

**Power of the People: Political Movements, Groups and Guaranteed Employment<sup>1</sup>**  
**Shaji Joseph**

It is not the imagination of one individual but a long drawn out and continuous mobilization and agitation by different groups and movements that made the passage of EGS possible. (From an interview with Comrade D.S. Deshpande of Lal Nishan Party; 7<sup>th</sup> December 2003)

Compared to other state led poverty alleviation programmes, there has been a greater degree of mobilization around the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) in Maharashtra. Between early 1970s and late 1980s, a number of organizations emerged mobilizing rural workers in different parts of Maharashtra to get EGS enacted and implemented. Further, they used EGS as a platform to raise broader questions of discrimination affecting marginalized groups, issues of social reforms and poverty. In 1981, they came together forming an umbrella organization—the Maharashtra Rajya Shetmajoor and Employment Guarantee Scheme Workers Samanvaya Samiti (henceforth Samanvaya Samiti)—to collectively advocate for changes in state policy relating to rural workers in the context of EGS.

Such a high degree of collective action warrants two related questions: First, what enabled activist organizations to collectively mobilize rural workers to advocate for changes in public policy? Second, what impact did the resultant programme—the EGS—have on sustaining activism? This paper delves deeper into these questions through a detailed examination of the role played by five activist groups in advocating for and later redefining the EGS. They are Maharashtra Rajya Shetmajoor Parishad, Yukrand, Shramik Sanghatana, Kashtakari Sanghatana, and Shramjeevi Sanghatana. We look specifically at the ways in which they contributed to the enactment and adoption of EGS and the ways EGS itself enabled activist organizations to translate their concerns into action. Subsequently, we examine the reasons behind the decline in activism among these organizations since the late 80s.

The role of these groups in mobilizing for social change does not start or end with EGS. Those existing prior to EGS had worked on land reforms, rural poverty and employment. Groups that emerged post EGS ratification worked on other important questions such as bonded labour and mobilizing unorganized workers. The history of their mobilization related to EGS can be separated into two phases. In the first phase (up to 1978) activist groups mobilized so that the government adopted the principle of guaranteed employment and campaigned for the inclusion of certain worker friendly provisions within the EGS Act. In the second phase (after 1978) activist groups focused on proper implementation of the EGS Act and to change some provisions in view of the changing conditions. While the Maharashtra Rajya Shetmajoor Parishad, Yukrand and the Shramik Sanghatana were more active in the first phase, the Kashtakari Sanghatana and the Shramjeevi Sanghatana were more active in the latter. As we shall see, all of them used EGS in various ways in order to advance their own specific agendas.

In light of the larger political context of the period, the late sixties witnessed the emergence of a flurry of activism. Scholars reflecting on the emergence of these new political actors termed them—‘Non Party Political Formations (NPPFs)’ (Kothari 1989),

‘grassroots initiatives’ or ‘new change agents’ (Seth, 1984). What was common among these conceptions was that these groups were born of a deep scepticism towards electoral politics and a critique of the state’s developmental agenda.

Kothari (1989), Seth (1984) and Sethi (1984) identify some common characteristics that unite NPPFs. *First*, NPPFs reflect the resurgence of the ‘people’ asserting their democratic rights, challenging the established order outside party political processes. *Second*, although these groups and movements were predominantly autonomous, they were also associated with radical and marginal political parties such as the Lal Nishan Party (LNP) and the Socialist Party. *Third*, their agitations were directed towards local problems, and though small, their impact on the prevailing discourse on poverty mitigation through public works was critical in reframing and enlarging the notion of public works (e.g. EGS as a means of creating sustainable public assets that would generate employment). *Fourth*, the NPPFs perceived poverty not only in terms of economic inequalities but also as a consequence of the social- structural locations of the poor; therefore raised questions of material concern such as land relations and land reforms. Simultaneously they addressed potent cultural and social questions regarding tribal and dalit identity because they recognized that economic exploitation alone did not explain poverty. *Fifth*, the groups in Maharashtra formed an umbrella organization, a loose federation networking among the groups mobilizing on EGS, called Samanvaya Samiti. *Sixth*, the leaders of the NPPFs belonged to the upper and middle castes and class and were mainly urban based. *Seventh*, over time, the leaders of some of these political groups institutionalized their work by altering these groups, from Sangathana (movement) into that of a Sanstha (NGO).

The five organizations examined in this paper fit this characterization of NPPFs, to a large extent. In the context of EGS, I detail the emergence of these movements and examine their link with political parties. I evaluate how EGS enabled them to mobilize rural workers in demanding the implementation of the EGS Act. I assess their strategies in using EGS to further broader agendas of worker, tribal and dalit rights, land reforms and poverty alleviation. I trace their involvement with the Samanvaya Samiti and its subsequent weakening and decline in organizing around EGS in general since the late eighties. My focus in tracing the history of the evolution of these organizations is to examine the spaces of intersection of organizations and government programmes to ascertain the extent to which government programmes enable or constrain organizational mobilization.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section II discusses the five organizations. Section III focuses on the work of the *Samanvaya Samiti*. Section IV concludes the paper.

### Methodology

The research was carried out over fourteen months during 2002 to 2004. It draws upon extensive interviews with social and political activists and their respective organizations. Several other political activists, villagers, and academics were also interviewed. Primary data in unpublished form, newspaper reports, files of different organisations, pamphlets, circulars and other internal communications were resourced.

A quick review of the organizations in the Samanvaya Samiti revealed a list of 45 organizations, although Acharya (1990) suggests that it had 109 member organizations. A preliminary study of these 45 revealed that many were either splinter or branch of some key primary organisations. Out of the various NPPFs, five were selected which were the most active in using EGS to mobilize workers covering the two time periods. (prior to 1978 and, post 1978 when EGS was enacted).

