

THE KISAN LONG MARCH IN MAHARASHTRA



**AN ESSAY BY
ASHOK DHAWALE**

**PREFACE BY
P. SAINATH**

**AFTERWORD BY
SUDHANVA DESHPANDE**

**EDITED BY
VIJAY PRASHAD**



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Many Battles Lie Ahead



*Farmers gather at CBS Chowk, Nashik, Maharashtra, before commencing on the Kisan Long March.
Photos: Shrirang Swarge.*

Vijay Prashad

Editor's Note

Far from the cities and so far from the corporate media, peasants across the planet have been involved in a serious battle for survival. Enormous land grabs by large corporations and the attack on the livelihood of small farmers by industrial farming and by the withdrawal of any pro-peasant state policy has made 90% of the world's farmers vulnerable to annihilation. Farmers' suicides in India are the dead canary in the coal mine – the noxious gases of capitalism snuffed them out. To take one's life is a tragic, but there is a social meaning here: it is a cry from the darkness against a brutal world.

Peasants grow what is needed for the world to survive, but they themselves are finding it harder and harder to remain alive. There are now about three billion people on the planet who suffer from forms of hunger, despite the fact that peasants produce 150% of what is needed to feed every person in the world. It is poverty – not scarcity – that produces this hunger, a hunger felt deeply in places closest to the production of food.

Across India – from Rajasthan to Maharashtra – peasants have begun to assert themselves, to be part of a global struggle of the world's peasantry against the inhumane capitalist system. We, at LeftWord Books, are proud to offer you this book that documents one of the more inspiring peasant struggles of our time – the fight of the kisans of Maharashtra against a government committed to money more than people. This book is one of many that we will produce of this kind – a small book on a large struggle that we offer, in print, at a very small cost, and electronically, at no cost

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Thanks to Shrirang Swarge and Binaifer Bharucha for permission to use their evocative and moving photographs, and to Vinutha Mallya for excellent and speedy copyediting.

LeftWord Books is committed to amplifying the work of our fighting organizations and to developing a strong vision for the future. Please read this book and then give it to someone else to read. And then to another person. We hope that this story will strengthen your resolve to fight to build a better world.



*CBS Chowk, Nashik. Fuelling up before the march.
Photos: Shrirang Swarge.*



*Midnight walk to Azad Maidan, Mumbai.
Photos: Shrirang Swarge.*

P. Sainath

Preface

Weeks after the Long March, the idea and image still lingers – of 40,000 people walking over 200 kilometres, the last 10–15 km in darkness and silence (as silent as it is possible for such a multitude to be). Those farmers and landless peasants walked into Mumbai, captured the city’s imagination and left it with an enduring memory. They won over the megapolis, outsmarted far more powerful adversaries, leaving a political statement that “made the deaf hear and the blind see.” And did all of the above with transparent sincerity.

The marchers were from a few regions of Maharashtra, but spoke for every farmer and labourer in the country. The protestors were very poor farmers and workers – in India’s wealthiest state. Gaps between rich and poor are beyond obnoxious in Maharashtra. The state sees far more hunger deaths than many poorer states do. In September 2016, the Bombay High Court expressed its dismay over the death of 17,000 persons in tribal areas of the state, in just the preceding 12 months, due to malnutrition. (There were many Adivasis in the Long March).

It is also the state that has seen more farmers take their own lives than any other. Between 1995 and 2015, going by the National Crime Records Bureau, close to 65,000 farmers committed suicide in Maharashtra. That’s more than a fifth of the total of over 300,000 across the country in the same period. That surely played a role in the decisive rout of the long-ruling Congress–NCP government in the state in 2015. The BJP government has predictably made things

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worse – and cooked the suicide data even more aggressively than its predecessor. The present regime also ensured that Maharashtra was amongst the states worst hit by both the insane extension of cattle slaughter laws, and the devastation of demonetization.

Mumbai is also a fortress of our highly corporatized media culture. You could see the importance of the farmers' Long March to the "mainstream" media in the fact that not a single national daily or network had a correspondent at the start of it in Nashik. When the reports on the March by Parth M.N. of the People's Archive of Rural India (PARI) went up early the next day, the media found this was far too big to ignore. Lots of reporters were suddenly sent off to join the Long March – especially in its last stretch. One national news agency sent its crime correspondent to cover the farmers' march. (Just in case there was any violence – ah, you know what these farmers are like, always making trouble.)

For many months, the media had also been reducing the farmers' demands, and most of their distress, to their seeking a loan waiver. While that was an important element of their agenda, they had many more demands that went to the heart of the country's agrarian crisis. The implementation of the key recommendations of the National Commission for Farmers was one of those. These farmers saw the Union Government's claim of having implemented its promise – of Minimum Support Price equalling the Cost of Production plus 50 per cent – for the charade it was. They were signalling the collapse in prices they received in the real world. That, while the actual and comprehensive costs of cultivation were soaring, their incomes were in decline. That the agrarian crisis is about the corporate hijack of Indian agriculture. That their problems were driven by conscious economic policy and not by natural calamity.

There were thousands of Adivasi farmers demanding the implementation of the Forest Rights Act of 2006 that could confer on them proper title deeds to lands their families had been



*En route to Sonale ground in Bhiwandi.
Photos: Shrirang Swarge.*

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cultivating for perhaps centuries. They were making the point that even their indebtedness was the outcome of the deliberate policies on credit followed by successive governments.

And how brilliantly they did it. With a march long on distance, short on rhetoric. By walking at night and timing their arrival at Azad Maidan in Mumbai, so as not to in any way disturb the city's children appearing for board exams the next morning. By looking the Maharashtra Government squarely in the eye – and not blinking. I've lived 35 years in this megapolis – and have rarely seen a rally so meaningful, so satisfying.

It's so good, too, to find LeftWord moving so quickly to publish this short but incisive tract by Ashok Dhawale of the All India Kisan Sabha. Dhawale tells us of the causes behind, and the huge amount of work it took the AIKS in executing this extraordinarily disciplined, democratic and dignified protest. It was, after all, AIKS that placed the agrarian crisis on the nation's political map.

The Long March has shown us a pathway. Here's what we all need to press for: a 20-day special session of Parliament to discuss nothing but the agrarian crisis and its related issues. And perhaps the Kisan Sabha, together with many other farmers' organizations, will lead a truly gigantic march on Delhi on that occasion, and have the farmers speak to the Indian nation from there.



*Top: Sleeping en route, after a long and tiring day.
Bottom: Midnight walk to Azad Maidan, Mumbai.
Photos: Shrirang Swarge.*



*Somaiya Ground, Mumbai.
Photos: Shrirang Swarge.*

A Remarkable Struggle

It was truly an amazing struggle, the likes of which has not been seen in Maharashtra in recent times. It caught the imagination of the peasantry and the people, and received their unstinted support, not only in the state, but all over the country. It received the backing of parties and organizations all across the political spectrum. During the week of 6 to 12 March, the Long March of nearly 200 kilometres became the centre of attention for the entire national and state media. Print, electronic and social media resonated with the march. The number one hashtag in India on March 12 was #KisanLongMarch. The editorial in *People's Democracy* (March 14) put it clearly,

The kisan march was unique in the way it was conducted with discipline, determination and a collective display of peasant power. The sight of a sea of red flags moving in a massive procession captured the attention of people everywhere and the national and regional media took this visual message to all corners of the country. No mass protest in recent times has had the nationwide impact as the kisan march.¹

The Long March began in Nashik. Twenty-five thousand farmers, including thousands of women, took the first steps. The March concluded in Mumbai with over 50,000 farmers. It was an

¹ 'Long March: A Brilliant Victory', *People's Democracy*, March 14, 2018, http://peoplesdemocracy.in/2018/0318_pd/long-march-brilliant-victory.

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ocean of red – the red flag of the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), red banners, red flags, red caps and red placards with our slogans.

