

ANDHRA PRADESH

Forever 'Disturbed'

Peasant Struggle of Sircilla-Vemulawada

K Balagopal

M Kodandarama Reddy

'REVOKE the disturbed areas proclamation in Sircilla and Jagtial!' is a slogan found splattered on the walls of Telangana towns. What used to be Sircilla (pronounced Sirisilla) at the time of the 'disturbed areas' proclamation in October 1978 has subsequently been cut into two talukas, Sircilla and Vemulawada, so that Vemulawada was, so to speak, born a 'disturbed area'. The bifurcating line is the Karimnagar-Kamareddy road, with Vemulawada lying to the north of the road and Sircilla to the south. Together they occupy the south-west corner of Karimnagar district.

The eyes of academics are yet to fall on the Karimnagar peasant struggle, but when they do, they will no doubt be impressed by the fact that it was in the 1970s that the struggle started and it was also in the 1970s that the Pochampad project on the Godavari river started watering substantial parts of Karimnagar. Fitting in well as this does with popular academic theories of peasant struggles (built around the irrigation-capital penetration-differentiation syndrome), this will no doubt spawn rich-peasant theories *à la* Barry Pavier, who managed to read the Telangana peasant uprising of the latter half of the forties as a peanut and castor revolution riding the ebb and flow of the lubrication needs of European army and industry.

But a slight difficulty which academics with a capital-penetration hang-up will face is that while the canal passes through the northern talukas of the district, the struggle started in the Sircilla-Vemulawada region, and that too not in the partly rice-cultivating Sircilla half which is at least fractionally watered by the 40 year old Upper Manair project on the Manair, a tributary of the Godavari, but in the predominantly jowar and maize cultivating shrub-forest region of Vemulawada. This September, about eight weeks this side of the kharif harvest, Vemulawada presents a desolate picture (even allowing for the unusual drought) of bushes and rocky soil, dotted with man-

high stalks of maize and jowar.

An objective reading of the actual situation indicates that it was not penetration of capital but penetration of communist cadre that sparked off the struggle. The old taluka of Sircilla was in fact among the few areas of Karimnagar district to be militantly involved in the peasant uprising of the forties. A guerrilla squad's raid on the Sircilla police station on June 10, 1950 is recounted by P Sundarayya (in his "Telangana People's Struggle and Its Lessons") as a turning point which led to a militant mass uprising against feudal oppression and the state's foodgrain levy in many villages of Karimnagar district. (As a solitary relic of those heroic days, Sircilla sends a CPI legislator, Ch Rajeswara Rao — not to be confused with the general secretary of the party — to the AP assembly.) But the present struggle can be regarded as a revival of the old militancy only in a symbolic sense. For at the time of the 1964 split all the leaders (and hence also the cadre) of Karimnagar district stayed with the CPI — the lone exception being a brief adventure by Baddam Yella Reddy who was with the CPI(M) for three months before scuttling back to the CPI. And consequently, when the revolutionary communists came out of the CPI(M) after 1967, in Karimnagar there was nobody to come out and nothing to come out from. Those who lead the present movement were political greenhorns in 1970 who have grown with the movement, so much so that few of the revolutionary communist leaders of Karimnagar are far on the wrong side of thirty.

THE BEGINNING

They entered the north-western part of old Sircilla (western part of present Vemulawada) in 1970-71, from Nizamabad district, crossing a range of what might pass for hills in the eyes of a particularly unimaginative midget. They were, apparently, impelled by nothing more material than the spring thunder of 1967, abetted by repression

in Armoor taluka of Nizamabad where they had been working till then. What they encountered in Sircilla was a dry shrub-forest region and villages dominated by archetypal feudalism of Asafjahi vintage. True, the 'doras' (lords) were no longer deshmukhs or jagirdars, but they were little different in substance.

