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**CONGRESS AND TRIBAL ENVIRONMENTAL PROTEST IN THE CENTRAL
PROVINCES, 1937-1947: A CASE STUDY**

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This paper deals with the question of the relationship between Congress nationalism and adivasi protest movements during the freedom struggle, as it arose within the confines of one particular zamindari estate of the Durg district (Central Provinces) during the last decade before Independence.¹ This is only a preliminary essay, which is part of a wider project on 'forest satyagrahas' and the processes of popular mobilization in the Central Provinces during the Gandhian phase of the national movement. It is mainly based on the records of the Political and Military Department of the government of the Central Provinces (now kept in the Madhya Pradesh State Archives, Bhopal). This entails a certain number of limitations regarding the scope of the enquiry, about which more will be said below. To some extent, this essay shares in the concerns of the historiographical trend known as 'microhistory'.² The basic purpose of microhistory is to try to grasp the complexity of real social life, which the one-sided approach of historical reality provided by the records usually obliterates, by analysing social phenomena, whenever adequate evidence is available, in terms of the strategies and idioms of the individual actors. The emergence of this historiographical trend is undoubtedly one aspect of the "return of the subject" in the social sciences which has begun during the 1980s, and it is also related to the post-modernist indictment of macro-social explanations of historical evolution. But microhistory can also be used, as is the case here, not as an alternative to macro-history, but as a complementary approach giving a better access to the inherent complexity of social phenomena. Experience shows that the social historian's perception of his object of study changes drastically when he narrows down his scale of observation, because of the rich variety of individual modulations of his general narrative which this brings him to discover.³ The colonial sources on which the present paper is based unfortunately do not provide a truly micro-scale picture of the adivasi protest movement under study, but they do nevertheless enable one to reconstruct the course of events at the level of the zamindari over a decade, and to follow the individual trajectory of its main

¹ On the general problem, see in particular C. Bates, "Congress and the Tribals", in M. Sheppardson & C. Simmons (eds.), *The Indian National Congress and the Political Economy of India, 1885-1985*, Aldershot, 1988, and the various contributions relating to the adivasi question and adivasi movements published in the *Subaltern Studies* series, several of which are quoted below.

² Cf. G. Levi, "On Microhistory", in P. Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Oxford, 1992.

³ See J. Revel (ed.), *Jeux d'échelles. La micro-analyse à l'expérience*, Paris, 1996.

educated leader. This is rare enough to attract the historian's attention and give him hope of interesting conclusions.

The setting

The zamindari of Dondi-Lohara in the Durg district of the Central Provinces was situated in the belt of broken jungle and hill surrounding the plain of Chhattisgarh, and, like most of the twenty zamindaris of the area in the Raipur and Durg districts, was a stronghold of the adivasi communities. This area of rocky hills and jungle was very backward and undeveloped on account of its remoteness, inaccessibility and unhealthy climate, of the presence of extensive and dense forests and of the depredations of wild animals. Communications there were extremely bad. There were no metalled roads and no railway passed through any of these zamindaris. The average rainfall was however copious and well-suited to rice cultivation in the lowlands. The forests contained no large timber but were nevertheless valuable and a major source of income for the zamindars. The Dondi-Lohara zamindari was a fair-sized estate of 136 villages in the south of the Durg district. It was the second largest of the Durg zamindaris, and that which paid the highest amount of land revenue. Its area was 280 sq. miles, of which one third was under cultivation and more than half under timber or grass (36% of the zamindari was high forest and 16% was scrub jungle or grass). It included two stretches of fertile open country containing a few dozen villages each, one in the north-east corner and the other in the extreme south, where the headquarters, Dondi khas, was situated. In the upland villages, soils were poor and cultivation was scattered amidst large areas of jungle. The zamindari was crossed from north to south by the Nandgaon-Antagarh road, and there were several cross roads leading to Balod, the tahsil headquarters, which were convenient for the extraction of forest produce. All these roads were unmetalled. The population of the estate was about 30,000 in 1921. The tenants of the zamindar were mostly adivasis, mainly Gonds and Halbas. The zamindar himself was a Gond (like most zamindars of the region). The estate contained some valuable forest. Young teak abounded everywhere and had a very large sale. Deforestation, however, aggravated the propensity of the area to famine when the monsoon was deficient. The estate exported its production of timber, bamboos, grass and minor forest produce to Rajnandgaon, where it was sold direct by the zamindar's agent to big wholesale buyers who supplied the demand of the thickly populated plain areas of Chhattisgarh. Market transactions were little monetized at the local level, paddy being a recognized medium of exchange, and barter was often resorted to by the dealers in jungle produce when they had to procure salt, cloth or iron from the local traders. Land in the zamindari was mostly abundant and cheap. Rents up to the beginning of the twentieth century were calculated by plough rates.

In consideration of their origin and long tenure, the Dondi-Lohara zamindars, as the other zamindari families of the area, enjoyed certain privileges, such as the right to exact "restricted" *begar* (corvee labour), inalienability and impartibility of their estates, and succession by primogeniture. The British administration did not hold them in high esteem as regards their capacities as landlords. A Settlement Officer wrote in 1922 in characteristic colonial style: "With a few notable exceptions, they are bad administrators, giving no thought to the development or improvement of their estates and caring little for any thing beyond their own pleasures. A prevailing fault is an exaggerated idea of their own importance which leads them into aping the circumstance of the feudatory chiefs and thence into extravagance and debt. For this reason and also for incapacity and minority, most of the estates have come under the Court of Wards at some time or other during the past 30 years".⁴ The Dondi Lohara

⁴ Madhya Pradesh State Archives, Bhopal (hereafter MPSA), Survey and Settlement Department, 4-18/1922, "Forecast Report - Revision settlement of Raipur and Durg zamindaris".

zamindar, however, was considered in the 1920s to be a wealthy man who had three or four lakhs in hard cash laid by, which he had accumulated from his forest operations and by exploiting his tenants. He had evicted almost all his *thikedars* (village headmen holding farming leases under the old *gaontiyahi* system of Chhattisgarh) to prevent them from acquiring the status of protected village headmen at the next settlement (1923) under section 115 of the new Land Revenue Act, and had taken their villages under *kham* (direct) management. Most cultivators were adivasis practicing rather unsophisticated methods of agriculture. Rice was sown broadcast, rarely transplanted, and it was not always weeded. Irrigation was negligible, and yields were low.

As regards forest exploitation, the Dondi-Lohara zamindar would have nothing to do with any contractor and managed everything directly. Timber and minor forest produce were collected by his tenants in godowns at Lohara and Dondi under a system which practically amounted to organized *begar* (and carted from there to Rajnandgaon).

The origin of the troubles

The troubles of the late 1930s and 1940s with which this paper is concerned originated in the Rani Saheba's⁵ decision, under the influence of her diwan, to restrict the grazing and nistar⁶ facilities formerly enjoyed by the tenants of the zamindari, which were much more liberal in actual practice than what the *wajib-ul-arz* indicated.⁷ The tenants were allowed to graze their cattle free not only in their own village but also in adjoining villages in the open season, and not merely in the cultivated area but also in the waste. No distinction was actually made between the agricultural and non-agricultural cattle (while free grazing in the *wajib-ul-arz* was recognized only for the former). As regards nistar, the people were similarly allowed to collect the forest produce they needed (particularly timber for building and repairing houses and cattle-sheds, wood for making agricultural implements, firewood, bamboos for roofing, fencing and making implements, and thatching grass) not only in their own villages and during the open period (i.e. from mid-April to mid-June), but throughout the year and in the entire neighbourhood.