The largest mobilization of peasants came from Nashik district. Thousands of Adivasi peasants, under the inspiring leadership of former AIKS state president J.P. Gavit (a seven-time Member of the Legislative Assembly in Maharashtra from the CPI(M)). The next largest contingent came from Thane-Palghar districts, followed by Ahmednagar district. Farmers came from other districts as well. Their numbers swelled on the last two days of the Long March.

CONDEMNATION OF BJP'S BETRAYAL

During the past two years, the BJP central and state governments had given certain specific assurances to the Indian peasantry. They had said that they would accept the demands for a series of concerns, such as:

- Farm loan waiver.
- Remunerative prices.
- Implementation of the recommendations from the National Commission of Farmers (2006), chaired by Dr. M.S. Swaminathan.²
- Stringent implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA).
- Increase in various pension schemes for poor peasants and agricultural workers.
- Compensation for losses sustained by farmers due to disastrous pest attacks (such as pink bollworm on cotton).
- Vesting of temple and pasture lands in the name of the tiller.
- Opposition to acquisition of peasant land in the name of fancy and elitist projects, such as the bullet train and super highways.

² 'Swaminathan Report: National Commission on Farmers', <http://www.prsindia.org/parliamenttrack/report-summaries/swaminathan-report-national-commission-on-farmers--662/>.

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- Issues connected to the public distribution system.
- Complete change in the river linking scheme that is to start in Nashik, Thane and Palghar districts. The AIKS demands that the tribal villages not be submerged and that the water is made available to these districts and to other drought-prone districts in Maharashtra.

Over the past two years, the BJP governments at the centre and at the state have betrayed the assurances given to the peasantry. This list of demands and grievances has been ignored. The Kisan Sabha organized the Long March to condemn the BJP state and central governments for consistent betrayals.

BACKGROUND OF MASS STRUGGLES

The Long March in March 2018 was the culmination of three years of constant struggle led AIKS in Maharashtra since October 2015.

A state-wide AIKS campaign called the Peasants Rights Awareness Campaign was launched for a month from October 5 to November 10, 2015. Extended AIKS district council meetings were held in 24 districts of the state. AIKS leaders Dr. Ashok Dhawale, Kisan Gujar and Dr. Ajit Nawale, along with other state office-bearers, attended all these meetings. In these meetings, the burning issues of peasant struggle were identified, the nature of the struggle was discussed, and the steps for organizational strengthening were decided.

In the second week of December 2015, over 50,000 peasants under the AIKS banner came on to the streets in 29 tehsil centres of 15 districts in all the five regions of the state on the four issues of land rights, loan waiver, remunerative prices and drought relief.

On January 7 and 8, 2016, respectively, the AIKS held two regional-level loan-waiver and drought relief conventions at Selu in Parbhani district for the Marathwada region, and at Malkapur in

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Buldana district for the Vidarbha region. Both were well-attended.

The AIKS and its allied organizations – Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and All India Agricultural Workers Union (AIAWU) – held a joint state convention on October 31, 2017, at Parbhani. A call was given for a joint action on January 19, 2018. That day, over 1,33,000 workers, peasants and agricultural workers held a massive joint state-wide *jail bharo* [fill the jails] stir for their demands against the BJP-led central and state governments. The largest number of those arrested – over 92,000 – were from the AIKS.

On January 28, the AIKS held a state-level convention in Nashik that gave a clarion call for an unprecedented state-wide *mahapadav* (siege) of 100,000 peasants from March 29 onwards in Nashik city. This struggle call was the culmination of the six-month long AIKS campaign in Maharashtra outlined above. Two lakh persuasive and attractive leaflets and 12,000 posters for the campaign were published by the AIKS and they were distributed to all the districts in the convention itself. District councils later also published thousands of leaflets.

From February 7 to March 1, 23 AIKS district conferences were held after village and tehsil conferences. They prepared for the struggle and also strengthened the organization.

ONE LAKH PEASANTS LAY SIEGE TO NASHIK

As a result of all these intensive preparations, the AIKS held a historic one lakh-strong independent state-wide rally on March 29, 2016. The AIKS also held an unprecedented day and night sit-in *satyagraha* for two days and two nights on March 29-30 at the CBS Chowk in the heart of Nashik. This *satyagraha* paralysed the city. The AIKS highlighted four issues for our struggle:

- Land rights under the Forest Rights Act (2006).



*Azad Maidan, Mumbai. After about 80 hours and over 200 km of walking.
Photos: Binaifer Bharucha.*



*Top: Resting after a hard day of walking.
Bottom: Sleeping under the stars.
Photos: Shrirang Swarge.*

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- Loan waiver for peasants.
- Higher remunerative prices.
- Drought relief.

This militant peasant action received massive and sustained coverage in both print and electronic media. Sections of the electronic media covered it live on both days. This struggle placed the AIKS for the first time in a long time at the centre stage of the peasant movement in Maharashtra.

The rally was addressed by CPI(M) General Secretary Sitaram Yechury, AIKS General Secretary Hannan Mollah, renowned journalist P. Sainath, AIKS leaders Dr. Ashok Dhawale, J.P. Gavit MLA, Kisan Gujar, Dr. Ajit Nawale and leaders of other mass organizations.

On March 30, the beleaguered Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis invited the Kisan Sabha for talks. A one hour discussion was held with the Chief Minister, three other Ministers and senior officials in the Vidhan Bhavan in Mumbai in the midst of the assembly session. Some of the demands were conceded, but were never implemented. The AIKS, therefore, began concerted struggles for their implementation.

STRUGGLE FOR DROUGHT RELIEF

On May 3, 2016, around 1,000 peasants and students from all the eight districts of the Marathwada region, led by AIKS and Students Federation of India (SFI), breached two police barricades and marched right inside the compound of Aurangabad Divisional Commissioner's office. This militant action was conducted for the burning demands related to the grim drought situation in the region. The agitators occupied the office for over an hour until the officers agreed to hold a meeting with the AIKS-SFI delegation the next day, in which all officials dealing with drought-related issues

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were summoned from all the eight districts. For two days and one night on May 3 and 4, all the agitators camped right outside the Commissionerate.

Under this pressure, in the meeting that was held on May 4, most of the major demands that lay within the administration's purview were conceded. The specific demands that were conceded related to the provision of drinking water, work and wages under MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005), fodder for cattle, agricultural inputs for peasants, fee waiver for students, land issues related to temple lands and forest lands and so on. The grave nature of the drought and the militant actions of the AIKS and the SFI forced the print and electronic media to cover the Aurangabad struggle.

10,000-STRONG "COFFIN RALLY" IN THANE

AIKS led a 10,000-strong novel "Coffin Rally" in Thane city, near Mumbai on May 30, 2016, to focus on the issue of peasant suicides. The peasants carried bamboo frames (called *tirdi* in Marathi) covered with white cloth, on which dead bodies are carried. This dramatically highlighted the grave issue of suicides of debt-ridden peasants in Maharashtra. This rally, which was addressed by then AIKS President Amra Ram, was widely covered by the media, especially since it highlighted the gravity of mounting peasant suicides. The subsequent state conference at Talasari in Palghar district on May 31 and June 1 was attended by AIKS General Secretary Hannan Mollah.

50,000-STRONG MAHA-GHERAO IN WADA

On October 3–4, 2016, over 50,000 Adivasi peasants, women, youth and students from various tribal districts of Maharashtra held a *gherao* at the house of the Tribal Development Minister



Top: 'Ownership rights to Devasthan [temple] land to the tiller'.

Photo: Shirrang Swarge.

Bottom: 'Narendra Modi . . . is anti-farmer'.

Photo: Binaifer Bharucha.