Until the declaration of the Emergency the struggle was mainly concentrated in a few villages with Nimmapally, Konaraopet and Veernapally at centre-stage. In Nimmapally the dora was Bontala Bhaskara Rao, who is said to have had 1,600 acres of land; in this as well as dozens of other cases of doras whose landholding acreage runs into monstrous figures, the allegation looks hardly credible until one realises that the ownership is neither legal nor even benami, but rather that he exercises his domination over large areas of common village land, forest land, shrub land, tank-beds and stream-beds, land not recorded in anybody's name, and even uncultivable waste-land. This is not because he gets any profit out of it but to prevent access to it to the village poor (and not-so-poor); in other words, it is an exercise of feudal authority par excellence, and not ownership in the strict (i.e., bourgeois) sense.

At some point of time in the fifties this Bhaskara Rao's father or grandfather had given 22 acres of 'his' land to some harijan families; the reason is said to be his desire to be on good terms with the working people of the village in the aftermath of the armed peasant uprising. It is to be added that Sundarayya refers to this village Nimmapally (as also Veernapally) as a 'communist stronghold' in those days. But come the seventies, these 22 acres had the good fortune to come under a small project on a stream called mularvagu which was expected to water about 2,500 acres of land (it was completed in 1978). So Bhaskara Rao wanted the land back and evicted the harijan families. They approached the party — later to become the CPI(M-L) led by Chandra Pulla Reddy — which had by that time started propaganda activities in some neighbouring villages. By 1973, Rytu Coolie Sanghams (peasant and agricultural labourers unions) were formed in Nimmapally, Konaraopet and Veernapally. The Sangham gave a call to the harijans to occupy the 22 acres and plant it with sesamum. The dora hired goondas to attack the harijans who were forced to retreat. The next year, people from the three vil-

lages were mobilised to occupy the land, and in the conflict that ensued, the police entered, set up camps in the three villages, and booked a large number of people under the Sircilla Conspiracy Case. (Those were the days when conspiracy cases were in fashion with the police; since most of them have been dismissed by the courts, the police seem to have lately lost some of their enthusiasm for them.) This case was also subsequently withdrawn for lack of evidence, but meanwhile the 22 acres reverted to the dora,

REPRESSION AND RESISTANCE

What is worth recording is not details of feudal oppression and resistance (which recur monotonously from village to village) but the strategy and tactics developed by the people, particularly under conditions of repression. Since the days of the Nimmappally struggle they have adopted the tactics that in times of repression 'expansion is the main form of resistance, followed by consolidation in the areas of expansion'. Repression in Nimmappally led to expansion to neighbouring villages, followed by consolidation in the form of developing struggles on other issues — beedi-leaf picking, wages of agricultural labourers and farm-servants, rural administrative corruption, etc. Between the two aborted attempts to occupy the 22 acres of land described above (in 1973 and 1974), the movement spread to students and youth in Sircilla and Vemulawada towns, and the Nimmappally struggle was publicised through a play called 'Naandi' (Prologue). They also took up the beedi-leaf struggle as part of the 'expansion and consolidation' tactics. The beedi-leaf struggle has actually been a perennial affair ever since the revolutionary communists started organising the tribals and other working people in the Godavari valley region (that is to say, since the early seventies); and though the Vemulawada shrub-forest is not part of the Godavari valley forest, the beedi-leaf struggle there has very much been part of the general struggle.

Every year, before the summer sets in the beedi-leaf (called tuniki leaf) is ready for picking. That being a lean season for agriculture, picking the leaf is a source of much-needed income for the landless and poor peasants. Earlier it used to be that they would pick the leaf and sell it to contractors (called guttedars) at the rate of 2 or 3 paise per bundle of one hundred leaves. The sale takes place at the village 'kalla'

where the contractor's agent (kalledar) would buy it. It is typical of the feudal atmosphere prevalent in the area that even in this seemingly 'business-like' transaction the contractor would extract 'unpaid' labour; one or two out of every ten bundles or so would be taken 'free' in the name of various deities, and the first bundle in the day brought to the kalla by a labourer would be taken 'free' as an auspicious omen.

