

Women, resistance, and development: a case study of Dang, India

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This paper examines the resistance put up by women in Dang, a tribal tract of western India, to attempts by the state Forest Department to limit their access to forest produce. It is based on the author's experience as a Project Officer with an NGO that supported the development work of a grassroots organisation, the Gram Vikas Mandali Association Trust (henceforth GVMAT).

It opens with an account of the historical background to the area during the British colonial era, when the forests were taken from the Dang communities; and goes on to examine changes during the last 20 years to the present day. A consideration of their moral economy shows how the Dangis never recognised the legitimacy of the takeover of forests by the Department, and how they question the Department's activities and rationale today. A specific act of resistance by village women is analysed, with a view to understanding why they acted in the manner they did. Finally, other acts of resistance by Dangis since then are discussed. This raises a perplexing question: why did women not play as significant a role in these later incidents? The article concludes with an attempt to understand why women were marginalised in popular resistance, and what this tells us both about the nature of resistance to the state, and the nature of women's involvement in it.

Historical background

Situated in south-east Gujarat, the 1,778-square kilometre district of Dang is almost completely covered by forests. The two principal tribes, the Koknis and the Bhils, are almost equal in size, and together account for about 90 per cent of the population of around 152,000 (first reports of the 1991 census).¹ Although there are minor distinctions between them in terms of their specific forms of subsistence, the communities will not be separately described here, for, despite the differences, the Koknis and the Bhils share a broadly common culture, evident in the

similarities in their marriage, birth, and death rituals. Also, while there is increasing stratification within and among the tribes, it is too early to talk of different classes among them.

In the pre-colonial period, Dangs was held by several Bhil chiefs, who had ties with the neighbouring kings of Gujarat and Maharashtra. The Dangis would frequently raid villages on the plains to collect their dues, known as *giras*. In 1818, after taking over neighbouring Khandesh, the British tried to stop the raids. In the process, they undertook three military expeditions into Dangs, in 1823, 1830, and 1839. Formerly, no plains powers had been militarily successful in Dangs, because of its dense forests and malarial climate. British military technology, however, overcame these obstacles and subdued the area. By 1844, the British began leasing Dangs forests from the chiefs. The leases were sought because the teak wood was considered exceptionally good for making warships and for other purposes.

At this time, Dangi agriculture was akin to classic shifting cultivation. A small plot of land would be cleared of undergrowth, which would be piled up along the field, and then fired. Seed would then be scattered, and the crop reaped some months later. Since population density was low, and long fallow periods were allowed before the same plot was re-used, forest cover was not damaged. Similarly, the communities depended on foraging, hunting, and fishing, at various times of the year, when agricultural crops had run out.²

While the British exploited the forests extensively for timber throughout most of the nineteenth century, they did not at that time interfere much with local subsistence agriculture. However, a new colonial ideology, known as scientific forestry, was developing throughout India. This claimed to be ecologically oriented; but, in practice, the concern was to guarantee the extraction of timber while trying to ensure that enough wood survived for extraction in future years. As much (or more) environmental degradation was caused by the operations of the Forest Department as by the tribal communities. But the colonial state steadily translated its ideology into policy.³ In Dangs too, colonial officials demanded that the local communities be excluded from the forests, on the grounds that their cultivation, hunting, and migration did much harm to them, and hindered the production of large timber.

In 1902, the policy was implemented in Dangs. One third of its area was set aside as reserves; and, within a decade, this had been increased to cover half the region. The Dangis were not allowed to cultivate,

collect wood, or graze their cattle within the reserves. More than half of the approximately 635 villages were situated in the reserved area; and people were forcibly evacuated and resettled in the remaining villages. Even here, Dangi subsistence practices were not allowed to remain unchanged. Tracts left outside the reserves were classified as Protected Forests, and Dangis were forced to change their style of cultivation. This involved burning only a small patch of the field, sowing seeds in it, and transplanting them to other parts of the field later. The British, and later the post-independence Forest Department, also sought to stop migration, forcing the Dangis to cultivate on the same spot year after year. This system, which used the thin topsoil very intensively (and that too after concentrating the population on half the area previously available), was eventually to cause serious environmental degradation.