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(from BJP) at the sub-divisional centre of Wada in Palghar district. The struggle was jointly led by the AIKS, All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), SFI and Adivasi Adhikar Rashtriya Manch (AARM). The main issues were the stringent and immediate implementation of Forest Rights Act, malnutrition-related tribal child deaths, work and wages under MNREGA, the plight of the Public Distribution System (PDS), health services and the educational problems of tribal students.

The *gherao* continued for 16 hours and all highways leading from Wada to Mumbai, Thane, Bhiwandi, Palghar, Dahanu, Talasari, Surat and Nashik were completely blocked. The Minister had fled a day before this action. When the people refused to move, the Minister had to send the state Tribal Development Commissioner for talks with the delegation and had to send a fax agreeing to a high-powered meeting at the state secretariat in Mumbai on October 7. It was only after a four-hour nightlong discussion with the Commissioner, after he conceded many demands, that the *gherao* was lifted at dawn on October 4 along with a huge public meeting.

The meeting of the delegation with the Tribal Development Minister, half a dozen Secretaries of related departments and half a dozen district collectors of tribal districts took place in Mumbai on October 7. It continued for over five hours. The Minister was forced to concede several long-standing demands about FRA implementation, malnutrition-related tribal child deaths, MNREGA and PDS-related demands, education and other issues. The minutes of the meeting and a special government circular were released to all concerned officials in the state, which put the demands conceded in writing. This struggle resulted in a major victory. There was some initial progress in implementation, but it then floundered.

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WHIPCORD RALLY AT KHAMGAON

On May 11, 2017, the AIKS organized an “Aasood” (Whipcord) State Convention followed by the “Aasood” State Rally to the house of the BJP state Agriculture Minister at Khamgaon in Buldana district of Vidarbha region to focus on the issues of peasant suicides, loan waiver and remunerative prices. Mahatma Jotirao Phule had written a celebrated book in 1881 titled *The Cultivator’s Whipcord (Shetkaryacha Aasood)*. It was from this that the Whipcord Rally was named (the whipcord is a form of braided cotton, used to make cloth or whips).

All these independent struggles over two years put the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha for the first time in the mainstream of the peasant movement in the state and helped it to become a key constituent of the united peasant struggle that began in June 2017.

HISTORIC FARMERS’ STRIKE

In the historic united Farmers’ Strike that lasted for 11 days from June 1 to 11, 2017, the AIKS played a crucial role. Farmers refused to bring their milk, vegetables and fruits for sale in the markets in the cities. The AIKS took the lead in bringing other farmers’ organizations together to continue the strike when some blacklegs tried a sell-out in a midnight meeting with the Chief Minister on June 2/3. Due to his role in opposing this sell-out at that meeting, AIKS State General Secretary Dr. Ajit Nawale was elected Convenor of the Coordination Committee of Farmers’ Organizations. A massive joint Maharashtra Bandh was successfully held on June 5 to support the Farmers’ Strike, followed by other large mass actions.

On June 11, a group of five Ministers of the state government was forced to hold talks with the Coordination Committee and they publicly agreed to give a complete loan waiver to the peasantry.

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But within a fortnight, although it announced a deceptive loan waiver package of Rs 34,000 crore (340 billion) and a waiver of up to Rs 1.5 lakh per farmer, it betrayed its promise of a complete loan waiver and imposed several onerous conditions that would leave a great majority of farmers out of the loan waiver ambit.

Massive joint agitations were held against this betrayal, including a united campaign tour of 15 large district conventions in July that mobilized over 40,000 farmers despite the monsoons, and a state-wide *Chakka Jaam* (Road Blockade) on August 14 in which over two lakh farmers blocked national and state highways at over 200 centres in 31 districts of the state. The AIKS participation in this joint Road Blockade action was the largest – over 85,000.

By a conscious decision, all the above independent and united struggles by the AIKS were peaceful and disciplined. Throughout the campaigns for all these struggles, apart from concentrating fire on the BJP–Shiv Sena state government, the BJP-led central government of Narendra Modi was also severely castigated for its anti-peasant, anti-people, pro-crony capitalist, and neoliberal policies and its dangerous communal and casteist conspiracies.

When the state government refused to relent on both, the crucial aspects of loan waiver and land rights, AIKS again decided to take up the cudgels against the betrayal of the BJP state government, and took the decision of organizing the Long March and the Assembly Gherao.

SHOCKING REALITY

Two shocking objective facts explain the massive peasant response to all these struggles.

One, the question of *farmers' suicides*. Since the advent of neoliberal policies in agriculture begun by the Congress government in 1991 and carried forward with great speed by successive Congress and BJP governments – the Modi government



*Top: Rukmabai Bendkule, a farm labourer from Dondegaon village
in Dindori taluka.*

*Bottom: Savita Lilake, from Nashik's Ambegaon village of Dindori Taluka.
Photos: Shrirang Swarge.*

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being the worst culprit – over 3,00,000 debt-ridden farmers in India have been forced to commit suicide in the past twenty-five years. These figures come from the National Crime Records Bureau of the Union Home Ministry. Maharashtra has the notorious distinction of being the largest ‘graveyard of farmers’, accounting for about 65,000 peasant suicides in the same period.

Two, the question of *starvation of Adivasi children*. Thousands of Adivasi children in the state, and also all over the country, die every year due to malnutrition and starvation – a result of multiple factors such as landlessness and unemployment as well as the breakdown of the Public Distribution System and the healthcare system.

These two searing facts are enough to throw a blinding light on the deepening agrarian crisis and agrarian distress in the state and the country.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE LONG MARCH

In Sangli, at the AIKS State Council meeting on February 16, 2018, a decision was taken to hold the Long March. The AIKS collective state leadership began to make meticulous preparations for this enormous endeavour. We had less than three weeks before the march was to take place. AIKS wanted to begin the march on March 6, a few days after Holi (March 1 and March 2). The State Assembly would be in session.

The most important task was mobilization of peasants for the March. Hundreds of meetings were held in the villages, thousands of leaflets were distributed, and registration drives were conducted. A press conference was held in Mumbai on February 21 and at Nashik on March 2 to publicize the Long March.

The question has often been asked – how were the logistics of the Long March dealt with? Rice, dal, chillies, oil and firewood

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for cooking was collected by peasants themselves from the villages and was stored in several tempos. The tempos used to go ahead of the marchers, and volunteers would cook and keep the food ready for the marchers when they reached the designated spots every day for lunch and dinner. Hired water tankers for drinking were stationed at various points along the way. An ambulance with a doctors' team of Kisan Sabha sympathizers and the necessary medicines collected by the CITU-affiliated Medical Representatives Union were kept ready for the Long March. AIKS state and Nashik district office bearers made three reconnaissance trips from Nashik to Mumbai and back to decide the appropriate places to have lunch, dinner and to rest at night. This was in itself a difficult task.

The marchers walked an average of 30 to 35 km per day in the scorching sun and on the second last day, the distance that had to be covered stretched to 43 km! It goes without saying that all AIKS leaders walked with the peasants throughout.

There were thousands of women in the march. Their grit and determination was amazing – and also humbling. Many of them walked barefoot, with bruised and bleeding feet. These women were specially lauded and saluted.

The way that tens of thousands of poor and landless peasants marched relentlessly with determination 30 to 35 km per day for seven days, in scorching heat, hundreds of them barefoot, bruised and bleeding on tar roads, stirred the conscience of the nation. It evoked not only massive public support for their cause, but also massive public anger against the callous and insensitive BJP-led state government. It made people aware of the economic injustice and social inequality prevailing in the country. This sight must have made many people want to fight against injustice and inequality.

During and after the strenuous march every night, hundreds of men and women still had the energy to sing and dance to the

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tune of their quaint musical instruments. Culture is an inseparable part of their lives. That they did this night after night despite all the physical exertion was indeed admirable and it enthused all others too.