GOVERNMENT TO THE RESCUE

The Sanghams took up a struggle to end these feudal practices and increase payment for the beedi-leaf. It led to a quick reaction from the government, which nationalised the trade to save the contractors. This action is actually a test case of nationalisation being used to save the private sector, for the government did not set up either co-operatives or a public sector corporation to procure the beedi-leaf, but instead undertook to buy the leaf from the pickers (and thereby bear the brunt of their agitation) and subsequently sell it to the contractors who would additionally pay royalty corresponding to the amount purchased. Even here, the government has not deputed the forest department to make the purchase but allows the contractors' agents (the kalledars) to directly purchase the leaf, and even advances them finance for the purpose. Indeed, the only effect of the nationalisation has been, on the one hand, to make the forest department bear the brunt of the pickers' agitation, leaving the contractors sitting pretty, and on the other to make room for plenty of corruption. For now the contractors in league with the forest officials understate the amount of leaf purchased and make a killing in royalty thus saved. The bribes paid by the beedi-leaf guttedars to the district forest officials is estimated to run into tens of thousands of rupees per season.

The beedi-leaf struggle is a story by itself but its relevance to the Sircilla story is that in times of severe repression of the anti-feudal struggle, it has served as a medium for the tactics of 'resistance through expansion and consolidation'.

In 1975 the Sangham was again active in Nimmappally, this time with a programme of picking the tamarind crop on the disputed 22 acres. Bhaskara Rao fenced the land and got the tamarind trees painted with a white band, signifying his proprietorship. The harijans removed the fence, painted the bands red, and declared that the land

and crops were theirs.

This resulted in further repression, but by this time the tactics of resistance through expansion had paid, and the people were not deterred. Soon, however, Emergency was proclaimed, and the entire movement met with a setback. But in the meantime it had, in its process of consolidating the expansion, taken up concrete struggles in most of the villages of the area against feudal oppression, and hence could go into hibernation awaiting the lifting of the Emergency.

STRUGGLE AGAINST FEUDAL OPPRESSION

While the movement went into hibernation in the Nimmappally area, once again the tactics of 'resistance through expansion' was adopted, and they moved down to the south of the Karimnagar-Kamareddy road into the western part of present Sircilla taluka. Their predicament was that they could no longer function in the name of the Rytu Coolie Sangham (let alone the party), but in this area they found a situation they could utilise. About 30 to 40 villages of this area covering about 17,000 acres of land are watered by the Upper Manair project. Even before the Emergency, there had been a 'harijan movement' in the area against untouchability and for higher pay for farm-servants. An equally important cause was resisting the feudal habit of people getting their feuds settled by the dora (which, apart from reinforcing his authority, entails both parties giving gifts to the dora, and has always been one of the principal modes of oppression in feudal Telangana). A Harijana Sangham had been formed to fight for these causes by two harijan farm-servants, Ramulu of Gudem and Mallaiah of Cheekodu. They built their struggle around the demand for implementing Indira Gandhi's notorious twenty-point programme (it is not clear whether this was out of cunning or ingenuousness). The revolutionary refugees from Nimmappally joined this Harijana Sangham and for quite some time did not reveal their difference of ideology; instead, so long as the Emergency lasted, they would express their demands in the language of the twenty-point programme. But slowly, they started changing the nature of the Harijana Sangham and by the end of the Emergency it was replaced by the Rytu Coolie Sangham. Both Ramulu and Mallaiah are today with the CPI (M-L), though their language (as that of practically all the activists of this

area) betrays their caste-struggle origins; whereas activities of other areas refer to their oppressors as dora (lord) or bhuswami (landlord), activities of his area often slip into the old habit of referring to them as 'those Reddys and Raos'. (Rao refers to the velama caste, though not every Rao need be a velama.)

Any village-by-village recounting of the oppression and struggles would be monotonous if it is brief, and unweildy if it is sufficiently elaborate to capture the variations from village to village. The struggle was mainly aimed against feudal social oppression which takes on a fantastic variety of forms in Telangana. Vetti or Vettichakiri (begar) in all its myriad manifestations is the most striking characteristic of feudalism in Telangana. Not only do the peasants perform 'unpaid' productive labour in the dora's fields, working people of all castes have to do vetti; toddy-tappers have to provide free toddy, potters have to give pots free, and so on right through the caste structure. Some of the castes (dhobis, barbers, etc) even have to perform vetti household labour unrelated to their caste occupation. More generally, any object (whether human or otherwise) that happens to catch the dora's fancy is his for the asking and taking.

