

10. Critically Analysis the Role and Contribution of Godavari Parulekar in Warli Movement

Dr. Vidhate Ganesh Shankar

Rayat Shikshan Sanstha's, Radhabai Kale Mahila Mahavidyalaya,
Ahmednagar, Dist. Ahmednagar.

Key Words: Warli, Serfdom, All India Kisan Sabha, Red Flag, forced labor, aboriginal hill, debt slavery

Objectives

1. Tracing the condition and background of Warli tribes and their movement
2. To discuss the injustice and oppression of the Warli tribals by moneylenders and zamindars.
3. To discuss the contribution of Godavari and Shamrao Parulekar in Warli movement
4. To review the role of Akhil Bharatiya Kisan Sabha regarding the Warli movement.
5. To Assessing the legacy of the Warli movement

Preface

Godavari Parulekar was a staunch anti-imperialist freedom fighter, a militant leader of the historic Warli Adivasi Revolt, one of the founders of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha, the only woman president of the All India Kisan Sabha in its long history, member of the CPI(M) Central Committee for a quarter century. She was a author of the celebrated work Adivasis Revolt and a dedicated social worker and a legendary leader of the communist and kisan movement in India. She was influenced by Marxist and Communist ideologies and spent her life fighting for the farmers and working class. In this Research Paper I will discussed the the Miserable condition of Warlis due to the exploitation by the landlords, moneylenders and efforts taken by Godavari Parulekar along with AIKS to get emancipation of Warli tribals from persecution of landlords in Thane District.

First Contacts With Warli Adivasis

It was to conduct propaganda for the first state conference of the Kisan Sabha that Shamrao Parulekar the husband of Godawari Parulekar visited the adivasi belt of Thane district for the first time in December 1944. The predominant tribe in this area was known as the Warli

tribe. Around 300 adivasis gathered for the meeting and told Shamrao of the medieval exploitation and inhuman atrocities that were being heaped on them by the landlords and moneylenders for years together. Shamrao was appalled at seeing the terrible landlord oppression that the adivasis had been facing for nearly a century. Shamrao called upon them to send representatives to the Titwala conference. They agreed on one condition – that Kisan Sabha workers must come to help them in their struggle. Shamrao agreed. Fifteen tribal delegates from this area attended the Titwala conference. It was these fifteen delegates, together with thousands of their adivasi brethren, who within six months were to begin a revolt that would be written in golden letters in the history of the peasant movement of India. Inspired by the conference, the adivasis took back with them the red flag, and appealed to Kisan Sabha workers to come and lead their struggles. In 1947, just when the first phase of the Adivasi Revolt was culminating in a hard-earned victory, Shamrao Parulekar wrote a remarkable book in English titled *Revolt of the Warlis*. It analyzed the entire struggle from the detached and objective standpoint of a progressive historian, although he was himself one of the key leaders of this struggle. Godavari Parulekar later wrote her celebrated book *Adivasis Revolt* in jail in the mid-1960s. Her book not only described the heroic revolt, but also included several moving personal experiences of this movement which only she could have related because of her complete identification with the lives of the adivasis. In his book, *Revolt of the Warlis*, Shamrao Parulekar graphically described the first stirrings of the revolt: The conference had a magical effect on the Warlis. It inspired and transformed them. One of them, Mahya Dhangda of Zari, who had never spoken more than a few words in all his life, volunteered to speak on the resolution on abolition of forced labor. He trembled while he spoke but he spoke with determination. His pent-up feelings had found an outlet and they burst out in torrents. He held the conference spellbound by his pathetic narration. In conclusion he solemnly declared that the Warlis would end serfdom and resist their oppressors. The Warlis understood the significance of the resolution and the conference quite differently from what the rest did. He understood his own declaration to end forced labour as a solemn pledge given to his fellow brethren which he must honour at any sacrifice and risk. The Warlis who returned home from the conference were not the same as those who had attended it. The conference had changed them beyond recognition. They no longer trembled in the presence of their oppressors but started defying them. They had carried with them a few Red Flags which had decorated the pandal of the conference. They felt that these would serve as their guide, friend

and philosopher. They discarded their routine mode of life and went as missionaries from village to village, holding group meetings of Warli peasants and preaching the message of the conference. The message stirred the whole mass of Warli peasants and the whole jungle tract vibrated with its echo.