### Mobilisations by Political Groups and Movements

#### A. Maharashtra Rajya Shetmajoor Parishad

The Maharashtra Rajya Shetmajoor Parishad (henceforth the Parishad) was a rural trade union established by Lal Nishan Party (LNP) leaders such as Datta Deshmukh in 1971 in Shrirampur Taluka in Ahmednagar and was affiliated to LNP to mobilize the rural poor against the drought.

However the Parishad and LNP retained distance from each other for strategic reasons. The Parishad limited its activities to the mobilization of rural workers and kept away from electoral politics which the LNP continued. And yet, in many ways the Parishad's rural base helped LNP to crystallise its long held vision- to forge an integrated rural-urban workers union. For example, in January 1971 the Parishad organized demonstrations of around 25,000 rural workers in Bombay with the support of the urban workers around the slogan '*ala re ala shetkari ala*' (here comes the farmer). The official journal of the Parishad called this the beginning of a new era in the working class movement in India (Grameen Shramik-1<sup>st</sup> Feb. 1972: 9).

I assess the role of the Parishad at two junctures. The first pertains to the introduction of EGS. The second involves the mobilization of the rural poor for the implementation of the provisions in the Act.

The Parishad used a combination of strategies to press its demands including demonstrations, strikes, road blocks, gheraos, sit-ins, long marches and fasts as also petitions and delegations to government. A demonstration in March 1971, involved over one-lakh rural workers from all over Maharashtra. In May 1971 the Parishad mobilized drought-affected workers to strike against untimely payment of wages. The Parishad's support broadened from 1971, pressurizing the government to extend drought relief and gradually the government accepted many of its demands. When the government failed to pay rural workers, the Parishad collected Rs 40 lakhs from the industrial workers in Bombay and Pune. This idea that the urban population could provide support to rural poor formed the Parishad's later demand of imposing a tax on urban professionals to provide resources for the EGS.

In January 1972 the Parishad demanded - the expansion of the Public Distribution System in drought prone areas, an inquiry committee to ensure minimum and timely wages in drought relief sites, controlling black marketing and inflation, taking action against officials who exploit the poor, controlling police authoritarianism and introduction of new employment opportunities. In February 1972, the Parishad put roadblocks to urge the government to accept these demands.

This pressure made the State Congress leadership incorporated the issue of employment guarantee in their 15-point programme. In April 72 the State government decided to initiate an "Employment Guarantee Scheme" for the whole State as a drought relief scheme. In addition to the above scheme it also decided to initiate local employment schemes to be operated by each village Panchayat with effect from the same date (Economic Times on May 2<sup>nd</sup> 1972:3).

Once EGS was introduced Parishad concentrated on the appropriate implementation of the existing provisions of the scheme. The main demands now included doubling of EGS wages, an eight hour working day, a weekly holiday, location of work sites within 5 Km and that work begins immediately when 50 or more people demanded work.

Parishad intended that the rights of the organized working class be extended to the rural poor. Their slogan was "*poore poore kaam, pot bhar dam, ya shivai mage hatoo naka*" (adequate employment and wages, or we shall resist until these demands are met). Following this the Parishad organized many struggles. For instance:

In Shrirampur due to the absenteeism of authorities work could not commence. Consequently, in July 1972 the workers threatened and overwhelmed two junior engineers. Only after higher officials intervened, they freed the engineers. However they now held the Tahsildar responsible and kept him as a hostage instead. They promised to release him only if work would commence immediately. The concerned authority promised five new EGS work sites. This intervention instantly attracted the attention of top district officials though the incident was peaceful in nature (Grameen Shramik, 1973, May: 5).

However, the problem of under/unemployment did not diminish though poverty and the effects of the drought did subside. Therefore, the Parishad attempted to make drought relief programs a permanent right through the slogan 'the right to employment on demand' (Interview - Comrade D. S. Deshpande of LNP, August 13<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> of 2003). Thus the Parishad demanded that the State government create a permanent fund for this scheme. The Rs. 5 crore pledged by VP Naik the Chief Minister in March 1973 was insufficient to deliver the benefits to the poor. By the end of 1973 there were about 1,54,000 relief work sites employing about 25 lakh workers. At this juncture Parishad proposed the introduction of a tax to be collected from professionals in urban centers.

Consequently, in December 1974, in a statement the government accepted the responsibility to provide full employment to those who seek it, as a fundamental objective of its fiscal and economic policy. - Directive Principles of the State as enshrined in Article 41 of the Constitution of India. (G.R. 1974) It recognized EGS as the first step in that direction. The same statement incorporated all the demands of the Parishad and announced the new professional tax as a resource base for the scheme.

However, the government had kept EGS wages below the agricultural wages. Subsequently, the Parishad mobilized to demand wages on par with agricultural wages while training workers for proper implementation of EGS provisions.

During the emergency, Parishad's activities waned. When EGS was passed in 1977 and as an Act in 1978, the Parishad started mobilizing again to implement the provisions of the Act. The demands included equality of wages between gender and between agricultural and EGS workers, social security, pension, dearness allowance, crèches, access to potable water, shelter, maternity relief, and the issuance of identity cards. They also demands abolishing the system of engaging contractors, providing permanent employment to muster clerks, and extension of EGS to forest work.

