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**A Journal
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the Study of
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Polity and
Society**

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PANCHAYATI IRRIGATION MANAGEMENT OVER CANAL SYSTEMS IN WEST BENGAL

Nirmalya Choudhury
Parthosarathy Banerjee
and R. Ranjit

The paper aims to trace out if the role that panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) play towards decentralised management system over large irrigation systems in the state of West Bengal. The study highlights that the devolution of legal power to the panchayat falls short of control over canal irrigation systems of the state. However, by virtue of the institutional powers that emanate from the structural arrangements, the PRIs play a semi formal role which is neither systematic nor easily recognisable, and remains more like a contingent response to critical situations. The study finally argues in favour of systematic and continuous involvement of the various panchayati raj institutions in the state through a state level irrigation reform.

Key Words: Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, Zilla Parishad, Legal Domain, Institutional Domain.

Decentralisation of irrigation management has been the buzzword in the policy arena for years together now. The mode of decentralisation is in the form of devolution of critical recurring activities that include maintenance of irrigation infrastructures up to secondary level, management of water distribution over the command up to a certain level and also undertaking the task of collection of irrigation charge from the farmers. The objective of such devolution is to ensure enhancement in the reliability of irrigation service and strengthening the hitherto financially starved irrigation departments in different states. The institutional arrangements designed are setting up or promoting of user specific organisations (farmers within the command) promoted either by the irrigation department directly or through community mobilisation by civil society organisations. The desired impact is however not uniform. Also there has always been a question of sustainability of these nascent organisations of users. These organisations often struggle to attract

allegiance from the farmer members in the command as they may often be seen as agencies of the departments rather than of farmers.

As they are formed mostly at the tertiary level, water user associations have limited control over the resource they command and the headwork of the system still remains in the control of the government bureaucracy. This limits the authorised and intended domain of action of the organisations. Such an arrangement may have the effect of reducing the *member centrality* [Shah, 1996] of these institutions. On the other hand, it needs to be mentioned upfront that irrigation though a very critical input for prosperous agriculture is not the sole input. So, while the water user associations may try to build in allegiance they may fail to do so because of the presence of bottle necks in any part of the entire supply chain necessary for the agriculture production system. In a scenario of agriculture characterised by high price of fertilisers and pesticides, seeds with low yields, poor storage and marketing reduce the *patronage centrality* [Shah,

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The views expressed in this paper are personal and do not represent the views of the government or any other organisation.

1997] of such institutions to the farmers. Though the devolution principles promises much in spirit, the modality of such devolution can constrain performance on intended promises. It becomes important to see if there are some complementary institutional arrangements which can be coupled with the present form of devolution. One such arrangement is to see if these user specific institutions get integrated in the overall developmental process through the PRIs rather than remaining isolated, parallel institutions.

This paper explores whether the PRIs do have a role in irrigation management, particularly the canal irrigation management, in the state of West Bengal. The role of PRIs is analysed at both legal and institutional levels. For this purpose, this paper focuses on an actual case, a case of a district in West Bengal where the PRIs have been playing a role in irrigation along with other rural developmental activity.

It needs to be mentioned that bulk of institutional reforms over irrigation system has occurred in the semi arid and hard rock regions of the country; mostly the North Western, Western and the Southern parts; often termed as water deficient regions of the country. In the contrary there is limited research pertaining to canal irrigation in general and Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) in particular in West Bengal.

In section 1, we provide a brief history of PRIs in West Bengal. In the state of West Bengal a large amount of rural developmental activity has been transferred to the PRI and this devolution has been associated by legal empowerment of panchayats from the top, which is through West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973, and its subsequent amendments. Section 2 tries to capture this macro phenomenon in terms of identification of empowerment of panchayat at various levels

pertaining to irrigation management particularly surface irrigation management. In section 3, we look at the institutional arrangement that is prevalent at the district, block and village level and its impact on the activity of PRI over irrigation systems. The observations were made from the fieldwork done in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal and at least some of them are expected to be valid across the State. Finally, Section 4 consists of the interpretations and the conclusions.

SECTION 1

West Bengal is now acclaimed to have one of the most vibrant and mature PRI in the country. The PRIs in West Bengal have evolved from the erstwhile Union and District Boards that were formed during the British Era in accordance with Bengal Local Self Government Act, 1885, and Bengal Village Self Government Act, 1919. The union boards were supposed to provide civic amenities but were always crippled due to lack of funds. They were far from being peoples' institutions and were mostly controlled by the rural elite, namely, a nexus of landholding gentry and the money lenders. They formed a crucial interface between the community and the *Raj* and were often an institution of patronage distribution [Ghosh, 2003]. Post independence, West Bengal enacted Panchayat Act, 1957, and then the Zilla Parishad Act, 1963, whereby a four tier system of village governance was formulated. The hitherto Union Board was now divided into *village panchayat* (akin to the gram sansad) and *Anchal Parishad* which will be a cluster of villages (akin to gram panchayat) whereby the responsibility for civic functions and the revenue generating powers were devolved to the Anchal Parishad. A new institution was formed at the block level named as *Anchalik Parishad* and the hitherto district board was renamed as *Zilla Parishad*. The members of the village panchayat were supposed to be directly elected by the villagers while the

higher level functionaries were to be chosen through a process of indirect election. The subsequent Panchayat Act of 1973 envisaged a three tier panchayati raj system whereby the village and anchal parishad were combined to a single body, *gram panchayat*. The anchalik parishad was now renamed as *panchayat samiti* while the district body continued to function as *Zilla parishad* [Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2004, Pp. 203-222]. Till now these institutions largely acted as an interface between the government and the people and were controlled by the large farmers, landholders and money lenders who commanded the rural agrarian West Bengal. The political regime till now was either too urbanised where the voice of the rural mass did not count much or the mode of political mobilisation was through a political machine where the linkage with the masses was made through the link men who were the rural elites and village heads [Ghosh, 2003].

The state election of 1977 was a watershed for PRIs when the left front government came to power with absolute majority for the first time. The government used the existing panchayat act in letter and spirit and went further by making two important alterations. For the first time, all the representatives in the three tiers of panchayat were to be elected directly by the rural populace and under political banner. Thus, much before the 73rd amendment providing constitutional empowerment to the panchayats, the Left front government in West Bengal could use the existing West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973, to formulate a three tier panchayati raj system with representatives being directly elected from the rural populace. And it went a step further by empowering them with administrative powers and routing the entire kitty of development finance through these new institutions. This was then coupled with the agrarian reform in the form of registration of share croppers through

Operation Barga and the strict imposition of the land ceiling act whereby the party took supreme interest to use the bureaucracy and the panchayat to identify vested lands and ensure transfer of ownership of the vested lands in the hands of the landless. All this cumulatively struck at the heart of the agrarian impasse prevalent for decades. Thus, the popular picture of rural Bengal, the *Zamindar* controlling the daily life and livelihood of the rural mass and often acting both as an oppressor and perpetuator of a century old system was now broken with emergence of a new group of people with power who could control both people's power as they were elected representatives and finance as the entire kitty of development finance was now to be routed through them. Simultaneously, the nexus that also existed between the *Zamindars* and the bureaucracy was now broken as the bureaucrats were made a part of the panchayat bodies. Early researches on the profile of panchayat representatives also reflected the majority presence of the landless and marginal farmers in the panchayat bodies. The oppressive nexus between the landholder-moneylender on whom large rural populace had to be dependent was now broken. A new generation panchayat leadership came up from the bottom of the pyramid; rather the pyramid has been turned on its head [Webstar, 1992]. From then, at various points of time, the state has endowed these bodies with powers and responsibilities for performing different rural development programmes and the institution of panchayat became the main plank of the party's rural development and electoral strategy [Ghosh, 2003]. The involvement of mass organisations of the people changed the pattern of rural governance resulting in a loud voice of the hitherto unheard and an attack on the bureaucracy. Till then the bureaucracy was a monolith with a lot of resources under its control, but was always insulated from the voices of those who neither commanded land nor money. This has often been

quoted as *rock departmentalism*, 'less physical but more psychological' [Webstar, 1992]. While these successes of institutionalisation have often been attributed to the political and ideological compulsions of the left party at the state, Kar (1998) attributes it largely to the aspirations of the rural masses and terms it 'movement from below'. He draws inference from the sustained legacy of the struggle undertaken by the rural populace. Lieten (1988), in a study over Muhammedbazar block in Birbhum, clearly brought out how the pattern of representation has changed from being dominated by upper and middle caste to a domination of SC/ST, agricultural labourers and poor peasants and the fading out of the caste based stigma and discrimination.

The government at the helm of the state remained unchanged and over the years has devolved a number of responsibilities to the panchayats in terms of devolution of both funds in the form of *grant in aid or tied project fund* and functionaries like involving the administrative and the departmental officers as ex-officio members in the different standing committees of the panchayat at the district and block level. Thus, in the new institutional arrangement, the district magistrate became the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Zilla parishad and Block Development Officer (BDO) acted as the executive officer of the Panchayat Samiti. To facilitate devolution of projects which require technical expertise, a post of an engineer (*Nirman Sahayak*) was created recently at the gram panchayat level itself [Government of West Bengal, 2004b].

Thus, the principal responsibilities of the panchayat have been:

- * Implementation of land reforms, chiefly identification of sharecroppers and of those entitled to receive land titles
- * Selection and monitoring beneficiaries of various agricultural development schemes (such as distribution of agricultural mini-kits and extension services) and antipoverty Programmes, including the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), employment generation programmes creating rural infrastructure (including the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) and the Rural Labour Employment Guarantee Programme (NRLEGP) during the 1980s, subsequently consolidated into the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY) from 1989), various welfare schemes (housing, old age assistance, pensions, disaster relief etc.).
- * Construction and management of local roads, school buildings, and irrigation facilities (such as tanks, ponds, river lift schemes, and wells)
- * Community and cooperative projects, including management of common property resources such as wasteland, forests
- * Collection of local taxes, levies and fees
- * Since the early 1990s, administration of *Shishu Shiksha Kendras* (SSKs), an alternative to the primary schools run by the state government.

[Adapted from Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2004]

In order to facilitate decentralisation of decision making, and to increase the accountability of the gram panchayat towards the people whom they represented, the government amended the panchayat Act in 1993 to create a fourth tier *gram sansad* or the village constituency. This institution was legally empowered to guide and advise the gram panchayat pertaining to different rural development projects, identify the principles based on which beneficiary selection is to be made, form beneficiary committees or users institutions to facilitate active participation of the

people in the implementation, cause management and equitable distribution of benefits and record objections pertaining to malfunctioning of gram panchayat functionaries or representatives. The legal empowerment is strong to the extent that gram panchayat account is also to be publicly audited during meetings of the gram sansad and in case the dissent is expressed in these meetings are not considered subsequently, the entire finance can be termed as illegal [Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002]. All along, the institutional innovation has had an impact on the public service delivery. Not only were the unheard voices of the poor rural peasantry heard in the governance institutions but the composition of the representations in this institution also shifted favorably towards the landless, marginal and small peasants. It was found in a large scale survey undertaken by Bardhan and Mookherjee [2003] that two thirds of the gram panchayat seats were occupied by the above social constellation. In another occasion Chattopadhyay and Dufflo [2004, Pp. 1409-43] had shown in a complete enumeration of all the gram panchayats in Birbhum that reservation of women in GP has resulted in increased participation from the fairer sex. On another occasion Ghatak and Ghatak [2002] found that the rural populace has even found a greater voice in recent years with institutionalisation of the fourth tier and the gram panchayat was made accountable to the rural populace during the gram sansad meetings and they concluded that the new institution had resulted in increased participatory governance. Annual Administrative Report 2003-2004 states that the five year average attendance in the gram sansad meetings in the state was 12.14% [Government of West Bengal, 2004b]. The impact of the institutional reform in the rural governance on accountability and public service delivery was studied by Bardhan and Mookherjee [2003]. They found that if accountability is the extent of responsiveness of the PRIs towards the

needs of the poor *vis-à-vis* non poor then the PRI in West Bengal panchayat was quite successful. Their longitudinal study based on a time series of 20 years from 1978-98 found that in most cases the fruit of the developmental programmes, where the panchayat were the implementing agency, went to the poor. The leakages of the programme was lower than the national standard and the often-quoted fear of elite capture, as explained by the extent of intra gram panchayat disparity in provision of benefits, was found to be fairly low. However development programme that had to pass on through different tiers with the jurisdiction of passage depending on panchayat at those levels attracted bias. Thus the panchayat system seems to be more mass-based and participatory and the corruption and malpractice of the panchayat functionaries were in check as the political environment was more mature and were made accountable to the masses and the party [Shah, 2001].

SECTION 2

This section portrays the macro environment in terms of legal empowerment under which the PRI at various tiers function. Starting from the gram sansad or the fourth tier of the panchayat we move up to understand their formation and both legal and administrative domains over different activities pertaining to canal irrigation.

Recent enactment of the panchayat law of West Bengal has created a new institution at the village level to ensure that all the developmental activity where the sansad is a unit can be holistically managed at the village level and the multiplicity of institutions for different programmes can be avoided. Panchayat Act, 2003, has introduced formation of village development committee (*gram unnayan samiti*) under the jurisdiction of individual gram sansads. The gram unnayan samiti will be the nodal unit at the sansad level which ensures people's

participation in implementation of all the different rural development activities and equitable distribution of benefits of different programmes [Government of West Bengal, 2004b].

The formation of such an institution is an extremely noble concept as often the development in a village gets lost within the plethora of committees often competing with each other and creating constituencies though most of them have a similar objective of overall village development. However, the process of formation of the Village Development Committee can be subjected to political manipulation. According to the law, village development committee is to be formed by GP through bye-laws and the mode of selection is a system of open voting. The open show of hands can often be influenced by local power structures. It was found during the course of the fieldwork that the village development committees were crucial institutions at the sansad level, more important than the sansad representatives. Thus, a party may lose a particular gram sansad but still have a control over the villages through the village development committee through majority representation. This is largely because the entire range of developmental programmes has to come up and get implemented through the VDCs. Thus, wading of patronage baton again allows the party controlling the VDC an electoral advantage.

The gram panchayat popularly termed as GP¹ is the most important institution in the panchayat raj system of the state. It is the institution where the real power lies. The chairman of this panchayat, known as *pradhan*, uses his executive and financial power through the functionaries of the panchayat directly, in contrast with the chairman of panchayat samiti and zilla parishad, where they are largely exercised through the chief executive officers and the standing committees.²

To facilitate better decentralisation at the GP level a number of sub-committees has been formed to look after different functions of the gram panchayat. According to the recently conducted activity mapping, the Agriculture and Animal Resource Development sub committee (*Krishi o Pranisampad Bikash*) has been empowered to involve in the development of minor irrigation system which includes 'identification of location of projects' and 'identification of potential beneficiaries of different minor irrigation projects through gram sansad'. Thus, the formal role of the GP lies in the identification of the spot for the structure and selection of beneficiaries. While the mapping vaguely defines 'water management' as one of the activities, it clearly devolves the responsibility of the Agriculture and Animal Resource Development sub committee like encouraging farmers for on-farm developmental activities and development of field channels for proper utilisation of water. This is where the role of the gram panchayat pertaining to canal irrigation creeps up for the first time. The responsibility of the GP in minor irrigation is, however, explicitly defined whereby they have been endowed with the power of deciding and collecting water charges for different schemes that have been turned over to the panchayat [Government of West Bengal, 2005].

According to the Section 20 of West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973, irrigation including minor irrigation, water management and watershed development are activities that the panchayat shall have to perform *but subject to devolution* by the state [Government West Bengal, 2004a]. It was found during the course of this study that while minor irrigation and watershed management has been devolved to the panchayat, irrigation management pertaining to canals were not legally devolved to the panchayat by the state government and here the *rock departmentalism* seems to still exist. Hence, the gram panchayat,

which is a very powerful grass root institution, does not have any legal control over canals. The right of the gram panchayat does not exist even for undertaking repair, improvement and maintenance of the canal. In case of any such activities, they need to take prior permission from the concerned officer of the state government [Government of West Bengal, 2004a]. Thus, while panchayat has been empowered in a number of rural development activities including the minor irrigation, Government of West Bengal has still persisted with the Bengal Irrigation Act, 1876, which strictly restricts the ownership right of the panchayat over the canal systems and thus limits the formal domain of the gram panchayat over canal irrigation.

Hence, though the gram panchayat is responsible through the gram sansad for better water management through field channel construction, motivating farmers for on-farm development and better water distribution, it does not have right over the main infrastructure. Even in order to undertake certain maintenance activity it has to bend down before the bureaucracy. Such duality in the rights of the gram panchayat often short circuits the decentralised management of the canal irrigation by the panchayat. It was found during the course of the study that the legal arrangement seriously constrains the formal domain of the PRIs (all three) over canal management and hampers any intended intervention of the PRI over canal systems. With regard to the higher level institutions, namely the panchayat samiti and the zilla parishad, legal powers have endowed them to undertake schemes including providing financial assistance for the development of minor irrigation, irrigation includes water management and watershed development.

Thus, in West Bengal there exists a duality between the major & medium canal irrigation systems and the minor irrigation systems in terms of devolution of power and responsibility to the panchayat to facilitate decentralised management. While the formal role assigned to the gram panchayat is limited in case of canal systems, PRIs are empowered to fix water charges for the supply of water that takes place under their jurisdiction and charge a separate registration fee over Shallow Tube Wells and Deep Tube Wells which are used for a commercial purpose. Thus, on the one hand while the state has legally empowered the panchayats to impose taxes on the water market (however impracticable though it might be to utilise the bestowed power in the rural backyards characterised by millions of water buyers and sellers with fragmented land), on the other hand legislature and the judiciary is totally silent in bestowing any power to the panchayat with respect to the large canal systems of the state. In West Bengal, where most of the rural development activities have been devolved to the governance of the panchayat, it was strange to find that the canal irrigation, which in spirit appears to be a powerful tool for rural development at least in terms of intensifying the agriculture, as a resource has every character of being pro-poor, the panchayat had little to intervene and the control of the department still rules the game.

Thus, on the *macro* level we find that canal irrigation management legally continues to be under the domain of department and *rock departmentalism* persists. Although area under canal irrigation has a considerable geographical spread, the government as a policy has shown no intention to legally devolve the management of the irrigation systems to the hands of the PRIs. It is instructive to delve deeper to see why this is so. The major and medium irrigation systems seem to gradually die out at least financially. The half

yearly performance review of West Bengal's annual plan 2005-2006 (2005) clearly mentions that for a period of ten years from 1991-92 to 1999-2000 the irrigation projects could generate a revenue that was only 2.9 per cent of the working expenses and thus incurring an average operating loss of Rs 95.37 crore. This seriously questions whether canal irrigation does constitute a significant chunk in the West Bengal agricultural scenario or whether it is too insignificant to draw any attention from policy makers.

The objective of this paper is not to trace the history of canal irrigation nevertheless a quick review helps put matters in perspective. The traditional systems of *ahar-phynes* prevalent in the Chottanagpur and South Bihar Plains where surface water from the hills and streams was diverted to the field through creation of small three sided bunded reservoirs named ahars and then conveyed through phynes have existed for a long time. Community management with a patronage from the feudal landlords were a driving factor behind the community based management [Sengupta, 1985]. In the adjoining plains of Ganges in West Bengal there existed a rich history of overflow irrigation systems [Wilcocks, 1930].

Going by the government records the ultimate irrigation potential created through the major and medium projects till 1999-2000 is around 14.30

lakh Ha which is around 53 per cent of the Ultimate irrigation potential from major and medium projects and 21 per cent of the ultimate irrigation potential of the state (ref: official website of Irrigation and waterways department). There are four major irrigation systems, namely the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC), Mayurakshi system, Kangsabati Irrigation System and Teesta Barrage Project. DVC is the oldest of the projects. It was formed in 1948 and the irrigation and canal system was handed over the West Bengal government in 1964. Though the canal was designed initially for Rabi and Kharif irrigations, in recent times irrigation is also provided for summer paddy. This system has created an irrigation potential of 4, 83,500 Ha and is spread over the agriculturally prosperous districts of Burdwan, Bankura, Hoogly and Howrah. Kangsabati reservoir project was started in 1956-57 and it has created an irrigation potential of 3, 48,477 Ha. The project, though originally planned for Kharif and Rabi, now has substantial area under boro cultivation in the districts of Bankura, West Midnapore and Hooghly. Mayurakhshi reservoir project, often claimed by the government as one of the best performing irrigation projects, is another major irrigation project which is functional since 1985, has created an irrigation potential of 2,50,860 Ha. This project is spread over three districts of Birbhum, Murshidabad and Burdwan.

Table 1. Status of Major Irrigation System in West Bengal

Major Irrigation System (1)	Maximum Irrigation Achieved (in Ha.)			Gross irrigated area (GIA) (5)
	Kharif (2)	Rabi (3)	Boro (4)	
DVC Irrigation System	333200	18450	69790	421440
Mayurakshi reservoir Project	220730	8150	25400	254280
Kangsabati reservoir Project	274940	45593	27944	348477
Total Irrigated area by 3 major projects				1024197
Gross Cropped Area (GCA)				7842000
GIA to GCA (in %)				13.06

Source: http://www.dvlp.com/temp/water_irrigation/index2.htm

It becomes quite clear from Table 1 that just these three major irrigation systems command a significant importance at least in terms of geographical coverage, leave alone the huge capital cost that has been invested over the years. On a macro level, the total area through government canal system is 12, 05,900 Ha. [Compiled by indiastat.com from Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics, Government of West Bengal] while the Net Sown Area is 55, 46,577 Ha [Agricultural Census, 2001] which implies that around 22 per cent of the net sown area is under canal irrigation.

In such a context, it becomes important to see if given a limited formal domain whether the panchayat institutions did play any role informally over the canal systems. Prima facie, it is quite improbable, in the rural agrarian scenario where irrigation is an important component of agrarian development and where newspapers report even murder of farmers pertaining to water related disputes, that the panchayat just remains a mere spectator.

SECTION 3

While at the macro level the institutional environment provides a limited legal domain for the panchayat to engage itself in irrigation management, the institutional arrangements governing the three tiers of panchayat, particularly at the district and the block levels, seem to have key implications. The institutional arrangements of the panchayat raj systems at these two levels set the canvass for involvement of PRI in the governance of the irrigation systems. To understand the dynamics that is seen between the government departments, panchayat and the rural populace in this partially formalised environment, through the unique institutional arrangements, we undertook a case study of

panchayat's activity in the district of Jalpaiguri over a major canal irrigation system, the Teesta Barrage Project (TBP).

Upfront it needs to be mentioned that in West Bengal at the district level, there are ten standing committees which are responsible for different rural developmental activities. Among these, one is Agriculture Irrigation and Co-operative Committee (AIC, *Krishi Sech o Samabaya Samiti*). AIC has also been strengthened by the Government Order of 1993. Under this order, the Executive Engineer of Irrigation and Waterways and Agri-Mechanical and Agri-Irrigation Department has been made an ex-officio member of this committee. Thus, this committee consists of representatives from Irrigation and Waterways Department, Agri-mechanical and Agri-Irrigation Department, State Water Investigation Department, Principal Agricultural Officer and five elected members of zilla parishad. The committee is scheduled to meet once in a month though this is not strictly followed.

The particular composition of this committee ensures that in case of emergency the PRI at various levels can actually have a control over the line departments either through the Executive Officer or through the ex-officio members. If there is a situation of water crisis, the panchayat can actually instruct the line department to release water to certain areas either through the Executive Officer, who, by virtue of his position of District Magistrate, also has some authority over different line departments, or as a decision undertaken in the meeting of this committee. The same phenomenon takes place at the block level where the BDO becomes the chief executive officer and senior most representative of concerned line departments at the block level become the ex-officio members of the committee.

Thus, here lies an apparent working arrangement which resolves the paradox between a macro phenomenon and the arrangements designed at the district and block levels. At macro level, in accordance with the panchayat act and Bengal Irrigation act 1886, the legal authority of canals lies with the irrigation department and the panchayat cannot do any activity without prior permission of the concerned department. On the other hand, the institutional arrangement, as mandated at the district and block level, ensures that the PRI enjoy certain amount of command over the irrigation department. According to one irrigation secretary of AIC, the line departments often are largely dependent on the panchayat for undertaking different activity as the bureaucracy in West Bengal loses its presence below the block level. Any scheme that needs to be implemented has to be done with the active participation of the panchayat. Hence, it is not the choice but often a necessity for the bureaucracy and the elected body to act together in mutual interest. In fact, early researches [Webstar, 1992] have provided insight into the relationship of newly elected and empowered panchayat representatives and ever powerful but suddenly hapless government bureaucracy. In the infancy years of panchayat, there were lot of reporting of enmity between them but with the persistence of a government, which built up this system of panchayat for more than three decades, has eased the tension.

To understand the functioning of the PRI at the district level in general and the level of the AIC committee in particular, a focus group discussion was organised with the panchayat samiti members of the Rajganj block in Jalpaiguri district. The block is largely irrigated from the two canal systems, namely the TBP and the Kartowa Barrage system, and the dependence on groundwater irrigation is minimal in this block. The panchayat samiti is well aware of the importance of the Teesta Barrage project that

passes through this block. The importance of Teesta Barrage Project lies in the increase in the production of boro paddy which happened after the project. Before every boro season, a meeting is organised by the Agriculture Irrigation Co-operative Committee which is attended by Superintendent Engineer and Executive Engineer from TBP, Sub Divisional Officer, Assistant Engineer, Agriculture Development Officer and representatives of the panchayat samiti and concerned gram panchayat representatives.

The major objective of this meeting is to decide the schedule of water distribution, particularly duration of water supply and areas to be irrigated. In this meeting, a review of previous years' irrigation programme also takes place with a view to overcoming the hazards faced and plan in advance for the forthcoming year. In this meeting, panchayat officials play an important role by voicing the problems faced and requirements of the farmers based on the experience of the irrigation season last year. However, in absence of any legal binding, there are no formal legal obligations on the part of the irrigation department to comply with the suggestions and address the complaints put up by the panchayat representatives. Though the exact date of water release is decided by the irrigation department considering the situation of water availability in Teesta barrage, generally water is released in the first and / or second week of December and continues at scheduled intervals till end of April. The meeting takes place at the end of October or the beginning of November. This allows the decision taken in this meeting to be communicated down to the village level through the mandatory gram sansad meeting which is to be held in the month of November. Thus, the structural arrangements in the PRI at the *micro* level provide a unique opportunity whereby the decisions of water release in the canal and its schedule can be communicated to the villagers.

Therefore, even if formally the PRIs do not have any legal domain over canal irrigation, the institutional arrangements at the district and block level have created a space for the intervention of the panchayat.³

The panchayat functionaries and the AIC committee were aware of the water distribution disputes that occur frequently in the command during the entire boro season. During this time, the block AIC receives innumerable complaints directly from villagers or from different Gram Panchayats where the disputed area spans over more than one panchayat area. Most of the water

related disputes are caused due to illegal bundings over the conveyance and distribution infrastructures. In this particular case, the disputes are more frequent over the two longest conveyance and distribution infrastructures, namely, Distributary 2 and Minor 3, which come under Rajganj block. It was also found that though the legal ownership of the canal lies with the irrigation department, in crisis situation it is the gram panchayat and panchayat samiti, often accompanied by police, who have to interfere and remove the blockades. The case of Kharif 2006 illustrated below is an important case in this regard.

Box 1

During Kharif of 2006, when drought was declared, the Zilla Parishad called an emergency meeting and persuaded the department to release water in the canals to ensure crucial supplemental irrigation for the kharif paddy. The canal was run at full capacity on insistence of the Zilla Parishad.

Distributary 2 (D2) and Minor 3 (M3) pass through four gram panchayats and two blocks, namely, Mantadari and Shikarpur in Rajganj block and Belakoba and Bahadur in Jalpaiguri Sadar block. The political composition of the gram panchayats was different though both the panchayat samitis are Left dominated. While Mantadari located at the head of D2 and Bahadur located at the Tail end of M3 are absolutely dominated by CPI (M), Shikarpur and Belakoba are non-Left dominated. Belakoba is a constellation of all the non-leftist parties forming a grand coalition; Shikarpur is left dominated though not through majority but with the help of independent and breakaway Trinamool Congress faction candidates. Thus, both these GP were politically not stable. While water was released in D2 and from it came to M3, it was found that Shikarpur and Belakoba were creating cross bunds over D2 and M3 and farmers were lifting water even outside the command while water did not reach the Bahadur panchayat. Such cases of cross-bunding are common in Boro but this time the situation was complex because it was a drought year and in this particular case the affected area was not only spreading below the gram panchayat jurisdiction but the issue was spread over more than one block. The situation was extremely volatile and the Bahadur GP went up to the Zilla Parishad and finally the sabhapati of Rajganj block had to travel to the concerned villages in her block to remove the blockades in the presence of police force.

The case of *Kharif 2006* has large implications for the issue of scaling up of community based natural resource management institutions in general and Water User Associations in particular. It shows how through the legal and political interlinkages across the three tier of panchayat a system of nested institution can be created such that disturbances at village level can

have wider amplifications in this particular case up to the district level. In irrigation parlance this throws up an opportunity where the tertiary system is managed at the gram panchayat level through Village Development Committees and macro level issues like water distribution across the system, duration of water supply and conflict resolution that spills over villages and thus fall

out of the ambit of any one particular Water User Associations or Village Development Committees. However at times practical realities also implied that in crisis situation or when there is a conflict pertaining to water distribution, panchayat representative gets swayed by local public sentiments.

Though formally their role may be limited as the legal control of the system lies within the irrigation department, according to the panchayat representatives, *de facto* the panchayat undertakes many a responsibility. Given the institutional space that they enjoy through the Agriculture Irrigation and Co-operative Committee they can also have a commanding position over the government departments and the gram panchayat under their jurisdiction. But there are times when in spite of having funds and functionaries the panchayat representatives cannot undertake works over the irrigation systems given the limited legal domain they enjoy over the system.

In one particular case the panchayat samiti at the block level expressed their plans to undertake de-silting and de-weeding operations to facilitate better conveyance of water through the system in their block. They do not have any tied funds for this activity but they are quite confident that money can be arranged from other sources. Quite contrastingly the panchayat samiti was well aware of the paucity of funds in the irrigation department for the repair and maintenance of the canal system. Thus, the block panchayat samiti decided to use the NREG scheme for the cleaning of the entire canal system. It was quite clear from their actions that the samiti was confident of the resources that they commanded and were in a position where they could leverage the funds they received from miscellaneous purpose, for irrigation purpose as and when situation demands. The panchayat samiti is of the view that the

irrigation department not only lacks funds but also lacks functionaries⁴ and hence often are not responsive to the farmers till situation deteriorates to the extent that the panchayat at various levels needs to undertake contingent action.

CONCLUSION AND INFERENCES

The institutional design at the micro level in the form of constitution of village development committee provides a unique opportunity for the state of West Bengal to integrate different rural developmental activity including irrigation management at the village level through this institution. At the district and block levels, the institutional arrangements have largely allowed the panchayat representatives to have some indirect control over concerned department by incorporating them as *ex-officio* members in relevant standing committees at various levels. The informal control transforms the PRIs from ineffective organisations as seen in many other states, into a vibrant and powerful system, (to the extent of being corrupt at times). While the PRI lacks legal domain over the resource, i.e., the canal irrigation infrastructures, it has been able to have indirect controls over the concerned department through its institutional arrangements at the district and block level PRIs. This has resulted in creation of a grey zone between the formal and informal domain of action, which is reflected by a general low key or apparently minimum intervention of the panchayat in the arena of surface irrigation but a strong presence and a latent role played by the panchayat, more by way of a contingent response as and when situation demands.