Degradation was also being caused by the introduction of scientific forestry. The British Forest Department extracted enormous amounts of teak. Unlike other parts of India, its re-planting programmes were relatively effective, and so deforestation was avoided. However, the species that were introduced were largely teak and bamboo, which were most useful for colonial purposes. This monoculture destroyed the ecological balance of the region, and made it more difficult for several species of small mammals and flora to maintain themselves.⁴

It is difficult to reconstruct the position of women in the period of 'pure' shifting agriculture before the 1902 demarcation. However, from conversations with older women, we can learn something about their role in subsistence farming before the late 1960s. They appear to have been actively involved in cultivation, performing tasks like transplanting, weeding, and harvesting. But cultivation was only one part of Dangi subsistence. Annual crops were reaped from around October, providing food until February or March the next year. By the time these foodstocks ran low, people were dependent on the mahua tree, which flowered in March and provided means of subsistence for over two months. Women and children were responsible for collecting and processing the mahua seeds. In the summer months, Dangi diets were supplemented by fishing and hunting. Hunting was an almost exclusively male activity. Fishing, however, was undertaken collectively, and entire families would settle by the river banks to catch fish. Before the monsoons began, they would return to the villages to prepare their fields for cultivation. After the monsoons, Dangis subsisted by foraging, or collecting wild roots, tubers, bamboo shoots, and vegetables and leaves from the forests. These tasks were carried out

almost exclusively by women and were crucial to survival until crops were ready. Thus, women traditionally played a vital role in most subsistence activities in Dangs.

The post-colonial decades

India's independence in 1947 did not mean much for the Dangis. The post-independence Forest Department continued with the same policies, although it appears that the major transformation of Dangs did not take hold until the 1960s, and was the consequence of four distinct influences.⁵

First, certain ecological transformations were coming to a head. Game in the region had been getting scarcer from the early twentieth century. The construction of the Ukai dam in neighbouring Surat district in the 1960s created a catchment area that cut across the seasonal paths of migration followed by animals into Dangs. With no replenishment of animal stock taking place, large game became almost impossible to find by the 1970s. Simultaneously, the deeper portions of the rivers and the pools in the region were being filled up through silting. As a result, breeding grounds for fish became fewer, and they were no longer as abundant as before.

Second came the creation of private land-ownership. Between 1967 and 1971, the Government of Gujarat appears to have carried out a survey, as a result of which each cultivator was assigned a fixed plot of land. A consequence was that even the modified shifting cultivation within the Protected Forests, which had been possible before, could no longer be undertaken.

Third came the stepping up of forest exploitation. Forest Department revenue from Dangs increased almost seven-fold between 1970 and 1985.⁶

Fourth was the creation of forest labour co-operatives. These were meant to provide labourers for timber extraction, and were part of a half-hearted state government effort to ensure that some of the resources generated during forest exploitation returned to Dangs. Formerly, exploitation had been carried out through timber contractors who grossly underpaid the Dangi workers.

Together, the increasing rate of Departmental timber extraction and the creation of co-operatives saw the beginning, from the early 1970s, of a phase of rapid commercialisation.⁷ There can be hardly any doubt that the amount of absolute wealth within Dangs increased as a consequence; and that there was possibly a significant trickle-down

effect up to the early 1980s. The period was also marked by a demographic boom. Mortality rates had fallen during the 1970s and 1980s, causing population to shoot up from around 71,567 in 1971⁷ to around 152,000 by 1991. Until the mid-1980s, the demand for a labour-force for timber operations absorbed the effect of this population increase.

However, the period of remarkable economic expansion came to a halt in about 1988, when the state government decided to suspend forest-felling operations. A response to growing worries about environmental degradation, this halt rendered the forest co-operatives entirely superfluous. It also meant a halt to the wages which Dangi labourers had been receiving since the 1970s for employment in timber-extraction operations. Accompanied by the other developments, this resulted in a sudden and huge surplus of labour in Dangs – more than could be supported on the lands on which the Department permitted cultivation. This laid the basis for the transformation of the tribals into a labour force for capitalist agriculture outside Dangs. The agriculturally prosperous belt of South Gujarat around Bulsar and Surat districts had long been a region to which tribals migrated seasonally. Seasonal labour was needed at the time of reaping and processing sugar cane. ⁸For this, tribals were largely employed in the sugar-cane fields and factories, at extremely exploitative wages and conditions. The first trickle of migration started in 1980 and fewer than ten years later had assumed the proportions of a flood. Tentative findings of the ten-yearly census, last conducted in 1991, reported that nearly 45,000 persons per year resorted to seasonal migration. This represents nearly one third of the population, and is in all probability a gross underestimate.

The meagre resources obtained through migrant labour could not offset the combined impact of environmental degradation, demographic expansion, and inadequate agricultural land. Matters have been made worse by the stricter policy adopted by the Forest Department in the name of conservation. The Department was cracking down heavily on hunting, or even the collection of wood for timber or houses.