Inhuman Exploitation, Unending Torture

Before coming to the next stage of the Adivasi Revolt, it is necessary to see the abominable nature of the exploitation, atrocities and repression that was prevalent in the area. Without this, it is difficult to understand the decisive importance of this revolt and the victories that it gained. A century ago, the Adivasis were the owners of all the land, but they were gradually expropriated of all that they owned by the landlords and moneylenders who were fully backed by the British regime. By 1945, just 6.8 per cent of cultivated land in Dahanu tehsil and 2.2 per cent of cultivated land in Umbargaon tehsil was held by adivasis, the rest being owned by the rapacious landlords and moneylenders. After robbing the adivasi of his land, the landlord made him his serf and introduced serf tenure in the area. Forced labour was extracted from the adivasi, who had to render all services to the landlord free. The system of debt slavery began. The wife of the debt slave was also the slave of the landlord and he regularly used her as his mistress. Massive rents and illegal exactions abounded. Exploitation and oppression by forest contractors and the government forest department went on relentlessly. The courts, police and administration were completely controlled by landlords. There was no redress anywhere. All this led to grinding poverty of the lakhs of adivasis on the one hand and to untold wealth of the handful of landlords on the other. As a result, the tyranny and oppression of landlords knew no bounds. In Adivasis Revolt, Godavari Parulekar narrates some shocking instances of this torture: One day, Roopji had not been able to resist the temptation of eating a mango. Out of the blue the watchman had pounced on him, given him a hard blow and dragged him before the landlord, taking the mango with him as evidence of the crime. Roopji was tied to the tree and whipped mercilessly till the flesh of his back split open. He howled like an animal under this beating, but nobody dared to go to his aid. Another adivasi was hung by his toes to a tree and a fire with chillies in it was lit directly below him. While the acrid smoke from the fire suffocated him, they began whipping him on his back. In those days most landlords and moneylenders kept a whip ready on the front porches of their houses. These whips were burning symbols to the Warlis of their slavery. The Warli women were not spared from torture either. Landlords considered their

tenants' wives and the wives of their debt-slaves to be their own personal property. They firmly believed that they had the hereditary right to enjoy these women whenever it pleased them to do so. It was a common thing for them to make obscene remarks to the women who worked for them, to touch them, pinch them, push them and get them alone into the corners to molest them. A woman was carrying a baby of about four or five days old in her arms. Three days after she had delivered the baby the landlord had ordered her to report for work. When she failed to turn up, he had enticed her into his house with conciliatory words and then slapped her again and again while she held her baby in her arms. He flung obscenities at her and ordered her to come to work the next day. When she did not, the landlord beat up her husband. A plough was being driven in the field. One of the two bullocks yoked up to a plough was released and an adivasi named Zhipper was yoked in its place and ordered to plough with a bullock on the other side. The tired Zhipper could barely pull the plough. As punishment for this, the foreman pierced him with a goad causing blood to spurt out. Even then Zhipper somehow managed to pull the plough twice round the field. After this the Mehta shouted, 'Will you shirk your work again?' Then, turning to the other Warlis he said, 'Have a good look. This will be your punishment also if you don't work properly.' It was this same Zhipper Jawaliya who later played a militant role in the Adivasi Revolt. Two more instances written about by Godavari are enough to make anyone's blood boil with rage. Once a whole furnace-load of coal was inadvertently spoilt. The owner was so furious at this that he picked up one of the adivasis and hurled him into the furnace. The adivasi burned to death. Landlords did not hesitate even to burn adivasis alive. This is the climax of bestiality. I was told of another incident where a brother of an Adivasi by name Janu was buried alive. Janu's brother's wife was a goodlooking woman. One night, when the husband was away, she was dragged off to the landlord's house. On his return the next day the woman's husband heard the whole story. He was a spirited fellow. He gathered the village elders, elected leaders and the panch of the tribe together and made a noise about the affair. When the landlord heard of this, he dragged away the wife before the very eyes of the husband. A loud altercation and violent scuffle followed, but the Warlis could do nothing. The landlord had a ditch dug in the ground and buried the Warli alive in it. Janu, his brother was threatened with dire consequences if he allowed a single word of his brother's fate to escape him. 'If anybody comes to know of this, I will chop off your arms and legs,' the landlord said. Janu fled the village. So did his brother's wife. Everybody in the village was scared into silence. Yet, somehow, the story got

around. A farce of a police inquiry took place followed by a trial in which the civil surgeon testified that the bones in the pit where Janu's brother had been buried, were of an animal and not of a human being. The landlord was acquitted.

