

Fate of the Forest: Conservation and Tribal Rights

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The recent circulation of a draft Forest Act has once again brought into question the future of India's forests. The draft Act proposes to take a strongly conservationist stand against environmental degradation by severely restricting people's rights to the forest. How environmentally successful and socially just will such a policy be?

This essay examines the experience of adivasis in Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh, whose livelihood derives from their use of the forest, and who are held responsible by the state for destroying the forest. The state's persistent efforts to deny adivasi rights to the forest has resulted in an ongoing conflict that today constitutes the biggest obstacle to forest conservation.

The author analyses the relationships between adivasis, the state and the forest to argue that the future of India's forests is inseparable from the future of India's adivasis. Forest conservation is possible only if people's rights are recognised and established within a larger programme of tribal development.

I Introduction

Sondwa (District Jhabua) May 28, 1994:

MORE than a thousand Bhil and Bhilala adivasis crowded the block headquarters in this small town to submit claims for the regularisation of their encroachments on forest land, locally known as 'nevad'. May 31 is the last date for submitting claims. The turnout, several times larger than that for any election, took the administration completely by surprise. The sub-tehsil office ran out of receipt books and had to extend its working to the next day, a Sunday.

The prospect of regularisation has driven adivasis in droves to the tehsil headquarters at Alirajpur where almost everyone capable of filling up a form is being besieged with requests to oblige. The owner of the local photocopying shop has made a killing with his package deal of xeroxing the forms (which are in short supply) and filling them up for his customers. For the almost wholly illiterate adivasis, such a service is worth even a hundred rupees. The biggest bucks, however, have been made by the village patvaris who keep revenue records and the forest nakedars. Their privileged access to government records has made them highly sought after as fillers-up of 'nevad' forms. The fast-approaching deadline for submitting forms has brought money pouring into their hands. One patvari demanded a sum of Rs 8,000 from the people of one village for merely forwarding their claims to the tehsil office; and, but for the intervention of a local adivasi trade union which opposed such extortionist demands, the patvari would have got it too. The adivasis do not know that they are entitled to free forms. There is supposed to be no fee at any stage of the process of submission of claims.

The adivasis who came to Sondwa have *de facto* control over the land that they cultivate. For decades they have laboured and tended their 'nevad' fields; they have

worshipped this land and raised their children on its bounty. But such is the power of the state over people's minds that they crave the legitimacy accorded by the government. One scrap of paper, in the usually illegible scrawl of the tehsildar, seems to be more real and true than the land and the soil itself. The state's sanction seems more authentic than adivasis' bonds with their earth. This irony is not incidental; it is the cumulative product of years of state intervention in the adivasi relationship with the forest.

The rush to submit claims is a consequence of a Madhya Pradesh government move to implement a central government directive to regularise 'nevad' (encroachments on forest land) which promises to give adivasis title to land that they have cultivated for decades. However, very few adivasis may actually meet the stringent conditions laid down in the ministry of environment and forests order. In order to qualify, adivasis must prove that their 'nevad' encroachment happened before October 1980, that the 'nevad' field does not have a gradient exceeding 30°, and that their legal landholdings do not exceed 2 hectares (ha). The fortunate few who satisfactorily meet these conditions will be entitled to patta (title) for 'nevad' such that their total landholdings reach the 2 ha ceiling. Very few of the adivasis who flocked to Sondwa or Alirajpur will ultimately get the patta that they desire so desperately.

The mass submission of claims also highlighted the utterly shocking state of land records in Alirajpur. The peasant's basic document of proof of landownership is a small booklet that lists the names of the owners, and the size and location of their plots of land. Many adivasis who came to Sondwa carried booklets that had belonged to their grandfathers, that had since acquired the patina and dog-eared look of venerable old age. While their antiquity rendered them mildly interesting as historical objects, they were useless in performing their primary function, viz. recording present-day landownership. Numerous land transfers

spread over two generations due to death, inheritance and partitioning, had happened without making their way onto the pages of the booklet. Since getting the booklet updated entails several trips to the tehsil office as well as bribes for the patvari, people usually give up after a while, and make do with obsolete records.

If records of legal holdings bear little relation to actual landownership, records of 'nevad' encroachments are much worse. The only official proofs of 'nevad' are the receipts that adivasis are supposed to get after paying fines for the offence of cultivating forest land. Most people, however, were never given receipts because the fines that they paid went directly into the pockets of the forest guards, nakedars and deputy rangers. When receipts were given in exceptional cases, very often they were small bits of paper that were easily lost or destroyed.

The absence or the poor quality of official records makes it very hard to precisely estimate the extent of 'nevad'. There are no detailed published statistics on the subject, even though the partial data that does exist indicates that 'nevad' forms a significant part of total forest land. An authoritative source estimated that out of Madhya Pradesh's total 15.5 million ha of forest land, 1.6 million ha (more than 10 per cent) was 'lost to encroachment' between 1956 and 1989 [Buch 1991: 12]. In Jhabua district, prolonged agitation by the adivasis of Sondwa block, led by Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath (KMCS), a local trade union, forced the forest department to conduct a survey of 'nevad' in the forests of Mathvad in 1988. The survey recorded that almost every cultivator in the area had supplemented his legal holdings with several small plots of 'nevad'. In one village alone, 14 cases of encroachment amounting to 192 ha of forest land were recorded. Most of these fields have been cultivated since 1970 and even earlier.

The prevalence of 'nevad', and its centrality in the lives of thousands of adivasis,

is also reflected in the quantum of litigation regarding forest offences. At least one case of violation of forest restrictions has been registered against almost every cultivator in Sondwa block. While some of these cases pertain to illicit felling of wood or other minor offences, the bulk are related to encroachment.

'Nevad' is a forest crime. According to the forest department, the adivasi practice of clearing forests and converting them into farm land is one of the main reasons for the destruction of the forest. Why then has the government moved to regularise some of these encroachments? Some people allege that this is a populist ploy or 'misguided philanthropy' on the part of the government [Buch 1991:61, 85], intended to please a tribal-dominated electorate. Such regularisation, it is predicted, will prove environmentally deadly in the long run for, once the flood gates are opened, there will be no stopping the deluge of 'nevad' claims. However, from the point of view of adivasis who have for decades been agitating for rights to the forest, regularisation is simply the forest department's surrender of territory that had never morally belonged to it. In this view, regularisation of 'nevad' is a belated first step towards a fuller recognition of adivasis' rights to the forest. Any genuine programme of forest conservation must begin by accepting adivasi rights of ownership and control as its basic premises. This latter argument, however compelling from the point of view of social justice, leaves unresolved the vexing issue of environmental damage. 'Nevad' does destroy forests. Where then does the solution lie?