By the late 1980s, another factor in the changed situation was the emergence of the GVMAT. Founded earlier in the decade by an Australian social worker who was influenced by Gandhian principles, it had initially concentrated on conventional development work, such as land-development programmes. By 1988, however, it had shifted its

emphasis to conscientisation. It was dealing with problems such as those posed by Forest Department irregularities and the right to demand infrastructural facilities from the government. Soon, the non-participation of women in its programmes was recognised as a problem, and female staff were employed to redress the situation. The women workers of GVMAT concentrated all their efforts on conscientisation work – unlike their male colleagues, who were also responsible for those economic activities that continued.

The moral economy of Dangs

Before considering the resistance of Dangi women, it is important briefly to discuss some aspects of the ‘moral economy’ of Dangs. James Scott has defined this as a community’s ‘notion of economic justice and their working definition of exploitation – their view of which claims on their product were tolerable and which intolerable’.⁹ Precisely such notions are found among the Dangis with reference to the state and the Forest Department. Indeed, there is such a high degree of consensus that it is possible to speak of a moral economy shared across ethnic and gender lines.¹⁰ Through oral traditions about how the forests were taken away, we can explore this moral economy. The most common account seeks to explain the loss of the forests in terms of a trick played by the British.

The *gora saheb* (white men) called all the chiefs to Bhavani killa (a fort near Dangs). They put three sacks in front of the *rajas* [chiefs]. They said, ‘*rajasahab*, choose any of these three sacks for yourselves’. The *rajas* went around feeling each of the sacks. They felt the first one, and said, ‘this is *maati*’ [earth]. Then they felt the second one, and said, ‘this is *dhilpa*’ [bark.] Then they felt the third one, and said, ‘this is *Paiha*’ [money.] The *rajas* said among themselves, ‘We already have bark and earth in our forests, what do we need those for? Let us take the money, since we do not have money.’ At that time, there was no money in Dangs. So they told the *gora saheb* that they would take the third sack. Then the *saheb* told the *rajas*, ‘now that you have taken the money, you shall get the money and we shall take away the forests and the land. Had you taken the sack with earth, you would have kept both the earth and the forests. Had you taken the sack with the bark, you would have kept the forests. Now you have lost both, but you will get a pension instead.’

Dangis also sometimes explain the loss of their forests by referring to the technological superiority of the British. Some stories describe the *saheb* as having sought shelter from the *raja* for a night, and then having measured the trees and the forests while the chief was sleeping. The tribals, in fact, often see acts such as measurement or writing as ways in which outsiders and the state gain dominance over them. This perceptive insight is reflected in other stories too.

Even before coming to Dangis, the *saheb* had seen the forests with a *durbin* [telescope]. He said to himself, 'these are forests of gold. I must get them for myself.' He went to the *raja* and asked for one year's permission to move in the forests. He went with the *rajas* for *shikar* [hunting] and studied the forests more closely. While moving in the jungle, he asked for the names of trees, which he wrote down immediately in his book. With the names in his book, he did not need the *rajas* any longer, for he knew everything about the forests himself.

What is most striking about these accounts is their questioning of the legitimacy of state ownership of the forests. Sometimes, of course, in a manner similar to what Scott describes as tolerable claims, the Dangis concede some rights of the state in forests.

Only three jungles were initially given to the *saheb*: those of Kot, Barda ni Khadi and Bhuria Sadada ni Vangan. But they did not stay to these, they took over other forests too.

The specifying of these three areas is significant, since they are the densest surviving tracts in Dangis. But in acknowledging a certain right for the Department in these areas, the state's authority over the rest of the forests is denied.

In addition to the idea that the Forest Department's presence in Dangis is fundamentally illegitimate, Dangi stories and perceptions also focus on the oppressive tactics of the Forest Department. This is most evident in the imagery used to describe forest officials. A forest guard is very often called a *komda chor*, or fowl thief. It is common for a forest guard to demand bribes such as fowls or home-brewed liquor, among the more expensive items that an impoverished Dangi household is likely to possess. These bribes are routinely demanded, even when the particular family has not done anything specifically wrong.

There are two reasons for this. Firstly, forest laws are so comprehensive that in the process of everyday living men and women

are bound to break them. If cattle roam into the reserved forests, small patches of which are scattered between the villages, then it is an offence. If, in the process of collecting firewood, a branch is collected that does not look like deadwood picked off the ground, the gatherer can be taken away for committing an offence. Secondly, the penalties are heavy, making the forest guard a very powerful and much-feared figure. Thus, Dangis have to give the forest guard what he demands. The abusive names that are used for the guards behind their backs are one form of everyday resistance.¹¹ Indeed, given the power of the forest guards, it is usually to such expressions that resistance has to confine itself.

