

“Worst in a Hundred Years”

The Kalahandi¹ Drought

Gail Omvedt

Kalahandi means “black pot,” suggesting that indigenous artisans made these of the rich black cotton soil that is indeed found in part of the district. The name itself suggests a kind of wealth. Yet today “Kalahandi” has become synonymous with the opposite: with drought, starvation, and child-selling. Kalahandi has become once again a symbol of the natural calamities that many people feel are pervading India today.

The Kalahandi (or western Orissa)

1. The districts of Orissa were divided only a couple of years back. “Kalahandi” as used in this article refers to the former united district, now divided into Kalahandi and Nuapada.

drought situation has once again been providing images to feed the newspapers and journals of India: images of bone-thin human beings, desperate men hanging themselves, women lying exhausted with their children at railway stations, villagers by the hundreds holding out begging bowls. Deve Gowda flew to the food summit with his joint family after visiting here; Chaturman Mishra described it as a “worse disaster than the Andhra cyclone” (but during his Orissa visit, not in Andhra itself!) And the reality is grim enough. Hunger, disease, exodus from the district in search of jobs, people desperately trying to save themselves and their families; a quiet misery pervading the countryside. Old people of 80-90 years say that it’s the worst famine they have seen in their lifetime. That means the worst in a century — and this is the region that was already notorious for drought and famine in the mid 1980s.

Is Kalahandi cursed? Is this indeed a “natural disaster”? Strikingly, this

was the former princely state about which Orissa’s British chronicler wrote in the early 20th century, “[It] has never suffered any general or serious failure of the crops, and even in 1900 when all the neighbouring country was severely affected, Kalahandi knew only a slight scarcity.” The really devastating droughts in Kalahandi in fact only began in 1965. Rainfall is not low; the drought-stricken regions of states like Maharashtra would yearn for its average of around 1200 mm a year.

Further, Kalahandi rice, the main agricultural crop of the region, is famous in Orissa for its quality. Foodgrain production per capita is *higher* than average in Kalahandi: in 1989-90, per capita production per year was 331.86 kg compared to 253.03 for Orissa and 203.13 for India as a whole. Kalahandi has been from pre-Independence times a self-sufficient district in food, and in the 1960s and 1970s it was the third largest average exporter of rice to other district of

What has changed in Kalahandi?

“The regular cultivating classes make very large profits annually by the sale of produce to merchants who flock to the State in large numbers to export rice, *rashi* (sesamun), and other cereals, and very large sums of money pass through the post office on this account . . . A vast change has come over the State during the last 50 years: the population has increased from 80,000 to 350,000. The soil has come under the plough and the open country is now highly cultivated and well-irrigated with fine tanks and embankments . . . *The State has never suffered from any general or serious failure of the crops*, and even in 1900 when all neighbouring country was severely affected, Kalahandi knew only a slight scarcity.” (L.E.B. Cobden-Ramsey, *Feudatory States of Orissa*, cited in *Kalahandi District Gazetteer*, pp. 241-2, emphasis mine.)

What has changed in Kalahandi? Were the seeds of the present disaster laid with the earlier “very large profits” from “sale of produce to merchants”? Or has the independent Indian (Orissan) state failed to maintain even the degree of development in the largely *adivasi* region of western Orissa brought about under British hegemony?

Orissa and other states.²

The paradoxes can be multiplied. Per capita landholdings of cropped area are the highest in the state (.592 hectare compared to .332 hectare for Orissa as a whole). Seventy-four percent of households (in 1980-81) held land as compared to 66 percent for Orissa as a whole.³ Even the Dalits and *adivasis* appear to have slightly larger average landholdings and less complete landlessness than in most parts of India.

Rainfall, it is true, is often highly variable and then crop failure occurs — but this does not explain, as activists like Jagdish Pradhan of the Paschim Orissa Krishijibi Sanghatana point out, why people suffer so intensively after one or two bad years. In richer areas of the world and in India itself crop failure occurs in agriculture — yet people do not necessarily starve. Most of Maharashtra has much less rainfall than Kalahandi, yet people in the drought-stricken regions of western India do not starve to death. Landlessness is far higher in Punjab, yet the poor migrate into Punjab to get work in agriculture rather than fleeing. The calamities of hunger, lack of work and income, and the resultant misery are hitting Kalahandi, one of the richest areas of India in terms of natural resources. Why? The answer, pure and

simple, is exploitation. The loot is centered on the low prices given for paddy and forest produce and on the total neglect of Kalahandi in any development policies. The worst effects of this fall on the landless and land-poor of tribal and low-caste background, and mainly on the women and children among them, though nearly all the people of the district suffer in one way or another. But before going into this, let us take a look at the district and its men and women.