II

Conservation and Draft Forest Act

The episode in Sondwa encapsulates the complexity of the 'nevad' issue. In the official view of the forest department, 'nevad' is part of a package of practices by which adivasis, especially Bhils and Bhilalas, destroy the forest. The degradation of the forest is attributed to 'biotic interference', a term used to describe the assaults made on the forest by local communities seeking fuel, fodder, other forest produce and, in the case of 'nevad', cultivable forest land. The livestock population of Madhya Pradesh increased from 30.6 million in 1951 to 42.5 million in 1981. The pressure of ever larger herds of cattle and goats foraging in the forests has not only destroyed existing vegetation, but has also prevented its regeneration. With the population of Madhya Pradesh swelling by 10 million over the 10-year period from 1971 to 1981, increased demand for fuelwood has led to such intensive lopping that trees have become stunted shrubs. And, finally, the conversion of forest land into cultivation through 'nevad'

encroachments is the most unkindest cut of all. No wonder then that an authority on Madhya Pradesh's forests remarked that, "the only symbiosis in the relationship of the Bhils with the forests seems to be that between a meat cleaver and the goat that it is about to decapitate" [Buch 1991: 84].

In order to save forests from further degradation, the ministry of environment and forests has proposed a draft bill called 'The Conservation of Forests and Natural Ecosystems Act' which seeks to meet its objectives by severely restricting local communities' rights to the forest. The act proposes strict state control for 'sound ecological management'. Sections 5 and 34 prohibit state governments from granting pattas or occupancy rights to unauthorised encroachers on forest land, without the permission of the centre. Sections 3(2) and 27A vest the centre with the power to direct any state government to constitute reserved forests in any specific area. According to Ramachandra Guha, the draft Act will sharply curtail people's rights by classifying most forests, especially the better quality ones, as Reserved Forests, to be owned and managed by the state. Sections 1.12 and 13(d) state that the exercise of rights in reserved forests, such as the collection of fuel, fodder, etc, can be continued "subject to the carrying capacity of the land in question and prevention of its overuse". If the land is "already degraded", the Forest Settlement Officer can immediately stop the exercise of rights until he is satisfied that the land has been "restored to its potential productive capacity". Sections 16 and 22A provide that all rights can be commuted, i.e. extinguished with a one-time payment, if the government considers this to be necessary for the prevention of "degradation of the said reserved forest". Likewise, Section 76A reserves to the central government the right to make any rules for "rationalising rights, privileges and concessions in respect of forest produce from reserved and protected forests". As Guha remarks, "rationalising" is, of course, only a euphemism for "extinguishing" [Guha 1994].

While closing off people's rights in Reserved Forests, the Act offers them a limited opening in the form of village forests which will be managed to meet the biomass needs of local communities. On closer examination, even this crumb of comfort turns out to be cold. Since the Act states that village forests cannot be constituted from Reserved Forests, and as Reserved Forests predominate in most states, very little area will actually be available for the formation of village forests. And, even in village forests, the state will retain its dominant role. Section 34AA 1(c) vests the power of determining villagers' rights with the state government. Section 34AA 1(j) empowers the state government to take over the management of

a village forest if it decides that the local body is unable to protect the forest. Anyone who is deemed to benefit from a village forest, stands to lose rights to pasturage and forest produce in reserve forests (Section 15(3)iii). The Act also arms the state with extensive punitive powers against offenders. Section 64(1) empowers any forest officer, police officer or revenue officer to arrest and detain in custody, without orders from a magistrate and without a warrant, anybody suspected of committing an offence, abetting an offender or obstructing the execution of an officer's duty. Thus, the Act, in its entirety, amounts to a systematic attempt to legislate people out of the forest.

There is widespread consensus that the problem that the draft Forest Act seeks to address is a genuine and pressing one. 22.4 per cent of India's land mass is designated as 'forest'. However, it is widely acknowledged that only 42 per cent of the area thus designated is actually under adequate tree or grass cover; the rest is more or less completely devoid of vegetation [Vohra 1980:3]. With satellite imaging, the government has been compelled to be more accurate in its estimates of deforestation. According to the National Remote Sensing Agency, forests covered 55.5 million ha (16.89 per cent of total land area) in 1972-75. During 1980-82, this area dropped to 46 million ha (14.1 per cent of total area). In the 1990s forests cover a scant 32.8 million ha or 10 per cent of total land area. Whereas four million hectares of forest area was 'lost' between 1951 and 1976, over the last 15 years, 22.7 million hectares of forest has been cut down [Gadgil and Guha 1992:196; UNDP 1992:173]. The rapidity with which we are losing our forests certainly demands immediate attention and action.

But while there is no disputing the fact of the crisis or the need for urgent action, there is considerable controversy about the way in which the government proposes to deal with the problem. Is state-controlled conservation, as envisaged in the draft Act, possible? Will extinguishing the rights of local communities prevent the degradation of forests? What is the optimal—socially just and environmentally sustainable—solution to what is apparently a trade-off between conservation and villagers' demands? In order to approach these issues with any degree of insight, we must examine the relationships between the state, adivasis and the forest. An appreciation of these relationships is essential for designing a conservation-oriented forest management strategy that actually works on the basis of popular support. This essay attempts to conduct such an analysis for a part of Alirajpur tehsil in Jhabua district, Madhya Pradesh, mentioned earlier as the place where the 'nevad' rush occurred. This area is particularly appropriate as an illustration of

the arguments contained in this paper for it has witnessed a sustained struggle by adivasis for their rights to the forest. This area is also the site of a small experiment in community forest management which offers an alternative model for forest conservation. The Alirajpur experience is relevant and significant not only for tribal areas in Madhya Pradesh, but elsewhere in India as well.

In this essay, I shall begin by describing the economy of the Bhil and Bhilala adivasis of Alirajpur, focusing particularly on their dependence on the forest. Then I shall delineate the periodic crises that have erupted whenever the state has attempted to close off access to the forest. Following this, we shall examine the state's analysis of the 'nevad' problem and official responses to these conflicts. The subsequent section will look at the state's own experience of forest management in Alirajpur, both historically and through present practices, especially in terms of their impact on adivasis. I will argue that the forest department's record with respect to environmental conservation contradicts its claims for pre-emptive rights to the forest at the expense of adivasis. In the concluding section, I shall examine some attempts made by a trade union in Alirajpur to initiate an alternate model of conservation based on local management of forest resources. This suggests that the goal of environmental conservation on forest lands can only be achieved by vesting ownership and control with local communities.

III

Alirajpur: Development Profile

Alirajpur tehsil in Jhabua district lies at approximately 22°N latitude and 74°E longitude in the south-west corner of Madhya Pradesh in western India. Here the river Narmada flows into a rocky valley flanked by two hill ranges—the Vindhya on its north bank and the Satpuras on the south, becoming the border between two states, Madhya Pradesh on the north bank and Maharashtra on the south. Being the western-most tip of the Vindhya, Alirajpur is mountainous; the hills are covered by dry deciduous mixed teak forests, which have been partly cleared for cultivation. The rocky terrain, broken by gorges and streams, has thin soils. The slopes are watered only by the monsoons and rain tends to vary wildly from year to year. While rainfall averages around 60 cm, in the last seven years it has fluctuated between 41 cm and 96 cm. Consequently, drought is a frequent visitor to this land. Alirajpur tehsil has an area of 2,237 square kilometres. The region is sparsely settled compared to the national average, with a density of only 87 people per square km.