It was against this vetti that the first struggle of the erstwhile Harijan Sangham had started in Gudem; and to the end, one major struggle was to put an end to the practice of shepherds (golla caste) being forced to give 'free' sheep and goats to the doras. Apart from ritual gifts of sheep (on festival days as Dasara), a certain number had to be given annually — often running to 30 or 40 per village. Another peculiar form of vetti which is particularly important in irrigated and paddy-cultivating regions such as this cluster of villages under the Upper Manair project, is forced and unpaid fertilisation: in the fallow period prior to the kharif sowing, the doras demand that the sheep of all the gollas in the village should spend the nights in their land and fertilise it. This is called vettimandalu (mandalu is plural for manda, meaning flock). Usually the doras' demand would run into two to three months per year, and as the peasants put it, "what can't you grow on the land after that?". There is the interesting case of a seemingly 'modern' landlord, Madhava Rao of Pothur, who uses his feudal authority to claim vettimandalu for more than six months in a year and grows

high-yield varieties of rice to such effect that he has received the district award for 'enterprising farmers'. In fact, the issues of forced 'gifts' of sheep and forced fertilisation of land appear to have been among the principal points of the Sircilla struggle — which is natural, considering that in a predominantly shrub country, rearing sheep is one of the few remunerative activities. The struggle against forced gifts of sheep is aimed not only at the landlords but also the forest officials, right down to the chowkidars. These employees of a formally bourgeois administration are well known to exploit the people in a purely feudal form. They do not collect fines for grazing sheep on forest land, but instead demand a 'gift' of a few sheep per year, much as the landlord demands gifts of sheep in compensation for allowing grazing on 'his' land.

VETTI ABOLISHED

Here is a sample of the severity of the struggle against vetti sheep, though it happened much after the Emergency, during 1978-80. The village is Namapuram, and the landlords are Reddys. The biggest of them (both named Narayana Reddy) are said to still 'own' about 500 acres of land, including 100 acres of waste land. All the landlords together used to demand — and get — 40 vetti sheep annually until, in 1978, the shepherds decided to stop this exploitation and refused to give sheep on the occasion of Dasara. Some youth from landlord families were incensed with this, and waylaid shepherds driving back their flocks in the evening and forcibly took some goats. Later the shepherds went in a group and got the goats back. In 1979 the refusal of the shepherds was repeated at the time of a marriage in a Reddy family. Reacting to this the landlords got hold of some sheep on the pretext that they were grazing on their land and locked them up in a public enclosure. The people took out a procession demanding release of the sheep and achieved it, but about a month later, when the people of the village went to Sircilla to attend a public meeting, the landlords once again arrested the sheep and demanded Rs 250 as fine; the shepherds paid the fine but did not resume the feudal donation of sheep and goats.

Realising that the people were adamant, the landlords formed a 'Rytu Sangham' to fight the Rytu Coolie Sangham of the people. They brought pliable 'elders' of the golla caste from neighbouring villages, and forced the

local shepherds to accept a settlement of a smaller quantum of gifts: the number of vetti sheep came down from 40 to 24, and the shepherds had to pay a fine of Rs 500 to boot. Later in the year, there was a taluka-wide movement against fines (or rather bribes) collected by the forest department for grazing sheep in forest land; as part of that, a procession was taken out in Sircilla town, to which shepherds from Namapuram also went; once again the landlords got another flock of sheep arrested. The shepherds, under the leadership of the Sangham, decided to get the animals released by mobilising their caste-fellows from neighbouring villages; accordingly, 100 people came in a procession and got the sheep released. Come 1980, one of the landlords once again refused shepherds the facility of grazing sheep on land under his occupation and collected Rs 100 as fine; such incidents continue, but they are in the nature of a last flicker, for the abolition of 'vetti' is final.

