ORGANISING FOR LAND
INTRODUCTION

As a dominant means of production in our society, land continues to be a major source of power and control in rural India. The distribution of land, and changes occurring in this pattern of distribution, have a direct bearing on the nature of poverty and its perpetuation in the country.

Since most of the social action groups in rural areas are working with a central purpose of upliftment of the poor and the deprived, the questions related to land ownership and alienation concern all of them directly or indirectly.

In response to such a concern of groups working in rural areas, PRIA began its involvement on the issues of land ownership and alienation about three years ago: assisting and strengthening groups in their work on land related issues.

Over this period, PRIA’s role has been three-fold, sensitizing those working with the rural poor, but not directly on land related issues; assisting those intending to take up land related issues in documenting and analysing the local situation; and, providing back-up support to those engaged in struggles on land related issues, by strengthening their knowledge base and understanding of the whole issue.

A national workshop on “Organising Strategies for Land Related Issues”, held during March 10-14, 1986 was: in fact, an outcome of this continuous involvement of PRIA with a number of groups in different parts of the country (attended by 35 participants working in 7 states in the country).

It is neither feasible nor advisable to have a common strategy for all situations; yet some common principles in organising people on land related issues could be of immense help, not only to those who are already in the struggle but also to those who are beginning to get involved.
This brief booklet represents a summary of key principles and issues highlighted and discussed during this workshop. It is hoped that it will assist activists and field workers engaged with similar concerns.

**BACKGROUND**

Struggles on land related issues in India have a long history. The focus of most land related struggles during pre-independence period was for the recognition of rights of the actual tiller over land and arbitrary fixation of land revenue. At the same time, it had clearly identified the enemy in the form of feudal landlords and the British rule supporting them.

Just after independence, the government took several measures for the abolition of intermediaries (landlords assisting in revenue collection) and for the protection of tenants. These measures did result in the official recognition of the rights of actual tillers of land, as well as in the elimination of the problem of arbitrary appropriation of land revenue. The government had thus built a direct relationship with the farmers on
revenue matters; at the same time, revenue from land became a smaller proportion of total government revenue. Hence, the focus of pre-independence land-related struggles was no more relevant.

The focus of land-related struggles after this period shifted to the implementation of various measures of land reforms and remained so for more than two decades. The radical rhetoric of land reform measures and logical consequences of these measures had blurred the form of exploitation in rural areas. With the recruitment of new sections of the peasantry in land-owning class and abolition of the revenue procurement functions of the landlords, the rural power structure underwent major changes; many of these changes remained invisible for a couple of decades after independence.

These developments, coupled with regional imbalances in the implementation of land reform measures in different states defied the growth of a unified national movement of the rural poor including poorer sections of the peasantry. This new situation had thrown-up newer and different issues in different areas, with a common underlying phenomenon of continued unequal distribution of land ownership.

Several efforts at organizing the rural poor on emerging land-related issues leading to significant local struggles have begun to sprout in the past decade. Activists are striving to discover new issues affecting the rural poor and evolve appropriate strategies to deal with them.

These issues can be classified in the following categories:

- Redistribution of land;
- Prevention of land alienation; and
- Restoration of alienated land.
(a) Redistribution of land

This is an issue which has been confronting the small and marginal farmers and landless agricultural workers since independence. In the first phase of land reforms between 1950-1960, Zamindari abolition legislations were enacted in different states, getting rid of the intermediaries. The main beneficiaries of this move were large cultivators who had participated in the peasant struggles during the national movement. With high political stakes involved, crores of rupees (Rs. 670 crores were estimated to be paid to intermediaries as compensation either in cash or in bonds) were paid to the intermediaries to smoothen this process.

At the same time, the steps taken to strengthen the proprietary rights of the tenants failed to evolve much enthusiasm in the government machinery, due to low stakes as potential beneficiaries were share-croppers and small and marginal farmers.

The loopholes left in the legislations have led to millions of disputes. Not even half of the potential beneficiaries could gain by this entire exercise.

