

Godavari Parulekar:

A Centenary Tribute

This is the birth centenary year of Godavari Parulekar – a staunch anti-imperialist freedom fighter, a militant leader of the historic Warli Adivasi Revolt, one of the founders of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha, the only woman president of the All India Kisan Sabha in its long history, member of the CPI(M) Central Committee for a quarter century, author of the celebrated work *Adivasis Revolt*, the first woman law graduate in Maharashtra, a dedicated social worker and a legendary leader of the communist and kisan movement in India.

Godavari and her husband Shamrao Parulekar were a unique revolutionary team that became renowned for its pioneering leadership of the Warli Adivasi Revolt which swept parts of Thane district in Maharashtra during 1945-47. This revolt was an integral part of the pre-independence peasant upsurge against landlordism that included glorious struggles like Tebhaga in Bengal, Punnapra Vayalar in Kerala, Surma Valley in Assam, the tribal struggle in Tripura and, above all, the magnificent Telangana armed peasant uprising in Andhra.

The Warli Adivasi Revolt was led by the Parulekars under the Red Flag of the Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party. But for a decade and a half before this struggle, Godavari Gokhale and Shamrao Parulekar were participants in India's struggle for freedom from British imperialist rule. Their ideological transformation from the reformist Servants of India Society to the revolutionary Communist Party of India is a fascinating account that has few parallels among those who became communists in Maharashtra in the pre-independence era. The multi-faceted struggles led by both of them during this period also form a remarkable but little-known record. The lives of both these stalwarts were so intertwined with each other that they must be looked at together.

EARLY YEARS

Godavari Gokhale was born on August 14, 1907, in a well-to-do family in Pune. Her father was the renowned lawyer Laxmanrao Gokhale, who was a cousin of the great Indian freedom fighter and leader of the Moderates in the Indian National Congress, Gopal Krishna Gokhale. Godavari graduated in economics and politics from Fergusson College,

Pune, and among her contemporaries were S.M. Joshi, N.G. Goray and Achyutrao Patwardhan, all of whom would later become leaders of the freedom struggle and of the Socialist Party. She then studied law, gaining the distinction of becoming the first woman law graduate in Maharashtra. Her father wanted her to join his law practice, but it was not to be.

Godavari, active in the student movement against British rule, was irresistibly drawn to the freedom struggle and plunged into individual satyagraha, for which she was convicted by the British regime in 1932. After her release from jail, her father, who was a political moderate, was incensed and refused to accept her, thus leading to a severance of family ties. Godavari then came to Mumbai, where she took up social service in the Servants of India Society in the early 1930s. She became the first woman to be inducted as a life member of the Society.

Shamrao Parulekar was born on October 2, 1902, in a landlord family of Bijapur in Karnataka. His father Vishnupant Parulekar was a district judge whose services were requisitioned by the royal family, and he then became the Dewan of Akkalkot. After completing his school and college education in Pune, Shamrao came to Mumbai University for higher studies. Here he passed the Masters degree in philosophy with a first class, which was an extremely rare distinction in those times. His father wanted him to go to England to study law, but Shamrao had already imbibed the nationalist spirit of the freedom struggle.

He refused to go to England, took his law degree in Mumbai instead, and then became a full-time worker at a small wage in the Servants of India Society in the late 1920s. Here he began his work of selfless social service, which also included organizing the working class. This turn of events could not but infuriate his father, the Dewan of Akkalkot. It is said that when his father angrily threatened to disinherit him, the young Shamrao promptly replied that he had already prepared the legal documents renouncing his claims to family lands and property!

THE SERVANTS OF INDIA SOCIETY

The Servants of India Society was founded by Gopal Krishna Gokhale in 1905. Like its founder, it was a moderate but patriotic organization. Its Constitution stated: "Love of country must so fill the heart that all else shall appear as of little moment by its side. A fervent patriotism which rejoices at every opportunity of sacrifice for the motherland, a dauntless heart which refuses to be turned back from its object by difficulty or danger, a deep faith in the purpose of Providence which

nothing can shake – equipped with these, the worker must start on his mission and reverently seek the joy which comes of expending oneself in the service of one's country." All but one of the six objectives of the Society were of a tame and general nature. The exception was: "organizing the work of political education and agitation, basing it on a careful study of public questions, and strengthening generally the public life of the country."

The Mumbai branch of the Society was then headed by N.M. Joshi, a man of great integrity and a renowned trade union leader who was general secretary of the AITUC during 1927-29, and again during 1940-48. Politically, he was a follower of Gokhale and therefore a liberal and a moderate. But unlike many moderates at the time, Joshi was not an anti-communist, and he generally co-operated with the communists and left nationalists in the AITUC, even while sharply disagreeing with them on certain matters of his conviction. Joshi took Godavari and Shamrao under his wing in the Servants of India Society. He unflinchingly stood by both of them to the end.

BEGINNING WORK AMONGST WORKERS AND PEASANTS

It was under the aegis of the Servants of India Society that Godavari and Shamrao began to organize first the working class and then the peasantry. Their activities in the 1930s, even before they joined the Communist Party in 1938-39, revealed their growing class orientation. Independence for them did not simply mean the end of the British Raj. It also meant economic, social and political justice for the toiling millions. And so they plunged into organizing the basic classes.

Shamrao first worked among the textile workers and leather workers of Mumbai, and then concentrated on organizing the workers at Ambarnath in Thane district, about sixty kilometers from Mumbai. The strike struggles of the Ambarnath workers, and especially those of the large Wimco Match Factory, were bitterly fought to victory during 1934-38 under Shamrao's leadership. They included a six-month long strike at Wimco in 1936, which resulted in severe repression and massive victimization of the workers. But many of the victimized workers, who themselves hailed from peasant families, started organizing the peasantry in the adjoining tehsils of Kalyan, Murbad and Shahapur. During the period of these working class struggles Shamrao was elected general secretary of the National Trade Union Federation and later joint secretary of the AITUC.

Big struggles were waged by the peasantry from 1937-39 against the oppression of landlords, the most famous of which was the struggle against the false weights and measures used by landlords to loot the peasants through exorbitant rents, which were then paid in

kind. The struggle was successful, and the government was forced to introduce official and accurate weights and measures. With this success, the peasant movement spread, and large conventions of thousands were held in Kalyan and Murbad tehsils, where an organization called the Shetkari Sangh was formed under Shamrao's leadership.