In 1937, as a result of the political work done by the Congress in the area during the campaign for the Provincial Assembly elections, the tenants began to awaken to their rights and came to realise that certain practices which were prevalent in the zamindari were illegal, such as requisitions of corvee labour,⁸ supply of ghee at half the market rate to the zamindarin, and *chhawa* grazing, i.e. grazing of the zamindarin's bullocks in the fields of her tenants even when crops were standing. These practices were justified by the diwan on the ground that the tenants got something over and above what they were entitled to in the *wajib-ul-arz*. But as tenants began complaining about them, he decided to confine grazing and nistar facilities strictly to the terms of the *wajib-ul-arz*. The first step he took was to charge grazing dues for sheep and goats on the ground that they could not possibly come under "agricultural

⁵ The zamindarin, Jhamit Kunwar Bai, was the junior widow of the zamindar, who had died in 1925, and she had succeeded to the estate at the death of the first widow in 1931. Shortly after, she engaged as diwan a former kanungo in the Balod tahsil office, Manaram Pande.

⁶ Nistar is the cultivator's right over the village waste in respect of forest produce required for bona fide domestic use (timber and wood, bamboos, firewood, grass, creepers, roots and leaves, thorns and fencing).

⁷ The *wajib-ul-arz* was the record of customs specifying the customary relations and mutual obligations of the zamindar and his tenants, which was drawn up at settlement.

⁸ *Begar* had ceased to be recognized at the last settlement of 1923. The Anti-Begar Act of 1938 (Act III of 1938) was however yet to be passed when *begar* became a subject of conflict in the zamindari.

cattle". He tried to restrict "agricultural cattle" to one cow, one calf, two bullocks and one she-buffalo per plough, and to charge grazing dues for extra cattle, and for all cattle grazing outside the village limits. As regards nistar, he required, among other things, that people should confine the free collection of forest produce to the limits of their own village, and that they should take all their requirements from the jungle during the two months mentioned in the wajib-ul-arz (a particularly irksome restriction for those who had no carts and were therefore obliged to bring their requirements for the whole year by head-loads, and for any cultivator who found an axle or plough broken suddenly outside the authorised period). Nistar could of course be collected at other places or periods, but against payment. In particular, rafters of seasoned wood had now to be paid for, as the wood had to be cut in June and allowed to lie in the forest for some months of the rainy season. Attempts were also made by the zamindari to carve out (unauthorized) reserves from the big tree forest areas of various villages without consulting the tenants, at the very time when the collection of nistar was being prohibited outside the village limits, and while people from the plains were allowed (on payment) grazing and nistar facilities in the forests of the estate, thus encroaching upon the supply available to the residents.⁹

As early as 1936, the Congress had recruited volunteers in various villages of the zamindari, and propaganda for swaraj had been started. Complaints against the diwan had been lodged in the Balod tahsil office and were enquired upon. Some cases of peasant turbulence and breaches of agrarian regulations were observed here and there. The first organised manifestation of discontent, however, occurred when complaints concerning the diwan's behaviour were formulated before Ravi Shankar Shukla when he visited Balod in January 1937 (Shukla, the "uncrowned king of the Mahakoshal and Chhattisgarh",¹⁰ was then president of the Provincial Congress Committee and a likely candidate to premiership if the Congress won the elections in the C.P. and Berar). Further complaints were made in March to the Deputy Commissioner of Durg. This was about the time of the elections, which were a Congress triumph (the Congress bagged 62% of the votes in the province). The Khare ministry (in which Shukla held the post of Education Minister) was formed in July. Congress in power was confronted with an all-round acceleration of popular demands and protest. But it was now in charge of the maintenance of public order, and it had its own, mostly elite and middle peasant electoral base to satisfy.

The situation in Dondi-Lohara was officially referred to the Nagpur government as early as the end of 1937. From the point of view of the administration, the zamindari was then considered as rather well run. The Rani Saheba looked to the construction of tanks and wells and ran schools at her own cost, her accounts were well kept and her rule was on the whole efficient. The new diwan was deemed competent and not tyrannical by the Commissioner of Chhattisgarh. It was felt that the agitation was fostered by people who had personal axes to grind, i.e. dismissed employees of the zamindari and a strong party of co-widows and other relations and hangers-on of the late zamindar, who were bitterly opposed to the diwan because he did not allow them to have a hand in the administration. They found the sudden rise of this Manaram Pande, formerly an ordinary tahsil clerk in Balod living on a small pay, a bit hard to swallow, and would do anything to oust him. As the rani was in *parda*, the management of the zamindari almost entirely rested with him. He had gradually gained her confidence, and there were now persistent rumours of their intimacy. The fact that he had stopped various malpractices which caused a drain on the treasury, that he had got two office clerks convicted

⁹ Government of the Central Provinces and Berar, Survey and Settlement Department, *Grazing and Nistar in the Central Provinces Estates: the Report of an Enquiry*, by H.S. Kamath, Nagpur, 1941, ch. 6-8, 22.

¹⁰ S.C. Varma, *Pandit Ravi Shankar Shukla: Life and Times*, New Delhi, 1991, p. 90.

and jailed for embezzlement, and that he was rather foul-tempered, of course helped to antagonize many people against him. But the current allegations that he was making money for himself by exploiting his position and that the zamindari was squandering money on extravagant expenditure did not seem to the Deputy Commissioner (as far as his information went) to be genuine.¹¹

Things, however, began to take a more serious and political turn at the beginning of 1938. Around the time when "Independence Day" was celebrated on 26 January in all the towns of the district, large meetings of tenants were held in the zamindari to protest against the highhanded administration of the diwan. These meetings began with the flag salutation (*jhanda bandan*) ceremony, and were attended by Congress MLAs. The front-rank organizers were two young Agarwal brothers from Balod (Sarju Prasad and Narsingh Prasad), both of them lawyers, and a handful of local Congress volunteers. The guest MLAs in their speeches militated in favour of appeasement, but went apparently unheeded. Civil disobedience on the lines of the Bardoli satyagraha (i.e. involving mass emigration of the peasantry) was advocated by Sarju Prasad and others. The Deputy Commissioner at once met the "responsible" Congress leaders of Durg, who undertook to set matters right by touring in the southern zamindaris and advising people to pay up their dues and obey the *wajib-ul-arz*. This they did in February.¹²

The leaders

Sarju Prasad had just passed his LL.B. and joined the Balod bar a few months earlier. He had practically no practice as yet. He and his brother owned a village jointly in Durg tahsil. He had plunged into politics and was now the president of the Sanjari-Balod Tahsil Congress Committee, and Joint Secretary of the Durg District Congress Committee. His elder brother Narsingh Prasad, also a pleader at Balod, had already been convicted and sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment in 1930 for delivering a speech in which he exhorted his audience to break Government and especially forest laws. He was again sentenced to six months' imprisonment in 1932 for directing picketing of excise and other shops and abetting the molestation by congress volunteers of persons who wanted to purchase foreign goods; then again in 1936 (one year's simple imprisonment) for seditious speeches delivered the preceding year.¹³ He had resigned from the bar in 1932.

There were other "agitators" at work, either true or self-styled Congress volunteers residing in the villages of the zamindari, but they failed to make much impression on the local people or were not trusted by them. As long as the propaganda work had been left to them, nothing much had happened. It was when Sarju Prasad appeared and took up their cause, touring in the zamindari, addressing gatherings of tenants and spreading allegations of oppression and tyranny, that fears of mass agitation began to rise. The Congress leaders of Durg (R.K. Jha, a lawyer, president of the District Congress Committee, and G.S. Gupta, MLA), when questioned by the Deputy Commissioner, at once disclaimed any responsibility in the troubles, and ascribed them to the inexperience and eagerness of Sarju Prasad, whom they promised to admonish and recall to his senses. There were however other local Congressites

¹¹ MPSA, Political and Military Confidential Department (hereafter PMC), 26/1938: "Agitation in the Dondi-Lohara and Panabaras zamindaris of the Drug District".