Forty-five years after independence, Alirajpur presents a dismal picture in terms

of various human development indicators: a scant 4.6 per cent of the population is literate; only 2 per cent of the women can read and write. Of the tehsil's total population of 1,96,000, only 14 per cent has access to government medical services. A mere 55 (16 per cent) of the 339 villages in the tehsil are electrified. Most villages have no source of safe drinking water. A part of the Bhil belt which stretches from western Rajasthan through Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh to Maharashtra, the population of Alirajpur is overwhelmingly tribal; almost 89 per cent of the people belong to the Bhil and Bhilala tribes. Another 6.7 per cent belong to various scheduled castes. The small non-advaisi population includes Bohra Muslims and Baniyas, who tend to be traders and moneylenders, and Rajputs. Just as commerce is dominated by non-advaisi, so is the state administration; generally, adivasis are employed only in a few petty posts. There is a sharp social divide between adivasis and non-advaisi (locally called 'bazaarias' or people of the town, by the adivasis), with the latter regarding the former as savage, backward, and contemptible.

Jhabua district is counted among the poorest districts of India, and most of the population of Alirajpur falls well below the poverty line. Almost all the people of Alirajpur make their living from the land. Eighty-three per cent of adult workers cultivate their own land, and another 8 per cent work as agricultural labourers. People mainly grow maize, jowar (sorghum) and bajra (pearl millet) and several kinds of pulses. While the cereals are intended for self-consumption, some part of the pulses may be sold. Oilseeds such as groundnut and sesame are primarily grown for sale. Small quantities of coarse cereals such as 'badi' (*Setaria italica Beauv.* or fox-tail millet) and 'batti' (*Echinocloa colona*), fibre crops like sunn hemp and 'bhend' (*Urena lobata*), and several kinds of fruits and vegetables are also grown for own use. Although people grow as many as 20 different crops, agricultural productivity is low due to skeletal soils and unpredictable rains. Only 8 per cent of the total cultivated area of Jhabua district is irrigated. Out of the district's total of 97,674 agricultural holdings, 91,507 holdings (93.6 per cent) are classified by the government as uneconomic.

Since their legal landholdings are marginal, people rely as much on livestock and the forest to sustain themselves. Access to the forest enables adivasis to own large herds of livestock that would be impossible to maintain otherwise. Besides keeping draught animals to work the land, most households have at least one cow and several goats. The better-off adivasis keep buffaloes and large herds of goats. Goats are the preferred form of livestock in Alirajpur, just as they are preferred by poor people everywhere for

their ability to thrive on low-quality fodder and for the comparatively small investment that their purchase entails [Jodha 1994: 165]. While there is little significant differentiation in the size of legal landholdings among adivasis, the size of livestock herds tends to vary quite a bit. Thus relative wealth is dependent on the number of cattle, goats and hens that a family owns. Villages where nearby forests provide plentiful fodder take in livestock from less well endowed villages for part of the year, in exchange for some cash or agricultural produce and the right to the manure.

DEPENDENCE ON FOREST

As important as legal land and livestock is the forest. Although the forests of Alirajpur have been written off by the experts as highly degraded, and indeed, crown density is 40 per cent or less, they still manage to sustain the tribal economy in a surprising variety of ways. In one village alone, people easily identified 150 different tree species and described their different uses. Through the seasons of the year, the cycle of collecting various forest produce marches along with the cycle of agriculture [Baviskar 1994]. Adivasi homes, constructed entirely of teak, bamboo and 'anjan', with floors of packed mud and cowdung, are in a way simply the forest transformed.

The forest is the source of much more than house-building material; fodder, fuel, fibre, fruit, medicines and edible gums figure among items too numerous to list here. To name only five of the most important species: bamboo is woven into baskets, some of them four feet high and equally wide to store grain; arrows and bows are made from bamboo as are fishing traps and brooms and axe handles; strips of bamboo line the roof so that baked clay tiles can rest on them. The flowers of the 'muhda',¹ the tree prized above all others, are eaten as well as dried and distilled for liquor; the fruit is pressed for oil. 'Anjan' (*Hardwickia binata*) yields a fibre that is used to make rope; its wood is burnt as well as used for making cots; its leaves are eaten by goats. Then there is 'temru' (*Diospyros melanoxylon*); its leaves are rolled to hold tobacco and smoked as bidis, its fruit eaten, its wood used to make carts. Finally, teak is used to make all agricultural implements—ploughs, hoes, rakes—drums and kitchen utensils; its wood is burnt; its large leaves are used to make packages for storing dried chillies or groundnuts.

The continuity between the forest, animal husbandry and cultivation is reiterated through rituals that seek to control and manage nature. Just as there are proscriptions against consuming certain crops during 'chaumasa' (the season of the rains), there are taboos about cutting green fodder and

teak leaves from the forest during the same season. Only when the gods have been propitiated after the rains can these products be used. In the 'gayana', the Bhilala song of creation, teak and 'pahal' (also called 'khakra', *Butea monosperma*) are as crucial in the myth as is jowar (sorghum) [Baviskar 1994].

Access to the forest enables adivasis of Alirajpur to hold their own economically. What is classified in government terminology as 'minor forest produce' is an integral part of what they live on. Besides self-consumption needs, they trade forest produce along with some of their agriculture produce for merchandise such as cloth, jewellery, iron implements and salt. And in years when the rains fail, the forest is refuge; they cut wood for sale in the market. As one adivasi observed, "during the drought, the forest is our moneylender". Whereas people from other drought-stricken areas are forced to migrate in search of a livelihood, the adivasis of Alirajpur who still have access to the forest manage to stave off starvation and avoid migration by selling forest produce. During a particularly lean summer, when asked why he and his fellow-villagers had not migrated for 'mazdoori' (wage labour), one Bhilala man replied, "we are doing *cheek ki mazdoori* right here". That is, villagers survived by collecting and selling the aromatic resin exuded from the 'halai' tree (*Boswellia serrata*).

The most controversial use of the forest by adivasis is not wood cutting, grazing or collecting forest produce (even though all these practices are blamed for destroying the forest), it is 'nevad'. The word 'nevad' literally means 'new field', or places that have been cleared and made suitable for cultivation. However, now it is used only to refer to encroached fields. There are two kinds of 'nevad'—revenue and forest, depending on which department happens to own the land encroached upon. In Alirajpur, forest 'nevad' is by far the more contentious category. The statistics about 'nevad' speak for themselves: the claims submitted in Sondwa revealed that each household cultivated 'nevad' holdings that were three to 10 times larger than its legal holdings. Since the size of legal holdings is too small for subsistence, it becomes imperative to supplement them with 'nevad' cultivation. 'Nevad' fields tend to be tiny patches of cleared forest, usually discreetly tucked away in the high hills. The land is generally sloping, with thin soils that are easily washed away. But despite its drawbacks, this land keeps the adivasi economy of Alirajpur on its feet.