In 1972 came another hope for the marginalised sections of the peasantry—land ceiling legislations. Though the mention of land ceiling was prevalent in government documents since the first five year plan, it could take shape only in 1972 after the national guidelines were endorsed by the Conference of Chief Ministers. This led to another arena of struggle by the poor peasant and landless labourers: first to fight for identification of surplus land; then its acquisition by the government and, then its proper redistribution among the deprived sections of the rural population. In late seventies and early eighties, it led to a number of local struggles in different parts of the country. Thus the issue of land redistribution is an important one for organising the rural poor.
(b) Prevention of land alienation

Loss of control over, and ownership of, land has become intensified in the recent decades. The major causes of land alienation are indebtedness, capitalist farming, development projects, and anomalies in land records and their maintenance. Among these, the factors of indebtedness and capitalist farming have a definite but indirect effect on land alienation; whereas the factors of development projects and anomalies in land records (and their maintenance) have a direct effect on land alienation. In fact, in post-independence India, the biggest threat in land alienation came from Land Acquisition Act by which land is acquired for public utility purposes.

For the problem of indebtedness, a lot of groups all over India are organising the rural poor in different manners. Some are trying to deal with the phenomenon by working out people's own thrift societies; others are trying to organise the people to take advantage of the Moratorium of Rural Indebtedness declared by the government in 1976; and a few others are making use of some schemes of the banks announced from time to time.

The problem of anomalies in land records and their maintenance is faced by all those working with the rural poor as a day to day problem, and is usually fought locally by different tactics. In fact during the Land Consolidation exercises (which are supposed to be done to update the land records) a lot of problems have been faced by the rural poor; good quality land of the poor getting transferred to the local powerful people as a result of consolidation exercise is a usual phenomenon. In most places, the consolidation exercise led to a number of disputes and much social tension in the area.

In case of land alienation caused by develop-
mental projects, the scenario is quite different. Initially, during the first two five-year plan periods, this problem could not become visible due to the enthusiasm generated for the so-called progress of the country. But later, it became increasingly evident that some had to sacrifice for the progress, but they did not get any share in the prints of this progress. This had led to resentment and protests in several places where development projects are being initiated.

One example of this is the Land Acquisition Act. This act was introduced in 1894 by the British to claim itself to lawfully lay its hand on any patch of land. Since then, this act has been amended and modified more than 16 times to strengthen it further. Even after independence, the act has been modified not less than 6 times. On the other hand, no uniform policy, regulation or act has been created to date to rehabilitate the people affected or displaced by this act. As a result, people's resistance to acquisition of land under this law is increasing every day. Because of the development psyche created over the years, people's struggles against deprivation of their land and the right to live with dignity is generally branded as anti-development.

Most of the struggles of the people displaced due to development projects have remained scattered and localised for a long time. Yet these local initiatives and efforts have been successful in raising some basic questions regarding the meaning and direction of development we are following since independence. Several efforts to coordinate such people's initiatives and work together for a cohesive set of demands, based on the acclaimed principle of 'progress with social justice' are in the process.

Increasing mechanisation and capitalist practices in agriculture have led to increasing landlessness in several places. The increasing costs of inputs like seeds, fertilizer, pesticides, irrigation etc., is pushing thousands of small peasants into the ranks of landless agricultural labourers every
year. Increasing cost of production of agriculture is making the small land holding non-viable. The process of small farmers leasing out their land to big landlords with tractors, tubewells and capacity to invest, and ultimately losing out land to them, in the regions of green revolution is a well-known fact by now.

Though not much has been done to organise the small and marginal farmers against this aggressive onslaught, some groups here and there are making small efforts to promote organic agriculture among small farmers, in order to save them from this eventualty. The government efforts to help small and marginal farmers, focus on bringing them into the fold of capitalist farming by extending low interest loans and subsidies to acquire machines, fertilizer and pesticides, etc. This poses serious dilemmas to those groups who are concerned about increasing land alienation, since any educational effort among small farmers has to contend with this 'grow more food' campaign of the government.