OVERWHELMING RESPONSE FROM THE PEOPLE AND THE MEDIA

The people responded with great love and appreciation for the Long March. People from the working class and the middle class – Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Dalits – welcomed the march with open arms in several localities. Groups of hundreds of people, including youth and women in large numbers, congregated at various spots en route to felicitate the marchers. They donated generously – both in cash and in kind. Ordinary people came forward to give us water, *sharbat*, biscuits, food and even footwear. In my 40 years of life in the Left movement, I must admit that I have never come across such a spontaneous outpouring of support and solidarity.

Many of the ordinary people who met us in Mumbai city, including several media persons and even some in the police explained to us the reason for their solidarity. This is the sum and substance of what they said – we are also the children of farmers; our roots lie in the villages; we know the plight of farmers; and that is why we have come out in your support.

The biggest and most spontaneous reception to the Long March was in the Dalit locality of Mata Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar at Ghatkopar in Mumbai, the very place that had seen the shooting down of 11 Dalits in police firing under the BJP-Shiv Sena regime 20 years ago. The Dabbawalas of Mumbai also contributed their mite to the cause. In the most touching move, farmers from Raigad district, under the leadership of the Peasants and Workers Party (PWP) brought 1.5 lakh rice *bhakis* and dry fish for the marchers on the last day at Azad Maidan. The CITU, AIDWA, DYFI and



*Top: A volunteer serves the marchers.
Bottom: Getting lunch ready.
Photos: Shrirang Swarge.*

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SFI in Mumbai and Thane-Palghar districts launched a campaign amongst the people in support of this Long March, but the mass response went far beyond that. This response of the people further steeled the marchers in their resolve.

The CPI(M) Maharashtra State Committee had, of course, given full support to this Long March right from the beginning. Another Left party, the Peasants and Workers Party (PWP) had also supported it throughout. CPI leaders were present at Nashik to greet the march when it began. All other political parties except the BJP – viz. Congress, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), Samajwadi Party, Republican Party, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) and also the Shiv Sena, which is a partner in the state government – openly supported the Kisan Sabha Long March, and their top leaders either joined the march for a time or pledged their support when it had stopped for the night at Sion or when it culminated at Azad Maidan. The massive response of the people and the media was the key reason for this unprecedented support of many unlikely forces right across the political spectrum.

The print, electronic and social media all over the country played a magnificent role. They highlighted not only the Kisan Long March but also the deep agrarian crisis and burning peasant issues which have relevance for the whole country. It began with a video taken by Dr. Ajit Nawale of tens of thousands of farmers marching down the hill of the Kasara Ghat near Igatpuri on the morning of Day Three, with the picturesque view of hills on one side and valleys on the other. The red banners, red flags, red caps and the sheer numbers really woke up the media. The video went viral on social media and after that we started getting a lot of coverage in the mainstream print and electronic media right up to the culmination of the Long March.

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SENSITIVE AND HUMANITARIAN DECISION

The Kisan Sabha leadership took the sensitive and humanitarian decision of walking day and night on the last day, from 11 am on March 11, when the march started from Thane city, to 6 am on March 12, when it reached Azad Maidan in the heart of south Mumbai. This decision was taken to avoid the inevitable traffic snarls on March 12 that would surely have disrupted the final board examinations of tens of thousands of SSC students in Mumbai and would have led to the loss of a precious year in their lives. Tens of thousands of peasants took this decision democratically, at the suggestion placed by J.P. Gavit, by a massive and unanimous show of hands on the night of March 11 when they reached the Somaiya Maidan at Sion in Mumbai city. Their noble sentiments were expressed in these memorable words, “It does not matter if we have to suffer some more, but we will not let our children in Mumbai suffer.” They had their dinner, rested for an hour or two, and restarted their march to Mumbai after midnight, reaching their destination at dawn. This gesture drew the unstinted admiration of people not only in Mumbai, but all across the country. Several prominent celebrities in India also expressed their appreciation for this gesture.

GOVERNMENT CONCEDES

All this put tremendous pressure on the BJP-led state government. Actually, the state government had not bothered to make any contact with the marchers until March 11, the penultimate day of the march, when the state Irrigation Minister Girish Mahajan met the leaders during the march itself and the memorandum of demands was handed over to him. Initially, before the march began, they had almost certainly underestimated its likely size. Later, the massive response to the Long March of the peasantry, by



*Top: Doctors set up mobile clinic at Somaiya Ground.
Bottom: Midnight walk to Azad Maidan.
Photos: Shrirang Swarge.*

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the people and the media, which they had least expected, shocked them into taking action.

On March 12, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, Ministers Chandrakant Patil, Girish Mahajan, Eknath Shinde, Pandurang Fundkar, Subhash Deshmukh and Vishnu Savra, along with a battery of top officials of various departments, held a three-hour discussion with Kisan Sabha leaders in Vidhan Bhavan. Also present were leaders of the opposition, Radhakrishna Vikhe Patil (Congress), Dhananjay Munde, Ajit Pawar and Sunil Tatkare (NCP).

PWP General Secretary Jayant Patil, who had helped the Kisan Sabha struggle all along, and State President of Janata Dal (Sharad Yadav group), Kapil Patil, MLC, were also present during the discussions.

The Kisan Sabha delegation included Dr. Ashok Dhawale, J.P. Gavit, former CITU state president and former MLA Narasayya Adam, Kisan Gujar, Dr. Ajit Nawale, Subhash Choudhari, Savliram Pawar, Sunil Malusare, Irfan Shaikh, Ratan Budhar, Barkya Mangat, Radka Kalangda, Umesh Deshmukh, Sidhappa Kalshetty, Vilas Babar and DYFI State Vice President Indrajeet Gavit. These were AIKS state office bearers who actually walked in the Long March, along with AIAWU state leader Manohar Muley and CITU state leader Vinod Nikole.

In the light of the earlier bitter experiences with the present government, the Kisan Sabha had taken the clear position right at the beginning that it would not withdraw this struggle without official written assurances. These written assurances on all the demands were given within an hour of the conclusion of the talks, with the signature of the Chief Secretary of the state government. Three ministers of the state government – Chandrakant Patil and Girish Mahajan of the BJP and Eknath Shinde of the Shiv Sena – came on their own to the victory rally at Azad Maidan and pledged to implement the agreement that had been reached. The

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Kisan Sabha also insisted that the agreement arrived at should be placed on the table of the House by the Chief Minister in the State Assembly that was then in session. Accordingly, the Chief Minister tabled that agreement in the House on March 13.

Concrete time-bound written assurances have been given by the government on AIKS's demands concerning the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA); river linking proposal adversely affecting tribals in Nashik, Palghar and Thane districts; loan waiver to farmers; mechanism for remunerative prices; vesting of temple lands; regularising houses on pasture lands; stopping land acquisition without consent; increase in old-age pensions; improvements in the Public Distribution System; and compensation to lakhs of farmers in Vidarbha and Marathwada regions who have suffered huge losses of cotton crop due to pink bollworm pest attacks and hailstorms; and other issues. The agreement reached on March 12 between the Government of Maharashtra and the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha has been published in the CPI(M) publications *People's Democracy* and *Loklahar*.³

RESOUNDING VICTORY RALLY

The resounding AIKS victory rally of over 50,000 farmers at Azad Maidan in Mumbai on the evening of March 12 was addressed by CPI(M) General Secretary Sitaram Yechury; CPI(M) State Secretary Narasayya Adam; PWP General Secretary Jayant Patil; Janata Dal (Sharad Yadav group) State President Kapil Patil; former AIKS President Amra Ram; AIKS Joint Secretaries K.K. Ragesh and Vijoo Krishnan (who had taken part in the first two days of the march); renowned journalist P. Sainath; CPI(M) Central

³ 'Maharashtra: Govt. Agrees to Implement Decisions on Kisan Sabha Demands', *People's Democracy*, April 1, 2018, http://peoplesdemocracy.in/2018/0325_pd/maharashtra-govt-agrees-implement-decisions-kisan-sabha-demands.