Visit to Kalahandi

What the world knows as Kalahandi is actually two districts in the heavily *adivasi* region of western Orissa. Until independence, Kalahandi proper was a princely state ruled by a dynasty of Raj Gonds, and Nuapada, formerly the Khariar *zamindari*, was integrated with Kalahandi to form one district after Independence, but again split off in 1992 when all the old districts of Orissa state were divided. Nearby are Balangir, Sonapur, and Baudh, parts of the old districts of Balangir and Phulbani; which are at the centre of the current drought.

Kalahandi (the old district) has 31 percent *adivasi* and 16 percent Dalit population; Balangir about 19 percent

and 16 percent, Phulbani about 39 percent and 19 percent. This gives them a much higher than usual proportion of Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) members, though lower than some districts of Orissa which are not plagued by drought and famine. These districts are part of a distinct region of Orissa, where a dialect quite distinct from coastal Oriya or “Kutaki” is spoken. In the pre-Independence period they were part of Kshatriya (*adivasi*)-ruled princely states that remained somewhat isolated from the coastal (and upper caste)-led Oriya independence and national movement. The region, which has had some sporadic demands for a separate state, includes the “old” districts of Sambalpur, Sundargarh, Kalahandi and Balangir. Sambalpur is a little more developed and famous for its sarees. Sundargarh is the district of the great steel centre, Rourkela. Both, for varied reasons, are a little better off, while Kalahandi, Balangir and Phulbani have remained backward and drought-ridden.

I visited Kalahandi on behalf of the National Institute for Social Work and Social Science (NISWASS) based in Bhubaneswar in October, 1996. My

2. Interviews, Jagdish Pradhan, October-November 1996. See also his seminal article, “The distorted Kalahandi and a Strategy for Its Development” in *Social Action* 43, July-September 1993. The statistics refer to the “old” Kalahandi district and cannot be updated because since the division of the old district into “new” Kalahandi and Nuapada, the government has released statistics only for Kalahandi and not for Nuapada, the main centre of the drought today. The available ones for new Kalahandi district (*District Statistical Handbook, 1993*) confirm the slightly larger landholdings and less land concentration noted in Pradhan’s article.

3. Pradhan, 1993, pp. 298-299.



Farmer destroying his drought-hit paddy to make new fields to grow wheat

The Price of Rice in Kalahandi

In Kalahandi people talked of selling their paddy for Rs 200-300 per quintal. The official price was Rs 340/350 but only a few could get that. When they had to buy rice for consumption they had to buy it at Rs 360/kg. Government rice is offered through the Public Distribution System (PDS) at Rs 2 per kg but this was rarely available. With the drought and forced price rise due to government bans on foodgrain movements and blackmarketeering, prices rose to Rs 5, Rs 7.5 and even Rs 10 per kg by the time we left.

What is striking about these prices is their overall low level. Rice is sold at Rs 9 to 10 on the open market in most parts of India and even in Bhubaneswar. More important, farmers growing and selling paddy in other parts of India get much higher prices, both “officially” and actually. In Punjab, rice is officially bought at Rs 395-415 depending on the variety and the FCI was trying to keep prices at Rs 395 by classifying varieties as “fine” rather than “superfine” (*Times of India*, November 5, 1996). People I talked to in Maharashtra could hardly believe the Rs 200-300 per quintal offered in Kalahandi.⁴

The low price is compounded by low productivity: in 1989, productivity in Kalahandi was estimated at 12 quintals per hectare, compared to an average of 16.9 for India as a whole, a potential of 45-58 from high-yielding varieties, and an actual 67 from Korea at that time.⁵ In other words, both low prices and low productivity have lowered people’s incomes, but low prices throughout the decades of Independence have deprived them of resources to invest in improving productivity.

Paddy and “non-timber forest produce”, also very underpaid, are the only products the people of Kalahandi have to sell. Out of these they buy whatever other consumer goods they need. But low prices and low wages mean they have very little with which to buy. The government does not (cannot) control the prices of industrial and processed goods in the way it controls paddy and forest produce prices. So the people have very little purchasing power, and little money is available in Kalahandi communities to invest in processing or rural industries of any kind. The low prices they have gotten for their labour and the wealth of their land for decades on end have left them helpless today in the face of drought and starvation.

visit is short, only four days, but it is at least longer than that of the four prime ministers and probably as many agricultural and other ministers from the state and national governments, who were flown in by helicopter to “personally study” the region. I go by one of the creaking buses of Orissa along with my companion Raj Kumar, from a SC (Dom) family of Kalahandi, who is the first Dalit graduate of the district to attend Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU).

We reach Khariar in the morning, groggily recover from the bus ride, and

4. In Maharashtra, people say that they get Rs 750-800 per quintal when selling paddy! The difference perhaps is that they are selling here to private dealers; the state does not purchase paddy in Maharashtra since it is not at all a major rice-growing state, and so has no great interest in holding down paddy prices.

5. Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy, *Basic Statistics Relating to the Indian Economy*, Volume I: All-India, August 1990, Table 13.4

find a jeep to take us on our survey, beginning with Raj Kumar’s village. This is in the plains area near the market town of Boden. On first impressions, the region does not look poor. Kalahandi has both fertile-looking plains and small hilly regions that rise starkly out of the plains and are still (remarkably, to eyes used to the barren hills of Maharashtra) swathed in green. But, though the land looks prosperous enough, both Boden and Khariar have few and meagrely-stocked shops. These are the supposedly major “urban” centres of Kalahandi, next to only its district town of Nuapada, yet both are little more than large villages by western India standards.

The roads (the major arteries of the district) are bumpy and filled with potholes. Building better roads and other infrastructural schemes is something that government-provided employment like Maharashtra’s Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) could do. “We’ve paved the *taluka*

with roads,” is a line in a women’s song in Sangli district, meant to satirise the unproductiveness of EGS; but now I remember it with a bit of nostalgia, thinking Kalahandi could use a little bit of paving. But, while Maharashtra has an “Employment Guarantee Scheme” set up after massive demonstrations during the drought of 1972-73, Orissa, like most other states, only has an “Employment Assurance Scheme” (EAS). And that is what it is — an “assurance”, a promise, like politicians’ promises. The state is not legally bound to provide work to any 50 people who demand it. As a result, it provides very little: people in Kalahandi get work from the government for only five to seven days at a time building small miscellaneous projects, on the excuse that EAS work should be “productive work.” People in Maharashtra hate the “rock-breaking” of EGS and it is certainly no long-term solution for the problems of development, but at least it has

provided a floor for livelihood during times of drought. Nothing like this is true in Orissa, and as a result, Kalahandi has terrible roads, and the people have no work to fall back on.

Raj Kumar's village, and the three villages of various sizes that we visit nearby, have almost no shops. There is electricity but few use it, and there is no assured irrigation water. Of the villagers we meet, the Gonds (STs) and Dom (SCs) are in the worst shape and the "farming" caste Chasis and Khondayats are only slightly better off. A group of enterprising Teli farmers in a small cluster appear to be doing well (partly due to their processing oil from mustard, a rare "cash crop" of the district) but we don't have time to talk to them.

Most families of both the Gond and Dom hamlets of Kharasel have small parcels of land (one to two acres for the Doms, perhaps slightly more for the Gonds). The people tell us their stories of subsistence and survival. Even in normal years, it is a poverty-ridden existence. Paddy is their only cash crop; they sell it to buy their few other needs at only Rs 200/quintal to a Marwari trader who comes and buys it for the local market. (There used to be a larger government-run market in the nearby big village — people say there was storage for grain there since the Mughal period — but the government does not provide money to keep it functioning). When they need it again for food they buy it — at Rs 350 a quintal.

Both landed and landless work for wages in a nearby central village at Rs 5 per day for weeding (women) or five to six kg of paddy a day for men and women on paddy fields. Because paddy work is paid in kind it is considered to be worth a little more. Besides paddy they sometimes plant onions, brinjal and tomato, but there are no buffalos or cows and the only vegetables they mention are

cucumbers, green leaves, potatoes (which they can buy) and occasionally *dal*.

The scanty diet is typical of the plains area; *adivasis* in the hills have had access to many more vegetables and fruits and have had a healthier traditional diet, but this is being gradually eaten away by deforestation.

They use cowdung, and some urea as fertiliser. They have tried hybrid seeds but with no water and chemical fertilisers too expensive to use according to prescription, these failed to produce. Like other farmers in the area, they prefer the indigenous variety of seeds — but only, it seems, because there is no water and fertiliser to support hybrid or "improved" varieties. Irrigation is a joke to them. The government gave them loans for Jivandhara wells and even to buy motors. But though there are now 25 of the simple Jivandhara lift wells, there is no water, though they dug up to 25 feet. Motors were put in two of these wells, but they could not get an electricity line.

The only person earning a bit more in this group was a Gond woman running an *anganwadi* at Rs 400/month. This woman, Muridei, responded enthusiastically to a

question about the land rights of women. In Koraput she knew of *adivasi* women who had land ownership rights, but this was not true here; the main *adivasi* communities in the district are as effectively patrilineal as the caste Hindus. She thought it was a good idea; because of lack of land ownership women were helpless: "we should get some land so we can do kitchen gardens, but we need facilities for that, and someone should teach us the techniques." Muridei, and the other women of Kharavel, pulling their sarees over their shoulders to hide the fact that like most village Oriya women they had no blouses, were among my bright memories of the tour.

Except for Muridei's *anganwadi* job, there is no diversification of occupation and income. Education is minimal: there are no graduates in the Dalit, *adivasi* and Other Backward Caste (OBC) communities we visit, and the official statistics for Kalahandi from the 1981 census show that only 27 percent of SC men and four percent of SC women, and 21 percent of ST men and two percent of ST women, are literate. The exceptional character of Raj Kumar's entry into JNU strikes me again, but the "normal" situation after so many decades of independence



Unemployed labourers of Kalahandi waiting for jobs, but nothing is available

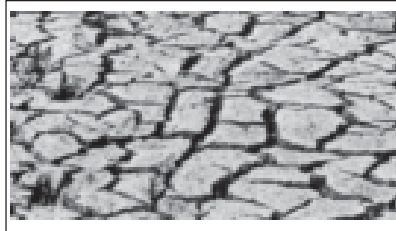
with a constitution promising “compulsory primary education” is appalling. With lack of education and occupational diversification, in “normal” years theirs is a subsistence existence at a bare minimum, and this is clearly not a normal year. The people expect famine. Paddy on the best quality land, they told us, will be harvested soon, and is all right, but all the other land will be affected by drought. Their mood is one of fatalism.