(c) Restoration of alienated land

This problem is quite acute in tribal areas of the country. Historically, tribal land has always been non-alienable, even with the introduction of the concept of individual holdings during the British period, some restrictions were laid down by the government to prevent alienation of tribal land. After independence, the government has also provided statutory safeguards against alienation of tribal lands. Most states have some statutory provisions to this effect. Despite all this, the alienation of tribal land could not be stopped. Even today, the tribal land is getting transferred to non-tribals, bypassing the laws. Today, this phenomenon has acquired serious proportions in tribal areas. Time and again, local and regional tribal struggles have taken place to protect their rights over the lands cleared and filled by their ancestors. Hence, tribals have to struggle for protecting
their existing rights on land as well as for restoration of already alienated land. Often this struggle for restoration of alienated land is backed by the statutory provisions, but lack backing of records which are manipulated by the vested interests.

The restoration of alienated land becomes a significant issue in the case of bondage labour also. In the process of getting in bondage people also lose their land to the master. Quite often, even the release of bonded labour in accordance to the laws of the land (particularly Bonded Labour Abolition Act, 1976) does not ensure the release of land. At many places, where attempts have been made to follow-up the release of bonded labourers, people had to make extra efforts to struggle for the restoration of their land also.

The restoration of already alienated tribal land becomes a major issue for organising them.
BASIC TENETS OF ORGANISING

In the course of organising people on all such issues, confrontation takes place with the state directly or with local power structure represented by an individual landlord or with a combination of both. And in each case a cohesive, broad based and strong organisation is the only way by which people can protect themselves from the retaliation of the combined forces of vested interests.

In accordance with the issues taken up and the focus thus confronted, different organising strategies will be required; yet during the deliberations in the workshop, it was felt that there are some general principles of strengthening the people’s organisations and struggles. On the basis of the experiences related during the workshop, following common principles emerged:

- Constant interaction with the masses
  Which requires regular contact, regular information sharing, and regular consultation in decisions.

- Continuous educational process
  - to refine and improve people’s understanding about their socio-economic situation and political alignments.
  - to gather more information to develop a historical perspective and a vision of totality on each issue taken up by the organisation.
  - to examine and understand the need for organisation and its implications.

- Promotion of shared leadership
  This was considered as an essential but very difficult aspect in the process of building up a
cohesive and strong organisation. It was felt that it required deliberate attempts from the very beginning, to develop a shared leadership. While relating their experiences, participants agreed that an inbuilt mechanism of continuous training and evaluation can be of immense help in achieving this objective.

- **Promotion of women’s involvement**

  Which meant that women be made a part of the organisation on a permanent basis from the beginning; rather than being incidentally for specific action.

  In most of the experiences shared during the workshop, women’s significant role in specific actions was recognised but at the same time lack of continuity in their enthusiasm and involvement was also observed.

  To provide a continuity to the significant role women have been playing, in struggles on land related issues, it is necessary to make extra efforts to include them in the organisations of the poor on a permanent basis.

  It requires a great deal of consistent effort to sensitize the group on women’s issue so that the inclusion of women in the organisation is done as a strategy, and not merely as a one-time tactic.

- **Non-violence or restraint as strategy**

  Because of the nature of forces one confronts while taking up land related issues, it is felt necessary to adopt non-violence or restraint as a strategy.

  A number of participants narrated their experiences of how traps are laid and provocations are made from the side of vested interests to force the poor struggling for their rights to indulge in violence. But once that path is adopted, things
always went out of the control of the poor because law and order machinery mostly takes the side of the vested interests. Experiences showed that such indulgence has mostly resulted in uninterrupted chain of harrassment, sometimes up to the extent of badly shaking people's confidence.

At the same time, it was felt that, no organisation can gain strength by putting up a coward face and not being able to defend or project its members. In this light the question of restraint was discussed at length and participants resolved the following:

(i) Restraint or non-violence does not define people from defending and protecting themselves.