¹² *Ibid.*, Fortnightly Confidential Report for fortnight ending 10 Feb. 1938, Drug District.

¹³ Government of the Central Provinces and Berar, *A Compilation of Important Political Trials in the Central Provinces and Berar*, Nagpur, revised edn., 1935, pp. 3, 16, 17, 23, 30.

(such as Wasudeo Rao Deshmukh) who were much less moderate in their views and less restrained in their speeches. It was in fact Deshmukh who advised the tenants to be ready for satyagraha and to leave the zamindari if need be to oppose the diwan and his administration. The Durg Congress was in fact deeply divided over this affair.

Some agitation related to similar questions was also going on in several of the other southern zamindaris of Durg (notably Panabaras and Khujji), but it was of comparatively minor intensity.

Heading towards a crisis

Mass meetings of tenants were held in the zamindari in February 1938. A Zamindari Mandal was set up, of which Wasudeo Deshmukh was appointed president. It was also decided to appoint two Congress volunteers in every village of the zamindari to carry on the agitation, and a kisan sabha was organised in the Dondi Station House area for the same purpose. The tenants were asked to observe a fast and hartal on 9 February (even cattle were not to be fed on that day), and again on the 23rd, in protest against the diwan's tyranny. Complaints relating to grazing, nistar and begar, which were mostly found on enquiry to be exaggerated, were pouring in at the Police Station Houses. The relations of the Rani Saheba who had been driven out from the palace at Lohara where they used to stay also took advantage of the situation to incite the people to take a bold stand against the diwan. The local authorities now feared serious agrarian trouble and laid the blame for this turn of things on "the mischief created in the name of political awakening by irresponsible so-called Congress volunteers".¹⁴

The Khare government, in consultation with the MLAs of Durg, ordered the Deputy Commissioner to announce publicly around mid-March that an official enquiry was to be conducted in the zamindari on April 19th and 20th. Written complaints were to be addressed to the DC up to April 14th. No preventive action was to be taken in the meantime against the leaders of the agitation, contrary to the line of action advocated by the SDO and DC, although the latter was explicitly given a free hand to take repressive measures in case of urgency without prior reference to the government, a disposition which was calculated to make any ringleader think twice before instigating disorders. The government thus logically postponed any strong intervention against the local radical Congress leadership, hoping that the enquiry and the fear of repression would suffice to calm people down.

A total of 124 complaints were received. Eight of these were received direct by the DC or by the Tahsildar, Balod, while the remaining 116, each bearing a multitude of signatures, were filed by the Congress on the 14th April after obtaining them on the spot from the people. The two-day enquiry was held in the Balod tahsil court premises and attracted large crowds from the zamindari area. It was conducted by the DC in the presence and with the assistance of V.Y. Tamaskar, MLA and vice-president, DCC, Durg, of K.L. Gomashta, Secretary, DCC, Durg, and of Sarju Prasad. It was agreed between them that complaints that were mere personal attacks on the diwan, or too old, or too vague and impossible to substantiate, or concerning matters which were seized of by the courts, would not be taken into consideration. It was thus found that the real grievance and the only one which required detailed examination was the restriction of the nistar rights. As has been explained, the diwan's decision in this regard had only been to strictly enforce the provisions of the wajib-ul-arz in this regard, thus withdrawing the concessions so far enjoyed by the tenants over and above these provisions on

¹⁴ MPSA, PMC, 26/1938, Report of the Sub-Divisional Officer, Balod, 24.2.1938.

account of the fact that various customs like bheth-begar, chhawa grazing, giving of grass, ghee, etc., to the zamindar, which had hitherto been prevalent, had been henceforth discontinued. The sudden enforcement of this decision by public announcement in the villages and the subsequent attempts at curtailment of nistar rights were of course impolitic and deeply upset the tenantry. The diwan's avowed enemies and the local Congress political workers had then begun to make capital out of the situation. The question whether the concessions should, after long usage, be considered to have become rights, could of course be examined. On the other hand, the requirements of the proper conservation of the valuable forests of the zamindari were also to be taken into account. The recommendations of the DC was that a working plan should be prepared for the Dondi-Lohara zamindari so as to separate clearly the reserved forests from the nistari forests; that the wajib-ul-arz should be modified wherever necessary by the DC as the law permitted upon application of the people concerned; and that the existing practice as regards nistar should be continued by the diwan until a decision was reached regarding these modifications.¹⁵ The DC's report and recommendations received the approval of the Durg Congress Committee.

The activities of Sarju Prasad then abated for several months. Meanwhile, N.G. Khare had resigned from premiership in July at the behest of the Congress Working Committee, and Pandit Ravi Shankar Shukla had been called to form the new cabinet. Sarju Prasad wrote to him in September to complain that nothing had happened since the enquiry hurriedly held in April, that doubt and discontent were increasing among the people, and that the whole affair amounted to a breach of faith. While he and other militants, he went on to say, refrained from carrying out any further activity among the tenants according to the wish of the Congress authorities, volunteers who had sympathised with their cause were being prosecuted by the government, and rent suits and other vexatious proceedings were being initiated by the zamindari against its tenants. He consequently threatened to leave the Congress fold and follow his conscience, which urged him to revert to action in defence of the oppressed, exposing himself to persecution in the interest of the suffering humanity as Socrates and Galileo had done in their time.¹⁶

As early as August, in fact, Sarju Prasad had revived the agitation in the zamindari. He now held public meetings in which he delivered violent speeches. He practiced intimidation against patwaris who recorded encroachments of agricultural land by tenants, and against the Excise Sub-Inspector of Balod when he put up some cases for illicit sale of liquor, and warned them of possible reprisals by Congress authorities. The disaffected peasantry was drifting into open opposition. The residents of certain villages grazed their cattle in large numbers in the closed forests of the zamindari. The tenants were beginning to oppose the payment of various legal dues. Ravi Shankar Shukla, who was in direct contact with the Congress leaders of Chhattisgarh, summoned Sarju Prasad and the diwan for an interview early in November. The government then thought that the agitation would soon subside.¹⁷ But in fact, nothing was settled. Sarju Prasad held a new meeting attended by about 1,500 persons at Dondi-Lohara on the 16th November, in which he gave an ultimatum to the zamindarin to redress the tenants' grievances within a month, failing which the tenants would rise and fight it out. He called the people to prepare themselves for the last struggle and be ready to sacrifice their lives, invoking the example of Bhagat Singh. And he invited them to a meeting to be held at

¹⁵ MPSA, PMC, 194/1939, Report by the DC, Durg, 12.9.1938.

¹⁶ MPSA, PMC, 25/1939, S.P. Agarwala, Pleader, Balod, to Pt. Ravi Shanker Shukla, Premier, C.P., 26.9.1938.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Chief Secretary, Government of C.P. and Berar, to Commissioner, Chhattisgarh, no. 429-394/Conf., 3.11.38.

Kusumkasa on December 12th where he would give them his final advice. A few days earlier, he had sent notice to the zamindarin, styling himself as "one of the representative of the tenants of the Dondi-Lohara zamindari", that if no satisfactory answer had been given to the tenants' grievances by December 11th, they would feel free to resort to any legitimate and peaceful methods they deemed fit to remedy the wrongs that were perpetrated against them.¹⁸ The Congress leaders of Durg thereafter confessed to the DC that Sarju Prasad was a puzzle to them and that they did not quite know what to do with him. The DC was of opinion that they were in fact embarrassed because the younger and more radical element in the local Congress was rather sympathetic to his combative stand, and they ran the risk of being destabilized. They soon entered into separate negotiations with the diwan, so as to cut the ground under Sarju Prasad's feet and try to reach a compromise.