In Nilji, where the *panchayat* for Kharasel, Baigapada and other hamlets is located, we meet some farmers of the Khondayat caste, which considers itself Kshatriya but has farming traditions. They say that more land could be irrigated from the Udanti river nearby, but floods and changing river channels meant only 20 acres could be irrigated. The Block Development Officer (BDO) controlling this has also arranged it so the water has become a monopoly of three big families. An ex-*sarpanch* owning 40 acres and planting paddy, black gram, *mung*, *urad*, brinjal, tomato and beans tells us that normally he gets 150 quintals of paddy; this year he is only getting 40 to 50. He and others use hybrid seeds — but they emphasise how difficult it is and think that indigenous varieties are better.

These people, the “rich farmers” or “landlords” of the villages, live in old *wadas* (sections), with some evidence of prosperity but nothing comparable to the new brightly painted cement houses found in Maharashtra or northern India. The middle class colony where I and some other faculty of NISWASS live in Bhubaneswar is also in many ways poorer than western or northern India — but the houses are “India-standard” quality and every fifth or sixth house of the most high-status “duplex” row seems to have a non-government organisation (NGO) board. People of Orissa in general are likely to remark about the extreme influx

of NGOs into the state; particularly in the coastal region, as a large number of them do have their central offices and homes in Bhubaneswar.

Next day we visit Kendupatti, a village where an NGO, the Jagrut Shramik Sanghatana, is working. It seems that if one visits Indian villages with NGOs one can gain an impression of very widespread work, but if villages are selected at random, in most cases there will be very little evidence of their work. In Orissa as a whole, NGOs are said to be “very thick on the ground” (partly because for a decade at least the main donor agencies have decided to finance projects in the poorer northern and eastern states) and



certainly they appear thick on the ground in Bhubaneswar. In Kalahandi it is hard to tell — certainly no NGOs were visible in the first villages we visited, which we chose because they were close to Raj Kumar’s home, not because of NGO contacts.

In Kendupatti, a cluster village which is proud of its forest protection committee, we meet the people of the Yadav and Dalit hamlets (the former known as Paikpara, proclaiming its army background, the latter as Harijanpara — up to the time he went to JNU even Raj Kumar, now one of a new breed of Dalit poets of Orissa, was using “Harijan” as his own surname). Both are areas of migration and dependent on the gathering of forest produce. Here we discuss the kendu leaf problem. It is a major product of the district which is controlled by a state agency, the Orissa Forest Development Corporation. This agency purchases the leaves and

resells them — and has been running losses of crores of rupees (*Sun Times* 24-11-96, 30-11-96) in spite of paying low prices to the people of western Orissa.

Picking kendu leaves is done by the poor, primarily women, in almost all the villages of the district for some part of the year. It is a major source of income for women — but it can hardly be called an income. The women of the Dalit and Yadav hamlets told us they can make 30 (at the most 40) packs of leaves a day, for which they get only Rs 20 from the state. Rs 400-500 is their estimate of their monthly earnings from kendu leaf gathering.

There is little of other forest produce or work. Cashews are a product of the district, but their production is monopolised by the government with rights sold only at auction — whatever the poor sell they do so illegally and thus at very low prices. In the heavier forest areas there are *sal* seeds, *mahua*, *char* and other products such as leaf plates made for sale to consumers as far away as Calcutta — but we hear little of these in the plains areas of Kalahandi. In Kendupatti, the little work that is available pays only Rs 15 on road construction and Rs 10 for agricultural labour: “there are no big farmers in Kendupatti and so no jobs,” as one man puts it. Women in the Yadav hamlet sell puffed rice from village to village (people won’t buy it from Dalits) but this occupation is also getting “crowded” and gives little income — from as little as Rs 4 to as “high” as Rs 10-12 a day. The villagers get nothing from the forest plot they are guarding with their “forest protection committee” — in fact, one complaint of people of the district is that they have to get permission to cut trees (and get income from their timber), even trees grown on private land.

