most reactionary, and were not prepared to pay the minimum of Rs. 2.50. They would not have resisted if they had not been encouraged by the Government.

The daily wage of Rs. 1.25 for forest work was the minimum which the Kisan Sabha had demanded. The timber trade had yielded fabulous profits to the merchants who could easily pay it. However, the timber merchants would not agree to pay more than a rupee as daily wage and all work in the forest, therefore, had stopped. There was complete strike.

Who was responsible for the dispute? The Government was more responsible than either the landlords or timber merchants. The dispute would never have assumed the serious proportions it did, had the Government during the initial stages of the dispute, remained impartial, neutral or even assumed the same indifference which it had done in 1945. But after 1945 the Government had changed its policy. It was quite unconcerned with the merit of the dispute, but not with the fate of the dispute. It was anxious to intervene with a definite purpose, to crush the influence of the Kisan Sabha, and its strength. It intervened to create a situation which would make settlement impossible, and to prolong it so that it could be utilised for the achievement of its ulterior object.

The dispute would never have arisen if the Government had not intervened. Long before the dispute arose in the month of July 1946, the District Magistrate of Thana had called a joint meeting of the representatives of the Kisan Sabha and landlords for fixing the rates of cutting grass and other varieties of labour. The meeting however was postponed with no explanation, and never reconvened. The only possible explanation for this behaviour of the District Magistrate could be instructions from higher authorities.

Instead of holding the meetings, and knowing that a large section of the landlords were actually paying Rs. 2.50 or Rs. 3 for cutting 500 lbs. of grass, he fixed the rate at Rs. 1.50. The Kisan Sabha refused to accept this proposition as the rate was lower than what the landlords were actually paying, and prepared to pay. This atrocious ruling of the District Magistrate intensified the dispute. It encouraged those reactionary landlords who had refused to concede the demand and to stiffen their attitude, at the same time instigated the others to reduce their rates. The B.G. Kher Ministry not only could have expressed their disapproval, but could have corrected the District Magistrate. It did nothing.

The dispute regarding the rate of forest work was settled on November 10. That it could easily have been settled earlier is clear from the fact that when the Special Officer, A.H. Khan, appointed for the welfare of the Warlis, intervened, the matter was settled after four-hour discussion with both the parties. The Welfare Officer intervened to settle the dispute amicably. The District Magistrate had intervened to prolong it. The District Magistrate's fixing of the rate at Rs. one for forest work was an incitement to timber merchants not to arrive at a settlement. The authorities ultimately failed in their objective, thwarted by the united struggle of the Warlis.

Following the D.M.'s ruling the most reactionary and notorious landlords, ever hoping to smash the solidarity of the Warlis and reimpose conditions of serfdom and bondage, had started intimidating and provoking the Warlis. False and frivolous complaints had been lodged in the criminal courts against several active Warlis and workers of the Kisan Sabha. The goondas of the landlords who had been the mainstay of serfdom,

became active once again and started assaulting the Warlis. There was a plan behind these moves of the landlords. They desired a repetition of the October 10, 1945 incidents. The Warlis did not lose their composure, and as a counter-move had started demonstrating their strength and solidarity by assembling in large numbers and marching in processions throughout the area. This had its salutary effect on the landlords.

The landlords' next move came in the first week of October. They thought to take advantage of Martyrs Day, October 17, by again spreading a false rumour that the Kisan Sabha was organising a meeting to commemorate the memory of the Warli martyrs who had fallen victims to the firing on October 10 and 11, 1945, by holding a meeting at the place of firing, and by wholesale acts of violence against the landlords in the area.

The Kisan Sabha had in fact convened no such meeting, but the known prejudices of the Government against the Kisan Sabha led the Government to believe the rumour. The District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police rushed to the area accompanied by sub-inspectors and about 150 armed constables. But this time the Kisan Sabha was vigilant and took precautions to see that the Warlis were not duped by the false cry about the meeting and did not assemble in large numbers on the day. Thus the game of the landlords was foiled, and the Government disappointed.

Having failed in these efforts, as a last resort, the landlords stooped to acts of intimidation, provocation and violence. Between October 15 and November 18, a number of Warlis were assaulted by the hired goondas. One of them was so brutally beaten near a village called Vangaon, that he died in the hospital on the fourth day. Another lost his fingers.