The Red Flag And The Message Of Liberation

After similarly describing the horrendous conditions of the adivasis, Shamrao wrote, In short this was the world in which these aboriginal hill tribes lived. They lived in the midst of the most brutal oppression known to the history of mankind. It was a world in which poverty, misery and destitution knew no limits. The aboriginal hill tribes had reached the lowest depths of moral degradation. They meekly submitted to the tyranny of the landlords in whose presence they trembled. They were timid and suffered in silence what even animals would have tried to resist. In this world there was none to help them and they were therefore overpowered with a sense of utter helplessness. They thought that their deliverance would never come. The Red Flag entered this world with its message of liberation in 1945. On May 23, 1945, a conference of over 5,000 adivasis, 500 of them women, was held at the village Zari in Umbargaon (now Talasari) tehsil. It was addressed by Shamrao and Godavari Parulekar, and it gave the clarion call to launch an uncompromising struggle around four main and simple slogans. These were: Do not cultivate the private land of the landlord unless he pays in cash the daily wage of 12 annas. Do not render any free service to the landlord. Resist him if he assaults you. Now We want to be owners of the land. He who works should rule. You must all unite. Thus began the famed Warli Adivasi Revolt against a century of serfdom, bonded labour, debt slavery, exorbitant rents and, above all, inhuman oppression and exploitation by landlords, money lenders and forest contractors. All of them were backed to the hilt by the ruthless and repressive state machinery that had long been in the hands of British imperialism. Godavari extensively toured the area and truly integrated herself with the adivasis, becoming one of them, sharing their trials and tribulations, joys and sorrows.

Abolition Of Serf Tenure And Forced Labour

The Zari conference and its slogans electrified the adivasi masses in Umbargaon tehsil, and within 24 hours its message had reached every nook and corner of the jungle. On the strength of cent per cent unity, the adivasis themselves broke their century-old chains, and within just three weeks, forced labour was abolished once and for all. Landlords were terrified at the new-found unity and might of the adivasis, and so the assaults and torture also automatically

stopped. The following month, in June 1945, with the onset of the monsoons, the adivasis of Umbargaon tehsil proceeded to abolish serf tenure as well. They refused to cultivate the lands of the landlords free, and demanded wages at rates fixed by the Kisan Sabha. In the face of this revolt of unprecedented intensity, the landlords had no choice but to yield. In September and October 1945, the revolt inexorably spread to the adjoining Dahanu tehsil. Here also a gigantic mass upheaval took place and forced labour as well as serf tenure were ended. But the militant adivasis of Dahanu went a step further. Mobilising in their thousands, they moved through every village and hamlet in the tehsil in four batches and liberated thousands of debt slaves from their century-old bondage.

The First Martyrs

The first phase of the Adivasi Revolt thus ended in glorious victory. The second and more difficult phase began in October 1945, when the Warlis went on strike demanding a minimum wage of Rs. 2.50 for cutting 500 pounds of grass, with the strike total in both tehsils. This time the landlords refused to yield. In collusion with the British police machinery, a plot was hatched. A false message was sent to the adivasis over a distance of over 1,500 square miles that Godavari was going to address a meeting on the night of October 10 at Talwada, but the landlords were planning to attack her, and so the Red Flag had directed all adivasis to reach there with lathis and sickles to defend her. This message went to every hamlet and by midnight over 30,000 adivasi peasants gathered at Talwada, many of them walking more than 50 km to reach there. At the same time, the police were informed that a huge armed adivasi mob had gathered for killing the landlords. The treacherous plot worked. Firing by the British regime was its culmination. Shamrao movingly describes what happened: Armed police arrived at the place of the meeting at about midnight on October 10 and opened fire on the peaceful gathering of the Warlis from the roof of a moving motor van. The gathering did not disperse though one of them was killed and a few were wounded in the firing. The police continued to fire at intervals indiscriminately and in all directions from a moving van till 3 pm on October 11. They opened fire thrice during the interval of 15 hours on the same gathering at the same spot. Five Warlis were killed in the firing. The number of wounded was large. Among the wounded there was a boy of 12 years of age. And still the gathering refused to disperse. This episode was a thrilling exhibition of the reckless defiance of death by the Warli, his loyalty to the Red Flag and the birth of rare courage in him. For 15 hours he had defied bullets which were showered on him from