CONFLICT OVER FOREST

Since 'nevad' is crucial for adivasi survival, any attempt made by the state to stop it evokes immediate and strong reactions.

Every time the forest department has tried to repossess 'nevad' fields, it has encountered widespread resistance. Adivasis refuse to surrender their 'nevad' because doing so would directly threaten their livelihood. They have made frequent representations to the administration to settle their claims through negotiation, but there has been no positive response to their call for a dialogue. The forest department, on its part, has rarely tried to find an amicable solution to this conflict,² preferring to enforce its claim with the unilateral use of force. Most confrontations have been sparked off when forest department parties have suddenly descended on an area and started digging CPTs (Cattle Proof Trenches), attempting to cordon off an area that may include grazing lands as well as 'nevad' fields. Such an incident occurred in March 1991 in Kiti village when the police fired to disperse assembled villagers from Kiti, Keldi and Vakner, who had been peacefully resisting CPT work.³ In another instance, forest guards came with a herd of cattle and set them to graze on standing crops in 'nevad' fields that belonged to Semlani village in August 1993. Very often, the forest department provokes a confrontation by setting its labourers to digging holes in the middle of 'nevad' fields, ostensibly for planting trees, as was done in Pujara ki Chauki village. Since this work can never have local co-operation, the forest department brings in labourers from distant villages under heavy police escort. In the instances when the forest department's attempts to reclaim 'nevad' have led to retaliation in the form of villagers throwing stones, the crisis has been precipitated precisely because of the state's use of force at the very outset.⁴

It must be noted that, while enclosure is justified on sound grounds from the viewpoint of conservation, viz, it allows the forest to regenerate through protection and tree plantation, in practice enclosures made by the forest department rarely achieve this laudable objective. Despite cordoning off the forest and related measures like confiscating livestock found grazing in the forest and fining trespassers, the survival rate of planted saplings in most areas is so abysmal that it is difficult to discern the difference between the degraded forest and the enclosed portion which has had the benefit of the forest department's ministrations. We shall discuss the reasons for this failure later.

Besides the violent mass confrontations that have occurred in villages like Kiti, Semlani, Pujara ki Chauki, Umrath, Khodamba and so on, the conflict over the forest has also been a ceaseless war of attrition, by which the forest department has tried to terrorise adivasis into submission. As mentioned earlier, the legal weapons used include litigation and confiscation. The forest department has registered thousands of cases, many of them on trumped up

charges, against adivasis for violating forest laws. This has trapped people in a wearying round of visits to the police lock-up and the court. The harassment and the expense entailed are considerable. People also risk getting their livestock confiscated and have to pay to get them back. If a pair of bullocks are confiscated at the time of ploughing during the crucial agricultural season, it can cripple an adivasi household's agricultural prospects for the entire year. If these forest offences are a measure, then almost every adivasi in Alirajpur is a criminal several times over.

More often than not, the means used by the forest department against adivasis are illegal. Villagers recount stories of the beatings that they suffered in the hands of forest guards. They remember times when the 'nakedar' or deputy ranger would enter their village and order that several hens be slaughtered and a feast of chicken and 'pannia' (bread cooked between leaves) and 'muhda' liquor be served for the pleasure of the officers. Earlier, forest guards would simply demand and receive a bottle of ghee or a bag of groundnut; no one dared resist. When called upon, an adivasi had to put aside his work and escort the forest official to the next village, carrying his bag for him. And a constant accompaniment to all these demands were the monetary bribes that villagers had to pay to persuade the forest department to look the other way.

Since 1982, the forest department's ability to get away with such blatant abuse of power has been sharply curtailed. A trade union called Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath (Organisation for the Consciousness of Peasants and Workers) has mobilised adivasis in about 95 villages to collectively fight for their rights to the forest. When the Sangath has sent representations asking the administration to negotiate a resolution for the 'nevad' issue, it has been rebuffed. Since then, the Sangath has had to adopt more aggressive tactics like mass demonstrations, hunger strikes, and the obstruction of forest-related work. These have succeeded in putting in an end to some of the excesses of the forest department, such as the petty violence and corruption. The Sangath's work is not defined by defending 'nevad'; its objective is the wider cause of empowering adivasis in their struggle to live with dignity, without being exploited and cheated, with control over the resources and processes that so vitally affect them. To this end, the Sangath has tried to work on several fronts—from organising a co-operative shop, teaching literacy in Bhili and Bhilali, to initiating a soil and water conservation programme, to generally strengthening adivasis' ability to stand up for their rights. For its troubles, the Sangath has been frequently called 'naxalite', the most recent sub-divisional magistrate (SDM) in Alirajpur going so far as to propose the

analytically interesting label of "semi-naxalite outfit masquerading as voluntary organisation" [Pathak 1994:10]. For the most part, the local administration has chosen to treat the mobilisation around the forest rights issue as a law and order problem, to be suppressed by means of state violence.

TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT IN ALIRAJPUR

A few administrators, however, have perceived the links between the issue of forest rights and the condition of adivasis in general. Realising the immense hardship entailed if adivasis were forced to give up 'nevad', different administrators have initiated different schemes, all of them ultimately driven by the logic of getting adivasis out of the forest. Each SDM or district collector has his pet projects for tribal development. While each SDM usually manages to finish constructing the mandatory fountain in Alirajpur town during his tenure, the development programmes stay half-done, only to languish and die during the reign of the next SDM. Some projects are wacky in the extreme. One SDM proposed custard apple cultivation on 'nevad' land as the panacea for adivasi poverty, much in the manner of Marie Antoinette telling the peasants to eat cake. When people barely manage to grow enough grain to see them through the year, to expect them to switch to a highly perishable luxury crop, in a place where infrastructure for transport and marketing is practically non-existent, is a ludicrous idea.

The lure of lucrative markets beckoning enticingly from a distance works a powerful magic on administrators, most of whose schemes focus on getting adivasis further integrated into the market. Instead of strengthening their natural resource base or improving their access to basic services such as health, education or drinking water, government schemes tend to prefer giving a one-time subsidised commercial asset—a milch cow (the Madhuban scheme), a truck (the Raftaar scheme), which is supposed to generate income. In keeping with a view of life seen from the front seat of a Maruti Gypsy, the last SDM's pet project was road improvement. In 1994, the state government sanctioned Rs 2.06 crore under the Innovative Jawahar Rozgaar Yojana scheme for a year-long project that concentrated on helping 12 villages in the Alirajpur area. Of this, Rs 1.22 crore (59 per cent) was allocated for road construction; Rs 0.3 crore (14.5 per cent) for education (constructing two school and three hostel buildings); Rs 0.28 crore (13 per cent) for soil and water conservation; and the rest for health cover and drinking water [Pathak 1994]. This allocation of funds was sanctioned for a scheme intended to generate employment! Of course, employing

people to build roads has always been a time-honoured device in drought-relief programmes. However, while road works provide short-term employment, they do little to address the root causes of poverty and unemployment. Such money could be used much more productively for soil and water conservation schemes which have the potential to create long-term employment and income, using local resources. But the SDM's expert opinion on people's priorities, and his prescription, prevails over the demands of the people themselves.

