

JEHANABAD

- Peasant Movement And Police Repression

People's Union For Democratic Rights (Delhi)
People's Union For Civil Liberties (Bihar)
June, 1983.

Police repression on the incipient peasant movement in Jehanabad block of Bihar's Gaya district has been attracting the attention of democratic rights organisations for some time now. In January 1983, the Calcutta based Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights and the Delhi based People's Union for Democratic Rights organised a combined fact-finding team. Recently, in the third week of May, Jehanabad was once again in news. On the 18th, newspapers both at Delhi and Patna reported the incident of a severe lathicharge at a conference of peasants in Jehanabad. Subsequently, the People's Union for Civil Liberties, Bihar and the People's Union for Democratic Rights, Delhi, together sent a fact-finding team in the last week of May, 1983 to investigate into the incident.

The team consisted of Shri Shashi Bhushan, (A.N. Sinha Institute of Social Studies, Patna and Secretary, PUCL, Bihar), Shri Arun Sinha (Journalist), Ms. Manimala (Journalist, Patna), and Ms. Kiran Shaheen (Mahila Mukti Manch, Patna) - all from PUCL, Bihar; Dr. K. Haragopal, Dr. Uma Chakravarti and C.V. Subbarao (all from Delhi University) - all from PUDR, Delhi. During the course of the investigation, the team met a cross-section of people in the area including peasants, agricultural labourers, and activists of MKSS (Mazdoor Kisan Sangharsh Samiti). In addition, it also interviewed senior revenue and police officials of the district and met persons detained in Gaya Jail. The report of the committee follows.

SOCIAL BACKGROUND:

Jehanabad is one of the sub-divisions of Gaya District. A part of the district is drought-prone and according to official sources, the district has been facing a severe drought almost every alternate year. Assured irrigation is available only for about 25 per cent of the cultivated land. The district has a little more than 29 per cent

literacy. Jehanabad sub-division presently has a population of about 9 lakh 83 thousand, almost all of which (excluding the 44,000 in Jehanabad town) is rural. The literacy rate in the Jehanabad area seems to be lower than even the district average. It is about 20 per cent in the villages we visited. A single primary/middle school seems to be serving a cluster of 5 to 7 villages.

An overwhelming majority of the population in the area is dependent on agriculture. An important feature of agriculture here is the high degree of concentration of land, and the consequent high proportion of agricultural labour. In some of the villages we visited, as many as 75 per cent of households were landless labourers. In addition, this concentration is further increased due to the prevailing practise of the landlords who occupy large tracts of government owned (gair mazarua) land. At Karaona village, for instance, the team was shown about 12 bighas of such land situated on both sides of the road leading to Jehanabad, currently under the illegal occupation of a local landlord.

The most important problem in the area is the extremely low wage rate obtaining for agricultural labourers. The wage is usually paid in kind and a few seasons ago it was 2 seers (1 seer = 933 gms.) pucca of grain for a full day's work. In recent times after the agricultural labour movement picked up, it was raised to 1.5 kgs. of grain and half a kilo of sattu. At the present rates it still falls short of the statutory minimum wage of Rs. 8.50 per day. This is the focal issue of the peasant movement in the area. The administration seems to be aware of the problem for the district magistrate of Gaya told us that during the two years of his tenure he had been to Jehanabad almost 'ten times a month'. He also claimed that the wages were raised

to the statutory level of Rs. 8.50 per day. We found no evidence of the increase although we were told of the district magistrate's frequent trips to the area.

An important dimension of the intense social contradictions of the area is the fact that almost all landless labourers come from the untouchable dalit ca-stes. Thus, the age-old traditions of social discrimination add to intense economic exploitation. A movement for increase in wages often appears as a caste conflict between the landed castes (like bhumihar or kumi in this region) and the dalits.

It is in this background that an organisation of the rural poor - Mazdoor Kisan Sangharsh Samiti (MKSS) - began to take shape in the area since 1982.