The event

In the latter part of 1989, a man was arrested from the village of Gira-Dabdar, about 8–10 kilometres from the market centre of Vaghai. The charge against him was that he had ‘stolen’ wood from the forests to build a hut. Initial efforts by villagers to get him released did not work. Later, his wife went to the police station with some elders and paid a fine to secure his release. Despite often having to pay such fines, villagers could not very well stop building houses for themselves: after all, shelter is one of the most basic human needs. A month later, forest officials again appear to have heard of timber having been felled for a house in the village. A Range Forest Officer, accompanied by half a dozen policemen, came to the village to confiscate the timber, crossing nearly 3 kilometres of steep tracks to get there. His search party found the house which was being constructed and moved towards it. But the response that the party met with was very different from the fearful manner in which the Dangis usually reacted.

The carpenters who were working on the site saw them approaching, called out to the younger woman of the house to tell her of the impending disaster, and ran away into the forests. The mother-in-law, who was cooking, came out with a sickle and stood at the threshold, waiting for the search party. As soon as it arrived, she took a determined step forward and told the officials to stay where they were, or face the consequences. Meanwhile, the younger woman had been yelling out for other women to join them.

What the search party met, then, was this formidable woman refusing to allow them to enter the house and measure the total quantity of wood stolen. Around the party was a large number of women of all ages, carrying whatever implements they had been able

to lay their hands on. The Range Forest Officer ordered them to move away, but they did not budge. He then told the old woman to shift, but she did not comply either. He then tried to dodge by her, but she moved quickly too, and stood on top of a log, saying, 'Only over my dead body will I allow you to touch this'. Frustrated, the officer threatened to open fire. Some women challenged him, saying 'Yes, go ahead, shoot. Let us see how much courage you have.' Others retorted that the forests did not belong to the Forest Department, while some women appealed to the guards to remember that they too were Dangis.¹² Such exchanges went on for a long while. Finally, exasperated, the search party left the village – but not before uttering threats that punishment would be meted out. This did not daunt the women, who walked them out of the village for a kilometre.¹³

The resistance put up by the women illuminated two striking and closely connected features of popular understanding. First, there was the reiteration that the forests are common-property resources. As the women told the officer, the forests belonged to nature, and the government had no authority to determine who should use what. Second, there was the perception of the government as representing external authority, with no legitimate position in Dangs. In their resistance, the women invoked the identities of us-and-them. As they told the forest guards (who are largely Dangis), the forests belonged to all of them. And if, because they were in uniform, the guards could not oppose the government or *sirkar*, they could still surely see how the women were justified in taking what belonged to all of them. The other side of the coin was the way women responded to the officer and senior members of the party, who were non-tribals from outside Dangs. What right did they have over the forests? Did they water it? Did they plant it? Did their forefathers belong to the area? In raising questions of this sort, the women were casting the Forest Department as outsiders, people from the plains or *desh*, with no claim over the forests.

From this understanding sprang their resistance. But why did the resistance break out when it did? After all, it began in a low key, as part of the usual 'small arms fire in the class war'.¹⁴ Such incidents happen regularly. Forest Department parties swoop on villages, confiscate timber, collect bribes, and go away. While Dangis might protest or argue, usually they do not physically obstruct the Department officials. In this case, matters went beyond that framework, and escalated rapidly into a confrontation in which the Department had to back down. Why?

First, there was the bad economic situation, which we have already examined. In this context, grievances against the Forest Department assumed a magnitude which they usually would not. Second, there was the role of the GVMAT. Gira-Dabdar was one of the villages in which it was very active. Several meetings had been conducted there, where the injustice of Forest Department actions had been emphasised. In this sense, local grievances received both self-legitimation and support from the outside. Third, there was the suppressed anger of the villagers, founded on their specific grievances, as for example the case of the man who had been arrested a month before.

But why did *women* play such a major role in putting up resistance? I had been to the village around two months before the incident happened, and was there again about a month after it had occurred. I recall discussing, with other women activists, the courage of the women who had faced up to the guns of forest officials, while the men had fled. We even laughed at the men's response, and attributed it to the women being more courageous and to their natural capacity to withstand pressure and stress.