In a way, road building fulfils a social need, itself a consequence of poverty in Alirajpur. Roads facilitate migration out of the area. As the situation of adivasis deteriorates, their migration to urban construction sites and agricultural fields in neighbouring Gujarat has increased. The SDM's project proposal says as much: "The common feeling was that with a good road, public transport would increase and *people could go out of the area for employment*, as well as take their meagre exportable surplus outside" [Pathak 1994:9; emphasis added]. In the absence of adequate state investment for making the Alirajpur agricultural economy more productive, adivasis have no recourse but to labour elsewhere. In the summer, in some parts of Alirajpur that do not have access to forests, entire villages may be found deserted but for a few elderly people. Bhils and Bhilalas have traditionally migrated during times of famine; but now they migrate every year, in much larger numbers, travelling further and staying away longer. State tribal development programmes have not helped them survive; 'nevad' has.

IV

State Management of Forest

When the administration blames adivasis for destroying the forest through practices like 'nevad' and tries assiduously to stop them, it chooses to ignore its own record of forest degradation. All over India, the government has continued the colonial policy of managing the forest for maximising its own short-term profits, without respecting the rights of local communities to use the forests for subsistence [Gadgil and Guha 1992]. In Alirajpur, commercialisation of the forest started after 1869, when the princely state of Alirajpur, ruled by Rajputs, was placed 'under the superintendence' of a British Political Agent. Before that, the forest was left to the adivasis. As the term 'nevad' (literally 'new field') indicates, adivasis in Alirajpur seem to have been shifting cultivators who were free to move from one place in the forest to another. As long as they fulfilled their obligation of free labour for the king, and paid up their taxes (calculated as a fixed rate per plough), they could use the forest for meeting their subsistence needs.

Around 1870, adivasis were 'encouraged' to stop 'dahia' (shifting cultivation) and settle down. Guha and Gadgil observe that "...almost without exception, colonial administrators viewed [shifting cultivation] with disfavour as a primitive and unremunerative form of agriculture in comparison with plough cultivation. Influenced both by the agricultural revolution in Europe and the revenue-generating possibilities of intensive (as opposed to extensive) forms of cultivation, official hostility to [shifting cultivation] gained an added impetus with the commercialisation of the forest. Like their counterparts in other parts of the globe, British foresters held [shifting cultivation] to be the most destructive of all practices for the forest, not the least because it competed with timber operations" [Guha and Gadgil 1989:152].

Earlier there had been no clear demarcation between revenue and forest land and administration of both was vested in the same official. Within the jurisdiction of his village, the headman gave permission for expanding cultivation. With the tightening of colonial rule, the authority of the headman to permit fresh clearings in the forest came to be abrogated and was instead vested with state officials [Nath 1960:27]. In the process, property rights were sharply redefined. However, in the more remote parts of Alirajpur, such as Mathvad, customary rights continued to be respected. The ruggedness of the terrain and the absence of roads limited the extent to which forests could be exploited for timber. As long as the state received its due, the thakur turned a blind eye to 'nevad', the expansion of cultivation. Without competition from large-scale state-sponsored deforestation and the pressure of increasing population density, 'nevad' could remain politically and ecologically tolerable. It must be emphasised, though, that Alirajpur was unusual in its geographic isolation which insulated it for almost 100 years from the widespread commodification of the forest that occurred around this time.

From being an intrinsic part of peasant agriculture, forests came to be inserted into a commercial economy which sharply undermined the ecological basis of subsistence agriculture, hunting and gathering. While adivasis were being increasingly excluded from the forest and their customary use rights restricted, in most places this was not justified by the British on grounds of environmental protection, for no policy of conservation was instituted. Land was leased to contractors whose activities turned vast tracts of forest into semi-barren land [Aurora 1972:87]. Indian teak was extensively used in ship-building for the royal navy in the Anglo-French wars of the early 19th century and by the merchant ships in the later period of maritime expansion, as a substitute for the depleted

oak forests of England and Ireland [Guha and Gadgil 1989:145]. The expansion of the railways (1870-1910) for the movement of troops and trade in the subcontinent also resulted in widespread destruction of the forests for manufacturing sleepers. The British 'reservation' of the forests for their own use resulted in large-scale felling in this region too. In the summer of 1877, "though the [Narmada] was unusually low, a flotilla of 625 logs and 6,000 rafters was, after a month's passage, safely and without incident floated from the north-east of Akrani to Broach [Bharuch], where it fetched more than three times the amount spent on felling, dragging, and floating it down" [KG 1880:9].

Under the British, land was surveyed and new tax rates fixed on the basis of size and quality of landholding, not per plough or on the basis of ability to pay as had earlier been the case. As a result, state receipts from land revenue went up by 50 per cent. Colonial efforts to survey and enumerate, ostensibly to aid good governance, invariably ended up to their monetary advantage as well. The administrators made strenuous efforts to know in order to tax and take away; only vociferous objections from the populace held them in check. In Alirajpur, to this end, the Native Superintendent wrote that, "...I am of the opinion that all the Mangoe [*sic*] and Mowa trees within the Rajpore state should be enumerated and registered in a Book, which will prove of service when some disputes arise about possession. Also, it is possible, when all the trees have been enumerated, that a tax, which will be deemed fit, may be levied" [NAI⁵ 1870].

With this view, measures were adopted to ascertain the total number of trees, but the work was stopped when the Bheel Agent was informed of the cultivators' 'displeasure'. The superintendent went on dismissively, "On this, I minutely inquired into the matter and informed Captain Cadell that they were not at all displeased on account of the trees, only they had entertained a doubt, which was removed by discontinuing the enumeration measures. But it is usual that the cultivators grumble and murmur at every new arrangement" [NAI⁶ 1870]. Similarly, a list of about a 100 local trees and their various uses was prepared in 1894 with a view to their commercial exploitation [NAI⁷ 1894].

The methodical mapping of tribal resources—the enumeration of the flora and its consequent exploitation, and the systematic shift to monetary taxation which commercialised agriculture—resulted in enormous deforestation and soil erosion, affecting people's ability to provision themselves on their own. The crushing pincers of the state's revenue exactions and the depletion of natural resources must have made survival even more precarious than usual, necessitating seasonal migration to

the fields of Gujarat, Nimar and the Tapti valley in years when famine stalked the land.