Also, the legal control that has been bestowed upon a higher level body over a lower level, (i.e., the control the zilla parishad has over panchayat samiti and the panchayat samiti has over gram panchayat) allows the three tier system to function more like a *nested organisation* thus providing a

structural option to address the challenge of the *scaling up* that PIM faces throughout the country. Thus, while in states like Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh there has been a deliberate stress towards the strengthening of institutions parallel to the panchayat system, through a process of formation of three tier institutional structure, (water user association at the outlet level, a distributary committee formed from out of the already formed water user association to manage distributaries or minors, and a project committee to manage an entire project formed from different distributary committees), here lies an alternative institution associated with the three tiers of the panchayat through the institutionalisation of *Agriculture Irrigation and Co-operative Standing Committee* at the district and block level and strengthening *village development committees* at the village level. But in spite of the presence of a powerful panchayat, commanding funds, functionaries and more importantly ordinary people in the villages, the canal irrigation has somehow missed out from the agenda of the government. During the course of the study, it was apparent that the panchayat seems to be stronger both in terms of funds and functionaries at least with regard to the recurrent activities like rehabilitation of the canal irrigation structures. The plan of the PRIs pertaining to utilisation of NREG scheme for canal rehabilitation is one case to prove their latent importance in this matter. However, the dualities that exist between the legal and the institutional arrangements often have every potential to constrain such activities. Thus, there were instances observed during the fieldwork where a gram panchayat was planning to submit a proposal to the panchayat samiti at the block for utilisation of NREGP funds for canal rehabilitation, it was unaware of the already undergoing rehabilitation contracted out by the irrigation department within their jurisdictional area. Also, the Draconian Bengal Irrigation Act

will never allow the panchayat to undertake the rehabilitation activity without the prior permission from the irrigation department.

In spite of this, the importance of canal irrigation is very much relevant in the rural backyards more so in contrast with the expensive diesel run groundwater extraction mechanisms. Thus, there always exists a mismatch of legal power bestowed on the panchayat over canal systems and popular pressure on the panchayat to play a governance role over the canal system as it continues to act as major livelihood fillip. This implies that currently the involvement of different PRIs will arise only when there is a dispute or only when a major decision needs to be taken and the solutions that emerge are also contingent to specific cases. But a systematic and continuous management of the PRIs through institutionalisation of rules, norms and systems to ensure smooth functioning of the canal systems is missing. Therefore, the inherent institutional strength of the PRI, coupled with the latent power and limited legal domain, calls for a reform at the macro level. The activities of panchayat and the inherent implications call for more formalisation and regularity. The power that the panchayat lacks now needs to be bestowed from above through bringing out state policy changes with respect of major irrigation more specifically pertaining to canal irrigations. But reform at the macro level will require political will from the state government. It is here where the catch lies. The major irrigation department formally known as Irrigation and Waterways (I&W) has always missed the priority of the state government. Nothing is more significant than this that I&W has always been looked after by a minor ally of the Left Front and not directly by the Communist Party of India Marxists (CPIM) in the Left Front Government. In the face of the call for rapid industrialisation, currently observed in the state, the land which was earlier scarce has become

scarcer as it faces competing land use. The central government in general, and Left Front government in the state of West Bengal in particular, is also facing criticism from different quarters that such an initiative would actually undermine the livelihood through agriculture of not just owner cultivator but also thousands of registered and unregistered sharecroppers and labourers. There is another criticism at the national level that with reduction in the cropped area, as agriculture land is used for non agriculture purpose, the overall production of food grains may also come down. In such a scenario, irrigation sector reforms have every possibility of enhancing the productivity of agriculture and also create an increase in the demand for labour.

The realities of today call for industrial growth based on a strong agricultural performance (which has also been the mandate of the ruling state government and spelt out at different point of time in different forums) calls for ensuring that maximum output is obtained from land, thus improving the productivity and the cropping intensity. This answers to both the criticism mentioned above. With an increase in irrigation coverage brought about by state level irrigation reform through legal and policy changes, would surely enhance the yield and cropping intensity. Shah [1993] noted that increase in irrigation coverage also will have the effect of an increase in labour demand and rural wages, which implies that the multiplier effect of such reforms would go beyond owner cultivators. The issue that then arises is: why canal irrigation and why not just groundwater irrigation? The answer is embedded in the political ideology of the left parties. The political constraints faced by the left and a generally poor rural populace in the state call for a pro-poor tool for attainment of the same. Any intervention over canal irrigation in the state of West Bengal is pro-poor when compared to the low reliability of rural electricity supply, large

tract of land being irrigated using diesel pumps despite continuous increase in the diesel prices and the falling groundwater table. A study undertaken by Webstar [1992] over Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) canal system clearly showed that in the initial years of the project when the canal ran full it was the landless and the marginal farmers in the canal command who benefited the most in terms of improvement of food security, in terms of productivity and income enhancement through advent of *boro* rice. The authors of this paper have recently completed another study over Teesta Barrage Project and they have also reached similar conclusions.

Thus, under current circumstances, there is a strong political need and also an opportunity for the left government to bring forth a new Water Policy or a PIM Policy in the state. This can then be followed by changes in the concerned Acts and passing of fresh Government Resolutions and Government Orders to allow the panchayat to play a more systematic and formal role over the irrigation systems.

NOTES

1. It was found that the farmers would commonly connote gram sansad as *panchayat* and the GP as *anchal*. It was strange to find that the legacy of Panchayat Acts of 1957 and 1963 continues.

2. It needs to be mentioned that the attack on rock departmentalism was well handled by the left government and to facilitate devolution of more power and better co-ordination between the line departments or the executives from state level or all India services with the elected head of the rural mass, these representatives are co-opted in the formal panchayat structure. Thus, the District Magistrate, an IAS officer, is the Chief Executive Officer of the zilla parishad and BDO as the CEO of the panchayat samiti. Also, the standing committees, pertaining to different activities undertaken under the umbrella of the zilla parishad and panchayat samiti, have heads of concerned departments co-opted in these committees as *ex-officio* members. Though the *ex-officio* members do not have the voting right and the ultimate decision making power rests with the elected representatives, such an institutional arrangement facilitates better co-ordination between the line departments and the elected representatives and, in the

process, also increases the accountability of the departments if not towards the people directly then at least to the panchayat representatives.

3. During the course of the second half of our fieldwork in the month of December in spite of non completion of the gram sansad meetings in several villages we found that pamphlets were being circulated in the villages where it was announced that under the direction of the *sabhadhipati* (president of the zilla parishad) it has been decided that water will be supplied from the canal on specified dates and even this was a tool where information pertaining to variety of seeds that would provide higher yield to the farmers and would reduce the cultivation period was also mentioned.

4. The lack of funds and functionaries that constrains the irrigation department is also reflected in the article published by Baidyanath Ghosh, executive engineer of Teesta Barrage Project with whom the researchers have also interacted.

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INTEGRATING DALITS WITH CASTE-HINDUS: THE STORY OF EKATMA SAMAJ KENDRA

S.H. Deshpande

[EDITOR'S NOTE: In 1985, Professor S.H. Deshpande carried out for NABARD a study of the voluntary agencies in and around Mhaisal, a village in Maharashtra. The report assessed in great detail and lucidly narrated an inspiring experiment which aimed at re-acquiring the lands of the Dalits in that village from money lenders by repaying their debts and then organising these Dalit land owners into a co-operative farming society, introducing the Dalits and the non-Dalits in the village to milk business by setting up a milk co-operative society with a milk collection centre, developing a co-operative housing society jointly of the Dalits and the non-Dalits, and endeavouring to promote a number of productive and educational, cultural and welfare oriented activities among the Dalits and the non-Dalits. The successful pooling of land for cultivation and other co-operative activities led to an all round economic and social development of the Dalits in the village to such an extent that it not only saw more or less an end of untouchability, poverty, illiteracy and addiction to drinking among them, and an improvement in the status of even Dalit women but also sensitised the Dalits to help solve the cultivation problems among the non-Dalit poor in the village.

To day, as we see ourselves living in a weak society in the midst of a fairly rapidly growing economy, the Mhaisal experiment of integrating Dalits with caste Hindus touches the core of one's heart as providing a glimmer of hope as a possible example of the way to achieve inclusive development, integrating the weaker sections of the society with the mainstream. And what could be more heart breaking than to find out, as the author of this report does in an update after two decades, which we urged him to add to his original report, that the once successful experiment eventually gravitated back into financial malaise due to low and falling level of productivity. The Co-operative Society sank into huge liabilities and finally stopped functioning for all practical purposes. The gains in the diminution of untouchability have remained, the levels of literacy and education have increased, the economic and social conditions of women have been ameliorated considerably and they have organised a number of Self Help Groups for mobilising savings for funding their small-scale business activities. But while the standard of living of some households has improved, poverty and hunger have surfaced again. Drinking among the young is wide spread. There is no leadership among the youth. The cohesion in the earlier generation of the members of the Society is lost. There are factions among the members now and charges of corruption. We are publishing here the original report with some revisions and an update, made by the author in spite of ill health, in the hope that social scientists and policy makers will ponder over how such innovative experiments of development (and there are many such which are on even now) can be saved from dissipating in the manner in which the Mhaisal experiment did.

The narrative style of the report, with occasional writing in the first person by the author, is retained with a view to reflecting how development touches day to day life.]

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INTEGRATING DALITS WITH CASTE-HINDUS: THE STORY OF EKATMA SAMAJ KENDRA

S.H. Deshpande

PART I ESK IN 1984-85

SECTION 1 INTRODUCTION

This work is a study of a voluntary agency working in rural areas of south Maharashtra.

1. Voluntary Agencies

Our development history over the last few decades has been at best a chequered one. On the one hand; We are in a position to boast a number of achievements symbolising the establishment of a modern economy. On the other hand, poverty and unemployment are believed to have grown. In spite of several special efforts to ameliorate poverty, substantial gains have not yet come our way. There has been increasing dissatisfaction over the performance of the governmental machinery in dealing with the problems of the poor. In this general atmosphere, it was natural that voluntary efforts should spring up and it was also natural that thinking minds should turn their attention to their achievements and potentialities.

Official interest in voluntary agencies has been a recent phenomenon. The Seventh Five Year Plan took particular cognizance of them and envisage their involvement in developmental efforts. A sum of Rupees 250 crore has been set aside for this purpose. Simultaneously, efforts are being made to evolve a code of conduct for the voluntary sector in order to improve its ability to discharge its function in a more effective manner. In this light studies of voluntary agencies claiming substantial success appeared interesting.

It is obvious that a voluntary agency has an edge over official development organs in respect of dedicated individuals, absence of rigid and hidebound procedures and consequent flexibility, their close proximity with and understanding of the problems of the locality which they serve, innovative approaches which can result from this and, finally, their human touch. Their general weaknesses are also well-known: (i) the area of their operations is small and it is seen that in many cases when they expand their scale of activities, their grip on the programmes begins to slacken; (ii) they are perennially short of resources; (iii)

The author studied the projects run by Ekatma Samaj Kendra (ESK) Miraj, District Sangli, in 1985-86. The research was funded by National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD). The Report titled *Voluntary Agencies in and around Mhaisal* was submitted in June 1988 to NABARD.

Dr. Vikas Chitre, Director Indian School of Political Economy, Pune, kindly offered to publish this Report in the *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy* of which he is also the Editor. It was also decided to have a re-look at ESK projects for which a budget was sanctioned by the Indian School.

The document being presented now carries the more apt title, 'Integrating Dalits with Caste-Hindus: The Story of Ekatma Samaj Kendra'. The Report submitted to NABARD (*Voluntary Agencies in and around Mhaisal*), in a somewhat revised form, now forms Part I and is re-titled as ESK in 1984-85. Part II, under the title ESK Now, contains up-to-date (2006-2007) information, and results of a brief re-survey. Some special studies submitted to NABARD in October 1986 and the author's two articles on cooperative farming are included in the Appendices.

The author wishes to point out that readers will detect a change in the tone in the writing in Part II. When the Report submitted to NABARD was written, Dewal, the founder of ESK was living and although the author did notice the shortcomings of the experiment and did mention them in the Report, the general atmosphere was one of high enthusiasm among the beneficiaries which, now he feels, influenced his style. In Part II, he has tried to become more objective. Distance (in time), he reckons, has lent some 'disenchantment' to his view!

The author heartily thanks the Chairman and Managing Director, NABARD, for giving him permission to publish the Report contained in Part I. He also owes a debt of gratitude to Dr. Vikas Chitre for his readiness to publish the entire document, and to the Indian School for providing a grant for up-dating the Report.

they lack formal management skills and expertise. However, even in spite of such handicaps, some of them seem to have made a definite impact on the problems that they set out to tackle.

But voluntary agencies should not be seen merely as possible alternative instruments for eradication of poverty. They play a much more important role through simply being *voluntary*, i.e., non-Government. The real strength of a democratic society is built up through voluntary effort on a wide variety of fronts. Excessive governmentalisation of life is an ever-present threat to vigorous democratic life, especially in the developing world and therefore voluntary agencies have to be looked upon as the real building blocks of democracy. In fact, they *are* democracy to the extent they express private voluntary initiative.

There is another characteristic of such agencies which is important from the point of view of development. They do not generally stop at what may be called *material* development. They also look to the mental and moral side of their targets. They try to build *new men and women*. The conception of the 'new men' may differ from agency to agency, but that they generally have some kind of a concept, articulated or not, is quite patent from what we know of them. It is not merely a comfortable existence of the poor they aim at but also some kind of 'good life'. This is inevitable given the moral promptings of their founders.

Even on the purely developmental plane, as it is generally understood, the voluntary agencies usually take a multi-dimensional view. For tackling poverty, the entire poverty syndrome has to be understood and such agencies, rooted among the people, discover the inter-relatedness of several problems. Their efforts, therefore, inevitably acquire the character of 'multi-sided' development.

These are some of the characteristics of voluntary agencies which make them particularly worth-while subjects of study. Associated with each one of the characteristics, and even independent of them, there are problems which arise and it would be one of the purposes of the study to understand and analyse them through the intensive study of a few such agencies.

2. Background of the Study

This author's interest in the work of voluntary agencies dates from around 1972. He himself headed, in the capacity of Professor-Advisor, a group of young men and women from all over Maharashtra, brought together under the auspices of the Bombay University's National Graduate Scheme [Patel, 1976; Deshpande, 1983]. He worked in this capacity from 1972 to 1975. Simultaneously, he has been a founder member of 'Gramayan' a forum of voluntary agencies located in Pune. Because of acquaintances established through Gramayan, he has had the privilege of visiting and observing quite a few such agencies. He has met their representatives in various seminars and camps and has had an opportunity of discussions with them. In 1979, he, in collaboration with two colleagues, completed a study of two voluntary agencies working in the tribal area of the Thane District [Deshpande et. al., 1980]. All this experience whetted his appetite for a deeper study of the ESK network.

3. Ekatma Samaj Kendra

This study pertains to the projects run by Ekatma Samaj Kendra (ESK), Miraj, District Sangli. The ESK was established in 1982 but the projects which now come under its umbrella have been in existence for a long time. In fact, the ESK came into existence as a result of the proliferation of the projects. Actually, our story begins in 1962 when there was no ESK. However, for convenience, when we want to refer to these projects, we shall call them ESK projects.

Why ESK was selected for study needs to be explained. It has some unique features not very frequently seen in other organisations. In the first place, its objective is avowedly social rather than economic and 'social', too, in a crucial sense. As the name 'Ekatma Samaj Kendra' implies, the objective is social integration, especially integration of the ex-untouchables with the larger Hindu society. Secondly, although the objective is social, the instrumentality used for this purpose is economic and poverty removal is its immediate goal. Thirdly, even in the context of economic development efforts, the ESK has a speciality in that it has set up co-operative joint farming societies on ex-untouchables' lands. This is remarkable considering the failure in our country and elsewhere of this particular kind of device for mobilising and augmenting the resources of the poor. Fourthly, the methods used by the ESK in achieving its objective are distinctive. Most of the lands were in possession of Savkars and the ESK used persuasion rather than conflict to retrieve the lands. Further, consistent with its objective of social integration. It has moulded the activities of the projects in a number of innovative ways. In the light of these factors, the study of the ESK projects promised to be rewarding.

There are other personal reasons why this particular agency was selected. One is that the author knew its founder for many years since both of us once belonged to the RSS. He had visited ESK projects thrice before this formal study was undertaken. The second is the author's continuing interest in co-operative farming, his subject of Ph.D. thesis being the same [Deshpande, 1977; 1983].

4. Scope

We may broadly indicate the scope of what we intend to do. In the beginning, since a voluntary agency cannot be understood without the principal 'volunteer' behind it, we devote a longish Chapter to Madhukar Dewal, the man

who inspires and guides it (Chapter 2). Then we relate the whole story of the projects in broad outlines as they evolved over the years (Chapter 3). As said above, the central instrument used by these projects is the co-operative joint farming society. Considering its importance, a special attempt has been made to study the problems connected with it (Chapter 4). Next, an evaluation of the economic and social impact of the experiments is presented in some detail (Chapters 5 and 6). In this context, the oldest project, i.e., the Shri Vitthal Joint Co-operative Farming Society, established in 1969, naturally, takes the major share of our attention. In the other villages, Mhaisal-like projects have come up recently and in terms of economic and social impact, they do not have much to show. However, the economic and social conditions of the ex-untouchable families in these villages have been studied in order to gain an understanding of their problems. At the same time, this information provides material for comparison with Mhaisal. Next, some consideration has been given to the prospects of Vitthal as they can be visualised today (Chapter 7). Then societies outside Mhaisal have been discussed (Chapter 8). Problems faced by the agency in dealing with Government have been studied (Chapter 9). The ESK, as a whole, is then studied (Chapter 10). In the closing chapter (Chapter 11), we bring together the various strands and offer a few reflections.

A special investigation was made of the programme of financing the poor. In the villages with which ESK has contacts, Banks have been persuaded to disburse individual loans. Four such loan programmes have been studied and their results have been presented separately to NABARD. Three of these directly pertain to villages with which ESK has a continuing connection. A summarised account of these, in the context of the discussion of 'management', has been incorporated in this Report in Chapter 10.

5. Methodology

My first acquaintance with Madhukar Dewal, the founder of these projects, took place around 1945, when both of us belonged to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in Pune. I left the RSS in 1946 after being a member for 8 years since 1938 and Dewal left it in 1950. I left Pune in 1949 and I saw Dewal again after a long time, in 1973, when I heard him recount the story of his projects in a Gramayan meeting in Pune. It was also around this time that the Press had begun to take notice of his efforts. I first visited Mhaisal in 1978 and then again in 1979. In May 1985, I spent about 11 days paying visits to various project-sites. It was during this visit that the germ of this study was first planted in my mind.

I had already acquainted myself with press-reports, editorials and articles as they had appeared from time to time. A full length book, *The Struggle of the Deprived for Development: The Mhaisal Untouchables*, authored by Dr. V.D. Deshpande, was published in 1983. Dr. Deshpande's book concentrates on only one Project, i.e., the Shri. Vitthal Society in Mhaisal. This particular study, by contrast, covers all the projects scattered over a number of villages. In addition, it tries to go into many more aspects of the projects, than what V.D. Deshpande has done.

In addition to the literature mentioned above, a study of the records of the ESK and the Vitthal and other societies was also made whenever occasion for it arose.

Four kinds of questionnaires were canvassed for the field investigations. The first one elicited general village information. The second was a more comprehensive one and sought to obtain information on the economic and social conditions of the ex-untouchables in six different villages. The villages are Mhaisal, Nandre,

Kavthe-Piran, Kothali, Kokale and Arag. The number of households covered in each village is given below:

Villages	Number of Households
Mhaisal	89
Nandre	71
Kavathe-Piran	58
Kothali	67
Kokale	20
Arag	72
Total	377

The third schedule was specially designed to study Caste Hindu attitudes and responses in Mhaisal itself. This was considered necessary because of the special stress that the ESK places on closing the social distance between the Caste Hindus and the Dalits. With this aim in view, 100 residents of Mhaisal, belonging to various castes and classes, were interviewed.

For the special study of loan operations, separate questionnaires were prepared for: (1) the buffalo loan in Arag; (2) the cross-bred cow loan in Mhaisal; (3) the financing of petty trades in Budhgaon and (4) financing of she-goats in the Vijaynagar colony near the Mhaisal Railway Station.

Although formal questionnaires have been used to elicit various kinds of information, the stress was all along on the qualitative aspects and social processes. Therefore, I myself conducted unstructured personal interviews with about 70 persons from various sites.

I made Miraj my headquarters because it was so located that trips to various sites could be more easily undertaken. Altogether for six effective months, I stayed in an improvised guest room adjoining the ESK office which was located in the yard of the house of Shri Dewal himself. This facilitated almost daily interaction with Shri Dewal, which contributed very greatly to my understanding.

Because of my residence close to the ESK office, a number of advantages came my way. There was a constant stream of people from various sites to the ESK office and this provided numerous opportunities for talks with them. Although I was introduced as a researcher, I was mostly taken by the people as a sort of a social worker helping Shri Dewal. In fact, I was taken as one belonging to their fraternity and this made my task very much easier. I could achieve a certain degree of closeness with the projects which is generally denied to outside researchers.

I had access to all the records of the ESK and of various projects. I could attend meetings of boards of directors of some societies. I attended almost all important functions which took place during my stay. I attended three meetings of the ESK Trustees as a special invitee. On the whole, conditions for research were almost ideal.

While I was in Miraj, I played a double role - that of an outside observer and that of a member of the group. Whenever foreign visitors came - and there were more than half a dozen occasions of this type - I did duty as interpreter. I prepared a couple of small brochures on the ESK and its work. I prepared a paper 'Voluntary Agencies in and around Mhaisal', based primarily on interviews with Dewal for presentation at the NABARD Seminar on 'Poverty Control through Self-Help' held in Pune in December 1985. I drafted proposals addressed to aid-giving agencies. I helped in English correspondence. I pursued some of the problems at various sites with Government and bank offices both in Miraj and Bombay. I delivered a couple of lectures on the Project and addressed a couple of social science seminars in Bombay. Finally, I was asked to plan and organise a leadership training camp, which I gladly did in June 1986. All this was rich experience and afforded insights into various ESK activities. As a result of this close association, I was able to strike personal friendships with many at the various sites.

A limitation must also be recorded. Although I undertook scores of trips to various sites, I would have liked to undertake more. Secondly, because of health problems, I generally avoided staying overnight in any village. I make a particular mention of this because one really never gets to know people unless one spends the evenings with them. It is only during evenings and nights that barriers loosen and relaxed conversation becomes possible. Unfortunately, this desire of mine remained unfulfilled. This deficiency was partly made up by my investigator who lived in various villages in the Dalit bastis for many days at a stretch and kept a record of his observations.

At this stage, one question will naturally arise in the mind of the reader. Given my own emotional involvement in the project (to which I confess) and given my long friendship with Shri Dewal, could I be sufficiently objective in my analysis? The only answer I can give is that I have done my utmost to keep the research scholar's conscience alive. Whether I have succeeded or not is for the reader to judge. I may say one more thing. Projects like the one I have studied can go forward only when they are evaluated in a thoroughly objective and impartial manner. In this sense, I hardly perceive any conflict between my role as one involved in the project and my role as a researcher.

6. Acknowledgements

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7. An Apology

I crave the indulgence of the reader for one deviation from strict academic norms governing the writing of a Report. This deviation is the occasional writing in the first person. Because of the method adopted, references to myself were bound to be numerous and writing in the third person would have made the style artificial and cumbersome. Therefore, I found it more convenient to write in a straightforward personal style. I hope to be forgiven this departure from convention.

SECTION 2 DEWAL AND HIS MISSION

1. A Brief Life-Sketch

Tryambak Mahadeo Dewal (endearingly called 'Madhukar' or 'Madhu' by friends and 'Dada' by villagers) was born in Mhaisal on 12th October 1918. He had his primary schooling in Mhaisal, secondary in Miraj and Sangli from where he matriculated in 1936. He joined the Willingdon College, Sangli and did his Inter Science in 1938. He then enrolled at the Fergusson College, Pune, from which he obtained his B.Sc. degree in 1939.

Savarkar's life and thought inspired many young men in those times. His speeches and writings called for unifying the Hindu society on rationalistic and humanistic principles. Savarkar made a deep and lasting impression on Dewal and his influence had a significant share in the making of his mind.

He had his earliest contact with the R.S.S. in Sangli but the real connection started while in Pune in 1938.

In 1939 the second world war started and the patriotic urge impelled him to join the army as an ordinary Jawan with a view to spread disaffection among the ranks. He was selected but tough resistance at home made him withdraw.

The R.S.S. connection continued. In 1940 Dr. K.B. Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS died and the second 'Sarsanghchalak' M.S. Golwalkar or 'Guruji' took over. As the war progressed restlessness began to stir in the minds of Dewal and some of his compatriots who had joined the RSS with a view to participate in the freedom struggle. Guruji first gave an indication that the RSS was poised to enter the fray as 1942 approached but eventually the RSS did nothing. This was a great blow to Dewal. The second blow came after Independence. Dewal thought that the RSS must now take up constructive work in villages with a message of caste and untouchability eradication. A talk with Guruji himself in Nagpur (the RSS headquarters) proved fruitless. Dewal lingered on for some time in the RSS and finally he parted company with it in 1950.

After aimless wanderings in search of sundry jobs and a stint at a Yogic Ashram he came back to Miraj to look after family property in Mhaisal which his father, who expired in 1955, left behind. Thus ended his long association with RSS for 12 years out of which for 8 years he was a full-time worker (Pracharak).

2. Madhukar Dewal's Ideas

Madhukar is a rationalist and an atheist. He imbibed these ideas chiefly from the articles written by Veer Savarkar in the Kirloskar magazine. Savarkar's thrust was against caste divisions, untouchability, etc., and in favour of

acceptance of modern scientific values. At the same time, Savarkar taught the importance of unity among Hindus. Madhukar avidly read his articles as a school boy and as a college student. He absorbed Savarkar's teachings so thoroughly that even as a school boy he began to question obscurantist ideas.

The Kirloskar monthly was a torch-bearer in the propagation of modern ideas. It also made its readers acquainted with new thought currents like Socialism and Communism, which planted in his mind ideas of equality. While he was an RSS worker in Pune, he had close friendships with one Bajirao Gokhale, a Communist and G.P. Pradhan, a Socialist. During his stay in Lonavala for training in Yoga he read Jawaharlal Nehru's writings and almost everything that was written about Nehru. These influences confirmed him in his egalitarian faith.

Madhukar holds very liberal ideas towards women. The organisation of Mahila Mandals (Women's Clubs) is an activity in which he takes great interest. He knows that women are treated most unjustly, particularly among the backward classes. When he talks to the menfolk, he tells them that if they want to get injustices done to them redressed, they must redress the injustices they were inflicting on their own women. In 1974, when he was Chairman of the Vitthal Society, it was planned to raise a grape garden on few acres. In order to acquaint the members with the techniques of grape cultivation, he took a group of 25 men and 25 women to Tasgaon to inspect the gardens there. This was a revolutionary thing to do because for the first time Dalit women stirred out of their locality and that too in the company of males. As a result of his efforts, a distinct change has come about in the women belonging to most sites.

This is the make-up of the man and this is his thinking. It is not surprising in this light that he should have had to wage a battle with the RSS

head. He saw the picture of a new kind of Hindu society based on the principles of social justice and scientific values. It was this picture he began trying to realise in Mhaisal.

3. The Vision

As indicated earlier, Dewal's work with Dalits in Mhaisal began in 1962. At that time, he did not have a full-blown philosophy. However, in course of time, his ideas have acquired a developed form and now they can be stated in more or less clear outlines.

The RSS heritage is unmistakable. Although Dewal fought with the RSS superiors and struck out a new path, the basic RSS vision of integrating and unifying the Hindu society remained with him. In fact, Dewal's complaint about the RSS was that it did not understand the full meaning of social integration. The RSS, in its daily meetings in the evenings, observed no distinctions of caste and class. This was good in itself but not enough. What was essential, according to Dewal, was to go into the rural areas and among the downtrodden classes, spread the message of economic and social equality and thus bring about real integration. Dewal thus tried to infuse real import into the RSS concept of 'Sanghatan'.

Dewal's work as it has been accomplished until now is addressed to the Dalits, mainly the Mahars. The Mahar community in Maharashtra, constitutes the majority community among the ex-untouchables. Because of its military tradition, it was also the first to be exposed to modern educational and cultural influences. Later, the community forged ahead educationally and politically under the leadership of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Although the Mahars ceased to exist as a unified political force after the death of Dr. Ambedkar, it is still politically and socially, the most conscious and articulate among the Dalits of Maharashtra. More important, the Mahars held their traditional *inam* lands which

afforded a stepping stone for their further economic progress. In his own village Mhaisal, Dewal and his younger brothers had childhood friends among the Mahars. The Mahars represented on the one hand, untouchability at its worst and on the other, also possessed some degree of enlightenment. It is not surprising that Dewal found the Mhaisal Mahars responsive to his efforts.

Dewal's work has to be viewed in the context of attempts made to eradicate untouchability over the last many decades by social reformers in India in general and Maharashtra in particular. Speaking of Maharashtra, Mahatma Jotirao Phule (1827-1889) can be said to have taken concrete steps to eradicate untouchability through such means as educating them and opening drinking water wells to them. After Phule, there has been a long line of reformers like Maharaja Sayajirao Gaikwad of Baroda (1863-1939), Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur (1874-1922), Maharshi Vitthal Ramji Shinde (1873-1944), Veer Savarkar (1883-1966), Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), Shri. Bhaurao Patil (1887-1959) and Prof. S.M. Mate (1886-1957). On examination, it appears that the thrust of the social reformers, excluding Dr. Ambedkar, was on carrying on propaganda for the enlightenment of the Caste Hindus and on the education of Dalits. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar mobilised the Dalit community for social and political rights and imparted a certain degree of militancy to the effort. Maharshi Vitthal Ramji Shinde was the first to notice that regular school education to Dalit students was not enough unless accompanied by occupational training so that they could be, in future, economically independent. His 'Depressed Classes Mission Society of India' had a wide network of schools, primarily in Maharashtra, but also in other provinces, in which classes were held in such crafts as book-binding, ropemaking, wickwork, drawing, painting, tailoring, carpentry, handloom weaving, etc. [Pawar, 2004, Pp. 231-33]. But

occupational training can at the most only help the students get some employment; Shinde did not think in terms of an economic project. Dr. Ambedkar, inspite of being a distinguished economist, did not provide much attention to the economic problems of rural Dalits except for abolition of Watans and his suggestion of new settlements where agriculture could be practised and khadi cloth could be produced as a sideline. The latter alternative was nowhere tried. Thus the problem of economic rehabilitation of the ex-untouchables largely remained neglected. It is here that Dewal's work breaks a new path. On the basis of whatever land they had, the Dalits were encouraged by him to set up co-operative farming societies. One can thus truly say that Dewal has opened up a new page in the history of untouchability eradication.

At the basis of this experiment, there is a certain understanding of the untouchability problem which is of value. Untouchability should not be considered merely in its physical aspect. The physical aspect is important but the psychological one is far more so. The treatment meted out to the untouchables resulted in taking away their self-respect. They have, in a way, lost their nerve and come to think of themselves as inferior beings. This lack of self-confidence and self-respect is a great obstacle in their path towards progress. Dewal thought that they must, basically, cease to think of themselves as good-for-nothing or as parasites, only if they crossed this hurdle, they would achieve self-respect as well as the respect of the rest of the society.

The Mahar Community in Maharashtra differs from other communities and even from other Dalit communities in one singular respect. All the other communities have a traditional craft which they could ply, whereas Mahars had no such craft. Among the Scheduled Castes in Maharashtra, the Matangs (Mangs) were rope-makers, Dhors were tanners and Chambhars were leather-workers;

only Mahars had watan lands (hereditary revenue-fee lands) in return for the services, mostly menial, that they rendered to the village as a whole and individual residents. They mainly subsisted on begging *bhakar* from door to door or a portion of grain handed over to them at the time of harvest by the Caste-Hindus. This almost amounted to living on charity. This must have been a soul-killing experience. Dr. Ambedkar in his articles on the Mahar Watan Land did not mince words when he said that the way of life of Mahars had induced into them a habit of mendicancy [Ambedkar, 1990]. Such people can never be the object of respect of their fellowmen nor can they feel the self-assurance which can come naturally with the feeling of being useful members of the society.