INDEPENDENT LABOUR PARTY, STRUGGLE AGAINST *KHOTI* SYSTEM

In the mid-1930s Shamrao joined the Independent Labour Party founded by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, and for a time was also its secretary. This brought him into the anti-caste struggle and, despite their later political differences, his relations with Ambedkar remained cordial to the end. In 1937, Shamrao was elected to the Bombay Legislative Assembly (Governor-in-Council) on the Independent Labour Party ticket from Ratnagiri district in Konkan. He distinguished himself in the Assembly by his incisive speeches in defence of the workers, peasants, dalits and the downtrodden.

In the Bombay Assembly, Ambedkar moved a Bill demanding the abolition of the *khoti* system of landlordism that was then widely prevalent in the Konkan region. In support of this Bill, Shamrao organized a large rally of over 10,000 peasants to the Assembly from Ratnagiri district. The remarkable feature of this rally was that the peasants had all come to Mumbai by boat, via the sea route. As a result of later struggles, the *khoti* system of landlordism was eventually abolished by law.

Among the other leaders of this struggle were R.B. More, a close associate of Ambedkar and the main organizer of the historic Chowdar lake satyagraha at Mahad, who later joined the Communist Party and was the founder and first editor of the CPI(M) state weekly *Jeevanmarg*, and Narayan Nagu Patil, who became one of the founders of the Peasants' and Workers' Party in Raigad district.

In July 1938, Shamrao was elected as the Indian workers' delegate to the international labour conference of the ILO at Geneva, where he made a brilliant speech analyzing the miserable conditions of the working class in India. Parts of this speech have been quoted by Rajani Palme Dutt in his classic, *India Today* (second edition, pp. 388-89).

LITERACY CAMPAIGN, ORGANISING DOMESTIC WORKERS

Godavari distinguished herself in the Servants of India Society by organizing a massive adult literacy campaign in the working class areas of Mumbai in 1937-38, this being perhaps the first ever organised literacy campaign in Maharashtra. It was so successful that

the Congress chief minister of Bombay state, B.G. Kher, offered to make her the chairperson of a new department of adult literacy to be started by the state government. But by this time Godavari was already becoming more radical in her views, and while declining the offer, she is said to have told the chief minister in her inimitable style that "there are some people yet who cannot be purchased"!

Godavari also made her mark in the trade union movement when she organized a new section, that of domestic workers. And in 1938, she astounded many by leading a 10,000-strong demonstration of domestic workers on the same day that the working class of Mumbai condemned the anti-worker Black Act. In 1938-39, Godavari helped in organizing the peasantry in Kalyan and Murbad tehsils of Thane district and led their struggles.

Godavari Gokhale and Shamrao Parulekar were married on May 24, 1939, and this was the beginning of a remarkable political and personal partnership that was to last for more than twenty-five years.

JOINING THE COMMUNIST PARTY, ONSET OF SECOND WORLD WAR

Through the rich experience that both Godavari and Shamrao gained from all the above struggles and campaigns, an intense ideological churning was taking place in their minds. They began to increasingly perceive the inbuilt limitations of both the Servants of India Society and the Independent Labour Party, and realized that these could not be the true vehicles of the radical social change that they ardently desired.

Both of them had already begun their study of Marxism and had started applying it to their own experience of class struggle. Shamrao was himself a serious student of philosophy and he firmly rejected all idealist and bourgeois philosophical currents and consciously accepted Marxist philosophy as his true guide. It was this inexorable process that finally led them to join the Communist Party in 1938-39. The onset of the Second World War set the seal on this process, and it also led to a deep crisis in the Servants of India Society from which it never recovered.

In a biography of N.M. Joshi that was published in 1972, V.B. Karnik devotes an entire chapter to the crisis that developed in the Society as a result of the war. Tracing its genesis to the early 1930s, he writes,

In that period half a dozen new members had been admitted into the Society. They were young men intent upon following a militant line in the social, economic and political fields. They did not believe in the old, moderate, constitutional path. They wanted the Society to abandon that path, move with the times and participate in the

mass actions that were developing in the country. . . . The most militant, active and energetic amongst them was Mr S.V. Parulekar. Later he joined the Communist Party, and later still, he became a member of the more militant Marxist Communist Party. He was active in the trade union and peasant movement. . . . His social and political opinions were at variance with the accepted views of the Society. . . . Some other younger members like Miss Godavari Gokhale, who was admitted as a member of the Society on the recommendation of Joshi, and who later married Mr Parulekar, and became active along with him in the Leftist Communist movement, were also carrying on their activities in a manner not consistent with the established tradition of the Society.

An interesting anecdote cited by Karnik in this chapter deals with a speech made by Shamrao before the workers of the Wimco Factory at Ambarnath. The speech so incensed the local Congress leaders that they directly complained to Mahatma Gandhi himself. Mahatma Gandhi wrote to N.M. Joshi asking for a report of what exactly Shamrao said in that speech. On December 4, 1938, Joshi wrote back to Mahatma Gandhi, and this letter is reproduced in the book. In that letter, Joshi not only strongly defended Shamrao but also cast aspersions on the Congress leaders who had complained to the Mahatma!

When the Second World War broke out, three divergent views came into sharp focus within the Servants of India Society. The first, that of extending unconditional support to Britain in its war efforts, was taken by the top leadership, persons like V.S. Srinivas Shastri and H.N. Kunzru. The second, that of extending conditional support, was taken by N.M. Joshi and others. And the third, that of unmitigated opposition, was that of Shamrao and Godavari Parulekar and their supporters.

The third group wrote a confidential letter on September 18, 1939, for selective circulation. It was signed by the Parulekars and three others. The letter, authored by Shamrao, was illuminating in its clarity and said,

Britain is involved in a war. Our national interests conflict with those of Britain. . . . Our relations are clearly those between the exploiter and the exploited. Any support from us to Britain will result in strengthening the hands of the exploiters. Crises such as these are rare in the history of a nation. Not to take advantage of such a crisis will amount to a gross betrayal of our national interests which are of primary importance. We, therefore, think that our attitude towards the war should be that of unmitigated opposition. It is therefore up to us to carry on persistent agitation and propaganda against the policy of giving any kind of help to

Britain. Our sympathies are entirely with the Polish people, but we are as much opposed to Britain as we are to Germany.

IN BRITISH JAILS FOR LEADING ANTI-WAR CAMPAIGN

But the Parulekars did not stop at merely circulating letters expressing their opposition to the imperialist war. They directly plunged into the anti-war campaign, touring various places and making fiery speeches advocating uncompromising resistance to the British war efforts. They also exposed the repression, injustice and exploitation of British imperialist rule over India. Along with other leaders of the Communist Party, they helped in organizing the first anti-war strike of the working class in Mumbai.