Ironically, the only historical evidence of the destruction of forests and its consequences is the immediate and enormous increase registered in the state's income, mainly from land revenue, excise dues and forests. Statistics for Alirajpur state's receipts from 1901-02 to 1937-38 show a three-fold rise in total revenue over a period when the rupee did not change significantly in value. Land revenue grew from Rs 38,000 in 1901-02 to Rs 2,41,540 in 1937-38, an increase of 635 per cent. Excise receipts rose from Rs 16,000 to Rs 37,521, an increase of 234 per cent. Over the same period, the forest department registered the greatest rise, mainly from massive deforestation and the sale of timber; while it had generated Rs 11,000 in 1901-02, in 1937-38 it produced Rs 1,13,564—an increase of 1,032 per cent. Expenditure statements show that a good third of this revenue went to the maintenance and expansion of police and revenue collection agencies [Aurora 1972:82].

The dominance of commerce and colonial administration over the tribal hinterland was spatially represented by the emergence of towns at places where 'haats' (weekly markets) were held. According to traders in Valpur and Chhaktala (towns in Alirajpur tehsil), the institution of the 'haat' has existed since known times, but all the present permanent traders are immigrants who settled there four or five generations ago [Aurora 1972:69]. The 'haat' metamorphosed into small towns which were locations of institutions of political authority as well as points in the trade of produce. These towns served as nodes which channelled regional surplus into a national market. Forest produce such as timber, lac, mahua flowers, for example, would go from the 'haat' "to Dohad (Panch Mahals) and Kukshi (Dhar), the nearest foreign markets" [Luard 1908:604].

After 1947, when India became free, the kingdom of Alirajpur merged with independent India as a constituent of the state of Madhya Bharat. Jhabua district was constituted in 1949 and Alirajpur became a tehsil within it. Almost the first act of the new regime was to order a detailed land survey for permanent settlement. Titles to land were issued, soil types were assessed, and regular rates of land revenue were fixed. For the adivasis, land settlement was simply land alienation. Enumeration left out many 'nevad' holdings, either because they were too high up in the hills for surveyors to check comfortably, or because their adivasi owners had not paid adequate bribes to the patvari. Other adivasi rights to the forest were also curtailed, leaving only limited rights of usufruct which were channelled through 'nistar' depots run by the forest department. Thus adivasis were supposed to approach

the forest department for their every need instead of going directly to the forest.

With the passing of power into the hands of the Congress nationalists after independence, the state embarked upon the project of 'development'. The independent state's agenda of progress called for accelerated industrialisation and modernisation together with a populist 'welfare' component in the form of anti-poverty programmes. The state was charged by the Constitution to "promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and in particular, of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, and [to] protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation" [GOI 1978:4].

To this end, Jhabua district was declared a scheduled area in 1950, and Bhils and Bhilalas were classified as scheduled tribes by 1956 [NCAER 1963:191]. Welfare measures such as ashrams (residential schools), income generation schemes such as the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), and government-controlled co-operative societies were started. However, most government programmes consisted of handouts in times of distress, especially during drought, which failed to address the underlying causes of adivasi impoverishment. Tribal rights to the forest remained unrecognised; their continued alienation from the land base upon which they depended for sustenance precluded any opportunity for genuine gains in power and prosperity.

This is not surprising when we examine the overall framework of the national policy for tribal areas and tribal communities in the country. According to the Report of the National Council of Applied Economic Research, the aim of the policy

is to integrate the tribal communities within the body politic of the nation. This is sought to be achieved through raising the standard of living in the tribal areas to that in the rural areas of the country. Since the tribal areas are exceptionally backward and primitive, welfare of the people living therein is sought to be achieved through some measures of protection during the next 20 years. This protection is in respect of seats in parliament and legislatures, reservation in services of all types and categories, educational benefits and economic protection. The aim of the government is to level up the tribal communities without unduly damaging their social structure or interfering with the way of their lives [NCAER 1963:vi].

To this lofty end,

top priority has been given to a programme of rapid industrialisation and extension of means of communication to the most

interior regions in the state. Our firm view is that the development of land and agriculture alone will not be adequate for the rehabilitation of the tribal communities. Agricultural land is insufficient and cannot serve the needs of even half the tribal population of the state. Fortunately, the tribal areas of the state are rich in industrial and power potential. There is no reason why in the wider interest of the nation and in the long-term interest of the tribals themselves, industries should not be developed and localised in tribal areas [NCAER 1963:vi].

In the 'wider interests of the nation', the state has exercised its prerogative of claiming eminent domain—the greater good of the people—to pre-empt resources for itself. Yet the pursuit of these policies has brought about rapid exploitation of natural resources in tribal areas, violating the interests of dispossessed adivasis. Between 1951 and 1976, 4,79,100 ha of forest were lost to river valley projects, and another 1,27,200 ha to establish industries [Gadgil and Guha 1992:196]. The colonial policy of 'scientific forestry' has become even more profitable after independence as industrial demand for wood has escalated.⁸ In Madhya Pradesh, the state government recently announced that it will turn over degraded forest land to private industry for planting trees for their own use. It is well known that it is primarily the rural poor who depend on these degraded commons for fodder and fuel [Jodha 1994]. Their replacement by private timber and softwood plantations will further reduce villagers' access to resources essential for survival. The acceleration of extraction has been matched by the expansion of administrative control to further restrict adivasi use of the land and the forest. These regulations have become the source of a steady stream of remuneration for petty officials who browbeat adivasis who break the law into the submission of bribes and 'gifts' of omission. Meanwhile the forest department, legendary in its corruption, colludes with timber merchants to decimate the forest.

FOREST MANAGEMENT TODAY

Aurora quotes the administrative report of Alirajpur state for 1939-40 which states that "about half the area of the state is under forests, of which 289 square miles is reserved forest and 149 square miles is unreserved forest" [Aurora 1972:59]. But even in 1939, much of this forest had been degraded due to timber extraction by the forest department. Since 1939, further areas were felled for timber as well as cleared for agriculture. The history of Alirajpur shows that forests were used primarily by the state to generate revenue for itself; an orientation that is reflected in present-day management practices as well.

By reserving the best forests for commercial timber, the forest department has closed off local people's access to the forest for meeting their subsistence needs. The village forests and pastures that would otherwise have met some of people's needs were anyway either destroyed or classified as reserved. In this way, the problem of 'biotic interference' is a creation of the management strategy adopted by the forest department which focuses on growing uniform crop and age timber forests. As MN Buch explains, "Had the forests consisted of the mixture designed by nature, with ground flora serving the needs of cattle, the lower and middle storeys serving the needs of the people in the matter of fuel and timber and the upper storey serving both environmental requirements and timber needs, even biotic intervention would have caused only a minimal damage to the forests" [Buch 1991:59].

The mandate of 'environmental conservation' has been given into the hands of a bureaucracy that has so far managed the forest for profit, both public and personal. It is now expected that forest officials, who have so far only been trained to measure diameter at breast height (DBH) and determine if a tree is ready for felling or not, will be competent judges of the ecological 'carrying capacity' of the forest. The orientation of the forest department has been towards maximum exploitation of the forest; there has been no evidence so far that the forest department has the knowledge, skills or sympathies to manage the forest for their conservation. Judgments about 'carrying capacity', an ecological concept that, in any case, is extremely hard to operationalise, will be made by forest officers who have the power to deny all long-standing rights and claims of local communities.