The novelty in Dewal's thinking precisely consists in grappling with this basic psychological problem. He thought that the only way in which the Mahars could be taught to overcome this deficiency was to enable them to acquire the capacity to do some productive work. Thus, his first attempt was to involve the Mhaisal Mahars in the milk production enterprise. The fact that about 90 families took to this business of milking buffalos over the period from 1962 to 1968 must be considered a landmark in Dalit uplift. The next step was the organisation of the co-operative farm. The achievements of the farm have been described later. One thing that clearly emerges from the description of the Shri Vitthal Farm is that the members have taken a break from their past by tilling their own soil. More important is the fact that the cultivation is not individual but co-operative. Co-operative farming simultaneously imparts two types of skills to the members: (1) skills of agriculture, and (2) skills of management. The economic enterprise also confers economic independence - the Mahars no more have to beg their food. In this manner, all the elements of a new kind of personality begin to take shape.

An economic institution, more particularly a co-operative farming society, if successful, does more than this. (1) It creates some kind of economic power. Today, the Mhaisal Society is in a position to devote part of its resources to educational and welfare work. It also has the power to help other needy people in the village in various ways. Individual cultivation would not give this economic power to the community as a whole. (2) The Society acts as a forum for its members to daily come together and carry on a joint enterprise. This interaction is important from the point of view of developing a community spirit. (3) Along with economic power comes some degree of political power in the sense that the society and its members become a lobby in village politics.

Purely from the psychological point of view, Dewal's experiment, in fact, takes one more step ahead. He is not satisfied with the Dalits being able to solve their own problems and being part of the mainstream of Hindu society. His continuous endeavour has been to take them out of their narrow community shell and make them look upon themselves as the leaders of the larger society. This is an extremely significant aspect of the entire experiment and needs to be illustrated in some detail. One can begin with an example. One day, about 20 Dalits, men and women, from the Nimgaon Mhalungi village in Pune district came to visit Mhaisal. The Dalits in Nimgaon-Mhalungi, under the leadership of Gramayan, a voluntary agency, set up a co-operative farm on the Mhaisal model. This was a visit organised in order to make them acquainted with the Mhaisal experiment. Late in the evening, members gathered together in the office of the Vitthal Society for a chat with the visitors. Dewal asked them as to what they found striking in the Vitthal Society. One said, 'They are growing very good grapes. We had never imagined that the people of our community could practise such advanced agriculture'. Another said, 'Here the women also are participating in a number of social

activities'. A third said, 'These people are running a complicated organisation'. Dewal paused for some time and said, 'You have not really gone to the heart of the matter. I will tell you what the people in Mhaisal are doing. They are trying to lead the Nation'.

In his many conversations with me, Dewal described his dreams. He said that these people must become the 'thought leaders' of the society. Once as I was glancing through a book on herbal medicines in his presence, he remarked, 'We must train our Dalit women in the art of dispensing herbal medicines so that they can be really useful to the rest of the society and earn their gratitude'.

The point is really fundamental. Here in Mhaisal is a small community which not many years ago was wretchedly poor and despised. These self-same people are now being asked not merely to improve their material conditions but also to assume the leadership of the entire society. Thus, a very large and comprehensive ideal is kept before the eyes of the people, who never considered themselves good enough for almost anything. The ennobling impact of such a vision is bound to be tremendous and betokens a singularly profound insight into the human mind.

Later, during the course of our discussion of the Vitthal Society, we shall have occasion to describe its attempts to be of help to the non-Dalit poor in Mhaisal. These attempts are also significant from the point of view of the idea expressed above. Dewal is fond of saying that the Dalits must acquire 'the power to oblige'. Those who were once at the receiving end must now be placed at the giving end. This amounts to a psychological metamorphosis. This, Dewal feels, will bring out the full human potential of the once downtrodden people.

4. ... and the Mind Behind

As said earlier, a voluntary effort cannot be understood unless the man behind it is understood. Dewal's personality is crucial in the context of the success of vitthal as will be shown later. Therefore, at some risk of appearing long-winded a final section must be added to what has been said above.

In the first place, there is the burning patriotism which is alive even today. This is what induced Dewal to enlist in the army when he was a young boy of 18 and this is what has rooted him today in the work that he does. This is what impelled him to throw himself into the freedom struggle and being denied that opportunity led him into clashes with the RSS superiors. The dreams about Independence turned into dreams of a strong nation after India became independent. For him, the Vitthal and other co-operative farming societies are not just instruments of economic and social development of the backward classes, they are instruments of building a strong, internally unified and homogeneous modern nation. This is the perspective which he has supplied to his co-workers and this is what gives his experiments a special character. This patriotic force drives him on. Today he is 68 and suffers from spondilitis. Yet his day begins at 5.30 in the morning and after a morning walk the rest of the day is for the work of the ESK. Visitors have to be received both from project sites and from places outside, their problems have to be discussed, their complaints have to be heard, emergency visits have to be paid wherever problems have to be solved or crises faced. Therefore, with no specific working hours, the work goes on the whole day and sometimes even into the night. Far-off places have to be visited, Government offices to be contacted, bank people to be cajoled and even domestic problems of some people have to be solved. The Doctor has already advised him against jeep rides but he sees no alternative.

As a bachelor, he has no homely comforts and yet in spite of these, he is one of the most cheerful men I have met. His entry into any gathering is not that of a solemn man weighed down by the burden of a great cause. On the contrary, he begins with remarks in a light vein and enjoys laughter. He has an abiding sense of humour. He does fly into rage on occasion, can get red in the face and shout when things seem to go wrong. But this is only momentary and within no time, he is again his former genial, smiling self.

His greatest quality, perhaps, as a social worker, is an indomitable spirit. Adversities do not daunt him. His projects have gone through several vicissitudes and there have been moments when lesser man would have buckled under. This does not mean he is insensitive. In fact, he has the utmost softness of mind. Yet failures and set-backs do not unmake him. I asked him once whether at any time he had any sense of failure and whether he had his moments of depression. He said, 'Never! I have had set-backs but they are part of the game and what frustration in my life could be worse than the frustration that I had with the RSS? Even if everything I have done collapses one day, I shall not be overwhelmed by the blues because I have been doing my best'.

At one and the same time, Dewal is of his work and not of it. On the one hand, he is involved in all the complicated affairs of the large network of enterprises which he is running but, on the other hand, he can keep himself above everything and aloof in a peculiar way. Most social workers get identified with their projects so much that their work swallows them up. They have no life except that connected with the project. Such excessive absorption is not very healthy because it prevents one from acquiring objectivity and a calmness of mind. Seven-thirty in the evening is his time reserved for a game of bridge at the Club. He has his own farm where he is busy making experiments. Then there is the Grape Growers'

Association of which he is an important member. As a result, he has few tensions and is entirely at peace with himself.

There is an openness and frankness about whatever he does. His projects are an open book for anyone to come and inspect. There is nothing to hide, not even the seamy side. He does not try to put a gloss on anything that is wrong or undesirable. I had one thing on my side from the beginning and that was my old friendship with him. However, I was also a researcher interested in taking a very critical look into everything that was of relevance. Yet, I was never sought to be kept out of anything; on the contrary, I was specially invited to participate and observe. I was considered almost one of the team of workers. In my conversations with him our differences on many points became plain. However, there was no attempt on his part to influence my thinking or the way I should present my views. But, my case apart, there have been other visitors and researchers who were intent on finding faults or even damaging the reputation of the projects. But they were allowed to visit the sites on their own, interview all kinds of people, consult whatever records they needed and to make whatever observations they felt like making.

Behind this attitude is the conviction that criticism is not only to be tolerated but also welcomed. This is so because finally it is the cause that has to prosper. Dewal is not rigid in his attitudes. He has no *idee fixe*. With a lifetime spent in Dalit work, he could be expected to flaunt his knowledge and experience. He could be pardoned if he took a knowing attitude. But that has not happened. On the contrary, there is a desire to learn. Many times, he himself brought up various aspects of his work for discussion.

Fundamental perhaps is his deep sympathy and understanding of the poor and cast-aways. He can see poverty not only in its obvious physical aspects but also its whole syndrome. The point is

important from the general angle of handling the poverty problem also. The poor are not only undernourished and unhealthy; they can be selfish and short-sighted. They can lie and cheat even their benefactors. Worse, they might turn ungrateful or cast aspersions on a lifetime of sacrifice. All this, according to Dewal, is part of the game and consequence of poverty, exploitation and social degradation. In fact, I sometimes feel that he errs too much on the side of kindness and generosity. Even the poor need some discipline if they must come out of their poverty. However, Dewal cannot certainly be described as a disciplinarian or a task-master. If anything, he is soft and kind-hearted. On the whole, there is much that he would forgive.

His generosity almost borders on a fault. He is single and probably rich. But all his money is for the projects and for the people. I did not succeed in eliciting information on how much of his own money he had spent on social work. This is not because he is secretive but simply because he does not remember and he keeps no account of his personal expenses. But I have heard from others that the sums perhaps run into lakhs of rupees. If the Chairman of a Society has to be hospitalised, Dewal will quietly pay the bill. Hospital expenses of the wife of another will be paid by Dewal. Somebody, who is important from the point of view of the work, needs money for the marriage of his daughter and Dewal cannot say no. It is true that he does not distribute his money as largesse. It is given as temporary accommodation and is expected to be returned. However, in very few cases, I think, it finds its way back to Dewal. And he is not a man who would relish reminding people that they owe him money.

Given my special relationship with him, I felt at liberty to ask him all kinds of questions. One day, as we were riding a jeep, I asked him as to why he did not get married and added jocularly that it must have been due to his forgetfulness. The answer he gave me was remarkable, showing

the character of the man. He said, during his RSS days, he used to hold the view that the RSS worker must not remain a bachelor but must choose a spouse of kindred social sensibilities. He used to canvass this view with his superiors. The RSS had an unwritten convention that its organisers remained unmarried and there was a large number of such. Dewal must have seen some of the unhappy consequences of this enforced celibacy and therefore he was of the view that a more healthy atmosphere would prevail if the workers led a normal house-holder's life. He was already some kind of a rebel in the RSS and his views on marriage elicited adverse comment from his superiors. They interpreted Dewal's demand as his own personal desire to get married and settle down in a comfortable domestic life. Dewal said, 'I abstained from marriage because I wanted to demonstrate that my view did not originate in any personal need'.

Enough has now been said to give a flavour of the man. Now we must turn to a detailed examination of his handiwork.

SECTION 3 THE STORY OF MHAISAL AND ITS OFF-SHOOTS

1. *The Beginnings*

Madhukar Dewal came back to Miraj in 1956 to look after his family property. His land was a 36-acre piece midway between Miraj and Mhaisal but within the jurisdiction of Mhaisal town. Although he was connected with both the places, his heart lay in the affairs of Mhaisal which at that time was little better than a village. Following his natural bent of mind, he took in hand problems of agriculture and irrigation. The Sangli Shetkari Sahakari Sakhar Karkhana (The Sangli Farmers' Co-operative Sugar Factory) was established in 1957 and agriculture was beginning to undergo change. He helped set up Mhaisal's first Lift Irrigation Co-operative Society, 'Dhanalakshmi', in 1960 and became its first chairman. Dewal also

took lead in propagation of improved varieties of crops. He was also instrumental in setting up a milk co-operative society.

From 1956 to 1962, he was engaged in development activities of a 'general' kind, i.e., without any special thrust towards the poor or the disadvantaged. A turning point came in 1962. Riding a bike to his own farm one day, he was accosted by an emaciated-looking man who begged for food and, exhausted, sank to the ground. Dewal handed over to him his own tiffin box. Inquires revealed that he was one 'Vithu Mahar' of Mhaisal and had not had anything to eat for several days. This brought home poignantly the realisation that a general development process, which he had helped initiate, could completely bypass the poor.

This incident prompted him to visit the Mahar locality and acquaint himself with its conditions. What he saw made him almost squirm - such was the picture of poverty, filth, drunkenness and superstition. This first visit was followed by further trips for a more systematic observation and talks with people. The first thing he did was to persuade the Mahars to buy buffalos and start production of milk.

2. *Milk Business*

To his proposal there was hardly any response. After a good deal of persuasion Kallappa Dadu Kamble became ready to borrow a small loan of Rs. 450 for a buffalo.

Kallappa recounts the story as follows: "Dada (Madhukar Dewal) tried to persuade me to buy a buffalo. I said, 'No, I don't want such a huge burden of debt on my head'. However, Dada persisted and got a loan application written out for me. I put my thumb impression hesitantly on the paper and threw it at him (so as not to touch him). Finally, I borrowed the 450 rupees from the milk co-operative and bought a buffalo on Dada's

advice. Somebody then told my mother, who said, 'Be careful, this *Baman* (Brahmin) will run away with your land'. Mother asked me to sell off the buffalo in the next weekly market. But I said, 'let's see what happens'. I tended the buffalo well and paid off the loan. Then another came and then another and thus the number of borrowers increased".

The Mahars had to be trained to milk the buffalos. Dewal himself trained them with the help of one Dr. Marathe of the Veterinary Department.

There was an initial problem regarding loans to landless Mahars. The Government had made available to the milk co-operative some funds specifically for the benefit of the Scheduled Castes. And yet the officer concerned was against issuing loans to borrowers without security. A battle followed and finally Dewal persuaded his co-workers in the milk co-operative to stand guarantee for the loans.

From 1962 to 1968, the number of Mahars in the buffalo milk business grew to about 90.

3. The Co-operative Farm

The Mahars had now begun to look up and earn some money. They were getting somewhat independent of the Savkars (landlords) around whose houses they hung daily for work or for food. Owing to the increase in the number of buffalos, the requirements of fodder increased. Formerly, it was the custom for the Mahar agricultural labourers to cut the grass where they worked and hand it back to the landlord in return for a tumbler of buttermilk or a piece of *bhakar*; now they retained and fed it to their animals. It is also possible that some buffalo owners filched fodder from Savkar lands. In any case, complaints arose: 'Look, Dada, you tried to help the Mahars and this is the result'. Then the search for land to grow fodder began.

The first discovery was that about 36 acres of land reserved for the scheduled castes had already vanished into the possession of local big-wigs. The second and more astounding discovery was that the Mahar community itself owned some 98 acres of watan lands most of which lay in the possession of the Savkars.

There were 17 Savkars in all, the biggest of whom was Dewal's own uncle, Vinayakrao Dewal. He and his two sons occupied about 32 acres. Madhukar approached the uncle and reasoned with him. 'We shall pay your dues but release the lands', he pleaded. Vinayakrao agreed, calculated the sums owed to his family and returned all the lands (see Appendices 1 and 2).

One by one all the Savkars fell in line. The total liability was about Rs. 1,50,000/-. Dewal put in his own money to the tune of Rs. 70,000/- as deposit. Other deposits were obtained from friends and relatives, one among whom was his own younger brother. In all, Rs. 1,25,000/- was collected by way of deposits and Rs. 25,000/- by way of donations.

As the lands were redeemed, they were not transferred to the original owners for private use but pooled together for common cultivation. Thus came into being the 'Shri Vitthal Co-operative Joint Farming Society Limited' on 1st January 1969. The first meeting was held in the temple of God Vithoba (Vitthal) and thus the name of the new Society.

Not all the land came back at one time. First a piece of 13 acres became available and the work of cultivation started. Dewal carefully supervised the operation. The 'farmers' had no equipment, not even a plough. They dug up the land with spades and planted a new variety of wheat. V.D. Deshpande describes the event as follows:

"This was the first time that the untouchables had sown wheat and naturally they knew nothing about the crop. Most of them expected the per acre yield to be no more than 100-200 kgs. Dewal, on the other hand, predicted a yield of about 1000-1200 kgs. per acre which seemed too fantastic to be true to the members At the end of the harvest, the members were staggered to see that the total yield had been 1300 kgs. per acre. The huge stack of about 170 bags was a miraculous revelation of what they could achieve if they pooled their resources" [Deshpande V.D., 1983, p. 83].

Some of the bags were sold and the cash obtained was used to purchase 90 saris to be distributed to the womenfolk. "The gesture touched the members deeply. They had long been used to wear rags - this was the first time their womenfolk had received decent clothing [Deshpande V.D., p. 55].

This imaginative action also strengthened the resolve of the community to prosper through collective effort.

4. Financing Small Trades

Although the co-operative farm was set up and was well on its way to further progress, it could be easily seen that it could not support all the member families. Other avenues of employment had to be found. So in 1970, Vitthal took up a programme to finance small trades at low rates of interest (7 to 9 per cent). Over the period from 7.3.1970 to 19.6.1975, 8 persons were given total loans of Rs. 4,650. Six of these loans were for purchase of bicycles to vendors, one was for a grocery shop and one was for manufacture of straw baskets. The experience, on the whole, was unhappy and so the programme was ended in 1975. About Rs. 500/- were still (1986) outstanding with 2 borrowers.

5. Milk Collection Centre

Because of the growing milk business of members, the Vitthal Society started its own milk collection centre (Shri Vitthal Milk Collection Centre) in 1970-71. It has around 180 members of whom 50 are Dalits (mostly Vitthal members) and the rest are from non-Dalits. In 1984-85, the Centre collected about 800 litres daily during the slack season and about 1200 litres during the peak season. Upto 1982, the Centre made a cumulative profit of about 92,000 rupees. The Centre also sold *Bharda* (concentrates) until 1982 and then stopped the activity because of increasing arrears with the members.

6. Producing Grapes

In 1971, the Society started a new and difficult venture - production of Seedless Thompson grapes. The beginning was made on 1.3 acres. In 1980-81, the grape garden was extended to 6 acres and in 1982-83 to 7 acres. In 1986, further 6 acres had been planted to grapes. In order to familiarise members with techniques of grape cultivation, 25 men and 25 women were taken in a truck to Tasgaon, an important grape growing centre.

7. Working for the Non-Dalits

By 1972-73, the Vitthal Society had fixed capital worth Rs. 85,000/-, it distributed a total income (rent + wages + salaries) of Rs. 84,000/- and made a net profit of Rs. 6,000/-. With this new found strength, the young Vitthal Society took an unusual step forward in the same year. This was a year of widespread famine and many farmers in Mhaisal and neighbouring villages were driven in hordes to famine works. The severity of the drought was so great that even after the monsoon rains started in 1973, the farmers had to continue to hire themselves out, neglecting cultivation of their own lands. Happily, the Vitthal members remained untouched by this calamity because by now they had a 100 acre farm

a part of which was supplied with irrigation water. This was an opportunity for Vitthal to come forward and do something for the non-Dalits. With the help of an organisation called Churches' Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), an aid agency, about 1300 poor farmers were given daily wages (mostly in the form of foodgrains and cooking oil) to cultivate their own 4000 acres. A total employment of about 1,62,000 mandays was created. Twentyfive members of the Vitthal Society, all Dalit youth, organised and managed the programme. In addition, they distributed *Sukhadi* (a nutritious preparation) to more than 1500 children daily for many weeks. This was a gigantic enterprise for the fledgling Vitthal Society involving as it did identification of poor farmers according to strict norms, enrolling them, supervising their work, managing queues, storing grain and oil, distributing it, keeping accounts and so on.

Later there was some form of institutionalisation of this help to the needy among the non-Dalits. The Society now advances money to them against the usufruct of their lands or cultivates their lands and pays them a rent. Even Caste Hindus preferred the Society to their own relatives or local Savkars for such transactions because of the trust it had generated. In one case, an orthodox Lingayat came with his widowed daughter-in-law to the Society and begged it to arrange for her a secure income from her piece of land. In another, a Muslim leased out his land to the Society to tide over the financial difficulty arising out of his daughter's marriage. There have been five or six cases of this until 1985-86. Such lands are returned as soon as the need of the party is over. This has already happened in three cases.

8. *Guru Govind Co-op. Housing Society*

This Society was registered in 1975. It has 200 members, all from Vitthal member families. The plan is to build 100 twin houses (a unit of two houses with one common wall). The cost was

estimated at Rs. 29,500/- per single house or Rs. 59,000/- for a twin house. The houses are to be constructed on the site of the present houses on a land admeasuring about 3.30 acres. The idea is to obtain a loan of Rs. 18,000/- per member from the Maharashtra Co-operative Housing Finance Society Limited. The remaining amount will be contributed by the members in cash and/or labour. Each house will be fitted with a toilet to which will be attached a Gobar Gas Plant. The built up area per house would be 514 sq.ft.

The loans will be paid off from increased earnings of the extended grape garden. If all goes well, about 117 houses will be ready in 1989 or 1990. Ten were in the process of construction in July 1986 from subsidies already obtained.

9. *Cow Loan*

In 1978-79, about 100 persons from Vitthal member families borrowed Rs. 5,000/- each from the Sangli Urban Co-operative Bank, Mhaisal Branch, for purchase of cross-bred cows against the guarantee of the Society. This could have been a major boost to the incomes of members but in the case of about half the borrowers, the programme proved a failure. (This is discussed later.) For those who benefitted, there has been a substantial rise in incomes.

10. *A Setback*

In 1983, the Vitthal Society suffered a grievous setback. The bower of the grape-garden over 3.5 acres collapsed allegedly owing to a storm, when the Society was expecting a bumper crop. In terms of damage and new construction, the Society underwent an immediate loss of about Rs. 400,000/-. The residual effects still continue in the sense that a large number of plants have suffered permanent damage and this has brought down yields.

The sequel to the disaster was encouraging. Within a short time of the event, scores of Mhaisal residents, big farmers among them, helped Vitthal raise the structure again.

11. A New Loan

The irrigation equipment and pipelines of Vitthal have become old. For repair and renovation of the existing works and for extension of the pipeline, a loan of Rs. 930,000/- has been sanctioned by the United Western Bank. The rate of interest is 10 per cent and the repayment period starting from the second year is 9 years with a grace period of 1 more year. The construction has already started in 1986.

12. Vitthal's Educational, Cultural and Welfare Activities

The Society runs one *Balwadi* (Kindergarten) within its locality and another in Ambika Nagar, a colony of landless labourers. About 70 children attend.

There is a Mahila Mandal (women's club) named 'Savitribai Phule Mahila Mandal', which meets every Sunday to discuss their problems or to hold reading sessions. It holds every year a 'clean-house' competition and awards prizes to the first three winners. It also holds every year a 'healthy baby' contest. Some women have been provided with sewing machine. The membership is about 50 and monthly subscription is 1 rupee. The Mahila Mandal helped 10 members acquire she-goats. It, along with other such Mandals in other ESK projects, has links with the Continuing Education Programme of the S.N.D.T. University, Pune, which gives them occasional training and sends its representatives to supervise their work.

There is a Tarun Mandal (Youth Club) whose membership is 75 with a monthly subscription of Re. 1. It runs a small library for the village, holds classes for school children, arranges sports and games and organises *Shramadan* (voluntary contribution or labour).

Bhajan Mandal (group which sings devotional songs) brings the old and young together. There are 62 members paying a monthly fee of Re. 1. The Mandal, in 1979, won the 5th prize in the Sangli District Competition contested by 112 singing groups. It gives about 100 programmes each year.

In addition, there are frequent festivals, seminars, rallies and camps. The birth anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar is celebrated with great gusto. Links are forged with the outside world through seminars and camps held in Mhaisal and other places. Men and women are sent as delegates to seminars and camps in places like Pune. Many eminent persons from outside who visit the Vitthal Society give lectures or hold discussions. In 1983 an interesting liaison was established with the Indian Institute of Technology, Powai, Mumbai. A batch of 15 secondary school students lived on the I.I.T. campus for a fortnight and got the benefit of instruction in subjects like mathematics, science and English at the hands of competent teachers. They could also inspect labs, workshops and themselves handle sophisticated equipment. In May 1985, a senior Post-Graduate student of I.I.T. stayed for over a week in Mhaisal and taught the school children the above mentioned subjects. Two more came later during the year and carried out the same programme. Another programme is for primary school children who each Sunday are brought to Miraj to obtain guidance from the teachers of Adarsh Bal Mandir, a renowned school.

The spread of the Mhaisal message needed new leaders to guide and nurture its ever-expanding network. From 1983 annually leadership training camps are held to motivate and train young people from various existing and potential sites of work. The organisational work in connection with the camps is shared by Vitthal Society and ESK.

A contact has been established with Dnyana-Prabodhini, Pune, a well-known educational institution which stresses character and leadership qualities along with formal education. In 1985-86, two secondary school boys were sent to the Prabodhini and in 1986-87 two more. The idea is to send a larger number in the years to come, funds permitting. This programme is meant to train future leaders.

The Vitthal Society buys half-a-dozen newspapers which are read by members and their children.

Among health programmes, the following need mention. Around 1978, a T.B. Centre for diagnosis and prescription was run for some time with the help of some Doctors. In 1983, the Vitthal Society organised an eye-camp for villagers (Dalits and non-Dalits) from 3 villages with the help of eminent eye-specialists. Eye-operations were carried out on 47 patients with the help of the 'Inner Wheel' of the Miraj Rotary Club and all the operations proved successful. Later, an eye-examination of primary school children was carried out and glasses were distributed free to 10 children.

Most eligible couples have been protected against further child-birth, chiefly through tubectomy.

13. The Vijay Housing Colony

This is not exactly an off-shoot of the Mhaisal

experiment but is related to it. In any case, it is now one of the projects under ESK co-ordination.

In the famine of 1952-53, a number of families from several villages migrated to Mhaisal and set up temporary shacks in the fields near the Mhaisal railway station. They lived a precarious and insecure existence for several years. Housing was their greatest need and these families, mostly agricultural labourers, had pooled their resources to buy land. But they found themselves in the clutches of local vested interests and finally came to Dewal for help in 1966. After a long struggle, the Vijay Co-operative Housing Society was registered in 1976. On an 11 acre piece of land now stand 44 pucca houses and 48 kachcha houses. The pucca houses have a built up area of 400 sq. ft. each. Seventeen houses were given gobar gas plants also. The most interesting feature of the Vijay Colony is the mixed composition of its membership.

As a consequence, the Vijay Colony became an experiment in inter-caste and inter-community intercourse about which we shall have something to say later.

14. Work Outside Mhaisal

The Mhaisal pattern was gradually introduced elsewhere and new Societies have come up in several places. They are listed below:

- 1) Navajeevan Co-operative Joint Farming Society, Limited, Kavathe-Piran, Tal. Miraj, Dist. Sangli. This Society was established in 1977 and was originally founded by a social worker, Shri. Arun Chavan of the Verala Irrigation and Development Project. Later the Society came under the ESK umbrella.
- 2) Dr. Babasaheb Co-operative Joint Farming Society, Limited, Kasbe-Nandre, Tal. Miraj, Dist. Sangli, established in 1979.

- 3) Gautam Co-operative Joint Farming Society, Limited, Kothali, Tal. Shirol, Dist. Kolhapur, established in 1983.
- 4) Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Co-operative Joint Farming Society, Kokale, Tal. Kavathe-Mahankal, Dist. Sangli. This Society was formally registered in August 1986, but in an informal manner, it has been functioning from 1983.
- 5) Shri. Udajirao Chavan Co-operative Farming Society, Limited, Kini, Tal. Hatkanangale, Dist. Kolhapur. This Society was registered earlier but started functioning only in 1985.

15. Arag and Budhgaon

These villages must also be mentioned in the context of general ESK activities. Arag is 18 km. east of Miraj in a low rainfall area. The Dalits have very good land, about 80 acres in a compact place, but it does not produce much because of successive bad seasons. Most land was in possession of the original Mahar owners with only a few pieces lying with Savkars. These lands have been redeemed in the usual ESK way. Since there is no possibility of supplying water to the Arag lands, no farming society has been registered.

The only activities at Arag today are the Mahila Mandal and the Balwadi. The Ramabai Ambedkar Mahila Mandal insisted on an income-yielding activity and therefore the ESK persuaded a Bank to disburse loans for buffalos in 1982. The results have been unsatisfactory. (They are dealt with in a later Chapter.)

In Budhgaon, 5 kms. from Sangli, is a settlement of a formerly nomadic community, the *Gosavis*. Their leader, Shri. Bharatbhau Gosavi met Dewal a couple of years ago, after hearing his reputation as a social worker and requested

him to look into the Gosavis' problems. He told Dewal that his community was just where it had been at the time of Independence and that no politician had really cared to help them. The Gosavis engaged themselves chiefly in selling scents and perfumes in various parts of the country, and some of them sold fruits, gee-gaws, scrap, buffalos and so on. Most of them were on the move for about eight months of the year and returned to Budhgaon on social and religious occasions. The leader's request was that a co-operative society be set up so that it could buy perfumes, etc., in bulk and thus raise the profits of members. Accordingly, an industrial co-operative society was registered in 1984. Later on, it was discovered that most gosavis had already been in debt to two banks and therefore their society could not be financed. Four Gosavi boys attended the leadership training camp in May 1985. The Gosavi women once played host to all the ESK Mahila Mandals in 1985. Apart from this, there has been hardly any ESK involvement in Budhgaon.

16. Setting Up the ESK

By 1982, Dewal was handling in all five co-operative farming societies, two housing co-operatives and had initiated work in Arag. There was no formal organisation behind him. Need was therefore felt of a body which would co-ordinate and supervise the work at various sites and channel funds to them. Thus, the ESK was registered on 21.8.1982. It is a Public Trust and Dewal is its Managing Trustee. The Trust Members are, apart from Dewal, two well-known journalists and writers, two social workers and two representatives of the Vitthal Society. The Local Managing Committee consists of Dewal, one social worker residing at Sangli and the two Vitthal representatives.

The ESK has rented two rooms, adjacent to Dewal's house, one for office and the other for an occasional guest. It has a jeep, bought by Dewal and maintained by ESK and a driver-cum-attendant. It employs, in addition, one accountant and one organiser.

Shri. P.S. Thakur, retired Deputy Director of Agriculture, Maharashtra, a well-known agricultural scientist and the man who has rendered expert advice to Dewal all these years, is specially invited for Board of Trustees meetings. So is Mrs. H. Bedi, Field Director, Community Aid Abroad (CAA), the principal funding agency.

We presented above the story of Mhaisal and its off-shoots as it evolved over the years and pointed out its important landmarks. In the next Chapter we study Vitthal's Co-operative Farm.

SECTION 4 VITTHAL'S CO-OPERATIVE FARM

Co-operative farming is basic to the whole philosophy of ESK. Wherever ESK makes a thrust, it is with co-operative farming. Therefore the earliest farm, Vitthal's farm, needs to be discussed in some detail.

1. The Meaning of Co-operative Joint Farming

In the beginning, a word about what co-operative farming is. There are basically two types: Co-operative Joint Farming and Co-operative Collective Farming. The ESK societies are all of the former (joint) type. Here the land belonging to the members is pooled together for common cultivation with individual ownership intact. In practical terms, this means that the member gets an income for ownership, by way of rent. The members also are expected to work on the Society's farm for wages

determined by the Society. Thus, the typical member gets his total income from the farm now from two sources. For the land contributed to the Society, he gets an ownership income, ideally, proportionate to the value of the land. For the work that he puts in on the Farm, he gets a wage. In other words, in a Joint Farming Co-operative, the ownership of the land remains with the members and only the rights of cultivation are assigned to the Society for a specific number of years. In a Collective Farming Society, on the other hand, individual ownership of members does not exist. The Society holds the land either in ownership or on lease from non-members.

A Co-operative Collective Farming Society can come into existence in any of the following ways. (1) The members themselves can sell or gift away their lands to the Society. (2) The Society might purchase land from its owners or from Government. (3) The Society may acquire land on lease-hold from its owners including Government. (In this last case, the Society is not the owner of the land. However, the distinguishing mark of a 'Collective' is that its own members do not have ownership rights in the lands in the possession of the Society. The Society as a whole may be a lessee to anyone as in this case).

Most Co-operative Collective Farming Societies in India are of the last type where usually Government leases out land to landless labourers on the condition that they cultivate it in common.