The protracted nature of this struggle indicates how strongly entrenched feudal practices are, and at the same time the basic orientation of the struggle, which is not a conflict between commodity producing peasant 'enterprise' and land monopoly, but rather between the toiling people and feudal social relations, for which land monopoly is merely the underpinning. Where land is an issue, it is neither irrigated land nor dry land suitable for commercial cultivation (and hence coveted by the enterprising peasant), but infertile semi-waste land which is nevertheless attractive to the landless because they can grow inferior varieties of grain on it, and is viewed equally covetously by the landlord because he naturally wishes to keep the landless landless. It is feudal authority, captured perfectly by the Telugu word 'pettamdari' that has always been the focus of peasant struggle in Telangana, whatever peculiar interpretations may be hung on them by capital-obsessed observers.

AFTER EMERGENCY

After the lifting of the Emergency, both the party and the Sanghams started functioning openly. They also extended from the two western pockets to the north-eastern part of the old taluka (eastern part of present Vemulawada); here, in villages like Nukalamarri, the party had had contacts and had run night schools during the Emergency; after 1977, Sanghams were quickly established in a large number of villages of the area. Parellely, in

Nimmapally to the west, the old struggle for the 22 acres of harijans' land was again taken up.

A landmark in the post-Emergency movement is an incident that happened at the time of a visit by Sharada Mukherjee, then governor of AP, to Vemulawada town sometime in 1977. The party mobilised a large number of people from all the villages where they were leading struggles, to take out a procession in Vemulawada and submit a representation to her. They were prevented by a contingent of policemen led by a DSP. The people were so enraged that they threatened to throw the DSP into the holy tank of the local temple (Vemulawada is a temple-town, described with local pride as 'Dakshina Kasi'); when the DSP was adamant, they were so eager to implement their threat that the leaders of the Sangham had to intervene and save the life of the DSP.

Of course, such heroism had to be paid for. Cases were booked against 70 people, and the incident looms large in the story of every village of the eastern part of Vemulawada taluka where the movement entered after the Emergency. The movement here is centered around a few core villages like Nukalamarri, Chekkapally and Kodurupaka. While Nukalamarri is dominated by one Bhaskara Rao (a landlord of 150 acres), who is said to be brother-in-law of AICC(I) general secretary, Satyanarayana Rao, Chekkapally is a neighbouring village ruled by Bhagawanta Rao, a particularly atrocious landlord; at Kodurupaka the dora is Venkatarama Rao, brother-in-law of Bhagawanta Rao. This trio has been the centre of a (by now) five-year old struggle in about 70 villages in the area. While Bhaskara Rao refused to part with 10 acres of land to his erstwhile tenant who claimed it under the state's tenancy legislation, Bhagawanta Rao had the unique distinction of getting all his land tilled and cultivated by vetti; he also used to have about 10 to 20 servants working at his house without payment. Trouble for him started when three of his servants approached the CPI(M-L) and started a Sangham in 'his' village. When the fight against him became severe he used his feudal authority to mobilise some of the people of his village and take out a procession from Vemulawada to Chekkapally, chanting 'Bhagawanta Rao is Bhagawan'; but a counter-procession by the Sangham a couple of days later cured the people of their awe. An incident that took place during this struggle (and which attract-

ed a certain amount of attention because of the visit by a PUCL team from Delhi) was the rape of an elderly woman, Rajavva, by goondas employed by landlord Venkatarama Rao of Kodurupaka village. It was an entirely 'political' rape, expressly to punish Rajavva for organising a militant Mahila Sangham. (The Sircilla movement has seen the birth of such Mahila Sanghams in 20-25 villages, mostly as a consequence of severe repression which drove the men away from the village.) The latest position is that the case against the goondas of Venkatarama Rao has been dismissed, but Rajavva is full of grit and determination and is willing to fight to the end.