The latter's next step was to call a Tahsil Political Conference at Balod on the 25th November on his own, and to invite some politicians from Jabalpur and Nagpur who had been expelled from the Congress to attend it. The leaders of the Durg DCC took steps to cancel the invitation and attended the meeting themselves. Sarju Prasad gave a speech in his usual strain, running down government servants and the employees of the diwan alike, and announcing his intention to start a mass forest satyagraha on the 11th December at Kusumkasa. The Congress leaders (R.K. Jha and V.Y. Tamaskar) then took the floor and condemned unambiguously Sarju Prasad and his hasty and ill-considered actions. Shortly after, Sarju Prasad tendered his resignation from the Joint Secretaryship of the District Congress Committee. Both the DC and the Commissioner had repeatedly advocated repressive measures against him, but the Congress government had until then refused to take action, saying that the matter could still be settled in a spirit of conciliation. Yet when Ravi Shankar Shukla visited Durg on the 1st December, he discussed the Dondi Lohara question in detail with the DC and then spoke to the Congress leaders, telling them clearly that he would have to yield to official pressure and prosecute Sarju Prasad if they were not able to call off the satyagraha and to prevent him from making provocative speeches. He authorised the DC to take such action as he might deem fit if emergency arose. The DC arranged to tour in the southern zamindaris in tents from the 6th to the 22nd December with a view to ascertain the wishes of the villagers and try to bring about an amicable settlement of the zamindari dispute. Meanwhile, the compromise talks between the diwan and the Congress leaders of Durg broke down, mainly because of the zamindarin's decision not to accept a reasonable *via media*.¹⁹

Such was the situation when the Kusumkasa meeting took place on 11th December 1938. Some Congress leaders of Durg had decided to attend the meeting and make speeches to counteract any undesirable initiative of Sarju Prasad. The latter was brought by the villagers in procession to the pandal with national songs. The Congress leaders (including, G.S. Gupta, MLA, R.K. Jha, etc.) at once took him aside and discussed with him for about one hour. The meeting then commenced with national songs and *jais*. Sarju Prasad took the floor and said that the Congress leaders sympathised with the tenants only when this served their own interests, that the tenants were still groaning under oppression although the Congress was now in office, and that those who went on fighting faithfully for their rights were persecuted. He informed the audience that he had resigned from the Tahsil Congress Secretaryship, but that he remained an ordinary Congress member and was willing to go on serving the Congress wholeheartedly. Yet he was not prepared to tolerate the weakness of the Congress, but preferred to act in his own way, however dangerous, knowing that success can be achieved only by sacrifice. The people should either leave their fate in the hands of the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Copy of notice dated 9.11.1938 given by Mr. S.P. Agarwal to the Rani Sahiba of Dondi Lohara.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, R.K. Jha, President, DCC, Durg, to Hon'ble Pandit R.S. Shukla, Prime Minister, CP & Berar, 7.12.1938.

Congress or follow him. The speakers who followed criticised Sarju Prasad heavily, and G.S. Gupta carried the audience with him by showing that the tenants had no chance to solve their problems unless with the approbation and help of the Congress. Sarju Prasad returned from the meeting crestfallen. No forest satyagraha was on the agenda any more for the moment.

In January 1939, Ravi Shankar Shukla had an Arbitration Committee appointed, which consisted in the DC, a representative of the zamindarin and another nominated by the tenants. The nominee of the Rani Saheba was an advocate and the DCC elected its president R.K. Jha as representative of the tenants. The negotiations broke down on 28 February mainly on the question of allowing free nistar to the 30 villages of the zamindari which had little or no forests of their own, while an agreement had been reached on all the other points (in particular, the zamindarin had agreed to allow nistar all the year round in the villages which had forests, and that grazing was allowed everywhere in the zamindari except in reserved forests, although a limit was placed on the number of cattle to be grazed free by each agriculturist). The Rani remained adamant as she refused to give up more than the other zamindaris were required to give up, and went back on matters which had been agreed upon, refusing from then on to take any part in the Arbitration Committee. She thus appeared to have been merely gaining time and taking advantage of the lull in the agitation, forgetting that this pause was largely due to the fact that the Congress had suspended all propaganda in the zamindari in order to help the successful termination of the negotiation, and that Sarju Prasad had been eliminated from the picture by the Congress leaders on purpose. The latter was always liable to get back into action, and the threat of a satyagraha had not disappeared.²⁰

The forest satyagrahas

The Commissioner of Chhattisgarh recommended that an officer with the powers of a settlement officer should be appointed to revise the *wajib-ul-arzes* of all the zamindaris, as the present versions were everywhere vague and capable of different interpretations, and the zamindarin of Dondi-Lohara would not mind giving up certain rights provided similar treatment was enforced in other zamindaris as well. Moreover troubles were also going on in regard to the same questions (nistar, grazing, etc.) not only in the other southern zamindaris of Durg but in certain zamindaris of Raipur (Phuljar, Kauria) and Bilaspur (Pendra) districts. The Commissioner's recommendation was viewed with favour by the government. Meanwhile, Sarju Prasad went on a hunger strike (April 1939), and he wrote on 2 May to Ravi Shankar Shukla that he would discourage all attempts at a forest satyagraha on the part of the tenants.

Nevertheless, a mass forest satyagraha occurred in the whole zamindari on the 7, 8 and 9 May, in the course of which trees were illegally cut and removed. Sarju Prasad and the other leaders were arrested. Court proceedings were to be started against them on 25 June, and the verdict was given on 13 October: Sarju Prasad and Wali Mohammad (a resident of Dondi) were condemned to 9 months rigorous imprisonment. Shortly after the event, the Durg Congress issued a notice written in hindi which was distributed in the villages of the zamindari around 20 May. In the leaflet, the Congress leaders reminded their "kisan brothers" that there was a Congress ministry in the province, that cutting the forests in the name of satyagraha was contrary to the teaching and principles of Mahatma Gandhi, and that such actions only put the Congress government in an embarrassing position. It warned the tenants that they should not commit punishable offenses at the behest of people like Sarju Prasad who did not care for the Congress, as the Congress would then be unable to do anything to relieve

²⁰ MPSA, PMC, 194/1939, DC, Durg, to Commissioner, Chhattisgarh, 17.3.1939.

them from the consequences of their actions. The power of an individual, they went on to say, was nothing when compared with that of the Congress, and any unlawful acts were in any case ill-advised inasmuch as the grievances of the people could be satisfied without risk through the medium of legislation at the hands of the Congress within a few months.²¹

A meeting of more than 1,000 persons of Lohara and surrounding villages was held in Lohara on 1st July. The crowd marched in procession across the countryside with a country music band and national flags, singing national songs, shouting *jais* of Mahatmaji and of Sarju Prasad and other arrested persons, and decrying Manaram Pande. The leaders of the Durg DCC were present in Lohara since the day before, impressing on the local ringleaders that the Congress was already considering their cause and about to remove the wrongs against which they were protesting, and that they should abide by the law. The Congressites had announced their intention to hold a meeting just after the procession, and awaited its arrival in an open place near the school. But the processionists refused to attend it and decided to assemble at the other end of the town. The Congress leaders had to run up to their place of meeting and explain that their object was not to plead the diwan's cause but to decide upon the best way to get Sarju Prasad and the other arrested persons acquitted. R.K. Jha's speech, however, was disturbed by the constant chitchat of the audience and finally interrupted by beats of drums. V.Y. Tamaskar, by shouting *jais* of Mahatmaji and Sarju Prasad, regained control of the crowd with difficulty, and explained that the forest satyagraha was against the will of the Congress and Mahatmaji, showered praise upon Sarju Prasad while insulting Manaram Pande, and asked the audience whether they were with the Congress. A few people answered positively but the majority of the audience remained silent. Krishna Halba, Laximan Lohar, Sobha Chamar and others who spoke after him and criticised his mocking and authoritarian tone on the contrary drew immediate support. It was decided that some of the people present would go to Durg in a few days to consult Sarju Prasad, and that another meeting would then be held at Lohara or close by to decide about a line of action. The crowd toyed with the idea of inflicting social boycott on the zamindarin's servants, but eventually dropped it.

