

# Killed For Defending Her House

## —Police Atrocities In Dahanu

THE forest department in Dahanu, Maharashtra, with the help of the police has been harassing the local tribal population in many ways. One way is to confiscate or demolish the tribals' homes, accusing them of having built their homes of illegally felled timber. The Kashtakari Sanghatna has fought for the tribals' right to housing, and resisted the forest officers' attempts to dismantle the houses.

On the other hand, the Sanghatna has informed the forest department of various incidents of timber merchants felling trees. The forest department has failed to take action in these cases, even when the offenders were caught redhanded by the Sanghatna and handed over to the forest personnel.

Charmashet Bhusarpada, a tribal village in Thane district, was the scene of clashes three months ago. It is a small village of 35 families, inaccessible during the monsoon. Most of the people are landless labourers. To ensure their security, the villagers felt that houses scattered away from the hamlet should be brought close to one another. So they dismantled 13 of their houses and began to erect them at one location through co-operative labour. Three houses had been erected and 10 were lying dismantled.

On February 9, 1987, at about 10 a.m., 12 Forest Development Corporation personnel and about 15 policemen came to the village and began loading the old timber of the dismantled houses into their trucks. There were about 15 men in the village at the time, as the others were in the fields. The police aimed their guns at the men and drove them away. The women began to protest. The police threatened to fire at the women. When the women did not desist, the police fired one round above their heads. The women dispersed

and the truck loaded with old timber moved away. The men had run away because in September 1986 some of them had been arrested and tortured. They were afraid lest this be repeated.

The next day, a truckload of SRP men came to the village. They began to chase the tribal men who ran away into the forest. One policeman had a bag of broken glass which he strewed at the entrance to the village. Then six jeeps filled with policemen and forest personnel arrived. There were a total of about 100 men, including PSI Sahane of the Jawahar police station. They were accompanied by labourers who began to take the timber of the houses that were under reconstruction. They pulled out several beams from the house of Jamnibai, a tribal woman, aged 25, mother of four.

"The truck was moving away when Jamnibai began running after it, crying and pleading with the police to return the wood from her house. When she was about 30 metres away from the truck, the police suddenly fired at her. She fell down immediately in a pool of blood. Sitibai, who was holding her infant nephew in her arms, ran to Jamnibai. A bullet fired at her, hitting her in the chest. She managed to run to her house where she collapsed. The police caught her by the hands and feet and dragged her to a jeep. Other women who ran to the assistance of Sitibai and Jamnibai were also fired at although fortunately no one else was hurt. The men, hopelessly outnumbered, stood and watched helplessly.

The police loaded Jamnibai's body onto a jeep. They assaulted Ramibai and Kashibai with rifle butts. After the post mortem, the police tried to get a woman activist of the Sanghatna to take charge of the body. She offered to take the body to

the village if the police provided a vehicle. The police refused, saying they feared being lynched if they went to the village. So the police disposed of the body in an unmarked grave, without informing any of Jamnibai's family members.

The police fabricated false accounts of the incident, saying that an 800 strong mob had attacked them with sticks and stones. They claimed that 22 policemen were injured. Sahane, who had fired his pistol at the women, claims that one stone hit him on the face (he has a pimple as proof), one stone landed on his chest and broke his pen (he has a broken pen as proof), and one on his hand (he has a loose bandage as proof).

A case of attempted murder has been filed against the villagers. The headman, the injured Sitibai and Kashibai are in police custody; on this charge while the trigger happy Sahane and the other murderers continue to be in their positions of authority.

It is ironical that in 1987, declared as international year of shelter for the homeless, a woman should be murdered for wanting to live in a dwelling fit for humans.

We request all concerned persons to send telegrams to the chief minister, Maharashtra, condemning the police atrocities and murder of Jamnibai, and to demand a judicial enquiry into the firing, the arrest and prosecution for murder of Sahane, and other guilty policemen, a compensation of Rs 100,000 for the family of the deceased and Rs 50,000 for the injured, immediate withdrawal of all fabricated cases against the tribals, release of the arrested, return of the confiscated timber, and an enquiry into the illegal timber trade in the area.

—Kashtkari Sanghatna