In a Collective Farming Society, therefore, the only source of income for the members is the wage for the work that they do. The ESK Societies, being all of the Joint Farming variety, the individual members enjoy an ownership income* in addition to the wage income. The *cultivation*

*In the Vitthal accounting parlance, it is called 'rent'. However, the ESK Societies distribute as 'rent' whatever is left after all expenses are paid. Thus, in fact, it is in the nature of a 'profit' rather than a 'rent' and may fluctuate from year to year.

in both the kinds of Societies is common but one has to guard against the literal meaning of words. Although cultivation can be described as 'common' or 'joint' or 'collective', in both the cases, to call the ESK farms 'collective' farms would be wrong because according to the official nomenclature, they are 'joint' and *not* 'collective'. In Soviet Russia and some other communist countries, individual ownership has, by and large, been abolished and the members of the co-operative farms in those countries do not have any ownership rights in the Societies' land. Thus, the Soviet Co-operative farms are properly called 'Collective' farms. Indian farms, by and large, are Joint farms. So, too, the ESK farms. In fact, the official Indian policy has been to encourage Joint Farming of private farmers and not collective farming.

2. Assessment of Vitthal's Co-operative Farm

In the absence of a systematic farm management type of study, no rigorous analysis of the efficiency of Vitthal's Farm is possible. The available data have a number of limitations. In the first place, crop-wise figures of income and expenditure are not available. Secondly, even an over-all view of the enterprise is difficult for several reasons. The Statements of Accounts in most Annual Reports are unaudited - a result of the irregular audit by the Co-operative Department. There are difficulties in interpreting the meaning of various entries. Sometimes, the same head of expenditure appears more than once. Sometimes an important item is missing from several statements because it is included under some other head. Then there are the usual problems associated with differences of approaches of an accountant and an economist - the latter does not find the former's treatment directly useful. For example, the statements of accounts give a figure for fertiliser purchases during a year but what the economist would like to know is the value of fertiliser *used* during that year or 'input cost'. There are conceptual hurdles

also. For example, Vitthal's functions are both agricultural and non-agricultural. This raises the question of division of some overheads between the two. A similar difficulty arises in the case of salaries of personnel having dual functions.

In the light of the above difficulties, what we propose to do is the following. We discuss the Society's land resources, irrigation, land-utilisation, crop-pattern and productivity. The stress is on showing the trends, particularly in respect of the last. Then we discuss the income generation of the Society and its distribution among various components. Finally, we make an effort to locate the causes of inefficiency in the light of the study of labour.

A. Land

In 1984-85, Vitthal had under its management a total of 50.46 hectares. This can be broken up as in Table 4.1

Table 4.1. Vitthal's Land

Sr. No.	Type of Land	Hectares
(1)	(2)	(3)
1.	Land of Members leased to the Society (or 'pooled' land)	39.63
2.	Land purchased by Society	00.80
3.	Land leased-in from others	10.03
4.	Total	50.46

Some explanation of the above categories is necessary:

No. 1: Land of Members

This is the land of Mahars in Mhaisal a part of which was earlier in the hands of Savkars. All this land is not in one place. In fact, it is fragmented in 4 plots. The four plots have different names:

a) *Mharki*: This is the largest and the best piece with 18.87 ha. Vitthal's office is located on this plot.

b) Mal: (or Gastyacha Mal): This is a piece of 3.27 ha. This piece lies near the Mhaisal railway station, about 3 kms. from the above piece.

c) Mali: This is a piece of 14.35 ha. situated on the bank of Krishna river and used mainly for growing fodder. This lies close to the *Mharki*.

d) Deskat: This is a plot of 3.11 ha. Originally it was Government land distributed to some Mahar families and now pooled into the Society along with other Mahar land.

No. 2: Land purchased by the Society. This is purchased for installation of lift, etc.

No. 3: This land belongs to non-Mahars but is currently in the possession of the Society. (We cannot call the owners 'non-members' because they have been made members after their connection with the Society was established. They are 'B' class members and those [Mahars] who have pooled the lands are 'A' class members.) Total land under No. 3 in 1984-85 was 10.03 ha.

This land consists of 2 plots held by 2 different owners.

a) Ghabre Patti: Ghabre is a Maratha who was under a burden of debt to the tune of Rs. 30,000/-. Ghabre's loan was paid off by the Society and his 5.60 ha. taken over in 1979. The Rs. 30,000/- are treated as advance rent to Ghabre for 14 years after which the land goes back to him. This land is in village Narwad, about 3 km. from Mhaisal.

b) Patil Patti: This plot belongs to a distressed Jain family and is 4.43 hectares. Since the owner - now a widow - cannot cultivate it, the Society has taken it on lease against annual rent of Rs. 250/- per acre (or Rs. 617 per ha.). This plot is also located in Narwad.

Then there is another plot called *Valvekar Patti*. This plot belongs to Maula Babu Valvekar, a Muslim, and is about 0.44 hectares. This was taken over by the Society in 1984 on a 14 year lease with advance rent payment of Rs. 14,000/-. This plot is not under the direct management of the Society. A member, Kallappa Dadu Kamble, has furnished the initial Rs. 14,000/- and he cultivates the land on a personal basis. The profits go to Kallappa. In other words, the land is only formally in the possession of the Society. It is not included in the above tally of 10.03 hectares nor are its accounts included in Society's statements.

Not all the land of members was lying with the Savkars; 14.34 hectares remained outside.

Not all the land was pooled at one time. In 1969 when the Society started functioning the land was 13.23 ha. being part of land called 'Mharki'. Another 3.60 ha. were added in 1972 making up a total of 16.83 ha. The rest 22.80 ha. were added later.

B. Irrigation

Mharki, the largest plot, has a lift on the Krishna river with a 25 HP. engine and pipeline to serve its area. In addition, it has a sunk well for additional supply of water. Of the 18.87 ha., only 10 ha. have the permission for year-round water from the river lift. Mal land, 13.42 ha. located near Mhaisal railway station does not have its own source of water; it buys water from a nearby lift of the sugar factory. It has permission for year-round supply to only 2.21 ha. Mali plot gets water from the Society lift. All the 3.11 ha. of Deskat are useless for cultivation because of salinity.

Thus today the situation is that of the Society's pooled land of 39.63 ha., only 12.14 ha. have the permission of the Irrigation Department for year-round use of the Krishna water. 23.55 ha.

either get seasonal supply from the river lift or are fed by Society's own well. The rest of the land (about 4 ha.) does not get any water.

On the leased land, the Ghabre patti (14 acres) has a well, but it does not have sufficient water. The Patil patti also has a well, but it needs to be deepened. Thus, both these plots can be said to have only seasonal water supply.

C. Fixed Capital

Table 4.2. Growth of Fixed Capital

Year	Value (Rs)	Year	Value (Rs)
1970-71	63,201.43	1978-79	1,93,791.57
1971-72	71,493.64	1979-80	2,20,831.78
1972-73	75,300.50	1980-81	2,47,033.88
1973-74	85,375.56	1981-82	3,17,663.52
1974-75	94,955.85	1982-83	3,03,760.53
1975-76	1,21,990.10	1983-84	4,16,747.53
1976-77	1,72,477.57	1984-85	3,97,558.00
1977-78	1,92,475.57		

The Table 4.2 shows that from 1970-71 (the second year of the Society) to 1983-84, the value of fixed capital of the Society rose from about Rs. 63,000/- to over Rs. 4,00,000/- or about 6 times. (There is a small drop in the last year.) At constant (1971-72) prices fixed capital rose to about 1,39,000/- in 1983-84 or 2.8 times.

The values of fixed assets obtained from the balance sheets and presented above do not obviously include some items. This became clear when we separately obtained from the Panch

Committee the rough values of all the relevant items for the year 1984-85. This is shown in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3. Fixed Capital, 1984-85

Items	Value (Rs)
3 Electric Motors and Pipeline	40,000.00
1 Tractor	87,000.00
1 Trailer	14,000.00
Accessories	20,000.00
Milk-Van	83,000.00
Bullocks	15,000.00
Cart and Implements	5,000.00
3 Wells	30,000.00
Electric Motors, Diesel Engines and Pipeline (Well)	20,000.00
2 Buildings	1,15,000.00
Investment in Grape Yard	2,80,000.00
Land Development	20,000.00
Total	7,29,000.00

If we exclude the value of the milk-van and half the value of buildings (since they are partly used for non-agricultural work), we get a figure of (Rs. 7,29,000 - Rs. 1,40,500) Rs. 5,88,500 or roughly Rs. 6 lakh as value of agricultural fixed capital on the Vitthal Farm, rather than 4 lakh rupees.

D. Land Utilisation

It was not possible to obtain land utilisation figures for all the years. We have information about the last three years (the latest in this case being 1985-86, the year in which the investigation was carried out). This is shown in Table 4.4:-

Table 4.4. Land Utilisation (Hectares)

Year	Non-agricultural	Uncultivable	Temporary Fallow	Total Unused (2+3+4)	Agricultural	Total (5+6)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
1983-84	2.01	3.10	6.66	11.77 (25.33)	34.81 (74.67)	46.58 (100.00)
1984-85	2.01	3.10	6.56	11.67 (21.77)	41.00 (76.49)	52.67 (100.00)
1985-86	2.50	3.10	5.96	11.56 (22.10)	39.36 (77.21)	50.92 (100.00)

1) There is an unexplained difference in the amount of land.

2) Figures in brackets are percentages to figures in the last column.

The non-agricultural land is occupied by structures and pathways, etc. It has increased from 2.01 to 2.50 acres because of additional construction work related to the new pipeline.

The constant figure of 3.10 ha. under 'uncultivable' is the Deskat land mentioned earlier. This land, obtained by some Mahar families from the Government, has gone out of cultivation as a result of leakage of water from nearby lifts belonging to the sugar factory. The Vitthal Society in collaboration with the Forest Department made an attempt to raise a plantation of eucalyptus but it failed.

Of the 5.96 ha. under 'temporary fallow' in 1985-86, 2.12 ha. were being prepared for new

grape plantation. This leaves 3.84 ha. and it is not clear why it remained unused. (Perhaps there is an error in the information supplied to us. The Patil patti - 4.14 hectares has insufficient well water. The kharif crop on it mostly withered due to shortage of rains. This may have been, by mistake, considered 'fallow'. If this is correct, the total land not used for agricultural purposes would be lower and this would perhaps apply to earlier years also.)

E. Cropping Pattern

Just as in the case of land-utilisation, we have rough figures of cropping pattern only for the recent three years, which is really too short a time to judge such changes. This is given in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5. Cropping Pattern (Hectares)

Year	Sugar Cane	Grape	Betel Leaf	Jowar	Turmeric	Wheat	Jute	Fodder	Vegetable	Seeds	Nursery	Total
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
1983-84	11.34 (32.78)	2.63 (7.60)	0.40 (1.16)	17.60 (50.88)	0.80 (2.31)	-	-	1.82 (5.26)	-	-	-	34.59 (100.00)
1984-85	7.89 (21.51)	2.63 (7.17)	0.40 (1.09)	11.74 (32.01)	1.60 (4.36)	5.92 (16.14)	3.26 (8.89)	1.24 (3.38)	1.00 (2.73)	0.40 (1.09)	0.60 (1.64)	36.68 (100.00)
1985-86	7.08 (18.01)	6.88 (17.50)	0.40 (1.02)	14.17 (36.04)	1.61 (4.09)	-	5.26 (13.38)	2.92 (7.43)	1.00 (2.54)	-	-	39.32 (100.00)

Notes: 1) Figures are rough approximations.

2) Figures in brackets are percentages of the total in the last column.

From Table 4.5, the important changes from 1983-84 can be summarised as follows: (1) Grape is increasing. (2) The crop-pattern is heavily cash-crop oriented. Jowar was the only foodgrain in 1985-86 produced on 14.17 ha.

F. Trends in Productivity

Table 4.6 provides per hectare yields of certain important crops over the years. This information is based on the *Panchnamas* (collective

judgements) made by the Panch Committee (Managing Committee) at the time of the harvest or at the end of the season. In some cases, they are estimates and in some they are weighments. We could ascertain that in the case of grapes, they are actual quantities harvested. In other cases, particularly in the case of sugarcane, they are sometimes estimates, but it could not be verified in which years. However, since estimates are made by experienced observers, they could be taken as rough equivalents of actual quantities.

Table 4.6. Per Hectare Productivity of Various Crops

Year	Area (ha)	Output (Tonnes)	Per Hectare Productivity (Tonnes)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Sugarcane</i>			
1970-71	6.68	514.00	76.95
1971-72	13.46	1334.84	99.17
1972-73	13.04	1527.00	117.10
1973-74	9.31	409.00	43.93
1974-75	12.51	864.00	69.06
1975-76	9.34	851.30	91.15
1976-77	14.89	1072.00	71.99
1977-78	13.21	992.80	75.16
1978-79	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
1979-80	7.69	350.00	45.51
1980-81	17.71	1625.00	91.76
1981-82	20.45	1884.00	92.13
1982-83	10.83	1152.00	106.37
1983-84	11.34	1055.00	93.03
1984-85	7.89	652.00	82.64
1985-86	7.09	460.00	64.88
<i>Grapes</i>			
1970-71	0.61	2.00	3.28
1971-72	0.45	1.07	2.37
1972-73	0.45	2.44	5.42
1973-74	0.45	3.20	7.11
1974-75 to 1978-79	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
1979-80	0.45	4.00	8.89
1980-81	2.43	40.00	16.46
1981-82	2.43	44.60	18.35
1982-83	2.83	52.05	18.39
1983-84	2.83	44.33	15.66
1984-85	2.83	40.00	14.13
1985-86	2.83	33.26	11.75
<i>Jowar</i>			
1970-71	1.21	0.40	0.33
1971-72	4.45	9.70	2.18
1972-73	-	-	-
1973-74	16.19	10.70	0.66
1974-75 to 1978-79	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
1979-80	3.64	3.00	0.82
1980-81	10.12	8.20	0.81
1981-82	10.93	9.20	0.84
1982-83	8.70	8.90	1.02
1983-84	5.87	6.60	1.12
1984-85	-	-	-
1985-86	14.17	7.00	0.49
<i>Turmeric</i>			
1984-85	1.01	4.40	4.36
1985-86	1.62	4.50	2.78

The sugarcane yield figures in Table 4.6 are aggregates for all kinds of sugarcane - *Suru* (new plantation), *Khodwa* (ratoon) and *Adsali* (one-and-a-half year crop). Their breakdown for only some years became available and is presented in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7. Sugarcane Yields (Tonnes/ha)

<i>Suru</i>		<i>Khodwa</i>		<i>Adsali</i>	
Year (1)	Tonnes/ha. (2)	Year (3)	Tonnes/ha. (4)	Year (5)	Tonnes/ha. (6)
1980-81	57.13	1980-81	86.87	1980-81	100.08
1982-83	60.24	1982-83	60.69	1981-82	58.96
1984-85	40.70	1985-86	63.75	1984-85	86.05
				1985-86	80.60

The conclusions from Tables 4.6 and 4.7 are as follows:

1. Sugarcane yields do not show any marked trend. However, yield in the latest year is on the lower side.
2. Grape yields are very low during the first four years. They pick up from 1979-80 and rose steadily upto 18.39 tonnes per ha in 1982-83. Then there is a steady decline. 1985-86 has the lowest yield in the last six years.
3. Jowar yields are poor throughout except in an early year - 1971-72. However, here, too, the yield in the latest year is the lowest among all the years barring the first year 1970-71.
4. Turmeric figures are available for only two recent years. Here, too, the latest year has the worse showing.
5. On the whole, the most recent year, 1985-86, is generally the poorest in all respects.

Weather-wise, the year 1985-86 was not bad. The Dewal brothers' farms are supervised by Madhukar Dewal himself. They yielded about 34 tonnes of grape per ha. in 1985-86. One of their

acres produced 20 tonnes (about 50 tonnes per ha.). The Mhaisal village average was heard to be 30 tonnes.

In the initial project report made for grapes by Shri. P.S. Thakur in 1976, the average yield was expected to be 28-30 tonnes. It is worth noticing in this light that Vitthal has never exceeded about 18.50 tonnes per ha. According to Dewal himself, good farmers should get around 25-30 tonnes per ha. The best of them can go upto 60 tonnes. Ten tonnes per ha. is generally considered to be a break-even yield. Vitthal has thus barely kept its head above water.

Grape is a crucial crop for Vitthal because of the expansion planned now. Already in 1985-86, further 4 acres have been planted. Three more acres will be taken up in 1986-87. By the end of that year, in all eight hectares will have been planted to grape. Guru Govindsingh housing loans are to be repaid through profits of grape sales. In this light, the poor yields are a cause of worry.

Sugarcane should yield at least 100 tonnes normally. For Adsali, good farmers can take 125 to 150 tonnes per ha.

At 4.94 quintals per ha., Vitthal's Jowar yield is dismally poor. (Good farmers can achieve 20 quintals per ha.)

On the whole, we have to record that Vitthal's farm productivity has been on the low side and is perhaps declining in recent years.

G. Income Generated by the Farm and its Distribution

Since on the basis of the records of the Society, it is not possible to calculate the profitability of the enterprise, the next best alternative is to consider the magnitude of income distributed by Vitthal by way of wages, salaries and rents. This is roughly the equivalent of 'farm business income' in farm management terminology. The relevant information is given in Table 4.8 for all the years from 1970-71 to 1984-85.

Total Income

Table 4.8 yields the following conclusions. The total income (wages + salaries + rent) increased from Rs. 25,933.24 to Rs. 2,15,829.00 from 1970-71 to 1984-85. This is more than an eightfold increase in nominal terms. At constant (1971-72) prices it rose somewhat less than thrice.

Table 4.8. Farm Business Income and Its Distribution

Year (1)	Wages and Salaries (2)	Rent (3)	Total (4)
1970-71	18,834.12 (72.77)	7,049.12 (27.23)	25,883.24
1971-72	31,325.30 (78.73)	8,463.25 (21.27)	39,788.55
1972-73	20,784.75 (24.78)	63,104.53 (75.22)	83,889.28
1973-74	44,612.24 (64.66)	24,387.85 (35.34)	69,000.09
1974-75	66,885.75 (97.10)	2,000.00 (2.90)	68,885.75
1975-76	49,831.05 (46.51)	57,305.00 (53.49)	1,07,136.05
1976-77	55,969.30 (99.29)	400.00 (0.71)	56,369.30
1977-78	70,236.95 (62.77)	41,654.50 (37.23)	1,11,891.45
1978-79	89,581.59 (51.85)	83,184.20 (48.15)	1,72,765.79
1979-80	1,12,963.43 (100.00)	0.00 (0.00)	1,12,963.43
1980-81	1,34,615.25 (61.84)	83,063.00 (38.16)	2,17,668.25
1981-82	1,21,891.90 (70.18)	51,792.00 (29.82)	1,73,683.90
1982-83	1,24,604.75 (60.55)	81,180.00 (39.45)	2,05,784.75
1983-84	1,40,466.98 (71.89)	54,914.25 (28.11)	1,95,381.23
1984-85	1,66,884.00 (77.32)	48,945.00 (22.68)	2,15,829.00
Total	12,50,877.36 (67.30)	6,07,879.79 (32.70)	18,58,757.15

Rent

The figures of rent in Table 4.8 (Col. 3) show wide variations from Rs. 00.00 to Rs. 83,000.00. Even if we exclude the suspicious-looking years 1972-73 and 1979-80, the variation is still considerable because the lowest rent paid is only Rs. 400.00 (in 1976-77). This is not surprising because rent, so called, is residual income in Vitthal and, therefore, is in the nature of profit.

Work Income

From 1970-71 to 1984-85, work income (wages + salaries, Col. 2, Table 4.8) increased from Rs. 18,884.12 to Rs. 1,66,884.00. (The figures for the first and the last years are the lowest and the highest respectively.) This increase is almost nine-fold. In constant prices this is slightly higher than a threefold increase.

Grape plantation grew to 2.83 ha. during this period. The generally higher level of work income must be, at least in part, attributed to the cultivation of grape which is much more labour-intensive compared to any other crop. From information given by grape-growers it appears that about 1800 mandays per year per acre are required for grape cultivation or about 10 to 12 workers per hectare. (This comes to one manday per year per creeper because an acre ordinarily accommodates 1800 creepers. Vitthal's average is less at 1657 in 1985.) Of Course, a part of the rise in work-income must be due to a rise in its rate, of which we have no information.

Work Income and Property Income

Table 4.8 has already given comparative figures of work income (Col. 2) and rents (Col. 3) of which the latter is purely property income. Their relative proportions, year-wise and for all

the years together are also given in brackets in the same table. Considering all the years together, work income constitutes 67.27 per cent of the total and property income 32.73 per cent. Over the years, however, the element of rent in the total has slightly increased.

Wages and Salaries

Separate elements of work income in terms of wages and salaries are given in Table 4.9.

Table 4.9 shows that while salaries have not even doubled - they have increased only 93 per cent - wages have increased 14.75 times. At constant (1971-72) prices the increase is somewhat less than sixfold. The salary bill in 1974-75 was Rs. 16,332.00 and in 1984-85 Rs. 16,835.00. In between, it fluctuated somewhat. This means for over 11 years, the salary bill has remained almost sticky. At constant prices there is a fall! Salaries which constituted 46.16 per cent in 1970-71 are only about 10 per cent in recent years. This means the administrative expenses are kept at a low, perhaps an unduly low level.

By way of summary of income generated and distributed, we can say that Vitthal's greatest contribution to its members has been in terms of employment and wages. True, all the wages do not go to members. As we shall show presently, about 25 per cent of the total labour input of Vitthal is non-member labour. Thus, about 75 per cent of the wages can be said to have been paid to member families. It must again be noted that all the salary income and all the rents go to members. And the wage component has increased substantially showing that employment (and wage-rates too) have steadily gone up over the years. In assessing Vitthal's economic performance, this aspect of the matter needs to be prominently taken into account.

Table 4.9. Wages and Salaries

Year (1)	Wages (2)	Salaries (3)	Total (4)
1970-71	10,116.42 (53.84)	8,717.70 (46.29)	18,834.12
1971-72	21,362.30 (68.20)	9,963.00 (31.80)	31,325.30
1972-73	12,144.15 (58.43)	8,640.60 (41.57)	20,784.75
1973-74	31,824.24 (71.34)	12,788.00 (28.66)	44,612.24
1974-75	50,553.75 (75.58)	16,332.00 (24.42)	66,885.75
1975-76	36,401.85 (73.05)	13,429.20 (26.95)	49,831.05
1976-77	42,019.65 (75.08)	13,949.65 (24.92)	55,969.30
1977-78	55,034.70 (78.36)	15,202.25 (21.64)	70,236.95
1978-79	71,813.59 (80.17)	17,768.00 (19.83)	89,581.59
1979-80	92,708.23 (82.07)	20,255.20 (17.93)	1,12,963.43
1980-81	1,12,779.75 (83.79)	21,825.50 (16.21)	1,34,605.25
1981-82	1,01,004.90 (82.86)	20,887.00 (17.14)	1,21,891.90
1982-83	1,05,970.75 (85.05)	18,634.00 (14.95)	1,24,604.75
1983-84	1,26,098.98 (89.77)	14,368.00 (10.23)	1,40,466.98
1984-85	1,50,049.00 (89.91)	16,835.00 (10.09)	1,66,884.00
Total	10,20,939.70 (81.62)	2,29,937.66 (18.38)	12,50,877.36

Vitthal's Economic Contribution

We have noted earlier that per family holding in the pooled land is only about an acre. But on this piece, it earned, in 1984-85, a rent of Rs. 450.36 and work income (wage + salaries) of Rs. 1,584.50 or altogether about Rs. 2,000.00 (Table 4.4, Table 4.8 and Table 4.9) If the small pieces were to be left with the individual owners, an income of this magnitude would have been unthinkable, even assuming that the lands would have remained in their possession and that they would have had the resources to cultivate them. This level of productivity reached by the average member's small plot must be considered largely the result of the investments, cropping pattern and

the technology made possible by co-operative farming. Our criticism (which is to follow) regarding inefficient functioning of the Farm only means that Vitthal's contribution to income of members would, in fact, have been higher than what it has been.

3. Causes of Low Yields

All the Vitthal land is not of good quality. Only parts of the Mharki and Mali plots (in all about 26 ha.) are good. Three ha. of Deskat are useless. The rest of the land is of medium type. Nor is all land perennially irrigated, as noted earlier. Of the original pooled land, 16 ha. give only one (kharif) crop.

But this might affect the overall yields. Some of the crops we considered - sugarcane and grape particularly - do not suffer from much handicap because they are grown on lands well supplied with water. Again, grape land does not have to be 'good' in the traditional sense. Much so-called 'inferior' or even 'barren' land has been found to be good for horticulture and there is a growing demand for such land now, because of the possibility of grape or pomegranate cultivation.

About the low yields of grape, the following explanation was offered by a knowledgeable Panch:

Of the 2.83 ha. under grapes, 0.20 ha. is an experimental plot; therefore, the acreage under grapes is actually only 2.63 ha. Because of the disaster in 1983 (collapse of the bower), over 1.41 ha. a large number of creepers have been affected. Assuming that their productivity is only half of the normal, we must consider this as only 0.70 ha. Thus, the effective acreage is only 1.92 ha. But one can make an even more precise calculation. (This was actually done by Panchas in November 1985.) There are in all 11,700 creepers on the 2.83 ha. Fruit-bearing creepers are only 7,500. This comes to 64.10 per cent or in terms of hectares,

only 1.81 ha., somewhat less than the figure arrived at above. Thus, if effective acreage under grapes is 1.81 ha., the per hectare yield in 1985-86 comes to about 19 tons per hectare, rather than 11.36 tonnes.

There seems to be merit in this argument. From 1980-81 to 1982-83, the yield averaged 16.30 to 18.28 tonnes. In the next three years; it has been much less.

And yet the fact stands that even 19 tonnes per ha. is not a good yield by any standard. And there is no reason why the 1985-86 yield should be lower than the two previous years.

The Leased-in Lands

We have said earlier (Chapter 2) that the programme undertaken by Vitthal in 1973 to help the small farmers by providing them with work on their farms was institutionalised later in the form of taking over lands of the needy, from among even the caste-Hindus, so as to help them out. This was conceived as an instrument of forging bonds of friendship with the larger society, on a continuous basis. Vitthal has already acted in pursuance of this ideal in several cases, some of which have been a botheration.

In 1973-74, a plot of 9.10 ha. called *Chambharacha Mal*, was taken over from one Vanmore, a Chambhar, against a loan of Rs. 53,950.00 for 22 years. He repaid the debt of the Society and the land was returned to him in 1980-81. This, according to Vitthal, was a profitable transaction. Another plot of 1.21 ha was taken from Yeshwant Jadhav, a Maratha, against a loan of Rs. 6,000.00 for 22 years in 1973-74. It was returned in 1983-84. This also was a profitable transaction.

In 1979, 5.67 ha. were taken over from one Ghabre, a Maratha, in village Narwad, 3 km. from Mhaisal. The details of the transaction are as

follows: Ghabre has borrowed Rs. 30,000.00 from an Urban Co-operative Bank against the guarantee of Vitthal. In order to ensure repayment, Vitthal took over the land.

There is a well in Ghabre's land, which needed deepening and Vitthal deepened it at the cost of Rs. 11,000.00. It planted sugarcane on 0.81 ha. but water shortage developed and the cane growth was not satisfactory. Yet, Vitthal did make an income of Rupees 10,000.00 on cane and wheat and paid off part of the interest. But its productive performance has always been bad. The liability has now risen to Rs. 60,000.00.

A further deepening of the well might yield more water but now Vitthal is shy to spend more. There is a lift nearby belonging to the sugar factory but Ghabre patti does not come within its command. Vitthal has made an application to the factory to lend water but no action has resulted.

As a routine Vitthal ploughs the land every year with its own tractor whose services, if purchased, would cost it Rs. 3,000.00. Assessment of Rs. 159.00 has to be paid by Vitthal. Sowing and other operations cost Rs. 5,000.00 to Rs. 6,000.00. But Narwad is in a dry belt and usually the crops wither. In 1985-86, it yielded an output of Rs. 500.00 to Rs. 600.00 only. Thus, according to the Secretary, Ghabre patti involves Vitthal into a net loss of Rs. 4,000.00 per year (without counting the tractor charges).

It is also to be noted that being away from the main Vitthal Farm, supervision of this plot is difficult and costly.

The other plot in the possession of Vitthal now is the Patil patti belonging to Patils, who are Jains. This plot is 4.14 ha. again in Narwad. It has a well which does not have sufficient water. There is a diesel engine on the well because electric connection has not been granted. If it is obtained, the management of the land would be profitable.

At the moment, it barely pays off the cost of cultivation. Just as in the Ghabre patti case, there is a problem of remote control in this case also.

On the whole, the scheme for the help of the needy has turned out to be costly for Vitthal. Perhaps taking a lesson from this experience, a new plot of land belonging to Valvekar, a Muslim, has been handed over to a member, Kallappa, without any liability to the Society. Kallappa, as we have observed earlier, is making good profit on it.

The Mali Plot

This piece of 14.35 ha. is part of Society's pooled land. It has water supply and the quality of land is good. However, Vitthal has reserved this plot for the exclusive production of fodder for its cattle-owning members. The arrangement is like this: The Society provides water and supervision. The land is divided into small strips which are to be managed by the milk producing member against a small payment of rent (which in turn is deducted from rent due to him from Vitthal). Vitthal earns about Rs. 7,000.00 by way of rent. However, if it were to bring it under direct management, an income of Rs. 15,000.00 to Rs. 20,000.00 would become possible. Here is a case where Vitthal helps some of its members at the cost of its own income. This is obviously a misplaced 'welfare' activity involving discrimination among members where only some (milk producing) members benefit at the expense of others.

Labour and Labour Management

Many residents of Mhaisal were critical of Vitthal's inefficiency and attributed it mainly to indifferent interest taken by members in Society's work. Almost everyone mentioned that every day workers were brought to Vitthal from Lokur, a Karnataka village about 10 km. from Mhaisal and that too in Vitthal's van. On enquiry, it was found

that these workers were imported chiefly during the busy grape season and not all through the year; that some other farmers also did the same and provided transport to these workers since they came from a long distance; that wages paid to them were adjusted downwards to recover transport expenses.

But even apart from this, many Mhaisal residents and some members themselves commented on 'excessive' dependence on outside labour. V.D. Deshpande observed as follows:

'Almost every office bearer of the Society voiced the complaint that they do not get the right kind of labourers in adequate numbers. One can easily see that a majority of the members are not at all willing to work as labourers. There was no data to show how many labourers working in the farm were members of the Society. According to some, only 70 per cent of the hired labourers belong to the member's families. Some of the labourers said that less than 50 per cent of the labourers belong to the members families. A female labourer put the figure for female labourers at 30 per cent or less' [Deshpande V.D., 1983, p. 71].

The complaints were of two kinds: one, the members did not report for work; two, when they did report, they worked indifferently.

It had to be found out, in the first place, as to how much of the total labour input was contributed by members or their families. An appropriate question to elicit this information was included in the schedule but since it was not properly addressed, the information was found unsatisfactory. So we adopted another method. The Farm's daily attendance register for 1985-86, the latest year, was used. In each month from July 1985 to June 1986, the second week starting from

Monday was chosen for study. Thus for 12 months, we have 12 weeks. In terms of weeks, this amounted to a slightly less than 25 per cent sample.

The register contained record of workers, male and female, part-time and full-time, who worked on each day. This was all that we needed. Separation of members from non-members posed a problem initially, since the attendance register made no such distinction, but it was easily solved as soon as it was learnt that all the Kamble's (and

'Shinge's) were members and no non-members were Kambles.*

The results of this exercise are set forth in Table 4.10.

1) It will be seen from Table 4.10 that the canard about members not attending the farm is false. 73.33 per cent or almost 3/4ths of the total labour input is supplied by members or their families.