(ii) At the time of struggle, the organisation should not initiate violence despite extreme provocation and should not provide exercise to vested interests to do so.

(iii) All the avenues of petitioning and re-petitioning should be exhausted and all legal formalities be fulfilled before acting in self-defence in case of such an eventuality.

(iv) The strategic importance of restraint or non-violence be discussed and clarified to the people and the adventurist trends within an organisation be eliminated through an education process.

In case of struggles on land related issues, the confrontation invariably occurs with the state or the forces representing vested interests controlling the state use of restraint as a well thought out strategy becomes all the more important in such struggles.
• Linkages with others

Despite all its weaknesses, the political system in our country is still a parliamentary system. To control the state power through such a system, even the vested interests have to put up a democratic face and camouflage their operations according to the rules of the game. During the last two decades, the base of democratic functioning has evolved rapidly, still the pressures of the democratic system operate some times. To that extent, it provides some amount of protection.

In this context, participants valued regular and close linkages with other organisations and sympathetic individuals which help in spreading the micro concerns on a macro canva. As a result, such linkages and their solidarity provide a stronger voice to the concerns of the struggling people: it also acts as a safeguard against blatant oppression in a limited way.

Such linkages, could be developed with other mass organisations of workers, peasants, students, teachers, journalists, other NGO's in surrounding areas, organisations struggling on similar issues elsewhere in the country and networking and support organisation at provincial and national level. Linkages with civil liberty and democratic right organisations, government employees associations and lawyer associations are also quite useful.

• Publicity in support of struggle

During the discussions, it was expressed that activists generally shy away from any kind of publicity due to a variety of reasons like idealism, fear of it being interpreted as individualism, etc. In such cases it is necessary to differentiate between personal publicity and publicity of an issue or a struggle. Publicity for the promotion of a cause is different from that for self-promotion.

In the given socio-political environment, where
public opinion does have some relevance it is very necessary to publicise the issue and a struggle on as broad a scale as possible. It helps in creating sympathetic public opinion. Hence there is no reason for activists to feel shy of publicity of a cause, an issue or a struggle. Restraint from self promotion is definitely necessary.

Some participants had pointed out constraint of time and resource required for publicity of an issue or a struggle. The general opinion expressed at the workshop had favoured the idea of publicity in support of issues or struggles through the help of other organisations or individuals with whom the linkage is established over a period of time and who share the common concerns.
USE OF LAW

In most of the cases during the struggle on land related issue, the activists have to confront law or seek help of law willingly or unwillingly. Participants expressed a need to exchange their experiences and arrive at an understanding regarding use of law for land related issues.

There was almost a consensus among participants that the existing laws and jurisprudence, in its ultimate implication, cannot help the poor and the deprived. It only can provide relief and breathing space to the organised efforts of the poor and the deprived at certain stages during their struggle. Most of the participants had some or the other experiences to relate on such aspects.

In this context, the concept of public interest litigation (PIL) and legal aid were critically reviewed. While accepting the limited utility of the poor and the deprived on land related issues, participants expressed the fear that its frequent issue may contribute to the creation of false consciousness among the people and activists. Participants had a lot of interesting incidents to narrate where courts have passed strictures on state governments and they were never complied with. Participants have expressed their concern about even some social action groups falling in this trap and spreading illusions about the benevolent face of our judicial system.

It was felt that the activists should be clear that radical social change cannot be brought through law. Accepting such limitations of the law, they should use it if a particular situation demands so. Activists and people's organisations should guard against too much dependence on it; because it may dilute the movement and the struggle. In fact, legal course of action should be only used as tactics in certain situations in order to
advance and enhance the organised efforts to resolve land related issues, and not as a permanent strategy with regular reliance on it.