The Parishad continued its activities at two levels. 1) for proper implementation of the provisions and 2) caring for adverse economic conditions and the specific plight of the small farmers. For instance, it asked the government to write off the agricultural credit loans. To this end it organized rallies in Sholapur and Osmanabad in 1979. It raised issues such as the non-initiation of EGS works, of corruption in EGS works, of timely payment of wages, and of ensuring that ration shops recognize food coupons given under the scheme. Its membership increased from ten thousand in early 1970s to sixty thousand in late seventies. (Interview with D.S. Deshpande)

Parishad's activities continued. However over time, it realized that EGS was not being implemented across the State. The Parishad's influence was in some districts while in others other groups such as Shetkari Shetmajoor Panchayat, a trade union of SSP and other NPPFs had a presence.

The internal documents of the Parishad show that over time, work in the districts among rural poor declined due to improved economic situation and the shift of their attention to unionizing the unorganized. There is only one record that I could find regarding their involvement in EGS. This record indicates a change in tactics. For the first time the Parishad used the Court to pressurize the state. In 1984, the Parishad filed a writ petition in the High Court to ask the government to pay unemployment allowance when it did not start the EGS works in Ahmednagar district. The court ruled in favour of the workers but the government did not implement this order till as late as 1999, indicating that EGS remained a low priority for the state.

The Parishad's work was highly significant in the mobilization of the rural poor and in ensuring that these workers' entitlements match that of the organized urban workers even though EGS was not a permanent job. In the early seventies the Parishad broadened the agenda by demanding proper implementation of land reform and minimum wages as part of a larger movement of landless agricultural workers. However over time their involvement declined as it focused on the legal front.

Why did the Parishad, so successful in the seventies, suddenly lose significance in late 1980s? B.R. Bauke, a founder member of Parishad, in an interview, stated that in areas where Parishad had its base, the number of EGS's works had declined affecting their mobilization. Additionally the Parishad faced internal organizational problems. The LNP had split with one group supporting the Congress party resulting in a split in the Parishad. One faction that supported B.R. Bauke did not support the Congress. As a result the Parishad's strength was reduced in Ahmadnagar where Parishad was strong. The failure of the textile strike in the 1983-4 was a deathblow to all communist trade unions in the State depleting LNP's monetary resources. This was also a period of growing

communalization in the country. The state was promoting NGOS in service delivery of development programmes. This tendency was part of a larger international trend of NGOisation, negatively affecting people's movements. Today all that is left of the Parishad is a few files in its Shreerampur office managed by its elderly leader B.R. Bauke who continue to adhere to his revolutionary ideology.

### B Yuvak Kranti Dal

Yuvak Kranti Dal (Yukrand) was started in 1969 as a student's organization in Pune.<sup>2</sup> Initially it focused its activities around issues faced by students in Colleges and Universities of Maharashtra. In the course of this mobilization in Pune, Bombay and Auranagabad, it came to understand the particular problems faced by student body in general and particularly the deprived groups, especially the scheduled castes. The latter were in the throes of transformation as they started understanding their own oppression through a new concept, that of being 'dalit' (the oppressed). The leaders of Yukrand understood dalit oppression as cultural and ideological oppression, encapsulated in the emerging Dalit Literature Movement and later by the Dalit Panther Movement. (Omvedt, 1992)

Yukrand leaders from the upper castes started rethinking their own social background and its impact on the organization of politics. They argued that there was a need to 'de-caste' themselves. Nalini Pandit, succinctly elaborates,<sup>3</sup>

Marx expected Socialists to be declassed. Every middle class intellectual is made aware of his class bias from the time he joins the Communist Party. The Socialists in the country realized that they needed to de-caste themselves before undertaking revolutionary activities.

This philosophy was extended even to interpersonal relationships including marriage. These changes gave many upper caste leaders of Yukrand a space within the dalit community not available till then to the outsiders. (Interview, S.P.Punalekar, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2003)

Yukrand activists formulated their vision and strategy by elaborating and collating the ideas of Marx, Gandhi, Phule and Ambedkar.<sup>4</sup> Like other left parties it critiqued unequal land holding patterns in the villages and wanted comprehensive land reforms in rural India. The Yukrand leaders were initially drawn towards contemporary socialist discourse of Ram Manohar Lohia but later questioned its efficacy through a Marxist and a dalit evaluation.<sup>5</sup> Yukrand's critique was at two levels. First it was against the mainstream socialist parties, which understood the nature of caste exploitation (unlike the communists) but did not integrate this into a political strategy for reconstruction of society. Second, the Republican Party of India, the party of the scheduled castes founded by Dr. Ambedkar, advocated an electoral strategy to change power equation. This Yukrand felt that this instrumentalised the goals of genuine revolution. It wished to extend participatory democracy to all organizational issues and matters at all levels. No wonder, its leaders advocated that all decision-making should be collective, after a thorough discussion and debate of the issues on board.

Yukrand became a part of the Dushkal Nivaran and Nirmoolan Samiti. In the initial period the demands of the Yukrand were similar to that of the Parishad. However, after 1972, when the State introduced the EGS programme, the nature of their work changed radically. Like the Parishad, Yukrand wanted to ensure that EGS becomes a permanent employment programme. But their approach included some of the revolutionary ideas that they were developing regarding caste based class exploitation and ways to reconstruct a casteless society.

As Gail Omvedt suggests,

It was impossible to speak of a 'Caste System' and a 'Class Structure' as separate phenomenon, since the two were interwoven. One conclusion from this is that low castes and especially the ex-untouchables (dalits) are... also a section whose majority are proletarianized toilers- agricultural labourers and workers. But as a section.... and it is unscientific and misleading to speak of 'Caste and Class' as parallel phenomena and parallel struggles in which the working class leads an 'economic revolution' while the dalits lead an 'anti-caste' revolution (Omvedt, 1982).