*Azad Maidan, Mumbai. Farmers get ready to leave by the night train to Nashik.
Photos: Binaifer Bharucha.*

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Committee member Mahendra Singh; AIDWA General Secretary Mariam Dhawale and Vice President Sudha Sundararaman; CITU Vice President Dr. D.L. Karad; and by leaders of the Long March – AIKS President Dr. Ashok Dhawale; former State President J.P. Gavit; State President Kisan Gujar; and State General Secretary Dr. Ajit Nawale – and, earlier in the day, by other leaders of the AIKS, CITU, AIAWU, AIDWA, DYFI, SFI, and by a wide spectrum of the supporting political parties, organizations and individuals.

All the farmers left Mumbai on the night of March 12, with tremendous confidence generated by this victory, buttressed with deep gratitude towards the people of the city, the state and the country, who had supported them to the hilt in this struggle. The massive nationwide public response to this Long March was a tribute to the valiant, peaceful, democratic and unprecedented struggle waged by tens of thousands of peasants under the collective leadership of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha.

A BATTLE WON, STRUGGLES AHEAD

This massive response was also a reflection of the fact that the demands of land rights, loan waiver, remunerative prices and pension, which were essentially directed against the neoliberal policies of the BJP-led governments in the state and at the centre, were in fact the demands of the peasantry of India as a whole. The Long March was an integral part of a movement of farmers that is breaking out all over the country. We have seen the huge and consistent Kisan Sabha-led farmers' struggles in Rajasthan and elsewhere in the country. We have seen the major united actions led by broad platforms like Bhoomi Adhikar Andolan (BAA), and Kisan Sansad and Mahila Kisan Sansad organized in Delhi last November by the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC).

Now the AIKS Central Kisan Committee has decided to

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broaden and intensify this struggle all over the country. We have decided on an unprecedented campaign of collecting 10 crore (100 million) signatures of farmers and all citizens across India to demand a loan waiver, remunerative prices, land rights, pension and comprehensive crop insurance. On August 9, 2018, the 76th anniversary of Quit India Movement, lakhs of farmers in the country will submit these signatures to every District Collector and will then conduct a peaceful and democratic countrywide *Jail Bharo* (fill the jails) agitation for these demands. The slogan will be: Just as Mahatma Gandhi told the rapacious British imperialists to Quit India, so also the farmers of the country will tell the anti-farmer, pro-corporate, communal, casteist and divisive Modi-led BJP government to Quit India!

One more major decision taken is to organize a massive countrywide Mazdoor-Kisan Rally in Delhi on September 5, 2018, jointly by the CITU, AIKS and AIAWU. It is an important step towards worker-peasant unity.

Another crucial gain of this Long March was that the peasantry struggled together as a class, rising above the divisions of religion, caste and creed. The massive peoples' solidarity with it also cut across all these barriers. It showed that, in the final analysis, class struggle and class solidarity is the only way to fight back the dark forces of communalism and casteism.

One battle has been won, but future struggles beckon. And after this victory, the battle shall be fought with even greater grit and determination all over the country!



*Top: Kisan Gujar points to the CBS Chowk in Nashik.
Bottom: Ajit Nawale speaks at the Kisan Vijay March in Kalwan.
Photos: Sudhanva Deshpande.*

Many Battles Lie Ahead

“You see this hut? From here on, it is all our land,” says Kisan Gujar.¹

We’re in a car, and I’m driving to give Ashok Dhawale some rest. Dusk is falling, and we’re driving out of Kalwan. Also with us is Prasad of the social media team. We had driven over 200 km to get here earlier in the day, with Ashok at the wheel the whole time.

“Till where,” I ask.

“All the way to the hill,” Gujar says, pointing to the horizon.

“Oh.” But I don’t understand. What does he mean by “our land”?

Ashok perceives my confusion. “All this is forest land being cultivated by Adivasi farmers, for which the Kisan Sabha got them the possession.” The Forest Rights Act (FRA), passed by the first UPA government under pressure from the Left, made it easier for Adivasis to open the way for giving them their right to the land

¹ As a follow up of the historic Kisan Long March from Nashik to Mumbai from March 6–12, 2018, the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) called for a Kisan Vijay [Victory] March in Kalwan, about 70 km north of Nashik, close to the border with Gujarat, on April 2. I travelled to Kalwan to be part of the march. I had never before been part of a farmers’ rally (except the ones that came to Delhi), and the Long March had been so inspiring that I wanted to get a feel of it from up close. I was particularly interested in learning about the organizers who had led the march. I’ve known one of them, Ashok Dhawale, for over two decades as a friend and comrade. The other three leaders I talk about here – Jiva Pandu Gavit, Kisan Gujar and Ajit Nawale – were people I knew of, but hadn’t really interacted with before. What follows, therefore, is a modest eyewitness account, no more.



*Top: J.P. Gavit speaks to farmers before the march.
Bottom: Farmers arriving for the Kisan Vijay March in Kalwan.
Photos: Sudhanva Deshpande.*

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that they had been tilling for generations. When we were driving in, too, I had seen the red flag in many fields – on little huts, on electric poles, on trees. Now I understood what that meant.

There isn't much activity on most fields, which look dry and fallow. I see grapes being cultivated here and there. Many years ago I had driven past several vineyards and wineries, and I know that some of the best Indian wine comes from the Nashik region. At some places I see harvested onion being stored. This is also onion country.

“The traders are paying farmers only Rs 1,000 for onions, even though this variety lasts about six months,” Gujar explains. “They'll hold on to it, and only release this in the winter, when the supply goes down and they can make a killing. The farmer gets nothing. Last year, the traders pushed the rate down to as low as 400. It was cheaper for farmers to destroy the onion than sell it. The traders are with Congress–BJP. The farmers are with us.”

We had come by the main highway route in the morning, and all along, we had seen groups of farmers going to the Kisan Vijay March. The entire town of Kalwan was red. Red flags everywhere. Red wall writing. And red caps. After the rally, Gujar got us out from a tiny, winding, picturesque back road because, he said, the main road will have all of our people going back, leading to heavy traffic and congestion.

Ajit Nawale is following us in another car, so we have to periodically stop to allow him to catch up. I don't mind stopping, but I'm intrigued. Ajit has a local farmer with him, so why does he need us to stop?

“This is not the normal route,” says Gujar. “Most people don't know all the turns.”

I don't mind. It allows us to take in the surroundings, pause, chat. Ajit drives at an easy pace. When we finally hit National Highway 160, it is dark. “Now we don't need to stop for him,” Gujar says. “Step on it,” he instructs me.

“Gavit and Gujar know this area the best,” Ashok tells me.

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“You know, Doctor,” Gujar turns to Ashok, “when we have to go underground, you will all get caught. Except me. I know places and roads that even the police don’t know.”

Later, as we stop for dinner on the highway, Gujar ribs him gently, complimenting Ajit for catching up with us in his “bullock cart.” Ajit laughs. “Every time I go anywhere with Comrade Gujar, I learn a new route,” he tells me. “Where it comes to maps, I don’t think. I just trust Google and Gujar. They know best.”

* * *

The rally itself was a sober affair. The local police estimated, Gujar told us later, that between 25,000 to 30,000 farmers attended. All I could see was a river of red when they marched. The Kisan Sabha had erected a large pandal with a stage on one side. This pandal couldn’t have accommodated everybody, and so they spilled out on all sides. Hundreds sat behind the pandal, many of them directly in the sun. Hundreds more, maybe thousands, sat on the main road, from where they could not see the stage, but could hear the speeches, thanks to the megaphones. And to the left and right of the pandal as well, wherever there was a nook or cranny, there were farmers.