At the following meeting at Kusumkasa on 12 July, Narsingh Prasad gave a violent speech in which he exhorted the crowd to swear to take revenge on the diwan, and to cut trees and bamboos freely (he was to be arrested and condemned on 25 August to nine months of rigorous imprisonment for this speech). The speeches of the Congress leaders present at the meeting proved ineffective in calming the audience down. The situation in the zamindari was worsening day by day. Even the payment of legal and customary dues was being refused by the tenants. A new meeting was held on 19 July at Lohara. Narsingh Prasad mounted a horse three furlongs from the place of the meeting, was profusely garlanded and brought in procession round the *basti*. The processionists shouted *jais* of Gandhi, Sarju Prasad and Narsingh Prasad and sang national songs throughout. The street was decorated with flags over a furlong in Narsingh Prasad's honour. The Congress leaders from Durg arrived when he was reaching the pandal. Prasad exhorted the people to make the diwan's stay in the zamindari impossible by boycotting him socially, and that panchayats should meet in every village for this purpose. If the Rani Sahiba tried to assist the diwan, she should be treated in the same manner. Satyagraha would have to be performed, though without violence. The Congress leaders then spoke to say that Narsingh Prasad's exhortations were unreasonable and that whoever followed them had no right to display the Congress flag or to use the name of Gandhi. Their speeches were frequently disturbed or interrupted by contradictors. At Dondi

²¹ MPSA, PMC, 25/1939, "Warning to the kisans of Dondi Lohara", signed by R.K. Jha, V.Y. Tamaskar, K.L. Gomashtha, etc.

on 26 July, Narsingh Prasad urged the tenants to action, saying that their grievances would not be removed unless at least 200 among them followed the path of Sarju Prasad and exposed themselves to imprisonment. Even the Mahatma, he said, would come running to help them if this happened. He was inviting them to boycott the diwan and collect freely their nistar as they used to formerly, when the Durg Congress leaders arrived. They took the same legalistic stand as before, advising the tenantry not to press for the removal of Manaram Pande without putting up a proper case against him, and announced that a bill likely to fulfil their claims about nistar would be introduced during the coming session - this amid constant disturbances and interruptions.

Two days later, illegal bamboo cutting started simultaneously at different points in the zamindari. The Sub-Inspector, Dondi, arrested 11 ringleaders, but a menacing crowd gathered outside the Police Station House, and the Sub Inspector called Durg asking for an additional force to escort those he had arrested. The DC proceeded immediately to Dondi with a lorry and a dozen constables. When he reached the place at night, the crowd had, with considerable difficulty, been persuaded to disperse. Bamboo-cutting without a pass and payment being expressly prohibited by the wajib-ul-arz, there could be no doubt that the cutting had been done with the deliberate intention of courting arrest as Narsingh Prasad had exhorted his audience to do on the 26th, and that the people who had gathered in front of the Station House also wanted to be arrested with them. The 11 ringleaders were expeditiously tried on the following day by the Tahsildar, and further arrests were made in other villages where illegal bamboo cuttings were about to begin, with mobs trying to prevent the police from leaving with the arrested persons. The authorities suspected that Narsingh Prasad (who had been released on bail) was going from place to place in the zamindari inciting people secretly to commit satyagraha and flood the jails. A small police reinforcement of 24 men sent by the Commissioner of Chhattisgarh was stationed at Dondi and Lohara for a week with orders to move about in the villages. Another cutting was however reported on 31 July. But the situation in the Dondi area (where the agitation of the previous days was entirely confined) was thereafter quiet, most probably as a result of the repressive action taken by the local authorities.

A meeting, which attracted an audience of about 2,500 persons was held on 9 August in Lohara. It was presided by Krishna Halba and one of the three speakers was also a Halba (Ramsingh Halba). Krishna Halba, who was being prosecuted as one of the ringleaders of the satyagraha launched in May, appeared to be the leader in the absence of Sarju and Narsingh Prasad. The removal of the diwan remained the foremost demand of the speakers, but it was also proclaimed that the tenants of the zamindari were willing to form a panchayat which would assume the responsibility of the management of the estate. The panchayat would meet once a month in the presence of the Rani Sahiba. The agitation was to be pursued at all cost, and no compromise with the zamindarin could be envisaged as long as those who had gone on pilgrimage (i.e. had been sentenced to jail) were not released. Yet the leaders had earlier wished the Rani to attend personally a meeting of her tenants, and had filed a petition with the Deputy Commissioner to this effect. This had been refused as incompatible with the rules of *parda*, but the Rani declared that she would agree to receive a deputation of ten or twenty tenants. Her offer was discussed during the meeting. The tenants eventually refused, on the plea that there were no leaders amongst them.

New cases of illegal bamboo cutting on the part of individual persons occurred during the first days of August. In a secret meeting held on the 9th, the tenants of the Dondi area

expressed their willingness to go on with the forest satyagraha, provided the tenants of the Lohara side now took the lead, as a number of persons from their side had already courted arrest and gone to jail. The people from Lohara agreed, and incessant propaganda was carried on in the villages. Meanwhile, the day of Narsingh Prasad's trial at Durg arrived (14 August). The accused made a statement in which he said: "The present regime of the Congress people is more dogmatic, bureaucratic and imperialistic than the foreign machinery which they mean to fight, because it has fallen short of the ideals it stands for. The ministers and MLAs are bent on applying the present reactionary Constitution instead of breaking it. If they really mean to be the true representatives of the people (...) there is no alternative for them but to vacate their seats". Besides him, 63 persons in all were being or had been tried (among whom a number of Gonds and Halbas). Most of the accused were sentenced to six month's rigorous imprisonment (nine months in the case of Narsingh Prasad) and fines of 10 to 50 Rs.

Further occurrences of satyagraha performed by batches of villagers took place during the last days of August. Thirteen ringleaders were arrested and put up for trial at once at Lohara before the Tahsildar, who had proceeded there to take up the cases on the spot. They were imprisoned forthwith in the Raipur Jail. Among them was Krishna Halba, who had played a leading part, in association with other leaders, in secretly inciting the tenants to action during small private sittings (*baithak*) where they were told that Narsingh Prasad had suffered incarceration for their cause and that it was now up to them to fill in the jails. The agitation thereafter subsided, though the situation remained tense for some time. The continuous rain damped the enthusiasm of many people, and most cultivators were busy weeding their fields. Above all, the prosecution of dozens of ringleaders at a time when the Congress was in office, and when no alternative structure of organized radical leadership could be relied upon, had obviously frightened the people, and had brought them to realize that they were fighting for a lost cause.²²

Epilogue

All the people convicted in connection with the satyagraha were let off in October, shortly before the Congress ministries resigned.