The experiments of social reconstruction in two locations are evidence of how Yukrand leaders translated their ideas into reality. In 1973 Kumar Saptarshi settled in Rashin village of Ahmednagar and initiated the first experiment and in 1979 Shantaram Pandhere did a similar effort in Vaijapur Taluka of Aurangabad. Other leaders also initiated such mobilisations in other regions. The Yukrand considered Rashin as the 'laboratory' while Vaijapur was the 'field'.

Rashin was one of the most backward villages, perennially under drought conditions. However sugarcane cultivation, which needed continuous access to water, dominated the region's crop pattern. As a result, landlords ensured that their land was irrigated leaving bereft the small and marginal peasants and the landless, mostly belonging to the dalit and the lower Maratha castes. This region suffered enormously during the drought of the early seventies (Brahme, 1979).

Saptarshi started by collecting information regarding the nature of oppression in the village, both historically and in contemporary terms. Land reforms had hardly made an impact in this region. This oppression was bolstered by a historically conditioned jajmani relationship of patron-client to the Maratha landlords. This hierarchical relationship created a dependency, which made the dalits accept their oppression, both material and cultural.

In 1973, Saptarshi mobilised the dalits and gaining their confidence by becoming 'one among them'. He and the other activists dwelled and shared food with the dalits. This kind of participatory involvement elicited immense support from the villagers.

We lived with the dalits and the EGS were the sites of mobilization. The activists ensured that the meetings were interactive. Once the villagers were aware of important issues, the next step was to defy the village officials - predominantly upper caste people. Our land grab movements

enraged the upper caste landlords in 1974 in Rashin who attempted a murderous attack on me. (Interview with Saptarshi, 12 February 2003)

Like the Parishad, Yukrand demanded that the rural poor have access to structural material needs. They also demanded an end to all cultural and ideological oppression. Yukrand wanted the state to implement a broad based strategy, such as giving land to the tiller, the distribution of common property resources and grazing land seized under Land Ceiling Act to landless and the dalits, provide minimum wages, wave loans, expand drought relief programmes and freeing dalits from all bondage by ending the practice of Zamindari (especially in Marathwada region)

Success of this experiment led to more work sites becoming centers of further mobilisation. Yukrand leaders were now able to understand that EGS had the potential of not only organizing the dalits but also of weakening the stronghold of the Maratha patrons. By providing an alternative employment, EGS freed the dalits from the patron-client dependency. However, they recognized that this dependence was structural and so needed a long-term solution as the dalits were subjected to social and other forms of oppression. Thus they wanted the dalits to be organized to demand for their own entitlements.

More specifically, like the Parishad, it wanted EGS to be a permanent employment programme always available on demand to the rural poor. They also attempted to enlarge the conception of productive work and integrate it to the notion of democracy and 'total revolution'. Yukrand leaders argued that to ensure an end to material and cultural exploitation of dalits and create economic capital for them, it was necessary that they decide what kind of public works need to be developed under EGS. They wanted to reclaim and develop wasteland, through watershed development, so that once developed, this could be distributed among the dalits.

This revolutionary experiment received a temporary set back during Emergency. After Emergency the organisation came under crisis in 1978. Saptarshi joined mainstream politics and became a member of the Janata Party. This divided the organisation into those who supported the move to mainstream politics and those who did not. The latter decided that they would conduct EGS mobilisation in their own respective regions and would be autonomous in organising these activities. They now argued that their philosophy was encapsulated in the slogan *Sangharash ani rachanatmak Karya*, that is, struggle and creative work.

A much-truncated Yukrand now started new experiments in different regions after the EGS became the Act. Shantaram Pandhere and his wife Mangala Khirswara mobilised the rural poor in Vaijapur in Aurangabad. Ajit Sardar in Khed (Pune), and Ranga Rachure in Udgir, Latur district. Below I discuss the work in Vaijapur as an example. Vaijapur comprised of 72 villages and was considered among the most backward Taluka, though hardly 70 kilometres away from the industrial town of Aurangabad. Plagued by perennial droughts, unemployment, the region was steeped into abject poverty with a large dalit community.



In 1979, Pandhere organised the dalits to demand that the Nandur Madheshwar canal irrigation work be brought under EGS and trained the dalits to execute this work themselves making long-term employment opportunities available for them. However the landlords from the Maratha community resisted this demand. Pandhere states in an interview,

One landlord was not ready to give up a piece of land through which the proposed canal was to pass through. He was adamant. The activists however began working without his consent on his land. As this was a collective action the landlord could not physically resist. However he filed a case of trespass with the high court. The case lasted for almost 20 years and finally the verdict was given in favour of the villagers.

Other landlords wanted it started but executed by private contractors -often members of their kin groups. At this juncture, the rural poor demanded that the work of the canal could only progress if it was under EGS. The pressure made the government accept their demand. This victory gave the rural poor a possibility of learning new administrative skills and learnt to fight for their rights. Pandhere recollects that,

In a village, the Talati made sexual advances towards a dalit woman. When she approached us, hundreds of EGS workers marched to the village office. The women forced the Talati out of his office, undressed him and garlanded him with chappals. He was then made to walk around the town while the women booed at him. This shows the confidence the women gained through the work of Yukrand.