The draft Forest Conservation Act continues to have the same deadly bias that the existing Indian Forest Act contains: it entrusts the task of conservation into the hands of an organisation that lives off the forests and the adivasis. The official discourse on 'nevad' and 'biotic interference' chooses to disregard the unofficial transactions to which it has given rise. From the legal sanctions against adivasis' use of the forest derives the power of forest officials; the act has sown the seeds of a thriving corruption. People can have access to the forest, but for a price, usually payable in cash, fowl, ghee. If the forest department were to really cordon off the forest for conservation, this steady stream of income would dry up.

Another stream of unofficial transactions that would end if the mandate of environmental conservation were implemented in earnest is smuggling. The illegal sale of wood by forest department officials and contractors working together has been common in the better forested parts of Alirajpur. A more recent trade is smuggling

'halai' resin, trade in which is banned. In May 1994, a consignment of resin valued at Rs 2 lakh was intercepted by the Gujarat authorities outside the Alirajpur border. The smuggler in question was chagrined; his seth (financier-boss) reportedly paid Rs 20,000 per month to the Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat forest department checkpoints to let his stuff go through unharmed. The previous year, when another consignment had been stopped on the state border, the smuggler negotiated an ingenious compromise: instead of confiscating and fining him on the basis of the value of resin in his truck, the forest department officials allowed him to remove the resin originally intercepted and replace it with inferior quality stuff so that the value of the consignment and therefore the fine payable on it would be considerably reduced. This generosity, of course, was made possible because of the fat bribes given by the seth to the forest officials. Conservation, properly implemented, would put an end to these mutually advantageous arrangements.

Since it is in the interests of the forest department to retain control over the forest, schemes for power-sharing with adivasis have never really got off the ground in Alirajpur. The Hitgrahi Yojana—a scheme in which forest land is leased to landless tribals for growing forest crops—was implemented in the mid-1980s as a compromise solution to the problem of 'nevad'. The entire cost of afforestation was to be met by the forest department, with a monthly cash grant being given for five years to support the adivasi till the forest crop matured. Adivasis were to have the right to the usufruct of the entire crop, including the corpus of the trees as may be grown and harvested. With the intervention of the Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath, some villages of Alirajpur were involved in this scheme. People planted tree crops on some of their 'nevad' land, but their initial mistrust of the government was borne out when the promised monthly payments stopped after three or four months. After initiating the scheme, the government aborted it by providing inadequate funds. The Hitgrahi Yojana and other failed afforestation schemes such as the community woodlot programme [Chambers et al 1989:164] are precursors of Joint Forestry Management (JFM) schemes which, after succeeding in West Bengal, are being tried out in Hoshangabad and Jhabua districts in Madhya Pradesh. Whereas JFM has elicited enthusiastic popular participation in West Bengal [Viegas and Menon 1993], in Alirajpur the forest department has formed village forest protection committees without holding proper village meetings, selecting office bearers at will [Banerjee 1993]. Villagers have gained from temporary wage employment, but there has been no meaningful participation or sharing of power.

JFM in Alirajpur also seems to have gone the way of other government programmes.

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT FUTURE OF CONSERVATION

We have seen that the forest department's efforts to protect forests have inherent contradictions and limitations which have brought about the present crisis in forest management. If power is further concentrated in the hands of the government, as the draft Act proposes to do, then the problem of forest degradation will be made infinitely worse. At present, there are few mechanisms to check the abuse of power by the forest department; increasing power without an accompanying system of outside control would place the forests and the people entirely at the mercy of the state. What then would be a better approach to ensure that the objective of environmental conservation is achieved? How would sharing power with adivasis show a way out of the environmental crisis?

The adivasis of Alirajpur are today living on the edge, forced to cultivate 'nevad' fields on fragile hill slopes and collect forest produce in order to avoid migration in search of work. They continue to be heavily dependent on the forest for their survival. Because adivasis have no security of tenure, and live under the constant threat of eviction, they cannot invest in improving their land. Their poverty prevents them from planting tree crops that have a long gestation period, and the illegality of their position precludes their receiving loans from the government for making agriculture more productive. Since adivasis' rights to the forest are not recognised, they have no stake in protecting it from the depredations of the forest department or from outsiders.

The first step towards recognition of adivasis' rights must be a comprehensive survey to systematically map all rights, claims and existing uses of the forest by adivasis. At present, rights are exercised on an *ad hoc* basis, as concessions grudgingly granted by the forest department. Adivasis have no guarantee that they will be allowed access to the forest on a regular basis. Therefore we urgently need a 'forest settlement', not to 'extinguish' or 'commute' rights, as the draft Act intends to do, but to recognise and incorporate them into a management strategy, into institutions and practices of participation. Secured access to the forest is a precondition for eliciting popular participation for environmental conservation. This implies that the state must also take the bold but essential step of settling legitimate 'nevad' cases. Ignoring the problem or trying to suppress it will impoverish the forest as well as the adivasis. And we must remember that it is adivasis who have a pre-eminent right to the forest, and not the state.

But regularisation of 'nevad' alone is not enough. Merely granting adivasis security of tenure and improved access to the forest does not equip them to improve the land or the forest. Considerable investment must be made for environmental conservation programmes to succeed. In addition, there has to be greater co-ordination between environmental conservation and tribal development programmes. Tribal development, which is presently a moribund affair, benefiting only the bureaucracy, has to be integrated with environmental conservation so that adivasis have a chance to create sustainable, self-reliant livelihoods for themselves. Both channels of state intervention—forest policy and tribal development policy—will only work if they articulate and address adivasis' felt needs. Such sensitivity has never been a distinguishing feature of top-down government policies; only when adivasis have acted politically has the state administration been forced to improve itself.

A group of villages in Alirajpur have demonstrated that the potential gains from political action in combination with environmental conservation work are infinite. The villagers of Atha, Gendra and Umraha have been active in the Sangath for several years. Their organisation into the Sangath, together with hundreds of other villagers, has allowed them to safeguard access to their 'nevad' fields. This collective sense of security has enabled them to invest in soil and water conservation measures on a large scale. Through a slow process of trial and error, people have tried to evolve a conservation strategy that works best for them. The Atha efforts are not perfect; activists' and villagers' interest and participation have flagged at times. But, despite the many setbacks, the achievements are there for all to see.