THE MKSS :

The Mazdoor Kisan Sangharsh Samiti appeared on the Bihar agrarian scene in early 1982. The Samiti is associated with a CPI (M-L) group. It held its first conference in March 1982 at Indrapuri, Aurangabad district and a charter of demands was passed. An examination of its literature coupled with interviews of some of the Samiti's leading activists indicate the legitimate nature of the organisation. Its charter of demands includes implementation of ceiling laws, implementation of the minimum wages act, equal remuneration act, etcetera, all of which are the responsibility of the Bihar government in the first place. In addition, the charter also includes demands for lowering of land ceiling levels, distribution of culturable wastelands, and exemption of taxes for peasants owning 5 acres or less of land. The Samiti also took up cases of organised crime in the area and the illegal occupation of government land by the landlords.

The Samiti's activities in the last one and a half year were largely confined to three major areas : (i) resisting the illegal occupation of government land by the landlords; (ii) mass resistance committees against organised crime ; (iii) agitation, including total strike, by agricultural labourers for better wages. Our inquiries revealed that the relative success of some of the issues taken up particularly, in the last two issues, is the source of its mass popularity. In many villages, we found that all the landless labourers were with the Samiti.

/a

The response of the local landed elite has been in the form of organised repression. The landlords have organised themselves into bhumi sena - an organisation led by some of the well - known landlords of the region, including ruling party legislators. The bhumisena is an armed association of the landlords and their henchmen. It has now emerged almost as a parallel state machinery and is said to be responsible for many acts of loot, arson and murder. It should be noted that 8 of the 11 activists of the Samiti killed in the last 15 months were murdered by the landlords or their henchmen. In one instance, we were told that the landlords forced agricultural labourers to work at gun-point when they went on strike.

The local administration seems to be completely biased against the landless. Apart from the fact that the armed landlords' association is functioning unrestrainedly in the area, the police and revenue officials' own acts of omission and commission establish this clearly. In the last one year, ever since the Samiti picked up its activities, section 144 (prohibiting the assembling of five or more persons and all forms of public meetings) seems to have been in force in the area almost uninterruptedly. In some

cases, the custodians of law are alleged to have collaborated with the bhumisena in organising their raids. In addition, the villagers associated with the Samiti are continuously harassed. The case of Hanslal Singh from village Sikaria is illustrative of the kind of harassment. Singh was implicated in many cases in the last one and a half years, in all of which after a spell of imprisonment he got bail from the court. Eventually, the police confiscated his property. Following his petition, the Patna high court held the confiscation illegal. The police not only did not comply with the court order but sent him again to Patna jail in yet another case, where he still languishes. In another case, a woman from the same village had to flee the village after her old father was arrested and her children were assaulted. Frequent interrogations, searches without warrant, beating and torture became the order of the day in the strongholds of the Samiti. In the last one year police camps were set up at one time or another in about 50 villages of the Jehanabad sub-division.

It is in this general background of increasing popularity despite intensifying repression that the Samiti decided to hold its second conference on May 17 at village Madua.

What followed thereafter was a tale of conflicting versions of severe repression on the hapless villagers. The committee attempted to ascertain the facts from both the people and the police. The people's version was gathered from interviews while the police version was gathered both from interviews and the First Information Reports filed at the police thana.

EVENTS LEADING TO 17th MAY :

On 27 April, 1983, the general secretary of the Samiti sent a written request to the Sub-divisional Officer, Jehanabad,

asking for the permission to hold the second annual conference of MKSS on May 17 at Madua. Apprehending its denial, copies of this request had also been sent to senior officials, the press and the Bihar PUCL. Receiving no reply, a week later on 4th May, the vice-president of the Samiti met the SDO personally who gave him oral permission and the Samiti went ahead with its preparations. On 8th May, four days after the assurance by the SDO, section 144 was clamped throughout the sub-division for a month.