In retrospect, there was possibly more to the incident than meets the eye. Is it possible that the women reacted more violently to Department oppression because it was affecting them more than men? This might be true for other areas, but not for Dangs. As we saw earlier, there is no sharp divergence of interests on gender lines in the perception of forests: men are almost as involved in the subsistence economy as women, albeit in different spheres. Could the men have been using the women? Such, for instance, is the argument that Emmanuel Konde makes for the Anlu rebellion of 1958–61. While there might be an element of truth in them, such arguments tend to ignore *women's* perceptions of matters, and deny women the role of actors.¹⁵

Explanations for the role that women played will have to be rooted in historical specificity. Let us begin by gendering, once again, Dangi modes of subsistence. While both men and women are involved with the forests, their relations with it are slightly different. Women do most of the foraging activities, fishing, and the collection of firewood. The latter can be considered illegal if it is suspected that trees have been cut for the purpose; but, on the whole, women's activities are largely within the Department's framework of legality. In contrast, men's activities are more likely to be seen as illegal. When men venture into the forests, it is more usually for hunting, for chopping down wood for buildings, or for lopping for agriculture. Sometimes, they venture in to

cultivate illegally in the reserves. In such cases, women are equally involved in the actual cultivation. But since the state works with male-centred notions, it is men who are held responsible for the act. Thus, in some respects men have more to fear from the Department than do women.

In other ways, of course, women have more to fear. One does not have to stray beyond the bounds of legality to be confronted by the Forest Department, especially its lower cadres. Women can be an easy target, because they are more involved in everyday activities, like the collection of firewood or other forest produce. Forest Department guards often catch them when they are walking through the forests and accuse them of planning to collect forest produce. As women, they also come in for sexual harassment from the guards. Thus, women have reason to feel angry with the Forest Department, although such anger usually has to be suppressed.

The role of GVMAT becomes especially significant in this context. Many of its female activists had spent a good deal of time with women from the village, discussing various aspects of everyday repression. Its role was heightened because of the status of two local woman organisers. The first, who was based in the village as an employee of GVMAT, had experience of Kandhalghodi, a village where women had earlier organised to challenge corruption in a local Primary Health Centre. Her presence and regular meetings with women helped in rousing their anger about what they suffered at the hands of the Department; and in making them aware that it was possible to take explicit action against it. The second, who was not an employee of GVMAT but was one of the most active local women, also played a major role. She was one of the most vociferous members of the local association. Apart from being a charismatic personality, she also happened to be from Gira-Dabdar – unlike most women, who marry into villages different from that in which they grew up, she had married into the same village. As a result, her own relations were there; and she was accepted and respected by the males there much more than a woman who had married into the village would have been.

Thirdly, women are very independent, especially in Gira-Dabdar. This was brought home to me during one meeting, when I observed that all the women had gathered for the meeting, and that the men were standing in the background, holding babies and taking care of the children. Even by the rather different standards of tribal culture, this was very unusual. After the meeting, I asked one of the local GVMAT

women why this was the case. She acknowledged that it was unusual, but explained it simply by saying that the men of Gira-Dabdar were very 'good'. This explanation is obviously inadequate.

More important, possibly, was the fact that a proportion of the population of Gira-Dabdar is Christian. The form that Christianity has taken is very interesting. Although Christian missionaries were in Dangs by the early twentieth century, it was only after the 1970s that they met with success. A significant, if small, proportion of the population is now Christian. Most striking among converts is the prominent role played by women. In fact, it has been women who have been the first in a family to convert to Christianity, and have then brought about the conversion of their husbands and, sometimes, their parents.¹⁶ While these women are usually conservative about the areas in which tribal women conventionally possess comparative freedom (such as premarital sex or the desertion of husbands), they are also very assertive and independent. The weekly prayer meetings, in which women participate, had also made their presence at village meetings a more acceptable matter. This explains the ease with which these women, in comparison with those from other villages, could participate in the GVMAT meetings.

These factors, then, made it possible for the women to respond to the aggression of the search party. But in responding as they did, the women were also using dominant patriarchal values to their own benefit. In the understanding of forest officials and others, women have two opposing identities. As women, especially tribal women, they are objects for sexual exploitation. This is most evidently the case when women are to be dealt with as individuals, when the power of officials over them can be exercised more directly and when they might have most to fear. In addition, there is the more problematic identity of women as a collective group. As such a group, women are more visibly bearers of the patriarchal notion of honour. In patriarchal societies, a community's honour is closely bound up with 'its' women. Public action against 'its' women, especially that which involves physical contact or abuse, is thus liable to be treated by the community as a slur on its collective honour, which requires redress. By physically acting against the women, the search party would have left itself open to charges of sexual harassment, and of violating the 'honour' of women.¹⁷ When the women defied the search party, they were strengthened in their knowledge that these patriarchal values shielded them.¹⁸ There was also the difficulty posed by the unusual nature of the

women's action. Used to assigning women a submissive role, the male search party was not prepared for the possibility of women venturing outside this sphere. This momentary confusion, and the lack of official state or male strategies to deal with such a situation, also helped the women in resisting the Department.