At the same time, everyone recognised the need to know the basics of land related laws and jurisprudence. Knowledge of this kind is necessary even to avoid the use of law. Activists involved with the poor and the deprived people's organised attempts to resolve land-related issues should be well acquainted with the nuances of legalities and should be in a position to explain and educate people about the weaknesses of law. Along with such legal education for activists, participants felt the need of educating the masses about their rights in different aspects of daily life, including land.

In this context, participants discussed the role of activist lawyers. The activists who have law degrees and who practice law for the purposes of supporting people's organisations are of immense use. A need was also felt of mobilising sympathetic lawyers and creating coordination among them, so that materials for legal education of activists and people could be generated more effectively.
TRIVIAL YET CONSEQUENTIAL ISSUES

Within the overall strategy of organising, there are certain questions quite specific to land related struggles. Land related issues generally involve a lot of legalities and procedural dealings with the chain of bureaucracy starting from the village level up to the state level. Almost everywhere in India, we have separate structure of land revenue department from the village level upwards. But in between this hierarchy, at certain points, the powers regarding land records and revenue merged with the administrative heads. On the other hand matters of dispute regarding land are governed by the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and Criminal Penal Code (Cr. P.C.). Certain types of disputes are also looked after by the Revenue Boards and Consolidation Authorities.

Then whole procedure is very complicated and cumbersome. Once the dispute gets into it, particularly if at a wrong place, it takes a few generations of the concerned parties to see the resolution of the disputes.

Hence, it requires a great amount of careful handling of legalities, procedures and hierarchies of related bureaucracies for successfully taking up a land related issue. Separate time to discuss the question of use of law was allocated during workshop. At the same time, participants expressed interest in discussing some of the questions which on the face of it may look trivial but have consequential implications. Such questions were.

(a) Petitioning higher authorities against lower officials
(b) Getting the job done even if it means "pleasing".
(c) Anticipating and using failures
(d) Role of study and information collection in organising.

(a) Petitioning higher authority against lower officials

Participants have expressed different types of apprehensions regarding the practice of petitioning higher authority against lower officials.

Most common apprehension was about the danger of developing a culture of petitioning in the organisation. Participants felt that frequent petitioning may raise high expectations amongst the people and direct attention from direct struggle to reliance on official machinery for redressal of grievances. It may also create a false impression that higher authorities are good and lower officials are bad. Sometimes it may antagonise the lower officials, who in the field of land records, have considerable power and thus, boomerang on the struggle. At the same time, this form can be used but with some direction and in case of a valid complaint only.

IT SHOULD BE USED WITH DISCRETION AND FOR A VALID COMPLAINT ONLY.

CULTURE OF PETITIONING SHOULD BE DISCOURAGED AT ALL COSTS.
(b) Getting the job done even if it means "pleasing"

Given the present character of official machinery in our society, particularly in cases of land related issues where the stakes are very high and vested interests have tremendous influence, organisations frequently face the situation where "pleasing" the concerned official could help in resolving the issue in favour of the struggling people.

Such situations pose a moral dilemma to the activists. On the one hand is the commitment to the cause of the organisation and the struggle; on the other is the moral stand against corruption and exposure of the corrupt officials. Such situations come frequently if the issue of people's right over land is being dealt with.

There was a unanimous opinion to reject this practice in principle. At the same time, it was also felt that in order to either remove an obstacle for a larger cause or to get a one time work done (e.g. getting an official document or copy of an inaccessible record), this practice of "pleasing" the concerned official could be used with a lot of caution. This should be done with anger and explained to the people in the organisation in order to educate them.