The strike in the forest work began by the middle of October. There were 120 coupes in the forests, i.e. separate areas defined for cutting. They were spread over an area of 1000 sq. miles. Over 200 villages and a population of over a lakh were involved in this work and affected by the strike. The message was conveyed to different villages that the Warlis should not start work unless the timber merchants conceded their demands. They conveyed the message in their traditional way—a stick to which toddy leaves and a chit conveying the message were tied

at the top. The stick went from village to village and the Warlis stopped work wherever it reached. Only in four coupes out of 120, a few of the Warlis to whom the message of the Kisan Sabha had not reached and who were too weak to resist the pressure of the hooligan agents of the timber merchants, had started work. To give them courage to join the strike the Warlis took out processions and went to the coupes in processions. No sooner did the procession reach the coupe, then the work stopped, and the Warlis joined the procession in joy. In this way, within 48 hours after the message was given by the Kisan Sabha, there was complete stoppage of all forest work in the whole area. It is alleged by the timber merchants that the Warlis in procession assaulted three of their agents. Even assuming the allegation to be correct, any impartial observer will come to the conclusion that but for the remarkable sense of discipline among the Warlis, their loyalty to their organisation and their willingness to go on strike, the strike could not have been so complete and successful, in so short a period and in such a vast area.

The strike regarding grass-cutting was equally successful. The landlords who had refused to pay the minimum wage asked by Kisan Sabha and had lodged frivolous complaints, could not secure the services of a single Warli in the whole area. They relied on the help and efforts of the Government but their efforts met with dismal failure.

The District Magistrate instructed his subordinates to campaign among the Warlis for accepting the rate fixed by him. No Warli attended the meetings. No Warli went on to work.

The grass as well as the paddy of the landlords rotted in the fields. Warlis not only struck work in the coupes and on the land, they also refused to ply the 5000 carts deployed by the landlords during the season, and there was a complete stoppage of carts. Not a single cart moved on the roads. The landlords tried to argue with the Warlis that cartage was not the issue in the dispute. The Warlis' reply was simple: "Bring the permit from Kisan Sabha office allowing plying of carts." The permits soon assumed such a general character that the landlords had to secure "permits" from the Kisan Sabha for every little thing they wanted done by the Warlis. Nothing moved without permits.

The spectacle of the solidarity and strength of the Warlis frightened the landlords, who had guilty consciences and all of them left their place of abode in the villages in the Warli area and went to live in the cities and towns where they owned big houses.

When the demoralised landlords saw the futility of continuing the dispute some of them approached the Kisan Sabha for a settlement, realising that continuation of the dispute would ruin them economically, and it was not possible to fight the solidarity of the Warlis. The landlords offered to withdraw the cases against the Warlis, but the Warlis were in no mood to withdraw on such terms. They agreed that the landlords should withdraw the cases, but the dispute would be settled only if the landlords agreed to pay Rs. 3 for cutting 500 lbs. of grass, and pay compensation to the village and each of the Warlis against whom complaints had been lodged. The terms were accepted and the dispute was settled. A small number of large landlords still conspired with the Government to search out adequate repressive measures to suppress the struggle, and continued to resist the demand.

OFFENSIVE OF THE GOVERNMENT

The Government was taking the side of the landlords and the vested interests from the beginning of the dispute. In the initial stages it used measures of indirect pressure for disrupting the solidarity of the Warlis. The whole State machinery in the district was set in motion for campaigning against the Red Flag. But it failed dismally and had to be abandoned. The Government then took measures of direct intervention and repression.

The District Magistrate issued a directive to the criminal courts to hear the cases in which the Warlis were alleged to have committed offences of violence and intimidation from day-to-day. A Special Court was appointed—the Warlis named it the Red Flag Court—because only these cases were conducted in this court. The directive was intended in effect to put the Warli at a great disadvantage in defending himself, send him to jail undefended and irrespective of the merits of the case.

The District Magistrate issued another directive to the courts that the courts should demand heavy bails from the Warlis. In effect the release of the Warlis on bail was to be denied. It was intended to make the Warli rot in jail before his guilt was formally proved against him. The court was also asked not to release the Warlis on bail unless they agreed not to attend any meetings and participate in any Kisan Sabha activities. This directive was intended to penalise the Warlis for participating in legitimate activities and movements without declaring them illegal. This was encroachment on the civic rights of the citizen and the legitimate democratic movement. There were other directives of a minor character. The object of all of them was to terrorise and frighten the Warlis.