In March 1940, Sarju Prasad was again reported to be trying to work up agitation, and showing his usual bitter personal animosity against the diwan as well as his antipathy to both the Durg Congress Committee and the Government. At a meeting held at Lohara on the 13th, after the flag salutation ceremony, he began to speak before a meagre audience of 150 persons, reiterating his usual attacks against the diwan and the District Congress Committee of Durg, and saying that the tenants, in spite of all that had happened, were still subjected to intolerable oppression, and that neither the government nor the Congress did anything to redress their wrongs. He read a resolution addressed to the Provincial Congress Committee. It expressed the tenants' regret at the policy of silence of the government and Congress, and a vote of non-confidence against Ghanshyam Singh Gupta, the Congress MLA of the constituency. And it requested the PCC to accord sanction for satyagraha. In defense of this resolution, Sarju said

²² The two preceding pages are based on the reports collected in MPSA, PMC, 214/1939.

that everyone had faith in the Congress, but that no one could rely on the DCC. He expected the tenants to court arrest by hundreds or thousands.

Another meeting was held at Dondi four days later. "Vakil Sahib" was brought in a small procession from the house where he was staying to the place of the meeting with drum and harmonium and *jais*, after which *jhanda bandan* was performed. About 300 villagers were present. Sarju Prasad told them that the sound of drums and the *gulal*²³ on his forehead must be reminding them of the coming Holi festival, but that they would soon have to celebrate Holi with their own blood if they wanted to get rid of the diwan's oppression. The diwan and his team of "big rats" were preying on the zamindari treasury and exploiting the tenantry without the knowledge of the Rani Sahiba. The big Congress leaders who had come to Durg with their caps on to settle the trouble, while calling him a rebel and a traitor, had failed miserably, and were now fighting among themselves like cats and dogs. G.S. Gupta, after taking the votes of the people, was now deceiving them. There was no question of leaving the Congress, which everyone respected as before. Yet the tenants had no choice left but to take their fate in their own hands and offer satyagraha, in conformity with Mahatma Gandhi's teachings. The same resolution as in Lohara was then read and passed, although the audience, the reporting police officer said, was apparently quite unable to make out what it meant.²⁴

Six months earlier, in October 1939, the government had announced officially that an ICS officer, H.S. Kamath, was being placed on special duty to carry out an enquiry in 17 zamindaris of the Central Provinces (including Dondi-Lohara) where tension and ill-feeling was growing between the zamindars and their tenants on the subject of grazing and nistar in the waste lands. The result was the Kamath Report, published in 1941,²⁵ which was favourable to the tenants, but to which no practical effect was given during the war years that followed. The entire agitation, however, had by then subsided, partly at least as a result of the wartime law and order legislation (Defence of India rules). In Dondi-Lohara, it started again briefly in 1942 in the wake of the Quit India Movement. A forest satyagraha was launched on the 31st August with 300 persons, and similar cases of illegal cutting of bamboos, felling of trees and removal of forest produce were repeated at various places in the zamindari during a large part of September. Satyagrahis were arrested and whipped. Sarju Prasad was eventually arrested in Balod on October 3rd on the charge of secretly organizing the satyagraha.²⁶

At the end of the war, Sarju Prasad appeared as ready as ever to take up arms against the diwan on behalf of the tenants. He raked up the whole matter afresh in 1946.²⁷ A Congress government headed by Ravi Shankar Shukla was again in office in the Central Provinces since April 27th. Sarju held meeting after meeting in Dondi and Lohara from October onwards, complaining of the highhandedness of the officials of the zamindari, instigating the

²³ The red powder which people throw on each other during the Holi festival.

²⁴ MPSA, PMC, 84/1940.

²⁵ Govt. of the Central Provinces and Berar, Survey and Settlement Department, *Grazing and Nistar in the Central Provinces Estates: The Report of an Enquiry*, by H.S. Kamath, I.C.S., Nagpur, 1941, 420 p.

²⁶ Government of the Central Provinces and Berar, *District Calendar of Events of Civil Disobedience Movement - August-October 1942*, Nagpur, 1942, pp. 72-3, 73A, 73B.

²⁷ 1946, it should be recalled, besides being an electoral year, was a time when localized but very militant mass agitation erupted in various parts of the country independently of the Congress and not unfrequently against its explicit will, notably the Tebhaga movement, the beginning of the Telengana insurrection, the Punnapra-Vayalar uprising, etc., not to speak of the many militant movements for democratisation and integration which developed in the princely states. On the political context of the time, see S. Kuwajima, *Muslims, Nationalism and the Partition: 1946 Provincial Elections in India*, New Delhi, 1998.

public to disobey their demands, criticising the inertia of the Congress government regarding the tenants' grievances, and asking the people to be ready for satyagraha.²⁸ When it became clear that the zamindari was again faced with the threat of forest satyagraha, the Deputy Commissioner had long talks with Sarju Prasad, impressing upon him that the principle of zamindari abolition had been accepted, and that he ought not to embarrass the Congress ministry, which was beset by more important problems arising out of the transfer of power and reconstruction. Sarju Prasad, however, remained unmoved. "He is adamant", the D.C. wrote, "and gives me the impression of being slightly unbalanced in his reactions to any subject relating to the Dondi-Lohara zamindari, as he has made himself believe that this is a sacred and holy undertaking, and also that the Hon'ble Prime Minister is his deadly enemy and will do nothing to help him. He says that he is committed to Satyagraha and will carry it out happen what may".²⁹

While touring the zamindari, the D.C. was constantly approached by tenants who spoke of nothing else except action against the diwan for curtailing their forest nistar rights. He gathered the impression that the tenants had been worked up to a high pitch by the speeches of the Durg Congress leaders about the abolition of zamindari, and that Sarju Prasad enjoyed a great deal influence among them. Incidents such as illegal cutting of bamboos, thefts of firewood and jungle produce, non-payment of market dues, etc., were occurring sporadically. There was active propaganda inciting the people not to work for the zamindarin and her officials even on payment. Sarju himself confirmed to the DC that preparations were being made for the launching of forest satyagraha in April-May (i.e. the period when the collection of nistar was legally permitted, provided the people applied for passes from the zamindari, as this would make the collection of evidence for formal prosecution of the culprits much more difficult).

In the interest of law and order, and in view of the widespread unrest throughout the country, the DC advocated drastic preventive action: Sarju Prasad and half a dozen of his associates should be detained or extradited from the Chhattisgarh Division for three months (i.e. until the monsoon had broken, as all villagers would be busy in agricultural operations by the time they were released, and there would then be little chance of a satyagraha). In the alternative, the government might consider the early implementation of the Kamath report, or at least an announcement to that effect at an early date. The Chief Secretary to the government himself pressed for action against Sarju Prasad and two noted Congressmen of Durg (V.Y. Tamaskar, now President of the District Congress Committee, who constantly spoke on public platforms against the rapaciousness and corruption of local government officials and invited the people to refuse to cooperate with them, and K.L. Gomashta, M.L.A., who was carrying on agitation in favour of the tenants, along the same lines as Sarju Prasad, in several of the southern zamindaris of Durg, which formed part of his constituency), both leaders of a section of congressmen in the district who openly opposed the ministerial Congress group, with an eye to the vote in future elections. There was danger, the Chief Secretary said, of the whole of the Durg district going out of hand. The local adivasi population was in a state of great excitement.³⁰ But preventive repression in the climate of effervescence which immediately

²⁸ MPSA, PMC, 3/1947, Secret Memo, Special Branch, C.P. and Berar, 8.2.1947.

²⁹ MPSA, PMC, 73/1947, D.C., Durg, to Commissioner, Chhattisgarh, No. 55, 25.2.1947.