It was a hot day, though not brutally hot. High 30s, I guess. The pandal blocked the sun, but it was still pretty hot in there, with buildings on all sides blocking the breeze, and thousands of bodies packed closely together. Outside the pandal, people were sometimes in the sun and sometimes in the shade, depending on the position of the sun.

Inside the pandal, the farmers, women and men, young and old, sat and listened in rapt attention as the leaders spoke. Each speaker began with fulsome praise for the courage and determination of the farmers. It is true, as everybody said, that they were the real heroes. Every once in a while, they would laugh when a speaker cracked a joke. Sometimes they would clap at a



*Top: Waiting for the March to commence.
Bottom: The Kisan Vijay March is a river of red in Kalwan.
Photos: Sudhanva Deshpande.*

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pronouncement. There were many speakers, and the rally went on for over four hours. And yet, right till the end, I didn't see any flagging of attention, nor did people start leaving. I walked around the area, outside the pandal, about three hours after the rally had begun. Even here, where even the stage was not visible, farmers sat in silence, paying close attention to the speeches.

One of the key allies of the AIKS in the Long March was the Bharatiya Shetkari Kamgar Paksha (Peasants and Workers Party of India; PWP). The General Secretary of the party is Jayant Patil, a member of the Legislative Council of Maharashtra. Patil referred to the arrogance of the BJP in thinking that they had wiped out the red flag with their win in the Tripura Assembly Elections. "Come here and see," he roared, "this is a sea of red here." As if on cue, hundreds of red flags started waving. "You think you can destroy the image of Lenin we carry in our hearts? We will erect a statue of Lenin in Alibag [Raigad district, near Mumbai; this is the main base of the PWP], and we will ask every political party to join us in doing this. By pulling down one Lenin statue, they don't know how many more statues they have helped in erecting."

Ajit Nawale, the young, firebrand General Secretary of Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha, explained the important concessions about the loan waiver as a result of the pressure of the Long March. He told the farmers that the government hadn't earlier agreed to a waiver of loans in the period 2001–09, which they did this time, and extended the waiver to 2016–17 as well. He also detailed a number of other onerous conditions that the government had earlier imposed, which they have removed this time.

Ashok Dhawale, President of All India Kisan Sabha, talked about the highlights and the significance of the Long March and also went into the details of the many demands conceded. He made three additional points. One, that the Modi government is set on diluting the provisions of the Forest Rights Act by proposing

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a PPP model for forests in its new Draft Forest Policy. This means, in simple terms, a privatization of forests, and opening them up to rapacious exploitation. Second, he explained how the Supreme Court has diluted the provisions of the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, and the government had done little to defend it. He condemned the government's stand, and extended full support to the protests that marked the entire country that day. Since a large number of the farmers are tribals, this affects them directly. Third, he outlined the future course of struggle. He told the farmers that the AIKS has decided to collect 10 crore (100 million) signatures for their basic demands and present these to the government. August 9, the anniversary of the Quit India movement of 1942, will be the day that farmers will court arrest en masse, in hundreds of thousands, all over the country. And they will ask the BJP government of Narendra Modi, the most anti-farmer government ever in the history of the nation, to Quit India.

The man of the hour was undoubtedly J.P. Gavit. He is a seven time (and current) MLA and the former president of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha. He spoke last, and his speech went over an hour. A large part of the speech was devoted to explaining in detail the nitty-gritty of the implementation of the FRA. While it is a historic victory, he said, there is every reason to be vigilant. The track record of this government, and previous governments, hasn't been anything to write home about. Farmers have been betrayed again and again. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. You have forced the government to concede your demands, he told the farmers, but don't think the implementation will happen without struggle. Ever vigilant, ever ready to fight.

To do this, he said, we need to build the Kisan Sabha in every village. He urged all those present to focus totally on membership and on creating village committees. Without a strong organization, there can be no struggle. And without struggle, there is no victory.

There were other speakers as well, who each spoke for a short

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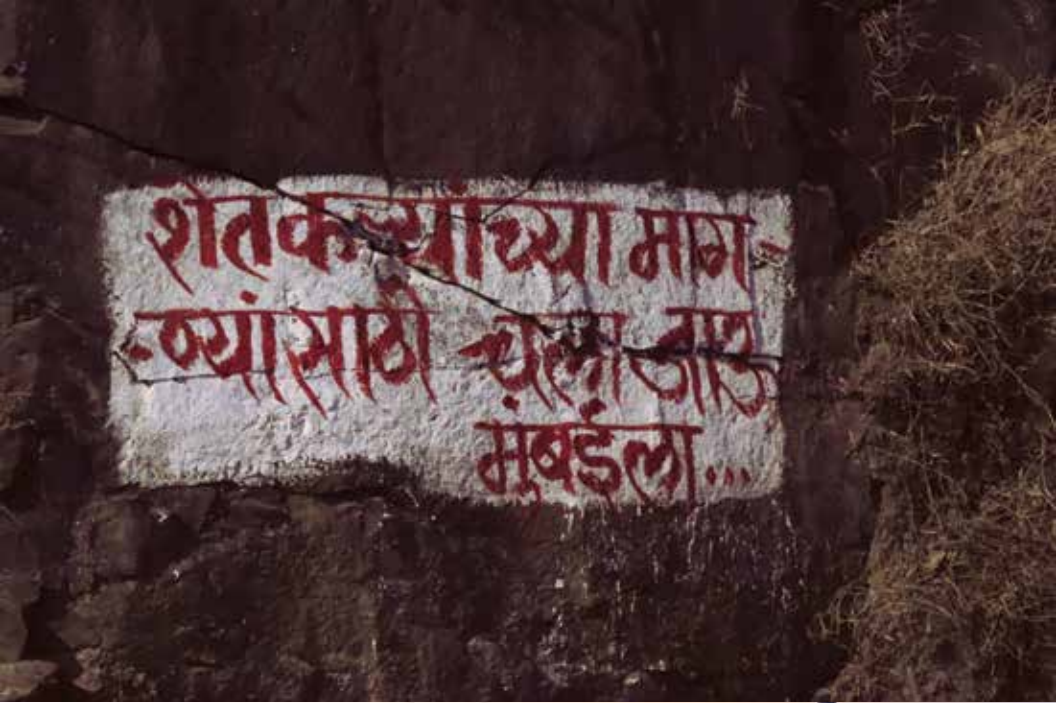
time. All of them congratulated the farmers on their historic victory. Some of the more prominent among them included: Kisan Gujar, President of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha; Ratan Budhar, President of the Thane-Palghar district Kisan Sabha; Savliram Pawar, President of the Nashik district Kisan Sabha; and Dr. D.L. Karad, Maharashtra State President of the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU). The meeting was conducted by Sunil Malusare, Joint Secretary of Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha.

It was, as I said, a sober affair. There was the occasional fire and brimstone, but in the main, the rally was more like a general body meeting, with the leaders reporting to the farmers in fairly minute detail what was agreed to in their negotiations with the state government, and why.

Both Ashok and Gavit explained why they didn't get the Chief Minister to sign the agreement with the farmers' delegation. Chief Ministers come and go, they said. It is relatively easy for a government to go back on the word of a previous government. What stays is the bureaucracy. So they had decided that they would insist on the agreement being signed by the Chief Secretary of the Government of Maharashtra, and ask for the Chief Minister to table it in the Assembly the next day. Given the upsurge of popular support, the government had no option but to accede to this.

Then there was the question of the support extended to the Kisan Long March by the opposition parties like the Congress, NCP and MNS, but also by the Shiv Sena, which is a part of the government. Since the demands concerned all farmers, the leaders said that we want our demands to be supported by all political parties. But we also know what these political parties are, and what they've done for farmers. So we welcome the support, but don't depend on it.

Farmers' demands are not partisan. They are society's demands.



*Top: Kisan Long March graffiti on a rock facing the highway en route.
Bottom: Igatpuri, where the marchers spent a night in this open space
adjacent to the highway.
Photos: Sudhanva Deshpande.*

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Consider this: the decision to have the Long March was taken on February 16; the march itself began on March 6, a mere 17 days later.