With miserable income from forest, agriculture, and road construction,

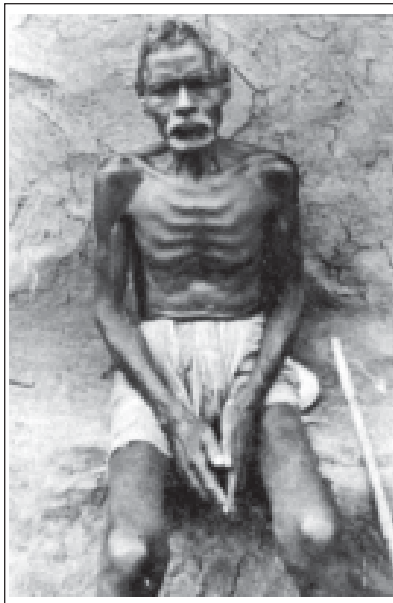
what is left for the people of Kendupatti and other villages of Kalahandi is only migration. According to a Dom woman from Harijanpara, "Four women died from diarrhea in our hamlet when the men went away. They migrate — to Raipur, Delhi, Nagpur, Mumbai. About 50 percent have gone to Raipur now. Land? The government has given us *pattas* for two acres for each family. We have the *pattas*. We don't have the land."

People have been migrating for generations to Raipur, which is closer to Kalahandi than Bhubaneswar. This migration, according to Abani Panigrahi of Lokadrusti in Khariar, started on a large scale after the drought of 1965; it has been mainly of Dalits and poor OBCs, while *adivasis* have preferred to retreat further and further into the forest. What is perhaps new in the recent drought is the beginning of *adivasi* migration. They are also now going to Nagpur, Mumbai and even Delhi, while some are permanent settlers in Raipur itself — in a colony known as the "Kalahandi Narka."

The Kendupatti discussion ends in almost total darkness: it is night, and although the streets of the village have electricity, none in the hamlets of the poor can afford even a kerosene lamp.

Later we have more discussions in Khariar with a variety of social activists and intellectuals. Several points come up, mostly related to the uniqueness of the Kalahandi/western Orissa region and the role of the state government. Almost everyone talks of the total lack of industry in the district — as one professor sarcastically puts it, a soap factory that is listed in the government records was closed 40 years before. But while outsiders often blame the "feudals" who dominated the region before Independence for not being interested in its development, Khariar people point out that the Kalahandi and Balangir *rajās* were interested in promoting agro-industry projects such

as jaggery. They blame the post-Independence Orissa state government of neglect. As A.V. Swamy puts it, "Nearly 25 years out of 43 of normal post-independent development was deliberately denied this region. Because of pre-independent loyalties, the *zamindars* and their feudal siblings went as people's representatives and the party in power then saw to it that no significant development activity occurred in the area represented by



With such low incomes from agriculture and forest produce, malnourishment is a constant threat

their antagonists. The neglect by the party in power has in turn helped in returning the very same representatives. In this process . . . the local people lost about 25 years of prime development period until new political equations emerged."⁶ If a pervasive apathy (a "feudalistic" culture or "culture of poverty") sometimes seems to exist in Kalahandi, it has to be seen in the light of this history.

Anjali Padhi, a literature professor, talks of her work in gathering and publishing folk tales of tribals in the western Orissa dialect (often called

"Sambalpuri" or even "Kosi" in contrast to the "Kataki" of coastal Orissa). There is in fact a fair amount of regional separatist sentiment, but occasional demands for a separate state have never coalesced into a movement, partly because of their high-caste and feudal leadership. Dalit political activists in Kalahandi are currently discussing this issue. As Raj Kumar points out, there are also strong differences between the upper caste language and the language that he grew up with.

Abhani Panigrahi of Lokdrusti, an NGO that has held one national seminar and carried out surveys as well as trying to run watershed management and women's development programmes in the Boden block, stresses the low prices paid for kendu leaves and other forest produce which provide about 40 percent of the income of the poor and are primarily gathered by women. The trade, he points out, was nationalised some years back but with so much corruption there has been no basic difference. Prices for all forest produce are higher in nearby Madhya Pradesh. There is no local processing, and "we don't even know where most of the forest produce is going."

Some NGO workers talk of the dangers of chemical agriculture and the loss of biodiversity it involves. R.A. Richarria, they pointed out, described western Orissa and the adjoining Chhotanagpur/Bastar regions as areas of extraordinary quality of local varieties of rice, but these and other indigenous crops are quickly vanishing. Although 33,000 seed varieties once existed, there are now only 71, says Natabar Rout, a geologist working with the Sahabagi Bikas Abhijan. Typical of this perspective is a headline from *Utkal Age* reporting on a three-day seminar on sustainable agriculture in Khariar with the

6. A.V. Swamy, quoted in *The State of Orissa's Environment*, 1992, p. 177.

Should trade in forest produce be opened up to competition?

If any economic sector feels the heavy hand of the state more than agriculture, it is forest produce. Both timber and the “minor forest produce” or “nontimber forest produce” that the *adivasis* and other communities of Kalahandi depend on are controlled either by state agencies or by merchants who have gotten monopoly licenses from the state. Prices anywhere in India — and the consequent earnings from their labour of mainly *adivasi* women — are kept low, and those in western Orissa are perhaps the lowest of all.