The repression failed to make any impression on the Warlis. The jail no longer held any terror for them. They continued the struggle with unabated enthusiasm, vigour and courage.

END OF THE DISPUTE

The strike had lasted for a month and showed no signs of weakening. This made the timber merchants impatient. They were anxious for a settlement of the dispute since it involved them in irreparable financial loss. The Special Officer for the Welfare of the Warlis intervened to bring about the settlement. The strike was settled on November 10, 1946, on terms which secured to the Warlis earnings much higher than that demanded by them, as well as several other concessions.

The agreement was signed by the representatives of the Kisan Sabha, representatives of the Timber Merchants' Association and the Principal of a High School as an independent witness. The Welfare Officer immediately left Dahanu, for acquainting the District Magistrate and the Ministry that the dispute had been settled. He had promised to furnish the copy of the agreement to Kisan Sabha; it was never received. The reasons for this remain a mystery till today. The Timber Merchants Associations ratified the agreement in its meeting held on November 14, 1946. The Kisan Sabha workers were busy informing the Warlis all over the area of the settlement. Normal conditions of work were being restored. It was the great victory

of the Warlis that they had successfully fought and met the offensive of the landlords, timber merchants and the Government.

GOVERNMENT REPRESSION

The popular ministry intervened, when the dispute no longer existed, by declaring a 'state of emergency' under the notorious Goonda Act. The dispute was settled on November 10, 1946. The state of emergency was declared on the 14th, and this declaration enabled the Government to resort to ruthless and brutal repression.

From November 10 onwards completely normal conditions prevailed in the area. Yet on the 21st the District Magistrate arbitrarily externed all prominent workers of the Kisan Sabha from Thana district and issued orders of detention without trial against 200 Warlis, who were either Communists or active Kisan Sabha workers. The popular ministry thus resurrected an issue which was dead and gave it a political turn and twist. The decision to use repression after the economic issue was settled, was no accident. It was a conscious and well-planned decision, prompted not by the merits of the situation but by a fixed determination to crush the movement of the Warlis, their Kisan Sabha, their solidarity, their loyalty to the Red Flag and their organisation. The ministry was silent on the issue in the beginning, but it became quite outspoken as the struggle developed. It openly declared that it had resorted to repression to arrest and crush the influence of a political party which did not agree with the Congress Government's aims, objects and methods of serving the people and the country.

Mr. Morarji Desai in the press conference on January 20, left no scope for speculation on the issue. He said :

"I am not interested in any settlement brought about by the Communists. Anything which helps the Communists in their nefarious activities will not be tolerated" (*The Times of India*, January 21, 1947).

"Shri Desai also made it plain that Government would not countenance any compromise which would give full control over the Warlis to the Communists" (*National Standard*, January

22, 1947).

These quotations need no comment. In order to win the confidence and influence over the Warlis, the Goonda Act was applied to Thana district. The late N.M. Joshi, then President of All India Trade Union Congress, said in his statement :

“To use the Goonda Act to put down an economic movement is clearly an abuse of powers. Mr. Morarji Desai, the Home Minister, in asking for these powers had stated that they would not be used against political parties and social workers. Unfortunately, after having obtained these powers the Government has forgotten the original purpose and started using them against political parties and economic movements. The Warlis have every right to make an effort and to carry on a powerful movement to free themselves from their age-long slavery and poverty and the Thana district Kisan Sabha is expected to help them in their effort . . . But to apply the emergency legislation to them is inexcusable” (*National Standard*, December 6, 1946).

The use of the Goonda Act was unjustifiable and was applied only to put down the struggle of the Warlis.

GOVT. JUSTIFICATION OF REPRESSION

In face of public criticism the Government had to defend its repression. It issued a press communique which relied on lies, misrepresentation and distortion of facts, and misleading and mischievous statements for justifying repression. The communique alleged in the main that there was a distinct rise in the lawless activities of the Warlis in the area, and the Kisan Sabha workers were inciting the Warlis to violence. This allegation of a distinct rise in the lawless activities of the Warlis, with the number of offences committed by them for a period of six weeks numbering 35, was a cheap frame-up. The landlords had filed many complaints which were frivolous and false. The assumption that the Warlis were guilty of offences alleged by the landlords, betrayed the prejudices of the Government against the Warlis and its bias in favour of the landlords. The communique failed to carry conviction even in the Congressmen.