time to time. Firing failed to influence him to move from the place and it was difficult to guess how long he would have continued to remain there if the Kisan Sabha worker had not arrived there at 3 pm on October 11 and dispersed the gathering. For 15 hours they had protected the Red Flag which they had hoisted by shielding it with their bodies. As the police van used to pass by the spot and the police opened fire, they crowded round the Red Flag. They thought that the police were aiming to shoot the Red Flag, and they felt it to be their sacred duty to protect it at the cost of their lives. Firing did not and could not have succeeded in dispersing the meeting. A word from the Red Flag for dispersal was necessary for the purpose. They would rather pay any amount of price in life rather than disperse without the permission of the Red Flag. Their hearts full of deep hatred and intense anger against their class enemies, the adivasis left. But they vowed to continue the struggle with all the strength at their command. After the October 10 firing, the government let loose a reign of terror. Thousands of adivasis were put behind bars, beaten and tortured. Their wives were threatened with rape. In the entire area, the right to assembly was banned for two months. Shamrao, Godavari and other leading comrades were exterminated from the area. But in spite of all this repression, the strike went on undeterred. Finally the landlords were forced to concede the demand for fair wages. The second phase of the Adivasi Revolt had achieved victory, braving cruel state repression and police firing. A massive victory rally was held at Mahalaxmi on January 21, 1946, on Lenin's death anniversary. The historic nature of the victories that they had gained in the teeth of police and landlord repression had imbued the Adivasis with tremendous self-confidence. They had become aware of the mighty strength of their own unity. Now the Kisan Sabha took up the next question, that of rent. It made several legitimate demands for rent reduction and banning of all forcible collections by landlords. These demands also had to be conceded. The Mahalaxmi rally also gave a call for the collection of one rupee from each family for the Communist Party struggle fund. Everyone responded enthusiastically and the tradition of regular fund collection from the people for the Red Flag began. The blood of the first martyrs of the Adivasi Revolt in Thane district was shed on October 10, 1945. Jethya Gangad and four others were gunned down under British rule. After this successive Congress regimes also resorted to police firing several times. There have been 59 such martyrs of the Red Flag in Thane district so far. Every year, October 10 is regularly observed as Martyrs Day to pay homage to their memory and to take a vow to carry forward their struggle.

Congress Regime Calls In British Army For Repression

Nine months later, another big struggle began in October 1946 for increased wages for grass-cutting and for work in the forest. The demands were met and an agreement with the landlords was reached on November 10, 1946. Actually that should have been the end of the matter. But without any reason whatsoever, the Congress regime declared an Emergency in the entire Adivasi area on November 14. On November 21, Shamrao and Godavari were externed from Thane district and over 200 leading Adivasi cadres were summarily arrested. The 'Goonda Act' was imposed. Savage repression was unleashed. But this time it was not the British government, but the interim Congress government led by chief minister B.G. Kher and home minister Morarji Desai that was the culprit. They too tried to drown the Adivasi Revolt in blood. Displaying its true class colours, the Congress government in a rabidly anti-communist press release issued on December 13, 1946, charged the Adivasi Revolt of being "the culmination of the undesirable activities of those who advocated violence to bring about a political change, viz. the ushering in of a Communist state in India." Morarji Desai declared in a press conference that "he had no interest whatsoever in any agreement concluded with the Communists. Nothing that helps the Commu-nists in their destructive activities will be tolerated." As a reply to this reign of terror, over 20,000 adivasis struck work in Umbargaon, Dahanu and Palghar tehsils. The new regime now went to the extent of sending for the British Army to crush the adivasi peasants. But a tremendous groundswell of public opinion denounced the interim Congress regime and its uncalled-for action against the savagely exploited, defenceless adivasis struggling for eminently just demands. Sections of the nationalist press also took the government to task. The Communist Party and the working class of Mumbai and Thane districts issued a stern warning to the government to desist from sending the British Army to crush the adivasi peasantry and threatened to launch a general strike if the Army was sent. This was an excellent example of worker-peasant unity in action. While the Army had already reached Kalyan, the government was forced to reverse its decision to send it to the Adivasi belt within just four days! The government then tried yet another tack. It summoned the notorious British police officer Moore Gilbert to repress the revolt. Moore Gilbert had played an extremely savage role in trying to suppress the Parallel Government that had been set up in Satara district during 1943-46 under the leadership of Krantisimha Nana Patil. This also led to another mass public uproar and he had to be recalled within three days! Finally the government sent in a contingent of 1,000 armed police.