In early 1980s, in many villages, Yukrand formed Lok-Samitis (committees of villagers). These Samities were organised around the slogans of peoples' education, peoples' movement and *Satyagraha*. All decision-making was by the rural poor while Yukrand leaders would be mere facilitators. Henceforth, Lok-Samitis decided on the demands regarding the nature and kind of EGS works, the selection of work sites, ensuring minimum and timely wages. They mobilised the villages against corruption and insensitivity of officials and demanded crèche facilities. In addition, Samiti started raising structural issues such as access to *gaonthan* and grazing land, which the landlords had encroach. Some Samities initiated a land grab movement and demanded that the government register the grazing and forest land in the names of landless.

The organization suffered further ideological division in 1982 on the issue of affiliating with the Marxist Leninist movement in the State. One group supporting the latter strategy remained headquartered at Pune and the other in Aurangabad. Later they merged with the SSP. These ideological and organizational tensions and divisions affected the local level mobilizations. In 1994 the organization was formally dissolved.

### C Shramik Sanghatana and Tribal Mobilisation

Magowa, a student Marxist group was formed in 1967 at Pune.<sup>6</sup> Magowa means 'to look back and to go forward'. It attracted the youth sympathetic to Marxist ideology but

critical of existing Communist parties. As Sulabha Brahme stated in an interview on 16<sup>th</sup> January 2003,

By the seventies, the communist parties had become oriented to parliamentary politics, though immediately after independence they were quite radical. The limitations of parliamentary politics led many youth to become radical and search for alternatives.

Sudhir Bedekar also confirms this analysis. He argues that in their discussions they attempted to address contemporary problems of peasants and landless and assess the nature of Indian capitalism and make a critique of the existing political alternatives. They were especially concerned with the lack of success of all-India movements, such as Kisan Sabha and also the Naxalite movements. He said that joining the parties could mean some compromise and stagnation.

Though the Magowa group drew inspiration from the Naxalite movement, they questioned their annihilation strategy. They felt that there has to be a mass movement against the landlords who exploit the tribals. This group saw their major enemies as the landlords, the Congress party and the state machinery.

The Magowa group tried to understand the specific conditions of tribals in Maharashtra. They found that tribal exploitation history dated before colonialism. During colonialism existing exploitative processes were further enhanced through policies denying the tribals access to forests, and thus to their traditional cultural and religious site. Additionally, during this period, the tribals were burdened with agricultural tax and agricultural commercialization leading to alienation of their land. Gradually, the tribals became landless agricultural labour and tenant cultivators from a position of being small landholding cultivators. In effect, this transformed the tribal economy, culture, and religion. This process of commercialization and land alienation intensified in the post-independent period. (Brahme and Upadyaya 1979, Gare 1984)<sup>7</sup>

The members of Magowa started their work in Dhule and Thane. These districts had seen major mobilizations since the thirties. One such movement was organised by Godavari Parulekar of the Kisan Sabha affiliated to the Communist Party. After independence, groups affiliated to the Gandhian movement established their presence in these two districts in addition to Praja Socialist Party and Bhoomi Sena which had a base in Thane in early 1970s. (Brahme and Upadhyaya 1979)

Amber Singh Suratwanti, a local tribal leader earlier associated with the Sarvodaya Mandal had organized the tribals in Dhule. Disillusioned by the Sarvodaya philosophy he had formed an organization - the Gram Swarajya Samiti, which initiated the Bhoo-Mukti Andolan. The Magowa activists joined Amber Singh's movement in January 1972. This movement started with a conference, which took place after a violent incident against the tribals. It focused on the exploitation by the landlords from the Gujjar and Maratha community in Dhule district and planned for long term struggle. It decided that the activists would be independent from political parties, responsible for the decisions of the movement and the movement will not resort to violence except for self-defense. In June

1972, the activists from Magowa set up the Shramik Sanghatana (SS) which worked with the Gram Swarajya Samiti. All these mobilizations were done in context to the drought relief work initiated through the EGS.

SS embarked on its mobilization when the drought was at its heights so its primary concern was getting employment for the tribals. The activists lived at these work sites and gradually conscientised the tribals regarding the exploitation and ways to resist the landlords. These landlords employed the tribals cheaply in the agricultural season. Under the leadership of SS the tribals boycotted the landlords. Through gheraos, roadblocks, picketing of government offices, long marches by the tribals the SS kept up the pressure. SS also took the government officials and police to task against harassing the tribals. The exploitative shopkeepers were publicly punished by trials. These tactics empowered the tribals.

The SS revolutionary agenda included the return of tribal land illegally cultivated by the landlords and/or moneylenders. SS had conducted a survey of the tribal land illegally usurped by the landlords. As a result of their struggle by May 1972 they recovered 1872 acres of land partly through negotiations and organized struggles. They demanded that land leased out for a limited tenure by the tribals need to be promptly taken back after the expiry of such tenures, that cultivation in forest land be declared legal and the government start programmes to provide employment.

Like in other parts of Maharashtra, the landlords in Dhule district were the Marathas. The SS emulated the Kisan Sabha model of land capture movement. Over 4000 acres of land was recaptured in the period 1972-74. The SS demands in 1973 included registration of the names of the tribals cultivating forest land, returning fines collected from them, canceling their debts, distributing land among the tribals, withdrawing all the judicial and police cases against them, and starting EGS works immediately on demand.

The Sanghatana a membership-base trade union had fifteen - twenty thousand members at the heights of its influence. Funds came from the members, but also had contributing well wishers in large cities. Like Yukrand, SS attempted to democratisise decision-making. Consequently, in 1979 there were eight tribal activists in the 14 full time activists.

The SS created Lok Samitis, *tarun mandals* and Mahila Mandals. In an interview Manohar Deenanath said that the *tarun mandal* activists would supervise the EGS sites, the measurement of works done, the payment of wages, the amount and quality of food grains, and ensured access to drinking water, shelter, as well as questioned corruption by officials. Their militancy made them visible and respected even by the local administrations.