On March 3, 1940, the textile workers' strike for increased dearness allowance began in Mumbai. Within a week, top leaders of the Communist Party, like B.T. Ranadive, S.A. Dange, S.S. Mirajkar and others were put behind bars. The next week, Shamrao and other leaders were also arrested for their anti-war speeches. It was then left to Godavari and other comrades to lead the 40-day textile workers' strike, a task that she fulfilled with grit and determination. Soon after this, Godavari was also detained for her anti-war propaganda. Hundreds of leading Communists from all over the country were flung into British jails for over two years, from 1940-42, for their opposition to British war efforts. They included the Parulekars.

With the arrest of the Parulekars in 1940, the moderate leadership of the Servants of India Society also cracked down upon them and terminated their membership of the Society. Joshi, who stood by them till the end, also severed his association with the Society.

Thus ended a significant chapter in the lives of Shamrao and Godavari. But a new, more challenging and truly historic chapter was about to begin.

FOUNDING OF THE MAHARASHTRA RAJYA KISAN SABHA

After their release from jail in 1942, Shamrao and Godavari switched over completely to organizing the peasantry, to which they devoted the rest of their lives. While explaining this decision in later years to this author and to many others, Godavari always used to stress a simple truth: "Our country has 70 per cent of its people belonging to the peasantry. If this huge mass is not brought to the Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party through its own experience of struggle and through concerted political education, our objective of the Indian revolution will only remain on paper! Take the experience of our neighbour China. Why did the revolution succeed, overcoming all

difficulties, in that country which is even more vast than ours? One of the key reasons is that there the Communist Party under Mao Tsetung brought the vast peasantry along with the working class into revolutionary struggle. Without building a powerful and militant peasant Kisan Sabha, without politically awakening the peasantry and bringing it under the influence of the Communist Party, a socialist revolution in India is impossible!"

The All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) had chosen Shamrao to be its organizer in Maharashtra. The AIKS had been formed at its Lucknow conference on April 11, 1936. But for a few years after that, the AIKS had no movement or organization in Maharashtra. The Parulekars began this work in right earnest after 1942. For three years, they moved in several districts, gave impetus to peasant struggles and made great efforts to set up the Kisan Sabha. In 1944, the Kisan Sabha was started in the Kalyan, Murbad and Shahapur tehsils of Thane district.

In the seventh conference of the AIKS held at Bhakna Kalan in Punjab in April 1943, Shamrao was elected to the Central Kisan Council (CKC). In its eighth conference at Vijayawada in Andhra in March 1944, Shamrao was elected AIKS treasurer. Later, he continued to be in the top AIKS leadership as joint secretary or vice president. Shamrao and Godavari met with leaders like P. Sundarayya and M. Basavapunaiah, with whom they continued to have very close relations throughout their lives.

The Parulekars then decided to hold the first conference of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha. Godavari has recorded that she, along with other activists, covered over 700 villages on foot and addressed 160 public meetings for this conference. The Lal Bavra Kalapathak of the Communist Party, led by cultural stalwarts like Amar Shaikh, Annabhau Sathe and D.N. Gavhankar toured far and wide to propagate this conference. The foundation conference of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha was held on January 12, 1945, at Titwala in Thane district in the midst of a very favourable political situation.

The Second World War was coming to an end. Under the leadership of Joseph Stalin, the Red Army, the Communist Party and the people of the Soviet Union, after going through unimaginable ordeals, were on the verge of a historic victory over Hitler's Nazi Germany. China, Vietnam and Korea were on the threshold of their own revolutions. Although British imperialism was among the victors in the World War, it had been greatly weakened. In such a situation, the Indian freedom struggle got a big boost. People's discontent, which had been repressed by the British regime in the war situation, burst out into the

open. Big struggles broke out all over the country under the leadership of the Communist Party, AITUC and AIKS.

More than 7,000 poor and middle peasants and agricultural workers from several districts attended this first state conference of the Kisan Sabha. Among the top leaders who addressed the conference were Sundarayya, Ranadive, P. Krishna Pillai, M.A. Rasul, Teja Singh Swatantra and N.M. Joshi. The conference elected a 33-member state council. Buva Navale from Akole tehsil of Ahmednagar district was elected the first president, Shamrao Parulekar was elected the first general secretary and Godavari Parulekar was elected the first joint secretary of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha.

FIRST CONTACTS WITH WARLI ADIVASIS

It was to conduct propaganda for the first state conference of the Kisan Sabha that Shamrao visited the adivasi belt of Thane district for the first time in December 1944. The predominant tribe in this area was known as the Warli tribe. Around 300 adivasis gathered for the meeting and told Shamrao of the medieval exploitation and inhuman atrocities that were being heaped on them by the landlords and moneylenders for years together. Shamrao was appalled at seeing the terrible landlord oppression that the adivasis had been facing for nearly a century.

Shamrao called upon them to send representatives to the Titwala conference. They agreed on one condition – that Kisan Sabha workers must come to help them in their struggle. Shamrao agreed. Fifteen tribal delegates from this area attended the Titwala conference. It was these fifteen delegates, together with thousands of their adivasi brethren, who within six months were to begin a revolt that would be written in golden letters in the history of the peasant movement of India. Inspired by the conference, the adivasis took back with them the red flag, and appealed to Kisan Sabha workers to come and lead their struggles.

In 1947, just when the first phase of the Adivasi Revolt was culminating in a hard-earned victory, Shamrao Parulekar wrote a remarkable book in English titled *Revolt of the Warlis*. It analyzed the entire struggle from the detached and objective standpoint of a progressive historian, although he was himself one of the key leaders of this struggle.

Godavari Parulekar later wrote her celebrated book *Adivasis Revolt* in jail in the mid-1960s. It was first published in Marathi in 1970, and later translated into English and several other Indian languages. Her book not only described the heroic revolt, but also included several moving personal experiences of this movement which only she could

have related because of her complete identification with the lives of the adivasis.

In his book, *Revolt of the Warlis*, Shamrao Parulekar graphically described the first stirrings of the revolt:

The conference had a magical effect on the Warlis. It inspired and transformed them. One of them, Mahya Dhangda of Zari, who had never spoken more than a few words in all his life, volunteered to speak on the resolution on abolition of forced labour. He trembled while he spoke but he spoke with determination. His pent-up feelings had found an outlet and they burst out in torrents. He held the conference spellbound by his pathetic narration. In conclusion he solemnly declared that the Warlis would end serfdom and resist their oppressors.

The Warlis understood the significance of the resolution and the conference quite differently from what the rest did. He understood his own declaration to end forced labour as a solemn pledge given to his fellow brethren which he must honour at any sacrifice and risk. The Warlis who returned home from the conference were not the same as those who had attended it. The conference had changed them beyond recognition. They no longer trembled in the presence of their oppressors but started defying them. They had carried with them a few Red Flags which had decorated the pandal of the conference. They felt that these would serve as their guide, friend and philosopher. They discarded their routine mode of life and went as missionaries from village to village, holding group meetings of Warli peasants and preaching the message of the conference. The message stirred the whole mass of Warli peasants and the whole jungle tract vibrated with its echo.

