

Deep within the virgin forest, the canopy of mammoth teaks filter sunlight to the minimum. The darkness at noon has a shroud of gloom. Wind whistles past, unmoved. In his own mother earth's lap, Mangi Reddy lies... awaiting death.

The Konda Reddy youth's image, two months old, from a trip of the Rampachodavaram forest ranges of East Godavari has a frightening 'freshness for one even today. Laid out by his wife and others under the front-yard jack tree, in a tribal hamlet by the side of the Marredumilli-Chintalapudi jeep road near Ivampalli, to die. Mangi Reddy's fate would sum up that of the tribal communities of the Godavari forests.

Existence has become nightmarish - within a sociological cul-de-sac. In the Bison Hills, as the Godavari areas of the Eastern Ghats are known for their wild bisons, the noose is being tightened further, with each passing day, on the 'original Telugu tribes' neck, by a few government agencies which ironically were set up to guide them, and the non-tribals who have encroached into the tribal pockets. The Girijan Cooperative Corporation (GCC) set up by the state government in 1969 to act as an intermediary between the tribals and the market with monopoly rights on minor forest produce, with a view to end the reign of middlemen, today takes the cake in hampering tribal interests. The GCC blocks the individuals' right for access to open

# Vanguard for Tribal Welfare

luding with outsiders in grabbing tribal lands.

The entry of the underground activists of various leftist/extremist colour into these forests where they were to be well entrenched provided a new angle to the Godavari tribals' struggle for existence. In the beginning though the fire power provided by the extremists enabled oppressed tribals to stand up to exploitation at least in a few cases, later when the police tightened its grip over the extremist hide-outs in a bid to liquidate the revolution on behalf of the state, the tribals too found themselves at the receiving end as the police often tended to look upon the tribals as those who harboured the extremists. Later on came stories of extremists and the police taking turns at terrorising and holding tribal villages to ransom. And under the weight all that lay the tribal population of the Godavari forests struggling for breath and life... like Mangi Reddy...

## Birth of Sakti

Here amidst all this, in the local

tribal reformist movement in 1985 March. That was Sakti...

Though essentially Sakti also would classify as a voluntary organisation, what makes it different from the thousands active today in the rural pockets of India is the fact that Sakti has adopted 'direct legal action' as its mode of operation against injustices to tribals, instead of the accepted methods of social protest like marches, rallies, demonstrations, appeals, etc. In organisational set-up too, Sakti has a different cast. The organisation which operates from Dr Sivaramakrishna's rented one-room house at Rampachodavaram has only tribals as members and office-bearers. The non-tribal presence around the organisation is limited to two-men - One is Dr Sivaramakrishna himself. The second is the young advocate Trinatha Rao whose presence runs as the lifeblood of the organisation itself now, since such is Sakti's line of action.

To ensure this freshness and also to ensure effectiveness in its mission Sakti adopted the method of direct action. Most of this Direct Action has come through in the form of stays from the courts of law against actions by non-tribals which may have proved detrimental to the interests of the tribal community. Sakti has so far secured at least half a dozen such stays against issues like land alienation, tree felling, outrages on tribal women etc. It's here that the role of Trinatha Rao, the advocate becomes important. Sakti, as a

Sivaramakrishna says there had been hitherto a high number of cases of non-tribal men having affairs with tribal women and discarding them after short periods. These men, for some reason, took the tribal women for granted - as if they were there for their sake. So one of the main areas of concentration in Sakti action has been against such offences on tribal women by non-tribal men. Last year a timber contractor kept a tribal girl for some time and left her once she had a child. Sakti took the woman and child to court praying that the contractor be asked to provide them maintenance. In another instance where another contractor had left a blind girl after a short affair too, Sakti has approached the court praying for maintenance. Both these cases are now in the courts.

All this has set the affluent non-tribal lobby against Sakti. Sivaramakrishna was arrested thrice by the police on trumped-up charges. Once while helping a tribal girl raped by an outsider. Sivaramakrishna and some Sakti activists

one. The tribal pattern of ownership does not suit our taxation methods. So it is totally illogical to tax tribals under non-tribal economic policies, says Sivaramakrishna. Sakti also wants the tribals to be permitted to take their produce to the open market in search of competitive prices, even as the GCC continues its operation as a safeguard against middlemen. As a first step, Sakti has approached the government for a permit for about 45 tribal families to sell their tamarind in the open market this year.

When Sivaramakrishna thought of organising the tribals of these areas into an organisation to fight exploitation from various corners, he was well aware of the existence of similar organisations all over the country and - in his own words - their limited effectiveness. These organisations were concentrating more on channelising development funds from the government as well as Indian and foreign donor agencies - than thinking of means to save the tribes from the socio-economical onslaught which they were being subjected to. Hence he was decided that Sakti should not end up as another development agency and that there should be a certain freshness in its approach.