The administration claimed that the imposition of section 144 was immediately communicated through the public address system in all the villages. However, the villagers said that they were not aware of it till the day before the conference. Samiti activists themselves said that they learnt of it only on the 16th when they decided to cancel the meeting.

On the night of 8th May following the imposition of section 144, the police shot dead a sympathiser of the Samiti, Pra-dip Bhind, in Patadia village. The police claimed that he was a wanted criminal and was killed in an armed encounter with them. The team interviewed villagers of Patadia who had a different story to tell. On the night of 8-9 May, around 11 pm, a large number of armed policemen, reportedly led by the district magistrate himself, surrounded the village and conducted raids. In the early hours of the morning, Bhind was called from his house and questioned for some time. A little later he was let off. As he turned his back he was shot dead. The police picked up his body and drove off in their jeeps even as the villagers ran after the jeeps for the body. The villagers said that though he was implicated in some cases, he had got bail and that there was no warrant against him. According to them,

he had been visiting Jehanabad almost everyday in connection with his work.

Two days later, on 10th May, armed landlords went to village Gonsa and killed Indradeo Mochi, an activist of the Samiti. It should be noted that the murder took place in the premises of the house of an additional district magistrate, posted at that time in another district.

On the night of 16th May, a massive armed police raid took place on the twin villages of Sukulchak-Madua. A large number of Bihar Military policemen are reported to have participated in the raid. In the first raid they attempted to find the foodgrains stored for the conference. After searching a number of houses, they confiscated some articles, and left. In the second raid conducted the same night, they once again raided the houses and questioned a large number of people. In the third raid, they beat up some people and threatened them with dire consequences if the conference was held. By then the Samiti took the decision to cancel the meeting and send messengers to the Jehanabad railway station to inform the incoming delegates. It was those delegates who could not get the message in time, who were subjected to a severe lathicharge on May 17.

17th MAY, 1983, MADUA :

Early that morning the employees of a tent merchant of Patna, whom the Samiti had contracted for tents, furniture etcetera, were the first to reach the venue of the conference, Shaheed Lakhani Swadeshi Nagar, village Madua, in a tractor. Meanwhile, hundreds of armed policemen arrived there, surrounded the place and started beating the tent workers. The beating went on indiscriminately sparing not even the delegates who unaware of the cancellation of the meeting, had reported

at Madua. Estimates of the number of people caught in rain of blows range between 70 and 100. Among the people who were beaten were two women delegates from Rohtas district, who had come to attend the conference. According to the MKSS vice-president, Triveni Singh, and six other injured persons who were met by the team at the Gaya Central Jail, all the people were herded to the Sukulchak police camp after an hour of beating. Here, they were beaten further. The women were separated and encircled by the police who rained blows on them under the personal supervision of the anchaladikari. The police singled out some people as special targets including a visiting trade union leader from Dhanbad who was threatened with being physical eliminated. The people who had been picked up were then taken to the thana and kept under police custody.

At the police station they were once again beaten up. In addition police also took away all the valuables. The arrested persons whom we interviewed at Gaya told us that altogether they lost 12 wrist watches and cash of Rs. 6000 collected for the conference. Next day six children, some women and the tent workers were let off. But others, altogether 62 in number, were sent to Gaya Jail. Enroute two of them were taken for interrogation by the district magistrate and were sent later to the jail. Though the cases themselves were minor in nature they were not given the usual bail on personal bond but were asked to produce two sureties each. Most of them stayed in jail for more than a week to ten days.

The fact finding team visited one of the affected villages on 26, May and talked to people consisting of both men and women agricultural labourers who had collected there from a number of neighbouring villages. Most of the people

interviewed showed clear and unmistakable evidence of having been severely beaten and had bruises on their arms, legs and backs. The women who met us stated that the anchal adhikari personally directed the assault on them. He instructed the police to give the women, who had been actively participating in the struggle for higher wages, a thorough thrashing. The women reported him as having said, "matha bacha kar khub maro taki yad rahe. Sale naxalite sammelan karenge! Teen kilo mazoori mangte ho, chalo thane mein theek mazoori denge." (Save the head and beat them so that they will remember it. Trying to organise a naxalite conference, is it? Ask for three kilos of grain, do you? Come, we'll give you proper wages at the police station!"). The beating was so severe that some lathis broke but this was no impediment, more lathis were routinely sent for.