³⁰ The circle Inspector of Police, Balod, reporting on an incident which broke out in January at Manpur, in K.L. Gomashta's area of operation, following the confiscation of fighting cocks by the police, remarked that "there is no doubt that the behaviour of the Gonds was very provocative, and they were bent upon picking a quarrel with us (...). The situation is being very bad". As regards Dondi-Lohara, the DC, in his letter of 25 February, spoke of "an explosive situation".

preceded the accession of the country to Independence would of course have been short-sighted policy. Ravi Shankar Shukla's answer, in an office note dated 12 July 1947, was as brief as it was scornful of the dreams, ambitions and rancours of petty politicians in remote "jungly" areas: "No action is called for. They have none reconciled to their fate".³¹

Conclusions

The major difficulty with the archival material on which this narrative is based is of course that it consists almost exclusively of governmental and police sources. It gives no direct information about the tribals' own view of the situation in Dondi-Lohara, or about their experience of the agitation. It only provides us with strings of more or less connected facts regarding the form and extent of their involvement in the militant actions organised by the local leaders, from which we are left to make out what their consciousness and idiom of resistance may have been. Our understanding of the behaviour and objectives of the Congress and other educated leaders is better, as we have detailed reports of their speeches and declarations, as well as accounts of their occasional interviews with the local officials. The aspect of the episode on which we are best informed is that with which we are the least concerned, namely the view of the troubles entertained by the governmental and local authorities, the reasons which lead them to consider or ignore the grievances of the people, and the policy which they follow to allay or quell the popular discontent.³²

In spite of these limitations, which only the collection of oral evidence on the spot could partly help to overcome, some important conclusions can be reached regarding the relationship between Congress nationalism and adivasi protest. Generally speaking, the Congress did not show much concern for the 'tribes' of India and their problems until well into the 1930s, besides the organisation of forest satyagrahas during the non-cooperation and civil disobedience campaigns of the early 1920s and 1930s, and its involvement in tribal and particularly forest movements was as a rule limited, partly on account of the socially explosive character of the issues at stake.³³ As regards the Central Provinces, urban leaders had instigated forest disturbances in several districts in the early 1920s, notably in the southern Sihawa circle of Raipur district (where Ravi Shankar Shukla and the Congress leadership of the district soon had to struggle hard to bring the agitation under control), and among the adivasis in certain parts of Betul and Mandla districts. Forest agitations again broke out in the province on a much larger scale in 1930 with the active participation of the Congress, but there is reason to believe that the Congress leaders' design was not only to strike at the government, but to forestall an autonomous and possibly violent upsurge of the adivasis.³⁴ In Dondi-Lohara as in all predominantly adivasi areas of the province, the people were extremely sensitive to all attempts at restraining their access to natural and especially forest resources, and it cannot be doubted that the grievances and discontent of the tenantry regarding the curtailment of its grazing and nistar rights preceded the coming of Congress political workers in the zamindari. Yet the rise of Congress activism in the area from 1936, the electoral campaign of 1937, the propaganda work done by Congress volunteers and the

³¹ MPSA, PMC, 73/1947.

³² See Ranajit Guha's well-known critique of what he calls the elitist 'discourse of counter-insurgency' in his *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, Delhi, 1983, pp. 14-17.

³³ See for instance R. Guha, "Savaging the Civilised: Verrier Elwin and the Tribal Question in Late Colonial India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31(35-37), Special No. Sept. 1996, pp. 2375-6. S. Sarkar, 'Popular Movements and 'Middle-Class' Leadership in Late Colonial India: Perspectives and Problems of a "History from Below"', Calcutta, 1983, p. 53.

³⁴ D. Baker, "'A Serious Time': Forest Satyagraha in Madhya Pradesh, 1930", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 21(1), 1984, p. 75.

meetings they organised in the villages, clearly generated for the first time a feeling that help was forthcoming from the outside and that change was possible.³⁵ Moreover, the tenants were made to realize that various types of exactions which they had been accustomed to obey without discussion were actually against the law and could be contested. At this early stage, however, it was the Congress who took the initiatives, using the techniques and resources of modern political activism, such as petitioning, staging rallies and demonstrations of tenants, and lodging complaints with the authorities so as to have enquiries made by local officials.

Once the Congress was in office, however, it soon became obvious that the educated leadership which had taken up the cause of the adivasi tenants of Dondi-Lohara since 1936 was less homogeneous than could have been supposed. The Congress ministry, now confronted with the responsibilities of power, was logically driven to consider all militant protest movements first of all from the perspective of law and order.³⁶ It tended to follow a policy of minimal concessions, while operating the network of party connections at its disposal to put pressure on the local activists so as to curtail their initiatives and defuse the tensions. As regards Dondi-Lohara, the main source of trouble for the Congress was a small intermediary leadership resident of the Balod area, headed by the Agarwal brothers (Sarju Prasad and Narsingh Prasad) and a few other educated radicals, and assisted by a number of the young and militant "volunteers" recruited by the Congress in the villages of the zamindari for the purposes of the electoral campaign. During the greater part of the decade, the local Congress authorities, i.e. the leaders of the Durg Congress Committee and the MLAs elected from the Durg constituencies, straddled uneasily between the government, which pressed them to intervene, and the radicals among their ranks, whom they were reluctant to alienate, as this might weaken their support base and undermine their own political prospects. The often eventful coexistence of reformist and radical groups within the Congress was of course nothing new, as has been shown for instance by Gyanendra Pandey in the case of Kalka Prasad, an anti-zamindar activist of Rae Bareilly district whose protest movement fizzled out in 1931 because it was disowned by the Congress establishment.³⁷ On the other hand, the Congress in office could take advantage of the fact that some sections among its membership were critical of the ministries or even openly opposed them, as this was likely to keep alive the image of the party as a fighting force.³⁸ It is not by accident that the Congress government, on the eve of its resignation, ordered all the men who had been convicted for their participation in the satyagraha to be released. Thus it is easy to understand why the C.P. Congress appeared to be bent on seeking a compromise with Sarju Prasad and never took firm action to put a final end to his militant endeavours. Sarju Prasad himself, on his part, disillusioned as he was, never took the initiative of formally breaking with the Congress although he threatened repeatedly to do so, knowing full well that such a move would be

³⁵ On the influence of Congress campaigns on the explosion of longfelt but only latent grievances in the forest areas, see for instance S. Sarkar, "Primitive Rebellion and Modern Nationalism: A Note on Forest Satyagraha in the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements", in K.N. Panikkar (ed.), *National and Left Movements in India*, New Delhi, 1980. Ramachandra Guha has denounced as "highly misleading" the use of the elite-fabricated denomination of 'forest satyagraha' to designate movements that were basically radical and autonomous lower-class upsurges born outside the orbit of the self-restrained Gandhian nationalism ("Forestry and Social Protest in British Kumaon, c. 1893-1921", in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian Studies and Society*, Delhi, 1985, p. 55). See also M. Gadgil and R. Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, Delhi, 1993, p. 179.

³⁶ Cf. V. Damodaran, *Broken Promises: Popular Protest, Indian Nationalism and the Congress Party in Bihar, 1935-1946*, Delhi, 1992, pp. 9-11, 373-4.

³⁷ G. Pandey, "A Rural Base for Congress: The United provinces 1920-40", in D.A. Low (ed.), *Congress and the Raj: Facets of the Indian Struggle 1917-47*, London, 1977.