**Table 4.10. Member and Non-Member Labour Input
(from Attendance Register)**

Member Labour Days						
Male		Female		Total		
Full	Half	Full	Half	Full	Half	Standard*
1,875	750	1,549	845	3,424	1,595	4,221
(Contd.)						
Non-Member Labour Days						
Male		Female		Total		
Full	Half	Full	Half	Full	Half	Standard*
651	276	588	316	1,239	592	1,535
Percentages of Standard* Labour Days						
Member			Non-Member			
73.33			26.67			

* Standard days are 'full' days plus half-days divided by 2. (Two half days = 1 full day).

2) Separate percentages for males and females are as follows: Member males contribute 73.96 per cent labour-days compared to non-members who contribute 26.04 per cent. Member females contribute 72.82 per cent and non-member females 27.18 per cent. Thus there is hardly any difference between males and females on the score of participation in

Farm work.

Further, it is not as if among member workers proportion of female labour-days is unusually high. It is 46.82 per cent, but among non-member workers, the proportion of female labour days is, in fact, slightly higher at 48.26 per cent.

* Shinge's were also originally Kamble's: they were assigned the function of blowing the traditional Maratha horn ('Shing') and thus acquired the new name.

The sum and substance of the above computations is that member labour constitutes 3/4ths of the total labour used by the Farm. The criticism that the Farm 'excessively' relies on non-member labour is not supported by data.

We saw above that the member labour input on the Farm is not so small as the critics believe. It is substantial at slightly less than 74 per cent. However, there seems to be little doubt that the work efficiency of members is low. There is no way to measure it but the Farm Manager's opinion must be considered valuable in this context. When asked if members do not work on the Farm, he said, 'My complaint is not that they do not come for work; my complaint is that they do not work wholeheartedly'. This really is the crux of the matter and a major part of the explanation of the Farm's relatively low productivity. The Farm Manager's statement was corroborated by many senior members. According to Aba Piru, Chairman, the early years of enthusiastic participation in work are gone. He said, 'Until 1974, we really went at it with a bang. Now that *elan* has disappeared'. In the earlier research of V.D. Deshpande, Aba Piru has been quoted as follows:

'The members report for work at 7.30 in the morning. After about an hour, they break up for a round of tobacco chewing which lasts for about half an hour. Another hour's work and it is time for lunch. They work again, hardly for an hour and break up again for another round of tobacco. One more hour in the Farm and then they call it a day. The Society has to hire labourers from outside mainly because the members are very poor labourers' [Deshpande V.D., 1983, p. 79].

There is nothing surprising in the attitude of member workers. It is the same story in all co-operative farming enterprises. The basic reason for this malady is that a co-operative farm can never enforce a satisfactory incentive system.

An effective incentive system requires some proportionality between effort and reward - in other words, greater effort, better quality work or more skilled work must get a higher remuneration. However, if a system of wage-differentials is adopted for member-labour, there can arise imbalances between the number of workers needed for a particular job and the number of candidates who are ready to do it [Deshpande, 1977]. Again, if some workers are given more remunerative jobs, others might complain of 'nepotism'; worse still, 'nepotism' can actually find its way into the enterprise. In the result, most co-operatives go in for a flat rate of wages to avoid heart-burning and ill-will among members. But this means no incentive for better work.

Vitthal does have some wage differentials though. They are as per Table 4.11.

Table 4.11. Wage Differentials

Sr. No.	Category of Work	Wages (Rs)	
		Full Day	Half Day
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1.	Workers doing heavy work with bullocks	12.00	8.00
2.	Workers working in Panmala (Betel Leaf Farm)	11.00	8.00
3.	Operating the Electric Motor	11.00	-
4.	Night shift for above	16.00	-
5.	Plucking of Betel Leaves	18.00*	-
6.	Ordinary Work : Men	10.00	7.00
7.	Ordinary Work : Women	8.00	6.00

* This is for one-and-a-half basket of leaves which is normally accomplished in a 7 hour (full) day. Actually, the payment is in proportion to the number of baskets (Quantity).

Then there are salaried workers working as supervisors, one with a salary of Rs. 300/- per month, two with Rs. 325/- per month, two with Rs. 350/- per month and the Farm Manager with Rs. 500/- per month.

Thus, there are some specialised categories with better payments but workers working in them are few. For the rest of the workers, who

are assigned 'unskilled' jobs, there is a flat rate - the only differential being in the wages of men and women. Thus, there is no provision for rewarding more honest or more sincere effort for the rank and file of workers. But as suggested above, trying to introduce a scheme of differential payments is fraught with difficulties. And so the flat rates are preferred. They are perhaps less bothersome; but they do not encourage efficiency, in fact, they discourage it. But that is a price every producers' co-operative has to pay.

An enterprise without economic incentives succeeds only when the ideological element among members is strong. This was the situation in the early days and this is really the meaning of Aba Piru's observation cited earlier. Now there is less of it - we shall have occasion later to comment on this.

The structure of a co-operative farm not only discourages good work, the members also develop a habit of giving less and getting more in other ways also and the latter results in occasional pilferage. There are several complaints of this type, just as about laxity and indifference.

Co-operative farming also suffers from a peculiar management difficulty. The member workers may not obey the manager's orders because they are his equal as members, although functionally the manager is superior. In a private enterprise the workers are all functionally inferior to the manager and there is no equality of status.

Under these circumstances, frankly speaking, there is no harm in members *not* working, i.e., not attending. In fact, there would be a gain in so far as outside labour works more efficiently. This has also been Vitthal's experience. My own investigator, who frequently watched the operations, came to the same conclusion. One of the members went to the extent of saying that it is good that outside labour is hired; members work better when they work in the company of

non-members. Vitthal will acquire better economic efficiency with non-member labour. Another advantage with hired labour is that he/she can be fired. Such strictness is impossible to practise towards members.

The problem basically would be that when member-labour withdraws, it does not do so *completely*. The position is somewhat paradoxical. When earnings outside the Farm are more attractive, members would be eager to take outside work; when there is a slack outside or wages not sufficiently attractive, they would come back to the Farm and as of *right*. This is the problem. And the member cannot, in all conscience, be denied his right to work on a Farm of which he is a part-owner.

This temper of labour affects the management of the Farm. Tasks are not done in proper time. There is delay in decision and execution. I have frequently accompanied Dewal while he sauntered on the Farm whenever he visited Vitthal. His roving eye would immediately spot a deficiency here or a slovenly piece of work there and he would draw the attention of the Farm Manager, saying, 'R.D., this is not done; this ought to have been done long back; I had told you about this', and so on. Once he accidentally noticed a big gap in the protective straw-wall of the betel garden through which pigs or other animals could easily enter and merrily eat up the crop. This hole was obviously not noticed by anyone or having been noticed was not attended to.

Vardi meeting, supposed to be held every evening, is not very regular now-a-days. One day, the whole Panch Committee was complaining about it, blaming the Secretary for this lapse. My investigator who was housed in the office building itself, recollects only five or six meetings during his stay of about a month.

There are many more examples that could be cited. V.D. Deshpande has listed several examples of this type. It is not necessary to multiply them.

Managerial Staff

We have seen that in Vitthal, the wage-bill has risen much faster than the salary-bill. We have no data on increase in employment and changes in rates of wages and salaries over the years. But the fact that the wage bill has risen over six times while salaries have fallen in real value and that for the last 10 years, the salary-bill has almost stagnated, surely calls for attention. Most probably, this means that both the size of the management staff and their remuneration have not kept pace with increase in the number of workers to be supervised and managed. Only five supervisors and one manager seem to be inadequate to handle a workforce scattered in five different places, the size of which in the peak season of December can reach upto an average of 100 or more every day. This is surely an area for Vitthal to look into. The Farm Manager is easily the hardest working man around the Vitthal farm and his travails need to be considerably lessened.

Investment, Technology and Work-efficiency

In the discussion in this Chapter we have shown, on the one hand, increase in the 'farm business income' of Vitthal year-by-year which is indicative of its growing prosperity; on the other, we have also drawn attention to the poor yields, the basic cause behind which appears to be labour and management inefficiency. Is there a contradiction in what we say? Hardly. The economic performance of any enterprise is the combined result of its investments, technology and organisation. In Vitthal's case, the organisational side, meaning, above all, labour discipline, is weak and probably getting weaker but the slack arising out of this has been more than made up by the counteracting forces of

investments (in irrigation, farm machinery) and technology (modern farm practices, new crops) at least until now. How long this will continue to happen is difficult to say. Just as resources are substitutes of each other, they are also complementary and if a minimum level of efficiency does not obtain, all the advantages of high investments and modern technology would remain purely theoretical. Therefore, work efficiency must be considered the central problem of Vitthal today.

In the next two Chapters, we consider the economic and social gains accruing to members as a result of co-operativisation.

SECTION 5 SOCIO-ECONOMIC GAINS IN MHAISAL I

In this and the next Chapter, we do the following things.

In this chapter in Section (1), we describe the economic conditions of the Vitthal Society Member families in Mhaisal with reference to the year 1984-85 (July to June). Section (2) is devoted to the social dimensions of their life as reflected in their (a) own responses, as well as (b) the responses of non-Members in Mhaisal, mostly caste-Hindus. We do not have base-line data on economic and social conditions in Mhaisal for the years 1961-62 (year prior to the beginning of the milk business) or for 1967-68 (year prior to the establishment of the Vitthal Society); however, we held a fairly large number of informal talks mostly with the senior members who have experienced the change and this material has been used in Section (3) mostly in the form of their own narrations.

In the next Chapter (Chapter 6), we take up in Section (4) a comparison between the conditions in Mhaisal with those of Dalits in other villages where ESK work is going on. The last Section (5)

is a review of what has gone before in the two Chapters and an attempt to form an overall judgement.

1. Economic and Social Conditions of Vitthal Members in 1984-85

In the year 1984-85 (July-June) which was selected as the reference year prior to the year of investigation (1985-86), the Vitthal Society had on its register 109 members. Of these six were nominal (non-landholding and non-Mahar) members and we left them out. Of the remaining 103, we could contact members or their representatives from 92 families. We found, however, that two of them were Maratha, made members because of their land transactions (mentioned earlier) with the Vitthal Society. So 90 remained. Of these, five were not in residence in Mhaisal at the time of investigation but the information about them was obtained from their relatives or friends for a general survey. Then it was discovered that sometimes a single family had more than one member and we wanted to get down to the family unit. So we have 75 families for purposes of assets, liabilities, household durables, etc. For purposes of distribution of land within owners, we separately treated the shares of the brothers except when the father was living. Such respondents were 78. In sum, we have three different samples:

- 1) Upto 90 member families for general information regarding views, social and religious practices, etc. ('Upto' because the number of respondents is not the same for all questions).
- 2) Upto 75 families for purposes of general economic conditions.
- 3) Upto 78 families for purposes of distribution of land held in the Society.

A detailed household schedule was addressed to these families. The investigation took place in May and June 1986. The year for which data were collected was, as said above, from 1st July 1984 to 30th June 1985.

Population and Family Size

The total number of persons belonging to the 75 families was 449 with 247 males and 202 females. The average family size was 5.98 persons with 3.29 males and 2.69 females.

Land

Table 5.1 summarises the position in respect of land-holdings of 75 respondent members.

Table 5.1. Land Holdings of Respondent Member (in Hectares)

Land Pooled in Society	Per Family Pooled Land	Owned and Self-Operated Land Outside Society	Owned Land Leased Out	Total Owned Land Outside Society (3+4)	Per Family Owned Land Outside	Land Leased in Outside Society	Per Family Leased-in Land	Per Family Owned and Leased-in Outside Society
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
39.63	0.40	1.51	0.66	2.17	0.02	4.65	0.06	0.08

It will be seen from Table 5.1 that the major portion of land of the members is pooled and therefore managed by the Society; outside land either owned and self-operated or owned and leased out, is negligible. Leased-in land of members is only 4.65 ha.

Land owned outside (2.17 ha) belongs to three families. The 4.65 ha are leased in by only two families.

The distribution of the pooled land within the Society is quite uneven as shown in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2. Frequency Distribution of Families According to Size-groups of Pooled Land (in Hectares)

Size Group (Hectare)	Number of Families	Size Group	Number of Families
Upto 0.05	1	0.4 - 0.8	1
0.05 - 0.1	29	0.8 - 1.2	2
0.1 - 0.15	5	1.2 - 2.0	4
0.15 - 0.2	5	2.0 and above	2
0.2 - 0.4	29		
Total			78

The Table shows that 40 out of 78 holders own land upto 20 ares or 1/5th of a hectare. The percentage is 51.28. Of these, thirty have upto 10 ares or 1/10th of hectare and their percentage is 38.46. There are only 9 holders having more than 40 ares (or 1 acre) and two having more than two hectares.

We may mention that the maximum sized holding is 4.60 hectare and the minimum-sized one is three ares.

Employment and Wages

As we saw in the previous chapter, the total labour days put in by members in 12 weeks of 1985-86 are 422/- Considering this as a 25% sample, member-labour days for the year would be 16884 or about 44 per day. (The total member and non-member labour days would be 23024 or about 63 per day.) We do not have comparable employment data for 1970-71 but even then one can surmise that the increase is substantial. (The information supplied by Vitthal office about wages does not reconcile with the figures in Tables 4.8 and 4.9.)

Income and Poverty

The earlier version of this Report contained calculations of Vitthal members' income in 1984-85 as also the income of members of societies in other ESK villages. In addition, of course, per family income and given the poverty-line income of 1984-85, the number of poor families was also calculated. At the time of revising the earlier version, the calculations were seen to be flawed and it was decided not to use the statistics of income and poverty.

However, some broad indicators of certain aspects of economic conditions of members were obtained from the otherwise faulty data and these are presented below.

1) Agricultural wages earned by members, both on Vitthal Farm and outside constituted the major source of income.

2) Apart from the Vitthal Farm's direct contribution, the 'Society' enabled the members to earn additional income. Such income was from milk sales, since the Society made it possible for members to acquire milch animals. Also one member could acquire a piece of land for cultivation as a tenant through the efforts of the

Society. If all this income is taken into account the Society's contribution to member's income would look larger -- a little less than 50 per cent.

3) To get at the core of poverty the following three questions along with the 'Yes' and 'No' answers are given in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3. Poverty

Question (1)	Total No. of Respondents (2)	'Yes' (3)	'No' (4)
a) Do you have enough food for all the days of the year?	75	75	0
b) Have you on any day experienced starvation during the year?	71	0	71
c) Do you get adequate food?	71	70	1

The second question might look the same as the first, only put in a reverse way. But it was asked because it was more pointed than the first. Yet for both the questions the favourable responses are one hundred per cent although the number of respondents has gone down by four. The third question elicited only one negative reply. This means that among Vitthal Society members in 1984-85 nobody was so poor as to go without food.

We did locate one very poor family. Phulabai Nemisha Kamble, is a paralytic. Her small son is in school. Both of them live with relatives. She obtained a rent of Rs. 433.75 and had no other income. She is a real case of distress. She was being looked after by her sister-in-law.

Just as we located the poorest family we located also the richest family. Its income was around Rs 53,000/- in 1984-85.

However high the spread might look from Phulabai's dire poverty to the riches of the richest family, one must notice the significance of high income. It has a manifold message. In the first place, a large income, *per se*, would confer a status on the family which earns it. Secondly, the high income-earners would certainly feel proud of themselves considering what miserable creatures they were only two decades ago. Lastly the family's not so fortunate brothers will certainly

envy it but they may also, at the same time, feel that they are, as a community, a people who, given opportunity, are no less capable than the rest.

Assets

Since the land values were difficult to obtain, we have not included them in the following table.

The non-land assets of an average member family are listed below:

Table 5.4. Non-land Assets

House	9,644.24
Animals	4,246.66
Other	1,243.53
Total	15,134.43

Liabilities (Outstanding loans)

The outstanding loan per family from various sources is given below:

Table 5.5 Non-land Assets

Savkar	Co-op. Society	Bank	Total
17.33	86.66	2,618.38	2,722.37

The heavy bank dues per family are mainly the result of the cross-bred cow loan borrowed by members (to be discussed later).

Some Indicators of Standard of Living

We have collected information on the

possession of certain articles or services indicating the standard of living. This is given in Table 5.6.

Table 5.6. Number of Families in Possession of Different Articles or Services

Sr.No. (1)	Article/Service (2)	Number of Families (3)	Per cent (4)
1.	Stainless Steel Utensils	47	62.66
2.	Radio/Transistor	37	49.33
3.	Clock/Watch	42	56.00
4.	Electricity	35	46.66
5.	Bicycle	31	41.33

In addition, there are 51 cross-bred cows, 75 buffalos and 24 goats in these 75 families.

was 67.59. The percentage of female literates was 33.13. The overall percentage of literates to the total population above 5 years was 52.31.

Literacy and Education

The percentage of male literates (above age 5)

There were in all 96 school and college going students whose distribution is given in Table 5.7.

Table 5.7. Distribution of Students According to Class-Ranges

Class Range (1)	1st to 5th (2)	6th to 10th (3)	11th to 12th (Junior College) (4)	13th to 15th (Senior College) (5)	Total (6)
Number	47	40	6	3	96
Percentage to Total	(44.76)	(38.09)	(5.71)	(2.85)	(100.00)

This shows that after the 10th the proportion of drop-outs is heavy. There are only 9 going to college.

More or less the same picture appears in the case of those who have stopped education.

Table 5.8. Distribution of those Who have Completed Education

Class Range (1)	1st to 5th (2)	6th to 10th (3)	11th to 12th (Junior College) (4)	13th to 15th (Senior College) (5)	Total (6)
Number	53	65	12	2	132
Percentage	(40.15)	(49.24)	(9.09)	(1.51)	(100.00)

From a consideration of two Tables (5.7 and 5.8), it is clear that there are 23 persons who have either been to College or were attending it in 1984-85.

Diploma in education and one has a Diploma of I.T.I. (Industrial Training Institute).

In addition, the following information is to be noted. There are three M.A.s; one has a Bachelor's degree in education; one has a

The information given in Section 1 points to two things: 1) Poverty has almost disappeared. 2) The majority of Vitthal members enjoy at least a lower middle-class standard of life.

2. Vitthal Members: The Social Dimension

We shall look at the social dimension from (a) the angle of what the members themselves feel and do, and (b) the angle of what non-member Mhaisal residents, mostly caste-Hindus, feel and do.

A) Behaviour and Perceptions of Members

Our schedule included a number of questions on this aspect, the replies to which are summarised below. (The number of respondents to each question is not constant).

Seventy out of 75 respondents (93 per cent) said that they do not drink. None of 74 respondents said that he gambled.

Of the 89 respondents, not a single one admitted to performing traditional menial village jobs associated with the function of the Mahar. Only 8 of 90 respondents (8.8 per cent) reported a *Devdasi* in the family. However, 29 out of 89 (32 per cent) said that they visited the Yallamma Fair.

Some explanations are called for. 'Traditional menial jobs'* assigned to the Mahar as a village servant included sweeping the streets and the *Chavdi* (village meeting hall) but more particularly disposal of dead animals. As soon as the Mahars received information of a dead animal, they were supposed to carry the carcass, flay it and bury the remains. Associated with this work was a more pernicious custom of eating the flesh of dead animals. None in our sample said he did these jobs, which also means that the associated practice of eating carrion has also vanished. There are in Mhaisal a few Mahar families who are not traditional residents of Mhaisal, do not share the *inam* land and, therefore, are not members of the Vitthal Society. Some of these families seem to

be performing these functions. Since the number of families doing these jobs has diminished, there is good money for those who do them.

Devdasi is a girl dedicated in her childhood to Goddess Yallamma and, in fact, 'married' to Her. In practice, this meant that the girl was, under the pretext of a religious vow, condemned to a life of sexual promiscuity and, in extreme cases, prostitution. Once there is a *Devdasi* in a family, her sacred amulet (*Tait*) is to be passed on to another girl in the family who, in turn, becomes a *Devdasi*; this means the vow once taken must be observed in each succeeding generation. The cause of the custom lies in a mixture of economic compulsion and religious superstition.

Inquiries revealed that the eight *Devdasis* are all of the older generation. After the establishment of Vitthal, no new dedications of girls have taken place. Yallamma, the Goddess (located in Saundatti in Karnataka), has still a hold on a perceptible number but this is so in most villages bordering on Karnataka.

The other questions addressed to the members related to their inter-mixing with the caste-Hindus and their wider acceptance in society.

Seventy-seven out of 84 (91.7 per cent) say that they enter caste-Hindu houses. Are they occasionally offered tea? Seventy-one out of 76 (93 per cent) said 'yes'. More important was the next question: Is the tea offered in the host's *own* cups or in separate cups? Here the number of respondents has come down to 70. However, all of them, except one, said that tea is not served to them in separate cups. Are they, when they enter, allowed to share a common carpet? Sixty-six out of 79 (83 per cent) say 'yes'. Are they invited to meals? Fifty-seven out of 74 (77 per cent) say 'yes'. (It must be noted here that such occasions are incidental to functions like marriages when large groups of people are invited to partake of a

* Officially these services ceased with the passing of the Bombay Inferior Village Watan Abolition Act in 1958.

feast. Individual invitations to meals are generally rare in any village and this applies to all castes and communities.) When they are invited to meals, are they made to sit separately from the others? The number of respondents has now gone down markedly to only 57 and yet 52 of them (91.2 per cent) say that they are not made to sit apart from the other invitees. Are they invited to weddings? Ninety responded with only two among them giving a negative answer.

Do the caste-Hindus return these courtesies?

Seventy-four out of 90 (82 per cent) say that the caste-Hindus do visit their houses; that they do accept tea (63 out of 71 or 89 per cent); that they even accept food. (In the last case, the number of respondents is the lowest - only 47, and out of them 35 (74 per cent) say so).

Do the Dalits enter Hindu temples? The number of respondents is 86 and about 70 per cent say that they do.

This exhausts our list of questions on this subject. The responses suggesting a change for the better are generally overwhelmingly large in number. In a few cases, the number of respondents is small; but this is understandable considering the rarity of certain kinds of events - even among Savarnas themselves. On the whole, it is possible to say that on most aspects of social intercourse, the members portray a picture which is remarkable in the light of what one knows of conditions of Dalits in most villages.

B) Behaviour and Perceptions of Mhaisal Residents

In order to understand the attitudes and opinions of people in Mhaisal, we administered a scheduled to 100 residents. The investigator, originally from Mhaisal, but away from it most of his active life as secondary school teacher and Principal, is now back after retirement and has

been in Mhaisal for the last four years. He was asked to choose his respondents mainly from the more influential communities. It was also decided that he give preference to persons whom he happened to know. The composition of the respondents is as follows:

Brahmin	14
Jain	22
Maratha	23
Lingayat Kumbhar	11
Muslim	6
Matang	2
Korvi	1
Wadar (stone cutter)	2
Chambhar (leather worker)	3
Nhavi (Barber)	4
Shikalgar	1
Davri	1
Dhanagar (Shepherd)	2
Sutar (Carpenter)	2
Sonar (Goldsmith)	3
Koli	3
Total	100

Thus, most communities are covered but prominence is given to Brahmin, Jain, Maratha and Lingayat. The sample is certainly not representative, but it is believed that general thought-currents in the village are fairly well represented in what follows.

The schedule elicited three kinds of information (in addition to personal details such as age, occupation, income, education, caste, duration of stay in the town, etc.): (1) Respondent's impression about the Vitthal Society and its members. (2) His opinions about untouchability. (3) His personal behaviour towards Dalits.

The analysis has been done mostly in aggregate terms. Other dimensions like caste, education, etc., have been used in cases where they appeared significant. (Note: The number of respondents is not constant from question to question.)

About the Members of Vitthal

All 87 agree that the mahar members' income has increased. All 99 say that education in the members' families has improved. All 97 say that cleanliness in the Mahar households has increased. Out of 68, 48 say that vice (drinking, gambling) has gone down, but 20 say 'No'. Ninety out of 91 aver that their 'general behaviour' has improved.

One could sum up by saying that according to Mhaisal Caste-Hindu residents there has been a good deal of improvement among Mahars.

Religious and Social Prejudices

Do you think untouchability should vanish? Eighty-three out of 94 say 'yes'; only 11 'No'. Is eradication of untouchability against religion? Only one 'Yes', 92 'No's. Do you think the untouchables will never do better? Only one believes that they will never improve whereas the rest 92 believe otherwise.

On the whole, religious and social prejudices are not much in evidence.

3) Caste-Hindu Behaviour

In our sample of 100, there are six Dalits: two Matangs, one Korvi and three Chambhars. We have excluded them from the following dialogues.

Do you allow them to enter your house? All 90 say 'yes'. Do you allow them to sit on your carpet? Eighty-five 'yes's and two 'no's.

Four of the positive respondents say that some of the Dalits themselves prefer to sit on the uncovered floor.

To the question whether they offered their Dalit guests tea in their *own* cups, the answers are interesting. Out of 94, 66 say that they use their own cups, 15 say that they use separate cups and 13 say that they are 'selective', meaning thereby that an educated, influential or 'cultured' Dalit would be treated more decently. Of the 66 who say that they offer their own cups, three say that they do it without the knowledge of their women-folk.

Do they visit Dalit households? 81 say 'yes' and eight say 'no'. Do they attend Dalit weddings? Eighty-seven say 'yes' and three say 'no'. However, only 24 accept tea from Dalits and 47 do not.

All 90 say that their womenfolk do observe untouchability at home, some of them particularly mentioning that they do not observe it outside the house. Asked about young men, eight say that they observe untouchability but 84 say that they do not. But it is interesting to note in this connection that six out of the eight parents of the orthodox youth are Muslim.

Has the reduction in untouchability come about and is this especially due to the establishment of the Vitthal Society? Eighty-one say 'yes', it has come down and one says 'no'. However, 11 say that it is no result of the Vitthal Society's doing whereas three are doubtful whether it is the Society's contribution. (What they mean is that the changes would have come about anyway owing to general social development).

All 84 respondents say that Dalits enter temples. All 92 say that the Vitthal Bhajan Mandal gives performances in temples. Nineteen respondents invite the Bhajan Mandal for programmes in their own houses.

By way of supplement, let us note the investigator's own observations made after the completion of the survey:

- 1) Muslims do not generally offer tea to Dalits in their own cups nor would they accept tea from them. They would, strangely, consider it against their 'religion'.
- 2) The Matangs, itself a Dalit caste, do not accept tea or food from Mahars.
- 3) A section of the Chambhars (leather-workers) call themselves 'Maratha Chambhar' and do not accept tea or food from Mahars.
- 4) Davris and Wadars are also against such a 'sacrilege'.

On the whole, the investigator concludes that those who accept food or drink from Dalits are members of advanced castes such as Brahmin, Maratha, Jain and Lingayat. Among them those having come under the R.S.S. influence, according to the investigator, seem to be in a majority.

Apart from replies to scheduled questions, some respondents have made additional observations. A few points are given below:

Economic Change

'Now you won't see anyone begging or hungry among them' (A Sutar).

'Now you won't see anyone getting up every morning and asking for food' (A Dhangar).

'At least in Mhaisal, the Mahar community has excelled us in education and income' (A Muslim).

'Some Mahars now cannot be distinguished from Jains, Marathas or Brahmins' (A Muslim).

'Some of them now enjoy lower middle-class or upper middle class incomes' (A Lingayat).

Social Change

'Carrying dead animals, digging pits and burying them is no more done by any of them, even for money. Only a few old families do flaying' (A Lingayat).

'Not very long ago, it was the custom for Dalits not to enter even the yard of our house. Now they come in and sit on the carpet, have tea and their cups are washed by our servants. This is the magic wrought by the Vitthal Society' (Police Patil, Jain).

Members and their Families

'Since they have an organisation behind them the boys are more aggressive' (School Head Master).

'The new generation has no gratitude'.

'The Members have become somewhat uppish'

'The Dalit youth have acquired new vices in the place of old. They are the greatest customers of (disreputable) video films'.

It can be seen that on some points there are differences in the perceptions of Vitthal members and others. But we shall take account of them in the closing section (Section 5).

3. Change as Seen by Members

Let some of the members themselves picture the change.

Mrs. Shalan Santram (Member, 50): 'There used to be hardly anything to eat or wear before

the founding of the Society. I didn't have enough pots and pans in the kitchen. Now I have sufficient utensils at home'.

Mallu Dadu Kamble (Panch, 50): 'I worked like a slave for 27 years in a big landlord's house. For 35 years, I wore only shorts. I was also a confirmed drinker. There is no street or no gutter in Mhaisal in which I have not fallen. The Society changed all this. Because of my addiction, I was kept out of the milk business at first. But I pestered them and finally obtained a buffalo. Then one fine morning, I gave up drinking and became a changed man. I rose to be the Chairman of the Society. The Society has given me status'.

'Formerly, people used to die because of lack of medical help. Now the Society's tempo can take the sick to Miraj Hospital at any time'.

Aba Piru Kamble (Present Chairman, 60): 'Now nobody has to sit at the doorstep of others (in expectation of food). Formerly, not even a dog reckoned us as worth anything. Now we walk with chests thrust forward'.

Rau Sitaram Kamble (Supervisor, 45): 'I used to work for the Savkar. We wore rags then. Now we can wear good clothes. Our people have become clever. There is no untouchability now. We can see this change because of the Society'.

Kallappa Dadu Kamble (Panch, 50): 'Today I don't have even a 5 paise worth of debt. I have 10 animals. That is capital worth 50 to 60 thousand rupees. I have kept Rs. 3,500/- in a fixed deposit in my wife's name. When I enter the Urban or the Laxmi Bank now, the staff say 'Welcome, Savkar''.

Yallappa Devappa Kamble (Member, 65): 'I had no land. There used to be no food to eat on about four evenings in a week. Water used to be poured from a distance into our palms when we asked for it. The barber did not serve us. Almost

everyone of us was hungry. You had to kowtow before the villagers. You had to go out and beg. Now there is none without food. There is good medical care. We are served tea by Savarnas in their own cups'.

'I never climbed up the footsteps of a school. In my time, only 3 or 4 went to school. No girl was among them. Now everyone goes to school, girls too. Drinking is now only two annas in a rupee. There were 10 or 12 Devdasis in the locality. Now there are only three or four, but they are old; there are no new Devdasis'.

'I worked for 15 years with a Savkar. I used to drink too much. But then I gave up drinking. I have 5 cows now. My house is bad but I won't spend on repairs - what I need is a good cattle-shed. I also want to buy land. Until then I shall not have even another shirt'.

On another occasion, Yallappa told the following story: 'At midnight, many years ago, my wife began to have labour pains. Then she delivered a baby. There was no water at home. I didn't know what to do. At midnight, I knocked on the door of a Jain and told him of my plight. He said, 'take this water quietly so that my wife does not hear. And don't tell anyone'.

Devappa Sitaram Kamble (Panch, 60): 'My wife used to have only one sari. The land was with the Savkar. Father used to work for rayats (farmers). Cups used to be kept outside the house for us. We used to hang about the door of the Savkar, asking for one thing or the other'.

'Society put life into us. We became men; it doesn't matter how much we eat. What we have we eat in dignity'.

'Look at our fellow-men in Kamnūr (near Ichalkaranji). There the Mahars are wealthy. They own power-looms. Some of them have houses worth lakhs of rupees. But their touch is still avoided by others. They are still scared to climb down a well and take water from it'.

Devappa has a dramatic story to tell of the early days.

'I had a small wound on my cheek and I had to go to the hospital in Miraj on alternate days. I used to walk up to Miraj and return by bus. One day, I was late and the last bus had left. It was past eight-thirty and it began to drizzle. I began to look for a bullock-cart but there was none. As I kept wondering what to do at the cart-stand, a Jain came with his bullock cart on his way to Mhaisal. I approached him and asked his permission to step into the cart. He refused it, saying, 'Devappa, womenfolk are inside. And there is food, too, since we have returned from a marriage ceremony. Taking you in means a bath after going home and in any case, the women won't like to have you in'. All right, I said, I shall walk behind your cart. There is at least company. The road was a lonely one in those days'.