INHUMAN EXPLOITATION, UNENDING TORTURE

Before coming to the next stage of the Adivasi Revolt, it is necessary to see the abominable nature of the exploitation, atrocities and repression that was prevalent in the area. Without this, it is difficult to understand the decisive importance of this revolt and the victories that it gained.

A century ago, the Adivasis were the owners of all the land, but they were gradually expropriated of all that they owned by the landlords and moneylenders who were fully backed by the British regime. By 1945, just 6.8 per cent of cultivated land in Dahanu tehsil and 2.2 per cent of cultivated land in Umbargaon tehsil was held by adivasis, the rest being owned by the rapacious landlords and moneylenders.

After robbing the adivasi of his land, the landlord made him his serf and introduced serf tenure in the area. Forced labour was extracted from the adivasi, who had to render all services to the landlord free. The system of debt slavery began. The wife of the debt slave was also the slave of the landlord and he regularly used her as his mistress. Massive rents and illegal exactions abounded. Exploitation and oppression by forest contractors and the government forest department went on relentlessly. The courts, police and administration were completely controlled by landlords. There was no redress anywhere. All this led to grinding poverty of the lakhs of adivasis on the one hand and to untold wealth of the handful of landlords on the other. As a result, the tyranny and oppression of landlords knew no bounds.

In *Adivasis Revolt*, Godavari Parulekar narrates some shocking instances of this torture:

One day, Roopji had not been able to resist the temptation of eating a mango. Out of the blue the watchman had pounced on him, given him a hard blow and dragged him before the landlord, taking the mango with him as evidence of the crime. . . . Roopji was tied to the tree and whipped mercilessly till the flesh of his back split open. He howled like an animal under this beating, but nobody dared to go to his aid. . . . Another adivasi was hung by his toes to a tree and a fire with chillies in it was lit directly below him. While the acrid smoke from the fire suffocated him, they began whipping him on his back. . . . In those days most landlords and moneylenders kept a whip ready on the front porches of their houses. These whips were burning symbols to the Warlis of their slavery.

. . . The Warli women were not spared from torture either. Landlords considered their tenants' wives and the wives of their debt-slaves to be their own personal property. They firmly believed that they had the hereditary right to enjoy these women whenever it pleased them to do so. It was a common thing for them to make obscene remarks to the women who worked for them, to touch them, pinch them, push them and get them alone into the corners to molest them. . . . A woman was carrying a baby of about four or five days old in her arms. Three days after she had delivered the baby the landlord had ordered her to report for work. When she failed to turn up, he had enticed her into his house with conciliatory words and then slapped her again and again while she held her baby in her arms. He flung obscenities at her and ordered her to come to work the next day. When she did not, the landlord beat up her husband.

. . . A plough was being driven in the field. One of the two bullocks yoked up to a plough was released and an adivasi named Zhipper was yoked in its place and ordered to plough with a bullock on the other side. The tired Zhipper could barely pull the plough. As punishment for this, the foreman pierced him with a goad causing blood to spurt out. Even then Zhipper somehow managed to pull the plough twice round the field. After this the Mehta shouted, 'Will you shirk your work again?' Then, turning to the other Warlis he said, 'Have a good look. This will be your punishment also if you don't work properly.'

It was this same Zhipper Jawaliya who later played a militant role in the Adivasi Revolt. He died a few years ago as an esteemed member of the CPI(M) and was felicitated by Harkishan Singh Surjeet in the Talasari rally in 1995.

Two more instances written about by Godavari are enough to make anyone's blood boil with rage.

Once a whole furnace-load of coal was inadvertently spoilt. The owner was so furious at this that he picked up one of the adivasis and hurled him into the furnace. The adivasi burned to death. Landlords did not hesitate even to burn adivasis alive. This is the climax of bestiality.

I was told of another incident where a brother of an Adivasi by name Janu was buried alive. Janu's brother's wife was a good-looking woman. One night, when the husband was away, she was dragged off to the landlord's house. . . . On his return the next day the woman's husband heard the whole story. He was a spirited fellow. He gathered the village elders, elected leaders and the panch of the tribe together and made a noise about the affair. When the landlord heard of this, he dragged away the wife before the very eyes of the husband. A loud altercation and violent scuffle followed, but the Warlis could do nothing. The landlord had a ditch dug in the ground and buried the Warli alive in it. Janu, his brother was threatened with dire consequences if he allowed a single word of his brother's fate to escape him. 'If anybody comes to know of this, I will chop off your arms and legs,' the landlord said. Janu fled the village. So did his brother's wife. Everybody in the village was scared into silence. Yet, somehow, the story got around. A farce of a police inquiry took place followed by a trial in which the civil surgeon testified that the bones in the pit where Janu's brother had been buried, were of an animal and not of a human being. The landlord was acquitted.

THE RED FLAG AND THE MESSAGE OF LIBERATION

After similarly describing the horrendous conditions of the adivasis, Shamrao wrote,

In short this was the world in which these aboriginal hill tribes lived. They lived in the midst of the most brutal oppression known to the history of mankind. It was a world in which poverty, misery and destitution knew no limits. The aboriginal hill tribes had reached the lowest depths of moral degradation. They meekly submitted to the tyranny of the landlords in whose presence they trembled. They were timid and suffered in silence what even animals would have tried to resist. In this world there was none to help them and they were therefore overpowered with a sense of utter helplessness. They thought that their deliverance would never come. The Red Flag entered this world with its message of liberation in 1945.

On May 23, 1945, a conference of over 5,000 adivasis, 500 of them women, was held at the village Zari in Umbargaon (now Talasari) tehsil. It was addressed by Shamrao and Godavari, and it gave the clarion call to launch an uncompromising struggle around four main and simple slogans. These were: Do not cultivate the private land of the landlord unless he pays in cash the daily wage of 12 annas. Do not render any free service to the landlord. Resist him if he assaults you. You must all unite.

Thus began the famed Warli Adivasi Revolt against a century of serfdom, bonded labour, debt slavery, exorbitant rents and, above all, inhuman oppression and exploitation by landlords, money lenders and forest contractors. All of them were backed to the hilt by the ruthless and repressive state machinery that had long been in the hands of British imperialism. Godavari extensively toured the area and truly integrated herself with the adivasis, becoming one of them, sharing their trials and tribulations, joys and sorrows.