Work through the Sangath has concentrated on two fronts: improving 'nevad' fields and managing the rest of the forest for sustainable fodder yields. Labour collectives have worked on bunding and gully plugging to prevent soil erosion from the fields. One year, villagers ran a nursery to grow saplings for planting. When they found that trees planted in 'nevad' fields did not do well because they needed too much tending, people chose more manageable sites close to their houses. Since people could select tree species and plantation sites that best met their particular needs (field boundaries or close to their houses), survival rates were high, in stark contrast to the failed plantation work of the forest department. People have adopted innovative crop-mixes, combining bamboo and pulses for instance, and invested considerable labour and thought to use the land to optimal advantage. Since such conservation started, some 'nevad' fields have become showpieces worthy of

any pampered agricultural extension station. Villagers have collectively decided which parts of the forest should be closed to livestock to allow regeneration. They found that trying to save more distant patches of forest was harder; not only were they difficult to guard, but the competing claims of other villages often led to quarrels. Instead, people chose to cordon off forests close to their fields which are easier to monitor. People take turns to regularly patrol the closed-off area. The increased fodder output is shared among the members. People have now also started planting trees on forest land. The only response of the forest department to this initiative has been to file a 'panchnama', recording this 'offence'.

Why has Atha succeeded where others did not even try? One reason could be the increasingly acute scarcity of forest produce around Atha which forced people to initiate action themselves. Gondvani and Vicholi are two villages near Atha (not members of the Sangath) which started planting bamboo on their land since bamboo disappeared from the forest. Other villages in the Sangath, which do not face such an acute forest crisis, have contented themselves with protecting particular species or patches of forest. For instance, Bhitada and Nadi Sirkhadi, villages on the banks of the Narmada, stopped using 'anjan' trees which had been lopped mercilessly and have consequently been rewarded by tremendous regeneration. While scarcity is a factor in explaining interest in conservation, income is another [Chambers et al 1989]. Wherever people have earned from conservation, they have invested in it. Atha has reaped the benefits of conservation through increased supplies of fodder, wood and bamboo. But even a village like Khodamba, surrounded by dense and apparently abundant forests, has started protecting species like 'halai' which yields an aromatic resin that fetches handsome prices.

The change of attitude that underlies these initiatives is all the more remarkable when we remember the centuries of state control during which adivasis have often internalised the dominant ideology that they have no right to the forest. Physical and political alienation had created profound psychological alienation. After years of being made to feel like trespassers in their own homes, it requires a sea change in their perceptions for them to think that they have a stake in the future of the forest.⁹ Even within the Sangath, this transformation of consciousness has been slow in coming. But wherever people have started protecting the forest, they have fiercely defended it against outsiders. The villagers of Khodamba, for example, have resolutely denied access to people from other villages. In Khodar village, a Sangath member has single-handedly

protected the forest adjoining his fields. Since he has laboured to take care of it, he regards it as his own. Now it is the forest department which is coming to be regarded as the interloper, not the adivasi.

The Attha example demonstrates people's preference for an approach where they have control over the conservation programme and where their rights are secured. However, a small financial base prevents them from expanding the scale of activity, and from undertaking works that require more bought materials (for water harvesting, for instance). People would like to travel to other places to learn from the experience of NGOs such as the Aga Khan Rural Support Project or Sadguru Water and Development Foundation in Gujarat. But while the SDM can bring Rs 2 crore to build roads, the adivasis of Alirajpur have to protect the forest and the land on their own. An organisation such as the Sangath can create a small island in Attha to show what is possible. But for all the adivasis in the Sangath, and for all the adivasis in India, such a transformation of the forest and of their own lives is possible only when political control is combined with control over the resources now commanded by the state.¹⁰

If the ministry of environment and forests (MoEF) takes its mandate of environmental conservation at all seriously, it will have to shed its unwillingness to facilitate people in doing things their own way, with their priorities foremost. Besides surrendering power over the forest into the hands of those who have a much greater right to it, the ministry must ensure that development resources are invested into this process. This requires legislative initiatives as well as administrative enterprise. The fate of the forest and the fate of adivasis are linked. As long as adivasis continue to be exploited and impoverished, so will the forest. The cause of conservation is inseparable from the cause of making adivasis' lives more secure, sustainable and prosperous. For environmental conservation, popular struggles have to be met half-way by an enlightened state. The ministry has previously shown its appreciation of these perspectives by encouraging fledgling efforts towards participatory forest management. It must not now fritter away its gains through a retrogressive act.

Notes

[Suggestions from Amit Bhatnagar, Walter Fernandes, Ramachandra Guha and Rahul N Ram greatly improved this essay. The author is responsible for the shortcomings that remain.]

- 1 *Madhuca indica*, or 'mahua' (in Hindi) holds a pre-eminent place in Bhilala culture, just as it does for adivasis all over central India. In the months of March and April, the white-green fleshy flowers of the 'muhda' fall to the ground and are collected and dried. They

are used in cooking, relished as much for their sweetly pungent flavour as for their nutrients; but they are valued even more for the 'huru' (liquor) that is distilled from them, a clear, delicately potent brew. No ritual occasion can go unmarked by the ceremonial partaking of 'huru'. The fruit of the 'muhda' yields an oil that tastes rather like ghee.

- 2 The sole exception to this has been a short-lived scheme called the Hitgrahi Yojana which we will discuss later.
- 3 For a fuller account of this incident, see Baviskar (1994).
- 4 Recently, such a confrontation occurred in Chikhli village, Dhar district, adjoining Jhabua. The forest department tried to forcibly plant trees on Chikhli's traditional grazing land, classified as 'culturable waste' by the revenue department. Representations to the tehsildar asking that the land not be turned over to the forest department were ignored. On May 17, 1994, on hearing that forest department officials had arrived with labourers to start plantation work, people rushed to the spot. The range officer fired in the air to disperse them, then incited the labourers to throw stones at the villagers. Police intervention broke up this fight but, later, villagers were arrested on charges of rioting and intimidation [Shraddha 1994].
- 5 From the native superintendent of Ali Rajpore to Col Blair, Officiating Bheel Agent, August 27, 1870, Bhopawar Political Agency. S No 16, 1/152/1870. NAI.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Report from the Ameen Alirajpur, 1894. *Yaad sadar aam riyasat Alirajpur. Babad haal darakhat jangal Alirajpur*. NAI.
- 8 For an excellent account of the way in which forest management has changed since independence and yet remained the same, see Gadgil and Guha [1992: 185-214].
- 9 In colonial times, while adivasis were generally excluded from the forest, some practices of the former princely rulers exemplified an understanding of the 'stakeholder approach' to conservation. Raja Pratap Singh (1891-1920) planted mango trees along all major roads in Alirajpur, entrusting their care to neighbouring villages who were then entitled to half the mango crop in exchange for their labours. Today the produce of these trees is auctioned to the highest bidder and villagers have no interest in caring for the trees.
- 10 We now have several examples of successful decentralised sustainable development. The achievements of the Chipko movement are famous. More recently, the villages of Ralegan Siddhi in Maharashtra [Pangare and Pangare 1992] and Sukhomajri in Haryana [see Chambers et al 1989:155, for sources] have become well known. For other case studies, see Chambers et al (1989), Singh and Burra (1993), as well as periodic reports in *Down to Earth*, an environmental newsmagazine.

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