In terms of day-to-day dealings with local officials, it was felt that there should be an effort to develop permanent and human relations with them. It was pointed out that sometimes there is a tendency to consider the local officials as "class enemies", and activists tend to behave with them arrogantly and ridicule them in public. Such tendencies, participants felt, should be discouraged and a practice of having normal human relations with local officials, as one keeps with other people, should be developed unless situation of some direct confrontation makes it impossible.
IT SHOULD NOT BE USED IN PRINCIPLE.
IT MAY BE USED
TO REMOVE AN OBSTACLE FOR A LARGER CAUSE
TO GET A ONE TIME WORK DONE
IT SHOULD BE DONE WITH ANGER
EXPLAIN THE WHOLE SCENARIO TO THE PEOPLE
USE THE SITUATION TO EDUCATE THEM

(c) Anticipating and using the failures

Land being a major source of power, struggles on land related issues are generally political in nature and prolonged in process. As a consequence, successes in land related struggles are hard to achieve and once achieved hard to sustain. Hence, organising people on land related issues is a tedious process, full of ups and downs. Every action, in the process of a prolonged struggle does not bring the expected results. Hence, to sustain the morale of the organisation in such situations is a question which activists constantly face.

During the discussion on this question, participants felt that discussing the potential dangers and consequences of each action at the time of planning itself is an important safeguard against possible future disappointment.
When such situations arise which amount to failure of a definite action and cause disappointment, it is necessary to analyse the failure, its causes and implication with the people. This will help to develop insights and contribute effectively in developing new strategies for the future.

It is necessary to find ways and means to overcome the disappointments caused by failure at some stage, and regain the strength in the organisation. Apart from analysing the failures with people, participants felt, broadening the base of the struggle and escalating it to the next higher level can be useful in such situations.

POSSIBLE FAILURE BE ANTICIPATED AND DISCUSSED WITH PEOPLE

FAILURES SHOULD BE ANALYSED WITH PEOPLE

(d) Role of study and information collection in organising

In the given socio-political environment and the specific context of land-related issues, an ongoing process of study is quite relevant.

An ongoing process of study was felt relevant in order to define the perspective regarding social, political, economic and legal structures and their interconnections affecting the people. It is also relevant to develop an understanding of land relations, land records, land laws, their objectives and defects; etc.

Another aspect, considered relevant was regular collection of information related to the issues of the struggle in order to provide people’s organisation and struggle on a formidable and sound basis. Apart from this, the discus-
sion had also highlighted the importance of documentation of the history of local struggles; comparative study of local struggles and issues at other places in order to derive insights and strength from past experiences and experiences at other places.

The participants also discussed the question as to who will do all this. The general opinion was that the activists have the main responsibility in this regard. They can create such a process with the help of like-minded, sympathetic experts and do the documentation, information collection and analysis with the people. During this discussion it was made clear that the role of like-minded and sympathetic experts should be largely restricted to imparting the necessary skills to the activists. This will help people and their organisations in controlling the process of creation and utilisation of knowledge relevant to them, as well as develop the expertise within the organisation to carry out such processes in the future as well.
STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL IN PALAMAU DISTRICT OF BIHAR

Palamau district of Bihar is one of the southern districts of the state with a substantial tribal population. Palamau is currently witnessing a major onslaught of modern development, further affecting the already impoverished and marginalised tribal population of the district.

The case presented at the workshop by the activists of Sarvangeen Gram Vikas Kendra concerns the struggle of poor peasants and agricultural labourer for compensation of their lost land and question of their rehabilitation after being displaced by the North Koel project.

North Koel Multipurpose Project was initiated in 1973. It was visualised to produce 12 MW electricity and irrigate 4,40,000 acres of land. Only 25 p.c. of the potential irrigated area, according to the scheme, fell in Palamau district, the rest in Gaya and Aurangabad districts.

Under this project, a 222 feet high dam was to be built at Kutku, the work for which began in 1979. In 1979 the cost of this dam was estimated at Rs. 113.77 Crores. On completion, it was estimated to submerge about 2885 Sq. km. of land. About 659 of this submerged area is forest land and the rest agricultural land. From this the land required for 110 km. long canal to take water to Aurangabad had not even been estimated.

AFFECTED AREA

This project will affect about 30 villages. Out of this, 17 villages with a population of about 6,000 will be totally submerged while about 600 families of 13 villages will get displaced because of being cut-off from the rest of the world.