During the emergency the SS activities declined. After the Emergency the Sanghatana did not revive, though they did initiate mobilizations for better implementation of the EGS. (Bedekar, 1978). They raised issues of measurement of work, timely payment of wages and dues that were pending from the earlier years, which the contractors had not paid. (Sathe, 1990)

However, ideological and personal difference among the activists could not sustain the organization. The decline relates to individual member's affiliation to political parties though the group had decided to avoid being part of mainstream parties. Some joined CPI (M) others joined LNP. Others wanted to be part of NGOs. By 1982 most of the leaders had left the organization. The only symbol of its existence that remained in Dhule district was a building (Sathe, 1990).

#### D Kashtakari Sanghatana

Kashtakari Sanghatana (KS) started in 1979 by members of the Catholic Church from Bombay. Pradeep Prabhu, Nikki Cordosso and Susheela Desouza the founders of KS had earlier worked with the Christian mission in Talassari taluka in Thane. Being deeply influenced by liberation theology they addressed the problems faced by the tribals. They critiqued the passivity of the church regarding structural exploitation and the violence perpetrated against the tribals. This forced them to leave the religious congregation and work on their own. As a result KS was established in Dahanu taluka in Thane and their activities focused in Dahanu, Jawahar and Mokhada Talukas.

KS was in many ways a different organization than the ones described above. Though it believed in mobilization, it was not a movement like the Parishad. It was run as an NGO with salaried activists. It did not have a global vision for a revolution. Other than tribals, its mobilization included workers in the unorganized sectors like construction, saltpan and brick kilns. They used the print media for eliciting support from the middle class. EGS was not the only means of mobilization, though it was critical in its initial stages.

The KS found that 95.53 % and 96.59 % of the tribal population in Jawahar and Shahpur lived below poverty line. Thus the immediate need was access to land and/or other employment. While a large number of tribals had become landless agricultural labour, some had become domestic servants. The police and the authorities were not being responsive and were colluding with the landlords in fabricating false cases despite incidences of ill treatment and sexual harassment.

KS believed in five concepts: 1. educating people, 2. Conscientising people, 3. people's work, 4. people's organization, and 5. people's might. KS organized youth camps, and youth festivals in the villages to popularize these. Initially EGS work sites became the site for mobilizing the tribals. In Amboli village, Dahanu Taluka, KS started its first mobilizations. In an interview, Shiraz Bulsara states,

A trader abused an elderly tribal woman when she asked for balance money from a shopkeeper after buying the provisions. The shopkeeper instead of paying her dues abused her and beat her up. The KS organized a morcha compelling the shopkeeper not only pay back the balance but also publicly apologize to the woman. This morcha included EGS workers in the same village. This was a moment of awakening to them that they brought a man with great political clouts to his knees. This won the KS the support of the tribals and identified the KS activists as their leader.

KS did many tribal demonstrations in Dahanu against the oppression of landlords. When the leaders were arrested, tribals struck work, carried out protest marches and even gheraoed the government officials. To counter it the landlords would boycott the tribals or get workers from other areas. In these circumstances, the EGS proved fruitful as an alternate employment. When in 1982, a drought like situation occurred in Thane, KS demanded EGS works, and the government sanctioned 13 sites providing work to about 6000 tribals. In 1982 there were 40 EGS works in Dahanu, and 200 in Jawahar taluka when KS demanded EGS for dam affected people.

The KS found that the EGS sites concealed economic interests of rich traders and landlords. For example, wells or roads being built near the field of landlords, giving them access to water, transport and markets. KS now argued that the government initiate schemes to create public works that aid the poor like social forestry, soil conservation, and small dams, because most of the EGS were related to road building. KS wanted that EGS be implemented the entire year to reduce the control of landlords on the tribals. Thus, during the Jabran Jot campaign against land alienation, the EGS works proved extremely significant in continuing the struggle and achieving some result. (Munshi, 1995, Prabhu, 2000) Anjali Deshpande, a journalist and a sympathizer narrates the struggles of 1982:

When people in Jamshet village realized that the landlord cheated them, they forcefully took their land back. When they were denied entry into the forest the women went on fast unto death until the officer budged. At Karanjivira the entire village refused to work for the landlord who had taken away their land. They resisted the cajoling of village elders, local politicians and efforts to bring labour from outside. Landlord suffered huge losses and next year allowed the villagers to occupy the disputed land.

KS is a membership organization. In 2000, almost 10,000 families paid an annual subscription of Rs. 50 from 300 villages in the three talukas. Though committed to the development of tribal leadership, not many tribals have become activists in KS. Funds from middle class and friends declined by late 1980s, making organizations like KS to seek international projects.

In early eighties, KS increasingly came into conflict<sup>8</sup> with the CPI (M) who felt that KS was encroaching on its domain, (There is a long history of Kisan Sabha mobilization in this area) diminishing the influence and mobilization of KS around EGS. The establishment of other NGOs affected KS's influence. Consequently, since late 1980s KS has started mobilizing tribals in the unorganized sector.

#### E Shramjeevi Sanghatana

Like KS, Shramjeevi Sanghatana (SJS) is a people's organization as an advocacy group to train bonded labour about their rights. Vivek Pandit and Vidyulata Pandit, members of the Janata Party, formally established it in October 1982 as a trade union. Initially they had organized an NGO called Vidhayak Sansad in 1979, functioning in the urban slums of Dahisar near Bombay. While organizing camps for the youth, they learnt about bondedness among the tribals. They filed Public Interest Litigation and were able to

“liberate” some bonded workers, in 1982. SJS was formed for this liberated bonded labour to find means to survive despite the opposition from their erstwhile patrons.