Organised resistance: the marginalisation of women¹⁹

What is most striking about the incident is its spontaneity. It was not planned as a deliberate act of resistance, but arose out of the frictions of a life in which illegality had been made an everyday phenomenon. The event, however, led on directly to more organised and planned resistance. Already by that time, another organisation, the Adivasi Bhumihin Kisan Hak Rakshak Samiti, was active in the region. Its two principal leaders, both from outside Dangs, were promoting a far more radical programme than was GVMAT. After this incident, it appears to have intensified its activity, extending it to villages around Gira Dabdar.

In early 1990, a group composed largely of men moved into a thickly wooded region in the reserved forest. In less than a week, they cleared large portions of bamboo. They claimed the spot was one of their *junigavthad* [old village sites] and that they had the right to cultivate around it. Their principal demand was to be given cultivation rights in the extended forests. The Forest Department was initially at a loss to know how to respond to such an unprecedented situation. Finally, after extensive preparations, and the summoning of reinforcements of police from other districts, it moved into the area. Around 90 people were arrested and taken into custody.

Several other incidents followed in quick succession. In early 1991, a search party visited one of the villages which had been closely associated with the militant movement, as part of its effort to intimidate the villagers. The villagers were, however, in no mood to be frightened. They surrounded the party and threatened its members. They abused the Sub-Divisional Forest Officer (one of the most senior forest officials in Dangs) who was leading the party and forced him to eat grass.²⁰ The party returned some weeks later in greater strength, this time armed with guns. The villagers had been preparing for such an eventuality. As the party approached, children warned the adults, who took up positions in different spots. One large group stayed to meet the party. The men carried with them their bows and arrows, weapons that had not been used much since large game had become extinct, and had not been carried around publicly for several decades. In the course of a

heated conversation, one of the armed policemen made a move which was interpreted by the village men as an indication that he might shoot. Their fears were heightened by their suspicion that he was drunk. Moving quickly, one of the village men knocked the gun out of his hand. From a place of hiding, another fired a stone from his catapult at another armed policeman, striking him on the shoulder. The villagers stirred, moving their bows and arrows. To the police party, this was not only threatening, but frightening. The last thing they had expected was such a show of strength, especially against so many policemen. Abandoning the two rifles that had fallen to the ground, they retreated in confusion.

Shortly after this, the Deputy Collector, the second most senior government official in the district, who believed that all that was needed to placate the villagers was a more sympathetic approach, visited the village. He was accompanied by the Deputy Superintendent of Police, together with a large team. When the Deputy Collector reached the village, he met with a cold reception. Initially, nobody came out of the huts to meet him. This was very unusual for a Dangi village, where outsiders are an unusual phenomenon and tend to attract a large crowd. He asked one of the villagers who happened to be outside to call the others. Slowly, the others drifted in; but nobody brought a *khatla*, or bed, for him to sit on. Usually, for outsiders, a light wooden bed is brought out immediately, and covered with the cleanest rug available. Such a gesture is a sign of respect for the visitor, a statement that he is considered of status high enough to sit on a bed instead of on the floor, as the Dangis do. Finally, after he asked for it, a bed was brought; but no sheet was spread over it. Nor was he given any water, another item that is usually brought to any visitor immediately. Only after he asked for it was muddy water brought in a dirty tumbler. When he asked for cleaner water, he was told that this was the sort of water which the villagers usually had to consume, and he would have to drink it too if he wanted any. The villagers were quite aggressive, listing their grievances against the Forest Department and the government. Needless to say, his visit was a failure as an attempt to dampen the villagers' militancy.

The growing resistance drew on the Dangi moral economy, and their notions of right and wrong. In clearing the bamboo forests and claiming that it was a *junigavthad* or old village site, the Dangis were drawing on collective memories of how their ancestors had been driven out of the forests; and were making it clear that they had still not accepted the legitimacy of that act.²¹

After that, many other acts of resistance followed: the Dangis, it seems, would not submit to the oppressive acts of the Forest Department. This may be a very welcome development. But there is one curious and worrying feature: women do not now play a prominent role in the resistance. Why did women have such a low profile in the later stages? One important factor is the orientation of the Adivasi Bhumihin Kisan Hak Rakshak Samiti. While its leaders are not in any sense opposed to women's participation, they had established contacts largely with Dangi males. The involvement of women in their organisation has been rather low. Nor had there been a concerted and deliberate effort to involve women, despite the recognition of the fact that women must play a role. So even when women have participated, their action has not been adequately recognised, nor has it led to their playing a significant role in the local leadership. Women too have been cautious about getting involved, because those who had led the action at Gira-Dabdar were facing sexual harassment from the Forest Department.²²