ABOLITION OF SERF TENURE AND FORCED LABOUR

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

The following month, in June 1945, with the onset of the monsoons, the adivasis of Umbargaon tehsil proceeded to abolish serf tenure as well. They refused to cultivate the lands of the landlords free, and demanded wages at rates fixed by the Kisan Sabha. In the face of this

revolt of unprecedented intensity, the landlords had no choice but to yield. In September and October 1945, the revolt inexorably spread to the adjoining Dahanu tehsil. Here also a gigantic mass upheaval took place and forced labour as well as serf tenure were ended. But the militant adivasis of Dahanu went a step further. Mobilising in their thousands, they moved through every village and hamlet in the tehsil in four batches and liberated thousands of debt slaves from their century-old bondage.

THE FIRST MARTYRS

The first phase of the Adivasi Revolt thus ended in glorious victory. The second and more difficult phase began in October 1945, when the Warlis went on strike demanding a minimum wage of Rs 2.50 for cutting 500 pounds of grass, with the strike total in both tehsils. This time the landlords refused to yield. In collusion with the British police machinery, a plot was hatched.

A false message was sent to the adivasis over a distance of over 1,500 square miles that Godavari was going to address a meeting on the night of October 10 at Talwada, but the landlords were planning to attack her, and so the Red Flag had directed all adivasis to reach there with lathis and sickles to defend her. This message went to every hamlet and by midnight over 30,000 adivasi peasants gathered at Talwada, many of them walking more than 50 km to reach there. At the same time, the police were informed that a huge armed adivasi mob had gathered for killing the landlords. The treacherous plot worked. Firing by the British regime was its culmination.

Shamrao movingly describes what happened:

Armed police arrived at the place of the meeting at about midnight on October 10 and opened fire on the peaceful gathering of the Warlis from the roof of a moving motor van. The gathering did not disperse though one of them was killed and a few were wounded in the firing. The police continued to fire at intervals indiscriminately and in all directions from a moving van till 3 pm on October 11. They opened fire thrice during the interval of 15 hours on the same gathering at the same spot. Five Warlis were killed in the firing. The number of wounded was large. Among the wounded there was a boy of 12 years of age. And still the gathering refused to disperse.

This episode was a thrilling exhibition of the reckless defiance of death by the Warli, his loyalty to the Red Flag and the birth of rare courage in him. For 15 hours he had defied bullets which were showered on him from time to time. Firing failed to influence him to move from the place and it was difficult to guess how long he would

have continued to remain there if the Kisan Sabha worker had not arrived there at 3 pm on October 11 and dispersed the gathering.

For 15 hours they had protected the Red Flag which they had hoisted by shielding it with their bodies. As the police van used to pass by the spot and the police opened fire, they crowded round the Red Flag. They thought that the police were aiming to shoot the Red Flag, and they felt it to be their sacred duty to protect it at the cost of their lives. Firing did not and could not have succeeded in dispersing the meeting. A word from the Red Flag for dispersal was necessary for the purpose. . . . They would rather pay any amount of price in life rather than disperse without the permission of the Red Flag.

Their hearts full of deep hatred and intense anger against their class enemies, the adivasis left. But they vowed to continue the struggle with all the strength at their command. After the October 10 firing, the government let loose a reign of terror. Thousands of adivasis were put behind bars, beaten and tortured. Their wives were threatened with rape. In the entire area, the right to assembly was banned for two months. Shamrao, Godavari and other leading comrades were externed from the area.

But in spite of all this repression, the strike went on undeterred. Finally the landlords were forced to concede the demand for fair wages. The second phase of the Adivasi Revolt had achieved victory, braving cruel state repression and police firing. A massive victory rally was held at Mahalaxmi on January 21, 1946, on Lenin's death anniversary. The historic nature of the victories that they had gained in the teeth of police and landlord repression had imbued the Adivasis with tremendous self-confidence. They had become aware of the mighty strength of their own unity. Now the Kisan Sabha took up the next question, that of rent. It made several legitimate demands for rent reduction and banning of all forcible collections by landlords. These demands also had to be conceded.

The Mahalaxmi rally also gave a call for the collection of one rupee from each family for the Communist Party struggle fund. Everyone responded enthusiastically and the tradition of regular fund collection from the people for the Red Flag began.

The blood of the first martyrs of the Adivasi Revolt in Thane district was shed on October 10, 1945. Jethya Gangad and four others were gunned down under British rule. After this successive Congress regimes also resorted to police firing several times. The Shiv Sena-BJP state government followed suit in 1997 and Lakshya Beej and Babu Kharpade were shot to death by its police. There have been 59 such martyrs of the Red Flag in Thane district so far. Every year, October 10

is regularly observed as Martyrs Day to pay homage to their memory and to take a vow to carry forward their struggle.

CONGRESS REGIME CALLS IN BRITISH ARMY FOR REPRESSION

Nine months later, another big struggle began in October 1946 for increased wages for grass-cutting and for work in the forest. The demands were met and an agreement with the landlords was reached on November 10, 1946. Actually that should have been the end of the matter. But without any reason whatsoever, the Congress regime declared an Emergency in the entire Adivasi area on November 14. On November 21, Shamrao and Godavari were externed from Thane district and over 200 leading Adivasi cadres were summarily arrested. The 'Goonda Act' was imposed. Savage repression was unleashed.

But this time it was not the British government, but the interim Congress government led by chief minister B.G. Kher and home minister Morarji Desai that was the culprit. They too tried to drown the Adivasi Revolt in blood. Displaying its true class colours, the Congress government in a rabidly anti-communist press release issued on December 13, 1946, charged the Adivasi Revolt of being "the culmination of the undesirable activities of those who advocated violence to bring about a political change, viz. the ushering in of a Communist state in India." Morarji Desai declared in a press conference that "he had no interest whatsoever in any agreement concluded with the Communists. Nothing that helps the Communists in their destructive activities will be tolerated." As a reply to this reign of terror, over 20,000 adivasis struck work in Umbargaon, Dahanu and Palghar tehsils.

The new regime now went to the extent of sending for the British Army to crush the adivasi peasants. But a tremendous groundswell of public opinion denounced the interim Congress regime and its uncalled-for action against the savagely exploited, defenceless adivasis struggling for eminently just demands. Sections of the nationalist press also took the government to task. The Communist Party and the working class of Mumbai and Thane districts issued a stern warning to the government to desist from sending the British Army to crush the adivasi peasantry and threatened to launch a general strike if the Army was sent. This was an excellent example of worker-peasant unity in action. It was only a few months ago in February 1946 that the working class of Mumbai under the leadership of the Communist Party had come out on the streets in their thousands to support the historic revolt of the Royal Indian Navy ratings, and hundreds of workers had been killed in the unprecedented repression let loose by the hated British regime.