The disturbed areas proclamation has certainly strengthened the hands of the doras, but the backbone of their domination — feudal pettamdari relations — has been irretrievably broken. Open struggle may today be much more difficult than before 1978, but nevertheless the situation has undergone a basic transformation. The concrete achievements are that the original starting point of the entire movement — the 22 acres of Nimmapally — have been finally given to the harijans; the beedi-leaf movement is well organised and today the rate paid is 10 to 12 paise per bundle, with all vetti bundles abolished. The wages of agricultural labourers and farm-servants have gone up. (Though these issues are perennial and come to the fore twice each cropping season, at the time of transplanting and harvesting paddy, and take the form of a massive taluka-wide movement, they get merely passing mention in conversation with peasant activists — all their most serious attention is fixed on the struggle against feudal pettamdari). Most vitally, vetti has completely vanished and so has the habit of doras sitting in judgment over village disputes. These last are easy to state, but they imply a total change in the life of rural Telangana. Most of the doras, including the notorious ones like Bhagawanta Rao of Chekkapally have left their villages sold substantial parts of their land and today live in Karimnagar or Hyderabad.

SOCIAL BOYCOTT

Not that they gave up the struggle lightly. Apart from Rajavva, there are many other women, like Lakshmi of Boinpally, who were raped by landlord goondas. Apart from Jakkula Elliah of Doomala who was killed when police fired on a 3,000-strong procession in Sircilla town in January 1980, there

were activists like Lakshmirajam of Timmapuram who were killed by landlords. Indeed it would be very wrong to think that the doras were content with the police help that was liberally given to them both before and after the disturbed areas proclamation. They were feudal to begin with and feudal to the end. They trained and armed their own gangs to fight the peasants, and regarded the police only as a standby; there is, for example, the case of Jagga Rao of Jogapuram who had 40 swords made to arm his gang with. Others, under the able leadership of Papa Rao, president of Vemulawada Samiti (block), train robber gangs to commit thefts in the name of the 'naxalite party' and alienate the people from the party. Especially after achieving basic victories like abolition of vetti, and driving away most of the landlords from the villages, one of the principal activities of the movement is to apprehend these robber gangs and force the police to arrest them (it takes considerable forcing, as can be imagined).

But the people's resistance is as varied as their enemy's offensive. The myth of the 'naxalite cult of violence' has been so assiduously cultivated and propagated that some of the forms adopted by them might not be believed. For instance, after the declaration of the area as a disturbed area, the police took to raiding villages during night times. To prevent this, entire villages (barring only the landlords and their henchmen) would stay awake, singing traditional folk or devotional songs, or listening to a haridas recounting mythological tales. Or else they would sit outside their homes and keep up a massive racket throughout the night, beating aluminium plates with laddles or metal tumblers. At the time of the seasonal struggles for higher rate for beedi-leaf and higher wages for paddy transplanting or harvesting, the police are forewarned and move into villages in strength to see that even posters calling for a strike are not pasted. In some places the sanghams adopted an ingenious tactic to counter this: cowherds driving cattle back into the village at dusk were charged with the duty of pasting posters; they would drive in the cattle in a rush, scatter the police standing in watch by the roadside and paste the posters before the police could recover. Indeed, it should be obvious to anyone not blinded by motivated propaganda that a mass movement cannot help adopting mass tactics. Similarly, those who ritually complain that Indian commun-

ists have never taken into cognisance cultural factors specific to India — like caste — would probably like to know (or perhaps not) that one of the strongest weapons in the anti-feudal struggle has always been what they call 'social boycott'. One of the defining qualities of Hindu 'dharma' being abhorrence of manual labour, boycott of the household work of landlords by toiling castes is as powerful a weapon in the anti-feudal struggle as a strike by productive workers is in the struggle against capital. Since men and women of landlord families do not perform any 'menial' chores, boycott by dhobis, barbers and harijans is often sufficient to bring the landlords down on their knees, and is generally the first tactic employed in most villages. It works particularly well with velama landlords, for the velames are a more haughty lot than the Reddys.