The Long March was, apart from everything else, a logistical miracle. Earlier in the day, as we were driving from Mumbai to Kalwan, we had stopped at Igatpuri where Ashok and Prasad had shown me the spot next to the highway where they had spent the second night of the march. Kisan Gujar, Sunil Malusare, and a couple of other comrades had done recon of the route three times (in vehicles, of course) to calculate the distances they could walk every day, where they could rest, have a bath, cook, and so on.

They asked groups of 500 farmers to pool together their grain, oil and other provisions. These were loaded on to tempos, which travelled ahead of the marchers. By the time the marchers reached the resting place, the tempos had set up camp and the volunteers had cooked the food on makeshift stoves made up of stones. And yes, they had also carried their own firewood, so as not to destroy anything on the way.

Gujar is a man with an eye for detail. They were carrying firewood and provisions, but where would they get the stones to make the stoves once they reached Mumbai? So, it was decided, they would carry their own stones. In the Kalwan Vijay March, when Gavit was recounting this, I could see many in the audience nodding and smiling when he said: You thought we were crazy to ask you to bring your own stones. But when you reached Mumbai, it made sense, didn't it?

He spoke about the outpouring of support and affection by the citizens of Mumbai, going over particular instances – doctors coming with medicines and setting up free camps; Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Dalits, and even the famous Dabbawalas of Mumbai serving food; a policeman supplying 50 buckets with

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his own money; and so on. He spoke about how the entire media supported the marchers, and why that was critical for them.

On the last day of the march (March 12), the Class X board exam was to be held in Mumbai. Had the farmers walked through the day, it would have surely disrupted traffic, causing snarls all along, and thousands of students would have been affected. Ashok spoke about that moment, when they had to decide what to do. On March 10, the fifth day, the farmers had covered the longest distance yet – 43 km. On March 11, again 25 km. Everybody was exhausted. Many farmers had calloused feet. Some were dehydrated. And yet, Ashok recalled, when Gavitt explained to them the situation, they voted as one, all 40,000 of them, to walk through the night and reach Azad Maidan at dawn before school children left their homes.

Then there was the other mind-boggling detail: when the marchers reached Azad Maidan, they found three truckloads of *bhakri* (a thick dry roti made generally of jowar, bajra or rice) and dry fish. This was the contribution of the Peasants and Workers Party members from Raigad district. They had collected grain and fish, and had cooked 150,000 *bhakris* for the marchers. It took them three days to make the *bhakris*. This was solidarity in action. Ashok pointed out another detail to me: while the AIKS accepted the support of all political parties including right-wing parties like the Shiv Sena and MNS, letting their leaders address the farmers, they refused to accept any material help from them. All parties were ready to contribute food, he said. We said no. When they insisted, we said, ok, you may give us water. But that's all.

In his speech, Gavitt spent a surprisingly long time going over details about food. Listening to him, and watching the audience listen to him, retracing in their head the march, was a humbling experience for me. I have never experienced poverty. I have never had to sleep hungry because there was no food. Gavitt is from a poor peasant family. He is tribal. Even after having been elected



*Top: J.P. Gavit, Ashok Dhawale and Jayant Patil
on the stage during Kisan Vijay March.*

Bottom: A section of the audience.

Photos: Sudhanva Deshpande.

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MLA seven times, he is known to be a man of simple means and lifestyle. He is a man of the soil. He is a man of the people. He knows what it is to be hungry. He appreciated, with his audience, the value of every meal they had while they marched.

* * *

Jiva Pandu Gavit first contested the election to the Maharashtra Assembly from Surgana (a reserved ST seat in Nashik district) in 1978 on the CPI(M) ticket. He got 7,527 votes and lost his deposit.

But, it turned out, all the other candidates had lost their deposits too, and Gavit emerged the winner by a margin of 595 votes. A narrow margin in absolute terms, but in context, comfortable enough.

The genius behind this win was Nana Malusare, a highly respected Kisan Sabha leader. He had instigated a very large number of candidates to file their nominations. One of them was even Gavit's own father-in-law. Votes were split; Gavit scraped through. He was a young man then, barely in his mid-twenties. Nobody in his family had previously been in politics. He was educated, having done his graduation, and worked as a muster assistant in the Employment Guarantee Scheme. He saw, from close quarters, how the benefits hardly ever reached the people they were meant for. When the legendary Kisan Sabha leader Godavari Parulekar, along with Nana Malusare, led an agitation at the time of the great drought in Maharashtra in the early 1970s to ask for the correct implementation of EGS, Gavit joined them.

Gavit has come a long way since. Today, he is Maharashtra's preeminent kisan leader. In a landscape dominated by Maratha kulaks and rural barons, for a tribal to reach this position is remarkable.

At the start of the march in Kalwan on April 2, there was a bit of chaos, with people raising slogans, playing instruments,

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dancing, and jostling, eager to get going. The main banner of the march was totally obscured from view. Several announcements for calm and order from the tempo that had the sound system made no impact. Nobody was listening. Till Gavit took the microphone. In less than a minute, he had got thousands of farmers to sit down on the blazing tarmac. He reminded them that the whole of Mumbai had admired their discipline, and that they were role models for kisans all over the country. “Now, in our own backyard, are we going to behave like this?” The march began soon after, in an entirely orderly fashion, with the banner and leaders in front.

If Gavit is the mass leader of the Kisan Sabha and its most recognized face, Kisan Gujar is the quintessential organization man. To a Delhi resident like me, his name sounds familiar – I had assumed that Kisan was pronounced as the Hindi word for peasant or farmer, with a long second vowel, and the *j* of Gujar was pronounced as in jar. I was wrong. Kisan is from Krishan, and Gujar is pronounced with *z*. Rugged and tough-looking, he worked in a factory in Nashik as a young man in the 1970s, and came in contact with Parulekar and Malusare. He was drawn to the Left movement, and joined CITU. He later joined the Kisan Sabha in the late 1980s. The Kisan Sabha was then struggling to strike roots outside the Thane-Palghar region, which had seen the historic Warli Revolt in the 1940s. Sometime in the mid-1990s, Ashok Dhawale suggested to Malusare that Gujar be brought into the leadership of the district Kisan Sabha. He was given key organizational positions, and within a few years the organizational strength of the Kisan Sabha in Nashik district was evident. A fair share of the credit for that must go to Gujar, who travelled tirelessly in the entire district, going to village after village, building the units of the organization.

Dr. Ajit Nawale is young, in his early 40s, thin and wiry, and he is the dynamic face of the Kisan Sabha. He came in the spotlight



*Nearly four hours into the public meeting, farmers listen with full attention.
Photos: Sudhanva Deshpande.*

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when he emerged as a key leader in the statewide Kisan Strike of 2017. This agitation included several kisan organizations, with the Kisan Sabha being an important component. At a crucial point, he saved the movement by walking out of a late night meeting with the Chief Minister and exposed the compromised deal that one section of the joint leadership was going to sign. That deal didn't go through, the farmers' strike was intensified with a successful Maharashtra Bandh to support it, and the government was forced to re-negotiate. The eventual agreement, though still not perfect, was in essence pro-kisan, and it was the non-implementation and subversion of that agreement by the government that eventually led to the Kisan Long March.

There's a story behind how Nawale came into the Kisan Sabha. An internet news story claimed that he and Ashok Dhawale happened to be co-passengers in a train and got into a conversation. When they exchanged names and towns of origin, Ashok asked him if he was related to Buwa Nawale, who was the founder president of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha. It turned out that young Ajit, then a student at an Ayurvedic medical college, was the older Nawale's grandnephew, and did not know much about him. When Ashok recounted to him the senior Nawale's contributions, he became interested in the Kisan Sabha and eventually joined it.