The effort of the Government to justify repression by

envoking anti-Communist prejudices, fabricating and distorting facts, not only failed in its object but only brought disgrace to it.

THE WARLI REPLIES

The spontaneous reply of the Warli to the unjustifiable and tremendous repression was a general strike. He stopped the carts which he had started plying, stopped the work in the forest coupes, stopped cutting grass. The strike was so complete that everything came to a dead stop in the entire area of the two talukas. The strike wave swept over 40 villages of the neighbouring talukas of Palghar, which had remained aloof in the earlier phase of the struggle, where 20,000 Warlis and Kolis stopped all varieties of work as a protest against Government repression.

The Government had initiated the repression by externing all the Kisan Sabha leaders and detaining without trial all the Kisan Sabha workers and Warlis whose presence was not wanted by the landlords. Though the repression intensified, the Warli would not submit to it. Even lawyers who were defending the Warlis on behalf of the Kisan Sabha were externed from the district. Anyone who had sympathy with or interest in the Kisan Sabha and dared to enter the area, was arrested and detained without trial. The total number of Warlis detained was about 300 and Warlis arrested for alleged offences, 400. The Government wanted to arrest many more Warlis but they evaded arrests by going underground.

The expectation of the Government that the measures of repression would crush the spirit of the Warli and his loyalty to the Kisan Sabha, proved to be wrong. Its next move, therefore, was to organise terror. Gangs of notorious anti-social elements, with the connivance of the police, resorted to acts of inhuman torture, atrocities and violence against the helpless Warli population. One village was attacked and wiped out of existence by one such gang. Hundreds of Warlis were brutally assaulted, even women and children were not spared. But the Warli stood erect in spite of the reign of terror and resisted it heroically. The Government then adopted the disgraceful measure of dis-

patching the military for suppressing the just struggle of the most oppressed and exploited section of the peasantry. Democratic opinion rushed to the help of the Warlis and the military was withdrawn within four days under the pressure of public opinion and the press. In place of the military, Mr. Moore Gilbert who was notorious for his anti-social and anti-people acts of suppression of the peasant revolt in Satara district, was sent for to conduct the operation against the Warlis. Once again he had to be withdrawn under pressure of public opinion, and was called back within three days.

In the end Government strengthened the armed police force in the area. More than one thousand police constables were brought in, and police parties placed in every village. The strength of the police officials was increased because the Government suspected some of the police of having sympathy for the Warli struggle. Wireless transmission centres were set up, and landlords were asked to render every assistance to the police. The Adivasi Seva Mandal was given the task of campaigning under police protection against the Kisan Sabha, and the District Superintendent of Police recruited Congressmen to strengthen the efforts of the Adivasi Seva Mandal. Thus the whole repressive machinery, in all its aspects, was set in motion to crush the resistance of the Warlis.

Within a week after these arrangements the police opened fire twice on the peaceful gatherings of the Warlis in two villages. At one place, Namivali village, five Warlis were killed and thirteen wounded. The Government unceremoniously turned down the demand for enquiry into the police firing. But even killing failed to impress the Warli. He would not budge from the right stand he had taken. Thereafter the reign of terror let loose made the life of the Warlis a veritable hell.

At Korbadi two women were mercilessly beaten by the police. At Charoti they entered the hut of a Warli at midnight and beat up a boy of sixteen, roughly handled an old woman and threatened to beat every one in the village. One Warli, Dhani-vari, was tied to the tree and whipped till he bled. At another village they twisted the private parts of a Warli. They made Warlis lie down on the ground and trampled on their bodies, they threatened women with raping. These instances are typi-

cal of the countless atrocities committed by the police and the landlords in most of the villages. Such was the record of repression carried out by the Government. There were only two alternatives open to the Warlis, either to surrender or to resist. They chose the latter.

For seven months they put up a heroic resistance. When the landlords realised that the extermination of all Kisan Sabha workers and detention in jails were proving ineffective, they resorted to greater acts of violence and atrocities to terrorise the Warlis, and the Government refused to respond to the appeal of the Warlis for help.