While the Army had already reached Kalyan, the government was forced to reverse its decision to send it to the Adivasi belt within just four days! The government then tried yet another tack. It summoned the notorious British police officer Moore Gilbert to repress the revolt. Moore Gilbert had played an extremely savage role in trying to suppress the Parallel Government that had been set up in Satara district during 1943-46 under the leadership of Krantisimha Nana Patil. This also led to another mass public uproar and he had to be recalled within three days! Finally the government sent in a contingent of 1,000 armed police. Police brutality and landlord repression reached new depths. In this third phase of the revolt thousands of Adivasis were jailed. Hundreds were tortured. Their women were ravaged. Police firing in Nanivali and other places claimed many more adivasi martyrs.

All this naked display of the anti-communism of the Congress regime was a natural corollary to its full support to the landlords and moneylenders. Thus, even before the attainment of independence, the Congress had come out in its true colours as the political agent of the exploiting classes who were soon to rule India. In more contemporary times, the BJP has followed in similar fashion.

But now the adivasis, who up to then had shown exemplary restraint in the struggle, struck back in self-defence, and with force. They launched a campaign of burning down the palatial farm-houses of the landlords and money lenders. These had been the symbols of their humiliation, the places where they had been tortured, where their women had been ravished for over a century. With inextinguishable hatred in their hearts, they razed hundreds of these abodes to the ground.

Simultaneously, to counter the growing state repression, thousands of young adivasi men formed militant teams which went from village to village to raise the morale of their people and give them courage to face the ordeal. A new awakening based on class consciousness had been born in the adivasi belt. It was this contribution of the Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party that steeled the people even further in their struggle.

The government and the landlords were thoroughly defeated. On April 5, 1947, the Chief Minister had to announce a policy of reconciliation towards the adivasis and had to withdraw all repressive measures as an earnest of his intentions. The immediate demands of the struggle, including the minimum wage and others, were conceded. Many of the long-term demands centering around land ownership were conceded as a result of later struggles, and tenancy laws and other legislation to that effect was brought in.

A REMARKABLE FEATURE OF THE REVOLT

A remarkable feature of the Adivasi Revolt was that both Shamrao and Godavari Parulekar were not allowed to openly set foot in Thane district during the entire period of the struggle from November 21, 1946, to January 14, 1953. From 1946-48 they were exterred, from 1948-51 they were underground, and from 1951-53 they were detained.

And yet such was the clear direction and firm foundation that they had given to the struggle in 1945-46, so strong was the base of the Communist Party and the Kisan Sabha that was laid during this short period, and so steeled was the leadership that had been forged among the adivasis themselves in the furnace of this struggle, that the Adivasi Revolt continued unabated even in spite of their physical absence from the scene. Godavari writes movingly about their return:

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

It is this humility that is the hallmark of true greatness.

GAINS AND LEGACY

It is best that the manifold gains and the rich legacy of the Adivasi Revolt are summed up in the words of the leaders of this struggle themselves. Shamrao Parulekar writes,

Within a short span the struggle won memorable victories. Serf tenure was uprooted root and branch. Forced labour was ended. Debt slaves were liberated. Their womenfolk were rescued. Assaults and torture was stopped. The movement sharpened the understanding and virgin intellect of the Warlis. It brought to the surface persons from their ranks who could take the initiative and lead it. . . . The experience of the bitter struggle through which the Warli had to wade, rapidly transformed him. His transformation has been so radical that he became a new being. Straight from infancy he stepped into maturity.

Godavari Parulekar adds,

In this struggle, the adivasis rose to magnificent heights of courage while the government, landlords and moneylenders sunk to the very depths of inhumanity in their reign of repression. Those who had marched into the battlefield with unlimited powers and money, and were aided by armed police and goondas, were made to bite the dust before half-naked, half-starved men and women, whose only weapons were a capacity for self-sacrifice, and invulnerable solidarity and unflinching dedication. Out of this battle arose the class conscious peasant.

. . . Honour and credit for the few concessions that have been given to the peasants in Maharashtra must go, in large measure, to the Warlis and their struggle. The minimum wages act, increase in the wages of farm labourers, the tenancy act, decrease in rents claimed from tenants, are some of the concessions that have been legally granted to the other peasants in Maharashtra as well. However, due to the lack of organization among those peasants, these concessions have remained mere promises on paper. It is only then that the adivasis will feel that their struggle has really been worthwhile when peasants in Maharashtra build their militant organization, and get ready to take a step forward on the strength of their unity. Only then will they reap the real joy of having reached a cherished goal.

. . . The main change in the Warli is the awakening of his pride and self-consciousness as a human being. His manner and deportment reflect the confidence he has gained out of the knowledge of his strength as a member of an organization. He has lost his fear and inferiority complex. He has become ambitious. He is consumed by a desire to understand world politics. The adivasi who has stood firm against injustice, will not stop where he is. He will advance. He has been well-prepared over the years, and especially during the struggle, and it is this preparation, this maturity, which is the real achievement both for us and for him.

The foundation of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha and the Warli Adivasi Revolt were undoubtedly the culmination of the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggle waged by Shamrao and Godavari in the pre-independence era. But their later years were no less significant, and may be briefly recounted to complete the picture of their rich lives.

INDEPENDENCE, REPRESSION AND ELECTIONS

On August 15, 1947, independence dawned over India at last. But on that day, over 600 adivasis from Thane district woke up to freedom in Congress jails, as did thousands of other Communists all across the

country. The most notable among them was, of course, another legendary leader of the Indian people – A.K. Gopalan.

1948-51 was a time of further repression against the Communists, following the second Party Congress at Calcutta in February 1948. The Telangana, Tebhaga and other peasant struggles were even then mobilizing thousands of militants. Shamrao and Godavari remained underground during this period, and Shamrao ably carried out the responsibility as state secretary of the Party during this difficult period.

The first general elections in 1951-52 were held when the Parulekars were still in jail. The Communist Party became the main opposition party in the Lok Sabha. The inner-Party struggle had begun and the Dange leadership denied the Party ticket to Shamrao and Godavari. But under the advice of Ranadive and Sundarayya, both of them fought the Vidhan Sabha elections from jail. They lost narrowly, mainly because the votes of thousands of illiterate adivasis were declared invalid. Although Congress candidates were elected, the Red Flag showed its prowess.

THE FIFTIES

In the 1950s the broadening and deepening of the adivasi struggle took place to include new and vital issues like land and forest plots. Simultaneous consolidation and expansion of the Party and Kisan Sabha was initiated in Thane district. Shamrao and Godavari always paid great attention to the political education of the adivasi comrades, most of whom were completely illiterate in those times. Regular political classes were held where elementary concepts were simply explained. The essence of Marxism and the principles of the Communist Party were taught. Godavari has written an entire chapter in her book on this aspect and it makes very interesting reading.