MORE SOPHISTICATED REPRESSION

Today's position is one of severe repression and greater sophistication of the enemy. It is not that as a consequence of the struggle "feudalism has gone and capitalism has come". As the activists clearly recognise, what has happened is much more complex than that. The doras — those who have not left the villages, that is to say — have changed the more obnoxious of their pettamdari spots, and become more 'democratic' in their outward behaviour. Whereas earlier much of their land used to be cultivated by vetti labour or by 'bonded' farm-servants, or, at best, by rent-paying tenants, today many of them give their land 'for a share', i.e. they get it share-cropped. The share is fifty-fifty both costs (on wet land) and produce. They no longer get vetti, but now they extract payment through different means. The various 'development strategies' adopted by the State have given the doras a chance to turn into brokers and suck the people's marrow. Yet they are not ordinary brokers working for a 'normal' commission but take the form of 'village elders' who represent to the government's development agencies on behalf of the villagers — and graciously accept what are modestly called 'expenses'. This role is, of course, facilitated by the fact that many of them are now Chairmen of land mortgage banks and agricultural banks, Presidents of co-operative credit societies, and of panchayat samitis, leaders of political parties, and so on. A good example is the CPI leader, Ch Rajeswara Rao, scion of a Desai family, one of whose

brothers is vice-president of a district agricultural bank, and another a leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party.

In other words, the essentially patriarchal relation has now been given a new mode of expression. True, this new mode of expression entails a difference in that it splits the toiling people and makes unity of action more

difficult than earlier — a variant of the trite observation that 'capital differentiates'. However, it is not difficulty of uniting the poor that worries the activists, but the problem of facing police repression. Repression is today so severe that in all but a few villages of the two talukas it is nearly impossible to discuss the movement openly with the people.

WEST BENGAL

When the Forests Disappear, We Will also Disappear

(By a Special Correspondent)

WHEN the well known writer, Mahasveta Devi, met the adivasis of Singhbhum district, in the border region of Bengal and Bihar, they told her a rather stark truth with characteristic simplicity: "When these forests disappear, we will also disappear."

The tragedy of the vanishing forests is not merely an environmental problem. The environmental aspect of the problem is tragic enough, if one remembers that between 1947 and 1980 the area under forests has fallen from 33 per cent to about 10 per cent. But it also concerns the existence of an entire people for whom the forest has been a home since time immemorial.

The adivasis constitute nearly 7 per cent of the population. This 7 per cent, apart from suffering the general economic disability of the 50 per cent of the people who live below the poverty line, also suffer from the special disability of being the most deprived economically and socially along with the Scheduled Castes. Government policies, in spite of pious resolutions, actually victimise the tribals. An indication of this is the fact that between 1961 and 1971, the number of landless labourers among the Scheduled Tribes increased from 197 to 330 per thousand, and the number of cultivators among them declined from 681 to 576 per thousand.

The problem of deforestation and its consequences on the life of the people, particularly the tribals in West Bengal is not unique to that state. One would have thought that some steps would have been taken by the West Bengal

government to reverse certain dangerous trends in the field of forest policy. But no such steps have been taken; instead there is a further accentuation of the same reactionary and shortsighted policies.

In West Bengal, there are two main forest regions — one is in the South Bengal region and is spread over West Midnapore, Bankura, Purulia and a part of Birbhum district; the other is in the North Bengal region and covers Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts and is part of the Himalayan Forest Region. In the North Bengal region, there is not such a concentration of tribal population nor are the people there so dependent on the forests for their livelihood. South Bengal region, which covers the Jharkhand region, is quite different. There nearly 50 per cent of the people are dependent on the forests for their livelihood. What follows is an account of what is happening to the South Bengal forest regions.

The main problem, as is well known and well established now, is the commercialisation of forests. For the last twenty years, the Forest Department has been auctioning the forests of West Bengal, and the policy still continues. The contractors cleared the old type of forests, where sal, mahua and kendu trees were numerous and planted the eucalyptus and another tree locally called the akashmoni. One of the main reasons for the planting of the eucalyptus is that it grows rapidly, and its wood is used for paper. The old type of forests provided food as well as a source of livelihood for the tribals