The saddest part of the government's extended presence into the secluded tribal pockets has been that the rules and laws imposed on the tribal socio set-up tended to



Trinatha Rao, extreme right, discussing land alienation with the tribals of Chintalapudi.

market and charges heavy 'commissions' thereby causing a considerable loss in return to the tribals for the forest produce. Next in the row comes the forest department of the state government, which from time to time conducts surveys to decide upon reserved forest boundaries displacing and alienating tribals in their natural habitat. The policies of the department on ownership of land and vegetation or cultivation rights in tribal areas have often turned out to be painful for the tribals. The industries are there next. They grab from the forest wealth - especially the bamboo and soft wood - without any concern for ecological balance or the tribals' future: For if the forest isn't there, how shall the tribal be... A fourth party in the outrage on tribals is the non-tribal settlers in tribal areas. Though there are rules prohibiting non-tribals from owning land in agency areas, in the Godavari forests which are the conventional habitat of the Konda Reddy and Koyas and a few other sub-tribes anyone can find hundreds of settlers even from outside the state trading or cultivating. Many of them have bought tribal land holdings illegally. Alienation at home went further up with the non-tribals laying their hands on whatever land was left by the Forest Department for the poor tribals. There have been instances of the state government's settlement department col-

school at Geddada between Rampachodavaram and Marredumilli, right in the tribal heartland, there was a teacher by name Sivaramakrishna. The youth with a post-graduate degree had come to Geddada from his native village of Jaggayapeta just for the job. Soon he realised that there was more to his calling here than just teaching. The fragrance of tribal life all around and the earthy flavour of the culture imbued the young man a passion developed to know it - to live it. Sivaramakrishna started researching into what he would call as Tribal Knowledge Systems and submitted a thesis titled *Tribal Folklore of Andhra Pradesh* in 1972 to the Osmania University which conferred the degree of doctorate on him in 1982. The young man whose involvement with the tribals and the problems which plagued them multiplied with each passing day. The trips he undertook on foot into the forest in search of more and more of these sweet couplets or the rest of a tale had given him an opportunity to see from close quarters the shape of things in the tribal settlements despite the government and various other agencies claiming to have done so much for the uplift of these communities ever since independence. Dr Sivaramakrishna's thoughts of these days - the days he himself lived the life of the tribals in the deep groves of the Bison Hills - took shape of a



Pics: Cover and inside, M Ramesh

tribal group, on its own would not have been able to think of timely and legal solutions to all the tribals' problems.

Sakti has got a stay order from the High Court against a plywood factory at Rajahmundry cutting fruit-bearing trees from the reserve forests. The argument has been



Dr Sivaramakrishna, founder of Sakti, talking to Konda Reddys at the Mamudikotta tribal settlement.

took the girl to the Mandal Revenue Officer before whom she gave a statement that she was raped. Later, under pressure, the girl was made to withdraw the statement and Sivaramakrishna was arrested by the police on the charge that he instigated the girl to make a false statement. On another occasion he was arrested for dismantling a liquor shop in the agency area along with some Sakti members. All that has not deterred him. He knows of the opposition he has to face.

Sakti, ever since its inception, had been campaigning against the monopoly rights the GCC enjoyed in the marketing of minor forest produce. Though originally conceived as a safeguard against middlemen this provision has now proved to be a disadvantage to the tribals. The main forest produce on which the tribals earn revenue here in tamarind. The GCC buys it at around Rs 4.50 per kg. Out of this the GCC deducts 15% handling charges, 8% as state govt sales tax and another 15% as forest rentals. After all the deductions what the tribal gets would be around a mere Rs 3 per kg of tamarind whereas the open market rates would be around Rs 5 per kg. So Sakti has demanded that the government should not levy rentals and taxes on forest produce since the forest produces are the birthright of the tribals. Their sociology is an entirely different

treat the tribals as "Tresspassers" The forest department has to take the major blame for this. Wrong policies regarding possession of lands by aboriginal populations, and the restrictions imposed on their movements and settlements within their own habitats as part of surveying and demarcating boundaries of reserve forests etc have been outrageous as far as the tribals are concerned. It has to be noted that these rules were imposed on them without even showing them an alternative way of living. Like bringing them on par with the developed non-tribal populations, so that the same rules could make sense for both alike. In the 1976 survey, many tribal settlements have come within reserved forest boundaries in the Bison Hills.

Unless the government gives thought to these, than being content with earmarking funds for the ITDA, there is no way the tribals could get justice. The scenario becomes disturbing as one realises that Sakti's is the lone voice that campaigns towards this and more so, considering the possibilities if its achievements fail to satisfy the tribes. After all, these are the forests from where Alluri Sitarama Raju organised his revolt. And these are the men who moved with him.

John Ulahannan