The most crucial reason, however, appears to be the different nature of resistance involved in each case. The resistance at Gira-Dabdar was relatively spontaneous and unplanned. In contrast, the act of clearing forests was premeditated. Even the confrontations with officials such as the Deputy Collector were events for which the villagers had been prepared. In this, the actions moved into the Dangi 'public' sphere, an area which had traditionally been the domain of Dangi males. While both men and women practise quiet, everyday resistance against the state, women are more likely to remain confined exclusively to that sort of resistance. For them, the step involved in moving from passive to organised and premeditated collective resistance is a great one, for in doing so they move into a sphere in which men have long been dominant. This is reinforced by the fact that, in practice, most activist organisations ascribe to women a limited role. This has been the case over and over again in GVMAT too. While women workers and women leaders have often been involved in challenging oppressive situations at a local level, the male leadership and male workers take over once it becomes an organised action.

Even when women do take part in public action, their role is often not to transform the movement, but rather a case of strategic deployment which might even reinforce patriarchal values. From the point of view of the patriarchal leadership of many movements of oppressed communities in the Indian subcontinent, the participation of women in resistance helps to underscore the gravity of the situation.

This is because of the predominant image of women and children as passive and non-violent. Given this understanding, if women are driven to action, the situation must be grave indeed. And, if action is taken against this group of 'non-violent' participants, then it is a transgression of patriarchal norms, and gives a moral advantage to the resisters. This is a strategy which has been used by many activist groups in areas around Dangs.

In cases where women have acted together in organised political movements and played a dominant role, this seems to have been linked to the diverging interests of men and women. The most striking example is that of the Chipko movement, in which women have played a leading role. In the Tehri-Garhwal region, where the movement took place, men were migrant labourers, much more involved in the market economy, while women were involved with cultivation and the subsistence economy.²³ In this, men did not share the same interest in stopping forest exploitation, or preserving their rights in the forest, that women did.²⁴

One lesson comes across very clearly. Radical organisations working with oppressed groups need to pay conscious attention to involving women actively – and to recognising accurately women's existing involvement – if they are not merely to reproduce patriarchal structures. Otherwise, even in areas where men and women are fighting for common interests, it is all too easy for women to be assigned an unimportant, peripheral role. Organisations seeking to enhance 'development' must ensure that their own actions and structures do not become an additional constraint on women seeking justice for themselves and the wider community.

Notes

- 1 Data for this account are drawn principally from Government of Gujarat (1971). This paper has benefited from discussions with Ajay Skaria. I also thank him for permitting me to use some of the material he has collected, especially in the section on the moral economy of Dangs. I am grateful to Renee Pittin and Mona Mehta for their comments on an earlier draft.
- 2 My account of colonial Dangs is drawn from David Hardiman (1989), and Ajay Skaria (1992).
- 3 My understanding of scientific forestry and colonial forest policy is drawn from Ramchandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil (1989) and Ramchandra Guha (1985, 1983, 1990).
- 4 It is now being increasingly realised that ecological transformations need

- not take place only through denudation or deforestation. Alfred Crosby (1985) reports on the ecological reconstitution of the Americas and Australia, among other places. As the case of Dangs indicates, we must look closely at how ecological balance in such a region was affected by the colonial introduction of indigenous flora as monocultures. In west, central, and south India, teak was to be monocropped, while pine was made a monoculture in north India.
- 5 I also draw for my understanding of the postcolonial decades from Ajay Skaria (1990).
 - 6 Revenue increased from about Rs.12.5-15m to Rs.9.8.6m over this period (Government of Gujarat 1971:23); S.P. Punalekar (1989) also has useful information on Dangs.
 - 7 Government of Gujarat (1971:1).
 - 8 See Jan Breman (1978-79, 1985). For Dangs specifically, see D. Mehta (1982).
 - 9 James Scott (1976:3).
 - 10 I am not suggesting that there are no differences in the broader moral economy of men and women, or of Koknis and Bhils. Dangi women often operate with something similar to a 'moral economy'. There is a set of beliefs about the actions they could legitimately resort to under certain circumstances, such as deserting their husband, having premarital relations, etc. These beliefs are very crucial in their defence of their rights against male encroachments. But the moral economy that informs perceptions of the state, which is seen as outside Dangi society, is coherent, and not divided along gender or ethnic lines.
 - 11 For a similar account of name-calling, see Scott (1985:13-22).
 - 12 Many Dangi men are employed by the Forest Department in lower-level positions such as forest guards. These jobs carry enormous power within the Dangi context, and they are therefore much coveted. At the same time, the jobs are considered undesirable, because, as forest guards, they are often in conflict with relatives and fellow Dangis. It was this Dangi identity to which the women were appealing.
 - 13 The Forest Department and the Police did react, though a month later. A large party of police and forest officials descended on the village, including a policewoman this time. They arrested a man, the husband of one of the women who had played a major role the last time, on the charge that he ran away when he saw the party, the assumption being that it was guilt which made him flee. Though some women were present and actively resisted this, no attempt was made to arrest them. This seems to be connected to the patriarchal values of the state, as a result of which the role of women was not officially recognised: it was their husbands who had to be held responsible.
 - 14 James Scott (1985:1). In Dangs, of course, the war was not with an oppressive class but with an oppressive state.
 - 15 Emmanuel Konde (1990). In the Indian context, similar arguments have been used by elite historians to deny a role to peasant and tribal groups in their uprisings. Like colonial officials before them, these historians have described the uprisings as the result of manipulation by upper-caste communities. For sharp critiques of such approaches, see many of the