'After about a year, I turned the tables on him. The same Jain was returning from another marriage party. He came to the cart-stand looking for a bullock cart to take him to Mhaisal. I was the only one there with a cart. The Jain had no alternative but to approach me'.

'Where are all the carts, Devappa?' 'They have all left' I said. 'Is that so? But you have one, isn't it? Let the women sit'. 'No Savkar', I said, 'There would be touch pollution. I shall have to take a bath'.

'I know Devappa what you mean. You want to take revenge on me because I treated you that way last year. Please forgive me. That was my mistake'. I still refused and prodded the bullocks on. He came running after me. He almost begged to be taken in. Then I took them'.

Yellappa then told me the moral of the story. 'Sir, touch-pollution exists only when it is convenient to them'.

Mahila Mandal Members: 'In those days, if there was food on one day, it wasn't there on another. The sense of touch-pollution was rampant. All that has gone now. Now we can buy on credit. Even the Mahila Mandal in the town invites us for *haladikunku* (women's gathering where turmeric powder and *kumkum* are exchanged). We go out now and attend meetings. Some husbands don't like it. One of them, returning home and not finding his wife said, 'Our Indira Gandhi must have gone for a meeting'.

Mahadeo Bala (Member, 70) is a sick old man, not at all articulate. The only thing he went on saying was, '*Societymule zakas*' (It is excellent because of the Society).

Ganpati Balu (Member, 35): 'The rainy season was really very hard. We used to go without food several times a week. Not that I have enough today. But still there is a difference. We are entertained in caste-Hindu houses. They do not avoid our touch'.

Yallappa Dadu (Member, 55): 'There were four acres between the four of us and all of them written away to the Savkar. Now we have a position in the village. Boys of all castes move about arm-in-arm. We of the Bhajan Mandal give programmes in the Vitthal, Kanakeshwar, Kalleshwar and Datta temples and even in the houses of some Jains and Lingayats'.

'My three elder sons have jobs now and the youngest goes to school'.

Bhau Sitaram (Member, 55): 'My land lay with the Savkar. My dhoti used to be in tatters. The wage was 4 annas for a man and 2 annas for a woman. How to survive the rains was a real puzzle in those days. Everyone was in the same kind of soup'.

'Now we eat thrice what we did. The children live like princes. They move about with arms around the necks of caste-Hindu boys. Only women of the older generation observe untouchability. Reputable houses invite our Bhajan Mandal and serve us food'.

'Drinking is rare among the younger lot'.

R.K. Kamble (Secretary, Vitthal Society, 39): 'My father worked for 40 years with the Police Patil. We used to sweep the dust on the threshing floor and pick up grains from it. We used to separate grain from dung of the cattle, wash it, grind it and make *Bhakar* out of it. People used to address us contemptuously and insult us. We could never hold our neck straight. We were "zeros"'.

'Now we have a status. Whenever there is an important meeting in the village, the organisers say, "Call Vitthal workers". In other villages, you can still hear of rapes and other atrocities. But not here'.

R.K. relates the story of an incident signifying the new sense of self-respect among the Vitthal member families.

This was in connection with a Jain cattle-insurance agent. He, it was alleged, took for himself some money settled in favour of Vitthal members as insurance claims in connection with their dead cows. R.K. learnt about this and went to the agent to question him. A quarrel ensued and the agent pushed R.K. away. At night, 200 men gathered on the *takky* (traditional meeting place of the Mahars) and gheraoed the agent's house. The agent told the gathering that the Vitthal office-bearers, including R.K., were themselves corrupt and that they themselves asked for a commission from him. Then R.D. (the Farm Manager) said, 'If you are telling the truth, swear by the name of your God Mahavir', to which the agent made no reply. Then Dada came. The

agent's elder brother folded his hands and said, 'We are sorry. Please forget the incident and forgive us'. Then Dada advised all of us to go back.

R.D. Kamble (Farm Manager, 40): 'We three brothers shared three acres out of which two remained with us and one was with the Savkar. Starvation and sickness stalked the locality. As a school-boy, I had only a single set of clothes. I and my friends used to pool our resources to buy a cake of soap and share it to wash the clothes in the evening, dry them and put them on again the next morning'.

'I had a small scholarship from which I saved for household expenses'.

'Of the total 96 acres of our community, 84 lay with the Savkars'.

'I could not participate in school excursions to Bombay or Mysore. I used to cry within my mind. I used to wonder, shall I ever see Bombay in my life?'

'Now I have been places. I even visited Nagaland as an escort to the Naga students who stayed with us in Mhaisal. I go and talk to the officers in Mantralaya'.

'There was a time when I could not stand on my legs to say even a few words. I remember my participation in a school elocution competition - I was so nervous that I did not know what I spoke. Now I can confidently give speeches'.

'Now everyone has enough to eat. On one occasion, we paid our workers more than what other farmers paid'.

'The change started when Dada began to mix with us and share our tea, plantains, or milk. This had an impact even on the Jains. Now our

inferiority complex has vanished. Even the illiterates among us have developed a personality'.

Let R.D. recount the work that Vitthal boys did for the Mhaisal poor in the 1972-73 famine.

'Because of the Society, we remained unaffected by the famine. Otherwise, we would have had to migrate permanently. But the famine was a serious matter for the other poor farmers and we took the responsibility of looking after them. So we implemented the CASA scheme of food-for-work'.

'I worked in the Narwad area with 12-13 boys to help me. We helped the farmers till their four and a half thousand acres. Big farmers, whom we had decided to keep out, pressed us and offered us temptations. But we stood firm. It was our rule not to accept even tea from anyone. On one occasion, we returned the tea sent to us by a big farmer'.

R.D. continues: 'We are a changed people. We are now more conscious of health, of what we eat, of how we live. If there were no Society, we would have remained lumps of clay. Look at how the village respects us today. I am a Director of the *Shetkari Pat Pedhi* (Credit Society). I am a member of the Plot-Holders Committee of the Gram Panchayat. I am on the Education Committee and the Construction Committee of the Rayat Shikshan Sanstha. 'M.N.' (M.N. Kamble, to be met presently) is a Director of the Laxmi Bank. Sham Kamble is a member of the Gram Panchayat'.

The change in R.D. himself is no less remarkable. Just two years after the establishment of the Society, R.D. got an appointment order to join as a clerk in the Panchayat Samiti office in Khanapur. 'I went to Dada and showed it to him.

Dada said to me, 'If you people go, do I run your Society?' That settled the question for me and I tore the order there and then'.

'Did you regret the choice afterwards?' I asked. R.D. said, 'Never'.

'R.D., your family has a good 10 acres. You are a good farmer. Don't you sometimes feel tempted to fall out of the Society and make a larger income for yourself?'

'There are people in the village who have been trying to put precisely these ideas in our heads. They say, Rama, your land is a piece of gold. Why don't you ask it back? I ask them, 'Did it produce gold for me when it was with the Savkars?' For me, it is the Society and nothing else'.

But R.D. is most eloquent when he compares the Dalit situation in Mhaisal with that in other places he knows.

'Take Kanwad. There is a lift irrigation Society run by the Mahars. Their land is only 10-12 acres but they make a good profit by selling water to others. But there is no social consciousness, no improvement in the way of life. They earn well but spend too much on drink. A mere lift irrigation society is no good. There was a Dalit lift society in Ashta; it is now defunct. There was a similar society in Walunj, now it is defunct. Atpadi society, the same story. There is no alternative to co-operative farming'.

'Since there is no community feeling in Ashta, people would not help even neighbours. There are 600-700 families. Education has increased. But there is no unity. In the same locality, there are three separate Ambedkar Birthday celebrations held'.

'Take Ichalkaranji. The Mahars have 80 acres. The lift has stopped. The land is all covered by Congress grass (a nasty weed). There are two

factions. There is a lot of drinking and gambling. They have a big, theatre-like Samaj-Mandir (Community hall) but what we find there is people playing cards (gambling). Even the school teachers take part in gambling'.

M.N. Kamble (Panch, 40) is a primary school teacher and chairman of the Guru Govind Co-operative Housing Society: 'We didn't know how much land we had. My father died in my childhood. He was a Tamasha artiste. The 34 gunthas lay with the Savkar. We had a ramshackle house and a broken roof which leaked profusely during the rains. During the rainy season, daily food was a problem. Yet I kept up school. I was a diligent student always securing the second or third rank. From my scholarship of three years in the 8th, 9th and 10th, I had to pay off the debt of 450 rupees'.

'40 to 50 people in the locality used to drink. Fifty per cent ate carrion. Many picked up grains from cattle dung'.

'Now drinking is about 1 to 1.5 per cent. Young boys don't drink'.

'My cousin ran an illicit liquor still in his farm. Then he shifted it to our house. I looked after the sales. The police learnt about it and rounded us up. Owing to a clever lawyer, I was freed. That was my year of matriculation'.

'After my S.S.C., I became a teacher. Then I began to drink. I drank a lot for one year but then gave up. The Society had then started. I did my B.A. in 1972, B.Ed. in 1974 and M.A. (Marathi) in 1976'.

I asked M.N. about neo-Buddhism and what the Dalit Panthers say about Vitthal. M.N. replied: 'Those people want us to be Buddhists - they are not concerned whether we live or die'.

'Contrast our situation in Mhaisal with that of our brothers in other places. I teach School at Kanwad. The Mahars have a lift irrigation society there and make a good income. However, there is no *sanskar* (enlightened influence). I myself suggested to them, let us have at least a Balwadi. They opposed me'.

'Similar is the situation in Shiroti (Tal. Shirol, Dist. Kolhapur) and Hasur. There, at least until a couple of years ago, separate cups were kept for the Dalits, outside the house'.

Yashawant Krishna (Member, 50): 'We used to eat the flesh of dead animals. We used to take the fat out of a buffalo carcass and use it for the oil-lamp. Sometimes, we cooked daal (pulses) in the fat and ate it'.

Bhupal Dattu Shinge (Student, 16): 'I am in the 10th. My closest friend is Gaikwad - a Maratha. I eat in his house and he eats in mine. We also have a Jain friend'.

'You haven't experienced untouchability?' I asked him.

'Never. We make fun of it. I tell my friends, "Look, if you are going to say that you are not going to touch me, remember you will get a good beating"'.

Both the economic and social changes that the Mhaisal Dalits have undergone have been portrayed above, partly through statistical data and partly through personal narrations. In the next Chapter (6), we take up the residue of this subject of socio-economic gains.

SECTION 6 SOCIO-ECONOMIC GAINS IN MHAISAL - II

In this Chapter, we take up the remaining two parts of the account of socio-economic gains in Mhaisal begun in the previous Chapter (Chapter 5). They are: Section (4) - Conditions of Vitthal

Members in comparison with those of other villages where ESK work, in some form, is going on and Section (5) - a review and judgement, under the title 'Reflections'.

4. Vitthal Members and Dalits in Other Villages

The other villages which we use for comparison are: (1) Kasbe-Nandre, (which we shall call simply 'Nandre') Taluka Miraj, District Sangli, 22 kms. from Miraj or 32 kms. from Mhaisal, (2) Kavathe-Piran, Taluka Miraj, District Sangli, 22 kms. from Miraj, (3) Kothali, Taluka Shirol, District Kolhapur, 28 kms. from Miraj, (4) Kokale, Taluka Kavathe-Mahankal, District Sangli, 55 kms. from Miraj, (5) Arag, Taluka Miraj, District Sangli, 18 kms. from Miraj.

The purpose of this comparison is to judge more precisely the contribution of the Vitthal Society to the economic and social uplift of the Mahars in Mhaisal. For such a comparison, ideally, we should have villages similar to Mhaisal in all respects except for the existence of the co-operative farming society. But in the villages chosen by us, co-operative farming societies have been functioning, except in Arag, and such a comparison, therefore, could be faulted on methodological grounds. However, there are two things to be said in favour of the choice. One, the Societies in these villages are relatively recent. Nandre Society was registered in 1979. K. Piran Society was established in 1977, but it was taken over by ESK only in 1979. The Kothali Society was set up in 1983. Kokale Society has been doing very limited work for the last three years and was formally registered only in 1986. In Arag, there

is no Society as yet. Two, all these Societies have numerous problems (as we shall see later) and they cannot yet be said to have made much impact either on their members or on the surrounding situation.

In fact, the villages were *not* primarily chosen for purposes of comparison they are included in the study *because* ESK work is going on in them. But the material also came in handy for comparison purposes.

Apart from providing inter-village comparison, the material presented in this Section will also help understand the changing untouchability situation in the rural areas of South Maharashtra.

The same socio-economic schedule as used in Mhaisal was canvassed in other villages. The Mahar respondents contacted in each village are as given in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1. Number of Respondents Village-wise

Village (1)	No. of Respondents (2)
Mhaisal	90
Nandre	71
K. Piran	58
Kothali	67
Kokale	16
Arag	60
Total	362

Economic Conditions

Per family land of various categories is presented in Table No. 6.2.

Table 6.2. Per Family Land (ares = 1/100th hectare)

Type of Land (1)	Mhaisal (2)	Nandre (3)	K. Piran (4)	Kothali (5)	Kokale (6)	Arag (7)
1. Pooled in Society	40.00	27.08	19.71	19.68	340.28	00.00
2. Owned Outside Society	00.07	43.24	8.97	3.10	00.00	69.45
3. Leased in Outside	5.89	2.40	00.00	00.00	00.00	2.50
4. Total	45.96	72.72	28.68	22.78	340.28	71.95

Table 6.2 shows that in terms of land endowment, Kokale is the happiest with 3.40 ha. per family. However, the Kokale situation is dominated by one family with 17.20 ha. Kokale land is also mostly barren. Arag has slightly less than one ha. per family, but it produces little because of low and erratic rainfall. Thus, only Nandre can be taken to be in a better position compared to Mhaisal.

Assets

There is no point in comparing all the household assets in the villages. In Mhaisal, we have not been able to determine the land values of pieces of diverse categories of land belonging to the family. Further, norms of valuation of

houses as well as land (usually obtained from official sources) cannot be considered comparable. We, therefore, pick out only the values of animals and 'other' assets which include jewellery and financial assets in 1984-85. These are presented in Table 6.3.

Thus in respect of some items of assets, the relatively better position of Vitthal members is clearly seen.

Migration

An interesting picture emerges from the data on migration. Table 6.4 sets out the relevant information.

Table 6.3. Household Assets per Family (Rs.)

Assets (1)	Mhaisal (2)	Nandre (3)	K. Piran (4)	Kothali (5)	Kokale (6)	Arag (7)
1. Animals	4,246.66	2,035.00	2,083.33	2,916.66	1,250.00	1,385.59
2. Other	1,243.53	761.90	882.33	935.00	2,671.62	279.00
3. Total	5,490.19	2,796.90	2,965.66	3,851.66	3,921.62	1,664.59

Table 6.4. Migration

Migrants (1)	Mhaisal (2)	Nandre (3)	K. Piran (4)	Kothali (5)	Kokale (6)
1. Total Population in Resident Families	479	286	232	309	48
2. Migrants from above	36	48	62	34	7
3. Percentage of above	(7.51)	(16.78)	(26.72)	(11.00)	(14.58)

Table 6.4 shows that Mhaisal has the smallest proportion of migrants from the resident families (7.51 per cent). Aside from Kokale, where the number is very small and untypical, the village having the largest percentage of non-resident members of resident families is K. Piran.

Our information is incomplete in that we have no knowledge regarding *when* the migrant members left. Moreover, we cannot satisfactorily analyse the factors behind migration from our limited data. However, it is generally well known that among 'push' factors, economic conditions

are the most important and the better economic position of Vitthal members may have been a cause of low migration. However, education would also be an important factor and in the K. Piran case, it seems to have played a part as we shall see later.

Other indicators of Development

Other indicators of development show a mixed picture as set out in Table 6.5.

This Table leads to the following conclusions:

- 1) In literacy, Mhaisal ranks low; it excels only Arag, the very poor village.
- 2) Mhaisal has a better showing than all the other villages in respect of possession of cross-bred cows.
- 3) In respect of household articles suggesting improvements in standard of life, Mhaisal is not specially distinguishable from the other villages. Kokale, because of the small sample and the dominance of one rich family in that sample, is a special case; however, even if we ignore Kokale, the above observation would not have to be greatly modified. Perhaps the explanation is to be found in the number of people holding outside jobs - non-residents - especially in Nandre, K. Piran and Kothali.

Table 6.5. Some Indicators of Standard of Life

Indicators (1)	Mhaisal (2)	Nandre (3)	K. Piran (4)	Kothali (5)	Kokale (6)	Arag (7)
1. Percentage of Male Literates	67.59	85.57	82.43	75.00	75.00	62.69
2. Percentage of Female Literates	33.13	41.73	44.57	29.26	41.17	29.83
3. Total Literacy Percentage	52.31	62.55	62.42	53.28	59.45	46.40
4. Cross-bred Cows per Family	0.68	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.00	0.00
5. Buffalos per Family	1.00	0.88	0.84	1.12	0.57	0.51
6. Goats per Family	0.32	0.62	0.69	0.29	0.42	0.18
7. Percentage of Families having Stainless-steel Utensils	62.66	98.00	84.61	94.44	100.00	86.66
8. Percentage of Families having Radio/Transistor	49.33	48.00	33.33	44.44	71.42	8.33
9. Percentage of Families having Clock/Watch	56.00	60.00	43.58	46.29	57.14	13.33
10. Percentage of Families having Bicycle	41.33	42.00	28.20	40.74	42.85	20.00

Comparison of Social Conditions

Now we shall compare the replies to several

questions pertaining to the social situation of Mahars in various villages. The information is grouped in Table 6.6.

Table 6.6. Responses Concerning Social Situation of Mahars (percentage of 'Yes' Responses)

Questions (1)	Mhaisal (2)	Nandre (3)	K. Piran (4)	Kothali (5)	Kokale (6)	Arag (7)
1. Do you enter caste-Hindu houses?	92	73	88	70	100	45
2. Do you have tea with them?	93	47	81	44	100	41
3. Do you share their carpet?	83	40	59	19	81	34
4. Do you have tea in their own cups?	99	81	74	58	100	80
5. Are you invited to meals by them?	97	94	91	56	100	59
6. Do the caste-hindus visit your houses?	82	49	90	66	100	41
7. Do they have tea with you?	89	35	52	24	81	19
8. Do they have food in your houses?	74	6	17	8	72	12
9. Do you visit temples?	70	4	28	5	100	33
10. Do you have Devdasis?	8	0	0	0	0	15
11. Are you converted to Neo-Buddism?	0	31	0	2	0	5

Leave aside Kokale where the data looks doubtful if that is done, Mhaisal has not only the best showing among all villages but also *substantially* better showing than the other villages in almost every respect. The more critical questions are: No. 4 (Do you get tea in their *own* cups?), No. 7 (Do they have tea with you?) and No. 8 (Do they have food in your house?). The percentage of positive responses in Mhaisal is higher by a very wide margin than in other villages.

Question No. 9 (Do you visit temples?) shows a high percentage of positive responses (70) in Mhaisal but very low in Nandre and Kothali. In this context, it must be noted that both Nandre and Kothali show an influence of Neo-Buddism (Question 11) which other villages do not. In fact, the influence could be even larger than what the figures suggest because people have a tendency to suppress this fact for practical reasons. Even otherwise, Mahars sometimes can be indifferent to temples.

Question No. 10 is about Devdasis. Here only Arag (15 per cent) and Mhaisal (9 per cent) appear in a bad light, whereas there are no Devdasis in other villages. However, as said in the last Chapter, the custom of Devdasis is prevalent only in villages bordering on Karnataka and such villages are only Arag and Mhaisal. (The border is only 2 km. from Mhaisal.)

We may conclude that socially, Vitthal members have made significant advances compared to their compatriots in other villages.

5. Reflections

We presented data on economic conditions of Vitthal members, their social conditions as reflected in their responses as well as in the responses of Caste-Hindus in Mhaisal and change as perceived by the members themselves. We also presented a comparative picture of the life of

Mahars in several villages including Mhaisal. It is now time to distil the essence out of these diverse kinds of data and to form a judgement on the precise socio-economic contribution of the Vitthal Society.

The economic transformation of Vitthal members stands out significantly. The central point is the dramatic reduction - almost 'abolition' - of poverty. This comes out clearly from the oral testimonies of senior members. The latter show that the Mhaisal Mahars have come a long way from days of all-round misery and hunger, occasionally finding expression in the search for eatable grain in cattle dung or in eating carrion.

The same is true of social transformation. The vicious Devdasi system has been rooted out. Menial jobs have ceased. Drinking and gambling is minimal although some Caste-Hindus would doubt this; however, here I would go by the testimony of my investigator who spent successive nights in the locality and observed no more than 2 or 3 habitual drinkers; he also observed that those who drink now do not make a scene. Change from a life of abject dependence and mendicancy of yester-years to an existence of self-respect and dignity is clearly observed from the reminiscences of old members.

According to the members themselves, their acceptability by the larger society is at a high level. But when we contrast their perceptions with those of the Caste-Hindus, some differences become apparent. About entry into Caste-Hindu houses and temples, there is an agreement regarding substantial change. The same is true about sharing a common carpet. In respect of offering tea in *own* cups, there is an interesting difference. The members, without exception, aver that there is no discrimination, but Caste-Hindus themselves do confess it. Sixteen out of 95 Caste-Hindu respondents confess to reserving separate cups for Dalits. Another important point which comes out of their talks is the selectivity

they exercise in their relations with Dalits. The more educated or the more important among them will be treated more decently than others. Thirteen out of 95 have said so in so many words.

In this matter of integration with the larger society, the responses of Vitthal members may have been somewhat too enthusiastic. They have witnessed such a vast change within the space of a generation that they probably tend to ignore the few unpleasant aspects of the present situation. It must also be mentioned that the older-generation Mahars would themselves be cautious and circumspect regarding how they conduct themselves in Caste-Hindu households. Ingrained habits and perhaps a lurking fear that they might yet offend the sensibilities of at least some of the Caste-Hindus may prevent them from behaving in a totally uninhibited manner. Four Caste-Hindus, for example, stated that some Mahars themselves preferred to sit on the uncovered floor.

That in respect of free intercourse with Caste-Hindus, the Mhaisal Mahars have made significant progress is clear from the inter-village comparison also.

Thus there is no doubt about a significant social step forward in Mhaisal. But we have to raise a deeper question: How durable is the change?

In the first place, a very encouraging feature is that all the Caste-Hindus interviewed are prepared to dissociate untouchability from religion and all of them have shed the belief that the Dalits can never improve. Those are signs of enlightenment at a deeper level. At the same time, it must be noticed that there is a disturbing conservatism among women. All the 90 respondents to the relevant question admitted this fact. In personal interviews, many respondents told us that when they entertained their Dalit guests to tea in their outer room, they took care

not to mention this fact to their women. A question to elicit this information was not included in the Schedule but if it were there, I am sure, most would have answered in the same way. (Only one qualification seems necessary: the Mahila Mandal women said that they - as a group - were invited for *Halad-Kunku* ceremony by the Caste-Hindu Mahila Mandal in the town.)

To regard untouchability as a social custom rather than something ordained by religion is so basic a change as to be almost startling. So is the belief that the Dalits are not inherently inferior. The Mhaisal males have come thus far; only the women are lagging behind, which is understandable, considering their own low status in society and the lack of educational and enlightening influence on them.

Where any society adopts changes in its behaviour, such changes happen to be the result of complex processes. No society accepts change entirely because it has been intellectually convinced. We have seen the changes in the behaviour of Mhaisal residents towards the Vitthal members. Remarkable as they are, not entirely due to enlightenment having dawned upon them. A large part of the mental change can be traced to Mhaisal residents' respect for and also utility of Shri Dewal.

For, undoubtedly Dewal is held in exceptionally high regard and even affection by not merely the Dalits but also by the other Mhaisal residents. Much of the positive feeling for the Society, I suspect, emanates from a regard for Dewal rather than the significance of the experiment. Apart from his transparent sacrifice and service, not only to the poor, Dewal evokes kindly feelings in Mhaisal because of his obvious use in influencing Dalit opinion favourably for the majority faction in the town.

True, there are individual exceptions. I vividly recall Rajarambhau Shinde, a Maratha, a man past eighty but lively to the core. I could notice the open-hearted praise he showered on Vitthal and the kindly bantering tone with which he addressed M.N. (the school-teacher we have met in the previous Chapter) who accompanied me. While talking to Rajarambhau, I made a particular mention of the gherao episode staged by Mahar youth against the insurance agent, which had become the talk of the town. I mentioned this incident mock-disapprovingly in order to provoke Rajarambhau. But he said, 'And why not? How long shall they continue to bow down?'. When I asked him, provokingly again, whether it was proper for Dalits to violate hoary customs, he asked, pointing to M.N., 'Is his blood different from mine? Are they also not human beings?'

As a counterpoint to Rajarambhau, I must mention Shri Desai, past 70, an old matriculate, a man who had seen a lot of the world in supplying transport services to the military - but a diehard Vaishnav Brahmin. He said he strictly observed untouchability. He did not touch the Harijan workers working on his farm. He did not drink 'stored' water touched by Harijans but only 'flowing' water. (This expresses the traditional belief that flowing water is always pure and remains unsullied by anyone's touch.) Suspecting his adverse tone throughout the conversation, I finally asked him a straight question: 'Tell me, Desaisaheb, am I to understand that you totally disapprove of whatever Dewal is doing for the Dalits?' 'There you are!' said Desaisaheb pithily.

Mhaisal citizenry stands between the two extremes represented by Rajarambhau and Desai, but somewhat closer to Rajarambhau.

Rajarambhau, his brother and nephew are old R.S.S. connections. The nephew is even today an active worker. This seems to support my investigator's observation that people under RSS influence behave more progressively towards

Dalits. That may be true. But even among several Brahmins, who were mainly under RSS influence, I hardly noticed the warmth that I expected.

When I discussed my impressions with Dewal, he entirely agreed. He said, 'We concentrated on the Dalits. An effort simultaneously to enlighten the Caste-Hindus was necessary, but it remained neglected'. This may be part of the explanation. There are other explanations which flow from the relative isolation of Vitthal from the mainstream in recent years which will be commented on later. And yet the fact remains that there are no signs of a welcome with 'open arms' to a path-breaking social experiment.

There is a good deal of sense in what Dewal says. The Caste-Hindus must also be educated. But this also means that they are not introspective enough nor conscious enough of injustices heaped on the untouchables by Caste-Hindus for millennia. They would not do anything actively to redress the traditional wrongs, nor welcome, with all their heart, an experiment which tries to do this. The Mhaisal Society tolerates change, even internalises it, but perhaps only under pressure of circumstances. This is true of all rural society - perhaps all society in general. What the caste-Hindus in Mhaisal know is that compromises in changing circumstances are inevitable. There must be very few among their who genuinely welcome the transformation of Vitthal members.

Complaints

The Mhaisal residents have some complaints to make. One is that the Society functions in isolation. There is truth in this charge and we shall see the reason later. The residents have no good opinion of the young men. This also shall be considered in the context of the leadership problems. That the Mahars have become 'uppish' is an accusation occasionally heard. Apart from

the Gherao incident in the village, which took place in 1979, the Vitthal members do not seem to have done anything to hurt the Caste-Hindus. I found most senior members of Vitthal decent and accommodative; there is nothing abrasive in their manner. What they have earned is an independence and a new sense of self-respect to which the older generation in the town has been unaccustomed. Such reactions are probably the result of ingrained prejudices at the subconscious level. One trait of many Caste-Hindus, noticed in interviews, is significant. Many of them would like to appear 'generous' and 'modern'. If a Dalit entered their house and sat in the chair or on the carpet, they would not like it although they would not object; however, if the Dalit hesitated for a while or himself preferred the uncovered floor, they would most solicitously ask him to sit on the carpet or in the chair. The feeling that the Mahars are trying to keep to their *payari* (Marathi word for 'step' which in turn means the 'place in traditional hierarchy') is internally satisfying and elicits a charitable gesture.

Vitthal's Contribution

The Mahars have changed, economically and socially. The Mhaisal populace also has changed. But what is the exact contribution of the Vitthal Society to this change? In particular, would the social changes have come about even in the absence of the Vitthal Society as some Caste-Hindu residents suggest?

The question is difficult because like all such questions, it can never be settled in a rigorous way and no evidence which would clinch the issue on either side can ever be produced. However, it is still possible to form a reasonably well thought-out judgement and that is what we shall try to do.

First in regard to economic change. As we have seen in Section (1) of Chapter 5, the contribution of the Vitthal Society farm to the members' total

income is small. However, the Society is much larger than the farm considering its total activities. The milk-business (buffalos and cross-bred cows), the income from rearing goats, the major part of income earned from outside land - all in one way or another arise from the Society. If all these are included, somewhat less than half the total income of the members derives from Society sources.

This is the picture today. However, it is possible to say that in earlier days, the members' dependence on the Vitthal Society must have been larger. About 17 years ago, the Mahar population must have been at least 30 per cent less than what it is now. It is also possible that opportunities of work offered by outside sources in Mhaisal must have been limited then. Over the last few years, Mhaisal has made great strides in sugarcane and grape cultivation which was not the situation earlier. On the whole, therefore, although the Society seems to play a small role in the economic life of members today, there are reasons to believe that in the early days, its role was more important.

There is one more consideration in the context of economic change. Supposing there were no Vitthal, what would have happened? It is possible to conjecture.

Mhaisal has prospered a good deal in recent decades. It is a good-sized town now of over 12,000. (The 1981 Census count was 10,963.) Of its total cultivated area of 3,530 ha., 3,240 or 92 per cent is under irrigation. There are 8 co-operative lift irrigation schemes and 4 private ones on the Krishna river. In addition, there are several wells. Mhaisal's land produces sugarcane, jowar, wheat and many other crops. Grapes are gaining in importance with 60 gardens today (as compared to 16 around 1980) [Deshpande V.D., 1983, p. 26].

Mhaisal is only 10 kms., From the Miraj railway junction and lies on the roadway to Bijapur in Karnataka. The Mhaisal railway station is only 3 km., away. There is a post office, telephone service and weekly market on Mondays. Drinking water is supplied through pipes. There are branches of 6 commercial banks and 2 urban co-operative banks. There are two multi-purpose co-operatives and five co-operative milk collection centres. There are 6 dispensaries and one Government hospital. There is a primary school with 603 boys and 622 girls, 1 boys' high school, 1 co-ed high school and 1 English medium high school. Junior and Senior college facilities are close at hand in Miraj and Sangli. Literacy is 50 per cent. Secondary activity is meagre with a couple of establishments for bullock-cart manufacture and two workshops for gobar gas tanks and fibre-glass tanks. But otherwise there is every sign of prosperity. After the establishment of the Sangli Shetkari Sahakari Sakhar Karkhana (Co-operative Sugar Factory) in 1957, production of sugarcane leapt up and land values rose. They got a further spurt when even relatively inferior land was found suitable for grape cultivation after 1970. A specific instance is that of our investigator's own good quality 18 acres which around 1955 fetched a rent of only Rs. 350.00, from which the assessment of Rs. 100.00 had to be paid. Today it produces 50 to 60 tons of *adsali* sugarcane *per acre*. Barren lands which were valued at Rs. 100 to Rs. 200 per acre then can now sell for Rs. 40 or 50 thousand. Residential space today sells at Rs. 10 to 35 per square foot.

Would it then be possible to conclude from this that the untouchables would also have benefitted from this general boom.

Understanding and experience of the development process has warned us against simplistic deductions of this kind. One truth has emerged and that is that great prosperity can co-exist with poverty at the lower end. Before

Vitthal came, the Mahar lands were already lying with Savkars; the Mahars had already become dispossessed. They could have, of course, got employment in agriculture and in this sense, they would have certainly been better off than before even in the absence of Vitthal.