Police brutality and landlord repression reached new depths. In this third phase of the revolt thousands of Adivasis were jailed. Hundreds were tortured. Their women were ravaged. Police firing in Nanivali and other places claimed many more adivasi martyrs. All this naked display of the anti-communism of the Congress regime was a natural corollary to its full support to the landlords and moneylenders. Thus, even before the attainment of independence, the Congress had come out in its true colours as the political agent of the exploiting classes who were soon to rule India. But now the adivasis, who up to then had shown exemplary restraint in the struggle, struck back in self-defence, and with force. They launched a campaign of burning down the palatial farm-houses of the landlords and money lenders. These had been the symbols of their humiliation, the places where they had been tortured, where their women had been ravished for over a century. With inextinguishable hatred in their hearts, they razed hundreds of these abodes to the ground. Simultaneously, to counter the growing state repression, thousands of young adivasi men formed militant teams which went from village to village to raise the morale of their people and give them courage to face the ordeal. A new awakening based on class consciousness had been born in the adivasi belt. It was this contribution of the Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party that steeled the people even further in their struggle. The government and the landlords were thoroughly defeated. On April 5, 1947, the Chief Minister had to announce a policy of reconciliation towards the adivasis and had to withdraw all repressive measures as an earnest of his intentions. The immediate demands of the struggle, including the minimum wage and others, were conceded. Many of the long-term demands centering around land ownership were conceded as a result of later struggles, and tenancy laws and other legislation to that effect was brought in.

A Remarkable Feature Of The Revolt

A remarkable feature of the Adivasi Revolt was that both Shamrao and Godavari Parulekar were not allowed to openly set foot in Thane district during the entire period of the struggle from November 21, 1946, to January 14, 1953. From 1946-48 they were extended, from 1948-51 they were underground, and from 1951-53 they were detained. And yet such was the clear direction and firm foundation that they had given to the struggle in 1945-46, so strong was the base of the Communist Party and the Kisan Sabha that was laid during this short period, and so steeled was the leadership that had been forged among the adivasis themselves in the furnace of this struggle, that the Adivasi Revolt continued unabated even in spite of their physical

absence from the scene. Godavari writes movingly about their return: We could only return to Thane district in February 1953. Thousands of Warlis had gathered in Mahalaxmi to welcome us back. We were deeply moved by their display of love, loyalty and enthusiasm. I wondered if we truly deserved it. It was Parulekar's habit to fall silent whenever he was deeply moved. He did so now, sitting quite still for a few minutes. Then he said, 'How puny individuals like you and I are, in the midst of this surging people! How devoted, loving and full of life they are! It was their own strength that helped them cut the chains of bondage. We only acted as catalysts.' It is this humility that is the hallmark of true greatness.