The failures of “nationalised” state agencies to make any difference in this situation are admitted by everyone. But few will point to the obvious solution — that the trade should be thrown open so that people can sell to whoever makes them the best offer. Arguments against this do not even dare to claim that the state agencies give a better deal, only that where the monopolistic controls have been relaxed and “petty contractors” have entered (the example of Madhya Pradesh is given) it has made no difference.

Dr. N.C.Saxena, Director of the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration in Musoorie and an expert on problems of forest administration, has a simple reply to this. Yes, scrapping government controls produces the most positive results where gatherers and producers are vocal and organised, with experience of marketing, as in Gujarat and Punjab. *Adivasi* producers and others in remote, dispersed areas with little marketing experience (and especially the women among them) do face numerous obstacles. But this is no reason for government monopoly. The trade should be opened up — but with government “promotional marketing boards” playing a facilitating role, helping people overcome obstacles of poverty, lack of information, market access, etc. — that is helping to empower them in the market rather than trying to eliminate it.

Writes Saxena, “It is their weak economy and poverty that makes them totally dependent on government staff, middlemen, moneylenders and urban merchants. These actors are too strong to be eliminated from the scene through nationalisation. Many-pronged strategy is required to reduce their influence and improve the economy of the gatherers. . . . Government organisations may compete in the open market with the private trade. . . but government should never acquire a monopoly. Inappropriate tenure and trade policies and government imposed regulations also lead to over-exploitation of forests, besides low revenues for collectors” (“Impact on Forest on Rural Poor in Orissa,” *Wasteland News*, May-July 1996).

Saxena does not touch the question of whether forest communities should have ownership rights over the land and its produce, but he does have some interesting observations on “forest protection committees” — the most successful ones have been those that have arisen spontaneously in Orissa, not those sponsored by the Forest Department; see “Forests Under People’s Management in Orissa,” *ibid.*, pp 45-52.

participation of 45 farmers and activists: “Indigenous Crops Fast Vanishing as Hunger, Child-Selling Graphs Rise” (September 13, 1996). Such NGOs sponsor village-level water harvesting schemes and “participatory resource mapping” campaigns and the like. They tend to reject all improved or hybrid seed varieties, and all irrigation projects larger than the village level, and they tend to blame “cash crops” for the problem of agriculture, while evading the question of whether Kalahandi paddy is a cash crop.

Jagdish Pradhan, who leads a western Orissa farmers’ organisation as well as a federation of NGOs, talks of problems of the prices of rice, the need for a sustainable agro-industrial

development policy, and speaks with anguish of the indifference and cynicism of the government in the face of the coming famine. “This is the most shameless government in history,” he says. Their only response to the drought had been to impose inter-district restrictions of movements of foodgrain on October 17 — on the excuse that without this, the government will not be able to procure rice for PDS. The farmers’ organisation argues that this is simply a gift to the mill-owners and black marketeers: the mill-owners will continue getting cheap grain; without free movement of foodgrain, prices at the local level will continue to rise far beyond people’s capacity; and PDS, anyway, does not reach the people. Pradhan is also

against fertiliser subsidies because he argues that they penalise farmers of rain-fed areas growing crops by natural methods.

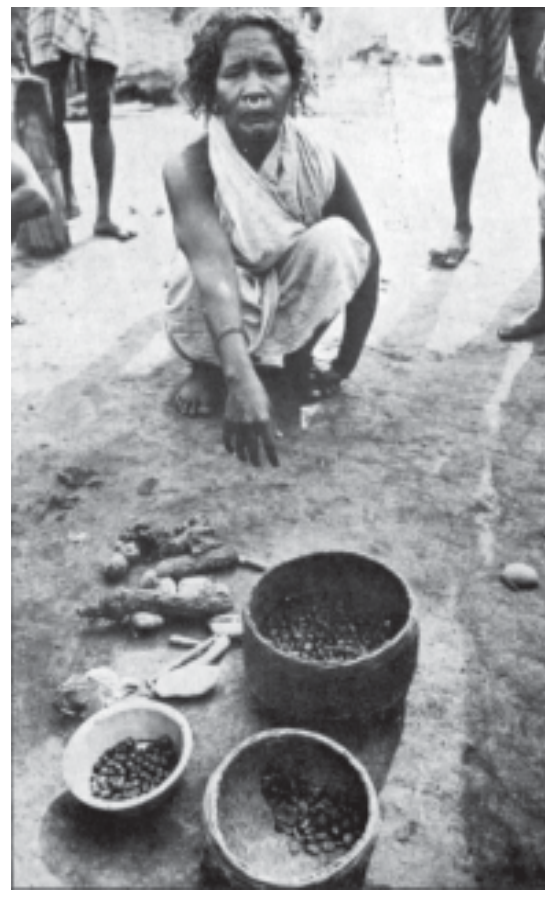
Cynicism about the state’s response to drought is all-pervasive in Kalahandi itself and in other parts of Orissa. In Cuttack I meet Robi Das, an old Sarvodaya worker who has toiled in the district helping people build up small income-generating enterprises without any NGO funding. “He is the only sincere worker in all of Kalahandi,” says a friend. “But when he comes back with reports of starvation deaths they are encashed by others. [Ex-Speaker of the Lok Sabha] Robi Roy gets on the phone to [Agricultural Minister] Chaturman Mishra and Mishra promises six crore