The liberation of large parts of Dadra and Nagarhaveli from Portuguese rule from July 24 to August 3, 1954, under the armed leadership of the Communist Party was another important event. This struggle was directly led by Shamrao and Godavari. L.B. Dhangar and hundreds of adivasi comrades participated in this liberation struggle.

The holding of the thirteenth All India Kisan Sabha conference at Dahanu from May 19-22, 1955, braving all manner of repression and obstacles by the government was yet another significant event that helped to strengthen the movement. Towering leaders of the AIKS like Sundarayya, A.K. Gopalan, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Hare Krishna Konar, N. Prasad Rao, M. Abdulla Rasool, Bankim Mukherjee, Harkishan Singh Surjeet and others attended the conference which was accompanied by a massive rally. Shamrao and Godavari were the moving spirits behind the organization of this conference. Another

legendary leader who spearheaded the four year-old Parallel Government (Prati Sarkar) in Satara against British rule in the mid-1940s, Krantisimha Nana Patil was elected AIKS president in this session.

The massive movement for the demand of Samyukta Maharashtra as part of the democratic struggle for linguistic states rocked Maharashtra from 1956 to 1960. An unprecedented 105 martyrs were killed in police firing in Mumbai in the course of this struggle. The movement spread across the whole state and Thane district was no exception. A huge convention for Samyukta Maharashtra was held at Shirgaon by the Party. Over 1,200 Adivasi comrades were arrested and many of them tortured. It was as a result of this movement that several Marathi-speaking villages in Umbargaon tehsil were incorporated in the new state of Maharashtra on May 1, 1960. This became the new Talasari tehsil, which has for long been the strongest base of the Party in Thane district.

It was also due to this movement that several communists and socialists were elected to parliament and to the assembly in the elections of 1957. Shamrao was elected to the Lok Sabha from Thane district and over the next five years he made his mark in Parliament as a fearless champion of the working people.

In 1958 a big joint statewide struggle for land was launched in Maharashtra. The significant aspect of this struggle was that blue flags of the Republican Party led by Karmaveer Dadasaheb Gaikwad and red flags of the Communist Party led by Shamrao, Godavari, Nana Patil, R.B. More and others came together in it. Thousands of dalits, adivasis and other landless took part in the satyagrahas and filled the jails. The government was forced to come out with concessions.

In 1960, the Kisan Sabha led by Shamrao and Godavari took up the vital demand of vesting forest plots in the names of the adivasis who have been cultivating it for decades. Thousands of acres of lands were vested in the name of adivasis as a result of the struggle, until the draconian Forest Conservation Act of 1980 put a stop to the entire process. Ever since, large struggles of adivasis have been led by the CPI(M), AIKS and AIAWU in several districts of Maharashtra to press this demand. The Tribal Forest Rights Act passed by parliament in December 2006 is a ray of hope, but it is scandalous that at the moment of writing this piece, the Act is yet to be notified by the central government although a year has passed since its passage.

INNER-PARTY STRUGGLE

The late 1950s and early 1960s were years of intense inner-party struggle in the CPI. But even before that, the Party and the movement

in Thane district had constantly borne the brunt of the revisionist Dange leadership, which in 1954 had gone to the extent of appointing a commission to check the genuineness of the Party membership of the adivasi comrades. This commission comprised Shamrao Parulekar, Krishna Khopkar and Ramakant Gupte, and after interviewing all the adivasi Party members in Thane district, it unanimously testified not only to their genuineness but also to their high quality.

When the Party split in 1964, almost the entire Party in Thane district, led by the Parulekars, unswervingly came over to the CPI(M). The first state conference of the CPI(M) in Maharashtra was aptly held at Talasari in Thane district. But both Shamrao and Godavari were among the 163 leaders of the Party in Maharashtra who were then in jail. S.Y. Kolhatkar was elected the first state secretary of the CPI(M) and both Shamrao and Godavari were elected to the state secretariat.

In the wake of the India-China border conflict, several leading communists in the country were detained under the Defence of India Rules on November 7, 1962. They included Ranadive, the Parulekars and many other leaders who were later to form the CPI(M). At the seventh Party Congress at Calcutta in November 1964, Ranadive was among the nine members of the first Polit Bureau of the Party and Kolhatkar and Shamrao Parulekar, who was then in detention, were elected to the first Central Committee of the Party.

TRAGEDY

But tragedy struck within months of this event, when Shamrao suddenly died of a massive heart attack on August 3, 1965, in the Arthur Road Jail in Mumbai. It was a shattering blow for Godavari, who was also in the same jail at the time. It took her several months to recover from this shock. In a sense, it would be true to say that she never fully recovered from this loss. Every year thereafter on August 3, she always made it a point to be alone at home that day with her memories.

When Shamrao died, most of the Party leadership in Maharashtra was in detention. At such a time it was none other than the CPI(M) general secretary Sundarayya and his wife Leela Sundarayya who specially took time off to come to Mumbai to stay with Godavari for over a week to help her get over her deep loss. It was a remarkable example of communist comradeship. Since both Shamrao and Godavari had devoted all their time to the Party, they had remained childless by choice.

A unique partnership had come to an end. Paying warm tributes to Shamrao in a huge condolence meeting, former AIKS president Krantisimha Nana Patil remarked, "One barrel of this double-barreled

gun has been silenced for ever." On August 4, 1965, distinguished legislators like Pralhad Keshav Atre, Krishnarao Dhulup, S.G. Patkar and others paid fulsome and emotional homage to Shamrao in the state assembly.

The CPI(M) Polit Bureau, the AIKS centre and the Party and mass organizations in Maharashtra warmly recalled Shamrao's sterling contributions to the communist and kisan movement. Shamrao's relatively early death at the age of 63 created a big void in the Party and Kisan movement in Maharashtra, which proved difficult to fill.

PRESIDENT OF THE ALL INDIA KISAN SABHA

It was in jail after Shamrao's demise that Godavari completed her book *Adivasis Revolt* in six months. She dedicated it to Shamrao's memory. After her release from jail on April 30, 1966, Godavari began her Party and Kisan Sabha work again. She was soon elected to the Central Committee of the CPI(M) and she remained in that post for over 25 years till the fourteenth Party Congress at Chennai in January 1992, when she gracefully stepped down for reasons of age and health. She was a member of the CPI(M) Maharashtra state secretariat since its inception, and here again she voluntarily stepped down from the post at the State Organisational Plenum at Nashik in January 1991.