Gains And Legacy

It is best that the manifold gains and the rich legacy of the Adivasi Revolt are summed up in the words of the leaders of this struggle themselves. Shamrao Parulekar writes, Within a short span the struggle won memorable victories. Serf tenure was uprooted root and branch. Forced labour was ended. Debt slaves were liberated. Their womenfolk were rescued. Assaults and torture was stopped. The movement sharpened the understanding and virgin intellect of the Warlis. It brought to the surface persons from their ranks who could take the initiative and lead it. The experience of the bitter struggle through which the Warli had to wade, rapidly transformed him. His transformation has been so radical that he became a new being. Straight from infancy he stepped into maturity. Godavari Parulekar adds, In this struggle, the adivasis rose to magnificent heights of courage while the government, landlords and moneylenders sunk to the very depths of inhumanity in their reign of repression. Those who had marched into the battlefield with unlimited powers and money, and were aided by armed police and goondas, were made to bite the dust before half-naked, half-starved men and women, whose only weapons were a capacity for self-sacrifice, and invulnerable solidarity and unflinching dedication. Out of this battle arose the class conscious peasant. Honour and credit for the few concessions that have been given to the peasants in Maharashtra must go, in large measure, to the Warlis and their struggle. The minimum wages act, increase in the wages of farm labourers, the tenancy act 1957, decrease in rents claimed from tenants, The unjust practices of Vethbigari (Vetha), Lagingadi, Ghargadi, Khawti, Palammod gradually decreased, are some of the concessions that have been legally granted to the other peasants in Maharashtra as well. However, due to the lack of organization among those peasants, these concessions have remained mere promises on paper. It is only then that the adivasis will feel that their struggle has really been worthwhile when

peasants in Maharashtra build their militant organization, and get ready to take a step forward on the strength of their unity. Only then will they reap the real joy of having reached a cherished goal. . . . The main change in the Warli is the awakening of his pride and self-consciousness as a human being. His manner and deportment reflect the confidence he has gained out of the knowledge of his strength as a member of an organization. He has lost his fear and inferiority complex. He has become ambitious. He is consumed by a desire to understand world politics. The adivasi who has stood firm against injustice, will not stop where he is. He will advance. He has been well-prepared over the years, and especially during the struggle, and it is this preparation, this maturity, which is the real achievement both for us and for him. The foundation of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha and the Warli Adivasi Revolt were undoubtedly the culmination of the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggle waged by Shamrao and Godavari Parulekar in the pre-independence era. But their later years were no less significant, and may be briefly recounted to complete the picture of their rich lives.

Conclusion

Under the rule of the British raj owned zamindars, the standard of living of the arli tribe of Thane district was destroyed by the unjust practices of Vethbigari, Lagingadi, Ghargadi, Khawti, Palammod. Government employees, landlords, moneylenders, sheths, coup contractors were oppressing with the help of Awari Pathans. Godavari Parulekar was the first victim of violence against women in Warli society. These women were trapped in a vision cycle. Eccentric landlords and social patriarchal pressures were causing them great intrusion. Equally sad is the belief that dead women are not as holy as men. Comrade Godavari Parulekar inculcated these tribal brothers in communist philosophy. He led his movement by inspiring the struggle against injustice and oppression. Organized Warli tribals by preparing a program of Warli movement from the meeting of Warli tribals in Zari and Dahanu. The then Congress government made a strong effort to suppress this warli struggle through police and military force. But the tribal Warlis continued their struggle regardless. The oppressive government had to back down and accept the Warlis' demands for justice. The stamp of social sudraty on Warli's name was erased. Godavaritai worked for women's rights and social and economic equality. The stamp of social sudratva on Warli's name was erased. Godavaritai worked for women's rights and social and economic equality. Their compassion for the Warlis gave the tribe the strength to regain independence and fame.

References

1. Parulekar Godavari, *The Awakening Of Man*, Popular Publication, Mumbai, 2015.
2. Prasad Archana, *Red Flag of the Warlis- History of an Ongoing Struggle*, LeftWord Books, New Delhi, 2017.
3. Srinivas, M. N., *Social change in modern India*. Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan, 1995.
4. Ghurye, G.S., *The Scheduled Tribes*, (3rd edition), Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1963.
5. <https://testbook.com/mpsc-preparation/freedom-fighters-of-maharashtra>, last seen at 29/03/2023
6. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Godavari_Parulekar, last seen at 29/03/2023
7. <https://www.indiejournal.in/article/historic-warli-revolt-turns-seventy-today-writes-shridhar-pawar>, last seen at 31/03/2023
8. <https://feminisminindia.com/2019/08/21/warli-revolt-ativasi-women/>, last seen at 31/03/2023.
9. <https://tribecultureandurbar.blogspot.com/2017/08/warli-movement-1944-1947.html>, last seen at 03/04/2023.