We argue in this paper that SJS differs from the other NPPFs. SS and in its early stages KS, were ideologically guided movements that raised structural issues. SJS and the KS later were mobilizing tribal migrants in urban fringe area, who had left tribal districts, and were now working in salt pans, brick kilns and quarries as bonded labour. Thus their demands were not concerned with access to land. This changed focus was also related to their philosophy of making the workers ‘free’ to work as labour in an unorganized setting. Thus their strategy was to demand from the state the constitutional right towards workers/labour.

They thus concentrated towards building public opinion through the media and conducted professional classes for training social workers and labour. SJS’s initial struggles were related to establishing the proof that there existed bonded labour before it liberated them. After years of struggle and litigation the government accepted the existence of the bonded labour in the State.

While the earlier NPPFs focused on political consciousness for revolution through EGS and theorized the exploitation of tribals, and were not averse to violence to realize their goals, for the SJS, the goal was creating an awareness regarding rights already granted to labour through peaceful protests and by creating public opinion. Employment under EGS was a substitute arrangement, until they attained these rights. Unlike the earlier NPPFs, SJS also participated in panchayat elections and have later aligned themselves to mainstream parties and to international NGOs.<sup>9</sup> (The SJS says that this political space helps them to obtain additional EGS work sites).

The SJS shared some common features with other NPPFs since EGS was a means to achieve its goals. However, the SJS is an issue-based organization and used EGS in transforming the existing patron/employer- client (bonded labour) relations into contractual ones. The liberated poor are trained to believe in their freedom, dignity, self-esteem, self-reliance and gender equality for which they have to attain rights; civil, socio-cultural and economic. Vivek Pandit terms this an ‘advocacy’. Like other NPPFs, SJS, organizes processions, gheraos and roadblocks. SJS has helped more than 6000 bonded labour gain their freedom. Others have been freed voluntarily by their patrons as a result of this struggle. Presently SJS has a membership of 100,000.

Pandit narrates the story of Anita Dhangda:

“I wish you could meet Anita Dhangda, the first bonded woman to be elected as a representative in a District government. Born into a bonded family, her father died young. In 1989 Anita approached our union to help free her family. We registered a formal complaint against the landlord. He stopped all work and food for Anita and her family. We mobilized the surrounding villages, who confronted the landlord, and we succeeded. Anita and 22 of her family members gain their freedom”

Samanvaya Samiti

In the post emergency period, the people's movements recognized the need to unite to fight the state's divide and rule policy. In 1981, the Parishad and Shetkari Shetmajoor Panchayat provided leadership to the formation of the *Samnvya Samiti* - a federation of trade unions coordinating all activities in rural Maharashtra.

However, by early nineties, Samiti found that its members had little interest in its activities. The general decline of mobilisations of the rural poor by its constituents affected the Samiti. Additionally, a loose federation of trade unions created difficulties in ensuring participation. Though all units of the Samiti were trade unions, some were also part of NGOs- creating tensions among the members.

Also, the Samiti - not a registered organization, used the office of the Hind Mazdoor Sangha affiliated to the socialists in the Janata Dal. Some constituents did not want an affiliation to a mainstream party. Additionally there was confusion as to whether the task of the Samiti was only EGS activities or to mobilise all agricultural workers. Some groups were only mobilising the rural poor for EGS while others had a larger agenda. The Parishad and the Panchayat wanted the issue of minimum wages to be the critical demand. This demand was connected to the strategy to build a revolutionary movement, a position not accepted by other constituents leading to ambiguity of the Samiti's role.

Despite these grave differences, the Samiti did agitate and initiate new campaigns across the State and raise issues regarding EGS in the Assembly. In 1982, the Samiti demanded that the minimum wages of EGS be equivalent to existing agricultural wages. It organised, a one day strike of 75,000 EGS workers spanning across State. A State wide agitation was initiated on Oct. 22 1982 of one lakh workers. The result was the rise in the minimum wages. In November 1983, the Samiti organised 138 public meetings, 109 meetings of leaders/representatives, 24 public representations and 7 public demonstrations. They achieved the introduction of maternity benefits into EGS Act.

The Samiti's agenda in its early years was dominated by a philosophy of trade unionism - an agenda of the two promoters. The Samiti was concerned about the issues of proper measurement of the work, timely wage payments, bonus and other gratuities, crèche and drinking water. Samiti also demanded that EGS works be included in the category of construction works which are paid at higher rates, as most EGS works, such as pajhar-talao, nala-bunding, making wells, road construction officially declared to be construction activities.<sup>10</sup> In 1984, the Samiti demanded that migrant workers be given travel allowance, ensure that part payment be made in kind with good quality food.

Till 1987 the Samiti was able to organise sit down strikes, *Jail bharo*, form unions of muster clerks assistants and arrange a joint conference of EGS and agricultural workers. As a result, it could reduce delays in the execution of EGS works and ensure that backlog in payment of higher wages was paid and unemployment allowance speeded up, Provident Fund be introduced for casual labourers. When in 1987, the government proposed an amendment of the EGS Act, the Samiti was able to organise protests.

After 1988, the Samiti's activities decreased. As Prakash Shinde of the Shetkari Shetmajoor Panchayat acknowledges in an interview:

In 1988 the wages were made equivalent to agricultural wages. Thus we were left with no issue to fight. Also the organisations had lost the battle to stop the change in the Act which introduced private contractors in executing EGS works. This defeat affected all of us.