In 1968, the AIKS also split and in 1969, the seventh state conference of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha was held at Moha in Beed district with the initiative of Gangadhar Appa Burande. AIKS general secretary Hare Krishna Konar attended this conference which decided the future course of the Kisan Sabha in Maharashtra. Godavari was elected its president and continued in that post for more than two decades.

In 1972-73, an extremely serious drought hit Maharashtra and the Kisan Sabha, led by Godavari Parulekar, Gangadhar Appa Burande, Narendra Malusare, Ramchandra Ghangare, Vithalrao Naik, L.B. Dhangar, Lahanu Kom and others led big peasant struggles for drought relief. The CITU in Maharashtra extended valuable fraternal help and this illustrated the concept of worker-peasant unity in action. Joint struggles on this issue were also launched along with the peasant organizations led by left parties like the PWP and CPI. It was as a result of these struggles that the state government was forced to start two important schemes – the Employment Guarantee Scheme and the Monopoly Cotton Procurement Scheme.

Undeterred by the Emergency in 1975-77, Godavari led a successful struggle in the Wada tehsil of Thane district and secured the release of over 1000 debt slaves in that area. This helped the Party and Kisan Sabha to spread to the Wada and Shahapur tehsils. Before this, work

had already spread to the hilly and backward Jawhar tehsil. During and just after the Emergency, she also staunchly fought against and overcame serious attempts at disruption of the Party in Thane district.

Godavari was the vice president of the All India Kisan Sabha for several years. And at its golden jubilee conference at Patna in 1986, she was elected president of the All India Kisan Sabha, the only woman to have held the post so far. Although she was 80 years old at the time, she nevertheless toured the country widely, exhorting younger comrades to unleash peasant struggles and to build up the AIKS as a powerful organization.

Several other honours were bestowed on Godavari in later years. They included the Sahitya Academy Prize, the Jawaharlal Nehru Award and the Soviet Land Award for her book; the Lokmanya Tilak Award for a selfless public life devoted to service of the downtrodden; and the Savitribai Phule Award for her work promoting social equality and emancipation of women.

A RICH AND INSPIRING LEGACY

Shamrao and Godavari's true legacy is the Party and its movement in Thane district, which has maintained and increased its strength and mass base over the last few decades. The innumerable cadres that they so painstakingly trained, the healthy organizational norms that they set and the communist principles and morality that they upheld have stood the Party in good stead over the years. One of the important lessons that they taught was that one's loyalty must be to the Party and to the Red Flag, and not to any individual.

In 1962, Dhakat Sutar became the first MLA of the Party to be elected in the adivasi belt in Thane district. In 1977 Lahanu Kom was elected as the Party candidate to the Lok Sabha from the Dahanu constituency. The Party has been winning the Jawhar assembly seat without a break for the last 30 years since 1978, and the current incumbent is Rajaram Ozare, who is also the first adivasi comrade to be elected as the Thane district secretary of the Party. It has been winning all the Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti seats in Talasari tehsil for the last four decades and several other ZP/PS seats in the Dahanu, Vikramgad, Jawhar and Wada tehsils as well.

It was under the leadership and guidance of Godavari that work in the adivasi areas spread to another important district Nashik, and it was then taken forward by leaders like Narendra Malusare and J.P. Gavit. Here also the Party has been winning the Surgana assembly seat almost without a break from 1978. 51 years after Thane district hosted the 13th national conference of the AIKS in May 1955, it was Nashik district that hosted the 31st national conference of the AIKS in

January 2006 with an unprecedented one lakh-strong peasant rally representing 30 districts of Maharashtra. Godavari Parulekar would have been the happiest had she lived to see it.

The honour that Godavari cherished most came during her last public function which, most appropriately, was a massive rally at Talasari in Thane district on March 24, 1995. Held in connection with the fifteenth state conference of the CPI(M), the rally commemorated the golden jubilee of the foundation of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha and of the glorious Warli Adivasi Revolt, both these events having taken place exactly 50 years ago in 1945.

On this occasion, Godavari Parulekar, aged 88, along with a dozen of her veteran tribal comrades who had taken a valiant part in the first struggles of the Adivasi Revolt, were warmly felicitated by CPI(M) general secretary and former AIKS president, Harkishan Singh Surjeet. The rally was attended by over 30,000 people, most of them her own beloved adivasis who had faithfully carried the Red Flag from when she had first given it to them half a century ago to the fourth generation without a break. It was an occasion of nostalgia for the past, and of hope for the future.

Godavari was given a special invitation to attend the fifteenth Party Congress at Chandigarh in April 1995. Although she could not attend for health reasons, she sent the Congress the following inspiring message: "I am now approaching the sunset of my life. But I feel satisfied and proud that I was able to devote more than fifty years of my life to the Communist Party, the Kisan Sabha and to the toiling people who are even today struggling against their foreign and indigenous exploiters. I am deeply convinced that it is only the CPI(M), with its unshakable faith in Marxism-Leninism, that is the only ray of hope for the liberation of the mass of working people in our country. My revolutionary greetings to the Party!"

This legendary Communist heroine died on October 8, 1996, leaving behind a blazing trail of achievement and a rich legacy for inspiration. On October 10, which by a significant coincidence was also the 51st anniversary of martyrdom of the first five martyrs of the Adivasi Revolt, Godavari was cremated at Talasari by a gathering of tens of thousands, which included CPI(M) Polit Bureau member and AIKS president S. Ramachandran Pillai, central committee members Vimal Ranadive, Mohd. Amin, Prabhakar Sanzgiri, Ahilya Rangnekar and leaders of fraternal parties.

The CPI(M) Polit Bureau in its statement described her as an 'ideal Communist leader' and said that 'the entire Party and Communist movement will always cherish her memory and will always take inspiration from her dedicated life.' Similar sentiments were expressed by the AIKS central leadership and by the Party and mass

organizations in Maharashtra. Every single Marathi newspaper in the state ran glowing editorials hailing her pioneering work for the downtrodden.

Three years before her death, Godavari Parulekar had prepared her will. We shall end with a few inspiring extracts from it. She wrote,

My deceased husband Shamrao Parulekar and I had carried out all our work for the rights of the workers, peasants, adivasis, women and other exploited sections of society through our Party organization; thus both of us were completely at one with the Party. Naturally, the interests of our Party and our interests were always one and the same. We had no other intellectual, political or emotional life that was independent of, or separate from, our Party.

It is my wish that the work to which my deceased husband and I devoted our lives should continue after my death. And this can only be carried out through the Communist Party of India (Marxist). That is why I have decided to give away all my property, movable as well as immovable, to the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

Such was the remarkable life and revolutionary work of Godavari and Shamrao Parulekar – an unending spring of inspiration not only for coming generations of communists but also for all patriotic sections of the people.