

A REPORT ON THE GUA MASSACRE OF 8TH SEPTEMBER, 1980

Gua is a small mining town in the south Bihar district of Singhbhum, 60 kms south west of the district headquarters at Chaibasa. On Monday 8th September the Bihar Military Police (BMP) opened fire on a peaceful meeting of tribals organised by the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, killing 11 and wounding another 14 persons. The final casualty count still remains to be tallied. What caused this unprovoked massacre of the tribals? Who are responsible for the repeated onslaughts of the police on the tribals? Who do the 'protectors' of the people (i.e. the police) turn 'predators' when it comes to the rights of the poorer people?

As part of the movement for a separate Jharkhand state, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha has been spearheading the 'jungle kato' movement in Singhbhum. This is not simply the destruction of the forests, since tribal subsistence is symbiotically related to the produce of the forest. Actually it is a movement to reclaim the village lands lost by the tribals since the days of the British rule. As a result of repeated tribal rebellions against the British during the 19th and 20th centuries, many tribals had fled or been forced to flee their villages. These had subsequently been swallowed by the forest. All that remained to mark their lost habitations were the 'sarangs', memorial stones indicating the burial ground of the ancestors which also serves as the place of congregation for tribals.

During the last five months the 'jungle kato' movement has been gathering momentum and spreading. Faced with the choice of either starvation or cultivation, increasingly prevented from access to forest produce, the latter is becoming the sole means of survival. This meant that land had to be reclaimed for cultivation within forest tracts where the tribal villages had existed before. The strength of the 'jungle kato' movement derived from this.

The growth of the movement also invoked the wrath of the state. A strong contingent of the BMP was posted in the area. In the characteristic style of the para-military forces (witness the PAC's behaviour in Moradabad, cf. M.J. Akbar's report in Sunday 24th August, 1980) they exercised their punitive authority over the tribals. BMP personnel harassed the local population by breaking into their homes, lifting fowls and vegetables without payment, indiscriminately arresting people from public places like bazaars and even misbehaving with tribal women.

Against such oppressive actions of the BMP, the local population, mainly tribals, had decided to mobilize public opinion. A meeting had been called under the aegis of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha on the afternoon of 8th September, at Gua aerodrome, to prepare a memorandum to be handed to the local authorities.

At the meeting the preparation of the memorandum had been completed when a contingent of the BMP along with two magistrates arrived on the scene. As the crowd proceeded to present the memorandum to the BDO, the police encircled them and started showering abuse. They were seemingly out to provoke the tribals. The tribals as is their custom were carrying bows and arrows and the police seems to have asked them to come out and face their rifles. The magistrates sought to pacify the police saying that since the gathering was a peaceful one the police should not interfere in the matter. Still the police insisted that the tribals stop their march towards the town where the BDO's office was located and disperse immediately.

Under the circumstances, the tribal leaders decided to submit the memorandum to the magistrates. This was done and a receipt obtained. At this point the BMP personnel and the magistrates left while the gathering instead of proceeding towards town as planned earlier assembled at the local bazaar to conclude the day's programme.

No sooner had the first speaker started addressing the 3000 strong Adivasi crowd when the BMP returned along with the magistrates and surrounded the crowd with upraised rifles. The Adivasis were ordered to disperse and their leaders to surrender. Whereupon the person addressing the meeting voluntarily stepped down and surrendered. He was taken into custody and the magistrates left the scene taking him in their jeep. The police lingered on. In the face of such provocation the next speaker got up and suggested that the meeting disperse peacefully as the police seemed to be waiting for a confrontation. Taking this as a sign of weakness, the police rushed into the middle of the meeting and started to drag away the speaker. The speaker asked the police why they were manhandling him when he was willing to give himself up. A melee ensued with the crowd trying to restrain the police from dragging away their leader. This served as the immediate cause of the firing.

In all about 37 rounds were fired by the police indiscriminately killing and maiming innocent people at point-blank

range. The firing continued as people scattered. Then the tribals retaliated in desperation and self-defence. Four policemen were killed by the arrows. Along with 25 casualties among the tribals many were arrested whose numbers are yet to be ascertained.

Curfew was immediately imposed and a news black-out attempted. The question, however, remains was this a pre-planned massacre? Otherwise why did the BMP return? Why were the local shopkeepers warned to keep their shutters down? When the law enforcers turn lawless then how do common people protect themselves?

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This report has been prepared by Anjan Ghosh with the help of observers from Chaibasa recounting from eye-witness accounts.

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