But two things would have been missing. One is the ownership of assets in the form of co-operative's land and augmentation of the resources on its basis *plus* the self-employment offered by milch animals. They would have been reduced to the position of pure landless labourers. Secondly, they could not have intelligently utilised the opportunities that Mhaisal's growing prosperity offered in the absence of a certain mental make-up which the Society shaped in various ways. For example, it is quite likely that they would have spent most of their income on drinking and gambling. But this latter point is connected with the Project's social contribution to which we now turn.

Vitthal's Social Contribution

The second question to which we address ourselves now is: Would social development of Dalits have come about in the absence of Vitthal and if so, how much?

Mhaisal must certainly be credited with some progressive stirrings long before the Vitthal Society. The credit for this goes to the Shinde family.

One Kedarrao came as an adopted son in the late 19th century into the Mhaisal Shinde family, which was *saramjamdar* (a kind of fief-holder) under the then Sangli Princely State, which was, in turn, under the tutelage of the Kolhapur Princely State. Kedarrao was a cousin of the famous Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, Prince of Kolhapur, who was an enlightened and progressive ruler. Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj did much to eradicate untouchability in his State and

to educate the untouchables. It is natural that these influences should percolate into the Shinde family of Mhaisal. Kedarrao's daughter-in-law (wife of his son Ganpatrao) Shantadevi, now past eighty, did her matriculation in 1918. Daughter of a Customs Officer, she was the first ever girl student to be admitted to the Desai High School in Malwan. In spite of her parentage, she, as a school-girl, participated in patriotic demonstrations. She told me that from 1924, they employed untouchables as household servants. A Matang woman has been a cook in their house for many years. (The woman brought us tea as we talked.)

Smt. Shantadevi is widow of Ganpatrao, youngest of Kedarrao's three sons. One of Shantadevi's sons, Mohanrao, has been a Congress (I) M.L.A. from the Miraj constituency for the last many years. The eldest son, Vijaysing or Abasaheb, who died in 1974, was one of the founders of the Sangli Sugar Factory and a Director of the Land Mortgage Bank. The second son, Jaisingrao, is a medical practitioner and was Chairman of the Mhaisal Gram Panchayat until some years ago. The entire Ganpatrao clan lives together in a large, imposing mansion, reminiscent of feudal times. The family is highly educated and obviously wealthy. The late Abasaheb's daughter, Rajashri is M.Com., M.Ed., and is working on her Ph.D. Thesis. She is also the Principal of the English Medium School. One of Abasaheb's sons is an M.Tech and doing his Ph.D.

Mohanrao's Grand father's (Kedarrao's) eldest son was Dattaji and Dattaji's son Shankarrao was a graduate of the Fergusson College, Pune, and the captain of the college cricket eleven. His widow, Ambikaraje, a daughter of the Dabhades of Talegaon, is a product of St. Helena's High School (Pune), and the N.S. Wadia College (Pune) and speaks fluent English. She is equally progressive in her outlook. Untouchables were employed in Ambikaraje's

household too. Ambika's son Kedarrao (II) was the Chairman of the Gram Panchayat. Ambikaraje was also the Chair-person of the panchayat some years ago. In their childhood, Kedarrao and his brothers were brought up by Mallu Dadu Kamble, a Mahar, whom we have heard saying that he worked for a savkar family for 27 years.

The Shinde family was the *de facto* ruler of Mhaisal, its *saranjam* village. Even under the new dispensation, it has 'ruled' Mhaisal and even wider areas in one way or another. The Shinde households are a peculiar mixture of old Maratha aristocratic traditions and modernity. On the one hand, they have eradicated untouchability from their houses; on the other, every visitor to Mohanrao's house was seen by me to bow down to touch the feet of any Shinde and address him (or her) as 'Sarkar'. Nonetheless, it is true that enlightenment entered Mhaisal, *via* the Shindes much before Vitthal and the fact that so influential a family adopted modern ways must have had its impact on the environment.

Developments in more recent times have been recounted by V.D. Deshpande. '... in the last 20 years, these practices (connected with untouchability) are on the wane. The biggest push in this respect was given by Shri Y.B. Chavan in 1963 when he held a meeting in the untouchable *basti*. After the meeting, there was a communal dinner joined by all castes. A similar programme was held a year later when the untouchables treated the rest of the villagers to dinner and tea. A few months later, a get-together of Jains and untouchables was arranged and the untouchables were to store drinking water in Jain houses. The untouchables, however, did not dare to visit the houses of Jains and hence the proposed get-together did not take place' [Deshpande V.D., 1983, p. 20].

There have been other developments not specific to Mhaisal. Observance of untouchability in public has been banned by law and is now a

cognizable offence. In school, there is no discrimination now. Simultaneously, Dalits have become conscious of their rights; they cannot be taken for granted. A barber or a restaurant-keeper refusing proper service to a Dalit is liable to be punished. Signs of this change are to be seen in every village that we have studied. The inter-village comparison which we made earlier, though favourable to Mhaisal, also shows that there is a significant change in social practices almost everywhere. Even Jains, a most orthodox community, are loosening their rigid stance. In Nandre, I was told by Appasaheb Patil, a wealthy and influential Jain farmer, a very interesting story of a Chambhar (leather-worker). 'The Chambhar used to come to the Mahaveer temple and listen to religious discourses from outside. This inculcated in him a respect and love for the Jain sect. Then he began to read the religious literature. Now he gives discourses in the *temple hall*'.

Thus, changes are afoot everywhere and Mhaisal, with its special background of anti-touchability efforts, would have had an edge over other villages even in the absence of Vitthal. Then, what is Vitthal's special contribution?

Two things: one, there is much greater intermingling of Dalits and others in Mhaisal. Signs of this we have noted earlier. The most significant thing here is the exchange of tea and food on a much wider scale than elsewhere. Thus, the distinction of Mhaisal compared to other villages is that in addition to reducing untouchability on the social level it has also done a great deal in reducing it on the personal, household level.

But, what do we exactly mean by eradication of untouchability? There is, it must be remembered, more to the concept of untouchability than the mere absence of physical 'touch'. It is a whole syndrome of religious, social, psychological, economic and moral

symptoms of a basically pathological social condition. Untouchability means complete degradation, a sub-human life in every respect; its eradication means lifting a whole community out of the deep quagmire of centuries. It is in this context that Vitthal's contribution has to be understood. This contribution is varied and we shall discuss it serially now.

1) Internal Integration

The Vitthal Society is a co-operative farming society which involves pooling and allocation of the labour of its members. This means *daily* interaction and its importance for the community must be judged against the earlier background of economically unconnected and scattered households each going its independent way. The feeling of closeness, again, was not confined to the working hours. Every evening, there was a *Vardi* meeting. *Vardi* means 'message' or 'information'. In the special context of Vitthal, it means a meeting to review the day's work and plan the next day's. Other problems can also come up for discussion as is natural when people come together on any pretext. Although *Vardi* is primarily meant for foremen, supervisors and other personnel connected with agricultural management, any member can attend it and participate in the discussion. Further occasions for interaction are provided indirectly through physical space made available by the Society. Vitthal has a large building, the ground floor of which is used as a godown and the upper floor is used in part as an office and in part as a meeting hall. True, the Mahars did have (in Mhaisal as elsewhere) a *takky*, the traditional meeting place, but the Society's hall is more spacious, cleaner, better-lighted and generally has a better atmosphere. Therefore, the Bhajan Mandal practices there almost every evening. The Mahila Mandal meets there. The Tarun Mandal meets there. All kinds of meetings, including occasional classes for students are held there. Apart from any specific occasion, members do trickle into the

hall, some for a glance at newspapers which the Society receives, some for small talk or argument and some even for a quiet afternoon nap. An overnight guest is also housed in the hall. Thus, the space provides many occasions for socialising among members.

2) External Integration

Because of its resources, both economic and organisational, Vitthal is in a position to help the other poor and needy in the area. The outstanding example of this 'obliging power' (Dewal's favourite phrase) is the programme of work and relief organised in 1973 and described earlier in Chapter 3. We have also noted the contribution of this spirit in a different form - that of taking over the lands of needy villagers.

Vitthal can render other kinds of help also to non-members as well as to members. Its milkvan is available to others in emergencies. There are five milk collection co-operatives and one private dairy in Mhaisal and some of these are friendly with Vitthal. This results in mutual help - for example, when Vasant Society's tempo is out of order, Vitthal may lift its cans and *vice versa*. Vitthal's milk collection centre has many non-Dalit members. Vitthal also has a tractor which it can lend to others. We have already noted the holding of an eye-camp and running of a T.B. Clinic for a short while. Vitthal's farm, moreover, provides upto 25 per cent of its employment to non-members, most of whom are Caste-Hindus.

If the Society wishes, it can do much more than what it is doing to establish bonds of friendship with the outside society. (This aspect will be commented upon at a later stage.) But there is no doubt that it has done a good deal and this has become possible because of its resources.

3) Development of Education and Culture

The activities connected with formal

education have been recounted earlier; to recapitulate - balwadis, students coaching classes, liaison with the I.I.T., Bombay, and the Dnyana Prabodhini, Pune, the connection with the Adarsha Bal Vidya Mandir, Miraj. We must now mention the non-formal and informal aspects of educational and cultural activities.

Many eminent men and women, among them writers, artists, social workers, politicians, Government officers and foreigners, visit the Society. Such visits are so frequent that hardly a week passes without somebody or the other coming. When visitors come the members have an opportunity to get exposed to wider educational and cultural influences and the world outside Mhaisal in general. This works in a subtler way too. The feeling that 'we' are doing something that is found unique by outsiders can make the members feel proud of themselves and strengthen their resolve to work together to preserve the 'good name' of the Society.

On a more mundane plane, the Farm of the Society is a great school of agriculture and management of co-operative agriculture. Especially in the context of the Mahars in Maharashtra, acquisition of technical agricultural skills makes very important sense. (This point has been made earlier in Chapter 2 in the context of Dewal's vision.) The idea is to develop their self-respect through useful work and also raise their status in the eyes of the larger society.

What Vitthal members practise is not merely agriculture but *modern* agriculture which is technology-intensive. They produce high-yielding crops, high-value crops like cotton, jute, sugarcane or turmeric and highly delicate crop like grape. The operations connected with grape-growing are so varied and so continuous and the care that it needs is so constant that it is a very exacting crop in terms of attention and

technical knowledge. Many Vitthal members, including women in their families, are now adept in this complicated enterprise.

Vitthal must be credited with producing 'farmers' as well. R.D. is the Farm Manager of the Co-operative Farm and an expert in all the departments, especially grapes. He regularly attends the seminars on grape cultivation arranged by the Grape Growers' Association. But there are entrepreneur farmers like Kallappa Dadu and Yallappa Devappa. As said earlier, the Society has taken on lease one acre and 9 gunthas belonging to one Ghabre of Narwad against advance rent payment of Rs. 14,000, for 14 years. The Society has an arrangement with Kallappa under which Kallappa has paid the advance rent from his own resources. Last year, he produced sugarcane and made a clean profit of Rs. 7,000/-.

Kallappa's own money came from the careful milk business of which he was the pioneer among Mhaisal Mahars way back in 1962 when he was the first hesitant buyer of a buffalo. (This part of the story has appeared in the previous Chapter.) From 1979, he went in for cross-bred cows. We may only state here that one of his Holsteins yielded 36.5 litres in 24 hours and bagged the first prize in the district competition. Kallappa as a farmer and dairyman, is totally a product of the Mhaisal project. The other product is Yallappa Devappa who also had leased in some land. He too is a good milk producer. Now he wants to buy land. He is the same man (met in the previous Chapter) who said he would not even buy another shirt because he wants to save up for land purchase. Kallappa Dadu says there are two agricultural 'experts' (his own word) among the Vitthal Society members. The first, of course, is he; the second, Yallappa.

The same goes for management skills too. Management of a co-operative farming society is a much more difficult job than management of any other co-operative. Particularly important

here is the tricky job of labour management, which other co-operatives are free from. Supervisors must be appointed, work teams must be got together, allocation of tasks must be done. Supervision of work, recording of work-hours, weekly payment of wages, reconciling differences, coaxing and cajoling member-labourers - all this is in the days' work.

Then there are other technical matters connected with keeping records of all kinds. The Vitthal Society has a small office-room containing a large shelf stacked with numerous files scrupulously preserved since its inception by one Secretary, R.K., for all the 17 years. The books are neatly written. The researcher may find it difficult to get at the precise data he wants and the precise form in which he would like to have it; It is also true that there is room for improvement in the method; but there is no doubt that the Society is in possession of almost everything that it needs for its everyday functioning. And the records that a co-operative farming society needs to keep are far larger in number than in other co-operatives.

There is, of course, all the training in democratic management that is informally given through general meetings and meetings of the Panch Committee. On two occasions I attended the latter and was impressed by the heated discussions as well as the resolve on the part of the Panches to get on with the task in hand irrespective of differences.

These two skills - those of farming and those of management of a complex enterprise - are important from the point of view of the objective of the Society. The acquisition of these two removes the rooted inferiority complex of the members on the one hand and improves their public image on the other.

The most important cultural activity of Vitthal is the Bhajan Mandal. The Mahars have been traditionally music-lovers (as well as *tamasha* artistes). *Maharache Gane* is an old Marathi saying which means the Mahar's distinction is in singing. The Bhajan Mandal, it seems, existed even prior to the Society and was trained at the hands of a Brahmin *haridas*. It got a boost after Vitthal's establishment. In 1979, the Mandal received the fifth prize in the Sangli district competition of singing devotional songs. The Mandal gets invitations for performances in homes of Mhaisal Caste-Hindu residents and in most of the temples, excluding the Jain temples. The Mandal members told me that they are offered tea wherever they perform and their cups are washed by Caste-Hindus. According to the Mandal members, their group has been a potent force in the reduction of untouchability.

4) Welfare Activities

For the normal marriages of girls in the Devdasi families, Vitthal advanced loans to parents and thus helped eradicate the custom. Now it has become a practice with the Society to advance money for all kinds of marriages and for purposes of medical care. There is no separate health service run by Vitthal but occasional health camps are held as mentioned earlier. The 'Inner Wheel' (Ladies' Wing) of the Rotary Club, Miraj, rendered expert medical advice especially on women's and children's health to the Vijay Colony and then to Vitthal, once a week, for some weeks last year.

5) Vitthal as a Lobby

The Vitthal Society is the expression of the organised strength of Mhaisal Mahars and this fact naturally has its repercussions on village affairs.

Mhaisal has two factions within the ruling Congress (I) party. One faction is led by Shri. Mohanrao Shinde, scion of an aristocratic family (described earlier on in this Chapter) and for the last several years, Member of the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly, elected from the Miraj Constituency. The other faction is headed by Shri. Balasaheb Patil, the present Police Patil. Mohanrao is a Maratha and Balasaheb, a Jain. However, the factions in Mhaisal do not follow clear-cut caste lines. The sprawling Shinde family is divided against itself. Kedarrao Shinde, son of a cousin of Mohanrao and, in fact, the heir to the senior branch of the Shinde clan, belongs to the opposite camp. So also Arun Shinde, another nephew of Mohanrao. Dewal's personal sympathies are with the Patil faction and so are Vitthal members'. Vitthal's small vote-bank can sometimes play an important role in village politics.

In the Gram Panchayat elections held a couple of years ago, the Patil faction got elected to power by capturing 13 out of 15 seats. In this victory, the help of Vitthal and the prestige of Dewal was considered important.

There are serious allegations against Mohanrao Shinde about land-grabbing and thwarting the development efforts of Gram Panchayat, now chaired by his nephew and political rival, Kedarrao. In a relay-fast staged to protest against Mohanrao's alleged doings last year, the Vitthal members participated.

With a sympathetic faction in power at the Gram Panchayat, some of Vitthal's problems become easy of solution. (In contrast to this benefit, there is also a cost to the extent that Mohanrao supposedly controls the higher administration.)

On the whole, Vitthal has made the Mahars a force, however small, to be reckoned with. Although Mahars form a small fraction of

Mhaisal population, it must be noted that in Mhaisal no other community is as well organised as the Mahars. (This is also the reason why occasionally others resent Vitthal members' show of strength, even when it is on the side of justice, as in the R.K. - insurance man episode.)

6) Ideological Influence

We have to remind ourselves at this stage that Vitthal was never conceived as a Project merely to improve the economic conditions of the Mahars in Mhaisal. Its ideal has been larger - to bear the torch of a new Movement. As V.D. Deshpande has shown, the Vitthal Society in almost every one of its annual reports has appealed to members to keep the larger perspective in view. We quote a few statements from the extracts given by Deshpande [Deshpande V.D., 1983, Pp. 54-56].

'This (the establishment of the co-operative farm) is the first step ... The Caste-Hindus have also helped us. ... We must proceed in such a manner as to avoid conflicts.' (Report 1969-70)

'... We must forge unity with other disadvantaged and oppressed sections of society.' (*ibid.*)

'Co-operative farming is, for us, only a means; our end is to ensure equality in all respects with the rest of the society.' (Report 1971-72)

'Every member should subject himself to a critical self-examination and overcome his shortcomings. Since it is our aim to help the other down-trodden ... it is our duty to share with them whatever we have.' (Report 1972-73)

'We should not remain complacent with our achievement. The work should not remain confined to Mhaisal. It must spread. Similar projects must be implemented in other villages

... For this purpose, there is a demand for workers from Mhaisal. We have accepted this responsibility.' (Report 1979-80)

These excerpts show that a wider ideal is kept before the members; they are asked to be spearhead of a movement. The methodology of the movement, with its stress on conciliation rather than conflict is suggested. The unity of all underdogs is emphasised. The spirit of sacrifice is invoked.

It is necessary to see what Vitthal has achieved in this direction. There are two questions to be answered. Has Vitthal created men and women who have imbibed the spirit behind the experiment? Has Vitthal produced workers to spread the message?

My talks with members convinced me that the wider meaning of the project is understood by many. R.K. in his interview (*vide* previous Chapter) said that at least 20 people know what they are doing. I am sure this is a fairly accurate number. R.K. also said that women, in fact, are more conscious of the importance of the work and I should think that he is right considering the liberating influence that they have undergone under Vitthal. (However, I could not verify the women's attitudes.) That the potential message of Vitthal must transcend the boundaries of Mhaisal is very well understood not only by the generation, now in their late 'thirties or early forties', of R.K., R.D., M.N. and Mallu Dadu, but also by senior but uneducated members like Devappa Sitaram, Aba Piru, Yallappa Devappa, Yallappa Dadu and several others.

As to the second question, the answer is as follows: A few years ago (probably in 1976), a group of young people organised by Gramayan held a camp in Mhaisal and with the help of Vitthal workers surveyed some 15 villages for prospecting possible sites of development. These

were the beginnings of early stirrings in villages like Kothali and Kini where Vitthal-like societies came up later.

In the early days of Kavathe-Piran Society, a young man trained in Vitthal was appointed as Secretary but it is alleged that he misbehaved and had to be recalled. One young man called Shelar, not exactly a product of Vitthal but one who served as a social worker with it, was sent to the Decco-Spin Trust at Ichalkaranji where a similar experiment was mooted. However, Decco-Spin did not take up the proposed project and Shelar serves the Trust in its other welfare activities. A very important example of a genuine Vitthal product shouldering responsibility elsewhere is that of Balasaheb Dhanawade who is for the last two years working with the Navachaitanya Co-operative Farming Society in Nimgaon-Mhalungi (Pune District) initiated by Gramayan on the Mhaisal pattern. Balasaheb is training his Nimgaon brothers in agriculture. During the first year, he stayed alone in Nimgaon; now he has shifted there with his family.

Whenever Mhaisal workers or members visit friends and relations in other villages, the talk naturally turns to Vitthal and its achievements. On such occasions, there are discussions and a quiet propaganda goes on. In addition, more formal visits are undertaken to some sites but this is now rather rare. During my six-month stay, it was only once that four Mhaisal workers visited the new possible site at Malangaon and addressed meetings. They ought to take a greater part in outside work but there is a whole set of problems connected with this which will be discussed in the context of leadership problems.

7) Women' Uplift

Separate attention must be given to the change among women. Not many years ago, the women were bound down to the kitchen, child-bearing and rearing and agricultural wage work. Widespread drinking among men meant frequent wife-beatings. Child marriages were common just as was the Devdasi custom. Desertions used

to be frequent. It was considered immodest for a woman to appear when men were around. Hardly any girls went to school.

The establishment of the Mahila Mandal began to change all this. For the first time, women came out of the house to meet each other and discuss their problems. We have earlier mentioned an incident when men and women together made a trip to Tasgaon at the time of the first grape plantation. This was their first ever experience of a mixed outing. These have been the beginnings of a new life. The almost total eradication of addiction has meant much domestic peace and a happier life for them. Most girls now go to school. There are two Balwadis under Vitthal and almost all children of kindergarten age attend them. In a couple of years, we shall see the first woman graduate from this community. Now women have a place of honour in any function of Vitthal. Some of them have been trained to sing welcome songs at gatherings.

Some Mahila Mandal members have attended women's camps in places like Pune and elsewhere. Under the Continuing Education Programme of the S.N.D.T. University, Pune, there is frequent organising of camps, training camps and the like. Awareness of health, cleanliness, child-care have percolated into the women's life. Most eligible women have undergone tubectomy. The Vitthal Mahila Mandal gets invitations from the Caste-Hindu Mahila Mandals in the town for various functions. Women can now talk to strangers and some of them can make short speeches.

They are obviously conscious of the new life and the new liberating influence brought about by Vitthal. They have also been comparing their life with that of the women-folk of their community in other villages. Shevantabai said, 'They have none of the freedom and respect that we have here in Mhaisal.'

Young marriageable boys in member families or their parents do not generally insist on dowry now. However, it is not so in other places. So Vitthal families have problems in marrying off

their daughters. It has become increasingly difficult to find educated, and decent bridegrooms for Mhaisal girls, particularly because of drinking and the general social backwardness in other villages. They do not like it there, some of them have come back and they constitute a problem - a paradoxically sorry result of Mhaisal Dalits' development. In turn, this result has made the Vitthal workers conscious of the need to spread their message in other villages.

We have described above the various social roles played by Vitthal and the earlier milk business project. In sum, internal integration of the community, its integration with the outside world, raising of the educational and cultural level of its members, giving a power-base to Mahars, however small, igniting the spark of ideological passion among them, raising the material level and the level of consciousness among women have been the contributions of the Society. This amounts to a transformation on all levels, economic, educational, psychological, moral, social, political and ideological. The last is the most important although its potential is yet to be fully exploited. Altogether, new men and women have been produced in Mhaisal, some specimens of whom we have already heard in the previous Chapter. This is Vitthal's contribution to 'eradication' of untouchability; it is difficult to imagine that the change we have described would have come about in its absence. The physical touch aspect is, of course, not to be ignored and in this direction, too, significant achievements can be credited to Vitthal, as shown earlier. But other aspects are deeper and Vitthal's contribution has to be judged against what it has done to tackle them.

SECTION 7 VITTHAL TODAY AND TOMORROW

In Chapter 4 we discussed the efficiency of Vitthal's economic base - its co-operative farm. Now we look at the internal strength of Vitthal,

both from the material and moral points of view to see whether it can face the challenges of the future.

1. Financial Aspects

A) Donations

Part of Vitthal's performance has to be attributed to aid received from outside.

Until end of June 1985, Vitthal received total donations worth Rs. 4,33,330.75. Their rough purpose-wise breakdown is given in Table 7.1.

**Table 7.1. Purpose-wise Donations to Vitthal
Until End of June 1985**

Sr. No. (1)	Purpose (2)	Donations (3)	Percentage to Total (4)
1.	Release of Lands	17,923.00	4.14
2.	Agriculture	3,47,673.52	80.23
3.	Housing	5,000.00	1.15
4.	Welfare and Education	39,570.23	9.14
5.	Office Building	15,614.00	3.60
6.	Miscellaneous	7,550.00	1.74
Total		4,33,330.75	100.00

Thus, about 80 per cent of the total grants received are for agricultural purpose.

The breakdown of aid received for agricultural purposes is presented below in Table 7.2.

Table 7.2. Aid Received by Vitthal for Agriculture

Item (1)	Donations (2)
Agricultural Production	3,000.00
Irrigation	1,05,673.52
Grape Garden	2,39,000.00
Total	3,47,673.52

We have seen earlier (in Chapter 4) that the total fixed capital is about Rs. 6,00,000/-. Even if we exclude the ambiguous item of 'agricultural

come down to 0.80 in 1984-85. Thus most of the indicators point to the financial soundness of Vitthal.

2. New Programmes

There is an ambitious scheme of housing for Vitthal members already mentioned in Chapter 3. The success of the scheme depends on Vitthal's economic strength in the future. Therefore, it is necessary to note the highlights of the scheme.

There are 200 members of the Guru Govind Housing Society registered in 1975. For these members, 100 twin-houses (with a common wall) will be built. The built-up area of a single house will be 514 sq.ft., and the cost is estimated to be Rs. 29,500/-. Of these Rs. 18,000/- will be obtained as a loan from the Maharashtra Co-operative Housing Finance Corporation Limited. The rest of the money (Rs. 11,500/-) will be contributed by the member in cash, material or labour. Subsidy worth Rs. 1,000/- per single house has been sanctioned by the Social Welfare Department. (In addition, a gohar gas plant will be attached to each house and its cost would be Rs. 3,860/-. For the gohar gas plant, the gram panchayat will give a subsidy of Rs. 500/-, the sugar factory of Rs. 1,000/- and the Panchayat Samiti Rs. 1,200/-. About Rs. 1,000/- will have to be contributed by the member. If he has to borrow the money, he will be able to repay the loan by selling the slurry).

The Housing Finance Corporation's loan of Rs. 18,000/- per member will be available at an interest rate of 8.25 per cent and will be repayable in 20 annual instalments.

How will the members pay off the loan? Deducting the subsidy, the loan liability will be Rupees 17,000/-. On this, the interest at the end of the first year would be Rs. 1,402.50. The instalment of the principal to be repaid will be Rs. 850/-. Thus, Rs. 2,252.50 will have to be found

by the member (or Rs. 187/- per month). The scheme will be initially completed only for 117 members; so Rs. 2,63,542.50 will be the combined liability of 117 members at the end of the first year. As repayments proceed, interest payments will go down in future.

How will members get these Rs. 2,63,542.50 to pay off their dues at the end of the first year? The explanation is given as follows: Fifty per cent of the profits of Vitthal's grape garden will be diverted to 'rent' from out of which the members will pay their dues.

Next year, the total area under grape will be 14 acres. On this Vitthal must make a net income of over Rs. 5.00 lakh so that 50 per cent of it or Rs. 2.50 lakh can be distributed as rent. This means a net income of about Rs. 35,000/- per acre will have to be produced. The per acre cost of production of grapes is about Rs. 30,000/-. In order to earn a net income of Rs. 35,000/- it must produce a gross value of Rs. 65,000/-. If we assume the price per kg., at Rs. 6.50 (as it was in 1984-85), per acre yield will have to be 10 tonnes.

This is not an impossible yield considering what an average grower can produce. But taking into account Vitthal's performance until now, this seems a tall order. (As we saw in Chapter 6, Vitthal's yield has never exceeded 7 tonnes and the 1984-85 yield was only 4.6 tonnes.)

Of course, the loan need not be paid off on the basis of grape production alone. This needs to be explained.

In 1984-85, the United Western Bank Limited, Satara, through its Miraj Branch, extended a 5-year loan of Rs. 4.00 lakh for the expansion of the grape garden and a new well. The rate of interest is 12.50 per cent. It has sanctioned another loan of Rupees 9.30 lakh for replacement of the old pipeline and its extension to the Mal (the plot near the railway station). This latter loan carries

10 per cent rate of interest and is repayable in 9 years (with a grace period of 1 year) starting from the 2nd year.

The economics worked out by the Bank is available for the second loan. It projects a cropping intensity of 170 instead of the present 150 and a gross surplus of 13,80,600 in place of the present 99,400. The net surplus is foreseen at Rs. 12,95,350/- instead of the present 88,650/- and the incremental income at (Rs 12,95,350 less 88,650) Rs. 12,06,700/-. Total loan amount is Rs. 8.78 lakh deducting the margin money. Equated annual instalment would be Rs. 1.64 lakh. This deducted from the net income leaves the Society with more than Rs. 11 lakh as surplus.

The Bank's projections appear too optimistic. Weather risks, especially for grape, do not seem to have been allowed for. The projections assume yields of grape, sugarcane and jowar, etc., at much higher levels than achieved by Vitthal. Presumably, the other loan of Rs. 4.0 lakh will also have to be paid from this net income. However, even if the net income reaches only half the figure projected by the United Western Bank, Vitthal should have no difficulty in supporting the housing project.

And yet, in the light of past performance, it must be said that Vitthal has assumed a great responsibility in its two new ventures - the Housing Project and the new loans. The problem of its efficiency becomes serious in this context.

3. Member Loyalty

How stable is Vitthal, psychologically, that is, from the point of view of the commitment of Vitthal members?

We asked the Mhaisal caste-Hindu residents the following questions regarding the Society:

- 1) Is the Society's working satisfactory?

- 2) Are there differences among members?
- 3) What do you think will happen if the leader (meaning 'Dada', Dewal) withdraws?

The first question elicited a 'yes' response from the overwhelming majority. But the other more specific questions drew much less favourable responses. To the second question, 58 replied that there are differences among members while only 26 replied 'no'. To the third question, the replies are extremely pessimistic. Only 5 say in an unqualified manner that the Society will run smoothly after Dada. One of them volunteered the additional observation that Dada has trained a proper leadership. But a large majority give either a qualified 'yes' or a straight 'no'. Most have the anxiety that a continued functioning will be difficult. A few hinted that the process of disintegration has already started. A couple of respondents foresee immediate break-up. Thus, Mhaisal residents, are, on the whole, not very hopeful about the future of the Society.

Contrast with these the responses to some important question addressed to Vitthal members:

- 1) Has the Society given you protection?
- 2) Has your respectability increased because of the Society?
- 3) Is Dada's work consistent with Dr. Ambedkar's teaching?
- 4) Do you want to withdraw your land from the Society?

To the first question, 81 said, 'yes' and 8 said 'no'. All the 86 respondents affirmed that their respectability had increased because of the Society. Thus, there is no doubt that most members have a sense of gratitude for what Vitthal has done for them.

production' (Rs. 3,000/-) from the above Table, it is obvious that more than half its value has come from donations.

Let us look at the sources of the donations:

Table 7.3. Source-wise Donations to Vitthal

Indigenous (1)	Foreign		Total Foreign (4)	Total (5)
	C.A.A. (2)	Other (3)		
1,65,090.50 (38.10%)	2,35,770.00 (54.40%)	32,470.25 (7.60%)	2,68,240.25 (62%)	4,33,330.75 (100%)

Out of Rs. 4,33,330.75, indigenous sources contributed Rs. 1,65,090.50 only or about 38 per cent and the rest were contributed by foreign sources. The share of C.A.A. alone is 54.40 per cent of the total.

It must be pointed out that among 'other' sources shown under 'foreign' are also foreigners of Indian origin. Out of Rs. 32,470.25 contributed by 'other' foreign sources, Rs. 20,070.02 come from organisations of Indians abroad.

We may, therefore, reclassify the above information into 'Indian' and 'foreign'. Here 'Indian' includes 'Indigenous' + 'Indians abroad'.

Table 7.4. Indian and Foreign Donations

Indigenous (1)	Indian		Foreign (4)	Total (5)
	Indians Abroad (2)	Sub-Total (3)		
1,65,090.50 (38.10%)	20,070.02 (4.63%)	1,85,160.52 (42.73%)	2,48,170.23 (57.27%)	4,33,330.75 (100.00%)

Thus 42.73 per cent of the contribution received by Vitthal may be considered to be of 'Indian' origin.

These calculations of aid reveal two things:

- 1) Vitthal's progress is not entirely due to its own effort; about half of it owes to free gifts received.
- 2) Of the donations received, somewhat less than 60 per cent came from foreign sources. To this extent, the Mhaisal residents' criticism is justified.