Issues like definition of public works and programme for sustainable growth for generating long-term employment hardly came up for discussion. The government had introduced new programmes such as Jawahar Rojgar Yojana and Employment Assurance Scheme, which paid higher wages than EGS. Also localised problems were not addressed by the Samiti, which made organisations loose interest.<sup>11</sup>

### Conclusion

In the 1970s, in Maharashtra, NPPFs emerged around the mobilization for guaranteed employment of the rural poor. I have argued that the immediate cause of their growth was the severe draught situation in the State. In the course of this mobilization the NPPFs defined the nature of exploitation faced by the dalits, tribals, landless and small peasants. Leaders who had socialist and communist ideologies led these NPPFs. Through their struggles these NPPFs were able to convert a drought relief programme into a permanent on demand employment programme and ensure that the workers obtain entitlements similar to urban industrial workers. These NPPFs also raised issues regarding reorganization of agriculture in Maharashtra, through land reform/land ceiling acts and distribution of wasteland, and the way EGS could be used to create sustainable public works. Also they interrogated the conception of democracy in practice and initiated organizational changes to ensure local participation and non-hierarchical practices.

The Emergency affected the mobilization of the NPPFs which revived after the Act was passed in 1978. But the emergency had inaugurated a new political situation, that of alignment of mainstream political parties against the Congress Party. This affected the NPPFs which became divided on whether to join these parties. Both Shramik Sangathan and Yukrand were victims of this phenomenon.

I have argued that the formation of Samanvya Samiti was the next important landmark in the growth of NPPFs. This Samiti was promoted and controlled by the Parishad and the Panchayat. They were able to ensure that minimum rights of urban industrial organized labour be granted to the EGS workers. This limited aim once achieved the Samiti lost its momentum. The divisions of the parent groups also affected the Samiti.

In the early eighties new groups emerged which drew upon radicalism but were being defined by the new situation in Maharashtra. First, the State was becoming increasingly urban. (In 2001, 44% urban population) Second, the State was providing target oriented alternate programmes for the poor. This divided the rural poor, into those who are below poverty line and those who are not. Thus organizations found little interest among the poor for EGS. Third, from 1987 onwards, the government was encouraging organizations to be converted into NGOs to help deliver development programmes - a move parallel with trends in international arena. Major donors and governments encouraged the



formation of NGOs. The buzzwords of this new agenda were service delivery, empowerment for human rights, and advocacy. This pressure led many organizations into NGOs while retaining a faith in them as people's organizations. Also, organizations have become sucked into the concerns of becoming professional groups rather than be leaders of political movements. New groups formed in the early eighties have attracted professional social workers rather than committed activists. This is the case of KS and SJS.

Thirty years of EGS has not helped eradicate the drought. Every summer and sometimes in the monsoon the State government declares parts of talukas and districts as drought affected. The people's movement had rethought of ways to ensure that this does not happen. As mentioned above, Yukrand had visualized a new programme of public works for wasteland development while Shramik Mukti Dal had visualized a plan for constructing small and medium dams to ensure continuous access to water for the small and marginal farmers. Can these experiments be made part of the Act? Can local communities decide what kind of public works they wish to have and why? Can such programmes be part of local democratic experiments? Paradoxically, interest in these concepts has now increased. And yet the experiments in Maharashtra are not taken to heart as the newly formed National Rural Employment Guarantee Bill suggests. It is time that there is mobilization across the country so that this concept is now introduced across India incorporating the visions with which the rural poor fought for its implementation.

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<sup>2</sup> The prominent youth leaders of Yukrand were Kumar Saptarshi, Ajit Sardar, Shantaram Pandhere, Subhash Lomte, Ranga Rachure, Hussain Dalwai, Madhu Mohite, Nalini Pandit, Ratnakar Mahajan among others.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to members of Yukrand, undated, files of year 1982-83 Yukrand Files (Sardar Archives)

<sup>4</sup> Both Gandhi and Phule advocated the devolution of the state and argued that villages should become units for development. Both visualised that villages be organised as cooperatives and promote panchayats.

<sup>5</sup> Lohia was one of the earliest socialists in the country. He started as a student leader the Independence struggle and later founded Congress Socialist Party. Jayaprakash Narayan was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and later espoused the Socialist ideology. He was instrumental in the initiation of the Navnirman movement in Gujarat and "total revolution" all over the country.

<sup>6</sup> The prominent members of the organization were Kumar Shiralkar, Ananth Phadke, Manohar Deenanath, Ashok Manohar, Vikram Kanhere, Bharat Patankar, and Chaya Datar among others.

<sup>7</sup> The majority of the tribal population concentrated in Dhule, Thane, Raigad and Chandrapur districts. In 1971, Thane had 67.28% of tribal population while Dhule had 40%. More than 90% lived below poverty line.

<sup>8</sup> On the conflict see Anjali Deshpande (198 )

<sup>9</sup> Vivek Pandit shifted from Janata Party to the Congress and recently fought elections on Shiv Sena ticket.

<sup>10</sup> Many of the EGS construction works had higher wages than agricultural works. However these EGS works received wages of the lowest agricultural zone. SS raised this issue and demanded that these works be paid according to the nature of the work.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews with, Bharat Patankar 15<sup>th</sup> March 2003 (Mukti Sangharash), Manohar Deenanath 29<sup>th</sup> September 2002 (SS), Nagesh Hatkar 28<sup>th</sup> December 2002, (trade Union Bombay), Prakash Shinde 10<sup>th</sup> August 2002, (Shetkari Shetmajoor Panchayat), and Ajit Sardar 19<sup>th</sup> July 2003, (Yukrand)

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