Driven to rely on their own strength, compelled to defend their home and honour, they resorted to guerrilla tactics. Utilising to the full the advantages provided by nature, they took to the protection of the thick forests covering the mountains. They organised a strong volunteer organisation of five thousand youth for protecting their homes and the helpless population left behind in the villages, mainly women, children and the aged. But for this support of the entire population and the cooperation of women and young boys in organising their resistance, the Warlis would not have succeeded in checking the lawlessness and violence of the landlords and the Government, which they were able, to a great degree, to do.

The following extract from the statement issued to the press by the Home Minister on January 21, 1947, shows to what extent their resistance in self-defence had proved effective :

“As a result of the activities of the Warlis the landlords and the contractors got panicky and would not go to the farm houses and jungles for their work, as they generally do during the working season. The result was that not only was the work stopped, but the whole field was left free to the outlaws for carrying on their nefarious activities. The panic amongst the workers, landlords and jungle contractors led in turn to panic amongst their workmen, watchmen and others. Most of these persons ran away to their respective homes in bigger towns.”

The Warlis had to fight back in self-defence, and it was then that they damaged some of the farmhouses (*awars*) of the landlords, in a spirit of desperation. There was an additional reason why they did so. The farmhouse of the landlord was the living

symbol of their slavery and shame. It was there that the landlord had brutally tortured them. It was in the farmhouse that the honour of their women-folk had been ravaged.

History has not only condoned but even glorified the French people for storming the Bastille. There is all the more reason for condoning the Warlis for damaging the houses of the tyrants.

The Warlis withstood all the repression and atrocities and acts of violence by their exploiters and Government, because they had come to understand that the repression was a blow aimed at the solidarity and unity they had forged, the strength they had acquired and the organisation they had built up with their sweat and blood.

The Government refused to recognise that a new Warli had been born in 1945. It had based its calculation on the belief that the Warli would meekly submit to repression, once the economic dispute was settled to his satisfaction. The Government realised, at the cost to their prestige, that they had misfired and miscalculated. The Warli had been transformed and had become a political being.

In spite of their stubborn struggle, the Government and the landlords would have succeeded in achieving their object of crushing the struggle of the Warlis if the Warlis had failed to break through their isolation from the people. But for the popular protest and indignation the Congress Ministry would never have hastily recalled the military from the area. Under universal pressure of disapproval from all patriotic sections of the people, including democratic minded Congressmen, the Chief Minister had to announce, on April 5, his intention of pursuing a policy of reconciliation towards the Warli detainees as an earnest of his intention. In addition, the entire press in the province had come to hold the opinion that the struggle of the Warlis was just. Almost every democratic person in the Congress and all patriotic sections of the people in other organisations sympathised with the struggle and supported its just cause. The Maharashtra Congress Committee appointed a committee to enquire into the unanimous report recommending immediate important reforms in the system of land tenure in the area. The people's verdict was that the struggle of the Warlis was just and

the repressive policy of the popular ministry was wrong.

This struggle was one phase in the overall struggle for liberation. The Warlis had brought it to a victorious end by their heroic resistance, indescribable sufferings and sacrifices, and by winning the support of the people. They withdrew their resistance after the Chief Minister announced his policy of reconciliation. Their gains as the result of struggle were many. They had won the verdict of the people that their cause was just. They were able to earn wages for felling trees, cuttings grass and agricultural work on the land in excess of what they had demanded at the beginning of the struggle, sustained increase in the rates of cartage and reduction in rent.

The wages for grass cutting today are Rs. 17 a day, and for felling trees Rs. 10 a day. The rent they have to pay is substantially reduced. It is five times the revenue or Rs. 20, whichever is less.

The Warli struggle has not, of course, finally ended. It will end only when the basic problem of the struggle is finally solved. One of the members of the sub-committee of the Constituent Assembly, Jaipal Singh, who visited the area, has correctly said :

“The aboriginal must be firmly rooted in his land ; where he has lost his land he must get it back. Landless he is hopelessly without moorings. Land is the biggest security. Give him his security and then healthy education and development will follow.”

The Kisan Sabha has extended its work to almost all the districts in Maharashtra inhabited by Adivasis.

The Maharashtra Adivasi Conference held at Nasik has instilled in them more self-confidence. They now wish the Kisan Sabha to work amongst non-Adivasi peasants, to strengthen the unity of the peasants for defence of their interests and for radical land reforms. □