- articles in Ranajit Guha (ed.), (1981-89). Tanika Sarkar (1986:140) specifically criticises the elitist assumption that when tribals revolted they had been instigated by others to do so.
- 16 In general, women appear to have been more involved in messianic and evangelising movements within Dangs. Thus, for instance, the Pir movement, which cuts across conventional religious barriers, also has women among its principal adherents. Nor does this seem to be an entirely new phenomenon. David Hardiman (1987) also notes the participation of women in the Devi movement, which took place in Dangs and surrounding regions around 1917-20.
- 17 This was why the second search party was accompanied by a woman constable. She could act physically against women without inviting the charge of having violated their 'honour'. Other women, even when they are part of a repressive state apparatus, cannot in patriarchal ideology violate a woman's honour. Such patriarchal ideology will not, of course, always protect women. In December 1991, a woman was killed when police opened fire on a demonstration that Dangi villagers had organised to demand their land rights and to protest against Forest Department atrocities.
- 18 In the perception of male Forest Department officials, women 'use' their gender identity to protect themselves. As one Sub-Divisional Forest Officer complained, women, when caught illegally carrying away freshly lopped timber, would challenge the forest guards if they were in groups. And the guards, he complained, could do nothing, since
- it was so difficult to act physically against women without inviting complaints. This is possibly the case on some occasions, but it is much more usual for women to be harassed by guards.
- 19 I was not directly involved in the villages where the events narrated in this section took place. I have drawn therefore on conversations with other villagers, with one of the leaders of the Adivasi Hak Rakshak Samiti, and with other activists. I cannot be certain, therefore, of some of the details. I believe, however, that my account does not seriously distort any of the processes described.
- 20 The act was an inversion of the Forest Department's dominance. Often, forest officials abuse Dangis by calling them savages, people without intelligence – like cattle. When making the forest official eat grass, the villagers told him, 'You call us cattle. Now see how it feels to be like one yourself.' A similar incident had occurred around the same time in the neighbouring Pindival region of Bulsar district. Here a forest official who had committed atrocities in the village was waylaid when he was moving around alone one day, and was forced to eat human faeces.
- 21 The responses to the Deputy Collector were almost classic forms of the everyday resistance that Scott discusses. For other examples, see Scott and Tria Kerkvliet (1986).
- 22 The two women prominent in the action at Giradabdar have been victims of harassment even after the incident. Once, when one was travelling in a bus, lewd suggestions were made to her, and one person tried to sit in her lap. When she tried to avoid the group and moved to a vacant seat, she was beaten up. On

another occasion, she was subject to verbal abuse on her way to her daughter's school. Both times, the attackers mentioned her involvement in the Gira-Dabdar action. Similarly, the other woman was harassed several times by the lower cadres of the Forest Department.

- 23 See Henrietta Moore (1988) for a critical discussion of the assumption that capitalist development in rural areas leads to men taking to market- and cash-oriented activities while women take up non-remunerative subsistence production. In organising women, other gender-related conflicts also played a role. Thus, one element of the Chipko movement was women organising against the liquor shops in which men spent their earnings and got drunk, subsequently beating up their wives (Gopa Joshi and Sunderlal Bahaguna, 1984:125-33). In Dhulia district, which lies beside Dangs, the issue of men squandering their resources on liquor was again taken up by an activist organisation, the Shramik Sanghatana, and later led to women playing a role in organised political protest as well (Savara and Gothoskar, 1984:135).
- 24 See Joshi and Bahaguna (1984:125-33) for a discussion that brings out the differing interests of men and women in the Chipko movement.

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