³⁸ This hypothesis has been advanced by C. Mitra, "Images of the Congress: U.P. and Bihar in the Late Thirties and Early Forties", in D.A. Low (ed.), *The Indian National Congress: Centenary Hindsight*, Delhi, 1988.

politically suicidal, and he consistently protested his loyalty to the Congress and faithfulness to Mahatma Gandhi in spite of his bitter disagreements with the Durg Congress leaders and the Congress ministries.

The extent of Sarju Prasad's backing among the adivasi tenantry of Dondi-Lohara was obviously considerable at the time of the two Congress ministries. It dwindled to almost nothing during the intervening period, except during the Quit India disturbances and their immediate aftermath. This would seem to show that the adivasi peasants' protest movements were not purely contingent upon the intervention of the well-intentioned educated outsiders who professed to sympathize with their grievances. They acted on their own initiative, and according to their own appreciation of the chances of success of collective action. And once they had made up their mind to follow the local leaders' exhortations to resistance and satyagraha, their response was widespread and determined. Thus there was, here as elsewhere, an autonomous dynamics of mass resistance, although it cannot be denied that the educated leaders played a decisive role by giving a political articulation to the grievances of the tenants and organizing their resistance.

The experience of struggle had the effect of building up the consciousness of the tenantry and strengthening its capacity for autonomous action. It is interesting to note that an educated tribal leadership came into prominence in August 1939 after the Agarwal brothers had been arrested, and that there were then many Gonds and Halbas among the village ringleaders who performed or directed in various places public violation of nistar rules. This was also the time when the tenants declared that they were ready to take up the responsibility of the management of the zamindari, and to form a panchayat for the purpose which would meet once a month in the presence of the Rani Sahiba. When left to themselves, they appeared anxious to compromise with her. They seem to have been confident all along that she remained fundamentally well-disposed towards them, and that she was ignorant of the abuses of power committed by the diwan: she was in the hands of dishonest servants who were the cause of all their troubles, and their plight would end if they were allowed to deal with her directly (even the relations of the Rani were, it seems, prevented from seeing her by the diwan). It is true that they turned down unanimously her offer to receive ten or twenty tenant leaders on deputation, because, as they said, there were no representatives of the tenants in the zamindari, but more probably because they felt that such a move would be useless or even counter-productive as long as the diwan remained in office. The tactics they chose to follow were in any case carefully concerted, and it was with a clear knowledge of the attendant risks that they resolved to act collectively in defiance of the law. Their reaction to the suppression of the troubles by the police was equally sensible: the agitation subsided as soon as it became clear that, in spite of the fact that the government was now in Congress hands, they were fighting a lost cause. There is no evidence in the records that rumours of invincibility or messianic expectations were afloat among them, as had so often been the case during peasant and tribal upsurges at the time of the Non-Cooperation Movement. This of course may simply result from the inadequacy of the sources themselves. But it may also be due to the fact that there was no truly charismatic leader on whom the tenants could pin their hopes and faith, and that Ravi Shankar Shukla, the only towering personality involved in the affair, looked on their agitation with disfavour. One can also more plainly assume that at this late stage of the nationalist movement, with the progress of Congress organizational penetration and the incipient assimilation of the principles of modern politics, the popular appreciation of the chances of success and risks of mass agitation was becoming somewhat more realistic.

There was undoubtedly a religious dimension in the Dondi-Lohara agitation, but we have no direct evidence of this aspect of the consciousness of the tribal tenantry, apart from the deep popular respect which the Rani Sahiba continued to enjoy throughout the period of the troubles.³⁹ The police reports, on the other hand, provide us with samples of the religious rhetoric and public rituals used by Sarju Prasad and the other educated leaders in their endeavours to goad the tenants into militant action. Narsingh Prasad, in his speech of 12 July 1939, reminded his audience that Ravana, although a Brahmin (like the diwan Manaram Pande), had been killed for his tyranny. At the beginning of the agitation, the tenants were advised, in Gandhian fashion, to observe absolute fast on 9 February 1938 to record their protest against the diwan's tyranny. Mention has been made of the comparison made by Sarju Prasad between the *gulal* used during Holi and the blood of sacrifice. More generally, exhortations to sacrifice constantly recurred in the speeches of the leaders, and allusions were made to the disinterested sense of duty taught by the Gita as an ideal to be followed by the militants.⁴⁰ The activists who had been sentenced to jail were referred to as "those who have gone on pilgrimage".⁴¹ This religious rhetoric, however, was more reminiscent of learned hinduism and the Gandhian political idiom than of folk religion. Whether it truly reflected the speakers' own intimate conception of the nature and aim of their commitment need not detain us here. What matters is that the leaders considered this type of discourse as an appropriate means to get their ideas across to the tenants and to retain their confidence. In other words, they felt that it filled an expectation on the part of the religious minded public which they were addressing.

No less significant were the nationalist political rituals which were used, in Dondi Lohara as elsewhere, on the occasion of each meeting so as to give to the tenants' movement the aura of legitimacy which attached to the sacred fight for the independence of the country (flag salutations, national songs, *jais* of Mahatma Gandhi, etc.). These practices were elements of the nationalist ritual idiom⁴² which by then had spread all over India, especially after the Congress election campaign of 1936-37, and through which the most diverse popular movements placed themselves under the broad aegis of the anti-imperialist movement. The processions which preceded the opening of the meetings similarly participated in the ritualization of protest. We have seen how, on various occasions, the leader (either Sarju or Narsingh Prasad), after mounting a horse, was garlanded and brought across the *basti* to the place of the meeting, proceeding along decorated streets with the accompaniment of national songs and with the crowd shouting slogans and *jais*. Through such temporary displays of lordly pomp and ritual across the towns where the meetings were held, these processions signified the public assertion of a local counter-power, and were meant to enhance the people's faith in their leader and their determination in the struggle. As devices of propaganda, however, these rituals of protest were only marginally successful. The discontented peasantry's confidence in the movement could hardly be unwavering when it was obvious that the Congress cold-shouldered its local leaders, and when the latter's political abilities did not appear to be particularly outstanding. Even at the height of the agitation, the organized violation of timber and grazing rules was always confined to a limited number of villages. As

³⁹ On the inherently religious character of the subaltern consciousness, see for instance D. Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India*, Delhi, 1987, pp. 9-11.

⁴⁰ Sarju Prasad said on 11 December 1938, in the words of the reporting Police Inspector: "I will find my own way to work. Success cannot be guaranteed. I will act according to the principles of the Gita that works without aim (*sic*). The way which I intend to adopt is very dangerous. Success can be achieved only by sacrifice." (MPSA, PMD, 25/1939).

⁴¹ Speech by Ramsingh Halba, 9 August 1939, MPSA, PMD, 214/1939.

⁴² Cf. B.S. Cohn, "Representing Authority in Victorian India", in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, Delhi, 1987, pp. 678-9.

was to be expected, popular support for the line of resistance advocated by the Agarwal brothers and other radical educated leaders fluctuated as years went by. Sarju Prasad complained in a speech in 1940 that there was no unity among the tenants, and that there were traitors among them.⁴³

Although the relationship between the aggrieved tenants and the Congress in office was fraught with ambiguities and ultimately disillusion, the repeated and quasi established use of national symbols and rituals by the adivasi protesters and their leaders showed that national consciousness had spread far and wide in the tribal areas at this ultimate stage of the independence struggle. The ambivalent attitude of the Congress leadership towards their grievances must have raised legitimate doubts in the minds of the tenants of Dondi-Lohara regarding the benefits which they could expect for themselves from the attainment of swaraj. But there was in any case no credible political alternative to the Congress as far as the succession to British power in India was concerned. Although the day of independence had at last come, the fight for the recognition of their rights had only begun.

⁴³ Speech of 13 March 1940, MPSA, PMD, 84/1940.