In so far as donations in general are concerned, the following may be said. An experiment of the type of Vitthal which is an effort to bring up totally destitute and dehumanised sections of society need not be castigated for receiving assistance, especially in the early stages. Upto a point, help received from outside also acts as an encouragement to the beneficiaries to do better. From the point of view of the 'giver', it is a token of his sensitivity to a social injustice. However, 'grants' (as distinct from loans) should not be relied on excessively in any development project. This issue we shall take up for further consideration in the Chapter on ESK.

More to be worried about is the 'foreign' element in grants. This point will also be addressed in the ESK Chapter.

B) Financial Indicators

We give below a few indicators of the financial strength of Vitthal.

From 1969-71 to 1984-85, Vitthal's Reserve Funds have gone up from Rs. 145/- to Rs. 82,802/- and other funds from Rs. 29,800/- to Rs. 4,76,794/-. Share capital has increased over the same period from Rs. 12,140/- to Rs. 15,530/-. Value of the fixed assets has gone up from Rs. 68,173/- to Rs. 4,07,149/-. In 1984-85, total assets (physical and financial) stood at Rs. 14,45,703/- and total liabilities at Rs. 11,08,883/-. The debt equity ratio which stood at 6.02 in 1969-71 has

The third question has a certain background. Dr. Ambedkar is almost a God to most untouchables, especially Mahars, and Vitthal members are no exception. One way of showing disapproval of the Society is to indicate that its objectives are contrary to what Dr. Ambedkar would have taught. It is remarkable that all the 86 respondents in this case said that there is no inconsistency.

To the 4th question about the desire to withdraw from the Society, there are 18 'yes' answers and 71 'no' answers. Thus, 1/5th our sample want to go out. This number is certainly large enough to disquieten but not so large as to threaten immediate disaster.

A heartening development is that a few months ago, a new agreement for 15 years was signed between the members and the Society. (The original lease agreement was for 20 years terminable on 31.12.1988. Unless a new agreement was signed, obtaining term loans from Banks would have become difficult. Therefore, the new agreement has already been signed). Most members have signed the new agreement except for 3 dissidents.

On the whole, there is not at present much evidence to justify the dark forebodings of Mhaisal residents.

Moreover, not all who desire to go out would actually do so when the crunch comes. There have been a few cases in which the dissenters who threatened to withdraw were asked to do so immediately - but they have not acted on their threat.

We interviewed 12 discontented members. Most of them seem to have some kind of personal grievance or other. Three of them who worked in responsible positions earlier, had, according to Vitthal leaders, committed serious offences and they had to be removed from those positions.

They are naturally bitter. A lady member complains that she was not considered for the cow loan and that she was not financially helped during illness. Another 4 accuse the leaders of not having helped them in times of need such as a daughter's marriage. Some accuse the four important workers of the Society of corruption and nepotism. Whether well-founded or ill-founded, such discontent is not of such serious proportions as to lead the Society to the brink.

The owners of very small pieces among the dissenters know what awaits them outside if they withdraw. And there are not many large holders in Vitthal. There are only 6 having more than 3 acres (Table 5.2). Two of them are thoroughly committed - one is the present Chairman and the other is the Farm Manager, easily two of the best specimens of Vitthal's products. The only important threat is from a lady, Kamala Koyna, who had more than 10 acres (and a large family), a former Devdasi, who cannot easily opt out because of a legal complication about her land. (There is a relation who claims a share.) Even this lady knows that for supply of water, she has to depend on the Society. (I was a witness to her quarrel with the leaders. On the one hand, she, along with her sons and a daughter, was vociferously demanding back her land and on the other, asking for an assurance that water would be supplied to her.) It is also reported that she is being instigated by the opponents.

There is at least one disgruntled member who has a long list of complaints and yet would not think of leaving.

The older generation, particularly the founding members, are a lot deeply committed and quite naturally because they owe a great deal to the Society in every way. The Society was the real turning point in their life, a new and glorious page in their history. The middle-aged men also know what it was to live before the Society came. The younger generation is somewhat problematic

and for understandable reasons. They do not know the travails through which the elders had to pass. What will happen to them will depend on the strength of the Vitthal culture which is sought to be passed on to them through leadership camps and such other programmes.

As Kamala Koyna's example shows, the investments of Vitthal and particularly, its irrigation network, are a great physical integrating factor and the discontented members will think several times before seceding.

One area of tension is the rents paid to members. Those who have relatively larger holdings and particularly those among them who do not contribute much by way of labour would be more or less solely interested in rents and there has been a demand from a section for a rise in rents. But the rents, as we have seen, are not fixed payments; they are a residual, and higher rents cannot be given unless there are larger surpluses. Nevertheless, there is a dissatisfaction in the minds of some about 'low' rents, especially when they look around and find that the level of rents in Mhaisal is much higher. We had a set of questions on this issue.

The first question was: Do you want a rise in rents? The number of respondents to this question was only 45 and 38 of them (84.44 per cent) wanted a rise. Although on the one hand, this means that a large majority was in favour of a rise in rent, on the other, it also shows that almost half the respondents were not interested in the question. Even those who wanted a rise were not prepared to reduce wage-rates if that was the alternative. Of the 37 who responded, only one did not mind if wages had to go down for a rise in rent to be accomplished. To the question whether wages should be raised, the respondents rose to 58 but only five of them welcomed a raise. This, on the face of it, might appear surprising, but a little consideration will show that wages just cannot outpace the general village wage level and

the people know it. A rise in wages would certainly mean a fall in rents (other things being equal) and when asked whether this would be tolerated, again the number dropped to 35 and none of them was in a mood to welcome this result.

This should mean that the demand for a rise in rent will continue to be made but will not be a serious cause for division among the members. At the moment, a rise in rents depends on increasing profits and a 'demand' does not really amount to much, except, in an implicit way, for an increase in efficiency and productivity. If the demand takes the form of a plea for treatment of rent as a fixed charge, then the restlessness will take a different complexion.

Certainly the old spirit of the members, particularly evinced in the first 4 or 5 years, has waned. In a way, this is natural because no institution can maintain its passion at white heat for all time. All human movements, as Max Weber pointed out, pass from a stage of 'charisma' to a stage of 'routinisation'. This has happened in Vitthal and this is hardly surprising. Yet, Vitthal is not today, from the point of view of member-loyalty, in a 'state of crisis'. That it will survive for at least another term of 20 years seems a safe bet.

4. Vitthal and The Mainstream

The supreme objective of Vitthal is 'integration' with the larger society. Under 'socio-economic gains' (Chapter 5 and 6), we have recounted Vitthal's achievements in this area and credited it with some remarkable gains. But there are signs now that Vitthal's stress on this aspect is diminishing in recent years. We must find out how and why. Let us again start from what Mhaisal residents say:

Some of their comments are as follows:

'They don't help the other untouchables.'
 'The Society keeps itself aloof.'
 'The Society has become an island.'
 'They do not call us for any functions.'
 'I wanted to go and attend the lecture by Sudhir Phadke (the renowned singer). But I was not invited.' (A retired Headmaster).
 'I have heard of the Society from young boys coming to my shop. They say it is a big Society. But I don't know much. I see people coming and going in cars, that's all.' (a barber).
 'Come, give and go - that is their attitude.'

In respect of the first criticism, it must be admitted that Vitthal has not taken any specific steps to help other untouchables. However, there is another side to the picture. An important section of untouchables in Mhaisal is that of the Matangs (Mangs) but is politically under the dominance of the opposite camp. In fact, a Matang himself said, 'They don't help us because we would not go to them for help. We belong to the opposite party.'

Complaints about the relative isolation of the Society make sense. After the 1973 programme of relief organised by Vitthal for small farmers in the area, no significant step has been taken to consciously integrate the caste-Hindus with the ex-untouchables. The continuation of this programme in a small way in the form of helping the poor or needy by taking over their lands is significant but from the point of view of impact, its weight is small; and as we have seen it has cost Vitthal a good deal.

Even if no dramatic measure of 1978 kind is adopted, there are many ways in which Vitthal can increase its contacts with the outside society. Many eminent outsiders come to visit Vitthal. On such occasions, a little prior planning to involve Mhaisal residents is not difficult. For special functions, only the usual friends and well-wishers of the Society are invited but the common man is left out. In the main square in front the Gram Panchayat office, posters or boards used to be put

up announcing programmes in the town but residents complain that Vitthal has more or less ceased to advertise its programmes in this manner. I myself experienced this coolness in the context of the Leadership Training Programme. A number of well-known speakers from outside were invited and it would have been a good thing to invite Mhaisal citizens to listen to these speakers along with the trainees. In spite of my constant requests in this behalf, nothing was done. Adoption of simple devices like this at a very low cost, can make the Mhaisal citizens feel closeness to the Society and make them take interest in what it is doing.

But there is still a question at a deeper level. By 'integration', we do not mean integration with the caste-Hindu community in Mhaisal alone. Vitthal has a philosophy, a point of view regarding the larger question of social integration with the Hindu society in general. In order that this be achieved, a continuous interaction with elements in the larger society is essential. In this context, the 'isolation' and 'island'-like character which Vitthal evinces becomes a cause for concern.

One important reason for this development is the virtual stoppage of Vitthal's efforts to tap *Indian* sources of help.

From the beginning in 1969 to 1976, Vitthal depended on purely Indian sources of help. The first requirement was funds to get the lands released from Savkars and all the money came from indigenous sources. Vitthal's 'donation register' tells us an interesting story of small sums, ranging from Rs. 10/- to 1,000/- being contributed by a large number of enlightened citizens, public spirited people, social workers, academicians, journalists and so on. The total contributed may not have been large but it makes a far greater sense in terms of the basic approach of the Society.

From 1976 onwards, foreign help has come in a large way and the situation has changed. (We have noted this earlier in Section 1 of this Chapter.) What is worse is that indigenous flow has almost dried up. This means Vitthal can do without indigenous help. But this has two kinds of consequences. One, whatever Vitthal achieves will tend to be ascribed to easy availability of foreign funds and no credit will be given to even its genuine achievements. Two, Vitthal's interaction with the outside *Indian* environment comes to an end and this frustrates its basic objectives.

What is true of Vitthal is more true of the ESK itself. This point we shall consider in greater detail in a separate Chapter addressed to ESK.

5. *Vitthal: Alternatives**

The central question of Vitthal is its low (and perhaps declining) efficiency. In the context of new programmes undertaken (discussed earlier in Section 1), this question assumes special importance.

Seen purely from the economic point of view, employment of non-member or hired labour is not at all an unwelcome development. Considering the low level of work ethic among members, it is almost certain that it is costlier than outside labour and substitution of more disciplined outside labour for inefficient member labour would improve matters. Looking to general conditions in Mhaisal, in terms of employment opportunities outside, the proportion of member labour in the total is likely to fall; if that happens nobody need feel worried.

Only the character of the Society will undergo a change. In technical language, it will be a 'co-operatively owned enterprise' rather than a 'producer co-operative' and in the method of production, it will be 'capitalistic', i.e., running on the basis of hired labour. It will be similar to a 'co-operative' sugar factory which is owned by producers of sugarcane, suppliers of an input, but which employ hired (non-member) labour for production purposes. In the case of Vitthal, it will be an enterprise where the land input is supplied by the members, but production is carried out by non-member hired labour.

The feeling of working together for a common cause and the daily interaction of members which have been the special features of Vitthal as a producers' co-operative will, of course, vanish if the above kind of transformation takes place. This is probably why the non-participation of members is resented.

Vitthal should, however, consider the other side. Its economic strength will improve and its resources to support social, educational and cultural activities will get augmented. In any case, the question of improvement in efficiency brooks no delay and its cost in social terms cannot be escaped.

As we have seen earlier (in Chapter 4) that members do attend the farm but work indifferently is the problem. But if efficiency requires non-member labour, Vitthal must not only tolerate the transformation, but must also encourage it. One way to do this is to create employment opportunities for members in enterprises subsidiary to agriculture so that their dependence on labour on the farm progressively diminishes.

Can efficiency be improved within the present

* As a backdrop to this discussion, see Appendix 4, which examines in detail the problems of incentive, management and allocation in co-operative farming, and Appendix 5, which elaborates the special problems of co-operative farming enterprise by small farmers.

set-up?

One alternative commonly thought of in most co-operative farming enterprises is the institution of rational incentive systems. Such systems have been adopted in many co-operative farming enterprises, but the results have not been commensurate with the efforts. And yet, there is a point in adopting them. In the Vitthal Society, a new experiment is being considered. As already noted, the productivity of the grape garden is not very high and another 13 acres are going to pose a tremendous problem. In order to meet this challenge and improve the productivity, it has been decided to adopt a system of incentives. The idea is to hand over plots of the grape garden to teams of workers. For example, an acre under grape may be assigned to a group of five or six workers. The team leader will have choice of his co-workers. The Society will undertake to provide general supervision, advise and supply of timely inputs. If the group's productivity exceeds some pre-determined norm, the excess will be shared between the team and the Society. For example, 50 per cent of the excess produced may go to the Society and 50 per cent to the team (for internal distribution). The Society is not yet thinking in terms of punishment for poor performance. For example, it has no plan to fine the team in case its productive performance falls short of the norm. The management feels that if they fall behind, they will lose their prestige in the eyes of others and that would be a sufficient punishment for them.

Let us consider the kinds of problems that are likely to arise. The first problem is in regard to the fixation of the norms. Since all the lands are not of the same quality, different norms will have to be adopted for different plots and this may not be an easy matter. However carefully the fixation of norms is done, it can always give rise to complaints. Second, in the case of shortfall, the members are likely to accuse the management, saying that they did not get proper advice or that

they did not get adequate inputs or that they did not get them at proper time. The buck will be sought to be passed from the teams to the Management. Thirdly, in the case of above-normal performance, the distribution of the bonus among the members of the team might create dissensions. Fourthly, in the case of below normal performance, mere loss of prestige may not be an effective guarantee of careful and hard work. However, it would be wrong to make *a priori* judgements; one must wait for the results. Maybe even with all these difficulties, there might yet be a net gain.

One could perhaps suggest another alternative which is more radical but more likely to be fruitful. There are among members of the Vitthal Society, a few very capable farmers. The Farm of the Society can be divided into five or six pieces of convenient size. These farmers can be given these lands for individual cultivation on a rental basis. Or, better still, the plots could be allotted to highest bidders from among members. The Society will retain the functions of general supervision, input supply, provision of equipment and marketing. More important from the point of view of the utilisation of existing investments and equipment, it will have to lay down also the crop pattern at least in the case of the major crops. The cultivators would either pay a fixed cash rent to the Society or a share of produce, or some combination of the two. Of the two fixed cash rent is preferable, shares would create hassles.

The merit of the system would be that individual incentive will operate vigorously and labour discipline will also improve because the cultivator will be managing a smaller number of workers and supervising them better. He can also afford to be harsh to them in case of need.

What are the drawbacks? In the first place, this amounts to substitution of family or capitalistic farming system within the framework of a loose kind of co-operative. This will mean that the

interaction of members as members will suffer. This is the principal drawback. Will the introduction of the system cause unemployment? The answer is, probably 'yes', to a certain extent, considering that lethargy would vanish and the number of workers required per acre would go down. At the same time, if the cultivator explores new directions of development which left to himself he would certainly do, there is a possibility of increasing the employment potential. Even if there emerges less requirement of labour per acre in the present circumstances, the effect will not be felt because of the planned new 13 acres under grape which has a high per acre labour intensity. In fact, considering the plans of expansion of the grape garden, this appears to be the right moment for introduction of the new scheme.

Acceptability on the part of the members may also be a problem, but perhaps not a very serious one, considering the prospective all-round improvement in productivity. One important question that has to be faced is regarding the composition of the work-force. Will the cultivator be allowed to choose his workers from the open labour market or will he be compelled to give preference to the members of the Society? It is very difficult to answer this question. If the cultivator is not allowed to exercise free choice in respect of his labour, he may feel handicapped. On the other hand, if the members do not get the right to work on the farm, they can feel disgruntled. This would be the most serious problem to be tackled. Capable and hardworking members will, of course, always have a chance to be selected even from the open market. The question would be pertinent only in the case of those who are not so good. But the new system might in fact encourage them to perform better and thus qualify them for selection.

On the positive side, the resources of the Society will increase because of the increase in the productivity. Thus, the various functions,

agricultural and non-agricultural, which the Society performs now, will be looked after even better.

On the whole, therefore, the risks seem to be worth taking. The problem of co-operative farming has already become serious and reform cannot be delayed any further. The ESK needs to consider this problem as an urgent one and take remedial action as early as possible. We have presented an outline of a possible restructuring; details will have to be worked out.

SECTION 8 SOCIETIES OUTSIDE MHAISAL

In this Chapter, we consider the state of co-operative farming societies in ESK villages outside Mhaisal.

1. Nandre

The 'Dr. Babasaheb Co-operative Joint Farming Society' was registered on 21.6.1979. It has 21.66 ha. of land in a compact block. The membership is 74. All the members are Mahars.

All the land of Mahars is not with the Society. The total land with Mahars lies in five different plots in various places and the plot in the Society's possession is only one of them. About 10 ha. of this plot were in the hands of 18 Savkars. The total liability was about Rs. 1.00 lakh but the Savkars settled for Rs. 78,000/- as compensation.

The Society came into existence as a result of the initiative taken by Dudhappa Dhale, a Police constable in Bombay, originally from Nandre, who read about the Mhaisal experiment in a newspaper and decided to launch a similar experiment in his native village after retirement.

Since its inception the Babasaheb Society has had a chequered and sad history. The first Chairman was Dudhappa. Soon complaints began to arise about his alleged mismanagement and a

rebel group formed, resulting in a new Panch Committee and a new Chairman taking over from 22.11.1983.

The year 1986-87 is the 7th year of the Society and the 6th Secretary has taken charge recently. The first secretary is alleged to have misused the funds of the Mahila Mandal. He also borrowed Rs. 7,000/- from Dewal for his sister's marriage and has not returned the money yet. The second and the third secretaries are said to have repeated the same story. One who succeeded the third was reliable but a love affair brought him into trouble and he had to leave. The fifth was in his position the longest time, a sprightly young man, SSC, and from the Mahar locality itself. But once again internal conflicts have led to his resignation and from July 1986, an ESK fulltimer has been carrying on the secretarial function.

The problems of the Society are numerous. A five-year term loan of Rs. 1,35,000/- at 8.75 per cent interest was borrowed from the Sangli District Central Co-operative Bank for the construction of a lift on the Verala river and a pipeline 8,000 ft. long. But the actual cost went upto Rs. 1,80,000/-. This loan could not be repaid in full and in June 1986, the Society was in arrears to the tune of Rs. 80,000/-. Because of these overdue, crop loans from the D.C.C. Bank did not become available and so the ESK had to come to help by way of zero interest loans to the tune of over Rs. 1,70,000/- which are also in arrears.

The Verala water irrigates only 3.24 ha. The water is brackish resulting in a very low sugarcane yield. From a nearby well, water is bought for additional four ha. An alternative is to bring water from a sugar factory lift on the Krishna river, but a new pipeline will cost about Rs. 50,000/-. Again it is not certain that the sugar factory lift will oblige because the Chairman of the Society, who is also a Gram Panchayat member, belongs to the opposite faction. The land lies very close to the village and has no protection from marauding

animals and people. Only last year, there was a fire in the sugarcane field which damaged crop on 1.20 ha. To put a fence around the land will cost about Rs. 25,000/-.

The general cultural level of the members appears to be very low. There is a lot of drinking and gambling. Many of the Panchas are reported to be drink-addicts and gamblers. (People playing cards in the shade of a tree near the Society office is not an unusual sight.) Sometime back, two Panchas had a physical fight in the office room. The atmosphere is rife with mutual suspicion and acrimonious quarrels. The old dethroned Chairman, Dudhappa, is evidently bitter about the present Panch Committee which again is not of one mind. Dudhappa has serious charges to make against the office-bearers and the office-bearers in turn allege that Dudhappa is sowing deliberate dissention among Panchas and members. He is even accused of running a gambling den.

Among the members, there is one more bone of contention. Not everyone's land was with Savkars nor was everyone's liability in proportion to his holding. This means the aid received to pay off the debts benefitted the members differentially. However, all are paid rent at the same rates. There is bad blood among members because of this discrimination.

The Chairman is an honest and upright man but being a full-time employee of the Kirloskar Factory, he commutes daily to Kirloskarwadi and returns home late. He has hardly any time to give to the Society. I personally found the erstwhile Secretary reliable and did not trust the charges against him. He is probably a little abrasive and indiscreet. He also developed a sour relationship with the Chairman in regard to a personal matter. His contention was that some Panchas tried to pressurise him into recording their attendance falsely. In any case, he had to leave.

Owing to this internecine warfare, the Farm is anything but a picture of efficiency. Weeds have grown in the sugarcane field. In June 1986, 17.40 ha. lay without any preparatory tillage for want of funds and virtual unconcern on the part of members.

There is a provision for Government subsidy at 50 per cent of the cost of lift irrigation to 'backward classes'. For several years, in spite of continuous efforts, it has not been sanctioned. If these 90 thousand rupees become available, the Society will certainly begin to come out of the red.

2. *Kavathe-Piran*

The Kavathe-Piran Mahars allege that they were cheated by local leaders who organised a lift irrigation society, avowedly for 'backward classes', but finally eliminated them by keeping membership fees at a high level. The lift irrigation society thus began to be run for the advantage of caste-Hindus only.

Then the Mahars began to think of their own lift irrigation co-operative. They were helped by Shri. Arun Chavan, a former resident of Kavathe-Piran. Shri. Chavan, a former professor of English, has been the head of a voluntary agency called the Verala Irrigation and Development Project. When Chavan sought the advice of Dewal, he recommended co-operative farming rather than co-operative irrigation. The 'Navajeevan Co-operative Joint Farming Society, Limited' was registered on 6.12.1977. The membership is 70 and land 19.43 ha.

Part of the land was with Savkars and the total liability was about Rs. 42,000/-. Arun Chavan obtained grants from various sources to pay off the creditors and release the lands.

The society has now a lift on the Varna river whose level continuously fluctuates.

The Society has been dogged by troubles all these years. In 1981, a few members accused the Panch Committee of misappropriating Rs. 55,000/-. When quarrels arose, Chavan and the first Chairman withdrew from the Society. The rebels sought the intervention of Dewal and a new Panch Committee was formed.

Discontent began to seethe again in 1984-85. The leader of the earlier rebel group himself began to advocate dismantling of the farming society and substitution of a lift co-operative in its place. The working of the Society had also been poor all these years and many members were in a mood to listen to him.

It is suspected that the principal agitator, who actually lives in Bombay, wants to buy land in the village and this will be easy once the society breaks up. An ideological colour is being sought to be given to the fight. The dissenters claim that the society and the entire Mhaisal movement is trying to keep the Dalits tied to land and impeding their educational progress; that it is an RSS plot to keep the Dalits under the thumb of Brahmins; that it is a negation of Dr. Ambedkar's teachings, etc. (The agitator's younger brother sought a special meeting with me in Bombay to explain this stand to me. For the last few months, he is back in Kavathe-Piran busily canvassing his ideas there and other ESK villages.)

Matters came to a head in June 1986 when a General Meeting was called and accusations made against the Chairman and some of the Panchas. Some of these accusations plainly seemed to stick! Dewal was specially invited for this meeting and he chaired it. The verbal consensus of the meeting seemed to be in favour of a break-up although it was obvious that those with small holding and in favour of the continuation of the Society did not dare to oppose. Dewal brought it to the notice of the meeting that ESK liabilities to the tune of Rs. 1,20,000/- had

first to be paid before the Society was wound up. However, he had no objection to a lift society and he would, in fact, help them in the new endeavour.

The rebels, it seems, had even earlier applied to the Co-operative Department to institute a special audit. The auditor had submitted his report in March 1986. The latest news is that the Co-operative Department has appointed an administrator to take charge of the affairs of the Society.

3. Kothali

The 'Gautam Co-operative Joint Farming Society Limited' was registered on 1.11.1981. It has 74 members and 16.20 ha. of land belonging to two communities - Mahar and Matang. It was, for ESK, an unusual experiment in that for the first time, it tried to bring two traditionally hostile communities together. But the project has come to a sorry pass.

The background in which the Society was formed is important. Kothali's agriculture is 80 per cent irrigated and it produces large quantities of sugarcane used by the Panchaganga Co-operative Sugar Factory in Kolhapur district. Around 1979-80, tussle arose between the landlords and agricultural labourers on the question of wages and working hours. The labourers consisted of Mahars, Mangs and Dhangars and their leadership was taken by Sonappa Kamble, a Mahar, now vice-chairman of the Gautam Society. There were demonstrations in which the women also participated and there was also a strike of sorts. The landlords succeeded in separating the Dhangars (a non-untouchable caste) from the fighting workmen and declared a boycott on Dalits, i.e., the Mahars and Mangs. All services were stopped to them - no flour-mill, no barbers, no provisions. At this stage, the Mahar and Mang leaders came to Dewal and sought his help.

Dewal, using his influence with the Government authorities, brought the social boycott to an end. Then for providing work, he persuaded the authorities to start the EGS works. Having done this, he began to inquire into their deeper problems and found the same story - lands in the hands of Savkars, low wages, poverty, drinking, gambling, etc. He told them of Mhaisal and suggested that they adopt the pattern.

The land was with 36 Savkars with a total liability of Rs. 1,20,000/-. The C.A.A. (Community Aid Abroad) advanced the money through ESK and the lands were retrieved.

This time, while paying off the debts and recovering the lands, the ESK followed a sensible approach by debiting the amounts to the loan accounts of the members. Each family's loan was to be recovered in 20 annual instalments and was to be adjusted against their rents. The loan carried no interest. When recovered from members, the loan amount was to be the property of the Society. This arrangement, on the one hand, builds the financial strength of the Society, and on the other, avoids, discrimination among members (as in the Nandre case) with differential incidence of debt-burden.

The Savkars gave a quick response to Dewal and released the lands. This was another example of his personal magic. One of the biggest landlords, a Jain, himself took the lead in getting together the Savkars and persuading them to agree to release the lands.

Out of 74 members, 69 are Mahars and 5 are Mangs. The total land of Mahars pooled in the Society is only 10.94 ha. as against 5.26 ha. held by 5 Mang families. There are two separate blocks of land at a distance of about 1 km. from one another. The Mahar land - 'Mharki' - was in the command of a lift under the management of

Panchaganga Sugar Factory and the lift was to provide water to the new Society. The Mang land has 3 old dilapidated wells, almost without water.

In the first year, the Society planted sugarcane on 7.29 ha. of Mharki. After a few waterings, the factory lift refused water on the pretext of shortage with the result that the sugarcane yield suffered disastrously. The 7.29 ha. produced a tonnage of 200, or about 30 tonnes per hectare when it should produced have at least 100. The Society came into trouble. Because of the unreliable supply of water, Gautam ceased its connection with the factory lift and invested about Rs. 25,000/- in deepening the well on the Mang land, desilting it and putting up an electric pump. But the well can supply water to only 1.30 ha. of sugarcane. The Society's economics went haywire.

Gautam then began to think of its own lift irrigation scheme but since the Mharki land was already in the command of the factory lift, it had to obtain a 'No-objection Certificate' which the lift authorities refused to issue.

The Mang land is not in the command of any existing lift and so a plan was prepared to have a lift to irrigate the Mang land and sell surplus water to neighbouring farmers. The designs and estimates were prepared by a friendly group in the Walchand Engineering College, Sangli, and the cost was worked out at about Rs. 1,60,000/-. The Society has already obtained permission of the Irrigation Department for using Krishna water and also permission to instal a 40 HP electric motor.

However, as these plans were being thought out, trouble began to arise from the Mang side of the members. The Society's economic performance had been very poor for obvious reasons and discontent could easily arise. But there are other complicating factors:

- 1) Whatever is produced now is being produced on the (original) Mang plot and the Mangs have a grievance that what *their* land produced they have to share with Mahars whose land does not produce anything.
- 2) The Mangs first raised a cry against the C.A.A. donation being treated as loan to members: 'The money has come from Australia and why should we be burdened with a debt?' In course of time, this demand was found attractive by some Mahar members also. They feel that if the Society is wound up, they will be rid of the debt-burden.

The real point behind the quarrel is this. Of the total Savkari loan, the Mangs had a disproportionate share. The dues of their 5.26 ha. were about Rs. 70,000/- compared to about Rs. 50,000/- on the 10.94 ha. of Mahars' land. Mangs will benefit substantially if these dues, now transferred to the members, are written off.

The principal instigator, the largest holder among the Mangs is alleged to have a personal interest also. The well dug up and repaired at the cost of Rs. 25,000/- is in his *own* piece. If the Society breaks up, he has a double advantage - he gets his land free from encumbrance and gets it back with the well in working condition.

Then there are other complaints also. There are the usual charges of corruption and mismanagement against Panchas, who are mostly Mahars because of their majority. It is also alleged that the lift scheme is costly and that supply of water to Mharki land will salinate it further. (Already a portion has been salinated and probably there is some truth in this complaint.)

In October 1985, the dissidents began organised action. On 8.10.1985, complaints were made to ESK signed by 46 members. This showed that the agitation was no more confined to the Mangs. On December 11, 1985, a report was

published in a taluka newspaper that complaints were filed against the management with the appropriate authorities. The report also reproduced some of the allegations mentioned above. Another report appeared in the same paper on 13.1.1986 saying that since the complainants had not received a response from the authorities, they had decided to wait for a fortnight and then start a protest fast in front of the Mamledar office.

Finally, in the second week of June 1986, the rebels told the Mamledar that they would consider the Society as non-existent and sow their lands individually. The Mamledar asked them to seek the permission of the Deputy Registrar. It was given and they sowed their fields. The Panch Committee then made a representation and according to a recent report, the Society is now under the charge of an administrator appointed by the Co-operative Department.

On the part of Panch Committee also there have been a few lapses. The expenses on the well, Rupees 25,000/-, have also been treated as a loan to the original owner, the Mang leader and the most active troublemaker. This was said to be done on the advice of the Auditor. The reason given was that if and when the member wanted to get out, he would have to pay for improvements on his land and since at that time, the 'burden' on him would be too large, it is better to start to recover it now by deducting loan instalments from rent due to him. This was a patently wrong thing to do and it was totally unnecessary. Whenever a member resigns, he is not necessarily given *his* original piece; that depends on whether the withdrawal of the piece does or does not affect the efficient working of the Society. Secondly, if his own piece is handed back to the member he has to pay the price of improvements. In fact, he knows it and has signed an agreement to that effect. The bye-laws are very clear on these points. Therefore, the action suggested by the Auditor was uncalled for. It is possible that the

disgruntled leader may have felt hurt because of this. (I suggested that the error should be rectified.)

As soon as the Society was formed, it was essential for the Society to see that appropriate changes were made in the village land records. The Society's name should have been put under 'other rights' on the 7/12 form pertaining to each individual's plot. The Secretary was asked to do it but he procrastinated. In the result, when the dissenters approached the Mamledar and told him about their resolve to sow their plots individually, the Mamledar looked up the papers and told them they could very well do so because they have their land in ownership and 'other rights' do not mention any lease or cultivation rights. (Only, he was careful to ask them to obtain the permission of the Co-operative Department.)

This is the tale of the Gautam Society. It is suspected that behind the happenings depicted above, there are deeper manoeuvrings by vested interests associated with the sugar factory. To starve the nascent Society of water and ruin its first sugarcane crop and then to deny it an NOC for a separate lift is considered to be part of a larger plan. The recent disturbances are also perhaps partly inspired by these interests. These vested interests have allegedly already swallowed up Dalit lands in the neighbourhood and they are waiting for the break-up of the Society so that they could swallow some more.

The Gautam Society has been all along supported financially by C.A.A. in the beginning and then by ESK, through, of course, CAA funds. There was the initial grant of Rs. 1,20,000/- for paying off the Savkars. (The C.A.A. has also sanctioned Rs. 1,60,000/- for the lift which money is with the ESK.) Then there are other sums advanced as crop loans at nil rate of interest. In