immediately. A thousand crore has been poured into the state for Kalahandi since this all began and who knows into whose pockets the money has gone!" People rail at the indifference of the bureaucracy. "People gathered at Kantabanji [the railway junction] to go in search of work. They were so desperate. The Collector pleaded with them to go back home, saying work would be provided locally. But when they asked him to at least give them breakfast, he refused," says Gharamani Bag, a woman activist of another NGO. The occasional honest and helpful official seemingly is lost in this overall feeling of bureaucratic oppression.

Who is the Enemy?

Who is to blame? Today those with nostalgia for the state-dominated economies (whether the former state "socialist" kind or the Nehruvian model) talk of "food security," point to the market, commercialism, the growing of "cash crops" at the cost of "food crops", the depredation of multinational companies, etc., as the cause of hunger in the world. None of this applies to Kalahandi. There is little commercialisation, there is little effective market, there are no multinationals in sight. Rice and forest produce are sold but it is not their sale, but the low prices people get from their sale, that keeps the people of Kalahandi destitute.

When people try to sell their rice, merchants and state agencies purchase the rice at shamelessly low prices, even officially. In most cases, effective local markets are not even set up to give official rates. Timber is also a monopoly of the state, and non-timber



Tribal woman selling wild roots, the only staple for the drought-hit region of Kalahandi

forest produce is monopolised either by state agencies or by merchants who are given monopoly licenses by the state. It is the state that underpays people and smothers local initiative. It was the state's Agency Marketing Cooperative Society which did not pay *adivasi* women in part of Kalahandi and nearby Phulbani for months for the leaf plates they made for a living because of their extensive corruption and money-sucking practices which has now rendered the agency bankrupt. When brooms were seized from an *adivasi* woman's cooperative in a nearby district some years ago it was by the Orissa forest department. Such examples can be easily multiplied.

It is the state which claims direct ownership of forest land — some 48

percent of the total area of Kalahandi district, and ultimate ownership rights over even private land — and none of the NGOs or even farmers' organisations working in this area have challenged this aspect of the concentration of property rights.

The primary looter of this region which has been plundered so extensively over the last century appears to be the government of independent India. However the "state" as an abstract entity cannot be blamed — it would be more accurate to say that the beneficiaries of the low-price labour provided by the poor of Kalahandi are the bureaucrats and politicians who control the state agencies, the merchants who get monopoly rights, the industrialists who get cheap raw materials and cheap labour. To go further would involve a longer analysis of the distribution of surplus among government employees and urban residents who benefit from the subsidies, etc.

This situation will not be changed by pleading for more subsidies and controls, only worsened. The people of Kalahandi need more freedom to manage their lives and production. Government agencies may provide help in the process, but the near total state domination seen in western Orissa has proved disastrous.

Women and Adivasis

Still more questions can be raised about Kalahandi. The efforts of the state to hold down agricultural and raw materials prices (including those of forest produce) is obvious everywhere in India, but why has it been especially devastating in this region? Punjab, to

What Path to Development?

“Experts” and “activists” prescribe contradictory development paths for Kalahandi. For the government agricultural and forest department “experts,” irrigation, hybrid seeds and the usual industrialisation methods are prescribed. But even those promoting hybrid seeds express dismay at their lack of acceptance.

NGO activists (there are almost no non-funded people’s movements in the district), on the other hand, call for preserving traditional nonchemical agriculture and local varieties of rice and other crops and building small “check dams” and “water harvesting schemes” at the village level. These are seen as alternatives to unsustainable “green revolution” agriculture and to dam-provided irrigation. As can be clearly seen in the ambitious and useful 1990 report, *The State of Orissa’s Environment*, all dams in the state and nearly all development projects seem to be opposed by one section or another of Orissa’s environmentalists.

But, though NGOs have very visible offices throughout Bhubaneswar, their impact at the ground level is hardly visible, and most of the water harvesting schemes which the state government has obligingly tried to finance are failing, perhaps due to bureaucratisation. Kalahandi thus seems to be in the situation of neither effectively developing traditional methods and micro-irrigation projects, nor of benefiting from green revolution development. Its rice productivity per acre is low by all-India and even more by world standards. Yields of 12 quintals per hectare can provide more than sufficient food for low population densities — but not in periods of population growth.

The many objections against over-dependence on chemical agriculture and big dam projects are valid, but it seemed clear to us, that simply maintaining traditional methods would be insufficient to allow the people of Kalahandi to move forward out of their misery. The need is development, not simply preservation or “conservation.” None of the farmers we met were in fact rejecting improved seeds, “modern” irrigation or other aspects of “development” — they were only saying these things hadn’t yet worked for them.