Among the others who were severely beaten were the youngsters of the village who had arrived at the conference site to help the visitors. But even stray passers-by including those who had come to graze cattle did not escape the assault by the policemen who indiscriminately beat up everyone around. Only a jawan of the army, who had been in the area on his annual leave, escaped. The police let him off when they discovered he was a jawan. The experience had been a shock to the jawan who wondered why the police had treated the people so brutally. Another woman described to us how she and her husband were intercepted when they were going to work in the fields, and ordered to carry the ammunition of the police back to the camp at Sukulchak. A particularly shocking incident related to us described how an agricultural labourer named Harnandan was picked up on the following morning (18th May) and taken to the police camp at Sukulchak and given a severe beating. The police pushed him on to the floor and stood on him,

kicking and beating him with a lathi simultaneously. This brutal assault was a deliberate act, a punishment for Harnandan's having had the courage to describe the police assault on the people to a journalist who had visited the area. The journalist had mentioned Harnandan Das by name in the newspaper report, and the police was furious at the exposure of their bestiality.

The police version of the events is simple and does not justify the action they have taken. The First Information Report on the incidents of 17th May has charged Ajay Narain and 62 others belonging to "Gaya, Aurangabad, Rohtas, Dhanbad and Patna districts", with being present at an illegal gathering armed with lethal weapons, violating section 144 causing injury by throwing stones et cetera. They have been charged under sections 143, 144, 145, 147, 149, 151, 152 and 188 of the Criminal Procedure Code. The statement of the Circle Officer further adds that the police ordered a mild charge when the gathering which was waving red flags and banners and "shouting slogans of class struggle" began pelting stones at the police. His statement also says that provocative leaflets and songs were recovered from them. According to the statement, the leaflets pertained to the murder of policemen, snatching of rifles, and the looting and killing of landlords. It is evident that the police version of the events leaves too many questions unanswered. Initial granting of the permission orally and its later denial in practice, the general campaign of terror prior to 17, May about which police records do not even have a formal explanation, mobilisation of unusually large number of armed policemen against unarmed peasants, beating up even tent workers and passers at Madua - all makes it clear that the police acted in a pre-planned manner. That also perhaps

explain the First Information Reports' suspicious silence on many matters. Senior police officials in their interview with us did not offer any credible explanation for their actions other than dismissing it as a 'naxalite the/ andolan'. In the light of the background of last eighteen months in Jehanabad, the police action against the MKSS conference do not appear to be an isolated instance.

CONCLUSION :

As we entered the village Karaona in a hot summer afternoon, a dead body of a young 14 year old boy greeted us at the entrance of the Harijan basti. The body lay under a tree, surrounded by wailing men and women. We were told that the boy had been suffering from a kidney ailment and was taken to the hospital at Jehanabad. The doctors wanted an amount of Rs. 200 for the operation. Before the landless labour family was able to raise the money, he died. His dead body was brought back an hour before we reached the village.

The/ In a sense this brought home to us dramatically the social situation in the area. Lack of medical facilities is a minor symptom of it. Denial of statutory minimum wages, coupled with intense social oppression, day to day harassment in the fields coupled with direct physical violence constitutes the social situation of Jehanabad. In such a situation the organisation of the rural poor is a necessary means for survival. / Majdoor Kisan Sangarsh Samiti is a legitimate response to this situation.