It is a charming story, but not entirely true. "I wish it had been so dramatic," Ashok said when I asked him about it. "It is true that Ajit didn't know much about his granduncle, and it is true that I told him. But it happened in the Pune Party office, not in a train, and it happened when I had gone, as State CPI(M) Secretary, to meet some young SFI (Students' Federation of India) comrades in Pune. So Ajit was already in the SFI movement when this happened."

It is characteristic of Ashok Dhawale to underplay his part. In personal conversations, he is soft-spoken and mild-mannered. I've now known him for some two decades, and have seen how he is

always courteous to his comrades, concerned about their wellbeing, and deeply appreciative of their contributions. This kindly, even-tempered exterior hides a deep commitment to principles and a steely resolve. When Bal Thackeray died in 2012, the whole of Maharashtra, it appeared, had a collective paroxysm, praising the strongman as the greatest son the state had produced in modern times. Even the CPI issued a shockingly mild statement. Nobody – no commentator, no media outlet, no political party or figure, nobody at all – was willing to say that Thackeray represented the politics of the gutter, that he rose to prominence on the back of brute thuggery, demagoguery, xenophobia and violence. Except Ashok Dhawale. He wrote the CPI(M)'s statement, and it was the one statement that did not even doff a token hat at the niceties of offering condolences. On the contrary, it reminded readers that it was Thackeray's Shiv Sena that was responsible for the killing of Krishna Desai in 1970. Desai, a respected trade unionist, was the sitting CPI MLA from the working class constituency of Parel.

“How did you come to the Left movement?” I asked him as we drove back from Kalwan. “Through the SFI, right?”

“No,” he said. “I came first to the CPI(M). Then the SFI.”

Here's what happened. As a young medical student attached to Nair Hospital located next to the Mumbai Central railway station in the mid-1970s, Ashok saw how they were routinely getting young children with tuberculosis. The children would be treated and cured, but very often the same children were back with a relapse a few months later. The young doctor decided to see for himself what the matter was. He visited the homes of many of these children, whose parents were often migrants who were in Mumbai looking for work. They lived in tiny hovels, dark and dingy, packed like sardines. “I realized that no medicine could cure the root causes of the children's tuberculosis. That required radical social change.”

Ashok started reading, and was drawn to Marxism. Dr. R.D.

THE KISAN LONG MARCH IN MAHARASHTRA

Potdar, an older doctor in Nair Hospital, his mentor, was the neighbour of Ahilya and P.B. Rangnekar, who were among the veterans of the Communist movement in Maharashtra. After discussions with them, and also once with B.T. Ranadive, Ashok joined the CPI(M). Simultaneously, after completing his medical studies, he decided to do an M.A. in Political Science, which led the Party asking him to work in the SFI. This was in the late 1970s. Within two years of joining the organization, Ashok was elected State Secretary of the SFI. He hastens to add that this was only because the SFI in Maharashtra was then a very small organization. Listening to him recounting how it happened, one would imagine that it was all a matter of him being at the right place at the right time, that it was luck, more or less undeserved.

Godavari Parulekar, all-India President of the Kisan Sabha, took a shine to the young, studious, radical doctor. She was keen for him to join the Kisan Sabha after SFI. He was too. But the Party decided that the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI) needed to be pushed along, so Ashok spent six years building the organization in key positions. Finally, in the early 1990s, he joined the Kisan Sabha. Between then and now, he has also served for three terms as the Maharashtra State Secretary of the CPI(M).

The Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha is today led by this core group of four – Jiva Pandu Gavit, the mass leader with a huge popular base; Kisan Gujar, the organization man looking at the nuts and bolts; Dr. Ajit Nawale, the dynamic young leader, unafraid to stick his neck out and take risks; and Dr. Ashok Dhawale, the experienced elder statesman, veteran of countless battles. Each of them brings their strengths to the organization, and complements the others. Around these four, there are a large number of other leaders from several districts.

With its deep roots among the poorest and most marginalized sections of the peasantry, and with a leadership which has risen, substantially, from them, the Kisan Sabha is the most dynamic Left organization in Maharashtra today. By a mile.

* * *

As we get back to Thane around midnight, I'm still processing all that I've seen and learnt. What, I ask myself, is the most heartwarming image I'm going to carry back to Delhi?

Perhaps it is this.

Vijay Patil, executive editor of *Jeewan Marg*, the CPI(M)'s weekly magazine, has taken up one corner of the stage as the meeting is in progress. With him is Dharma Shinde, another comrade. They are counting and making stacks of the magazine. Ashok Dhawale, in his speech, asks the farmers to buy the two special issues of *Jeewan Marg*, which have write-ups and photos of the Kisan Long March. The two together cost Rs 15. As soon as the announcement is made, one by one people start inching their way to the stage and collecting copies for their groups. Then the copies are distributed to the farmers, who each pay for it. As I move around, I see farmers reading the magazine, looking at the photos, pointing out faces, smiling. "Many of them can't read," Kisan Gujar tells me later. "But they'll all buy the issues, take them home and get their children or grandchildren to read it to them. Not this or that article. The whole issue, cover to cover. If you come here twenty years later, you'll find these two special issues in many homes. Why? Because they're about the Long March. The farmers know they've done something historic. And they are proud." Over 1,000 sets of the magazine were sold that day, till they ran out of copies. Many more would have sold, if only they had stock. After the rally ends, I find many people rueing that they were right at the back, so couldn't get to the stage in time.

Earlier in the day, I had seen how farmers paid Rs 5 each for the red cap. That they will take home, of course. At the end of the rally, an announcement is made from the stage to return the red flags, so they can be used again. Again, people start collecting the flags and returning them. The red flag is called *lal jhenda* in standard, urban Marathi, but it is called the much more endearing



Top: Vijay Patil of Jeewan Marg (back, bespectacled), and Dharma Shinde hand out copies of the magazine.

*Bottom: Farmers reading Jeewan Marg.
Photos: Sudhanva Deshpande.*

MANY BATTLES LIE AHEAD

lal bawta in villages. One of the popular slogans is: *Lal Bawte Ki – Jai!* (Victory to the Red Flag!) The Communist Party (irrespective of which particular one it may be) is called *Lal Bawta Party*. The poorest farmers, tribals, Dalits, and women, the marginalized of the marginalized, owe their allegiance not to this or that leader, but to the *lal bawta*.

As I pass a young boy rounding up flags, I ask him what he's doing.

“Collecting flags so that people don't take them home.”

“Why?” I ask.

“We need them for the future,” he says. Then, in Hindi, “*Aage aur ladai hai.*” I smile, and he smiles, because we both know the popular slogan he is quoting,

Abhi toh yeh angdai hai

Aage aur ladai hai

This was but an arm stretch

Many battles lie ahead.



*Collecting flags for the battles ahead.
Photos: Sudhanva Deshpande.*



It was an incredible sight – 40,000 poor farmers and landless labourers walking over 200 kilometres, from Nashik to Mumbai. They captured the city’s imagination and left it with an enduring memory. They outsmarted far more powerful adversaries. They made the deaf hear and the blind see.



**WHEN THE
FARMERS GO
MARCHING
IN...
We want to
be in that
number !**

This book documents one of the more inspiring struggles of our time – the fight of the kisans of Maharashtra against a government committed to money more than people. How did it come about? What were the causes that led to it? How much work did the All India Kisan Sabha put into this extraordinarily disciplined, democratic and dignified protest?

Ashok Dhawale, one of the main leaders of the march, writes a lengthy and detailed essay that is analytical as well as gives a rich sense of the nuts and bolts of the march. Sudhanva Deshpande’s Afterword profiles some of the organisers who made the march possible. This slim, readable volume, with stunning photographs reproduced in full colour, also contains a Preface by P. Sainath, India’s most important chronicler of agrarian conditions and rural distress over the past three decades.

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