About 60% of the agricultural land being
submerged is of 'irregular tenure' called 'Gair Majurva' land, while only 40% is under regular tenures. This Gair Majurva land belongs to the cultivators tilling it for 40-50 years but yet not have been recorded in their name.

STRUGGLE

Initially, a Sangharsh Samiti (Struggle Committee) was organised by the local people under the leadership of non-tribal upper caste persons. This had taken-up the demand of better cash compensation, which was not quite useful for the tribals and other poor peasants. Due to the attraction of cash compensation, the first line leadership of this sangharsh samiti got coopted and started resisting further attempts by the tribals and poor peasants to continue their fight for their rights. This leadership started working as middlemen between the project authorities and the people; they also got lured by the usual propaganda of jobs and contracts in the project.

Such a situation led to the formation of another organisation of the affected people called 'Kulku Dube Chettra Mukti Sangathna' (Kulku Summerged Area Liberation Organisation). During 1984, this problem of the affected people was presented to the students of Daltonganj through their organisation. About 40 student volunteer went to the area to collect information. For about one and half years, this process of talking to the villagers and holding meetings continued: The number of meetings and the level of discussion during meetings had substantially improved. It helped the emerging organisation of the people to develop a clearer perspective.

During this process, the activists and members of the organisation realized the futility of cash compensation for most of the affected people who knew nothing other than agriculture. The information collected during such meetings showed that even those who got about Rs. 80,000/- as compensation during 1984 are not left with even Rs. 8,000/- by the end of the year 1984. Besides, the compensation was paid to the
regular tenure-holders only; which constituted 40% of the total agricultural land under submergence. There was a concerned effort by project authorities to avoid paying compensation for 60% of agricultural land due to lack of proper records of titles.

The most interesting phenomenon revealed through these meetings was regarding official attempts to acquire land at village Tehri, 40 km south of Kutku for rehabilitation purposes. The administration is trying to acquire 236 acres of land. About 100 acres of this land is held by 42 families, though it has not been regularised due to callousness of the local administration. Thus it is a unique case of displacing 42 families without any compensation, in the name of rehabilitation of people displaced by a dam.

Kutku Dube Chetra Mukti Sangathna, after mobilising people through a continuous process of meetings and discussions, decided to go into action. On January 16, 1985 a big demonstration was taken out in which about 4000 people participated. This was followed by strikes on March 26, April 10, and May 13, 1985.

The administration tried to break these efforts through communal and caste propaganda. The feudal lords, who had become contractors due to dam construction, provided the social base and goondas to threaten the activists and break the movement. About 12 organisations like PUCL, Nari Raksha Samiti, Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, Youth Federation; etc. stood up to express solidarity with the movement. This helped in terms of creating public opinion at the district level, which provided some guard to the movement from blatant attacks from these forces. Another significant success of the Mukti Sangathna was in winning over the confidence of construction workers at the dam site, who are mainly migrants, and whom the contractors had tried to use against movement.

No negotiations were done in camera; the Sangathna stuck to the demand of public negotiations. Officers were forced to answer the
demands for about three hours. The administration then imposed Sec 144 in order to force the Sangathana to come for negotiations at headquarters. After getting frustrated in their attempts to corner the leadership by such actions, the administration went astray. About 200 policemen surrounded a village of 500 population and threatened the whole village; Sec 144 was extended to the whole Manderia police circle; 41 people were arrested and false cases were initiated against 60. All this was done ignoring the Supreme Court order of April 9, 1985 stopping dispossession of the tribals in this area. On June 24, 1985, again on the basis of the report of the commission appointed by the Supreme Court, it issued stay orders, but the police and the administration refused to listen to anything. On June 27, 1985, when four workers of the Sangathana went to the magistrate at the construction site with the copy of S.C. order, he took them in his vehicle for consultation with district authorities and put them in lock-up. They were later released because of the pressure created by civil rights movement in the state.

The struggle of the tribals to demand just compensation for their land continues till today.