Perhaps the NGO “activists” are not activist enough yet to really represent the people, and the “experts” do not know enough about local conditions to suggest useful ways of developing the indigenous capabilities. Some kind of “middle path” of sustainable development has to be found — with the leadership from local people themselves but with the help of adequate research and extension agencies.

take a striking contrast, is a state where the government of India has attempted for decades to get cheap foodgrains, but a vigorous farmers’ movement and various forms of demands for autonomy and independence, sometimes based on Sikh religious identification, fought back. This is why the prices for wheat are relatively high in India compared to rice, and why Punjabi farmers have succeeded in getting better prices even for rice. Why haven’t the people of Kalahandi been able to raise even such a partially successful fight?

One simple clue is to note the relatively high *adivasi* population in the drought-ridden region of Orissa. It is also striking that reports of starvation deaths in Maharashtra have come not from the really chronic drought districts, but from the *adivasi* region of Melghat in Amravati districts — and of the 41 districts declared as “prone to starvation deaths”

according to a central government committee the majority are not areas of particularly low rainfall, but are rather border districts and districts with relatively high *adivasi* population (see *Times of India*, December 2, 1996). Is it possible that the dispersion and relative helplessness of *adivasi* communities within the main region of India (the Northeast provides an important contrast here) has made it particularly difficult for them to resist the exploitation of their natural resources and labour?

I use the term “*adivasi*” rather than “tribe” deliberately. Most indigenous communities throughout the world reject the term “tribe” as demeaning. In fact, it is generally used in a denigrating sense and as an anthropological term for pre-state societies it has only questionable relevance in India today. The Gonds and Khonds, the largest ST communities in Kalahandi, have total

populations in India in the millions and hundreds of thousands — larger than many prosperous, industrially and agriculturally developed states. To make a comparison, among the countries classed by the World Bank as “high income”, Ireland has a population of 3.6 million, Kuwait of 1.6, Norway of 4.3, New Zealand of 3.5, Iceland of 266,000 and Luxembourg of 404,000.

With the state claiming ownership of forest land (not to mention ultimate rights over private land) it is no wonder that demands for autonomy and smaller states are growing. Such demands reflect, in part, a desire to gain control of land. So far it appears that none of the government committees or activists aiming at helping the “tribals” have considered the simple solution of full property rights (as communities or individuals, whichever they prefer) to the land — including so-called “forest land” — surrounding their

villages. Even by the famous Bhuria Committee, now being championed by NGOs and their fronts like the National Front for Tribal Self-Rule, apparently only calls for greater autonomy for *adivasi panchayats*, more “community control” over resources, lesser “roles” to the Forest Department etc. and “joint management” for the “control and use” of natural resources (see report in *Update*, May 13, 1996). These are obfuscations. *Adivasi* and other communities have the right to — dare I use the words? — ownership or sovereignty or both over the natural resources of the territory they live in.

As for women: it is women and girl children who disproportionately die and live stunted, malnourished lives in most of these areas, whether they come from *adivasi*, Dalit or OBC communities. The fact that “food insecurity”, or more bluntly hunger, starvation, and disease, disproportionately affect women is an old, old story and with some old and fairly simple reasons. In spite of relatively greater equality, women in almost all communities in India, including Dalits and *adivasis*, are deprived of significant property and political rights. The Khonds, Gonds, Dalits, OBCs, etc., of Kalahandi are as patrilineal and patrilocal as elsewhere, and women’s labour remains gender stereotyped and underpaid. It is no mystery why women and girl children are dying in greater numbers in the current drought.

Hope for Kalahandi?

What lies in the future for the people of Nuapada, Kalahandi, Balangir and the other resource-rich but looted regions of western Orissa? If there is hope, it does not lie in the hands of politicians and bureaucrats, nor in the hands of NGOs. Out of their own efforts, the people may begin some developmental projects, organise



Women digging holes in the dried-up bed of the Sunder river for their daily water requirements

and get a few more rupees for their rice, kendu leaves, *sal*, and bamboo, start some small enterprises, and force others to help them. In this area farmers’ organisations, *adivasi* and other community organisations, and sometimes NGOs do play an important facilitating role.

In the long term, ownership and control of local resources and the ability to extract a greater return for their labour (whether in the form of wages or prices) will make diversification and development possible. Intelligent expertise and technical help provided on environmental and engineering questions — whether by NGOs, government agencies, private consultancies, etc. — will help ensure that the development is ecologically sustainable. Getting their own people trained as such experts and technicians will speed up the process.

For immediate relief, food and work can save lives, and here again there is

a glimmer of hope. The last report from Kalahandi was that large numbers of the oppressed poor went to Kantabanji, but instead of slipping away west to Raipur and beyond, they boarded the train this time east to Bhubaneswar, to sit in front of the state assembly and shame the politicians a bit. Their voices may finally be heard.

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Photographs courtesy

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