The MKSS is a legal organisation. Its charter of demands includes those measures which are primarily the responsibility of the state. Its forms of struggle - leaflets,

demonstrations, meetings and organisation of strikes - are all constitutionally valid rights of the people. Yet the local administration treats it, for all practical purposes, as an illegal organisation. The argument that it is a naxalite organisation, it appears, is being used to oppose any form of struggle by the rural poor. As an old agricultural labour woman puts it 'Jab ham ladai karte hai, to ham ko naxalvadi kaha ke mar dete hai' (when we struggle, we are labelled as naxalites and killed). This repressive policy of the police must be seen in the context of the landlords own bhumisena and its operations.

Landlords and their henchmen, operating under the banner of bhumisena seems to have no restrictions on them. They freely go about in the area with guns and rifles. While the MKSS was not allowed to have its meeting on 17, May, a meeting of the bhumisena, in which congress (I) legislators are reported to have participated, was allowed on 18 and 19 May at Gaya. On the other hand the local administration is fully participating in all the police operations against the poor. The district collector himself participated in the 'encounter' operation that left Pradeep Bhind dead. The local Sub Divisional Officer of Jehanabad participated in all the police operations against the people. All these factors clearly point out the close co-ordination with which the landlords, civil and police administration are operating against the organised peasant movement of Jehanabad.

In the light of its findings the committee recommends -

- 1) Cases against all the arrested persons in Jehanabad must be immediately withdrawn.
- 2) Continuous misuse of section 144 against the peasant movement should be stopped immediately.

- 3) An enquiry into the killings of Pradeep Bind and Inder Dev Mochi should be held.
- 4) An enquiry should be ordered against the SDO, Jehanabad and officials and the guilty should be punished.
- 5) All the gun licences in the area should be cancelled and steps should be taken to disband the armed bands of bhumisena.
- 6) All restrictions on the functioning of MKSS should be removed and the cases against its leaders and activists should be withdrawn.

(Sd.)

Shashi Bhushan
Kiran Shaheen
Arun Sinha
Manimala
K. Haragopal
Uma Chakravathy
C.V. Subbarao

WKSS: Roll Call Of The Dead, July 1982 May, 1983

No.	Date	Place	Name	Village	Profession	Killed By
1.	2, July 82	Jamuk	Siddheshwar Mochi	Sikaria	Ag. Labourer	Landlords with police
2.	2, July 82	Jamuk	Sheo Pujan Paswan	Salarpur	-do-	-do-
3.	3, July 82	Khadiorchak	Gyanchand Bhagat	Khadiorchak	Small Peasant	-do-
4.	10, Aug. 82	Bhagwanpur	Lakshan Manjhi	Bhagwanpur	Ag. Labourer	Landlords
5.	-do-	-do-	Swadeshi Manjhi	Sikaria	-do-	-do-
6.	-do-	-do-	Balkishore Manjhi	Bhawanpur	-do-	-do-
7.	January, 83	Bhavani-chak	Mathuna Singh	Bhavanichak	Small Peasant	Landlords
8.	14, April 83	Bhavani-chak	Rohan Paswan	Surangapur	Teacher	Landlords
9.	-do-	-do-	Sheo Dayal Paswan	Surangapur	Small Peasant	Landlords
10.	9, May 83	Patadia	Pradeep Bind	Patadia	Middle Peasant	Police
11.	10 May 83	Gonsa	Indradeo Mochi	Gonsa	Farm Servant	Landlords

E_R_R_A_T_I_A :

- | | | | | |
|-----|------|---------|---------|--|
| I | p.2 | para 3. | Line 2. | Add : It should be noted that they include landed labour also in some parts. |
| II | p.2. | para 3. | Line 4 | Old Wage rate is 2 seers Kaccha (roughly 1 kg.) (instead of 2 seers Pucca) . |
| III | p.3. | para 2. | Line 7 | Add Rajputs. |
| IV | p.3. | para 4. | Line 2. | Early 1981 (not 1982) |
| V | p.3. | para 4. | Line 4 | March 1982, Indrapuri Rohtas district (not Aurangabad.) |