STRUGGLE FOR THE PREVENTION OF LAND ALIENATION AT MURBAD (DISTT. THANE) MAHARASHTRA

Shramik Mukti Sangathana (workers liberation organisation) is working among the tribals of Murbad Taluka of Thane district in Maharashtra.
Sangathana, in its initial work, identified several tribals working on "warkas land" (hilly land on which landlords grow grass) for last 50 years or so. They were paying regular rent to the landlords in kind but never got receipt for the same. These tribals, the cultivators of this land, did not figure in land records. They themselves were not even aware of the survey numbers of the plot they were tilling.

After discussing the issue with the people, Sangathana started an informal survey. The individual and collective applications on behalf of these tribals were prepared giving details of land, amount of produce and rent and name of the owner to get the survey numbers. These applications were submitted to the Tahsildar in the area. The Tahsildar used to give dates (which the workers took in writing) to visit the area and to settle the issue after conducting on the spot survey. He tried his best to avoid visiting the area; he gave dates but never turned up. Finally, as a result of constant persuasion, he visited the village along with his subordinates. He asked his subordinates to do spot checking and give them form VII/XII extracts.

After determining the survey numbers 45 acres were filed under section 70B to find out the status of the tenants. The landlords ignored the notices and the Tahsildar started exparte learning without the presence of landlords. Under pressure from landlords, this Tahsildar has transferred at this stage. The new Tahsildar wanted to start fresh learnings. People's delegations were taken to SDO and the Collector to ask the new Tahsildar to hold learning at the village instead of Taluka headquarters. The Tahsildar then came to the village and had lunch with the landlords during the proceedings. This incident was quite educative for the people, they saw the connection of vested interests and bureaucracy with their own eyes.

For these proceedings, the Sangathana had prepared the people in advance to put forward their position forcefully through role-plays. People
people were generally full of confidence. All the people were invited to watch the court. During this period of the proceedings the legal education of the people was carried out through a series of meetings and role-plays, this helped the people to develop a proper understanding of the legal machinery.

The experiences of anti-tribal practices of the revenue department and hinderances placed by local bureaucracy in the release of bonded labourer in surrounding villages were discussed with the people in detail. All these issues were combined to organise a big Dharma at Taluka level. Other organisations, working on land related issues in the area, were also involved and the purpose of proposed action was also broadened to accommodate the concern of others. On January 13, 1986 the Dharma took place at Taluka headquarters.

At this stage, landlords started retaliating and some direct confrontation started taking place.

People have succeeded last year due to their collective effort. Now the demand for transferring the Tahsildar has been raised by the people. People have also acquired a stay order from the court. Crop inspection was raised as an issue. ‘Panchnamo’ was done but the certified copies were not given to people.

The activist presenting the case during the workshop, summed up their relationship with the people by the slogan they promoted in the field:

“We take care of papers
You take care of lands.”

This meant that while the activist would work towards maintaining and obtaining legal papers, the people would ensure control over their land. He had also lauded the role played by women at time of direct confrontation with the landlords.

During the discussion it came to the light that some of the landlords are tribal and the cases are filed against them as well. The movement is trying to acquire class consciousness and transcend the tribal bonds.
ABOUT US

Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) is a non-profit, voluntary organisation registered under the Indian Society’s Act.

Participatory Research is a methodology based on the belief that knowledge is power and, therefore, can contribute towards the empowerment of the poor. It promotes the involvement of the poor and oppressed, their organisations and representatives in the creation and utilisation of knowledge in their own collective interests. It thus attempts to challenge the monopoly over knowledge and its tools in the hands of the few.

We work with local groups and activists involved in struggles of the poor and oppressed.

‘PRIA’ provides this support through training, research, evaluation, bringing together groups on common issues and preparation of learning materials.

We are a team of ten persons working with partner groups all over India.

In the last four years of its existence, PRIA has speciality focussed on primary health care, adult non-formal education, problems of deforestation, land alienation, women’s income generating and occupational health hazards. Besides this, workshops and training programmes on relevant themes have been organised as per the needs of partner groups.

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